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MARITIME TRADE OPERATIONS IN THE RAN

The surveillance and protection of maritime trade have always been amongst the intrinsic tasks of the RAN. The history of the RAN's involvement in maritime trade operations can be traced back to 1913 when, with the arrival of the first units of the Australian fleet, the RAN assumed control of the 'trade' function formerly conducted by the Royal Navy's Australian Squadron. These duties included an Examination Service at Australia's defended ports and a system of reporting shipping movements around the Australian coast. This reporting system largely relied upon information provided by light-house keepers and shipping agents[1].

The First World War

At the outbreak of WWI, German cruisers commenced commerce raiding operations along the Indian Ocean and South-west Pacific trade routes. While the number of merchant vessels attacked was sustainable, the impact of these attacks was profound. The sea-lanes were swept clear of merchant traffic as owners found it almost impossible to obtain war risk insurance. This prompted two responses. Firstly, the British Government agreed to underwrite the War Risk Insurance scheme and, secondly, the trade section, of the RAN's Operations Division, was expanded to implement a merchant ship reporting system, designed to integrate the British and Australian merchant fleets into the RAN's intelligence network[2].

By underwriting war risk insurance, the British Government exerted a form of de facto control over merchant shipping, as shippers could only obtain insurance cover for voyages directed by the Government.

Increasing U-boat attacks in European waters led to the development of a formalised system of naval control[3]. From 1916 naval officers, attached to the RAN's Trade Section, were assigned to brief and de-brief merchant-ship masters, provide them with detailed sailing instructions and to report their movements to a central plot. Through the use of these measures, the RAN's Operations Division became integrated into a worldwide shipping control and intelligence system referred to as 'Naval Control of Shipping' (NCS). In 1917 the NCS system was adopted by Britain's major allies, France and the USA[4].

The Inter-War Years

At the conclusion of hostilities, Admiral Lord Jellicoe examined Australia's naval defences. In his 1919 report, he recommended, inter alia, that the RAN retain 'a very complete system for issuing route and other war instructions to shipping…'[5] Consequently, a number of reserve, NCS trained, officers were retained in the major trading ports of each state.

In 1921, as a result of an initiative of the RN's Intelligence Division, an imperial system of Naval Control of Shipping was adopted by Britain and her dominions. Under this system, the RAN was charged with the maintenance of those measures necessary to enable the Commonwealth Naval Board to assume full control of merchant shipping in the

Australia Station during wartime and to incorporate merchant shipping into a worldwide routing and intelligence system. To implement this initiative, reporting officers were located in all Australian ports and reserve officers were trained in NCS procedures to enable the system to be implemented immediately upon the outbreak of war.[6]

It was expected that the passage to war would proceed through phases. As each phase was reached, ships' Masters were obliged to follow a graduated series of NCS instructions, which culminated in their submission to full naval control after the outbreak of hostilities.

Mandatory routing for all merchant vessels was the foundation for this system, while the convoy formation was the system's primary shipping loss management tool.

Figure 1- In 1919, Admiral of the Fleet, Lord Jellicoe advised on the retention of a complete system for the issuing of war instructions to merchant ships. Source: www.en.wikipedia.org

The Second World War

On 27 August 1939, the NCS system[7] was activated with the call up of 350 members of the RANVR. The duties of these officers included the supervision and plotting of all shipping movements, the issuing of route instructions, mustering confidential books, inspecting convoy equipment, collecting ships' data and reporting movements via a system known as VESCA Reporting (VESCAR).

Between1939-41 the NCS system played a crucial part in neutralising German surface raiders which were again dispatched to plunder the Indian Ocean and South-West Pacific trade routes. Thereafter, the NCS system was the key instrument in protecting trade from an extensive submarine campaign waged by the Japanese Navy off the east coast of

Australia between 1942 and 1944. The intensity of this assault upon shipping is evidenced by the fact that more than 40 merchant ships were attacked by Japanese submarines, off the NSW coast, during 1942-43.

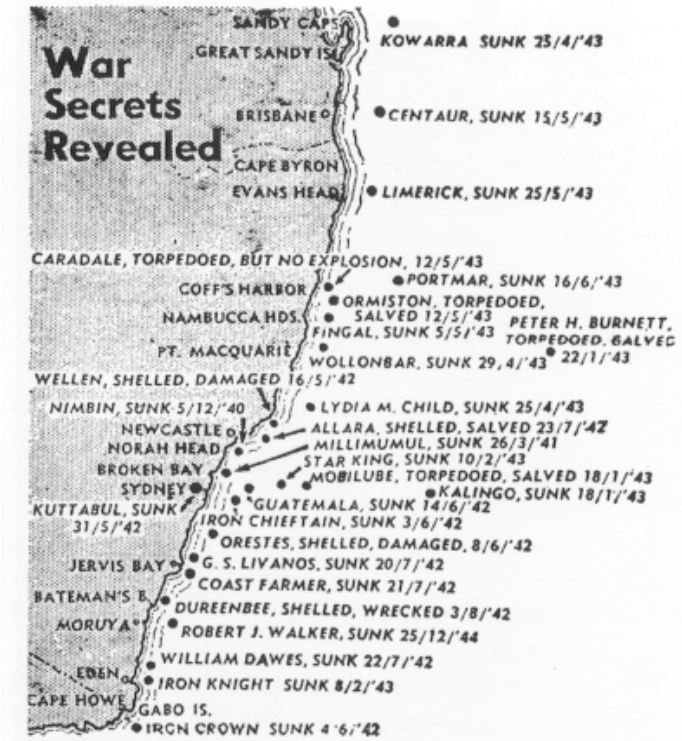

Figure-2 Japanese submarine attacks off NSW and South QLD. Source: www.mns.ewebs.com

The Cold War Era

At the conclusion of WWII, the NCS structure was maintained as an element of the RANR to meet the contingency of a future global conflict. In 1951, the Radford Collins Naval Control of Shipping Agreement was concluded between Australia, New Zealand, the USA and the UK. Under this agreement, Australia was given the responsibility of co-ordinating the protection of merchant shipping within a defined region, bordering Australia, but extending to cover a large area of the Indian Ocean and including PNG[9]. The agreement was based on the premise that the primary threat to trade would come from Eastern Bloc submarines during global hostilities. The naval planners assumed, however, that the Australian area would be subject to sporadic attacks only. On the basis of these assumptions, provision had to be made for escorting particularly valuable vessels, while the majority of merchant ships were to proceed without escorts in compliance with routing instructions. The NCS system was to remain latent until implemented at a point when the Cold War threatened to become hot. The NCS system was to be controlled through the Operational Control Authority (OCA), a position occupied by the Maritime Commander (MC AUST) at MHQ while NCS port HQs were to be stationed at Townsville, Manus, Darwin, Fremantle, Adelaide, Melbourne, Hobart, Port Kembla, Sydney, Newcastle and Brisbane. NCS duties at all other ports were to be performed by Reporting Officers (REPTOFFs), who were typically officers in the Australian Customs Service.

From 1952 the parties to the Radford-Collins Agreement periodically conducted NCS exercises, commencing with the RIPCORD, ROLLER COASTER, and ROLL CALL series followed by the biennial BELL BUOY series. During these exercises, the command and control of the movement of shipping was simulated (through the use of real and "paper ships") in accordance with a developing war-time scenario. Ships' Masters were briefed and de-briefed, sailing orders and communication plans were issued, all aspects of convoy planning simulated, shipping information collected, movements reported via a system known as MERCO ('Merchant Ship Reporting and Control') and a detailed shipping plot developed.

Post Cold War – MTO & NCAGS

The break up of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact brought about a fundamental reorganisation of the NCS structure. It was changed from a latent force to force actively involved in the daily operations of the ADF, operations ranging from humanitarian relief to military operations, potentially, at any point along the conflict spectrum. This change necessitated a thorough review of NCS doctrine. The old doctrine based upon a 'total war' scenario was initially replaced by a doctrine more fitted for localized conflict called Regional Naval Control of Shipping (RNCS). RNCS was, in turn, replaced by a doctrine based upon working co-operatively with the maritime industries to meet any contingency along the spectrum. This doctrine is known as Naval Co-operation and Guidance for Shipping (NCAGS). The name of the Branch also underwent some transformation, changing from the Naval Control of Shipping Branch to the Maritime Trade Operations Branch (MTO) in April 2004. This name more properly reflects the Branch's current focus and tasking.

Figure 3- Shipping interdiction during OP ACTIVE ENDEAVOUR. MTO tasking covers interdiction of shipping as well as the monitoring and passive protection of shipping. Source: www.mapn.ro

NCAGS was implemented for the first time during the 1999 East Timor crisis (OP WARDEN). From September 1999 until February 2000 NCS officers were continually rostered through HQNORCOM. Their work involved not so much the protection of shipping (although all vessels were closely monitored) but rather duties such as liaison with port authorities, shipping agents, NGOs and logistic elements of the ADF. The Timor experience demonstrated to operational commanders that NCS (now MTO) could provide specific services, particularly in the support of exercises and operations that involved the maritime industries – both ashore and afloat.

From that time, MTO has been engaged in ADF operations on a full-time basis with MTO watch-keeping staff working

365 days a year in the operations room of Maritime Headquarters.

The MTO Branch has adapted remarkably to meet the demands of the post-Cold War era. It has moved from an obscure role designed to meet a major conflict to a role that requires it to complete operational tasking on a continuous and daily basis. The MTO Branch has the distinction of being the only RAN operational capability provided solely by RANR members.

END NOTES

1. Review of Naval Control & Protection of Shipping – Directorate of Naval Policy, August 1992.
2. The British Ministry of Shipping instigated full control of Imperial shipping on 22 December 1916.
3. Ibid and see AW Jose, The Royal Australian Navy 1914-1918, AWM- see Chapter XII- The Naval Brigade (including the Examination Service and Port Security- Naval Guard Section);
4. M. Bailey, "Australia, Imperial Trade and the Impact of War" in Australian Maritime Issues 2004-Sea Power Centre-AustraliaMark Bailey, "The Australian Role in the Development of a Worldwide Imperial Trade Control and Intelligence System" in D. Stevens, Maritime Power in the 20th Century: The Australian Experience, Allen & Unwin 1998 pp68-84
5. Report of the Naval Mission to the Commonwealth, August 1919
6. M. Bailey op cit. (both works)
7. The expression "NCS system" refers to both the RAN's Naval Control Service (the precursor of the NCS Branch) and the government's Shipping Control Board.
8. see D. Jenkins, Battle Surface! Japan's Submarine War Against Australia 1942-1944 and G.H. Gill, Royal Australian Navy 1942-1945, AWM 1968 (ed) p557. It is arguable that the NCS system played the pivotal role in this campaign, particularly as operational successes were minimal. The RAN sank only 1 submarine (the I-124 off Darwin); RAAF aircraft attacked submarines, off the Australian coast, on 19 occasions without inflicting any serious damage while losing 23 aircraft and 104 airmen in the course of coastal operations.
9. see Thomas-Durell Young, "Australia Bites Off more than the RAN can Chew" Pacific Defence Reporter March 1986 pp15-17; G. Priestnell "ANZUS and the Radford Collins Agreement" Journal of the Australian Naval Institute, Vol 23 No 1 pp49-52.
   Note: the Radford Collins Agreement is not a "treaty" but rather a "service to service agreement". It was revised in 1978.

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