

## HMAS ADELAIDE AND THE 1927 MALAITA EXPEDITION

On 30 June 2017, Australia's 14-year participation in, and leadership of, the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) concluded. Known in the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) as Operation Anode, the ADF component of RAMSI's Operation Helpem Friend (Pidgin for 'Helping Friend'), this long running operation to provide stability in the Solomon Islands was preceded by Operations Plumbob<sup>1</sup> (2000) and Trek<sup>2</sup> (2000-02). The RAN's involvement in operations in the Solomon Islands is not a new activity and 2017 marks the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its first significant peacekeeping operation in this region.

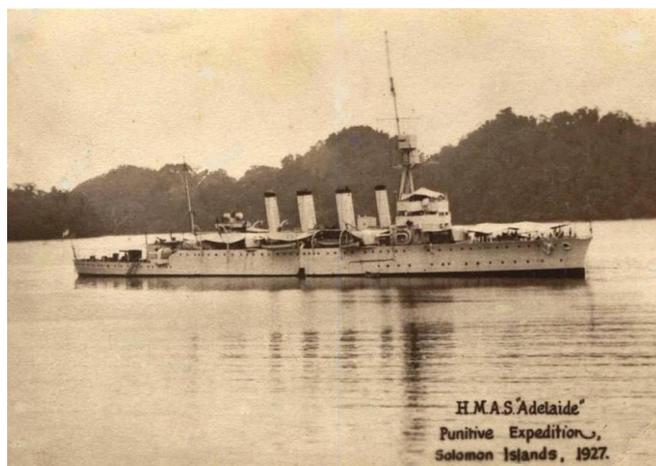
In early October 1927, the light cruiser HMAS *Adelaide* was at Garden Island (Sydney), undergoing maintenance, when news was received of an alleged native uprising on the island of Malaita in the British Solomon Islands Protectorate (BSIP). As the British Government had no warships in the area the British Colonial Office requested Australian support. The 'native uprising' stemmed mainly from BSIP policy of imposing a 'head tax' on every able bodied Solomon Islands man. The five shillings per annum tax forced the Solomon Islanders to work as labourers on British copra plantations. The tax was deliberately introduced, due to the shortage of local labour, as a way to induce the Solomon Islanders to work to earn the necessary cash to pay the tax. The Solomon Islanders resented this as well as the increased inroads into their traditional way of life being made by missionaries, traders and British officials.

On 4 October 1927 the matter came to a head on Malaita when the District Officer, Australian born William Bell, his British assistant Kenneth Lillies and 15 local policemen, were attacked at the village of Gwee'abe, near Sinalanggu Harbour, while collecting the tax. Basiana, a Malaita warrior, and several of his followers killed Bell, Lillies and nine local police. The surviving police fled to Tulagi (then the Solomon Islands administrative centre) and raised the alarm.

The Assistant Resident Commissioner considered this the beginning of a full scale uprising in the Solomon Islands and the Colonial Office, in London, was consequently contacted and immediate military support requested. The Colonial Office passed the request to the Australian Naval Board, on 8 October, and within 24 hours Australia's Prime Minister Stanley Bruce authorised the RAN to provide assistance.

On 9 October 1927, *Adelaide* (Captain Gerald Harrison, RN) was ordered to proceed to Tulagi with all dispatch. Extra arms and ammunition, Mills Bombs (grenades), provisions and medical stores were rapidly embarked. A shortage of portable wireless sets

prompted Petty Officer Telegraphists Oscar Allen and Clarence Scrivener to purchase the necessary parts and they constructed a shore wireless set while en-route. This was to be the only set available ashore until the Royal Australian Fleet Auxiliary *Biloela* arrived in late October with more stores and equipment. Additional personnel including an extra medical officer joined the ship swelling *Adelaide's* crew to 470 men.



*HMAS Adelaide in the Solomon Islands 1927*

*Adelaide* sailed late on 10 October and steaming at 20 knots arrived at Tulagi on the afternoon of 14 October. The survey ship HMAS *Geranium*, operating in north Queensland waters, was also put on standby to sail but this order was cancelled due to her slower speed and smaller crew size. *Biloela* embarked additional coal, provisions and stores to resupply *Adelaide* and she sailed from Sydney a few days later.

After arriving at Tulagi, Harrison met with the Resident Commissioner to discuss the ship's role in the expedition. The situation was found to be far less serious than originally reported with only one tribal group on Malaita involved. Harrison agreed that his ship's company would supplement the local police force, and a hastily raised local volunteer force, while also providing communications and logistics support. The cruiser's presence also provided a significant show of force to impress the Solomon Islanders. *Adelaide* sailed from Tulagi on 16 October with the new District Officer and several local police onboard. A small naval detachment remained in Tulagi to provide administrative and communications support to the Resident Commissioner.

At Sinalanggu Harbour (east coast of Malaita), Harrison put a detachment ashore at Gwee'abe to assess the situation. One of their first tasks was to dig

proper graves for the deceased local police and burn the deserted village. Gwee'abe became known as Beach Base and by the 18<sup>th</sup> there were over 150 personnel ashore erecting tents, setting up a galley, wireless station, incinerator and field latrines as well as stockpiling stores, equipment, water in kegs and provisions. Onboard *Adelaide*, 24 hour upper deck sentries were posted in case of an attack from Solomon Islanders in canoes. The reality was that this was an unlikely scenario as those involved in the murders had retreated inland.



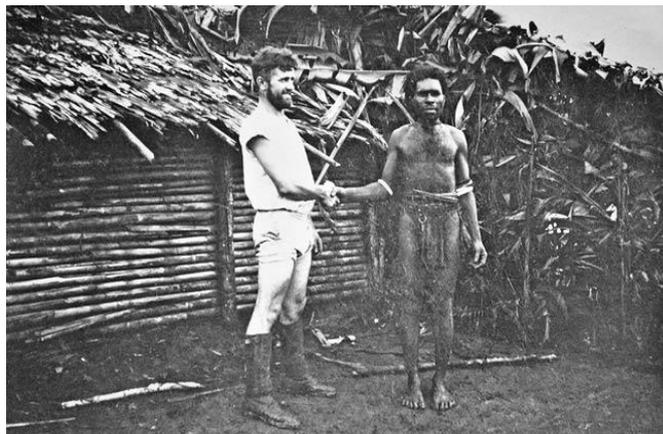
*Adelaide personnel landing at Malaita 17 October 1927*

On 19 October a platoon of *Adelaide's* sailors, over 100 local police and 150 locally recruited stores carriers began moving inland. After marching for several hours through difficult country they reached the deserted village of Furingudu which was set up as a forward operating base (Base B). Later that day the local civilian volunteer force and two more platoons of *Adelaide* sailors moved up to Base B. *Biloela* arrived at Sinalangu on 23 October with more stores including barbed wire to form entanglements to protect the bases. She also brought coal for *Adelaide* to enable the cruiser to return to Sydney. *Biloela* then returned to Australia.

The punitive force left Base B on 26 October for the village of Falavalo. Over 150 local men were now necessary to carry the provisions, stores and equipment needed by the force and it took two days to complete the journey. On arrival the village was designated Base A and tents pitched, a wireless transmitter set up and communications established with *Adelaide* and Tulagi. The search for the culprits responsible for the massacre then began in earnest. The local police and civilian volunteer force conducted patrols into the hinterland and were often absent for up to three days at a time. Effective patrolling and harsh interrogation meant that Basiana and his followers were quickly rounded up. *Adelaide's* men did not take part in these patrols and became solely responsible for the logistics and communications support for the mission and security of the bases.

Living conditions ashore were rudimentary with the men living in tents and subsisting mainly on tinned food. Washing, when possible, was restricted to using local streams while daily 'convoys' shuttled supplies between Beach Base and Base A, returning sick personnel to the cruiser for medical treatment. The ships surgeons and sick berth attendants worked long hours dealing with the ill and injured but were exasperated when they discovered many men were not taking the issued Quinine, to prevent Malaria, as they did not like the taste of it. By the end of the operation, in November, approximately 20% of the ships company of *Adelaide* was suffering from Malaria, Dysentery or septic sores.

By early-November the need for the presence of *Adelaide* and her ships company was deemed unnecessary as the local police were effectively locating and arresting Basiana and his men. In mid-November the sailors began moving supplies and equipment back to Beach Base and on 16 November 1927 the cruiser sailed from Malaita and returned to Sydney on 23 November. A few wireless telegraphists were left behind at Tulagi to provide communications support with the local police force at Malaita. By early December the police had captured most of the men who had conducted the massacre including the ring leader Basiana. Altogether 82 men faced trial at Tulagi and six were subsequently convicted and hanged while 21 others were sentenced to lengthy prison terms.



*An Adelaide sailor with a locally recruited stores carrier*

Upon return to Sydney, *Adelaide* offloaded the additional stores, ammunition and equipment. Her sick and injured were sent to hospital while the rest of the crew cleaned the ship in preparation for proceeding on Christmas leave. Captain Harrison wrote his official report for the Naval Board stating that the ships company had performed their duties well but that the need for the warship was debatable as there were - *five hundred natives awaiting the word to attack the murdering tribe. It seems a great pity that no such order can be given as they would undoubtedly clear up the whole situation in a week*<sup>3</sup>.



Several of *Adelaide's* officers and men were commended to the Naval Board for their service especially the medical staff, cooks and officers stewards. The Naval Board even graciously reimbursed Petty Officers' Allen and Scrivener the money they had spent to build the wireless set. In December 1927 the British Government sent the following signal of thanks to the Australian Government:

*His Majesty's Government of Great Britain desires to convey to His Majesty's Government of the Commonwealth of Australia an expression of their grateful thanks for the help afforded by HMAS Adelaide in the search for the perpetrators of the outrage at Sinarango (sic) and the restoration of order in the disaffected area*<sup>4</sup>.



*Adelaide sailors with a Solomon Islander*

Thus ended the RAN's role in the Malaita punitive expedition. While, with hindsight, some may call into question the necessity of the deployment, the Navy was able to carry out the lawful direction of the Australian Government with speed, skill and devotion to duty. The deployment reinforced the versatility and the effect that the presence of maritime forces can have in influencing regional security both at sea and ashore.

## Greg Swinden

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<sup>1</sup> Operation Plumbob (8-24 June 2000) was a services assisted evacuation involving ADF force elements including HMAS *Tobruk* (Landing Ship Heavy) that evacuated 486 civilians from Honiara on 10 June following a breakdown of law and order in the Solomon Islands capital.

<sup>2</sup> Operation Trek (4 November 2000 – 15 March 2002) was ADF support to the Solomon Islands Peace Monitoring Council (PMC) and the International Peace Monitoring Team (IPMT). Several RAN and RNZN ships were involved in this operation.

<sup>3</sup> Solomon Islands Massacre – NAA File MP 1049/5 (2026/6/111).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

