

THE 21ST CENTURY SAILOR'S CONTRIBUTION TO AUSTRALIAN MARITIME SECURITY

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On 20 October 2018 Prince Harry, the Duke of Sussex, declared the 2018 Invictus Games open. In his opening remarks he referred to current and recently serving Commonwealth Service personnel as the *Invictus Generation*, acknowledging that it was redefining what it means to serve despite their sacrifices too often going unrecognised by society. With that in mind it is worth looking at this generation of sailor's contribution to the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) and, more broadly, its contribution to regional and global security in the 21st century.

The contemporary RAN fleet is crewed chiefly by personnel born in the last two decades of the 20th century. The Navy they joined in the early 2000s was one transforming rapidly to improve capability and effect change to become a more inclusive employer, in step with society's expectations. In that regard it was well on the way to doing so. Mixed gender ships were, with few exceptions, the 'norm' and throughout the 1990s Navy men and women had served operationally side-by-side at war and in numerous peacekeeping and peacemaking operations both regionally and around the globe. The contribution of that generation of sailors would pave the way for those that followed, whose service would coincide with a dramatic increase in the RAN's operational tempo across the diplomatic, constabulary and military span of maritime operations.

Some of the first members of the 21st century Navy (XXI-N) were the officers and sailors who served in East Timor during Australia's intervention in 1999/2000. They would become the veterans of Operations SPITFIRE, STABILISE, WARDEN, TANAGER, and CITADEL all of which played an important part in restoring security to the strife torn island. Their nation building efforts would culminate in East Timor becoming the first new sovereign state of the 21st Century when it became the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste on 20 May 2002. In 2006 the RAN reprised its role in Timor-Leste when it returned under the auspices of Operations ASTUTE and TOWER to again assist in restoring security.

Further afield, early members of the XXI-N were serving in the Middle East Region (MER) as participants in the last of the Operation DAMASK deployments. Fittingly the last deployment (DAMASK X) fell to one of the RAN's then newest warships HMAS *Anzac* (III) which was crewed by an increasing number of young personnel from the XXI-N. *Anzac's* mission was two-fold; first to conduct compliant boarding operations in support of United Nation Security Council resolutions, second, and more significantly, to interdict the illegal trade that was exiting the Khawr Abd Allah waterway from Umm Qasr. Taking a more aggressive approach to interception, *Anzac* soon demonstrated that its boarding teams were capable of

taking on smugglers almost anywhere, day or night. It was during this deployment that news of the September 11 terrorist attacks on the US was received; news that was destined to affect both serving and future members of the XXI-N as the Navy's focus shifted heavily towards the MER.



XXI-N personnel engaged in weapons training in HMAS Arunta during exercises in 2015.

Meanwhile in the Indo-Pacific a number of new challenges were emerging with maritime security and peacekeeping operations unfolding, or ongoing, in Bougainville (Operations: BELISI, BELISI [II], ABSEIL) and the Solomon Islands (Operations: PLUMBOB, DORSAL, ORBIT, TREK, ANODE). Each of those operations saw RAN ships and personnel deploy at sea, ashore and in the air to stabilise security throughout the region. Partaking in those deployments was a growing number of the XXI-N whose operational exposure and experience was incrementally growing to produce the next generation of warfighters.

Running in tandem with those operations was a strong commitment by the Australian Government to prevent incursions of unauthorised vessels into Australian waters and to deter people smugglers and asylum seekers from attempting to use Australia as a destination. Under the auspices of Operation RELEX (later Operation RESOLUTE) numerous RAN vessels were soon involved in the conduct of surveillance and response operations within an expansive operational area stretching from Christmas Island at the one end, to Ashmore Reef at the other. Protection of resources within the Southern Ocean was also to receive the attention of the Government and a number of long-range constabulary operations were mounted to arrest vessels illegally fishing in Australian territorial waters.

In April 2001 Operation TEEBONE saw RAN personnel involved in the arrest of the foreign fishing vessel *South Tomi* and its crew following a 2000 nautical mile hot pursuit across the Southern Ocean. Operations SUTTON, GEMSBOK, CELESTA and MISTRAL followed involving

various RAN units and personnel conducting fisheries patrols in the Heard & McDonald Islands exclusive economic zone.

Other constabulary and domestic security operations included the provision of naval personnel and assets in support of Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings, State visits, the 2001 Sydney Olympic Games (Operation GOLD) to name just a few.

In April 2003 HMAS *Stuart*, 816 squadron and Navy clearance divers were involved in the high profile intercept and arrest of the drug smuggling vessel MV *Pong Su* under the codename Operation TARTAN. The North Korean registered freighter came under surveillance on 16 April and was subsequently shadowed by *Stuart* after locating the suspicious vessel on radar in the Tasman Sea east of Jervis Bay. On the morning of 20 April, *Stuart* closed the smuggler at 25 knots ordering her to stop. The master of *Pong Su* complied and boarding teams and divers were quickly inserted by fast rope from *Stuart's* Seahawk helicopter while members of the Special Air Service, police and customs officers were inserted by boat.



Boarding officer Lieutenant D. Osborne prepares to lead his team to intercept a dhow in the Somali Basin. Piracy, drug and illegal arms smuggling in the Indo Pacific poses an ongoing threat to regional maritime security.

All of these domestic and regional operations were taking place against the backdrop of a growing commitment in the MER under the auspices of Operation SLIPPER. There the RAN's presence was taking on a wider significance as part of an International Coalition Against Terror (ICAT) in the aftermath of the attacks in the US. Altogether 33 Operation SLIPPER deployments were mounted between 2001 and 2014, punctuated by operations BASTILLE, FALCONER and CATALYST in 2003 when offensive military operations were mounted against Iraq.



Able Seaman Combat Systems Operator A. Pace, monitors surface contacts in the operations room of HMAS Adelaide (III) during exercises in 2018.

In July 2014 RAN maritime security operations in the MER transitioned from Operation SLIPPER to Operation MANITOU with an increasing focus on counter piracy and drug interdiction. Since 2014 ten separate Operation MANITOU deployments have been executed and elsewhere RAN XXI-N personnel have deployed variously in support of Operations ACCORDIAN (MER), OKRA (Iraq) and HIGHROAD (Afghanistan).

Since the first of the XXI-N's personnel deployed operationally in the late 1990s its number has swelled considerably and today the RAN is home to a generation of seasoned seagoing personnel most of whom have experience serving in a diverse range of operations not all of which are mentioned in this piece.

Many of the junior personnel of the early 2000s are now experienced senior sailors and officers working shoulder-to-shoulder to train the next iteration of the XXI-N. Their experience, coupled with the new capabilities being introduced into the RAN now and into the future, bodes well for the future 'despite their sacrifices too often going unrecognised by society' as acknowledged by the Duke of Sussex.

The XXI-N generation of sailors is fast approaching what the Navy aspires and needs it to be to face the challenges and uncertainties of the future. It is diverse, inclusive, thinking, well trained, experienced and united in a common cause to serve and protect Australia and its national interests globally.



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