

SEMAPHORE

NEWSLETTER OF THE SEA POWER CENTRE AUSTRALIA

ISSUE 12, NOVEMBER 2003

AUSTRALIAN OPERATIONS IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

Operation ANODE is the Australian Defence Force's current effort to assist the Government of the Solomon Islands in reversing the lawlessness that has plagued the country in recent years. However, it is certainly not the first such operation. Indeed, for more than 120 years Australian or Australian-based forces have been active in the region, assisting at first the British colonial administration and then independent local authorities with both good order and national development. The common thread throughout this prolonged period of involvement has been the deployment of sea power in either a constabulary or diplomatic role, and thereafter the use of the flexibility inherent in naval vessels to provide an immediately responsive and sensitive reaction to government direction.

As early as 1880, the Commodore of the Australia Station despatched HMS *Emerald* to Florida Island after the massacre and mutilation of five British seamen engaged in a survey operation. The case was of deep concern for the Navy because it represented not just an outrage, but also an affront to the institution itself, and 'if the murderers are not severely chastised, [the Navy's] power for good, and as a deterrent to crime amongst the islands, will receive a great shock'.¹ Soon afterwards, as the British colonial efforts to secure free labour from Melanesian communities became more widespread, a cultural group called the Kwaio, from the eastern mountains of Malaita, resisted. Naval vessels maintained a constant, if tedious and dangerous, patrol, investigating incidents as they took place and taking punitive measures where necessary. Although most naval officers disapproved of the labour trade, they worked within a culture that had always placed great value on good order and discipline in human affairs, and ever hoped that their own sacrifice would in some way 'improve the condition of the native races – or to help us establish better relations between them and the white traders and others who visit their islands'.² Despite these hopes, violent clashes remained common and continued into the next century.

By the 1920s the British colonial administration in the Solomons had introduced a 'head tax' on the Malaitan communities. The only way for locals to earn this money was to work on the European-owned plantations and, understandably, the tax was not very popular. On 3 October 1927 a District Officer, accompanied by a Cadet Patrol Officer and over a dozen local police, arrived at Sinalagu to collect the tax. A prominent Kwaio warrior named Bassiana lined up dutifully to pay his tax, but instead drew a concealed weapon and bashed the District Officer to death. Others in the crowd then drew spears and clubs and attacked the remaining police officers, killing ten. Upon hearing news of the massacre, and fearing an all-out island wide 'native uprising', the Resident Commissioner cabled the Colonial Office in London and demanded that they send a warship to crush the insurgency. By now, however, the

Royal Navy was no longer responsible for the Solomons area. Instead, the Colonial Office contacted Australian authorities and requested that they respond.

The only ship available was the light cruiser HMAS *Adelaide*, which had just arrived back in Sydney from a 'showing the flag' cruise in the New Guinea area. She sailed on 10 October, the day after her captain was advised of the need to depart, and arrived off Malaita on 16 October, just 13 days after the massacre. Agreement had already been reached that *Adelaide* would provide logistic and communications support in addition to a significant show of strength, while her crew would supplement the local police force in mounting an expeditionary force. The 150 naval personnel put ashore were disciplined professionals, who performed creditably and provided a wide range of services from construction to catering, but the same could not be said of the remainder of the combined force. In a desire to wrap up the work quickly, the local police, some of who were traditional enemies of the Kwaio, arrested or shot some 20 innocent people before capturing the actual culprits.³ By mid-November it had been decided that *Adelaide* was no longer needed and she returned to Sydney.⁴

Twenty years later, Malaita remained a focus for local challenge against colonial rule. The Japanese occupation during World War II had shattered the myth of European racial superiority, as did the later arrival of Afro-American soldiers in relative positions of authority. Such factors combined to blur the horizontal distinctions between ethnicity and class, which had for decades been rigidly enforced by the British. As a result, a (limited) pan-Malaitan political movement known as the Maasina Rule developed, posing a challenge to the colonial administration. The movement formed its own island-wide political structure, complete with its own sub-district councils. Even though the non-violent political negotiations posed no immediate threat, the destroyer HMAS *Warramunga* was dispatched to Guadalcanal in 1947 to exercise a 'steadying influence'. The British authorities ordered the arrest of prominent Maasina Rule leaders on charges of sedition, and once again the mere presence of a warship was used to deter civil unrest.

RAN warships kept up a semi-regular program of visits to the Solomon Islands over the next three decades. These visits were symbolic rather than coercive, and primarily served to demonstrate Australia's continued interest in and support for the region's development. In a diplomatic sense they culminated in the destroyer HMAS *Vendetta's* presence in the capital city of Honiara for Independence Day celebrations in July 1978. Thereafter, the RAN became more closely involved in nation building activities, including the provision of patrol craft for surveillance work, assistance with surveying, and an annual deployment by a heavy landing craft and clearance divers to undertake wharf construction and reef channel



clearance projects. In 1986 the RAN sent four warships to transport food supplies and reconstruction equipment after Cyclone Namu ravaged the islands. The larger ships were used as self-contained workshops in the Honiara area, while the landing craft resupplied remote localities utilising their beach landing capability. Commenting on the breadth of the RAN's activities and the skills delivered by his sailors, the Chief of Naval Staff, described the naval involvement as an 'aid scheme'; one moreover, that fostered 'personal goodwill which could never be achieved through any amount of diplomacy or aid dollars'.⁵

Despite these achievements there were practical and political limits to Australian influence. Exactly fifty years after the demise of the Maasina Rule, and two decades after independence, ethnic conflict erupted on Guadalcanal. The indigenous inhabitants (or Isatabu people) increasingly saw Malaitan migrants to the island as the new political and economic colonists. Malaitans controlled much of the government and business of Honiara and even the police force was 70 percent Malaitan. Some Guadalcanal indigenes formed a militant group, the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army (later called the Isatabu Freedom Movement) and began raiding police armouries, harassing Malaitan businesses, and threatening and attacking Malaitan homes. Malaitans retaliated in kind, forming their own para-military force – the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF). Since the police force was already compromised, and in many cases collaborated with the MEF, the central government had no practical means to halt Guadalcanal's spiral into lawlessness. In 2000 a coup ousted the then Prime Minister and installed a new government, which proved to be even less capable of restoring state authority. In June the heavy lift ship HMAS *Tobruk* was dispatched from Sydney at short notice to evacuate Australian and foreign nationals from Honiara, eventually transferring 486 people to Cairns.

The evacuation of civilians did not mean the abandonment of the people of the Solomon Islands and over the next two years a succession of Australian major and minor fleet units were deployed to the area to provide a stabilising presence, monitor cease-fire agreements and further promote the peace process. RAN warships provided not only logistic, transportation and medical support to the International Peace Monitoring Team (IPMT), but also a neutral safe haven where the warring parties could meet and negotiate. Yet again, there were limitations on what could be achieved without direct intervention, and in June 2002 the IPMT withdrew from the Solomons leaving an indigenous Peace Monitoring Council to continue the process.

Law and order, however, remained problematic, with clan rivalries persisting and ex-militants pursuing agendas based on self-interest and consolidation of their local power and influence. Finally, in July 2003 at the request of the Solomon Islands leadership, Australia decided to embark on a regional assistance mission along with contributions from Fiji, New Zealand and Tonga. Although chiefly a criminal issue, and hence led by the Australian Federal Police, the operation to help the Government of the Solomon Islands restore good governance and re-invigorate its economy still required a significant ADF presence. Again it has been the role of RAN warships to act as enablers, transporting personnel and materiel and providing essential support to forces ashore. But more than this, warships have acted as a highly visible

presence, an unmistakable demonstration of the power that backs Australian participation in the ongoing crisis.

Australian warships and personnel have a long history of involvement in the Solomon Islands and the remainder of the South-West Pacific region. The inherent capacity of a warship to easily change its posture and apply graduated, disciplined force is obviously the foundation on which this association rests. Yet, depending on circumstances, reassurance can be as important as compulsion and, rather than a tradition of assertive gunboat diplomacy, the flexibility of maritime forces has more often allowed the RAN to work towards the maintenance of a positive security environment through a program of constructive regional engagement. In this endeavour, the professionalism, competence and adaptability of a ship's company has made them extremely effective and welcome ambassadors, particularly when humanitarian intervention or civil aid is required. 'The RAN', as Professor Peter Edwards noted at a recent SPC-A conference, 'has had a more significant role in the South Pacific than has often been understood or portrayed'.⁶ Operation ANODE simply provides the latest example of this role, and in the uncertain world of the future it is one that seems likely to continue.

¹ See J. Bach, *The Australia Station*, NSW University Press, 1986.
² *ibid.*
³ Some sources place casualties at 70 or more. See S. Alasia (1997). *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia: Party Politics and Government in Solomon Islands*. Australian National University Discussion Paper 97/7.
⁴ See G. Swinden, 'HMAS Adelaide and Malaita', D. Stevens (ed.), *Maritime Power in the 20th Century*, Allen & Unwin, 1997.
⁵ See D. Stevens (ed.), 'The Royal Australian Navy', Oxford University Press, 2001.
⁶ P. Edwards, 'The RAN in Australian Diplomacy', Third King-Hall Naval History Conference, July 2003.

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