

SEMAPHORE

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THE PACIFIC PATROL BOAT PROJECT

The 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) introduced a 200nm exclusive economic zone (EEZ) around sovereign coastal states. The sudden expansion of responsibility from a 12nm territorial sea to a 200nm EEZ dramatically increased the area of ocean requiring surveillance, monitoring and policing by these nations, increasing the strain on existing maritime patrol resources, and highlighting the need for countries without a maritime patrol force to obtain one. In particular, island nations throughout the South-West Pacific were faced with the responsibility of policing an area of ocean that was often far larger than their landmass, with unsuitable or non-existent patrol resources, and limited funding and experience with which to obtain a suitable capability.

In 1979 the Australian and New Zealand governments, at the request of Pacific island nations, sent defence representatives into the South-West Pacific region to assess surveillance and maritime patrol requirements.¹ With the exception of Australia, which had declared a 200nm Australian Fishing Zone in 1979, the advent of UNCLOS introduced regulatory, surveillance and patrol requirements far beyond the capacity of any regional nation. The governments of a number of the Pacific island nations expressed their concern about the need for a suitable maritime patrol force to fulfil their new surveillance requirements. The Australian government responded by instituting a Defence Cooperation Project (DCP), to provide suitable patrol vessels and associated training and infrastructure to island nations in the region. The Pacific Patrol Boat Systems Program Office was created within the Minor War Vessels Branch of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) procurement organisation to manage the DCP² and to be the Project Authority.

In August 1984 the Australian government released a request for tender for the construction of patrol craft suitable for Pacific island nations to use in surveillance and maritime patrol operations.³ Australian Shipbuilding Industries Pty Ltd (now Tenix Western Australia) was awarded the contract for the design and construction of the patrol boats in September 1985 and the first of ten vessels was scheduled for delivery in early 1987.⁴ The resulting Pacific Patrol Boat (PPB) is a light, but robust, vessel designed for surveillance and interdiction patrols, search and rescue, and fisheries protection. With a range of 2500 nautical miles at 12 knots, a sprint capability of 20 plus knots, and light armament, the PPB is well suited for use by Pacific island nations to monitor and police their EEZs. The first vessel, HMPNGS *Tarangau*, was officially handed over to the Papua New Guinea Defence Force on 16 May 1987. Some initial teething problems were identified and corrected

after the first two vessels were completed, with upgrades to propellers, air conditioning, engine cooling systems, and other modifications, becoming standard features in later vessels.⁵ Tenix maintains follow on support for the PPBs in Brisbane, Queensland, and in Suva, Fiji, through the provision of spare parts and technical advice.

The number of vessels planned for construction and the number of participating countries increased during the course of the project. The end-state of the construction phase of the project was a total of 22 boats delivered to 12 countries, compared to the original order of 10 boats for 8 countries. Nations currently operating PPBs include Papua New Guinea (4), Fiji (3), Federated States of Micronesia (3), Tonga (3), Solomon Islands (2), Cook Islands (1), Kiribati (1), Marshall Islands (1), Palau (1), Western Samoa (1), Tuvalu (1) and Vanuatu (1)⁶. The final vessel to be constructed was delivered to the Federated States of Micronesia in June 1997. In total, the project cost for 22 vessels and associated support was \$A155.25 million.



Pacific Patrol Boat

In addition to providing the patrol boats, Australia has conducted training for personnel intended to operate the PPBs, giving them the skills to conduct surveillance operations with minimal external input. This training has come from two sources. The Department of Defence has provided training through its International Navigation and Navigator Yeoman courses, as well as more general management, staff and operational courses. The Australian



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Maritime College (AMC) in Launceston, Tasmania has provided many courses in maritime technical, seamanship, communications and management subjects in support of the PPB Project. Since 1998, the AMC has conducted 32 courses per year for the PPB Project at an annual cost to the Australian government of approximately \$A1.5m.⁷

Although Australia does not operate the PPB, the project has provided a number of RAN posting opportunities. Positions have been established for one officer and one or two senior sailors, as operational and technical advisors, in each island nation operating the PPB. The RAN advisory teams aim to assist in the development of sustainable maritime surveillance capabilities,⁸ whilst also providing assistance and support for personnel operating PPBs, and ongoing training for their effective operation. The advisors concentrate on factors including command and control, surveillance and maintenance and repair of the vessels. Additionally, the RAN has provided infrastructure and support for the PPBs through wharf and support facility construction and the progressive establishment of 17 Maritime Surveillance Communications Network Centres throughout the region.⁹

Australia's continued support of the PPB has contributed to closer relations with neighbouring countries.¹⁰ Strengthened relations through the South-West Pacific aligned well with Defence aims through the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the strategic focus shifted from a 'Defence of Australia' posture to a shared understanding of strategic priorities and cooperation. This incorporated the development of strategic capabilities and the fostering of a 'self reliance' attitude in Australia's neighbours – an aspect well provided for by the PPB project. A potential long-term benefit of investing in capabilities of other nations is the refinement or redirection of Defence support spending in the future, as those nations grow in experience of maritime surveillance and response operations.

Additionally, the introduction of self-reliant patrol forces throughout the region has eased the strain on Australia's own maritime patrol force. Cooperation between Australia and its Pacific neighbours has allowed for a greater allocation of RAN patrol boats to protecting Australia's maritime resources, patrolling the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC), and conducting border protection operations. Australia currently conducts bilateral and multilateral exercises with countries participating in the PPB project to develop and maintain high standards of surveillance and patrol capabilities in the region.

Recently, PPBs from all nations involved in the project have undergone a half-life refit and are undertaking a life extension program. The life extension program provides a refit for the vessels at the 15-year mark, in addition to the previously conducted 7-8 year refit, and also provides for further training and logistic support from Australia. The life extension refit involves the refurbishment of the hull and structure, and the refurbishment or replacement of ship systems. The life extension program commenced in 2003 and is expected to complete in 2012. As a result, the service life expectancy of the vessels has been doubled from 15 years to 30 years. This will see the PPB potentially operating in the region until at least 2027.

Because the PPB project has been such a success in providing an effective surveillance and response capability, countries that have developed expertise in the operation of the PPB may in the future see a need to enhance this capability by incorporating a more sophisticated vessel, with greater endurance, improved seakeeping, and better boarding capacity, into their maritime patrol forces. The driving factors behind such a policy decision would most likely be linked to increasing pressure on local fish stocks from foreign fishing, as oceanic resources are increasingly depleted in traditional fishing grounds outside the South-West Pacific, or changes to the coastal state rights and obligations currently detailed in UNCLOS.

Should this be the case, the design and construction capabilities of Australian industry can meet the requirement. As an example, the *Armidale* Class patrol boats currently being constructed by Austal Ships for the RAN may be a suitable design. An alternative might be the Inshore Patrol Vessel to be constructed by Tenix Defence Pty Ltd for the Royal New Zealand Navy. In addition to enhancing the current capabilities of countries operating PPBs, and increasing the interoperability of Australia's maritime patrol capabilities with those of neighbouring nations, these options would support Australia's maritime industry by providing for the construction of additional patrol boats beyond the current project completion dates of 2008 and 2010. However, Australian industry should be well placed to meet whatever the future aspirations of the PPB user nations are as the boats themselves approach their life of type.

The Pacific Patrol Boat Project has been beneficial for the ADF in general, and the RAN in particular. The development of self-reliant regional maritime patrol forces is significantly improving the response to resource violations in South-West Pacific EEZs. Strengthened regional relations and increased maritime patrol capabilities help maintain Australia's sovereignty and SLOCs, as well as contributing positively to regional stability and maritime security cooperation.

¹ Department of Defence, *Defence Cooperation: Program Evaluation*, Director Publishing, Defence Centre, Canberra, January 1995, p. 2-3

² DMO Internet, *SEA 1363 – Pacific Patrol Boat Project*, Online, <http://intranet.defence.gov.au/dmoweb/sites/SEA1363> visited 7 Feb 05.

³ Royal Australian Navy, *Chief of Naval Staff Newsletter April 1985*, Department of Defence (Navy Office), Canberra, 1985, p. 16

⁴ Royal Australian Navy, *Chief of Naval Staff Newsletter November 1985*, Department of Defence (Navy Office), Canberra, 1985, p. 12

⁵ Tenix Defence Pty. Ltd., *31.5m Pacific Patrol Boat*, Tenix Marine Division.

⁶ Department of Defence, *Review of the Defence Annual Report 2002-03*, Defence Publishing Service, Canberra, 2003, pp. 64-65, para. 6.5

⁷ DMO Internet, *SEA 1363 – Pacific Patrol Boat Project*, Online, <http://intranet.defence.gov.au/dmoweb/sites/SEA1363> visited 7 Feb 05.

⁸ Department of Defence, *Defence Report 2002-03*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 2003, p. 171

⁹ Department of Defence, *Defence Report 1993-94*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1994, p. 172

¹⁰ Department of Defence, *Defence Report 1998-99*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1999, p. 7



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