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RAN ACTIVITIES IN THE SOUTHERN OCEAN

The effect of the weather in or near the Southern Ocean and its impact on Royal Australian Navy (RAN) operations was considered in a recent *Semaphore* Newsletter.¹ This *Semaphore* describes some RAN activities in the Southern Ocean since World War II (WWII).

RAN capabilities were vital to the creation of the Australian National Antarctic Research Expedition's (ANARE) scientific Research Stations on Heard and Macquarie Islands in the late 1940s. The RAN then conducted annual resupply of the stations for several years and undertook a number of emergency medical evacuations. More recently, the RAN has operated deep into the Southern Ocean, firstly to meet Australia's international Search and Rescue obligations, and secondly, in fisheries protection operations around Heard and MacDonal Islands (HIMI).

HMA *LST3501* had been selected to provide logistic support to ANARE for the establishment of research stations on Heard Island, about 2160nm south west of Perth, and Macquarie Island, about 810nm south of Hobart. On 28 November 1947, *LST3501* left Fremantle arriving at Heard Island on 12 December. On arrival there were two tasks: identifying suitable landing sites to offload stores and personnel; and identifying the appropriate location for the Research Station. Small craft were used to ferry stores ashore in extremely difficult sea conditions, and *LST3501* beached to allow quick offloading of stores. After offloading all the stores, and leaving 14 ANARE personnel for their 12-month sojourn, *LST3501* departed for Kerguelen Island to land fuel for HMAS *Wyatt Earp* and then proceeded to Melbourne.² In late 1947, the RAN commissioned the motor vessel *Wyatt Earp* to explore King George V Island off Antarctica. It departed Melbourne on 8 February 1948, however, the pack ice was too dense to force a passage and after numerous attempts, *Wyatt Earp* set course for Macquarie Island.³

After repairs in Melbourne and re-storing, *LST3501* departed for Macquarie Island on 28 February 1948, carrying 13 ANARE personnel and 400 tons of stores. On 7 March, she arrived off Macquarie Island but could not beach herself as the shoreline was strewn with rocks, so small craft were used to reconnoitre and move stores ashore. The waters off Macquarie Island are quite rough, and these craft as well as pontoons were often damaged and in some cases destroyed. *Wyatt Earp* arrived on 20 March and both ships departed for Australia on 25 March.⁴

On 16 December 1948, *LST3501* was renamed HMAS *Labuan* (I) and under that name sailed to Heard Island three more times (January-February 1949, January-March 1950, and January-February 1951) and to Macquarie Island twice more (March-April 1949, and April 1950) to resupply the research stations and change-out the ANARE personnel. However *Labuan* was severely damaged by weather on her final return from Heard Island in 1951, and was not used again. This caused some disruption to ANARE resupply operations and since then ANARE has relied on chartered civilian resupply ships.⁵ However, in October 1985, the ANARE supply ship MV *Nella Dan* became trapped in pack

ice and could not resupply Macquarie Island, so HMAS *Stalwart* was diverted from South East Asia to provide essential supplies. This resupply effort involved the changeover of 39 research personnel, and offloading of 200,000 litres of fuel and more than 100 tonnes of general cargo, the bulk of which was transferred ashore by Sea King helicopter.

As there are no airstrips on Heard or Macquarie Islands, any medical evacuation must be done by sea, and the RAN has conducted four such operations. In July 1950, the Medical Officer on Heard Island self diagnosed himself with appendicitis and requested medical evacuation. After two civilian ships failed in their attempts to effect a rescue, the task fell to the RAN. On 27 July 1950 the heavy cruiser HMAS *Australia* (II) was dispatched on a lengthy mercy mission through gale conditions and blizzards. The crew of *Australia* had one day's notice of the impending mission and spent that time taking on fresh provisions, winter and Arctic clothing and special stores, while offloading all equipment, such as motor boats, the whaler and skiffs, from the upper deck. The major planning consideration was fuel usage and the principal factor affecting fuel usage was the weather. The need to sail at speed would deplete fuel quickly, and the possibility of poor weather at Heard Island would require *Australia* to loiter, demanding the extra fuel that would have been used in a rapid transit. Luckily the weather on the outward passage was better than expected and left enough fuel for the remainder of the task, while poor weather off Heard Island delayed *Australia* for a day before she could launch a boat to the island to collect the patient. *Australia* suffered some structural damage during this operation and the Government decided the RAN would not be made available in future to attempt this type of rescue for ANARE.⁶

However in October 1966, HMAS *Queenborough* while on a training cruise in Tasmanian waters was dispatched through 9 metre swells and up to 60 knot winds with blinding hail and snow, to effect an evacuation from Macquarie Island. Once there, it took 30 minutes for the ship's boat to get to shore, allowing the patient to be immediately loaded onboard. The weather then worsened and it became apparent that, had *Queenborough* arrived an hour later the weather would have been too poor to allow boat work, and the ship would have had to loiter offshore and use up valuable fuel reserves.⁷

In May 1967, HMAS *Perth* (II) evacuated a patient from Macquarie Island. In spite of icy conditions, gale force winds and rough seas, the patient was taken offshore in an inflatable life raft, thence to the ship's boat and then to *Perth*. Finally, in January 1979, HMAS *Hobart* (II) was dispatched to Macquarie Island to evacuate a badly injured patient. On this occasion, *Hobart* operated in conjunction with the Antarctic Support Vessel *Thala Dan*. *Hobart's* crew constructed a makeshift helipad so that *Thala Dan's* helicopter could pick up the patient from the island and airlift him directly to *Hobart*.⁸

In the 1990s, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) conducted two well-publicised rescues of stranded yachtsmen deep in the Southern Ocean. In late December 1994, HMAS *Darwin*



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was directed to sail in search of the lone yachtswoman Isabelle Autissier, stranded some 900nm off Adelaide. On 1 January 1995, *Darwin* launched its Seahawk helicopter and an hour later Autissier was safe onboard. Two years later, the ADF undertook one of the most complex ocean rescues ever attempted. On 6 January 1997 distress beacons were activated in the Southern Ocean, and the Australian Maritime Safety Authority ascertained that two yachtsmen were in trouble. HMAS *Adelaide* (II) sailed at 1600 that day and was in constant contact with Royal Australian Air Force Orion aircraft that had located each vessel and directed *Adelaide* to effect the actual rescues. Early on 9 January *Adelaide*'s Seahawk helicopter rescued Thierry Dubois from a RAAF life raft dropped earlier near his stricken yacht. Shortly thereafter, *Adelaide* came to Tony Bullimore's overturned yacht, launched its boat and rescued him after he swam out from beneath the hull.⁹

Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea 1982, Australia now claims a 200nm Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) for its offshore territories, and also claims sovereign rights to manage and conserve associated fish stocks in those waters. The Patagonian Toothfish is a valuable fish found in the waters around the HIMI and is the target of illegal fishing. The RAN is occasionally tasked with patrols into the HIMI, and given the possible open-ended nature of each deployment, the major fleet units are accompanied by a tanker. The purpose of these patrols is to deter Foreign Fishing Vessels (FFVs) or catch them in the act and then take them into custody. The RAN has undertaken four such deployments, supplementing civilian-chartered vessels by the Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA) and been involved in two other interception activities.

In October 1997 HMAS *Anzac* (III) deployed from Fremantle with the tanker HMAS *Westralia* (II) in support as part of Operation DIRK. On 15 October, *Anzac* sighted a FFV on radar, subsequently identified her as the *Salvora*, shadowed her and then attempted a boarding, but bad weather intervened. Later that day, the *Salvora* was boarded, a steaming party embarked and she was directed to make passage to Fremantle. On 17 October, *Anzac* inserted a boarding party by Seahawk aboard another FFV, the *Aliza Glacial*, and a steaming party was left on board while *Anzac* escorted both FFVs to a rendezvous with *Westralia* on 18 October. *Westralia* subsequently took charge of both FFVs while *Anzac*, after refuelling from *Westralia*, continued patrolling, but no further FFVs were sighted.¹⁰

In February 1998 HMAS *Newcastle* and *Westralia* deployed as part of Operation STANHOPE. On 19 February, the *Big Star* was boarded and apprehended 9nm inside the EEZ. During the boarding operation, the Rigid Hull Inflatable Boat (RHIB) overturned, requiring a 'rescue' by the Seahawk helicopter. *Westralia* and *Big Star* detached from the area on 22 February to make passage for Fremantle, while *Newcastle* continued patrolling until poor weather led to her being recalled. *Newcastle* rendezvoused with *Westralia* on 28 February to refuel, and then all returned to Fremantle.¹¹

In April 2001, a Togo-registered but Spanish owned FFV was caught illegally fishing in the HIMI by the AFMA chartered vessel *Southern Supporter*. When challenged, the *South Tomi* initially headed towards Fremantle, but once on the high seas it turned towards Africa. The AFMA vessel chased the ship across the Indian Ocean for 14 days, while RAN personnel flew to South Africa and with the assistance of the South African Defence Force, boarded the ship, which was subsequently returned to Australia for the crew to face court. The skipper of the *South Tomi* was fined \$136,000, the illegal catch of 116 tonnes of Toothfish was sold for \$1.4m and the boat was forfeited. Similarly in Operation GEMSBOK, the

ADF operated in conjunction with AFMA, Coastwatch and the Republic of South Africa to apprehend the *Viarsa I* as it fled from the HIMI EEZ across the Indian Ocean in late 2003.

On 29 January 2002, HMAS *Canberra* (II), which had been preparing to deploy to the Arabian Gulf, and *Westralia* deployed as part of Operation SUTTON to apprehend up to three fishing vessels. On 6 February, the *Lena* was discovered early in the morning but bad weather delayed boarding until the afternoon. *Westralia* subsequently escorted the *Lena* while *Canberra* investigated a contact to the north, and later that day the *Volga* was boarded and apprehended.¹² *Westralia* escorted the *Lena* and the *Volga* outside the HIMI EEZ while *Canberra* continued patrolling, but there were no more sightings so all ships returned to Fremantle.¹³

In January 2004, HMAS *Warramunga* (II) deployed as part of Operation CELESTA. *Warramunga* boarded and apprehended the *Maya V* and two days later HMAS *Success* (II) rendezvoused with *Warramunga*. *Warramunga* returned to Fremantle with the *Maya V*, and *Success* continued patrolling. *Success* subsequently discovered two sets of fishing buoys that had been layed by *Maya V* as part of her long line fishing; they were recovered and proved to be crucial prosecution evidence against the *Maya V*. During *Warramunga*'s return to Hobart, she sighted a suspect FFV 350nm south east of Heard Island and warned her off as there was no other reason for the vessel to be in the vicinity unless she planned to fish illegally.¹⁴

The RAN's activities in the Southern Ocean emphasise a number of characteristics of naval forces. The reach of naval forces is considerable and is further enhanced through the use of tanker support. To place the distances inherent in Southern Ocean operations in perspective, the transit from Fremantle to Heard Island exceeds the breadth of the North Atlantic Ocean; a WWII Atlantic Ocean convoy would have travelled, at a minimum, 1740nm from Londonderry in Northern Ireland to St Johns in Newfoundland in Canada.

Sea conditions in the Southern Ocean are treacherous, yet naval forces are resilient in the face of weather damage and able to continue with their assigned tasks. Importantly, multi-rolled naval forces seamlessly transition between roles and are able to be re-tasked quickly, usually without any need for further resupply of specialised crew training.

¹ Royal Australian Navy, 'The Effects of Weather on RAN Operations in the Southern Ocean', *Semaphore* Newsletter, Issue 13, July 2006.
² HMA *LST3501*, Report of Proceedings – Voyage to Heard Island [1947-1948]
³ HMAS *Wyatt Earp*, Report of Proceedings, 1 April 1948.
⁴ HMA *LST3501*, Report of Proceedings, 1 April 1948.
⁵ T. Bowden, *The Silence Calling: Australians in Antarctica 1947-97*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonard's, 1997, pp. 82, 86.
⁶ HMAS *Australia*, Report on Mission to Heard Island July-August 1950 and T. Bowden, *The Silence Calling*, pp. 77-80.
⁷ Royal Australian Navy, *Navy News*, 9 December 1966, p. 3.
⁸ Royal Australian Navy, *Navy News*, 12 May 1967, pp. 1, 3. HMAS *Hobart*, Report of Proceedings, January 1979. This rescue is covered in more detail in Royal Australian Navy, 'Naval Ingenuity: a Case Study', *Semaphore* Newsletter, Issue 18, November 2005.
⁹ HMAS *Darwin*, Reports of Proceedings, December 1994, January 1995. HMAS *Adelaide*, Report of Proceedings, January 1997.
¹⁰ HMAS *Anzac*, Report of Proceedings, October 1997.
¹¹ HMAS *Newcastle*, Report of Proceedings, February 1998.
¹² The pursuit of the *Volga* raised interesting legal questions which are examined in Royal Australian Navy, 'Hot Pursuit and Australian Fisheries Law', *Semaphore* Newsletter, Issue 11, June 2006.
¹³ HMAS *Canberra*, Report of Proceedings, January 2002.
¹⁴ Peter Chase, 'Antarctica Success' in Royal Australian Navy, *Australia's Navy 2004*, Canberra, 2005, pp. 9-11.

