

## THE LOGISTIC SUPPORT ELEMENT – MIDDLE EAST

The Logistic Support Element (LSE) Middle East was established on 30 August 1990 to support Australian military operations in the region and now, after 18 years, its work continues as a testament to Australia's enduring interests in the Middle East.

On 10 August 1990, Prime Minister Bob Hawke announced the Australian Defence Force (ADF) would deploy to the Middle East to assist the United States (US) led multinational force in maintaining the United Nations (UN) sanctions against Iraq.<sup>1</sup> The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) contributed three ships to Operation DAMASK to assist the Maritime Interception Force (MIF) patrolling the Gulf of Oman. A number of smaller units, including medical detachments and an Australian Clearance Diving Team (AUSCDT 3), were also dispatched to the region. The LSE was established, the first of its kind to be formed by the ADF, to support these units.

Commander Boyd Robinson, RAN, arrived at Oman with a small team of supply specialists and he became the inaugural RAN Liaison Officer (RANLO) - Muscat and Commander of the newly established LSE. Initially the element's task was relatively simple: to consolidate air freighted stores and mail from Australia for transfer to the ships; to arrange for provisions, fuel and repairs from local sources; and to arrange ship visits to ports and anchorages throughout the Middle East. This soon expanded to include arranging medical treatment, sporting and recreational activities, and negotiating with foreign nationals for the provision of various contracted services. RANLO adopted a 'quasi diplomatic role to ensure the LSE could conduct its activities in the most effective manner and to represent other significant operational and administrative matters to local authorities.'<sup>2</sup> LSE staff also arranged RAN ships' port visits to the area, and their duties ranged from ensuring adequate force protection measures to providing information on the local attractions.



*HMA Ships Adelaide and Success in Muscat 1990 (RAN)*

In December 1990 the Australian Government authorised the RAN task group to enter the Arabian Gulf and cooperate with other allied naval forces preparing to use force to liberate Kuwait under UN Resolution 678. The LSE's area of support and concept of operations increased accordingly. To cover the additional burden, logistic support detachments were established at the principal transport hubs of Bahrain

and Dubai. While the main LSE remained at Muscat, some LSE personnel supplemented these small detachments.

Operation DESERT STORM, the offensive to free Kuwait, was launched on 17 January 1991. As commercial air services in the region ceased immediately the LSE lost its primary means of supply from Australia. The air link was rapidly re-established using Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) aircraft and freight was transported either by road between Muscat and Dubai or using transport aircraft supplied by our allies. To assist the LSE in this new role a specialist movement and transport non-commissioned officer from the RAAF joined the team, increasing the number of deployed LSE personnel to ten.

The RAN needed to be self-sufficient to sustain its operations in the Gulf and the LSE was a vital cog in the wheel that supported the Australian warships. The LSE developed agreements with allied nations to deliver stores, fuel, freight and personnel into and across the region, and Australian ships were able to receive supplies and personnel while at sea even in the absence of the RAN replenishment ship. As a result Australian warships were able to remain on station longer than originally anticipated. The LSE also provided support to AUSCDT3, the Australian medical teams embedded in the US hospital ship *Comfort* and to visiting ADF personnel and aircraft. All ADF units and personnel required a flexible and responsive service in order to meet unplanned and often urgent requirements.

On cessation of hostilities in February 1991, RAN ships remained on station to continue enforcing UN trade sanctions against the Iraqi Government under Saddam Hussein. The LSE centre of operations moved from Muscat to Bahrain to take advantage of the country's excellent telecommunications and its position as a major transport hub. The presence of the US Navy's Administrative Support Unit in Bahrain also allowed greater cooperation between allies.

Australian operations subsequently moved to the northern Red Sea, where RAN ships were inspecting all merchant traffic entering the Jordanian port of Aqaba. This led to the construction of some unique logistic supply chains as in almost all cases personnel, mail and other freight arrived in Bahrain by commercial aircraft. Personnel could generally travel via commercial airlines to the closest port for transfer to their destination. Mail and freight went by an indirect route; from Bahrain via Sicily to Egypt before delivery. During this period the LSE also provided administrative support for Australians attached to the UN Chemical Destruction team operating in Iraq and became the point of contact for a 'rapidly expanding interest in Australian military training for Middle Eastern armed forces.'<sup>3</sup>

Over the next three and a half years the RAN continued to enforce trade sanctions against Iraq with the LSE delivering 'replenishment, maintenance and support to personnel, including health, administration and financial arrangements.'<sup>4</sup> On occasion, this support extended beyond the Middle East. For example, during Australia's contribution to the UN led peacekeeping force in Somalia, Operation SOLACE,

RANLO Bahrain was required to liaise with local authorities in both Mombasa (Kenya), and Mogadishu (Somalia).<sup>5</sup> Here the established relationships between the LSE and its primary agent, Inchape Shipping Services (ISS) proved beneficial. The ISS representative in Mombasa provided assistance, including making a workspace and dedicated telephone line available within his own office space. Although an Australian Army support group operated in Somalia outside of RANLO Bahrain's control, some of the equipment to establish the support group was supplied by the LSE and most of the stores for the RAN ships in Operation SOLACE were distributed by the LSE.

In August 1994, Australian ships temporarily withdrew from the Middle East and the LSE was deactivated. The transfer of about 200kg of official records and specialist equipment back to Australia and the sale of all furniture and office equipment made the process 'reasonably time consuming and frustrating'.<sup>6</sup> The final RAN representative departed Bahrain on 18 August 1994, four years after the LSE's inception in Oman. But the Australian deployments to the Middle East were only suspended temporarily.

The RAN returned to uphold UN sanctions against Iraq in May 1996, when HMAS *Melbourne* was deployed to the Arabian Gulf and the LSE, now consisting of three staff, returned to Bahrain. To help boost Australia's diplomacy in the region *Melbourne* conducted ten port visits in the space of three months. The specific aims of these port visits were to conduct sporting and cultural exchanges, to 'fly the flag' through events such as official receptions, and to provide the crew with rest and recreation.<sup>7</sup> When *Melbourne* left the region the LSE was deactivated, but after a two year absence the LSE returned to the Gulf in May 1999. This time the three member LSE team was based at Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. As for earlier deployments the LSE provided direct logistic support as well as those services more commonly handled by port authorities in Australia. Following another short intermission the LSE was reactivated in July 2001, with a staff of two, in support of HMAS *Anzac's* deployment to the Gulf.



Members of the LSE Middle East team during 2004 (RAN)

The situation in the Middle East changed dramatically after the 11 September 2001 terror attacks against the US. The ADF presence in the region was increased considerably as Operations BASTILLE and FALCONER evolved and the LSE grew to nine personnel spread between Bahrain and Dubai. The LSE's responsibilities included: scheduling replenishments at sea and coordinating activities with the US Commander Logistics Forces (Commander Task Force 53),

port visit support, provision of goods and services, health care, provisions, stores/mail, personnel movements, finance and general administration.<sup>8</sup> Such logistic inputs enabled RAN ships and AUSCDT 3 to make a significant contribution during the 2003 Iraq War.

Operation CATALYST, Australia's contribution to rebuild Iraq, began on 16 July 2003. The now five strong LSE remained to source and coordinate the delivery of spare parts, provisions and general support to Australia's maritime units. They also acted as the interface between ships and shore support infrastructure, facilitating diplomatic clearances, customs and quarantine compliance, and contractual arrangements for support. This support included handling a total of 8810kg of mail both in and out of the area over a six month period. Routine stores from Australia arrived via a weekly ADF charter flight using Ilyushin IL76 transport aircraft. Other commercial aircraft were used only for urgent stores deliveries. Onward distribution was achieved through a number of methods, but primarily by using coalition air assets. Between September 2003 and March 2004 over six tonnes of stores were air-freighted between Australia and the Middle East.

Today the LSE continues to provide operational logistic support to ADF elements and personnel assigned to operations in the Middle East. They not only support Australian elements in the Arabian Gulf but also handle urgent stores and material for Australian Army elements operating in Afghanistan. During the past 18 years the LSE has supported operations in Kuwait, Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan as well as port visits to almost every port along the Red Sea, the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Gulf. Team members have operated throughout the Middle East Area of Operations (MEAO), rarely staying in the one location for more than two weeks in order to meet consignment flights, for loading and off-loading stores and materiel, or arranging and supporting visits. Port visits are now a regular part of the RAN's diplomatic engagement in the Middle East, with at least twelve visits programmed throughout the MEAO during each six month rotation.

Regardless of the number of ships on duty in the Arabian Gulf, a trained, active and appropriately resourced LSE will always be a force multiplier, maximizing the time spent by ships on station; providing logistic support at sea and port support alongside; acting as a conduit between ADF forces and the national support base; and undertaking a naval diplomatic role within the Middle East region – all with a handful of dedicated staff working to the motto: *Anything, anywhere, anytime.*

1. For an overview of RAN operations in the Middle East see G Nash & D Stevens, *Australia's Navy in the Gulf*, Topmill, Sydney, 2006.
2. B Robinson, 'Operational Logistics – A recent experience', *Naval Supply Magazine*, June 1991, pp. 13-19.
3. R Jude, 'Operational Logistics – Ongoing Support', *Naval Supply Magazine*, June 1993, pp. 33-37.
4. Royal Australian Navy, *The Navy Contribution to Australian Maritime Operations*, Sea Power Centre - Australia, Canberra, 2005, p. 64.
5. R Jude, 'Operational Logistics – Ongoing Support', *Naval Supply Magazine*, June 1993, pp. 36.
6. H. Lok, 'Tales from the Middle East', *Naval Supply Magazine*, December 1994, pp. 51-59.
7. C. Opie, 'Operation Damask IX Logistic Support Element – Dubai', *Naval Supply Magazine*, December 1999, p. 45.
8. A Mierisch, 'RAN Logistic Support Element – Middle East', *Navy Supply Newsletter*, January 2003, pp. 76-77.

