

Persian Gulf

Australia's participation in the Maritime Interception Force

- 4.1 The Maritime Interception Force was established in August 1990, in response to resolutions passed by the United Nations Security Council, to halt all inward and outward maritime traffic to Iraq to ensure compliance with the economic sanctions imposed on Iraq after its invasion of Kuwait.¹
- 4.2 Royal Australian Navy (RAN) ships have participated in the Maritime Interception Force since its inception, under the codename OPERATION DAMASK. In the period before the September 11 terrorist attacks, 13 RAN ships had been deployed to participate in the Interception Force. Other nations have also routinely contributed ships to the Interception Force, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Belgium, New Zealand, Italy and the Netherlands.
- 4.3 Following the September 11 attacks, Australia's participation in the Interception Force was extended indefinitely and the forces deployed were incorporated into OPERATION SLIPPER, the ADF's contribution to the International Coalition Against Terrorism.
- 4.4 The Maritime Interception Force conducts patrol and boarding operations in the central and northern Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. Vessels containing cargoes of prohibited goods bound for Iraq are turned away or escorted back to their port of origin. Vessels containing prohibited exports from Iraq (mostly oil, but also other commodities) are detained and diverted to ports in the area for sanctions enforcement actions as required by the United Nations Security Council resolutions. The Interception Force

1 See United Nations Security Council Resolutions 661, 665, 687, 986 and 1175.

does not conduct operations within the territorial waters of Gulf States, other than Iraq and Kuwait (which allows Interception Force ships to berth for resupply and maintenance purposes).

- 4.5 It is important to stress that the maritime interception operations are not offensive operations against Iraq. They are routine sanctions enforcement measures authorised by Security Council resolutions.

Current commitment

- 4.6 At the time of the delegation's visit, two RAN ships, the Anzac class frigate HMAS *Arunta* and the Adelaide class frigate HMAS *Melbourne*, were deployed to the Maritime Interception Force. In addition, a small logistics element to support Australian naval units and personnel in the Gulf region is integrated into the United States Task Group Headquarters in Bahrain.
- 4.7 All Australian ships deployed to the Interception Force remain under Australian national command, although, as the Interception Force is led by the United States, the ships are under United States Navy operational control. Day-to-day tactical control of the Interception Force rotates between the various contributing nations and has, on a number of occasions, been exercised by RAN commanders. At present, tactical control is exercised by RAN Captain Peter Sinclair and his Australian Naval Task Group staff embarked on *USS Hopper*, a United States Navy guided missile destroyer.

Visit to the *USS Hopper*

- 4.8 The delegation transferred from Kuwait's naval base to the *USS Hopper* using a combination of US Navy Special Warfare Mark 5 boats and a RAN Seahawk helicopter.

A Royal Australian Navy Seahawk helicopter transferring members of the delegation to the *USS Hopper*.

- 4.9 On arrival aboard the *USS Hopper* the delegation was met by the ship's captain, Commander Ken Auten, and the Australian Naval Task Group Commander, Captain Peter Sinclair.
- 4.10 The delegation received a comprehensive brief on the operations of the Maritime Interception Force from Captain Sinclair and his Chief of Staff, Commander Peter Stafford. The key elements of the brief were as follows:
- the Australian Naval Task Group Commander exercises tactical control of the Interception Force from the *USS Hopper*. Staff of the Naval Task Group Command are fully integrated with the *USS Hopper*'s crew;
 - a classified level briefing on the day-to-day tasks associated with enforcing sanctions against Iraq – covering the operation of smugglers seeking to illegally export Iraqi oil and other commodities, including dates; the vessels and tactics used by smugglers; the patrol and boarding operations undertaken by the Interception Force; the area in which those operations occur; and the cumulative impact of those operations. It was apparent that the Interception Force has developed a comprehensive understanding of smuggler operations and is using this knowledge to counter, very effectively, illegal smuggling operations;
 - interception operations are continuing at a very high tempo, requiring Coalition naval vessels to be ready to respond to smuggler break-outs at short notice. During the visit, the delegation observed a boarding party from the *USS Hopper* board a suspected illegal oil smuggler and direct the vessel to return to port in Iraq; and

- the Australian Naval Task Group had injected a different tactical approach to the operation, which is widely regarded as having increased the effectiveness of the sanctions enforcement effort. There is, however, a limit in the extent to which the Naval Task Group can change operational parameters, as they operate within the broader US-led Interception Force command structure.

4.11 The delegation was also briefed by Lieutenant Rich Butler, the *USS Hopper*'s Combat Systems Officer, on the capabilities of the *Hopper*.

Lieutenant Richard Butler, US Navy, briefing the delegation
(with Senator Alan Ferguson, Senator Marise Payne and Laurie Brereton MP).

4.12 The *USS Hopper* is an Arleigh Burke class multi-mission AEGIS guided missile destroyer. The ship's primary task is to operate offensively in a high density, multi-threat environment as an integral member of a battle group, surface action group, amphibious task group, or underway replenishment group. It has an impressive air warfare capability that enables it to detect, identify, prioritise and destroy air threats at extended ranges. This capability is far greater than that possessed by the deployed RAN frigates. The presence of the *USS Hopper* in the Persian Gulf greatly assists in the force protection of Australian and other Coalition naval vessels. Arleigh Burke class destroyers also carry HARPOON anti-shiping missiles, TOMAHAWK cruise missiles and an undersea and mine-warfare capability.

4.13 The *USS Hopper* is a 'state of the art' vessel, which could potentially provide the long-range air-defence capacity identified by the Government as a requirement in the *Defence 2000 White Paper*. The *White Paper*

described the acquisition of air warfare destroyers with this capacity as a major issue for the RAN – ‘without it our ships are more vulnerable to air attack, less capable of defending forces deployed offshore and less capable of contribution to coalition naval operations’.²

- 4.14 **The Government has commenced a project to acquire air warfare destroyers with this capability, known as Project Sea 4000. Given the significance of this project, the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade will, through its Defence Sub-Committee, closely monitor its progress.**
- 4.15 The formal brief was followed by a tour of the ship, during which we observed the high level of professional integration between the Australian Naval Task Group staff and the *USS Hopper* crew: they work side-by-side in the operations room, on the bridge and on watch.

Lieutenant Courtney Rogers, US Navy, briefing the delegation during a tour of the *USS Hopper* (with Senator Alan Ferguson, David Jull MP, Geoff Prosser MP and Senator Marise Payne)

Visits to HMAS *Arunta* and HMAS *Melbourne*

- 4.16 Following the visit to the *USS Hopper*, the delegation split into two groups for transfer by RAN Seahawk helicopter to the HMAS *Arunta* and the

2 Department of Defence, White Paper – Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force, Commonwealth of Australia, October 2000 p. 89

HMAS *Melbourne*. Senator Ferguson, Senator Payne, Mr Jull and Mr Prosser transferred to the HMAS *Melbourne*. Mr Brereton, Mr Edwards, Mr Snowden, Mr Scott and Mr Beazley transferred to the HMAS *Arunta*. Both parties stayed on-board overnight.

4.17 While aboard the *Arunta* and the *Melbourne*, the delegation toured the ships, met the crew and observed operational routines as both vessels conducted patrol and boarding operations. The key observations from this period are:

- the morale on both ships was very high. The crew were open, friendly and clearly finding the experience of working on active service to be professionally rewarding;
- both ships were extremely busy. While the delegation was aboard, crew from both ships conducted boardings of suspected smuggler vessels throughout the night. This involved sending armed boarding parties in small Rigid Hull Inflatable Boats (RHIBs) to board suspected smugglers and inspect their cargo. A number of the vessels boarded and inspected were found to be carrying illegal oil and date exports and were ordered to return to port in Iraq;
- the men and women participating in RAN boarding parties have demonstrated a unique, high-level capability by conducting 'non-complaint' as well as 'compliant' boardings. Regular naval personnel from other nations operating as part of the Maritime Interception Force conduct only 'compliant' boardings – leaving 'non-compliant' boardings to be undertaken by Special Forces;³
- the delegation was extremely impressed by the commitment being shown by the officers and crew on both the *Arunta* and the *Melbourne* and noted that the management of crew fatigue is a key issue if the high tempo of operations is to be continued in a sustainable fashion; and
- the close working relationship and high level of interoperability with the other Coalition ships is notable. The *Arunta* and *Melbourne* are in constant contact with each other and the other ships in the Interception Force and are able to rapidly share critical information by means various secure and compatible systems.

3 A boarding is 'compliant' when the boarded vessel facilitates the boarding and complies with the directions of the boarding party. A boarding is 'non-compliant' when the boarded vessel fails to comply with the directions of the boarding party and employs passive defence measures to hinder or delay the boarding team. Passive defences may include measures such as denying a boarding party access to the wheelhouse or engine room through the construction of barriers or the locking of doors or hatches.

- 4.18 Those members of the delegation on-board the HMAS *Melbourne* departed at 3.00am on Thursday 25 July, travelling to the HMAS *Arunta* by RHIB. After touring the *Arunta*, both parties departed by RHIB or Seahawk helicopter, returning to the Kuwait Naval Base.

The HMAS *Melbourne*, an ADELAIDE class frigate

The HMAS *Arunta*, an ANZAC class frigate

The HMAS *Arunta* on patrol in the Persian Gulf

A boarding party from the HMAS *Arunta* prepares to board and inspect a cargo vessel.

Conclusions and observations

4.19 The primary observations and conclusions arising from this part of the visit are as follows:

- all of the RAN personnel with whom the delegation met demonstrated a strong commitment to their task and high morale. They were busy, focused and professional. They had no major complaints and were happy with their connectivity with home via a combination of the Internet, e-mail and telephone;
- the close and cooperative working relationship that has developed between Australian and other Coalition naval forces, particularly the United States Navy, is impressive. At an operational level, the ships are conducting combined operations successfully on a day-to-day basis. At a command level, the Australian Naval Task Group is exercising tactical command in a way that reflects great credit on the capacity of the RAN; and
- the RAN is making a very substantial contribution to the success of the Interception Force. The rate of successful interception of smuggler vessels is at an impressive level: smugglers are being deterred and illegal exports are being halted.