

# **History of Defence Landing Craft in Australia**



## **Balikpapan Class of Landing Craft Heavy (LCH)**

**1971 – 2014**

**Monograph 200**

# History of Australian Defence Landing Craft and the Balikpapan Class Landing Craft Heavy (LCH) 1971 – 2014

A personal account by Bjarne Kristensen.

## Introduction

When I commenced my research on the Balikpapan Class Landing Craft Heavy (LCH) it became obvious that the story needed to include a brief history of the amphibious vessels in the Australian Defence Force (ADF) as background to the introduction of the LCH in the early 1970's. My interest in amphibious craft used by the ADF, both Army and Navy, stemmed from my service in the LCH. I was posted to HMAS *Balikpapan* on three occasions. The first as Petty Officer Coxswain (POCOX) in 1979, then as an officer, the Executive Officer (XO) and last as the Commanding Officer (CO). Whilst researching the LCHs, I discovered Australian amphibious ships dating back to WW1.

## Research and Images

What follows are my recollections of HMAS *Balikpapan* and the other LCHs, and their crews, supplemented with information extracted from the Report of Proceedings held by the Australian War Memorial for the period and publications by the Australian Naval Institute and Naval Historical Society of Australia. Further research included FLICKR photographs, The Forge from the Australian Defence College, the Australian Army History Unit, the Australian Army Journal, and from Informit as well as the history of Walkers Limited.

## PART ONE

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF AMPHIBIOUS VESSELS IN AUSTRALIA

#### Amphibious Vessels Prior to 1959

Australian soldiers have operated watercraft since Federation. From the arrival of the first fleet, Royal Marines provided security and operated various types of watercraft. After Federation, as British Forces withdrew, the Marines were gradually replaced by the newly formed Australian Army. Australia never formed a Royal Marine force, but the Australian Army operated a number of small vessels around Australia in various roles up until WW II. Between 1939 and 1945 the Army operated over two thousand watercraft. The RAN had been loaned several vessels with the capability to embark tanks. These vessels were around 2,000 tonnes with a length of 105 metres, operating alongside the UK, US, and allied forces from Tobruk to the Pacific. During WWII and into the 1950's there were hundreds of LSTs of various versions, built in the UK, US, and Canada. In 1946 the RAN purchased three of the Landing Ships, Tank (LST) from the UK.



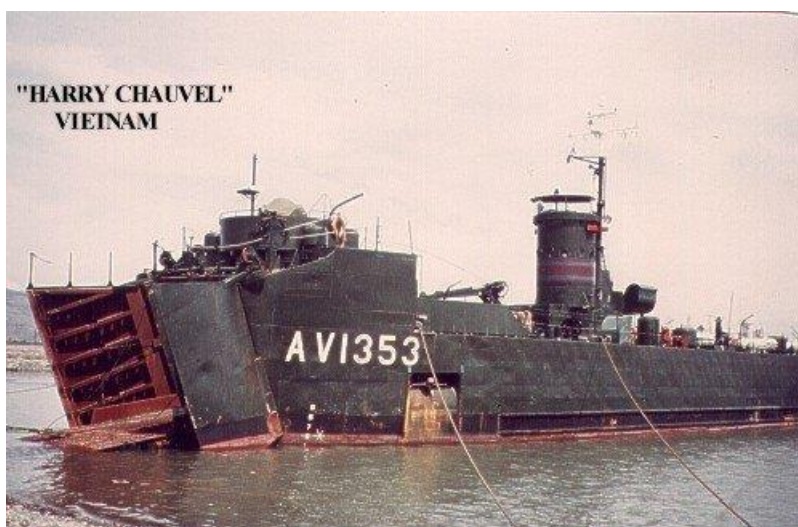
**HMAS *Lae* (L3035)** was a Landing Ship, Tank operated by the Royal Navy and the Royal Australian Navy (RAN). HMAS *Lae* was sold for scrap in 1955.

On 25 January 1950, HMAS *Tarakon* L3017 berthed alongside the Garden Island naval base in Sydney making good defects prior to departure for New Guinea when an explosion occurred aft under the mess decks. The explosion killed seven sailors and one dockyard tradesman and injured twelve sailors and a second tradesman. The ship was extensively damaged and was later sold for scrap in March 1954.

HMAS *Labuan* L3501 did extensive work supporting the establishment and resupply of Heard and Macquarie Islands. On the fifth trip, in 1951, the vessel suffered numerous mechanical breakdowns and on route home broke down completely and had to be towed to Fremantle. *Labuan* paid off in 1951 and was sold in 1955.

### Amphibious vessels in the Australian Army: 1959 to 1970s

After the LSTs had been paid off there was no interest in the RAN to acquire amphibious vessels for sealift. The Army on the other hand was restricted in moving equipment. This was most felt by the 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Regiment in moving Centurion tanks as they were restricted by substandard roads and rail facilities. To overcome this the Australian Army purchased four ex WWII US Navy Landing Ships Medium (LSM), to be operated by the Royal Australian Engineers. These ships were 638 tonnes and sixty-two metres long.



AV 1353 Harry Chauvel

Landing Ships Medium operated by the Australian Army.

- |                                 |                   |             |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|-------------|
| - AV 1353 <i>Harry Chauvel</i>  | (The Shovel)      | 1959 - 1971 |
| - AV1354 <i>Brudenell White</i> | (The Broody Hen)  | 1959 - 1971 |
| - AV1355 <i>Vernon Sturdee</i>  | (Burning' Steady) | 1960 - 1972 |
| - AV1356 <i>Clive Steele</i>    | (The Steel)       | 1960 - 1971 |

In 1965 the Army also purchased an Australian built transport vessel renamed AS 3051 *John Monash*. She displaced 1010 tonnes and was 71m long.

All the ships were crewed and operated by the Transportation Service of the Royal Australian Engineers (RAE) and were in the 32 Small Ships Squadron, RAE. These ships were deployed to operational areas including Vietnam and Timor-Leste.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P04986.052

AS 3051, *John Monash*, AWM image

## PART TWO

### BALIKPAPAN CLASS LANDING CRAFT HEAVY

#### Acquisition

In 1969 the Army did not have any replacement for the ageing amphibious fleet most of which had been sold for scrap. One project for replacement vessels at 1200 tonnes had already been rejected by the government. Instead, the Army proposed a smaller vessel (470 tonnes) capable of carrying three Leopard tanks or thirteen M113 Personnel Carriers. They also ordered eight new Landing Craft Heavy (LCH) to be manufactured in Australia. The ships were to be 44.5 metres long, have a beam of 10.1 metres, a draft of two metres and a standard displacement of 320 tonnes. They were built with General Motors Detroit 2 Stroke Diesel engines. The complement was sixteen including two warrant officers (WO1 and WO2). Construction commenced in 1969 at John Walkers Co. Ltd in Maryborough QLD. Walkers was a foundry company having its beginnings in Ballarat, Victoria and had taken the opportunity to set up a foundry in Maryborough for the mining and sugar industries. The company's financial manager, William Frederick Harrington (1840-1918), became General Manager. A grandson of his was to become Vice Admiral [Sir Wilfred Hastings Harrington](#), Chief of the Australian Naval Staff from 1962 to 1965.

Due to reorganisation of the Department of Defence and a decision by the Chiefs of Staff committee, the LCH project was shifted from the Army to the Navy, a great blow to the Army.

HMAS *Balikpapan* had already been accepted and commissioned by the Army, so the remaining seven vessels were to be commissioned directly into the Royal Australian Navy on completion between 1973 and 1977. HMAS *Balikpapan* was transferred from the Army and commissioned into the Navy. The last LCH was commissioned on 27 September 1974.



*Balikpapan* was initially based at the Bulimba Barracks in Brisbane with the Australian Army Water Transport Squadron and on transferring to the RAN she was then based at HMAS Moreton with the other LCHs.

All eight of the Balikpapan Class of “Landing Craft Heavy” (LCH) had a long and diverse service history of over forty years. The Army initially ordered these vessels to replace an ageing fleet of vessels that had been loaned or purchased second hand. At the time of acquisition the Navy did not have any capability for amphibious operations, especially heavy sealift. It was not until the end of the 1960s that amphibious operations became part of ADF joint operations. Army and Navy

amphibious operations merged under the newly formed joint operations group with a Joint Headquarters tasking the three services in operations.

The decision to transfer all LCHs to the RAN seemed, at the time, to be a good move but there had been advantages in having small to medium amphibious vessels in the Army. The Army had a long history of using amphibious vessels during WWI, WWII and in Vietnam. Vessels of six hundred tons were available to move soldiers as required. Vessels of 1000 tons and above had carried men and equipment to various theatres of war with ease with ships such as *John Monash* as well as the LSTs manned by Army. Civilian ships such as *Jeparit* and *Bonnaroo* which initially had civilian crews were chartered by the Department of Shipping and Transport on behalf of the Army to transport military vehicles, ammunition, aid, and supplies. Both *Jeparit* and *Bonnaroo* were later commissioned into the RAN due to union actions. In Vietnam with the exception of HMAS *Sydney*, all logistic ships went alongside in Subic Bay to unload and load. Some, such as *Clive Steel* took equipment directly to the Australian Task Force 20 miles inland up the Saigon River to Nui Dat without escorts.

### COMMISSIONING DATES

HMAS <i>BALIKPAPAN</i> (L126)	Army on 08 December 1971 RAN on 27 September 1974
HMAS <i>BRUNEI</i> (L127)	RAN January 1973
HMAS <i>LABUAN</i> (L128)	RAN March 1973
HMAS <i>TARAKAN</i> (L129)	RAN June 1973
HMAS <i>WEWAK</i> (L130)	RAN August 1973
HMAS <i>SALAMAUA</i> (L131)	RAN October 1973 Decommissioned on 26 November 1974, transferred to PNGDF.
HMAS <i>BUNA</i> (L132)	RAN December 1973 Decommissioned on 26 November 1974, transferred to PNGDF.
HMAS <i>BETANO</i> (L133)	RAN February 1974

## Commissioning, Initial Trials and Tasking

### HMAS *Brunei*

HMAS *Brunei* was commissioned into the RAN on 05 January 1973 at Walkers. The vessel was initially put into Army hands, and *Brunei's* first Commanding Officer LEUT D. N. Sando accepted the vessel from an Army Captain P.H. Murray an Ordinance Officer. HMAS *Brunei* was named after an Island off Borneo where several amphibious landings occurred during WWII including 20 Brigade troops from HMAS *Kanimbla* 10 June 1945.

HMAS *Brunei* as the first of the Balikpapan class LCH directly commissioned into the RAN and after departing Maryborough and clearing the Mary River commenced conducting emergency exercises and familiarisation for the crew. The first major defect occurred around 1400 hrs in the steering system. Unable to be fixed by the ship's company, *Brunei* made her way to Bundaberg using manual steering from aft for the four- and half-hour passage. This proved successful.

After rectification she sailed for Brisbane and HMAS *Moreton*, her home port. On arrival she was the first LCH alongside the upgraded HMAS *Moreton* wharf. After a short stay conducting recertification of defects, she sailed for Sydney and to Jervis Bay for further training, including inflatable life raft drills and helo winching. Returning to Sydney *Brunei* sailed again on 1 February 1973 with Fleet staff for trials, returning to Garden Island upon completion. The ship conducted further trials in Jervis Bay during the month, including gun safety for the 50 cal machine gun. This included cutting and fitting the cams.

On return to HMAS *Moreton*, she embarked a caravan as accommodation for training of the selected new ship *Labuan's* crew. *Brunei* continued to conduct exercises for crew training in Moreton Bay, including endorsement of the Commanding Officer (Designate) of new ship *Labuan*. *Brunei* commenced Exercise "Brunei Sands" in the Moreton Bay Scarborough area, with communication exercises and with 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion The Royal Australian Regiment. On completion of this exercise, HMAS *Brunei* became the first operational LCH and continued in service for over forty years.

### HMAS *Labuan*

HMAS *Labuan* was commissioned into the RAN on 9 March 1973 in Maryborough. The first Commanding Officer being LEUT R.H. Old RAN. The next day, she cast off and proceeded down the Mary River, conducting emergency drills, and evaluating the bower anchor (ketch Anchor). She then secured the Urangan Pier, still a tourist attraction in Hervey Bay. The first defect was the refrigeration system which failed. However, ships staff, with assistance from Walkers repaired one unit. Next day HMAS *Labuan* cast off to continue conducting drills, including the first beaching on Moon Point bank. Anchoring overnight, the ship weighed anchor next morning, setting course for Bundaberg conducting further workup and exercises enroute.

HMAS *Labuan* arrived in Bundaberg and secured to the John T. Fisher wharf next to the Naval cadets Unit. On 2 May 1973 the CO and elements of the *Labuan* crew went to Maryborough to bring the new ship *Tarakan* to Brisbane. On Friday 4 May 1973, elements of *Labuan's* crew arrived in Brisbane with *Tarakan* and berthed at HMAS *Moreton*. On Monday 14 May 1973 *Labuan* proceeded to Bulimba and embarked a caravan for the *Tarakan* crew undertaking familiarisation and training alongside.

On 22 May 1973 HMAS *Labuan* proceeded to Moreton Bay for sea training of *Tarakan's* crew and that evening, a report came in that a local fisherman had reported a large object resembling a torpedo had been caught in his net and dropped near North Point, Moreton Island. Embarking elements of Diving Team one, HMAS *Labuan* departed early on 23 May 1973 to investigate with three fishermen and two divers from visiting British ship HMS *Hydra*. With guidance from the fishermen and in company with LCM8 1059 the area was searched and at 1430 the object was located. It turned out to be a high explosive torpedo warhead. The Clearance Diving team placed explosives and eliminated the danger.

## HMAS *Tarakan*

HMAS *Tarakan* was commissioned into the RAN on 15 June 1973 at HMAS Moreton in Brisbane under the command of LEUT C. A. Ritchie RAN. On 19 June 1973 HMAS *Tarakan* cast off and proceeded into Moreton Bay to commence workup. This period of workup was interrupted by defects such as lack of fuel to main engines, refrigeration problems and minor defects common in a newly commissioned vessel. On 23 June 1973 HMAS *Tarakan* proceeded out into the open sea and remained twenty miles off Cape Moreton during the night. That night the ship's company all learned the value of correct ballasting of an LCH. She returned to HMAS Moreton the next day. On 25 June 1973 Cadets from Brisbane Church of England Boys Grammar School embarked for a day trip. The ship slipped and proceeded into Moreton Bay and over to Tangalooma to conduct a beaching. Unfortunately, the ship's company could not lower the door, due to a hydraulic leak. Cadets were given the opportunity to steer the ship and handle weapons after a tour of the ship. On return to HMAS Moreton and for the next few days, HMAS *Tarakan* made repairs to engines and refrigeration. On 27 June 1973 HMAS *Tarakan* continued with workups without any further delays and became fully operational.

## HMAS *Wewak*

HMAS *Wewak* was commissioned into the RAN on 10 August 1973 at HMAS Moreton in Brisbane. Her Commanding Officer was LEUT G. W. Scown RAN. On 20 August 1973 *Wewak* cast off and proceeded down the Brisbane River into Moreton Bay to conduct emergency exercises during the morning and her first beaching at Tangalooma. The ship proceeded out of Moreton Bay conducting boat drills and rigging and assessing the outboard transducer.

HMAS *Wewak* steamed overnight off Double Island Point returning to Moreton Bay next day to continue workup. On 23 August 1973 *Wewak* entered the Brisbane River and went alongside the Wheat Wharf at Pinkenba to embark personnel from the Department of Shipping and Transport and proceeded into Moreton Bay. Personnel from the Department of Shipping and Transport conducted trials on vibration and electrical equipment. *Wewak* then returned to Pinkenba disembarking the government personnel before proceeding to HMAS *Moreton*. She remained there until 31 August when she proceeded to the Bulimba Barrack ramp to embark an accommodation caravan.

*Wewak* having completed workup, proceeded to conduct tasking north of Townsville, departing from Brisbane on 3 September 1973. The ship anchored off Magnetic Island on 6 September 1973, the sea boat was deployed, and a reconnaissance party sent ashore to survey the beach. The survey showed a good area for the beach. *Wewak* conducted the first beaching in this area before proceeding to Townsville.

## HMAS *Salamaua*

HMAS *Salamaua* was commissioned into the RAN on 19 October 1973 at HMAS Moreton in Brisbane. The Commanding Officer was LEUT W. K. Scott RAN. On Monday 22 October *Salamaua* cast off and proceeded out of the Brisbane River into Moreton Bay to commence workup. Her first venture to sea was prevented by bad weather and she was forced to return to Moreton Bay. Her first beaching was then conducted off Tangalooma after a sea boat survey proved it safe to conduct. Workups continued with an overnight at sea prior to returning to HMAS Moreton on Friday 26 October.

HMAS *Salamaua* cast off on Tuesday 20 November 1973 and proceeded to beach on Bulimba Barracks ramp to embark one caravan for LCH *Buna* crew familiarisation. Three Armoured Personnel Carriers and two Fire Support Vehicles were also embarked prior to proceeding out of Brisbane to Tin Can Bay. Arriving in that area on Wednesday 21 November 1973, *Salamaua* was the first LCH to cross the Wide Bay Bar. At Snapper Point she conducted a beaching to unload vehicles, leaving a caravan for *Buna's* crew training. After retracting she sailed for Brisbane.

After returning to HMAS Moreton, *Salamaua* prepared for exercise "Last Fling" with CMF troops over the weekend of 24 and 25 November 1973. She loaded army vehicles from Bulimba and conducted a number of beachings prior to returning to HMAS *Moreton*.

Monday 26 November saw *Salamaua* passage to Tin Can Bay to retrieve the vehicles previously unloaded. She returned to unload them at Bulimba early Wednesday 28 November. This included the caravan used by LCH *Buna* familiarisation over the last week.

## HMAS *Buna*

HMAS *Buna* was commissioned into the RAN on 7 December 1973 at HMAS Moreton in Brisbane. The Commanding Officer was LEUT M.C. Smith RAN. On 10 December *Buna* cast off and proceeded down the Brisbane River to commence workups in Moreton Bay. Various emergency and breakdown exercises were conducted enroute to Tangalooma beach and on completion she anchored overnight. *Buna* continued workup until midday Thursday 13 December, returning to HMAS Moreton for Christmas leave.

On Monday 14 January 1974 *Buna* cast off from HMAS Moreton and departed Brisbane for Sydney and tasking from the Commander of the First Australian Landing Squadron. On departing the CO of *Buna* made comments on the lack of Azimuth circles.

“The non-provision of terrestrial azimuth circles on delivery from Walker’s shipyards and unserviceability of other circles throughout the LCH Squadron meant that only one azimuth circle was available for the passage to Sydney. This was the only Azimuth circle available between four Landing Craft. “

“During passage, however, the Decca 101 Navigational Radar performed outstandingly, even in heavy weather, thus belaying fears of complete lack of Nav aids in the event of damage to the Azimuth circle.”

The task was to load sheet metal from Cockatoo Island at Woolwich for transport to Walkers in Maryborough. *Buna* arrived at Woolwich early on Thursday 17 January. The Army Tug, *Joe Mann* towed the first of three lighters to Woolwich ahead of *Buna*. At about 1500 hrs with twenty-seven tons loaded and thirteen tons of metal still on the wharf, heavy rain prevented the crane from further loading. Loading recommenced 0800 on Tuesday 22 January, but was stopped again as an LCM8 tried to reverse but got stuck between the lighter and the west wall, The tug *Joe Mann* and another LCM8 had to tow it clear so loading could continue.

The cyclone season was in full swing with cyclone “Wanda” off the North coast and after a number of attempts to get to Brisbane, where floods had caused some damage, *Buna* finally berthed at Moreton on 1 February. On 9 February *Buna* was redirected to offload the 153 tonnes of steel in Williamstown in Melbourne as Walkers had closed its shipbuilding operations in Maryborough. In the end *Buna* went to Sydney and unloaded all the steel at Woolwich

In July 1974 *Buna* was tasked with Operation ‘Kentia Palm’, the re-supply of Lord Howe Island and loaded supplies from Woolwich. In company with HMAS *Betano*, *Buna* sailed from Sydney and arrived at Lord Howe Island on the 18 July to unload. On departure from Lord Howe Island the next day, both bow door hooks sprung back. This had been a problem since commissioning with replacement hooks proving in the trial. After securing the door with three-ton wire and bottle screw, she continued passage. Two hours later the door was seen to detach from the bottom hinges, swing out and go straight down, to not be seen again. The ship closed to emergency stations and manoeuvred the stern into the sea. HMAS *Parramatta* was despatched and after some difficulty connected a tow with a bridle. *Buna* was towed to Sydney. This was the only incident of the complete loss of the bow door of an LCH that I am aware of. There were a number of incidents of the bow door breaking both wires, but they remained attached to the hinges.

## HMAS *Betano*

HMAS *BETANO* commissioned into the RAN on 08 February 1974 at HMAS Moreton. The first Commanding Officer was LEUT Graeme G. Rodgers RAN. *Betano* was prepared and ready to sail on the 12 February 1974 but had to delay due to a defect with the Armour Brown steering console. On Wednesday 13 February *Betano*, in company with *Brunei*, departed Brisbane for Sydney. *Betano* was to conduct workup and assessment on passage.

On arrival in Sydney on 15 February *Betano* anchored in Watsons Bay then weighed an hour later when *Brunei* had completed refueling. *Betano* then proceeded to HMAS *Waterhen* berthing at the Oil Fuel Lighter by Mediterranean mooring to fuel. On completion *Betano* berthed alongside *Brunei* and *Buna* ready to commence exercise “Long Beach” an exercise in direct support of the Army.

Exercise “Long Beach” was held between 18 February to 1 March 1974. *Betano* was to commence loading at Woolwich at 0600, but the CO delayed this by an hour to have better light to assess the hard, the tide and the wind, as this was *Betano*’s first beaching. Once beached *Betano* commenced loading. *Betano* then berthed on Woolwich wharf with *Buna* berthing outboard after completing its loading.



On the evening of 18 February all three vessels sailed from Sydney for Port Stephens where the exercise was to be conducted. The Operation Order had *Buna* tasked to tow an old Naval Lighterage Equipment with its big outboard motors to Port Stephens escorted by *Betano*. However, due to weather conditions this was delayed until Friday 22 February. A decision was made on Thursday 21 February to remain until Sunday when conditions would have improved and both COs granted 48 hours leave. This was to bite both CO's as they were directed to sail with the tow. *Buna* sailed on Friday with the tow and some of *Betano's* crew. *Betano* sailed on the Sunday.

### *AV Balikpapan*

AV *BALIPAPAN* was the first built and on completion was handed over to the Army as Australian Vessel (AV) Balikpapan. On 1 September 1974 *Balikpapan* was handed to the Navy and tendered to HMAS Moreton whilst undergoing major refit at Cairncross Dockyard.

*HMAS Balikpapan* was commissioned into the RAN on 27 September 1974 at HMAS Moreton. The first Commanding Officer was LEUT M.D. Otter RAN. *Balikpapan's* first task was to sail on 2 October 1974 around to Hamilton Reach to undertake a magnetic compass swing, returning alongside Moreton on completion.

A shakedown and workup was then conducted in Moreton Bay before returning to HMAS Moreton on Friday 11 October. Departing on Monday 14 October in company with *Labuan* into Moreton Bay Balikpapan recommenced workups. Commander, First Landing Squadron (CMDR R.S. Barrell RAN) embarked with his staff to conduct the Operational Readiness Evaluation. This was the first organised team assessment of an LCH.

On 25 November *Balikpapan* was tasked to load steel from Garden Island, Sydney, the same steel *Buna* had previously ended up off loading. *Balikpapan* was to take the load to Williamstown, as *Buna* was unable to complete the delivery.

After the work involved in bringing *Balikpapan* into Navy, the crews Christmas break was welcomed. Unfortunately, natural disasters are not planned, *Balikpapan* in company with *Betano* was deployed to support Darwin in response to Cyclone Tracy.

## PART THREE

### Service: 1974 to 1988



HMAS Moreton at New Farm, Brisbane commissioned on 18 August 1968 and decommissioned on 11 May 1994. HMAS *Bass* is moored at the end of the wharf with three LCHs. *Bass* was based at Moreton from 1960 until 1994. LCHs were home ported at Moreton until HMAS Moreton was decommissioned.

## HMAS *Salamaua* and HMAS *Buna* transferred to the Papua New Guinea Defence Force.

On 26 November 1974 *Salamaua* and *Buna* were decommissioned in Port Moresby and then commissioned into the Papua New Guinea Navy as PNGS *Salamaua* and PNGS *Buna* both ships Commanding Officers remained in command.

PNGS *Salamaua*'s first task was to take part in dumping 180 tons of WWII ammunition in Oro Bay. With nine extra PNG sailors from the base, PNGS *Salamaua* carried out five trips, loading trucks on each trip. After carrying out the dump as assigned, *Salamaua* returned back to Port Moresby

PNGS *Buna*'s first task was to assist the PNG Defence Force in Wewak Province transporting vehicles and equipment. During one of these trips *Buna* was called to assist in finding a vessel which had set off flares. As the ship was beached and unloading, the sea boat was initially sent to assess the situation. *Buna* followed on the turn of the tide.

## Formation of LCH Squadron, Transfer of Duties and Lay Ups

The six remaining LCH's formed The First Australian Landing Craft Squadron in January 1973 based at HMAS Moreton in Brisbane.

Following Cyclone Tracy's devastation of Darwin, *Balikpapan*, *Wewak*, *Betano*, *Brunei* and *Tarakan* were deployed to assist *Operation Navy Help Darwin* arriving in Darwin mid-January 1975. Their ability to access areas delivering equipment, supplies and personnel over the beach was invaluable.

In June 1979 HMAS *Labuan* transferred to the Brisbane Reserve Port Division which undertook maintenance and manned her for training and operations.

On 19 May 1984 HMAS *Balikpapan* (CO LEUT W. Richard RAN) was tasked to transport RAAF vehicles, equipment, and personnel from Brisbane to Penang in Malaysia, a trip of 5,400 nautical miles, being the longest ocean voyage undertaken by an LCH.

On 19 September 1985 HMAS *Tarakan*, *Balikpapan* and *Wewak* were decommissioned and put in reserve at North Queensland Engineering and Agents (NQE) in Cairns.

HMAS *Brunei* and *Betano* were transferred to supplement Hydrographic Surveys until late 1988. During this time they were based at HMAS Waterhen, Sydney and also used by diving teams for training and operations.

As a consequence of these changes in the ADF, the Army lost the capabilities provided by medium and heavy amphibious vessels. The Army did retain the smaller LCM 8s.

## PART FOUR LCH Service from 1988 - 2012

### Reformation of the LCH Squadron 1988 - 2012

*Tarakan*, high and dry at NQE in Cairns was given a new life and recommissioned in 1988. She completed a half-life refit and a new crew prepared her for workup in the Cairns area. *Balikpapan* was recommissioned in 1990 and sent to Darwin as an RAN Reserve training vessel for the Darwin Port Division. *Wewak* was the last to be reactivated and recommissioned in 2000 after much repair including the removal of a tree growing in the welldeck.

The pattern of operations changed as *Brunei*, *Tarakan*, *Labuan* and *Wewak* were now based in Cairns and *Balikpapan* and *Betano* based in Darwin.

The LCH's were now prepared for operations by the Amphibious and Afloat Support Group, within Maritime Headquarters and the Headquarters Joint Operations Command located at Bungendore, NSW commanded operations.

Operations in which the LCH participated during this period.

- i. Operation Bel-Isi II helped the Government of PNG and the Island of Bougainville.
- ii. In 1999 Australia took Command of the International Force East Timor (Timor-Leste) INTERFET. Operations STABILISE and WARDEN began 16 September 1999 and once again the LCH's were heavily involved.
- iii. This work continued in support of the UN Transitional Authority East Timor (UNTAET) in February 2000 as Operation Tanager
- iv. In 2006 *Balikpapan* and *Tarakan* deployed to Timor-Leste to assist the International Stabilisation Force deployed following communal unrest in the country. The two ships helped offload troops, vehicles, stores, and equipment from three large amphibious ships: HMA Ships *Kanimbla*, *Manoora* and *Toorak*.
- v. Operation Outreach 2007 was a government initiative to assist Northern Territory National Emergency Response during which a Joint Task Force (JTF 641) including the LCHs was tasked to transport demountables and equipment to remote communities in conjunction with Defence and other Government agencies.

This busy period of taskings in support joint operations and humanitarian assistance and other Government initiatives was to come to an end commencing in 2013 with the progressive decommissioning of the remaining LCHs.



HMAS Betano conducting a stern door marriage with HMAS Kanimbla



LCH Squadron exercises off Townsville, North Queensland.

## PART FIVE

### LCH Decommissioning and disposal 2013 - 2014

#### Decommissioning 2013 – 2014.

By 2012 the aging LCH's and LCM8s had had more than four decades of service. Escalating maintenance costs made their retention in service unviable. A project to replace both of these classes of vessels had been in existence for some time. However, the project (Land 8710) was suspended.

An Army project for Landing Craft Mechanised (LCM 2000 class) was approved for delivery of six in 2001. These were to supplement the Kanimbla class LPA vessels and replace the LCM8. On receiving them, they proved unsuitable for LPA's for a number of reasons including design faults. In Oct 2010, the project was designated as a 'project of concern' and in Feb 2011 the Government announced that the project was cancelled and that the craft were to be disposed of.

#### Decommissioning

Decommissioning dates and disposal details for each LCH are as follows.

11 December 2012

HMAS *Wewak* LEUT Luke Weston – transferred to Philippines renamed BRP *Iwaki*

12 December 2012

HMAS *Balikpapan* LEUT Justine Archer – transferred to Philippines renamed BRP *Agta*

HMAS *Betano* LEUT Christopher Cockerill – transferred to Philippines renamed BRP *Waray*

19 November 2014

HMAS *Labuan* LEUT Christopher Cockerill – transferred to PNG renamed HMPNGS *Lalekamu*

HMAS *Tarakan* LEUT James Carroll – transferred to Philippines renamed BRP *Batak*

HMAS *Brunei* LCDR Matthew Richardson – transferred to Philippines renamed BRP *Ivatan*

## Memories and Conclusions

### First Posting to HMAS *Balikpapan* (Balik)

I was posted to Balikpapan as the Petty Officer Coxswain (POCOX) on 29 November 1979. This was a complete change of life for me. My first posting as POCOX was to an Attack class Patrol Boat in Darwin conducting fishery patrols. It ended after a Board of Inquiry and subsequent court martials of the officers. *Balikpapan* was based at HMAS Moreton which was essentially a large warehouse. Taskings were ad hoc. One such tasking was to proceed to HMAS Cerberus via Hans Inlet in Western Port, Victoria to load vehicles and ammunition to be delivered to the Army in Hobart. The return trip was the backloading of old army vehicles to HMAS *Cerberus* for subsequent disposal. An additional tasking on departing Hobart was to drop supplies to rangers in Port Davy in the Southwest National Park of Tasmania. The supplies were then to be taken to a location some kilometres inland. LSET Rodger (Sarge) Sergeant accompanied me through a very thickly wooded mountain area to deliver the supplies.

*Balikpapan* then proceeded to Macquarie Harbour entering through the Hell's Gates entrance and then alongside Strahan for a visit. Our next port was Stanley (also known as Stanley on the Knoll) for the local Fishing Festival. Here the ship's company enjoyed participation in the associated festivities which on departure included a race against an old Army tug- the former "Joe Man" that had been converted to a fishing boat.

### Second Posting to HMAS Balikpapan

My second posting on *Balikpapan* was as Executive Officer (XO) on 20 June 2005.

Prior to this posting I was a Lieutenant serving in Headquarters Northern Command involved in managing current operations. I had been there for three years when I was asked if I would accept a posting as XO in *Balikpapan*. The Navy was short of officers at the time. It happened that the *Balikpapan's* commanding officer Barry Leroy was also a Lieutenant and junior to me. After some discussions with Barry, I agreed.

I served in *Balikpapan* for two and half years. One and half with Barry and then one year with his successor. The experience was extremely rewarding although testing at times as we worked with the Army Surveillance Unit, NORFORCE all over the northern coast of Australia. The tasks included such activities as removing ghost nets in the Gulf of Carpentaria, and loading Army road building equipment onto HMAS *Kanimbla* in Broome and getting beached on an ebb tide. In this high tidal range area, remaining on the beach overnight was certainly different but with the loading completed next day, *Balikpapan* sailed off for Darwin.

On Monday 22 May 2006, *Balikpapan* was tasked to standby for Operation Astute in Timor-Leste, commanded by Brigadier Michael Slater. *Balikpapan* was ordered to sail on Thursday 25 May 2006 and crew were onboard by 0100 and we sailed at 0230. *Balikpapan* arrived at 2000 hrs on Friday 2006 and commenced unloading HMAS *Kanimbla*. This operation continued with short breaks, until 1400 on Wednesday 31 May 2006, when we departed for Darwin for more stores.

On 3 January 2007 the new CO, Paul Hines joined. Until I posted off a year later 21 January 2008 the large variety of taskings continued. These included participation in border protection tasks under Operation *Resolute* from the northwest shelf oil rigs down to oil rigs in the vicinity of Dampier and the Montebello Islands.

I had known Paul for several years when we first met when he was a Chief Petty Officer Coxswain and CO of MSA *Bandicoot* Y298. Some of my best memories are those at sea, when Paul and I, after dinner, had a cup of green tea on the bridge wing solving the world's problems.

### Third Posting to HMAS Balikpapan

My last posting to *Balikpapan* was as Commanding Officer from 15 December 2008. This posting was most unexpected as I had just turned fifty-eight and was past my compulsory retiring age. Certainly very few were getting command at this age. I was selected for command in April 2008 and had to complete CO Designates Courses commencing in August 2008. This included the Intermediate Navigation Course (for the second time) as the CO of an LCH is also the navigator.

On joining for handover from Paul Hines the ship was high and dry on Coonawarra slips for maintenance. The first incident was when technical sailors found asbestos above a number of trunks in the engine room. The ship was evacuated whilst contractors removed and conducted inspections. Unfortunately more asbestos was found and the ship's crew were again cleared of the ship while contractor's boarded to remove it. A medical report was completed again and a team of three Engineer Warrant Officers was sent from Sydney to investigate.

With trials and inspection completed, the ship slipped and commenced workup till 16 Feb 2009 when we sailed for Townsville for our first deployment - a Squadron Exercise called SEA LION. This was with LCH's and Army units from Lavarack Barracks as well as the New Zealand ship HMNZS *Canterbury*. All six LCH's for the last time prior to decommissioning were there. The exercise was to certify the LCH's ability to conduct amphibians' operations in a combined large amphibious fleet, the other major units were HMAS *Kanimbla* and *Canterbury*. Initial exercises commenced by loading a LARC V in Cleveland Bay then into Herald Island Training Area.

On completion *Balikpapan* received full Amphibious Certification by Commander Amphibious Task Group, Capt. Woodal and we returned to Townsville to unload LARC V's and conduct debriefings. Balik and the other LCH's departed and returned to Cairns, coming alongside HMAS *Cairns* at 0700 on Friday 06 March 2009. Cyclone Hamish was developing off the coast and all LCH's were ordered to shelter by passage up Chinaman Creek into Wahday Creek behind Cairns, commencing 0800. This was a "first" of having all six LCH's line astern tied to the mangrove trees for two days as the cyclone passed Cairns. The LCHs returned to HMAS *Cairns* on Monday 09 March 2009.

After maintenance in Darwin, Balikpapan in company with *Betano* sailed down the west coast and visited Broom before returning to Darwin. Balikpapan then sailed for *Talisman Sabre 2009* arriving at Shoalwater Bay Thursday 16 July 2009. The exercise was a combined US and Australian Amphibious exercise. This was a very intense period, and the crew welcomed the return to Townsville for respite prior to returning to Darwin.

October saw *Balikpapan* in company with *Betano* passage to Timor- Lester, to load army vehicles and transport them back to Darwin. It was great to be back to a peaceful Dili and to be able to get into the city which was now in a rebuild phase.

As I was now fast heading for 60 years of age it was time to hand over Balikpapan and on return to Darwin I was able to hand her over to my friend LCDR Paul Hines, concluding my three postings on the *Balik*.



HMAS *Balikpapan* makes her way through a heavy swell off the coast of Darwin during Minor War Vessels Concentration Period in June 2010. RAN image

Always wish for fair winds and a calm sea.



HMAS *Labuan* at anchor off Savo Island, Solomon Islands, September 2014. RAN image.