

## The White Ensign in the Middle East

By Greg Swinden

HAVING RECENTLY RETURNED from a second deployment to the Middle East a colleague suggested that I put down in writing some of my thoughts and recollections of this period.

My first *Operation Slipper* deployment to the MEAO was in the LPA HMAS Kanimbla, which was heavily involved in oil embargo operations in the Persian Gulf during 2001-02.

My second deployment was in a much different setting as the J4 (Logistics) in HQJTF 633 based at Al Minhad Air Base (AMAB) in the UAE in 2011, and a month in Kabul in our subsidiary HQ as the Acting Chief of Staff.

Firstly, let me say that having had two deployments to the MEAO in a ten-year period actually puts me in a minority of RAN personnel. While some navy personnel have yet to deploy, there are others clocking up three, four, five or more deployments. With RAN warships and personnel almost continually deployed since 1990 the Persian Gulf, Northern Arabian Sea, Red Sea, Horn of Africa, Iraq and Afghanistan are now a well-worn path for many of us under the White Ensign.

While most RAN personnel deploy in the frigates, or as the ubiquitous RANLO Middle East staff conducting the necessary Maritime Security Operations (MSO)/piracy patrols, there are many others doing equally important jobs elsewhere; in particular there are a large number of tasks now being carried out by RAN personnel ashore in what was once the purview of the Army/RAAF only. The ADF has effectively been on a war footing since the East Timor campaign commenced in 1999. Many Navy personnel would say that for the RAN this 'war footing' started in 1990 with Gulf War I followed by Operation Damask anti oil smuggling patrols through-out the 1990s, Somalia (*Operation Solace*), Cambodia (*UN Transitional Authority-Cambodia*), Rwanda (*Operation Tamar*), Bougainville I (*Operation Lagoon*), Bougainville II (*Operation Belisi*), Solomon Islands I (*Operation Trek*), Solomon Islands II (*Operation Anode*), Sudan (*Operation Azure*), the plethora of East Timor operations, the never ending border protection patrols of Operations *Relex* and *Resolute* and the Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief operations that are now on the increase. Recently RAN personnel returned to serve on Operation *Mazurka* in the Sinai as the Army has found that they are stretched too thin to fill all the billets. If you are in the Navy and feel deployment weary then you should be!

The last 22 years since 1990 have been virtually a non-stop round of training and operational deployments for the RAN. When I joined the Navy in 1985 there were few medal ribbons to be seen other than the Long Service Medal and the occasional 'old and bold' who had served in the Vietnam War. Now the Australian Active Service Medal, Australian Service Medal, UN medals and Campaign medals for East Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan are commonplace.

In the Middle East the Army and RAAF have now experienced ten straight years of war and are seeking respite for some of their personnel. Enter the Navy, who since at least 2003 (*Operation Bastille/Falconer/Catalyst*) have been pushing RAN personnel into roles ashore. At first these were mainly staff officers and Clearance Divers but as the years have gone by more and more personnel have swapped DPNU Combat Coveralls and Anti Flash for Desert Cams and a Steyr F88.

Throughout the Middle East now you can find RAN personnel, ranging in ranks from Able Seaman to Commodore, performing wide ranging jobs such as Legal Officers, Photographers and Public Affairs Officers, Writers as Pay and Admin Clerks and running the Cash Office, Cooks and Stewards overseeing catering contracts or managing accommodation, Communicators in COMCENs everywhere, SNs in warehouses from AMAB to Tarin Kowt (TK), aircrew on exchange with the Royal Navy flying helicopters

in Helmand Province, Chaplains, Intelligence Analysts, Physical Training Instructors, Naval Police Coxswains(undertaking crime scene investigations and weapons/IED analysis) and officers/senior sailors of all specialisations filling staff officer jobs or watch keeping in Operations Rooms in Kandahar, Kabul, TK and AMAB.

Behind the Clearance Divers who work closely with the Army and Special Forces, disposing of IEDs, the next closest rate badge to the 'front line' are often the 'Phots' (now termed Imagery Specialists) who are frequently out on patrol gathering footage and evidence to assist in 'telling the story' and bringing in imagery to help round up suspected Taliban. Often these men and women, armed with both camera and Steyr, are only a few feet away from the fighting.

Those serving in the main bases such as Kandahar and TK are subject to frequent Indirect Fire (known as IDF) from rockets fired indiscriminately into these large compounds. Those in Kabul are less likely to be rocketed but suicide bombers – particularly Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIED) are more common as well as the occasional attempts at forced entry by armed insurgents.

AMAB, known locally as the Big 4 Caravan Park, is deemed quite safe but security remains high just in case. On the same day as the 'Green on Blue' attacks by a rogue Afghan soldier at Patrol Base Sorkh Bed, which killed three Australian soldiers and wounded seven more in late October 2011, a VBIED killed a number of Coalition Personnel in Kabul only a few kilometres from the Australian HQ. This road had been traveled only the day before by an ADF Road Convoy in which RAN personnel had been co-drivers. The risk is ever present, and you never know when it might not be your lucky day. So far, the RAN has been lucky with no one killed and only two personnel wounded amongst the approximately 200 ADF personnel wounded in Afghanistan since 2001. But the risks are real and recently a Clearance Diving Officer, Lieutenant Richard Brickacek, was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal (DSM) for his courage under fire in Afghanistan in 2010. So next time you see imagery of ADF personnel operating in Afghanistan don't just assume that because they are wearing 'cams' that they are Army. Check the rank badges and shoulder patches and you could well find they Navy personnel.



*The author at Kandahar Air Base*