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Maritime operations

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Australia's maritime military operations are unique among those of the broader Australian Defence Force (ADF) because the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) has had ships more or less continually deployed to the Persian Gulf or the Red Sea since Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990.¹

During both the 1990 Gulf War and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the RAN's contribution was a three-ship task group and a clearance diving team, with an embarked task group staff and logistic support element (LSE) ashore. However, for most of those long years the contribution was a single frigate integrated into the multinational Maritime Interception Force (MIF). In the period between the 9/11 attacks and the immediate aftermath of the 2003 hostilities, the Navy bolstered its contribution to two or three ships with a task group commander and staff.

During the 1990 Gulf War, while the RAN provided three ships to the large multinational armada and a mine-clearance diving team, its task group commander did not have a command role in the multinational organisation.

1 For further information and sources consulted, please see P. Jones, 'The maritime campaign in Iraq', in *Naval Power and Expeditionary Wars: Peripheral Campaigns and New Theatres of Naval Warfare*, ed. B.A. Elleman and S.C.M. Paine, Routledge, New York, 2011, pp. 167–81.

A generation of officers and sailors had therefore become increasingly familiar with the Persian Gulf, the inshore waters of Iraq, their allies, the at times aggressive neutrals in the case of the Iranians, the myriad of shipping and not least their prospective enemy, the Iraqis.

The other benefit of this exposure was the growing confidence of the US Navy in Australia's ships and, from 2001, in its task group commanders. This meant that often the Australian naval task group commander was dual-hatted and had, in addition to command of the RAN task group, alternating command of the MIF with a US Navy captain.² This was very much a conscious decision on the part of the US Navy. For example, in the lead-up to the 2003 Iraq War, my superior, Rear Admiral Barry Costello, USN, told me that because of my time in theatre, I, supported by my staff, would fill the role of Maritime Interception Operations Screen Commander, and not a US Navy captain, as originally conceived.

Overview of operations, 1990–2003

The enduring thread from 1990 to 2003 was therefore maritime interception operations with their asset-intensive surveillance and boarding operations. This was first to enforce sanctions imposed under United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 661 and then, after the Iraq War, under UNSCR 687, to maintain security, prevent smuggling by non-state actors or promote freedom of navigation.³

Such surveillance and boarding operations date back to the age of sail. They can be conducted for many years and require endurance, patience and a sea-going temperament. They also needed a sophisticated naval organisation to meet the unremitting tempo. History records that such operations, if well conceived, are effective. The blockade of Napoleonic France in the first decade of the 19th century and the Kaiser's Germany in the second decade of the 20th are two such examples, and, I would contend, that of Iraq up to 2003 was also effective.

2 The US Navy captain was the Commander Destroyer Squadron 50, normally based at Fifth Fleet Headquarters at Bahrain.

3 UNSCR 661 was adopted in August 1990 to sanction Iraq following its invasion of Kuwait. UNSCR 687 of 1991 outlines the terms imposed on Iraq after the expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait. See en.wikisource.org/wiki/Portal:United_Nations_Security_Council_Resolutions (retrieved 31 March 2020).

The nature of such operations is not something all governments and policy-makers understand. In respect of the sanction enforcement on Iraq, while the first Bush and then the Clinton administration largely understood the purpose of these operations, the second Bush administration did not.

The command arrangements for operations in the Gulf were complex. The Commander US Fifth Fleet was the operational-level commander based ashore in Bahrain. He was also the Maritime Component Commander to Commander United States Central Command (CENTCOM) based in Tampa, Florida. The commander of the on-station carrier battle group provided the operational-level command of naval forces. The command of the MIF was typically exercised from a US Navy cruiser or destroyer.

During the period from 1990 to 2001, there had been occasions when land- and sea-based air strikes and Tomahawk land attack missile launchings had been conducted against Iraq. These were generally in support of the efforts to disarm Iraq of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) or in response to breaches of the Iraqi no-fly zone. Targets struck included military command and control and civil telecommunications facilities. The cumulative degradation of command and control capacity had an important impact on the ability of the Iraqis to respond to the 2003 invasion.

During that same period, however, the effectiveness of the MIF was less than optimum. Smugglers of oil and other goods seeking to circumvent the embargo would often use the presence of Iraqi shore-based missile batteries on the Al-Faw Peninsula and a passage through Iranian territorial waters to avoid interception. On occasion, the MIF would conduct night surge operations near the mouth of the Khawr Abd Allah and Shatt al-Arab waterways to increase their chances of intercepting smugglers, clearing the coast before sunrise. These operations had little strategic effect on sanction enforcement. The strategically vital offshore oil terminals near the mouth of the Khawr Abd Allah and Shatt Al-Arab would remain of enduring significance and a high priority to be secured in the event of the outbreak of conflict and before oil could be released into the Gulf.

Post-9/11 operations

The most significant development in this protracted sanction enforcement campaign was the attacks of 11 September 2001. In their wake, not only were the naval forces infused with a significant increase in ships from the long-standing contributors but also other navies contributed forces to assist in the Global War on Terror. This blurring of mission between UNSCR enforcement against Iraq and the anti-al-Qaeda Global War on Terror differed between nations. Some nations would deploy forces only in and around the north Persian Sea and Gulf of Oman as well as the Gulf of Aden to cut al-Qaeda lines of communication, while other nations such as Australia grouped the two missions together.

Like the conduct of many naval operations of the past, the post-9/11 phase of operations shifted in response to a confluence of strategic-, operational- and tactical-level developments. The increase in naval forces in the Persian Sea and Persian Gulf enabled the Commander Fifth Fleet to deploy separate coalition task groups in the north Persian Sea/Gulf of Oman and the Gulf of Aden. These forces not only provided a capability for the Global War on Terror but also, as events unfolded, would by their presence provide enhanced security for the 2002–03 force build-up before commencement of the US Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The MIF was also to enjoy a substantial increase in force levels. But before additional forces arrived, a significant tactical shift took place. The immediate response to the 9/11 attacks made it necessary temporarily to detach US Navy Tomahawk fitted ships from the MIF. This left the depleted MIF under the command of Captain Nigel Coates in HMAS *Anzac*. Coates, in response to the drastic reduction in force numbers, used his ship's shallow draft and national rules of engagement to move into Iraqi territorial waters at the mouth of the Khawr Abd Allah waterway. This shift to a close blockade had an immediate effect on smugglers.



HMAS Adelaide patrols the waters around the oil terminals in the North Arabian Gulf during Operation Catalyst, 2004.

Source: Courtesy of the Department of Defence.

The initial success was limited by few warships having sufficiently shallow draughts to allow them to operate close inshore. For the close blockade to be effective, continuous inshore frigate presence was required. This capability was provided by an increased number of British Royal Navy and RAN warships. From 2001 to 2003, the crews of these ships built up considerable knowledge of the shallow waters, thus allowing incrementally greater freedom of manoeuvre. This would prove invaluable during OIF.

For their part, the smugglers responded to the new challenge posed by the MIF. A move and counter-move ensued until 2003 with smugglers welding doors and hatches, electrifying guardrails and attempting mass breakouts to swamp the MIF. The MIF replied with acetylene cutters, greater coordination and training. By mid-2002 the larger merchant ships were effectively submitting to being searched and trying to hide modest quantities of oil in hidden tanks. In the last six months of the sanction enforcement, only two merchant ships escaped the interception force's net, and even then the MIF successfully encouraged the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy to apprehend them in their territorial waters.



Members of the Afghan National Army, 3RAR Battle Group and Mentoring Task Force 4 step off on their first handover/takeover patrol from Forward Operating Base Mirwais in Chora, Afghanistan, 2012.

Source: Courtesy of the Department of Defence.

The main focus became smuggling in much smaller dhows. Night mass breakout attempts of 40–60 dhows were not uncommon. The MIF responded with improved tactical cohesion between the boarding parties of the RAN, US Coast Guard, Royal Marines and US Navy. These conventional forces were augmented at night on a regular basis by Polish special forces (Grupa Reagowania Operacyjno-Manewrowego or GROM)⁴ and US Navy Seals, who were based in Kuwait. In addition to the boarding parties, helicopters were used to vector boarding parties to breakouts.

Over the years the boarding parties benefited from design improvements in the Rigid Hull Inflatable Boats (RHIBs), which resulted in boats of greater endurance, reliability and comfort. Having said that, in the early months of the year boarding parties could risk hypothermia if not well equipped and their on-water time closely managed.

4 In English, Group [for] Operational Manoeuvring Response.

In the air, US Navy Seahawk helicopters fitted with the Hawklink tactical data link allowed video streaming of the dhow breakouts to the MIF commander's command ship. This visual perspective was invaluable in coordinating modest MIF resources.

The two other actors in this complex and shifting maritime scene were the naval forces of Iran and Iraq. Iran had units of both the Iranian navy and the Iranian Republican Guard Corps Navy. The latter was the most active in the northern Persian Gulf and at times unpredictable. Its small craft irregularly swept through waters at the mouth of the Khawr Abd Allah and boarded vessels and harassed crews. In contrast, the Iranian naval presence was weighted more in the central and southern Gulf. The Iranian navy proved helpful when cued through interlocutors to intercept smugglers transiting through Iranian territorial waters or responding to search and rescue incidents.

The Iraqi Navy largely confined itself to its two bases of Umm Qasr and Basra. However, in mid-2002 their PB-90-class patrol boats initiated solitary daytime patrols in the Khawr Abd Allah approaches. There was concern in US Navy Fifth Fleet headquarters that the close proximity of the Iraqi PB-90 to MIF warships might allow the patrol boats to inflict damage to the larger ships in a surprise attack. To ward against that possibility, the MIF invariably had a missile-armed helicopter airborne and would warn the Iraqi PB-90 not to interfere with interception force operations. Once again, the Hawklink-transmitted video stream allowed the MIF commander to monitor deck movements on the PB-90 in this situation, although the PB-90 was significantly less capable than the units of the MIF. The naval forces were in a unique position whereby they saw their prospective foes on a regular basis and had an opportunity where possible to intimidate them.

Preparations for Plan 1003V: The invasion of Iraq

The operational plan to invade Iraq and disarm the regime of WMD was developed by CENTCOM under the command of General Tommy R. Franks. It was designated Plan 1003V. Work commenced in 2002 and was refined in numerous iterations. The maritime elements of this plan were developed by the Commander of the US Fifth Fleet, Vice Admiral Timothy Keating, and his staff both in Tampa and in Bahrain.

The central characteristic of the maritime campaign was the diverse nature of the tasks assigned to the navies and marines. These tasks included:

- Protecting of focal points from the Suez Canal to Kuwait to ensure the massive logistical build-up of supplies for land, air and sea forces. As with Operation DESERT STORM, the overwhelming bulk of material was shipped by sea.
- Facilitating the entry into Iraq of special forces and other covert elements before hostilities.
- Providing a sizeable proportion of the air power for the operation. This requirement was significantly increased when sorties could not be flown from air bases in Turkey, nor over-fly rights obtained from that country. A significant element of this air power would be sea-based Tomahawk strike missiles in the initial 'shock and awe' wave of attacks on Iraqi infrastructure and leadership.
- US Marines and the Royal Marines providing a significant element of the land force. The marines would be involved in securing southern Iraq, including the ports. Some elements would move north to Baghdad.
- Securing the Mīnā' al-Bakr and Khor al-Amaya offshore oil terminals to prevent a catastrophic oil spill into the Gulf and ensure their preservation for the benefit of post-war Iraq.
- Countering Iraqi naval operations, including any mining.
- Ensuring the merchant ships and dhows (potentially more than 400 vessels) holed up in the Khawr Abd Allah (estuary) and the Shatt Al-Arab (river) did not interfere with coalition operations along the length of the Gulf.
- Forcing entry to the Khawr Abd Allah and facilitating the port of Umm Qasr into a hub for humanitarian aid. This would inevitably involve a significant mine counter-measures effort.
- Deterring any attempt by the Iranian naval forces or al-Qaeda seaborne elements from interfering with coalition operations.

The campaign had to factor in the possibility of Iraqi use of biological and chemical agents. This threat, despite subsequent absence of WMD, was deemed to be a major risk to coalition forces.

The missions and tasks required a significant force build from about 50 warships to 150. This build-up began in November 2002. The coalition force was centred on the newly arrived USS *Constellation* carrier battle

group (Rear Admiral Barry M. Costello) and the USS *Abraham Lincoln* battle group (Rear Admiral John M. Kelly), which returned following a short break in Australia. In assigning responsibilities, Vice Admiral Keating gave Rear Admiral Kelly the role of commanding the strike elements and Rear Admiral Costello the multifaceted sea control missions. There were other subordinate command arrangements, which reflected the shift of Fifth Fleet missions from one of UNSCR enforcement and sea control to combat operations in the littoral. Like many operations, the command arrangements were a compromise between clear lines of accountability, national sensitivities and assessments of likely rates of effort of US and supporting coalition naval vessels.

A central feature of Plan 1003V was the significant application of naval air power. This was achieved with the deployment of four carrier battle groups to augment those two already in theatre. USS *Kitty Hawk* and later USS *Nimitz* joined the two carriers in the Gulf while the USS *Theodore Roosevelt* and USS *Harry S. Truman* carrier battle groups would operate from the eastern Mediterranean Sea. To facilitate the integration of naval and air force assets, Rear Admiral David C. Nicholls became the Deputy Joint Force Air Component Commander at the Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia. US Navy personnel also integrated into the air planning staff.

The United States also deployed the specialist forces that Plan 1003V needed for success. These included:

- mine counter-measures vessels US Ships *Ardent*, *Cardinal*, *Dextrous* and *Raven*
- mine-clearance diving teams employing remotely operated underwater vehicles as well as dolphins to detect bottom mines
- MH-53E Sea Dragon minesweeping helicopters
- the heavily armed patrol boats USS *Firebolt* and USS *Chinook* as well as the US Coast Guard cutter *Boutwell* and the US Coast Guard patrol craft *Adak*, *Aquidneck*, *Baranof* and *Wrangle* for the envisaged inshore operations
- the high-speed catamaran USS *Joint Venture* deployed to support special forces
- additional replenishment ships and the hospital ship USNS *Comfort* pre-positioned in the Gulf.

Britain's Royal Navy deployed the UK Amphibious Task Group (UKATG), centred on aircraft carrier HMS *Ark Royal*, into the Gulf. This was under the command of Commodore A.J.G. Miller. The *Ark Royal* was configured as a helicopter carrier and had not embarked Harrier strike aircraft. The other major UKATG ships were the helicopter carrier HMS *Ocean*, the aviation support ship RFA *Argus* (fitted as a hospital ship) and the landing ships RFA *Sir Tristram*, RFA *Sir Galahad* and RFA *Sir Percivale*. These ships were escorted by the destroyers HM Ships *Liverpool*, *Edinburgh* and *York*, frigates *Marlborough*, *Chatham* and *Richmond*, minehunters *Grimsbey* and *Ledbury*. They were supported by the tankers RFA *Fort Rosalie* and RFA *Orangeleaf*. In addition, the survey ship HMS *Roebuck* would undertake surveys of the north Persian Gulf. The Tomahawk-fitted submarines *Splendid* and *Turbulent* would be multitasked in the operation.

The RAN deployed the amphibious ship HMAS *Kanimbla* to bring to the Gulf stores for the Australian joint force. While originally intended to join the logistic forces in the Gulf, as Australian Naval Task Group Commander, I had her reassigned to the MIF where her amphibious, command and communications capabilities proved invaluable. Indeed, once *Kanimbla* offloaded her stores, my staff and I shifted the MIF command function from the Arleigh Burke destroyer USS *Milius* to *Kanimbla*. Her planning spaces were extremely useful in the lead-up to the conflict. To compensate for this reassignment, *Kanimbla*'s Sea King helicopter joined the US 'Desert Duck' logistic helicopter effort one day a week. *Kanimbla* joined the frigates HMAS *Anzac* and HMAS *Darwin*, which had their time in theatre extended. The Navy also deployed Clearance Diver Team 3 to work with other coalition diving teams under the command of US Navy Commodore Michael P. Tillotson.

The Polish Government deployed GROM, and a fresh crew was flown into theatre for its support ship ORP *Kontra Admiral Xavier Czernicki*, which was assigned to the MIF. Her ability to embark additional boarding teams and boats would prove very useful.

Contribution of the Marines

The US Marines and the Royal Marines made a substantial contribution in size and combat power. The campaign represented the largest marine deployment since the Gulf War of 1990. The US contribution included elements of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, commanded by

Lieutenant General James T. Conway. The force would number 65,000 personnel supported by 142 MIAI tanks, 606 amphibious assault vehicles, 279 light amphibious vehicles, 105 howitzers, 7,000 trucks and 454 Marine Air Wing aircraft. The vast majority of these forces would be pre-positioned in Kuwait.

The British provided the 3rd Commando Brigade, Royal Marines, under the command of Brigadier James Dutton. The force would also pre-position ashore in Kuwait from the UKATG. The initial requirement was to secure the ports of Umm Qasr and Az Zubayr from land. This was undertaken by the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit (15th MEU) while the Royal Marines combined with the British Army's 1st Armoured Division to secure Basra following an air assault on the Al-Faw Peninsula.

Information and communications technology

For the first time in a major naval conflict, satellite communications would play a pivotal role not only in long-haul strategic communications but also between ships and formations. Commercial software tools such as email, chat and web surfing became critical command and control aids and proved vital to the success of the mission. The allocation of satellite bandwidth became a matter of close attention for commanders.

Chat was of particular significance in passing orders and disseminating information. It allowed ships to join in a 'meeting room' with their task group commanders where reports would be made and orders given. Chat proved excellent for providing shared situational awareness and fostering task group cohesion. For example, one-on-one 'whisper boxes' between task group commanders and individual ships allowed details to be sorted out before posting orders in open meeting rooms. Innumerable task-specific chat rooms proliferated throughout the theatre for such functions as logistics, air warfare or shore bombardment. There were, however, challenges with this novel tool. Information overload was a risk, as was providing too much transparency to higher commands who became tempted to micromanage issues. In addition, chat could distract the eyes of operations crews from radar screens and charts.

Lead-up to the Iraq War

Critical to the operation's success was the massive build-up of materiel for the land, air and sea forces. As in 1990, the vast bulk of equipment and stores came by sea. From January until the end of April, the US Military Sealift Command moved about 21 million square feet of materiel and more than 261 million gallons of fuel. The commander of the Military Sealift Command, Vice Admiral David L. Brewer III, attributed this achievement to the adoption of lessons from the Gulf War. The large, medium-speed, roll-on/roll-off ships were such an example and became the prime movers with a carrying capacity of 300,000 square feet per ship. The surge of the Military Sealift Command was assisted by Ready Reserve Force roll-on/roll-off ships from the US Maritime Administration and commercial charter. The protection of these ships from interference from al-Qaeda, Iran or Iraq was of critical importance. Ships were provided not only naval escorts (often by the MIF) as required but also on-board US Navy and US Marine Corps security teams.

From January 2003, ships stationed in the Gulf began to receive additional training and had defects repaired. An example of this training was naval gunfire support drills for the Australian and British frigates designated for this mission. In preparing for the likely conflict, the MIF identified four worst-case scenarios: Iraqi mining, short-range Iraqi missile strikes from the Al-Faw, a blue-on-blue incident, and a collision involving helicopters unfamiliar with the confines of the north Persian Gulf. The MIF developed enhanced procedures to mitigate these risks. They included improved reporting and tracking procedures for merchant ships, aircraft and boats, and a range of visual and procedural tools to confirm identity. The MIF Commander became the North Arabian Gulf Local Surface Warfare Commander and Local Air Warfare Commander. These small but important steps were to ensure not only that the MIF could operate in a broader warfare context but also that when the inevitable force build-up occurred, the much-enlarged coalition force could operate safely in this relatively confined area.

A key to the cohesion between not only the on-station ships but also newly joined forces was the long-standing ties between most of the naval forces. In particular, American, British and Australian sailors had long association and familiarity. Extensive use of embedded liaison officers in the different levels of command helped to resolve issues and promote cohesion.

The new joiners also had the benefit of chat rooms to immerse themselves as they steamed in theatre. The Royal Navy frigates were visitors to MIF chat rooms from the point when they commenced steaming down the English Channel. This accelerated their eventual integration into the MIF.

While the coalition forces prepared for war, the Iraqis began to rebase their warships from Umm Qasr to Basra. This unprecedented redeployment of all major ships included Saddam Hussein's presidential yacht, *Al-Mansur*. It was assessed that Iraqis thought Basra offered more protection for these ships, as well as allowing a short passage across the Shatt Al-Arab to Iran if considered expedient to do so and should Iran prove to be accommodating.

As part of revised command and control arrangements, Commodore John W. Peterson in the cruiser USS *Valley Forge* was made the North Arabian Gulf Commander. He had extensive north Persian Gulf experience and had been heavily involved in developing the maritime plan. His new purview was operations off both the Khawr Abd Allah and Shatt Al-Arab, and supporting special forces operations. He also had to align the activities of the coalition with the Kuwaiti–Bahraini–Emirati Defence of Kuwait Task Group now at sea. Major General Ahmed Yousef al-Mulla, Commander of the Kuwait Naval Force, in the United Arab Emirates frigate *Al Emirat* commanded this task group as it operated in the western sector of the north Persian Gulf.

From mid-February to early March, the planning tempo increased significantly. An important issue was aligning the different components of the plan to reduce the possibility of fratricide.

On 1 March 2003, we scrutinised the plans for the clearance of merchant and dhow traffic from the Khawr Abd Allah. We desired clearance of the channel to ensure that delivery of humanitarian relief to Umm Qasr could occur within 72 hours of the adjacent land sector being secured. The plan involved *Kanimbla* being used as a command platform with the MIF to oversee a force of 38 RHIBs inspecting, clearing and directing dhows and merchant vessels to designated holding areas. All vessels would be searched for explosives, mines, weapons and contraband material before being allowed down a defined route into the central Persian Gulf. US Navy and US Coast Guard patrol boats, as well as Kuwaiti patrol vessels and maritime interception operations helicopters, would support operations. In addition to the organic RHIBs, *Kanimbla* and *Czernicki* would host additional boats and associated personnel from other non-MIF warships

operating further down the Gulf. Later, part of the MIF would deploy forward to protect the mine counter-measures effort and patrol the river once cleared.

The proposed use of naval gunfire support in the assault on the Al-Faw Peninsula became a contentious issue. Four frigates in two fire support areas planned to provide fire across the whole of the Royal Marines' 40 Commando area of operations and on to 42 Commando's insertion point. Despite US concern about deconfliction with air assets and an initial lack of Royal Marine support, it was agreed that naval gunfire support would become a feature of the plan. The planning work and assiduous advocacy by the commanding officer of HMS *Marlborough*, Captain Mark Anderson, was instrumental in this outcome. As events were to unfold, naval gunfire support was to prove invaluable to the assault.

On 11 March 2003, Rear Admiral Costello convened a final planning conference on board USS *Constellation* in which all plans were outlined. Elaborate anti-fratricide measures for the small boats were also briefed. Such was the concern about fratricide that Costello directed that a weapons safe posture was to be adopted, with engagement of the enemy to be directed by him unless in self-defence. This approach reflected the preponderance of coalition military power and the confined nature of the battle space. More challenging was the deconfliction between maritime and land operations in the littoral. Despite the sharing of plans, albeit often later than desirable, and the exchange of liaison officers, there remained doubt as to whether all risks had been retired.

Rear Admiral Kelly's remit was complex and required the integration of the naval air and strike assets into the coalition air and targeting plans. In addition to striking Iraqi targets, the naval forces had to complement operations to ensure air superiority over both Iraq and Kuwait. A particular challenge was to protect Kuwait city from a possible short-range missile attack from Iraq. The US Army deployed Patriot anti-air missile batteries around the city, and the destroyer USS *Higgins* was fitted with additional equipment to provide early warning and tracking for these forces.

The Iraqis had developed defensive plans that were being incrementally implemented. In the first instance, the Iraqi navy moved the last of its larger ships from Umm Qasr to Basra. Some tugs, small patrol craft and a barge were fitted with disguised mining rails to enable them to lay defensive minefields at the mouth of and along the Khawr Abd Allah. Plans were also put in place to destroy navigational markers along the

waterways. Small inflatable boats were also rigged as suicide boats from components of Iraqi-built LUGM-145 naval moored contact mines. These boats were to be deployed from the Al-Faw, enabling coalition warships to be attacked from the Khawr Abd Allah and Shatt Al-Arab waterways.

The MIF, through its contact with merchant ship and dhow crews, had learnt of some of these plans, including the threat to navigation marks and the Mīnā' al-Bakr and Khor al-Amaya offshore oil terminals. As a result, all Iraqi government vessels were trailed by MIF RHIBs while at the entrance to the Khawr Abd Allah to monitor their actions.

During the evenings, there had been a noticeable increase in smuggler movement with increased desperation to exit the Khawr Abd Allah. On the evening of 15 March 2003, a Kuwaiti patrol boat fired warning shots at an exiting dhow that had not responded to its order to stop. The ill-directed fire hit an Indian crew member. A medical team from HMAS *Anzac* was unable to save his life, and the dhow was directed back up the Khawr Abd Allah. Perhaps, as a result of this event, there was a marked reduction in dhow activity.

On the arrival of the UKATG in the north Persian Gulf, pre-positioning of the Royal Marine force in Kuwait commenced with US and Australian assistance. Reconnaissance of the peninsula, commenced by Royal Navy airborne Sea King Mk 7 helicopters fitted with early warning radar, provided synthetic aperture radar images of the terrain and installations. HMAS *Kanimbla* was used as a forward operating base for crew swaps and refuelling. Tragically, on 22 March 2003, two of these helicopters collided with the loss of seven lives.

On the afternoon of 17 March, 38 dhows attempted an unusual daytime escape of the Khawr Abd Allah. Their crews had heard erroneous news reports of the impending start of the war. In their desperation they started to jettison cargo. Vice Admiral Keating approved the recommendation of the MIF to clear the Khawr Abd Allah rather than turn the dhows around in accordance with the UN sanctions. It was a historic moment because it was the effective end of the 12-year embargo. The well-developed plan of the MIF was activated. All dhows were anchored and searched for arms, explosives, mines and deserting Iraqi leadership before being physically marked, cleared and directed south along the designated track called Red Route 1. Coalition aircraft and warships monitored their passage down the Gulf.

For their part, once the dhows' crews understood what was happening, they were compliant. For some boarding teams and dhow crews, it was a poignant moment. After months, if not years, of being boarded and being turned back, this was to be their last meeting. Among those vessels cleared was the Indian dhow that lost her crew member two nights earlier.

As expected, the word of the clearance quickly spread up the Khawr Abd Allah, and the following day the merchant ships made their outbound passage. Fifty-six dhows and 47 merchant ships were inspected and cleared in about three days. This early clearance emptied the waterway in preparation for combat operations.

In the early morning of 19 March, UN officials on the *Mīnā' al-Bakr* and *Khor al-Amaya* oil terminals were detained and taken to Basra in an Iraqi government tug. There were fears that they would find themselves used as 'human shields' just as such people had been used during the earlier Gulf War. To prevent this, CH-47 Chinook helicopters intercepted the tug, removed the UN workers, and allowed the vessel to proceed on its way. The UN workers reported that Iraqi military were present on the two offshore oil terminals with some suspicious equipment. This corroborated earlier reports from merchantmen that Iraq might detonate explosives on the terminals.

Hostilities

On the evening of 19 March 2003, US Navy Seals and Polish GROM, under the overall command of US Navy Commodore Robert S. Harward, conducted a sea and airborne assault on *Mīnā' al-Bakr* and *Khor al-Amaya* oil terminals. HMAS *Anzac* stood by to extract these forces if the assault was repulsed. However, the attack proceeded to plan, and both platforms were quickly secured. Iraqi explosives were present on the platforms but had not been fitted. At the same time as the oil terminal operation, US Navy Seals secured the two related oil manifolds on the Al-Faw Peninsula.

This operation was soon followed by the first wave of Tomahawk land attack cruise missile launches from US Navy cruisers, destroyers and submarines as well as British submarines. In all more than 800 Tomahawks were fired from 35 coalition ships from the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Persian Sea and the Persian Gulf, with almost half of those being fired in the first 24 hours. A third of the missiles were launched from submarines, including from the British submarines.

The Al-Faw coalition aircraft commenced strikes on Iraqi army positions, augmented by 148 Battery Royal Artillery firing from Bubyán Island, the largest island in the Kuwaiti coastal island chain in the north-western corner of the Persian Gulf. On completion of this bombardment, Royal Marines conducted an airborne insertion on the Al-Faw Peninsula.

Soon after the commencement of hostilities, an Iraqi navy PB-90 patrol boat proceeded down the Khawr Abd Allah to attack coalition warships. En route it was detected by a AP-3C Orion from Patrol Squadron 46, which relayed its location to an AC-130 gunship then supporting the Al-Faw operation. In a brief exchange of fire, the PB-90 blew up under the hail of fire from the aircraft's 76mm gun. Three survivors, suffering from hypothermia, were picked up at daylight by Adak. They were expeditiously recovered to HMAS *Kanimbla* where they told their tale of survival.

At around 0200 on 20 March 2003, HMS *Marlborough*, HMAS *Anzac*, HMS *Chatham* and HMS *Richmond* were detached for shore bombardment duties. The passage to assigned fire support areas was challenging with a strong tidal stream, poor visibility and shallow waters. The Royal Marines encountered stubborn resistance from Iraqi forces and called for naval gunfire support at 0604. The ships engaged command posts, bunkers and artillery positions. In one action, HMAS *Anzac* destroyed a T59 artillery piece in a fire mission of three rounds. Such was the unprecedented accuracy of the frigates that spotters used single rounds to direct Iraqi troops up the peninsula. Very accurate fire was provided by frigates at near maximum ranges with Royal Marines in close proximity waiting to exploit the effects. Naval gunfire was used to encourage capitulation by Iraqi forces with success on a number of occasions. The battery commander reported: 'Success on the Al-Faw was due to the aggressive use of indirect fire support, especially the swift response from naval gunfire support ships which had a huge impact on the ground and shattered the enemy's will to fight.' A total of 17 fire missions were executed with just 155 rounds of 5-inch and 4.5-inch ammunition expended.

During the night another aspect of the operation was executed. This was the protection of an amphibious transit lane for the fast landing craft air cushion (LCAC) hovercraft to take equipment from Bubyán Island across the Khawr Abd Allah to the Al-Faw Peninsula. USS *Chinook*, USS *Firebolt*, USCGC *Adak* and USCGC *Aquidneck* reported three Iraqi tugs

and a barge coming down the Khawr Abd Allah. It was discovered that the tug *Jumariya* had a barge with 20 Manta and 48 LUGM contact mines concealed in its hull, while the tug *Al Raya* contained 18 LUGM mines. The mines on the upper deck of the *Al Raya* were concealed by hollowed-out 50-gallon barrels. The barrels were lined in rows, simulating a cargo barge and tug. An Australian Army LCM-8 landing craft ferried the 38 Iraqi crewmen to a US Navy designated prisoner-holding amphibious ship. SEALs from USS *Joint Venture*, which had come up the channel west of Bubiyan Island, then confirmed that there were no additional Iraqi mine barges further up the Khawr Abd Allah.

Later in the day, four small Iraqi suicide boats proceeded down the Shatt Al-Arab. They were pursued by Iranian naval forces and beached themselves. In response to this threat, I detached HMS *Chatham* and HMAS *Darwin* as a Surface Action Group to the mouth of the Shatt Al-Arab. The ships possessed a good combination of weapon systems to deal with small inshore contacts. The ships remained off the mouth of the Shatt Al-Arab until the danger of these boats had passed.

The anticipated short-range Iraqi missile attacks from the Al-Faw did materialise on 20 March, but the target was Kuwait city, not coalition warships. At least six SCUD missiles were fired with limited damage sustained. The Patriot missile defence batteries, with cueing from USS *Higgins*, intercepted at least two SCUDS, destroying them in mid-flight.

While this activity was occurring at the mouth of the Khawr Abd Allah, the US, British and Australian clearance diving teams had driven across the desert from Kuwait behind the leading 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit elements into Umm Qasr. Once the port had been secured, they commenced mine clearance of the port precinct. Australian, British and US Navy diving teams were complemented by dolphins trained by the US Navy to locate bottomed mines. The mine clearance forces were supported from the amphibious ship USS *Gunston Hall*.

On 20 March, US Marine Corps Task Force Grizzly advanced to South Rumaylah to prevent Iraqi efforts to destroy the oilfields. However, the main effort of the US Marines was to push into Iraq and approach Baghdad from the south-east, securing vital points en route. Meanwhile, the Royal Marines and British Army units focused on securing the south and took Basra on 6 April. By 10 April 2003, the US Marines had established themselves in Baghdad. The focus then shifted to stabilisation and security operations.

Meanwhile, the aircraft carriers maintained continuous air missions to support the air campaign, while the Tomahawk armed cruisers, destroyers and submarines also contributed to operations. More than 400 navy aircraft from six fighter wings flew more than 7,000 sorties in support of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM between 20 March and 14 April. Among the many Iraqi targets struck were the remnants of the Iraqi navy tied up alongside in Basra, including *Al-Mansur*.

The US Marine Air Wing flew some 9,800 sorties and expended nearly 6.25 million pounds of ordnance during the operation. Owing to the shortage of airfields and other considerations, their AV-8B Harriers operated from their amphibious ships. This demonstrated the US Marines' 'Operational Manoeuvre from the Sea' concept, which is premised on a largely self-contained force being able to project force and sustain operations from its offshore support ships, integrating all joint, combined and organic assets.

During the next couple of days events moved quickly. Once the Al-Faw was secured, the coalition mine counter-measures vessels HM Ships *Bangor*, *Blyth*, *Brocklesby* and *Sandown*, as well as US Ships *Dextrous*, *Cardinal* and *Ardent*, complemented by the two Sea Dragon helicopters with towed sidescan sonars, commenced counter-mine operations. MIF patrol boats and RHIBs protected these forces through ever-lengthening riverine patrols. On one such patrol, USS *Chinook* observed suspicious activity on the Al-Faw shoreline. On landing a team ashore, they chased away Iraqis who left a semi-inflated boat and a cache of rockets and other weapons. The MIF continued riverine patrols until the Al-Faw was secured.

The campaign plan called for clearing of mines in the Khawr Abd Allah up to Umm Qasr within 72 hours. But this goal proved unrealistic owing to the large number of mine-like objects littering the riverbed. This was hardly surprising as the Khawr Abd Allah has been a battle zone on several occasions in the 20th century. To speed up the clearance, the normal mine counter-measures process of detect, identify and destroy was modified to detect and destroy mine-like objects. In the end, the coalition mine counter-measures forces cleared the equivalent of 913 nautical miles of water in the Khawr Abd Allah and Umm Qasr port area. Eventually, 21 berths for ships were opened in Umm Qasr, and this cleared the way to allow the first coalition humanitarian aid shipments into Iraq on board RFA *Sir Galahad* on 28 March.

The maritime component of operations to dislodge the Saddam Hussein regime was long in the build-up but short in duration. On 12 April 2003, Baghdad fell to coalition forces. Even before that day, once the land forces had secured Umm Qasr and Basra, the primary role of maritime forces fell to contributing to the air campaign.

At this phase of the campaign there was a strong desire to rapidly draw down on forces. This was not only because of their attendant logistic and fiscal burden but also because they could become a target for local insurgents, al-Qaeda or misadventure. In consultation with the overall campaign commander, General Franks, the naval footprint was therefore rapidly decreased.

In coming months, however, there was much work to be done by coalition naval forces in stabilising the post-Saddam Iraq. This included opening up ports and waterways and, most importantly, protecting the vital offshore oil terminals through which more than 90 per cent of Iraq's foreign earnings flow.

Summation

The maritime campaign to oust the Saddam Hussein regime was noteworthy for the diverse range of missions undertaken by an integrated multinational force. The Deputy Maritime Component Commander, Rear Admiral Snelson, on reflection stated: 'Overall, the campaign was a classic use of maritime power in support of initial diplomatic and coercive objectives and then in support of a joint war-fighting campaign.'⁵

The success of the maritime element was based on a number of factors. Key among them was 12 years of experience operating and sustaining naval forces in the narrow confines of the northern Gulf. Related to this experience was the high level of interoperability among participants. This was a testament not only to the experience of working together but also to the widespread use of liaison officers and the development of mission-specific procedures and doctrine for the operation. An example was the elaborate identification procedures to prevent friendly fire on RHIBs. Rear Admiral Snelson stated:

5 D. Snelson, 'Liberating Iraq—The UK's maritime contribution', *Naval Review*, vol. 91, no. 4, 2003, p. 328.

This very close integration of forces practised by the Australian Navy as well as the US [Navy] and [Royal Navy], resulted in unparalleled unity of effort that paid dividends in preventing friction, blue-on-blue engagements and forcing the sharing of intelligence and C2 connectivity.⁶

This integration extended to the higher levels of command and planning. Vice Admiral Keating remarked:

This was a different war, perhaps obviously, but for not-so-apparent reasons. It was joint war-fighting at the highest form of the art I've ever seen. The component commanders (air, land, sea) working for General Tommy Franks had spent about a year formulating this plan.⁷

Despite the complexity of the operation, the relatively sophisticated command and control tools allowed large amounts of information to be disseminated. This allowed units to be multitasked or retasked. Vice Admiral Keating remarked, 'We were able to keep up with the rapidly dynamic and changing war in ways that were, in my experience, unprecedented.'⁸

The most decisive strategic effect created by the maritime component was the generation of air power from six carrier air groups in an operation where constraints were placed on land-based air power. The second crucial effect was sea control that enabled the build-up and sustainment of all land, air and sea forces. This sea control also enabled the strategically vital offshore oil terminals to be secured before oil could be released into the Gulf by Saddam Hussein's regime. The consequences of such a release could have been catastrophic. The coalition's sea control also prevented sea mining of the Gulf, which could have had serious implications on the coalition's conduct of operations. Finally, deployment of significant marine forces made a notable contribution to the success of the land campaign.

6 Ibid., p. 326.

7 T.J. Keating, 'This was a different war: Interview with Vice Admiral Timothy J. Keating', *US Naval Institute Proceedings*, vol. 129, no. 6, 2003, p. 30.

8 Ibid., p. 30.

Post-Iraq War operations

Following the Iraq War, the thread of maritime interception operations and the provision of good order at sea was once again picked up. Initially, the environment was benign, but then Iraqi insurgents and later al-Qaeda and Islamic State terrorists posed a threat in the northern and southern Gulf. Seaborne forces had the opportunity to disrupt the drug trade between the subcontinent and Africa. These and the earlier operations showed the utility of naval forces that are capable of both sustained maritime interception operations and, if needed, littoral warfare.

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