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Royal Australian Navy Update July to December 2011

The tempo of the Royal Australian Navy Fleet remained high through the latter half of 2011.

Operations

The frigate, HMAS *Toowoomba*, completed its commitment to Operation *Slipper*, returning to Western Australia in November. *Slipper* is Australia's military contribution to: the international campaign against terrorism; maritime security in the Middle East Area of Operations; and countering piracy in the Gulf of Aden. The frigate, HMAS *Parramatta*, departed Sydney in September, relieving *Toowoomba* on station.

Navy clearance divers participated in *Operation Render Safe 2011* in Papua New Guinea in October. They disposed of more than 2000 items of unexploded ordnance with a net explosive quantity of 7 tonnes. In Simpson Harbour, Rabaul, HMAS *Gascoyne* investigated an uncharted contact which was ultimately identified as a probable World War II Japanese submarine.

The patrol boat fleet continued to support border security (Operation *Resolute*), including enforcing Australian fisheries, customs and migration laws, and supporting the Australian Federal Police.

Non-operational Deployments

Some Navy trainees embarked in the P&O icebreaker research vessel *Aurora Australis* for a sea training deployment from Hobart to Macquarie Island in July. They played a role in rescuing a fishing vessel, *Janus*, adrift on the Southern Ocean.

HMAS *Broome* prevented an environmental and maritime disaster off Papua New Guinea, towing commercial container ship, MV *Vega Fyren*, from danger after she lost power and was drifting towards Ragelapra Reef on 24 October.

Major Exercises

In July, a number of Navy assets took part in the United States led Exercise *Talisman Sabre* to improve combat readiness and interoperability. Participating were ANZAC-class and Adelaide-class frigates, Huon-class mine-hunters, Armidale-class patrol boats, auxiliary oiler replenishment ships, landing craft heavy, landing craft, Seahawk and Sea King helicopters, and clearance divers.

Minor War Vessel Concentration Period II was held off Darwin in September. HMA Ships *Gleneig*, *Maryborough*, *Balikapapan*, *Betano*, *Melville*, *Paluma*, *Mermaid*, *Huon* and *Yarra* participated, along with two A109E helicopters and Army light armoured vehicles, mechanised landing craft and amphibious resupply cargo lighters.

Capability

Navy's amphibious fleet remained in the spotlight. In July, the Rizzo Review into ship repair and management practices was released. The report confirmed that problems with the amphibious fleet had built up over a decade or more with insufficient resources allocated to address materiel and personnel shortfalls since the ships were brought into service 20 years ago. Twenty-four

recommendations were made to improve operational availability and ensure the ongoing technical integrity of Navy ships. Defence accepted all the recommendations and is in the process of implementing them.

In September, the Government announced the removal of gender restrictions from Australian Defence Force combat roles, opening the way for women to apply to become naval clearance divers.

The amphibious ship P&O *Windermere* was leased from 14 October 2011 to 31 January 2012 to enhance Navy's amphibious capability during the cyclone season.

The amphibious ship, HMAS *Kanimbla*, was decommissioned at Garden Island, Sydney, on 25 November, after 17 years of service. *Kanimbla's* decommissioning date was brought forward from 2014 as the level of maintenance to keep her active did not represent a reasonable return to the Australian tax payer.

On 6 December, the ex-Royal Fleet Auxiliary Ship *Largs Bay* arrived in Australia and was commissioned as HMAS *Choules* on 13 December. It was named after Mr Claude Choules, the last known veteran to have to have served on active service in World War I. The Government also announced its intent to purchase a third ship to support humanitarian and disaster relief capability until the arrival of the landing helicopter dock amphibious ships.

A study was announced into alternative methods of crewing some of Navy's support ships. The review will examine the viability of crewing some vessels with a mix of civilian and military or even all civilian crews.

Navy's Sea King helicopters were withdrawn after 35 years of service on 16 December. 817 Squadron was simultaneously decommissioned.

Navy's current long range Standard Missile-2 (SM2) air defence missile was approved for future use by the air warfare destroyers. The conversion of the missiles will provide an enhanced anti-aircraft and anti-ship missile defence capability. Approval was also granted for a contribution to the international risk reduction study for the Evolved Sea Sparrow Missile (ESSM) which is currently fitted to ANZAC-class frigates and will be fitted to the air warfare destroyers.

Following the successful upgrade of HMAS *Perth's* Anzac Frigate Fleet Anti-Ship Missile Defence System, it will be rolled out to the remaining seven Anzac frigates, enabling them to target more than one object.

To protect and support the LHDs, the RAN will re-enter the destroyer field after a gap of 14 years with three Hobart-class air warfare destroyers (AWD), of 6250 tonnes, which is significantly bigger than the current Newcastle-class and ANZAC-class frigates. With remarkable command and control capabilities and a very versatile and effective weapons fit, the Hobarts will provide the RAN and the ADF with area air defence capabilities well in excess of what is now available. These ships will replace the upgraded FFG-7-class frigates, which have served the nation since the 1980s, and will join the Anzac-class frigates, now being retrofitted with an advanced

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multi-channel air defence system of Australian design. It is a salutary reminder of the longevity of these programmes to realise that HMAS *Anzac* was delivered to the RAN in May 1996, and is more than half way through her effective service life.

The MRH90s replace the venerable Sea King helicopters flown by the RAN for over 30 years and the destroyer/frigate force is to be re-equipped with the MH-60R combat helicopters, at last filling the gap caused by the cancellation of the Sea Sprite project in 2008 for the *Anzac* class.

These re-equipment projects are underway towards delivery at a time when the RAN and Defence generally, as well as defence industry, are experiencing a shortage of engineering and project skills, and it is estimated that it might take as long as 10 years to redress this. The sad sagas of the continuing reduced availability of the Collins-class submarines and the failure of the landing platform amphibious programme to keep amphibious ships available and in service, are reminders of what can go wrong if this aspect of the re-equipment effort is not properly addressed. There is also pressure on skilled manpower generally because of the resources boom.

Waiting Government decision are more naval equipment projects, including a proposed expansion of the RAN's submarine force to 12 boats and replacement of the Collins class commencing in 2016; the replacement of the *Armidale*-class patrol boats, the mine-warfare force and the hydrographic vessels at the end of their lives in the early 2020s with a more capable multi-role vessel; and development of a new class of frigates to replace the *Anzac* class from the mid-2020s. The heavy landing craft will need replacement before then. Government, Navy, Defence and Australian industry are working hard to resolve the engineering issues affecting the delivery of these projects. Their success or otherwise will determine whether the ships can be completed as scheduled and adequately supported in service.

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