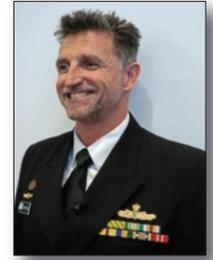


## *Australia's capacity to generate naval task groups for amphibious operations and sea control*



A paper based on a presentation to the Institute on 27 August by

**Captain David Tietzel, CSM, RAN**

Deputy Commodore, Flotillas, Royal Australian Navy<sup>1</sup>

*In this paper, Captain Tietzel describes how Australia's Amphibious Task Group has evolved since 2014 to project a land force onto a potentially hostile shore; and how a Maritime Task Group has co-evolved to enable both bluewater maritime manoeuvre/sea control and to protect the Amphibious Task Group.*

**Key words:** Australia; amphibious capability; Amphibious Task Group; Maritime Task Group; Maritime Component Headquarters; Royal Australian Navy.

Headquarters, Australian Fleet, has the overall responsibility for our Fleet's warfighting skills and 'fleet lethality'; and, also, for the planning and design of the Royal Australian Navy's annual exercise programme, task group work-ups, force integration training, and the mounting and certification of task groups for operations.

The Fleet Battle Staff, of which the Amphibious Task Group is the largest component, is responsible for leading our exercise and operational planning and for the provision of dedicated task group staffs and command and control across the Fleet.

In this paper, we will look at our journey so far and how and why we generate task groups for both amphibious operations and sea combat power.

### **Naval Task Groups**

Many of you will know that the Australian navy was born from the Royal Navy well over a century ago. Since then, our ships and forces have been involved in nearly every major operation, action and conflict from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

Nevertheless, despite constant changes in the strategic landscape, shifting operational priorities and the continual development of technology, and, with it, the growth of military capabilities, we have continued to generate, deploy and employ our maritime capabilities and their effects via the naval task group. This has reflected our traditional, tactical-level deployment of single ships or small groups of ships to regional operations in support of allied efforts.

More recently, we have seen a shift in how Australia views its role and influence as a maritime power within and across the Indo-Pacific. Given this enhanced role, the strong influence of maritime and sea-power, and, with it, the importance of our navy and our defence force to our nation; we have seen a corresponding

change in how the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) and the Australian Defence Force (ADF) conceive, plan, generate and execute maritime exercises, deployments and operations. Now, we are very focused on ensuring we generate task groups that are properly formed, staffed and appropriately mission-enabled.

In what seems like record-time, the nature, tempo, shape and weight of maritime activities have all ramped-up dramatically. What was an artist's impression at the Institute's amphibious operations seminar in 2014<sup>2</sup>, is now a realisation. As a maritime snapshot, we have commissioned our second Aegis guided-missile (air-warfare) destroyer, HMAS *Brisbane*, which is currently conducting combat and weapon system trials and certification in the United States.

HMAS *Toowoomba* deployed to the Middle East earlier this year and *Ballarat* is getting ready to go again – a deployment pattern we have been maintaining and repeating for over 30 years. At the same time, we have had two major task groups deployed within the Indo-Pacific region: the first was a surface combatant task group conducting a North-East Asia deployment; while the second saw our amphibious assault ships at the centre of Australia's role in providing maritime security and command and control support: to the RIMPAC exercise; to the government of Papua New Guinea for Operation APEC Assist; and to the last three Indo-Pacific annual deployments, in an unbroken chain of exercises and operations that saw on average 60 per cent of navy's major fleet units at sea at any one time. All of this represented an unprecedented 'peace-time' rate of effort.

However, this shift in focus, our new pathways, and this increased rate of effort and operational tempo, are not without their challenges, costs, risks or pains.

<sup>1</sup>Email: [david.tietzel@defence.gov.au](mailto:david.tietzel@defence.gov.au)

<sup>2</sup>The proceedings of the Institute's 2014 Amphibious Operations Seminar were published in *United Service* Vol. 65, No. 3, September 2014.

So much remains to be done and a lot more progress needs to be made before we can be satisfied we have gained the means necessary – in terms of measures, skills and experience-levels. Ultimately, we have to make sure we have sufficient resources to generate the capabilities to meet our current, ongoing and future tasking requirements, in terms of people, money and time, and in the face of other competing requirements. This continues to present a significant challenge for the Fleet and the wider Defence organisation.

### **The Need for and Development of an Amphibious Task Group**

Historically, the RAN operated as an adjunct to formations commanded by our allies. We provided our platforms to operate under the command of either senior British or United States navy commanders. Later, we formed large groups of ships for training, exercises and routine deployments for either defined periods or defined tasks.

While these formations were often supported by staff from the RAN's sea training group – then the core of our most experienced warfare and tactical experts – it would be a stretch to call these formations 'task groups' in the modern sense. While they were suited to the capability requirements and the tasking of the day, taking a contemporary view, we can now see some significant shortcomings in the way we fielded them in terms of their preparation, equipment, manning, command and control, enablers and certification. Put simply, we now look back and see how much better we can prepare our maritime forces and task groups to ensure we build, deliver and deploy them to be more capable, flexible and sustainable.

While these arrangements served Australia well in war and peace for many years, it became increasingly clear, post the 1980s, that we would need to expand our capabilities to support a greater regional maritime security burden. Australia's acquisition of the landing ship dock, HMAS *Tobruk*, and later, the landing platforms amphibious, *Kanimbla* and *Manoora*, provided our Fleet with a new foundational capability.

While amphibious in nature, the capability was predominantly employed with troop movements, sealift, transport, regional assistance and for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations. Nevertheless, we realised early that this capability would need a dedicated staff capable of managing the complexities of this amphibious-related work, including an effective command and control architecture. To that end, we established the RAN Fleet Battle Staff with separate amphibious and surface task group staff components. This structure proved highly effective over many years, noting our successes in contributing to a range of operations and contingencies, including East Timor, as well as

numerous deployments to the Middle East and countless taskings for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief events across the region.

The changing strategic balance in the Asia-Pacific over recent years, however, caused us, and continues to cause us, to re-think and re-adjust our approach to maritime operations, particularly in a joint and a whole-of-government sense.

Successive Australian government defence and foreign affairs white papers have highlighted both new risks and new opportunities across and within our region. These risks and opportunities now require a more visible, active, engaging and assertive maritime strategy and policy framework. A posture that recognises Australia's need to engage more closely across the Indo-Pacific, while being prepared to compete and, if necessary, ready to contest and protect our critical maritime interests.

In recognition of this, our government is delivering the largest acquisition programme in the history of Defence. Within a decade, the ADF capability portfolios will have delivered two amphibious assault ships, three of the world's most advanced Aegis air-warfare destroyers, new anti-submarine frigates, new off-shore patrol vessels, two new tankers with their dedicated staff capabilities, as well as the MRH90 and the MH60R helicopters, the P8 maritime patrol aircraft, the joint strike fighter, the FA-18 Super-Hornet and Growler aircraft, and the E7 Wedgetail airborne early warning and reconnaissance aircraft. I list these platforms, not to highlight them for their individual worth, but rather to point to their collective capabilities and the contribution they will make together, to the joint maritime task group. The task group will usually be centred on or around our amphibious assault ships, either for regional peacetime activities, or for force projection in an amphibious operation, or supporting sea combat. In any or all these cases, the amphibious assault ships will be providing the command and control, flag facilities, and networks and enablers all vital for task group operations.

As well as platform, enablers and equipment considerations, the amphibious assault ships' capability also needed a new and much bigger staff to provide greater levels of knowledge, know-how and skill. This saw a massive expansion of the Amphibious Task Group, largely enabled at the expense of our Surface Task Group, and through the provision of a large number of army positions and people. As well as a new and bigger Amphibious Task Group, we also stood up a permanent Maritime Component Command Element staff within the Deployable Joint Force Headquarters at Enoggera, Brisbane, to support the commander in his role as the ADF amphibious lead.

### **The Maritime Task Group and Sea Combat Skills**

Organisationally, our amphibious activities over the

last few years have consumed a great deal of our time and resources. As well as the effort involved in introducing the amphibious assault ship into service and the ongoing work in overseeing its further development, Navy is now being increasingly locked into a rigid annual amphibious training and certification cycle driven by force generation requirements.

Recently, we realised that our preoccupation with growing our amphibious, force projection and littoral<sup>3</sup> warfare capabilities has come at some cost to our traditional and long-standing blue-water sea combat skills. This should not be surprising given that we had knowingly sacrificed our Surface Task Group staff to allow the expansion of a more capable Amphibious Task Group.

To address this gap and re-invest in our Surface Task Group's sea combat capabilities, the Fleet Battle Staff has again established a new Maritime Task Group staff. As well as being responsible for routine Maritime Task Group deployments across the region, such as the annual Indo-Pacific Endeavour (engagement with and assistance to regional nations), the Maritime Task Group, with its core of 18 staff, is responsible for developing and executing the Sea Combat Commander and Marine Regional Air Defence Commander task group and force warfare functions.

The generation of maritime task groups sits at the core of Plan Pelorus, the Chief of Navy's strategic vision for the RAN over the next four years. With the requirement to generate task groups for training and exercises, as well as our standing preparedness requirements for contingency operations and conflict, we are seeing an insatiable, unrelenting and escalating demand for maritime task groups.

Indo-Pacific Endeavour, centred on an amphibious support ship, with up to six escorts, is a 3- to 4-month deployment representing a considerable commitment and investment by Navy, and Defence more generally. It is not surprising then, that the last two deployments achieved considerable success in promoting Australia and in pursuing our national engagement objectives within a region that remains of significant importance to us all.

While Indo-Pacific Endeavour provides a valuable vehicle to progress some task group capabilities, its focus on international engagement and providing assistance within the region falls well short of generating and maintaining other different but essential high-end task group force-warfare and warfighting capabilities and competencies.

The guided-missile (air-warfare) destroyers in particular, but also the *Hunter*-class frigates, will be

central to the Maritime Task Group. Alongside the platforms, the Maritime Task Group is part of a wider command and planning staff, which operates both ashore and at sea. In establishing the Maritime Task Group, now the RAN's third staff pillar, alongside the Amphibious Task Group and Maritime Component Command staffs, the RAN has staff capacity to support a sustainable, repeatable pattern of generating simultaneously, planning and executing, two major task groups through the year, in the amphibious domain, in the sea combat domain, or more generically, on a regional maritime deployment.

## Conclusion

We have developed a task group construct that remains fit-for-purpose across the entire spectrum of task group operations. The Maritime Task Group will deliver two primary operational outputs:

- The first is blue-water maritime manoeuvre, such as securing key sea lines of communication, and dominating the maritime battlespace (sea control), through command and control, and air, surface, and underwater warfare.
- The second is force protection of the Amphibious Task Group, by employing sea control capabilities in blue-water or brown-water (littoral) environments to enable the Amphibious Task Group to project power ashore.

The Maritime Task Group will further build upon and develop RAN sea combat skills to provide the 'at-sea fight', and then defend the force-projection task force. Indeed, with the introduction of the Maritime Task Group to complement the Amphibious Task Group, we now have the sea-combat task force to assure the force projection task force – we are now enabled for 'the fight upon the sea' as well as 'the fight from the sea'. The fight to the fight!

While recognising we still have a long way to go, I think we can be encouraged by what we have achieved so far.

**The Author:** Captain David Tietzel, CSM, RAN, is Deputy Commodore Flotillas at Fleet Headquarters. A career naval officer, who joined the Royal Australian Navy 31 years ago, he has served in a range of ships, from patrol boats up to amphibious assault ships, as a watch-keeper, navigator and principal warfare officer on his way to becoming executive officer of HMAS *Anzac* in 2006 and, in 2013, commanding officer first of HMAS *Warramunga* and then of HMAS *Arunta*. Along the way, he saw operational service in the Middle East and was awarded the Conspicuous Service Medal for service on exchange with the United States Navy. He was executive officer of HMAS *Adelaide* for two years before assuming his present posting on promotion to captain in September 2018. [Photo of Captain Tietzel: Department of Defence]

<sup>3</sup>Littoral' is derived from the Latin for 'shore'. In military use, 'the littoral' means the region at the land-sea interface, i.e. the shore and its adjacent coastal waters.