

The ARMILLA Patrol

Operation ARMILLA and its successors comprised graduated maritime deployments in the Arabian Gulf, which commenced in 1980 at the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war following a strategic-level request from the US President to the British Prime Minister. They were intended to prevent disruption to trade, particularly during the 'Tanker War' (1987-1988), to build local capacity and to prevent the outbreak or escalation of conflict in the region. Over the course of a decade, the steady stream of warships and associated auxiliaries reassured British shipping and friendly governments in the area, promoting cooperation and cohesion through numerous port visits and providing assistance to ships attacked. Operation ARMILLA also enforced UN sanctions and was key not only in influencing the Gulf states but also for enhanced engagement with significant allies in the area, particularly the US and Australia, bringing considerable benefits including access, information, and interoperability. For over 30 years it acted as a deterrent to both Iraqi and Iranian forces, and had some harder elements in that the British government reserved the right for the patrol to defend itself and, if necessary, act to punish and coerce an aggressor. What it lacked in numbers it made up for in persistence and continuity, and was thus able to have a significant influence in the region. It is credited with the ease with which access, basing and overflight rights were obtained prior to both Gulf Wars, and formed the basis for surges of tailored task groups, ranging from mine countermeasures (1987-1989) to the Operation TELIC 1 Amphibious Task Group in 2003. ARMILLA enabled the Royal Navy, to work perform its subsequent stabilisation mission in the Northern Arabian Gulf, protecting Iraqi waters and critical offshore oil infrastructure, and providing training and capacity building for the Iraqi Navy.

Operation Armilla (The NZ Contribution)

The **Armilla patrol** is the [Royal Navy's](#) permanent presence in the [Persian Gulf](#). The Royal Navy had withdrawn its forces from the Persian Gulf in [1971](#) in line with the UK's general retreat from imperial commitments. However, tensions in the area remained high and Royal Navy ships were still a frequent sight in the area. In [1980](#) war broke out between [Iraq](#) and [Iran](#). In response to the increased danger to British shipping and other British interests, a Royal Navy escort vessel was sent to the Gulf and at least one has remained there ever since. In addition to the surface combatant, the RN has also maintained an auxiliary of the [Royal Fleet Auxiliary](#) in the Gulf.

During the Falklands War, New Zealand offered assistance to the British Government and **HMNZS Canterbury**, which was the only operational frigate at the time, the first RNZN frigate to participate in Operation Armilla. She was relieved by **Waikato**. Both ships then did another patrol each, making a total of two patrols per ship.

The story starts with **HMNZS Canterbury** sitting alongside Hong Kong, May 1982 and I was having breakfast in the Senior Rates Mess when the 0700 local news came on.

“It has just been announced that the NZ Frigate, **HMNZS Canterbury**, currently sitting alongside at the Naval base in Hong Kong, has been seconded to the Royal Navy for duties in the Falklands conflict.”

I remember eating cornflakes at the time. These I managed to spray over the Chief sitting opposite me. Shortly thereafter, I was piped to go to the CO's cabin. I assured him that nothing unusual of very high precedence had come in by signal during the night. The Right Honourable Muldoon had been dining with the British PM, Maggie Thatcher at 10 Downing Street and had promised her an operational frigate to help out.

Anyway, sometime thereafter, and a little way down the coast in a place called Singapore, we eventually discovered that we were not going to the Falklands but to help in something called Operation Armilla. The RN frigate, whose place we were taking on patrol, departed for UK to have some armament changes (the addition of Sea Wolf - an anti-missile system) added prior to going to the South Atlantic. The biggest threat during Operation Armilla could come from Iranian or Iraqi fighter jets and in order to reduce this threat, the NZ Ensign was painted on top of the upper bridge. This allowed for national identification from the air and thus reduce the possibility of being shot at.



POTASI Mike Law and willing helper painting the NZ Ensign on the Upper Bridge - Singapore prior to deployment.

In June, we departed from Singapore in company with a RN Ikara equipped Leander class frigate (**HMS AJAX**), who also had SATCOM, and **RFA Gold Rover**. We transited the Indian Ocean to the point that juts out on the bottom left hand side of the

Red Sea - the French protectorate of Djibouti. Stayed there for a couple of days and then escorted the two RN ships up the Red Sea. If any of you sparkers remember anything about Ducting we were achieving distances of up to 1200 miles on VHF Channel 16 and a couple of hundred miles on secure UHF voice. The winds would whip the sand up from the desert and carry it across the Red Sea in the atmosphere. Watch on deck had to continuously keep the air intakes clear from the sand and the buntings had to change the NZ white ensign on several occasions because it kept turning pink.



Djibouti - this mosque appeared in the 1950's movie "The White Feathers"

After leaving the two RN units to make their way through the Suez Canal, we had to wait in the area for a while until the other frigate (**HMS AURORA**) and **RFA Grey Rover** came through the Canal to join up with Canterbury. This meant that we were now without our SATCOM link. However, we had pre-arranged to go onto a duplex MRL with the RAF base at Episkopi in Cyprus. We stayed on this MRL throughout the Patrol.



RFA Grey Rover

Whilst waiting for the other two units to join us, we visited Port Sudan and some of us had the opportunity to visit Suakin, which is about 35 miles down the coast. Suakin used to be the departure point for Muslims heading to Mecca. Apart from the fortifications, most of the city was made out of coral. Framework, window frames and doors were made out of wood and over the years, the inhabitants used the wood for fires there being no trees around for hundreds of miles. Consequently, most of the buildings have collapsed and the area looks like the aftermath of a nuclear explosion. Prior to this town collapsing, it was also used in the movie "The White Feathers".



Suakin, Sudan

The RN frigate (**Aurora**) coming out to join us broke down and returned to Gibraltar. Our patrol consisted of **Canterbury** and **RFA Grey Rover**. We departed the Red Sea and went into the Gulf of Oman. Our job was to protect merchant shipping in the area by conducting patrols, monitoring merchant shipping and belligerent activities. Our helo visited the International airport at Oman a couple of times a week and so we were able to get mail regularly. Radfones were held as often as operationally possible,

but with the Task Force coming back from the Falklands, it wasn't uncommon to be told that you were 54th in the queue.



Old British fort, Suakin, Sudan

Communications duties included maintaining the MRL with RAF Episkopi and monitoring all the International Distress Frequencies on the MF, HF, VHF and UHF bands. The patrol concluded when we rendezvoused with **HMNZS Waikato** off Colombo, Sri Lanka. We stayed there for about 8 hours to do our handovers and refuel whilst **Waikato** stayed on for a few more days.

Shortly after entering the Gulf for the first time, I was shaken by the LRO during the early hours of the morning and informed that we had received a FLASH grouper (an encrypted message in five letter groups). He was unable to set up the RACE crypto machine as the message had been encrypted in a special keylist which was held by the Captain. I hadn't seen a FLASH message since my days on the Royalist in 1965 so I was keen to see what this was all about. I raced up to the CO's cabin, woke him up (fortunately he was a light sleeper) and requested if I could have the special crypto settings that were held in his safe.

I took this material back down to the MCO (Wireless Office) and instructed the LRO to set up RACE using the CO's keylist. When it was ready, I fed in the tape whilst the CO looked over my shoulder. It was a message from the Admiralty (MODUK (Navy)) that a Soviet Tupolev TU-95 bomber had left its base in Aden and would be in our area at daybreak. Sure enough, this huge bomber flew over us and came around for a close up. It was near enough to see the crew in the cockpit and the gunner in the rear turret. A friendly wave was given by both sides (and probably photos) and the bomber went on its way. This was to become a regular occurrence during the patrol.



Tupolev TU-95 - codename "BEAR"

Operation Armilla 1982: Communications Circuits for the Patrol:

1. MRL (Duplex Secure RATT) with Cyprus - HF broadband aerial.
2. Simplex Orestes HF (Secure RATT) with RFA Grey Rover - 643/CJP - AWN whip.
3. Radfones with NZ - via UK - AWF whip.
4. Monitor:
 - (a) 500 kHz - FM16 with MF Broadband if/as required.
 - (b) 2182, 4125 kHz, 6 and 8 MHz - AWF whip as required.
 - (c) Channel 16 – Type 689
 - (d) 121.5 MHz - AN/ARC182
 - (e) 243.0 MHz - AN/ARC159's could all be set to "GUARD" as well as monitor the frequency in use.

About every 10 days, we were permitted to anchor off a remote part of the coast of Oman and send personnel ashore for R & R. However, In order to make a good impression, the First Lieutenant, Lt Cdr Nick Byrne, decided that the RNZN were not going to spoil this coastline and so the very first pipe made prior to the Banyan Party proceeding ashore was " Do ya hear there. XO speaking. We want to make a good impression whilst we are here and so there will **be no** drinking or eating ashore - enjoy yourselves!" He became known as Be-no Byrne after that.

It was bloody hot ashore and no shelter and I spent my four hours ashore in the water up to my neck with a sun hat on, trying to keep cool. I never went ashore again after that.



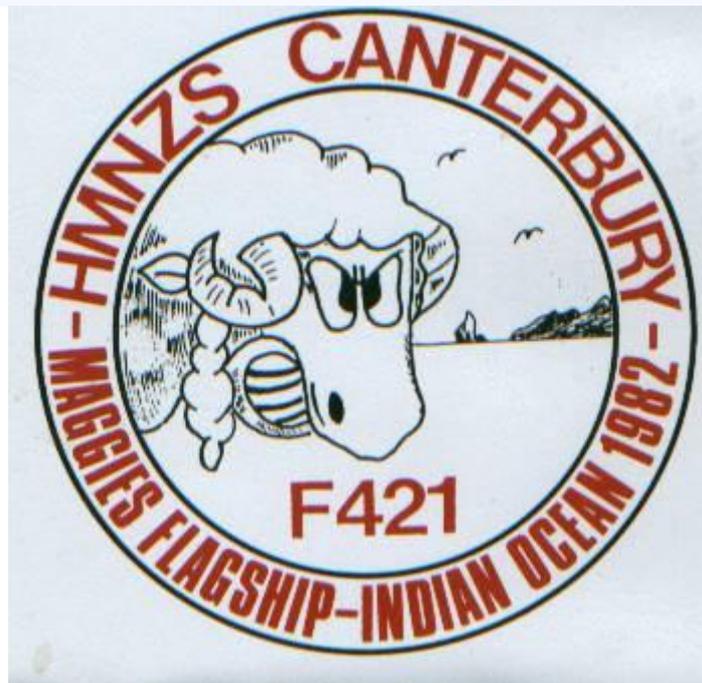
Club Med Oman!

To add insult to injury, I walked up the beach to the top of the sand dune and discovered a long trench full of empty allied beer cans!
The best way to keep cool was to use the Ship's Olympic size swimming pool:



CPOME Frank Lind and CPORS Jim Dell - 20 laps before breakfast!

I had asked for support from Waiouru between Singapore and the Gulf and the return passage. They were unable to assist as they were concentrating all their support on the ships in the Falklands. Between the Gulf of Oman and passage through the Indian Ocean to Singapore, we had to rely on the limited resources of the RAN station at North West Cape (NAVCALS Exmouth - VHB). This Station provided us with excellent support until we were able to establish communications with Navcommsta Darwin for the passage back to Singapore.



The front of beer holders made in Singapore

The Communications crew for that deployment were made up as follows:

Radio

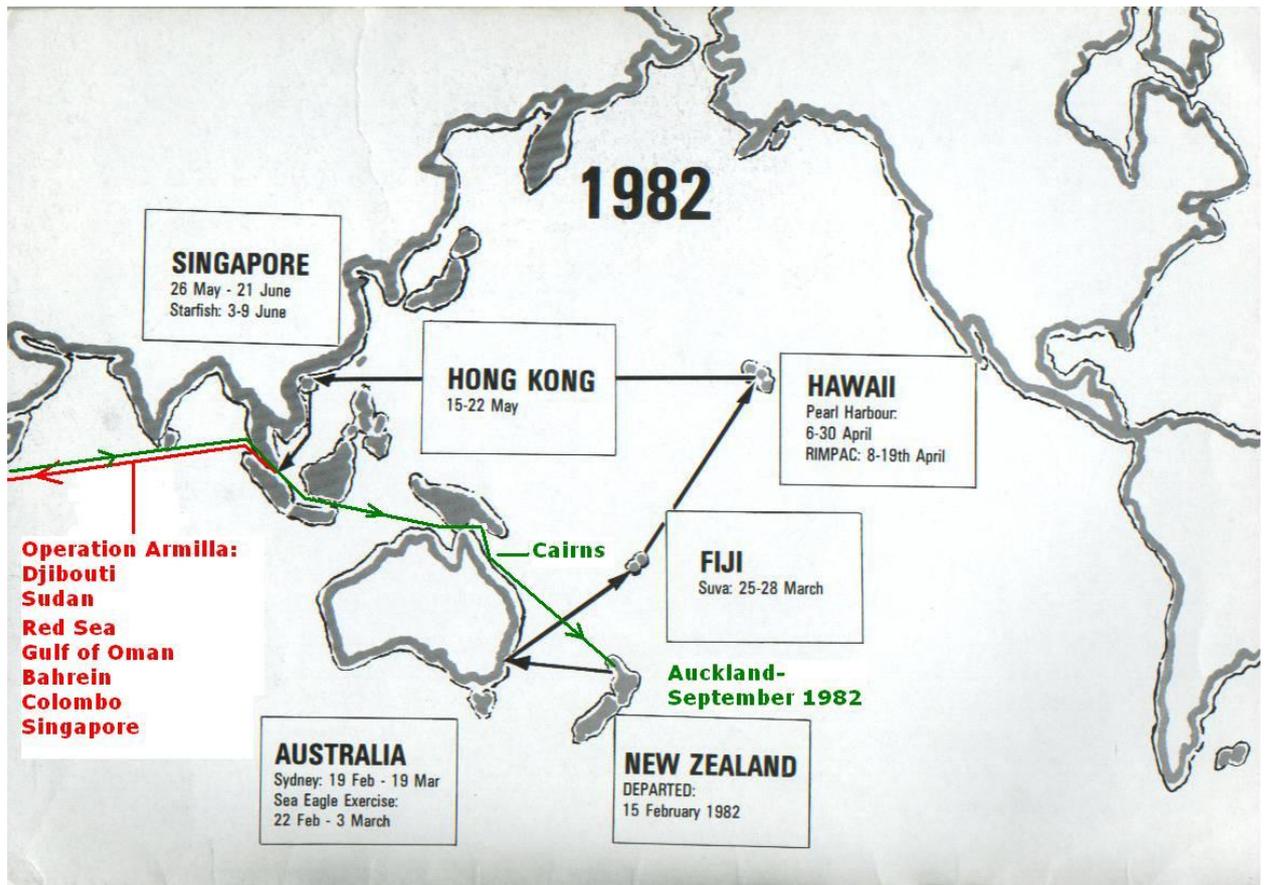
CPORS, 3 x LRO, 6 x ARO.

Signals

POYS, 3 x LSG, 5 x ASG

The EW Branch had 1 POEW who was an ex Sparker but the rest of his staff were EW Seamen. Two ARO's were seconded to the EWO for watch keeping duties with 2 of the LROs having to keep watches in the MCO.

The Communications Branch on Frigates in the RNZN had been permanently on a three watch system at sea ever since Canterbury first arrived from the UK. I explained to the XO prior to the start of the Commission that Communicators would not be available for communal/mess deck duties. On Otago in 1975/76 I also had a discussion with the XO about supplying Communicators for extraneous duties.



Canterbury's deployment 1982



You probably thought that Red Sea Rig was half blues with a cumberband - wrong!
This is the proper rig as purchased in Sudan, the Red Sea.