

THE FOUR NAVIES OF FIJI

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Fiji has had, between 1870 and 1995, four organisations that have at the time been designated the Naval Forces of the country. There have been different reasons for raising all four, none duplicating any of the others.

THE CAKOBANU NAVY

Stranded sailors, deserters, beachcombers and traders started to leave their ships and settle ashore in Fiji from the early days of the nineteenth century. The most popular place to settle was the port of Levuka where most of the trading ships came as it was the best-known safe port in this part of the world. Men from many other countries settled there because the local chief, Tui Levuka, was a genial host and made them all welcome on the island of Ovalau. Furthermore, the chief where Tui Levuka's allegiance lay was Ratu Seru Cakobau, the Vunivalu of Bau, the greatest power in that area of the islands and with sufficient influence to guarantee their security when forces from outside the burgeoning town of Levuka raided their premises, attracted by the imported trade goods they displayed.

The first result was that chief provided watchmen to guard the stores from pilfering. As a distinguishing mark, these men were each provided with a British Army uniform cap. An enterprising trader had imported a pile of these caps destined for the Yorks and Lancs Regiment which had left New Zealand by the time the uniform items arrived. When the raids on Levuka increased the settlers persuaded Cakobau to form a Government and even declared him king. Instead of a party of watchmen he now found it necessary to recruit a fighting force, which soon became known as the "Royal Army."

Encouraged by the settlers, some of whom had secured high positions in his Government, Cakobau soon had a two-ship (navy commanded by a half-pay Lieutenant of the Royal Navy named Dan O'Neill. The ships were a former trading vessel, *Marie Douglas*, and the armed cutter *Vivid*. The duties of this force were mainly ceremonial. A visitor to Levuka, Adolf Joske from Suva, at this time wrote of seeing the two vessels flying the newly designed flag of the Cakobau government as ensigns while at anchor in Levuka Harbour.

The "Royal Army" on the other hand, was busily engaged and repelling the warriors of Lovoni in their frequent raids on the stores of settlers in Levuka. At first, they were led by the chief himself and were conducted in the classical way of Fijian tribal warfare of the time which resulted in unsatisfactory endings. On the advice of his expatriate ministers, European officers were engaged both to lead and to train men in the use of the old "Tower" muskets which were then a popular item of trade and were in plentiful supply. It was a successful move, and writers of that period mention the improvements in the use of firearms and in the tactics employed. But Nemesis in the shape of a Royal Navy officer threatened the future of both forces. He was Captain John Goodenough who was then holding the appointment of Commodore, Commanding the Australian Squadron of the Royal Navy. Together with the newly-appointed British Consul Edgar Layard, he was to report in the recent offer of cession.

RECOMMENDATION

The two had already made their joint recommendation that in the future Fiji should be a Crown Colony “of a severe type” and then started to reconstruct the Cakobau Government, examining all records. While they recognized a need for the “Royal Army” to protect the investment of settler it was decided that a Government which could not pay its debts should not have the additional expense of running a Navy. In any case, if the recommendation about a Crown Colony was accepted, Goodenough’s own Australian squadron would assume responsibility for the naval defence of the islands and there would be no need for a local force. Accordingly, the Navy was disbanded, the two ships were sold and the money went to reducing the debt of the Government.

The demise of the first Fiji Navy saw the responsibility for naval affairs of the Colony, which was declared on 10 October 1874, being assumed by the Royal Navy, Australian Squadron. The composition of the squadron changed dramatically during the next 25 years with all iron and later steel steamships gradually replacing sailing ships. The colonies of New South Wales and Victoria acquired ships dedicated to the defence of those colonies but this was halted by the federation in 1901.

Britain sent a balanced squadron to Australia and that country paid towards operational costs. New Zealand was regarded as part of the Australian station and assumed part of the cost.

Moves were being made to control the operation of ships on the station and in October 1912 King George V approved the title Royal Australian Navy. With that force primarily concerned with the defence of Australia, the New Zealand Division of the Royal Navy was formed and assumed the task of caring for British Empire interests, including Fiji, in the Pacific. A cruiser, to be named *New Zealand*, was ordered and it was decided that *New Zealand* ratings would be trained in the country and the old cruiser *HMS Philomel* was stationed in Auckland as a training ship. But the outbreak of war in Europe altered many plans. The bulk of naval power was kept in home waters and there *HMS New Zealand* served in the Grand Fleet through-out the war, although the original intention was that she be the flagship of the Far Eastern Fleet.

HMS Philomel was commissioned on 13 July 1914, and started sea training. She was recalled from her first cruise on the outbreak of war on August 4, and within a few days sailed from Auckland in company with two other light cruisers, *HMS Psyche* and *HMS Pyramis*, escorting two troopships carrying New Zealand soldiers who occupied German Samoa on 30 August. The only involvement of Fiji against the enemy occurred in 1917 when Count Felix von Luckner was apprehended at Wakaya Island. His former command, the commerce raider *Sea Alder* had been lost on a feed in French Polynesia and he was seeking another ship to continue his depredation against Allied shipping. His capture was carried out by Police.

WORLD WAR II

The “war to end all wars” from 1914 to 1918 failed in that objective and by the 1930s the nations of the world were heading for the biggest war ever. The feeling of “it can happen here” was now here so strong as in Fiji. Only one man seemed to be concerned at the lack of readiness in the South Pacific for such an event, James Patrick Mullins, a New Zealander by birth, was serving in the Colony as master of the Government ship *HMCS Pioneer*. The whole defence of the portion of the South Pacific Islands which owed allegiance to Britain was the responsibility of the New Zealand Division of the Royal Navy, which in the early 1930s consisted of two sloops and a minesweeper used for sea training of the RNVR Divisions in the major cities. Mullins knew that many naval tasks in the islands would be beyond the capabilities of the New Zealand Division and urged the formation of the Naval Division in Fiji.

His letters on the subject, addressed to the Colonial Secretary, the authority for all Colonial Government correspondence, started in 1936. Even the Admiralty realized the vulnerability of this area and at that time were proposing that two Leander class light cruisers should be stationed in New Zealand and manned to the extent possible by ratings from that country. There was no matching interest in the proposals of Jimmy Mullins.

At that time Captain Mullins started a correspondence with Captain Olphert, then the senior Naval Reserve officer in New Zealand. Aware of the problem, Olphert recommended the formation of a Volunteer Reserve Division. This idea was included in the suggestions to the Secretariat. The letters were dealt with by an Assistant Secretary, as was the custom, but still produced no results. One such official did acknowledge receipt of one of the letters and mentioned that he would be anxious to join, should the Reserve be formed. Finally, in late 1937 Mullins received a letter finally putting an end to the correspondence and stating that the Colonial Secretary planned no action on the matter in the foreseeable future. *The Pioneer* reached the end of her useful life was scrapped.

The captain was appointed to stand by her successor, then building in Hong Kong. Before he reported to the shipbuilders in Taikoo Dockyard in Hong Kong Captain Mullins took leave in England where he joined the Royal Naval Reserve, receiving a commission as a Lieutenant-Commander. When next he wrote on his favorite subject to the Secretariat, he would be able to write more authority as a serving Reserve Officer. But that was not to be. On September 3, 1939 he was in Hong Kong when it was declared.

The new ship, still outfitting, was the requisite size for an auxiliary minesweeping and the Royal Navy had it fitted with a minesweeping wind and a 4” gun. It was tacitly understood that when the ship, to be named *Viti*, was completed she would be commandeered by the Admiralty. Minesweeping and gunnery trials were held under the aegis of the naval command in Hong Kong.

These were completed using Gunnery Officers from the naval dockyard for the gunnery trials and members of Hong Kong of the RNVR in the trials of the minesweeping equipment. It looked at that time as though this Division would eventually operate the *Viti*. The war situation in the Pacific changed dramatically before the prediction could be fulfilled.

JUNE 19, 1940

On the 19th June, 1940 the Royal Mail Trans-Pacific steamer *Niagara* was sunk by a German mine in the approaches to Auckland Harbour just after leaving that port for Vancouver via Suva.

The evidence that German commerce raiders were operating in the South Pacific was confirmed by the disappearance of cargo ships in the area, after one at least had managed to send a signal that she was being attacked by a surface vessel. The Governor of Fiji lost no time in sending a signal that he have his minesweeper "as the Germans are now sinking ships at my back door".

In Fiji the Government had woken up to the situation and had formed the Fiji Naval Volunteer Force. There was no one to guide the organisation and it suffered for that reason. Not being properly administered it was purely a local force and had no meaning outside Fiji. The members only met at night and on some weekends and drilled with small arms and learned visual signaling.

They had no uniform to wear and, in many cases, did not even know that they were in the Army. Captured with them was Charles Fulford Williams, the District Officer Northern Gilberts who was stationed at Butaritari.

A few weeks later, a broadcast beamed to New Zealand announced that these men were prisoners or were in Tokyo. Government employees were allowed to escape and a small ship from Fiji was sent to pick up a boat load of escapees. The coast watchers were left on their tiny atolls with no place to hide.

Finally, the Japanese sent a ship around to all the islanders and collected the coast watchers in the Gilbert Islands. The ones in the Ellice Island were left undisturbed. Although bombing and strafing runs were made on the island of Funafuti and Nanumea when US Forces had constructed airstrips and several strafing runs were made on the old missionary schooner John Williams V when she was engaged in re-supplying the coastwatchers at Naumea.

IMPRISONMENT

The prisoners together with five other Europeans were tied to coconut trees for several days in the hot sun and then released to work on the fortification of Betio Islet which was near the entrance to Tarawa Lagoon. One day in October 1942 a passing US ship shelled the island and a plane dropped a bomb.

One prisoner had escaped from the lunatic asylum compound and ran cheering and waving at the ship and plane as they passed, and he was shot by a guard and after that all other prisoners had been called together.

The cheering of the prisoners engaged their captors and they were all assembled and made to dig a shallow grave.

Union flags were spread before the grave and the prisoners were ordered to wipe their feet on the Union Jack which had been spread on the ground by their captors who made no secret of the fact that they intended to execute all the prisoners and that the shallow ditch they had dug would be their grave.

It must have been a traumatic moment knowing that there was no hope. A few Gilbertese were ordered to watch and that is from their testimony given before a Court of Inquiry, that we know what happened next.

Among the coast watchers who formed a majority of those present were five European residents, one of whom was a missionary, the Reverend Sadd. He stepped forward before any of the guards could stop him and addressed the remainder.

“They are obviously going to kill us,” he said. “Don’t give them the satisfaction of being afraid.”

He then picked up the flag and kissed it just before a furious guard struck his head from his shoulders with a Samurai sword. The same fate befell the remainder of the 22 prisoners. Their fate was unknown until the US Marines took Tarawa after three days of bloody fighting in November 1943.

A Board of Inquiry was convened by the Western Pacific High Commission who found that the 22 were murdered by the Japanese in October 1943.

When the results were passed to the War Crimes Commission, that body decided that no Japanese soldiers were involved and that the murders were committed by unknown civilian labourers.

It was impossible to identify the war criminals at that stage but a large number of Korean labourers were among those killed in November 1943 when the US Marines took Tarawa.

HMS Viti was still in the Gilbert & Ellice Islands Colony when the Japanese altered the war situation in the Pacific by bombing Pearl Harbour.

The setting up of Coastwatching stations was completed in October after which the ship again headed North on a tour of inspection with the Governor. She was approaching Canton Island two hours after the planes of the Japanese Navy had hit Honolulu. There was a team of US Army Engineers working ashore supported by a destroyer crafting offshore.

As soon as *Viti* was sighted, wearing what to most Americans was an unfamiliar flag although the white engine would be recognised in most countries of the world, she cleared decks for action, hoisted battle flags and bore down on the small intruder with all her guns loading and pointing at us. On hearing the news of Pearl Harbour the Governor caught the Pan American flying boat back to Suva and *Viti* followed.

ARRIVAL IN SUVA

On arrival in Suva it was to find that the Admiralty had placed *Viti* under the operational control of the New Zealand Naval Board and was ordered to sail there to be fitted with submarine detecting gear and extra weapons.

While *HMS Viti* was in New Zealand being fitted with Asdic dome and anti-submarine weapons, there was furious activity as Fiji tried to establish in a few weeks what Capt. Mullins had been urging them to do since 1936. New Zealand and the USA provided the planning and much of the motivation now. In New Zealand ratings were selected for training as operators of the soon-to-be installed Asdic gear. Due to the educational requirements of the new branch, only the European ratings were able to cope with the examinations. The top qualifier A. B (late Sir) Charles Stinson was chosen for further training in maintaining and overhauling the new equipment. Extra guns, depth charge rails and throwers were installed and training was given in operating all the additions.

DEFENSIVE BOOM

In Suva the US Navy rigged a defensive boom across the entrance to Suva Harbour and made a preparation for doing the same at Momi, the gateway to the Fleet anchorage that had been established in Nadi Bay. At one time it was under consideration to place a boom across the inside passage of Suva Harbour from Laucala Bay to deter midget submarines, but eventually the project was abandoned. While the coastal batteries at Suva, Bilo and Momi had been established already, new-fangled sono-buoys were placed at the entrance to Suva and Momi to detect the presence of submarines.

Two former New Zealand pleasure launches- the Matanui (Q7) and Maranui (Q8) were brought to Fiji, fitted with depth charges and a machine gun and were inspection vessels at Momi, operating in conjunction with the coastal gun battery.

Extra troops were sent from New Zealand – three battalions of infantry, which comprised the 8th Brigade Group NZEF. An RN surveyor with the assistance of the RNZN minesweepers made a close survey of Nadi Bay which was then declared a fleet anchorage, suitable for the larger units of the fleet.

To protect this asset, mines were laid in most of the reef passages, leaving only Navula passage into Momi Bay free of mines. Mines were also laid in Nukulau, Nukubuco and Makuluvu passages, the alternative entrances to Suva Harbour.

However, although Suva Harbour was protected by a boom across the main entrance (named Daveta Levu), and the presence of anti- submarine ships, the main defence against submarines at the Fleet Anchorage in Nadi Bay, apart from the minefields, remained as one ex- pleasure launch armed with a Bren gun and depth charges. Enemy surface vessels would be engaged by the 6” guns of the Momi coastal battery as they attempted to enter the bay. That the anchorage was vulnerable was proved in the 1960s when a Japanese torpedo was found on the seabed near Malolo Island and destroyed by a demolition charge. It was presumed by divers that it had been fired at extreme range and had sunk at the end of its run. Two battleships USS Colorado and Maryland which had survived the bombing of Pearl Harbour were the two biggest ships to use the anchorage.

When *HMS Viti* returned to Suva after her refit in April 1942 the harbour defences were then working well and the new Port War Signal Station was established and manned by RNZN and FRNVR personnel.

RNZN ratings, signal personnel and Petty Officers lived in barracks in the same building as the Port War Signal Station. All other ratings serving in HMNZS Venture were housed in a large tent camp near the wharf entrance where the Suva Municipal Market now stands.

ADMINISTRATION

The administration of the original unit, the FNVF, was found to be wanting, and the personnel were transferred to the Fiji Naval Volunteer Reserve and administration had been taken over by the RNZN at the request of the Admiralty which had also handed over operational control of *HMS Viti*.

Four anti- submarine fitted minesweepers of the United States Navy had arrived in Suva and with *HMS Viti* provided escort duties to convoys and single ships in and out of Fiji waters. In December one US sweeper and *Viti* were detached to stand by a salvage attempt on an American supply ship which had run aground in Vuata Vatoa reef. The supply ship *Thomas A. Edison* had on board 36 torpedoes which were urgently needed by a PT boat squadron operating out of Tulagi in the Solomons and very much involved in the defence of Guadalcanal against Imperial Japanese Navy warships. Other cargo was sacrificed to uncover these times, the deck cargo of new trucks being pitched overboard so that the hatches could be opened. A hurricane interrupted the

salvage attempt and eventually the cost was one supply ship broken in two and most of the cargo damaged and a US Navy fleet tug sent to assist, sitting alongside the first wreck on the reef.

IN 1943

In February 1943 Guadalcanal was finally secured and the war started to move northward and westward. The convoys escorted by *Viti* went further afield and she was often in the Solomons where soldiers from Fiji in the 1st Battalion FIR were engaged. In November of that year she received orders to sail for Tarawa in the Gilberts which was then firmly in the possession of a Japanese garrison. By the time *Viti* arrived the 1st Division of the US Marine Corps had stormed the island and in one of the bloodiest battles to date had captured the island. That visit was a short one, but the ship was back in Tarawa on January 1944.

After the episode of establishing coast watching stations, and as convoy escort, *Viti* was engaged in duties which concentrated on establishing Colonial Office rule back in both the Solomons and the Gilbert and Ellice Islands. An SDML patrol launch was launched to Fiji by the RNZN and sailed for Suva in company with *HMS Viti*. The patrol boat had a variety of duties, mine disposal and maintenance of coast watching stations among them. In December 1944 patrol boat Q1148 was returned to New Zealand and was replaced by another SDML Q1348.

This patrol boat was on duty until the end of the war when she was returned to New Zealand.

In the meantime, six FRNVR ratings had been selected for service in New Zealand and arrived there just in time to join a draft leaving for the U.K. For Service with the Royal Navy. They did not serve as a unit and the ratings were drafted to ships of the R.N. in various theatres including the Mediterranean and Murmansk convoys. One of them finished up with a party that went the surrender of U-boats in Germany.

The *Viti* for a short time filled a vacuum by providing a passenger service between Fiji and New Zealand but was then sold and entered the trans-Tasman service. The four Fiji Naval Volunteer Reserves had proved that the forecast of Captain Mullins was a correct one and proved the need for a Navy.

By the end of the war the FRNVR had grown to a strength of 600 and involved the manning of three sea-going ships *HMS Viti*, Q1384 and a supply ship *Awahou*, in addition to several converted private boats which were classed as tenders to HMNZS venture.

Ashore there was the Port War Signal Station in a house overlooking Suva Harbour and that was the site of barracks for the signal personnel. The main body of men were in a tented camp now occupied by the Suva Market.

The coder and the writing personnel were in Navy Office and an officer representing the Naval Control of Shipping Services occupied an office in the Bank of New South Wales building. It would have been cost effective to keep a small number of trained men as the nucleus of a naval reserve.

Unfortunately, the legal status of a naval force was established under wartime emergency regulations and when these were repealed there was no legislation for a naval force, although it was agreed that such a force was necessary. A start was made in drafting legislation but it was 1951 before an Ordinance to justify such a force was passed. But those anxious to organise a naval reserve were unable to proceed because regulations had then to be written and agreed, which took another four years. On January 1st 1955 the Fiji Royal Navy Volunteer Force became a legal identity. Lieutenant-Commander 'Slinger' Woods, RNZVR was the inaugural Commanding Officer and Lieutenant S.B. Brown was promoted to Lt.Commander and appointed Executive Officer. The Engineer Unit of the Fiji Military Forces started the building of a drill hall, lecture rooms and store complex on Queen's Road opposite Draunibuto Bay. The announcement of recruiting brought a rush of young men to join the new unit. A few men who have the benefit of their experience. Chief among them was Ratu Inoke Bainimarama who had been regulating Petty Officer and was at that time serving in the Prisons Department.

By virtue of being a Crown Colony the FRNVR was a sub-unit of the Royal Navy but for convenience the reserve was under the administrative control of the Royal New Zealand Navy, which authority would supply a staff officer and petty officer instructors. The first staff officer was Lt.Commander W.Williams, RNZN who also acted as Naval Staff Officer to 5 Squadron, RNZAF, an anti-submarine squadron stationed at RNZAF Lauthala Bay. At the time ships of several Commonwealth Navies came to Suva for anti-submarine exercises, the submarines being Royal Navy boats stationed in Australia. It was a perfect opportunity for reservists to gain practical experience and sea training was available to the Reserve on both RN and RNZN ships. An SDML on loan from New Zealand arrived in October 1955 just as the Headquarters Building were finished and both were commissioned as HMS Viti at a ceremony attended by the Governor of Fiji, Sir Ronald Garvey, KCMG, MBE, and the Chief of Naval Staff from New Zealand.

The next year saw more Navy ships visiting Fiji to exercise with the Sunderland aircraft of 5 Squadron and again the reserves were able to take advantage of the sea training opportunity. In addition, HMNZS Lachlan under command of Commander Steve Ritchie, R.N., stopped in Suva to pick up passengers who had flown out from the United Kingdom, a Navy hydrographic surveyor and an Army major from the Corps of Engineers.

They were on their way to Christmas Island, the one south of Hawaii, to carry out surveys to test the sustainability of the island for Operation GRAPPLE, the testing of Great Brittan's first hydrogen bomb.

When Commander Ritchie offered two places on the ship for our ratings the FRNVR became one of the first units to take any part in this operation. On the voyage north the Navy officer, knowing ship routine and which ratings could be separated from their normal duties, selected a fine team to assist him in his task of surveying the anchorages around the island.

An army engineer was charged with the responsibility of assessing the strength of the coral on the island to take the weight of a landing strip for large planes and when he came to ask for volunteers, all the best men had been assigned duties and he was left with the remainder.

His men were given an empty copra sack each and were dropped at various points around the island.

The only jeep that the island possessed would not be available for a second trip as the ratings were told to fill the sacks with rocks and return to the beach. The ratings had been dropped a long distance from each other but without any consultation they shouldered the empty bags, made their way to the beach and filled the bags with stones there.

When the stones were tested after being flown to the UK, the tests proved that the coral information in the areas from which the rocks had been supposedly collected, was strong enough to support a runway of enough weight to take heavy bombers. If it proved anything, it was that the stones on the beach were as strong as those in the middle of the island.

In 1957 the men who were to serve ashore started to arrive on the island. A troopship carried a large number but others were flown out via the United States. They wore civilian clothes and travelled as individuals. That was the time when the American Civil Liberties Union or MCarthyism was active in the States and these young men had to answer questions such as "You got any pornographic literature." The forces in Britain by 1957 consisted mainly of National servicemen, many of whom were away from home for the first time. Much money had been spent on the building of the bomb and on the scientists and their expenses.

The three services had to pay they're not inconsiderable part out of the normal Defence Vote, which made no provision for amenities of any sort.

There was a movie shown at night but funds only allowed for a change of programme twice a week.

As a result, some men saw one film four times a week and others three times. On the ships anchored off the island, life was more comfortable but the routine was boring. The ships started to arrive one by one, an aircraft carrier as Flagship.

The members of the FRNVR were able to benefit from the fact that members of the British Commonwealth had been asked to participate in the bomb tests which were now known by the code name Operation GRAPPLE.

As a result, two frigates of the Royal New Zealand Navy were to take part in the operation and they called in at Suva to embark the forty ratings who had been chosen. At the last moment, one rating was unable to go and the draft numbered 39. After passage to Christmas Island in HMNZS Rotoiti and Pukaki the Fiji contingent was drafted to the flagship HMS Warrior, a light fleet aircraft carrier. In Warrior, life was new and exciting.

Friday was the big day and we were all awake early. The orders were that all personnel were to be completely covered from head to foot and then everyone was inspected for evidence of torn clothing which would expose vulnerable skin. For the bomb test, Point Zero would form one corner of an equilateral triangle with the other two corners being occupied by *HMS Warrior* in operational command and *HMS Narvick*.

Further away from Malden Island was the dispatch ship of the C-in-C *Far East*, carrying all the media representatives and *HMS Cook* carrying observers. The carrier was maneuvered so that her starboard side was presented towards Malden Island. All the observers on the flight deck, which included myself, faced to port wearing dark glasses. We were told to close our eyes and then cover them with our hands and on no account to turn around to look at the bomb burst.

Loudspeakers had been installed to reach all parts of the aircraft carrier so that all hands could hear the commentary of events leading up to the explosion of the bomb. A Vulcan bomber of the RAF carried the bomb and its proximity and the start of the bombing run were being broadcast so that even those below decks would be informed of each stage of the operation.

The surgeon commander noticed a change of attitude on the part of the ship's company on this, the second of three bomb drops.

During the first one no one had looked at the plane carrying the H-Bomb. Fear of the unknown kept all eyes downcast and everyone was tense. The men looked at the plane and with one successful bomb burst behind them exhibited more faith in the scientists and aircrew.

BOMB DETONATES

As the plane started its final run, we were so informed and finally received the Air Force announcement "Bomb away" after which the commentator started to count down. At "Zero" he announced that the bomb had detonated and immediately through my hand, closed eyelids and dark glasses, I was conscious of a bright light and at the same time

felt a warm flash on the back of my neck through the protective hood. We had been advised not to look at the burst with naked eyes as it was sufficient to melt our eyeballs. The commentator continued to count, this time upwards and at "13" announced that we would feel the shock wave. It passed over the ship with a low booming sound. A few who kept their eyes open although covered with a hand, reported that all bones in their hand had been highlighted against the bright lights as in X-ray photograph. The only "eye" to see the explosion were those of two instruments known as "flashometers".

The first action taken after the bomb burst was to fly the film of the instrument aboard *Warrior* to the scientific support ship *HMS Narvick*. Once there it was compared with the exposure there and measured and, within 15 minutes the scientists were able to announce that it was a "scheduled burst", in other words everything had gone as planned and there would be no fallout.

Meanwhile, we had been advised when it was safe to look at the bomb burst, first through our dark glasses and then with the naked eye. A huge replica of the sun hung against the bright blue sky, occasionally shaken by internal explosives. Then a white substance resembling a frothy cloud started to spill out of the top of the orange sphere spreading out to form that by now familiar shape of a mushroom cloud. The "stalk" of the mushroom started to grow from the sea surface upwards as ground forces sucked water and vapour up to join the "mushroom". As the cloud continued to grow Canberra bombers of the RAF started to fly through the clouds, gathering data on radiation. Samples of the flash photos and all other data were helicoptered back to *HMS Warrior* where they were loaded aboard the carrier's only fixed wing aircraft to be flown back to Christmas Island and then to Britain.

In the first British H-bomb test the only plane with sufficient range and speed for this, was American.

TESTING

When the *Mustang* fighter flew off with the evidence of a successful test, *Warrior* started a journey back to the anchorage off Malden Island, followed by the other ships which made up Grapple Squadron. The carrier was preceded by the helicopters probing with sensors for any evidence of radiation and passing back by radio any information. No adverse readings being recorded, the carrier proceeded back to the anchorage while the other ships hove to in the vicinity, there being limited room off Malden. The captains of the ships of the squadron were the first to arrive on board, receiving the reception to which they were entitled, being piped aboard in the age-old ceremony.

The other guests began to arrive and as if by arrangement the sea became choppy and spray over the bows of boats ensured that many of the guests, including a large number of press and radio representatives, arrived wet through. They included columnists from the tabloid newspapers who earned a living by slinging mud at the services. But none were so anti-Navy as to refuse free drinks and a party.

One of the men was frankly looking for a seagull with a broken wing, or some similar subject for his next column but was mollified by an invitation to the lower deck where he spent his time trying to find the problems of the junior sailors so that he could highlight them in next Sunday's publication.

After lunch Ratu Penaia and I flew back to Christmas Island from Malden where the RAF were staging a massive celebration of a successful operation. It had been a hectic week but a very satisfying one seeing our reservists fitting in so well. Later the same year I visited Christmas Island and called on the few operation officers left from Operation Grapple. A further series of tests were contemplated and the three-armed services had been ordered to support the project, but out of their normal budget allocation. The abortive Suez Canal operation in 1956 had depleted the funds available for defence. The first tests had been budgeted for, but now further tests were required and there were no extra funds.

MEMORIES

My visit recalled memories of how well the Fiji Naval Reservists had performed when serving in *HMS Warrior* during the earlier tests and emphasised the fact that it would be much cheaper to bring men from Fiji than from the United Kingdom.

As the result of that conversation a mixed detachment of Fiji naval reservists and Fiji Army served in Christmas Island for several months. But when they returned there was no reserve to join.

On June 14, 1959 the FRNVR suspended training and all officers were placed on the Supplementary List. Attempts by the Reservists to continue to serve without pay were turned down, although lack of currency had been given as the reason for winding up.

WITHOUT A NAVY

Once more Fiji was without a Navy, the Fiji Naval Association was formed that year to oversee the interests of ex-naval personnel and their families. The Governor was angered by the re-action of the public and the press to the abolition of a Navy and the Commanding Officer was ordered to submit no more proposals for a Navy.

Each separate test ending in the dropping of a bomb involved a preparation phase lasting from Monday to Friday when the bomb was dropped.

Such a date was secret, but shortly after Ratu Penaia and I arrived on board the *Warrior*, the news was circulating all around the lower deck that this was a bomb week. It was assumed that we had spread the word that we had arrived to witness the test.

In fact, the reason for the leak of information was more prosaic that it was a real “galley buzz” – a rumour started in the galley. The Commander (S) had that morning chaired a meeting of his staff to discuss the requirements for the week in terms of victualling and accommodation.

He told them the ship would be sailing that day and would be in the vicinity of Malden Island for the remainder of the week. On Thursday night there would be extra army personnel accommodated aboard and on Friday there would be many extras in the wardroom for lunch.

Having already experienced one test, the cooks, stewards and stores ratings knew that Tuesday would be a rehearsal day.

Thursday would be evacuation day when all the personnel on Malden Island would be brought aboard the carrier and the extra mouths to feed on Friday would be brought aboard the carrier, and the extra mouths would be those of the world’s press who would come aboard after witnessing the explosion from the carrier.

When this was realised, the finger of suspicion no longer was pointed our way. First priority was a ceremonial welcome to Ratu Penaia from the 39 Fijian ratings on board, and a long discussion of the training our men were receiving. Arriving off Malden Island, we were given a helicopter trip around the target area, Point Zero as it was called, a ride in a helicopter being a novel experience in 1957.

Arriving back at the carrier the first rating we saw on deck was a Fijian Sick Berth attendant whom, with his First-Aid kit, met every arriving flight on board. We then passed through the Citadel, a part of the bridge superstructure where everyone arriving on board was checked for radiation and, if necessary, was put through a cleansing process.

The highlight of Tuesday morning was a ‘dummy run’ in which an RAF Vulcan Bomber flew over the target and dropped an ordinary high explosive bomb, set to detonate the same as the Hydrogen Bomb at 10,000 feet above Point Zero.

The evasion routine to move the place away from the blast site with maximum speed was carried out exactly as it would be on “the day.”

All went off as planned and in the afternoon the presentation of a *tabua* was made to the Commanding Officer of *Warrior* who was also the Commodore of Grapple Squadron.

Other ships which would have specific duties on the day, started to arrive and assume their duties.

HMS Narvick, a landing ship was the scientific headquarters and had on board all the senior scientists involved with tests and a good deal of electronic equipment.

The frigates of the RNZN which had brought our ratings from Fiji to the Line Islands were on their patrol areas surrounding the drop zone to ensure that any shipping that had not been warned to stay out of the area by the current Notices to Mariners, was prevented from entering the danger zone.

The survey ship, *HMS Cook*, on her way to survey the waters of Fiji was detained when passing through the area by the Commodore and given surveillance duties. Wednesday was given over to drawing protective clothing and radiation badges. The latter, to be worn outside the protective clothing, had a film which would change colour and indicate to an observer whether the wearer had been exposed to a dose of radiation.

The protective clothing consisted of a white coverall worn with anti-flash gear such as is worn by gunnery personnel consisting of a hood and elbow length glove. We were shown a place on the starboard side of the flight deck where we should be placed for the actual test. As visitors we should be the closest on board to the target even though we should be 35 miles away.

The next day all the army personnel who had been on Malden Island, mainly engineers who had been installing the target markers, were evacuated from the island and brought aboard the carrier.

Most of their equipment came with them, but an item of earthmoving equipment considered too heavy to lift was placed in a hole dug in the sand and covered with more sand.

1975

During the following years which led independence in 1970 Fiji had no naval force, but the members of the Fiji Naval Association never lost hope that someday the newly independent country would have a Navy. Royal Navy survey ships *Cook*, *Dampier* and *Hydra* spent periods in Fiji and HMNZ ships called regularly so Commonwealth naval liaison continued. There were three matters that hastened the formation of a naval force, firstly the Prime Minister, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara was in favour, secondly the United Nations Law of the Sea Convention had indicated that 200 nautical mile Exclusive Zone would be acquired by each country with a sea boundary, and last of all the Minister for Defence, U.K announced that all ships "East of Suez" would be withdrawn and hence forward would be based in home waters. If Fiji wanted her future EEZ patrolled she would have to do it herself.

Early in 1975 HMS HYDRA left Fiji for the last time breaking an association that had been in effect since 1835. The need for a Navy was publicly acknowledged. Into the picture now came the Ambassador of America, Armistead Selden who had previously held the post of Assistant Secretary for Defence and had many connections with senior officers of the United States Navy. He advised Government of the availability of two ships shortly to be decommissioned.

The ships were USS PHOEBE and USS PEACOCK and were still in full commission at Long Beach, just out of Los Angeles. As Naval Liaison Officer, Fiji, I was sent to inspect the ships and report on their suitability for operating in Fiji as patrol boats.

The ships were equivalent to the TON class of British minesweepers but had been re-designed by Sparkman & Stevens, noted yacht designers.

They were comfortable, well-ventilated and of wooden construction which made them ideally suited for tropical service. They had both served in Vietnam and had undergone a long refit in Japan before returning home.

“It looked to me as though all my Christmases had arrived together. I had only to write a glowing report and Fiji would have the nucleus of Navy. But it wasn’t to be that simple.” The ships belonged to the 5th Minesweeping Squadron commander, COMINERON 5, who took me to one side and uttered a word of warning.

“Don’t accept those ships,” he said.

“They have Packard engines and only 170 were ever built. Spares are scarce and we have a hard time keeping them operational in America. It would be impossible in the South Pacific.”

My euphoria vanished as he went on.

“All the mine force ships have recently had an inspection, the three ships that came out at the top are in Seattle and will be available next month. They have engines that are commercially available all over the world. I will be no trouble keeping them in spares.”

So, I returned to Fiji and wrote my report – the hardest words I have ever written – stating that the ships were not suitable owing to the unavailability of spares but pointing out that other ships with Detroit diesel engines would soon be available in Seattle. In effect I had said “No” to the very generous offer and talked about ships that were not on offer. My report was looked on as a great gaffe and a diplomatic blunder. However, Fiji was finally offered a choice of the ships based in Seattle and another journey there revealed the truth of the assertion of COMINERON 5.

The ships were indeed in superb condition with the ship’s companies aboard. All were enthusiastic about seeing the ships continue service in another navy rather than being laid up and they all sang the praises of their individual ships. Eventually we chose the two ships that had scored the highest marks in the recent inspection with the third highest also in our recommendations. The Government approved the acquisition of two and we chose USS VIREO and USS WARBLER. Back in Fiji we started recruiting and were overwhelmed by the response. Eventually we selected enough for two ships’ companies of 31 each plus another ten men. New Zealand sent the training ship HMNZS INVERELL to make the induction training more realistic.

Several old members of the two previous Navies acknowledged that they were now too old and sent their sons along. One who was recruited at that first intake is now the Captain commanding the Fiji Navy.

None of the considerable assets of the FRNVR Division remained. The material and the SDML on loan from New Zealand had been returned when the division was wound up in 1959. The Headquarters, built by the Army Engineers at Drauniboto Bay had been given to the Co-operative Department and could not be returned to the Navy. Parade training commenced at Queen Elizabeth Barracks and classrooms were used for communications and technical training. As had been the case as often in the past, New Zealand came to the assistance of the fledging Navy by making training ship HMNZS INVERELL available for training in Fiji waters. A passing out parade was held in September and reviewed by Commander RFMF.

In October 1975, an advance party went to Seattle where they were joined a week later by the remainder of the two ship companies. The two ships USS VIREO and USS WARBLER had been towed across Puget Sound from Bremerton Navy Yard and berthed at Pier 90 which was then in use by the US Navy. Before being laid up all tanks had been drained and cleaned. The fuelling berth was the other side of Puget Sound and there were no fuelling facilities at Pier 90. Eventually it was agreed to allow one tanker on to Pier 90 and with fuel in the tanks both ships were sailed to the fuelling berth. It was no easy job making a ship operational after she had been mothballed, especially a strange ship in a foreign port. Eventually engines, both main and auxiliary were started and the ships commenced to have a "lived in" atmosphere. A series of work up exercises were held in Puget Sound in foggy and rainy weather that is a feature of Washington State at that time of the year. Most of the ships' companies had never been in cold weather and were not used to such basic precautions as closing doors to prevent heat escaping from the mess decks.

When the Minister for Home Affairs visited Washington D.C to affect the transfer of the ships from USA to Fiji, he was persuaded to part with \$42,000 for the services of a training team. The team arrived aboard a few days later and were obviously made up of sailors who were "available." Only two or three were of any value and we ended up keeping only two engine room petty officers – the rest were sent ashore at Long Beach. The ships sailed from the call on waters of Puget Sound and ran into the worst weather the NorthPacific had to offer. 95 per cent of those on board were seasick and useless including most of the training team.

Calls were made at San Francisco, Long Beach and San Diego for various exercises, including fuelling at sea from USS BOLSTER, a salvage ship which would be in convoy to Suva. One call was to be made en route at Pearl Harbour where we had arranged for training in search and rescue from the US Coastguard, acknowledged to be the world's expert in this field. The training was intense and fruitful including a day spent at sea with a Coastguard plane cooperating in a search. It says much for the young ratings that they could absorb all the effects of several big cities and still master all the skills required.

At Pearl Harbour the services of the two USN engine room petty officers was terminated.

From Pearl Harbour we began the last leg of the delivery voyage. Fiji had a poor history of obtaining ships from overseas, most requiring long refits to fit them for service and a great deal of expenditure. Our aim right from the start was to arrive in Suva and immediately show the capability of these ships. On the last day before arrival, KULA the new name for VIREO, developed engine problems which she had to slow down in order to fix. The other ship KIRO, pressed on and arrived right on time to a tumultuous welcome headed by the Prime Minister. The ceremony of cere was performed and two days later, at a function on Queen's Wharf, attended by the Prime Minister, the ships were officially commissioned.

Within two weeks the two ships proceeded to sea with the Cabinet embarked and demonstrated a series of naval drills including gun firing, replenishment at sea, firefighting, damage control and towing. Shortly afterwards we received permission to acquire the third ship which we had identified in Seattle. This time the ship's company arrived in June and found that Seattle was a completely different place in summer. The US Navy had given up its ownership of Pier 90 which had reverted to the care of the Ports Authority and was only available to us on payment of high wharfage costs. Permission was obtained to berth at the US Naval Reserve facility in Lake Union. This meant negotiating the Chitterndem Lock each time we went to seas which was excellent practice in ship handling.

The highlight of the summer season in Seattle is July 4th when powerboat racing is held on Lake Washington. After being guests there her ship paid a visit to the Royal Canadian Navy at Esquimalt. On completion of that very pleasant interlude, the new ship ex USS ABANAKI and sailed direct to Pearl Harbour for another week of search and rescue training. The weather on this occasion was so calm that a day was gained and the ship anchored at Welegilala for a clean-up before sailing for Suva. On this occasion the ship was met by the Governor-General and the cere was again performed. The three ships now entered a phase of EEZ patrolling and further training. Midshipmen were accepted for training in HMNZS TAMAKI and ratings were also sent for training courses in New Zealand. A Staff Officer for the Navy was supplied by the RAN and Australia also offered training.

A successful helicopter medivac of an injured seaman from a tug at sea led to enquiries being made about the feasibility of landing a helicopter on the ex-minesweepers. Ian Simpson, owner of Pacific Crown Helicopter Company, and the pilot who had carried out the difficult medivac, was asked for advice and a flight deck was designed to his specifications. Ian learned to fly with the Royal Navy as a National serviceman and at that time flew helicopters in many countries before settling in Fiji. In HMFS KULA all the minesweeping equipment, including the winch, was moved and a mess deck built in its place. The top of the mess was equipped as a landing platform with adjustable railings. Although the idea raised eyebrows and objections, the finished product was such a success that Australia paid the expenses for operating the ship and for the charter of a

helicopter for the rapid survey of baseline points so that the Fiji EEZ could be correctly charted. This was carried out as an aid project. The smallest ship to operate helicopters in Commonwealth navies was frigate and it was not economically feasible to contemplate using such a ship. With the Fiji EEZ correctly and economically charted the aid project was extended to survey points in Tonga, Kiribati, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. The officers and ships company benefited greatly from the experience gained in these operations.

Two ships represented Fiji at the Tuvalu Independence celebrations in 1982 when the Commander, Fiji Navy was pilot to HMNZ OTAGO and USS BENJAMIN STODDART. Two years later he was again pilot in HMS BRITTANIA.

The minesweepers were over twenty years of age when first acquired and gave good service for over ten years. By that time the refits required more funding than was available and the ships were phased out. First KULA and then KIKAU and in 1995 KIRO. Two ex-rig replenishment boats were acquired from America in 1987 and four DABUR class fast patrol boats from Israel in 1991. The first Pacific patrol boat from Australia in 1994 and the second in July 1995. The minesweepers as a squadron acted as Royal Escort in Fiji waters to HMS BRITTANIA when The Queen visited Fiji in 1977. HMFS KIRO performed that duty in 1982 when Her Majesty visited Tuvalu for the first time.

On patrols the Navy have regularly visited Conway Reef (now named CEVAMAIRA) (Southeast) and been responsible for the planting and growth of the small sandy island there. Commander Brown retired in April 1987 after suffering a stroke and the Navy is now commanded by Captain Frank Bainimarama, who joined as an ordinary seaman in 1975.

On July 25, 1995 the Chief of Naval Staff in Australia commissioned the Suva Naval Base in Walu Bay. It is now named RFNS STANLEY BROWN. Australia has built the 2-storey administrative block and for the first time since inception in 1975, the Navy has proper administrative offices including the Operation Room. This has allowed the holding of regional exercises featuring the Pacific patrol boats of other island countries of the South Pacific.

RFNF VITI has become a training base commanded by an officer of the RNZN on secondment. The biggest influence on training has been the regular attendance midshipmen and sub-lieutenants at training establishments in England. In addition, after the attendance at several Staff Colleges in Malaysia, Pakistan and New Zealand, naval officers are now attending regularly at the RAN Naval Staff College and two officers have already completed the Joint Services Staff College. The implementation of the recommendations of the Defence Review Committee should further benefit the Naval Squadron.

– This is the end of the Fiji Sun's series on 'The Four Navies of Fiji' as written by the first Fiji Navy Commander, Captain Stanley Brown