



CALL THE HANDS

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HMAS Adelaide – Boarding Party, Persian Gulf 2004

The following story was first published in the June 2007 edition of the Naval Historical Review. At the time, very little news about the RANs day to day activities was reported in the Australian media, apart from the occasional 'good news' story in Navy News. The remote location of Coalition naval forces in the Persian Gulf was the most likely reason.

A brief outline of this incident originally appeared in Brisbane's Courier-Mail newspaper on 26 January 2006, announcing awards of the Distinguished Service Medal (DSM) to both LCDR Johnston and PO Keitley, for coolly defusing a situation that could have ballooned into a major international incident.

The Courier-Mail article was subsequently republished in the February 2006 edition of TOUCHDOWN (the Australian Navy Aviation Safety and Information Magazine), acknowledged as the basis of this NHS article, with the kind permission of its editor, LCDR Shane Firkin RAN. Additional details were obtained by later discussions with LCDR Johnston, for publication in NHSA Review

This unusual incident developed from a routine boarding operation carried out by the guided missile frigate HMAS Adelaide (Commander Bruce Victor RAN) on patrol at the mouth of the Shatt al-Arab river at the extreme head of the Gulf on 6 December 2004. Acting on directions from the (USN) naval force commander, Adelaide was sent to investigate a large roll on/roll off (Ro Ro) cargo ship which had run aground on a sandbank and remained stuck there for an extended period. The boarding party was despatched several miles distant from the ship in two Rigid hull inflatable boats (RHIB) (standard 7m and 12m seaboats carried in most RAN vessels, configured specially for carrying out boarding operations) to check the status of the vessel. This had been checked on several occasions previously. Overhead observation and top cover of the operation was conducted by the ship's embarked Seahawk helicopter Adelaide's Flight Commander, LCDR Tony Johnston, was airborne as TACCO and Mission Commander, along with Pilot Lieutenant Sam Dale and Sensor operator (SENSO) POA Andrew Watson. Once the boarding party of twelve personnel and two interpreters led by POCD Keitley had embarked without incident on the vessel and the boats had laid off, the helicopter departed to conduct a surface surveillance mission in the Northern Arabian Gulf (NAG).

Sometime after the helicopter had departed, the boarding party sighted a small boat in the distance coming towards them at speed. The unidentified boat was soon followed by several others. These were assessed as belonging to the Iranian Republican Guard Navy (IRGCN) – a maverick organisation known to have carried out the detention of a similar Royal Navy boarding party earlier in the year.

While the boarding party went about their business, Adelaide's boats came under threat from the newcomers, and with only the coxswains remaining onboard, withdrew from the scene to avoid any escalation. At the height of the confrontation with the Iranians, as many as six IRGCN armed boats circled the stranded vessel, with their crews brandishing AK-47 rifles, assorted small arms, rocket-propelled

grenades and rocket launchers. The Australian boarding party, armed only with light side arms, 9mm pistols and two shotguns, prepared to fend off the threatening boarders.

LCDR Johnston in the helicopter had by now completed his surface patrol and was returning to *Adelaide*. Once onboard, Johnston was informed of the developing situation by the Command Team and began making immediate preparations to relaunch. Upon returning, the aircraft had been released for programmed maintenance, which was quickly stopped. The flight maintainers set to, to return the helicopter to full serviceability, which they achieved in less than half an hour, enabling a rapid response to the unfolding crisis.

Johnston and his crew, now supplemented by Lieutenant John Flynn in the rear cabin, took up a watching position two miles to the west of the incident ship at 1000 feet. From this vantage point the aircraft could easily surveil the entire area and its approaches, keep clear of weapon envelopes and maintain good communications with all parties.

The boarding party was advised to maintain a low profile and stay out of sight as much as possible. It was with some relief that they realised that the Iranian gunboats could not get close enough to the merchantman in the shallow water. An attempt was made by some of the gunmen to board the ship via a commandeered cargo dhow, but this proved unsuccessful when the boat grounded on a sandbar some 65 yards short.

It was decided that it might be too risky to send the RHIBs back alongside to re-embark the boarding party, as the boats might be attacked, captured or sunk in any escalation, so they were ordered to return to the *Adelaide*. Indeed, the entire boarding party would run the risk of capture during a boat transfer back to the ship. Johnston decided to return to his ship refuel and to brief his command on the tight situation facing the recovery of the boarding party. PO Keitley later commented that the Iranians appeared to be testing the Australians' resolve by being highly aggressive at times, then mellowing again afterwards.



Navy RHIB (Rigid Hull Inflatable Boat) and boarding party in the Arabian Gulf
(Image: Defence PR Photographic Collection)

Decision to recover

Meanwhile the tense situation had been relayed to other Allied forces in the area, to summon strong support in the event of outbreak of hostilities, or to prevent the capture of *Adelaide's* boarding party by the Iranians. Ultimately the requested support was not forthcoming, and in the event, LCDR Johnston decided to recover the entire boarding party by winching them off the merchantman, without risking the boats. A dummy pass was made at low level to observe the reactions of the Iranian boats. This action tended to confuse them, although one in particular took up a close-in position, possibly to threaten the Seahawk in the hover.

Having relayed his intentions to PO Keitley, Johnston came in again and hovered low over the bridge. He winched off seven of the boarding party and promptly flew them safely back to *Adelaide*, less than 10 minutes away. He took off again immediately to attempt a similar operation for the remainder of the boarding party. This time the Iranian gunboats appeared more alert and tense, and Johnston was forced to carry out a series of approaches to mask his real intentions. Finally he came down low to winch the remaining members of the boarding party from the upper deck. Subsequently, while the evolution was precisely conducted in a remarkably short period, Johnston records it appeared to take ‘... an extraordinarily long five minutes...’ in the hover, and he swept away when PO Keitley was finally winched onboard, blindsiding the most aggressive of the Iranian boats by departing in the opposite direction to his earlier approach. Breathing a collective sigh of relief, the remaining boarding party members were returned safely to *Adelaide*.

Commenting on the situation much later, LCDR Johnston maintains that the ship’s previous mission-capability training, including the winching drills for all boarding parties, paid dividends when the crunch came in this unexpected incident. It was a measure of the dedication and professionalism of the entire ship’s team that a successful conclusion was achieved in the face of increasing threats and adversity, without having to rely on external armed support, which may well have led to a need to ‘fight it out’, perhaps with ensuing casualties, loss of prestige, adverse propaganda, or the indignity of capture in the circumstances.

The citation for the award to Lieutenant Commander Anthony Johnston of the Distinguished Service Medal reads:

‘For distinguished command and leadership in action as Mission Commander of HMAS *Adelaide*’s Seahawk helicopter during Operation Catalyst.

During December 2004, facing overwhelmingly superior and hostile forces and without the support of coalition aircraft or firepower, LCDR Johnston showed exemplary leadership, courage, composure and determination as Mission Commander and Scene of Action Commander to facilitate the safe extraction of HMAS *Adelaide*’s boarding party from perilous and harmful circumstances.’

Editor’s Note

In another well-publicised incident, a group of fifteen sailors from HMS Cornwall, operating in circumstances not dissimilar to those described above, were taken prisoner by the Iranians and held for about two weeks. In light of the similarities between that incident and the one described above, I invited LCDR Johnston to clarify the means by which helicopters, and more particularly RHIBs, fixed their positions in such potentially contentious waters. His reply:

‘Re navigation. The Seahawk nav system is an integrated package that combines inertial x 2, Doppler and GPS. The boats have their own GPS. The ship has an excellent nav package itself.

In the case of 6Dec04, the ship easily established the exact location of the target vessel within Iraqi waters. They were only eight miles away, unable to close due to the shoal waters that had claimed the merchantman, as well as other duties precluding same. This check had occurred well prior to any boardings taking place.

We had all been operating in the area for almost 4 months and knew the region intimately. Weather and visibility on the day were excellent, allowing us to visually cross check our position with some well known local and coastal features. I also have radar coverage from a very watchful air controller onboard *Adelaide* to keep me honest. The bottom line here is that all of this is SOP and we all know where we are.

Clearly, I cannot speak for our ‘friends’, but you have to think that they have some sort of electronic navigation assistance. The simplest indication of where you are is whether you are North East or South West of the SAA channel as this is the inter-national boundary (as can be seen on any chart). The ship was obviously South of that line – placing it in Iraqi waters without doubt.’