

CHAPTER 9 - HMNZS Otago - 1975 - 76 Commission



HMNZS Otago entering the Naval Base, Sydney.

Otago had gone into a long refit in July 1974 and I joined 1 August 1975, along with POYS Bruce Kenyon and POEW Brian Burford. As the Senior PO, I was given the duty of being the Communications Division Coordinator. Initially, we didn't have much to do onboard the ship as the dockyard was still undertaking work and the old survey ship, *Lachlan*, was the refit barge from where we planned our forecasts and routines for bringing the departments and messdecks back into operation. During the initial stages of the refit, we attended a communications management course at the Comms School and the Advanced NBCD Course at Ngataranga Bay.

The refit saw major changes to the communications equipment. Out went the heavy, antiquated Ultra High Frequency and low powered High Frequency transmitters and receivers. In their place came smaller more efficient, state of the art gear. The UHF transceivers were USN F14 aircraft sets (AN/ARC159) about the size of a bread box and the new HF single sideband transmitters (Redifon Type 643) and receivers (Redifon CJP) were also compact and emitted less heat. This made the Transmitter Room cooler and the equipment less likely to fail because of heat problems that were encountered with the old gear.

Toward the end of 1975, TASMEX took place with several allied ships visiting NZ ports. **HMS Plymouth** and **HMS Llandaff** berthed at Devonport for about 10 days and the Radio Supervisors on there and I became good friends.



HMS Llandaff – an air direction frigate

Otago didn't have any emergency aerials that I could find, so I made up a 35ft wire for HF, a UHF cross and an earthing stick ("bleeder"). These would come in handy during the Work-up in Sydney. We made up a new MF main roof wire aerial, the MF DF Sense and the SRE wires. These last two wires were sited forward of the Foremast. The usual keying characteristic trials on HF and MF DF calibrations took place and a visit from GCSB showed that our new Creed Type 444 Teleprinters emitted electro-magnetic radiation that could be picked up outside of the ship.

HMS Plymouth – a modified Type 12 frigate – hangar, flight deck and helo



The refit finished in November 1975 and the ship settled down to post refit trials. This consisted of Harbour Acceptance Trials and Sea Acceptance Trials during which we exercised with **HMS Plymouth, RFA Gold Ranger, HMNZS Tui** and **HMNZS Inverell**. Thanks to Canterbury coming out from UK with a reduced crew, the comms department at sea was now reduced to 7 sparker J/Rs and 8 bunting J/Rs. The EW complement was 5 EW J/Rs. When the XO, Lt Cdr Mike Pate came to see me about supplying two hands for Communal Duties, I explained why we couldn't and he was happy with the response. At sea, comms was in three watches and alongside, included the EWs so that the J/Rs could be in six watches. ASG Karl Sankey was the MSO Dayman. The LRD, LSG and the two LEWs did Duty Leading Hand. None of the EWs, including Brian, could read morse - any CW monitoring was done in the Bridge Wireless Office by the sparkers.

During the SATS Phase, the ship anchored in Port Tryphena for a weekend to undergo Exercise Awkward - the operational defence against enemy divers. During the evening on Saturday night, Bruce and I were up on the Flag Deck and we heard the sound of a Z-boat approaching. Bruce turned on the 20-inch Signal Projector and lit up the approaching boat. There were two divers in the boat - one sitting, steering and the other standing in the bow holding on to the painter. He had a demoniacal grin on his face. The diver steering, misjudged where the bow was and there was a huge KERDUNG as the diver in the front hit Otago's bow. He suffered severe head injuries as a result; the exercise was terminated and we raced back to Devonport to get the injured diver to hospital. I think he survived.

These trials finished in May 1976 and on the 22 May sailed for Sydney for our operational workup. These workups used to be in Pearl Harbour but the RNZN found that the RAN were more attuned to our needs so we went there instead. When we first arrived in Sydney, the Fleet WORS and his PORS came to visit. The WORS was Reg Foden, an ex-submariner who didn't like going to sea on surface ships but enjoyed a tot or two.

Each week we were given an EAXP (Eastern Australian Exercise Program) which outlined our program from Monday through to Friday, spending the weekends alongside in Sydney. The EAXP used to be distributed onboard on the Friday afternoon as soon as we arrived back in harbour. You had to go through the EAXP, page by page, to work out the communications plans for each day as the scenario changed from one serial to the next. This used to take several hours and by the time I had finished, it was too late to go ashore. My LRD was Bob Paul and he would make sure that the COMPLAN was up and running on Sunday nights ready for Monday morning.

Taranaki had come over with us and on the first Saturday, I arranged to meet Scouse and go ashore with him up to Kings Cross. We had just passed the El Alamein Fountain and standing by the traffic lights when a police paddy wagon pulled up and Scouse yells out that he would like to see inside. Quick as a flash, the two occupants got out and threw Scouse in the back. I didn't see him again that night as he enjoyed the hospitality of the local police cells. Saw him the following morning - he was alright but his wallet was a lot lighter. Perhaps Posting Office had had a premonition about the two of us serving together at sea...

One of our serials was to be escort for the carrier, **HMAS Melbourne**, which had also come out of refit. One night we did an evolution called Stationmaster which, in the past, had caused the sinking of HMAS Voyager. I didn't go to bed but stayed up to make sure that our equipment was functioning correctly. Just as well as the Ops Room reported that they had lost contact on one of the UHF tactical frequencies with Melbourne. Our new AN/ARC159s were found to be working correctly.



HMAS Melbourne

Later back in Sydney, I was sent for by the Signals Communications officer of **Melbourne**, to report to him. This I did, and he stated that our new UHF equipment was defective and could have caused another major incident. I tactfully suggested that our equipment had been checked out over a six-month period, including line of sight distances of 35 miles between ships and 250 miles from ship to aircraft. As his ship had just come out of refit, had his (old) radio equipment been checked? In no uncertain terms, he told me to leave his ship! I thought - how rude.

Promoted to Chief Radioman 16 June 1976.

The day of the Final Battle Problem arrived in which the ships' company would be assessed on their operational capabilities. The first thing that WORS Reg Foden did was to "kill" me off and I spent the day in my mess. I wasn't worried. The sparkers were all well trained and Bob Paul did a magnificent job running the BWO. Both of the emergency aerials had to be connected and hoisted during the FBP and they performed admirably. The post-match briefing took place in the J/R's Dining Room and the Communications Department achieved an excellent result. Reg then invited me to take him down to my mess for a celebratory tot.

We departed Sydney 17 August for Singapore but not before a problem with the Sydney dockyard workers was sorted out. They were on strike and weren't allowing any ships to tie-up or depart. Once again, a couple of 40oz bottles of rum came to the fore and we sailed on time. We sailed up the east coast of Australia and stopped at Cairns and Darwin. When we left Cairns, I told Bob Paul that he was in charge of the BWO until we got to Singapore. Bob had passed for PO and had demonstrated that he was more than capable of taking command. In Darwin, I was met by the Communications Officer, NAVCOMMSTA Darwin and taken to his home for lunch (we were only there for an 8 hour fuelling stop).

We docked at the NZ Forces SE Asia berth, Sembawang, and amongst those ashore to welcome the ship was PRD Chris Farrow. Chris came onboard and we had a couple of beers and I was invited later to dinner at his house, where I met his wife Joan, for the first time. The Senior Rates received an RPC from the Woodlands WOs and Sergeants Mess for 1600 that day. We duly fronted up in half whites and as I walked through the door, someone in the Mess yelled out "Where's the other one?" I stopped and the voice said "Yes. You - Jim Dell." I said "Do you mean Scouse Newell?" "Yes." was the reply. I said "he's on the Taranaki." "Is the Taranaki here as well?" "No" I replied. "Thank God for that!" was the response. It was Pete Burrell, former President of the Waiouru WO's and Sgt's Mess! I was amazed at the number of army SNCOs that were there from Waiouru that I knew, including several of my Father's RNZ Ordnance Corps mates.

Between August and September, we were part of NZ Forces Southeast Asia and visited Georgetown, Penang, in Malaysia and were given a warm welcome by the Australian airforce base at RAAF Butterworth. Communications on the SE Asia station at that time were non-existent. There were no major communications facilities from Commonwealth radio stations that could cover the whole of our operational area that we had in the old days – Hong Kong, Singapore and Darwin. Hong Kong had one duplex, radioteletype, secure system available and I had requested that facility six months prior to sailing from NZ but was told that it was already booked for an RN ship.

NZ Defence Communications in Singapore could only handle a CW and an SSB Voice circuit – neither was conducive to strategic communications back to the command. Otago managed to maintain communications for about a month with Naval Communications Station Darwin using a duplex, secure, radioteletype circuit. I remembered the problem that had occurred on Taranaki during Longex 1970 with the cracked insulator and the resulting arc from the base of the whip to the guardrail. I didn't want to take any chances with the 1 metre red circle at the base of the whip and had a bigger, physical barrier put up using brooms, mops and ropes to ensure that personnel did not come within close proximity of the base of the whip.

This was supplemented by regular broadcasts over the Ship's main broadcast to make personnel aware of the possible danger. Subsequent analysis has shown that for 1000 Watts at 21 MHz, the safe distance in a uncontrolled environment should be over 7 metres. Under the old system the original maximum safe distance was 1.5 metres!



Georgetown



RAAF Mirage aircraft at Butterworth

Our Rugby team was the best in the RNZN and included a young Buck Shelford. We beat all the teams in Australia and the RNZIR Battalion at Dieppe in Singapore. At all the events, I had arranged frequency clearances and our matches were broadcast live on one of our new HF Portable transceivers (Squadcal TRA906) by L/Sea Oscar Tyler back to the ship for those that were on duty.

We were in Singapore during the '76 Olympics when NZ beat Australia at hockey. HMAS Parramatta was berthed on the other side of the basin and during the night, some of our crew rowed over in the Z-boat and painted hockey sticks on the side of their ship!

At the old British naval base in Singapore was a recreational area called Aggie Weston's and after the British pulled out in 1971, the NZ Forces took it over and called it the Fernleaf Centre. I took a room there in 1965, whilst serving on Royalist to celebrate my promotion to Radio Operator 1st Class (ARD) as I was then allowed overnight leave. It had a great swimming pool and we used to watch movies from the building side across the pool to a big screen and have cold drinks whilst watching a movie.

There was another swimming pool in the Dockyard and I hired it for an afternoon to shout the sparkers to a BBQ and drinks from monies made from Interflora flowers, telegrams and radiotelephone calls.



Fernleaf Centre 1976

2nd September we left Singapore for Manila in the Philippines and spent the weekend there before proceeding to the US Naval base in Subic Bay. Prior to that, the circuit with NCS Darwin had become marginal. I looked up COMBEXAG V and saw that they had secure UHF and HF facilities available for allied ships. We called up on the allocated HF frequency and linked up to Navcommsta San Miguel (NPO), then changed over to the UHF relay link at Manila.



Manila

There was still a curfew in the Philippines and everyone had to be off the streets by 2330.

When we arrived in Subic Bay we were assigned to **Task Force 77** with **USS Enterprise** as the Task Force Commander. In Subic Bay, I arranged for the Comms Department to visit the USN Communications stations at San Miguel. Myself and Brian Burford were wearing khakis and the J/Rs were in 10s. When we got to the main gate, a US Marine came onboard, looked at me and asked for my ID Card. He looked at it, saluted me and said "Hope you and your men enjoy your visit to Navcommsta San Miguel, Lutenant Brown, Sir!" Somewhat taken aback, I saluted from the sitting position and looked at my ID Card. He obviously didn't understand what a CRD was but saw the colour of my hair "Lt Brown"...We were made welcome at the receiving station and at lunch time were taken to an all ranks club where lunch had been put on. One of the sparkers asked if the bar was open, to which an astonished waiter asked "you guys drink at lunchtime?" Yes, was the reply.



Main gate Navcommsta San Miguel



Otago was to do Carrier Rescue Destroyer duties during the five-week anti-piracy deployment in the South China Sea en route to Australia and Bob Paul and I visited Enterprise prior to sailing to arrange for them to take communications guard.



USS Enterprise

We did a firepower demonstration for the Task Force, including Seacat Missile firing and our Anti-submarine mortars. The seacat aimer was primed with a couple of navy rums and he hit the target square on. Next, the six AS mortars were set to shallow depth and fired forward, slightly to the right of the mast of **Otago** and the first mortar detonated about 100ft below the surface with the next five mortars detonating close to the surface – very impressive. The AS crew marched smartly onto the quarterdeck faced the Task Force and bowed to a tremendous ovation!



I took this with a Kodak Instamatic camera during the Seacat firing



Seaking Helo from Enterprise doing a mail drop – looking aft

8 October until 25th the ship took part off Australian waters in Exercise Kangaroo 2. Otago departed on the 25th for NZ with **HMNZ ships Canterbury** (CRD John Bullock) and **Taranaki** (PRD Frank Lewis) in company.

The ships arrived back at Devonport naval base 4th November and I was posted to the Communications School as the Chief Radio instructor 17th November of that year.

Top Row- EW, EW, Fisher M, Hunt, Baxby, Robinson, Lowden, Fisher S

Middle Row - O'Neil, Stove, Wano, EW, Sankey, Wharerau

Sitting - Potter, Paul, Dell, Dorset, Burford, Bettridge, Overton, SG



Communications Division 1976 - Singapore

SCO: Lt Neill Dorset

Sparkers: CRD Jim Dell, LRD Bob Paul, ARD Biggy Hunt, ARD Bob Overton, ARD Steve Fisher, ARD Alan Baxby, ORDN Mark Stove, ORDN Graeme Lowden.

Buntings: POYS Bruce Kenyon (absent from pic), LSG Jim Bettridge, ASG Karl Sankey, ASG Mike Fisher, OSG Herbie Wharerau, OSG Robinson, OSG O'Neil (I think), OSG Wano. Plus one

Gollies: POEW Brian Burford, LEW Martyn Evans (absent from pic), LEW Potter, plus three AEWs.