

# RETURN TO THE ICE AFTER 40 YEARS

BY KEITH INGRAM



Since the New Zealand Protector fleet was first mooted in 2002 in the Maritime Forces Review, there has been a lot of public debate over the project, its potential worth to the local marine industry, its value to the Royal New Zealand Navy and finally its contribution to the greater public good.

Granted, the project could have been better managed at the early stages, but given that the Ministry of Defence knew very little about operating ships, especially ships built to civilian standards and international class, it's no wonder a few glaring mistakes happened along the way.

To be fair, to build seven ships of the size and capability we now have for \$500 million was never going to be easy and it was never going to be a turnkey delivery, as many expected.

There were problems, recognised by the Chief of Navy when he was expected to take delivery. Some were resolved and others would require the combined negotiating skills of the heads of Navy, MoD and Crown Law to come to a satisfactory resolution with the shipbuilders. Part of this resolution involved compensation of some A\$83 million before final delivery of all the ships took place, the last being the two offshore patrol vessels. This aside, to get seven ships for what is now less than \$500 million has got to be the envy of every small navy in the world – the deal of the century, one might say.

Subsequently we have seen the troublesome RHIB sea boats replaced, the stability and seakeeping issues of *HMNZS Canterbury* are being addressed, along with the capability problems associated with the landing craft. The





The danger of freezing salt spray is constant in rough weather



The crew are well wrapped up during sea boat trials

through-life weight problems for the offshore patrol vessels will just need to be managed.

To this end, *Canterbury* has come into her own, proving her capability as a disaster relief ship in Samoa following its tsunami and then Lyttelton after the recent Christchurch earthquakes.

While it might have been far better to test this capability offshore, her support locally was immense and well appreciated by this shattered community.

The focus of this article is on one of our OPVs, *HMNZS Wellington*, the first RNZN ship to return to the Ross Sea and Antarctica, or the “ice”, as southern seafarers affectionately know it.

I was a member of the last Operation Deep Freeze with Task Force 43 aboard *HMNZS Endeavour* (II) providing Antarctic and Scott Base support in 1970.

*Wellington* and her sistership *Otago* were commissioned into service in mid-2010 and underwent the first phase of sea trails in the sub-Antarctic Islands in December 2010 and early February of this year.

The Southern Ocean is not a place for the fainthearted or the ill-prepared, as conditions can change from flat calm seas to intense storm in a matter of hours.

As you travel south they do not call the climate the Roaring Forties, Furious Fifties and Screaming Sixties for nothing. This alone should warn those who choose to venture south. From the experiences of our southern contributor, Henk Hazen, his adventures on the *Tiama* bare testament to my words. The Southern Ocean is, after all, the gateway to Antarctica, the last known frontier. ▶



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Searching in the ice-bound waters of McMurdo Sound



*Wellington's* commanding officer, Lieutenant-Commander Simon Griffiths, said the Antarctic sea trials were a fundamental way to introduce the ship into service and test her capabilities.

The offshore patrol vessels are designed and built to operate in the deep Southern Ocean, which includes the Ross Sea. They have long endurance and strengthened hulls.

"The recent trials aimed to operationally test and evaluate the ship and her crew's ability to handle the heavy weather of the Southern Ocean and the light summer ice conditions of the Ross Sea," said Simon.

"The Southern Ocean presents conditions and environments we have not operated in before. The trials have helped highlight the ship's cold-weather capabilities and limitations, and has allowed the RNZN to familiarise itself with the dynamics of the Ross Sea area.

"We have also proved the ship can conduct small-boat operations in Antarctic waters, land and operate personnel along the Antarctic coastline and conduct reconnaissance and surveillance operations throughout the Ross Dependency. The RNZN can now work alongside other government agencies to conduct various surveillance and support operations in Antarctic waters," he said.

This was a key statement, because besides the core ship's company of 35, the OPVs may carry a flight crew of 10 when they have a helicopter on board. There are special cabins with security facilities for up to four staff from government agencies such as the Police, Customs, Fisheries or the Department of Conservation, and further accommodation for up to 30 embarked personnel.

Part of the work of our Protector fleet is fisheries protection, with this extending into the Ross Sea, where the lucrative Patagonian toothfish is at risk of being overfished by fish thieves from other nations who regard the high seas and our southern waters as being open to plunder.

The OPVs have strengthened hulls to enable them to enter southern waters where ice may be encountered. They are not designed as icebreakers or to enter Antarctic ice packs, but they do have the range and ability to undertake patrols in the Southern Ocean, where ice may be encountered.

Obviously these ships deliver a substantial new capability to the Navy. They can go further offshore, stay longer at sea and conduct more challenging operations than previous RNZN ships of this size.

They conduct helicopter operations using a Seasprite SH-2G helicopter, boarding operations using the ship's rigid hull inflatable boats and military support operations with embarked forces.

The RNZN can now conduct patrol and surveillance operations around New Zealand, the Southern Ocean and into the Pacific with a capability not experienced since the Cold War.

While the *Wellington* was deep in the Ross Sea, battling some of the heaviest seas these younger sailors had ever experienced, she faced the added problem of dealing with a distress call from a foreign recreational adventure vessel whose EPIRB was activated in McMurdo Sound.

"The ship could not initially respond to the distress call of the 14m yacht *Berserk* due to the heavy weather conditions and the need to maintain the safety of the ship in known ice-laden



“The emotional pressure was on the ship and the outside world was looking.”

waters. But once we were able to we headed to the last known position of the distress signal,” said Simon.

This was a tough call for any master. Do I push my crew to the limits, or do I let their level of training and safety prevail? Training is ongoing, much like reality television. A ship’s ability is only as good as her crew training. If someone has activated an EPIRB, they are in trouble in icy conditions with minimal chance of survival if they enter the water or are lost in a liferaft.

This must have been on the captain’s mind. I believe this young master and his crew exercised the right and only call of safety first. This aside, the ship’s company was suddenly mindful that this was no longer a training exercise, but human lives were at risk. People could and would die. The emotional pressure was on the ship and the outside world was looking. Contrary to popular belief, there are no secrets from modern media who demand instant information in real time, like now!

From a public relations perspective this could have quickly turned into a nightmare for the Navy and the government. But the *Wellington* responded against some foreboding odds and as a weather break appeared they were able to extensively search the last known position of the *Berserk* in McMurdo Sound. After 12 hours on site, sadly there was no sign of the yacht, her liferaft or crew, and any chance of survival in these icy waters was deemed nearly impossible.

With the weather quickly deteriorating again, preventing *Wellington* from searching further, the building storm conditions meant making some tough calls. There was no sign of the yacht, her liferaft or crew, so the decision was made to seek open, safe waters.

The crew was gutted by their inability to find the yacht or liferaft, as the weather for the time of year was proving to be typically atrocious.

I would suggest that given the circumstances, one could ask no more from this very professional naval crew.

And yet, when the weather behaves, the waters of the Ross Sea can be an inspiring place. “Antarctica is incredibly beautiful, with so much history still clearly visible,” Simon said. “Yet it is also wild, remote and very unforgiving.


“In four days in the lower Ross Sea we experienced both the beauty and the fury of Antarctica. It was an incredible challenge, packed with action and adventures that provided us all with experiences that will stick with us forever!”

Clearly, from a New Zealand strategic perspective it is now vitally important that we demonstrate to the world, especially those who would like to rape and pillage our waters and resources, that New Zealand can and will protect our sovereign waters and exclusive economic zone, and support our Pacific neighbours to ensure the rogues of the high seas do not continue to steal from the waters under our control.

This includes protecting our Southern Ocean marine mammal sanctuary, which the Japanese appear to have little respect for. With the government coming under increasing pressure from whalers and protesters, my guess is that with this new-found ability it won’t be long before our politicians say enough is enough, and we join Australia in taking a stronger stance to prevent the continued killing by Japanese whalers of hundreds of our whales under the guise of science in the sanctuary. All the more so when we now have DNA dart sampling methods to deliver the same scientific results. Yeah, I know, you can’t eat a dart sample. Tough!

The success story here is that with the commissioning and introduction of the Protector fleet into active service, our nation’s



ability to protect our shores and surrounding oceans is now a reality. As the Navy moves forward I believe we will see more examples of where these ships, in carrying out their diverse range of duties, directly benefit our nation. 

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