



# OPERATION SUMATRA ASSIST

## – Logistic Support at the Sharp End in Banda Aceh

By CAPT Sean Darbyshire

Operation Sumatra Assist was the code name for the Australian Defence Force contribution to provide assistance to the South East Asian region in the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami on 26 December 2004. The earthquake and tsunami impacted on approximately 400 kilometres of the northwest coast of Northern Sumatra in Indonesia and predominantly affected its northern most province, Aceh. The provincial capital of Aceh, Banda Aceh, and the regional population centre of Meulaboh were severely damaged. Many of the smaller coastal villages were almost completely destroyed by the tsunami.

By 30 December 2004 the Combined Joint Task Force 629 (CJTF 629) was established to support the Indonesian relief efforts and alleviate further suffering. Under the leadership of its Commander, Brigadier David Chalmers, CJTF 629 was deployed quickly to establish the critical capabilities needed to assist in the multinational relief effort. To achieve this CJTF 629 established its headquarters in Medan, a large provincial city on the northeast coast of Sumatra. Throughout Operation Sumatra Assist CJTF 629 provided critical engineer, health and air transport support to the Government of Indonesia and the international relief efforts. The Joint Force Support Group (JFSG) was established to support the activities of CJTF 629.

The JFSG comprised of elements from the 10th Force Support Battalion, the 9th Force Support Battalion and miscellaneous RAAF and RAN units. Composite groups were formed from these elements to establish the Force Support Element Banda Aceh (FSE-BA) and the Force Support Element Butterworth (FSE-

BW). In the drawdown phase of Operation Sumatra Assist a significant number of personnel from these groups were re-assigned to force extraction teams at Sabang and Butterworth, Malaysia. Sabang is a small island located off the northern tip of Aceh. The FSE-BW was the intermediate staging base supporting CJTF 629 task groups. The FSE-BA provided second and third line logistic support to deployed units at Banda Aceh with its three main dependency elements being elements from the 1st Health Support Battalion, the 1st Combat Engineer Regiment and the 5th Aviation Regiment. Much of the support to other elements such as 1st Joint Support Unit and Joint Movement Control Office was provided through the aforementioned three main logistic support elements.

On 1 January 2005 the recall from Christmas leave to deploy in support of Operation Sumatra Assist commenced for the majority of members who made up the various elements of the JFSG. Given that a critical mass of personnel and equipment for the JFSG was to come from 10 FSB, Lavarack Barracks in Townsville became the forward mounting base for the JFSG deployment. The JFSG was principally made up from soldier trades to provide for a range of capabilities, namely, operator supply, terminal operator, transport driver, petroleum operator, electrician and vehicle mechanic. Other integral components of the JFSG were the service men and women providing support in clerical administration, cash office, finance, local purchase, postal services, primary health care, psychological services, trade specialist watch keepers, liaison officers and staff officers.

Joint Logistics Command (JLC) through the Deployable Logistics Information Systems Support Team (DLISST) provided embedded support to the JFSG in the establishment phase and from thereon through the assignment of a JLC Liaison Officer (JLC LO). Other embedded support was provided through the use of a RAN Liaison Officer (RANLO) located with the FSE-BA and HQ in Medan to support HMAS Kanimbla. The benefits of

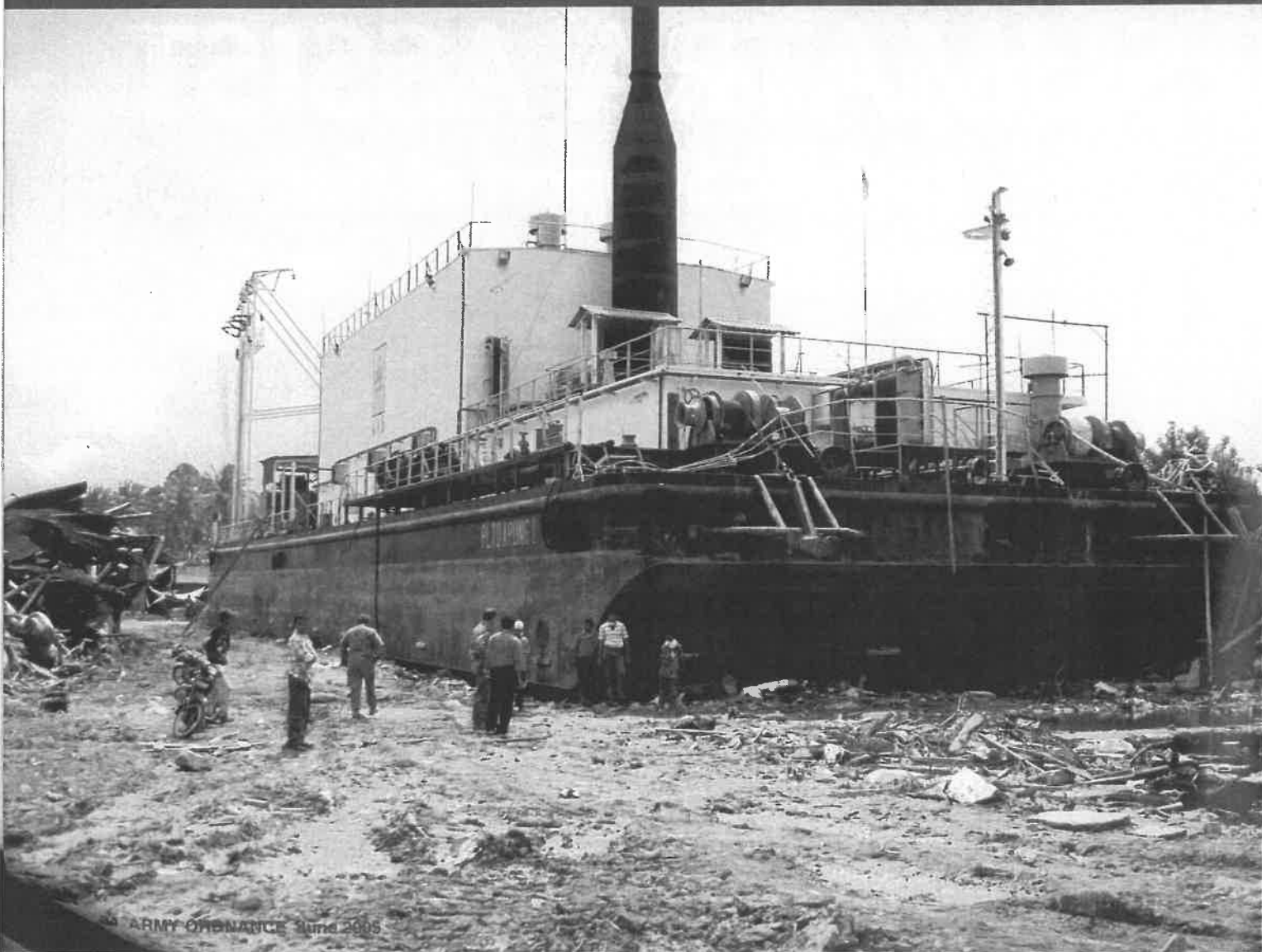
embedding the DLISST and the RANLO in the JFSG, particularly in the establishment phase of Operation Sumatra Assist, was priceless in terms of increasing the effectiveness and timeliness of logistic support.

The new Commanding Officer of 10 FSB, Lieutenant Colonel John Hathaway, was appointed as the CJTF 629 Logistic Component Commander and hence the Commanding Officer of the JFSG. The JFSG reconnaissance party, led by the OPSO 10 FSB, Major Piers Cambridge, deployed to Operation Sumatra Assist on 2 January 2005. The CO JFSG deployed with his advance party on 5 January 2005. The main body departed on 7 January 2005. The presence in Townsville of the Commander Logistic Support Force, Brigadier Mick Kehoe, during the force preparation phase and the commencement of the insertion phase, heightened the sense of awareness for those deploying as to the significance of what they were about to embark on. He also painted vivid pictures as to what life on the ground for those deploying to the Banda Aceh area was likely to actually be. His words of encouragement and advice to junior leaders in small forums produced immeasurable benefits in keeping these members focussed throughout the mission.

With the arrival of the main body of the JFSG in the early evening of 7 January 2005 at the Royal Malaysian Air Force Base – Butterworth, the FSE-BW formed and then sprang into action. Arguably it existed from the 5 January 2005 with the arrival of an advance party led by the OC FSE-BW, Major Peter Williams. In this regard, when the FSE-BW transformed to become the FET-BW on 1 March 2005, Major Williams switched hats to become the OC FET-BW.

In the pre-dawn hours of 8 January 2005, an advance party of the FSE-BA including civilian medical specialists from Emergency Management Australia and myself as the OC FSE-BA

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departed RMAF - Butterworth in the short RAAF C-130 flight across the Straits of Malacca into Banda Aceh Airport. As the plane commenced its descent into Banda Aceh, I recalled a significant period of reflective silence amongst all those being conveyed. In the moments prior to its landing, whilst looking out the windows of the aircraft, it was clear to see random boundaries dividing Banda Aceh from those areas with power for lighting from other areas which were in total darkness. In addition to the pre-deployment briefs, those last glimpsing moments were the final opportunity to prepare for what was to be a truly shocking scene however the prelude was the chaos of Banda Aceh Airport.

The C-130 landed at Banda Aceh Airport at approximately 0630 hours on 8 January 2005. Amidst the absolute clutter of predominantly military aircraft and surrounded by a massive outdoor warehouse full to the brim with stores and equipment was one small corner of relative sanity, namely, the south-west corner of the tarmac dominated by the 5th Aviation Regiment detachment. They lived and worked from a neat row of tents just off the edge of the tarmac in what was rapidly becoming a muddy quagmire. The relentless and piercing noise of aircraft turbines made the most basic of conversation a shouting match. The greeting party for the fourteen-member advance party of the FSE-BA was WO2 David Nosworthy. He had been holding the flag on behalf of the JFSG for what would have been close to two horrendous days. Also in location were the familiar faces of a section of petroleum operators from 10 FSB who were working hand in hand with the 5th Aviation Regiment. This section reformed as part of the FSE-BA however remained co-located under local arrangements with the 5th Aviation Regiment in order to provide around the clock hot refuelling to the Iroquois helicopters. The 5th Aviation Regiment detachment, under the

leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Peter Steel, was already in full throttle ferrying injured civilians and delivering humanitarian aid to remote and dislocated areas.

The FSE-BA mission at this juncture was to gain a foothold in the city of Banda Aceh at a location from where it could provide the necessary supply and service support to the ANZAC Field Hospital. The hospital was located within the tsunami ravaged and corpse-ridden Zainal Abidin General Hospital. Concurrent to this mission was transporting to the ANZAC Field Hospital their critical stores that had been flown in by RAAF C-130s from Butterworth. Only two Unimogs were available in Banda Aceh to undertake this task! The TNI curfews preventing any movements in the streets between sunset and sunrise, traffic congestion outside of curfew hours, a lack of communications, a shortage of material handling equipment assets and seasonal torrential rainfall were all impediments to the timely relocation of the urgently demanded stores. In the face of this, a combination of gutsy work from the transport, terminal and supply sections plus the fortuitous provision of transportation capability from a nearby German field hospital enabled the FSE-BA to achieve what the CO 1st Health Support Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Georgeina Whelan, so desperately required. It is also worthy to state that her decision to release her first line transport capability to the FSE-BA was a defining moment. The trust she afforded the JFSG to kick in at this point and provide total top logistic cover was never taken for granted by members of the FSE-BA. It also laid the foundation for a highly effective and enduring working partnership between 1 HSB and the JFSG.

Now the timely movement of critical hospital stores had been achieved, the goal of maintaining momentum each subsequent day during the establishment phase was no less challenging. On the 12 January 2005 the FSE-BA located its headquarters and accommodation lines at the SMK 3 Technical College adjacent to the Zainal Abidin General Hospital utilising a building wing

normally dedicated as a hair dressing school. In addition, two thirds of the road width between the school and hospital was utilised as a stores transit area, a warehouse for bottled water and rations, a kerbside re-fuelling point and as a vehicle and plant lay up area for the eagerly anticipated 1 CER detachment. On 15 January 2005, fresh off the HMAS Kanimbla, arrived the engineer detachment led by Lieutenant Colonel Ian Cummins. Arriving not a minute too soon for the people of Banda Aceh it didn't take long thereafter for a dramatic transformation to take place in the streets and drains. The city came back to life and with a refreshing vengeance.

It took around two weeks for the FSE-BA to achieve what can best be described as steady state. The element had grown to close to fifty personnel and in this short period of time a close comrade had developed within the group. This was not surprising given the circumstances the FSE-BA lived and work in. Transport drivers had good reason to be particularly affected by the sights of deceased persons observed during their repetitive daily journeying to both the APOD and SPOD. Few escaped this grisly aspect of the job and the pre-deployment advice rang true. Some of this advice was along the lines of remaining busy and to not dwell in one's mind repeatedly on the disturbing aspects of the mission. Other advice was to avoid handling personal effects of assumedly deceased Acenese. Personal items such as photos and countless sandals from feet of all sizes were scattered in every conceivable crevice. One element impossible to avoid was the pervading cocktail stench of rotting flesh and mud. Such was the state of Banda Aceh at that time.

The FSE-BA, once fully established, provided and facilitated a significant array of supply and service support to its dependencies. These deliverables included the provision of combat rations, supplementary rations, fresh rations, bottled water, a kerbside re-fuelling point, an aircraft re-fuelling point, distribution of bulk water, transportation of stores and equipment, a forward repair team comprising mechanics and electricians, a laundry service, a postal service and on the ground support to SDSS.

The 26 March 2005 was the required date for all ADF

elements to be out of Banda Aceh. The 5th Aviation Regiment detachment was the first major dependency to depart in mid-February. With the ANZAC Field Hospital wards at the Zainoel Abiden General Hospital finally handed over to Ausaid in late February, 1 HSB, with heart felt reluctance, departed. On 4 March, after an emotional parade and handover ceremony to teachers and school students by 1 CER of a school precinct they occupied and restored, they too departed. And with this successive return to Australia of three significant capabilities gifted to Indonesia during the disaster relief phase, the FSE-BA progressively wound down its activities. Its final day of operation as a force support element was 27 February 2005. By this time much of the team had been re-assigned to either of the two force extraction teams. The remainder of the team made the final preparations for their return home.

Much has been said, written and graphically displayed in the worldwide media as to the horror both during and remaining after the Boxing Day earthquake and tsunami. As with many things in life, one doesn't gain a full appreciation unless it is based on first hand experience. For those soldiers working in the Banda Aceh area, regardless of which force element they belonged to, the images of devastation and death are indelibly imprinted within their minds. Despite this, the opportunity to provide assistance to fellow humans in such appalling circumstances provided a counter balance that made it bearable. Besides, the courage and humility shown by survivors assisted personnel greatly in retaining a positive outlook.

The opportunity to lead the logisticians that made up the FSE-BA was a profound experience. These men and women I affectionally regard as the 'dream team' were a daily inspiration. We all honed our skills in the integrated logistics environment and reaped the benefits of remaining flexible in our approach to supply and service delivery. Despite the tragic reason for our presence, we managed to maintain a sense of humour throughout. The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Major Peter Williams in 'word smithing' the introduction to this account of events.

