

## The road to Banda Aceh

### *ADF planning, deployment and airlift mission*

Boxing Day provides an opportunity for many in Australia to relax with family and friends, a chance to wind down after the mad rush towards Christmas. As news of the  $M_w$  9.1 earthquake and subsequent tsunami on 26 December 2004 was broadcast into their homes, Australians were sobered by the sheer scale of the unfolding human tragedy in countries around the Indian Ocean to the north. Many were motivated to donate to various charities and tsunami appeals, but for thousands of Australians, the news of the disaster brought a premature end to their festive season as they prepared to contribute their time, skills and resources to the largest Australian overseas disaster relief effort to that time.

One of these was Wing Commander William (Bill) Griggs, who had seen his share of trauma, conflict and disaster. While training to be a doctor, he had worked as a paramedic, and after joining the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) as a reserve medical officer in 1988, he deployed to the Middle East, Bougainville and East Timor, and had helped coordinate the evacuation of injured Australians after the first Bali bombing in 2002.<sup>1</sup> In mid-afternoon on 27 December 2004, he received a telephone call asking whether he was available for another disaster relief mission. Three hours later he was flying to Sydney for what was supposed to be a seven-day deployment with an RAAF aeromedical evacuation team.<sup>2</sup> Griggs would later reflect that trauma specialists often talk of the 'next big thing' but, along with hundreds of other Australians who saw first-hand the devastation in Banda Aceh, he must have wondered if a bigger thing was even possible.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter traces the beginnings of Australian Defence Force (ADF) involvement in the relief effort in Indonesia by looking at planning and preparations within the organisation. It then takes the story from the deployment of the first Australian personnel

through to the use of aircraft and helicopters to deliver humanitarian aid and transport displaced persons and casualties.

### INITIATING THE ADF RESPONSE

As the extent of the tragedy in the region became clearer, telephone calls and emails began to be exchanged among ADF personnel and their units, signalling the start of planning and preparations for an anticipated response. Captain Lachlan Fryer, a linguist with 1st Combat Engineer Regiment (1 CER) in Darwin, for instance, was in Canberra at the time, like many other ADF personnel on leave visiting family, when he was called by his company sergeant major seeking volunteers. A follow-up call from his commanding officer confirmed his selection and participation in the relief mission.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, any presence of Australian military personnel providing assistance after a natural disaster requires a formal invitation from a host government, but in practice, a range of informal discussions and preparations at various levels usually precede this formality. Soon after the tsunami on 26 December 2004, staff of the Australian embassy in Jakarta, including Ambassador David Ritchie and defence attaché Brigadier Ken Brownrigg, began to liaise with their contacts within the Indonesian military and other agencies to get an indication of what might be needed and to provide preliminary information on how Australia might be able to assist. It was soon apparent, as the extent of the disaster unfolded, that Indonesia would welcome international help, leading to the acceptance of a third-party note and formal approval for Australian assistance by Indonesian authorities in the afternoon of 27 December.<sup>5</sup>

Discussions and planning progressed during the first few days at various levels. From the outset, Prime Minister John Howard had made clear to his staff and the members of the Inter-Departmental Emergency Task Force (IDETF) that Australia's response should be 'comprehensive and quite generous', thus guiding their initial planning.<sup>6</sup> The following day, 27 December, Howard rang President Yudhoyono to give his condolences and offer assistance on behalf of the nation.<sup>7</sup> The Chief of the Defence Force (CDF), General Peter Cosgrove, telephoned his counterpart in the National Armed Forces (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia*; TNI), General Endriartono Sutarto, who requested food, power generators, medical supplies, water purification and shelter.<sup>8</sup> The Minister for Defence, Robert Hill, also contacted his opposite number, Juwono Sudarsono, to confirm that TNI direction of relief requirements was acceptable to the Indonesian Government.<sup>9</sup>

Within Australia, Defence staff were likewise undertaking planning and preparations at various levels and with numerous agencies. Defence participation in the IDETF has been mentioned, but Cosgrove preceded each of these meetings with a video-conference

4 Interview, L. W. Fryer, 5 March 2005.

5 Statement by R.M. Hill, *Committee Hansard*, Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee, 14 February 2005, p. 84; and minute, V Adm R.E. Shalders to R.M. Hill, 28 December 2004, Defence: EDMS, B329348.

6 Statement by A. Metcalfe, *Committee Hansard*, Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee, 14 February 2005, p. 78.

7 S. Sofios and N. Casella, 'No escape – swept away', *Daily Telegraph*, 28 December 2004.

8 Minute, CDF, Gen P.J. Cosgrove to R.M. Hill, 27 December 2004, Defence: EDMS, B329499.

9 Statement by R.M. Hill, *Committee Hansard*, Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee, 14 February 2005, p. 84.

1 R. Codey, 'Just reward for medical marvel', *Air Force News*, 15 December 2005.

2 Wing Cdr W. Griggs, 'Post-action report', 20 January 2005, Defence: DRMS, T368885 (hereafter Griggs, 'Post-action report'). Griggs was away for seventeen days.

3 R. Codey, 'Just reward for medical marvel', *Air Force News*, 15 December 2005.

with the Strategic Command Group, comprising his staff, and including Defence staff from International Policy Division, Strategic Operations Division, Air Command and Joint Logistics Command staff from the newly formed Headquarters Joint Operations Command (HQJOC) operating out of Sydney, and Brownrigg in Jakarta.<sup>10</sup>

Imagery provided on the day of the tsunami by the Defence Imagery and Geospatial Organisation (DIGO) to Defence planners depicted widespread flooding and damage to infrastructure in Banda Aceh.<sup>11</sup> In the absence of other detailed information concerning the situation on the ground, it was decided for several reasons that the ADF effort would focus on Sumatra in Indonesia. As the closest landmass to the epicentre of the earthquake and the first to be struck by the tsunami, Sumatra had suffered the greatest damage and loss of life. As one of its closest neighbours, Australia could send an initial response by Hercules aircraft quickly, and follow with a larger deployment by amphibious ship, if required, within two weeks. A focus on Indonesia would have a secondary effect for the ADF of improving relations with the TNI and, by extension, of further improving relations between the two countries.<sup>12</sup> Where in Sumatra the Australians would be based, however, was not yet clear.

## BEGINNING THE AIRLIFT MISSION

With Indonesian approval for Australian assistance forthcoming, the CDF issued orders to initiate the ADF response at 3 pm on 27 December 2004.<sup>13</sup> The initial focus on the dispatch of Hercules transport aircraft with relief supplies and personnel led to the appointment of Air Commodore Glen Steed, the commander of RAAF's Air Lift Group, to command Joint Task Force (JTF) 629 from RAAF Base Richmond. Group Captain John Oddie was appointed Deputy Commander of the task force to lead a small command group from No. 86 Wing from a forward operating base in Indonesia.<sup>14</sup>

The first two Hercules from No. 36 Squadron left Richmond in the late afternoon of 27 December, having been loaded with relief stores that had been arranged to be delivered by road from the Defence National Storage and Distribution Centre at Moorebank by Emergency Management Australia. The two aircraft stayed overnight in Darwin and arrived in Medan on 28 December with the first ADF personnel, including Oddie and his forward command group, a medical team and humanitarian supplies.<sup>15</sup> Two more Hercules departed the following day (one each from Nos 36 and 37 Squadrons). An additional Hercules from No. 37 Squadron was pre-positioned at Darwin for evacuation of injured Australians, should that be required, and the government of New Zealand provided a Hercules from No. 40 Squadron Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) to join the Australian task force from 28 December.<sup>16</sup>

Group Captain Oddie penned his first instructions to his command group on the flight, which consisted of a brief outline of the situation and a cautious appraisal of the job facing them. Oddie had a clear understanding of the importance to the mission of the relationship he had to establish with the TNI, and that he needed to ensure that expectations did not overwhelm the resources of the initial small task force.<sup>17</sup> They were joined the following day by a further two Hercules, with the first flights by Australian aircraft into Banda Aceh being made later that day, 29 December. The cargo in these first flights included medical supplies, emergency shelters and tarpaulins, collapsible water containers, water purification equipment, power generators and body bags.<sup>18</sup>

After his arrival in Sumatra on the afternoon of 28 December, Group Captain Oddie set up a makeshift operations room in an office of the domestic terminal at Polonia Airport in Medan, from where his headquarters began to coordinate the relief flights of the Australian Hercules and other aircraft.<sup>19</sup> Indonesian authorities initially gave permission for the first Australian Hercules to fly to Medan to deliver humanitarian supplies and personnel, then to return to Halim military air base south-east of Jakarta, where an Australian forward operating base was to be established.<sup>20</sup> By the time the aircraft arrived in Medan in the afternoon of 28 December, the Indonesian Government had opened up Aceh to foreign military and civilian aid organisations, and had given permission for the four Australian Hercules to remain in Indonesia for humanitarian tasking at the direction of the TNI.<sup>21</sup> It was becoming clear that Medan would be the logistics hub for the Indonesian and international effort, so the Australians established their forward command element at Polonia, rather than at Halim.<sup>22</sup>

After the initial flights, the Australian and New Zealand Hercules were allocated humanitarian tasks within Indonesia by the TNI. Early jobs included the movement of an ambulance, an Indonesian recovery and support team, and a medical resuscitation team. The New Zealand Hercules on 31 December moved an Indonesian field kitchen from Halim to Banda Aceh to cater for the growing number of TNI troops in the area. Other tasks included transporting vehicles and stores for the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), moving a UN health assessment team and a water purification team.<sup>23</sup>

The task force grew steadily in the following days, but in a somewhat *ad hoc* manner. Captain Joanne Pope, for instance, arrived in Jakarta on the morning of 28 December to take up a position with the Defence Supplementation Staff at the Australian Embassy, to be told immediately to redeploy to Medan to command the Joint Movement Control Cell.<sup>24</sup> By the end of 30 December, Oddie had in theatre 110 ADF personnel, four Hercules, one Boeing 707 aircraft and one Beech King Air 350, and an additional

10 Annex A to minute, DDWE to DCJOPS, 23 February 2005, Defence: A11502, 2003/44714/1; and D. Sibley, 'Calm in the midst of the storm', *Defence Magazine*, February 2005.

11 DIGO report 2228/04, 26 December 2004, Defence: EDMS, B495285.

12 Minute, FASIP to R.M. Hill, 31 December 2004, copy in AWM: AWM330/822/41.

13 Signal 270402Z, CDF to CJOPS, 27 December 2005, Defence: EDMS, B329266.

14 Minute, V Adm R.E. Shalders to R.M. Hill, 28 December 2004, Defence: EDMS, B329348.

15 Signal 270402Z, CDF to CJOPS, 27 December 2004, Defence: EDMS, B329266; and report, Wing Cdr G. Harland, 'CJTG 629.4 post-operational report', April 2005, Defence: EDMS, C653308.

16 Signal 262000Z, CDF to CJOPS, 27 December 2004, Defence: EDMS, B329250; and minute, V Adm R.E. Shalders to R.M. Hill, 28 December 2004, Defence: EDMS, B329348.

17 Handwritten note, Gp Capt J. Oddie, 'Commander's intent', 28 December 2004, Defence: APDC, No. 86 Wing Unit History.

18 Minute, V Adm R.E. Shalders to R.M. Hill, 28 December 2004, Defence: EDMS, B329348.

19 Minute, V Adm R.E. Shalders to R.M. Hill, 31 December 2004, Defence: EDMS, B329683; and C. Levert et al., 'The earth shook, the sea rose up and there was death on a biblical scale', *SMH*, 1 January 2005.

20 Signal 270730Z, CDF to CJOPS, 27 December 2005, Defence: EDMS, B329294.

21 Minute, V Adm R.E. Shalders to R.M. Hill, 28 December 2004, Defence: EDMS, B329348.

22 Signal 282333Z, DCJOPS to CDF, 29 December 2004, Defence: EDMS, B329463.

23 Minute, V Adm R.E. Shalders to R.M. Hill, 31 December 2004, Defence: EDMS, B329683.

24 Interview. I. Pope. 16 March 2005.

RNZAF Hercules.<sup>25</sup> A further two RAAF Hercules and the Boeing 707 provided strategic airlift between Australia and Indonesia. Most of the personnel were in Medan, but two airlift teams, for instance, were deployed to Banda Aceh on the evening of 30 December, and a few personnel were at Halim air base in Jakarta.<sup>26</sup>

## INITIAL MEDICAL ASSESSMENTS

The initial ADF response to the tsunami included a ten-person resuscitation and environmental health team, two RAAF-based aeromedical evacuation teams and a two-person medical assessment team. These personnel were to provide initial medical support and report on what further medical capacities were required. The resuscitation and environmental health detachment was commanded by an Army medical officer, Captain Mark Hanley. It was drawn from the 1st Health Support Battalion, based at Holsworthy in Sydney and the online health response unit for the Army at that time, and included preventive medical and environmental health officers, nursing officers and medics. With little time for more than a short health brief and medical check, the team left Sydney on 27 December 2004, moving on to Banda Aceh after a 24-hour layover in Medan.<sup>27</sup>

Squadron Leader Jeff Stephenson led the two four-person aeromedical evacuation teams, which included Bill Griggs and other reservists with significant disaster relief experience. The teams were assembled in Richmond by late on 27 December and arrived in Darwin just after noon the following day, but they did not arrive in Banda Aceh until 3 January 2005. Griggs and Squadron Leader Allan Mackillop, however, travelled on the second Australian Hercules to Medan, which left Darwin at around 2.30 pm on 28 December, on the orders of the deputy commander of the JTF, Group Captain Oddie. Stephenson was unhappy about splitting his team before they had even left Australia, but the early presence of Griggs and Mackillop would lend valuable experience for assessments of the situation.<sup>28</sup> It turned out that Oddie's orders were a misunderstanding. Wing Commander Greg Norman, commander of No. 3 Combat Support Hospital, and Group Captain Geoff Robinson had travelled on the first flight with Oddie as part of the medical assessment team. Norman, after discussions with Robinson, persuaded Oddie that the two experienced reservists would add value to their reconnaissance of Banda Aceh, set for the following day, and they were given permission to stay and participate.<sup>29</sup>

At 1.30 pm on 29 December, Griggs, Mackillop, Norman and Robinson arrived in Banda Aceh, where they were met and accompanied on a tour of the city's medical facilities by doctors from the IOM. Also with them were members of the resuscitation team and several ADF photographers. The first facility they visited, Fakinah Hospital south-west of the city, was undamaged but deserted. Zainoel Abidin Hospital, the main teaching hospital for Banda Aceh, was severely affected, its ground floor filled with mud, debris and bodies. The short period of their stay precluded a visit to the third, and only active,

hospital at that time in the city, Kesdam Hospital, which had military and civilian wards (see map 20). At a subsequent meeting with the acting governor, who requested an Australian field hospital in Banda Aceh, permission was received from the local police chief for the use of Fakinah Hospital. Having completed the brief four-hour reconnaissance of the city, the members of the assessment team returned to Medan and were split up, carrying out various clinical and liaison roles in Banda Aceh and Medan. All were back in Australia by 12 January 2005.<sup>30</sup>

Group Captain Tony Jones, the Australian Air Force attaché from Jakarta, conducted a further medical survey of the city on 30 December. He left the ADF resuscitation team under the command of Wing Commander Norman to work with Indonesian colleagues at Kesdam Hospital to assist with the treatment of civilian casualties, in particular to help clear the backlog of surgery cases at the overcrowded facility.<sup>31</sup> From 1 January, the team began to treat patients in a primary health clinic that they had been asked to establish. Private Anthony Dawson, one of four medical assistants in the team, recalled how the local people were initially wary of the Australian military medical personnel, but soon were queuing up asking to be treated by them.<sup>32</sup> These personnel were later joined by some members of the Australian Field Hospital after they arrived in early January, where they worked in the civilian ward at the hospital, treating mainly lacerations, infected wounds and head injuries. The TNI staff at the hospital gave the Australians good support, but the Indonesians allocated to the Australian ward those patients who were least likely to survive.<sup>33</sup>

## AN EXPANDING COMMITMENT

The sheer scale of the unfolding disaster across the Indian Ocean soon made it clear that Australia's immediate response, including the provision of \$10 million for relief and the despatch of ADF aircraft and personnel, was only the first step in a much larger relief effort. Prime Minister Howard said on 28 December: 'I stress this is an initial contribution. Australia will and should give more.'<sup>34</sup> The scope of the relief effort subsequently increased the following day to include an amphibious ship with two Sea King helicopters on board, engineering personnel and equipment, three UH-1H Iroquois helicopters and personnel, and a Beech 350 aircraft to support ADF and embassy staff.<sup>35</sup> The mission expanded again on 30 December to include a primary casualty reception facility (PCRF), to be deployed on HMAS *Kanimbla*, and a ninety-person health support company to be deployed by air as soon as possible.<sup>36</sup>

To support the expanded mission, HQJOC formed the Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) 629 to replace the Air Lift Group-based headquarters. The task force was designated 'combined' because of the inclusion of aircraft from the RNZAF, but it would later also

30 Griggs, 'The Asian tsunami', p. 155.

31 Minute, V Adm R.E. Shalders to R.M. Hill, 31 December 2004, Defence: EDMS, B329683; minute (overtaken), V Adm R.E. Shalders to R.M. Hill, 7 January 2005, Defence: EDMS, B330401; and Griggs, 'Post-action report'.

32 A.M. Dawson, 'Survivor Aceh', n.d., Defence DRN, copy in AWM: AWM330, PK1/822/38.

33 Interview, M.J. Robertson, 2 March 2005; and interview, G.M. Whelan, 26 February 2005.

34 S. Sofios and N. Casella, 'No escape – swept away', *Daily Telegraph*, 28 December 2004.

35 Signal 290741Z, CDF to CJOPS, 29 December 2004, Defence: EDMS, B348716.

36 Signal 300331Z, CDF to CJOPS, 30 December 2004, Defence: EDMS, B329610.

25 Signal 302020Z, CJTF629 to DCJOPS, 30 December 2005, Defence: EDMS, C581004. The Beech 350 was replaced in January by a Beech 200, chartered and operated by Army's 173rd Surveillance Squadron (minute, V Adm R.E. Shalders to R.M. Hill, 12 January 2005, Defence: EDMS, B330810).

26 Minute, V Adm R.E. Shalders to R.M. Hill, 31 December 2004, Defence: EDMS, B329683.

27 Interview, G.M. Whelan, 26 February 2005.

28 Sqn Ldr J.C. Stephenson, 'Operation Tsunami/Sumatra Assist – RAAF AME team', 6 February 2005, Defence: APDC (hereafter Stephenson, 'Operation Tsunami/Sumatra Assist').

29 Griggs, 'Post-action report'; and Griggs, 'The Asian tsunami', p. 153.

include British personnel (see chapter 22).<sup>37</sup> The new land-based headquarters was formed from staff of the Deployable Joint Force Headquarters (DJFHQ), a specialist organisation founded in 1997 and based on Headquarters 1st Division in Queensland, to command air, land and maritime forces in joint and combined operations.<sup>38</sup>

Initially, the commander of the DJFHQ, Major General Mark Kelly, was to command Operation Sumatra Assist. After advice from Brownrigg in Jakarta, however, a commander with rank lower than the senior Indonesian TNI officer in charge of the relief effort was deemed appropriate to ensure that the Australian contingent appeared subordinate to TNI direction. Brigadier Dave Chalmers, as commander of 7 Brigade, a motorised infantry brigade co-located with 1st Division Headquarters at Enoggera in Brisbane, had just returned from visiting his troops deployed in East Timor when he received a telephone call from Lieutenant General Peter Leahy, Chief of Army, asking him to lead the mission.<sup>39</sup>

Brigadier Chalmers was a good choice to meet the challenges of a potentially sensitive mission. In 2001–02, he had served as National Commander for Operation Tanager, the Australian contribution of around 1,600 personnel providing security for the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor. This position required careful handling of his TNI counterparts during a period of simmering tension between the two countries, not to mention continuing security incidents along the border between East Timor and West Timor where Australian troops were patrolling.<sup>40</sup> Chalmers was, according to Lieutenant Colonel Georgeina Whelan, commander of the medical group in Operation Sumatra Assist, patient and diplomatic in his dealings with the TNI and Indonesian authorities in Sumatra, but he was willing to take a firm stand against unnecessary obstructions to Australian efforts when required. She related one instance when Chalmers stepped in after several frustrated attempts to secure ward space in Zainoel Abidin Hospital, telling Indonesian officials that 'the next time you move my staff, I will move them back to Australia'.<sup>41</sup> His words had the desired effect.

When Chalmers arrived at DJFHQ to take over the task force, his headquarters staff already had a two-day head start planning for deployment under Major General Kelly. While in Canberra before deployment, Chalmers spoke with the commander of Operation Shaddock, Lieutenant Colonel Rod West, who provided some background to the Australian response after the 1998 tsunami on the north coast of PNG (see chapter 17). Chalmers felt this was useful in a general sense, but he knew the damage resulting from the present tsunami was far greater than after the earlier disaster and that the responses and challenges would be very different.<sup>42</sup> The task force had to be structured so that it could adapt to a range of contingencies, which depended on whether it was deployed in one or several locations, on the actual tasks required, and on the level of infrastructure and support available. As a consequence, the structure shown in table 20.1 was eventually adopted.

The uncertainties during the planning stage were compounded by HQJOC placing limits in numbers on each of the elements of the task force. Chalmers had received

**Table 20.1** Structure of Combined Joint Task Force 629

Task force element	Commander	Main constituent units	Number
Headquarters	Brig D. Chalmers	DJFHQ, 7 Bde	30
Maritime Group	Cdre P. Leschen*	HMAS <i>Kanimbla</i> , 817 Sqn	340
Engineer Group	Lt Col I. Cumming	1 CER	160
Medical Group	Lt Col G. Whelan	1 HSB	145
Air Component	Wing Cdr G. Harland	Air Lift Group, 5 Avn Regt, 1 CCS	250
Joint Force Support Group	Lt Col J. Hathaway	10 FSB	145
Communications Group	Lt Col D. Webster	1 JSU	15
Other (liaison, embassy, etc)			21

\* Leschen handed over command of the Maritime Group on 7 February to Cdre G.A. McGuire, who had relieved Cdr S.P. Woodall as captain of *Kanimbla* on 30 January.

Source: Brig D. Chalmers, 'CJTF 629 POR', May 2005, Defence: EDMS, C653294; and attachment to minute SEC/OUT/2005/61, R.C. Smith to Minister, c. 14 February 2005, Defence: A11502, 2005/1022008/1

conflicting advice, both that caps were and were not to be applied, but Major General Mark Evans, Deputy Chief of Joint Operations, was uneasy about the task force exceeding a total of a thousand personnel.<sup>43</sup> In the end, a total of around 1,400 participated in the mission, a maximum of approximately 1,100 being deployed at any time.<sup>44</sup> In an operational environment, sufficient force strength and appropriate force elements are considered essential to the success of a military mission. In disaster relief, however, these expectations are often not met, as political and higher command pressures work to reduce the overall size of disaster relief contingents. In Operation Sumatra Assist, personnel in supporting roles in particular often found themselves short-handed and taking on additional tasks, as the contingent was structured to maximise the delivery of humanitarian assistance and minimise the resources supporting that effort. The structure of CJTF 629 is outlined in chart 20.1.

## DEPLOYING COMBINED JOINT TASK FORCE 629

The cap on personnel was just one of several substantial issues for Defence planners to overcome. The nature of disaster relief missions means that personnel and equipment are prepared and sent overseas at very short notice. Further, the timing of the disaster, over the Australian Christmas stand-down period and during a major posting cycle, meant that required personnel had to be recalled from leave at short notice or called up early to new postings. The government's desire for the ADF to deploy and begin relief work quickly further shortened periods of planning and preparation. The changing scope of the Australian mission further led to the ADF task force deploying from several bases over a period of weeks by a mix of military, commercial and chartered transport. This led to numerous cases where units were separated from the transport of their equipment, leading to some delays in setting up. Despite all these problems, Australians were among the first to be seen to be providing relief to disaster victims, even while they were struggling to catch up behind the scenes.

<sup>37</sup> A 'combined' force includes military personnel from different allied countries, while 'joint' refers to different service arms within the military of a single country.

<sup>38</sup> K. Noble, 'Deploying force', *Army*, 19 June 2003.

<sup>39</sup> Interview, D.H. Chalmers, 15 March 2005.

<sup>40</sup> See for example UN document S/2002/432, 17 April 2002, p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> Interview, G.M. Whelan, 26 February 2005.

<sup>42</sup> Interview, D.H. Chalmers, 15 March 2005.

<sup>43</sup> Interview, D.H. Chalmers, 15 March 2005.

<sup>44</sup> Nominal roll, 'Master OPSA tracking', Defence: AAHU, Op Sumatra Assist.

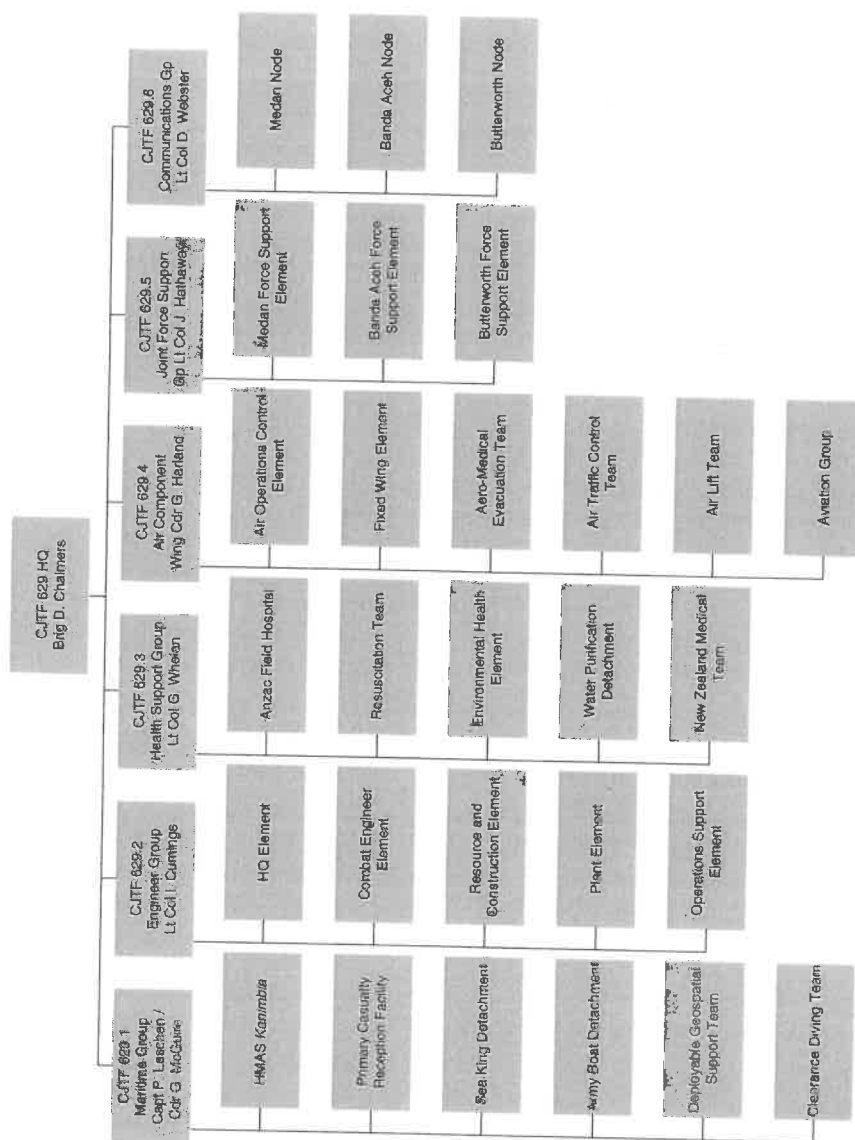


Chart 20.1 Combined Joint Task Force 629 organisation chart

The speed of deployment for many members of the task force meant that pre-deployment briefings were short or lacking in detail. Some units did not even know where they would be based until they were on their way to Medan. This was partly because there was no single point of contact within Indonesia in the first crucial days to provide clear and coordinated information for planning purposes.<sup>45</sup> Members of the task force who travelled to Banda Aceh in *Kanimbla* received some health, media, cultural and language briefings during the six-day journey from Darwin, but most received little more than general briefings. Maps were also hard to come by in the early weeks of the mission.<sup>46</sup> Indicative of this lack of preparation was that on 31 December, a senior Australian nursing officer reported that twenty RAAF other ranks had turned up at the hotel in Medan that day with 'no doxycycline, no health brief, no country brief, no intell brief and no officers'.<sup>47</sup>

The pace of preparations for Sumatra Assist led to a corresponding rush to prepare required medical and travel documentation. The Indonesian Government did not waive a requirement for ADF personnel to present an official passport with a valid visa on entry into the country for relief work. Holding an official passport was not a general requirement for ADF personnel, so a great deal of time and effort was expended within deploying units in filling out forms, presenting them to passport offices and liaising with various Indonesian consulates to secure visas.<sup>48</sup> Passport staff at the DFAT office in Darwin, for instance, worked overtime through public holidays to issue more than 200 official passports during the period from 30 December to 7 January to personnel from *Kanimbla* and from 1st Combat Engineer Regiment who were travelling to Sumatra in the ship.<sup>49</sup>

Chalmers arrived in Medan in Sumatra on 2 January 2005, taking command of the mission from Air Commodore Steed the following day. Oddie, who was in command of the JTF 629 forward element, thereafter led the Air Component of the larger task force until 8 January, when he handed over to Group Captain John (Sam) Samulski. The command of the Air Component then passed to Wing Commander Geoffrey Harland on 7 February, then to Squadron Leader Robert Vogel on 12 March for the transition and withdrawal phase.<sup>50</sup>

Chalmers's first task was to establish contact with the TNI to determine where the various elements of the Australian relief force would be based. Major General Bambang Darmono, the senior TNI officer in charge of the relief operation, was based in Banda Aceh, so Chalmers travelled to see him the day after his arrival, 3 January. His Hercules flew from Medan over Meulaboh on the west coast, then followed the coast north to Banda Aceh, providing Chalmers and his staff a first-hand view of the total destruction from the tsunami along the coastal strip. Arriving at Banda Aceh airport, Chalmers immediately sought out Darmono. Indicative of the state of the relief effort at that time was Darmono's headquarters, which seemed to Chalmers to consist of several pink plastic chairs set among the chaos at the side of the airport.<sup>51</sup>

45 Minute, V Adm R.E. Shalders to R.M. Hill, 28 December 2004, Defence: EDMS, B329348.

46 Interview, D.H. Chalmers, 26 March 2012.

47 Cited in Griggs, 'Post-action report'.

48 Appendix 9 to annex D to Brig D. Chalmers, 'CJTF 629 POR', May 2005, copy in AWM: AWM330, PKI/822/52 (hereafter Chalmers, 'CJTF 629 POR'); and interview, C.R. Bury, 7 March 2005.

49 Email, Darwin Passport Office to Crisis Centre, 14 January 2005, DFAT: 05/120095-14.

50 Annex H to Chalmers, 'CJTF 629 POR'.

51 Interview, D.H. Chalmers, 26 March 2012.

Meulaboh on the west coast was foremost in Chalmers' mind as a location for the Australian medical team. There was an obvious need, and it would give Australia prominence in an area not yet receiving much attention, although it would spread the Australian task force over several locations. At that time, however, the airport at Meulaboh was still damaged and could not cater for larger aircraft like the Hercules, and a Singaporean team was heading to the damaged city with a large medical contingent on the day Chalmers flew over the area.<sup>52</sup> The issue was moot, however, as Darmono instructed Chalmers to establish his task force headquarters in Medan and advised him that the ADF engineers and field hospital should be located in Banda Aceh along with military contingents from other Western countries.<sup>53</sup>

Darmono explained that military contingents from ASEAN countries were deploying to other areas, such as Meulaboh, and that Western contingents would be based in Banda Aceh. The reason given was Indonesian concerns for the security and safety of foreign aid workers – although presumably the ASEAN contingents faced similar threats. Despite assurances by Alwi Shihab, the government minister overseeing the relief effort, that foreign workers would be welcome wherever there was a need, Vice President Jusuf Kalla declared at the weekend of 8–9 January that foreign soldiers and aid workers could travel outside Banda Aceh and Meulaboh only with specific permission and TNI escorts because of concerns over security in these areas.<sup>54</sup> This step was criticised in the press at the time, but it was in the interests of Yudhoyono's new government to ensure that unarmed foreign aid workers, including foreign military personnel, remained safe and secure while in Sumatra.

The CJTF headquarters was initially established in the Novotel in Medan. Lieutenant Colonel Dan Webster, commander of the task force Communications Group, arrived on 2 January and realised that there was no secure area outside the hotel to set up the force's satellite and other bulky communications equipment. He subsequently located a more suitable site at the nearby Danau Toba Hotel, which had a fence and large external car park. After lengthy negotiations with the hotel operators, agreement was reached for the hotel to provide accommodation and the use of a basement conference room for the Australian headquarters. The Danau Toba also had the advantage of being set back from the road more than the Novotel, providing a more secure location. Security was provided by local Indonesian police, who maintained a presence at the stairwells leading to Australian-occupied areas of the hotel. Webster recalled that the hotel staff were happy to host the Australians owing to their contribution to the relief effort in Banda Aceh.<sup>55</sup>

An Australian logistics hub was established at the Royal Malaysian Air Force base at Butterworth, through which most of the Australian personnel and equipment transited.<sup>56</sup> The ADF chartered large transport aircraft such as Antonov 124 (AN-124) and Ilyushin 76 (IL-76) to carry into Sumatra cargo, equipment and vehicles, much of

<sup>52</sup> Situation report 11, OCHA, 'Indonesia – earthquake and tsunami', 5 January 2005; and Rahman, *Heart of a lion*, p. 48.

<sup>53</sup> Interview, D.H. Chalmers, 15 March 2005.

<sup>54</sup> M. Moore, 'Military bans a blow to aid', *Age*, 10 January 2005.

<sup>55</sup> Interview, D.L. Webster, 2 February 2005; annex D to Chalmers, 'CJTF 629 POR'; and interview, D.H. Chalmers, 26 March 2012.

<sup>56</sup> Annex A to minute, DDWE to DCJOPS, 23 February 2005. Defence: A11502 2003/44714/1





**Photo 53** (From left) Captain Anthony Chambers, Captain Brett Courtenay and Captain Elizabeth Christie, all from 1st Health Support Battalion, operate on an Indonesian patient in the mobile field hospital established in front of Zainoel Abidin Hospital in Banda Aceh, January 2005. (© Department of Defence)



**Photo 54** Private Jessica Butler from the Anzac Field Hospital uses a thermal fogging machine to control mosquitoes in Banda Aceh, February 2005. (© Department of Defence)

which would not fit into a Hercules.<sup>57</sup> From 3 to 6 January six chartered flights carried cargo for the Health Support Group, the Aviation Group and other elements of the Australian task force.<sup>58</sup> This had been a common arrangement for the ADF since the start of Australia's involvement in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the two years before the tsunami, the ADF had chartered more than 200 flights to transport cargo to the Middle East, the vast majority of which were undertaken in Ilyushin aircraft.<sup>59</sup>

## PROBLEMS IN DELIVERING AID

Problems with the coordination of delivery of humanitarian assistance in Sumatra, which had led at the political level to the formation of the Core Group of countries as described in chapter 19, made the job of the Australians in Medan extremely difficult at the tactical level. Although good relations had been established with officials from the TNI, customs and immigration, the local authorities were struggling with the size and scope of the task, and airport operators were providing limited support services. Further, the level of coordination and prioritisation of aircraft movements was poor, and the preparation and loading of cargo caused significant delays and congestion.<sup>60</sup> The Australian operations room at Medan airport was improved by 2 January with the addition of fax, telephone lines and printers, but the following day, the Australians moved to the TNI military building at the airport to co-locate with air operations staff from other contributing nations.<sup>61</sup> The Air Operations Centre was not a combined command, but the proximity of personnel from Indonesia and numerous international military contingents allowed improved coordination, and helped to identify problems as they arose.<sup>62</sup>

The huge increase in air traffic bringing humanitarian aid to Sumatra placed great strain on the facilities in the airports at Banda Aceh and Medan. Sultan Iskandar-muda airport, also known as Blang Bintang, is situated approximately 15 kilometres by road south-east of the centre of Banda Aceh. It was unaffected by the tsunami, but the earthquake rendered the tower unserviceable and damage to lights initially limited the airfield to daylight operations. There was little organisation at Banda Aceh, and the airfield had no taxiways and little unloading space, meaning that many aircraft would land, offload their humanitarian cargo wherever there was space on the runway apron, then take off again as quickly as possible. This was not generally a problem for Hercules flights, but larger aircraft, such as C-17 Globemasters, were taking a long time to unload and turn around, and were taking up valuable apron space.<sup>63</sup> Delays of several hours waiting for clearance to leave Banda Aceh were common.

<sup>57</sup> 'Department of Defence contracts listing for the period 01/01/2005 to 31/12/2005', Defence website, viewed 30 August 2011, copy in AWM: AWM330, PKI/822/21.

<sup>58</sup> Talking points, 'Operation Sumatra Assist', 5 January 2005, DFAT: 05/120095-09.

<sup>59</sup> Answer to questions in writing, D-A. Kelly, 'Middle East Cargo Service', CPD, HR, 10 August 2005, pp. 187-93.

<sup>60</sup> Signal 011957Z, CJTF 629 to DCJOPS, 1 January 2005, Defence: EDMS, B329911.

<sup>61</sup> Fax, 'JTF 629 (FWD) Op Tsunami Assist Sitrep', 3 January 2005, Defence: EDMS, B330077.

<sup>62</sup> The Air Operations Centre included personnel from Australia, France, Germany, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Singapore and the United States (annex H to Chalmers, 'CJTF 629 POR').

<sup>63</sup> Email, R. Rigney to G. Grunbaum, 6 January 2005, DFAT: 05/120095-11.

The Australians initially deployed a small RAAF air-load team to Sumatra to assist with the loading and unloading of humanitarian supplies at various airports in the region. Five personnel, including the air-load coordinator, Warrant Officer Paul Lemarshall, remained in Medan, with three members deployed to Halim air base in Jakarta and a further two to Banda Aceh.<sup>64</sup> These initial teams were insufficient in size and lacked material handling equipment, having to scrounge forklifts and baggage trolleys to aid unloading and movement of relief supplies. Non-qualified personnel were used to provide manpower before additional air-load teams and terminal operators were deployed to assist.

The destruction of homes, continuing aftershocks and the threat of disease led thousands of people to seek evacuation from Banda Aceh. Australian aircraft began transporting displaced persons to Medan and Jakarta on their return journey from the first flights into the airport, and had moved more than 900 people by 1 January 2005.<sup>65</sup> By that time, the IOM was coordinating movements of displaced persons, but swelling numbers at the airport were overwhelming the small contingent of TNI personnel providing crowd control.<sup>66</sup> The Australian forward commander on 1 January recommended an additional twenty Australian airfield defence guards to supplement the nine already assisting the Indonesians at Sultan Iskandarmuda airport, but he recognised that the TNI would probably not permit this deployment owing to sensitivities about other nations providing security-type functions. The situation was soon improved, however, with a steady flow of evacuations from the airport and as a result of improving organisation by the TNI forces. The Australian aircraft continued to backfill relief and sustainment flights into Banda Aceh and, by the end of the mission, had evacuated more than 2,500 people from the damaged city.<sup>67</sup>

The flow of aircraft through Banda Aceh airport was further disrupted after an Indonesian chartered Boeing 737 at 4 am on 4 January collided with a water buffalo that had wandered onto the runway during the night.<sup>68</sup> The crew were unharmed, but damage to the aircraft left it stranded, leading to an initial assessment that the airport would be closed for three days.<sup>69</sup> An *ad hoc* international team formed to deal with the problem. Crewmen from the aircraft carrier USS *Abraham Lincoln* assisted, using salvage equipment flown in by a Republic of Singapore Air Force helicopter. An Australian forklift was one of several used to stabilise the aircraft on a makeshift cradle as a tractor dragged the damaged plane off the runway.<sup>70</sup> The airport in the end was reopened by 5 January, but the temporary closure only added to the logistics problems, delaying, for instance, five planned Australian flights and seven Indonesian flights from Jakarta with medical teams.<sup>71</sup>

Despite these problems, Australian and New Zealand aircraft from the task group transported an average of 25 tonnes of humanitarian aid per day during January.<sup>72</sup> During the month, other organisations, such as the UN Joint Logistics Centre, were providing and organising an increasing number of civilian airlifts, sea transport was gearing up and road transport into the region had increased. The first convoy of fifty trucks with relief supplies from Medan arrived in Meulaboh on the west coast, for instance, on 11 January, and by the end of the month, almost 6,500 tonnes of supplies had been delivered by road to Aceh province by a fleet of more than 300 trucks chartered by the IOM and the World Food Programme.<sup>73</sup>

## HUEYS AND SEA KINGS OVER ACEH

Momentum for the inclusion of Australian helicopters in the relief effort came from several directions. A meeting of international defence attachés in Jakarta on 28 December 2004 identified rotary-wing support as an area of obvious need to provide relief supplies to outlying areas inaccessible by road or sea. Indonesian helicopter support was initially minimal, other militaries were still determining their contributions, and civilian agencies were generally slow to deploy – the UN Humanitarian Air Service did not have helicopters in Banda Aceh until mid-January because of protracted charter negotiations and the decision to paint the helicopters 'UN-white'.<sup>74</sup> In Australia, AusAID was looking to improve distribution of aid within Indonesia and approached the ADF at the afternoon IDETF meeting on 29 December for possible use of Hercules aircraft for airdrops. Defence proposed helicopters as an alternative, given the possibility of casualties from airdrops, as had occurred previously in East Timor.<sup>75</sup>

Defence was, in fact, already moving, as General Cosgrove issued orders on 29 December – at around the same time as the above-mentioned IDETF meeting – for the inclusion of three army Iroquois helicopters in the expanded Australian relief task force, with a fourth Iroquois being added several days later.<sup>76</sup> The commanding officer of 5th Aviation Regiment based in Townsville, Lieutenant Colonel Peter Steel, became commander of the Aviation Group, a subunit of the Air Component of CJTF 629, with a contingent of forty-seven personnel, including aircrew and support staff for four Iroquois. In addition, two navy Sea King helicopters were embarked in *Kanimbla* for ship-to-shore transport of personnel and equipment in Sumatra, and for humanitarian flights if required. The Sea Kings, which were assigned to the Maritime Group of

64 S. Liebelt, 'IATS commended for providing critical link', *Air Force*, v. 47 no. 1, 10 February 2005.

65 Signal 011957Z, CJTF 629 to DCJOPS, 1 January 2005, Defence: EDMS, B329911.

66 Minute, V Adm R.E. Shalders to R.M. Hill, 31 December 2004, Defence: EDMS, B329683.

67 Annex C to Chalmers, 'CJTF 629 POR'.

68 Elleman, *Waves of hope*, pp. 50–1.

69 Boey, *Reaching out*, p. 94.

70 Signal, CDF to DCJOPS, 4 January 2005, Defence: EDMS, C584701.

71 Situation report 11, OCHA, 'Indonesia – earthquake and tsunami', 5 January 2005; and incident report, Gp Capt R.D. Owen, 'Aircraft accident Banda Aceh airfield', 4 January 2005, Defence: EDMS, C584059.

72 See for example signal 150955Z, CJTF 629 to DCJOPS, 15 January 2005, Defence: AAHU, Op Sumatra Assist, 611/1/4; and minute, V Adm R.E. Shalders to R.M. Hill, 28 January 2005, Defence: EDMS, B332629.

73 Situation report 17, OCHA, 'Indonesia – earthquake and tsunami', 12 January 2005; situation report 21, OCHA, 'Indonesia – earthquake and tsunami', 26 January 2005; and briefing, Brig D.H. Chalmers to DCJOPS, 23 January 2005, Defence: A11502, 2005/1016801/1; and situation report, IOM, 'Aceh', 31 January 2005.

74 Bennett et al., 'Coordination of international humanitarian assistance in tsunami affected countries', p. 36.

75 Minutes IDETF, 'Tidal wave crisis December 2004', 1630 hr, 29 December 2004, DFAT: 05/120099. Nelson Soares, a three-year-old boy, lost his leg after being struck by an air-dropped relief package from a UN aircraft in September 1999 ('Timor boy's leg amputated after hit in UN airdrop', *Reuters News*, 29 September 1999).

76 Signal 290741Z, CDF to CJOPS, 29 December 2004, Defence: EDMS, B348716; and signal 310641Z, CDF to CJOPS, 31 December 2004, Defence: EDMS, B329733.



the CJTF 629, not the Aviation Group as were the Iroquois, were deployed from 817 Squadron, then on standby as the operational response squadron, with a detachment of thirty personnel commanded by Lieutenant Commander Mathew Bradley RAN.<sup>77</sup>

The need for large numbers of helicopters in Banda Aceh led to consideration of further deployments of Australian helicopters. The commander of 16th Aviation Brigade subsequently placed four S-70 Black Hawks, two CH-47 Chinooks and supporting personnel on reduced notice to deploy.<sup>78</sup> Chinooks from C Squadron were at that time being used for tactical lift in the Middle East, but two were available for deployment to Indonesia within five days with an additional forty aircrew and support personnel.<sup>79</sup> By 2 January 2005, the need for additional rotary-wing support had eased, as the United States and other militaries had begun to deploy large numbers of helicopters, and civilian aircraft were also soon expected in Indonesia to assist. The Australian helicopters were consequently kept on reduced notice to move in case the need arose.<sup>80</sup>

The first three Iroquois were transported from Amberley air base to Sumatra in chartered Antonov, arriving in Medan in the evening of 2 January. Personnel from 5th Aviation Regiment arrived the same day on a chartered Virgin Blue 737. The Iroquois were reassembled and tested in Medan; two being operational by 5 January and the third by 7 January after the arrival of parts, then deployed forward to establish an operating base at Banda Aceh airport.<sup>81</sup> The fourth Iroquois arrived in Banda Aceh on a chartered Ilyushin and was operational by 11 January.<sup>82</sup> In addition, two British Bell 212 helicopters from Brunei were integrated into the Australian rotary-wing operation from 12 January, commencing operations several days later.<sup>83</sup>

The Iroquois, or 'Huey', as it was known, was well suited to humanitarian missions.<sup>84</sup> It could be deployed quickly and needed minimal support in the field, and the rotors had less downwash than other larger helicopters, thereby reducing the impact on people on the ground in affected areas.<sup>85</sup> The Iroquois had a crew of four, could carry a further five people or 680 kg in cargo, and had a fully laden range of around 500 kilometres. The Sea King also had a crew of four but, by way of contrast, had a range of more than 1,200 kilometres, and could carry up to sixteen passengers and 2,700 kilograms in an underslung load.<sup>86</sup>

77 RAN, *Nias Island Sea King accident: Board of Inquiry report*, chapter 3, p. 17.

78 Note, 'Request for information – Op Sumatra Assist', 31 December 2004, Defence: EDMS, G18863; and minute, V Adm R.E. Shalders to R.M. Hill, 4 January 2005, Defence: EDMS, B329989.

79 Note, Col A. Dudgeon, 'Answers to request for information', c. 1 January 2005, Defence: EDMS, G18864.

80 Minute, V Adm R.E. Shalders to R.M. Hill, 2 January 2005, Defence: EDMS, B329799.

81 Signal 021835Z, LC JOC to ARMYHQ, 3 January 2005, Defence: EDMS, B329970; signal 071304Z, LCC JOC to HQJOC, 8 January 2005, Defence: EDMS, B330517.

82 Situation report 108, ADS-J, 'Operation Sumatra Assist', 11 January 2005, AGD: CBR/2005/008710/EMA; and L. Edmestone, 'Open wide, come inside, we're on our way to Aceh', *Courier Mail*, 10 January 2005.

83 Minute, V Adm R.E. Shalders to R.M. Hill, 12 January 2005, Defence: EDMS, B330810; and signal 150955Z, CJTF 629 to DCJOPS, 15 January 2005, Defence: AAHU, Op Sumatra Assist, 611/1/4. The Bell helicopters were from an independent flight of the British Army Air Corps based in Brunei.

84 The nickname Huey came from US personnel in the Vietnam War, but was adopted by Australian forces. It comes from the designation UH-1 (originally HU-1).

85 Wiharta et al., 'The effectiveness of foreign military assets in natural disaster response', p. 35; and Annex A to minute, DDWE to DCJOPS, 23 February 2005, Defence: A11502, 2003/44714/1.

86 Hamilton, 'Elder utilises', p. 11.

A daily routine developed after the detachment was settled and operations had begun. A coordination meeting was held at the TNI headquarters each evening at 7 pm. The meeting was chaired by Colonel Pandjaitan, the TNI coordinator of rotary-wing operations, and attended by the Australian Aviation Group detachment commander or operations officer, and representatives of other agencies providing rotary-wing support. The participants presented their aircraft availability and discussed other loading and operational issues. At 7 am the following morning, the TNI issued a 'task order' that outlined the requirements for Australian and other helicopters for the day.<sup>87</sup>

Once initial fuel supply problems at Banda Aceh were overcome, the high volume of humanitarian tasks and small overall number of aircraft saw two of the Australian helicopters operating up to 8 hours per day, but this soon decreased to a more manageable 6 hours of operations per day. The Hueys transported various relief supplies and personnel to outlying areas up to 150 kilometres from the base at Banda Aceh, and returned with casualties and displaced persons.<sup>88</sup> By the end of the deployment, the Australian helicopters had flown almost 300 missions, delivered 150 tonnes of relief supplies and transported nearly 500 displaced persons and casualties.<sup>89</sup> For many local residents, these flights were a welcome lifeline in the absence of road and sea delivery of supplies.

Lieutenant Commander Bradley's detachment of two Sea King helicopters were used for several days after the arrival of *Kanimbla* on 13 January to unload Australian personnel, equipment and stores. Their primary role was to support the Australian force, but the Sea Kings were also used for humanitarian airlift. Chalmers was initially unhappy that Bradley had unilaterally employed the Sea Kings in this way, but their capacity made them ideal and they were used to deliver humanitarian supplies, move personnel from the TNI and non-government organisations, and transport displaced persons and casualties.<sup>90</sup> From 17 January, the Sea Kings operated out of Sabang, a small island just north of Sumatra, transporting humanitarian supplies that had been diverted from the busy Banda Aceh airport. After 21 January they operated alongside the 5th Aviation Regiment Iroquois and other international helicopters under TNI coordination from Banda Aceh airport.<sup>91</sup>

Typically, one Sea King would operate within UHF radio range of *Kanimbla* (around 40 kilometres), on call to provide evacuation of Australian personnel if required, with the other operating further afield on humanitarian or other tasks.<sup>92</sup> The range and payload of the Sea Kings made them ideal for transport to areas further down the west coast of Sumatra. A typical mission carried rice, biscuits and water from Sabang to Aleubata, an isolated village 200 kilometres distant from Banda Aceh and inland from Meulaboh. The cargo was loaded at Sabang by a human conveyor belt of civilian and military personnel from many countries, and unloaded at the destination by the crew and local villagers.<sup>93</sup>

87 Minute, Brig D.H. Chalmers to HQJOC, 15 January 2005, Defence: EDMS, C588926.

88 C. Jamieson, 'Deliverance from above', *Army News*, 10 February 2005.

89 Media release 27/05, R.M. Hill, 17 February 2005.

90 Interview, D.H. Chalmers, 26 March 2012.

91 Interview, M.O. Bradley, 9 March 2005; Annex E to Chalmers, 'CJTF 629 POR'.

92 Signal 201222Z, CTG 629.1 to CJTF 629, 20 January 2005, Defence: AAHU, Op Sumatra Assist, HMAS *Kanimbla*.

93 Louys, *Aceh*, pp. 10–11, 150–4.

Owing to the poor conditions at Banda Aceh airport, a decision was made to rotate the Aviation Group in early February but, as discussed in following chapters, helicopter operations ceased on 11 February, with the newly arrived contingent returning with the Iroquois to Australia by 22 February.<sup>94</sup> The Sea King detachment did not rotate, but ceased humanitarian operations on 3 February in line with the reduced need for military helicopters.<sup>95</sup> The last mission conducted by the Army Iroquois detachment was back to the village of Lhong, the site of frequent missions during the deployment. Accompanying the flight were Brigadier Chalmers and his Indonesian counterpart, Major General Darmono. In addition to humanitarian aid, the crews of the three Iroquois delivered toys and soccer balls that they had bought for the local children.

## SENDING AN AUSTRALIAN AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL TEAM

Compounding the organisational problems on the ground at Banda Aceh airport was the associated congestion in the air from more than a hundred aircraft movements per day during the peak of the relief effort.<sup>96</sup> Before the tsunami, five air traffic controllers were employed by the state-controlled company Angkasa Pura II to direct approximately ten flights per day on the airport's single runway. The control tower was modern and well equipped, but did not use radar. The company brought in around twenty civilian air traffic controllers to the airport from elsewhere in Indonesia after the disaster, but they were unfamiliar with the local terrain and procedures. Initially, the controllers were operating from a tent and a temporary wooden structure on the top of a water tank. Portable radios were used to direct aircraft, but visibility was poor and many international crews had problems with the Indonesians' pronunciation of English, the standard language used in air traffic control. The provision of traffic collision avoidance systems fitted on modern aircraft helped to overcome these shortcomings and prevent a serious incident in the often crowded airways over Banda Aceh.<sup>97</sup>

The ADF proposed on 1 January to send a small team of RAAF air traffic controllers to assist at Banda Aceh airport.<sup>98</sup> This had been raised in coordination meetings in Jakarta between Australian embassy staff and the TNI, as well as in the IDETF in Canberra, which urged the Australian ambassador, David Ritchie, to press the Indonesian authorities to accept the Australian offer.<sup>99</sup> The Indonesians approved the deployment, and a team composed of eight air traffic controllers from No. 44 Wing and two communications support personnel from No. 1 Combat Communications Squadron (1 CCS) were readied to travel at short notice to Sumatra. The detachment was led by Squadron Leader Phil Owen, an experienced air traffic controller, with seventeen years service in the British Royal Navy and

eight years with the RAAF.<sup>100</sup> The team arrived in Banda Aceh on 6 January to a scene of chaos, described by Owen as 'almost like a scene from *Apocalypse Now*'.<sup>101</sup>

Despite the confusion at the airport, the Australians quickly introduced themselves to the Indonesian authorities, who were expecting them but were unsure of their arrival date or capabilities. The Indonesians were unwilling to allow Owen and his team to assist with fixed-wing air movements, but allocated them control of all helicopter flights into and out of the airport. Up to that time, these had been controlled by a lone US Navy officer working alongside the Indonesians. The Australians developed procedures for controlling helicopters in consultation with 5th Aviation Regiment and other contingents operating at the airport. These were approved by the Indonesians and distributed to all operators. The Australians had brought their own radios and tents, but all equipment was provided by the Indonesians. They began operations from noon on 7 January, the day after their arrival, and operated rotary-wing movements only during the day, which generally meant from 7 am to 7 pm. Controllers did shifts of four to six hours in the tower, then were engaged in other duties around the airfield and base, including helping the Indonesians to coordinate the unloading of aircraft to improve turnaround times.<sup>102</sup>

Conditions in the temporary tower at the airport were challenging. The roof leaked and was too low to allow standing, there were only slits in the walls to look out, impeding a view of the runway and incoming aircraft, and there was no ventilation to clear the air of constant cigarette smoke from the Indonesian controllers.<sup>103</sup> While the damaged control tower at the airport was being repaired, the Indonesians approached several countries, including Australia and the United States, for the provision of a temporary mobile facility.<sup>104</sup> In the end, a mobile tower was provided by Singapore, which was transported to Banda Aceh in three Hercules aircraft. Although in place by the morning of 8 January 2005, it was not fully operational until Singaporean air force personnel gave the Indonesian controllers several weeks instruction on its use.<sup>105</sup>

In addition to four Australian Iroquois from 5th Aviation Regiment, the Australian air traffic controllers directed more than 120 military and civilian helicopters that were operating out of Banda Aceh airport during the emergency phase.<sup>106</sup> A total of almost 12,000 flights, at an average of 234 rotary-wing aircraft movements per day, were controlled by the Australians from 7 January to 27 February, when they handed over to the Indonesians.<sup>107</sup> The high tempo of movements at the airport was stressful and tiring for all the controllers but, according to Squadron Leader Owen, morale remained high owing to the nature of the mission and the results they achieved.<sup>108</sup>

100 Interview, P.D. Owen, 3 March 2005.

101 S. Liebelt, '300 moves a day in Aceh', *RAAF News*, 10 February 2005.

102 Interview, P.D. Owen, 3 March 2005.

103 Wynter, 'Unique experiences', p. 74.

104 Email, R. Rigney to G. Grunbaum, 6 January 2005, DFAT: 05/120095-11.

105 Boey, *Reaching out*, pp. 92–3; and Wiharta et al., 'The effectiveness of foreign military assets in natural disaster response', p. 35.

106 Elleman, *Waves of hope*, p. 51; Wiharta et al., 'The effectiveness of foreign military assets in natural disaster response', pp. 99–105; and D. Yates, 'Indonesia: shift from military relief in Aceh key challenge – UN', Reuters, 26 January 2005.

107 The busiest day was 31 January, with 443 helicopter movements (appendix 4 to annex C to Chalmers, 'CJTF 629 POR').

108 S. Liebelt, '300 moves a day in Aceh', *RAAF News*, 10 February 2005.

94 Minute, V Adm R.E. Shalders to R.M. Hill, 20 January 2005, Defence: EDMS, B331734; and annex H to Chalmers, 'CJTF 629 POR'.

95 Interview, M.O. Bradley, 9 March 2005.

96 Annex A to minute, DDWE to DCJOPS, 23 February 2005, Defence: A11502, 2003/44714/1.

97 Interview, P.D. Owen, 3 March 2005; and S.L. Quigley, 'Squadron brings relief to tsunami-devastated region', American Forces Press Service, 12 January 2005.

98 Signal 010142Z, CDF to CJOPS, 1 January 2005, Defence: EDMS, B329805.

99 Minutes, IDETF, 'Asian tsunami crisis', 1000 hr, 2 January 2005, DFAT: 05/120099.

Australia's decision to offer air traffic control assistance was in response to the bottleneck in the delivery of aid at Banda Aceh airport. The Indonesians accepted the offer, but their unwillingness to allow the Australians to direct fixed-wing aircraft perhaps indicated that their acceptance was for political rather than practical reasons. Even so, although the Australian controllers did not operate as they might have first thought they would, their contribution to the delivery of aid through control of helicopters at Banda Aceh airport was timely and valued.

## CONCLUSION

On 31 December 2004, General Peter Cosgrove said of the ADF response: 'This operation will call from us our endurance, ingenuity and compassion in abundance. Our neighbour is in trouble. We must help.'<sup>109</sup> At that time, the first Australian elements had commenced relief activities, but the bulk of the task force was still preparing to travel to Banda Aceh. Over the following weeks, personnel from all three services were deployed from various locations in Australia by ADF, commercial and chartered air and sea transport, and deployed through Butterworth, Malaysia, or directly to various locations in Indonesia. The result was an often chaotic deployment into a disaster zone with almost no infrastructure, a local government struggling to cope and, at times, too many foreign agencies trying to help. On top of this confusion were the effects of the earthquake and tsunami in Banda Aceh and elsewhere. Most confronting were the bodies of victims, tens of thousands of which were buried or initially lay scattered about the city. For many Australians, including Brigadier Chalmers, these were the first dead bodies that they had seen first-hand.<sup>110</sup>

Into this devastation, RAAF aircraft were among the first international relief flights to arrive, with the first landing in Indonesia within 48 hours. Subsequent flights into Medan and Banda Aceh brought in supplies, equipment and personnel to assist the Indonesians and the international community in the massive relief effort. During the subsequent three-month mission, Australia committed up to six Hercules, a Boeing 707, a Beech 350, four army Iroquois helicopters and two navy Sea King helicopters. These aircraft collectively carried 1,327 tonnes of humanitarian supplies and relocated 2,528 internally displaced persons, in addition to providing deployment, sustainment and repatriation flights for ADF personnel, equipment and supplies.<sup>111</sup>

From 3 January, Brigadier Dave Chalmers and his headquarters took command of the Australian combined task force in Indonesia. This signalled the expansion of Australian activities from a predominantly air-based response to include a substantial medical and engineering component. The following chapter continues the story with the contribution of these elements to Operation Sumatra Assist.

<sup>109</sup> Signal 310306Z, CDF to CJTF 629, 31 December 2004, Defence: EDMS, C581043.

<sup>110</sup> Interview, D.H. Chalmers, 15 March 2005.

<sup>111</sup> Defence, *Defence annual report 2004–05*, p. 161.