THE GULF WAR – AUSTRALIAN INVOLVEMENT AND BACKGROUND TO STUDY

Overview facts

- Over 1,800 Australian Defence personnel were deployed in the Gulf War from August 1990 to September 1991.
- The force comprised units from the RAN, Army and the RAAF. In addition, Army and RAAF provided personnel to Operation Habitat.
- The Australian contribution was two Oliver Hazard Class frigates, the replenishment ship HMAS Success (relieved by HMAS Westralia in January 1991), HMAS Sydney (IV), HMAS Adelaide, HMAS Brisbane and HMAS Darwin, a detachment from the Army’s 16th Air Defence Regiment, a RAN Clearance Diving Team, RAAF photo-interpreters, Defence Intelligence Organisation personnel, and four medical teams.
- No deaths occurred among Australian personnel, although Coalition losses amounted to 166.
- Operations were named Desert Shield, Desert Storm and Desert Farewell.

Background to the Australian Gulf War Veterans’ Follow Up Health Study (Follow Up Study)

The 2003 Australian Gulf War Veterans’ Health Study (2003 study) commissioned by the Department of Veterans’ Affairs (DVA) was the first comprehensive health study of a group of Australian war veterans involved in a single theatre of war. The 2003 study sample was drawn from the Australian Gulf War Nominal Roll consisting of 1,871 Navy, Army and Air Force personnel.

The 2003 study found that Gulf War veterans reported general health symptoms more commonly than the military comparison group. Further, Gulf War veterans were more likely to report a higher number of symptoms and to report symptoms that were more severe in nature. However, when examined using factor analysis to identify patterns of grouped symptoms, these patterns were very similar to those found in the comparison group. These findings suggest that there was no unique pattern of symptom reporting in Gulf War veterans.

There was a small excess of disease-related deaths detected in the Gulf War group compared with the comparison group in the 2003 study, but the numbers were too small at that time to draw any meaningful conclusions. A recommendation was made to undertake further research in the future.

The Follow Up Study, conducted in the period 2010-2015, was primarily designed to examine the physical, psychological and social health of Gulf War veterans 20 years after deployment. The findings build upon the results of the 2003 study. The Follow Up Study was funded by DVA under its Applied Research Program.

All participants in the 2003 study, comprising Australian veterans of the 1990-1991 Gulf War and the military comparison group, were eligible to participate in the Follow Up Study.

Overview of the 1990-1991 Gulf War conflict

On 2 August 1990, Iraq invaded its rival oil-exporting neighbour Kuwait. The invasion was widely condemned, and four days later the United Nations (UN) Security Council unanimously approved a trade embargo against Iraq. A blockade of Iraq’s access to the sea followed within weeks, as the United States (US) assembled a large multinational task force (Coalition) in the Persian Gulf, while another was formed in Saudi Arabia.

By the end of 1990, the Coalition force numbered some 40,000 troops from 30 countries, although the US remained the dominant partner in the Coalition. In November 1990, the UN Security Council set 15 January 1991 as the deadline for an Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait. Iraq failed to comply, and on 17 January 1991 full-scale war erupted when Coalition forces began an air bombardment of Iraqi targets. Within four days, Coalition forces destroyed the Iraqi invading
forces and drove the remnants out of Kuwait, although the Iraqis retained significant military
strength intact in Iraq. The air bombardment continued without respite until the war ended 43 days
later.

On 24 February 1991, after more than a month of air attacks, the Coalition’s ground forces moved
against Iraqi positions in Kuwait and in Iraq itself. The magnitude and decisiveness of these
strikes destroyed what was left of Iraq’s capacity to resist. After two days of air strikes, Baghdad
radio announced that Iraq’s armed forces had been ordered to withdraw from Kuwait to the
positions they had occupied before August 1990. The Coalition ceased hostilities and declared
victory on 28 February 1991. Coalition losses amounted to 166 killed, many by friendly fire. At
least 100,000 Iraqis had been killed.

**Australian Defence Force contribution**

Australia was one of the first nations to join the Coalition force. Australian forces were deployed
under the auspices of the UN. Three Australian warships conducted blockade operations in the
Persian Gulf. Australia also provided a supply vessel, four medical teams and a mine clearance
diving team that joined a protective screen, under US operational control, around aircraft-carrier
battle groups in the Gulf.

The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) provided vessels for the multinational naval force, which formed
an interception force in the Persian Gulf to enforce the UN sanctions. The RAN presence included
two frigates and the replenishment ship HMAS *Success*, which, having no air defences of its own,
relied on the Army’s 16th Air Defence Regiment. In January 1991, the replenishment tanker
HMAS *Westralia* left Fremantle, Western Australia, to relieve *Success*. Four warships, HMAS
*Sydney* (IV), HMAS *Adelaide*, HMAS *Brisbane* and HMAS *Darwin*, also served tours of duty in the
Persian Gulf. During the operational phase of their deployment, they formed part of the anti-
aircraft screen for the carrier battle groups of the US Navy. A RAN clearance diving team was also
despatched for explosive ordnance and demolition tasks.

Army personnel took part on attachment to various British and American ground formations. A
small group of Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) photo-interpreters was based in Saudi Arabia,
together with a detachment from the Defence Intelligence Organisation. Four medical teams were
also despatched at the request of the US. Although the ships and their crews were in danger from
mines and possible air attack, Australia’s war was relatively uneventful and there were no
casualties.

At the conclusion of hostilities, 75 Australian personnel were sent to northern Iraq to assist in the
provision of humanitarian aid to Kurds living in the UN-declared exclusion zone while ships of the
RAN remained on station, at the request of the US, to enforce UN sanctions. Several Australian
Navy officers commanded the multinational interception force. Australia later provided weapons
inspectors in Iraq to monitor the discovery and disposal of prohibited nuclear, chemical and
biological weapons of mass destruction.

**Source:**

2. Department of Veterans’ Affairs, Education and Community Awareness, Historian.
3. *Australian Gulf War Veterans*’ *Health Study 2003.*