

AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE

Regional Assistance Gurus



In early August the Australian Defence Force was called upon to deal with what was to prove to be the first in a new wave of assistance missions across the region – missions for which few if any organisations are better prepared or more capable of handling.



Tonga/PNG

Pics Corporal Chris Moore

Just days after members of the Royal Australian Navy's clearance diving fraternity arrived in Tonga to search for the wreck of a passenger ferry, the MV Princess Ashika, the ADF was called out to assist in another civilian search and rescue mission in PNG.

The ADF immediately responded with support to search and rescue efforts for an Airlines PNG Twin Otter aircraft that went missing on 11 August enroute to Kokoda, following a request from the Government of Papua New Guinea, by making a Caribou aircraft that was in Port Moresby on a separate activity available for tasking by PNG authorities.

HMAS Success, with an embarked Sea King helicopter was also diverted from a task in the Torres Strait, with the Sea King flying in to Port Moresby the same morning and Success arriving later in the day.

Two Australian Army Black Hawk helicopters were also quickly prepared for airlift from RAAF Base Richmond using a C-17 Globemaster and were available for tasking in PNG the next day.

A C-130 Hercules also departed RAAF Base Richmond early on the 12th, carrying an aeromedical evacuation (AME) team capable of handling one high-dependency patient and a number of other lower-dependency patients; a six-person

Mobile Air Load Team to be used as an incident-site support party to assist with search and recovery efforts; a 13-member Australian Federal Police (AFP) Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) team; and, four members of an Australian Transport Safety Bureau team.

While the Navy dive team did locate and confirm the location of the Tongan ferry, the depth at which she lay precluded any attempt to retrieve human remains, so that mission was concluded.

Meanwhile, in PNG, however, with the crash site of the Airlines PNG plane having been located, and with it determined that there was no chance that anyone could have survived the crash, the ADF was well positioned to support the AFP's DVI team and the PNG authorities' work at the site.

Members of the PNGDF were lowered by winch from the Black Hawks onto the mountain – no small feat given that the site was said to be 1000 feet above the cloud line – or nearly 5800 feet above sea level – where not only visibility was an issue, but helicopter performance is pushed towards its limits in the thinner air.

Once on the ground, the engineers cut a rudimentary helicopter landing pad from virgin forest on the steep sides of the mountain, just metres from the crash site, to facilitate helicopter operations.

Again, the difficulty of helicopter operations cannot be underestimated – the steepness of the site forcing the helicopters to 'land' on two wheels only while the tail-wheel hung precariously in the air during all unloading and loading operations.

But, with this pad in place, the DVI team was deployed to the site with recovery of the victims their priority.

Australian and Papua New Guinean authorities worked tirelessly for the next five days to extract the human remains from the crash site, supported and sustained by the Caribou transport aircraft (and its ability to land in remote locations without need of a sealed landing strips) combined with the Black Hawk helicopters' precision spot-landing ability.

Eight days after the crash and with the aid of Australian Army Engineers, the first engine from the Twin Otter aircraft, was retrieved from the crash site, under-slung from a Black Hawk.

Two weeks into the mission, the DVI team had completed the task of identifying the remains from the crash and, with the site clear of all the wreckage needed for investigation by Australian Transport Safety Bureau and the PNG authorities, the ADF was ready to bring the bodies of nine Australian citizens who died in the crash home. A C-130 from Richmond arrived on 25 August in preparation for the repatriation.