

WHEN THE RAINS CAME

DEFENCE WAS CALLED UPON TO ASSIST WHEN DEVASTATING FLOODS HIT LARGE PARTS OF QUEENSLAND JUST AFTER CHRISTMAS.

While flooding was widespread, the south east – especially the ranges west of Brisbane were particularly hard hit, with the waters rushing headlong into many of the city's suburbs and the CBD.

Three Army helicopters, soon joined by two Sea Kings from the Navy, were on the job early – in fact, Army was already working in the Rockhampton hinterland when the heaviest rains hit the Toowoomba ranges.

Royal Australian Air Force C17 Globemasters and C130J Hercules joined in with large-capacity supply runs to Townsville and Rocky, delivering vital non-perishable grocery items – pallet loads of dried milk, nappies, baby formula, toilet rolls and breakfast cereals were on the manifests.

In the end, more than 1.5 million kgs of much-needed supplies were air-lifted, as roads from the south remained impassable for several days.

By mid January, after the emergency had progressed from just another bad Aussie flood to killer natural disaster of unprecedented scale, Australian Defence Force personnel in their hundreds were deployed to help with cleanups and with the grim task of searching for bodies.

The sight of convoys of Bushmaster protected mobility vehicles, trucks and other military equipment on suburban streets was at the same time surreal and relieving as men and women in uniform came to help.

Other deployments that spoke of the scale of this flood was the sight of a Naval mine hunter in Morton Bay, searching for debris large enough

to cause hazard to shipping lanes – and Navy clearance divers in the Brisbane River on standby to blow things up if debris large enough to threaten bridges came sailing down the river.

At the peak of effort, 19 Defence helicopters were operating in Queensland and 1200 personnel were involved – the largest Defence deployment for a natural disaster since Cyclone Tracy hit Darwin in 1974.

Chief of Defence Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston said Defence personnel were always ready to respond to any disaster.

"As we go forward, you will see more and more personnel out there doing the hard yards and they give their work very willingly. They see it as a very important part of their function as members of the Defence Force," Air Chief Marshal Houston said.

"I must say, I am very, very proud of everything they've done thus far and we will be here for the long haul. We will assist as much as we can in the days and weeks ahead."

ADF personnel involved in Operation Queensland Flood Assist came under the direction of JTF (joint task force) 637, initially commanded by a colonel, but later upgraded to brigadier as it grew.

It must also be noted that while the worst of the disaster was in Queensland, much of northern New South Wales was also inundated as the floodwaters travelled south. And, Victoria and Western Australia were battling their own floods.



In fact, as the pressure eased in Queensland, a couple of Navy helicopters were repositioned to help out in Victoria – and the RAAF heavy lifters also chipped in, delivering, notably, 100,000 (empty!) sandbags among other much-needed supplies.

In Queensland, the emergency eventually turned to cleanup and recovery as the water receded. And, again, Defence personnel were involved, assisting with engineering infrastructure assessments; road clearance and repairs, including the clearing and repair of culverts, construction of temporary bridges, removal of debris and general clean up; water purification; building and area searches; helicopters and aircraft for medical evacuations, resupply and transport; and, psychological and environmental health support.

And, just as the cleanup began, a massive cyclone loomed large off the north Queensland coast!

CONTACT'S OPINION: It should be remembered – and can easily be forgotten, given the media's gravitation towards helicopters and uniforms – that the military assets and personnel were sent out to assist emergency services and communities already doing excellent work on the ground.

The Australian Defence Force has a lot of manpower and very useful equipment that can incidentally add a lot to emergency-management efforts, but it is the State (and sometimes Federal) emergency services who have ultimate authority and expertise in dealing with major emergencies.

While the ADF as an organisation and it's members as good Australian citizens are always more than willing and able to render assistance to the civil community when asked – at the end of the day, the ADF must wait to be asked by the people who are ultimately responsible for managing the emergency. The ADF cannot open the barracks gates and rush out to save the world, as the media and the community often demand. To do so could add chaos to an already desperate and confused situation.



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Contact Magazine is an Australian soldier who was wounded when his patrol was engaged by insurgent small arms fire in the Western Valley yesterday. The M16, an M16A1 variant, was used in the engagement. The soldier was wounded in the right arm of the left arm of the rifle. The soldier was wounded in the right arm of the left arm of the rifle.

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