

8 March 2007

Commodore RJ Griggs RAN  
Deputy Fleet Commander  
Maritime Headquarters  
Potts Point  
NSW 2011

REPORT ON AE1 SEARCH HMAS *BENALLA*  
BY JOHN FOSTER

- Reference A Deputy Fleet Commander Memo dated 23 February 2007
- Reference B “*AE1 Entombed But Not Forgotten*”- *John Foster-AMHP Sydney 2006*
- Reference C Chart AUS 679
- Reference D Monte Carlo Method for ocean searches
- Reference E Probability Area on Chart AUS 397 Extract (attached)
- Reference F Sunken warships and military aircraft  
-Legal Considerations- Roach, J.A. - 1996

Dear Commodore Griggs,

It was a fortuitous coincidence that we were able to meet on Norfolk Island last weekend. I don't think the island has seen such activity there for a long time and as you would imagine, I spent much of my RANC term reunion time dodging the media.

Thank you for your kind invitation to participate in the search for submarine AE1 on board HMAS *Benalla* (AO3). My ability to observe the ship's operations was appreciated and I was shown every courtesy by Lieutenant Commander Richard Mortimer and his ships company throughout the search.

I must say from the outset that whatever the final result that completes this saga, the one positive outcome has been at last the attention of the Australian public has been drawn to the tragedy of our first naval loss in wartime. As you would be aware, the press coverage was, and still is, rather comprehensive.

As a result of my previous research on the subject, and with the use of the protocol at Reference D, a probability area was constructed to the seaward of the south- eastern and southern coastline of the Duke of York Island Group (Reference C).

### Briefing

A briefing for the search procedure was held at the Rabaul Hotel on Sunday 26 February. Present were myself, the commanding officers of both SML's *Benalla* and *Shepparton*, LCDR Richard Mortimer, LCDR Darryn Mullins, Gary Mellon (former submarine engineer of Project AE1), David Martin and Steven Marshall of the ABC Foreign Correspondent program.

At this stage, I was informed that it would only be *Benalla* participating. Apparently *Shepparton* was obliged to continue with her surveying tasks in southern New Britain. As it transpired, it would have been useful if she had stayed as a consort and backed up after an incident with *Benalla*'s C\_MAX side-scan sonar.

It was agreed that the probability area would be divided into two sections: Wirian Point to Berard Point and Wirian Point to Kabakon Island to the south-west.

### Sensors Available

HMAS *Benalla* carried the portable C-MAX Towfish operating on dual frequencies 325/100Khz and the CM2 Sidescan system operated remotely from the chartroom. It also was fitted with the Knudsen hull mounted side-scan sonar system and the Knudsen 320M precision depth sounder.

### The Search/Survey

*Benalla* sailed at 0800 on Monday 26 February for the Duke of York Group and arrived on task at about 1000. I will leave the detail of the survey and recordings to the commanding officer who will no doubt be expanding his operational reports, but suffice to say that there was no sign of any contact that would resemble a man made object in the first section of the probability area.

In the southern section off Mioko Island and Mioko Reef to Kerawara Island, a thorough search revealed two man made contacts that were of course reported by *Benalla*. I cannot say that I have much experience with these sensors, but I was quite startled when I noticed the regular shape of these two images. They were in the same water column and appeared man-made.

The current was setting west at around 2 knots, but it can be much stronger than this. At the time of AE1's loss, Admiral Patey reported a very strong current and I have personally observed it at around 3 knots running either south-west or north-east with the division occurring at Wirian Reef. *Benalla* at times had to offset 30°-40° to hold track on the survey lines.

#### Contact

These two contacts were examined in by a 3D presentation, and whilst the shape was vague, it confirmed the 4 metre height. The PDS trace was remarkably accurate and presented a definite rounded shape of the upper contact. Both contacts were at 65 and 130 metres respectively in the same water column.

It is perhaps not wise to speculate at this stage, but the location of the contacts some 1500 metres west of Wirian Point- which I believe to be a point of particular interest-would be commensurate with the proposition that *AE1* suffered some damage here and drifted in a parlous state westwards. It is the opinion of the commanding officer *Benalla* and myself that the contacts are not a natural feature and are worth examining further.

As reported by the ship, the CMAX side-scan sonar was lost on the afternoon of day 1. Despite the valiant attempts of the artisans and seamen of the ships company using a fabricated grapnel, it was unable to be recovered. However, I do not believe that this was a major loss of capability and the remaining sensors were capable of completing the task satisfactorily.

### Site Security

I discussed this matter with you on Norfolk Island, and you indicated to me that matters were in hand to deploy a suitable mine-countermeasures vessel at the earliest opportunity. You further indicated that discussions with the PNG were in progress, and as I indicated I was particularly concerned about local treasure/wreck hunters who would jump at the opportunity to dive and take souvenirs.

To quote an old nautical phrase, “The cat is out of the bag”, with the activities of *Benalla* having been closely monitored by islanders and other local identities. In this regard, I would recommend that consideration being given to seeking the assistance of the Mioko Islanders, in particular the people of Wirian village who have been helpful and supportive in the past. *AEI* is after all, part of their island history too and I believe they would guard the site as well as they look after their own island.

### Summary

The presence of Gary Mellon was appreciated. He was able to contribute significantly to the briefing discussions and post survey wash-up. He also assisted with shore liaison throughout the mission.

I wish to emphasise that caution must be given to the veracity of these contacts. History has shown that sometimes such contacts turn up as other unknown objects or just unusual geological features. However, I am much encouraged by the contact's location and physical characteristics, but it must be ground proofed at the earliest opportunity.

I am grateful for the support of the Hon Bruce Billson, and the Chief of Navy through the Maritime Commander. I also thank the commanding officer of *Benalla* and his dedicated ships company for their professional work around the clock.

John Foster, AFAIM  
Commander RAN (Rtd)