

# RAAF Participation in Medical Activities on US Naval Ships *Comfort* & *Mercy*

## *Medical Support in the Gulf 1990-91*

A 40-strong ADF medical element (including eight RAAF members) was deployed as part of the international response to Iraq's invasion of its oil-rich neighbour, Kuwait. This included medical support during the Gulf War 1990-91 as well as supporting subsequent naval operations to enforce United Nations maritime sanctions in the Arabian Gulf. They became an integral part of the US Navy's hospital ship *Comfort*—one of the largest (69 000 tonnes) and most advanced trauma facilities in the world.

The ship remained on station until after the American led UN forces expelled the Iraqis from Kuwait at the end of February 1991, although casualties from combat were light and *Comfort* medical personnel treated only a small number of patients.



SQNLDR G Robinson and *Comfort* in the Gulf - On 8 March 1991 the ADF medical support element returned to Australia by RAAF C-130 from Bahrain.



The ADF detachment assigned to USNS *Mercy* during 2012.

Members of the RAAF (and ADF) medical and health staff have been amongst those undertaking deployments over recent years. Many of these staff have been assigned to multiple deployments in both operational, peacekeeping and humanitarian circumstances. The regular deployment to the United States Naval Ships (USNS) *Mercy* & *Comfort* has offered a range of unique and satisfying professional experiences.

### ***Some Personal Perspectives from ADF Medical Staff***

After a tour on USNS *Mercy* in 2010 one RAAF nurse explained:

*“ ... The Comfort operates in the Atlantic and the Mercy operates in the Pacific. ... They have more capability on one vessel than we have in the ACT and certainly in the ICU more than we have in the ... area as well.*

*It's about 70000 ton displacement, 272 metres long, 32 metres to the beam, max speed is 17.5 knots (32 kilometres per hour) and it's staffed by 61 civil mariners being a USNS it's the civil sailors that do it and there's 1214 military personnel on-board and then 1000 patients on top of that, so it's big.*

*So 14 days in the Philippines then we sailed to Manilla for a resupply, across to Na Trang in Vietnam and that was a ten day mission and once we finished there sailed down to Singapore for a resupply and that's where we got off and another contingent got on and they then sailed through down to Timor, resupply in Darwin, they then went out to Port Moresby, Micronesia then back to Guam.*

*There was also a detachment of Army engineers, so when the Mercy goes out there was medical, dental engineering, veterinarian and education, so multi discipline.*

*USNS Mercy sits in the bay and does surgical services and acute services and then staff from the Mercy goes to the local facilities and they also run shore medical camps as well to service the people and also search through the population to find persons who would be suitable to bring aboard to provide medical services for as well..”*

Drawing on interviews with an ADF detachment the *Air Force* newspaper reported in 2012:

*Fulfilling a wide range of nursing duties, the nurses are working in the wards and operating rooms of the 1000-bed US hospital ship USNS Mercy and also ashore at surgical and medical civic aid projects.*

*After a two-week stint in Indonesia's North Sulawesi Province, the Mercy was stationed off Calbayog City in Samar, one of the Philippine's eastern islands.*

*Born with cataracts in both eyes, the Filipino patient, Mary, has led a life with vision similar to looking through frosted glass, and was selected by the Mercy's ophthalmological surgeons for cataract surgery.*



*Mary is so sweet, so happy and excited to be here with the potential to be able to see ... We've introduced Mary to our music; she enjoys listening to my iPod and flicking through the music from Australia ... Mary has since received cataract surgery for her right eye and is now getting used to a broader range of vision...”*

*The Mercy has significant surgical capability, thanks to its 12 on-board operating rooms. On a recent record-breaking day of 35 completed surgeries, ... a RAAF Reserve theatre nurse*

*from 1 Expeditionary Health Squadron, assisted with surgery to correct a three-year old girl's club foot.*



*“ ... Back home we would do other things when a child is younger to help straighten the foot, but in this case surgery was the only option at this point, ... We were able to straighten it and put it in plaster. She should do very well..”*