

West Australian base to be used for US navy "sea-swap" trial

Richard Phillips
15 November 2002

The Australian government has agreed to allow the US military to use the HMAS Stirling naval base in Cockburn Sound on the west coast of Australia to trial its new "sea-swap" program. The plan, which is aimed at boosting US naval firepower in the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf, is part of the Bush administration's preparations for war against Iraq.

The purpose of "sea-swap" is to provide faster replacement of crews and warships in the Indian Ocean. The US has no naval base of its own in the region and ships based on the US West Coast and their crews have to travel about 11,000 nautical miles across the Pacific and through the Malacca Straits in South East Asia to take up duty in the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf. US East Coast-based ships travel about 8,400 nautical miles.

Under its current naval deployment system, the US navy requires a tag team of three warships and their crews to provide 300 days of continuous frontline coverage for one warship in the Indian Ocean.

"Sea-swap" is designed to reduce the changeover time and cuts costs by airlifting sailors and helicopters from the US to Western Australia in the southern Indian Ocean to re-crew warships from the Persian Gulf. As a result, US destroyers will be able to remain on continuous duty for up to 400 days and the navy estimates it will save \$US9 million in fuel costs. Swapping crews, who previously remained with one ship, will also cut transit time by approximately 45 days each way.

The trial is due to commence when the destroyer USS Fletcher visits Perth in January and the USS Higgins in May. Both ships are Spruance Class destroyers armed with Tomahawk Cruise missiles and other weapons, which will be used to bombard Iraq. USS Higgins set sail for the Persian Gulf on November 2 as part of the seven-ship battle group of aircraft carrier USS Constellation. USS Fletcher is already in the Arabian Sea, deployed with the USS Abraham Lincoln battle group.

The Howard government's offer of naval facilities in Western Australia is in line with its unconditional support

for the US war against Iraq and broader US ambitions in the region. Australian warships are already involved in the naval blockade of Iraq and there are SAS troops in Afghanistan. In addition, Australia hosts US communications and satellite monitoring stations at Pine Gap, Nurrungar and North West Cape, which are an integral part of the US global military and intelligence network.

Canberra is also aiming to benefit financially. In announcing the program late last month, Defence Minister Robert Hill declared that it demonstrated "Australia's support for a principal ally and friend" and would provide "business opportunities in Western Australia".

HMAS Stirling naval base in Cockburn Sound is located only 15 kilometres from Fremantle, a densely populated suburb near the state capital Perth. If the trial is successful, Howard and the WA state government want to extend the scheme to include visits by entire US aircraft carrier battle groups.

Both the federal and state governments have bent over backwards to entice the US navy to conduct the trial at Cockburn Sound in the hope that it will eventually lead to lucrative maintenance and repair work on US warships. In addition to Cockburn Sound, the Howard government also offered use of the Pearce Royal Australian Air Force Base in Perth, the Leeuwin Army Barracks and ship-to-shore and air-to-ground bombing facilities at Lancelin Defence Training Range. Lancelin is located 115 kilometres north of Perth and just eight kilometres from a small township.

The US navy currently has access to only two ship-to-shore live fire-testing ranges—in California and on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques. Its facility on Vieques has been the subject of extensive protests, including occupations and legal action, forcing the navy to look for alternative locations for its target practice.

Local residents in Fremantle and Lancelin have opposed the "sea-swap" program and demanded the state Labor government withdraw from the project. Those in Lancelin have warned that live-fire bombing would create serious health risks and have cited the dramatic increase in cancer

rates and other health problems that have emerged on Vieques.

The Western Australian government has brushed aside all objections to the “sea-swap” scheme and done what it can to ensure that the US navy visits take place.

In July, the state Labor government sent a high-level delegation to the US to “secure as many sea-swaps in Perth as possible”. Headed by Mark McGowan, parliamentary secretary to Premier Geoff Gallop, the group met with defence lobbyists and several senior navy personnel during the 14-day visit.

McGowan enthused to state parliament: “We were advised that its [the US navy’s] total budget is approximately \$US100 billion per annum. This means that there are enormous amounts of money spent on repairing and maintaining US ships... This presents an opportunity to a city like Perth.”

McGowan explained that he had told US officials that a devalued Australian dollar and low hourly wage rates made Australian ship repair and maintenance costs much cheaper than the US. State officials held detailed discussions on the infrastructure requirements needed to attract US naval shipyard work.

The US navy is constrained by the “Title Ten” law, which confines most maintenance and repair work of US ships to American facilities. But US officials told the WA delegation that the restriction could be overcome in the future through the use of Australian-based US companies and other measures. American consultants advised the delegation to pursue an “incremental strategy” and “work up from sea-swaps to emergency repairs”.

The state government is currently investigating the possibility of upgrading facilities at the Australian Marine Complex in Cockburn Sound so that deep-water US aircraft carriers can use the base. It has also established a task force involving the ship repair, tourism and accommodation industries.

Local business lobby groups have hailed the “sea-swap” program. State Development Minister Clive Brown declared that the trial would be an “economic boon” for the state: “[I]f this proves to be successful by the US then it will continue to have positive economic benefits for Western Australia given the nature of the spend that always occurs here when we have one of these visits.”

Anne Snow, who lives near the Lancelin live-fire bombing range, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that local residents in the township and in Fremantle opposed the sea-swap system and were planning protests when USS Fletcher visited Cockburn Sound in January.

“The US is pushing strongly for this so they can beef up their operations against Iraq. This will make us a terrorist

target and it is very irresponsible of the government not to consider this or the safety of residents.

“US or local officials will neither confirm or deny what weapons they will have on the ships visiting WA but if they are coming from Iraq they most likely will have depleted uranium weapons on board. There is some talk that they used chemical weapons during the last war against Iraq, so how do we know that they won’t be carrying chemical weapons?

“The mainstream media here have shown no interest in this issue. The *West Australian* won’t even publish letters to the editor opposing sea-swap and when they have written anything it has been to denounce opponents of the scheme as alarmist.

“With regard to Lancelin,” Snow continued, “this facility has been offered to the US navy without any investigation of its health effect on the local population. The US navy can’t use firing ranges like this on the American mainland anymore so why are they able to come here and do this a few kilometres from our homes?

“Lancelin firing range was being used once a month by the Australian navy. This has increased to seven or eight times a month in preparation for the attack on Iraq and we’ve just been informed that on November 20 the navy will be shelling between 2am and 6am. If the US navy uses the firing range we expect these exercises will go on day and night.

“When all this started we thought it was just the federal Liberal government forcing it on us and expected the state Labor government to support us and stop it. In fact, the state Labor government has been in the forefront. When we found out that McGowan had been to the US and Premier Gallop was pushing it, we were just astounded. We are being sacrificed in pursuit of money that might be made from the US navy visits. But what about our health and our democratic rights?”

Snow went on to explain her opposition to the US-led war against Iraq: “I’m no fan of Saddam Hussein but it is up to the people of Iraq to kick him out, not up to America to take over the country. This has nothing to do with stopping weapons of mass destruction but is about oil. The country with the largest numbers of weapons is the US and yet no one is allowed to go in there and demand inspections of that country.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact