

A New Zealand Army Pinzgauer offloads from HMNZS CANTERBURY's landing craft.

# EXTROPIC MAJOR



By Andrew Bonallack

## 8 hours to go

It's the night of 4 May, and Exercise Tropic Major in Vanuatu is only hours away from its zenith.

Days of preparation and rehearsal are about to culminate in an amphibious assault against an armed criminal group occupying Epi Island in Vanuatu. This fictitious scenario is the basis of the biggest New Zealand military exercise ever conducted in the South West Pacific, building on Exercise Southern Katipo 17 and reinforcing the New Zealand Defence Force's ability to conduct operations in a tropical environment.

Epi Island is familiar ground for the NZDF with personnel from all three Services there in 2015 following Tropical Cyclone Pam, which devastated Vanuatu.

There are over 500 personnel involved in Joint Task Force 651, under the command of Captain Garin Golding, RNZN, the Commander of the Deployable Inter-agency Joint Task Force. He sits at the front of the operations room in HMNZS CANTERBURY while representatives of the assembled forces file in. CANTERBURY is the main platform and Command Headquarters, while HMNZS WELLINGTON, containing the divers of HMNZS MATATAUA, lies some distance away. CANTERBURY has embarked the battlefield helicopter group, No. 3 Squadron, with two NH90 helicopters. Army combat engineers and a platoon of infantry from Bravo Company are also among the embarked force. A New Zealand police officer, working with a team of Vanuatu police, sits in the meeting, plus an adviser from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Unlike a news bulletin, the weather report comes first. Things are looking okay – a sea state of 2+, with a 1.5m swell and a southerly. "The moon rises at 2050," says Lieutenant Commander Bronwyn Heslop, the meteorological officer. "The moon will be behind you." This could be a mixed blessing for the zodiac crews, due to infiltrate in the early hours. "Stay low and slow, to reduce your profile, reduce the silver trail."

The team refresh their knowledge of the opposing force. The main actors in the criminal group have impressive resumes. Objective Gold is Salmal, the group's leader. He's an experienced former infantry officer turned international arms trader with a sideline in drug running. Intelligence marks him as narcissistic and irrational – not a good combination. Objective Silver, Le Roux, is an ex-Navy combat diver, with experience in designing maritime mines. He's mined one of the bays in Epi Island. There are also six ambitious local supporters and a network of paid informants. According to a hidden reconnaissance team, the criminals – who wear yellow bandanas as a mark of identification – are armed with Steyrs.

The two local police officers on the island have been out of their depth for days, but have been left alone as long as they don't try anything. One man, the deputy director of Epi High School, has been shot and killed during an altercation, and two church workers have been taken hostage. Locals have been harassed and menaced, to emphasis who is in control. It is beyond the Government of Vanuatu to handle, and New Zealand's help has been requested.

A key outcome of the mission is successful prosecutions of the criminals, which only the Vanuatu Police can enable. The job of the Joint Task Force is to





Bravo Company soldiers detain a member of the criminal group on Epi Island.



Bravo Company soldiers pause and keep watch as Vanuatu Police conduct a door-to-door search in Lamén Bay.

empower the police to do their job: process the scene, collect evidence, make arrests, and get them to court. If criminals decide to put up a fight, then it is a matter of self-defence, says a member of the legal team. In other words, the infantry can engage.

“A long and hard week,” sums up CAPT Golding. “Tomorrow is about the execution. Let’s do New Zealand and Vanuatu proud.”

### D-Day

The assault starts at 0430, with combat engineers and infantry in zodiacs going into a quiet bay – low and slow – to secure a southern beachhead and make it safe for CANTERBURY’s Landing Craft to start deploying troops and vehicles to shore. HMNZS MATATAUA’s hydrographers have previously surveyed the bay and the divers have dealt to the mines. The mines’ architect, Le Roux, has been caught – an early bonus for the Advance Force. He is later handed over to Vanuatu Police and arrested.

The main objective is the village of Lamén Bay to the north, which contains Epi High School, an airfield and several guest houses, where the criminal leaders have been staying. An NH90 helicopter has made a lot of noise in an approach from the north, as a feint to cue the enemy that way and hopefully give Bravo Company more time. With Bravo Company soldiers and Pinzgauer troop transport vehicles now ashore, the amphibious force advances by a tortuous up-and-down road to Lamén Bay.

It means a house-to-house search for the police, with the soldiers silently ringing each house, looking in every direction. The setting is idyllic, practically a golden-sands paradise, with soldiers quietly positioned among the trees. The locals are fascinated and pull out phones to take photos.

One local recognises a picture the police show him and points to a house. Police search and find evidence the criminals have been there. Slowly, the soldiers and police proceed north. Gunfire, like popping firecrackers, turns everyone’s head. The soldiers are already running towards the airfield.

Suddenly everything seems very close, as an exchange of fire ensues between the criminals and soldiers. Someone among the criminals has done a bit of thinking, setting up a makeshift gun emplacement at the end of the airfield. While other criminal members are scattered, three gang members, wearing yellow bandanas, are armed with Steyrs and hold their emplacement grimly.

Green smoke drifts across the grass. By now hundreds of villagers, including children, have come to watch, inching closer along the road or wandering along the beach to get a better view. Isabella Donald, a woman’s rights adviser, says people from other side of the island have come to see the action. “People are eager to see it. We told the children to be curious and watch, there would be bangs, loud noises, good guys and bad guys. They have seen videos, but they wanted to see the real things.”

In the emplacement, two of the criminals have been hit. Suddenly the New Zealand soldiers appear to fall back,

sprinting away. The remaining gang member, confused and undecided, stands to look and is hit by sniper fire.

### Reflection

Exercise controller Lieutenant Colonel Martin Dransfield says the intense, 12-hour operation is the first of its kind and tests a whole series of capability. “The rules of engagement were if they come out firing, our forces can engage.” The leader, Salmai, has been scripted to escape to a southern village, Sara, requiring a team to go in and capture him.

“There’s a lot of moving parts in this exercise. It’s completely Joint Forces, with landing craft, NH90s, infantry, engineers, boat teams, with Command HQ on CANTERBURY. It’s all the force elements, all working together.”

He designed it to be challenging. “There’s a lot of problem-solving. And there’s nothing on the island to sustain you, so you have to sustain yourselves – the local community only has enough for themselves.” Exercise Tropic Major, if done again, would occur in alternate years to Exercise Southern Katipo, he says. “This is about embarking a large force, doing things we don’t get to do in New Zealand. We’re working in a tropical climate system, on an island, with our Pacific neighbours. Do we want to continue doing this? My assessment is that we do. This brings us closer to our aspiration of an Integrated Defence Force.”



Epi Island local, Alwin, talks to New Zealand Army soldiers Isaiah Herbert (left) and Shayne Pore (right).



A soldier on patrol as HMNZS CANTERBURY waits off-shore.