

The Maritime Patrol Aircraft Detachment

Background

- 4.1 Australian P3C Orion maritime surveillance aircraft were deployed to Iraq as part of Operations Bastille and Falconer in 2003. They were originally tasked with surveillance operations in support of the maritime interdiction operations in the northern Arabian Gulf but their task has expanded considerably as their significant capabilities have become better understood by coalition commanders.
- 4.2 An extremely versatile aircraft, the Orion performs well in a multitude of roles including Under Sea (anti submarine) and Surface (anti ship) Warfare, Maritime Surveillance, Naval Fleet Support and Search and Survivor Supply. The significantly upgraded Australian Orions currently deployed to the Middle East, designated AP-3C, were introduced into service in 2002 and are fitted with a variety of sensors, including digital multi-mode radar, electronic support measures, electro optics detection (infra-red and visual), magnetic anomaly detector, identification Friend or Foe and acoustic detection.
- 4.3 The aircraft has several characteristics that made it ideal for employment in the maritime patrol task in the northern Gulf. The Orions have the advantage of significant endurance, typically flying long 12-hour missions, especially at night, over the Persian Gulf. They have added significant clarity to the surface forces conducting naval operations in the Gulf by keeping track of the large number of small vessels in the area, both to curb smuggling and to guard against the danger that they could be suicide boats packed with explosives.

Figure 4.1 A P3C Orion from 92 Wing RAAF, currently deployed to the Middle East, testing its newly fitted Self Protection System



Source <http://www.defence.gov.au/media/download/>

- 4.4 The sophistication of the sensors on board the aircraft have allowed the Australian detachment to provide the Coalition with images of sufficient quality to observe the true nature of a large number of vessels operating in the area. The detachment can determine whether a vessel is configured for illegal oil or fuel smuggling, traditional fishing, or for collecting intelligence on coalition vessels in the area.

Conduct of the Visit

- 4.5 The visit to the Maritime Patrol Aircraft Task Group was conducted in two parts as follows:
- Two members were taken to the detachment on arrival in the Middle East and prepared for an operational mission with a crew from the detachment. The members conducted a day / night mission over eight hours;
 - The complete delegation visited the task group for a briefing by the CO, Wing Commander 'Max' Heinrich and his key staff. The delegation then had lunch with members of the task group before receiving a display aboard the aircraft of the mission systems.

Current Operations

Expanded Operations

- 4.6 Many of the capabilities present in the P3Cs remain classified and will not be described in this report. The members of the delegation however, received significant insight into the capability that is now amongst the most important Australia contributes to the coalition through two excellent activities. The first insight was provided through the inclusion of two members, Mr Cameron Thompson MP and Mr Kim Wilkie MP, on an operational surveillance mission with the detachment. The second opportunity was provided to the complete delegation in the form of a first class briefing at the detachment in which members were shown the surveillance products of recent operational tasks and given the opportunity to discuss the capability of the aircraft with the crews.
- 4.7 Significantly the role of the detachment has expanded considerably since its arrival in the theatre. The complex nature of the counter insurgency operation in Iraq has put pressure on the coalition surveillance assets in the operational area. Quite simply there are never enough eyes in the sky. As a result the Australian P3C is increasingly tasked over land as well as water. Again, while the exact nature of these tasks is beyond the scope of this report, the delegates were given graphic evidence of the effectiveness of the Australian contribution to the counter insurgency. The operational mission that included the two delegates included a significant portion over southern Iraq.
- 4.8 This expansion of the Maritime Surveillance role to include operations in support of ground forces is a first for the ADF. It represents a further example of the increasingly joint nature of military operations and is an excellent example of the flexibility or agility of the deployed ADF personnel as they develop the procedures for a completely new mission while on operations.
- 4.9 Like all ADF assets deployed to the Middle East the Australian aircraft are assigned under operational control of the Coalition. Tasking is therefore in accordance with a broad coalition priority system. The security of the Gulf Oil Platforms, protected in part by the Australian Frigate, is a high priority task and thus receives a significant component of P3C surveillance effort. Australian land operations are in areas considered more stable than insurgent strong-holds so coalition tasking of the aircraft in support of Australian land operations is rare.

Figure 4.2 Mr Cameron Thompson MP is fitted with his personal survival equipment before conducting an operational mission with the P3C Detachment



4.10 The members of the delegation were particularly interested in the development of the new component of the capability. They were briefed that lessons learned on the deployment were being fed back to the Australian capability development process and would inform the development of Australian doctrine and other capability decisions. The Chief of Army, LTGEN Peter Leahy, has visited the detachment and participated in an operational mission to observe the capability in action.

Conclusion

4.11 The delegation congratulates Wing Commander 'Max' Heinrich and his team for their exemplary performance. The principal conclusions and observations from the visit to the task group were as follows:

- The operations conducted by the P3C Orion detachment make a significant contribution to coalition operations to reconstruct Iraq.
- The delegation was delighted with the innovation and determination being shown by the Australian aircrews and support staff. The detachment continues to deliver a sophisticated and thorough output in its traditional area of strength over the waters of the Arabian Gulf. Concurrently it is developing a capability completely new to the ADF during a demanding operation.
- The detachment also draws significant praise from the coalition leadership for displaying the characteristics of a high quality Air Force

operation. The Australian ground crews are achieving very high levels of aircraft availability under extreme environmental conditions and the aircrews are achieving equally high rates of mission success in the face of complex environmental and operational conditions.

- The detachment staffs are adding considerable value to the products of their missions. They are analysing the results of the missions and producing high quality outputs to the supported forces.
- The complete detachment has maintained excellent relations with their host nation, despite major cultural differences. The delegation visited during the period of the Muslim Ramadan. The detachment personnel conduct themselves during such periods with high levels of cultural awareness and discretion.
- The robust size of the task group, based on complete capability elements, allows for the management of fatigue and ensures high standards of safety. This is a critical component in the success of this task group over two years of operations, under extreme environmental conditions.
- The delegation supports the proposal to construct shelters for the aircraft if the detachment is to remain in place over the next northern summer. Such shelters will allow maintenance personnel to work on the aircraft for longer periods during the heat of the desert summer.

Figure 4.3 The Hon Warren Snowdon MP and the Hon Bruce Baird MP inspect the cockpit of a P3C Orion in the Middle East



