

Afghanistan

Bagram Airbase

- 6.1 On Friday 27 July 2002, the delegation departed Kyrgyzstan and flew to Bagram, Afghanistan by RAAF C-130 Hercules aircraft. This leg of the journey required, as a standard procedure, a tactical air approach to Bagram Airbase in order to minimise the potential threat posed by surface-to-air missiles and anti-aircraft weapons.
- 6.2 Bagram is located approximately 40km north of Afghanistan's capital, Kabul. It is a major Coalition operational hub and is the base for most of the Coalition national contingents operating inside Afghanistan, including the Australian Special Forces contingent.
- 6.3 Bagram is an ex-Soviet military airbase. It is littered with Soviet era debris and equipment, and scarred by years of conflict. The presence of land mines, laid by various combatants over many years, remain a serious threat in and around the base. Coalition forces regularly conduct de-mining operations, and run anti-mine education and awareness training for villagers living around the base.
- 6.4 While Bagram is an operational base for the International Coalition Against Terror, it is located within the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) area of responsibility. ISAF is a multi-national force, comprising seventeen countries which has been established to maintain security in Kabul and its immediate surrounds for the Afghan Government. ISAF was established in accordance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1386 and is currently being led by Turkey. ISAF and the International Coalition Against Terror are separate forces with separate command structures and different objectives. The two forces

are, however, in close contact and work together on matters of security in the Kabul area as necessary.

- 6.5 Australian Special Forces are not part of ISAF. They contribute directly to the Coalition operations against terrorism.

Australian Special Forces Task Group

- 6.6 On arrival at Bagram, the delegation was met by the Commander, Australian Special Forces Task Group, Lieutenant Colonel Rick Burr and taken on a tour of Bagram before visiting the Task Group headquarters for a briefing on Australian operations in Afghanistan.
- 6.7 The wide-ranging brief covered the structure and capabilities of the Special Forces Task Group, an analysis of the enemy, a summary of operations to date, and some points on future operations inside Afghanistan.
- 6.8 Lieutenant Colonel Burr, and his intelligence officer, reported that while many Al Qaida and Taliban fighters had retreated across the national borders (most notably the Pakistan border), or had blended into the Afghan community following the collapse of the Taliban regime, residual enemy forces continued to operate inside Afghanistan.
- 6.9 The briefing also canvassed the identity and background of various Al Qaida and Taliban leaders. The picture developed was of an enemy:
- capable of adopting a low profile and blending into the local community, making positive identification and detection difficult;
 - which is clever, committed, aggressive and well trained; and
 - capable of effectively employing modern weapons and tactics, often based on methods developed during the Soviet-Afghan War.
- 6.10 Lieutenant Colonel Burr outlined the structure and capabilities of the Special Forces Task Group, describing, in particular, the Task Group's position within the Coalition command and control structure. He suggested that the Special Forces Task Group provide a niche capability that is respected and regularly used by senior Coalition commanders. The capability has been demonstrated on many occasions, most notably during OPERATION ANACONDA, where Australian Special Forces troops played a significant role in the largest ground battle of the campaign.
- 6.11 Lieutenant Colonel Burr explained that the Australian approach to operations, while easily combined with other Coalition methods, was distinctive and had contributed significantly to Coalition success. He

described numerous occasions where Australian soldiers had exercised judgement, discipline and control in carefully discriminating between the terrorist enemy and other non-terrorist hostile groups. The ability to exercise such judgement in dangerous circumstances has preserved life and enabled more detailed intelligence to be gathered.

- 6.12 The successful conduct of joint operations since the beginning of the campaign has helped establish a very effective working relationship between the Australians and the other Coalition national contingents, especially the Americans. This relationship manifests itself in high levels of mutual trust, ready access to up-to-date intelligence, key commanders, operational information and mission support assets.
- 6.13 At the conclusion of the briefings, the delegation toured the Special Forces Headquarters area, observing the information systems and intelligence links available to support Australian forces deployed in the field.

Australian Special Forces on a live-fire exercise in Afghanistan

The AH-64 Apache Attack Helicopter flight-line at Bagram Airbase, Afghanistan

Special Forces compound

- 6.14 The delegation then moved to the Australian Special Forces compound, for further briefings and meetings with the officers and men of the Special Air Service Regiment.

- 6.15 In this phase of the visit the delegation:
- inspected the patrol vehicles, weapons and equipment available for use by the troops;
 - discussed the typical nature and duration of patrols;
 - discussed the terrain, climatic conditions and threat levels experienced by patrols; and
 - discussed the operational parameters and rules of engagement within which the Australian Special Forces operate.
- 6.16 It was apparent from these discussions that the Task Group invests considerable time and effort in preparing for, rehearsing and supporting each patrol, with the aim of ensuring the safe and successful completion of missions.
- 6.17 The delegation was also briefed by the Special Air Services Regiment Squadron Commander on the alleged 'Wedding Party' incident - which had been reported in the press as an engagement in which an Afghan tribal wedding party had been inadvertently fired upon.
- 6.18 The Squadron Commander reported that the engagement, which had involved Australian Special Forces troops as well as US air support, involved hostile enemy forces, not a wedding party. He provided photographs and first accounts to support his description of the event, which involved an Australian patrol being fired upon by an aggressive, heavily armed force employing a range of weapons, including heavy machine guns. The restraint, professionalism and response of the Australians involved was, by all account, remarkable in the circumstances and the incident is now used as a 'best practice' example for all Coalition forces deployed to Afghanistan.
- 6.19 The brief concluded with an impressive computer-based presentation compiled by members of the Squadron - using images taken by the soldiers while on patrol across Afghanistan and a music soundtrack. The images illustrated the often friendly contact between our men and local tribal communities, the dangerous nature of their work, the harsh and variable climatic conditions and terrain in which they are working.

Graham Edwards MP with two members of the Special Air Service
Regiment in Bagram, Afghanistan

Geoff Prosser MP with the Australian Special Forces long-range
patrol vehicles in Bagram, Afghanistan

Issuing a campaign medal

- 6.20 Some soldiers raised with the delegation the prospect of the Australian Government issuing an International Coalition Against Terror campaign medal.

- 6.21 This matter had been raised by a number of other Defence personnel at different locations during the delegation program. The soldiers were of the view that in addition to awarding the Australian Active Service Medal with an International Coalition Against Terrorism clasp (as already announced), the Government should issue a campaign medal. To encourage consideration of this proposal, the soldiers passed on to the delegation three suggested designs for such a campaign medal. The designs focussed specifically on Special Forces operations in Afghanistan.
- 6.22 Brigadier Bornholt advised the delegation that in multi-national coalition operations it was not uncommon for the lead coalition nation to issue a campaign medal to foreign contingents. He added that, in this instance, he was not aware of any intention by the United States Government to issue such a medal.
- 6.23 Concern was also expressed by a number of soldiers about the delay in issuing the Australian Active Service Medal. It was suggested that the value of the medal as an expression of government and community appreciation would be enhanced considerably if it were awarded prior to the conclusion of a deployment or immediately upon return to Australia.
- 6.24 This matter is discussed further in Chapter 8.

Coalition Combined Joint Task Force Headquarters

- 6.25 While at Bagram, the delegation visited the newly established Coalition Combined Joint Task Force 180 (CJTF 180) headquarters. CJTF 180 is the senior Coalition operational headquarters deployed to Afghanistan and is under the command of Lieutenant General Dan McNeill from the United States Army. A small number of Australian officers are fully integrated into the staff of this headquarters. Australia has also assigned a national liaison officer to CJTF 180 who provides a direct link for issues of national concern. The Australian Special Forces Task Group are within the CJTF 180 command structure.
- 6.26 A feature of the visit was a live demonstration of the command and control information system used to plan, monitor and coordinate Coalition operations on the ground. At the time of the delegation's visit, troops from the US Special Forces and the Afghan military were involved in a battle with suspected Al Qaida operatives in southern Afghanistan. The delegation was able to view, in real-time, the exchange of information between the units involved in the fight and commanders at CJTF 180. The delegation observed, for example, the call for and deployment of fire support from Coalition aircraft, and the coordination of airborne and

ground-based medical assistance. The system provided immediate connectivity between headquarters staff and troops on the ground, allowing staff officers real-time access to critical intelligence and operational information. The Australian staff on CJTF 180 have direct and open access to these facilities.

- 6.27 Lieutenant General McNeill provided an overview of current operations and possible future developments. He talked positively about the success of the International Coalition and expressed appreciation for Australia's prompt and effective commitment. He also praised the valuable contribution made by Australian Special Forces troops since their initial deployment.

Conclusions and observations

- 6.28 The following is a summary of the main observations and conclusions drawn from the visit to Bagram:
- the Australian Special Forces in Afghanistan continue to make an important contribution to Coalition operations in Afghanistan. They are respected by their Coalition partners and are fully integrated into the Coalition team, providing a niche capability built on its unique mix of training, skills, tactics, temperament and equipment. Coalition commanders are clearly impressed with the quality and capacity of the deployed Australian troops;
 - the operations conducted by Australian troops in Afghanistan continue to be hazardous and demanding, requiring careful preparation to minimise the risks faced while on patrol. Australian forces have excellent access to critical information and resources essential for the conduct of effective operations;
 - the Coalition has deployed a powerful array of forces and supporting assets into Afghanistan, including close air support, attack helicopters, tactical airlift aircraft and a wide range of medical and logistic capabilities. Australian forces are able to draw on these assets for the conduct of their operations and work regularly with the ground and air forces of the other Coalition contributing nations;
 - the Australian forces are rightly proud of the role they are performing. Their morale is high and their professionalism, commitment, maturity and good humour is highly regarded by their Coalition colleagues;
 - although welcoming the opportunity to participate in the International Coalition, the soldiers are, naturally, looking forward to returning

home to family and friends. The troops currently deployed have a total of thirty-five children waiting at home, three of whom were born during the deployment, with another child expected within a week of the delegation's visit. They reported that they are well connected with families at home via postal services, the Internet, e-mail and telephone; and

- the awarding of a campaign medal to ADF personnel deployed as part of the International Coalition Against Terror and the prompt awarding of the Australian Active Service Medal are important issues for those personnel who have seen active service as part of the International Coalition.