

Visit to the Middle East Area of Operations

Background

- 1.1 On 18 April 2005 the Chair of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, Senator Alan Ferguson, wrote to the Minister for Defence, Senator the Honourable Robert Hill, seeking his support for a Committee visit to Iraq. The stated aim of the visit was to demonstrate the Parliament's appreciation for the difficult work being performed by ADF personnel in Iraq. The Chair proposed possible dates to the Minister but acknowledged the uncertain security climate in Iraq and suggested that the Department of Defence should determine the safest period for the visit. He offered that the period selected should cause the least disruption to ADF operational activities.
- 1.2 The Minister for Defence supported the concept of a Parliamentary Delegation to the Middle East Area of Operations and sought approval from the Prime Minister. On 13 July 2005 the Prime Minister approved a Parliamentary Delegation of up to eight members of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade to travel to Iraq. The Prime Minister directed that, in addition to visiting ADF elements, the delegation was to also meet with members of the Iraqi Transitional National Assembly to demonstrate Australia's support for the emerging democratic Parliament.
- 1.3 In consultation with Defence, the period 22 to 28 October, immediately after the Iraqi National Referendum on the draft constitution, was selected for the visit and volunteers from the Committee were canvassed.

Figure 1.1 From Left Mr Kim Wilkie and Mr Cameron Thompson MP are briefed on P3C survival equipment prior to an operational mission over the Arabian Gulf and southern Iraq



Planning

- 1.4 Planning for a delegation to a destination as dangerous as Iraq required significant amendment to the usual Parliamentary Delegation planning process and is worthy of discussion in this report.
- 1.5 Defence advised that they could only provide adequate security for the delegation while it travelled in Iraq if the existence of the delegation was kept secret until after the event. Should any insurgent groups in Iraq have known of the delegation in advance it would have provided a tempting target to any group seeking to influence Australian policy or simply further harm the democratisation of Iraq. It is likely that, had the existence of the delegation been exposed during the planning phase, it would have been cancelled to prevent the risk to the members and the Defence personnel providing them protection.
- 1.6 As a result of the need for high levels of security, planning for the delegation was limited to a small group within the Parliamentary Relations Office (PRO), the members and a small number of their key staff, and the Defence Joint Operations Command (JOC) staff.
- 1.7 These limitations presented significant challenges to both the organisers and the members of the delegation. That these challenges were overcome

brings great credit to all involved and resulted in a safe, effective delegation to a dangerous and uncertain location.

Delegation Aims

- 1.8 The delegation had three specific aims in undertaking the visit to the Middle East. These were as follows:
- Its primary purpose was to demonstrate the Parliament's strong bipartisan support, and the support of the Australian community, for Defence Force personnel deployed on this demanding operation.
 - Secondly, the visit allowed the members of the delegation to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the situation in Iraq, the tasks being undertaken by Australian personnel and the suitability of the training and equipment they receive.
 - Finally the delegation, in meeting with the Speaker of the Iraqi Transitional National Assembly, became the first delegation from the Australian Parliament to the Transitional National Assembly of Iraq, supporting Australia's engagement with the newly democratic nation.
- 1.9 The comprehensive delegation itinerary allowed the members to achieve each of these aims. Exposure to this range of issues and experiences could only be achieved as a result of a very well orchestrated program. The highlights of the program were as follows:
- 23 October 2005 - Mr Cameron Thompson and Mr Kim Wilkie participated in an operational surveillance mission with the Maritime Patrol Group of the Joint Task Force. They deployed in a P3C Orion aircraft for an eight hour operation over the northern Arabian Gulf and southern Iraq.
 - 24 October 2005 - visit the Australian naval frigate HMAS *Newcastle*, deployed for six months on protection operations in the northern Arabian Gulf and visit the Australian Air Force Maritime Patrol Aircraft Detachment for briefings and a demonstration of the imagery collected on recent operations.
 - 25 October 2005 - deploy to Iraq on Australian C130 Hercules aircraft and visit the Al Muthanna Task Group (AMTG) in Al Muthanna province southern Iraq. The delegation travelled in ASLAV and Bushmaster vehicles and stayed overnight with the AMTG.
 - 26 to 27 October 2005 - deploy by US Blackhawk helicopter from Al Muthanna province to the Baghdad International Zone to visit the Australian Ambassador Mr Howard Brown and the Army Security Detachment charged with his protection. The delegation also met with the Speaker of the Iraqi Transitional National Assembly, Mr Hajim al-

Hassani, and members of the Assembly before flying to the main coalition command headquarters to meet with US General George Casey, Commander of Multi-National Forces Iraq.

- 1.10 To conclude the visit the staff of the Australian National Headquarters provided a comprehensive, classified briefing on the Australian assessment of the situation in Iraq at their headquarters in Baghdad.

Acknowledgements

- 1.11 The delegation members are very appreciative of the considerable effort made by ADF personnel, both in Australia and in the Area of Operations, to ensure the visit was successful.
- 1.12 The delegation was warmly received and professionally briefed at each location despite the demanding operational tempo faced by all members of the deployed force.
- 1.13 In particular, the delegation would like to thank Commodore Geoff Ledger, the Australian National Commander and his staff in Baghdad. Commodore Ledger escorted the delegation throughout their visit, giving them the benefit of his considerable experience of military operations in general and his impressions of almost six months in the Area of Operations. Thanks are also due to the VCDF and his Operations staff in Canberra and Sydney, particularly Colonel Michael Krause, Wing Commander Dick Larkin and Squadron Leader Rob Williams who were the Committee interface throughout the planning phase.
- 1.14 Special thanks must also go to personnel from the ADF Task Groups deployed throughout the Middle East, all of whom warmly received the delegation, were frank and professional in their explanations and gave significantly of their time during high tempo operations. While it is impossible to acknowledge all personnel the following personnel are representative of many others:
- Wing Commander 'Max' Heinrich, CO of the Maritime Patrol Group and his ECSS Officer, Squadron Leader Steve Laredo and the airmen and women of the task group;
 - Captain Trevor Jones and the ships company of HMAS *Newcastle*;
 - Lieutenant Colonels Roger Noble and Steve Tulley, Majors Bye, Garraway and Barras, and the officers and soldiers of the Al Muthanna Task Group;
 - Captain Kurt Black-Sinclair and the officers and NCOs of the Close Personal Protection Team from the 1st Military Police Battalion; and
 - Mr Josh Wiles, Majors Ed Smeaton and Malcom Wells, and the Command Sergeant Major WO2 Andy Hamilton from the elements of

the National Headquarters without whom the visit would not have been possible.

- 1.15 Thanks also go to the Australian diplomatic staff in the region. These officials operate under demanding conditions. Their understanding of the region and the local requirements were key to the success of the delegation:
- Dr Ralph King, Australian Ambassador to Kuwait;
 - Mr Howard Brown, Australian Ambassador to Iraq;
 - Captain Gorringe RAN, the Defence Attache from the Embassy in Riyadh (who is also accredited to Kuwait); and
 - Colonel John Mansell, the Defence Attache in Baghdad.

Report Structure

- 1.16 This report provides a record of the main issues arising from the various components of the visit. It is important to note that many aspects of the visit involved classified briefings and displays that cannot be reported in this document because of the requirement to protect the safety of deployed Australian Defence Force personnel and their coalition partners.
- 1.17 The report is structured as follows:
- Chapter 2 provides the context for Australia's current commitment to the reconstruction of Iraq;
 - Chapter 3 discusses Australia's Naval contribution to coalition operations.
 - Chapter 4 discusses the contribution being made by the Maritime Patrol Aircraft Detachment.
 - Chapter 5 describes the operations of the Al Muthanna Task Group.
 - Chapter 6 describes the observations made by the delegation in discussions in Baghdad with Iraqi, US and Australian leaders.
 - Appendix A includes the delegation itinerary.

