

## Visit to Al Minhad Airbase, United Arab Emirates

### Background

- 3.1 Al Minhad Airbase (AMAB) is located in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and is a host nation operational military base where Australia has its Middle East air head and HQ based on the invitation of the Government of the UAE. The ADF has been located at the airbase since 2003 when the airfield was utilised to base RAAF AP-3C Orion maritime surveillance aircraft. In late 2009 HQ JTF 633 moved to the AMAB from Baghdad as a result of the withdrawal of Australian combat forces from Iraq.
- 3.2 AMAB is also the ADF's base for the Reception, Staging, Onward Forwarding and Integration (RSO&I) of all forces deploying into the MEAO, with the exception of the Maritime Forces' ships company. This RSO&I provides Australian force elements and individuals with time to deal with jet lag, acclimatise to the conditions and it is where additional theatre specific training is conducted and additional equipment is issued.
- 3.3 The following ADF elements are based in the AMAB:
- HQ JTF 633
  - Air Component Command
  - Force Communications Unit, rotation 4 (FCU-4)
  - Force Support Unit, rotation 4 (FSU-4)
  - Combat Support Unit, rotation 5 (CSU-5)

## **Purpose and Conduct of Visit to AMAB**

- 3.4 The purpose of the visit to AMAB was to visit the HQs and units based at the airbase, be provided with update briefs on issues affecting ADF operations in the MEAO and to conduct abbreviated force preparation training prior to deploying into Afghanistan. The delegation was provided formal briefings from most ADF elements based at AMAB. Some of these briefings were of a classified nature and will not be discussed in this report.

## **Visit and Briefing by HQ JTF 633**

- 3.5 On arrival at Dubai International Airport the delegation was met by the Australian Defence Attaché for the UAE and Gulf States, Captain Phil Warrick RAN who helped escort the delegation from the airport and conducted informal discussions with the members on the situation in his area of responsibility.
- 3.6 On arrival at HQ JTF 633 the delegation was briefed by the Deputy Commander JTF 633, Air Commodore Oddie and the key staff of the HQ. Air Commodore Oddie introduced the role and structure of HQ JTF 633. The HQ provides the National Command of Australian Forces deployed across the MEAO. This responsibility does not include the Australian military contingents deployed with the United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation (Israel, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt) or the Multinational Force Observers in the Sinai. The main effort and focus of the HQ is towards those forces deployed in Afghanistan.
- 3.7 The JTF 633 Area of Operations is vast, covering some 10 per cent of the globe, and includes Afghanistan, Iraq, the Gulf States, the Arabian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, the Indian Ocean and the Somali Basin. The Maritime Area of Operations is 2.5 million square miles, equivalent to an area the size of Continental USA.

Figure 3.1: Delegation receiving MEAO Brief from Deputy Commander JTF 633 at AMAB. L-R Commodore John Oddie (back of head), LTCOL Stuart Kenny, Dr Dennis Jensen MP, Mr Stuart Robert MP and Senator Mark Furner



- 3.8 The delegation was then provided classified and unclassified briefings by the following key staff officers on HQ JTF 633.
- 3.9 **Intelligence Officer.** Commander Hogan conducted a classified briefing to the group providing a summary of the threats throughout the region, which included an overview the insurgency in Afghanistan, an overview of the threats in the Maritime Environment, which includes Piracy and the Smuggling of weapons and drugs to arm and finance terrorism and the insurgency. A key issue raised during this briefing was the lack of a national policy for the detention of pirates faced by our Naval forces.
- 3.10 **Operations Officer.** Lieutenant Colonel Miles described for the delegation the laydown of Australian forces in the MEAO, with key locations being Afghanistan, UAE, Baghdad, Bahrain and the areas of maritime operations. He discussed the impending hand over of responsibility for security of the Australian Embassy in Baghdad from Defence to a DFAT contractor. This hand over was to be completed by mid 2011. He also provided the following details regarding counter piracy operations in the period 15 May 2010 to 14 May 2011:
- Number of merchant vessels attacked by pirates: 245
  - Number of vessels pirated: 40
  - Number of vessels released for ransom: 27
  - Number of vessels released by other means without ransom: 3

Figure 3.2: Delegation receiving Improvised Explosive Device (IED) related awareness training at AMAB with LTCOL Matthew Jones (third from left)



- 3.11 **Counter IED (CIED).** The Director of CIED HQ JTF 633 provided a classified briefing on the IED threat and Counter IED operations. The key unclassified points were as follows:
- Discussed methods to defeat IEDs: attack the IED system (eg the bomb makers), find the IED before it detonates and the development of force protection measures to protect (eg more armour).
  - The Bushmaster PMV has been very effective at defeating the effects of IED on the vehicle's crew.
  - A key issue in the CIED fight is the time taken to deliver CIED capability to the field versus Army/ DMO's desire to apply normal acquisition processes. He assessed it was better to deliver an 80% solution now rather than a 95/100% solution too late.
- 3.12 **Personnel.** Squadron Leader Nansen provided the delegation with an overview of the personnel plans and issues within the MEAO. The key points were as follows:
- Discussed numbers of ADF and other government agency numbers deployed to the MEAO.
  - Provided the number of Non Battle Casualty figures for 2011 as at 14 May as follows:
    - ⇒ MTF and SOTG: Injury 13, Illness 38, Total 51
    - ⇒ All other Task Groups/ Units: Injury 11, Illness 40, total 51

- Discussed plans for the conduct of 'Decompression' of formed units returning from Afghanistan to UAE, in order to assist soldiers to better reintegrate into Australia on return from the MEAO.

3.13 As part of the visit to HQ JTF 633 the delegation also undertook an abbreviated RSO&I program. This program was offered to provide the delegation with an understanding of the threats in Afghanistan and the process which all service personnel pass through prior to deploying into Afghanistan. The program for the delegation included Explosive Hazards Awareness and Protection, basic combat first aid familiarisation, health risks in the MEAO and the issuing of personal protection equipment.

Figure 3.3: Ms Gai Brodtmann MP affixes a combat bandage to Mr Stuart Robert MP's simulated sucking chest wound during abbreviated Combat First Aid training in the RSO&I training at AMAB



## Brief by Force Communications Unit

- 3.14 The delegation was provided a classified brief from the Commanding Officer of Force Communications Unit- 4 (FCU-4), Wing Commander Houghton. FCU-4 is a Tri-Service unit of 119 personnel and has its personnel spread across all locations in the MEAO where there are Australian forces. It is tasked to provide secure communications and IT systems across the force to enable communications from unit locations back to HQ JTF 633 and back to Australia.
- 3.15 A key issue raised by FCU-4 is the reluctance of the Chief Information Officer Group (CIOG) to spend money to fix IT related issues to ensure

interoperability between Australia's Defence Secret Network and the Multi-National Secret Systems due to cost and compliance of a national interface.

Figure 3.4: Dr Dennis Jensen MP being coached by members of Force Support Unit 4, firing the F88 Steyr on the small arms range at AMAB as part of the abbreviated RSO&I package



## Air Component Command

- 3.16 The Air Component Commander, Group Captain Heap, hosted the delegation airside prior to their departure into Afghanistan on 15 May. He provided a classified brief on the Air Component to JTF 633.
- 3.17 Air Component Command commands all Australian Air capabilities in the MEAO less the CH47's of the Army's Rotary Wing Group, the Army's Skylark UAV and the RAN helicopter aboard HMAS Stuart. The command is made up of:
- **Air Component HQ:** 133 personnel coordinate the operations of RAAF air elements, and liaise with Coalition air forces in the MEAO.
  - **AP-3C Orion:** The RAAF provides two AP-3C Orion aircraft for overland surveillance of Afghanistan, and maritime surveillance of the Arabian Gulf, Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, and the Gulf of Aden.
  - **C-130J:** The RAAF provides three C-130J Hercules aircraft which conduct troop and equipment transportation across the Arabian Gulf and Afghanistan. In Afghanistan they provide support to both Australian and Coalition Forces.

- **C-17:** The RAAF provides C-17 aircraft from Amberley (Queensland) for routine strategic lift support to Australian Forces in the MEAO including Afghanistan.
- **Heron UAV Task Unit:** Heron UAV based at Kandahar Airfield and provides overland surveillance in RC(S) Afghanistan.

## Observations

3.18 The delegation made the following observations during their visit to AMAB:

- HQ JTF 633 is well lead by a very capable group of officers and SNCOs and is manned by quality staff working hard to provide command support. Air Commodore Oddie should be commended for his efforts to ensure the delegation's visit was successful and for his frank and informative briefings to the delegation.
- The Air Component Command provides excellent support to the force, and the operations conducted by the task elements of the command make a significant contribution to both Australian and Coalition operations across the MEAO. The Command is well lead by Group Captain Heap and morale seemed high across the command with the airmen and women focused on the important task at hand.
- Force Communications Unit is a widely dispersed unit providing a vital enabling service to the ADF across the MEAO. They provide excellent support in harsh conditions and are well trained and lead.
- The food and facilities provided at AMAB for those based at the location, and for those personnel transiting through the base, are of a very high standard.
- The RSO&I package is thorough and professionally conducted, providing a high standard of final preparation to Australian Service Personnel prior to deploying into their respective locations throughout the MEAO.
- HQ JTF 633 raised the following issues which need to be addressed:
  - ⇒ There is a lack of a National policy for the detention of pirates faced by our Naval forces.
  - ⇒ There is an issue with how long it takes to deliver CIED capability to the field versus Army/DMO's desire to apply normal acquisition

processes. It was stated that JTF 633 would prefer an 80% solution delivered now rather than a 95/100% solution too late.

- FCU-4 raised the issue that CIOG is reluctant to spend money to fix IT related issues to ensure interoperability between Australia's Defence Secret Network and the Multi-National Secret Systems due to cost and compliance of a national interface.