

Recent Operational Deployments: Been There, Done That, So What?

The Office of Air Force History has conducted a series of interviews with about 40 LAC's to WOFF's who have been on recent operational deployments to ascertain their experiences, impressions and opinions on what the Air Force might learn to better achieve its Mission.

The sample was constructed through the auspices of the WOFF Air Force and covered a span of operational and operational support musterings across all Groups. It included deployments to Australia's neighbours in the region as well as deployments to the Middle East Area of Operations (MEAO). The relatively random nature of the sample assisted in providing a degree of confidence in the views.

This synopsis is not provided with any intention of initiating formal analysis but rather as 'food for thought'. Although future operational deployments will never be exactly the same, much of this feedback is useful to those looking at Air Force leadership and values.

The Good News

An overwhelming proportion of those interviewed view their operational deployment(s) as a very positive experience. This positive response is founded upon the following:

Personal and Professional Growth. Almost all interviewees found the challenges of the deployed environment had led to growth as a person, as a member of the Air Force and in their technical and professional skills and competences.

'....Field conditions, Basically where we slept and lived was right next to a river there where bodies would just float by.a body floats up, tie a rope around it, bring it back to the shore, drag it up, about ten metres away from where we lived and slept.....Basically I shut down at one point to put it simply. All emotions just blanked out..'

Preparation and Training. Members believed themselves to be more than adequately prepared through the continuum of training, including their general Air Force training in their normal duties, the pre-deployment force preparation and the inter- theatre and in-situ refresher and task training. Yes, some repetition was an irritant but most saw that a common denominator had to be assumed and all those being deployed received training and preparation from that level.

Conditions of Service. Members believed that the ADF package of conditions spanning tour lengths, kitting, accommodation domestic and working, welfare facilities and allowances etc were very favourable when compared to those of other nations in similar circumstances.

The One Team Ethos. In those circumstances where the security and operational threats were higher and / or where the deployment involved the initial establishment of the Air Force or ADF presence,

members reported a clear 'One Team' harmonious experience; whether across international, inter-service, inter unit or operational element basis.



28 December 2004

Two days after Indian Ocean littoral countries were devastated by a tsunami generated by a severe earthquake off Sumatra, Indonesia, on 26 December, the first two RAAF C-130H transports from No 36 Squadron touched down at Medan to begin flying relief into Aceh Province. The initial focus of the Australian effort was the disaster-affected town of Banda Aceh, on the northern tip of Sumatra. Crews of aircraft flying over the region, especially up the west coast of the island, were dismayed by the total absence of any visible life. RAAF participation in the relief effort, called Operation *Sumatra Assist*, ranged from medical staff and aeromedical evacuation teams to air traffic controllers (needed to help manage the increased flow of aircraft into the region), engineers, logistics personnel, as well as a variety of transport aircraft (C-130s, Boeing 707) and air terminal staff.

“ ... How did people handle the circumstance? ... Everyone had their own little way. Some people acted tough and laughed about it. Other people like myself,I was more than happy to say. I'm scaredit's just a coping mechanism.....The hard part I found too.....we had to go to a lot of RAMP ceremonies of other nations and actually it hit home when you see a coffin going into an aircraft to go home..... and you're thinking. There's someone's family waiting at home for that soldier or that airman.....”

Leadership. Examples of high quality values based leadership by Air Force and other service commanders and supervisors was the reported norm (but see exceptions below). Many reported that this example from the higher leadership fostered and encouraged a similar level of performance from themselves, most leaders and followers.



5 September 2008

The day after being formally approved to conduct aeromedical evacuation (AME) tasks, a C-17 Globemaster III heavy lift transport was used on this day to bring home five wounded and injured Australian Defence Force personnel from Afghanistan. Accompanying the patients were 18 members of two AME teams—permanent and reservist specialist and general duties doctors and nurses, and medical assistants—who provided around-the-clock care during the flight from Tarin Kowt to Amberley, Queensland. The C-17 proved to be a functional and comfortable aircraft to use on AME missions, reflecting the fact that it had been designed with that role in mind. Capable of carrying up to 36 stretcher-borne patients, or up to five critical-care patients plus 18 low to medium dependency patients, the Globemaster was a major addition to the RAAF's capabilities.

“.....The respect I have for my OC he was brilliant. He led by example. He didn't micro manage us and let us do our job and put the rules in place and we had a very mature group of people, it was awesome..”

“.....he was second to none in my opinion. He was really good he was switched on to exactly what had to happen. He met me once and from there on he was always calling me that kind of leadership to me instills full confidence.....

The Not So Good News

As would be expected not all the operational deployment experiences were sweetness and light. Although, that the interviewees felt comfortable and confident enough to report and relate the not so good news, is good news in itself! The following perhaps provides food for thought to a learning organisation such as the Air Force.

Leadership. Examples of poor leadership were related. These involved the application of double standards or indeed 'no standards' in circumstances of unacceptable behaviour. There are few secrets in small operational deployments particularly when it involves personal behaviour. Inconsistent leadership decisions that do not reflect the values or rules diminish the leader involved and establish uncertainty and dissent. Some interviewees suggested some leaders seemed more concerned to 'avoid anything adverse being seen to happen on my watch' than actually leading!

".....What I saw there was a real mix..... You had a lot of junior officers who were straight out of training; let's send them overseas to blood them. And that's the mentality that I've seen in a lot of operations I've been on..... new people coming that don't sink; life experience is a big one. If they've had a lot of life experience before they joined the military it helps them out..."

Us vs Them. Perhaps as a consequence of the above but in most cases allied to it, members reported instances of a breakdown of the One Team ethos. Deployments broke into camps – Us vs Them. What one camp viewed as a reasonable request for flexibility in the operation of procedures and processes was often viewed by the other camp as prima-donna or special pleading! Relationships frayed and minor matters assumed greater significance, morale was lower than it should have been.

Structural and Organisational Impacts. Several members commented upon the adverse impacts in terms of morale and indeed health of trying to maintain a 24/7 capability with in some cases only two members assigned to a position or perhaps a third member being rostered as a 'secondary duty'. Most accepted that these arrangements might suffice in an emergency or for a short time; but to predicate the continued operation on such a basis was viewed as unsound and not reflecting Air Force values in relation to caring for personnel.

Administrative Irritants. Was it really necessary to post the member while on deployment with wof dates and circumstances relating to the gaining unit that required the spouse to effect the physical move? Why were families not contacted during the deployment notwithstanding 'ticking the right box' during force preparation? What credibility accrues when the welcome home dinner is interrupted by a phone call to advise that the deployed member will be home in the next few days!!

Multiple Deployments. As will be well known to the Air Force leadership there are certain mustering and trade groups where circumstances dictate multiple deployments. The first is an adventure, the second a challenge because you are the expert, the third and subsequent deployments can become a chore and a burden.

Post Deployment Employment and Retention. If indeed the returned member has 'grown' in personal and professional terms and the challenges of the deployed environment have been met; is the normal routine booring? Many members feel so. Are we the Air Force making best use of these members? Are we able to meet their expectations? Many interviewees thought they might need to seek challenges and opportunities outside the Air Force.



19 April 2006

After rioters torched parts of the Solomon Islands capital, Honiara, to protest the installation of an unpopular Prime Minister on 18 April, four C-130H Hercules transports from No 36 Squadron delivered 110 troops of 1st Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (1 RAR) from Townsville, Queensland, to help restore order. The soldiers joined members of the multinational Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), who had been helping to stabilise the fragile country since mid-2003 but were overwhelmed by the latest unexpected outbreak of violence. The aircraft were then used to evacuate foreign nationals fleeing the riots—mainly Chinese whose businesses had been especially targeted. On 21 April another company of 110 troops from 3 RAR was flown to Honiara on a B-707 aircraft from RAAF Base Richmond, NSW, followed by 35 men from the RAAF's No 2 Airfield Defence Squadron at Amberley, Queensland, who also travelled by 36 Squadron Hercules.

So What!

The Air Force has established a justified reputation for achieving the operational mission. The deployment opportunity is viewed as a positive experience by almost all those interviewed.

But all is not sweetness and light! Opportunities to improve exist. The production of a more experienced and capable Air Force member through the challenges of operations might be a double edged sword.

".....Did they get the same wife and mother back?I think they got a better person, because it gave me a time to evaluate my kids, my life and made me realise how lucky we are in Australia, really that's the honest truth. I come back a stronger person, yeah it was good. My dad was very proud, he's a Vietnam Vet so yeah it meant a lot to him...."

Now that they have experienced the world - How do we keep them down on the farm? Food for thought.