On 29 April 1965, the Australian Government announced its decision to commit an infantry battalion for ground combat service in the Vietnam War. In addition to the First Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR), the force would include a troop of armoured carriers and a logistics supply company. One company of the battalion, along with elements of its Support and Administration companies and most of the force’s vehicles, equipment and supplies, were to be moved to Vietnam a month later on board HMAS Sydney (III)—the former aircraft carrier that had been converted to service in the Royal Australian Navy as a fast troop transport. The remainder of 1RAR would follow early in June, on board a Qantas Boeing 707 jet operating from RAAF Base Richmond.

At this stage of the war, Sydney was a high-value asset of the Australian defence forces in that she had a unique sea-lift capability, and a successful attack on her would seriously delay or possibly cancel Australia’s commitment to the war. Sydney and its cargo had to be protected at all costs. Based on this assessment, the decision was taken in the Defence Department to provide multi-layered protection for the deployment, with both sea and land-based air power playing a major role in the operation.

At that time, the RAAF’s maritime patrol force consisted of two squadrons of Neptunes: 10 SQN based at Townsville, and 11 SQN based at Richmond. On 21 April, WGCDDR Geoff Michael AFC, the CO of 10 SQN, was briefed about Operation TRIMDON—the deployment of 1RAR to Vietnam—and ordered to begin planning the air support required. There was no specific threat identified, however the worst case scenario would be an attack on Sydney by a submarine of a nation that was allied or sympathetic to North Vietnam. The tone of the briefing was reflected in the RAAF Operations Order which stated ‘a wartime situation is to be assumed throughout the operation’. Continuous air support was required all the way to the destination, the Vietnamese port of Vung Tau. All Neptune aircraft involved in Operation TRIMDON would carry live torpedoes and depth charges on all sorties. Aircraft captains were briefed that attacks were authorised on any target that ‘was acting in a hostile manner’—although what constituted a ‘hostile manner’ was not defined.

RAAF support to Operation TRIMDON commenced on 28 May, when three Neptunes of 11 SQN deployed to RAAF Townsville and two to Lae, in Papua New Guinea. That same day, support personnel and equipment were deployed to Lae by C130A aircraft. One 10 SQN Neptune joined the others at Lae on 29 May. These aircraft shadowed the Sydney task group during passage through the Coral Sea, around the island of New Guinea and through the Vitiaz Straits between New Guinea and New Britain. At least one Neptune remained on station at all times approximately 200 km ahead of the task group. Passive sonobuoys dropped in the water listened for any submerged submarines while the Neptune crews used radar and visual lookouts to detect any submarine on the surface or at snorting depth. The escorting destroyer HMAS Duchess provided close-in protection using sonar and radar. The detection of a possible hostile submarine required the RAAF crew to warn Sydney’s captain who would then coordinate an appropriate response using all the assets available. Unless contact with a possible threat was made, all aircraft had to maintain radio silence.

By 2 June, approximately half-way between New Guinea and the Philippines, Sydney was joined by the destroyer escort
HMAS Parramatta. Three Neptune aircraft began flying support sorties from Agana airfield on the island of Guam. Two of these aircraft flew to Naval Air Station (NAS) Sangley Point in the Philippines on 4 June to join five other RAAF Neptunes which had just completed an exercise in the Philippines area. Together, these aircraft and crews provided protection to Sydney for the remainder of its voyage to Vietnam.

Later voyages of HMAS Sydney to Vietnam were also provided with screening aircraft. Two voyages in 1966 were escorted by RAAF Neptunes as well as aircraft from Melbourne. For the voyages undertaken in 1967 and 1968, HMAS Sydney embarked its own flight of four Wessex helicopters from either 725SQN or 817SQN to provide screening.

HMAS Sydney and the Neptunes have gone but the requirement to maintain sea control remains. Ships such as the new Landing Helicopter Dock (LHD) give the ADF the capability to deploy an expeditionary ground force over long distances and then sustain it during operations. However, such an expeditionary force will need protection from air, surface and sub-surface attack. Networked air power provided by sophisticated attack aircraft, air defence ships, maritime reconnaissance aircraft, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and ship-borne helicopters will be a major component of this protection in the future.

- Providing multi-dimensional and layered defence for an expeditionary force is a complex joint operation.
- Expeditionary operations need long range force protection.

‘Counter sea operations are typically integrated with those of friendly naval forces seeking to maintain a desired degree of control of the sea, but can also be conducted as independent air operations within the joint or combined campaign.’