AIR POWER WATCHING OVER AUSTRALIA’S MARITIME APPROACHES

In April-May 1918, the Department of Defence responded to a flood of alleged sightings of enemy aircraft and ships in Australia’s south-eastern sea lanes by ordering the first maritime air patrols in local waters (see Pathfinder #54). Since that time, the importance of air power in defending the nation’s vast maritime approaches has been recognised. The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) deployed maritime patrol aircraft routinely throughout World War II, and then the Cold War, during which they undertook Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) and Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) missions.

As memories of the Cold War started to fade, Australia concentrated more upon its own national security needs, over and above its enduring defence requirements. When the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) came into force in 1994, Australia became responsible for the management and security of one of the world’s largest maritime jurisdictions—over 14 million square kilometres, or almost twice the size of mainland Australia. At that time, the RAAF had the ability to conduct routine patrols, exercises, and special missions ‘on demand’; however, the amount of effort required to protect the nation’s maritime resources, provide maritime security, and to defend maritime approaches, increased over time. Missions to enforce UNCLOS spread from a few days into weeks or months. With RAAF resources still allocated at a peacetime level, these ongoing commitments soon brought out issues of capability, sustainment, and crew limitations.

Among the events that challenged Australia’s enforcement of its maritime jurisdiction in the decade following the implementation of UNCLOS, and its ability to ensure the security of its maritime approaches, was the unauthorised arrival of people making the long and dangerous journey from mainland Asia by boat to claim political asylum or refugee status. Since the first big influx at the end of the Vietnam War 35 years ago, there have been several waves of ‘boat people’ seeking to escape conflict in such places as Sri Lanka, Iraq and more recently Afghanistan. To meet this challenge, in 2001 the Australian Government instituted measures to conduct regular, coordinated and systematic searches of the waters off the north and northwest coasts of Australia, to detect, report, and apprehend any illegal activity within the Australian Economic Exclusion Zone (EEZ). The resources of the RAAF and the Royal Australian Navy, in coordination with other Australian Government agencies, were allocated to what became known within the Australian Defence Force (ADF) as Operation Relex.

On 30 August 2001 two RAAF AP-3C Orions of No 10 Squadron commenced the first of many thousands of sorties over Australia’s northern approaches, followed by aircraft from No 11 Squadron a fortnight later. A standard deployment as part of Operation Relex was two to three weeks long and consisted of one AP-3C, with 13 aircrew and 20 maintenance and support personnel (drawn from across No 92 Wing) stationed at RAAF Base Darwin. A second standby crew was ready for operational deployment at RAAF Base Edinburgh. Headquarters Northern Command and No 321 Combat Support Squadron also provided regular support to the high-priority operation. An average sortie would last eight hours, and search an area of about 360 000 square kilometers. Crews completed between four and six sorties a week, during which they searched and identified all contacts within their assigned area and reported any illegal or suspicious activity. When necessary, assistance was also provided to vessels, such as dropping batteries for a sailor’s GPS navigation aid or search and rescue activities.

During the first few months of Operation Relex, the Orions successfully detected a number of Suspected Illegal Entry Vessels (SIEV) and by December 2001 the unauthorised
arrivals had stopped. In March 2002, the operation was resumed. Although renamed Relex II, the role remained essentially unchanged. Operation Relex II was the ADF contribution to the whole-of-government program ‘to detect, intercept and deter vessels transporting unauthorised arrivals from entering Australia through the North-West maritime approaches’. Routine patrols helped to deter the efforts of people smugglers who profited from each boat they sent into Australian waters, and so no SIEVs were detected until July 2003.

Watching over Australia’s maritime approaches

The number of unauthorised arrivals has fluctuated considerably since that time, but the need for constant detection and observation has not diminished—rather it has been reaffirmed. Operation Resolute commenced on 17 July 2006, bringing together the entire ADF contribution ‘to protect Australia’s borders and offshore maritime interests’. It consolidated previous ADF operations including Operations Relex II (SIEVs), Cranberry (illegal fishing and smuggling), Celeste (patrols of Australia’s southern ocean), and Mistral (patrols protecting Australia’s gas and oil infrastructure). Operation Resolute continues to this day, as the only ADF operation that currently defends the homeland.

RAAF Orion crews constantly watch and monitor those who enter Australian waters, and by the fifth anniversary of Operation Resolute the aircraft involved had notched up about 9000 flying hours. They have conducted long-range surveillance missions within Australia’s EEZ, and provided early warning of maritime security threats. It is now ten years since the first sortie under Operation Relex, and it is clear that the need to watch over the maritime approaches is continuous and enduring. The RAAF contribution to Operation Resolute is much more than just the aircraft and aircrews. RAAF personnel also serve in the Transit Security Element (TSE) embarked in Royal Australian Navy (RAN) patrol boats, supplementing the existing Navy boarding party teams and providing additional security on board apprehended vessels.

In addition, ground and air crew from the RAAF’s Air Lift Group have been called in to support activities whenever Resolute needs them. In April 2009 this involved the employment of RAAF C-130 Hercules and C-17 Globemaster aircraft, along with aero-medical health professionals, to assist after an apprehended foreign vessel, SIEV 36, exploded in the vicinity of Ashmore Reef. On 22 August 2011 Leading Aircraftman Thomas Borton and Sergeant Sharon Jager were recognised—alongside Navy and Army colleagues—with a Group Bravery Citation, for their contribution toward rescuing people in the water and on board the burning vessel. Many other RAAF personnel deployed to Operation Resolute have become unsung heroes, just by undertaking their daily activities on land, at sea and in the air. They provide humanitarian assistance and aid when lives are endangered at sea. Considering its importance to border protection, maritime air operations will remain a high priority within the RAAF for many years to come.

• Air power is an essential component of activities to protect Australia’s maritime resources, provide maritime security, and defend its maritime approaches.

• Since 2001, RAAF aircraft have provided an almost continuous coverage of Australia’s northern approaches to monitor those who enter the nation’s waters.

• RAAF personnel are deployed to Operation Resolute—in the air, on land, and at sea—to provide humanitarian assistance and aid when lives are endangered at sea.

The sailors, soldiers and airmen afloat and airborne, at all hours of the day and night, frequently in difficult weather conditions, have remained vigilant and have delivered a highly successful outcome for the ADF and Australia.

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