RAAF ORIONS: WATCHING OVER THE MIDDLE EAST

‘The prominence of ISR … is a clear reflection of its growing importance in enabling operational success in the increasingly complex environments in which the ADF is called upon to operate.’

—Air Chief Marshal Houston, AC, AFC

The return to Australia of the No 92 Wing Detachment in the Middle East Area of Operations (MEAO) in November 2012 will mark the end of the longest deployment of an Air Force element on combat operations to date. While based in the Middle East, the aircraft and crews flew missions for four separate operations. During this highly successful, 10-year deployment, both the character of missions and the tactics employed to achieve success changed markedly.

On 16 and 17 January 2003, two Australian P-3C aircraft and approximately 160 aircrew, maintenance and support personnel arrived in the MEAO to take part in Operation Slipper, the ADF contribution to the International Coalition against Terrorism. On 28 January 2003, the detachment flew its first Operation Slipper mission over the Gulf of Oman and the first Persian Gulf sortie on 5 February 2003. Over the next seven weeks, the detachment flew one mission each day over the Persian Gulf to identify threats and to support the interdiction of any terrorist activities by al Qaeda or other organisations.

When Operation Falconer, the combat operation to disarm Iraq, began on 18 March 2003, the Orion operations entered the next phase. One Coalition objective was the seizure and clearance of approaches to Umm Qasr, Iraq’s only deep-water port, and the capture Iraq’s offshore oil platforms. The Orions’ role in this operation was to provide Coalition forces, which included RAN ships and Australian Army landing craft, with accurate surveillance of the surface activity in the operational area. The Orion’s sensors, crews and analysis teams ensured that vessels posing a threat were observed and challenged well away from the fleet so operations were not interrupted. This activity resulted in the detection and capture of a number of Iraqi mine-laying vessels. As well as missions over the Persian Gulf, Australian Orions flew overland intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) missions over southern Iraq, starting from 18 March.

With the end of major combat operations in Iraq on 1 May 2003 and the start of Operation Catalyst in June 2003, the nature of the Orion’s operations changed. Fewer missions were flown over the Gulf and more overland ISR missions provided increased support for Coalition ground forces in Iraq. These missions gave ground forces near real-time imagery of enemy activity, provided warning of suspicious activity to vehicle convoys, and detected signs of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). They also monitored buildings suspected to be enemy meeting places or used to cache weapons and supplies.

On occasions, the Orion crew alerted ground commanders to rioting and other dangerous activities of the civilian population, reducing the risk of a situation escalating out of control.

Countering IEDs was a major task for Coalition forces in the MEAO. Sophisticated electro-optical as well as visual and radar surveillance capabilities permitted the Orions to perform overwatch on strategic supply routes through Iraq monitoring for suspicious activity or threats. Cued by an Orion crew, ground patrols were able to move forward and investigate the possible IED or avoid the area. On occasions, Australian Orions tracked suspicious vehicles and personnel, which frequently led to the discovery of caches of IEDs and weapons. In this role, the Orion detachment directly contributed to the saving of Coalition lives and the preservation of essential land force capabilities.

Through 2007, 60 per cent of Australian Orion operations were focused on overland ISR across Iraq...
with the remaining 40 per cent on maritime surveillance of the Gulf. Improved data links enabled video streaming in near-real time to ground forces. This capability significantly increased the ground commander’s situational awareness of the tactical situation. With the withdrawal of Australian ground forces from Iraq in July 2009, the Orions’ shifted its overland ISR missions to Afghanistan supporting Australian and allied ground forces primarily in Oruzgan and Helmand Provinces.

From the start of 2009, the Orion detachment joined an anti-piracy operation under the command arrangements of Operation Slipper. The rate of attacks by pirates on shipping around the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Sea had steadily increased from the mid 1990s. In January 2009, a UN mandate to the multinational Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) saw its operations around the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea increase to include the protection of shipping from pirates. RAAF Orions and a number of RAN ships made up Australia’s contribution to CMF operations.

One particular incident on 28 January 2011 demonstrated the flexibility of the Orions and their crews. During a routine surveillance patrol of the Persian Gulf, an Australian Orion received a distress call from the German merchant vessel New York Star, indicating it was under attack by pirates. The Australian crew observed pirates attempting to board the ship and firing rocket-propelled grenades. The crew flew a series of low level show-of-force passes and repeatedly broadcast via radio that the arrival of a warship was imminent. The Orion crew also communicated directly with the crew of the New York Star to assist in countering boarding operations by the pirate vessels. The actions by the Orion crew directly influenced the actions by the pirates, and when a Special Forces team landed on the deck of the New York Star, they found that the pirates had gone. The ship’s crew, who had locked themselves inside a pirate-proof cabin, were unharmed. With the piracy incident over, the Orion crew resumed their surveillance task. Another day in the office for the Orion detachment.

Throughout its 10-year deployment in the MEAO, the 92WG Detachment supported Orion operations from its base in the desert. Despite the 45-degree summer heat (actual tarmac temperature often over 55 degrees), aircraft serviceability was sustained at a high level. This extraordinary achievement was directly attributable to the professionalism and dedication of the maintenance personnel. Support personnel at the base provided 24-hour intelligence plus operations and analysis support to the crews planning their missions. Further, amongst all the activity surrounding Orion operations, base personnel maintained continual support to RAAF and other coalition aircraft transiting the MEAO.

The departure of the Orion detachment from the MEAO closes a chapter in Air Force history, but the index of credits is extensive. From counter-terrorism operations, maritime surveillance across the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, counter-piracy in and around the Horn of Africa, to ISR operations over Iraq and Afghanistan, the detachment upheld the operational traditions of the RAAF’s maritime force. By December 2012, the detachment will have flown over 22 500 hours on more than 2400 missions in the MEAO and has earned its place in Air Force history. ‘Watch and Ward’, the motto of No. 92 Wing, has been proudly upheld.

Key Points

- The longest deployment on combat operations in Air Force history.
- The Orion was the ADF’s primary ISR asset in the Middle East Area of Operations.
- The Orion demonstrated the flexibility of air power, often doing multiple tasks on the same flight or being re-tasked in flight.