Sixty years ago this year, Australia made a significant contribution to the Cold War defence of western Europe through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In February 1951, the British had suggested that Australia may wish to contribute to the West’s military presence in the Middle East. As Australia had a national security interest to defend the sea lines of communication which ran through the Middle East—to maintain international order and to protect trade routes—such a deployment was seen to be in the nation’s strategic interests. Indeed, at that time, British imperial global strategy identified the Middle East as a higher priority for Australian forces than the Far East.

Discussion centred upon sending ‘a token force’—a RAAF wing of two squadrons with half their wartime establishment. It was decided not to send Australian aircraft, rather sixteen Vampire FB.9 fighters were leased from Britain for the deployment. Prime Minister Robert Menzies despatched No 78 (Fighter) Wing RAAF, that included Nos 75 and 76 Fighter Squadrons and associated support elements, to the Middle East, with the advanced party arriving in Malta on 9 July 1952. A month later the Australian pilots, led by Wing Commander (later Group Captain) Brian Eaton, commenced flying.

No 78 (Fighter) Wing served under No 205 Group RAF and were tasked by the RAF’s Middle East Air Force (MEAF). The MEAF was responsible for the Mediterranean as well as the Middle East and reported to the NATO Commander-in-Chief Allied Forces Mediterranean. It was earmarked, in a crisis, to supplement other NATO forces in Europe under the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR). The stage was set for No 78 Wing’s engagement with NATO.

NATO was founded in April 1949 as a western alliance aimed at countering aggression by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in Europe. By early 1953, NATO believed it was in danger of being overwhelmed by the rapid expansion of Soviet forces in eastern Europe, the increasing number of Soviet nuclear weapons that undermined the American ‘nuclear umbrella’ deterrent, and the ongoing commitment to the United Nation’s forces in Korea. NATO strategists believed that a massive build-up of Western military forces was necessary to deter the Soviets in Europe, and that offensive air power was a key deterrent against the Soviet’s use of their conventional forces.

NATO’s response to probable Soviet expansion was a show of force during the European summer of 1953—Exercise CORONET. As a physical demonstration of Western air power, CORONET brought together about 2000 aircraft and 40 000 personnel from nine NATO countries and one non-NATO country (Australia). Air units were deployed to West Germany from bases across Western Europe, Britain and the Mediterranean in defence of Central Europe. Commencing on 23 July and lasting for nine days, CORONET itself was based upon a complex scenario involving an initial conflict between two hypothetical regional powers—Westonia (2nd Allied Tactical Air Force (ATAF) area including Belgium, the Netherlands and the British Zone of Germany) and Fantasia (4th ATAF area including the American and French Zones of Germany and part of Eastern France).
After five days, on 27 July, a third hypothetical major power intervened to end the conflict—Wessex (all UK-based raider forces).

CORONET brought together almost every type of military aircraft flown by the West at that time—Sabres, Meteors, Vampires and Venoms from 2nd ATAF; Sabres, Thunderjets, Shooting Stars, Vampires and Invaders from 4th ATAF; Greek and Italian Thunderjets; as well as the Australian Vampire wing based at Malta. The United Kingdom bases provided common raider forces of Washingtons, Lincolns, Canberras, Valettas, Varsitys, Meteors and Sabres; the last two types simulating high-level bombers. All the ground units supporting these aircraft were essentially expeditionary with as little use as possible being made of normal static facilities. The land battle was fictional and intended to provide practice for air-land support missions. In the end, CORONET achieved its desired outcome—it demonstrated the West’s ability to use air power offensively to defeat a Soviet thrust in Central Europe.

The Australians based at Malta were delighted, if a little surprised, to be included in the NATO exercise. Group Captain Eaton described CORONET as ‘so realistic that they were pretty near the real thing.’ The only difference between it and actual war was that in this exercise gun cameras were used to film attacks instead of guns loaded with bullets and shells. Squadron Leader Ken Andrews, who was one of the most experienced fighter pilot instructors in the RAAF, stated that: ‘This exercise placed a tremendous strain on everyone who took part in it, because of the many moments of tension and grimness. The normal hazards of jet flying were increased by so many aircraft milling about the sky over small areas at one time. The faces of men took on that hard look as their eyes scanned the sky when a plane failed to return to base, and there was that same nerve-wracking tenseness in the operation room as the men there waited for the phone to ring to tell them what had happened.’

The ground crew, despite having to improvise in the ‘wartime’ field conditions, performed extremely well. After eight days the Australian wing had the highest rate of aircraft serviceability among all the forces in the Exercise. At the conclusion of CORONET, on 31 July, senior Royal Air Force officers and official observers from the United States Air Force and Western European air forces praised the Australians highly for their pilot’s flying abilities and the achievements of the RAAF ground staff. Even though 78 Wing was ‘a token force’, its value as a physical symbol of Australia’s national interests in the defence of the West was clearly demonstrated on the world stage during the NATO exercise.

No 78 Wing remained in Malta until December 1954, when higher priority defence commitments in Southeast Asia necessitated the wing’s return to Australia. By that time, 78 Wing had also participated in other NATO exercises, including Exercise SHIELD I which involved the air defence of Southern Italy and the central Mediterranean. On different occasions 78 Wing pilots had flown alongside, or on exchange with, squadrons from France, Belgium, the United Kingdom, the United States, Turkey, Greece, Italy and New Zealand. Interestingly, New Zealand deployed a Vampire squadron to Cyprus around the same time, and at times they operated as a third squadron of the Australian wing at Malta. Members of 78 Wing even represented Australia at Queen Elizabeth II’s coronation. Although a token force, the Malta deployment demonstrated Australia’s resolve to safeguard its strategic interests as well as the RAAF’s high professional competency.

Key Points

• Historically, Australia’s national interests have had a global dimension.
• No 78 Wing RAAF contributed to NATO exercises during 1953 and 1954.
• The RAAF has a long tradition of working alongside other national air forces and making useful contributions towards coalition air power.