TAIPAN IN AFGHANISTAN

“Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity”

General George S. Patton

Like the rest of the RAAF, the air defence component peaked at the end of WWII with some 210 radar sites operating around Australia and the South-West Pacific. The post-war force reductions saw the air defence force and capability reduced to a shadow of its former self, and by the 1950s it was operating only a single radar and height finder. However, because of the worsening regional security situation from the late 1950s, the RAAF began to regain some of its previous strength, which included an improved air defence force of three radar units. While much of the RAAF deployed on operations post-war, the air defence community was rarely committed to overseas operations, focussing most of its effort on national tasks that included the Olympic and Commonwealth Games, and border protection. Until Afghanistan in 2007, its sole, off-shore post-war operational mission was as part of the Commonwealth’s response during the Indonesian Confrontation, a mission which ended in 1966.

The Afghanistan deployment came at the request of the USAF who had been the major air battlespace authority in Afghanistan since 2005. The USAF had an Air Control Squadron (ACS) at Kandahar with the RAF’s No 1 Air Control Centre managing the UK’s discrete airspace around Helmand Province. These two elements, sometimes supported by a USAF E-3, were responsible for military radar coverage and air battlespace management throughout the theatre. By 2007, the older, maintenance-heavy control cabins and TPS-75 radars of the USAF’s ACS were in need of a period of rest and re-constitution.

The USAF requested Australia to provide a similar capability, initially for a 12 month period, to allow the USAF ACS to re-equip. As part of an increased Australian commitment to Coalition operations in Afghanistan, the Australian Prime Minister agreed to the request on 10 April 2007. The planning and conduct of the deployment quickly devolved to the RAAF, especially No 41 Wing (41WG).

No 41 Wing conducted an early reconnaissance and noted the need for airfield works at Kandahar and for essential equipment upgrades in order to match the USAF’s in-theatre capability. The plan saw No 114 Mobile and Control Reporting Unit (114MCRU), callsign ‘Taipan’, form the core of the initial deployment, with subsequent rotations being made up from all parts of the RAAF’s air surveillance and battlespace management community.

No 41 Wing developed a multi-phased plan to enable Taipan to match the USAF’s in-theatre capability; the USAF could not withdraw until this was achieved. An initial cadre of 41WG air battle managers and air surveillance operators would prepare the site and qualify on the USAF equipment, permitting the USAF to commence winding back their operations. The early move of the radar and cabins was made using chartered Antonov aircraft, a first for 41WG. Taipan would only take full responsibility for the mission once sufficient personnel and equipment were fully operational and certified at Kandahar. After this, operational control of Taipan would pass to the USAF Combined Air Operations Centre (CAOC) at Al Udeid Air Force Base. In common with other ADF units in theatre, national command remained with CJTF 633 while technical control (TECHCON) stayed with CAF. OC 41 WG was delegated as his representative.

OC 41WG TECHCON responsibilities centred on supporting the radar and cabins, managing upgrades and providing specialist personnel. To meet the unit’s establishment of about 75 personnel, most of 41WG’s specialist personnel would rotate through Kandahar. Providing 24 hour, 7 day coverage required a minimum of 59 personnel—34 operations and 25 maintenance staff,
even with the USAF providing communications and ISAF providing catering, most medical needs and external force protection. A small support and command element rounded out the unit. Unlike many ADF units, Taipan had an additional requirement to qualify operators in theatre as it proved impossible to simulate the scale and tempo of Afghanistan operations at home in Australia.

Fortunately for the unit’s personnel, its radar and cabins were essentially new and state of the art; with the TPS-77 radar and Warden operating system having been introduced into service shortly before deployment. Although it was an impressive system, some additional capabilities were still needed to optimise its performance in theatre. In particular, a full tactical data link capability, Link-16, was necessary as was secure, same-time chat. Installing new equipment wasn’t the only demand placed on the maintenance flight: the extreme operating environment, while having been anticipated, could only be fully comprehended after experiencing the weather at Kandahar. Extreme temperature ranges and fine dust tested both the maintenance staff and the equipment. Nevertheless, Taipan achieved better than 98 per cent serviceability throughout the deployment.

With both equipment and personnel in place, the unit started its task of controlling and coordinating all Coalition fixed wing aircraft, and compiling the airspace picture. Taipan’s airspace picture was disseminated to the CAOC and throughout the region via tactical datalinks. With up to 120 aircraft operating in their airspace at any one time, the unit coordinated the air support for over 5000 combat engagements in the just over two year period that they were deployed in-theatre. When combined with feeds from other radars, Taipan had a unique perspective from which to conduct their complicated task.

For most Australian operators, not only was Afghanistan their first operational deployment but it was also their first exposure to Link-16 and managing complex air-to-air refuelling operations. Both of these tasks were critical enablers for the highest priority task, that of coordinating and marshalling aircraft to provide close air support to Coalition troops in contact. Contacts occurred throughout the deployment but it soon became apparent that there was a marked difference between ground operations conducted by day and those conducted at night. Normally daylight ground operations were larger and reactive which necessitated flexible responses from both Taipan and air elements. Night operations frequently were more discrete and focussed tasks conducted over a shorter period. Taipan operators tended to remain on either day or night shift for the duration of their deployment enabling them to acquire specialised skills in supporting the different type of operations.

By early 2009, the unit commenced planning for return to Australia. In common with most ADF units, a great deal of effort was put into meeting the exacting Australian biosecurity requirements for the homeward trip. Getting the unit’s equipment re-constituted also figured prominently in planning, as did a robust hand-over to the incoming USAF unit. The USAF had elected to remote data from the relief USAF radar to the new Battlespace Command and Control Centre (BC3) located outside Afghanistan. The withdrawal of Taipan from Afghanistan did not mean the end of a RAAF air battlespace management contribution since a small contingent of RAAF members continues to form part of the USAF’s BC3.

By agreeing to replace the USAF’s air battlespace control element in Afghanistan, the RAAF had a unique opportunity to gain invaluable operational experience for its air defence units while contributing directly to the Coalition effort. The deployment placed considerable demands on the relatively small operational and maintenance workforce in 41 Wing. However, the success of the deployment brought RAAF capability into line with Allied skills and capabilities.

Key Points
• Until 2007, RAAF air defence units had not deployed on operations since 1966.
• The considerable differences between tempo, mission demands and equipment capabilities in Afghanistan and Australia required equipment upgrades and flexible approaches to training and procedures.
• By establishing a theatre wide view of air and land operations, Taipan had a unique perspective that allowed the optimum placement of aircraft to support Coalition land operations and facilitated centralised control and decentralised execution of air operations over Afghanistan.