‘Air power will not make a land force potent, but without air power a land force will never be potent.’

Air Marshal Geoff Brown,
Land Warfare Conference 2012

Throughout the course of Operations Falconer, Catalyst and Slipper the improvised explosive device (IED) emerged as the clear weapon of choice for the insurgents and was the greatest threat faced by the Coalition forces. While the use of IEDs reduced the need for insurgents to directly engage with Western forces, these potent weapons caused more deaths and injuries to Coalition forces and the civilian populations in both Iraq and Afghanistan than any other weapons system. Coalition fatalities attributable to IEDs escalated sharply from 20 in 2005 to 368 in 2010. Approximately 40 percent of Australian soldiers killed in action and over 60 percent of those wounded were as a direct result of IED attacks. High as those casualty figures are, Coalition development and deployment of a variety of increasingly successful countermeasures prevented the IED toll from being still higher. These measures resulting in IED casualty numbers declining from 2011.

Much of the Coalition’s multi-faceted response to IEDs has been well documented, including the use of courageous, highly trained, dismounted combat engineers conducting manual searches to detect and neutralise IED threats, explosive detector dogs, and more recently, safer, vehicle-mounted detection equipment. However, far less is known about the counter-IED role played by the RAAF’s P-3C, and later, AP-3C aircraft and their crews deployed to the Middle East Area of Operations (MEAO).

From January 2003 until December 2012, RAAF crews from 92 Wing flew demanding high tempo operations while force assigned for Operations Falconer, Catalyst and Slipper. During these operations the RAAF flew 2,410 missions, totalling over 22,500 hours flown and achieving a 96 per cent success rate. At the commencement of operations, the RAAF detachment was employed in their traditional maritime Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) role in the Arabian Gulf. These early missions helped provide Coalition forces with the battlespace awareness vital to the success of the air, sea and land campaigns conducted against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Following the defeat of the regular Iraqi military, the RAAF continued to fly missions in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea to protect essential sea-lanes of communication and vital installations from insurgent attack. Such missions were critical for the security of Coalition forces and the stability of the Iraqi economy dependent on the output from its offshore oil platforms.

As the scale of the Iraqi insurgency increased, the focus of Coalition forces changed to conducting stabilisation operations in conjunction with Iraqi Security Forces. These operations required significantly more airborne ISR assets than were available from assets normally employed in this role, and led to the RAAF detachment being tasked in the non-traditional overland ISR role. The first RAAF mission in this role was flown in March 2003 when the RAAF detachment was still equipped with the ‘basic’ P-3C. By August that year the Air Force, tasked on increasingly complex overland ISR
missions over Iraq, were operating the AP-3C, with its greatly enhanced sensor fit and associated improvements in capabilities.

The development of the overland ISR role required an extraordinary effort across 92 Wing and other key support organisations. Reconfiguration of the aircraft with significant new sensor and communications systems, integration of those systems with Coalition systems, development of new tactics, techniques and procedures, and the associated training and certification of air and ground crews occurred within a greatly condensed timeframe to cater for operational imperatives. Notably, much of this occurred in-theatre while the detachment was continuing to undertake other tasking.

The scope and complexity of the overland ISR missions grew rapidly. They were often conducted at short notice, or after inflight re-tasking between disparate roles in response to the dynamics associated with Coalition ground troops in contact with insurgents. The RAAF operated in a fragile strategic environment, in close proximity to sensitive international boundaries and the potentially hostile military assets of regional neighbours.

In July 2009, while continuing maritime operations, (now on anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden, Red Sea and Indian Ocean), RAAF AP-3Cs commenced overland operations in Afghanistan in support of Coalition ground forces. In this theatre Taliban-deployed IEDs again represented a potent threat to Coalition forces and the civilian population.

Throughout its involvement in counter-IED operations, the P-3C’s (and later, AP-3C’s) comprehensive sensor suite, the aircraft’s long endurance and relatively large crew permitted the aircraft to remain on station for extended periods, obtaining the detailed intelligence and associated pattern of life information necessary to cue Coalition forces to neutralise IED cells in both Iraq and Afghanistan. From covert stand-off ranges crews detected IED factory and cache locations, IEDs that had been deployed and, on occasion, insurgents in the process of laying IEDs. The latter role included the provision of overwatch until and during the response by Coalition ground forces.

Use of RAAF P-3 aircraft in the counter IED role reflected the aircraft’s inherent agility and flexibility, its capacity to be upgraded with increasingly capable sensor and communication equipment, new software programs and upgrades, the ability of aircrew to readily adapt to changing tasking in a complex operational environment, and the remarkable support effort from technicians, maintenance personnel, intelligence, operations and training staff.

While 92 Wing has generally been regarded as ‘the quiet achiever’ for past operational excellence, deserved recognition was given on this occasion for 92 Wing’s sustained and outstanding service for almost a decade in support of warlike operations in the MEAO during Operations Falconer, Catalyst and Slipper. Not only did 92 Wing excel in its traditional maritime role, it also adapted to new roles such as counter IED patrols to the considerable advantage of Coalition forces and those they sought to protect.

Key Points

- Adaptable, flexible, committed and highly trained air and ground crew, and well resourced logistics support are essential to successful air operations, as exemplified by the RAAF’s marathon commitment to operations in the MEAO.
- Platforms employed by the RAAF must have the capacity to accept upgrades in response to changing roles and new threats.
- Interoperability and good communications with ground forces are key to the effective delivery of air power’s effects.