

PATHFINDER

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AP-3C OPERATIONS IN THE MEAO NEW MISSIONS FOR NEW WARS

AP-3C Orion deployments in the Middle East Area of Operations (MEAO) on Operations *Catalyst* and *Slipper* have comprised missions that have been both evolutionary and revolutionary. In adapting flexibly to new demands while on operations, the AP-3C crews have demonstrated professional mastery which underpins our Air Force doctrine.

The mission changes are evolutionary in the sense that the conduct of maritime surveillance operations is a continuance of what has effectively been the traditional roles of Numbers 10 and 11 Squadrons for the past 68 years; and revolutionary in that the Overland Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (OISR) role was developed, introduced and perfected while undertaking warlike operations in theatre.

OISR tasks that can be undertaken by the Orion crews include target development, route clearance, convoy clearance, indirect fire detection, Improvised Explosive Device detection, curfew overwatch and the provision of situational awareness for ground forces on patrol or in contact.

Flying out of a forward operating base the Orion crews conduct maritime and OISR missions in the MEAO in support of coalition forces. For Operation *Catalyst*, these patrols contribute directly to the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Iraq with the maritime patrols providing support to the coalition warships protecting the economic infrastructure at the 'wet end' of Iraq. While the coalition Naval forces provide persistence and presence, the Orions provide reach, flexibility, speed and responsiveness to create enduring effects.

Operation *Slipper* missions are conducted in a different vein to Operation *Catalyst*, as they predominantly provide support for the interdiction of trans-national crime, namely the smuggling of arms, drugs, alcohol and people. Interdiction of vessels conducting this traffic removes a significant source of revenue for terrorist organisations.

OISR has come as a revolution for maritime crews. The conduct of OISR missions is a departure from the traditional environment and way of thinking, as Orion crews have gone from conducting operations over

water to working over land. Despite the change of environment, the principles have remained the same, albeit with a number of new considerations such as understanding the language and tactics used by ground forces and the different threat environment.



P3 aircraft on take-off

The use of a manned platform to conduct OISR provides a useful adjunct to the unmanned platforms undertaking a similar role. Although lacking the endurance of a High Altitude Long Endurance Unmanned Aerial Vehicle, such as a Global Hawk or Predator, the AP-3C has a broader view that provides greater situational awareness of the battlespace by virtue of its multiple observer stations and sensors that encompass the entire electromagnetic spectrum. All observers (i.e. anyone looking out a window—from pilots to AEAs) can observe tactical events and call the Electro Optic turret onto target—providing far greater utility than the 'looking down the soda straw' field of view that is a restriction for most unmanned systems. Furthermore, the multi-crew capacity enables onboard analysis, reducing time taken and bandwidth required to transfer data to ground stations.

Given the fluidity of the tactical situation in the MEAO, AP-3C missions have to remain totally flexible and adaptable as they can be retasked at short notice. On occasions an AP-3C on a maritime patrol mission has been retasked while airborne to conduct OISR and then a few hours later returned to its original over-water surveillance task. Similarly, aircraft on OISR missions provide situational awareness to maritime forces during over-water transits. This consistently demonstrates the versatility of the multi-role aircraft conducting swing

roles in a single mission. By operating as part of the Command and Control network, the AP-3C provides operational commanders with the necessary flexibility to achieve their objectives.

In order to remain flexible and responsive, the AP-3C detachment operates under a robust command and control structure supported by a responsive and effective secure communications network. Prior to being accepted, any proposed retasking is cleared through the C2 chain to ensure it is within the scope of the Task Group's mission and Australian Government direction.



P3 cabin

The MEAO effort is optimised by a support structure that provides the intellectual rigour to develop and test Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs) that are used by the deployed crews. Although a revolution, the OISR role has been undertaken only after careful consideration of the risk, mission profiles and desired outcomes. These are constantly revised and updated to keep pace with the continually changing operational environment. Considerable effort has also been devoted to train and prepare crews for deployment and, once in theatre, to update them on the latest TTPs, developments and the emerging tactical situation.

The skill sets developed during training for direct support of anti-submarine warfare have been key to preparing crews to conduct OISR. Joint operations with the Navy have enabled tactical crew members to function in a multi-threat, multi-dimensional battlespace where they interpret the data from different sensors and then fuse the information into exploitable forms. This data is then provided to the

'customers' in a timely fashion via multiple radio nets in specific formats that meet the individual customer's requirements. The crew coordination required to conduct anti-submarine warfare is akin to that required when conducting OISR in a challenging environment.

Over its four and a half year commitment to operations in the MEAO, the AP-3C Orion Task Group has earned an excellent reputation for its professionalism, capability, and responsiveness in its highly-rated contribution to coalition operations. The crews from 10 and 11 Squadrons are regarded as setting the benchmark for theatre maritime patrols and OISR.

The evolution and revolution in mission content that has taken place in the MEAO conclusively proves that the training and education provided to RAAF personnel in air power doctrine and theory is sound, and when practically applied can produce results well in excess of the investment.

- *AP-3C Orion aircraft have adapted their traditional capabilities in both an evolutionary and revolutionary manner to optimise their contribution to operations in the Middle East.*
- *By ensuring that a robust command and control system is in place the Task Group has optimised its contribution to ISR, both maritime and overland.*
- *The flexibility and adaptability that manned platforms provide in the conduct of ISR complements Uninhabited Aerial Vehicles in the same role.*
- *Professional mastery is the foundation of flexible air power.*

"Any nation intent on going to war to pursue an interest or defend a principle must first secure the air above it."

*AVM Tony Mason,
Air Power: a centennial appraisal (1994)*



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