



The RAAF in the Iraq War 2003- Australia's Contribution to the Coalition Air Campaign

By Wing Commander Craig Stallard

At 0530 Baghdad time on 20 March 2003, cruise missiles and bombs rained down on the Iraqi capital publically signalling the commencement of the operation that led to the end of Saddam Hussein's regime. In the lead up to this 'shock and awe' campaign more than 467 000 Coalition forces had amassed in the largest sea and air lift operation since the 1990-91 Gulf War. Iraqi air defence systems had been softened during Operation *Southern Watch*, the eleven year UN mission to monitor and control airspace over Southern Iraq, but the 'Super MEZ' (Missile Engagement Zone) over Bagdad remained intact.

The job to take down the Super MEZ and run the air campaign for the US Operation *Iraqi Freedom* (OIF) fell to the Joint Force Air Component Commander (JFACC) Lieutenant General Michael (Buzz) Moseley. As JFACC, he commanded over 1800 aircraft and more than 55 000 personnel. The nerve centre of his command and control was the Coalition Air Operations Centre (CAOC), which at its peak had a staff of nearly 2000 including an embedded team of RAAF and Army personnel under the command of the then Group Captain (now Air Marshal) Geoff Brown. The CAOC planned and executed OIF air operations in line

with the air power tenet of centralised control and decentralised execution.

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) contribution to the Iraq campaign consisted of 2050 personnel, including 620 RAAF members. In total, the ADF allocated 19 fixed wing and three rotary wing aircraft for use in Coalition air operations.

In mid-January 2003 a detachment of two AP-3C Orion aircraft, with more than 150 personnel from the then Maritime Patrol Group and No 381 Expeditionary Combat Support Squadron (ECSS), were deployed as part of ADF Operations *Bastille* and *Falconer*—the lead-up phase and the Australian contribution to the war in Iraq. For the next four months the Orion crews flew essential ISR missions providing valuable information to support the development and execution of maritime, land and air campaigns. On 16 July 2003 Operation *Catalyst* commenced as the ADF contribution to the US-led Multinational Force effort to develop a secure and stable environment in Iraq, to assist national recovery programs and facilitate the transition to Iraqi self-government. Orions continued to provide critical ISR capabilities across Iraq in support of operations until their withdrawal in 2011.

In early February 2003, three C-130H Hercules aircraft departed Australia for the Middle East Area of Operations (MEAO). About 100 personnel from the Air Lift Element Group, known as the Combat Air Lift Unit (CALU), formed part of a large multi-national air mobility effort. By mid-March 2003, the Hercules crews had lifted roughly 400 000 kilograms of cargo and 500 passengers across the MEAO, as well as training extensively with SAS troops who were to later operate across Iraq. Air personnel from No 36 Squadron and No 386 ECSS effectively contributed to the lightning campaign of manoeuvre undertaken by Coalition Special Forces. Three Australian CH-47 Chinook helicopters contributed to these missions in western Iraq by providing short duration, smaller payload flights into areas inaccessible to larger fixed wing aircraft. Throughout the war, RAAF Hercules aircraft were used to fly supplies and equipment into Iraq, and later flew some of the first humanitarian aid missions into Baghdad International Airport. C-130J model Hercules of No 37 Squadron joined the C-130Hs to continue to provide airlift to Australian and Coalition forces.

During the second week of February 2003, a detachment of 14 F/A-18 Hornets from No 75 Squadron deployed to a base in the Middle East. With the personnel of No 382 CSS, approximately 250 RAAF personnel deployed from Air Combat Group. The decision to deploy the Hornets was criticised by some commentators, who believed deficiencies in the aircraft combat systems would limit their inclusion in initial operations. In reality, the Hornets sent to the Gulf had recently been upgraded to Hornet Upgrade Project (HUG) 2.1 standard, which made them at least as capable as the F/A-18C aircraft operated by the US Marine Corps and the US Navy. RAAF Hornets were initially engaged in defensive counter air (DCA) operations, however after nine days the

Hornets were transitioned into air-ground operations—close air support and ‘kill box’ interdiction—in support of the Coalition advance. Targets varied from military barracks to missile launchers. The Iraq War saw the first bombs dropped by the RAAF in 32 years, and in keeping with the advances in technology, only precision guided weapons were employed.

In addition, an Air Forward Command Element of about 70 RAAF personnel was deployed to Iraq as part of Operation *Falconer*. This element was responsible for coordinating air operations with coalition partners and providing national control of RAAF assets. It included 42 staff attached to the CAOC, numerous liaison officers, several exchange officers and six Imagery Analysts. This element was embedded with their Coalition counterparts and took part in the planning for the employment of 1600 Coalition aircraft which flew on the daily Air Tasking Order (ATO) which tasked all the aircraft flying in support of OIF.

In May 2003, then Warrant Officer of the Air Force Peter Hall, summed up the RAAF contribution to the Iraq War 2003. “I think it’s the first time we had to really integrate with a coalition force and we proved that we could fit in, like a jigsaw puzzle,” he said. “I spoke with all the base chief master sergeants who have had nothing but praise for the Australians even though we were just a drop in the ocean compared with them. Our people have enhanced Australia’s reputation and became the good citizens in the camps, and in some cases become leaders in the social push to get everyone together. We have gone out and done the business and not lost anyone, which, of course, is great. Our people over there have worked really hard, long hours.”

RAAF expeditionary capability and professional mastery were tested during the Iraq War 2003. Although the war generated some challenges,

all obstacles were overcome and the Air Force was able to make a significant contribution to Coalition operations in the MEAO. The Australian airmen and women, who served in the MEAO during 2003, and in the decade since, have upheld the finest traditions of their predecessors and staked their claim in Air Force history.

- *The RAAF provided a vital and flexible air element to Coalition air power during the Iraq War 2003.*
- *The RAAF's expeditionary capabilities and professional mastery enabled Australia to be an effective partner in Coalition air operations.*
- *Despite considerable obstacles and extreme conditions, the RAAF performed exceedingly well in the Iraq War 2003.*



Air Marshal (now Air Chief Marshal retired) Angus Houston talks with members of No 75 Squadron in 2003



Ground crews work on F/A-18s from No 75 Squadron amid a dust storm