

END OF MISSION

OP HERRICK
rotations conclude

A Royal Australian Artillery detachment concluded a unique series of attachments of artillerymen to British operations in Helmand Province in April, bringing to a close an exchange that has drawn the highest praise from British counterparts over several years.

In the months leading up to the end of mission, the Aussie gunners continued their valued and respected efforts by providing fire-support missions in support of coalition and Afghan National Security Forces.

Fifteen gunners from Brisbane-based 1st Field Regiment were attached to the British 7th Parachute, Royal Horse Artillery (7 Para RHA) and operated from a new patrol base at Lashkar Gah Durai, in northern Helmand province.

Commanding Officer 7 Para RHA Lieutenant Colonel Gary Wilkinson said the integration had been seamless and the Australian troops had been remarkably flexible and shown absolute adaptability to any mission.

"Personally, it has been an absolute pleasure to have the Australians here," he said.

"I worked with the Australians on their first rotation with Operation Herrick and now for this final deployment – and very sad to say it is the final deployment.

"It has been a great pleasure and a very effective example of multi-national integration on demanding operations."

The Australian gunners of 105 'Tiger' Troop lived and worked alongside their gunner colleagues of 7 Para RHA in remote Patrol Bases in Helmand for the past five months.

While the security situation in Helmand province had become increasingly stable towards the end of their mission, the Aussies and their British colleagues were attacked by insurgents with rocket-propelled grenade launchers and small arms during an early stage in their deployment, at a forward operating base in Helmand.

The men were forced to defend their position by using the 105mm light guns in a direct-fire role, a rarely used technique for artillery that essentially means the guns are lowered to fire

directly at a seen target, in the same fashion as an aimed rifle.

On another night, Gunner Larry Aitcheson, 1st Field Regiment, recalled a mission when he was the first to arrive at the gun after an urgent fire mission was called for.

He jumped straight into action and prepared the gun for firing, then stood by to wait for full and proper orders.

"We got the mission and it was for four rounds, fire for effect, but we were actually ready but on 'rest', waiting for the fire support teams out on the ground to call us on fire," Gunner Aitcheson said.

"But then we got 'cancel my command – cancel cease loading,' which pretty much

In 2006, the UK announced it would send a Provincial Reconstruction Team with several thousand personnel to Helmand for at least three years.

This had been planned as part of ISAF's expansion from the Kabul region to the rest of Afghanistan.

An initial strength of 5700 personnel was planned, which would stabilise to around 4500 for the rest of the deployment.

The move was to be coordinated with other NATO countries to relieve the predominantly American presence in the south. To this end, the Netherlands and Canada would lead similar deployments in Uruzgan and Kandahar respectively.

The Taliban pledged to resist this expansion.

As of 17 November 2010, British forces have suffered 345 fatalities – all but five since the move into Helmand. At least 300 fatalities are classed as 'killed in action', while 31 were the result of illness, non-combat injuries or accidents, or have not yet been assigned a cause of death pending the outcome of investigations.

In the same period, nearly 1600 British personnel have been wounded, injured or fallen ill, although only about one-quarter of these are classed as 'wounded in action'.

