MIDDLE EAST AREA OF OPERATIONS

MEAO Facts

OPERATION SLIPPER
Australia’s commitment to Operation Slipper (Afghanistan) currently includes:

- Reconstruction Task Force (RTF) is Australia’s contribution to the Dutch-led Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Oruzgan Province. It provides command, security, engineering and operational-support capabilities – 385 personnel
- Special Operations Task Group (SOTG) provides support to ISAF security operations, and provides security and force protection to the RTF. SOTG consists of Commandos, members of the SASR and enabling and support personnel – 300 personnel
- Air Force Control and Reporting Centre (CRC) for operational airspace control at Kandahar Airfield – 75 personnel
- Force Level Logistic Asset in Kandahar – 60 personnel
- National Command Element in Kabul, led by Colonel John Frewen – 30 personnel
- 20 Liaison Officers serving with ISAF plus 1 at UN HQ

OPERATION CATALYST
Australia’s commitment to Operation Catalyst (Iraq) currently includes:

- OBG-W (Overwatch Battle Group-West) in Dhi Qar Province – 515 personnel
- Three C-130 Hercules for intra-theatre airlift – 155 personnel
- SECDET (security detachment) to provide protection and escort to Australian Embassy staff – 110 personnel
- Force Level Logistics Asset – 110 personnel
- AATTI (Australian Army Training Team Iraq) training Iraqi Army throughout the country – 100 personnel
- Detachments to multi-national force headquarters and units – 95 personnel

Some ADF assets and personnel in the Middle East Area of Operations are dual-assigned in support of both operations:

- One ANZAC Class Frigate for maritime patrol and security – 190 personnel
- Two AP-3C Orions for reconnaissance and surveillance – 170 personnel
- Australian Joint Task Force 360, commanded by Major General Mark Evans – 90 personnel
Heading into the mission, OBG(W)3 (Overwatch Battle Group (West) 3) were under no illusion that this mission could be as dangerous as it was vital to the future of Iraq. Just two weeks before being officially farewelled from Darwin by a large contingent of family, friends and dignitaries, their predecessors in Iraq had been targeted in a series of deliberate and potentially lethal attacks.

On 23 April, an OBG(W)2 patrol was involved in an incident where three roadside improvised explosive devices (IEDs) were detonated as the vehicles passed. While no one was killed – a fact easily attributable to the protection afforded by the ASLAV vehicles they were travelling in – two soldiers were injured, one of them relatively seriously. The attack, which occurred north of An Nasaryah in the Dhi Qar Province, saw one ASLAV destroyed and a second badly damaged. Both of the soldiers who were injured were travelling in the destroyed vehicle, which careened off the road after the IED exploded and burst into flames (see “48 Hours of Action” for more detail).

Before leaving for Iraq, the soldiers were formally farewelled on a traditional parade at Robertson Barracks on 10 May, which featured 5RAR trooping its Colours. The battalion had only recently rededicated itself to the original Queen’s and Regiment Colours in an apt but largely unheralded ceremony while on mission rehearsal exercises in Cultana Field Training Area in South Australia.

Sir Roden Cutler VC originally presented the 5RAR colours to the battalion in 1967. Six years later, 5RAR and 7RAR were formally linked to form 5/7RAR. Both battalions’ colours were eventually ‘laid up’ at the Soldiers’ Chapel, Kapooka, in 2004. Now, however, under a $10billion plan to expand the Army by 2600 personnel, 5RAR and 7RAR have again been split. The delinking happened while 7RAR was on operations in Afghanistan and 5RAR was preparing for deployment to Iraq – affording both battalions unique, moving and fitting opportunities to write new chapters in their proud histories.

Subsequently, in Iraq, life for 5RAR proved to be relatively quiet. Save for a broken arm and a few bruises in a vehicle accident in mid June, Overwatch Battle Group (West) 3’s mission (to date) has run routinely and to plan. One major operation of note for the soldiers of the OBG(W)3 was the provision of support to a coalition movement called Operation Crimson Advance, in July. The Australian contribution, coded Operation Hindmarsh, saw the battle group play an important role in assisting the British Army’s King’s Royal Hussars (KRH) move from Maysaan Province to Basrah. Op Hindmarsh gave the Australian battle group a valuable opportunity to support major Coalition security operations that involved British and US ground forces as well as other coalition forces.
well as combat aircraft, Apache helicopters and Australian P-3C Orions. Commanding officer OBG(W)3 Lieutenant Colonel Jake Ellwood says it is particularly noteworthy that the Australian Battle Group played a vital role securing two important bridges (favoured insurgent ambush points) in the urban sprawl of An Nasiriyah.

Securing the bridges enabled the KRH to cross the Euphrates River and man up with the Australians, who then escorted the Brits through one of Iraq’s largest cities, which only weeks earlier had been the scene of fierce fighting between the Mahdi Army and the Iraq Security Forces and where Australian patrols had been ambushed.

Lieutenant Colonel Ellwood says that part of the success of Operation Hindmarsh can be attributed to Australian UAVs and other Coalition air assets that provided the ground forces with vital situational awareness and real-time imagery during the mission.

“The operation was conducted in the dead of night and the belligerents, who potentially could have attacked the convoys with RPGs and machineguns, were undoubtedly disabled by the battle group’s speed and night-operating capabilities,” he says.

“There could be no better ending to a Coalition operation of this scale or undertaking.”

Commanding officers from both the KRH and the OBG(W)3 later celebrated their success with a good cigar – presumably in the absence of G&Ts.

With no real beer for the soldiers of OBG(W)3 until they return to Australia in October, we wish them well for the remainder of their deployment.

48 HOURS OF ACTION

“A I can remember it was just an almighty bang, which in turn knocked us to the turret floor.”

That was the first recollection of the callsign V0B crew commander after his ASLAV, on a patrol north of An Nasiriyah in southern Iraq, was struck by an IED at 6.24pm on 23 April.

That explosion and two other IEDs within the next 11 minutes were part of a series of coordinated attacks against OBG(W)2 over two days.

It was the worst level of violence targeted against Australian forces since they began operations in southern Iraq in 2005.

The first attack occurred around lunch time on April 30 at An Nasiriyah, north of An Nasiriyah in the Dhi Qar Province, when the battle groups’ ASLAVs and Bushmasters came under RPG and small-arms fire, with no damage resulting.

During their move south, heading back to the camp at Al ‘Air Base, Tallil, the patrol received further small-arms fire from An Nasir.

Then, about 1.7km north of An Nasiriyah, the first of three IEDs exploded.

Back at the OBG(W)2 headquarters at Tallil, operations room staff were monitoring the incident (via a live video feed from a UAV looking overhead the battle scene) and saw V0B veer off the road into swampy lowlands and burst into flames.

What followed on the ground was a demonstration of good training and drills, with critical support from the battlegroup HQ, logistical and medical staff as well as Coalition air assets – an effort battlegroup commander Lieutenant Colonel Tony Rawlins described as “phenomenal.”

The crew commander, driver and gunner of V0B extracted themselves from the burning vehicle within seconds of the blast, despite the driver, Trooper Andrew Behmdt, having received serious leg injuries and burns.

At the same time, infantry soldiers and other attachments quickly moved to check for further IEDs, provide security, secure a helicopter landing zone, support the injured and provide details of the injuries to already inbound US medevac helicopters.

With the crew well away from the burning vehicle and a security cordon in place, a second IED exploded, damaging two more ASLAVs in the next packet of vehicles. A third IED detonated a short time later.

While jet fighters swooped low and where Australian patrols had been ambushed – our vehicles moved into place, and we got the casualties out.”

Unable to recover the burning ASLAV, the battle Group continued its journey to Tallil in the early hours of April 24, only to be ambushed again with RPG and small-arms fire on a bridge in An Nasiriyah. The Australians returned fire but pushed on.

That night, the recovery operation for the abandoned ASLAV was again ambushed. The Aussies returned fire, but emerged unscathed – except for the already gutted V0B, which stopped another RPG hit while it sat on the back of a recovery vehicle.

With permission AMY newspaper

DOUBLE TROUBLE

Reconstruction Task Force (RTF) security troops recently delivered two body blows to Taliban forces operating about 10km north-northeast of the Australian/Dutch base at Tarin Kowt in Oruzgan Province, Afghanistan.

The first contact happened on 8 July during a reconnaissance operation. The Australian troops had moved into an area for the first time to conduct an engineer survey of Afghan security posts so that planned construction work could be conducted by the engineering component of the RTF.

Troop Leader Lieutenant Scott Owens says the Aussies were expecting trouble before the first round was fired.

“We had moved across a road into an area where the locals had recently been harvesting a wheat crop,” he says.

“There were wheelbarrows and harvesting equipment lying around in the open, and my driver remarked on how it looked weird because there were no people around.

“About a minute later we were in contact.”

The battle was initiated by a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) fired from ahead of the RTF patrol, and was followed by small-arms fire.

Lead-vehicle commander Corporal Jason Hatcher says that once the contact started everything worked as per training.

We were moving in formation through open terrain when there was an explosion at the rear of the troop,” he says.

“To our front we saw the puff of smoke from where the round had been launched and then we saw a guy move around from behind the wall of a compound he had an RPG on his shoulder and was prepared to fire again.

“So, we engaged. All our training kicked in – our vehicles moved into place, and we opened fire. Our drills worked excellently – it was a scenario we had rehearsed and trained for and everything just fell into place.”

Above: Sergeant William Ross supervises soldiers firing an 84mm Carl Gustav.

Right: Private Nicholas Reed and Corporal James Gosling provide support in a simulated attack at Camp Terendak.

PIC BY LEADING AIRCRAFTMAN RODNEY WELCH

FOR TALIBAN

Left: Sergeant Brett Embry prepares breakfast.

PIC BY LEADING AIRCRAFTMAN RODNEY WELCH
The combined firepower of the ASLAVs forced the enemy to flee their positions ahead of the follow-on infantry clearance sweep.

Lieutenant Owens says the initial firefight was over fairly quickly.

“Once we returned fire they wanted to withdraw, because they knew we had a lot of overmatch on them.”

About 20 minutes after the ambush, a group of Bushmaster-mounted Australian infantry arrived on the scene to sweep the area.

In the second action, the Australians arrived at a police outpost, not far from the first contact, just as the Taliban launched an attack. Although the Afghan police held their ground, the assistance of the Australians and some nearby Dutch forces was well appreciated by the policemen.

Swift employment of the Australians’ light armoured vehicle’s main armament was a dramatic wake-up call to the Taliban as they quickly realised they were on the receiving end of cannon and machinegun fire. Their woes weren’t over yet, however, as Dutch Apache helicopters joined the fight and conducted strafing runs on the hapless extremists.

The fight was a great success for the Afghan police and the Australian and Dutch soldiers with no personnel wounded. The same could not be said for the Talian, however.

When the Australians drove up to the Afghan police post, the Diggers were greeted with loud cheering and clapping.

RTF commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel Harry Jarvie says the result was a team effort.

“We’re in a close partnership with the government of Afghanistan and their police force as we try to re-establish security here in Afghanistan,” he says.

“Today was a perfect example of that cooperation.”

Key to the package, however, is its high-zoom optics with day and night capability giving operators an excellent view of what’s happening on the ground. And, being capable of staying aloft for 15 hours at a time, it can cover a lot of ground in a single mission.

The secret to ScanEagle’s success is its stealth and optics. Powered by a whipper-sniper-size engine, an improved muffler system makes the aircraft practically silent at altitude and its relatively short 4m wingspan and haze-grey paint scheme make it almost invisible.

Under the cover of darkness, Taliban extremists dig swiftly into dry, dusty ground beside a rutted track that leads to a Tiri River crossing point. When they are satisfied the hole is deep and long enough they gently lower the improvised explosive device, barely daring to breathe, in case their unstable home-made device detonates in their hands. Finally, pleased with their work, they carefully backfill and camouflage their deadly trap and scurry back to their mountain observation post – totally oblivious to the Australian Army unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) silently recording the whole event from 6000 feet above them.

UAVs have become a high-demand intelligence asset in both Iraq and Afghanistan. After establishing a capability using a smaller model two years ago, the Australian Army has now deployed the high-tech ScanEagle UAV to Afghanistan in support of Australian and coalition forces operating in the Oruzgan Province.

Commanding Officer 20STA (20th Surveillance and Target Acquisition Regiment) Lieutenant Colonel Philip Swinsburg, who oversaw the UVA’s introduction, says the tempo of UAV operations is already high despite only being in theatre for a few months.

“ScanEagle is in demand because it is a 24-hour-capable system that allows us to give the guys on the ground a lot more confidence in where they are going,” he says.

“If there is an incident we can usually be on the scene very quickly.

“We pass information to both the commander at the scene of the incident and back to headquarters so that everyone understands what’s going on and they can react to the situation better.

“The feedback we are getting is very positive.”

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A few hundred metres from the launch pad, in air-conditioned comfort, Bombardier Michael Konig says he has never regretted transferring to UAV operations.

“It’s a fantastic job flying an aerial vehicle,” he says.

“You can see what’s happening on the ground and help the boys do their job by providing real-time information that can actually save lives.”

Flight crew for a mission consists of an air-vehicle operator (AVO) who manoeuvres the UAV, and a mission commander (MC), who operates the optics and retains overall control.

“I get situation reports from higher command and have the UAV moved around accordingly,” Bombardier Konig says.

“There must be close coordination between the AVO and MC, because the air vehicle will crash if you don’t work together.”

As ScanEagle was a rapid-acquisition project for the ADF’s commitment to Afghanistan there was also a rapid training regime to prepare operators for the deployment.

“We went to the US for two months of intensive UAV training with Insitu, the manufacturer,” Bombardier Konig says.

“It was quite hard. There was a lot of flight time involved and you must stay focused.”

He says that while missions can be very long and demanding he was proud to be doing such an important job in Afghanistan.
Well, here I am, back for another task and working in the varied and various locations where Aussies are based in the MEAO (Middle East Area of Operations).

We had a new member in our group this time who had not deployed before – anywhere – so it was enlightening to see his reaction to the various locations to which we travelled.

After using the FLLA (Force-Level Logistics Asset) facilities we moved forward to Baghdad where, almost immediately on arrival, a rocket landed less than 400m away and gave us the by-now almost expected, familiar and fitting welcome-to-Baghdad handshake! A few days later, a car bomb exploded just 200 metres away, but thankfully on the other side of the fence.

In all, we had four rockets land – some as close as 100m – during our brief stay. The random aiming of these damn things were as amazing for their lack of real damage as anything else.

It was very interesting to see that many countries had departed Iraq since my last visit and moved to Afghanistan to concentrate their war efforts in that theatre.

As always, the weather was stinking hot and the food was plentiful but monotonous.

Our task finished, we departed Baghdad – and certainly relieved to do so, especially the new guy.

Kandahar saw us arrive into the mayhem of the main support base for Operation Slipper, where British, Canadians, Dutch and, of course, Americans are also heavily concentrated.

The base is very crowded, but the facilities are not bad, if you can put up with the afternoon smell from the sewerage farm, which can get quite thick and toxic depending on the prevailing weather conditions.

Random rocket attacks saw the bunkers used on a regular basis, and usually when you were just about to get in the shower or sit down to a meal.

Accommodation for the Aussies is quite crowded and unprotected here, except for the concrete perimeter, which can make for interesting nights contemplating the random nature of rocket attacks. But, if you don’t think too hard on the subject, you can sleep quite soundly – and we did.

The heat was a bugger, though. It was quite intense. Our RTF (Reconstruction Task Force) base is a relatively small outpost near the town of Tarin Kowt. It sits inside the confines of the larger Dutch ‘Kamp Holland’ and sits in the shadow of magnificent mountains.

Aussies deployed here live in armoured accommodation, which is very heavy and is by far the strongest we encountered. As visitors, though, we slept in plywood huts, which are much more roomy and cool.

It’s hard to imagine there’s a war going on outside the fence here, but it is real and, with frequent missions departing and returning, Apaches taking care of air cover down the valley, and outgoing 155mm artillery from the mobile howitzer, it certainly is a busy place. The arty rounds, in particular, were a popular cause of great debate, shaking the whole base when they fired.

Huge firefight were taking place 15km away and were easily visible through binoculars from many vantage points.

While we were there, Kamp Holland was directly attacked only twice.

Throughout our deployment it was very satisfying to see the many teams undertaking their tasks so professionally despite much pressure and a heavy workload. It was really good to be part of it all.

Our newly deployed member is now hardened to the environment and is looking forward to returning, knowing what to expect.

Opportunities for deployment for the Australian Defence Force look set to continue for some time to come and, in the end, I am confident we will have a highly trained and experienced core of people, ready for anything.