

## RAAF MODERNIZATION AND TRANSFORMATION: SHAPING A WAY AHEAD



2014-12-04 By Robbin Laird

The Royal Australian Air Force is in the throes of significant modernization. As I wrote during my visit earlier this year to Australia about the [process of change](#):

*The Aussies entered the 21st century with an aging Air Force. The silver lining in that difficult position is that as the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) began to modernize, they could do so within the context of new 21st century capabilities.*

*The process really began by adding the C-17, which was at the end of its production run, but introduced a new lift capability for the force. The reach, range and lift performance of the aircraft was important for the Afghan engagement, but will become a key asset as the Aussies focus primarily on Pacific defense.*

*The new A330MRTT tanker is the next piece. The impact of the tanker, which is refuelable, will be significant in allowing the Aussies (individually and in terms of coalition contributions) to engage with extended reach, range and endurance in the Pacific.*



A Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) F/A-18F Super Hornet prepares to refuel mid-air from a RAAF KC-30A Multi Role Tanker Transport over Iraq. Credit: Australian MOD, 11/26/14

*And operating in extended reach and range to protect the borders of Australia, to operate within the strategic quadrangle from Japan, to Guam, to Singapore and to Australia, will be new aircraft able to manage the battlespace with 360 degree extended reach.*

*The coming of the F-35 is a key piece of the re-set of airpower in Australia, but the air battle manager for the RAAF will be the new Wedgetail aircraft.....*

*It is clear that this is a new capability for Australia. And the squadron, which has a distinguished combat record, is approaching the aircraft with a sense of enthusiasm, adventure and willingness to explore new ways it might be used. The backgrounds of the squadron are diverse with navy and air force operators mixed in, and with a wide range of experience in airborne surveillance and battle management, including several years of operational experience with the RAF on the AWACS.*

*For an American who grew up from the 1950s and is used to the US introducing new systems first and then allies following, the Wedgetail is a whole new experience. When you visit Australia you get to see the E-10 we did not buy (Wedgetail) nor the A330MRTT tanker which we did not buy either.*

*This puts the Aussies in a rather odd situation whereby they are at the*

*leading edge of 21st century changes, coupled with working with the USAF main contribution to this effort, the F-22.*

With the RAAF self-deployment from Australia to engage in the air strikes against ISI, a visible change in capability is apparent, although not really noted in the United States.

To discuss this change and the way ahead for the RAAF, Air Vice-Marshal (Ret.) John Blackburn, now the Deputy Chairman of the influential Australian think tank, the [Kokoda Foundation](#) (as of January 2015 it will be called the Institute for Regional Security) and Deputy Chair at the [Williams Foundation](#), was interviewed from Canberra.

I last talked with John when we were both in Rome for [a joint seminar](#) with the Italian Chief of Staff, for the Italian Air Force, Lt. General Preziosa.



A Royal Australian Air Force KC-30A Multi Role Tanker Transport aircraft returns in darkness and is brought to a halt by ground crew after another mission over Iraq as part of Operation Okra. Credit: Australian MOD, 11/22/14

**Question: When you made your presentation in Rome, you highlighted Plan Jericho and the COS of the RAAF's approach to**

**transformation of the force.**

**But a reality already in place is that the RAAF is already in the swing of modernization.**

**A measure of progress is that the RAAF force which went from Australia to the Middle East, self-deployed.**

**With its own tankers and airlift, the RAAF strike force moved rapidly from Australia to support the ISIL allied strike.**

**Could you discuss the change already underway?**

John Blackburn: Prior to the current modernization program, the RAAF would need several months warning time before they could assemble a strike force. And they did not have the logistic capability to support that force at long distance from Australia.

For example, the RAAF had C-130s and a small amount of B 707 tanking support which was in reality only a training capability.

Contrast that to today where in the current Middle East deployment, in a matter of weeks, the forces were able to respond rapidly and to deploy against the threat. And they have an ability to provide the complete logistical support as well to the force. The C-17 and the KC-30As have been crucial to this effort, and is why the government is seeking to acquire additional C-17s and KC-30As as well.

It is a mindset as well as capability change as well. In today's world you are not going to have six months warning with that amount of time to respond. You need forces that can be gathered together rapidly and deployed as a package.

Our government wants to insert forces rapidly to deal with crises; not to have to wait for a long period to deploy. We don't want to respond to the PM's request to deploy with: "Call us in six months, and we will let you know when we are on our way. Governments want real options; not a recorded message."

**Question: In other words, you are enhancing your expeditionary force capability prior to the arrival of the F-35, which can then**

**provide significant ISR, and C2 capabilities to work with the force?**

John Blackburn: The RAAF has always had to be expeditionary given the size of Australia.

Moving from airbases on the East Coast of Australia to the Northern territories is more than four hours. But with the new equipment, and the changes in readiness levels and training we can expand the Air Force's range and capability to support expeditionary operations.

The RAAF are now looking at how not just to modernize the force; but to transform it. They are looking at the F-35 as a key to that effort. It is not a replacement airplane; it is a force for transformation. The focus is not just the airplane or its systems but the impact upon, and the transformation of, the whole force. This transformation will be guided by the RAAF's Plan JERICO.

The Air Force is anticipating already some of these transformational changes as a result of the radar and systems in the Wedgetail AEW&C aircraft; however, the F-35 is a whole new concept and level.

**Question: Looking back, the challenges, which the Australian forces faced in the East Timor operation in 1999, were clearly a turning point in rethinking your way ahead.**

**Could you speak to that transition point?**

John Blackburn: East Timor was a regional security crisis of the sort that Australians saw themselves as being able to lead and to support a coalition force. However, the experience was an eye opener, it was a mindset change.

The scale of the operation clearly challenged our ability to ramp up and sustain the forces throughout the operation.. It triggered a mindset shift in terms of a defense force that was training in order to be ready to do something one day, to a defense force that has to be able to do something "now."

A part of that mindset change which resonates with the RAAF today is that they are not waiting until the F-35 shows up to figure out how to transform the force. When the JSF enters service, they are going to need to be able

to employ the JSF from day 1.. Rapid insertion forces clearly are becoming a key toolset for our political leaders.



Royal Australian Air Force KC-30A Multi Role Tanker Transport aircraft maintenance crew prepare to launch the jet at dusk, commencing another mission refuelling Coalition aircraft over Iraq. Credit: Australian MOD, 11/24/14

**Question: What will be the perception impact on other allies of Australian shaping a modern self-deployment capability?**

John Blackburn: With regard to the United States, the US is always carrying the heavy load.. What you are seeing now is that allies are seeking acquisition of lift and tanking to have more capability to self deploy for their own needs and also to be more effective allies with the US or for each other.

The fact that many allies are buying the F-35 and are likely to think along similar lines as the RAAF are about transformation could well lead to a situation where the capabilities of allies will become proportionally greater. It is important to examine where coalition airpower can go by 2030 under the influence of the twin forces of growing capability of core allies to self deploy and the combat capability of a fifth generation led force.

**Question: How will the RAAF look to integrate platforms such as the Growler and the F-35?**

**The discussion in the United States often views these as polar opposite platforms, and the RAAF is the only force other than the**

**USN which will operate both.**

**What will be the approach?**

John Blackburn: When Australia buys a system, it generally looks at the parent service, which has developed and deployed them.

This means the RAAF has a close relationship with the USN, with the Super Hornets, the Growlers and the P-8s to come.

With the coming of the F-35A the RAAF will work with the USAF and train at [Luke AFB](#).

I expect that the RAAF will initially use the Growlers in a similar way to the USN does; however, as they gain experience I expect that new ways of integrating the Growlers, Super Hornets and JSFs will be developed. These changes may in turn influence how the US Forces use their range of capabilities.

In perhaps a unique fashion we're at the intersection of a set of relationships with U.S. Navy, the U.S. Air Force, the Marines. This relationship is especially strong at the operator level where the innovations are clearly going to occur.

We will clearly tap into the US and allied F-35 community to drive change on how to integrate that change with overall force transformation.

**For our Special Report on Australian defense modernization see the following:**

<http://www.sldinfo.com/australian-defense-modernization-shaping-capabilities-for-21st-century-operations/>

For other pieces or interviews with John Blackburn see the following:

<http://www.sldinfo.com/the-australian-military-and-logistics-when-preparedness-equals-survival/>

<http://www.sldinfo.com/the-challenge-of-energy-security-in-the-21st-century-the-australian-case/>

<http://www.sldinfo.com/the-coming-impact-of-the-f-35-on-raaf->

[modernization-transformation-by-a-battle-hardened-force/](#)

<http://www.sldinfo.com/the-coming-of-the-f-35-to-australia-shaping-a-21st-century-approach-to-airpower/>

<http://www.sldinfo.com/an-australian-perspective-on-the-way-ahead-for-a-pacific-strategy/>



### **Published on Nov 16, 2014 by Australian Ministry of Defence**

Australia's Air Task Group (ATG) consisting of six RAAF F/A-18F Super Hornets, an E-7A Wedgetail Airborne Early Warning and Control aircraft and a KC-30A Multi-Role Tanker Transport aircraft continue to support Operation OKRA with missions in Iraq.

The ATG comprises around 400 RAAF personnel who have deployed to the Middle East.

Australia's efforts are in response to a request for assistance by the Iraqi Government in combating ISIL terrorists.

Operation OKRA is the Australian Defence Force's contribution to the international effort to combat the ISIL terrorist threat in Iraq. Australia's contribution is being closely coordinated with the Iraqi government, Gulf

nations and a broad coalition of international partners.

**And the video at the top of the article shows the RAAF operating over the skies of Iraq.**

The RAAF Air Task Group (ATG) has completed its first operational missions over Iraq. A RAAF E-7A Wedgetail Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) aircraft and KC-30A Multi Role Tanker Transport conducted missions on 1 October 2014 in support of coalition forces. The E-7A conducted a support mission over central Iraq while the KC-30A conducted a support flight over Iraq.

The missions were completed without incident and the aircraft have returned safely to Australia's main support base in the Middle East. The ATG is operating within an Iraqi Government-approved and US-led international coalition assembled to disrupt and degrade the operations of ISIL. Australia's efforts are in response to a request for assistance by the Iraqi Government in combating ISIL terrorists.

Credit: Australian Ministry of Defense

10/2/14

**The following story published November 25, 2014 highlights one impact of the Australian engagement in the air operations against ISIL:**

*The discovery of a 'hidden network of caves and bunkers' occupied by the Islamic State in northern Iraq, by an Australian military plane, has led to an enormous airstrike and the death of over 100 terrorist fighters.*

*Vice-Admiral David Johnston, the chief of joint operations at the Department of Defence, revealed details of the successful multi-national airstrike during an operational update in Canberra on Tuesday.*

*He said that an Australian F-18 Super Hornet military plane, fitted with regular and heat-seeking night cameras, located the concealed bunkers and tunnels in a hillside at Kirkuk while monitoring movements on the mountain during the last week.*

*Within days a subsequent multi-national airstrike involving 20 aircraft*

*attacked 44 targets, complimented by a large-scale ground operation that was led by the Kurdish security forces, that rapidly entered that area, cleared it of the remaining ISIL militants, and with some reporting indicating that over 100 ISIL fighters were killed in those clearance operations,' Vice-Admiral Johnston said.*

*Another recent airstrike that was led by an Australian crew led to the 'severe damage' of a major improvised explosive device factory in Mosul.*

For an update on the ATG published on the Australian MOD website see the following:

<http://www.defence.gov.au/Operations/Okra/atg.asp>