



Foreign Affairs Committee members at a briefing by the Royal Australian Air Force 84 Wing Detachment at Manas Air Base, Kyrgyzstan.

On the ground in Afghanistan

Searing heat, harsh terrain and a persistent enemy confront Australian service personnel fighting against terrorism. Nine federal parliamentarians recently visited the Australian men and women serving in Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf and Kyrgyzstan to see for themselves the dedication and skills needed in this toughest of combat assignments.

Photos: Department of Defence

Planes flying into Bagram Air Force Base in Afghanistan use a spiralling, twisting tactical descent when coming in to land. The threat of a surface to air missile attack is real and ever present.

On the ground, the danger is just as real as Australian Special Forces troops, working as part of the US-led international coalition, seek to track and engage the remnants of Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters.

Bagram Air Base, located in the dusty, wind-swept plains north of Afghanistan's capital Kabul, is a major staging point for the war against terrorism.

Danger is a daily reality for Australian troops based there. It was a reality members of federal parliament's Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee wanted to see for themselves as part of their watching brief on the war against terrorism.

Over an eight-day period nine members of the committee visited some of the key locations where Australian troops are based, including Bagram, Manas in Kyrgyzstan and Australian Navy ships in the Persian Gulf. It was a unique opportunity for our federal parliamentarians to observe and talk with Australian troops in a combat zone.

More than 1,500 Australian service personnel are deployed in support of the international coalition's military efforts to combat terrorism. The demands on them are significant.

Australian troops face an unconventional enemy in an environment that can be just as much of an enemy. During the committee's visit, daily temperatures exceeded 50 degrees Celsius.

"We were just staggered at the climatic conditions that our troops are working under and the magnificent job they're

doing there," Committee Chairman, Senator Alan Ferguson, told Dan Craig of ABC Radio 666, Canberra, following the visit.

"We had the opportunity to fly out on a terrain flight with the US forces in one of their Black Hawks, and there are camps out in the desert where guys go for four months on the trot, and I honestly don't know how they survive."

It's in situations like this that the years of intensive training and the multitude of skills acquired by Australian service men and women come to the fore. Their abilities have won the respect and admiration of their coalition partners.

"I spoke to the American general in charge at Bagram and he said he was just so proud of the way our guys perform under difficult conditions," Senator Ferguson said. "They are very, very highly regarded."

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Kim Beazley, Warren Snowdon and Bruce Scott being briefed by RAAF pilots on the ground at Manas about air-to-air refuelling.



Graham Edwards watching a refuelling demonstration at Manas, Kyrgyzstan.

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Bringing together the armed forces of many nations to work effectively as a united force is one of the numerous challenges faced by the coalition. For the committee, nowhere was this more amply demonstrated than on the navy ships in the Persian Gulf, there as part of the Maritime Interception Force to maintain United Nations sanctions against the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein.

Australians are playing a key role in the interception force: the HMAS *Arunta* and the HMAS *Melbourne* are in the front line of the blockade and, while the interception force is under operational control of the US Navy, an Australian officer exercises day-to-day tactical command.

“We were on the USS *Hopper* for a while where we saw Australians and American Navy personnel working side by side and together in their operation rooms,”



Warren Snowdon at Bagram.

Senator Ferguson said. “We were quite amazed to see the extent of the integration and the fact that they’re working so well together.”

The committee spent time on both Australian ships, with half the members staying on HMAS *Arunta* overnight and the other half on HMAS *Melbourne*.

From those ships, Australian navy personnel set out in inflatable boats day and night to intercept, board and turn around ships that are trying to smuggle out Iraqi oil and goods in contravention of UN sanctions. During the committee’s brief stay of 12 hours, eight boarding parties were sent out on interception missions. Those missions are making a difference: the smugglers are being denied passage, the flow of illegal oil is drying up and revenue is being denied to Saddam Hussein.

Each mission carries significant risks. Adding to the pressure is the need to maintain operations 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

It’s the same for Air Force personnel at Manas in Kyrgyzstan—a fully integrated coalition airbase. They are flying two 707 air-to-air refuelling aircraft in support of American and French fighter operations in Afghanistan. Many hundreds of fighters have been safely refuelled by Australian personnel, who have been able to sustain unexpectedly high rates of serviceability from the 707 tankers.

“All of the personnel deployed are working enormous hours,” remarked Senator Ferguson. “But they seemed a really happy bunch of people who’re really successful at what they’re doing.”

Maintaining morale is critical to success, particularly when the conditions are so harsh and the enemy is scattered through difficult terrain. It’s something that Special Forces troops operating from Bagram in Afghanistan know well.

Those troops routinely undertake patrols as part of coalition operations to conduct reconnaissance, seize weapons and

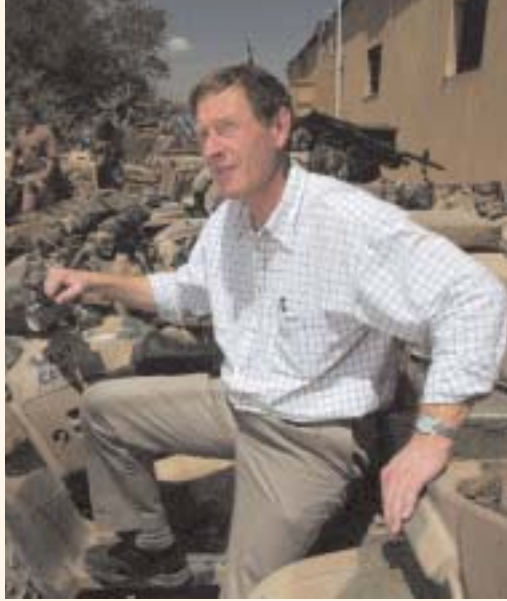
ammunition caches, and deny enemy forces freedom of movement. Operations remain directed at destroying terrorist networks and providing a stable foundation for Afghanistan’s transition to peace.

“At Bagram they go out and patrol for extended periods in their small groups in the mountains. They are so professional in their attitudes that every one of us that was on this delegation was just so impressed with the way they were conducting themselves,” Senator Ferguson said.

The deployment of troops relies on the cooperation of countries in the region—countries like Kyrgyzstan and Kuwait, where Australians have long been deployed in support of the defence of Kuwait. During their visit, committee members met with defence and foreign affairs representatives from both countries to discuss relationship matters of common interest.



Left to right: Lt Courtney Rogers (US Navy) speaks with Alan Ferguson, Grant Harrison (committee secretary), Captain Peter Sinclair (Australian Commander of the Maritime Interception Force), David Jull, Geoff Prosser and Marise Payne on the USS *Hopper* in the Persian Gulf.



Geoff Prosser at Bagram.



Kim Beazley and Alan Ferguson speak with Special Forces personnel at Bagram.

Relationship building is a key element in sustaining the US-led coalition's presence in the region. Contributing to the development of the region is an important part of that relationship building, and here too Australian service personnel are actively involved.

In Kyrgyzstan, Australians participate in humanitarian programs with the Americans, providing humanitarian supplies and charitable goods, such as toys to local children. It's all part of the effort to build trust and cooperation among the nations and communities that have been brought together in the fight against terrorism.

Also critical to the war effort is the individual commitment that each Australian service man and woman is making. It's a commitment shared with their families at home in Australia.

"They join these forces knowing that they're going to be sent away at times," noted Senator Ferguson. "It's part of their career; it's part of their life, and I guess they adjust as families to that. But it's still a long time away from home."

The deployments last from three to six months. Regular rotations are necessary to ensure that personnel are rested, skill levels are maintained and equipment is kept in good working order. Special Forces troops in Afghanistan are on their third rotation following the establishment of the international coalition, and the Air Force and Navy are on their second rotations.

What makes the time away a bit easier is the contact that modern communications enable the troops to have with their families.

"They've all got phone contact," said Senator Ferguson. "In these days of PCs they've all got email."

"One guy I spoke to had only seen his daughter for two weeks before he was posted. But he said that through the web he actually saw his daughter roll over for the first time.

"Modern communications mean they feel as though they're closer to home even though they're not."

The Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee members will now prepare a report on their visit for presentation to parliament.

"We'll be reporting to parliament as to what we've seen," Senator Ferguson said. "It's not something where we're likely to make a lot of recommendations of any sort."

"We'll just be reporting accurately our impressions of the eight days we had away, so that all those in parliament can know that we have a unanimous view on various issues. And we hope that the report will then spread into the community so that Australians know how well served we are by these wonderful men and women."

The members of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade who undertook the visit were: Alan Ferguson (Chairman and Senator for SA); Laurie Brereton (Deputy Chairman and Member for Kingsford Smith, NSW); Marise Payne (Senator for NSW); Kim Beazley (Member for Brand, WA); Graham Edwards (Member for Cowan, WA); David Jull (Member for Fadden, Qld); Geoff Prosser (Member for Forrest, WA); Bruce Scott (Member for Maranoa, Qld); and Warren Snowdon (Member for Lingjari, NT). ■

About the House is grateful to ABC Radio 666, Canberra, for making available Dan Craig's interview with Senator Ferguson.



Bruce Scott, David Jull, Kim Beazley and Laurie Brereton speak with Special Forces troops at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan.