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CHIEF OF THE DEFENCE FORCE

Opening Statement
Budget Estimates Hearing
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Thank you Senator.

I will give an overview of our operations around the globe. Firstly, our operations in Iraq are currently focussed on supporting the Iraqi Security Forces as they continue their offensive to regain control of the city of Mosul. In late January, Prime Minister al-Abadi declared East Mosul had been fully liberated and on 19 February, he announced the start of Iraq's campaign to retake west Mosul.

Over the past week, the Iraqis have recaptured a number of strategic positions including Ghazlani military base and Mosul Airport with support from Coalition nations, including Australian Special Forces advisors and the Air Task Group.

I had the opportunity to join the Air Task Group during a recent mission in support of the Mosul operations. Flying over Iraq, observing the F/A-18 Hornets, following the targeting processes as well as monitoring the interaction between coalition aircraft and ground forces reinforced the complexity of the battlespace and the excellent work our people are doing at all levels of operations against Daesh.

In numeric terms, to date, the E-7A Wedgetail has completed 319 airborne command and control sorties while the KC-30A Tanker has offloaded an impressive 33.5 million kilograms of fuel to Australian and Coalition aircraft since Operation OKRA commenced in October 2014. Our Hornet aircraft have conducted more than 2,100 sorties over Iraq and Syria, including those in support of the Mosul offensive which began last October. During the Mosul offensive, our Hornets have struck over 130 targets around Mosul including Daesh fighting positions, IED factories, weapons storage facilities and a tunnel system used to conceal and move both weapons and fighters.

I also spent some time with the Australian Special Operations Task Group, including the remotely based joint terminal attack controllers who have been highly effective in supporting Iraqi ground forces. Working closely with other Coalition Advise and Assist teams, they have coordinated over 450 strikes that have allowed the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service to maintain its momentum in the Mosul offensive. When the Counter Terrorism Service suffered casualties, Australian Special Forces medics

have helped provide critical combat first aid to their wounded Iraqi counterparts. This support has not only saved lives, it has strengthened the relationship between our soldiers and the Iraqi soldiers.

The Counter Terrorism Service is ably supported by Iraq's regular security forces, many of whom have trained under Task Group Taji. As the combined Australian-New Zealand Building Partner Capacity Mission approaches the two year mark, successive rotations have trained in excess of 19,000 Iraqi soldiers and, more recently, federal police. When I visited in January, a number of units that had trained with Task Group Taji had recently returned for further instruction. Battle hardened, but more confident in their own capability, these soldiers have developed a special relationship with their Australian trainers.

Senators, that rapport and respect for Australian Defence Force personnel is echoed across all our operations in the Middle East Region. Our people are doing an excellent job, delivering exactly what government has asked us to do. Everyone I met; from the technicians maintaining our aircraft to the intelligence and legal officers providing critical support, through to the Australians who are engaged at the tactical level, they understand the importance of their mission and they are proud of the work they are doing to disrupt, degrade and ultimately support the defeat of Daesh. I know that sentiment will be repeated later this year when I meet the ADF personnel training, advising and assisting the National Security and Defence Forces in Afghanistan in their fight against the Taliban.

Australia remains one of the largest non-NATO contributor to the Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan. Although this is a non-combat training mission, our ongoing assistance has seen the Afghan forces continue to mature. Despite the persistent threat from insurgent and terrorist groups, local security forces have demonstrated their ability to hold territory, retaining control of the country's major population centres, including Tarin Kot.

Afghanistan's future security will however, depend on the government's ability to raise, train and sustain its defence and security forces. The Afghan National Army Officer Academy outside Kabul is an integral part of forward planning and so are the ADF trainers and advisors who are working with the next generation of military leaders. Since it was established in 2013, around 2,000 Army Officers have successfully completed military training at the Academy.

As you are aware, there is a third arm supporting our training missions and strike operations in the Middle East and that is our maritime contribution. The Royal Australian Navy is one of 31 nations patrolling more than 3.2 million square miles of ocean as part of the Combined Maritime Force maintaining security and stability in international waters. HMAS *Arunta* is currently on a nine month deployment, conducting counter-piracy and counter-narcotic operations to cut off a major source of funding for terrorist and criminal organisations. *Arunta* is the 64th Royal Australian Navy vessel to conduct this mission. Since January 2014, Australian ships have seized and destroyed illegal narcotics worth an estimated A\$2.68 billion.

Senators, our contribution in the Middle East region accounts for approximately 70 per cent of all ADF personnel currently deployed on operations. Importantly, today,

newly promoted Major General Simon Stuart takes over as Force Commander overseeing the multi-national peacekeeping observer force on the Sinai Peninsula. He is only the second Australian to command the Multi-national Force Observers since the mission began 30 years ago. The remainder of our personnel are undertaking important work on a range of operations at home and abroad, including in South Sudan.

In our immediate region, the interagency relationships established on border protection operations have allowed the ADF, the Australian Federal Police and Australian Border Force to successfully conduct a number of joint counter-narcotic operations. Using the same skills as our boarding parties in the Middle East, sailors in Australian Navy ships *Newcastle*, *Adelaide* and *Bathurst*, have intercepted shipments of cocaine and methamphetamine with a combined street value of \$426 million, including the largest ever cocaine bust which prevented 1.4 tonnes of cocaine hitting our streets.

Senators, our ability to support these joint operations, in support of whole-of-government outcomes, demonstrates the ADF's agility and interoperability. We pride ourselves on being able to complete our mission, whatever the task we are asked to perform and wherever that maybe.

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