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'Operation Bastille': Forces and Likely Tasks for Australia's Contribution to the War in Iraq

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4 February 2003

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Glossary

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|------|--|
| AD | Air Defence |
| ADF | Australian Defence Force |
| CBR | Chemical, Bacteriological and Radiological |
| CDT | Clearance Divers Team |
| EWSP | Electronic Warfare Self-Protection |
| HMAS | Her Majesty's Australian Ship |
| IRR | Incident Response Regiment |
| RAAF | Royal Australian Air Force |
| RAR | Royal Australian Regiment |
| SAS | Special Air Service |
| UK | United Kingdom |
| UN | United Nations |
| US | United States |

Major Issues

The commitment of significant numbers of Australian forces to Operation Bastille for a potential war in Iraq marks a significant departure from recent practice. This could be the first time since World War II that Australian forces move to participate in a military conflict without either UN Security Council backing, or the invitation of a properly established government (as was the case in Malaya, the Indonesian Confrontation, Vietnam and East Timor).¹

The forces identified by the Australian Government for deployment to the Persian Gulf cover a multitude of capabilities and areas of expertise, ranging from chemical detection and decontamination, to undersea mine clearance and ground attack aircraft. However, it appears that these forces go as disparate packages, without a clear command and control structure and without clearly outlined logistic support arrangements.²

The composition of the Australian contingent suggests that these forces will be employed in the southern front of the war, most likely in the area of the city of al-Basra and the Shatt-al-Arab Seaway which links this important port city to the Persian Gulf.

While the initial tasks appear clear, difficult decisions will need to be taken by the Australian Government if the progress of the war is dragged into the quagmire of house-by-house fighting within Iraq's sprawling cities.



Source: Central Intelligence Agency

1. The ADF deployed limited forces to the Gulf in 1998, arguably under the umbrella of existing UN Security Council Resolutions, but did not engage in actual combat.
2. The judgments made in this document are based on freely-available open-source materials. They may require revision as new information becomes available.

Introduction

Through the second half of 2002 and the early days of 2003, an almost overwhelming momentum for war against Iraq has developed in Washington, London, and Canberra. Evidence of this momentum can be seen in both the rhetoric emanating from Washington, as well as by the large numbers of forces already sent to the region in recent times by both the United States (125 000 troops) and the United Kingdom (26 000 troops). Details of Australia's actual military contribution were foreshadowed by the Prime Minister in his press conference of 10 January 2003 and later specified by the Minister for Defence on 22 January and 1 February 2003. The forces outlined by Senator Hill were in two categories. Those for which deployment was confirmed, and those that were to be prepared for potential forward deployment.

This Brief seeks to provide some details about the Australian forces being committed to the Persian Gulf, and looks at some of the factors affecting their tasking if war actually is declared. It also considers the tasks likely to be assigned within the larger coalition plans for the conduct of the War on Iraq.

Forces Committed For Deployment To The Persian Gulf

HMAS ANZAC and HMAS Darwin. These two frigates are already in the Persian Gulf, and are engaged in monitoring sanctions against Iraq as part of the Maritime Interception Force.

HMAS KANIMBLA. This is the second time that this amphibious support ship has been deployed to the Persian Gulf for operations as part of the Maritime Interception Force. As was the case during its previous deployment, the vessel has embarked a detachment of ground-based air defence troops from 16 AD Regiment. Unlike recent deployments by KANIMBLA or its sister ship HMAS MANOORA, the vessel has embarked one Sea King helicopter (instead of its usual complement of four Blackhawk helicopters), and a detachment of Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) troops. It is unclear why these latter troops had to deploy on this vessel rather than by air with the bulk of Australia's commitment to the war.



Special Forces Task Group. These troops are said to include (but not necessarily be limited to) one SAS squadron. A larger deployment could encompass two squadrons of SAS and two companies from the 4th RAR (Commando) Battalion, as well as associated signals and other supporting elements. Their deployment date has not been made public.

RAAF Recon Team. This team is intended to prepare the ground for the deployment of one squadron of F/A-18 aircraft. Their deployment date has not been specified.

Air Command Element. This appears to be only a small liaison team as there is no indication that the RAAF's own radars and control systems will be deployed. This unit will therefore most likely operate within a larger coalition headquarters and carry out liaison and coordination tasks. It will also provide and maintain national control of the RAAF aircraft deployed to Iraq.

Squadron of F/A-18 aircraft. These aircraft have a reasonable capacity for ground attack, but are limited by their lack of electronic warfare self-protection (EWSP), poor interoperability with US command and control systems, and their relatively short range. No details have been released on the number of crews that will accompany the fourteen aircraft. However, if the aircraft are to be committed as a squadron to operations around the clock, then at least two crews would be required per aircraft. This would require the deployment of the bulk of the RAAF's operational fighter pilots.

C-130 Hercules aircraft. Three of these aircraft will be committed to supporting the deployment to Iraq out of a total Australian fleet of 24 aircraft.

Forces Detailed for Potential Deployment

Chemical, Bacteriological and Radiological (CBR) protection troops from the Incident Response Regiment (IRR). While the IRR was originally set up for domestic response within Australia, their skills may unfortunately be in heavy demand in Iraq. Their capacity is limited by their small numbers and their lack of heavy decontamination equipment.



CH-47 Chinook Helicopters. Australia flies six of these heavy-lift helicopters which have been recently updated. Like the F/A-18 these aircraft lack effective EWSP. No details of numbers to be deployed have been released.

Quick Reaction Force from 4th RAR (Commando) Battalion. These have only two commando companies and could be considered to be in a state of flux as they develop the skills required to maintain the

East Coast Tactical Action Group (announced in 2002–03 Budget) as well as retaining the traditional raider skills gained from its amalgamation with 1st Commando Battalion. A deployment of troops from this battalion will adversely affect the establishment of an effective counter-terrorism group on the East Coast of Australia.

Clearance Divers Team (CDT). One team is being deployed to the Persian Gulf out of the Navy's two operational teams. These highly trained divers are normally tasked with beach-reconnaissance and mine clearing.

Factors Influencing Tasking

- The forces nominated for deployment are all small contingents of disparate forces largely unable to operate coherently, in comparison to, for example, the brigade deployed to Vietnam, or the forces sent to East Timor. There is no indication that any of the ADF's deployable headquarters are being mobilised for deployment (as happened in East Timor). This suggests that if the Australian forces are committed to actual operations, they will do so under the operational control of American commanders.
- No details have been released of the logistic support arrangements for the deployed forces. Force elements such as the F/A-18 fighter aircraft, the CH-47 Chinook helicopters and even the elements of the 4th RAR (Commando) Battalion require significant and specialised logistic support elements to operate effectively. In the case of Air Force, past operations have seen the deployment of one of the Expeditionary Combat Support Squadrons. For example, one of these squadrons was deployed to East Timor to support the limited RAAF commitment to that operation.
- Australian combat aircraft and helicopters being sent to the Persian Gulf lack effective EWSP. This suggests that they will not be committed to areas within reach of the Iraqi air defence system while it remains a threat.
- The specialist troops from the Incident Response Regiment (IRR) lack heavy decontamination equipment. This suggests that their role will be confined to detection and containment of sites affected by chemical weapons.

Likely Conduct of the War Against Iraq

It is of course impossible to predict how a particular military conflict will evolve, but sufficient details have emerged about the (now likely) war in Iraq that its general shape and rhythm may be deduced.

Phases

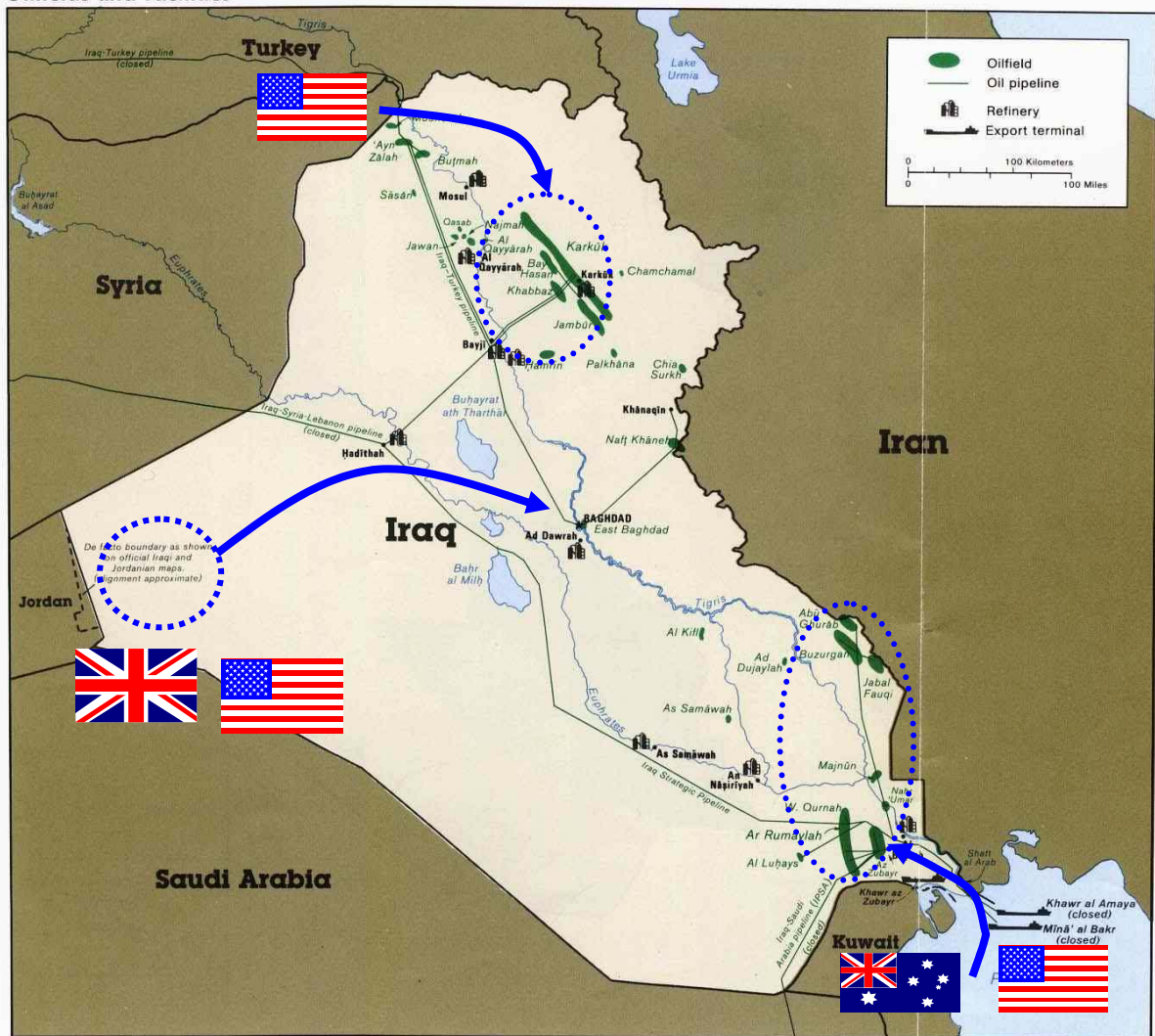
It appears that the war will take place in four distinct phases. The first of these started sometime last year and involves Special Forces troops from both the US and UK operating within Iraq to identify critical nodes within Iraq's military infrastructure and strategies.

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The second phase could entail massive precision bombardment of Iraqi military and government installations, as well as likely Scud sites in the western parts of the country. The intensity of the attack would be intended to paralyse the decision-making processes of the Iraqi military and government. US sources suggest that upwards of 800 cruise missiles may be used in the first 48-hours of the assault.

Phase three should see the commencement of the land assault. Best indications are that the coalition will attack from three directions. These are illustrated in the map below.

Oilfields and Facilities



Map of Iraq Showing the Most Likely Coalition Approaches

Source: Central Intelligence Agency

The shape of the fourth phase of the operation will depend on the level of resistance that Iraqis present to the coalition forces. If the defence is dispirited and easily overcome, then this phase may be nothing more than a rapid triumphal march to the gates of Saddam's palace. If resistance is heavy, then the coalition commanders have two options. They can either lay siege to Baghdad, or they can go into the streets and alleyways of the Iraqi capital to fight for its control, house-by-house, in an environment where the technological superiority of the coalition forces is almost irrelevant. If the choice is to lay siege, then the civilian population of the city will suffer significant privations. If the coalition commander chooses to fight his way into Baghdad, then the coalition casualty figures are also likely to be very high.

The final phase of the operation will consist of an extended period of peacekeeping and nation building. It is unlikely this phase would last less than five years, with the most likely duration being about ten years.

Tasking of the Australian Contingent

Most Likely

SAS Squadron. As they did in Afghanistan, the SAS is most likely to be engaged in long-range reconnaissance and reporting in the southern part of Iraq. Their job will be to act as the coalition commander's eyes and ears far ahead of the coalition main force.

Remainder of the Australian contingent. Their shortcomings in terms of self-protection, interoperability with US forces, and political constraints may mean that Australian forces will only be engaged in low-risk operations away from the main thrusts of the war, if at all.

Less Likely

SAS Squadron. Engages in long range reconnaissance and reporting, as well as directing strikes from coalition air forces onto targets in the South of Iraq.

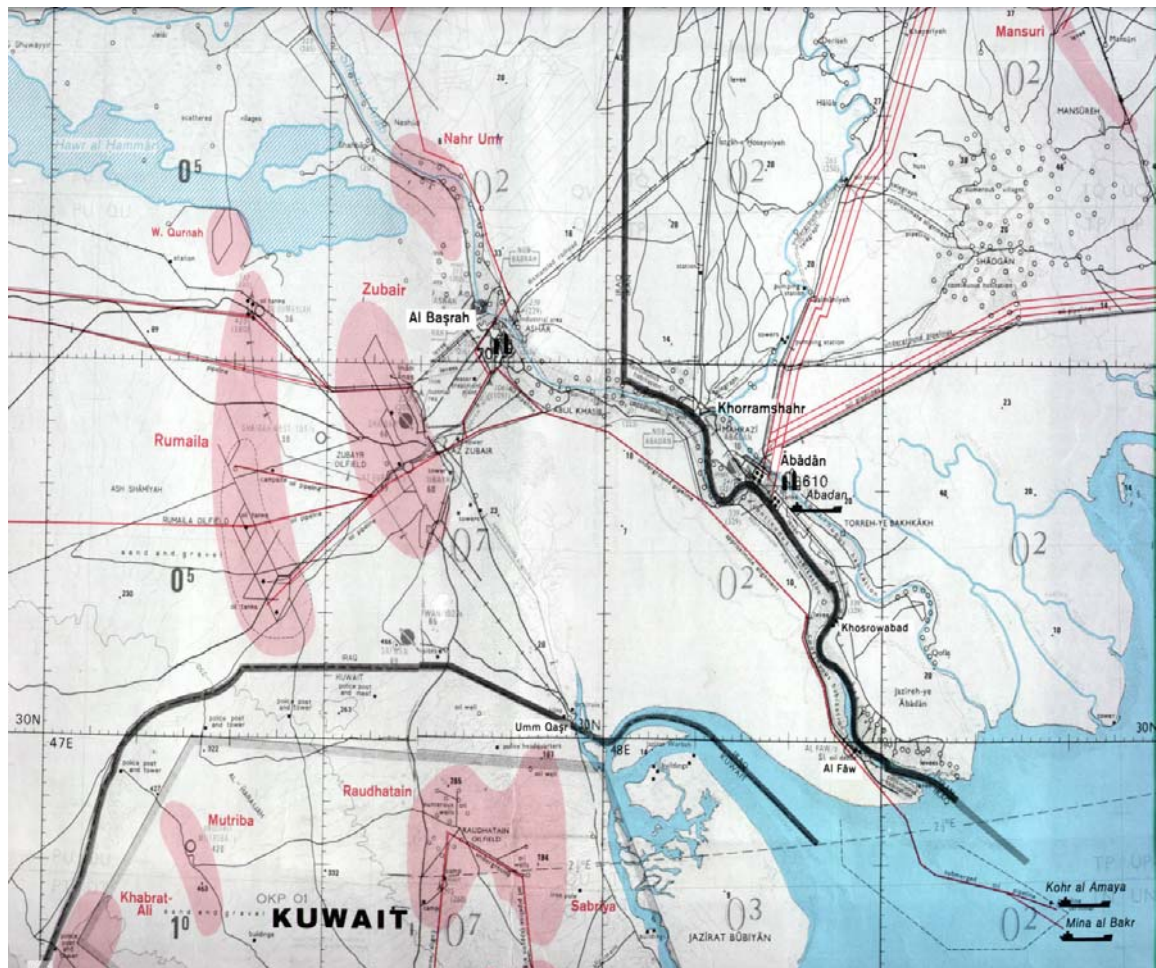
4th RAR (Commando), CDT and CH-47 Chinook helicopters. These forces are tasked to assist in the clearing of the Shat-al-Arab Seaway from the Persian Gulf to the Iraqi port city of al-Basra. This includes carrying out raids, beach reconnaissance and mine clearance operations.

F/A-18 Squadron. Strike operations in support of coalition efforts to clear the Shat-al-Arab Seaway and the city of al-Basra.

Beyond Day One

The scenarios listed above assume a rapid collapse by the Iraqi forces. Should this not be the case and the war move to the streets of Baghdad and other cities, then it is likely that

the coalition forces will suffer significant numbers of casualties. Under such circumstances it may prove difficult for Australia to avoid committing ground forces to the maelstrom of house-to-house fighting. A protracted war may also see an escalation of Australia's military commitment, as was the case during the Vietnam War. Then, the original deployment of thirty-six advisors in 1962 climbed to 800 combat troops in June 1965, and eventually to over 8,000 men from all three armed services in 1968.



Map of Southern Iraq Showing the City of Al-Basra, The Shatt-Al-Arab Seaway And Nearby Oilfields (In Pink)
Source: 1:670,000 From Iraq-Iran: Central AND Southern Border Areas CIA 1980