

By Dr Carlo Kopp

MELBOURNE – Early retirement of the F-111 will impair Australia's ability to contribute effectively to US-led coalition campaigns. It demonstrates a remarkable insensitivity to the pressures faced by the US and ignorance of the bombing techniques used in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The US Air Force has adopted a technique called "persistent bombardment" designed for the rapid defeat of highly mobile and fleet ground targets – terrorists and militias in light vehicles, armour, mobile air defences and motorised and armoured ground units. The stunning collapse of Saddam's Republican Guard owed much to the massive attrition inflicted by coalition air craft flying persistent bombardment – formally labelled "Kill Box Interdiction".

A bomber or bits in a box of interest within minutes of potential targets. As soon as a target is positively identified, the bomber attacks with precision weapons.

In this game the longer the aircraft can orbit between aerial refuellings and the more bombs it

Persistence wins friends, influence

can carry, the better. The B-1B and B-52H heavy bombers worked over time in both air campaigns, while F-15Es frequently remained aloft for nine to 10 hours on such sorties. Even so the US experienced a genuine shortage in these high payload/high endurance platforms – so much so that 30 B-1Bs are being pulled out of AMARC moth balls to return to active duty.

The F-16C, requiring often a dozen or so refuellings a sortie, was not a prominent player over Iraq or Afghanistan.

The US is now suffering genuine difficulties in providing enough tanker capacity for its forces. A large proportion of the KC-135E and KC-135R fleets are queued up at depots for corrosion and systems repairs. Such downtime may have been tolerable a decade ago. But now it is causing real grief as the US Navy is now almost wholly reliant on US Air Force tankers.

Persistent bombardment demands twice the refuelling support compared with traditional strike

techniques.

While the US will accept at most any coalition force contribution it can get, it is quite clear that contributions which put less strain on stretched US capabilities like tanking will be far more appreciated than contributions which add to existing stresses. Contributions which are well matched to the roles and missions where the US is running short of assets – airframes and qualified aircrew – will obviously carry more political weight in Washington.

In this context, the F-111 is the best combat asset the ADF has to contribute to coalition air campaigns. With the ability to carry almost 50 per cent of the Mk.82 load of a US B-52H, with excellent loiter endurance and range by virtue of 34,000lb in internal gas and a swing wing, a pair of F-111s delivers similar combat effect to a B-52H – armed with precision weapons.

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Poor armour killed sergeant

LONDON – Britain's Ministry of Defence admitted some military equipment for British troops in Iraq was in short supply at the start of the Iraq war, after the widow of a British soldier killed in Iraq demanded a public apology from Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon.

Hoon refused to take responsibility

for the fate of 33-year-old Sergeant Steve Roberts, killed four days into the Iraq war on March 24 because his body armour was taken away from him.

An official report said last week that Roberts, serving with the 2nd Royal Tank Regiment near the southern Iraqi town of Al-Zubayr, was sued with special armour but was told to hand it back because other troops did not have enough. He was given less effective armour.

An investigation by the defence minister is trying to conclude that the better armour would have saved his life.

Hoon had claimed 98 per cent of British equipment had reached Iraq in time for the war.

The UK deployed 46,000 troops to the Gulf and 51 were killed.

Britain's National Audit Office said not enough special flak jackets were distributed to frontline troops, adding that there had been difficulties with distribution.



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The F-111 mistake, part 2

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The RAAF is well practised in flying persistent bombardment – this method has its origins in TAC 48th TFW techniques which were assimilated via exchange postings to Amberley.

The novel bombing paradigm is a US adaptation of the RAAF Amberley-developed technique, Precision Air Support.

If Australia is to maximise the political return from coalition campaigns, contributing capabilities the US is hurting for is smarter than contributing capabilities the

US has in abundance, or adding stress on the US tanker fleet.

The plan to dump the F-111 wholly disregards the problems the US Air Force faces – every F-111 is worth about 150 per cent of an F-15E and demands less tanking. In perspective Australia's 30 plus F-111s are equivalent in punch to 25 per cent of the US Air Force F-15E fleet.

Killing off the F-111 also impacts the US posture in the volatile Asia-Pacific. It shifts a capability burden on to the over stretched US Air Force – some thing which the Americans will recognise over time.

The long running and acrimonious argument over capabilities between the US and its EU allies owes much to capability down sizing in the EU.

Therefore, killing off the F-111 fleet sends a clear message to Washington that Australia has no respect for the genuine pressures the US is facing over the next decade – and that Australia is treating its coalition contributions as an excuse to push its own force structuring pressures in the region on to the US.

Can Australia afford to be so politically naive?

Germans sue on radar radiation

BERLIN – German soldiers exposed to high radiation from radar and later developed cancer are now suing the American defence companies which made the equipment.

A court in El Paso, Texas, has agreed to hear a case brought on by

German Bundeswehr soldiers suffering from leukemia or testicular cancer who claim they contracted their illness after exposure to radar equipment made by American defence contractors such as Raytheon, Lucent Technologies and ITT Industries.

The US case was first filed in autumn 2002 by close to 450 sick soldiers, who are seeking compensa-

tion that could reach as high as \$450 million, the German edition of the *Financial Times* reported.

Most of the affected workers were mechanics who operated and maintained radar facilities and were consequently exposed to high levels of radiation.

The alleged exposures took place over more than three decades, from 1958 to 1994.

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**John Stackhouse,
Killara**