

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE >

Flying under the northern sun

By Flight Lieutenant Jaimie Abbott

One fast jet after another competed in airspace the size of central Europe during Exercise Pitch Black 08. When they weren't flying, the aircraft were proudly displayed on the tarmac under the Northern Territory sun – everything from the F/A 18 Hornet, F-111 and F-16 to E3 AWACs and Air Refueling Tankers.

Held from 6-27 June, Pitch Black 08 saw around 3000 additional personnel supporting the exercise between RAAF Bases Darwin and Tindal, near Katherine.

Joining the RAAF was Singapore, Thailand, the US, France, Germany, Canada, the UK and, for the first time, Malaysia and NATO, providing an opportunity to interact both professionally and socially.

The 'imaginary war' was the result of two years of solid planning. The biennial exercise is the Air Force's biggest, and presented a solid learning experience in a multinational environment.

During Pitch Black 08, the Northern Territory was divided into 'Blueland' and 'Redland'. Different nations carried out a role play, where cross border tensions increased and fighter aircraft defended.

In the scenario, Redland had a history of hostility towards the neighbouring Blueland. The capabilities of these forces were put to the test during the three week exercise, both in the air and on the ground, using air defence assets.

Now Chief of Air Force, Air Marshal Mark Binskin, flew into Darwin to officially open the exercise, which he said was a fantastic opportunity to work with Australia's regional neighbours.

"Darwin is a great town; there is very strong community support here," he said.

That community support was a driving force for the inclusion of an Open Day during this year's exercise. Darwin residents had the opportunity to explore the local RAAF Base and get up close and personal with the aircraft, which most had only ever seen flying across the sky.

Residents used the opportunity to meet Australian Defence Force members who had come to the 'Top End' from all over the country to participate in the exercise. The community also had a chance to meet those from other nations.

"For the Air Force, this is a very important exercise. It gives us a chance to get a lot of the forces together and work on integration and high end air combat capability," Air Marshal Binskin said.

"As the major air exercise we have every two years, this is very important for us and it helps us to roll into other multi-national exercises like Talisman Sabre, which will be held up here next year."

While this year's Pitch Black set new records with the debut inclusion of forces from the Royal Malaysian Air Force and NATO, it also marked history with the last appearance in an exercise for the B707 Air to Air Refueller, which will retire from RAAF service during 2008.

Pitch Black 08 also used the Joint and Combined Training Centre to insert simulated assets into the live missions. Number 3 Control and Reporting Unit controlled many of the airspace missions from RAAF Base Williamtown.

This exercise wasn't about winning, but more about national pride and, most importantly, learning. It was a test to see how well the Australians could defend their bases against air and ground attacks.

Pilots navigated their fast jets in face-to-face dogfights. The missions were not only pre-meditated, but spontaneous, which meant the ball

could never be dropped in the airspace interaction. With around 60 aircraft participating, pilots trained with a variety of jets in different 'packages'.

As the exercise developed, these 'packages' increased from one-on-one flying to dozens of aircraft being in the air at one time. As well, there weren't only missions during business hours – overnight flying reflected the realities of a combat situation. There was also competition for air superiority in air-to-air battles, as well as air interdiction in air strikes on ground targets.

Australia's northern outback offered an ideal backdrop for Exercise Pitch Black's war, which was designed to give aircrews' realistic experience in a joint air combat training environment. But Exercise Pitch Black 08 wasn't all about the aircrews. Without those on the ground, it couldn't come together. RAAF bases were filled with many different support groups – logistics and intelligence officers, cooks, medical and security staff, photographers, maintenance crews and chaplains.

Commander Air Combat Group, Air Commodore Neil Hart, reinforced the importance of the event.

"Exercise Pitch Black 08 provides a great opportunity for participating personnel to demonstrate their capacity to operate tactically in a coalition environment," he said.

"Throughout the exercise, participating nations [were] given the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to participate in, and contribute to, a multi-national defence exercise across cultures and regions."

NATO's inclusion for the first time and the participation of the Advance Early Warning Airborne Control System aircraft could shape the future of the exercise by using strike direction. Once it is online, Australia's Wedgetail will become a vital asset during Pitch Black in the future to assist the defence alert system.



OPPOSITE: An aircraft maintainer with the Royal Thai Air Force marshals in an F-16 after a familiarisation flight over the Exercise Pitch Black 08 air space. **ABOVE LEFT:** Aircraft maintainers from the Republic of Singapore Air Force prepare their F-16's for a sortie in the shadow of an Australian C-17 Galaxy during Exercise Pitch Black 08. **ABOVE CENTRE:** Corporal John Mamotte, from 1 Airfield Operations Support Squadron in Williamtown, marshals in a Republic of Singapore Air Force C-130H during the lead up to Exercise Pitch Black 08. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Flying Officer Kevin Murray, an Air Traffic Controller, at 44 Wing Detachment Darwin, watches as a C130H Hercules passes over head as part of Exercise Pitch Black 2008.