



Te Matataua

The Scouting Party of Air Power

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RNZAF Force Protection

Every airfield should be a stronghold of fighting airgroundsmen, and not the abode of uniformed civilians in the prime of life protected by detachments of soldiers. It must be clearly understood by all ranks that they are expected to fight and die in the defence of their airfields.

Winston S. Churchill

Force protection, which in this case focuses on physical security of people and equipment rather than the broader force protection context that includes health, weather, natural hazards etc., has perhaps become the primary issue for deployed forces, even sitting above the actual mission. There are many reasons for this, and the main one is conservation of forces.

Arguably, control of the air is the primary role of an air force and force protection clearly sits under the Defensive Counter Air mission. Control of the air starts with control of the ground you are operating from, which Churchill was acutely aware of. You have to maintain the integrity of the force element, or your capacity to carry out your role will be compromised and may even result in mission failure.

Aircraft are scarce, expensive and relatively fragile; anyone with limited knowledge of aircraft and a large screwdriver could cause enough damage to an aircraft to keep it grounded for days. Main operating bases are large, static areas whose locations will be well-known to an adversary. Air operating locations are difficult to disguise or relocate and they can have limited redundancy;

there will be limited bases in theatre and they are likely to be crucial to the success of the joint campaign. The strategic consequences which could arise from the loss of air freedom of manoeuvre, or loss of a key air platform, mean that force protection must be highly proactive, requiring the employment and coordination of a wide range of capabilities. Force protection is therefore a particular characteristic of air power and a critical enabler for achieving freedom of manoeuvre.



The vulnerability of air operating locations, including both operating bases and tactical landing sites, necessitates protection in depth through a layered approach. Ideally this should include the establishment of a Ground Defence Area (GDA), extending well beyond the perimeter of the base, in order to prevent direct and

indirect attacks being targeted against aircraft (both on the ground and in the air), facilities, or personnel. Furthermore, the linkage between countering and mitigating adversary action, and the immediacy of air operations requires that the GDA is normally placed under the control of the airbase commander.

An early-entry force protection capability is necessary at the outset of an operation to shape the environment and facilitate the arrival of critical air assets; it will also provide the nucleus for an enduring force protection element. This will need to integrate organic, specialist and complementary force protection elements, using a command and control structure that can provide a central focus for cross-spectrum activity. The responsibility for balancing the protection of the defended location and force elements against the requirement to continue air operations must be vested in the air commander, who is in the best position to adjudicate between these potentially competing demands.

Force protection depends on effective risk management, based on a detailed assessment of the threat, drawn from accurate, current, all-source intelligence. This information is used to prioritise the allocation of resources, and risk is mitigated by the judicious application of proactive and reactive force protection measures. These are designed to reduce the likelihood or significance of an attack, and thus to enable the continued prosecution or resumption of air operations with the minimum of degradation or delay. The level of force protection in place is a relative condition and depends on available resources and the risk that a commander is prepared to take.

Incorrect assessment of risk can be costly; the failure of perimeter security at Camp Bastion in Afghanistan in 2012 resulted in the loss of six USMC Harriers, damage to two others, a number of casualties, and the destruction of three refuelling stations. The raid was carried out by a team of 15 insurgents dressed in US Army uniforms; two USMC generals were relieved of their duties as a consequence. Resource limitations, constraints imposed by the nature of coalition or joint operations, and changes in the operating environment will require threats to be reviewed as part of an iterative process. Where specific force protection measures are constrained by host nation sensitivities, imagination and negotiation may be required to achieve the desired outcome, but using different means.

Conservation of forces is especially vital to the RNZAF due to our limited resources; literally every operational airframe is a strategic asset. Many of our operational deployments involve only one aircraft supported by the minimum number of people, and minimal ground support equipment. Should just one entity of the force element be denied by an

adversary, the operation will be put at risk. Our people and our equipment must be secure and that is the role of force protection. Every deployment of an RNZAF force element, be it in New Zealand or overseas, should have at the top of its planning list, 'what force protection do we need?'

On operations, it cannot be assumed that force protection will be provided by someone else at the deployed base, though in practise RNZAF force protection measures are likely to be limited to the security of the flight line and immediate associated infrastructure. Security and any defence measures outside this area would normally be the responsibility of the host-nation and coalition partners.

Force protection is not something we only do on deployment. As all RNZAF force projection activities originate in New Zealand, force protection considerations apply equally to non-deployed elements. Force protection of RNZAF airbases and deployed air elements conducting expeditionary operations is an NZDF responsibility and involves all NZDF members. On New Zealand bases the NZDF may be supported by Public Service and contracted civilian security staff working for the NZDF. However, this civilian support will be generally limited to access control and passive force protection measures.

A particular feature of RNZAF Force Protection is the military working dog (MWD) specialists and their dogs, which should ideally be a constant and persistent feature of our base security. MWDs can be used across the spectrum of airbase force protection operations; from man/dog team security patrols in the close defence area (which encompasses hangars and the flight-line), through to Force Protection patrols within the wider Patrol and Surveillance Areas, and when required trailing/tracking patrols in pursuit of intruders. MWDs provide a potent deterrent to the curious and mischievous, as well as a significant obstacle to higher-level threats to base security. MWDs represent a unique and significant force multiplier, which technology can never truly replace.

Key Points

- Force protection is a critical enabler of freedom of action.
- Force Protection is a whole of force responsibility.
- Force protection is a relative condition and depends on available resources and the risk that a commander is prepared to take.

Disclaimer: The views in Te Matataua are not necessarily those of the RNZAF

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