

Australian pilots aborted US-assigned bombing raids during Iraq war

Terry Cook
23 March 2004

An extraordinary account in the Sydney *Sun-Herald* on March 14 revealed that during the course of the Iraq war, Australian fighter pilots aborted over 40 missions, refusing to drop bombs on targets assigned to them by US field commanders. According to the article, each of the 14 RAAF F/A-18 Hornet pilots aborted three or four bombing raids when they discovered that the pre-flight briefings on targets did not correspond to what they saw on the ground. The Hornets flew over 600 missions during the course of the war. Of these, 350 were combat sorties.

The *Sun-Herald* reported comments by RAAF Squadron Leader Daryl Putney that he and other Hornet pilots had to weigh up in a “split second” if their mission would involve civilian casualties and broke off when they decided that there was no valid military reason to drop their bombs. “Each guy would have made that decision once to half a dozen times in the conflict,” Putney confirmed. “It was presented as being just one pilot in one incident, but it was all of us several times.”

Putney was referring to a claim made by the Australian Defence Department during the Iraq war that only one Australian fighter pilot had aborted a mission set by Allied headquarters and this had supposedly been due to poor weather conditions. While Australian Defence Force (ADF) chief General Peter Cosgrove this week would not confirm the pilots’ claim, he inadvertently conceded it was true by insisting there would be no recriminations against the men involved.

Cosgrove declined to reveal whether the US military had completed any of the aborted missions, declaring “we do not comment on our Coalition partner’s operations.” However, a statement by US Air Force spokesperson Lieutenant-Colonel Jennifer Cassidy made clear that the targets were not abandoned. “They would have gone back into the mix at headquarters,” she said.

Putney’s statement confirms that Australian pilots were

directed by Allied command to bomb civilian targets. His further comments also suggest that despite the high number of missions aborted, Iraqi civilians may still have been killed during those air raids that went ahead. “You do not always make the right decision,” Putney admitted, “but we were always leaning towards not making the wrong decision.” He continued, “Often it was a little niggle in the back of your brain that it (the raid) was not the right thing to do.”

Despite their decision to defy command directions to attack dubious targets, it is unlikely that the pilots could have determined from the air the exact situation on the ground because of the speeds they were flying. If their payloads were indeed dropped on civilians, the effects would have been devastating. The Hornets were carrying numerous precision-guided weapons, including 2,000-pound (900 kilogram) and 500-pound laser guided bombs. They were also equipped with air-to-surface missiles, conventional bombs and 20mm nose-mounted cannon.

Given the enormous pressure exerted on military personnel in a war zone and the extreme penalties that flow from disobeying orders, the Hornet pilots’ decision to abort missions suggests there were widespread misgivings among sections of the armed forces about the legality of the US-led invasion and therefore of any actions they might be called upon to carry out.

That such concerns did exist was reflected in the continuous assurances by the Howard government’s Defence Minister Robert Hill just prior to the deployment of Australian military forces to Iraq that they would be “subject to more stringent rules of engagement” than their US counterparts, and that “civilian targets are not legitimate targets for Australian troops.”

According to the Australian Defence Department, the rules of engagement forbade strikes on hospitals, schools, places of worship, dams and nuclear power stations and,

unlike those governing the US, banned the use of cluster bombs and land mines. Pressed during a media interview in March last year about what would be required of Australian troops under US command, Hill replied that the US, “knows the restrictions that Australia has accepted under various international conventions and the like, and they simply don’t put us in an awkward position.” The latest revelations reveal that assurance to be a lie.

Anticipating high civilian casualties, Hill attempted a justification in advance. Any Iraqi military installations or weapons near civilian populations were a “grey area.” He would only guarantee that “civilian targets with only some incidental military benefit” would be avoided.

Hill’s claim that Australia abided by international agreements banning the use of cluster bombs and other anti-personnel devices is just more cynical deception. While there have been no reports that Australian planes used such weapons, they most certainly would have provided cover for US aircraft that dropped cluster munitions and for US tanks and artillery that fired anti-personnel shells during the invasion. One such attack by US forces using cluster munitions left 61 civilians dead and 450 seriously wounded, including many children, in Hilla, a town 80 kilometres from Baghdad.

According to the Australian Defence Department the Hornets were required to provide “defence air missions to protect high-value Coalition assets” and “close air support missions in support of Coalition ground forces.” Hill boasted after the war that Hornet command had “operated seamlessly with other coalition aircraft” demonstrating “a high level of interoperability....”

A statement on the eve of the Iraq war by Professor Tim McCormack of the Asian-Pacific Centre for Military Law also made clear that Australian pilots would be directed to attack targets that would involve civilian casualties. McCormack, who advises the ADF on legal matters, said that the criteria for attacking military targets in civilian areas required a decision to be made that the “direct military advantage to be gained by destroying the target is not outweighed by the likely incidental loss of civilian life and damage to civilian objects.”

McCormack’s reference to the need for “direct military advantage” serves to cover over the fact that the illegal war on Iraq was an entirely one-sided slaughter, carried out by the world’s greatest military superpower using the most sophisticated military technology and weaponry against a virtually defenceless and impoverished nation.

It should be recalled that in the course of the 20-day

invasion, the allied forces rained down on both Iraqi military personnel and civilians alike, many thousands of precision-guided bombs, dumb bombs, cruise missiles, cluster and fragmentation munitions, 6,000 kilogram daisy cutters and 2,000 kilogram bunker buster bombs. Despite courageous attempts by Iraqi forces to fight back, thousands were killed in their positions by long-range artillery, tank fire and precision-guided bombs dropped during the hundreds of sorties flown by allied planes.

It is now a known fact that during the entire conflict not a single Iraqi aircraft appeared in the sky to challenge the allied planes that mercilessly pounded military positions, villages and cities bereft of any significant anti-aircraft defences.

Even the highly-vetted media reported numerous civilian casualties resulting from allied attacks, including the notorious hit by an American missile on the Shu’ale market in Baghdad on March 22 killing 62 people. Baghdad’s Al-Mustansariya University and the Red Crescent maternity hospital were also bombed and over 200 civilians perished in the unsuccessful attempts by the US to bomb and kill Saddam Hussein and his cousin Ali Hassan al-Majid. These, and the thousands of other civilian casualties, were simply written off as unavoidable “collateral damage.”

The Howard government’s continued insistence that Australian forces only attacked “legitimate” military targets, even if it were true, does not absolve it from the charge of being a perpetrator of war crimes. Having deceived the Australian people—as well as its own pilots, sailors and ground forces—about the reasons for going to war, it participated in an unprovoked war of aggression on a sovereign nation. Along with the US and other members of the “coalition of the willing,” the Australian government is fully responsible for all the acts of barbarity carried out against the Iraqi people during both the war and the ongoing occupation.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact