

Brisbane residents startled by low altitude military flight

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Residents and office workers in Brisbane, Australia's third largest city, were alarmed last Wednesday morning when a large military transport plane passed over the city, appearing to swoop below the height of the city's tallest buildings.

The flight by a new Air Force Globemaster was so low and noisy that people in the city and nearby suburbs feared that a plane crash was about to occur. In the suburb of Holland Park, residents came out of their houses into the streets, concerned about the danger.

The exercise was another display of military might. In November 2012, Globemasters were flown over central Brisbane and again in July this year. FA-18 fighter jets also conducted operations over the city in November 2014, during the G-20 summit in Brisbane. The public is being conditioned to increasingly visible military activity in line with Australia's involvement in the US "pivot to Asia" and Washington's escalating provocations against China in the South China Sea.

Unlike the earlier operations, Wednesday's exercise was unannounced. It appears that a federal government minister and senior air force commanders were directly involved. After the fly-over, the Globemaster C-17A landed at Amberley air force base, 40 kilometres southwest of Brisbane, where it was greeted by Defence Materiel and Science Minister Mal Brough, Chief of Air Force Air Marshal Leo Davies and Boeing executive Syd Blocher.

Officially, this was a welcoming ceremony for the aircraft, the eighth to be delivered by Boeing to the RAAF, although the plane had arrived at the Amberley base from the US on Monday.

In a media statement issued a day before the flight, the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) described it as "high altitude routine training in the Brisbane area." However, the statement said the exercise would also

"showcase the latest C-17A to the public."

The RAAF acknowledged to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that it failed to warn people about the low fly-by. A spokesman said that when the opportunity arose for "low-altitude tactical training," those involved took it. "There was an opportunity to take it lower than announced," he said. "So maybe the media release could have been communicated a bit better for the public, so they were not alarmed."

The spokesman then indicated that the flight was conducted deliberately, precisely to make a public impression. "More people can see it when it goes lower," he told the ABC. "If you're up higher, it gets lost in the background. If it goes lower there is greater visual spectacle."

Asked by the *World Socialist Web Site* whether Brough had authorised the low flight, the minister's office denied any knowledge of it, insisting that it was "an operational matter" organised by the defence authorities. Defence Media refused to answer a list of questions from the WSWs about who authorised the exercise, who authorised the lowering of the altitude and the purpose of the exercise.

Whoever exactly was involved, the flight displayed utter contempt for the residents and alarmed many people, both physically and politically.

"Almost level with the office window—Level 24," one Reddit user wrote. Another eye-witness said: "It just flew over Red Hill about 100m off the ground and scared the sweet f*** out of me. What the hell!!" Among the comments on Twitter, one resident wrote: "Ok I just thought of Tomorrow When the War began with that plane that flew over."

One office worker told the ABC the plane did "a nose-dive within 15 metres of the roof of the Brisbane

Convention Centre, below the level of the neighbouring multi-storey offices. We stood frozen for several minutes waiting to hear the following smash as it clipped the edge of South Bank before plunging into the river.

“Returning to the office we jumped online to find out what happened. I was furious to find out that this was a planned military operation.” She said the exercise felt like it was designed to intimidate the public. “How else can they explain the need to perform this stunt in a public area but to coerce people to feel the terror of war and war machines?”

A Holland Park resident told the WSWs: “The flight path of the Globemaster aircraft took it over a number of Brisbane suburbs, including my own, which is about nine kilometres from the city centre... The roar of the jet engines was almost deafening and, quite frankly, frightening.

“I really thought a commercial passenger plane was about to crash into a residential area close by, as did many of my neighbours, who came out of their houses to try to determine what had happened.”

He asked why the air force supposedly took the “opportunity” to turn a scheduled high-altitude test flight into an unannounced low-level pass over Brisbane. “Why Brisbane City, of all places? West of Amberley air base there are plenty of unpopulated or semi-populated areas.

“The only conclusion I can come to is that this was a deliberate, contemptuous act, designed to intimidate and terrify the populace, and to demonstrate the power that lies in the hands of the ruling class and its military, i.e., ‘We can do what we like, when we like and where we like’.”

Costing at least \$350 million each, the eight Globemaster aircraft have been purchased since 2006 in close cooperation with the US in order to rapidly deploy large numbers of troops, combat equipment, tanks and helicopters to war zones, and integrate that capacity into American operations. This is part of an aggressive buildup of the armed forces to participate in US-led interventions around the world, including against China and Russia.

“With extraordinary lift and range, the C-17A Globemaster is an integral part of the Australian Defence Force’s airlift capability,” Minister Brough told the welcoming ceremony. He said the aircraft had

already “played a central role in “supporting the international effort to combat Daesh [ISIS] in Iraq and Syria,” and “recovering the victims of the MH17 tragedy in the Ukraine,” as well as in humanitarian relief operations.

Brough emphasised how quickly the latest two planes arrived, after being ordered in April. “Australia has worked closely with the United States Air Force to acquire the additional operating capability within a short time-frame, supporting the government’s commitment to building a strong, capable and sustainable Australian Defence Force.”

The acquisition of the two additional C-17s, taking the fleet from six to eight, involves a \$1 billion project, comprising \$700 million for the two aircraft plus sustainment, and a further \$300 million for a new, dedicated C-17 maintenance hangar plus aircraft hardstand and taxiway upgrades at Amberley.

Amberley is Australia’s largest air force base, employing more than 5,000 personnel. It is currently being transformed into a “superbase,” hosting F/A-18F Super Hornets, F-35 Lightning II stealth fighters, KC-30A aerial refueling aircraft and the C-17 Globemasters.

Behind their backs, the people of Brisbane are being placed on the front line of a possible US-led war over China. Already, planes from the base are being used to conduct bombing operations in partnership with the US in Iraq and Syria. As well, the Globemaster fly-over is a warning that this military capacity can be used domestically in the event of popular opposition to this militarist agenda.



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