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# LAND ROVERS IN THE FIRING LINE



The United States and Australian military forces recently came together in north Queensland for a joint exercise. Pete Bedwell went along for the ride to report on the vital contribution made by Land Rovers.

**Y**OU can chuckle at the names given to military exercises, but approaching the normally sleepy Rockhampton airport, it was hard for an old (and that's me, not the hardware) aeroplane spotter to contain my excitement when I saw the assortment of dove grey military aircraft parked over every square centimetre of grass.

Uncle Sam was in town! To be precise 21,500 members of the US military had joined with 5700 of Australia's armed forces to make sure that the close working relationship that started more than three generations ago still works well.

The first time Australian and US forces fought side by side was in 1918 during WWI when the little French town of Hamel on the Somme was taken from the enemy in a copy book

battle that lasted for just ninety three minutes and achieved its objectives with, by World War One standards, minimal casualties.

By curious coincidence the date of that engagement was July 4, American Independence Day!

In March 1997 Rockhampton's BASC base and the nearby Shoalwater Bay training area, had become a temporary home for thousands of US and Australian troops.

My particular purpose was to photograph Australian military Land Rovers and in particular, follow the progress of the Australian Defence Forces Electronic Media Unit (EMU) which had recently been equipped with three Land Rover Defender 130 Crew Cab units.

The Australian Defence Forces have taken delivery of more than 3400 Land Rovers since the start of the 'Perentie' project in 1992.

The initial order was for 2500 Land

Rover 110 4x4 3.9 Isuzu diesel powered units and 600 6x6 two tonne Land Rovers fitted with a turbo charged 3.9 Isuzu.

This order was completed in 1992 and the vehicles were built at the JRA Liverpool plant.

A further 300 Land Rover 6x6s have been delivered recently under the 'Bushranger' contract and these were built at the Adelaide-based British Aerospace plant.

Recently, various branches of the Defence Forces have acquired a number of Solihull-built Defender 110 Station Wagons and 130 Crew Cabs, fitted with the 2.5 Tdi 300 diesel.

Ten days into the exercise, trying to con a ride into the Shoalwater Bay training area, wasn't like catching a bus. The military, for obvious reasons, doesn't favour tourists.

In the event, a ride from the Canberra-based Optus Defence equipment rep, Ted Younger, got me

where I needed to be: Samuel Hill, a usually desolate reference point on the Shoalwater Bay training area map.

During the Tandem Thrust exercise 'Sam Hill' was a base for the United States Marine Corps and supporting units of the Australian Army.

The logistics involved in an exercise like Tandem Thrust are staggering.

Sam Hill had been transformed into a tent city. Dozens of noisy diesel electric generators provided the power for everything from the electric urn to the vast array of communications equipment vital to any large scale military exercise.

Apart from the drone of the generators, there was a constant clatter from the twin rotor CH 46 helicopters that circled the base.

These venerable choppers, in service since Vietnam and the Marine Corp Air Wing's maid of all work, are universally known as 'Frogs'.

My escort, a young Marine lieutenant, explained what's what and what it does.

It seems curious in an era of extremely sophisticated military hardware that much of the equipment seems familiar.

The big GM 6x6 trucks, most with a canvas topped cab, share a similar profile to the vehicles that supplied the US and Allied forces in WWII and the 155mm howitzer trailing behind some of these old workhorses, did not look very different to the 'Long Tom' 155mm field gun from the same period.

The omnipresent Hummers, the US forces equivalent of Australia's Defenders, are a relatively new addition and the vast array of satellite dishes that soak up most of the electricity from

*Seemingly glued together, the F18s turned and with their wingtips pointing vertically upwards, disappeared over the ridge, leaving a crackling sound of rolling thunder'*

the droning generators provided state-of-the-art communications facilities for the complex exercises.

The recently acquired Australian 'Parakeet' satellite communications system demonstrated its worth during Tandem Thrust.

Carried on the tray of a 6x6 two tonne Land Rover, the Parakeet utilises the Optus satellite network; it can be off the Land Rover 6x6 and operational in less than half an hour and provides, in layman's terms, the equivalent of eight dedicated telephone lines which can supply our operational forces in the field with a reliable communication system throughout Australia and surrounding coastal waters.

Interestingly, the system used by the US Marines at Sam Hill required the services of two heavy trucks to transport and a lot more power to achieve the same result!

While talking about the varying types of communications equipment, I noticed that the ubiquitous 'Frogs' seemed to have quit the air for a moment.

There was a rustling sound just audible over the noise of the generators.

Then two dove grey Marine F18 jet fighters, travelling just above the tree tops, screamed over the camp at huge speed.

Seemingly glued together, they turned and with their wingtips pointing vertically upwards, disappeared over the ridge leaving a crackling sound of rolling thunder.

This is not air show flying, it's as close as it gets to the real thing and as such, an awesome sight.

My escort, himself a marine pilot, explained that these particular F18s are the latest derivative, much lighter than the earlier built examples used by the Australian Air Force.

The aircraft, as we had just witnessed, is not only blindingly fast, but also extremely manoeuvrable – a sort of 'competition version' of an already potent jet fighter plane.

Their pilots, my marine friend informed, me are 'the best'.

I got the distinct impression he'd sooner be in one, rather than having his eardrums assaulted while escorting journalists like me around.

Those who enjoy being scared half to death by jet fighters tearing past had a good time on Tandem Thrust.

The US Seventh Fleet, including the giant aircraft carrier USS Independence, was stationed off the coast near Rockhampton and its F18 Hornets and F14 Tomcats put in a





Below: a transportable earth station (project Parakeet) mounted on the back of a Perentie Land Rover. Left: a 105mm round explodes from the barrel of a Hamel gun, fired by 107 Field Battery, Royal Australian Artillery. Photos by Dave Broos and Mark Dowling.



Photo courtesy of British Aerospace Australia

regular appearance over the training areas.

Sitting down for a quick lunch or MRE, that's meal-ready-to-eat (only in America!) with a group of marines, the conversation drifted to the Hummers and Land Rover Defenders parked or moving about the base.

There could be no greater contrast in design of two vehicles substantially designed to perform the same duties.

Like the Land Rover Defender, the Hummer has constant four-wheel drive and is diesel powered; but there the similarity ends.

On the road, or indeed off it, the performance potential of the Hummer's vast V8 diesel is blunted by the three ton plus weight of the beast.

On the positive side, the strong construction combined with a Kevlar armour floor, make the Hummer the perfect vehicle if you fancy picnicking in a minefield, which as my escort pointed out, is often a downside of service in the Marine Corps!

Back at Rockhampton base I finally made contact with the EMU.

The Electronic Media Unit, during Tandem Thrust exercises, had an opportunity to put its trio of Defender 130 2.5 Tdi Crew Cabs to the test.

The aim of this Canberra-based defence force facility is to provide Australian, and in this case US media, with on-the-spot images of the proceedings.

EMU has state-of-the-art equipment and during the Tandem Thrust exercises its excellent camera work was transmitted around the world as well as to an Australian audience.

Some of the images used to illustrate this article were taken by EMU cameramen, in particular Corporal Dave Broos and Corporal Mark Dowling.

When I did finally catch up with Lisa Keen, who runs the unit, and Warrant Officer Buckley (the senior armed services EMU member), they were well pleased with their new Defenders and their team's efforts.

They had captured some memorable television footage and still pictures during the proceedings.

The EMU Defenders certainly looked the part: the recently applied

camouflage paint job on two of the three vehicles was almost completely obliterated by Queensland mud.

Australians, in general, tend to be fairly diffident about their armed services and what they do, but in the US interest tends to be greater.

Tandem Thrust involved not only elite units of Uncle Sam's military, but huge numbers of volunteers and reservists from all over the country.

Though specific knowledge of Australia among the general US population may not be that detailed, few would be ignorant of the achievements of the US Navy and Marines during WWII in the Pacific regions to the north and east of Rockhampton.

The Battle of the Coral Sea that took

real war situation.

That was in the past.

Now military exercises have a more serious and current purpose.

During the same period that Tandem Thrust took place, the political situation in PNG was becoming a real cause for concern in Australia and elsewhere in the Pacific region.

There was, before common sense prevailed, a situation developing where more than twelve thousand Australian citizens could have required immediate evacuation.

In Zaire there is an evolving situation that may result in the US Marines having to transport similar numbers of its citizens to safety.

During recent times Australian forces

have served with other United Nations contingents in Cyprus, the Middle East, Cambodia and Somalia.

Their role, (apart from the Gulf conflict), has not been fighting a war but simply trying to save lives when political manoeuvring has failed.

Situations that can only be effectively dealt with by using armed services have arisen suddenly and with depressing regularity in recent years.

Exercises such as Tandem Thrust ensure that our armed services can be operational at a moment's notice and work well with key allies like the United States.

Being a witness to the capabilities of the mighty forces of the US and our own well equipped and

trained Australian military, was a unique experience.

Both countries' forces have demonstrated in recent times that they can do any job thrown at them despite the conditions they face.

The US Marines I met were young, fit, friendly, efficient, and even after two weeks of hard work in often unpleasant conditions, cheerful.

Apart from a Brigadier General at Sam Hill, I was the oldest person there.

I reflected on this while eating my Qantas-provided dinner, winging my way home to a comfy bed while thousands of young men and women were preparing for another night under canvas with nothing more than an MRE for comfort. Rather than me! \*\*



place in 1942 is a prime example.

To the US military, this is hallowed ground and accordingly attracts more than the usual interest.

The EMU was able to provide material to keep not only Australian but the vast US news networks happy with its excellent on-the-spot camera work.

In the past, military exercises were known as 'war games'.

Typically during the long 'Cold War' era, the giant nuclear-equipped forces of NATO and the Soviet Union lined up their forces in ritual demonstrations of strength.

There was probably the fervent hope by everyone involved, that the respective capabilities of both sides were never actually put to the test in a