

Pitch Black 2018



Hans van Herk

Indian AF Su-30MKI-3 SB048 and RAAF F/A-18F A44-207 in close formation during Pitch Black 2018. Jurgen van Toor made this shot at Mindill Beach near Darwin, on 2 August 2018.

Exercise Pitch Black is a biennial three week multi-national large force employment exercise conducted from RAAF Base Darwin and RAAF Base Tindal. The 2018 edition was held from 27 July to 17 August 2018.

The main goal of this type of exercise is to ensure the Royal Australian Air Force remains ready to respond whenever the Australian Government requires. The training and integration of forces that occurs during this exercise directly supports the Royal Australian Air Force's ability to conduct operations. Pitch Black features a range of realistic, simulated threats which can be found in a modern battlespace environment and is an opportunity to test and improve our force integration, utilising one of the largest training airspace areas in the world - Bradshaw Field Training Area and Delamere Air Weapons Range.

The first Pitch Black exercises took place in 1981 between different RAAF units. In 1990, the exercise started training between Australia and Singapore, and it then expanded to other air forces with defence ties to Australia being invited. Countries unable to participate are able to send observers. Although the 2000, 2004 and 2006 exercises were held in the Northern Territory, the 2002 exercise was scaled down and held at RAAF Bases Amberley and Williamtown, on the Australian east coast. RAAF Base Glenbrook (near Sydney) is used as the command and control centre, as it would if the simulated conflict were real.

Looking at the participants and especially this year's edition it is noticeable that the exercise recognises the strong relationship Australia has with its participant nations and the high value it places on regional security and fostering closer ties throughout the Asia Pacific region.

More than 4,000 Australian and international personnel along with 140 aircraft belonging to Canada, France, Germany, India, Japan, Republic of Korea, New Zealand, Philippines, Indonesia and the US amongst others took part in the exercise. During Pitch Black 2018, RAAF's E/A-18G Growler electronic attack aircraft and C-27J Spartan battlefield airlifter debuted and a forward operating base was created at Batchelor Airfield.

In all, more than 1,120 missions were performed during the exercise and also saw the first participation of the Indian Air Force with the C-130J Hercules and Su-30MKI Flanker, as well as the French Air Force, flying with the Dassault Rafale.

The first week was mainly used for familiarisation flights, whilst the remaining two weeks participants were heavily involved in all kinds of training scenarios. At the end of the first week the RAAF created two public events. On Thursday late afternoon a sunset air show was arranged in front of

Mindil Beach in Darwin and on Saturday the base hosted an Open Day where all participating air forces could be seen up close.

The main flying force was operating out of RAAF Darwin, with almost 100 aircraft flying multiple missions each day. RAAF Tindal was the temporary home base for twelve USMC F/A-18Ds, two USMC KC-130Js and RAAF PC-9s and F/A-18A Hornets. According to the official RAAF information also two B-52Hs participated whilst operating out of Guam.

The trip to this year's Black Pitch exercise was made with 4Aviation. With a small group of aviation enthusiasts we tried our luck with photographing the exotic participants. Photography was possible at both ends of the runway during the day. Flying started early with several transport and tanker aircraft leaving the base. A spot on the northside of the runway was good for take-off shots, at that time of day the sun is in your back. Just before 09:00 hours the first fighter aircraft started their engines and soon after the first waves took to the air.

After these take-offs it was time to go to the western end for landing shots. Darwin is located at the Timor Sea and each day the wind direction is easterly in the morning changing to westerly in the afternoon. The sun turns over the runway around 3pm, after that photography is only possible on the eastern end.

Pitch Black 2020 is scheduled to be conducted in the Northern Territory in mid-2020.

The following participating aircraft were noted in the first week:

RAAF		
F/A-18A	75sq	A21-14, A21-47, A21-54 (3sq mks)
F/A-18A	77sq	A21-20, A21-36 (3sq mks), A21-40
		A21-45, A21-50 (nmks)
		A21-53 (3sq mks), A21-54 (3sq mks)
F/A-18A	2 OCU	A21-25, A21-28, A21-56
F/A-18B	ARDU	A21-101
Plus one more classic Hornet.		
F/A-18F	1sq	A44-205, A44-206, A44-207, A44-210
		(special mks), A44-211, A44-214, A44-221
		A44-223, A44-224 (plus one more)
EA-18G	6sq	A46-303, A46-304, A46-308
C-17A	36sq	A41-213
C-27J	35sq	A34-003, A34-008, A34-009, A34-010
KC-30A	33sq	A39-003, A39-004
C-130J-30	37sq	A97-448, A97-467
Beech 350	38sq	A32-439
Also based:		
AP-3C	11sq	A9-662, A9-664

RCAF

KC-130H 435sq 130339

AdIACN235M-200 ET00.052 066/52-ID
Rafale B ETR03.004 346/4-FM, 347/4-FN, 348/4-FO**Indian AF**Su-30MKI-3 102sq SB048, SB184, SB307, SB323
C-130J-30 87sq KC3807**Indonesian AF**F-16C-52-ID SkU3 TS-1625, TS-1633, TS-1636, TS-1638
TS-1639, TS-1641

F-16C-52-ID SkU16 TS-1627, TS-1634

Malaysian AFF/A-18D-50 18Skn M45-01 (special mks), M45-02, M45-06
M45-07, M45-08

A400M 22Skn M54-04

RSAF (Singapore)

F-15SG 142sq 8310

F-15SG 149sq 8302, 8312, 8317, 8327

F-16C-52-CF 140sq 611

F-16D-52-CF 140sq 691, 696

F-16C-52-CF 143sq 615, 642

F-16D-52-CF 143sq 632

G550 EA&WC 111sq 611

KC-135R 112sq 753

RTAF (Thailand)

JAS39C 701sq (Kh20-5/54)/70105, (Kh20-7/56)/70107

JAS39D 701sq

USAF

80th FS/8th FW WP yw

F-16CM-40-CF 88-0543, 88-0549, 89-2054, 89-2077
89-2113, 89-2121 (special mks), 90-0711
90-0718, 90-0736, 90-0763
90-0791

F-16DM-40-CF

35th FS/8th FW WP bl

F-16CM-40-CF 89-2042

USMCMV-22B VMM-268 Bu168322/YQ-00 (special mks)
Bu168345/YQ-01, Bu168307/YQ-02
Bu168294/YQ-04, Bu168290/YQ-05
Bu168285/YQ-07, Bu168608/YQ-09
Bu168022/YQ-11

Additional visitors for the Open Day were:

PC-9/A 4sq A23-022 (from RAAF Tindal)
E-7A 2sq A30-001 (from RAAF Williamtown)
Tiger ARH 1st AVN A38-015 (from Robertson Barracks)
KC-130J VMGR-152 Bu167925/QD-925
Bu167983/QD-983 (both from

RAAF Tindal)

F/A-18D VMFA(AW)-242 Bu164653/DT-00 (from RAAF

Tindal)
DHC-8-315MPA Border Guard VH-ZZN
DH82A Tiger Moth ex Australia A17-640/VH-NMD
AT-6D-NT Texan ex New Zealand NZ1090/VH-VFM

The Indonesian Air Force participated in Pitch Black with eight F-16s. Seen here is F-16C-52-ID TS-1634 from SkU16. (Darwin, 1 August 2018, Hans van Herk)



RAAF F/A-18Fs A44-210 and A44-214 from 1sq on their way to a Pitch Black-mission. A44-210 (still) has markings for 100 years 1sq, an event which was celebrated in 2016. (Darwin, Hans van Herk, 2 August 2018)



The Royal Thai Air Force sent six Gripens to Darwin. One of these was (Kh20K-4/54)/70104. It belongs to 701sq 'Sharks' which is based at Surat Thani air base. (Darwin, 1 August 2018, Jorgen van Toor)



Although the markings on this legacy RAAF F/A-18A A21-54 are from 3sq, it belongs to 77sq. In December 2017, 3sq divested all of its legacy Hornets to other RAAF squadrons to prepare for the delivery of the F-35A. In September the first F-35A (A35-009) was delivered to 3sq at Luke AFB (AZ). (Darwin, 1 August 2018, Jorgen van Toor)



Singapore took part in Pitch Black with F-15s, F-16s, a G550 and KC-135. Seen here is F-16C-52-CF 642 from 143sq. (Darwin, 1 August 2018, Jorgen van Toor)