

Harvesting the Rewards of Multinational Cooperation

The Royal Air Force's Project Seedcorn

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The introduction of the first P-8 Poseidon aircraft into service as part of a £3 billion program marked a major milestone for the defense of the United Kingdom (UK), but the move has been underpinned by multinational cooperation.¹ The Royal Air Force (RAF) announced that the fourth RAF P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft, which arrived at RAF Lossiemouth in late 2020, has been named the “Spirit of Reykjavik” in recognition of “the role played by the Icelandic capital and its people in enabling the Allied victory during the Battle of the Atlantic.”² The acknowledgment of the importance of Iceland during the Second World War is a poignant tribute, but the wider significance of other nations supporting the RAF's maritime airpower should not be underestimated.

The Seedcorn initiative, which saw personnel embedded with multinational partners, was designed to underpin the preservation of the UK's maritime patrol aircraft skills and has helped to enable the effective integration of the P-8 Poseidon—a multirole aircraft that addresses a gap in the RAF's maritime patrol capability.³ The P-8 Poseidon will undertake various roles, including patrolling the seas, antisubmarine warfare, helping to protect the nuclear deterrent, and search and rescue missions.⁴ The eventual nine P-8s have been deemed a “political and operational necessity” for the UK, given the “resurgent Russian submarine threat in the Atlantic and North Sea.”⁵ The aircraft are already demonstrating their worth with an RAF P-8 completing its first operational mission on 3 August 2020, when it tracked a Russian warship in the North Sea.⁶ The mission was momentous, but it should be noted that the RAF received significant support from multinational partners in reaching initial operating capability.

Exchanges with the United States have been especially noteworthy and have been described as a “staple of the relationship” between the RAF and US Air Force (USAF).⁷ The RAF and USAF approved reciprocal exchanges under the military personnel exchange program in 1971 and the initiative was eventually expanded to enable UK personnel to serve with the US Army, Coast Guard, Marine Corps, and Navy.⁸ Perhaps most notably, RAF and Royal Navy pilots underwent training with the US Marine Corps in preparation for the introduction of the F-35, with 120 personnel undergoing instruction in the US in 2017.⁹ RAF aircrews have also been reported to have flown a range of “high-sensitivity” USAF

aircraft, including the F-22, F-117, RC-135, and the B-2.¹⁰ The RAF has also had both student and instructor pilots participate in the USAF's Pilot Training Next 2.0 initiative.¹¹ Seedcorn represents, therefore, just one element of the broadening of personnel exchange arrangements between the UK and the US.

Personnel exchanges have been considered an essential means to develop partner capability and improve interoperability. It has been reasoned, "To ensure the interconnected multinational force works cohesively, service members and leaders from each nation must learn to communicate and understand the perspectives of their international partners."¹² Exchanges between high-end allies have been considered particularly important.¹³ MSgt Douglas Braden (USAF) has described personnel exchanges as the "bilateral sharing of best practices."¹⁴ Flt Lt Ian Hart (RAF), who flew the B-2 on exchange with the USAF, highlighted the mutual benefits of exchanges involving UK and US personnel:

We do have different ways of looking at things. We're a smaller air force so the way we approach a problem is different to the way the USAF will approach it. So, I like to think my different tactical background enables me to bring an alternate viewpoint on the tactical procedures used. Ultimately, we're looking at developing the way we work together.¹⁵

The importance of personnel exchanges has prompted air forces around the world to expand and enhance their programs.¹⁶ Their significance prompted Gary Roughead, a former US Navy chief of naval operations, to contend, "As in all endeavours, people are key. There must be more flexibility in how we embed military personnel into each other's forces."¹⁷ The requirement for that flexibility was emphasized by the RAF's training requirement in maritime patrol aircraft.

The retirement of the Nimrod MR2 and the cancellation of the Nimrod MRA4 in 2010 resulted in the RAF not having a specialist maritime patrol aircraft for "the first time in its history."¹⁸ In advance of the acquisition and receipt of the P-8s, and to "re-grow" maritime patrol aircraft capability, RAF personnel were embedded in the Royal Australian Air Force, Royal Canadian Air Force, Royal New Zealand Air Force, and the US Navy under the "Seedcorn" initiative.¹⁹ Lord Astor of Hever declared:

The Seedcorn initiative will sustain the UK's ability to operate high-end fixed-wing maritime patrol aviation in a range of complex operating environments by maintaining highly perishable skills, particularly in anti-submarine warfare, anti-surface unit warfare, search and rescue, and maritime intelligence, target acquisition and reconnaissance.²⁰

It was estimated that the Seedcorn program would cost up to £2.4 million per year when it was initiated.²¹ It was announced in June 2016, however, that the

program had already cost “some £14.1 million” since its commencement in 2012.²² While the expenditure may seem extravagant, the benefits can be considered to outweigh the costs. Some RAF crews have, for example, accumulated more than 1,000 flying hours on US P-8s.²³ That experience has been critical in helping to prevent the diminishment of expertise. Air Vice-Marshal Gerry Mayhew proclaimed in 2016:

The Seedcorn initiative has been vital in ensuring that our future MPA [maritime patrol aircraft] aircrew are prepared to regenerate the UK’s MPA capability. By retaining those essential skills, our aircrew are already on the front foot when it comes to operating these new aircraft.²⁴

The success of British personnel during competitions such as the US Navy’s antisubmarine rodeos was viewed as evidence that the RAF would operate the P-8s with “high efficiency” from the outset.²⁵

Then Air Commodore Ian Gale has contended that “Seedcorn” is a mutually beneficial initiative:

The US Navy is being incredibly helpful with bringing in our P-8 fleet. They’re assisting with processes, skills and knowledge and we’re already working very closely operationally with them. We’re deepening that, and all the time we’re adding knowledge to our force and it’s de-risking our programme. In return, the Seedcorn personnel are providing useful input into the US Navy. It’s an equal relationship in that they’re helping us grow our force and by doing so, of course, we’re contributing to the global requirement to conduct maritime patrol operations.²⁶

In addition to the individuals seconded under Seedcorn, 38 members of the 120th Squadron commenced operational conversion training at NAS Jacksonville, Florida, in January 2019, marking the first complete crew to undertake US-based training.²⁷

Although there will be a transition to training all RAF P-8 personnel in the UK, the importance of overseas support in preserving perishable skills and kick-starting the regeneration of the RAF’s maritime patrol aircraft capability deserves recognition as an example of the importance of defense engagement.²⁸ The training of personnel to operate the P-8s is not unique. In 2013, for example, Chief Petty Officer Stacy Gager became the first Royal Navy sailor to qualify as an aircraft director on a US Navy aircraft carrier as part of the long-lead specialist skills program, following a training period onboard the USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower*.²⁹ The program was initiated with the intention of training at least 300 personnel in preparation for the introduction of the Queen Elizabeth Class aircraft carriers. Bruce Lemkin prudently observed, “The most advanced system needs trained

operators who understand both the systems and the operating procedures. Interoperability is not just ‘things,’ it is people.”³⁰

Building and strengthening partner capacity is often viewed through the lens of supporting developing nations. That is frequently but not exclusively, the case as demonstrated by historical and contemporary experience. The support provided by France, Italy, and the UK in developing and sustaining the American Expeditionary Forces Air Service in World War I was an early example of airpower capacity building.³¹ Project “Seedcorn” is merely one of the latest iterations of partner capacity being enhanced to support a common and collective effort; in this case, maritime patrol operations.

The Seedcorn initiative demonstrated the importance of international exchanges in maintaining skills as a necessary bridge in the event of a capability gap and provides a model for emulation in the future. In reference to the US-UK relationship, Maj Jeff Olsen (USAF) declared that the “special relationship” in the realm of airpower was “alive and well” in 2010, an idea reinforced by the “Seedcorn” initiative.³² The “special relationship” can be extended to the wider Five Eyes network as cooperation with Australia, Canada, and New Zealand also proved to be significant. Not only are there direct benefits for the personnel and the wider RAF, but there is significant potential for improvements in interoperability as Australia, New Zealand, and the US will also be operating P-8s. In name and practice, the P-8s—as well as the Seedcorn initiative that has helped to preserve the necessary skills—represent the spirit of multinational cooperation and emphasize the significance of military personnel exchanges. ✪

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Notes

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