



Structuring air power

Combat power through organisation, Part I

Recent On Target columns in *Australian Aviation* have focused on the aeroplane and its evolution from airborne platform to airborne weapons system, an evolution which has seen lessening incremental gains in platform performance but huge leaps in weapons system capability.

Unsurprisingly, these advances in the combat capability of airborne platforms have become the focus of much interest, and often debate. But there is much more to air combat power than just airborne platforms and systems, with even the seemingly mundane subject of organisation becoming a discriminating combat factor between air forces.

As one of the world's oldest air forces, the RAAF has some interesting history in how it has organised its elements of air power. Initially, as a very small air force, developing within the sphere of influence of the British Empire, the RAAF simply took what was RAF organisational policy and adopted it as RAAF policy. It was a practical option, especially in its first 20 years when the fledgling air force was under-resourced and struggling for institutional survival. It also allowed Sir Richard Williams, the founding father of the RAAF, to allocate what resources he could secure from government to the building of several stations – as the RAF called its bases – upon which Australia's small air force could consolidate and develop.

What a shrewd move that was, for when World War 2 came the RAAF was able to use its combination of 'area commands' and 'stations' as the foundation upon which it could execute its prodigious expansion; not so much as a combat air force but as a training air force, a role determined by government which fed Australian airmen into RAF combat organisations in Britain and North Africa.

When the Japanese entered World War 2, with ferocity and success, the RAAF had to evolve its organisational

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• A replica Spitfire is lowered onto a plinth outside the RAAF Museum last year. The replica is painted in the markings of No 79 Squadron, one of the constituent units of the RAAF's First Tactical Air Force.

RAAF MUSEUM



model into something more appropriate for combat operations in the vast theatre of the South West Pacific Area. But the speed of events in the Pacific war quickly overtook the capacity of the RAAF and, given Australia's dire military situation, the Curtin government soon handed over the command of all Australian combat operations in the South West Pacific to General Douglas MacArthur, with RAAF combat units falling under the operational command of General George Kenney, USAAF.

RAAF combat units were grouped into a command called RAAF Command, commanded by Air Vice-Marshal William Bostock who reported to General Kenney, Commander USAAF 5th Air Force. But Kenney had underlying concerns about the organisation of units within RAAF Command, especially their leadership, mobility, coordination, flexibility and effectiveness.

It was therefore not surprising when the RAAF established No 9 Operational Group on June 15 1943. The group, organised on a functional basis, then located on Goodenough Island, comprised two operational wings, one works wing, and one radio location (radar) wing. Air Commodore Joe Hewitt was appointed commander of No 9 Operational Group with a charter to better coordinate and concentrate the assets of the group to meet the demands of the theatre. It was noteworthy the change substantially reflected USAAF practice.

A second operational group, No 10 Operational Group, under the command of Air Commodore Scherger, was soon formed. In November 1943, No 10 Operational

Group evolved into the RAAF First Tactical Air Force (No 1 TAF); an operational entity still smaller than a USAAF 'numbered air force', but nevertheless a large, powerful and mobile fighting air force. These seemingly minor World War 2 organisational changes were significant changes in RAAF organisational policy for three reasons.

First, the South West Pacific theatre provided the main opportunities for senior RAAF officers to command large air operational entities as, in the European and North African theatres where RAAF personnel were dispersed among RAF operational entities, few senior RAAF officers were granted command at levels higher than that of a squadron commanding officer – a tactical level command. Second, the South West Pacific theatre exposed senior RAAF officers to the functional operational command model employed by the USAAF. Third, the performance of RAAF commanders in the South West Pacific generally demonstrated the RAAF had within its ranks officers with the ability to command large aggregate groupings of operational units.

Given General MacArthur generally chose not to use Australian operational units in his advance to the Philippines, the RAAF did not have too many more opportunities to gain further experience at the operational level of war. Hence, the decision to structure RAAF tactical units into operational groups in the South West Pacific was a significant milestone in RAAF organisational policy in that it added to the depth of experience the RAAF was gaining as it matured into a more credible and more powerful air force. The question was; how would the RAAF translate this operational experience into the post-World War 2 air force? **A**