



The end of Area Commands

Combat power through organisation, Part II

The RAAF's introduction of the operational air group structure in the South West Pacific theatre during World War 2 was a step in the evolution of Australian air power.

It was therefore not surprising the RAAF included the notion of an operational air group in its post-war plan which was for a force of 191 squadrons, organised into five 'home defence' area commands, and a 'mobile task force' comprising fighter, bomber and transport wings and a reconnaissance squadron, including an operational wing headquarters and organic maintenance support.

But with government prioritising a massive post-war demobilisation, which saw the RAAF downsize from 191,337 personnel in August 1945 to 7,897 personnel at the end of 1948, the RAAF had neither the resources nor personnel to implement its plans. The RAAF mobile task force remained unfunded, with the organisational concept of five area commands becoming the basis of post-war air force organisation.

In 1952, the RAAF signalled a small departure from its RAF heritage by designating its 'stations' as 'bases'; stations being a RAF term. But subsequently, and perhaps with a touch of irony, it was a RAF officer who went on to implement fundamental change in RAAF post-war organisation.

Air Marshal Sir Donald Hardman, a RAF officer of high regard, was appointed Chief of Air Staff of the RAAF following the 12-year tenure of Sir George Jones, and it was Hardman who set about organising the RAAF on a functional basis, rather than on a geographic basis; the change taking place on October 1 1953.

The changes, which coincided with the abolition of Air Force Headquarters and the establishment of the Department of Air, saw the five area commands folded into a Home Command under one operational commander. Two further functional

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● An undated image of RAAF Mirages and Neptunes sharing a hanger. When a flying squadron deployed, the command chain switched from the officer commanding of the squadron's home base to the officer commanding the squadron's deployment base.
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commands were established, Training Command and Maintenance Command, which were soon merged into a single command, Support Command. Later, Home Command was retitled Operational Command.

But the organisational concept of the World War 2 operational air group had been lost as, at base level, the principle of functional command had not been followed through. On Operational Command bases the mobile wings and squadrons of the RAAF reported to the officers commanding (OCs) of their respective bases. The RAAF attempted to rectify this by titling the officer commanding as a Formation Officer Commanding, such as OC RAAF Williamstown rather than as a Base Officer Commanding, such as OC RAAF Base Williamstown.

But with fighter squadrons at Butterworth and Williamstown, and maritime squadrons at Townsville and Richmond, all reporting through different 'formation officers commanding', it was clear there was no single commander overseeing either the RAAF fighter force or the RAAF maritime force.

A further command discontinuity occurred when a flying squadron deployed, the command chain switched from the officer commanding of the squadron's home base to the officer commanding the squadron's deployment base – 'chopped' in the jargon of the day. For example, if

No 1 Squadron deployed from Amberley to Darwin, CO 1SQN would report to AOC Operational Command through OC RAAF Darwin, not OC RAAF Amberley. This could result in CO 1SQN reporting through a commander who may not have flown a jet aircraft, let alone an F-111C.

In an attempt to simplify command chains and save resources, the RAAF also disestablished its operational wings, with commanding officers of flying squadrons reporting directly to formation OCs. But the group captain, who was previously the Wing officer commanding, and his staff, remained on base and morphed into the Air Staff Officer (ASO).

As a staff officer, the ASO reported to the formation OC but, as a staff officer, he had no command authority. The RAAF now had a 'staff versus command' issue, as ASOs, officers generally of group captain rank, were effectively interposed between formation OCs and the squadron COs. ASOs and squadron COs worked through this staff versus command issue in various ways. But with formation OCs delegating differing degrees of authority to their respective ASOs, clarity of command and command accountability issues at base level were not uncommon.

The introduction of functional chains of command by Sir Donald Hardman was a seminal change in RAAF organisation, although the principle of functional command did not fully flow down to RAAF bases and operational units until the concept of the Force Element Group was introduced. ■

Next issue, On Target will discuss the evolution from 'RAAF bases' into the 'RAAF Force Element Groups', introduced on a trial basis on February 1 1987.