



## Function over geography

### Combat power through organisation, part 3

The October and November On Target columns outlined the evolution of RAAF organisational policy up to 1986, with the observation that although the RAAF proclaimed to organise itself on a functional basis, that organisational functionality was disrupted by the reality that 'RAAF Formation Officers Commanding' were geographically limited 'RAAF Base Officers Commanding'. So unless all the assets of an air capability were co-located, such as the maritime patrol units at RAAF Base Edinburgh, the singular oversighting of an air force capability by a dedicated commander was difficult.

For instance, when Mirage squadrons were resident at Williamstown, Butterworth and Darwin, the three squadrons reported through different command chains, through their respective OCs at Williamstown, Butterworth and Darwin. Similarly, the RAAF air support squadrons of Chinook, Iroquois and Caribou were spread across Fairbairn, Richmond, Amberley and Townsville with command chains through four different OCs. These command arrangements meant there was no single appointment responsible for the oversight of either the tactical fighter force or the tactical transport force until the various command chains came together at the level of the AOC, Operational Command.

This was a serious organisational deficiency and it took some years to carry the argument that 'unity of command' over all the assets of a specific air capability was more important than 'unity of command' over all the units located on a particular base.

After some years of discussion, especially at the tactical and operational levels, the Chief of Air Staff (as the Chief of Air Force was then known) Air Marshal 'Jake' Newham decided

to transition the Air Force to a fully functional operational organisation. He determined, with effect from February 2 1987, that RAAF operational units would be organised into 'force element groups' (or FEGs). Newham, with his strong operational background, including tours as staff officer operations and senior air staff officer at Operational Command, was well placed to decide this issue, although initially he introduced the new arrangements on a 'trial basis', to give time to win over doubters. But it was obvious there would be no going back, and the FEG structure was formalised in June 1988.

In brief, like-roled operational units would be grouped together under one commander. For the fighter capability, all fighter units together with the operational fighter training units were grouped into the Tactical Fighter Group (TFG), and with air defence and air superiority operations being dependent on air surveillance and direction, the supporting air surveillance/direction units of the Air Defence Ground Environment (ADGE) were also included in the TFG. OC RAAF Williamstown became CDR TFG, commanding units located at Williamstown, Tindal, Darwin, Amberley and Pearce.

The Strike Reconnaissance Group (SRG) incorporated the strike/reconnaissance F-111C

squadrons, together with F-111C operational training. The Maritime Patrol Group (MPG) incorporated the maritime P-3C Orion squadrons together with the P-3C operational training units. OC RAAF Amberley and OC RAAF Edinburgh became CDR SRG and CDR MPG respectively.

OC RAAF Richmond became CDR Air Lift Group (ALG), gaining authority over the Fairbairn-based VIP squadron while losing command of the Richmond-based Caribou tactical transport squadron. Critical to the 24/7 operations of the ALG, was the Air Movement Coordination Centre and the RAAF high frequency radio network through which command and control of deployed air lift and maritime patrol aircraft was effected.

A significant change was the establishment of the Tactical Transport Group (TTG) comprising the Iroquois/Black Hawk, Chinook and Caribou squadrons, resident at Fairbairn, Richmond, Amberley and Townsville. In hindsight, as all these units were in the business of 'air support', especially air support of the Army, this FEG might have been better titled the Air Support Group, with its command elevated to an air commodore, rather than a group captain. Both measures would have emphasised the importance the RAAF placed on air support operations.

The FEG commanders

also gained command over the operational/intermediate level maintenance units, such as the 400 series maintenance wings, supporting each FEG; and the reorganisation resolved the ambiguity about the authority of the Air Staff Officer by abolishing the appointment, and returning to the practice of grouping some squadrons into wings under the command of an 'OC', generally of group captain rank. Two of these wings, No 81 Wing (F/A-18A) and No 82 Wing (F-111C), were also given roles as deployable tactical headquarters which provided the Air Force with options for the command and control of deployed air operations.

The 1987/1988 FEG reorganisation, heralded by the formation of No 1 Operational Group in 1943, was a seminal event in RAAF history, and while the FEGs have since been reshaped as the capabilities of the Air Force evolved, the Air Force became a more capable combat force because of its more focused, accountable and effective operational organisation. ■

**Air-Vice Marshal Brian Weston (ret'd) was CO Base Squadron Richmond in 1986, OC Base Support Wing Richmond in 1987, and CDR Tactical Fighter Group from July 1990 to July 1993.**



A retired F-111C is towed to be placed on display at the RAAF Wagga Heritage Centre last year. Nearly 30 years ago command for the jet became the responsibility of the Strike Reconnaissance Group. defence