

# Evolving the FEG

## Combat power through organisation, part IV



➤ RAAF Hornet tactical fighters and F-111 strike bombers fell under the umbrella of the new Air Combat Group from January 2002. DEFENCE

The RAAF formalised the organisation of its operational units into Force Element Groups (FEGs) on June 1 1988.

The new FEGs were Tactical Fighter Group (TFG), which included the supporting air direction units of the Air Defence Ground Environment (ADGE), Strike Reconnaissance Group (SRG); Maritime Patrol Group (MPG); Air Lift Group (ALG); Tactical Transport Group (TTG); and Air Operational Support Group (AOSG). (The TTG was short-lived, disbanding in February 1991 after the RAAF helicopter capability was transferred to the Army and with Caribou capability folded into the ALG.)

The development of the Jindalee over-the-horizon radar (OTHR) at the Joint Facility, Alice Springs also had implications for the RAAF ADGE as it added a new dimension to Australia's wide-area surveillance capabilities. Accordingly, the Air Force stood up No 1 Radar Surveillance Unit (1RSU), headquartered at Mt Everard, near Alice Springs, on July 1 1992 and assigned the unit to No 41 Wing.

Subsequently, the decision to re-shape the RAAF 'air defence' capability more towards an 'air battle management' capability had further organisational implications. Firstly, all ADF air traffic control services, including at Army and Navy airfields, were amalgamated within a reformed No 44 Wing and secondly, both Nos 41 and 44 Wings were spun-out of the TFG in 1996, into a new Surveillance and Control Group (SCG).

By 1997 the Defence Efficiency Review and the follow-on Defence Reform Program had begun to impact on the RAAF by transferring much

of the individual FEGs' maintenance and organic support capabilities to contractors, reducing some FEGs to a group consisting of only one wing, with an obviously unsatisfactory 'one-group-commanding-one-wing' command chain.

Another issue was that at SRG, new air defence capabilities, especially the increasing availability of look-down radars, had eroded the ability of the F-111C to exploit terrain masking during its final approach to a target. It was becoming apparent that in future, the F-111C and F/A-18A forces would need to cooperate tactically to ensure F-111C survivability against improving air defences, hence the establishment of the Air Combat Group (ACG). But the long-standing silos that segregated the RAAF tactical fighter and strategic strike capabilities, a situation going well back to the 'fighter' and 'bomber' heritages of both capabilities, was a significant institutional barrier to 'fighter/bomber' cooperation.

That cultural 'fighter/bomber' segregation was a concern to then Chief of Air Force Air Marshal Errol McCormack. With a Sabre and Canberra background, experience participating in the first F-111C cohort (1968), time flying the RF-4C on exchange with the USAF, and his time as OC No 82 Wing flying the F-111C, McCormack had plenty of pertinent advice to offer Air Commodore John Quaife of his posting as the first commander ACG. After spending 12 months planning the merger of the TFG and SRG, Quaife took up his post as CDR ACG in January 2002, commanding Nos 78, 81 and 82 Wings.

The formation of ACG was accompanied by further development

in the new SCG when, in 1999 1RSU moved to Edinburgh as a precursor to controlling not only the Alice Springs OTHR but also the new OTHRs at Laverton, WA and Longreach, Queensland. Those radars came online in mid-2003, completing the Jindalee Operational Radar Network (JORN).

Further developments followed which brought the existence of the short-lived SCG to an end when it was merged with MPG, a group which had been reduced to overseeing one wing – No 92 Wing flying the AP-3C.

The SCG-MPG merger saw the establishment, on March 30 2004, of Surveillance and Response Group (SRG), and with the impending introduction of the RAAF airborne early warning and control capability, SRG, headquartered at Williamstown, became a FEG of considerable capability, fully justifying the appointment of a commander of air commodore rank.

SRG reached maturation on January 1 2006 when No 42 Wing was reformed flying the E-7A Wedgetail, joining Nos 41, 44 and 92 Wings in SRG.

In contrast, ALG saw a long period of organisational stability as it continued its 24/7 role of air transport operations, with some improved capability when 37SQN, in 1999, traded its 1966 vintage C-130E Hercules for the much-improved C-130J.

AOSG, headquartered at Edinburgh, also continued unchanged but not so the Operational Support Group (OSG) at Townsville, where the RAAF strove to retain some of its organic expeditionary support capability, so unthinkingly stripped by the crude and blunt Defence reviews of the 1990s.

Certainly the 20 years to 2007 saw much organisational change, but it was re-assuring the RAAF was still able to retain an operational organisation, in keeping with the principles of functional force element groups, first trialled in 1987. 🇦🇺

**Air Vice-Marshal Brian Weston (ret'd) is a Sir Richard Williams Foundation board member.**

**'Long-standing silos had segregated tactical fighter and strategic strike capabilities.'**