

CHIEF OF AIR FORCE
AIR MARSHAL MEL HUPFELD, AO, DSC

Australian Defence Force Oration 2021 - Order of Australia Association (ACT Branch)

09 August 2021

“The Centenary of the RAAF, and our vision for the future”

Spoken in Ngunnawal language.

(This is Ngunnawal Country. Today we meet on Ngunnawal Country.)

I acknowledge the Ngunnawal people as the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet tonight. I pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging. I also pay respect to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women who have contributed to the defence of Australia in times of peace and war.

MAJGEN (Retd) Mick Crane, DSC& Bar, AM, Chair of the Order of Australia Association and Convenor of this oration, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, good evening.

It is an honour to be here to deliver this year’s Australian Defence Force Oration. Tonight, I want to take this opportunity to reflect on the Centenary of the Royal Australian Air Force and to share our vision as we embark on our second century.

It is indeed a very proud moment for me to be the Chief of Air Force during this important milestone in our history. The motto of our Centenary is “Then. Now. Always.” This simple theme encompasses Air Force’s journey of service, sacrifice, and unswerving commitment to our Nation.

Reflecting briefly on the first one hundred years of the Royal Australian Air Force’s service to Australia, I wish to acknowledge that Australia’s air power began with the Australian Flying Corps, which fought with distinction in the Middle East and Western Front during WWI. Since then, generations of Air Force members have provided outstanding service to the nation – including WWII, Korea, Malaya, Vietnam, East Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq as well as humanitarian and disaster relief at home and abroad.

This year, we honour the service and sacrifice of over 350,000 personnel who have served the Australian people as members of the Air Force, and particularly remember the over 11,000 Air Force members who lost their lives while serving Australia.

Our Air Force is here today, because we stand on the shoulders of giants and visionaries.

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People like 1 Squadron's WW1 aviators, Paul McGuinness and Hudson Fysh who founded QANTAS. Lieutenant Lawrence Wackett who served on the Western Front in WW1 with No. 3 Squadron, where he mastered the method of accurately dropping ammunition to ground forces by parachute; and despite the disbanding of the Australian Flying Corp at the end of WW1, we saw the vision of Major General J.G. Legge when he produced his "Outline Policy for the Military Air Force of Australia" on 29 April 1919. I am proud of our heritage from the Army – we started with part of a service that was perfect, and made it better!

At the heady rank of Wing Commander, Richard 'Dickie' Williams, with his Army heritage, controversially and relentlessly pursued the formation of the world's second independent Air Force and became its Chief of the Air Staff on 31st of March 1921. Rising to the rank of Air Marshal, Sir Richard Williams is widely regarded as the Father of the RAAF.

Back then, and even though powered flight had been around for just over a decade, the notion of a joint effort between air, land, and sea was forged, out of war, out of the necessity to gain an advantage over the Central Powers.

The notion of Joint Force effects started at the very beginning.

Today for Air Force, I have made it very clear that our purpose is to enable the joint force in pursuit of national objectives. I do not think there has ever been a time in our history where the unified purpose of the Australian Defence Force, under One Defence, has been so strong.

I want to make it very clear that today I am not only speaking to you as the Chief of Air Force, but also as the Air and Space Domain lead for Defence.

On the 31st of Mar this year, I announced that, as we commence our second century, we would change from the terms airmen and airwomen to 'aviators'. We are ALL **aviators** and our trade is Aviation. In everything that we do, we are aviators, first and foremost. Our common and collective purpose to the Nation is to think, act and imagine from the perspective of the skies and space above us.

I also constantly impress, on our Air Force aviators, the importance of expanding their expertise outside of the air and space domain – to how these intertwine with maritime, land and cyber domains, in pursuit of common purpose.

How can they expect to contribute fully to the Joint Force if their knowledge is limited to two of the five domains we are expected to be able to contest?

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Our integration as part of the Joint Force is already extensive, but one of the things I want to impress upon you today, is that the days of traditional thinking about Navy, Army, and Air Force as discrete operating institutions is outdated. This is truly about multi and all domain integration. Without a strong integrated and joint culture, we cannot be effective in an integrated all-domain contest.

One of the objectives during my tenure is to ensure Air Force aviators are thinking about our tradecraft not in terms of how many E-7A Wedgetail or JSFs are above, but what *effect* they have on our environment. I want them thinking about the effect of those Air assets in concert with other ADF elements, along with those of our interagency partners and, when in coalition, with our international partners and allies. We must face our current and evolving challenges with this mindset.

As Chief of Air Force, one of the important considerations for us right now and into the future is how we will operate as an integrated and joint force in the current and future geo-political and geo-strategic environment.

In 2020, the Australian Government released a Defence Strategic Update, which acknowledged that our home in the region is undergoing the most consequential strategic realignment in decades.

The Indo-Pacific is at the centre of great strategic competition, making the region more contested and apprehensive. These trends have arguably been accelerated by the pandemic.

In response to our changing environment, the Australian Government has set Defence three strategic objectives; Shape, Deter, Respond:

- To shape our strategic environment
- To deter actions against our interests, and
- To respond with credible military force, when required.

In his Chief of Defence guidance to the senior leadership group, CDF narrowed down, or simplified the government's policy settings in the Defence Strategic Update to be, direction to do two things, **prepare and engage**. He listed three points, which were of vital importance in achieving this.

The first two points he emphasised are things the military is relatively good at:

- Measuring and improving our preparedness for today's contest, and
- Ensuring we have the capabilities necessary for the future contest.

Air Force especially has benefited greatly from my predecessors in these areas. Their focus on developing our capability was first rate and because of this, our Air Force is one of the most modern in the world.

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However, CDF's third item is where all of Defence needs to become more sophisticated and that is:

- Understanding and shaping the context in which we may be called upon to fight.

Without this important strategic context up front, we run the risk of having a force that is preparing to fight the wrong war, part of the war, or one where our fastidious investment could be nullified by emerging disruptive technologies.

In my mind, this point is the essence of what 'strategy led' means. So, while Air Force is effective at one and two, understanding and shaping the context in which we may be called upon to compete and if necessary contest, becomes the guiding principle in my view.

So what is the context in which we may be called on to do this?

Firstly, we will have ambiguous warning time – it is arguable that the warning time came and went as we are in that contest today.

That contest is challenging traditional force design assumptions and taking place in a strategic setting requiring competition in the grey zone – it may not be the type of "fight" we typically conjure in our minds for traditional operations. Responding may not require a named operation – as our response to grey zone competition must be business as usual.

It needs to be integrated across Defence and the Whole of Government and executed and commanded through multiple domains with the risk that escalation to short periods of high intensity conflict could occur.

For decades, we have been conducting conventional exercises, and so we should.

However, in parallel, we also need to become more effective across the competition spectrum.

We must be able to work in a whole-of-government context where the military arm of national power is orchestrated in concert with all others.

End states as we know them in our prevalent Joint Military Appreciation Process, will be elusive in this environment and we must instead seek to achieve transient operational and strategic advantages.

The traditional campaign-phasing model is a linear approach and is arguably no longer fit for purpose to deal with political warfare and actions in the so-called grey zone. The concept of 'Shape, Deter, Respond' runs the same risk if we try to box it and serialize it - it is not meant to be linear. We will not be doing one, then the next, then the next. We will likely need to operate across all, concurrently.

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From a military power viewpoint, we have incredibly capable platforms like the JSF. However, our mindset has been locked into how these platforms force generate to contest and win in an advanced fight for traditional air control. To succeed in this new reality, Air Force needs to change. In driving this change, we need to understand that Air Force does not generate air or space power for itself. We provide air and space power options as a component of military power, realised by the Joint Force in support of national objectives.

Our approach to advanced warfighting is a necessary but not sufficient response. Right now, our portfolio of platforms and capabilities are not optimised for engagement with partners in the region in the grey zone. Nor is it optimised for interoperability with the joint force and partner agencies for grey zone operations – as these are rarely exercised, if ever.

In order to prepare Air Force for its next century, I have released an updated Air Force Strategy (AFSTRAT), which aims to position Air Force for this contest. The strategy calls for us to embrace delivering Air and Space power as part of the Joint Force. Air Force has traditionally focussed on high-end warfighting, and while that capability remains an essential part of our tool kit, as recent events have shown, we need to be able to offer a wider proposition to government.

The strategy compels us to develop a skilled and intelligent workforce. As part of the joint force, we need to grow air and space power leaders, not just Air Force leaders. This will require educating our people (at all levels) to foster ‘strategic acumen’. I do not have all the answers, the best thing I can do for Air Force during my tenure, as Chief is to foster the conditions whereby people have the ability to be curious and strategically aware.

I want our Air Force to be ready to seize opportunities to engage and assure access in our region, while denying the opportunity for malign actors. For us to contest along the full breadth of the competition continuum, we need to be an integrated, joint, multi-domain, and interconnected force. Our interconnectedness is everything and our common objective, Australia’s national security, depends on it.

With the intent of government, we have done excellent work to hone our Air Force so that it possesses the adaptability and the sophistication needed to respond to the challenges ahead. We are creating the right cultures, the right workforce, and the right mix of technologies to succeed in our second century.

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At the beginning of its second century the one constant the Air Force continues to experience is in the notion of change. The future Air Force will look very different from what we have had in the past. Significant increases in computational power, advanced manufacturing, miniaturisation, sophisticated sensors, enhanced access to space, and artificial intelligence will dramatically change the capability landscape. Combined with global power shifts and near-peer competitor's investment in technologically advanced military systems, the future battle-space will be a complex one.

Air Force will become one of Australia's most advanced organisations. And it must, if we are to adapt to this changing world.

Air Force will have different skills, different weapon systems, agile bases, multiple redundant networks, and we will be active in space. Space will become more pivotal - supporting our multi-domain operations. We will do this together as part of the joint force across Defence.

Our best thinkers are today contemplating what an Air Force will look like in the next 100 years. Including that always asked question – will we have pilots in the cockpits?

To succeed in this space I need innovators and disruptors in the organisation that see things differently - those that are willing to try something and to fail, but in the process learn something for next time –innovation that enhances our capabilities and future proofs us.

While our technologies and systems are important, they are only one part of what enhances the delivery of Air Power. Without our people intelligently wielding them, our cutting-edge technologies are simply inanimate objects.

Our people not only need to be technically brilliant, but also they need to be strategically aware, have a solid understanding of their place in the joint force and their responsibilities to Government.

Our people need to be comfortable operating in the environment of constant competition within our Joint Force. Our strategy is to give our people the tools they need to be creative and to encourage their curiosity to build the effects we need for the future.

Our people are our future, and our future is everything.

While we still have a long way to go, our Air Force is more diverse in culture, ethnicity, and gender than ever before in its history, we are stronger for it. Our Air Force has seen transition from a wooden and fabric airframe to supersonic, composite based aircraft and space programs; however, there has been one constant throughout all this time – and that is the calibre of our people.

A sustainable Air Force innovation program to take us through the second century requires an intelligent and skilled community who demonstrate agility, creativity and innovation at every level in our workforce.

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The traits, values, innovation and courage demonstrated by our original pioneers are the same that characterised our people today. I have absolute confidence in those coming after us – they are better, stronger, smarter and they are determined. I have no doubts as to their courage, strength and resilience. We just need to create the space for them to flourish and I know that they will sustain our Air Force through the next century.

As we project forward into our 2nd Century we can be certain our Air Force will serve Australia as a global partner, a regional neighbour, and a country that values its national interests and respects the interests of others. As Dickie Williams would have said, “These are facts”.

In closing, in the words of the Ngunnawal people:

Spoken in Ngunnawal language.

(We respect the land, water and sky we fly over, and through. We will protect them.)

Then. Now. Always.