



Opening Address

**Deputy Chief of Air Force
Air Vice-Marshal Warren
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CAF Gender Conference
Canberra ACT
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Thank you so much Aunty Matilda for your kind welcome. I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we are meeting today, the Ngunnawal People, and pay my respects to their Elders past and present. I would also like to pay my respects to the Indigenous men and women who have contributed to the defence of Australia in times of peace and war.

Aunty Matilda, you support Defence in many forums and on many occasions; we are always the richer for your presence and your wise words.

Uncle Harry, as our Air Force Indigenous Elder you are contributing in so many important and powerful ways. Thank you for your service and for being such an eminent member of the Air Force family.

Ladies and gentleman, this is the third Air Force Gender Conference. We initiated these forums in 2012 after receiving excellent reports of something happening off our south eastern shores. Our friends in the New Zealand Defence Forces had been holding a Women's Development Forum since 2006. As with the many fine imports from 'over the ditch', our initial Air Force Women's Development Forum proved to be a worthy fit for the Australian context. I thank the Deputy Chief of the Royal New Zealand Air Force, Air Commodore Mark Brunton, who will be joining us later, for any part he may have played in the origins of today's forum.

Our 2012 Women's Forum was themed '*Surviving and Thriving in non-Traditional Employment*'. It was held just months after Defence's Pathway to Change program was launched and barely a year on from the Skype incident and the ensuing set of reviews into Defence culture. It is a marker of how far we have come, that today's conference theme is '*the difference I bring is the value I add*'. That's quite a big idea in a military context, where for much of our history we have valued sameness over difference. For good reason, much of our past training and indeed culture was based on doing the same things in the same way at the same time.

So why is difference more useful to us now? The answer is change. Our Air Force must be ready to face the challenges of the future. We do this knowing that the entire fabric of Air Force is changing. The systems we use are changing. Warfare is changing. The threats to our national security are changing. And of course society is changing. We simply have to adapt and embrace any opportunities that will make us stronger.

You will all be aware of Plan *Jericho*. Plan *Jericho* describes Air Force's path to maximising its effectiveness and capability as it takes on new platforms and embraces new systems. People are central to this. We need people who can make the most of the technology and

resources we have, who are agile of mind and can innovate. Our people must think in terms of whole systems and work cohesively across organisational boundaries. We need talented people who can bring fresh ideas, knowledge and methods. Once you understand these needs, it becomes very clear that drawing from only a narrow range of ideas, methods and approaches is a path to failure.

Women make up more than half of our population. To have the best people, Air Force must be able to attract and retain talented women. Since 2012 the percentage of women in Air Force has climbed to 19 per cent. We are aiming for 25 per cent and we will not get there by accident or by hope. It will take further committed action. Our commitment to having a diverse and inclusive culture is not a 'special interest' issue. When you encounter views that suggest that gender diversity is not important to Air Force, or that it is someone else's responsibility, challenge them. This is a shared responsibility and we all have a part to play.

One area to be reviewed in the next twelve months is our flying training system. Since 2014, Air Force has been working with the Australian Human Rights Commission to explore opportunities for increasing gender diversity and building an inclusive culture. We have recently received the report on the pilot training continuum—sometimes referred to as the 'fast jet report'. We see this as an opportunity for Air Force. Efforts are now underway to implement nearly all of the suggested actions in the report, from the earliest stages of the training process through to combat pilot training and instruction within Air Combat Group.

My final message to you is about barriers. Anyone interested in change will have to address barriers at some point. Change isn't easy. At every step along the way, there will be reasons not to do things and to cling to the present. I need Air Force to be agile in its thinking as well as in its intent. So when we face a structural barrier to our intent for gender diversity, I don't want us to shrug our shoulders and give up. I want us to think about how to overcome barriers with better policies, more agile methods and better operating models.

On the other hand, I know we have a workforce that is deeply committed to building a better and stronger Air Force. Ultimately this will prevail over any short-term discomfort with change. The Air Force of 2023 will have greater diversity of workforce composition, diversity of thinking, and diversity of method. It will be better equipped, more agile and more powerful than what we have today. By then, I think Air Force people will already be looking back on our diversity journey and asking why it seemed so hard, when the benefits are so clear.