

Air Force Strategy 2017–2027

by

Air Marshal Leo Davies, AO, CSC

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Following the official release of the Air Force Strategy 2017–2027 at the 2017 Australian International Air Show, all interested Defence Force personnel were invited to attend a special briefing on the strategy by the Chief of Air Force. The strategy comes at an important time for Air Force—a time of large-scale force renewal, strategic complexity and uncertainty. The strategy comprises five strategic change 'vectors' for Air Force, which will guide Air Force's transformation to a 5th-generation Air Force and position it for continuing success in providing Government with potent air power options.

Air Marshal Leo Davies, AO, CSC

Air Marshal Leo Davies joined the Royal Australian Air Force as a cadet navigator in 1979 and graduated to fly P-3B and P-3C Orion aircraft with No 11 Squadron at Edinburgh, SA. After completing pilot training and F-111 conversion course, he was posted in 1988 to No 1 Squadron at RAAF Base Amberley. Air Marshal Davies has undertaken a range of flying appointments including a posting the United States on exchange, command of No 1 Squadron and Officer Commanding No 82 Wing for which he was awarded the Conspicuous Service Cross (CSC).

Air Marshal Davies worked as Director Combat Capability within Air Force Headquarters. He deployed to the Middle East to work within the Combined Air Operations Centre. In 2008, he was the Director General Capability Planning within Air Force Headquarters followed by a posting to Washington as the Air Attaché where he was awarded the United States Legion of Merit – Officer for his work. Air Marshal Davies returned from Washington in January 2012 to commence his appointment as Deputy Chief of Air Force. In 2014, he was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) for distinguished service to the Australian Defence Force in senior command and staff appointments.

He was promoted to Air Marshal and appointed Chief of Air Force on 4 July 2015.

Air Marshal Davies: Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for the opportunity to talk about the *Air Force Strategy*. We provided an opportunity for people to be exposed to the strategy, to hear about it, probably over the last six or eight months. We certainly started with a conversation at ASPI [Australian Strategic Policy Institute] about October last year. It was a chance for us to flesh out a few pieces of the strategy, how it related to other documents, but also how people related to it. And that was important. We made some adjustments then launched the strategy, officially, at Avalon [Airshow] two weeks ago.

The development process became important because there were adjustments in there that were needed. We didn't have it exactly right, but the changes were mostly around how it related. How does the strategy relate? Plan *Jericho* was an important bit. Where does *Jericho* fit in? How we would measure it? That's where the Air Force Business Plan became important and it's role in measuring whether the strategy was working and whether we needed to make any adjustments.

Before I get into this presentation, I'd like to explain that this strategy was a way to communicate. It is essentially that. It's a way of getting an understandable, reliable and, in many respects, a repeatable method of talking about how we do our business.

I don't know whether you would agree with me or not, but I suggest that Air Force would be a better organisation if we all had the same focus in mind. We probably do this in our own lives, in our households: When you set a target somewhere, whether that's going for a holiday; whether it's saving for a new car; whether it's making a change in lifestyle, if you set a target, everyone in the household, everyone in the group, gets on board and goes there.

And that, for me, is really important about this strategy. It is being able to have every airman, and those people who support Air Force and work alongside Air Force in doing its job, understand what the strategy, or the place we want to be, is. Our target is to become a 5th-generation Air Force.

I'm going to raise a point here, and it might resonate with some. Does anyone know what the Borg are? Who doesn't know what the Borg are? In science fiction, the Borg are a group who can communicate with each other from a distance without saying anything. They have the ability to communicate telepathically, if you like. I raise this story because it does relate to the strategy and to the way we communicate. I'm going to be bold here and suggest to you that at some point in your Air Force career, you'll be thought of as the Borg. I was told that the Army thought the Air Force were the Borg. And the reason for that largely came from the F-35. It was thought that no matter where you went in the Air Force organisation, that if you asked about the numbers of F-35 we needed, everyone said '102'. 'We have to have 102 F-35s.'

And it didn't matter who you asked, Corporal Smith or Air Vice-Marshal Jones, didn't matter, you got the same answer. And it was, 'How do you get that? How does the whole Air Force know that that's what you want to do?' And it became apparent that we are the Borg. And we took some pride in that.

I like the thought of us having the same story, which is what the strategy is about. At the last Senior Leadership Forum, somebody—a new member of the SLT [Senior Leadership Team]—raised the question, 'Is that a good thing?' And the answer at the end of that leadership session was, 'No it's not. We don't want to be the Borg because that's just Air Force. We want everyone to understand and hear and be part of where Air Force is going.'

We made a decision at that leadership team, that we, as Air Force, are no longer the Borg. We want the whole of Defence and all those agencies we work with to know about our strategy, be part of it and help us where they can. And we would help and educate them on what our strategy is all about. We thought we were good being the Borg. But someone new to the leadership team showed us that that perhaps wasn't the way for the future.

Plan *Jericho*—has anyone here not heard of Plan *Jericho*? Thank you. Plan *Jericho* is a method; it is a way for us to deliver aspects of the five vectors of the Air Force Strategy. I was asked in an interview, only about three weeks ago, pre-Avalon, whether there was some method in having *Jericho* released before the strategy. And it was a really good question. I said to the gentleman, 'I'm pretty sure that we would not have been able to do the strategy, or at least not do it as successfully as we did, if we hadn't gone through *Jericho*.' We allowed the *Jericho* concept to free us to be able to make some of the decisions and the cultural shifts. It also prepared us to run a little bit of risk for lots of

reward and prepared us to say, 'Yes, we're going to have a go at these particular elements'. *Jericho* has been a very important part of delivering the strategy.

This strategy is not a warfighting strategy. It's not something that you would put up there on the same constructional or conceptual basis as Clausewitz or Sun Tzu. It's not that. It's about doing our business. It is a practical approach. In fact, for those that haven't heard how it started, it was really around a communications requirement. I asked, 'How do we get the message from me to AC or ACW Jones, wherever they might be. How do I get that same message out? I want a communications plan. I want something that will cascade and flow and be reusable and have about a three-year life and will keep renewing every year for the next three years.' And the response was, 'Well that's great, boss, but what do you want to tell them? It's great to have a communications plan but there is no heart, no body to what you're going to communicate.' And that's where the strategy was born.

The generation of this strategy has created a lot of synergy with what other people are doing. This is not a document that stands alone as the Air Force document. As I said earlier, it works very closely with and is measured by the business plan. But if you have a look around our region, and even across most of our coalition partners, there are a number of air forces, a number of navies, a number of armies, a number of defence outfits, that are all looking at, 'What do we want to do over the next ten years? and Across all those forces, there is a lot of synergy with not just what's happening with Australia, but what is happening around the world.

Jericho will end as a means of guiding how we do our business. I don't know exactly when, but I'm thinking somewhere around 2020. Because, if we haven't got our methods, our DNA, the way we approach an issue or problem or an opportunity ... if we haven't got that sorted by about then, we might have missed out on culturally shifting ourselves to the way we [want to] operate every day. We should, at some point, not need to say, 'Because Plan *Jericho* said it's okay.' It should be because, 'This is what Air Force does.' And so in 2020, or thereabouts—don't have an exact date for you; might be a Tuesday, don't know—*Jericho* will stop because we'll have taken over in, in everyday sense.

What doesn't change though, what won't go away, is our requirement to, and our appetite for innovation, for safety, education, [and] international engagement; but from a working basis, not necessarily because it is part of the strategy. We've come a long way in many other evolutions as a contemporary defence force. Most of those are cultural and they will need to continue to evolve. So the strategy gets us started down five of those vectors. *Jericho* will stop but those intrinsic pieces that make us a viable defence force, and Air Force in particular, won't change.

So there are five vectors. I got asked a couple of times now, and it did surprise me a little, 'Which is the most important vector?' Do I need to answer that? No, there is no most important vector. The one that I would focus on first, however, is the one that underpins everything we do. It doesn't appear first on the list but it's the 'people' vector. It is the bit that allows all the rest to happen, but it's not more important. It is just the one, I think, [that] has already been started on and it is the vector that we will sharpen, if you like, over the next two or three years.

There has been an element of sophistication added to this strategy. We have a number of plans and documents, that you just saw, that will allow us to be more sophisticated in how we approach and understand and communicate the strategy. I am very firmly of the view that every airman has a part to play. [But I understand] that not everything that the

Chief says is understood by every base, by every rank, by every specialisation. We need a way to cascade that [message].

So part of our early work will be to have each rank and each specialisation, each base and each [squadron], understands what part they play in this strategy. And it's an important element because if it doesn't have a relevance to every rank and specialisation, we won't be able to drive it.

We as an ADF, got *Pathway to Change*. I don't mean we got it because someone gave it to us; we understood it. Air Force established and understood *New Horizon*. We began to understand the cultural shifts that make us contemporary. We understand Air Force values. We understand what it means to innovate. I've already spoken about it, but we got *Jericho*. When I get *Jericho* read back to me from international chiefs at Avalon saying, 'We like your Plan *Jericho*; we like what it does and the opportunity it presents,' now that's telling me that it certainly has relevance and people have got it. *Air Force Strategy* is just the next step.

It might sound like we're a little arrogant. Why is Air Force leading? Why is the Air Force important to Army, Navy, Public Service and other departments? It's not a level of arrogance at all, in my view. It is where we are. We have been both sophisticated and lucky in getting a capability life cycle that is just happening now. We're delivering—as we saw at Avalon—many of these pieces that we'll have to operate differently.

If we want to be successful, if we want them, those capabilities, to be as powerful and impressive as they can be, we have to make these changes. I think it is just a point in time, not one of any particular [sentiment that] Air Force is better than [other services], it is not the case at all. It is just where we are and we should take advantage of it.

By the way, I'm very pleased to say that, in my communications with Army and Navy, at various levels, with the Public Service, with Government, with international services, I'm not hearing one of, 'You're so far out there, how could we possibly [contribute]' that's not the case at all. It's one of, 'How can we be part of that?' And this is important for Air Force to understand because there will be a necessary element of education. We'll need to make sure we go at a pace that is good for the ADF, good for joint outcomes, not one that is just best for Air Force.

I sometimes find people in an audience like this get a bit squirmy. I'm about to propose something that is not necessarily grand in boldness, but one that we haven't really thought about much before. And that's about prioritisation within Air Force, about the thought that if what you're about to do, if the decision you're about to make does not fit one of the five vectors of the strategy, then why would you do it?

That also involves a change in [thinking]. If we're truly going to be joint, if we're truly going to look after our people, invest in infrastructure, communications and international engagement, at some point here, the real question will be: Would I give up an F-35? Would we only have 101 F-35s if it meant that the base that supported them was as good as it could be? Would it be that we would not fly that mission from No 3 Squadron at Williamstown with the four F-35s on Tuesday and we sent two F-35s off to work with the Army in Townsville because that would give us a better joint outcome? We should make that call. It should be the first thought we have, and I'm not sure, as an Air Force, we are thinking that way. It's not that we have been recalcitrant; it's that we haven't had this opportunity to think that way before.

Note: Words in square brackets [] have been added to the transcript during the editing process for clarity.