To defend Australia and its national interests, the Australian Defence Force is regularly called upon to operate in high risk environments. Air Force’s role as the primary provider of Australia’s air power capability requires it to undertake hazardous operational missions that require dedicated preparation and training. Integral to Air Force’s professional mastery of air power is the requirement to establish and maintain the fine balance between flying safety and mission achievement in the conduct of all operations, exercises and training.

The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) is one of the best smaller air forces in the world. Fundamental to that status is the emphasis our professional values and organisational culture places on flying safety. As a result, Air Force is a world leader in the flying safety records of all the current platforms in its inventory. The flying safety cultural norms of the RAAF today, however, should not and cannot be taken for granted. As one of the oldest air forces in the world, the RAAF’s culture is the product of its history and close association with the development of the civil aviation industry in this country.

Military aviation in Australia began at the Central Flying School (CFS) at Point Cook. In the early days of powered flight, the nascent aeronautical and mechanical technology made flying a particularly perilous affair as airframes and engines frequently failed. Shortly after flying operations commenced at Point Cook in March 1914, Captain Henry Petre suffered Australia’s first military flying accident when his Deperdussin monoplane crashed. During the course of World War I, eight flying courses were conducted at Point Cook after which the pilots were dispatched to England for further training. The advanced training conducted by the Australian Flying Corps’ training wing in Britain was more demanding of both students and aircraft and resulted in a high accident rate that claimed the lives of at least 25 Australian airmen.

Following World War I, the Australian government established an independent air force on 31 March 1921. Barely a week after the formation of the RAAF, the first fatal crash occurred at Point Cook. This tragic beginning was, unfortunately, to be the first of many accidents during the inter-war period that was characterised by poor flying safety.

During April and May 1927, two flypasts to mark the visit by the Duke of York were marred by very public air disasters that claimed the lives of five airmen. When the RAAF’s own internal investigation essentially exonerated all involved, the government established an independent Air Accidents Investigation Committee. This body was the first official air safety organisation tasked with investigating accidents and promoting air safety in Australia. Air Force’s safety record, nevertheless, did not appreciably improve and between 1921 and 1937 the RAAF suffered a total of 56 flying fatalities. As continuing progress in the reliability and airworthiness of aircraft had little impact on the RAAF’s accident rate, it became increasingly clear that a major cause of the poor safety record was to be found in the Air Force culture.

The early culture of the Air Force was a product of World War I as nearly all of its first members were veterans of that conflict. As a group, Air Force’s most senior leaders were all relatively young men who shared the common bonds and intense camaraderie common among war veterans. Most had proven themselves in combat, with the majority of officers of Squadron Leader rank or higher possessing at least one decoration for flying prowess or valour. Their collective and individual experiences made them reluctant to either give or receive criticism from their colleagues and peers. They, and the succeeding generation of pilots that they trained, created an organisational culture that emphasised ‘spirited’ individualism which accepted unnecessary risks and tended to turn a blind eye to cavalier attitudes towards safety and lapses in discipline.
The costs to Air Force were high. For the small Air Force establishment the most obvious of these costs was the loss of a significant number of promising airmen to death or injury. The high mortality rate also raised serious questions regarding Air Force’s basic competence in its core business of flying. Successive Australian governments had cause to doubt the professional expertise of the Air Force’s leaders and twice during the inter-war years invited senior Royal Air Force (RAF) officers from Britain to review the state of Australia’s air defences. The second such review, by Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir Edward Ellington, paid a great deal of attention to Air Force’s safety record and was scathing in its criticism. As result, Air Vice-Marshal Richard Williams, the Chief of the Air Staff, was relieved of his post in 1939 and the Australian government appointed a British officer, Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Burnett, in his place.

The demands of World War II resulted in a vast increase in the quantity and tempo of flying training. Burnett’s appointment, however, had little impact on flying safety and over 300 instructors and trainees were killed in fatal accidents in Australia during the war. Of greater consequence for the future development of air power in Australia, Burnett’s highest priority was the air defence of Britain and he threw his full support behind the Empire Air Training Scheme. The dispersal of Australian airmen across RAF squadrons deprived the RAAF of any sense of national and organisational identity. It also greatly limited the opportunities for senior RAAF officers to gain experience in command and opportunities to engage in the higher strategic level development of air power.

In the decades following World War II, the RAAF worked hard to overcome the legacy of its formative years. The post-war years witnessed the development of more professional training institutions and curricula for development of aircrew and ground staff. As airborne platforms became increasingly complex and costly, and required a growing number of specialists to fly and maintain, air safety became a whole-of-organisation responsibility. Tragic and costly accidents during the post-war decades periodically gave renewed emphasis on improving flying safety and the organisational and procedural reforms necessary to achieve it. Most importantly, Air Force embraced the promotion of flying safety as a core organisation value.

The past decade has seen a significant increase in operational tempo at a time when Air Force has reduced in size. The future holds little prospect for a respite in operations and the next decade will see Air Force introduce an entirely new generation of weapons systems. The level of risk accepted for military operations will often exceed that allowed by civil authorities and must be carefully managed in light of the military situation. ADF Boards of Inquiry into some recent air accidents have highlighted that periods of increased operational commitments and the burdens imposed by the introduction of new weapons platforms are those most likely to lead to compromises in air safety. Our current culture of flying safety has been dearly won with lives of RAAF personnel and deserves to be safeguarded by all Air Force members as one our most precious assets.

- **The capability and professional credibility of Air Force as the primary provider of Australia’s air power is dependant upon our flying safety practices and culture**

- **Failure to maintain flying safety not only unnecessarily endangers the lives of personnel, but can have serious repercussions for Air Force command and administration**

- **The Air Force’s current flying safety culture has been hard-won over many years and requires constant attention to preserve and maintain**

“I didn’t mind your fellows looking through my window when they were passing yesterday, but I did object to the fellow who winked at me.”

RAF officer in the Air Ministry commenting on the AFC pilots who flew aircraft through London streets on Anzac Day 1919

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No 33 Squadron B707 A20-103. On 29 October 1991 this aircraft stalled and crashed into the sea while attempting to simulate asymmetric flight. All five aircrew were killed.