

PATHFINDER

AIR POWER DEVELOPMENT CENTRE BULLETIN



Issue 132, April 2010

EMPIRE AIR TRAINING SCHEME: RAISE, TRAIN AND SUSTAIN DURING WORLD WAR II

'Victory in this war will depend upon mastery in the air ... the training of an overwhelming strength in pilots and aircrews is one of the most essential tasks to be undertaken by the democracies.'

J.V. Fairbairn, Minister for Civil Aviation,
30 September 1939

During World War II, 37 000 Australians were enlisted into the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) as part of the Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS). The participation of Australia in this scheme—along with Canada, New Zealand and Rhodesia—made a substantial impact on the conduct of the air war in Europe and it remains a truly unique episode in the conduct of coalition warfare. The scheme was the RAAF's principal wartime activity up until the entry of Japan into the war in December 1941. Furthermore, it established within Australia the raise, train and sustain facilities that enabled the rapid expansion of the RAAF during the early years of the war and that were subsequently crucial to the Air Force's ability to meet the Japanese threat in the Pacific.



EATS trainees departing Sydney for Canada - Oct 1940

On 29 April 1940 the first Australian EATS trainees were inducted into the RAAF at No 1 Initial Training School (ITS) at Somers, Victoria. They, and the thousands of men that followed, then passed on to elementary and service flying schools, or other specialised training schools in Australia and Canada, before going on to Europe for service with the Royal Air Force (RAF). Of the Australian EATS graduates, 13 000 served in RAF Bomber Command's strategic air offensive against Germany and Italy. Of these, 3486 lost their lives in skies over Europe—more than half of the total of all RAAF personnel killed in action, and almost 20 per cent of all Australian combat deaths in World War II.

At the outbreak of war, it was by no means clear that Australia's principal contribution to the war in Europe

would be through the provision of trained aircrew to the RAF. Based on the experience of World War I, senior RAAF officers had always assumed that another general European war would require the raising of a contingent for service overseas—the same assumption that informed Australian army planning. In September 1939, the acting Chief of the Air Staff, Air Vice-Marshal S.J. (Jim) Goble, submitted a plan to the War Cabinet for the dispatch of an air expeditionary force composed of six squadrons and supporting units totalling 3200 personnel.

The RAAF's plan, however, was overtaken by events when the British government proposed that the Dominion air forces jointly contribute instead to a massive pool of trained aircrews for service with the RAF. On 5 October, the War Cabinet—without reference to the Air Board—agreed to the British proposal. Although the government stated that it remained committed to sending an air expeditionary force, Australia lacked trained personnel to implement both schemes. Australia also lacked suitable modern combat aircraft for the expeditionary force and the six squadrons would have to be equipped by the RAF on arrival in Britain.

The immediate dispatch of 3200 officers and airmen, from a force that consisted of 3489 all ranks at the outbreak of the war, meant that any air contingent would have involved sending almost the entire standing RAAF overseas. This would have left little capacity in Australia for raising and training the men required to expand the Air Force for home defence, or provide additional squadrons for what was expected to be a long war in Europe. Furthermore, the lack of a mature aircraft industry meant that Australia was unlikely to be able to do much more than provide trained personnel in the short term. On 31 October 1939, it was officially announced that the air expeditionary force had been put on hold; ultimately, it was never implemented. Although Australia did contribute three formed squadrons to the war in Europe and around the Mediterranean, these units were never brought together as an Australian air contingent.

In principle, Article XV of the EATS agreement had addressed the Dominions' primary concern for preserving distinctive national identity of the men being sent to serve in the war, by mandating the formation of nationally coherent squadrons within the RAF. In all, there were 17 Article XV "RAAF" squadrons—Nos 450-464 and 466-467. Four of these units served in Fighter Command, seven in Bomber Command, and one in Coastal Command; five were formed in the Middle East. Later in the war, two of the squadrons were sent from Britain to Australia for service in the war against Japan.



RAAF and RNZAF bomber crew and RAF ground staff - July 1944

There were many shortcomings to the arrangement that was arrived at. The fact that RAAF personnel were dispersed throughout the RAF (more served in some 200 different squadrons than within the designated national units under Article XV) meant that it remained hard to discern anything that was unique or special to the RAAF contribution. Moreover, few Australian airmen got to exercise command beyond the squadron level, and neither the Australian government nor the RAAF's Overseas Headquarters in London had any say in the strategic direction of the air campaign or employment of Australian airmen serving with RAF squadrons.

Despite its limitations, EATS was a remarkable accomplishment and undoubtedly represented the most practical and substantial contribution the RAAF could make in the early years of the war. Under the auspices of the scheme the RAAF was rapidly transformed into an enormous organisation for raising and training aircrews. Some 36 schools were established across Australia, covering not just flying training but navigation, observation, bombing, gunnery and wireless work as well. These schools were established at airfields in every state and became crucial in enabling the RAAF to rapidly expand to a peak

strength of 182 000 by mid-1944. Coincidentally, many of today's RAAF Bases and Australia's regional airports had their origins as EATS training facilities.

The global and multi-national character of EATS also remains a remarkable feat in the annals of coalition warfare. In addition to Australia's contribution, during the course of the war the other participating Dominions supplied another 140 000 trained airmen to the RAF. The scheme's facilities in Canada were also used to provide training to over 40 000 British aircrew trainees as well as aircrews from several other Commonwealth nations and émigrés from the nations of occupied Europe. The final outcome was a formidable marshalling of air power resources that made an invaluable contribution to the Allied victory in World War II.



On 31 March 2010, the Chief of Air Force announced that No 460 Squadron was being reformed within the Defence Imagery and Geospatial Organisation. No 460 Squadron is Australia's most distinguished bomber unit from World War II. Formed in Britain in November 1941, the squadron was immediately assigned to RAF Bomber Command's strategic air offensive against Germany. Operating Vickers Wellingtons and later the Avro Lancaster, the squadron flew more sorties than any other Australian bomber squadron and dropped more bomb tonnage than any squadron in Bomber Command. It lost 1018 aircrew (589 of whom were Australian) and 169 of its aircraft were destroyed. The new 460 Squadron will be stood up in July, with a formal dinner under the wings of 'G for George', the ex-World War II Lancaster held by the Australian War Memorial.

- *This year marks the 70th anniversary of the commencement of EATS training in Australia.*
- *The enormous raise, train and sustain organisation established under EATS enabled the RAAF to rapidly expand Australia's air power to counter the threat from Japan.*
- *EATS represents a unique chapter in the conduct of coalition warfare.*



Air Power Development Centre
Level 3, 205 Anketell Street
TUGGERANONG ACT 2900

Ph: 02 6266 1355 Fax: 02 6266 1041
Email: airpower@defence.gov.au
Web: www.raf.gov.au/airpower

