For centuries, monarchs and governments have recognised outstanding performance by military units in battle by the granting of commendations. Battle honours, in which the name and year of the battle are emblazoned (embroidered) on the unit’s colour or standard, forms part of such commendations. However, is the concept of battle honours, that originated on European battlefields in the eighteenth century, relevant to a modern air force?

Although the granting of battle honours had already occurred earlier, it was not until 1784 that British Army units were authorised to display their battle honours on their colours. The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), like the Royal Air Force (RAF), had no battle honours up to World War II. In 1943, King George VI approved the award of a standard to any RAF squadron that had 25 years of service or one that had received ‘the King’s appreciation for outstanding operations’. The approval included provision for battle honours to be added to each squadron’s standard, even though the RAF at the time had no approved battle honours.

In due course, a list of air battles and campaigns in which the RAF took part was approved by the King as the first Air Force battle honours. This list included battles in both World Wars, and allowed RAF squadrons to inherit honours from their similarly numbered squadrons in the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service. The list also included honours awarded to Australian squadrons, both Australian Flying Corps (AFC) and RAAF, that served under British command in both World Wars. However, many battles in the Pacific theatre did not have RAF involvement and therefore, were not awarded a battle honour at this time.

In 1952, the newly-crowned Queen Elizabeth II approved the award of standards to RAAF squadrons that also included the right to emblazon battle honours on each standard. Two years later, the Australian Prime Minister recommended to the Queen a list of proposed battle honours for the RAAF. This list included honours for battles such as Milne Bay and Bismarck Sea—battles which the RAF had not taken part in. In addition the wording of the recommendation granted the authority for the Air Board to allot battle honours from the list to squadrons that had taken part in the battle. All recommendations were approved by Her Majesty on 1 October 1954.

In the next two decades, most existing Air Force squadrons were allotted the battle honours they had earned in World War II. Squadrons also inherited the World War I battle honours from their predecessors in the AFC. However, squadrons that had not reformed after the major disbanding of units in the demobilisation of 1947-48 were not bestowed any honours.

In 1979, during the process of recommending battle honours for operations in Korea, Malaya and Vietnam, it was found that each of the Australian services had its own approving authority for battle honours. Reluctant to make three different recommendations, one for each service, to the Queen, the Governor General asked the Australian Government to develop a single approval process covering all three services. In response, Her Majesty delegated to the Governor General in 1981 the authority to approve the award of battle honours to all three services as well as the authority to allot battle honours to participating units, on the recommendation...
of the Prime Minister. Battle honours for Australian operations in Korea and Vietnam were approved in the following year, although those for Malaya would not be considered for another two decades.

In 2009, the RAAF Historian initiated a review of Air Force battle honours which resulted in recommendations for nine new battle honours over the period 1945 to 2003. The new honours included awards for service in the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, East Timor and Iraq. All honours were approved by the Governor General on 22 June 2009. As Operation SLIPPER, which included operations in Afghanistan, was still current at the time of the review, it was not considered for a battle honour.

Although air forces inherited the tradition of battle honours from armies, there are some significant differences between Army and Air Force honours. For air forces, battle honours are commonly awarded for campaigns and wars, with fewer awarded for individual battles. This is due to the very nature of air warfare and the Air Force perspective.

Air battles cannot be defined in the same way as land battles. A land battle occurs at a given place or over a given area, and at a specific time or time period measured in hours or days. Whereas an air battle, even one fought as part of a land battle, may have begun before the ground phase and have been fought over a much greater area, perhaps even tens or hundreds of kilometres away. The Battle of the Bismarck Sea, for example, was fought between the islands of New Britain and New Guinea over a 6 day period in March 1943. The Battle of the Atlantic, on the other hand, was fought over the entire Atlantic Ocean over a period of five years and eight months.

In the modern era, battle honours present a dilemma. They have customarily been awarded to units for their performance as a unit—not as individuals. Since the INTERFET operation in East Timor in 1999, Air Force aircraft and personnel deploying for combat operations have been force-assigned to a Joint Task Force (JTF), which disbands as soon as the operation is over. Rarely is a whole unit or squadron deployed. The combat support squadrons deployed to East Timor in 1999 were made up of personnel drawn from combat support squadrons from all over Australia. If such a deployed squadron is to be commended for its performance, the question of the award of a battle honour remains. As the unit which actually carried out the operation no longer exists as a separate entity, the commendation serves no purpose because it cannot be displayed. For this reason RAAF unit lineage is an important heritage issue to consider before organisational change and deployments are implemented.

Battle honours have served the Air Force well in the past. They remind present squadron members of the great achievements of their predecessors and they foster confidence in the Australian public. However, in the current operational environment where deployed Air Force units are composed of parts of different permanent units and operate within a JTF, are battle honours relevant? Are they relevant to a modern Air Force or are they only appropriate to past wars? The jury may well be still out on this question.

**Key Points**

- Battle honours are commendation for outstanding performance of a unit under combat conditions.
- Air Force battle honours were inherited from British Army traditions via the Royal Air Force.
- Battle honours may be less relevant today than in the past due to the force assignment procedures in current operations.