As the ADF looks to its future in the wake of the First Principles Review, Force Structure Review and the imminent White Paper, it is worth looking back to the last major reorganisation of the ADF that took place in the wake of the 1973 Tange reforms. These reforms coined the term Australian Defence Force, enshrined the Defence Diarchy within Defence and consequently helped shape Australia’s response to security challenges in the post-Vietnam era.

The tabling of *The Australian Defence: Report of the Reorganisation of the Defence Group of Departments* in federal parliament on 4 December 1973 was a watershed moment, bringing three distinct fighting forces into a single cohesive group capable of conducting a joint operation to meet national security objectives. Colloquially known as the “Tange Report”, named after the author Sir Arthur Tange, then Secretary of the Department of Defence, the aim of the Report was to institute structural, strategic and economic changes to ensure that the three services could better serve Australia.

Its key recommendations included: the abolition of the three Service’s departments and their respective Boards; consolidation of the administrative functions of the individual Services back into the Department of Defence; appointment of a single Minister responsible for all defence matters; appointment of a Minister Assisting; the creation of Chief of Defence Force Staff position; and amendments to the responsibilities of the Service chiefs.

Tange’s recommendations sought to improve organisational structures that dated back to 13 November 1939, when, as a result of the increasing demands of World War II on the Australian Government, the Department of Defence was separated into smaller departments of Defence Co-ordination, Air, Army and Navy with new ministers and secretaries appointed for each. As a result each minister with encouragement from their respective Service Boards became increasing inwards focused, seeking a greater share of the defence budget.

Once the War concluded, there were calls by senior officers such as Air-Vice Marshal William Bostock to appoint a commander-in-chief with the authority to conduct joint operations, while others like the then Defence Secretary Sir Frederick Sheddon argued for a neutral official to balance out the demands from the services. Contrary to the lessons learned in the War, there was a level of resistance from within government and defence leaders to meld the three services into a more cohesive force.

Initial moves to merge the three Services, the Departments of Supply and of Defence Production into one large Department of Defence can be traced back to a Defence group review headed by Lieutenant-General Sir Leslie Moreshead in 1957. Only part of the Review Group’s recommendations were accepted by the Menzies government — that of amalgamating Defence Production into Supply. The Government also issued an administrative directive creating the Chairmen of the Chiefs of Staff Committee (CCOSC) position to act as principle military adviser to the Defence Minister. This position had no command authority over the Services.

The next notable change was during Air Marshal (subsequently promoted to Air Chief Marshal) Sir Fredrick Scherger’s term as CCOSC from May 1961 to May 1966. He consistently argued for a single
“Australian Defence Force” of three fighting arms in lieu of independent services, under one Minister. However as the Vietnam War was gaining momentum he was reluctant to pursue this issue as he felt it would be a distraction to each service’s ability to conduct its part in the War. When General Sir John Wilton succeeded Scherger, he also supported a single department but wanted to retain three distinct services. By 1972 both political parties of the Australian Government recognised that amending the Defence structure was a matter of necessity.

Tange, a career public servant, was appointed as the Defence Secretary in March 1970 and recognised that action needed to be initiated to make the Defence group more efficient. In December 1972 the newly elected Lance Barnard took ministerial control of the five separate departments, Defence, Air, Army, Navy and Supply. Barnard requested that Tange complete a new White Paper on Defence. On 15 November 1973 Tange submitted the report to the Minister. The government accepted most of the recommendations and immediately began implementing them. Changes that could be effected without legislative amendment were commenced and on 30 November 1973, the three single service departments were abolished and placed under the jurisdiction of a single department and minister.

The Defence Force Act 1903 was amended to change the CCOSC post to the Chief of Defence Force Staff (CDFS), (subsequently renamed Chief of the Defence Force (CDF) in 1984). The amendment made the position the statutory commander of the Australian Defence Force with the authority to appoint an officer from any service to lead a tri-service taskforce. The Defence Force Reorganisation Act 1975 became law on 9 September 1975 and the main provisions of the Act took effect on 9 February 1976. From this date individual Service Boards were abolished and ministerial directives were issued to the Service Chiefs amending the chains-of-command and authority.

For Air Force, this was the biggest change in its command structure since its formation in 1921. The directive informed the Chief of the Air Staff (CAS, retitled to CAF in 1997) that the Air Board no longer commanded the Air Force, but that CAS had become solely responsible for command, management and effectiveness of Australia’s air power. Accordingly the Air Board met for the last time on 30 January 1976 and a new advisory body, the Chief of the Air Staff Advisory Committee (CASAC) met for the first time 16 February. The CAS through this challenging period was Air Marshal James Rowland, (CAS March 1975 – March 1979 and Knighted in 1977), a decorated WWII Pathfinder pilot with Bomber Command, test pilot and engineer. Rowland was perhaps an ideal leader to guide the Air Force through this period of significant change.

As the revised Department of Defence now had a diarchy leadership, that of the CDFS and the Secretary, the Report also recommended that ministerial directives be issued to both parties to clarify duties and boundaries. The restructure did experience some push-back in its early phases of implementation and there followed a long period of continuous reform and fine tuning into the 21st century. Tange noted that the phrase “the Defence Force” within the Defence Act legislation was rarely mentioned—in a measure of the broad maturity and influence of the Tange reforms, today the term is in common usage.

Key Points

- Post World War II the Defence organisation needed to be reformed to make it more efficient and responsive to Australia’s security needs.
- The ‘Tange Report’ recommended the most significant command change in the Air Force since formation.
- The CAF is now sole commander responsible for the management and effectiveness of Australia’s air power.