



RAAF 88<sup>th</sup> Birthday Service  
- Chief of Air Force: Air Marshal Mark Binskin  
AO –  
Australian War Memorial

*(Check with delivery)*

The Minister for Veteran Affairs, the Hon. Alan Griffin, MP, the Chief of Army, Lieutenant General Ken Gillespie, Former chiefs of Air force. Distinguished guests, ladies and gentleman. Thank you all for joining us as we celebrate 88 years since the formation of the Royal Australian Air force, on 31 March 1921.

I would particularly like to thank the Director of the Australian War Memorial for allowing us the use of this wonderful venue for this evening's function, here in the midst of the memorial's latest exhibition 'Over the Front'.

The film and sound sequence we have just watched serves as a fitting and remarkably appropriate introduction to paying tribute to the founders of the RAAF, and reflecting on how far the Air Force has come since its earliest days. Of course, the events depicted on the screen pre-date the RAAF by three years, but as the narration at the end made clear, it was the experience of that nature of warfare, which shaped the origins of the third service.

The aircraft of World War I also represented a major component of the force which Australia brought into being in 1921. The RAAF would not have been much more than a flying school without the war surplus types received as a gift from Britain in

1920. The technology level, which these machines embodied, stayed with the RAAF until shortly before World War II.

When World War II started in 1939, the RAAF was transformed. By 1945 Australia was maintaining an Air Force of more than 130,000 personnel, organised into over 60 squadrons with 3200 operational aircraft.

In fact, only in the last few days have we again paused to remember the bravery and dedication of the men that flew in this time. Last Thursday the plaques of the 11 RAAF squadrons were laid and dedicated on the floor of the St Clement Dances Church in Central London. A fitting tribute that their heroic efforts should be immortalised in a thousand year old church beside those of their sister squadrons and their mates.

It was a unique privileged to reconnect with part of our living history at the reception afterwards. It was even more special for me when I found out one of the surviving members of 451 Squadron who had flown across from Australia was a Spitfire pilot who had taught me to fly gliders when I was 15. To be able to reconnect with him and indulge our mutual aviation obsession, was really quite special. To watch his wife of 60 years gracefully retire from the conversation as it descended into the respective handling characteristics of F/A18s and Spitfires with bombs and to be joined by our current Australian exchange pilot who is flying the RAF's latest fighter, the Typhoon, was a bonus. It must have been a quite a sight—three men, each separated by a quarter of a century swapping stories with their hands.

But an Air Force is much more than about the people who fly the aircraft and we often do ourselves a disservice when we present our history in terms of heroic young men dog fighting at close range. We often overlook what is an air force's greatest strength—the people that don't fly the aeroplanes. At its heart, Air Force is a complex engineering and logistics organisation that is totally reliant on the quality of that support (determines the quality of the Air Force). It is really quite basic when you think about it—there is no more useless implement of war than an aircraft that can't fly whether it's a C17 or a Super Hornet. I think one of the things we often overlook is the dedication of those men and women supporting operations.

One of the highlights for me was as CO 3SQN when we were hosting a visit from 450 Squadron association. I was explaining one of the activities when I realised how enduring some of the characteristics were. The ground crew at 3SQN were always obsessed with making sure their aircrew had the best possible aircraft. Occasionally we swapped a/c between squadrons to even out the hour's usage. On this particular occasion, the jet had come from 75 Squadron and I think the majority of squadron pilots had commented on the fact that they thought it was a particularly good radar. The ground crew was always keen to know how well the pilots thought the aircraft were performing.

In WWII the squadron used Italian workshop trucks which were apparently much better than anything they were supplied with. They also used a captured Caproni transport as well as restoring a captured Me 109 to flight so that their pilots could fly it and develop new tactics to fight it in their Kittyhawks. The common theme was they were obsessed with giving their aircrew the best possible chance in the air war in the desert.

If we think back to the 'over the front' presentation as great as it was, it does only show one aspect of the origins of an Air Force.

Think about the early engineers who struggled with producing better engines, better wing designs, bigger better weapons that could fire through propeller arcs, to the men who worked hard to repair the damaged aircraft. One of the leading Australian Aces, Robert Little, used to get so close engaging his opponents that he would often bump into them. Being one of Robert Little's maintainers would present some significant challenges.

There are many examples in Air Force's rich history. What I hope I have done tonight is illustrate there is one element, which formed a constant thread, connecting those veterans of both world wars with those of us who wear the blue uniform today. The expectations and requirements placed on the airmen who slugged it out "over the front" in 1918 and on the ground personnel who helped keep them flying, would have been the same as those we find demanded of us today: dedication to the task at hand, devotion to the cause and the team, professional mastery in the air domain, courage and strength in adversity.

Though the gulf of differences, developments and refinements may separate us from the forms and notions of air war and air power as it was practiced in WW1, WW2 and today... there is every reason to feel pride in what it means to be a member of the Royal Australian Air Force. It is not simply a matter of acknowledging and paying tribute to our origins. We can also learn from their experience, their example and challenge ourselves to keep up to the mark in our day-to-day efforts to maintain an

Air Force relevant to Australia's defence and security needs. That us a task which everyone in this hall can undertake as we continue to force a proud record of achievement n the nation's service.

As we stand here tonight, I would like to say a thank you – on behalf of the men and women of the RAAF – to the Australian community. It is that community, which provides the reason for our existence, supports us in our endeavours and inspires the Service in its ethos and values. And with that in mind we have every reason to celebrate the RAAF's 88<sup>th</sup> birthday and look forward to many more occasions in the future.

Thank you.