



THE MISSING MAN FORMATION

There are few distinctive and common traditions which have proved constant or enduring in most air forces. Among those that the RAAF observes, none is more emotive than the use of the Missing Man Formation at a Service funeral. During a fly-over at the church or graveside, either the formation contains a gap where one aircraft is conspicuously missing or an aircraft in the formation abruptly pulls up during the flypast and climbs steeply away while the rest continue in level flight. The gesture is intended as more than a respectful farewell, for which a simple flypast would suffice; it is a personal tribute to the person who has passed away or fallen in combat – an expression that he/she will be sorely missed.

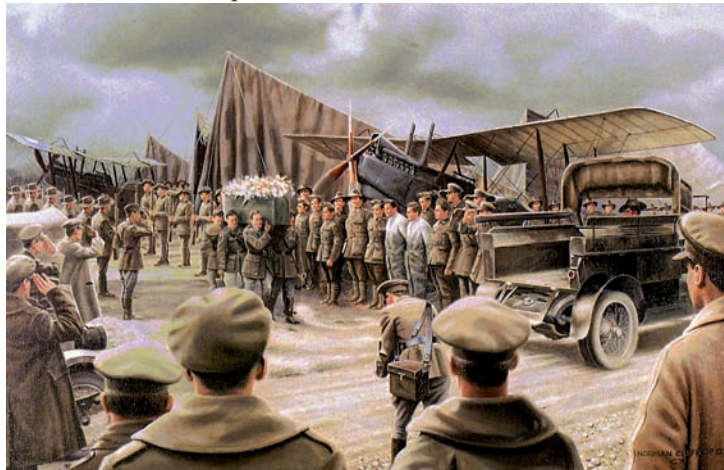
The Missing Man Formation is, first and foremost, a custom that is specific to airmen and air forces. Its use, therefore, during the recent funerals of two former chiefs of the Australian Defence Force – both of them Army generals – became the subject of much discussion among the RAAF community, mainly regarding the origins and meaning behind the practice. When is the use of such a formation appropriate and what are the conventions associated with its conduct?

The historical origins of the practice are quite obscure. Claims are often made that it began during World War I, when units returning from an operation routinely formed up on arrival over their home airfield to allow observers on the ground to see at a glance what the day's losses had been. If this was a recognised and common practice, personal accounts by airmen of that war are strangely reticent about mentioning it.

Another popular myth seems to be that the formation was first flown by the Royal Air Force as a mark of respect for the fallen German ace, Manfred von Richthofen – the famous “Red Baron”. If true, Australian sources would

have been ideally placed to record the fact, since the funeral of this enemy airman was conducted by No 3 Squadron of the Australian Flying Corps at Bertangles, France, on 22 April 1918. Remarkably, not a single account mentions the use of the Missing Man Formation, nor indeed any flypast at all.

What is certain is that, after World War I, flypasts and aerobatic displays by aircraft from the armed services became increasingly common during ceremonial occasions and prominent public events. Flypasts at



Burial of the “Red Baron” - no ‘missing man’?

funerals, however, largely remained an informal and private arrangement within the military air services. The first officially recorded Missing Man Formation was flown in Britain in January 1936, during the funeral service of King George V – an honour rendered appropriate by the monarch’s rank as a Marshal of the RAF.

In the United States, the first Missing Man Formation appears to have been flown at the funeral of Major General Oscar Westover, chief of the US Army Air Corps, in September 1938. When General Hoyt Vandenberg died in April 1954, he became the first senior officer of the USAF to be honoured with a Missing Man Formation flypast at Arlington National Cemetery, involving six B-47 Stratojets in a V-formation with the second position on the right vacant. What these instances demonstrated is that, far from being reserved exclusively for airmen at unit level, the Missing Man Formation has been regularly accorded to senior ranking officers.

Further blurring the picture is the fact that ‘missing man’ flights have taken on a wide appeal, so that they are no longer the sole preserve of air forces at all. Especially in the United States, private associations and groups also perform Missing Man Formations at funerals of prominent members of the community, not just veterans,

and during other commemorative occasions. Law enforcement agencies often conduct flypasts at the funerals of policemen killed in the line of duty, while commercial aviation companies also fly tributes at the funeral services of deceased pilots. This widening of application has produced some further refinement of the standard Missing Man Formation, as in the variant where the flight approaches from the south, preferably near sundown, and one of the aircraft suddenly peels off to the west and flies into the sunset.

The trend towards non-exclusivity with aerial salutes has also been evident in Australia, to the extent that when the pioneering female aviator Nancy Bird Walton died in January 2009, a Qantas A380 flew over St Andrews Cathedral at the commencement of her state funeral service in Sydney.

Within the RAAF, practice of the Missing Man Formation has largely followed the traditions established by the RAF. A large-scale flypast marked the funeral in 1980 of Sir Richard Williams, regarded as the “Father of the RAAF”, involving four separate groups of RAAF aircraft – without, so far as is known, there being any empty gaps in the formations. At the funeral just four years later of the RAAF’s first four-star officer, Air Chief Marshal Sir Frederick Scherger, a ‘missing man’ was flown by five RAAF Macchis.



*‘Missing Man’ for
WGCDR Dick Cresswell,
19 Dec 2006*

at his funeral service in Brisbane. And in 2006, Wing Commander (‘Bobby’) Gibbes and Wing Commander Richard (‘Dick’) Cresswell, two of Australia’s most

While the Air Force’s most senior and distinguished officers have frequently been accorded the ‘missing man’ honour in Australia, the same tribute has also been paid by individual RAAF units, particularly fighter squadrons, to their past and present members. After Wing Commander Ross Fox, Commanding Officer of No 75 Squadron, was killed in an aircraft accident at Tindal in 1990, a Missing Man Formation was flown by the squadron

accomplished fighter pilots, were both accorded the honour on their passing away. Serving members of the units that these renowned airmen had once led in combat—No 3 and No 77 Squadron, respectively— flew the ‘missing man’ in F/A-18 Hornets.

Although the Missing Man Formation is an aerial salute that works best as an informal tribute by airmen to ‘one of their own’, history demonstrates that the custom has never been confined solely to airmen nor initiated only at unit level. While use at the close personal level of airmen farewelling a respected and cherished colleague is probably closest to the original intention of the gesture, certain historical precedents exist for the Missing Man Formation – in all its variants – to be used for departed senior and prominent figures, even without an Air Force background.

- *The Missing Man Formation has been in use for a long time as an aerial salute to farewell departed colleagues, not just airmen.*
- *The custom exists in several forms and remains an informal practice.*
- *Precedents suggest it is unlikely to become an exclusive Air Force tradition, even while the RAAF continues to observe it..*

‘Fox’s body was recovered on 3 August. The 39 year old ... was a popular commanding officer – ‘a very fine officer and a great bloke.’ On 10 August 1990, all the officers and airmen who had served with 75 Squadron for two years were flown by Boeing 707 to attend the funeral ... at St John’s Anglican Cathedral, Brisbane. A party of 82 officers and airmen escorted the colours and bore the casket through the streets ... to its final resting place. A formation of F/A-18 aircraft from 2 Operational Conversion Unit, Williamtown, flew a ‘missing man’, that most poignant of formations, over the parade.’

David Wilson, *Seek and Strike* (2002)



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