

PATHFINDER

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ORGANISING FOR WAR: THE RAAF AIR CAMPAIGNS IN THE PACIFIC

Prior to the outbreak of World War II, the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) had not developed any substantial plans for the organisation and conduct of mobile air combat operations in defence of Australia and its northern approaches. It was assumed that the RAAF would be employed within global plans for the defence of the British Empire—much as had been done during World War I. The RAAF had also never been organised into an echelon command structure or operational formations above that of squadron level. In 1939, the RAAF's 12 flying squadrons, four stations, two aircraft depots and the flying training school were all directly commanded by RAAF Headquarters in Melbourne.

The expansion of the RAAF following the outbreak of war in Europe necessitated reorganisation and the establishment of a higher command and control structure. The Chief of the Air Staff, Air Vice-Marshal S.J. (Jim) Goble, developed an air plan for the dispatch to Europe of an expeditionary Australian air force composed of six squadrons and the requisite support units, organised into one fighter and two bomber wings. This plan, however, was never implemented following the War Cabinet's decision in October 1939 that Australia would participate in the Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS) to provide aircrews for service with the Royal Air Force (RAF). While EATS was accorded the highest priority, the RAAF also continued to form additional squadrons in Australia to provide for home defence. In November 1939, as an interim measure to accommodate rapidly increasing operational and training strength, RAAF Headquarters created No 1 Group in Melbourne and No 2 Group in Sydney.

In March 1940, the RAAF adopted a geographical command structure that divided the nation's air defence into Southern, Eastern, Western and Northern Areas. Air Officers Commanding (AOC) in each area exercised operational and

administrative control of all Air Force formations within their respective geographical boundaries. By the end of 1941, in addition to the RAAF units being formed in Australia and the EATS trainees being despatched to Canada and Britain, a number of RAAF squadrons were also serving with the RAF in Europe and the Middle East. Four more squadrons, under the command of a RAAF Group Headquarters, formed part of the RAF's Far East Air Force at Sembawang air base in Singapore. In November 1941, Sembawang was formally transferred to the RAAF, becoming its first overseas air station.

Following Japan's entry into the war and its stunning drive across the Asia-Pacific region, Malaya and Singapore fell and the remaining RAAF aircraft and personnel were hastily evacuated. In response to the Japanese threat to the north, it was felt that Northern Area was responsible for the air defence of too large an area and it was therefore re-organised into North-Western and North-Eastern Areas.

In March 1942, the Australian government accepted the appointment of General Douglas MacArthur



RAAF Area Commands in the SWPA – 1942-45

as the Supreme Allied Commander, South West Pacific Area (SWPA) and all operational RAAF units in the Pacific came under his command. From late 1942 George Kenney, Commanding General Allied Air Forces, subdivided his command along national lines into the US 5th Air Force and RAAF Command. Air Vice-Marshal W.D. (Bill) Bostock, AOC RAAF Command, exercised operational control over all RAAF combat operations in the SWPA. Air Vice-Marshal George Jones, Chief of the Air Staff, however, retained administrative control of the RAAF as a whole. Unfortunately, to the detriment of the smooth functioning and reputation of the RAAF, this organisational arrangement placed two strong-willed local officers of equal rank with distinct, but overlapping, command responsibilities for the Australian units and personnel in the SWPA.

By late 1942, after the Battles of the Coral Sea and Midway, the Allies moved onto the strategic offensive. The RAAF's static area commands, however, were predominantly defensive in nature and ill-suited to the conduct of mobile offensive operations. In September 1942, the RAAF reorganised operational units in Papua into No 9 (Operational) Group (No 9 OG), giving its Officer Commanding operational command of all RAAF combat formations operating in Papua and New Guinea. No 9 OG was organised as a self-contained tactical air force, which eventually grew to nine flying squadrons organised into three wings, an airfield construction wing, a radar wing, and supporting logistics and medical units.



Air Commodore Harry Cobby, AOC 1TAF (left), and Group Captain Clive Caldwell, OC 80 (Fighter) Wing (right), at Morotai in January 1945

The operational group structure gave the RAAF, for the first time, the capability to independently mount sustained and mobile air combat, strike and anti-shipping operations far from Australia in the inhospitable environs of New Guinea. The group played a major role in the campaigns in Papua and south-eastern New Guinea, including the Allied victory at the Battle of the Bismarck Sea. By early 1944, Allied offensive operations in the SWPA swung to the north-west, by-passing the large base the Japanese had established at Rabaul. In order to ensure that the Japanese forces in Rabaul were contained, No 9 OG remained in Papua, establishing a new headquarters at Milne Bay, and effectively became the RAAF area command for Papua and south-eastern New Guinea.

The RAAF's mobile air operations were assumed by No 10 (Operational) Group (No 10 OG). Formed in September 1943, No 10 OG began combat operations in north-western New Guinea and the Allied campaign in Western (Dutch) New Guinea. By September 1944, during the Battle of Morotai, No 10 OG had grown to encompass 12 flying squadrons and two airfield construction wings, as well as the

requisite support units. As a result of this expansion in size, No 10 OG was renamed the First Tactical Air Force (1TAF) in October 1944.

As the Allied advance continued towards the Philippines and the Japanese home islands, the 1TAF was tasked with harassing and subduing the large Japanese forces in the Dutch East Indies that had been isolated and by-passed by MacArthur's American forces. During May to July 1945, 1TAF undertook its last major combat operations in support of the Allied campaigns in Borneo and surrounding islands. In July 1945, 1TAF had reached its peak strength of 20 Squadrons and over 18 000 RAAF personnel.

During the course of the Borneo Campaign, 1TAF headquarters and most of its combat and supporting elements were gradually relocated from Morotai to airfields in Borneo and the surrounding islands. In order to release 1TAF to undertake further offensive operations, No. 11 Group was formed on Morotai in July 1945 as an area command to assume air garrison duties and administrative control of all RAAF units in the Dutch East Indies, Sarawak and British Borneo.

The end of the war occasioned the large scale demobilisation of the RAAF. 1TAF and the overseas Groups were disbanded. The area command system, however, was retained and remained the basis of RAAF's organisational structure into the 1950s until Sir Donald Hardman introduced a command system along functional lines (see Pathfinder No 106).

- *The RAAF entered World War II without any experience in planning or executing air campaigns for the defence of the Australian mainland.*
- *The RAAF initially adopted a geographical area command system to provide for the air defence of Australia and its immediate surrounds.*
- *As Allies moved on to the strategic offensive, a substantial part of the RAAF's operational air power in SWPA was organised into mobile air groups, and subsequently a tactical air force, for the conduct of offensive air campaigning.*



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