

# Turning the Tap Off – Stopping the flow of pointless jobs in the RAAF

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WGCDR Borg's monograph *Royal Australian Air Force 2025: A new organizational structure to optimise combat effectiveness in an era of great power competition* (Borg, 2023) included a statement that is more telling than it appears at first glance:

“We are too busy mopping the floor, we don't have time to turn off the tap.”

Anonymous

The opening quote accurately depicts the current feeling across many squadrons, wings and groups across the RAAF today.” (Borg, 2023, p. 29)

This problem corresponds to an issue identified within David Graeber's book *Bullshit Jobs – The rise of pointless work and what we can do about it*, specifically 'duct tapers' whose jobs only exist to solve a problem that should not exist (Graeber, 2018, p. 40). With the Defence Strategic Review focusing the Australian Defence Force on the strategic challenge within our region (Department of Defence, 2023), there is a need to address the problem identified above and others detailed within WGCDR Borg's monograph (Borg, 2023, p. 47). There is a need to address *bullshit* or pointless jobs in the RAAF.

Graeber (2018, pp9-10) defines *bullshit* jobs as a 'form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case.' The majority of jobs in the RAAF are undoubtedly necessary. But it would be dishonest to say that there are no pointless jobs in the RAAF. So how do we identify pointless jobs? How do we get rid of them?

In addition to 'duct tapers' mentioned earlier, Graeber (2018) identified four other types, of which the second type of pointless jobs are 'task masters'. There are two specific categories of 'task masters'; the first is unnecessary superiors in that, if they were not there, subordinates would be perfectly capable of carrying on by themselves; and the second are those who generate unnecessary task, supervise or create entirely new pointless jobs (Graeber, 2018, p. 51). The RAAF has a significantly higher ratio of general officers to other ranks than the Australian Army, US Air Force and other militaries (Borg, 2023, p. 16). This number could be reduced by restructuring Headquarters Air Command (HQAC) to become more combat effective (Borg, 2023, pp. 56-75) demonstrating the potential existence of the first category of 'task masters'. The growth in O-5 to O7 positions within HQAC is greater than the growth of Squadrons, Wings and Groups demonstrates the potential existence of the second category of 'task master' (Borg, 2023, pp. 11-12).

The third type of pointless jobs are 'flunkies'. These jobs exist primarily to make someone else look or feel important (Graeber, 2018, pp. 28-29). While leaders undoubtedly need some staff to assist them in their roles, there is also potential for 'flunkies' to be created in addition to those positions that are actually useful just to enhance the status of leadership positions. Is a general officer seen as important if they don't have a staff officer and/or a warrant officer

supporting them? Is a senior officer important if they don't have any subordinates? Evidence of this can be partially seen in the grown of senior officers discussed above.

The fourth type of pointless jobs are 'box tickers'. These jobs exist to allow an organisation to be able to claim that it is doing something that, in fact, it is not (Graeber, 2018, p. 45). Often this can take the form of administrative processes, such as reviews or reports, which indicate a desire for action but don't actually achieve anything. This was demonstrated in the CAFAC processes regarding the need for wide ranging organisational change. Demand for change was articulated in July 2015, review processes were started, an interim report provided in 2018 and the matter was deferred in 2019 (Borg, 2023, pp. 5-7).

The last type of pointless jobs are 'goons'. This type of job is created because other people employ them, which creates a need for similar jobs in another organisation. There is also an aggressive element to the role. Examples of this could be lobbyists, PR specialists, telemarketers, corporate lawyers (Graeber, 2018, p. 36). This was partially demonstrated by the staff-work churn that occurs for collective training. Pressures for providing staff work from one headquarters requires the creation of staff officers in subordinate and flanking headquarters to meet the bureaucratic needs of the demanding headquarters (Borg, 2023, p. 62).

Now that these pointless jobs have been identified, how does the RAAF reduce them? "Let's use technology to get rid of them!" I hear you say. Unfortunately, that's not the answer. Technology certainly has displaced a number of roles; however, the digitisation of the RAAF, specifically defence computer networks, has increased in the last few decades along with the rise in pointless jobs (Graeber, 2018, pp. 255-265). Moving from inefficient use of technology, such as manually created spreadsheets, to dedicated personnel, capability and financial management systems may streamline some processes and remove some 'duct tapers', but this doesn't address the bigger problem of why they exist.

The key output from the RAAF comes from Squadrons but there are five layers of hierarchy stretching from Squadrons to Air Force Headquarters. Some hierarchy is necessary as the span of command is best suited between three and six subordinate elements (Department of Defence, 2021, p. 15). Given there are 74 Squadrons, this provides a need for 13-26 Wings and 3-9 Force Element Groups (FEGs) (note: as of 2020 there were 17 Wings and 6 FEGs). Then there are two layers of hierarchy beyond the FEGs (Borg, 2023, pp. 9-12). This layering of hierarchy could be described as a sort of medieval feudalism where the additional chains of command make sense as the best structure to absorb the resources provided by the government (Graeber, 2018, p. 246). Restructuring this hierarchy could reduce the number of general officers, eliminate unnecessary headquarters and improve combat effectiveness as recommended by WGCdr Borg (Borg, 2023, pp. 56-75).

It is mildly amusing that Squadron Leaders don't lead Squadrons, Wing Commanders don't command Wings and Group Captains don't command Groups. Since World War II, rank description has been delinked from role, but rank is intimately linked to the financial incentives for serving; the higher the rank, the higher the salary. This also provides an incentive to create additional high-ranking positions as it generates promotion opportunities for every rank below. Given there are nine officer ranks and seven enlisted aviator ranks, maybe it is time to consider the need to fill every one of these ranks for the current size of the RAAF and explore a means to delink rank from financial incentives.

No one volunteering to serve their nation wants to believe that their job may be pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious. With a variety of the surveys conducted across the ADF, it may be worth asking individuals if they feel that way about their job or their superiors' job. Change is hard but there should be a discussion beyond structure to look at how rank is affecting our efficiency as an organisation. There are potentially a number of jobs that could be repurposed to produce a more combat effective air force and stop people feeling like they are too busy to turn the tap off.

## References

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