

Is the RAAF seeking combat effectiveness?

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The question being asked is sometimes more important than the answer. WGCDR Borg's thesis *Royal Australian Air Force 2025: A new organizational structure to optimize combat effectiveness in an era of great power competition* (David Earl Borg, 2021) provides a more efficient structure for the RAAF to improve combat effectiveness. This is based on the assumption that the RAAF wants to be more combat effective. This assumption needs to be scrutinised more thoroughly: does the RAAF truly want to be a more combat effective force?

WGCDR Borg's thesis was written in 2021 before the Defence Strategic Review (DSR) was commenced and published in 2023 (Department of Defence, 2023). WGCDR Borg highlighted Australia's strategic challenges in the Indo-Pacific and that the RAAF had been a significant beneficiary in addressing this challenge (David Earl Borg, 2021, pp. 7-8). This resulted in the RAAF having an updated fleet of aircraft, making it 'one of the most modern, capable and potentially lethal small air forces in the world' (David Earl Borg, 2021, p. 1). The DSR highlighted that the Indo-Pacific faced increased competition, and circumstances are more challenging. The risk of military escalation or miscalculation has risen (Department of Defence, 2023, p. 5). This was to be addressed by changing the ADF (including the RAAF) from a balanced force model to a focused force. The focused force was to be designed on the strategy of denial with an integrated force that could harness effects across all five domains with the RAAF requiring an improved network of northern airbases, integrated air and missile defence and long range strike capabilities (Department of Defence, 2023, p. 16).

All of this points towards a need for a more combat effective force focused on denying threats to Australia from within the region. The RAAF procuring a modern fleet of highly capable aircraft appears to fit this need. But is this an example of the RAAF seeking to be truly more combat effective, or is it a bureaucratic organisation benefiting from the circumstances it finds itself in to upgrade its existing fleet?

I hear you say, 'But hasn't the RAAF been operationally deployed since 1999? Surely this would indicate that it is a combat effective organisation?' True, but these deployments have largely been small commitments of choice to the Middle East or regional operations to provide humanitarian support with little combat risk. The peak of combat operations was the deployment of RAAF Hornets, Super Hornets, KC-30A and E-7A from 2014-17 as Air Task Group 630 to strike ISIS in Iraq and Syria (McLaughlin, 2017). This was conducted from the safety of the United Arab Emirates, over 1400km from the target areas. There were no RAAF aircraft losses or damage from combat action. There were over 2,000 missions conducted, with an average of less than one bomb dropped per mission (Kerr, 2017). While a noteworthy demonstration of combat effectiveness; airlift, maritime patrol and combat support units sustained RAAF operations in the Middle East for over a decade.

The Air Force strategy released in 2020 provides a mixed approach to developing combat effectiveness for the RAAF (Department of Defence, 2020). This is directed towards strategic effects in an environment where the terms 'war' and 'peace' do not adequately apply. It recognises that the generation of air combat power has formed the basis for how the RAAF sees itself, but this is no longer sufficient in describing how the RAAF contributes to national strategic effects. This highlights the need for further understanding on what combat

effectiveness means for the RAAF. Is it high end warfighting in conflict? Is it shaping the environment through effective engagement with other nations? Is it enabling partners with airlift and ISR? Regardless, the RAAF structure has not changed to be more efficient for any of these outcomes.

The issues brought to light by WGCDR Borg regarding the lack of change in Headquarters Air Command (HQAC) Force Element Group (FEG) structure shows the RAAF is not seeking to become more combat effective. The current FEG structure is designed to efficiently support aircraft raise, train and sustain (RTS) outcomes. Aircraft with different roles are siloed in FEGs and separated from their main operational supply concerns, such as aviation fuel. This structure has not changed significantly since 1987, even though it was sought by at least two Chief of Air Force (CAF). This points to the inability of the broader organisation to move away from a structure designed for efficient RTS to one that prioritised combat effectiveness (David Earl Borg, 2021, pp. 4-7).

Another key problem highlighted by WGCDR Borg was the top heavy nature of the RAAF. The RAAF had 55 general officers (officer of the rank O-7 or higher) in 2021 providing a ratio of general officers to other aviators of 1:262. The ADF comparison of Australian Army general officers was 1:343. Comparisons with other nations provides a ratio of over 1:1,000 (David Earl Borg, 2021, p. 16). This indicates that the RAAF could effectively conduct operations with between 15 to 42 general officers. WGCDR Borg offers a method for reducing the number of general officers through restructuring the FEGs as the additional general officers do not appear to add combat effectiveness. Instead, it produces a bureaucracy designed to grow and control its own fiefdoms (Edgeley, 2022, p. 75). The additional rank also potentially exacerbates the issue of the 'frozen middle' by pushing decision making to higher ranks than is actually necessary (Williamson, 2023).

With regards to the question of whether the RAAF wants to be more combat effective, I choose not to offer a definitive answer. The answer will not be seen in more words; it has to be seen in action. Actual physical change that produces a more effective combat organisation is hard. The hope is that this action does not need to happen in response to a conflict. How quickly the RAAF acts and changes in response to the DSR will speak volumes in answering this question.

References

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