

# The Multi-Skilled Aviator – What does this mean?

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Since coming into Air Force in January 2024, I have heard many references to the 'Multi-skilled Aviator' (MSA). What I have definitively not heard is what the 'Multi-skilled Aviator' is.

Before proceeding, I must caveat my thoughts with what I believe the MSA is will vary across different Force Element Groups (FEGs) and the MSA will be specific to the requirements of those FEGs. As such, given my limited Air Force experience is solely within Combat Support Group (CSG), I intend only to discuss what I think an MSA is within a CSG context. However, before I offer my thoughts on what I think the MSA is, I think it might be useful to provide some insight into my own background.

I am Logistics Officer who transferred to the Air Force after serving 36 years in the Army as an Officer in the Royal Australian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (RAEME). I was a non-technical officer, who originally joined as an Apprentice Fitter and Turner. I served as a tradesman and military Instructor for 18 years. I later commissioned and practiced as a genuine Logistics Officer, not as an Engineering Officer. I have served both in the full-time and part-time capacities. While serving as a part-time RAEME Officer, I also served as a sworn police officer (Tasmania Police).

Since transferring to Air Force, I have heard many conversations regarding the MSA but very little as to what this undefined character is. Throughout 2024, I began to put some thought into what I think the MSA is, but before offering those thoughts, it is worthwhile discussing what I think it is not.

In my view, the MSA is not someone who is qualified in two or more different musterings or disparate technical skillsets. The ability to cross-train in different technical skillsets is extremely complex and time consuming. If it was easy to cross-train individuals in multiple different technical skillsets, we would have done it already. I do not foresee Aviators initially qualified as Personnel Capability Specialists\* (PCS) being dual qualified as Avionics Technicians\* or initially trained Fire Fighters\* being dual qualified as Movements\* operators. In my view, the gap between these skillsets is too wide to efficiently or effectively bridge. It would take an extremely long period of time to train for and then to maintain the new skillsets in circumstances such as this. Seeking a result along this pathway would likely see a decrease in the actual skills in both musterings/technical skillsets rather than achieving skill mastery in both.

Within CSG, I can foresee the MSA being derived from one of two different methods. The first method for deriving MSA, occurs when Aviators possessing common baseline skillsets are trained, within a new context, to provide additional capabilities that leverage their existing common baseline skillsets. An example, and there are many others, of an MSA I can foresee within this methodology is: an initially trained Fire Fighter who is later trained as an Airbase Operations Centre (ABOC) operator. Within this example, the emergency management and emergency operations skills of a Fire Fighter are leveraged and enhanced to allow them to manage operations and emergencies commonly experienced within the ABOC setting. In this

example, a Fire Fighter may be rostered for their normal firefighting duties and then be called upon to perform a number additional hours of ABOC operations.

Another example I can foresee is the Aviation Refueller (AvR) who within their current job role is delivering fuel to an aircraft extends that role so that they can perform 'hook ups' and actually pump fuel to refuel the aircraft, as is currently the case with their civilian counterparts. Within this example, an AvR delivers the fuel and refuels the aircraft without the need for a technical person to also be present, freeing up the capacity of the 'technical' specialist to perform other duties. In my view, the job enrichment and satisfaction gained in this example will significantly outweigh any concerns over 'technical vs non-technical' workforce arguments. Note, however, that these are examples only. There is no intent to disparage any mustering or to imply that the personnel of any mustering are not capable of cross skilling.

The second method or pathway I foresee, is where CSG can, and should, achieve the MSA by training every CSG member to perform their primarily trained role to a high level as well as training them to be able to undertake local area defence/security and vital asset protection (VAP) tasks to a competent level. In my view, this is an implied task contained within the National Defence Strategy (NDS) (Australian Government, 2024). This training can and should build upon the foundational skills provided to all aviators as part of their initial training upon enlistment or commissioning.

The NDS requires Air Force to operate from a '*Network of Northern Bases that is resilient and enhances Australia's ability to project force*' (Australian Government, 2024). In considering the 'network of northern bases', the network must be of sufficient size (number of sites) to allow the Air Component Commander (ACC) the ability to effectively manoeuvre in support of and the delivery of Air Power (Bingham, 2020). Furthermore, in order to create decisional dilemmas, increase asset survivability, and to feed into deception plans targeting the adversary decision cycles, the size of the network of northern bases must be of such magnitude as to create uncertainty, increase asset dispersal and make targeting information unreliable. The ability to manoeuvre Air Power at will provides significant complexity to all adversary decisions and increases the risk of poor targeting decisions by an adversary (Bingham, 2020).

If the premises above are to be accepted, it is the 'sufficiency' of the network of northern bases that drives the need for CSG personnel to be trained in local area defence/security and VAP tasks. The first and most pressing reason in support of this assertion is that there are simply not enough personnel, based on current staffing numbers, to achieve local defence/security or VAP tasks without adopting this approach. Many will argue that the No. 1 Security Forces Squadron (1 SECFOR), the 2 SECFOR or the Australian Army will perform these roles.

However, perspectives based on this argument fail to consider that the 1 SECFOR and the 2 SECFOR are relatively small organisations with different roles and skills. They utilise mass to achieve their particular security effects, therefore penny-packeting these force elements diminishes their effect. The requirement for mass limits the number of locations where they can provide security effects. As such, it is likely they will be tasked to best utilise their specific skills and roles in a very few specific locations.

When considering the Australian Army as providers of local defence/security and VAP tasks for the network of northern bases, it must be remembered that the 1<sup>st</sup> (Australian) Division, will likely be employed in littoral manoeuvre (Australian Government, 2024), and this will preclude them from much of the local area security and VAP tasks. The 2<sup>nd</sup> (Australian) Division has been given the mission of 'Protecting Australia' (Australian Government, 2024). This task will not only include high priority Defence sites but will also include high priority civilian sites, like: dams, power generation sites, seaports, airports, communications nodes and other locations deemed high priority. The 2<sup>nd</sup> (Australian) Division is simply not big enough to perform their mission at the myriad of sites that will require their efforts.

The 'Police' will also not be positioned to undertake this task. All police services within Australia conduct their operations at a national average ratio of approximately 1 police officer for every 465 people. In the event of conflict or adversarial strike upon Australia, the police will be very busy maintaining the peace and order within their local populations across 24-hour operations just like Defence.

Some may argue that local area defence/security or VAP tasks can be contracted out, and I believe this is largely true in a strategic competition environment, but only in some locations. However, when strategic competition turns into conflict and the security to be provided or the vital asset to be protected is literally in the most austere locations in the middle of the northern parts of Australia (thousands of kilometres, or hours of flying, from the nearest significantly sized community), it then becomes unlikely that these tasks can be contracted out.

A contracted local defence/security solution is even more unlikely if the move from strategic competition to conflict has been initiated by some form of kinetic strike on Australia. As such it is my assessment that a contracted solution to the local defence/security and VAP tasks question will be unlikely provided by contractors, particularly in the austere parts of northern Australia where the 'Network of Bases' has been directed.

In deriving my answer to the MSA question, I have limited my assessment to local defence/security and VAP tasks. I have done so in the belief we will not have to face large scale ground-based force on force threats. However, I do believe that we will face: criminal activities, foreign agents, intelligence collection, uncrewed aerial assets, coerced individuals, civilian population actions, and potentially Special Forces actions against the 'Network of Northern Bases' and current fixed base locations. Given the expected size of these threats, the provision of local defence/security and VAP tasks to be undertaken by CSG personnel is certainly achievable and in my view desirable (Bingham, 2020).

It is for the reasons outlined above that when considering the question what an MSA is, within the CSG context, it is my belief that it is an aviator who can perform their primarily trained role to a high level and conduct local area defence/security and VAP tasks to a competent level. The NDS requires it, there is no-one else available to do it, and it will be vitally important if we want to create uncertainty and dilemma in any adversarial decision-making cycles.

## References

Australian Government. (2024). *National Defence Strategy*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

Bingham, P. T. (2020, October 1). *The Air Base: The Air Force's Achilles' Heel?* Retrieved from Air & Space Force Magazine: <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/the-air-base-the-air-forces-achilles-heel/>