

Air and Space Power Conference 2026: Opening of Conference

Presenter: Air Marshal Stephen Chappell, DSC, CSC, OAM

Good morning friends and colleagues. I would like to echo Group Captain Jesse Laroche's acknowledgement of our traditional owners, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respects to their elders past, present, and emerging. My respects to all who are here and online today, and my respects to all Indigenous peoples who have served our nation with pride and distinction in times of peace and war.

Alongside my dear friend and colleague Lieutenant General Susan Coyle, who oversees our space and cyber domains, I would like to firstly welcome you all and open today's and tomorrow's Air and Space Power Conference. I would like to formerly welcome a few colleague, former Chiefs of Defence Sir Angus Houston and Air Chief Marshall Mark Binskin. Former Chiefs of Air Force, Ray Funnell, Leo Davis, Jeff Brown and Geoff Shepherd. Additionally, I'd like to make a special welcome to Katherine Bennell-Pegg who is joining us today, who was recently named Australian of the year, works for the Australian Space Agency and is the first Australian to qualify as an astronaut under Australia's space program. We are also honored to have her as a reservist Group Captain in the Royal Australian Air Force and of course I'd like to welcome the many international friends and colleagues who have travelled so far to be with us today and attend the Australian Air and Space Power Conference.

For several years now in military conferences like this, both in Australia and around the world, we have heard how we are facing the most challenging strategic circumstances since the Second World War. It's a phrase we have heard often, and it's a situation we must take seriously. We find ourselves in an era of deep and accelerating geopolitical disruption, one that calls for strategic discipline, heightened preparedness, and a shared commitment to safeguarding our future.

Last year saw conflict between Israel and Iran, the continuation of the war in Ukraine, and closer to home our aviators flying in region, including the South China Sea where we have been operating for decades experiencing unsafe and unprofessional interactions with aircraft flown by the People's Liberation Army. Then of course, there have been the events of recent weeks where we have seen the continuation of conflict between Israel and Iran which has seen us provide support to our partners.

At the request of the United Arab Emirates, our aviators have deployed with an E-7 Wedgetail to the Middle East to provide surveillance and assist in the protection of civilians and the collective Defence of our partners in the region. These events illuminate today's strategic environment, and I want to share with you a story from last year that, for me personally highlighted the strategic environment in which we operate.

The best part of my job, hands down, along with my dear colleague, Warrant Officer Ralph Clifton, is visiting our Royal Australia Air Force aviators and the broader air domain team out on our bases and out on operations and exercises. And it was a particularly special occasion for us to visit our our E-7 team deployed in Poland as part of Operation Kudu. Our aviators were working alongside our NATO partners, providing critical surveillance so humanitarian aid and military supplies could continue to flow to Ukraine.

When Ralph and I visited our deployed E-7 team, they were operating on overnight shift at around one in the morning as we were conducting a town hall meeting. The real world scramble alarms went off. I got to experience firsthand the professionalism of the E-7 crew as they integrated their high end technical and their human capabilities into the NATO air defence system and watch them play their part in the mission around the logistics node in Southeast Poland. I watched them as they were yet again seized at the gravity of the situation as another mass Russian attack unfolded in the early hours of that Sunday morning in late September. What was happening across the border and was playing out on their sensors and screens was not lost upon them as professionals and as human beings.

One of the things that struck me was the sense of purpose and pride they had in doing the job incredibly well. They also told me the story of the first time they checked in on a real world mission a few months earlier, and were talking to the Polish Air Operations Centre. The very first words that greeted by their Polish counterparts were along the lines of, “Thank you, Australia. Thank you for being here to help defend us.”

Like I said, we live in a pivotal time in history. We do indeed face the most challenging and precarious strategic environment since the Second World War. And what that means for us as leaders during this time is that we must respond in ways not seen since the Second World War. Ways that may feel unfamiliar to us because circumstances are not as they have been throughout our careers nor even, for many of us, in our lives. A couple of years ago the Australia government detailed our approach to address Australia’s most significant strategic risks based on the concept of national defence. National defence changes how we and our country think about an approach. National defence is a coordinated whole-of-government and whole-of-nation approach that harnesses all arms of Australia’s national power to defend Australia and advance our interests. It signals to the whole of Australia that defending Australia and advancing our interests is now a national endeavor. It is everyone’s responsibility.

So, since taking command of the Royal Australian Air Force, I don’t think there has been a day that’s gone by where I haven’t described our circumstances as being in a Strategic autumn. I know I risk sounding like a broken record and repeating that, but the risk of not seizing this time in history to

strengthen our preparedness is far greater. So please indulge me while I explain what I mean by a strategic autumn. Some parts of the world use autumn to prepare for a potentially brutal winter. Autumn is a time to chop and stack firewood, stock up on supplies, switch to winter tires and make sure you have plans in place should you be snowed in.

As the season that precedes winter, autumn is a time of preparedness. When I talk about a strategic autumn I talk about a season of preparedness. A time to make changes, evolve and ensure that we are ready for any number of plausible, possible future scenarios including the worst case scenario of conflict and war. Now the beauty of this strategic autumn, which is very different to nature's autumn, is that winter conflict and war is not inevitable. It can be deterred. In fact, the more we are prepared in autumn, the less chance of winter.

In military speak, I am talking about preparedness enhancing deterrence. I am a big believer that to deter actors from taking actions against our national interests, not only do we have to signal our determination to defend our interests, but we must be able to demonstrate that we have the capability and the capacity to actually do the things that we hope we never have to do. The hard power things.

It's not enough to talk about deterrence. I believe we must demonstrate that we have the air power to degrade, disrupt, destroy, and defeat. Those 'D' words are what actually generates deterrence in the current force and continues to signal deterrence as we look to the future force to get to those 'D' words of deterrence is to demonstrate that we have the capability and credibility – which we do in the Royal Australian Air Force – and then communicate that in a way those malign minds can comprehend. Then we've got to do it collectively, with our integrated force including our industry team mates, our interagency and our allies, and partners. And we must do it cumulatively. Over and over again.

If you attended my Chief of Air Force Symposium in Melbourne last March, you may remember listening to Admiral Rob Bauer, who was the 33rd chair of the military committee of NATO, where he likened deterrence to a seven foot tall bouncer at the front of a nightclub, making you think twice about gaining free entry. To use his analogy, that seven foot tall bouncer is us demonstrating through training, exercises and operations that if called upon, we can generate and deliver highly effective airpower with enhanced lethality and survivability. It is demonstrating how our capabilities are amplified by the integrated force, as well as our capability to further enhance with our allies and partners.

Last September, as well as visiting the E-7 team in Poland, I also met with the commander of the Finnish Air Force, Major General Timo Herranen. As a country, as a society Finland is an incredible case study in preparedness, the Finnish Air Force is highly regarded for how it maximizes military and civilian infrastructure for agile air operations. Finland has long taken its security seriously because circumstances, including its geography have made it necessary.

During the Second World War, like many other countries, Finland learned that fighting a war requires harnessing society's full capabilities. The Finnish people, industry and wider society have willingly accepted their role and responsibility in Finland's comprehensive security model. Finland has civilian defence shelters, it stockpiles, its private sector actively helps prepare for emergencies. From an air power perspective, it was impressive to be briefed on how Finnish F-18's and some of their NATO allies regularly use civilian highways and makeshift runways as part of their agile operations, their dispersal, their deterrence.

Finland is not just 'talking' deterrence. From its Air Force to its wider society, it demonstrates day in and day out its capacity, capability, and resilience. In Finland, preparedness is not a standalone thread, it is tightly weaved into their culture and their ways of thinking and doing. I was very grateful to Timo for sharing with me more about the Finnish Air Force's strategy and doctrine. It was a particularly useful conversation and I know there are many examples of allies and partners, including here in the room and from whom we'll hear from today as they refine their preparedness and their resilience. These types of discussions will assist us in the Royal Australian Air Force to evolve and implement what we are calling Building Fighting Depth.

Before I delve into Building Fighting Depth, I'm going to give you a quick overview of today's Royal Australian Air Force. I am incredibly privileged to command one of the world's tier one Air Forces, what I mean by that is we may be a small to medium sized force from a capacity point of view but we are definitely a tier one force from a capability point of view. Tier one means to me that as an Air Force we can deliver to a very high level across all the key air power roles that most Air Forces agree are doctrinally relevant to air power and the air domain – control of the air, strike, ISR, and air mobility.

The list of platforms, equipment, sensors and weapons we operate is impressive. And our human capability, our people, are even more impressive. In my opinion, given the strategic autumn that we live in, it has never been more important for Australia to have and maintain a tier one Air Force in the Indo-Pacific region, and how we further and strengthen that tier one Air Force is by building fighting depth.

So let me explain what building fighting depth is not. It is not a strategy, it is not a plan and it is not a blue print. BFD is an idea. It is an idea to guide the way people are thinking and operating. We want our aviators and the wider air domain team to ask "what am I doing today that is adding fighting depth in some way".

Building fighting depth is about creating more capacity and capability in everything we do and in all of our thinking, behaving and operating differently. Its part mindset and part making sure we have the right capability and systems, the right culture. It's unlocking more capacity by recruiting the next generation of aviators, strengthening relationships with our partners and finding new partners to work with. It's harnessing Australia's diverse aviation resources both military and

civilian. It's doing the ordinary things extraordinarily well every day and finding those one and two percenters in everything we do to further unlock our potential and optimize our capacity. After all, unlocking all the 1000 one percenters gives significant enhancement to our performance. All of this helps us as an Air Force give the nation more options in more places, more often. Building fighting depth is about growing what we can do as an Air Force, how much we can do, and the circumstance in which we can do it across the dimensions of time, space and posture.

So what does that look like on RAAF bases, one exercises and deployments, working alongside our allies and partners within industry and across society? The good news is we are already doing it, we have been for years. We now need to accelerate and expand its adoption. Let's look at Building Fighting Depth through the lens of my Chief of Air Force intent. The people, purpose and preparedness. Firstly people, we are implementing Building Fighting Depth by strengthening existing links and creating new links with industry allies and partners and the wider aviation community.

Our firefighters at RAAF base Williamstown are just one example of our people Building Fighting Depth through their own initiative. They have been working closely with their civilian counterparts in the NSW Rural Fire & Rescue Service and Fire & Rescue NSW training together. Not only is this building a bigger, better fighting team at one of our largest bases, it is also giving our firefighters more realistic training including live fire conditions. As a result, we will be better prepared with more options and more backup.

In regards to purpose, we build fighting depth by making sure the whole air domain team feels connected to our mission of generation and delivering air power and that they have a warfighting mindset. At RAAF base Tindal and other northern bases we have been rehearsing and drilling to make sure these critical fighting positions can survive and recover from attack, so they continue to execute their core mission of generating and delivering air power, recovering and launching combat power.

These activities directly link every person on that base to our core purpose and we strengthen our preparedness by investing in platforms and weapons, harnessing national resources and demonstrating our ability to deliver air power to degrade, disrupt, destroy and defeat.

From the recent announcement of the additional investment in the Australian made MQ-28 Ghost Bat, collaborative combat aircraft, to the arrival of the first two MC-55s, to our recent OT&E successes with our the razz 'em and jazz 'em ER standoff weapons; we are adding depth to our platforms and weapons capabilities, and capacities.

The concept of thinking, behaving and operating differently isn't new to our Air Force, our history

is filled with ingenuity, innovation, resourcefulness and resilience. At the height of the Second World War, our Air Force and allies operated from diverse and expansive network of civilian resources across northern Australia. Civilian aerodromes, rural properties and small towns, were all part of our war fighting efforts. What was key to our success back then, was the willingness of people to contribute to our national defence and that willingness of people to contribute remains key to our success right now. It is people, both inside and outside of Air Force and the air domain team, and their willingness to think, behave and operate differently. That is key to strengthening our tier one Air Force by building fighting depth. This is a view shared by many, not just in regards to Air Force but broader Defence. Our government is harnessing all aspects of a society to contribute to national defence not seen since the Second World War. It's also a view shared by a fellow national security expert, Dr Rory Medcalf, and I appreciate his participation in today's conference. He believes preparedness ultimately comes down to people, because they are the one capability we really cannot substitute. He has previously said, in a way the strength of a national robustness and security is the quality of the people and their willingness to contribute. It doesn't matter how powerful a submarine fleet or an air force might be. If you have a population that effectively says we're not interested in risk and responsibility to protect the things we enjoy as a society, then you have effectively surrendered all of that other capability and it is important that a population is willing to contribute because of the defence of Australia is not just a national endeavor and a national responsibility, it is a national trauma.

If you have ever hit the backroads of Australia, you may have noticed that in every town across the country, large and small, there's a cenotaph or a war memorial honoring the locals who left for war and never came home. Our aviators all wear the same uniform but they come from all different parts of Australia. Every state and territory, and countless towns and cities, they willingly, voluntarily, contribute to defending Australia alongside their teammates in navy and army. And they have families supporting them across the country. Our responsibilities as leaders during this time in history is to make sure we are as prepared as possible for any number of future scenarios. I have been talking about strategic autumn since becoming Chief, it is real and we are responding. We are building fighting depth to deter winter from coming, and also be prepared should deterrence fail despite our best efforts. We stand on the shoulders of those who have come before us, as a tier one Air Force. And we must continue to strengthen and accelerate our efforts to add capability and capacity by thinking and operating differently. This is how the Royal Australian Air Force continues to offer Australia and the integrated force, more options, in more places, more often. But we cannot do it alone, and I call on everyone here, to think about how they can contribute to our building fighting depth.

Per ardua ad astra.

Thank you.