

Are We There Yet: When do we know we have built fighting depth and the airminded warfighter?

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The main theme of the 2026 Air and Space Power Conference was “building fighting depth” and the Aviator Symposium was “the airminded warfighter.” However, a question that came up repeatedly during the event was “what success actually looks like?” Speakers were constantly asked how we would know when we had achieved airmindedness, or when fighting depth had genuinely been built. These questions were put to senior leaders, including the Chief of Air Force and the Warrant Officer of the Air Force, and while the responses were thoughtful, they were rarely definitive and left open to discussion.

That lack of clear answers during the Conference and Symposium was not due to avoidance. It reflected that airmindedness and fighting depth are not outcomes that can be ticked off inside a single strategy or milestone. They are shaped, over time, through education, experience, and culture.

To me, the highlight of the conference was remarks made by Air Marshal (Retired) Ray Furnell, a former Chief of the Air Staff from 1987-1992. He said that in the early 1990s he set about to create a “thinking man’s air force” and reflected that the first Air Power Manual was released in 1990 and before that, air power was not spoken about widely across the force. He then stated that the 2026 Air and Space Power Conference and the Aviator Symposium themselves – 34 years after his command – were proof that his goal had been realised. The 2026 Conference and Symposium, attended by over a thousand aviators of all ranks, was evidence that a habit of intellectual curiosity and thought that had taken root in Air Force and endured.

That observation suggests a useful way to approach the question of success: extend the time horizon. Instead of asking what success looks like now, ask what it would look like decades from now if these ideas had truly taken hold.

Imagine the Air and Space Power Conference being held in 2056

In 2026 the speakers were overwhelmingly Air Force. But in 2056, the speakers are drawn from Air Force, Army, Navy, the APS, contractors, industry, academia, and the broader national aviation enterprise (Directorate of Strategic Design - Air Force, 2025). All of them speak comfortably about air and space power. No attendee even sees this as noteworthy or tokenistic.

That would suggest that airmindedness had become widespread rather than confined to a single service. It would show that Air Force had produced people with sufficient depth of understanding to influence and educate others, and that integrated force partners had absorbed those ideas into how they think about operations. There is no need to justify why air power matters or to explain its relevance to joint or national outcomes. Army and Navy

speakers would routinely frame their own operational challenges in terms of access to air and space, and the consequences of losing it.

In 2056 junior officers, NCOs, civilians, and reservists are **more** visible participants in panels and discussions. This would point to an increased depth of understanding across the organisation, not just at senior levels. Intellectual assets would be dispersed rather than concentrated, allowing Air Force to absorb shocks and continue thinking and fighting.

The content of the conference would also be telling. The discussion would focus on action and not just concepts. **How**, and not *why*, the force sustains itself under pressure. There would be more topics on regeneration after disruption, operating with degraded systems, workforce resilience, and command decisions made in uncertainty. It would build on actual Australian case studies and would include recent crises, exercises or operations.

These case studies would be delivered by the Air Force. The debrief culture spoken about at the 2026 Aviator Symposium would be fully embedded across the organisation. Mistakes and near failures would not be avoided and would prove the RAAF is an institution comfortable with learning from experience and in the Chief's words "seizing opportunity and not just managing risk."

Industry and civil aviation representatives would speak in practical terms about their role in sustaining air and space power. Conversation could focus on maintenance capacity, workforce development, supply chains, and the ability to respond quickly to increased demand. Their presence would not be symbolic nor would it be remarkable. It would demonstrate that we have operationalised the concept of the "**national air power enterprise**" (Directorate of Strategic Design - Air Force, 2025). Their participation underlines how we are generating fighting depth from national systems and not just in Defence.

What might be most noticeable, however, is what is missing. There would be little debate about what *airmindedness* means or whether fighting depth matters. Those ideas would be evident in the way people spoke and the assumptions they made, rather than being topics for explicit discussion. For example, at this year's aviator symposium, the panel that discussed professional growth and professional military education (PME) did *not* talk about *why* aviators need PME. This was assumed. Rather, the panel spoke about *how* to get it and used our junior aviators' case studies and experience as examples.

The questions posed by attendees would also be different. Instead of asking what success looks like, they would ask where vulnerabilities were emerging and where resilience might be eroding unnoticed. At the 2056 conference they will say "this idea is outdated and what can we do about it" rather than ask "what ideas are becoming outdated"?

Air Marshal Furnell's comments made clear that organisational success does not arrive at a defined milestone. It is visible in hindsight, through a shared way of thinking that had become normal and largely unremarkable. Ultimately, if we were to have built fighting depth and a force of airminded warfighters we may have staved off the strategic winter that we were warned was coming in 2026.

If this is what success might look like in 2056, then the work sits with us now. As the Chief said repeatedly during the conference, it is the one-percenters that will achieve success, and a thousand one-percenters across the force will generate significant air power. The question I left the conference with is simple: what are the one-percenters missing in our daily practice that will shape what that future conference takes for granted?

Reference

Directorate of Strategic Design - Air Force. (2025). Concept ASPECT Edition One. Canberra: Air and Space Power Centre. Retrieved from <https://airpower.airforce.gov.au/conceptaspected1>