

Northern Australia: Blueprint for Resilience

Todd (Brodie) Nelson
Royal Australian Air Force

Introduction

Over the past years, the theme of resilience has been firmly enshrined as one of the many attributes required of the contemporary war fighter. Within the Air Force, the Chief of Air Force's 2024 intent laid out how we will achieve our mission to generate and deliver highly effective airpower as part of an integrated force. That is to focus on the three P's – people, purpose, and preparedness. Nowhere in the country is the preparedness of our Air Force more succinct than in northern Australia.

Our aviators at RAAF Base Tindal have firsthand experienced the transformation from the 2024 *National Defence Strategy* to now being prepared to fight as we have been trained. The challenge now for Air Force, is how do we replicate the lessons learned from RAAF Base Tindal to ensure that no matter where are assets and people are located, we have a playbook that adequately provides solutions to the challenges in supply chains and remote locations our people and assets may face into the future.

RAAF Base Tindal: A Warfighting System

Since its establishment in 1942, RAAF Base Tindal has played a crucial role in Air Force's posture in the top end. Forming part of the overall capability, Tindal is home to hundreds of aviators across all musterings and specialisations, as well as an integrated APS and contracted workforce. This provides unique insight into the requirements and capabilities of all parts of Defence working together to produce and sustain air power. Commanding Officer 17 Squadron WGCDR Alex Smith spoke at the 2026 Air and Space Power Conference on the importance of this base-wide airmindedness. That is, an entire workforce collaboratively working together to be "base fit". When asked to, aviators and civilians must be able to adapt to what is happening, regardless of the situation or context, to ensure the continuation of flying and ground operations and the associated support functions. The question that needs to be asked is whether the rest of the Air Force as prepared as RAAF Base Tindal?

In recent years, Tindal's multi-skilled aviators have, through building depth in time, demonstrated through exercises and normal daily activities, the base's ability to transition from preparedness to readiness. That is, when directed by local commanders or during formal HADR requests, all operators across the base adapt to the event or task at hand. The recent March 2026 flooding and subsequent Tropical Cyclone Narelle emergencies have shown that the workforce's training and resilience ensured minimal impact on base operations. With the neighbouring town of Katherine cut off by road, and the only supermarket shut, Tindal residents and their families had essentially become isolated. The fortitude of the members and their families was tested dramatically, but thanks to a high-performing workforce and a strong community, everyone got on with the job and made do with what they had. Simply put, preparation to readiness and a bias for action.

Lessons Learned

As with all remote operating bases, the lessons learned at Tindal and other remote locations can and must have a wider impact in building fighting depth to ensure that all aviators, when called upon, have a level of resiliency instilled within. The need to train in how we fight is not a mantra applicable only to soldiers, sailors, or aviators across our northern bases. The ADF and the Air Force will need to ensure that all members can operate and, if required, live in uncomfortable climates, with limited resources, and for extended periods of time. The ability to operate homogenously and for an extended duration away from family and friends may be required in the future - and the entire force must be prepared.

The recent fuel crisis due to the war in the Middle East has highlighted how interruptions to supply chains occur without notice. This may serve as indication of what life may look like should conflict ever reach our shores or if disruptions with critical resources occur. The need to make do, be resourceful, and adapt quickly are all key lessons we can take away to better prepare our people in a crisis. A mindset shift is needed for all aviators, not just those in frontline or operational units or those who face these common challenges regularly.

AVM Glen Braz, as Air Commander Australia, committed to helping to address these concerns and taking the learnings from RAAF Base Tindal to the entire organisation. The announcement of the introduction and adaptation of a renewed 'Air Base Operation Plan' for each Air Force establishment to ensure that members, contractors, and civilians know what to expect and what the 'actions on' are in case of conflict, should it occur, is a promising step forward. All Defence locations across the country are vital to our strategy of denial, and the Air Commander's plans will allow for greater preparation and help build the resilience required for aviators across Australia, as has been done in Tindal.

Conclusion

The need for the Air Force to remain capable and ready has never been more important. The current strategic challenges within our region and across the globe have shown that we live in uncertain times. All aviators across all domains must be prepared for what may come. Resilience remains a key attribute of the modern aviator.

As you take a moment to reflect, can those aviators not posted to a northern base ask themselves - am I ready for conflict? Are my colleagues? Is my family? Moreover, if you are not ready, how do we get there? This rhetoric must challenge us to think, but also act as an entire force.

The challenge now is for leaders at every level to ensure that, no matter where our people are located, they are prepared and ready for what may come – both mentally and physically. And if they are not ready, they need to take the required steps to ensure they are fit to fight. We must ensure we can operate outside our comfort zones and with degraded systems and supply chains, if necessary, to fulfil the mission. The lessons learned from bases like RAAF Base Tindal show that with strength, fortitude, and determination, our aviators continue to achieve amazing things and enable the building of fighting depth across the air domain.