

# MILE STONES

# 90 years of Australian Air Power

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*Moritura te Salutant - the RAAF's Wirraway, procured as an armed trainer, was flown against much superior Japanese A6M2 Zero fighters during the desperate early months of 1942, and suffered heavy combat losses. Many brave RAAF crews were lost as a result of irresponsible pre-war planning.*

THE Royal Australian Air Force can take credit for being one of the oldest independent air forces in existence, after 90 years of continuous service.

The RAAF like all air forces has experienced a varied mix of difficult, challenging, but also some very successful times through its existence. The first two decades of the RAAF's existence were challenging, as the first generations of RAAF personnel sought to construct a modern air force through the period of the Great Depression.

The RAAF played a major role during the Second World War, and it's not well known that the RAAF could be legitimately ranked as the fourth most powerful air force globally at the cessation of hostilities in 1945. Only the United States, Britain and the Soviet Union could boast larger and more potent air forces at that time. This air force grew from an embryonic strength of around 3,000 personnel in twelve squadrons, before the war started.

At the beginning of the war, the RAAF was ill prepared for what was coming. Much of the planning and thinking during the late 1930s was centred on supporting Empire commitments, and much effort was invested in setting up and launching the Australian contribution to the Empire Air Training Scheme. The EATS later played a critical role, training large numbers of Australians who later flew in RAAF units, or other Commonwealth units, across all theatres of this war. In total, the EATS trained almost 40,000 Commonwealth aircrew.

At the outbreak of war in Europe the focus in Canberra was firmly on supporting Britain in its desperate battle to survive the onslaught of German forces through Western Europe and Scandinavia, and later the Mediterranean when Italy entered the war. As pressure grew in the Pacific, the RAAF was confronted with the challenge of building up capability in the Pacific, while supplying aircrew for operations in Europe and Middle East.

When war broke out in the Pacific, the only modern RAAF aircraft in theatre were Lockheed Hudson maritime patrol aircraft, as the Wirraway trainers were at best useful for close air support. As the Japanese advanced, RAAF pilots in 2, 8, 21, 24 and 453 Squadron flew and died fighting a more experienced, and numerically and technologically better equipped opponent, in Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, and then over the north of Australia. In the subsequent four years the RAAF expanded in size and capability in manner not matched anywhere, then or since. RAAF aircrew in RAAF squadrons and other Commonwealth squadrons

played a major role in the Mediterranean and Western European air wars, especially in RAF Bomber Command, while the RAAF became one of the two pillars of Allied air power in the South West Pacific Area (SWPA), operating across the north of the continent, New Guinea, Borneo, Java and Malaya.

Attempting to detail the breadth and depth of RAAF operational effort and its exceptional combat record during this period is a task of major proportions. Some important highlights should however be detailed.

In North Africa, 3 Squadron and 450 Squadron, initially flying P-40s in the Desert Air Force, operated against Italian, Afrika Korps and Luftwaffe forces, later participating in the invasion of Italy, after which they converted to the Mustang III. Other notable units in theatre were 451 Squadron flying Hurricanes, 454 Squadron flying Blenheims and Baltimores, 458 Squadron flying Wellingtons, 459 Squadron flying Hudsons, Venturas and Baltimores, and 462 Squadron flying Halifaxs. Many other Commonwealth units in theatre were heavily crewed by Australians.

In Great Britain, RAAF personnel were formed into a number of RAAF squadrons, but also widely deployed across other Commonwealth units, especially in Bomber Command, which suffered heavy ongoing combat losses through the war – nearly a quarter of Australians lost were in Bomber Command. RAAF units operating from Britain included 451 Squadron flying Spitfires and Typhoons, 452, 453, 457 Squadron flying

Spitfires, 455 Squadron flying Hampdens and later Beaufighters in Coastal Command, 456 Squadron flying Beaufighter and later Mosquito night fighters, 460 Squadron flying Wellingtons and later Lancasters, 10 and 461 Squadron flying Sunderlands in Coastal Command, 462 and 466 Squadron flying Halifaxs, 463 and 467 Squadron flying Lancasters, and finally 464 Squadron flying Venturas and later Mosquitos.

The important contributions and sacrifices made by RAAF personnel, and Australians in the RAF, in both the MTO and ETO campaigns are often forgotten in contemporary media discussion of Australian involvement in this war.

The SWPA was where the RAAF formed and operated the largest number of units. By the end of the Second World War, the RAAF had almost 132,000 personnel in theatre, and over 3,000 aircraft, with 20 operational squadrons in theatre. Notable units include 1 Squadron flying Beauforts and later Mosquitos, 2 Squadron flying Hudsons and later B-25 Mitchells, 4 Squadron flying Wirraways and later Boomerangs, 5 Squadron flying Wirraways, 6, 7, 8 Squadron flying Hudsons and later Beauforts, 11 and 20 Squadron flying Catalinas, 12 Squadron flying Wirraways, then Vengeances, and later B-24 Liberators, 13 and 21 Squadron flying Beauforts and Venturas, 14 Squadron with Hudsons, 15 Squadron flying Hudsons, Venturas and Beauforts, 22 Squadron flying Bostons and Beaufighters, 23 and 24 Squadron which started war with Wirraways and ended it equipped with Liberators, 25 Squadron which started with Buffaloes and ended with Liberators, 30, 31 and 93 Squadron flying Beaufighters, 75, 76, 77, 78 Squadron flying P-40s, 79 Squadron flying Spitfires, 82 Squadron flying P-39s and P-40s, and 452 Squadron flying Spitfires, redeployed from Britain. Early in the war, many Australian aircrew were assigned to US Army Air Corps units in theatre, to backfill a desperate shortage of American crews.

During this period the RAAF operated nine airfield construction squadrons, eight aircraft depots, and built or operated over 300 airfields. These included a network of airfields across the Northern Territory, North-West and Cape York, which hosted RAAF and USAAC units.

The war in the SWPA lasted from late 1941 until September 1945 when Japan collapsed. The RAAF fought continuously through this period, starting with the desperate and unsuccessful defence of Malaya and Singapore, where RAAF pilots in Buffaloes were sent to stop modern high performance A6M2 Zeros of the Japanese Naval Air Arm. The Japanese advance was stopped in New Guinea, and what followed was a slow and sustained aerial war of attrition as Australian and American forces across the theatre confronted Japanese Army and Naval Air Arm air power.

Perhaps the most notable, yet least known to the general public, RAAF contribution to this protracted campaign was its joint participation with the Americans in the Battle of the Bismarck Sea, where a large Japanese troop convoy carrying an infantry division was located by air, and then annihilated in a sustained series of airstrikes by USAAC and RAAF aircraft. The damage done to the Japanese was greatly in excess of the Battle of Milne Bay, often cited as the key RAAF achievement in theatre. As Japanese air power withered across the SWPA, through unsustainable combat attrition against American and Australian forces, the

RAAF increasingly deployed its air power in strike operations, against Japanese ground forces, shipping, littoral barge traffic, airfields, basing and later fuel infrastructure.

Australia lost almost 40,000 service personnel during the Second World War, a large fraction were RAAF personnel.

Demobilisation after the Second World War saw dramatic downsizing of the RAAF, which had to simultaneously adapt to the shift from piston engine combat aircraft to jets, while coping with an enormous loss in personnel numbers and funding. When the North Koreans surged south in 1950, RAAF Mustangs in Japan joined the handful of US combat aircraft in the theatre in an effort to slow down the relentless advance of the Communist forces. The Korean War later saw the RAAF operating jet Meteors in the first air war of the jet age, but suffering heavy combat losses against the superior MiG-15bis, flown mostly by experienced Soviet aces, with much Second World War combat time.

The RAAF later participated in the Malayan Emergency, flying Counter Insurgency (COIN) operations in the Malay Peninsula against the Communist PKM insurgency. That was followed by the Confrontasi standoff, when the Soviet and Chinese backed Sukarno regime in Indonesia sought to destabilise Malaysia. RAAF Sabres based at Butterworth patrolled Malaysian airspace to keep intruding Indonesian aircraft away.

The RAAF's major operational commitment during the 1960s was the Vietnam Conflict, in which RAAF aircraft contributed to the US led COIN effort in South Vietnam. Less known is that 79 Squadron Sabres were committed to air defence in Thailand, between 1962 and 1964.

In South Vietnam, 'Wallaby Airlines', 35 Squadron flying Caribous, supported the ground force between 1964 and 1972. UH-1 Iroquois helicopters, flown by 9 Squadron, deployed in 1966 and remained in theatre until late 1971. Canberras of 2 Squadron deployed in 1967, flying COIN airstrikes until their return in 1971. One Canberra is believed to have been lost to a North Vietnamese S-75 Vokhov / SA-2 missile attack, with both crew killed. Three RAAF pilots flew F-4 Phantoms in combat, while on exchange duty with US Air Force squadrons during this conflict.

The three decades following the Vietnam deployments saw no overseas combat deployments by the RAAF. When the US sought to engage allies to participate in the 1991 Desert Storm air campaign, Australia declined to send any RAAF F-111s, despite the shortage of theatre strike aircraft and genuine need for this capability in theatre. Australia also did not participate in the subsequent twelve year long Southern and Northern Watch aerial no-fly zone enforcement operations.

The RAAF did play a critical albeit publicly understated role during the Australian occupation of East Timor in 1999 – it presented the Indonesians with the certainty that their forces in the theatre would be annihilated if they engaged the Australian ground force or naval units involved. The F-111s, on alert and loaded, were deployed in Darwin to enforce compliance if necessary.

After the 911 attacks, the RAAF supported the United States with the deployment of 77 Squadron and later 3 Squadron Hornets to Diego Garcia to provide air defence coverage during the air campaign against Al Qaeda and the Taliban during that period.

In 2003, Australia did deploy fourteen 75 Squadron F/A-18A Hornets to Al Udeid in Qatar, to support Operation Iraqi Freedom, the invasion of Iraq. The RAAF Hornets were initially tasked with escorting AWACS and tankers, but when it became clear that the remnants of Saddam's air force declined to participate in combat, the Hornets were retasked with battlefield interdiction and close air support. A pair of RAAF AP-3C Orions supported maritime operations in theatre, and three RAAF C-130 Hercules supported logistical operations.

RAAF combat aircraft have not tasked with any combat role in subsequent operations in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Two summary observations can be made, considering the nine decades in which the RAAF has been tasked with protecting Australia and its interests.

The first is that there is no doubt that the RAAF has made important historical contributions, and sacrifices in lives, especially during the Second World War, and later the Korean War. Since then Australia has been fortunate enough not to have to fight in any major wars, and the RAAF has never been deployed in strength to fight across the full spectrum of its capabilities.

The second and final observation is that all too often, the RAAF has been sent to war equipped with aircraft which were either obsolete, or otherwise unsuitable for the combat environment at hand. If there is a lesson to be learned from this, it is that Australians collectively need to think much more about how well the RAAF is equipped, so history does not repeat itself.



*From Top: P-40 Mustang fighter in RAAF colours. The RAAF's No 2 Squadron flew Hudson bombers during World War II. The first F-111s arrived in June 1973 and remained Australia's primary deterrent for the next four decades.*