

Island Australia: improving resilience in a rapidly-changing region

The contribution of the Royal Australian Air Force to improving resilience



A paper based on a presentation to the Institute in Sydney on 23 November 2021 by

Air Vice-Marshal Joe Iervasi, AM, CSC

Air Commander Australia

Vice-Patron, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, New South Wales

The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) is inherently resilient. Forward looking, alert and ready, it adapts to change and, through the professionalism of its personnel and systems, remains relevant, credible and reliable. This was exemplified by a non-combatant evacuation operation from Kabul in August 2021.

Key words: Australia; change adaptation; credibility; professionalism; relevance; reliability; resilience; Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF); Australian Defence Force (ADF).

I really appreciate the opportunity to follow on from both my great mates and compatriots, the Fleet and Forces commanders. We come from very similar backgrounds but bring a nuanced approach to the way we need to do business and that will be the sub-theme of my address. It is strength through diversity that provides us with inherent resilience.

Resilience in RAAF Terms

The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction defines resilience as: “The ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate, adapt to, transform and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner, including through the preservation and restoration of its essential basic structures and functions through risk management”¹.

In this centenary year of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), one could argue that it is inherent in the RAAF’s DNA to be resilient. Between its formation in 1921 through to the start of World War II, our then Chief of the Air Staff, Sir Richard Williams, spent a majority of his time arguing the case for the retention of an independent armed service for the provision of air power. Thus, Air Force has always been adapting to the environment within which it existed. The critical issue, however, is are we resilient by design as an Australian Defence Force (ADF), in particular as an Air Force? So, in the design criteria, we need to address those attributes identified in the definition of resilience.

The ADF, including the RAAF and Air Command, is a medium-to-small entity when compared to defence forces globally. We are not a defence force of mass.

Without mass as an inherent redundancy or resilience measure, we have to cope through quality, a critically important measure of our success. The quality of our systems and our people to adapt to and cope with the environment as it changes over time becomes a key measure of our resilience – what we colloquially call within Air Force “bombs on target, on time”, *i.e.* the delivery of precise effects on time. Our true measure of resilience is our ability to deliver quality on time – it is the critical design criterion within Air Command.

Adapting to Change

Never before in our careers has there been such an alignment from strategy to task in terms of what we need to do. In the 2020 Defence Strategic Update (Defence 2020a), there are three strategic defence objectives: to shape, deter, and respond. The Force Structure Plan (Defence 2020b) outlines major capital acquisition projects and, importantly for our government, reaching out and touching others who might be our competitors within our part of the world. Then, finally, the Defence Transformation Strategy (Defence 2020c) talks about the way the ADF needs to perform. These three documents represent strategy, capability and reform. Within Air Command, we view strategy, capability and reform through three key questions; we need to ask ourselves: are we relevant, are we credible, and are we reliable? The test of relevancy is are we doing what is actually expected of us? That is maintaining alignment with and being attuned to, not only our government and its expectations, but more broadly expectations around the world.

The ADF, if you consider it as a biological entity, does not exist in its own ecosystem. It is connected with other entities in a broader ecosystem. To be able to adapt quickly, we need to have enough sensors out there attuned to the wider ecosystem that we inhabit. It goes beyond taking a specific direction from govern-

¹United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction at <https://www.undrr.org/terminology/resilience>, accessed 28 December 2021.

ment; the ADF must also think. But, in order to think and be prepared, not only do you need those sensors out there from a diverse and inclusive workforce, you also need to have information from as many sources as possible. The motto within Air Command is to “be alert and ready”, but as we collectively say, you cannot be ready if you are looking at your shoes. You can only be ready if you are looking ahead. Our ability to be resilient is also our ability to predict – to make military judgements about changes within the world in which we live – and how quickly we can adapt to those changes.

Hence, we need to be looking far enough ahead to give us sufficient indicators and warnings about whether the system we have created remains relevant over time. We have plenty of people employed within the Department of Defence involved in strategy beyond the 10-year time horizon. They give us the general steer about the future vision for the ADF. We need that broad strategic vision to give us a central line of advance for the force-in-being.

The force-in-being is the force that we have today. We fight with what we have, not what we wish we had, nor what we think we have. It is what we employ in the real world and our time horizon extends out about four years, the time horizon for official projections. Within this timeframe, we can make real changes to our course. Importantly, four years generally goes beyond the tenures that most commanders and leaders have in their respective positions. Hence, we always need to look beyond our tenure to ensure that we continue to evolve over time. The strategic thinkers can give us indicators with a longer lead time to develop capabilities to address nuts we cannot crack now and point to broader capabilities we will need to develop.

ADF Relevance, Credibility and Reliability

One way to view the role of the Chief of the Defence Force is to ensure the ADF, as an institution, endures over time and remains relevant, credible, and reliable. Therefore, we must always be looking ahead, and that is where the Fleet Commander, the Forces Commander and I are challenged day-to-day.

To remain relevant, we must ask whether we are picking up on the changes in the environment, whether we are evolving. And once we are attuned to those changes, we must focus on how we articulate them in a way that makes sense to our leadership and to the government. That, then, is our first resilience consideration, being attuned to the environment.

The second theme, about the credibility of what we do, is actually ensuring that not only do we retain the soft skills that keep us attuned to the community and be part of the community, but also that we develop the hard edge as a defence force as well. The ADF is the only mechanism that the Australian Government has to deliver hard power. The only branch that is authorised to kill people and blow stuff up. We must ensure that we are able to do that if called on. It does not mean that our sole focus is on mayhem, but, when called on to deliver

it, we must be prepared to use force. Being credible also ensures that we are providing the government with confidence that we can deliver hard power.

We can test our credibility, in part, by being relevant to the government and turning up to do the things that it requires of us. In the last couple of years, the ADF might be viewed through the lens of international rescue. There has been no mission, no task, no crisis too big or too small that we have not demonstrated an adaptability to tackle *e.g.* reconstruction efforts after disasters in Pacific nations; disaster responses within Australia and to the global pandemic. How we and our people have coped is inherently our job. It is to do what government directs and to do it well.

The third theme is reliability – we say what we mean and we mean what we say. Defence in the past has been criticised for not being able to clearly articulate, or for lacking transparency, about what it does, *e.g.* why are you spending \$10,000 on coffee machines? This can be a distraction from the investment in time, people and resources to be trained and prepared to do the difficult things that we need to do. Reliability, though, is also keeping a connection to the community and to the taxpayer – taxpayers to whom we say we are spending your money wisely.

When we, the ADF’s current senior commanders, joined up in the in the mid-to-late 1980s and early 1990s, the world was raging peace. Most of us lived through what was a wonderful environment. But there were always questions about why we needed a defence force. A defence force has always been like an insurance policy. As with any insurance policy, unless you draw on it, over time, you question why you should keep putting money towards it. So, we need to go back to theme one; we need to remain relevant and, while some tasks might not necessarily be about delivering hard power, they keep us relevant to our current government and keep us relevant to the Australian nation as well.

Now I don’t think many of us could foresee the incidental, experiential benefits that could have arisen as a consequence of supporting Australia’s response to the pandemic through the COVID task force. We had women and men interacting with the Australian community; all aspects of the community, with all socio-economic means and needs, people stressed, people with other problems as well. It is a true testament to the women and men of the ADF that they are able to show a great level of empathy and professionalism and provide support directly to their fellow Australians. In the case of those involved in the COVID task force, I think all of them would say it is something that was deeply personal for them. They could see that they were doing something that was benefiting their fellow Australians. So, when the Australian people can see that the Australian Government through the ADF is helping them, it provides the people a level of confidence that the ADF is doing a good job and represents the best of the nation. That also provides a

level of confidence about how capable, adaptable and resilient the nation is. So, while the military is just one part of national power, it is the most visible part from a human dynamic perspective. And the level of confidence that provides about us as a nation, from an identity perspective, is absolutely crucial.

ADF Professionalism

The ADF's reformation over the last 10 to 15 years from a workforce diversity and inclusivity perspective also has helped it with community integration. I look at the RAAF today and I will steal a comment from a mate of mine that the Army we have today is the Army he wished he had joined; and I have a similar view about the Air Force. The Air Force we are in today is the Air Force I wish I had joined. We are a far more professional outfit: we are attuned; we understand. We present in a way that demonstrates confidence to the Australian people.

As an example, in late August 2014, we were just on the backward swing of the first peacekeeping task in Afghanistan, the world was going into its next phase of raging peace and then Iraq turned sideways. The Australian Government decided that we needed to come to the aid of Iraq and their elected government. Operation OKRA was initiated and an Air Task Group was formed within Air Command in September 2014. Normally, for that type of mission, we would have required a minimum of 35 days notice to move – to prepare our resources, train for mission certification, and get going. As the operational commander, at that point, I had a call from my chief saying you have 28 days. Oh, that is going to be tight. 48 hours later another call: it is now 14 days to go. In another 24 hours, it changes to 7 days. We ended up deploying an Air Task Group as part of the Joint Force that encompassed a KC-30 multi-role tanker transport, six Super Hornet fighters and the E7 Wedgetail. Our force development had foreseen a need for us to be self-sustainable and deployable; we were able to mobilise and deploy to the Middle East within 7 days. Astonishing! Within an additional 7 days, we were operating within the theatre itself, seamlessly tapped straight into the operation. 7 days later, at the 21-day point, we dropped our first weapon on our first target, being still 14 days inside of what our normal notice to move period was mandated. That we were able to do so was a testament to the quality and adaptability of the workforce, but was evidence that our training processes and procedures combined with the foresight of our capability development decisions were relevant, credible and reliable.

A second example is a non-combatant evacuation operation we took part in recently in Afghanistan. It is a true credit to the women and men directly involved in that they have changed the lives of 4100 Afghans and the second and third-order effects go into the tens of thousands of indirect benefits. On Friday 13 August 2021, we got the call that it was on, and within 36 hours

we had personnel from a joint force moving from Australia. What was extraordinary was that at that point in time we had been living in a COVID environment for the past 18 months along with the rest of the world. The RAAF's workforce was working both virtually and physically distributed to minimise workforce exposure to COVID. We also had a lot of our women and men deployed to the COVID task force. We were able to gather them up and deploy a force forward in a 36-hour window. Absolutely astonishing!

To add to that context, the nature of air power is that we move routinely between states and internationally. Over the previous two years of operations through COVID, every time we moved internationally or between states, we incurred a quarantine bill based upon each nation or state's restrictions. As of today, Air Command alone has accumulated over 200 years worth of human time in quarantine. Leading up to that point on Friday 13 August 2021, we had an accumulation of people repeatedly going into and out of quarantine, with one person having completed 160 days of quarantine alone. Fortunately, we have a very attuned workforce; we knew who was available, who was not, and how we could get up and get running. Therefore, the fact that, within 36 hours of that task being notified, we were up, operating and deployed was extraordinary. That workforce had to assemble from various states, they could not even concentrate in one place before they deployed. They first consolidated at our Middle East bases where they got together, adapted and the rest is history. Once again, this underlines the quality of the systems and the personnel that we have and their ability to adapt and adjust rapidly.

The Future

Where are we going and what is important for us? There is a good book by Ed Catmull, president of Pixar and Disney Animation. Catmull was one of the founders of Pixar Animation, the company responsible for *Toy Story*. He did an analysis of what made Pixar successful, what made big companies successful and what made big companies at the height of their power fail. When Pixar developed *Toy Story*, it was a world-leading product. When they went on to develop *Toy Story II*, they thought they had a repeatable process. The supposed winning formula almost broke their company. What had not been recognised was that in a first-of-type event, all employees are willing to do whatever is necessary to make a successful product, but they couldn't back that up the second time around.

We need always to be checking our 'homework'. When an entity or an event has been successful, we need to understand and analyse the reasons for its success and whether it is repeatable and sustainable over time. We, as a nation, need to check our own homework. It is great to get the pats on the back, but the danger is if you are blind to something that is going wrong or could fall off the rails.

(Cont'd next page)

(continued from page 24)

In the future, I will be looking deliberately for things that we know are not working, and for things that we are not looking at hard enough or asking ourselves the tough questions about true resilience. Not only do we need to check our own homework but, equally importantly, we need to get others to check our homework, too.

Conclusion

We are completely aligned within the ADF about what is necessary. We have wonderful women and men of whom you should all be proud. They are extremely capable. The keys to our success are always being attuned to our environment, our strength through diversity, our strength through insights, and our strength through partnerships with our nearer neighbour nations.

Hopefully, what you have seen in this seminar is that you have a very capable ADF whose personnel are not resting on their laurels and are always willing to adapt and change.

References

- Defence (2020a). *2020 Defence Strategic Update* (Department of Defence: Canberra).
- Defence (2020b). *2020 Force Structure Plan* (Department of Defence: Canberra).
- Defence (2020c). *2020 Defence Transformation Plan* (Department of Defence: Canberra).