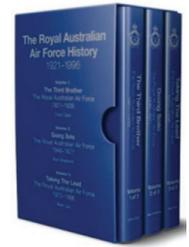


## BOOK REVIEW:

# *The Royal Australian Air Force history: 1921 - 1996*

by Dr Chris Clark, Dr Alan Stephens and Dr Mark Lax

*Big Sky Publishing: Newport, NSW; 2020; 2034 pp.; ISBN 9781922488008 (hardcover);  
RRP \$69.99 ~ Ursula Davidson Library call number 903.92*



The history of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) is presented in this three-volume box set, covering three distinct periods of the Air Force since its establishment in 1921. The history of the RAAF during World War II is covered separately in four volumes published in the mid-1950s and early 1960s. This three-volume box set was drawn together to commemorate the centenary of the RAAF.

The first volume covers 1921 to 1939 (when the RAAF entered World War II). Written by Chris Clark, it was first published in 1991. This volume describes the challenging start of the RAAF as it emerged as a small, but independent air force, before expanding fifty-fold during World War II to become the world's fourth largest air force. However, its early existence was strongly contested by the Army and Navy who resisted the notion of independence, instead preferring to control air elements as part of their own forces. A lack of funding during the Great Depression, and a period during which the RAAF suffered an atrocious spate of aircraft accidents in the 1920s, did not make the assured existence of the RAAF any easier – reflected in the title *The Third Brother*.

*Going Solo* by Alan Stephens addresses the second period from 1946. It covers the demobilisation of the wartime air force, military commitments in Korea, Malaya, Indonesia and Vietnam, and a move towards joint warfare, culminating in the Golden Jubilee of the RAAF in 1971. The importance of the control of the air was undisputedly acknowledged by the end of World War II and signalled the end of the threatened existence of the RAAF as an independent air force. The demobilisation period is often overlooked, but it was masterfully managed, seizing the opportunity to place the “new” air force on the right strategic path for the defence of the country. The period marked the need for the RAAF to go solo and marked a shift of focus to the Australian region of the world. This was reinforced with the close association that the RAAF and United States Forces experienced during the Vietnam War. The author describes the major force elements of the developing Air Force: fighters and air defence; bomber; maritime patrol; and transport forces.

The final volume, by Mark Lax, covers the period 1972 to 1996. During this period, the RAAF arguably “came of age”. Throughout the preceding period, the RAAF had been expeditionary in nature and committed to the support of Australia's treaty and alliance

obligations as part of a forward defence posture. Now it was time to shrug off the “protective embrace of great and powerful friends” and to develop a modern, technologically-advanced regional air force, able to prosecute air operations under its own command arrangements. It was designed for the defence of Australia, but also was capable of contributing to regional stability, peacekeeping operations, wider defence exercises and assistance to the civil community. It marked a period of independence, maturity and managing change, reflected in the title *Taking the Lead*.

Chris Clark (*The Third Brother*) graduated from the Royal Military College in 1972 and served in the Australian Army Intelligence Corps until 1979. He then served in the Departments of Defence, Foreign Affairs, and Prime Minister and Cabinet. He has written several commissioned histories and worked at the Australian National University and the Australian War Memorial. From 2004 until 2013 he was RAAF Historian and Head of the Office of Air Force History.

Alan Stephens (*Going Solo*) is a visiting fellow at the University of New South Wales, Canberra (UNSW). Previously he was a senior lecturer at UNSW, a visiting fellow at the Australian National University, an advisor in federal parliament on foreign affairs and defence, and an RAAF pilot. He has lectured internationally, and his publications have been translated into more than twenty languages. In 2008, he was awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for his contribution to military history.

Mark Lax (*Taking the Lead*) is the Senior Air Force Fellow at the Office of Air Force History. After a 33-year career in the Permanent Air Force, retiring as an Air Commodore, Mark continues to serve in the RAAF Reserve and has since completed a PhD in Military History. He lectures widely and writes on the broad spectrum of RAAF history in this the RAAF's 100<sup>th</sup> year.

Histories of air forces often focus on aeroplanes at the expense of people – this is not the case with this history. While the three volumes cover significant detail, they are easy to read and will hold the reader's attention. They are indexed very well and have excellent end notes. They provide a complete history of all aspects of the RAAF in each of the periods they describe. I thoroughly recommend them to every reader with an interest in the history and development of the Royal Australian Air Force.

**Bob Treloar**