

# Australia's Air Power Strategy - Chief of Air Force Outlines Vision for Deterrence and Defence

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By Robbin Laird

In a discussion at the Sir Richard Williams Foundation seminar on September 18, 2025, Air Marshal Stephen Chappell, Chief of Air Force, provided comprehensive insights into the Royal Australian Air Force's strategic direction and operational philosophy.

Speaking to Air Marshal (Retired) Brown and an audience of defence professionals, Chappell outlined a vision that balances immediate readiness with long-term capability development, drawing critical lessons from contemporary conflicts while positioning the RAAF for future challenges.

## The Strategic Framework: People, Purpose, and Preparedness

Fourteen months into his tenure as Chief of Air Force, Chappell has crystallized his leadership approach around three fundamental pillars. His first

100 days involved extensive consultations across all Australian air bases, including remote locations like Curtin and Scherger, engaging with what he terms the “air domain team” or aviators, soldiers, sailors, public servants, and industry colleagues who collectively generate and deliver air power.

“Every member of the Royal Australian Air Force and every member of the broader air domain team directly contributes every day to the generation of delivery of air power,” Chappell emphasized. However, he noted a concerning disconnect: “Too many folks in the Air Force and too many folks in the air domain team don’t see that. They just think they’re doing their job, their bit, and aircrew and a few others are doing the air power thing.”

This observation led to his focus on building shared purpose which is transforming individual jobs into a collective calling. The framework extends to medium-term objectives, including influencing the 2026 National Defence Strategy update, and long-term vision development for air power in the 2040s and beyond.

Central to this approach is a single key directive: “preserve the force.” This concept creates what Chappell describes as “healthy tension” between maintaining readiness for immediate threats while avoiding unnecessary attrition that could compromise long-term capability.

## Redefining Deterrence Through Demonstrated Capability

Chappell’s approach to deterrence represents a departure from traditional acquisition-focused strategies. While acknowledging that acquiring future capabilities with future funding contributes to deterrence, he argues it’s insufficient on its own. Similarly, being “really, really good at current operations” which Australia demonstrably is remains important but incomplete.

The key, according to Chappell, lies in how air forces contribute to deterrence through continuous force generation and demonstration. “We contribute to deterrence directly through force generation, through raise, train, sustain, sustaining a tier one force and demonstrating that every day,” he explained. This involves showcasing the ability to “degrade, disrupt, destroy, defeat” or the “D words” that demonstrate hard power capabilities.

This philosophy extends to what he calls the “six Cs” or having capability and credibility that aligned minds will comprehend, communicated collectively with innovative force structures including allies and partners, delivered cumulatively over time. The repetition of these demonstrations, Chappell argues, is what truly deters malign actors by showcasing consistent, credible hard power.

## Operational Excellence in Practice

The RAAF’s current operational tempo provides compelling evidence of this deterrence-through-demonstration approach. Chappell detailed several recent examples that showcase the force’s ability to respond rapidly and effectively to emerging challenges.

In June 2025, a C-130J crew deployed at extremely short notice to assist in evacuating Australians and other approved nationals from Tel Aviv. The mission exemplified operational excellence under pressure: called on a Saturday, the crew launched by Monday with minimal preparation, conducting a 19-hour mission with multiple takeoffs and landings while receiving real-time intelligence from the Air Operations Center. The captain timed landings between ballistic missile barrages, loading 119 people in just 10 minutes before departing ahead of the next attack wave.

During Tropical Cyclone Alfred’s impact on Southeast Queensland, the RAAF demonstrated its ability to rapidly relocate and regenerate air power. After flushing assets from affected bases, the force quickly reorganized to conduct a marathon strike mission covering over 2,400 nautical miles into the northern South China Sea – all without preparation or rehearsal.

The deployment of EA-18G Growlers and F/A-18F Super Hornets to Clark Air Base in the Philippines provided another validation point. Operating in the West Philippine Sea/South China Sea, these assets verified their capabilities against real-world competitor systems, something impossible to replicate on any training range globally.

## Lessons from Contemporary Conflicts

Chappell’s analysis of current conflicts provides sobering insights for air power practitioners. Regarding the Russia-Ukraine conflict, he argues that Russia “took the wrong lessons from the Spanish Civil War,” maintaining air

power as a subservient component of continental land forces rather than developing genuine air domain mastery.

“They never developed the culture, doctrine, capabilities, the capacity to actually genuinely fight in the air domain and try to master that domain,” Chappell observed. Had they achieved air superiority early in 2022, the conflict might have proceeded very differently.

Conversely, Ukraine has demonstrated remarkable resilience in air base operations, continuing to generate air power despite sustained attacks. This resilience, Chappell noted, exceeds what most analysts predicted and suggests that air bases possess more inherent survivability than commonly credited.

The proliferation of drones in the Ukraine conflict, while significant, represents what Chappell sees as a second-order effect of Russia’s failure to achieve air superiority. “Drones are just adding additional lethality in an attempt to get lethality and mobility and maneuver into the conflict,” he explained, while the fundamental nature remains an attritional ground fight.

The contrast with Israeli operations in the Middle East is stark. Over 12 days in June, Israeli air operations demonstrated “what a tier one Air Force can do utilizing multi-domain effects.” While acknowledging that tier one air forces represent significant investment, Chappell emphasized they’re “vastly less expensive than the alternative, which is a tier two air force.”

The rapid degradation of Iranian air defence systems surprised many observers, but Chappell attributes this to the layered, multi-domain approach characteristic of tier one air operations. Fifth-generation capabilities, electromagnetic warfare assets, and multi-domain integration created synergistic effects that quickly overwhelmed defensive systems.

### Integrated Air and Missile Defence: The Priority Program

When discussing Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD), Chappell’s urgency was evident. “It is the thing that I would look to pull forward as quickly as possible,” he stated, emphasizing the program’s strategic importance for Australian defence.

His conceptual framework for IAMD encompasses multiple layers: passive defence, active defence, counter-force operations, and counter-proliferation measures. While acknowledging that counter-proliferation may be less relevant given Australia's primary strategic competitor, he noted its continued importance as regional proliferation dynamics evolve over decades.

The passive defence layer draws heavily on lessons from Ukraine and Israel, both of which have demonstrated continued air power generation despite significant attacks on their infrastructure. Australia has been developing these capabilities through exercises like Coral Sea, where forces practiced rapid relocation, refueling, rearming, and replanning using agile basing concepts with C-17 transport aircraft supporting fast jet operations.

Counter-force capabilities received significant attention, with Chappell highlighting recent maritime strike demonstrations that effectively reached "the primary area of military interest for Australia." These exercises validated the ability to engage tier-one targets at maximum range, providing crucial deterrent signaling while building operational confidence.

The active defence component will see prototype testing next year in collaboration with U.S. forces to demonstrate integrated air and missile defence concepts. Integration with broader ADF sensor networks and countermeasures will be crucial to the system's effectiveness.

### Addressing the Drone Threat: Cost-Effective Solutions

The emergence of low-cost drone threats has prompted significant rethinking of air defence economics. The unfavorable cost-to-kill ratios of using expensive interceptors against cheap drones has led to renewed interest in kinetic solutions, including the return of cannon-based systems for point defence.

"There's lots of ways of countering UAS," Chappell noted, emphasizing that threats won't necessarily originate from overseas but could include internal threats. The RAAF has established a panel of providers to advise on counter-UAS capabilities and is implementing both active and passive defence measures.

Current efforts focus on protecting air bases and key infrastructure during the latter half of 2025, though Chappell acknowledged that "we are not ahead of



the track” in this area. Learning from Israeli, European, and US experiences, the RAAF is exploring lower-cost effectors that can be deployed even on high-end platforms like fast jets.

### The Ghost Bat Revolution: Collaborative Combat Aircraft

Chappell’s enthusiasm for the MQ-28 Ghost Bat program was unmistakable. Having recently observed live demonstrations, he described watching two aircraft launch and operate in trail formation “just like a fighter formation,” with control systems simple enough to operate while inverted in an aircraft.

The program’s collaboration with the United States has yielded impressive results, including demonstrations where a single operator controlled multiple Ghost Bats simultaneously while performing “find, fix, track, and transmit” missions with operationally relevant data. The system has been deployed to operational bases and tested in realistic environments.

“I’m really confident when I talk to my fellow air chiefs that we have a world-leading collaborative combat aircraft in the MQ-28,” Chappell stated. The strategic implications are significant: the ability to position uncrewed assets across Australian air bases during crisis periods could transform Australia from a “tier one small air force into a tier one medium-sized air force” without burning out human capability and capacity.

The Ghost Bat’s potential for defensive counter-air operations is particularly compelling. Positioned to intercept threats before they reach Australia, these systems could engage hostile aircraft over key terrain while preserving human crews. Even if subjected to preemptive strikes, losses wouldn’t include irreplaceable aircrew.

### National Aerospace Enterprise: Integrating Civilian Capabilities

Looking beyond pure military capabilities, Chappell outlined preliminary concepts for a National Aerospace Enterprise through an aerospace council. This initiative recognizes Australia’s vibrant aviation sector and seeks to integrate civilian capabilities more effectively with defence needs.

“We are an aviation nation,” Chappell observed. “We’ve got an incredible amount of capacity and capability out there, but we are no way stitched up.”

Even within the defence establishment, integration remains incomplete, making broader civilian integration even more challenging.

The concept addresses practical questions that become critical during crisis:

- Which civilian reserve personnel should be recalled to active duty versus remaining in industry roles where they contribute more effectively?
- Where should civilian aircraft land during emergencies, and which airfields should remain clear for military operations?

These decisions require coordination mechanisms that don't currently exist.

The aerospace council would provide a framework for addressing cultural and mindset challenges while developing practical solutions with available resources. As the 2026 National Defence Strategy provides opportunities for increased funding, this groundwork will prove essential for maximizing return on investment.

### Looking Forward: The 2040s Vision

While maintaining operational focus on current threats, Chappell emphasized the importance of imagining air power's evolution into the 2040s. His interactions with international counterparts at the Global Aerospace Chiefs Conference reinforced his confidence in the RAAF's tier-one status, built through a century of investment in human capability and decades of platform acquisition by his predecessors.

This legacy creates an obligation to future air forces. The decisions made today regarding capability development, force structure, and operational concepts will determine whether Australia maintains its tier-one status through the next generation of air power evolution.

### Conclusion: Balancing Present Readiness with Future Vision

Air Marshal Chappell's strategic vision for the RAAF represents a sophisticated balance between immediate operational requirements and long-term capability development. His emphasis on deterrence through

demonstrated capability, rather than mere acquisition, provides a framework for maximizing current investments while building toward future needs.

The integration of human capability development, technological advancement, and operational excellence creates a comprehensive approach to air power that extends well beyond traditional service boundaries. By engaging the broader aerospace community and learning from contemporary conflicts, the RAAF is positioning itself to meet the challenges of an increasingly complex strategic environment.

As Australia faces an uncertain security future, the RAAF's commitment to maintaining tier-one status while innovating for tomorrow's challenges provides a model for how middle powers can maintain strategic relevance in an era of great power competition.

The success of this approach will depend on sustained commitment to excellence, continued investment in both human and technological capabilities, and the wisdom to learn from current conflicts while preparing for future challenges that may be fundamentally different from today's threats.

*Featured image: Air Marshal (Retired) Geoff Brown and Air Marshal Stephen Chappell, Chief of Air Force addressing the audience at the seminar.*