

## If You Ain't a Pilot...\*

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Air Marshal Sir James Rowland, NSW state governor 1981-89 and chancellor of the University of Sydney 1990-91, was almost deemed ineligible to be Chief of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) when the top position in Australia's premier military service fell vacant in 1975. This despite his distinguished military career to that date, which included: service as a Pathfinder pilot with RAF Bomber Command 1943-44, survival of captivity in a German POW camp after being shot down over Europe in 1944; later service as chief test pilot at the RAAF Aircraft Research and Development Unit; participation in the Mirage III O aircraft acceptance trials in France (prior to Australia's introduction of the aircraft into service) 1961-64; high level RAAF staff appointments as Senior Engineering Staff Officer at Headquarters RAAF Operational Command, as Director-General of Aircraft Engineering and as Air Member for Technical Services on the Air Board; attainment of the rank of Air Vice Marshal and award of both the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Force Cross.<sup>1</sup> Sir James's otherwise impeccable credentials for promotion to Air Marshal and service as Chief of the Air Force were spoilt, for Air Force traditionalists, by his possession of a degree in aeronautical engineering, gained after WW II, and his consequent membership of the RAAF's Engineering Branch rather than its General Duties (GD) Branch.

Tradition is important to the RAAF, the world's second-oldest independent Air Force. Since its formation as a separate service in 1921, the RAAF has always been headed by a GD Pilot. While the RAAF had seen benefit in training a small, specialised cadre of engineers as pilots and as test pilots, this group had been regarded as boffins rather than as warriors and so had been firmly relegated to Engineering Branch. Sir James's background was unique and his impeccable front-line operational experience clearly fitted him for the role of Chief, so the RAAF avoided any difficulty associated with breaching its unwritten tradition that the Service must be headed by a GD Pilot by the expedient of transferring him from Engineering Branch to GD Branch. Immediately Sir James was officially once again a pilot rather than an engineering officer, the Service was happy to countenance his promotion and assumption of the most important three star military role in Australia.

The Air Force is unlike Australia's other armed services in a particularly significant fashion: in the RAAF, it is principally the GD Branch officers who

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\* Traditional Air Force saying: 'If you ain't a pilot, you ain't shit'.  
 1 Anon., *Who's Who in Australia 1988*, Ed. XXXIV (Melbourne, Information Australia, 1998), p. 1386.

bear the risks of combat. Essentially, all the RAAF's thousands of enlisted personnel and non-GD officers (other than small numbers of airborne electronics operators, aircraft engineers, loadmasters and helicopter gunners, and some medical and nursing staff who undertake aeromedical evacuation missions in combat zones) constitute nothing more than support elements for the few hundred members of the elite GD Branch who bear responsibility for the RAAF's ultimate purpose: to fly and to fight. Understandably, the RAAF's GD Branch is a tightly-knit, exclusive group, proud of its heritage and jealous of its privileges and status as the Service's organisational pinnacle.

Even within the RAAF's GD Branch, not all officers are considered to be equal and manifestations of tribalism are universal. Operators of any aircraft type routinely disparage all other types and their crews: thus maritime crews from the P3C Orion surveillance and interdiction aircraft are referred to as 'fish heads'; transport aircraft aviators, be they from tactical (Caribou), strategic (C130 Hercules) or VIP (B 707 and Falcon) squadrons, are lumped together as 'trash haulers'; and pilots of the FA 18 Hornet have inherited the RAAF's longstanding sobriquet for fighter pilots, 'knucklehead'. When the RAAF still operated its own helicopters, before their annexation by Army, it was common to observe on RAAF choppers stickers bearing messages such 'Help stamp out fixed wing operations'. The tyro pilot who has just completed training is little valued by professional seniors, hence usually informally referred to by them as a 'bog rat', self-evidently a term of utmost execration, implying its bearer is the lowest imaginable form of animal life!

Such folkloric manifestations of Australian tribalism within the microcosm of the RAAF's GD Branch are predictable.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, they merely reflect and parallel an entrenched, officially sanctioned RAAF custom (copied from the RAF and used also by the RNZAF) which visually asserts the pre-eminence of the pilot group over all other aircrew members, including non-pilot GD members, by distinctive embellishments used on their uniforms. Only RAAF pilots are awarded a full, bialar brevet ('wings'): all other aircrew, including navigators, receive a half- or monoalar version (See Figure 1). The origins of this distinction are described in an official RAAF publication detailing Service Customs.

#### Pilot's wings

One of [the RAAF's] oldest customs is the award of 'wings' to those pilots who have attained prescribed proficiency in flying aircraft. Designed by General Sir Frederick Sykes and General David Henderson, the flying brevet was approved by King George V in 1913. It consisted of the wings of a swift in white silk embroidery, with the monogram 'RFC' (Royal Flying Corps) in the centre encircled by a laurel wreath in brown silk: the monogram surmounted by a crown, all on a background of drab cloth. The brevet was worn on the left breast of the jacket centrally above any decorations or medals. After slight alterations to the colourings and the change of the monogram from 'RFC' to 'RAAF', this became the 'wings' of the Royal Australian Air Force.

<sup>2</sup> Graham Seal, *The Hidden Culture: Folklore in Australian Society* (Melbourne, OUP, 1989, 1993), pp. 9-10.

#### Other aircrew brevets

Many of the badges worn by aircrew today evolved from the early Royal Flying Corps pilot's brevet. Observers, who shared the dangers of battle in World War I with their pilots, had no badge to identify them as combatant fliers until September 1915 when the Observer badge was introduced. The qualifications for this badge were somewhat elastic. In some squadrons the period for qualification on active service was such that only a few survived to gain it. There were occasions when replacement Observers arrived from the United Kingdom wearing the badge - this did not meet with approval and it was removed until they earned it the hard way. The badge consisted of a half-wing protruding from the letter 'O' embroidered in white silk on a drab background. The Navigator's badge evolved from the Observer's badge. It was first issued in World War II and unlike the pilot's 'wings' is an Australian design which uses a different wing from that utilised by other Commonwealth Air Forces.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 1

For pilots, the navigator's and other lesser brevets are dismissed as 'thalidomide wings', while envious non-GD officers, who have no entitlement to distinguishing brevets, dismiss all such accoutrements as 'f.o.l.t' (feathers on the left tit).

Tribalism among future aircrew members is sanctioned by long-standing practice. Early in each RAAF pilot training course, members select an unofficial course motto and design a distinctive course badge which, once made up as cloth patches, members wear sewn onto flying clothing and other informal attire. Some varied examples of such unofficial but essentially 'required' course badges are depicted in Figure 2. This method of setting the trainee members' individual pilot courses apart by their adoption of distinctive embellishments serves as yet another means of group identification for trainees who will spend two years together before achieving 'wings'. Interestingly, despite the pressure of squadron peers, referred to previously, to belittle pilots from other types, graduates from the same pilots' course typically maintain career-long and life-long friendships with one or more course mates, neatly demonstrating the validity of Seal's observation that

[...] individuals in a complex modern society like Australia belong to a multiplicity of folk groups throughout their lives and, indeed, at any particular period of their lives.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Anon., *Customs of the Royal Australian Air Force, Ed. 4* (Canberra, RAAF Publications Unit, 1996), pp. 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> Seal, *op. cit.*, p. 9.



Figure 2

Moore has recently demonstrated the proclivity of youthful military groups compelled to live in monastic, barracks-style accommodation, to develop a specialised argot which is largely unintelligible to outsiders.<sup>5</sup> (The writer, who had over a decade of continuous military service at the time, who was variously posted to several positions within sight of the RMC (Royal Military College) during 1983-85, and who had regular professional dealings then with RMC

Cadets, had believed himself conversant with most non-technical specialised speech registers of the Australian Defence Force until encountering Moore's monograph. Yet, when the first and last pages under each head letter in Moore's *Lexicon* were examined, only 130 of 413 entries were recognised: almost 70% of usages were completely unfamiliar to him). No similar study of the linguistic usages of RAAF cadet pilots has been attempted, but it appears likely that their specific usages would be no less arcane than those of their peers at the former RMC.

The more general folkloric verbal expressions used by RAAF pilots reflect international contemporaries' usages, particularly those of pilots of the RAF and the US Air Force. Apparently indigenous coinings are few but colourful. RAAF pilots' idiosyncratic and distinctive speech registers characteristically emphasise their preoccupation with the military operational pilot's unique role and self-perception. An updated collection of RAAF-specific speech is an overdue and potentially fascinating research project, but one far beyond the modest compass of this paper. The following selection of typical RAAF pilotspeak, drawn from the decades of the 1970s and 1980s, illustrates the evocative power of the laconic *mot juste*.

Aardvark (or 'vark)	F-111 strike aircraft
Adgies	Airfield defence guards
Blunt (-ie)	extremely pejorative term for a non-operational / bureaucratic member of RAAF, such as an Administrative Officer. (cp. WW II vintage RAF 'shinybum' or Viet Nam era USAF 'R.E.M.F.')
Bowyangs	harness gaiters, fixed below the knees, which retract legs to a safe position when an ejection seat fires.
Carry box	Caribou (tactical airlift) aircraft
Doggie	Guard dog handler (specialised Adgie)
Fanta can	Macchi air trainer aircraft (so named because of its Dayglo orange, high visibility paint scheme used throughout the 1970s)
Gecko watcher	reserved person; non-participant in raucous mess / crew room activities; probable self-abuser
hooting and roaring	uninhibited behaviour, especially in a group of peers; a bowdlerised version of its obvious metathesis
Miracle	Mirage III O fighter aircraft
Plastic Parrot	CT4 air trainer aircraft
Poofter and dunce	a person of little consequence (cp. 'Blunt')
Sky Hook	Chinook heavy lift helicopter
Spits	Service police
Stud Book	<i>The Air Force List</i> (so named because of its supposed use by ambitious mothers to canvass potential spouses for their offspring)
Tron	F-A 18 fighter aircraft
Weekend warrior	member of RAAF Active Reserve (21-28 'named' City Squadrons, etc.)

5 Bruce Moore, *A Lexicon of Cadet Language: Royal Military College Duntroon in the Period 1983 to 1985* (Canberra, Australian National Dictionary Centre, 1993), *passim*.

Equally among RAAF pilots as within other occupations, idiosyncratic language use defines and delineates membership of this exclusive group and

Ye shall know them by their (verbal) fruits [...].<sup>6</sup>

Neither the ear of a Henry Higgins nor the deductive power of a Sherlock Holmes is required to recognise RAAF pilotspeak or its users!