



No 44 Wing

Motto: Steadfastness

No 44 Wing forms part of Surveillance and Response Group and is headquartered at RAAF Base Williamtown in New South Wales. The Wing provides airspace management and air traffic services to support Australian Defence Force operations. The Wing has two subordinate squadrons, Nos 452 and 453, which are headquartered at RAAF Base Darwin and RAAF Base Williamtown, respectively. Between them, the two squadrons command Air Traffic Control Flights at RAAF Bases Amberley, Darwin, East Sale, Edinburgh, Pearce (including Gin Gin airfield), Richmond, Tindal, Townsville and Williamtown, and also at HMAS *Albatross* at Nowra in New South Wales and at the Army Aviation Centre at Oakey in Queensland.

The unit badge of No 44 Wing incorporates a sword, a lightning bolt and shepherds crook with the Southern Cross Constellation overlaying the globe. The Wing's motto is: *Steadfastness*.

No 44 (Radio) Wing was formed on 14 December 1942 at Adelaide River in the Northern Territory, about 100 kilometres south of Darwin. It was redesignated as a Radio Direction Finding wing in January and was the first of three such wings formed between December 1942 and February 1943. The

others were Nos 41 Wing formed at Port Moresby, Papua on 16 February 1943, and No 42 Wing formed in Townsville, Queensland on 1 February 1943.

By the time of No 44 Wing's formation, the war in the Pacific had been in progress for about a year. Darwin and northern Australia had been bombed repeatedly and the possibility of a land attack against Australia was thought possible. In January 1943, No 1 (Fighter) Wing arrived in the Darwin area to defend the city and the nearby satellite airfields, and Army, Navy and American units stationed near the city. No 1 Wing's flying units were No 54 Squadron, Royal Air Force, and Nos 452 and 457 Squadrons, all equipped with Spitfires.

Prior to the formation of the three Radio Direction Finding Wings, the Air Force had formed seven Fighter Sectors and the Americans had formed an eighth. The air warning network consisted of Radio Stations as reporting units and Zone Filtering Centres which fused information received from all sources. Fighter Sectors used this information to control fighters and issue air raid warnings. The Radio Stations, which were usually remote and geographically dispersed, were poorly administered and had inadequate logistics support. The creation

of the Wings was designed to redress the deficiencies in administration, technical control and logistic support for the Radio Stations.

The North-Western Area Headquarters was based at Adelaide River. The headquarters had coverage of the Northern Territory, the northern tip of Western Australia and the Netherlands East Indies. It carried out air defence, aerial reconnaissance and protection of the sea lanes of communication. No 44 Wing's role was to administer and technically control Radio Stations. At the time the Wing was formed there were six radio stations operating in its area: Nos 31 at Dripstone Caves, 38 at Cape Fourcroy on Bathurst Island, 39 at Port Keats, 105 at Point Charles, 109 at Mount Woods, and 132 at Eleven Mile (Knuckey's Lagoon). No 31 Radio Station equipped with a Light Weight / Air Warning set was the first to become operational, which it achieved on 22 March 1942. A further three portable Radio Stations, Nos 307, 308 and 309, arrived on 19 January 1943 after the Wing was formed. New arrivals to the Wing were billeted temporarily with the North-Western Area Headquarters at Adelaide River, however a separate camp was constructed subsequently about two kilometres from the North-Western Area Advanced Headquarters at 59-Mile Airstrip, at Cape Van Diemen, Northern Territory.

The Wing continued to build up its personnel numbers and equipment during January and February 1943. On 18 January, Flight Lieutenant Rex W. Wadsley assumed command of No 44 Wing. The Wing relied on the services of the auxiliary vessel HMAS *Patricia Cam* for delivering equipment, spares, food and other supplies to outlying Radio Stations. When she was sunk by the Japanese on 26 January 1943, the Wing found difficulty in making these deliveries. Alternative shipping not being available, No 44 Wing relied on operational aircraft and an Anson from No 6 Communication Flight to deliver urgently needed spares and rations to Nos 38, 39 and 195 Radio Stations.

Sites were selected during February for Nos 307, 308 and 309 Radio Stations at North Peron Island, Batchelor and Fenton, respectively. North

Peron Island is one of two low-lying islands off the west coast of the Northern Territory. Batchelor and Fenton Airfields accommodated many Australian and United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) units which conducted long-range bombing operations against Japanese positions in the Netherlands East Indies and the South-West Pacific. On 23 February, the Wing responded to an urgent request for assistance from the sloop HMAS *Warrego* in Darwin. *Warrego* needed help to render the ship's Air-to-Surface Vessel (ASV) radar operational following an attack by a Japanese aircraft. After the successful completion of repairs, *Warrego* resumed duty escorting shipping to New Guinea.

No 44 Wing's manning had improved by the end of April, with twelve officers and seventy-four airmen on strength. Additional Radio Stations were received and sites selected for them. On 2 May 1943, an air raid was called over the Darwin area. No 38 Radio Station at Cape Fourcroy detected enemy aircraft about 260 kilometres north-west of Darwin and advised No 5 Fighter Sector. Further plots were recorded, the developing air picture showing that a large formation of enemy aircraft was approaching Darwin. Fifty to sixty enemy aircraft were intercepted by the Spitfire squadrons of No 1 (Fighter) Wing which were scrambled to meet the attackers. Another air raid was detected on 9 May and warning given by No 308 Radio Station at Batchelor airfield.

Inspection and calibration visits were frequently made to outlying Radio Stations. Flying Officer Frederick H. Porter had a lucky escape after one such visit to No 309 Radio Station which had relocated to Goulburn Island. He was a passenger on a No 6 Communication Flight D.H.84 Dragon which had flown low to examine a beached lugger when it hit a tree and crashed twenty-four kilometres south-west of Goulburn Island. The pilot was seriously injured and another passenger, Flying Officer Leslie J.K. Olney, was killed. Flying Officer Porter was uninjured.

By June, Radio Stations commanded by No 44 Wing were spread from Wessel Island to Drysdale, Western Australia, and yet the Wing still had no aircraft

allocated. This situation made effective administration of the Radio Stations particularly difficult. The Air Officer Commanding North-Western Area determined at a conference held on 5 June to seek an amendment to No 44 Wing's establishment, to add flight lieutenant administrative officers to command seven of the isolated Radio Stations. Four such officers arrived at Wing headquarters just twelve days later and were sent to command Nos 38, 105, 317 and 321 Radio Stations.

Three of the Wing's Radio Stations located on the Western Australian coast had the distinction of having a pair of Q.F. 18 Pounder Mk II Guns installed at their sites. The installation was undertaken by an Army unit, No 166 Coastal Artillery Searchlight, from Potshot (later renamed RAAF Base Learmonth) near Exmouth. No 310 Radio Station located at Vlaming Head, seventeen kilometres north of Exmouth, had its guns installed on 29 March 1943, the first to do so. The next to be equipped with guns was No 326 Radio Station located at Cape Leveque which is situated on the tip of the Dampier Peninsula north of Broome. Its guns were installed on 27 February 1944. No 327 Radio Station located at Ganthaume Point, a promontory about six kilometres from Broome, had its two guns installed and became operational on 24 and 25 June 1944.

By June 1943, No 44 Wing members had begun serving as radar countermeasures aircrew with 380th Bombardment Group (USAAF). The role of these aircrew was to use radar countermeasures equipment to identify, locate and analyse transmission characteristics of enemy stations active in the region. On 11 June, the Wing received the news that one such member, Sergeant Joseph Holohan, was missing in action. He was a crew member on a 531st Bomber Squadron Liberator which had completed a mission over enemy occupied territory. The Liberator was destroyed by enemy action over the Timor Sea as it was returning to base. This was the first casualty in battle for No 44 Wing. The Wing was notified on 23 June that a second member, Sergeant John A. Graham, was also missing in action over Makassar while on a radar countermeasures mission with 380th Bombardment

Group. Both members, specially-trained wireless air gunners, were subsequently confirmed killed in action.

Darwin's Spitfire squadrons rose once more on 20 June 1943 to defend the Darwin area, having received excellent warning from No 44 Wing assets of a large incoming enemy air raid. The Spitfires claimed twelve enemy aircraft destroyed and ten more probably destroyed, for the loss of three of their own. During this raid, there was enemy action in the vicinity of Nos 31, 109 and 132 Radio Stations. Nine low-flying enemy aircraft, thought to have been Dinahs (Mitsubishi Ki-46) reconnaissance aircraft, came in within 200 metres of the Radio Direction Finding tower at Lee Point. However, no damage resulted. On 30 June during yet another raid, this time in the Fenton area, the Wing's assets once more gave excellent warning of an incoming formation of twenty-seven bombers escorted by twenty-one Zeros. Fourteen enemy aircraft were destroyed for the loss of six.

In September 1943, the Wing was renamed No 44 (Radar) Wing. However, the change in name made no difference to its operations. The Wing headquarters continued administering and overseeing the performance of its Radio Stations until August 1944, when the Wing was disbanded and the Radio Stations were allocated to other units. Days before No 44 Wing was disbanded, No 326 Radio Station was the centre of some excitement. On 13 August 1944, the Radio Station had detected an unidentified vessel which it reported and continued to track until 15 August when the vessel was observed to come closer to shore. The RAAF guards and two Army personnel were alerted. One of the RAAF guards identified the vessel as a large prau in distress with sails torn and drifting with the tide. The Army personnel fired a shot across the vessel's bow using one of the 18-pound guns. The Commanding Officer, Flight Lieutenant Robert W. Fletcher, formed a boarding party and requisitioned a boat which they used to board the vessel. Eventually those on board the enemy vessel, *Bandoeng Maru*, were handed over to the appropriate authorities.

By the middle of 1944, the war in the South-West Pacific Area had become highly mobile, so that maintaining the Radio Stations under the command of the Radar Wings no longer made sense. On 22 August 1944, No 44 Wing disbanded and its Radio Stations were assigned to other units. During No 44 Wing's period of activation, the number of Radio Stations in the North-Western Area had grown from six to twenty-one. The Wing had installed seventeen new Radio Stations from West Montalivet Island in the west to Wessel Island in the east, and to Cape Van Diemen, Melville Island in the north. It had also disbanded two obsolete Radio Stations and equipped five with updated equipment. In addition, the Wing had installed twelve radar homing beacons and relocated ten Radio Stations. Whereas only the Darwin area had radar coverage initially, by August 1944, the whole of the coastal area and important inland locations had coverage. Elements of No 44 Wing saw action in the defence of Darwin, the Northern Territory and the northern part of Western Australia.

No 44 Wing was reactivated on 27 November 2000 under the command of Group Captain Terrence C. Delahunty. The Wing assumed command and control of eleven Air Traffic Control Flights previously commanded by No 41 Wing then referred to as 'Air Traffic Control Detachments'. No 44 Wing's creation relieved an excessive span of command being experienced by No 41 Wing and of the then Headquarters of Surveillance and Control Group. No 41 Wing was concurrently in the process of introducing major new capabilities which were to enter operational service within the next several years. Among these new capabilities were the Jindalee Operational Radar Network and airborne early warning and control. The re-formation of No 44 Wing also provided enhanced management of ADF air traffic control (ATC) activities. Command of the ATC technical workforce was also transferred to No 44 Wing in October 2002.

Within five months of No 44 Wing's reactivation, its members serving at RAAF Bases Tindal and Darwin joined a Defence contingent commemorating

Anzac Day at Adelaide River, renewing the Wing's connection to its place of origin. In 2003, No 44 Wing personnel deployed to Iraq when Australia joined the US-led coalition. Australian forces were deployed under Operation *Bastille*, the lead-up and deployment to the Middle East which commenced on 19 January. Operation *Falconer*, began on 19 March and comprised Australia's contribution to combat operations to enforce Iraq's compliance with its international obligations to disarm. No 44 Wing deployed an ATC Detachment numbering nearly sixty on 3 February 2003 to provide air traffic services at Baghdad International Airport; this element was known as Task Unit 633.4.2. The Detachment comprised thirteen air traffic controllers as well as an Airfield Engineers Section, a Communications Section, and operations, intelligence, administrative and logistics staff. The Detachment also included Airfield Defence Guards who were charged with protecting the Australian compound. The Communications Section and the air traffic controllers operated on a 24-hour basis. The latter managed more than 650 air movements on a daily basis, more than two and a half times the number normally managed in Darwin, one of Australia's busiest airfields.

While Operation *Falconer* ceased on 16 July 2003, the ATC Detachment remained in Baghdad until August 2004 under Operation *Catalyst*. In January of that year, the Detachment celebrated their one hundred thousandth air movement. In August 2004 a contingent of six controllers relocated to Balad Air Base to supplement United States Air Force tower and approach controllers, with the final rotation departing Iraq in December 2005. Task Unit 633.4.2 was awarded the Meritorious Unit Citation for their work in Baghdad.

No 44 Wing's Detachment to Iraq overlapped with the deployment of Wing personnel on Operation *Anode*, the ADF's contribution to the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). RAMSI was mounted in July 2003 at the request of the Solomon Islands government. The Air Traffic Control Detachment deployed to

Honiara International Airport, previously known as Henderson Field during World War II.

Air Command's Force Element Groups underwent significant change on 30 March 2004 when the Surveillance and Control Group merged with Maritime Patrol Group to form Surveillance and Response Group. The organisational restructure was designed to place Air Force intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance and electronic warfare components into a single Force Element Group, to develop emergent capability and to prepare the information infrastructure for the introduction of new systems.

On 1 January 2005, No 44 Wing deployed an Air Traffic Control Detachment to Banda Aceh on Operation *Sumatra Assist*. The operation, a humanitarian mission, was mounted after an earthquake occurred in the Indian Ocean off the coast of Sumatra. It was followed by numerous tsunamis during which an estimated 228 000 people perished across the globe, nearly 130 000 in Indonesia alone. The Air Traffic Control Detachment, a part of Joint Task Force 629, included eight controllers and two communications electronic technicians, all of whom were encamped next to the runway. Not only had they to contend with the potential for tropical diseases but also the pervasive heat, stench and chaos. As both air traffic control towers had been damaged, Singapore deployed a mobile tower facility. No 44 Wing's Detachment remained deployed for two months.

In the late 2000s, the separation rate of experienced air traffic control officers grew significantly. Military air traffic controllers are highly trained and as a consequence are highly valued in civil aviation. In an effort to stem the tide, the government introduced a retention bonus. A similar bonus scheme initiated in 1996 had expired five years later. For its part, Air Force also implemented initiatives to improve location stability, career enhancement and longer-term remuneration.

No 44 Wing's Detachment at RAAF Base Darwin won the RAAF Maintenance Trophy for 2009. The trophy is awarded to the most proficient RAAF maintenance unit in recognition of that

unit's engineering and technical excellence and for the contribution made by all members of the unit towards the successful completion of allocated tasks.

On 12 February 2010, five No 44 Wing air traffic control staff deployed to Port Au Prince in Haiti, following a catastrophic earthquake which had struck twenty-five kilometres from the city. More than 200 000 people were killed and more than a million displaced. As part of Operation *Unified Response*, the United States Air Force (USAF) took control of the main airport, which quickly became chaotic as aid flew in from around the world. At times, up to six aircraft would attempt to take-off or land concurrently. The USAF requested the RAAF to deploy air traffic control specialists whose International Civil Aviation Organization rating gave them legal standing to control both military and civilian aircraft movements. Prior to deploying, No 44 Wing's personnel underwent training in Miami, Florida. In Haiti, they were embedded with the USAF airfield / air traffic services team and helped bring order to the skies. They departed for home on 15 March, satisfied after a job well done.

In early 2010, the Wing's air traffic controllers underwent a name change. They became joint battlefield airspace controllers (JBACs) to better reflect their role within the ADF. JBACs formed a specialist group within the Officer Aviation category. In recognition of their status, they received a qualification badge to be displayed on their uniform. In May 2018, as part of a broader reform of all officer aviation streams in Air Force, the use of the term JBAC was discontinued and Officer Aviation – Air Traffic Control (OA-ATC) adopted. As part of this reform the JBAC qualification badge was renamed Mission Controller qualification badge; it is worn by OA-ATC and ground-based air battle managers in No 41 Wing.

No 44 Wing's reactivation had succeeded in consolidating air traffic control command and control. However, it also resulted in eleven Flights (called Detachments) which resided on Air Force bases across Australia reporting to a single commander. The arrangement placed an unacceptably high

burden on a single command position. Accordingly, No 44 Wing was restructured on 1 December 2010 creating two new subordinate units through the reactivation of Nos 452 and 453 Squadrons, two former Spitfire squadrons which now were assigned air traffic control duties. The squadrons' reactivation was celebrated at a ceremony on 16 February 2011. The two new squadrons provided an equitable distribution of command authority and enhanced the ability of the Wing headquarters to focus at the operational level.

On 1 February 2019, a twelfth Flight was added to the No 44 Wing order of battle. Deployable Air Traffic Control Flight was formed under No 452 Squadron after No 44 Wing assumed command and control of all deployable air traffic control equipment. The management of deployable air traffic control capabilities has resided within many units over the years, starting in September 1965 with the formation of the Air Transportable Telecommunications Unit normally abbreviated as ATTU but also known as AIRTELU. The Unit initially provided basic air-ground-air and high frequency radio communications and later offered secure digital communications and air traffic control capability during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The Air Transportable Telecommunications Unit became No 1 Combat Communications Squadron on 1 July 1999 and the Squadron's support role evolved to support expeditionary air operations. Airfield Systems was a section within the Squadron that supported deployed air traffic control activities by deploying Mobile Air Traffic Control Cabins, Tactical Air Navigation beacons and Tactical Air Surveillance Radar systems. In January 2016 this capability was transitioned to No 114 Mobile Control and Reporting Unit in No 41 Wing before it found its way to No 44 Wing.

Major Exercises such as *Talisman Sabre*, *Hamel* and *Pitch Black* appear regularly on the task list for the Wing. Typical exercise deployments overseas

include to New Zealand, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and the United States. On operations, No 44 Wing personnel have deployed to Baghdad, Qatar, UAE, East Timor, Iraq, Solomon Islands, Banda Aceh (Indonesia), Khartoum (Sudan), Juba (South Sudan), Tacloban (Philippines) and Afghanistan. No 44 Wing personnel have also supported disaster relief activities in Innisfail (cyclones *Larry* and *Yasi* in 2006 and 2011 respectively). No 44 Wing staff from No 453 Squadron Edinburgh Flight provide ongoing maintenance support to Woomera range along with air traffic control services on an as-required basis. Through a Regional Antenna Maintenance program No 44 Wing technicians also support communications infrastructure at the RAAF bare bases (Curtin, Learmonth and Scherger), at multiple air weapons ranges across the country and at Cocos (Keeling) Islands in the Indian Ocean.

No 44 Wing air traffic control personnel again answered the call during Operation *Bushfire Assist 2019-20*. In early January 2020, a small team deployed to the Transportable Air Operations Tower at Bairnsdale. They provided an airfield flight information service for civilian and military aircraft supporting Victorian State Emergency Services to fight bushfires and provide community aid.



No 44 Wing air traffic controllers controlling air movements at Bairnsdale from the Transportable Air Operations Tower during Operation *Bushfire Assist 2019-20*. Source: Department of Defence