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FROM THE Front Line

The Royal Australian Air Force is dedicated to the future prosperity and protection of Australia, with a focus on highly skilled staff and leading-edge technology.

Images courtesy of the Royal Australian Air Force

As the second-oldest air force in the world, with roots reaching back to 1921, the Royal Australian Air Force understands the importance of adaptability and growth. With skilled staff, cutting-edge technology, and close-knit collaborations with partner forces and governments, the RAAF is ensuring that it's prepared for whatever challenge comes up on the horizon.

Geoff Brown, Chief of Air Force, recently shared his thoughts with *The CEO Magazine* on where this vital organisation is going and the role it will play in shaping Australia's future.

The CEO Magazine: You joined the RAAF in 1980. What changes have you seen over the past 34 years?

Geoff: The changes have been enormous. I think over time the RAAF has become a far more professional outfit in many respects. Additionally, just the general evolution of technology has had a big impact on the air force and how it operates.

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In a recent speech, you said that the future is impossible to predict. How have you ensured, as a force, that you're ready for the unforeseeable future?

It's important that we maintain a very adaptable force. The Australian Defence Force has learned a lot of lessons out of Afghanistan, but the biggest mistake you could make is to look at those lessons and say that's how you should structure your future force. You need to be ready for challenges right across the whole spectrum of warfare, and that's what the defence force has to do to maintain Australia's prosperity.

One of the things that we've tried to get across is that we have a maritime strategy as our overall strategy. Many people don't realise that our geography determines how we trade with other states. In a more than one-trillion-dollar economy, half our GDP is imports and exports. The reality is that if anything goes wrong with a stable world order, Australia's prosperity is directly affected. I'd argue every day of the week that the defence force is out there to maintain that stable, rules-based world order.

One of the mistakes that a lot of people make when they look at the defence force or air force is that they think we're purely here to defend the Australian continent.

What lessons did you learn from Australia's involvement in Afghanistan?

If I'm talking specifically, it was a largely land-centric campaign, only because of the limitations that the Taliban had, so it didn't use all of our defence force's high-end capabilities. That's not necessarily the way the next operation will play out.

How have you worked with other forces or governments to maintain positive, functioning relationships?

I would say that our challenge as an air force is to work seamlessly with the rest of the ADF. We do that pretty well within the air force. We have an Air Operations Centre embedded in our Joint Operations Command that allows us to command and control the aircraft. The ADF also has to work in a whole-of-government context because the execution of a >



maritime strategy involves a lot of different arms of government.

One of the classic examples at the moment is border protection. The navy has a big commitment to that with its patrol boats, but we also have a very large commitment with our maritime patrol aircraft. We also contribute a lot to surveillance and reconnaissance; it's one of the key roles of the air force and it's a key contributor to the whole border-protection undertaking.

Air force can't do this in isolation, and an air force is much more than just the aircraft. I always say that the air force, at its heart, is a complex engineering and logistics organisation. The quality of engineering and logistics support determines the quality of the air force, and that support is backed up by many great Australian contractors.

Coming from a defence point of view, how do you think your role differs from CEOs in more traditional businesses?

In many respects, there are actually a lot of similarities in what you're trying to build, which are high-performance teams right through the organisation. You're trying to invest in the future as well as maintain current operations. I suppose the difference is that if a CEO doesn't invest in the future, then they lose market share, while if I don't invest in the future and



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make the right decisions, then it can have wide-reaching consequences for the entire country if the air force can't perform in the future. When I look at the future, it's more critical that we get it right.

What would you say are the key measurements for the RAAF's success right now?

I believe the key measurements for me are that we are a reliable, trustworthy, and relevant force for government so that when they ask us to do something, whether it's short notice or not, we have the assets and training to complete the task. We pride ourselves on being immediately responsive to government needs.

You've said before that the two defining factors for an air force are adaption and improvement. Looking towards the next five years, what areas are you hoping to improve on?

We have a large capability transformation underway at the moment. We're in the midst of introducing a lot of new systems and aircraft. The key thing for me is that we adapt our personnel so that they can get the best out of those new systems as we move forward. Arguably, we are the strongest air force east of India

and south of China—and we have been for quite a while—and I'd like to maintain that.

We can only maintain that if we've got leading-edge equipment and if our personnel are highly trained and adaptable so they can utilise that equipment. We have quite a few programs going on in the air force at the moment where we're internally restructuring ourselves so that we can take advantage of some of the new technology that's coming on board.

Retaining these trained personnel is essential. How do you keep these valued employees in the force?

I believe what keeps people in the force is a belief that they're doing something worthwhile for society. They're able to work on and maintain leading-edge equipment, and they see themselves as more than capable of doing whatever mission the government requires us to do. I've had a 34-year career in the air force, and that's always been a driving factor for me.

There's a lot of variety in an air force career. We have more than 60 different careers in the air force, and every one of our people knows how they contribute to the overall capability and output of the RAAF. •

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This year, we celebrate the centenary of the world's first commercial flight and Australia's first military aviation flight.

For more than 80 years, Airservices and the Royal Australian Air Force have worked in partnership to deliver safe and efficient air traffic services to travellers. With air traffic in the Asia Pacific region tipped to grow at seven per cent a year to 2030, it is more important than ever that we work collaboratively.

Together we are working to deliver a new, joint, air traffic management platform, OneSKY, which will deliver the future of air traffic control to Australia's skies. This once-in-a-generation opportunity will ensure we are well placed to connect the Australian aviation industry to deliver world-best industry performance.