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CAN WE PUT THE ARMY BACK IN ARMY AVIATION?

by

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We live in exciting times. In a short while we will have an aircraft fleet not one type of which we had forty years ago. With Tiger, Blackhawk, MRH-90 and Chinook we will be technically superior to most of our neighbours, with the ability to annihilate small numbers of tanks or other vehicles, move small numbers of troops over short distances, and support them, and move the enormous amounts of aviation fuel required to do so. In a country as vast as and undeveloped as ours, and with a military force as small as ours, our reliance on comparatively large, short- range helicopters is an interesting strategic concept. Of course, our rented fixed wing can move our generals quickly and comfortably to anywhere in the region, and provide surveillance over any critters who don't possess the same level of electronic sophistication or the training to counter it.

Unfortunately, the cost of our advancement has meant other arms have not always been able to fulfil their wish lists.

We certainly have come a long way from our humble beginnings, when army officers, *with flying badges*, merely provided intimate support to the commander on the ground. Having been there and done that, they appreciated the commander's (and his troops') problems, and were in a good position to advise and help both from a vertical dimension. They worked closely with them on a day to day basis, took them flying to show them the ground so critical to their operations, and helped them with the difficulties of viewing it from a different perspective. The pilots knew the local and the large picture intimately, not merely through briefings from liaison officers or intermediaries, and were available to provide not just reconnaissance, but limited resupply and casevac, radio relay, or to direct supporting arms and aircraft – all potentially critical tasks - *at a moment's notice*.

The RAAF in an earlier period owned the battlefield aviation resources, except for our small stuff for which they still provided technical control (read 'stringent operating restrictions'). Their own personnel and aircraft were perpetually remote in distance, doctrine, tactical awareness and attitudes, and took hours if not days to get on the job. This was an unacceptable situation in peacetime – let alone war. In South Vietnam, while individual air force pilots often strove to do their best for the troops on the ground, their force structure and operational situation meant that with the possible exception of SAS operations, they could not. Unfortunately for them in that conflict, US Army Aviation aircraft provided a striking contrast in every type of operation – crewed as they were with army officers, warrants and specialists determined to get the job done, and with the odd view that survival of troops on the ground was more important than possible damage to their own aircraft. After all, it was just another means of transport, not something sacrosanct.

This contrast was not lost on the platoon commanders and company commanders at the time. It was reinforced during peacetime operations, when again the RAAF distanced itself from what was occurring on the ground. The occasional attempt by individual pilots or squadron commanders to provide intimate support resulted in official air force disapproval, heightened by a tragic accident attributed to fatigue resulting from living in field conditions.

Gradually the platoon commanders and company commanders became generals. They had long memories. They knew that in future conflicts the battlefield helicopter had to be operated by army personnel to be effective, so the lobbying and manoeuvring began. The rest, as they say, is history.

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Of course, all this presupposed that the new army crews would be trained to a level that they could talk on equal terms with the people they were supporting, have personal experience in the operations that those people were involved in, and would be highly motivated towards the job they were doing. No doubt they are. They would also fly aircraft that would be useful to the ground commander and the particular operation, and that would not add significantly to his logistic tail.

In almost every one of our missions since Korea fifty years ago, whenever we have contacted a hostile force that force has been of sub-unit or smaller size. That is, a company or less. We have supported the infantry – almost exclusively in battalion or company sized operations - in locating, fixing, and destroying or capturing the enemy, just as artillery, armour, signals and engineers have. There are those who deride the lessons of military history as being irrelevant in today's real-time technology and weapons. Whatever their fanciful ideas, the infantryman is the final arbiter of the battlefield. No matter how big and technical army aviation gets, we cannot defeat an enemy of any size on our own. And what *is* the size of the enemy expected in future operations? We do need to be able to defend against a conventional force, but let us not forget the other end of the scale.

How much useful support will we provide the battalion or company commander then? If he wants to see what is on the other side of a hill, do we provide a Blackhawk, or Chinook? The technocrats will of course say that we will send a UAV, so that if everything still works perfectly after say a month of remote area operations and he gets the information in the time he needs, he can look at little pictures and commit his men to battle on the strength of them.

If one of his platoons is out of water and ammunition, what then do we send? An MRH-90? If he has a man dying in the middle of nowhere, can we get one of our very expensive aircraft to him in time? If we don't, what will our image then be in the eyes of the diggers?

Most of the time we are at peace with the world. Natural disasters, however, occur all the time. Political ones, too. Army aviation has been sent to assist with relief work on innumerable occasions here and overseas: floods, cyclones, bushfires, locusts, earthquakes, and tsunamis. We have supported operations covering refugees, illegal immigrants, political unrest, and mapping surveys. With the capability of rapidly deploying several aircraft using one or two RAAF aircraft, we have been a very useful tool for both emergency organisations and our political masters.

When the Kiowas and Iroquois eventually fade from the scene, what do we do? Sit on our thumbs? A light helicopter or STOL fixed wing aircraft – not necessarily turbine powered, but preferably so – would enable quick and rapid deployment within and outside Australia to provide the intimate support that we will no longer have. It would not have the logistic burden that our future aircraft will have. It would definitely put the army back in our title.

It was also unfortunate that with our rapid and massive expansion, recruitment became a real problem, and the outsourced organisation charged with meeting that duty saw fit to advertise that being an army pilot for a few years would be a quick entrée and stepping stone to aviation generally, and particularly the airlines. No doubt none of the successful aircrew was so motivated, but the high attrition rate of qualified aircrew is (as it always has been depending upon the employment climate in aviation generally) a real problem. Not only do you get a shortage of aircrew, but the workload on those remaining increases to the detriment of their morale and family circumstance. Throwing money at them has been shown not to work. Rapid promotion to meet the expansion has meant that many at all levels do not have the same command experience and training as other arms officers receive.

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Emphasis in a peacetime army has been on administration and management rather than exercising command, which further exacerbates the morale problem. Bringing in (poaching?) experienced aircrew from other services and overseas is helpful to the manning problem, but may create problems within units even if the new crew never assume command positions. The continuing requirement for permanent officers to have postings and training as part of their career progression also reduces aircrew availability.

Would that we could enjoy the luxury (and force multiplier) of having several crews per aircraft, so that they could be flown around the clock when necessary.

We may have missed the boat as far as two solutions to the problems of manning are concerned. Firstly, we might have established Army Aviation Reserve Units, with their own organisation, support and training. Being reserve units, they would operate on weekends, and set periods during the training year, using the aircraft, plant, vehicles, equipment and workshop of a 'tied' regular unit. Reserve members would be available for the tied regular unit operations, including overseas deployments if necessary. This would assist in creating the force multiplier mentioned above.

The second opportunity involved the use of other ranks as aircrew. Yes, we do have aircrew loadmasters, but what sort of career structure do we offer them? Unlike other nations, we cling to the notion that pilots must be officers. Both the UK and Germany have corporals and sergeants to fly their aircraft. In the US Army warrant pilots form the backbone of their Aviation Branch. In these countries the pilots have a long career in flying, building up priceless and uninterrupted experience. Taking such aircrew from other teeth arms ensures that they have sound experience of how the rest of the army works.

The decision that the front seater in the Tiger must be an officer pilot is extraordinary. Not only does it increase pressure for more officer pilots, it denies a progression for OR aircrew that would solve many problems, and must be a body blow to the diggers themselves. Are they really considered incapable of doing the job? Those who worked with Aircrewman Observers (no longer on the books, and a sad waste of resources) know they proved themselves equal to any officer pilots in the tasks they did, including flying the aircraft.

For those sceptics who do not think that there is a problem with the rest of the army, talk to members of all ranks about the support they now feel they get from army aviation. Perhaps we have not missed the boat. Let us rethink where we are going, and not become just another air force.

Remember our heritage, and our commitment to the rest of the army.

Put **army** back in our name.

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