

INTRODUCTION

The declaration of war by Britain on 3 September 1939 and Australia's rush to follow suit a day later caught both country's defences sadly lacking and ill-prepared for the coming conflict. For all three services, this meant mobilising from a peacetime cadre to rapidly building both defensive and offensive forces. Four days later, the British government declared that the main weakness of the Allies *vis-à-vis* Germany was in air strength - and this included any contribution from the young and struggling Royal Australian Air Force.

Formed in March 1921 from the remnants of the Australian Flying Corps, the RAAF then was little more than a small training organisation with obsolete World War I aircraft. Subsequent government funding for the new service had been so paltry that up to 1936 it was only enough for the RAAF to maintain just two composite squadrons, a seaplane flight, a flying training school and three rudimentary air bases. By 1937, several damning reviews forced the government's hand but by the end of 1939, the RAAF still only had a total personnel strength of 3,489. To meet the demands of war, 246 aircraft formed the front-line strength of which only 164 were operational machines. At that time, the RAAF had three squadrons in Melbourne, four squadrons in Sydney and two at Perth. Darwin and Brisbane had a squadron apiece.

Hence by late 1939 the RAAF had twelve squadrons, yet only seventeen days after the declaration of war, Australia generously offered six of these squadrons for service with Britain. Initially, this proposal was left in abeyance and apart from the men of No. 10 Squadron already in England, another 450 Australians (of whom at least 159 were pilots) were serving with the RAF as part of a pre-war training arrangement. No. 10 Squadron had been sent to England in 1939 to take delivery of Short Sunderland flying boats then on order. Australia offered the squadron's services for maritime patrol and No. 10 Squadron remained in Britain for the remainder of the war. It was just the beginning of what would become a substantial effort.

Other RAAF squadrons were to follow with overseas deployment. By 1940, No. 3 Squadron had been despatched to the Middle East and Nos. 1 and 8 Squadrons to Malaya. By early 1942, the RAAF was in action on four fronts: Europe, the Atlantic, the Middle East and in the Asia-Pacific. When the European war ended, in May 1945, 15,000 Australians had been employed in the air war against Germany and Italy. In all, 6,636 RAAF men died in action in the European theatre, one-fifth of the entire Australian war deaths from all services and campaigns of the war.

There can be little doubt that the RAAF came of age as a fighting force during World War II. Although arguably the world's second oldest air force, it was little more than a flying club until the war forced its rapid expansion and technical development. At the height of the war, the service had expanded to a strength of 20,000 officers, 144,000 airmen and 18,000 airwomen. Over the war years, the RAAF grew to 50 squadrons in the Pacific and seventeen