

# The Brotherhood of Airmen: The Men and Women of the RAAF in Action, 1914-today

David Wilson

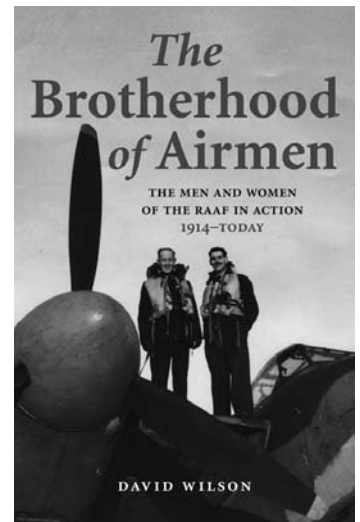
Reviewed by Mark Lax

On picking up this book I expected to find a collection of anecdotes from Royal Australian Air Force members past and present as seems to be a common genre nowadays. Instead I found a relatively concise record of the RAAF's complex and varied 85-year history including brief coverage of its predecessor, the Australian Flying Corps. Set at the tactical (or squadron) level, *The Brotherhood of Airmen* is very much focused on what the RAAF did on operations in the many theatres of war it has fought in, and the book provides a complete summary of Air Force activities up to the present.

The RAAF had its beginning in 1921, but was founded on the strong air mindedness of the Australian people and the legacy of the Australian Flying Corps. The force's first fifteen years were a struggle for institutional and operational survival. It received a meagre percentage of the overall defence budget and this allowed just three bases and a few training squadrons. With war clouds forming over Europe and a growing awareness of the threat from Japan, the RAAF received a much-needed boost to its funding but still entered World War II as a hollow and fragile force. In this war the RAAF operated in every theatre and subsequently became the world's fourth largest air force by war's end. From that experience grew the professional, fighting force subsequently involved in conflicts in Malaya, Korea, Vietnam and the Gulf, most of the ADF's peace operations of varying types, and virtually all Australia's domestic and overseas humanitarian activities. The RAAF continues this tradition today with just 13,500 personnel and a dozen front-line squadrons.

*The Brotherhood of Airmen* starts and ends with Australian airmen coming full circle – from Mesopotamia in 1915 to Iraq in 2003 (and where support operations still continue). World War II exploits take up over 40 per cent of the text as would be expected. In the later chapters, the author brings to public attention a more contemporary coverage of the RAAF's involvement in peacekeeping, humanitarian operations, disaster relief and, very briefly, the force's contribution to the global campaign against Islamist terrorism. The post-1991 Gulf War activities have generally not been widely publicised to date and will no doubt be the subject of more detailed publications in the future.

The author, Dr David Wilson, wrote his PhD thesis on RAAF maritime operations. Until his recent retirement he headed the RAAF Historical Records Section in Canberra, which no doubt gave him unparalleled access to the official record collection and unit monthly history returns. David has written numerous other books on RAAF history including *Lion over Korea*, *Seek and Strike: 75 Squadron RAAF 1942-2002* and *Warden to Tanager: RAAF Operations in East Timor*. He has also written a number of noted historical papers



including one on the divisive and debilitating command struggle in World War II between Chief of Air Staff, Air Marshal George Jones, and the operational commander, Air Vice-Marshal Bill Bostock, a saga significant in Air Force history but surprisingly not mentioned in this book.

Subtitled *The Men and Women of the RAAF in Action, 1914-today*, the 242-page paperback is more a concise history than light bedside reading, with ten chapters roughly corresponding with the chronological eras readers would be most familiar with. The book is very descriptive in style and drags a bit in the middle with seemingly endless mission-by-mission details of who shot who down and so forth. There is an obvious bias towards fighter pilots however, to his credit, the author includes comment on the often forgotten ground crews and technicians who support the aircrew and keep our aircraft flying. A short bibliography and a reasonable index support the broader accounts. There are no maps and the 33 black and white photographs are centrally placed in random order rather than spread throughout to link or illustrate the text. The paper is of lower quality but the font size is adequate for the average reader.

The principal failing of *The Brotherhood of Airmen*, however, is it desperately needed a thorough proof read before printing. The seemingly endless minor errors and spelling mistakes that have crept in tend to spoil an otherwise reasonable summary of the RAAF's complex and proud history. Many readers may not notice but the numerous errors detract considerably from the accuracy one should expect from an Allen&Unwin military history series publication. The publishers normally do better than this and any future editions would require a complete review. However, despite this annoyance, the book is readable and worth a look if you are after a short reference covering the RAAF's long and illustrious history. Although at \$35, the book is priced at the upper end of the reasonable price range for this type of history, especially given the overall presentation of the book. ♦

David Wilson, *The Brotherhood of Airmen: The Men and Women of the RAAF in Action, 1914-today*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest NSW, 2005, Softback, 242pp., RRP: \$435.00.