

Farewell to Chief of Air Force

By Jack Foster

Air Marshal (AIRMSHL) Geoff Shepherd, has recently retired after 37 years of Air Force service. Here, he reflects on his career and some of the future challenges facing the Royal Australian Air Force.

It was 1971, and a long-haired, motorbike-riding surfer named Geoff Shepherd decided to act on an Air Force Academy recruitment clipping. This decision marked the beginning of a distinguished career that has spanned four decades.

AIRMSHL Shepherd remained modest about his achievements, despite being awarded two Order of Australia medals along with numerous promotions and appointments leading to his position as Chief of Air Force (CAF).

"I'm part of a long endurance race, and my time as CAF was an opportunity to hold the baton for a period of time," AIRMSHL Shepherd says.

"I only ever saw myself as the tip of the Air Force spear. I couldn't have done my job without the whole Air Force behind me."

His family, a fishing boat, and the final renovations to his house in the Noosa hinterland will dominate the first few months following his departure. Beyond this, CAF says it has been difficult to plan long-term while still in his job.

"There is no wind down period – I'm Chief to

“Our Air Force offers a great environment for teams of people”

the last minute, so I haven't really thought about what I'll do in retirement. I just need to get out in good order, both personally and for the Air Force."

Air Marshal Shepherd believes he is leaving an improved Air Force.

"The Air Force is on the threshold of a wonderful and exciting future," AIRMSHL Shepherd says.

"I'd like to think I have brought the Air Force forward; I'd certainly like to think I helped further develop our wonderful culture – the RAAF family culture."

The Air Force culture has had a profound effect on AIRMSHL Shepherd – he sees it not only as something that has defined his enjoyment over the years, but as the key factor behind future recruitment and retention success.

"Without a strong culture, and without good people, all the policies and all the weaponry in the world will amount to nothing.

"I hope I have helped strengthen what binds us together as airmen and what binds us together as people serving the Air Force; as people serving the Nation."

AIRMSHL Shepherd believes the Air Force values of mateship, comradeship and teamwork

have remained strong throughout its 87-year history, and have not changed in his 37-year career.

"You can be anywhere in the world, talking to Air Force people at Gallipoli or walking down the street in London – if you run into a fellow Air Force member there is an easy familiarity and a sense of comradeship."

AIRMSHL Shepherd enjoyed around 4500 hours in the sky, which included flying the F-111 at RAAF Base Amberley. However, he says his experiences on the ground were as equally exciting as those in the air.

"I've enjoyed every posting I've had. I don't want to sit here and say that all of my flying jobs were better than my ground jobs. That is not true, because some of the most exciting work I've done was during ground operations."

He is adamant the Air Force will remain a first-class force because of the quality of its people, and is confident that there will be a continued stream of outstanding recruits.

"Our Air Force offers a great environment for teams of people to work with some awesome technology and make a real contribution to the Nation.

"This doesn't mean that we should be



ABOVE LEFT Chief of Air Force, Air Marshal Geoff Shepherd, signs the visitors' register at the RAAF AP-3C Orion Detachment in the Middle East Area of Operations.

ABOVE RIGHT Chief of Air Force, Air Marshal Geoff Shepherd, addresses the RAAF AP-3C Orion Detachment during his visit to the Middle East Area of Operations in May this year.



ABOVE Chief of Air Force, Air Marshal Geoff Shepherd, presents Leading Aircraftwoman Elle Mongan with the Australian Active Service Medal and Iraq Campaign Medal during his visit to the RAAF AP-3C Orion Detachment in May this year.

Photos provided by Public Affairs.

complacent. We need to be innovative to make sure that we continue to attract and retain talent in the long-term."

AIRMSHL Shepherd predicted that the Air Force needs to grow by about 1000 people to cover the continued very high operational tempo and the intensive non-operational commitments required during the introduction of new capabilities. This will be developed through the White Paper process.

"We have to continue to work to ensure we keep attracting top applicants – the challenge for us is to ensure that the jobs and conditions of service we offer remain competitive."

Although the core responsibility of providing air and space power remains a priority, AIRMSHL Shepherd admitted the Air Force will need to become more proactive, rather than reactive.

"We must decide to influence the air battlespace, not just react to it. We need to be a more strategic Air Force, and more generally a strategic Defence Force.

"We'll get this through a fusion of all the work from all of our people, at all levels."

Another challenge for the future Air Force is meeting cost-efficiency measures in a time of financial reform; something AIRMSHL Shepherd believes does not always result in sweeping cut backs.

"We need to reengineer the way we do our business. We need to look at how we use our current resources, so we can get on with producing a better service.

"I understand people may read that as us just cutting back on the little things, but it's not that. It is fundamentally looking at the way we go about our daily processes. It is about being smarter in how we do things – it is within our abilities to solve these issues," AIRMSHL Shepherd says.

Retirement provides an opportunity for AIRMSHL Shepherd to reflect on some of the difficulties during his years in the more senior positions.

"In senior leadership jobs, there is a degree of uncertainty and there are no clear-cut answers – a lot of the time it is not black and white."

From Malaysia to Canberra, AIRMSHL Shepherd saw many parts of the world through his duties and, although a Queenslander at heart, he had one important rule when posted to a new city or town – he had to support the local sporting teams.

"I think that supporting the local team automatically gets you involved in the community you have moved to. It makes it much easier to settle in. When I was at Glenbrook I supported the Panthers, when in Canberra I followed the Raiders, but I always support Queensland," AIRMSHL Shepherd says.

Retirement also provides the opportunity to see the world from a different perspective – arriving in the back of the plane rather than the front.

"It will be nice to go back and look at the places I've travelled to on official duty and see them through a tourist's eyes."

AIRMSHL Shepherd says it has been a great privilege to serve the Air Force and his country and, although ready for the next chapter, his final days as Chief were most certainly filled with mixed emotions.

"I am finding I'm getting more excited about retirement than I thought; but I'll really miss that easy camaraderie of friends and the wonderful Air Force culture."