

WORLD'S FOURTH LARGEST AIR FORCE?

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“With the surrender of the Axis forces in 1945 the RAAF became the fourth largest air force in the world.”

Frank Doak,

Royal Australian Air Force - A Brief History (1981)

Since at least the early 1980s, the claim has been made that, at the end of World War II, Australia was the country with ‘the fourth largest air force in the world’. The same claim has been made by Canada, so is the Australian claim historically valid or is it just an example of journalistic licence?

With the surrender of Germany on 8 May 1945, followed by the surrender of Japan on 15 August, there is no doubting that the three great air powers remaining in the world were the United States, the Soviet Union and Britain—in that order.



Kittyhawks at Oakey, Qld – some of the 5000 surplus RAAF aircraft in 1946

The US Army Air Forces (USAAF) had 2 253 000 people operating 63 715 aircraft, even without counting the air arms of the US Navy and Marine Corps. The size and strength of the latter can be appreciated from the fact that the US Navy was training 20 000 pilots annually in 1943–44, and in March 1946 established a program to place into storage 6000 of the aircraft it was then operating.

Reliable data on the Russian Air Force (VVS) is scarce, but with an estimated 18 500 aircraft, it was second only to the USAAF in size. The Royal Air Force came next with 1 079 835 men and women operating 9200 frontline aircraft alone.

What do the RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force] figures disclose about its size and shape at this stage? On 29 August 1945, a fortnight

after the war against Japan ended, the RAAF had 173 622 personnel personnel [*sic*] operating 5585 aircraft. A majority, almost 132 000 (including the 17 243 women in the WAAAF [Women’s Auxiliary Australian Air Force]), were serving in the Pacific. That theatre was also the focus for all but 20 of the RAAF’s 75 flying squadrons.

This represented a fifty-fold expansion over the size of the air service which Australia had maintained at the start of World War II. In September 1939, the RAAF had 3489 officers and airmen in uniform, manning 12 flying squadrons with a total of 246 aircraft—164 of them operational (though obsolescent) types. It was even then in the midst of an expansion program intended to see it grow to 18 operational squadrons and 5000 personnel by mid-1941.

It is significant that the end of the war did not actually find RAAF at its peak. That point had been reached a year earlier, in August 1944, when the number of personnel stood at 182 000. In that month, however, the Australian War Cabinet directed that 15 000 men were to be released by the RAAF to meet the manpower needs of civil industry. From this stage, while the number of operational squadrons continued to increase, the total number of personnel in the RAAF declined.

The story of the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) is remarkably similar. From a strength in September 1939 of around a dozen squadrons, both permanent and auxiliary, and a plan to expand its full-time personnel strength to 5025 officers and airmen, the RCAF grew to 215 200 men and women filling 78 flying squadrons. It is therefore incontestable, then, that Canada had the fourth largest allied air force during the course of the war.

The crucial point of difference is that the RCAF hit its peak in January 1944. Moreover, because Europe was the focus of Canada’s contribution to the allied war effort—it had 48 of its squadrons in that theatre in May 1945—as soon as Germany’s defeat was imminent, the need to keep it at such levels diminished. By 31 May 1945, the RCAF had already shrunk

to 164 846, and by the time of the Japanese surrender the Service was rapidly reducing towards a figure of 16 000 that the Canadian government had decided upon as the RCAF's demobilisation target.

On that basis, the RAAF claim to have been fourth largest at the point when hostilities in all theatres had ceased is also correct. This was largely due to the fact that the RCAF was reducing faster than the RAAF, but anyway it was not a distinction that the RAAF kept for very long.

Like Canada, Australia also accelerated its demobilisation plans for the armed services, so that by the end of October 1946 the RAAF had dropped to 13 238 members. This process still had some way to go, with the post-war low for the RAAF being a strength of just 7897 reached at the end of 1948.



BCATP/EATS trainees at an airfield in Canada

A further point to be considered when looking at the relative size and strengths of the RCAF and the RAAF is that personnel numbers alone were not a true indicator of the combat air power that each service was capable of generating. This is because both Canada and Australia had become partners in what was known as the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan [BCATP] or the Empire Air Training Scheme [EATS], designed to provide a pool of trained aircrew to help maintain and expand the wartime Royal Air Force.

This was an arrangement which required both countries to maintain abnormally large training establishments, but particularly Canada because it was the main training ground for advanced training for all four partner countries under the pooling scheme. According to the Canadian War Museum, the RCAF

was obliged to run nearly 100 flying schools, utilising more than 10 000 aircraft and 100 000 personnel to administer. Australia had a similar commitment to EATS, albeit on a lower scale, operating 34 flying and seven technical schools.

The raw numbers used in this comparison also do not reflect the fact that Australia, to a far less extent than Canada, found itself facing a constant struggle to acquire capable modern aircraft until almost the last stages of the war. For the first four years, the RAAF was obliged to make do with a large collection of mostly obsolescent and unsuitable aircraft which seriously impaired its operational effectiveness. On the other hand Canada, by virtue of its shared land border with the US, was able to establish itself as a virtual extension of the American aircraft industry and was well-placed to ensure that its needs for combat aircraft were adequately met throughout the war. To illustrate the point, production of military aircraft in Canada during the war years totalled more [than] 15 800, including types such as the Lancaster, Mosquito and Hurricane—and even the Helldiver for the US Navy.

In terms of actual combat power that the RCAF and RAAF were each capable of generating by 1945, there was probably little difference between the two services that can be usefully measured.

- At the end of World War II, the US, the Soviet Union and Britain were the three major air powers in the world.
- At its peak in 1944 the Royal Canadian Air Force provided the fourth largest allied air force, but after Germany's defeat it began a process of rapid reduction.
- On Japan's surrender, the RAAF stood as the fourth largest air force in the world—but did not remain so for long.



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