

# FCI

by Andrew McLaughlin



photo - LAC David Gibbs RAAF

## Eagles aid RAAF Fighter Combat Instructor course

**The RAAF is in the midst of an intensive and extended air combat training exercise which will range from RAAF Base Williamtown near Newcastle and finish at RAAF Base Tindal in the Northern Territory.**

The Fighter Combat Instructor (FCI) course aims to graduate expert leaders and instructors capable of tactic development, validation and instruction on fast jets such as the F/A-18 Hornet and the F-111C. FCIs are considered the best fighter pilots in the RAAF, and they wear their characteristic blue and yellow shoulder patches with pride.

Williamtown based 20CU has conducted 29 FCI courses over the years for pilots and navigators/air combat officers (ACOs) on Meteors, Sabres, Mirages, and F/A-18s and, in recent years, the F-111. The course has also been expanded recently to include intelligence officers and air battle managers from 41WG's Surveillance and Control Training Unit.

"To be an FCI, pilots and ACOs have to be 'B-Cat' rated, so they are already at the highest level of leadership as a fighter pilot," 20CU CO WGCdr Phil Gordon told *AA*. "But we give them the skills and knowledge to take it to the next step. So these guys, as well as being excellent

in the air, they become subject matter experts on all of the systems, the weapons, the tactics and all of the wider ADF and coalition capabilities as well. So, if you need something done in a warfighting sense, these are the guys that know where to get the answers and what's the right thing for the job."

"FCI course objectives will be achieved by exposing the students to a combination of programmed events taught and assessed by graduated FCIs and fighter combat controllers (FCCs)," WGCdr Gordon added. "There are four fundamental skill sets that will be taught to meet the course objective; basic and advanced fighter pilot execution; knowledge pertinent to tactical warfare and fighter operations; tactics and game-plan development; and leadership and weapons officer characteristics.

"The FCI course is the pinnacle of training. We take our most experienced and most capable fighter pilots, ACOs, airspace battle managers and 'intelos', and we all come together to execute our FCI course which is our version of Top Gun. Actually, we like to think it's better than the Top Gun course as our course is longer and more intense, and covers more things. While Top Gun is the US Navy course, we actually have very close links with the USAF Weapons School

based at Nellis AFB (near Las Vegas)."

The current No 30 FCI course, which is being undertaken by six F/A-18 pilots, two F-111 pilots, one F-111 ACO and three airspace battle managers, comprises eight phases conducted over a period of nearly six months. These include an instructional technique phase; an air-to-air phase; Exercise Aces South; an interagency visit; an advanced weapons employment; an air-to-surface phase; Exercise Aces North; and a series of end-of-course academics.

Phases 1, 2 and 3 are conducted out of RAAF Bases Williamtown and Amberley. "We start off with an instructional technique phase – experienced guys in the back seat teach the students how to fight and dogfight," explained WGCdr Gordon. "We then go to the air-to-air phase which covers everything from basic one versus one dogfighting, right through to Aces South which is going to be 12 good guys versus upwards of 30 bad guys defending Williamtown."

To this end, two groups of US Air National Guard (ANG) F-15C/Ds from Oregon and Hawaii visited Williamtown in September to provide coalition and adversary training support for the course. "The F-15s have been doing a mix of flying as the bad guys – everything from one versus one to two versus two, right

up to eight versus 20, but we also had them flying as part of the good guy package too.”

“After Aces South, we do some academic lectures and some agency visits throughout the course to improve the students’ knowledge and awareness,” WGCdr Gordon continued. “We do an advanced weapons employment phase at Woomera in early October where we shoot off some air-to-air missiles in challenging profiles, and we also drop some GPS guided JDAM bombs, again in some challenging profiles, to make these guys experts in everything to do with fighter flying and weapon employment. We then move into the air-to-surface phase where we work very closely with land forces – one of the focuses for our guys is that air-land integration – and that culminates in exercise Aces North which is at the end of the air-to-surface phase. While it involves us trying to drop bombs at the end of it, we need to stress that, for every 30 seconds of dropping a bomb, there’s a couple of hours of fighting an air war to try to get to that point in time and space.”

The flying part of the course culminates in the intense Exercise Aces North which will be conducted at RAAF Base Tindal and the adjacent Delamere training range in NT. “The Aces North exercise at the end of the year is our high end warlike exercise, so we get everything we can there including coalition assets, jamming assets, an air-to-air refueller, whatever we can,” WGCdr Gordon said. “We get all the support assets we can get our hands on, but what we don’t manage to get we try to replicate that through other means. So for example, if we don’t actually have an ISR asset, then we’ll control a scenario through feeds of information to make it seem as if we have got ISR coverage. So the aim is at the culmination of this course to simulate some high intensity warfighting with the full coalition assets in play.

“We’re really after the guys who, on day one of the war, can stand out the front and actually lead the aircraft as they go across into bad guy land. So if anything new comes out these are the guys who should be able to analyse the problem, come up with a solution, and develop the tactics, and brief it and lead those missions in really challenging circumstances. By training a small cadre of people to a really high level of proficiency and knowledge, it increases our overall capability because we don’t all have to be at that same level, but we need



A two-seat F-15D launches on another sortie from RAAF Williamtown. (LAC David Gibbs RAAF)

people at that level who can lead the rest of us across the line on that first day, and throughout any operations.”

### EAGLE SUPPORT

Not all FCI courses have the luxury of support from coalition assets, but 30 FCI course was fortunate to have not one, but two visiting USAF F-15 units take part.

“We always put the invite out, but it very much depends on funding and the availability of air-to-air refuellers and strategic lift aircraft to get the assets down here,” said WGCdr Gordon. “But you just can’t replicate the sort of training you get by having a different aircraft with different pilots here, both by being on your side testing whether we’ve got this coalition thing under control, as well as getting some great training done by using the F-15s as the adversary. There’s only so much training you can get done with like-minded pilots in similar performing aircraft, and it’s great having someone out the back who’s trying to shoot you when he’s got a different way of doing things and he’s in an aircraft that performs very differently to yours. It really increases the realism of the training and the value of the training.”

The Oregon ANG brought six F-15C/Ds to Williamtown, along with a KC-135R from the nearby Washington ANG’s 141st Air Refuelling Wing. “We are actually extremely well suited to provide the adversary training for the FCI course because when 20CU isn’t doing FCI, they’re doing their F/A-18 conversion which is the primary mission of us back at Klamath Falls, to train F-15 pilots,” said Major Brian Bergeron of the Oregon ANG. “So we understand the mentality of what it takes to be an instructor pilot and to teach. That being

said, the primary thing we have gained here is an understanding of how the F/A-18 performs, its strengths against the Eagle and its weaknesses against the Eagle, and how the RAAF operates. We’ve had a robust effort to put Hornet pilots in the Eagle back seats, and our pilots in the Hornet back seats to see how each airframe performs. In the first week we were here, the one versus one dogfighting was extremely beneficial to all of us. But just from the perspective of deploying, anytime a fighter wing picks up and moves across the globe and exercises, that deployment capability is extremely invaluable and many lessons are learned there as well.

“Our squadron also has five or six people who have gone through the USAF Weapons School. For the most part, when you talk about ANG units, there are usually at least two-thirds of us who are part time, and one-third full time. But we are fortunate in what we do to have 100 per cent of our pilots full-time – we have no other jobs, and it’s our full time job to train F-15 pilots which is very unique. The reason we’re able to justify that is because being an instructor pilot is a very perishable skill, and that’s something that really needs to be done full time to maintain those skills and to maintain that credibility as an instructor to teach.”

The RAAF certainly appreciated having the Oregon and Hawaii ANG aircraft and personnel attend FCI.

“These guys have come all the way from Oregon and Hawaii to support us, and have done a magnificent job,” WGCdr Gordon said. “They’ve given us training that we otherwise could not do ourselves, and the camaraderie, and the exchange of ideas and information has been fantastic.” □