

Standing Their Ground: Human Factors Influencing Young Aviators' Responses Under Attack on Australian Air Bases

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Australian air bases have not faced kinetic attacks since the Bombing of Darwin in 1942, raising critical questions about how contemporary young aviators would respond if bases came under fire. This paper addresses a significant gap in military human factors research by examining whether young Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) personnel would maintain their positions throughout a kinetic attack on their home base. Findings reveal universal affirmation of service commitment: all participants stated that they would recommend military service to their younger selves despite knowing that conflict was likely. However, this commitment coexists with critical vulnerabilities. These include heavy reliance on immediate supervisors creating potential brittleness if key non-commissioned officers (NCOs) are thinly staffed or compromised. Most participants believe that peers would 'break down, flee or freeze' under acute stress despite expressing cautious optimism about their own performance. Participants also perceived substantial preparedness gaps, including confusion about the rules of engagement, lack of after-hours command protocols, and unrealistic expectations regarding command clarity during dynamic operations. Gender differences emerged in motivational narratives but retained consistent commitment levels. Families would create an emotional burden without driving desertion, contrasting with historical patterns where family connections facilitated departure. Despite these vulnerabilities, the findings reveal that young aviators will maintain base operations if adequately supported. Key opportunities for the RAAF include building leadership redundancy at the NCO level, increasing scenario training frequency, communicating and rehearsing after-hours command protocols, and implementing ongoing family communication strategies.

1. Introduction

Air bases in Australia have not come under kinetic attack since the Bombing of Darwin in 1942 (Grey, 2009, p. 165). This raises the question of how contemporary aviators in the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) would respond to such an event and what factors may influence their decision to make an unauthorised departure in the face of an imminent threat to life. The consequences of their decisions could result in mission failure, threat to the lives of fellow aviators and be detrimental to the entire force.

Despite the significance and cascading consequences, there is a scarcity of contemporary human factors research, particularly since 1945, on the precursors of military desertion within Western militaries, notably air base operations on home soil. This gap can be attributed to several factors: lack of major conflicts directly focused on the Australian mainland and the sensitivity of narratives that detract from military success (van der Dennen, 2005). While scholarly attention has addressed desertion in non-Western contexts, theoretical and empirical studies of how Australian military personnel might respond to attacks on home territory are absent from the literature.

This paper considers the human factors at play in such a scenario, drawing on historical research and a qualitative study of young aviators. Noting the vulnerabilities faced by the youthful, dispersed workforce of air base operations, this paper seeks to specify the opportunities and challenges of leading this segment of Australia's military defence efforts. A qualitative study of young aviators is presented to highlight their perspectives of service and performance under threat. Their answers provide material for an as-yet unexplored research topic in the defence of Australia.

This paper draws on historical cases spanning the Seven Years' War (1756–1763) to contemporary Middle Eastern conflicts and the ongoing Russia–Ukraine War to identify patterns in which personal risk, family connections and leadership quality influence desertion. Semi-structured interviews with 16 young aviators (aged 18–25; 10 male, 6 female) at RAAF Base Darwin employ systematic thematic analysis that revealed attitudes towards service commitment, hypothetical crisis responses, family influences and leadership dependencies. Note, however, that this study's findings are bounded by its single-site, small-sample design and the hypothetical nature of the scenarios explored. Replication across multiple bases and with participants

who have experienced base defence exercises would strengthen generalisability. The paper's value lies in establishing the thematic landscape rather than statistical prevalence.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Personal risk and mortality

Across studies on the phenomena of desertion, personal risk of mortality is the primary driver of unauthorised departure. Research on Syrian Army desertion in 2011 found that temporal patterns of withdrawal correlated more strongly with deterioration survival odds than with financial incentives or leadership legitimacy. This underscores the scholarship on military desertion that mortality risk is military members' primary consideration (Albrecht & Koehler, 2018; van der Dennen, 2005). The report applying RAND's analytical model to the Iraqi Army's collapse in will-to-fight did not identify a single cause but found an interplay of leadership quality, morale and personal risk assessment as collectively determining whether individuals maintained their positions (Connable, 2022). Whether this calculus holds for young Australians who enlisted voluntarily, are defending their own country and have never experienced operational threat are questions this paper considers.

2.2. Family and civilian connections

Family support has emerged as a key enabler of desertion in Western conflicts. During the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), British forces saw their ranks depleted through desertion, most often when the soldier had the support and companionship of a friend, lover or relative to encourage and aid their desertion (Agostini, 2007). This pattern demonstrates that desertion was rarely a purely individual decision but rather a social act requiring external networks to provide emotional support, moral validation and practical assistance.

From the collective nature of family to individuality of thought, an examination of desertion by British soldiers during the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815) revealed that many newer recruits possessed a strong sense of their individual rights, reminiscent of their civilian lives and reinforced by their civilian connections (Linch, 2016). This underscores a persistent tension within military organisations: the challenge of cultivating a collective military identity that transcends civilian identity and loyalties, especially among those with limited operational experience and in technical roles that mirror civilian life. The interviews in this study highlight the themes of job roles and workplace culture over the unifying identity of military fighters, a particular challenge for contemporary air forces (Kelly, 2022). While historical identity conflicts often arose from recruits maintaining civilian connections and a consciousness of rights, contemporary air forces face a different challenge. Operating aviation in Australia necessitates a high degree of alignment with civilian aviation roles and practices, blurring the lines between military and civilian

workplace cultures. The interviews in this study explored how RAAF members experience this tension.

Albrecht and Koehler's examination of military desertion in the Syrian Civil War (2012–2024) finds that families provide not only logistical and emotional support for departure, but also a destination (Albrecht & Koehler, 2018). It can be observed that young aviators return home for various forms of leave, special occasions, convalescence and upon discharge in their younger years. The draw of the family home as an emotional or physical safe harbour could reasonably be attractive for a considerable number of young aviators.

2.3. Leadership, morale and institutional preparedness

It is no surprise that studies on military performance consistently show the importance of leadership quality. While Spanish desertions were fuelled by historical social loyalties, Allied forces' fighters in World War II (1939–1945) were more concerned with their personal hardships and horrors. Frontline fighters faced the challenges of limited rotations, inexperienced officer leadership and loss of comrades (Glass, 2014). Van der Dennen examined British forces' performance in the Northwest Europe Campaign in 1944–1945. He found that factors supporting fighter participation included survival, disciplined obedience, loyalty to comrades and masculine honour (van der Dennen, 2005). This cluster of characteristics could be encapsulated under the terminology of morale or human factors. Such morale, while influenced by numerous external factors, is typically shaped by quality leadership.

Disjointed leadership can be argued to be responsible for the ill-disciplined withdrawal of Allied, including Australian, forces from Singapore in 1942. The Fall of Singapore, with the surrender on 15 February 1942, provides valuable insight into the mindset and actions of Australians facing defeat under chaotic conditions. It was evident for over a week that the British-led forces would surrender. Civilians, including their families, were permitted to evacuate and they did so expeditiously. In the days preceding 15 February, soldiers were observed looting for valuables, becoming inebriated, and forcibly boarding evacuating vessels ahead of civilians (Maynard, 2017). Soldiers recounted that the final days of British rule were chaotic, and some reflected that those who managed to depart from Singapore, thereby avoiding years of incarceration, were fortunate and made judicious decisions (Maynard, 2017). This Australian perspective highlights that when communication is either limited or contradictory, even junior enlisted personnel may take the initiative, prioritising their own survival over strict adherence to the chain of command.

The RAAF Station in Darwin (now RAAF Base Darwin) was inadequately prepared for an attack in terms of infrastructure, communication systems and established ground defence capabilities (Lowe, 1945). Following the attack, the Station Commander instructed personnel to receive their meals at a designated location, situated half a mile from the aerodrome. While the majority of personnel assembled at this location, the order was apparently miscommunicated

as it was relayed through the chain of command, resulting in some individuals proceeding southward by several miles (Grose, 2009/2017). The narrative that seasoned Air Force personnel were simply escaping for their own safety is challenged by a story of local initiative. Reverend Chris Guy, who was a key leader in Darwin's civil defence activities, reportedly drove away from the RAAF Station and came across Air Force members on foot, intending to 'go bush'. Despite not having any military authority, the Methodist minister reportedly engaged them in conversation and successfully convinced most of the Air Force members he met to return to the RAAF meeting point (Gallagher, 2017). This story indicates that young airmen were willing to take appropriate action if leadership direction was clear and logical.¹

The importance of visible leadership under particular threat is seen across militaries. Demonstrating that leaders share the burdens of service can improve the resolution of all who serve (McLauchlin, 2015). Given the numerous challenges faced by Allied fighters in World War II, desertions were surprisingly rare. The key factor in this resilience was morale enabled by good leadership (Dupuy, 1990; Fennell, 2014; Woodford, 2016).

2.4. Democratic military culture and individual agency

The scholarship since the 1990s identified individual initiative and mission command as significant determinants of military effectiveness (Reiter & Stam, 1998). While the relationship between style of government and battlefield performance remains a contested empirical question (Lyll, 2020), the underlying mechanisms are directly relevant to the scenario this study examines: that is, personnel able and willing to exercise personal judgement when operating under dispersed mission command. Australia's all-volunteer, technical workforce operates within a democratic tradition that values individual moral reasoning, reinforcing the value of independent judgement.

Reiter and Stam's analysis identified that forces whose members are accustomed to exercising personal judgement perform more effectively under the stress of novel and rapidly changing conditions (Reiter & Stam, 1998). Biddle and Long refine this claim, finding that human capital, training quality and harmonious civil-military relations are more important than the style of government per se (Biddle & Long, 2004). This is useful for the Australian context, where an all-volunteer force with high levels of education and training exhibits these kinds of characteristics. Lyll's work complicates government-type determinism showing that, within the force, factors such as equity of treatment and unit cohesion matter as much as the broader political context (Lyll, 2020). This is consistent with the study's finding that participants found confidence not in the ab-

straction of government style but the quality of their immediate leadership.

Taiwan, a small yet prosperous democracy confronting a credible military threat, serves as a pertinent reference point for Australia in the Indo-Pacific context. Research found that potential combatants were positively influenced by perceptions of others' willingness to fight. Notably, female participants showed no statistically significant reduction in combat willingness despite not participating in National Service, unlike 97% of male respondents (Wang & Eldemerdash, 2023). This is consistent with the present study's sample, where commitment was universal across genders and prior operational experience was absent for all but one participant.

The Darwin 1942 precedent illustrates the individual agency argument at the operational level. The willingness of Air Force personnel to respond to a reasoned appeal from an informal civilian actor, in the absence of formal military authority, suggests that the capacity for individual moral reasoning was present even under the chaos of disconnection from leadership (Gallagher, 2017). The question for contemporary young aviators is not whether that capacity exists, but whether the institutional conditions are sufficient to direct it productively when it is needed.

2.5. Contemporary evidence the Ukraine case

The Russia-Ukraine War, ongoing since 2022, provides the most relevant contemporary evidence, representing the largest sustained military desertion threat in a democratic force defending home soil since World War II. Peer-reviewed scholarship on this conflict remains emergent. Journalistic sources currently provide the richest source of reflection to date. Qualitative observation of Ukrainian volunteer units in active combat found that under-threat behaviour exists on a spectrum rather than a binary. Individual soldiers vary in their willingness to perform dangerous routine tasks. The problem of absenteeism-without-leave was described as a common form of graduated risk-avoidance. Outright refusal to fight was highly exceptional (Jajcay, 2025, p. 67). This spectrum of discipline deviation, rather than discrete desertion, better characterises how commitment degrades under sustained threat. In more recent journalist observations, leadership failure at the immediate command level was consistently identified as the primary driver of departure. This was exemplified by commanders whose orders led to avoidable casualties, withheld leave or blocked legitimate transfer requests (Harding, 2025). Together, these observations in Ukraine align with the drivers of desertion found in the historical literature. Themes such as mortality risk, family pressure, leadership quality and institutional preparedness remain relevant in twenty-first century democratic military contexts.

¹ The account of the local pastor's intervention is solely based on Gallagher's book and has not been corroborated by Darwin historians.

2.6. Summary of theoretical research

Across conflicts spanning three centuries and four continents, the literature identifies four factors as consistently determining whether military personnel maintain their positions under threat: the individual mortality calculus; the nature of family and civilian connections; the quality of immediate leadership and institutional preparation; and the degree to which individual agency is cultivated within military culture. These factors do not operate in isolation. Initial Ukrainian evidence confirms that they remain operative in contemporary democratic forces defending home soil, and that the motivational character of the force influences how each factor is experienced under sustained pressure. Australian military personnel present a distinctive configuration of these variables: an all-volunteer, technically skilled workforce operating within a democratic tradition that values individual moral reasoning, defending their own country, with no recent experience of kinetic threat on home soil. Whether that configuration produces resilience or vulnerability under attack is the question this study examines.

3. Theoretical framework for the current study

This study did not impose a predetermined theoretical framework on this research question. Interview questions, while cognisant of historical research, were designed to give young aviators the opportunity to reflect on service meaning, peer expectations, family relationships and self-assessment without bias. Themes were identified inductively through systematic thematic analysis applied to the full interviews. The resonance between emergent themes and patterns in the historical record is a finding of the study, rather than a confirmation of a prior hypothesis. This suggests that the human dynamics of military commitment are both historically persistent, even as forms change. Where findings depart from historical patterns, such as the interplay of family relationships, these differences are significant rather than anomalous.

3.1. Research method

Following ethics approval (Departments of Defence and Veterans' Affairs Human Research Ethics Committee, 662-25), face-to-face structured interviews were conducted at the RAAF Base Darwin between 30 September and 8 October, 2025. Eligible participants were full-time Air Force members aged 18–25 posted to the base. Sixteen volunteers participated (10 male, 6 female; mean age 21.5 years, range 19–25 years), representing diverse ground-based roles, including Personnel Capability Specialists (n=3), Security Forces (n=3), Air Movements (n=3), Chefs (n=2), and other ground-based roles (n=5). Ranks ranged from Aircraftman/woman (n=6) and Leading Aircraftman/woman (n=8) to Corporal (n=1) and Flying Officer (n=1). Throughout this study, 'male' and 'female' refer to the participants' presenting gender.

The interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Structured questions prompted reflection on

Table 1. Coding categories: thematic codes groups with gender comparison

Category	Total Codes	Men % (n=10)	Women % (n=6)	Difference (M-F)
Meaning and Purpose	26	70%	83%	-13pp (F higher)
Preparedness and Training	30	80%	67%	+13pp (M higher)
Emotional and Psychological	30	75%	72%	+3pp (M higher)
Family and Social	25	80%	83%	-3pp (F higher)
Leadership and Command	11	90%	83%	+7pp (M higher)
Values and Identity	20	85%	78%	+7pp (M higher)
Service Evaluation	12	100%	100%	No difference
Practical Considerations	8	70%	50%	+20pp (M higher)

the meaning of service, hypothesised reactions of themselves, peers and family to life-threatening conflict scenarios, and retrospective advice to their younger selves about enlisting, given current knowledge and experience. The interview duration ranged from 6 to 20 minutes (M=9.3 minutes), excluding introductions or reacquaintance, preliminary consent procedures and post-interview welfare checks. No participant requested additional support following the interviews. Verbatim quotes when printed do not always capture the way young participants think faster than they speak and rely on tone and gestures to be understood. This was true of all participants, particularly those who spoke English as a second language. At times the narrative around the analysis needs to be read together with the verbatim quotes to understand the participant's intended meaning.

Interview data was analysed using systematic inductive thematic analysis. An initial codebook of 80 codes, developed from the first interview, was iteratively expanded to 142 codes through the analysis of all 16 transcripts. The codes were organised into eight categories: Meaning and Purpose, Preparedness and Training, Emotional and Psychological Responses, Family and Social Influences, Leadership and Command, Values and Identity, Service Evaluation, and Practical Considerations. Interview responses were segmented into meaningful units, with each segment receiving 2–5 codes, yielding 171 coded segments across all participants (M=10.7 per participant, range 7–23). (see [Table 1](#)) Thematic saturation was assessed through iterative comparison, with later interviews confirming existing themes rather than generating substantively new codes. Gender-based comparisons revealed notable differences in only a few thematic categories.

4. Findings

4.1. Universal commitment with caveats

All 16 participants affirmed that they would recommend military service to their younger selves, even knowing that

conflict was likely. This universal commitment is particularly striking given the participants' realistic, non-heroic self-assessments throughout their interviews. Personal growth emerged as the predominant benefit, with 69% of responses coded for valuing personal development through service. However, participants articulated this through diverse pathways. RECAP² framed service as 'a big stepping stone for me into turning into adult and actually being a productive member of society', while female participants more frequently emphasised finding purpose, with SAMEX stating the uniform gave her 'a sense of purpose to come to work'.

Several participants invoked civic duty with striking matter-of-factness when asked if they would advise their younger selves to join if they knew there would be life-threatening conflict. REFIX captured a sentiment expressed across genders: 'Well, someone's gotta do it, if not me, who? Um, and knowing what the skill sets I now know, and skills and friendships and values that I have gained while just being here. I'm in the Air Force. I would still say, yep, join, like, yes, it'll be scary. Yes, it'll be dangerous, it's an experience like no other. Might as well get out. Have a go.' Immigrant and refugee participants articulated a particularly strong gratitude-based commitment. REDUX, though not born in Australia, stated simply: 'it's my country now and I wanna look after it.' This aligns with Lyall's (2020) findings that newcomers become highly motivated combatants when fully included. Multiple participants referenced 'signing the dotted line' as creating a moral obligation beyond mere employment, transforming enlistment into a promise.

Critically, this universal affirmation coexists with significant doubt about peer resilience. While the participants expressed cautious optimism about their own performance, they invoked faith that 'adrenaline would kick in'. Most believed that a significant number of peers would 'break down, flee or freeze' under acute stress. RAPID predicted: 'I do think a lot of people at the moment would not stay. They would decide it's not why they do it, and they'd leave.' RAZEE estimated a '50/50' split in peer coping capacity. Participants attributed anticipated peer failure to the Air Force's peacetime working routines, youth and lack of operational exposure. RECAP noted: 'Most people join for that job, and for that lifestyle ... I think a lot of people would fly, a lot of people would leave.'

This self-other performance gap (Vazire & Carlson, 2011), where individuals affirm personal commitment while predicting peer failure, suggests that members may not be able to fully predict their own actions based on hypothetical scenarios. Historical research demonstrates that visible desertions increase the likelihood of further desertions (Albrecht & Koehler, 2018), suggesting that his expectation of peer failure could become a self-fulfilling prophecy if initial panic triggers cascading breakdown.

4.2. Leadership dependency and training gaps

Leadership dependency emerged as the most frequently cited factor for maintaining performance under threat, with 69% of participants emphasising their reliance on immediate supervisors for direction and task clarity. When asked what would help them stay focused during an attack on their air base, participants mentioned leadership more than training and personal values combined. However, the nature of this dependency varied considerably, revealing a spectrum from sophisticated understanding to expectations that may prove unrealistic during protracted operations.

RAPID demonstrated nuanced awareness: 'I think leadership would become pretty important. I think in a cloud of confusion, clear instructions would help anyone. Obviously, if you're spiralling and there's someone at the helm to tell you what to do, you don't need to think about what to do because they'll tell you what to do. Um, I think that would be how we, the most important thing, if the base did go under attack, uh, would be each section's chain of command, actually functioning as a chain of command. It's difficult, for Air Force because we operate as a business, mostly especially in the aviation side.' His observation recognises that the Air Force bases operate to deliver air power in peacetime, with convenient access to information flows and the right of access for important tasks. Other participants revealed expectations regarding command clarity that combat operations cannot guarantee. RADAR articulated a common concern: 'the last thing you want is, "He said this thing and he said this thing and sir said this thing ... convoluted".' This fear of conflicting guidance suggests a limited understanding that in dynamic combat situations, orders may change rapidly as new threats emerge.

Critically, participants referenced their immediate corporals and section officers as their leaders, not senior command. RAZEE stated simply: 'my leader, like my corporal's pretty good.' He did not refer to any others in his chain of command and indicated comfort in clear instructions with the comment in the same answer, 'So, yeah, sort of, just want to keep to your daily routine, don't go off it'. This granular dependency creates potential brittleness if key NCOs or junior officers are staffed too thinly, are themselves compromised, or are required to act at higher levels. The importance of immediate leadership was particularly evident among Air Base Operations Centre (ABOC) members, where RECCE, the only participant expressing high confidence in peers, attributed this to section leadership. In considering peer responses he said, 'Um. so, I feel like, additionally, the leadership that we've got in the ABOC currently is another solid reason as to why people would stay and continue to fight rather than I guess cower away, and look for safety individually'.

² A five letter unique identifier was assigned to each participant.

Participants identified multiple preparedness gaps that compounded their leadership dependency. RECAP voiced frustration about after-hours protocols: 'Something could happen right now or tonight, when I am sleeping, I'd be like, well, I would probably go to the ABOC because one, it's a shelter of some sort and two, that's where all the information is coming in ... I've heard nothing of that sort.' Participants expressed understandable confusion about the rules of engagement and armament authority³. RECAP stated with force: 'If someone is assaulting, especially a foreign nation, assaulting our base. I'm not waiting for AFP [Australian Federal Police]. We shouldn't have to be waiting for AFP ... If someone's shooting at me, I'm pretty sure I can shoot back, but I haven't seen the policy since recruits.'

SPECK, a junior officer, provided a systematic critique: 'we know what to do in a cyclone. Ah, we don't know specifically, what to do if we came under fire?' She advocated frequent scenario-based training to build conditioned responses to a range of threats. The gap between busy routines and wartime requirements extends to junior leadership's reluctance to delegate life-threatening tasks. SPECK noted: 'It's one thing to be ready to sacrifice your own life ... whereas particularly as an officer like thinking about sacrificing other people's lives is a totally different thing to think about.' This hesitancy, also observed during a major training exercise, may impede a rapid crisis response when necessary.

4.3. Family influences: concern without desertion

All 16 participants anticipated significant parental distress if the base came under attack, with a consistent gendered pattern. Mothers would express overt worry, while fathers would mask their anxiety. REFIX articulated what others described: 'My dad would be worried, but would not show it. My mom would be crying, she'll be terrified.' Despite this anticipated emotional burden, most participants stated that family concerns would not influence their decision to stay. SEIZE captured the tension: 'They definitely would want me to leave ... my dad does get, like he hates, like his kids are leaving and that it does make me feel bad. But I also do like being here better than [home town], so it's like ... I would feel terrible, but I don't think I would leave.'

Participants with Defence family backgrounds described a more developed appreciation of the potential risks of service. RECAP, whose father served in the Navy and both parents worked in law enforcement, stated: 'I'll probably get a lot of calls very quickly, um, mum and dad are both cops or, well, dad's an ex-cop now, so they get it. Dad's ex-Navy as well. Um, so they know what I've signed up for probably more than what I know, what I've signed up for. Um, so I'd get a lot of calls fairly quickly. My sister would freak out a lot as well, she's not Defence by any means. I think they're happy with where I am, and they wouldn't neces-

sarily want me to leave, but they'd also want me to be safe and make smart decisions.' REDUX, with an Army stepfather who served 40 years, expected family to 'understand and support' because 'my family have the background being in Defence'. These defence-experienced families appeared to have engaged in more realistic conversations about risk, providing psychological preparation that non-defence families lacked.

REMIX's family connection to Darwin's history deserves particular attention. When asked about family responses he answered, 'My family is well aware of what I've got myself into, my Grandad was in the Navy, and he, my dad, understands that, of course, it comes with danger. I am in Darwin, so that is the area that will probably get hit first. They are, well, aware ... someone else in my family history is also was here when Darwin first got bombed and didn't make it. Yeah, it was an interesting story. My mum didn't tell me about until I was going to Darwin as a joke. She's just like, "oh, hopefully, that doesn't happen to you!"'. This dark humour suggests that families may use humour to explore the potential dangers of their young person's service.

Several participants anticipated engaging in emotional labour to manage parental distress. RADAR anticipated his own and their distress by answering, 'I'd probably try and calm them down. Yeah, if I was in a state to even be able to do that. Like if I was hysterical, then what I wanted to do as well, but I would you know, if I had the facilities to do it? I think I'd try and console them as much as I can'. RELAX anticipated being as proactive as possible in his reassurance: 'I will probably notify my, you know, loved ones first, so you know this is going on. I might not be able to contact you for 24 hours.' The finding that families would create emotional stress without driving desertion suggests that institutional family communication beyond *ab initio* graduation ceremonies could reduce both participant burden and parental panic during an actual crisis.

4.4. Gender and generational patterns

While commitment to service was universal across genders, male and female participants articulated their motivations in measurably different ways. The study's gender composition (10 male, 6 female; 62.5% and 37.5%, respectively) over-represented women relative to RAAF demographics, where women comprise approximately 25% of full-time service members. This sampling composition strengthens the confidence in the observed patterns. Clear differences in motivational narratives emerged despite enhanced female representation. (see [Table 2](#))

Male participants more frequently framed military service as essential to 'growing up' and becoming productive adults. RECAP's formulation was representative: 'Joining Defence Force was a big stepping stone for me into turning into adult and actually being a productive member of soci-

³ The legal rights of ADF members to defence not just for themselves but for military assets when Australia is not in a 'state of war' and yet are under attack remains unclear and unresolved at the highest levels of the ADF and the Australian Government.

ety.' This reflection is consistent with Elder's work in earlier generations, in which he observed that young men did not just join the military as they came of age, but found the military helpful in giving them skills and structure to mature into adults taking on adult relationships and responsibilities (Elder, 1986; Elder et al., 1991). This maturation narrative did not appear in the women's accounts. Men were also more likely to invoke explicit patriotic duty. REFIX's 'someone's gotta do it, if not me, who?' and RHYME's self-sacrifice narrative, 'I rather join ... rather be me than my family, my young cousins, my friends' typified this pattern.

Female participants more frequently articulated service in terms of finding purpose and taking pride in their meaningful work. SAMEX contrasted her pre-service life, 'I felt like I was just doing nothing', with the sense that wearing the uniform gave her 'a sense of purpose to come to work'. SEIZE described gaining 'a purpose and also like, pride, like in the country'. Female participants also emphasised confidence-building, with SAMEX stating, 'I build all my confidence. I feel like I've grown personally and if I were to leave, I feel like I'm so much stronger mentally than I was before I joined'.

A distinctive motivation emerged among the immigrant and refugee participants across genders. RELAX, who came to Australia as a refugee, described service as 'just way to give back to, you know, the country a little bit'. RHYME, a second-generation immigrant, stated, 'Even though I am from a family of immigrants, Australia is all I know; I was born here ... This is, yeah, my country'. This gratitude-driven commitment aligns with Lyall's (2020) findings that newcomers become highly motivated combatants when fully included, as they recognise concretely what they are defending.

These differences indicate not a hierarchy of commitment but alternative cultural pathways to the same destination: willingness to serve under life-threatening conditions. Both the male maturation narrative and the female purpose narrative led to equivalent affirmation of continued service despite the risk.

5. Discussion

This study addresses a critical gap in military human factors research: whether contemporary young aviators would maintain their vital work if an Australian air base came under attack. The findings suggest cause for both confidence and concern.

The universal affirmation of service commitment, with 100% of participants stating they would enlist again despite knowing that conflict was likely, stands in notable contrast to historical Australian examples. During the Fall of Singapore (1942), soldiers looted and fled ahead of the civilians. Following the Darwin bombing (1942), Air Force personnel proceeded southward despite no evacuation order (Lowe, 1945). Contemporary young aviators articulate a stronger rhetorical commitment than these historical precedents might predict. However, this commitment coexists with significant vulnerability, most participants believed their peers would 'break down, flee or freeze' under acute stress. This self-other performance gap creates the risk of a self-

fulfilling prophecy, as historical research demonstrates that visible desertions increase the likelihood of a cascading breakdown (Albrecht & Koehler, 2018; Linch, 2016).

The heavy reliance on immediate leadership, with participants citing corporals and section officers rather than senior command, validates findings from democratic military effectiveness research (Reiter & Stam, 1998) while revealing potential brittleness. The loss of key NCOs or junior officers could disproportionately impact section morale and performance. This dependency is compounded by perceived inadequate preparation, unrealistic expectations of unchanging task clarity from the chain of command, confusion about the rules of engagement, and lack of clarity regarding after-hours command protocols.

The young aviators' belief that families would create emotional burdens without driving desertion differs from historical patterns, where family support facilitated desertion (Agostini, 2007; Linch, 2016). Contemporary participants anticipated managing parental distress rather than being swayed by it, although this emotional labour could degrade performance under sustained operations. Defence families showed better preparation through realistic conversations about risk, suggesting that institutional family communication beyond *ab initio* graduation could reduce both participant stress and parental panic.

Gender differences in motivational narratives, such as male maturation versus female purpose-finding, led to equivalent commitment. The strong gratitude-based motivation among immigrant participants validates Lyall's (2020) findings about newcomer combatants and suggests this demographic may demonstrate particularly robust commitment under mortal threat.

The study's focus on young aviators without operational experience reflects a particular vulnerability of inexperience, immaturity and dislocated family support. Their universal commitment provides a foundation for confidence, but potential institutional gaps in rehearsals, leadership redundancy and preparing personnel for rapidly changing tasks, represent addressable issues. The answer to whether young aviators would stay and maintain base operations appears to be affirmative, if adequately supported. The ABOC example, where operational scenario training produced the only participant expressing high peer confidence, demonstrates that appropriate preparation builds realistic capability, alongside commitment. This suggests that the gap between commitment and capability can be bridged through institutional investment in rehearsals and junior leadership retention.

The implications extend beyond Darwin specifically to all northern air bases that are perceived by members as particularly vulnerable to kinetic attacks. The patterns identified – leadership dependency on immediate supervisors, unrealistic expectations about command clarity and peer performance doubts despite personal commitment – likely exist wherever young, inexperienced aviators operate. The 'brittleness' concept identified in Iraqi forces (Connable, 2022) finds potential parallels in the Australian context: not from top-down control structures, but from inexperience in the reality of combat operations where orders

Table 2. Code frequency: codes applied at rate of 19%

CODE NAME by Category	Definition	Total	%
Meaning and Purpose			
PERSONAL_CHALLENGE	Personal growth through challenging experiences	5	31%
COLLECTIVE_EXPERIENCE	Shared experiences among unit members	4	25%
PATRIOTIC_DUTY	Serving one's country as core motivation	4	25%
MEETING_PEOPLE	Value in meeting diverse people through service	4	25%
DEFENSIVE_MISSION	Focus on defensive rather than offensive operations	4	25%
Preparedness and Training			
TRAINING_VALUE	Importance of training for preparation	4	25%
LIMITED_COMBAT_EXPOSURE	Lack of real-world combat experience	3	19%
Emotional and Psychological			
EXPERIENTIAL_UNCERTAINTY	Unable to predict own response without experience	9	56%
VARIABLE_RESPONSES	Recognition that people respond differently	8	50%
ADRENALINE_ANTICIPATION	Expecting adrenaline to drive action	4	25%
FIGHT_OR_FLIGHT_INSTINCT	Primal survival response	4	25%
RELUCTANCE_SACRIFICE_OTHERS	Lack of emotional preparedness to order others into highly risky tasks in crisis	3	19%
Family and Social			
FAMILY_UNDERSTANDING	Family understands military risk	10	63%
PEER_TRUST	Trust in peers/colleagues	9	56%
FAMILY_STRESS	Stress on family members	6	38%
FAMILY_DEFENCE_BACKGROUND	Family members with defence experience	5	31%
GENDERED_FAMILY_CONCERN	Different concern levels between mother/father	4	25%
FAMILY_SUPPORT	Family provides support despite worry	4	25%
Leadership and Command			
LEADERSHIP_DEPENDENCY	Heavy reliance on leadership for direction	11	69%
CLEAR_DIRECTION_NEED	Need for clear, unambiguous orders	5	31%
Values and Identity			
PERSONAL_DEVELOPMENT_VALUE	Valuing personal growth from service	11	69%
RISK_UNDERSTANDING	Understanding risks of military service	11	69%
CONTRACT_AWARENESS	Awareness of enlistment contract obligations	10	63%
TRANSFORMATIONAL_EXPERIENCE	Service as life-changing experience	6	38%
CAUTIOUS_ACCEPTANCE	Accepting risk with caution	5	31%
MORTALITY_ACKNOWLEDGMENT	Acknowledging possibility of death	5	31%

change rapidly, communications fail, and personnel must operate with incomplete information and high stress.

Key institutional opportunities emerge. These include increasing opportunities for scenario training, establishing after-hours response protocols, communicating actions in case of ground-based threat, building junior leadership redundancy as well as further support for young adults still looking to parents for guidance and implementing ongoing family communication to reduce crisis-time emotional burdens on young aviators. The junior leadership reluctance to delegate life-threatening tasks observed during a major exercise suggests the need for explicit ethics and leadership training at E3/O2 levels addressing the necessity of accepting risk in crisis scenarios.

6. Conclusion and future work

This qualitative study addresses a critical gap in contemporary military research by examining the human factors that influence young aviators' confidence and potential responses to kinetic threats on Australian air bases. The findings reveal a paradox inherent in democratic military forces. While all participants demonstrated unwavering commitment to service and strong patriotic identity, their heavy reliance on immediate leadership, limited operational experience, and reluctance to delegate life-threatening tasks to subordinates suggest potential vulnerabilities in crisis scenarios. The universal anticipation of maternal distress among participants highlights an under-examined dimension of military resilience – the civilian family

network whose support or anxiety may influence operational effectiveness during protracted domestic conflicts. Drawing on historical patterns of desertion from the Seven Years' War through to contemporary Ukrainian contexts, this research demonstrates that self-preservation instincts, family influences and leadership clarity remain salient factors across centuries and cultures. For RAAF, these findings suggest three specific interventions: continued training scenarios for ground based aviators that provide realistic context for evolving threat environments; character education at the Leading Aircraftman/Aircraftwoman and Flying Officer levels to prepare junior leaders for the moral weight of operational decision-making; and a sustained family engagement strategy that extends beyond *ab initio* graduations to maintain parental understanding of their children's vital contribution to national defence. As geopolitical tensions in Southeast Asia intensify, understanding and addressing these human factors becomes an operational imperative for maintaining the confidence and capability of Australia's youngest aviators in the operation of Australia's air bases.

Future research would benefit from conducting interviews during or immediately following base defence exercises, when aviators are actively engaged with scenarios involving risk assessment and operational response to threats. It would further benefit from a deeper exploration of the aviator's priorities, perceptions of preparation and predicted responses to deaths of colleagues. This interview timing would provide participants with concrete experiential context for discussing their reactions, reducing reliance on purely hypothetical framing while maintaining ethical boundaries. The immersive nature of exercises may also help participants articulate responses more authentically than peacetime interviews allow, as they would be drawing on recent simulated experiences rather than abstract speculation. Such research design would bridge the gap between hypothetical scenarios and observed behaviour, providing richer data on how young aviators process risk, make decisions under simulated pressure, and respond to leadership guidance in contexts that approximate crisis conditions.

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