

# LEADING EDGE

of the  
Wedgetail

The first two Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) aircraft have now been formally accepted by Air Force. As **Jaimie Abbott** reports, it's been a long journey.

A new chapter has begun for Surveillance and Response Group (SRG), with the first two Wedgetails now officially accepted into service at RAAF Base Williamtown. The aircraft will be a key part of Australia's air combat capability into the future.

Thousands of hands have made the project work – from contractors to military members in Boeing and its partners, Defence Materiel Organisation, 2SQN and Headquarters 42WG. All have committed to delivering a world-class AEW&C system that meets our war-fighting resource requirements from day one until final acceptance.

Headquarters 42WG Logistics Officer FLTLT Nick Willers has been a part of that process for the past four years, and said it's been among the most challenging highlights of his career.

"There has been no manual on how we needed to piece together this project. The Wedgetail aircraft is a 'first of type' development and extremely complex," FLTLT Willers said.

That complexity is a result of the cutting-edge radar technology and sensors that have been incorporated into each aircraft. Three more Wedgetails are expected to be delivered to Williamtown later this year and the final one by early next year.

There have been many hoops to jump through along the way, particularly with respect to radar and integrated system performance.

For 2SQN maintenance crews, the biggest hurdle has been the process of receiving the Authorised Maintenance Organisation (AMO), which means they now have the authority to do maintenance work on the Wedgetail aircraft.

Squadron Senior Engineering Officer SQNLDR David Johnstone said the staff had put in long hours to meet the regulations and implement the appropriate support systems.

"Establishing an initial AMO for a new aircraft type was always going to be a challenge and we've had to wait for spares, procedures and publications to be completed before we could pass the test," he said.

Williamtown has undergone a significant and dedicated infrastructure upgrade to accommodate and support the Wedgetail aircraft.

Headquarters 42WG Administration Officer FLTLT Nicole Strybosch said engaging regular stakeholders, including with community leaders, contractors and base sup-



**TANKS FOR COMING:** Aircraft technicians SGT Bevan Leedham and CPL Daniel Amiet prepare to remove the liquid oxygen tanks from the hangar.  
Photo: CPL David Gibbs



**AT THE READY:** Right, aircraft technician LAC Michael Osgood inspects the frame of the new Airborne Early Warning and Control aircraft.  
Photo: LAC Craig Barrett



**NEW REACH:** Number 2SQN B Flight Commander SQNLDR David Martin at work on board the Wedgetail aircraft.  
Photo: LAC Craig Barrett



**ENGAGING:** HQ 42WG ADMINO FLTLT Nicole Strybosch liaises with a staff member.  
Photo: CPL David Gibbs



**FAMILY INSIGHT:** SQNLDR Amool Prasad and his son Carter in front of an F/A-18 at the open day.  
Photo: CPL David Gibbs



**BIG ADVENTURE:** Above, a Boeing 737 AEW&C Wedgetail aircraft sits on the tarmac at RAAF Base Williamtown and, right, clerk SGT Lisa Swan and logistics officer FLTLT Nick Willers work together to make sure everything runs smoothly.  
Photos: CPL David Gibbs



port elements, had been the key to harmonising all of the program's capability elements.

When all six Wedgetails are eventually operating at Williamtown, an extra 200 personnel will contribute to, and benefit the local economy in the Newcastle, Port Stephens and Hunter communities.

Already in location, Headquarters 42WG Clerk SGT Lisa Swan said it was exciting to finally see the Wedgetail at Williamtown.

"I'm still getting used to looking out the window and watching the new aircraft take off and land," SGT Swan said.

The introduction of Wedgetail changes the face of Air Battle Management (ABM) in the Air Force. Previously, air combat officers (ACOs) in the ABM stream have worked from a static ground location as part of 41WG.

Known as air defence officers since the early '90s, they've been purposely exposed to and given AEW&C experience through liaison roles and exchanges. Those operating with the Royal and United States air forces have trained on the E3 AWACS and others on the US Navy E2C Hawkeye.

Former 2SQN CO and now HQSRG Chief of Staff GPCAPT Tracey Friend said this had helped in gaining insight into large-scale AEW&C operations and enhanced understanding of their training framework and employment procedures.

Operators (mission crew and pilots) and technicians have been embedded with the AEW&C Project Resident Project Team in Seattle, and within the Boeing Company itself.

SRG's WGCDR Rob Saxton spent an extended period of time in Seattle as the Wedgetail Test and Operations

Manager. "Over there we regularly flew the Wedgetail aircraft using the same systems we expected to operate with, when the aircraft was eventually delivered to the RAAF," WGCDR Saxton said.

"We supported the improvement of tactical and interface procedures with other agencies as well as developed an understanding of some of the Wedgetail's capabilities in a broad battle scenario."

Working in 42WG and on the Wedgetail, the ACOs can talk to external assets including in the Army and Navy using the comprehensive communications system while airborne.

The Navy will provide one fighter controller per mission crew, which will add to the operational experience and understanding of maritime operations for everyone in 2SQN.

The Army has also established 14

Ground Liaison Section within the Wing to provide special land expertise.

Number 2SQN B Flight Commander SQNLDR David Martin said: "We now have a further reach and can influence a lot more of the decisions by providing a clearer picture to ground, sea and other air forces."

Training has been essential for all aircrew in preparation for the acceptance of Wedgetail. Next door to the 42WG and 2SQN Headquarters is the AEW&C Systems Program Office (AEW&C SPO), where modified Boeing 737 simulators have been the foundation for initial and on-going training requirements for operators. The back-end simulator is a reflection of the real-time environment for ACOs.

Pilot SQNLDR James Pearson said the modifications to the simulator had resulted in Wedgetail having one of the best air-to-air refuelling training devices.

Several of the squadron's pilots have also been attached to Virgin Airlines in Brisbane to fly on their Boeing 737 aircraft to gain further experience leading up to the delivery of the Wedgetail aircraft.

The celebrations continued with an open day organised by the AEW&C SPO, 2SQN and 42WG, where family members were invited to attend.

Up to 400 people turned out to the family day on May 16. There were static displays of a Hornet, Wedgetail aircraft tours, and children's activities.

One of the attendees was SQNLDR Amool Prasad who said: "It was really exciting for my family to get an insight into the work I've been doing for the past four years, and my son Carter was excited to see the Wedgetail aircraft up close."

The Wedgetail aircraft will have five broad roles: surveillance, air defence, maritime support, force coordination, and support to civil agencies.