



# Defence Force Remuneration Tribunal

## DECISION

*Defence Act 1903*  
s.58H—Functions and powers of Tribunal

### **AIR FORCE: AIR SURVEILLANCE OPERATOR** (Matter 2 of 2024)

MS B. O'NEILL, PRESIDENT

MR A. MORRIS, MEMBER

CANBERRA, 30 APRIL 2024

MAJGEN G. FOGARTY AO RETD, MEMBER

[1] This decision arises from a listing application received from the Australian Defence Force (ADF) for a determination to be made under Section 58H of the *Defence Act 1903* (the Act). The listing application<sup>1</sup> seeks to restructure the Air Force Air Surveillance Operator (ASOP) employment category and skill grade continuum to better support contemporary employment environments and evolving capabilities.

#### **Background**

[2] ASOP's are ground-based aviators who provide specialist surveillance and integration support in the maritime, land, air and space domains through the collection, analysis, integration and dissemination of tactical and strategic sensor data. ASOP's enable airspace control and the execution of battle management operations.

[3] We considered this matter in hearing on 18 April 2024. Ms K Hagan appeared for the ADF and Mr M Guteridge for the Commonwealth. Warrant Officer R Cole CSC, ASOP Workforce Category Advisor, Headquarters Surveillance and Response Group, appeared as a witness for the ADF.

## Submissions

### ADF

[4] The ADF states the current ASOP category is designed across two employment environments, with four skill grades, and spanning the ranks from Aircraftman/Aircraftwoman through to Warrant Officer. It submits the ASOP role has evolved since it was incorporated into the Graded Other Ranks Pay Structure (GORPS) in 2008, declaring it has been *'shaped by various influences, the most significant being the introduction of new capabilities and employment environments and trade modernisation'*.<sup>2</sup> Further, it says *'the addition of roles within space, simulation, and mission planning and support, for an employment category without recognised skill grade career progression in these roles, requires training flexibility to accommodate personnel who transfer between different operating environments at all ranks'*.<sup>3</sup>

[5] As a result, the ADF is seeking to contemporise the ASOP employment category by:

- a. introducing three new employment environments;
- b. amending the career progression/skill grade requirements and training continua for current and prospective career pathways; and
- c. amending the pay placement for the ASOP Manager skill grade.<sup>4</sup>

### Commonwealth

[6] The Commonwealth submits it *'does not oppose'* the proposal, acknowledging that *'expectations incumbent on the ASOP workforce have changed to reflect growing priorities and capabilities of the ADF, including space operations'*.<sup>5</sup>

[7] However, the Commonwealth did query the proposed changes to the skill grade advancement for ASOP Managers questioning *'how lowering the minimum rank for skill grade advancement for ASOP Managers aligns with the submission that there is increased complexity and expectations incumbent of personnel engaged in this role'*. At the same time, it also expressed concerns regarding the *'sustainability and enduring nature of the proposal as there has not been a full work value assessment for each skill grade conducted for the restructured ASOP employment category'*.<sup>6</sup>

### Evidence

[8] Warrant Officer (WOFF) R. Cole CSC gave written and oral evidence in this matter. She expanded on the employment environments for ASOP's *'including but not limited to Control and Reporting Centre (CRC), Jindalee Operational Radar Network (JORN), Space, Simulation and Mission Planning and Support'* remarking that *'ASOPs can currently post between any of these*

*environments at all ranks*'.<sup>7</sup> She explained that the current continuum supports only two of those employment environments – the CRC and the JORN.

[9] WOFF Cole explained that the JORN is now referred to as the Battlespace Surveillance Centre but that terms are interchangeable noting JORN is still used in the current workforce structure. We note the same applies to the CRC which, in the existing structure, is referred to as the Regional Correlation Centre. We will continue to adopt the term JORN in the way it was presented to us in evidence and have used the term CRC throughout this decision, again, because it was introduced in evidence with that nomenclature.

[10] WOFF Cole gave detailed evidence in support of the application to *'remove the requirement to attain multiple proficiencies solely within a specified environment and introduce a library of proficiencies for each skill grade*'.<sup>8</sup> She gave evidence that *'the proposed continuum maintains the four skill grades of ASOP1, ASOP2, ASOP Supervisor and ASOP Manager*' with each skill grade requiring the attainment of one proficiency from the library. She expanded that *'training options within all five contemporary environments have been included in the full proficiency library*'.<sup>9</sup>

[11] WOFF Cole also succinctly explained the differences between the roles of an ASOP Supervisor (who is focussed on direct supervision of subordinate roles, providing subject matter expert advice to subordinates and technical recommendations to managers) and a Manager (who is leading the surveillance team and focussed on the outward integration and projection of surveillance data).<sup>10</sup>

## **Consideration**

[12] We conducted our deliberations in circumstances where we accept that the ASOP workforce is *'under strength*' and with the current continuum resulting in a *'number of retention issues*'.<sup>11</sup>

[13] We accept employment environments have expanded and that, in addition to the CRC and JORN, ASOPs are now employed in Surveillance and Response Group units, Defence Space Command units, and Air Warfare Centre units as well as in single-Service and joint operations and strategic units including units in Butterworth, Malaysia and Colorado, USA.<sup>12</sup> We accept the additional environments mean there are now *'additional training and employment pathways incorporated for space, simulation and mission planning and support*' across the workforce.<sup>13</sup>

[14] We considered the evidence that the underlying functions of the role are now defined through four pillars: *'identification of the surveillance picture; sensor/system optimisation; integration; and information management*' and that *'what has changed significantly is how ASOP's achieve each of the surveillance pillars*'.<sup>14</sup> We queried the impact of this technology across all ranks and accept the evidence of WOFF Cole that *'capability developments such as new surveillance platforms, advanced sensors and an increased level of integration have directly correlated with an increased complexity to the information management responsibility*'.<sup>15</sup>

[15] We accept that limiting the employment pathways to the two traditional environments has created an additional training burden within both. We refer to the evidence of WOFF Cole that there are *‘two main issues, the first being that there is only the two environments within the current continuum of the CRC and JORN. So that means people who are posted into one of the other newer environments either have to cross-train across onto the other systems, which creates an unnecessary training burden for that unit, or if the cross-training isn’t available they don’t re-grade in alignment with their peers’*. And the second issue, *‘that within each of the two parts within the current continuum it is a very linear training path so that everyone has to start with the same course and then progress through’*.<sup>16</sup>

[16] We accepted the evidence of WOFF Cole, both in the hearing and in her affidavit, that the proficiency library permits an ability to attain each skill grade within each employment environment allowing *‘more flexible workforce planning as posting across these environments will not negatively affect skill grade attainment’*.<sup>17</sup> We agree this change will permit units to train *‘based on capability requirements’* and therefore provide more flexible training options. We accept the evidence it will provide *‘broader career options and recognise the skills that some members have already gained in those new environments’*.<sup>18</sup>

[17] As stated, the submission proposes to increase the pay placement for ASOP Managers from pay grade 5 to 6 within the GORPS. We considered the evidence that changing the prerequisites for skill grade advancement between the role of Supervisor to Manager means that personnel can, having attained the lower rank of Sergeant (as opposed to Flight Sergeant), advance to the Manager skill grade. We considered the appropriateness of a resultant change in pay grade to pay grade 6 to *‘recognise and remunerate the increased complexity of tasks, depth of knowledge and level of responsibility required of personnel beyond the rank of Corporal’*.<sup>19</sup> We agree the *‘proposed increase in pay placement will recognise the increased work value of an ASOP Manager and also provide incentive for ASOP Supervisors to continue trade skill progression’*.<sup>20</sup>

[18] In this regard, we addressed the concerns of the Commonwealth as to how lowering the minimum rank for skill grade advancement for ASOP Manager aligns with the increased complexity and expectations of the role. We accept the evidence, mentioned in paragraph 11 of this decision, and expanded on by WOFF Cole in the hearing using an example of the JORN environment, that *‘the ASOP Supervisor is more focussed inwards for direct supervision of their subordinate positions, providing them with more expert advice and providing some information recommendations up to the Manager’*. We also accept that, in that same environment, the Manager is *‘responsible for leading the whole surveillance team’* with a more *‘outward focus looking at resources, priorities, external liaison and planning for contingencies within a contested operational environment’*.<sup>21</sup>

[19] We do not share the concerns of the Commonwealth about the long-term sustainability of the structure, and, in that context, had regard to its own submission that it *‘does recognise that capabilities in this area are constantly evolving, meaning the ADF’s ability to propose a long-term and enduring structure is limited’*.<sup>22</sup>

[20] Although we consider workforce expectations to be a matter for the ADF, throughout our deliberations we were encouraged by the evidence that *‘the ASOP workforce has been engaged throughout the development of the new continuum’* and that there has been *‘positive feedback’* from members at all ranks.<sup>23</sup> We note that any member adversely affected by the transition from their existing skill grade to a skill grade under the new structure will receive *‘detailed notification of the transition, tailored to their individual circumstances’* and that *‘any gap training requirement will be detailed in a notification letter, including required completion dates and consequences of non-compliance’*.<sup>24</sup>

## **Conclusion**

[21] In closing, we agree ASOP’s are no longer limited to employment in two defined environments and agree the restructured ASOP category is to be configured across four skill grades, comprising five employment environments and career pathways, ensuring appropriate career progression and skill grade alignment as well as training continua. We agree the restructure will support Air Force in providing a *‘contemporary and more effective surveillance and integration capability’*.<sup>25</sup>

[22] We accept there is an increase in work value between the ASOP Supervisor and Manager across all employment environments and agree that an increased pay placement recognises and remunerates the increased complexity of tasks, depth of knowledge and level of responsibility for ASOP Managers. At the same time, we agree it may provide incentive for ASOP Supervisors to seek skill progression contributing to retention within the workforce. We accept that Sergeants and Flight Sergeants, while having differing levels of responsibilities outside operational environments, are able to hold the same levels of *‘technical mastery’*<sup>26</sup> thereby supporting the amendment to the lower rank for ASOP Manager.

[23] We accept the ASOP workforce will transition to the restructured employment category from Q2 of 2024 with all individuals transitioning to the skill grade appropriate to their currently held qualifications. We note some members may be provided with non-reduction provisions, where required, under s58B of the Act for a period of five years.

[24] Determination 1 of 2024 gives effect to our decision from 23 May 2024.

MS B. O’NEILL, PRESIDENT  
MR A. MORRIS, MEMBER  
MAJGEN G. FOGARTY AO RETD, MEMBER

*Appearances:*

*Ms K Hagan for the ADF assisted by Flight Lieutenant L. Hawkett*

*Mr M Guteridge for the Commonwealth assisted by Mr K. Wong*

*Witness:*

*Warrant Officer R L Cole, Headquarters Surveillance and Response Group, RAAF Base Williamtown*

---

<sup>1</sup> BN77326946 *Listing Application: Air Force: Air Surveillance Operator* dated 7 February 2024.

<sup>2</sup> ADF Submission Matter 2 of 2024 – Air Force: Air Surveillance Operator dated 19 March 2024 (ADF1) page 2 paragraph 1.5.

<sup>3</sup> ADF1 page 2 paragraph 1.8

<sup>4</sup> ADF1 page 3 paragraph 1.9.

<sup>5</sup> Commonwealth Submission Royal Australian Air Force: Air Force Air Surveillance Operator dated 12 April 2024 (CWLTH1) page 9 paragraphs 45 and 48.

<sup>6</sup> Transcript 18 April 2024 page 9 lines 34 to 43.

<sup>7</sup> Affidavit Warrant Officer R L Cole CSC dated 2 April 2024 (ADF2) page 3 paragraph 10.

<sup>8</sup> ADF1 page 17 paragraph 4.11.

<sup>9</sup> ADF2 page 6 paragraph 22.

<sup>10</sup> ADF2 page 7 paragraph 27.

<sup>11</sup> ADF2 page 8 paragraph 30.

<sup>12</sup> ADF 1 page 7 paragraph 3.5.

<sup>13</sup> ADF1 page 15 paragraph 4.4.

<sup>14</sup> ADF2 page 4 paragraph 12.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Transcript pages 15 and 16 lines 41 to 4.

<sup>17</sup> ADF2 page 6 paragraph 22.

<sup>18</sup> Transcript page 16 lines 29 to 31

<sup>19</sup> ADF1 page 20 paragraph 4.20

<sup>20</sup> ADF2 page 7 paragraph 27.

<sup>21</sup> Transcript page 17 lines 12 to 21.

<sup>22</sup> Transcript page 10 lines 3 to 6.

<sup>23</sup> ADF2 page 9 paragraphs 34 and 35.

<sup>24</sup> ADF 1 page 36 paragraph 6.7.

<sup>25</sup> ADF 1 page 39 paragraph 7.1.

<sup>26</sup> Transcript page 18 line 43.