

## Chaplain Stephane Sarazin

### Senior Coordinating Chaplain, RAAF Base Amberley

Fr Stephane Sarazin is the Senior Coordinating Chaplain at RAAF Base Amberley, QLD, Australia's largest Air Force Base. Fr Sarazin is a member of 23 Squadron RAAF, which has a proud history: 23 Squadron was formed in 1937 as a Citizen Air Force unit at Laverton, Victoria equipped with Avro Ansons. It was subsequently based in New South Wales, Queensland and Northern Territory. Over the years it operated a variety of aircraft: Wirraway, Hudson, P39 Airacobra fighters, Vultee Vengeance dive bomber, Liberator heavy bomber, Vampire jet fighter and Meteor jet fighter. During WW2 the squadron was involved in combat operations in the Pacific. Subsequently, its role changed to provide servicing support for the Canberra and F-4 Phantom aircraft and Chinook helicopter. In 2010 the squadron was transferred to Combat Support Group and at RAAF Base Amberley is now responsible for Fixed Base Management.

The Royal Australian Air Force publication, *Chaplains Stories Beyond their Ministries*, includes the following article on Fr Sarazin:

***Kangaroos, sunshine and no snow... As a Canadian who had never travelled to the Southern Hemisphere, those were my impressions of Australia when the ADF came knocking in 2009 to bolster its ranks with experienced overseas Chaplains.***

I had been in the Canadian Defence Forces since 1997 but before then I was a church lawyer. In one of the cases in which I was assisting the prosecution, a priest had abused 250 children and then walked away with a plea bargain without doing a day of jail time. This put me off that particular career path. So I moved to a civilian parish and spent some years in that role before realising that I couldn't deal with the politics. I'd always wanted a missionary role and was seeking other opportunities to serve when I met a military Chaplain at a funeral in Canada who promoted military Chaplaincy as a way of seeing the world. I did an internship that gave me experience of all three Services, Navy, Army and Air Force, before going to sea for two years with the Navy and putting in three trips with NATO Forces.

9/11 changed everything; our entire world. I was posted to the naval blockade in the First Gulf War, a fascinating experience in which none of us had any idea of what we were going into. We were training around the clock for chemical warfare and had stopped in the Suez Canal to pick up extra recruits, load ammunition and body bags. For the next three months, we patrolled the Gulf non-stop and were on a high state of alert because of escalating tensions between India and Pakistan, two nuclear powers with a history of enmity. I'd returned to Canada to serve in the Air Force when the call came from Australia. Within four days, I'd sold my home, someone took over my car lease, and 30 days later I came to Australia as a missionary and was posted at RAAF Base Williamtown, where I bought a house by the water with help from the Defence Housing Authority.

Australia and Canada are both part of the Commonwealth so it wasn't a big adjustment to move countries. Australia's drinking culture is a bit more extreme than Canada's but maybe the thing that shocked me the most when I arrived was my observation of the lack of awareness of or progress in LGBTI acceptance. Although Australia lifted its

restriction on gays and lesbians serving in the military in 1992, there was a lack of safe spaces and specific policies to address LGBTI issues.

The issue first came to my attention when I was providing advice about a domestic violence issue. I was visiting a 19 year-old member with a broken arm and asked some questions about how the injury occurred while at home. It turned out that the member was in a same sex relationship but while the doctor seemed aware of this, the question wasn't asked to obviate potential embarrassment.

The Aids Council of New South Wales (ACON) had started its safe place program for LGBTI people a year before the ban was lifted in the ADF in 1992 but no unit in the ADF had met the requirements to be certified by ACON as an inclusive, safe place. I worked with ACON and my co-worker Chaplains at RAAF Base Williamtown to rectify this situation and the Chaplaincy Centre became the ADF's first certified safe space in 2014.

Any prejudice toward LGBTI people has no place in the Australian Defence Force and a safe space foregrounds Defence's policy with respect to openness and diversity. The program has really flourished since then. After I became the Senior Coordinating Chaplain at RAAF Base Amberley early in 2016, we set up two places in the Chaplaincy offices that are now certified safe spaces and I've received a request on how to establish a safe space at the Al Minhad Air Base (AMAB) in Dubai for our ADF members.

I'm working towards establishing safe spaces in all the Air Forces Chaplaincy centres and have received a lot of support for this idea. As Chaplains charged with the responsibility for the welfare and wellbeing of personnel we are leaders on this issue, and these spaces are beacons for diversity where LGBTI personnel, or more importantly, any member can receive judgment-free spiritual advice and other support.

For inspiring stories about other RAAF chaplains go to: [tinyurl.com/RAAF-CHAPLAINS](http://tinyurl.com/RAAF-CHAPLAINS)

(Fr Sarazin has updated the above article by reporting that most of RAAF's Chaplaincy Centres are designated as Safe Places and the concept is incorporated into a *Statement of Expectations for the Air Force Chaplain Branch*. Chaplaincy Centres are to provide, at all times, a Safe Place for Defence members and their dependants. )



Fr Sarazin discusses with Chaplain Chew (Ret'd) the concept of Safe Place designation for Chaplaincy Centres



June 2018: Official Opening 23 SQN Fire Section, RAAF Amberley, by AIRCDRE Robinson, Commander Combat Support Group with a Blessing of the building by Chaplain Stephane Sarazin and Fireman's Prayer by Baptist Chaplain Steve Turnbull (background).