

PATHFINDER



AIR POWER DEVELOPMENT CENTRE BULLETIN

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WHICH AIR POWER CAPABILITY IS MOST IMPORTANT?

Which air power capability is most important? Take 1: Control of the Air. As argued in Issue 2 of *Pathfinder*, control of the air is an essential prerequisite for all other military endeavours. If we fail to achieve and maintain control of the air, the adversary's air power could pick off our forces at will. Not only would this nullify friendly air power, such as our own strike, information and mobility aircraft, but also all friendly land and maritime forces. Our military bases, population centres, and industrial facilities would also be easy targets for adversary air power. We would thus be unable to achieve anything, and must surely be defeated.

So the most important air power capability is clearly that which is an essential prerequisite to the success of all other military endeavours: the most important air power capability is control of the air. Without control of the air, we are naked.

Which air power capability is most important? Take 2: Strike. An effects-based approach to warfare stresses that our ultimate aim is to achieve effects on the adversary that result in a cessation of unacceptable behaviour. From a military point of view, only the threat or use of force can directly achieve such effects. (Other actions may be taken that may be successful in achieving the same ultimate effect, but the use of force is the only action that is solely a military responsibility.)

Strike is overtly offensive. Is it right to adopt an offensive capability as our highest priority? We must consider whether a conflict could actually be won using purely defensive means. This is akin to trying to win a football match by using all of our players to guard our own half of the field, but having nobody who is able to score. We could certainly make it hard for the opposition to score, but we could *never* score. Unless our defence was perfect, the opposition would still manage to sneak through occasionally, so we would be guaranteed of a loss. So it is only through an offensive capability that we have a chance of success. And the only offensive air power capability is strike.

So the most important air power capability is clearly that which actually achieves a useful effect directly on the adversary and gives us the means to prevail: the most important air power capability is strike. Without strike, we are toothless.

Which air power capability is most important? Take 3: Information. We are in the information age. The ADF's adoption of Network Centric Warfare (NCW) reflects the criticality of information to the modern way of warfighting. Without accurate and timely information, we could not achieve control of the air because we could not know where the threats are. Neither could we achieve useful effects through strike because we could not know about target importance, location, defences, and so on. And we could not coordinate our operations without the effective communication of information between all relevant forces and decision-makers.



Air power can contribute very significantly to the ADF's information requirements. It is able to undertake surveillance and reconnaissance over great distances and at high speeds. With AEW&C, we will be able to process such information and control aspects of the battle with greater alacrity.

So the most important air power capability is clearly that which allows us to make smart use of the other capabilities: the most important air power capability is information. Without information, we are blind and ignorant.

Which air power capability is most important? Take 4: Mobility. We cannot expect adversaries to mount their attacks where it would be most convenient for us. Even if that were their plan, it would be safer for us to confront the adversary at some distance from our population

centres and industrial assets. Australia's interests also involve us in off-shore operations with increasing frequency.

Therefore, we must be an expeditionary force. Most, if not all, of our combat and information aircraft cannot perform their roles from their home bases. Nothing useful can happen until they, and their support, have been relocated to appropriate expeditionary air bases. Once there, regular resupply is necessary to keep them going. The need for rapid mobility is equally important for the deployment and sustainment of land forces.

Due to its speed, reach and capacity, air power can provide a quality of mobility that cannot be achieved by any other means.

So the most important air power capability is clearly that which puts our other capabilities where they can be most efficiently used: the most important air power capability is mobility. Without mobility, we are legless.



Which air power capability is most important? Take 5: Combat Support. All of the air power capabilities described above require air bases. Without secure and functional air bases, nothing could leave the ground. Our aircraft could not move forward, and there would be nowhere to move them to. Our ability to acquire information would be severely hampered, we could not achieve control of the air, and we could not strike.

So the most important air power capability is actually that which never leaves the ground: the most important air power capability is combat support. Without combat support, we have no feet.

Which air power capability is most important? Take 6: none of the above—or all of the above. Without any one of the capabilities, air power cannot succeed in warfighting. Various arguments can be used to assert one capability over the others; for example, strike is what

actually wins the war, or combat support has to happen before anything else. It is often helpful to consider which capabilities support which other capabilities; for example, mobility obviously supports control of the air. However, such dependencies actually tend to be circular; for example, without adequate control of the air, there can be no mobility. In general, we find that all capabilities depend on all other capabilities.

What does this mean? It means that we must strive for a balanced force, with sufficient individual capabilities to allow the others to be fully utilised. If we try to maximise one capability at the expense of the others, we could actually end up with an overall deterioration in total capability.

Of course, we should ask, 'balanced for what?' The capability proportions required for warfighting are quite different to those required for peacekeeping or natural disaster relief. By considering the contribution of each capability to each of the ADF's responsibilities, we can optimise our capability balance and thus maximise our air power.

Air power is the most difficult of all forms of military force to measure, or even to express in precise terms.

- Winston Churchill, 1948

'Pathfinder' is a fortnightly bulletin from the Air Power Development Centre. Its title is a tribute to the Pathfinder Force which operated within RAF Bomber Command from August 1942. The original Pathfinders were an elite navigational group with the role of preceding each raid and accurately lighting up the target area with incendiary fires to permit visual bombing by the main force. The first commander was Group Captain (later Air Vice-Marshal) D.C.T. Bennett, a Queenslander who trained with the RAAF in 1930-31 before transferring to the RAF, and many other Australians also flew with the force.

The emblem we have adopted is 'Fiery Mo', the unofficial insignia carried on No. 6 Squadron's Hudson aircraft in New Guinea during 1943.



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