

PATHFINDER

AIR POWER DEVELOPMENT CENTRE BULLETIN



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HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF AUSTRALIAN AIR POWER DOCTRINE: PART I

From its uncertain beginnings in 1921, the Royal Australian Air Force has grown into a leading small air force. In less than a century the Air Force has evolved from a small collection of men individually skilled in military aviation into a modern war-fighting organisation exercising professional mastery of air power. The history of the development and maturation of the Air Force is closely linked to the development of its strategic doctrine.

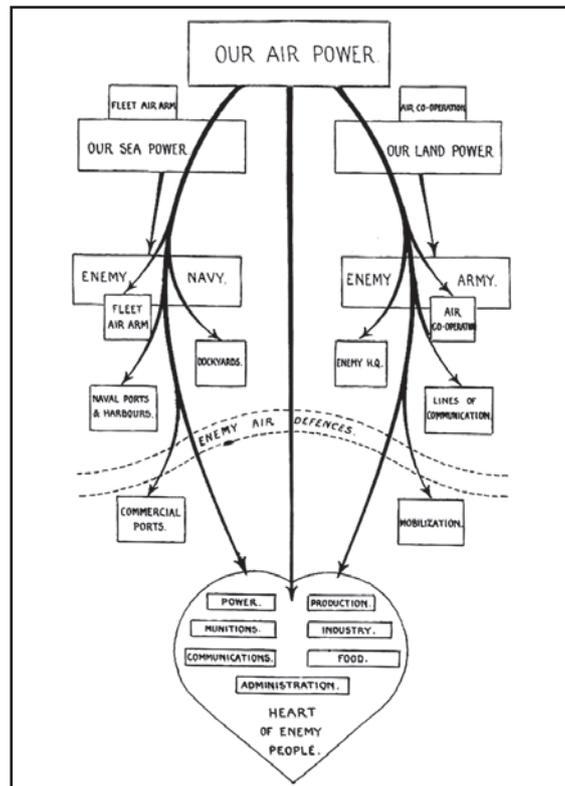
During World War I Australian airmen trained and operated with both the Australian Flying Corps (AFC) and the British armed air services, where they gained valuable experience in all aspects of air operations. Following the post-war demobilisation, Lieutenant Colonel Richard Williams advocated the need to create an independent air service to the Australian government. William's two most telling arguments were the establishment of the independent Royal Air Force in Britain and the financial economies that would accrue from operating a single air service. These arguments were given added impetus in 1920 when the British government offered a gift of aircraft and ancillary equipment to any of the Dominions willing to establish a standing air force. A year later the Australian Air Force was formed on 31 March 1921.

At its inception the nascent Air Force had no formalised doctrine and was equipped with surplus aircraft donated by Britain, and not with weapon systems selected to meet Australia's strategic defence needs. Throughout the 1920s, the Army and Navy remained opposed to an independent air force and the RAAF's senior leadership was completely occupied defending their Service's very existence and obtaining sufficient resources just to remain operational. As a consequence, the focus of the

organisation was on maintaining Air Force's core skills of flying and maintaining aircraft.

The majority of the Air Force's senior officers were decorated veterans of World War I, who valued individual aviation skills and courage above all else and promotions largely depended on an officer's flying skills. There was only limited interest within the RAAF for intellectual and educational development beyond the immediate technical requirements of aviation.

However, a few officers did demonstrate a more sustained interest in the development and application of air power. Henry Wrigley, an AFC veteran and future Air Vice-Marshal, wrote extensively during the 1920s and 1930s on air power based on his experiences on the Western Front with No 3 Squadron (see *Pathfinder* 58). In the absence of formal, officially endorsed texts on air power doctrine, Wrigley's remarkably detailed and thoughtful essays and notes reflect a profound understanding of war and air power. His theories and writings can be considered the earliest foundations of Australian air power doctrine.



Wrigley's Concept of the Strategic Effect of Air Power

In 1935, Squadron Leader John McCauley, future Air Marshal and Chief of the Air Staff, directed all flying units to examine their roles and tactics for the local defence of Australia and to prepare papers which would form the basis for formulating Air Staff policy. Modest though these efforts were, they represent the first positive steps within the RAAF towards developing a distinct air power doctrine for Australia.

That the value of such work was not clearly understood by the RAAF was symptomatic of the distinct lack of appreciation within the Service of the importance of

doctrine and intellectual endeavour to the development and employment of air power.

The RAAF's actions to improve the air defence of Australia were limited to quantitative measures—the acquisition of more aircraft and the establishment of more RAAF Stations. In 1925, Wing Commander Richard Williams, now Chief of the Air Staff, set out in his *Memorandum Regarding the Air Defence of Australia* a case for the creation of an Air Force composed of 30 squadrons and over 300 aircraft at an annual cost of £2.5 million—a five-fold increase in the size and budget allocation of the RAAF. Unsurprisingly, Williams' ambitious proposal received little support from the Government or the other Services.

Despite AVM Wrigley's writings and concepts, the RAAF was content to be guided by the doctrine and concepts of employment of air power developed by the RAF. However, it is surprising that the *RAF Manual AP1300 Operations*, which had existed since 1928, was not considered for formal acceptance by the RAAF at this time. It was not until 1957, when the document was in its 4th edition, that it was finally adopted by the RAAF. This is indicative of the lack of emphasis placed on doctrine. Between the wars, senior RAAF officers attended the RAF Staff College in Britain and each year a proportion of the newly graduated pilots from Point Cook were offered short-service commissions with the RAF. As a result, the air defence of Australia was principally viewed in terms of the collective security of the British Empire—the RAAF expected to be called upon to dispatch expeditionary forces for service overseas in defence of the Empire and, in turn, relied on the timely arrival of Imperial forces to ensure Australia's security.

The lack of an independent air power doctrine and a national air strategy meant that, despite a rapid expansion undertaken in the late-1930s, the RAAF was ill-prepared for World War II. Aircraft acquisition was entirely dependent on what Britain was prepared to sell to the RAAF rather than to meet Australia's strategic needs. As the possibility of another European war loomed, the Royal Air Force was also in the midst of an urgent re-armament program and reserved for itself the most modern aircraft being produced. As a consequence, the RAAF's initial contribution to the war was restricted to the supply of trained personnel.

World War II starkly exposed the RAAF's lack of independent strategic doctrine. The Air Force entered the war with obsolescent aircraft and limited understanding of the strategic doctrine to support its role in the defence of Australia. The RAAF, however, quickly rose to the challenge and operated as an independent air force in the Pacific theatre within the overall Allied air campaign. Although RAAF personnel repeatedly demonstrated their skills at the operational and tactical levels, the legacy of the RAAF's lack of strategic doctrine continued to be felt throughout World War II.

Several of the major problems encountered by Air Force during World War II, particularly in the higher command arrangements, equipment acquisition processes, and the operational roles and areas of operation assigned to the RAAF, had their origins in the pre-war strategic doctrinal vacuum. The next *Pathfinder* will explore RAAF's post-World War II doctrinal developments.

- *At its inception, the RAAF lacked clearly defined strategic concepts for the air defence of Australia.*
- *Between the wars, RAAF leaders were focused on the political battles for ensuring the survival of the independent Air Force, precluding the development of air power doctrine.*
- *The absence of an independent intellectual foundation for the development of air power in Australia resulted in the RAAF being ill-prepared to meet the demands of World War II at its outbreak.*

'... in the pre-war officer corps of the RAAF there were few individuals who demonstrated a coherent conception of air power adapted to Australian circumstances—indeed, few who appeared to have any interest at all in theoretical issues affecting the employment of their service.'

Chris Coulthard-Clark,
The Third Brother: The Royal Australian Air Force
1921-39



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