



BATTLESPACE SUPERIORITY – II

The previous issue of *Pathfinder* identified three aspects—Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR); Command and Control (C2); and Engagement—as the key elements of battlespace superiority. In this issue the concept is examined from an historical perspective, to provide the background essential to understanding the way in which air power contributes to the achievement of this critical effect in one's own interests.

Realisation of the impact that 'eyes in the sky' could make on the battlefield ensured that ISR was the very first role conceived for military aircraft. It was the necessity felt by every land commander to know what lay beyond the next hill, and every ship's captain to know what was beyond the horizon, that provided the impetus for the powers of Europe (and even military bit-players like Australia) to begin acquiring the frail and unarmed aircraft available before 1914. In Britain the link between ISR and aviation received no clearer recognition than that, during the lead up to World War I, development of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) was placed under the direction of the British Army's foremost expert on field intelligence, Major-General David Henderson.

Not surprisingly, the first use made of an aircraft in war—by the Italians fighting the Turks in Libya on 22 October 1911—involved a one-hour reconnaissance flight. Even after several years of attrition warfare on the Western front had spawned new roles for aircraft (strike, air defence), the ISR role was so fundamental to the air effort that specialised reconnaissance units remained integral to the RFC. No 3 Squadron of the Australian Flying Corps was one such 'corps reconnaissance' unit. Later wars and developments in methodology have never altered the basic equation; collecting information on terrain, enemy locations and activities remains the foremost contribution that

air power can make towards enabling commanders to reach the decisions that achieve battlespace superiority.

Information relevant to the battlespace comes from many sources and in many forms, and needs to be assembled and sorted effectively and quickly (in real-time, if possible) if it is to benefit and inform a commander seeking to impose dominance over an adversary. These days this historical truism linking ISR and C2 is currently embodied in the commitment of advanced defence forces to embracing the goal of 'network-centric (or enabled) warfare'. But this also is nothing new, particularly in the air warfare scene.



First military use: Capt Piazza and his Bleriot in Libya, 1911

Consider the outstanding early example of networking achieved by the RAF during the 1940 Battle of Britain through the use of operations rooms. HQ Fighter Command, located at Bentley Priory in Stanmore, London, contained the Air Defence of Great Britain (ADGB) filter and operations rooms. The filter room sorted through incoming information from radar stations, observer corps posts, etc, to remove duplication, doubt and confusion before this information was sent to the plotting tables at both command and group level. The operations room at Bentley Priory allocated

threats to the various groups for defensive measures to be taken, and allowed a complete overview of the battle to be maintained.

Without a doubt, it was this innovation in processing information and presenting it in a form that commanders could use to make timely and well-judged decisions that became one of the key ingredients in the RAF success in the Battle of Britain. Recent scholarship has exposed the myth that a small band of RAF fighter pilots ('The Few') staved off defeat by overwhelming German numbers. In fact, the Luftwaffe and RAF had broad parity in fighters throughout August–September. It was the British possession of radar and the C2 advantage conferred by the ability to vector in resources where they were needed, at the time they were required, which enabled the RAF to achieve battlespace superiority by mid-September. To an extent, some commentators now wonder whether the importance of these advantages meant that the outcome of the battle was actually a foregone conclusion.

Examples where Engagement has been a critical factor in achieving battlespace superiority are numerous. Perhaps none is more striking, however, than the successful integration of all arms practiced by the Germans during the opening land campaigns of World War II. 'Blitzkrieg' entailed a level of coordination between armoured and infantry columns, operating with close artillery and air support, which had not been seen since the battles of Hamel and Amiens in 1918 (both of which involved the Australian Corps). An air example closer to home is the battle of the Bismarck Sea in March 1943, when a timely intelligence windfall (sigint disclosure of a Japanese intention to reinforce their New Guinea forces by sea) translated into a carefully planned air attack (which was practiced and rehearsed) and was delivered in a coordinated manner that totally overwhelmed the air defence the enemy was able to provide

their ships at sea. The result was the near-total destruction of a vital troop convoy, which deterred the Japanese from again attempting major surface reinforcement in the New Guinea theatre.



Still preserved: 11 Fighter Gp ops room at RAF Uxbridge

As these examples illustrate, the achievement of battlespace superiority—itsself a critical precursor to securing victory in a conflict—is best assured when attention is fully focused on the three elements of ISR, C2 and Engagement. The next *Pathfinder* will address battlespace superiority in the current Australian context.

- *Utility of aircraft in providing information recognised from earliest military usage*
- *Ability to network knowledge into correct command decisions a key to victory through battlespace superiority*
- *Effective engagement usually reliant on successful application of ISR and C2 principles*
- *The ends remain the same, but the means are constantly changing*

The darkest place is beneath the lantern.

– Korean proverb



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