



## AIR POWER IN DEFENCE OF AUSTRALIA - EARLY THOUGHTS

A major difficulty that confronted the RAAF in the first years of its existence concerned its inability to convince the Army and Navy that air power had a role to play in Australian defence that justified Air Force's existence as an independent third service. The Chief of the Air Staff, Group Captain Richard Williams, several times in the 1920s attempted to argue what that role might be. These statements represent the earliest expounding of doctrinal principles for the employment of air power for the defence Australia that have been found.

The origins of this problem actually predated the formation of the RAAF on 31 March 1921. As early as 29 January 1920 a body met in the Defence Department specifically to examine air defence policy. This committee—called the 'Air Board' (although it bore no relationship to the longstanding body of the same name, which subsequently administered the RAAF once it was established)—was a four-man panel of Army and Navy officers, and the scheme that it submitted on 7 February 1920 was a hasty amalgam of two separate proposals that had been previously devised by Army and Navy. This produced an alleged requirement for an air force of 36 squadrons, totalling 644 aircraft and with another 322 machines in reserve. So far as this entity's role was concerned, the Board's report noted that Australia's isolation, combined with the limited range of existing aircraft, meant that 'independent action by air forces against enemy centres [was] impracticable'. For this reason, 'the action of aircraft in the defence of Australia will be confined to auxiliary work for the Army and Navy as far as can be foreseen at present'.

In April 1925 Williams produced a 'Memorandum Regarding the Air Defence of Australia', which was, in effect, a detailed concept of operations for the RAAF. He realised that nothing had changed to make

strategic bombing any more relevant to Australian circumstances, but he maintained that control of sea lines of communication would be the key to national security if Australia was ever attacked, and the use of aircraft represented the best and most cost-effective means of achieving this. The structure he proposed—30 squadrons comprising 324 aircraft—was still large (based on countering Japan's naval air capabilities) and would require a five-fold increase in the RAAF's budget allocation. This factor alone was probably sufficient to ensure that Williams' scheme was simply ignored by the government.

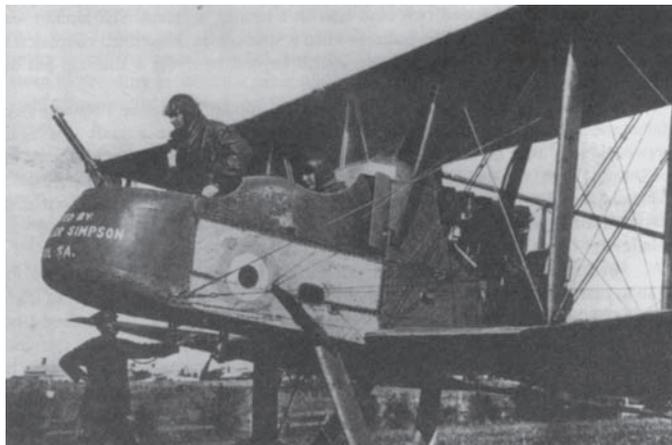


*WgCdr R. Williams,  
CAS from 2 Oct 1922*

When the RAAF's right to exist as a separate service subsequently came under challenge from the Army and Navy, Williams obviously felt nothing would be gained by attempting to reassert his vision in the absence of government support or endorsement. In 1926 he did, however, seek to specifically counter provisions that he discovered had been included in the Army War Book (the military forces' response plan in the event of war) that the RAAF's army cooperation squadrons would be transferred to Army control at 'the appropriate time' after mobilisation.

On 29 April he wrote to the Secretary of the Defence Department to point out that the Army was mistaken in its notion that the RAAF merely existed to mind air assets in peacetime that would revert to it and Navy in time of war. Equally, the Army belief ignored several fundamental realities, which included that for periods of operations the whole of Air Force might actually be required for 'naval duties', or that on occasions the RAAF might be employed on strike operations 'when the army was totally uninvolved, as in the period before an enemy expeditionary force actually landed'. In such circumstances, he argued, it would be essential that air assets not be 'subordinated to less mobile services prematurely'.

Williams went out of his way to reject any suggestion that the RAAF saw itself as functioning in war independently from the other services at a time when those services were themselves engaged in operations. But, he stressed, just as one service alone was insufficient for national defence, ‘nor is any one purely auxiliary to another’. In advocating a joint approach and focusing on Australia’s air-sea gap, Williams was actually foreshadowing strategies of five decades later.



*FE2b preparing to patrol from Yarram, 1918*

The thoughts that Williams was expressing were not so novel that they were without firm precedent, even in the Australian context. Although he had been still overseas with the Australian Flying Corps at the time, in 1918 there had actually been an occasion when aircraft had been employed in the defence of Australia—and very much in the manner that Williams was then describing.

In July 1917 the coastal freighter *Cumberland* was damaged in a mystery explosion ten miles off Gabo Island, near the Victoria–New South Wales border, and subsequently sank. Fairly soon it was determined that a mine had been the cause, and the presence of a whole minefield in the area was later confirmed. When news broke in March 1918 that a German raider named *Wolf* had laid the minefield while passing through Australian waters the year earlier, even claiming (falsely) to have flown its own seaplane over Sydney, Defence authorities were flooded with alleged sightings of enemy aircraft and ships in the south-eastern sealanes.

To quell growing public disquiet, two air detachments were sent from the flying base at Point Cook in late April 1918 to conduct maritime reconnaissance from Yarram in Gippsland, Victoria, and Bega, New South Wales. The first of these parties was under command of Captain F.H. McNamara, VC, and its 20 personnel included seven radio operators supplied by the RAN and seven ground guards provided by the Army.

Each detachment operated one aircraft: McNamara’s party a FE2b (until this was crashed and replaced by a M.F. Shorthorn), and the Bega group a M.F. Shorthorn throughout. All aircraft were armed with only a single Lewis machinegun, although 20-pound Hales bombs were subsequently supplied to the Gippsland detachment. Sea-patrols from Yarram were conducted from 21 April until 10 May, and from the Bega racecourse from 29 April until 8 May. Although probably realised at the time to have been totally unnecessary and pointless, these were the first warlike air operations ever conducted within Australia.

- *as early as 1926 CAS Williams’ thinking about employment of air power in defence of Australia emphasised the likely joint nature of operations and importance of defending the sea-air gap*
- *because RAAF might be involved in repelling an attack in conjunction with Navy, long before elements of Army became involved, he argued against giving separate control of RAAF assets to Army or Navy in wartime*
- *Williams’ case was buttressed by precedent of first warlike air operations in defence of Australia in April–May 1918, involving patrols over sealanes around south-eastern coastal waters*

*Air warfare is a shot through the brain, not a hacking to pieces of the enemy’s body.*

Major General J.F.C. Fuller



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