



THE DOCTRINAL CONTRIBUTION OF AVM WRIGLEY - A FRESH ASSESSMENT

Air Vice-Marshal Henry Wrigley CBE DFC AFC (1892-1987) is widely regarded as Australia's first true air power analyst. His essays and notes on air power, written during the 1920s, were published for the first time in 1990 as *The Decisive Factor: Air Power Doctrine by Air Vice-Marshal Wrigley* (AGPS, Canberra). The book refers to him as 'Australia's first authoritative commentator on air power', and his writings as 'a *de facto* expression of early Australian air power doctrine', noting that the RAAF had no indigenous air power doctrine prior to 1990. The book also cautions that Wrigley should not be thought of as a significant original thinker. Regardless, Wrigley was a clever observer and analyst of air power as it emerged as a new dimension to war fighting in the early 20th century, and it is worth considering whether his analysis of air power issues are still relevant today.

Wrigley's writings covered a wide variety of air operations scenarios. His definition of air superiority included not only a capability for air-to-air fighting and making attacks on aerodromes, but also the ability to attack an enemy's means of military-industrial production. Of course, Douhet and others had also advocated attacks on war production, which in World War II was to become a primary goal of the combined strategic bombing offensive. Wrigley, however, more specifically advocated the use of both day and night bombing—the former for its accuracy, the latter for its lower casualty rate among the attacking aircraft. This was prophetic of how the allied bombing of Germany and occupied Europe during World War II was actually conducted.

Wrigley had a number of other insights into what did and did not work well in aerial warfare. He advocated the integration of naval, land and air elements in operations, and the employment of naval reconnaissance from the air. He saw the advantage of 'long range firing' from aircraft—another prophetic vision of the current spread of stand-off and beyond visual range aerial weapons. He emphasised the importance of the 'moral effect' (morale) gained by successful attacks. He advocated the

dispersal of aircraft at air bases, a lesson that air forces have learnt the hard way over the years. In another insightful comment he notes that one of the first duties of an invading army ought to be securing or preparing aerodromes. A classic example of the effectiveness of this principle is the rapid securing of a succession of aerodromes in France following the Allied D-Day invasion. In the subsequent air war over Europe, lines of communications and supply became increasingly important targets. Here again, Wrigley had addressed the issue as a possible future development, which he linked back to Napoleon's strategy. Every war following his writings has featured air strikes against transport and communication nodes in a major way.



Although focussing primarily on combat air power, Wrigley's view of air strategy also encompassed reconnaissance, which is, he wrote, 'now almost essential to military operations'. This was a reflection of his own operational background. During World War I he piloted RE8 biplanes with No 69 Squadron, Royal Flying Corps (later renamed No 3 Squadron, Australian Flying Corps). These were primarily reconnaissance aircraft, though occasionally employed as bombers, and Wrigley gained much experience on patrols to locate enemy

guns and photograph the changing tactical situation on the front line.

In 1935, Wrigley published his wartime memoirs in his book *The Battle Below*. This was one of only a few other works by World War I Australian airmen, and the first by a serving member of the RAAF. Viewed against his earlier unpublished writings, Wrigley's book is a non-analytical account of his experiences. Interesting though they are, he gives what is basically a day-to-day account of the squadron's tasks, with little interpretation of the usefulness of this work in the bigger picture. He describes his squadron's role in each of the offensives it was involved in—Flanders, the Somme, Amiens, the advance to Peronne, Mont St Quentin and the capture of the Hindenburg Line.

The book gives some detailed descriptions of the methods employed by his unit to complete its assigned tasks. One example is the system of relaying information on the accuracy of their firing to artillery units—the clock code system, developed by a Royal Flying Corps officer as early as January 1915. This system was first used two months later in the Battle of Neuve Chapelle in north-west France. In this action, an infantry advance was preceded by a concentrated artillery bombardment across a two kilometre line that was directed, in part, by several squadrons of reconnaissance aircraft. In the clock code system, the pilot signalled a letter-number code in Morse using an early airborne radio. The code told Allied artillery the location of the fall of their shots in relation to the target, using a bulls-eye in which the numbers of a clock-face were superimposed on concentric circles labelled with letters. It was still in use in the mid-1930s when Wrigley published his book.



No 3 Sqn RE8 departing on night-bombing, France 1917

The Battle Below also makes passing reference to the usefulness of aerial photography and the development of the art of photo interpretation. The whole of the I Anzac Corps front was systematically photographed, and the photos analysed with as little delay as possible. It was a godsend for the strategists and the men in the trenches alike. Its modernised and wider development, remote sensing, is an indispensable tool of modern warfare.

The contemporary usefulness of Wrigley's air power commentaries and analysis was limited, as he had little opportunity to put them into practice. In the years before World War II, he commanded RAAF Station Laverton, Victoria, and during the war he commanded Southern Area, covering Australia's southern states. He was also Air Member for Personnel, and commanded RAAF Overseas Headquarters in London. Although the latter position took him geographically closer to an air war

'front line', it was largely an administrative posting. He was not in a position to influence the way in which the air war was fought from Britain.

How should we assess the contribution of Henry Wrigley today? His writings were insightful and often prophetic, but as they did not see the light of day until 1990, nearly 70 years after they were written, they were of no practical value in Wrigley's day. Today, Wrigley is probably more widely remembered for an aerial accomplishment he made just after World War I—the first flight across Australia, from Melbourne to Darwin—than for his contributions as an air power thinker. However, *The Decisive Factor* is an important document in understanding the historical development of Australian air power thought.

- *Air Vice-Marshal Henry Wrigley's essays and notes on air power, written during the 1920s, are considered to be the earliest expression of Australian air power doctrine.*
- *Wrigley's experiences as a reconnaissance pilot in France during World War I moulded his thinking, but he was primarily an astute commentator on the theory and practice that was in force at the time.*
- *As they were not published until 1990, his writings had little impact on the development of air power in Australia.*
- *For contemporary pundits, the lesson from Wrigley's history is that if you want to make a difference to today's Air Force and you have a considered view to put, don't wait for somebody else to write your story for you, act now!*

Finally, there is the need for some sort of thinking department. Often and often throughout the war when some development occurred, we wondered why we hadn't thought of it before, and nearly always came to the conclusion that there was no real reason. It was only lack of foresight.

AVM H.N. Wrigley, c. 1928



Air Power Development Centre
Level 3, 205 Anketell Street
TUGGERANONG ACT 2900

Ph: 02 6266 1355 Fax: 02 6266 1041
Email: airpower@defence.gov.au
Web: www.raf.gov.au/airpower

