RAAF Base Amberley is the largest air base operated by the Air Force. Amberley currently employs approximately three thousand Service and civilian personnel and provides the permanent air base facilities for the F-111 strike squadrons and the C-17 strategic airlift squadron. RAAF Base Amberley is also the centre of the RAAF’s expeditionary deployment capability, hosting the Headquarters of the Combat Support Group and the Airfield Defence Wing. Amberley is currently undergoing a major multi-phase redevelopment program to make it the RAAF’s first superbase.

From its inception, Amberley air base has played an important role in the expansion and strategic development of the RAAF. In 1925, Wing Commander (later Air Marshal Sir) Richard Williams prepared a detailed strategic argument for expanding the RAAF, including the establishment of a permanent air base near Brisbane. This view was supported in 1928 by Air Marshal Sir John Salmond, a senior RAF officer commissioned by the Australian government to review the state of Australia’s air defences. Both Williams and Salmond concluded that Australia’s strategic requirements necessitated the establishment of permanent air bases and flying squadrons at Perth, Darwin and Brisbane for the air defence of western and northern Australia. But, with the advent of the Great Depression, another decade was to pass before the government’s attention again turned to the defence of Australia.

It was not until 1938 that the RAAF established a presence at Amberley with the acquisition of a property (a dairy farm called Amberley) situated 50 kilometres to the southwest of Brisbane. RAAF Station Amberley became operational on 17 June 1940 and the base was established on a war-time footing from the very outset. Although the superbase design model is a 21st Century concept, Amberley was a major RAAF air base during World War II and fulfilled a wide variety of functions for the generation of Australian and Allied air power. Throughout 1940-41, Wirraways and Hudson bombers based at Amberley prepared for the air defence of Brisbane and conducted patrols in search of German raiders and submarines. No 3 Recruit Depot and No 3 Service Flying Training School were also established at Amberley in 1940 and the station became one of the main air bases for the war-time expansion of the RAAF and the provision of aircrews as part of the Empire Air Training Scheme.

The entry of Japan into World War II gave renewed impetus to the tempo, scale and range of activities undertaken at the base. As the Pacific War intensified, No 3 Aircraft Depot was established in March 1942 and Amberley was transformed into a major centre for the assembly, maintenance and salvage of combat aircraft. Amberley also became home to hundreds of United States Army Air Forces personnel and served as a major assembly area and staging base for the vast numbers of the Allied coalition’s servicemen and aircraft moving into the war zone.

After the war, and the RAAF’s post-war demobilisation of formation and units, Amberley was retained as a permanent RAAF Station. In 1946, No 82 Heavy Bomber Wing Headquarters moved to Amberley. To this day No 82 Wing remains at RAAF Base Amberley and has retained responsibility for the RAAF’s strike roles with successive generations of RAAF bombers – Lincoln, Canberra, Phantom and F-111 aircraft operated by No 1, 2 and 6 Squadrons. Amberley has always been more than simply the RAAF’s bomber base. It has provided the permanent air base support for a wide range of air power systems including RAAF and Army rotary wing squadrons. During the 1980s, Amberley also became the major operations
and training centre for the RAAF’s Combat Support, Security and Airfield Defence capabilities.

Amberley is currently undergoing a multi-million dollar redevelopment involving the extension and construction of runways, and the upgrading of engineering services, logistic support capacity and base facilities. Phase One of the project has been completed and future development of the base will ultimately see the Amberley superbase employing approximately 800 additional personnel and providing permanent base support for F/A-18F Super Hornets, F-35 Lightning II, KC-30B Multi-role Tanker Transport and C-17 Globemaster aircraft. The superbase concept also extends to the co-location of other ADF units such as Army’s 9th Force Support Battalion which took up residence at Amberley in March 2008.

The superbase concept allows the RAAF to take advantage of economies of scale, synergies for greater efficiency and a variety of other benefits for the better generation of air power and the conduct of air operations. Air power relies on the ability to coordinate and integrate a range of air power systems working together to achieve strategic, operational or tactical objectives. The co-location of strike, fighter, air-to-air refuelling and air lift aircraft at Amberley will significantly enhance the Air Force’s ability to effectively generate and apply air power by providing increased opportunities for the RAAF to develop, network and practice a wider array of air power operations involving multiple air power systems.

The grouping of a number of air power systems together offers the potential for more effective and efficient use of resources through the consolidation and improved integration of RAAF and industry services. It will also provide better opportunities for base personnel to develop their technical and professional skills by undertaking postings to a range of different units, supporting different systems and capabilities, without the need for postings to geographically distant locations. A key feature of the superbase design is the construction and extension of multiple runways and support facilities that will enable an increased number of platforms to operate simultaneously from the base. The breadth and mass of the infrastructure also adds to the strategic depth of the RAAF to support air operations- allowing the base to accommodate a significantly increased tempo of operations, including the support of operations by additional Air Force, joint or coalition forces.

The optimum combination of air power and air power support systems on the Amberley superbase will ultimately provide an enviable capacity for concurrent activities. During peacetime, superbases have the depth to simultaneously conduct peacetime activities, such as support to civil surveillance programs, while conducting a range of training, exercises and maintenance that are essential to the raising, training and sustaining of the force.

For more information on the fundamental importance of air bases to the conduct of air operations, see CAF Occasional Paper No. 3, Air Bases: The Foundation of Versatile Air Power (Air Power Development Centre, August 2008).