

PATHFINDER

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WHAT IS AIRMINDEDNESS?

The effectiveness of an air force is directly dependent on the professional mastery of its personnel, which is much more than the ability to operate sophisticated technology. By virtue of the inherent three dimensional nature of air warfare, professional airmen have a unique perspective—fundamentally different to that of a soldier or sailor—regarding the concept, characteristics and conduct of warfare. Further, since air power is a dynamic entity, it requires a nuanced understanding to capture all aspects of its employment, which could be termed ‘airmindedness’. Therefore, from an air force perspective, a critical ingredient of professional mastery is the need to be air-minded. So what is airmindedness?

Airmindedness is not a new concept. In fact, the term itself dates back to the 1930s when early air power theories were being developed. Broadly, it meant the need to have a deeper understanding of the third dimension in order to utilise it to achieve national objectives. Airmindedness should not be confused with air power doctrine and theory or air force strategies. It is an intangible quality that binds airmen together in a common understanding of the utilisation of the air domain to further national interests.

All professions have their own perspectives regarding events—past, unfolding and future—that reflect their particular institutional point of view. This is also the case with airmen, who view history, contemporary conflict scenarios and evolving and future security imperatives through a unique lens. The uniqueness of the lens through which airmen view events is resident in the understanding of the primary tenets of the employment of air power and influenced by collective experience. Air forces and air power are perceived in different ways by outside agencies and other Services. It would be correct to say that none of these views would be an all encompassing, holistic view

of an air force, because the peculiarities of the agency making the assessment would influence its judgement. In fact, it would not be far from the truth to state that such appreciations are almost always only two-dimensional. Air power is a multi-dimensional entity, making air forces multi-dimensional organisations. This is the strength of air forces and an understanding of the nuances of this multi-dimensionality is at the core of airmindedness.

Airmindedness is essentially an explicit appreciation of the potential of air power across all levels of its application, from the strategic to the tactical. This has to be supplemented by an inherent understanding of the ability of air power to create strategic effects,

even through minimal involvement and tactical actions, tempered with the forces’ experience in applying force. Airmindedness, therefore, cannot be imbibed purely through training; it is the product of personal perception, education and involvement in air activities in both peace and war.

Airmindedness is the instinctive ability to use the air domain as a single entity to create the necessary effects

that either independently or as part of a joint task force contributes to campaign objectives and national security. Ideally, this is what independent air forces must be able to accomplish. Land forces optimise their air arms to provide organic mobility, fire support to tactical battles and operational or tactical level ISR. Similarly, naval aviation is primarily meant to protect the fleet from attacks from, above or beneath the surface by acting as an extension of the mother ship. In contrast, air forces by virtue of their three-dimensional perspective, are able to contribute directly to ground and maritime operations while simultaneously conducting theatre-wide, independent, strategic operations. In a cyclical manner, such operations further enhance an



AFC aircraft over Palestine during World War I

airman's air-mindedness and are in turn optimised by the air-mindedness of airmen at all levels.

At the strategic level, air-mindedness is an essential criteria to ensure that the national security planning process is cognisant of the contribution that air forces can make in terms of deterrence, stabilisation and when necessary the lethal application of force. The precise, discriminate and proportional application of lethal force is unique to air power and cannot be easily replicated. An appreciation of this holistic capability is based on a broad ability to be air-minded. At the operational and tactical level, it requires an airman with adequate knowledge of air force capabilities to ensure that its contribution to the joint campaign is well enmeshed in the overall plan and appropriately employed.



MALAT Heron UAV in ACS Maritime Trials off Weipa

Air-mindedness is critical to understanding the decisive roles of air power and their optimised application. Operation *Allied Force* conducted by NATO forces in Serbia and Kosovo in 1999 is an example. This operation was primarily reliant on air power for its success, which has led to a debate regarding the 'decisiveness' of air power. Irrespective of the tactical level debate, airmen must appreciate that in this operation air power was effective as a military, diplomatic, economic and informational instrument of power that achieved the desired strategic objectives. Such an appreciation will no doubt influence the future application of air power and can only come with being air-minded.

Recent operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have reinforced the effectiveness of air forces when employed with sufficient understanding of the evolving conflict situation. Air power has carried out extreme long range

strikes, provided close air support and ISR, improved the effectiveness of numerically limited ground forces by increasing their virtual mass, and delivered humanitarian aid. At times these disparate activities have been carried out simultaneously. Further, the combination of air power and Special Forces has created its own asymmetric effects within the battlespace which an inherently asymmetric adversary is unable to counter. It is the agility of thought in airmen, nurtured through being air-minded, that has permitted these innovative applications of air power.

By virtue of the multi-dimensionality of air forces, airmen think differently and, therefore, are more likely to find alternative solutions to problems. Technical dexterity is an essential component of air power, but only when it is focused with professional mastery will it produce the synergy needed to be effective. Professional mastery in an air power context involves airmen being air-minded to understand the multi-dimensional aspects of the air domain and the nuances in the generation, delivery and sustainment of air power.

- *Air-mindedness is not a new concept and dates back to the 1930s.*
- *Air-mindedness is the instinctive ability to use the air domain as a single entity to create the desired effects.*
- *From an air force perspective, air-mindedness is a critical component of professional mastery.*

Air-mindedness is much harder to convey than the perspectives of soldiers and sailors for several reasons. The viewpoint of the soldier and sailor—bounded by the apparent horizon—is part of everyday life and instinctive understanding; few have ever operated an aircraft or contemplated the problems of aerial warfare; and few popular sources of information reflect an Airman's perspective.

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