The introduction into service of the Navy’s Landing Helicopter Docks (LHDs), alongside the generation of an Army battle group capable of mounting operations off these amphibious platforms, will fundamentally change Australia’s force projection capability. As Chief of Army, Lieutenant General David Morrison said recently, ‘it is a capability we have not been able to field since the end of the Second World War’. The Australian Army and Navy are undergoing an organisational and cultural transformation which will allow them to realise the potential of this future amphibious capability.

But what does this mean for the Royal Australian Air Force? Will Australia’s approach to air power have to change to enable this evolutionary shift in Australian military capability to occur?

Air power’s roles of Control of the Air, Strike, Air Mobility and Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) are enduring, however, the shape of these roles has evolved because of ongoing technological advances and the changing face of war. ISR has become more persistent and responsive to the war fighter; while air mobility now has global reach. Precision and standoff inherent in strike puts at risk a greater range of targets across both our maritime and land environment, and unparalleled advances in situational awareness has increased our ability to obtain and maintain positive control of the air.

The missions conducted to realise these air power roles have also largely gone unchanged through the years and will remain so with the advent of Australia’s amphibious capability. Close air support will provide firepower to the landing force troops in contact, counter-air will attain air superiority over the naval task group and ground element, whereas strategic strike and air interdiction will reduce an adversary’s ability to threaten the task group. ISR will supply the war fighter with situational awareness, anti-submarine and anti-surface warfare will seek to negate the enemy’s maritime abilities, while airlift will insert and sustain follow-on operations.

So, as some of the functions of Australian military power change with the introduction of an amphibious capability, has the role of air power changed?

History has demonstrated that in order to enhance the viability of amphibious operations and reduce the vulnerability of an amphibious force, air power must be integrated into the amphibious capability. Lessons can be drawn from the 1982 Falklands War, where at least eight ships of the Royal Navy were sunk or badly damaged by Argentine air attacks. Amongst these was the MV Atlantic Conveyor, a roll-on roll-off ship that was carrying Chinook helicopters, fuel, trucks and other essential elements of the amphibious force. The lack of air cover had serious detrimental impact on the combat power and mobility of the amphibious forces.

Each of Australia’s LHDs will be able to carry up to 1000 combat soldiers with all of their weapons, ammunition, vehicles and supplies, along with a mix of MRH-90s, MH-60R Seahawks, Tiger Armed Reconnaissance helicopters and CH-47 Chinooks. Along with the amphibious support vessels and surface combatants, the combined effects this force is capable of creating will have far-reaching strategic influence. However, the loss of any of these vessels would have an enormous strategic impact on Australia that would stretch well beyond the materiel loss. Thus air power will have two major contributing roles in Australia’s future amphibious capability; force protection and force projection.
The size and operational importance of an amphibious task force makes it a high-value target for any adversary, thus its protection will be of paramount importance during its transit and while it is in the area of operation. The degree of force protection required will be dependent on the level of threat and the operational environment.

Force protection will be a jointly delivered effect, enabled by the integration of many elements of the ADF. From RAAF maritime patrol aircraft working with Navy helicopters and surface combatants to protect the task force from any submarine threat, through to the integration of Super Hornets, Wedgetail and surface combatants (and in the future Joint Strike Fighters and Air Warfare Destroyers) undertaking layered defence against enemy maritime forces; the capability to protect the amphibious elements are resident in our current and future force structure.

Equally, the landing force component of the amphibious force, ‘the weapon system of the embarked force’, will require air power to realise the combat effects they are tasked to deliver. The air power contribution can range from achieving air superiority to counter the threat of air attack, close air support and air interdiction to contain the threat from ground forces, ISR to provide the landing force with situational awareness of their objectives, and electronic warfare to suppress or disrupt the adversary’s communications and radar systems. These elements of air power differ little from what could be required by the follow-on land force.

Underpinning this employment of air power will be the missions such as air-to-air refuelling to increase the range and endurance of the majority of our capabilities, Airborne Early Warning and Control to be the ‘eyes in the sky’ and command the airborne battlespace, air mobility to enhance logistics and deliver the follow-on force, and contributing aero-medical evacuations that are essential in any combat operation.

Essential to the RAAF’s employment of air power are airfields. Air-to-air refuelling will extend an aircraft’s combat radius, but appropriate forward basing may need to be secured to enable sufficient air power to be projected over the amphibious task group and embarked landing force.

But is having these capabilities sufficient to meet the requirements of our future amphibious force?

To quote the Chief of Army, General Morrison again, ‘size does matter’, a point echoed by Chief of Air Force, Air Marshal Geoff Brown, on the number of fighter aircraft required to provide force protection over a desired area. Capability, the ability to do something, is important, but capacity, the amount of what you can do, is the real determinant to achieving both force protection and force projection. The degree of projection and protection is a factor of the number of platforms, range to the objective, required persistence and the threat itself.

Australia’s future amphibious force will revolutionise the ADF’s force projection capability and Air Force is well positioned, under the current plans for Force 2030, to have the capability and capacity to meet the force projection and protection requirements. Australia’s approach to air power may well evolve, but the current roles and missions are sufficiently robust to meet any future challenges.

- Air power will have two major contributing roles in Australia’s future amphibious capability; force protection and force projection.
- Current Australian airfields will enable extensive force projection of air power but securing appropriate forward airfields may be required.
- While Air Force’s current roles and missions will largely go unchanged, capacity will be a key element in determining the level of air power’s contribution to an amphibious task group.

The argument has been advanced that the Air Force should be concerned with land objectives, and the Navy with objectives on and over the water. That distinction is to deny the peculiar quality of the air medium, the third dimension. The air is indivisible; it covers land and sea.

General Carl A. “Tooey” Spaatz
First Chief of Staff, USAF