THE RAAF EXPERIENCE
OF INFORMATION OPERATIONS

Periodically certain technologies such as gunpowder and the aeroplane precipitate a revolution, or perhaps more accurately accelerate an evolution, in military affairs. The information age and the advent of computer processors, small enough to fit in the pocket of an individual, coupled with rapid advances in the internet and social media have significantly transformed military operations and fundamentally changed the way information impacts the conduct of war. The information age is also helping to drive a shift towards creating non-kinetic effects in lieu of purely kinetic ‘damage’. Today, Information Operations (IO) are broadly defined as the coordination of information effects to influence the decision making and actions of a target audience and to protect and enhance our own decision making and actions in support of national interests.

Information Operations are the processes of bringing together different elements and focussing them to create specific effects. The elements of IO include operational security, psychological operations, deception, electronic warfare, civil-military cooperation, as well as military networking and posture, presence and profile. Although the principles of war have not changed, the importance of IO in modern warfare has increased. Information Operations are inherently joint, with the Air Force being a major provider of capability. These operations have formed part of air campaigns since the very beginning of military aviation and the RAAF’s experience demonstrates that many of its elements are really not all that new.

The earliest experiences of IO for Australian airmen occurred during World War I. For instance, in 1918, No 1 Squadron Australian Flying Corps flew posture and deception missions in support of the Arab Revolt irregulars fighting alongside Colonel T.E. Lawrence, (‘Lawrence of Arabia’), against the Turks. They also dropped messages containing information on friendly and enemy troop concentrations that improved the Arab fighters’ situational awareness.

During World War II, the RAAF conducted a broad range of IO over the Pacific and over Europe. These operations invariably demonstrated how they could be used to influence and undermine the decision making cycles of the adversaries while at the same time also strengthening one’s own decision making cycles. In July 1942 the Far East Liaison Office (FELO) was formed in the South West Pacific Area (SWPA) to plan and direct propaganda operations against the Japanese. Personnel in FELO were drawn from each of the three Services, with the understanding that one had to be a soldier, sailor or airman to understand each Service’s culture and thinking processes. In addition, it was felt that only an Allied airman could correctly understand how a Japanese airman thought and fought.
Established in secrecy and operating from forward posts, initially in Darwin and Port Moresby, FELO disseminated propaganda disparaging the courage and effectiveness of the Imperial Japanese Army and Navy Air Forces. A number of Japanese commanders were extremely irritated by this propaganda and their airmen were spoiling to dispel the Allied claims. In early 1943, when FELO undertook an Allied deception operation that portrayed Allied air defences at Port Moresby as in a weakened state, the Japanese took the bait and attacked. It was only when they were over Port Moresby on 12 April 1943 that the Japanese discovered that the Allied air defences were at full strength. The Allies destroyed 25 Japanese aircraft and recorded a further 10 aircraft as probables.

FELO continued operations until the end of the Pacific War, working eventually across the entire SWPA. A staggering 69 million items were printed by FELO between 1942 and 1945 and these were highly successful in capitalising on the will of indigenous populations, and also included instructions on how to assist downed Allied airmen, and encouraging isolated Japanese troops to surrender. RAAF and USAF aircraft were used to distribute millions of leaflets across the area. At the end of World War II, a review of the effectiveness of FELO operations reported that 951 Japanese surrendered as a direct result of propaganda leaflets; over 20 per cent of those captured in the SWPA.

In Europe and the Middle East, No 462 (Australian) Squadron conducted more than two years of heavy bomber operations before its primary role changed to IO. From 1 January 1945, the squadron used aluminium chaff (code-named window) and wireless jamming equipment (airborne cigar) to give the impression to German radar operators that a much larger force was attacking than was actually the case. These aircraft were able to use electronic warfare (EW) to confuse German airmen and disrupt their commanders’ decision making cycles. As a consequence, the Luftwaffe wasted fighter aircraft sorties, aviation fuel and considerable ground-based air defence effort against a small deceptive force while the mainstream of bombers attacked their primary targets elsewhere. By flying such non-kinetic EW missions or ‘spoof raids’ in support of their Bomber Command colleagues, 462 Squadron, one of the original EW squadrons, helped to save many lives.

The RAAF had considerable experience of IO during the Cold War, particularly during the Malayan Emergency and the Vietnam War. In Malaya, aircraft were used for ‘sky shouting’ to encourage Chinese ‘terrorists’ to surrender. In Vietnam, No 9 Squadron Iroquois helicopters often flew leaflet dropping missions in areas known to be occupied by Viet Cong forces.

The increasing importance of IO in recent conflicts is perhaps best demonstrated by Operation Stabilise, the ADF-led intervention in East Timor 1999-2000. The generation of IO, especially presence, posture and profile, were critical to that operation’s success. From the start, the International Forces East Timor (INTERFET) commander directed that all rotary and fixed wing aircraft were to fly at low level across the capital Dili. These air presence missions demonstrated INTERFET’s resolve and helped to influence events on the ground by showing that INTERFET had arrived, it meant business and it was there to stay. The population was reassured and the level of violence subsided. By applying non-kinetic means, air power made a significant contribution in East Timor in deterring potential adversaries and positively influencing the people.

Information Operations have been part of RAAF operations for decades but they were often not identified as a specific activity within the Air Force. However, in March 2001 the Air Force formed a specialist IO squadron in recognition of the increasing importance of IO. In April 2005 this squadron was renamed No 462 Squadron in recognition of its World War II predecessor.

Key Points

- The RAAF has conducted Information Operations since its inception.
- Australian airmen have gained considerable experience in psychological operations, deception, electronic warfare as well as presence, posture and profile actions.
- Information Operations are necessary to achieve decision superiority and are vital for success in joint warfare.