From the time that aircraft first went into combat in 1912, intelligence has always been a prerequisite for the successful planning, execution and assessment of air operations. In its earliest forms information was passed directly by pilots and observers to senior commanders and headquarters staff, yet over time the need for air intelligence has increased and specialised disciplines have evolved. Modern Air Forces now use air intelligence as a capability—which is synchronised with and integrated within each of the air power roles and used in direct support of current and future operations. For over 100 years, air intelligence has been a people-centric capability, reliant on data and information.

In its early days, the RAAF has not always understood that effective air operations are heavily reliant upon air intelligence, and that people are the backbone of an effective air intelligence system. As General Duties (GD) officers, aircrew were sometimes given intelligence tasks as secondary duties and the majority were quintessentially amateurs with little or no formal training. The experience and knowledge of intelligence that was available was essentially tactical—often limited to the squadron or wing level. On the other hand, a small number of Australians gained knowledge of air intelligence during World War I. When the RAAF was formed in 1921, one of these veterans, Wing Commander Richard Williams, was appointed as the Director of Intelligence and Operations. He was subsequently appointed Chief of Air Staff in October 1922. Williams and a few other like-minded RAAF officers—including Henry Wrigley, John McCauley, Joe Hewitt, Frank Bladin and Gerard Packer—managed to increase their air intelligence knowledge throughout the 1920s and 30s but their first duty was still to undertake and command operations. Air intelligence remained a secondary task. This small group of ‘thinkers’ managed to produce some useful air intelligence within the Australian context, but they could not get their message across to the Australian Government before the start of World War II.

In late 1939 the Royal Air Force (RAF) formed a specialist Air Intelligence Branch because war had highlighted the need for dedicated intelligence officers supported by experienced non-commissioned intelligence analysts of various musterings. Air intelligence was recognised as a profession demanded by modern air warfare. Within Australia this requirement was not as well established. The RAAF’s main contribution to the war effort during the early years was through the Empire Air Training Scheme, which produced some 37 000 aircrew but did not produce other specialists such as intelligence personnel. The RAAF perspective of air intelligence in Europe was again almost completely limited to the tactical level. The official historian, Douglas Gillison, described the situation succinctly, ‘… no specific organisation on which a comprehensive Intelligence service might be built. At this stage, combat operations were far removed from Australia and the need for the development of Intelligence, though keenly appreciated by all concerned, was not immediately pressed.’

Dedicated officers like Wing Commander Gerard Packer, who became Director of Intelligence at RAAF Headquarters when it was split from Operations in September 1941, worked hard to highlight the major deficiencies within the Australian air intelligence community and the increasing air threat from Japan. Once again, most of Packer’s efforts...
fell upon deaf ears. Even during the first few months of the Japanese onslaught, his proposals were refused. After Japanese air strikes on Darwin in February 1942, he gave damning evidence to (Sir) Charles Lowe’s inquiry into the state of the RAAF’s preparedness for war in the defence of Australia.

The Pacific War changed the RAAF’s outlook on air intelligence forever. The Air Force quickly realised that it had to work with the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) in the South-West Pacific Area (SWPA) in order to be able to make a significant contribution to the air war. USAAF air intelligence doctrine, albeit modified for SWPA use, was the bedrock upon which a comprehensive RAAF air intelligence system was built. From 1942 until the end of the war, RAAF personnel worked with their American colleagues to generate high-value, multi-source air intelligence, which contributed significantly to the victory against the Japanese. The RAAF employed hundreds of intelligence staff, men and women, who undertook wide ranging air intelligence activities at all levels of command in what was a mature people-centric capability.

Unfortunately this capability did not survive post-war demobilisation and force rationalisation programs. Unlike the RAF and United States Air Force (formed in 1947) the RAAF had too few senior intelligence officers with World War II experience to maintain a critical mass in its air intelligence capability. Again, intelligence was not considered core RAAF business but a secondary responsibility for GD officers and a handful of junior Special Duties (Administrative) officers. As intelligence units were disbanded, the air intelligence personnel working within the related musterings almost vanished entirely. Despite attempts to raise the profile of intelligence within the RAAF, the momentum was lost and air intelligence returned to its pre-World War II norm—being mostly limited to the tactical level within a squadron or wing. The notable exception to this was the formation of No 3 Telecommunications Unit (3TU) at RAAF Pearce on 15 October 1946 as the key element of the RAAF contribution to Australia’s strategic intelligence capability—it was only disbanded on 1 March 1992.

The RAAF’s initial reluctance to recognise the critical role of air intelligence to air operations and to form an Intelligence Branch is difficult to understand. Perhaps the reason for the change can best be understood by Victor Hugo’s famous quote, ‘One cannot resist an idea whose time has come’. By 1963, the array of new and emerging systems, coupled with the increasing threat and Air Force commitments in South-East Asia, finally convinced the RAAF leadership that it needed a dedicated specialist air intelligence capability to support Australia’s ongoing defence commitments. On 20 September 1963 the Air Board approved the formation of a dedicated Intelligence category within the Special Duties Branch under Air Board Agendum 13019. The change confirmed 24 Intelligence Officer (INTELO) positions and included two Wing Commanders and four Squadron Leaders. For the first time, the RAAF’s intelligence airmen in the various signals and imagery trades would be led by specialist intelligence officers.

Over the last 50 years the Air Force’s intelligence organisation has grown from strength to strength. Technologies have changed and the amount of information available from intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance has increased exponentially, however the central requirement for Air Force people within the intelligence capability has not changed. This people-centric capability has served, and will serve, the nation well into the future.

Central Interpretation Unit (CIU), HQ RAAF Command, Brisbane 1945 (AWM PO4220.001).

Key Points

- Air Intelligence has been an integral part of Air Campaigns for over 100 years.
- The Air Force’s Intelligence Branch was formed on 20 September 1963. Since then it has grown from strength to strength—providing direct support to air operations.
- Air Intelligence has always been heavily reliant upon its people.