In August 1918, Nos 2 and 4 Squadron of the Australian Flying Corps (AFC) conducted two raids on German airfields near Lille, France. These attacks resulted in the destruction of over 50 enemy aircraft, multiple hangars as well as associated airbase and transport infrastructure. These successful attacks at a tactical level also demonstrated how the application of air power had evolved over the course of the war. Starting from simple reconnaissance flights in August 1914, the concept of flying operations had developed to reflect a far more mature understanding of the need to control the air and the effects that air power could generate across the broader military campaign.

Established in September 1912 by Army Order 132/1912, the AFC began World War I with one flying unit consisting of four airworthy aircraft and only a rudimentary understanding of how the new air arm could be employed in conflict. By August 1918, the AFC had a Central Flying School, four squadrons deployed on operations—one in the Middle East and three on the Western Front—and four additional operational training squadrons based in the UK. Importantly, the experience gained by its members in the war equipped the AFC’s officers with a mature understanding of the operational and tactical application of air power. The raids on the Lille airfields in August 1918 are an excellent example of how the understanding of the application of air power had progressed, not just within the AFC but also across the air arms of all the belligerent nations.

In the weeks leading up to the raids, the RAF’s No 80 Wing, which included the AFC’s Nos 2 (S.E.5a) and 4 Squadron (Sopwith Camels), conducted numerous offensive patrols in the area around Lille and the Lys Valley. These patrols resulted in frequent dogfights with German fighter aircraft such as the Fokker triplane and Pfalz scout. Wider operations included constant bombing and strafing attacks on troop concentrations, trench lines, supply lines and trains. Regardless of the nature of operation undertaken, the opportunity to engage with enemy aircraft was pursued with vigour. The overall intention was to weaken the German forward areas in preparation for the ground offensives planned for September along the front lines of the Flanders area.

It was unlikely that the almost random interception of enemy aircraft during the offensive patrols of this period could achieve control of the air. An assessment of the operations conducted during this period indicates that the rate at which the Germans were losing aircraft was well within their ability to replace. This fact was highlighted in late July when a noticeable increase in German aircraft was reported in the area. This increase in enemy numbers resulted in major air-to-air combat over Aubers Ridge on 31 July, as each side attempted to launch attacks on opposing ground forces in the area. It required a concentrated effort on the part of the Allied squadrons before local control of the air could be reasserted. The engagements of 31 July clearly indicated that if the Allies were to achieve any form of enduring...
control of the air, a significant change in operational tactics was required.

The first Allied response was to increase the size of the Allied fighter formations conducting offensive patrols. Encountering larger formations, the German air force would either leave the area or attempt to send up larger formations of their own. Quite naturally, this lead to more dogfights of considerable size and duration. Overall, though, the Allies were able to exert a growing control of the air that enabled attacks on ground targets to be continued while limiting the occasions of German observation aircraft encroaching into Allied airspace.

The opportunity to make a significant difference to the degree of control of the air occurred in mid-August. The offensive in the Somme on 8 August drew German reserves away from the Flanders area. To take advantage of the dislocation of the German forces, No 80 Wing launched two orchestrated raids on two of the largest German airbases in the Lille area—Haubourdin and Lomme—and also on the adjacent railway hubs. The twin intent of the raids was to destroy the air capability of the enemy at a time when they were least able to replace their losses, and to disrupt the main lines of supply prior to the forthcoming ground offensive.

Just after midday on 16 August, the AFC’s Nos 2 and 4 Squadron launched from the airfield at Reclignhem, France, loaded with incendiary and explosive bombs and as much ammunition as could be carried. With their escort of the RAF’s No 88 Squadron (Bristol Fighters) and No 92 Squadron (S.E.5a), the 65 aircraft assembled into a large, multilayered formation over the airfield. Flying east in a shallow arc via La Bassée, the large Allied formation forced any enemy aircraft in the area to retreat to their airfield. On arriving over Haubourdin airfield, Harry Cobby, commanding No 4 Squadron, led what was to be a devastating attack with an estimated 37 aircraft destroyed on the ground and one in the air. Once the airfield and all possible targets had been attacked, the raid shifted focus to the adjacent railway lines, trains and rolling stock. Any clearly identifiable military vehicle or position became a target, as the AFC aircrews conducted a particularly thorough attack on the area.

On the following day the tactics were repeated. This time the airfield at Lomme was the primary target, followed by the surrounding railway infrastructure. Again the attack was effective; enemy aircraft in the air returned to base at the first sight of the approach of the large Allied formation, only to become targets for the bombing attacks. This raid achieved the same level of widespread destruction as the first, with at least 17 aircraft on the ground being destroyed. It was during this attack that the only casualty suffered by the AFC squadrons during course of the two days of fighting occurred, when Lt Edgar McCleery of No 4 Squadron was shot down and killed by anti-aircraft fire.

Smoke billows from the first bombs dropped by Nos 2 and 4 Squadron, AFC, on Lomme Aerodrome, Lille, France 17 August 1918.

While the raids themselves were dramatic, the longer-term effects were even more so. In the following weeks the German air presence was markedly diminished, enabling Allied air power greater freedom of operations. This level of control of the air contributed directly to a series of successful ground assaults. Any attempt by the German airmen to conduct reconnaissance or artillery spotting flights was effectively blocked, while Allied air forces were almost completely free to conduct these operations themselves. Blinded and increasingly isolated from their supply routes, the German resistance in the Flanders area around Lille and the Lys Valley was significantly weakened, greatly facilitating the Allied ground advance into that area. Adaptive and effective use of air power had established the foundations of success on the ground in a manner that has been repeated in conflicts ever since: El Alamein, D-Day, Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom, to name a few.

Key Points

• Control of the air is a prerequisite for the success of any operation.
• Typically the air campaign should begin well before the ground campaign.
• The ability of air power to shape and prepare the battlespace is a key component of modern military operations.