Through World War I, it became commonplace to classify bomber aircraft as ‘light’ or ‘heavy’. Aircraft such as the single engine D.H.9, later to serve in RAAF colours, were deemed light bombers. Its modest weight of 1700kg and bombload of no more than 210kg clearly differentiated it from the heavy bombers of the era, such as the Handley Page 0/400 with a weight of 6360kg and 910kg bombload. As aircraft and engine design improved through the 1920s and 30s, larger aircraft such as the four-engine Tupovlev TB-3 redefined the heavy bomber capabilities. By the beginning of World War II, bomber aircraft were being described as light, medium or heavy. These simple terms soon became a means of defining a level of capability for aircraft being used in strike roles.

Australia’s experience in developing its bomber, or strike, capability from 1921 proved problematic. While there was sound rationale to pursue the induction of larger aircraft with greater range and payloads, external constraints prevented balanced force development, creating challenges for the RAAF in developing a long-range strike capability.

When Ross and Keith Smith made their epic England to Australia flight in 1919, they arrived in a Vickers Vimy, a ‘heavy’ bomber of World War I vintage. That aircraft was initially gifted to the Australian Air Corps and later taken on charge by the newly formed Australian Air Force in 1921. Plans were made to acquire an additional aircraft to form a long-range strike capability suited to Australia’s large expanses and undefended coastlines.

This proposal, however, encountered difficulties. Australia had also been gifted a mixed force of 58 D.H.9 and D.H.9a light bombers by the British Government as part of a larger consignment of aircraft and equipment to form the Air Force. Any additional aircraft the RAAF wanted would have to be purchased at a time when the budget and manpower were both insufficient to operate the aircraft already in Australia. There were also Government, Navy and Army requirements that resulted in the purchase of seaplanes and general-purpose aircraft, none of which could have been considered anything more than a light bomber.

At the outbreak of World War II, the RAAF had still not progressed in developing its strike capabilities in any meaningful way. While it had a growing number of Avro Anson twin-engine light bombers of limited combat use, the RAAF had been unable to purchase any medium or heavy bombers. Despite the approval to purchase the Bristol Beaufort for the RAAF in 1938, British industry was unable to supply the aircraft as the UK’s RAF demand was taking up all their manufacturing capacity.

As World War II developed into a global conflict, the RAAF expanded into a much larger and better-equipped force. Aircraft such as the Lockheed Hudson and the Consolidated PBY Catalina were acquired from the USA,
and local production of the Beaufort began in August 1941. These aircraft, as well as the Bristol Beaufighter, Douglas Boston and the de Havilland Mosquito that were soon to follow, demonstrated to the RAAF the utility of light to medium bomber aircraft. In the trying tropical conditions of the South West Pacific Area (SWPA) of operations in which they were employed, the RAAF’s strike platforms were able to operate from austere airfields and conduct wide-ranging operations, which included low level maritime and land strike missions, medium level bombing, close air support and search and surveillance missions.

In common with other nations, the RAAF also found that high performance fighter aircraft could be particularly effective in the ground attack and close air support roles. Australia’s Curtis Kittyhawk fighters were progressively modified to carry ever-greater bombloads, finally carrying up to six bombs or an all up load in excess of 680kg. The acceptance of the concept of multirole flexibility would be reflected in later RAAF aircraft acquisitions such as the North American Mustang operated in both World War II and in the Korean War; and later still by the Dassault Mirage and the Boeing F/A-18 series of aircraft.

Australia’s experience in the RAF’s Bomber Command, in the North African campaign, and with the long-range strike missions conducted by the Catalina aircraft in the Pacific, highlighted the need for the RAAF to operate long-range heavy bombers in the SWPA theatre. Without the ability to produce its own heavy bombers, Australia looked to the UK and the USA to supply its needs. Here politics played a hand, with the UK reluctant to release any heavy bombers to Australia in the belief that it would divert RAAF aircrews from the RAF Bomber Command effort in Europe. On the other hand, the US leadership in the Pacific simply didn’t want to provide anything that might distract attention away from the achievements of the US forces in theatre. This combined with the UK pressure on the USA to refuse to supply heavy bombers on the basis of the ‘beat Germany first’ strategy, prevented supply of such aircraft to the RAAF until February 1944, when Consolidated B-24 Liberators began arriving in Australia.

While the B-24s lacked the manoeuvrability, versatility and rough field performance of the light and medium bombers, they could carry 3500kg of bombs and had a radius of action of nearly 2000km. Further, they had the added redundancy of four engines and the self protection measures of up to ten 0.5 calibre machine guns. The B-24’s ability to reach out across the SWPA of operations was demonstrated on 27 January 1945, when two RAAF B-24 aircraft destroyed the hydroelectric power stations at Kali Konto in Japanese held Java. Previously out of range of RAAF strike aircraft, the 3700km round trip was made possible by the Liberator’s ability to install long-range fuel tanks into its forward bomb bay while still being able to carry a useful ordnance load in the rear bomb bay.

The combination of light, medium and heavy bombers available to the RAAF’s First Tactical Air Force in the SWPA in 1945 gave it the flexibility to undertake a multitude of concurrent strike sorties, each tailored to the needs of each mission. However, this period marked the high water point of the RAAF’s mixed bomber force of World War II, it being rapidly scaled back in the post war years. By 1955 the RAAF was operating a mixed fleet of Avro Lincoln and English Electric Canberra aircraft in the strike role. While potent and successful aircraft in their own right, the force did not mirror the broad flexibility of the previous wartime capability.

Part II of this Pathfinder will consider these postwar developments of the RAAF’s strike force from 1945 to 2003.

Key Points

- Development of significant capability in order to conduct core air power roles can be protracted and challenging.
- Decisions on force structure and capability can be influenced by external factors that could impact on the overall development of national air power.
- During the era of visual, free-fall bombing, a balanced and flexible strike force required a force structure that comprised light, medium and heavy bombers.