COMBAT CONTROL IN THE RAAF

“Air interdiction and ground manoeuvre must be synchronised so that each complements and reinforces the other. Synchronisation is important because it can create a dilemma for the enemy that has no satisfactory answer. His dilemma is this: if he attempts to counter ground manoeuvre by moving rapidly, he exposes himself to unacceptable losses from air interdiction; yet if he employs measures that are effective at reducing losses caused by air interdiction, he then cannot manoeuvre fast enough to counter the ground component of the campaign.”

Price T. Bingham

Air power is a scarce resource that needs to be carefully managed to generate the best possible effect, especially when employed in conjunction with maritime and land forces. Given this limitation of resource, centralised control and decentralised execution are critical tenets in the application of air power. However, for this to routinely occur at a tactical level, an air component specialist is needed to plan, coordinate and execute the generation of air effects. To this end the RAAF created the combat controller mustering in 2010 whose role is primarily to coordinate the generation of air effects. While this role is often centred on providing kinetic effects for surface forces, combat controllers also conduct tasks that permit the use of expedient airfields in both war and peace.

The rapid development of air power capabilities during recent conflicts, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan, has offered new possibilities to the joint force commander in the prosecution of the land battle. Land forces and in particular Special Forces, have had the opportunity to train, fight and generally become familiar with air assets especially in situations where close air support and airlift are required. However, the combat advantages offered by the rapid advances in airborne capabilities, particularly of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance platforms, has placed increasing demands on air power.

The Australian combat experience during the early phases of operations in Afghanistan showed that a more co-ordinated approach in meeting demands for air power requests was required. The experience highlighted that the provision of integrated combat air power for Special Operations required a detailed and in-depth understanding of all aspects involved in connecting air and land power to joint operations. Without this being established, the desired air effects provided to the supported commander may not be optimal and, may not provide the critical and timely impact needed on the battlefield.

The battlespace is becoming increasingly complex and as the capabilities of air platforms improve, the need for closer integration between the air and land power becomes critical. However, the enhanced capabilities that modern air assets can provide means that fewer platforms are necessary to achieve the same result. In turn, fewer platforms require more precise planning in prioritising tasking requests. As platform numbers reduce there can be a tendency to dilute the force by spreading the platforms evenly across the supported commanders. However, this would be a wrong concept. Air power that is focused, integrated and combined into land operations that can create disproportionate effects – that is, Special Operations – results in improved mission success rates and increases the chances of overall progress of the campaign.

The demands placed on air power by Australian field commanders are not new. While the RAAF’s World War II history shows that army co-operation squadrons existed to meet the varying demands on air power, this capability was not sustained in the post war period, and degraded quickly after the cessation of hostilities. Today, the alignment of airborne systems in the air/land battle has
become too significant and central for it to be re-learned during each new operation. The skill of successfully integrating airborne systems into the joint battle is not one that can be readily learned as it must be practised and understood at all levels of the process or the field commander is likely to lose the advantage sought from the desired air effect.

To meet this demand on airborne systems, a dedicated, skilled specialist workforce of professional airmen who are practised in land manoeuvre is required. In essence, they are the professional masters of, and advocates for, air effects for the commander. They must be able to work at all levels of Special Operations, and if necessary, operate independently in support of other air elements to deliver the desired effect where and when required once assigned an air asset.

Unlike the post-World War II experience, the RAAF has established, and is committed to maintaining, a core of specialist experts who can maximise air effects in the air-land battle. This expertise is enhanced by drawing the experience of other nations. In particular, the RAAF and the USAF have developed a close working relationship to share insights.

To generate this capability for the ADF, especially in support of Special Forces, the RAAF has developed the concept of installing an individual combat controller who is resident in the combat control teams of No 4 Squadron. With extensive training and regular practice, the combat controllers have the skills and flexibility needed to conduct reconnaissance, joint terminal attack control and advanced force operations either as part of a larger advanced force or independently. Through this training they have developed an enhanced understanding of air power and what it offers for the supported commander.

While much is offered by the theoretical integration of air power into the air/land battle, validation can only be gained by operational experience. No 4 Squadron has provided individual combat controllers at the manoeuvre element level within many of the Commando Regiments’ rotations. Their experience on operations in Afghanistan has demonstrated that air power effects have the most positive impact on the air-land fight when managed by those whose raison d’etre is in this role.

The integration of air power into the air/land force has historically offered enduring advantages to Australia but the lack of a dedicated professional air specialist has prevented this from being sustained. By raising and training a force of specialist professional combat controllers, the RAAF has gone a long way to ensuring that air power is most effectively and appropriately applied to support the land force commander as required. These airmen bring with them a deep understanding of the tenets of air power, and their skills act as a true force multiplier.

Key Points

• The effective use of air power during Special Operations requires dedicated professional air power specialists.
• The advent of combat controllers is a relatively small investment that has significantly enhanced air operations.
• Air power employment has been made more effective and has covered an increasing range of roles through more precise application of air effects in the air/land battlespace.

An ADF section which includes an Air Force combat controller during operations in Afghanistan.