The 70th anniversary on 13 February 2015 of the destruction of Dresden by RAF Bomber Command during WWII did not go unnoticed for the tragic loss of life and the destruction of thousands of years of cultural heritage. While the merits of this operation remain a controversial subject, one issue that emerged from this operation was the need for future bombing campaigns to preserve, where possible, buildings that represent national heritage and are of cultural significance.

The destruction of Dresden was a watershed moment for future air campaigns where cultural heritage sites became included on ‘no-strike’ target lists. Some progress was made with the Hague Convention of 1954 which included the specific protection of cultural heritage. However, the destruction of items of cultural significance continued and was considered collateral damage. The issue was further complicated by the fact that there was no recognised definition of what constituted ‘cultural heritage’.

It was only in 1972 that the United Nations (UN) agreed on a definition. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural organisation (UNESCO) Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage defined ‘cultural heritage’ as: ‘... architectural works, works of monumental sculpture and painting, elements or structures of an archaeological nature, inscriptions, cave dwellings and combinations of features... groups of separate or connected buildings which, because of their architecture, their homogeneity or their place in the landscape, are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history...’

The destruction of culturally significant artefacts in the Iraqi cities of Nimrud and Hatra by the Daesh (Islamic State) has been condemned by the international community to the extent that some regard this latest incident as a war crime.

In recent conflicts, air power has strived to preserve cultural heritage sites. Rapid developments in technology have created air weapons with the potential to cause widespread and permanent destruction. However, their employment today is governed by the principles of precision, proportionality, and discrimination. To this end, selective targeting in order to protect the cultural heritage of the society under attack forms a central tenet in the application of air power. Preservation of cultural heritage is an international standard that must be upheld. In a modern and cosmopolitan society cultural heritage helps to foster an appreciation of diversity, knowledge of the society and an understanding of the past. These traits are the hallmark of societal progression and therefore need to be protected.

Technology-enabled modern systems have exponentially enhanced the capability of air power to apply lethal force. Today, more than ever before, air power provides the most rapid military response available at all levels of operations—from humanitarian aid to precision strike. Air power’s reach, responsiveness, precision and persistence is unparalleled. Specifically, each air power role—control of the air, strike, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR), and air mobility—is incidental to the protection of cultural heritage. In this sense, the use of precision guided munitions to create proportionate effects and discrimination in targeting underestimate the capability of air power to minimise collateral damage. No-fire target lists are underpinned by modern
intelligence systems that identify culturally significant property and shield these items from deliberate attack. Such practices are espoused in doctrine and law, and only highlight the enhanced awareness in the application of air power and the acceptance of collateral damage and destruction during earlier wars.

‘... Buildings devoted to religion, the arts, or charitable purposes; historic monuments; and other religious, cultural, or charitable facilities should not be attacked, provided they are not used for military purposes. It is the responsibility of the local population to ensure that such buildings are clearly marked with the distinctive [cultural heritage] emblem ...’

—Operations Law for RAAF Commanders, pg 68

The UN mandate to the specificity of target lists in such operations today excludes buildings, sites and monuments of cultural heritage. Moreover, it is the expectation of the wider society that the use of aerial weaponry be proportionate and discriminatory at all times. Indeed, the precise, proportionate and discriminatory use of airborne weapons reduces collateral damage and reinforces the very legitimacy of air power, although there are some limitations in the application of such capability.

To this end, structures and sites placed on a no-targeting list requires that the adversary honour the status that is afforded to these buildings by not using the structures as bases to wage war. Further, air power may very well be a victim of its own success in such operations. Generating responsive, precise, proportionate and discriminatory options when the use of force in the other domains is unpalatable or not an available option, suggests that air power becomes the weapon platform of first choice. This is a double-edged sword and could potentially misrepresent air power’s ability to shape the environment. It could lead to a distortion of the role of air power in modern conflicts. Overstating air power capability will likely result in more harm to the preservation of cultural heritage. It would be incorrect to assume that air power alone will allow the military to preserve property, protect non-combatants and defeat an adversary with a negligible commitment of ground forces.

Air power practitioners are today obliged to employ munitions for operational effect while reducing the potential for collateral damage. There is a corollary to this strategy: if there must be conflict, then protecting cultural heritage and having an understanding of the culture of the adversary reduces the potential for future war. Proportionate targeting to create the necessary effects, and the discriminatory use of kinetic air power, will contribute to the protection of cultural property for future generations. In the modern world, buildings and places of cultural significance should be guarded against deliberate attack. The role of ISR provides a persistent and in some cases omniscient view of the contemporary battlespace in which an adversary attempts to move. Persistent ISR cues potentially time sensitive targets, highlights the likely combatant from among the wider population and distinguishes culturally significant buildings and monuments. Air mobility provides the potential to transport en masse items of value, to relocate displaced people and to afford a level of rapid transport when required.

The preservation of cultural heritage is almost a byword in today’s air power lexicon. Contemporary application of air power includes active advocacy for the rule of law, the rights and dignity of humanity, and a range of operations that lean towards the preservation and protection of cultural heritage in a secure world.

Key Points

- The bombing of Dresden focused the UN on saving sites of cultural heritage
- Air power is committed to preserving cultural heritage
- Cultural heritage sites should be clearly marked as such

The deliberate destruction of ancient Buddhist statues by the Taliban at Bamyan in Afghanistan caused widespread international outrage.