A mistake in the first deployment of the force is hardly retrievable during the entire campaign. But a great deal of prewar preparation can be accomplished. The war preparation of the force, its equipment, doctrine and training, the organization, the transport system, all should be planned before war.

Field Marshal Helmuth von Molke, 1871

The experience of World Wars I and II established the tenet that control of the air is the primary role of an air force and is a prerequisite for military success. From the time the Fokker Eindecker dominated the skies over the Western Front in 1915, the primary tool in the control-of-the-air mission has been the fighter aircraft.

Considering the strategic significance of obtaining control of the air, it seems unthinkable that an air force would not seek the best fighter aircraft available to meet this need. However, despite having undergone a three-year modernisation program, this was exactly the situation Australia found itself in when World War II broke out in September 1939. Of the 246 operational aircraft of the Air Force, not one was a modern fighter. Also missing was a mature doctrine to guide the decisions of the Air Board in developing a balanced, capable air force. Consequently, it was two and a half years into the war before Australia had a contemporary fighter force available for air defence duties.

The shortfall in fighter aircraft development in Australia during the 1930s was due to a number of issues—the first of these being the outcomes of the Imperial Defence Conferences from 1923–37. The formulation of the Singapore strategy during the 1923 conference established a maritime-centric plan based on the assumption that the defence of Australia would be best met by a strong British naval presence at Singapore. While valid in 1923, by 1937 the plan was deficient in its appreciation of the development and proliferation of air power across the region, in particular, the development of carrier-based aviation. The impact of the Singapore strategy on the Air Force was specifically evident after the 1930 Imperial Defence Conference. It was assumed, almost as an article of faith, that the main air threat to Australia would be from low-performance aircraft launched from cruisers. This assumption resulted in the main role for the Air Force being limited to surveillance and reconnaissance duties with the secondary function of responding to small-scale raids by surface or airborne adversaries. These assumptions heavily influenced Air Force modernisation plans.

In 1928, the Salmond Report, written by the RAF Chief of Air Staff at the request of the Australian Government, drove home the degree to which the Government had allowed the Air Force to deteriorate. While the criticality for the Air Force to address the report’s findings was accepted, the Great Depression prevented any action on the report’s recommendations until the national economy began to recover in 1934. When action was finally taken, the available funding was insufficient to address all requirements simultaneously. Second, the numerically small Air Force of 1936 with only 1262 personnel was
simply too small to expand rapidly enough to cope with an infrastructure development program as well as an influx of new aircraft, personnel and equipment.

The question of “which aircraft for Australia?” also proved to be highly problematic for the Air Board. By 1938, the prevailing view was that as Australia’s strategic assets were predominately situated on the eastern coastline, the detection and response to raids would have to be addressed through coastal patrols by maritime and airborne surveillance assets. It was further considered that the most effective means of disrupting attacks from the seaward approaches would be to intercept the threat as far out to sea as possible.

Deliberations by the Air Board over 1938-39 resulted in a decision to purchase the Bristol Beaufighter aircraft as a long-range interceptor. In many ways, the type’s selection addressed a number of Australia’s geo-strategic demands. The Beaufighter’s performance clearly met the requirement for deploying across the long distances between Australia’s population centres and the role of long-range interception of enemy aircraft far out to sea. However, the cost of the Beaufighter caused the Air Board to later drop the project and instead adapt the CAC Wirraway general-purpose aircraft to the ‘fighter’ role.

In 1939, a second report on the Air Force’s fighter requirements put paid to a long-range fighter; in fact, it put paid to any consideration of a specialist fighter at all. The report noted that given the warning time provided by seaward reconnaissance and that the probable threat would be low performance strike aircraft, the general-purpose CAC Wirraway, then being produced in Australia, would be more than adequate for point defence of strategic assets. The report further stated that while the Wirraway may lack high performance by the standards of modern fighters, it was nevertheless up to the task of addressing the likely threat posed by small raids. The report failed to explain why only small raids were considered the only threats to Australia or why the modern carrier forces of the Japanese, then identified as the most likely adversary, would not be employed against Australian cities.

The report ended in recommending the Beaufighter purchase be cancelled and the funds so released transferred to the purchase of additional Lockheed Hudson light bomber/surveillance aircraft and increase Wirraway production. The combination of Hudson and Wirraway aircraft was considered the best air defence option for Australia. These recommendations were accepted by the Air Board and no modern fighter of any description was envisioned for the Air Force for the near future.

While an excellent general-purpose aircraft, the CAC Wirraway was unsuitable as a fighter by the standards of 1939.

The deficiencies in the Air Force air defence capability would be the cause of much debate in the months following Japan’s entry into World War II. The loss of air superiority over the Malay Peninsular eventually resulted in the loss Malaya and Singapore and the sinking of HM Ships Repulse and Prince of Wales. On 19 February 1942, a wave of high-performance fighter and bomber aircraft, launched from aircraft carriers to Australia’s north, bombed Darwin. A second wave of land-based bombers followed up with even more destructive attacks on the city and surrounding Defence infrastructure. Included in the losses were a number of Hudson and Wirraway aircraft intended to have been the vanguard against such an attack.

It was only in February 1942 that the Air Force finally gained fighter squadrons with modern aircraft. Equipped with Curtis Kittyhawk fighters, Nos 75, 76 and 77 Squadron were the first of the Australian-based fighter squadrons capable of both offensive and defensive control of the air missions.

Key Points

• Control of the air is central to air power strategy; the capability to gain and retain control of the air must be central to development of a balanced force.

• Budgetary restraints and poor threat analysis can prevent the acquisition process from producing the required level of capability.