To be an Air Force of influence the RAAF needs to ensure that it maintains and improves its capability to conduct expeditionary operations and deploy forces wherever and whenever necessary.

AIRMSHL Geoff Shepherd, 1 April 2008

At the close of World War II the Australian Air Force was the fourth largest air force in the world consisting of 182,000 personnel supporting the operation of 6500 aircraft. Importantly, the Air Force was also comprised of airfield construction squadrons, deployable control and reporting units and other specialised units. In fact, the Air Force of 1945 boasted the comprehensive range of capabilities necessary to mount and sustain a combined expeditionary air campaign in remote areas with no pre-existing infrastructure. This rather advanced level of capability was developed over a period of five years from what was an extremely low level of manpower, skills and equipment.

The poor condition of the Air Force's deployable capability in 1939 was a failure to consider the demands of sustaining deployed air operations. This neglect is reflected in most of the Air Board's planning documents from Report on the Air Defence of Australia of 1920 and the Memorandum Regarding the Air Defence of Australia of 1924. While both of these reports recognised the limited aviation infrastructure across Australia, both failed to address the requirement for operations away from established bases.

The Air Force's pre-war approach to sustaining operations in areas such as New Guinea and the Solomon Islands was a program to establish a line of advanced operating bases (AOBs) extending out from Australia in an arc to the north extending to the Pacific. The AOBs established the means to sustain an aviation presence in the region. However, as progressive as the AOB concept was, the resultant capability was mostly limited to basic seaplane operations because of the difficulties in building and sustaining airbases so far from the Australian mainland.

While establishing AOBs was an important step in the development of Air Force expeditionary capability, the bases were only part of the requirement. The main shortfall at the time was personnel, and this particular deficiency began to be addressed in earnest by the Air Force from September 1939 onwards. The expansion in the workforce took two
forms. First the Air Force was expanding the diversity of the skill within its ranks. For example, in February 1941 the Air Force had 66 separate musterings open to its enlisted personnel. These musterings included aircrew roles as well as traditional air and ground related trades such as electrical fitters and blacksmiths. By 1945 workforce structure had grown to encompass 132 separate musterings including plant operators, coxswains and radar mechanics.

The second form of personnel development became evident as the air campaign in the SWPA opened new fronts and as additional equipment was acquired. The demands for greater numbers of personnel also increased. These demands were proportional across all the musterings. For example the Air Force went from needing 27 blacksmiths to 160 and from 195 electrical fitters to 1540.

It is perhaps in the new musterings that the demands of expeditionary capability were most evident. In August 1942 during the period of the Battle of Milne Bay, the Air Force had no specialist radar mechanics in uniform despite having fielded a deployable radar unit to the area. However, by August 1945 there were 675 specialist air radar mechanics and a further 634 ground radar specialists supporting a network of radar and reporting units spread along the coast of Australia and extending into the operational areas of the SWPA.

In total the Air Force went from 27 805 enlisted personnel in 1941 to 132 784 in August 1945. While the statistics clearly represent the growth in the size and overall capability of the Air Force, what is not reflected by numbers alone are the requirements to administer, train, and sustain the expanded workforce domestically and on operations. The complexity of the raise, train and sustain function that the Air Force experienced in World War II and how that challenge was overcome is a remarkable story in itself.

The Battle of Milne Bay, 25 August – 6 September 1942, was a defining moment for the Air Force since it highlighted the inadequacy of the Air Force's expeditionary capability. To construct, sustain and protect the three airfields in the Milne Bay area, the Air Force needed the support of the Australian Army, RAN and US airfield engineers. From this pivotal battle the growth in the Air Force ability to sustain itself in the field became ever more evident. At each successive landing in the long process of liberating the SWPA from occupation, the Air Force continued to become a more complex force, not only in the air domain, but in ground and maritime domains as well, with airfield defence squadrons and a fleet of Air Force supply vessels each contributing individually to the air campaign. By the time the Air Force landed at Morotai in September 1945 it boasted a fully capable Tactical Air Force (No 1 TAF) and was operating from multiple bases, constructed and sustained by Air Force personnel.

The sophistication and capability of the Air Force to conduct remote area operations is perhaps illustrated by the example of the American landings in the Philippines in late 1944. The only Australian units that landed as part of the US forces were included to make up for a shortfall in American capability. The two units were the Air Force’s No 3 Airfield Construction Squadron (No 3 ACS) and No 6 Wireless Unit (No 6 WU). While the role of No 3 ACS is self-evident, that of No 3 WU is less so. A highly specialised radio intercept unit, its work during the Philippines operation is credited with the destruction of 17 enemy ships and the interception of numerous air raids. In the closing days of World War II the Air Force had turned around the expeditionary equation. From a supported element it had transformed itself into a highly effective independent force capable of supporting any campaign.

Key Points

- Capability development requires planning, investment, commitment and time.
- Sustained expeditionary operations require a complex integrated force capable of generating effects across multiple domains.
- While shortfalls at force level can be mitigated by allies in joint operations, the scale and tempo of potential conflicts require a base level of capability to be developed and sustained.