



AIR BASES - SUSTAINING AIR POWER

Air forces provide nation-states with responsive, adaptable and effective air power as an integral part of the military contribution to national security. They can conduct a wide range of air operations, from defence of the homeland to humanitarian assistance, wherever their nation's interests are engaged. However, the application of air power through the full range of military operations is completely reliant on assured access to secure air bases, in the right location with the essential support personnel and services. Availability and adequacy of air bases are therefore, critical considerations in planning air operations.

Navies, armies and air forces all require bases to generate forces with the necessary capabilities to conduct operations. However, there is a fundamental difference in the way air forces utilise their bases to project power as compared to both navies and armies. Once the necessary force level capabilities have been generated, land and maritime operations are usually conducted away from naval and army bases, while air bases remain a crucial component throughout the application of air power. Inadequate air basing capabilities, not aligned towards air operations that fundamentally change the characteristics of a military base, will not permit air forces to employ air power in support of national security objectives. These nuances will be further explored and explained in a forthcoming CAF Occasional Paper. From the advent of air power as a military capability, the nature and location of air bases have been as important a component of planning air operations and therefore, designing air forces as any other air power system. Ideally, an air base, whether permanent or expeditionary, will be a capability system in its own right that enables the optimum sustainment and so employment of an air forces' air power. It will also retain its inherent flexibility and provide a range of services such as being a command and control node and logistics hub supporting not only the air force but also a wide range of users.

Depending on the context, the success of air operations is reliant on forward air bases within the nation or on foreign air bases made available through political and diplomatic arrangements between governments. To fully exploit the operational freedom that such arrangements provide, air forces, especially those involved in expeditionary operations, must have the capacity to complement such forward bases with support personnel and services as necessary.



Bradshaw Field Training Area - airfield under construction

Operations away from home bases may require air forces to deploy personnel and systems that have an organic capacity to establish the full range of services from a base that has not been operational. For example, during the 1999 Operation STABILISE in the then East Timor, the air head at Dili was critical to the rapid deployment of forces. However, the airport infrastructure at Dili had been largely destroyed. In order to provide the basic infrastructure to conduct air operations, the RAAF's Expeditionary Combat Support Squadrons with force protection elements were the first to be deployed. They provided the skilled personnel, deployed systems and base protection to ensure that the airlift

into East Timor was successful. The ability to create the infrastructure to conduct efficient operations is an intrinsic part of an air force and is fundamental to its ability to deliver air power that is effective and responsive.

An air force needs a critical mass of adaptable personnel to efficiently operate an air base in order to ensure that it can leverage air power's inherent characteristics of reach, flexibility and timely and rapid response to achieve stated objectives. The responsiveness of air power across the spectrum of conflict can only be realised by ensuring the availability of an essential core group of military personnel with the skill sets required to establish, secure and operate an air base, often at short notice and in hostile circumstances.

Air bases are vulnerable and valuable, making them attractive targets. Aircraft and air bases are lucrative targets to adversaries who lack conventional air power capabilities. Forward deployment of air power assets is likely to be into hostile or uncertain security environments. In such cases, the personnel deployed to establish and operate air bases must also include base protection forces to provide adequate security for the deployed contingent, infrastructure, aircraft and systems. To develop the technical mastery necessary to support expeditionary air operations, air force personnel train for and practise supporting air operations from permanent air bases. This technical mastery must be complemented by specialised training provided to personnel for specific roles demanded in military air operations. The development and refinement of these essential skills will determine the way in which air force personnel are trained, the permanent air bases are operated and the larger air force organisation is shaped.



Standing guard

Specialised skills and professional mastery of air power are essential to understand specific air base requirements for each operation and to comprehensively plan, execute and sustain air operations. Air forces may choose to operate their permanent air bases using only uniformed personnel or a balanced combination of uniformed and civilian personnel. Depending on the size of the air force, the balance will vary. However, the forces' organic capability to deploy and operate from forward air bases, especially in combat operations, will depend on the availability of a minimum core group of uniformed personnel. Some air forces may seek to realise the full potential of their air power by operating a range of air bases in dispersed locations on a full-time footing. A smaller air force will not be able to sustain such an option.

Air forces must provide the capability to deploy and support responsive air power. This includes providing the capacity to operate permanent air bases from which they generate forces and the bases from which they conduct deployed operations. These bases must have the full range of essential air power support services to optimise the use of the air forces' air power assets. The provision of these services, particularly from expeditionary bases, is a critical organisational consideration for smaller air forces whose resources are constrained for financial, political and other national reasons. Such air forces must adopt innovative designs and operating models to ensure the efficient generation and sustainment of their personnel and air power systems. They must also maintain an adaptable organisational capacity to conduct effective expeditionary air operations where and when required without compromising their capability to generate and renew their forces.

- *Air bases are capability systems in their own right, critical for the delivery of efficient air power in support of national security objectives*
- *Air forces must retain the capacity to complement forward bases with specialist personnel and services to fully exploit air power's inherent flexibility*
- *Even when operating from permanent bases, air forces must retain a core group of uniformed personnel to ensure organic capability to carry out combat operations.*

“Based on the United States Air Force’s experience in the Gulf War, sustaining one squadron of fighters at a bare base for three weeks requires the deployment of almost 600 personnel, 72 vehicles, 1,347 tonnes of munitions, almost 5,000,000 litres of fuel and over 400 tonnes of miscellaneous cargo.”

- Willard E. Naslund

*Quoted in Peter McLennan,
Where are they when you need them: Support
Arrangements for Deployed Air Power*



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