

PATHFINDER

AIR POWER DEVELOPMENT CENTRE BULLETIN



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THE RAAF IN NON-MILITARY OPERATIONS

'To be most effective ... [air power] must be fully integrated with all the levers of national power.'

ACM Sir Stephen Dalton,
RAF Chief of Air Staff, 2009

Operations by the Royal Australian Air Force in recent decades have frequently been as much about providing aid to civil authorities as they have with directly dealing with specific security and military situations. This has demonstrated that air power is, at its core, a commodity underpinning national interests well beyond the ordinary range of roles which form the primary focus of an Air Force. What is perhaps more surprising is that what is regarded as 'civil work' has been part of the RAAF mission-spread from the very beginning of the service's existence.

Government in Australia has sought to use air power for non-warfighting purposes even before the RAAF was formed in 1921. For instance, in October 1917 aircraft from the Point Cook air base outside Melbourne were used to advertise the federal Treasury's bid to raise £20 million under a 'Liberty Loan' scheme. The exercise was repeated in August 1919 and mid-1920, for 'Peace Loans' to raise funds for the post-war economy. In September 1920 two aircraft from Point Cook were despatched to search for a missing coalboat off the east coast of Tasmania; one of the aircraft disappeared without trace, its two-man crew becoming the air service's first operational fatalities within Australia's borders.

As noted in a previous *Pathfinder* (see #25, June 05), even the very formation of the RAAF can be partly

attributed to the desire of the government of the day to have an Air Force that was capable of pioneering air mail services across Australia. Without this incentive, which was not a defence consideration, establishment of the Service may have been delayed well beyond what became the official birth date of the RAAF. A large part of the flying work done in the RAAF's first years was taken up with surveying the air routes needed to get mail services up and running.

Hard on the heels of these first ventures into civil work came others. In 1922 the RAAF had aircraft involved in exploring the hydrography of Lake Eyre in outback South Australia, and in 1923-24 flights were undertaken to provide various government departments and non-government agencies such as universities with aerial photography for planning, survey and exploratory purposes. Air Force leaders quickly discovered that the Government's expectations of the RAAF were varied



A Wapiti engaged in aerial photography for survey mapping in 1935

and at times focused on purely 'civilian' duties. When the Acting Chief of the Air Force in 1924 attempted to suggest that taking on even more duties of general benefit to the public would be inimical to efficiency, he was told in no uncertain terms that the Air Force was unlikely to get more money unless it did.

Perhaps galvanised by this harsh imperative, the RAAF took on a diverse range of tasks in the years before World War II. The RAAF played a leading role in surveying the Great Barrier Reef and Northern Australia generally, potential oil fields in Papua New Guinea, and the forestry resources of Tasmania; search and rescue missions in the waters of Port Phillip Bay and across outback Australia; supporting exploration in Antarctica; and conducting summer bushfire patrols, aerial crop-dusting, and daily meteorological flights for the Weather Bureau. So extensive was its involvement in civil work in this period that it almost seemed that the RAAF's

non-military duties had eclipsed its air combat role in Australia's defence.

While World War II provided the necessary incentive to turn the RAAF into a more professional and combat-oriented Service, in the post-war era civil demands on it did not diminish. Air Force resources were applied to assisting the CSIRO with rain-making trials and a host of other experimental tasks. RAAF aircraft and crews were delegated to supporting national mapping priorities in Australia and across the Pacific region. They were also called out to respond to a range of disaster relief and community support situations: from Cyclone Tracy in 1974 to the Victorian bushfires of 2009; from delivering emergency supplies following earthquakes, tsunamis, cyclones to lesser calamities such as droughts, famine and floods; from evacuating casualties after terrorist atrocities such as the 2002 and 2005 Bali bombings to evacuating stranded civilians caught up in wars, rebellions and civil strife; from long-distance searches for yachtsmen in peril in the Southern Ocean to helping the storm-ravaged fleet in the 1998 Sydney-to-Hobart yacht race. These tasks have become a necessary part of the RAAF's operations, quite apart from its primary mission of the defence of Australia as a vital element of the Australian Defence Force.



*Inside the last C130 en route to Darwin
(Op Bali Assist 2002)*

The men and women of the RAAF can have no expectation that the call on their Service will reduce at any time in the future, since the inherent flexibility, reach and responsiveness of air power, resident in the RAAF, makes it the first-choice option in emergencies. Because air power is indispensable to coping with the

vast distances associated with Australia's size and geographical location—no other agency of government is capable of responding so rapidly to many emergencies—a popular expectation has emerged that the RAAF will invariably respond whenever circumstances require. There is an evolving appreciation and visibility of the Air Force in Australia.

In the war-weary and disarmament-inclined days of the 1920s, there was a perception that money spent on defence was essentially a waste, and governments needed to extract some return on investment in the armed services by utilising them on projects for the larger public good wherever possible. More recently, the realisation has come that pursuing the national interest requires, more than ever, what is called a 'whole of government' approach. Because assuring national security involves more than one agency, assets and resources from across the sphere of government often have to be used in ways and forms for which they were not primarily acquired.

In this context, air power has come to assume ascendancy among the elements of national power that are available to government. Political leaders find it convenient and expedient to turn to the RAAF whenever there is a need for a timely, flexible, far-reaching but 'light-footed' response both in war and peace. While the RAAF is structured as a war-fighting element, its inherent flexibility allows it to respond in a timely manner to other national exigencies.

- *The RAAF has been involved in non-military duties in support of civilian national objectives since the beginning of its existence.*
- *Air power's reach and responsiveness makes the RAAF remain at the forefront of Government's response to emergency situations.*
- *Modern governments have recognised the special utility of air power as a practical instrument, and more freely wield air assets in pursuit of national interests, objectives and policies unrelated to defence.*



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