

***FROM PAST TO FUTURE:
THE AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE OF LAND/AIR OPERATIONS***

DOCTRINE AND COMMAND IN THE LAND/AIR BATTLE
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In addressing my subject, 'Doctrine and Command in the Land/Air Battle', and noting my present appointment, which entails permanent membership of the air power doctrine board and given the colour of my uniform, I could be regarded as a fifth columnist by both services, a sad but typical fate for many of us in 'purple' jobs.

Doctrine is not a word of romance, adventure and passion. In fact did you know that when Mandrake the Magician 'gestures hypnotically' he actually whispers the word 'doctrine' at his subject. If doctrine is the opiate of the military masses then at our higher echelons the word 'command' (and the arrangements for it) acts as a clarion call to arms.

To some officers, doctrine is like the castor oil bottle on the shelf at home: regarded with loathing and destined to stay firmly closed unless there is a dire emergency; then it is most reluctantly opened and consumed with distaste, and when taken has predictable results. Of course some favour this less formal definition of doctrine: 'Fundamental principles by which military forces guide their actions in support of national objectives. It is authoritative but requires judgement in its application'.¹ And so at this late hour I am to give you the poisoned chalice of doctrine, with the dagger of command aimed at your heart, to finish off the list of conference topics.

The sailors, soldiers and airmen of Australia have a magnificent reputation in twentieth century military history—one any nation would be proud of. Prominent within our popular history are the Anzac qualities that create the image—courage, self-sacrifice, a deep sense of decency and fair play, wonderful humour and mateship. These qualities were there, and are still in the ADF, in abundance. What was also there then but is not referred to nearly as much was a nascent but shrewd professionalism at the tactical and occasionally the operational level. It is this bent towards professionalism, more a national characteristic than an exclusively military one, which I feel will be the key to our proficiency in the future land/air battle. It is professionalism, and our need to do more with less, which will balance the fragmenting influences of tribalism and competition for resources.

Our early military records show that the significant events of Australia's army history are closely shadowed by the exploits of Australia's airmen; unlike a number of western military societies there is not the historical weight of tradition and tribalism in favour of the Army over Air Force. Nonetheless the same institutional impediments to full synergism are evident in the Army/RAAF relationship as in some (or most?) other comparable militaries. Perhaps though we have never quite reached these depths:

At the onset of World War II, General Gamelin, commander-in-chief in charge of the coordination of ground and air forces, transmitted his first general order ... to the Army only. When he finally transmitted it to General Paul Vuillemin, commander of the Air Force, he added a brief note that said: 'I am sure, that as during the Great War, the Air Force will be on the Army's side'.²

Another distinguished French soldier and military thinker was obviously not inclined to assign a decisive battle-winning role to his country's air force:

For the effects produced by bombing aircraft, terrible as they are, have something static about them. The flying machine itself cannot draw any advantage from its power. It is true that the ruins it leaves in its wake, the chronic terror it produces, have in the long run, a serious effect on the enemy, but these are indirect. Like artillery, of which it is in the final analysis, the development, an aircraft can destroy, but it cannot compel, cannot conquer, cannot occupy.³

Mind you, some historians ascribe the blame for the width of this tribal gulf partly to the zeal of air power proponents of the time:

It is one of the distressing tendencies of airpower theorists to argue themselves into a position of claiming too much for their chosen weapon. Airpower does not have to win wars alone in order to be decisive any more than does an army. True unification—what today we would call jointness—recognises that all weapons and services have unique strengths and weaknesses.⁴

But while in the early years in some countries, the jaundiced view of the zealots on both sides prevailed, in a few cases the pragmatic exploitation of emerging air power doctrine was most notable. A recent analysis of the role of the Luftwaffe in the Spanish civil war, the first modern use of air power, concludes that:

The Germans entered the war in Spain with a military doctrine that was effective, adaptable and ideally suited to a limited conflict. The key to victory lay in joint operations, the effective co-ordination of the air and ground battles. In 1936 Germany, alone of the major powers, possessed a comprehensive military doctrine that made joint operations the focus of their operational planning and training. The doctrine factor alone magnified the battlefield impact of the Condor Legion.⁵

This provides a quite pithy and apt paradigm for the ADF's modern circumstances: a very small but modern air force had a most disproportionate battlefield and campaign effect because of its sophisticated, integrated employment in supporting land operations. In a more relevant and comforting example, Macarthur had this to say about allied (including Australian) air/ground operations at Buna:

The outstanding military lesson of this campaign was the continuous calculated application of air power, inherent in the potentialities, of the air force, employed in the most intimate tactical and logistical union with ground troops.⁶

This is the past though, and the past can signpost the future but it cannot direct it. The future land/air battle in which the ADF will participate will be characterised by tremendous exploitation of the electromagnetic spectrum and by extremely high degrees of situational awareness at all levels, from weapon platforms to Cabinet. It will entail pinpoint lethality, giving truth to the 1960s 'see-hit-destroy' maxim. It will also be characterised by high levels of deception, and protection of crucial war-fighting assets. This will lead military commanders to the most complex considerations of counter-force or indirect approach concepts.

In acknowledging that the most crucial and difficult thing that our air force will do is to protect Australia's air space from incursion and Australian assets from air attack, a few things need to be said concerning the doctrinal emphases that this compels. Air Force is, and rightly will remain, preoccupied in terms of focus of training and materiel, with achieving regional excellence, and by implication superiority, in counter-air and strike operations. Maintaining the 'edge' in the future will only get harder. Some, and probably many in uniform, will say that even as a wealthy country we can barely afford to hold the line into the future in this regard.

Other roles will be to some extent peripheral to this. Yet we cannot afford to have an 'air force in being', marginalised like the British Grand Fleet in the First World War—optimised and reserved for a type of warfare that did not eventuate—and thus left on the shelf. Our Air Force must indeed be optimised for the major challenge of air defence but also must be robustly capable of other roles urgently necessary in the land and maritime environments.

Army's problem is of course different. Army, like Air Force, will recoil from the pure attritional battle wherein a trading of assets ultimately decides a military victory. But Air Force in comparative terms is able to operate in a world of virtual physics and formulae, wherein the effects of platforms and weapon systems, allied with a calculus of training and maintenance proficiency, allow shrewd predictions of outcomes. While such influences are not absent from the land environment, the uncertainties appear greater. Significantly greater difficulty with target detection and acquisition, much greater complexity in deciding and applying target effects, the relative inflexibility of deployment of land forces, the issue of collateral damage—all these, and more, differentiate the land battle environment from that of the air.

In order to win the land battle swiftly, decisively and economically, the land tactical commander will require highly capable reconnaissance, surveillance and target acquisition resources and will then need highly potent and flexible fire support and manoeuvre means, to reduce the incidence and level of attritional engagements. Army's approach will not depart from this time worn adage of Nathan Bedford Forrest (1821-1877): 'I always make it a rule to get there first with the most men' (widely misquoted as, 'I git thar fustest with the mostest men').

Aerial platforms will continue into the foreseeable future to represent the most effective hosts for these capabilities, notwithstanding the following cautionary note which underscores the sensitivity of collateral damage in limited war: 'significant political limitations were placed on the conduct of the wars in Korea and Vietnam, a constraint which sounded a warning for the use of offensive air power in particular'.⁷

Army must be optimised in its doctrine, organisation, etc to exploit fully the most modern, lethal capabilities available—many of them emanating from Air Force platforms. But also Army must be prepared to do the job with less. The role of joint doctrine in this process is to encapsulate, in a rigorous yet digestible form, the war fighting ethic and philosophy of the overall force and its parts, taking into account present and near future technologies and organisations.

The ADF's land and air doctrine must be flexible and responsive to the spectrum and scale of modern conflict. Land doctrine must comprehend the possibility that the land battle might be subordinate to the air battle, in terms of the unavailability of some of air force's multi-role assets; in those circumstances land operations must still be possible of success in the absence of significant offensive air support and some degradation in other types of air support. Air Force doctrine on the other hand must acknowledge the possibility that when the risk from enemy air strike/interdiction is low the majority of the air effort may well be turned to supporting land operations in order to hasten the successful conclusion of the campaign.

The Army accepts that a future conflict will place a tremendous premium on air power and implicitly understands its own inability in its present form to achieve its missions without a benign air environment. The Army refutes, however, the suggestion that air power or even air power and sea control can render the sea/air gap largely impermeable. For that to be true given the size of our continent, Air Force and Navy and other national assets would need to be much bigger and more capable than we are likely to be able to afford. Air Force accepts that the application of air power alone is unlikely to protect Australian sovereignty adequately or even to deter conflict or achieve lasting conflict resolution.

Much argument across the decades and not a little angst has attached to the proposition of command of air power assets. I contend that ownership has never been the issue, nor has the 'dedication' or 'guarantee' of assets. Rather the essence to their optimal employment has been common understanding and acceptance of ideas by the protagonists and mutual confidence that understanding exists, and mutual trust that wisdom and goodwill underpin land/air operations. This happy state can exist temporarily based on individuals, but I contend it cannot long survive without doctrine. (I may say parenthetically in this land/air forum that the material and intellectual integrations necessary to achieve a unified approach in the future land/air battle must also include the maritime environment.) The following statement concerning command of air assets must not be seen as a line in the sand drawn by airmen but as an invitation to their other service colleagues to gain the understanding necessary to utilise the air resource effectively:

Unity [of air power] does not mean indivisibility'. Air power is inherently divisible. Some nations can, and do, successfully divide their air power forces ... direction of all air power assets must be centralised so that one authority exercises command ... command must be at the highest appropriate level, exercised by a single authority expert in the application of air power. Control should be delegated as necessary.⁸

In fact another quotation from the same source places this nicely in context:

the organisation of what was the most successful air campaign in history [the 1991 Gulf War], was based on the maxim of unity. Unity in an overall sense was achieved through the appointment of a joint force commander, and unity of air power was afforded through the appointment of an air component commander.⁹

We have all the ingredients for military success—high levels of education, great self confidence, access to excellent capability and training technology, the national affluence to buy these into our force structure and the military ethic necessary to use all these in a sophisticated and effective way. What we need to have is the comprehensive environmental understanding and the will to exploit the whole range of defence capabilities. The common criticism levelled between the services is not one of ill-will or incompetence but a lack of understanding. The solution to this is education and the foundation of education is doctrine.

You could fire cannons through Army officers' messes without endangering more than a tiny handful of officers who had read the *Air Power Manual*. A similar exercise in RAAF messes would entail no massacre of readers of Army's fundamentals of land warfare. Yet we each bemoan the other services ignorance of these tenets. But simple knowledge is not understanding. Each body of doctrine is true in itself, yet in a modern context they are also fundamentally interdependent. Understanding this complementarity is the key to the three dimensional vision necessary for success in the future land/air battle. Doctrine must describe and prove this nexus in a convincing and attractive way which creates a new horizon for air and land warfare practitioners while leaving them their narrower focus on their own environments.

The essence is not to change the philosophy of the army to that of air power or to change that of the air force to one of a continental strategy. Rather it is to create a breed of commanders who fundamentally understand the strengths and weaknesses to be exploited and protected in both approaches.

So it may be said, as a kind of shorthand summary of what qualities the ADF's land/air battle doctrine ought to possess, that it should be right, relevant, ready and read. But at what level do we need to focus the spotlight of training and indoctrination so that this potential synergy and exploitation of capabilities can bear the ripest fruit? Surely our commanders must be our primary targets as it is they who will interact at the decisive level. We should however work on two principles: first, not trying to teach old dogs (or commanders) new tricks and secondly, the need for understanding of joint land/air doctrine to pervade all of the war fighting staffs. Thus we should have a multilateral approach to the challenge. In attempting to illustrate this point let me remark that the wisest, most determined air marshal, general or admiral, able and intent on exploiting the synergies available within the force, can easily be thwarted by the narrow single service bias of majors, commanders or group captains in the execution of the plan.

Is there some simple and all embracing formula to create this culture of harmonious understanding? Nothing ever is as simple or comprehensive as we might wish it to be but here is an attempt:

- Continued and increasing emphasis on formal joint professional training (for example, retain ADFA, JSSC and ACDSS) and introduce an ADF staff college as a matter of priority.
- Further development of joint training agencies such as ADFWC and the Joint Operations Simulation System.
- Logical development of joint staffs.
- Creation of a joint staff career stream with some cachet of elitism attached.
- The clearest possible focus on rigorously debated and challenged joint warfare doctrine which is current and relevant to Australia's security needs.

Let me propose an interesting approach in considering the role that the ADF's doctrine should play in shaping the way we fight a future land/air battle. In the ADF we are inclined to see our doctrine as the extrusion or essence of experience, leavened by the temporary realities of funding, social dictates and the like. Doctrine at any given time has a bedrock quality—until it is replaced by a new body of doctrine imbued with similar qualities. Much US Armed Forces doctrine is the same—much but not all. Some has the nuance of a philosophical proposition, of untried and challenging concepts, meant to guide and to test but not to govern or prescribe. The Air/Land Battle doctrine of 1982 was like this. It became Air/ Land battle 2000 which recently gave way to the US Army's 'Force XXI'. Could we similarly use doctrine with a designed short shelf life, to test and experiment in this way, ready to confirm, embellish or discard? It is my view that we are in a *de facto* sense doing that already, but in a less than revolutionary way.

Exercises such as K 95 show clearly the tantalising closeness of truly joint land/air operations. My unit conducted an exercise analysis of K 95 and it was a thrill to see the familiar and powerfully effective way in which Air Force and Army interoperated in executing some crucial land/air operations such as the airborne/airland operations and strategic and tactical air transport operations. That has come through practice, goodwill and application. Excellence is transitory but there is no need to fear that that part of the relationship shall atrophy given the high operational imperative underpinning the capability. My confidence is not as high that we have it right over the doctrinal and organisational framework to achieve effective air space control and offensive support. In the future we are going to need to work hard on reconnaissance, surveillance and target acquisition in the land/air battle. In fact, the general area of targeting, both in terms of target profile and target effect, should be a subject of close, joint Air Force/Army scrutiny and debate. The future land/air battle will require that the application of fire support of all natures be swift, sudden, precise and overwhelming. Working back from the target effect which Army will advise and require of Air Force, there is much to be done in both services to create these four outcomes in application.

Future doctrine which describes the interoperating of Air Force and Army must comprehend the practical, ongoing limitations which resourcing will place on training and exercising to achieve proficiency. We must look carefully and thoroughly for ways and means to make inter-service understanding more profound and fundamental and less fragile and requiring of constant practise. We must strive for C4I systems which allow rapid and comprehensive information flow. We must look for target acquisition and designation systems of great ubiquity, reliability and discrimination, matched by precision weapon systems that, combined with all the former factors, reduce the training burden as far as possible.

Army must be trained and eager to 'work up' to the most sophisticated capability the ADF can achieve in the land/air battle; Air Force must be trained and ready to 'work down' from a full-on counter-air and strike posture to virtually full on anti-surface forces and interdiction roles.

Much of the debate on the approach to the land/air battle centres on what the Air Force will or will not be able to do for the Army in terms of manoeuvre and fire support. I suggest that this approach is too restrictive and that there are areas of high priority air operations, beyond ground defence of bases, where we should be ready to take a wider view. An example: on the matter of the offensive counter-air role, it is interesting to note the following statement from the *Air Power Manual*:

the utility of naval and ground forces in contributing to OCA attack should always be considered if they offer lower cost options for achieving the objective. Naval Gunfire Support (NGS) has proved useful in the past and may do so again in the future ... in some circumstances, for example if specific intelligence is imprecise, effectiveness and surprise might be better achieved by special forces. Special forces offer a low cost but viable alternative for small targets at the lower levels of conflict.¹⁰

This statement is well and good as far as it goes but to my mind it is way too restrictive. For a start it seems to consider land or maritime assets only in the destruction role; it does not acknowledge that even a mission as heavily air-biased as offensive counter-air is likely to be can, and almost certainly will, have other Service components as part of the operation: for

example in roles such as reconnaissance and surveillance, deception, perhaps target designation. The operation will be joint. The days of 'oh, that's a RAAF show' or 'that's an Army operation' have gone. This observation in my view applies to just about all other hitherto single service operations. The corollary is that the operational commander conducting, for example, OCA will no doubt need profound expertise in the primary discipline but will also need expertise, or expert advice, in the use of the supporting forces.

I am not suggesting that there are major flaws in the *Air Power Manual* or RAAF's approach to doctrine but I do contend that all services need to display this wider ambit or horizon in their doctrine which, while maintaining clear and narrow professional focus on key missions, does so in the context of the likely joint interaction that performance of the mission will involve.

We need to continue our own modest revolution in military affairs. As befits a small but highly sophisticated defence force we are properly cautious about radical changes to our force structure: mistakes or experiments gone wrong can have a very significant ripple effect in a force our size. We can however contemplate the mildly radical intellectual shift from insularity to interdependence.

A final quotation, emanating from the new dawn heralded by the breathtaking effectiveness of air power in preparing the battlefield in the Gulf War:

Our interviews with officers of all services suggest that this service-centred focus is alive and well. The services' after-action reports read more like public relations documents than like serious and thoughtful analyses of what happened and why ... there is a tone of advocacy and a not so subtle emphasis of [sic] the perceived shortcomings of other services in these articles and documents.¹¹

The land/air battle is not one to be fought first between sister Services before being expanded to include enemies of the state.

Endnotes

1. Australian Defence Force Publication 1 (ADFP 1).
2. Pascal Vennesson, 'Institution and Airpower: the making of the French Air Force', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 18: 1 (March 1995), 36-67 at p 47.
3. Charles de Gaulle, *The Army of the Future [Vers l'armee de metier]* (1st edn, 1934); repub Westport, CT, 1976), pp 151-52, quoted in Vennesson, 'Institution and Air Power', p 46.
4. Phillip S Meilinger, 'Proselytiser and Prophet: Alexander P de Seversky and American Airpower', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 18: 1 (March 1995), 7-35, at p 30.
5. James S Corum, 'The Luftwaffe and the coalition air war in Spain. 1936- 1939', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 18: 1 (March 1995), 68-90 at p 83.
6. US Joint Publication, 3-56.1, *Command and Control for Joint Air Operations*, 14 November 1994, ch 1, p 4.
7. DI(A) AAP 1000, *The Air Power Manual* (2nd edn), Brunswick, Victoria, 1994, 3.17.
8. Ibid, 3.58-59.
9. Ibid, 3.60.
10. Ibid, 5.29.
11. James A Winnefeld and Dana J Johnson, *Joint Air Operations: Pursuit of Unity in Command and Control, 1942-1991*, Annapolis, MD, 1993, p 169.