

## **Richard Williams and the Defence of Australia**

**Alan Stephens**

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The two previous “*On Target*” articles have outlined the unsurpassed contribution made to Australian air power by Sir Richard Williams. This article continues that story by describing Williams’ strategy for defending Australia.

It was Williams who, almost one-hundred years ago, first defined the fundamental nature of Australia’s defence challenge and established the enduring characteristics of the RAAF’s strategic thinking. Remarkably, the concept of operations he proposed in 1925 eventually became the basis of Australia’s official defence strategy in 1987.

In 1923 Williams went to England to attend the British Army staff course and then the RAF course, stopping-over on his way home for further study in Canada and the United States. On resuming command of the RAAF in February 1925 he was deeply disturbed by the government’s lack of interest in air power.

Williams immediately began drafting a concept of operations, and by May had completed a “Memorandum Regarding the Air Defence of Australia”.

“Memorandum” was something of an understatement because the document contained sixty-eight pages and a great deal of detail, analysing such issues as Australia’s strategic setting, Japan’s war economy, a proposed RAAF force structure, technical and personnel matters, logistics, costs, local aircraft production, and training.

The lack of support for the Air Force was, Williams argued, inconsistent with modern theories of warfare, which postulated that the aeroplane would decide future conflicts. Drawing on the inherent qualities of air power, he pointed to his service’s unique ability to “pass over defences, armies and fleets and penetrate into those portions of a country and attack [targets] which previously have been immune”.

While geography and the modest range of existing aircraft made the European strategy of bombing an enemy’s homeland impracticable for Australia, air power could still provide the key to national security by controlling the sea lines of communication.

Williams suggested that the main justification for maintaining an army and navy was to prevent an enemy from occupying Australia, yet that was an outlook which more than any other demanded the use of aircraft.

Command of the sea was a prerequisite for an invasion. Given Australia’s defensive challenge of immense distance, small population and limited infrastructure, the other two services could never be expected to provide the necessary level of security against invasion (a judgment which was implicitly acknowledged in the so-called Singapore strategy, under which Australia relied on the British Royal Navy to defend it).

Aircraft, with their speed, range, and reconnaissance and striking power, were the obvious solution. It was also reasonable to assume, Williams continued, that no enemy could expect to secure a lodgement in Australia without first establishing air superiority, and fighter aircraft were the best means of defence against air attack.

Williams identified five roles for the RAAF: air superiority (which would be limited to specific locations, such as overhead an invasion area); army cooperation; navy cooperation; long-distance reconnaissance over land and sea; and attacks against enemy targets on land and sea.

There was no prevarication about which country might threaten Australia. In calculating the number of aircraft the RAAF needed, Williams based his figures on Japan's military capabilities.

Taking into account training, operational reserves, and the wide dispersion of the vital areas which might have to be defended, Williams proposed a force structure of thirty squadrons and 324 aircraft. Special emphasis was placed on the attack force, which he described as the component most relevant to Australia's needs. Because aircraft were able to strike harder, faster, and at greater distances than any other weapon system for the same cost, a well-equipped and well-trained strike force would attack the enemy at sea "long before he reaches the coast".

But institutional biases and faith-based thinking could not, like battleships, easily be made to change direction, and Williams' plan was ignored by the government.

During the inter-war years, the RAN received about 60 per cent of all defence appropriations, the Army about 30 per cent, and the RAAF 10 per cent. Despite that financial largesse, the RAN amounted to little more than an auxiliary squadron of the RN, with no capability to defend Australia without major reinforcement.

The ultimate consequence was that, when Japan launched the war in the Pacific in December 1941, Australia was dangerously unprepared and vulnerable. Yet had one-quarter of naval expenditure been invested in next-generation technology, Australia might have fielded some 500 strike/reconnaissance aircraft armed with bombs and torpedos.

Almost fifty years later, in arguably what was the most significant Defence White Paper ever published, *The Defence of Australia 1987*, the superseding importance of protecting Australia by controlling the maritime approaches to our north and north-west was formally endorsed.

This was, in effect, yet another acknowledgement of Richard Williams' extraordinary legacy.

*Dr Alan Stephens is a research fellow of the Williams Foundation, and a visiting fellow at UNSW Canberra*