

Historic Book Review

Basic Principles of Air Warfare

Written anonymously under the pseudonym '*Squadron Leader*'

Published by Gale & Polden Ltd (Aldershot) 1927

Reviewed by Gp Capt Neville Parton

The first question that has to be considered with regard to this publication is one that is similar to many early air power offerings, namely why should it be of interest to us now? It is certainly not a publication that is well known to most air power enthusiasts, and did not even receive a particularly warm reception at the time¹. The answer is that firstly it was written at a particularly interesting point in the development of thinking about air power within the RAF, secondly that the quality of the thought which lay behind it could be seen as being a half-a-century (if not more) ahead of its time, and thirdly that the story behind its production is both fascinating and Machiavellian in equal measures – and has been the subject of a considerable degree of misapprehension. We will therefore begin by considering when it was written, and by whom, before going on to examine the contents and its route to publication in a little more detail.

The year of publication for *Basic Principles*, 1927, lies between the dates of issue of the two major RAF doctrinal publications of the inter-war years: CD 22 (the *RAF Operations Manual*) which was issued in 1922, and AP 1300 (the

RAF War Manual) which was delivered in 1928. However the gulf which lay between them was greater than the relatively short period perhaps suggests, as they had fundamentally different approaches to air power in terms of the central role of an air force during war time. In other words, this was a phase when the RAF's thinking about air power was going through some considerable change, and although *Basic Principles* appears closer in time to AP 1300, it has a very different approach in many areas – which is what makes it so interesting, given the background and position of the writer.

The author obviously chose his pen-name with a degree of prescience, as he remained in the rank associated with the title for almost his entire career. In fact until recently there was still a degree of conjecture over the author's identity, with English referring to the fact that it was "believed to have been a Sqn Ldr C G Burge, who was Trenchard's Personal Assistant"². In fact it has now been proved beyond all doubt that Burge was indeed the author³ which is fortunate as it we can consider the individual in some detail, for this was not the first manuscript that he had succeeded in getting published – he had already produced a very readable history of the wartime exploits of 100 Squadron under the title of *Annals of 100 Squadron* in 1919. And the reason that he was so familiar with this was quite straightforward: he had been the CO of 100 Squadron during the last year of World War 1, and during its entire period as a Night Bomber squadron acting as part of the Independent Force operating under Trenchard's control, equipped first of all with DH9s and

later with Handley Page 0400s. However this had not been his only command; he had joined the R.F.C. from the infantry in 1915, and went on to command 3 squadrons during the Great War: Numbers 33 and 36 (both Home Defence squadrons) before moving to 100 Squadron. After the war he was at one point the Adjutant at the newly established RAF College at Cranwell, before ending up at the R.N. War College in 1925 – from where he was posted directly to the position of PA to Trenchard in July 1926. Perhaps he is best known as being the uncle to one Douglas Bader – and the man who arguably first introduced him to the Royal Air Force.

So, with the scene set, what does the book actually say regarding air warfare? Trying to synthesise down the 147 pages of ideas for a review is not easy as there is a considerable amount of original thought contained within it. The book itself consists of 7 chapters plus a brief introit, and does reveal a definite staff college influence, such as the use of the newly-identified (at least by the British military) principles of war, which is perhaps not surprising in that Burge probably wrote the majority of it whilst at the Naval War College. However, what is perhaps most useful from our perspective is to consider certain key areas where the author's thoughts are markedly different from those that the Ministry would reveal the following year in their War Manual.

The first is the continued emphasis throughout on the first role of an air force being the gaining of air superiority. Although this was certainly part of CD 22's thinking, it was not the case for AP 1300, which was a much more polemic piece that saw the bomber as

the instrument of national salvation. Moreover the reason for the gaining of air superiority is also interesting, as this was seen as an enabler to allow the army, navy and air campaigns to proceed without undue interference – and that brings us to the second critical difference. *Basic Principles* is at its heart a book about the application of air power in a joint context – and a plea for the Air Force's existence to be considered along these lines. "The author does not accept the belief that the forces of the air will supplant those of the sea and the land. He prefers to regard all three services as essentially complementary." And whilst seeking a joint approach, he had a straightforward Clausewitzian understanding of the nature of war: "Economic pressure and attacks against moral may, indeed, assist in the defeat of a nation and its armed forces, but the surest and quickest method of winning a war is to defeat the armed forces of the enemy." So the emphasis on the gaining of air superiority, a truly joint approach to warfare, and a Clausewitzian approach all mark this out as vastly different from what would become official RAF doctrine less than a year later.

But perhaps most importantly Burge explicitly saw the importance of developing doctrine to take account of the impact that air power had on the strategic scene, "There is only one method of fitting our intellects to be ready for war; and that is by studying the history of air warfare, and by no means should we neglect naval and land warfare.", but bearing in mind that taking a inflexible approach was dangerous, especially as the history of war in the air was so short "To dogmatize about the employment of aircraft in war is futile, inasmuch as

we have comparatively little historical guidance to rely upon.” And in terms of what air superiority actually meant, it is clear that Burge saw command of the air as analogous to command of the sea, with absolute command unlikely ever to occur. He defined air superiority as ‘A state of moral and material superiority over the enemy, which prevents him from seriously interfering with hostile air operations, and at the same time denies him the successful employment of his own forces.’ It was seen as a precursor to all air operations on a large scale, and necessary for all land or sea operations in which air forces were going to be extensively used, with the secondary benefits of obtaining a great ‘liberty of action’ as you know what the enemy is doing but they are denied similar information relating to your forces. Furthermore it enables the ability to interfere directly with the enemy’s forces, lines of communications and so on – with the hope that this will prove to be of significant benefit. Burge also considered that air superiority would generally be limited in both time and space, and that the key would be in gaining the right amount of air superiority over the required area at the desired time.

He also attacked head-on the concept of air power winning wars by itself, pointing out several major conceptual flaws with the view that, up until then, had probably been best expressed in *Air Power and War Rights*, wherein Air Forces could win war by directly attacking the moral of the population. But Burge cogently pointed out that in pursuing such an approach, a nation would leave its own land, sea and air forces open to attack by the enemy, and at the same time grant the enemy’s forces considerable freedom of action.

Furthermore he came down firmly on the side of another analyst at the time, General Bird⁵, in believing that the pressure which led to public opinion forcing government to sue for peace had generally come only after defeat of a nation’s armed forces – as from that point on no protection of the public was possible. Another particularly effectively made point was that the approach outlined by Spaight assumed that the air forces of one power could effectively ignore those of another, which was patently not the case during the previous war, where in fact the attrition rate amongst aircraft on offensive operations had become a serious drain on the resources of all belligerents⁶. He also identified that with regard to the moral effect of bombing in the First World War, this generally had less to do with the damage caused or casualties inflicted than it did with the publicly-perceived efficacy of the efforts being made to defend them. In fact he makes a telling comparison between the belief at the time in the efficacy of attacking the moral of the enemy’s population directly and the operations in the Dardanelles in 1915, and concludes that in both cases that the problem lay in an overemphasis on the advantages to be gained if the approach was successful without adequate consideration of whether the approach was likely to succeed, and if it did not what the consequences would be of failure⁷.

However it would be wrong to endow Burge with infallible insight. He did suffer from a very understandable problem common to a number of contemporaneous authors, namely identifying the wrong technology in terms of future development. In his case this came in the field of naval air power, where he saw aircraft carriers as being of

limited use in the future, but considered airships far more suited to extending the influence of air forces at sea. However this is a very minor criticism in what is otherwise a tour de force of analysis and insight.

Now knowing something about the author, and the contents, it is appropriate to look at how the book has been perceived as fitting into the pantheon of air power thought. For some considerable period of time it has been assumed that it was produced at Trenchard's behest⁸, in line with his publically-stated desire to find a 'Clausewitz or Mahan of the air'⁹. However in fact nothing could have been farther from the truth, as an entry in Liddell-Hart's diary for Wednesday 9 February 1927 quite clearly reveals:

Sqdn-Ldr. Burge, Trenchard's Personal Assistant, was lunching also with Raynsford and told us that after the Air Ministry had passed his book on basic principles of Air Warfare, Trenchard had banned it because he was afraid of criticism, especially from Sykes. Burge said my description of Trenchard as an inarticulate genius, incapable of rational argument or expression, fitted exactly. I offered to tell Hoare about book ban – Trenchard had said he did not wish any officer to write books...¹⁰

In fact, Trenchard was actively seeking to prevent publication of *Basic Principles*, rather than encouraging it – and from the contents it is perhaps easy to see why. This was not a book which sat comfortable alongside Trenchard's own thoughts as laid out in the 'War Role of An Air Force', nor AP 1300, as unlike them it did not proselytise the virtue of independent air operations. What is unclear is how,

given Trenchard's opposition, the book did appear later that year? And why did Burge choose General Ironsides to write the foreword, with whom Trenchard had fallen out only a few years before¹²? What is certain is that not long after its publication Burge left his post as PSO, and moved to undertake a short course at the Army Staff College, from which he would retire the following year – still in the rank of squadron leader. However Burge did not completely lose influence with the Service, as he went on to be the very first editor of the *RAF Quarterly* (*Air Power Review's* spiritual ancestor!) in 1930, and also ended up as a member of the Bombing Committee during the Second World War, although it is noticeable that he never wrote any further books on air strategy or warfare.

In summary, *Basic Principles* is an important book in terms of air power thinking within the RAF in the mid-1920s, but not for the reasons that are generally understood. Instead of revealing the RAF's innermost thoughts on their agreed doctrine of air power, it instead reveals something of the turmoil that was going on within the Service as a clear doctrinal position was established, although as has been noted by a number of other authors that eventual position was to owe far more to articles of faith rather than cogent analysis and synthesis. But *Basic Principles* is also interesting in its own right as it reveals what would now be regarded as a far more mature and 'joint' approach to air power, based on an explicitly stated desire to produce doctrine based on actual lessons learned from the Great War, rather than unproven hypotheses and fanciful conjecture. The supposition that the first and most fundamental reason for the existence of an air force is to gain air superiority is one that would

certainly meet with approbation from most modern theorists, as is the fact that the reason for gaining it is to provide freedom of manoeuvre for both land and sea based forces. The need to have a common objective at the strategic level is also one that would find much favour today. It is interesting to speculate what might have happened if Burge's doctrinal position had become the accepted learning for the RAF, and what difference in turn that might have made to the relationships with the Navy and Army during the late 1920s and early 1930s. If nothing else it makes clear the perils that can befall the keen air power theorist – and ones in those days that even an exemplary war record could not rescue you from.

Notes

1 'Review of Books', *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute* 72 (1927), p 468-9 ("... the work, while strictly orthodox and applicable to the period following directly on the Great War, somehow appears to lack vision as to the future.")

2 Allan D English, "The Raf Staff College and the Evolution of British Strategic Bombing Policy, 1922-1929," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* Vol 16 No 3, no. September 1993 (1993). p 431

3 LH 11/1927/1

4 Main chapter headings were: Chapter I - Introductory, Chapter II - Air Superiority, Air Combat and Superiority of Moral, Importance of Production and Reserves, Chapter III - Offence and Defence, Principle of Concentration, Principle of Surprise, Principle of Economy of Force, Maintenance of the Object, Diversions, Chapter IV - The Principal Objective of Air Forces, Introductory to Combined Operations, Co-operation, Chapter V - The Influence of Air Power on Sea Warfare, Chapter VI - The Influence of Air Power on Land Warfare and finally Chapter VII - Conclusions.

5 Squadron Leader, *Basic Principles of Air Warfare*, (Aldershot, Gale & Polden, 1927) p 55.

6 And a major factor in the planning of operations – which of course Burge was well aware of from his time on the IF. This would also of course come to be a driving factor in the operations of Bomber Command during the Second World War.

7 Squadron Leader, p 58.

8 English, "The Raf Staff College and the Evolution of British Strategic Bombing Policy, 1922-1929."

p 424.

9 Air Marshal Sir H M Trenchard, "Aspects of Service Aviation", *The Army Quarterly*, 1921, p 18.
10 LH 11/1927/1

11 The Air Staff, "The War Aim of the Royal Air Force", Confidential Document 64 (Air Staff Memo 43), October 1928.

12 Trenchard Archive, MFC 140/5 (letter to Air Cdre Brooke-Popham from PS to CAS dated 3rd December 1923).

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