

Strategy for Victory: The Development of British Tactical Air Power 1919-1943

By David Ian Hall

**Dr Hall has done
air power
practitioners
a great service
in this book, and
I unhesitatingly
recommend it.**

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Reviewed by Gp Capt Ian Shields

The British Army's lack of air support during the opening campaigns of the Second World War stands out as one of the great ironies of that conflict. The British, after all, perfected air support during the great War, and, in 1918, possessed what many at the time believed was the finest tactical air force in the world. Yet, by 1939, co-operation between the Army and the Royal Air Force was minimal at best.

So begins the Preface to this excellent book by Dr David Hall, one of the air power lecturers at the Joint Services Command and Staff College (and therefore someone probably well-known to many of the readers). This immaculately researched volume, based (as he acknowledges) on one of his academic theses, is very well written, easy to read and insightful throughout. The pace is good but this is not a long book: the main body is only just over 150 pages although the extensive notes, superb bibliography (if only I had the time to read them all!) and good index occupy another 90 pages. So what has Dr Hall to say?

He sets the scene well in the Introduction, looking at the rapid development of air power and of Air/Land co-operation in particular. He highlights the dysfunctional early approach the British adopted but how, once the First World War gathered pace, a more 'combined-arms' (rather than fully integrated, or Joint, as we would recognise it today) approach was adopted, with air power playing an increasingly valuable role, particularly in the Battle of Amiens in August 1918 and the subsequent final 100 days of the War. By the end the Great War, air power had developed all the roles that

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we still recognise today, but of most note airmen had come to recognise the benefits of centralised command and control while their Army colleagues not surprisingly, disagreed with their 'upstart air force colleagues.' They wanted to retain 'their' military support aviation, and they were not inclined to pursue the development of its wider application'. The Armistice denied the opportunity to address this key command and control issue, and this growing divergence of opinion sowed the seeds for the bitter inter-War rivalry that, largely financial driven, was conspicuous for the intensity and vehemence with which the two Services attacked each other.

And it is this rivalry that Dr Hall traces through the first half of his book. The very survival of the independent air arm through the 1920s and into the 1930s is well documented elsewhere, and he rightly does not concentrate on this issue, instead drawing (correctly, in my opinion) the implications for Air/Land co-operation. The rivalry was bitter and prolonged, and in part forced the Air Ministry's hand into writing (some very good) doctrine. This doctrine stressed the strategic value of air power and against the writing of the early air power proponents (Douhet, Mitchell, et al) it is not surprising that the Air Force's emphasis was on bombing. However, Army Co-Operation was being addressed, not least by Slessor, initially at the RAF Staff College but latterly in the Air Ministry. But the period was, as Dr Hall skilfully draws out, dominated by a seemingly determined bid by the Army to regain control of the fledgling RAF and equally determined efforts by the CAS to retain its independence. The great sadness, as Dr Hall points

out on page 37, was that the 2 sides were just starting to meet to address the shortcomings when the Second World War broke out.

The initial days of the War are addressed succinctly and with little emotion, before the book goes on to examine in some detail the analysis of the causes of the failure in France. Dr Hall examines in depth the findings of the Bartholomew Committee which looked at the campaign that led to the fall of France and the Dunkirk evacuation, and its insistence that the Army needed its own air force including dive-bombers, because that was what the Luftwaffe had offered the German Army. This, of course, completely missed the point and, as Dr Hall highlights: '...Recent war experience, noted the airmen, confirmed that success on the ground depended on superiority in the air'. The inevitable tussle followed, but (perhaps fortuitously for the RAF) resource reality came to the fore and it was admitted that the Army could not raise and train its own force: compromise was required. The result was an agreement to form, in November 1940, an Army Co-operation Command though whether this would work was unclear, and Britain did not have the luxury of time at this point in the war.

The first half of this book ends with a look at the preliminary campaigns in North Africa. By contrast with France, there was some good news to be had here in terms of co-operation. While, as Dr Hall highlights, the severe shortage of assets for both the Army and the RAF, but particularly for the latter, required a pragmatic approach and, bolstered undoubtedly by the fortuitous combination of characters on

both sides, great results were achieved. Indeed, many of the later successes and templates for co-operation have their roots in this period: the attachment of a Senior Air Staff Officer to the GOC's HQ; the creation of (army) Air Intelligence Liaison Cells to front-line squadrons; the discovery (when they arrived in theatre) of the robustness and flexibility of the Hurricane; and, above all, the decision to establish the Operational-level HQs for both the Army and RAF on contiguous sites ahead of Operation Compass in 1940. Great things were achieved against the Italians, but both the diversion to support Greece (and in particular the disastrous involvement in Crete) and the arrival of Rommel soon undid much of the good work and in the aftermath recriminations again flew. This time, though, the RAF received the support from above and with the removal of Wavell as GOC and the arrival of Auchinleck and Tedder, the stage was set for the success that follows. Here though, I have one minor criticism of Dr Hall's analysis: he pays insufficient attention, perhaps, to the relatively long and successful relationship between the two Services in the Middle East during the Empire Policing period when discussing the situation in 1939/1940, but this is but a minor omission in otherwise excellent coverage and consideration.

The somewhat shorter second half of this volume looks at how a system (arguably THE system) of air support was subsequently organised. In looking first at the shortcomings and then dwelling less on the success, Dr Hall could be charged with dwelling on failure; this is emphatically not the case as it is only by setting out the much less well-known shortcomings that he

is able to explain as clearly as he does the subsequent successes in the Western Desert. But first, he reviews the ongoing attempts at solving the problems of co-operation back in the UK. Personality, entrenched views and blatant mistrust still abounded at the upper levels and undermined the real progress being made lower down. Things started to come to a head in the middle of 1941 when the Army identified the need for 3,888 aircraft for Army Co-operation duties of various sorts (still including dive bombers); the entire front-line strength of the RAF at that point was some 300 aircraft less than that figure. As Dr Hall highlights, there continued a lack of understanding of how and why the Germans achieved so much success: the Air Staff thought in terms of creating favourable air situations while the Army hankered after direct command and control. There were faults on both sides, and Dr Hall carefully guides the reader through the trials and tribulations that involved the Prime Minister himself, and rightly points out that Britain was, throughout 1941 and much of 1942, doing all she could just to survive; there was little realistic chance of the RAF supporting the Army's training for a (non-existent) European campaign when fighting the Battle of the Atlantic and providing air defence of the UK homeland!

But this book then moves onto a happier upland: the overall success story that was the Western Desert. Again, Dr Hall shows his strength of analysis by resisting the temptation to leap into a discourse on that theatre of operations alone, instead he concentrates on the rise of the Command and Control apparatus, the parallel improvements both in the desert and back in Whitehall and the

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timely and decisive involvement by Churchill in September 1941. That, combined with some very successful trials and exercises in Egypt, led to the significant advances against Rommel that culminated in El Alamein.

In his next chapter, Dr Hall highlights one final spat back in London between General Sir Alan Brooke, CIGS, and Portal. CIGS kicked off by renewing the demand for immediate and dedicated Army support, but now amounting to 4,101 aircraft(!). Portal's rejection of the accusations of lack of co-operation centred on practicalities: the War Office confused 'lack of co-operation with a lack of means to co-operate'. Brooke does not come out well from Dr Hall's consideration of the awkward year of 1942, although Brooke's position could have been due to his own personal experiences of the Dunkirk retreat; however, a combination of Churchill's firm direction, the logic of Portal's position and the demonstrable successes in Egypt swayed the argument. What came out of this argument was, though, a great success: it set the stage for the victory in the Western Desert but more importantly, as Dr Hall emphasises, through the Slessor report set the model for what was to follow in 1944 in Normandy and through to Berlin: the Second Allied Tactical Airforce with its Command and Control arrangements and emphasis on the favourable air situation above the troops.

The final chapters take an almost triumphant gallop across the (initial defeats then) victories in North Africa and what was to follow with the Second Allied Tactical Air Force in France and Germany. The lessons were, finally, learned and air power became a critical

tool in land campaigns. Much of what emerged by the end of 1943 is still recognisable as best practice today, a point that Dr Hall could perhaps have emphasised more in his conclusion.

This is a very good book and addresses in excellent manner the previous lack of consideration of how British tactical air power doctrine developed from the Armistice to the end of 1943. It seems almost petty to criticise, but I have three minor irritations: first, the photographs and maps are sparse and the former would have benefited from being produced on glossy paper; however, that is more the fault of the publisher than of the author. Which brings me to my second point: an academic, not mainstream, imprint has published this book and consequently it would be very expensive to buy: Amazon is presently quoting £66.50 (and that is at a discount!). This is a great shame because this book deserves to be widely read. Finally, in criticising Army high command so freely (and with much justification based both on his research and hindsight) Dr Hall perhaps takes the pro-RAF view just a fraction too far, which will cause the hackles of some readers, particularly of a 'green' persuasion to rise. This would be a great shame because they should read this, if only to offset the 'utterly, utterly useless' school of thought. Dr Hall has done air power practitioners a great service in this book, and I unhesitatingly recommend it.

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