

Sir,

I should like to offer some additional perspectives on Gp Capt Al Byford's piece on the Battle of France in the last issue of *Air Power Review*.

Whilst I agree with the fundamental thrust of his piece I think there are some important aspects which are missing. He rightly points out that the grand strategic background was set by a Government decision which effectively reversed the policy of limited liability which had been in place for the previous two decades. It might be argued that this change was politically long overdue and that had it been implemented earlier diplomatic efforts to counter Hitler might have borne more fruit. For the RAF, however, it undermined the strategic assumptions on which the Service's organisational and industrial policies had been built.

It is a truism that RAF doctrine in the inter-war period had been anchored in strategic bombing, but it is an exaggeration to suggest that no consideration had been given to army co-operation. The RAF's 1940 doctrine manual actually contains some perfectly sensible doctrine regarding support of a land campaign. Its application in practice, however, was hampered by a number of factors.

First, the RAF's expansion schemes, and thus the underlying production policy, had been based on expanding Bomber Command and Fighter Command in accordance with the Government's strategy. This produced, unsurprisingly, bombers and fighters. Sir Hugh Dowding is frequently praised for his persistent refusal to recognise the legitimate calls for fighter squadrons

to be sent to the BEF's air component. Few people understand that this position was not brought about by the disasters of May 1940 but had been his consistent stance from March 1939 onwards. As production priorities and orders could not be changed at the drop of a hat, fighter squadrons to support the BEF could *only* be provided at the expense of Fighter Command. Aside from the Stuka squadrons, which were not a large proportion of the *Luftwaffe* orbit, the overall make-up of the RAF and the *Luftwaffe* was not markedly different.

Second, the key problem was surely control of the air. The RAF was caught on the horns of a dilemma: whether to protect the home base, or protect the deployed Expeditionary Force. That is, to retain squadrons in Fighter Command where they were likely to be more effective as part of the Chain Home IADS, or send them to the Continent where they would be less effective because there would be no effective air defence system. Some on the Air Staff recognised this problem. Thus, the then Gp Capt John Slessor as Director of Plans was engaged in the staff talks with the French. He proposed that the air defence of the UK and France be treated as a single problem and that a joint organisation be set up to co-ordinate its defence. In purely doctrinal terms this was a perfectly sensible solution. However, it ignored the political, and perhaps more importantly, the logistical and technological aspects. The UK had a properly integrated system, no such system existed in France. The assets in the UK could only be "flexed" across to France at the cost of their operational effectiveness, and the range and speed of the aircraft was also inadequate in this respect. Therein lay the rub, as the *Luftwaffe* could and did exploit

operational surprise and its numerical, tactical and technological edge in the air to win control of the air. Once control of the air was lost doctrine and C<sup>3</sup> became irrelevant.

In 1944 the situation was reversed. The Allies obtained control of the air before commencing land operations on the Continent. They were thus able to keep a relatively small air defence component in the British Isles and a much larger fighter force on the Continent, which both maintained the high level of superiority and acted offensively in support of the land component. The *Luftwaffe* in turn found itself trying to reinforce its units in France from its home defence fighter units, but could not achieve any lasting effect because of Allied control of the air.

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