

Book Review

The Past as Prologue: The Importance of History to the Military Professional

Edited by Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich

Reviewed by Gp Capt Ian Shields

In the summer of 2003, the British Army's Directorate of Ground Development and Doctrine (now part of the Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre) sponsored a conference on 'Past Futures'; the same conference was subsequently repeated in almost its entirety at the US Marine Corps University at Quantico that autumn. This book comes from that conference – and what an excellent book it is. If any reader of *Air Power Review* had any doubts of the need as professional air power advocates to read extensively military history (and I would hope that that is not the case) then this book will persuade. It is 265 pages of high-protein, well-written prose that explores many different aspects of the past as the prologue for the future, and there is not a weak chapter in the book.

The book is split into three unequal parts. The first element, the introduction, is dominated by an essay (based on his opening address at the conference) by the incomparable Sir Michael Howard. Those familiar with his early 1990s work *The Lessons of History* will not be surprised by the direction of this essay in which he argues that while the academic study of war has expanded to consider far broader societal effects and impacts, at the core of the study of military history

must lie the study of the central activity of armed forces, that is, *fighting*. A timely reminder in the present environment, when we are as much or more concerned about society as we are about straight forward military undertakings.

The seventy pages comprising Part One that follow consist of four, loosely linked essays. General Sir John Kiszely (the recently retired Director of the Defence Academy) sets out, from the British viewpoint, the relevance of history to the military profession. Understandably written from an Army viewpoint, General Kiszely charts the rise of interest in professional military, and particularly military history, in the British armed forces, ending with the assertion that we need inspirational instructors, since most of such history will have to be self-taught, a sentiment with which I fully concur. There follows an even more personal essay written by Paul Van Ripper on the same subject, but from his viewpoint as an American Marine. This, quite humbling, chapter shows how one man chose to tackle the study of military history, but very much from a self-taught viewpoint. Finally, in Part One, each of the editors contributes a think-piece. Richard Sinnreich reviews the formal teaching of military history (again, primarily from a Land perspective) and is far

from complimentary. There are broad parallels here for our own teaching, and this chapter sounds a timely warning about an over-reliance on technology rather than thinking. Finally, Williamson Murray offers some personal insights on military history and the profession of arms. He warns against seeking prediction from history, but urges that history, properly studied and understood, be used as a tool with which to unpick seemingly intractable problems.

The remaining two-thirds of the book is gathered under the collective title of 'The Past as Illuminator of the Future' and comprises eight essays arranged roughly according to the period they are discussing. This Part two of the book is a veritable cornucopia of outstanding essays. Each is of a length that it is easy to read and understand in a single sitting, but short enough that your mind does not wander. Each of the authors is clearly writing on subjects that they have studied in depth, and their enthusiasm and knowledge shine from the pages. While it would be legitimate to criticise Part One for overlap and repetition, there is no such danger in the broad sweep that is the majority of this book. Paul Rahe starts off by arguing that Thucydides, in his defining history of the Peloponnesian War, should be treated as an educator and that his book should teach, not just be read. Colin Gray continues with a robust defence of Clausewitz, contending that he is as relevant today and into the future as he has been in the past. John Gooch follows with an examination of history and the nature of strategy, suggesting that reading histories will not, in itself, offer insight, only by reading good

histories and thinking deeply will this be achieved. There follow two vignettes looking at lessons to be learned, mainly from a maritime perspective, from the Royal Navy's transformation during the long era of peace it enjoyed throughout Queen Victoria's reign (by Andrew Gordon from the Joint Services Command and Staff College, drawing on his excellent book *'Rules of the Game'*), and a case-study of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904 (by Jonathon Bailey). Both argue that lessons can be learned by studying these periods and, by extrapolation, that the study of history aids us in identifying lessons more generally. The historic theme continues with Paul Harris' review of the resistance to change in the British Army between 1918 and 1939 (in stark contrast to the far more effective analysis by the Germans and their willingness to adapt, including copying some of the better ideas the British came up with). This chapter is particularly commendable for a very well balanced section headed 'The Reckoning' where he shows that there are two sides to every argument – a point some historians who write with the benefit of hindsight can forget. The book closes with two essays touching on very contemporary issues: Christopher Harmon asks what history suggests about terrorism and its future (and answers that it is very much here to stay); finally, Francis Hoffman looks at the history and then the future of civil-military relations.

It would be unfair to single out any one chapter as being better or weaker in this consistently excellent book. Best tackled by reading the Introduction and Part One in their

totality, Part Two lends itself to reading individual chapters. The book is thought-provoking and instructive throughout, well presented with a plethora of footnotes. Personally, I would have liked to have seen a concluding chapter by the two editors, drawing the work together, and a consolidated bibliography of the numerous works cited by the individual authors. The index too is perhaps a little sparse. However, these are common thoughts on books of this kind, essentially an anthology of the papers delivered to a conference, so perhaps I am being over-harsh. Although this book makes little more than occasional reference to air power, for anyone not yet convinced that they should read and study military history, this book will convince you. For those already convinced by the argument put forward in the book's title, this volume will offer new insights and afford new avenues of study that will amply reward the effort of reading. A first class book that I strongly recommend.

Book Review

Constant Vigilance

By Nigel W. M. Warwick

Pen and Sword, Barnsley, 2007

Reviewed by Sqn Ldr David Williams

'...and with the dangers of infiltration ever present, the need is for constant vigilance.'

Operations Record Book,
1307 Wing HQ, RAF Regiment,
South-East Asia, October 1945.

Constant Vigilance concerns the RAF Regiment's operational history in South-East Asia Command (SEAC) drawing on the Operational Record Books, diaries and recollections of the men who fought in this forgotten theatre. It describes the humble beginnings of the RAF Regiment and how it became a specialist ground force capable of defending the critical air bridge into Burma. The success of SEAC, under the Supreme Command of Lord Mountbatten, featuring the 14th Army's General Slim and 3rd Tactical Air Force Commander Air Marshall Sir John Baldwin, was largely as a result of the most effective air/land co-operative effort ever seen. This could only have been achieved with the support of the RAF's transport, fighter and bomber squadrons and, without the RAF Regiment's diligence, tenacity, persistence and professionalism in the defence of these assets, the RAF would not have been able to operate from the forward bases so vital for the provision of close air and logistic support, reinforcement, aero-medical evacuation, as well as fighter cover

and the interdiction of the enemy's supply lines.

At first sight, Nigel Warwick has an unusual background for a military historian. A university lecturer and qualified Doctor in Plant Biology he lives in New South Wales, Australia. Despite his profession, Warwick is in fact an ardent military historian and it was his late father's (ex-5th Grenadier Guards) interest in the Burma campaign that led him to the trail of the RAF's youngest fighting arm – the RAF Regiment. As the book's Forward suggests, Warwick's focus is not on Grand Strategy or High Command. Instead, he seeks to capture the atmosphere and attitudes of the men serving in the RAF Regiment in South East Asia at that time. The author manages to pack in an amazing amount of detail of unit dispositions, numbering and movements that gives his work enormous historical credibility and builds a detailed understanding of the RAF Regiment's development including the three major reorganisations that the Corps was subjected to. At the same time he has managed to maintain the overall strategic and operational context and, thus, it is easy to see where the RAF Regiment's contribution fitted in to the bigger picture. Warwick has also successfully incorporated the human element into his book

by placing carefully selected diary and interview accounts into the narrative, supported by an excellent collection of photographs, prints, maps and sketches. The sheer depth of research is impressive and it is hard to imagine that any relevant sources have been overlooked. Warwick's writing style is effective, but his particular skill is in his ability to weave his sources together into a compelling account of this part of the RAF Regiment's history. These accounts remain relevant to contemporary air and land operations, from the harsh environment and dangers of endemic disease and enemy action that the airmen and soldiers endured, through the sacrifices made to successfully prosecute the mission, to the critical close air and logistics support provided to land operations. Of course they differ in terms of the length of detachment; three years for married men and four years for those that were single.

The book's early chapters describe the formation of the RAF Regiment. Personnel selected to become members of this new Corps did not realise what an outstanding organisation it was to become in such a short period of time. Warwick tells of the boredom of early mustering and training, and the fact that RAF Regiment Gunners learnt morse-code in their spare time in the vain hope that such a skill would improve their chances of changing to another trade! However, these reluctant transferees and recruits rapidly began to bond, a process that led to an intense esprit de corps and 'jealous-like' pride in which the RAF Regiment Squadrons took in their own service. Many of these bonds were formed through the

harsh working and living conditions endured and the rigorous training undertaken. For instance, in Chapter I, the RAF Regiment's first Depot assault course, at Secunderabad in India, is described in great detail. Considered the hardest in this particular theatre it was responsible for a significant number of casualties in its own right. Warwick manages to balance the severity of the situation with the humour that abounded, exemplified by anecdotes and stories such as how unarmed combat at the same Depot was called 'Karoti' because this was how the Geordie physical training instructor pronounced Karate! Anyone who has read any of Spike Milligan's classic WWII memoirs, 'Monty: His Part in My Victory' for instance, will recognise a similar, if more subtle, form of 'we're all in the same boat' British military humour.

The narrative builds to a crescendo in the middle of the book during the thrust for, and capture of, Meiktila and the subsequent defence of its airfield – the landing site for the critical air bridge activities sustaining the 14th Army's push to re-take Burma and the RAF's associated Close Air Support. The exploits of 1307 Wing and its four constituent Squadrons are remarkable even for the time. Commanded by Wing Commander Bill Lander, a larger than life character, the Wing were responsible for holding the airfield. As Warwick explains, however, this could not be done on a permanent basis as there were insufficient troops to occupy it at night so involved a daily fight to clear the Japanese from the strip and its surroundings in order to allow aircraft to take off and land – perhaps best described in a quote taken from

the book:

'At each sunset the force withdrew to the protection of its barbed-wire Box; the Japanese, knowing the airfield was left undefended, stubbornly returned to it. With first light, an attack was put in to clear them out. As soon as the airfield was reported to be back in British hands, 17 Squadron flew in. Invariably they had to help in removing enemy corpses from the runway. The RAF Regt won bloody renown in the fierce fighting for repossession of the landing ground every humid morning.'

CO 17 (F) Squadron RAF,
Squadron Leader 'Ginger' Lacey

Lander was eventually killed leading his men into action to clear the airfield's operating surfaces. The situation was so dire it was four days before his body and that of his runner could be recovered.

The final two chapters of the book describe the RAF Regiment's involvement in peacekeeping and stabilisation throughout the region, including the recapture of Malaya and Singapore. In the penultimate chapter, Warwick describes a particularly touching moment during the signing of the Instrument of Surrender, by the Japanese, at the Municipal Building in Singapore. When Lord Mountbatten noticed that there was no RAF Regiment representative a request was sent out to the CO of 2896 Field Squadron for an airman to come in to witness the signing. Corporal W Vance, the smartest airman on parade, was sent in and captured on camera in the well-known official photograph of the signing. Such anecdotes are indicative of the high regard in which the RAF Regiment was

held by senior commanders who recognised the contribution and sacrifices its members had made. The book concludes with the draw-down of forces and the mixed personal feelings of the men involved. It also describes the physical effects of years of fighting in such a harsh environment.

While reading *Constant Vigilance* several thoughts struck me. Firstly, what a challenge writing a first book like this must be – in this case the fruit of 10 years of research – and how successful the author had been in capturing this moment in history. Secondly, having attended the book release and met a few of the remaining SEAC veterans, it was significant how animated the contributors to the book were. The founding President of the RAF Regiment SEAC Association, Mr Henry Kirk MBE, and a former colleague were eventually cajoled into standing up and talking about their experiences displaying heartfelt warmth towards the author for finally telling their story. The list price of £25 seems insignificant when you consider the sacrifice that the cast of this amazing story made and the quality of Warwick's research and writing. Although particularly relevant to past and present serving members of the RAF Regiment, this record of events in South-East Asia displays the challenges, fledgling solutions and ingenuity of the period and will touch and inform civilians and servicemen and women of all three services alike.

This article has been republished online with Open Access.

Ministry of Defence © Crown Copyright 2023. The full printed text of this article is licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0. To view this licence, visit <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/>. Where we have identified any third-party copyright information or otherwise reserved rights, you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned. For all other imagery and graphics in this article, or for any other enquires regarding this publication, please contact: Director of Defence Studies (RAF), Cormorant Building (Room 119), Shrivenham, Swindon, Wiltshire SN6 8LA.

 **ROYAL
AIR FORCE**
**Centre for Air and
Space Power Studies**

OGL