

Sir,

Brian Armstrong's article on the lessons identified by the Royal Air Force from the Spanish Civil War (Volume 12, No 1) is a most welcome addition to the historiography of RAF doctrine during the inter-war period. Sqn Ldr Armstrong offers an interesting corrective to some of the assumptions made about the attitudes of the air force to the conflict, particularly the old canard that Sir Cyril Newall regarded air support as a 'gross misuse of resources'; as Armstrong notes, Newall in fact disputed the value of apportioning a large number of fighter aircraft in a DCA capacity directly above friendly troops. Although it cannot be denied that Newall's tenure as CAS was not marked by innovations in air support, rather than damning it outright as has been supposed, Newall would appear to have followed the Trenchardian logic that experience from the Great War demonstrated that such apportionment was largely ineffective and reduced the flexibility of the air force in its ability to provide effective support – even if that was best achieved out of the sight of those on the ground.

One further area of Sqn Ldr Armstrong's article deserves some elaboration. On pages 50-51 he notes:

"...some effort was made to identify a direct support bomber requirement to appease army sensitivities. A two seat, four machine gun turret-armed aircraft with a 1,000lb bombload was specified for direct support work but there would be no dive-bomber despite Army wishes."

This was all very well, but it is perhaps worth recalling that such an aeroplane

would almost certainly have been a disaster over the battlefield in 1940. This type of aircraft would have proved easy pickings for the enemy in the absence of a favourable air situation – a direct support bomber of the sort specified would have performed just as well (or badly, depending upon how one looks at it) as the Fairey Battle over the Meuse or the Stuka over southern England. Four-gun turrets were essential on heavy bombers, but when fitted to tactical aircraft proved less than successful, as the Defiant and the Roc illustrated. The weight and bulk of the turret did little to enhance the capability of the aircraft and made it more vulnerable.

The lessons from the First World War suggested that while specialised attack aircraft were a useful asset, a fighter-bomber type which stood a chance of fighting its way out of trouble was preferable. The Sopwith Camel led the way in this regard, and the Hawker Typhoon and Republic P-47 Thunderbolt were to highlight this further in the Second World War. It is perhaps no coincidence that as the Luftwaffe lost control of the air on the Eastern Front it began replacing its specialised support aircraft (notably the Stuka) with the Fw 190 and largely relegated its dive bomber types to night operations (where their success was aided by the lack of a Soviet night fighter capability).

Yours sincerely,

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