

Book Reviews

High Stakes: Britain's Air Arms in Action 1945-1990

By Vic Flintham

Reviewed by Wing Commander Clive Blount

This is a well-researched and comprehensive look at Britain's use of Air Power throughout the Cold War, and covers all of the incidents and major campaigns of the period. It is not an RAF history - it attempts to cover events that have involved all of Britain's military air arms and even includes a section on *Op Eldorado Canyon*, on the somewhat tenuous basis that the US aircraft took off from British bases. Largely chronological in layout, each section contains a short background history to each conflict before describing, in some detail, the contributions of air power to the campaigns. Flintham also attempts interweave a thematic approach looking at such areas as Defending and Maintaining Empire, Humanitarian and Peacekeeping and Homeland Security; this he achieves with varying degrees of success, but the combined approach means that every use of British airpower during the period is covered.

I particularly enjoyed the book's coverage of the lesser well-known crisis of the period, such as the infiltration of insurgents into Communist Albania in 1946 (largely compromised by the spy Kim Philby) and the operations to 'stabilise' South East Asia after the defeat of the Japanese, although coverage of more recent operations such as those in Northern Ireland, Beirut

and the Falklands is equally adept. It is the breadth of coverage which is most impressive, although I feel that sometimes depth suffers, with some events being glossed over with, effectively, just a list of aircraft and units taking part. However, as an introduction to crises in which British air arms have participated and a gateway to further research, the detail is about right.

The volume is well illustrated and brimming with facts, with each section including lists of units participating, aircraft types, locations and dates and, periodically, more detailed panels about the key aircraft types. However, it is this wealth of detail that leads to my main criticism of the book - it is difficult to see what niche the book is intended to fill. The history sections are well-researched and cover even the most obscure incidents in appropriate detail but, just when one's interest is piqued, one is assailed by a block of facts, squadron numbers etc, or by some fairly lightweight details about an aircraft type. It is neither a history textbook or a 'spotter's guide' but seems to be trying to do both, without doing either particularly well. The book also lacks a serious index which has certainly hampered my use of it as a reference in research.

This is a shame. Flintham's research must have taken years and, as a

historical text without the pointless aircraft panels this would be a very useful addition to Cold War literature. Indeed, I am sure he has sufficient facts to produce an excellent, but separate, guide to Cold War aircraft which, in company with the history text, would form a very useful reference. All this said, *High Stakes*, is a sumptuous volume which is a pleasure to dip into. It is largely an enjoyable read, but its main strength lies in that it is an easy and accessible book to browse through and enjoy. Notwithstanding its faults, it is a fine addition to an aviation enthusiast's library.

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