

Book Reviews

Night Fighters - Luftwaffe and RAF Air Combat over Europe 1939-45

By Colin D. Heaton and Anne-Marie Lewis

Reviewed by Rev Dr (Squadron Leader) David Richardson

Seventy years ago, the 'Dowding System' of aerial defence played a vital role in Britain's survival; this volume seeks to analyse the analogous and less celebrated systems developed by the Luftwaffe during the Allied bombing offensive. The underlying thesis of the book is that mid-level Luftwaffe commanders developed a highly capable array of equipment and techniques and were largely let down by poor strategic leadership. Heaton and Lewis have obviously amassed a considerable degree of knowledge in studying this area, and the volume is replete with technical information.

The authors rightly highlight the role of emerging technology in the duel between Bomber Command and the Luftwaffe, most notably the varying electronic systems such as Naxos and H2S, and point to its legacy in the current conduct of air operations. The description of the evolving German 'wild boar' and 'tame boar' systems is especially interesting.

However, it is difficult to recommend this book as a useful purchase except to the most ardent devotee of this subject. In the first place, there are a large number of egregious errors, such as the ascription of a peerage to 'Lord Winston Churchill', and some bizarre nomenclature; 'Air Vice Sir Hugh Montague Viscount Marshal Trenchard' being the most

outstanding example. There are numerous factual inaccuracies; doubling the number of engines on the Avro Manchester being one. The reader may also be surprised to find that Dowding and Trenchard were both still actively directing air operations in 1943!

Beside these flaws, there is a deeper weakness within the book - a willingness to make some superficial judgments on a paucity of evidence. For instance, Heaton and Lewis caricature the Royal Air Force as a class-ridden organisation, which 'in typical RAF fashion' was slow to respond to new intelligence, 'illustrating Bomber Command's penchant for oversight'. Although the authors do have some useful insights into the changing patterns of the nocturnal air war, and an engaging sympathy for the human cost of conflict, their analysis is frequently clouded by generalisation and confused chronology.

The real origins - and potential - of the book can be gleaned by examining the photographic pages. There, amongst the expected images of aircraft and weapons, are pictures of Heaton quaffing drinks with German night fighter veterans, most notably Hajo Herrmann and Wolfgang Falck. Although probably a misguided move by the publisher's photographic editor (it

hardly enhances the appearance of academic impartiality), it reveals the real strength of the book: Heaton's personal links with Luftwaffe survivors. These two men in particular loom large in the index and it is probably best to read this book as a record of their initiatives and observations. Had Heaton and Lewis chosen to create the volume as edited memoirs, rather than attempting an overall history of the air campaign, it would have made a more useful contribution to the field.

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