

Book Reviews

The Age of Air Power

By Martin Van Creveld

Reviewed by Group Captain Clive Blount

Introduction

The name Martin Van Creveld on the cover of a new book guarantees wide public interest, a meticulously researched product and, most likely, an element of controversial thinking, *The Age of Air Power* does not disappoint. One is normally wary of wide ranging general histories as they often lack depth and usually miss out minor, but important periods, in the development of the use of air power – or make little effort to detail the context against which that use may be analysed. This is most definitely not the case in this work, Van Creveld has produced a comprehensive, thoughtful and wide-ranging work in which, it is probably fair to say, that no recorded use of aircraft in war has been excluded, ranging from the Italo-Turkish war of 1911/2 through to the insurgency in El Salvador during the early 1990s. The compression required to achieve this fascinating ‘one stop shop’ of air power history has resulted in a somewhat dense and challenging read, but it is a read that rewards perseverance.

The book is divided into five main sections followed by a conclusion. The first section, entitled *Into the Blue*, covers the period 1900 – 1939 and describes the development of air power from the early days of the Wright brothers, through its coming of age in the first world war, and then discusses the developments of early air power thinking and the emergence of ‘air forces’. The second section is devoted to the Second World War, which Van Creveld sees as the zenith of air power’s development... and utility. Sections three and four cover the ‘cold war’ period, 1945-1991, and the use of air power in the numerous ‘small wars’ during that time; he devotes section

five to 'wars among the people'.

Martin Van Creveld is an internationally recognized authority on military history and strategy, and it is this pedigree that comes to the fore as the book progresses. Strategic context and analysis is incisive and compelling – although his almost total reliance on secondary sources is a little disappointing. It rapidly becomes obvious, however, that Van Creveld is not an Air Power specialist. Many of his assertions demonstrate a lack of knowledge of the technical background to air operations. For instance, he describes that US F4s and F111s were ineffective in Vietnam because they were difficult to manoeuvre when they had to *slow down* to deliver their bombs (!) and describes the NVAF MiGs as having a huge advantage over USAF attacker during Rolling Thunder because they had 'lots of guns'... he fails to produce any evidence to support this assumption – which accepted wisdom suggests is just some what off the mark. Sadly, I often found myself frustrated that he was 'missing the point' – often a good point – in the same way that one is frustrated at so-called 'military aware' pundits in the media.

This failing in the 'tactical' details of the book means that, by the time one reaches the conclusion, the impact of the somewhat 'anti-air power' polemic is lost and I found myself just impatient with the author. In essence, Van Creveld's thesis is that, despite its remarkable dominance as an instrument of war throughout the second half of the twentieth century, air power is now, effectively, obsolete, despite the billions of dollars it costs. For instance, he suggests that the claims made about modern technology raising the effectiveness and utility of modern air power are merely myths - he cites the fact that, despite the so-called "Revolution in Military Affairs", US ground troops calling for air support in Iraq in 2003 did not receive it any faster than Allied forces did in Tunisia in 1943 or in France in 1944-45. (It is a shame that he did not mention the massive follow-up when this fact became apparent which has led to the excellent degree of Air-Land integration being enjoyed in Afghanistan today). In other arguments against air power he suggests that, if air power is so important, why is it that the number of military aircraft being procured around the world each year has fallen from over 200,000 in 1944 to a few hundred today? And also, why shouldn't air power be 'penny-packeted' out to the users rather than centrally controlled by an independent service? I am fairly sure that any regular reader of APR could make a fair argument to answer this question quite readily! The author concentrates primarily on the kinetic use of air power and does not fully discuss the wider roles of air power, particularly in enabling mobility and supporting the ISR effort, and hasn't fully analysed the effects of emerging technologies such as UASs and DEW. One feels that he has deployed facts selectively to court controversy in an attempt to demonstrate that air forces are an institutional relic and that air power has passed its 'high-water' mark as a military implement and is in decline. What is probably a more supportable argument is that the utility of 'hard' military power, of which air power is just one part, is in decline and that a number of Van Creveld's arguments could be applied equally to maritime or land forces.

As a historical *tour d'horizon* of air power this book is probably without equal. It is a shame that factual misinterpretation and poorly supported arguments undermine the analysis. That

said, as profession air power practitioners, we should maintain an open mind to alternative ideas and be willing to engage in lively debate in order to keep what we do relevant – and to develop. With that in mind, and noting the limitations discussed above, this book is certainly worth a read.

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