

## Book Reviews

# British Naval Aviation: The First 100 Years

By Tim Benbow

Reviewed by Group Captain Alistair Byford

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### Introduction

The Strategic Defence Review of 1998 was unashamedly interventionist in outlook and aspirational in philosophy. It was, therefore, not entirely surprising that it mandated the acquisition of a fleet aircraft-carrier capability for expeditionary power projection, resulting in the two-ship *Queen Elizabeth* programme that is currently underway. However, the strategic environment has changed fundamentally since the project was instigated: the global recession ushered in an era of austerity in UK defence spending, with inevitable scrutiny of the most expensive planned capabilities, while a decade of enduring, land (and air-land) centric operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have called into question the degree of priority that should be given to the procurement of new carriers in an already overheated equipment programme. The result has been an acrimonious and very public debate about both the carriers and the Joint Strike Fighter planned as their primary combat capability, conducted within a context of fierce inter-service competition for limited resources. Although the issue was settled by the prime ministerial decision - taken immediately prior to the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review - to build both carriers (although only one is likely to enter service), this was offset by the imposition of a 'capability holiday' in carrier-based naval aviation through the early disposal of *HMS Ark Royal* and Joint Force Harrier. The SDSR debate, and the way it was conducted, has arguably created a legacy of inter-service distrust that is only likely to be dispelled by the demonstration of good faith and the development of mutual empathy over a protracted period of time; but from an RAF perspective, this is essential, as JSF will represent the core of the air component's future top-end combat

**air capability beyond 2020, so close and harmonious engagement with the Navy is a necessity, not a luxury.**

Against this backdrop, the publication of this collection of essays charting the theory and practice of British naval aviation is timely, as it provides a useful context for developing a better understanding of the roles, requirements, opportunities and sensitivities involved with the delivery of air power in the maritime and littoral environments; and while many of the papers are ostensibly historical, the themes they highlight are of absolute contemporary relevance. The editor, Tim Benbow, may be known to some RAF personnel through his role in the Defence Studies Department of King's College London at the Joint Services Command and Staff College, Shrivenham. As a maritime historian, he has followed a broadly chronological approach in assembling this volume, but key issues emerge repeatedly across the chapters: particularly the long-standing controversy about the control of naval air power (and the ownership of ship-based air assets) and the interplay between strategy, capability and service politics at the most crucial turning points in British defence policy.

In this respect, Edward Hampshire's paper about the cancellation of *CVA01* in 1965 provides a useful counterpoint to Lee Willets' concluding essay on the politics around the current *Queen Elizabeth* class carriers, with both pieces providing an insight into the Navy's thinking and sensitivities. The 'traumatic shock' of the *CVA01* decision is so firmly embedded in the RN's institutional psyche that (at least subliminally) it still affects its relationship with the RAF today, and certainly shaped its approach to the recent SDSR. As Hampshire points out, there has never been any hard evidence that the Air Staff nefariously moved the position of an island airbase on a map of the Indian Ocean to support its argument for land-basing aircraft over carrier acquisition, but the fact that this myth still has such widespread currency within the Navy is instructive in itself. The Navy's visceral sense of betrayal was further heightened by the Falklands War, where the RAF was unable to provide land-based air cover for the fleet (as the RN believed it had promised to do when *CVA01* was cancelled) and the RN felt it would have suffered far fewer losses if it had been able to deploy a large, fleet carrier with a much bigger and more capable air wing than was possible with the small VSTOL carriers that were available. As an aside, it is interesting to note that the RAF made an effective case in 1965 by 'restraining its firebrands' and adopting a moderate, logical argument that was regularly updated by the Chief of the Air Staff's office and articulated by all of its senior leadership, enabling a single, consistent message to be delivered that could be easily understood by politicians and decision-makers; arguably, the same clarity of thought and messaging has not always been evident in subsequent defence reviews.

The recent focus on air-land integration in Afghanistan and the dissolution of the maritime patrol aircraft force means that air-maritime integration has become something of a neglected competency in the UK; for example, it is barely mentioned in the current iteration of *AP3000: British Air and Space Doctrine*, although this omission will be addressed in the forthcoming edition. The examples of the practice of maritime air power and air-sea cooperation in this

collection are therefore welcome, including new insights on the role of naval aviation in limited wars and crisis management, and areas that have previously received scant attention, such as the contribution of British naval air power in the Mediterranean and Pacific theatres in the Second World War. Geoffrey Till's analysis of the Singapore campaign is particularly useful in highlighting the problem of competing visions of air power and the consequent requirement for effective integration through the employment of mutually supportive – rather than independent – air and maritime capabilities.

Taken as a whole, this volume offers a comprehensive survey of a key aspect of air power as well as shedding new light on the way that Britain's defence policy, strategy and military capabilities relate to one another. Airmen may find some of the views offered by enthusiastically maritime-orientated academics challenging, while more careful copy-editing would have removed minor irritations such as the misspelling of 'air marshal'. Nevertheless, there is still much here that bears careful consideration. The Development, Concept and Doctrine Centre's *Future Character of Conflict* work predicts that future wars are most likely to be fought in the littoral, while Libya has pointed the way to an air-maritime strategy as an alternative to the 'boots on the ground' commitment of land forces for future interventions. Air-maritime integration will, therefore, be an inescapable part of the RAF's future, especially as so much of the air component's combat capability will be capable of being ship-based. In a sense, the relationship should be instinctive, as doctrinally air and maritime power are very closely linked; for example, the principles of sea control and control of the air have much in common. However, as this book amply demonstrates, effective integration has proved to be elusive in the past, often for reasons of personality and because of issues of ownership rather than the actual practice of aviation from (and over) the sea. Airmen and sailors need to work together as a matter of urgency to develop their thinking about the employment of air power in the maritime environment; this volume provides the necessary background to start the process, and is recommended whole-heartedly for the purpose.



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