

Book Reviews

The Sowreys: A Unique and Remarkable Record of One Family's Sixty-five Years of Distinguished RAF Service

By Air Commodore Graham Pitchfork

Reviewed by Chris Hobson

Introduction

In the annals of Royal Air Force history there are several prominent families that spring to mind: the two Salmond brothers, John and Geoffrey, who each rose to become Chief of the Air Staff (albeit tragically cut short in Geoffrey's case); the Atcherley twins, Richard and David; and the three MacRobert brothers, all of whom were killed while flying with the RAF and who were commemorated by a Stirling, a Buccaneer and a Tornado aircraft being named 'MacRobert's Reply'. Another name that stands out is that of the Sowrey family several of whom served with distinction in both World Wars as well as the Cold War period and now Air Commodore Graham Pitchfork has written a comprehensive record of their achievements.

The advantage (and challenge) of writing about two generations of a family which has produced six pilots and a member of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force is the sheer breadth of their collective experience. Remarkably, all three brothers of the first generation, John, Fred and William, made their operational debut in night fighter squadrons in the UK during the First World War and Fred Sowrey became an instant household name when he shot down a Zeppelin near Billericay. The trio later served in reconnaissance, fighter and bomber squadrons

on the Western Front. The usual mixture of home and overseas service (including air policing) followed the end of the War and the three also served in various appointments during the Second World War when the next generation of Sowreys, Johnnie, Jimmy and Freddie, took to the air. These three flew fighters primarily and Jimmy was the only Sowrey to be killed in service when his Hurricane was shot down in the Western Desert in 1941. Johnnie and Freddie both had distinguished post-war careers serving in several interesting roles throughout the Cold War era. This included operational experience commanding Meteor and Javelin fighter squadrons, test flying, and running a Thor IRBM station, as well as staff appointments including commanding the National Defence College, overseeing the withdrawal from Aden, and involvement in high-level RAF and NATO policy and operations.

This meticulously researched and highly readable book is much more than a family history; it is a history of the RAF as seen through the very personal lens of a most remarkable family. The author's extensive and deep knowledge of the Service and its history comes to the fore and is invaluable in giving the reader just the right amount of context in which to place the main subjects of the book. The Sowrey dynasty is almost unique in the annals of the Service and this book firmly places on record the immense contribution made by this one large family to that much larger family, the Royal Air Force.

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