

Book Review

Churchill and His Airmen: Relationships, Intrigue and Policy Making 1914-1945

By Vincent Orange

Reviewed by Sebastian Cox

The Royal Air Force owes Professor Vincent Orange a notable debt of gratitude for his remarkable series of biographies of senior RAF Commanders of the Second World War. His biographies of Keith Park, "Mary" Coningham, Hugh Dowding, Arthur Tedder and John Slessor have advanced our knowledge and understanding of these important figures in RAF history. Sadly, Professor Orange died before this, his last work, was published. He had been suffering ill-health for some time before he died, and perhaps this explains why, regrettably, this book is not amongst his best.

Professor Orange had always been fascinated by Churchill and had considered writing a straight biographical study, but decided to combine his interest in the great man with his wider interest in the RAF and many of its leading figures. Unfortunately, this approach did not work as well as might be expected in that it has led to a book which is "neither fish nor fowl". It contains many interesting insights into Churchill and his fluctuating attitudes to air power and his interaction with many of the leading airmen of the RAF but it lacks a consistent theme, unless it be that of "great men" and their influence on history. It is precisely in employing this seductive, but ultimately simplistic, narrative that the author goes astray.

He begins with Churchill at the Admiralty as the First World War approaches. Churchill's fascination with technology, gadgets great and small, is well known and he undoubtedly drove the development of naval aviation forward in those early years. However, in trying to follow the many vicissitudes of Churchill's post-Gallipoli career through to 1918 the author ends up writing short pieces with headings such as "Trenchard's Constant Offensive", "Still No Air Ministry", "Haig, Tiverton, Smuts, Ashmore", some with only tenuous links to Churchill himself. This approach breaks up the flow of the narrative and introduces characters who enter and disappear from the scene with the bewildering speed of extras in a film. This may in part explain why the book too often degenerates into superficial analysis. For example, when looking at Trenchard's offensive policy the author criticises him for "persuading himself" that his inferior aircraft and poorly trained crews "were destroying large numbers of German aircraft and undermining German morale, which... they were not...". He states that the RFC's concentration on aerial combat was at the expense of the "more positive" contribution of attempting to locate batteries, taking photographs of troop movements and offering close support. This is a common criticism which signally fails to appreciate two seminal issues. Firstly, that the RFC had little choice but to engage in offensive action if the British Army was doing the same, which it was, for example, during the infamous 'Bloody April' in 1917. And more fundamentally, that Trenchard's principal aim was not to destroy German aircraft *per se*, but rather to keep them away from the large numbers of British aircraft constantly engaged in the very activities which the author rather bizarrely appears to think they neglected, but in fact did not. To locate batteries, and photograph troop movements required penetration behind the lines and hence the conduct of 'inner' and 'outer' air battles. Trenchard on occasion pushed this too hard, but his fundamental reasoning was sound enough – it is called the air superiority battle. It is difficult to see how any other commander could successfully have adopted a policy much different in the circumstances.

Moving through the thirties and into the Second World War, the same trends appear. Certain individuals, notably Dowding, Park, Tedder and Coningham, all subjects of previous biographies by the author, are lavished with praise, much of it undoubtedly merited. Others come in for more criticism, again some merited. However, the author's views on RAF doctrine and policy are excessively simplistic. For him, any failures in policy and weaknesses exposed when War comes are down to distortions due to excessive adherence to Trenchardian views on strategic bombing. This supposedly results in a failure to provide for close air support forces for the Army, or maritime air support for the Navy. Air defence is only provided because of the vision of Dowding, Park and a few like-minded persons apparently struggling against the prevailing views. This is compared unfavourably with the *Luftwaffe's* supposed adherence to "close support". But there were many senior RAF officers other than Dowding and Park who espoused the need for some element of air defence, and Trenchard bowed to their opinion in his 1923 expansion scheme. The RAF did much thinking on the subject before Dowding became involved.

Come the 1930s what the author ignores is the Government's extreme reluctance to postulate any large scale commitment to land warfare on the Continent and its extreme anxiety to deter war – a policy which continued until a last minute *volte face* in March 1939 expands the putative BEF from 4 Divisions to 32! No large continental army, and a desire to deter equals strategic bombers and fighter defence of the UK, which is what the RAF built, though the latter ultimately took precedence. There were, in fact, more chapters on co-operative warfare than on strategic bombing in the main RAF Doctrine manual of the pre-war era.

Much criticism is also levelled at the bomber aircraft with which the RAF entered the War for which there is some justification, though they were not noticeably inferior to their German counterparts, but no blame is attached to Dowding although he was, in the early 1930s, precisely the officer responsible for issuing all of the specifications to which these aircraft were built.

The author also consistently conflates operational level air warfare in support of Armies, which is principally what the *Luftwaffe* was designed for, with close air support, which is a different thing. The two are complementary, not synonymous, and the RAF actually become experts at supporting the Army in the Middle East principally, though not exclusively, through the former not the latter. What this depends on is firstly air superiority, secondly proper organisation, and thirdly and crucially good inter-service communications, both personal and technical. Orange gives Tedder and Coningham nearly all the credit, whereas Sir Arthur Longmore and others laid much of the foundations, particularly organisationally, on which they were able to build. The exploration of Longmore's relationship with Churchill is largely limited to the former's demise at the hands of the latter.

In its analysis of the war years the book again tends to view events through the lens of these same airmen. Other important critically important figures including Harris and Portal

do feature, but the narrative tends to revolve around Tedder and his views and influence. More space should surely have been given to Portal, and arguably Harris, and their direct relationships with Churchill, not just when those relationships brought them into contact with Tedder.

This review has highlighted the many weaknesses in the book, especially the tendency to analyse decision-making and personality almost devoid of context and wider influences. It is therefore only fair to say that it contains much of value and interest as well, notably in its assessments of Churchill himself, where it gives a balanced and thoughtful assessment of the great man's strengths and weaknesses. It should therefore be read with an awareness that it tends to give a partial (in every sense) view.

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