

## Book Reviews

# Jaguar Boys: True Tales from Operators of the Big Cat in Peace and War

By Ian Hall

Reviewed by Dr David Jordan

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### Introduction

*Jaguar Boys* is another in Grub Street's growing '...boys' series in which those who flew or maintained particular RAF aircraft types which entered service during the Cold War recount their experiences with and impressions of the aircraft. On one level, these books are intended to be nothing other than brief, entertaining accounts aimed at the enthusiast community and perhaps those who were involved with the aircraft, but as noted in the review of the accompanying volume *Vulcan Boys* in Volume 17 No 2 of *APR*, there is more to this series of books than a simple appeal to 'spotters' and 'WIWO...s' ('When I was on...'; often the opening gambit to a recollection by a pilot). If the limitations of the genre are taken into account, then these books provide a useful form of historical record, not least since they offer insights into aircraft capabilities (and limitations) that tend to be overlooked, or over-simplified in many studies of the work of the RAF during the years after 1945. This is particularly true of the Jaguar, which did not enjoy the same degree of publicity as the types it served alongside such as the Harrier, Phantom, Lightning and Tornado. As the aircraft was employed by the RAF for just over thirty years – despite often being cited as the most likely candidate for imminent retirement in numerous defence reviews and spending rounds – this is unfortunate.

The SEPECAT Jaguar was the result of an Anglo-French programme intended to provide both the RAF and Armée de l'Air with a supersonic training aircraft. As time progressed, the cost of operating supersonic trainers, coupled with both air forces' need for new attack aircraft

led to the programme being re-aligned to fulfil this task. Over the course of its service with both the French and British, the Jaguar served in the nuclear strike, offensive support and reconnaissance roles with distinction, although the aircraft's legendary lack of thrust – the source of much banter – did present a number of problems which were never really overcome.

*Jaguar Boys* concentrates mainly upon the type's use with the RAF, although the recollections of General Bernard Molard, a French exchange pilot at Coltishall in the early 1980s and brief accounts of the Jaguar in Nigeria and Oman are provided. For various reasons, the Nigerian experience of operating the Jaguar is held by most accounts to have been rather fraught - Mike Crook's chapter gives some interesting insights into the challenges of bringing advanced aircraft types into use in developing air forces. Ian Ord's consideration of the Jaguar's service in Oman – the source of some familiar online photographs of extreme low-flying – is both instructive and entertaining. It is, perhaps, something of a pity that there is no accompanying coverage of Ecuadorian, French and Indian use of the aircraft, not least since all three used the aircraft in combat. French Jaguars, despite the lower sophistication of their avionics suite were prominent in operations in Africa and Operation *Daguet* (the French contribution to the 1991 Gulf War). Likewise, the Ecuadorians employed the type in the 1995 Cenepa War, while India – which still operates the type – made notable use of its Jaguars in the Kargil War in 1999.

One of the reasons for these omissions must lie in the amount of activity which the Jaguar undertook in RAF service. It is in this area that *Jaguar Boys* is particularly strong, since the accounts range from those explaining the way in which the aircraft was introduced into service, insights into operational conversion and the way in which Jaguars were used during the Cold War era, particularly in RAF Germany, and on deployments to NATO's northern flank. Again, while these chapters are relatively short and anecdotal, they offer useful insights for anyone studying the way in which the RAF operated during the Cold War and wishing to understand the reality of operational flying during that period.

By the end of the Cold War, it appeared that the Jaguar would not last long in British service. The Tornado had replaced it in RAF Germany, leaving three squadrons at Coltishall clearly vulnerable to the projected 'peace dividend', under which the RAF would begin a process which has seen its combat air reduced by over 75% in less than 20 years - a decline sadly not matched by a reduction in commitments and contingency operations. The first of these new commitments came in 1991, when Jaguars deployed as part of Operation Granby.

*Jaguar Boys* considers the aircraft's role during the 1991 war, drawing upon the recollections of the vastly experienced Sqd Ldr Dave Bagshaw and then looks at other operations. Air Vice-Marshal Bob Judson covers operations over Bosnia in an informative and pithy manner, also giving some consideration to the Jaguar's commitment to the Iraqi No-Fly Zones. It is a shame that a separate chapter covering the Jaguar's use over Iraq after Operation Granby is not addressed in more detail, since this was an ongoing commitment in which the Jaguar – despite the previously-mentioned problems with a lack of power – did sterling work. Finally, the

book examines the impressively swift and cost-effective upgrading of the Jaguar, bringing self-designation capability for precision guided weapons and improved avionics; while Wing Commander Pete Birch's account is self-contained, it provokes questions about the manner in which upgrades are conducted. The outstanding efficacy of the Jaguar upgrades tends to confirm the view that the processes of equipment upgrading and procurement have not been as agile, innovative or cost-effective as they might be, various efforts at reform notwithstanding.

The end result is another useful book in the series for those studying the RAF's work during the Cold War and beyond. As it was never intended to serve as a detailed academic source for air power scholars, it would be deeply unfair to criticise the book for lacking detailed analysis. It is far better to see it for what it is – an often entertaining account of life in the RAF's Jaguar force, offering some useful snapshots which add to our general knowledge and point towards areas for further academic research. The book's insights, when combined with primary source documentation, should be of considerable utility for those studying British air power. If the work's limitations are accepted, and *Jaguar Boys* taken for what it is, Ian Hall and the contributors should be commended for providing much useful source material and clues for further research for scholars and for an interesting and entertaining book for a wider audience.



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