

Book Reviews

Wings of Empire: The Forgotten Wars of the Royal Air Force, 1919 – 1939

By Barry Renfrew

Reviewed by Lieutenant Colonel (Retd) Richard Newton (USAF)

Biography: Lieutenant Colonel (Retd) Richard Newton is a senior lecturer at Joint Special Operations University at MacDill AFB, Florida, and an editor for the Air Commando Journal. A graduate of the US Air Force Academy and the US Army School of Advanced Military Studies, he served 22 years in the US Air Force as a combat rescue and special operations helicopter pilot, strategic planner, and educator.

Introduction

W*ings of Empire* offers a good story and is one that deserves to be read, especially by readers in the general audience who might wish an introduction to the history of the RAF during the 1920s and 30s. Mr Renfrew's journalistic style is easy to read and his research is unique.

This book builds upon previous histories of the RAF between the Wars by David Omissi, Phillip Towle, Seb Ritchie, and others in what are now Iraq, Jordan, Pakistan, Sudan, and Yemen. What sets this book apart from others' work though, is the author's extensive use of oral history interviews, personal diaries, and personal papers from the pilots, crewmen, and technicians who flew the missions and kept the aircraft flying. This book adds to the previous histories that were often based on squadron records, 'doctrinal' publications, senior leader biographies, and official documents from the Air Ministry, Colonial Office,

Foreign Office, etc. What gives *Wings of Empire* its realistic 'flavour', is that it captures the human perspective, i.e. how air control was implemented at the personal level, the hardships of barracks and mess life in the Middle East and NWF, and the difficulties of maintaining a nascent technical service on the edges of the empire in very austere conditions. This is a very different perspective from that found in official correspondences and publications.

Another strength of this book is its reflection of everyday social context as the young Service sought to establish itself among the traditions of the Army and Royal Navy. Unlike nearly all other treatments of the air control scheme, Renfrew gives one a sense of what it was like to fly and to maintain delicate canvas and wood biplanes against a guerrilla adversary in harsh environmental conditions characterised by sandstorms, locust swarms, excruciating heat, jungles, and soaring mountains at the end of a precarious logistic chain. And, because *Wings of Empire* relies heavily on the personal histories of enlisted technicians and mid-level officers to enlighten the official papers of more well-known senior officers such as A. Harris, N. Bottomley, and L.E.O. Charlton, the book offers a much more workaday perspective than previous histories of air control.

The author makes the disclaimer right up front that 'this book is not an attack on the men who tried to rule the empire from the sky'. (p. 15) The rankers' point of view serves to remind readers that the social context of the inter-war period was very different from current standards. This was an era where indigenous peoples were commonly labelled 'savages', 'uncivilised', or worse—an uncomfortable condition for modern sensibilities, but a necessary acknowledgement if one is to comprehend the attitudes and actions of those who implemented the air control scheme.

Renfrew, like others who have considered the cultural and ethical aspects of air control, occasionally strays worryingly from an accurate account of the sources. For example, he states that the RAF claimed in a 1924 Air Staff Memorandum, *Psychological Effects of Air Bombardment on Semi-Civilised Peoples*, that 'it was not immoral to bomb black women and children' (p. 107). This phrase is not contained in the original Air Staff Memo (ASM 19). The original four-page memorandum is actually a comparison of the effects of bombing on all civilians during war, both in developed and developing communities. The memorandum's main purpose was to defend the independence of the RAF by considering the effects on indigenous peoples caused by punitive expeditions by land forces, naval blockades, and sieges, in addition to imperial control from the air.

As an academic piece, this book adds little to others' research into RAF operations during the inter-war period, some of which has been presented in this journal. Students and researchers will find Renfrew's referencing frustrating, almost to the point of distraction. First, he has too many quotations without citations (e.g. on p.105 he quotes a proposal that aircraft sprinkle 'crow's feet' in order to cripple men and livestock, but does not offer a source for this extraordinary claim). Second, where he has cited primary sources from Kew or IWM, he only

This article has been republished online with Open Access.

Ministry of Defence © Crown Copyright 2023. The full printed text of this article is licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0. To view this licence, visit <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/>. Where we have identified any third-party copyright information or otherwise reserved rights, you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned. For all other imagery and graphics in this article, or for any other enquires regarding this publication, please contact: Director of Defence Studies (RAF), Cormorant Building (Room 119), Shrivenham, Swindon, Wiltshire SN6 8LA.

 **ROYAL
AIR FORCE**
**Centre for Air and
Space Power Studies**

OGL