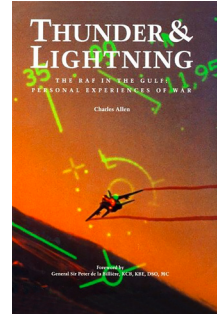


Book Reviews

Thunder & Lightning – The RAF in the Gulf: Personal Experiences of War



By Charles Allen

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Reviewed by Squadron Leader Nigel Jones

Biography: Squadron Leader Nigel Jones is SO2 Trg Pol A at No 22 (Trg) Gp. He is a CAS' Fellow, having graduated from King's College London's inaugural 'Air Power in the Modern World' Masters programme, and is an active member of the RAF's Centre for Air Power Studies Advisory Group.

Introduction

The preface to this book begins with some advice from the Duke of Wellington to an author who wished to write an account of the Battle of Waterloo, *'you may depend upon it you will never make a satisfactory work'*. The reasons for this can be found in a letter that he wrote less than 2 months after the defeat of Napoleon *'The history of a battle is not unlike the history of a ball. Some individuals may recollect all the little events of which the great result is the battle won or lost, but no individual can recollect the order in which, or the exact moment at which, they occurred, which makes all the difference as to their value or importance'*. We can today, however, construct a pretty accurate picture of what went on through eye-witness accounts, media reporting and the examination of the operational records from the campaigns, especially as we now have the tools to sort these vast amounts of information. This will only ever give a second hand account of events as, as Charles Allen states in the preface to this book, *'Only those who were there know what it was really like'*. Well, in the word of that famous Welsh philosopher - Max Boyce, I can say *'I know because I was there'*.

From my recollections, this book does a very good job of identifying and capturing those elements of the conflict which were shared experiences of all the airmen who took part.

It captures the atmosphere in the RAF prior to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Just over 6 months previously the Berlin Wall had come down and the Cold War was coming to an end. There was talk of a Peace Dividend and the 'Options for Change' Defence Review, announced on 25 July 1990, had recommended the RAF be reduced from 89,000 to 75,000 personnel¹. The thoughts of Tornado GR1A aircrew of II (AC) Sqn, RAF Laarbruch concerning the possibility of redundancies were common to many of us in the early summer of 1990. These thoughts were quickly put on the back burner when Saddam Hussein ordered the invasion of Kuwait at the beginning of August and Western politicians decided that this act of aggression would not be allowed to stand. The book captures the massive scale of this effort which saw around 7,000 RAF personnel deploy to Saudi Arabia in support of firstly 'DESERT SHIELD' and then 'DESERT STORM' or what we knew as Operation GRANBY.

Thunder and Lightning uses a largely chronological structure which follows the initial response to the invasion. It covers the rapid deployment of the initial tripwire force, made up of Tornado F3s, RAF Regiment Rapier units and support elements such as Tactical Supply Wing, which was sent out to deter any Iraqi incursions into Saudi Arabia. It then details the steady 6 month build-up of force elements from right across the RAF looking at the deployments of Tornado GR1s, Jaguars, Buccaneers, Nimrod, AWACS, Victors, Hercules, VC10s, Tristars, Puma and Chinook. It also looks at the role played by the support elements such as the Movers, Medics, Suppliers and Regiment. The book details the individual and organisational effort that was required to put this force in place. The pre-deployment training and kitting process where everyone ensured they could 'mask in 9' and get an NBC suit on quickly and properly, as we all knew that Iraq had used chemical weapons. The extensive modification programme that went on at home units, and during the work up phase in theatre and in some cases continued during the conflict itself. The book does a good job of using the experiences of personnel to convey the urgency and sheer hard work that was required. It also covers the ingenuity of personnel in making the living conditions comfortable and includes how we all 'utilised' the support of the US forces, it reminded me of our supplier who managed to swap a pair of flying gloves for over 100 American cot beds.

When examining the conflict phase of the campaign from 17 January to 28 February 1991, the book draws on the experience and eye witness accounts of the personnel involved to give the reader some insight into what it was like to be there. The experience of the Tornado, Jaguar and Buccaneer crews, who were involved in the bombing of Iraqi airfields and Iraqi Army positions, is well told. The book also conveys the sense of relief all personnel involved in launching the aircraft felt when you heard them come back at night. I seem to remember the Brian Hanrahan phrase from the Falklands War about 'counting them out and counting them all back in' being used a lot. Sadly this didn't happen in all cases and effect of losing crews is well told through the words of their friends and colleagues.

¹ HoC Library (2010). *A Brief Guide to Previous British Defence Reviews*.
<http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN05714/SN05714.pdf>

Overall this book does a very good job of telling the story of the First Gulf War through the personal experiences of the RAF personnel who took part. It will rekindle the memories of those who served in the Gulf the experience of whom will also be familiar to those who have served in the campaigns since 1991. In many ways the 1991 conflict marked the sea change from the Cold War posture to the Expeditionary operations we prepare for now. This book captures that moment in time well.

Finally just a note on the different versions of this book. The earlier hardback copy came out in initially in late 1991 and is lavishly illustrated with over 150 photographs from all stages of the campaign. The paperback version was printed in 1994, has considerably less photographs, but has an additional page which acts as a preface which details the role of 7 Squadron's SF Flight during Op GRANBY. Either copy can be found for around £5 on leading booksellers websites, my preference would be for the hardback version as there are certain photographs which will evoke memories for anyone who was there.

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