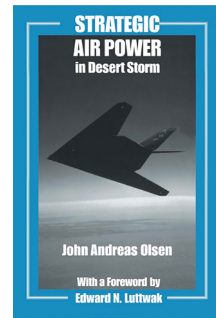


Book Reviews

Strategic Air Power in Desert Storm



By John Andreas Olsen

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Reviewed by The Reverend Dr (Squadron Leader) David Richardson

Biography: The Reverend Dr (Squadron Leader) David Richardson is a graduate of the universities of Edinburgh, Belfast, Trinity College Dublin and King's College London, and a contributor to the Cambridge Dictionary of Irish Biography. Ordained in the Church of Ireland, he has served 10 years as a chaplain in the RAF at Lyneham, Odiham, Amport House and Halton. Operational experience includes two tours of Afghanistan and a recent deployment on Op SHADER, working with both air force elements in Cyprus and training teams in Iraq.

Introduction

A quarter of a century ago, the kaleidoscopic night skies over Baghdad seemed to mark the beginning of a new era for strategic air power. In this volume, Royal Norwegian Air Force colonel and visiting professor at the Swedish Defence University John Andreas Olsen sets out the chain of events which brought the bombers over Saddam's capital, and assesses the outcome. The book is divided into five main parts; looking at the strategic context of the conflict, the doctrinal development of US air power, the evolution of this doctrine into practical planning, the structure of the Iraqi regime, and the results of the bombing campaign. Olsen's thesis, simply put, is that American air power had essentially become a tactical adjunct to land forces during the Cold War period, and Operation Desert Storm marked a step change to a more strategic stance. He singles out the zealous activity of Colonel John Warden in blending the Clausewitzian concept of centres of gravity with the capabilities offered by modern air power. Set out in his famous '5 rings model', Warden believed that 'strategic paralysis' could be induced by directly attacking the leadership structure of an enemy nation – a significant departure from the existing American doctrinal view of aircraft supporting armour on a battlefield. This is far from a hagiographical account, however, and both the weaknesses and strengths of the colonel's thinking are

explored. Olsen teases out how Warden struggled to have his views accepted within the US military establishment, and how the doctrinal purity of his concept was altered as the strategy of DESERT STORM developed. Although Olsen's account of Warden's odyssey requires close reading given the complexity of the issues at stake, it is worth persisting with. To put it mildly, Warden's single-minded advocacy of strategic air power did not always accord with the views of the theatre air commander, General Horner. Olsen nicely illustrates the key roles of General Buster Glosson and Warden's deputy David Deptula in ensuring that at least some of the master's teaching was implemented alongside the more conventional demands of battlefield support.

A key strength of Olsen's book is the equal care that he takes in describing the Iraqi regime as it stood in 1991. In a fascinating account of the Hussein power base, he sets out the various layers of political and tribal complexity, which lay behind the 1990 invasion of Kuwait. Crucially, Olsen argues that Warden's failure to grasp the unique nature of Saddam's rule compromised the ultimate effectiveness of his planning. The balance of military, Ba'ath Party, and Tikriti tribalism that made up Saddam Hussein's authority 'offered an enormous durability and survivability' (p.222), resistant even to the smartest of bombs. Key regime assets such as the Republican Guard were effectively ignored by planners and remained intact to support Saddam's authority.

Nonetheless, Olsen concludes that the air campaign in 1991 had a significant effect. Coalition air strikes focusing on the command and control network of the Iraqi regime effectively degraded the efficiency of Saddam's government and undermined the morale of his forces, contributing materially to the success of the war. Indeed, Olsen suggests that by early February 1991, the air war alone had convinced Saddam to begin consideration of a withdrawal from Kuwait.

The ultimate issue of the campaign, however, was the lack of a grand strategy for the region. Warden and his team had looked beyond the immediate issue of an Iraqi army occupying Kuwait and envisaged the possibility of an air campaign, which would root out Saddam's regime completely. However, this was hardly thought through comprehensively; as Olsen argues, 'the planners did not have suggestions as to how the regime should be overthrown beyond assuming that if they managed to paralyse the regime such an outcome was inevitable' (p.291). The nature of the Hussein regime was such that any possible political alternative had been effectively quashed. The Washington political establishment was, however, even more vague as to what the post- ceasefire future might be - the result being that Saddam remained in power for over a decade longer, bloodied but relatively unbowed.

This strategic evaluation is perhaps the key recommendation to reading Olsen's book. Purchasers expecting a bomb-by-bomb account of the conflict will be disappointed – what this volume offers rather is a thoughtful statement of the need to link political thought to the potential of air power. Whilst Warden's work may have ensured that strategic air power came to the fore once more, his concepts were largely developed 'in a political and military vacuum' (p.293). With an inadequate understanding of the enemy state, and an opaque vision of the

post-conflict world, strategic air power could only achieve a limited amount. Twenty five years on, this volume remains a salutary reminder of that to a new generation of air power practitioners.

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