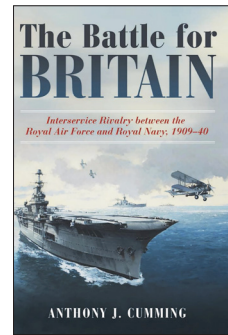


Book Reviews

The Battle for Britain: Inter-service Rivalry between the Royal Air Force and Royal Navy 1909-1940



By Anthony J Cumming

Publisher: Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 2015 (ISBN: 978-1612518343), 224 pages

Reviewed by Mr Colin McHattie

Biography: Colin McHattie is a PhD student at the University of Birmingham. His research topic examines policy debates between the three Services in the 1920s.

Introduction

Previous histories have dealt with the development of air and naval policy in the inter-war period, most notably Montgomery Hyde's *'British Air Policy between the Wars'*, (London, Heinemann, 1976) and Roskill's *'Naval Policy between the Wars'*, (London, Collins, 1968/1976). Given the background of these authors there is clearly an opening for a book which critically investigates the relationships between the two services, especially considering that much government time was spent adjudicating the intense rivalry between the two factions which developed.

Cumming's book is a continuation of his thesis that the Royal Navy and not the Royal Air Force was ultimately responsible for victory in the Battle of Britain. These ideas have appeared in his PhD thesis *'The Navy as the Ultimate Guarantor of Freedom in 1940'* and in *'The Royal Navy and the Battle of Britain'* (Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 2010).

From the title one would assume that the central focus of this new volume would be the inter-service rivalry between Admiralty and Air Ministry in the interwar years, but the first half of the book is taken up with a rather selective review of developments in air and sea power looked at without reference to the broader inter-service perspective. Cumming presents an excessively one-sided view of air and navy responses to economic constraints and strategic requirements, with little examination of the causes and response to the genuine rivalry which existed. Cumming uses a number of secondary sources which cannot be described as representing the high ground of academic debate. In consequence the book adds little to the historiography. In the introduction to his doctoral thesis Cumming states that:

‘It is perhaps my own irrational irritation with the eternal emotional bombast obstructing rational debate on these matters that motivates me to challenge some of the most cherished assumptions of 1940 and to ask who saved Britain in her finest hour.’

Clearly then there is a case for following E.H Carr’s advice to study the historian before you begin to study the facts. Even the publisher’s cover notes begin with the comment that the content is a provocative reinterpretation of British air and naval power.

Rather than focusing on the conflicts between the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy three chapters are devoted to an aggressive critique of Trenchard’s efforts to ensure the survival of an independent Royal Air Force; the RAF role in Imperial Policing in the Middle East and North West Frontier; and the period which Churchill described as ‘The Locust Years’.

In these chapters Cumming engages in lengthy discourse on such matters as gunnery, anti-submarine warfare, and defence against mines from a naval perspective on the one hand, and then, on the other hand, equally long diversions to discuss the failure of the Air Ministry to establish a proper fighter/bomber ratio, or a capable bomber which would enable RAF operational capability to match the rhetoric of the Air Ministry. However, major points of disagreement between the Royal Air Force and Royal Navy, such as over the control of the Fleet Air Arm, are almost completely overlooked in Cumming’s review.

Having failed to provide any analysis of the rivalry between the two protagonists, which is supposedly the subject of the book, Cumming then proceeds to provide an equally one-sided view of the events of the summer of 1940 painting the role of the Royal Air Force in the Battle of Britain in the worst possible light. In the opening paragraph of this chapter Cumming cites three leading academics in a quote intended to provide evidence that the air campaign in the Battle of Britain was by no means decisive, and that the Royal Navy remained the real guarantor of defence against invasion. The quotation was incomplete and led to the academics concerned writing lengthy rebuttals in the RUSI Journal following publication of the original article which Cumming had referenced.

What Cumming has failed to do is to seek the holistic view which the authors [Goulter, Gordon and Sheffield] had considered essential. An opportunity to present a reasoned debate is lost. In fact there is general acceptance amongst historians that both services contributed to Hitler's decision to cancel Operation Sealion, an established view which did not come about as a consequence of Cumming's provocative text.

Having failed to address the inter-war rivalry Cumming balances two chapters covering the air war in 1940 with the naval situation and therein he discusses two elements which could reasonably have been subject to the type of critical analysis which the title of the book suggests; albeit at the very end of the period supposedly under examination in the book title. The topics discussed were the action at Mers-el-Kebir and the Battle of the Atlantic.

The decision to deny German and Italian forces the opportunity of capturing the French fleet was a difficult one, and in the aftermath of Mers-el-Kebir it would have been extremely problematic to portray it as a victory to a British public in need of some evidence of turning the tide on German advances. In comparison the public perception of a significant victory against the Luftwaffe was much easier to promote. Furthermore there was an imperative to present a defiant message to Roosevelt in order to demonstrate British resolve, and the destruction of the ships of a former ally would hardly have portrayed the desired message. Although Cumming does devote a passage to these considerations, the interested reader would be better served in examining the *'The Good Fight: Battle of Britain Propaganda and The Few'* by Dr. Garry Campion, (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

Similarly, a much more balanced analysis of the competing views with regard to the use of air power with respect to the Battle of the Atlantic can be gained by reading the work by John Buckley, *'RAF and Trade Defence 1919-1945: Constant Endeavour.'* (Keele University Press, 1995).

The penultimate chapter of the book deals with the war in the Mediterranean and as with the preceding chapters one is left to wonder what the relevance is to the book's title. Instead another review of events is given, with no engagement with the central question of inter-service rivalry. From cover to cover Cumming fails to describe or explain the political conflicts which existed between the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy.

In his conclusion Cumming asks whether it is ever possible for the service chiefs to place the wider national interest above loyalty to their own service. It is a question which might well have been asked at the outset as a means for examining the rivalries which were prevalent between Admiralty and Air Ministry throughout the period covered in this book.

Polemic can be a productive device to raise new and controversial questions in the hope of improving understanding. Unfortunately Cumming's book does not invite considered appraisal of the subject matter raised, but rather has the potential to polarise opinion, based upon a very biased presentation of the topic. For the serious academic reader this volume has little to offer.

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