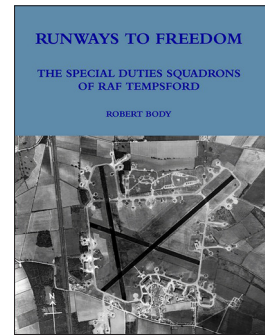


Book Reviews

Runways to Freedom: The Special Duties Squadrons of RAF Tempsford



By Robert Body

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

Biography: Lieutenant Colonel (Retd) Richard Newton is a senior lecturer at Joint Special Operations University specialising in air power theory, planning, and integration. He is a graduate of the USAF Academy, the US Army School of Advanced Military Studies, and King's College London. Dr Newton served 22 years in the USAF as a combat rescue and special operations helicopter pilot, planner, and educator.

Introduction

Bob Body has produced a valuable history of air power that ought to resonate with every airman and special operator, especially now when the need for special operations forces (SOF) to address the challenges of modern conflict has become so acute. What *Runways to Freedom* capably illustrates is how airmen, like their land and maritime counterparts, stepped up and developed unconventional and innovative tactics and equipment needed to support Resistance organisations from Norway to the Mediterranean and from the Atlantic to Poland.

In the spring of 1940 the Prime Minister appointed Hugh Dalton, as the Minister of Economic Warfare, with the mission of disrupting German activities, supporting the Resistance, collecting intelligence, and spreading subversion across occupied Europe. Thus, the Special Operations Executive was created. In August 1940 in order to support SOE operations, the RAF formed two Lysanders into 419 Flight at RAF North Weald. Very quickly, the task grew too large for two Lysanders and by February 1942 two squadrons, 138 and 161 Sqns, were based at RAF Tempsford and employed for special duties.

Runways to Freedom is a detailed history of these two unique squadrons and the men who flew and supported special air operations during the Second World War. The book makes extensive use of primary source materials from The National Archives, with two-thirds of the pages given to month-by-month synopses of the squadron records. The author overcomes the inherent dryness of such a foundation by enlivening the pages with personal histories, anecdotes, and stories provided by the veterans of these squadrons.

Body nicely illustrates a challenge that modern special operations airmen continue to face – they tend not to fit with their conventional Air Forces by equipment, primary missions, and temperament. A point highlighted by Sir Arthur Harris' proposal that special operations tasks could be performed by ordinary bomber crews as part of their normal duties. During the summer of 1942, 138 and 161 Squadrons participated in a few conventional bombing raids until the Prime Minister and the heads of Special Intelligence Service and Special Operations Executive intervened to ensure that the squadrons were not subsumed into the conventional air force.

One of the strengths of this book is that it gives acclamation to the supporting elements that made the special duties mission succeed. The men of the SD squadrons had to develop procedures for low-level airdrops out of aircraft not originally designed for such operations. For the bombers, a 40" hole was cut into the bottom of the aircraft and a hinged door emplaced. People and cargo would be sequenced out of the hole based on mission requirements. To allow the door to work, the two mid-level gun turrets had to be removed – saving weight, but increasing the aircraft's vulnerability. As aircraft were lost, the engineers and mechanics were constantly modifying replacements to SD standards.

What comes out of Body's narrative is the tremendous price these airmen paid in order to 'do their jobs'. Because operational flying was limited to two weeks either side of the full moon – navigation was primarily visual with the navigators or pilots using moonlight reflected off rivers, lakes, and roads to find their drop zones or landing zones – the number of aircraft and aircrews lost was very high. And because not everyone was suited for nor desired to perform the long, lonely, and low-level flying across the length and breadth of Europe, the pool for replacement aircrews was small.

Runways to Freedom is a worthy addition to any collection of air force histories and especially for those in the general audience who are interested in the more unusual aspects of air power. The author achieves a nice balance between primary source materials and personal anecdotes, and he does not clutter the pages with the quantity and specificity of notations expected from a primarily academic work. The references to primary sources is sufficient to stimulate further research by academics, while maintaining the readability and clarity that keeps the book appropriate for non-academics.

Upon reading *Runways to Freedom*, modern airmen will recognise that many of the administrative and technical challenges faced by SD airmen during the Second World War

still exist today – lack of appreciation for the unique contributions by special air operations to national security, struggles for material and manpower resourcing within and amongst the Services, and balancing operational security with the need to coordinate air operations in crowded airspaces. The book serves as an excellent case study about what it means to be ‘SOF’. The men of RAF Tempsford showed that it was the ‘special operations mind-set’, looking at the challenges at hand and then applying unconventional and inventive means to overcome those challenges that made the RAF’s Special Duties squadrons different and ultimately successful.

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