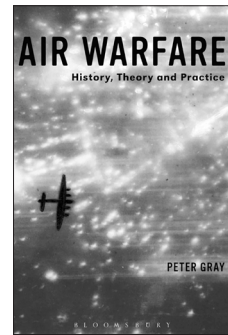


Book Reviews

Air Warfare: History, Theory and Practice



By Air Commodore (Retd) Dr Peter Gray

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Reviewed by Group Captain (Retd) Ian Shields

Biography: Ian Shields is a retired Group Captain. A navigator, he operated the Vulcan and primarily the Hercules, commanding 47 Squadron 2001-2003. He holds post-graduate degrees from KCL and Cambridge University, where he is currently researching for a doctorate.

Introduction

If there is a contemporary British academic suitably qualified to write a new textbook on air warfare, it would have to be Air Commodore (Retd) Dr Peter Gray. A former Director of Defence Studies for the RAF, the Royal Aeronautical Society's Senior Research Fellow in Air Power Studies and the convenor and primary lecturer in a Master's programme in Air Power Studies at the University of Birmingham, the author is eminently well-qualified to write such a book. And it is the *tour de force* that one would have hoped for. It is, in its intent and its delivery, unashamedly an academic textbook, and is not a lightweight read, but given the complexity and the seriousness of the subject material, it is all the richer for this.

One of the book's many strengths is that it tackles, head-on, many, if not all, the core debates surrounding air warfare today. The book starts by setting the scene with a thorough examination of the study of air warfare and its place against the wider sweep of military history, before examining the historiography of air warfare, considering the value of different sources and evaluating how our thinking about the subject has evolved. Although a slightly dry subject, these early chapters are vital in setting the scene for what is to follow, and in particular the succeeding chapter that traces the development of air power thinking. This development, with its themes of over-optimism and misplaced faith (largely driven by ignorance and too

little understanding of the technical limitations of the time) continues to shape the debate today, as is clear in the next two chapters that delve into the practice of air warfare and its leadership. Here, the value of the earlier chapters becomes ever clearer, for without first examining its academic origins, the mistakes and the odd triumph of air warfare in its delivery would have not been so easily, and so well, explained. But for this reviewer, it is the chapters on legality, legitimacy and ethics, and on strategy, operations and tactics, that make this book such a compelling read. Of all the issues facing proponents of air warfare today, the ethical dimension and the correct level at which air power can and should be employed are the most pressing. In commendable detail but with telling clarity, Peter Gray dissects these most complex of issues to expose the real questions. Equally impressively, he avoids the Siren's call and does not offer answers or opinions, sticking rigidly to his aim of delivering a true textbook.

While this book offers little that is new, drawing as it does on well-used and well-documented sources, the clarity of the thought throughout this book marks it out as a future classic. While many American authors have attempted similar feats, this rare offering from a British author, tackling the issues from the perspective of a British academic and through the twin lenses of the RAF and wider British military experiences, offers a new and valuable, not to say well-targeted, analysis. It is not, in all honesty, a light read, but again it is a textbook, designed for students studying British military power in the third dimension. Nor is it a long book: the substantive chapters run to just some 120 pages, albeit of dense text. But this will no doubt become a staple of air power studies, and deserves the time and effort to be read thoroughly; contemplation of its messages will be well rewarded. This book should be a well-thumbed addition to the bookshelves of all air power thinkers and practitioners.

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