

Book Reviews

THE ROYAL FLYING CORPS, THE WESTERN FRONT AND THE CONTROL OF THE AIR, 1914-1918



BY JAMES PUGH

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Biography: Squadron Leader Phil Clare is an RAF Logistics officer. He is currently serving as a member of the Directing Staff at the UK Joint Services Command and Staff College and holds an MA in the British History of the First World War from the University of Wolverhampton.

INTRODUCTION

If you are looking for a book that will provide you with either a narrative of the air war over the Western Front or, indeed, a glimpse into the lives of the famous aces, you may need to look elsewhere. If, on the other hand, you want a work that dissects the underlying principles behind what it means to control the air, its development throughout the First World War, and the way in which the concept has to be both championed and tested, then I strongly advise you read on.

This is an academic work that unashamedly places control of the air at its heart. By doing so, it provides Pugh with the scope to address some of the omissions contained in the historiography surrounding Britain's attempt to gain control of the air during the First World War. It also gives him the latitude to explore the term 'control of the air' and its many definitions and interpretations that have developed since the concept was first mooted. The reader will very quickly realise that although Pugh recognises the attraction of the propagandised 'Knights of the Air', he quickly moves the debate away from the heroic and romantic aspects of air-to-air fighting, which he believes mask the underpinning theory and principles of control of air – principles which, Pugh believes, had

a more fundamental basis. His starting point rests on the overlooked pre-war theories of early air power proponents such as Burke and Capper who realised there would be a need for aircraft to fight each other, but attempts to develop aircraft to accomplish that task were hampered by the technology of the day. Pugh then analyses in a chronological manner how these early ideas and concepts were tested and developed from the start of the War through to Neuve Chapelle and Loos in 1915.

The Somme battles, where Trenchard had achieved the desired mass to dominate the air in July and August 1916, are used as both a pivot and a portal to access the increasingly attritional air battles of 1917 and 1918. For Pugh, emphasising how the British Army under Haig began to understand the need to gain and maintain control of the air to realise effective tactical air support is a key driver to countering the critical narratives of how the air war was conducted. The relationship between Trenchard and Haig was key to aligning the new Corps' organisational values and ethos with those of the wider British Army – a relationship and an understanding that were developed through the production of a series of pamphlets and air instructions that reflected the growing importance of gaining and maintaining control of the air. The air battles over Arras and particularly the campaigns of 1918 are, for Pugh, the RFC's own 'learning curve', where Trenchard's mantra of the relentless offensive was tempered by Salmond's more nuanced view.

Pugh's focus on the Western Front is understandable, but his gaze is also quite rightly drawn to London where the call from politicians and the public for better home defence against Gotha raids in 1917 and a move towards independent air power threatened to challenge the primacy of the RFC. Instead of being distracted by the Home Front, Pugh uses such developments to reinforce his argument that the primary role of the RFC was to win control of the air and provide air support to the British Expeditionary Force on the continent. Trenchard's fighter squadrons were only 'leant' to Home Defence for limited periods, for example, and Trenchard's case to advance the front line in Belgium to force Gotha raiders further from the coast or to force them to fly over British lines before they crossed the Channel was factored into Haig's plan for the Third Battle of Ypres. By the middle of 1918, the majority of raids flown by the RAF's Independent Force were actually against German airfields rather than German towns and cities. This is somewhat surprising for a Force born out of the clamour for reprisal raids but it certainly reinforces Pugh's argument that control of the air over the Western Front, which included these offensive counter air missions, remained paramount until the War's end.

It is this part of the book that provides a fascinating sub-text surrounding not equipment, doctrine or tactics, but personalities. In essence, Haig and Trenchard and the Western Front versus Henderson, Sykes and the development of independent air power: powerful individuals who shaped the arguments and policies at the strategic and operational levels.

Do not let the book's title distract you. Although Pugh's work focuses on the period between 1912 and 1918, issues such as doctrine, politics and personality from that era remain relevant today, be it for control of the air or, indeed, other domains such as space and cyber. To that end, this book has much to recommend for a wide audience. It is an essential read for those who study the First World War and air power. It is also of significant interest to anyone who wishes to better understand the sacrifice and determination required to gain and maintain control of the air and the benefits that brings to our fighting forces and civilian population.

James Pugh is a Lecturer in Modern History at the University of Birmingham. His research includes the history of air power during both World Wars. His latest work explores the history of amphetamines in Britain between 1935 and 1945.

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