

Book Reviews

HOW THE WAR WAS WON: AIR-SEA POWER AND ALLIED VICTORY IN WORLD WAR II



BY DR PHILLIPS PAYSON O'BRIEN

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Biography: Group Captain John Alexander is deputy secretary of the D-Notice Committee and an RAF Reserve. As a regular he specialised in air/land integration, including in the Falklands and various Middle Eastern campaigns, was twice a CAS Fellow, conceptualised future conflict for the MOD, and spent six years working on counter-terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

INTRODUCTION

'There were no decisive battles in World War II.' Thus, Phillips Payson O'Brien begins this persuasive argument against the orthodoxy that the War was won on the Eastern Front by the Red Army's systematic destruction of the German Army in a succession of massive and bloody land battles. Instead, O'Brien shows that in terms of production, technology and economic power, the war was a contest of air and sea supremacy. It was Anglo-American air and sea power which, from 1943, put unbearable pressure on German and Japanese fighting power in a 'super-battlefield' over Europe, in the Atlantic and in the Pacific, destroying over half of Axis materiel before it had even reached the front-line.

Central to O'Brien's argument is the premise that Germany's fate was determined in the summer of 1943 once its U-boats could no-longer damage Allied convoys. The Battle of the Atlantic was Germany's only 'modern' air-sea campaign, which, until early 1943, significantly damaged and diverted Allied effort (for example for the first six months of 1942 the US Army Air Forces (USAAF) in the UK were devoted entirely to anti-submarine

operations) whereas U-boat production represented only 10% of total German weapons production in 1942. Yet Germany was to lose 20% of its operational U-boats (41) in May 1943 alone, by attacking convoys increasingly well protected by: escorts, carriers and aircraft; sensor and weapon technology; and by increased convoy speeds.

Meanwhile, from mid-1943 the Anglo-American Combined Bomber Offensive's targeting of German production, oil and transport forced Germany to strip the battlefield of fighter cover, and dedicate 60% of its weapons production to aircraft and anti-aircraft munitions to protect itself. In contrast the armoured fighting vehicle (AFV) losses at Kursk, the war's largest tank battle, represented less than one per cent of German weapons production for 1943. The impact of Allied air operations continued in 1944 with *Luftwaffe* losses increasing to an average of 73% of its fighter strength each month. Half of these were through non-combat losses from poor production standards and reduced training capacity resulting from the impact of Anglo-American bombing. This at a time when the average attrition rate for Allied bombers fell to 1.4% per sortie. O'Brien's insights on the material impact of the air campaigns include that V-2 rocket production cost Germany as much as all AFV production from 1939-1945 (although the RAF and USAAF dropped more ordnance to counter V-1 and V-2s than in support of Allied armies in Normandy) and that by 1944 28,000 people were employed building air-raid shelters in Germany.

O'Brien also highlights the scale and impact of the air-sea campaign in the Pacific. Japanese fighting power, initially greater than the USSR's, was rapidly degraded in 1943 when US submarines prevented Japan importing resources essential for aircraft production and, as a result, for pilot training. One result was that between November 1942 and June 1944 the Japanese Navy lost 5889 aircraft in non-combat operations compared to 2754 in combat, and in the 'Marianas Turkey Shoot' it lost 426 aircraft, 90% of its force, in 2-days largely because of poorly trained pilots.¹ In comparison to the impact of the air-sea campaign, O'Brien reflects that Macarthur's Philippines campaign and Britain's Burma campaign were utterly insignificant in the damage they did to Japan.

O'Brien provides insight on the differing perspectives of the Anglo-American leaders behind the air-sea strategy. The Army chiefs Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke and General of the Army George C. Marshall had a narrow battlefield perspective, where air and sea supported armies. Churchill swung between seemingly understanding the potential of air-sea operations (wanting to conserve British manpower and supporting strategic bombing) to relapses, such as championing the Italy campaign on the basis of diverting German divisions, for O'Brien 'a World War 1 analysis of World War II'. Roosevelt is portrayed as very different, wanting the US to dominate air-sea, and decisively, even before Pearl Harbour, overruling Marshall and prioritising aircraft instead of army equipment production. General 'Hap' Arnold (Commanding General, USAAF) and Admiral of the Fleet Sir Dudley Pound (Royal Navy First Sea Lord) tended to view air and sea

respectively in isolation, whereas Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir Charles Portal (Chief of the Air Staff), Fleet Admiral King (Commander in Chief, US Fleet and Chief of Naval Operations), and Fleet Admiral Leahy (Roosevelt's chief of staff) understood the potential of air and sea power, although King's focus was very much on the Pacific. O'Brien suggests that Portal recognised the importance of attacking German oil and transport from 1941 but was unable to convince Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris (AOC-in-C Bomber Command) to divert effort from city bombing, a controversy much explored in the literature.

Overall, O'Brien's argument is persuasive but perhaps too one-sided, giving limited consideration to land campaigns and individual battles. The importance of geography also warrants greater consideration as the German and Japanese conquests of 1938-1941 increased Axis access to resources and these conquests were stopped in the battles of Britain, Moscow, Stalingrad, El Alamein, and Midway. Furthermore, USAAF B-29 bombers could reach Japan only once the Mariana Islands were taken and, as Richard Overy has recently reminded us, Germany was only finally defeated with the Red Army's capture of Berlin and the death of Hitler.² Finally, O'Brien surely underplays the impact of Germany's manpower commitment on the Eastern Front and its tremendous losses. O'Brien's arguments, however, are supported by significant statistical research and analysis.

Nevertheless, *How the War Was Won* is highly recommended as a stridently revisionist account, highlighting the RAF's contribution to winning the War in the grand strategic context of Anglo-American air-sea power. Like Adam Tooze's *The Wages of Destruction: the Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy*, for O'Brien the Combined Bomber Offensive significantly degraded German war production from 1943, rather than 1944 as more commonly viewed. The book is also a timely reminder of the importance of air-sea power and economic warfare given Western militaries' renewed focus on peer adversaries.

NOTES

¹ The 'Marianas Turkey Shoot' was the nickname given by USN aircrew to the Battle of the Philippines Sea 19-20 June 1944, when the USN totally destroyed Japanese carrier capability.

² Richard Overy, 'Bombed Into Defeat?', *The RUSI Journal*, 160.4 (2015), 10-13 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2015.1079037>>.

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