

Book Reviews

THE ROYAL AIR FORCE: THE FIRST ONE HUNDRED YEARS



BY JOHN BUCKLEY AND PAUL BEAVER

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Biography: Wing Commander James Parker MBA BCom RAF is currently Station Commander RAF Scampton, having commissioned into the Flight Operations branch in 1999 as a University Cadet. A fluent French speaker, he recently spent four years in Paris, initially on the Advanced Command and Staff Course at the Ecole de Guerre and then as an exchange officer on the French Joint Staff.

INTRODUCTION

The centenary year of the RAF has seen the publication of several books chronicling the history of the Service. However, *The Royal Air Force: The First One Hundred Years*, stands out from the crowd. Condensing one hundred years of RAF history into a manageable volume would be a challenge for lesser authors, yet John Buckley and Paul Beaver succeed because of their skill in melding insightful strategic assessments with genuinely fascinating historical and contemporary details. This ensures a new and authoritative perspective on a story whose essentials are relatively well-known.

The author of several other notable books, including *Monty's Men: The British Army and the Liberation of Europe 1944-5*, which won the Templer Medal in 2014, Buckley is Professor of Military History at the University of Wolverhampton. His cooperation with Beaver, who spent five years as editor of *Janes Defence Weekly*, and is an Honorary Group Captain in the Royal Auxiliary Air Force, has resulted in an informative and highly readable book. Structured into twelve chapters, the book addresses the full breadth of RAF history from inception to the present day, conveying the authors' premise that the three greatest influences on the RAF have been technology; finance and resources; and the connection between air power and national strategy.

The book begins by outlining the formation of the Service, highlighting many points of interest, some of which may also amuse the reader. Many will be aware that a major driver for the formation of the RAF was the public perception that the United Kingdom was vulnerable to German aerial attacks, but it is probably less well-known that 'the damage to the economy caused by German bombing was around one per cent of [the damage] caused by rats' (page 22). The second chapter turns to 'Imperial Policing in the Interwar Era', noting that by 1920 the Service had been reduced to some 30,000 personnel and 20 operational squadrons, and that there loomed the distinct possibility of it being broken up. However, Trenchard's vision of the RAF ensuring Imperial defence through cost-effective air control and policing ultimately proved to be the Service's saving grace, despite its limitations in terms of political and human cost. The following chapter on 'The Road to War' introduces Thomas Inskip, 'a relatively unknown and colourless character in British history but [one who] was to prove critically important' (pages 51-52) as the Minister for the Coordination of Defence in 1936. In essence, despite arguments to the contrary, Inskip prioritised the production of fighters over bombers. Rightly, the better-known developments of this period are also detailed, including the development of an integrated air defence network as well as the growth of both the RAF's budget and the UK's aero-industry.

Given the authors' view that 'the RAF's role in the Second World War remains its most important and vital contribution to the survival and progress of the British nation' (page 143) it is logical that three chapters, comprising one-third of the book, are devoted to the period 1939-1945. Furthermore, they identify a number of key lessons that remain relevant today. These include the fact that both the quantity *and the quality* of aircraft available to each protagonist are important factors in assessing the likely outcome of a confrontation, as evidenced in 1940; and that air superiority is an essential prerequisite for providing ground forces with close air support, as shown by the Western Desert Air Force under Air Vice-Marshal Coningham. Most theatres of the war are well-covered, particularly the tribulations and successes of Coastal Command, though more on the use of air power in the fight against the Japanese would have made interesting reading. A standalone chapter is dedicated to 'The Bomber Offensive' against Germany. This book offers far more than a bland recounting of the official line; indeed, Beaver and Buckley acknowledge the unease surrounding the Strategic Bombing Offensive. Nevertheless, they conclude that 'actions have to be understood in the context of the war' (page 119) being one of national survival. Moreover, they recognise that in today's age of great precision it is easy to be critical of the past. As such, it is worth considering that the 1941 Butt Report highlighted that only one-third of bombs came within 5 miles of their intended target, largely due to the inefficiency of the navigation aids and bomb-aiming technologies in use at the time. Also covered in detail is Operation Chastise in May 1943, one of the most famous bombing raids ever conducted, and the Dambusters' audacious achievements are all the more impressive in terms of accuracy when set against the other operations conducted at the time.

History from 1945 to the present day is outlined in several short chapters covering the RAF's entry to the nuclear age; its role in the Cold War and post-Cold War environments; and ending with a chapter on 'War in the Gulf and Other Not So Small Wars: 1990 to the Present Day', which concludes by recounting the trilateral strikes conducted against suspected chemical weapons facilities in Syria in April 2018. Any overlap between the chapters is minor, and the authors paint a convincing picture of the RAF playing a crucial role countering the Soviet threat as well as taking part in numerous campaigns across the globe. For example, the development of the V-Bombers and other iconic jets of that period is covered with the same enthusiasm as tales of Spitfire-on-Spitfire engagements in the first Arab-Israel conflict, the strategic implications of the Blackbuck bombing raid during the Falklands War as well as the success of precision strike during the First Gulf War. The importance of allies is made clear, primarily the United States, and more recently the French through the 2010 Lancaster House Treaty. In the final chapter which considers 'Future Proofing the RAF', the authors argue that the 'RAF continues to struggle against the public perception that RPAS [Remotely Piloted Air System] is some kind of futuristic, dystopian and chilling weapon system' (page 238). More positively, they highlight that the RAF is keen to grasp the cyber and space domains, notably through a Rapid Capability Office at Headquarters Air Command that fully embraces and expedites technological change.

In conclusion, this book is extremely readable and offers something for everyone, from those with little knowledge of RAF history to the veritable enthusiast. To attempt to cover the history of the RAF in a single volume was ambitious, but the authors have succeeded admirably and have produced a fitting tribute to the world's oldest independent air force.

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