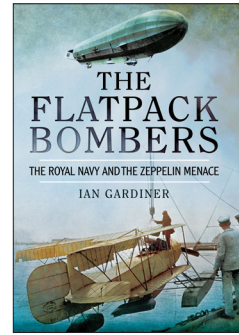


Book Reviews

The Flatpack Bombers – The Royal Navy and the Zeppelin Menace



By Ian Gardiner

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Reviewed by Squadron Leader David Tucker

Biography: Squadron Leader David Tucker completed an MLitt in Strategic Studies at the University of Aberdeen in 2004, winning the Gordon Shephard Memorial prize that year for his essay published in the *Air Power Review* on European Defence Integration. He is an RAF fast-jet navigator, currently serving in a staff appointment at HQ Allied Air Command in Ramstein.

Introduction

Following the centenary of the Royal Air Force, it is fitting that we, as a Service, reflect upon our antecedents. There is a wealth of material about the exploits of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) between 1914 and 1918, largely because of its full commitment to the support of the British Army on the Western Front. Material on the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) for the same period is less common, yet it was the RFC's resoluteness to the war in the trenches that led to the RNAS's involvement in arguably some of the more cutting-edge developments in air warfare elsewhere. Ian Gardiner's book deals with this subject and fills the gap in an entertaining and informative manner.

In a well-structured book, Gardiner makes a convincing case that the exigencies of the First World War led the RNAS to develop many of the roles that were later to become recognised as intrinsic parts of air power. The Service was at the forefront of seaplane development, and pioneered the very earliest aircraft carrier operations, first from converted merchant ships and later from purpose-built warships.

However, the most interesting claim for the student of air power is that the RNAS flew the first strategic bombing raids. Gardiner makes a convincing case for this as follows: at the First World War's outbreak, the Germans had a key advantage over the allies in terms of sea power through their possession of an airship fleet. 'Possession of the Zeppelin gave Germany potential strategic supremacy in the air' (p.1). The UK had had an unhappy relationship with its own airships up to this point and so did not have the capability to provide air support to its surface fleet in the way that the Germans did. This gave the Germans an unopposed capability which mitigated the RN's superiority in terms of warships. In those days before radar the Zeppelins allowed the Germans to pinpoint the position of the British fleet before the British could locate the German ships. The British had no immediate response to this threat as the heavier-than-air aircraft at the time could not fly high enough to intercept the Zeppelins, and in any case 'airships could go at speeds which were not greatly exceeded by aircraft until well into the First World War' (p.13). In addition, the British public, fresh from the release of H G Wells' *The War in the Air*, had an irrational fear of the threat posed to the civil population by the Zeppelin ('The Public's Hysteria' (p.38)). The solution, proposed by Charles Samson (an early pioneer of naval aviation) and championed by Winston Churchill (First Lord of the Admiralty) was to bomb the airships in their sheds, and thus tackle the problem at source – certainly bombing raids with strategic effect.

Gardiner goes on to chart the numerous developments in the early years of naval aviation, and links them to theoretical aspects of air power. Indeed, he discusses the relevance of a number of air power theories of the period and relates them to subsequent developments and shows how the RNAS activities at the time laid the foundations for many aspects of modern air power.

His understanding of the subject is clear, and he draws upon numerous sources, from contemporary records to conversations with some of the protagonists while they were still alive. He also gives us an insight into the relationships between Sykes, Henderson and Trenchard during the First World War. All can claim some level of parentage for the new service (p.19). Furthermore, he gives an interesting treatment of the development of Carrier Strike Operations in 'Cuxhaven – The First Carrier Strike' (p.85). In addition, he argues convincingly that the presence of General Smuts 'in London when the second (Zeppelin) raid on that city took place' (p.132) had an influence on his recommendation that an independent air force should be formed in 1918 in his eponymous report to the war cabinet.

The Flatpack Bombers – The Royal Navy and the Zeppelin Menace goes some way towards redressing the balance of understanding of the origins of the RAF. Gardiner has achieved the unusual feat of writing an academically rigorous and well-researched book which is also entertaining to read. It will fascinate both the academic and the casual reader and is highly recommended to anyone wishing to learn some of the less well-known facets of the early days of air power in the UK.

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