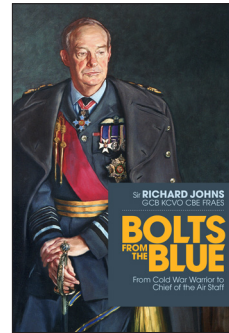


## Book Reviews

# Bolts From The Blue: From Cold War Warrior to Chief of the Air Staff



By Sir Richard Johns GCB KCVO CBE FRAeS

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Reviewed by Group Captain James Beldon

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**Biography:** Group Captain James Beldon currently serves as the RAF's Director of Defence Studies. A graduate of the UK Advanced Command and Staff Course, and holding an MPhil in International Relations from the University of Cambridge, he oversees the RAF's engagement with academia and co-ordinates the Chief of the Air Staff's Fellowship Scheme. An Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance expert, he previously commanded 8 Squadron (AWACS) and has flown on operations in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq, amassing more than 3,000 flying hours in the process.

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### Introduction

In its centenary year, the Royal Air Force was treated to a tsunami of publishing attention, but of the many titles surfing the wave of public interest in the Service, only a few, including Professor Richard Overy's *Birth of the RAF 1918* and Patrick Bishop's *Air Force Blue*, seem in their own right to have broken genuinely new ground and look set, therefore, to stand the test of time on merit rather than coffee table appeal alone. Another, and perhaps the most important of all, is Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Johns' masterly example of an autobiography, *Bolts From The Blue*. Launched after the bunting and logos of RAF100 had been consigned fondly to the souvenir drawer, Sir Richard Johns' book served as a literary bolt from the blue itself: it is, in this reviewer's opinion, the most significant contribution to the Royal Air Force's historiography made by one of its senior commanders for many years.

By any definition, *Bolts From The Blue* is an enjoyable read: Sir Richard's personality and sense of humour shine throughout, and engagingly propel the reader along. There are some colourful,

and occasionally surreal, vignettes, which inform and amuse in equal measure – his 500-knots duel with a Yemeni tribesman and a bizarre mess ball committee meeting in the middle of nowhere are examples of the latter! But contained within the prose too is evidence of a man whose determination and ‘stickability’ were even more profound. Whilst the title of Sir Richard’s book is derived from his interpretation that he was fortunate to be delivered a great number of opportunities by chance, the reader cannot but reach a different conclusion than that this was a man who took a unique road to the top of the Service he regarded as the best in the world, and which the Service ultimately regarded him as the best it had. Both were right, and Sir Richard’s account bears testimony not only to the 43-year epoch in which he served, but to the ethos of potential, merit and recognition that has been the sacred bond exemplifying the Royal Air Force and its people for more than a century.

There was no assured destiny for the young Richard Johns to reach air rank when he joined the Royal Air Force as a Cranwell flight cadet in 1957; but the door *was* open, as it was, indeed, for his fellow intake member, Michael Graydon, who as Air Chief Marshal Sir Michael Graydon would later precede him as Chief of the Air Staff in the 1990s. But reflecting six decades after his experience of Cranwell in the 1950s, Sir Richard offers a not-uncritical, but nevertheless balanced, assessment of the College in those days; somewhat tellingly he states bluntly that he ‘did not enjoy his first year at Cranwell’, and his critique of some of the staff there is deservedly sharp. Furthermore, the wastage rate during training was simply ridiculous and economically scandalous – imagine today an initial training system with a 50% suspension rate! Nevertheless, and one surmises that this is true for all who have gone through tough initial military training of one sort or another, it cultivated ‘that certain bloody-mindedness which is the bedrock of determination to succeed.’ It is this comment, perhaps more than any other in the book, that calibrates the reader’s assessment of Dick Johns’ rise to the top: because, although the author’s inherent modesty and entertaining prose are apt in seducing the reader into believing that each career step he took forward was a fortuitous ‘bolt from the blue’ or evidence of his ‘talent for good luck’, there are reminders throughout the book which point to the steel core of a man with whom the buck stopped at each level of command he held. All will enjoy the sections dealing with Aden (his descriptions of flying at ultra-low level among the terraced mountains are simply a joy), and those officers approaching or serving in mid-level command appointments will find something useful to extract from every sentence concerning his command of 3(F) Squadron and as Harrier Force Commander and Station Commander of RAF Gütersloh in Germany.

Sections of the book concerning staff and ground-based command appointments are no less interesting, nor the exposure of the challenges he faced any less revealing. Throughout, he is absolutely frank, and his ability to take in the full historical sweep of events is extremely useful to the military scholar. For example, he provides a superb insight into Britain’s response to Turkey’s invasion of Northern Cyprus in 1974 and offers a succinct and interesting comparison of British strategic myopia in departing Aden in the manner it did in 1967 with the British withdrawal from Iraq in 2009.

Sir Richard's account contains a wide-ranging cast, from the Prince of Wales – whom Flight Lieutenant Johns served as qualified flying instructor – to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Sir Michael Palin, and every senior figure in Defence and the Royal Air Force in the 1990s. It is fair, I think, to say that Sir Richard was not enamoured with the political class (with the notable exceptions of Margaret Thatcher and the team of Ministers under George Robertson in the 1997 New Labour Government). He was certainly frustrated by the relative lack of authority he considered the Service Chiefs of Staff could wield, which may come as a surprise to more junior members of the Service today.

A genuinely 'joint' officer – after all, he is the proud son of a Royal Marines officer – Sir Richard Johns was the epitome of the professionally adept, ruthlessly efficient airman, who could 'mix it' credibly with his peers from each Service (including the Civil Service). He was the product of a Royal Air Force flying and staff education system that prepared him well for every level of command, and to which he made considerable personal investment himself – not least through the creation in 1998 of *Air Power Review*. Notwithstanding, throughout *Bolts From the Blue*, one never loses touch with the young Richard Johns, whose love for flying was just as evident on his final sortie in a Hercules with son Douglas at the end of his career as it was the beginning. One absolutely gets the sense that the thrill of flying such a wide variety of types (with the possible exception of a Romanian MiG-21!) more than adequately compensated for the occasional tribulation.

Through his autobiography, Sir Richard has made another – perhaps his most valuable – gift to the conceptual capital of the Royal Air Force so far. Entertaining and persuasive, such carefully distilled advice has found superb form in the shape of *Bolts From The Blue*.



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