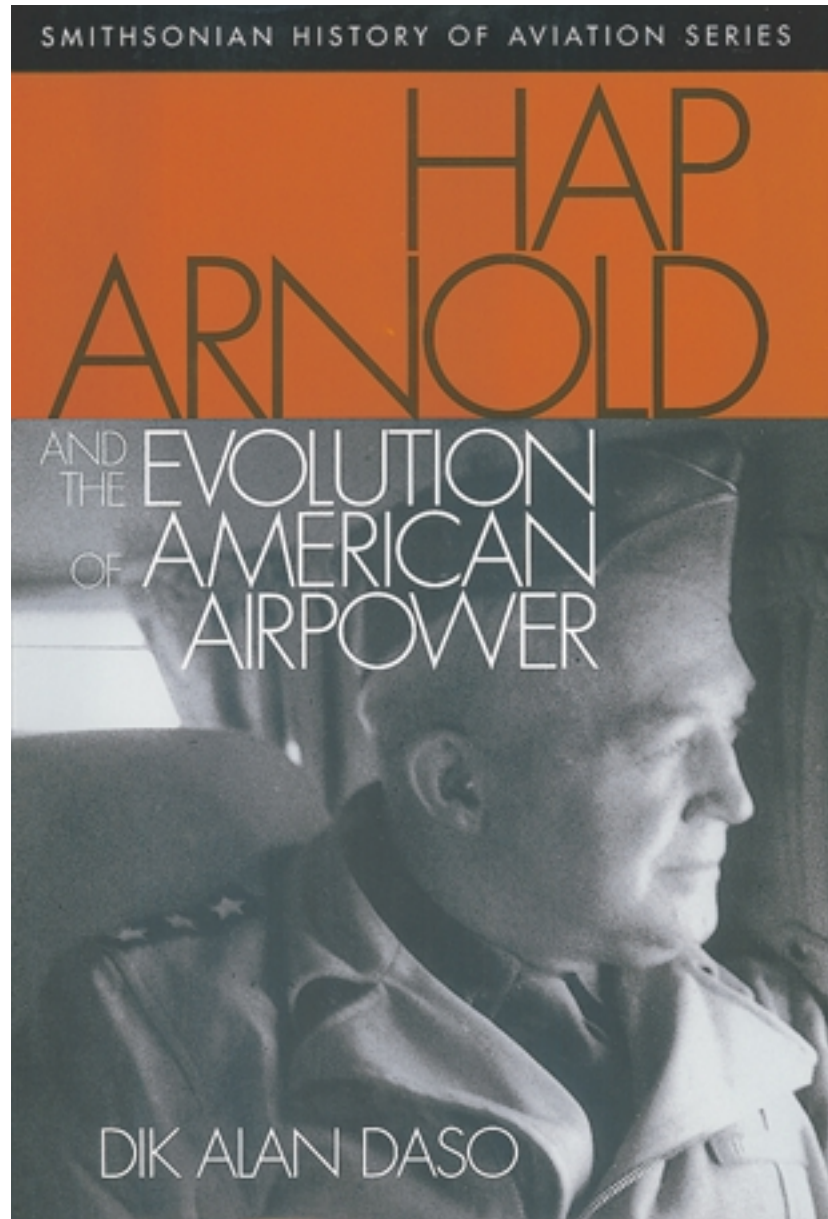


BOOK REVIEW BY SEBASTIAN COX

HAP ARNOLD AND THE EVOLUTION OF AMERICAN AIR POWER

Dik Alan Daso

General Henry Harley "Hap" Arnold's name is not as well known outside the United States as it deserves to be. Arnold was the commanding general of the United States Army Air Corps, later the United States Army Air Forces, throughout the Second World War. He oversaw the transition from a Corps of some 26,000 officers and men with just 23 B-17s in September 1939 to a wartime peak of 2.4 million men and 80,000 aircraft. Arnold was a convinced and determined advocate of



strategic air power, but he did not serve long enough to see through the final logical organizational transition from Army Air Forces to United States Air Force, which came about in 1947, two years after he retired, his health severely compromised by the unstinting effort he had devoted to his service and his country through the long war years.

It is strange that until now Arnold has lacked a proper biography, whilst other American airmen of his era such as Carl Spaatz and Claire Chennault have been the subjects of full-length studies. Dik Daso, a USAF fighter pilot who holds a PhD in history, has set out to rectify that omission. He follows Arnold's career from the excessively dangerous early days before the First World War, when a pilot's survival owed just as much to luck as it did to skill. Arnold was a true pioneer. He was one of the first two qualified pilots in the US Army, and learned to fly at Wilbur and Orville Wright's School at Dayton, where he received ground instruction from the Wrights themselves. Orville Wright himself became a lifelong friend, one of many friendships Arnold forged in the aviation community which were to stand him in good stead later in his career.

Daso's biography is particularly strong on the early influences, triumphs and tribulations of Arnold's career and marriage. By the end of the First World War Arnold had reached the rank of Colonel and had been posted to Washington DC as the executive officer in the Army Department's Air Division. Arnold never held a combat command, and the nearest he came to the war itself was a visit to Europe when his arrival at the front coincided exactly with the Armistice. Arnold's duties in Washington had involved him in both materiel production and training, and the experience, though far from happy, gave him invaluable insights into the problems of producing sufficient aircraft and personnel, which would again prove of

inestimable value twenty-five years later. His career stagnated for a period as a result of his outspoken support for General Billy Mitchell at the latter's infamous Court Martial, but by the eve of the Second World War Arnold stood just one rung below the top of the Air Corps ladder. The death of the Commander of the Air Corps, General Westover, in a flying accident, catapulted Arnold into the prime seat in 1938, just as the aircraft and technology available to the airmen began to show signs of fulfilling their more extravagant claims.

Daso excels at drawing out Arnold's farsighted insistence on establishing a close and enduring relationship, not only with industry and industrialists, but also with scientists and the universities, particularly Robert Millikan and the Hungarian born Theodore von Karman. Arnold developed and nurtured a sophisticated and effective research and development organization through his establishment of formal links and personal relationships with von Karman and others, to the inestimable long-term advantage of the US Air Force. Anyone who doubts the fundamental link between effective military power and a strong research and industrial base would benefit from reading this book.

Unfortunately, Daso is less surefooted regarding Arnold's crucial relationships within Washington DC. In particular the pivotal understandings between on the one hand Arnold, crucially supported by Army Chief of Staff General George C Marshall, and on the other President Roosevelt and his special adviser Harry Hopkins. It was this axis that allowed the wholesale and successful expansion of US air power and turned it into a war winning military tool of unprecedented power. One will search this book in vain for a detailed explanation of exactly how Arnold achieved his goal of creating a massive modern air force. There is

little, for example, on Arnold's part in the crucial meeting of September 1938, shortly after his appointment as Commanding General, when President Roosevelt ordered the first of several massive expansion programmes into effect. Daso seems content merely to highlight Arnold's extraordinary vision in propounding an air force with tens of thousands of aircraft at a time when lesser men in the Air Corps and Government were thinking at best in four figure numbers, without explaining fully how it was that he put the vision into effect.

Daso also fails properly to explore Arnold's relationship with the British, particularly British airmen such as John Slessor and Arthur Harris (both of whom spent extended periods in wartime Washington) or Arnold's opposite number Sir Charles Portal. The RAF/USAAF relationship was a complex, occasionally fraught, but essentially symbiotic one, and its depiction here is rather one-dimensional. For example, Daso appears not to comprehend that the early large scale British and French orders to US aircraft companies laid the foundation for their later expansion to meet the vast wartime demands of the USAAF and makes no comment on Arnold's shortsighted view that US-built aircraft should be reserved for the USAAF. Daso also makes much of Arnold's resistance to Churchill's attempts to persuade the USAAF to switch from day to night bombing, but fails to understand that there were some RAF officers who were engaged in the same task, notably Slessor. There are also one or two minor errors, such as characterizing Slessor as "British Air Minister", Portal as "overall commander" of the combined bomber offensive, and, following Arnold's own idiosyncratic style, referring to "Bert" Harris as "Bertie", thus improbably making the latter appear like some ineffectual refugee from P G Wodehouse. Here it would seem that Daso fell victim

to the narrowness of his sources. His three primary historical resources were the papers of Arnold and other US airmen, oral interviews with leading figures, and an almost exclusively American literature base. A wider reading of the air power literature would have enabled him to write a better book, but that may be a counsel of perfection when we remember that Daso combines his historical research with a full time career as a USAF pilot.

Whilst these faults perhaps mean that Arnold still lacks that definitive biography, this is still a very interesting, entertaining and valuable study of

one of the world's pioneer airmen: a man who never saw combat, but who built and commanded the largest air force ever to go to war. Those who profess an interest in air power and the complex interrelationships between science, industry, government, and the military should read this book.

Smithsonian Institution Press £21.00

Publication: 2000

ISBN: 1-56098-824-X

Book review by Mr Sebastian Cox

This article has been republished online with Open Access.

Ministry of Defence © Crown Copyright 2023. The full printed text of this article is licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0. To view this licence, visit <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/>. Where we have identified any third-party copyright information or otherwise reserved rights, you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned. For all other imagery and graphics in this article, or for any other enquires regarding this publication, please contact: Director of Defence Studies (RAF), Cormorant Building (Room 119), Shrivenham, Swindon, Wiltshire SN6 8LA.

 **ROYAL
AIR FORCE**
**Centre for Air and
Space Power Studies**

OGL