

## **BOOK REVIEW BY GROUP CAPTAIN PETER W GRAY DIRECTOR OF DEFENCE STUDIES (RAF)**

**WILFRID FREEMAN: THE GENIUS BEHIND ALLIED SURVIVAL  
AND AIR SUPREMACY 1939 - 1945**

**ANTHONY FURZE**

**Spellmount, Staplehurst, 1999**

**ISBN I-86227-079-I**

Biographies of senior wartime leaders are always welcome additions to the bookshelf. Those that cover a relatively new figure or replace out-of-date works are particularly welcome. This book covers the life of Air Chief Marshal Sir Wilfred Freeman, thereby filling a significant gap in air power historiography. Some other valuable 'lives' are imminent with Air Commodore Henry Probert due to publish his life of 'Bomber' Harris in the not too distant future. Dr Vincent Orange is also nearing completion of his work on Tedder. Both of these works are of well-known figures and are eagerly awaited. We are overdue up-to-date biographies on Trenchard and Dowding. But was Freeman in the same category? In fact who was he?

Inevitably, the well-chosen sub-title to the book gives an instant answer to these questions. Possibly more pertinent would be to ask why the lacuna if he was so important. The simple explanation of the gap is the lack of personal papers that so frequently make the biographer's task relatively easy. It is evident from the author's notes that several well-known historians shunned the task for this reason alone. Furze, however, gives full and generous credit to colleagues who had collated material on Freeman, but were unable to transpose this into a full manuscript. As Freeman was not an operational commander, he certainly attracted little attention.

Freeman was Air Member for Research and Development and then Air Member for Development and Production between April 1936 and May 1940. He subsequently served as VCAS to Portal, who ironically had been one of his students at Staff College. Freeman's lack of preferment for the post was ascribed to his having been divorced! His support to Portal was vital as was his influence over high-level decision-making in the Air Ministry. He was a contender for the position of Deputy Supreme Allied Commander (filled by Tedder), but discounted himself on the self-effacing grounds that he lacked recent operational experience. Freeman returned to the Ministry of Aircraft Production, 'in civvies,' as its Chief Executive in October 1942 with the task of remedying what Churchill called 'the state of chaos – a muddle and a scandal'.

This track record alone highlights Freeman's contribution to his Service. Furze enumerates in considerable detail Freeman's other contributions. These include his fervent support for the Mosquito – in the face of considerable hostility from successive Cs-in-C Bomber Command to whom the concept of an unarmed bomber was preposterous. Freeman kept the project alive with orders for photo-reconnaissance aircraft. He was an early supporter of Whittle's jet research and later became an astute manipulator of jet engine production. Freeman, according to Furze, forced Harris into accepting the concept of the Pathfinder force and was instrumental in the decision to award Malta the George Cross. As with many biographies, there is often a tendency to ascribe all positive actions to the subject of the book in hand – and vice-versa. The reality in the case of the Pathfinder Force was that Portal forced Harris into line – admittedly after Freeman's intervention.

Perhaps Freeman's greatest contribution, and the one most valued by the crews who flew the aircraft that he ordered, was his never-ending struggle to ensure that political demands for numbers were not to the detriment of quality.

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