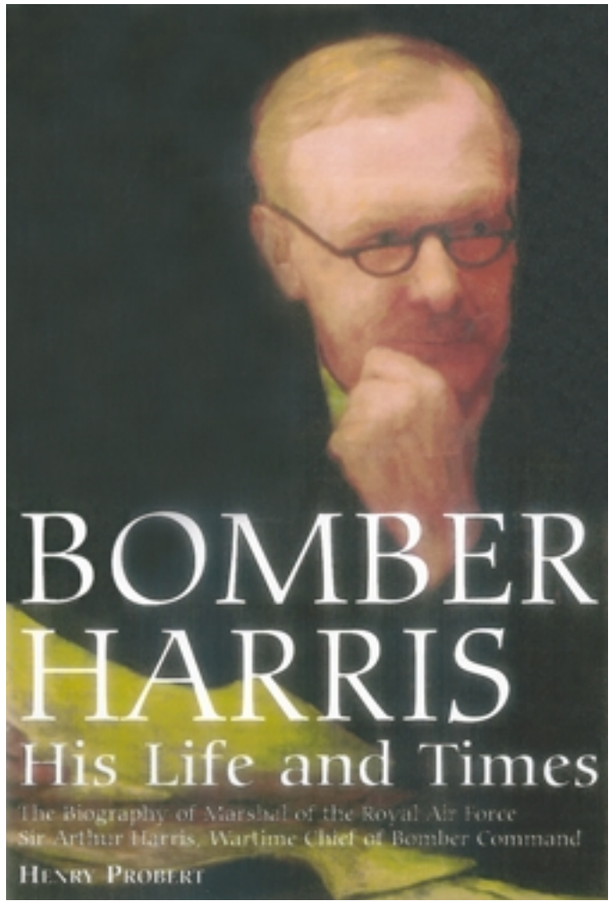

REVIEW ESSAY BY GROUP CAPTAIN PETER W GRAY RAF

Bomber Harris, His Life and Times

Air Commodore Henry Probert MBE MA
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Sir Arthur Harris had many nicknames and epithets over his Service career and during his subsequent years of fame, or infamy depending on one's viewpoint. He was totally indifferent to many of these sobriquets, only objecting to 'Ginger'. Air Commodore Probert uses 'Bomber' as it coincides most closely with public perceptions and common usage. Yet in his own day, Harris was almost uniformly known as 'Bert' – by his crews, colleagues and by the likes of USAAF Generals Hap Arnold and Ira Eaker.

On the face of it, one could be forgiven for thinking that the exploits of Bomber Command, and its irascible leader, have been more than adequately covered with a surfeit of books, television programmes, journal articles, theses and the like. Indeed Probert makes this point at the very beginning of his book in the opening sentence of the Preface. Arguably, however, the very proliferation of material is good cause for the administration of an occasional douche of common sense to bring the debate back to serious levels. This authoritative biography on Harris certainly meets this objective. It also serves to highlight the previous lacuna in the field and should make many academics, commentators and authors review their earlier material for balance, content and the risk of preconceptions. Harris did not write a full autobiography, understandably preferring to chronicle his views on wartime matters in his formal missive – *Despatch on War Operations 23rd February 1942 to 8th May 1945*, (published with a preface and introduction by Sebastian Cox, Cass, 1995). This represents Harris's own testament to his tenure at the head of Bomber Command; it was not published at the time because of what Tedder, who was CAS when it was completed, called 'insurmountable security objections'. Harris acquiesced in this decision, but drew heavily on the work to produce *Bomber Offensive* (Collins, 1947). There was then a considerable gap until the only hitherto authorised biography on Harris was completed by Dudley Saward in 1984 (*Bomber Harris*, Buchan and Enright). Saward had been the Chief Radar Officer at Bomber Command and had proven his literary skills in writing *The Bomber's Eye* (Cassell, 1959) describing the use of radar by bombers in World War II. Probert suggests that he would also be highly likely to complete the work under his master's supervision and be amenable to direction (page 403). Harris forbade publication until after

his death thereby exacerbating the fallow period in which liberal consciences, and other axe-grinders, had full rein to lambast Bomber Command and its erstwhile Chief.

The absence of comprehensive coverage has also allowed some historians to make causal links between events in Harris's life and his performance as Commander-in-Chief. Probert covers many of these areas in commendable detail. Aspects of Harris's childhood and school days risk misinterpretation and must seen in the light of existing practice – not in a modern context. The boarding out of children from colonial outposts, unnatural as it now seems, was as commonplace as using a four-by-four for the half-mile school run of today. The resulting difference in self-reliance should not be surprising.

Harris joined the army at the outbreak of the Great War and his experiences of route marches in Africa certainly resulted in him, in later life, never walking if he could drive! It also confirmed that, at least for him, the soldier was perhaps not the best offensive weapons system. Equally his earliest flying experiences attempting to shoot down Zeppelins at night must have influenced later thinking, both in terms of the air defence of the United Kingdom and the relative safety of attempting to bomb by night. Skill at night flying does not come easily, or by accident – Harris was a staunch believer in making people practise. His later penchant for showing aerial photographs that he had taken of Passchendaele provides eloquent testament to the impact on him of this battle and his ensuing wish never to repeat the horrors of Trench warfare. Arguably, the legacy of Harris's experiences in Mesopotamia had more to do with the need for rigorous training and decent equipment than over the efficacy of bombing to destroy enemy morale.

Many myths and misunderstandings have grown up over the years concerning Harris and his stewardship of what for a significant portion of the war was Britain's only means of striking Nazi Germany directly. These myths have inevitably been exacerbated by lack of understanding and a willingness to accept elements of lore at face value. The commonly held view that the US 8th Air Force only engaged in precision bombing in contrast to the RAF policy of area bombing is a classic example. Academic research clearly shows that the Mighty 8th was certainly capable of accurate bombing (thanks to the Norden bombsight which Harris desperately tried to get the Americans to sell to us as early as 1938), but like Bomber Command, had to default to less precise means when the weather was anything other than perfect. There is also a tendency to focus on the later years of the war, rather than applying balance across the whole. Bombing policy in 1945 when, with benefit of hindsight, the war in Europe was all but won, overshadows the grim realities of operations in 1939 through to 1942. Similarly, it is all too easy to focus on Harris's debate over bombing policy with Portal in the last months of the war, allowing this spat to eclipse years of genuine respect, friendship and loyal service.

The beginning of the end of the War also saw something of an unseemly scramble for the moral high ground with senior politicians – such as Churchill – manoeuvring with indecent haste to distance themselves from the less politically correct war-winning tools, their exponents and sadly their practitioners. That the same politicians had been vocal advocates for their employment, and responsible for the accompanying directives and policy, could only serve to disillusion straightforward officers

and men who formed the vast majority of Bomber Command. The relative lack of recognition for Bomber Command personnel added greatly to the bitterness and Probert's treatment of this aspect is both sensitive and comprehensive.

HARRIS AS A WAR CRIMINAL

To some commentators, Bomber Command and its leadership should have been more in line for an appearance at the Nuremburg War Crimes Tribunal than for honours and awards. At a more rational level, however, Harris has been widely criticised on a range of counts. The first of these is that he was indeed a war criminal, particularly for his role as the prime architect of area bombing. This essay is neither the time nor the place for a detailed review of RAF inter-war strategic bombing doctrine, or for a discussion on the relative merits of air power theories. Suffice it to say that, from the perceptions of those responsible for the direction of higher level policy, strategic bombing was a valid and inevitable means of waging war. Stanley Baldwin summed up the widespread belief in the House of Commons in 1932 stating that 'the bomber would always get through' – he went on to add, with evident regret, that 'The only defence is offence, which means that you have to kill more women and children more quickly than the enemy,' (House of Commons, 10 November 1932. 270 Parliamentary Debates (House of Commons), Official report 5th Series, c632). The ethical issues, however, were not consigned to the dustbin as is commonly thought. In a paper that started as a presentation to the Imperial Defence College in 1928, and was then circulated to fellow Chiefs, Trenchard dealt at length with the need to target military objectives and avoiding 'indiscriminate bombing of a city for the sole purpose of terrorising the civilian population'; this address has subsequently been termed his 'last will and testament'. A decade later, Chamberlain cited international law in his formal guidelines to Bomber Command. He stated unequivocally that:

1. It is against international law to bomb civilians as such and to make deliberate attacks on the civilian population.
2. Targets which are aimed at from the air must be legitimate military objectives and must be capable of identification.
3. Reasonable care must be taken in attacking those military objectives so that by carelessness a civilian population in the neighbourhood is not bombed.

Chamberlain went on to state in the House of Commons that not only was bombing civilian populations contrary to international law, but that in his opinion such action would not be a successful war winning tool. His ethical and legal approach was heavily influenced by the practicalities of the matter. These concerns over practical capabilities were equally evident to the air staff. Slessor points out that our capabilities were such that decisive results could not then be achieved. Chamberlain's directives were translated, after much debate, into operations orders that could be issued to the Command; considerable doubt remained as to what could be reasonably described as military objectives. Slessor concluded, however, that, without doubt, 'sooner or later, the gloves would have to come off'.

The early days of the War saw a natural reluctance to remove the ‘gloves’ – partly over concerns of retaliation, but also acknowledging the limited capabilities possessed by Bomber Command. The ensuing constraints were gradually removed over time and industrial areas were attacked through 1940, as well as obvious targets such as concentrations of invasion barges in channel ports. Writing in July 1940, Churchill was unequivocal in his determination that the only way to get through to the enemy was through ‘an absolutely devastating, exterminating attack by heavy bombers from this country upon the Nazi homeland’. The move to area bombing was consolidated by the Air Ministry in a directive to Sir Richard Peirse (Harris’s predecessor as C-in-C) dated 9 July 1941. This missive accepted the difficulties of finding and hitting precise targets in Germany by night; it proposed that, in reality, concentration on large towns and cities would mean that the military installations and economic facilities contained therein would be suitably attacked. The move to ‘area’ targets also allowed morale of civilian workers, and of the population as a whole, to be attacked.

Discussions between Churchill and Stalin in August 1942 confirmed the Grand Strategic level direction for Bomber Command. The leaders agreed that not only should German industry be bombed, but also the population and its morale. Stalin stressed the importance of attacking Berlin and this cascaded down to Harris later that month. Stalin’s appreciation of the efforts of Bomber Command was reinforced by Harris sending the Russian leader a book of aerial photographs of the damage wrought.

The air of mutual satisfaction continued through to the Casablanca conference in February 1943. Strategic bombing policy was discussed, but it was not the top item on the agenda – a key strategic area for discussion was confirmation of ‘Germany first’ and the ensuing argument over the desirability of an early land offensive in Northern Europe versus a Mediterranean policy. The resulting bombing directive read:

> ‘The primary objective will be the progressive destruction and dislocation of the German military, industrial and economic system, and the undermining of the morale of the German people to a point where their capacity for armed resistance is fatally weakened’.

As Professor Biddle has pointed out, this contained something for everyone and gave the commanders a deal of latitude, both in target sets and methodology. As far as Harris was concerned, this constituted ideal mission command guidance (to use the language of current doctrine) – what had to be achieved, but not how to do it.

Some unity of purpose was imposed on the scene in the lead-up to the Normandy landings with the attacks on the German transportation system. Once the land offensive was established, however, differences of opinion again surfaced over priorities. Tedder (as Deputy to Eisenhower) advocated that priority continue to be given to transportation and communications targets. Spaatz (Commander of the USAAF Eighth Air Force) favoured attacks on oil, while Harris continued to insist on the maintenance of area bombing. Throughout this debate, Harris fervently believed that the carnage that he had witnessed in the Great War could be avoided through the application of undiluted air power – with no diversions to panacea targets.

Nevertheless, when he had had his say, and was overruled, he applied Bomber Command to the given task with appropriate dedication.

The Nuremburg War Crimes Tribunals established that following orders did not constitute a legal defence. Had Harris been indicted formally, it is unlikely that he would even have attempted such an argument. In total war, he considered that the resolute application of air power – i.e. Bomber Command – could shorten the conflict and prevent needless slaughter. Even the brief scope for overview provided by this review essay suggests that had Harris been summoned to the dock, he would not have been short of company.

AN UNRECONSTRUCTED BOMBER ZEALOT?

From the doctrinal perspective, and from the more serious matter of allocation of resources, Harris is perceived as being an entrenched member of the heavy bomber mafia. The theory was that the Royal Air Force of the inter-war years was largely populated by short-sighted exponents of the Douhetian theory that bombers would win wars without the need for armies and navies. This thesis falls at the first hurdle in that few, if any, senior British airmen had heard of, let alone read, Douhet – even though his work had some influence in America. Similarly, the citation of Trenchard as coming from the same school of thought is flawed. Appropriate quotations are widely available from speeches, lectures, notes and files; these can be taken to prove almost any thesis. But allowance must be made for the fact that, on the vast majority of occasions, Trenchard was speaking politically in the defence of his Service, and indeed for its very survival. His broader perspective, that air power was an essentially offensive weapon, was a matter of faith with which few air power advocates would disagree today. The Trenchard suggestion that a football team comprised of eleven goalkeepers would win no matches did not mean that he was selecting only centre forwards to play ‘up front’. The key was in the balance. Arguably the same is true in the ‘war against terrorism’ with a hard balance to be struck between force/home protection and the need to strike at the roots of evil.

In the lean inter-war years, there was considerable debate over the ratio of fighter squadrons to bombers. There was no question of the nation being left undefended; the key question was again one of balance. Denis Richards describes a young Squadron Leader Portal being summoned by Trenchard to take part in meetings on this balance (*Portal of Hungerford,* Heineman, 1978). The junior staff officer was anything but a bomber zealot in arguing for far more fighters than his Chief would countenance. The unbroken line of fighter operational requirements, and the development of radar make questionable the premise that the Royal Air Force only focused on bombers.

From Harris’s perspective it should also be remembered that he started his flying career flying night fighters in defence of the homeland. Although he went on to other roles – and they were not so specifically delimited as they are today – there is bound to have been some impact on his experience base. Likewise, Harris must have been influenced to some degree by his attendance at Army Staff College at Camberley (rather than the RAF equivalent at Andover). Little of his staff work has survived,

but from the little that Probert has unearthed, it is evident that Harris saw aerial bombardment as a natural extension of the development of projectiles from apes throwing rocks, through archery to firearms. He described 'the exploitation of range' as being a principle of war. This type of thinking almost certainly owes more to the doctrinal heritage of Fuller and Liddell-Hart than to Douhet and Mitchell. Harris also spent a most enjoyable interlude as CO of 210 Squadron, a flying boat unit where he first met Donald Bennett; hardly the normal stamping ground for the bomber zealots! Rising tension saw Harris promoted and destined for the Air Ministry. As Deputy Director of Plans, Harris was a staunch advocate of the replacement of light and medium bombers with a credible heavy bomber force; this again must be seen in the light of Navy and Army scepticism. The debate over the ratio of fighters to bombers continued. His other work included a formal appreciation of the likely situation in the event of war with Germany. Again bombers feature heavily in the work, but in balance with other forms and means of warfare. Baldwin's dictum on the bomber getting through set the mood – not the other way round.

In June 1938, Harris's planned posting to Palestine was replaced with a surprise move to Fighter Command as Senior Air Staff Officer (SASO) to Dowding. Neither posting was a likely stamping ground for bomber zealots. Harris objected to the switch primarily because he did not see himself getting on with 'Stuffy' Dowding, but it was only his new wife's entirely sub-tropical trousseau that persuaded the CAS to relent. Keith Park went to Fighter Command in his place.

Harris was less than sympathetic to demands on his assets from other Commands. He has been criticised for considering sending aircraft to Army Co-operation Command as a 'gross misuse of the RAF'. Likewise he has been quoted as calling Coastal Command an 'obstacle to victory'. Strong stuff indeed. Yet actions speak louder than words and it must be recorded that Harris did not begrudge his Command's employment on mining duties. These continued throughout the war, were not glamorous, but had undoubted **effect**. It was the lack of **effect** that so frustrated him in having to bomb U-boat pens against which his crews were endangered for little result. Likewise, when told to support the army in Normandy, he did so with full resources.

As AOC 5 Group and then C-in-C Bomber Command, it was very much part of Harris's primary duties to extol the virtues, capabilities and potential of his Commands. Equally, it would be surprising if he had not protected his assets (and in particular his crews) and deplored their utilisation elsewhere. Historians would be more entitled to look askance at his performance as a leader had he done otherwise.

HARRIS AS A LEADER AND SUBORDINATE

Many of the critics of Harris's style of leadership run the risk of confusing leadership with command and management. They also fail to take proper account of any one individual's capacity and the number of hours in a day. During the Franco-Prussian War, Marshal Bazaine led cavalry skirmishes and fired cannon at his Prussian foes: this was fine theatre, but poor use of a commander's time. Harris was altogether more focused. As AOC 5 Group he frequently visited his squadrons and was strongly

proactive in seeking to improve the lot of his people – as he had consistently been as a squadron commander. As a Commander-in-Chief he had relatively little time to visit and furthermore saw this as the AOC's prerogative rather than his. Unit commanders were almost certainly relieved not to have Bert turning up on their patch on a regular basis!

It must also be remembered that he was sending his crews in harm's way on a daily basis and, as Probert makes very clear, Harris saw the responsibility as being his alone. He was not prepared to shirk this awesome task, or to delegate. What is more he was at pains to ensure that his boys were not put at risk unnecessarily. In no way can Harris be seen through the Blackadder cameo of sweeping men and machines off the table like a latter day Haig. Harris did not shrink from the responsibility, but nor did he wear his heart on his sleeve. The personal pressure on him must have been enormous; he was under considerable personal financial stress (partly because of the stringencies of having to entertain on wartime rationing and part on the high alimony bills he was paying to his first wife). These pressures were exacerbated by an untreated duodenal ulcer – like many aircrew, Harris was a reluctant visitor of the medical centre! It may be a difference in the biographers' art, but Probert does not recount Harris as enjoying the fishing, shooting and bird watching interludes that Portal and Alanbrooke had the odd occasion to enjoy. Harris did not socialise in the Mess at High Wycombe, but was keen on the feedback provided by those who did so. He was, however, a convivial host at home and canvassed unceasingly for Bomber Command in the process.

Much has been made of individual instances such as Operation Millennium (the attack on Cologne with 1,000 bombers on the night of 30/31 May 1942). His efforts in accumulating the necessary numbers of aircraft have been revisited frequently. As with many individual raids the extent of the damage was not as great as originally thought. But, to use modern parlance, the **effect** achieved in Germany, in the United Kingdom and amongst our allies was immense. Rather than cover the debate in detail, the comments of John Terraine (*The Right of the Line*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1985), one of this nation's most outstanding historians should suffice: 'Harris's calm and deliberate decision to stake his whole force and its future on that night showed the true quality of command'.

Notwithstanding the subtleties of command styles and leadership, one cannot doubt that working for Harris as a staff officer was probably not the most pleasant of tasks. In such a position, one can conclude that one was doing all right – or you would have been sacked! There is little doubt, however, to his crews Harris was a hero to be followed to the ends of the earth.

Having Harris as a subordinate cannot have been an easy task either. He had a reputation for being prickly and did not suffer fools gladly – irrespective of their seniority. One area where Harris was particularly difficult was when officers junior to him wrote to him, 'trying to do his job for him', but with the authority of a higher formation; he objected vehemently to the use of Air Ministry 'directed letters' in which the phrasing 'Sir, I am directed by the Air Council to instruct you to..' prefaced yet another interference that was seen as unwarranted. Harris's dealings with the Air Ministry in general and Bufton (Director of Bomber

Operations) and Bottomley (DCAS) were often acerbic. Portal tried on a number of occasions to calm the waters, but was not always able to produce lasting peace. Harris had seen Dowding win what he described as one of the Nation's greatest victories only to be sacked for his pains and be replaced by Judas like plotters from the Ministry. As the War approached its climax, the correspondence between Portal and Harris became increasingly tense. Commentators since have questioned whether or not Harris should have been replaced at this point. One must add, however, that the areas of agreement between the two men were, even at that stage, greater than the rifts. Furthermore, they had been very good friends for many years and had huge respect for each other's talents. From Portal's viewpoint one must consider first of all whether or not Churchill would have sanctioned such a move. Harris had been very close to the Prime Minister early in his tenure, dining regularly at Chequers (but always back-briefing Portal on the discussions). Churchill and Harris had drifted apart as the war progressed and the PM had other priorities, but it is far from certain that the removal would have been allowed. Portal was also well aware of the high esteem in which Harris was held throughout his Command and the detrimental effect that his sacking would have. He also had to consider what benefit would have been achieved in replacing Harris with someone new. He was after all still an outstanding Commander and Portal was too great a leader himself to move someone just to get a quiet life in the corridors of the Air Ministry.

There can be little doubt that the histiography of the Bomber offensive will continue to grow and that its prime architects – Churchill, Portal, Harris, Spaatz and Arnold – will continue to attract attention. Hopefully as the debate continues, the extremes of oscillation will even out as discussion becomes more rational. Balanced biographies that bring new and interesting material are vital to this process and Air Commodore Probert has certainly succeeded in fulfilling both of these fields. The book adds considerably to the sum of knowledge with excellent coverage of Harris's early life and of his post-war activities. There are areas still worthy of research and Probert highlights these. An example of this is on the issue of Harris's peerage and other awards although many of the issues are covered very clearly.

Probert does not pretend that his book represents a comprehensive survey of the bomber war; that has been covered many times. Noble Frankland (co-author of the Official History of the Strategic Bomber Offensive) wrote that people preferred to feel rather than know about strategic bombing. The same has been true over 'Bert' Harris. This excellent biography should help to shift the balance.