

Skies of Fire *Dramatic Air Combat*

by **ALFRED PRICE**

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Reviewed by Group Captain Chris Finn

Skies of Fire is the third in a series of books by the historian Dr Alfred Price. Before becoming a full-time aviation writer in 1974 Alfred Price flew as an air electronics officer in the V Force and his knowledge of electronic warfare and tactics is evident throughout this book. The book is a series of 22 vignettes of varying length looking at aspects of air power from its first expeditionary use by the Italians in Libya in 1911 and 1912 to the employment of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) over Kosovo in 1999. Some of the chapters are very short and give no more than a brief overview of the subject, and the lack of footnotes or bibliography means that the book's primary value is in stimulating an interest and awareness in the history of air power as opposed to providing a more academic analysis. That said, other chapters provide detailed and informed comment on specific operations. The chapter on the use of electronic warfare in Operations TAXIBLE, GLIMMER and others, as one tactical part of the enormous deception plan in the lead-up to D Day, is a particularly good example. Three linked trends also emerge in the book, which are the impact of technical advances upon aircraft themselves; the development of equipment, tactics and countermeasures; and the constant impact of the human dimension throughout the history of air power.

The technological issues are well illustrated by his comparison of the Italian Bleriot fighters of 1912 with the DH4s of only 5 years later, which had twice their speed, carried 5 times their bomb load, operated as reconnaissance aircraft at altitudes as high as 20,000 feet and were also highly effective Zeppelin killers. The second thread starts with an article concerning the loss of a Dornier DO 217 bomber in October 1941, due not to fighters or anti-aircraft fire but to the meaconing of German radio beacons which led to the bomber running out of fuel and landing near Rye in Kent. The story continues with the D Day jamming referred to above, and finishes with a detailed description of the USAF responses, both technical and tactical, to the deployment of the SA2 missile system near Hanoi during the Vietnam war.

The final thread is that of people, which is best exemplified by comparing the story of No 266 Squadron during its short time in combat during the Battle of Britain where losses soon rendered it ineffective with that of the pilot of a German Messerschmitt ME410 heavy fighter who was transferred to Focke-Wulf FW190 single-engine fighters in July 1944 and with only minimal training, thrown into dog fights against American fighters. The story of Captain Roger Locher's 23 days evading capture in Vietnam when his F4 was shot down, and the pilot was killed, is at one level a story of courage and resourcefulness but is also a reminder of what may happen to any aircrew involved in current operations. The final article, on UAVs, makes the point that they still require a man in the loop to make different although equally time-critical decisions as do those in the cockpit.

In summary, this is a very readable book which at one level will provoke 'I didn't realise that' comments from readers, but which also has enough substance for readers to draw their own conclusions about some of the more enduring aspects of the employment of air power.

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