

Book Reviews

The Bristol Blenheim A complete history

By Graham Warner

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Many black and white photographs with a short colour section.
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Reviewed by G R Pitchfork

Some aircraft have received a great deal of attention from authors, yet others that made a significant contribution to the air war have virtually been neglected. One such aircraft is the Bristol Blenheim, an aircraft that fulfilled many roles and operated in just about every theatre of operations during the Second World War. Many will have looked forward with eager anticipation to the publication of Graham Warner's book – they will not have been disappointed.

The Blenheim was an innovative design that was well ahead of its time when it first appeared in its initial civil guise as the Type 135. Developed as a bomber, it entered RAF squadron service early in 1937 and, by the beginning of the war, over 1,000 were in service – more than any other aircraft. In Europe, Blenheims flew operations on the first day of the war, and they bore the brunt of the daylight bombing campaign and attacks against convoys against murderous anti-aircraft fire.

At a time when Fighter Command was winning the Battle of Britain, Blenheim squadrons were attacking targets in France and the Low Countries, including Hitler's invasion fleets, suffering terrible losses amongst their aircrew. Their role and contribution to the air war during those desperate times deserves to stand alongside their fighter colleagues, some of who flew the fighter version of the aircraft. The Blenheim went on to give excellent service in Bomber, Fighter and Coastal Commands until replaced after over two years of operations.

The Blenheim was just as active with the overseas Commands, having to remain in service for longer, and they were the first to attack the Italians in the North African desert and the Japanese in Malaya before returning to make a significant contribution during the early phase of the battles in Burma. The gallantry of the crews flying from Malta, in Greece, the Middle East and in the Far East was rarely, if ever, surpassed and the casualties were amongst the highest of any force.

The author's long association with the restoration and operation of the only airworthy Blenheim is well known. His interest in the aircraft, however, goes much deeper and he has researched the history of the Blenheim with meticulous care. He describes the background and development of the aircraft in great detail before relating its operational history. At the end of each chapter there are copious notes and details of losses providing the historian with a unique reference. The book is superbly illustrated throughout with many photographs, the majority appearing in print for the first time.

This book is primarily for the aviation historian and researcher, yet it also provides a fascinating insight to operations and the supreme gallantry of those who flew the aircraft. Much has been written about the Spitfire, Mosquito, Lancaster and others, and detailed accounts of the 'forgotten' aircraft are long overdue. Graham Warner has addressed this as far as the Blenheim is concerned and done so in superb fashion. This is, and is likely to remain for a very long time, the authoritative book on the much under-rated Blenheim. It is a fitting memorial to all those who gave their lives flying the aircraft, and is an absolute must for every aviation historian. Very highly recommended.

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