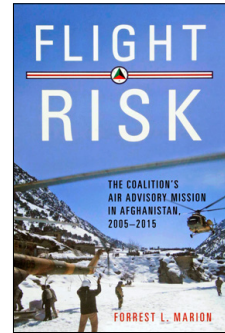


Book Review

Flight Risk



By Forrest L. Marion

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Reviewed by Dr Frank Ledwidge

Biography: Frank Ledwidge is a Senior Lecturer in Law and Strategy at the University of Portsmouth, currently teaching at the ACS in RAF Halton. Amongst other books, he is the author of *Losing Small Wars* (Yale 2011/2017) and *Aerial Warfare* (OUP 2018) both of which were selected for the relevant CAS Reading Lists.

Introduction

This is a fine book which might be summarised as a story of strategic failure in miniature. It will be essential reading for anyone involved in advising or assisting developing air forces. Given that the topic is the Afghan Air Arm, it is fair to say that most problems that will be encountered by RAF personnel in an advisory capacity will have been encountered by the (largely American) coalition air advisory team in Afghanistan. In 2011 it was designated the NATO Air Training Command-Afghanistan or NATC-A. *Flight Risk* is their story.

The book begins with a concise history of Afghan Air Power from 1919 to the period just prior to the western interventions in 2001. This is an interesting story in itself; it is also instructive. The most telling account is that of the time of the Soviet invasion from 1979-1989 and indeed for the three years subsequent when Afghan forces remained reasonably intact. This reviewer is not the first to remark upon the achievements of Soviet advisors during that particular bloody occupation, Roderick Braithwaite in *Afghantsy* (Profile Books 2012) being the most distinguished. By the end of the Soviet invasion the Afghan air force was a functioning service comprising over 400 aircraft. An account of how the Soviets achieved this remarkable growth would have been very useful, if only to counterpoint the failures of the later ISAF mission.

I should say that this is the only major criticism I have of this book. For now, it is enough to say that for the Soviet Union Afghanistan was, and more importantly was treated, as a genuine strategic national priority.

No effort was spared by the Soviets in ensuring that personnel involved in Afghan civilian and military roles were trained not by contractors in makeshift surroundings, but brought to the Soviet Union in their thousands. There they were taught Russian and trained to Soviet standards. It is for this reason, as many who have served in Afghanistan will note, that in dealing with senior Afghan officials during the ISAF period, knowledge of the Russian language was very often just as useful as either of the main Afghan languages, Dari or Pashtun. Interestingly Marion makes the point that the small Czech team attached to the mission, most of whom knew at least some Russian and of course knew the airframes used by the nascent new Afghan Air Arm, were some of the most effective advisors.

The Coalition air mission got under way in 2002 from a standing start. As Marion points out, 'It was literally designing an Air Force from scratch' (p. 58). Very, very few airframes had survived the NATO attacks. By 2005, the Afghan Air Arm, always and still very much the junior element of the army, had managed to produce the capability to transport the president around the country reasonably safely, hardly a ringing endorsement of an effective reconstruction mission.

Several themes percolate the subsequent account. With a great deal of effort, the problems of selecting and training aircrew were painstakingly dealt with if not entirely solved. However, serious issues around Command and Control, a dearth of suitable ground personnel available for recruitment, effective and safe maintenance and above all endemic corruption run through the book. It is the latter, and specifically the influence of what are termed 'Corrupt Patronage Networks' ('CPN's) which cuts through much of the book. The most sinister manifestation of this was, or seems to be, the killing of nine members of the mission. Marion's most controversial conclusions relate to this 'Green on Blue' assault in April 2011. The evidence as it is now available suggests that the first US investigation into the murders may, wittingly or otherwise, have ignored or sidelined evidence that CPNs were involved, and not the Taliban as was first alleged. Why this should be the case is not immediately clear from the text. Were there secrets that needed to be hidden? Was the killing some form of warning? We are not told.

A second investigation informed the commander of the first that they had concluded that organised crime in the Afghan Armed Forces was behind the murder. 'Bingo' he replied, 'you solved it; now good luck getting it past the command' (p. 113). The theme of the burial of bad news by senior command is another that runs through the book, and very strongly so in its later sections. Marion summarises this; 'unfavorable [sic] reports were simply not permitted' (p. 193). As one advisor is quoted as saying 'We highlighted every small advance and downplayed or just didn't mention the many epic failures' (p. 193).

Subsequent to the killing of the nine, the practice of 'Guardian angels' was instituted; it was generally believed that this 'was necessary but killed advising' (p. 128). As the mission proceeded, a sense of waste seems to pervade the mission. Between 2002 and 2011 the US spent an amazing \$72 Billion on this effort. The issue of culture clash is another perennial. Again, everyone who has served in Afghanistan alongside Afghans will be closely familiar with this. One interesting manifestation of cultural dissonance was the surprising prioritisation of bringing the bodies of dead soldiers to their families over the delivery of the wounded to hospital. There were many others. On a lighter note, concerning Command and Control, more than one reader may reflect that the practice of senior officers co-opting aircraft for their own (apparently private) use or convenience, is not confined to Central Asia.

Away from the details of the perils and pitfalls of advising in what might be described as an unfavourable environment, the book describes the vicissitudes of the overall Western mission. It points up a wider lack of a strategic approach to identifying realistic objectives and what happens when there is a failure by senior officials to be transparent about what is going right and what is going wrong. The author is a Staff Historian at the US Air Force Historical Research Agency. He makes it clear that the text has been 'cleared' in the introduction. Perhaps paradoxically given its focus on a lack of transparency regarding failures of the Mission in theatre, this book is a remarkable testament to the willingness of the USAF, or at least some elements of it, to be almost as blunt about failure as about success; in doing so it seems to indicate an openness to critique which other air forces could consider replicating.

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