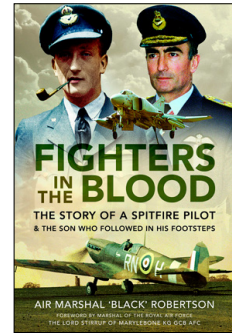


Book Review

Fighters in the Blood: The Story of a Spitfire Pilot – And the Son Who Followed in his Footsteps



By Air Marshal 'Black' Robertson CBE, BA, FRAeS, FRSA

Publisher: Air World (19th August 2020)

(ISBN-13: 978-1526784865), 336 pages

Reviewed by Group Captain James Beldon

Biography: Group Captain James Beldon currently serves as the RAF's ISTAR Deputy Force Commander at RAF Waddington. An intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance expert, he previously commanded 8 Sqn (AWACS) and has flown on operations in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq, amassing more than 3,000 flying hours in the process. He previously served as the RAF's Director of Defence Studies and holds an MPhil in International Relations from the University of Cambridge.

Introduction

For those who have had the privilege of poring over the exquisite entries in 8 Squadron's 1960s photograph albums and wondered when, why and where the shock-haired Fg Off Robertson had acquired his now long-established given name of 'Black', the answer is revealed in his book, *Fighters in the Blood*. Air Marshal Robertson rose to the highest ranks of the Royal Air Force during a period that encompassed Britain's withdrawal from Empire, the sharp-end of the Cold War in Germany and the 'Peace Dividend' that followed. As a pilot, tactical commander and Whitehall Warrior, Black Robertson was at the heart of an Air Force tuned for war's ultimate expression which mercifully never materialised. Deterrence succeeded, which meant that for Royal Air Force fighter pilots of Robertson's

generation, relatively few experienced combat, and none (with the arguable exception of RAF pilots seconded to the Fleet Air Arm during the Falklands Conflict of 1982) experienced air-to-air combat.

Understandably, therefore, a theme to which Robertson turns repeatedly throughout the book is the question of how he would have performed in aerial combat himself. An examination of Royal Air Force history strongly suggests that there is little doubt that he and his contemporaries would have 'done the business'; more importantly from a deterrence perspective, it is clear that their adversaries were equally convinced of their capabilities. But it is his comparison with the past, and particularly in relation to his father's career as a distinguished Spitfire pilot, that serves as Robertson's lodestone for self-analysis. It is this aspect which sets this autobiography apart. Feeling that he might have been intruding on his parents' nascent relationship, it was evidently with some trepidation that Robertson first delved into a bundle of wartime correspondence between his fighter pilot father and his then fiancée. Robertson has distilled from those letters a rich testimony that sheds an important light on the RAF's wartime culture and training system, as well as exposing new insights into life as an operational fighter pilot in some of the most harshly contested theatres of the war. In recognition of his operational excellence, Robertson's father was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, but his exploits also required him to bale out of a burning Spitfire over Sussex and later cost him an eye and his flying career when he was shot down over the Western Desert. Although the young Graeme Robertson initially considered cricket as a future career, there was, as was to prove the case, every likelihood that he would follow in his father's footsteps – there was, after all, no finer role-model that he could have looked to for inspiration.

Robertson's description of his flying career as a junior Hunter pilot through to being an F-4 instructor with the USAF and later as a Phantom squadron commander in RAF Germany and station commander in Suffolk have much to offer the aspirant pilot and serving officer climbing the career ladder alike. His analysis of the challenges facing UK Defence in the 1990s are of equal value to the student of strategy. But, most of all, through his own reflections and the light he casts on his father's experiences, Black Robertson manages to convey the continuity of excellence that suffuses all generations of the Royal Air Force. That is not to say that he ignores the negative aspects, and he does not hold back in his criticism of those he felt fell short – perhaps most notably during his time as RAF Germany's Deputy Commander-in-Chief.

Marked by amusing anecdotes from training at the Royal Air Force College Cranwell (where he was a stablemate of a future Chief of the Air Staff in the form of Peter Squire), Robertson's account of his own career is precise, elegant and fun. He makes no bones about the 'almost impossibly high' standards he set as a leader and instructor throughout his career, but, in mitigation, he clearly held himself to similar standards. There is, however, a lingering sense of regret over the outcome of his own Royal Air Force career, a point made plain by the title of Chapter 22: 'Reflections of a nearly man – and the ultimate frustration'. In the view of this reviewer, he is too harsh on himself. He was a 'nearly man' only insofar as he was never tested in

the cauldron of combat and didn't make it to 4* rank. However, it was a more than creditable career, which seems at the end, not to have been recognised as generously as it should have been. Ultimately, however, it is Black Robertson himself who is his harshest critic. In the opinion of this reviewer, his was a career carved out of great determination and rather more skill than he credits himself with. Entertaining and in places poignant, *Fighters in the Blood* adds a unique twist to the standard autobiographical form, which is a 'must read' for those embarking on, or already part-way through, a Royal Air Force career.

This article has been republished online with Open Access.

Ministry of Defence © Crown Copyright 2023. The full printed text of this article is licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0. To view this licence, visit <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/>. Where we have identified any third-party copyright information or otherwise reserved rights, you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned. For all other imagery and graphics in this article, or for any other enquires regarding this publication, please contact: Director of Defence Studies (RAF), Cormorant Building (Room 119), Shrivenham, Swindon, Wiltshire SN6 8LA.

 **ROYAL
AIR FORCE**
**Centre for Air and
Space Power Studies**

OGL