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SUBJECT

A small air force is ineffective unless its quality is high. Discuss how the high quality of the Royal Air Force can be sustained and its tasks discharged against a background of constraint on defence budgets.

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'The enemy', the elder Moltke once remarked to his staff, 'has three courses of action open to him. Of these, he will choose the fourth'.

The warning implicit in this statement is as valid today as it was a century ago, but to act on it has become vastly more difficult, because lack of money prevents us from supporting nationally a strategy aimed in Gaullist fashion round 'all horizons'. Our defence policy is thus the outcome of a series of choices, and it is vital that these choices are made on the basis of principle rather than of expediency. This essay therefore has a two-fold purpose: firstly, to consider the principles on which our Service should be founded for the next two decades; and secondly, to suggest institutional changes which will help us to achieve our aim.

But what is our aim? This is the foundation stone of the whole structure; fortunately, it is clear and unlikely to change. In common with our sister Services the aim of the Royal Air Force is to deter our enemies both from armed aggression, and from the use of political blackmail backed by military force. How is this aim to be achieved? By convincing a potential aggressor that the cost of an attack would outweigh the anticipated profits, thereby making him eschew the use of force to gain his ends. And how can we do this? By being able, in essence, to deliver the right weapon, in the right place, and at the right time. Our aim is to deter, our consequent function is to be able to fight effectively; and it is towards enabling us to fulfil our function that all our efforts must be bent.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF OPERATIONAL SUCCESS

Success in battle depends on two basic ingredients – the right equipment and the right men. To deal with equipment first does not belittle the value of the human factor in air warfare, but only recognises the truth of the adage that whereas armies equip men, air forces man equipment; and the sorts of aircraft and weapons we deploy largely dictate the form of our organisation. In times of prolonged peace and financial hardship a policy of 'more and cheaper' appears increasingly seductive, but its blandishments must be resisted because to yield to them would be to flout both a fundamental principle and the teaching of operational experience. The principle is simple – if you are faced with a selection of potential enemies you should prepare yourself to deal with the most powerful of them, on the grounds that what will suffice for him will be more than adequate for the lesser fry. This ignores the question of numbers, but raises in consequence the principle of alliance,

to which we will return later. The teaching of operational experience is equally simple: tactical success follows technological superiority. From the Battle of Britain to the last Arab/Israeli war, the balance of advantage has lain with the side which held the scientific and technical initiative; and despite popular scepticism the same law prevailed in Vietnam, although American aerial tactics which were successful in themselves were vitiated by a defective strategy. The conclusion is clear; no matter what the pressures to the contrary, we must strive constantly to equip our squadrons with the best that we can get, and accept the organizational consequences.

But when technical forces are in balance, or even tilted slightly to one side, the human deciding elements of will, intelligence and skill remain paramount. We therefore need men to match the machinery, whose natural abilities require to be released by long and expensive training, which in turn indicates a system of lengthy engagements if the profit on this human investment is to be realized. The cardinal principle on which this costly manpower is recruited is that of voluntary service, and it follows that whatever institutional changes are mooted must obtain at least the acquiescence of the majority of servicemen. This does not herald the onset of anarchy, but merely acknowledges two facts: that discontent causes men to leave and deters others from joining; and that lack of faith in 'the system' lowers the morale which is essential for operational success.

It is in this light that we must consider our present predicament, wherein as the opportunities for making detailed economies are seized and thereby eliminated, political pressure to make some fundamental and dramatic gesture may grow. In this context both a Canadian-style merger of all the Services and the dismemberment of the Royal Air Force into forms of re-constituted RFC and RNAS are potential candidates, and it is vital that our attitude to such proposals should be rational rather than emotional.

As regards the Canadian experiment, two basic factors must be borne in mind. The first is that the automatic guarantee of American protection which geography confers on her enables Canada to take greater risks with her armed forces than we can afford. The second is that unification is a palliative and not a cure; it can delay the effects of rising costs, but it cannot stop them rising, nor raise a fixed ceiling of expenditure. To seek a temporary relief from economic pressure by requiring all servicemen to make a fundamental and repugnant change in their basic loyalties would therefore be an irrational act, because in taking gross risks with morale our fighting effectiveness would suffer and our power to deter would consequently diminish, thus courting permanent disaster.

The same argument applies with equal force to any scheme whereby components of the Royal Air Force are shared between the Royal Navy and the Army. Neither is this question of morale merely hypothetical. The recent precedents in such cases, the demise of the fixed-wing Fleet Air Arm and the assumption of the role of the Airfield Construction Branch by the Royal Engineers, show that when obliged to leave their parent Service most men prefer to return to civilian life rather than to transfer to another. And it is axiomatic that free men in a free society must be offered such a choice.

Nor is the operational case in favour of dismemberment convincing. In sum, it maintains that without strategic bombardment an independent air force has no 'raison d'être', and that as British air power is now confined to the support of land and naval forces, both operational effectiveness and economy argue that it should be combined organically with those forces. The first basic flaw in this case is the assumption that a service's 'raison d'être' consists of a particular role or even category of equipment; if this were true the Navy would have disappeared with the battleship. Our true 'raison d'être' is that warfare is possible in the element in which we operate, so that we must evolve means of combat appropriate to the time and environment, thereby creating a body of expertise which is a speciality in its own right. This leads us to the second error – that air power is

now exclusively the handmaiden of the other Services. Disregarding the obvious exception of national air defence, this misconception arises from the traditional division of responsibility for land and sea operations between the Army and Navy, with the consequent belief that the resources necessary for success in such operations must lie under the hand of the appropriate naval or military commander. But this assumption ignores the fact that air power would in many cases exercise not an auxiliary but a dominant role, with success on land or at sea contingent upon success in the air. As to the contention that the subordination of air forces to their elderly sisters would enhance efficiency and cut costs, the great bulk of the operational experience available shows that soldiers and sailors, once possessed of aircraft, are indissolubly wedded to a belief in personal air umbrellas which is certainly the reverse of economical, and usually the reverse of effective.

The course of discussion so far thus leads us to the following conclusions: that the proper use of air power requires that it continues to be exercised by an independent Air Force, which must be equipped with the best available weapons systems, and manned by personnel of high quality. These conclusions may not be comfortable, because they exclude the possibility of any panacea, but they serve to focus attention on the fronts on which our struggle to remain cost-effective must continue. These fronts are: our internal organization and procedures; the extension of our strength by means of alliances; and the preservation of the national will to provide us with adequate resources.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL FACTOR

The scope for major structural alteration within the Royal Air Force is now negligible. The problem therefore is how to manipulate the existing organization so as to extract the maximum combat effectiveness at the minimum cost. This year pay and allowances will take 47 per cent of our Vote, and the first key question thus arises: can we cope with fewer men? And the second, which follows from the first is: can we get the quality and numbers of men we require more cheaply?

As regards the first question, the short answer must be No, given that the current numbers of aircraft and rates of effort are to be maintained, and that our specialists are not hopelessly wrong. But in the longer term we cannot be certain. We can only guess that, even if our tasks remain roughly similar, scientific advances in such fields as communications and data-handling will make many of our current practices obsolete, and open the way to reductions in manpower. We must therefore remain flexible in our attitude to career planning, marked 'Compulsory Redundancy'. For the Service could not survive for long preaching the virtues of a dedicated communal life while practising the commercial ethic of 'hire and fire'; the strain on most men's loyalties would be too great.

To the second question we can answer a qualified Yes. The key to this solution – which, it must be emphasised, is a defensive measure rather than a desirable option – lies in distinguishing clearly between units and roles which are front-line, and those which are auxiliary in the strict sense of the word. It is axiomatic that units with a direct operational role must be manned wholly by regulars; but the same rigidity need not apply to those which are basically static within the United Kingdom and whose operational role, if any, exists only in times of emergency. 'Civilianization', although comparatively cheap, has been resisted in many areas because it would weaken service control over essential processes; but now we need to minimise our costs and must seek a formula which will enable us to employ civilians under military direction; and this formula can be encapsulated in the phrase 'actively-employed reservists'.

The 'actively-employed reservist' may be defined as a man who, on taking a job at an RAF establishment, agrees as a term of contract to become a reservist for the period of his employment at that establishment, in a rank appropriate to the position he will hold. To provide the Service with

the necessary flexibility such reservists should be embodied when necessary by simple ministerial declaration, but, like the original Auxiliaries, their liability to serve should be limited to the units which they join. Nor should this proposal be confined to the ground branches. Second-line flying tasks currently undertaken by civilians should be brought into the fold, together with communications flying and basic aircrew training. The latter case would flout the tradition that student aircrew should be taught by men with recent squadron experience, but the Royal Air Force successfully trained fixed-wing naval pilots for years with instructors whose knowledge of carrier operations was culled solely from books and the cinema, while the trend to longer front-line service will in any case reduce the flow from this source. And lastly, we should strive to extend the scheme to the State airline. Current plans to use civil aircraft in emergency involve cumbersome and protracted procedures which frustrate the speed essential in crisis management, and when the watchword is 'flexible response' it is anachronistic that all State assets should not be readily available to serve overriding national interests.

But if we seek to lay our hands on other people's aeroplanes and crews we must show that we are making the most of our own, and we could profitably re-examine the roles we allot to our pilot training aircraft. The Hawk, particularly, holds promise as an armed aircraft and could provide us with the ability to intervene in Third World War operations without weakening the NATO front line; a cheap and useful insurance in the face of an inscrutable future. Our long-term aim should be to arm all Hawks, and to form shadow squadrons similar to those now operating at the Tactical Weapons Unit. Deterrence is no longer simply a function of nuclear strength, and by extending to a greater depth in the Service our ability to fight we would reinforce our ability to deter, and thus to achieve our aim.

THE EDUCATIONAL FACTOR

One danger latent in a successful deterrent strategy lies in its tendency to become a psychological Maginot Line. The vast majority of our men have never fired a shot in anger; nor do they expect to; and many of them suffer from the misapprehension that the ability to deter is somehow separate from the ability to fight, rather than dependent on it. This misconception, when combined with the incredible cost and complexity of our equipment, reinforces the trend inherent in any Service in peacetime towards rigidity, caution, and bureaucracy. If this trend is to be resisted the process will therefore be as much educational as organizational, and must start with our training methods.

Military training has two basic functions: to impart skills and to inculcate attitudes. When money is scarce and the demands on skill are high, there is a natural inclination to concentrate on the former function to the detriment of the latter, and this is the vogue within our Service. The assumption underlying this practice is that in a crisis the innate qualities of our men will hold them to their duty; but this comfortable theory is not borne out by experience. The history of warfare teaches that courage, like electricity, requires to be harnessed if it is to be used effectively, and we must therefore examine our syllabi to see where we can expand the specifically martial elements. Activities such as the decoration of pensioners' houses and the clearance of canals may impress the neighbours; one wonders whether they impress the Russians.

The challenge is common to all branches, because in a future European war the man on the ground will need to be as staunch and self-reliant as the man in the air, but it presses most closely on the aircrew, whose working lives are dominated by an unresolved dilemma: how does one prepare a man to destroy a target at all costs while teaching him that his normal duty is to put safety first? In fundamental terms this problem is insoluble, but its effects can be ameliorated by extending the positive aspects of the accident prevention campaign and by operational indoctrination. The former has two lines of approach: we must ensure that our aircraft are ergonomically efficient, so that our

crews can operate them to their limits with the minimum of distraction; and we must deepen our understanding of the causes of human failure so that we can recognise not only when aircrew err, but why.

Operational indoctrination would aim to make the student aware from the beginning that the sole purpose of his training was to enable him to use an aircraft as a weapon, by stressing the connection between each exercise and the eventual ability to perform an operational task. This process should be reinforced by the creation of shadow squadrons at the Schools, using the traditions of disbanded front-line units to assist in the moulding of the new generation. We are instinctively suspicious of anything which smacks of the theatrical, but as the informal influences of Mess and Station life are weakened by social change, we must supplement them by positive action to help the individual to understand and accept his relationship with a fighting Service.

In the last analysis, however, intelligent men can be convinced only by rational exposition, and we shall therefore need to show that the Service has a body of coherent and relevant tactical doctrine, in which each man can see where he plays his part. Our current system ensures that, while almost all our personnel are required to assimilate some organizational theory, very few are exposed to the operational theory to which the organizational aspects should be subordinate. Thus men can spend a strenuous confusion of means with ends. The vehicle for reform in this crucial area lies in the Department of Air Warfare, whose charter should be extended to cover the provision of training material for all ranks, and through which all officers should pass during their careers, for periods ranging from a two-day briefing for a junior supply officer posted to an operational Station, to the current Air Warfare Course. And if such centralization proves impracticable, then the work should be delegated to Groups on the agency pattern pioneered by CFS.

THE EXTERNAL ELEMENTS

No matter what measures we take to enhance our own efficiency, we will never be able to tackle alone our most formidable potential enemy, the Soviet Union. If our deterrent is to be effective its power must therefore be combined in NATO with that of others, and our fate is consequently to some degree in their hands. International headquarters as a breed work ponderously towards the lowest common denominator of what is generally acceptable; but this same institutional lethargy enables groups of energetic officers to act like yeast in dough, often able to exercise an influence disproportionate to their rank or formal appointment. We should therefore penetrate such organizations as widely and deeply as possible, in order to ensure at all levels that the general interest coincides as closely as possible with our own.

But neither internal reform nor external support will avail us if our country starves us of essential resources. The retreat and retrenchment of the past twenty years have induced in many officers a profound pessimism, but we should not be too despondent. Most of our countrymen are not hostile to us but indifferent to what we do; they have come to terms with the primacy of the superpowers, feel no immediate threat, and regard our comparatively puny efforts as irrelevant. The problem thus exists at two levels: firstly the 'selling' of Defence as a concept; and secondly, the 'selling' of our Service. We should concentrate upon the latter, because while the acceptance of the necessity of air power implies the acceptance of Defence, the reverse is not automatically true. And in an age when governments judge arguments by volume rather than weight, we need to muster the widest possible range of support.

We start at a disadvantage, because with the exception of Search and Rescue we lack an easily visible productive role in peacetime. Moreover, since 1945 air power has generally had a bad Press; the controversies over the bombing offensive, nuclear disarmament, and the Americans' attempts to

substitute firepower for manpower in the Asian campaigns, have caused an articulate minority to regard air forces as the immoral agents of indiscriminate slaughter. Our public education policy should therefore have two thrusts: first, our general publicity should emphasise our more socially-acceptable roles, such as air defence and maritime operations; and second, through our network of contacts – such as the RAFA, the University Air Squadrons, and the Air Training Corps – we need to preach the gospel of the current applicability of air power in a rational and determined way. We may not have thought of ourselves as a missionary organization, but we could and should become one.

In summary, the route we should follow is evolutionary rather than revolutionary. The current state of development in air warfare maintains it as an independent branch of military science in its own right, which demands equipment and men capable of operating at the very limits of technology. This makes the exercise of air power a very expensive business, which in times of financial pressure obliges us to take radical measures to ensure our effectiveness while controlling costs, and in particular to be flexible in the planning of our engagement structure; wherever possible to employ civilians as reservists under Service direction; to extend our flexibility by ensuring the rapid availability of the resources of the State airline; and to re-examine the potential roles of our pilot training aircraft. But successful deterrence – which is our aim – does not depend solely upon possessing the right machinery; the machinery must be in sufficient quantity, and the men behind it must have the will as well as the ability to use it. As regards the former, the size of our major potential enemy requires us to sustain a positive attitude towards our policy of alliance; while the effects of the prolonged peace demand that the technical skills of our men be reinforced by more extensive and systematic operational training and education. And all these activities must be underpinned by a campaign aimed to convince the general public of the relevance of air power to their own survival. No man has the gift of prophecy, but we are all familiar with the laws of cause and effect, and the effects on our country of a failure to maintain an Air Force capable of playing its part in deterring aggression would almost certainly be fundamental and catastrophic. The price of success may be high; the price of failure would be immeasurable.