PROCEEDINGS
OFTHE ROYAL AIR FORCE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Issue No 8 – September 1990

Committee

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors concerned and are not necessarily those held by the Royal Air Force Historical Society or any member of the committee

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Printed by Top Copy. Bristol BS16 2QG.
Set in Times New Roman

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Monday 11 March 1991. Annual General Meeting and lecture on 'The Malta Campaign' by P B 'Laddie' Lucas. Royal Aeronautical Society, 4 Hamilton Place, London.

Summer 1991. The Society hopes to conduct a seminar on Photographic Reconnaissance. Possibly in conjunction with the RAF Staff College.

Autumn 1991. The Society hopes to conduct a seminar on the Kuwait crisis of 1961.

EDITOR'S NOTES

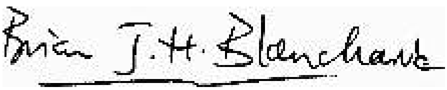
This issue of *Proceedings* is unusually slim for the Committee has decided that the material generated by The Battle of Britain Seminar (25 June 1990) would be better presented as a book. Work on this is well under way and it will probably be published by Tri-Service Press in the not-too-distant future. It will certainly be something to watch out for.

The interesting programme being devised as far ahead as Autumn 1991 indicates the liveliness and creativity of the Society; not only that, it shows too the rich seam of history waiting to be mined. One seam I look forward to seeing in the light of day is the history of that unique formation, the Royal Air Force Regiment, whose 50th birthday falls in 1992 – I write with some bias as a former Gunner and exercising Editor's privilege for the last time!

I am very glad to have done a stint on the Committee of the Society and especially to have served as Editor of *Proceedings*; it is only that. having retired early from Bristol Polytechnic and taken up work connected with the Anglican Church in Wales, covering the whole Province, I find the demands entailed so time-consuming as to preclude further commitment on my part to the Committee, much to my regret.

However, *Proceedings* will now have Tony Richardson's immensely capable hands on the controls and from my seat on the back benches, I wish him and our Committee *bon voyage* and happy landings.

Brian J H Blancharde



LECTURE DELIVERED ON MONDAY 5 MARCH 1990 AT THE ROYAL AERONAUTICAL SOCIETY, LONDON

The RAF and Air Control between the Wars

Air Chief Marshal Sir David Lee

The subject of the lecture tonight is 'Air Control between the Wars'. This is the sort of operation which the Royal Air Force has had a great deal of experience in, in many different countries over the years, and as our lecturer will tell us, it really started in 1923. Our speaker tonight is Dr Philip Towle, who is primarily a Teaching Fellow in Defence Studies at the University of Cambridge. He is also Deputy Director of the Centre for International Studies, and has many other appointments. In addition, he has written a host of books, pamphlets and articles concerned with defence studies.

Dr Philip Towle

Air policing between the two world wars: how significant was it, in historical terms? I think the answer is that it was very significant indeed. First of all, it prevented the British Empire from contracting in that period as fast as it otherwise certainly would have done. Secondly, I think it played a significant part in keeping the Royal Air Force as a separate and independent Service. One can't be certain that in other circumstances it would have been swallowed up by the Army and Navy, but it's perfectly possible that, in the conditions prevailing in the 1920s, that would have been the case. It also played a significant part, I would suggest to you, in the history of many of the countries where it operated – in Jordan, in Iraq, on the frontier between India and Afghanistan, and in Aden. So, all in all, I can say that it was a very significant historical phenomenon in that period.

To begin talking about it, we have to go back to the conditions prevailing at the end of the First World War, and there were six significant factors to take into account:

a. In 1918, we had completed, as we thought, the war to end wars, but in some ways, as far as Britain was concerned, it was a Pyrrhic victory; the treasure which had been built up through the nineteenth century had been expended on the conflict with Germany and Austria/Hungary and therefore, obviously, the emphasis from then onwards was going to be on economics.

b. Secondly, there was no significant enemy in sight at that period: obviously one can talk about the possibility – the outside possibility – of friction with France and the United States of America, but in real terms there was no significant enemy on the horizon. Therefore, the role of all the armed forces at that period was essentially imperial peace-keeping: keeping the Empire intact.

c. Thirdly, one has to emphasise the public horror and antagonism towards war in all its manifestations, and particularly towards the use of aircraft. The German bomber and Zeppelin attacks on Britain in the First World War had caused consternation out of proportion to their actual material damage, and one of the factors which I want to stress over and over again in this history of air policing is the importance of keeping public opinion on one's own side, keeping it convinced that one was not using excessive force to maintain the Empire. So the third point was the public attitudes towards warfare, and particularly bombing, at that time.

d. A fourth point was that the Empire had expanded in fact to its maximum extent. It had taken over – or was in the process at the end of the First World War – of taking over Mesopotamia, Iraq, Jordan and Palestine. This was the greatest extent which the British Empire had ever achieved, and indeed which any empire in history has achieved. But while it had expanded, it was also encountering greater and greater difficulties. Nationalism had been immensely encouraged by the First World War, so that many parts of the Empire were in fact in turmoil. At the end of the First World War, we thought in terms of incorporating Egypt as a formal part of the Empire's protectorate. Almost immediately, in 1922, we went back on that and maintained it essentially as an informal part of the Empire. In fact, as early as 1919, we had the rising in India which led to the Amritsar massacre. There was an explosion in the same year in Mesopotamia. So, all across the Empire, there was a rising tide of nationalism, which was going to cause increasing problems in the future.

e. The fifth point was the emergence of the Royal Air Force itself, employing, by the end of hostilities, hundreds of thousands of people, tens of thousands of aircraft. a substantial service in its own right, and determined to maintain its newly-won independence from the other Services.

f. The sixth and final point was the prevalence of people at the top of the Royal Air Force, and in Government – I'm thinking particularly of Hugh Trenchard and also Winston Churchill – who were prepared to gamble, prepared to take risks. I don't think that you would have seen Mesopotamia handed over to the control of the Royal Air Force at the beginning of the 1920s unless Winston Churchill had been in Government at that time, because no other political party would have been prepared to take the risks involved in countering the opinion of most of the experts on the Middle East. So it was absolutely essential to have those figures at the top of the Royal Air Force and also, as I said, in Government.

So those are the six factors: the end of the war to end wars and the perilous economic position in which we found ourselves; the lack of a significant enemy; public hostility towards warfare, and particularly towards bombing; the expansion of the British Empire and also the growing forces of nationalism right across the world; the emergence of the Royal Air Force itself; and finally the emergence of people in the Government and at the top of the Royal Air Force who were prepared to take the risk of using the Service as a tool of peace.

The doctrine emerged very quickly after the end of the First World War; its history is usually traced back to the campaign in Somaliland just afterwards. For the two previous decades, we had been having trouble in Somaliland with the man whom we liked to describe, at the time, as the Mad Mullah. The Army had failed to crush his resistance in Somaliland; at the end of the fighting against Germany, the Government turned its attention to dealing with these disturbances. A plan was worked out by the Army to send soldiers to Somaliland, but as soon as it was costed, it became obvious, in the financial conditions at the time, that this was going to be extremely difficult, and it was in those circumstances that the Chief of the Air Staff, Hugh Trenchard, stepped forward and offered the Royal Air Force as an alternative way of dealing with the Mullah. Trenchard proposed to send twelve DH 9 aircraft to Somaliland and argued that, by doing this, one could very cheaply deal with that problem. He was then, and later, opposed very strongly by the CIGS, Henry Wilson, who believed it would be impossible to effect the Mullah's defeat in this way, but the Government decided it would take the risk and, in January 1920, operations were in progress. The Mullah's forces were dispersed by the DH 9s, working together with the Camel Corps. There is still an argument about this; there are still military historians who contend that the RAF afterwards tended to exaggerate the impact of the aircraft on the Mullah's forces. I agree that it was, in fact, a joint operation between the Camel Corps and the aircraft, but one has to say that if the Camel Corps had been able to do the job on its own, it's surprising that it hadn't done it in the previous ten years or so. So, Somaliland was the first proving ground as far as the Air Force was concerned in peace.

There is some evidence, too, that in 1918 there began to be discussions on the possibility of handing over the newly-acquired territory of Mesopotamia to the Royal Air Force. Sir Arnold Wilson, the man who was put in charge of Mesopotamia at the start, apparently at that stage began to propose that the area should be given over to the control of the Air Force, but in fact it's in early 1920 that you find Trenchard himself, and Churchill, discussing this as a realistic possibility. Churchill, at the time concerned, was both War and Air Minister and therefore combining both posts, and able, if you like, to adjudicate between the War Office and the Air Ministry; and the Air Ministry's advice, certainly in 1920, was that it was going to be enormously expensive to garrison Mesopotamia in perpetuity. This lesson was underlined in the middle of that year when the whole of the country exploded into revolt and divisions had to be rushed from all parts of the Empire to deal with the conflagration. Once that had happened, and once Whitehall realised how expensive it was going to be to control Mesopotamia, as far as Churchill and Trenchard were concerned, this strengthened the arguments for using the Air Force rather than the Army to maintain the situation.

Now, at the crucial stage, Churchill moved across the road from War and Air to the Colonial Office, and became Colonial Secretary. As such, in March 1921, he summoned to Cairo all the British representatives in the Middle East – all the High Commissioners in the newly-acquired territories and also the Commanding Officers of the various armed forces. And at the pivotal Cairo Conference in March 1920, he outlined and argued the case for handing Mesopotamia over to the Royal Air Force. He met virtually blanket opposition from key figures in that part of the world – Sir Percy Cox, for long the High Commissioner in Mesopotamia, was totally opposed to handing over control of Mesopotamia to the Royal Air Force. So was the general commanding the Army forces in South Mesopotamia. The only support he got, as far as I could see from the records of the Cairo Conference, was from Lawrence of Arabia, who perhaps had the imagination to see that Air Force control was possible. Despite all this opposition, Churchill and Trenchard decided to go ahead: basically, they told the other people who had come to the Cairo Conference that it was the Air Force or nothing. It was completely impossible in the financial circumstances at the time to go on spending whatever it might be – up to £20 million a year - on garrisoning Mesopotamia with the Army. The RAF therefore had to be given a chance or else British forces had to be removed from Mesopotamia altogether and the locals would have to he given some armaments. So the scheme went forward, and, as you all know, it proved to be an astonishing success. The point I want to stress to you is that had Churchill not been there and had Trenchard not been in charge of the Royal Air Force at that time, one could be sceptical about whether it would have gone ahead in that sort of way. Very quickly he found that the people who had most opposed it in Cairo were won over and became convinced that the Air Force could maintain order in that part of the world.

From the start, there were 'humanitarian' objections to using the Force in this way and this was the usual argument which the Army put forward; it argued that, in fact, all the Air Force could do in the event of rebellion or difficulties inside Mesopotamia was to bomb (as it put it) women and children in the villages. The Air Force, therefore, had constantly to watch that it was not open to that objection. And of course public opinion was very sensitive; the Labour Party was growing in importance – it took office in 1924 – and it was necessary to convince the public that one was not using excessive force to maintain order.

Now, the Air Force, it seems to me, gradually refined its tactics of air policing and what it was actually doing. What one had in Mesopotamia, very frequently, were tribes who refused to pay their taxes; tribes who attacked their neighbours: tribes who, in one way or another, refused to obey the Government. There was difficulty with the Turks who, from time to time in the early 1920s, attempted to invade Mesopotamia and restore their control, at least of the northern part of the country, and very strong resistance occurred in the Kurdish part of Iraq. The RAF's technique in the early days was to fly over recalcitrant villages to drop warning messages that the tribes had to cease whatever activity was arousing the antagonism of the Government; otherwise, on a specific day, the village would be bombed. That was the procedure as it went ahead, and you can find plenty of photographs in the Public Record Office of villages being attacked in that way. As time went on, the methods were refined and the Air Force tended to try to concentrate on upsetting the normal work patterns of the villages in question. In other words, it wasn't necessary to destroy their houses; one would, by preventing them going out and tending their crops, by forcing them to live in caves in the vicinity, make life particularly and peculiarly unpleasant and so eventually compel them to come in – in the expression of the time – and make terms with the Government. It was these techniques which were extremely suspect.

Some modern historians have criticised the technique on the grounds that it was too easy for the Government; very often, the Government didn't know much about the tribes and forced them or tried to compel them to do things which, for economic reasons perhaps, were almost impossible. In other words, in the early days, the Government, by using air power, would have more control over the villagers in the hinterland than any previous Government in that part of the world. It wasn't fully aware of the poverty of some of the villagers and it perhaps attempted to make them pay taxes on a scale which was impossible for them to meet; therefore they broke out into rebellion. I think this was probably true in the early 1920s, but as the Twenties went on, more and more political officers were sent out and these found out more and more about the villagers. The Government

therefore became sensitive to what was happening there and to the possibilities. So while I think the air policing in Mesopotamia was perhaps open to that objection, at the beginning it became much less so as the years went by.
Of course, air policing was not just tried in Mesopotamia – it spread to many other areas. In Trans-Jordan, Abdullah placed himself on the throne immediately after the First World War – he was the son of Hussein of the Hejaz. If you look at the British documents of the period, we were somewhat hesitant about backing Abdullah in the early years, but we decided as an experiment to give him some support, and as the years went by the Royal Air Force and the armoured cars associated with it became the main support for law and order inside Trans-Jordan. Not only that, but just as in Iraq the Air Force had to deal with incursions across the frontier from Turkey, so in Jordan it had to deal with incursions from what we now call Saudi Arabia, from a fanatical Moslem sect who tried to over-run what they considered to be the effete Jordanians and to bring them to the true Moslem faith. As the Air Force was dealing with them, it was also dealing with constant problems in the early years on the frontier between Jordan and Syria: basically, the problem was that rebels against the French in Syria came over the frontier into Jordan, lived there and then operated into Syria and, conversely, Jordanian rebels operated from Syrian territory into Jordan. But eventually, amicable agreements were reached with the French in that part of the world and the frontier was, to some extent, pacified. So if Iraq was the first area where air policing was tried, Jordan was the second.

The third one was Aden. No 8 Squadron of the Royal Air Force took over Aden from the Army in 1928. There had been aircraft there before, but it was in 1928 that the Royal Air Force took over complete control of that area. The Air Force had already proved extremely successful in rebuffing incursions from North Yemen into the Aden area and after it had taken over, it proved again extremely successful in bringing law and order amongst the tribes in the hinterland. Normal airstrips were built all over Aden so that the light aircraft of the time could land, so that the political officers could be moved about in the hinterland and thus learn the attitudes of the various tribes, find out when trouble was brewing, and all the rest of it. The area under control in Aden gradually expanded as the years went by; in fact the process wasn't complete when the Second World War broke out and many of the aircraft were then removed from Aden. So the whole area wasn't pacified and not all the airfields that the Royal Air Force would have liked were built. Nevertheless, as a whole, the RAF operations in that part of the world proved to be extremely successful.

As I mentioned before, there was a good deal of resistance from the Army to the expansion of the Royal Air Force's activities. For example, in Iraq, the Army made as much difficulty as possible when the RAF wanted to set up the armoured car units in order to protect the Air Force and for other reasons. The basic problem was, of course, that all the Services were under tremendous financial pressure; the more the Royal Air Force expanded and took over different territories, the more difficult it was going to be for the Army to maintain its share of the defence budget. It was perhaps in India that the arguments between the Air Force and the Army over this question became most bitter. The last of the great wars against Afghanistan broke out in May 1919. As far as the Air Force was concerned, it believed that its role in that war had been absolutely crucial and not only in helping the Army repel the Afghani incursions into Indian territory. It also believed that sortie over Kabul by a single Handley Page had helped to cause panic in the Afghan capital and helped to push the Emir into making peace with British India. The Army flatly objected to that claim, arguing that there were indeed other reasons why the Afghanis had eventually come to terms, and disputing the importance of the Royal Air Force in the final war against the Afghanis. The Army also believed that the best way of dealing with the frontier tribes between Afghanistan and India was to build roads through their territories and set up permanent forts in the tribal territories in order to maintain law and order. The Air Force's attitude was completely different. It believed that the more soldiers one had on the ground, the more one attracted attacks on them by the frontier tribesmen because they could gain glory, they could win loot, and they had a chance perhaps of defeating the British soldiers. On the other hand, if you were having difficulty with one of the tribes and you could use the Air Force on its own, you could send the aircraft over, you could drop the usual warning signs that they had to come to terms or they would be bombed, and then you could move in and bomb them: they would have no chance of defeating you, there would be no chance of loot and this would be by far the most effective way of forcing them to come to terms. I think that the Air Force had the best of the argument, but the dispute rumbled on extremely fiercely through the 1920s and, perhaps slightly less ferociously, into the 1930s. So that was the other area where air policing, embryonically, was used on the same scale, although to an extent it was frustrated by the caution of the Army.

One thing which the Air Staff was agreed upon at the time was that air policing was only suitable for rural areas; it wasn't suitable for use in urban areas and towns – in places like Ireland, for example, in the early 1920s, or in Palestine, or indeed in the towns of India, say, when trouble arose in 1919 around Amritsar. In fact, when the riots in Amritsar occurred in 1919, three aircraft were sent to try to see if they could deal with the rioters: two of them turned back because they couldn't distinguish rioters from ordinary townspeople going about their normal business and the third pilot thought that he could distinguish the rioters from other people and proceeded to drop his bomb but unfortunately hit perfectly innocent civilians who were going about their normal business. So it was an object lesson, in some ways, in how not to do it, because air power could not be used in urban areas in that way, and this was very important as far as the primary area where the RAF was involved was concerned, that's to say, Palestine. The RAF, when it took over Iraq and Trans-Jordan. was also given control of Palestine, but it was not given control with the idea that it would carry out normal air policing methods inside the country; obviously it could do that perhaps in the rural areas of Palestine, but it couldn't do it in the built-up regions. I stress the point because in 1929, and again from 1936 onwards, when there was growing violence between the Jews and the Arabs in Palestine, there were plenty of people in the Press and the Army who said, over and over again, that air policing had failed. As I say, that was not the case; it was never intended that air policing would be operative in urban situations in Palestine, and in fact, when you had the full-scale Arab revolt in Palestine in 1936 onwards the area had to be handed over to the Army to maintain law and order.

So its main areas of operation were Iraq, Trans-Jordan, Aden, to some extent the frontier with Afghanistan, rather than Palestine as a whole. There was – I come back to the point – always a problem of convincing the public that one was not using excessive force and this was why the Air Force developed the very careful doctrine to defend air policing by trying to limit the use of force to the maximum extent possible, and why it also carried out a very large propaganda campaign, as I suppose you could call it, in Britain to convince the public of what it was up to in these parts of the world. No doubt, at the time, it considered the criticisms which were made against it, in the Press and in Parliament, as unfortunate and counter-productive, but with the advantage of hindsight we can see that public criticism did in fact play an important and constructive role. If we had not had that sort of constant warning that the Air Force would be subject to public criticism if it began to use air power to excess against the Middle East, then we could have ended up with a situation similar to the one the Americans found themselves in in Vietnam after the Second World War. Because they hadn't had that historical experience of moderating the use of air power, they were open to the criticism that they had used it excessively. The Air Force took care not to be in that sort of situation.

The great frustration I found in writing the history of this period was that it was extremely difficult – indeed, as far as I was concerned, impossible – to get a view of what the whole thing was like from the Arab side. It may be that there are Arab reports of being policed by the Royal Air Force in the inter-war period; on the other hand, of course, many of the Arabs involved were probably not literate and therefore unlikely to record their memoirs. I was therefore unable to find any account of the situation from the Arab side, or even any accounts from journalists who operated with the Arabs and were on the receiving end of the Royal Air Force's bombs. There are accounts by journalists certainly of being on the receiving end of Italian bombs in the 1920s, but then the Italians in what is now called Libya did not try to restrict the use of air power and seem, on the face of it, to have used gas/chemical weapons on a fairly wide scale. So the descriptions which the journalists operating with the Libyans against the Italians left behind probably wouldn't reflect the experience of the Arabs in Iraq, Aden and so on. Similarly, we also have accounts of what it was like operating in Spanish Morocco and being under bomb attack from Spanish and French aircraft during the Riff Rebellion in the early 1920s. But again, it's clear from those journalists' accounts that very little attempt was made to protect, say, mosques or to protect women and children, and so on, and so again it's not certain that these accounts reflect anything like the experience of the Arabs who were subject to British bombing in that period.

One other point I would make is that the Air Force was, in a sense, in the 1920s. fortunate in the type of aircraft that it had available. Now, this might not have been obvious to the pilots at the time, who had to struggle with the inefficient and unreliable aircraft – the DH 9As, the Bristol Fighters, and so on – available in the 1920s. But in other ways they were peculiarly suitable for the operations in Iraq and elsewhere. They were cheap, because plenty were left over from the First World War; they could land in the desert and take off in the desert; they were not particularly susceptible to shots from the Arabs against them and they were relatively slow compared with the aircraft which succeeded them. So, in many ways they were ideal for these operations which were being carried out at that time. When the next generation of aircraft – the Spitfires and Hurricanes and so on – arrived in the late 1930s, these were much less suitable for anti-insurgent operations, and this helps explain why, after the Second World War, we very often found the Harvard trainer very much more useful than the most modern combat aircraft because it was relatively reliable; it was relatively slow and it was manoeuvrable. It didn't of course have the advantages of being able to land in the desert, which you had with the aircraft in the 1920s.

So let me finish where I started off: how important was air policing and how important was it perceived to be in the inter-war period? The answer is that it was perceived by Governments in that period to be very important indeed. One indication of this was their attitude to the Geneva World Disarmament Conference which took place in

1932. A consistent effort was made by many of the Continental countries in 1932 to prohibit bombing altogether and the Government in power in Britain at the time was extremely anxious that this should take place; there was great fear, as you all know, through the 1930s, about the vulnerability of London to bomb attack. Therefore nothing would please the Government more than a prohibition of bombing. This would also have fitted in to Labour Party ideologies at the time. But they had to face the fact in 1932 that if they prohibited bombing, it would be virtually impossible to maintain many parts of the British Empire without enormous increase in the military budget. Therefore, faced with all these conflicting pressures, the Government came up with the suggestion, which many of the people at Geneva found extremely ludicrous, but nevertheless was the best they could do, that bombing should be prohibited except 'for police purposes in outlying regions'. This produced almost universal hilarity in Geneva, but the Government really couldn't think of any other way out of the dilemma with which it was faced. By that stage, the Army was out of Iraq, out of Aden virtually, and so on; the whole situation was being controlled by the Air Force, and to do anything else was going to be enormously expensive. Many people on the Left then blamed the Government for the breakdown of the World Disarmament Conference, but in fact that was completely erroneous; it broke down because of Germany's determination to achieve equality with France and ultimately to go on and dominate the Continent. The importance of the issue was simply that it showed the significance of air policing as far as the British Government was concerned.

In the long run, however, the Air Force recognised that the situation was likely to change; air policing was not going to be effective into the distant future. First of all, as I've said and stressed, air policing was not useful in urban situations; patently, the world was going to become less civilised (*sic* – more civilised? **Ed**) and therefore air policing methods were not going to be operable in a larger part of the world. Secondly, it was recognised that the aircraft were going to become less suitable as time went on; they were going to be faster, more expensive, and so on, and therefore less effective in these types of operations. Thirdly, the rebels were going to get more sophisticated and they were going to develop techniques which made it more difficult for aircraft to operate; ultimately, they were going to be able to out-last air policing methods. In other words, in this period, if life was made very difficult for the tribesmen, they would eventually decide that it wasn’t worth the candle and they would come in and make terms with the Government. But of course, when one was dealing with much more sophisticated guerrillas in post-1945 – the Chin Pengs and so on – they were not going to give up in that straightforward sense. Fourthly, one had to watch public opinion – and the public was going to become even more sensitive to the issue of bombing post-1945 than it had been before that. So, all in all, one can say that this was a specific period in history in which this specific tactic was enormously useful, both for maintaining the independence of the Air Force and also for maintaining the size of the British Empire at that time. This specific technique was not going to be of indefinite duration: that’s not to say that aircraft don’t have an enormously important part to play in anti-insurgent operations today, but it was not to be of the same type that we saw in the inter-war period.

Discussion

Ms Goulter

I think more needs to be said on the cost benefits. Taking the example of Iraq when it was in the hands of the Army, it cost something staggering like £32 million and then the RAF stepped in a couple of years later and the cost was about £100,000; that's a tremendous difference. Secondly, I think the influence of the policing experience on senior members of the Air Staff was important.

Dr Towle

Yes, on the first point, I should have given you more figures. There's no doubt air policing as a whole was extremely cost-effective as far as Britain was concerned. On the second point, influence on air doctrine. I'm less convinced of its positive side. It may be that a false impression was given of the accuracy which could be achieved as far as bombing was concerned. It was, after all, a very difficult business flying at relatively low level in daytime over Arabs equipped only with rifles, and dropping your bombs on them, as opposed to flying at night over Germany and trying to hit a city. That experience was wholly and totally different. I also think that one of the greatest problems with the bombing campaign against Germany was not so much that we failed to break German morale but that we hadn't worked out what would happen once we had broken German morale and how the ordinary German people were to bring pressure to bear on the Nazi Government. Now this was quite a different problem as they were a totalitarian society; how could people in Germany, facing the power of the *Gestapo*, bring pressure to bear on their Government to alter its policy? In Iraq, or somewhere like that, you were dealing with a wholly different problem: you were bombing a precise tribe and you could very quickly make it force the tribal leaders to make terms with the Government.

Anon

Taking up that point, Dr Towle, whilst one accepts that the policing activities in the 1920s and '30s were invaluable to the Air Force in preserving independence, unfortunately there were those in the Air

Staff who tried to project those methods into the Continental situation and I would like your view on their impact on our foreign policies at the beginning of the 1939-45 War. It was actually suggested at one of the conferences, quite seriously, that we should drop leaflets on a selected German city to warn them that we were going to bomb them, the following day, or whatever, at a certain time. This was based on the Trenchard doctrine of the effect of bombing on morale to material as 20 to 1. I would suggest that, however successful the RAF was at policing, this experience was misleading so far as our wartime policies were concerned.

Dr Towle

I agree with that. Of course, it's very difficult to prove what impact something like air policing has on bombing operations, but one tends to think that you're right. It did lead to certain assumptions, to a certain optimism, about the impact that bombing would have on Germany, and of course we did go in for dropping leaflets over Germany in the Second World War, and providing them with all the waste paper they needed for the whole conflict.

Desmond Johns

If we think of the situation which the Russian Air Force was faced with in Afghanistan, that was perhaps the nearest modern equivalent. I wonder if you've had an opportunity to consider the success or otherwise of this campaign.

Dr Towle

If Afghanistan shows anything, it shows that modern guerrillas are not going to come to terms just from bombing. Indeed, in certain circumstances, it can have a counter-productive effect. In the Afghan case, most of them simply got their wives and children over the frontier into Pakistan, went back and operated as guerrillas against the Soviet forces. My feeling, nevertheless, was that the Soviets learnt a great deal from Afghanistan, and that they greatly improved their helicopter tactics as time went on. There was a stage in the war in Afghanistan in which the use of helicopters, plus the use of other specialised units, was bringing them as near to victory as one could get in that sort of campaign, with an open frontier and a country like

Pakistan next door. What changed that, of course, was the introduction of anti-aircraft missiles, particularly the American Stinger. I think the context is the same. in that they were fighting in Afghanistan just as we fought in Afghanistan, but I think it demonstrated how much had changed in terms of the sophistication of the rebels and their determination not to come to terms, so the Russians had to adopt all sorts of new tactics.

Mr Cecil James

For the purposes of this contribution, I am a retired Air Ministry civil servant, and I'd like to tell a story which shows the extent to which the air control in Mesopotamia was monitored in London. As the story goes, and I've every reason to believe that it's a true story, towards the end of the day's business, the Chief of the Air Staff decided that he needed some more information for a meeting the following day in the Colonial Office to decide the extent of reparations to be imposed on a tribe which had become naughty in Mesopotamia and attacked another tribe. It had done all sorts of really quite nasty things – it had carried off some of the tribe's ladies and it had destroyed some of its crops, but, most important of all, far more important than the ladies, it had driven off a herd of camels, and the Chief of the Air Staff wanted to know a little bit more about what size of bill should be presented to this recalcitrant tribe. He had an idea that the size of a herd of camels was finite, depending on the time of the year, and that when the herbage was good, the size of the herd was such and such, and when it was not so good, it tended to be rather less. So he caused the telegram to be sent 'flash' to Air Marshal Sir Edward Ellington, the AOC, and wanted a reply the following morning. So he said this telegram must be replied to 'most immediate', and he summoned the rest of the department and said that whenever the reply from Sir Edward Ellington came in, they must wake him up and tell him what it said, because he would be at the Colonial Office at 9.30 in the morning. So he sent his telegram off. And the essential question was: how many camels in the herd? Round about three o'clock the following morning, the reply came in from Sir Edward Ellington, and the resident clerk opened it and read it and scratched his head – 'Well, he did say I must wake him up.' So he rang him and got a sleepy voice at the other end. The resident clerk, bright young assistant principal, said: 'Telegram received from Sir Edward Ellington, Sir.' 'Well, read it,' said the CAS grumpily and sleepily. 'Quote: I'll buy it. How many?'

To be a little more serious, there's one area where I thought perhaps you didn't quite give sufficient emphasis. It was in respect of the ground support that the air operations needed and one could see it again done on a shoestring with the levies in each of the various countries; there were the Assyrian levies and the Iraqi levies, the Aden levies of course, and I imagine the Arab Legion was involved in control of Trans-Jordan. One spin-off was the air photography which was done in the Mesopotamian area in particular; a great contribution was made to archaeological study, because things were showing up from the air which simply were undetectable from the ground, and that use of air photography has of course continued apace.

Dr Towle

Of course, when you're writing a thesis, the nicest part is collecting the anecdotes. One of the best ones I had from Iraq was where a pilot and co-pilot were flying over the area looking for a group of rebels and they suddenly saw two groups of horsemen approaching each other looking as if they were about to attack each other. They weren't quite sure what was going on, but just to make sure they dropped a few bombs in the vicinity, to scatter them and frighten them all away. It was only when they'd landed, and something like a week later, that they discovered that this was the marriage ceremony of a very friendly local sheikh and that all these people were just cantering around in the area as part of the celebrations.

Graham Thorpe

I was very interested in the accurate description of the period, as I was in the Air Force in 1929 and all my friends and compatriots took part in these operations. I'm surprised we've got so far without mentioning the counter-measures that – particularly on the North West Frontier – they used, which resulted in the Air Force using ghoolie chits, but apart from that, it gives the impression that that battle was won and we won the war. Now, I begin to ask myself, at this age, whether we did win it. Would it have been a lot better if we'd lost and were not now subject to such a multi-cultural intake from the people who we were holding down in those days?

Sir David Lee

Perhaps I could give an example of this. A certain flight lieutenant crashed in a Wapiti in a completely inhospitable part of the North West Frontier province and broke his leg: the Afridi tribesmen put him on a makeshift stretcher and carried him, I suppose 40 or 50 miles, to Shah Hospital. and they were so taken with his courage and his fortitude that they sent a deputation to Shah Hospital every week to see how he was getting on, and that was one of the most hostile tribes in the whole of that area.

Anon

You made comparison with the Vietnam War. I'm afraid that the public criticism of American air tactics was not just phenomenal but never experienced before in the democratic world.

Dr Towle

The point I was making was that although the Air Force regarded criticisms and comments on air policing as a nuisance at the time, nevertheless the fact that it had to look over its shoulder throughout the period to make sure that it wasn't alienating the public did mean that we didn't get into the sort of campaign the Americans did. I think the Americans had never been in that position before: looking back to the Korean War, if there was public criticism of their behaviour at that time, it came from the Right in the sense that it was felt that they had been too moderate and hadn't given enough power to people like General McArthur. Therefore, when they came to fighting Vietnam, I don't think they envisaged that they were going to get that sort of criticism from the Left (if you could use the term Left) for using excessive power. We would not, I think, have made that mistake; we had a long historical experience of criticism, or potential criticism, over our air activities.

John Peters

During the First World War there was considerable experience of night-time operations. What effect do you think our operating methods between the wars had on our aircraft and equipment, and the way we used them?

Dr Towle

My hunch is that, as a result of what you were talking about, the aircraft and the equipment were not correct for use in operations in Europe, counteracting, as you rightly indicated, the experience of the First World War. That's not to say, of course, that they didn't fly at night in Iraq and elsewhere; they did fly at night and they also dropped delayed-action bombs to prevent people going out and tending their crops during the dark, and so on – there were night-time operations. But the emphasis was on day-time operations and on relatively simple tactics; I think you're right – in that sense it was counter-productive.

Sir David Lee

I must now wind up this excellent lecture and discussion. One thing I noticed – it hasn't really been mentioned in the connection of air policing between the wars – was the appalling inadequacy of our maps. They really were dreadful. Of course, the days of aerial mapping hadn't really arrived and one had only the most sketchy and appalling maps; this certainly affected Iraq and it affected the North West Frontier. I was sent off myself to one particular village, which didn't exist. I came back and said it wasn't where it should have been, and they just laughed. Fortunately, I had taken photographs of where it wasn't and it was 12 miles to the north, and the leaflets had been dropped in the wrong place.

We have had a very fine lecture indeed from Dr Towle; he has covered the subject extremely well, with interest to us all, so it only remains now for me to thank you very much indeed for a most excellent evening.

SEMINAR HELD ON 27 JUNE 1990 AT KING'S COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Coningham: A biographer's lament and declaration

Dr Vincent Orange

First, my lament. One of Britain's most eminent historians – Geoffrey Elton – regards biography as 'a poor way of writing history' and I suspect that many historians agree with him. However influential he may have been,' wrote Elton (*The Practice of History*, p169) 'no individual has ever dominated his age to the point where it becomes sensible to write its history purely around him. And. above all. those parts of his career that may carry the greatest historical significance are not likely to be those on which a biographer should mainly concentrate. He should give much weight to those private relationships and petty concerns which have little to tell the historian: in particular, if he is to understand his subject's personality, he should deal thoroughly with those formative years during which the history of the age is likely to be quite unaware of the growing man. None of this speaks against biography as a form of *writing,* but it does mean that biography is not a good way of writing *history*.' It is certainly true that a serious weakness in most biographies concerns the 'formative years'. As a rule, little is known even about young princes expected to become kings, let along young men of humble origins who become air marshals, but the influences that guide our fortunes are not all felt in youth: the child is not always father of the man. a fact for which I at least am profoundly grateful.

In Coningham's case, he was discharged as medically unfit from the New Zealand Army in April 1916 at the age of 21. After twenty months of undistinguished service, hardly any of it in contact with the enemy, he was officially considered of no use to the war effort even in New Zealand, let alone overseas. By that time, his memories included poverty in Sydney, where he also heard the grown-ups discuss his parents' spectacularly scandalous conduct and suffered the consequent taunts of other little boys and girls. Later, his memories included more poverty in Wellington, where he heard the grown-ups discuss some more spectacularly scandalous conduct by his parents and suffered further taunting from bigger boys and girls, who were presumably able to think of crueller things to say. His school record was poor and before his anonymous military service he had had a couple of years as a farmhand, still remembered for finding out how large a piece of gelignite can be hit with a hammer before the explosion becomes dangerous.

However, this rough lad refused to be put down by medical opinion, sailed to England at his own expense, joined the RFC and ended the Great War not merely as a dashing fighter-pilot, decorated three times for gallantry, but – more interestingly – as a major and Squadron Commander responsible for many men and machines: 25 officers, 154 men, 46 machine-guns, 6 motor-cars, 9 lorries, 8 trailers, 8 motor-cycles, 4 side-cars and, not least, 19 aeroplanes. He coped admirably with the very different pressures of personal combat, leadership in battle and management of affairs on the ground. At the end of the war, having realised that the RAF was the place for him, Coningham applied for one of the few permanent commissions then available. He was ticked by Trenchard in his copy of the Air Force List as one of the promising young officers to watch and, twenty years on, would vindicate Trenchard's judgement by his masterly conduct of a succession of ever-more demanding commands.

A novelist could easily explain this transformation from farmhand to air marshal and even a biographer could try – if he had the luck and diligence to find letters, diaries or surviving contemporaries to provide the necessary material. But this biographer found hardly anything about Coningham's early years. He did no better with Keith Park. At 22, Park was an Assistant Purser with the Union Steam Ship Company of Dunedin. I gather that he loved horses, artillery and the sea, but he did not become famous as a cavalry officer (or jockey), nor as a general (or urban guerrilla), nor as an admiral (or yachtsman). Like Coningham, Park had done poorly at school and, again like Coningham, his parents had separated and though their separation did not make the front pages of the newspapers, who can say that it was therefore less traumatic for the young Park?

My justification for writing a biography of Coningham is that he played key roles in events of great importance in the Middle East, the

Mediterranean and North-west Europe during the Second World War. Numerous accounts of those events have been published in the last forty years, but Coningham usually appears – in passing, without introduction – as the man who had the day-to-day responsibility for the tactical handling of fighter or medium bomber forces. Mention is sometimes made of his quarrel with the American General Patton in Tunisia; more frequent mention is made of his differences with the British General Montgomery; and, in cocktail chat, one can hear tattle about alleged thievery at the end of his career. After my biography was published, the *Daily Telegraph* telephoned me in New Zealand one midnight to discuss this (and only this) aspect of his long, distinguished career and later printed a puff on the subject that attracted more tattle in its letter column, including a priceless 'my lips are sealed' comment from an air commodore.

I asked myself these questions about Coningham. Firstly, 'Where did the tactical director' of so many important campaigns come from?' I supposed that it was not a matter of 'Buggins's Turn'. I hoped that the RAF had deliberately selected an efficient, experienced officer with the necessary cool temperament and ability to react swiftly and sensibly to sudden pressure. It seemed to me that the answer to this question would be interesting and, as far as I could see, it had not already been given. Coningham pops in to the story of this or that campaign and then, campaign over, pops out again. I therefore felt it necessary to discover and report what I could of his life before 1939.

I also asked, secondly, 'What became of Coningham after his *first* appointment as a Commander?' The RAF, like any other large employer – especially in a time of national crisis – might well promote a man beyond his capacity. If that had been so, I reasoned, Coningham should have sunk without trace after his term as AOC 4 Group in Bomber Command from 1939 to 1941. But he then went out to the desert at Tedder's express request and everyone (except, of course, Montgomery and his admirers) speaks highly of Tedder, Even so, Tedder was no doubt as capable of misjudgement as the rest of us and had he found that Coningham was not up to the job, Coningham would soon have been sent home. This did not happen and, under Tedder's patronage, Coningham rose higher and higher for the rest of the war. 'Talent will out,' they say, but it has usually been an advantage, since organised society began, to have the backing of a powerful patron – and Coningham had that.

Finally, I asked: 'What were his tactics and were they in fact correct – or at least sensible?' As for the correctness or otherwise of his tactics, I found material in the PRO and elsewhere that has not been published before. To this extent, my biography adds something to historical knowledge, particularly in regard to the influence Coningham had upon several senior American officers and the tactics they introduced in their own air service. Moreover, the controversies with Patton and Montgomery turned upon the management of air power as well as the more obviously dramatic clashes of strong personalities and had not hitherto been examined from Coningham's point of view. It seemed to me that, in fairness, someone should speak up for him.

You may argue, as Elton would, that my questions could better have been answered without reference to an individual officer. The problem of selecting officers for senior command should be looked at more broadly than I have done and the analysis of tactics in various campaigns should likewise be considered as part of a whole. My attempt to relate these valid questions to the career of a single participant simply distorts and may even trivialise the answers offered. I fear that this may be true. I can only reply that I wanted to know about this particular man; that many correspondents in Britain, the United States and Australia, as well as in New Zealand, encouraged me to complete this biography; that the number of detailed biographies of senior RAF officers is not great; and that. while working on it, I have been struck by ideas for writing 'proper' history, such as a study of the various uses of air power in the Middle East in war and peace from 1914 to 1945.

What problems have I faced in writing about Coningham? Above all, the problem of *oral evidence*. I have interviewed or corresponded with many men and women whom I hoped could tell me things about him which books, articles, boxes of documents and even reels of microfilm could not. I have found oral evidence sometimes essential, often disappointing and always taking up more time than any other source.

It has been essential in that members of Coningham's family, his friends and acquaintances gave me information that is not otherwise available. Only by meeting them or writing to them could I obtain access to their letters, photographs, memories and friends. Without such material, my book would not be a biography at all; it would be merely a chronicle of official duties.

But oral evidence has been disappointing in that many men and women who could have told me much had died before I began work. Most survivors were too junior to Coningham in years or rank to be in his confidence. They told me what he was like as a boss, but did not know what he was like as young man, a good friend or a bad enemy. These survivors, moreover, knew that it would be difficult for me to check much of what they told me. And opinions change, not only with time, but with hindsight. One forgets, remembers or revises according to many variables; not least. even such passions as love and hatred often fade in time. The only famous person I have known reasonably well was Dame Ngaio Marsh. One day I may be asked what I remember about her. My answers will be filtered according to my current opinion of Ngaio and her works (influenced by whatever I have read about her and them since she died); my reaction on the day to the interviewer's manner, age and sex; and my knowledge of whether any other friend of Ngaio's is still around to correct any lies I may tell about my closeness to her. I am also aware that my means and energy for tapping all the men and women who knew something about Coningham were severely limited. Unlike, for example, David Irving's, who evidently visited everyone still on God's earth who had anything to do with Hitler or was kin to anyone who did.

Oral evidence, however, takes a great deal of time: in writing letters, in travelling to and from, in taking tea, or better, and, most of all, in being a captive audience. Those whom one visits know that you have not called out of interest in *them* so much as interest in *who they used to know and what they used to do.* Given that we all have more to say about our own lives than anyone else's, you must therefore listen to what they wish to tell you, with an alert expression and not interrupt; only then may you ask your questions and only then do you find that they know little, have muddled or invented what they do know or have become too tired to bother. And, of course, it is true – as I have so often been told by people who knew Park or Coningham – that 'it all happened a long time ago, dear boy, and we were rather busy in those days'.

I never met Coningham. He could have told me a thousand things in one day that I would love to know. A few of them I gathered from many sources over several years, with more or less certainty that I had got them right. On the other hand, there are papers and letters of his that I have read which I do not believe he would have permitted any biographer to read. Coningham was a most reserved man: unfailingly courteous, even talkative, but one could know him as well after a single meeting as after a hundred. Tommy Elmhirst, his right-hand man for years during the Second World War, kept a diary and wrote numerous letters home in which Coningham was often the main subject. Elmhirst greatly admired him, though not uncritically, and probably knew him in his maturity better than any other serviceman, but even Elmhirst was kept at a distance. Coningham, however, was only just 53 when he died and if he had enjoyed a normal span it is possible that he would have co-operated with a biographer, particularly to contradict some of Montgomery's claims; I think it less likely that he would have written his own story.

So much for my Lament. The rest of this talk is devoted to my **Declaration.** Coningham was among the first generation of permanent Air Force officers. This is a most important point, helping to shape his character and attitudes in three ways.

Firstly, these officers shared a fear throughout their *lives* – let alone their active *careers* – of the Army and/or the Navy ending the cherished independence of their beloved service. Portal, Tedder, Dowding, Douglas, Harris, Slessor, Leigh-Mallory, Park, Coningham and the rest might quarrel vigorously among themselves, but they stood shoulder-to-shoulder against soldiers and sailors.

Secondly, that fear made them anxious to find a new role for their service after 1918 as a peace-keeping (or war-winning) bomber force. Theories about strategic bombing were concocted in the Air Ministry or imbibed in staff college courses. Devotion to these theories is said either to have won us or very nearly lost us the

Second World War. The arguments are endless, but Coningham had no part in them. Of all the RAF's senior officers in that war, he was – I believe – unique in that he received no formal, theoretical service training. He became inordinately proud of the fact that he never served in the Air Ministry nor studied at staff college. All my contacts spoke of him as a marvellous pilot; a gifted teacher (an amazing feat for one who had never been taught to teach); and a natural leader. He had no theories and was strictly practical, as a good Kiwi should be.

And thirdly, these first-generation officers were well versed in Army-Air co-operation: either in clearing the battlefield sky of hostile aircraft or in the more dangerous skills of low-level attack on ground targets chosen by the Army in the front, rear or lines of communication of enemy forces. Army-Air co-operation had been their *raison d'être* during the Great War and remained so (made far easier by complete air superiority) throughout the 1920s and '30s in many parts of the Empire. When Coningham returned to the desert in July 1941 he already had behind him long years of practical experience in work that earned him his reputation, not least among those Americans who became his colleagues.

For a whole year before Montgomery arrived in Egypt, Coningham was proving his mastery of desert air warfare: managing fighters, bombers, supplies, reinforcement and men – in advances, in defences and (most difficult of all) in retreats. He had seen the Army less well handled. When Montgomery arrived, Coningham was immediately impressed and said so: 'We now have a man,' he told Elmhirst, 'a great soldier if I'm a judge, and we'll go all the way with him.' And they did, through many hard campaigns in the next three years. Montgomery was perhaps the most air-minded of all Allied generals in the Second World War and in October 1943, for example, when Mountbatten asked Montgomery for advice (an exceptional event in itself), the latter replied: 'Win the air battle before you fight the land, or sea, battles. This policy will save you many lives, and many ships, and much material.'

Given this high appreciation of air power, Coningham and Montgomery might have remained on good terms, respecting each other and even perhaps becoming friends. They had much in common. Coningham, like Montgomery, was a non-smoker, who drank very little, hated smutty stories, worked long hours and discouraged visitors to his headquarters. They liked to visit the men under their command, especially those in forward positions. They preferred verbal to written orders and would not permit themselves to be swamped by paperwork. They chose good subordinates, delegating to them a generous measure of independence, protecting them firmly from outside interference and sacking them ruthlessly if they blundered. Both, in short, were excellent professionals with the necessary strength of character and force of personality to train and lead men in wartime. Both were at their best in times of crisis, keeping calm and exuding confidence as well as issuing appropriate orders in clear, simple language. Both were appalled by the shambles on the ground and in the air of the Anglo-American invasion of North-West Africa (Operation Torch) and both did their successful best to see that the shambles was remedied.

As for their personalities, Montgomery's has been studied in great detail. His many disgraceful actions are amply documented and need no recounting by me, save to set in context his bitter remarks about Coningham. For, despite their similarities, they did not long remain friendly or even civil partners. By 'set in context' I mean that Montgomery regarded most of his colleagues in all Services with unconcealed contempt. His strictures on Coningham may therefore mean less than they would if spoken or written by a more temperate man. For his part, Coningham undoubtedly came to detest Montgomery and said so loudly, but no-one else with whom he served angered him – or was angered by him – to anything like the same extent.

What went wrong between these two exceptional men? It is said that the delay (however justified) in pursuit of Rommel after the battle of El Alamein in October 1942 damaged their partnership and that the delay (however justified) in capturing Caen after the Normandy landings in June 1944 injured it beyond repair. In considering these events, we must remember firstly the skill and ferocity of the German Army in retreat; secondly, the reluctance of British commanders with experience of the Great War to incur casualties on a like scale; and thirdly, the undramatic (but only too real) problems which commanders faced in gathering and distributing supplies and reinforcements. Tedder, Coningham and many since, both participants and historians, sharply criticised Montgomery's slowness in many situations. Although a good case can be made in his defence, Montgomery's lies and evasions so angered Coningham (among many others) that he became unwilling to recognise the merit in that case.

Montgomery rode out, though by increasingly narrow margins, criticisms arising after Alamein, in Tunisia, in Sicily, in Italy, in Normandy and over Antwerp and Arnhem. The British failure to take Caen on or shortly after D-Day, the disasters of operations Epsom, Charnwood and Goodwood in June and July 1944 collectively brought Montgomery to the very edge of dismissal, as Coningham well knew. Indeed, he and Tedder did their best to bring about that dismissal, supported by American commanders whose detestation of Montgomery was, if anything, even greater. Nevertheless, Montgomery was made a field marshal at the end of the Normandy campaign while Coningham got nothing. At war's end, Montgomery climbed even higher (though making new enemies and hardening the opposition of old ones), while Coningham went off to Flying Training Command for a couple of years before retiring, ostensibly at his own request. A few weeks later, seeking to fashion a new career, he was killed in an aircraft accident.

Does this bitching at the top matter? That is, did it either keep everyone on their toes, helping to win the war sooner, or did it impair the Allied war effort? Lieutenant-General Sir Brian Horrocks once wrote [when reviewing Kingston-McCloughry's book *The Direction of War* (Cape, 1955) in the *Sunday Times,* 25 September 1955]: 'War is a ruthless business, and those who rise to command armies and fleets both on the sea and in the air are usually determined men with strong opinions of their own who do not lightly brook interference with their plans. The only way to control them is to have at the top the man with the strongest character – a Winston Churchill in fact. It is a waste of time to discuss the inevitable personal discords which arise during wartime, when the main problem is how to perfect the complicated machinery of command.' But that 'machinery of command’ is made up of Horrock’s ‘determined men with strong opinions’. Given that there are always fewer top jobs than men wishing to fill them, and that the conduct of operations will vary enormously depending upon which of the ‘determined’ seize those jobs, it does not seem to me a waste of time to study their conduct. Better by far than to suppose that ‘issues’ can be separated from ‘personalities’.

Let me end on a more cheerful note, On 30 April 1945, a few days before the war ended, Trenchard wrote to Coningham. No airman of Coningham’s vintage was unmoved by words from ‘the Immortal Boom’. However angered, distressed or saddened Coningham might have been at the failure of his partnership with Montgomery, these words from an altogether greater man must have heartened him. The turn of the tide, wrote Trenchard, was Alamein: ‘when the Air stopped the Germans entering Egypt’. The air, he thought, had found four principles. Firstly, to maintain air superiority and with that went the others: secondly, to destroy the enemy’s means of production and communication; thirdly, to enable the Army to build up; and fourthly, to prevent the enemy build up. ‘This is what you and your Air Forces have done.’

DISCUSSION

Air Cdre Probert

Are there any people present with historical connections with 'Mary' Coningham who may wish to add anything?

Mervyn Mills

I should just like to say that whilst there were conflicts in the high command of the RAF, the Germans had some very much more bitter quarrels, perhaps because they had a superior air force which was misused. 'Mary' Coningham would not have allowed the RAF to be used as long range artillery in the German fashion. Also, although there was high level conflict between the Services, at the lower levels RAF/Army co-operation was excellent.

Group Captain McCarthy

I served as Coningham's personal pilot during my last two years of service, and I was very distressed to read the allegations in the *Daily Telegraph.* I dealt with 'Mary' Coningham on a personal basis for two years and he never took with him anything which was not legally acquired. Animosity between him and others was based on his idea of a proper standard of living. He always maintained a high standard of living, including a Rolls-Royce Phantom III, as well as a villa in Cannes and a yacht donated by the Guinness family. I brought back an aircraft full of material from the Continent, but it was all donated to hospitals.

Dr Orange

Unfortunately, I met Group Captain McCarthy too late to include any of his memories in the book.

Gp Capt McCarthy

I left the RAF six months before Coningham and he interviewed me and told me he would be leaving shortly because nobody on the Air Council had any time for him. I remember telling him to be careful who he flew with.

Air Cdre Probert

You say nobody on the Council had any time for Coningham, but

Tedder was CAS and they had worked very closely together.

Gp Capt McCarthy

Yes, but Tedder was only one voice – the rest of the Council were not pro-Coningham.

Gp Capt R W Lewis

I was PA to Park in ACSEA, and within weeks of his return to the UK from the Far East he was out of the RAF. The RAF was contracting and contracting, and Park and many other talented senior officers were out.

Dr Orange

I would support that view. I found Tedder's personal letter to Park saying he would have to go. Of course Slessor, who was then AMP, had no time for Park or Coningham.

Anon

Is there any evidence of Slessor's attitude?

Dr Orange

Slessor is on record as saying that he thought Park an excellent operational commander, but they had quarrelled incessantly in Sicily. Coningham thought Slessor his enemy. Of course, both Park and Coningham had very different temperaments to Slessor, which may have had something to do with it.

Gp Capt Madelin

Slessor felt that war should be uncomfortable, and when he arrived at a Headquarters in a Schloss he promptly unfolded his camp bed.

Air Cdre Probert

Is there not some significance in the fact that Coningham had not been to Staff College, nor had he held a post in the Air Ministry, and he therefore had no establishment track record?

Air Vice-Marshal Hunter

It was surely perfectly reasonable to say that Coningham's background did not suit him to a position in the post-war RAF.

Furthermore, the Service would have been anxious to bring on younger officers.

Mr Sydney Goldberg

I served under Park, Coningham and Leigh-Mallory. From my reading of books I associate Coningham with the Eisenhower cabal against Montgomery in North-West Europe, whereas in the desert they had enjoyed a close relationship.

Dr Orange

Initially the operations in the desert were not especially complicated. Once the war entered Tunisia, however, the plans are increasingly complex, and of course the Americans were there. Montgomery was against the Americans and they against him, whereas 'Mary' Coningham got on well with the Americans and *vice versa,* so the friendship of Montgomery and Coningham was already starting to diverge before they left Afirca. They diverged also physically – Monty's HQ became physically separated from the airmen – but Monty was also becoming detached from his *own* HQ. He increasingly isolated himself in his small Tac HQ where he surrounded himself with young acolytes.

Anon

Was Broadhurst then an acolyte of Montgomery?

Dr Orange

In Tunisia Broadhurst stayed with Montgomery in the North, whilst Coningham and Cross were in the South. The *Luftwaffe* was held off by the latter in conjunction with the Americans, which effectively isolated the battlefield and enabled Broadhurst to fill the sky above the British Army's heads with friendly aircraft – something the soldiers had always dreamed about but which depended, crucially, on the battle for air superiority being won elsewhere, out of sight of the troops on the ground. Broadhurst was younger and, quite understandably, attached himself to Montgomery's chariot.

Mr Saxon

Coningham obviously possessed qualities in terms of speed of thought and was a good tactical commander, but did he contribute to the wider planning?

Dr Orange

Tedder was his mentor, and Tedder was an academic who had the big picture. Coningham respected Tedder enormously and worked at the operational level within Tedder's strategic picture. Elmhirst was also very important – he did all the tedious jobs. People now say they realise how good it was to always have petrol/rations, etc, which they thought little about but which required great organisational skills. Mary Coningham recognised in Elmhirst a positive genius in the management of material.

Air Cdre Probert

Elmhirst had, of course, been to Staff College!

Gp Capt Lewis

It could likewise be said of many commanders that they relied heavily on organisationally-talented right-hand men, eg Harris had Saundby. How was Coningham thought of by his staff?

Dr Orange

A provost branch squadron leader on his staff, who saw him only three or four times in the course of his tour, told me that when he left Coningham sent for him and made him feel that he had done a valuable job. That I think was typical.

Humphrey Wynn

I am sure we are all very grateful to Vincent Orange for his biography. We have all known about Coningham, but not what he did. I was astonished to read of his rough boyhood followed by his time as a farmhand. Perhaps the open air life was the key to his character – desert life is of course the same. Post-war he was not of the establishment, and would not have felt at home with it.

AVM Hunter

Personally I am unhappy with the word 'establishment'. If Coningham's great operational experience did not fit him for the post-war RAF, and there was an obvious need to retire some senior wartime officers, then that was surely reasonable and does not really relate to whether he was an 'establishment' man.

Air Cdre Probert

There is one slight puzzle over Coningham's career, and that is the time he spent as a bomber group commander with 4 Group. It seems a little out of step with the rest of his career which was devoted to the application of tactical, and not strategic, air power.

Dr Orange

Yes, but I think it stems from his close associations with Ludlow-Hewitt, who of course was CinC Bomber Command at the time, and Newall who was CAS.

The Chairman then thanked Dr Orange for his very interesting and stimulating lecture.

Following this discussion, Mr Mervyn Mills wrote to the Chairman of the Programmes Committee. Mr Mills served as a squadron leader during the war and then worked for many years in the Historical Branch; we believe members will be interested to read his letter, and he has agreed to its publication.

I feel urged to write to you and express my deep appreciation for a most pleasurable evening at King's College. The memories of those far-off days. when serving as Camp Commandant to 'Mary' Coningham, came surging back. I met again the charm and sincerity of old wartime RAF comradeship – the easy communication and resonant laughter. No longer was I my eighty-four years!

This biography by Dr Vincent Orange, putting on record Coningham's great achievement and contribution to final victory is invaluable and long overdue. The research, spreading over such a wide canvas of time and campaigns, must have been daunting and impossible of achievement (on this scale, at least) without the prompting and co-operation of AHB.

'Ah, did you see Shelley plain?', I saw and knew personally Coningham of TAF as his Camp Commandant. At Hammamet in Tunisia I helped prepare a Mess in Villa Bury, left reeking with filth and degradation by its previous occupants, with the aid of the whole volunteer force of officers and mess staff. This, by the light of flares and the headlamps of a lorry. Coningham arrived with Beamish and Elmhirst, those legendary figures of the Desert Air Force who contributed so much to the Axis Forces' defeat in North Africa, including Rommel's *corps d'elite*' the Afrika Korps. The 'Chief', as we called him, sent the PMC across to compliment me for what had been a communal effort. Later, he sent for me in his Spartan trailer at Cassibile in Sicily, a camp I had helped to found. 'Has anyone been hazing you, Mills?', he asked. He kept his ear to the ground, in spite of the intensity of air operations. Somehow he must have learnt that I had crossed the path of an over-enthusiastic Senior Staff Officer. It had been for me a serious incident, but I shrugged it off. Coningham went on to discuss the great age of the olive trees and how it saddened him that war had come to Sicily and would continue up the Italian peninsula, with its classic associations and superb cities.

It was then that I became aware of Coningham's great and significant statute in what had been our fight for survival and our great land victory. This man, with the handsome head of a Silver Age Caesar, was chatting to me, a mere flight lieutenant, on equal terms of basic humanity. He had the Arab 'baraka', an indefinable emanation of greatness, such as one meets only once – if ever – in a long lifetime. It was something more than 'charisma': a kind of emanation of destiny on one on whom the gods had shone, smiled, and one day turned down the thumb.

Years earlier, I had immersed myself in the life of Horatio Nelson for my stage play *Nelson of the Nile*, published by Putnam but unhappily never produced. In both men (I sense no presumption in comparing the two) I felt the same quality of relentless will and great humanity such as warmed the hearts and affections of those sympathetic to such feelings, a tenacity of purpose and a mastery of the medium in which they operated, in one case the sea and the other air-land warfare, both artists in action.

Nelson's clash with My Lords of the Admiralty was there in Coningham's indifference to the Air Ministry. Both were great innovators in the medium in which fate and destiny had chosen for them to operate and came up against establishment prejudices, and both had the obverse to their characters which I do not need to stress. Hero-worship? In a sense, yes! But in a long and varied lifetime, one is privileged to meet and know such outstanding personalities who in a sense crystallise a nation's efforts in times of great stress and danger.

A factor overlooked, perhaps, but of which I myself was made conscious, was the telling (possibly, in a sense, ridiculous) phrase 'sand in their shoes'. War in the Western Desert had created an elite force, proud and intolerant of outside criticism and control. My posting to HQ NATAF as a squadron leader (initially Philippeville in Algeria) was by Air Ministry, retaining my acting rank of flight lieutenant. Nevertheless, on my arrival at Le Kef in Tunisia, I found myself in limbo as Messing Officer and later as Camp Commandant of the Command Post at La Marsa demoted to flying officer. Elmhirst refused to see me, so I put up an appeal in my best Admin fashion saying that my posting by Air Ministry stated specifically that I was to retain my acting rank, the squadron leader post going to Eric Spencer (later my valued friend) who, coming from 242 Group, already had 'sand in his shoes'. Only by dint of getting several truck-loads of stores from Algiers and valued extra rations from the Americans was I able to prove initially my fitness to be accepted into this exclusive inner hierarchy of HQ TAF and my acting rank was restored without loss of seniority. Truly I was bewildered but felt no resentment, for the truth was that conditions and requirements for active service in Tunisia (in my own case quite small beer) were largely unrelated to my previous experience as flight lieutenant at RAF Hereford.

Possibly in this fact was the root of the seeming clannishness akin to arrogance of the TAF hierarchy. AVM Coningham with Air Commodore George Beamish as SASO and Air Commodore Elmhirst as SADO formed a monolithic pyramid of seasoned Tactical Air Commanders which brooked little or no criticism or interference from outside. In this, they had the support of Tedder, then an air chief marshal, the overall strategic master 'brain'. It was he who tempered the Coningham intolerance, akin to arrogance, with politic suggestions in his beautifully (if that is the word) expressed and well-timed dispatches to CAS, Air Chief Marshal Portal.

One factor that militated against Coningham's acceptance by the Air Ministry Establishment was the well-known characteristic that the true man of action (which he epitomised) was more often than not temperamentally unsuited for administration. Coningham had a devotion to the principle of war of the cutting edge. He pared Advanced TAF down to the sinews and bones of an operational Air HQ with the bare modicum of supporting staff, which included the Camp Commandant, for whom it was a curiously 'upstairs-downstairs' situation in which I somehow adjusted myself to perform the duties of liaison officer and operate on the two levels.

On the eve of Operation Husky, Coningham had the TAF HQ assembled in the open air. In that address, or rather informal talk, he spoke vividly, as I remember, of the spoils of war (not in so many words). It was this buccaneering trait that, to my mind, allied him to the Border raiders, whose genes he may have inherited, which coloured his outlook at a later date. The enigma of Coningham lies somewhere along the line here, and in his case I feel strongly that the word 'thief' should never have been used.

I realise I am walking on dangerous ground here, but it is a subject that must not be shirked. You will appreciate that I am writing across the memories of almost half a lifetime and of a world at that time immersed in almost unimaginable total war conditions. I recall taking back to his Unit, after interrogation at TAF HQ, a RAF pilot who had escaped from the Germans in the confusion at the crossing of the Po. He described graphically German officers forcing their way through against the mass of soldiery, in staff cars packed high with loot. My wife, Marie-Therese, who is French from Lorraine, has told me of the systematic despoiling of France by the Germans. Two of her uncles were deported to Germany for what was virtually slave-labour. The family had known invasion three times in as many generations and the memories are indelible.

In this world of overturned values I somehow read Coningham's own attitude to an element of ancestral freebooting, much as an act of revenge and a justifiable levelling up of old grudges. This does not excuse, but helps possibly to rationalise, such a private and complex man's make-up. When I saw our old well-loved and respected Chief in civilian clothes at the Eighth Army Reunion at the Albert Hall, where Tedder and Montgomery spoke. I guessed that things had gone badly awry, It was 'thunder on the left' and speculation was rife at the time.

That Coningham died in such mysterious circumstances added to the element of Greek tragedy. He had offered and given so much to the RAF. He was a gallant, highly-decorated pilot, a brilliant innovator of ground support tactics. I am sure, had Rommel had his genius for air warfare on his own side in the Afrika Korps, the Battle of Alamein would never have been a British victory. Essentially it was the Tedder-Coningham combination of strategic and tactical air power in North Africa that ensured victory. Montgomery, in a sense, was only the *'deus ex machina',* something I endeavoured to express in my [AHB] Narrative of the campaign.

Forgive my garrulity - 'Time's winged chariot'

BOOK REVIEWS

REFLECTIONS ON INTELLIGENCE

Professor R V Jones

Heinemann, 1989, £19.50 ISBN 0-434-37724-4

The many of us who read and were fascinated by *Most Secret War* will find R V Jones' sequel to it equally compelling. In *Reflections on Intelligence* he gives us further insight into many matters described in his earlier book, taking full advantage of a mass of additional information sent to him from a host of sources. He also reflects on wider aspects of intelligence, giving us common-sense views on some of the more recent issues that have arisen, not least the debates about official secrets: one can readily sympathise, for example, with his judgement that on many matters GCHQ has exhibited an excessive zeal for security. It is sad too to be told that, when he returned to the Directorate of Scientific Intelligence in the early 1950s, the close relationship between scientific intelligence and the operational staffs that had been so fruitful in wartime no longer existed.

R V is one of those who rightly keep reminding us that the hard-learnt lessons of war must not be forgotten in peacetime, and his point is made from the inter-war as well as the post-war years. In one of this examples he refers to two research papers written by Viscount Tiverton in 1917 on strategic bombing – one about tactics and the other about target selection. Here was a genuine attempt at operational research, yet not only were his remarkably perceptive finding's ignored between the wars but OR itself was not seriously undertaken until World War II was well under way.

Many wartime incidents are recounted, and one can mention only a few. There was the invention of Jay beams in 1941 in an attempt to deceive the Germans about the true purpose of the early GEE equipment that was being installed in the RAF's bombers. There was the reluctance to develop radar counter-measures such as Window in the late 1930s; although the idea had been put forward in 1937, nothing was done until 1941, partly because to do so might have weakened the Air Staffs belief in the effectiveness of the home radar chain. The book contains, too, many touching reminiscences based on meetings with men and women who were connected with his story. And there are salutary reminders for historians, such as the dangers of relying on individuals' personal recollections for the details of events long past; Dowding and Tizard are two whose memories clearly failed them.

Having taken us through so many different facets of the intelligence story, R V concludes with a detailed section on the Oslo Report, whose origin is a mystery no longer. The remarkable set of coincidences that put him on the right track are fully described; they leave us in no doubt that the author of one of the most important intelligence documents of World War II was the German scientists Hans Mayer.

As befits the trained scientist, and as we who know him would expect, Professor Jones' research has been meticulous, and between his two books he has given us the benefit of his unique insight into the world of scientific intelligence. Historians will always be in his debt.

OF WIND AND WATER – A KIWI PILOT IN COASTAL COMMAND

By James Sanders

Airlife, 1989, £12.95 **ISBN 1-85310-069-2**

This book is a welcome addition to a part of aviation historiography neglected since the war: maritime air operations, particularly those of Coastal Command in North-West Europe. This year is the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Britain; it is also the fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of Coastal Command's anti-shipping campaign in European waters, and the work carried out by the aircrews of Coastal Command should not be forgotten. *Of Wind and Water* relates the author's experiences as a pilot. from elementary flying training in his native New Zealand, reconnaissance sorties in the Mediterranean in search of Rommel's supply convoys, anti-shipping operations in the Skaggerak, through to a post-war position as Flight Commander of an RNZAF Territorial squadron. James Sanders' story is extraordinary, from a number of points of view. He survived a second tour of operations, engaged in a type of work which wartime documents show was as dangerous as the worst of Bomber Command's attacks (the anti-shipping offensive often claimed casualties in excess of twenty per cent per operation). Also, during his eight years of Air Force life, James Sanders survived five crashes, including one spectacular prang while attempting to land in a desert sandstorm. Reading about these experiences led the reviewer to wonder whether the title of the book is more properly a reference to the author's wartime constitution!

James Sanders has an established reputation as a writer, with seventeen other titles to his credit, including a biography of Group Captain Leonard Trent of 487 Squadron fame. His latest work displays his talent with the pen, producing a highly readable book which is difficult to put down. It has the immediacy of a wartime diary, but the advance of years has also enabled James Sanders to stand back and reflect on his experiences in an honest and refreshing style. He remembers airmen friends who 'got the chop' and does this without sentimentality. There are also a few well-placed digs at academic aviation historians, many of whom (and the reviewer includes herself in this category) have fallen into the trap of being wise after the event.
Christina Goulter

THE BOMBER COMMAND WAR DIARIES
- An operational reference book 1939-1945

By Martin Middlebrook and Chris Everitt

Penguin Books, £12.99 ISBN 0-14-012936-7

Many readers will already be familiar with this excellent and comprehensive work of reference, now published in paperback for the first time, and thus within reach (just!) of the less affluent. The book attempts to list every operation in which Bomber Command was involved during the course of the Second World War, together with an assessment of the results, culled both from Allied sources, and from German and Italian national and local archives. The result is a rich seam of invaluable material for all those interested in the subject, whether academic historian or amateur. Parts Two and Three

contain excellent statistical analyses of performance from the individual squadrons, up through the Groups, to Command level. Any serious student of the RAF in 1939-1945 should buy a copy.
Sebastian Cox

BOOKS RECEIVED

Flying Start

by Hugh Dundas.

Penguin Books, £3.99 ISBN 0-14-012864-6

[Penguin have agreed to make a contribution to the RAF Benevolent Fund for each copy sold.]

A famous fighter pilot's memoirs, now released in paperback. For a full review, see *Proceedings 6.*

The Air Force Memorials of Lincolnshire

by M J Ingham.

Beckside Design, £2.75 ISBN 0-9512108-4

A useful guide for anyone contemplating a nostalgic tour of the 'bomber county'. It gives the location, including OS map reference, and a brief description of forty-four memorials.

Parnall Aircraft since 1914

by Kenneth E Wixey.

Putnam Aeronautical Books, £24.00 ISBN 0-85177-841-0

Another in the well-known series on aircraft manufacturers, though this volume is devoted to one of the less famous firms.

Cross Country

by E Travers

Hothersall & Travers, £12.75 ISBN 0-951546104

An unusual and fascinating book, consisting of extracts from the letters of Jim, Herbert and Charles Travers; an aviation trio whose names, though never famous, appear constantly in the story of British aviation from before the First World War. Though it would have benefited from an editor's scissors, anyone with an interest in British aviation will find much to entertain them.

FOURTH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE SOCIETY

Extract from the Chairman's Report

The Chairman welcomed members to the Meeting and asked for their consent to take the Notice of Meeting as read.

The Chairman stated that the past year had reinforced the rightness of the original concept of the Society to concentrate on the past Policy, Personalities and Operations of the Royal Air Force. Certainly the comments from members and non-members on the quality and content of our Proceedings bears this out and the gradual increase in membership to its present figure of 500 is an encouragement to your Committee. Last year he updated the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Peter Harding, on our progress and would like to read you his reply. 'I was very pleased to received your update on the Royal Air Force Historical Society. As you know, I place great importance on the Society's work and I am delighted to learn that it is progressing so well. I am most grateful to you and your colleagues for all that you have done to foster and develop a sense of history in the Royal Air Force.'

All the work is done by a committee of volunteers at no expense to the Society: I cannot speak too highly of their collective efforts on our behalf.

Now to the future. My only concern is that our success is driving us into more and more administration and time-consuming organisation. We are fortunate that Bracknell has taken much of the weight of the Battle of Britain Seminar from our shoulders but progress meetings are still needed and the detail needed to set up the October seminar with American participants is considerable. Therefore the Committee agree that although you have a retired Senior Officer as your Chairman, it need not necessarily be so, and that a senior serving Royal Air Force Officer might be an advantage at some time in the future.

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