

SUPREME AIR COMMAND

THE

DEVELOPMENT OF

ROYAL AIR FORCE COMMAND PRACTICE

IN THE

SECOND WORLD WAR

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the development of RAF high command of the Metropolitan Air Force (MAF) during the Second World War. It sheds new light on the re-organisations of the Air Ministry in 1934, the RAF Command structure in 1936, and the tri-service debate in 1937 concerning the RAF proposal to establish a Supreme Air Commander (SAC). It reveals that while frontline expansion created an impetus for re-organisation, it was operational readiness that was the dominant factor in the re-structuring of the RAF. It examines the transition in RAF frontline organization from the mono-functional command system of 1936 to the multi-functional organisation that emerged after 1943 by looking at command structure and practice, personalities, and operational thinking. This study builds on the established historiography but challenges the accepted explanation of RAF reforms in the 1930s. It addresses a significant gap in the literature concerning the way the frontline was directed by the War Cabinet and the Air Ministry. In doing so it seeks to establish a new starting point for the analysis of RAF high command by providing an assessment of the effectiveness of the reforms of the 1930s to the higher command of MAF operations during the Second World War.

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ABBREVIATIONS

The listed abbreviations and codewords will be used throughout this document without further explanation after their first use. This will be either in full in the text or for abbreviations that feature little in the subsequent discussion in an associated footnote. On a small number of occasions, such as a title, they may be used in full to preserve the style of the paper. They have been placed into functional or institutional groupings to make reference easier than there being contained in a long unstructured but alphabetical list.

MILITARY RANKS

Royal Air Force

MRAF	Marshal of the RAF (5*)
ACM	Air Chief Marshal (4*)
AM	Air Marshal (3*)
AVM	Air Vice-Marshal (2*)
Air Cdre	Air Commodore (1*)
Gp Capt	Group Captain
Wg Cdr	Wing Commander
Sqn Ldr	Squadron Leader
Flt Lt	Flight Lieutenant
Fg Off	Flying Officer
Plt Off	Pilot Officer

Royal Navy

Adm	Admiral (4*) in both RN and USN
VAdm	Vice Admiral (3*) in both RN and USN
RAdm	Rear Admiral (2*) in both RN and USN
Cdre	Commodore (1*) in RN
Capt	Captain in RN

British Army

Gen	General (4*) in British and US Army Ground and Air Forces
Lt Gen	Lieutenant General (3*) in British and US Army Ground and Air Forces
Maj Gen	Major General (2*) in British and US Army Ground and Air Forces
Brig	Brigadier in British Army, Brigadier General in US Army
Col	Colonel in British and US Army Ground and Air Forces
Lt Col Forces	Lieutenant Colonel in British and US Army Ground and Air Forces
Maj	Major in British and US Army Ground and Air Forces

MILITARY SERVICES

RAF	Royal Air Force
RFC	Royal Flying Corps
RN	Royal Navy
RNAS	Royal Naval Air Service
FAA	Fleet Air Arm
GAF	German Air Force
USA	United States Army
USN	United States Navy
USAAF	United States Army Air Forces
USSTAF	United States Strategic Air Forces

GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS and APPOINTMENTS

British Government and War Cabinet

PM	Prime Minister
CID	Committee of Imperial Defence
MAP	Ministry for Aircraft Production
MEW	Ministry for Economic Warfare
JIC	Joint Intelligence Committee
JPC	Joint Planning Committee
JPS	Joint Planning Staff
COS	Chiefs of Staff (UK)
DCOS	Deputy Chiefs of Staff (UK)
CCS	Combined Chiefs of Staff (UK/US)
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff (US)
1SL/CNS	First Sea Lord/Chief of the Naval Staff
VCNS	Vice Chief of the Naval Staff
DCNS	Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff
CIGS	Chief of the Imperial General Staff
DCIGS	Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff

Air Ministry

SofS	Secretary of State
CAS	Chief of the Air Staff (4/5*)
VCAS	Vice Chief of the Air Staff (4/3*)
DCAS	Deputy Chief of the Air Staff (3/2*)
ACAS	Assistant Chief of the Air Staff (2*)
ACAS(I)	Assistant Chief of the Air Staff (Intelligence)
ACAS(O)	Assistant Chief of the Air Staff (Operations)

ACAS(P)	Assistant Chief of the Air Staff (Plans)
ACAS(T)	Assistant Chief of the Air Staff (Training)
AMDP	Air Member for Development and Production
AMP	Air Member for Personnel
AMRD	Air Member for Research and Development
AMSO	Air Member for Supply and Organisation
AMSR	Air Member for Supply and Research
DGSR	Director General for Supply and Research
DOI	Director of Operations and Intelligence
DofI	Director of Intelligence
DofOps	Director of Operations
DofO	Director of Organisation
DofP	Director of Plans
DofT	Director of Training
DofWB	Director of Works and Buildings
D Ops (H)	Director of Operations (Home)
D Ops (MC)	Director of Operations (Military Co-operation)
D Ops (NC)	Director of Operations (Naval Co-operation)
D Ops (O)	Director of Operations (Overseas)
DSD	Director of Staff Duties
DDOI	Deputy Director of Operations and Intelligence
IG	Inspector General
SD	Staff Duties
PS	Private Secretary
PSO	Personal Staff Officer

Commands and Structures

AASF	Advanced Air Striking Force
ADGB	Air Defence of Great Britain
AOC	Air Officer Commanding
AOA	Air Officer Administration
BAFF	British Air Forces in France
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief
Cs-in-C	Commanders-in-Chief
MAF	Metropolitan Air Force
SASO	Senior Air Staff Officer

Operations

CBO	Combined Bomber Offensive
COA	Committee of Operations Analysts
COPC	Combined Operational Planning Committee
RDF	Radio Direction Finding (aka by the US term RADAR)
SAC	Supreme Air Commander
WAP	Western Air Plans

CODEWORDS

Allied Conferences (in chronological order)

ARCADIA	UK/US Conference in Washington, December 1941
SYMBOL	UK/US Conference in Casablanca, January 1943
TRIDENT	UK/US Conference in Washington May 1943
QUADRANT	UK/US Conference in Quebec, August 1943
SEXTANT	UK/US Conference in Cairo, November-December 1943
EUREKA	UK/US/Soviet Conference in Tehran, November-December 1943
OCTAGON	UK/US Conference in Quebec, September 1944

Codewords

ADLER TAG	GAF Plan for the Air Attack against Britain in 1940
ARGUMENT	USAAF Plan for to defeat the GAF Fighter Force in Feb 44
BOLERO	US Ground Forces build-up in the UK
COLD WATER	RAF pre-emptive plans to disrupt GAF Bomber Force in 1940
POINTBLANK	Directive for the Combined Bomber Offensive, Jun 43
OVERLORD	Allied invasion of North West Europe
SEALION	Planned German invasion of Britain in 1940
SICKLE	US bomber force build-up in the UK
SPARTAN	RAF Exercise to develop 2TAF in 1943

NAMED PERSONALITIES

Arnold	Gen Henry 'Hap' Arnold
Ashmore	Maj Gen Edward Ashmore
Bader	Gp Capt Douglas Bader
Baker	ACM Sir John Baker
Baldwin	Mr Stanley Baldwin
Barratt	ACM Sir Arthur Barratt
Blount	AVM Charles Blount
Bottomley	ACM Sir Norman Bottomley
Bowhill	ACM Sir Frederick Bowhill
Brooke-Popham	ACM Sir Robert Brooke-Popham
Buften	AVM Sidney Buften
Burnett	ACM Sir Charles Burnett
Courtney	ACM Sir Christopher Courtney
Coryton	ACM Sir Alec Coryton
Dickson	MRAF Sir William Dickson
Douglas	MRAF The Lord Douglas of Kirtleside
Douhet	Gulio Douhet
Dowding	ACM The Lord Dowding of Bentley Priory
Durston	AM Sir Albert Durston
Eaker	Lt Gen Ira Eaker USAAF
Eisenhower	Gen Dwight D Eisenhower USA
Ellington	MRAF Sir Edward Ellington
Elliott	ACM Sir William Elliott
Evill	ACM Sir Douglas Evill
Freeman	ACM Sir Wilfrid Freeman

Game	AVM Sir Philip Game
Garrod	ACM Sir Guy Garrod
Gibson	Wg Cdr Guy Gibson
Gossage	AM Sir Leslie Gossage
Haig	FM Earl Haig
Hankey	Lord Hankey
Hards	AVM Frederick Hards
Harris	MRAF Sir Arthur Harris
Henderson	Field Marshal David Henderson
Hill	ACM Sir Roderic Hill
Inglis	AVM Francis Inglis
Joubert de la Ferté	ACM Sir Philip Joubert de la Ferté
Leigh-Mallory	ACM Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory
Longmore	ACM Sir Arthur Longmore
Ludlow-Hewitt	ACM Sir Edgar Ludlow-Hewitt
Medhurst	ACM Sir Charles Medhurst
Mitchell	ACM Sir William Mitchell
Newall	MRAF The Lord Newall of Clifton upon Dunsmoor
Park	ACM Sir Keith Park
Peck	AVM Richard Peck
Pierse	ACM Sir Richard Pierse
Portal	MRAF Viscount Portal of Hungerford
Ramsey	Adm Bertram Ramsey
Salmond G	ACM Sir Geoffrey Salmond
Salmond J	MRAF Sir John Salmond

Sinclair	Viscount Thurso, Sir Archibald Sinclair
Slessor	MRAF Sir John Slessor
Smuts	Gen Jan Smuts
Spaatz	Lt Gen Carl Spaatz
Steel	ACM Sir John Steel
Stevenson	AVM Donald Stevenson
Swinton	The Earl of Swinton, Philip Cunliffe-Lister
Sykes	Maj Gen Sir Frederick Sykes
Tedder	MRAF The Lord Tedder
Trenchard	MRAF Viscount Trenchard of Wolfeton
Weir	Viscount Weir, William D Weir
Welsh	AM Sir William Welsh

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

Just over 100 years ago, on 1 July 1916, the British launched their offensive on the Somme in part to assist their French Allies who were under great pressure at Verdun. The British Army of 1916 consisted of many recently raised battalions who were extremely enthusiastic to play their part but limited in their tactical ability. Sheffield has stated that one ‘factor thus united Haig and his Army commanders: that they had no previous experience of command at the level that they were called upon to perform on the Somme’.¹ Similarly, in 1943 the Western allies committed to a strategic bombing offensive, in part, to assist the Soviet Union by opening a second ‘aerial front’ to relieve pressure in the east. In a further parallel the forces tasked with the offensive, RAF Bomber Command and the USAAF Eighth Air Force were extremely enthusiastic to play their part but again limited in their tactical capability and experience. The result in both cases was an extended and gruelling battle of attrition and a lengthy historical debate concerning the utility and merit of the undertaking, along with a most critical analysis of the respective commanders all of whom had limited experience of command at that level.²

The popular history of the RAF in the Second World War is dominated by the Battle of Britain, the bombing campaign against Germany, tactical operations in

¹ G Sheffield, *The Somme* (London: Cassell, 2003), p. 25.

² R Neillands, *The Bomber War – Arthur Harris and the Allied Bomber Offensive 1939-1945* (London: John Murray, 2001); A Verrier, *The Bomber Offensive* (London: Batsford, 1968); and see R J Overy, *The Bombing War – Europe 1939-1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2013) for three differing perspectives on the campaign.

North Africa and Normandy, and spectacular events such as the Dambuster Raid against the Ruhr Dams in 1943. Personalities, such as Harris, Dowding, Bader and Gibson are central to this popular narrative. To the reader RAF operations are a catalogue of loosely connected heroic acts that contributed, in a way not usually explained, to the wider war aims of the nation. Whilst this literature fills the shelves in even the best bookshops, it is, at best, a partial picture of the RAF's contribution to the Allied victory.

Contrary to the popular view, RAF operations were very much coordinated by a central authority, the Air Staff, acting on behalf of the individual constitutionally charged with ensuring the efficiency and effectiveness of the Service, the Chief of the Air Staff (CAS). From the War Cabinet came the policy decisions that provided the legal basis for the RAF's operations and which formed the rationale for the directives issued by the CAS to the commanders of the frontline commands. In this way the aircrew, when they manned their aircraft, were undertaking legal missions that were intended to contribute to the democratically derived war aims of the government.³

Black highlighted the tendency for military history to over focus on frontline operations at the expense of the higher war direction.⁴ This is particularly true in studies of Second World War air campaigns. The efforts of Bomber Command against Germany are regularly portrayed as an exclusive alternative to the use of Bomber Command in support of Coastal Command in the Battle of the Atlantic.⁵ Many histories do not address the higher co-ordination of the air war or its integration

³ Lord Hankey, *Government in War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1945), pp. 60-65.

⁴ J Black, *Rethinking Military History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), p. Xi.

⁵ M Hastings, *Bomber Command* (New York: Touchstone, 1989), pp. 178-180 and A Verrier, *The Bomber Offensive*, pp. 116-120.

into allied strategy. Often the focus of attention is placed on the field commander who is portrayed as the main actor in the drama, for good or ill. His interaction with subordinate formations and personnel is often seen as paternal, particularly in the case of Dowding and Harris, and in contrast with the inevitable ‘staff battles’ that were fought with over demanding and misunderstanding faceless individuals in higher authority.⁶ But this is the analysis of the crew room not the boardroom.

In any complex organisation teamwork and aligned co-ordinated action are the keys to success. In the case of the RAF the organ for higher direction and co-ordination was the CAS and the Air Staff at the Air Ministry.⁷ The reasons for this were two-fold. First, the UK based MAF had re-organised itself into a mono-functional frontline structure rather than the multi-functional organisation adopted by the Luftwaffe, the USAAF, and the RAF in its overseas commands. This mono-functional approach required central co-ordination between the commands to create co-ordinated multi-functional output. Second, the British way of control in war depended on a wartime extension of the peacetime committee structure that underpinned the Government of not just the country but of the empire. This demanded an efficient and effective flow of operational direction from the political level through the high command to the frontline.⁸

This committee structure centred on the War Cabinet and the policy direction it gave to the armed services and their respective chiefs whose task it was to ensure

⁶ See V Orange, *Dowding of Fighter Command – Victor of the Battle of Britain* (London: Grub Street, 2008) and R Wright, *Dowding and the Battle of Britain* (London: Corgi, 1970); both these books describe the view from the commander as being paternal towards their subordinates and critical towards their superiors be they higher headquarters or higher commanders. This singular perspective can be found in many popular histories and understandably in almost all memoirs.

⁷ Hankey, *Government in War*, p. 62.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

their Service produced the outcomes desired.⁹ Such a structure placed the First Sea Lord (1SL), the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) and the CAS in a critical position for they held the highest responsibility for their Services' operational effectiveness. Thus literature that focuses on subordinate commanders only tells part of the story for in the case of the RAF with its functional structure; it underplays or ignores the vital role of higher direction, integration and co-ordination.

In 1937 the RAF proposed to the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) the establishment of a senior air command position to co-ordinate the actions of the Metropolitan Air Force (MAF) mono-functional commands. The proposal was rejected by the Deputy Chiefs of Staff (DCOS) who decided to put in place a Central War Room to be supported by War Rooms in the three Service Ministries and an enhanced process of co-ordination between the DCOS to achieve the aim the RAF had proposed.¹⁰ As a consequence, the CID sub-committee retained its central authority, enhanced inter-service co-ordination and avoided the unwelcome prospect of empowering a single individual with overwhelming authority for the tool of war, air power, that many considered might become critical in the expected struggle with Germany.

The stimulus for this research study was an insignificant footnote in *The Growth of Fighter Command 1936-1940* by T C G James.¹¹ It recorded that in 1936 it was envisaged that a Supreme C-in-C would to be established between the CAS and the command Cs-in-C. However, James stated that the Cs-in-C of Bomber Command

⁹ Ibid., pp. 64-65.

¹⁰ TNA CAB 53/38/3 CID, Memorandum by the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee, CID 1425-B, The Co-Ordination and Control of Defence Operations, dated 29 April 1938.

¹¹ T C G James, *The Growth of Fighter Command 1936-1940* (London: Cass, 2001), p.23, footnote 8.

and Fighter Command, Steel and Dowding, opposed the idea suggesting that it would detract from the authority of the CAS. He also alluded to the implications for the other Services and summarised by stating that the idea was dropped in 1937.¹²

This footnote raised a number of questions, especially given the criticism in the historiography of the effectiveness of higher RAF command, the much vaunted success of the unified air command that developed in the Middle East in 1942-43, as well as the disruptive debates that ensued in the MAF over operational direction and force development.¹³ The debate within Fighter Command over night air defence and in Bomber Command over targeting priorities and Pathfinder development supported the view that RAF high command lacked grip with consequential operational ineffectiveness and inefficiency.¹⁴ Could the decision not to appoint a Supreme Air Commander (SAC) have contributed to these debates and the perceived inefficiency that followed? This study explores this question by re-examining the RAF reforms of the 1930s and assessing their effectiveness in preparing the RAF for high command in the Second World War.

The Literature

This study is deliberately broken into two parts. Part I takes a fresh look at the development of the RAF's high command from the unreported 1934 reform of the Air Ministry to the start of the Second World War. It focuses on the actions of the CAS and the Air Staff in their direction and co-ordination of the MAF. Part II analyses the development of RAF high command practices in the European air war of the Second

¹² Ibid.

¹³ J Terraine, *The Right of the Line: The Royal Air Force in the European in the European War 1939-1945* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985), p. 343-347.

¹⁴ Hastings, *Bomber Command*, pp. 334-336.

World War. Much of the later discussion focuses on the way in which the RAF addressed the outcome of the SAC debate and the practices it put in place to create the system of command that oversaw the final and critical years of the war. In key areas this study sets out the source material for the first time and casts a new light on the structure of the RAF and the conduct of the air war. Because of this, this study assesses the performance of the MAF in the Second World War from a new start point, namely that the CAS and his Air Staff were a key element in the higher command of the MAF in a way that has not previously been explored or recognised. This study aims to correct that deficiency.

RAF Organisational Reforms in the 1930s. No studies have been published concerning the Air Ministry Review of 1934 or the debate concerning the creation of a SAC appointment in 1937. Moreover, the secondary sources relating to the Command Re-organisation of 1936 focus almost exclusively on the impact the new command structure had in relation to RAF expansion management.¹⁵ The reforms of the Air Ministry in 1934, the frontline in 1936 and the SAC debate of 1937 are covered in TNA AIR 2/673 S32201 – War Organization of the Air Ministry, TNA AIR 2/8875, S35818 and TNA AIR 2/1950, S39818 respectively. These sources form the key documents in the chapters 2, 3, and 4 respectively which deal with each reform in detail and all cast new light on the generally available literature. This is mysterious because the primary sources are quite clear as to the driving purpose of

¹⁵ H Montgomery-Hyde, *British Air Policy between the Wars 1918-1939* (London: Heinemann, 1976), and M Smith, *British Air Strategy between the Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

each reform, but the literature conforms almost entirely to the perspective given in two key secondary sources.¹⁶

These publications make no reference to the 1934 Air Ministry review which is an important gap in the understanding of the RAF's command structure in the Second World War as this re-organisation set the tone for the Air Staff's development and importantly established the Director of Training (DofT) appointment that would be responsible for all post *ab-initio* training, ie, the training of all of the RAF's frontline forces. This was a critical role, for in combination with the Air Staff's plans and doctrine staff, it was central to establishing the capability of the frontline through advanced and combined training. This all came about as a result of the 1934 Air Ministry reform, yet it is covered nowhere other than in the primary material.

Fortunately, the 1936 frontline review benefits from better coverage in the literature. The key source is Montgomery-Hyde whose excellent review of British air policy addresses the topic superbly but adds authority to the concept of a management induced re-organisation.¹⁷ Others follow this line. Biddle, Terraine, Richards, James *et al* all reinforced the explanation of an expansion-led command re-organisation.¹⁸ Helpfully, Smith expands on the subject by observing that the re-organization of the command structure raised the important question of how it would be directed in co-ordinated action in war.¹⁹ Although he does not explore the issue further, he does observe, in terms of the relationship between the armed services, that in the absence

¹⁶ Montgomery-Hyde, *British Air Policy*, and Smith, *British Air Strategy*.

¹⁷ Montgomery-Hyde, *British Air Policy*.

¹⁸ T Davis Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare, The Evolution of British and American Ideas about Strategic Bombing, 1914-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Terraine, *The Right of the Line*; D Richards, 'Royal Air Force 1939-45, Vol 1, *The Fight at Odds*' (London: HMSO, 1974); and James, *The Growth of Fighter Command 1936-1940*.

¹⁹ Smith, *British Air Strategy*, pp. 41-43.

of a central co-ordinating authority with sufficient power to compel, it was unrealistic to expect institutions with differing aims and perspectives to do little more than that which suited their narrow individual goals. Smith was discussing this in relation to the calls for the establishment of a Ministry of Defence and the ultimate decision to introduce a Ministry for Defence Co-Ordination, but it was equally relevant to the higher command of the functionally independent RAF commands, and is one of the few works that offer more on this important subject.²⁰

The Air Historical Branch (AHB) Narrative of the development of the bombing offensive against Germany offers better coverage of this important period but omits critical aspects.²¹ In summarising the creation of BC the authors stated that the:

Separation of the branches into independent commands, co-ordinated by the Air Staff itself and organised upon a 'functional' basis, was therefore the natural and logical outcome of expansion.²²

They concluded by stating that the 'establishment of a separate Bomber Command was the product chiefly of administrative convenience. It reflected no real change in policy'.²³

These words seem to have set the scene for many subsequent authors but the AHB conclusion does not wholly reflect its narrative. Under the side title 'Its Functional Character' the Narrative highlights the fact that operational analysis into the possible course of a future war with Germany was at the heart of the re-organisation, pointing out that it was considered likely that the roles of RN/Army

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 76-83.

²¹ TNA AIR 41/39, AHB Air Ministry Narrative, *The RAF in the Bomber Offensive against Germany – Pre-War Evolution of Bomber Command 1917 to 1939*, pp. 110A-110E.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., p. 110E.

support, fighter defence, coastal and trade defence, and offensive operations would emerge as generally separate functions for the MAF.²⁴ This disparity between the narrative and the firm statements in the conclusion might lie at the heart of why the historiography is consistently biased in favour of one opinion while the primary sources are clear that the 1936 command reform was initiated to better prepare for the operational demands of the anticipated war with Germany, and as a logical development following the 1934 Air Ministry re-organisation.

The 1937 debate concerning the SAC proposal is, like the 1934 Air Ministry reform, another area where there is little subsequent acknowledgement that it ever took place or had any impact on the development of the RAF. James mentions it briefly in a footnote, and Webster and Frankland refer to it in passing, but it receives scant attention elsewhere.²⁵ In this case the reasons are more obvious. In contrast to the command re-structuring the proposed SAC appointment was not accepted so it is understandable that it would be edited from many studies. This, however, misses the essential point that the SAC proposal shows that the CAS and his staff had a more comprehensive and sophisticated perspective on the requirements of high command than has been portrayed, and that the proposal also demonstrates that they were aware of the operational limitations of the command structure, and the demands that might arise for multi-functional responses to the reality of war. This subtlety of thought and preparation is not something attributed to the RAF by many authors, who more usually criticise the high command for their lack of imagination and operational flexibility.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 110D.

²⁵ James, *The Growth of Fighter Command 1936-1940*, p. 23, footnote 8 and Sir C Webster and N Frankland, *The Strategic Air Offensive against Germany Vol 1 Preparation* (London: HMSO, 1961), p. 83. (Hereafter this title will be referred to as SAOG)

This perspective and new research is central to this study. However, the thesis put forward, that the reforms were driven by the needs for operational efficiency and effectiveness, is at odds with the accepted and well respected work of significant authors. This seeming contradiction deserves early consideration and reconciliation for Montgomery-Hyde's important work established in the historiography the image of a strong causal link between RAF expansion and re-organization.²⁶ He noted that the Command re-organisation came about as the 'natural and logical outcome of the expansion and the advances in technology which the German menace evoked.'²⁷ Expansion did create a demand for efficient management and advances in technology required operational development and effective frontline procedures to be developed. However, the primary sources clearly show that the motivation behind the various re-organisations was not management or technological development but operational preparedness.²⁸ This clearly begs the question of why should Montgomery-Hyde and others have attributed this explanation when the primary sources so clearly point elsewhere.

The answer may lie in the span of the study he undertook and his professional background. The book summary contained on the dustcover highlights the fact that 'No definitive history of British air policy between 1918 and 1939 has hitherto been possible'.²⁹ It goes on to outline the impressive scope of the work which encompassed: the development of Government air policy; the bitter inter-service rivalry of the 1920s and 1930s; the personalities and relationships of Government ministers, senior officials, high ranking officers and the staffs of government

²⁶ Montgomery-Hyde, *British Air Policy*, p. 385.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 385.

²⁸ TNA AIR 2/8875, S35818.

²⁹ Montgomery-Hyde, *British Air Policy*.

departments; foreign policy and overseas operations; the demands of rearmament; the rise of Hitler; the creation of the shadow aircraft factories; the question of offensive and defensive posture in terms of defence policy; and various key developments and setbacks in the progress of British civil aviation. Added to this, Montgomery-Hyde explains his approach in his preface commenting:

If I have dwelt more on personalities than another writer in the same subject might have done, that is because as a biographer I tend to regard personalities as the stuff of history.³⁰

Reading his book it is remarkable that he covered so much but it is also clear that much, of necessity, had to be omitted. His experience as a Member of Parliament and previous private secretary to an Air Minister not unreasonably seems to have predisposed him to view matters predominantly from the political and ministerial level. This coupled with his biographer's preference for examining events through the eyes of the protagonists also emphasises the main actors who occupied high political and public office.³¹

The RAF reforms covered in Part I were responses to changes in Government defence policy. So it could be argued that the reforms were a direct response to the needs of expansion. But that would also be to over simplify a complex matter. Military expansion could only follow Government policy decisions but it was not the role of government to make decisions concerning the way in which the RAF was organised or how it intended to command in time of war. Thus, the subject of this study is a consequence of the decisions that form the core of Montgomery-Hyde's work, but which lay outside his particular frame of reference.³² The argument that the

³⁰ Ibid., p. xiv.

³¹ TNA AIR 75/135 dated 17 February 1975.

³² Ibid.

Command restructuring was the simple response to the needs of expansion and technological development has become so central to the historiography that no work begins from an alternative perspective. This coupled with the complete absence of any reference to the Air Ministry Review of 1934 and the almost total sidelining of the SAC debate of 1937, creates a false starting point for any assessment of RAF high command in the Second World War.

Montgomery-Hyde's work addressed the development of British air policy at the highest level between the wars. It was concerned with the essential building blocks upon which the Second World War would be fought in the air. Without the expansion programmes the RAF would have been without the adequate means to fight the war and would have been doomed to defeat. If expansion had not taken place it would have mattered little whether or not the RAF had reformed its command structures because it would have been without the required equipment and overwhelmingly defeated. Thus it was entirely reasonable that Montgomery-Hyde paid no attention to the RAF reforms save for how the Command restructuring interplayed with the expansion programmes.³³

However, there may be an even simpler explanation. The title of the Air Ministry file containing much of the primary source material is 'Organisation of the Home Commands – Consequent on Expansion Scheme 'C'.³⁴ This would clearly suggest that the MAF command structure was reorganised to cope with the demands of expansion. Therefore, it would be entirely reasonable for Montgomery-Hyde and many others to conclude that expansion management was the driving and critical

³³ Ibid., dated 28 February 1975.

³⁴ TNA AIR 2/8875 S35818/35 date opened 18 June 1935 Organisation of the Home Commands – Consequent on Expansion Scheme 'C'.

factor. However, for this study it is the motivation behind the decision making that is important. In the case of Montgomery-Hyde and Smith, their focus was on the creation and development of British air policy. In assessing the performance of the RAF in the Second World War, air policy was clearly important but the thinking and mindset of the CAS and Air Staff in their consequent decision making was of greater importance.

The difficulty with works that adopt the expansion management theory is that while this explanation is perfectly sound for studies concerning air policy development, it creates an incorrect starting point for studies of high command in the Second World War, because it down plays the focus, attention and awareness of operational priorities that motivated the CAS and Air Staff, many of whom would reach high rank in the Second World War, in their deliberations on frontline restructuring. On 4 May 1936 the Air Council promulgated a letter to establish the new Command structure.³⁵ It stated in paragraph 1 that the Air Council wished to state that:

In consequence of the Expansion scheme it has become necessary to review the system of command and administration.³⁶

However, in paragraph 2 it stated unequivocally that:

The first principle which has guided the Council in their examination of the problem has been the desire to frame a peace organisation which conforms as closely as possible with the organisation visualised for war.³⁷

On balance, the seeming confliction between this study and the conclusions in such fine works as Montgomery-Hyde's is due to approaching a common event from a different perspective. In terms of air policy the expansion management explanation

³⁵ Ibid., E39A dated 4 May 1936.

³⁶ Ibid., E39A para 1.

³⁷ Ibid., E39A para 2.

is entirely reasonable. But from the perspective of understanding the dynamics of air command in the Second World War it is inadequate and at odds with the primary material.

RAF High Command in the Second World War. Part II will explore the command adaptations that were required to meet the unfolding operational demands of the Second World War. Here a mixture of primary and secondary sources, many of which relied on the earlier officially edited narratives, will form the basis of the assessments. The excellent work by Terraine leant heavily on the AHB series of monographs which were equally at the heart of the Official History of the RAF in the Second World War.³⁸ Neither of these works suffers as a result of this, but the reader must bear in mind, as Cox expertly advises, that both originate from the same official assessment and this is particularly relevant when looking at subsequent studies that use these earlier works foundation documents.³⁹

In the case of the air offensive against Germany this pattern is repeated with Verrier making great use of the official histories.⁴⁰ Indeed, in his section entitled References, Verrier states the ‘three authorities...most frequently cited are:’ and goes on to list Webster and Frankland, Craven and Cate, and the AHB analysis of ‘The Rise and fall of the German Air Force’.⁴¹ All these official documents are based on primary sources, but each is also the product of edited narratives. The process of reprising earlier work can then continue. Hastings thanked Verrier for his ‘good study

³⁸ Terraine, *The Right of the Line* and D Richards and H St G. Saunders, *Royal Air Force 1939-45* ‘ Vols 1-3 (London: HMSO, 1975)

³⁹ Cox, ‘Setting the Historical Agenda: Webster and Frankland and the debate over the Strategic Bombing Offensive against Germany, 1939-1945’ in J Grey, *The last word: essays on official history in the United States and British Commonwealth* (London: Prager, 2003).

⁴⁰ Webster and Frankland, *SAOG* and Verrier, *The Bomber Offensive*.

⁴¹ Webster and N Frankland, *SAOG*; W F Craven and J L Cate, *The Army Air Forces in World War II Vols 1-7* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958) and AHB Narrative, *The Rise and Fall of the German Air Force 1933-1945* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1983).

of the strategy of the campaign’ to which ‘I am indebted for many lines of thought’ as well as Webster and Frankland for their Official History.⁴² This re-working of facts and ideas from the AHB narrative to the Official Histories on to the initial secondary sources and eventually into the subsequent analysis created the distinct possibility of generating a singular perspective is clear.

In analysing the RAF’s response a sound methodology is to follow the decision-making chain from the political to the tactical level. Churchill’s six volumes of *The Second World War* are valuable in providing the insight of the man at the pinnacle of the British decision making system.⁴³ However, Reynolds and Woods cautioned that they must be read carefully.⁴⁴ Woods stated one can forgive ‘Churchill the beating of drums and the waving banners’.⁴⁵

But he cautioned the reader that:

This new found benevolence is further reason why *The Second World War* cannot be taken as objective history, quite apart from its author’s stated intentions. It led to reticences that obscured the actual details of wartime difficulties, particularly in the sphere of personalities.⁴⁶

Nonetheless, Churchill’s work is an essential starting point even if it must be regarded with some caution.

Churchill’s biographer Gilbert produced the most extensive work comprising seven comprehensive volumes.⁴⁷ Gilbert addressed all aspects of Churchill’s private and public life and volumes VI and VII, which cover the war years are invaluable for

⁴² Hastings, *Bomber Command*, p. 376.

⁴³ W S Churchill, *The Second World War* Vols I-VI (London: Cassell and Co Ltd, 1948).

⁴⁴ D Reynolds, *In Command of History – Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (London, Penguin, 2004) and F Woods, *Artillery of Words – The Writings of Sir Winston Churchill* (London: Leo Cooper, 1992).

⁴⁵ Woods, *Artillery of Words*.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ M Gilbert *Winston S Churchill Volume* Vols I-VII (London: Heinemann, 1986).

understanding the pressures that the Prime Minister (PM) faced and the War Cabinet had to address. Another dimension can be added by reference to his Private Secretary (PS), Colville's diaries which add yet more colour to the context of wartime decision making.⁴⁸ As to the background of the way in which British government was conducted in 1939 the biography of Lord Hankey is very important.⁴⁹ So too is Hankey's volume of Lees Knowles Lectures published in 1945.⁵⁰ All of these references reveal the pressure of leading the wartime Government and the complexity of the challenges the War Cabinet had to face. This is further revealed in the excellent Grand Strategy series in the British Official History of the Second World War.⁵¹ Gibbs' Vol. I, Butler's Vol. II, Gwyer's Vol. III, Howard's Vol. IV and Ehrman's Vols. V and VI are vital for understanding the strategic context facing Newall and Portal as CAS during the Second World War. It shows the complex and competing pressures facing the Chiefs of Staff (COS) and the Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCS) and the political purpose of the operational plans that they developed.⁵²

From a primary source perspective, the decisions of the War Cabinet are contained in the CAB series held by the National Archives (TNA) many of which are conveniently available online.⁵³ The next stage in the process, as far as the RAF is

⁴⁸ J Colville, *The Fringes of Power – Downing Street Diaries* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985).

⁴⁹ S Roskill, *Hankey – Man of Secrets* Vols 1-3 (London: Collins, 1970).

⁵⁰ Lord Hankey, *Government in War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1945).

⁵¹ J Butler (ed), *History of the Second World War – Grand Strategy* Vols I-VI (London: HMSO).

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ TNA records: PREM 3 Churchill Papers: Operational Correspondence, CAB 4 Committee of Imperial Defence: Memoranda, CAB 14 Committee of Imperial Defence: Air Committee, CAB 23 War Cabinet: Conclusions, CAB 24 War Cabinet: Memoranda, CAB 65 War Cabinet: Minutes, CAB 66 War Cabinet: Memoranda, CAB 69 War Cabinet: Defence Committee Minutes, and CAB 88 War Cabinet: Combined Chiefs of Staff.

concerned, is contained in the records in the AIR series at TNA.⁵⁴ The British COS process is well covered by Jackson and Bramall who describe the creation of the COS system and cover in great detail its workings and its key personalities.⁵⁵ Their chapters 6, 7, and 8 are particularly pertinent and add to the works relating to Churchill and grand strategy.⁵⁶

Below the COS sat the Air Ministry about which very little has been written. Grey published a general history of the Air Ministry in 1940 which is helpful but not particularly detailed.⁵⁷ Most other works deal with the Ministry as part of their wider narrative, for example, Dean, who was PS to the CAS and later Head of the Air Staff Secretariat, includes useful insights into the workings of the organisation as part of his broader study into the RAF in both world wars.⁵⁸ Senior officers who served in key posts such as Joubert de la Ferté, Slessor, Douglas and Harris all mention their experiences in the Air Ministry, but none detail its close inner workings.⁵⁹ Probert and Cox, previous and current heads of the AHB respectively go into specific detail in a number of publications and offer the best analysis.⁶⁰ Furse added to this with his

⁵⁴ TNA AIR 2 – *Air Ministry Correspondence*, AIR 8 – *Chief of Air Staff Papers*, and AIR 9 – *Directorate of Plans* as a starting point for the primary source material relating to the RAF response to War Cabinet decisions.

⁵⁵ W Jackson and D Bramall, *The Chiefs – The Story of the United Kingdom Chiefs of Staff* (London: Brassey's, 1992).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 143-260.

⁵⁷ C G Grey, *A History of the Air Ministry* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1940)

⁵⁸ Sir M Dean, *The Royal Air Force and Two World Wars* (London: Cassel, 1979).

⁵⁹ Sir P Joubert de la Ferté, *The Third Service – The Story behind the Royal Air Force* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1955) and *The Fated Sky* (London: Hutchinson, 1952); Sir J Slessor, *The Central Blue – Recollections and reflections by Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir John Slessor GCB DSO MC* (London: Cassell, 1956); S Douglas, *Years of Command* (London: Collins, 1966); and Sir A Harris GCB OBE AFC, *Bomber Offensive* (London: Collins, 1947).

⁶⁰ H Probert, 'The Determination of RAF Policy in the Second World War' in *Boog's The Conduct of the Air War in the Second World War* (New York/Oxford: Berg, 1992); and P W Gray and S Cox, *Air Power Leadership – Theory and Practice* (London: HMSO, 2002) Chapter 12 by S Cox 'Sir Arthur Harris and the Air Ministry'.

chapters on Freeman's time as Vice Chief of the Air Staff (VCAS) under Portal.⁶¹ Orange also offered insights in his biographies on several senior RAF commanders, along with Probert's excellent work on Harris.⁶² Fortunately the organisational handbook of the Air Ministry exists in the primary records from which the duties and organisational structure of the Air Ministry and its development over time can be deduced.⁶³ On the other hand, neither Ellington nor Newall left any meaningful papers in their RAF Museum record or the AHB, and Portal's papers, held at his college in Oxford, offers much but little on the workings of the Air Ministry.⁶⁴

Below the Air Ministry, the historiography is extensive and highly variable covering issues as diverse as uniform design to the moral debate surrounding aerial bombardment.⁶⁵ The reader can quickly become overwhelmed with reinterpretations or the sub-division of campaigns into daily or even hourly analysis.⁶⁶ Many of these works are extremely interesting and revealing of tactical detail and human experience, but they are less informative on the higher direction of the air war. In approaching the literature one must be ruthlessly guided by the hierarchy of secondary sources and concentrate on those contributions that truly add value. For this study a relative small number of acknowledged authoritative works were central to the analysis.

⁶¹ A Furse, *Wilfrid Freeman – The Genius behind Allied Survival and Air Supremacy 1939 to 1945* (Staplehurst: Spellmount Ltd 1999)

⁶² V Orange, *Dowding of Fighter Command – Victor of the Battle of Britain* (London: Grub Street, 2008); *Park* (London: Grub Street, 2001); *Slessor Bomber Champion* (London: Grub Street, 2006); *Tedder – Quietly in Command* (London: Frank Cass, 2004); and H Probert, *Bomber Harris His Life and Times* (London: Greenhill, 2001)

⁶³ Air Ministry, Department of the Chief of the Air Staff - List of Staff and Distribution of Duties, Part II, Dated July 1939, copy held in AHB.

⁶⁴ Christ Church Library, University of Oxford, *The Portal Papers*.

⁶⁵ J James, *The Paladins* (London: Macdonald, 1990) and A C Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities – Was the Allied Bombing of Civilians in WWII a Necessity or a Crime?* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006).

⁶⁶ J L Ethell and A Price, *Target Berlin Mission 250: 6 March 1944* (London: Arms and Armour, 1989); A Price, *Battle of Britain 18 August 1940 - The Hardest Day* (London: Granada, 1980); and M Middlebrook, *The Peenemünde Raid – 17/18 August 1943* (London: Penguin, 1988); *The Battle of Hamburg* (London: Viking, 1980); *The Berlin Raids* (London: Viking, 1988); and *The Schweinfurt-Regensburg Mission* (London: Penguin, 1985)

Overy has produced many works relating to the Second World War air war of which three stand out covering the Battle of Britain, the overall bombing campaign and the air war in general.⁶⁷ Terraine's analysis also remains an invaluable reference despite its close reliance on the AHB Narratives.⁶⁸ Similarly, recent scholarship by Bungay, Addison and Crang, and Holland on the Battle of Britain allied to older works by Mason and James give a new perspective on this important period.⁶⁹ These works also cover the operations in France and at Dunkirk, which are also well covered by Buckley.⁷⁰ This period is also well covered in the comprehensive AHB narratives of the campaigns.⁷¹ Likewise the developments in 1941 and 1942 concerning Fighter Command and Coastal Command are addressed generally in the history of the RAF 1939-1945 and associated AHB narratives.⁷² Beyond the official records, personal recollections by Joubert de la Ferté, Douglas and Slessor add colour and insight to the decisions made.⁷³

As far as the Combined Bomber Offensive (CBO) is concerned the historiography is vast requiring careful and targeted reading. The AHB narratives are

⁶⁷ R J Overy, *The Battle* (London: Penguin, 2000); *The Bombing War – Europe 1939-1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2013); and *The Air War 1939-1945* (Washington DC: Potomac Books Inc, 2005).

⁶⁸ Terraine, *The Right of The Line*.

⁶⁹ S Bungay, *The Most Dangerous Enemy – A History of the Battle of Britain* (London: Aurum Press, 2000); R J Overy 'How Significant was the Battle?' in P Addison and J A Craig, *The Burning Blue – A New History of the Battle of Britain* (London: Pimlico, 2000); J Holland, *The Battle of Britain – Five Months that changed History May-October 1940* (London: Bantam Press, 2010); K Mason, *Battle over Britain* (London: McWhirter Twins Ltd, 1969); and T C G James, *The Battle of Britain* (London: Frank Cass, 2000).

⁷⁰ J Buckley, 'The Battle for France and Flanders – Sixty Years on' - 'The Air war in France' in B Bond and M Taylor (eds), *The Battle for France and Flanders – Sixty Years on* (London: Leo Cooper, 2001).

⁷¹ TNA AIR 41/20 *Review of the Campaign in Norway* and AIR 41/21 *Review of the Campaign in France and the Low Countries*.

⁷² Richards and Saunders, *Royal Air Force 1939-45* and TNA AIR 41/45, 41/47, and 41/48.

⁷³ P Joubert de la Ferté, *The Third Service – The Story behind the Royal Air Force and The Fated Sky*; Slessor, *The Central Blue – Recollections and reflections by Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir John Slessor GCB DSO MC*; and Douglas, *Years of Command*.

essential along with the Official History of both the British and US contributions.⁷⁴

Thereafter, Overy, Terraine, Richards and Saunders, and importantly Boog are

essential sources.⁷⁵ On the German side Caldwell offers an excellent modern

summary, matched by the work of Keeney, Davis and Hammel for the US

contribution.⁷⁶ Concerning the interplay of the CCS during the CBO, Howard,

Richards, Furse, Overy, Biddle, Mets, and Huston all offer important perspectives.⁷⁷

Finally, works by Middlebrook, Freeman and Foreman give the useful tactical details

from which the operational narrative and broader conclusions can be drawn,

especially in terms of the fielding of operational capability and the co-ordination of

activity.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ TNA AIR 41/39 *The RAF in the Bombing Offensive Against Germany: Vol.I. Pre-War Evolution of Bomber Command (1917-1939)*; AIR 41/40 *The RAF in the Bombing Offensive Against Germany: Vol.II. Restricted Bombing (September 1939 – May 1941)*; AIR 41/40 *The RAF in the Bombing Offensive Against Germany: Vol.III. Area Bombing and the Makeshift Force, (June 1941 – February 1942)*; AIR 41/42 *The RAF in the Bombing Offensive Against Germany: Vol.IV. A Period of Expansion and Experiment (March 1942 – January 1943)*; AIR 41/43 *The RAF in the Bombing Offensive Against Germany: Vol.V. The Full Offensive (February 1943 - February 1944)*; AIR 41/56 *The RAF in the Bombing Offensive Against Germany: Vol.VI. The Final Phase (March 1944 - May 1945)*; and AIR 41/57 *The RAF in the Bombing Offensive Against Germany: Vol.VII. The Planning of the Bombing Offensive and its Contribution to German Collapse*; See Webster and Frankland, *SAOG1939-1945 Vols I-IV*; and W F Craven and J L Cate, *The Army Air Forces in World War II Vols 1-7* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958).

⁷⁵ H Boog, G Krebs and D Vogel, *Germany and the Second World War vol VII The Strategic Air War in Europe and the War in the West and East Asia 1943-1944/5* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006).

⁷⁶ D Caldwell, *The Luftwaffe over Germany – Defence of the Reich* (London: Greenhill, 2007) and *Day Fighters in Defence of the Reich – A War Diary, 1942-45* (Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2011). See L D Keeney (Ed), *The War against the Luftwaffe 1943-1945* (Campbell California: Fastpencil Inc, 2011) and *The Pointblank Directive* (Oxford: Osprey, 2012). See R G Davis, *Bombing the European Axis Powers – A Historical Digest of the Combined Bomber Offensive 1939-1945* (Maxwell Alabama: Air University Press, 2006). See E Hammel, *The Road to Big Week – The Struggle for Daylight Air Supremacy over Western Europe* (Pacifica California: Pacifica Military History, 2009); and *Air War Europa* (Pacifica California: Pacifica Military History, 1994).

⁷⁷ Howard, *Grand Strategy Vol IV*; Richards and Saunders, *Royal Air Force 1939-45*; Furse, Wilfrid Freeman – *The Genius behind Allied Survival and Air Supremacy 1939 to 1945*; Overy, *The Bombing War – Europe 1939-1945*; Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare*; D R Mets, *Master of Air Power – General Carl A Spaatz* (Navato California: Presidio Press, 1988); and Maj Gen J W Huston USAF (Retd), *American Airpower Comes of Age – General Henry H ‘Hap’ Arnold World War II Diaries Vols I-II* (Maxwell Alabama: Air University Press, 2002).

⁷⁸ M Middlebrook and C Everitt, *The Bomber Command War Diaries – An Operational Reference Book 1939-1945* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985); R A Freeman, *The Mighty Eighth – A History of the US 8th Army Air Force* (London: Macdonald, 1970); and *Mighty Eighth War Diary* (London:

Strategy and Doctrine. Building on Montgomery-Hyde's comprehensive study of the development of British policy the later work by Smith introduces another perspective and lays out an alternative approach.⁷⁹ Smith argues that whilst criticism of RAF leaders can be sustained, it should not be as all-pervading and intense as some declare. Rather than adding to the view that the RAF entering the Second World War was a victim to the overbearing influence of Trenchard's ill-conceived views on air power, Smith argues that Trenchard's true views, though often misrepresented, were much more in line with the way in which the air war of 1939-1945 unfolded.

The picture of Trenchard being singularly wedded to a standalone independent air strategy is not one that Smith supports. Rather, Smith argues, the concept of 'Strategic Interception', in which the maritime, land and air forces are focussed on the enemy through mutually supporting and interdependent operations was the theory advanced by Trenchard and Sykes as being the one that would best suit the UK in the age of air power. Smith argues that the concept, although fundamentally sound, was a sophisticated concept that demanded close and harmonious co-operation between the services. Unfortunately the inter-service disputes over the future of the RAF and the subsequent arguments over policy and resource allocation created a situation in which such a complex concept as Strategic Interception was almost doomed to failure from the outset. However, as Smith reflects, it was exactly a form of Strategic Interception that ultimately served the Allies so well.

Jane's, 1981): and J Foreman, *Fighter Command War Diaries Vols 1-5* (Walton on Thames: Air Research Publications, 2004).

⁷⁹ Smith, *British Air Strategy*.

Smith highlights that UK air policy in the 1930s went through three distinct phases.⁸⁰ Initially, the Government used the RAF and its frontline as a tool to support its goals of disarmament. Thereafter, it sought parity with Germany as a means of deterrence, before finally shifting through political diktat the purpose of the RAF from one of strategic offence to strategic defence. For the RAF the effect of this was to shift its focus from defeating the enemy's expected 'knock-out blow' by executing a strategic air counteroffensive, to parrying the expected initial blow from the enemy with defensive measures and offensive force conservation until the strategic situation developed to the point whereby the strategic air offensive could be launched with meaningful results. This analysis is a much more balanced and nuanced assessment of the period and one which undermines the more simplistic assessments found in more popular histories. It highlights the fact that far from their being an ill-directed drift to war, those in power during this critical period were faced with the complex problem of achieving national security at a time of acute economic and strategic threat. He thus exposes the challenges facing the RAF's higher commanders as they sought to align policy with realistic strategy in a time when technology was transforming the potential of warfare.

Smith's analysis of the RAF's strategic interception concept is the foundation work for the historiography of the concepts and doctrinal theories held by the RAF.⁸¹ The view that the RAF adopted a concept of war that served its interests both to support its continuation as an independent service and to bolster the views that air power was a revolutionary way of warfare in which the role of the surface forces became increasingly subordinate echoed the vision set out by General Smuts in his

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 311-322

⁸¹ Ibid., pp 57-64.

Second Report that paved the way for the creation of the RAF.⁸² But as Smith highlights it is also too simplistic an assessment.⁸³ The concept of Strategic Interception envisaged to sophisticated co-ordination of the nation's war fighting capability to defeat the enemy through a preliminary combination of blockade and strategic attack before the culminating land assault completed the defeat of the enemy. Nowhere in this concept was air power seen as an independent war winning capability, rather it was seen as a means by which strategic interception could be undertaken as it could attack directly the enemy's war making capability whilst surface forces held the blockade. As Smith describes it was a combination of growing institutional extremism in the face of limited resource, and the attendant breakdown in inter-service co-operation which was always recognised as essential to the successful execution of a strategic interception strategy. Unfortunately, several subsequent authors glossed over this subtlety and emphasised the more contentious statements of some notable RAF personalities, especially Harris.⁸⁴

The notable work by Biddle is a case in point.⁸⁵ Although it remains a very good summary of the development of air power thinking between the wars and a good analysis of air warfare during the Second World War, it suffers from its analysis of the thinking of the RAF in the 1930s, where it is not as comprehensive as the work of Smith. Numerous other authors have addressed RAF conceptual and doctrinal development as part of wider works, but most have followed the line that RAF thinking was over dependent on Trenchard's influence and too extreme, bordering on

⁸² TNA CAB 24/22, (GT. 1658) War Cabinet: Committee on the Air Organisation and Home Defence against Air Raids (2nd Report), dated 17 August 1917.

⁸³ Smith, *British Air Strategy*, pp. 61-63.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare*.

fundamentalist, in subordinating land and maritime action to the primacy of air power. But, however much some may hold this view, it does not accord with the reality that was outlined by Smith or importantly the views held by both CASs during the war. Neither Newall nor Portal advocated the view that air power could win alone. Rather both were firm supporters of coordinated land, sea and air action. Unfortunately, many authors by underplaying the role of the CAS and Air Staff in their analysis inadvertently fail to address this point.

Thesis Content

The historiography suggests that decisions concerning RAF organisation made during the 1930s were dominated by expansion and administrative efficiency. Undoubtedly these factors were at play, but the dominant factor was operational effectiveness. In particular, the pressing need to transition the RAF from the centrally organised and controlled institution of the 1920s into a more flexible and adaptable war fighting force ready to face another major conflict with Germany.⁸⁶ The chapters of this study are designed first to lay out the primary source material that underpins this contention and then to analyse the development of RAF high command during the Second World War. In offering a contrary view to such a well-rehearsed historiography this study treads on delicate ground. However, the primary material is compelling, and while expansion to maintain parity was concurrent with the organisational changes, it was subordinate to operational preparedness in terms of being the driver for change. Consequently, this study is split into two distinct parts.

⁸⁶ See *The Royal Air Force Quarterly July 1936* Volume VII Number 3 pp. xxiii-xxvii, *The Royal Air Force: Home Commands Reorganisation of Command and administration*, this Air Notice, as it was termed, clearly states that 'One primary feature of the new organization is that it makes the peace organization conform as closely as possible with the organization visualized for war'.

Part I addresses the organisational changes of the 1930s and sets out in detail the primary source material underpinning the operational motivation contention of this work. It attempts to answer the obvious question of why all the other works are so consistent in their assessment that the changes were motivated by expansion. Chapter 2 will look at the Air Ministry Review of 1934 and show that the motivation of Salmond in initiating the study was to prepare the Air ministry for the major war that in 1934 seemed inevitable. Chapter 3 will cast a new perspective on the Command Re-organisation of 1936, again highlighting the operational motivation and focus that underpinned the review that established the organisation of the MAF for the Second World War. Finally, in Part I, Chapter 4 will address, for the first time in detail, the debate held in 1937 concerning the RAF's proposal to introduce a Supreme Air Commander into their command structure.

Part II addresses the response of CAS and Air Staff to the varying demands of commanding the MAF in the Second World War in terms of adaptations required to address operational challenges, personnel issues, doctrinal changes, inter-allied pressures within the context of a truly global war, and the pressures brought about by the need to pave the way for OVERLORD with a successful and innovative major air campaign. Part II must also recognise that virtually all available works, including official narratives, have not acknowledged the operational thesis that is set out in Part I, namely the operational focus and motivation of the Air Ministry as revealed through re-analysis of the reforms of the 1930s.

Chapter 5 will look at the adaptations Newall made to the higher command structure in the first year of the Second World War, particularly in relation to the operational pressures that grew as the real nature of the war was revealed. Chapter 6

will examine the Battle of Britain and the Blitz as a background to the study of the changes in high command appointments that occurred at the end of 1940. Chapter 7 addresses the adaptation of doctrine and thinking that was a consequence of the shift in late 1940 towards a more offensive strategy, and the pressure brought about by the vital need in mid-1941 to support Britain's new ally the Soviet Union. This strand of inter-Allied responsibility and its consequences for the higher command and direction of the MAF will be explored in detail in Chapter 8 through an examination of Portal's role in the CBO, the essential air campaign designed to set the conditions for OVERLORD. Finally, Chapter 9 will draw all the themes of Parts I and II together to answer the question posed by this thesis, namely how effective were the RAF reforms of the 1930s to the conduct of RAF high command of the MAF in the Second World War?

PART I

RAF Organisational Reforms in the 1930s

Chapter 2

THE 1934 REVIEW OF THE AIR MINISTRY

On 22 December 1932 John Salmond, the CAS, circulated a note stating that a committee was to be established ‘for the purpose of ascertaining in what manner the various questions of War Organization and War Training can, with the most advantage, be studied by, and fitted into the general organization of, the Air Staff’.¹ The Committee would be chaired by Air Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham who would begin his study on 24 January 1933. Salmond was beginning the process of adapting the RAF for war by realigning and bolstering the ability of the Air Staff to undertake the role of the ‘air general staff’ that Smuts had foretold in his second report of 1917.² This review would determine the basis upon which the RAF would develop over the coming years and the manner in which it would prepare for war, especially in terms of how the CAS and Air Staff would relate to the frontline and command and control wartime operations.

That this has not been highlighted before may relate to the simple fact that the study of staff re-organization is hardly the most exciting undertaking and offers little by way of traditional heroes. However, the actions of those heroes who were to emerge during the Second World War were grounded in the organisational foundations of the Service in which they served. Any air force is founded on the robustness of the many structures, functions, practices and procedures that support the obvious activity of operational flying. For an air force to enter combat without

¹ TNA AIR 2/673 S32201 Encl 1A, dated 22 December 1932.

² TNA CAB 24/22/58, Second Smuts Report, dated 17 August 1917.

securing its organisational base is as grave an act of dereliction as failing to provision the frontline with the quality and quantity of equipment necessary to fight.

Beginning with the Second Smuts Report of 17 August 1917 the purpose of the RAF was the subject of continual and, at times, continuous debate. The Air Council Minutes from the autumn of 1917 highlighted the uncertainty surrounding the implementation of the Smuts' recommendations.³ Much of the discussion surrounded the need to establish an 'air staff' that could offer independent and expert advice on the application of the new military power that aviation offered.⁴ But how could independent advice come from officers who would owe their allegiance and career prospects to the Admiralty and the War Office? Eventually, Henderson stated that it was clear that the creation of an air staff meant the creation of a separate service.⁵

Another founding principle of the RAF was that the air staff would be an operational staff and that the CAS was central to the operational efficiency of the Service.⁶ However, personalities quickly altered the organizational dynamics. Trenchard's resignation as CAS in March 1918 set the conditions for an equivocal air command structure to develop during the final stages of the First World War. When Trenchard was eventually persuaded by Lord Weir, the Secretary of State for Air (SofS), to accept the command of the RAF's Independent Force of bombers stationed in Eastern France around Nancy, he insisted that his chain of command would by-pass his successor as CAS, Sykes, and he would report direct to Weir and the War

³ TNA AIR 6/9 Minutes of the Air Council.

⁴ Smith, *British Air Strategy*, p. 19.

⁵ TNA AIR 6/9 Minutes of the 140th Meeting of the Air Council 16 July 1917.

⁶ Ibid.

Cabinet.⁷ Meanwhile, the RAF in France in support of the BEF would be commanded by Salmond who would report to Haig.⁸ Thus despite the organisational theory, Sykes would remain one step removed from the field commanders who by virtue of their ownership of the equipment of aerial warfare would dictate the way in which it would be used, and would thus, in practice, determine the day to day contribution it would make to the overall strategy.⁹ Thus from the very outset the RAF, founded on the principle that the Air Staff of the Air Ministry would act as an ‘air general staff’, adopted through dint of strong personalities a method of localised field command that demanded central support but eschewed central direction. It was to address this legacy that the CAS directed the study to be undertaken by Brooke-Popham.

The Brooke-Popham Report

Brooke-Popham, began his study on 24 January 1933 and submitted his report to the CAS less than a month later on the 22 February 1933.¹⁰ Brooke-Popham stated that his proposals could be briefly summarized as follows:

- a. The Director of Training’s responsibility would be transferred to the CAS department from AMP.
- b. The Director of Organization and Staff Duties with the Works and Buildings section would be split with the Staff Duties element remaining with CAS and the remainder transferring to AMP.
- c. The Director of Training’s remit would expand to encompass War Training.
- d. The Staff Duties element would be expanded to address War Organization.¹¹

⁷ M Cooper, *The Birth of Independent Air Power* (London: Allen Unwin, 1986) p. 128.

⁸ J Laffin, *Swifter than Eagles – A biography of Marshal of the RAF Sir John Salmond GCB CMG CVO DSO* (London: Blackwood and Sons, 1964) p. 100.

⁹ E Ash, *Sir Frederick Sykes and the Air Revolution 1912-1918* (London: Frank Cass, 1999)

¹⁰ TNA AIR 2/673 S32201 – War Organization of the Air Ministry – Sir R Brooke-Popham’s Report Minute Sheet attached to E2.

¹¹ The AMP abbreviation in the quote refers to the Air Member for Personnel (AMP).

The personnel cost would be modest comprising the addition of a permanent wg cdr post, the temporary addition of a sqn ldr for 12 months, and the possible requirement for a junior officer.

CAS initialled this note on 10 March 1933, less than a month before handing over to his older brother Geoffrey Salmond on 1 April 1933, and noted his thoughts to the AMP and Deputy Chief of Air Staff (DCAS) the same day.¹² He began:

I shall not have time to deal with Sir Robert Brooke-Popham's Report on the Reorganization of the Staff before my successor takes over.¹³

This appears to be rather awkward and ill-timed for the deliberation of such an important piece of work. It is also remarkable that Brooke-Popham, who did not begin his study until 24 January 1933, was able to produce a researched, considered and co-ordinated report of 18 pages with seven appendices in 30 calendar days by 22 February 1933. Even allowing for superior staff work, this is a remarkable feat and suggests that the outcome had to a degree been pre-judged. Given the strategic importance of the Air Staff organization to the operational effectiveness and efficiency of the RAF, this staff process demands scrutiny.

Brooke-Popham began his Report by re-stating his Terms of Reference which were to establish the 'various questions of war organization and war training' and how they could be best 'fitted into the general organization of the Air Staff'.¹⁴ He then immediately recorded that 'an examination of past history shows that these terms of reference imply that not a re-organization, but rather a continuance of development'.

¹² Ibid., E3A Minute 4, dated 10 March 1933.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., E1A, dated 22 February 1933.

He opined that three phases in the growth of the RAF and its Air Ministry were identifiable.

The First Phase was termed the ‘Construction of the Framework’ during which ‘centralization was desirable to ensure no divergence of policy’. The first Order in Council regulating the business of the Air Ministry had set the scene on 13 October 1920 by establishing just two Service Members of the Air Council, the CAS and the Director General for Supply and Research (DGSR).¹⁵ Under this arrangement CAS controlled Operations and Intelligence, Training and Organization, Personnel, Medical Services, Equipment, and Works and Buildings. Meanwhile DGSR oversaw Research, Aircraft Supplies, and Inspection.

The Second Phase which he termed ‘The Period of Consolidation’ emerged from the need to place administration on a broader basis, to have more Service Members and to have an ‘organization in close touch with Personnel’. Thus the Order in Council issued on 14 July 1922 led to the following allocation of duties: CAS would address Operations and Intelligence, Training and Staff Duties, Works and Buildings, and Communications; AMP would cover Organisation, Personnel, Services, Chaplains Branch; the Air Member for Supply and Research (AMSR) would oversee Research, Inspection and Equipment.¹⁶

The Third Phase was consequent on the decision to establish the command structure known as the Air Defence of Great Britain (ADGB). It was realised that Organisation was strategically critical to the formation of the new command and that

¹⁵ HC Deb dated 13 October 1920; Director General for Supply and Research (DGSR).

¹⁶ HC Deb dated 14 July 1922; Air Member for Supply and Research (AMSR), the post developed from DGSR.

Training had obvious and intimate links with personnel. To cement these changes a new Order in Council was issued on 19 December 1923 which allocated CAS Operations and Intelligence, Organisation and Staff Duties, Works and Buildings; AMP was responsible for Personnel Services, Manning, Training, Medical services, and the Chaplains Branch; AMSR retained his previous portfolio.¹⁷

Beyond these three phases of Air Staff development, Brooke-Popham highlighted other minor changes such as the July 1932 decision to establish a Directorate of Equipment responsible for the 'efficiency of the system of repair and upkeep of RAF aircraft and engines whilst in Service use'. He then stated the fundamental purpose of the next Phase of RAF development:

The Royal Air Force is now entering upon its 4th Phase and is now ready to concentrate on its real function, that of Preparation for war, and it is natural to consider what changes in the organization of the Air Ministry are thereby entailed.¹⁸

Five guiding principles circumscribed the work:

First, every effort had to be made to minimize staff increases.

Secondly, as few changes as possible should be made.

Thirdly, that although the division of duties should be logical there was a limit to that thinking especially if additional staff numbers resulted.

Fourthly, the CAS Department must not be overloaded.

Fifthly, although it might be impracticable to organize the Air Ministry purely on what was required for war, the arrangement must enable an easy and efficient transition to war.¹⁹

In relation to the final principle he highlighted that the RAF must do all within its power to avoid a situation that could lead to their being criticized as the War Office had been by the Esher Committee of 1904.²⁰

¹⁷ HC Deb dated 19 December 1923.

¹⁸ TNA AIR 2/673 S32201 – War Organization of the Air Ministry, E1A para 3, dated 22 February 1933.

¹⁹ Ibid.

The need for the Review was reinforced by those activities which were receiving insufficient attention. Tactical training of units; war organization and co-ordination of the administrative details of War Plans; expansion of the RAF to meet war requirements, especially with regards to Training and Maintenance; strategy for the offensive side of Home Defence; mobilization of the Air Ministry, including duties that would have to be delegated to commands at home in time of war; in short, the fundamentals of a fighting service. This catalogue of shortfalls could be seen as shocking to a modern audience looking back with the certainty of how events were to unfold. It is more understandable if one considers what the RAF had been through in its first 15 years of existence as a third service. And it should be remembered that Brooke-Popham's Study was a self-generated attempt to set matters right. It is also notable that the contemporary view was that unit tactical training, war organisation and strategy for the 'offensive side of Home Defence' were centrally placed among the list of challenges to be addressed. Authors have criticised the RAF for not addressing these issues sufficiently, but have simultaneously ignored the Brooke-Popham Air Ministry review.²¹

Brooke-Popham pointed out that extra work would be required to address the shortfalls identified, and that the work could be accomplished in a number of ways. Duties could be reallocated so as to save energy, some work could be omitted, individuals could work harder, or there could be an increase in numbers. However, the lack of qualified and experience staff officers was a critical constraining factor, even

²⁰ Lord Esher's Committee addressed the British Army's performance during the Boer War and led to the reforms that created the general staff and frontline with which Britain began the First World War, see for example, J P Harris, *Douglas Haig and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) pp. 42-44; and J Terraine, *Douglas Haig – the educated soldier* (London: Hutchinson, 1963) pp. 38-45.

²¹ Hastings, *Bomber Command* pp. 44-45 and p. 57.

so, Brooke-Popham concluded that the RAF had reached the point at which it would have to expand to meet the challenges it faced in readying itself for war. Brooke-Popham's aimed to minimize staff growth whilst simultaneously encompassing the obvious staff shortfalls. Organization and Training became key areas for, on the one hand, they established the structure of the Service and how it should be fought, whilst on the other, they ensured the personnel were best prepared to carry out their duties in pursuit of the campaign plans devised.

Dealing first with Training, Brooke-Popham concluded that although *ab initio* training was clearly connected to personnel matters it was a continuum whose ultimate purpose was the efficiency and effectiveness of the frontline.²² Given that tactics and strategy were central to the CAS' remit to oversee the operational efficiency and effectiveness of the Service, then Training should be concentrated under the CAS who would then be wholly responsible for both the development of tactics to meet the threat and the preparation of the personnel to undertake the duties required to overcome that threat. He stated:

I feel convinced that all Flying Training should come under one member of the Air Council, and since it is obvious that advanced training must come under the Air Staff, then elementary flying Training must go there too.²³

He did not suggest that Ground Training should be moved, indeed, he pointed out that the need to manage the transition of airmen into civilian life and ensure accreditation of their skills argued strongly for their training to remain in the hands of AMP.

However, his eye for operational focus identified the School of Photography as needing to come under the new Directorate of Training he proposed to establish in the CAS Department. He stated:

²² TNA AIR 2/673 S32201 – War Organization of the Air Ministry – E1A, dated 22 February 1933.

²³ Ibid., E1A, dated 22 February 1933.

I am of the opinion that the work of the School of Photography needs some further direction as regards policy: it should be told what are the Air Staff requirements as regards photography. At present there seems a tendency to let technical development dictate photographic policy rather than the reverse.²⁴

He also considered that co-operation with the other Services should be concentrated under the DoFT, stating:

The question of Army co-operation is simple. That of Naval Co-operation is complicated.²⁵

He suggested a generous manning level to address the needs of Naval co-operation and the oversight of the then Fleet Air Arm (FAA) of the RAF. And he hoped that the proposed manning levels would:

gradually tend to eliminate misunderstanding and establish confidence between the Admiralty and the Air Ministry. Perhaps in two or three years' time, when these matters are on a really satisfactory footing and thoroughly established, an amalgamation and consequent saving of personnel would be advisable. At present, though possible, it is in my opinion inexpedient.²⁶

Turning to War Organization, Brooke-Popham stated the stark truth that at present there was no definite organization in the Air Ministry to ensure the co-ordination of the administrative details of war plans. He highlighted a process by which 'The Plans Staff set out a project for some future operation, dealing almost entirely with the operational side', without the necessary scrutiny by those responsible for the administrative details implicit in any such plans. In short, RAF war plans were developing in a vacuum of reality.

Brooke-Popham proposed the creation of a section under the Director of Staff Duties (DSD) who would be responsible for the organizational aspect of the RAF's preparation for war. He compared his proposal with the model employed in the

²⁴ Ibid., E1A, dated 22 February 1933.

²⁵ Ibid., E1A, dated 22 February 1933.

²⁶ Ibid., E1A, dated 22 February 1933.

Admiralty which he thought inappropriate for the RAF. Far better was the structure in place in the War Office where war organization was actively co-ordinated by the Army SD branch in concert with the other elements of the War Office and Army structure. This federated approach had the further benefit of reducing additional manning requirements.

Brooke-Popham also recommended the rebalancing of work areas among the Air Council Members to ensure an equitable split of responsibility and to ensure the CAS Department was not overloaded with peacetime duties as it was recognized that its war preparation workload had only just begun to reveal itself. Taking a further lesson from the War Office, Brooke-Popham was keen to ensure the CAS had enough time to reflect and consider the broader aspects of the employment of the Service and he was determined not to overload the CAS with administrative detail. Thus he recommended the movement of the Peace Organization department and the Directorate of Works and Buildings (DofWB) to AMP to balance workload and reflect comments previously made in Air Staff reviews. This seemingly simple recommendation occupied a single short paragraph, but would come to dominate the subsequent debate surrounding the Report.

Brooke-Popham's Report succinctly and logically laid out a series of change recommendations that would enable the RAF to prepare for, and transition to, the war that the international situation was making increasingly likely. In his Minute to CAS he recognized that the Air Staff now had to choose which approach they would take and withheld his final detailed assessment of manning requirements, writing:

If my proposals are approved I am ready to tabulate the detailed list of duties and also to work out the changes necessary in the list of Committees.²⁷

The task was now for the RAF to digest the Report and adapt to the challenges ahead.

The RAF View

Any organization reaches a conclusion through a complex interplay of logic, emotion and experience. The decisions are made by humans each of whom brings their personal experience and prejudice to the matter under discussion. The key RAF personalities in the early months of 1933 were the CAS, DCAS, AMP, and AMSR. The CAS was first, John Salmond, then his brother Geoffrey until his early death on 28 April 1933, and then John Salmond again until Ellington assumed the post on 22 May 1933. DCAS was Ludlow-Hewitt; AMP, Ellington until 22 May 1933 when the post was gapped until 31 July 1933 before Bowhill took over. AMSR was Dowding throughout, a post he had held since 1 September 1930.²⁸

CAS wrote to AMP and DCAS on 10 March 1933 enclosing the Brooke-Popham Report for their consideration and took the opportunity to offer his views.²⁹ This would be poor practice were he attempting to gather viewpoints before he made the final decision, but J Salmond knew he would not be making that final decision, his brother would, so setting out one's views to be known, by way of 'guidance' to subordinates, could well be seen as the act of someone wishing their legacy to develop in an acceptable way. Whatever his purpose he stated that:

I have not been into the details of the Report, but notice it is suggested that the whole of Director of Training's branch should move from AMP to

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ *Air Force Lists 1930-1934*, a comprehensive collection of *Air Force Lists* is held in the Library of the RAF College Cranwell, Lincolnshire.

²⁹ TNA AIR 2/673 S32201 – War Organization of the Air Ministry – E3A Minute 4, dated 10 March 1933, Minute by CAS to AMP and DCAS.

CAS. I think the advantage of this is doubtful, as, apart from overloading CAS, it will mean the divorcement of *ab initio* training from the same branch in which the Director of Postings works.³⁰

But he was not blind to the pressing need to improve advanced training and concluded that:

I should have thought it possible, and would be more advisable to leave *ab initio* training where it is, and pass war training to CAS.³¹

AMP tasked the DofT, Courtney, to study the Report and deliver recommendations. This Courtney did in a Minute to AMP on 1 May 1933.³² Courtney fully agreed with Brooke-Popham's assessment that there was a shortfall in war training and he had for some time thought it advisable to put his Directorate in the Air Staff. He debated whether *ab initio* training should remain with AMP but concluded that it should remain intact and accompany war training to the CAS Department. He argued that the *ab initio* schools were already increasing their activity to address 'advanced' training skills so he felt it was desirable that one organization would be responsible for the harmonization of a complete training package. He recognised the point made by CAS about the need to maintain Training and Posting in close harness, but concluded that the benefits in war readiness were greater than the costs in increased co-ordination required between the Training and Postings Directorates.

AMP drafted a response to CAS setting out his detailed views on the Report and, given his imminent assumption of the position of CAS, an interesting resume of his command philosophy.³³ Unfortunately, no record of the letter having been sent exists in the records and it is possible that it was not actually sent. Ellington agreed that the proposals were 'quite workable' and should not over burden AMP or CAS.

³⁰ Ibid., E3A Minute 4, dated 10 March 1933.

³¹ Ibid., E3A Minute 4, dated 10 March 1933.

³² Ibid., M14 dated 1 May 1933.

³³ Ibid., E5A undated Draft Minute from AMP to CAS written by AMP.

Nevertheless, he was not satisfied that the proposals were the ‘best solution to our difficulties’. Going against the advice of his director of Training, Ellington supported John Salmond’s view that *ab initio* training and war training should be split. He observed that:

What I think is essential is that the CAS’s Department, which must lay down the strategical and tactical doctrines which are to guide the RAF in war, shall supervise the study and application in peace of these doctrines.³⁴

Whilst offering a number of more detailed adjustments, AMP was broadly content with the Report’s conclusion, with the exception that he felt that the DofWB should remain with CAS rather than be transferred to AMP.

The staffing of DCAS’s response was more extensive and not disrupted by the posting moves consequent upon the death of the CAS. The DSD, Air Cdre Mills, not surprisingly offered a fulsome response to DCAS the essence of which is contained in the following:

I do not feel that there are any grounds for suggesting that the existing machinery is really unsatisfactory or lacking in efficiency, and the only serious defect is the lack of a branch to deal with war organization.³⁵

It would be easy to portray this as the type of bureaucratic complacency which is often associated with government institutions. But it may be more accurate to see it as a genuinely held view of a responsible officer confronting the enormous change that was about to befall the RAF. Seen in this light the subsequent changes enacted by the Air Staff are the more impressive.

Mills gave a very detailed and reasoned exposition of his analysis of the Report recording his concern at a growing trend in the Service:

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., E5A, dated 9 June 1933 – Minute from DOSD to DCAS.

There are unmistakable signs that our organization tends to drift towards the requirements of peace and further from a state of preparedness for war. Owing to financial pressure, civilianization of establishments has been carried to a stage which must inevitably embarrass mobilization.³⁶

He concluded his remarks by aligning himself with CAS' view that training should be split and DSD expanded to address both War and Peace Organization.

On 16 June 1933, Pierse forwarded a Minute to the new CAS, Ellington, outlining DCAS's view on the Brooke-Popham Report. He began by confirming Brooke-Popham's observation that 'hitherto there has been no provision for the proper study of these subjects', namely the study of war organization and war training.³⁷ This admission is significant because the war for which these studies were to focus upon was a mere 6 years away, and the expansion schemes of men and materiel were clearly beginning from the foundation of weak or non-existent operational thinking. Far from being the product of conspiratorial institutional prejudice it appears that the predilection of the RAF for a way of warfare had far more to do with there being no mature thinking upon which to base their plans. This perspective is supported by the work of Smith who emphasises the irrelevance of the operational experience of the RAF in the 1920s and early 1930s to any European context and the politically driven focus on deterrence to underpin the recent disarmament talks in Geneva.³⁸

DCAS highlighted his concern that in attempting to balance workload between the Air Council Members, Brooke-Popham had proposed a less than optimum position. Thus he argued, supported by the DoFT, DSD, and of course, the CAS in his

³⁶ Ibid., E5A, dated 9 June 1933 – Minute from DOSD to DCAS para 3(b).

³⁷ Ibid., M7, dated 16 June 1933 – Minute from DCAS to CAS.

³⁸ Smith, *British Air Strategy*, pp. 306-322.

previous role as AMP, that the DofWB and the Director of Operations (DofOps) should remain with CAS. He ducked the debate on *ab initio* training suggesting that CAS might take this up directly with the DofT. Finally, he observed that the Report had been under staffing for a considerable time and that it had yet to receive the attention of ‘all the departments concerned in these important proposals’.³⁹

CAS gave his views to DCAS via a Minute on 29 June 1933.⁴⁰ In a manner that was to become his routine whilst CAS, he laid out his decisions unequivocally. He decided that the DofT would remain under AMP. Advanced training would be placed under the DSD which would embrace, *inter alia*, the Staff College, Staff exercises, and air tactics. The DofWB would remain under CAS. In short, his views as AMP had transferred with him to the post of CAS. Ellington’s stated views are important for they reveal the inner thinking of the man who would guide the RAF for an important period of war preparation. They also reveal the organizational atmosphere in which the Air Staff had to work. Ellington, despite disagreeing in detail with Brooke-Popham, accepted his overall argument that the RAF needed to focus on war preparations and that the issue of unit training and strategy development were crucial matters. This approach created the basis for a unity of thinking linking strategy, organisation, staff college education and training, unit training and development, and operational exercising and execution. As such it represented a significant step forward and an important foundation stone upon which to build.

³⁹ Ibid., M7, dated 16 June 1933, Minute DCAS to CAS.

⁴⁰ Ibid., M10, dated 29 June 1933, Minute from CAS to DCAS.

The External View

DCAS had alluded to the fact that the changes being proposed were of such importance as to be of interest to other departments, including of course the Air Ministry.⁴¹ The Air Ministry of 1933 was not only the ‘Whitehall HQ’ of the RAF, it was also the Department responsible for Civil Aviation and the SofS, Lord Londonderry, held a wide brief for all aviation related matters. Of particular relevance was the Department of The Secretary of the Air Ministry. Occupying a position of equivalence to the CAS and Controller General of Civil Aviation, the Secretary was the senior official responsible to the SofS, and someone whose support was essential if any organizational change was to endure within the RAF and the Air Ministry.

Ellington wrote to the Secretary, Bullock, for the first time on this subject on 21 September 1933.⁴² He reviewed the Report and the staff process by which he had come to his decisions and gave the Secretary a detailed briefing of the logic underpinning his conclusions. He emphasized the need for balanced workloads and the on-going requirement for co-operation between Air Council Members. Having reviewed the implications of the decisions made he proposed a new Branch directly under CAS to address War Training and SD, leaving DSD to address organizational matters, and would be called the DofO. The destiny of the DofWB was stated to be in the CAS department where it could be closely aligned with other aspects of the RAF expansion schemes under consideration.

⁴¹ Ibid., M7, dated 16 June 1933, Minute DCAS to CAS.

⁴² Ibid., M16, dated 21 September 1933 - Minute from CAS to Secretary.

The Secretary replied on 17 November 1933 some eight weeks later.⁴³ His type written Minute ran to over five pages and must have come as a disappointment to a CAS who was keen to re-configure his Service for the challenges ahead. The Secretary began by emphasizing the importance of the issue and concluding that:

As a result I agree that at present there is a gap in our organization which needs filling in one way or another.⁴⁴

He stated that but for the:

closely reasoned conclusions of Sir R Brooke-Popham, the views of Sir Philip Game, who had almost unequalled experience in the matter of headquarters organization, the opinions of the last DCAS, and the numerous divergences of opinion which have found expression on the present file, I should have hesitated to question the main outlines of the latest proposals, despite my special responsibilities for the organization of the Air Ministry from the angles of establishment and finance.⁴⁵

This minute has the distinct feeling that it was, in part, intended to ensure that the new CAS, unexpectedly appointed, knew where power lay within the Air Ministry and that not including the Secretary earlier in the process was a serious tactical error.

Paragraph 4 of his Minute set out his opening position:

I frankly confess that I am myself much more drawn to Sir Robert Brooke-Popham's recommendations than these latest compromise proposals, though I realise that the acceptance of the former in *toto* may be impracticable.⁴⁶

He went on to challenge virtually all of CAS' proposals citing alternatives that were variously supported by other Air Council members. Comparisons with the War Office punctuate the Minute, for example, the Secretary urged the CAS to consider that although:

equipment establishments bulk much larger with us than with the Army, the Adjutant General is apparently responsible for the organization and

⁴³ Ibid., M19, dated 17 November 1933 - Minute from Secretary to CAS.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., M19, dated 17 November 1933 - Minute from Secretary to CAS.

⁴⁶ Ibid., M19, dated 17 November 1933 - Minute from Secretary to CAS.

administration (including establishment questions) of the Artillery and the Royal Tank Corps – no doubt working in close conjunction with AMSR's opposite number the Master General of Ordnance, who is responsible for war equipment tables and equipment regulations for the Artillery, Tanks, etc.⁴⁷

To Ellington, an ex-artilleryman and Director General of Military Aeronautics at the War Office in 1918, this lesson in organizational structure must have seemed rather unnecessary.

The Secretary moved on to challenge CAS's proposals for the War and Peace Organization structures to be placed under the DofO in the CAS department, again arguing that there were precedents in the Army that supported an alternative approach. The retention of the Works and Building Directorate came in for particular opposition having been adversely commented on by the Estimates Committee in the summer of 1932. Once again the War Office and this time the Admiralty were held up as exemplars the RAF should follow. Having outlined his broad objections which extended to almost every part of CAS' proposal he moved on to his points of detail.

The main issue was the proposed increase in establishment. Here the Secretary undertook a forensic destruction of CAS' argument:

I do not doubt that we are at present rather behindhand, but, when arrears have been made up, I should have thought that all experience of the past decade suggested that new contingencies entailing completely new plans would arise with relative infrequency.⁴⁸

Continually, the Secretary referred to the structure of the War Office to underscore his conclusion that, rather than the modest increase of five staff officers proposed by CAS, two or at most three would be acceptable. He concluded that he would have preferred the Brooke- Popham proposals but would accept CAS' views if he felt the

⁴⁷ Ibid., M19, dated 17 November 1933 - Minute from Secretary to CAS.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

alternative could not be made to work but he was firm in his view that the DofWB should be transferred to AMP to satisfy the Estimates Committee.

On 30 November 1933 CAS replied to the Secretary in his typical unequivocal style:

I am quite sure that war training would not be better dealt with by transferring the whole of flying training to CAS Department.⁴⁹

Furthermore he was entirely:

unconvinced of the desirability of transferring DofWB from CAS to the AMP's Department.⁵⁰

As to the importance of placating the Estimates Committee CAS observed that:

The criticism of the Estimates Committee in this matter is, I consider, based on ignorance which we shall better try to dispel rather than to defer to it.⁵¹

Moving on to War Organization CAS opined that the manning levels proposed were the bare minimum:

I do not think this would be nearly adequate for a branch of work which has been far too neglected. With the abrogation of the 'ten years' rule it is essential that we should take war organization more seriously.⁵²

After concluding with some details to address the Secretary's Minute, CAS stated:

I am desirous that this reorganization should be submitted to the Secretary of State for his approval as early as possible and hope that you will be able to deal with these papers without delay.⁵³

There is no record of the Secretary's reaction to receiving this Minute from CAS but one might imagine that there was a growing realization in the Air Ministry that the unexpected CAS knew his mind and was not afraid to state it.

⁴⁹ Ibid., M20, dated 30 November 1933 - Minute from CAS to Secretary.

⁵⁰ Ibid., M20, dated 30 November 1933 - Minute from CAS to Secretary.

⁵¹ Ibid., M20, dated 30 November 1933 - Minute from CAS to Secretary.

⁵² Ibid., M20, dated 30 November 1933 - Minute from CAS to Secretary.

⁵³ Ibid., M20, dated 30 November 1933 - Minute from CAS to Secretary.

The Secretary replied to CAS 8 days later on 8 December 1933 and began by stating:

Having placed my views upon record against any future review of these problems and stated my preference for something more resembling Sir R. Brooke-Popham's proposals, I am ready to defer to your opinion over this re-organization as a whole save for two points only, *viz.*, (a) the allocation of the Works and Buildings Directorate and (b) the size of the staff of the new Deputy Directorate of War Organization.⁵⁴

The Secretary argued strongly for the move of the DofWB to AMP's Department and alluded to the organizational principles of the War Office which strove to ensure the CIGS was able to devote as much time as possible to the employment of the Army leaving the administration of the Service to other members of the Army Board. These arguments were more relevant to matters that would emerge in 1936 when the re-organization of the RAF was under discussion and appear to have been used by the Secretary to broaden an argument already lost in the specifics of the Air Ministry debate.

After offering a compromise to enable a reduction in manning numbers the Secretary concluded with a pointed reference to the staffing process that had accompanied this Review:

Finally, on a minor point of procedure, though I do not imagine there are likely to be any further major schemes of reorganization of this character for some time to come, if and when they should mature, it would be helpful to me if I could be brought into the discussions at an earlier stage.⁵⁵

He proposed a small committee of officials to ensure his awareness and involvement. CAS did not respond to this proposal in any recorded way.

⁵⁴ Ibid., M21, dated 8 December 1933 para 1 - Minute from Secretary to CAS.

⁵⁵ Ibid., M21, dated 8 December 1933 - Minute from Secretary to CAS.

On 11 December 1933 CAS wrote to the SofS to gain his approval for the plan before his departure for Egypt.⁵⁶ He stated simply that war training would move to his department, war organization would be bolstered and come under the CAS and that the Works and Building Directorate would remain with CAS for a further two to three years despite the Secretary's objection. The next day Lord Londonderry replied that he approved the transfer of Higher Training to CAS.⁵⁷ However, whilst content for the Works and Buildings Directorate to remain with CAS in the near term he did not see this as a long term solution. He was also keen to bear down on manning numbers, but again to overcome the backlog of work would initially accept CAS's requirements pending longer term review.⁵⁸ Thus everyone was able to leave happy, CAS had training and Work and Buildings, and adequate manning; and the Secretary had made his point and it had been recorded for the future; in short a perfect British compromise.

Despite the SofS's approval the matter was not finalized and the early months of 1934 were taken up with lengthy discussions with the Treasury. Eventually an Air Council Command Letter was issued on the 22 February 1934 outlining the proposed changes which after consultation with the Lords Commissioners, communicated in a Treasury letter dated 2 March 1934, came into effect on 3 April 1934.⁵⁹ The CAS would have four Directorates: Operations and Intelligence; Organization; Staff Duties; and Works and Buildings. AMP would oversee *ab initio* training and

⁵⁶ Ibid., M22, dated 11 December 1933 - Minute from CAS to Sof S Lord Londonderry.

⁵⁷ Ibid., M25, dated 12 December 1933 - Minute from SofS to CAS.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., E 37A, dated 22 February 1934, Air Council Letter setting out the Air Ministry Re-Organisation; and E 39A dated 2 March 1934, Correspondence from the Treasury confirming the agreement of the Lords Commissioners.

established personnel matters. War and Peace Organization would be the responsibility of the DofO.

Operational Foundations – The Review in Retrospect

As the RAF awoke on Wednesday 4 April 1934 very few would have realized that changes had been made that would have significant implications for the readiness of the Service for the Second World War. The RAF now had the means to address the significant gaps that were identified by Brooke-Popham and the operational foundations upon which the RAF would build were greatly strengthened.

Higher Training was soon to become the responsibility of Tedder giving him the authority to focus the RAF's rapidly expanding force on those activities which were considered to offer the greatest utility in war for the limited training time that remained in peacetime.⁶⁰ But the task of creating a training system that was able to take a pilot from first flight to combat readiness in the timescale available with the equipment of the frontline was immense. Reality had to determine the way of warfare that was possible for the RAF. It would be pointless to establish complex tactics and procedures that were beyond the grasp of the aircrew available at the time. That the RAF never fell in the trap of deploying aircrew that were woefully inadequate for the task can, in no small measure, be attributed to the Brook-Popham reforms of the Air Ministry. Equally, the limitations in training and operational concepts that were to emerge in the coming years left future RAF field commanders with a similar challenge to the one faced by British Army commanders in 1916 when their tactical

⁶⁰ *Air Force Lists* 1934/5, Tedder was the Director of Training in the Air Ministry.

schemes had to be constrained because the tactical ability of the volunteer soldier could not support the more complex and operationally effective alternatives.

Whilst the review laid the foundations to address the training challenge, and Government policy was slowly expanding the size of the frontline, it was the balance of quantity and quality that continued to occupy the Air Staff. It was well recognized that the state of the British aircraft industry severely constrained the options for expansion that the RAF could explore.⁶¹ Ellington was extremely concerned that the RAF did not expand too rapidly and create a hollow force of numbers but of limited quality.⁶² Over time the quality of equipment expansion, personnel recruitment, and training shifted to enable the foundations of a robust force to be built. Establishing the organizational structure that would underpin these new capabilities was the responsibility of the new DofO, Air Cdre Welsh and as with training a balance had to be struck between the optimum and the realistic. It was the role of the new DofO to ensure the RAF was structurally configured to enable the integration of the trained airman with the new equipment, and importantly to ensure the force was task organized for operational success. The staff work involved in this was enormous and not surprisingly, the hoped for reductions of the Secretary never came to fruition, in fact quite the reverse. But the Review had set the conditions to support the expansion and allow for later adaptation.

The debate over the organizational location of the DofWB was instructive. Everyone was right to a degree and all were equally wrong. There can be no doubt that AMP's Department could have undertaken the task but that was not what the

⁶¹ S Ritchie, *Industry and Air Power – The Expansion of British Aircraft Production, 1935-1941* (London: Cass, 1997) pp. 255-265.

⁶² Terraine, *The Right of the Line*, p28.

CAS wanted and given that RAF Expansion demanded the biggest works and airfield construction programme the Service had faced, it was fortunate that the Directorate remained with the CAS close to the organizational and operational staff who would create the demands for works and buildings.

The Secretary constantly highlighted comparisons with the Army in his discussion with the CAS in an attempt to persuade the CAS that the prosaic and functional Directorate covering Works and Buildings had no part in the CAS' Department.⁶³ But Ellington held firm to his view that an air force was intimately linked to its supporting infrastructure in a way that had little comparison in the Army and limited in the RN. In this events were to prove him right for the sustainability of the airfield was to become a key element of operational resilience and the parlous state of airfield infrastructure that greeted the RAF in France in 1939 amply demonstrated that Ellington was right to stick to his guns. This perspective of Ellington is at odds with the view expressed by Montgomery-Hyde who quoted several comments by Ellington's contemporaries that are deeply critical of the CAS.⁶⁴ However, analysis of his conduct over the Air Ministry review shows him to be far more determined and robust than he is generally seen as being.

The staffing of the Brooke-Popham Report gave Ellington an opportunity to assert his authority in the Air Ministry. He was a CAS who has been harshly judged by history including being described by Freeman as the 'worst chief we ever had'.⁶⁵ However, others including Terraine and Dean have recognized the great debt the

⁶³ Ibid., M21, dated 8 December 1933 - Minute from Secretary to CAS.

⁶⁴ Montgomery-Hyde, *British Air Policy*, p. 494.

⁶⁵ Furse, *Wilfrid Freeman*, p. 95.

Service owes him during those difficult years of the middle 1930s.⁶⁶ If Bullock had been attempting to assert his position in the Air Ministry with his initial response to Ellington, then it must be concluded he failed, because the final outcome was almost exactly what Ellington had drafted in his response to Salmond when AMP.⁶⁷ And neither was this a pyrrhic victory that was dismantled by the bureaucracy when the senior's attention had moved on to more pressing matters. The Air Ministry reforms of 1934 were sustained throughout the war expanding in scale but not in principle as the RAF grew to its greatest size and fought its most demanding conflict. In one area though Ellington learnt a useful lesson and in future he made a more determined effort to include the Secretary and his department at the earliest opportunity. That he did not in 1933 could be partly excused by the turbulent way in which he became CAS and it is understandable that in his early days his attention was demanded across a wide span of control that had been greatly upset by the unexpected changes at the top of the Service.

Another factor lingering in the background at the time was the unresolved tension concerning the role of the Air Ministry in the command of operations. In part the Brooke-Popham reforms were intended to address this issue and to make good the principle that Smuts had highlighted in his Second Report of 1917 and Henderson had referred to in his statement concerning the establishment of an Air Staff within the Air Ministry, namely that the CAS, the Air Staff, and the Air Ministry should command

⁶⁶ Terraine, *The Right of the Line*, pp. 44-45 and Dean, *The Royal Air Force and Two World Wars*, p. 88.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, E5A undated Draft Minute from AMP to CAS.

and fight the RAF in time of war in a way analogous to the Admiralty and the War Office.⁶⁸ The 1934 reforms laid the foundation for this to be done.

As 1934 unfolded the Air Ministry changes began to take hold and allowed the CAS greater confidence that the shortfalls in war preparation were beginning to be resolved. On 5 June 1935 CAS would write to DCAS to initiate the next major phase of the RAF's adaptation for war, the re-organisation of the Home Command structure that would lead to the creation of Bomber, Fighter, Coastal, and Training Commands, the task organization with which the RAF in the UK would fight the Second World War.⁶⁹ That work would build on the Air Ministry Review of 1933/34 and would be fundamental to the RAF's war fighting capability.

⁶⁸ TNA AIR 6/9 Minutes of the 140th Meeting of the Air Council 16 July 1917.

⁶⁹ TNA AIR 2/8875, S35818 Part I, E6b, Minute 1, dated 5 June 1935, Minute by CAS to DCAS outlining his intention to re-organise the Home Commands.

Chapter 3

THE 1936 RE-ORGANISATION OF THE FRONTLINE

Introduction

The Air Staff re-organization that came into being on 4 April 1934 addressed the immediate needs of directing the RAF during the turbulent period of expansion and change that was underway to address the growing threat from Germany.¹ At that time the MAF, was organized under a unitary command known as the ADGB commanded by the C-in-C Brooke-Popham. His Command was headquartered in Hillingdon House at Uxbridge and consisted, under the terms of the Scheme A expansion programme, of four Bombing Areas, a Southern Fighting Area, and a Northern Fighting Area consisting of a Northern and Central Fighting Group. Coastal and Inland Areas were also established to handle maritime and training matters.²

The ADGB had been created in 1923 to handle the 52 squadron RAF then envisaged.³ As an operational command construct it had the advantage of having a single commander in charge of both the offensive and defensive forces thus allowing for close co-ordination between the main arms of the RAF's striking power. With the expansion now under way the practical limits of this approach, in terms of span of control, were becoming clear. This chapter covers the development of the thinking, staffing, and implementation of the RAF Command re-organization begun in 1935 and enacted in July 1936. It reveals the more operational focus underpinning the re-

¹ TNA AIR 2/8875 S35818/35 date opened 18 Jun 35 Organisation of the Home Commands – Consequent on Expansion Scheme 'C', E39A, dated 4 May 1936.

² TNA AHB, RAF Narrative (First Draft), *The RAF in the Bombing Offensive against Germany' Vol 1 'Prewar Evolution of Bomber Command 1917-1939*, p 110B.

³ Smith, *British Air Strategy*, p. 32.

organization and sheds light on the working practices of the Air Ministry under Ellington and Lord Swinton, the SofS, giving a new insight into the nature of the inter-war RAF.⁴

A Memo from CAS

CAS wrote to DCAS, Courtney, on 5 June 1935 to outline his thoughts and task an urgent study into the organizational structure of the Service.⁵ By mid-1935 it was apparent that the structure of the RAF would not withstand the increasing pressures of expansion and war preparation and Ellington began by setting the overall context:

We shall shortly have to make up our minds as regards the organization of ADGB when it reaches a size of 105 squadrons besides having under its operational control a large body of Territorial guns and lights.⁶

Admitting that he had yet to finally make up his mind, he informed his DCAS that:

I am inclined to think that ADGB as one Command with 6 Bombing Areas, 2 or 3 Fighting Areas, even if grouped under a super Fighting area, 2 or more Territorial Anti-Aircraft Command, and a large number of Observer Groups, is going to be so large as to be unwieldy.⁷

From this outline analysis flowed his tasking to Courtney;

Consequently I should like your views as to a proposal to separate the defence part of the organization from the offensive part.⁸

Several authors have suggested that the primary reason for the 1936 re-organization was the need for the RAF to accommodate the demands of physical expansion and attend to the obvious administrative challenges that such growth would create.⁹

However, Ellington's memo makes it quite clear he was more motivated by

⁴ Viscount Swinton, *I Remember* (London: Hutchinson, 1948)

⁵ TNA AIR 2/8875, S35818 Part I, E6b, Minute 1, dated 5 June 1935.

⁶ Ibid., E6b, Minute 1, dated 5 June 1935.

⁷ Ibid., E6b, Minute 1, dated 5 June 1935.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Montgomery-Hyde, *British Air Policy* and Smith, *British Air Strategy*.

operational factors than the prospect of easier administrative of the increasing frontline. He stated that the suggested separation of the defensive and offensive parts of the Service:

would be more in the direction which I believe things will develop after the outbreak of war, if not on its outbreak, if a large part or the whole of the bombing squadrons were sent overseas.¹⁰

This important memo in the development of the RAF shows that the twin pressures of expansion and war preparation were at the heart of CAS' ambitions for the re-organization of the Service. Once again, Ellington had openly signalled the direction in which he wished the changes to develop and the subsequent staffing of this work must be seen against this background of clear direction from the CAS.¹¹

Courtney responded on 11 June 1935, the following Tuesday, beginning with a safe statement:

I am inclined to think that we ought, as you suggest, to separate the offensive and the defensive parts of ADGB and place each directly under the Air Ministry.¹²

However, the remainder of his Minute suggested that a significant amount of thought had been given to this topic ahead of CAS' tasking Minute of the previous Wednesday and DCAS went on to outline the supporting arguments for his opening statement. He was firmly of the mind that the two organizations would be 'performing in war two quite separate functions.' The fighter organization would have to concentrate on the relatively straightforward and obvious defensive function, whilst the bomber forces would undertake the more complex mission of the offensive with its direct and indirect effects. He argued that the bombers would be:

¹⁰ TNA AIR 2/8875, S35818 Part I, E6b, Minute 1, dated 5 June 1935.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² TNA AIR 2/8875, S35818 Part I, E6b, Minute 2, dated 11 June 1935.

endeavouring by bombardment, to weaken enemy resistance and his power to continue the war, and incidentally, will be assisting the defence.

By separating these two distinct functions DCAS considered that each commander would be able to concentrate on his responsibilities without distraction from other priorities. However, he thought that there would, without re-organization, be too many subordinate groupings for a single commander to effectively command, and he was adamant that the imposition of a super C-in-C over the proposed offensive and defensive parts would:

not only produce a very top-heavy organization, but will be tantamount to giving this super C-in-C functions which should properly belong to the CAS.¹³

This was a very interesting statement in light of the debate that would emerge in 1937-39, and was the first reference to the concept of there being a super C-in-C, for it was not something CAS had raised in his Minute.¹⁴ It can only be concluded that it was under discussion in the Air Staff and that the DCAS was addressing a subject and dismissing it before it could gain traction in the staff process. Nonetheless, it was obvious that the DCAS was opposed to any higher co-ordination of the emerging commands by anyone other than the Air Staff. He argued that if a super C-in-C were established he would be distracted from the needs of the offensive campaign by the pressing demands of the defensive battle.¹⁵ This could lead to his being continually called to the War Cabinet. He even considered that the stress of responsibility for the success of the defensive campaign and its impact on the population of the UK would 'be likely unduly to influence the selection of objectives for the counter-bombardment campaign.'

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ TNA AIR 2/8875, S35818 Part I, E6b, Minute 1, dated 5 June 1935.

¹⁵ Ibid., E6B, Minute 2, dated 11 June 1935.

Courtney then went on to emphasize that the demands of the offensive battle and the additional complexities that would arise from part of the offensive force being deployed overseas, demanded that the defensive duties should fall to another commander. In a sentence that clearly revealed the mood of the time and the relative priority the RAF felt should be accorded the offensive over the defensive function, he concluded this section by suggesting that the challenges of the offensive mission would 'undoubtedly absorb the activities of one man without the distractions of the defensive campaign.'¹⁶ Thus in the mind of DCAS the separation of the two functions was a sound operational move that would allow the parallel campaigns to be conducted without overloading commanders or distracting them with the pressures and demands of the other mission. The offensive held primacy and was the more complex and the offensive commander must be protected from the 'distractions' of the defensive battle.¹⁷ Finally, he could see no need, and several drawbacks, to the establishment of a super-C-in-C to co-ordinate the offensive and defensive missions. As a summary of Air Staff thinking in 1935 it was succinct and unequivocal.

However, despite his sentiment that the offensive and the defensive could and should be seen as 2 separate campaigns with limited interconnection, Courtney went on to suggest that:

it must be realized that there are several points of contact between the offensive and defensive parts of the organization which, if separated, would require the closest liaison.¹⁸

He considered that there would need to be close co-ordination of intelligence, safe bomber routing through the defensive zones, and close co-ordination in peacetime

¹⁶ TNA AIR 2/8875, S35818 Part I, E6b, Minute 2, dated 11 June 1935.

¹⁷ Ibid., E6B, Minute 2, dated 11 June 1935.

¹⁸ Ibid., E6B, Minute 2, dated 11 June 1935.

training to allow mutual development and understanding. DCAS concluded by saying that his thoughts are ‘by no means exhaustive’ but that he understood CAS intended to hold a small conference to discuss the matter.¹⁹

In mid-1935 the Service membership of the Air Council consisted of the CAS, the AMP, Bowhill, the AMRD, Dowding, and the AMSO, Newall, with Sir Christopher Bullock as the Secretary of the Air Ministry²⁰. All these senior colleagues needed to be consulted and make their contribution to this pivotal debate that would shape the ability of the RAF to function successfully in war. Over the coming days their responses to CAS’ Minute began to emerge.

On 12 July 1935 Newall wrote to CAS introducing a Memorandum prepared by the DofO Welsh, on ‘The Organization of the Home Commands – 1935 Expansion Scheme C’.²¹ Newall recommended Welsh’s paper as the basis for further discussion and highlighted where it differed from CAS’ stated views.²² He supported Welsh’s contention that the present Air Staff were over-worked and thus incapable of addressing all the issues necessary for the preparation of the RAF for war. He stated:

There is no doubt in my mind that the Service as a whole, particularly at Home, is under-staffed. There is no pool to meet war requirements and, practically speaking, there is no time available to mobilize a Home Defence Force for war. It is, therefore, essential that our staffs and organization in peace-time should be as near as possible to our requirements for war.²³

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ *Air Force List* for January 1935 and 1936, the posts of Air Member for Research and Development (AMRD) and Air Member for Supply and Organization (AMSO) grew from the post of AMSR and the increased importance of organizational planning.

²¹ TNA AIR 2/8875, S35818, Minute 3, dated 12 July 1935.

²² Ibid., Welsh’s Paper entitled Memorandum by D of O on the Organisation of the home Commands – 1935 Expansion Scheme C, is filed as E1A, dated 19 June 1935.

²³ Ibid., Minute 3, dated 12 July 1935.

He then summarized that:

I agree also with D of O that as a Service we are prone to over-centralization and that now is the time to put matters right.²⁴

Furthermore,

I am convinced some co-ordinating authority, other than the Chief of the Air Staff, and freed from the burdens of administration, will be required over and above the Fighter, Bomber and Coastal Commands in Home Defence.²⁵

He was, thus, in opposition to DCAS on the emerging issue of the need for a super C-in-C, a subject that was to be further addressed in the submission of AMP.

Bowhill's contribution was sent to CAS on 18 July 1935, just ahead of the meeting planned for 22 July 1935, the following Tuesday.²⁶ In it he recorded for the first time several issues and opinions that events were to prove over the coming years to have been particularly prescient. Bowhill began his service career in the RN where he was an acknowledged and courageous leader.²⁷ Immediately prior to taking up the appointment of AMP from Ellington, he had served as AOC Fighting Area in ADGB, the DSD in the Air Staff under Salmond, and as Senior Air Staff Officer (SASO), HQ Iraq Command under Ellington.²⁸ He was, therefore, amply qualified to offer an operational perspective on the re-organization proposals.

He began by offering equivocal support to CAS' central premise:

I am of the opinion that to have a C-in-C Offensive and a C-in-C Defensive is the ideal solution except for one most important point, namely that it will really mean that the CAS will become Commander in Chief in wartime as far as home defence goes.²⁹

²⁴ Ibid., Minute 3, dated 12 July 1935.

²⁵ Ibid., Minute 3, dated 12 July 1935.

²⁶ TNA AIR 2/8875, S35818, E 6c, dated 18 July 1935.

²⁷ Montgomery-Hyde, *British Air Policy*, p. 352.

²⁸ *Air Force List* appointments for Bowhill 1925-1934.

²⁹ TNA AIR 2/8875, S35818, E 6c, dated 18 July 1935.

He considered this inevitable because:

The tendency nowadays with wireless and improved communications is definitely for Commanders-in-Chief to get orders of what to do from their respective heads. I think this was proved during the last war as far as the Navy and the Army were concerned.³⁰

Having set out a logical position he homed in on what he saw as the nub of the issue:

I think the whole question revolves round the point: can CAS divorce himself from the operations of a home air defence war? It would be an ideal solution if he could, but I do not think it will be possible for him to do so. The Cabinet will continually refer to him in respect to the operations and in this new warfare with our intricate social obligations so many departments will also be involved. Co-ordination will have to be carefully worked out between the fighters and bombers, and also we must not forget the aircraft which are in our commands under Coastal area and Inland area.³¹

This led Bowhill to conclude that it was inevitable that the Air Staff would have to be ‘the co-ordinating body to give the main directions of the campaign.’ If his views were accepted, he suggested the Air Ministry would need an operational room and that the COS for the CAS would be the DCAS who would require enhanced staff support. Offering an alternative which involved the IG acting in the central co-ordinating role, Bowhill conceded that such a scheme could work. But whichever approach was chosen there would be a requirement for co-ordination, a view in contrast to that espoused by DCAS, and that co-ordination, Bowhill felt, would be best offered by an enhanced Air Staff in which DCAS acted as CAS’ operational executive. Bowhill concluded his Minute by offering alternative arrangements for the Inland, Armament, and Maintenance areas, all of which would eventually find favour in the final plan.³²

³⁰ Ibid., E 6c, dated 18 July 1935.

³¹ Ibid., E 6c, dated 18 July 1935.

³² Ibid.

The CAS Conference - 22 July 1935

Having received their submissions, CAS wrote to AMSO, AMP and DCAS on 22 July 1935 ahead of the Conference he had convened to discuss the issue.³³ He began by stating that he did not agree to the proposed super C-in-C and that the duty of co-ordination would be undertaken by the Air Staff in the form of the DCAS who in wartime would shed his DOI duties which would be allocated to a new appointment.³⁴ He was content with the Fighter Command proposal but thought that three Groups would be required to meet the operational demands as he saw them unfolding. Issues remained with Coastal Command and the allocation of reconnaissance bomber squadrons which he felt would necessitate different arrangements for peace and war for these units. He cautioned against too high a rank being allocated for some appointments, particularly those relating to administration in the Command HQs. Finally, he expected the Groups to be commanded by a mix of AVMs and Air Cdres not just by AVMs as had been proposed. He concluded with a detailed listing of appointments and ranks to summarize his thoughts and direction.³⁵

The meeting proceeded in close harmony with the views set out in CAS' note, and first addressed the question of whether the C-in-C ADGB was still required.³⁶ It was concluded that it was not and that in peacetime the duties of supervising Fighter Command and Bomber Command would be undertaken by the Inspector General (IG), the newly appointed Brooke-Popham, supported by the DSD in the Air Staff.³⁷ In wartime the responsibility for co-ordination would fall to the CAS who would be

³³ TNA AIR 2/8875, S35818, E 7a, dated 22 July 1935.

³⁴ Director of Operations and Intelligence (DOI).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ TNA AIR 2/8875, S35818, E 8a, dated 22 July 1935.

³⁷ Ibid.

assisted by a deputy, the exact appointment of whom would be decided once the future of the IG post was established³⁸. They agreed that there should be a C-in-C for both Fighter Command and Bomber Command and that their initial locations would be Uxbridge and Bentley Priory respectively. Fighter Command was to have three groups and Bomber Command six, commanded by a mixture of AVMs and Air Cdres. Organizational flexibility would allow the Torpedo Bomber squadrons to come under Coastal Command in peacetime before transferring to Bomber Command for operations in war. The previous term 'Area' was to be dropped and the new title of 'Group' was to be adopted to recognize the functional vice geographic structure of the new organization.³⁹ AMP was to make a broad assessment of the career implications of the decisions reached and co-ordinate with his Air Council colleagues.⁴⁰

Thus, in the space of less than seven working weeks the senior staff of the RAF had reached a conclusion about the future structure of the Service. The only record of the civilian staff being engaged is contained in the CAS Memo of 22 July 1935 in which he notes that S.7, the Air Ministry Secretariat, had recorded on 17 July 1935 their concern that the proposed rank allocation could imbalance the overall officer career structure. But Ellington could not be accused of leaving the civil servants in the dark over his intentions as the original note to DCAS had been copied to S.6, another part of the Secretariat. However, there is no record of any significant involvement in the debate by the civilian staff, or of CAS consulting directly with the Secretary, Bullock, who had asked CAS to ensure there was early engagement in future matters after difficulties they had had in the Air Staff review completed in

³⁸ In 1935 the Inspector General post was a temporary appointment that was awaiting official confirmation of its place in the RAF organization.

³⁹ Ibid., TNA AIR 2/8875, S35818, E 8A, dated 22 July 1935.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

1934.⁴¹ This apparent oversight aside, what is obvious is that Ellington was dominant in the debate from his initial Minute tasking DCAS to undertake the study, to his Memo prior to the 22 July 1935 Conference which so clearly focussed discussion and would have indicated to his subordinates what their senior had in mind. Aside from the primary sources it is notable that the key works that deal with this period, namely Montgomery-Hyde, Dean and Smith say nothing about this debate or this particular conference.⁴²

CAS tasked AMSO to co-ordinate the broad details with the wider staff.⁴³ This second phase of the re-organization addressed the consultation with civilian staff, field commanders and their staff, and the critically important Treasury, who were being asked how the structure would and could work, not what the structure should be, that had already been decided. And it is important to keep in mind that the discussion among the Air Council Members was focussed on the operational aspects of the re-organization not the administrative aspects of expansion.

Welsh approached Bullock on 2 August 1935 suggesting that he would ‘wish to see this file’.⁴⁴ On 10 August 1935 the Air Ministry Deputy Secretary, Ross outlined his concerns that the proposals involved ‘some highly important questions of financial control and procedure and of accounting organization’ and that the ‘Secretary will wish himself to review these points and thereafter to remark on the

⁴¹ TNA AIR 2/673 S32201 – War Organization of the Air Ministry –M21, dated 8 December 1933 - Minute from Secretary to CAS.

⁴² Montgomery-Hyde, *British Air Policy*; Smith, *British Air Strategy*; and Dean, *The Royal Air Force and Two World Wars*.

⁴³ TNA AIR 2/8875, S35818, E10a dated Jul 35 distributed under cover of S3598 Minute from D of O, dated 3 August 1935.

⁴⁴ TNA AIR 2/8875, S35818, Min 10, dated 2 August 1935; Welsh addressed his short Minute to the Secretary, DSD Air Cdre Barratt, and DOI, Gp Capt Peck.

proposals as a whole'.⁴⁵ Welsh approached the Secretary again on 15 October 1935 highlighting the keenness of the Air Staff to begin the process of re-organization.⁴⁶ Ross offered his view to Bullock on 19 October 1935 pointing out that the re-organization involved 3 sets of questions: the organization of the commands; the organization of the administrative services; and the details of the personnel establishments.⁴⁷ He did not debate the proposed Command re-organization but produced a note for the Secretary's consideration on the administrative services which he considered was the key to the successful implementation of the scheme. The tone of the Deputy Secretary's Minute was entirely helpful and contained an acknowledgement that Welsh was aware of the need to address the detail of administrative arrangements and personnel issues.⁴⁸

Bullock minuted Welsh on 30 October 1935 his broad support and agreement with Ross' issues.⁴⁹ He confirmed that he was in favour of air rank administrative officers at the commands but wanted to be reassured that administrative functions would not be repeated further down the chain of command. His views on financial decentralization are revealing:

I am afraid there is little prospect of such decentralization on any extensive scale. My personal opinion is that financial control tends to be over-centralized throughout the Government machine, e.g., I do not consider the Treasury itself delegates sufficiently to the big spending departments.⁵⁰

He feared:

⁴⁵ Ibid., Min 12, dated 10 August 1935.

⁴⁶ Ibid., Min 22, dated 15 October 1935.

⁴⁷ Ibid. Min 23, dated 19 October 1935.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ See AIR 2/8875, S35818, M 24, dated 30 October 1935.

⁵⁰ Ibid., M 24, dated 30 October 1935.

that the theory and practice of centralization are so deep rooted in our system of National Finance that the Treasury would never agree to any extensive further devolution of financial powers.⁵¹

Bullock then observed:

On the other point canvassed on this file, I myself, feel that an AOC-in-C Air Defence of Great Britain, outside the Air Ministry, will be inevitable later on – with a minimum staff, primarily for operations.⁵²

However, he also noted that CAS proposed to let this matter rest until more experience had been gained and he supported this approach and implicit concept of decentralisation.⁵³

The Decentralization Conference - 18 November 1935

The meeting Welsh had hoped to hold in August was finally convened in the Air Ministry on 18 November 1935 with AMSO taking the Chair. Newall began by stating that the purpose of the gathering was ‘to obtain the views, particularly of the Commands, regarding the possibility of decentralizing administration from the Air Ministry’.⁵⁴ He also highlighted the need to remove administrative duplication, or ‘post offices’ in the chain of command, and to delegate the fullest authority to subordinate commanders to allow them to act without ‘constant reference to higher command’. He then went on to inform the Conference that the CAS ‘wished to have only one link in the administrative chain between Stations and the Air Ministry’. Accordingly, it was proposed that the Groups would have full operational staff but practically no administrative personnel, while the Commands would be given a full complement of both. He observed that:

⁵¹ Ibid., M 24, dated 30 October 1935.

⁵² Ibid., M 24, dated 30 October 1935.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ TNA AIR 2/8877, S35981, E 32, dated 12 December 1935.

This would mean that the general work of administration was carried out directly between the Commands and the Stations, leaving the main function of the Group Commander the training and operation of the units under his command.⁵⁵

The Conference began with the C-in-C ADGB, Steel, observing that he believed both the Commands and Groups would require full administrative staff and that there was little, in his opinion, that the Air Ministry could 'off-load' on the Commands. Unsurprisingly, the Group commanders believed that if there was to be only one filter between the units and the Air Ministry, it should be the Groups and that they would require administrative staff. Steel explained that a similar experiment in India, when No. 1 (Indian) Group at Peshawar had been given only operational staff, had failed because the AOC lacked the essential administrative detail to carry out his duties. That AOC was now DSD, Barratt, who supported C-in-C ADGB saying that until he was given his full staff 'his position as an operational commander was intolerable'.⁵⁶

The debate continued with two viewpoints emerging which pivoted on the need for full staff support at the various levels of command. The Deputy Secretary of the Air Ministry, Ross, pointed out that the Service was short of experienced staff officers and would be for the foreseeable future; therefore it was essential to place these valuable personnel in the location where they could have the maximum effect. Barratt observed that comparisons which were regularly made between the organization of the Army and that of the Air Force were of limited value given the fundamentally different natures of the two Services. He argued that Group Commanders needed full staff support as did the Cs-in-C but that the exact detail of

⁵⁵ Ibid., E 32, dated 12 December 1935.

⁵⁶ Ibid., E 32, dated 12 December 1935.

the balance of duties could be developed later. Picking up on comments by the Deputy Secretary, Barratt pointed out that the Esher Committee has recommended that the 'number of units which should be controlled by any formation was from 3 to 5'. Barratt saw no reason to depart from that view.

Representatives of the Inland, Coastal, and Fighting Areas all supported the need for administrative staff at group and command levels. Steel then suggested that a Sub-Committee should study the matter and examine how much decentralization was possible or desirable. He went on to observe that a Group Commander 'could not divorce himself from technical development and maintenance.' Therefore, he was forced to conclude that two filters were required between the Air Ministry and the units.

At this point the Conference moved on to the discussion of which units would form which Groups. A lengthy debate ensued in which idea and counter idea were explored without any clear outcome.⁵⁷ If the purpose of the Conference has been to reach broad consensus, then it had failed. If, on the other hand, its purpose was to flush out positions, allow all parties to have their say, and to explore alternatives that the Air Staff could then incorporate into the final proposal, then it was a success.

The year concluded with an exchange of staff notes setting out respective positions for the record but with no major alterations to the re-organization as envisaged by the CAS. Indeed, Lord Swinton wrote to Lord Wigram at Buckingham Palace on 12 December 1935 seeking His Majesty's approval to a series of senior appointments he wished to make and informing the King that:

⁵⁷ Ibid.

I am proposing to divide the Command into two, one Command of bomber squadrons and one of fighter. The squadrons will be organized in groups under these two Commands, and responsibility for co-ordination will rest with the Chief of the Air Staff.⁵⁸

It would be somewhat awkward for the Secretary of State to walk away from such an unequivocal statement to the Sovereign, whose constitutional position was that of Chief of the Royal Air Force.⁵⁹

Air Council Deliberation

On 15 January 1936, AMSO wrote to Lord Swinton, the Under Secretary of State, Sir Philip Sassoon, CAS, AMP, AMRD, and the Secretary, Bullock.⁶⁰

Enclosing provisional establishment outlines and a memorandum outlining the details of the new organization, he asked his colleagues to ‘consider this organization and to agree to it in principle after which Treasury approval will be sought.’ He pointed out that initial discussion with the Treasury had exposed their concerns as to the number of groups and staff proposed, but he advised his colleagues that if they continued to agree that the proposed structure was required, then Treasury support could be expected.⁶¹

AMP contended that he was unclear as to what useful function the TC would perform in peacetime.⁶² He felt the Training Groups were sufficiently distinct as to require no greater co-ordination and to thus the case for a C-in-C was dubious.

Nonetheless, he supported the idea of decentralization and minimizing the duplicative staff that some were insisting upon. He suggested that a Maintenance Liaison Officer

⁵⁸ TNA AIR 2/8875, S35818, Loose leaf copy of letter to Lord Wigram from S of S, dated 12 December 1935.

⁵⁹ *Air Force List*, January 1935.

⁶⁰ AIR 2/8875, S35818, E 30a, dated 15 January 1936.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, E 30c, dated 29 January 1936.

at the Group level could ensure the Group Commander was sufficiently briefed on maintenance issues without the need for additional technical staff.⁶³

AMRD, Dowding, replied on 1 February 1936 in his own hand and as far as AMSO would have been concerned, in a less than fully supportive way.⁶⁴ He stated:

I am sorry to say that I should find the greatest difficulty in agreeing to this organization in principle. It is often the case that a system, not theoretically sound, can be made to work by energy and good will, and it may be that this is such a system, but I have my doubts. [Emphasis in the original]

I presume, although it is not precisely stated, that the basic fact is that it is impossible to find the individuals to man Command and Group Staffs for some years to come, and that some device must be found to for overcoming this difficulty. But this is only a surmise, and without the basic facts and figures, I could not put forward any constructive criticism.

I should very much like to see the Minutes of the November Conference (para 10) if they exist. My main apprehensions are that, instead of decentralization, a terrific centralization will be created at Command HQ, and that the difficulty of visiting stations so numerous and widely scattered will result in a loss of touch in technical matters; and that the proposal to allot Personnel Work to Groups, and the remainder of the Administrative work at Commands, will result in confusion.⁶⁵

One wonders what AMSO must have thought on reading such a submission.

However, with typical efficiency and speed, CAS had already written to AMSO on 20 January 1936 stating:

I agree in principle with this organization.⁶⁶

This swiftness of response, and the close working and personal relationship Newall enjoyed with the Secretary of State, Lord Swinton, were to be pivotal in securing the decision he and the CAS sought.⁶⁷

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., E 30d, dated 1 February 1936.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., E 30b, dated 20 January 1936.

⁶⁷ J A Cross, *Lord Swinton* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1982) p. 150. Cross records that Swinton's relationship with Ellington was 'never close' and that he found Dowding 'prickly'.

The Secretary replied to AMSO on 29 January 1936 the same day he minuted the Secretary of State.⁶⁸ To Newall he offered a lengthy critique by Ross of the re-organizational proposals and the opinion that ‘there is need for further consideration and elucidation of the major points raised.’ But he endorsed Ross’ final summary and with the exception of clarification regarding 12 and 13 Groups and the organization and control of the Training Groups, was broadly content, especially as AMSO’s purpose was to obtain Treasury approval for the general scheme to enable the necessary work to institute the Commands to proceed.⁶⁹ However, in his note to Swinton, the Secretary adopted a different tone:

What I think is wanted before there can be any question of taking an Air Council decision is further examination and elucidation between branches, and I have asked AMSO to discuss the points raised by the Deputy Secretary with him in the first instance.

I think the proposals are certainly not quite ripe for discussion at a special meeting of the Air Council and unless you particularly wish I am not at all certain that such a meeting will necessarily be the best procedure.⁷⁰

A day later, 30 January 1936, Lord Swinton replied to the Secretary:

I now understand the main proposals, which I think are sound.⁷¹

He then endorsed the principles of decentralization, the desire to eliminate ‘post offices’, the concept of a Maintenance Liaison Officer at the Groups, the need for an AOC to command and oversee the Training Groups, and the general desire to minimize staff size, stating clearly that:

While I am satisfied as to the general principles, it is the duty of the Air Council to ensure that the number of Groups does not exceed what is really necessary, and that the staffs provided are no larger than is necessary.⁷²

⁶⁸ TNA AIR 2/8875, S35818, E 30e, dated 29 January 1936.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., E 30f, dated 29 January 1936.

⁷¹ Ibid., E 30f, dated 30 January 1936.

⁷² Ibid.

A day later the Secretary forwarded a Minute to AMSO with the Secretary of State's decision:

I have always had a very open mind about the Training Command, and am quite ready to accept it – subject to S of S's remarks on the question of staff.⁷³

There is no indication of written contact between CAS, AMSO and the S of S. But the swiftness of Swinton's response in the face of the Air Ministry's Secretary's urging for delay and further study, suggests that some pre-briefing of Lord Swinton must have occurred. Either way, the stage was now set for Newall and Welsh, assisted by Ross, to engage with the Treasury and gain their approval.⁷⁴

This process was concluded on 25 April 1936 when Mr Parker from The Treasury wrote to Ross giving the Treasury's overall approval⁷⁵. A number of issues needed clarification but none were significant. Ross was thus able to issue the Air Council commanded letter, promulgating the establishment of the new command structure, on 4 May 1936⁷⁶. The letter summarized the background to the changes and provided Appendices that illustrated the new structure. It directed that Bomber and Fighter Commands would come into existence on 1 July 1936 and that the Training Command would form 'a little later'.⁷⁷ In actual fact DofO sent a directed letter on 20 May 1936 clarifying the establishment dates.⁷⁸ Fighter and Bomber Command would now form on 14 July 1936 and Training Command would form with 24 Group on 10 July 1936. He also clarified that 22 (Army Co-Operation) Group would be

⁷³ Ibid., E 30f, dated 31 January 1936.

⁷⁴ Ibid., E 33a, dated 23 April 1936.

⁷⁵ Ibid., E 34a, dated 25 April 1936.

⁷⁶ Ibid., E 39a, dated 4 May 1936.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., E 40a, dated 20 May 1936.

administered by Fighter Command but for operations and training it would remain directly under the Air Ministry.⁷⁹

Bowhill and Dowding - Unfinished Business

This, however, was still in the future. Newall still owed his colleagues AMP and AMRD a response to their earlier correspondence. He used a similar opening paragraph to both asking them to accept in principle the proposed re-organization of the Home Commands.⁸⁰ He pointed out that the proposals had already been accepted by the S of S and CAS and that there was a pressing need to reorganize in advance of the new squadrons forming. To both he offered the concession that he did ‘not pretend that this re-organization is perfect and at first sight there may appear a number of anomalies.’ And then went on to address the various issues they had raised in their correspondence with him. Once again the discussion related to operational focus, administrative viability and the necessity for staff duplication. His note to Dowding concluded with the sentence:

I am asking you to accept it in principle now so that we may proceed to work out the details and have the organization given an adequate trial.⁸¹

AMP replied on 25 March 1936 repeating some of his concerns about the Training and Armament Groups but concluding:

I note the S of S and CAS have agreed in principle to the proposed re-organization. Having put the above opinions on record, however, I will spare no pains to ensure, as far as I can, that this new organization will work properly and smoothly.⁸²

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., E 30c, dated 23 March 1936, M2 was sent to AMP (Bowhill) and M3 to AMRD (Dowding).

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., E 30c, dated 25 March 1936.

AMRD's response, sent on 27 March 1936, deconstructed virtually every element of the proposed structure. Dowding began simply:

You put me in a very difficult position.

If my agreement is of any importance or value, I wish that I had been consulted before CAS gave his approval, instead of being presented with a '*chose jugee*' and asked to accept it blindly.

I am afraid I am not convinced by your arguments in minute 3.⁸³

Dowding's arguments were based on a basic difference of opinion in which he felt that the way to achieve less upward referencing was for the Air Ministry to demand less information. He was not convinced that the approach taken was the best, or that alternatives had been given a fair assessment, or that the RAF's propensity to employ officers in staff appointments vice warrant officers in the manner of the Army was the most efficient way ahead. He also challenged the immediacy of the need for change given that the expansion of the Service would take place incrementally and not all at once, therefore, there would be time to evolve new structures.

In view of his approach to command during the Battle of Britain his comments at paragraphs 17 and 18 are interesting:

I consider that the alternative of leaving the Groups devoid of staff and concentrating staff at Command Headquarters is still less desirable because I am convinced that, in large formations, great congestion of work would occur, and the staff will be quite out of touch with the units. But I think the system might be made to work after a fashion if Group Commanders were considered not as being intermediate links in the chain of Commands, but as being inspectors of training and operations acting under Command Headquarters.

I do like the idea but, even so, I would prefer it to the proposal with which I am now asked to agree, which, in my opinion, is a system foredoomed to failure. Neither the C-in-C nor the Group Commander will be in a position

⁸³ Ibid., E 30d, dated 27 March 1936.

to have complete information about his units. A divided control and responsibility will ensue, which is bound to lead to inefficiency.⁸⁴

Dowding, finished his critique with an expression of loyalty:

If and when it should ever be my duty to command a Formation under the system now approved by CAS, I need hardly say that I should make the most loyal and wholehearted attempt to make it a success.

What you are asking me to do is something quite different and that is to accept, in principle, as a Member of the Air Council, a scheme which I believe to be basically unsound, on the grounds that it has already been submitted to, and accepted by, the senior Members of the Council.⁸⁵

To put this comment in context, Dowding was due to handover the post of AMRD to Freeman in four days on 1 April 1936 in preparation for assuming the post of C-in-C Fighter Command, an appointment approved by HM The King in December 1935. If his colleagues were of the opinion that Dowding was difficult and ‘prickly’, this letter will have done nothing to change their minds. But, as with most of Dowding’s viewpoints, there was a great deal to be said for what he raised. The problem was that his response arrived a month after CAS and S of S had signalled their agreement to the plan. Whereas AMP accepted this with good grace, Dowding’s response could hardly be seen as displaying the levels of collegiate responsibility hoped for in a senior Air Council member.

Newall let the matter rest with Dowding but informed CAS on 16 April 1936 that he had gained the agreement of AMP but not AMRD.⁸⁶ Nonetheless, AMSO requested CAS’ permission to proceed with the final Air Council endorsement. He added a hand written note to CAS:

⁸⁴ Ibid., E 30d, dated 27 March 1936.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., Min 30, dated 16 April 1936.

Possibly when the late AMRD assumes his new command you may wish to consider writing him a line?⁸⁷

The following day, 17 April 1936, CAS minuted AMSO:

I agree that this organization should be given a fair trial, and I have already discussed the matter with A/M Sir H Dowding. I think we can rely on him to give the scheme a fair trial, and I think, also, that it may require considerable modification in detail. The aim is sound; it is the difficulty of getting a commander to dissociate himself from one aspect of the activities of his Command which is likely to give trouble.⁸⁸

Barratt - an Alternative View

Barratt, DSD, arrived at the Air Ministry on 12 January 1935 from the post of SASO, HQ RAF India and prior to that appointments commanding No 1 (Indian) Group, Chief Instructor at the RAF Staff College, and more distantly Commandant of the School of Army Co-Operation. He was both an accomplished staff officer and seasoned commander. On 4 October 1935 he wrote directly CAS to outline his views on the proposed re-organization.⁸⁹ That he should feel able to do this says much for Ellington's openness and approachability, traits which he is often not credited with having in abundance.⁹⁰ That the nature of Barratt's note was one of criticism of the position taken by CAS further supports the contention that the Ellington Air Ministry was one where staff felt able to speak up and offer their views.

Barratt began by recognizing that CAS had already offered his clear view on the future organization of the Home Command and stated that:

It is therefore with considerable diffidence that I submit this note giving my views in favour of a C-in-C of all the operational Commands at home.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Ibid., Min 30, dated 16 April 1936, hand written note before the salutation signature to CAS from AMSO (Newall), dated 16 April 1936.

⁸⁸ Ibid., Min 31, dated 17 April 1936.

⁸⁹ Ibid., Min 19, dated 4 October 1935.

⁹⁰ Montgomery-Hyde, *British Air Policy*, p. 494.

⁹¹ TNA AIR 2/8875, S35818, Min 19, dated 4 October 1935.

He suggested that:

the centralization of control under the CAS of the Bomber and Fighter Commands is likely to be dangerous from two points of view:

- (a) The Staff side.
- (b) Operations.

Barratt felt that on the outbreak of war the demands on CAS would be enormous, so much so, that he would rarely be able to dedicate sufficient time to pure operational matters. This would necessitate the DCAS assuming the operational role, ‘in other words the DCAS becomes a virtual C-in-C’.⁹²

He also suggested that if the Air Ministry were to become pivotal in the conduct of day to day Home Defence Operations there would be an inevitable tendency for the Air Staff to over focus on that campaign to the detriment of other actions taking place elsewhere. To support this argument he highlighted the partial focus created in the War Office during the First World War in part by the tendency for the General Staff officers to become over immersed in the daily conduct of Western Front operations. Quoting Sir William Robertson in *Soldiers and Statesmen*, he argued that the CAS would need to act as a ‘shock absorber’ between the Prime Minister and the overall C-in-C of RAF forces.

He argued for the creation of a small operational staff for the C-in-C that would conduct exercises and training with the forces they could expect to command in war. He deprecated the alternative whereby peacetime staff officers would take up war appointments with little experience or knowledge of the structures and units under command.

⁹² Ibid., Min 19, dated 4 Oct 35.

In terms of operational factors, he found himself at variance with DCAS in considering that although the offensive and defensive organizations had separate functions, they were and would remain, mutually dependant. He suggested that there would be occasions when the bomber force might need to be directed against enemy aerodromes, and he asserted that he believed that ‘this action is better controlled by a C-in-C who is freed from all other distractions.’

He summarized his position:

I therefore submit that in order that our organization may proceed from peace to war with the minimum of dislocation and improvisation and be ready to operate at full efficiency from the outset, there should be a C-in-C supported by an organization and operational staff (including Intelligence) and Signals.⁹³

He thought it sensible that both the bomber and fighter units of the RAF Contingent should be organized under a single group which would ensure the AOC had experience in the training and operational control of the units he would command overseas.⁹⁴

CAS responded to AMSO on 8 October 1935 stating that he had read DSD’s Minute but he did not intend to change what was settled in July 1935.⁹⁵ He observed that:

DSD’s proposal really means introducing a super C-in-C between the Air Ministry and the organization proposed last July. Should it be considered necessary to do this, it can be done later. In any case during the expansion I am satisfied that we should adopt the organization by which Fighter and Bomber C-in-Cs come direct under the Air Ministry.⁹⁶

⁹³ Ibid., Min 19, dated 4 October 1935.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., Min 20, dated 8 October 1935.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Barratt became the Commandant of the RAF Staff College with promotion to AVM on 1 January 1936 and so it would seem that speaking his mind in a reasoned, logical, and loyal way to a CAS willing to listen and be challenged was no hindrance to Barratt's future prospects, and shows that the RAF and Air Ministry of the 1930s was an organization of which tolerated debate and the expression of well considered but contrary views.

The Re-organisation in Retrospect

The background and debate surrounding the re-organization of the RAF in 1936 has been reproduced in great detail for this information does not exist in any other publication, and its absence from the record inadvertently supports the view that the 1936 changes were primarily a response to the needs to manage the physical expansion of the Service.⁹⁷ The primary sources do not support this theory and the records reveal that the discussions overwhelmingly focussed on the operational and war preparedness needs of the Service. CAS, in particular, constantly referred to the requirement to construct a system that could transition from peace to war with the least possible disruption and maintenance of efficiency.⁹⁸ Even the opposing views offered by some were cast in terms of operational need. The greatest critic, Dowding, whose contribution to Newall effectively opposed almost every element of the proposed changes, did so because he held a different philosophy of command and operational effectiveness.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Montgomery-Hyde, *British Air Policy*, p. 385.

⁹⁸ TNA AIR 2/8875, S35818 Part I, E6b, Minute 1, dated 5 June 1935.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, E 30d, dated 27 March 1936.

The operational thesis is not to say that the re-organization did not facilitate the receipt and induction of the newly forming units and the various new aircraft that were to come into service after 1936. Clearly the new structure was better placed to administer the expansion. The decentralization of administration and the establishment of the Air Officer Administration (AOA) posts at the Command HQs was undoubtedly a more robust structure to oversee the myriad of issues created by expanding the RAF to meet the growing threat of war. On the other hand, the creation of the AOAs was primarily designed to ‘relieve the Commanders-in Chief of operational commands of as much administration work as possible’.¹⁰⁰ And this was:

intended to allow Commanders-in Chief to devote more time to the strategical, operational, and training aspects of their commands, to allow them to visit units to a greater extent than has hitherto been possible, and to attend to others matters which they are called upon to perform from time to time by virtue of their high rank and appointment.¹⁰¹

Thus the plans to address administration were grounded in the need to allow the commanders to focus on the operational aspects of their responsibility, a strand of thinking that can be easily traced back to the Brooke-Popham Report on Air Staff re-organization.¹⁰² Likewise the new SASO posts established in the Commands and Groups added further operational focus and oversight.

Relieved of their administrative responsibilities the SASOs were now able to focus exclusively on operations, training, and war preparation. That they were intended to be junior in rank to the AOAs was deliberate because they would be working on a daily basis with the C-in-Cs whose rank would ensure the authority and focus required for the primary purpose of the command or Group. The AOAs were

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., E 35a, Memorandum of Staff Organization for RAF at Home dated 8 October 1935.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² TNA AIR 2/673 S32201 – War Organization of the Air Ministry – Sir R Brooke-Popham’s Report Minute Sheet attached to E2.

officers of the General Duties branch, ie, they were aircrew with an operational background, and were expected to work independently using a combination of their own authority and that accorded them as the representative of the C-in-C.¹⁰³ However, the limited staff capacity of the RAF in the 1930s is highlighted by the fact that the intended rank differential between the AOA and the SASO did not emerge until the promotion of Evill to AVM as AOA Bomber Command in March 1938.¹⁰⁴ Until then the AOA and SASO posts were held by Air Cdres.¹⁰⁵ Nonetheless, the intent was for the AOA to work more independently and to allow the C-in-C and SASO to concentrate on operational matters.

The difficulty in populating the staff structure with officers of the correct rank illustrated one of the enduring aspects of life in the RAF of the mid-1930s. The Service had been so small in 1934, approximately 31,000 officers and men, that the expansion expected was too great and at too fast a pace for it to expand without a drastic reduction in rank experience and expertise.¹⁰⁶ If the RAF had existed in a vacuum, then this would not have been an issue as it would have been its own reference point. But it did not, and it had to maintain equality of rank and talent with its sister Services, who would be all too quick to highlight any shortfall in standards by the junior Service. Thus, Ellington and Bowhill, as AMP, were acutely aware that despite the pressures of expansion, rank still needed to be earned and its recipients must be respected as having achieved a comparable standard to their Army and Navy colleagues. Allowing officers time to grow at a controlled pace in the new structure,

¹⁰³ *Air Force List* January 1937, the AOAs were: Bomber Command, Air Cdre Brock; Fighter Command, Air Cdre Gill; the SASOs were: Bomber Command, Air Cdre Evill; Fighter Command, Air Cdre Cunningham.

¹⁰⁴ *Air Force List* for January 1939.

¹⁰⁵ *Air Force Lists* January 1937 to January 1939.

¹⁰⁶ Montgomery Hyde, *British Air Policy*, p. 353.

as the structure also grew, ensured those officers were well grounded and ready for the challenges ahead. The same approach guided the development of the Services equipment.

Ellington is often criticised for his reluctance to advocate more rapid expansion of the RAF in the early years of expansion.¹⁰⁷ His logic was twofold. First, he doubted the realistic pace of German re-armament particularly in the air, and secondly, he did not wish to fill the RAF with aircraft that would be obsolete before the beginning of the war for which he was preparing.¹⁰⁸ This last point placed him at variance with those who wished to maintain a numerical dominance over Germany to underpin diplomacy.¹⁰⁹ Ellington would appear to have had his focus on the need to build a Service of the correct quality to meet the expected quality of the Luftwaffe when the war came.¹¹⁰ Montgomery-Hyde recorded Ellington as saying:

There is no reason to change the view that Germany will not be ready for or is not intending to go to war before 1942.¹¹¹

In this Ellington was to be proven wrong, but he was merely repeating the common view of the time. In the meantime, support to diplomacy and qualitative preparation for inevitable war with Germany remained very hard imperatives to harmonize in 1934-6.

The general shortage of experienced junior staff officers also had its impact on the plans for the re-organization. Dowding addressed this with Newall in their

¹⁰⁷ Terraine, *The Right of the Line*, p28.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, pp. 335-336.

¹⁰⁹ The following aircraft entered service in the months given: February 1935, Vickers Vincent and Valentia, April 1935, Short Singapore, May 1935, Gloster Gauntlet, December 1935, Hawker Hind, March 1936, Avro Anson, October 1936, Saro London, December 1936, Supermarine Stranraer. These aircraft represented the final development of the 1914-18 bi-plane and canvas design (with the exception of the Avro Anson) and illustrate the inadequate aircraft types that Ellington had to consider in balancing the needs of quantity and quality.

¹¹⁰ Montgomery Hyde, *British Air Policy*, p. 353.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 336.

exchange of letters in early 1936. Newall countered Dowding's assertion stating that although:

it would be impossible to produce in the time sufficient staff officers for the Groups and the Commands on the present basis, this was not the basic reason for changing the organization.¹¹²

Nonetheless, the shortage of qualified staff officers was a clear planning factor in determining the proposed structure. But it appears that Newall, in particular, was using this obvious constraint as a virtue to drive through bigger changes in attitude that he, and others, especially Welsh, felt were needed if the RAF was to be properly configured for war. Newall told Dowding that the main reasons for the organisational changes were:

the necessity for speeding up the administrative machine, for giving officers responsibility concomitant with their rank and appointment and to free Commanders of certain details of administration to enable them to devote more time to operational training.¹¹³

He then went on to highlight the practice that he felt had developed during the early years of the RAF's post-war existence:

Up to the present, as pointed out in the draft Air Council letter, owing to the necessity for producing a common doctrine there has been a tendency for subordinate commanders to lean on their superiors in matters which it is now considered they are capable of handling themselves. This habit of leaning goes right up the ladder from the Units to the Air Ministry and if we do not change our organization, will persist.¹¹⁴

Newall hoped that by removing one of the administrative 'links in the chain', self-sufficiency would be encouraged and the decentralization they sought would be achieved.¹¹⁵ Dowding remained sceptical.¹¹⁶

¹¹² TNA AIR 2/8875, S35818, E 30d Min 3, dated 23 March 1936.

¹¹³ Ibid., E 30d Min 3, dated 23 March 1936.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., E 30d Min 3, dated 23 March 1936.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., E 30d Min 4, dated 27 March 1936.

The working practices of the inter-war Air Ministry are not well covered in the literature. Few publications address this rather mundane topic as most focus on the more exciting narrative surrounding the development of the aircraft that formed the backbone of the expansion schemes. Even the various Official Histories and AHB Narratives throw little light on exactly how the Air Ministry worked and Dean, Ellington's PS, paints only a sketchy picture of the actual staff practices.¹¹⁷

The Air Ministry at Work

Although CAS had his detractors:

What is rarely mentioned is Ellington's superb quality as a Staff Officer. He had an acute mind and a remarkable memory. He was quick to embrace new ideas. His faults, if such they were, did not include a lack of understanding.¹¹⁸

Ellington is one of those senior officers of the RAF whom history has cast into the shadow of seemingly greater men. It is undoubtedly true that his assumption to the post of CAS came about in the most unfortunate of circumstances surrounding the death of Sir Geoffrey Salmond, and he was, therefore, clearly not the first choice.¹¹⁹ He was also a shy man whose military background did not include any operational flying, but that did not inhibit his ability to get on with his Service contemporaries, particularly his COS colleagues in the Royal Navy and Army. But Freeman's assertion that Ellington was 'the worst we ever had' probably reveals more about the opinionated Freeman than it does about Ellington.¹²⁰ He was clearly much more than that as the following summary will show.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Dean, *The Royal Air Force and Two World Wars*.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 88.

¹¹⁹ The Marquess of Londonderry, *Wings of Destiny* (London: Macmillan and Co Ltd, 1943) p. 162.

¹²⁰ Furse, *Wilfrid Freeman*, p. 95, footnote*.

¹²¹ Terraine, *The Right of the Line*, p. 16-17.

The initiating note to DCAS was sent by CAS on 5 June 1935. By 22 July 1935 CAS had held a Conference and confirmed in writing to his colleagues the broad details of the Re-Organization as it would unfold in 1936. The consultation with the Civil Service, Treasury and RAF operational commanders was undertaken by Newall and Welsh during the winter of 1935/36. But the S of S had been sufficiently briefed and convinced, presumably by Ellington and Newall, that in December 1935 he was confident enough to reveal the main details of the plan to the King. The Air Council and Secretary were engaged in January 1936 but their objections were circumvented by the CAS and S of S taking and recording their views before their objections could be raised. The subsequent harmonization of AMP and ARMD/C-in-C Fighter Command was handled directly by Ellington while Newall addressed the final details of the scheme with Ross, the Deputy Secretary in support. Just over a year after tasking the study, Ellington presided over the creation of the operational organization with which the RAF would fight the Second World War, and the basic structure had been decided within seven weeks in June and July 1935. It was a remarkable achievement and a repeat of the success Ellington had in reforming the Air Staff in 1934. But what does it show of the way the Air Staff worked?

The first observation is the central role of Ellington. He appears to have had a very clear idea of what he required before tasking the DCAS to study the matter. His habit of making his views clearly known also had the effect of focussing his subordinates to deliver his wishes not those of the assembled staff. Some would criticise this as being poor management because by making his views known he would inevitably limit the options that the staff would offer. On the other hand, his approach would today be called 'command-led' decision making, after which the staff

enact the commander's desire.¹²² However, given the complex nature of the re-organizational challenge it is debateable whether it required a more collegiate and consultative approach.¹²³ And it could be argued that by not fully satisfying the counterintuitive views of senior colleagues that the ground was set for continual debate and unnecessary adaptation in the future, as in fact occurred. But Ellington's main aim appears to have been to break the mould and create a new structure that he readily acknowledged was far from perfect. In terms of effective change management this was an essential step.

The second observation is the small circle of personnel who were actually within the decision-making group. Although CAS addressed his request to DCAS, AMSO and DofO dominate the subsequent staffing. The Secretary's Department had been informed via S.6 and probably updated by Dean, Ellington's PS, but Bullock was not officially informed until well after CAS had firmly concluded the shape of re-organized RAF. Air Council Members were handled personally by Ellington but their concerns expressed in early 1936 were only partially accommodated within the final plan. Finally, Swinton was clearly engaged and positively so. How this took place is unclear as Swinton's biographer suggests that Swinton only enjoyed a relationship with Ellington that was 'never close'.¹²⁴ It is likely that both Ellington and Newall engaged Swinton who was only too pleased to receive their support, for Swinton had

¹²² K Grint, *Leadership, Management and Command – Rethinking D-Day* (Trowbridge: Cromwell Press, 2008), pp. 13-16.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹²⁴ Cross, *Lord Swinton* p. 150. On the other hand, Cross records that 'he had high regards' for Newall, whom he first met in January 1934 when on his East African tour as Colonial Secretary.

a reputation for active engagement in his duties and a determination to be at the heart of senior decision making.¹²⁵

Thus, it is possible to identify a central group of decision makers that included Swinton, Ellington, and Newall with Welsh in senior staff support. In support were the other Air Council Members whose ‘agreement in principle’ was vital but whose views were of interest but little more. Next came the Secretary and Ministry civil servants whose task, as seen by Ellington, was to enable his decisions. Finally, the affected commanders in the field needed to be engaged in a way that allowed their views to be incorporated but not to the extent of altering the fundamental structure the CAS desired.

There was little wrong with this approach. It delivered an outcome swiftly that was to prove more than fit for purpose. It allowed significant a change programme to be undertaken in parallel with the other major changes that were underway in the RAF at the time. And it kept up the tempo of change in the wake of the re-organization of the Air Staff. It is also true that this small group was but one of many that orbited with Ellington at the centre. Other equally exclusive groups addressed equipment developments, training matters and financial scrutiny. The trio of Swinton-Ellington-Newall was not the only close group of decision-makers in the Air Ministry at that time, and there is no evidence to suggest that Ellington was exercising command through an early form of ‘kitchen cabinet’. What he appears to have been doing was to gather trusted advisors close for specific matters. He kept the SofS informed

¹²⁵ Ibid, p. 146. Cross states that Chamberlain as Chancellor, on one occasion criticized Swinton’s desire to be ‘his own Managing Director’.

because Swinton was well respected by the RAF and central to the final agreement of the scheme, as his role in January 1936 shows.

The final observation is that there appears to have been a deliberate distance between the RAF element of the Air Ministry and the Civil Service staff. That is not to say that at the more junior levels the working relationships were not close and harmonious, they clearly were and there is much primary evidence to support that assessment. In this case the distance appears to have been at the more senior level. In handling the Air Staff re-organization in 1934, Ellington had had difficulties with Bullock because the latter thought he had not been included early enough in the process. Ellington had, nonetheless, achieved his aim and reinforced his position in the ensuing staff exchange. In 1935/36 Ellington again engaged Bullock after the main decision had been made and again had difficulties in gaining the Secretary's agreement at the Air Council. Notably, unlike the Air Staff debate, Bullock chose not to engage with Ellington directly over the Command re-organization, which he left to Ross the Deputy Secretary. But Bullock's parallel submission to Newall and Swinton on 29 January 1936 suggests that Bullock was not above playing one off against the other to achieve his aims.¹²⁶

The insight the 1936 Re-Organization gives into the working practices of the Air Ministry is of a structure that, although confronted by monumental challenges, was well led and capable of reaching decisions and seeing them to fruition. The staff processes were tight, the committees and conferences focussed and well recorded, the engagement with other Government Departments was well handled and the communication and engagement with the RAF structure outside the Air Ministry was

¹²⁶ TNA AIR 2/8875, S35818, E 30e, dated 29 January 1936.

continual, broadly harmonious and productive, especially at the director level. Big personalities did stride the stage but these appear to have been quietly handled by the CAS himself. Constructive criticism was allowed and indeed encouraged. Those with a valid view needed to have no fear of offering their views, within the strictures of normal politeness, right up to and including a direct approach to the CAS even after he had made his final views quite clear.

This is a picture of an organization far removed from the staid, hierarchical structure ~~that~~ brooked eding no dissent that is often portrayed as the military culture of the 1930s. What is indisputable is that by the summer of 1936 the RAF had re-organised its Air Staff and Air Ministry and established a frontline command structure that was founded on the then agreed assessment of how a future war would develop. That concept envisaged largely separate campaigns being fought in distinct geographical settings. Thus the changes from the geographically defined 'Area' to the functionally defined Command and Group was accompanied by a conceptual view that the functionally defined commands would fight in geographically separated areas, thus obviating the need for intimate co-ordination. Were future operations not to develop along these lines then the functional model would be strained and the pressure placed on the CAS/Air Staff co-ordinating role could become unbearable. However, in 1936 there was little reason to believe any meaningful variation from the widely held view of a future war would unfold, indeed, a Joint Planning Committee

(JPC) report would shortly re-confirm the underlying principles that the RAF had used to establish the basis for its new Command structure.¹²⁷

The Super C-in-C Debate Returns

Barratt, Newall, and others had supported the idea that a super C-in-C should co-ordinate the operations of the Commands in war and prepare them in peace. CAS, in responding to Barratt's note to him on the subject had suggested that if the idea gained traction it could be accommodated at a later date. On 11 December 1936 CAS wrote to DCAS, AMSO and the new DSD, Air Cdre Douglas, stating:

The method of exercising higher command or control of the Fighter and Bomber Commands in War will have to be settled before long. During the present stage of the expansion, and while I was CAS and Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, Inspector General, I had intended to exercise the control by making him DCAS on the outbreak of war, and the existing DCAS, D O I only.¹²⁸

What the current DCAS thought of this is not recorded, but CAS had opened the debate on one aspect of the unfinished business of the 1936 Re-Organization. The outcome of this debate was to have significant implications and consequences for the higher direction of the war not just in the RAF, but in the other Services and the Nation's War Cabinet.

¹²⁷ JPC Paper 155 Appreciation of the situation in the event of a war against Germany in 1939 dated 26 October 1936, summarised in AHB Monograph *The RAF in the Bombing Offensive against Germany* Vol I, p. 145.

¹²⁸ TNA AIR 2/1950 S39818 Control of Bomber and Fighter Commands in Time of War, Minute 11, dated 11 December 1936.

Chapter 4

THE 1937 SUPREME AIR COMMANDER DEBATE

By July 1936 the RAF had established the basic structure of the Air Ministry and the Metropolitan Command organization that would operate throughout the Second World War. Ellington oversaw both reviews and his guiding and determining influence is clear in the surviving records. It is also clear that that he remained concerned about the higher command of the RAF in war and particularly the manner in which the new command structure would work.¹ The simple questions of who would ‘command’ the Commands and how that mechanism would operate remained unanswered.

Some clues to Ellington’s thinking can be seen in the documentation relating to the 1936 Command Review. CAS’ Minute to DCAS on 5 June 1935 highlighting the need for the RAF to adapt its command structure to meet the challenges of expansion emphasized far more the need to adapt the service’s structure to meets the challenges of war.² In particular it emphasised the need to ensure that the limited number of experienced staff officers in the RAF were effectively positioned within a system that could make best use of their talents with the minimum of duplication and friction. The efficiencies demanded by Ellington were required to meet the stark reality that the RAF was insufficiently manned with experienced staff officers to undertake the roles and responsibilities that would inevitably fall upon it in wartime.³

¹ TNA AIR 2/1950 S39818, Minute 11 dated 11 December 1936.

² TNA AIR 2/8875, S35818 Part I, E6b, Minute 1 dated 5 June 1935.

³ Ibid.

This theme pervades the paper circulated by Welsh, on 19 June 1935, and was the central topic for debate at the critical CAS meeting held on 22 July 1935.⁴

A further Memo from CAS

CAS circulated a memo firmly setting out his viewpoint and the organizational structure he wished to see.⁵ He was clear that the new commands would work directly to him via the air staff who would oversee the co-ordination of the functional commands proposed. At the Meeting he addressed whether the C-in-C ADGB was still required and concluded it was not and that in peacetime the duties of supervising Bomber Command and Fighter Command would be undertaken by the IG, the newly appointed Brooke-Popham, supported by the DSD. In wartime, Ellington said he envisaged he would be assisted by a deputy, the identity of who would be decided when the future of the IG was finally established. Clearly, CAS had in mind an operational command war role for the IG and a complementary peacetime role supervising the preparatory work of Bomber Command and Fighter Command.⁶

Ellington returned to this theme when he made public his concerns that the higher co-ordination of the RAF was still unresolved, on 16 November 1936, in another telling memorandum to his colleagues inviting their views on his proposal that the IG should now formally act in the role of senior co-ordinator of the functional commands.⁷ Writing to the Cs-in-C Bomber and Fighter Command, he stated:

⁴ Ibid., Welsh's Paper entitled Memorandum by D of O on the Organisation of the home Commands – 1935 Expansion Scheme C, is filed as E1A dated 19 June 1935, and E7a dated 22 July 1935.

⁵ Ibid., E 7a dated 22 July 1935.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ TNA AIR 2/1950, S39818, E 1A, 2A dated 16 November 1936.

I have recently been considering how the control of the Fighter and Bomber Commands is to be exercised in war, and I am quite clear this cannot be exercised direct by the Chief of the Air Staff.⁸

He continued:

As long as Sir Robert Brooke-Popham was available as Inspector-General, and during the period when expansion puts the greatest strain on our resources for the provision of staff, I have intended to make him my deputy should war break out while he was Inspector General and I was Chief of the Air Staff. Now, however, his time as Inspector-General is nearly up, and it is not yet settled whether or not there will be an Inspector-General to succeed him; and I also am approaching the end of my time.⁹

Although not previously officially stated it was clear Ellington intended to use Brooke-Popham and the small IG staff to carry out the function of higher co-ordination alluded to at the Command review meeting in July 1935. In a Minute to DCAS, AMSO, and DSD he was more specific in his thoughts:

During the present stage of the expansion, and while I was CAS and Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, Inspector-General, I had intended to exercise the control¹⁰ by making him DCAS on the outbreak of war, and the existing DCAS DOI only. This I have always recognized as a temporary expedient only until we had the time and means of setting up a permanent organization.¹¹

Both Steel at Bomber Command and Dowding at Fighter Command replied promptly the same day, 20 November 1936.¹²

Steel began by reassuring Ellington that he and Dowding had been considering the co-ordination of the two Commands for some time.¹³ He felt that peacetime co-ordination and liaison between 'must be continuous' but that appropriate guidance from the Air Ministry through DSD would suffice for non-routine matters such as RAF Displays, Army Manoeuvres etc. He observed that the established mechanism of

⁸ Ibid., E 1A, 2A dated 16 November 1936.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ellington was referring to the 'The method of exercising higher command or control over the Fighter and Bomber Commands in war.' Ibid. Min 11, para 1, dated 11 December 1936.

¹¹ Ibid., Minute 11 dated 11 December 1936.

¹² Ibid., E 4A and 5A dated 20 November 1936.

¹³ Ibid., E 4A dated 20 November 1936.

Air Ministry co-ordination conferences sufficed and that from them grew the staff integration necessary for efficient operations. Turning to the requirements of War, Steel offered the following:

In War time the situation is somewhat different, in fact, I think co-ordination as such will naturally be far less. We are now considering the simplest method by which Fighter Command is kept accurately informed of the movements of our own Bombers and for dealing with the Intelligence brought back continuously by our own Bombers. Our object is to provide the most simple machinery for producing what is required and cutting out any unnecessary links in the chain of communication.¹⁴

He summarised his opening thoughts thus:

You will see from the above remarks that as far as the actual carrying out of our respective duties I am quite satisfied that no additional supervision is required.¹⁵

C-in-C Bomber Command then addressed the question of how Bomber Command and Fighter Command would get the ‘necessary strategical direction in War.’ After summarizing Ellington’s proposal he stated simply:

May I say straight away that I think such an arrangement would be most unsatisfactory and very inefficient.¹⁶

Steel then developed his strongly held view that the responsibility for the overall co-ordination and command of the RAF could rest only with the CAS and if that argument was accepted that challenge then became one of creating sufficient capacity within the Air Staff to carry it out. Clear no fan of the post of IG, Steel was blunt:

Before giving you my ideas on how this might be done I want to refer to the question of an Inspector-General. I do not think there is a place for such an individual in the RAF and I think the appointment should be abolished.¹⁷

Ellington highlighted this passage in the File with his characteristic double pencil sidelining.¹⁸ It should be borne in mind that at the turn of 1936/37 Ellington was

¹⁴ Ibid., E 4A dated 20 November 1936.

¹⁵ Ibid., E 4A dated 20 November 1936.

¹⁶ Ibid., E 4A dated 20 November 1936.

¹⁷ Ibid., E 4A dated 20 November 1936.

expected to serve as CAS for no more than nine months and that the discussion over whether the post of IG should continue naturally intertwined with the debate over who should occupy that post. Ellington would have been a clear candidate. Thus, the situation facing the Cs-in-C was that a new CAS was about to be announced and the out-going CAS could very well be appointed to the IG role with responsibilities for the peacetime co-ordination and training of their Commands and their direction in War. This cannot have been a particularly appetizing prospect for the two main Field Commanders, Steel and Dowding.

Dowding's reply was more concise comprising six short paragraphs but equally non-supportive.¹⁹ As ever, Dowding was swiftly to the point:

The Commanders-in-Chief of the Bomber and Fighter Commands will be conducting two separate campaigns abroad and at home respectively, and I think that there is no necessity for the creation of any additional Command outside the Air Ministry. In fact, I think that the creation of any such Command would be definitely harmful as introducing an additional wheel of the chariot.

I think that the two Commanders-in-Chief should get their instructions direct from the CAS or from the Air Staff speaking on his behalf.

If the CAS is too pressed to exercise direct control, and if he feels that the existing Air Staff will be inadequate for the purpose, he could appoint a senior officer as his Deputy and allow the existing DCAS to revert to his primary function of 'Director of Operations and Intelligence.'²⁰

Dowding concluded by suggesting that his proposal could be useful in peacetime to alleviate the pressure he felt the Air Staff were already facing.²¹ The similarity of opinion and construct of these two letters suggests a measure of co-ordination between the respective offices of the Cs-in-C, despite Steel's request to CAS to be permitted to share a copy of his letter with Dowding. Both were firmly of the opinion

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., E 5A dated 20 November 1936.

²⁰ Ibid., E 5A dated 20 November 1936.

²¹ Ibid.

that a SAC was unnecessary. Both believed the Air Staff needed enhancement and additional senior deputies needed to be appointed. And both either explicitly, or implicitly, opposed the continuation of the IG position. This commonality of view from the two field commanders could not be ignored and was assessed by James to be the deciding factor in the ultimate decision.²²

Separate to the Cs-in-C, Ellington had written to Trenchard and Brooke-Popham seeking their views.²³ Trenchard's hastily dictated reply, signed by his PS, gives a feel for the mood of the time:

I am dictating this letter on the platform at Euston Station, so I shall not see it before it is sent to you, nor shall I be able to sign it.

Thank you for your letter and also the enclosures with reference to a C-in-C.

I am afraid I have never read anything that so fills me with alarm as the two letters you have sent me, as not, in my opinion, showing a grasp of the problem. As far as I can see both advocate the Air Ministry being Commander in Chief. This, of course, means eventually the Secretary of State – Quite impossible. I hope you will change it. Remember, I will not have read this after dictation.²⁴

Brooke-Popham's reply was more measured and comprehensive, and developed ideas that he had raised during the Air Ministry Review of 1934.²⁵ As a summary of what would be required in a future war it stands out for its foresight and clarity.

Beginning with an accurate summary that the 'main functions of the C-in-C Bomber Command' in war would be the allotment of tasks to the Groups and the ordinary duties of a C-in-C regarding maintenance and the sustainment of morale. He

²² James, *The Growth of Fighter Command 1936-1940* p.23, footnote 8.

²³ Ibid., TNA AIR 2/1950, S39818 to Brooke-Popham at E 3A dated 17 November 1936, and to Lord Trenchard at Enclosure E 6A dated 23 November 1936.

²⁴ Ibid., E 8A dated 25 November 1936.

²⁵ Ibid., E 9A dated 1 December 1936.

thought the commander should 'spend a lot of his time going round the squadrons, especially those that had had a rough time.' C-in-C Fighter Command would be 'responsible for the general direction of Fighter activities as between his Groups and must also keep a general watch on the enemy offensive'. In a sentence that would have great resonance in 1940, Brooke-Popham felt that C-in-C Fighter Command:

should not concern himself with the immediate details of raids but should watch methods and trend of enemy activities so as to be able to deduce what they are likely to do next.²⁶

Demonstrating a broader view of the interdependence of offensive and defensive operations than was evident in the replies of the responsible Cs-in-C, Brooke-Popham was unequivocal in calling for co-ordinated command and control:

There must be someone in supreme control to co-ordinate the Bomber and Fighter activities. For instance, if the Fighter Command are having great difficulty in dealing with one particular type of enemy aircraft, the Supreme Commander might have to order the Bomber Command to attack the depots that feed this particular type of enemy aircraft, or the aerodromes whence they operate, possible after consultation with the War cabinet through the CAS.²⁷

In pencil, Ellington sidelined this passage and commented 'Certainly'.²⁸

Brooke-Popham concluded his letter by summarizing his views on the post of IG which he felt was of great use during the period of expansion but could be difficult to sustain once the expansion was complete. Nonetheless, he felt there was much to be done and described a process which today would be seen as corporate mentoring which could enhance the capability and capacity of Service, acknowledging all the time that the appointment called for someone who besides:

possessing considerable tact, must have sufficient prestige and length of service to enable them to visit squadrons and Commands without causing

²⁶ Ibid., E 9A dated 1 December 1936.

²⁷ Ibid., E 9A dated 1 December 1936.

²⁸ Ibid., E 9A dated 1 December 1936.

offence, and he must also carry out his duties without encroaching on the authority of the CAS.²⁹

Ellington's correspondents emphasized the diversity of viewpoint that his proposal would have to harmonize. At the heart of the matter was the vision of air warfare that the various individuals held. If air warfare could be compartmentalized into offensive and defensive activities, then a process of staff co-ordination and liaison would probably suffice to ensure the necessary de-confliction and information flow; the view held by the two Cs-in-C. However, if air warfare was to be the interplay of offensive and defensive action integrated into a wider campaign of mutually supporting activity, then the need for more active and engaged command and control emerged. This was the view espoused by Brooke-Popham, and one suspects, also by Ellington.

Within the Air Staff, Ellington officially began the debate with the Minute to the DCAS, AMSO, and DSD on 11 December 1936.³⁰ Once again his responses highlighted the difference of viewpoints held by the staff. The DCAS response was sent 3 February 1937 and supported the views of the Cs-in-C.³¹ Agreeing with the view that the need for co-ordination between the two commands was 'very small indeed', DCAS offered the view that the type of 'control' that would be necessary in war would be the 'issue of instructions and directives' which would be very different in nature between the two commands. He felt Fighter Command's role was 'a cut-and-dried job' that was not 'susceptible of orders or instructions from above.' Indeed, he felt that:

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., M11 dated 11 December 1936.

³¹ Ibid., M13 dated 3 February 1937.

It may be that the Air Ministry would wish to give instructions on points of detail but in regard to the major policy of the campaign there is really nothing to be said to them except to do their best to defeat the enemy attacks.³²

The direction of Bomber Command was a different proposition. DCAS concluded that the flexibility of attack offered by Bomber Command would lead to a situation in which it would be pulled in a ‘variety of ways and a variety of directions’. He felt sure the War Cabinet:

would take a very direct and real interest in the operations of the bombers, and no doubt there will be many conflicting demands from various quarters.³³

He then offered a view that would be central to the future conduct of the air offensive:

In my view, a decision as to how the bombers are to be used cannot be made by the Bomber Commander-in-Chief nor indeed by anyone except as a result of discussion and agreement at the War Cabinet or Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee. I maintain that no CAS would abrogate his responsibilities for giving advice to the War Cabinet or to the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee as to the proper direction in which the bombers should be used, and for this reason hold that there is no place for a super Commander-in-Chief.³⁴

Addressing Trenchard’s criticism that the proposals risked turning the Air Ministry into a ‘Commander-in-Chief’, DCAS pragmatically highlighted that whatever arrangements would be concluded there would always be a need for the Air Ministry to pass on the direction of the War Cabinet and that that, in itself, did not constitute the assumption of ‘Commander’ status by the Air Ministry. He concluded by agreeing with Steel and Dowding that the time may have come for the post of DCAS to be split from that of DOI but he reaffirmed that he was firmly of the view that the CAS must

³² Ibid., M13 dated 3 February 1937.

³³ Ibid., M13 dated 3 February 1937.

³⁴ Ibid., M13 dated 3 February 1937.

be singularly responsible for the issuing of orders, albeit through the normal staff process.³⁵

On 3 March 1937, AMSO, Newall, sent his reply.³⁶ He began by highlighting a challenge the RAF continued to face, namely the acceptance of its method of command and stated his view that:

I can see no real analogy with C-in-C in the Field but I feel most strongly it is essential that the basic principle of a supreme commander should be preserved and indeed it seems to me even more essential for operations at home.³⁷

Disagreeing wholeheartedly with Steel and Dowding to the point of suggesting he understood their ‘parochial point of view’ that they would like ‘to be left alone to get on with their jobs and resent any possible interference’, he raised a potentially significant point concerning the nature of warfare fought over the Metropolitan area. Newall considered that in the event of a major air attack the population would demand the appointment and identification of a ‘generalissimo’ who would be responsible for all aspects of the aerial battle. He was convinced that:

No kind of committee control, divided responsibility, Air Council direction or anything of that kind would satisfy the public and what was really required is the inspiration and confidence such as that inspired by Kitchener at the commencement of the late War.³⁸

But the problem would then become how to protect the authority of the CAS and prevent the SAC from being constantly summoned to the War Cabinet. In outlining his ideas he had encapsulated the dilemma the RAF faced.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., M14 dated 3 March 1937.

³⁷ Ibid., M14 dated 3 March 1937.

³⁸ Ibid., M14 dated 3 March 1937.

Newall also took exception to the view expressed by DCAS that the co-ordination between the Commands would be 'very small indeed'. With prescience which hindsight confirms he went on to state:

I am convinced that this will prove a fallacy and in addition to the co-ordination between these two Commands there will be the operations of the Coastal Command, possible air striking forces and contingents with the Army on the Continent, and further, as each year passes and the range and speed of aircraft increases, air forces in the Middle East at any rate are becoming operationally so near to this country that their activities may well require co-ordination.³⁹

In 1937 this was the stuff of dreams but by 1943/44 it was a matter of fact and an issue of command still demanding resolution.

Newall concluded with five summary points including his view that Home air defence presented an enormous task which must be undertaken by a commander, or 'generalissimo' as he termed the appointment, who enjoyed government and public confidence. That commander would need a good staff and a location close to, but outside London.⁴⁰ Douglas, replied on 11 March 1937 concurring with Newall before stating that the CAS should set out the strategic policy determined by the War Cabinet to the 'generalissimo' who should then ensure it was carried out in the most efficient and effective manner by the various forces at his disposal.⁴¹ He would, in effect, 'allot the tasks to the various Commanders-in-Chief'. He also emphasized that there were great advantages in having the detailed direction of the air war in the hands of a single commander who could view the air strategy as a whole unencumbered by distracting administration.⁴²

³⁹ Ibid., M14 dated 3 March 1937.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., M15 dated 11 March 1937.

⁴² Ibid.

At the end of this consultation process Ellington faced two firmly held viewpoints from within his own Air Staff and from the Commanders-in-Chief. His method of resolution gives further evidence that he was a man of far firmer conviction than historians have previously credited. While various staffs were responding with their views, Ellington had already gained the support of the SofS, Swinton, to the main elements of his proposal. On 5 February 1937 CAS wrote to DCAS to inform him that the SofS had agreed to the establishment in time of war of an operational command interposed between the CAS and the Cs-in-C of the four commands at home.⁴³ The command would probably be formed from the IG and his Staff and would be located close to the Air Ministry; its function would be to issue directives and instructions at the behest of the CAS and the War Cabinet. Internal staff discussions continued but on 19 April 1937 the Secretary, Sir Donald Banks, wrote to the Home Commands informing them that an overarching operational command would be formed in wartime to oversee and co-ordinate their operations.⁴⁴ The SofS signalled his agreement on 15 April 1937 adding in a hand written footnote that he assumed that there would be 'no public announcement of any kind'.⁴⁵ No such public announcement was planned and as far as the CAS was concerned the matter was now settled along with 3 other matters that developed in parallel with the SAC debate.

First, the PM established on 15 February 1937 a Standing Sub-Committee of the CID to examine defence plans from the point of view of Government Policy and to 'Provide a possible nucleus of a War Committee or War Cabinet in the event of

⁴³ TNA AIR 2/1945, S39754, minute M14 dated 5 February 1937.

⁴⁴ TNA AIR 2/1950 S39818, E28D dated 19 April 1937.

⁴⁵ Ibid., M 27 dated 15 April 1937.

War'.⁴⁶ Second, the future of the IG position had been finalized following a discussion between the SofS and CAS.⁴⁷ Ellington would assume the role on standing down as CAS on 1 September 1937 and thus become the inaugural SAC. And third, the selection of Ellington's successor which the SofS and CAS had also discussed at their meeting on the afternoon of 13 January 1937 was also finalised.⁴⁸ Swinton chose Newall who would assume the role on Ellington's departure on 1 September 1937.

Given the juxtaposition of all these various decisions and events, it would be reasonable to conclude that Ellington's determination to steer his plan through largely unmodified, and in the face of unanimous opposition from his Cs-in-C, would have in some small part been influenced by the foreknowledge of his appointment as the IG. Likewise, Newall's support for the proposal, but with the caveat that the 'generalissimo' should be located outside the Air Ministry, suggests that he too was aware of his likely succession when drafting his reply to Ellington almost a month after Ellington had informed the Staff that the SofS had agreed the plan. The subsequent speed with which matters were concluded and the absence of any obvious further dialogue with the Cs-in-C or Trenchard, again suggests the Air Ministry was engaged in a formal process of consultation for procedural propriety, perhaps behind a more informal dialogue, to ensure an outcome that it had sought in the first place. However, the internal decision making of the Air Staff and Air Ministry now had to be exposed to the scrutiny of the other Services and the COS Secretariat under Hankey. Unfortunately for Ellington and Swinton, their 'internal organizational

⁴⁶ TNA AIR 9/81, HA/1/59 AHB, Plans archives Vol 59, 'Co-ordination and Control of Defence Operations', Loose enclosure outlining the composition and purpose of the Stand Sub-Committee of the CID, dated 15 February 1937.

⁴⁷ CAS Private Appointment Papers held by the AHB, Unnumbered Confidential Minute from CAS to SofS dated 13 January 1937.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

matter' now became entwined and complicated by the arguments designed to support the RAF's staffing of the Inquiry into the future organization of the FAA.

Wider Implications of the FAA Dispute

By early 1937 DD Plans, Harris, had developed a wide ranging, but somewhat strongly worded, paper addressing the higher command of air power in general and the FAA in particular.⁴⁹ Harris argued that the only way to exploit the air arm that the Nation could afford was to ensure it was used in the most efficient and effective way and that that required a flexible command structure that was able to allocate scarce resources to the most important areas for as long as required and no longer. Proposals that allocated aircraft to self-sufficient organizations were, according to Harris, wasteful, inefficient and indicative of a Service, the Royal Navy, which did not understand the nature of air power and the need for flexible command arrangements.⁵⁰

On 8 March 1937 he wrote to DCAS, Pierse, emphasizing the need to reach some measure of agreement over the method of exercising effective co-ordination, in this case, of operational planning.⁵¹ He identified four areas of co-ordination that events were to prove to be particularly troublesome once war began; integration of Coastal Command into air and naval plans, apportionment of Bomber Command to naval co-operation, inter-communication between the Services, and the method by which the air striking force would integrate its activity with naval and military operations. These issues were intimately linked with the wider role that some envisaged for the SAC, that of horizontal co-ordination with the sister Services and

⁴⁹ TNA AIR 9/81, HA/1/59 AHB, Plans archives Vol 59, Co-ordination and Control of Defence Operations, Memo by DD Plans The Organization, Control and Co-operation of the Defence Services with particular reference to the Role of the Air Arm, dated 8 March 1937.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ TNA AIR 9/81, M1 dated 8 March 1937.

anticipation of evolving operational needs and pressures. It was increasingly impossible to separate one specific aspect of higher operational command and control from another and Harris' plea was summarised in typical hand written candour:

I suggest, therefore, that there is urgent need for 'Coordination' to be brought to the fore forthwith in the hope that, as soon as the FAA controversy is settled, we can get down to planning the operational control of the future campaigns in a manner permitting departmental details to be settled in the light of overall policy rather than *ad hoc* guesswork.⁵²

On 10 March 1937, the DCAS wrote to Ellington seeking his agreement to broaden the circulation of a modified form of DD Plans paper with the aim of adding a new strand of thinking into the FAA debate, arguing that the paper would help to 'ventilate with everybody the foundation upon which our arguments against Admiralty contentions are based'.⁵³ Ellington refused on the sound grounds that the SofS would not permit the paper's wider circulation until he had had an opportunity to consider its implications himself.⁵⁴ However, he was content for the paper to be re-worked into a broader piece addressing the Higher Co-ordination of Defence.⁵⁵

The RAF operational perspective was based on the belief that the advent of the aeroplane had fundamentally changed the nature of warfare.⁵⁶ It was not that the creation of a third service that had complicated matters, but that a faster national decision-making process, able to exploit the advantage of air power still needed to be created. Regardless of the unfolding expansion schemes, the RAF knew that they would never have sufficient resources to perform the ever growing list of tasks they were being expected to deliver. If the response from the other two services was to

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., E3, M2 dated 10 March 1937.

⁵⁴ Ibid., E3, M3 dated 13 March 1937.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., M1 dated 8 March 1937.

press for self-sufficiency to address their own environmental needs, then the resources the Nation was prepared to allocate to air power would be unnecessarily divided and effectively reduced. If this were to happen then the RAF would be nothing more than the source of ancillary support to the traditional means of warfare.⁵⁷

Following Ellington's earlier direction, a much modified version of Harris' original paper was offered to the DCOS Committee bearing the title DCOS 49 'Higher Co-ordination and Control of Defence' on 16 April 1937.⁵⁸ As the summer passed into autumn the changes of CAS and IG took place. Pierce remained as DCAS and the RAF representative on the DCOS Sub-Committee of the COS Committee, the committee that would study the RAF's proposal with its embedded concept of the SAC.

DCOS 49 outlined the need for co-ordination of operational control; the problem requiring solution under the headings of co-ordination of the defensive, co-ordination of the offensive, and co-ordination of the offensive and defensive together; the factors and difficulties affecting a solution, before concluding with its recommendations. Accepting that progress had been made in several important areas, e.g., co-ordination of planning and intelligence, it argued that it was now vitally important to develop a 'satisfactory system for co-ordinated control of actual operations'.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ TNA CAB 54/3, DCOS 49, A Memorandum by the Air Staff – The Co-ordination and Control of Defence Operations, dated 16 April 1937.

It highlighted a particular aspect that continually troubled the Air Staff and which grew out of the flexible weapons systems they were introducing to service. It stated:

That inherent limitations in the total strength of our armed resources make it impossible to provide permanent allocation of separate and specialized air contingents for every possible task which the air forces may have to undertake.⁵⁹

This was the nub of the RAF's command and control philosophy and a viewpoint that put them squarely at odds with their naval and military colleagues. The flexibility claimed by the airman inspired his vision of the command structure required for the efficient and effective use of the air arm. It was this difference in philosophy that had increasingly marked the boundary lines between the Services in their various inter-war debates. The second half of the paragraph quoted above illustrates this point well:

In any case it would be wasteful, even if it were otherwise possible, to adopt that course seeing that the flexibility of air forces enables them to be transferred from one task to another at very short notice.⁶⁰

Echoing comments made by Newall, this quote encapsulates the goal the Air Staff sought, namely the creation of a dynamic decision-making system to enable the flexible exploitation of the air arm with its wider utility, rapid re-tasking potential, and greatly increased operational tempo.

The Air Staff also argued that the air arm, and its utility in all forms of warfare, meant that:

Defence problems, in short, cannot be solved by a division into watertight compartments on a basis of independent spheres of Service responsibility.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Ibid., TNA CAB 54/3, DCOS 49 dated 16 April 1937.

⁶⁰ Ibid., TNA CAB 54/3, DCOS 49 dated 16 April 1937.

⁶¹ Ibid., TNA CAB 54/3, DCOS 49 dated 16 April 1937.

Despite the attempt to sanitize that paper from the more extreme rhetoric of Harris' original, it is not hard to identify the main target of the RAF's concern. The RN was firmly wedded to the concept of 'tactical self-sufficiency' and was at constant pains to point out that their considerable operational experience supported their view. The RAF was equally sure that the air weapon would be in far greater demand than could ever be met from any realistic expansion scheme and that to avoid a situation in which air assets were underutilized in one area whilst in great demand elsewhere, the principle of 'tactical self-sufficiency' had to be modified.

The remainder of the paper developed the central themes and argued for the establishment of more specific arrangements to meet the various scenarios conceived. While the paper put forward a strongly held conviction it is notable that the tone was neither dogmatic nor prescriptive. For example, the cornerstone of the RAF's thinking, the SAC was placed in its broadest context:

As regards the Royal Air Force, the Air Staff have reached the conclusion that for a Home Defence war the appointment of a Supreme Air Commander will be essential in order to secure the requisite operational co-ordination between the various Royal Air Force Commands. Whether similar appointments of supreme commanders of the whole of our sea and land forces respectively is a feasible proposition is a matter for consideration by the Admiralty and War Office. It may be that such a step will be unnecessary, even undesirable.⁶²

The paper concluded that the establishment of a permanent combined headquarters and staff manned by the three Services would alleviate the problems it had identified. This would help to 'correct the parochial outlook of individual staffs, and to stimulate a broadminded spirit of co-operation at the seat of control'. The combined headquarters would provide the needed 'reporting centre and clearing house' in the face of enemy attack and ensure 'effective counter-measures'. The

⁶² Ibid., TNA CAB 54/3, DCOS 49 dated 16 April 1937.

‘permanent and consequential wasteful, allocation of air forces to particular forms of specialized employment could be avoided’ but accurate and prioritized requests for support would be enabled through the combined staff. The Cs-in-C of the ‘offensive’ forces would have a single centralized authority with which to deal and co-ordinate requests for support, this, it was concluded, would prevent the ‘dispersion of effort through overlapping or un-coordinated operations.’⁶³

As a charter for integrated command it had few equals, but that was its weakness as it continued a theme associated with the RAF of calling for the greater integration of the three Service Ministries into a singular Ministry of Defence. Trenchard had long advocated this approach and Hankey, the Admiralty and War Office had long objected on the grounds that it would place too much authority in the hands of one individual.⁶⁴ The fundamental problem from the perspective of the Naval and Military authorities was that to agree to a Ministry of Defence would mean their agreeing to an equal status within the structure for the new Service, the RAF. Seen from today’s perspective this appears perverse in the extreme, seen from 1937, when the RAF was barely a 20 year unpleasant departure from sound naval and military organizational principles, conceding the establishment of a combined headquarters with ‘non-parochial staff’ would have been a step far too far.⁶⁵

Wider Scrutiny

The 22nd Meeting of the DCOS Committee took place on 15 October 1937 with Hankey as Chairman, VAdm James, Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff (DCNS),

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Smith, *British Air Strategy*, pp.81-83, and Montgomery-Hyde, *British Air Policy*, p.361.

⁶⁵ Ibid., Smith, pp.103-105.

Maj Gen Harding, Director of Military Operations and Intelligence, AVM Peirse, DCAS, Col Ismay as Secretary, and Mr Ryan as Assistant Secretary.⁶⁶ Hankey began by setting out the ‘arrangements contemplated for the exercise of control in war’. Supreme control would rest with a War Cabinet in a major war or a War Committee of the Cabinet in a war of secondary importance. The established Defence Plans (Policy) Sub-Committee of the CID would constitute the foundation of the War Cabinet, as envisaged by the PM earlier in the year. He envisaged that the COS would have to be present at all meetings of the War Cabinet ‘at which military matters were under consideration’. Hankey was content that ‘in practice the system would work smoothly and quickly’. He foresaw no insurmountable reasons why rapid decisions could not be achieved at short notice and considered that below the War Cabinet or War Committee the COS Committee would work as currently configured. He then asked Peirse to outline the main features of the DCOS 49 paper.

DCAS described the SAC role and the method of directives to the Cs-in-C that was envisaged as the means of ensuring co-ordination of the air fighting. He stated that the Air Ministry felt the CAS would be too occupied with ‘major questions arising in all theatres of war and in their relation to the political situation at home’ and that he and his Air Staff would not have time to ‘undertake the day-to-day control of air operations’. Harding outlined the role of C-in-C Home Forces in the Army structure pointing out its similarity to the SAC position. With the seeming beginnings of a positive outcome at hand, DCNS entered the debate.

⁶⁶ TNA CAB 54/3/1, 22nd Meeting of the DCOS Committee of the COS Committee dated 15 October 1937, and TNA AIR 9/81 E7 dated 15 October 1937.

James stated that:

in the case of the Navy, the Chief of the Naval Staff of the Admiralty would exercise general operational control over the whole naval effort.⁶⁷

Furthermore:

the Admiralty did not accept the that the Chiefs of Staff were going to be so taken up with the study of future possibilities that they would be unable to maintain contact with day to day operations.⁶⁸

James made his case that the CNS would make the operational decisions relating to the Service for which he was ultimately responsible. Difficulties in the allocation of resources, extensive communications established in the Admiralty, the need for orders to be framed against the broadest canvas all argued against the Air Ministry proposal being adopted by the Navy. He was also concerned about the role of the DCOSs which he believed the Air Ministry paper had overlooked. The Navy believed the DCOSs would control the day to day operations as had happened during the First World War. Nothing appeared so compelling as to demand an alternative, and in the Admiralty's view expensive and duplicative, system be developed along the lines proposed by the Air Staff. James then re-iterated the operational viewpoint that was at the heart of the Air Staff's desire for greater flexibility:

the Admiralty felt that in principle the best form of command was secured by providing the greatest possible measure of tactical self-sufficiency.⁶⁹

Hankey then stated that he had expected the Admiralty to take that view and proceeded to recount his experience in the Admiralty at the start of the First World War by way of further illustration that the ISL/CNS should act as supreme operational commander. Partially closing off further debate on the matter of naval and

⁶⁷ Ibid., E7 dated 15 October 1937.

⁶⁸ Ibid., E7 dated 15 October 1937.

⁶⁹ Ibid., E7 dated 15 October 1937.

military counterparts for the SAC, Hankey then focussed the meeting onto matter relating to the sharing of intelligence and the conduct of joint operations. Repeatedly James emphasized the need for 'tactical self-sufficiency' and focussed on methods by which the RAF could provide better support for the coastal defence mission.⁷⁰

The Meeting subsequently rehearsed and re-rehearsed the RN and RAF positions. The Army offered little but was concerned that established procedures should not be upset, particularly; they could see no benefit in the establishment of a Joint Staff as this would merely duplicate work that must be undertaken in the War Office. Somewhat exasperated Pierse repeated his question:

With whom was the Supreme Air Commander to co-ordinate?⁷¹

James replied:

The Supreme Air Commander should go to the Admiralty. The Admiralty, that is to say the Chief of the Naval Staff, was in effect the Supreme Naval Commander.⁷²

On reflection he added:

In actual practice the officer with whom the Supreme Air Commander would get into touch would be the Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff.⁷³

Hankey again summarized the situation as he saw it:

it would be necessary to adapt the Air Ministry scheme so as to make it conform to the present machinery for naval control. The Supreme Air Commander should work through the Chief of the Air Staff on questions of major importance, but should go direct to the deputy Chief of the Naval Staff in matters of secondary importance.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Ibid., E7 dated 15 October 1937.

⁷¹ Ibid., E7 dated 15 October 1937.

⁷² Ibid., E7 dated 15 October 1937.

⁷³ Ibid., E7 dated 15 October 1937.

⁷⁴ Ibid., E7 dated 15 October 1937.

Despite Pierse attempting to address the complications caused by the time factor, Hankey then moved on to intelligence co-ordination. In his final summing up Hankey concluded that:

co-ordination in operational control between the Navy and the Air Force could not be worked out in the way shown in the chart attached to the paper under discussion. In theory that layout might be correct and comprehensive but past experience showed that there would be practical difficulties in the way of working it, Some other plan must be concerted.⁷⁵

The Meeting agreed, or at least the Minutes recorded that it had agreed, that the RAF could retain its concept of a SAC but that naval procedures would not be altered and the SAC should liaise with the Admiralty at CNS or DCNS level. The proposed Joint Operations Staff were considered redundant because the COS were not Commanders responsible for the actual conduct of operations, but the RN and RAF would establish closer intelligence links.⁷⁶

Pierse cannot have left this meeting in good humour. The Chairman had heavily influenced the debate, James' interventions were given significantly greater authority than the proposals set forth in the Paper, attempts to address the unanswered challenges posed by increased operational tempo were diverted into debates about intelligence sharing, and the proposal to establish the basis of an integrated joint operations staff was dismissed with barely any serious consideration. Viewed in retrospect, Pierse had been ambushed, out manoeuvred and left the meeting empty handed; it would be easy to portray James as the villain but his subsequent behaviour paints a different picture.

⁷⁵ Ibid., E7 dated 15 October 1937.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

DCNS wrote to Hankey on 18 October 1937 stating that he had been ‘reflecting on our recent discussion about the proposal emanating from the Air Ministry’.⁷⁷ In his third paragraph he developed his basic difficulty with the SAC concept:

in view of the vital importance to the sea-going forces of the reconnaissance and attack air forces attached to them, decisions to re-orient the war effort of those forces would always be a matter for the highest authority and could not be a responsibility for an interposed commander.⁷⁸

He also suggested that ‘it is the time factor in relation to the movements of the human body that causes our apprehensions on this question’ whereas the RAF was concerned with the time factor as it related to the operation of aircraft that had caused them to propose the solution that he had opposed. He then developed this somewhat obscure analogy into the compromise that he hoped would allow the matter to be resolved.

Reiterating the Admiralty experience of the First World War, James suggested that by establishing a ‘central war room’ properly manned and continually updated, the COS, or their Deputies, could meet and quickly give direction and decision to any short notice issue that might arise. He explained his time analogy by stating that he ‘had in mind the difficulty of the three COS getting quickly together and making important decisions of an immediate nature.’ He copied his proposal to Haining and Peirse and wrote separately to DCAS on 21 October 1937.⁷⁹

James suggested to Peirse that he might wish to consider ‘the possibilities of establishing your officer who is to control the British aircraft at your Ministry in the same way as the DCNS is located here.’ He asked whether it might be that a DCAS

⁷⁷ TNA ADM 1/4, Letter to Sir Maurice Hankey from DCNS Sir William James RN dated 18 October 1937.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, dated 18 October 1937.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, DCNS to DCAS, dated 21 October 1937.

would be ‘a better practical solution in view of the inevitable centralization of all information at your own Ministry?’ Once more reverting to Admiralty experience in the First World War, he explained that DNCS was responsible for the main operations while the ACNS concentrated on the specifics of the anti-submarine war. He suggested to Pierse that he felt DCAS embraced the duties of both DCNS and ACNS and wondered if the time had not come for the Air Ministry to expand its organization and introduce an additional senior officer onto the Air Staff to allow DCAS to operate in a manner analogous to DCNS?⁸⁰ Pierse acknowledged James’ letter on 23 October 1937 thanking him for his helpful and positive suggestion which he found ‘very heartening’ and convinced him that a practical solution could be found.⁸¹

In the space of eight days from the 15 October 1937 DCOS Meeting to the 23 October 1937 when Pierse replied to DCNS, the RAF’s position on the establishment of a SAC fundamentally shifted towards the methods and procedures of the Admiralty. While James’ counterproposal had much to recommend it, it stopped short of addressing many of the underlying challenges identified in the original DD Plans paper. It also failed to meet published Air Council policy, namely the creation of a SAC.⁸² That such change could take place so quickly suggests a number of possibilities; the idea was fundamentally flawed and a great error of organization was prevented by the helpful intervention of the DCNS; the RAF singularly failed to prepare its case and gain support for a sound concept; or the RN were determined to resist change, protect their ownership of allocated aircraft, exploit a favourable period of institutional advantage following the FAA debate, exploit the dominance and

⁸⁰ The Assistant Chief of the Naval Staff (ACNS) was the deputy to the DCNS.

⁸¹ TNA AIR 9/81, E11 dated 23 October 1937.

⁸² TNA AIR 2/1950 S39818, E28D dated 19 April 1937.

prestige of the 1SL, and the sympathetic ear often given by Hankey to RN viewpoints. Or perhaps the Air Staff, and especially the DCAS' heart, were not truly committed to the idea.

Pierse had opposed the concept at the start of the year and could see that a SAC would seriously complicate his appointment's war role and significance in the eyes of the CAS. Newall was a supporter of the overall concept but one wonders what his view was, having assumed the post of CAS, of his predecessor occupying such a critical role in war. Could that have been partly behind his suggestion that SAC should not be located in the Air Ministry? Either way, the argument was shifting significantly towards the Admiralty solution and a memorandum published by the DCNS on 11 November 1937 added further weight to the RN argument.⁸³

Entitled 'Operational Control in War' James set out over three closely typed pages the rationale behind the Admiralty's position. It was an expertly argued paper and an important document in the development of Britain's command structure for the Second World War. Its basic premise was encapsulated in the opening sentence of the third paragraph:

Furthermore, the Admiralty were not convinced that it would be necessary or desirable for the Chiefs of Staffs to remove their hands from the pulse of operations to the extent suggested in the Air Ministry proposal.⁸⁴

This was an important point of disagreement and one which the Admiralty had every right and responsibility to argue. The 1SL, CIGS, and CAS, stood, constitutionally, ahead of their Service Board colleagues responsible to the Sovereign and Government for the fighting and operational effectiveness and efficiency of their

⁸³ TNA ADM 1 and TNA AIR 9/81, E13 dated 13 November 1937, DCNS Paper to DCOS colleagues, Operational Control in War, dated 11 November 1937.

⁸⁴ Ibid., dated 11 November 1937.

respective Services.⁸⁵ While other commanders would of necessity be charged with the detailed execution of the allotted operational plans, it would remain the COS responsibility for their ultimate success. It is difficult to see, given this constitutional position, how the RAF proposal would not have resulted in the CAS being weakened in the eyes of his War Cabinet and COS colleagues.

James developed his argument embracing the need to integrate the most up to date information into the decision-making location.⁸⁶ He was adamant that reliable and secure communications were essential to all sub-commands to enable efficient control but was realistic that the cost of providing such communications argued that the RAF proposal to establish an additional ‘combined headquarters’ was unaffordable given that the Service Ministries would also require them. A balance also had to be struck between the proposed structures for the co-ordination of Home defence and the wider requirements of Imperial security, both of which would be the pressing responsibility of the various COS. Against this background, and supported by First World War experience, DCNS concluded that the most cost effective and pragmatic way ahead was in line with his suggestion to Hankey and Pierse that a Central War Room should be formed and permanently manned to enable the Chiefs of Staff and their Deputies to exercise the detailed control of operations that would be necessary in war.

⁸⁵ HC Deb 21 February 1918, vol.103,c.959; and TNA AIR 8/1354 - Chiefs of Staff Relationship with HMG dated 24 February 1936.

⁸⁶ TNA ADM 1 and TNA AIR 9/81, E13 dated 13 November 1937, DCNS Paper to DCOS colleagues, Operational Control in War, dated 11 November 1937.

His final paragraph offered a telling perspective that subsequent events were to bear out. It was in contrast to the picture painted by the RAF in its paper and gives the insight that was important in sealing the decision:

When thinking in peace time of the conduct of war, it is inevitable that a tempo is visualized which is seldom, if ever, reached. Occasionally matters move very fast, but those occasions are rare. The history of war shows that for weeks on end nothing very startling happens, nothing requiring important new dispositions of forces or re-orientation of war effort. It is therefore suggested that those in responsible positions would have time to meet, either for quiet consideration of the future or in order to make a quick decision to counter a sudden and unexpected move on the part of the enemy.⁸⁷

This was especially wise counsel and illustrated a potential false analysis within the RAF case. While aircraft could indeed move quickly over the battlefield and shift from one mission to another far quicker than forces on land or at sea, the relevant 'time factor' in relation to the higher co-ordination of defence was the 'time factor' relating to the human decision making not the aerial vehicle.

Whilst the contents of DCNS' Memorandum were being digested by the respective staffs, the Air Staff were considering the proposal for reforming the DCAS role.⁸⁸ Quickly it was concluded that DCAS was overloaded:

Turning to the past it may be said that while the system has never actually broken down, successive DCASs have been forced to choose between delay and decisions given upon insufficient consideration. This highly undesirable dilemma is however unavoidable under the present system.⁸⁹

More damningly it continued:

it is contended that the DCAS' responsibilities as at present defined have been drawn upon so wide a scale that he is denied the leisure, except upon the rare occasion, to give the attention to the more important class of problem which they certainly demand.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ TNA AIR 9/81 E13, Memo on the Duties of DCAS, undated.

⁸⁹ Ibid., undated.

⁹⁰ Ibid., undated.

Despite the tortuous and dated language, the message was clear; the DCAS post had evolved into a bottleneck within the smooth running of the Air Staff because its remit had expanded too far.

To resolve the issue, DCAS would focus on RAF longer term planning covering the Plans and Operational Requirements Directorates, while the Deputy DOI would be raised to Director status and work directly with the CAS on operational matters. To ensure DCAS could continue to discharge his duties as the Deputy to the CAS, he was to be closely informed of all relevant operational matters. This was a different structure to the one proposed by the DCNS in detail but not in principle. The CAS would retain his primacy over operational matters. He would be supported by a Directorate responsible for the integration of operations and intelligence, which would contain Deputy Directors able to work in concert with their peers in the Admiralty and War Office.⁹¹

On the 29 November 1937 the DOI issued a memorandum ambitiously entitled ‘Co-ordination of Higher Control of Operations by the Three Services in time of War and the Organization of the Higher Command of the Royal Air Force’.⁹² The paper sought to consider:

The war organization of the Air Staff in the Air Ministry, with whom – whether a Supreme Air Commander is appointed or not – must remain the higher direction of the RAF in war.⁹³

This was unequivocal in reaffirming the role of the Air Staff and the Air Ministry and stated firmly that:

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² TNA AIR 9/81, E14, Co-ordination of Higher Control of Operations by the Three Services in time of War and the Organization of the Higher Command of the Royal Air Force, dated 29 November 1937.

⁹³ Ibid., dated 29 November 1937.

There is a discernible tendency to imagine that the supreme air commander on his own responsibility could, for instance, divert large numbers of squadrons engaged on trade protection duties under Coastal Command, to take part in the main bombing offensive against Germany; or from the main bombing offensive to objectives connected with the operations of the Army on the Continent. It must be agreed that any such assumption is based on a misunderstanding of the responsibilities and functions of the Chief of the Air Staff, and, moreover, is very dangerous in its repercussions upon the attitude of the other Services to this question of co-ordination of defence operations in war.⁹⁴

Of course the alternative view emphasized by Harris in the original paper could be argued to be more efficient, but it ignored the political reality of the military system. It was unanimously agreed that higher direction of the war would be the responsibility of the War Cabinet and its political elected leaders. A scheme that presumed a subordinate senior officer would be able to act in ways that could seriously alter the nature of the operations being fought, without reference and sanction from the War Cabinet, was fanciful as DOI's paper highlighted.

DOI further revealed the mood in the Air Staff in the summary of the 22nd DCOS Meeting discussions⁹⁵:

Considerable doubt has emerged within the Air Staff as to the functions of the Supreme Air Commander, and in fact of the wisdom of having such an appointment at all.⁹⁶

On the other hand, DOI welcomed the compromise proposal put forward by DCNS to create a Central War Room ruefully observing:

This idea no doubt falls short of the ideal; but it is in the character of British institutions that they develop gradually, and not by revolutionary bounds.⁹⁷

Turning to the 'War Organization of the Air Staff' the paper argued that the initial idea of placing longer term planning in the hands of DCAS while DOI focused on

⁹⁴ Ibid., dated 29 November 1937.

⁹⁵ TNA CAB 54/3/1, dated 15 October 1937 for details of the 22nd DCOS meeting.

⁹⁶ Ibid., AIR 9/81, E14 dated 29 November 1937.

⁹⁷ Ibid., E14 dated 29 November 1937.

operations was flawed in that it would either undermine the post of DCAS relative to his naval and military colleagues, or create unnecessary work to update and brief him to undertake his DCAS role. Either way a better solution could be achieved by mirroring the Admiralty structure in which the DCAS would be responsible for main operations and the Assistant Chief of the Air Staff (ACAS) for subordinate activity. In peacetime the ACAS would undertake the majority of the committee work relieving the DCAS to concentrate 'more time for his proper function as Deputy to the CAS.

The paper then deployed a compelling and conclusive argument against the post of the SAC based on the previously aired concerns of undermining the role and status of the CAS, the inability to make meaningful re-dispositions without recourse to higher authority, the danger of creating duplicative staff structures, and the refusal of the other Services to establish equivalent positions with whom the SAC could work. It went on to highlight that because Coastal Command would operate as a co-ordinating headquarters above the broadly 'self-sufficient' Groups, the opportunity for the SAC to make a meaningful contribution was reduced by a third adding more evidence against the appointment.⁹⁸

This document was an important stepping stone in the development of the RAF's Second World War command structure. It showed that the Air Staff, regardless of the CAS and Air Council's decisions, were unconvinced about the concept of a SAC. Undoubtedly they benefitted from the opposition to the proposal by the DCNS and the difficulties that arose from harmonizing the role of the CAS with the role of the SAC, but it was also apparent that the idea was not popular and that its debate offered an opportunity to address a matter that had more resonance with them, namely

⁹⁸ Ibid.

the establishment of an ACAS to redistribute the growing workload within the Air Ministry more sensibly. However, Newall was not prepared quite yet for the staff to administer the *coup de grace* to the SAC concept.

When Pierse attended the 23rd DCOS Meeting on 14 December 1937 he outlined the RAF's position as it had developed over the previous weeks.⁹⁹ He stated that:

it had become clear to him that an organization for the High Command based on a Supreme Air Commander outside the Air Ministry would not provide satisfactory co-ordination in the absence of his counterpart in the army and navy. For good reasons, the naval control was to be centralised in the Admiralty, and the Air Staff therefore recognized that command would have to be exercised from within the Air Ministry.¹⁰⁰

As a consequence, 'co-ordination would need to be effected from some central position by the three Chiefs of Staff either working through the deputies or other officers specially appointed for the purpose.'

Pierse told the Committee that the CAS had approved the re-organization of the Air Staff in line with the DOI Memorandum but that the SofS had yet to give his final approval. Nonetheless, the Air Ministry structure would conform very closely to that of the Admiralty and the post of SAC was under close scrutiny:

Under the scheme outline above, there was really no place for him, but the Chief of the Air Staff and his predecessor had been strongly in favour of a Supreme Air Commander.¹⁰¹

His next statement is particularly relevant to the manner in which Newall commanded as CAS in 1939-40:

in the opinion of the present CAS there might be some political outcry if there was no individual designated as responsible for the co-ordination of the air offensive and defensive. This uncertainty, however, need not affect the

⁹⁹ TNA CAB 54/1/7, DCOS 21st- 23rd Meeting, dated 14 December 1937.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., dated 14 December 1937.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., dated 14 December 1937.

consideration of the problem before the Sub-Committee. If a Supreme Air Commander were appointed, his functions would now be limited to co-ordinating the air offensive and defensive. He would have no functions in regard to the Coastal Command, nor would he be able to decide, in Committee with representatives of the other Services, such as major policy questions as the degree of pressure to be exercised, or whether bombers were to be taken away from co-operation with the navy and switched to other targets or vice-versa.¹⁰²

The DCNS spoke next and said that ‘he greatly appreciated the way in which the Air Ministry had now approached the problem’.¹⁰³

Inter-service harmony was further reinforced in a letter sent by DCNS to Hankey on 11 January 1938 on behalf of himself and DCAS stating ‘DCAS and I have had a most successful meeting on the problem of operational control in war time’ and setting out their plans.¹⁰⁴

Pierse then circulated his Draft Report on the Co-ordination and Control of Defence Operations.¹⁰⁵ Over the next few days it was commented on by his colleagues, re-drafted and issued as DCOS 57 ‘The Co-ordination and Control of Defence Operations in a War against Germany’.¹⁰⁶ Hankey thought it ‘admirable’ while DCNS had ‘no comments’ and assumed it would be issued forthwith.¹⁰⁷ On 22 April 1938 following Ismay’s advice, the DCOS 57 Paper was re-worked into CID Paper 1425-B and circulated by the COS in Sub-Committee of the CID summarising

¹⁰² Ibid., dated 14 December 1937.

¹⁰³ Ibid., dated 14 December 1937.

¹⁰⁴ TNA AIR 9/81, E19 dated 11 January 1938.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., E25 and 26 dated 3 March 1938.

¹⁰⁶ TNA CAB 54/4/4 DCOS 57 The Co-ordination and Control of Defence Operations in a War against Germany, dated 1 March 1938.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., TNA AIR 9/81, E29, dated 16 March 1938 and E30, dated 18 March 1938,

the winter's discussions and setting out the agreed process for the higher co-ordination and control of defence operations.¹⁰⁸

High Command in War - CID 1425-B

In line with Hankey's earlier summary, the responsibility for the supreme direction of the war at the highest level and embracing all aspects of Government responsibility rested with the Cabinet.¹⁰⁹ The PM would discharge that duty through the War Cabinet or War Committee as determined by the size and scope of the crisis. It was expected that the Defence Plans (Policy) Committee, recently re-titled the CID for the Consideration of War Plans, would form the basis of the war time structure.

The machinery for submitting advice to the War Cabinet would be the same as had been developed in peacetime. The 'mainspring of this machinery was the COS Sub-Committee of the CID under the Chairmanship of the Minister for Co-ordination of Defence'.¹¹⁰ The COS Sub-Committee would support the War Cabinet in all matters relating to the planning, execution, and assessment of the war situation. They would propose changes and enact the decisions reached by the War Cabinet and be present or represented at the War Cabinet whenever discussion of military matters were envisaged. Collectively they would act as a 'military advisor "in commission" to the Cabinet.'¹¹¹

The JPC would provide the COS Sub-Committee with the necessary appreciations and reports for submission to the War Cabinet; the Joint Intelligence

¹⁰⁸ TNA CAB 53/38/3 CID, Memorandum by the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee, CID 1425-B, The Co-Ordination and Control of Defence Operations, dated 29 April 1938.

¹⁰⁹ TNA CAB 54/4/6 CID, Report by the Deputy Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, DCOS 68, The Co-Ordination and Control of Defence Operations, dated 22 April 1939.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., dated 22 April 1939.

¹¹¹ Ibid., dated 22 April 1939.

Committee (JIC) would provide the joint intelligence appreciations for the Joint Planning Staff (JPS) and the COS Sub-Committee; and the DCOS Sub-Committee would 'produce agreed reports containing advice and recommendations on matters usually of current as opposed to long range importance.'¹¹²

The COS would receive the Minutes of the War Cabinet meetings but their actual instructions would be transmitted to them through the recognized channels, namely, the PM, Minister for Co-ordination of Defence, Service Ministers and/or the Secretary of the War Cabinet depending on the degree of urgency of the matter. Once received the instructions would be translated into 'terms of action' for each Service by the Chief of Staff concerned.¹¹³

This process would prove satisfactory for the handling of strategy and long range planning but the co-ordination of day to day operations in war required new processes and procedures. The paper reprised the path to the final decision, conceding Newall's requirement for the SAC role to be retained for possible use but only for the 'co-ordination between the action of the bombers and fighters.'¹¹⁴ It highlighted that the Air Staff had already been re-organized and an ACAS introduced into the structure so that:

the air war will be exercised from the Air Ministry on lines similar to those in force in the Royal Navy.¹¹⁵

Against this background the proposed system for operational co-ordination assumed that 'direct control of the operations of the forces of any one Service must be vested in that Service; and only when the necessity is proved beyond doubt should any Service

¹¹² Ibid., dated 22 April 1939.

¹¹³ Ibid., dated 22 April 1939.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., dated 22 April 1939.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., dated 22 April 1939.

assume control over any of the forces of another Service.’¹¹⁶ Thus, it was argued, the problem boiled down to ‘the provision of an organization whereby, while each Ministry controls the operations of its own Service, those operations shall be co-ordinated with those of the other two Services, and of the civil air defence organization.’¹¹⁷

To accomplish this goal each Service Ministry’s War Room would act in concert and harmony with the Central War Room that would be situated ‘in some convenient building in proximity to all the Ministries concerned.’¹¹⁸ The Central War Room would act as the meeting place for the COS or their Deputies ‘for discussion on the current situation or plans for the immediate future.’¹¹⁹ Decisions taken would ‘be implemented by each COS through his own individual Ministry.’¹²⁰ Addressing the issue that had caused much previous discussion particularly over the authority the SAC might enjoy, it was clearly stated that:

If a situation arises which demands any major modification of the strategical employment of any one Service in the interests of the combined national armed effort as a whole, the necessary arrangements should be concerted by the Chiefs of Staff or their Deputies in the War Room.¹²¹

The process for short notice and day to day events was, in effect, a compressed version of the higher level process but one that relied heavily on the establishment of the War Rooms and a spirit of co-operative working among the Joint and Single-Service staff. It lacked the singular authority that Harris had sought but it embraced a far stronger element. It was the agreed position of a complex institutional structure that had grown from discussion, compromise and co-operation, indeed it was a

¹¹⁶ Ibid., dated 22 April 1939.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., dated 22 April 1939.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., dated 22 April 1939.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., dated 22 April 1939.

¹²⁰ Ibid., dated 22 April 1939.

¹²¹ Ibid., dated 22 April 1939.

quintessentially British compromise, but one that preserved the teamwork necessary to face the uncertainty of the unfolding international scene.¹²²

The SAC Debate in Retrospect

James stated emphatically that the concept of establishing a SAC positioned between the CAS and the Cs-in-C was abandoned in the face of stiff opposition from the Steel and Dowding.¹²³ It is true that both Steel and Dowding were strongly opposed to the idea but their views were not decisive. The chronology of the debate, set out for the first time outside the primary sources, shows the much more complex process that ultimately influenced the manner in which the Nation fought the Second World War.

Once again, Ellington had a vision, that of a SAC, that he wished to see become established RAF policy. With his characteristic determination and ruthless authority, he drove the concept through the normal internal consultative process. Gaining the early agreement of the SofS to his idea he brushed aside opposition from the Cs-in-C and gave his senior staff officers little time to mount an effective opposition before effectively declaring that the SofS had agreed to his proposal and it would now be enacted as Air Council policy. In a manner similar to his behaviour during the 1934 Air Staff review and 1936 Command structure re-organization, he showed his strengths and weaknesses in equal measure. He was certainly willing to tolerate debate and dissent and not afraid to consider alternative views. He exercised a quiet benign authority within the Air Staff and among his Air Council colleagues but at the same time was very clear in his mind what it was that he

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ James, *The Growth of Fighter Command 1936-1940*, p.23, footnote 8.

ultimately wanted. The central core of his vision was operational preparedness and the three RAF reforms of the 1930s are linked by that common theme of preparing the RAF organizationally and structurally for war. Ellington epitomised this continuity and his thinking about the role of the SAC can be traced in various forms back to the start of his time as CAS.

He had a clear idea of how he wished his Service to develop and was determined to see that vision enacted. While he possessed complete authority, if he wished to use it, within the bounds of the Air Staff and Air Force Board, he had far less authority in the wider sphere. In 1934 he ran into difficulties with his own Secretariat for not including them early enough in the Air Ministry review to allow it to be smoothly enacted. In 1936 he repeated the error over the Command Re-organization and came up against difficulties with the Treasury. In 1937 the stumbling block occurred within the wider tri-Service debate, but on this occasion he no longer had any continuing authority to ensure his vision survived his retirement as CAS on 1 September 1937 and his assumption of role of IG. Moreover, Newall was not prepared to force through his ideas in the face of compelling opposition.

Ellington's time as CAS was pivotal in preparing the RAF for war. He is regularly credited with being responsible for the establishment of a frontline of aircraft that ultimately proved enormously successful, and a training scheme that provided the training excellence necessary to man the frontline.¹²⁴ What has not been acknowledged is the contribution he made to the war readiness of the RAF. This contribution is equally and arguably more important than his role in the development

¹²⁴ Terraine, *The Right of the Line*, pp. 44-45.

of radar, the fielding off the eight-gun fighters, and the commissioning of the heavy bomber force that would ultimately lead to counter-offensive in the air.

What separates the debate surrounding the SAC from the Air Staff and Command restructuring is that the essential elements of the proposal did not survive the wider consideration necessary for their adoption. However, while both the Air Staff and Command re-organizations were enacted, it would be wrong to argue that the failure of the SAC concept was due to the absence of Ellington from the CAS appointment in 1937/38. The alternative views that Ellington ignored, from the Cs-in-C and DCAS, contained all the elements that were to carry the day when the topic was debated by the DCOS. Also the removal, or at least diminution, of the authority of the CAS for the conduct of the RAF's operations implicit in the proposal was ultimately a step too far for the Admiralty and War Office to similarly adopt, who in retrospect, we certainly correct.

Ellington appears to have become enmeshed in a combination of a personally held view, borne of his own experience and close relationship with Brooke-Popham, that he would need a 'deputy', and the implications of a series of wider arguments relating to the nature of air warfare and air command that formed part of a paper designed to address a totally different subject, namely the FAA debate. There also emerged the irresolvable problem implicit in the proposal that Newall added to with his reference to a publically recognized figure to act as the 'generalissimo', but who was concurrently not supposed to undermine the position of the CAS. This was a dichotomy that no amount of procedural sophistication or nuance could address. To create a 'generalissimo' for the reasons advanced by Newall was to undermine the CAS regardless of what protective measures were to be put in place. The Admiralty

and War Office appear to have been very alert to this and there was little likelihood they would adopt it within their own structures.

Although there were common strands contained in the various arguments put forward, the Air Staff appear to have conflated these thoughts into a paper that, when exposed to wider scrutiny, failed to compel or win support. For those opposing Ellington's and Newall's view this proved fortunate but it was not they who changed the policy. A combination of DCNS and DCAS were instrumental in shaping the now broadened debate concerning the higher direction of defence operations. The compromise reached in CID 1425-B bore many of the features that Steel had put forward in his reply to Ellington the previous year.¹²⁵ On the other hand, virtually none of the advice offered by Newall, when AMSO, survived except for the caveat that a SAC might be established to co-ordinate the bomber and fighter forces. In the end the structure that emerged from the debates over the autumn and winter of 1937/38 was better and more robust than the ideas offered in the original Air Ministry proposal.

Newall was too experienced a Whitehall staff officer and too aware that high command demanded compromise and an agility and adaptability of mind and purpose, to fight a peripheral battle on a matter of principle.¹²⁶ The Central War Room, enhanced Air Staff personnel and organization, coupled with a broad agreement across the Services and CID, was more than adequate compensation for the loss of a previously preferred solution to the problem of operational co-ordination. Moreover,

¹²⁵ TNA AIR 2/1950 S39818, E 4A dated 20 November 1936.

¹²⁶ S Douglas, *Years of Command* (London: Collins, 1966), p 37.

it would have been an unwise COS that chose to alienate his peers so early during his time in office.

However, one must spare a thought for Ellington. As the new IG he was the putative SAC but had to stand to one side as the final piece of his re-organizational work was dismantled within four months of his departure from office. It is hard not to feel sympathy for a man who had worked so tirelessly to steer his Service through such turbulent times and who anticipated continuing to make a useful contribution as the SAC. As was typical of the man he made no fuss and continued to give loyal and helpful service as the IG.

It would be dramatic to conclude this chapter with newly discovered evidence of a scurrilous conspiracy by the Cs-in-C, the ex-RN DCAS, the DCNS and Hankey, who combined to manipulate the outcome to their advantage after Ellington's departure and before Newall could establish himself in post. No such evidence exists. The final decisions were made with an open mind and in a pervading atmosphere of compromise and collective endeavour to create a system of co-ordination that would best serve the nation. In many ways it showed the British institutional committee system at its best, not at its worst. Ellington's plan was flawed and the solution that emerged was significantly better.

Part II will explore how the system for higher co-ordination fared in the conduct of the Second World War. Hankey was pivotal to the development and stewardship of the CID from its inception until the outbreak of the Second World

War.¹²⁷ Thus the CID 1425-B process could reasonably be termed the Hankey System in recognition of his constant goal of collaboration, compromise and the avoidance of dispute and his central role in its development.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ W Jackson and D Bramall, *The Chiefs - The Story of the United Kingdom Chiefs of Staff*, (London; Brassey's, 1992), p. 441.

¹²⁸ Roskill, *Hankey – Man of Secrets* Vol 3, pp. 321-322.

PART II

RAF High Command

in the

Second World War

Chapter 5

COMMAND ADAPTATION

Introduction

The course of the Second World War is now well known, but from the perspective of September 1939 the unfolding crisis was one of unknown risk and uncertainty. The preparations of the 1930s had created a far better air force, but its readiness to meet the demands of war had yet to fully evolve. In retrospect it is easy to criticize but a more mature and nuanced assessment is called for to fully understand the pressures of the time.

As war broke out the War Cabinet and COS were content with the arrangements set out in CID 1425-B for the control and co-ordination of the nation's defence forces.¹ The COS delivered the strategy agreed by the War Cabinet after discussion informed by the input from the COS. It was expected that the frequency of War Cabinet meetings would make it possible to balance policy with practical military reality through an iterative process of directive, action, assessment, and re-assessment that would enable the necessary adjustments to be made. It was inevitable that pressure would build to carry out actions for which preparations were scant or absent but that was the reality of war, where the enemy could always dictate the tempo or direction of events. But this was not a phenomenon new to Britain in 1939, or resulting from the years of equivocation and appeasement in the 1930s. It was how all crises and wars developed and the British War Cabinet process, borne from hard

¹ TNA CAB 65/1/1 War Cabinet 1 (39) - Meeting held at 5pm Sunday 3rd September 1939, dated 3 September 1939.

won experience in the First World War, was as developed as any to cope with the pressure, indeed paragraph 1(a) of the first War Cabinet meeting stated that its work would be conducted ‘in accordance with the practice of the War Cabinet in the last War’.² For the RAF, CAS was at the heart of its policy making and operational performance. It was his duty to ensure, through accurate briefing and advocacy, that War Cabinet policy was fully aware of operational capability so that strategy was achievable.

Strachan neatly summarised the essence of strategy as ‘a profoundly pragmatic business’ in which it ‘has to deal in the first instance not with policy, but with the nature of war’.³ Newall held a vital role in ensuring the War Cabinet was aware of the actual capability of the RAF, especially given the incomplete outcome of the years of re-armament and the attempts to dissuade Germany through a policy of air parity that was inevitably compromised through the limited availability of modern weapon systems. And it was Newall’s responsibility to ensure that the RAF’s contribution to the agreed strategy was as efficient and effective as it could possibly be. This was the key operational role of the CAS and the Air Ministry, and the reforms of the 1930s all emphasised that CAS and the Air Staff would act in high command, with the CAS as SAC in effect, to ensure the direction and co-ordination of the MAF and overseas frontline commands. It is a key point which many histories of the RAF in the Second World War underplay in favour of focussing on the Cs-in-C and their frontline Commands.

² Ibid., para 1(a) dated 3 September 1939.

³ H Strachan, *The Direction of War Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p 12.

Newall accepted that the debate over the SAC post was closed but he left the matter with a clause that the post could be considered if events were to develop that made it advisable. Between 1938 and 1939 events did not suggest that the SAC debate needed to be resurrected.⁴ However, Newall, who left no meaningful private papers and was not given to expressing private thoughts in official papers, had strongly supported the need for a SAC to act as the point of effective co-ordination and as the ‘generalissimo’ to whom the public could look for reassurance in command of the air.⁵ Against this background it is reasonable to conclude that Newall still felt that a form of the SAC role might have a part to play and might be required as the complexity of the war unfolded.

At 9 am on 2 September 1939, Newall convened his first Morning Conference with his senior staff and advisors.⁶ Slessor, who in 1939 was Director of Plans (DofP) commented that it was ‘broadly true the 1939-45 War was the first air war, and before 1939 we really knew nothing about air warfare’.⁷ He further reflected that ‘Where we went wrong in those pre-war days was not in our estimate of what air power could do when it had the tools, but in our estimate of the tools required to do the job.’ The critical feature of any higher command structure was the system by which direction was given, action co-ordinated, and progress assessed towards the desired outcome.⁸

⁴ TNA AIR 9/81 E32 and 33 dated 14 October 1938.

⁵ TNA AIR 2/1950 S39818, M14 dated 3 March 1937.

⁶ TNA AIR 2/3155 CAS War Conference Minutes of Meetings, Final Minutes of the 1st Meeting held on 2nd September 1939, dated 2 September 1939.

⁷ J Slessor *The Great Deterrent* (London: Cassel, 1957), p.138.

⁸ The means of transmitting the intent of the central directing body is axiomatically central to the efficiency and effectiveness of any military organization. Probert highlights this in his assessment of ‘The Determination of RAF Policy in the Second World War’ in Boog’s *The Conduct of the Air War in the Second World War* (New York/Oxford, Berg, 1992), p. 683-686. Grint also touches on this subject throughout his study into *Leadership, Management and Command – Rethinking D-Day* (Trowbridge, Cromwell Press, 2008) continually emphasizing the importance of transmitting the higher level

If the system was too rigid then initiative was stifled and opportunities were lost. If it was too loose, then un-co-ordinated activity can take on the image of real achievement only for the shock of operational reverses to prove otherwise. What was required was that fine balance between control, local freedom and in-built initiative, what today is called 'mission command'.⁹

CAS was supported by Pierse as DCAS, Peck as DOI, soon to become ACAS (Ops and Int), Douglas as ACAS(OR and T), and in time Joubert de le Ferte as Advisor on Combined Operations. These officers formed his senior staff and were his closest advisors. Below them came the key Directorates led by officers of Air Cdre or Gp Capt rank. Peck's organization was the hub containing the War Room and its staff and the operational directors who were responsible for the issuing of instructions to the Commands and ensuring their co-ordination and performance. There were four directorates of operations, D Ops(H) under Stevenson, D Ops(O) under Coryton, D Ops(NC) under Durston and D Ops(MC) under Fraser.¹⁰ If these Directorates ensured operations were in accord with higher direction and agreed strategy, the Plans Directorate was responsible for the development of the plans the Operations Directorates and the Commands were striving to accomplish.¹¹ The Plans directorate

problem analysis and policy determination to those charged with undertaking the action demanded by the developed strategy.

⁹ Whilst many official definitions of 'mission command' exist, perhaps the most concise summary is to be found in Gray and Cox's edited work *Air Power Leadership – Theory and Practice* (HMSO, London, 2002) in the contribution of Howieson and Kahn 'Leadership, Management and Command – the Officer's Trinity' on p.21 in which they highlight the fundamental difference between the 2 styles of individual command highlighted by Sheffield in *Leadership and Command: The Anglo-American Experience since 1861*, namely the German concept of *Befehlstaktik*, 'an inflexible, authoritarian form of 'top down' command' which offers little room for initiative and *Auftragstaktik* in which mission specific orders are given setting out the specific goals to be achieved but simultaneously freeing the subordinate organization to employ maximum flexibility and initiative in their achievement.

¹⁰ These appointments sat below the posts of DCAS and ACAS; Directors of Operations for Home, Overseas, Naval Co-operation and Military Co-operation were designated D Ops (H), (O), (NC), and (MC) respectively.

¹¹ Ibid.

was headed by Slessor who had been in the post since 17 May 1937.¹² Intelligence, the understanding and knowledge upon which plans and Operations should be built, was the responsibility of the DOI Major Boyle whose organization was about to grow significantly as the reality of war struck home.

The Air Ministry Handbook listed the responsibilities of the Air Staff.¹³ Newall was charged with ‘all questions of Air Force policy’, ‘advice on the conduct of air operations and the issue of orders in regard thereto’, the ‘fighting efficiency and collective training of the Royal Air Force, and , *inter alia*, the ‘collection of intelligence’ . This placed Newall squarely in the role of a commander as the Hankey System intended. Pierse was responsible for the ‘plans and orders for air operations and home defence’, the work of the CID and League of nations, the collection and distribution of air intelligence and liaison with attaches. To undertake the detailed work Peck’s duties were summarized as being ‘operational policy’ and liaison with the War Office Admiralty, Home Office and other agencies as required. This cascade of increasingly detailed responsibility emphasized the central role envisaged for the Air Staff in the conduct and oversight of operations. The detailed liaison with the Commands would be undertaken at a lower level.

Stevenson was responsible for operational policy, issuing orders and questions relating to the conduct of defensive and offensive operations conducted from the UK, dealing mainly with Bomber and Fighter Commands. This Directorate was to bear the greatest strain as war unfolded and as pre-war concepts and plans were severely tested. In parallel, Durston performed a similar function in support of Coastal

¹² *Air Force List*, June 1937.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Air Ministry, *Department of the Chief of the Air Staff - List of Staff and Distribution of Duties*.

Command and the Admiralty. These Directorates were linked to the Commands through the respective SASOs, whose role was to support the Commanders in the conduct of operations. Direct liaison between the CAS, DCAS, or ACAS and the C-in-C was normal, but invariably it was supplemented by written correspondence, in the form of an Air Council Directive or directed letter, to record the decisions taken or opinions expressed. As war began Ludlow-Hewitt led Bomber Command, his SASO was Bottomley; Dowding led Fighter Command and had Park as SASO; and Coastal Command led by Bowhill, had Hards as SASO.¹⁴

These men were all well known to each other. Some were friends, some rivals, some worked harmoniously while others were best kept apart. The RAF of 1939, while expanding very rapidly was still commanded and staffed by a close knit group of men who knew a great deal about each other's strengths and weaknesses. They were also subject to many of the dangers that over familiarity and homogeneity can bring to any organization. The numbers were small, in January 1939, there were 3 serving ACMs, 6 AMs, 22 AVMs, and 35 Air Cdres in the RAF giving total of 66 officers above the rank of gp capt on whose shoulders the enormous responsibility of wartime command would fall.¹⁵

North Sea Operations - Informal Adaptation

The War Cabinet instructions from the first meeting on 3 September 1939 for the RAF to dispatch bombers against the German fleet set the scene for the anti-shipping air operations in the early months of the war.¹⁶ The aim was the continual

¹⁴ *Air Force List*, September 1939.

¹⁵ *Air Force List*, January 1939.

¹⁶ TNA CAB 65/1/1 War Cabinet 1 (39) dated 3 September 1939.

pursuit of offensive action of the German Navy in order to inflict a serious setback on the German High Command whilst strengthening the superiority of the RN in the North Sea.¹⁷ It seemed a simple task but it became one which exposed the deficiencies of pre-war thinking and the limitations of the current frontline capability and higher command structure. Not only were the means of reconnaissance extremely limited but the ability to disseminate that knowledge once gained, and act upon it effectively before events had moved on, were to be frustratingly elusive for many months to come.¹⁸ The operational story is well recorded but the higher command aspects are much less well documented.¹⁹

Operations in the North Sea area against the German Navy were exactly the type of activity for which the Hankey System had evolved. They required the integration of various operational elements which were not under single command or control but which had to act as one if the fleeting opportunities presented were to be exploited. However, gaps and friction created a sub-optimal situation as Durston commented in October 1939:

the striking force for these operations consists of Bomber Command squadrons, but as the target is a Naval one the operation requires the closest liaison with the Admiralty, and the control of the operation is, therefore, largely, though not completely, in the hands of the A O C-in-C Coastal Command.²⁰

However:

It is not possible to put the operation entirely under the direction of the A O C-in-C Coastal Command owing to the fact that the necessary

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ TNA CAB 65/2/23 War Cabinet Minutes dated 20 November 1939.

¹⁹ Terraine, *The Right of the Line*, Richards, *The Fight at Odds*, Vol 1 of the *Official History of the RAF in WWII*, and S W Roskill, *The War at Sea*, 3 Vols (London: HMSO, 1954-1961).

²⁰ TNA AIR 2/3139, S2222, M18, dated 24 October 1939.

communications between Coastal Command and Bomber Command units do not exist. The result is, therefore, a form of joint control.²¹

Durston encapsulated the gap between the theory of the Hankey System and the practical implementation of War Cabinet direction. The lack of a single individual responsible for the execution of the operations and the provision to that individual of the means necessary to deliver the desired outcome all illustrate that the compromises necessary to address the wider issues of inter-service command and control contained the impediments to the successful and efficient prosecution of operations. The organisational tactic to solve this disparity of capability was the time bounded re-allocation of assets to Coastal Command from Bomber or Fighter Command or both when the need arose.²² But as Durston illustrates, the gap between practice and theory was wide.

On 20 November 1939 CAS briefed the War Cabinet on the 'Policy as to the Attack on the German Fleet'.²³ He followed this on 22 November 1939 with a meeting to discuss 'The Arrangements for an Operation against the Heavy Ships of the German Fleet'.²⁴ The Minutes clearly illustrate the state of preparedness for air operations over the North Sea and the contemporary performance of the higher command structure of the British forces. The CAS stated that the War Cabinet now:

desired some modification of the existing policy for attacks on units of the German Fleet. At present our policy was to attack only ships at sea and to avoid going into the "Hornets' Nest". The War Cabinet felt that our control over the North Sea had weakened somewhat recently.²⁵

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., M19, dated 25 October 1939.

²³ TNA CAB 65/4/16 Air operations; Policy as to the Attack on the German Fleet, dated 20 November 1939.

²⁴ TNA Air 2/3139 E30A and B, dated 30 November 1939.

²⁵ TNA AIR 2/3139 E30A and B dated 30 November 1939.

He emphasized that the War Cabinet felt that in the ‘present atmosphere it was considered to be a matter of capital importance to sink or damage one of the five German heavy ships’.²⁶ The discussion on 22 November 1939 demonstrates, with the great benefit of hindsight, the gulf between contemporary expectation and subsequent experience and offers a clear insight into the difficulties that were faced by the RAF commanders in the early months of the war.²⁷

In answer to a question by CAS concerning the possibility of operating at night during the upcoming moon phase, Ludlow-Hewitt felt there was a serious chance of a mistake in recognising ships at night. Nonetheless, he agreed that night reconnaissance might be possible and agreed to investigate it. Pierse thought it ‘a pity to miss any opportunity of carrying out a successful attack’. He thought the chances of ‘doing damage by night were greater than the chances of sinking a ship by day’ and thought there was a reasonable chance of carrying out a night attack at heights well above 3,000ft, the figure that Ludlow-Hewitt considered to be the height from which that attacks would have to be made. Then Ludlow-Hewitt thought night attacks might be possible from 6,000ft, before upping the figure to 7,000-12,000ft in response to a question from CAS. Finally, he concluded that it might be possible ‘to bomb from 17,000 to 18,000 feet.’ On the matter of the number of aircraft required the debate concluded that 24 would suffice, only to be de-railed by Stevenson who pointed out that practice camp results ‘showed that 36 (aircraft) were required to ensure the likelihood of destructive damage, ie, two hits by a 500lbs S.A.P bomb’.²⁸

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ TNA AIR 2/3139 E30A and B dated 30 November 1939.

²⁸ Ibid. SAP was the abbreviation for Semi-Armour Piercing bomb.

This narrative is not included to lampoon the participants, rather the opposite, namely to demonstrate the openness of mind with which they approached the unknown. For all the attendees the matters at hand were new and way beyond the pre-war planning or contingency operations. That history would record that they were somewhat off the mark should not detract from the rigour and endeavour with which they undertook their tasks, and in the face of a pressing demand from the War Cabinet that ‘something must be done’, their options were limited. On 8 December 1939 the Air Ministry signalled Bomber Command explicit instructions to carry out the attacks ‘with the object of destroying the German battle cruisers and pocket battleships’.²⁹ Of note, considering Stevenson’s comments regarding the number of aircraft needed to guarantee 2 hits with 500lbs SAP bombs, the signal instructed that the striking force ‘should not exceed 36 bombers unless Air Ministry approval has been obtained’.³⁰

In early December Newall appointed Joubert de la Ferté to a new Air Ministry post responsible to him for the direct Co-ordination of Air Operations.³¹ This post, with dedicated staff, was to act in concert with Pierse, to enable the Air Ministry to discharge its responsibilities under CID-1425B for the operational co-ordination of the RAF’s frontline forces. In mid-December Peck wrote to Joubert addressing his views on the command and control aspects of the current arrangements for air operations over the North Sea.³² An earlier directive to C-in-C Bomber Command had instructed him to place 24 aircraft at the disposal of C-in-C Coastal Command ‘for operation under his direct control as a striking force for the attack of enemy naval

²⁹ TNA AIR 2/3139 Enclosure 33A dated 8 December 1939.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ *Air Force List* February 1940, p 10. Joubert is listed, without an associated appointment date as being the CAS’ Advisor on Combined Operations within the CAS department.

³² TNA AIR 2/3139 M35, dated 16 December 1939.

units of the battleship or cruiser class.’³³ This Directive exemplified the procedures that the Hankey System required and is good evidence that the system as a whole was well practiced within the Air Staff and the subordinate Commands. However, in his Minute to Joubert, Peck went on to address the practical reality of the operations envisaged in the 12 October 1939 Directive.³⁴

Peck recorded that Ludlow-Hewitt, had already pointed out the consequences of the Directive which made it ‘very difficult for him to take the responsibility which he should take for the conduct and result of operations ordered by another Commander-in-Chief’.³⁵ Ludlow-Hewitt’s argument centred on the lack of authority which the Directive gave him for the actual conduct of the forces under his command when compared to the complete responsibility he bore for the success of the operation carried out at the command of another C-in-C. Too many operational variables were at stake in the conduct of winter operations over the North Sea for it to be reasonable to just instruct a C-in-C to act without giving him the discretion to assess the battlefield and act accordingly. Despite Ludlow Hewitt’s concerns Peck felt he could see a way ahead which he proposed to Joubert. In paragraph 5 of his Minute he made his case:

I am inclined to think that the right solution, now that your organization has been formed, is to cancel the arrangement by which 24 aircraft are placed at the disposal of Coastal Command and substitute for it an arrangement by which Bomber Command retains 24 aircraft at short notice for similar operations but at the disposal of the Air Staff, and when such action is needed is laid on from the Air Ministry.³⁶

He concluded:

³³ Ibid., E11, dated 12 October 1939.

³⁴ Ibid., M35, dated 16 December 1939.

³⁵ Ibid., M35, dated 16 December 1939.

³⁶ Ibid., M35, dated 16 December 1939.

The operation would then be one laid on by the Air Staff but only one Commander in Chief would be responsible for its conduct instead of, as at present, dividing the responsibility between two.³⁷

The proposal was clear evidence the consequences of the Hankey System were having a negative impact on the conduct of operations. What Peck was suggesting was the establishment of the structure that was at the heart of the SAC concept in which a 'super C-in-C' based close to the Air Ministry, the CAS and the Air Staff, would act as 'co-ordinator in chief' of the functional commands. The Hankey System, heavily influenced by the Admiralty structure, required the RAF frontline to operate largely as the RN in which vessels were allocated to at-sea commanders for specific missions. But that was not how the RAF was organised and that difference was critical to the ease with which the Hankey System could work. Ludlow Hewitt's concern regarding operational responsibility and intelligence provision were but two manifestations of that difficulty.³⁸

Joubert responded to Peck on 19 December 1939 stating that:

As you know I consider it wrong in principle that C-in-C Coastal Command should have a mixed force of bombers, fighters and GR (General Reconnaissance) at his disposal, but in the present circumstances I think it is unavoidable. May I suggest we leave the matter until after Christmas, when we should get Cs-in-C Coastal, Fighter and Bomber Command together for a general discussion.³⁹

This perspective shows that the logic of a mono-functional command structure remained well supported and that Joubert's role appears to have been intended to be one of more effective co-ordination rather than overt air command. Newall was clearly attempting to make the Hankey System work even if events were making its operation difficult. To formalize the appointment of Joubert, DCAS sent a letter to the

³⁷ Ibid., M35, dated 16 December 1939.

³⁸ Ibid., M38, dated 20 December 1939.

³⁹ Ibid., M36, dated 19 December 1939.

respective C-in-Cs on 28 December 1939 informing them that a new branch of the Air Staff was being established under Joubert to co-ordinate the North Sea air operations and that the detailed arrangements would follow in due course.⁴⁰

Joubert was quick to enter the debate with a note released the next day, 29 December 1939 concerning the 'Control of Operations in the North Sea'.⁴¹ Joubert summarised the situation:

The present control of Air operations in the North Sea is very largely the responsibility of Coastal Commnd (sic). This Headquarters is in the closest touch with the Admiralty and is very experienced in these operations.

The present system has resulted in Coastal Commnd (sic) practically taking commnd (sic) of that portion of the bomber forces which daily stands by for the operations over the North Sea.⁴²

There are two important conclusions to draw. First, Joubert's appointment was initiated to address the emerging shortcoming in the Hankey System. Second, the need for Coastal Command to take control of Bomber Command assets to undertake a Coastal Command mission was a direct criticism of the mono-functional logic of the 1936 command restructuring. Thus by 29 December 1939 two foundations upon which RAF high command was based were beginning to give way under the pressure of wartime reality.

Joubert proposed that while much could remain as was, the difficulty, raised by Ludlow-Hewitt of having his squadrons under the direct orders of another C-in-C while he retained responsibility for their performance and operational effectiveness, demanded that changes be made.⁴³ He suggested that a North Sea Intelligence Section be established at Bomber Command to address the intelligence gaps; that C-in-C

⁴⁰ Ibid., E43A, dated 28 December 1939.

⁴¹ Ibid., E44A, dated 29 December 1939.

⁴² Ibid., E44A, dated 29 December 1939.

⁴³ Ibid., E44A, dated 29 December 1939.

Coastal Command should continue to request Bomber Command support but that C-in-C Bomber Command should be free to deliver that support as he saw best. Most controversially his final paragraph concluded that:

Owing to the urgent necessity to co-ordinate naval action on the higher plane with the requisite air action, I feel that all important operations should be directed from the Air Ministry. It is only routine work that should be delegated to Coastal Command.⁴⁴

The staff response to this was not wholeheartedly positive. Durston could see little to support Joubert's arguments and conclusions and cited the CID-1425B conclusions to underline his argument that the system that what was in place was adequate.⁴⁵ His central argument was that the difficulties that had arisen were due to the Air Staff's failure to allocate the correct resources to Coastal Command to enable them to undertake what was clearly a more important mission than the one that was keeping the assets allocated to Bomber Command. To Durston the problem was one of a failure to analyse the operational situation and allot resources appropriately, not one of malformed command and control structures. But this approach required the expansion of multi-functional capability within Coastal Command, a development opposed by Joubert and showing all the signs of 'self-sufficiency' that Harris had abhorred in his original paper.⁴⁶

Internal to the Air Staff, Peck wrote to Pierse on 9 January 1940 outlining his perspective.⁴⁷ Interestingly, he records his view of the role of Joubert as being the continuous study of the sea/air situation and the recommending, in consultation with the Operations Staff, of courses of action for the decision of the DCAS. This was a

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., TNA AIR 2/3139 E45A, dated 2 January 1940.

⁴⁶ TNA AIR 9/81, HA/1/59 AHB, Plans archives Vol 59, Co-ordination and Control of Defence Operations, Memo by DD Plans, The Organization, Control and Co-operation of the Defence Services with particular reference to the Role of the Air Arm, dated 8 March 1937.

⁴⁷ TNA Air 2/3139 M48, dated 9 January 1940.

limited portfolio and one that only partly filled the role of SAC, nonetheless, events had demanded such adaptation and thus it offers a telling insight into the validity of pre-war assessments concerning the requirements for RAF higher command. Peck broke the problem down into the need for a rapid response force to take advantage of the fleeting opportunities presented by the German Navy, and the provision of a follow up force to exploit the first attack and deliver a decisive blow. This neat segregation allowed him to conclude that Coastal Command should be made responsible for the initial striking force, with appropriate assets to undertake the task, and that Bomber Command should deliver the follow-on forces. In the margin alongside a comment from Peck that the initial striking force could continue to be supplied by Bomber Command but be ‘despatched and controlled by the Air Ministry’, Piers wrote an emphatic ‘No’. Clearly the role for the Air Ministry in the day to day conduct of operations envisaged by Joubert was not universally held by his colleagues.⁴⁸

On 26 January 1940 DCAS held a meeting to discuss the allocation of Bomber Command squadrons to Coastal Command.⁴⁹ Joubert highlighted various shortcomings in the current arrangements whereby different squadrons were allocated each day to Coastal Command. This negated any attempts to improve training and operational awareness which was exacerbated by the lack of communication facilities between HQ Coastal Command and the allocated Bomber Command squadrons. This created the situation highlighted earlier by C-in-C Bomber Command whereby his squadrons effectively had two masters and he was left with operational responsibility

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., E54A, dated 26 January 1940.

but limited operational authority over when missions would be mounted. DCAS responded by pointing out:

The supreme importance of keeping intact and maintaining the efficiency of the bomber striking force, which had a bigger role to perform than the attack on units of the German Fleet. He did not consider it desirable that a Commander in Chief who was primarily concerned with the war at sea should be able to dispatch at his discretion a considerable part of the bomber force on operations which might involve severe casualties.⁵⁰

Peirse's last point referred to the loss of two of three Wellington aircraft on 2 January 1940 in a sweep in the Heligoland area that had been the subject of a meeting chaired by CAS on 4 January 1940.⁵¹ Peirse continued by stating that:

It was for this reason that we had laid down a restricted area within which no targets could be attacked without the concurrence of the Air Staff.⁵²

To counter DCAS, Joubert:

emphasised the importance at the present time of the war at sea. Every German capital ship destroyed would release units of our own fleet for essential duties of trade protection.⁵³

DCAS, however, maintained that:

we must not lose sight of the larger issue. In general, anything which tended to break up the homogeneity or reduce the efficiency of the bomber force must be regarded as undesirable.⁵⁴

To which ACAS, Peck, agreed and went on to suggest:

That one only of the Bomber Groups should be selected for co-operation with Coastal Command; that the squadrons of this Group should be specialised in attacks on enemy warships and carry out special training to that end.⁵⁵

Eventually the meeting concluded, *inter alia*, that 'no detachment of bomber squadrons to Coastal command should be made'; that the 'Air Staff had come to the

⁵⁰ Ibid., E54A, dated 26 January 1940.

⁵¹ Ibid., E50, dated 4 January 1940.

⁵² Ibid., E54A, dated 26 January 1940.

⁵³ Ibid., E54A, dated 26 January 1940.

⁵⁴ Ibid., E54A, dated 26 January 1940.

⁵⁵ Ibid., E54A, dated 26 January 1940.

view that it would be more effective if one Group in Bomber Command were specialised in amphibious air war'; that 'because C-in-C Coastal Command would have only one Group commander to deal with he should be given direct telephone access'; that 'not more than two squadrons of aircraft should be employed'; and that 'C-in-C Coastal Command should inform the Air Ministry at the same time he contacted the Bomber Group'.⁵⁶

Over the coming months the debate ebbed and flowed with Coastal Command requesting greater access to Bomber Command assets and Bomber Command and the Air Ministry resisting. The role of Joubert as advisor continued but never broke through the firmly held views that were exposed at the 26 January 1940 DCAS meeting. On the one hand, Newall had attempted to solve the problem of co-ordination in the developing multi-functional campaign in the North Sea, through the introduction of an informal 'SAC'. On the other hand, the purpose of Joubert's role was never clearly defined and his authority was always limited. DCAS and ACAS both resisted attempts to broaden Joubert's co-ordination role for to have allowed it would have been to recognise the increasing importance of the North Sea operations vice the bombing campaign that formed the cornerstone of RAF strategy. It would also have diminished their personal authority under the terms of the Hankey System. Joubert mentions his time as the Advisor to CAS on combined operations only briefly in his autobiography. He states that he 'led an uneasy existence' and that 'fortunately this period of my service did not last long' and his biggest concern was that within both the RAF and the RN he had 'little or no authority'.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Joubert de la Ferté, *The Fated Sky*, p 171.

Operations in France - Formal Adaptation

If the introduction of Joubert into the command structure for operations in the North Sea was to address a relatively simple set of tactical matters, the creation of the British Air Forces in France (BAFF) under the command of Barratt was needed to settle a complex mix of national and later international tensions. The available sources covering RAF operations in France are considerable. Primary sources and narratives cover all aspects.⁵⁸ Secondary sources are equally comprehensive and have undergone innovative review and reappraisal in recent years.⁵⁹ For the purposes of this study, however, it is not necessary to recount the course of the campaign. The issue here is the adaptation of the RAF command structure in France in response to allied, inter-service and internal pressures for change.

In 1939 there were two RAF formations in France.⁶⁰ The Advanced Air Striking Force (AASF), formerly No 1 Group, commanded by Playfair was a detachment of Bomber Command deployed to airfields around Reims with Battle light bombers. The reason for their being in France was to bring them in within range of targets in Germany covered in the Western Air Plans (WAPs) that Bomber

⁵⁸ TNA CAB 65 War Cabinet Minutes and Conclusions (1939-1945); CAB 66 War Cabinet Memoranda; CAB 80 War Cabinet and Cabinet: Chiefs of Staff Committee: Memoranda; AIR 35 Air Ministry: British Air Forces in France; AIR 41/21 Review of the Campaign in France and the Low Countries pp. 43-45; AIR 2/7359 RAF Experiences in France 1940; AIR 35/197 BAFF Operations: Dispatch by Air Marshal Barratt; and AIR 16/1023 Report on British Air Forces in France.

⁵⁹ A very good grounding can be found in the following; J R M Butler (ed), *Grand Strategy Vol II; September 1939-June 1941* (London: HMSO, 1957); L F Ellis, *The War in France and Flanders* (London: HMSO, 1953); B Bond, *Britain France and Belgium 1939-1940* (London: Brassey's, 1975), *British Military Policy between the Two World Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980); A Horne, *To Lose a Battle* (London: Macmillan, 1969); R Jackson, *Air War over France 1939-1940* (London: Ian Allan, 1974); P Warner, *The Battle of France, 1940* (London: Cassel, 2001) A Byford, Fair Stood the Wind for France? The Royal Air Force's experience in 1940 as a case study of the relationship between policy, strategy and doctrine, *Air Power Review* 14:3 (Autumn/Winter, 2011), pp. 35-60; The Battle in France, May 1940: Enduring, combined and joint lessons, *Air Power Review* 11:2 (Summer 2008), pp. 60-73; finally the recent reappraisal of the campaign by M L Powell, *Army Co-Operation Command and Tactical Air Power Development in Britain, 1940-1943: The Role of Army Co-Operation Command in Army Air Support*, (PhD Thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham, 2013).

⁶⁰ TNA AIR 41/21, Review of the Campaign in France and the Low Countries, pp. 25-32.

Command might be tasked to attack⁶¹. This forward basing was to compensate for their range limitations, just as the Independent Force commanded by Trenchard in the First World War had occupied similar areas for the same purpose.⁶² The AASF was accompanied by four squadrons of Hurricanes from Fighter Command to provide base area defence and escort which were grouped under No 60 Wing.⁶³ They were part of the Air Component commanded by Blount which had been formed from No 22 Group in secret on 24 August 1939. The remainder of the Blount's Air Component was allocated to support of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) under Gort. Overseeing this bifurcated structure sat Barratt as Head of No 1 British Air Mission to the French CAS, Vuillemin. In parallel there was a No 2 British Air Mission that existed to co-ordinate bombing matters between Bomber Command and the 1st French Air Army under Mouchard. The convoluted act of explaining these arrangements demonstrates their inadequacy.

To task an aircraft of the AASF following a forward reconnaissance mission, the information would first be passed to No 2 mission who would pass it on to Bomber Command, who would consider it and, if satisfied, instruct either their Groups in the UK or the AASF to undertake a mission against the revealed target. There was a caveat that if the situation demanded, Barratt at No 1 Mission could step in and order No 2 Mission to task the AASF directly, but the terms of his intervention were not set out and the dangers of interfering when so much depended on institutional co-operation were obvious. However, changes within the French Air

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 34.

⁶² J Rennles, *Independent Force – The War Diaries of the Daylight Squadrons of the Independent Air Force June – November 1918*, (London: Grub Street, 2002).

⁶³ Ibid., AIR 41/21, p. 51.

Force command structure provided the opportunity for the RAF system to be rationalised.

In late 1939 the French re-organised their air army structure and removed Mouchard's organisation altogether. This led to alterations in the structure of No 2 Mission and the creation of sub-units to interact with the French 'zones'. Viewed from the perspective of Barratt this merely created even more difficulty in harmonising activity and ensuring it was focussed against the main point of effort. In the words of the AHB Narrative the situation was 'little short of fantastic'. In addition to the pressures arising in France for organisational change, at Bomber Command Ludlow-Hewitt was also coming to the view that improvement were necessary. He argued that a co-ordinating HQ was required 'to button up the divergent or convergent requirements' of the various agencies that needed the support of the RAF in France and the UK.⁶⁴

Powell highlighted that the War Office was also pressing for both changed command structures, and increased aircraft allocation.⁶⁵ Their immediate goal was for 'large numbers of bombers directly under their control' because the current command arrangements gave them little confidence their requirements would be met.⁶⁶ The CIGS had also been concerned for some time that the tasking procedures needed tightening to allow the Army commander more direct control of his allocated air

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Powell, *Army Co-Operation Command and Tactical Air Power Development in Britain, 1940-1943: The Role of Army Co-Operation Command in Army Air Support*, pp. 80-81.

⁶⁶ Ibid., Powell, p. 81.

assets.⁶⁷ However the simple arithmetic of available numbers continued to provide the real stumbling block.

On 2 November 1939 Hore-Belisha the SofS at the War Office submitted a paper to the War Cabinet entitled 'Air Requirements of the Army'.⁶⁸ To address the Army's perceived shortfall, Hore-Belisha stated that:

The Land Forces Committee at their first meeting upon this subject put into train certain enquiries relating to the drawing up of a specification of an aircraft suitable for mass production.⁶⁹

In parallel:

the Secretary of State for Air was to examine and report to the Committee on the means by which an additional 250 first line aircraft, suitable for the close support of the Army and acting under its orders (together with the necessary pilots and reserves) can be made available by the Spring of 1940.⁷⁰

However, he continued:

It now appears that the Secretary of State for Air contests this conclusion in principle and is not wilting to place additional machines at the disposal of the Army to act under its orders.⁷¹

Hore-Belisha's next paragraph stated:

I had made it clear that this spasmodic allocation of aircraft for the Army would never be satisfactory, and it must, I submit to my colleagues, be axiomatic that (to employ words once used by Lord Balfour) "A fighting department should as far as possible have the whole responsibility (subject to Treasury and Cabinet control) of the instruments it uses, the personnel it commands, and the operations which it undertakes".⁷²

This self-sufficiency in a time of severe resource limitations was unrealistic, even if later in the war it might be achievable. In the meantime, it represented as severe

⁶⁷ TNA WO 193/678, Note by CIGS, dated 27 September 1939.

⁶⁸ TNA CAB 66/3/11, Air Requirements of the Army, Memorandum by the Secretary of State for War, dated 2 November 1939.

⁶⁹ Ibid., dated 2 November 1939.

⁷⁰ Ibid., dated 2 November 1939.

⁷¹ Ibid., dated 2 November 1939.

⁷² Ibid., dated 2 November 1939.

challenge to the RAF. Hore-Belisha concluded with what he considered to be a reasonable request:

Agreement to the moderate demands which I make would go far to remove a feeling, growing ever more prevalent in the Army, that it lacks an essential arm of its equipment and that it is being sorely hampered by the present restraint upon its natural evolution.⁷³

The SofS for Air replied on 3 November 1939 stating that the point of issue was that:

the point at issue is this: The Secretary of State for War demands in effect the creation of an Army Air Arm, under the complete and permanent control of the Army and ultimately trained and administered by the War Office. This is to include a large force of special type bombers manned by Army Officers, amounting to a total of 250 first line aircraft, together with the necessary pilots and reserves, by the Spring of 1940 and ultimately to a much larger number, to be a "permanent part of the mechanism directly under the Commander-in-Chief in the Field".⁷⁴

The RAF, he stated:

propose that bomber support for the Army shall be found from the main Air Striking Force, from which Squadrons should be allotted by the Chiefs of Staff to operations in support of the Army, in such proportions as may be necessary according to the situation or to the plans projected. The Air Ministry are arranging for a proportion of the bomber force to receive special training with the Army -just as a proportion now receive special training for the attack of ships at sea. But they consider it vital to retain the Bomber Command as a homogeneous force, of which any part, or the whole, can be immediately concentrated on whatever task is of greatest importance at the time, whether it be counter-offensive operations in connection with the defence of this country against air attack, operations in support of the Navy against enemy naval or air forces threatening our coasts and sea borne trade, or operations in support of the Allied Armies in France against enemy land and air attack.⁷⁵

This lengthy extract is quoted for it illustrates the tension that many had foreseen, namely the inability of the nation to meet the requirements of all commanders for air support. This problem was exacerbated in the case of the Army by their desire to exclusively control their own air assets. The SofS went on to summarise this position:

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ TNA CAB 66/3/12 Air Requirements of the Army, Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Air, dated 3 November 1939.

⁷⁵ Ibid., dated 3 November 1939.

I must emphasise at once that, quite apart from the principle involved, it is impossible to provide, complete with the necessary reserves and trained personnel, both ground and air, 250 aircraft by the Spring of 1940, save by accepting a corresponding reduction in some other direction.⁷⁶

He then reminded his colleagues that:

The Secretary of State for War acknowledges that the problem of air support to the Army only assumed importance consequent upon the decision, reached just before the war, to recruit a Continental Army. The Air Ministry, of course, do not question that decision, and fully accept its implications. It represents a fundamental change in our general defence policy, and our air policy must be adapted to meet it.⁷⁷

The SofS then illustrated the challenge the Army's proposal raised:

A continental Army involves heavy demands on our resources in classes of aircraft other than bombers. It requires large numbers of Army Co-operation and Reconnaissance Squadrons as well as Fighter Squadrons, and these must be found at the expense of Home Defence Fighter Squadrons, Coastal Command Squadrons, the Fleet Air Arm, or the Air Striking Force. I must stress the fact that until the rate of aircraft production rises and training of personnel has made substantial progress, even the provision of the essential number of Reconnaissance and Fighter Squadrons will be a matter of the utmost difficulty. If in addition we are to find large numbers of bombers "continually under Army control" then they can only be found by taking them away from our main Air Striking Force. An allotment of 250 first line bombers with reserves would mean a reduction in this force of nearly 50% of its present first line strength.⁷⁸

He concluded:

In particular, I wish to record my conviction that if the War Office is to be allowed to enter into competition with the Air Ministry in ordering or acquiring airframes, aero-engines and accessories of any type for any purpose, then the result in the sphere of aircraft production will be chaotic.⁷⁹

To reconcile the two departmental viewpoints Lord Chatfield, the Minister for Co-Ordination of Defence, was asked by the War Cabinet to investigate the situation.

He reported to the War Cabinet on 2 December 1939.⁸⁰ He held two meetings with

⁷⁶ Ibid., dated 3 November 1939.

⁷⁷ Ibid., dated 3 November 1939.

⁷⁸ Ibid., dated 3 November 1939.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ TNA CAB 66/3/12 Air Requirements of the Army, Memorandum by the Minister for Co-Ordination of Defence, dated 2 December 1939.

Deputy CIGS, COS to C-in-C BEF, Pownall, and DCAS from which he was able to report that:

As a result of the progress made at these two meetings, I requested the two Deputy Chiefs of Staff to continue the discussions without me and to endeavour to obtain an agreed solution of the problem within the limits of the Cabinet decision and likely to be acceptable to the two Services. I am now able to report that Air Marshal Peirse and Major-General Massy have prepared in full agreement a proposed solution which I have carefully examined with them, and which is appended as Annex I to this Memorandum.⁸¹

Chatfield then outlined the proposals:

The proposed scheme which is based on the analogy of the existing relationship between the Royal Navy and the Coastal Command, R.A.F., is generally as follows:

- (a) An RAF Command to be established in France to co-ordinate the operations of all R.A.F. units there.
- (b) The Commander to be designated the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, British Air Forces in France, his position being similar to that of the Commander-in-Chief, B.E.F., except that he will not be under any French Commander.
- (c) The Command will include all the bomber squadrons of the Advanced Air Striking Force in France, which will be detached from the bomber command.
- (d) The Advanced Air Striking Force, or any part of it, when ordered to operate in conjunction with the bomber command in some strategic operation, other than in support of the armies in France, will pass temporarily under the command of the A.O.C.-in-C, Bomber Command, who will issue operation orders direct to the A. O.C. Advanced Air Striking Force. It is agreed that such an order would only be given by the Chiefs of Staff Committee with War Cabinet sanction.
- (e) The Air Component of the B.E.F. will be absorbed into the new command but will remain under its own A.O.C, who will act as adviser to the Commander-in-Chief, B.E.F. and under his operational control.
- (f) The A.O.C. -in-C. will be charged with the responsibility of seeing that the Commander-in-Chief, B.B.F- has at all times "full assurances regarding air support". Accordingly, he will place at the "disposal of the Commander-in-Chief" such bomber squadrons as the

⁸¹ Ibid., dated 2 December 1939.

latter may, in consultation with him, consider necessary from time to time.

(g) The precise arrangements to give effect to give effect to this decision to be concerted in detail between the Commander-in-Chief, B.E.F., and the A.O.C.-in-C. British Air Forces in France, who will consult, as necessary, the French High Command.⁸²

Chatfield concluded by recommending that:

Having discussed the proposed solution with the Secretary of State for War and the Secretary of State for Air and obtained their general concurrence, and with the assurances as to supply referred to in paragraphs 6-10, I recommend approval of the agreed solution.⁸³

This outcome, which had Newall's agreement, also addressed his concern for establishing a known person to be the face of the air contribution, a 'generalissimo' who would reassure the various stakeholders that air was under control. The Hankey System's reliance on bureaucratic process singularly failed to provide this human reassurance. Thus the appointment of a commander of all RAF units in France would improve the situation and by the incorporation of wider responsibilities to support the BEF 'abate the more unrealistic' Army demands.⁸⁴

Barratt was informed he would become the C-in-C on 31 December 1939.⁸⁵

BAFF was formed on 15 January 1940 taking command, as per the Chatfield agreement, of the RAF Air Component to the BEF, the AASF from Bomber Command, and all the sundry units and establishments that had, overtime, emerged in France.⁸⁶ Barratt's status was confirmed as the equivalent of Gort's but his responsibilities, based on the air assets he controlled, extended well beyond the BEF zone of operations. Barratt was also not under the control of any French officer as

⁸² Ibid., dated 2 December 1939.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., TNA AIR 41/21, p. 46.

⁸⁵ Ibid., Letter by A Street to Barratt, dated 31 December 1939.

⁸⁶ Powell., *Army Co-Operation Command*, p. 82; and Byford, *Fair Stood the Wind for France?*, pp.49-53.

Gort was, but under the direct authority of the CAS and Air Ministry⁸⁷. In effect, BAFF was a new multi-functional MAF command that happened to be located in France. As such it represented the first true multi-functional organisation established by the RAF in North West Europe in the Second World War and many of the lessons it learned in its very short existence were to be invaluable in the years to come.⁸⁸

The flexibility of approach embedded in BAFF was also noteworthy. Barratt was charged to ensure that at all times Gort had 'full assurances' the air support needs of the BEF would be met.⁸⁹ Whilst the Air Component was under BAFF's command, it was under the BEF's operational control, overseen by Barratt who could, in extremis, intervene. But unlike the situation Barratt had faced with intervening between Bomber Command and the AASF, in this case it would be based on the daily growing relationship of close trust he was building with Gort. In this Barratt was supported by his Directive from the Air Ministry which specifically highlighted the fact that since the BEF was holding a small part of the Allied line, the British bombers in France should be called on to operate 'in accordance with the day-to-day needs of the Allied situation on the western front as a whole'.

On 17 January 1940 Barratt secured agreement with his colleagues that he should order and control reconnaissance missions and in consultation with Fighter Command the allocation of fighters within the BAFF structure. Developments with the French provided better co-ordination and enhanced operational control.⁹⁰ Incrementally over the coming months Barratt developed the new command with the

⁸⁷ Powell., pp. 82-83.

⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. 130-139.

⁸⁹ Ibid., TNA AIR 41/21, p. 47.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

AASF remaining in the area around Reims, the Air Component located to the north in the rear of the BEF zone and the Blenheims of No 2 Group Bomber Command, who were originally intended to move to France as part of the AASF but withheld due to the lack of airfield facilities, at readiness in Norfolk.⁹¹ On 9 May 1940 Gort wrote to the War Cabinet setting out his assessment of the situation in France, in his penultimate paragraph, he restated his view concerning the priority in air support that his operations should be given:

As land forces cannot operate successfully in modern war without air support, the availability of air forces must also be included in these assessments. Whilst the Allied High Command can count on the willing and effective co-operation of all the air units now in France, this will not be enough and the whole weight of our Metropolitan Air Forces will be needed to help in the formidable task of repelling the German onslaught when it begins. Germany to-day has the initiative and the power to surprise; she can concentrate her superior air forces wherever she decides. At present the Allies have superiority in aircraft and crews, but considerable inferiority in numbers.⁹²

Gort's timing could not have been more apposite, for on the morning of 10 May 1940 the Germans struck and within days BAFF was split in two. The Air Component to the north of the German advance retreated with the BEF and its ground units left via Dunkirk. The AASF and its associated fighter squadrons fought on to the south of the Germans and eventually retired through the ports of western France along with the BAFF and AASF HQs. Events were to be so chaotic that it is impossible to assess whether the creation of a multi-functional BAFF with its own SAC materially affected the performance of the campaign. It most certainly did not hinder it and the function of command continued to be undertaken by Barratt, Playfair and Blount

⁹¹ M J F Bowyer *2 Group RAF – A Complete History, 1936-1945* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974) See Map 6 p. 81.

⁹² TNA CAB 66/7/30, War Cabinet Situation on the Western Front – Letter by the Commander-in-Chief British Expeditionary Force, dated 9 May 1940.

throughout the hectic days of retreat.⁹³ Throughout the short campaign the MAF was actively engaged, as Gort had desired, but the efforts of the modestly sized force that the MAF was in 1940 was never going to be the decisive factor.⁹⁴

The most telling aspect of the background to the establishment of BAFF is that it occurred to address the very obvious inadequacies of command that had been created on the precepts of Hankey System. The need for BAFF showed that management of operations only achieved so much, what was also needed was the human leadership element of confidence building , trust and shared endeavour to ensure that all participants in what had to be a complex matrix of structures believed that their needs would be taken into account and addressed when the moment demanded. The creation of BAFF was the outcome of War Cabinet level discussions. To reconcile the conflicting positions of the Secretaries of State for War and Air required the Minister of Defence Co-Ordination to bring the two sides together and reach a compromise. BAFF was that compromise but it also addressed the concern that both Newall and Barratt had concerning the need for a clearer command chain and a means of preventing the potential wastage of valuable assets on less than high priority missions. In this sense the issues of limited resource and tactical self-sufficiency demanded by the Army were finessed into a command structure that created a *de facto* SAC, Barratt, and an embryonic multi-functional command, BAFF. This first step towards multi-functionality would not be that last and the collapse of the Allied Forces in the west would bring about another crisis of command.

⁹³ Byford, *Fair Stood the Wind for France?* pp. 47-49.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Dunkirk – Crisis Adaptation

At 2.45pm on 13 May 1940 Mr Churchill, the newly appointed PM, addressed the House of Commons.⁹⁵ He began by stating:

I beg to move, that this House welcomes the formation of a Government representing the united and inflexible resolve of the nation to prosecute the war with Germany to a victorious conclusion.⁹⁶

He then moved on to announce the formation of his new all party administration:

A War Cabinet has been formed of five Members, representing, with the Opposition Liberals, the unity of the nation. The three party Leaders have agreed to serve, either in the War Cabinet or in high executive office. The three Fighting Services have been filled. It was necessary that this should be done in one single day, on account of the extreme urgency and rigour of events.⁹⁷

Before clarifying in the clearest terms the intention of the Government in the face of the developing crisis:

We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering. You ask, what is our policy? I will say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival.⁹⁸

It was clear the British Government intended to make its stand against Germany and Churchill's defiant rhetoric epitomised the 'survive at all costs' mentality that would develop over the coming months. Indeed, the situation was such that on 21 May 1940 the PM urged Parliament to pass with the utmost haste the Treachery Bill.⁹⁹ However, the collapse of the French military position and the

⁹⁵ Hansard, HC Deb Vol 360, cc 1501-25, dated 13 May 1940.

⁹⁶ Ibid., dated 13 May 1940.

⁹⁷ Ibid., dated 13 May 1940.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Hansard, HC Deb vol 361 c25-7, dated 21 May 1940.

attendant political crisis added further to the immense complexity facing the Government and UK high command. On 23 May 1940, the PM stated that:

The German armoured forces which made their way through the breach in the French Army have penetrated into the rear of the Allied Armies in Belgium and are now attempting to derange their communications. Abbeville is in enemy hands and heavy fighting is proceeding around and in Boulogne. It is too early yet to say what the result of this coastal fighting may be; but it evidently carries with it implications of a serious character.¹⁰⁰

Despite desperate Allied resistance, in which the RAF attempted to fight a co-ordinated campaign employing much of Bomber, Fighter, and Coastal Commands in support of the military operations in France, the German onslaught drove on and the situation continued to deteriorate. The PM updated the House of Commons on 28 May 1940, stating that:

The House will be aware that the King of the Belgians yesterday sent a plenipotentiary to the German Command asking for a suspension of arms on the Belgian front. The British and French Governments instructed their generals immediately to dissociate themselves from this procedure and to persevere in the operations in which they are now engaged.¹⁰¹

However the situation was grave as the PM subsequently stated:

The situation of the British and French Armies now engaged in a most severe battle and beset on three sides and from the air, is evidently extremely grave. The surrender of the Belgian Army in this manner adds appreciably to their grievous peril. But the troops are in good heart, and are fighting with the utmost discipline and tenacity, and I shall, of course, abstain from giving any particulars of what, with the powerful assistance of the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force, they are doing or hope to do. I expect to make a statement to the House on the general position when the result of the intense struggle now going on can be known and measured.¹⁰²

His next statement neatly hid the true nature of the operation now underway at Dunkirk:

the House should prepare itself for hard and heavy tidings. I have only to add that nothing which may happen in this battle can in any way relieve us of our duty to defend the world cause to which we have vowed ourselves; nor

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., HC Deb vol 361 c314, dated 23 May 1940.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., HC Deb vol 361 cc421-2, dated 28 May 1940.

¹⁰² Ibid., dated 28 May 1940.

should it destroy our confidence in our power to make our way, as on former occasions in our history, through disaster and through grief to the ultimate defeat of our enemies.¹⁰³

What Churchill was concealing from the House of Commons was Operation DYNAMO, the evacuation of the BEF and French forces from Dunkirk, in which the RAF would play a significant but ultimately controversial role.¹⁰⁴

On the 19 May 1940, VAdm Ramsey began the planning for Operation DYNAMO at his Headquarters in Dover and on 20 May 1940 the PM directed that as:

a precautionary measure the Admiralty should assemble a large number of small vessels in readiness to proceed to ports and inlets on the French coast.¹⁰⁵

However, on 25 May 1940 the War Cabinet was discussing a response to General Weygand who had asserted that the BEF was withdrawing, which was not the position as understood by the War Cabinet.¹⁰⁶ The confused nature of the time is well

illustrated by the following:

The Prime Minister thought that we should await further news from Lord Gort before taking a decision on this matter. The War Cabinet agreed that, pending further news of the situation of the British Expeditionary Force, steps should not be taken to withdraw reserves of ammunition from the bases in France. In the meantime, the ships should be kept standing by in the ports.¹⁰⁷

On the 26 May 1940 Ramsey was ordered to execute DYNAMO and begin the evacuation of the Allied armies concentrating in the defensive perimeter of Dunkirk. However the fighting was still some way from the beaches and the surrender of the Belgium forces was adding to the danger facing the BEF, the PM summarised the key priority to the War Cabinet:

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ TNA CAB/65/7/24, War Cabinet 129/40 Minutes, dated 19 May 1940.

¹⁰⁵ TNA CAB/65/7/26, War Cabinet 131/40 Minutes, dated 20 May 1940.

¹⁰⁶ TNA CAB/65/7/26, War Cabinet 138/40 Minutes, dated 25 May 1940.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., dated 25 May 1940.

Our chief preoccupation now was to get off as much of the British Expeditionary Force as possible. There would be very confused fighting in the area of operations. The bombers on both sides would be able to do little, as the opposing troops would be very much intermingled. The German bombers, however, would get their opportunity when our men reached the coast.¹⁰⁸

To this the CAS highlighted the situation that day:

large numbers of fighters had been operating that day over the French coast. We had lost 9 aircraft, but 23 Germans had been shot down for certain and several more unconfirmed. The German Air Force had been very active indeed during the day. The Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Fighter Command, was proposing to use formations of 3 squadrons the following day in order to compete with the large fighter escorts of the enemy.¹⁰⁹

Whilst Ramsey was beginning his planning on the 19 May 1940, the Air Ministry had agreed with Gort and Blount that the Air Component needed to be evacuated back to the UK and continue as best it could to support the BEF from a forward base area in the SE of England.¹¹⁰ Accordingly, Blount established his Back HQ at RAF Hawkinge in Kent near to Ramsey's HQ in Dover.¹¹¹

This background to the evacuation has been highlighted in some detail to illustrate the close link between the War Cabinet, the COS, and their respective frontline commands. Events on the frontline were of immediate importance to the War Cabinet and stimulated responses that required immediate actions from the three services. Here the COS played their key role in the co-ordination of defence and their respective staffs acted as their executives to ensure the frontline acted as the War Cabinet desired. This was the principle at the heart of the Hankey System and at the highest level it worked well. The difficulties emerged closer to the frontline where the completeness of higher co-ordination would have the most telling effect. Newall

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., dated 25 May 1940.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ TNA AIR 35/308 and TNA AIR 41/21 dated 19 May 1940, p. 312.

¹¹¹ Ibid., pp. 312-313.

dispatched Joubert to act as the forward co-ordinator, a natural development of Joubert's combined operations advisor role.¹¹² The task facing the RAF was to focus the efforts of all frontline commands in support of the evacuation. This was exactly the role that had been envisaged for the SAC.

Joubert arrived at Back HQ at 0630 hrs on 26 May 1940 to take over the HQ and ensure the 'co-ordination of reconnaissance, fighter and bombing operations' in support of the evacuation. However, Joubert quickly found that Blount, who arrived on 27 May 1940, had established a sound HQ and he returned to London in the afternoon leaving Blount in command. Blount was further assisted by the arrival in the evening of Lt Col Festing of the War Office whose role was to help in the co-ordination of the RN, RAF and evacuating BEF. By the end of 27 May 1940 Blount and the Back HQ were, by virtue of CAS' representative Joubert's endorsement of Blount's HQ, effectively charged with the SAC role for the Dunkirk evacuation. Although Fighter, Bomber and Coastal Commands would act at times independently, their directing co-ordination would come from Blount through the Air Ministry.

Blount's HQ was naturally very rudimentary and poorly staffed. Furthermore, his understanding of what was happening in the Dunkirk perimeter was patchy at best and he had to piece together whatever information he could get to gain a basic insight with which to plan and task his forces.¹¹³ His forces, of course, were not his, but as Richards comments:

he was dependent for all his tasks other than reconnaissance, upon "requests" to the chiefs of the operational commands. Fortunately, Portal,

¹¹² Ibid., p. 313.

¹¹³ Ibid.

Dowding and Bowhill were all men who recognized a crisis when they met one, and the organization, though cumbersome, somehow worked.¹¹⁴

The role of Blount as the very specific SAC for the operations in support of DYNAMO marks a waypoint in the changes that had taken place since 1939. In Blount the RAF created an SAC to undertake exactly the task it said in 1937 would be required in wartime, namely the active co-ordination of the mono-functional commands to deliver multi-functional effect. But Blount's appointment was not on the same level as the creation of BAFF and the elevation of Barratt to C-in-C. Blount was empowered to task and co-ordinate the air assets committed to a very specific and vitally important military operation in a confined operating area. He did not simultaneously have authority over Bomber, Fighter or Coastal Commands' wider operations and the time period envisaged for his authority to last was obviously very limited. In retrospect, the example of Blount highlighted the benefits that could come from empowered co-ordination and control, and as such provided a pointer for what might be required once operations moved beyond the fight for survival towards the beginning of co-ordinated offensive action. Blount became an SAC by circumstance rather than considered deliberation as in the case of Barratt. His performance in that role should have highlighted that the objections within the RAF to one individual being given authority over operations not in their immediate area of expertise, were flawed. But that lesson would not be learned at that time.

Higher Air Command - The Reality of War

The introduction of Joubert and the elevation of Barratt to C-in-C status highlighted early indications that the Hankey System contained difficulties for the

¹¹⁴ Richards, *The Fight at Odds*, p. 131.

RAF. That the system should have evolved from the experience of the First World War was both a blessing and a curse. On the positive side its process and procedures ensured a systematic approach to war governance was established and maintained. It allowed all parties to make their case and have it properly considered before decisions were reached.¹¹⁵ It avoided, at least until the change of PM, the domination of war policy by personality which was to have such an adverse effect on the conduct of the war by the Germans, Italians and Soviet Union. It also professionalised the management of operations and allowed for decision making to be undertaken amid the growing complexity of information and strategic demand. On the other hand, it reflected a way of working that technology was rapidly overtaking.

The flexibility and adaptability of emerging military capability was outstripping the capacity of the Cabinet decision making process. Events would move at such pace that yesterday's decision could easily be overtaken by today's events. The argument made by James that command decisions moved at the pace of humans rather than machines, was increasingly coming under question. This had been a central tenet of James' argument during the SAC Debate but the reality of combat operations was increasingly showing that the ability of air weapons to act, recover, and act again meant that the traditional concepts surrounding the command and control of military operations were coming under question.¹¹⁶ Even in the early months of the Second World War the multi-role capability of the RAF's frontline meant that demands for different types of air support from the same platform were going to become a central feature of air command. For the RAF this was particularly critical as its capability offered the War Cabinet, and the other Services, the fastest reacting means with which

¹¹⁵ Hankey, *Government in War*, pp. 60-65.

¹¹⁶ See Chapter 4 above.

to deal with the unexpected. Thus to harness it to a process which relied on the directives and central co-ordination when flexibility and adaptability were essential was a significant weakness. By resisting the RAF's request to establish a SAC the DCOS Committee significantly weakened the RAF's ability to respond to wartime requirements. Whilst James was correct in asserting that war was often a period of protracted inaction, he was wrong in applying this precept to the air environment where the demands for support and assistance continually outstripped availability, just as Harris had warned they would.¹¹⁷

Another challenge was this limit of authority that could or should be exercised by the CAS and the Air Ministry. CAS held overriding authority and it is difficult to argue that he lacked the command authority necessary to pull together the various components of the RAF into a cohesive whole. Moreover, he was responsible for all senior appointments and in his hands rested the gift of advancement or retirement. So how could it be possible that he did not have the authority necessary to act as the SAC in the Hankey Model?

The simple answer is that the characterization above of his singular authority is overly simplistic and ignores the reality of higher command.¹¹⁸ High command was not analogous to dictatorship. The CAS may have theoretically possessed the authority described but that did not mean that it would have been right for him to use it in an unthinking or unsympathetic way. As CAS he had constitutional seniority over his Service colleagues, but he was still subject to the direction of the Air Council and

¹¹⁷ This was central to Harris' argument put forward in his paper AIR 9/81, The Organization, Control and Co-operation of the Defence Services with particular reference to the Role of the Air Arm, dated 8 March 1937.

¹¹⁸ TNA AIR 8/1354, dated 23 September 1939.

had at all times to consider the morale and sustainability of his high command colleagues and the well being of the RAF and its morale. That does not imply that he was honour bound to defer to their wishes or perspectives, but the collegiate nature of British military command demanded that their views must be considered and that their position and personal authority must be acknowledged. So it was not the case that the CAS could simply direct and order, it was much more complex than that and one of the reasons why the role of SAC was not something that could simply be added to the duties of the CAS as required by the Hankey System.

Another factor was the command responsibilities of the Cs-in-C. They were responsible for the fighting efficiency of their frontline units and the successful delivery of the requirements set out in the operational directives they received from the CAS via the Air Staff. This responsibility was jealously guarded by the three operational Cs-in-C as it defined the unique role they held in the command structure of the Service. Indeed, when the subject of establishing a SAC was first broached it drew significant opposition from the Cs-in-C who argued that a SAC would undermine their role and weaken their link with, and authority of, the CAS. It is highly likely that that would have been true as the SAC would, in effect, have been a Supreme C-in-C sitting above the Cs-in-C with overall operational responsibility.

The Cs-in-C saw themselves as the final arbiters of the actions of their Commands and they possessed firm views on how their organizations should be used to contribute to the war. At a time when air power theory was based on flimsy and equivocal evidence it was possible and intellectually defensible to hold very diverging opinions on the 'way' in which air capability should be used. The effect of this was to enable the Cs-in-C to hold firm views of how their capability should be

used that were difficult, if not impossible to gainsay. That understandable lack of certainty limited the 'authority' that a wise CAS could or would apply.¹¹⁹

If the RAF had found the CAS acting as the SAC a difficult transition, the Hankey System found its responsiveness to unfolding events a severe challenge. In retrospect it is clear that in the early days of the war under the premiership of Chamberlain the War Cabinet had not yet fully transitioned to a war footing.¹²⁰ In particular, the responsiveness necessary in the higher command procedures was lacking in the early months. Air forces may be highly flexible and adaptable but this attribute also makes them highly attractive to close political control. That the RAF should still in 1939 have shown all the signs of bridling at this truth is strange given that the RAF was in part born of a political desire to exercise control over the growing military power represented by the air service in 1917 and 1918.¹²¹ Nonetheless, the RAF, and the C-in-Cs in particular, often became exasperated at the continually changing directives they were expected to address.¹²² Whilst one can be sympathetic, such sympathy must have limits for the very attributes which airmen heralded as their unique capability were the ones which demanded that they establish a command and control structure able to address the consequences of their ownership. The situation exposed in 1939 would continue throughout the war, as often the only asset capable of

¹¹⁹ Idib.

¹²⁰ C Hill, *Cabinet decisions on foreign policy – The British Experience October 1938 – June 1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p 85-99.

¹²¹ Smith, *British Air Strategy*, pp. 17-19.

¹²² In a manner that he would later find frustrating, and from a perspective that his biographer would term 'tactical', even Portal reacted strongly to what he saw as continual interference in his overall direction as a C-in-C of an important arm of British defence, namely Bomber Command. Richards, *Portal of Hungerford*, p 160-162.

offering a response was the air force.¹²³ The airman was becoming the victim of his own capability and success.

The Hankey System was designed to ease the management of war and to replicate the efficient machinery of government that emerged in the final months of the First World War. But the First World War was not to be a rehearsal for the Second World War; the retreat from Mons and the Miracle on the Marne were not to be repeated after the German breakthrough at Sedan. The Hankey System was ideally suited to the management of a stabilized front and the gradual shift to the offensive enabled by the inevitable dominance of industrial output and capacity. In this they were supported by the JPC assessment on the expected conduct of a future war against Germany which foresaw a defensive battle preceding stalemate after which the allies would build strength before committing to the offensive.¹²⁴ But in 1939 and 1940 the situation was far from a repeat of the last two years of the First World War and significantly different from the JPC re-assessment of 1936.¹²⁵ The pace of events and the strategic implications that developed created a situation more akin to fire fighting than crisis management.

The decision process once the attack in the west began was simply too slow to cope with the needs of the moment. But in truth the limitations of the Hankey system had existed for a long time for they were embedded in the management concept that underpinned the system. Management of the experienced and familiar was feasible, management of the unknown and dramatic change and chaos was almost

¹²³ Ibid., Harris, TNA AIR 9/81, dated 8 March 1937.

¹²⁴ TNA CAB 53/25, COS 421(P), JPC Provisional report, Appreciation of the Situation in the Event of War with Germany, dated 1 August 1935.

¹²⁵ TNA CAB 53/29, COS 513(P), JPC Provisional report, Appreciation of the Situation in the Event of War with Germany, dated 26 October 1936.

impossible.¹²⁶ In 1939 neither the Government nor the RAF higher commanders were really prepared in either mind or process to deal with the chaos that would attend to the outbreak of German operations in the west. The Phoney War masked the symptoms but they were there nonetheless. The fact that Newall had twice established a SAC in the first four months of the war is ample evidence that the RAF's command structure was not correct and that the decision taken for good reason in 1937 was at the heart of this problem.

In both these cases, Joubert as CAS' Combined Operations advisor and Barratt as the C-in-C BAFF the root cause was the same, inadequate resource in the face of exponentially growing demand. The pressure to achieve more success in the North Sea demanded better internal co-ordination within the RAF and with the RN. The need to address the Army's requirements in France led to War Cabinet decisions that effectively directed the RAF to form BAFF to overcome the intractable dispute between the War office and the Air Ministry. Either way, capability shortfalls coupled with resource shortage and the attendant need for centralised control of scarce assets were the driving factors.

As the fighting in France drew to a close the limitations of the War Cabinet and RAF higher command structure, in terms of command authority, responsiveness, and organization had been exposed. For the RAF their SAC proposal that had been defeated in 1937 returned to haunt them in 1939. It would be simplistic to conclude that the RAF should have imposed a SAC and vested their higher command in that

¹²⁶ Grint, *Leadership, Management and Command – Rethinking D-Day*, p 11-18, citing the work of Weber on the ability of management to deal with the known and experienced, ie, the equivalent of *déjà vu*, but its inability to address the demands of the unknown. This, Grint argued, is the realm of '*vu jade* (never seen this before)' and as such is the preserve of leadership rather than management.

individual. In the first place the other two services would have been unlikely to have co-operated, especially the RN, and in the second place the RAF would have publically gone against agreed CID process as encapsulated in CID 1425-B.

Newall's response was to insinuate a SAC equivalent into the various operational structures without challenging the agreed wider system of higher command. The successful elevation of Blount to oversee the air operations over Dunkirk typified this approach, but this typically British compromise met with limited success. In 1939-40 the outcome of the war's events were not determined by the arrangements for the RAF's contribution, other grander strategic factors would dominate. However, as the surviving war leaders took stock in the aftermath of the French surrender, air command was to come into extremely sharp focus and for a short but crucial time become the determining factor in the survival of Britain.

Chapter 6

PERSONNEL ADAPTATION

Introduction

The previous chapter reviewed the challenges the RAF faced in commanding its forces when operating in allied coalition with France and in a combined operation with their Army and RN colleagues. Adaptations were made to address inter-service demands for greater use of RAF assets, a problem exacerbated by the limited size and mono-capability of the RAF frontline in 1939-40. In the case of North Sea operations, the campaign in France, and the evacuation from Dunkirk, the RAF needed to address joint requirements for maritime and land support, both of which had not figured greatly in the 1936 debates concerning the structure of the frontline. However, by late June the isolated position of Britain was clear. Although the immediate task was to survive whatever threats the coming weeks might produce, underlying this survival was a long standing dispute within the RAF over the balance between offensive and defensive strategies. This debate would reach a climax in the autumn with the wholesale re-organisation of the RAF's higher command. This change of personalities would be central to the leadership and command of the RAF for the remainder of the Second World War. Therefore, whereas the previous chapter addressed the need for high commanders to adapt their command structures and practices to the operational demands of the time, this chapter will investigate the equally important challenge of ensuring that the right personnel occupy the high command positions so that the practices and processes of command can function effectively. During both the day and night air battles over the UK between July 1940 and May 1941 the practice of

command conformed more or less to the precepts set out in CID 1425-B – the Hankey System. During the Battle of Britain the personnel were those who had begun the war and had significant pre-war staff and command experience. During the Blitz virtually all high commanders were new having been appointed in the last three months of 1940. That they should both execute the Hankey System with success says much for its inherent strengths, regardless of the shortcomings highlighted in the previous chapter.

The Battle of Britain

Following the fall of France, the strategic situation simplified, Britain's only policy could be one of survival and therefore all must be done, regardless of perspective, ambition or mindset, to ensure that Britain survived until the autumn storms made a cross-Channel invasion too risky an enterprise for the Germans to consider.¹ This meant that from mid-June, the Home Defence Forces had to counter the threat of invasion until mid to late September, some four months in which to survive and in which the operational goal was not victory but the avoidance of defeat.² Among the Home Defence Forces the RN and the RAF held the key to success.³ The Germans could not mount a realistic assault until they had achieved some measure of air superiority and even if that were to be gained they would still face the prospect of a climatic sea engagement with an as yet undiminished RN.⁴ Thus the Germans had two immediate operational goals. First, the RAF must be defeated to

¹ W S Churchill *The Second World War* Vol II, pp. 102-104.

² Bungay, *The Most Dangerous Enemy – A History of the Battle of Britain* pp. 109-115.

³ Richards, *Royal Air Force 1939-45*, Vol 1, *The Fight at Odds*, p 152, and J Holland, *The Battle of Britain – Five Months that changed History May-October 1940* (London: Bantam Press, 2010) p. 343.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Churchill *The Second World War* Vol II paragraph 2 of a Note by the Prime Minister dated 10 Jul 40, p. 253 which highlights the recognised importance and strength of the RN to counter any possible invasion at sea.

such an extent to grant freedom in the air, and secondly, the RN must be reduced in capability so that it could no longer deny freedom of movement in the Channel to the invasion forces.⁵ With the great benefit of hindsight, these two pre-conditions make it clear that an invasion of southern Britain in 1940 was an unlikely undertaking, but that ignores the contemporary evidence to the contrary. The Germans had already defeated Poland, Denmark and Norway in a matter of weeks, and tellingly had defeated the French Army and evicted the BEF from the Continent. The threat of invasion, whatever calm reflection may suggest, was perceived at the time as both real and imminent and the RAF found itself very much in the frontline.

The emerging situation was the one for which Dowding and Fighter Command had been planning since 1936, based on previous preparation stretching back to the First World War but with the added complication that the enemy now occupied the entire Channel and North Sea shore from the Brest Peninsula to the northern tip of Norway.⁶ This extension of the threat sector that Dowding must consider greatly increased the pressure on his already thinly dispersed forces. That the enemy could now strike from the Shetlands to Land's End meant that Fighter Command's focus could not be exclusive to any one sector. On the other hand, the bulk of the German forces and all their single engine escort fighters were concentrated on the airfields of northern France where the bulk of the GAF's offensive capability was also concentrated.⁷ So while in theory Dowding faced an enemy frontline extending over many hundreds of miles, in reality his main threat would originate from northern

⁵ Ibid., Bungay *The Most Dangerous Enemy*, p. 115 and p. 118.

⁶ The development of the Dowding System can be traced back not just to the development of RDF but to the earlier developments in organised air defence in WWI. For a concise summary of this see F K Mason, *Battle over Britain* (London: McWhirter Twins Ltd, 1969) pp. 33-40 and pp. 91-97, and James, *The Growth of Fighter Command 1936-1940*.

⁷ Overy, *The Battle* pp. 47-50.

France and the Low Countries and be targeted against the south east of England and the London area in particular. This was only to be expected as the purpose of the aerial battle was to gain air superiority over the Channel and planned landing areas in order to enable the invasion planned under the German operational plan SEALION.⁸ This particular issue would prove to be central to the command changes that would unfold in late 1940.

The course of the Battle of Britain is well known and need not be repeated in this study.⁹ The important consideration for this study relates to the manner in which higher operational co-ordination was achieved. Judging from the period covered in the previous chapter, the creation of bespoke co-ordinators would have been understandable. However, from mid-1940 onwards RAF high command conformed increasingly to the pattern laid out in CID 1425-B. In the Air Ministry, the DCAS acted as CAS' operations director through his D Ops(H) whose close staff co-ordinated the operations of Fighter Command with the actions of Bomber Command and Coastal Command and with the RN and British Army.¹⁰ To create this co-ordination their colleagues in the other Air Ministry Directorates responsible for Bomber Command and Coastal Command directed their commands to undertake the

⁸ Ibid., Bungay *The Most Dangerous Enemy*, p. 118 and H R Trevor-Roper, *Hitler's War Directives 1939-1945*, (London: Pan, 1966)pp. 74-81.

⁹ The historiography of the Battle of Britain is voluminous ranging from strategic assessments to personal memoirs of those who fought in the air and on the ground. However, it is possible to gain a thorough understanding of the air battle and its broad direction from four more recent sources. Overy's work *The Battle* (also published as *The Battle of Britain*) is an excellent short but very concise summary, which is complemented well by the fuller work of Bungay, *The Most Dangerous Enemy*. Together they form a very sound basis for understanding the battle. More recently Holland's book *The Battle of Britain – Five Months that changed History May-October 1940* has exposed new evidence concerning the Luftwaffe perspective and the role of both Bomber Command and Coastal command in the overall air campaign to defeat the Luftwaffe threat. Finally, C Bergström *The Battle of Britain – An Epic Conflict Revisited* (Oxford: Casemate, 2015) has revealed new perspectives on the battle particularly at the tactical level of aircraft loss rates, mission goals and aircraft performance which cast a different light on several of the many 'certainties' that have grown up around this very well documented battle.

¹⁰ Air Ministry Handbook and *Air Force List*, July 1940.

operations aimed at defeating the prospect of invasion and securing Britain's survival into 1941.

Ray succinctly summarised the task facing the German High Command in July 1940.¹¹ The poor state of the German Navy in the aftermath of the Norwegian campaign, severely constrained the options or, indeed, feasibility of landing the German Army on British shores. Whatever invasion plan was to be developed for the surface forces, the essential pre-requisite was for the Luftwaffe to achieve air superiority over the RAF. For the RAF the task was to not cede control of the air by remaining a viable and effective defence, to protect the valuable targets that were based within range of the GAF offensive forces, and to inflict on the enemy as much damage as possible to reduce its capability to mount and sustain an invasion by attacking its shipping, invasion barges, and offensive air capability.¹² In addition to this Bomber Command was also under orders to take the fight to the German homeland through the early phases of its bombing campaign and to assist Coastal Command in its fight against the German Navy. Finally, by reforming the units which had so recently fought in France under the AASF, Bomber Command was to also contribute to the anti-invasion capability by developing the means of attacking the German Army when and if it landed. Thus the task of co-ordination facing the Air Ministry was considerable.

Throughout the summer, Bomber and Coastal Command conducted parallel but complementary operations directed against the invasion forces and the Luftwaffe

¹¹ J Ray, *The Battle of Britain New Perspectives – behind the Scenes of the Great Air War*, (London; Cassell Arms and Armour Press, 1994), pp. 39-47.

¹² Ibid.

bases.¹³ Additionally, Bomber Command began tentative early operations against the German homeland, and in a PM directed mission responded to the bombing of London on the 24 August 1940 by bombing Berlin the following night.¹⁴ This combination of offensive defence against the means of the German invasion potential and offense against the German industrial and political infrastructure typified the growing flexibility with which the Air Ministry and the frontline commands were beginning to operate. Coastal Command also attacked the coastal shipping and invasion ports that were essential to mount the invasion and continued its North Sea duties against the German High Sea Fleet.¹⁵ However, what was notable about these operations was that although the separate commands were very responsive they were, in the main, conducted as separate operations confined within the mono-functional structures. The multi-functional perspective was held by the CAS and Air Ministry, especially the DCAS, Douglas.¹⁶ He was responsible for all the elements of the Air Staff responsible for directing the actions of the commands. He was also responsible with his Army and RN DCOS colleagues for ensuring co-ordination across the Services. It was a pivotal position and in effect the SAC sought by the RAF but without the public authority and profile.

The net result of the centrally co-ordinated action of the commands was a tactical position that by 14 September 1940, following a particularly successful raid against Ostend which had led to the sinking of 80 invasion barges, led to Adm Raeder advising Hitler in a Conference he had called to consider the state of invasion

¹³ L Donnelly DFM, *The Other Few – The Contribution made by Bomber and Coastal aircrew to the winning of the Battle of Britain* (Walton on Thames: Red Kite, 2004).

¹⁴ Middlebrook and Everitt, *The Bomber Command War Diaries*, pp. 43-44 and pp. 76-77.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Donnelly, particularly p 64-66 for an insight into this work, Terraine *The Right of the Line* p. 209, and Richards *The Fight at Odds* p. 188.

¹⁶ Douglas, *Years of Command* pp. 84-92.

preparations that ‘The present air situation does not provide the conditions for carrying out the operation, as the risk is still too great.’¹⁷ Three days later Operation SEALION was delayed indefinitely following the evidence of Fighter Command’s continuing strength revealed during the operations of 15 September 1940.¹⁸

The Battle of Britain is nearly always portrayed as a battle fought by Fighter Command. But that is a partial view for the overall damage to the German invasion forces came about through the co-ordinated actions of all three frontline RAF commands centrally directed and controlled by the CAS through his DCAS and supporting Air Staff. The command of the Battle of Britain represented a significant success and validation of the Hankey system. The way in which central co-ordination was achieved, despite the inevitable frictions along the way, was an excellent demonstration of the effectiveness that could be achieved in the central co-ordination of a complex defence structure. However, the success achieved during the battle disguised an increasing unease at the highest levels within the RAF and Government that the high command, though successful, had been found wanting.¹⁹ This, some argued, had led to the retirements of Newall and Dowding, and the replacement of Park, by underhand conspiracy and shabby treatment.²⁰ However, more sober reflection by Ritchie delivered a more balanced and insightful assessment.²¹ Ritchie’s work is complemented by Ray’s study of the Battle of Britain which highlighted the

¹⁷ Ibid., Terraine *The Right of the Line* p 209, and Richards *The Fight at Odds* p. 188.

¹⁸ Ibid., Trevor-Roper, *Hitler’s War Directives 1939-1945*, p. 80.

¹⁹ Douglas, *Years of Command* pp. 84-90.

²⁰ Wright, *Dowding and the Battle of Britain*. Wright offered a very partial and personal opinion based on his close working relationship with Dowding.

²¹ For the background to the replacement of Newall the best source is S Ritchie ‘A Political Intrigue Against the Chief of the Air Staff: The Downfall of Air Chief Marshal Sir Cyril Newall’ *War and Society*. 16(1) 1998, pp. 83-97.

‘long-standing dissensions over the leadership, strategy and tactics of Fighter Command’.²²

The view that Newall and Dowding were the victims of underhand treatment ignores the supreme danger of the time. Both served at the behest of the Prime Minister who had to have the utmost confidence in his appointed commanders. Likewise, Dowding commanded Fighter Command but as the agent of the CAS, who was responsible to the War Cabinet for the performance of the RAF. As the day and night battles developed it was entirely reasonable, indeed, entirely proper for the Air Staff to take a close overseeing role monitoring the one element of the RAF frontline that circumstances had brought to the very forefront of the defence of the nation. Whilst authors such as Wright have accused Douglas of underhand and personally motivated tactics, this completely ignores the central role that Douglas had in the operational direction of the RAF and the ensuring of its effectiveness and readiness for combat.²³ A review of the primary sources provides a different and more balanced perspective.²⁴

Douglas, as DCAS, was effectively responsible for the day to day operational performance of the RAF. Whilst Dowding held sway over Fighter Command, Portal Bomber Command and Bowhill Coastal Command, the point of higher co-ordination was Douglas on behalf of Newall. As such it was imperative that he took a close interest in all operational matters of which the increasing Fighter Command losses and damage to No 11 Group airfields during August and early September, along with

²² Ray, *The Battle of Britain New Perspectives*, p. 11.

²³ Ibid., Wright, *Dowding and the Battle of Britain*, chapters 12 and 13.

²⁴ TNA AIR 2/7281 Fighter Command Tactics against German Mass Formations 1940, dated 22 September 1940 and AIR 16/387 Night Air Defence Policy – The Salmond Committee, dated 15 September 1940.

the growing night attacks after 7 September 1940, were the two most pressing issues of the time. He was also responsible for ensuring the harmonisation of Air Staff Plans with operational reality in terms of bomber, fighter and coastal operational policy.

On 24 September 1940 Douglas replied to Saundby, the ACAS (Training) that:

I have received a number of criticisms recently from several sources about the combined tactics employed by Fighter Command squadrons, (particularly by those on No 11 Group), to deal with the large enemy formations that come over by day.²⁵

After noting that although tactical memoranda had been issued he observed that they were ‘not actually translated into effect by units’. He continued:

What we want is some plan by which, when a large number of squadrons are sent up to tackle a very large enemy formation, there is some sort of broad co-ordinated plan of action between them.²⁶

Next he offered a contrary view to the established procedure of allocating each squadron a separate radio frequency for its ground control and airborne communications:

It has been suggested to me that it is a mistake for all fighter squadrons to be on different wavelengths. It might well be advisable that, say, three or four squadrons should work on the same wavelength, so they could communicate with each other and arrange a co-ordinated plan of attack.²⁷

Collectively these views represented a severe critique of Fighter Command and No 11 Group’s operations. That they should be stated just after the subsequently identified culmination of the battle illustrates the uncertainty of the time and the on-going concern that larger scale attacks would continue. This particular issue would be

²⁵ TNA AIR 2/7281 M7, dated 24 September 1940.

²⁶ Ibid., dated 24 September 1940.

²⁷ Ibid.

addressed at a conference chaired by Douglas on behalf of CAS, on 17 October 1940, but before that the issues facing Dowding would grow in scale and complexity.²⁸

On 14 September 1940 Dowding had received a letter from the Air Council informing him that:

The minister for Aircraft Production has invited Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir John Salmond, GCB, to undertake a thorough enquiry into the equipment and preparation of night fighters. The Air Council, in promising their fullest co-operation in this enquiry, have proposed that its scope should be extended to cover all matters in connection with air fighting at night which are of common concern to the two Ministries.²⁹

The letter concluded by asking Dowding to nominate a representative whom the Air Council thought should be Brand, AOC No 10 Group. With remarkable speed Salmond's Committee reported its findings on 17 September 1940 and the Air Council wrote to Dowding enclosing their conclusions on 25 September 1940.³⁰

Thus at the culminating point of the day battle the C-in-C's operational methods by both day and night were under external review. This can hardly have been a comfortable situation for Dowding, especially given the uncertainty surrounding his tenure in command that had been on-going since the late spring. This correspondence has been well covered in the literature with Newall writing to Dowding on 5 July 1940 to ask him to extend to October.³¹ Dowding replied on 7 July 1940 with a letter to Newall stating his perspective on the handling of his appointment and career from a letter received from Ellington in 1937 and the nine subsequent letters he received until Newall's letter of 5 July 1940.³² Dowding stated:

²⁸ Ibid., Conference Minutes E 16A, dated 20 October 1940.

²⁹ TNA AIR 16/387 E 1A, dated 14 September 1940.

³⁰ Ibid., E 6A, dated 25 September 1940.

³¹ Ray, *The Battle of Britain New Perspectives* and Ritchie 'A Political Intrigue Against the Chief of the Air Staff: The Downfall of Air Chief Marshal Sir Cyril Newall'

³² TNA AIR 19/572 E 1A, dated 7 July 1940.

Before the war, as I told the S of S, I should have been glad enough to retire; now I am anxious to stay, because I feel that there is no one else who will fight as I do when proposals are made which would reduce the Defence Forces of the Country below the extreme danger point.

I would therefore suggest that I should not be called upon to retire otherwise than at my own request before the first retiring date given to me, viz. April 24th 1942 or the end of the war, whichever is the earlier.³³

This was an extraordinary ultimatum to the CAS. First, Dowding claimed only he would defend the frontline and second he effectively demanded to be left alone in charge of Fighter Command for the foreseeable future. Ignoring the fact that Newall had been the main protagonist in opposing the PM's demands for more fighter aircraft to be sent to France, Dowding was suggesting that the CAS was incapable of maintaining the RAF frontline in a fit state to defend the home base. Also by demanding to be left in post until early 1942 or the end of the war, Dowding was demanding effective autonomy from Air Ministry and CAS oversight and displaying a very inflated sense of self-importance.

On 10 July 1940 Churchill entered the debate with a note to Sinclair expressing his surprise and displeasure that Sinclair was considering removing Dowding. Churchill then stated that he:

greatly admired the whole of his work in the Fighter Command, and especially in resisting the clamour for numerous air raid warnings, and the immense pressure to dissipate the Fighter strength during the great French battle.³⁴

Churchill concluded by hoping that Dowding's appointment 'should be indefinitely prolonged while the war lasts'.³⁵ Sinclair noted on the PM's letter in pencil that he

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., E 4A, dated 10 July 1940.

³⁵ Ibid.

had discussed the matter with him on 12 July 1940 and that the PM had agreed to let the matter rest for further review in a month.³⁶

Newall replied to Dowding on 13 July 1940 in a conciliatory tone:

No one is more fully aware than I of the inconvenience to which you must have been put by the various changes in the date proposed for your retirement.³⁷

After offering his 'sincere apologies', Newall set out his reasoning for asking

Dowding to extend until October:

I have to consider the retirement of the more senior officers in order to maintain an adequate flow of promotions into the higher positions in the Service, and it is always my desire to give the officers concerned as long notice as possible; but particularly in the case of the highest Commands in the Royal Air Force the rapidly changing events of the last two years have forced new decisions upon us at short notice. You will recall that on two earlier occasions when you were asked to defer your retirement, in March, 1939 and March, 1940 the country was, as it is now today, faced with a critical threat. The reasons which applied then do so now and compel me to try to avoid a change at Fighter Command.³⁸

Newall then addressed Dowding's implicit criticism of him and the Air Staff and his demand to be extended in post until 1942 or the war's end:

With regard to your reason for suggesting that you should not be called upon to retire before April 24th, 1942, or at the end of the war, whichever is the earlier, I am afraid that I am unable to agree that there is no one else who could resist as you do proposals to reduce the Defence Forces of this country below the extreme danger point. From time to time, as we both well know, there has been pressure on the political and other sides to divert A.D.G.B. in one way or another. While, only last month, I was glad to have your support at the Cabinet when the question of sending fighter squadrons to France was under consideration, I must point out that the policy of the Air Staff has consistently been directed towards conserving our Air Defence Forces in the face of the various conflicting claims that have rightly or wrongly been made upon them. Nevertheless, it is the duty of the Air Staff, no less than of the Command, to give effect to the decisions the Government has taken, whatever our personal views may be.³⁹

³⁶ Ibid., sideline note of 12 July 1940 in pencil by Sinclair on E 4A, dated 10 July 1940.

³⁷ Ibid., E 7A, dated 13 July 1940.

³⁸ Ibid., dated 13 July 1940.

³⁹ Ibid., dated 13 July 1940.

Newall concluded by re-iterating that:

I can only repeat that so far as can be seen at present I must ask you to make it convenient to defer your retirement until the end of October.⁴⁰

Dowding replied on 14 July 1940 accepting Newall's apology, commenting that he was thinking as much about other events where he had stood for no fighter diversion, and concluding by stating that:

I realise, however, that this is a matter upon which we cannot be expected to see eye to eye, and further discussion would be unprofitable.⁴¹

Dowding had also replied to Sinclair, to whom he had copied his original letter to Newall of 7 July 1940, with a short note stating that he now understood that he would be 'placed on the Retired List at the end of October 1940'.⁴²

But matters were not to rest there for on 10 August 1940 Sinclair received a sharp note from the PM stating:

I certainly understood from our conversation a month ago that you were going to give Dowding an indefinite war-time extension, and were going to do it at once. I cannot understand how any contrary impression could have arisen in your mind about my wishes. Let me however remove it at once, and urge you to take the step I have so long desired.⁴³

On 12 August 1940, Newall wrote to Dowding:

When I wrote to you on July 13th I could not see any alternative to indicating the end of October as the time for your retirement. In the present circumstances, however, I fully realise the disadvantages involved in this decision and I am now glad to be able to say that it has been decided to cancel the time limit to the period of your appointment as C-in-C Fighter Command.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., E 8A dated 14 July 1940.

⁴² Ibid., E 5A dated 12 July 1940.

⁴³ Ibid., E 10A dated 10 August 1940.

⁴⁴ Ibid., E 11A dated 12 August 1940.

The same day Sinclair wrote to Churchill informing him of the removal of the time limit on Dowding's appointment.⁴⁵

A week after Churchill had urged Sinclair to extend Dowding, he received a letter from Irene Ward MP offering another perspective on the leadership of the RAF.⁴⁶ Miss Ward stated that:

I'm one of the members who have been kept informed about the views of many people in the Air Force who want a change in the Air Chief Marshall (sic) and have seen the confidential memorandum.

I am told a change may take place and I write to say that on all sides there appears to be among the service people an overwhelming desire that the Commander-in-Chief Bomber Command Air Marshal Portal should be appointed to succeed.

My information is that the RAF would consider it a disaster if the Commander-in-Chief of Fighter Command were given the supreme office.⁴⁷

Given that Churchill had previously suggested that Dowding should be retained at Fighter Command unless a more senior appointment became available, this view must have caught his attention. Churchill sent a copy of Miss Ward's letter to Sinclair on 21 August 1940.⁴⁸

On 7 September 1940, Miss Ward passed a copy of the memorandum entitled 'A Weak Link in the Nation's Defences' to Brendan Bracken who passed it on to the Churchill and ultimately to Sinclair.⁴⁹ It was a personal attack on the calibre and conduct of Newall as CAS and some of the comments were very relevant to the subsequent fate of both Newall and Dowding. The author of the memorandum, whom Richie believes was Wg Cdr Kingston-McCloughry, stated that:

⁴⁵ Ibid., E 12A dated 12 August 1940.

⁴⁶ TNA PREM 4/3/6 Letter Ward to PM, dated 17 August 1940.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., Note to Sinclair from PM, dated 21 August 1940.

⁴⁹ Ibid., Letter Ward to Bracken, dated 7 September 1940.

Indeed, HQ Fighter Command is substantially a one man show and is ruled by Air Chief Marshal Dowding who is a definite personality, but unfortunately he has inadequate mental ability and a very slow brain. He is also a classic example of a complete non-co-operator either with the Air Ministry or any other authority. His treatment of his staff is deplorable and he tolerates only 'yes' men.

Air Chief Marshal Newall has not the strength of character to deal with Air Chief Marshal Dowding or to insist on having a strong and balanced staff at HQ Fighter Command.⁵⁰

On 6 November 1940, the Chairman of the Conservative 1922 Committee, Sir Reginald Clarry MP, wrote to Churchill to inform him that following a meeting of its members to hear 'certain criticisms of the Fighter Command' that he wished to 'represent to you the lack of confidence in which Sir Hugh Dowding is held in certain quarters of the personnel of the Force'.⁵¹ Churchill's reply on 8 November 1940 was to the point:

I do not think it would be at all a good thing for the 1922 Committee to become a kind of collecting house for complaints against serving Commanders-in-Chief or other important officials.⁵²

But 6 days later on 14 November 1940 Churchill was writing to Sinclair informing him that during a meeting with Dowding that morning he had insisted that Dowding leave Fighter Command and undertake the role of representing the UK in the US to get 'American war aviation developed on right lines, and lines parallel to ours'.⁵³

Ray covers the complex reasons for the removal of Dowding, and subsequently Park, well, highlighting the complex interplay of disputes over day tactics, reinforcement policy, inter-group co-ordination, and importantly night air

⁵⁰ Ibid., Unsigned memorandum entitled *A Weak Link in the Nation's Defences*, and Ritchie 'A Political Intrigue Against the Chief of the Air Staff: The Downfall of Air Chief Marshal Sir Cyril Newall'.

⁵¹ Ibid., Letter Clarry to PM, dated 6 November 1940.

⁵² Ibid., Letter PM to Clarry, dated 8 November 1940.

⁵³ Ibid., Letter PM to Sinclair, dated 14 November 1940.

defence.⁵⁴ He concludes that Dowding's decline after the conference of 17 October 1940 was both steady and certain stating that:

Through pressure from Sinclair, Balfour, Macdonald and Clarry, combined with the influential opinions of Trenchard and Salmond, both Beaverbrook and Churchill came to recognize the need for change. This they accepted reluctantly, but the measure became part of the RAF's new policies, which also involved the replacement of Newall by Portal.⁵⁵

From the perspective of high command it illustrated the fundamental responsibility placed on a Service Chief, S of S or PM to ensure that those charged with carrying out operations are aligned, capable and committed to achieving a successful outcome sought by the War Cabinet, whatever, as Newall pointed out in his letter to Dowding, may be their personal view. As the day Battle of Britain subsided and the mass formations of enemy bombers that had generated so much discussion faded from the operational scene, there arose the need to shift from pure defence to whatever offensive action could be undertaken. That required a different approach and fresh minds. But, in the meantime, the night time assault that began on 7 September 1940, and was fundamental in the decision to replace Dowding, was growing evermore destructive and demanding a significant response.

The Blitz – The Command Challenge for the New Command Team

On 25 October 1940 Portal became CAS in succession to Newall.⁵⁶ Portal was replaced at Bomber Command by Pierse, the VCAS, who in turn was replaced by Freeman at Portal's insistence. The relationship between Portal and Freeman was close and complex. Freeman had tutored Portal at the RAF Staff College and they remained close and supportive colleagues throughout their careers. An interesting

⁵⁴ Ray, *The Battle of Britain New Perspectives*.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁵⁶ *Air Force List*, November 1940.

insight into their relationship is given by Furse who records the evidence of Freeman's chauffeur, Davies, that Freeman and Portal drove around Hyde Park while Portal agonised over accepting the post of CAS, which 'horrified him' as he considered himself to 'not have enough experience on the Air Council' and insufficiently familiar with the 'top people in the RAF to be able to choose the right men for the top appointments'.⁵⁷ It needs to be borne in mind that Furse's work is favourable to Freeman and that Furse is a distant relative of Freeman, however, Furse's subsequent comment that Portal then persuaded him to join him as his VCAS is supported by Portal's biographer Richards. On 25 November 1940 Douglas, replaced Dowding at Fighter Command who departed the UK to lead a procurement mission to the US.⁵⁸ And at No 11 Group, Park was replaced by Leigh-Mallory on 18 December 1940.⁵⁹ Thus in the space of two months almost the entire senior command structure of the RAF was reshuffled and at a time when the German air assault was causing a great loss of civilian life and the RAF seemingly had no effective defensive response.⁶⁰

The answer the RAF sought to develop was to shift their operations from the defensive to the offensive.⁶¹ This reflected in part the considerable influence Trenchard continue to have over the current high commanders, especially Portal, who enthusiastically supported Douglas' policy of 'leaning forward into France', a euphemism for taking the offensive against the German fighter force.⁶² This was a

⁵⁷ Furse, *Wilfrid Freeman*, p. 153

⁵⁸ V Orange, *Dowding of Fighter Command – Victor of the Battle of Britain* (London: Grub Street, 2008), p. 228.

⁵⁹ W Newton Dunn, *Big Wing – The Biography of Air Chief Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory* (Shrewsbury: Airlife, 1992), p. 81.

⁶⁰ Richards, *The Fight at Odds*, p. 217.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 383.

⁶² Terraine, *The Right of the Line*, p. 289.

policy Trenchard and Salmond had strongly advocated and had echoes of fighter operations in the First World War when Trenchard and Salmond were commanders and Douglas and Portal were senior pilots. However, in early June Dr R V Jones had discovered that the Germans were using a form of blind landing equipment to guide their bombers with great accuracy to their targets.⁶³ During the summer much progress had been made in electronically countering these methods but still they represented a considerable threat. In parallel, great effort was applied to the task of fielding an effective airborne radar equipped fighter that could take the fight to the bombers by night as the Spitfires and Hurricanes had done by day.⁶⁴ But by the time of the command changes the fruits of this work were still some months away. In this circumstance alternative methods were necessary. The Air Staff's response when prisoner of war interrogations and ULTRA decrypts revealed in November 1940 that the Germans intended to mount a significant air attack illustrates the difficulty the new high commanders faced in shifting from a defensive posture to one in which the enemy would be held at risk through co-ordinated offensive action.⁶⁵

On 14 November 1940 Stevenson issued at 0300 hrs 'Operation Instructions for Air Operation (COLD WATER)' to Fighter, Bomber, Coastal Commands and other key organisations.⁶⁶ He began by alluding to the source of the information:

Reliable information has been received that the enemy have planned a major air night bombing operation against this country. This will probably take place during the period 15 – 20th November inclusive.⁶⁷

⁶³ R V Jones, *Most Secret War* (London: Wordsworth Military Library, 1998), p. 120; Richards, *Vol 1*, p. 198; and J Laffin, *Swifter Than Eagles – A biography of Marshal of the RAF Sir John Salmond GCB CMG CVO DSO* (London: Blackwood and Sons Ltd, 1964), pp. 233-237.

⁶⁴ Richards, *The Fight at Odds*, pp. 207-209; and Holland *The War in the West – Germany Ascendant 1939-1941*, p. 429.

⁶⁵ F W Winterbotham, *The ULTRA Secret* (London: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 60.

⁶⁶ TNA AIR 8/352 Operations 'Moonlight Sonata' and 'Coldwater', dated 14 November 1940.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, dated 14 November 1940.

Four potential areas were given all in and around London and the Harwich-Ipswich area and the staff assessed that the operations would be carried out either in three phases on a particular night or on three consecutive nights. Stevenson then described how the enemy operation was expected to be executed:

The plan is for K.G. 100 led personally by the Commanding Officer of this Geschwader - using the KNICKEBIEN type beam – who may carry out the first attacks and undertake beam calibration and weather reports over England as required. The aerodromes from which it is anticipated the enemy bombers will be operating are tabulated in Appendix A.

Any further information acquired regarding this operation will be signalled to Commands concerned referring to this operation order. It is anticipated that information will be available in the Air Ministry shortly after midday on the day on which the operation 'COLD WATER' is to be put into effect.⁶⁸

Under the heading 'Intention' it was stated that:

It is intended that the Metropolitan Air Force shall carry out an operation to counter the German attack.⁶⁹

The plan which had been developed required many elements of the MAF to work in unison under the central direction of the Air Staff. This was not the issuing of a new bombing directive that called for C-in-C Bomber Command to attack a new range of targets over the coming weeks and months; this was a very specific and closely co-ordinated attack under detailed Air Staff direction to be undertaken by the various mono-functional components of the MAF acting in concert to produce multi-functional effect. Stevenson outlined the plan in the 'Execution' part of the operation order:

All measures to interfere with the enemy W/T navigation aids are to be brought into effect. All measures for night interception and destruction of enemy bombers, including A.A defences, are to be undertaken by Fighter Command.

⁶⁸ Ibid., dated 14 November 1940.

⁶⁹ Ibid., dated 14 November 1940.

Security patrols by aircraft of Bomber and Coastal Commands will be carried out against enemy night bombing aerodromes in use. The heavy bomber force will carry out an attack on a City in Germany.⁷⁰

He went on to detail specific tactical actions that needed to take place and be cross co-ordinated between the Commands. Coastal Command was to assist Bomber Command with security patrols over enemy airfields and specifically mount an attack against Vannes airfield in France where K.G. 100 was based. The heavy bomber force of Bomber Command was to mount a concentrated attack ‘on military objectives in a selected German city’.⁷¹ And Fighter Command were to mount the most effective night air defence they could but also act as the eyes for Bomber Command and Coastal Command by maintaining reconnaissance over the French airbases and usual bomber assembly points. Finally, No 80 Wing, the recently formed organisation undertaking early electronic warfare against the German beams and navigation facilities was to ‘establish the position and identity of the enemy beams’.⁷²

Stevenson concluded the operations instruction by stating that every ‘endeavour will be made’ to issue the executive order for the execution of COLD WATER by 1500 on the day, but cautioned that ‘it may be issued later depending on the receipt of information regarding the enemy intention’.⁷³

Early on 14 November 1940, Portal initialled a note to the PM entitled ‘Note for the Prime Minister on Projected Operation by G.A.F – ‘MOONLIGHT SONATA’ and the Counter Operation by the Metropolitan Air Force – ‘COLD WATER’.⁷⁴

Portal’s note was revealing in both its subsequent accuracy and error. In the first

⁷⁰ Ibid., dated 14 November 1940.

⁷¹ Ibid., dated 14 November 1940.

⁷² Ibid., dated 14 November 1940.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., dated 14 November 1940 – Note from CAS to PM.

paragraph he asserted that London and the south east were the expected targets. He identified the role of the GAF unit and the time period for the attack, namely 15-20 November 1940.⁷⁵ However, he then related that the ‘very good source’ that had highlighted the potential attack was corroborated by a GAF prisoner interrogation of 9 November 1940 who stated that:

Goering is convinced that the people in London are on the point of revolution and that Buckingham Palace has been stormed. He has therefore arranged a great raid to take place on Coventry and Birmingham with the object of destroying workers dwellings in order to undermine the morale of the working classes.

We believe that the target will be those noted in paragraph 1 above, probably in the vicinity of London, but if further information indicates Coventry, Birmingham or elsewhere, we hope to get instructions out in time.⁷⁶

Portal then outlined the plan in considerable detail for the PM, highlighting the co-ordinated roles of No 80 Wing against the GAF beam system, Fighter Command including the AAA forces against the enemy over the UK and northern France, and Bomber Command and Coastal Command attacks against the GAF mounting airfields especially Vannes.⁷⁷

At 1621 on 14 November 1940 the Air Ministry signalled Bomber, Coastal, and Fighter Commands, and No 80 Wing, a short message stating ‘Executive Cold Water’ – the order to execute the plans laid down in the operation instruction issued earlier that day.⁷⁸ This order was repeated at 1055 on 15 November 1940 and 1047 on 16 November 1940 covering the nights of 15/16 and 16/17 November 1940 respectively. During this period the Commands fought hard but the GAF attacks continued and were at times serious. In response to a question by the CAS concerning

⁷⁵ Ibid., dated 14 November 1940 – Note from CAS to PM.

⁷⁶ Ibid., dated 14 November 1940 – Note from CAS to PM.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., dated 14 November 1940 – Air Ministry Note.

the performance of the night fighters, Stevenson wrote on 15 November 1940 stating that Fighter Command would submit a full report but he had discovered verbally that Fighter Command had achieved six airborne radar and seven visual sightings but only two visual interceptions had been achieved which resulted in a 'brief exchange of shots'.⁷⁹ CAS received a fuller report later in the day which stated:

Up to midnight a total of 54 fighter sorties had been sent up. 4 interceptions have been reported of which two resulted in combats which were, however, indecisive. Fighter patrols were maintained over Coventry by Blenheims fighters during the following periods:

1857 hours to 2114 hours.

0136 hours to 0336 hours.

0140 hours to 0340 hours.

0440 hours until enemy clear of Coventry.

Bomber Command's effort during the night amounted to 122 aircraft of which 49 were directed on Berlin, 53 on enemy aerodromes, 17 on the Homburg oil refineries, and 3 on mine laying. Security patrols on aerodromes report good success with fires and explosions. First reports of the Berlin operation state that large fires were started which could be seen from a considerable distance.

Coastal Command detailed a total of 29 sorties (Hudsons and Blenheims) to attack the important aerodromes at Vannes and St Leger. No reports yet received as to results.

A special bombing operation carried out against enemy beam transmitters in the Cherbourg peninsula was followed by one transmitter becoming silent and a second reported as unserviceable.⁸⁰

A more comprehensive report was issued on 17 November 1940 which gave greater detail on the intelligence background and the assessed results. The attack on the Cherbourg beam transmitters by two specially modified Whitley bombers was confirmed by intercepted intelligence as being particularly effective. But the final

⁷⁹ Ibid., dated 15 November 1940 – Stevenson to CAS.

⁸⁰ Ibid., dated 14 November 1940 – Report for CAS.

paragraph which summarised 'Enemy Action and Tactics' revealed why the beam attack did not have the effect hoped for, it stated:

It is estimated that some 330 enemy aircraft were engaged in the attack on Coventry, which was opened by some 10 aeroplanes from KG-100, which flew up the beams and started fires in the target area. The remaining aircraft then bombed the fires. While earlier raids followed the beams they were soon abandoned by subsequent sorties, which took full advantage of the bright moonlight and approached the objective over a wide front.⁸¹

The damaging outcome of the GAF raid on Coventry on the night of 14/15 November 1940 is well known and represents a very dark moment in the Blitz and the early years of the war. The failure of the RAF to prevent the attack, despite the very comprehensive and timely planning illustrated above, demonstrated the continuing gap between operational plans and operational capability. Nonetheless, in terms of higher command, Operation 'COLD WATER' encapsulated the exact role envisaged for the Air Ministry and Air Staff set out in CID 1425-B.

The reference in the 'Intention' paragraph to the MAF illustrated the importance of the Air Staff in bringing together in co-ordinated action the component parts of the UK-based RAF to deliver multi-function effect against a specific enemy threat. As had been argued in 1937, only the Air Staff had the immediate access to the national sources of intelligence, the proximity to the political decision-making apparatus and the authority over the RAF commands to bring about rapid co-ordinated action. That the co-ordinated action should not prevent the damage visited on Coventry and many other towns and cities during this period was due to the operational limitations of the frontline at the time, not the command structures and arrangements. The limitations of contemporary airborne radar, which was undergoing rapid development, was a serious shortcoming in Fighter Command's arsenal, as was

⁸¹ Ibid., dated 17 November 1940.

the very limited number of available airborne intercept (AI) equipped aircraft. This combination of capability and capacity would improve out of all recognition over the coming months, but in late 1940 it was the unfortunate reality of war.

Personnel Changes in Retrospect

At Dunkirk the final vestiges of the BAF structure represented by Blount's Back Violet HQ acted as a SAC command node that co-ordinated the various contributions of the frontline. On the other hand, during the Battle of Britain and the Blitz, the Air Staff played the role intended for it in the policy encapsulated in CID 1425-B. In the case of the Blitz, RAF command was led by an almost completely new group of senior commanders.

Newall's departure removed a man who had been at the heart of the RAF's war preparations and had seen it evolve as the reality of war bit during 1939 and early 1940. Portal, by contrast, was uncertain of his suitability for the appointment.⁸² His conversations with Freeman illustrated the concern he felt and the fact he insisted on Freeman becoming his VCAS reinforces the view that Portal began his time as CAS uncertain as to his suitability and preparedness.⁸³ The removal of Dowding is often portrayed, with some justification, as the replacement of a difficult man with someone, Douglas, more attuned to the needs of the time. When considered in the round it is clear that the changes created a situation in which stability was weakened in the pursuit of re-energising the command structure with younger men of new ideas and greater vitality. That they would grow into a successful generation of commanders was to be proven by later events, but in late 1940 they were

⁸² Terraine, *The Right of the Line* p. 253.

⁸³ Furse, *Wilfrid Freeman*, pp. 153-157.

inexperienced and finding their way. Although a common motivation in the changes was the shifting of attitude to a more offensive spirit, technology and operational necessity would restrain offensive ambition during the winter of 1940 and the early months of 1941. However, by making needed changes to the RAF high command in late 1940, the PM, SofS and CAS ensured that energy and momentum would be maintained. That the method of command remained resolutely the Hankey System can be seen as the rational response to the situation of the time.

The higher command of Operation COLD WATER clearly illustrated that the Hankey System was broadly fit for purpose and capable of operation with a new cohort of high commanders. Indeed, the speed of co-ordination and execution of Operation COLD WATER is compelling evidence that the new command team were more than up to the task. That the raid on Coventry and subsequent attacks across the UK should continue to devastate the country was not due to shortcomings in the command system, rather it was due to the simple fact that the enemy held the tactical and technical advantage. In time this balance would shift as the next chapter will explore.

Chapter 7

ADAPTATION OF THOUGHT

Introduction

The change in personnel in late 1940 brought together a group of senior officers who were broadly of a similar outlook, in tune with the two key RAF personalities, Trenchard and Salmond, and importantly at one with the spirit of the PM. Between 1941 and the end of 1942 doctrine would develop in tune with improving capability and the growth of the RAF frontline to that critical point when there began to be almost enough air resource to meet the wartime demands. In early 1941, this was in the future and the pressing challenge was to shift the balance of activity towards the offensive so the enemy could no longer dictate the terms upon which the war would be fought. The debates over day fighter tactics that had culminated in the Air Ministry meeting of 17 October 1940 and the review of night tactics undertaken by Salmond were important markers in the transition of tactics from the defensive to the offensive. This chapter will explore some of those developments in operational thinking and the command processes that emerged to oversee them. It will focus on fighter and bomber operations by day and night and the mechanisms by which they were co-ordinated and controlled.

The main operational experience of the RAF's high commanders of the Second World War was gained over the battlefields of the Western Front, and importantly under the influence of Trenchard and Salmond in the period 1916-1918.¹

¹ Air Historical Branch, RAF Narrative (First Draft), *The RAF in the Bombing Offensive against Germany* Vol 1 'Prewar Evolution of Bomber Command 1917-1939', pp. 12-20.

The constant theme driving Trenchard's application of air power was the primacy of the offensive.² By taking offensive action the enemy had to respond and was thereby denied the freedom to initiate action. Trenchard often commented that air defence was almost impossible due to the vastness of the sky and the freedom the attacker had in choosing his moment and place of attack.³ Thus the defender would always be on the back foot and only really capable of mounting inefficient defence of those locations and targets that he could not afford to be attacked. Detection systems in the First World War gave little if any warning of attack so the only possible effective defence was the hugely inefficient standing patrol which created casualties of its own through aircraft wear and tear and routine flying accidents. By contrast, it was argued, the offensive mission was mounted to achieve a rational purpose and was, therefore, an efficient use of assets.⁴ If the enemy could also be engaged in aerial combat then the opportunity for more damage to be inflicted on them could be taken. But the main purpose behind Trenchard's preference for the offensive was to impose his will on the enemy and thereby undermine their morale.⁵ In the period 1916-1918 there was much to be said in favour of this approach. However, for commanders raised under the guidance of Trenchard and Salmond, the situation in 1941 was significantly different.

The two key differences were the presence of RDF which the RAF had utilized to such great effect during the previous summer, and the performance of the monoplane fighter.⁶ This coupled with the fact that the Germans were free to deploy their forces wherever they saw fit across a territory that stretched from the new Soviet

² R J Overy, *The Air War 1939-1945* (Washington DC: Potomac Books Inc, 2005) pp. 11-14.

³ Webster and Frankland *SAOG* Vol 1, pp. 54-57.

⁴ AHB, RAF Narrative (First Draft), *'The RAF in the Bombing Offensive against Germany'* Vol 1 *'Prewar Evolution of Bomber Command 1917-1939'*, pp. 4-5.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, Overy, *The Air War 1939-1945* p. 15 and Douglas, *Years of Combat*, p. 236.

border in the east to the Atlantic Ocean in the west and the Arctic Sea in the north created a difficult challenge for the advocates of the offensive air strategy. Faced with such a vast area the RAF threat from its isolated island base with aircraft of limited range and capability meant that the Germans knew exactly from where the RAF could mount their attacks and could, if it so desired, refuse combat if the threat posed represented no significant loss.⁷ Given that the RAF could only operate in daylight with fighter escort and that that escort could only reach the Pas de Calais and coastal regions of Belgium and the western Netherlands, the GAF could take a much more relaxed approach than the one that was forced on the RAF in the Battle of Britain. In fact, very few targets in the region that the RAF could reach were important to the Germans.⁸

What both the experience of the First World War and the reality of the Second World War created in the minds of the commanders was a view of air superiority that was rooted in the near-term, both in terms of time span and geography.⁹ Air superiority was something to be gained for the purpose of more important offensive action.¹⁰ It was a means to an end, not an end in itself. As such air superiority was a constant struggle that was an inevitable part of all air operations rather than a campaign in itself designed to be won to set the conditions for the follow-on campaign to unfold and succeed. This perspective of air superiority created a viewpoint that saw the creation of offensive air superiority as being primarily a battle of fighters. Metz records that over time this was to be a fundamental difference of

⁷ S Douglas, *Official Dispatch - Air Operations by Fighter Command from 25th November 1940 to 31st December 1941*, The London Gazette, dated Thursday, 16th September 1948 (London: The London Gazette, 1948) para 133, p. 5026.

⁸ Ibid., paras 149-152 pp. 5027-5028.

⁹ Douglas, *Years of Command*, pp. 115-116.

¹⁰ Overy, *The Air War 1939-1945*, p. 9.

opinion between the RAF and USAAF.¹¹ The USAAF held the view that air superiority could be achieved through a planned and relentless battle of attrition against the production means of the GAF and the GAF deployed at the front. Many in the RAF held a narrower view of air superiority as being a state that was gained temporarily over the battle by simultaneous air action. This short term view underpinned the concept behind the air plan for the Dieppe Raid on 19 July 1942 and was the view held by Leigh-Mallory concerning D-Day and opposed strongly by the USAAF Commander Spaatz.¹² Consequently, in the view of the Air Staff, the WAPs of Bomber Command against the German aircraft industry were part of a much longer campaign of industrial destruction and denial, an active blockade that would in time make it impossible for Germany to continue, but would not affect the situation at the Front where the aircraft and reserves already existed.¹³

Multi-Command Operations - *Leaning Forward into France*

An essential element of multi-command operations was the provision of fighter escort both to protect the attacking assets and to attack, and hopefully destroy, the enemy fighters that gave battle. On 9 October 1940 Fighter Command issued Operational Instruction No 40 'Provision of Fighter Escorts for Bomber and Coastal Commands' Operations'.¹⁴ The Instruction began by summarising the existing situation:

Consideration has recently been given to the question of co-ordinating action when fighter escorts are provided for aircraft of Bomber and Coastal Commands. In the past difficulties have arisen because fighter escorts have

¹¹ D R Mets, *Master of Air Power – General Carl A Spaatz* (Navato California, Presidio Press, 1988), p. 201.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., Overy, *The Air War 1939-1945*, p. 13.

¹⁴ TNA AIR 15/33, dated 7 October 1939, E 120A, dated 9 October 1940.

been required at short notice, and little time has been available in which to make detailed arrangements. In particular arrangements for the assembly of the bombers and fighter escort have to be carefully made.¹⁵

The instruction went on to outline these initial steps which involved the aircraft of Bomber or Coastal Command circling the airfield from which the fighters were due to take-off to allow for them to join in formation or for the Bomber or Coastal Command aircraft to be signalled that escort was not available. The inadequacy of the communications, co-ordination and control for such a complex mission was plain, and the comment in the instruction that 'the leader of the bomber formation must decide whether to cancel the operations or proceed to carry out their attack without fighter protection' illustrates the inherent difficulty that was created by the mono-functional command re-organisation and the challenge that the Air Staff faced in exercising the SAC role under the Hankey System.¹⁶

On 9 February 1941 CAS wrote to the PM in response to the loss of eight Fighter Command fighters on a fighter sweep undertaken on 5 February 1941 in which the GAF had only lost two aircraft.¹⁷ Portal recorded that:

The orders did not fully cover the weather conditions actually encountered. The weather conditions on forecast were expected to be clear but in fact there was considerable cloud over Kent. This interfered with the arrangements for the rendezvous and caused some straggling and bad timing.

The fighters conformed to the action of the bombers instead of vice versa. Bombers are only needed to make the enemy come up and fight and they need not always be used. When used they should bomb and get away at once. On this occasion they hung about taking deliberate shots at their target and kept the fighters too long in one area and made it difficult for them to manoeuvre.

The objective chosen was unnecessarily far inland (40 miles from Calais). This again came from regarding the bombing too much as the *raison d'être* of the operation.

¹⁵ Ibid., dated 9 October 1940.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ TNA AIR 8/456 Offensive Sweeps, dated 9 February 1940.

I have discussed the operation fully with the A.O.C.-in-C. Fighter Command and we are agreed that if the above lessons are attended to there is every advantage in continuing these operations.¹⁸

The PM replied to Portal on 17 February 1940 stating:

I am much obliged to you for your explanation. There evidently was a serious breakdown between the Fighter and Bomber Commands. The Bombers were late, and the various waves of Fighters were thrown out of gear in consequence.¹⁹

In terms of operational command the PM's next paragraph was particularly interesting:

It would seem desirable when an Operation of this kind is to be undertaken, that the Officer Commanding by far the larger number of aircraft to be used, irrespective of whether they are Fighters or Bombers, should have unified Command.

I am very glad to know you will continue these operations.²⁰

This exchange of notes between the PM and CAS encapsulated the challenge facing the RAF in early 1941. How could the offensive be achieved and how best to execute the detailed plans that would emerge? That the PM identified the need for unified command of the allocated task assets was telling as it chimed with the reasons that Ellington used when forming the concept of a SAC in 1937. CAS' reply to the PM outlined his thinking on how best the tactical command and co-ordination should be undertaken. On 18 February 1941 CAS wrote to the PM thanking him for his Minute and explaining that:

We always employ many more fighters than bombers for it is primarily a fighter operation, the bombers only being used to make the enemy come up and fight. The A.O.C.-in-C. Fighter Command is therefore responsible for co-ordination.²¹

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., Letter Serial M 196/1 PM to CAS, dated 17 February 1940.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., Minute CAS to PM, dated 18 February 1941.

Whilst the correspondence between the PM and CAS would appear to be clear cut, the process of reaching this accord required more complex co-ordination. On 9 February 1941 CAS had written to Peirse at Bomber Command enclosing a copy of the note he had sent to the PM in which he criticised the performance of the No 2 Group's Blenheim bombers.²² He concluded by stating that he enclosed to copy of the note 'for your information and future guidance'. Peirse replied on 12 February 1941 stating in his fourth paragraph:

If we do (and we do) want engagements then they must be profitable to us because we shoot down more fighters than we ourselves lose, or because we inflict material damage on the enemy.²³

To this CAS replied on 13 February 1941 with a passage that reveals much of his thinking at the time:

Before coming to the main point I would like to say that I cannot agree with the reflection in your paragraph 4, namely that these operations are desirable only if we shoot down more of the enemy than we ourselves lose, or else inflict material damage by our bombing. I regard the exercise of the initiative as in itself an extremely important factor in morale, and I would willingly accept equal loss or even more in order to throw the enemy on to the defensive, and give our own units the moral superiority gained from doing most of the fighting on the other side.²⁴

From this doctrinal viewpoint, with its echoes of Trenchard and Salmond, Portal moved on to address more practical matters:

I really do not see that we need to incur losses as heavy as we inflict on the enemy unless we spoil the chances of the fighters by tying them too much to the bomber operations. We want to translate the initiative into practical terms of numbers, height, and a tactical plan, and above all we must avoid falling between the two stools of fighting and bombing.²⁵

To address a concern about the use of the word 'bait' in relation to the Blenheim operations that Peirse had raised, Portal commented:

²² Ibid., Minute CAS to C-in-C BC, dated 9 February 1941.

²³ Ibid., Letter C-in-C BC to CAS, dated 12 February 1941.

²⁴ Ibid., Letter CAS to C-in-C Bomber Command, dated 13 February 1941.

²⁵ Ibid., dated 13 February 1941.

I do not like the word ‘bait’ and it need not be mentioned to the Blenhiems. They are doing a useful job in harassing the invasion ports and at the same time they are playing an important part in our efforts to get the initiative back from the enemy.²⁶

To resolve the co-ordination aspects of the planned operations the CAS suggested that the C-in-Cs should consult and if necessary meet with him.²⁷ However, on 15 February 1941 C-in-C Fighter Command wrote to CAS to say that he had met with Peirse and other senior commanders, including Leigh-Mallory AOC No 11 Group, and that they had agreed on a new definition of the planned attacks, namely:

The object of these attacks is to force the enemy to give battle under conditions tactically favourable to our fighters. In order to compel him to do so the bombers must cause sufficient damage to make it impossible for him to ignore them and refuse to fight on our terms.²⁸

It was also agreed that Leigh-Mallory would co-ordinate and control the operations thus adding further clarity to the suggestion made by the PM. That matters had not been entirely straightforward is illustrated by a comment Douglas made in a letter to Bowhill relaying the outcome of his discussions with Peirse:

There has been a certain amount of argument with Bomber Command (sic) but Peirse has finally agreed to come into line.²⁹

This exchange of correspondence illustrated a number of important features of RAF operational command at that time. As highlighted with the control of Operation COLD WATER, MAF operations came under the very close scrutiny of the War Cabinet, and especially the PM. This required the close attention of the CAS and the Air Staff, especially the DCAS, both upwards to the PM and down to the frontline. Portal was not afraid, despite his relatively short time in post, to assert his view and authority. The issue over the role of the Blenheims which could be argued led to their

²⁶ Ibid., dated 13 February 1941.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., Letter C-in-C FC to CAS, dated 15 February 1941.

²⁹ Ibid., E 155A dated 15 February 1941.

poor performance on the 5 February 1941 raid, was quickly and decisively resolved with the CAS leaving no one in any doubt as to what his desires were. That he should also offer his Cs-in-C a personal meeting to settle any remaining difficulties illustrated that he was open to discussion and actively involved and attentive to unfolding MAF operations. Equally, that the Cs-in-C should eventually resolve the matter at their level illustrated their recognition of their responsibility and the broadly harmonious and increasingly co-operative relations that were becoming established among the new RAF command team.

On 30 January 1941 Douglas had written to Bowhill asking if Coastal Command would be prepared to:

assist in these fighter-bomber operations by providing a force of Coastal Command aircraft to carry out the bombing attacks when Bomber Command Squadrons are not available to take part.³⁰

Bowhill's response on 8 February 1941 was unequivocal:

I am very willing to co-operate in these proposed Fighter-Bomber operations.³¹

On the same day, Leigh-Mallory issued Operation Instruction No 6 entitled 'CIRCUS OPERATIONS', the object of which was:

To lay down principles which are to govern the carrying out of all air operations in which No 11 Group Fighter Squadrons are taking part in company with, or in support of, Bomber aircraft supplied by either No 2 Group, Bomber Command, or No 16 Group, Coastal Command, or both.³²

Following the discussions and clarification given by Portal concerning the operations of 5 February 1941, Douglas reinforced to Leigh-Mallory that:

It has been clearly agreed by the Air Staff that the purpose of these operations is to destroy enemy fighters under circumstances favourable to our squadrons. Our bombers are present only for the purpose of forcing the enemy

³⁰ TNA AIR 15/33, dated 7 Oct 39, E 1378A, dated 30 January 1941.

³¹ Ibid., E 141A, dated 8 February 1941.

³² Ibid., E 148A, dated 8 February 1941.

to come up and fight and they must therefore conform to the requirements of our fighters in pursuit of the main aim of the operation.³³

In parallel with the shift to multi-command offensive operations epitomised by the development of CIRCUS Operations outlined above, Fighter Command, and especially Leigh-Mallory at No 11 Group, were also developing ideas on the offensive use of his assets on their own.

The Emergence of Multi-Functional Groups - Intruder Operations

On 21 December 1940, Leigh-Mallory issued an outline instruction to the stations of his Group entitled ‘OFFENSIVE ACTION – MOSQUITO OPERATIONS’.³⁴ His first two paragraphs summarised the shift in mindset the command changes had brought about over the previous months:

It would appear that the life of the Germans on the FRENCH and BELGIUM coasts is at present by day a comparatively easy one. They are seldom molested by offensive action on our part, and their aircraft are free to fly at will.

It is considered desirable to harass the GERMANS by daily ‘tip and run’ operations, to make them feel that flying over NORTHERN FRANCE and BELGIUM is unsafe and so force them to some system of Readiness in order to protect themselves. If this is achieved, it will materially affect the morale of the German Air Force.³⁵

Leigh-Mallory envisaged nuisance raids under cover of cloud by flights or squadrons on a rotational basis within his Group. He emphasised that commanders were not to take undue risks, that only experienced pilots were to be used and that the purpose of these missions was to ‘inflict the maximum casualties on the enemy without loss to ourselves’.³⁶

³³ Ibid., E 150A, dated 12 February 1941.

³⁴ TNA AIR 16/366 dated 22 December 1940, E 1A, dated 21 December 1940.

³⁵ Ibid., dated 21 December 1940.

³⁶ Ibid.

The early operations under this plan were not particularly effective with the GAF rarely responding to the presence of such a small force of RAF fighters. Equally, despite Leigh-Mallory's desire to inflict damage on the enemy without loss 'to ourselves' this rarely occurred and RAF losses began to mount.³⁷ On 2 March 1941, Leigh-Mallory wrote to Douglas at Fighter Command proposing the 'Use of Incendiary Bombs by Single Seat Fighters'.³⁸ His proposal to carry seven 4lbs incendiary bombs in the flare tube of Hurricanes and Spitfires to add to the offensive capability was not accepted by Douglas who, replying on 16 March 1941 noted that:

The primary object of the 'Rhubarb' operations is to shoot down enemy aircraft. Low flying attacks on ground targets are to be regarded as a secondary consideration.³⁹

Douglas felt that the possession of 'these bombs would encourage pilots to take unnecessary risks for very inadequate return'. On a more positive note he reported that trials to fit the Hurricane with two 500lbs bombs were underway. Douglas would have felt reinforced in his assessment when on 29 March 1941 two Hurricanes of 601 Sqn had to break off an attack on three enemy aircraft taking off because one of the Hurricane pilots had expended most of his ammunition against a goods train. He curtly commented to his SASO:

It is a pity F/O Seddon did not save his ammunition for the E/A taking off – a far more profitable target than French trains. Please mention it to No 11 Group.⁴⁰

Undeterred Leigh-Mallory wrote again to Douglas on 7 April 1941 on another important aspect of offensive fighter operation, namely range extension, which he had

³⁷ J Foreman, *Fighter Command War Diaries* Vol 2, (Walton-on-Thames: Air Research Publications, 1998), pp. 127-152.

³⁸ TNA AIR 16/366, E 22A, dated 2 March 1941.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, E 30A, dated 16 March 1941. Note that the MOSQUITO codeword had been previously changed by Air Ministry Instruction at E 11A dated 24 January 1941, to avoid confusion with the Mosquito aircraft then under development.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Minute dated 3 April 1941

touched upon in his letter of 2 March 1941.⁴¹ He stated that he thought auxiliary fuel tanks would be particularly useful for escorting ‘bombing attacks on targets just beyond the present effective range of single seat fighters, e.g. Brest and Lorient. It was relevant that Bomber Command were heavily engaged at that time in operations to support the Battle of the Atlantic by attacking German naval facilities in France. He also thought extra fuel tanks would permit ‘offensive patrols of deep penetration by small numbers of single-seater fighters in suitable cloud conditions. This last point was directly related to expanding the reach of his RHUBARB missions. He concluded by highlighting that jettisonable tanks would allow his fighters to enter combat without their performance being impaired and that tanks containing 50 gallons would offer an additional one hours endurance. Douglas replied to Leigh-Mallory on 15 April 1941 to inform him that jettisonable tanks were under development and that information would be available in the near future.⁴² On the other hand, on the previous day Douglas had told Leigh-Mallory that the Air Ministry would not grant permission ‘to attack moving trains in Occupied France’.⁴³

This tentative approach was typical of the time with the MAF feeling its way from the defensive to the offensive. The drive from Leigh-Mallory and No 11 Group to develop new operational procedures, fit single seat fighters with bombs and extend their range with the use of external fuel tanks was notable and commendable. But it was also matched by the initiative of the Air Staff who away from the frontline through the relevant directorates of the Air Ministry had in parallel initiated action to develop the tanks, bomb fittings, cannon armament, and new aircraft that would allow

⁴¹ Ibid., E 38A, dated 7 April 1941.

⁴² Ibid., E 41A, dated 15 April 1941.

⁴³ Ibid., E 40A, dated 14 April 1941.

Leigh-Mallory to unleash the drive and aggression that his command clearly possessed. These initial small steps toward multi-functionality would grow over the coming months but in the meantime the German attack on the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 led to a significant debate on the best use of the MAF.

BARBAROSSA – The Responsibility of Coalition Warfare

After the German invasion of the Soviet Union the UK and Empire forces were no longer alone in the war, but that welcome improvement came with collective responsibility. However, there was precious little the UK and Empire air forces could do to directly assist the Soviet Union. Bomber Command in the early stages of the German invasion of the Soviet Union was conducting the operations from which strike photographs would prove that it was incapable of hitting anything but the most obvious target and that 80% of its attacks were outside of 5 miles from the intended aim point.⁴⁴ The Butt Report, which delivered this damning conclusion in August, would severely dent confidence in the capability of Bomber Command.⁴⁵ Thus, a strategy that was based on precision attack was clearly a forlorn hope. An alternative was to increase the threat posed in the west to a point whereby the Germans were forced to re-deploy aircraft from the east to meet the growing threat in the west.⁴⁶ Part of the logic of the No 2 Group and Fighter Command operations was to create pressure on the Germans to keep a sizable force in the west so as to prevent its redeployment to the Mediterranean. Thus a logical first step would clearly be to

⁴⁴ Ibid., Webster and Frankland *SAOG* Vol I, p. 178.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 179-178.

⁴⁶ TNA AHB IIIH/240/4/112 FC/S.24752, encl 7A, dated 17 June 1941.

increase the scale and scope of these operations in order to assist the Soviet Union.⁴⁷

The key question was how best to accomplish this.

On 19 June 1941 Douglas, Peirse, and the newly appointed Joubert, C-in-C Coastal Command, met at Fighter Command:

To consider options which would prevent the enemy from withdrawing further forces from the West to the EAST, and to force him to return those forces which he might already have sent, particularly in the event of operations developing against Russia.⁴⁸

They identified four possible contributions: daylight attacks on west and north west Germany; daylight attacks in strength on the important industrial area of Bethune-Lens-Lille; daylight attacks to stop all movement of enemy shipping through the Straits; and general invasion preparations. They agreed to propose to the CAS that Bomber and Fighter Command would plan and develop heavy attacks on the Bethune-Lens industrial area; that Coastal and Fighter Command would attack all shipping through the Straits and Channel area during daylight; and that the RN and Army should be pressed to co-operate 'in staging elaborate dummy' preparations for a large scale landing aimed at north west France. In their final paragraph they commented on the need for range extending auxiliary fuel tanks and recommended that five Spitfire squadrons be so equipped and the Hurricane tanks destined for the Middle East be re-allocated to Fighter Command squadrons to enable long range fighter escort and protection.⁴⁹

On 22 June 1941, Freeman, the VCAS, wrote to CAS putting forward the Cs-in-C proposals and adding comment of his own.⁵⁰ First, he was unconvinced that the

⁴⁷ Ibid., Richards, *The Fight at Odds*, p. 384.

⁴⁸ TNA AIR 8/928, dated 19 June 1941.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., TNA AIR 8/928, dated 22 June 1941.

GAF would give battle unless targets of significance were chosen, he recommended the Potez Factory at Albert as a promising choice. Secondly, he was more confident that a concerted attack on shipping in the Channel would bring results and he went so far as to advise that if Bomber Command continued to fail to provoke the GAF through attacks on their airfields they should be directed against shipping targets in tune with Coastal and Fighter Command. He advised CAS that he had already taken action on the tanks for Spitfires and Hurricanes and mentioned that Peirse had a 'hush-hush operation' that he would explain to CAS in the coming days.⁵¹ This secret mission was also mentioned by Douglas in his covering note to the Minutes of the Cs-in-C meeting and it was clear that the final paragraph of the Minutes, dealing with the need for long range fuel tanks, was stimulated by the needs of Peirse's mission.⁵²

On 25 June 1941 Peirse wrote to CAS outlining his secret plan which involved Blenheims attacking a German inland port on 28 June 1941. Anticipating success he planned to follow up the Blenheim attack with daylight heavy bomber attacks in the following days. He then specifically requested the allocation of 20 Mosquito aircraft, at the time planned for reconnaissance duties, for use as bombers, believing he could 'penetrate considerable distances with them, armed or unarmed.'⁵³ CAS replied the next day, 26 June 1941, stating that he had asked about the use of Mosquitoes but that they were not yet in service and although three were expected within days, they would require another 21 days before they could be used to drop bombs.⁵⁴ He therefore

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., TNA AIR 8/928, dated 21 June 1941.

⁵³ Ibid., dated 25 June 1941.

⁵⁴ Ibid., dated 26 June 1941.

concluded that it was not 'worthwhile considering them for bombing in the near future'.⁵⁵

On 27 June 1941, Bottomley, the DCAS, wrote to Peirse on behalf of the Air Council with a revised list of targets in northern France for daylight attack supported by fighter cover.⁵⁶ The list dealt with transportation and power targets which were seen to be of greater importance than had previously been realised. DCAS followed up on 3 July 1941 with a complementary list of industrial targets 'known to be working for the Germans in the Pas de Calais area'.⁵⁷ The hopes of the time are reflected in the second paragraph:

there are indications that the attack of these targets is likely to result in serious industrial trouble, especially amongst the Communist element of the French workers, with consequent embarrassment to the Germans. There is even a suggestion that in view of the weakened German forces this unrest might develop into a revolt.⁵⁸

Also on 3 July 1941 DCAS had written to both Peirse and Douglas reversing the policy given by CAS on 13 February 1941 concerning the objective of the CIRCUS operations. He stated that:

In light of the present strategical situation it is necessary to modify the aim of these operations. Their primary aim should now be the destruction of certain important targets by day bombing, and incidentally, the destruction of enemy fighter aircraft.⁵⁹

Saundby, SASO Bomber Command, wrote to Fighter Command and HQ No 3 Group on 5 July 1941 to give substance to this change of policy.⁶⁰ He stated that henceforth it was the intention of Bomber Command to augment the Blenheims of No 2 Group

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ TNA AIR 16/369 E 14A, dated 27 June 1941.

⁵⁷ Ibid., E 21A, dated 3 July 1941.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., dated 3 July 1941.

⁶⁰ Ibid., E 29A, dated 5 July 1941.

that had been operating in concert with Fighter Command, with Stirlings from No 3 Group with up to eight sorties per day.

The background to this change of approach was given in a memorandum titled 'Implications of German-Soviet Air War' prepared by Freeman, the VCAS, and distributed on 8 July 1941.⁶¹ Freeman noted that the Soviet Air Force whilst numerically superior to the GAF it was suffering severe losses in the early fighting. However, the GAF was also under pressure and 'in certain sections of the front bomber operations are not to be undertaken without close fighter support'.⁶² He considered that:

It is, therefore, to our advantage to prolong as long as possible the Russian defence since this will not only weaken the GAF but will also delay the re-construction of her Air Forces in the West against this country, and provide time for reinforcing our own Air Force with new material.⁶³

Therefore, he continued, the best way to assist the Soviet Union was to force Germany to withdraw forces from the east by 'attacking objectives of such value' that the GAF had to respond to protect the vital targets attacked.⁶⁴ Having set the scene, VCAS reviewed the current options for attacking German interests through continuing the fringe attacks already undertaken, by 'heavy and effective attacks on the French Atlantic ports used by the Germans for the attack on the trade routes, and particularly the enemy capital ships at Brest', and finally through the direct attack of objectives in Germany.⁶⁵ In his paragraph 9 he summarised the contemporary thinking concerning attacks on Germany:

⁶¹ TNA AIR 8/431, dated 8 July 1941.

⁶² Ibid., dated 8 July 1941.

⁶³ Ibid., dated 8 July 1941.

⁶⁴ Ibid., dated 8 July 1941.

⁶⁵ Ibid., dated 8 July 1941.

Whatever may be the effect of attacks against objectives in the Pas de Calais and Brest areas the best chance of persuading the enemy to withdraw appreciable fighter forces from the Russian front would be to undertake more demanding attacks against key objectives in north-west Germany and the Ruhr. Apart from the possibility of severe material damage, the effect on morale of the German industrial population of daylight attacks delivered against industrial targets would be very serious. Whatever might be their views on strategical grounds the German High Command might well be forced to accede, against their better judgement, to a popular clamour for greater protection in the industrial areas of Western Germany.⁶⁶

Freeman fully acknowledged that at the present time Bomber Command had very little experience of the essential skills of formation flying and fire control that were vital to enable successful daylight operations. However, ‘under conditions which afforded a reasonable measure of security by flying at a great height, or under conditions of cloud cover, or possibly by low flying’ he felt that daylight operations were feasible especially given their potential for significant and telling damage to be inflicted.⁶⁷ In parallel, continued and intensified attacks in the Pas de Calais and coastal zones could cause dispersion of the fighters retained in north-west Germany thus easing the task facing Bomber Command. He concluded:

Every effort should, therefore, be made to develop this form of attack at the earliest possible date. One of the main aims of our bomber attacks and sweeps in the Pas de Calais, Channel and Brest areas should be to compel a thinning of fighter defences in north-west Germany so as to facilitate day attacks in that area.

The current day operations should be designed with this aim in view and the general strategical principles out in this memorandum should guide Commanders-in-Chief in the planning of such operations.⁶⁸

Whilst VCAS was addressing the needs of daylight attacks, DCAS was issuing a new Air Council Directive to Bomber Command setting out the view that ‘a comprehensive review of the enemy’s present political, economic and military

⁶⁶ Ibid., dated 8 July 1941.

⁶⁷ Ibid., dated 8 July 1941.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

situation discloses that the weakest points in his armour lie in the morale of the civilian population and in his inland transportation system'.⁶⁹ In relation to the guidance issued by VCAS the previous day, this Directive stated that:

It is accepted as a principle in this plan that the successful attack of a specific target at night can only be undertaken in clear moonlight. It follows therefore, that for approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of each month it is only possible to obtain satisfactory results by heavy, concentrated and continuous area attacks on large working class and industrial areas in carefully selected towns.⁷⁰

Nonetheless, the daylight principles that VCAS had identified were being practiced and on 8 July 1941, echoing VCAS' suggestion that daylight attacks might be possible from high altitude, three newly arrive B-17 Flying Fortresses of No 90 Sqn attacked Wilhelmshaven.⁷¹ Two aircraft bombed successfully and all returned safely. Until the end of the month Bomber Command would mount 17 daylight missions including a major raid against Brest, Cherbourg and La Pallice on 24 July 1941 in which 151 aircraft took part. Losses were heavy in some forces; 20 Blenheims, 10 Wellingtons and five Halifax were lost, but the Wellingtons and Halifax were all lost on 24 July 1941 when they were unescorted because of a lack of fighter escort assets.⁷²

This episode showed the close involvement of the Air Staff and the leading role they took in the development of concepts and tactics. Daylight missions by Bomber Command had been abandoned in December 1939 after the heavy losses incurred in North Sea operations. That the MAF should shift from a firmly defensive posture in July 1940 to a very aggressive daylight doctrine in July 1941 was of course due to the pressing strategic need to support the Soviet Union, but it was also due to

⁶⁹ Webster and Frankland, *SAOG Vol IV*, pp. 135-140.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, Middlebrook and Everitt, *The Bomber Command War Diaries*, p. 177.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp 184-185.

the drive and attitude of the CAS and Air Staff, and frontline commanders who felt empowered by the clear direction that was being set from above. In that vein a meeting was called for 29 July 1941 for CAS to review the policy of daylight attacks.⁷³

The Minutes paint the picture of a reflective group striving to achieve the strategic goal of support to the Soviet Union in the form of the diversion of GAF aircraft back to the west to meet the threat posed by the MAF.⁷⁴ Peirse outlined the major daylight operation that had taken place on 24 July 1941 pointing out that the majority of aircraft lost to enemy fighters were already lagging behind the main force due to flak damage. He also observed that none of the Flying Fortresses which led the raid at high altitude had been lost. He then stated that he felt the ‘strategical conception’ upon which the recent daylight operations had been based was ‘unsound’:

When the present policy had been decided he had hoped that by drawing the majority of the German fighters into the Pas de Calais a backdoor would be opened into Germany. He was now convinced that this expectation was over optimistic and we could not develop heavy bombing with our present forces without heavy casualties.⁷⁵

Peirse went on to state that:

He was himself convinced that greater effect on German dispositions in the East would be obtained by the activities of Fighter Command in the Pas de Calais where the Germans were highly sensitive and could not afford to lose air superiority.⁷⁶

In the margin Douglas wrote ‘not without heavy bombing’, and commented in the meeting that ‘his fighters were unable to bring the German fighters to battle unless bombers accompanied them’.⁷⁷ CAS agreed stating that in ‘his opinion the best hope

⁷³ TNA AIR 8/431, dated 26 July 1941.

⁷⁴ TNA AIR 16/369, E 78B undated.

⁷⁵ Ibid., E 78B undated.

⁷⁶ Ibid., E 78B undated.

⁷⁷ Ibid., E 78B undated.

was for the Blenheims to continue hitting away at the Pas de Calais to prevent the Germans withdrawing fighter defences from this area'.⁷⁸ Therefore, it was decided that the development of daylight bombing operations should continue in accordance with the strategy laid out in VCAS memorandum of 8 July 1941, that Blenheims and if possible Stirlings should continue to be used and the Flying Fortresses should develop techniques for long range high altitude bombing.⁷⁹

On the matter of anti-shipping attacks AOC No 2 Group requested that he be allocated Hurricanes equipped to carry bombs, in effect broadening his attack capability but also creating a self-escorting multi-functional force. CAS declined saying that:

He had decided that the Hurricanes now being produced to carry bombs should be allocated to Fighter Command in the first place to use against ships.⁸⁰

However, if Fighter Command found they could not obtain full value he was prepared to 'consider transferring them to Bomber Command control'.⁸¹ In fact the reverse happened and on 6 October 1941 the DCAS, on behalf of the Air Council, informed Douglas that:

you will assume responsibility for day operations against enemy shipping in the area defined in paragraph 16 of your instruction....(i.e. in the area Manston-Ostend-Dieppe-Beachy Head).

He went on to agree to a proposal by Douglas sent on 14 September 1941 that Fighter Command could use Hurricane bombers against fringe targets on the enemy coast and stated that the Air Ministry Intelligence staff would shortly be providing suitable target details, which would be updated by the Target Committee from time to

⁷⁸ Ibid., E 78B undated.

⁷⁹ Ibid., E 78B undated.

⁸⁰ Ibid., E 78B undated.

⁸¹ Ibid.

time.⁸² In effect this authorised the creation of a light attack force within Fighter Command.

This represented a significant shift in organisational and doctrinal thinking for through the acquisition of the Hurricane bomber Fighter Command had gained the means of conducting offensive attack operations. Bomber Command had hoped that this aircraft with its functional role of attack would be allocated to No 2 Group, but CAS decided that it was better for it to remain in Fighter Command where it could be employed by units familiar with the type and integrated into the radar control system that Fighter Command ran.⁸³ It was a significant step towards multi-functional commands and represented a dramatic shift from the role and approach of Fighter Command a year earlier.

Operations to divert German resources from the east resumed in early August, but by September questions were being raised about their sustainability given the mounting losses being incurred.⁸⁴ Eventually events on the evening of 7/8 November 1941 by Bomber Command and during the day on the 8 November 1941 by Fighter Command settled the offensive activity of both forces for the coming months. During the night of 7/8 November 1941, Bomber Command raided Berlin and in the process lost 37 aircraft from the 400 dispatched.⁸⁵ On the following day Fighter Command mounted its only Circus operation for November and lost 14 pilots for the claimed destruction of five enemy aircraft.⁸⁶ On 11 November 1941 the War Cabinet directed

⁸² Ibid., E 126A, dated 6 October 1941.

⁸³ Ibid., E 78B undated.

⁸⁴ TNA AHB IIIH/240/4/112 FC/S.24752, encl 78B.

⁸⁵ Middlebrook and Everitt, *The Bomber Command War Diaries*, pp. 217-218.

⁸⁶ Douglas, *Official Dispatch* para 163, p. 5029; and Foreman *Fighter Command War Diaries* Vol 2, p. 315.

that the offensive should be suspended and a policy of conservation imposed on both Bomber and Fighter Command to enable them to resume the offensive in the spring.⁸⁷

Between 14 June and 31 December 1941 Fighter Command lost 411 pilots in the daylight offensive whilst claiming 731 enemy fighters.⁸⁸ This gives a good indication of the sense of achievement that would have been present at the time. The fact that the Germans had not lost 731 but only 154 illustrates just how far removed from reality the processes of the day could make the high command become.⁸⁹ Clearly gaining air superiority was not a straightforward task and as the year came to a close it was obvious that the strategy of diverting German assets from the east to the west had failed to achieve its objective. Terraine argued, with the benefit of hindsight, that:

Less helpful was the continuing disposition to find ways of resuming day bombing, when really there was only one way that could make it effective – the introduction of a true long-range fighter to protect the bombers.⁹⁰

His subsequent analysis, in tune with Webster and Frankland, stating that Portal was at fault has been influential in the historiography, with Terraine devoting an Appendix to his assessment of the matter.⁹¹ However, as this analysis has highlighted, methods of extending fighter range through the use of external jettisonable tanks had been discussed and squadrons were equipped during the summer of 1941. The awareness of the importance of fighter escort was widely held as was evidenced by the discussion at the CAS Meeting of 29 July 1941 in the wake of the large scale Bomber Command

⁸⁷ Ibid., Douglas *Official Dispatch* paras 163-164, p. 5029; and TNA AHB IIIH/240/4/112 FC/S.26678, encl 1A, 2A and CMS.868 encl d, dated 12 November 1941.

⁸⁸ B Collier, *The Defence of the United Kingdom* (London: HMSO, 1957), p.294, footnote2.

⁸⁹ Ibid., Collier, pp. 294-296, and Terraine, *The Right of the Line*, p. 285.

⁹⁰ Ibid., Terraine, *The Right of the Line*, p. 294

⁹¹ Ibid., Terraine, *The Right of the Line* Appendix G, pp. 703-704 and Webster and Frankland *SAOG* Vol I, p. 239.

daylight attack of French coastal bases.⁹² On 1 March 1942, in the wake of Japan's entry into the war, the PM sent a short minute to the CAS:

Let me have a note on the comparative ranges, so far as known, of Japanese and British fighter aircraft of all kinds.

We are repeatedly reading about long-range Japanese fighters, but the Air Ministry have always led me to believe no important advance in range was likely to be made.⁹³

On 14 March 1942 General Wavell, C-in-C India, telegraphed his assessment of the recent fighting in the Far East and his conclusion that the 'possession of fighters with a range up to 1500 miles' was 'the most outstanding' advantage the Japanese enjoyed. After arguing for the bolstering of air defences in his region and the dire consequences of not acting, in terms of the security of India and Burma, he concluded with the memorable phrase; 'You have been warned'. This was taken up by the PM the following day who demanded an explanation and stated:

This is very grave. You have repeatedly assured me that ranges of this kind were impossible for fighters.⁹⁴

CAS replied the same day:

I suggest you are mistaken in thinking that I have repeatedly assured you that ranges of 1500 miles are impossible for fighters. We ourselves have for some time possessed the Beaufighter which, as I stated in the attachment to my minute of 3rd March, has a theoretical range still-air range of 1460 to 1870 miles according to the armament carried.

I agree that I have repeatedly told you that the long range fighter has little chance when up against the short range fighter, owing to the better performance of the latter. If we had had adequate short range fighter defence in Malaya and Java we should, in General Wavell's words, have 'beaten the Japanese air forces out of the skies' as we did in Burma where it was possible for an exceptionally efficient commander to organise some sort of short range fighter defence.⁹⁵

⁹² TNA AIR 16/369, E 78B undated.

⁹³ TNA AIR 8/327, dated 1 March 1942.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 15 March 1942.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 15 March 1942.

Earlier Lord Cherwell had added to the debate on 11 March 1942, writing to the PM stating that:

The average speed of the Japanese machines....is some 100 miles per hour less than that of ours. It is true that their range is greater, using auxiliary tanks that can be jettisoned. When we fit these, the range of our fighters will be equal to that of the Japanese machine and our speed will be higher.⁹⁶

CAS submitted the special report the PM had asked for on 19 March 1942 summarising the position concerning range extending tanks. He explained that both jettisonable and non-jettisonable tanks were available for the Hurricane and jettisonable tanks for the Spitfire. Performance loss when the tanks were carried restricted the use of the tanks by the Fighter Command Hurricanes to 'Intruder' operations but that both clearly suffered no performance loss once the tanks were dropped.⁹⁷

This passage of correspondence, far from revealing a Service unprepared for the demands of war, shows that whilst Terraine was correct in suggesting that Portal had a blind spot over the potential performance of the long range fighter, as subsequently demonstrated by the capability of the P-51 Mustang, he was not correct in suggesting that Portal and his colleagues were against the use of range extending drop tanks. Without the pressure from both the Air Ministry and the frontline the procurement system would have not been as far advanced as it was in early 1942. This beginning of the capability to fight over longer range and penetrate the enemy's defences to reach targets that were of significant importance to him, coupled with the deployment of more multi-functional aircraft would shape the development of operations and high command for the rest of the war.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 11 March 1942.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

Multi-Role Capability and Command Flexibility

This chapter has so far addressed the ability of the RAF high command to adapt thinking to operational necessity. This section now focuses on the adaptation that was enabled through the introduction of new capability, be that in the form of new aircraft, modified and upgraded existing types, or electronic and scientific devices that offered transformational capability to the frontline. At the start of 1942 equipment changes had already begun the process of transforming the mono-functional commands of 1936 into increasingly multi-functional commands with growing levels of self-sufficiency. Coastal Command in particular, due in part to its specialised role and close working relationship with the RN, was already provisioned with attack, reconnaissance, fighter, and escort fighter capability. Fighter Command possessed the Hurricane bomber and recent policy changes in October 1941 had given it authority to attack shipping and land targets. Of the three, Bomber Command was the least multi-functional although the command mechanisms by which it gained multi-functional support were well tried and practiced.

During 1942 the fielding of new capabilities in all three Commands would alter the way in which the CAS and Air Staff were able to co-ordinate air operations from the UK. New aircraft with greater multi-role capability created the conditions in which the mono-functional commands remained coherent in terms of aircraft types, training schools, maintenance support etc, but were increasingly blessed with the means to undertake roles that had previously been beyond them. In Coastal Command the creation by Joubert of the Coastal Strike Wings based on the various models of the Beaufighter allowed Coastal Command to configure strike wings from within its own resources which now comprised fighter, torpedo bomber, and attack versions of the

same aircraft thereby releasing it from the need for inter command support.⁹⁸

Likewise Fighter Command acquired aircraft, such as the Havoc, Boston, Mosquito, Hurricane bomber and Beaufighter, which were able to perform functions that previously had to be provided by its sister organizations.⁹⁹ In the case of Bomber Command the developments were less transforming but the arrival in Fighter Command of the Mosquito in the night fighter role greatly improved night fighter escort, and the development of electronic counter-measures embedded in Bomber Command aircraft further broadened the functional capability of the Command.¹⁰⁰

This transition to multi-functionality created new options for command and control of UK based air operations and reduced the inherent need for inter-command co-ordination from the Air Staff. However, the growing self-sufficiency also led to inter command difficulties. For example, both Bomber Command and Coastal Command considered they held primacy in the attack on shipping, but for different reasons.¹⁰¹ Coastal Command considered their environmental focus gave them priority while Bomber Command considered that their offensive functional lead meant they should hold sway. On 15 July 1941 this growing dispute reached the

⁹⁸ D Richards and H St G. Saunders, *Royal Air Force 1939-45*, Vol 2, *The Fight Avails* (London: HMSO, 1975), p. 96, and Joubert de la Ferte, *The Fated Sky*, p.231; however, the best overall summary of the development of CC Strike Wings is C J M Goulter *A Forgotten Offensive: Royal Air Force Coastal Commands Anti-Shipping Campaign, 1940-1945*, (London: Cass, 1995).

⁹⁹ Foreman, *Fighter Command War Diaries* who gives the Fighter Command Order of Battle for 1 January 1942 on pp. 11-14 confirming the presence of all these aircraft types in the frontline of Fighter Command.

¹⁰⁰ These wide ranging developments are covered in a variety of sources. See, for example, Middlebrook and Everitt *The Bomber Command War Diaries* pp. 269-271 and 297-301; A Price, *Instruments of Darkness – The History of Electronic Warfare, 1939-1945* (London: Greenhill, 2005), pp. 118-119; Neillands, *The Bomber War - Arthur Harris and the Allied Bomber Offensive 1939-1945* , p. 75; and Webster and Frankland in Vol II of *SAOG*, p. 6.

¹⁰¹ TNA AHB IHH/240/4/112 FC/S.24572, encl 47B.

arbitration of the CAS who allocated Bomber Command responsibility from Cherbourg to Texel and Coastal Command the lead in all other areas.¹⁰²

In October 1941 responsibility for the counter German Navy ‘Channel Stop’ operation in the area Manston-Ostend-Dieppe-Beachy Head was devolved entirely to Fighter Command following Bomber Command’s withdrawal of its Blenheims and the equipping of Fighter Command with the recently fielded Hurricane bombers that could substitute with bombs and cannon for the offensive capability of Bomber Command.¹⁰³ This arrangement, albeit only covering a small area, but one of significant operational importance, was possible because the deployment of a multi-role aircraft types enabled Coastal Command and Fighter Command to undertake this task self-sufficiently thereby permitting the clarification of command and control arrangements. It was also helped by the ease with which both Coastal Command and Fighter Command had demonstrated they could co-operate over the previous months under Douglas, Bowhill, and Joubert.

Clearly it would be stretching the point too far to suggest that as a result of the arrival of the Hurricane bomber that Fighter Command had become a multi-functional command. On the other hand, it would be entirely reasonable to highlight this as an example of the operational efficiency and potential created by the fielding of more capable and adaptable aircraft. In a similar vein the widespread use of cannon armament in Coastal Command and Fighter Command aircraft gave them all a realistic ground strafing capability that could be used to attack aircraft, shipping, vehicles, rail stock, unprotected buildings and general ground facilities. In earlier

¹⁰² TNA AIR 16/369 E 60A, dated 19 July 1941.

¹⁰³ Ibid., E 126A, dated 6 October 1941.

times this would have been undertaken by the light bomber force of No 2 Group Bomber Command which would have required higher level direction and co-ordination.¹⁰⁴

By night a similar transition was underway with the increasing presence of ‘attack’ capabilities embedded in Fighter Command assets, or as in the case of the Coastal Command the Coastal Strike Wings, the fighter and longer range escort capability inherent in their new Beaufighter. The night Intruder operations developed during 1942 to the point where they were capable of providing increasingly effective fighter sweep, escort and support to the Bomber Command main force operations.¹⁰⁵ The provision of the Mosquito brought the German operational training airfields in range and the heavier and more comprehensive armament, comprising cannons, machine guns, and four 250lbs bombs enabled effective and telling attacks to be made. As a result of this increase in capability Douglas revamped the Intruder control system to integrate planning, liaison, co-operation and execution of the nightly intruder missions.¹⁰⁶ This new facility, the Intruder Operations Room at his Headquarters in Stanmore, enabled the integration of the ‘Y’ Service real time intelligence output with the real time conduct of the airborne missions.¹⁰⁷ The presence of liaison staff from Bomber Command and Coastal Command added to the ease with which co-ordinated action could be undertaken and hence enhanced operational effectiveness. By the end of 1942 Intruder operations were reaching beyond the Ruhr and providing Bomber Command with both airborne escort and

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ TNA AHB IHH/240/4/112 FC/S.27142, encl 32A.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., Douglas, Official Dispatch para 72 5021.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., TNA AHB IHH/240/4/112 FC/S.27142, encl 32A, para 15.

support and co-ordinated offensive strikes against the German night fighter bases.¹⁰⁸

Throughout 1941 and 1942 the RAF transitioned from its necessarily defensive posture of the first two years of the war to an increasingly offensive role. At the higher command level this was driven by both political and personal factors.

The political, and naturally the determining factor, was the view of the War Cabinet and the desire to regain the initiative from the Germans after the Battle of Britain.¹⁰⁹ Once a measure of survival had been achieved wider options became available.¹¹⁰ Securing the Atlantic was as critical in 1941 as securing the UK had been in 1940.¹¹¹ This could only come about if the Germans were placed under an obligation to respond to the offensive actions of the RN and RAF.¹¹² This was further emphasized when the pressing need to relieve pressure on the Soviet Union emerged in mid-1941.¹¹³ On 4 September 1940 the War Cabinet had discussed an appreciation by the COS on Future Strategy.¹¹⁴ This was not endorsed as Government policy but it was circulated to ‘the Dominions as a valuable staff study’.¹¹⁵ It concluded that ‘our strategy during 1941 must be one of attrition’ but that as 1942 approached we should ‘pass to the general offensive in all spheres’ with the ‘utmost strength in the spring of 1942’.¹¹⁶

The personality factor concerned the change at the top of the RAF command structure. As highlighted, the new commanders were a younger generation who had

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., TNA AHB IHH/240/4/112 FC/S.31066, encl 6A.

¹⁰⁹ Butler, *Grand Strategy* Vol II, p.344.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 547-551.

¹¹¹ Ibid., pp 465-466.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 467.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 547.

¹¹⁴ TNA CAB 69/1/8, dated 4 September 1940.

¹¹⁵ Butler, *Grand Strategy* Vol II, p.343.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

fought as aircrew and squadron commanders in the First World War. Their attitudes had been formed during the establishment of the RAF in the 1920s and 1930s and they were the products of RAF, rather than Army or RN staff and command education and training. Portal, Peirse, Douglas, and Park were all students on the first RAF Staff College Course, and Freeman was one of their instructors.¹¹⁷ This common background created an alignment which contained both strength and potential weakness. Its strength lay in the general ease with which business could be conducted, a distinct asset when conducting high command under the Hankey System. On the other hand, its potential weakness lay in the danger of what today would be termed ‘group think’ the tendency to visualize and address challenges from a certain perspective, to reinforce that perspective through dialogue and to shut out contrary views and opinions. In the first two years of their time in command, this group did not seriously succumb to this danger, as it shown by the doctrinal and tactical debates that unfolded during 1941 and 1942, often at the behest of Freeman. Indeed, the presence of Freeman as the chosen VCAS may have been vital for his approachable authority and stature was a distinct asset to Portal as he found his feet as CAS.¹¹⁸

The change of personalities enabled the change in attitude from the defensive to offensive strategy. The new leaders wanted to take the fight to the enemy and to undertake the operations that had formed the basis of all pre-war planning.¹¹⁹ The continuing influence of Trenchard and Salmond undoubtedly added to this desire. Once released by the War Cabinet from the demands of defence the new generation embraced the opportunities offered to demonstrate their offensive credentials at a time

¹¹⁷ Furse *Wilfrid Freeman*, pp. 47- 48 and illustration ‘The RAF Staff College, Andover 1922’, p.48.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 163-165.

¹¹⁹ TNA AIR 15/33, dated 7 October 1939 for the continual pressure applied by both Douglas and Leigh-Mallory to enable Fighter Command Circus and fighter sweep operations.

when the RAF held a particularly central position in all British war making. In this way, a combination of political desire, personal alignment, and developing doctrinal thinking provided the backdrop to the attempts to transition to the offensive during 1941 and 1942. That the results were far less promising than was thought at the time, and the Germans were never constrained sufficiently to transfer assets to the west to meet the growing threat, is now well known.¹²⁰ From the perspective of this study it is the response of the CAS and Air Staff at the time that is relevant, particularly in their approach to the higher command of their forces.

The experiments in gaining air superiority during 1941 and 1942 reveal a CAS and Air Staff that were content to operate in accordance with the precepts of the Hankey System. With the war becoming more complex and nuanced after the period of crisis, the Air Staff, in concert with the Admiralty and Coastal Command, operated the Hankey System well. The growing experience of the staff officers within the Air Ministry and at the Commands undoubtedly facilitated this. So too did the fact that a previous C-in-C, Portal, was now the CAS, a previous VCAS, Pierse, and DCAS, Douglas, were now Cs-in-C, a previous AOC, Harris, was now the DCAS and a man with almost universal respect, Freeman, occupied the quiet but pivotal post of VCAS to a young and inexperienced CAS.¹²¹

The period also shows clearly that although the equipment on hand may have been inadequate to deliver the effect desired the understanding of the complexity and interrelationships between the various components of operational planning and design were well understood. Douglas foresaw these difficulties in several of his replies of

¹²⁰ Ibid., Terraine, *The Right of the Line*, p. 285

¹²¹ *Air Force List* January 1941 and July 1941.

the time.¹²² Writing to his SASO concerning Leigh-Mallory's proposal to form fighter wings, Douglas highlighted the doctrine that would, in time, prove instrumental in the defeat of the GAF over Germany in 1944.¹²³ He stated that:

I have never been very much in favour of the idea of trying to interpose fighter squadrons between enemy bombers and their objective. The best, if not the only, way of achieving air superiority is to shoot down a large proportion of enemy bombers every time they come over. It would be better to do this before they reach their objective if possible, but I would rather shoot down 50 of the enemy bombers after they have reached their objective than shoot down only 10 before they have done so.¹²⁴

Tellingly he observed:

Although the Dunkirk battle is by no means an exact parallel, it is noteworthy how much better results we got when we went from the system of having patrols of one or two squadrons over Dunkirk all day to less frequent patrols of 4, 5 or 6 squadron strength. The number of enemy bombers shot down went up by leaps and bounds.¹²⁵

He was sure that the success of Fighter Command during the Dunkirk operation was due to the 'adoption of the policy of larger fighter formations' and the abandonment of the policy of trying to interpose a small fighter force between the 'enemy bomber and his objective'.¹²⁶

In 1943 and 1944 the USAAF would learn this same lesson in terms of interposing fighters between the GAF fighters and the USAAF bombers they were trying to protect. When the USAAF shifted to a policy of destroying the GAF fighters in the air and on the ground in large numbers the daylight bombing offensive was transformed. Douglas, like Freeman, Joubert, Leigh-Mallory and Portal, cannot be criticised from the primary records for constraining their thinking or being blind to opportunities. What they lacked in 1941 was the capability; by the end of 1942 the

¹²² TNA AIR 16/367, dated 14 December 1940.

¹²³ Ibid., Minute 4, dated 17 December 1940.

¹²⁴ Ibid., dated 17 December 1940.

¹²⁵ Ibid., dated 17 December 1940.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

Allied production system was beginning to deliver both the capability and the capacity that would transform air warfare in the final years of the Second World War.

As the war transitioned into a phase in which Allied co-operation would dominate, the RAF had achieved a system of higher command, which although far from perfect, was effective and, with the advent of new capabilities, was underpinned by Commands that were inexorably shifting away from the mono-functional design of 1936 towards a flexible and adaptable multi-functional structure in 1942.

Chapter 8

PORTAL AND THE COMBINED BOMBER OFFENSIVE - CCS EXECUTIVE AGENT

The previous three chapters have assessed the performance of the RAF high command when faced with operational, personnel, and doctrinal challenges. Over time the precepts of the Hankey system were first challenged, then adapted, and then re-embraced following a significant change of command personnel. In parallel the mono-functional commands that began the war, slowly through the acquisition of more flexible and adaptable capability, gained a level of self-sufficiency that allowed the effective creation of SAC authority within the post of C-in-C. Whilst the Air Ministry remained the overriding authority and drove the development and co-ordination of operations, equipment and doctrine in close co-operation with the new frontline commanders. This chapter will develop this concept by re-examining the role of Portal in the high command structure of the CBO that emerged from the Allied Conference in Casablanca that began on 14 January 1943.¹

The ‘Conduct of the War in 1943’ – Strategy and Plans

Gilbert and Howard revealed that the priorities facing Churchill and the British CsOS in the weeks leading up to the Casablanca Conference were complex and wide ranging, and the direction of the combined activity of Bomber Command and the Eighth Air Force was but one of many issues to be addressed.² Slessor, who as ACAS (Plans) accompanied Portal, kept contemporaneous notes that reveal that the

¹ Howard, *Grand Strategy* Vol IV, p. 244.

² Gilbert, *Winston S Churchill* Vol VII, pp. 292-315; and Howard, *Grand Strategy* Vol IV - especially Chapter XI ‘The Autumn Debates’ pp. 191-221.

development of the strategic concept was not without its difficulties.³ He recorded that by lunch time on 18 January 1943, the day the CCS were planned to brief the President and PM at 1700hrs, that:

The CCS had, in fact, agreed upon nothing at all! Tempers were getting a little frayed – or anyway Alan Brooke’s was – and it looked perilously as though 1700hrs would arrive with the British and US Chiefs of Staff at complete loggerheads as to the Anglo-US strategy to adopted in the coming year.⁴

However, from Slessor’s perspective:

it became increasingly obvious to me that the two sides, British and American, were not in fact half as far apart in their conceptions of our proper strategy as they thought they were.⁵

Slessor’s subsequent drafting of a compromise agreement that Brooke and Portal presented to the CCS, who agreed after some modification, is well recorded.⁶ The agreed memorandum by the CSS entitled ‘Conduct of the War in 1943’ was issued on 19 January 1943.⁷ It highlighted first under the heading of ‘Security’ that the defeat of the U-boat ‘must remain a first charge on the resources of the United Nations’. Furthermore, assistance to Russia ‘must be sustained’ but ‘without prohibitive cost in shipping’. Under the heading ‘Operations in the European Theatre’ is optimistically stated that operations will ‘be conducted with the object of defeating Germany in 1943’. After outlining in greater detail the planned operations in the Mediterranean, such as the ‘occupation of Sicily’ and creating the circumstances in which Turkey might become an active ally, the memorandum set the ground for the CBO. It stated that in the United Kingdom the ‘heaviest possible bomber offensive against German war effort’ would be mounted. This, coupled with limited offensive

³ TNA AIR 75/11 undated memo Conduct of the War in 1943 at first enclosure.

⁴ Ibid., TNA AIR 75/11 undated memo Conduct of the War in 1943.

⁵ Ibid., TNA AIR 75/11 undated memo Conduct of the War in 1943.

⁶ Howard, *Grand Strategy* Vol IV, p. 251; and Overy, *The Bombing War*, pp. 302.

⁷ TNA CAB 99/24; and Howard, *Grand Strategy* Vol IV, p. 621 - CCS 155/1 dated 19 January 1943; and TNA AIR 75/11.

operations and the assembly of the 'strongest possible force in constant readiness to re-enter the Continent as soon as German resistance is weakened to the required extent', clearly placed the proposed bomber offensive within a complex and inter-related Allied strategy. However, on the matter of the nature of the bomber offensive the PM was yet to be convinced.

Howard recorded that Churchill was not fully swayed that the Eighth Air Force would be best employed on daylight operations.⁸ Understandably from his experience of 1941 and 1942 with the RAF, the PM had seen attempts to conduct daylight operations flourish and flounder despite occasional successes such as at Augsburg.⁹ The PM stated in a note of congratulations to Harris, the new C-in-C Bomber Command:

We must plainly regard the attack of the Lancasters on the U-boat engine factory at Augsburg as an outstanding achievement of the Royal Air Force. Undeterred by the heavy losses at the outset 44 and 97 Squadrons proceeded in broad daylight into the heart of Germany and struck a vital point with deadly precision.

Please convey the thanks of His Majesty's Government to the officers and men who accomplished the memorable feat of arms in which no life lost was in vain.¹⁰

Against this background, Churchill's concern over proposed USAAF operations could seem incongruous. However, Churchill was well aware that of the 12 Lancasters that had set out on the raid only five returned; four had been shot down en route and a further three near the target giving a loss rate of 58%, a totally unsustainable figure for any long term campaign.¹¹ On the night of 30/31 May 1942 Harris mounted his first 1000 bomber raid, this time against Cologne. He followed

⁸ Howard, *Grand Strategy* Vol IV, p. 262.

⁹ TNA AIR 16/369, dated 18 April 1942.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Middlebrook and Everitt, *The Bomber Command War Diaries*, p. 258.

this up on 1/2 June 1942 against Essen and concluded on 25/26 June 1942 with a raid to Bremen. The loss rates on these raids were 3.9%, 3.2%, and 4.9% respectively, which while still serious were sustainable in the long term. Also the damage achieved was impressive and Bomber Command had perfected their night bombing techniques to the point where they could pass 700-800 bombers over the target in less than 20 minutes. Furthermore, inter-command co-operation, developed in 1941, was in 1942 providing intruder support, enemy night fighter airfield attack, electronic support, and diversion bombing operations. And of significance, Mosquito aircraft of 105 Sqn Bomber Command provided immediate photo-reconnaissance support to allow the bombing damage to be assessed; which was the first use by Bomber Command of the Mosquito.¹²

With this obvious comparison so clear in his mind Churchill must have recognised that given the CCS were proposing ‘defeating Germany in 1943’ then the ‘heaviest possible bomber offensive against German war effort’ could not afford for the USAAF to re-learn the lessons the RAF had so painfully learnt in 1941-42. In this Churchill was supported by the evidence of the very limited daylight operations the Eighth Air Force had conducted since their first raid against Rouen on 17 August 1942.¹³ Overy commented that there ‘was impatience’ in ‘both London and Washington, with the slow progress of the Eighth Air Force’.¹⁴ Churchill, Overy

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Craven and Cate, *The Army Air Forces in World War II, Vol 1 Plans and Early Operations*, pp. 661-668.

¹⁴ Overy, *The Bombing War*, p. 304.

stated, was strongly sceptical of the claim that daylight bombing would work and that they ‘will probably experience a heavy disaster’.¹⁵

To represent the case for USAAF daylight bombing Arnold chose Eaker.¹⁶

When Eaker learned from Arnold of the opposition to the daylight doctrine of the Eighth Air Force his response was unequivocal, but also extremely relevant in terms of the capability of the force he commanded:

General, that is absurd. It represents complete disaster. It will permit the Luftwaffe to escape. The cross-Channel operation will then fail. Our planes are not equipped for night bombing: our crews are not trained for it. We’ll lose more planes landing on that fog-shrouded island in darkness than we now lose over German targets....If our leaders are that stupid, count me out. I don’t want any part of that nonsense!¹⁷

Arnold replied that he was pleased Eaker had reacted that way, and knowing the high regard Churchill had for Eaker, he was trying to arrange an opportunity for him to speak to the PM to put the argument for continued daylight operations. Eaker prepared a single page paper entitled ‘The Case for Day Bombing’ which he presented to Churchill on 20 January 1943. After Churchill had read the paper and questioned Eaker, he concluded:

Young man, you have not convinced me you are right, but you have persuaded me that you should have further opportunity to prove your contention.¹⁸

Eaker had included in his paper the concept that by joining the RAF night attacks with the Eighth Air Force day attacks; the Allies would be able to strike Germany ‘around the clock’. That phrase particularly struck a chord with Churchill who commented ‘how fortuitous it would be if we could, as you say, bomb the devils around the

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 305.

¹⁶ J Parton, *Air Force Spoken Here – General Ira Eaker and the Command of the Air* (Bethesda Maryland: Adler and Adler, 1986), p.215.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.215.

¹⁸ Ibid.,pp. 215-216.

clock'.¹⁹ With Churchill's tacit agreement to Eighth Air Force daylight bomber operations secured the way was clear to further define the plan.

On 21 January 1943 the CCS published Directive CCS 166/1/D 'The Bomber Offensive from the United Kingdom'.²⁰ It was sub-titled the 'Directive to the Appropriate British and United States Air Force Commanders, to govern the operations of the British and United States Bomber Commands in the United Kingdom'. It stated that:

Your primary object will be the progressive destruction and dislocation of the German military, industrial and economic system, and the undermining of the morale of the German people to a point where their capacity for armed resistance is fatally weakened.²¹

The primary objectives given were, in order of priority, as German submarine construction yards; the German aircraft industry; transportation; oil plants; and other targets in the enemy war industry.

The Directive expanded on the objectives by observing that day and night attacks had already commenced on the submarine operating bases on the Biscay coast, which, if put out of action, would represent a 'great step forward' in the Battle of the Atlantic.²² Berlin, it stated:

Should be attacked when conditions are suitable for the attainment of specially valuable results unfavourable to the morale of the enemy or favourable to that of Russia.²³

In terms of the assault on the GAF:

You should take every opportunity to attack Germany by day, to destroy objectives that are unsuitable for night attack, to sustain continuous

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ TNA CAB 99/24; and Howard, *Grand Strategy* Vol IV, p. 623 - CCS 166/1/D dated 21 January 1943; and TNA AIR 75/11.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., CCS 166/1/D dated 21 January 1943.

²³ Ibid., CCS 166/1/D dated 21 January 1943.

pressure on German morale, to impose heavy losses on the German day fighter force and to contain German fighter strength away from the Russian and Mediterranean theatres of war.²⁴

This Directive demonstrated the clear linkage of the proposed bomber offensive with other aspects of the agreed strategy for 1943. It also showed the desire to do all that was possible to ease the pressure on the Russian front, be it by destruction of German manufacturing capacity, the fixing of GAF fighter assets in the west, or hopefully, the redeployment of GAF assets in the east to the west to meet the growing threat from the day and night bomber offensive. Underpinning this was the continuous goal of damaging German morale and undermining her capacity to continue the fight. Of particular interest, given subsequent developments, was the specific reference to day bombing operations being targeted against the ‘German day fighter force’.²⁵ Taking this document in isolation, however, can create a somewhat distorted perspective on the importance of the air war to the CCS, and the President and PM in particular.

Overy observed that the records of discussions at Casablanca ‘give little hint of arguments over bombing taking place’ and that the records of the American Joint COS (JCS) mentioned bombing only three times and that it was discussed during the plenary sessions only twice.²⁶ He also pointed out that the final list of CCS agreed priorities the:

critical issues were the commitment to an invasion of Italian territory in the Mediterranean and an eventual campaign in north-west Europe, for which bombing would be a necessary prelude to maximise the chances of success for a major combined-arms operation.²⁷

²⁴ Ibid., CCS 166/1/D dated 21 January 1943.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Overy, *The Bombing War*, pp. 306-307.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 307.

In Churchill's summary telegraph to Attlee and the War Cabinet on the outcome of the Conference he does not mention bombing.²⁸ Overy concluded that:

The army and navy commanders at Casablanca devoted almost nothing in their memoirs to the arguments over bombing strategy. The projection of air power against Germany was essentially a subsidiary to the wider strategic intention of re-occupying Europe during 1943 and 1944.

The Casablanca Directive itself was a brief set of instructions to destroy and dislocate the German 'military, industrial and economic system' and to undermine the morale of the German people to the point where the German power of resistance was 'fatally weakened'.²⁹

This is an important and nuanced perspective on the outcome of the Casablanca Conference. In retrospect it is clear that the decision to embark on the CBO led to an air campaign of great importance and operational significance. It is also now clear that the achievement of air superiority over the GAF in North West Europe was an essential precondition for the successful prosecution of Operation OVERLORD. However, at the time these events were not as clear cut as hindsight now makes them, and it is that perspective that is important in assessing Portal's approach and mindset during the coming months of 1943 and 1944.

The reason Portal's perspective is important for this study emanates from a decision recorded in the CCS Report on the SYMBOL Conference issued on 23 January 1943.³⁰ Portal, although content that the CBO decision had clarified the way ahead for Bomber Command and secured the USAAF focus against Germany from the UK, would undoubtedly have been aware that the CBO was but part of a wide range of strategic options that would develop over the coming months. Therefore, the CBO must be seen in perspective. For Portal, whose intelligence and political

²⁸ TNA CAB 120/76 *Stratagem No 198*, dated 23 Jan 43; and TNA AIR 8/1076, dated 21 January 1943

²⁹ Overy, *The Bombing War*, p. 307.

³⁰ TNA CAB 99/24; and Howard, *Grand Strategy Vol IV*, p. 625 - CCS 170/2, dated 23 January 1943.

understanding were well attuned, this would have made him acutely aware of where the CBO stood in the minds of the President and PM and in the priorities of his CCS colleagues. This understanding would be vital for as CCS 170/2 states in paragraph 4:

We have agreed that the United States Heavy Bombardment Units in the United Kingdom shall operate under the strategical direction of the British Chief of Air Staff. Under his general direction the United States Commanding General will decide upon the technique and method to be employed.

We have agreed upon a directive (CCS 166/1/D) to be issued to the British Commander-in-Chief, Bomber Command, and to the Commanding General, United States Air Forces in the United Kingdom.³¹

When stripped of its official language and style, paragraph 4 appointed Portal to the role of strategic commander of the CBO, effectively the SAC to ensure co-ordination of planning supply and execution of the bombing campaign which, as Overy noted, ‘would be a necessary prelude to maximise the chances of success for a major combined-arms operation’.³²

Portal - The Appointed SAC

Overy recorded that the Americans were pleased when the decision was made to make Portal the ‘nominal director’ of the whole bombing campaign as it removed the threat of Harris being placed in charge of the Eighth Air Force which they would have found very difficult because of his stated view that the Americans should operate at night and abandon their plans for daylight operations.³³ Webster and Frankland noted that in response to the ‘pressing question of how the air offensive was to be conducted’ that it was left unresolved in the Casablanca Directive and that ‘everything depended upon how the direction was interpreted’.³⁴ They noted that ‘Sir Charles

³¹ Ibid.

³² Overy *The Bombing War*, p. 307.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Webster and Frankland *SAOG Vol II*, p. 13.

Portal had been charged with the ‘strategical direction’ of the British and American bomber operations from the UK and that ‘in theory at least, the responsibility for the interpretation of the Casablanca Directive might have been supposed to be his’.³⁵ However, what was clear from the Directive was that ‘strategical direction’ did not embrace the power to determine tactics or techniques.³⁶

Tactics and techniques were to remain the preserve of the frontline commanders, Harris at Bomber Command, Spaatz and Eaker with the Eighth Air Force, and because of the limitations of the aircraft having the authority over the tactics and techniques of the execution of the CBO conferred on the recipient considerable authority over the progress of the campaign.³⁷ Considerations of weather, training, weapon load, and aim points all gave the tactical commanders considerable leeway in the execution of higher direction. Harris had already proven that he was adept at interpreting directives he received from the Air Ministry, and Spaatz and Eaker were learning fast that directives were not executive orders but expressions of direction from their political leadership as to how they wished to see the campaign progress.³⁸ In 1943 it was simply impossible, given the capability of the time, to impose more rigid control. To Portal this would not have been a surprise given the experience he had gained in his putative SAC role as CAS since 1940. Moreover, the softer touch of senior executive guidance among close colleagues who

³⁵ Ibid., p. 13.

³⁶ TNA CAB 99/24; and Howard, *Grand Strategy* Vol IV, p. 625 - CCS 170/2 dated 23 January 1943.

³⁷ Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare*, p. 215.

³⁸ P W Gray and S Cox, *Air Power Leadership – Theory and Practice* (London: HMSO, 2002) Chapter 12 by S Cox ‘Sir Arthur Harris and the Air Ministry’, pp. 225-226.

were aligned to the greater purpose was much more Portal's style than the role of an overbearing 'Super C-in-C'.³⁹

There is no surviving evidence of what Portal thought of his role at the time, or whether he saw himself as a 'Super CinC', rather than the CCS' 'executive agent' to oversee the CBO.⁴⁰ From the available sources it is difficult to determine what exactly the CCS expected of Portal for many sources do not even mention that Portal even had an executive role. Biddle commented that though 'Portal was theoretically in control of what was now called the Combined Bomber Offensive, the real power was in the hands of Harris and Eaker, since the tactical decisions of field commanders often were as consequential as the higher-level strategic plans.'⁴¹ This was a fair point, but it also confirms that Portal was 'in control' of the CBO even if the nature of air warfare at the time meant that subordinate commanders could have a serious impact on the conduct and outcome of operations based on tactical considerations. This was, and remains, an entirely normal situation when dealing with any large undertaking. Central direction, planning and guidance eventually have to give way to the individuals who will ultimately carry out the orders. This truth was implicit in General Eisenhower's message to the troops on D-Day. Beginning 'Sailors, soldiers and airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Forces!' he recognised that his vital role in forming, planning and deciding on the mounting of OVERLORD had now been overtaken by the vital role of those charged to carry out his plan.⁴² In the case of the CBO, Harris and Eaker may indeed have been able to significantly influence the

³⁹ Richards, *Portal of Hungerford*, pp. 180-182.

⁴⁰ See A Rawson, *Organizing Victory – The War Conferences 1941-1945* (Stroud: The History Press, 2013), pp. 49-50 and Webster and Frankland *SAOG Vol II*, p. 13.

⁴¹ Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare*, p. 215.

⁴² D Eisenhower, *Eisenhower at War 1943-1945* (London: Collins, 1986), p. 256.

outcome of the plan but the plan remained the preserve and responsibility of the higher authority, namely Portal. The CCS were expecting him to oversee the strategic direction and coherence of the campaign and ensure the planning, resourcing, execution and, if necessary, adaptation of the plan was carried out to deliver the desired outcomes. So even if some historians have underplayed Portal's role in the CBO, he was central to its success or failure.⁴³

The ironic aspect of the situation in which Portal found himself in early 1943 was that he had the exact authority of SAC that the RAF had sought in 1937. The SAC was never intended to be the arbiter of day to day tactics or techniques and procedures, which were always intended to be the role of the Cs-in-C. By contrast the SAC was to be the conductor of the complex orchestration that would create multi-functional effect from mono-functional components. Portal's role for the CBO was entirely in tune with the role that the RAF had foreseen in 1937. In 1943 Portal would have 'higher direction' of the increasingly multi-functional RAF Bomber Command specializing in night operations, the growing multi-functionality of the Eighth Air Force with its embedded bomber, fighter, and air support commands, and authority as CAS over Fighter Command and the growing tactical air assets being established to support the planned invasion of Europe. Dwelling on the fact that subordinates still had great influence is to miss the essential point. Portal had the authority of the CCS, the experience of CAS under the Hankey System, and the will of his CCS colleagues

⁴³ Overy, *The Bombing War*, merely comments that Portal was 'the nominal director of the whole bombing campaign', p. 306.

to lead the development and execution of the CBO, whose success was seen as an essential stepping stone to invasion.⁴⁴

The ‘Round the Clock’ CBO - Directives and Plans

On 2 April 1943 Eaker wrote to Portal saying that a Col Cabell had arrived carrying a letter from Arnold concerning the planning and development of the CBO Directive. Eaker stated that Arnold:

Believes that in order to build-up an American Air Force of sufficient size in the UK he must be armed with two needs: first, a list of the industrial targets in Germany which, if destroyed, will cripple her ability to wage war: and secondly, the size of the air forces required for the accomplishment of this task.⁴⁵

Arnold felt that if armed with this information he would be able to convince the US authorities and obtain their agreement to make the build-up ‘our Air Forces in this theatre’ the ‘first priority of the US’.

Arnold’s letter dated 24 March 1943 introduced a report by his ‘Operational Analysts on the subject of strategic targets in Europe.’⁴⁶ After setting the scene he came to his main point:

In view of the new facts we now have, I believe we should review the bombing priorities set out in paragraph 2 of CCS 166/1/D, approved by the

⁴⁴ For an overview of the CBO see, from the British perspective, Webster and Frankland in Vol II of SAOG; Overy, *The Bombing War – Europe 1939-1945*; Terraine, *The Right of the Line*; D Richards and H St G. Saunders *Royal Air Force 1939-45*, Vol 2, *The Fight Avails*; and Overy, *The Air War 1939-1945*; and from the USAAF perspective Craven and Cate, *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, Vol II *Europe: Torch to Pointblank*; DeWitt S Copp, *Forged in Fire – Strategy and Decisions in the Air war over Europe 1940-1945* (New York: Doubleday, 1982); E Hammel, *The Road to Big Week – The Struggle for Daylight Air Supremacy over Western Europe* (Pacifica California: Pacifica Military History, 2009); E Hammel, *Air War Europa* (Pacifica California: Pacifica Military History, 1994); L D Keeny, *The Pointblank Directive* (London: Osprey, 2012); J Parton, *Air Force Spoken Here – General Ira Eaker and the Command of the Air*; H S Hansell Jr, *The Air Plan that Defeated Hitler* (Atlanta: Hignns-McArthur, 1972); and C Griffith, *The Quest – Heywood Hansell and American Strategic Bombing in WWII* (Maxwell Alabama: Air University Press, 1999).

⁴⁵ TNA AIR 8/1103, dated 2 April 1943.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, dated 23 March 1943.

Combined Chiefs of Staff at Casablanca. The directive itself is in broad terms, and apparently needs no change.

Our efforts in the past to build up a larger bomber force in the United Kingdom have been disappointing. Bombers for that theatre have too often been regarded as a reservoir from which demands of other theatres can be met. As I see it, a definite program of operations from the United Kingdom must be initiated without delay.⁴⁷

In his reply to Arnold, Portal commended the study by the Committee of Operational Analysts (COA) saying 'we have been very much impressed with it' and that 'we are in general agreement with it, at least as far as the more important industries are concerned'.⁴⁸ The previous day Portal had replied to Eaker, allocating his Director of Bomber Operations, Bufton, to Eaker's Committee and asking to see the plan in draft form at his earliest convenience.⁴⁹ Eaker had also circulated the plan to Harris who replied on 15 April 1943 with his initial impressions.⁵⁰ Harris was clear, stating:

I am in complete agreement with the policy recommended. The effect of linking up precision bombing of selected targets in daylight by an adequate force of VIII Bomber Command with intensified night bombing by the RAF will unquestionably cause both damage to material and morale on a scale which the enemy will be unable to sustain. The necessity under which such an offensive will place him of maintaining still larger day and night fighter forces in the west from dwindling production will, inevitably, reduce his fighters on other fronts below the danger point and force him to put more and more emphasis on fighter production to the emasculation of his already inadequate bomber force.⁵¹

He went on to say that he felt the plan as then stated 'may prove somewhat in elastic' and thought that in practice it might need to be 'modified as necessary to meet developments'.⁵² On the subject of U-boat attacks he was firmer basing his comments on his experience of attacking U-boat installations over the previous year which he

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., dated 10 April 1943.

⁴⁹ Ibid., dated 9 April 1943.

⁵⁰ Ibid., dated 15 April 1943.

⁵¹ Ibid., dated 15 April 1943.

⁵² Ibid., dated 15 April 1943.

opined had been ‘an extravagant and comparatively fruitless task’.⁵³ He hoped such attacks could be made:

less prominent in the Plan – or, if that is impracticable, if it could be made clear that only precision day bombing against selected vulnerable points in those bases, and not heavy night attacks, are recommended.⁵⁴

He then stated unequivocally that:

Apart from these points, which concern the detailed presentation and not the substance of the matter, I have nothing to add to the Plan itself.⁵⁵

Also on 15 April 1943 Portal wrote to Arnold:

As you know, the Eighth Air Force has been engaged with the Air Staff in drawing up a detailed plan for the purpose of discharging the responsibilities laid upon our combined bomber forces at the Casablanca Conference.

The Plan is now complete. It is based on our combined resources in the matter of intelligence and operational data including the very valuable report of your Operations Analysts and has been drawn up in close consultation with the Ministry of Economic Warfare.

I have carefully examined the plan and discussed it in all its aspects with the Commanding General 8th Air Force. I take this opportunity of saying that I believe it to be entirely sound and that it has my full support.⁵⁶

Portal then moved on to the issue that would determine the effectiveness of the plan, an issue which he as the ‘executive agent of the CCS’ had particular responsibility. He continued stating that:

The Plan includes an estimate of the rate at which the strength of the Eighth Air Force must be developed in order to achieve the planned effect. I believe this rate of build-up and the time factor generally to be of primary importance. The German Fighter strength is increasing and every week’s delay will make the task more difficult to accomplish. We cannot afford to miss the good bombing weather which will soon be due. We cannot exploit to the full the great potentialities of the daylight bombing technique if the requisite numbers are not available.

For all of these reasons I earnestly hope that every effort will be made to achieve and if possible to exceed the programme.⁵⁷

⁵³ Ibid., dated 15 April 1943.

⁵⁴ Ibid., dated 15 April 1943.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., Letter Portal to Arnold, dated 15 April 1943.

Col Cabell again acted as courier and delivered Portal's letter to Arnold who replied on 19 April 1943.⁵⁸ After acknowledging the quality and soundness of the plan, Arnold addressed Portal's concerns about resources and the build-up of the Eighth Air Force:

The destruction of the targets set forth therein is within our capabilities, provided we can prevent any further diversion of our forces to other theaters.

Let me assure you that I will do everything within my power to augment the American heavy bomber forces in the UK. In this connection, I am opposing the proposed diversion of two more heavy bomb groups to North Africa, even for a limited period. Such a diversion would be entirely inconsistent with the plan just evolved for the combined bomber offensive, particularly during this first phase.⁵⁹

He concluded by stating that 'I feel the work that has been done on this plan within the past few months by your people and mine will have a profound influence upon the conduct of the war'.⁶⁰

To assist Arnold in his quest to ensure the build-up of the Eighth Air Force went according to plan, Portal authorised his representative in Washington, Foster, to re-iterate, in a speech in New York to the American-Canadian Club on 28 April 1943, comments made by the PM at a Staff Conference in London on 22 April 1943 concerning the 'best way to defeat the Japanese'.⁶¹ Foster reported that Arnold felt that such a speech would 'do much to remove lingering suspicion among many people here that we do not really mean business with Japan' and that it would 'strengthen his hand considerably to resist pressure' to divert assets away from the UK.⁶² Foster's

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., Letter Arnold to Portal dated 19 April 1943.

⁵⁹ Ibid., dated 19 April 1943.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ TNA CAB 79/60, dated 22 April 1943.

⁶² TNA AIR 8/1103, dated 25 April 1943.

speech was successful but the pressures on Arnold to divert heavy bomber allocation would not abate just yet.

This passage of correspondence showed the close involvement of both Portal and Arnold in the development of the CBO Plan. Both were members of the CCS, both led their respective air forces, and both realised the vital importance of the proposed campaign, not just to the air war but to the wider campaign to defeat Germany. As the CCS 'executive agent' his style of leadership was to enable, engage and encourage. Much of his work was behind the scenes, as evidenced by the authorisation and fine tuning of Foster's speech. Furthermore, he was rightly much more focussed on the challenge of making available to the frontline commanders, Eaker and Harris, the necessary resources than overseeing the detail of the operational plan. The response of the enemy, particularly in terms of his fighter force and the impact that would have of the time available for the effective conduct of the CBO, featured highly in Portal's correspondence. In terms of the Eighth Air Force Portal would have recognised the challenges he had faced in his early days at both Bomber Command and as CAS when the resources were barely available and constantly under threat of diversion to seemingly higher priority missions. In 1943, Bomber Command had grown to a size which gave it the capacity to be somewhat more flexible to extra demands; the small and resource starved Eighth Air Force did not enjoy such benefits. Portal appears to have focussed on those issues that required his authority and weight of effort. Others could and did deliver a tactical plan that was based on the best available information. Overseeing the whole was Portal who quietly exercised the authority he had amassed in the eyes of his British and US counterparts to ensure

Eaker and others delivered the Plan and Arnold was as supported as possible to deliver the resources to carry out the plan.

On 15 April 1943 Portal wrote to Foster to emphasise the importance of RAF support to Arnold in the wake of the completion of the Eaker Plan.⁶³ He explained to Foster that:

I have today signed a letter to General Arnold stating that I believe the plan to be sound and that I back it 100%. I have added that I regard the time factor as vital and that if the plan is to succeed development of the Eighth Bomber Command must equal, and if possible exceed, the scheduled rate. Failing this, the whole success of the plan will be imperilled by the rapid development of the German fighter force now in progress.⁶⁴

Portal acknowledged that the plan would be ‘attacked by those who believe that the American tactics of precision bombing by day have not proved themselves’.⁶⁵

The view of the Air Staff must therefore, ‘be made plain’.⁶⁶ He emphasised to Foster:

The immense advantages which would accrue if the Americans succeeded with their plan for precision bombing by daylight have never been doubted. The plan opened up the possibility of systematic destruction of vital targets in Germany coupled with the ability to inflict heavy attrition on the German fighters. The plan was clearly the perfect complement of our own night bombing operations, as the two forces in combination would tend to exhaust the German fighter defence and spread the attacks over the full 24 hours. The only doubt was whether the Americans could achieve the necessary penetrations and maintain the accuracy of daylight attacks in the face of intense flak and fighter defences.

Sufficient experience has now been accumulated to show that the Americans have proved their case.⁶⁷

Portal urged Foster to ensure that the support of the Air Staff was unequivocal and that the USAAF had, in the view of the Air Staff, proved their case for daylight

⁶³ Ibid., Letter Portal to Foster, dated 15 April 1943.

⁶⁴ Ibid., dated 15 April 1943.

⁶⁵ Ibid., dated 15 April 1943.

⁶⁶ Ibid., dated 15 April 1943.

⁶⁷ Ibid., dated 15 April 1943.

bombing.⁶⁸ This correspondence shows the twin concerns of Portal at the time, namely, the build-up of the Eighth Air Force and the pressing need to arrest the build-up of the German fighter force. Arnold, however, had another concern. With support given to Arnold to help him deliver the resources for the Eaker Plan, the task shifted to gaining CCS approval and the final sanction of the President and PM.

Portal's records contain a copy of the US COS paper advocating the 'Plan for Combined Bomber Offensive from the United Kingdom'.⁶⁹ The 'Problem' the plan sought to solve was the provision of a plan:

to accomplish, by a combined US-British air offensive, the 'progressive destruction and dislocation of the German Military, industrial, and economic system, and the undermining of morale of the German people to a point where their capacity for armed resistance is fatally weakened' as directed by the Combined Chiefs of Staff at CASABLANCA.⁷⁰

Thus the antecedence was clear and so was the purpose, as revealed by the opening paragraph of the detailed plan under the heading of 'The Mission'. Reprising the problem stated above it clarified that the phrase 'fatally weakened' was construed as meaning 'so weakened as to permit initiation of final combined operations on the Continent'.⁷¹ Therefore, the CBO was clearly in the minds of the CCS the stepping stone to invasion, not a separate means of winning the war as some, such as Harris, sought.⁷²

Much has been made of the role of Harris and Bomber Command in re-wording the Eaker Plan, and indeed several passages were significantly re-worked.⁷³

But just as the US commanders were worried at Casablanca that Harris might

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., CCS 217 dated 14 May 1943, and Webster and Frankland, *SAOG Vol IV*, pp. 273-283.

⁷⁰ Ibid., dated 14 May 1943.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² P P O'Brien, *How the War Was Won* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 268-271.

⁷³ Webster and Frankland, *SAOG Vol II*, pp. 27-31.

interfere with their methods and tactics, he too was concerned that having developed Bomber Command significantly during 1942 into a force designed to undertake night bombing, the CBO could upset his methods and tactics.⁷⁴ When in April and May the Eaker Plan was being staffed the Eighth Air Force, despite the reassurances given by Portal, had far from resolved their ability to operate by day and thus it would have been unwise for Portal to have been too firm with Bomber Command over their desire to focus on their night offensive against German industry which was also a clearly stated aim of the Casablanca Directive. Indeed, in all of Portal and Arnold's correspondence there is a clear recognition that the two bomber forces would undertake two separate styles of attack, which the Plan would co-ordinate overall.

Thus Portal, as the CCS representative, allowed a sensible degree of ambiguity to ensure Alliance cohesion and operational insurance.⁷⁵ To have demanded a change in the methods of Bomber Command at a time when the methods of the Eighth Air Force were unproven might have appeared strong but would not have been wise. At the First TRIDENT Conference in Washington on 12 May 1943 the pressing issues for the President and PM were operations in the Mediterranean, China, and the Pacific.⁷⁶ The PM commented that some issues were now so broadly agreed that he 'did not propose to deal with the U-boat war and the aerial bombardment of Germany. There were no differences of opinion on these subjects'.⁷⁷ Portal had provided a campaign plan that focussed on the 'round the clock' aspect of the CBO concept in which the enemy would have no respite from the growing capability of the Allies in

⁷⁴ Ibid p. 15.

⁷⁵ Webster and Frankland, *SAOG Vol I*, pp.361-364.

⁷⁶ Rawson, *Organizing Victory – The War Conferences 1941-1945*, pp. 73-81.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 74.

the air.⁷⁸ On 18 May 1943, Portal proposed to the 5th CCS Meeting of the TRIDENT Conference in Washington that the CCS should consider Eaker's Plan and agree it for immediate implementation.⁷⁹ After a short discussion which once again emphasised the pressing need for the build-up of the Eighth Air Force assets in the UK and the threat posed by the growing GAF fighter force, the CCS approved CCS 217 the plan for the Combined Bomber Offensive from the UK whose codeword was POINTBLANK.

POINTBLANK – Campaign Analysis and Control

On 4 June 1943 the CCS requested that they should receive periodical reports on the progress of the CBO.⁸⁰ On 12 June 1943 Eaker wrote to Portal following up the proposal requesting support from the Air Ministry in producing the requested reports.⁸¹ However, Portal's reply, on 16 June 1943, painted on a larger canvass.⁸² Portal pointed out to Eaker that the CCS required:

A periodic analysis of the effects of the combined bomber offensive which, amongst other things, would help in assessing the extent to which conditions for a re-entry into the Continent of Europe had been created.

My own view is that the Joint Intelligence Committee, with all sources of information at its disposal, is much better qualified to make an assessment of the effects of our bomber offensive, particularly in relation to the creation of conditions suitable for re-entry in to the Continent, than would be the more domestic committee you suggest in your letter.⁸³

This was an excellent example of Portal as the military statesman, bridging the needs of the highest command level with the desire of the operational strata to advocate its case, but doing so in a way, by rational use of the JIC, that allowed everyone to move forward in harmony and agreement. Portal proposed a quarterly

⁷⁸ Webster and Frankland, *SAOG Vol II*, pp. 23-24.

⁷⁹ TNA AIR 8/1103, dated 18 May 1943.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, dated 4 June 1943.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, dated 12 June 1943.

⁸² *Ibid.*, dated 16 June 1943.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, dated 16 June 1943.

report based on the Monthly Industrial Damage Report of the Ministry of Economic Warfare (MEW), the Monthly report on 'The Combined Bomber Offensive and German Morale', and a new monthly report on 'The fighting value of the German Air Force' which he said was 'being introduced partly for this purpose and partly in connection with the new directive'.⁸⁴ He concluded his letter to Eaker by stating that:

I think these arrangements will fully meet the requirements of the Combined Chiefs of Staff and at the same time provide a complete picture of the progress which we are making towards the fulfilment of our task.⁸⁵

Whatever criticism could later be made of the CBO, in mid-1943 the man responsible for it could not be accused of not preparing to understand the effect of the operations about to get underway.

Between the Casablanca Conference in January and the issuing of the POINTBLANK Directive in June the main striking force of the Allies bomber assault had been Bomber Command and its night offensive. This had first been directed against the Ruhr industrial region beginning on the 5/6 March 1943 with the raid on Essen. The Eighth Air Force was growing in capability, but was still hampered by disruptions in its build-up programme. However, by the middle of July the objective was about to shift with the first co-ordinated and combined day and night attack, this time against Hamburg.⁸⁶

Despite the success of the combined raids during the Battle of Hamburg between 24/25 July – 3 August 1943 the offensive was yet to produce telling results. The attacks against Schweinfurt and Regensburg on the 17 August 1943 marked a significant advance in the ability of the Eighth Air Force to penetrate German

⁸⁴ Ibid., dated 16 June 1943.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Middlebrook and Everitt, *The Bomber Command War Diaries*, pp. 362-365 and pp. 410-411.

airspace, but they also revealed a significant and growing limitation, namely the increasing vulnerability of the unescorted day bombers over Germany to GAF fighter attack beyond the range of US fighter escort.⁸⁷ Two months later on 14 October 1943 the Eighth Air Force returned to Schweinfurt and was so badly damaged that it was necessary to mirror the limitations placed on Bomber Command in November 1941 and conserve the force until suitable fighter escorts could be made available.⁸⁸

On 12 October 1943 Portal planned to hold a meeting to assess the progress of both the Eighth Air Force and Bomber Command towards the defeat of the GAF fighter force and the achievement of the POINTBLANK aims. This meeting came just after the completion of Phase II of the US plan which ended on 30 September 1943.⁸⁹ During this phase it was estimated that the Eighth Air Force Bomber Command would:

be able to penetrate to a limit of 400 miles, a determined effort must be made to breakdown the German fighter strength by every means at our disposal, concentrating primarily upon fighter aircraft factories.⁹⁰

On 7 October 1943 Portal had received a memorandum on the extent to which Bomber Command and Eighth Air Force had been able to defeat the GAF fighter force.⁹¹ Quoting figures for the increase in the GAF fighter strength from 300 to 700 from a paper by the DoFI in the series 'Fighting Value of the GAF', dated 3 September 1943, the author stated that:

It can be reasonably argued that the GAF fighter force alone prevents the British and American bomber forces from undermining morale and disorganising German war economy as to fatally weaken armed resistance within a matter of months. Unless the present build-up of the GAF fighter

⁸⁷ Craven and Cate, *The Army Air Forces in World War II, Vol II Europe: Torch to Pointblank*, pp. 681-687, and Hammel, *Air War Europa*, pp. 170-171.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, Craven and Cate, p. 711.

⁸⁹ CCS 217 dated 14 May 1943, and Webster and Frankland *SAOG Vol IV*, pp. 273-283.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ TNA AIR 8/1103 dated 7 October 1943.

force is checked there is a real danger that the average overall efficiency and effectiveness of our bombing attacks will fall to a level which the enemy can sustain them.⁹²

The memorandum then moved on to assess the effectiveness of the Eighth Air Force attacks on GAF targets stating that the recent raids on Regensburg and Weiner-Neustadt had demonstrated what could be achieved in that fighter production had been significantly reduced from what would otherwise have been the case.

Nonetheless, it was still significant and twin engine fighter production and that of the FW 190 fighter had been 'affected only to a relatively small degree'. These attacks had shown what could be achieved but the attacks had 'not, as yet, been as heavy and as numerous as was contemplated' in the POINTBLANK plan. The main reasons the USAAF had been unable to carry out the plan were threefold. Firstly, Eighth Air Force aircraft and crew strength was only 70% of that planned; secondly, weather had proved a stubborn limiting factor; and thirdly the three heavy bomber groups that had been diverted to the Mediterranean to 'assist in operations HUSKY and AVALANCHE' had further depleted the fighting power of Eaker's command.

The next observation was that 'the effort of Bomber Command has been directed to a small extent only on targets associated with the GAF'. However, the need to concentrate on the Ruhr during the summer months, when the short nights precluded deeper penetration and the short expected operational life of the OBOE system demanded that Bomber Command concentrate on those targets that were both within OBOE range and could be attacked under cover of darkness. However, with longer nights approaching it was considered that the enemy fighter factories in Augsburg, Brunswick, Gotha, Bernberg, Kassel, and Leipzig would make excellent

⁹² Ibid., dated 3 September 1943.

targets in combination with USAAF day attacks. This was particularly so because the first four towns listed were responsible for 100% of GAF twin-engine fighter production, while the last two produced 27% of the GAF's single-engine fighters.⁹³

Portal received another update on 11 October 1943 which looked at the Eighth Air Force operations in the first 10 days of October.⁹⁴ This report highlighted a 'disturbing tendency for the Eighth USAAF to divert its effort from German fighter production to area bombing and to various precision targets, such as shipyards and port areas, unconnected with the GAF'. The report stated that any diversion from GAF fighter assembly plants would be very serious for the build-up of the GAF fighter force was the most 'serious menace' to the CBO and the success of OVERLORD. The report concluded by suggesting that at the Conference on 12 October 1943 two options presented themselves; first, continuing the destruction of the GAF fighter production plants by concentrating both bomber forces on that aim, or second, the 'all out effort by both Bomber forces in the area attack of German cities'. Both could not be accomplished and the over-riding priority was the reduction in the German fighter force. This it was argued would 'open the way for the full exploitation of area bombing later' and it would also 'open the way for OVERLORD'.⁹⁵

These two reports added further evidence to the picture that had been emerging over the previous months. On 15 August 1943 Portal had issued, under cover of CCS 309, a summary of the current situation with POINTBLANK.⁹⁶ Portal

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., dated 11 October 1943.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., dated 15 August 1943.

stated that the GAF fighter force had increased by 22% since 1 April 1943, that its strength in the west had doubled, that the increase in the west had absorbed all the increased production, that experienced units and pilots were being withdrawn from the Mediterranean and Russian fronts, and that despite the present strain on the GAF night fighter units they were being used to counter the 'deep daylight penetration of POINTBLANK into Germany. He highlighted that the present strength of Eighth Air Force was 921, with 105 deployed to the Mediterranean theatre, against the planned strength of 1068 heavy bombers. He also pointed out that the GAF fighter force was 2260 aircraft against the 2000 that the plan hoped 'would not be exceeded if POINTBLANK' were to be executed as planned. He then stated:

I do not set out the above information in order to make a criticism of an inability to have achieved complete fulfilment of 'POINTBLANK'. My object is to bring out the fact that, in spite of some shortfall in the build-up, Germany is now faced with imminent disaster if only the pressure of 'POINTBLANK' can be maintained and increased before the increase in the GAF fighter force has gone too far.⁹⁷

Portal continued by highlighting the rewards that could be achieved by bringing enough force 'to bear to win this battle during the next 2 or 3 months' and concluded by inviting the JCS to 'take all practicable steps at the earliest possible date to increase the striking power of the 8th Bomber Command'.⁹⁸ It was ironic that Portal's note should be released two days before the Eighth Air Force were to suffer significant losses during their attacks on Schweinfurt and Regensburg, but also telling that the attack on Regensburg had significant impact on the production of fighter aircraft.

⁹⁷ Ibid., dated 15 August 1943.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

These records from August and October 1943 clearly show Portal at the heart of initiatives to ensure that the campaign was understood and that his colleagues were aware of both the progress being made and the challenges ahead. This was a vital role for the CBO had become the essential preparation for OVERLORD and knowledge of its progress, as Portal alluded to in his correspondence with Eaker, could only come from a comprehensive independent study of progress. It says much of Portal's confidence that he was prepared to cede to the JIC the responsibility for the compilation of the CCS Quarterly Analysis reports, given that they were reporting on the campaign for which he was appointed the CCS 'executive agent'. One wonders if other commanders of the time would have been so open. Nonetheless, by early October 1943 serious concerns were emerging that the POINTBLANK campaign was falling short of its target and that it would fail to prepare the ground for OVERLORD. By both day and night the growing impact of the GAF fighters had to be addressed or failure was a distinct possibility.

While the Eighth Air Force was recuperating after the losses incurred on its daylight operations, Bomber Command continued its night campaign by mounting an assault on Berlin.⁹⁹ This battle would bring Bomber Command to the point of collapse and require the RAF to rethink its approach but during the period November 1943 to February 1944 whilst the USAAF conducted limited operations the only significant element of the combined 'round the clock' POINTBLANK offensive was the RAF's night campaign. Davis has argued, with some justification, that the CBO was combined in name only, but it is difficult to see, given the capabilities of the time and the all-pervading effect that weather had on air operations, how it could have been

⁹⁹ Webster and Frankland, *SAOG Vol II*, p. 190, and Middlebrook and Everitt, *The Bomber Command War Diaries*, pp. 446-451.

more inter-related.¹⁰⁰ Targets that were able to be attacked in daylight were often obscured by weather at night, and vice versa. Although radar bombing was now commonplace in both bomber forces its accuracy was significantly below that of precision attack.¹⁰¹ With its aim being the progressive attack on the German industrial base to shift the planning calculus for OVERLORD in the Allies' favour, the key and now essential goal was the attainment of air superiority over the GAF fighter force.¹⁰²

Throughout November 1943 Portal was closely involved in the high level debate on the progress of POINTBLANK, particularly as it related to the GAF fighter force, and by implication the feasibility of OVERLORD, in preparation for his attendance at the first part of the SEXTANT Conference planned for the 22-26 November 1943 in Cairo. On 3 November 1943 he received a memorandum prepared by ACAS (Intelligence), Inglis, reporting on the 'probable strength and disposition of GAF on the Western Front' on 1 December 1943 and 1 April 1944.¹⁰³ Inglis' closely argued paper concluded that the strength of the GAF at 1 December 1943 was estimated to be 5150 aircraft but that on 1 April 1944 it could be 5450. Specifically:

On the basis of a total strength of 5450 it is considered that 2400 aircraft would be on the Western Front, and that of these about 1150 (including 500 single engine fighters and 125 twin engined fighter) could be employed during the first day against a cross-channel operation in April east of Cherbourg.¹⁰⁴

For Portal this was most unwelcome news as his response to Inglis shows:

I think that this is a very serious paper to put in because it means nothing less than that we have abandoned our belief in the 'POINTBLANK'

¹⁰⁰ R G Davis, *Bombing the European Axis Powers – A Historical Digest of the Combined Bomber Offensive 1939-1945* (Maxwell Alabama, Air University Press, 2006), p. 207.

¹⁰¹ TNA AIR 8/1103, dated 11 October 1943.

¹⁰² CCS 217 dated 14 May 43, and Craven and Cate, *The Army Air Forces in World War II, Vol II Europe: Torch to Pointblank*, pp. 729-730.

¹⁰³ TNA AIR 8/1104, dated 3 November 1943.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

plan which was prepared with our assistance and backed up by us 100 per cent.

The Americans have performed about 85 to 90 per cent of what they undertook to do. They (and we) estimated that 100 per cent of the projected effort would reduce the German fighter force (excluding fighter/bombers) to about 650 aircraft by 1st of April 1944. We now say that if they go on as they are at present the German fighter force on the 1st of April will be 2865. This is tantamount to throwing overboard the whole plan and I cannot possibly let this report go forward until you have reconciled your present views with those which were expressed by the Air Staff while the plan was under preparation.¹⁰⁵

Inglis submitted his response to CAS on 9 November 1943.¹⁰⁶ He reprised his analysis but did not give great ground. Quoting Portal in a note to the PM he pointed out that it had already been conceded that it seemed ‘doubtful whether there will be any further reduction in German single engine fighter strength during the next few months: there may well be some increase’. He stated that he:

Was under the impression that the point had already been taken that we should have to achieve substantially greater results against the aircraft industry than we have done in the last few months, good though these have been, if further production is to be reduced to the point where there will be a rapid fall in first line strength.¹⁰⁷

Inglis added that to achieve the desired result by 1 April 1944, the scale of attack against the fighter factories will have to be considerably increased.¹⁰⁸

In parallel with the debate with Inglis, Portal also received the analysis of DCAS.¹⁰⁹ His analysis, which he had discussed with Eaker who was in complete agreement, took an alternative look at the planned attack of German fighter factories pointing out that in Phase I (April-June) only one factory was planned for attack, in Phase II (July-September) two were planned, whilst in Phase III (October-December)

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., dated 4 November 1943.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., dated 9 November 1943.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., dated 9 November 1943.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., dated 11 November 1943.

six plants were due to be attacked. Thus, DCAS continued Phase III represented the 'first time in the plan when substantial results could have been expected to be achieved' against the GAF fighter force. He then explained that the culminating effort was planned for Phase IV (January-April 1944) when eight plants were scheduled to be attacked by 1200 sorties and an additional 1100 sorties were to be mounted against fighter engine factories. DCAS recognised that:

Although the aim of the directive was to reduce as rapidly as possible the strength of the German fighter force, it was realised when the plan was being formulated that the deep penetrations involved could only be accomplished when the force had been built up to a certain minimum size. This is the crux of the problem.¹¹⁰

The Eighth Air Force were in mid-November 26% below the expected frontline strength upon which the plan had been based and were, therefore three months behind the planned build-up that would enable the deep raids to be sustained. Nonetheless, DCAS pointed out that the USAAF had mounted successful attacks against some of the deeper targets with considerable success but despite this the remaining and critical factories could only be attacked if one of two options was adopted by the CCS. Firstly, the CCS could direct that these factories be destroyed and 'accept the resulting immobilisation of the force for the period required to rebuild it'.¹¹¹ Or secondly, they could order the 'build-up of the force immediately to the size already calculated to be the minimum'.¹¹² There was, DCAS asserted, no 'easy 3rd way out' and nor could the CCS fall back on the hope that the Mediterranean bomber force could materially alter the calculus.¹¹³ Portal was clearly much more taken by

¹¹⁰ Ibid., dated 11 November 1943.

¹¹¹ Ibid., dated 11 November 1943.

¹¹² Ibid., dated 11 November 1943.

¹¹³ Ibid., dated 11 November 1943.

this contribution than the one of Inglis, writing in pencil on the cover note to his PS ‘Sextant with other papers on Control of Strat Bombing’.¹¹⁴

It was telling that he used the phrase ‘control’ of strategic bombing for it suggests that he saw himself very much in control and responsible for the outcome of the campaign. In the primary sources this is one of the few indications of what Portal actually saw himself as being. Earlier Portal had received information from Field Marshal Dill that the Americans could be expected at the SEXTANT Conference to ‘demand the right to unify their own bomber forces and possibly place them under the Supreme Commander for OVERLORD. Portal tasked DCAS ‘to prepare, if necessary in unofficial collaboration with General Eaker (who must on no account be quoted), a note setting forth the disadvantages of the proposed arrangement as we see them’.¹¹⁵ This was not the first time that the matter of overall control had been raised for on 22 April 1943 Arnold in thanking Portal for his support of the Eaker Plan commended that:

It occurs to me that the time has arrived for the establishment of somewhat more formalised machinery for the closes possible co-ordination, or rather, integration, of the two bomber efforts. The increasing complexity of their operations would appear to me as soon to be beyond the capabilities of the commanders, in person, to co-ordinate. Some ‘pick and shovel’ men, organized and functioning constantly, would seem to me from this distance, to be necessary for the maintenance of continuity in all the many details relating to the combined effort. These men would require frequent guidance from the responsible commanders, sitting as a committee.

I would suggest that consideration be given to the establishment of a permanent co-ordinating body on the policy level, which would include representatives appointed by you and Eaker and on the operations levelled appointed by Harris, Longfellow, Leigh-Mallory and Hunter.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., dated 9 November 1943.

¹¹⁶ Longfellow was the commander of the VIII Bomber Command of Eighth Air Force and Hunter the commander of the VIII Fighter Command, their equivalents of Harris and Leigh-Mallory at Bomber Command and Fighter Command respectively.

Over the summer the process of control had remained a network of co-ordinating committees reporting to Portal who reported to the CCS, in effect a mirror of the Hankey System for the MAF extended to the Eighth Air Force but crucially including many of their senior staff to build trust and co-operation and exploit their knowledge and expertise. DCAS's response addressed the matter under two headings, the unification of command, and the control of US Strategic Air Forces by the Supreme Commander of OVERLORD, who at the time had not been selected. He began discussing the 'Unification of Command' by highlighting that the subject had already been carefully examined in the wake of Arnold proposal that a 'Supreme Air Commander should be appointed to co-ordinate the activities of the Strategic Air Forces, both British and American operating from this country and from the Mediterranean theatre'. It was thought that it would be impossible for a SAC located in either the UK or Mediterranean to be in effective contact with the forces in the other theatre, and that the weather variations between the two theatres would make effective co-ordination difficult if not impossible. Furthermore, the strategic forces in the Mediterranean were an essential part of the armoury of the Theatre Commander, thus interposing a SAC would be of little benefit and potential disruption. These arguments mirrored the RAF experience with control of the MAF and control through empowered Air Cs-in-C of the overseas commands. AS DCAS pointed out:

These arguments apply with just as much force to unification of command of the US Strategic Air Forces as they do to that of Allied Air Forces. If the arguments in the Paper sent to General Arnold by CAS on 27 October, 1943, are accepted by the Americans in their application to both the US Bomber Forces and our own, they must accept them in their application to their own VIIIth and XVth Air Forces.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ TNA 8/1108 Letter Portal to Arnold, dated 27 October 1943.

On the matter of the US forces being placed under the authority of the Supreme Commander for OVERLORD, DCAS was unequivocal:

Although the US and British strategic bomber forces will undoubtedly be called upon to give a large measure of direct support to the OVERLORD operations, and indeed may for a certain period be employed exclusively in this role, they certainly will not be employed continuously or extensively for this purpose.¹¹⁸

He concluded that the best means of exercising flexible control was through the extant procedures under the CAS, and that any allocation of the bomber forces to OVERLORD must be through the Air C-in-C AEF under the terms of a clear directive from the COS.¹¹⁹

Huston highlighted that the motivation behind Arnold's proposal was both operational and institutional.¹²⁰ Operationally Arnold wanted to link and oversee the operations of both the USAAF Eighth and Fifteenth Air Forces with a single commander. Institutionally, 'Arnold had desired a single commander for all bombers' who was free of the 'control by a non-aviator theatre commander' and who operated 'directly under the Combined Chiefs of Staff'.¹²¹ Of course for the CBO Arnold had this arrangement already in the wake of Casablanca, but the single air commander was British and Arnold's 'Anglophobia was still alive'.¹²² Arnold hoped that the American air commander would be based in London, with access to the British intelligence network and communications facilities, and with rank equivalence to the theatre

¹¹⁸ Ibid., dated 9 November 1943.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ J W Huston USAF (Retd) *American Airpower Comes of Age – General Henry H 'Hap' Arnold World War II Diaries Vol II* (Maxwell Alabama: Air University Press, 2002), pp. 68-69.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 69.

¹²² Ibid., p. 69.

commander. Huston commented that success for such a 'command would enhance Arnold's post-war goal of a separate Air Force'.¹²³

En route to the SEXTANT Conference in Cairo aboard the USS Iowa, the JCS 'determined that they would attempt to secure approval of a US Strategic Air Command'.¹²⁴ At the Fifth Meeting of the CCS in Cairo on 6 December 1943, the Allies agreed that the USAAF Eighth and Fifteenth Air Forces should come under a unitary command which would eventually be called US Strategic Air Forces (USSTAF) which would be established with Spaatz in command on 1 January 1944.¹²⁵ With this the nature of Portal's role as the executive agent of the CCS for the CBO changed, although, Spaatz was to prove himself a co-operative commander and Doolittle, who replaced the highly regarded Eaker also on 1 January 1944, would rapidly be seen as an excellent ally and air commander. The operational challenge for Portal in the first months of 1944 was to address the concerns raised by Inglis and ensure the outcome of POINTBLANK delivered by 1 April 1944, namely, a sufficiently favourable air situation as to permit the launching of OVERLORD by the newly appointed Supreme Commander Eisenhower.

On 6 December 1943 at the 5th SEXTANT Meeting between the CCS and the President and PM, Portal had outlined the progress made by POINTBLANK and asked the CCS to address the alternatives posed by Bottomley in his memorandum of 11 November 1943.¹²⁶ The CCS decided that the plan for the CBO should remain unchanged and that reinforcement of the Eighth Air Force in the UK should have the

¹²³ Ibid., pp. 69-71.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ See PREM 3/136/10 and Huston *American Airpower Comes of Age*, pp 70-71.

¹²⁶ TNA AIR 8/1104, dated 11 November 1943.

highest priority.¹²⁷ Portal's advocacy was critical in keeping the CBO on track and free from serious disruption and reassignment. As the correspondence of early November showed there was at the time very little reason to be confident that matters would turn out for the better. But as the executive agent he had maintained the aim in the face of equivocal opinion and evidence, for as hindsight now reveals, the balance of advantage was about to shift in favour of the Allies. The deployment in significant numbers of a true long range escort fighter, namely the Merlin engine P-51 Mustang equipped with range extending drop tanks, provided the catalyst that transformed the Eighth and Fifteenth Air Force capability.¹²⁸ This aircraft when combined with the existing P-47 Thunderbolt and P-38 Lightning in a more efficient relay escort tactic would enable the VIII Fighter Command to wreak havoc among the GAF fighter force. An additional stimulus were the command changes instigated by Arnold to re-invigorate the daylight campaign and shift the focus of the fighters away from bomber defence to attacking the enemy fighter force in the air and on the ground.¹²⁹

Whilst these changes were underway, Portal was engaged in an exchange of correspondence with Harris.¹³⁰ The eventual outcome was that on 14 January 1944 the Air Ministry issued Harris with a new Directive focussing on a strategy of destroying 'selected key industries' of which the ball-bearing plant at Schweinfurt was one.¹³¹ The Directive was blunt, for persuasion with Harris had by that time failed:

It is confirmed and emphasized that the closest co-ordination is essential to the successful prosecution of the Combined Bomber Offensive and that without it, the reduction of the German fighter strength which is a

¹²⁷ Webster and Frankland, *SAOG Vol II*, pp 51-52.

¹²⁸ S L McFarland and W P Newton, *To Command the Sky – The Battle for Air Supremacy over Germany 1942-1944* (Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1991), pp. 138-141.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, Webster and Frankland, *SAOG Vol II*, pp 54-70.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

prerequisite to the launching of 'Overlord' as well as the effective conduct of 'Pointblank' may not be achieved in the time available.¹³²

Having made clear his direction to his MAF subordinate at Bomber Command, Portal then issued clarification to the three senior airmen responsible for the execution of POINTBLANK as the CCS 'Executive Agent' on 28 January 1944.¹³³ Portal stated that:

It has been decided that to ensure best possible use of short time before 'OVERLORD' maximum effort of strategic bomber forces is to be concentrated upon key installations in the German fighter aircraft industry and ball-bearing industries, and the towns associated with these key installations.¹³⁴

He then listed targets for Eighth Air Force covering fighter aircraft and ball-bearing plants, before detailing Bomber Command to attack Schweinfurt, Leipzig, Brunswick, Regensburg, Augsburg, and Gotha, all of which contained aircraft industry targets.

This note was followed up on 17 February 1944 with a new Air Ministry Directive to Bomber Command which stated that the Primary Objective of Bomber Command was the attack of targets supporting the GAF, especially those concerned with single or twin engine aircraft production. The Directive stated the Concept was the:

Overall reduction of German air combat strength in the factories, on the ground and in the air through mutually supporting attacks by both strategic air forces pursued with relentless determination against same target areas or systems so far as tactical conditions allow, in order to create the air situation most propitious for 'OVERLORD' is the immediate purpose of Bomber Offensive.¹³⁵

The result of these directives and the arrival of new capability and increased resource allowed the Allies to mount an overwhelming anti-GAF campaign. Under the codename Operation ARGUMENT, but known colloquially as Big Week, the

¹³² Ibid., Vol IV pp 160-162.

¹³³ The three airmen were Harris at BC, Spaatz at USSTAF and Leigh-Mallory as C-in-C Allied Expeditionary Air Force (AEAF).

¹³⁴ Ibid., Vol IV pp 160-162.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

attack began with a 730 aircraft raid by Bomber Command on 19/20 February 1944 against the Messerschmitt factory at Leipzig.¹³⁶ Over the coming week the Eighth and Fifteenth Air Forces would mount daylight missions from the UK and Italy, and Bomber Command would attack complimentary areas by night. Indeed, Harris mounted seven night raids, four with the main force of heavy bombers and three with the light night striking force of Mosquitoes, against aircraft installations that were then struck by the Americans. By the time Bomber Command aircraft had returned from their final attack on Augsburg the GAF fighter force was not destroyed, but over the coming months it would decline at such a rate and across such a widespread area that it would be unable to offer any serious opposition to the mounting of OVERLORD.¹³⁷

The Essence of the Portal System

Determining Factors. This chapter has looked at Portal's role as the CCS 'Executive Agent' for the CBO in terms of his involvement in the planning, resourcing, analysing, controlling and executing the POINTBLANK plan. It has explored the primary source material to show how engaged Portal was in this role and how critical he was to the maintenance of support among the CCS and the steadfastness of their approach that saw the campaign through the very difficult period in the late autumn and winter of 1943/44. In retrospect, it is clear that although the Casablanca Directive was 'a classic example of pragmatic compromise at the strategic level' Portal's

¹³⁶ Hammel, *The Road to Big Week*, p. 335.

¹³⁷ Ehrman, *Grand Strategy Vol V*, pp. 337-339.

performance in seeing his way through the resulting uncertainty was admirable.¹³⁸ Indeed, it is difficult to identify any other single figure, and supporting staff, who could have aligned the MAF, integrated the USAAF in the UK, retained the confidence of the CCS, the President and PM, and held off the demands and pressures from a man of the stature and forcefulness of Arnold, whilst simultaneously presiding over a structure of international military and civilian stakeholders who were grappling with a problem that had never previously been solved, namely how to gain and sustain air superiority over an enemy air force on a continental scale and to such an extent that the enemy's industrial capacity could not address the shortfall, and the enemy's air force could not interfere with the largest planned amphibious landing in military history. When cast in those terms, Portal's achievement was great and resulted from both his personality and his recent command experience.

By D-Day the RAF had created a high command method in the UK that had evolved considerably from the one envisaged under the Hankey System. Various factors shaped these changes particularly the demands of war; the experience and approach of the commanders; and the quality and availability of the frontline equipment. New capabilities altered the calculus of operations and allowed, through multi-role capability, the emergence of the tactical self-sufficiency that the RAF had abhorred so strongly in the RN.¹³⁹ Significantly, Portal's entire senior command team had changed in the space of just over seven months¹⁴⁰. Such a comprehensive change

¹³⁸ P W Gray, 'The Strategic Leadership and Direction of the Royal Air Force Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany from Inception to 1945' PhD Thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham, October 2009, p. 226.

¹³⁹ TNA AIR 9/81, HA/1/59 AHB, Plans archives Vol 59, Co-ordination and Control of Defence Operations, Memo by DD Plans The Organization, Control and Co-operation of the Defence Services with particular reference to the Role of the Air Arm dated 8 March 1937.

¹⁴⁰ Overy, *The Air War 1939-1945*, p. 136. Overy observes that between 1938 and 1943 17 senior command positions changed hands to achieve the goal of 'eradicating conservatism and incompetence'.

in the higher command of any service at war has few parallels and the fact that it has not been studied more is an obvious shortfall, perhaps due to the continual historical focus on events at the front.¹⁴¹ Eight days after Joubert took command of Coastal Command Germany invaded the Soviet Union and the strategic demands on British forces changed significantly.¹⁴² That complexity grew when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and Germany declared war on the United States. The demands of coalition warfare meant that the RAF's activity had to have wider impact for it to contribute to the successful outcome of an ever widening global war. These complicated pressures demanded a mature response and Portal rose to the occasion co-ordinating and advocating the RAF's response in mid-1941, and playing a key role with the COS and the PM.

The period 1941-42 saw a strengthening of the CAS and Air Staff Hankey System role coordinating the activities of the Command. The hand of Freeman can be detected in much of this despite the fact that operations were not a mainstream element of his duties.¹⁴³ Freeman was never a man to allow his official terms of reference to restrain him when he felt matters needed to be addressed.¹⁴⁴ His office was separated by a single green baize door from Portal's and as Dean recorded that close proximity was of great benefit in the smooth running of the RAF, especially for

¹⁴¹ Black, *Rethinking Military History*, p. Xi.

¹⁴² Gilbert, *Winston S Churchill Vol VI Finest Hour 1939-1941*, pp. 1119-1121; Operation BABAROSSA began on 22 June 1941 whilst Churchill slept at Chequers having been fore warned of Hitler's intention via Enigma decrypts. He broadcast later in the day and stated 'we shall give whatever help we can to Russia' effectively reshaping the strategic picture of the UK contribution and its wartime policy for thereafter all decisions had to be viewed through the prism of their effectiveness *viz a viz* the Soviet Union. This would have significant implications for the RAF.

¹⁴³ Furse, *Wilfrid Freeman*, p. 161 and pp. 163-166.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 160. Slessor's comments quoted here represent the widely held view of Freeman among the new generation of RAF senior commanders.

Portal whose trust in Freeman was peerless.¹⁴⁵ This was also a period in which Portal was repeatedly called upon to defend the reputation and structure of his Service.

The Butt Report of August 1941 shook confidence in the effectiveness of Bomber Command and by inference the *raison d'être* of the RAF.¹⁴⁶ Likewise, the curtailment of Bomber and Fighter Commands following heavy losses in the early winter of 1941 also undermined political and inter-service confidence. Demands for bespoke air solutions by the RN for Coastal Command, and the Army for a separate Army Air Force, were effectively calls for the dismantling of the RAF as a separate service.¹⁴⁷ Failure to draw German forces from the east and gain an enduring level of air superiority over Northern France again illustrated that while the RAF was very active it was achieving little of strategic importance.¹⁴⁸ On the other hand, over Dieppe on 19 August 1942 the RAF did deliver its operational mission and was wholeheartedly congratulated by both the Army and RN for its 'faultless air support' and gained perspective on air superiority over an invasion beachhead that was to have a significant effect on its future thinking.¹⁴⁹ Efforts by Bomber Command to demonstrate its relevance, such as Operation MILLENNIUM, the 1000 bomber raid against Cologne, further shaped thinking and established enduring perspectives.¹⁵⁰ This coupled with the immense overseas pressures in the Mediterranean and the Far East, Portal's responsibility was vastly greater in scale and complexity than had been the case for Newall, or perhaps envisaged by Ellington. Moreover, Portal led the

¹⁴⁵ M Dean, *The Royal Air Force and Two World Wars* p. 183; and Furse, *Wilfrid Freeman*, p. 160.

¹⁴⁶ Overy, *The Air War 1939-1945*, p. 110.

¹⁴⁷ TNA CAB 66/13/19, 66/13/38, and 66/13/39 November 1940; and Richards, *Portal of Hungerford*, p. 200 and 204.

¹⁴⁸ Terraine, *The Right of the Line* p. 285.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 561.

¹⁵⁰ Richards and Saunders, *Royal Air Force 1939-45*, Vol 2 pp. 132-137.

organization that was emerging as the key element for operational success, and air superiority and air attack were beginning to be seen as the essential pre-requisites for success on land and at sea.¹⁵¹ The demands on his assets seemed to know no limits and their flexibility demanded an efficiency of management and operations that was second to none.

It was not surprising; therefore, that Portal was not inclined to tamper with the higher command processes he had inherited. In this he was supported by Freeman who was keen to play his part in the primacy of Air Staff authority under the Hankey System.¹⁵² Freeman's dispute with Harris over the armouring of Lancasters and a return to more accurate daylight operations, were both concerned with exploiting the full potential of the available aircraft.¹⁵³ As was his long-running debate with Portal on the focus of bombing policy.¹⁵⁴ In all these matters no final conclusion was reached but it illustrated the willingness of the RAF's highest commanders to debate and reconsider 'established' decisions. When Freeman left the Air Staff to return to the Ministry of Aircraft Production (MAP) as its Chief Executive in October 1942, his departure removed a strong counterbalance to the Cs-in-C and a powerful advocate for the emerging views of the battle experienced Air Staff in their dealings with the Commands.¹⁵⁵ Given the original role for the Air Staff to control the strategy of the air, Freeman's departure was a significant event.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵¹ Overy, *The Air War 1939-1945* p. 84.

¹⁵² Furze, *Wilfrid Freeman*, pp. 163-164, and Terraine, *The Right of The Line*, pp. 255-256.

¹⁵³ TNA AIR 8/431, dated 21 April 1942 and 26 May 1942, and Furze, *Wilfrid Freeman*, p. 170, and Terraine pp. 494-495.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, Furze, pp. 196-197.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

¹⁵⁶ TNA AIR 6/9, dated 16 July 1917, and Webster and Frankland, *SAOG Vol I*, p. 37.

The Growth to Multi-Functional Commands. By 1943 the MAF commands had developed a level of multi-functionalism through a combination of higher command decision, re-equipment, scientific advance, and campaign imperatives. To achieve the goals established at Casablanca, namely the creation of the CBO as an immediate Second Front, the gaining of maritime supremacy in the Atlantic to enable BOLERO and SICKLE, the build-up of US ground and air forces in the UK, and the broad commitment to a cross-Channel invasion in 1944, the MAF commands had to be deeply involved.¹⁵⁷ Bomber Command had to continue its night offensive, Coastal Command faced an ever growing and important role in the Battle of the Atlantic, and Fighter Command had to develop concepts and plan for the creation of an Allied expeditionary tactical air force. To achieve this there were two broad but not completely mutually exclusive options. On the one hand, Portal could continue with centralized co-ordination of the increasingly multi-functional commands. Or, on the other hand, he could develop a more flexible system that preserved central responsibility but enabled decentralised authority and created greater self-sufficiency based on increased aircraft capability and greater availability brought about through improving industrial output.

Coastal Command had transitioned far from a ‘Cinderella’ command fitted with obsolete and inadequate aircraft to an organization equipped with long range bombers, torpedo bombers, long range escort fighters, long range and long endurance reconnaissance aircraft, and a command and intelligence structure designed to support

¹⁵⁷ Rawson, *Organizing Victory*, pp. 40-73, the SYMBOL Conference in Casablanca took place 15-23 January 1943.

the Admiralty led Battle of the Atlantic.¹⁵⁸ By 1943, Coastal Command was able to conduct semi-autonomous operations with limited support from the other RAF Commands.¹⁵⁹ Under Slessor's leadership, as a semi-independent force emerged rather than the mono-functional sub element of a larger air force requiring constant central co-ordination.¹⁶⁰ This multi-functional Coastal Command was able to play an equal part alongside its Bomber Command and Fighter Command units in the growing multi-functionality co-ordinated air war that was developing.¹⁶¹

In parallel, Fighter Command was able to conduct attack operations that would complement its growing offensive fighter role and fighter capability to increase the range of escort for medium bomber and reconnaissance operations.¹⁶² Together these activities defined the roles and missions of a tactical air force, and matched the experience that had emerged from the Desert Air Force in North Africa.¹⁶³ And it was in the direction of a tactical air force that Fighter Command had been developing since the decision to 'lean towards France' had been taken in late 1940. By 1943 Fighter Command was equipped with excellent, but still short range, fighters, powerful fighter bombers, twin engine night fighters and Intruder fighters, specialist reconnaissance aircraft, and had access and in time control of medium bomber aircraft.¹⁶⁴ Developments in command and control systems allowed for effective

¹⁵⁸ V Orange, *Slessor – Bomber Champion – The Life of Marshal of the RAF Sir John Slessor, GCB, DSO, MC* (London: Grub Street 2006), p. 99 and pp. 115-122.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ Saunders, *Royal Air Force 1939-45, Vol 3, The Fight is Won*, pp. 54-55.

¹⁶¹ Terraine, *The Right of The Line*, pp. 440-441.

¹⁶² Foreman, *Fighter Command War Diaries Vol 3*, p. 339.

¹⁶³ Overy, *The Air War 1939-1945*, p. 69.

¹⁶⁴ Foreman, *Fighter Command War Diaries Vol 3*, pp. 238-240. The Command's main fighter aircraft were Spitfire Mk V and Mk IX; pp. 238-240. The new Typhoon fighter bomber was replacing the Hurricane and operating alongside the well armed Beaufighter; pp. 238-240. The Mosquito and Beaufighter formed the backbone of the Command's night fighter force; pp. 238-240. The Mosquito was replacing the aging Whirlwind and Hurricane fighters in the Intruder role that supported Bomber

expeditionary command, and Exercise SPARTAN developed air-land co-operation techniques which would be further developed in the months leading up to D-Day.¹⁶⁵ On top of this, the establishment at C-in-C Fighter Command's initiative of a Combined Operations Planning Committee (COPC) brought together Fighter Command and Eighth Air Force to plan and enable the escort of Eighth Air Force Bomber Command operations by Fighter Command fighter escorts.¹⁶⁶

Finally, Bomber Command had also established the foundations of multi-functional capability through the creation on 8 November 1943 of No 100 Group to oversee the development and operation of all the Commands operational support capability.¹⁶⁷ Night Intruder squadrons were transferred from Fighter Command to give Bomber Command organic night offensive fighter capability.¹⁶⁸ And scientific developments to improve navigation and bomb aiming further enhanced the capability of the Command.¹⁶⁹ The Air Staff also allocated some of the Mosquito night fighter support Harris requested and also ensured that Fighter Command provided robust a escort capability during the daylight operations that were increasingly a feature of operations in 1944.¹⁷⁰ Finally, the contribution of electronic capabilities to jam and

Command penetration and USAAF Eighth Air Force missions; pp. 238-240. The Mustang formed the core of the Command's tactical reconnaissance capability; pp. 238-240. The Havoc II and Boston III were the core of the Command's attack capability but were soon to be augmented by the Mitchell bomber of 2 Gp with the formation of the 2nd TAF in mid-1943.

¹⁶⁵ Terraine, *The Right of The Line*, pp. 562-563.

¹⁶⁶ Saunders, *Royal Air Force 1939-45*, Vol 3, p. 3; and R A Freeman, *Mighty Eighth War Diary* (London: Jane's, 1981) and Foreman, *Fighter Command War Diaries Vol 3* who highlights that Fighter Command provided widespread support to early Eighth Air Force operations, eg, p. 170 for 17 August 1942 first Eighth Air Force bombing mission to Rouen.

¹⁶⁷ M W Bowman and T Cushing, *Confounding the Reich – The Operational History of 100 Group (Bomber Support) RAF* (Yeovil: Patrick Stevens Ltd, 1996), p. 7.

¹⁶⁸ Price, *Instruments of Darkness*, p. 229.

¹⁶⁹ A Harris GCB OBE AFC, *Bomber Offensive* (London, Collins, 1947), p. 202 and p. 225.

¹⁷⁰ TNA AIR 8/1161, dated 23 April 1944, and Webster and Frankland, *SAOG Vol III*, p. 170.

spoof the GAF defence forces was also a significant contribution to the multi-functionality and self-sufficiency of Bomber Command.¹⁷¹

By late 1943 the 3 RAF commands were all multi-functional in their capability and their Cs-in-C were all combining mono-functional capability into multi-functional effect; effectively the SACs envisaged by Ellington. By taking advantage of the production superiority of the Allies and relaxing the organizational precepts that had previously defined the MAF Commands, Portal and the Air Staff created a higher command system that allowed him to balance his widespread responsibilities as CAS, British COS, and Allied CCS with the role of SAC allocated to him under CID 1425-B. This emergence of a multi-functional command structure for the MAF less than eight years after the creation of the mono-functional commands was a remarkable transition and one that has not been properly emphasised in the literature. Its recognition casts a new light on the command and conduct of RAF operations, particularly the CBO and the operations for OVERLORD and beyond.

This multi-functional transition was aided from a variety of sources. The Cs-in-C wanted greater control over essential assets. The Air Staff concerned, for example, with bombing efficiency demanded the creation of the Pathfinders.¹⁷² And the frontline developed tactics, such as the Master Bomber technique of real time airborne control.¹⁷³ Further removed, scientists and industry developed electronic support systems, and the two great oversights of the pre-war era, navigation and bomb aiming, were eventually addressed by the development of airborne air to ground radar sets that allowed for both accurate navigation in all weathers and the bombing of

¹⁷¹ Price, *Instruments of Darkness*, pp. 253-254.

¹⁷² Webster and Frankland, *SAOG Vol I*, pp. 418-436.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, *SAOG Vol II*, p. 159 and pp.176-177.

targets through clouds and smoke, thus in large measure freeing Bomber Command of many of the weather restrictions that bedevilled its operations in the early war years.¹⁷⁴

Throughout this transitional period Portal maintained close and harmonious working relations with his Cs-in-C and senior staff. The presence of Freeman undoubtedly, as Portal intended when he demanded his appointment, helped oil the machinery of higher command and Freeman was very active in the debates over the Pathfinders and the introduction and development of both the Mosquito and the Merlin-engined Mustang.¹⁷⁵ However, Portal's approach was neither passive nor unsophisticated, and he was content to adopt various solutions to similar problems. He was not, for example, initially minded to allow for the dispersed allocation of fighter aircraft to Bomber Command.¹⁷⁶ But he was amenable to requests to develop long range twin engine fighter escorts within Coastal Command.¹⁷⁷ He was determined to create the Pathfinders and encouraged the development of Fighter Command into an expeditionary tactical air force in advance of D-Day.¹⁷⁸ In this way, he acted as both stimulant and restraint on the multi-functional development of the RAF's command structure. Throughout he appears to have been guided by the need to develop the Service and to provision it to meet the ever growing range of tasks demanded by the increasingly complex operational situation. Portal's correspondence with Tedder shows clearly the close attention he played to the development of capability and tactics in the other operational theatres that would inform the planning stages of the

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Furse, *Wilfrid Freeman*, p. 171 and pp. 225-241.

¹⁷⁶ Webster and Frankland, *SAOG Vol III*, p. 171.

¹⁷⁷ TNA AIR 8/1161, and Terraine, *The Right of The Line*, p. 422.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., Terraine, p. 565.

work being undertaken in London.¹⁷⁹ In this way he behaved exactly as he should as the strategic head of the RAF, but it was still a notable achievement.

Despite Portal's somewhat insular nature and restrained self-confidence, assuming command of the RAF over the heads of many more senior in both experience and age, and serving one of the most demanding Prime Ministers in British history, cannot have been an easy task.¹⁸⁰ It would have been only natural for him to be cautious at first, as indeed he was. Only later did he sanction developments in the command process and enable the growing multi-functional structure. Thus Portal grew into the role of organizational reformer in tune with his gaining confidence with his senior commanders and staff and his growing experience and standing as a key member of the COS.¹⁸¹ At the heart of this nuanced perspective was the interplay of the political and the operational. It was the boundary that the COS occupied and it defined their special role and unique contribution to their respective Services.¹⁸² As the war progressed, and Portal gained in both confidence and responsibility, did his perspective shift?

It was clear in his handling of the CBO that he was as much motivated by the operational demands of the campaign as he was by its political goals. Portal had in mind, at all times, the political consequences of the RAF's activity. Portal remained more distant from the day-to-day aspects of MAF operations than Newall. However, this must have been influenced by the vastly increased complexity that Portal faced.¹⁸³ This, coupled with the demonstrated strength and developing talent within the RAF's

¹⁷⁹ Richards, *Portal of Hungerford*, pp. 230-246.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 175 and pp. 185-187.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 183-185 in which Ismay states when questioned as to who did he consider to have been the greatest commander on the British side during the war that 'the answer is Peter Portal – quite easily'.

¹⁸² Jackson and Bramall, *The Chiefs*, pp xvii-xxii.

¹⁸³ Richards, *Portal of Hungerford*, p. 305.

senior officers, created a situation in which Portal was able to devote the necessary close attention he clearly gave to his COS and CCS duties.

Portal was consumed with the vital work of the British COS and Allied CCS for much of his time. During 1943 he attended six major CCS Conferences which required him to be away from Whitehall for several months. Throughout, Portal played a key role in the most senior direction of the global war as well as being responsible for the executive oversight of the CBO. It is also obvious from the way he conducted himself among the CCS that he was convinced, as was the PM, that the maintenance of Alliance cohesion was a higher priority than parochial air power matters, such as his advocacy of allowing the Eighth Air Force to test its daylight theories in battle rather than insist on their being directed to join Bomber Command at night.¹⁸⁴

The statesmanlike approach that Portal developed, and many of his contemporaries admired, was central to his willingness to loosen the command reins held by the Air Staff over the Cs-in-C. Once his Commands had developed to the point where they were capable of 'independent' action, Portal appeared to be content for his commanders to exercise the freedom of command over the multi-functional forces that he had been responsible for providing.¹⁸⁵ A combination of the capability and the capacity allowed the creation of the multi-functional forces, whilst the confidence, borne of experience, to devolve authority to the Cs-in-C to command these forces was coupled with a sophisticated understanding that effect of the RAF

¹⁸⁴ Webster and Frankland, *SAOG*, Vol I, pp. 361-363.

¹⁸⁵ For example Fighter Command gained attack and fighter bomber capability, Coastal Command Strike Wings based on the Beaufighter and Mosquito, and Bomber Command electronic and combat support units within No 100 Group.

had to be harmonious with the political short, medium and long term goals. Qualitative improvements created multi-functional flexibility that when coupled with excellent training, provided a route to operational self-sufficiency that had been impossible earlier in the war. Once the quality was available in sufficient quantity then the need for central co-ordination of scarce valuable resources eased, and the way was free for the loosening of central control and the growth of the 'C-in-C as SAC' of their increasingly multi-functional self-contained commands. Portal was at the heart of these developments and the resulting command process that emerged was sufficiently different to the one Hankey envisioned that it deserves to be identified as the Portal System, the sophisticated process through which the MAF was commanded during the last two years of the war and which allowed the CAS to shoulder the enormous load he faced and still remain in control of the RAF in the UK and overseas.

It is important to recognise that Portal did not attempt to resurrect Ellington's SAC concept. He preferred an adapted form of higher command and one that was much more in tune with the realities of the time. On 2 March 1942 the PM had asked the COS for their views on the 'Appointment of Supreme Commanders', stating that he was 'increasingly impressed with the disadvantages of the present system' and that it 'seems to me that we should move in the direction of appointing Supreme Commander in particular areas and for special tasks'.¹⁸⁶ Portal's views are revealing for they are the only source to offer his perspective on higher command. He was clear:

I very much doubt whether any of our failures in this war can be fairly attributed to the present systems of command or planning.

¹⁸⁶ TNA CAB 80/35, dated 2 March 1942.

I think they can mostly be accounted for by the inadequacy or insufficiency of the forces, equipment and shipping available.

I of course agree that the offensive spirit is vital, but I think it will show itself both in planning and in the field as soon as the forces and equipment are adequate and sufficient and can be shipped to where they are wanted.¹⁸⁷

He continued addressing the specific issue of Supreme Command:

I maintain that the authority of the supreme commander must be exercised only in the fields of strategy and broad administrative policy, and that he must on no account attempt the tactical control of the forces under his command. This must at all levels be exercised by the respective commanders of the Services acting in closest co-operation with one another; their ability to do this has been proved.¹⁸⁸

This insight into Portal's thinking reflects the manner in which he acted as the 'Executive Agent' for the CBO, the way in which he nurtured, developed and empowered the Cs-in-C of the MAF, and the role he played as a member of both the COS and CCS Committees. Although he would undoubtedly have abhorred the suggestion, he acted entirely in tune with his views of the duties of a Supreme Commander.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., dated 2 March 1942.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

Chapter 9

CONCLUSION

Introduction

This study set out to examine the efficacy of the RAF's organisational changes of the 1930s when tested by the wartime conditions of 1939-1945. Review of the primary sources uncovered two important aspects of the RAF's inter-war development. First, the forgotten review and reform of the Air Ministry in 1934 and secondly, the barely mentioned plans for the establishment of an overarching C-in-C to co-ordinate the actions of the RAF's mono-functional MAF. These re-discovered aspects coupled with the well-recorded but mal-attributed Command restructuring of 1936 set the scene for the command of the RAF during the Second World War. Unfortunately, little attention has been given to the higher command of the Service at the level of the CAS and the Air Ministry. This was a critical level for it set the operational direction and purpose of the MAF by translating the policy decisions of the War Cabinet and later the CCS into directives and orders. Without this guiding influence the frontline's actions would have amounted to little more than courageous, exciting, but uncoordinated and incoherent activity falling way short of strategic achievement.

Peacetime Preparation

A common theme runs through the Air Ministry Review of 1934, the Command re-structuring of 1936, and the SAC Debate of 1937. That theme was the need to move the focus of the RAF away from the Phases of institutional survival and

development identified by Brooke-Popham onto a fourth Phase concentrating on its real function, the preparation for war.¹ Likewise, Ellington's memorandum that initiated the re-organisation of the commands was motivated clearly by the need to organise in peacetime as it was expected the RAF would fight in war.² Finally, the RAF's proposal to establish a SAC to oversee operations was also to meet perceived operational need, with Ellington stating unequivocally that he intended in time of war to introduce Brooke-Popham into the command chain to oversee the activities of Bomber Command and Fighter Command.³ The view that the 1936 command restructuring was to address the management of expansion simply does not accord with the contemporary record in the primary sources.

The Air Ministry review addressed the needs of growing a coherent force, establishing a secure operating base within the UK and the co-ordinated training and development of the frontline. It also addressed the chronic shortfall in manpower, not by the creation of larger staff, but by the establishing of the need for greater staff that would inevitably develop over time. By winning this argument in 1934 the RAF was able to expand its staff capability over the coming years with the grudging but positive agreement of the Treasury and other government bodies. This achievement alone went a considerable way to delivering the air staff envisaged by Smuts in 1917 as being capable of developing air strategy and conducting air operations on a par with its counterparts in the Admiralty and War Office. Ellington's insistence on retaining the works department and unit training direction within the Air Ministry ensured the close control of two vital aspects of any air force's capability, namely

¹ TNA AIR 2/673 S32201 – War Organization of the Air Ministry – Sir R Brooke-Popham's Report Minute Sheet attached to E2.

² TNA AIR 2/8875, S35818 Part I, E6b, Minute 1 dated 5 June 1935.

³ Ibid., E 7a dated 22 July 1935.

effective and secure operational bases and co-ordinated and common training standards that would allow co-ordinated and effective operations to be centrally directed by the Air Ministry. The re-structured arrangement in the areas of operations, intelligence and staff duties and organization all contributed to the creation of a system not aimed at the command of the RAF of 1934 but of a future RAF of much greater size and equipped with much more capable aircraft facing the challenge of a major European war against Germany.

Likewise, in the 1936, Ellington was clear that the purpose of reform was the establishment of greater operational capability and the potential for better operational development. This was reinforced by his attempts to establish the post of SAC in the last days of his tenure as CAS. This was the thinking of an operationally aware commander, something very few have given Ellington credit for being. He was content for the frontline to focus of developing its capability under the headings of offence for Bomber Command, defence for Fighter Command and maritime co-operation for Coastal Command, but when war came, he expected that the demands would not fall so simplistically into these narrowly defined stovepipes, hence his perceived need for a 'super air c-in-c' to oversee the whole. This conclusion has not been emphasised in previous studies and it points to an Air Staff with a much clearer view of what was needed for the RAF to fight the forthcoming war.

Wartime Adaptation

The process encapsulated in CID 1425-B required the RAF to be centrally co-ordinated by the CAS and Air Staff to achieve the desires of the War Cabinet. It was an entirely logical approach and one that had the benefit of having gained credibility

in the First World War. It suited the RN and the British Army whose frontline assets, once allocated to a particular mission or task were virtually fixed in that endeavour until completion. Neither the RN nor the British Army was faced with the possibility that political or inter-service operational demands could be exercised on their frontline forces on a day to day or even hour to hour basis. Neither force possessed the inherent flexibility and adaptability borne of the speed of movement and multi-role capability that the RAF possessed even with the aircraft of 1939. In reality the RAF, in striving for consensus and compromise in the SAC debate of 1937, had achieved much but left unresolved the critical aspect of the effective command system they required for war. In retrospect, several of the command adaptation during Second World War came from this root cause.

The first concerned the changes under Newall in which he employed Joubert as his advisor to oversee co-ordination of RAF assets in the North Sea operations in a manner very similar to the one envisaged for a SAC. The second major change resulted from Army pressure for more air support and greater authority over deployed air assets in France. Here Newall, under COS direction, established BAFF under Barratt to centralise the command and control of all RAF units in France to provide Gort with an air point of contact more in tune with the methods and procedures of the Army. Finally, Newall created the *ad hoc* SAC appointment of Blount at Back Violet HQ Hawkinge during the Dunkirk evacuation to co-ordinate all MAF support. These changes were brought about by a variety of factors but two were overriding: shortfalls in capability and inadequate availability of assets.

Newall's RAF had mono-functional aircraft and a frontline strength that was woefully inadequate to address the demands made upon it. He was faced with the

unenviable task of transitioning from the theories and investments of peacetime to the realities and demands of war. Apart from the increasing production of established types and the replacement of outmoded platforms, Newall benefitted from no transformative frontline improvements. His adaptations to the system of higher command and control addressed the shortfalls in CID 1425-B amid the emergence of wartime reality.

Newall's final adaptation was not an adaptation at all but the oversight of the system of command envisaged in CID 1425-B, but it was possible through an undesired circumstance; the collapse of France and the eviction of the BEF from the Continent. Against this background Newall had to confront the command requirements for a strategic battle of survival which unexpectedly would fall predominantly upon the RAF. CAS and Air Staff, under the precepts of CID 1425-B co-ordinated the mono-functional commands of the MAF, balanced the needs of their sister Services, and remained alert and ready to the demands of the new PM, Churchill. They pushed forward development of capabilities that would in time be required and co-ordinated the many agencies seeking to counter the GAF night bombing capability. This performance during the critical summer months of 1940 was a solid vindication of the principles of Hankey System and a serious question mark over the validity of Ellington's proposal to employ a SAC.

But once again, in retrospect it is clear that the nature of the battle was such that the various commands of the MAF could undertake broadly parallel activity within their mono-functional discipline. Whilst Fighter Command battled the day offensive of the GAF, Bomber Command and Coastal Command attacked the build up of invasion craft, forward GAF airfields and apply a small measure of disruption to

German industry and transportation. Only rarely did these separate activities come into contact. For the vast majority of time the components of the MAF could make their contribution to the overall fight co-ordinated centrally by the Air Staff. But this was really only possible because during the Battle of Britain the needs of the battle coincided with the overarching priorities of the War Cabinet. The pressures that had previously arisen from the demands of the RN and British Army were, in the summer of 1940, secondary. It was not however, a situation that would last. With Newall's departure and the immediate threat of invasion passed, his successor, Portal, faced a different set of circumstances and a different mix of factors.

During the Battle of Britain it was clear that those who had held command appointments at the start of the war needed to be replaced. Echoing the popular opinion that 'it never pays to be a British Chief at the outbreak of a major war' the command changes were necessary to re-invigorate the structure and to ensure those occupying high command appointments were imbued with the same offensive spirit as the PM and War Cabinet.⁴ That created a situation in which Portal, along with Freeman as his DCAS, swiftly established within the Service the moral authority over his subordinates to match the positional authority he enjoyed as CAS. This combination gave him a powerful position and one that would allow him time to develop the RAF as he and his advisors saw. However, regardless of the internal authority he possessed he quickly faced the external challenge of Beaverbrook and the RN over the control of Coastal Command⁵. Having resolved that matter to his satisfaction by agreeing to the RN exercising operational control of the day to day activities of Coastal Command within a more integrated RN/RAF command structure

⁴ Ibid., Jackson and Bramall, *The Chiefs*, p. 180.

⁵ Ibid., Terraine *The Right of the Line*, pp.240-244.

coupled with the appointment of Joubert as the next C-in-C Coastal Command, he faced further institutional pressure concerning the allocation of Bomber Command and the support given by the RAF to land support operations⁶. Had he failed to carry the day in either of these debates the status and future of the RAF would have been severely curtailed. That he was successful was due to both the fundamental strength and logic of the arguments he deployed and the skill with which he advocated his position.

The case of the Army was narrowly focused; the RN's case for self-sufficiency was inefficient and readily countered through greater devolved operational control. Moreover, the alternatives to the continued build-up and use of Bomber Command were extremely limited and flew in the face of many of the arguments the PM had previously deployed in support of the bomber offensive. Nonetheless, all these debates could easily have been lost and it is of great credit to Portal, Freeman and the wider air staffs that they managed to emerge with their Service largely intact. It was in retrospect an institutional baptism of fire and test of his fitness for high command, and he and his colleagues emerged enhanced. But regardless of how well Portal was performing as CAS in 1941, little had changed in terms of capability since the start of the war. With the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 the strategic calculus of the war was fundamentally changed.

The emergence of a new form of coalition warfare created a new set of imperatives for the UK COS. No longer were operations in North Africa aimed solely at the protection of the Suez Canal and access to the wider Empire. Neither was the Battle of the Atlantic a fight for the survival of the UK island base. And the

⁶ Ibid., Richards, *Portal of Hungerford*, pp. 204-206.

embryonic bombing campaign against Germany now took on a much wider geo-strategic importance. All these separate campaigns now interplayed with the war unfolding on the Russian front. Pressure from the PM to undertake operations that would help ease the situation facing the Soviet forces now led to greater emphasis on offensive operations that could both destroy the Germans' means of war production, interdict its ability to transport war materiel, and cause the retaining of forces in the west, or the re-deployment of forces from the east, to counter the hoped for growing threat in the west. This all affected the RAF and Portal's emerging response was to enable the greater self-sufficiency of his increasingly trusted subordinate commanders.

Thus, Douglas at Fighter Command was given greater freedom and resources to conduct the offensive into northern France. Joubert at Coastal Command benefitted from the allocation of a wider array of more multi-role aircraft to enable him to conduct his offensive maritime operations with less recall to his fellow commanders in Fighter and Bomber Commands. Only in Bomber Command did matters remain broadly as before, but in Bomber Command multi-role capability had yet to emerge, and improvements in navigation, bomb aiming, electronic protection, offensive fighter escort, and weapons capability, although in the pipeline of development and production, were still some months away from fruition.⁷ Nonetheless, the die was cast in 1941 for the shift of the RAF command structure from mono- to multi-functionalism. If improvements in personal trust, institutional standing, and geo-political imperatives set the basis for this multi-functional shift, it was the combination of capability, capacity and concepts that sealed the transition.

⁷ Ibid., Webster and Frankland, *SAOG Vol IV*, pp. 3-25 and pp. 31-40.

In 1936, the command structure was based on a concept of war that envisaged separate mono-functional activities centrally co-ordinated. War had demanded a more complex approach and events in North Africa, although largely tactical in purpose, were continually demonstrating the benefits of greater integration and multi-functional co-ordination. Thus, co-ordinated fighter activity combined with fighter escorted bomber and maritime attack were successfully contributing to a much more favourable air situation which the land and maritime forces could exploit⁸. In the UK, the essential difference was that there was no engaged land force to exploit the success in the air, and the challenge in the north Atlantic was of a specialist nature that required a specialist solution, one that was increasingly being fielded. Notwithstanding, the multi-functional lessons of North Africa were compelling and Portal's response was to allow the increasing multi-functioning of the MAF. In this unprecedented developments in capability and capacity were the key.

The development of the US support to the UK in Second World War began well before the entry of the US into the war on 7 December 1941. Thereafter, despite arguments and disputes over priorities and geographical allocation, the productive capacity of the US, the wider Empire, and the increasingly secure UK main base, made the outcome of the production war beyond doubt. Even if all that had happened had been the creation of increasing stockpiles of existing weapons, it is arguable that even that would have been sufficient to eventually win the war. But the vast increase in production was matched by an impressive array of capability advances that changed the forces of 1939 into the war winning arms of 1944 and 45. This

⁸ Ibid., Richards, *Portal of Hungerford*, pp. 239-242.

combination of capacity and capability transformed what could be envisaged on land, at sea and in the air.⁹

The improvements in the capability and the enormous increases in availability removed the penalty of self-sufficiency that had dominated the debate in 1936 over the command structure and which had underpinned the SAC debate of 1937. Perversely, the author of the self-sufficiency critique, Harris, was to be the beneficiary of the self-sufficiency reality in the form of Bomber Command in 1944/45. The criticism he levelled at the RN regarding self-sufficiency became the underpinning argument he employed to grow and develop EW capabilities, form No 100 Group and realise a day fighter escort force, albeit one that was not under his command. But all of this only happened because the industrial capacity of the Western Allies allowed for the enormous build up of the RAF's frontline and the deployment of transformational capabilities.

Throughout Portal's handling of the MAF Cs-in-C was a master class in military statesmanship. He maintained alignment and cohesion, despite great tensions. He secured and maintained political support. He gained and maintained Alliance confidence. He supported Arnold to ensure US decisions went in favour of UK aims. And he allowed the MAF to breathe and innovate and the Cs-in-C to act in the role of 'C-in-C as SAC' without the oppressive oversight applied by Arnold or Goering.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid., Furse, *Wilfrid Freeman*, pp. 280-290. Furse gives a good summary of aircraft production after Freeman returned to MAP in October 1942.

¹⁰ TNA AIR 6/620 and 6/620 contain the correspondence and minutes of the Monthly Meetings Portal conducted with his Cs-in-C and clearly demonstrate the effort he took to communicate with and understand their concerns.

Victory and Demise

The 1945 RAF multi-functional command structure and ‘C-in-C as SAC’ process did not survive the post-war drawdown. It was a consequence of the time. It was a contextual event whose relevance going forward was undermined by the reduction in capacity and the advent of the nuclear bomb which demanded highly centralised control and tight political oversight. But its creation was an important development in the air war of the Second World War and one which has not been properly acknowledged. That it was a contextual way point along the path of the RAF’s development was not the point. It shaped how the MAF conducted operations and therefore deserves much more study and analysis. The RAF did not re-organise in 1936 just to accommodate the growth of the Service under the expansion schemes. It did not ignore the need to prepare to fight a war as the Air Ministry reorganisation shows. It did not fail to understand the requirements of air command as the SAC debate reveals. And it did not sit impassive as war revealed its true nature and the need for adaptation grew. In all these areas the RAF took the steps that at the time were the best argued and least preconceived that it could. The adaptation of its command structure and processes bears favourable comparison to similar developments in the British Army during the latter years of the First World War.¹¹

By 1944 the Hankey System of CID 1425-B was overtaken by the Portal System of empowered multi-functionality. This came about as a result of many factors: the limits of inter-command co-operation; the rightful and relevant needs for self-sufficiency; the unique command requirements of air power; the developments in

¹¹ S Bidwell and D Graham, *Fire-Power The British Army Weapons and Theories of War 1904-1945* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Military, 2004), p. 3 and G Sheffield, *The Somme* (London: Cassell, 2003), pp. 160-164.

air capability; and the great advances in equipment availability. This was all coupled with the growth of mutual trust within and between the command chain, the positive and negative impact of personalities, and the overarching impact of Alliance warfare with its complex interplay of politics, diplomacy, and military operations.

In 1945 Portal addressed the boys of his old school, Winchester College, stating that his job as a COS in war was ‘two jobs rolled into one’.¹² One was to attend to service matters such as ‘policy’ and the ‘selection of types of aircraft to have’. However, he had to acknowledge that he did not ‘direct actual operations’. He then recounted the tale of a small boy he had met who, he recalled, had ‘greeted me with a demand to know what job I did’:

Did I send the bombers out? No, that was the job of the C-in-C Bomber Command.

Then did I send out the fighters? No, that was the job of the C-in-C Fighter Command.

Then what do you do? Well I said I sat up till 2 o’clock this morning arguing with the Prime Minister.

Oh, he said, and my Mother told me you were somebody quite important.¹³

Setting aside the forward nature of the small child, this anecdote gives a clear insight into Portal’s character and disposition.

This study set out to examine the efficacy of the RAF organisational reforms of the 1930s when set against the challenges of the Second World War. The only fair conclusion is that the reforms were sound and that Portal’s conduct was of the highest order. He saw his role as one of high level stewardship, setting the ship of the correct course for others to steer in detail. He also understood he was one of the PM’s close

¹² Richards *Portal of Hungerford*, pp. 180-182.

¹³ *Ibid.*

military advisors rather than a supreme operational commander. The 1930's re-organisations led by Salmond, Ellington and Newall, were the bedrock upon which wartime adaptations, driven by experience, were built. This trio of reforms needs to be seen as a critical factor in understanding the performance of the MAF in the Second World War.

It was Portal's stewardship of the RAF during this period that enabled the creation of the efficient and effective command structure that fought the last and critical years of the Second World War. It was far from perfect and retrospectively shortfalls can be identified. But in war the best is definitely the enemy of the good and the command structure, command practices and processes, and command cohesion that emerged, were a transformation from the situation in 1939. The RAF never fully adopted the role of SAC; events were to show that it was too simplistic for the complex conflict that the Second World War became. But the reforms of the 1930s of the Air Ministry, Command structure and higher command processes laid a solid and sound foundation for wartime development and adaptation. That they have never received adequate attention is the shortfall this study sought to right and it is hoped that this work will play a small part in reassessing the performance of the higher commanders of the RAF in the Second World War, and the importance of the close linkage between policy direction and operational action.

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