Historic Book Review

AIR POWER AND ARMIES

By Wg Cdr J C Slessor

Oxford University Press, London 1936
Reviewed by Air Cdre Neville Parton

'It is no longer a matter of the soldier making his plan for battle on the ground and then turning to see how the air can help him. Land and air operations must be deliberately planned to get the best out of each other, and the plan of campaign on the ground, whether in attack or defence, may be profoundly influenced by the air factor.'

Sir John Slessor's masterpiece on air-land relationships is definitely one of those publications that should be more widely recognised than it actually is. Although some aspects of it are relatively well known – such as the opening quote above – much of the analysis and underpinning theory is not. Given that this was produced by an individual who would go on to have a highly distinguished career, ending as Chief of the Air Staff from 1950 to 1952, this is perhaps surprising. However what is perhaps even more remarkable was that Slessor should not only have been a published author but also then been successful in his RAF career, given the distinct lack of enthusiasm in the early RAF for writing for public consumption. In fact there was a distinct antagonism in some senior quarters to this effect, and it could certainly have an adverse impact on an individual's career – as has been noted in previous articles in this series – for instance in the case of Squadron Leader Burge and his Basic Principles of Air Warfare.

What of Slessor himself? He was certainly unusual amongst his contemporaries in being a keen, and gifted, writer – although there was nothing in his early life that indicated a strength in this particular direction. Born in India in 1897, and educated at Haileybury School, he contracted polio whilst a child, and when the resulting lameness prompted a medical rejection by the Army, managed to talk himself into a commission with the Royal Flying Corps in 1915. His wartime service was not without incident, winning an MC in the Sudan, and following repatriation after being wounded went on to complete two squadron tours in France. After the war he attended the 3rd RAF Staff College course at Andover, serving under another noted Haileyburian in the shape of the Commandant, Air Commodore Brooke-Popham. As Slessor later observed the course produced from amongst the 28 staff and students no less than 17 air officers – seven of whom reached air chief marshal. He also famously struck up a close relationship with Trenchard whilst in the Plans Branch of the Air Staff, where he came to fill the role one of the 'English merchants', able to translate the great man's ideas into readable English. However it was his four-year stint at the Army Staff College at Camberley, as a member of the directing staff, which provided the material that would form the basis of Air Power and Armies. His wartime career saw him moving in rapid succession from being the Air Member of the Joint Planning Committee at the

start of the war to AOC 5 Group in Bomber Command from Apr 1941 to March 1942. This was followed by a spell as ACAS (Policy), where he helped to shape the bombing directive which issued from the Casablanca conference in 1943, before taking over as C in C Coastal Command from February 1943 – January 1944. His last war appointment was as the RAF C in C for the Mediterranean and Middle East. This was followed by the highly challenging post of Air Member for Personnel in the immediate post-war period, and then Commandant of the Imperial Defence College from 1948 until taking up post as CAS. His autobiography, The Central Blue, still stands as probably the best (if not only!) book written by a former CAS, and he continued to be involved in the defence debate right up until his death in 1979. Having thus established the length and breadth of his illustrious career, we can turn to the first publication that would bring him to public knowledge – and establish him as a highly prescient analyst, as has been observed elsewhere: '… much that he said stood the test of battle and campaign in the Second World War.'

Slessor's introduction begins by making a very pointed observation on the purpose of military history as he understands it:

'… the really important function of any kind of military history is not primarily to serve as interesting material for the general reader, but to enable commanders and staff officers of the future to be wise before the event, and to learn not only from the successes but from the failures of their predecessors.'

This approach lies at the heart of Air Power and Armies, as it is categorically not a publication that simply attempts to analyse what worked during the First World War, and hold this up as an exemplar to be emulated. Instead, after considerable analysis relating to the role of air power, a highly accurate, but critical, mirror is held up to allow re-examination of one of the high points of the British armed forces during the War – the battle of Amiens in 1918 – and as will become clear, this is then used to assist in producing some highly logical deductions regarding air-land interaction.

The book is based upon his lecture series at Camberley, and is specifically constrained to a particular strategic subset of operations, namely those that would require a joint (in modern parlance) expedition to an overseas theatre – thereby neatly avoiding any of the controversy at that time which still dogged the question of the main wartime aim of the RAF. It is organised in four parts, covering air superiority, the selection of objectives, an examination of the battle of Amiens in 1918 in some detail, followed by a set of wide-ranging conclusions. Some detailed appendices are included, giving details of force ratios and usage of air forces on both sides during the battle of Amiens, as well as maps providing context for both the battle and wider use of air power during the First World War. So much for the outline – what of the content?

The first section attempts to define, in considerable detail, what is actually meant by the term 'air superiority', and how this relates to the main offensive in any given conflict. Here, in concert with other air power writers of this era, the concept of a variable degree of air superiority is introduced, along with a considerable exposition on the part that 'vital centres' (cf centre of gravity) have to play in modern war. In a very vivid illustration, Slessor points out that

a vital centre does not necessarily have to be destroyed to produce the desired effect, but that dislocation for a period of time may be sufficient. The importance of the offensive is also stressed, not only because of its importance in maintaining the initiative (and reflecting its importance in the RAF War Manual), but also as this is seen as the most effective way of neutralising or destroying the enemy's air force. He is also very clear that obtaining air superiority is not an end in its own right, but an enabler – or to use his phraseology, air power is '… the Method, not the Intention.' No overall deductions are produced at the end of this section, although the difficulty of achieving absolute air superiority is again stressed through observation of the contemporary 'fleet in being' concept.

The part relating to the selection of objectives reflects a particular belief of Slessor's, clearly refined during his time at two staff colleges, that in fact the principles of war should be reduced to three rules – namely concentration, offensive action and security – and that air power had a considerable part to play in enabling all three. Whilst he does not shy away from the role that an air force can have in attacking the enemy's supply base, or in other words the industrial capacity that enables warfare, he clearly believes that at the right time the use of 'independent air' against a tactical target set (i.e. supply lines) can have a much greater impact. With regard to close air support, he saw three clearly defined potential tasks, namely action in aid of an initial assault, action to turn a retreat into a rout, and action to prevent an enemy attack from breaking through. Careful consideration is also given to the part that air power can play in dislocating supply lines, with a thoughtful analysis of the merits of attacking roads and railways, including the 'superficial' attractiveness of attacks against bridges. What he does see is that all of these lines of communication (LOCs) produce bottlenecks of men and material which air power is ideally placed to attack, and in so doing, to generate a far greater impact on the course of battle.

Analysis of the 1918 Battle of Amiens forms the penultimate component, and in particular an examination of the part that the RAF played. The reason for looking at this particular encounter is best summed up in Slessor's own words:

'… it is impossible to assert with any confidence that the result of the battle … would have been materially different, or that the ultimate line reached and held by our forward troops … would have been materially short of where it in fact was, if not a bomb had been dropped or a round fired by aircraft against ground objectives. If this be so it is a damaging admission, in view of the fact that this battle saw the greatest concentration of air strength of any battle of the war …'

What follows is a methodical examination of the plan of attack, followed by a reconstruction of the actual course of events. This brings out certain key factors, such as the lack of involvement of the senior air force commander in the army planning conferences, the arrangements for air co-operation being almost entirely ad-hoc in nature, and the lack of thought given to the roles that the air could play in the follow-on activities after the initial assault. Indeed the point is stressed that no trace of a formal air appreciation

can be found – which certainly showed itself during the process of weapon to target matching later on. So whilst the planning for the involvement of the RAF in the very early stages of the attack (the first 6 hours) was detailed, very little consideration was given to the role that could be played in enabling both the maintenance of the ground taken and exploitation of the breakthrough.

The final element contains Slessor's conclusions regarding the future, ten in number, which form the smallest part of the book, but still manage to present the author's main thesis – which begins with a belief that the conquest of the air formed a new revolution in military activity. To try and summarise: Slessor saw that in modern warfare with massed armies the margin of safety on LOCs was poor in the face of air power, and therefore no army should rely on a single LOC if it was within bombing range of the enemy – which in turn meant that staffs would have to think more broadly ("…use larger maps" was his phrase) when campaign planning. However he did recognise the limitations of air power, in that the initial concentration of man power was not likely to be stopped in countries well served with railways, although it could be probably delayed. Whilst the delaying of the forward movement of armies was possible, the greatest opportunity arose when they were operating with long LOCs that were few in number, which in turn would necessitate a need to rethink the general approach to battle – for instance to use the defensive land operations to canalise enemy movement on the ground to increase their vulnerability to attack from the air. This meant that, particularly from a European perspective, railways would no longer be regarded as an instrument of major tactics, and the primary task of an air force engaged in a land battle would be to isolate the attacked area from reinforcement and supply. And of course in turn this required a truly joint plan of campaign – and hence the opening quote of this article. In fact his last conclusion is supported by reference to some words of Churchill from 1917: "For our air offensive to attain its full effect it is necessary that our ground offensive should be of a character to throw the greatest possible strain upon the enemy's communications." Slessor does not leave his reader in any doubt with regard to his views on the part that air power will play in the future of warfare, which is that whilst it will not decide the 'next great war' alone, it will be a decisive factor – and one which favours any army that is highly mobile, hard-hitting, armoured and above all mechanized. His observations can also be seen as supporting the case for thinking very carefully about how air power is best employed in support of an army, or more importantly, how not. Whilst not directly stated, there is a clearly inferred belief that whilst what we would now term close air support may be justified in certain circumstances, by and large air interdiction of forces at choke points further back is where the greatest effect can be created for the least cost.

In Slessor's case, he was able to attempt to put some of his ideas into practice, as these were translated into the plans for the Advanced Air Striking Force during the period that he spent as Director of Planning at the Air Ministry in the late 1930s, having taken over from Arthur Harris in that role. He also won the Royal United Service Institution (RUSI)

Gold Medal competition in 1936, with a paper examining the influence of the internal combustion engine on the British Army, which contained many of the same ideas as well as an examination of the way in which a truly mechanised army might cope with the threat posed by a modern air force. However, like one of his Army contemporaries – J F C Fuller – his prophetic words were not sufficient to galvanise the defence establishment into a radical re-evaluation of the requirements for contemporary warfare. Certainly Slessor's vision appears to identify many of the elements that made blitzkrieg such an effective approach only a few years later.

Where does that leave us in terms of Slessor's analysis and its relevance to the RAF in the 21st century? His ideas regarding the principles of war, and those that are the most important, can still act as a remarkable stimulus to thought. But it is his observations on the nature of the interaction between air forces and land forces that perhaps still carry the most weight, if only because they are still so remarkably accurate – at least from an airman's perspective. If there were an air power library Hall of Fame, irrespective of the author's background, *Air Power and Armies* would have rightly won a place on the shelves. But Slessor's background, undoubted command ability and strategic analytical skills demand a more respectful approach – this is one of those books which will repay careful reading.

Bibliography

Higham, Robin. The Military Intellectuals in Britain: 1918-1939. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1966.

Probert, Air Commodore Henry. High Commanders of the Royal Air Force. London: HMSO, 1991.

Slessor, J C. Air Power and Armies. London: Oxford University Press, 1936.

Slessor, Sir John. The Central Blue. London: Cassell & Co. Ltd, 1956.

Notes

1 See Air Power Review Volume 10 Number 2 (Summer 2007). Slessor's success at combining writing and a career may have had something to do with publishing after Trenchard had retired from his post as CAS!

2 Sir John Slessor, The Central Blue (London: Cassell & Co. Ltd, 1956), 47.

3 Air Commodore Henry Probert, High Commanders of the Royal Air Force (London: HMSO, 1991), 41.

4 Robin Higham, The Military Intellectuals in Britain: 1918-1939 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1966), 217.

5 J C Slessor, Air Power and Armies (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), vii.

6 'Note that actual material destruction of a vital centre is not essential in order to be fatal. Thus a man's windpipe is a vital centre; yet it is not necessary to cut it, but only temporarily to stop air getting through it order to kill that man. One or more essential railway junctions may be vital centres of an army in the field; yet it is not necessary absolutely to demolish those junctions, but only to prevent railway trains passing through them for a sufficient length of time, to be fatal to that army.' Ibid., 16.

7 Ibid., 5.

8 Ibid., 164.9 The First World War equivalent of an air estimate.

10 In fact the chapter is entitled 'The Third Revolution', with gunpowder and the machine gun having been identified by Slessor as the first two revolutions.11 Slessor, Air Power and Armies, 212.

12 'Tactical and Administrative Implications of the Introduction of the Internal Combustion Engine into the British Army, in Relation to Its Capacity to Overcome Modern Defences and Counter the Threat of Air Action.' to give its full title!