# Historic Book Review

## *Victory through Air Power*
By Major Alexander P. De Seversky

Reviewed by Air Cdre Neville Parton

*Published by Simon and Schuster, New York (1942)*

*'The task of each generation is to interpret accumulated experience and to adapt it to new conditions. The past and the present are useless to us unless they enable us to see boldly into the future'*[1]

In the pantheon of air power books, there are few that have ever achieved best-seller status, and even fewer that have been turned into a film. In fact only one fits into this category, and that is *Victory through Air Power*, published in 1942 by an émigré Russian aviator who had taken up residence in the United States of America. In common with a number of the other authors in this series, de Seversky had a colourful background which had shaped his understanding of air power, and this needs to be understood in order to place his contribution to the theory of air power in perspective. Indeed, de Seversky's range of achievements in the aeronautical field were extremely broad, covering operations at one end, through experimentation and design (including a number of U.S. patents) to being a highly effective advocate for American strategic air power – all the more impressive when his perhaps unlikely background is borne in mind.[2]

Alexander Nikolaievich Prokofiev De Seversky was born in 1894 in Tiflis, Georgia, to a Russian family of noble parentage. Educated at a military school from the age of ten, he then joined the Imperial Russian Navy via the Naval Academy, where he was commissioned as a lieutenant in 1914, and saw service in a destroyer flotilla in the Baltic for the first year of the First World War. In 1915 he became an early convert to the aeronautical field, qualifying as a naval pilot, as well as completing a postgraduate course in aeronautics. During the remainder of the First World War he served as a naval aviator, losing his right leg in combat on a bombing, but recovering well enough to continue to fly for some considerable period thereafter as a fighter pilot with an artificial limb. At the time of the Russian revolution in 1917, he was in the United States as a member of the Russian Naval Aviation Mission, and made the decision to stay in America rather than returning to his homeland – offering his services to the U.S. Government as an aeronautical engineer and test pilot. After the War, he worked closely with General 'Billy' Mitchell, particularly during the demonstrations of the effectiveness of aircraft against capital ships, and it was to Billy Mitchell that *Victory through Air Power* was dedicated. It was during this association that De Seversky began to develop his own ideas about the future potential for air power, in which, unsurprisingly, he was heavily influenced by Mitchell – as was self-evident in his later views on navies and naval aviation.

In 1923 De Seversky married Evelyn Oliphant, an American socialite – and fellow pilot – who came from New Orleans. They settled in New York city, and in 1927 De Seversky became a naturalized citizen of the United States

– by the following year he had also been commissioned as a major in the U.S. Army Air Corps Specialist Reserve. However by 1931 his efforts had turned more to the field of business, and in that year he founded the Seversky Aircraft Corporation, which produced a range of aircraft over the next seven years. Indeed, he established a number of world speed records in Seversky aircraft during this period. Unfortunately his skills lay more in showmanship than project management, and despite securing a number of lucrative government contracts, the organisation seemed unable to produce a profit under his management. Eventually in 1939, the Board of Directors voted him out and changed the name of the business to the Republic Aviation Company, which subsequently became best known for the P-47 Thunderbolt.[3] The nature of the relationship between De Seversky and Republic is not clear, but certainly their aircraft receive many favourable 'plugs' in *Victory through Air Power*.

He was certainly well-informed with regard to developments in air power, having conducted a European tour in early 1939, during the course of which he managed to visit the air forces and aviation industries of Britain, France, Italy and Germany. In Britain he spent a month at Martlesham Heath, during which time the Seversky aircraft that he had brought with him were assessed. De Seversky was allowed to fly both the Hurricane and Spitfire, being favourably impressed by both aircraft – and the state of the aircraft industry, which was already being established for operations on a wartime footing. In Germany he was impressed by the technical ability of the German companies, as well as their facilities and production machinery, although he was critical of the defensive armament on bombers. Italy he was generally unimpressed by, and France received a vitriolic assessment, covering the poor performance of their aircraft, inadequate (and dirty) production facilities, and corrupt and ignorant administration![4] In 1940 he was presented with the International League of Aviator's Harmon Trophy by President Roosevelt for his outstanding achievements in the field of American aviation, by which time he was also a well-read commentator on all matters aeronautical.[5] He was also, if not an accomplished engineer, certainly an imaginative one. He took out his first U.S. patent in 1921 for a method of air-to-air refuelling, and forty-odd years later, was still taking out patents – with his last being in 1964, for a lifting device known as the ionocraft.[6] But it is for his book that he is perhaps best remembered today, as well as the subsequent collaboration with the Disney Studios which resulted in a motion picture promoting the cause of strategic air power.[7]

Given his predilection for the memorable and dramatic, it should come as no surprise that this is very definitely not a dry and considered piece. Indeed, its beginning is remarkably redolent of Douhet's writings some 20 years before. Consider the following extract from the opening pages:

From every point of the compass – across the two oceans and across the two Poles – giant bombers, each protected by its convoy of deadly fighter planes, converge upon the United States of America. There are thousands of these dreadnaughts of the sky. Each of them carries at least fifty tons of streamlined explosives and a hailstorm of light incendiary bombs … With the precision

of perfect planning, the invading aerial giants strike at the nerve centers and jugular veins of a great nations … The havoc they wreak is beyond description. New York, Detroit, Chicago and San Francisco are reduced to rubble heaps in the first twenty-four hours.[8]

However it would be wrong to write off this publication as simply the ramblings of an air power fanatic. Even though it does suffer some major deficiencies, which will be returned to later, much of the analysis of aviation's role in the Second World War – or at least the first two years of it which had passed when this was written – is extremely lucid and informative. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the publication is first and foremost a polemic exercise, aimed at convincing the American people that they should invest in their air power – and do so at the expense of land and sea forces.

The book consists of twelve chapters. The first, from which the extract above was taken, paints a Douhetian picture of the fate that awaits America if it does not take the threat from the air seriously. The next three chapters examine particular aspects of the Second World War, as observed in 1941, concentrating on a comparison between operations in Norway and Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain, and operations in the Mediterranean and against the Bismarck. The rest of the book consists of an analysis of the changes that air power had wrought at the strategic level in warfare, an examination of the mistakes made in Europe over aviation development and, after a sideswipe at navies, a considerable critique regarding the state of air power development within the U.S. The book finishes with a number of recommendations regarding the way that air power should develop within America, based on a combination of geostrategic factors, fundamental principles of air power, and the comparative advantage provided by industrial capacity and technological superiority.

In the latter part De Seversky identifies eleven air power lessons for America, based in particular on his own analysis of the role of air power in the World War to date. These effectively form the heart of his argument, and it is therefore worth considering these as they make explicit the thinking that underpinned his eventual conclusions.

1. *No land or sea operations are possible without first assuming control of the air above*. Although this had arguably been identified as a principle of air power in a joint context from before the First World War[9], the examples of the German successes in mainland Europe, and failure in operations against England clearly gave considerable strength to this proposition. Of course it is couched in far more trenchant terms: 'Those who do not understand this … cannot be trusted with authority in modern war …'[10]

2. *Navies have lost their function of strategic offensive*. Here the case is made that whilst in the past a nation's capital ships could take the war to an enemy's shores, this is no longer possible if the enemy is possessed of an air force with any capability. De Seversky's prejudices are at their most blatant, as no mention is made of the role that submarines could play in forcing a blockade against an enemy – which by this time was self-evidently effective in the Battle of the Atlantic – or of the part that carrier-

borne aviation could fulfil in dealing with an enemy air force. In fact he is damning in his views on naval power in general, and pours scorn on those who would suggest that investing in a navy is the way to guarantee both security and freedom of action.

The French poured billions of francs into the concrete of the Maginot Line, their superfortress. We are pouring billions of dollars into the ring of steel, our supernavy. The only difference is in the substance: the French favoured concrete, we favour metal. The ideas and the psychology behind both are the same, and unless we come to our senses in time, the same results may follow.[11]

3. *The blockade of an enemy nation has become a function of air power*. Following on from the previous premise, De Seversky argues that air forces are now far more able to blockade an enemy, pointing to the fact that according to official Nazi statistics the Luftwaffe was responsible for around 25% of the first 13 million tons of British shipping sunk (the other 75% being mostly due to the U-boat fleet). However no mention is made regarding the difficulty in such an approach against an enemy that is not dependent upon sea lines of communication, although the ideal counter-measure is identified – which ties in which the next point, as the solution put forward is to have defensive air power to protect shipping.

4. *Only air power can defeat air power*. Although this does not quite go as far as the 'constant offensive' of RFC and early-RAF doctrine, it does convincingly argue that ground-based defences are a palliative, not a cure, and the elimination or stalemating of an air attack can only be achieved by an air force. The vulnerability of ships in this regard is emphasised, with reference to the destruction of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*.

5. *Land-based aviation is always superior to ship-borne aviation*. Although there is an element of truth in this premise, related to the modifications necessary to allow carrier operations and the consequent impact on aircraft performance, it again clearly demonstrates the prejudices of the author. For instance the fact that dispersion of assets is impossible on a carrier is mentioned, whilst the point that the airfield in question can be moved by hundreds of miles in a day does not appear to be recognised.

6. *The striking radius of air power must be equal to the maximum dimension of the theatre of operations*. This is an argument solely constructed to support a need for the establishment of fleets of intercontintental bombers, able to strike anywhere in the world from bases within the United States:

The entire logic of aerial warfare makes it certain that ultimately war in the skies will be conducted from the home grounds, with everything in between turned into a no-man's land. As soon as aviation exploits its full technical potentialities of fighting range, intermediary points will be abandoned, one after the other, like so many obsolete outer fortifications.

This was certainly a powerful argument in the line of development of what would become Strategic Air Command, and is still evident in American air power policy to this day (think of the B2 or Project FALCON[12]). However, the

cost of those 'full technical potentialities' is still a factor in the practicality of such an approach, and as with much else in aviation, trade-offs are inevitable.

7. *In aerial warfare the factor of quality is relatively more decisive than the factor of quantity*. This conclusion was specifically related to the Battle of Britain by De Seversky, as he attributed the defeat of the Luftwaffe directly to the speed and armament advantage enjoyed by the Spitfire and Hurricane, with these factors negating the overall numerical superiority of the German forces – although the ratio was perhaps not quite as one-sided as is suggested here.[13] Other elements are ignored though, such as failures in strategy, intelligence and targeting.

8. *Aircraft types must be specialized to fit not only the general strategy but the tactical problems of a specific campaign*. This is a rather odd principle, and appears to relate more to De Seversky's experience in aircraft design and manufacture. The approach calls for far more 'foresight' amongst military leaders, in order to be able to foresee the need for specialist types of aircraft for specific campaigns. Given that the development time for larger aircraft in particular was even then measured in years rather than months, this appears to be advice along the 'run faster, fly better, land smoother' line – and hence not particularly helpful.

9. *Destruction of enemy morale from the air can be accomplished only by precision bombing*. Although this aspect ties in with the unofficial doctrine regarding the need for precision bombing espoused by the US Army Air Corps at the beginning of the Second World War, here the argument is made that indiscriminate bombing against civilian targets has been demonstrated to fail, and is both costly and wasteful in terms of resources. Instead, it is suggested that precise bombing against the essentials of life – food, shelter, light, water and sanitation – will be far more effective. It also reiterates a point made earlier, in that modern industrialised societies were seen as much more vulnerable than primitive ones to air power.[14]

10. *The principle of unity of command, long recognized on land and on sea, applies with no less force to the air*. Interestingly, the approach taken with regard to unity of command is not related to modern arguments relating to prioritisation of scarce resources and the ability to focus on the most appropriate point, but instead upon the difficulty of developing an efficient air service if it is split into different elements, each subservient to another fighting service. The example given again relates to recent British experience, 'Imagine the Battle of Britain under similar circumstances, with the Royal Air Force split into segments, one under the Admiralty and the other under the Army!'[15]

11. *Air power must have its own transport*. In this last postulate, a case is made for the increasing use of aerial transport to support aerial warfare. Particular emphasis is placed upon the ability of air to reinforce far-flung locations, but the point is well made than unless it can arrive with all necessary supplies then it will not be able to influence any combat in the way that the previous ten lessons have indicated.

Based on these lessons, De Seversky's conclusions were simple – and the first was repeated at regular intervals throughout the publications, and simply

stated that '… at present we have no air power at all'.[16] This was based upon both the way in which aviation only existed in the form of auxiliary elements to the naval and land forces, and also with regard to the way that the American government was extremely defensive regarding the quality of the aircraft that its industry produced. At the same time America's geostrategic situation and scientific, technological and economic strengths made air power the natural weapon of choice for the future. However the corollary to these conclusions was that a truly independent air force would be required in order to overturn the 'old guard', and to enable the production of an air force that would realise the predicted potential:

Air power is the American weapon. It will not fail us, if only we unchain it and provide immediately the minimal conditions for its unhindered development.[17]

Viewed with the perspective of 60-years of hindsight, *Victory through Air Power* is a bit of a curate's egg; some parts highly prescient, based on extremely cogent analysis, whilst elsewhere descending into diatribe against the government and military establishment of the day. Furthermore, thanks to its extensive print run it is still possible to obtain a copy today at a reasonable price. But what impact did it have? It was certainly widely sold –and read – being reprinted at least five times within the first year of publication, and reaching the Number One position on the newly-introduced New York Times best-seller list for non-fiction on 16 August 1942. In fact, it was estimated that five million Americans had read the book, and over twenty million knew of the author and his message.[18] Appearing less than six months after the attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941, and the entry of the United States into the Second World War, the book was extremely popular, with its strong endorsement of the formation of an independent air force and the development of long-range bombers, as well as a commitment to the strategic use of air power, which implicitly involved diversion of resources away from current war operations. Nonetheless, its bitter criticisms of the state of air power in the U.S. and denigration of land and naval forces won it few friends within the miltary establishment. However it was probably the accompanying film, made by Disney as part of their commitment to the war effort, which had a greater impact on the American public. The film had all critical comments removed from the script, which resulted in the USAAF adopting it as a means of educating recruits about air power. It was also considered to be a great educational piece by such individuals as Air Marshal Jack Slessor and even Winston Churchill.[19] In America it is credited with having built a sense of air-mindedness, and an understanding of the particular relevance of strategic air power to America, which came together in the creation of the United States Air Force in 1948.

As an end note, it is worth considering that De Seversky focuses in on the fact that the American entry into the war was '… signalized by a humiliating defeat through enemy air power'[20] and of course Pearl Harbor was a turning point in American history. It could be argued that the next single event which would have such a similar, singular impact,

on the subsequent course of American conduct was also a form of air power – the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington. De Seversky's identification of the air as being the only real military threat mechanism to the homeland United States may still hold true in the 21st century…

**Bibliography**

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***Meilinger, Phillip S***, ed. *The Paths of Heaven : The Evolution of Airpower Theory*. First ed. Maxwell, Alabama: Air University Press, 1999.

***Seversky, Major Alexander P. De***. *Victory through Air Power*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1942.

**Notes**

1 Major Alexander P. De Seversky, *Victory Through Air Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1942), 122.

2 For greater detail on De Seversky's life, and an in-depth-analysis of his contribution to the making of American air power, see Phillip Meilinger's chapter entitled *Alexander P. de Seversky and American Airpower* in Phillip S Meilinger, ed., *The Paths of Heaven : The Evolution of Airpower Theory*, First ed. (Maxwell, Alabama: Air University Press, 1999).

3 The Republic Aviation Company was eventually taken over by Fairchild in 1965.

4 It is worth noting in this regard that some correlation can be drawn between the way in which De Seversky's aircraft were assessed by those countries that evaluated them (France, Italy and Great Britain), and the way in which he wrote regarding their industry! See Seversky, *Victory Through Air Power*, 184-212.

5 Although this award was considered controversial within a few years: the Secretary of the Air Force stated in 1947 that he did not believe that De Seversky deserved the award (RB to Matthew J. Connelly, June 14, 1947; White House Central Files: Official File 1049 357R, Truman Papers, Truman Library).

6 Brief explanation of how it works!

7 Ref for film and DVD.

8 Seversky, *Victory Through Air Power*, 7.

9 Following the 1912 Manoeuvres in which he defeated General Sir Douglas Haig, having made considerable use of the reconnaissance available to him from the aircraft of the RFC, General Grierson commented that: "I think there is no doubt that, before land fighting takes place, we shall have to fight and destroy the enemy's aircraft. It seems to me impossible for troops to fight while the hostile aircraft are able to keep up their observation. That is to say, warfare will be impossible unless we have mastery of the air." Mead 46

10 Seversky, *Victory Through Air Power*, 123.

11 Ibid., 177.

12 FALCON (Force Application Launched from the Continental United States) is a Defense Advanced Research Project Agency (DARPA) run project to be able to place a 12 000 lb warhead anywhere on the Earth's surface within 2 hours. See http://www.darpa.mil/ucar/text/programs/falcon.htm for a project resumé.

13 De Seversky estimated 3000 German fighters against 1200 British; the actual figures were approximately 1200 for the Luftwaffe (Me 109 and Me 110) and around 650 for the RAF. Seversky, *Victory Through Air Power*, 50. and Stephen Bungay, *The Most Dangerous Enemy*, First ed. (London: Auram Press Ltd, 2000), 418-22.

14 Seversky, *Victory Through Air Power*, 147.

15 Ibid., 149.

16 Ibid., 279 as an example.

17 Ibid., 352.

18 Meilinger, ed., *The Paths of Heaven : The Evolution of Airpower Theory*, 256.

19 Ibid., 258.

20 Seversky, *Victory Through Air Power*, 4.