RAF Air Policing over Iraq – Uses and Abuses of History

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The academic discipline of history and the practical study warfare have been intertwined since man first sought to record his thoughts in writing and in oral history. Over the centuries, warriors have sought to fathom the depths and the mysteries of previous wars, whether successful or otherwise, to improve their chances of success – or to justify rhetoric. The use of air power over Iraq in the inter-war years has not escaped, especially during the No-Fly zone policing period of recent years. This paper seeks to highlight some of the dangers in drawing shallow conclusions and suggests ways of avoiding the pitfalls of dubious comparisons.

The lessons of history are never clear. Clio is like the Delphic oracle: it is only in retrospect, and usually too late, that we understand what she was trying to say.

Michael Howard[1]

Introduction

The essential theme of this paper is that there are real dangers in drawing parallels between what has happened in the past and the events of today, and air policing over Iraq has been no exception. The victims of the potential pitfalls extend beyond the policymakers and practitioners to include students at every level of education. Also vulnerable are the casual, but interested, readers of military history whose latest foray into a given subject invites the immediate construction of 'lessons'. Equally prone to misinterpreting the past are the legions of those charged with commenting on the present who will inevitably feel tempted to delve into history, either from shortage of material, impoverished analysis or a misplaced certainty that the parallels exist. It will be further argued that although these risks exist in any field of history, military history is particularly prone to the challenges.

The period in which the RAF, along with its allies, operated over Iraq is at least as vulnerable to these difficulties as any other in air power history. This paper will outline some generic challenges to the use and abuse of military history. It will then outline some possible guidance on how history can be used before analysing some of the key challenges pertinent to air policing and Iraq.

Uses and Abuses of Military History

All elements of history within the widest definition of the subject are possible areas for exploitation in both the beneficial sense and in terms of possible abuse. Military history certainly falls within that category. For a paper that was initially prepared for delivery in a Staff College environment, it is worth adding that the students studying therein, worldwide, both add to the risk and suffer from it. The same is, however true of University students at every level when they come to choose titles and subjects for dissertation purposes. In both environments (and arguably there is considerable overlap in degree-awarding establishments with many staff colleges offering masters level degrees) the onus is on the author to identify an interesting, or challenging subject area; analyse what has been said before; highlight gaps or areas of controversy; and then describe how their work will contribute to the sum of knowledge. Inevitably, the degree of care, desperation, clutching at straws or brilliance will vary depending on the skill of the student, the patience of the supervisor and the availability of source material. The point of this is that in the 'old days', once examined, the document would have been consigned to a large box-file and deposited in a locked store cupboard. The reality now is that these things are likely to surface with regularity when summoned by Google Scholar or some other search engine – albeit without the possibly feisty comments of the examiners. At the very best, this vastly increases the amount of material available for present and future scholars. At worst

it also increases the amount of critical analysis that has to be expended on the subject in question.

In choosing subjects for study, current operations are always both relevant and popular. Often the detail is classified and has to be avoided. One way of achieving this is to draw parallels with earlier periods: this is especially attractive when the location chosen has been fought over before – in this case Iraq. The temptation is even greater if the operations are kinetic, coercive or involved in 'influence', but the fighting is short of full scale war. Again the relevance of air policing and Iraq loom large. But attempting to do this type of study requires a much broader analytical approach than is often considered prevalent in 'military history'.

The discipline of military history is a vexed subject in its own right. This is a topic for a paper in its own right and there are many criticisms, not least that many exponents of the profession have tended to concentrate on the tactical detail and the events on the operational front without having recourse to the wider context.[2] The very breadth of works published on military topics compounds the difficulty in using history as a guide. This in turn is complicated by the reality that what purports to be a historical work may well turn out to be a non-specialist re-interpretation by a non-specialist; this is particularly problematical when historical events are used to justify a particular theory as occurs regularly in the business school world examining leadership.[3] 'Real' military history – if there is such a thing – is as influenced by 'schools of thought' as any other field of history whether it be a Marxist interpretation, post-modern or Whig. But critically, military history is also prone to micro-schools of thought that are specific to a period of writing. In the case of this paper there was a clear service-level (or environmental) school of thought emanating from some, but not all, air power scholars that 'air power could do it alone'. An immediate parallel to current debates is over the importance of 'boots on the ground'. The real danger is that these schools of thinking descend into dogma and influence the historical work in its formulation and, worse, in its subsequent interpretation. The issue of dogma immediately raises the spectre of doctrine and policy. But without entering this fraught arena, it is worth noting that military history is probably more prone than most areas to the challenges of the short span from practice and policy.[4]

The final area where the use of military history can become undone is over myths. Michael Howard considers that they have a useful social function as 'nursery history' which is beneficial in providing a palatable introduction to the realities of warfare.[5] But he goes on to argue that where an interpretation of history is merely a myth, and this is exposed as such, it can be 'an anguish to be deprived of it'.[6] It could be argued that military history, and military practitioners in particular, are especially prone to the establishment of myths and reliance thereon. Accordingly myths become another challenge to the use of military history in analysing contemporary events.

How to use Military History – some thoughts for guidance

It could be argued that military

professionals could do far worse than follow Howard's 'three general rules' for those wishing to study military history; these involve studying in width, depth and context.[7] But doing so in isolation from some of Howard's other comments on the education of the military profession would lead to an incomplete analysis. In the context of the air presence over Iraq some of his assertions just do not hold up to the realities of that period. The first of these is that the soldier, sailor and airman would only be likely to engage in their profession once in a lifetime.[8] Furthermore, warfare, unlike economic, political or administrative activity is intermittent.[9] He goes on to state that war is 'clearly defined, with distinct criteria for success or failure'.[10] This observation risks a detailed debate on whether the air policing over Iraq was actually war, or merely military activity. But it cannot be termed 'intermittent' and the criteria for success or failure were not easily stated.[11] These are but some of the challenges facing students of the period.

Notwithstanding the reservations over Howard's wider comments his 'general rules' remain valid. By studying in *width* (Howard's emphasis), those seeking to establish lessons or precedents, or even just gain a greater understanding, should read far beyond the immediate period and seek out the discontinuities as well as the parallels.[12] Howard then advocates taking a single campaign and going beyond the official histories (and the ever-increasing mass of secondary literature) by examining memoirs, diaries and letters to gauge 'what really happened' thus removing the veneer of order left by previous historians.[13] The third, and arguably most important, guideline is the requirement to study in *context*.[14] Not only are the 'roots of victory and defeat' apparent from wider social and economic factors, but so are the reasons for the conflict and its continuation. The twenty years of operations over Iraq can only be understood by examining each of these in a critical and analytical way.

Air Policing over Iraq

One of the chief problems with trying to deploy precedents from military history in examining air power over Iraq is just that; the issues, past and recent were a long way from being just being military in nature. Howard's criteria of width, depth and context are useful tools in analysing the historical backdrop to the Twenty Years over Iraq.

Many who have merely relied upon the geographical proximity of the operations immediately miss the whole point of width. Air policing was carried out in the inter-war years in other areas. The reality is that the wider issues implicit in air policing were applicable from Great Britain and Ireland through Palestine and Africa to India. The political situation was different in each region as were the strategic imperatives. It should therefore go without saying that the missions facing Imperial forces (not just the British troops) were different, as were the threats.

For a subject such as this to be given adequate coverage, the depth issue is almost insurmountable for many casual students. The ability to spend the requisite amount of time in appropriate archives studying letters, memoirs and original files is

problematic. The standard recourse to lack of time in historic study is the use of secondary literature and citing material chosen by others. This flies in the face of Howard's admonition that the student needs to get beneath the veneer. Although this can feasibly be offset by due critical analysis of the secondary sources, this is not the normal result. Instead the student adds to existing veneer, often introducing (to take the metaphor a bit far) a further layer of dust and grime.

The greatest challenge to historians and students of the air policing period who have subsequently attempted to draw parallels and lessons has invariably been the absence of context. The decision to deploy air power to Iraq/ Mesopotamia was taken in the immediate aftermath of the First World War and an understanding of the economic situation is key to appreciating the wider situation in which the decision was taken. By mid-way through the First World War it was evident that the material costs would be unprecedented. The actual monetary value of the munitions expended was greatly exacerbated by the hidden costs involved in refiguring industry onto a wartime footing and then returning it to peace – turning ploughshares to swords and then back again does not come cheap. These costs escalated rapidly with the unprecedented application of science and technology into areas such as shipbuilding, tanks and the aircraft industry. Shipping losses were huge. The human costs were horrendous with 8 million servicemen killed, 7 million permanently disabled and a further 15 million wounded in some way. Civilian casualties amounted to at least 5 million with many times that in Russia. The monetary cost has been estimated at $260 billion which equalled 6.5 times the world national debt accrued from the end of the 18th Century to the outbreak of the War.[15] Britain lost 6.3% of her male population (723,000) a significant proportion of whom were from the social elite (28% of those going up to Oxbridge in 1910 –1914 died in the War).[16] The manpower requirements had caused Britain to draw deeply from the resources of the Empire as well as from home – nearly one third of British manpower came from abroad.

Imperial policing was a major, if not the most significant, defence task for all three services. The Army, along with Imperial forces and locally raised levies were constantly involved. The Royal Navy was charged with protection of the sea and trade routes. It was only natural that the fledgling Royal Air Force would seek a role in the work at hand. The centrality of these tasks to the *raison d'etre* of the armed forces is hard now to grasp with the later focus on home defence and then NATO.

The struggle for their due share of the defence expenditure has always been high on the military list of priorities. It is not at all surprising therefore that both the Navy and the Army would resent every penny spent on the third arm. It is equally unsurprising that Trenchard and his senior colleagues would employ all means to ensure its survival. Whilst this is well-trammelled ground, it is important to note that what was in dispute was not the immediate use of air power. What was contentious was that the

Royal Air Force needed to exist as a separate Service in order to provide that capability at the front line. At the time, it appeared that this could only be justified if air power could claim outright primacy with its own people as the C-in-C, or with independent access to the political authority of the country or mandate concerned. Anything less than this would have undermined the chances of survival. This is not the same as more recent arguments advocating that air power can 'do it alone'. Nor do many of the 'air control' arguments rest on the use of the bomber acting against strategic targets – although this was suggested from time to time (for example, over Kabul). Ironically, the real debate was not about air power doing it alone – it was more about air in the lead. This can best be illustrated using the expression of 'air control' as meaning air as supported commander – i.e. in control of the whole operation.

The situation at the beginning of the first Gulf war was hugely different in terms of the economic situation. But at a superficial level there were similarities; the pressure on budgets, for example, would have been familiar to Trenchard and Salmond. By 1990, the demise of the Warsaw Pact had seen the almost desperate clamour for a 'peace dividend' resulting bizarre occurrences such as the financiers seeking the disbandment of squadrons as they were on the very brink of deployment to theatre. Another key parallel was the advancement of technology with all of the associated costs; the air war during 1991 had showcased the potential of modern air power, amounting in some authors' opinions to a revolution in warfare. The apparent parallels are all too seductive, tantalising and yet ephemeral; but the difficulties did not prevent the attempts at describing unhelpful precedents.

The Motivation for Drawing Precedents

The first motivating factor for students of air power to want to draw parallels emanated from the 'do-it-alone' school. The essence of this was that with the demise of the Warsaw Pact, the impact of which was then still having serious repercussions, super-power levels of conflict had been replaced by more containable, conventional conflict. In these potential conflicts, commanders and their political masters would have clear choices of the weapons needed to bring about the resolution. The air war against Iraq in 1991 had allowed the land forces to 'mop up' in 100 hours of concentrated manoeuvre. The more extreme of the air power prophets considered that the weight of the air offensive alone could win future conflicts without the need, or even the threat of a ground offensive. Seeking parallels within the air policing operations over Mesopotamia in the inter-war years thought that they had the ideal precedent. The reality was that these operations required close co-operation with discrete ground forces, and especially with political officers who were well-versed in local conditions. Nevertheless, it was clear that air power was both the weapon of first resort and that the air component was the supported, not the other way round. Furthermore, the air operations were much more economical than major operations

requiring large formations of ground troops.

The period between the wars against Iraq was one of reducing defence budgets across many nations. In this environment, there was considerable pressure to use the force elements, or risk seeing them consigned to obsolescence or even oblivion. Whole capabilities were likely to be lost. This is often a short-term view, but particularly evident in the thinking of finance ministries and Treasuries. The rhetoric runs along the lines of 'if you didn't use it in Iraq, when are you: it is a cold-war legacy so cut it'. Arguably, we are still hearing the same over Afghanistan. In attempting to impose a longer term view, the air power advocate would appeal to the lessons of history for evidence that there was real value in terms of flexibility, agility and in the case of air policing the evident virtues of impermanence! One of the key factors to emerge from the first Gulf War, which was then constantly reinforced during the no-fly zone period, was the importance of precision. But the desired degree of accuracy inevitably came at a considerably increased cost which had to be defended by current and future requirements, bolstered with recourse to the past.

Inextricably linked to the quest for precision for genuine operational reasons was the wider requirement for the campaign to be waged in a humane or ethical manner. The cynics may have argued that this merely because of the risk of being caught by CNN, but this is overly harsh in that most planners and policymakers appreciated that the inevitable regime change would have to be followed by a wider accommodation with the populace. In addition to the fundamental importance, for its own sake, of waging an air war in a just, discrete and proportional way, it was vital for the cohesion of the alliance and for the domestic audiences in the contributing nations in particular. Recourse to history in this area was particularly fraught, especially if taken out of context and only considered without depth and breadth. The context in the inter-war years encompassed the very survival of the fledgling Service and the acrimony from the other two over what they perceived to be a diversion of assets. Any criticism of air policing was worth the airing and, in the aftermath of the First World War, there was a ready audience for tales of inhumanity and brutality. A flavour of the rhetoric was the comment from Sir Henry Wilson as CIGS that the essence of air policing was the 'bomb that falls from God knows where and lands on God knows what'.[18] But as Slessor recounts from his own experience, considerably more damage and destruction was caused by artillery – a reality in Afghanistan today.[19] Whether in the press, parliament, the corridors of the financial planners or the drinking houses of Whitehall, it is easier to condemn air power for indiscriminate action as 'proved' by history than it is to meticulously to build the case for the defence citing the archival records, memoirs and so forth as commended by Howard in his quest for depth.

Conclusions

The RAF air policing operations over Mesopotamia in the inter-war

years have been scoured for lessons, parallels and precedents that could be applied to operations in more recent times. These lessons from history have been sought for a variety of reasons and in a number of contexts. The first of these has been to 'prove' that air power could 'do it alone', or at the very least should be the weapon of first choice. Inherent in this is that the air component could, and to the more vocal, should be the supported component. These arguments and debates become all the more germane in periods of economic downturn, fiscal uncertainty and devastated budgets. Finally, but no means last, the detractors of air power have frequently sought to draw parallels between the alleged indiscriminate, or inhumane, nature of air power in the inter-war years with more modern conflicts. The reality that artillery has often resulted in greater damage and death is almost invariably overlooked.

In attempting to draw lessons from the 'Delphic Clio', the modern student of history, whether they be historian, politician, financier, business school guru or moral philosopher, would well at least to note Professor Sir Michael Howard's advice that the scholar should do her or his research in breadth, depth and context. Arguably the latter is the most important. The scholar, policymaker or practitioner needs to examine the wider context of the times in which history was recorded embracing geo-strategic, economic, technological and policy factors. But they also need to understand the circumstances in which the original authors committed their thoughts to paper. Why did they write? What messages were they trying to get over then, or leave for posterity? For current policymakers in particular, why are you scouring history? Is your intent honourable use, or do your studies harbour dark threats of abuse?

Notes

[1] Michael Howard, 'The Use and Abuse of History', in *The Causes of War, and other essays* (London: Temple Smith, 1983), page 195.
[2] For an introduction see Peter W Gray, 'Why Study Military History', *Defence Studies*, 5(1) March 2005, pp. 151-164. For this particular warning see Jeremy Black, *Rethinking Military History* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. xi.
[3] See for example, Alan Axelrod, *Patton on Leadership: Strategic Lessons for Corporate Warfare* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1999) and Keith Grint, *Leadership, Management and Command: Rethinking D-Day* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
[4] At a general level see Richard Overy, 'Doctrine not Dogma: Lessons from the Past', *Royal Air Force Air Power Review*, 3(1) Spring 2000, pp. 32-47.
[5] Howard, 'The Uses and Abuses of History', p. 189.
[6] Howard, ibid., p. 190.
[7] Howard, ibid., p. 195. Given as guidance to contributing authors in John Olsen, *A History of Air Warfare* (Dulles VA: Potomac, 2010), p. xiii.
[8] Howard, ibid., p. 194.
[9] Howard, ibid., p. 193.
[10] Ibid.
[11] See Col. Mark Garrard USAF, 'War Termination in the Persian Gulf: Problems and Prospects', *Aerospace Power Journal*, XV(3) Fall 2001, p.42.
[12] Howard, ibid., pp195-6.
[13] Ibid., p. 195.

[14] Ibid.
[15] All figures taken from Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 – 2000* (London: Fontana, 1989), p. 360.
[16] David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the 20th Century* (London: Longman, 1991), p. 105
[17] See, for example, Richard P. Hallion, 'Precision Air Attack in the Modern Era' in Richard P. Hallion, *Airpower Confronts an Unstable World*, (London: Brasseys, 1997), p.129. See also Col. Philip S. Meilinger USAF Ret'd, 'Precision Aerospace Power, Discrimination and the Future of War', *Aerospace Power Journal*, XV(3) Fall 2001, p.12.
[18] Cited by MRAF Sir John Slessor, *The Central Blue* (London: Cassell, 1956), p. 66.
[19] Ibid.