Book Reviews

Air Commanders

By John Andreas Olsen

Reviewed by Air Vice-Marshal (Ret'd) Tony Mason

Introduction

Air Commanders is a study by different authors of twelve United States air commanders, spanning World War 2, the Cold and post-Cold War periods. The short biographies, introduced by a thought provoking introduction by Colonel Olsen, place the individuals in their strategic, operational or tactical contexts, examining their background, education, training, experience, character and leadership styles with which they faced the challenges of high command.

Collectively, the studies raise important questions for all airmen. Is there an ideal career progression to prepare for high command? What personal qualities are best suited? What are the implications for modern high air command of the very different environments of World War 2, the Cold-War and the wars of a new, post-cold war era? The success or failure of a commander may be assessed by a comparison of objectives and outcome, but how far is that success attributable to personal qualities and how far to circumstances beyond his control? Do the demands of high command in air warfare differ from those facing army generals?

Clausewitz heavily emphasized the prime importance of "chance" in warfare. Consequently, a commander needed above all to have a powerful intellect to identify and react to the unexpected, and the determination to act on the basis of his judgment. That fundamental requirement was recently placed in the context of RAF high command in the first Gulf War by the then Director of Operations to the UK Joint Force Commander at RAF High Wycombe:

"During Operation Granby I observed at first hand that at the very highest level of command there is a step change in pressure which places greater emphasis on certain personal characteristics. While total commitment to the cause and the determination to see it through are self evident, as is military professionalism of the very highest order, the unremitting pressure of Granby over eight months stressed the importance of stamina and resilience. A considerable reserve of mental stamina was essential to be able to master both concept and detail and to maintain concentration over long periods, no matter how many diversions there were. And one needed a similar degree of resilience to cope with these diversions, which modern communications guaranteed came thick and fast- and principally from unwelcome quarters."

(Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Johns, addressing the RAF Historical Society, 13th March 2013. RAF Historical Society Journal No.57, pp21-22)

That unique insight into the challenges to high air command in 1991, in a relatively short campaign fought from a headquarters 2500 miles away, with resources but a fraction of those at the disposal of any of the commanders in this book, illuminates the enormous scale and complexity of the tasks facing the latter. It also, by implication suggests that the historical "fog of war" caused by uncertain or lack of information has been replaced by a surfeit which could prove equally impenetrable.

Clausewitz confined his comments on "chance" to a commander's ability to react to the unforeseen after war had begun. Indeed, air operations are still more vulnerable to vagaries of weather than those on land. The opponent may be superior or inferior in numbers, quality, or equipment; he may make mistakes or display unexpected brilliance. But in fact, chance affects the performance of a commander, and especially an air commander, far more widely than that. He is likely to have little or no opportunity to determine the resources made available to him. General Spaatz for example was fortunate to take over a bomber force which was well equipped for the task. General Tunner on the other hand, personally drove the Berlin Airlift to literally a history defining success from an inheritance of inadequate aircraft, low morale and poor organization.

In a coalition, other factors beyond the commander's control demand more than just stamina and resilience. Generals Ryan and Horner were well resourced but fully understood the constraints of NATO allies in one case and of the Saudi hosts and Israeli concerns on the other. They brought a wealth of experience, powerful intellect and overwhelming superiority to their tasks but in addition, both realized that air power, like any other kind of armed force, must be subordinate to and in harmony with political sensitivities. A truly great air commander is one who in his decision making can transcend the limits of his own experience, not just benefit from it.

Air commanders in World War 2 possessed advantages denied to their post war successors. They drew upon virtually unlimited resources to sustain thousands of aircraft. Political constraints

were minimal; disagreements were only over strategy; the general public and the media were supportive. Heavy civilian and military casualties and extensive civilian destruction were accepted, with one or two exceptions, as inevitable features of total war fought in a just cause.

General Spaatz had been decorated in France in World War 1, and was close to the inter war USAAC leaders. He was not a good speaker, was taciturn, disliked military education and according to General Eisenhower "couldn't write what he wanted". Author Richard Davis quotes General Lemay saying that "he never got any direct orders from General Spaatz on anything". But he successfully commanded the US Army Air Forces from 1943 to 1945 although General Ira Eaker commanded 8th Bomber Command, known as 8th Air Force, from January 1942 until December 1943, when replaced by General Doolittle. In that period Eaker, not Spaatz, was responsible for implementing operations against targets in occupied countries and in Germany from August 1943 onwards. Spaatz' leadership was marked by determination, flexibility, mutual trust and confidence at all levels but he had the good fortune to inherit overwhelming superiority over the Luftwaffe.

General George Kenney on the other hand inherited poorly performing USAAF units in the Pacific theatre in 1942 and over three years transformed them into a theatre- dominating force. He had a powerful intellect, strong will and was a good selector of subordinates to whom he competently delegated. He brought operational and planning experience, doctrinal awareness, understanding of personnel issues and maintenance awareness to his professional mastery. One suspects that Clausewitz would have approved of George Kenney. Yet even his competence did not survive his transfer to Commander of the infant Strategic Air Command. Alan Stephens' comprehensive, well balanced study also illustrates the risks when a commander's confidence spills over into overconfidence, generating errors of judgment when he strays into unfamiliar territory.

Major General Weyland was included in the collection as an example of a commander at tactical level: leading the Ninth Tactical Air Command for the last ten months of WW2. He inherited the very effective air-land allied doctrine and practice originated by Air Marshal Coningham and enjoyed considerable air superiority. Richard Muller describes his success, but concentrates on his strong personal relationships with army commanders. His questionable priorities in allocating fighter bombers to the siege of Brest at a cost of reducing support of the advancing ground forces are passed over. Muller emphasizes the attention paid by Weyland to reconnaissance and signals intelligence, but fails to explain why then he was taken completely by surprise by the Luftwaffe's January 1945 offensive, which would have had much more serious consequences had the overall strategic environment not been so favourable. Such contradictions suggest that Weyland might not have made Air Marshal Johns' "step change" in pressure to high command.

General Curtis Le May was perhaps the best known air commander who established his reputation in World War 2 and enhanced it in the early years of the Cold War, as Commander

of Strategic Air Command (SAC). Williamson Murray ascribes to him a dark and forbidding personality not inclined to "doctrine stuff". He was respected however, as determined, clear sighted with a well-deserved reputation as a brave and effective combat commander. He was prepared to challenge accepted wisdom and respond flexibly to changing operational circumstances. He forcefully transformed an inefficient SAC into the primary instrument of western nuclear deterrence, albeit with vastly increased resources. But just as Kenney was given a job too far, Le May's elevation to USAF Chief of Staff revealed an inability to adapt to an environment requiring compromise and political astuteness. Indeed, his career prompts the question whether an air commander at the highest level needs the flexibility to be, in UK terms, both a combat leader and a Whitehall Warrior.

General William Tunner, the master mind of the Berlin Airlift is an exception in this collection in that he had not been a combat leader and indeed was an unimpressive pilot. But James Corum convincingly portrays an airman who, from inauspicious beginnings became an outstanding organizer, manager of resources and innovator in maintenance and logistics. He was not in the mainstream of the Air Corps, nor, unlike Spaatz or Kenney was he ever a protégé of influential inter-war Air Corps figures. During World War II however, he was rapidly promoted through a series of ferry and transport appointments before commanding air supply operations in the China Burma India theatre.

After the Berlin Airlift, he organized air transport for US and UN forces in Korea, successfully commanded USAFE in Germany and finally commanded the USAF Military Transport Service. He had a cold personality, was not especially sociable, was a hard task master and did not inspire affection. He was however always aware of the need to maintain morale among aircrew and ground crew alike. He earned respect, and was loyally followed because of his manifest professionalism and efficiency. In these circumstances, his known shortage of combat experience was not relevant, but at the time it was exceptional.

For three other Cold War generals, air command was not so straightforward. The Soviet conventional threat to Europe, the risk of a Soviet-Chinese alliance and the shadow of nuclear escalation influenced operational decisions in Korea and Vietnam. A successful air campaign could no longer be pursued to unconditional victory, but failure and defeat could still be a risk.

Tom Keaney clearly and comprehensively portrays General George Stratemeyer in his operational context. He recovered the poor condition of the Far East Air Forces at the outbreak of the Korean War, overcame friction with General Mac Arthur's staff, responded quickly to unexpected circumstances, encouraged precision technology and operated effectively within US government political constraints. He had a very wide career path, including spells with the US army, in training and doctrine and commanding USAAF forces in south east Asia. He was not a charismatic leader, but affable, low key and an "organizer" of air power rather than a "hands on" commander. His leadership style in many ways resembled that of Eisenhower, with in his case the need to manage relations not just with allies but US forces –Marine Corps and Navy -

competing for resources and publicity. Perhaps his most powerful attributes in high command were his confidence and judgment to delegate wisely to trusted subordinates. They call to mind the advice once given to a relatively senior RAF officer by the highly decorated and formidable General Sir John Hackett, "Identify what you alone need to do, my boy, and delegate everything else".

General William Momyer would have disdained such advice, at best. He was not by inclination a delegator. In theory, the commander of the USAF 7th Air Force in Vietnam from 1966 to 1968 could not have been better qualified for his appointment. He was a successful and brave tactical Group commander in World War 2; supervised the writing of the post war USAF doctrine manuals, including air-land theatre operations; he was Director of Operational Requirements and prior to his Vietnam appointment C-in-C of Training Command. He had a very incisive and flexible mind which could retain significant detail as well as swiftly master issues of policy and strategy. He was highly respected by subordinates, superiors and contemporaries. Case Cunningham describes both the difficulties of the Vietnam environment and Momyer's frustrated reaction to them. He struggled to overcome the impact of uncertain political objectives, political micro management, uncoordinated inter-Service air operations, target constraints and the difficulties of interdicting ground forces when they could dictate the tempo of operations. His association with the politically directed, much maligned, staccato Rolling Thunder campaign of 1968 produced conflicting assessments of his achievements. General Momyer's experience demonstrates that even the most accomplished commander can be thwarted by circumstances beyond his control. Case Cunningham's study is particularly noteworthy because more than all the other contributors, he draws heavily on contemporary records to complement subsequent interviews with colleagues and friends.

Four years later, General John Vogt was appointed in April 1972 by President Nixon to command the 7th Air Force with a mandate to rejuvenate a tired USAF effort in Vietnam. He had completed two combat tours in Europe in 1944 before spending the next twenty six years in increasingly senior military/political staff appointments interspersed with attendance at Yale, Columbia and Harvard Universities, but no higher military education. He was very self-confident, well connected politically, had a powerful intellect, an easy smile and was media savvy. Prior to his appointment he had been overtly critical of USAF performance in Vietnam. Unfortunately he quickly demonstrated his lack of recent operational experience and lack of trusted subordinates; on arrival he actually abandoned the existing daily staff briefings. His failure to remedy weaknesses in the Command prompted interventions by USAF Chief of Staff Ryan and C-in-C Pacific Air Forces General Clay. A tactical revision which ultimately led to the success of Linebacker II was initiated not by Vogt, but by Major General James Hollingsworth, air advisor to an Army Corps. Stephen Randolph concludes that Vogt's remarkable achievement was to sustain President Nixon's trust, despite the failure of the first Linebacker air offensive. It may well have been, but this study provides an object lesson in why there is no substitute for relevant experience in an air commander,

especially when compounded by an absence of higher military education and a perception of political patronage.

When the USAF next saw combat, eighteen years later, the Cold War had ended. The new era would place novel and complex demands on air commanders. A coalition led by the USA would defeat Iraq in a six week campaign which the present writer named "the apotheosis of air power".

Dick Hallion's enthusiastic paean to General Charles Horner, commander of allied air forces in Desert Storm, is well founded. He generated both respect and affection. From his combat experience in Vietnam he learned how not to employ air power. Instead, he led a unified command and delegated responsibility to the lowest possible level. He had the self -confidence and judgment to inspire confidence in others and worked well with coalition partners. He had the flexibility of mind to adapt the rigid bombing dogma of John Warden to the situation on the ground in the Kuwait theatre. He placed confidence in the potential of stealth and precision weapons for concentrated strategic effect while at the same time taking care to protect Saudi Arabia from a possible Iraqi offensive. In the campaign he quickly responded to the need to divert resources to hunt the SCUD missiles which threatened to draw Israel into the conflict, even though the hunt proved fruitless. Perhaps the most important base of Chuck Horner's success as an air commander, not mentioned by Hallion, was that he never studied leadership or command, but from his earliest days as a very competent fighter pilot, he consciously observed leadership around him: good, bad and indifferent, and remembered. Arguably, with the good fortune to enjoy vast superiority in resources, manpower and overall quality, Horner could not fail. But without his leadership, success could have been more protracted and much more costly.

Desert Storm was the last of the 20th Century wars. Media exposure had heavily influenced US public opinion over Vietnam, but Saddam Hussein sought to use the media as a strategic instrument by giving the international press instant access to civilian destruction or casualties, real or imaginary. Military assets were deployed among civilian communities. The casualties in the Al Ameriyah bunker tightened targeting control, while images of destruction on the Basra road brought air operations to an unexpected halt. Western public opinion, released from the mind set of "total war", became increasingly sensitive not just to "friendly" casualties but to the infliction of "enemy" civilian casualties and "collateral damage". The days of national exultation, for example over the devastation caused by the Dambuster raid of 1943, were long gone. Air commanders in the next generation would be faced by constraints unknown by their predecessors.

Four years later, General Michael Ryan was commander of the NATO air forces which in a brief campaign brought an end to the first conflict in the Balkans arising from the breakup of the state of Yugoslavia. Over Iraq, conditions had been ideal for the successful use of air power: overwhelming air superiority, clearly defined political objectives, popular support, an incompetent opponent, terrain offering little cover, identifiable and accessible targets.

Chuck Horner had no need to micro-manage. General Mike Ryan on the other hand was applying air power for limited humanitarian objectives in poor weather, among mountains, forests and attacking hostile ground forces frequently deployed among civilians with constant uncontrolled media exposure. His career had included combat in Vietnam, military education at all levels, an exchange tour with the Royal Australian Air Force, maintenance, weapons instruction, planning and personal staff officer to the USAF Chief of Staff. Experience is not in itself a guarantee of successful high command, but Mike Ryan had the intelligence to learn from it and the ability and character to apply it. He had to devise his own strategy, prepare his own plans and have the flexibility to adapt to unforeseen circumstances.

Mark Bucknam's perceptive examination of his leadership is particularly relevant to air commanders in the 21st Century. The General was acutely sensitive to the need to minimize casualties on both sides and avoid collateral damage, especially when the effects of all operations were revealed almost immediately by the international media. The operation was small enough for him to exercise close personal control over almost every aspect: target selection, axis of attack, target sequence, weapon selection and bomb damage assessment.

He recognized the political constraints associated with the tortuous UN and NATO command chain. While well versed in air power doctrine, and instinctively seeking to attack quickly and forcefully, he did not make the mistake of trying to repeat Desert Storm or complain because his environment was so different. Instead he worked smoothly with British Army General Rupert Smith to bring a successful conclusion to the campaign.

Subsequently in Kosovo in 1999, General Michael Short faced very similar problems, aggravated by uncertain Alliance objectives, strategic disputes and a poor working relationship with his superior in theatre. He was a charismatic, widely experienced commander, but with no higher military education. With a deep sense of responsibility he led, ultimately, a successful campaign. Rebecca Grant's assessment would however have been more persuasive had she observed that Short was frustrated because he did not appear to understand that the application of contemporary USAF doctrine, of overwhelming strategic attack in the manner of Desert Storm, would in the political circumstances of Kosovo have been disastrously counter-productive, threatening to wreck alliance cohesion and let Milosovic off the hook. The contrast with the formidable Ryan is stark. To the latter, doctrine had to be adapted to circumstances. With Short, doctrine had calcified into dogma, apparently revealing an inflexibility of mind which was incompatible with the fundamental flexibility of air power.

The studies conclude with the command of General Michael Moseley in Afghanistan and Iraq from 2001 to 2003. James Kiras describes a forceful, highly professional and inspirational airman who in environments more akin to Desert Storm than Deliberate Force forged strong relationships with his Army superior in theatre, delegated wisely to trusted subordinates and applied lessons learned from Afghanistan to the successful combined operations in Iraq in 2003. He succeeded in being a powerful advocate of air power and of the need to integrate it

fully into the joint force, while fully understanding the implications of unfettered international media. That has to be a model for any 21st Century air commander.

No single model for the ideal air commander emerges from these studies nor can any amalgam of qualities construct one. Factors beyond their control often influenced their paths to greatness. But in preparation to meet the challenges identified by Clausewitz and Air Marshal Johns some common factors are apparent: affability is no substitute for respect; relevant experience is essential, not least for credibility, but even more so the ability to think and act beyond it, including learning from other people's experience; confidence and judgment to delegate; the ability to work harmoniously with Joint Service colleagues; self-awareness to know when to be determined and when to be flexible; the need to adhere firmly to fundamental air power principles, but adapting doctrine to changing political and operational circumstances. One quality which is implicit but not expressed in the studies is that evidence of spare capacity may well be an indication of the ability to make the "step change" to high command. Finally, the air commander is distinguished from his or her army or navy counterpart by his air mindedness: his mastery of the air power profession.

There is much here for the ambitious junior officer to learn and for more senior colleagues to reflect upon, including those already holding air rank. Nor would the book go amiss on the shelves of those who are responsible for identifying promising young officers and preparing them for high command. In military education, it will provide rich material for discussion of light blue leadership, as the wealth of detail is sufficient for readers to make their own assessment of the subjects. They may wish to explore the characters and campaigns in greater depth through the comprehensive foot notes and bibliography.

In sum, Air Commanders is a highly recommended, unique addition to the air power library.