Viewpoints

Reply to: The Battle of France, Bartholomew and Barratt: The Creation of Army Cooperation Command

By Mr Greg Baughen

Biography: Greg Baughen has been researching the history of British and French Air Forces for over forty years, examining how air power evolved in both countries. He has published Blueprint for Victory and the Rise of the Bomber with his third book, The RAF in the Battle of France and Battle of Britain, due for release in summer 2016.

Abstract: Published in APR in spring 2015, Matthew Powell's article, *The Battle of France, Bartholomew and Barratt: The Creation of Army Cooperation Command* examined the impact of the Battle of France, 1940 and British Army's subsequent investigations into these events and the delivery of tactical air power on the battlefield. Here, Greg Baughen gives an alternative insight to the investigations, the inter-service acrimony surrounding these events and the eventual creation of Army Cooperation Command by the RAF.

Introduction

I read with interest the article *The Battle of France, Bartholomew and Barratt: The Creation of Army Cooperation Command* in your Spring 2015 issue, which set out to untangle the tangled web of British Army/Air Cooperation in 1940. Might I suggest that perhaps the War Office was not quite as ill informed as the article suggests?

It is true that the British Army had problems understanding the blitzkrieg tactics the Wehrmacht used in 1940. It did not help their cause that the BEF was the only Allied Army involved in that campaign that did not experience the full weight of the initial Panzer/Luftwaffe onslaught. The Dutch Army had to deal with the 9th Panzer, the Belgian Army was brushed aside by the 3rd and 4th Panzer on the Albert Canal and the French Army ended up having to deal with nine of the ten panzer divisions committed. The BEF was very much in the eye of a storm. It was difficult for British commanders to appreciate the problems faced by their counterparts on other fronts. Lt.- Gen. Pownall, Gort's Chief of Staff, was convinced the French had collapsed at Sedan in the face of a few German raiding parties.[1]

The panzers were of course the decisive factor in the defeat of the Allied Armies in France. The German Air Force was merely playing a supporting role, but it is perhaps not surprising that the German air effort made more of an impact on the British Army than the German use of tanks. It was not so much a case of deliberately trying to deflect attention from the failings of the British Army; it was just that British commanders did not have the opportunity to discover how serious these failings were.

The generals were, however, very aware of how effective the Luftwaffe had been, especially against troops in the battle zone. The BEF was not immediately affected by this, but from the very first day of the campaign, Ju 87 Stukas and Henschel Hs 123 ground attack planes were providing very close support for the German airborne forces that had captured Dutch airfields and bridges over the Maas and Albert Canal. There was more close support for the panzers heading for Rotterdam and Gembloux. The aerial bombardment of French defences at Sedan was a very dramatic example of the effectiveness of close air support, but was far from being a one-off. After this assault, the German Air Force continued to provide close as well as indirect support to smooth the path of the advance and beat off Allied counter attacks. As the British forces fell back on Dunkirk, and, in the second phase of the German offensive, as they tried to halt the German drive westwards from Abbeville, British troops in the frontline felt the full weight of German air power.

Even without the panzers to take advantage, the Luftwaffe was capable of having a decisive influence on the battlefield. Once the Belgian Army had retreated out of the path of the panzers heading for Gembloux, it only had to deal with German infantry. Belgian commanders believed their troops had demonstrated they could hold their own on the ground. They could not, however, deal with incessant air attack. It was the German Air Force that broke the Belgian Army.[2] The Luftwaffe was proving to be a very effective battlefield weapon and the

Bartholomew report was quite right to identify this willingness to operate close to as well as far behind the frontline as the key difference between the RAF and Luftwaffe approach to air support.

The War Office fully appreciated the value of attacking targets deep in the enemy rear. It had been pushing for better air support since long before the French May-June campaign and this included "strategical support ...extending to a considerable depth'.[3] But they also wanted air support much closer to the frontline. For more distant support, they were happy to rely on twin-engine planes like the Blenheim and its proposed B.11/39 replacement, but for close air support, they wanted a much smaller, more manoeuvrable, single-engine plane capable of dive-bombing and low-level attack. This was much closer to what was required than the large twin-engine planes the Air Ministry kept offering. The War Office had even suggested that close air support could be performed by older single-seater fighters being phased out of service.[4] This would soon become the standard way of using fighters no longer suitable for the air superiority role. The success of the Ju 87 Stuka in the French campaign inevitably led the War Office to focus more on the need for a steep dive-bombing capability. However, whether the dive-bomber, armoured low-level assault plane or a fighter-bomber was the best way to apply close support was merely a side issue. The central controversy was whether the Army should have any close air support. The Bartholomew report was quite right to insist it should.

This was always going to be extremely hard for the Air Staff to accept. The segregation of air and land warfare made it difficult for the Air Force to understand what the Army needed. In the eyes of the Air Staff, using aircraft to hit battlefield targets was, as Slessor colourfully put it, 'using well-trained pilots as propellant for artillery shells'.[5] The Air Staff could not see why the Army needed aircraft if a target was within range of a land-based weapon. For their part, the War Office could not understand how the Air Staff could fail to appreciate the immense value of a means of engaging the enemy that could move in three dimensions above the battlefield.

Air Ministry attempts to meet Army demands caused more frustration. If the Army insisted on having a plane for close air support, the Air Staff wanted it to be a large plane that could exchange its armour for more fuel and its solid nose with machine guns for a bomb aiming position.[6] The plane would then be able to play a part in their strategic bombing offensive. The final straw for the War Office came when the Air Ministry invited them to inspect the prototype Armstrong Whitworth Albemarle as a potential close air support plane.[7] Reading War Office documents of the time, one is struck by the frustration bordering on despair at the Air Ministry attitude. It is not surprising some saw an army air arm as the only way round the problem.

The War Office was also right to question the way fighters had been used. The RAF had emerged from the First World War with a sound tactical fighter doctrine, but the tactics used

in the first part of the French campaign were more reminiscent of the RFC in 1916/17 than the more focused fighter operations of late 1917/1918. Attempting to sweep airspace clear of enemy fighters so that unescorted bombers and reconnaissance could operate unhindered was a complete failure. By the end of the French campaign, RAF commanders had accepted this and close escorts had become standard.[8] Similarly, when protecting ground forces, RAF fighters had to focus their effort where the Army needed it. On 21 May, the key event was the Arras counter-attack and the Army expected fighter cover. Hours before the attack, with German spotter planes hovering above and no sign of RAF fighters, Gort issued an urgent request for an intensification of fighter effort in the area.[9] During the course of the afternoon fighter sweeps and escort missions were flown fifty miles to the west, but none were sent to the Arras area until the evening.[10] By the time they were dispatched, the counter-attack had been halted and retreating British troops were being dive-bombed. Once the Army had retreated to Dunkirk, there could be little doubt about where the fighters should be operating, but for such a crucial operation, the Army might reasonably have expected more than 200-320 fighter sorties a day.

Bombing operations controlled by the BAFF in France were fairly well directed, but this was not always the case for those controlled by Bomber Command. The War Office would not have been fully aware of the AASF efforts to support the French further south, so some of their criticisms were not entirely justified. Nevertheless, the Bartholomew report's overall conclusion that German air effort was more focused was valid. The report was also correct to highlight the effect air power can have on morale. The expression 'flying the flag' was perhaps a hostage to fortune, but it was demoralising for troops if the enemy had visible air support and they did not.[11] Again, this was something the War Office had been concerned about long before the May-June campaign. 'In all conversations on the subject of direct support I find the same', the Director of Military Training (Maj. Gen Malden) complained. 'We think close co-operation is really close in, the RAF think 50 miles is close.'[12] Rather pointedly, the Bartholomew report also emphasised that German air effort had not been diverted to strategic bombing.

This was the crux of the problem. Hindsight is a wonderful thing. We now know that RAF attacks on German oil plants were not causing any serious damage, but at the time, the Air Staff genuinely believed they were crippling the German war machine. This made it far more difficult for the Air Staff to appreciate the value of tactical air support. From their perspective, the Army was expecting the RAF to go to a lot of trouble to destroy a handful of targets on the battlefield when the Air Staff believed that it would not be long before the entire German Army would be crippled by a shortage of fuel. If the Air Staff had known how little their oil offensive was achieving, their attitude to tactical air support would surely have been very different. It needed to be different. Britain could not assume it would not be invaded in 1940. Nor could an invasion in 1941 be ruled out. Army/Air Force cooperation was not just required for some distant invasion of mainland Europe. It might be required at any time to help repel German troops landing on the south coast.

As the article points out, only one RAF officer was asked to appear before the Bartholomew committee. Brook-Popham's parallel Air Ministry investigation into the French May-June campaign did not ask any Army officers to give their views. That perhaps summed up the state of British Army/Air Cooperation in 1940. The two ministries could not even coordinate their investigations. It is just as well the Army and Air Force did not have to work together to defeat an invasion in 1940.

Notes

[1] Bond, *Chief of Staff Vol. 1* (1972), p. 327.
[2] National Archives CAB65/7/39 (28 May 1940) Comments of Sir Roger Keys and Lt-Col. Davy.
[3] National Archives AIR2/2896 (11 July 1940).
[4] National Archives WO106/5152 (Festing to DCIGS 31 December 1939).
[5] National Archives AIR2/2895 (June 1939).
[6] National Archives AIR9/137 (December 1940).
[7] National Archives WO106/5151 (December 1939-August 1940).
[8] National Archives AIR41/21 p.466.
[9] National Archives AIR20/2061 (21 May BEF HQ to Air Ministry).
[10] National Archives AIR25/193 No. 11 Group Operations book 21 May 1940.
[11] In fact the "flying the flag" was actually a reference to the RAF having to do the best it could with existing equipment until specialist close air support planes were developed.
[12] National Archives WO106/5152 (7th May 1940).