Viewpoints

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

By Dr Matthew Powell

Biography: Dr Matthew Powell has a PhD in Modern History from the University of Birmingham awarded in 2014. His thesis investigated the role of Army Co-operation Command in developing tactical air power in Britain during the Second World War . His first book, *The Development of British Tactical Air Power, 1940-1943: A History of Army Co-operation Command* was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2016.

Abstract: Matthew Powell's article The Battle of France, Bartholomew and Barratt: The Creation of Army Cooperation Command, published in APR in Spring 2015, provoked a response from Greg Baughen whose viewpoint, published in APR in Spring 2016, gave an alternative insight to the investigations following the Battle of France, 1940. Greg Baughen sought to explain the War Office's frustration with the lack of appetite for Close Air Support shown by the Air Ministry, by examining and highlighting the tactical success of the Luftwaffe in 1940. Here Matthew Powell explains that the Air Ministry was equally frustrated at the War Office's lack of appreciation for the Operational and Strategic levels of war and their commitment to the Tactical.

Introduction

I read with interest the viewpoint published in *Air Power Review* Volume 19 No 1 and its attempts to present an alternative viewpoint to the one I had taken in my article The Battle of France, Barratt and Bartholomew in a previous issue as well as for moving the debate on the impact of the Battle of France, 1940 on the development of tactical air power in Britain forward.

The viewpoint put forward by Mr. Baughen, much like the Bartholomew Report itself, however, puts forward a limited tactical level analysis that fails to take into account several important factors that had more of an effect on the outcome of this operation. That the British Army's focus was on the impact air power had had over the greater impact of the overall German operational way of war is correct as they had indeed not suffered as greatly at the hands of land-based power as France or Belgium. This focus, however, does highlight the narrow tactical level thinking of both the War Office and the author. The close support attacks conducted after the German success at Sedan only served to give greater tactical success to the *Wehrmacht*. Their operational and strategic success came through greater tactical speed and mobility, turning the tables on the situation that occurred during the First World War where it was operational speed and mobility that was superior and led, in part, to the trench warfare seen for the majority of the conflict. For the Allies, the Battle of France was already lost after the German breakthrough around Sedan where they were able to utilise this tactical speed and mobility to disorientate the slow and cumbersome command, control and communications (C^3) system employed by the Allies and force them off balance as they drove across France. The Allies had little hope of reacting with any real force and the majority of the counter-attacks conducted were hastily planned and with few uncoordinated forces. The *Wehrmacht* were also able to take advantage of the Allied strategic plan to advance to the Dyle River. The C^3 system of the Allies meant that they would never be able to react quickly enough to German thrust. This is further demonstrated by the fact the Allied air attacks on the decisive point around Sedan did not take place until a full three days after the initial assaults on the French defences. Where Allied air power may have had a decisive effect and turned the Battle of France in their favour was through the interdictory attacks on the German columns advancing through the Ardennes. These columns stretched almost as far as the German border. Attacks on these forces would have cut the advanced forces designated to carry out the attacks away from reserves and logistical support, cutting them off and rendering them unable to utilise their greater tactical firepower and mobility. These attacks, which the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief British Air Forces in France, Air Marshal Sir Arthur Barratt, had requested permission to attack when they were first spotted. This was refused by the French High Command for fear of retaliatory attacks on French forces or civilians[1]. The attacks on Belgian fortresses, whilst spectacularly successful and showing great operational imagination, also had no real decisive impact on the outcome of the Battle of France.

To now turn to the War Office and its attitudes towards air power, it must be borne in mind that they were in full agreement not only with the air support system utilised by the Royal Air

Force (RAF) in France, but also on the nature of the targets that were to be prioritised[2]. These targets were to be interdictory rather than close support in nature. To then claim a lack of close support after the event is nothing if not a bit rich! The War Office were fully aware of the parlous state of the RAF's close support capabilities which is why they were in full agreement in September 1939. The British Army's thinking for the whole of the inter-war period, and indeed the majority of the First World War, is at fighting at the tactical level of war. This is why they see close air support as the panacea to any tactical problem they may encounter when in close contact with the enemy. They are unable, at this point in the Second World War, to conceive of fighting at the operational level and are unable to see the effects battlefield air interdiction can have on operations[3]. This is evident in the Bartholomew Report where the focus is simply on air power at the tactical level. The War Office sees close support as acting as 'flying artillery' to be awaiting their beck and call[4]. This lack of knowledge, not only about fighting at the operational level, but also of the fundamental principles of air power and its inherent speed and flexibility, means that they cannot see artillery controlled by an army commander is a much more effective tool at supporting ground forces than aircraft as far more firepower can be concentrated around a target for a far longer period of time than aircraft[5]. This is why the RAF were reluctant to aircraft being used in such a way. Resources that could be utilised to greater effect elsewhere would be wasted performing a role that could be done more effectively by resources already under the Army's control.

In terms of the fighting in France. The major reason why the *Luftwaffe* is able to direct its air campaign with more focus is due to the fact that, through the interdiction attacks conducted against Allied aircraft and aerodrome, they are able to gain at least localised air superiority around what they have decided is the decisive point of the entire operation, allowing them to act with impunity in the air against little to no opposition[6]. Air superiority is the crucial factor to success in any air operation and this is something that the War Office and Bartholomew are unable to understand[7]. This is made clear in the Bartholomew Report when to the committee members, air superiority is taken to mean a protective umbrella of fighters above the heads of ground forces protecting them. This is also what the report means by 'fly the flag'. Friendly ground forces seeing aircraft supporting them. If Allied operations had been successful, it is highly doubtful that ground forces and their commanders would have complained about not seeing friendly aircraft in the skies. This is also why the RAF attempt to sweep the skies on enemy fighters[8]. Air superiority would provide far greater protection to ground forces than a protective umbrella and would also allow successful aerial operations to be conducted, as was the case in France from 1944 onwards when the Allies controlled the skies and the Germans made similar complaints[9]. Aircraft cannot be successful in any operation without relative control of the skies. In this the RAF and Air Ministry were more than correct to stick to their guns. This control of the air gives greater advantage to ground forces allowing them to act with greater freedom. This is why it is fought so bitterly for in the First World War.

The RAF's doctrinal publications also give greater insight into how the RAF view close support and interdiction and it is not the case that the RAF saw fifty miles as being a form of close

support[10]. This claim from an army officer appears to be an exaggeration in order to make a larger point about how the army itself sees air power. What the RAF is, however, is more discerning about when close support should be employed as they are aware of not only how difficult it would be to conduct without air superiority, but also the difficulties inherent in conducting impromptu air support and the dangers that it exposed both pilots and ground forces to[11]. In its investigations the Air Ministry, it is true, did not call on a single army officer to give evidence. The reason for this is that the Air Ministry were not looking to analyse the British Army's fighting methods or doctrine. They were looking to investigate their own methods and organisations in order to establish what had and had not worked in order to improve their capabilities, which they undertake very quickly after France in the form of the Wann-Woodall experiments. The RAF realised that the key to improving their close support capabilities and developing a truly impromptu air support system, lay in communications and signals organisations and not necessarily in doctrine, aircraft, tactics or pilots. In this they were aided by their experiences in France through the use of the Allied Central Air Bureau (ACAB) and the air/ground communications formation 'Phantom' which sent tentacles out with forward formations to report back to the ACAB and allowed the RAF, at times, to receive information up to thirty hours before the French High Command[12].

Conclusion

The Battle of France was not won or lost due to superior or inferior capabilities in close air support, despite what is claimed in the Bartholomew Report. It was lost due to greater mobility and speed at the tactical level that gave a greater advantage at the operational level that allowed the *Wehrmacht* to achieve a strategic victory. This mobility and speed meant that the *Wehrmacht* were able to get inside the Allied OODA loop and it was from this that the Allied forces were never able to recover. The assault and subsequent breakout from Sedan was decisive at the operational level. The tactical air power attacks that followed the breakout, whilst decisive at the tactical level, were merely an afterthought as the Allies were never able to recover to be able to defeat the German advance at the operational level.

The War Office and British Army were unable to conceive of fighting at the operational level and saw the next operation against the Germans breaking down into a tactical level struggle just as the First World War had been. Due to this, they were unable to see how aircraft could aid them at any level of war aside from the tactical. This is why they continued to argue for an army air arm that was under their operational control and used simply to aid ground forces when faced with a tactical problem in the field. They were unable to perceive how isolating the battlefield could aid them in a contest at the tactical level for the majority of the Second World War. Isolating the battlefield would have the increased advantages of cutting enemy forces off from men and materiél support, meaning that once tactical success had been gained victory would be easier to achieve at the operational level. Once this had been achieved, aircraft could then conduct close support attacks with greater impunity to increase the decisiveness of any victory gained.

Notes

[1] TNA AIR 35/354 Barratt's Despatch, Part III: Work of BAFF Prior to Land Battle, July 1940.
[2] TNA WO 106/1597, Air Components for the BEF, France – Notes by CIGS on CAS's Memorandum on Arrangements for Bomber Support for the Allied Army in France, November 1939. TNA WO 190/435, Military Air Targets of an Army Nature, 18 May 1936.
[3] This is dealt with in more detail in Matthew Powell, 'Re-discovering the Operational Level: Army Co-operation Command and Tactical Air Power Development in Britain, 1940-1943', *British Journal for Military History*, 2: 1 (November, 2015), pp.72-85.
[4] TNA AIR 20/3706, Memorandum by Lieutenant-Colonel J.D. Woodall to GHQ Home Forces on Certain Problems in the Organisation of Close Support Bombing, 13 August 1940.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Paul Deichmann, *Spearhead for Blitzkrieg: Luftwaffe Operations in Support of the Army, 1939-1945* (Greenhill Books: London, 1996), p.106.
[7] TNA AIR 10/5547, Air Historical Branch (AHB) Narrative Air Support, 1940.
[8] TNA CAN 106/220, Bartholomew Committee Final Report, p.14, 1940.
[9] Ian Gooderson, *Air Power at the Battlefront: Allied Close Air Support in Europe, 1943-45* (Frank Cass: Oxon and New York, 1997), p.35.
[10] TNA AIR 10/1910, Royal Air Force War Manual, 1928. TNA AIR 10/1206, Manual of Combined Naval, Military and Air Operations, 1925.
[11] TNA AIR 10/1911, Royal Air Force War Manual Part I, 1935.
[12] TNA AIR 10/5547, AHB Narrative Air Support. TNA AIR 20/3706, Memorandum by Woodall to GHQ Home Forces, 13 August 1940.