Book Reviews

Apache Over Libya

By Will Laidlaw
Publisher: Pen & Sword Aviation (5 April 2016) (**ISBN:** 978-1473867628), 200 pages

Reviewed by Dr Christina Goulter

Biography: Dr Christina Goulter is a Senior Lecturer in the Defence Studies Department at King's College London, based at the UK Joint Services Command and Staff College. Between 1994 and 1997, she was Associate Visiting Professor of Strategy at the US Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island. Her research interests include air power, intelligence and counter-insurgency warfare.

Between March and October 2011, a coalition of NATO and partner states conducted a campaign against Gaddafi's regime in Libya. The coalition succeeded in preventing a wholesale massacre in Benghazi and the crushing of a rebellion against Gaddafi's rule. The principal element of the intervention was air power, but various national Special Forces and naval components were also involved. However, it has been held up as a unique example of an aerial intervention strategy, not least because it was done in concert with indigenous ground forces. Air power had been used in a coercive strategic role in the Vietnam war, Kosovo, Bosnia and Afghanistan in 2001, to name just a few examples, but what made the Libyan campaign different was external air power being used in support of local rebel forces. Therefore, it is legitimate to call this a victory *through*, rather than purely *by*, air power.

A handful of studies have emerged since 2011, dealing with air power's role in the Libyan civil war, but almost all of these focus on the fast jet and other fixed wing contributions. This is why Will Laidlaw's book is a vital contribution to our understanding of the campaign. The author is an Army Air Corps pilot by background, and his unit was embarked on HMS *Ocean* during the campaign. Laidlaw takes the reader through a brief history of 656 Squadron, and his own key

role in developing an Apache maritime capability in the months prior to the Libyan campaign. This is one of the most interesting aspects of the book, and the author is very frank about the issues surrounding the Apache's employment. The inability to fold fully the helicopter's blades limited the number of Apaches which could be embarked on HMS *Ocean* to five. However, the author's reference to how the 'soldiers had to get used to the confines of the ship', how 'old procedures had to be re-learned, new ones had to be developed' somewhat underplays the difficulties encountered during the workup period, including the fact that it took months, as opposed to the days implied in the media (p.16). Also, because of the risks involved, the Apaches required a disproportionately large amount of Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) support to ensure their safety and the accuracy of their attacks (given the overriding Responsibility to Protect remit which governed the conduct of the campaign), and the Apache missions had to be given fast jet cover. The latter fact seems to have caused the author consternation: 'jets had to hold our hands, whatever that meant' (p.168).

Laidlaw explains that the chief purpose of the Apache deployment was to have a cognitive impact on the pro-regime forces (p.37). Five Apaches were not going to do vast damage to the regime, but because of the helicopter's fearsome reputation, even a small number were going to have a coercive effect on Gaddafi's forces and the regime. Indeed, pro-Gaddafi forces posted sizeable rewards for the first successful shooting down of an Apache. The regime had cause to be concerned. From the time of their first operational sorties on 3 June 2011, the helicopter crews made short work of their targets: regime 'technicals', tanks, artillery, AAA sites and radar installations, and such attacks complemented those undertaken by French *Tigre* attack helicopters from their assault ship *Tonnerre*. The UK ROEs mean that the Apaches did not have the freedom of manoeuvre that the French *Tigre* crews enjoyed, and one of the reasons the Apache sortie total was comparatively small is because most of the 'no-go' decisions were due to uncertainties over collateral damage risk. The author is quite right to criticise those who have made unfavourable comparisons between the Apache operations in Libya and the level of French sortie generation or UK Apache operations in Afghanistan. As Laidlaw emphasises (p.166), Libya was an unprecedented campaign, and the Apache crews had less than a week's notice before becoming operational with new Tactics, Techniques and Procedures. By the end of the campaign, 656 Squadron had performed 48 combat sorties, attacking 116 targets under the cover of darkness. As the UK military representative to NATO, Air Marshal Sir Christopher Harper, commented: 'this was jointery at its best' (MOD, 'Libya: Operations Updates', 2011).

Among the many strengths of this work is the exposure of cultural differences between the Army and air force aviators. For example, he refers to the way in which operational intelligence and information from the Combined Air Operations Centre was couched in 'jet lingo' (p.55) and how he and his compatriots had to get to grips with airspace coordination. The author makes many insightful comments which need to be taken on board by defence, and one of his most important observations relates to how the 'lessons process' is treated. He made the point that very few people were interested in his post-op report briefs, with scarcely a handful of people turning up to listen (p.168). Sadly, his experience is not unusual. Some readers may

find the conversational 'boy's own' style of writing intrusive and jingoistic, and the author might have been better to treat the subject in a more scholarly style. It is an important subject, and the tone needed to reflect the same. The criticism of the other Services may also seem a little pointed. However, the book captures the bravery and dedication of the Apache crews in the Libyan campaign, and that was the main intent of this work.