

In Command of History:¹

The Air Power Implications

A Review Essay by Air Cdre Peter W Gray RAF

Churchill regularly stated that he was more than content to leave a particular controversy (of which he presided over many) to history – but then quipped that he intended to write the history himself! This clear intention was manifest throughout his long career, both in and out of office. Churchill was a master of communication in all of its forms. His speeches, and broader rhetoric, are still regularly turned to as sources of quotations; his journalism kept him almost close to being able to afford the lifestyle that he chose to adopt; and his multi-volume histories have established his place as an esteemed historian of the English-speaking world. By the time that he returned to office as First Lord of the Admiralty in Chamberlain's government, Churchill had considerably refined his methodology for preparing for prosperity – of which his place therein was of no small importance! Indeed, Churchill's preparation, paper handling, archive forming and occasionally the contents of his

famous minutes all had his writing of the history in mind to a greater or lesser extent.

This major work by Professor David Reynolds² concentrates on Churchill's authorship of the six-volume memoirs-cum-history *The Second World War*. The Allied victory in this conflict cemented, for better or worse, the Churchillian legend that he had done much to engender. The *Second World War* was, and is, a huge work comprising of some 2 million words. Cassells published the work in the UK with sales passing the two million mark; similar sales were recorded in North America where it was also serialised in the *New York Times* and *Life*. The *Second World War* was composed over some seven years and each volume reflects the politics – domestic and international – of the period after 1945 in which it was written. As such, his own role as titular leader of the opposition, or prime minister, had a bearing on what he could, and could not, say. Churchill had a number



Churchill, however, did not ignore air power in its entirety. After all, he was a keen follower of technology and had attempted to gain his own Pilot's Licence; he had been seriously taken with the 'fascinating new art' of flying and it took a near fatal crash

in 1919 to persuade him that his pressing on would be irresponsible to his family. This did not, however, stop him wearing RAF 'Wings' on his Air Commodore's uniform on occasions!

of motivating factors for undertaking such a monumental work while visibly ageing and under increasing pressure. Not least of these was money and Reynolds' descriptions of the machinations Churchill's lawyers undertook to prevent most of the proceeds from the prolific world-wide sales ending up as tax make fascinating reading. Churchill was also seeking to re-establish awareness of the reality that the United States had not won the war on her own – as contemporary publications and movies were beginning to imply. Most of all, however, as Reynolds points out, Churchill was seeking vindication for his own actions – and condemnation of others. He was hugely successful in his damnation of appeasement with the reputations of Chamberlain and Baldwin never recovering. Likewise the stark contrast between the 'feeble French and the defiant

British' in 1940 'has shaped English-language history ever since'³. The implication that this work should have such far-reaching influence and authority has been no accident. Churchill's Cabinet Secretary, Sir Edward Bridges, and his successor Sir Norman Brook both considered the work to be part memoir, but also part official history. Indeed, the latter acted both as a censor and unofficial editor with several pages of the work entirely in his own words.

A work of this authority had immediate implications for the ensuing historiography of the Second World War; for the careers of those of whom Churchill approved; and for the myriad of policy issues on which Churchill commented. The role, and delivery, of air power is one such case. This review essay will explore the issues

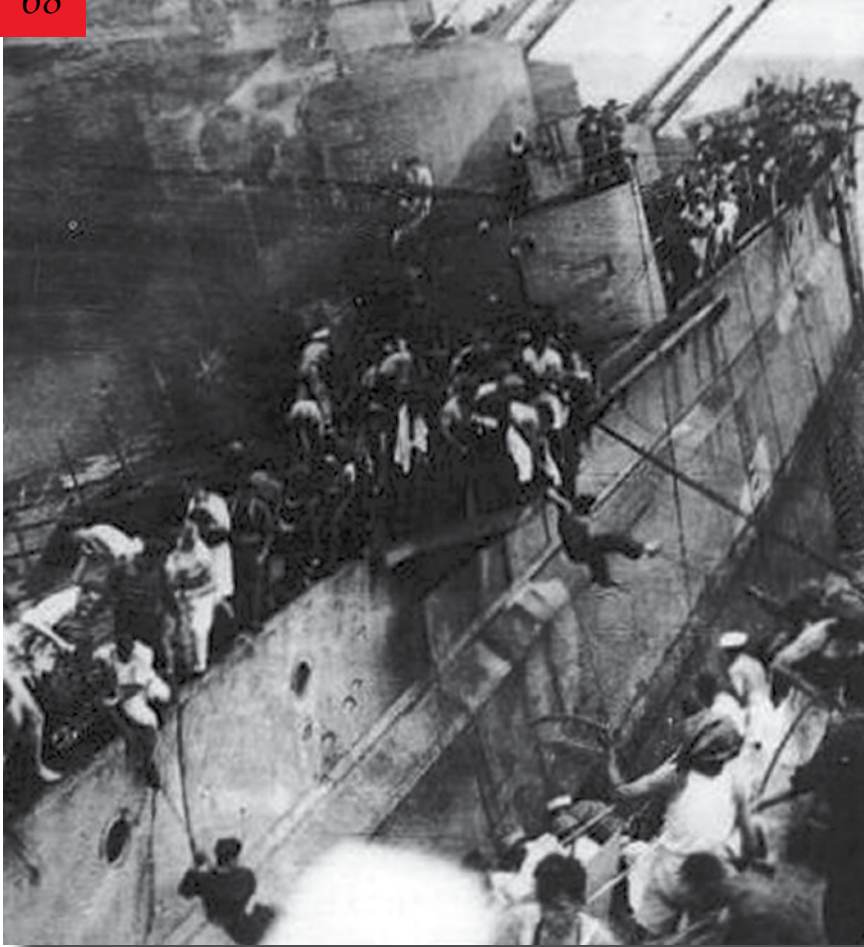
that Reynolds highlights in his book along with the methodological rationale that led to the subject being dealt with in the way that Churchill chose so to do.

In analysing Churchill's treatment of airmen and air power in *The Second World War*, it must first be acknowledged that Churchill did not write all 2 million words himself. Rather, the six volumes were the result of the endeavours of a team of researchers who became known as the 'syndicate'. In addition to the unofficial efforts of the Cabinet Secretary, Churchill drew on the expertise of a former Vice-Chief of the Imperial General Staff – Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Pownall – who handled military operations, for example producing papers on the Battle for Monte Cassino; his efforts run consistently through the whole. Churchill was also assisted by Lord Ismay who had been the wartime Military Secretary to the Cabinet. Professional historical academic support came from William Deakin who had served as a Colonel in the Army in command of the first British Military Mission to Tito⁴; he had previously assisted Churchill with his work on the life of Marlborough and later went on to head one of the Oxford Colleges. The naval aspect was provided by Commodore Gordon Allen who had served at Jutland in the First War and then ended the Second as Senior Naval Officer in the Combined Operations HQ. The fifth recruit was Denis Kelly who had won an MC in Burma. Two things immediately become apparent: the first is that each of these individuals came to the party with their own baggage, memories or agendas. Pownall, for example, had worked in British Expeditionary Force HQ and had later had first hand experience of Churchill's erratic working habits. More importantly, Churchill did not have an airman permanently on his team. As Reynolds points out⁵ this led to the air power angle suffering from neglect. Admittedly Churchill referred some texts to Viscount Portal who had been his Chief of the Air Staff for much of the War. He also attempted to fill the gap by asking Air Marshal Sir Guy Garrod to produce some material on the strategic bomber offensive, albeit that this material ended up being unceremoniously dumped out of sequence in a later volume. But in terms of balance, this created

an immediate and lasting imbalance within the six-volume book and the serialisations. It also, and arguably more importantly, led subsequent air power historians to have to rely on the official histories of the individual campaigns (such as Webster and Frankland's *Strategic Air Offensive against Germany 1939-1945*).

Churchill, however, did not ignore air power in its entirety. After all, he was a keen follower of technology and had attempted to gain his own Pilot's Licence; he had been seriously taken with the 'fascinating new art' of flying and it took a near fatal crash in 1919 to persuade him that his pressing on would be irresponsible to his family⁶. This did not, however, stop him wearing RAF 'Wings' on his Air Commodore's uniform on occasions! Churchill was also well aware of the potential of German air power and his message features prominently in Book 1 of *The Gathering Storm* (Volume I of the master work)⁷. It is evident, even in this early reference, that Churchill was rather dismissive of the potential of tactical air power while showing a propensity for exaggerating the scope for civilian casualties. Reynolds points out very clearly⁸ that Churchill's memoirs suggest that he was considerably more clear thinking and far-sighted than was actually the case. It should also be acknowledged that he was not quite the lone voice that has become part of the Churchillian myth. In fact, he was but one of a number of players working to increase awareness of German potential. Nor was he alone in misjudging the potential casualty figures that could result from the Luftwaffe attacking our cities. In *The Gathering Storm*, Churchill makes a bland admission that he painted too dark a picture – but deliberately excises some of his numerical predictions from one speech and buries others deep in appendices.

In fairness to Churchill, his involvement in pre-War air defence committees gave him a head start when he became Prime Minister in 1940. The fall of France and the Battle of Britain provide the central theme to Volume II – *Their Finest Hour*. Naturally these events also provide the scope for some of Churchill's most memorable speeches. But the rhetoric often hides the divisions that



The crew of HMS *Prince of Wales* abandoning ship

Churchill's sublime self-confidence in his own ability as an accomplished naval strategist was to suffer several rude awakenings at the hand of air power during the conflict. One, almost literal, awakening came with the news of the loss of the Prince of Wales and Repulse to Japanese aircraft in December 1941

were present within the strategic leadership. Lord Halifax, as Foreign Secretary, remained convinced that a negotiated settlement with Hitler was the only practical solution. From Reynolds' uncovering of 'Confidential Annexes' belonging to the Cabinet Secretary⁹, it is apparent that Churchill himself admitted to the possibility of subsequent negotiations with a successor regime to Hitler's once German resistance had been lowered. Seen through the prism of 1940, when the abyss seemed all the darker and wider, it is clear that the only practical mechanism for Britain to bring this about was through the generation of our own strategic bombing offensive. Hindsight allows Churchill, and his successors, to see the inescapable logic of 'unconditional surrender'. But this only became feasible after Hitler's attack on Russia and American entry into the conflict. At the time, strategic bombing was, in modern vernacular, a 'no-brainer'.

But first the threat of invasion had to be countered. Reynolds again highlights¹⁰ that the various intelligence staffs had been seriously rattled by their failure to predict many of Hitler's more audacious moves and the success of tactics such as Blitzkrieg. The assessment pendulum swung from complacency to panic and invasion fever was alive and well. The disagreements between Churchill and his Chiefs of Staff over the severity of the invasion threat, its target area and whether it would be attempted without air superiority were largely eradicated from the successive drafts of *Their Finest Hour*.

Churchill's subsequent description of the Battle of Britain is as well known as any other English-language classic. What is interesting from this description, particularly from the historiographical point of view, is that the story was already well known when Churchill reached for his pen (or

more accurately started dictation). The Air Ministry (through the Air Historical Branch) had, in 1941, published a publicity pamphlet under the title, not surprisingly, *The Battle of Britain*. At threepence a copy, and sixpence for the illustrated version, orders exceeded 1.5 million within the first week¹¹. It was marketed widely in America and served to elevate the Battle of Britain to parallel Trafalgar (although reference to the latter was taken out of the French version!). Churchill had its original author tracked down and commissioned him to update and prepare a companion paper on the Blitz. Churchill therefore accepted the official account of the Battle with its four phases and concentration on 15 September 1940 – even though post-war research (available at the time) had shown that the Luftwaffe lost more aircraft on 15 August. This allowed him to avoid a battle of numbers and perpetuated the myths that he had helped to create. A final point that comes out of the writing of this episode was the depth of focus on ‘the Few’. When Churchill made his famous speech on 20 August 1940, he deliberately referred to all British aircrew — including the Bomber crews who would be taking the battle to the Reich¹². This theme was a key factor in his thinking at the time, that modern warfare was to be fought by relatively few specialists, rather than the masses involved in trench warfare¹³. The Air Ministry pamphlet had focussed public attention on the Fighter Command pilots as being ‘the Few’, and with the debate growing on the ethics and effectiveness of the Bomber offensive, Churchill was more than content not to rock this particular boat.

Churchill’s sublime self-confidence in his own ability as an accomplished naval strategist was to suffer several rude awakenings at the hand of air power during the conflict. One, almost literal, awakening came with the news of the loss of the Prince of Wales and Repulse to Japanese aircraft in December 1941¹⁴. Churchill’s treatment, in Volume III, *The Grand Alliance*, of these incidents also reveals his greater strategic error in underestimating the power and potential of Japan. He gave vent at the time to his anger over Japanese by urging a massive air assault on Japan which should include the ‘burning of Japanese cities by

incendiary bombs’; not surprisingly, and consistent with his stance on Dresden, Churchill was less aggressive in his memoirs.

On 3 September 1940, while Fighter Command was locked in its deadly contest with the Luftwaffe, Churchill wrote that ‘the Bombers alone provide the means of victory’¹⁵. He went on to advocate the destruction of the enemy economy as the only option open at that time. Although Churchill printed these, and other similar comments, on bombing in *Their Finest Hour*, they are either buried in appendices or quoted out of context. Reynolds dryly comments their ‘significance for strategy is thereby obscured’! A similar stratagem was used in the publication of the papers prepared by Air Marshal Sir Guy Garrod on the strategic bombing debate. This debate was at its height in 1942 and should therefore have fitted into Volume IV *The hinge of Fate*. Admittedly publishing pressures did not help, but they cannot excuse the consignment of this work, out of context, into Volume V *Closing the Ring*. The debates on whether air power should have been transferred to the Middle East, or to support the Battle of the Atlantic, are well known. The fact that by summer 1942 they had escalated to Cabinet and Chiefs of Staff level is glossed over by Churchill¹⁶. In practical terms, Churchill could see little real alternative but to continue the Bombing offensive. He was certainly reluctant to see the air power assets spread too thinly between the Coastal Command and the army. Reynolds suggests that Churchill did not share Trenchard’s view that the strategic bombing offensive could make an invasion unnecessary. But it is clear that he saw the systematic attacks on Germany as essential preparation for the eventual invasion. It is not explicitly stated that Churchill foresaw that an absolutely essential element of the preparation – the battle for air supremacy over the beaches and landing grounds of Normandy – would actually be conducted over the heartland of the Reich. Churchill’s treatment of the work of Bomber Command in his volumes is, at best, lukewarm. It is clear that Garrod was neither a historian, nor an accomplished staff officer like Pownall. Garrod’s work was therefore comparatively pedestrian and it is evident that he brought little ‘baggage’ on the

subject to his narrative (he had been in the Far East and the Mediterranean for the last two years of the war, rather than involved in the controversy over bombing policy).

In his minutes, Churchill was unambiguous over the need to hammer the enemy — whether it was Germany, Italy or Japan. It became evident as the War progressed that Churchill did not stay abreast of the various debates, particularly the ones that centred on primacy between oil, transportation and area bombings in 1944. There is also a strong suggestion that, by this stage, he was positioning himself for the post-war moral high ground¹⁷. His rather grudging comments on Harris' leadership are just part of the theme.

As one progresses through the original six volumes, or through Reynolds' probably more readable text, it becomes clear that Churchill has a very clear preference for a given style of leadership¹⁸. It would probably be too grand to say that he espoused one theory over another, but it is clear that he favoured certain 'Great Men' of history and of the contemporary conflict. Particular favourites included Montgomery, Mountbatten and Alexander. Although it is evident from Henry Probert's fine biography of Harris that Churchill had a close relationship the Commander-in-Chief of Bomber Command in the early years of the war, this is not reflected in *The Second World War*. The World Statesman and Nobel Prize Winner (albeit for Literature, not to Churchill's chagrin for Peace) was content to keep his distance in posterity. Churchill is equally reticent over Dowding in general and, in particular, his unseemly dismissal in late 1940. Reynolds usefully points to an early draft covering this episode in which Churchill admits to having been wrong in not standing up to the Air Ministry¹⁹.

Conversely, Reynolds describes Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal as rarely standing up to Churchill²⁰ in his role as Chief of the Air Staff. During Admiral Pound's time as First Sea Lord, especially as he was increasingly dogged by ill health, he had been relatively docile; the burden of challenging Churchill fell, by default, to General

Alan Brooke (later Viscount Alanbrooke). Pound's replacement by Cunningham, which according to Reynolds, changed the internal dynamic within the Chiefs of Staff Committee. Almost inevitably this is in marked contrast with Denis Richards' tale in his official biography of Portal²¹ in which the CAS is regularly seen as perfectly willing, tactfully and with charm, to stand up to Churchill when necessary. Alex Danchev, Field Marshal Viscount Alanbrooke's *Diaries*' editor, points out that Portal was "highly intelligent, and a model of integrity, he was perhaps the most reserved of the COS". It may also be that Portal had the sense to let Alanbrooke do the fighting as he clearly relished the challenge — and was anyway the Chairman of the Chiefs²². Churchill's own words²³ shed little light. Alanbrooke's diaries²⁴ go both ways. On 8 March 1944, Alanbrooke describes a wrangle with Churchill over Pacific strategy in which "Portal as usual not too anxious to argue against the PM, and dear old Cunningham so wild with rage that he hardly dared let himself speak. I therefore had to do most of the arguing"²⁵. Alternatively, in discussing aid to Russia on 4 December 1941, Portal refused to sanction the Prime Minister's intent leading to Churchill storming out of the Chiefs of Staff meeting that he was supposed to be chairing complaining that they sought to block every move he tried to make²⁶. This interchange led to Alanbrooke confiding to his diary "God knows where we would be without him, but God knows where we shall go with him!".

Overall, Reynolds has produced an outstanding volume containing much original analysis. Beyond that, it is a highly entertaining contribution to the Churchill genre of material. It provides a unique insight into Churchill as an author per se; and more importantly into Churchill as the 'Master' (in the Syndicate's own words) of a complex and talented research engine. *In Command of History* is both a book about *The Second World War* and about the rest of the historiography surrounding the early writings on the conflict in the English-speaking world. It also sets the tone for much of the subsequent debate on the Cold War which was escalating, to Churchill's dismay, as he wrote. *In Command of History* also highlights the pitfalls in reading only one version

of history. Churchill had his own complex agendas which varied as he wrote each successive book and volume. Their contents have to be seen in that light. More worryingly the generations of subsequent historians, politicians and practitioners who have either read, or been taught, according to the authorised Churchillian view without seeing the need to read further. In some ways, air power came off lightly in being relatively neglected!

Notes

¹ In *Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War*, David Reynolds, Allen Lane 2004, Penguin Books 2005, London

² Professor of International History at the University of Cambridge.

³ Penguin version (as all page numbers from the Reynolds text) page 504. For a detailed discourse on the impact of the work on the historiography of the War see pages 153-9.

⁴ F W D Deakin, *The Embattled Mountain*, OUP, London, 1971, tells the story from the first parachute insertion.

⁵ Page 77 for example.

⁶ Page 523.

⁷ Page 119.

⁸ Pages 97 – 100.

⁹ Page 173.

¹⁰ Page 184.

¹¹ Page 186.

¹² For the full text, see *The War Speeches of the Rt Hon W S Churchill*, compiled by Charles Eade, Vol 1, Cassell, London, 1951 pages 240, 241.

¹³ See also footnote 54 in Chapter 6 to Stephen Bungay's *The Most Dangerous Enemy*. Bungay states that, as an avid reader of H G Wells, Churchill derived this notion from *War in the Air*.

¹⁴ Pages 264-7 and 269.

¹⁵ Page 175.

¹⁶ Page 321,

¹⁷ Reynolds cites Max Hastings *Bomber Command*. But see also this author piece on *Dresden 1945 – Just Another Raid?* In *Air Power Review*, Vol 4 No 1, Spring 2001.

¹⁸ The author is currently Director of the Defence Leadership and Management Centre and lectures widely of Leadership theory issues.

¹⁹ Page 187.

²⁰ Page 405.

²¹ *Portal of Hungerford- The Life of Marshal of the Royal Air Force Viscount Portal of Hungerford*, Heinemann, London, 1977, Chapter XVIII.

²² Churchill effectively appointed him to replace Pound whose health was failing, but ahead of Portal whose 'turn' it would have been.

²³ W S Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol V, 'Closing the Ring', Cassell, London, 1952, has many quotations from his official memoranda, but little of the substance. Disagreements with Clement Atlee prevented him from quoting the Chiefs of Staff responses.

²⁴ *War Diaries 1039 -1945*, Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke, edited by Alex Danchev and Daniel Todman, Wiedenfeld & Nicholson, London, 2001.

²⁵ *War Diaries*, *ibid*, page 530 and *The Second World War*, *ibid*, pages 504 – 6 on the same subject.

²⁶ *War Diaries*, *ibid*, page 207.

This article has been republished online with Open Access.

Ministry of Defence © Crown Copyright 2023. The full printed text of this article is licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0. To view this licence, visit <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/>. Where we have identified any third-party copyright information or otherwise reserved rights, you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned. For all other imagery and graphics in this article, or for any other enquires regarding this publication, please contact: Director of Defence Studies (RAF), Cormorant Building (Room 119), Shrivenham, Swindon, Wiltshire SN6 8LA.

 **ROYAL
AIR FORCE**
**Centre for Air and
Space Power Studies**

OGL