Speech

Battle of Britain Speech

A speech made in 2018 at the Royal Air Force Club, London, on the Royal Air Force's Hundredth Anniversary.

By Air Vice-Marshal (Retd) Marten van der Veen

Biography: Air Vice-Marshal (Retd) Marten van der Veen joined the Royal Air Force as an Engineer Officer after taking a degree at Oxford. He spent two years as an Exchange Officer with the French Air Force followed by the Advanced Staff Course. Later tours included Director of Defence Studies (RAF), Station Commander at RAF Cosford and subsequently at RAF St Athan. He was the last Commandant at the RAF Staff College at Bracknell, and in 1997 he retired following a tour as Director General of Support Management (RAF). Subsequently, he became Bursar and Fellow of Balliol College, Oxford.

Introduction

The Formation of the RAF

Now, to people of our age, I guess the first thing that comes to mind when thinking about the RAF is the Battle of Britain – undoubtedly the RAF's finest hour. Many even now would hold the somewhat rosy view expressed by one of the early post-war historians in 1945, namely that 'The Royal Air Force was certainly too small in 1939, but for all that it was the finest air force in the world'. Well, that was simply not true.

In 1939 Sir Edgar Ludlow-Hewitt, the CinC (Commander-in-Chief) of Bomber Command – one of the three operational commands, wrote: 'Today our bombing force is, judged from a war standard, practically useless and cannot take advantage of the excellent characteristics of its new and expensive aircraft.'

As for the second of the three operational commands, Coastal Command, this was the acknowledged Cinderella, weak in numbers and almost entirely equipped with obsolescent aircraft. It had virtually no anti-submarine capability, as the Royal Navy thought ASDIC[1] – their sonar system – would deal with any submarine menace. Coastal Command's main task was keeping an eye on surface ships. It did not quite turn out that way.

Of the three operational commands, only Fighter Command had anything like the right equipment and operational doctrine, but the numbers were small – so small that Sir Hugh Dowding, the CinC, when told in July 1939 to earmark ten squadrons for the British Expeditionary Force to go to France, wrote: ' If ten regular squadrons are withdrawn, the remaining resources would be altogether inadequate for the defence of this country.' So even Fighter Command was on a knife edge.

As for Army Cooperation Command – with battlefield fighter aircraft, with bomber aircraft designed to isolate the battlefield, and aircraft for reconnaissance, for artillery spotting, and for attacking tanks – well, it simply did not exist! All the lessons that the Royal Flying Corps had so painfully learnt in the First World War had largely been forgotten.

So in truth, in 1939 the RAF was largely in disarray. But let's not be too condemnatory. Little money had been available in the 1920's and 1930's, and the RAF could not do everything. But neither the public nor Parliament were really aware of this.

So how could this have happened in those twenty-one years since the RAF was formed in 1918? - at which time it had without doubt been the finest air force in the world.

This is the tale that I want to try to get over to you this evening, by attempting to answer five questions. Why was the RAF formed in the first place? How on earth did it manage to retain its independence? Why was it in disarray? How was it that Fighter Command managed to beat the German air force? And lastly, who were the brilliant people we should thank?

As I expect you all know, the Royal Flying Corps was formed in 1912 with two wings, one military and one naval – the latter separating from the Royal Flying Corps two years later. Even though the principal battles of the First World War took place on land in Belgium and France, there were some relatively ineffectual Zeppelin raids against London in 1915 and 1916. Later, in May and June 1917, the Germans sent waves of Gotha twin-engine bombers to bomb British cities. Hundreds were killed, of course, but it was nothing like the carnage in France. Nevertheless, the public were incensed. Britain had not been so humiliated since the Dutch fleet sailed up the Thames in 1667.

The government clearly had to do something, and so it set up a committee – of two: General Jan Smuts, a South African, and the Prime Minister himself, Lloyd George. Smuts wrote the reports; he worked fast and presented them within a month. The key report was the second one, which many historians regard as the first of three events vital to the RAF's victory in the Battle of Britain. It recommended the establishment of an independent Armed Service – the Royal Air Force. It is true there was some degree of consensus at that time that the two air arms had to be amalgamated – essentially because, and I quote: 'The Army were always trying to grab from the Navy materiel which the latter had been able to acquire. The Army, on the other hand, complained that the Navy purchased everything in sight, whether they required it or not'. So, the formation of the Royal Air Force in April 1918 stemmed in part from this procurement inefficiency, in part from the dismay that we appeared to have no proper defence against the Gothas, and in part from Smuts' understanding that aircraft opened up a new way to wage war – by bombing. We were lucky that the PM chose Smuts, and Smuts was fortunate to have as his closest adviser Lieutenant General Sir David Henderson, who had been the first commander of the Royal Flying Corps in France. It was these two men – Smuts and Henderson – who shaped the course of aviation history.

Major General Hugh Trenchard, the commander of the Royal Flying Corps in France in 1917 was recalled to be the first Chief of the Air Staff (CAS), but we were lucky in many ways that he did not get along with the Air Minister at the time. Extraordinarily, he resigned as Chief of the Air Staff of the fledgling Service just two weeks after the RAF was formed. He was then put in charge of the RAF's Independent Bombing Force – an organisation that was essentially given free rein to bomb the industries of Germany in those last six months of the War. And it was this experience, as much as anything, that persuaded Trenchard that Air Forces could be used independently of the other two Services to wage war. It was this theory of waging war that allowed him to argue for the continuing independence of the RAF during the 1920's. Indeed, the Trenchard Doctrine of offensive action largely drove the way the RAF was structured and equipped between the wars – and, as we shall see in due course, it led to the theory of the 'knockout blow' which did so much to frighten people in the 1930's.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Trenchard had been put in charge of the Independent Force; Major General Frederick Sykes, who had been heavily involved in the formation of the Royal Flying Corps, had become CAS after Trenchard's resignation; and in 1919 Churchill became

Secretary of State for War and Air, combining two posts - possibly because Lloyd George had concluded that the RAF should be disbanded after all. Churchill was not so sure. But he was clear that the Sykes plan for the peacetime air force was far too grandiose for the money available. He sacked Sykes and reappointed Trenchard, liking his alternative plan for a small, part-professional peacetime RAF. And Trenchard stayed as CAS for more than ten years! It is not surprising, then, that every RAF establishment has a portrait of him on their walls – including the RAF Club! If anyone man could be said to personify the RAF, that man would surely be Lord Trenchard. He presided over the Service for its first decade, fighting as maybe nobody else could have done to preserve its independence, and laying the foundations on which his successors could build. He is known by many, with considerable justice, as the 'Father of the Royal Air Force', although he himself disliked the term. In his view, Sir David Henderson deserved the epithet more than he, and that perhaps reflects the enormous influence Henderson had had with Smuts in the writing of report that founded the RAF.

Trenchard combined his plans for the structure of the Service with a radical proposal to use airpower to police the difficult corners of the Empire, initially Somaliland. There had been unrest in Somaliland for many years, and the Army had failed to quell the problem. The RAF proposed to send a force of twelve aircraft. And in the course of 1920 such a small, economical force, in conjunction with soldiers of the Camel Corps, did indeed quell the rebellion.
It conjures up a rather wonderful picture, doesn't it? Trenchard was now in a position to suggest similar policing operations in other troublesome parts of the Empire. No one was prepared to give up the colonies and protectorates, but on the other hand the resources available were few. And so, a system of reprisals by bombing, and so of deterrence, was established in Iraq, Aden and later in the north-west Frontier of India. In this way we managed to pacify large tracts of difficult countries, and to do so essentially independently of the other two Services. It was one of Trenchard's master strokes, but it required someone of Churchill's stature - with the imagination and the willingness to take risks - to accept that it could be done.

I mentioned three key events: the first being the establishment of an independent Air Force. The second of these key events was Trenchard's blueprint for the new Service. Let's examine this blueprint a bit. He knew that the RAF would be a technical Service, and that a large proportion of the personnel would have to be skilled tradesmen to maintain the aircraft. This needed a different calibre of people from those entering the Army and the Navy; indeed, it required an apprentice training college to develop their skills: RAF Halton, near Aylesbury.

Trenchard also knew that he needed to produce a stream of competent pilots, and instil an esprit de corps in an officer corps separate from the other two Services. Consequently, the RAF College Cranwell was established in 1920. Operational flying is and was for the most part a young man's occupation, and for this Trenchard introduced a short service commissioning scheme – a scheme unlike that of the other two Services. And in 1925 the first Auxiliary Squadrons were formed – the RAF's TA (Territorial Army) of the day.

Furthermore, Trenchard realised that the RAF would need a small cadre of well-educated senior officers – and to ensure that he established a Staff College at Andover. Some of the place names may have changed a bit, but in essence, Trenchard's structure for the RAF survives to this day – so durable was it.

His structure was one of the key elements in the preservation of the Service's independence in those interwar years, and crucial also to the way in which the Service worked during the war: the need for quality, both in technical training and in flying training - with which the RAF had been imbued during those pre-war years – was only very rarely put aside, and then only in the direst circumstances.

So, in view of the solid basis that Trenchard established, what went wrong in those pre-war years? Well, much of it stemmed from a lack of money. Where have we heard that before! Britain was no longer the richest country in the world, and we were still trying to preserve an Empire. The other thread was the understandable horror of what had happened in the First World War. 'Never again' were the watchwords. And remember that for Britain the whole exercise had been most unusual. The continental countries were quite used to raising conscript armies from time to time. Britain had never had to do that before. We did not want to do it again. The continental commitment had become an anathema, and so, after the great demobilisation at the end of the First World War, the British Army was run down to very small numbers again, and structured for Empire rather than for another continental war. The strategy of having an Air Force capable of delivering a knockout blow by bombing, and – by having such a capability, deterring potential enemies – came to be regarded as a very neat economical alternative. That and the Royal Navy to protect the seas around our islands.

It was very much the fear of a repetition of World War I and of aerial bombardment in particular that led to the Geneva Disarmament Conferences of the early 1930's, under the aegis of the League of Nations. In fact, the British Government made a number of apparently serious proposals to the Disarmament Conferences suggesting that bomber aircraft should be banned internationally. You can imagine the distraught rear-guard action from the Air Staff at the time. The conferences, which lasted from 1931 to 1934 – just as Hitler was coming to power, had the very unfortunate effect of putting any serious re-equipping of the Services on hold for a number of years, so concerned was the government to avoid compromising progress at these conferences. But in the end, Germany walked out, as Hitler had rather different ideas. Nevertheless, the bomber concept was still stuck in the public's imagination. One of the much-quoted speeches of Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin in 1936 has it that the 'Bomber will always get through.' And let us face it, at that stage they probably would have done – as proper fighter defence was not really possible then. It was this consensus that allowed the RAF to submit requisitions for new bombers. Much of the rearmament programme in the pre-war years included considerable expenditure on such famous aircraft as Wellingtons, Hampdens, and the design of other aircraft like the Manchester – which led to the Lancaster. The catch was, as

Sir Edgar Ludlow Hewitt articulated so tersely three years later, that even these fine new aircraft had neither the range, nor the bomb load, nor the navigation systems, nor the bombing systems actually to put into effect the strategy that the RAF propounded. The bomber doctrine had been accepted for so long because many believed any civilian populace would succumb to bombing very quickly and demand an end to the war. We should not mock these beliefs; there was without doubt an element of truth in them. The Dutch, after all, surrendered after Rotterdam was bombed and Utrecht was threatened.

But fortunately, Chamberlain became Prime Minister in 1937, and his Minister for Coordination of Defence, Sir Thomas Inskip, argued that 'the RAF's role is not an early knockout blow, but to prevent the Germans from knocking us out'. In this way, Inskip upended years of RAF doctrine which held that the best means of defence was attack. Even if the Air Ministry had not quite come to this conclusion, Dowding – who had been appointed CinC of Fighter Command in 1936, had certainly got there, propounding the so-called 'Dowding Doctrine': 'The best defence of the country is the Fear of the Fighter. If we are strong in fighters we should probably never be attacked in force.'

This was the very opposite of the 'the Trenchard Doctrine' of the knockout blow, which had hitherto been regarded as RAF's principal task and raison d'être. Fortunately, fighters had not been completely neglected – of course not!

But it was certainly the bomber doctrine that allowed the Service to preserve its independence – and just as well that it did – for that very independence permitted Fighter Command to emerge and perfect the system that beat the Germans. It was only under the pressure of war and with the mobilisation of all the best scientific and technical brains in the country that the bomber deficiencies were eventually resolved. By 1945, Bomber Command was indeed a mighty weapon of war. But not in 1939.

However, fighters alone cannot make a defence system. Let's therefore look briefly at one or two other technological developments. And I wonder if you can sense where I am going with this? Well, we really need to go back to 1934 to trace the succession of lucky breaks. The first of these was the formation of a scientific committee to survey air defence. It was actually a very high-powered committee, chaired by Henry Tizard, chairman of the Aeronautical Research Committee (and once an RFC pilot), and it included two Nobel laureates as well as senior Ministry men – both Service and civilian. It was in fact the first time that scientifically trained researchers were seen as having a vital part to play, not simply in the weapons of war, but also in the study of operations. One option they looked at was a 'death ray'. Not surprisingly, that was rejected, but the Superintendent of the Radio Department at the National Physical Laboratory (NPL) – a certain Mr Watson-Watt - added that, even if it could be devised, it would be useless unless you could locate the target accurately. But here he thought he might be able to help. He knew of a Post-Office report which mentioned that aircraft interfered with radio signals and re-radiated them. And so, the crucial concept of radar was born. The establishment

of this scientific committee was, I think, the third significant event that permitted Fighter Command to win the Battle of Britain.

That was one key technological development. The other was the development of the eight-gun monoplane fighters – the Spitfire and the Hurricane. It's an interesting story, and it starts with the Schneider Trophy competitions – which had been set up by a Frenchman in 1912, believe it or not! – to encourage aircraft development. And it was in part thanks to a private donation of £100,000 from a Lady Houston that the Supermarine team were able to compete once again in 1931, and win for the third time. This allowed them to keep the trophy, which, incidentally, you can see today in the Science Museum. It was the Supermarine design team, led by Reginald Mitchell, that came up with the design for the legendary Spitfire, which first flew in 1936 - based on the Schneider trophy developments.

But it must be said that the RAF's stroke of genius in all this was tying all the elements together into an air defence system, with a proper command and control system. Interestingly, a unified command structure of fighters and anti-aircraft guns had been established around London in July 1917 following on from General Jan Smuts' first report.

The unified system had never been dismantled, and in the late 1930's it was further developed by Sir Hugh Dowding and Air Vice-Marshal Keith Park into an extraordinarily smooth-running mechanism, centred on Headquarters Fighter Command at Bentley Priory. Some of you may have been there and seen the control room where Dowding could survey the unfolding battle. Information came in from the radars, from the Royal Observer Corps, from the airfields, from the ships – and everything was displayed on a huge horizontal map of Britain, with a dozen or two WAAFs (Women's Auxiliary Air Force) pushing markers across the board with something akin to billiard cues. The appropriate portion of the Fighter Command map was displayed at the next level down at Group Headquarters – 10 Group, 11 Group, 12 Group, and 13 Group. It was there that the squadrons were allocated to the incoming raids.

But control of the aircraft was exercised from the Sector Control Rooms at the level below that of the Groups. Originally the Sector Control Rooms were on some of the airfields, but fortunately alternatives were provided some miles off base. And here we see another stroke of genius that could only have occurred in the RAF. The people who actually controlled the aircraft in the air, directing them hither and thither to the right height and position to engage the enemy, were mostly mere squadron leaders. You could not possibly imagine that sort of tactical control of a major weapon of war being implemented by such relatively junior officers in the Navy or the Army – even nowadays!

The plotting system in Dowding's system was a masterpiece of graphic design, and the whole was an elaborate information network, a sort of analogue intranet – as we might put it today. It was a brilliant innovation: robust, flexible, effective, and the Germans really never understood how it was that the RAF was always at the right place at the right time to take them on.

But during the Battle of Britain – which raged officially between 10th July and the end of October 1940, we had another stroke of luck. In the first few weeks after Dunkirk, the Luftwaffe concentrated their attacks on coastal targets and ships in the Channel. Then they turned their attention to Fighter Command. Only if the Germans had command of the air could they keep the Royal Navy at bay while the invasion fleet went across. Although the British inflicted heavy losses on the German bomber fleets, and fighter force too, the Germans in their turn inflicted heavy damage on Fighter Command aircraft, airfields and some of the radar sites – but none of it enough to incapacitate Fighter Command. However, some stray bombs fell on London on the night of 24th August 1940, and Churchill immediately demanded retaliatory raids against Berlin. Some days later Wellingtons and Hampdens did a small amount of damage to Berlin, and Hitler was incensed.

On 30th August Hitler rescinded his ban on bombing London, and the Luftwaffe switched its main effort against London. The Germans may well have hoped that attacking London would bring the British government to heel. Even at that time Hitler was still – almost certainly – hoping that Britain would come to terms, and that no invasion would be needed. In the event, the change in targeting gave some very welcome respite to Fighter Command. Aircraft, airfields and radar sites were repaired, and on 15th September (nowadays regarded as Battle of Britain Day) the RAF once again inflicted very heavy damage on the Luftwaffe, destroying many of the attacking aircraft. Two days later the German invasion plans were cancelled, and Britain was left to fight another day.

So, the very first significant air battle in history had been won by the RAF, and the Germans had suffered their first defeat of the war. I daresay that you would expect me to make the point, but it seems to me quite impossible to imagine that we in Britain could have put anything like this air defence system together, had the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service been squabbling over resources, contracts, engines, and aircraft as they did in the First World War. It needed the independence of a separate Service to allow the development of Dowding's smooth running air defence system.

And so, the RAF had reached its majority – it was twenty-one years in those days – in triumph. Much of it, of course, was due to the courage and sacrifice of the fighter pilots in the Battle of Britain. But we had come through on the basis of a tremendous amount of luck, as I have tried to indicate, quite a lot of brilliant management, and some exceptional individuals. Indeed, it seems to me that without their insight and determination, and indeed a touch of genius on the part of Smuts, Churchill, Trenchard, Tizard, Park and Dowding, I would not be writing this, or else it would be in German.

I will leave it to others to tell the RAF's story concerning the rest of the war – the bomber offensive, the Battle of the Atlantic, the land/air battles in the desert, Italy and in Normandy. The combination of excellent generalship, an economy geared for war, the brilliant use of science, technology and operational research, and of course extraordinary effort and sacrifice

on the part of those on the frontline brought success in every area. But sadly, in victory in 1945, Britain was financially broke, just as it had been in 1918.

One might therefore have expected a rapid demobilisation and enormous loss of military skill and expertise – just as there had been after the First World War. But this time – as we all know – another enemy appeared, namely the Soviet Union. Of course, military numbers went down, but we did not drop our guard. Indeed, since the war the RAF has been constantly busy. First, we had the Berlin Air Lift, and Confrontation with Indonesia. We were then involved with British nuclear weapons, the Cold War, and then – out of the blue – the Falklands. And that particular war was a watershed for the RAF, as we used precision guided bombs for the very first time. Only now can air power win wars on its own, as so many of the pre-war advocates had forecast. Our efforts in the first Gulf War, for example, led General Sir Peter de la Billiere, Commander of the British Forces, to write: 'I have no hesitation in saying that this war was won primarily through the effective use of air power using high-technology, precision-delivered weapons systems.'

Later we saw the RAF in action in the Second Gulf War, and then in the war against Colonel Gadhafi – which was a war conducted solely by aircraft. And very recently we have seen it in the war against Isis; there have been very few British boots on the ground there; our contribution has been attack from the air – just as it used to be in Iraq in the 1920's! Scarcely believable!

And to round off, let me come back to General Smuts' report of 1917 which sparked off the RAF's formation. In his report he predicted that 'the day may not be far off when aerial operations with the devastation of enemy lands and destruction of industrial and populous centres on a vast scale may become the principal operations of war, to which the older forms of military and naval operations may become secondary and subordinate.' Well, as we see, this has largely come true.

So, for the RAF it has been an extraordinary hundred years, and, I think, a pretty successful hundred years at that.

Notes

[1] Editor comment: The word used to describe the early work ('supersonics') was changed to 'ASD'ics: 'ASD' standing for: Anti-Submarine Division, hence the derived British acronym ASDIC.