

British Journal for Military History

Volume 6, Issue 3, November 2020

Review of *RAF on the Offensive: The Rebirth of Tactical Air Power 1940-1941* by Greg Baughen

Matthew Powell

ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 25 November 2020

Citation: Matthew Powell, 'Review of *RAF on the Offensive: The Rebirth of Tactical Air Power 1940-1941* by Greg Baughen', *British Journal for Military History*, 6.3 (2020), pp. 195-197.

www.bjmh.org.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.



The BJMH is produced with the support of **Goldsmiths**
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

BOOK REVIEWS

themselves – always for someone else’s misdeeds - to contrived apologetics. British attitudes can be even more chilling. Victor Cavendish-Bentinck, aristocratic Foreign Office and intelligence grandee, saw in early intimations of the Holocaust useful material to distract from criticism of the murders at Katyn Wood perpetrated by Britain’s wartime ally of convenience, the Soviet Union. When the time came to punish war criminals, the obsession with security trumped thoughts of justice. To begin with the authorities had taken care to make recordings of incriminating conversations but when it came to the crunch, the unthinking reflex that intelligence operations should never be disclosed ruled out the use of bugged conversations as evidence at Nuremberg.

ADRIAN PHILLIPS
Independent Scholar, UK

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v6i3.1442

Greg Baughen, *RAF on the Offensive: The Rebirth of Tactical Air Power 1940-1941*. Barnsley: Air World, 2018. Vii + 304 pp. ISBN 978-1526735157 (hardback). Price £25.

This is Baughen’s fifth publication on early twentieth century British or French air power and as with his previous works there are serious flaws on display in the most recent volume to be published. The work is aimed at a general audience rather than the academic community, and this is one of its major failings. The bibliography is exceptionally limited and from this it appears that the most recent historical works published in the last ten to fifteen years have not been consulted. It is not clear if the author is simply unaware of these works or has deliberately not engaged with them as he is unable to counter the arguments being made in them as they firmly refute his own. This makes Baughen’s claim to have written a definitive history of air power in Britain inherently questionable. It is, however, not only the lack of academic rigour which highlights real failings within this book. The author clearly does not (either deliberately or inadvertently) understand basic air power concepts such as air superiority and how fundamentally important these are for the conduct of any aerial operation. This lack of understanding is demonstrated through the following quote:

The Air Staff ... maintained that air support had only worked for Germany in Poland and France because they had air superiority. Once the RAF had air superiority, the Army would get all the support it wanted. This was very dangerous thinking. Clearly providing an army with air support is easier with air

superiority. However, an army cannot wait days, weeks, months or years until air superiority is achieved before getting support.

This lack of understanding on such a basic, yet important, concept calls into question other aspects of the work which have largely been understudied by British historians. As had been highlighted by the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Marshal Sir Hugh Trenchard, as early as 1919, a degree of air superiority was vital to allow air forces the freedom of the skies to conduct a variety of missions including support of ground forces. It is not simply a case, as Baughen claims, that air forces had to find different tactics to be able to support ground forces. Baughen's understanding of air superiority reads in a similar vein to that of the War Office in the 1920 and 1930s. Air forces attempting to operate without control of the skies will find missions difficult to conduct, and the vast majority of aircraft will not return to home bases. It will be very difficult for any influence to be had on events on the ground. The work covers the attempts, largely in Britain, to develop a functioning air support system and plays this against the backdrop of the continued strategic air offensive against Germany.

Baughen's argument, that the air offensive was a waste of time, money and resources that could have better been deployed in creating a tactical air force is, on the surface, a compelling one. But this argument is made in such a way and with such little acknowledgment of the available documentary evidence that it quickly falls apart. What coverage there is, is difficult to discern given the referencing style utilised which simply gives the file number and date of the document with no additional information. There are also important pieces of evidence missing that would provide rounded analysis. For example, in his coverage of the aftermath of the Battle of France in 1940, Baughen does not acknowledge the Bartholomew Report, the War Office report into the fighting, and his reading and subsequent analysis of the Wann/Woodall experiments conducted in autumn 1940 are misread and wildly misunderstood. This is particularly the case for how the report deals with the application of close air support for the British Army. Baughen appears to be finding the evidence to support a pre-conceived argument rather than developing an argument from the evidence. This is something that is prevalent in all of Baughen's work.

While the argument being made has a degree of accuracy to it in a general sense, it falls down in several key areas. The first is a lack of understanding of the wider historical context. In Britain, with no real capability to conduct active operations against German forces in north-west Europe, there was time and space to develop a functioning air support system capable of handling the sheer weight of traffic cross-Channel operations would create. Baughen is correct to highlight that any air support in the event of a German invasion in either 1940 or 1941 would have been haphazard in nature, as was freely admitted by the Air Staff. What Baughen fails to acknowledge is the other side of the coin and the difficulties that would have been faced in

BOOK REVIEWS

maintaining an invasion operation, particularly one launched without control of the air above the Channel and south east England. This, according to Baughen, would not have caused the Germans any real problem, but he fails to explain why such an invasion was not launched. The coverage of early RAF/army operations in north Africa and in Greece and Crete are a welcome addition as these have largely been overlooked in the literature but given the failings in both research and analysis previously highlighted it is difficult to be convinced by the conclusions reached. Overall, this is a poorly researched piece of amateur history, that, due to its price point, could have a significant negative and potentially misleading impact in terms of public understanding of this particular topic.

MATTHEW POWELL

University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, UK

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v6i3.1443

Ian Mitchell, *The Battle of The Peaks and Long Stop Hill: Tunisia, April-May 1943*. Warwick: Helion & Company, 2019. 26 photographs. 15 maps. 326pp. ISBN 978-1911628934 (hardback). Price £35.00.

Most accounts of the 1943 campaign in North Africa dwell on the achievements of the British 8th Army; Montgomery's victory at the Second Battle of Al Alamein at the end of the previous year was famously referred to by Churchill 'as the end of the beginning' of a war which, until then, had seen British and Commonwealth forces struggling to overcome a seemingly irrepressible foe. The 8th Army's achievement in driving Rommel's Africa Korps back into Tunisia was quite rightly lauded by a public eager for good news. More than this though, Montgomery's penchant for self-publicity ensured that the men who fought under his command would dominate the post war historical narrative. It might come as a surprise to many people, therefore, that much of the fighting in the latter stages of the North African campaign was undertaken not by the 8th Army, but by Lieutenant General Kenneth Anderson's British 1st Army. Indeed, Tunis, the first capital city to be taken by the Western Allies, fell to the latter on the 12 May 1943, heralding the capture and imprisonment of 250,000 German and Italian combatants.

Following the successful execution of Operation Torch, the Anglo-American invasion of French Morocco and Algeria, the British 1st Army struck out into Tunisia. As Tunis itself came under threat from the Allied force German and (to a lesser extent) Italian