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Review of *To Save An Army: The Stalingrad Airlift* by Robert Forsyth

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His son Ross Reyburn's prologue, on the other hand, suffers no such censorship and has the benefit of hindsight and his father's later criticisms. It is not light in its condemnation of the mistakes of the operation. He too devotes a considerable amount of time to re-examining Mountbatten's role in the operation, and in an objective and balanced way before, inevitably, coming to the same conclusion as his father.

At the same time, whilst the sacrifice was very much a Canadian one on the day, he does point out that they were keen and raring to go. They had spent two years training in Britain whilst their Commonwealth cousins from Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, India and other countries had been involved in combat operations for years in theatres like North Africa and Burma, plus of course at sea and in the air. Nobody needed to persuade the Canadians to go to Dieppe, although some had reservations about throwing inexperienced and unblooded troops into such a difficult assault.

There is a plethora of books written on Dieppe and Operation Jubilee, and I have read some of them previously. But as the only eyewitness account from the ground this has a place amongst them. I did like the book and it gave me a new perspective on a well-known story. If I was being picky, I might suggest that Ross Reyburn's prologue might have served better as an afternote or epilogue, for personally I would have preferred to read his father's original account before reading his son's modern commentary. Nonetheless, I would happily recommend this book to general readers and military historians alike as an important addition to our understanding of combined operations and the Second World War.

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**Robert Forsyth, To Save An Army: The Stalingrad Airlift. Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2022. Notes, Index, 385pp. + 57 Illustrations & Maps, ISBN: 978-1472845382 (hardback). Price £20.00.**

There are few Second World War topics that equal the Battle of Stalingrad in terms of drama, scale and impact. For just over five months during the Autumn and Winter of 1942/43 Friedrich Paulus's German 6 Army, along with elements of the 4 Panzer Army, fought a life and death struggle to take and retain a city which arguably held marginal strategic importance, but which carried the name of the Soviet Union's leader

## REVIEWS

– Joseph Stalin. The story of the battle is extremely well documented, with numerous books on the subject ranging from weighty academic studies like David Glantz's three volume magnum opus 'Stalingrad' through to more accessible accounts such as Antony Beevor's bestselling book of the same name. The popular narrative coalesces around a number of themes: the over ambitious objectives of *Fall Blau* (the summer 1942 offensive); an underestimation of the Red Army by the German Oberkommando des Heeres (OKH); the folly of relying on long and poorly defended flanks; Paulus's unwillingness to attempt a breakout during Eric von Manstein's *Unternehmen Wintergewitter* relief attempt; and, the inability of the Luftwaffe to properly supply the surrounded 6 Army after the encirclement. It is the latter aspect that commands the attention of the author, Robert Forsyth. Was it ever feasible to deliver three hundred tons of supplies per day into the Stalingrad Kessel ('cauldron' or encircled military area)? Where were the key decisions regarding the airlift made, and by whom? How well was the air transport plan implemented and what were the main operational challenges? In answering these questions, the author has brought a refreshingly new perspective to a well-worn subject – providing real insight into an aspect of operations which has not featured as heavily as it should in the historiography: the air transport arm of the *Luftwaffe*.

Operation Uranus, the encirclement of an entire German Army numbering over 265,000 combatants by the Red Army, was a master stroke in conception and execution. However, it was not the first time that a German Army had been encircled and supplied by air. Early in 1942 elements of the 16 Army had been isolated at Demyansk. In this earlier instance, the *Kessel* was smaller, but the fact that the Luftwaffe was satisfactorily able to supply approximately 100,000 service personnel by air for almost three months is sometimes cited as an appropriate precedent for the Stalingrad relief effort. The author quickly dispels this argument by proving that the airlift conducted by *Luftflotte 1* at Demjansk was simply not scalable, and in any case the operational context was fundamentally different to that which prevailed at Stalingrad.

Notwithstanding the obvious point that after-the-fact memoirs should be treated with caution, it is pretty clear that with the noticeable exception of *Reichsführer* Hermann Göring, virtually all of the senior Luftwaffe commanders involved were highly sceptical that the air supply to the Stalingrad *Kessel* could succeed. Nevertheless, the effort put into the airlift was phenomenal, involving as it did – a Herculean effort from everyone involved. Flight times for the air crews lengthened as Axis home airfields were overrun by the advancing Red Army, the weather was unforgiving with temperatures dropping to -20 degrees or lower, and the logistical challenge of getting the right supplies to the correct railhead became more and more testing. The German aircrew and those who maintained the aircraft in the most difficult of conditions, suffered grievous losses – and the first-hand accounts quoted in the book are not easy to read. Similarly, the

reports of what was happening to those who were trapped in the *Kessel* serve to illustrate the horrors endured by combatants from both sides as the battle unfolded.

The author draws heavily from the memoirs of key *Luftwaffe* leaders such as Wolfram von Richthofen (the commander of *Luftflotte 4*), Erhard Milch (appointed by Adolf Hitler to oversee the airlift in January 1943), Friedrich Wilhelm 'Fritz' Morzik (*Luftwaffe* airlift operations) and others to show the scale and complexity of the air supply challenge. The post-war Karlsruhe Project, quoted in Appendix I of the book, quantifies what was achieved. Over the course of seventy days from the 25 November 1942, 6,591 tons of supplies were airlifted into the *Kessel* – a daily average of 94.16 tons which was about a third of what 6 Army actually required. Other authoritative sources reveal that just under 25,000 wounded, sick and other personnel were evacuated by air. In achieving these numbers, the variety of aircraft used will come as a surprise to some, for example, the Focke-Wulf Fw 200 (Condor), a four-engine adapted airliner that had seen extensive service in an anti-shipping role over the North Atlantic.

As is clear from the evidence presented, the plan to supply 6 Army by air was never viable. Nevertheless, given that Adolf Hitler had no intention of giving Stalingrad up, it was perhaps inevitable that it would be attempted, particularly if one took the view, as he did, that the encirclement of 6 Army would be short-lived. No effort was spared by the *Luftwaffe* in the execution of the plan, and it is difficult to identify anything more that could have been done by those who had responsibility for it. Indeed, the author explores every aspect – human, operational, tactical and technical – in reaching this conclusion. The *Luftwaffe's* effort can be considered doubly impressive when one takes into account the Soviet attempts to frustrate the airlift. A resurgent Soviet air force and highly effective ground operations against the airfields used to support the air-bridge (including the spectacularly successful *Tatsinskaya* Raid) served to accentuate difficulties caused by the *Luftwaffe's* lack of transport capacity, worsening serviceability and aircraft losses. Whilst the failure of the airlift was catastrophic, the outcome was entirely predictable. In reading this book, one is drawn to the conclusion that the causes of the decisive defeat of the German Army at Stalingrad lie elsewhere. Indeed, the author does an excellent job in illustrating that the *Luftwaffe* did all that it could to fulfil an undertaking that it should never have been given.

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