



The Development of British Tactical Air Power, 1940–1943 by Matthew Powell.

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This volume is independent historian¹ Matthew Powell's first book. It is a study of the debate about how to apply air power most effectively in modern warfare. The author maintains that the Royal Air Force (RAF), founded in 1918 as an independent branch of the United Kingdom's armed forces, overlooked the obvious in pursuit of the theoretical in 1919–39.

The *obvious* was Britain's use of aircraft on the Western Front in 1914–15. Despite army command's initial skepticism, air reconnaissance supplied information on the disposition of German forces accurately enough to inform sound operational decisions, not least in the counterattack that stopped the German offensive at the Marne in September 1914. Besides various reconnaissance and intelligence roles, the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) later had success tasking pilots with support operations for ground troops, notwithstanding the vulnerability of early aircraft to defensive fire.

The *theoretical* was the tentative strategic use of aircraft in the bombing of enemy territory, industry, and population by both Germany and Britain before the war's end. Sadly for the British army and, to a lesser extent, the RAF itself, the vision of strategic air power dominated the thinking of its high command during the interwar years, to the neglect of tactical air power in close-air support operations. Combined with other factors, this led to the rout of British and French forces in the Battle of France in 1940. The RAF's response to that humiliation was to create the Army Cooperation Command (ACC), an administrative innovation designed as much to appease the army as to develop tactical airpower. Although the ACC was charged with promoting tactical air power, the RAF never fully committed to it. In this regard, Powell's book is a discerning case study of interservice rivalry and organizational inertia.

The book's six chapters² begin with the interwar development of close-air support on the foundations established in World War I. Powell then turns to the ACC's advances in army air support after the debacle of 1940 and, finally, to its ultimate disbandment in 1943. The author's astute handling of relevant primary sources and secondary scholarship makes his book a welcome resource for students and scholars of modern warfare, combined-arms operations, and air power.

Powell seeks to illuminate the growth of tactical air power during World War II "by focusing not only on the ACC as a stand-alone command but also by placing the organization within its historical and geographical context" (xii). In so doing, he engages with a secondary literature lately obsessed with misconceptions about the Battle of France. The following is typical:

[Ernest R.] May is correct in the assertion that the Allies were at least a match for the Germans in terms of the number and quality of troops and equipment used, but not in the claim that the doctrinal thinking of the two forces was at similar levels. It was only the *Wehrmacht* that was thinking about how armoured and mechanized formations might transform the battlefield and return fast-

1. Powell has previously held positions at the Univ. of Birmingham and the Portsmouth Business School.

2. There is also an introduction, conclusion, and extensive bibliography.

flowing operations to it. The British and French were, on the whole, preparing for operations that unfolded at a similar pace to those of the First World War, including the Hundred Days of 1918. The thinking on tanks was to use them in penny packets [small units], including as an infantry support weapon and not spearheading attacks or acting in a semi-independent role. (45)³

Powell observes that the outcome of the Battle of France prompted the British army to consider how best to match the *Wehrmacht's* performance. Among other lessons, it concluded that an air arm under its own command, with a stress on dive-bomber capabilities, was essential. Yet with no prospect of an early return to the continent and the Battle of Britain now upon it, the War Office could be forgiven for not plowing resources into tactical air power (91–92). Moreover, the RAF maintained that the creation of an army air force would imperil the unity of British air power and divert attention from the strategic goal of establishing air superiority over Germany. The pressure “to appear to be doing something as quickly as possible” (95) impelled the Air Ministry toward establishing the ACC, even as Fighter Command battled the *Luftwaffe* in the skies over southeast England.

Once the German air offensive had been defeated and fears of an amphibious invasion subsided, Britain's chances of winning the conflict depended upon a massive increase in the capacity of Bomber Command, with the result that the ACC “would have to make do with the scraps that were left over” (148). The RAF's commitment to the strategic bombing of Germany outweighed all other claims on air power.⁴

In 1941, few resources were made available to the British army in the Western Desert of North Africa. Happily, the German army was badly under-supplied as well. While the British army pushed for its own air component, the RAF insisted that the overall command of air resources should remain centralized under its control. Still, when US forces entered the war in 1942, Allied troops that deployed to Africa and thence to Sicily and Italy benefited from close-air support techniques developed during the fighting in the Western Desert (187).

The ACC, despite some successes, was disbanded in June 1943 as part of a radical overhaul of the air support system for continental operations.

With offensive operations on the Continent being planned, the emphasis on development of air support shifted, and gave both the RAF and the army something to concentrate on and a chance to work together to achieve a common aim. This ethos had been lacking while a return to the continent was unfeasible and led to increasing infighting between the two services. Army Co-operation Command, an RAF organization, had been stuck in the middle of this infighting and its ability to fully develop tactical air power was hampered as a result. The experience in the Western Desert demonstrated what properly constituted air support could achieve and how important artillery observation was in supporting ground forces. (222)

Matthew Powell concludes that the ACC could have achieved much more, had it been given greater freedom and responsibility to begin with. That it was not had little to do with the inherent significance of its mission and everything to do with the interservice struggle over available resources in the heat of war. Verily, a timeless tale. *The Development of British Tactical Air Power* is a small brick in the wall of military history, but a solid one.

3. See also Jonathan M. House, *Combined Arms Warfare in the Twentieth Century* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2001) 112–17.

4. See, further, Tami Davis Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare: The Evolution of British and American Ideas about Strategic Bombing* (Princeton: Univ. Pr, 2002).