

4-29-2019

Review of "Flying to Victory: Raymond Collishaw and the Western Desert Campaign, 1940-1941" by Mike Bechthold

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Recommended Citation

Stubbs, David () "Review of "Flying to Victory: Raymond Collishaw and the Western Desert Campaign, 1940-1941" by Mike Bechthold," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 28 : Iss. 1 , Article 19.
Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol28/iss1/19>

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Mike Bechthold. *Flying to Victory: Raymond Collishaw and the Western Desert Campaign, 1940-1941*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017. Pp. 281.

Historians and senior Royal Air Force (RAF) officers generally agree that the leadership provided by Air Marshal Arthur Tedder and Air Vice-Marshal Arthur Coningham was a key component in the success achieved by the RAF in the Western Desert during the Second World War.¹ In stark contrast, the leadership of Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore and Air Commodore Raymond Collishaw, in the period preceding the arrival of Coningham, is viewed less positively. The reasons for this include the widespread acceptance of Tedder's narrative of events, the way the RAF became associated with the land operation defeats and the belief that the only opposition facing the RAF in the Western Desert was the relatively weak Regia Aeronautica.² In *Flying to Victory: Raymond Collishaw and the Western Desert Campaign, 1940-1941*, Mike Bechthold, a historian of the First and Second World Wars and the author of a series of battlefield guides, argues that Collishaw's leadership in the early air campaign in the desert has been significantly misrepresented and wholly undervalued. In evaluating this neglected period of the desert war, Bechthold challenges the narrative that has portrayed Collishaw as a man who lacked the necessary intellectual and administrative skills to rise to the challenge of defeating the combined forces of the Luftwaffe and the Regia Aeronautica.

To support his case, Bechthold uses a comprehensive array of primary and secondary sources. He begins the analysis with an examination of the breadth and depth of Collishaw's operational experience in the First World War, the Crimea, Kurdistan, Palestine, Egypt, Sudan, and with the Royal Navy. These experiences required him to work with army and naval commanders in operations supported

¹ See, for example, "The End of the Beginning: A Symposium on the Land/Air Cooperation in The Mediterranean War 1940-43," *Bracknell Paper No. 3*, 1992; and Wing Commander Dave Smathers, "'We Never Talk About That Now': Air-Land Integration in the Western Desert 1940-42," *Air Power Review* 20, no. 3 (2017): 32-48.

² I. Gooderson, "Doctrine from the crucible: The British air-land experience in the Second World War," *Air Power Review* 9, no. 6 (2006): 7-9; and H. Smyth, "From Coningham to Project Coningham-Keyes: Did British Forces Relearn Historical Air-Land Cooperation Lessons During Operation 'Telic'?" *Defence Studies* 7, no. 2 (2007): 263-264.

by extraordinarily fragile lines of supply. Bechthold suggests that Collishaw's experience in this environment made him especially equipped to deal with the array of challenges facing the RAF in North Africa, in terms of personnel, shortage of equipment and the omnipresent inter-service dysfunction. *Flying to Victory* consists of ten chapters, comprising 178 pages of text, 24 pages of pictures and 7 of maps. The book generally follows the chronological progress of the RAF's involvement in the battles of the Western Desert, from 1939, when the Italians were contemplating whether or not to enter the war on the side of the Germans, to July 1941, a month after the British failed in their attempt to relieve the fortress of Tobruk—this was the period when the RAF was fighting the combined German and Italian air forces.

Bechthold explains how Collishaw optimised the relatively few aircraft at his disposal in a campaign designed to create the illusion of RAF superiority. The campaign began with attacks against the Regia Aeronautica on the ground, before the focus of the offensive operations changed to deliver small-scale attacks across a broad front in order to unbalance the larger Italian air force and blunt its offensive activities. The success of this campaign reduced Italian air attacks on British soldiers and prevented what had threatened to be a shattering reverse. The case is well constructed, well written and easy to follow, though, at times, it narrowly avoids being hagiographic. Bechthold contends that the paucity of modern aircraft at Collishaw's disposal limited his options to such an extent that the dynamism, enthusiasm and leadership he exhibited during the early fighting, particularly during Operation Crusader, has never been properly recognised.

The very different views the army and RAF held about the way air power should be employed was at the heart of the many problems in planning and coordinating joint operations between the British Army and RAF. Bechthold shows how, despite the difficult inter-service environment, Collishaw developed personal relationships with Lieutenant-General Richard O'Connor, Major-General Noel Beresford-Pierce and Brigadier William Gott in a way that gained their trust in his views on how air power should be employed. General Archibald Wavell, however, wanted the RAF to provide comprehensive direct support to the army and, whenever RAF aircraft were employed in other duties, chose to believe there was a direct correlation between the air power the army was given and its performance on the battlefield. Wavell praised Collishaw when things

went well, but during the retreat from the frontier, when the fighting on the ground resulted in an ignominious defeat, Wavell concluded that the RAF was chiefly responsible for the rout and was unduly hasty in reporting this view directly to the War Cabinet in London without consulting Longmore.

Tedder believed that Collishaw had exhibited recklessness in supporting the army's ground operations to reach Tripoli because he thought Collishaw had unwittingly allowed the logistics train to become perilously close to collapse and that only good luck had prevented disaster.

Collishaw later contended that he fully understood the risks and benefits of maintaining the offensive. Bechthold also shows how Tedder's assessment of Collishaw's ability was transmitted in 'strictly private' correspondence with the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal, and his deputy Air Chief Marshal Sir Wilfrid Freeman. The messages were replete with smears about Collishaw's character and ability and indicate that there was a degree of personal animosity between the two men. Tedder counselled that Collishaw was naïve, brutal and rash. He compared him to a "village blacksmith" and "a bull in a china shop," who had a tendency "to go off half-cock." Collishaw's lack of university education may also have played a part as Tedder thought Collishaw "lacks a sophisticated analysis of events" and was, therefore, unfit "to tackle the Hun and the Army" (p. 187). In this context, the way Collishaw's reputation was later callously undermined by Tedder becomes easier to understand. It is clear that, despite Collishaw's many operational successes in the face of superior enemy forces, he simply did not fit in with the type of senior officers reaching North Africa in late 1941. Tedder clearly preferred the company of Air Vice-Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham, the urbane New Zealander, whose administrative skills were as haphazard as Collishaw's. Without the support of Air Commodore Thomas Elmhirst, whose talent for administration were renown,³ Coningham may have been less favourably compared to Collishaw.

In the atmosphere of recrimination levelled at the RAF in the aftermath of the defeats in Greece and Crete, Portal and Tedder wanted to avoid the RAF becoming subordinate to the army in the desert. Bechthold explains how, with Portal's approval, Tedder

³ V. Orange, *Coningham* (London: Methuen, 1990), 89.

devised a strategy to gain the army's confidence before undermining its officers' claims that only full-scale direct support to their units was the best way to win the battles in the desert. Consequently, Tedder initially overruled Collishaw by supporting the army's request to keep Hurricane fighters within the besieged fortress of Tobruk. Then, in contrast to the way Collishaw had vehemently fought for the RAF's independent activities in the desert, Tedder decided to accede to Beresford-Pierce's demands for an 'air umbrella' during Operation Battleaxe in the belief that the army's likely failure to relieve Tobruk would help garner Churchill's support for the RAF's independent control of air power. Tedder also agreed to Churchill's demand to 'throw everything in' to support the beleaguered forces on Crete before blaming Collishaw for not reigning in his aircraft when losses increased substantially. While Tedder's plan to undermine the army's arguments was ultimately successful, Collishaw had successfully fought the same battle, albeit with Longmore's support, without being party to the flawed operational design or the consequent loss of life.

Bechthold argues that Tedder's decision to dismiss Collishaw after Operation Battleaxe was based on the subjective perception that Collishaw did not have the capacity for higher-level leadership and would be unable to cope with the increasing complexities of the desert war. The lack of chemistry between the two men is only lightly examined, though it appears possible that it had something to do with their very different backgrounds, personalities and contacts. Longmore trusted Collishaw and the empathy between them might have had something to do with their time in the Royal Navy (RN) before joining the RAF. It would have been interesting to learn how deeply Portal felt threatened by Longmore's repeated requests for more aircraft to be sent to the Middle East, which had been strongly echoed by his fellow army and RN commanders and were reinforced by the assessment of General Jan Smuts, the South African President, who was one of Churchill's trusted confidants.⁴ Collishaw's closeness to Longmore may have prompted Portal's distrust and Tedder's animosity.

⁴ J. Terraine, *The Right of the Line: The RAF in the European War 1939-1945* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985), 308; D. Richards, *Portal of Hungerford* (London: Heinemann, 1977), 230-231; and Robin Higham, *Diary of a Disaster: British Aid to Greece, 1940-1941* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1986), 160-164.

As you would expect from a project that started as a PhD dissertation, the book is very well researched. The only minor criticism is that Bechthold has been too ready to accept Collishaw's belief that air-to-ground, close air support missions were disproportionately expensive in men and aircraft. Recent research has suggested that the pilots' subjective fears were reinforced by the way the topic was taught at the RAF Staff College and articulated in doctrine.⁵ Overall, the book provides a significant contribution to the literature of the military history of the fighting in the desert during the Second World War. It is likely to be of interest to scholars, amateur historians and the general audience alike.

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⁵ Alistair McCluskey, "The Battle of Amiens and the Development of British Air-Land Battle, 1918-1945," in *Changing War: The British Army, The Hundred Days Campaign and the Birth of the Royal Air Force, 1918*, Gary Sheffield and Peter Gray, eds. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 238, 244; Jonathan Boff, "Air/Land Integration in the 100 days: The Case of Third Army," *Air Power Review* 12, no. 3 (2009), 80; Lord Douglas of Kirtleside, *Years of Combat* (London: Collins, 1963), 240; Wing Commander R.A. Mason MA RAF, *The Royal Air Force Staff College 1922-1972* (RAF Staff College Bracknell, 1972), 1; AP 956, B. E. Smythies D.F.C., *A selection of lectures and essays from the work of officers attending the first course at the RAF Staff College 1922-1923, Experiences During the War, 1914-1918* (London: Air Ministry, 1923), 80, 86; A.D. Harvey, "The Royal Air Force and Close Support, 1918-1940," *War in History* 15, no. 4 (2008), 466-468; and R.P. Hallion, *Strike from the Sky: The history of Battlefield Air Attack 1911-1945* (Shrewsbury: Airline, 1989), 16-17.