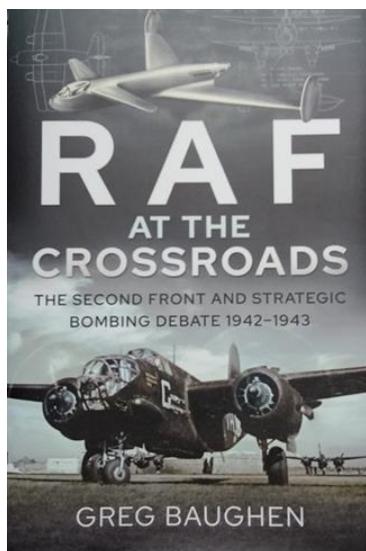


BOOK REVIEW
RAF AT THE CROSSROADS
The Second Front and Strategic Bombing Debate 1942-1943

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Strategic bombing theory was developed in the latter years of the First World War, a combination of those early German Air raids on Britain and the Allied, especially RFC/RAF bombing campaign which was only just starting to get into its stride when the Armistice was signed in November 1918. Despite the fact that strategic bombing had not really been evaluated in WW1 it became a central principle of air power theory in the post-war period. In part this was because it was the one independent decisive (potentially) role that the air forces could perform. For the RAF this was enshrined as the Trenchard Doctrine: 'the nation that would stand being bombed longest would win in the end ... to win it will be necessary to pursue a relentless offensive by bombing the enemy's country, destroying his sources of supply of aircraft and engines, and breaking the morale of his people.'

Greg Baughen in this excellently researched and written volume not only questions the effectiveness of the RAF strategic bombing campaign but examines the multitude of aspects that concerned the strategic and tactical approach to war fighting in period especially to resources applied to maintain the bombing campaign versus the demand of support to ground forces. His observations of 'Blitz Krieg is an interesting insight into how the Luftwaffe and Heer cooperated in a true combined arms approach to the campaigns in Poland and the invasion of France. As Baughen makes clear by the time the Butt Report was published on the 18th August 1941 the accuracy of RAF Bomber Command aircraft in hitting their targets was being questioned. Bomber Command had no real means of determining the success of its operations. Crews would return with only their word as to the amount of damage caused or even if they had bombed the target. The report concluded that only about one third of aircraft claiming to reach their target actually did so!

It had become clear that that the bomber offensive against Germany had achieved very little and Baughen points out that the outcomes of the fighting in Europe, Africa and Asia was not being decided by heavy bombers. He (in my view rightly) points for example, to the *modus operandi* of the Desert Air Force as a tactical air force supporting the ground forces of 8th Army in order to win the ground battle.

For the Air Staff this approach was seemingly an anathema and it was dogmatic in its view that "the bomber war was the way to defeat Germany. It seemed certainly that the Army's and Admiralty's need for air support was secondary to resourcing the bombing campaign. Of course Britain did not have the resources to have a large strategic bomber fleet and a large army. Baughen covers the American entry into the war and their view of the bomber war and their enthusiasm for an invasion of France as early as possible. There was perhaps an expectation that American resources would come to the fore and the USAAF were certainly as keen on the bomber offensive as the British Air Ministry. Baughen however covers in great detail the political, industrial and technological aspects of the bomber campaign and its impact in terms of resources and outcomes for land operations, the Atlantic Battle and Coastal Command operations and the Air Defence of Great Britain. There are insights into the minds of key players including Portal, Tedder, Harris, Douglas, Conningham, Leigh-Mallory,

Brooke, Eisenhower and Churchill to name just a few. The book stimulates thought on questions such as “When does doctrine become dogma?” and the reasons for the apparent stovepipe nature of the thinking particularly in the Air Ministry and the overall effects the offensive stance of Britain and her Allies. Suffice to say that all was not as portrayed in the popular films shown during and after the war! However this mustn’t detract from the bravery and stoicism of air crews and all who served be it on land, air or sea.

Greg Baughen has given the reader a highly detailed, well written and eminently readable account of the strategic debate of 1942-1943. There is a strong bibliography, comprehensive notes, and a good index. I thoroughly recommend this book to those with an interest not only in the Bomber Offensive but also in the more diverse aspects of war strategy and its conduct.

Martin Willoughby