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AIR POWER IN BRITISH POPULAR CULTURE

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As the Royal Air Force celebrates its centenary, it is timely to survey how British popular images of military air power have changed over the past century, as reflected in books, films and the media. I will argue that, although air professionals and a significant body of (overwhelmingly male) air enthusiasts have been fascinated by aerial technology and tactics, the British public as a whole has focused much more on the human traumas associated with the exercise of air power. I will further argue that, although this preoccupation with human trauma has been enduring and deep-rooted, the particular form it has taken has varied very significantly over the past century. It is important to recognise this variation over time, since there are growing signs that the pattern of public attitudes to air power which has become familiar over the past few decades may now be shifting yet again, with great potential significance for the political environment within which the RAF will have to operate in its second century of existence.¹

Hardware vs Humanity

It would be easy to exaggerate the importance of aircraft themselves in British popular images of air power. Ever since the first RAF 'Pageant' at Hendon in 1922, hundreds of thousands of people have flocked to watch displays and fly pasts by historic and contemporary military aircraft, whether at annual air shows like Farnborough or in free summer shows at seaside resorts around the country.² Despite ever-growing resource pressures, the RAF still maintains its iconic 'Red Arrows' jet display team and its Battle of Britain Memorial Flight precisely to service these frequent air shows. The fascination which high performance combat aircraft hold for many British males of all ages is demonstrated by the tens of thousands of books, journals and specialist videos and DVDs showcasing these streamlined war machines and detailing their technical specifications and operational and

design histories. There is a continuing market for ready-made or self-assembly 3D scale models of the craft concerned, and aviation art has long been a profitable sub-genre of painting for British exponents like Frank Wootton and Robert Taylor.³ Writers like Alfred Price publish numerous popular analyses of air tactics and air campaign history, and many thousands of British men and boys recreate these tactics virtually via simulation games.⁴

However, it would be wrong to over-estimate the influence of these air enthusiasts on British popular culture as a whole. The average Briton could not even recognise a Hurricane or Tornado, let alone differentiate specific marks of these craft. Although mass market films such as the 1964 classic *633 Squadron* do sometimes include multiple shots of iconic aircraft (in this case Mosquitoes) swooping through the air, there are far more scenes focusing on the humans involved in the conflicts concerned. With the exception of the Spitfire, whose distinctive curved form and Merlin engine roar have become emblematic of Britain's 'finest hour', the popular culture of air power in the UK does not revolve primarily around the aircraft themselves, let alone their weapons or tactics.⁵ It focuses instead on the traumas which air conflicts create for the people involved, as I shall demonstrate in the remainder of this article.

Risk and Fear

Two factors dominated early British popular reactions to the novel phenomenon of military air power. One was admiration for the daring displayed by early aviators in the face of severe personal risk. As in other nations, the minority of air 'aces' such as Albert Ball and James McCudden who managed (at least for a while) to avoid being killed while downing an

increasing tally of hapless opponents were lionised as 'knights of the air'.⁶ Misplaced popular ideals of chivalry in aerial duels were exemplified by W.E. Johns' fictional air ace 'Biggles', who appeared in nearly a hundred books from 1932 onwards.⁷ Real Second World War aces like Robert Stanford Tuck, Douglas Bader and Johnnie Johnson maintained the tradition, as did the continuing stream of published memoirs such as Cecil Lewis's 1936 book *Sagittarius Rising* and Paul Richey's 1941 work *Fighter Pilot*.⁸

Films of the time capture well the prevailing popular awareness of, and admiration for, the grave risks which these early aviators ran. The 1938 film *Dawn Patrol* portrays First World War airmen grappling with the strain of successive perilous sorties, and even extending a chivalrous welcome to a captured German pilot who shot down their own veteran colleague. The 1952 film *Angels One Five* shows an RAF squadron in the Battle of Britain bravely resisting the Luftwaffe despite continuing losses which soon claim the novice hero himself. In both films, the air action takes place mostly off screen and the focus is instead on the strains which the aircrew endure between sorties. Even when the dubious ideal of chivalry slipped and was replaced by a darker and more anti-heroic image of past aerial conflicts, as in the 1976 film *Aces High* and in Derek Robinson's novels *Goshawk Squadron* (1971) and *Piece of Cake* (1983, televised in 1988), the focus remained squarely on how these young aviators coped psychologically with the enormous cumulative risks which combat flying during the World Wars entailed.⁹

The second factor dominating early British popular images of military air power was fear of aerial bombardment of civilians. Britain was especially sensitive to this potential threat because it had hitherto been shielded from the devastation of war by the Channel and the

dominance of the Royal Navy. It is no surprise that it was British author H.G. Wells who highlighted the danger in his 1908 novel *War in the Air*.¹⁰ Even though the primitive raids on England by Zeppelins and later by multi-engine bombers in World War One inflicted three hundred times fewer casualties than British forces suffered in the carnage of the Western Front, they loomed very large in public concerns and were instrumental in the establishment of the RAF itself in 1918.¹¹ In the inter-war years, apocalyptic fears of societal collapse through poison gas bombardment were dramatised in Wells's 1933 novel *The Shape of Things to Come* (filmed in 1936), and they contributed significantly to Britain's initial policy of appeasement of Nazi Germany.¹²

When war came again for real, the combination of thwarted righteousness and the delayed and gradual escalation of German air attack allowed most British civilians to come to terms with the bombing in 1940-41 and to pride themselves on their 'Blitz spirit', holding firm against the unmitigated evil of their opponents.¹³ The V-weapons offensive of 1944-45 was difficult to endure now that Britain was clearly on the brink of victory and last minute sacrifice became especially poignant, an atmosphere captured in Graham Greene's 1951 novel *The End of the Affair* (filmed in 1955 and again in 1999).¹⁴ However, civilian casualties in the UK were still a hundred times lower than those across the rest of the European continent, especially in the east. What made civilian fear of aerial bombing an enduring feature of post-war British popular culture was not so much the UK's actual experience in World War Two but rather the apocalyptic potential of the new atomic and hydrogen weapons. Mushroom cloud imagery from the continuing atmospheric tests dominated media portrayals during the early Cold War, and television films like *The War Game* (1965)

and *Threads* (1984) documented in chilling detail how nuclear attack could affect British provincial cities.¹⁵

If there is any single film which encapsulates British popular perceptions of air power in the mid twentieth century, it is surely Harry Saltzman's 1969 production *Battle of Britain*, which has been shown repeatedly ever since on UK television. This film does give a basic portrayal of the strategy and tactics of the battle, but it comes alive in its depiction of human trauma, be it the ambush of hapless novice pilots, the terrible consequences of burns injuries, the strain of repeated deadly sorties or the sudden randomness of bombing casualties, whether on RAF airfields or in Blitzed London, with age or gender being no protection. Britain's lone stand in 1940, as celebrated in Churchill's famous rhetoric, has become a central pillar of national identity, and at its heart is a mainly positive image of air power as a shield wielded by 'The Few' brave men and women of the RAF to protect Britain's civilian population against dastardly opponents.¹⁶ However, as the twentieth century progressed, a darker popular image of air power arose to challenge this positive association, as I will now discuss.

Guilt and Perfectionism

Air power is a double-edged sword, and defensive air campaigns like that of 1940 were always complemented by offensive air operations. The infant RAF sought to survive the pressures of the inter-war years in part by championing 'air policing' of colonial territories as a more cost-effective alternative to traditional punitive columns of ground troops. However, Britons have always had a marked sympathy for the 'underdog', and so reliance on bombers as an asymmetric means of targeting tribal villages lacking in effective air

defence triggered growing concerns at home about the 'unfairness' of the practice and its impact on innocent civilians.¹⁷

In World War Two, the progressively deadlier British air raids on German cities failed at first to provoke similar public disquiet. The Nazis were seen as a much more existential threat, and they were perceived to have taken the lead in bombing civilians (as captured in 'Bomber' Harris's famous Biblical aphorism in 1942 that, 'They sowed the wind, and now they are going to reap the whirlwind').¹⁸ Furthermore, British airmen were clearly paying a very heavy blood price of their own in this campaign, as reflected in the fact that Bomber Command aircrew had the highest fatality rate of any service during the war except for the German U-Boat arm.¹⁹ The classic 1955 British film *The Dam Busters* focused entirely on the ingenuity, daring and heavy sacrifice of the Allied protagonists during their 1943 precision raid, while completely downplaying the fact that the breaching of the dams drowned around thirty people (mostly Soviet forced labourers) for every airman lost.²⁰

As British memories of the dangers and costs of World War Two became less vivid, there was an increase in retrospective guilt about the human impact of the area bombing campaign. Books appeared describing the devastating firestorms at Hamburg in 1943 and Dresden in 1945, with the latter especially being seen by many as disproportionate given the proximity of Nazi defeat.²¹ Disquiet also grew about the morality and safety of relying on nuclear deterrent threats of even more indiscriminate and apocalyptic destruction. Anti-nuclear protest movements such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament arose especially in the 1950s and 1980s, and the classic 1964 film *Dr Strangelove* satirised the human weaknesses which could compromise the safe operation of nuclear deterrence.²²

Britain's use of air power in real post-war conflicts such as Korea, Malaya and Aden hardly registered in popular culture compared to the dread of nuclear Armageddon. Britain was not directly involved in the ongoing conflict in Vietnam, but perhaps because of this detachment, it was just as susceptible to the development of a much more jaundiced image of air power. Central to this changed perception was the increasing availability of anecdotal imagery in the shape of photos and film. Hitherto, bombing targets had been seen only in grainy overhead imagery from the aircraft themselves, but now reporters on the ground could capture and relay vivid shots of the impact on individuals such as the naked and burnt nine year old Phan Thi Kim Phúc running towards the camera after a napalm attack in 1972.²³ Such anecdotal glimpses of 'collateral damage' were far more heart-rending than cold statistics, and they became even more potent with the later advent of real time satellite news coverage and of 24 hour TV news channels such as CNN.²⁴

Britain was lucky that its own air operations in the Falklands in 1982 and the Persian Gulf in 1991 took place in remote and sparsely populated environments. However, it soon became apparent that a further consequence of media anecdotalism was enhanced sensitivity to friendly aircrew losses, especially when downed crews were taken prisoner and paraded on television as happened to John Nichol and John Peters in 1991.²⁵ Fortunately, technology and the increasing asymmetry of air conflicts seemed to offer a solution to this growing anecdotal sensitivity to friendly losses and collateral damage. Electronic jamming, stand-off weapons and unmanned platforms enormously reduced the risk to friendly aircrew, while precision weapon guidance allowed 'surgical' strikes on point targets without the area devastation characteristic of the World Wars.²⁶ The spectres of Dresden and nuclear

annihilation were displaced in the post-Cold War era by an almost god-like image of air power's ability to disarm opponents quickly and cleanly with minimal risk to friendly forces or to civilians at home or in the battle area itself.²⁷

Sadly, such euphoria rarely lasts, and the new paradigm had two unfortunate consequences. The first was diminished popular respect for air personnel. Whereas aircrew during the World Wars were admired for their evident daring in facing such appalling risks, modern fast jet crews tend to be portrayed as comfort-loving and risk averse compared to the 'real heroes' who face the enemy at close quarters.²⁸ Journalist and historian Max Hastings wrote in 2007 that 'the Army's role is today overwhelmingly paramount', and he described Air Force and Navy personnel as 'not fighting forces in the same way' and as 'bureaucrats in uniform rather than warriors'.²⁹ During the 1999 Kosovo campaign, there were claims that NATO aircrew prioritised their own safety over descending low enough for clear target identification, and in 2015 a British TV comedy pilot called *Bugsplat!* satirised the indifference and detachment of an RAF drone crew.³⁰ There are even sporadic suggestions in the British media that the RAF should be re-absorbed into the other services to save precious resources.³¹

The second unfortunate consequence of the new paradigm has been a revolution of rising expectations regarding the avoidance of collateral damage. With air personnel themselves seen as enjoying almost god-like immunity from risk, it is natural that the traditional popular focus on the human traumas associated with air power has shifted even more towards the fate of those on the receiving end of air attack.³² For all its modern precision, air power is seen as vulnerable to poor intelligence and as less capable than ground forces of subtle and

discriminate interactions such as searching inside buildings, conversing with people, taking prisoners and building trust.³³ Prime Minister Gordon Brown said in 2009 that, 'what separates successful counter-insurgency from unsuccessful counter-insurgency is that it is won on the ground and not in the air'.³⁴ Anecdotal media coverage invariably homes in on occasional mistakes such as the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade or of innocent wedding parties in Afghanistan or Iraq, and even though British aircraft have very rarely been involved directly in such episodes, popular images of air power are inevitably tarnished as a result.³⁵

If the 1969 film *Battle of Britain* best encapsulates British popular perceptions of air power in the mid twentieth century, then the equivalent encapsulation from the early twenty-first century is perhaps the very different British film from 2015, *Eye in the Sky*. In this film, senior British military and political leaders agonise interminably over whether to launch a drone strike on a jihadi bomb factory on the other side of the world outside which an innocent girl is selling bread. The screenplay focuses on the human traumas of 'playing God', the complex pattern of life in the target area, and the juxtaposition between incredible real time global surveillance and communication technologies and the relative inflexibility of the warhead which must either be withheld altogether or delivered with locally indiscriminate destructive effect. In 2017, the British media focused for a while on the similar real life dilemma underlying the drone strike which reportedly killed British ISIS member Sally Jones at the expense of also killing her twelve year old son who was with her in the car.³⁶ This individualised, forensic and unilateral image of air power is a world away from the previous paradigm in which thousands of combatants and non-combatants on both sides perish simply through the blundering horror of mass attritional air warfare.³⁷

Compassion Fatigue

It is impossible to predict how perceptions of air power in British popular culture will continue to evolve in the decades to come. However, there are several straws in the wind which suggest that the paradigm encapsulated in the film *Eye in the Sky* may not endure for long. Foremost among these is the growing realisation that Britain and its Western partners do not in fact enjoy god-like military dominance and the luxury of precise and judicious application of force without reciprocal risk. In Kosovo in 1999 and Libya in 2011, it looked for a while as if Western air power could intervene in 'wars of choice' to turn the tide against oppressive and bloodthirsty regimes and to rescue local populations without any loss of Western lives.³⁸ However, the world of 2018 looks much darker and less tractable, with numerous tangled and seemingly interminable 'wars among the people', just as General Sir Rupert Smith predicted in 2005.³⁹ Britain in 2018 feels less like a benevolent 'global policeman' and much more like a beleaguered and reactive middle power, struggling to cope with increasingly complex and intractable economic and security challenges.

One reason for this shift is frustration at having so gravely under-estimated the difficulty of achieving lasting stability through Western military interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya over the past two decades.⁴⁰ A second factor is the revival of great power tensions with an increasingly assertive Russia and China, at the very time when Western unity is being compromised by Britain's own tortuous and divisive Brexit process and by the rise of nationalist regimes in the USA, Poland, Hungary, Turkey and elsewhere.⁴¹ A third factor is the renewed sense of societal vulnerability to a wide range of threats, ranging from homegrown gang violence or jihadi terrorism to cyber attack, a mass influx of desperate

refugees or economic migrants, or even nuclear escalation by Russia or a newly capable 'rogue state'.⁴²

In this increasingly febrile atmosphere, in which the drowning of many thousands of refugees trying to cross the Mediterranean has been met with appalling ambivalence, it is scarcely surprising that public outrage at the depredations caused by aerial bombing has been more muted than one might expect.⁴³ Although non-Western states such as Syria, Russia and Saudi Arabia have recently displayed striking ruthlessness in deliberately targeting civilian populations in coercive air bombardments, British arms sales to Riyadh have continued without much public outcry, and even the repeated use of poison gas by Syria has provoked little consistent response.⁴⁴ The UK's own recent air operations against ISIS have been much more discriminate, with a goal of 'no civilian casualties', but the murderous behaviour of the jihadis has put them so far beyond the pale that even the devastation of Mosul and Raqqa in the process of liberation aroused hardly any popular disquiet at home.⁴⁵

Recent experience illustrates clearly the limits of media anecdotalism. Although even a single heart-rending photo (such as the toddler drowned in 2015 when trying to cross to Greece) can echo round the world and provoke outrage, media reports of the death of thousands do not evoke a proportionately greater response.⁴⁶ This applies especially if access by camera crews is problematic or if the increasingly brazen and routine proliferation of 'fake news' muddies the waters and makes it hard to determine the truth.⁴⁷ It is frightening how quickly humanitarian sensibilities can erode in an age of mass migration, indiscriminate terrorism, economic insecurity and old-fashioned power politics.

So does this mean that the RAF's second century of existence may see a return to something like the political culture of the mid-twentieth century, with the British public more concerned about the risks to UK civilians and service personnel than with safeguarding innocents abroad? There is certainly a chance that fast jet crews will regain something of their old heroic image as increasingly capable air defences undermine the utility of drones and deprive human aircrew of their accustomed invulnerability.⁴⁸ It is also likely that public sensitivity to collateral damage will decline somewhat from its recent peak, as the focus shifts from 'wars of choice' to 'wars of national interest'. However, it is very hard to imagine the RAF returning to anything like the kind of deliberate coercive city bombing practised in the past by Bomber Command and more recently by the Russian and Syrian Air Forces.⁴⁹ For free democracies like the UK, legitimacy is an indispensable element of the application of military force, so it will remain vital for British air power to gain the moral as well as the aerodynamic high ground.

¹ For a fuller analysis of this and many other aspects of air power, see now Olsen, J. (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Air Power* (London: Routledge, 2018)

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