



The Air Land Debate Goes On

■ by Wg CDR (GBR AF) Simon JESSETT

In 2009 the issue of air-land integration (ALI) rightly remains at the forefront of NATO thinking, but the debate is often soured by antagonistic arguments that have echoed since the inception of military flight. And whilst the air-land interface is working well at the tactical level in Afghanistan, its gears greased by several years of combat experience, the familiar tensions between components remain at the operational level. What do the lessons of the past tell us, what causes this perpetual friction, and is there anything we can do to improve our lot? Although the following article uses British experience for its examples, the universal arguments were replicated almost exactly across Europe and on both sides of the Atlantic.

Since the first aircraft tottered into the skies as artillery spotting platforms in the Great War there were differences of opinion regarding the best use of air power, and the 'post-war debrief' cemented divisions that have shown re-

markable staying power. It is no exaggeration to claim that much of the ill-informed tension between components today has its origins in the arguments of the interwar period. But by understanding the realities and avoiding the more simplistic views on offer, we can use history to steel ourselves against the temptations of parochialism.

As the two sides emerged from the Great War there was a demonstrable disparity between the ideas of air power's most enthusiastic proponents and the offensive capabilities of their aircraft. Air power had arguably proved ineffective in the strategic bombing role, its aircraft incapable of carrying many bombs or of delivering them with any accuracy, but it had been successful in tactical support to the army. Yet the interwar Royal Air Force (RAF), apparently blind to the evidence, would lean heavily towards the heavy bomber, whilst the Luftwaffe would develop a highly efficient tactical air capability. As German

‘combined arms’ forces then swept across continental Europe at the start of WW2, it is unsurprising that disagreements arose between the land and air components.

But what had driven the RAF to neglect their air support doctrine? The British electorate was sincere in its belief that war on the scale of 1914-18 could never happen again. Defence expenditure was cut dramatically as a result, engendering the familiar internecine warfare between the Services. The RAF defended itself against hostility from its sister Services by arguing that a small number of aircraft could police the colonies effectively, while strategic bombing was an attractive premise for a country seeking to avoid a repeat of the horrors of continental trench warfare. Meanwhile in Germany military thinkers were motivated by the most obvious lesson of the Great War—that victory must be achieved quickly and decisively. The restrictions of Versailles inspired the German General Staff to develop the doctrine of manoeuvre that others would christen Blitzkrieg. Perhaps most importantly the Germans were able to focus upon the air-land interface because they knew they were going to need it. As a continental power with growing ambitions, they were unencumbered by the colonial policing requirements of empire, and had a relatively small navy. Put simply, they expected to fight another continental land war whilst the British did not.

In reality however the thinking on air power in Britain and Germany in the 1930s had been very similar. Each country had its share of heavy bomber enthusiasts and supporters of tactical doctrine. The differences in force mix that were apparent by 1939 were a result of differing geo-strategic outlook and, perhaps most importantly, the shortage of funding in Britain. Although many senior British figures could see the benefits of tactical air power, strategic bombers and fighters simply came higher up the doctrinal priority list at a time of financial constraint.



The Allies would forge a successful air-land relationship in North Africa in 1943, demonstrating the enduring value of concepts such as co-located HQs and mutual trust. By the time of Overlord, however, vitriolic apportionment debates and clashing egos had soured the atmosphere. And once the war was over air and land services across the new NATO alliance would go back to their own exclusive domains, determined to protect their individual service’s interest in a difficult economic environment.

The enduring lessons are compelling. Which of us today can claim to come from a nation whose military funding matches its strategic aspirations? Entrenched parochial views and intense resource pressure are continuing features of the defence landscape, distorting doctrine and force structures now as they did in the 1920s and 1930s, and potentially condemning us to another vicious circle of mutual mistrust and internecine squabbling. Sage voices urge the abandonment of ‘Cold War anachronisms’ such as destroyers and stealthy fighter aircraft, focussing on today’s COIN campaign just as the commentators of the



1930s focussed on colonial policing and the strategic bomber. As we concentrate on ALI today, other roles and capabilities are starved of resources and shrivel on the intellectual back-burner. We must be mindful that once we have disengaged from Afghanistan we will have to work very hard to regain the skills required for more conventional operations, whilst seeking to avoid a repeat of the cycle that sees hard-won lessons about ALI being lost all over again.

Debate between the components regarding the apportionment of assets is no bad thing. There are justifiable arguments both for and against indirect air operations that target the enemy beyond the range of land forces, just as there are compelling reasons to advocate more direct air support to the troops at the frontline. The key is that the debate should take place in an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust, in which each component uses its expertise in concert with the other to produce the most effective joint campaign. Sadly in Afghanistan today the air and land components continue to generate friction at the op-

erational level as they manoeuvre for institutional advantage.

Imperfections along the fault lines between joint forces will always exist, caused by a raft of considerations, both military and political, a situation exacerbated when individual services are forced to fight for their own slice of an inadequate financial cake. What is important is that we should understand the forces at play, and give ourselves the best chance of overcoming the inherent friction. Only by seeing the broader picture, and by avoiding less than objective assessments that simply castigate one side or the other, will we be able to create an interface in which air and land forces are 'so knitted that the two together form one entity. If you do that, the resultant military effort will be so great that nothing will be able to stand against it...'¹

Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author. They do not reflect the official view or policy of HQ NRDC Italy or the British MoD. ■

¹ General Bernard Law Montgomery reflecting on Air Support in North Africa in 1943.