

THE BRITISH ROYAL AIR FORCE:
A FAULTY FOUNDATION AND THE DECISION TO SURVIVE, 1918-40

By

Zachary J. Zweigle*
Lindenwood University

On 20 August 1940, Sir Winston Churchill gave a memorable speech acknowledging the crucial role of the British Royal Air Force (RAF) in keeping the German Luftwaffe at bay:

The gratitude of every home in our island, in our Empire, and indeed throughout the world, except in the abodes of the guilty, goes out to the British airmen who, undaunted by odds, unwearied in their constant challenge and mortal danger, are turning the tide of the World War by their prowess and by their devotion. Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.¹

In fact, never in the field of British aviation was so much owed by so many to one man. Had it not been for Lord Hugh Trenchard and the role he played in the development of the RAF during the interwar period, Britain might not have had an air force ready to take on the Luftwaffe during the Battle of Britain.

The Royal Air Force was in a precarious state after its creation in 1918. Faced with an overwhelming war debt and a looming economic depression, many in the British government regarded an air force as an unaffordable luxury. Trenchard assumed control in 1919 and, instead of formulating a grandiose scheme for the RAF, adopted a mindset of survival and devised a series of plans that would allow the air service to develop as an efficiently modern fighting

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¹ Simon Sebag Montefiore, ed. *Speeches That Changed the World: The Stories and Transcripts of the Moments That Made History* (London: Smith-Davies Publishing Ltd, 2005), 95.

force.² That attitude shaped the decisions made during the interwar period, affirming the RAF's relevance and necessity as an integral component of Britain's defense community, and allowing it to survive this crucial period. Hugh Trenchard is widely regarded as "the father of the RAF," though he himself had no use for that moniker. In recent scholarship, historians have begun to question how vital Trenchard was to the establishment of the RAF as an independent entity. Malcolm Cooper states that he was "one of the most strident opponents of unification, Trenchard was the last man to foster the growth of independent spirit with the RAF... his heart was clearly never in the job."³ John James adds, "to Trenchard... the Air Arm was essentially a part of the Army, just like the Artillery or the Engineers. It could have no independent role and therefore no independent existence."⁴ Thus, "Trenchard had to be persuaded that an Air Force could operate quite divorced from the activity of an Army."⁵ Malcolm Smith, in his chapter titled, *The Trenchard Legacy*, states, "Trenchard's role in the development of the RAF was perhaps less far-sighted than RAF hagiography would have us believe, but it was nonetheless crucial.⁶ His contribution was more that of the pragmatist than the visionary."⁷

To those who questioned his aims in unifying the air service, Trenchard defended himself by saying, "I thought that if anything were done at that time to weaken the Western Front, the war would be lost and there would be no air service, united or divided. I wanted to unify it, but later on at a more suitable opportunity."⁸ He continues, "this made it possible to

² For additional information on the development of the RAF, see: Zachary John Zweigle, "Through Adversity to the Stars: The Development of an Autonomous British Royal Air Force," (M.A. Thesis, California State University, Fresno, 2009).

³ Malcolm Cooper, "Blueprint for Confusion: The Administrative Background to the Formation of the Royal Air Force, 1912-19," *Journal of Contemporary History* 22, no.3 (July 1987): 447.

⁴ John James, *The Paladins: A Social History of the RAF Up to the Outbreak of World War II* (London: Macdonald and Co. Ltd., 1990), 75.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁶ *The Trenchard Legacy* is the first chapter in: Malcolm Smith, *British Air Strategy between the Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

⁷ Smith, 14.

⁸ Andrew Boyle had a working relationship with Lord Trenchard before his death; consequently, Boyle's biography of Trenchard, which uses first-hand interviews and official and private papers, is often given equal

form the air service on a sound basis when the Great War was finished, and I doubt now that we could have unified it then, with the opposition from the army and navy we would have had.”⁹

Trenchard approached the task of leading the RAF with the resolve to see it through its trials so that it could gain full autonomy. This is reflected in the remarks of Phillip Meilinger, who states, “the fact that Trenchard refused to accept the exaggerated claims of men like Sykes and Smuts was more a sign of measured maturity than of fickleness.”¹⁰ In September of 1919, just months after taking over as Chief of the Air Staff, Trenchard produced a memorandum stressing “why the RAF should be maintained as separate from the army and navy.”¹¹ As this article will reveal, from September 1919 onward, Trenchard was incredibly outspoken about the need to keep the air force independent and thus his critics cannot accuse him of failing to support the new force or its mission.

The Faulty Foundation

To make this great change would be a difficult and lengthy operation in peacetime.... I am inclined to think it would be practically impossible in wartime.

– Lord Derby¹²

The famous July 1909 flight in which Frenchman Louis Blériot crossed the English Channel from France to Britain awoke the island nation to the fact that they were no longer geographically isolated.¹³ Politicians realized that Britain had fallen drastically behind its European neighbors in the realm of aviation. Yet it was two more years before Prime Minister H.H. Asquith would form, in 18 December 1911, a Technical Sub-Committee under the

standing to an autobiography. Boyle remarks in the preface, “though he was blind, hard of hearing and enfeebled in body, his mental faculties were as sharp as ever.” Andrew Boyle, *Trenchard: Man of Vision* (London: Collins, 1962), 5.

⁹ Boyle, 232.

¹⁰ Phillip S. Meilinger, “Trenchard and ‘Morale Bombing:’ The Evolution of Royal Air Force Doctrine before World War II,” *The Journal of Military History* 60, no. 2 (April 1996), 251.

¹¹ John Sweetman, “Crucial Months for Survival: The Royal Air Force, 1918-19,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 19, no.3 (July 1984), 536.

¹² Boyle, 173.

¹³ John Buckley, *Air Power in the Age of Total War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 34.

Committee of Imperial Defense to examine the possibility of creating an aviation service.¹⁴ The sub-committee's findings led to the formation of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) in 1912, under the purview of the British Army. Roughly two years later, on 1 July 1914, the admiralty withdrew its aerial resources from the RFC and created the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS).¹⁵ Unfortunately, neither the RFC nor RNAS was the remedy officials were searching for, as the two services failed to cooperate, leaving Britain's air resources divided and virtually ineffective. Moreover, this falling-out deepened the entrenched rivalry between the two services during a critical wartime period. As the First World War swept across Europe, and German dirigibles swept across the English skies, it was quickly revealed that neither branch's air service had the ability to combat the menacing Zeppelin and Gotha bombing raids.¹⁶ As homes were destroyed, and civilians were wounded and killed, the terrified public demanded that the government protect them from this experience of total war.¹⁷

Given the air services' failure to defend the nation, people wondered why the already limited air resources should continue to be divided between two organizations. Once again, the government appointed a committee to survey the British air defenses. Jan Christian Smuts, head of the committee, recommended in 1917 that an air service be created that would be independent of the other two branches and backed by its own air ministry.¹⁸ The Smuts Report was then approved by the War Cabinet on 24 August 1917. Less than eight months later, the

¹⁴ James, 38.

¹⁵ Ibid., 53.

¹⁶ Accounts of these attacks can be found in: "Aeroplane Raid at Dover," *Times* (London), 26 December 1914; Francis K. Mason, *Battle over Britain: A History of the German Air Assaults on Great Britain, 1917-18 and July-December 1940, and the Development of Britain's Air Defences between the World Wars* (London: McWhirter Twins Ltd., 1969), 17.

¹⁷ The discussion over Britain's loss of the English Channel as a defensive barrier would remain an issue throughout most of the interwar period. Official Air Ministry papers reveals that as late as 1927 Cabinet Committees were attempting to address the problem by looking at new methods of defending the Isles. For additional information, see: The National Archives at Kew Garden (PRO), AIR 8/92, *Suggestion for Increased Security (1927)*.

¹⁸ Boyle, 229; James, 62.

Royal Air Force was formed through an amalgamation of the air resources of both branches.¹⁹ But building a new force out of the existing air services proved problematic; as Malcolm Cooper notes, “the Royal Air Force represented little more than old wine in new bottles.”²⁰ The RAF faced an initial struggle for supplies and was unable to accrue the material surpluses necessary to build and maintain aircraft. This “caused a degree of dislocation which might well have destroyed the new force at birth.”²¹ Fortunately, this dislocation was only temporary. Furthermore, with the nation at war, the RAF had little opportunity for a conventional procurement, construction, and development process, thus most improvements were attained through improvisation. As the war continued into its remaining months, both the army and navy were too embroiled in actual campaigns to further engage in a political struggle back at the home-front.

This brief period of subdued rivalry should have allowed the RAF a chance to solidify, but sadly, as the external pressures began to wane, internal pressures surfaced. Personalities were in constant conflict, and feuds between some of the top-ranking leaders in the RAF were ever-present. Just seven days after the formation of the RAF, Frederick Sykes replaced Hugh Trenchard as the new Chief of the Air Staff (CAS), and two and half weeks later Lord William Weir replaced Lord Rothermere as President of the Air Council. Lord Weir would only remain in office until 10 January 1919 before being replaced by Winston Churchill, and CAS Sykes would again be replaced by Trenchard on 15 February 1919.

Although arguments against the air service were temporarily quelled during the remaining months of the war, they would return after the armistice and be further fueled by the

¹⁹ Royal Air Force: Benefit of Unified Control, *Times* (London), 1 April 1918.

²⁰ Malcolm Cooper, *The Birth of Independent Air Power: British Air Policy in the First World War* (London: Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1986), 107.

²¹ *Ibid.*

recessed post-war economic situation in Britain. In order to survive the next round of inter-service attacks, the RAF would need to solidify its base quickly and demonstrate its necessary autonomy.

The Decision to Survive

A good pilot is both born and made. The best would look upon his work as a combination of adventure and a serious mission.

—Major General Sir Frederick Sykes²²

The short tenure of Frederick Sykes as Chief of the Air Staff provides a glimpse into ‘what if’ history, as we can study his far-sighted plans for the air service; but more than that, it offers a stunning contrast between the developmental schemes of Sykes and Trenchard, who would replace Sykes ten months later during a shuffle of the RAF’s top leaders. Sykes was certainly a visionary with a brilliant scheme for the growth of the newly-minted independent air arm, as shown in his staff paper titled *Memorandum by the Chief of the Air Staff on Air-Power Requirements of the Empire*.²³ However, his paper also reveals just how out-of-touch Sykes was with Britain’s economic climate. As John James notes, “what is impressive about this memorandum is that there is virtually no mention of finance.”²⁴

Sykes conceptualized the British realm as being held together by a large network of government aviation, with little commercial privatization. In his scheme, the Air Ministry would take up the responsibility of policing operations, postal duties, and an assortment of other public obligations. Additionally, he recommended that home defense consist of twenty squadrons with a cadre of regular commanders; these units would include eight squadrons of day bombers, nine

²² Sir Frederick Sykes, *From Many Angles: An Autobiography* (London: George G. Harrap & Company Ltd., 1942), 96.

²³ *Memorandum* is dated 9 December 1918; for more information, see: Sykes, 558-574.

²⁴ James, 82.

squadrons of night bombers, and three squadrons of flying boats.²⁵ RAF units would be required to discharge coastguard responsibilities, perform all other government aerial obligations, balloon and airship services, as well as undertake surveying, anti-aircraft, and sound-locating duties.²⁶ He noted that geographical boundaries no longer offered security; therefore, forces should maintain a state of readiness throughout the empire – the Dominions would also be required to maintain squadrons.²⁷ Obviously the meager defense budget could not accommodate Sykes' ambitious plans, and the previous scheme was never developed by the Air Ministry. This inability to conceptualize the needs of the air service led some within the top echelon of the Ministry to believe that Sykes was unsuitable in his position as CAS, and as a result should be replaced.

In December of 1918, Prime Minister David Lloyd George offered Winston Churchill his choice of appointments as either head of the Admiralty or the War Office. He chose the former, but was given the latter. Lloyd George then told him that he would also be appointed Secretary of State for Air – the political head of the Air Ministry and the RAF. Both *The Times* and *The Daily Mail* expressed outrage over this arrangement, for they feared that it would worsen inter-service rivalries and might lead to a disbandment of the RAF.²⁸ As Lord Weir handed over control of the Air Ministry to Churchill, Sykes was still serving as Chief of the Air Staff – the military head of the RAF. Weir pressed Churchill to replace Sykes with Hugh Trenchard,

²⁵ James, 81; Sykes, 559, 561, and 562.

²⁶ Sykes is often given little recognition for his planning and implementation; ultimately, he was instrumental in implementing “the meteorological service, flight medicine, more effective training, long-range bombing, improved air-to-air and air-to-ground communication, aerial photography, the creation of the WRAF, accident investigation procedures, mission planning and post-mission reporting and Air Intelligence.” For more, see: Eric Ash, *Sir Frederick Sykes and the Air Revolution, 1912-1918* (London: Frank Cass, 1999), 217.

²⁷ Sykes, 262-263 and 559-560. The Dominions would maintain 37 squadrons – Canada 12, Australia 10, South African 9, and New Zealand 6.

²⁸ Sweetman, 530.

stating, “[Trenchard] can make do with little and won’t have to be carried.”²⁹ As a result, Sykes was made Controller-General of Civil Aviation and Trenchard took up the post as CAS on 15 February 1919.

Trenchard was first commissioned in the British Army. However, once he had reached the rank of major, the monotony of regimental life set in. He feared that soon the War Office would send him off with a pension and his service career would be over, thus he recognized that a change in venue was needed and transferred to the air force. Trenchard seemed an unlikely candidate to begin flight training in 1912; at thirty-nine years of age he was nearly too old for the flying corps, which had a cut-off at age forty imposed by the War Office for all qualified pilots entering the RFC. It was this age restriction that motivated Trenchard to complete his flight training as quickly as possible.³⁰ In the end, “he earned his wings in exactly one hour and four minutes of flying time spread over thirteen days.”³¹ For Trenchard, the RFC was an important step in his career, as it would grant him opportunity for promotion in rank and position.

Immediately after taking the position, Churchill tasked Trenchard with laying out a new scheme for the RAF. Trenchard’s memorandum officially titled *White Paper Cmd 467: The Permanent Organization of the Royal Air Force*, was more in step with the fiscal needs of the RAF than the scheme previously proposed by Sykes.³² Trenchard understood that growth was vital to the RAF’s future, and thus set up the necessary framework for later expansion of the air

²⁹ Wing Commander Ian M. Philpott (RAF Retd), *The Royal Air Force: An Encyclopedia of the Inter-war Years; Volume I, The Trenchard Years 1918 to 1929* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2005), 29.

³⁰ James, 41; Boyle, 99-100.

³¹ Boyle, 99.

³² The full document is available at The National Archives at Kew Garden (PRO), AIR 1/17.

service. He described this approach as, “building the foundations for a castle which may be built at some later date but in the meantime building a cottage upon those foundations.”³³

Trenchard approached the charge of leading and developing the RAF with the determination to ensure full autonomy. His commitment over the next twelve years of the interwar period adequately demonstrates this resolve. During this time of tense rivalry between the services, Trenchard recognized that his decisions would be scrutinized by the army and navy, thus every decision had to be justified. Still, Trenchard was not without support, as his intentions were buttressed by Churchill, who was not going to allow the RAF to be reabsorbed into the two senior services. Soon after accepting his role, Churchill wrote to Walter Long, First Lord of the Admiralty to inform him that he was renaming the RAF’s ranks and titles, making it clear that the RAF wished to remain independent.³⁴

Churchill liked Trenchard’s plan for the restructuring of the Air Ministry. The Ministry would be small and efficient, consisting of a Secretary and Under-Secretary of State for Air, followed by eleven additional senior officers. Though it would be relatively small compared to Admiralty and War Office, Lord Weir assured Parliament that the Ministry could be effectively operated with this reduced contingent.³⁵ The intent of Trenchard’s design was in no way an attempt to impair the RAF; rather, he recognized the coming recession and thus concocted a simple framework sufficient for survival without overreaching. Trenchard himself asserted, “it has been possible therefore to concentrate attention on providing for the needs of the moment as far as they can be foreseen and on laying the foundations of a highly-trained and efficient force.”³⁶ Trenchard’s plan served both immediate needs, as well as allowed for future expansion

³³ Philpott, 29.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ The complete layout of Trenchard’s restructuring of the Air Ministry can be found in Boyle, 331-332.

³⁶ H. Montgomery Hyde, *British Air Policy between the Wars* (London: Heinemann Ltd., 1976), 63.

“without drastic alteration to the basic organization.”³⁷ Perhaps the most critical of Trenchard’s concepts, and certainly a gamble, was the notion that all planning would be based around the expectation that no wars would break out for ten years, thus giving him the opportunity to build up resources, complete the initial framework of the RAF, and fight the inevitable political battles.³⁸ In the meantime, he faced a more immediate issue, as the inter-service rivalries that had been at bay during the closing months of the war had begun to re-emerge.

By 1919, Britain had begun to reduce defense spending, and all three service branches saw their budgets cut drastically. The air force received a disproportionately small allotment of funding in comparison to the army and navy, who would have preferred the RAF’s budget be reduced to zero.³⁹ With the RAF only in its infancy, the army and navy “saw it as a frail and youthful little brother easily bullied.”⁴⁰ But the relationship went beyond mere bullying; the two older services maliciously sought to wound or perhaps kill the young service. Phillip Meilinger notes, “it is difficult to determine who threw the first punch, but relations between Trenchard and his service counterparts, Field Marshal Henry Wilson and Admiral David Beatty, were stormy bordering on rude. These two men made no secret of their desire to disband the RAF.”⁴¹ On this subject, Trenchard wrote:

The Field Marshal wishes to lay axe to the roots, as by doing so he thinks he may the easier obtain fruit. What is wanted in order that the maximum amount of fruit may be got for our money is severe pruning of the overhead fruitless branches of some of the neighboring trees which are present crowding out the younger and more productive growth and thereby preventing its vigorous expansion to full maturity.⁴²

³⁷ Smith, 22.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ In 1920, the army received £125,000,000, the navy was allotted £90,872,300, and the RAF was given £22,992,230. By 1920 that number was virtually cut in half for the army and air force, and by a third for the navy. Source: Hyde, 516.

⁴⁰ Meilinger, 252.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 253.

The Admiralty perpetuated the argument that the Air Ministry, due to its inexperience and the problems associated with the economic recession, was not in a position to meet the navy's aerial needs effectively. Admiral Beatty saw potential for an air fleet in the future, but he felt that though all funding should be concentrated in the hands of the army and navy in the meantime. He contended that aviation should operate in the commercial realm and focus on research and production.

Late in 1919, Trenchard realized that the Royal Air Force was never going to gain solidarity or autonomy if he had to keep going to battle merely to justify its existence. He recognized that in order to give the RAF a stronger foundation, a temporary "cease fire" was necessary. On 8 January 1920, Trenchard met with Beatty and Wilson regarding the independence of the RAF. Neither man had any intention of listening to the Chief of the Air Staff's reasoning. Trenchard realized that "it would be easy enough for them to maim the R.A.F. fatally before it had grown big enough to justify even his own faith in its future."⁴³ He would have to appeal to the decency of these men. Thus, in true British fashion, he asked for a sporting chance to defend himself: "give me just twelve months' grace to get started."⁴⁴ Beatty was partial to this noble sense of fair play and agreed to a one-year moratorium. During this one-year period, the army and navy would allow the RAF to develop without interference. This would give Trenchard an opportunity to establish the RAF and allow both sides to prepare for a sporting fight. Beatty and Wilson would later regret this decision, as they did not expect that Trenchard would be able to secure adequately the RAF's position and ensure its survival.

Imperial Policing

It is probable that future war will be conducted by a special class, the air force, as it was by the armored knights of the Middle Ages.

—Brigadier General William "Billy" Mitchell⁴⁵

⁴³ Boyle, 349.

⁴⁴ Hilary St. George Saunders, *Per Ardua: The Rise of British Air Power 1911-1939* (London: Oxford University Press, 1945), 307; Smith, 23; Boyle, 349-350.

⁴⁵ R. G. Grant, *Flight: The Complete History* (New York: DK Publishing, 2002), 103.

With Europe no longer at war, the threat of air bombing raids had ceased, essentially leaving the RAF without a peacetime role to fulfill. From 1918 to 1919, the size of the air force was therefore drastically scaled back.⁴⁶ Lloyd George's government might even have abolished the RAF at this point had it not been for Churchill and Trenchard. In January of 1919, Churchill pushed an agenda that would send squadrons to the farthest reaches of the British Empire. Policing the empire was a unique challenge, as vast distances intermixed with cultural diversity, adding fuel to glowing embers of civil strife and ethnic uprisings. For decades, the army had deployed large garrisons of soldiers to these various regions at exorbitant cost. Churchill and Trenchard were confident that the RAF was a cheaper and more efficient option, and began deploying squadrons. In 1919, the RAF had just twenty-five and a half squadrons. Trenchard elected to send nineteen of them overseas: eight were sent to India, three to Mesopotamia, seven to Egypt, and one was divided between naval bases within the empire. Two and a half were sent to the naval home fleet and two were allocated for army co-operation, leaving just two squadrons to protect the heart of Britain.⁴⁷

The utilization of aircraft, especially the police bomber, was the culmination of what David Omissi terms as "technological imperialism."⁴⁸ For the Royal Air Force, imperial air policing represented a new frontier, both figuratively and literally, as well as a valuable test of its abilities as an independent air organization. By May of 1919, the RAF was prepared to commence with its policing campaigns. It was imperative that the RAF leadership, in coordination with its airmen, exceed the expectations placed by Churchill and Trenchard, as success in these campaigns would provide a stronger argument in favor of the RAF's survival. Policing the Empire would be the first step in a series of endeavors by Trenchard and his staff to demonstrate the autonomy and necessity of the air force.

⁴⁶ In 1918, RAF personnel numbered 291,170, aircraft numbered 22,647, and squadrons numbered 188. By 1919, those numbers were reduced to 30,000 personnel, 200 aircraft, and 25.5 squadrons. See: Hyde, 23 & 503; James, 241 & 247-8; and Meilinger, 243-270.

⁴⁷ Boyle, 354.

⁴⁸ David E. Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force 1919-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 4.

Early in May 1919, the RAF was dispatched to Afghanistan during the Third Anglo-Afghan War.⁴⁹ It was there that RAF forces joined British and Indian ground troops in a supporting role. Aircraft began their attacks by bombing an Afghan army depot at Dakka, which was followed by aerial raids on Jalalabad on the 17th, 20th, and 24th of May. RAF leaders felt justified in their attacks against Jalalabad, as it was of military significance, but it was the civilian sector of the city that was most badly burnt and damaged, adding some controversy to these early operations. Most civilians fled for fear of further attacks. Additionally, if frontier tribesmen joined the Afghan effort, their villages were bombed in retribution. Although the bombing efforts produced little damage, the propaganda value of the mission was far greater; David Omissi states, “the... raid would be repeatedly adduced by the Air Ministry as evidence for the value of air power in imperial defence.”⁵⁰

In May of 1919, the RAF embarked on a campaign to bring down Mohammad bin Abdulla Hassan, popularly known as “Mad Mullah”, and his following of Dervish religious forces in Somaliland.⁵¹ In December, the aircraft were shipped to Berbera, the British colonial capital of Somaliland, under the guise of an oil prospecting operation. The aircraft were quickly assembled, tested, and prepared to commence their missions on 21 January 1920. The attack took place in two phases: “the first, which lasted only five days, consisted largely of independent air action, while during the second, more than three weeks long, aircraft were used to support the military units of the protectorate.”⁵² By February 18, just twenty-nine days after the start of the campaign, the Dervish forces were defeated and the aircraft returned to Berbera. The entire cost of the campaign reached £150,000, but the cost of the air operations were a mere £70,000.⁵³ Trenchard was jubilant. Boyle notes, “the sky awaited his pilots. It required no capital, no

⁴⁹ For additional information on the Third Anglo-Afghan War or the RAF’s role in Afghanistan, see: Omissi.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵¹ For additional information on the rise of Mohammad bin Abdulla Hassan and his Dervish forces, especially their rise to power during World War I, see: Omissi, 13-16; Hyde, 90-91.

⁵² Omissi, 15.

⁵³ Smith, 28; Omissi, 15.

painstaking toil by armies of labourers to open up like the roads of old, only the courage and persistence and navigational skill of his airmen.”⁵⁴

These initial colonial campaigns proved an efficient method for policing the empire. However by 1920, the worsening economic situation in Britain meant that political leaders faced further domestic pressures to cut spending. Politicians felt that financial reductions to the military would be the least damaging to their own careers. Once again, the Air Ministry was placed in a difficult position, calling into question its survival. The Ministry responded by offering a fiscally efficient scheme for the policing of Iraq. Iraq represented a strategic territory for Britain as it was oil rich (a commodity that was becoming more of a necessity for the survival of the empire).⁵⁵ Up until 1919, Iraq had been policed by ground forces, but at a high cost to the government; the military garrison numbered twenty-five thousand British troops and eighty thousand Indian, with expenditures of £18 million per year. Churchill recognized the RAF could provide a similar outcome at less expense. He proposed using aircraft equipped with gas bombs, which would be supported by a reduced contingent of ground forces – about four thousand British and ten thousand Indian troops.⁵⁶ Trenchard agreed, and designed a scheme that followed Churchill’s proposal.

Samuel Hoare, who served as Secretary of State for Air during this period, believed that aircraft were “the key that closes the door on disorder and insecurity.”⁵⁷ Historian Malcolm Smith notes that speed and unpredictability were two components that led to successful imperial policing campaigns. This was reinforced by Field Marshal Wilson, who stated that the RAF aircraft were “appearing from God knows where, dropping their bombs on God knows what, and going off again God knows where.”⁵⁸ By the end of the campaign in 1929, the RAF had been largely successful. Most notably, they operated within budget. In 1921-22, before the

⁵⁴ Boyle, 370.

⁵⁵ The British Navy had just retrofitted their ships from coal burning to oil burning, thus oil was even more crucial. For more information on the Iraq campaign or any of the other colonial desert campaigns, see: John Bagot Glubb, *War in the Desert: An R.A.F. Frontier Campaign* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1960).

⁵⁶ These troop estimates can be found in Omissi, 21.

⁵⁷ Omissi, 37.

⁵⁸ Smith, 29.

approval of the proposal regarding the use of the air force, the total British expenditure in Iraq was £23.36 million. However, in 1922-23, with the implementation of aircraft, that sum dropped to £7.81 million, and by 1926-27 it had fallen to £3.90 million. Finally, by 1930 the cost of operations in Iraq had decreased to just £650,000 per year.⁵⁹

The RAF did contend with certain difficulties during these operations. The task of deploying squadrons to distant locations throughout the empire was arduous.⁶⁰ Also, the distance of these campaigns from supply centers often resulted in detailed logistical operations. The lessons learned through the daily tasks of repairing, refueling, and rearming by ground crews in distant locations, was of great significance as the RAF continued to lay out its basic structure for future development. Air policing represented a tremendous opportunity for the RAF to model itself as an efficient and viable option for securing the Empire, and thus ensure its own survival. The true significance of these missions is that they showed the need for a separate air force during a period when the British government might easily have been convinced to eliminate the RAF on financial grounds alone.

Developing a Separate Identity

Boys of the Navy, men of the Army and Gentlemen of the Air Force...

—Cyril Newall, Marshal of the Royal Air Force⁶¹

This quotation reflects a deliberate attempt by the leadership of the RAF to create and nurture an attitude of unity and superiority among the men and officers of the air force.

⁵⁹ Omissi, 37; Smith, 29.

⁶⁰ For additional information on difficulty of deploying squadrons, read Captain T. Henderson's official report, which catalogues his squadron's journey from Provin, France to Heliopolis, Egypt. See: The National Archives at Kew Garden (PRO), AIR 1/2689, *Report on Flight from Provin, France to Cairo Egypt by No. 58 Squadron (Handley Pages) by First Trans. Continental Aerial Route. May 3rd – July 2nd 1919.*

⁶¹ Marshal of the Royal Air Force Newall used this as his opening line during a wireless radio broadcast to servicemen in New Zealand in 1938; it reflects an attitude of superiority that was only gained after a twenty-year struggle by the RAF for its own existence: Gordon McLauchlan, *Bateman New Zealand Encyclopedia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1984), 390.

Consequently, almost immediately after the formation of the Royal Air Force, air service personnel began to perceive themselves as different, as superior. Trenchard and the RAF leadership deliberately moved toward establishing the RAF as a separate entity, in an attempt to gain stability and absolute autonomy.

As head of the RAF during this developmental phase, Trenchard had the onerous task of instilling a distinctive character within the ranks of the service. Several of the squadrons formed during the war had developed an *esprit de corps* that Trenchard wanted to preserve to maintain their fighting spirit. But preserving existing traditions and creating new ones were two entirely different challenges. Since flying was at the very core of the RAF, Trenchard placed a strict requirement on those preparing to join: “all new officers would have to learn to fly, and no officer joining after this date would be considered for an appointment in the air force who had not learnt to fly.”⁶²

On 3 April 1920, Lord Londonderry replaced Lord Seely as Under-Secretary of State for Air. While Trenchard did not want Seely to depart his post, he appreciated the arrival of a more aristocratic Under-Secretary. Londonderry brought a new mystique to the air service; Hyde notes, “there was a tendency on the part of the personnel of the two other services, at least in these early days, to look down on the RAF, so that the aristocratic Londonderry’s association with the force proved a social corrective, the effect of which was greatly appreciated by Trenchard and the Air Staff.”⁶³ The conversations between Trenchard and Londonderry reveal that both men had a great deal of respect for one another, which would continue throughout their lives. Shortly after taking the posting, Londonderry wrote to Trenchard, “my only ambition is to help you to achieve your plan and I think success is already assured.” He also

⁶² Boyle, 332.

⁶³ Hyde, 71.

informed Trenchard, “we are not going to get much help from either Service because the heads are terrified that the C-in-C [Commander in Chief] of the next war is going to be an airman. We must capture the new generation and soft soap the old for the time being.”⁶⁴

Lord Londonderry’s prior suggestion of capturing a new generation resonated with Trenchard; he knew that training would not only be crucial in preparing new personnel, but would also aid in the survival of the RAF by establishing and fostering an undeniable *esprit de corps* amongst his airmen and officers. In November 1919, the Royal Air Force College (RAFC) Cranwell was formed, and on 5 February 1920 it was officially opened. Cranwell had begun as a naval training centre, and the first air cadets slept in the original huts erected by the navy.⁶⁵ When the college opened, there were just fifty-two cadets taking a broad survey of courses that included academic, military, and practical topics.⁶⁶

During the initial phases of Cranwell’s development, Trenchard resolved to abolish entrance exams. He believed that these examinations did not provide an accurate assessment of the cadet’s potential. Trenchard had learned this lesson personally, as he was never the most resolute pupil and rarely received top marks. His abilities and leadership manifested in a more practical sense.⁶⁷ Prince Albert (later George VI of Britain), among others, advised Trenchard to keep the examination process. Eventually, he decided in favor of the examinations on the condition that he had the option to overturn the verdict of the examiners.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Hyde, 71.

⁶⁵ Boyle, 350.

⁶⁶ The cost to attend was £215 for the full two-year term. Michael Armitage notes, “for some parents at this time it was a considerable sacrifice.” Michael Armitage, *The Royal Air Force: An Illustrated History* (London: Brockhampton Press, 1998), 55; Saunders, 283-284.

⁶⁷ For more information on Trenchard’s school years, see: Boyle, 19-42.

⁶⁸ Boyle., 361-362.

Trenchard had also learned from personal experience that a lack of money and status might prove distressing for his cadets; therefore, he simply removed the alluring and costly attractions of London.⁶⁹ Trenchard remarked, “marooned in the wilderness, cut off from pastimes they couldn’t organise for themselves, they would find life cheaper, healthier and more wholesome. And they’d have less cause to envy their contemporaries at Sandhurst or Dartmouth and acquire any kind of inferiority complex.”⁷⁰ On the opening day, Trenchard’s speech sought to inspire the Cranwell cadets, “You will have to work your hardest, ...in order to be capable of guiding this service through its early days and maintaining its traditions and efficiency in the years to come.”⁷¹ Cadets at Cranwell began to recognize that the RAF was distinctly different from the other two services. Group Captain Peter Heath wrote in his diary on 15 March 1929 while still a cadet at Cranwell: “some of these dear old ladies ask how people dare fly. Well, dash me, would they rather be shelled to bits in a dug out, or on a floating coffin of a battleship. I’d much rather get killed up in the air. You’ve got a chance, it’s your own fault if you do get killed.”⁷²

Trenchard never intended for the college to be large; certainly it would be made to accommodate the growth of the air service, but not grow out of proportion. Size of the service was important to Trenchard; he had known too many officers in the army who never got an opportunity to get promoted to a higher field grade or become a general officer. They remained in a stagnant overpopulated pool of captains or majors who occasionally received a term-limited brevetted position. He wanted to create a more efficient system that allowed for growth and

⁶⁹ The location for the college in the countryside of Lincolnshire served a valuable purpose for Trenchard. Many of the cadets who attended Cranwell in its early years came from middle-class homes. During this time, a certain snobbery still existed among the wealthy and noble families who turned up their noses at RAF; these families favored traditional commissions in the army or navy for their sons; John James, 137.

⁷⁰ Boyle, 361.

⁷¹ Saunders, 302.

⁷² RAF Museum Hendon, File B2711, 74.

advancement. Thus, he planned for a twenty-year expansion. James notes, “he could therefore calculate the number of senior and air officers he would want in twenty years’ time, and on this basis he planned the size of Cranwell. He was planning for a set number of officers who had been made suitable by background and training to hold posts of military or financial or political responsibility.”⁷³ Although Trenchard had intended for Cranwell to be small, the number of entrants during the first five years was discouraging.⁷⁴ The Chief of the Air Staff’s official paperwork states, “The number of candidates coming forward for Cranwell is very inadequate and is not improving. Only half the number of cadets required have been forthcoming and owing to the absence of any competition the average intellectual standard has been low.”⁷⁵ The committee recommended scholarships and incentives be offered to stimulate enrollment.

Trenchard’s foresight did not end with the establishment of Cranwell; he understood that a staff college was essential for the further development of leadership among his officers. Trenchard formed the RAF Staff College at Andover in 1922. He nicknamed it “the cradle of our brain,” as the faculty trained the brightest of the RAF’s officers for advanced leadership positions within the air service.⁷⁶ The syllabus at Andover encompassed air doctrine, tactics, administrative duties, and coordination between the three services.⁷⁷ The thorough diffusion of information was critical to the RAF. Aviation was still largely in its early stages of development and the air staff needed to learn the endless new techniques and concepts. The training at Andover ensured a measure of consistency among the officers. Group Captains Arthur Harris and Hugh Dowding were students at Andover, and were the next generation to take up the

⁷³ James, 140.

⁷⁴ The number of entrants in 1919 was 34; in 1920, there were 43; in 1921, 33; 1922 had 44; 1923 had 48; there were 49 in 1924; and 15 in 1925. Source: The National Archives at Kew Garden (PRO), AIR 8/77, *Chief of Air Staff’s Papers Regarding the Committee on Rates of Pay (1925)*, 5.

⁷⁵ The National Archives at Kew Garden (PRO), AIR 8/77, *Chief of Air Staff’s Papers Regarding the Committee on Rates of Pay (1925)*, 2.

⁷⁶ Meilinger, 262.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 263.

leadership reigns of the RAF during yet another critical period in its history. The operational decisions made by Trenchard in the interwar period and those made by Arthur Harris and Hugh Dowding during the Second World War, demonstrate the consistency advocated by Trenchard when he established the Staff College at Andover.⁷⁸

During this period, the RAF relied on the use of technology much more than the other two services did. This meant that competent service personnel were required to fulfill duties never before necessary, such as engineering faster and more capable airframes and engines, as well as developing better radio and navigation equipment, and much more powerful ordnance. David and Mady Segal, in their article “Change in Military Organization,” cite the development of the air service as a turning point in military history. For the first time, a military organization recruited personnel based solely on their technical aptitude. From this point on, military and civilian organizations began to converge; thus Trenchard’s air service had to compete with private enterprise to recruit the most skilled tradesmen.⁷⁹ For some personnel, military service provided opportunities to learn valuable trade skills. This meant that some personnel stayed with the air service far longer than those in other branches; some even decided to make military service a career. John James reinforces this notion by contrasting army and RAF personnel, and their motivations for entering their respective branches:

The airmen had joined to advance themselves, while the soldiers saw their enlistment as a bottom step in a long social descent. “The fellows at Uxbridge had joined the RAF as a profession – or to continue in it at their trades... These fellows (soldiers) have joined up as a last resort, because they have failed and were not qualified for anything else.” The airmen, on the other hand, saw their service as the beginning of a real career.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Marshal of the Royal Air Force Arthur “Bomber” Harris was Commander-in-Chief of Bomber Command during World War II and Air Chief Marshal Hugh Dowding was head of Fighter Command during the Battle of Britain.

⁷⁹ David R. Segal and Mady Wechsler Segal, “Change in Military Organization,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 9 (1983): 161.

⁸⁰ James, 108.

Therefore, recruitment and training became an important issue for the RAF, which was stressed by Trenchard: “We must use every endeavour to eliminate accidents both during training and subsequently.” He continued, “this end can only be secured by ensuring that the training of our mechanics in the multiplicity of trades... is as thorough as it can be made. The best way to do this is to enlist the bulk of our skilled ranks as boys and train them ourselves.”⁸¹ In the “Boy Mechanic Scheme” (later named the Apprentice Scheme) new apprentices were recruited at the age of sixteen.⁸² These boys were generally nominated by their secondary schools or through involvement in youth organizations. The Air Staff explained, “the great majority of boys come from families who are connected either with one of the services or Engineering trades. The parents of these boys are themselves well educated and in fairly comfortable circumstances, and look to the future prospects of their sons in selecting a career for them.”⁸³ In order to ensure that the most qualified personnel were advanced, Trenchard decided to take the top three apprentices from each culminating term and award them with a cadetship at Cranwell. They would then go on to commission and become leaders within their respective fields.⁸⁴

Although skilled tradesmen were the backbone of the RAF, the War Office had much difficulty determining pay rates for these men. They were essentially lumped in the same category as the non-technical combatants of the army, meaning that pay was relatively standard across the board, which made it difficult to recruit skilled workers. Therefore, in 1925 the Air Staff argued in favor of each service being allowed to settle its own pay requirements, as long as it was within reason. The Air Staff stated, “in the past we did not object when the Army paid their clerks a good deal more than ours.”⁸⁵ By not objecting to the Army’s decision to advance the pay of their clerks, they set a precedence, and thus the Army should not object to the RAF’s

⁸¹ James, 106.

⁸² Within in the RAF, the three larger apprentice trades were fitters and engine workers, as well as riggers and airframe workers, which were trained at Halton. The last of these three, wireless radio personnel, were trained at Cranwell.

⁸³ The National Archives at Kew Garden (PRO), AIR 8/77, 49.

⁸⁴ Boyle, 363.

⁸⁵ The National Archives at Kew Garden (PRO), AIR 8/77, 29.

pay scale. To the RAF, what mattered most was that the pay was sufficient to recruit efficient, skilled personnel on the most economical basis: “broadly speaking the higher the skill the lower will be the establishments required and the lower will be the wastage, and therefore the lower the necessity for a bigger establishment.”⁸⁶ The committee recommended to Trenchard that the incentives offered by the RAF should be made better known:

Pension, clothes are provided, Insurance is paid for the men, they get Medical treatment, and to some extent they get Medical treatment for their families, and they also get a chance of promotion. When comparing civilian wages with the lower rate of pay, it would be fair to say that a man in the Air Force has a better chance of promotion than a man in civil life has of being promoted to foreman, etc.⁸⁷

As a result of these incentives, the RAF could actively recruit the servicemen most needed to facilitate the growth of an advanced technical organization. By now, the RAF was becoming a prominent member of the defense community. Unable to deny its position, the Army and Navy invited the junior service to take part in co-operative training.

In the mid-1920s, the British defense services began conducting coordinated training exercises designed to include personnel, equipment, and resources of the three branches. During these, co-operation presented some challenges, as soldiers and sailors were made aware of the differences between them and the airmen of the RAF. On some occasions these differences would translate into minor tensions. During one such instance in 1926, an RAF airman passed an Indian army officer without rendering a salute, which led the officer to raise a “fuss.” The airman returned to inquire what the shouting was all about and later stated:

The chap who had shouted out, again very excitedly repeated his query and I informally said that normally I could distinguish between officers and men but as I belonged to the Royal Air Force I was not quite *au fait* about the Army. I said “You chaps wear stars and paggrees, stars without paggrees, long hair and short hair, it’s all quite confusing.” Before I could say anything else he asked in an acid tone and still excitedly, “Don’t you ever read your Regimental orders?” I replied that we had no regimental orders we were R.A.F.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ The National Archives at Kew Garden (PRO), AIR 8/77, 39.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁸⁸ RAF Museum Hendon, MF10019/6, 454.

During another instance of co-operation, army and RAF lorries (trucks) were being used in a convoy. The army personnel complained that their vehicles were being overloaded and were worried that they might break down. However, the army personnel had no reservations about overloading the RAF lorries, sometimes with two tons over the prescribed limit. One airman questioned why the RAF vehicles were being loaded so full; he noted, “as an excuse their Transport Officer said to me ‘the R.A.F. always seem to get the best types of vehicle, and five tons is nothing for a Leyland to carry, etc.’”⁸⁹

Official documents reveal that by 1925 many of the old attitudes and opinions held by the army and Admiralty toward the Royal Air Force were beginning to change. These documents demonstrate an inter-service dialogue centered on co-operation between all of the three branches. The *Manual of Combined Naval, Military, and Air Operations* stressed the “Importance of Peace Training.” Officers from all three services should be given the opportunity to attend exercises and maneuvers conducted by the other services.⁹⁰ The Admiralty offered these proposals: officers from the services could embark on three-month cruises onboard naval vessels; opportunities to carry out actual shore landing operations in conjunction with army and RAF; and lectures on aspects of combined operations by officers of each service. In 1926, official Admiralty documents reveal the decision to create a liaison position between the Royal Navy and the RAF. This position previously existed only between the army and Admiralty. This document demonstrates the value and importance the navy placed on co-operation with the air service.⁹¹ By 1935, the debates over co-operation appear to be largely settled; official documents catalogue in detail many of the coordinated training operations taking place between the three services. These operations demonstrate that by the mid-1930s the Royal Air Force no longer had to defend its place among Britain’s defense community, as both

⁸⁹ RAF Museum Hendon, MF10019/6, 455.

⁹⁰ The National Archives at Kew Garden (PRO), ADM 116/2517, *Co-operation between the Three Services (1926-1929)*, 18-20.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

the army and navy were eager to incorporate the RAF into their training schemes.⁹² The Admiralty concluded that “The defence of the Empire cannot be secured by any one particular service. Only by the closest collaboration and co-operation of all services can that objective be attained.”⁹³

Conclusion: Trenchard’s Uncontested Air Force

In December 1929, Trenchard prepared to retire as Chief of the Air Staff after more than ten years in the position, a term of service that is double the average of all of the Chiefs of the Air Staff to follow. His tenure was impressive; he laid the foundations for the service and oversaw much of its early development. Upon learning of his retirement, Lord Londonderry wrote to Trenchard: “I shall never see a finer spectacle really than the way in which you gripped the whole situation, liquidated the war situation and set to work a new Air Service... so I was glad when Winston [Churchill] decided to install you as head of the Force, and how wise was his selection.”⁹⁴ On 1 January 1930, Air Chief Marshal Sir John Salmond officially took over as Chief of the Air Staff. Salmond benefited greatly from the work done by Trenchard, who had established a firm foundation, worked through many of the early struggles, built infrastructure, set up an efficient operational scheme, and labored aggressively so that the RAF would be on par with the army and navy.

Furthermore, the *esprit de corps* that was cultivated among the airmen and cadets was partly the result of Trenchard’s mystique. Many within the air service began to form a cult of

⁹² The National Archives at Kew Garden (PRO), AIR 2/1510, *Training and Education, General (Code A, 53/1) Air Defence of Great Britain Annual Training Programme 1935*; The National Archives at Kew Garden (PRO), AIR 2/1628, *Formation of Additional Army Co-operation Squadrons (1935)*; The National Archives at Kew Garden (PRO), WO 32/3495, *Employment of Military Forces: Organization (Code 53 (C)): Memorandum by Chief of the Imperial General Staff on Co-operation Between the Army and the Royal Air Force (1934)*.

⁹³ The National Archives at Kew Garden (PRO), ADM 116/2517, 12.

⁹⁴ Hyde, 72.

personality around him; it was as though these men saw him as a sort of deity or legendary figure. Sources from the period reveal the passionate opinions held by some of the airmen. Thomas Edward Lawrence, known popularly as “Lawrence of Arabia,” enlisted in the RAF under the alias of John Hume Ross in 1922. He recorded his time with the service in a manuscript that was later published under the title *The Mint*.⁹⁵ He wrote, “Squad 5 is today the junior unit of the service. There are twenty thousand airmen better than us between it and Trenchard, the pinnacle and our exemplar: but the awe of him surely encompasses us. The driving energy is his, and he drives furiously. We are content, imagining that he knows his road.”⁹⁶ Lawrence continues:

The Jew said that God made man after his own image—an improbable ambition in a creator. Trenchard has designed the image he thinks most fitted to be an airmen; and we submit our nature to his will, trustingly. If Trenchard’s name be spoken aloud in the hut, every eye swivels round upon the speaker, and there is a stillness, till someone says, “Well, what of Trenchard?” and forthwith he must provide something grandiose to fit the legend.⁹⁷

Lawrence’s comments show that part of the reason why the officers and men of the RAF were able to bond and form a cohesive and unified force despite many obstacles was their faith in Trenchard.

During those formative years, Trenchard not only was attuned to the needs of the air service, but also recognized the precarious position of the British Empire and charted a course that benefited both equally. With the assistance of Churchill, he implemented a scheme that enabled Britain to police the Empire in a much more efficient and fiscally responsible manner by utilizing the RAF. Additionally, Trenchard saw the need to recruit and train the next generation of RAF officers in order to facilitate the growth of the air service. This was achieved by establishing a separate cadet college at Cranwell, which allowed the teaching of a distinct air force curriculum and the fostering of an “Air Force Spirit.”⁹⁸ Trenchard transcended his role as

⁹⁵ Thomas Edward Lawrence, *The Mint* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1957), 11.

⁹⁶ Lawrence, 116.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁹⁸ James, 137.

the Chief of the Air Staff and was seen by his men as an unwavering example. The decisions he made represent a mindset that allowed the RAF to survive an intense period of uncertainty due to inter-service rivalry and an unstable post-war economy in Britain.