



Flying to Victory: Raymond Collishaw and the Western Desert Campaign, 1940–1941 by Mike Bechthold.

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In *Flying to Victory*,¹ military historian Mike Bechthold (Wilfrid Laurier Univ.) rescues the reputation of (fellow Canadian) Air Vice Marshal Raymond Collishaw from the savaging it received in Sir Arthur Tedder's widely read memoir.² Tedder, who removed Collishaw from command of 204 Group, the fore-runner of the Western Desert Air Force, criticized him as a tactician well out of his depth. Most historians of the conflict in North Africa have parroted Tedder's criticisms.³ Bechthold, by contrast, argues that Collishaw did not aggressively squander his force in reckless attacks, like the Great War fighter pilot he had been. Instead, he built a foundation on which his successors, notably Sir Arthur Coningham, erected the modern system of air-ground cooperation.⁴

Collishaw was dismissed after the failure of the Royal Air Force (RAF) to effectively help the Western Desert Force (WDF) relieve the besieged garrison at Tobruk during Operation Battleaxe. Unable to achieve much during his subsequent command of 14 Group or in the strategic backwater of Scotland, he retired early, having failed to fulfill the promise of an otherwise distinguished career prior to the Second World War.

Bechthold proceeds chronologically, concentrating on events from the first Italian thrust into Egypt (fall 1940) through Operation Battleaxe (summer 1941). In the introductory chapter 1, he sketches Collishaw's notable Great War career and interwar experience in empire policing. Chapter 2 concerns the Western Desert campaign in 1939–40. The author then turns to the first three (of six) back-and-forth campaigns between Cairo and Tunis. Chapter 3 describes the first Italian sortie (Sept. 1940), some forty miles from Libya into Egypt, which gave Collishaw and British and Commonwealth forces defending the border an easily passed test. Bechthold quotes Anthony Eden's droll paraphrase of Churchill's quip after the Battle of Britain: "Never has so much been surrendered by so many to so few" (73). Chapters 4–5 detail the British drive into Cyrenaica as far as El Agheila (Operation Compass), which precipitated the German entry into the theater. Chapters 6–7 concern Gen. Erwin Rommel's counter-thrust to the Libyan-Egyptian border and the bottling up of the 9th Australian Division in Tobruk. The governing theme of these four chapters, the heart of the book, is that it was specifically Collishaw's flexible air support system that enabled the British Army to drive across Cyrenaica and then elude destruction during its retreat back to the Egyptian border. Chapters 8–9 focus on Operation Battleaxe and the recriminations it triggered. The book ends abruptly in chapter 10 with Collishaw being relieved of command, leaving readers to wonder about the famed "Desert Rats" still stranded in

1. Orig. diss. Univ. of New South Wales (2014), directed by Jeffrey Grey.

2. *With Prejudice: The War Memoirs of Marshal of the Royal Air Force, Lord Tedder* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1966).

3. See, e.g., Robert S. Ehlers Jr., *The Mediterranean Air War* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2014).

4. See, further, Vincent Orange, *Coningham: A Biography of Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham* (1990; rpt. Washington: Ctr for Air Force History, 1992).

their fortress. The book features good maps (drawn by the author!) and twenty-five pages of photographs.

Bechthold has canvassed the relevant British and Canadian primary sources and drawn on Collishaw's own published memoir and materials in the Public Records Office. The paucity of references to Italian and German sources is mitigated by his reliance on the magisterial British official history.⁵ Unfortunately, Collishaw the person often fades into the background of the story of the units under his command. But their successes and failures reflect on their commander's abilities; as Bechthold puts it, "with such diverging views on his [Collishaw's] leadership abilities, it may be best to allow his operational record to tell the story" (123). In the end, warfare is a fickle occupation where only results matter. Such extenuating circumstances as the British Army's flawed application of airpower, interference from above, and diversion of resources to the ill-fated campaign in Greece and Crete do not exonerate Collishaw or WDF commander Sir Archibald Wavell, who found himself banished to India. Sometimes the only recourse left to wartime political leaders is to sack unfortunate commanders, justly or not.

Collishaw's greatest success came against an Italian force that was (his critics rightly point out) in no way prepared for modern warfare. This and his later poor performance against Rommel's Afrika Korps seem to confirm Tedder's harsh assessment. But Bechthold stresses Collishaw's astute handling of his outmanned formations and effective use of airpower in a decisive interdiction campaign. He attributes the RAF's failure in Battleaxe to the Army's insistence on an "umbrella" of air power to protect ground formations, something Tedder agreed to, in order to divert blame from the air service if its ground partners' offensive were to fail. This paints an unbecoming picture of a service willing to risk battlefield defeat to prove a doctrinal point, while intruding its own priorities into Allied operational plans (202). Freed from Tedder's and the British Army's umbrella tactics, Collishaw's squadrons sufficiently degraded Rommel's formations to prevent any substantial counterattack on Tobruk. Bechthold reminds us that the more effective cooperation of services later in the war was no forgone conclusion: it took considerable effort by Collishaw and other "engineers of victory" to establish a war-winning team.

Bechthold's rehabilitation of his protagonist sometimes flirts with hagiography: "The very landscape was often more hostile than the enemy; extremes of weather climate, temperature, and distance were major limiting factors on operations. All these conditions combined to demand a commander who was smart, resourceful, adaptable, flexible, decisive, and fearless. Collishaw demonstrated all of these traits" (11). But, for the most part, the author retains his objectivity. For instance, he admits that, although Collishaw wisely conserved his few aircraft (55), the Air Vice Marshal did not employ his staff well and had difficulties delegating authority (117). His long experience as a squadron commander, Bechthold notes, likely limited his ability to lead larger units successfully.

Bechthold has produced a masterful assessment of a pioneer in the development of tactical air power, redeeming him from almost seventy-five years of obscurity, whether or not the reader entirely agrees with his argument. As the author acknowledges, it is telling that Collishaw was not directly involved in Churchill's reorganization of the Middle East command or his efforts to repair the conspicuously dysfunctional relations between ground and air forces on Collishaw's watch. But, he writes (207), his behind-the-scenes work to ensure effective cooperation during the earlier desert campaigns and his avoidance of ill-advised attacks on well-defended front-line targets in favor of an interdiction cam-

5. Ian Stanley Ord Playfair et al., *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, 6 vols. (London: HM Stationery Office, 1954–88).

paign against softer targets behind the battlefield ensure Collishaw a place in the pantheon of air commanders who helped create a decisive combined-arms team.

Coningham was an effective commander, but his role was to refine and improve the effectiveness of the Desert Air Force (the successor to Collishaw's 202 Group) using the vastly greater resources at his disposal. This system was later adopted by the Allied air forces in Northwest Europe and served as the template for both American and British tactical air operations in support of the D-Day landings and through the rest of the war. Yet this conventional narrative overlooks the genesis of the Desert Air Force and the fact that Coningham inherited Collishaw's maturing organization, which had already proven itself in battle using exactly the same tenets for which the air vice marshal would be credited. (5)

Mike Bechthold is to be commended for shedding new light on a significant but neglected period of the Second World War and clarifying important lessons learned in North Africa regarding a critical aspect of modern warfare.