



The Battle for Britain: Interwar Rivalry between the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy, 1909–40 by Anthony J. Cumming.

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It is odd for a military historian to end a book with a rhetorical question, but Anthony Cumming¹ does just that in *The Battle for Britain*, asking “What is the purpose of *independent* air power?” (170). Readers will know what answer he expects. Whether he proves it to be correct is another matter.

Although Cumming’s introduction states that his “aim has been to produce a short guide that views the period [1909–40] as a struggle between proponents of the air and of the sea” (4), that is not what he primarily does. The book’s ten concise chapters sketch British naval and air policy in the targeted period. They also nicely summarize current scholarship on Cumming’s topic.² And the author clarifies as well the bureaucratic context of policy formulation in the era. But he does not spend much time actually making his case against an independent air force. That is, narrative often supplants argument.

The thesis is clearly stated—that the creation of an independent Air Ministry and Royal Air Force (RAF) was a mistake. More specifically, he writes that “To base national defense on an offensive aerial strategy without regard for the nation’s vulnerability to economic blockade was extremely foolhardy...” (27). But he never shows in any detail why an offensive aerial strategy could not knock enemy forces out before they cut Britain’s economic lifelines (as the RAF “Bomber Barons” claimed it could throughout the 1930s and early 1940s). Cumming simply presents his points as if they were self-evident.

The strongest section of the book concerns the creation and justification of the RAF as an independent service during the Great War. To provide background, Cumming details the German bombing raids on Britain, the overall strategic situation in 1917–18, bureaucratic politics, and the overlapping functions of the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service (especially in fighter defense of the United Kingdom and in fighter operations over Flanders). The perception that German bombing raids would increase in scope and severity and that a counter-bombing force would thus be indispensable motivated the formation of a single ministry to coordinate and control both offensive and defensive operations. Exhaustion and a sense that the war was nearing a climax in spring 1918 also contributed to the decision to form a unified RAF, with profound consequences: it delayed the development of naval air power and close air support (barely mentioned by Cumming) into the Second World War.

Fear, then, had spawned the RAF and ensured its continued existence in the 1920s and 1930s. A further consideration was that it might make imperial policing less costly. British elites, certain that, as Stanley Baldwin put it, “the bomber would always get through,” wanted a bomber force, which in their view meant an independent air force. In the event of war, British political and military leaders hoped to deter an enemy’s attacks or undermine his economy through RAF counter-bombing raids. In an era

1. His earlier work includes *The Royal Navy and the Battle of Britain* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2010).

2. For much fuller information, see N.H. Gibbs, *Grand Strategy*, vol. 1: *Rearmament* (London: HMSO, 1976)—not cited by Cumming.

of tight budgets and Winston Churchill's Ten Year Rule, that meant reducing the resources allocated to Coastal Command and the Fleet Air Arm. Thus naval air power was hamstrung by an elite consensus that strategic bombing was the wave of the future and Britain's best investment for deterrence and war-fighting capability.

The intervention of Treasury Minister Sir Warren Fisher and Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain tempered the parsimony of the Air Ministry regarding Fighter Command and its proposed Chain Home RDF (radar) system. Coastal Command and the Fleet Air Arm did not fare as well. In 1937, the latter was placed, after more than a decade of bitter infighting, under Admiralty control, and substantial funding was approved in a belated effort to boost British carrier air power. But the necessary personnel and infrastructure for a large, modern Fleet Air Arm could not be procured on short notice, while Britain was scrambling to meet higher priorities. For better or worse, Bomber and Fighter Commands overshadowed the Fleet Air Arm. By 1939, the RAF was receiving more money than even the Royal Navy for men and equipment. The proponents of air power had won the day.

The Battle for Britain provides a solid introduction to British naval and air policy in the years 1918–40. But its author musters too little evidence to prove his thesis regarding the dubious value of an independent air force. Key questions are left unasked: for example, should Great Britain have foregone a bomber force altogether? Who would have coordinated the air defense of the United Kingdom? How might the British Army have fitted into this matrix without reproducing interservice rivalries like those between the RAF and the Royal Navy? Anthony Cumming, like the air power enthusiasts he criticizes, fails to definitively rebut those who maintain that an independent air force was essential to Britain's survival in the world wars.