

# Boekbesprekings / Book Reviews

## Roy Macnab: THE FRENCH COLONEL VILLEBOIS-MAREUIL AND THE BOERS 1899-1900

Oxford University Press, Suid-Afrika.

Dit word aanvaar dat 'n biografie moeilik is om te skrywe. Die skrywer van 'n biografie moet sy stof so objektief benader dat die persoon waaroor geskrywe word, nie as 'n bo-natuurlike mens voorgestel word nie. Verder moet die skrywer se navorsingswerk deeglik wees om sodoende sy onderwerp binne die regte historiese milieu te plaas en ten slotte moet die skrywer oor 'n bo-gemiddelde skryfvermoë beskik anders loop sy werk gevaar om bloot 'n opeenhoping van historiese feite te word.

Aan hierdie vereistes voldoen Roy Macnab se boek oor Villebois-Mareuil. Die verhaal lees soos 'n storieboek. Die gemaklike Engels waarin Macnab skrywe, dra waarskynlik heelwat by tot die leesbaarheid daarvan. Nooit word die historiese feite bloot vir die vloei van die verhaal verkrag nie.

Villebois-Mareuil se lewe as professionele soldaat het iets van die 'tragiese held' in. Hy kom na Suid-Afrika om die Engelse te beveg, kry nooit 'n werklike geleentheid om sy talent tentoon te stel nie, word gedood en word met volle militêre eerbewys deur die Engelse begrawe.

As professionele soldaat, wat dissipline en moreel as voorvereiste vir militêre sukses stel, ontstel die metodes van die Suid-Afrikaanse burgerlike soldaat hom:

'... the boers themselves, he thought, ought to have justified his military philosophy. They certainly possessed 'la force morale', stemming from an ardent belief in their cause; that they so infrequently provided the practical proof of his theories was just another of those imponderables that were to make the Boers such an enigma to him.' (p 37).

Villebois-Mareuil het die oorlog in Suid-Afrika aangegryp as 'n terrein om sy teorieë oor oorlogvoering prakties te kom toets. Die Boere se militêre organisasie het hom verstom en dit is miskien die groot waarde van hierdie boek: Boerehelde word in perspektief gestel en die swakhede van die stelsel word ontbloot. Die onwilligheid om verantwoordelik-

heid te aanvaar, swak dissipline en strategie is vir Villebois-Mareuil 'n voortdurende frustrasie.

Die Dagboek wat Villebois-Mareuil in Suid-Afrika bygehou het, vorm die sentrale dokument van hierdie boek. Hoewel dit in die Staatsargief, Pretoria, vir navorsers beskikbaar is, is dit in Frans geskrywe en dus vir min Suid-Afrikaners as bron toeganklik. Ook in hierdie opsig is Macnab se boek n' waardevolle bydrae tot die Suid-Afrikaanse militêre geskiedenis.

Omdat die beginsels van oorlogvoering deur die eeue gefundeerd is en hierdie boek deurspek is met Villebois-Mareuil se filosofieë van oorlogvoering, is dit belangrik dat militêre studente die boek moet lees. Enkele aanhalings sal hierdie bewering bewys:

'... the importance of the human contact between officers and men which provided an army with a morale that could be invincible.' (p 28).

Verder:

'... the "force morale" of an army was even more important in winning success than the arms themselves.' (p 36).

Die boek is goed gedokumenteer, keurig versorg en behoort deur elke ernstige militaris en liefhebber van Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis gelees te word.

W. Otto.

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## Denis Richards and Hilary St George Saunders: ROYAL AIR FORCE 1939-1945

**Volume 1: The Fight at Odds**, by Denis Richards, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1974, pp xii 430.

**Volume 2: The Fight Avails**, by Denis Richards and Hilary St George Saunders, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1975, pp x, 415.

**Volume 3: The Fight is Won**, by Hilary St George Saunders, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1975, pp x, 441.

Price Soft Cover £2, per volume.

This three volume official history of the Royal Air Force in World War II was first published

in 1953 to satisfy the need for a brief, interim history until such time as a fuller, more analytical treatment could be attempted. In the event the Royal Air Force was not dealt with as a separate entity in the massive official **History of the Second World War** edited by J. R. M. Butler, except for the four volumes published on the strategic air offensive. In view of this Her Majesty's Stationery Office has taken the welcome decision to re-issue this work by Richards and Saunders, with some minor textual emendations.

Rarely can the reader of military history, lay or professional, have been presented with a work which so happily combines scholarship with literary excellence. There can be few historians with the wit or courage to begin a book as Richards does.

'Monday, the twenty-third of July 1934, was a day of deep national preoccupation. At Leeds the implacable Bradman was completing a remorseless triple century, but there was always the chance of rain, and the fate of the Ashes still hung in the balance. While affairs of such moment were in issue a debate in the House of Lords — a mere incident in the game of politics — naturally attracted little attention. It was, nevertheless, an important debate; for it vitally concerned the future of the Royal Air Force, and therefore of the country.'

After this auspicious opening Richards describes Britain's leaders first realisation of the need for a stronger air force with which to face the possibility of war. By 1939 Britain's air force was still inferior in numbers and capability to her foe's, but the author is at pains to show that more had been achieved than armchair critics are sometimes wont to claim. The point is well made that the potential of a force in a protracted war depends on its organisational and technical capacity to expand and improve, and on the possession of sound doctrines as to how the force should be employed. In 1939 Britain had all this, and, thanks to the year gained at Munich, had been able to augment her front line stocks of new eight-gunned fighters.

The next chapters deal with the unsatisfactory period of the phoney war, the ineffective and expensive strikes against German coastal shipping, the dropping of pamphlets instead

of bombs on German soil, the arduous and ill-equipped anti-submarine missions. This episode is so often treated as nothing more than a comic overture to the real business of war, yet, as Richards points out, valuable experience was gained and lessons were learned at less expense than would have later been the case. Even the Scandinavian débacle taught the other two services the impossibility of their tasks without adequate air support, a lesson which was forcefully repeated once Hitler's armies turned on France. The fall of France was a tragedy in which the Royal Air Force and its leaders have come in for a lot of blame; yet Dowding was undoubtedly correct to veto the erosion of Britain's aid defences to bolster a doomed ally, and the suicidal gallantry of the Royal Air Force pilots as they tried in vain to stem the German advance needs no further witness than the fact that on 14 May 1940 of 71 bombers dispatched on missions, 40 failed to return.

Fortunately the tale of woe was running to its end, and although the story of the Battle of Britain has been told many times before, it has surely seldom been recounted with such balance and skill as in this account by Richards. The author manages to describe the technicalities of the British air defence system, the dreadful arithmetic of mounting losses in aircraft and pilots as production and training struggled to maintain the unequal balance, without for one instant losing the drama and atmosphere of the summer of 1940. It is also somewhat refreshing in these more cynical times to read the author's final judgement on the battle.

'The public verdict, though it has done less than justice to others has thus rightly acclaimed Dowding's pilots as the foremost artisans of victory; and when the details of the fighting grow dim, and the names of its heroes are forgotten, men will still remember that in the summer of 1940, civilization was saved by a thousand British boys.'

For some months after Fighter Command had won its essential victory, the bombardment of Britain's urban areas continued, mainly by night, when the Royal Air Force was virtually powerless to intervene, but this sort of attack could scarcely have a decisive influence on the course of the war.

Having dealt with the home front, Richards

turns his attentions to the Mediterranean, to the initial successes against the **Regia Aeronautica** and the setbacks in Greece and the subsequent expulsion of the Allies from Cyrenaica.

The central volume of the trilogy begins with the disastrous opening of a new theatre in the Far East, where Allied naval and land forces learned once more of the impossibility of successful operations without air superiority. Indeed, once such superiority was achieved in 1944 it was used to mount huge air supply operations, which unfettered the Allied armies from their overland logistics systems and enabled them to strike hard and effectively at the Japanese enemy.

On the home front the last two volumes trace the transformation of Bomber Command into a truly offensive weapon. The gradual build up of stocks of suitable aircraft, the application of navigational aids to night bombing such as 'Oboe', 'Gee' and 'H2S' are all detailed here; the protracted and fiery debate between the proponents of area and strategic bombing; the rising casualties of the Allied bomber force over Germany, these are all discussed clearly without for once losing sight of the human effort.

In their considerations of the Middle East, Italian and later French campaigns, Richards and Saunders are able to shed a great deal of light on the development of sound tactical arrangements for close air support. The thread of sound air doctrine runs as strongly here as through their considerations of anti-submarine warfare or bombing operations.

Thus, for example, we are told that in June 1942 there were still serious weaknesses in the organisation of tactical support.

'The retreat from Gazala and the struggle in July had left the Middle East Air Commander keenly aware that there were still serious weaknesses in the organization of tactical support. These no longer sprang from the inability of the Royal Air Force to keep up with a fast-moving battle but from the inability of the Army to maintain an up-to-date

picture of its own movements. Moreover, although brigades at once demanded air cover when they were bombed, they very rarely appealed for air support when they were hard-pressed on the ground. During the retreat from Gazala, when many units of the Eighth Army were in desperate straits, Cunningham received only twelve requests for air support; all other attacks made by his squadrons were planned on information which they themselves had gathered.'

Montgomery's appointment brought a great improvement in this respect as in many others, for as the author states:

'... he also brought to his post a remarkably keen, clear and vigorous appreciation of the part that could and should be played by air forces in a land battle.'

The soldiers were beginning to turn goodwill into constructive co-operation. By the time the Allied armies reached Italy air superiority had been established to such an extent that new techniques of ground support were possible; indeed the nature of the fighting made developments such as the 'Cab Rank' and 'Rover David' vital as methods of providing rapid and accurate targetting.

As the authors freely admit, these volumes were written too close to events to assess with complete accuracy the contribution made by the Royal Air Force to the Allied victory. For all that this work constitutes an accomplishment scarcely likely to be equalled, for Richards and Saunders have indeed achieved that elusive balance between readability and scholarship, and have contrived to inject anecdotes and personalia into the details of planning and operations so skilfully that they recreate the atmosphere and spirit of the air war. Three volumes are a brief space to tell the story of the Royal Air Force from 1939 to 1945, and not a word is wasted. The result is an elegantly written text for the professional, and for the layman an epic tale stirringly told.

— Richard Cornwell.