

# Into the Blue

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Yes, it's cool; yes, it was in *Die Hard 4.0*; but it just has way too many dangly bits to do the business. Image (c) <http://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/>

*"We are shackled by the past and never has the future been more difficult to divine. What we must do is to quite ruthlessly discard ideas, traditions, and methods which have not stood the test...each of the fighting services must go for speed, mobility and economy, and develop the whole time with an eye on the other two members of the team in co-operation, not in competition."* This 1947 quote from Marshal of the RAF the Lord Tedder opens an article by the new UK Chief of Air Staff, The Future of British Air and Space Power: A Personal Perspective, in the ***Autumn 2009 Air Power Review***<sup>1</sup>. He follows this with a quote from Darwin on the second page of the article *"It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the most adaptable."*

It is indeed good to see a newly-appointed service chief (appointed on 31 July 2009) publicly stating his opinions and intentions. Certainly, as a general rule across government, this is not something that we do well in New Zealand – tons of internal marketing and engagement but not too much with the poor old public or our friends and allies...I actually think that it should be mandatory for CEOs and chiefs within government and its ministries and agencies to release a public stance on where they think they will go during their tenure as 'boss'.

The new CAS will most likely achieve much of what he sets out in this paper. He has steered clear of the 'boots on the ground' versus 'ships at sea' spat between the Chiefs of Army and Navy and it is only in late January this year that he issued a cautionary note<sup>2</sup> regarding the risks involved in focusing Defence acquisitions too much on 'the' war and not enough on 'a' war *"...the point is to have those discussions in the context of a proper review so we don't end up making short-term decisions on the financial (question) of the availability of money in the current environment or the short term rationale. We need a long-term view..."* This is somewhat of a contrast to the previous CAS who, only a month or so before handing over the role, predicted that the RAF would take over Royal Navy jet

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.airpowerstudies.co.uk/APR-Vol 12 No 3.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/onthefrontline/7067393/Head-of-RAF-warns-against-short-term-military-spending-decisions.html>

operations<sup>3</sup>. While this may be the current situation through the establishment of the Joint Harrier Force, it certainly created waves as the Royal Navy anticipates the introduction into service of two new 'real' aircraft carriers equipped with brand spanking F-35 Lightning IIs. Lightning is the US name for the F-35 which the RAF has adopted although nothing published as yet defines whether they see it as the successor to the Lockheed Lightning 'I' which the RAF wasn't that impressed with; or as a possible successor to the English Electric Lightning 'I' which is and will always be one of the all-time grunter fighter aircraft.

I have my own reservations regarding the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, all versions; it seems reminiscent of the McNamara one-size-fits-all-roles aircraft in the F-111 debacle and comes across as an attempt to (ap)please everyone and will end up pleasing no one. Even though the RAF has stood fast in its procurement of the Eurofighter which lies in capability somewhere between the F-35 and the now-cancelled F-22, it has already shrunk its fleet from the 232 originally needed to only 123 aircraft. This seems scarcely enough for the RAF's primary mission, as described in the article, of controlling and protecting British airspace, let alone to support any but the most benign expeditionary operations. Even though the Typhoon will eventually be joined by the F-35, reading between the lines of the UK MOD's current financial stresses, it is likely that its numbers will also be dramatically reduced from the 150 originally planned. This number has already been whittled down to 138<sup>4</sup> and there is speculation that this number will be reduced again.

While the ***Air Power Review*** article sees the F-35 Lightning II as "...*primarily an ISTAR asset...with hugely effective built-in Attack and Control of the Air capabilities...*", it does caution against the risks of "...*putting all our investment into a small number of highly capable platforms...that we will field a 'middle-weight' force structure which is too sophisticated to fight low technology insurgencies in a cost effective manner but equally, is unable to be completely effective against the high technology equipment that future state adversaries...are likely to deploy...*" Unfortunately, as costs spiral upwards passing budgets spiraling the other way, it does not seem like that the RAF as it is currently being structured will be able to meet its obligations to "...*capitalise on air power's ability to acquire and process intelligence, and to strike with proportion and precision...*" The article concludes by listing ten key propositions for the future of British air and space power:

1. **Air and space power is all about creating influence.**
2. **Control of the Air and Space remains the paramount air and space role.**
3. **Air and space power is about the provision of capability, not the generation of platforms.**
4. **Time is a weapon: air and space power offers the mean to dominate it.**
5. **Combat ISTAR will lie at the heart of the RAF's future capability.**
6. **Unmanned Air Systems are here to stay. UAS are an integral part of the UK's air power capability.**
7. **Space and cyber are joint domains but the air component is best-placed to lead in coordinating the defence effort in these areas.**
8. **Technology and air and space power are synergistically related.**
9. **Agility and adaptability are the key to the delivery of capable, relevant and affordable air and space power in a complex and uncertain world.**

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3 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/politics/defence/5461255/RAF-chief-predicts-controversial-takeover-of-Royal-Naval-air-power.html>

4 <http://ceoworld.biz/ceo/2009/10/21/jet-fighter-requirements-of-current-joint-strike-fighter-jsf-partner-countries>

## 10. Network Enabled Capability is critical to unlocking air and space power's potential.

First things first: the UK does not have a space capability – it got out of that game in the 60s. Any interdiction and control of space will be reserved for those nations that can get into the operating environment: the US, Russia and maybe China and India one day. Even the EU is not a real player in the 21st Century space game which is a shame because there is no reason that it should not be, other than general apathy and too great an interest in keeping the here and now nice and comfortable...

ISTAR and cyber are and MUST be a Joint, Interagency, Multinational and Public (Bring out the JIMP!) responsibilities. As soon as any one player declares it is 'their' role and grabs for primacy in either role, it only demonstrates a total failure to grasp this fact. Both ISTAR and cyber relate to facets of information; attempts to cram them into legacy single service stovepipes only cripples the wider effort. There is not one single whiff of evidence to suggest that any service is better or worse in these domains than any other. If our children are to be believed, it is the unkempt, Gen Z-ers with their trousers habitually halfway to their knees who rule in the information domains...

Technology and air and space power may be synergistically related but possibly not in the way intended in the article. I am a big fan of Alfred Thayer Mahan; in fact, *The Influence of Seapower Upon History* is one of only two books that I have as both Audible files<sup>5</sup> and hard copy publications – the other being William Manchester's *American Caesar*. I first read *The Influence of Seapower* in the mid-90s when the third frigate debate raged across Defence. Although Mahan was oft-quoted by the frigate lobby, I always suspected that those doing the quoting hadn't actually read it as one of the key points I took away from it was that, in order to control the seas, you must actually be capable of doing so. Thus, the French and Spanish talked it (seapower) up but were never able to quite deliver whereas the Dutch and most definitely the Royal Navy were very much able to enforce their will on and dominate the waves.

If the RAF seeks to control the Britain's air space or the air space of an operational theatre, then perhaps it simply can not afford these high tech platforms like Typhoon and F-35. More importantly, it might not be able to afford to replace them should an opponent adopt an attritive strategy. Even if an adversary lacks its own air power capability, conflicts in Zimbabwe, Vietnam and the Falkland Islands have demonstrated how small groups of soldiers can apply their own counter-air campaigns on aircraft on the ground. Similarly, an over-dependence on UAS will come a cropper as an adversary targets the links between the UAV, its controllers and its 'clients'.

In defining the way ahead for the RAF, it is not clear that the article has fully considered where it has been. Scene-setting early paragraphs cite the air policing of no-fly zones over Iraq from 1991-2003 as a relatively cost-effective (no loss of coalition lives and \$1 billion annually) method of neutering Saddam compared to the 4000 US KIA and \$12.5 billion monthly cost of OIF. This is very much a chalk and cheese comparison: the no-fly zone campaign was at the bottom end of a containment strategy that did little to curbs Saddam's aspirations, power or depredations against his own people. OIF, on the other hand, was very much a high intensity state on state conflict that, rightly or wrongly, deposed Saddam's regime and heralded significant change and consequences for all Iraqis. While I could by no means be accused of land-centricity, the simple fact is that there are few campaigns where the employment of air power in isolation has been a deciding

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5 <http://www.audible.com/>

factor in a conflict. The bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, the Berlin Airlift, and Operation EL DORADO CANYON are three rare examples where this has occurred.

Immediately following this example, the article states that “...even where a significant presence is required on the ground as part of a joint campaign, air power is able to act as a force multiplier to dramatically reduce exposure. Ideally, the ‘boots on the ground’ required in a counterinsurgency operation will eventually be provided by indigenous forces after suitable training...” It cites no example to support this statement and it is unlikely that many examples exist. These statements overlook two fundamentals of COIN (as opposed to Countering Irregular Activity as Op ELDORADO CANYON did), namely the need to close with and engage (not necessarily ‘strike’ or ‘attack’) the people in the campaign theatre, and that, for the purposes of shaping UK forces for the future, the ‘long war’ nature of COIN requires a long term commitment of land forces. It is only in the very late stages of a successful COIN campaign that air power might become the primary form of aid to the host nation.

Like *Friends in High Places*<sup>6</sup>, this article only pays the barest lip service to the less kinetic aspects of air power. Instead of ‘engage’ it still displays an archaic mindset of ‘attack’. The force multiplying value of RAF fixed and rotary wing transport capabilities is only skimmed over and does not earn so much as a mention in the ten key propositions for the future of British air and space power listed above. Relationships with the other services receive little mention, and even less is awarded to allies and coalition partners. The RAF has yet to fully consider the final part of Lord Tedder’s advice that opens the article “...and develop the whole time with an eye on the other two members of the team in co-operation, not in competition...” In the frantic scrambling for the remnants of the British Defence budget, the RAF may have been a little too quick to “...ruthlessly discard ideas, traditions, and methods...” without fully considering the nature of the test that each should have withstood.

Indications of this are evident in the article in that there is not one single mention of control of the sea lanes upon which Britain relies so much. Although Mahan wrote of naval control of the sea, it is not difficult to extrapolate his principles to include control of the sea from the air as well, regardless of who, RAF or RN, might own that air power. The US Navy integration of air power into control of the sea is probably the most powerful example of Mahan’s work being put into action. From its earliest days, the RAF has played a key role in control of Britain’s sea lanes; although it could be argued that this might fall under one of the ISTAR principles listed above, that does not include any capability (apart from F-35?) to actually inflict control on those areas i.e. the roles filled by the Hudson and Liberators of Coastal Command and now assumed by Nimrod today. The sea is the other ‘space’ the RAF should be seeking to control both as one of its core traditional roles and also as one directly linked to the prosperity and growth of Mother England.

The RAF has some tough decisions ahead of it, as do the Royal Navy and British Army. The simple fact is that Britain is no longer the world power that she once was and has not been for decades: the Falklands Islands campaign almost 30 years ago could easily be regarded as the last gasp of an Empire. Sometime less = less and more = more: maybe the RAF needs to be less swayed by the attractions of technologies it can no longer afford e.g. Typhoon and F-35 – who exactly might be the threat against which such capabilities maybe required? It may well be that such high-tech platforms are now solely in the bailiwick of those that can afford to operate them like the US and Singapore (sorry, Australia). In their place, perhaps the RAF should be considering adoption of greater

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6 <http://sjponeill.wordpress.com/2010/01/28/friends-in-high-places-review/>

quantities of the 21st Century equivalents of the Hawker Hunter, Douglas A-4 Skyhawk and Northrop F-5...?