

## A JUBILEE FOR AIRMEN

A Book Review by

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### Air Power: A Centennial Appraisal

by Tony Mason

London: Brassey's, 1994.

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As the surge of publications and events commemorating the anniversary of World War II subsides, two dates in aviation history are prompting their own retrospectives: the 50<sup>th</sup> birthday of the U.S. Air Force in 1997 and the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first flight by the Wright Brothers in 2003.

Tony Mason, a retired air vice marshal of the Royal Air Force and the author of a number of books on airpower, describes the history of military airpower from 1893 to 1993 in *Air Power, A Centennial Appraisal*. Anniversaries aside, this volume comes at an important moment for a U.S. audience, particularly considering the debate over the strategic role of airpower and what components of it are needed in force structure of the future.

Despite the success of airpower in the Gulf War, the subsequent drawdown of U.S. forces presents some unanswered questions. Did Desert Storm show airpower at its maximum potential or is it at the dawn of a revolution in military technology in which it will become even more dominant? Do more recent military operations in Somalia and Bosnia reveal a more realistic picture of what is ahead? Will U.S. preeminence in the air face future challenges and what form will they take? Mason provides context for examining these questions. He singles out the United States as having "differential" airpower—a capacity well beyond any combination of other countries—and draws important lessons about our past and indicates where we should be going.

Mason dates airpower from a lecture given in 1893 by Major J.D. Fullerton of the British army to military engineers meeting in Chicago. He prophesied that aeronautics would bring "as great a revolution in the art of war as the discovery of gunpowder," that "future wars may well start with a great air battle," and that "command of the air would be an

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essential prerequisite for all land and air warfare." These remarks, made ten years before the Wright Brothers flew, embody a recurring theme of airpower's first century: the "promise" of airpower technology, given well in advance of actual achievement. Mason also cites it as a caution for the future. His ability to draw on such themes and to synthesize aircraft and doctrinal development makes this a truly superior study.

Not solely a history of airpower nor speculation on the future, *Centennial Appraisal* shows Mason equally at home dealing with both. His coverage of aviation history is skewed to the latter half of the century and deals with aspects of airpower not normally emphasized. The half century of airpower through World War II occupies less than a quarter of the book. More recent conflicts such as operations over Bosnia and in the Arab-Israeli wars and the Gulf War (as seen from both the Iraqi and coalition perspectives) receive more analysis. No doubt reflecting his interests, Mason devotes more attention to the role of airpower in NATO and Warsaw Pact strategies than to the Korean and Vietnam Wars combined. Throughout, his analysis is incisive and well argued. Only one section needs a qualifier, a chapter on airpower and arms control. The focus is limited to negotiations on the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty and aircraft-counting rules for it. There exists no more lucid discussion of the treaty, but its application to airpower in general and to arms control is minimal.

Particularly timely is the chapter on peacekeeping operations. Mason writes about ongoing operations in Bosnia (using mainly 1993 and 1994 newspaper accounts as sources) and attempts to reach conclusions on the relative advantages and disadvantages of airpower in that environment. His examination of issues, such as the effectiveness of offensive airpower in those circumstances and the role of airlift, provides an excellent starting point for debate. Even after two further years of experience in the Balkans, his observations have not been overtaken by events.

But in arriving at his conclusions, Mason runs into a common dilemma: limited scope. He interprets peacekeeping as involving humanitarian assistance, protection, self-defense, and peace-enforcement (not further defined). His task is thus to look for commonality in events ranging from the Gulf War to Somalia. Only recently has literature on peace operations (and military doctrine in particular) begun to delineate this field.

Readers looking for indications of the revolution in military affairs will find Mason careful in his judgments and perhaps somewhat of a traditionalist. He calls for even more emphasis on the electronic warfare environment and extols the value of satellites as well as unmanned vehicles (but sees a continued dependence on manned aircraft). His faith in technology is tempered by his look at other periods in this century, comparing the dominance of the F-117 in the Gulf with the fleeting dominance of the German *Gotha* bomber in 1917 and the British *Mosquito* during the latter stages of World War II.

If there is a revolution, Mason finds it in the preeminence of U.S. "differential airpower" that is derived from superiority in four areas: an aerospace industrial base, a capacity for research and development, the ability and inclination of a government to allocate resources for an air force, and the size and quality of that force. He cites the United States as the only nation that can meet all the criteria and claim overwhelming preeminence. Such superiority is more vital and long lasting to Mason than any technological advantage. But no preeminence goes unchallenged, and he sees Russia as the most likely U.S. competitor. Mason devotes an entire chapter to reconstitution of the Russian aircraft industrial base and reorganization of its air force. In China he detects potential for regional dominance but not the capability to close the airpower differential with the United States.

The particular strength of this book is Mason's comprehension of the necessary elements of airpower. Beyond numbers, he understands the nature of factors ranging from personnel policies to the need for well-developed aerial refueling. Using the history of airpower he concludes that its proponents must stop relying on the promise of things to come and stand or fall "like any other military power, by its relevance to, and ability to secure, political objectives at a cost acceptable to the government of the day."

The insight and solid analysis found in this book make it an important contribution to any discussion on the future of airpower in the United States or elsewhere. An unabashed advocate himself, Mason succeeds in portraying airpower in a national context, urging his readers to get beyond either zealotry for airpower or the residual parochialism in armies and navies against its independence. **JFQ**