

## 'The RAF Must Fly the Flag': The British Army's Interpretation of Tactical Air Power during the Battle of France, 1940

Matthew Powell<sup>1</sup>

*University of Birmingham*

The Battle of France in 1940 was effectively decided in the favour of Germany after their successful crossing of the Meuse River in the Ardennes region of France and Belgium. This was a strategically vital point both to the defence of France and the overall German operational plan as success in crossing the Meuse would allow the *Wehrmacht* to advance quickly to the Channel coast of France. It was at this point that the *Wehrmacht* concentrated their forces in order to force a breakthrough and sow confusion and disorganisation within the Allied command, control and communications structure. The crossing of the Meuse was the only major example of relatively organised resistance faced by the *Wehrmacht* until Hitler's infamous stop order when the Germans had reached the outskirts of Dunkirk. When attempting to cross the Meuse, the Germans faced poorly trained, led and motivated third-rate conscripts whose resistance quickly collapsed in the face of the German onslaught and a very short period of retreat quickly turned into a large-scale rout. The popular perception as to what caused this rout was the *Luftwaffe's* application of tactical air power, particularly close air support, and the image is one of Ju-87 'Stuka' aircraft acting with absolute freedom against Allied forces, conducting close air support missions across the battlefield in support of the German Army.<sup>2</sup>

This misconception has partly arisen from the emphasis placed upon the role played by the *Luftwaffe* during the crossing of the Meuse river, and has been seen as applicable to the whole battle during May and June 1940. Recent scholarship by the likes of John Buckley has, however, looked to revise the emphasis that has been placed on the role of the 'Stuka' and the decisiveness of its impact in the German success.<sup>3</sup> German tactics in conducting close support were, and continue to be, misinterpreted. The

1 matthew.powell213@hotmail.co.uk

2 A detailed history of the 'Stuka' can be found in Price, A., 'The Rise and Demise of the Stuka', *Air Power Review*, Vol. 3, No.4 (Winter 2000), pp. 39–54.

3 Buckley, J., 'The Air War in France', in Bond, B., and Taylor, M.D. (eds.), *The Battle for France and Flanders 1940: Sixty Years On* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2001), p. 111.

belief that the few close air support attacks conducted by the *Luftwaffe* were on an impromptu basis was fundamentally wrong, as they had been fully pre-planned during discussions the day before.

This misinterpretation, however, provided the driving force for the Royal Air Force (RAF) to develop this capability and enhance their abilities in this area.<sup>4</sup> It is necessary at this time to define several air power specific terms for clarity: close air support is the use of aircraft against front-line enemy troops in conjunction with land operations and requires close integration to prevent friendly fire casualties. Battlefield air interdiction is another form of tactical air support and applies to operations conducted by air forces away from, but having a direct tactical influence on, the battle. This is achieved through operations that seal off the battlefield from the enemy, preventing reserves and materiel from moving up to support operations being conducted. Finally, air superiority battles are fought to gain control of the skies over the battlefield to allow operations to be conducted. This does not, however, mean that enemy air forces will not be conducting operations of their own, but they will be at a severe disadvantage when they do.

Whilst this paper will continue the work done by Buckley and others, it will explore how the myth of the role of the 'Stuka' came to take hold, particularly in Britain, after the Battle of France. The British Army suffered a catastrophic defeat at the hands of the *Wehrmacht*, this is particularly surprising when it is considered that in both qualitative and quantitative terms, the Allied forces in 1940 outmatched the Germans.<sup>5</sup> The investigations conducted by the British in the wake of France were fundamentally flawed, exaggerating aspects of the fighting where it suited, and looking to justify the doctrine that they had applied. The investigations emphasised the lack of air support, and placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of the RAF.

There are several possible motives behind the British Army's desire to do this: the army did not fully comprehend the inherent flexibility of air power and the myriad ways in which it could influence a land battle. It was looking to protect itself and the morale of its officers and troops upon its disastrous return to Britain or it was fundamentally misguided that its tactics and doctrine had in fact been sound and they had been beaten by a better opponent. This paper will, however, argue that this move was a deliberate attempt to force the RAF's hand in terms of army

4 Powell, M., *Army Co-operation Command and Tactical Air Power Development in Britain, 1940–1943: The Role of Army Co-operation Command in Army Air Support* (University of Birmingham PhD Thesis, 2013), p. 95.

5 May, E.R., *Strange Victory: Hitler's Conquest of France* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), pp. 5–6.

air support, which it felt had been neglected throughout the inter-war and early Second World War periods. Through this calculated attack, tactical air support, particularly close air support, would be given greater emphasis and, as an end result, they would gain an Army Air Arm over which they would have full operational control. This would allow the army to provide to its ground troops the 'correct' form of air support to allow it to be successful in the field. It is from the British army's investigations that we can see the myth of the 'Stuka' begin to emerge and which has only recently started to be revised.

### THE AIR FIGHTING IN FRANCE

The role of tactical air power during the Battle of France has been greatly over exaggerated. The traditional image of dive-bombing 'Stukas' attacking enemy troops with the 'Jericho Trumpets' wailing was only applicable to one small section of the front during the crossing of the Meuse at Sedan. Whilst this was an overwhelming success, it was only possible through the attaining of air superiority over this section of the Meuse in the days preceding the German Army's advance. This was achieved through air interdiction missions that destroyed many Allied aircraft on the ground, combined with the diversionary attack mounted to draw the Allied forces into Belgium, which the Allied plan called for anyway.<sup>6</sup> Other crossings of the Meuse were achieved with no air support whatsoever. A major example of this was Rommel's 7<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division.<sup>7</sup>

The RAF's tactical air support force had undergone substantial reorganisation whilst it was in France. It was originally two separate forces, the Advanced Air Striking Force (AASF) and the RAF Component of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). These forces had two distinct roles, the AASF was to use the advanced airfields in France to conduct strategic bombing raids against the German homeland, while the RAF Component was to provide support to the BEF through interdiction missions, a role which had been agreed by the army. This was also the role which they had argued the RAF should play throughout the inter-war period and prior to the German invasion of France and the Low Countries.<sup>8</sup> After much discussion, these forces were combined to form the British

6 Weinberg, G.L., *A World At Arms: A Global History of World War II* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005 [1994]), pp. 123–4.

7 Buckley, 'The Air War', p. 123.

8 Hall, D.I., *Strategy for Victory: The Development of British Tactical Air Power, 1919-1943* (London and Westport: Praeger Security International, Connecticut, 2008), pp. 43–8.

Air Forces in France (BAFF), under the command of Air Marshal Sir Arthur 'Ugly' Barratt. BAFF was responsible for all air support conducted by the RAF in France and this support was not to be limited to British sections of the line.<sup>9</sup> Barratt was the most senior RAF officer versed in air support, and had previously been an artillery officer and had been key in developing co-operation between artillery batteries and aircraft during the First World War.<sup>10</sup> He had attended the army's Staff College at Camberley and been the Commandant of the RAF's School of Army Co-operation during the inter-war period.<sup>11</sup> The German invasion saw the implementation of the Allied Dyle plan designed to secure the French industrial region and allow the fighting to take place as far in front of French soil as possible. It was in this region and not in the Ardennes Forest that the RAF conducted its interdiction missions. Whilst this was conducted ably by the RAF, there were problems in co-ordinating this with the BEF, as whilst the advanced headquarters of BAFF was closely located with the local French Commander at Chauny, it was not near the BEF's headquarters as had been laid down in inter-war doctrinal publications.<sup>12</sup> The Allied forces had recognised the German thrust across the Meuse against Sedan as the main point of their attack on 12 May, two full days after the Germans had begun their drive through the Ardennes Forest.<sup>13</sup> As the junior partner in the alliance in 1940, Barratt had to have permission from the French High Command to conduct air support operations in the Ardennes. Due to French insistence that a modern army utilising large formations of armoured and mechanised forces could not pass through the Ardennes at any great speed, this permission was not granted.<sup>14</sup>

The major action of the RAF at the Meuse came on 14 May when the Germans had had ample time to prepare anti-aircraft defences in the region. This anti-aircraft defence took the form of a protective umbrella of

9 The National Archives (TNA) AIR 24/681, Minutes of a Conference held at General Headquarters on 17 January 1940 to discuss certain aspects in connection with the Royal Air Force in France and the Appointment of an Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, the British Air Forces in France.

10 Carrington, C., *Soldier at Bomber Command* (London: Leo Cooper, 1987), p. 7.

11 <http://www.rafweb.org/Biographies/Barratt.htm> [accessed 11 September 2014].

12 TNA AIR 35/354, BAFF Barratt's Despatch, Appendix N Summary of Dispositions and Operations of BAFF during Various Phases of the Land Battle, First Phase 10-15 May 1940, Dispositions of BAFF, July 1940. TNA AIR 10/1794, Army Co-operation Report 1930, Part I.

13 Powell, *Army Co-operation Command* p. 93.

14 TNA AIR 35/354, BAFF Barratt's Despatch, Part III: Work of BAFF Prior to Land Battle, July 1940.

*Messerschmitts*.<sup>15</sup> It had been decided on 13 May by Generals Georges and Gamelin that attacks would be made on the pontoon bridges spanning the Meuse the following day. The RAF were to conduct the first waves of attacks in the morning followed by the French later that afternoon.<sup>16</sup> The results of the morning attack were extremely poor: out of four waves of bomber attacks only one hit was claimed.<sup>17</sup> The French *Armée de l'Air* was unable to provide the resources necessary to conduct the afternoon attacks and so the burden fell again to the RAF. Barratt was aware that after the morning's attack the enemy would be on full alert and that he would be ordering his men on a suicide mission. Due to this, he approached the light bomber crews and asked for volunteers. All of the crews on duty that afternoon stepped forward. The effect this attack had on Barratt has been described by Victor Bingham:

Even if not said in so many words, the sacrifices were made to prevent any further invasion and to save Allied forces. Barratt knew it when he committed his BAFF forces, but he had little option. It has been said that it almost broke him.<sup>18</sup>

The attacks of that afternoon were an unmitigated disaster. Many of the Fairey Battle crews were set upon by 'hordes of *Messerschmitts* ... and destroyed. Others fell to Flak and many more were shot out of the sky on the way home.'<sup>19</sup> Of the seventy-one aircraft that conducted the operation only thirty-one returned. In the five days of daylight operations conducted by the RAF they had lost half their bombers stationed in France.<sup>20</sup>

The operations against the German bridgeheads on the Meuse were relatively chaotic due to the preparedness of the German anti-aircraft defences in the area and this is further highlighted by the high casualty rate suffered by the RAF during this one day operation. The majority of the air support operations conducted by the RAF in the advance to the Dyle were for military operations, relatively un-chaotic. Part of the reason for this was that German activity around Belgium was heavy

15 Perett, B., *A History of Blitzkrieg* (New York: Stein and Day, 1983), p. 94.

16 Ellis, L.F., *The War in France and Flanders* (Uckfield: The Naval and Military Press, 2004 [Her Majesty's Stationery Office: London, 1953]), p. 55.

17 TNA AIR 41/21, 'The Campaign in France and the Low Countries September 1939-1940, Military Summary, Bombing Operations near Sedan, 14 May. Cull, B., and Lander, B., with Weiss, H., *Twelve Days in May: The Air Battle for Northern France and the Low Countries, 10-21 May, As Seen Through the Eyes of the Fighter Pilots Involved* (London: Grub Street, 1995), pp. 122–3.

18 Bingham, V., *Blitzed: The Battle of France May-June 1940* (New Malden: Air Research Publications, 1990), p. 64.

19 Johnson, J.E., *Full Circle: The Story of Air Fighting* (London: Cassell Military Paperbacks, 2001 [London: Chatto and Windus, 1964]), p. 116.

20 *Ibid.*

enough to convince the Allies that this was the centre of gravity of the invasion operation. As David Ian Hall has stated the Germans were too astute and polite to highlight to the enemy when they were making a fatal mistake.<sup>21</sup> The fighting on the ground in France, however, was of an extremely chaotic nature, almost from the moment of the Germans arriving in force at the Meuse River until the stop that was ordered outside of Dunkirk. One of the major factors that made the fighting so chaotic was the sheer operational speed of the German advance. The French forces, and as a result the British as well, were thrown off balance by the sudden break-through at Sedan. The speed of the German armoured formations combined with a slow and cumbersome French command, control and communications system meant that they were never able to recover.<sup>22</sup> Information sent from front-line formations had to be passed up the command chain. The operational speed of the *Heer* meant that by the time information had reached senior commanders it was already out of date.<sup>23</sup> By the time action had been decided and passed down the command chain to the same front-line formations, the units were nowhere near their original position and the orders could not be acted upon. As the retreat continued, this situation became worse and acted as force multiplier for the Germans as they were advancing against a demoralised, uncoordinated and confused enemy.<sup>24</sup> French morale was also seriously undermined after the Sedan attack. Troops in retreat spread panic amongst the reserves being deployed in an attempt to plug the gap caused by the German break-through and advance and in certain cases fell back with the troops they were meant to be supporting. The Germans also utilised the flood of civilians to hamper French defensive efforts. Floods of refugees hampered the French efforts to bring reserves up to form a defensive line and added to the already low morale of the infantry.<sup>25</sup>

The Allied forces would never recover from the initial shock they had received across the Meuse. The RAF flew further interdiction missions, attacking the extending German supply and communication lines, but these attacks were nothing more than a nuisance and could not prevent

21 Hall, *Strategy for Victory* p. 53.

22 Powaski, R.E., *Lightning War: Blitzkrieg in the West* (Hoboken: Castle Books, 2006), pp. 12–3.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 175–7.

24 Dougherty, R.A., *The Seeds of Disaster: The Development of French Army Doctrine, 1919–1939* (Connecticut: Archeon Books, 1985), pp. 3.

25 For more details on the civilian experience of the Battle of France see Diamond, H., *Fleeing Hitler: France 1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

the rolling advance of the German Panzer divisions. During this advance the *Luftwaffe* returned to providing an interdiction role acting as guards for the open German flanks.

The relative inability of the RAF, and indeed the British Army, to prevent the *Wehrmacht* from sweeping through France and dominating Western Europe and the Channel ports had little impression on the British public in terms of how the RAF and air power in general were viewed. Whatever failings the RAF had, or would be claimed to have had were overshadowed by two major events in British history. The first was Operation DYNAMO: the evacuation from Dunkirk. This allowed the British military and government to claim a moral victory out of the disaster that was the Battle of France. The contemporary focus was on this rather than on the wider strategic context that would focus on why the British and French needed to be evacuated from the Dunkirk beach. The other event that followed shortly afterwards and allowed the idea of the airman being all-powerful was the Battle of Britain. The victory gained by the RAF during the summer of 1940 allowed the RAF and the government to cover up the problems that had been faced in France and again the strategic context behind the RAF having to fight such a battle against the *Luftwaffe* at all. In a war such as the Second World War, especially in Britain, the 'victories' of Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain played a much larger role in how air power and the RAF were seen by the public than the Battle of France.

### THE BRITISH INVESTIGATIONS

The investigations into the disastrous fighting began while the commanders of the RAF, Barratt, and the BEF General Lord Gort were still in France. Both had written lengthy despatches on the fighting and these documents highlight the differential thinking that existed between the two forces. Gort's despatch also highlights how the army would use air support as a means to excuse their defeat. In Barratt's opinion, the framework for conducting air support was theoretically sound but needed improvement in terms of centralisation and having an air force commander in overall operational command of all air forces in a given theatre.<sup>26</sup> Gort, however, felt that only a protective umbrella of fighters could have prevented the

<sup>26</sup> TNA AIR 35/354, BAFF Barratt's Despatch, July 1940, Part V — Conclusions and Recommendations, Command.

isolated attack of British ground forces.<sup>27</sup> This idea was pushed further with the full investigation launched by the British Army in June 1940 conducted by General William Bartholomew.

General Bartholomew was an unusual choice to head an investigation such as this, unless the army was looking for someone to find the 'correct' reasons for their defeat. He was vehemently against the idea of an independent air force and joint operations. These views had also seriously affected his career prospects. It was believed that Bartholomew was one of the front runners to become Chief of the Imperial General Staff during the inter-war period but was transferred to India instead in order to avoid a total collapse in relations between the RAF and army. The Bartholomew Committee Report was flawed in several respects: it took evidence from only one RAF officer, those who formed the Committee demonstrated a lack of understanding of air power terms and how these related to operations in the field and a misreading of German tactics and operational doctrine.<sup>28</sup> The report's focus and indeed one of its conclusions demonstrated the blinkered way in which the army viewed air support. The report fundamentally misunderstood the interdiction operations conducted by the RAF and stated that the ground troops in France felt they had received no air support as they had only seen enemy aircraft in the skies above the front lines. The recommendation of the report was that the RAF must fly the flag: that is they must be seen by friendly ground troops in order to boost morale, particularly if they were under attack from enemy aircraft. In the opinion of the Committee this should be done at the expense of other tasks. In the view of the Committee, the RAF was not conducting the correct form of air support by conducting interdiction missions. The report also believed that the air support attacks conducted by the *Luftwaffe* were impromptu and a reaction to the operational situation faced as the drive to and across the Meuse unfolded. The Committee also fundamentally misunderstood German land tactics, particularly how the new 'Blitzkrieg' method of waging war looked to bypass major obstacles and probed the enemy's line looking for weak spots through which it could pass. It is difficult to discern if this misunderstanding was deliberate or not, however, it did allow the report to pronounce that British tactics were sound.<sup>29</sup>

27 TNA CAB 106/246, Despatches of the Operations of the British Expeditionary Force, 3 September 1939–19 June 1940.

28 Powell, *Army Co-operation Command*, p. 113. Place, T.H., 'British Perceptions of the Tactics of the German Army, 1938-1940', *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (July 1994), pp. 495–519.

29 TNA CAB 106/220, The Bartholomew Committee Final Report, 1940.

The only air officer to give evidence to the Committee was Air Vice-Marshal C.H.R. Blount who commanded the Air Component of the BEF during the fighting in France. There is no evidence that the testimony given had any bearing on the conclusions reached. Barratt was not consulted and there are several possible reasons for this. As the head of all RAF forces in France, he may have been too distant from the tactical situation on the ground to be aware of how the air support system actually functioned in the heat of battle, as an RAF commander, the potential of bias may have coloured his view of the performance of the RAF or, as this was primarily a land battle, one voice from the RAF was deemed to be enough. Despite these possible reasons, it is my opinion that the main reason behind Barratt's omission from giving evidence was that the army, aware of the content of his despatch from France, did not want a senior RAF commander giving evidence that may implicate the BEF and its tactical and operational doctrine as the fundamental reason behind its defeat. The Bartholomew Report itself does not state whether they looked in detail at Barratt's despatch, but it is fair to assume that they were aware of the conclusions presented in it at least.<sup>30</sup> The Committee's conclusions have come to impact on the memory of the Battle of France in a more fundamental way. There is a widely held belief that if the RAF had had a better tactical air support system to utilise in France then the German success could have been halted on the Meuse at Sedan. This stems directly from the conclusions reached in the Bartholomew Committee Report. This view, however, fails to take into account the overall strategy implemented by the Allies that was primarily of French design.

This strategy was based on the experience of the First World War and the desire of the French to fight as far away from French territory, and their industrial heartland in the north-east, as possible. In order to prevent this the Allies planned to advance to the Dyle River in Belgium. The planning for this operation was severely hampered by the Belgian declaration on neutrality in 1936.<sup>31</sup> This prevented staff talks between the French and Belgians and would hamper the co-ordination of defensive operations. Of more importance, however, were the operational implications of such a strategy. The Dyle Plan was based around the assumption that the Germans would attempt a repeat of their attack in 1914, sweeping through the Low Countries and advancing through northern France.<sup>32</sup> This was, in fact, the original German strategic plan, and was designed

30 Ibid.

31 Bell, P.M.H., *The Origins of the Second World War in Europe* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition) (Harlow: Pearson Education, 1997), p. 237.

32 Freiser, K.H., *The Blitzkrieg Legend: The 1940 Campaign in the West* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2005), pp. 90–1.

as a strategy that would yield limited success by occupying German territory and providing a position from which more decisive operations could be launched. The plans for these attacks, however, were discovered after Major Helmuth Reinberger carrying them became lost and crash-landed in Belgium. This caused a great panic amongst Adolf Hitler and his General Staff and work began on a new plan for which many ideas were suggested.<sup>33</sup> General Gerd von Rundstedt put the one that was eventually employed in 1940 forward. The Allies used the captured German plans as confirmation that their strategy was sound. The change in strategy meant that all Allied operations were conducted away from what Clausewitz has termed the centre of gravity, which was along the Meuse rather than Dyle River. The vast majority of the air support operations conducted by the Allies were to support the advance to the Dyle. The Allied realisation of the centre of gravity of the German operation was far too late for any air support action conducted to have a decisive effect on the German advance. That any was conducted around Sedan was done out of sheer desperation and the requirement to try anything to prevent the flow of German armour, reserves and materiel across the Meuse.

#### THE IMPACT OF THE BARTHOLOMEW REPORT ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF TACTICAL AIR POWER IN BRITAIN

The Bartholomew Report forced the RAF in Britain into a difficult political position with regards the development of tactical air support and its future relations with the army. The RAF now felt it had to at least be seen to be developing a more robust and influential air support capability. The RAF's major fear if they did not at least appear to be taking air support more seriously was that the army would continue to push for, and eventually gain, their own army air arm, over which they would have full control. This desire was based on the army's misunderstanding that the *Luftwaffe* was subordinate to the German army. If this situation occurred, it would likely lead to calls for the RAF to be disbanded as an independent force and for air resources to be reorganised into the system that had prevailed during the First World War where there was a Royal Flying Corps attached to the army and a Royal Naval Air Service attached to the Royal Navy. In order to prevent this from happening, discussions

33 Powaski, *Lightning War*, pp. 3-6. Keegan, J., *The Second World War* (London: Pimlico, 1997), p. 48.

took place in the autumn of 1940 between the RAF and army over the best way to enhance the air support capabilities of the RAF, and improve the extremely strained relations between the two services.

The result of these discussions was the creation of Army Co-operation Command, with Barratt as the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief (AOC-in-C). The army were happier with the appointment of Barratt than the RAF as he was deeply unpopular amongst the higher commanders of the RAF.<sup>34</sup> The army actively worked against the RAF to keep Barratt as the AOC-in-C of Army Co-operation Command when first the RAF and second Winston Churchill attempted to remove him from his position in 1941.<sup>35</sup> The remit for this new Command was to work closely with the army, not only to improve its understanding of the various roles air power could play at the tactical level of war, but to develop an air support capability that would give the army the confidence needed to conduct operations when it returned to the continent. The idea of Army Co-operation Command was a War Office and not an Air Ministry idea but, through its creation, it would allow the RAF to appear to be taking air support more seriously, whilst still allowing it to prosecute the air war in what they believed to be the correct use of air power: a strategic campaign against the German homeland.

Despite the restrictions faced by Army Co-operation Command caused by the way in which it was created by the RAF, there were some developments in tactical air support achieved in Britain.<sup>36</sup> The Command worked closely with the School of Artillery to develop the Air Observation Post concept, where aircraft located in friendly territory would spot and correct the fall of shot for artillery batteries on the ground.<sup>37</sup> A system that allowed front line troops to request impromptu air support was also developed, refined and codified into doctrine. This system also allowed those allocating the support to advise the various formations if they would or would not be receiving the support requested. This theoretical system would then be further refined in the light of operational experience gained through fighting in the Western Desert and North Africa. Army Co-operation Command also worked closely with the army in Britain, greatly improving relations between the two services to a level that could not have been imagined in June 1940. The restrictions faced by

34 Imperial War Museum Carrington Papers 81/11/6.

35 Powell, *Army Co-operation Command*, pp. 148–52.

36 Powell, M., 'The Battle of France, Bartholomew and Barratt: The Creation of Army Co-operation Command', forthcoming *Air Power Review* Vol. 18, No. 1, (Spring 2015).

37 Powell, M., 'A Forgotten Revolution?: Army Co-operation Command and Artillery Co-operation, 1940-42', *Canadian Military History* Vol. 23, No. 1 (Winter 2014), pp. 71–88.

Army Co-operation Command, however, meant that the army was still frustrated in its desire for an operational air support force. Army Co-operation Command was an experimental and developmental Command and could not test its ideas in battle. This meant that it was always last in the order of priority for resources when these demands were placed against those of the operational RAF Commands.<sup>38</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The BEF looked to place the blame for their defeat in France squarely on the shoulders of the youngest British service, the RAF. That they were largely successful in this is reflected in how tactical air power is seen to have impacted upon the Battle of France. Until recently, the view of historians in this area was the same as that largely held by the general public: close air support as delivered from specialist aircraft was a major factor not only in the speed of the German advance but also the completeness of their victory. This view has taken hold due to the actions of the British Army in the wake of the Battle of France through their false emphasis on the impact of tactical air power during the fighting. As this paper has, however, demonstrated, this was a deliberate misunderstanding by the army in order to place the blame for the defeat away from them and the methods employed during the fighting. This put the RAF under great political pressure to create an organisation they were not comfortable with in Army Co-operation Command. Whilst the creation and work of Army Co-operation Command improved the relations between the RAF and army, which were extremely strained in the wake of the Battle of France, there were still huge disagreements between the two services over fundamental air support issues. This included the best organisation to conduct air support when the army returned to the continent. The army felt that the natural home for any operational air support force was Army Co-operation Command, whereas the RAF argued it should be created and developed within Fighter Command. This was where the new tactical air support force, 2<sup>nd</sup> Tactical Air Force, was eventually created and developed.<sup>39</sup>

38 Powell, *Army Co-operation Command*, p. 169.

39 1<sup>st</sup> Tactical Air Force referred to the force used to conduct air support operations in the Western Desert and North Africa.