

The father of the RAF was one of the first to grasp that aviation would radically change warfare.

# Trenchard at the Creation

By Rebecca Grant

**B**EFORE Hap Arnold, before Tooey Spaatz, before Douhet and de Seversky, even before Billy Mitchell, there was Britain's Hugh M. Trenchard. Yet, Trenchard today rates barely a footnote in most histories of airpower. When mentioned at all, he is remembered mainly as an advocate of an independent air force and as the first true practitioner of strategic bombing.

In his day, Trenchard was known as the father of the Royal Air Force—a gruff and forceful patron saint of airpower. He trained and organized the RAF for World War I, then led it into battle, pioneering many of the concepts central to air warfare today.

Trenchard the aviator was a dominating presence. He was described by American airpower legend Billy Mitchell as "decided in manner and very direct in speech." The stern and uncompromising officer who eventually found his niche in the Royal Flying Corps started off slouching through his military career. (The RFC, which was formed in April 1912, joined with the Royal Naval Air Service on April 1, 1918, to become the Royal Air Force.)

He twice failed the British Army entrance exams. However, by age 20, he slid through, became a lieutenant, and was posted to India, where he met a fellow officer, the young Winston Churchill, in a polo match in 1896.

Early on, he gained a reputation for flouting military authority and



keeping his distance from Army bureaucracy. His passions were polo and military tactics, and he cared little for social graces.

Trenchard first saw combat in September 1900 in South Africa during the Boer War. His time in Africa ended after he and the Australian horsemen under his command pursued Boer riders into a valley. Trenchard, charging in ahead of most of his men, led a small party assaulting the farmhouse where the Boers were holed up. He was hit by a Boer bullet that pierced a lung and grazed his spine, knocking him out of the war.

Sent home to England as an in-



**A rough landing while tobogganing apparently fixed a spine injury that Trenchard suffered in the Boer War. Never very impressive as a junior officer, he found his calling late in his career, as an air tactician and strategist.**

valid, he could not walk without a cane. A benefactor paid for him to go for the air to the Alpine resort of St. Moritz, where Trenchard took up the toboggan. Miraculously, it restored him. One morning, he took a down-hill curve too fast and flew off the toboggan, landing hard 30 feet down the hill. Rather than causing more damage, the jolt jarred his spine in such a way that the half-paralysis dissipated. He got up out of the snow, able to walk with no impediment.

His biographer Andrew Boyle wrote, "He had cured himself by violence."

Unfortunately there was no tonic for his career in the Army. After another 10 years of postings in places like Nigeria and Ireland, Trenchard, as a major at age 39, had an undistinguished record and few prospects.

It was at that point that Trenchard determined he would learn to fly.

### **The Airman**

His commanding officer told Trenchard that he was too tall and too old. The infant Royal Flying Corps of 1912 accepted no one over 40. Undeterred, Trenchard got two weeks' leave and paid for his own instruction.

Thirteen days later, he soloed, after a grand total of one hour and four minutes of flying time. In truth, Trenchard was never a good pilot. According to Boyle in *Trenchard, Man of Vision*, he was described as "indifferent" by Royal Navy Lt. Ar-

thur Longmore, who had two years' flying experience.

Fortunately, Trenchard found his niche at the new Central Flying School, which needed an adjutant to put it in order. Despite his tendency to be abrupt and gruff, Trenchard, during his Army years, had developed not only the knack of listening but a keen sense of human nature.

He set the curriculum for trainees and emphasized discipline and skills, such as map reading, signals, and engine mechanics. In the two years remaining before World War I broke out, Trenchard's courses turned out

most of the officers for the land-based branch of the Royal Flying Corps.

He also earned the nickname "Boom" for his bluntness and loud voice. (British Prime Minister Churchill would later jokingly say Boom should be changed to "Bomb.")

Trenchard was one of the first to grasp the radical impact aviation would have upon land warfare. The revelation came in September 1912, when he flew as an observer with Longmore during Army maneuvers. In less than an hour, Trenchard was able to locate the opposing force. He and Longmore reported back to headquarters, then set out again to find their side's cavalry and redirect them.

Trenchard realized that no army could maneuver in secret, with airplanes to spot them. From 1912 on, he was convinced that aviation would change the conduct of war.

Horatio H. Kitchener, the war minister, and Churchill, running the admiralty, were both believers in aviation—Churchill the more so. But the real man to impress was Gen. Douglas Haig, commander of Britain's First Army, in the World War I trenches in France.

Trenchard soon got his chance. He went to France in November 1914 as commander of one of the Royal Flying Corps' three operational wings. His observation of the war to date convinced him the corps was too cautious. Trenchard believed it was vital to fight for air ascendancy, not just undertake routine patrols and reconnaissance. Summoned to a meeting



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**Winston Churchill (in flying helmet) returns from a flight in 1915, greeted by a crowd of well-wishers. Churchill's enthusiasm for aviation aided Trenchard in his push to expand resources and responsibility for Britain's fledgling air arm.**

with Haig in early January 1915, Trenchard learned of secret plans for a March offensive at Neuve Chappelle and offered his view on what air units could do.

### Abandoning Caution

"I explained rather badly about artillery observation (then in its infancy), reporting to gun batteries by Morse and signal lamps, and of our early efforts to get wireless going," Boyle quotes Trenchard as saying. Scouring maps of the front with Haig, Trenchard explained where his squadrons would be. He convinced Haig. According to Boyle, Haig told him: "Well, Trenchard, I shall expect you to tell me before the attack whether you can fly, because on your being able to observe for the artillery and carry out reconnaissance, the battle will partly depend. If you can't fly because of the weather, I shall probably put off the attack."

In February, Trenchard's airmen scored a coup that justified such confidence. Trenchard had encouraged them to replace sketch pads with cameras for reconnaissance of German trench lines. One set of photographs uncovered German lines around a brick factory. Trenchard briefed Haig's ground commanders, who, using the aerial photos, took the brickworks in daylight. Now Haig wanted the aviators to not only map the whole trench line but also stage an aerial bombardment, in conjunction with the artillery barrages that were to precede the offensive. He approved an elaborate scheme linking aerial observers and artillery.

Haig summoned Trenchard to his headquarters at midnight on March 8 and asked him to send up a pilot at dawn for a weather report. Despite lingering low clouds, the fliers took to the air in perhaps the first instance in which air support was directly linked to a major ground assault.

Unfortunately, the Neuve Chappelle assault was not a success. The Germans regrouped and repulsed the attack. Haig did not fault his air support. Instead, he reprimanded his artillery commanders for ignoring aerial signals.

Trenchard realized, however, that the aerial bombing raids were too piecemeal and, in some cases, had failed altogether. Haig continued to look to Trenchard for support, though, and, for the spring offensives, Haig



Imperial War Museum

*Gen. Douglas Haig was receptive to Trenchard's ideas for the use of air in World War I. Here, Haig confers with British war minister David Lloyd George (right), as French minister Albert Thomas and French Gen. Joseph Joffre look on.*

again asked Trenchard to provide aerial reconnaissance and bombing of targets behind enemy lines.

In August 1915, Trenchard became commander of all British air forces in France. One month later, at the Battle of Loos, Trenchard's fliers sketched out for the first time a campaign recognizable as full-scale support to a land commander. It began again with meticulous mapping of enemy strong points, giving British heavy artillery targets in advance.

Haig hoped to break German lines at Loos at a narrow point then pour infantry reserves through the gap. To aid the plan, Trenchard's squadrons carried out three days of bombing of rail junctions and other targets to hinder movement of German reserves into the gap. The ground attack began Sept. 25, 1915. Airmen once again spotted for artillery, but Trenchard, for the first time, held some squadrons in reserve, dispatching them where needed, as the heavy fighting shifted. They were to survey the lines at low level and to update positions of enemy and friendly forces for the artillery. Communications were inadequate, so he pulled some pilots out of their cockpits and assigned them to the ground troops to signal patrolling aircraft during the battle.

Reconnaissance, interdiction, close air support, air liaison: the Battle of Loos featured them all, and it was Trenchard's handiwork.

The operation as a whole was no more successful than any of the other

British assaults of 1915, yet senior military leaders recognized the value of the aerial support. The Battle of Loos brought Trenchard a promotion to general and, far more important, a citation from the British Expeditionary Force commander in chief, Field Marshall John D.P. French, praising the Royal Flying Corps for its work, especially the railway bomb attacks, which disrupted enemy communications.

Trenchard's practical insights had made airpower a partner—albeit a junior partner—among the combined arms. Next, Trenchard sought air superiority.

The technically superior German Fokker, with its synchronized machine guns, dominated the western front in late 1915. Following soaring Royal Flying Corps losses in November and December, Trenchard imposed a new rule on his pilots: Any aircraft flying reconnaissance must be escorted by at least three other aircraft, and all the aircraft must fly in close formation. Formation flying thus became a fundamental tactic, along with taking the offensive to establish air superiority.

Trenchard's tactics worked so well that the French, under pressure at Verdun in February 1916, began to borrow his style of concentrating airpower and fighting for air superiority. Trenchard coached the French air forces—through his French-speaking aide-de-camp, Capt. Maurice Barrington—over Verdun as they battled back

and forth with the German airmen for air superiority.

The lessons of 1916 showed that the air arm had to protect its own ability to operate—establish air superiority—before it could assist ground forces. Trenchard managed it smoothly. Haig, who was now in overall command of British forces in France, continued to call on him for air support plans and favored Trenchard by sending him choice staff officers to relieve some administrative burdens.

### Birds of a Feather

Word of Trenchard's expertise reached the ears of a US Army officer, one Lt. Col. William Mitchell, when he arrived in France in the spring of 1917, a peak time for offensives. Mitchell drove to Trenchard's country-house headquarters and asked to see him as Trenchard was about to



*By the end of World War I, Trenchard had made the RAF a critical part of an integrated land-air team. Here, Queen Mary, escorted by Trenchard (on her left), inspects aircraft in France in 1917.*

Imperial War Museum



*Massive in those days, the Handley Page played a pivotal role in demonstrating some of Trenchard's theories of bombing. The aircraft was built in the US for Britain. Note the large bomb slung beneath the fuselage.*

leave on an inspection trip. Trenchard was brusque when Mitchell said he wanted to see all the Royal Flying Corps squadrons, equipment, and supplies and, of course, to hear all Trenchard could tell him about air operations. Trenchard, per an account in his biography, was true to form, barking out: "Do you suppose I've got nothing better to do than chaperone you and answer questions?"

Mitchell, according to Boyle, replied: "I don't suppose anything, General. I just know you've got a good organization here. It won't miss you if you take a day or two off, no

matter how bad you say things are."

Trenchard admired well-placed brashness. Three days of inspection tours and discussions followed. Mitchell left with a crash course in the principles of airpower and a fatherly invitation from Trenchard to seek him out any time. Mitchell later wrote that never had he spent a more instructive time.

Trenchard called Mitchell "a man after my own heart," wrote Boyle.

A year later, Mitchell sought out Trenchard's advice as the American planned his nation's first major air campaign—the Battle of St. Mihiel in

September 1918. No doubt Trenchard's clout and backing helped Mitchell secure cooperation from the British, French, and Italian Air Forces. It also may have helped boost Mitchell's handful of American squadrons into a 1,400-airplane force.

Allied aircraft patrols gained air superiority over the lines, observation aircraft supported the half-million men on the ground, pursuit airplanes bombed behind German lines, and Trenchard's bombers hit rail junctions and other deep targets. Mitchell had played it in the style pioneered by Trenchard.

Despite these successes for airpower and Trenchard's ease with Allied airmen, he often faced trouble with his superiors in London. The discord reached a peak in April 1918 when Trenchard abruptly quit his post as the first chief of the Air Staff after only four months in the job and just two weeks after formation of the Royal Air Force. He blamed headquarters politics. However, within a few weeks, he expressed shame at his behavior at a time when the Germans were poised to invade Paris. Returning to France, Trenchard took command of an inter-allied independent bomber force.

### Strategic Bombing

Trenchard's aim was to use long-range bombing to take more of the offensive to Germany itself, but the French commanders, who were leery of the independent air force, needed convincing. The father of the RAF



**Trenchard was not a major airpower player in World War II, but he continued his development of bombing theory. Here, he talks with a protégé, Air Chief Marshal Arthur Tedder, who later served as deputy supreme allied commander.**

faced an issue that would hound air commanders until the end of the 20th century: the allocation of airpower. Even the head of the French air service, Gen. Maurice Duvall, believed that allocating bombers to Trenchard for independent bombing equated to making the bombing of Germany the primary objective and relegated defeat of the enemy in the field to a secondary role.

The debate laid bare the essential point: Armies had grown attached to airplanes, and the trade-offs necessary to apply airpower to theaterwide objectives raised huge concerns for ground commanders. They were not soothed by Trenchard's assurances that he could easily divert bombers to support missions when ground forces got in trouble.

The 1918 campaign did not resolve this issue; indeed, it reappeared in every major combined campaign until the end of the 20th century.

In the summer of 1918, with all eyes on his bomber force, Trenchard had to produce results. His strategy was to distribute attacks across different points in Germany to keep the German Air Force off balance and unable to concentrate against the Allies. Trenchard's favorite targets were railways, since the Germans were short of rolling stock, and blast furnaces, because they were easy to find at night. His pilots also specialized in bombing German airfields.

His new challenge was motivating aircrews to carry out the campaign in

spite of nearly overwhelming hazards. They not only had to make deep night bombing raids, flying underpowered machines loaded with bombs weighing up to 1,650 pounds, but also had to do it in bad weather. Trenchard, as quoted by Boyle, later said, "My job was to prod, cajole, help, comfort, and will the pilots on, sometimes to their death." His customary technique was to make frequent unannounced visits and talk straight. Often he watched the squadrons take off, waiting up until they returned.

The Handley Page bomber crews were Trenchard's prized veterans, assigned the most difficult long-range night missions. The aircraft were also prized for the loads they could carry. Metz, Cologne, Coblenz, Stuttgart, and many tactical targets in Germany felt the weight of Trenchard's bombers. They routinely raided cities up to 200 miles from their bases in France. Steadily, their bomb tonnage increased, from 70 tons dropped in June to 1,000 tons in August.

### **Maintaining the RAF**

After World War I, Trenchard battled for the continued existence of the Royal Air Force. In 1919,

Churchill, who became secretary of war and air, recalled Trenchard to be chief of the Air Staff, a position he kept until his retirement in 1929.

During his tenure as Air Staff chief, he dealt with the impact of depleted budgets and fended off Army and Navy efforts to eliminate the RAF. Trenchard also established the RAF College at Cranwell and continued to promote training, organization, and technological advances as the solid foundations of the force.

When World War II broke out, Trenchard was in his early 60s and played no major role in it. Churchill did ask him to visit the squadrons during the Battle of Britain.

Many of the pilots Trenchard had helped to train now led the RAF. Not least among them was Charles F.A. "Peter" Portal, who soon became chief of the Air Staff, and Arthur W. Tedder, one of his young squadron commanders of 1918, who became deputy supreme allied commander to Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower and a force behind the unified application of airpower in the Normandy invasion and beyond.

Trenchard pushed hard for unrelenting air attacks on Germany. He believed the airpower rout of German Gen. Erwin Rommel in North Africa reconfirmed the role of air superiority and the application of airpower in land warfare. According to Boyle, Trenchard wrote, "We won the battle of the air before El Alamein and Tunisia could be won."

British, French, and American airmen in two wars all owed much to Trenchard's practical ability to mold airpower into a respected weapon of warfare. That he did so in an age when airpower's technologies were still sorely lacking made the feat even more remarkable.

During and after the war, Trenchard was instrumental in raising money for the Battle of Britain Chapel in Westminster Abbey and, on his death in 1956, he was buried there. The formidable marshal of the RAF left a profound airpower legacy that showed itself best in those he influenced. ■

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