

BOOK REVIEWS:

Air battle For Burma: allied pilots' fight for supremacy

Bryn Evans

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The *Air Battle for Burma* is an excellent account of the history of the Allied efforts to defend Burma in World War II from a seemingly invincible foe, the Japanese Army Air Force.

While the air battles that raged over Burma are the main focus of the book, the author has blended the strategic context of the battle for Burma with descriptions of individual dogfights – from the frantic and desperate early dogfights between Hurricane fighters and the overwhelming and better equipped Japanese Zeros; to the introduction by Britain of the Spitfire into the air campaign and the resultant reversal of fortune in the fight for air superiority.

The reader is led to the Burma campaign through the defeats suffered by the British forces in Malaya and the United States at Pearl Harbour, and recognition of the vital need to support Chiang Kai-shek's forces battling the Japanese across China. The strategic context is updated throughout the book.

Bryn Evans, who is a member of the Institute, brings alive the epic aerial battles through the inclusion of numerous personal accounts of fighter pilots engaged in desperate dogfights that took an enormous toll of pilots and aircraft. The result is an excitement, seldom found in historical accounts, that is gripping. It is provided in a way that enables an understanding not only by those experienced in military air operations, but also by those who are much less familiar with the intricacies, fear, exultation and sacrifice experienced in aerial combat.

It is a wonderful blend of first hand accounts of the air battle from the men in the cockpit who desperately fought and died; and of the challenges faced by the Armies below who fought grinding battles in the jungles across Burma. The *Air Battle for Burma* reinforces an axiom oft forgotten regarding the vital need to attain air superiority over the battlefield so that land forces can survive and fight – as acknowledged by General Slim, Commander of

Britain's 14th Army, "... *there could have been no victory without the constant support of the Allied Air Forces ...*".

But the book is much more than a battle history, as exciting as that is. The reader is able to relate to the men who flew the Spitfires, Hurricanes, and Thunderbolts in the dogfights; the transport force of Dakotas and the Curtiss Commandos tasked with the enormously challenging requirement of the air supply of large armies over remote and featureless jungles; fighter-bombers, Hudsons and B-17 bombers who blunted the Japanese land forces; and Catalina reconnaissance aircraft who enhanced the early safety of outnumbered naval forces at sea.

The main air forces engaged in the air battle for Burma were Britain's Royal Air Force (RAF), the American Volunteer Group and the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF), and of the latter in particular the United States Air Transport Command. Within the RAF was a mix of Australian, Canadian and New Zealand aircrew who fought alongside their RAF counterparts. Among them was Wing Commander Noel Constantine, a Royal Australian Air Force pilot born in Moama, New South Wales. He was unsung and largely unrecognised. He flew Hurricanes in the early desperate dogfights and survived to lead the most successful Spitfire squadron in Burma. His exploits and insights, along with those of many other pilots, are blended into the history of the battle as it unfolds.

This book is a well-written and researched history of the air war over Burma. An engaging and informative read, it is also an unexpectedly exciting account of the air battle and of the men who fought it.

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