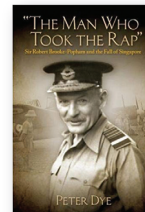


BOOK REVIEW:

“The man who took the rap”: Sir Robert Brooke-Popham and the fall of Singapore

by Peter Dye

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Ever heard of Sir Robert Brook-Popham – or more correctly, Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, GCVO, KCB, CMG, DSO, AFC? If the answer is yes, it very likely associates him with the fall of Singapore. And yet, the life and achievements of this man were remarkable and reflect the development of air power from before World War I and the evolution of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) and the Royal Air Force (RAF).

Brooke-Popham joined the army in 1897 as a gentlemen cadet at Sandhurst. After graduation, he was attracted to aviation, gaining a pilot's licence. His early service included Army Staff College and membership of the Air Battalion, later established as the RFC. During this period, he was an early advocate of the potential of air power, including control of the air, and was ridiculed by many for his postulations. His paper was reported favourably at a Royal United Services Institute (London) lecture in 1912. Brooke-Popham was instrumental in “general fathering of aeronautical design and the proper standards of safety for safety”.

He was Trenchard's staff officer during World War I and served in France with responsibilities for the administrative and logistic support for the RFC. During his tenure, the RFC grew from four squadrons and 860 personnel to 23 squadrons and 6506 personnel in 1916. His leadership helped create the complex, sophisticated and highly effective logistics system that sustained the RFC and RAF during World War I.

Following World War I, Brooke-Popham established the RAF Staff College and the Imperial Staff College; he commanded “the fighting area” – later known as Fighter Command; was Air Officer Commanding (AOC) Iraq Command, when Iraq was a British mandate following World War I; AOC for the Defence of Great Britain from 1933 – 1935 and was the first senior officer to appreciate the value of scientists when others were still refusing to admit them to their headquarters. Following an appointment as Inspector General of the RAF, Brooke-Popham retired and was appointed Governor of Kenya.

He was returned to active duty at the declaration of World War II with responsibility for the establishment of the Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS) in Canada and South Africa. The EATS became the backbone for the supply of aircrew to Bomber Command.

At age 62, Brooke-Popham had had a remarkable and very distinguished career, but he is mainly remembered for his appointment as Commander-in-Chief Far East in October 1940, responsible for defence matters for Malaya, Singapore, Hong Kong and Burma. He was replaced in November 1941 with “an Army

Officer with more recent experience” and a much younger man. Noting that the demands of office had taken a toll on him, his removal from command was assisted by members of the colonial administration who resisted his requirement to place the colonies on a war footing. They considered that the continued supply of tin and rubber to Great Britain was more important than preparing for war.

Brooke-Popham's directive was to convince the Japanese that the defences of Singapore and Hong Kong were too strong to challenge; make preparations for war; and to build strategic alliances. The unfortunate capture of Cabinet War Papers by the Germans who passed them to the Japanese undermined his efforts with regard to dissuading Japanese aggression. Effective preparation for war was made almost impossible by the ructions within the colonial administration, compounded by Brook-Popham's control being limited to land and air forces, and did not include naval forces or the civil service. The directive was flawed in that the defence of Singapore was badly undermined by a failure of Churchill to provide the necessary forces. However, Brooke-Popham was successful in building strong alliances between the United States, Holland and Australia.

To quote the *Times* newspaper in February 1942: “Soft troops, unenterprising commanders, outwitted strategists, an incompetent administration, an apathetic native population – these are not signs of a gallant army betrayed only by bad luck; they sound uncomfortably like the dissolution of an empire”.

This is a remarkable story. It is well told by Peter Dye and is a good read. Although Dye is acknowledged as a professional disciple of Brooke-Popham, he provides a balanced and objective biography.

Peter Dye is a graduate of the Imperial College and Birmingham University. He served in the RAF for more than 35 years and was awarded the Order of the British Empire for his support of British Forces in the First Gulf War, retiring as an air vice-marshal. He was appointed director-general of the RAF Museum in 2008, retiring after six years in post to concentrate on lecturing, research, and writing on airpower topics. He is an honorary research fellow at the University of Birmingham.

I recommend this book to those with an interest in the strategic development and organisation of airpower and to those who would like to consider another aspect of the story of the fall of the “impregnable fortress”.

Bob Treloar