

BOOK REVIEW:

The dawn of carrier strike: and the world of Lieutenant W P Lucy DSO RN

by David Hobbs

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With the construction and commissioning of aircraft carriers ongoing around the world, the history of the development of naval aviation has contemporary relevance.

Commander David Hobbs MBE is a retired Royal Navy pilot with extensive experience of the operations of both fixed wing and rotary aircraft at sea; and is a former curator of the Fleet Air Arm Museum, Yeovilton. A well-published author, he has written authoritatively on many aspects of the development of doctrine that led to the recognition of the aircraft as an integral arm of maritime operations.

This book explores the exchanges, sometimes acrimonious, between the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) and the fledgling Royal Air Force (RAF) following the end of the Great War. He fleshes out this battle, conducted mainly behind closed doors in the Ministry of Air and the Admiralty, by tracing the life and death of Britain's first World War II air ace, Lieutenant William (Bill) Lucy, DSO, RN.

In 1922, successive committees failed to resolve the Navy-Air Force impasse. This eventually led to the Trenchard/Keyes agreement which gave effective control of all matters related to aviation to the Air Ministry. Air Force pilots and aircraft were seconded to Royal Navy carriers. There was little confidence, however, that these pilots had an in-depth appreciation of naval strategy and operations. With complex and competing command and control arrangements, squadrons did not readily integrate with ships' companies. The Admiralty insisted on having appointed as observers, experienced, appropriately trained, naval officers knowledgeable in how to best deploy ship-borne aircraft in the multiple roles required of them: reconnaissance and navigation over the sea, well away from their parent ship; anti-submarine patrols; air defence; torpedo and dive bombing; mine laying; support for amphibious operations over the beach; and calling the fall of shot by the capital ships, sometimes against targets over the horizon.

With persistence, the Navy regained a degree of operational control over embarked flights, but it was not until 1937 that Cabinet agreed to return full responsibility to the Navy for raising, training and sustaining the "Air Service of the Royal Navy", which later adopted its present name "The Fleet Air Arm". Despite the wishes of the Navy, however, Coastal Command remained under Air Force control and communication problems with the fleet manifested themselves - as Mathew 6: 24 avers, "no man can serve two masters".

In contrast to the Royal Navy, neither the United States Navy nor the Imperial Japanese Navy were hampered by such considerations. Both took note of the successful raid by Swordfish aircraft from HMS *Illustrious* on the Italian

Fleet at Taranto in November 1940. America, however, did not anticipate the Imperial Japanese Navy attack on Pearl Harbour just over 12 months later.

Lieutenant Bill Lucy (1910 – 1940) joined the Royal Naval College, Dartmouth, as a 13-year-old. After training with several ships in the Fleet, and serving as a member of the Executive Branch, he volunteered for flying duties, gaining his naval 'wings' in April 1933. In 1940, he was appointed in command of 803 Squadron, equipped with Blackburn Skua fighter-bombers, at Royal Naval Air Station Hatston in the Orkney Islands.

"Bill was well aware that flying under-powered dive-bomber/fighters against enemy aircraft with a superior performance either from the deck of an aircraft carrier or from a naval air station ashore would be a dangerous task but he was determined at the outset to take the fight to the enemy".

Taking off before dawn on 10 April 1940 with Lieutenant M. C. E. Hanson RN as his observer, Lucy led a combined force of 16 Skuas from 800 and 803 Squadrons for the port of Bergen in Norway where a *Köln*-class cruiser, the *Königsberg*, had been identified. Operating at the extremity of their range, Lucy led a classic dive-bombing attack from 12,000 feet sinking the 7700-ton cruiser alongside at the wharf. She was the first major warship to be sunk by dive-bombing in the war. All but one of the Skuas returned to Hatston, a number just making it back with their fuel tanks almost exhausted. For this operation, Lucy was awarded the DSO and Hanson the DFC.

Flying combat air patrols (CAP), Lucy shot down at least five Heinkel HE 111 bombers, thus qualifying as Britain's first World War II 'Air Ace'. On 14 May 1940, flying a CAP from HMS *Ark Royal*, Lucy and his accompanying flight of two Skuas attacked a formation of five enemy bombers at 18,000 feet. In the ensuing *mêlée*, Lucy accounted for one of the Heinkels before his aircraft was seen to explode and plummet into the sea. Lucy's body was recovered by the destroyer, HMS *Whirlwind*, and buried at sea. Hanson's body was not recovered.

Hobbs concludes: *"There are lessons from this period that apply directly to Defence matters two decades into the twenty first century...."*. The book contains a bibliography and many photos from Hobbs' collection. The narrative successfully combines the inspiring story of a naval aviator with the early development of carrier strike. It is recommended for aviators and all services involved in maritime and amphibious operations.

Michael Flynn