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# Bomber Harris, His Life and Times: The Biography of Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir Arthur Harris, the Wartime Chief of Bomber Command

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is now such a biography is owed to the perseverance of the publisher's executive director, who served in the 1st Marine Division after the Korean War.

Fortunately for his biographer, O.P. kept meticulous records of his professional life, comprising some three dozen boxes in the Marine Corps University Archives and, more important, a detailed, daily personal log of his Korean War service. La Bree conducted interviews with officers who had served with O.P. to help fill in the blanks.

*Gentle Warrior* would have benefited had the author provided a broader context for the historical events in which its protagonist participated. It would also have been improved by more attention to the first decades of O.P.'s career, which are largely omitted—official records could have provided at least grist for the mill here. That O.P.'s youth and college years are absent from this account is due principally to his family's desire for privacy, which the author respected. Thus we do not really know the father to the man—the account really starts with O.P.'s deployment to Iceland.

Nonetheless, this is a good, honest book. It is probably not the definitive account of O.P.'s life and career, but we are fortunate to have it. He emerges as a consummate, dedicated professional military officer who served his country and his Marine Corps extremely well and did so with little fanfare or expectation of public approbation. On more than one occasion, Smith risked his career to speak truth to power. In short, there is much worth emulating in the character and career of O. P. Smith. Serving officers would do well to read this book and absorb its lessons.

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Probert, Henry. *Bomber Harris, His Life and Times: The Biography of Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir Arthur Harris, the Wartime Chief of Bomber Command*. London: Greenhill, 2001. 432pp. \$34.95

In the 1920s, early in his career, when Arthur Harris commanded 45 Squadron in Iraq, he was concerned with improving the accuracy of his unit's bomb aiming. Can this be the same man who, twenty years later, was responsible for leading the Royal Air Force Bomber Command's area-bombing campaign against the cities of the Third Reich, the apogee of which was the apocalyptic raid on Dresden in February 1945?

Yes and no. As Henry Probert demonstrates in his admirable biography of this most controversial Allied airman, Harris did indeed stress the need for his bombers to operate efficiently and effectively as they policed their corner of the British Empire, and he continued to emphasize these qualities for the remainder of his career. Harris cannot be made to bear personal responsibility for either the area-bombing strategy in general, or the Dresden raid in particular. Although Harris became a lightning rod for post-war criticism of the strategic air offensive, the critical decisions were made higher up the chain of command by the Chiefs of Staff, the War Cabinet, and Winston Churchill. In pointing out this simple but often overlooked fact, Probert, like Robin Neillands in his recent *The Bomber War* (Overlook Press, 2001), seeks to debunk myths and set the record straight by putting Harris in his proper historical context.

In some respects this task is not an easy one, but Probert is well qualified to make the attempt. A retired RAF air commodore with a long record of service,

Probert is also a former head of the Air Historical Branch of the Ministry of Defence. For this biography he was given unrestricted access to Harris's substantial collection of personal papers. Probert has made good use of this archive and of the interviews he conducted with Harris's friends and associates. His aim, he writes, is to present a biography of the man rather than yet another history of the bombing campaign, and there is much detail here that cannot be found elsewhere, even in the authorized biography by Dudley Saward, which was written in the 1970s but not published until after Harris's death in 1984. Probert rightly judges Saward's book to be disappointing, not least because it leaves many questions unanswered.

Yet while the author attempts to offer a rounder picture of the man by examining Harris's pre- and post-Bomber Command life, readers will inevitably be drawn to those chapters dealing with the war years. Despite Probert's desire not to retell the story of Bomber Command, he feels it necessary to offer some verdict on the air campaign itself. Here he wisely follows the lead of Richard Overy (King's College, London) in concluding that the night area offensive did much more damage to the German war effort than it has been given credit for, mainly by diverting resources to the defence of the Reich, putting a ceiling on industrial production, and generally disrupting economic and social life.

The picture of Harris that emerges is in some ways all too familiar. He was just the tonic that was needed at Bomber Command Headquarters in High Wycombe when he took up his appointment in February 1942. He was a strong-willed, opinionated, and forceful commander who promised to inject a

sense of purpose into a force that was flagging, and to do his utmost to build up its striking power. In this he was spectacularly successful, but his success came at a price. Harris's personality was a liability as well as an asset, and this was never more apparent than in his dealings with the staff officers of the Air Ministry. One of Probert's strengths is his understanding of the decision-making machinery and the bureaucratic and institutional framework within which bombing policy was made, a dimension of the story that is too often neglected or misunderstood.

Relations between Bomber Command and the Air Ministry's Directorate of Bomber Operations were frosty, due in no small part to Harris's contempt for what he believed to be the Air Staff's ill-advised criticism of, and interference in, the operation of his command. To a certain extent his views were justified, although one does not get from Probert a full sense of the deep distrust that some members of the Air Staff had of Harris's judgment and of his readiness to obey orders. Yet it takes two to tango, and too often Harris was overeager to dance. In addition to possessing a weakness for exaggeration, he could be inflexible, intolerant, scathingly sarcastic, and narrow minded in his view of the war. The results were frequently counterproductive, introducing unnecessary friction into the business of running the bomber offensive. Sometimes he was right, as in his denunciation of the pointless attacks on the concrete-reinforced U-boat pens on the French coast. At other times, however, he was dead wrong, as in his dogmatic dismissal of oil as just another "panacea" target.

Probert is too conscientious a biographer to excuse Harris's lapses uncritically, but he also seems a bit too willing to give his

subject the benefit of the doubt, suggesting in his concluding remarks that others might have misinterpreted or misunderstood what Harris was trying to say or do. He is surely right in judging him to be one of the great commanders of the Second World War. If that is the case,

however, it is equally true to say that Bomber Command achieved as much as it did not only because of Sir Arthur Harris but in spite of him.

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