

**The Coming Peril in the Air**

THE RIGHT HON. THE EARL OF BIRKENHEAD, P.C.

To the historian of the future, the outstanding mark of the Great War will be the conquest of the air and the development of the air arm which the war brought about.

It is certain that the significance of this development and the problems which it is fraught are far from being appreciated as yet either by the public in the streets, or by politicians given by the Fighting Services themselves.

We all know that the Air Services of Great Britain and of the other combatant countries were in all cases very small when the war started and they were in most cases very large when the war finished.

We know that a vast amount of inconvenience, loss, suffering and casualties to the civil population were caused by the air raids on London and other parts of Southern England, and we remember (it seems that we should do so) that the sum of casualties caused from the beginning of the war to the end was nothing to the suffering by the Armies in France in a single minor engagement.

As for the future, we are tired of war and everything connected with it. We can hope and believe that the next generation will go on and for the present the country feels that it is fully doing its duty by maintaining an Air Force which will cost £21,000,000 in the coming financial year, or three-quarters of what the British Army cost in 1914, and the equivalent of more than 4d. in the pound income tax.

This is a fair description of the mind of the average Englishman, who distrusts alarmists and distrusts experts. He is inclined to agree with the late Lord Salisbury that if soldiers were given full scope they would insist on the importance of garrisoning the moon to protect us from Mars.

As a nation we prefer to meet great emergencies by sudden and greater exertions, and like the Athenians, to trust not in the devices of national preparation, but in our own good spirit and valour.

But on one question the mind of the country for some generations past has been inflexibly and rightly attentive. That is the security of our sea communications, the protection against invasion, and the maintenance of a navy sufficient to guarantee that security and protection.

Do we yet as a nation realize that not only for the future our security from attack by air is even a more primary condition of national security than the maintenance of the Navy? It is difficult to give a confident answer to this question in spite of the great increases which have been authorized in the Air Force for the purpose of Home Defence. At sea we possess a power standard, but in the air we are as yet far from reaching a power standard, and in the most important conditions it must be satisfactory to the Government, not to a private citizen.

It is not only in the air that we are in a position to be out of step with the world. In the maintenance of the Navy we are also in a position to be out of step with the world. In the maintenance of the Navy we are also in a position to be out of step with the world.

We can go further and say plainly that adequate air defences might exist in more sudden and appalling attacks than even inadequate naval provision could.

Our communications are our lifelines. These lifelines are the heart of the Empire. The neglect of sea power in the past would have allowed our arteries to be cut off and our heart to be pierced.

In other words, neglect of air power would expose us to the risk of sudden and continuous attacks upon our most vital centres of population of a severity which would within a very short time reduce the whole machinery of Government and industry to chaos—chaos from the appalling loss of life.

The nature of these attacks may be better appreciated if we remind ourselves that whereas the greatest weight of bombs dropped in a single raid over this country during the last war was three tons, and twelve tons in any one month, the present French striking force could, according to an estimate quoted about a year ago in the House of Commons by the present Secretary of State for Air, drop 170 tons of bombs in the course of a month, but in the course of 24 hours could keep up a bombing attack of 100 tons daily or nightly for an indefinite period.

Against this danger the Naval Forces afford no insurance. Indeed, our inland position, which has in the past made the Navy our sure shield, is no advantage as regards air security.

The experience of the last war showed that we could have but little warning of the approach of raiding aircraft, and within almost a few minutes of their first passing over these islands they would be within reach of the centres of population.

When, therefore, we realize what the scope of air attack might be, and

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consider the effect of those attacks upon the intricate structure of production and transport upon which the great and closely compact urban population of Great Britain is dependent for its daily existence, it is evident that our ability to resist would be exhausted in a period which could be measured by weeks rather than months, by days rather than weeks, perhaps by hours rather than by days. There would be no process of gradual attrition or breathing time in which

earlier mistakes or misfortunes might be retrieved. The security of these islands therefore requires us to be at least as vigilant to maintain an adequate Air Force as we have been, and are, to maintain an adequate Navy.

The Navy and Army Estimates for 1914-15 amounted to some £78,000,000; the combined Estimates of the three Services in the years 1925-26 are over £124,000,000, which again is the equivalent of an income tax of about

2s. 6d. in the pound; this after our triumphant efforts in a war which ended in the complete defeat of our principal opponent. Of this expenditure £21,000,000 only, or, roughly, a sixth part, is in respect of expenditure on the R.A.F. This is really oversteating the amount spent on the air, as a considerable amount, nearly half, is spent on that "air" that is used purely as an auxiliary to the Navy and Army in order to enable them to carry out purely Naval and

Military work. Therefore we really arrive at the fact that what is spent on the air is certainly less than ten-tenths of what is spent on the older Services. Though there is no doubt that this Air sense and vigilance are necessary for the Navy and Army, how much more necessary are they for the defence of the heart of the Empire? In other words, not only do we maintain just as large an Army and just as large a Navy as if there were no air force, but in addition a large amount of expenditure on the Air Service is necessary to enable the Navy and Army to do their work.

The tendency of both the Navy and Army is to enlarge their demands for the supply of air units as auxiliaries to their own forces. Are the dangers to this Empire such that it will require, this increased cost to Army and Navy, or are there more vital dangers which imperatively demand adequate air protection for this country? And whatever is decided in regard to the Navy and the Army, must not our Air Service be more adequate? We must ask ourselves, too, if this is a satisfactory position, or one in which a country that is debt-laden and tax-ridden should acquiesce without an investigation as to whether, with the coming of the Air Service, it is not possible that some of the respon-

abilities given to the older Services in the past should to-day be undertaken by the Air Service?

In the past the Navy and the Army operated in two distinct elements and the line of demarcation of their responsibilities on the greater questions was sufficiently obvious. But the Air also operates in its own element, and that element covers that of the Navy and the Army.

It has, further, ranges of activity which are entirely independent of the operations of sea and land forces; it has other spheres in which the functions of the other Services are so closely interconnected with those of the Air Service that it may be difficult to say whether a particular operation is primarily an Air or a Naval or Military operation.

As aeroplanes can operate over both sea and land, so it is obvious that it will often be a matter for consideration whether in any particular time or place Air Forces cannot be more economically and conveniently employed than Naval or Military forces.

The present method of control in Iraq is a case in point. In that country air control has during the last two and a half years taken the place of control by land forces and we have thereby been enabled largely to reduce the size and cost of the Imperial garrison at present maintained in that country and without any loss to the country's peace and security.

It is reasonable to believe that the experiment in the employment of Air Forces not in addition to, but in replacement of, other forms of defence which has been recognized on all hands as being so successful in Iraq, may in future be applied in other areas and to solve other problems of defence.

No person with even a layman's knowledge of Air developments in the last 10 years, or with any imaginative ability to realize what future developments of the next quarter or half a century may bring forth, will be disposed to accept dogmatic limitations upon the capabilities of the Air arm to take a large, perhaps a predominant part in solving many of the problems of Imperial defence.

Lastly, it is probable that in the development of the Air arm lies the greatest potentiality of co-operation for mutual defence between different parts of the British Empire.

Provision by the Dominions of aircraft and aerodromes on their coasts, primarily for their own defence against surface borne craft or aircraft, can be achieved at far less expenditure than an equal amount of defence in the form of naval or land forces and in addition would form a reserve of air strength in the event of any threat against the Empire as a whole.

It is material to remember that the Dominions have shown special aptitude for aviation and that their contribution of personnel to the flying services during the war was amazingly high in relation to their population.

But I would not close this article without again drawing attention to the fact of the change in the position of these islands that has taken place since the day that Bleriot crossed the Channel.

It is not too much to say that in the future, the whole population of Great Britain may be involved in precautions and measures of defence which will be imperative if the country is to live and be capable of carrying on its vital services during Air hostilities. And the geographical situation of our home land, and the geographical positions of the centres of population within them, add to the difficulties of the problem, and to the necessity for adequate expenditure on Air—Pearson's Weekly.

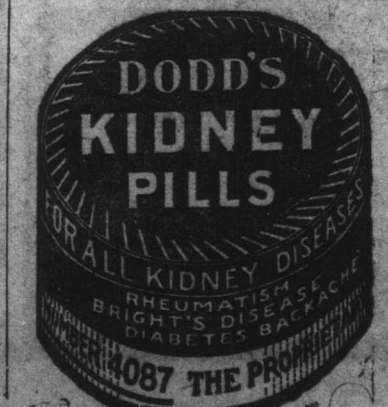
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Dated St. John's, April 27th, A.D. 1925.  
S. J. FOOTE, ESQ.,  
Solicitor for Executor.

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