Transatlantic aviation

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Introduction

Water crossings have presented perhaps the most formidable challenge for the development of aviation. Indeed, in 1903 powered flight started on the fringe of the Atlantic when the Wright brothers sped towards the surf from Kill Devil Hills. In the following years, flights went from seconds to minutes. In July 1909, commentators were enthused when the first airplane crossed the English Channel, staying airborne for all of 36 min and seconds. The next decade saw dramatic changes in aircraft technology and performance. Airplanes developed for public entertainment were associated with mortal risk to the pilot to weapons of war-bringing lethal dangers to others and finally to instruments of transport. These technological changes pushed aviation to become a factor in world affairs. At the end of World War I, public opinion held that aeronautics would fundamentally alter society—and world order. Many believed that thanks to the airplane distances would be ‘shortened’. The challenge to fly over water, where the airplane effected its biggest gain in travel time, presented a stimulus to aeronautical development. The first European air services that sprang up after 1918 all involved sea crossings.

Other than such natural barriers, human-made obstacles have also played an important role in the development of aviation. The context of the nation state in particular was a major influence. National states stood for national interests and the defence of borders and sovereignty. These were conducive factors for the development of technologies that resulted in armed craft that used the air medium to defend or further the national interest. However, national interests were not absent from the new civil and commercial use of the air either. The history of commercial aviation is fraught with conflicts over landing and transport rights, resulting from states’ sovereignty in the air. For these reasons, operating in the air environment has always been challenging. This special issue of the *Journal of transatlantic Studies* offers five contributions that revolve around the military and commercial manifestations of natural and human challenges in the field of aeronautics.

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The contributions range from challenges to the thinking behind strategic conceptions of air power in Britain and in the USA in the 1920s and 1930s to Anglo-American uses of such air power to effect diplomatic goals in World War II. Challenge is also the keyword as focus shifts to France where novelists from the sphere of aeronautics contested the defeat of France in 1940 and projected their views for a new post-war world of peace. Peacetime conditions presented challenges to the organization of operations of Pan American Airways in Africa after 1945, although the airline remarkably failed to address these. The final contribution investigates the challenge to Britain to translate its technological lead in the development of jet engines into exports of aircraft technology that would open up transatlantic markets to the British aeronautical industry in the 1950s and 1960s.

In the opening piece, Ian Horwood and Chris Price write about the transatlantic air power controversy of the early 1920s. At the return to peace conditions following the end of World War I, Britain's newly founded Royal Air Force, just established as a separate branch of the armed services, supplied a model for advocates of air power worldwide. In the USA, general Billy Mitchell strived to copy the British organizational model to form a unified armed force in the air. His ideas met with forceful resistance from the Navy that wished to retain a dedicated air weapon under its own command. In the 1920s and 1930s, the US Navy theorized on the use of airplanes in naval operations and used the instrument of war games to develop its own conceptual uses, in which aircraft carriers came to play a vital role.

Graham Cross takes the treatment of air power into the late 1930s and 1940s with an exposé on how Anglo-American air power could become a factor in wartime diplomacy. He distinguishes four manifestations of the use of air power: deterrent, coercive, persuasive, and moral. The first was to send a warning signal to possible aggressors in the international arena: heave to, or risk retaliatory air strikes. The second acted as a pressure instrument to influence policies of enemies in the war. The third use, persuasive air power, intended to effect desired behavioural changes among allies. The fourth was the use of air power to break enemy morale. All of these manifestations were present in Roosevelt's and Churchill's approaches to air power in the context of World War II, and in their perception of how air power might work for national wealth and prominence once the fighting had ceased.

Such conceptions were also present in the thinking of French literary figures who entertained various links with aviation, some of them actually flying in combat for the glory of their country, although privately questioning the nationalist ideologies behind the conflict. Andrew Williams writes about Romain Gary, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Joseph Kessel, and André Malraux, whose books have become an omnipresent part of French culture. In their work, they depict the dilemmas of their time through the lens of literature: through imagined realities they capture the spirit, if perhaps not the documentable historical moment of the times. This way these writers visualized the present, and the post-war future, through their art. Their novels depict the way piloting an airplane stood for the wider struggle against Nazism and thus fictionalize what we think we 'know' about the French dilemmas of the period and the alliance with Britain across the sea.

Taking us away from immediate military perspectives, Gordon Pirie next details how wartime circumstances created the setting for the epitomic United States' *flag*

carrier Pan American Airways (Pan Am) to develop a transatlantic air route to Africa. Pan Am's plans to establish a foothold on the continent fitted the Allied war effort. The African stops were also intended to suit Pan Am's envisaged round the world network. Remarkably, Pan Am lacked serious knowledge of and interest in the region, but stayed for the best of five post-war decades nonetheless. In this period, it accumulated disappointing operational and financial results. Defying the commercial logic that drove international airline development, Pan Am's presence in Africa resided in an ill-perceived servitude to wider US strategic and foreign policy goals in Africa at a time when US policy towards the continent, largely built on anti-communist interests, was still in the making.

The wartime Anglo-American understandings on aviation and air power also provide the backdrop to David Devereux' article on the introduction of jet air transport across the Atlantic in the late 1950s. This contribution delineates how London, as a consequence of meandering government policies towards the British aeronautics industry and consecutive organizational changes in government structure that resulted from the political process in Britain, lost its initial technological lead in the development of jet-powered commercial transport aircraft to the Americans. All this despite the widely shared view at the time in London that the aviation industry represented a crucial part of the British economy and was as such to be considered a national asset.

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