

PATHFINDER



AIR POWER DEVELOPMENT CENTRE BULLETIN

Issue 43, April 2006

THE SMUTS REPORT

And the day may not be far off when aerial operations with their devastation of enemy lands and the destruction of industrial and populous centres on a vast scale may become the principal operations of war, to which older forms of military and naval operations may become secondary and subordinate.

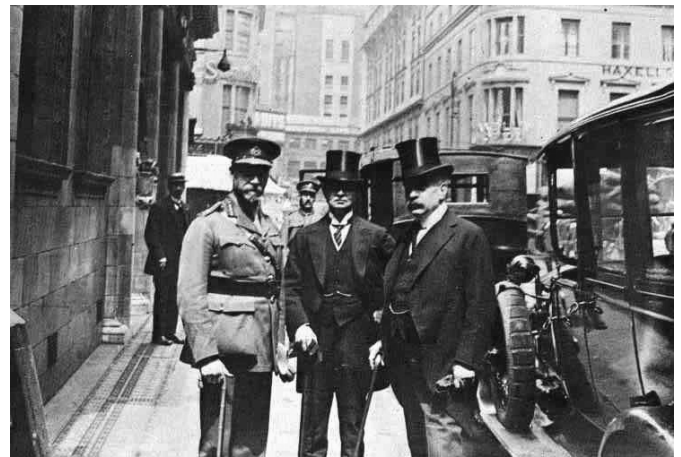
- Smuts Report, 17 August 1917

The formation of the Royal Air Force in 1918 was directly influenced by two reports written the previous year by J.C. Smuts, a South African general (later field marshal) who had been invited to join the Imperial War Cabinet by Britain's prime minister, David Lloyd George. Rather dryly entitled 'The 1st and 2nd Reports of the Prime Minister's Committee on Air Organization and Home Defence against Air Raids', these documents have become collectively referred to as the 'Smuts Report'. The recommendations they contain, while intended for action by the British air arms only, establish the rationale for independent air forces and include certain doctrinal truths as relevant today as they were 90 years ago.

Smuts considered the problems facing Britain during World War I, and arrived at what he considered the best solution in setting right the air defence of Britain and correcting the deficiencies in the organisation of its air arms. After accepting the Smuts Report, the War Cabinet went on to pass the *Air Force (Constitution) Act of 29 November 1917* and in due course the RAF was formed on 1 April 1918.

Born in South Africa to Dutch parents in 1870, Jan Christiaan Smuts completed a comprehensive legal education at Cambridge in 1895. During the Boer War he was an outstanding administrator and field commander with the Boers, rising to prominence as a minister in the government which followed that conflict. Despite his past alliances, Smuts was progressively distanced by the Afrikaner movement due to his seemingly pro-British stance. He had taken his own council when considering the future of his country and could no longer see a rationale for independent Boer republics. Instead, he preferred to see a united and independent South Africa—not as part of Britain's empire but as a member of a British Commonwealth of Nations (he was one of the first statesmen to use the term).

When World War I began, Smuts led South African ground forces that successfully attacked German East Africa. Significantly, he had several aircraft within his command during this campaign and gained valuable understanding of their employment. As a consequence of all this, by the time he arrived in London in March 1917 he already had a well-deserved reputation as a soldier, statesman and intellectual.



General Smuts (left) in London, July 1918

The problem besetting the British government stemmed from the air attacks which, starting on 24 December 1914, had been mounted by German Army and Naval air assets in the form of airships and fixed wing aircraft. This bombing campaign over England was not only progressively becoming more effective; the British air defences seemed incapable of halting it. Under extreme public pressure to act, Prime Minister Lloyd George formed a committee on 11 July 1917 to report on the military's response to the bombings and recommend workable solutions to the problem of homeland air defence, along with the broader issues regarding the organisation of Britain's air assets. Smuts, as a member of the War Cabinet, was appointed the key coordinator.

The shortcomings to which Smuts addressed himself were serious. When the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) formed on 13 April 1912, it included both an Army and Naval wing but no central controlling authority responsible for command and control, development or logistics. Each parent service ultimately developed and employed their fledgling air arms separately. Attempts at forming various Air Committees and Boards from 25 April 1912 onwards, to coordinate the activities of the two air arms, consistently failed due to a lack of executive power. When the German bombing attacks

began there was no integrated air defence network and no synergy of effort between the ground and air forces.

Smuts brought together a team of experienced military officers who were well-versed in aviation, most notably Lieutenant General Sir David Henderson. Well-known as the British Army's leading authority on tactical intelligence (during the Boer War he was Director of Military Intelligence in South Africa), Henderson had been at the forefront of the RFC since its inception. As the first Director-General of Military Aeronautics in 1913–14 he had acquired unparalleled knowledge of the corporate history of military aviation in the UK. He had added to that a thorough knowledge of the tactical application of Air Power, acquired while leading the RFC in France for the first three years of World War I. It seems ironic that Henderson and Smuts, after fighting on opposite sides during the Boer War, should have worked together on creating what was to become such an influential report for the British.



Lieut.-General Sir David Henderson

The first of Smuts' reports dealt exclusively with homeland defence and contained four recommendations. The essence of these was the establishment of unified command and control encompassing the Observer Corps, anti-aircraft batteries and RFC aircraft. Smuts emphasised the importance of unity, professional mastery and concentration of force, balanced against resource management to counter multiple raids. The same organisational principles were extant in the British air defence network during the Battle of Britain.

The second report dealt with the organisational dysfunction of the air arms and contained eight recommendations. This report, influenced heavily by Henderson and the other Naval and Army aviators on the team, recommended the amalgamation of the RFC and Royal Naval Air Service, under the control of a newly-created Air Ministry that was to be on

an equal footing with the War Office and Admiralty. Smuts also made a provision for operational command of Air Force assets by Army and Navy commanders, thus facilitating joint operations. Further, he stressed the importance of strategic planning in terms of logistics, targeting and force structure. Importantly, the report envisioned interdiction missions independent of Army and Naval operations.

The Smuts Report was grounded in the hard-won lessons gained during World War I. Almost every air power role we know today was demonstrated in some form during that conflict. From strategic strike to close air support, tactical airlift to maritime surveillance, all were carried out between 1914 and 1918. The Smuts Report recognised the diversity of Air Power applications and provided a blueprint for RAF operations in both independent and joint campaigns.

Unfortunately, the legacy of the Smuts Report and World War I subsequently seem to have been lost, and was only rediscovered by the RAF in the Western Desert in 1940–41. Budget cuts and the interservice rivalry for resource allocation in the 1920s led the head of the RAF, Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Trenchard, to concentrate predominantly on those roles that maintained a case for the independence of his service, lest it be subsumed by Army and Navy. Consequently there was disproportionate theory, and ultimately doctrine, based around strategic strike.

A similar environment to the 1920s exists today. Limited resources tempt us to focus on the 'high end' of air power capability, to the detriment of the broader roles that air power brings to the fight in the tactical environment. If our doctrine is truly influenced by history, the lessons of World War I and the rationale for the Smuts Report are worthwhile reality checks when we visit our plans for Air Force capability and force structure.

- *Smuts was personally well-qualified, and equally well-advised, in tackling the issue of Britain's homeland air defence*
- *Emphasised unity of command, professional mastery and concentration of force—organisational principles of enduring relevance*
- *Acknowledged that broader roles of air power require strategic planning in terms of logistics, targeting and force structure*



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