

Hurricane Bookshelf: Aerial Warfare Failures, Including Hurricanes

by Scott Kruize

Why Air Forces Fail: the Anatomy of Defeat

Authors/Editors: Robert Higham and Stephen J. Harris

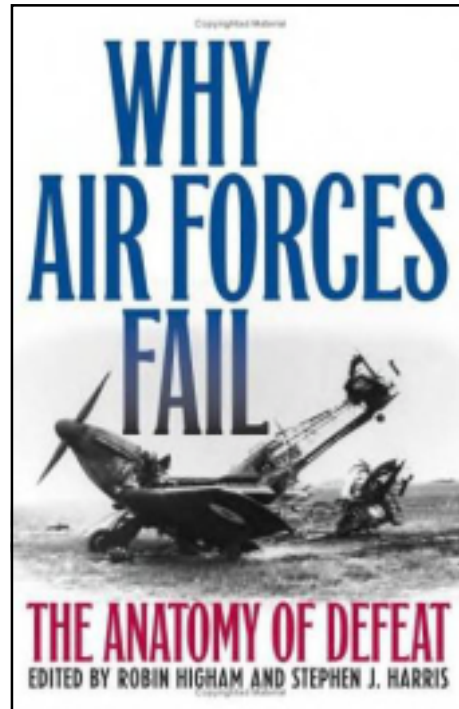
Copyright 2006 by University Press of Kentucky, 382 pages

Well, I never thought this column would be written about a book whose main thesis's illustration is of thoroughly wrecked Hurricanes. But air forces do fail—there's plenty of material for a book like this to cover!—and at the beginning of the Second World War, Hurricanes were among the early victims of the German juggernaut.

No one sets out to fail, as the author/editors explicitly state, but there are all kinds of reasons for failure. An air force's equipment may not be up to the current level of technology, and in aerial warfare, even a slight technical difference might mean the margin between victory and defeat. Peacetime planning may not encompass the reality of what actually happens when the shooting starts. Strategy and tactics might be ill-conceived or downright unworkable. Training of personnel may be inadequate in quality or quantity. The economic and political support may be lacking to make for a large enough air force, or one with reserves and 'staying power' that enable it to persist in combat.

The Hawker Hurricane eventually went on to great victories, and to status as the Allied warplane which destroyed the most Axis aircraft. Early on, however, Hurricanes suffered greatly from Axis assaults. The airfields were all worked over when 'the balloon went up' in France and the Low Countries. The British expeditionary and French air forces lost many warplanes on the ground; all of Belgium's Hurricanes –

their most modern warplanes—were wrecked on the first day. Two years later, Hurricanes and other warplanes guarding the Empire's outposts in the Far East were lost to surprise Japanese attack.



Besides lack of adequate facilities to keep planes operational, or warning systems to save them from being destroyed on their own air fields, faulty training and tactics were to blame for many losses. What especially comes to mind is the concept of 'Fighting Area Attacks'. The fast new Hurricanes (and Spitfires) were to fly into one or another of a set of rigidly 'choreographed' formations, which was then supposed to engage an enemy bomber formation. All the fighters would fire all their guns at once, and their victims would all burst into flaming fragments and crash in formation! (No consideration was made about what the enemy **fighter** formations would be doing during this impressive airpower ballet!) The imagination boggles at how anybody could ever have thought that anything like this could possibly be made to work. And this book specifically refers to the Spanish Civil War experience.

It was small-scale, compared to what would come later, but many of the basic lessons of modern air combat were there to be learned. People from some air forces learned their lessons, others didn't.

Not that we Americans should feel too much contempt for these failures. The book includes a chapter about our spectacular defeats in late 1941, more than two years into the war. Our considerable airpower in the Pearl Harbor and the Philippines was nevertheless taken utterly by surprise and crushed by Japanese air power.

There are other chapters about WW2 defeats: the air forces of Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and Imperial Japan, despite their early victories, had major flaws. (It's not enough to observe that America's aircraft industry simply out-produced those of our enemies. Large portions of blame go to the Axis leaders and planners. Among other things, many of them seemed **way** more concerned with 'defending their turf'—executive power and privilege—than with serving their country in fighting the war!)

Other chapters come up to more modern times. One describes the failure of the Arab air forces. I was going to say 'combined Arab air forces', but the chapter makes clear that much of their failures were because, facing the Israeli Air Force—compact, well-disciplined, well-trained, and purposeful—the air forces of Egypt, Syria, and others were defeated piecemeal. There was grossly inadequate co-operation among them.

I referred to the book's 'author/editors' because they included, as chapters, independently written essays, each by an expert in that particular field. The styles and format of these discussions of air force failures are all a little bit different, but all share an approach to give clear explanations of how air forces can come to fail when they transition from peacetime, where they only had to look good, to actual warfare, where the only measure is fighting performance.

One of these independently-written chapter considers the ‘small’ modern war between Great Britain and Argentina. I already have two books about this on the Hurricane bookshelf: *The Battle for the Falklands*, by Max Hastings and Simon Jenkins, and *Air War: South Atlantic*, by Jeffrey Ethell and Alfred Price.

There’ll be more in a future column about all these, particularly next year, the 30th anniversary of the war, when the Northwest Scale Modelers do a special exhibit for the Museum of Flight. But for now, let me just say that *Why Air Forces Fail* taught me things those other books didn’t. Because of a formal agreement among the top dog military leaders of the Argentine ‘junta’, which has ruled the country for decades, the Air Force was actually forbidden to ‘encroach’ on the Navy’s prestige by practicing or preparing for war at sea, at all!

For all the courage and ability of the sailors and soldiers of the British task force, and the incredibly effective use of the Harrier as an interceptor, the mind boggles at what might have happened if the Argentine Air Force had been properly trained and prepared for long-distance overwater flights and the very specialized maneuvers of maritime strike. After reading the chapter in this book, it’s not at all far-fetched to imagine the British task force subjected to twice as many effective attacks, losing twice as many ships and personnel. There would have been a quite different *Why Air Forces Fail*, and **all** the books on the Falklands/Malvinas war would have had to be re-written!

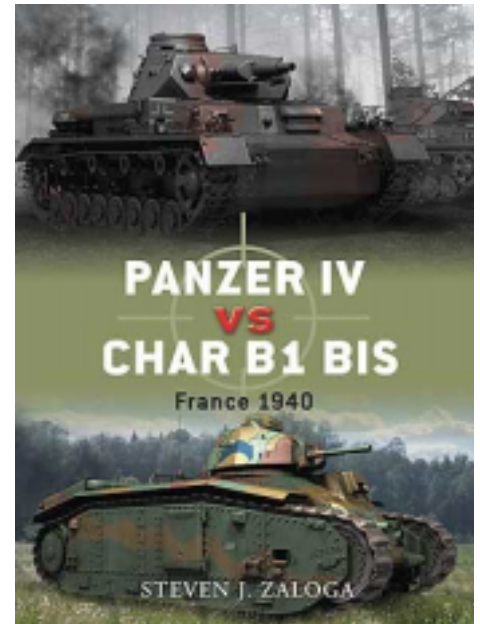
***Panzer IV vs. Char B1 Bis France 1940*, by Steven J. Zaloga**

reviewed by Andrew Birkbeck

Despite the use of “tanks” in the First World War, and their use in the opening stages of the Second World War in Poland, September 1939, it was in the Battle of France in May 1940 that these weapons were used for the first time on any large scale. The battles around the French towns of Stonne, Hannant, and Gembloux for the first time in history saw massive clashes, involving hundreds of tanks on both the French and German sides. And it was during these battles that actual “armored divisions” from both sides were involved. This book covers the two major armored vehicles of the Battle of France, the Wehrmacht’s Panzer IV, and the French Army’s massive Char B1 Bis. The author, Steven Zaloga, is a well known military historian of the Second World War, and also a keen modeler. He is also a very good writer, and the prose of this book flows very well.

The book is divided into seven major chapters, and flows in an intelligent chronological order. The text is augmented by black and white period photos, some color photos from museums, and color artwork, together with charts and battle maps. A brief history of tank warfare is given from the First World War through the post war period, and up to the start of World War Two. This includes the military thinking on both the French and German sides as to the utility of tanks, and how they should best be employed on the battle field. The book then moves on to show how these ideas (different on each side) went on to influence the type of tanks the German and French armaments industries produced. A quick look at pictures of the Panzer IV and the Char B1 Bis show them to be very different vehicles, and the author expertly briefs the reader as to why they turned out the way they did: the Char B1 Bis heavily armored,

yet relatively slow, while the Panzer IV was more lightly armored, and as a result lighter, and thus faster.



Under the heading “The Combatants”, the author describes the crews of the two tanks, their training (or lack of it), the various mechanical devices installed in the tanks (episcopes etc), and how these helped or hindered the effectiveness of the two tanks. Also covered is the makeup of the two tank organizations, on the French side the DCR (Division Cuirasee) and on the German, the Panzer Division. The author then concludes with a vivid description of the major engagement of the two armored formations in the Battle of France: The Duel at Stonne.

At the opening stages of the Battle of France, the Germans had more “tanks” than the French by a small margin, but many of these German tanks were lightly armed Panzer I and Panzer II vehicles. In terms of more capable tanks, such as the Char B1 Bis, Hotchkiss H35/39, Renault R-35 and Somua S-35, vs. the Panzer III and Panzer IV of the German units, the French had numerical superiority. Yet why were the Germans able to destroy the French Armies in such a short period of time? From the tank vs. tank perspective, this