

"Cognac With Douhet"

A Comparison of the Airpower Perspectives
of
Dr. Richard P. Hallion, USAF Historian
and General Giulio Douhet, Airpower Theorist

by

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Following the closing ceremonies of the latest "Gathering of Owls," I had the good fortune of interviewing the ghost of General Giulio Douhet.¹ The General invited me back to his palatial residence where we retired to the tall wingback chairs of his study. We sipped his fine cognac by the fireside and discussed all matters of airpower.

After some social conversation and emptying our glasses, the General refilled our snifters and we settled back in our chairs. He indicated that he had recently read an article titled, "Air Power Past, Present and Future," written by Dr. Richard P. Hallion, the U.S. Air Force Historian. It served as the introduction to a new book titled *Airpower Confronts an Unstable World*. Having recently read it myself, I was interested in Douhet's thoughts on the subject.

"General," I asked, "What is your basic impression of Dr Hallion's article?"

Douhet reached forward to pat the head of the Labrador Retriever that now rested its chin on his lap. "Dr. Hallion is a fine disciple of my theories. In fact, he wrote the forward for the latest printing of my book *The Command of the Air*. He properly credits me with center stage among airpower theorists. I was the first. Other theorists merely stand on my shoulders." (I could see the General still had a healthy ego.) "Moreover, I am delighted that despite the technical and political changes that have occurred since my day, Hallion claims that none have 'outdated the notions of Douhet in the slightest.'² It must be noted of course that Hallion is not an airpower theorist, but rather a historian. His agenda is to record the history of airpower and the personalities that made it great. I believe that he is inclined to paint a picture of airpower in the rosiest possible light. As for the article, he uses historic examples that, I contend, prove that I am still correct—command of the air is all important in modern warfare."³

Dismissing the dog from his lap and sliding forward in his chair, he set his cognac down on top of a leather bound book that rested on the nearby table. He leaned towards me, and using his hands to emphasize every word, he continued. "Hallion understands the facts that I pointed out so long ago. Namely, airpower *has* revolutionized warfare."⁴ As I

like to say, 'to conquer the command of the air means victory; to be beaten in the air means defeat.'⁵ Hallion's concepts of air dominance, parity, and subordination describe the dire need for command of the air quite well.⁶ He correctly states that 'any nation that considers itself an airpower faces the dominant challenge of ensuring air superiority.'⁷ This was the case during the Battle of Britain. As Hallion describes it, Great Britain 'secured its national salvation through airpower.'⁸ The point he is making is that the Germans failed to gain air dominance over Great Britain. Without air dominance they were unable to secure their aims. Eventually, the Allies turned the table on Germany. In the Combined Bomber Offensive they conducted strategic attack on Germany and slowly beat the German Air Force into a position of air inferiority and ultimately, air paralysis. Once that was accomplished, the outcome of the war was inevitable. Hallion uses one of my favorite quotes when he cites General Eisenhower's proclamation on the beaches of Normandy, 'Without air supremacy I wouldn't be here.'⁹ That being said, Douhet finished his cognac, poured us another, and sat back in his chair.

I was quite pleased with the cognac and felt the interview was going very well. "General, in your book you assert your belief that all future wars will be total in nature. However, Hallion makes reference to *limited* wars in Vietnam, the Gulf, the Falklands and others that occurred after you published your book. Were you wrong?"

"Well, that depends on how you look at it," the General replied. "I believe that my assumption was correct in my day. Events have since shown that I...um...may have...ah...overlooked the possibility of limited wars, but of course Hallion has two advantages over me. First, he has my theory. Second, he has seventy years of world history since my death against which to compare it. You must remember that my airpower theory evolved during the carnage of World War I. At that time, it seemed reasonable to expect that wars would continue to be total. Certainly, this was the case in the Second World War, which I did not live to see."

Douhet's eyes narrowed as he gazed into the fire. "Being dead places a special burden on me. I cannot publish new editions of my book to make corrections when new evidence becomes available. It becomes the responsibility of airpower theorists in each generation to build upon my work. Mitchell and Trenchard were two of my earliest disciples. They undoubtedly used my theory to help their nations prepare for the total nature of the Second World War."

"General, you mention the Second World War. In Dr. Hallion's article, he claims that the effects of the atomic bombs over Japan fulfilled your apocalyptic prophecies of airpower and thus ended the war. Do you agree?"

"Yes, absolutely," he said, twisting the corner of his full handle bar mustache with his fingertips. "Airpower was decisive. I always knew it could be. Airplanes armed with atomic bombs broke the will of the Japanese people and their leaders to continue the war. It is interesting to speculate how much shorter the war might have been if the atomic bombs were available and used at the outset." Douhet paused for a moment. "I guess we will never know, but I imagine that a tremendous number of lives might have

been saved. As you probably are aware, I zealously advocated using the full force of airpower early in a conflict to conduct crippling strategic attacks on the enemy's vital centers. Hallion mentions two recent wars where the full force of strategic attack from the air was unleashed. I am referring to Desert Storm and Bosnia. In each case airpower was the decisive hammer that brought the war to a speedy end. If ground forces had been the first to engage, or if airpower was not used to its full potential, both wars might still be going on. I am convinced that the longer a war lasts the more lives will be lost.

Douhet looked at his boots and smirked, "I am sometimes called bloodthirsty because I recommended targeting civilian vital centers after gaining command of the air. I am convinced that civilian morale is unstable and that such targeting will break the will of a nation to persist in the war. Besides, in total warfare, everybody is a combatant, military and civilian alike. I am *not* bloodthirsty. On the contrary, I believe my method is quite humane because striking such vital centers early in a campaign will bring a war to its quickest conclusion. I suspect that Hallion would part company with me on this issue, but he did not explicitly address targeting in his article. I am a product of different times. Hallion is a product of today's politically correct times in which you try to win wars while inflicting as few enemy casualties as possible! Bah!" He drained his cognac and refilled our snifters.

"General, Dr. Hallion refers to many different kinds of aircraft throughout history that performed a wide variety of roles. He goes so far as to advocate different specialized aircraft such as air transports, tankers, and other high-technology platforms. You principally advocated only one kind of aircraft—the battleplane. How do you reconcile the difference between your position and his?"

"Quite simply, Hallion is a modern American. I believe Mitchell heavily influenced him. Mitchell always advocated a variety of aircraft types specially designed for certain roles and missions. America is a relatively wealthy nation that was in a much better position following the First World War to develop specialized aircraft than my native Italy. Faced with extreme fiscal constraints, I was concerned with economy of force. Put this together with the fact that I believed there was no effective defense against a bomber. Therefore, it made sense to me that an air force comprised almost exclusively of heavily armed bombers would be the most efficient means to the end."

Douhet stretched out his legs and crossed his ankles. He smiled and added, "Hallion brings up an interesting parallel between my battleplane and the use of modern technology in newer aircraft. He claims that economics may drive air forces in the future to combine stealth, unmanned aerial vehicles, and precision weapon into a single type of aircraft to perform a variety of roles. He says this in effect is 'giving new life to [my] old term 'battleplane.'"¹⁰

"You brought up the issue of defending against bombers, General. Dr. Hallion states, 'The mistaken interwar years doctrine that unescorted bombers could always penetrate enemy air defenses even in the face of intercepting fighters cost virtually all combatant nations—including the United States—dearly.'¹¹ The mistaken doctrine is very similar

to your edict that 'the bomber will always get through.' Are you responsible for this mistake?"

"No, certainly not. Again, this issue must be set in context. Hallion also states, 'a nation that ignored its aerial defense did so at its own peril.'¹² This implies that an effective aerial defense is possible. That would have been absurd eighty years ago. At that time I stated, 'Aerial warfare admits no defense. We must therefore resign ourselves to the offenses the enemy inflicts upon us.'¹³ I considered the invincibility of the bomber as a basic principle guiding the development of airpower. You see, in my day, multi-engine bombers were outperforming fighters in every important area, such as range, speed and altitude. When I declared that 'the bomber would always get through' it seemed reasonable to expect that they would always do so. I did not anticipate much need for escorts because I envisioned battleplanes defending themselves using their superior speed, altitude, armor plating, and guns. However, I was unable to anticipate the rapid advances in fighter technology fielded by the time the Second World War erupted. Hallion uses historic events that occurred after my time to prove that the bomber did *not* always get through and fighter escorts *were* required. I could not have known this when I published my work. I may also be criticized for stating, 'Nothing man can do on the surface of the earth can interfere with a plane in flight.'¹⁴ Here again, I was unable to foresee improvements in anti-aircraft artillery. Perhaps my experience as an artillery officer before the First World War did me a disservice. I conceived of artillery fire as an attack from one fixed location to another fixed location. I did not anticipate that anti-aircraft artillery would rapidly adapt to effectively fire against a target moving in three dimensions. As for the 'mistaken interwar years doctrine,' it was the responsibility of each nation to test its theory and doctrine in realistic scenarios to ensure that it was correct. Undoubtedly, I had a profound effect on the thinking of airmen during the interwar years, but they were responsible for their own doctrine, not I."

Douhet flashed me a proud smile and added, "I am more interested in today's airpower doctrine. It seems to me that the American Air Force is using stealth bombers to reinvigorate my axiom that 'the bomber will always get through.' It has been proven in war. I am disappointed because Hallion fails to give me credit for this return to my vision of airpower theory."

"Do you agree, General, with Dr Hallion's assertion that 'airpower rapidly achieved primacy over more traditional two-dimensional surface forms of warfare via direct attack?'"¹⁵

"Yes! Yes! Yes! I spent a year in prison for arguing this point to men who did not want to listen to reason!" Douhet pounded his fist on the arm of his chair. "As I have said before, the ability of airpower to strike directly at an enemy's vital centers is the very revolution that airpower has delivered. Until the First World War, military men generally agreed that the offensive form of warfare was superior. Reality, however, was quite different. Modern weapons ground armies to a halt, they dug in, and a stalemate resulted. I believe this is a permanent condition for surface warfare. I even went so far as to argue that 'every development or improvement in firearms favors the defensive.'¹⁶

Only airpower was free from the bonds of earth to conduct offensive operations. As I said in my book, 'Because of its independence of surface limitations and its superior speed—superior to any other known means of transportation—the airplane is the offensive weapon par excellence.'¹⁷ Unfortunately, the old school army officers in most nations failed to appreciate the freedom to maneuver that airpower provided. It was a solution to positional warfare. I irritated my superiors greatly when I insisted that airpower, acting as an independent force, can deliver victory without the clash of opposing armies and navies on the surface. What fools they were," he sneered. Douhet poured us another cognac.

"It was immediately clear to me," he said as he unbuttoned his stiff collar and opened the breast of his jacket, "that an Independent Air Force was required. If we had left airpower to the army and navy, it would certainly have been doomed to a support role. Airpower had to be free to seize command of the air and to conduct strategic attack against the enemy. Hallion emphasizes airpower's vital role in conducting strategic attack. He also agrees with me that airpower is inherently offensive. It can operate independently and delivers unique effects on the battlefield. As I said in my book, 'An air force should logically be accorded equal importance with the army and navy and bear the same relation to them as they now bear to each other.'¹⁸ Only foolish nations kept their airpower tied to their armies organizationally and doctrinally. You will notice that Hallion agrees with me on this point because he states, 'Germany's subordination of its air service in the First World War (and its air force in the Second) to the needs and perspectives of the German army, coupled with a failure in both wars to fully appreciate the offensive nature of air power led to its losing both air wars.'¹⁹ Once they had lost the air war their fate was sealed."

Douhet took a deep breath and let out a sigh. "Hallion has the luxury of writing in a time when independent air forces are a foregone conclusion. Men like Mitchell and I paid dearly to get separate air forces. Poor Mitchell did not live long enough to see it. I find it amusing and ironic that Trenchard did not want a separate service when Great Britain created the Royal Air Force and put him in charge. As for Italy, my very dear friend Benito Mussolini took aviation to heart and restored my good name on the road to an independent air force. I should tell you stories about Benito sometime."

"Yes, General, I would love to hear them. In your book you made the statement that 'aerial bombardment can certainly never hope to attain the accuracy of artillery fire; but this is an unimportant point because such accuracy is unnecessary.'²⁰ Dr. Hallion points out that precision munitions have become a revolution of sorts.²¹ In fact, precision technology has made aerial bombardment more accurate than artillery in recent years. Moreover, there is a demand for ever-increasing precision, as this technology becomes more common. Does this poke holes your theory?"

"No," he snapped, looking annoyed at the way I phrased the question. "It does not poke holes in my theory. On the contrary, it actually strengthens my argument about the primacy of the airplane as an offensive weapon. When I wrote my book I presumed that our bombs would either hit their target or be large enough to obtain the desired effect. I

receive criticism for over-estimating the effectiveness of aerial bombardment. In my day, such criticism might have been warranted. However, it seems to me that with the advent of nuclear weapons and precision munitions that reality is just now catching up with my theory. Hallion claims, 'The kinds of technological capabilities that we enjoy as a global air power provider attest to the breadth of [Douhet's] vision.'²² Hallion thinks the greatest strength of my theory is that I used a very visionary approach. He is correct. I had to be visionary because I was trying to promote an airpower program for my nation that would carry it into the future. Mitchell did the same thing in America. He, too, was persecuted for his effort."

"General, what part of Dr Hallion's article do you believe most supports your theory of airpower?"

The General was silent for a moment. He watched as he swirled the cognac in his snifter. He took a sip. Then he spoke. "Hallion best supports my theory of airpower when he asserts that, 'Control of the air was, is, and will remain, first and foremost, the most important of all air power missions.'²³ It is command of the air that makes it possible to conduct the types of strategic attacks from the air that can bring the enemy to accept our terms. Hallion states, 'With air superiority, all manner of military operations are possible. Without it, one is too busy fighting off an enemy air force to be able to undertake much of significance on the ground...'²⁴ This statement supports my contention that airpower further reduces the effectiveness of surface forces, both army and navy. I am very surprised that Hallion does not make a case for reducing the size of armies and navies in favor of giving more funding to airpower. I will forever believe that it is airpower that will win wars. Armies and navies should be relegated to smaller defensive and supporting roles. I suppose the bureaucrats and politicians are too frightened of the army and navy lobbies to make their air forces the dominant branches of their military establishment." Douhet tightened his jaw. "I had better watch my tongue. The last time I spoke out like that I spent a year in prison. Let's have another drink, shall we?"

We spent the rest of the evening finishing his cognac and telling war stories. We laughed until two o'clock in the morning. As I was leaving he presented me with a copy of his book, *The Command of the Air*. I made him autograph it before I left.

Notes

1. "Gathering of Owls" is a fictitious event similar to the "Gathering of Eagles." However, whereas the Gathering of Eagles brings together airpower doers, the Gathering of Owls brings together airpower theorists. In this case, Douhet is clearly the senior "owl" since his work predates the other prominent airpower theorists. Other owls include Billy Mitchell, Hugh Trenchard, John Slessor, and John Warden.

2. Giulio Douhet, *The Command of the Air*, trans Dino Ferrari, new imprint (Washington, D.C. Office of Air Force History, 1998), iii.
3. Douhet, iii.
4. Richard P. Hallion, "Air Power Past, Present, and Future" from *Airpower Confronts an Unstable World*. 3
5. Douhet, 28.
6. Hallion, 3-4.
7. Hallion, 3.
8. Hallion, 6.
9. Hallion, 7.
10. Hallion, 10.
11. Hallion, 10.
12. Hallion, 6.
13. Douhet, 55.
14. Douhet, 9.
15. Hallion, 6.
16. Douhet, 11.
17. Douhet, 15.
18. Douhet, 5.
19. Hallion, 10.
20. Douhet, 19.
21. Hallion, 9.
22. Douhet, iii.
23. Hallion, 7.
24. Hallion, 6.

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