

Anybody who still persists in believing that history does not repeat itself simply has not read enough of it, or thought remotely laterally about what they have just read, believes Francis Tusa, the editor of Defence Analysis.

At a time when all three of the Services in the UK are gearing up for SDSR 2015, and when industry is watching the process apprehensively, it is fascinating to read about a time when at least some of the UK Services not only fought wars (and rather successfully), but also managed to do so with a very strong partnership with industry.

The Service in question in particular was Anti-Aircraft Command in the Second World War, a command which, whilst technically in the Royal Artillery, was commanded from 1939-1945 by General Sir Frederick ("Tim") Pile (a Royal Tank Regiment officer), and came directly under command of RAF Fighter Command. To put it into perspective, Anti-Aircraft Command numbered over 250,000 personnel, manning an array of fixed and more mobile heavy artillery sites. It reached its zenith in 1944 when, in an astonishing display of operational mobility, a massive and near-overnight redeployment created an entirely new anti-aircraft gun belt along the English coast to counter the new threat from V-1 flying bombs - no mean feat when one looks at what was involved with this...

But what, to this reviewer, makes Anti Aircraft Command so interesting (apart, naturally, from the truly astonishing degree of "Purpleness" in its command structure, as well as Gen Pile's remarkable longevity in command) was the attitude of the senior leadership of Anti-Aircraft Command to the development of new weapons and systems.

A lot of work throughout the War focused on increasing rates of fire, effective altitudes for weapons, targeting, communications and lethality. To anyone that regards "ack-ack", certainly in a UK context, as something of a Cinderella, they need look no further than complete weapon systems such as the wonderfully-named Green Mace, an auto-loading 4" gun, with a rate of fire of fire of 96rpm, or the Ripfire and Autofire airfield defence rocket systems.

But what makes the Command so fascinating from an industrial point of view is precisely how General Pile managed such technological development, and especially in a wartime environment when his Command was always competing fiercely (for funding, engineering assets and manufacturing capacity) against other Services, and weapon programmes.

General Pile's memoirs are clear:

"I doubt if there has been a Command in war which had so much influence on the type of equipment it was eventually armed with. The producers [= industry] heard once a month, without fail, what we required and why. I am in no doubt that a similar committee on which would have sat, if not the Commander in Chief in the field, anyway his deputy, would have resulted in far better tanks and anti-tank guns that we possessed, even at the Armistice"

[Note: taking that last point, at the time of the Armistice in may 1945, the 17 Pounder was -finally - the main anti-tank gun, and the prototypes of the A41 Centurion tank had literally just been delivered]

Compare General Pile's comments with those of General Martel, a very senior armoured officer, bemoaning the abolition in September 1942 of HQ Royal Armoured Corps, and the direct effect that this had on subsequent British tank development:

"When you do away with the head, you cannot expect... things to be thought out and directed properly"

It might be a little simplistic, but it is not incorrect to say that, until very late in the War, British armoured formations succeeded despite their equipment. But Anti-Aircraft Command met increasingly stringent (political) demands that it defeat almost all intruding German bombers and unconventional weapons.

70 years on, look at the Royal Navy, with a series of tightly-drafted Terms of Business Agreements with its suppliers of surface ships, submarines, and support. Its relationship with BAE Systems, Babcock and Rolls-Royce are intimate but professional, and it has a coherent vision for the shape of the Navy, and the ships and boats that will comprise it, not just for the next 5 years but even the next 35 years. Then turn to the Army, whose entire defence industrial strategy seems to have been to shout "We are at War", and order something from everyone under UOR. And it then wonders why, post-Afghanistan, it lacks a single viable armoured vehicle programme. Which of these two Services has taken the time to talk at the highest level, even if not, like General Pile, monthly, to its most important suppliers?

References:

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