Introduction

This book appears to spring from the growing interest in ‘battlefield’ archaeology, and the author’s own interest in the 1939-45 air war and his subsequent involvement with two Channel 4 ‘Time Team’ episodes examining crash sites. It introduces the subject area, outlining its potential and practical implementation from an archaeological perspective, and presents the results within a wider debate regarding the dichotomy between history and archaeology; highlighting the advantages and disadvantages of each evidential strand, and how they can be used to compliment one another.

The Text

*Battles Over Britain: The Archaeology of the Air War* is illustrated not only with numerous examples from the Battle of Britain itself (July-October 1940), but also from the ill-fated British Expeditionary Force of May-June 1940 (culminating with the evacuation from Dunkerque), the Blitz (September 1940-May 1941) and also the Allied bombing offensive against Germany (principally from 1942, involving RAF Bomber Command and the United States 8th and 9th Air Forces). The majority of crash sites and other physical remains discussed are located in southern England, East Anglia (where the USAF bombers were based) and northern France. Also, archaeological examples of the air war from Germany and other theatres are not considered, for instance the Dresden ‘firestorm’ has left a readily identifiable archaeological horizon, which resulted from the massive RAF bombing raid of 13th February 1945.

The book is organised into seven chapters. The first three chapters (*Myth, The historical background and The aircraft*) ‘set the scene’. Chapter 1 outlines how the current popular conception of the Battle of Britain has been created and fostered. This is achieved by considering the available documentary record, wartime propaganda, contemporary books (such as *The Last Enemy* by Richard Hillary, published in 1942) and official Ministry of Defence records. Also utilised are the popular imagery of the aircraft (particularly the Vickers-Supermarine Spitfire), personal testimonials (a finite resource, as the participants’ generation reach old age) and the curatorial decisions regarding what and how salvaged remains are exhibited. An additional section entitled *Rituals in the air* is also included, which regards the idiosyncrasies of the aircrew [Footnote 1]. Highlighting the ‘human dimension’ of the air war appears to have been the rationale behind these chapters.

In contrast, the following two chapters aim to provide the necessary factual framework for those unfamiliar with this period of history, i.e. archaeologists with no previous knowledge of the air war of the Second World War. Chapter 2, *The historical background*, outlines the development of the military ideology and philosophy behind strategic bombing in the 1920-30’s (strangely the role of single-seat fighters as bomber interceptors was an afterthought), the chronology and minutiae of the Phoney War, the Battle of Britain and the beginning of the Blitz, the mood of the British populace and the defensive measures that were put in place.

Chapter 3 *The aircraft* charts the general evolution of aircraft design during the inter-war period from braced-framed wood and canvas biplanes to all-metal stressed-skin monocoque monoplanes. This process was enabled by advances in metallurgy (mass production of aluminium and other lightweight alloys) and the departure from technically simple air-cooled radial engines to vastly more
powerful liquid-cooled inline supercharged engines, as the preferred design of power-plant. The developmental histories of the Hawker Hurricane and Vickers-Supermarine Spitfire are considered in detail, as case studies, to illustrate British aircraft design, German aircraft design is considered more generally, as it essentially pursued the same philosophy (with the exception that Germany was severely hampered by restrictions imposed after the First World War, which meant most military aircraft designed in the 1930’s masqueraded as civilian specifications). Extant examples are considered, alongside the recovery policy towards downed aircraft at the time, to demonstrate the scarcity of the resource-base.

Although 

Battles over Britain is predominantly concerned with the aircraft and their crash sites all the physical remains from the air war of the Second World War which survive to the present are discussed. Airfields (Chapter 5) that survive to this day are relatively few in number, especially the rather makeshift grass fields of RAF Fighter Command dating to 1940, partly because of the subsequent demands of development in southern England (a few still operate as airfields, such as Manston and Duxford). More likely to survive, to some degree, are the slightly later and much larger purpose built (with concrete runways) American bomber bases of East Anglia. However in most instances the runways have been returned to agricultural use. Air raid shelters, bomb damaged buildings (especially pertinent to archaeologists working in large urban conurbations) and more infrequently defensive sites, such as the concrete footings of anti-aircraft batteries, barrage balloons, listening posts and radar stations, are all considered (incorporated into Chapter 6 The Blitz).

The crux of the book is not reached until 

Excavating the air war (Chapter 4). This chapter commences with a justification for the excavation of crash sites, and poses the rhetorical question (paraphrased here) of ‘why excavate a well documented event when the date, location, sequence of events, and the identity of the aircrew and aircraft are already known?’. This is juxtaposed with the wider criticism often applied to archaeology of ‘why excavate more Neolithic axes or Roman pottery?’ (De la Bédoyère’s example) - a question we have all faced as archaeologists from the lay-public, and one that also requires an inner reconciliation and justification. Ultimately, the known ‘facts’ are always incomplete or inaccurate, and further research enlarges the dataset, enabling re-interpretation and the development of new perspectives.

Of interest to the archaeologist is how an aircraft crash site can be treated as an archaeological site and how it can be excavated in a methodical way, when in reality all it represents is a massive single event with no real stratigraphy (other than an irregular shaped hole full of wreckage and disturbed natural). De la Bédoyère, using the example of a Spitfire excavated in northern France by the ‘Time Team’, eloquently describes what happened to the airframe and engine when it hit the ground in excess of 500mph in a near-vertical dive. This reconstruction is based on fieldwork that amalgamated aspects of both traditional archaeological excavation and air-crash investigation.

As with all other physical remains incorporated into the archaeological record, aircraft are subject to differential preservation, partially due to the nature of the burial environment. This is also dependent on the materials used in their construction, for instance various components were manufactured from magnesium, which corrodes into a blue-coloured oxide in a short period of time. Therefore, crash sites are also finite resources, and have to be treated as such; the need to treat physical remains from the Second World War as an archaeological resource is becoming more widely recognised, for instance through the implementation of projects like The Defence of Britain Project databases maintained by the Archaeological Data Service.

Many crash sites constitute official war graves, as they still contain the remains of aircrew, and their excavation is subject to legislation (1986 Protection of Military Remains Act). The morality issue concerning exhumation is considerably heightened when the remains of Second World War aircrew are involved (for obvious reasons), and will consequently require careful and empathic consideration before excavation is embarked upon. It is actually illegal (without the relevant permission and licences from the Ministry of Defence, which are rarely issued) to excavate Second World War aircraft crash
sites and several groups have been prosecuted for doing so. Conversely in cases where human remains have been present, the relatives have usually supported exhumation, as it enables a proper burial. De la Bédoyère does not consider this aspect in a specific section (it would have been ideally suited to the Excavating the air war chapter), but interweaves it throughout the book.

Chapter 7, The effects of bombing, outlines how the Blitz affected the historic centres of many British cities, and how through post-war redevelopment archaeological research has been greatly facilitated (despite the obvious information loss through destruction). This is illustrated with numerous Romano-British and medieval examples, mostly from London and Coventry, and makes a special case study of London’s City churches, which were designed and re-built by Sir Christopher Wren after the Great Fire in 1666. Understanding the urban landscape of Britain has increasingly fallen within the realm of archaeology (with the advent of developer funding, technological innovations, such as GIS, and the greater attention given to standing building survey), so understanding how Second World War bomb damage has contributed to its evolution is essential.

When attempting to justify the treatment of World War Two aircraft and all their attendant elements as an archaeological resource, De la Bédoyère highlights the fact that the period is virtually out of living memory, and the documentation (through blatant propaganda and the ‘fog of war’) is often inaccurate [Footnote 2]. As a Romanist and numismatist, De la Bédoyère draws numerous analogies between the air war and chronological periods which are more usually the preserve of the archaeologist. This is in an effort to demonstrate the relevance and importance of the physical remains of the air war as an archaeological resource, and how the analysis of this epoch from an archaeological perspective can aid its interpretation. This is only partially successful, although not from any real failing on De la Bédoyère’s part. The treatment of Second World War aircraft as an archaeological resource may be validated from an ‘intellectual’ stance, but remains difficult to justify to the contemporary (sceptical?) majority.

De la Bédoyère has likened the current state of aviation archaeology to that of nineteenth century antiquarians, and this may have historically been the case with the advent of crash site excavations in the 1960s by small amateur groups. However increasingly such groups are refining their techniques and are keen to legitimise their activities. The British Aviation Archaeologist’s Council (BAAC) has even introduced a code of conduct for its members. Increasing professionalism seems to be reflecting a more general interest in ‘battlefield’ archaeology by not only legislative organisations (English Heritage is preparing an advice note entitled Military Aircraft Crash Sites: Archaeological Guidance on their Significance and Future Management - refer to Holyoak 2002), but also the general public (for instance the BBC’s ‘Two Men in a Trench’).

### Conclusion

Overall, De la Bédoyère has produced an articulate and informative book that manages to maintain a balance between providing an introduction to Second World War aviation for the lay-person and the archaeologist alike, whilst fairly successfully arguing and justifying aviation archaeology as a legitimate sub-discipline. The narrative is also well illustrated with a wide variety of examples, diagrams and photographs supporting the narrative. The appendices also contain useful information, such as further reading and contact addresses, for anyone wishing to discover more on the subject. Additionally, anyone interested in ‘battlefield’ archaeology could also refer to three other recent publications: Freeman & Pollard (2001), Holyoak (2002) and Saunders (2002).

### Footnotes

[1] For example, how would an archaeologist interpret a half-crown found amongst the personal affects of a Luftwaffe airman, which was recovered from the wreckage of his downed aircraft?
For instance, all airframes and engines had their own unique identification number, but the official documentation is often missing or incorrect (as paperwork was a minor consideration at the time). This was exasperated because it was not unusual for an airframe or engine to have a combat life measured in seconds.

Bibliography


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