



Spies In The Sky by Taylor Downing.

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Spies In The Sky, written by historian and tv documentary producer Taylor Dowling, tells the story of the development of photographic reconnaissance (PR) and photograhic interpretation (PI) in the U.K.during the Second World War. Using primary and secondary sources, the author describes how aerial intelligence, neglected and forgotten after WWI, evolved from small beginnings using civilian aircraft and pilots and a handful of photo interpreters (PIs) into a major operation involving thousands of servicemen and women. In a clear, readable and authoritative style he narrates the technical development of PR and the bravery of the pilots who

flew out of R.A.F.Benson, and the importance to the war effort of the ever-increasing resourcefulness, improvisation, intuition and expertise of the PIs at Medmenham.

Despite its title, the book's 17 chapters are devoted to the work on the ground at Medmenham of the CIU – the Central Interpretation Unit, later renamed Allied Central Interpretation Unit to reflect the employment of Americans, Poles, Norwegians, Canadians and others. A typical PR flight is described in the Prologue. In the 10-page Epilogue there are references to modern times – JARIC, SR-71 Blackbird, U-2, Canberra, Predator and Wyton for example – but the body of the book is concerned with WWII.

There were three phases of scrutiny of photographic prints, many of which were of very high quality in that pre-digital age. The third phase, in which the most detailed scrutiny took place, was carried out by sections specialising in, for example, shipping; airfields; aircraft (led by the famous Constance Babington Smith); decoys; camouflage. The photogrammetry section was able to measure with great accuracy, using slide rules, stereoscopes and other devices, small and large features both vertical – by correlating the time of day and the length of shadows – and horizontal.

From the early days a fundamental truth about aerial (or indeed any) intelligence was understood: that while the picture it showed was important, what change it showed was more important. Many a PR Spitfire or Mosquito sortie was repeated several times to discover what changes had occurred. The lengthening of a runway and additional fuel installations could indicate the impending entry into service of a new aircraft type. The rebuilding of a factory previously put out of action by Bomber Command could signify the resumption of armaments production there.

Benson and Medmenham played a major part in most operations in WWII, including those against the battleship *Bismarck* and the V-weapons and the planning for D-Day. Failures are highlighted as well as successes. Hitler's preparations just before Christmas 1944 for his final desperate but fruitless gamble in the west, an advance westward through the Ardennes to open up a path to Antwerp after splitting the American and British armies, went completely unnoticed, leading to the Battle of the Bulge. Bad weather had prevented any PR and the assembly of three German armies was carried out in total radio silence. "On most occasions", the author states, "[photo intelligence] succeeded because it worked alongside other forms of human or signals intelligence (HUMINT and SIGINT)". On this occasion none was available.

Despite occasional scepticism on the part of some senior officers and politicians; despite interdepartmental and even interservice rivalry, and frustrated as the PIs sometimes were by the need-to-know policy with which we are all familiar (only one senior officer at Medmenham had access to ULTRA information), the book shows that the PR squadrons and the men and women of Medmenham played a vital part in the outcome of the Second World War. An unnamed "leading U.S. reconnaissance officer" cited in the notes to chapter 17 claimed that "80% of all military intelligence in the Second World War came from aerial photography". Perhaps, at the time he made that assertion, the officer had no knowledge of our predecessors in the field and at Bletchley Park. If he was speaking just after the war he certainly would not have known about ULTRA.

Nothing, however, can detract from the statement made in the author's concluding sentence. "In the Second World War they" (the PIs of Medmenham) "were a vital ingredient in helping to bring victory to the Allied cause". We may add "as were the PR pilots".

This excellent book is thoroughly recommended to all RAFLings and their families. My copy came from the local library.

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Readers will be interested to know that while all the PIs at Medmenham were officers, their equivalents in the German organisation were all NCOs.