

# DON'T PUSH OFF JACK!

## Reasons for Present Difficulties in the R.A.F.

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WHAT a remarkably fine tradition the Royal Air Force achieved, in peace and war, within its short span of life! Lord Trenchard's dictum of quality rather than quantity may in truth be held to have saved civilization at the Battle of Britain (1940 A.D.). The present Chief of the Air Staff, Lord Tedder, treads the same straight path, more aware than anyone how awkward are the problems he is set.

To begin with, the Cabinet has decreed that the R.A.F. is to be our First Line of Defence, a lead swiftly followed by the State Department in Washington when they gave pride of place to the United States Air Corps. Thus the Royal Navy is no longer "our sure shield," a role it so brilliantly played until 1939. The honour, and the responsibility, of holding this island base secure against invasion by air and sea, now belongs primarily to the R.A.F., with a proper measure of priority for its more pressing needs.

Fortunately, the old days of inter-service ambitions and rivalries are dead. The fighting Services nowadays have become a trinity in which any one of them is master only in its own element, and a servant in the others. For all that, in martial operations, most of which are nowadays combined, balances have to be struck, which fact accounts for the pride of place now accorded the Air.

### A Lesson from the Past

Looking back through the years, when the Royal Navy had the same distinction, what did it do? It built up a wave of public opinion to support its policies; it hand-picked its officers and men from among the finest stock in the country; and it imposed an exemplary standard of discipline which stood it and the country in good stead.

Can the same be said about the Royal Air Force to-day? To begin with, how well is the R.A.F. case appreciated in the country? I venture the view that not one person in a hundred knows of the Cabinet decision; the Air Council has made it public it cannot secure the type of men it wants for as long as it wants them; and many among us have good cause to be concerned lest standards of discipline and ability should deteriorate for reasons outside the control of all ranks.

What are prime among those reasons?

First, the National Service man, fine and British though he may be, is of limited use to a highly technical Service in which fitters and radar mechanics take years to achieve the necessary high standard of skill and experience.

Secondly, the pay of officers and men is years out of step with the laws of demand and supply; and grossly inequitable when compared with the "rate for the job" of the highly organized and largely static Trade Unionist, with his family secure in a house at a low rent. It would be of interest to know how much he would demand for doing his job anywhere in the world; liable to be bombed, hanged, shot, burned, crippled, maligned, victimized, and generally hustled about; leaving his wife and family to fend for themselves as best they can at home.

Discipline? Without wishing to put a foot wrong, how can the officers to-day maintain the standards of yesterday? Whatever happens, we must not let R.A.F. stations become soviet rather than commands. Is this risk there?

The lone skilled sergeant or airman must not be allowed to become a god to his officer and he a "bod" to them. The barrack room lawyer type (ever the bugbear of all save those who could spot them with unswerving zeal) must not become a shop steward. Yet, it must be admitted, the threat of a letter to a Member of Parliament, unknown in the old days, has stayed the tongue of many a C.O., of many a sergeant.

In the good old days a wavering regiment was some-

times saved in war by the ever-unpleasant

gallantry of an officer who shot the first man to falter, lest all his men should be butchered by the enemy. On a lower plane, many a B.R.L. has been silenced for ever with punishment, to maintain the morale and discipline of the majority.

In these democratic days, is there too much talk of the rules of evidence and too little of personality, where authority is required to be respected?

When church parades were abolished, was that the yellow light, with every logical argument why men and women should not be paraded to church—save one? Yet how else can the padres as well help the commanders fashion their men and women for their duty to the community?

As a matter of fact, a young Squadron Commander once tried this theory out, in Khartoum, during a hot summer. Over-impressed by the ideal, he cancelled compulsory Church Parades in favour of the voluntary variety. The men were put on their honour. The following Sunday, out of a maximum church input of about a hundred, to his glee ninety appeared. A week later the number dropped to twenty. A fortnight later it was six, a figure around which it stayed until it was smartly popped up to a hundred again.

Theoretically and theologically, in this there isn't a leg to stand on. Practically, men and women soon accept the *status quo*, and, indeed, begin to develop a sense of pride in themselves, collectively and individually; while the padre has a chance to tell them all the God-fearing things which don't always become every officer or N.C.O.

After all, on this score of discipline, what is the object of a fighting Service? Surely it is to train a man conscientiously to do what he is told when he is told to do it, a purpose which applies even more to a highly technical Service, in which his contribution to the common cause is often unobserved, than to any other. Wherefore there is no need to pander him, nor to let him pander those for whom he is responsible in his turn.

Which raises again the recruiting aspect. All this talk of sitting-rooms and bedside lights, of pleasures and playthings, is that the way to obtain men for what some of us regard as the Finest Service in the Greatest Empire the World has ever known?

An alternative? Offer the young men of this country a life of adventure amid the rigours of the desert and the arctic wastes; promise them a tough life, with both responsibility and prospects, for those who work hard and play fair; and, when and if they unfortunately die, haul their honoured remains proudly to their last resting place, flags a-flying and bands playing, that all may know where rests a gallant British airman of His Majesty's Air Force. Let the approach be to those among our youth who can take it and pass it on, rather than to those for whom the tea bell tolls. What is more, for heaven's sake secure them as soon as they leave school.

These few words are all too inadequate to present the case in a world where argument no longer holds action. Some among us may justifiably hope we are not called to meet our Maker before the Royal Air Force, to which we once had the honour to belong, again rears its head in the air, confident in its strength. Ah! There is the nuance—confident in its strength.

Many good men and true may be forgiven their nostalgia, as they listen to the whispers of their old friends the gremlins—red, yellow, and, thank God, air force blue, with his plaintive:—

"Don't push off, Jack! I'm not on board!"  
*God Save the King.*

GREAT interest has been aroused by Sir Philip Joubert's articles on "Manning the R.A.F." (December 9th and 23rd). Here are the views of a Vice-President of the R.A.F. Association, expressed in his own particular style. The author commanded the R.A.F. Station at Blackpool during the war, where upwards of 40,000 airmen and airwomen were in residence.