

Est.
1841

YORK
ST JOHN
UNIVERSITY

Horwood, Ian and Price, Christopher
(2025) Strained Sinews of War: The Commonwealth and the Air
Campaign in the Korean War. *International History Review*.

Downloaded from: <https://ray.yorks.ac.uk/id/eprint/11707/>

The version presented here may differ from the published version or version of record. If
you intend to cite from the work you are advised to consult the publisher's version:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2025.2471798>

Research at York St John (RaY) is an institutional repository. It supports the principles of
open access by making the research outputs of the University available in digital form.
Copyright of the items stored in RaY reside with the authors and/or other copyright
owners. Users may access full text items free of charge, and may download a copy for
private study or non-commercial research. For further reuse terms, see licence terms
governing individual outputs. [Institutional Repository Policy Statement](#)

RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at ray@yorks.ac.uk



Strained Sinews of War: The Commonwealth and the Air Campaign in the Korean War

Ian Horwood & Christopher Price

To cite this article: Ian Horwood & Christopher Price (27 Feb 2025): Strained Sinews of War: The Commonwealth and the Air Campaign in the Korean War, The International History Review, DOI: [10.1080/07075332.2025.2471798](https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2025.2471798)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2025.2471798>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 27 Feb 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 43



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Strained Sinews of War: The Commonwealth and the Air Campaign in the Korean War

Ian Horwood and Christopher Price

School of Humanities, York St John University, York, UK

ABSTRACT

The Commonwealth air contribution to the UN campaign in Korea has received scant attention by comparison with that of the Commonwealth ground forces. Fundamentally unenthusiastic about participation in the Korean War Britain and its closest Commonwealth allies nevertheless saw it as necessary for the achievement of their collective objectives. We argue that their ability to do this was negatively impacted by the limitation of US financial aid after the Second World War and that the consequent damage to the military base of the Commonwealth actually worked against US interests in the Cold War. The Commonwealth air campaign in Korea is perhaps the first occasion when this damage became apparent. Commonwealth air and naval air units were available for early deployment to Korea and they were seen as an especial signifier of Commonwealth military-technical expertise. However, the developing military situation in Korea made the provision of ground forces inevitable, and the limited air assets committed by the Commonwealth, while contributing positively to the operational objectives of the United Nations Command also illustrated the weaknesses of Commonwealth airpower which flew in the face of the institution's self-image as a technological superpower particularly regarding military aviation technology.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 October 2024
Accepted 20 February 2025

KEYWORDS

SAAF; RAAF; carriers;
Mustang; Sabre; Meteor

Introduction

The Commonwealth air effort in Korea has received little consideration from historians as a discrete topic.¹ Reasons for this relative neglect are easy to find. The Commonwealth contribution, including that of the United Kingdom, was ultimately modest in comparison to the lavish commitment of resources by the United States as the principal Western power in the conflict. The Royal and Royal Canadian Air Forces did not commit units to the Korean Peninsula,² only pilots embedded in USAF and Australian units, and land-based air involvement relied upon single squadrons of the Royal Australian Air force (RAAF) and the South African Air Force (SAAF). The Royal Navy and Royal Australian Navies sustained a single light fleet carrier on station at any one time (though the support carrier HMS Unicorn sometimes raised this to a nominal total of two). The effort also failed to match the salience gained by the Commonwealth army units, which though also relatively small, achieved distinction in famous actions such as the battles of Kapyong and the Imjin River in 1951. The first of these battles is discussed in greater detail in Michael Kelly's article in this special edition. However, deeper analysis of the Commonwealth's

CONTACT Ian Horwood  i.horwood@yorksj.ac.uk

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

contribution in the air yields much of value to historians in the context of its time. The British, 'old' Commonwealth, and some decolonised states had serious aspirations for the Commonwealth as an independent economic military and political force in world affairs, objectively lesser than either superpower but too strong to be ignored in their fundamental calculations.³ There was little unanimity on the form that such a grouping might take as each Commonwealth member had its own ideas and contingencies which might require concerted Commonwealth action were likely to be unforeseen. It was certain, however, that if any agreed and independent Commonwealth policy was to be asserted in the diplomatic sphere it was likely to rely on the British ability to project force, which could be amplified by Commonwealth participation but not replaced. Re-emphasis of this perspective qualifies the assumed primacy of the 'special relationship' in all circumstances. The post-war dominance of the United States in the non-communist world was obvious and each Commonwealth state had to form the best relationship with Washington that it could, but what of contingencies, for example if the US was sympathetic to a Commonwealth imperative such as Malaya but not to the extent of committing resources, or as in Korea demanding a distinct military commitment sufficient to impress?

A third possibility was that the United States might be actively if inadvertently unhelpful. Such occasions were rare, but in the brief period immediately after the war when the Soviet Union was not yet firmly identified as an American adversary, the British experienced American economic and financial power as an existential threat, not just to their self-perception as a great power but also in the context of basic economic survival when Lend-Lease was suddenly withdrawn at the end of the war and powerful American constituencies and policy makers perceived the Empire and Commonwealth primarily as a trade competitor. Nor was the US Congress in the immediate post-war period any more willing to fund the building of Socialism in Britain than it was to sustain British Imperialism. These fears would fade over time, but we argue that in this brief period the limitation of US financial aid to a level just sufficient for the conversion of the British economy to peacetime normality but not to sustain Britain's 'military industrial complex' were of far-reaching importance, damaging the military base of the Commonwealth but in doing so actually working against later US and wider western interests in the Cold War. The Commonwealth air campaign in Korea is perhaps the first occasion when this damage became apparent, as the Commonwealth had to deploy not just manpower and World War Two equipment in a land campaign but also the high technology and expensive infrastructure of a modern air war.

Regardless of political issues the post-war Commonwealth in the sense of a collective was sustained in the short term by the need of its members to lean on each other. As late as 1950 the Commonwealth 'supplied 49% of Britain's imports and took 54% of its exports, figures which would have brought joy to Joseph Chamberlain half a century earlier.'⁴ These figures, however, represented the duration of the post-war economic crisis rather than the development of the Sterling Area into a form of permanent customs union. This was eventually understood in Washington, but the motives of the decolonised in accommodating this need were less clear to Americans. In 1951 an American Special Mission to the UK published its findings and stated that: 'There are many dark and unpleasant pages in the history of British Imperialism: in more than one country of the Sterling Area they are bitterly remembered. Why is it then that India, Pakistan and Ceylon, having finally attained complete independence from Britain, chose to remain in the Commonwealth and to maintain their membership in the Sterling Area?'⁵ They had no cogent answer but in the short term at least Commonwealth countries provided mutual support.

This was true of the 'old' Commonwealth of the white dominions but it had attractions for the 'new' Commonwealth too, though these states did 'not wish to overtly promote an organisation which reminded them of their former colonial status.'⁶ Nehru, the Prime Minister of newly independent India saw no continued British role in India's internal affairs but 'hoped to use the Commonwealth to counterbalance American dominance of the non-communist world, increase India's global standing and promote Asian issues and his message of non-alignment'⁷. Like the

old Commonwealth, India and Pakistan 'both realised that their shaky economies and precarious external security were inextricably connected to the Commonwealth'.⁸ These are themes explored in more detail in Robert Barnes' article in this special edition.

The messages provided by the Commonwealth air effort in Korea for the Commonwealth as a distinct force in world affairs when it needed to act as such are tantalisingly mixed. The contribution of carrier air power by the Royal and Royal Australian Navies was valued by the Americans in political and military terms beyond its scale, and in the early war the Fleet Air Arm's presence was also militarily important. On the other hand, the national exceptionalism represented by the SAAF in Korea reflected a worrying and ultimately crippling division in the concept of Commonwealth unity, while the provision of obsolescent Gloster Meteor jets to the more Commonwealth-minded Australians cast doubt on the idea that the British military-industrial base could sustain the Commonwealth as a military force, despite the British self-image as a technological superpower with a distinct edge in aviation.

Ultimately British power melted away as its economy drifted into relative decline and the post-World War Two Bretton Woods system, once it was functioning and trusted, removed the Sterling Area's *raison d'être* as a defensive trading bloc. Decolonisation also transformed the Commonwealth into a largely cooperative organisation for independent states with a non-political role. Nevertheless, the air war in Korea highlights more accurately than the land campaign a pivotal moment in this process, culminating in Suez, between the prior period of Commonwealth aspiration and its subsequent dissolution as a political and economic entity.

The road to 1950

When World War Two ended in 1945 there was a brief period of apparently realistic hope that the world could settle down to a lengthy period of peace based on the new UN and continuing political accommodation between the big three powers of the wartime 'grand alliance'. The US had clearly achieved its interwar ambition 'for the United States to displace Britain as the managing segment of the world economy'⁹ but both countries envisaged a liberal future based on international financial structures and the freest possible multilateral trade. The New 'Bretton Woods' system, would bring this about under US control but with British blessing and indeed the two powers had constructed the system together in the latter years of the war. Neither, however, in this climate anticipated a future need to rearm. When the Korean war arrived the sudden need to do so was difficult even for the United States to meet, but an almost insurmountable challenge for the United Kingdom.

The status of the British Empire and Commonwealth as a great power at the end of the Second World War was ambiguous. It sustained armed forces in the field only marginally smaller than those of the Soviet Union and the United States, with more than 11 million service personnel. It also seemed to have a firm productive base in the UK. Duncan-Hall's official history *North American Supply* noted, 80% of the equipment used by Commonwealth forces in the war was manufactured in the UK and Canada (70% and 10% respectively), while the US accounted for 17%.¹⁰ The key weakness of the Commonwealth, however, was that the British economy at its core had become utterly dependant on American aid during the war for general supply of all types beyond weaponry and thus the Commonwealth's immediate fate appeared to depend entirely on the policy position of the US Administration. There was a degree of complacency in London in this regard, however, given the closeness of the wartime alliance.

The British understood correctly that Lend-Lease would end with the war, but at Quebec in 1944 Churchill had agreed verbally with Roosevelt that the period between the defeat of Germany and that of Japan, 'Stage II' of Lend-Lease, supply was to reduce systematically ending with defeat of Japan which, though certain, was then expected to be protracted until the second half of 1947. This situation created a perverse incentive to delay victory: "The Japanese will not let us down" was a grim joke that went around the offices in Whitehall.¹¹ By this point the British

economy was expected to have adjusted to peace time viability. Japan's sudden collapse after the use of the atom bomb in August 1945 upset all calculations and planning for an orderly British transition to peace were shattered by the cessation of Lend-Lease supplies to the United Kingdom (though not immediately to the USSR) by president of the United States Harry Truman immediately after the formal Japanese surrender.

The unexpectedly swift end of Lend-Lease created a crisis of the first magnitude for the UK. Even before the war ended the great economist J.M. Keynes had warned the incoming Labour government of 'what might be described, without exaggeration ... as a financial Dunkirk'. This would mean 'sudden and humiliating withdrawal from our onerous commitments with great loss of prestige and acceptance for the time being of the position of a second-class power'¹². Under the Lend Lease programme the United States had provided military equipment, but also food and raw materials, to the UK free of charge with the question of payment deferred for post war settlement.

A condition of this supply of basic needs was that the UK would not re-export any Lend-Lease supplies or export equivalent British products. The result was that the UK could redirect resources to war production, which peaked at a staggering 55% of national income in 1943 (compared to a US peak of 40%), but that exports fell to 30% of pre-war level,¹³ a position which left Britain unable to purchase essential supplies of food and raw materials on the return of peace and which led to a real fear in the UK Treasury of immediate economic collapse. An anonymous economist writing in the Chatham House journal *The World Today* summarised the situation caused by Britain's 'extreme over-mobilization in the war' neatly: 'The Americans sent us the imports under Lend Lease so that it might not be essential to keep up the exports to pay for them. Instead, we exported fire and sword to the enemy. Now those exports of fire and sword are not needed; and the imports have to be paid for with peace-time goods – which we cannot make until we get our economy reconverted'.¹⁴ This task could only be completed with substantial US aid.

The British government considered that the US had an ethical obligation to provide support, given that the collapsed export capability that was UK's fundamental economic problem had been created artificially by the Lend-Lease agreement with the United States in pursuit of the common aim of defeating the enemy. Nevertheless: 'Suspensions about British imperialism, political and economic, made many Americans unsympathetic to British appeals for American help'.¹⁵ The war had transformed Britain, in Barnett's phrase into 'an American satellite warrior-state'.¹⁶ Unfortunately for the transatlantic military-industrial complex the USA in 1945 expected and undertook rapid disarmament and favoured a reversion to normal trade based on healthy competition in a world at peace.

The full consequences for the UK of this situation were averted by a hurriedly arranged loan of \$3.75 billion repayable over 50 years, secured from a sceptical US Administration and Congress at commercial rates of interest (2%)¹⁷ to cover the transition from US economic life support to economic and financial self-sufficiency. Lord Keynes, having negotiated the deal explained the American position in the House of Lords when it debated the Agreement in December 1945 which looked 'towards influencing the future and not towards pensioning the past' He asserted that the agreement 'would contribute to the well-being of our tired and jaded people'. Critically, however, he warned that it would not be 'becoming in us to respond by showing our medals, all of them, and pleading that the old veteran deserves better than that'.¹⁸

This advice was wise as the US congress was no more enthusiastic about the deal than the British parliament. Some polling suggested that up to 60% of respondents were against further transfers to the United Kingdom.¹⁹ The presence of Winston Churchill in the United States at this time as the one British national for whom admiration there was unreserved is considered by some to have helped in an unexpected way. He had in fact been deployed by the new prime minister of the United Kingdom, Clement Attlee, to sway American opinion in favour of the loan, but his visit is famous for the delivery of his 'Iron Curtain' speech at Fulton, Missouri. Keynes'

biographer argues that the ‘electrifying effect of Churchill’s speech ... shows what a fillip a Churchillian speech to congress in November 1945 might have given to the stagnant financial negotiation.’²⁰ There was no perceived need at this time for the United States to pay the United Kingdom to make weapons against Communism, but the dual impact of Churchill’s visit suggests that Britain might have missed such an outcome by a frustratingly narrow temporal margin, given the unforeseen imminence of Marshall aid to Europe and its associated Mutual Defence Assistance Act. Gannon argues that the Fulton speech gave Congressmen an anti-Soviet angle justifying support for the loan,²¹ which passed the House by the un-resounding margin of 64 votes.

Survival as a superpower

The American loan allowed an attempt at conversion to normal trade in distressing circumstances, even if the sum available was considerably less than the \$6 billion apparently promised by Roosevelt as Stage II Lend-Lease at Quebec, and the \$8 billion Keynes optimistically thought he could get before negotiations began, but it left the UK with little margin to sustain overseas commitments and its military strength was necessarily reduced. The effects were particularly marked in the high technology field of air power generation and its projection overseas, fundamental components of the contemporary definition of a superpower.

In 1945 the Royal Navy possessed fifty aircraft carriers of different types, a total reduced to four operational fleet carriers of World War Two vintage when the Korean War broke out. The large 1945 number was deceptive. 32 Escort carriers were vessels provided by the United States under Lend-Lease and were simply returned. Lend Lease naval aircraft presented a trickier issue as the Americans did not want them back and they would otherwise have to be purchased with Britain’s limited dollar reserves or destroyed. Ultimately, ‘the last option was the cheapest and thousands of aircraft were dumped into the sea off Australia, India, Ceylon, South Africa and in the waters around the United Kingdom.’²²

Less dramatic but more significant was the cancellation of ships under construction in British shipyards. Eighteen carriers were under construction in 1945 as the residual British commitment to the war against Japan envisaged an impressive Pacific naval force. Had the war continued to late 1945 and the invasion of Japan, the British Pacific Fleet would have been twice as large as that on VJ day, with ‘nine front-line carriers, four battleships, 450 carrier aircraft and hundreds of additional warships and auxiliaries’, a force much smaller than the US fleet but which would have ‘grown proportionately’ and become ‘large and powerful enough to engage in truly independent operations.’²³

The end of the war would inevitably have seen a considerable reduction in fleet size, but the effect was amplified by the economic crisis and initial hopes for a lasting peace. Attlee, who ‘was slower than Bevin to abandon hopes of reaching agreement with Russia within the UN framework’,²⁴ reverted to a version of the infamous pre-war ‘ten-year rule’ on a ‘5+5’ basis whereby there would be virtually no danger of war until 1950 and then gradually increasing danger over the next five years.²⁵ In this context he ‘told the Cabinet defence committee bluntly in January 1946 that, ‘It was not necessary in present circumstances to have a large fleet ready for instant action as there was nobody to fight.’²⁶ Twelve of the new carriers were cancelled, including all four of the large *Malta* class fleet carriers which would have been most capable of operating new jet aircraft. Of the four carriers operational when the Korean war began *Implacable* and *Theseus* were in home waters with *Implacable* earmarked as a development vessel for trials of prototype jet aircraft. *Glory* was stationed in the Mediterranean and *Triumph* alone was on station in the Far East. All British carriers at this time were equipped with piston-engine aircraft.

Land based air power was also weakened by the crisis. The British state was very conscious of the nation’s role as a pioneer of the jet age, along with Germany and some distance ahead of

the United States, which was gifted the early Whittle jet engine as part of the Tizard mission in 1940. In 1945 Britain was one of only three states which produced jet aircraft and remained in the forefront of jet engine development, but in view of the financial crisis, expectations of peace and what was perceived as a likely slow development of aircraft, the RAF and aircraft industry also found themselves bound by the revived 10-year rule.

The Government 'considered that no major war could be expected for a decade and that provision of completely new aircraft for the RAF and the Royal Navy would not be called for before 1957'. The aviation historian Derek Wood considered this to be 'a fatal error of judgment which was to cost Britain a complete generation of fighters and heavy bomber aircraft',²⁷ but in truth the economic crisis of 1945 made such outcomes unavoidable. There was also the fact that Britain had decided to secretly commit massive sums to the development of a British atomic bomb. Attlee had been in the US concurrently with Churchill in 1946 and had failed to secure US nuclear cooperation promised in the war. The MacMahon Act of 1946 ended all collaboration in nuclear technology with the United States' former allies. In the circumstances the Cabinet saw no alternative but to go it alone.

Despite the challenges of the post-1945 years however, the British state had by no means relinquished its self-image as a great power. Indeed, the term 'superpower' coined by the American IR theorist William T.R. Fox encompassed all three members of the wartime Grand Alliance.²⁸ In addition, Attlee's team of Labour cabinet ministers were not easily overawed. They had been a driving force of the wartime Coalition Government and had played a leading role in the management of the war and in dealing with its demands. They had no conception of the inevitability of national decline and viewed their task in terms of a predicament to overcome. Their overriding objective was the attainment of economic independence after which Britain's power base, it was hoped, could be reconstructed with the Commonwealth as its basis.

Paradoxically British material weakness eventually became something of a strength in dealing with the United States. As the Cold War took shape and despite its generally hostile attitude to British imperialism the cost imposed British retreats from Empire were actually reassuring for Americans suspecting the survival of Churchillian imperial attitudes. Thus 'the ending of empire was conceptualised and presented as a necessary modernisation' and the commonwealth as 'nothing less than a "world-wide experiment in nation building"'.²⁹ The United States assumed, surprisingly in the circumstances, that the British were capable of bearing numerous security burdens alone, including the defence of western Europe, the Mediterranean and the Far East. The withdrawal of British forces from Greece and Turkey in 1947, however, indicated that London was prepared to abandon costly commitments and drop them in Washington's lap, at least in part to stress the need for a full US contribution to European defence. This imperative was reinforced more positively by other Cold War crises. The British government, driven by Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, took a leading role in formulating the allied response to the Soviet blockade of Berlin and decided more quickly than the US that airlift was an appropriate response. The UK was also able to provide a significant component to the airlift over the year of its course and 1949 culminated in the realisation of another of Bevin's priorities, the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). By 1950 it also seemed that the British economy could function normally by itself and that economic independence had been restored.

Nevertheless, the economic and military challenges outside Europe testing Britain's status as a global power were emphasised by the burgeoning communist insurgency in Malaya, which became a threat of overriding importance. The American motor industry ran on Malayan rubber tyres and it was thus a vast dollar earner, without which operation of the Sterling Area would be impossible. As the enemy was communist, US approval of the counterinsurgency campaign was forthcoming, though not material support. Other Commonwealth states in the region were alarmed by the proximity of communism and demanded a strong British effort, in which they participated. Thus, a strong and ultimately successful Commonwealth military effort was the result, though one which strained British resources to the limit.

The overall lesson of such episodes was that British military support in Cold War scenarios was valuable to the United States but could not necessarily be relied upon if British interests were not directly threatened and US support was not forthcoming. Nevertheless, a strong British showing in Cold War crises was usually advisable and generally unavoidable where these overlapped with Commonwealth interests. By 1950, the US attitude had moved generally from fundamental hostility to the Commonwealth as a political and economic unit to one largely of indifference, but the political freedom of movement this provided was preferable to London even if the costs of the Cold War were irksome.

When the Korean War broke out in June 1950, therefore, there were many questions to weigh up. There was no direct British or Commonwealth interest at stake and given the Malayan emergency and other Cold War and colonial disputes yet another commitment was far from welcome. On the other hand, an American request for at least a token British military deployment was likely and the operation was also conducted under the auspices of the UN, which also promoted the advisability of involvement. Privately the British government was also concerned by the increasingly extreme manifestations of anti-communist rhetoric in the US and sometimes doubted the judgment of the US administration.

The Commonwealth contribution to the Korean War

Following their invasion of South Korea on 25 June 1950, the well-equipped forces of the Korean People's Army supported by more than one hundred Soviet supplied T-34-85 tanks and a potent air force of more than 150 piston-engine fighters and fighter-bombers swept south driving the outnumbered Republic of Korea Army – little more than a lightly armed gendarmerie with no armour or air force – before them. Having taken the decision to intervene the only immediate option before the United States was to try to hold the North Koreans up with air strikes mounted from Japan, then under US occupation following her defeat in the Second World War.

These efforts began on 29 June when aircraft of the United States Air Force attacked targets in Korea for the first time from bases in Japan. Commonwealth forces were soon involved in the campaign when F-51D fighter-bombers of 77 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force, then just completing a tour of occupation duty in Japan, struck targets in North Korea from their base at Iwakuni on 2 July.³⁰ Naval air power was not far behind when, on the following day, the first United Nations carrier air strikes of the war took place. Aircraft from Task-Force 77's carriers, the *USS Valley Forge* and *HMS Triumph* simultaneously attacked targets in North Korea. Twelve Seafire FR47 fighters and nine Firefly FR1 attack aircraft of 800 and 827 Naval Air Squadrons respectively attacked Haeju airfield and nearby railway bridges in North Korea with rockets and 500lb bombs. The attacks were deemed successful and all aircraft returned to *Triumph*.³¹ Thus, Commonwealth airpower was very rapidly out of the traps in Korea and *Triumph's* first raid ushered in a continuous Commonwealth naval air presence as part of Task Force 95 operating from the Yellow Sea off the West coast of Korea.

These early war Commonwealth actions suggested a greater willingness to join the conflict than was in fact the case. The British armed forces and those of regional Commonwealth states Australia and New Zealand were still deeply embroiled in the Malayan Emergency, which threatened the interests of each directly. Concerns about the expansion of monolithic Soviet communism played a less important role in Commonwealth thinking here than economic and regional defence as the Commonwealth states were not whole-hearted subscribers to the American policy of containment even though the Malayan insurgents were for the most part ethnically Chinese communists supported by the new Chinese communist state. Britain had even recognised the new communist People's Republic of China while fighting its Malayan clients. Nevertheless, given that Malaya contributed to a dawning American realisation that a strong Commonwealth dedicated to democratic values and possessed of powerful modern military capabilities represented a useful ally in the developing Cold War with the Soviet Union the British could reasonably argue

that it was doing its bit for the Cold War in the theatre and could not stretch to Korea as well. A token commitment of air power would have it uses, however.

Despite the dangers of strategic overstretch, Britain and its Commonwealth allies saw the ability to contribute meaningfully in Korea as desirable, especially in the important field of air power, in which the United Kingdom hoped to remain one of the world leaders. The United Kingdom was a technical pioneer of the jet age and was acutely conscious of the symbolic value of maintaining this position. As it transpired however, the Commonwealth was unable to deploy impressive new aircraft in Korea that might have upheld this image as post-war austerity had delayed both aircraft and aircraft carrier development programmes. It was, therefore, an irony of the conflict that one of the aerial stars of the war, the Soviet MiG-15 jet fighter was powered by the Klimov RD-45, a reverse-engineered version of the British Rolls Royce Nene engine, the most powerful jet engine available at the time. It is a testament to the gulf between British and American attitudes to the Soviet threat in the immediate post-war world that the Labour government of the time had sold several Nenes to the Soviets on the condition (guaranteed by Stalin's word of honour) that they would not use the engine for military purposes. The Nene, as the Pratt and Whitney J42, also powered the Grumman F-9F Panther naval jet fighter, which served in considerable numbers in Korea with the US Navy and Marine Corps while the Royal and Royal Australian Navy aircraft carriers off Korea were restricted to operating only piston-engine aircraft.

As a result of the Korean War emergency the British government accelerated production of new Nene-powered naval fighters, the Supermarine Attacker and the Hawker Sea Hawk, the latter of which enjoyed better performance than the Panther, but the Attacker arrived in operational service at a point when the intensity of the war was winding down and the Sea Hawk too late to have any impact on the war, and neither aircraft was deployed to Korea. In any case, British aircraft carriers needed refurbishment after the Second World War and had only a very limited capacity to operate jets or larger post-war propeller-driven aircraft. British light fleet carriers, conceived as throw-away carriers, with a three-year design life, to fill the gap between small escort and larger fleet carriers, were considered too small to operate post-war aircraft without modernisation, while the fleet aircraft carriers were inhibited by the low headroom in their below-deck hangars imposed by their armoured decks.³² Of the 18 aircraft carriers under construction in British ship yards at the end of the Second World War the British completed six. These were modernised to accommodate post-war aircraft, but this slowed their construction so that they were not available until the end of the Korean War.

In addition to Royal Navy carrier airpower and 77 Squadron RAAF's contribution to the UN air campaign in Korea the Australians were later joined by another land-based Commonwealth air unit: 2 Squadron South African Air Force in November 1950. A Wing of RAF Sunderland flying boats also operated from their base in Japan in support of UN naval forces. The last augmentation of Commonwealth air strength came when the Royal Australian Navy committed the aircraft carrier *HMAS Sydney*, which flew off its first missions of the war in October 1951.

Although similar in terms of the number of aircraft they contributed to the United Nations Command, the expression of naval power represented by the Commonwealth aircraft carriers of the Royal and Royal Australian Navies was potentially more imposing on American observers. The British had pioneered carrier air operations since the First World War, the Second World War had proven the aircraft carrier the most powerful of naval assets, supplanting the big-gun battleship and, post-Second World War, only the United States and Commonwealth countries operated aircraft carriers.³³ Certainly, the Americans appreciated Commonwealth naval airpower's early contribution to the UN air campaign and its consistent availability throughout the war.³⁴ While the provision of carrier air power was not the sole role of Commonwealth naval forces in the Korean War, the Commonwealth aircraft carriers represented the most powerful component of a force that approached 'and even exceeded for a time the size of the United States naval commitment' to the war and it was the only part of the Commonwealth contribution to the war which merited a separate major operational command: Task Force 95, commanded by a British admiral.³⁵

However, Commonwealth aircraft carriers were to prove disappointing expressions of Commonwealth technical and military expertise in some respects.

At the outbreak of the Korean War, the British were opposed to the commitment of scarce resources in an area that they believed was of only peripheral strategic significance but Attlee felt obliged to demonstrate Commonwealth resolve and solidarity and preserve Anglo-American relations.³⁶ British and Commonwealth hopes that the naval and air forces immediately committed would constitute both a significant and sufficient contribution to support American efforts in Korea, were to be disappointed by the deteriorating situation on the peninsula and a consequent request from the United States for ground forces.

Despite their reluctance, the British government decided that the political advantages likely to accrue from the dispatch of some land forces to Korea outweighed the disadvantages and the Cabinet agreed to dispatch a British brigade 'as soon as possible to operate in Korea under United States command.'³⁷ The British - and the Americans - hoped that this brigade would form part of a divisional size Commonwealth force, and the Americans were equally enthused by the multi-national flavour that a separate Commonwealth Division would bring to the US dominated UN Command. However, the process of bringing the Commonwealth contribution up to divisional size proved slow and difficult. Like the British, the Canadians, Australians and New Zealanders only reluctantly came round to the idea of committing ground forces, and the South Africans rejected the idea outright.

Under pressure from the United States to commit a promised infantry brigade two British infantry battalions from the Hong Kong garrison arrived in Korea on 29 August 1950.³⁸ These, along with an Australian battalion formed the 27th Commonwealth Brigade. A New Zealand artillery regiment would follow, as would the British 29th Infantry Brigade, but the British intended to keep only one of the two brigades in theatre, with the likely result that, even if a promised Canadian brigade was finally committed, both Commonwealth brigades would be under the operational command of American divisions, dramatically reducing the impact on the Americans of a distinct Commonwealth divisional command.³⁹ Thus negotiations continued between Britain and its old Commonwealth allies, plus India, to expand the Commonwealth ground forces. A battalion of the Canadian brigade became operational in February 1951 but the remaining two battalions did not become operational until May 1951. The First Commonwealth Division was finally constituted in mid-1951 under the command of British Maj. General A.J.H. Cassels. The division comprised the 29th British Infantry Brigade, the 25th Canadian Infantry Brigade and the 28th Commonwealth Infantry Brigade which had one Australian and two British infantry battalions and was commanded by a British officer until a second Australian battalion arrived in March 1952 when an Australian officer took command.⁴⁰ Neither land-based nor carrier-based Commonwealth air components would make an impression of similar status to that achieved by Commonwealth army units in Korea. They were, however, deployed with greater dispatch than the ground forces and represented a more capital intensive and technologically advanced commitment, particularly in the naval air component of the force.

Given that the UNC was effectively an American command, operational control of most Commonwealth formations, including the naval and air force elements, would naturally come under the United States. However, administrative control would come under the commander-in-chief of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF) in Japan, commanded by Australian General Horace Robertson. With the signing of a peace treaty with Japan, the BCOF became the British Commonwealth Force Korea (BCFK) which included Australian, British, Canadian, Indian and New Zealand units.⁴¹ This transition is covered in more detail in Simon Bytheway's article elsewhere in this special edition. However, some Commonwealth units and personnel served outside the BCFK remit, directly with US and other UN formations. This was true of the South African Air Force No. 2 Squadron, of which the South African government finally announced the commitment on 4 August 1950, and which served only directly within the American chain of command.⁴² Given the small size of the forces involved, there was little

operational justification for an independent Commonwealth air command in Korea, though when the commander of the US Far East Air Force (FEAF) US Air Force General George Stratemeyer did suggest the formation of a Commonwealth air wing the South Africans refused to participate in such a formation.⁴³

The South African government of prime minister D.F. Malan also hoped, with more success than the British government as it turned out, to confine its contribution to Korea to air power alone. Its reasons for participating in the war were at variance with those of the other Commonwealth participants. Like them it was at first reluctant to intervene at all but it came to see the advantage of demonstrating solidarity with the United States against international communism and Malan was also eager to divert international attention away from the implementation of the policy of apartheid from 1948 onwards, to which India was a vocal opponent. Apartheid legislation was particularly provocative to the Indian government given its effects on the significant Indian and Indian descended population in South Africa, and in this context the South African priorities in Korea worked powerfully against Commonwealth unity rather than in favour of it. This was perhaps exacerbated by the limits of South African exceptionalism. Rather than taking itself out of the organisation, which its behaviour might have suggested, the South African government wished to retain membership of the Sterling Area and maintain a British defence link. Malan also rejected in the short term the option of becoming a republic, so the British monarch remained Head of State.

The South African government concluded that the provision of a single SAAF squadron would be the minimum required to achieve its objectives in Korea without stimulating domestic criticism about a major land commitment like that which had occurred during the Second World War. Thus, the South African government was only interested in the operational objectives of the war to the extent that 2 Squadron could be seen to contribute to South African national objectives. No 2 Squadron SAAF was to make an impressive operational contribution to the UN campaign in Korea nonetheless. As the South African military historian Ian van der Waag has commented: 'If the Korean War ushered in a new era for the armed forces of the Commonwealth as a whole, it very much represented the close of a period of the history of the UDF [Union Defence Force]. It was the last time the Union was to act in concert with the Commonwealth defence structure.'⁴⁴

Commonwealth air and naval air forces flew a variety of tactical air missions in Korea, including close air support, armed reconnaissance, escort, interdiction and counter-air missions. Anti-aircraft fire could be intense, and this was the cause of most casualties among Commonwealth aircrew, but the air-to-air environment was relatively benign with the bulk of the North Korean air force being swept from the sky by preponderant US air power. Air-to-air encounters were, therefore, relatively rare. A dramatic exception was in the area on the north western border between North Korea and China that came to be known by the UNC as 'MiG Alley'. This was the scene of intense fighting as UN forces approached the Chinese border during the UN counter offensive in 1950 that took UN forces across the 38th parallel into North Korea. Chinese forces then intervened in the war and while they never received the air support that Mao Zedong requested from Stalin, they did deploy new jet MiG-15 fighters, often flown by Soviet pilots, flying across the border from their base complex in Antung Province (now Liaoning Province). The swept-wing MiG-15 came as a profound shock to the UNC, outclassing, as it did, all UN combat aircraft in theatre in air-to-air combat until the arrival of the American F-86 Sabre jet in December 1950.⁴⁵

Commonwealth land-based aircraft types

Both 77 Squadron RAAF and 2 Squadron SAAF were equipped with the American F-51 Mustang in Korea, the redesignated P-51 of Second World War fame. 77 Squadron had already operated

the type during its tour of occupation duty in Japan. 2 Squadron was effectively a new volunteer squadron constructed around an existing 2 Squadron core. Its pilots had flown a variety of aircraft in South Africa. Most had flown the P-51 during the Second World War and a majority had flown jet aircraft. Arriving in Japan in early November 1950 they acquired F-51s from the USAF and underwent a brief conversion course before commencing combat operations from bases in Korea later in the month.

Early UN land-based aircraft operations against the North Korean invaders were undertaken from established bases in Japan, and here the Australian F-51s, flying from their base at Iwakuni, had an advantage over the thirsty jets which now equipped USAF tactical squadrons. The American F-80 Shooting Star jet, which had been pressed into service as a ground attack aircraft, had insufficient range to operate for more than a few minutes over Korea from bases in Japan and it could not stage from bases in Korea because at the start of the war these were too austere for the delicate jets. The F-51, by contrast had much greater endurance, enabling them to operate effectively from bases in Japan. While it was considerably slower than the F-80 it was fast enough to compete on more than equal terms with North Korean fighter aircraft until the Chinese entered the war. Thus, the Australians had an operational advantage – though this would prove temporary – from their failure to adopt jet aircraft at the same pace as the Americans and as the only F-51 unit operational in theatre the Americans were keen to get the assistance of 77 Squadron. Later, Commonwealth tactical aircraft moved to bases in Korea to limit the range to their targets and here, again, the F-51 was found to be more tolerant of the makeshift conditions at these front-line bases than the F-80.⁴⁶

The F-51 proved a capable ground attack aircraft, the role for which it was mostly employed in Korea. Aside from its long range, it was highly manoeuvrable and capable of carrying a large weapons load of bombs, rockets and napalm canisters. Indeed, so well suited to the task at hand was the F-51 that the Americans began converting six squadrons of F-80s back to F-51s using the plentiful numbers of the type in storage. The F-51 did, however, have disadvantages, when compared to jets in the ground attack role. Its slightly slower speed meant that it suffered from longer exposure to anti-aircraft fire in the target zone than jet aircraft, its propeller disc reduced visibility from the cockpit and its cooling radiator was dangerously exposed on the underside of the aircraft to ground fire, and even small calibre hits could lead to engine seizure or fire.⁴⁷ Ground attack was a dangerous business under any circumstances but the F-51 was also, like other piston-engine aircraft in Korea, and also many UN jets, out-classed by the MiG-15 when it appeared in Korean skies. Consequently, both the Australians and the South Africans requested the re-equipment of their squadrons with modern jet aircraft.

The American answer to the MiG-15 was the swept-wing North American F-86 Sabre jet which would enjoy a favourable kill ratio compared to the MiG, even if the extent of this was overstated at the time. The Australian government hoped to replace its F-51s with these state-of-the-art aircraft, but in 1950 it was informed by General Stratemeier that all F-86s were committed to the USAF and there was not sufficient production capacity to supply RAAF or SAAF needs as well. He advised the Australians to look to the British for provision of suitable jet aircraft.⁴⁸

This proved to be a not entirely satisfactory arrangement. As we have seen, the British saw themselves as world leaders in aviation technology, and a steady stream of exotic experimental aircraft projects during the 1940s and 1950s reinforced this self-image. However, behind the façade of this 'empire of the clouds' the British military aviation industry was in fact atrophying because of a combination of economic difficulties and government policy.⁴⁹ The revived 10-year rule asserting that no entirely new aircraft were likely to be required by the RAF and Royal Navy until 1957, had a corrosive effect on the British aircraft industry. Thus, while the British Air Ministry continued to commission a number of experimental jet aircraft projects, these were not envisioned as prototypes for production aircraft.⁵⁰ Actual aircraft production also slowed so that the British military aviation industry was in a poor position to react to the demands suddenly thrust upon it by the war in Korea.⁵¹ When it came, the Korean War threw the British Air Ministry

and the RAF into a panic. A programme of urgent swept-wing jet aircraft development and construction was put in place by 1952, but British industry still struggled to meet the demand and the programme did not bear operational fruit until after the Korean War had ended. The Americans, by contrast had been developing jet fighter aircraft and introducing the designs into service in a steady incremental manner such that the Nene-powered Grumman Panther had been in service aboard American aircraft carriers and the F-86 had been in service with the USAF since 1949.

From early 1950, the Australians had been interested in building a design by the British Hawker aircraft company, the P1081, under licence as their next jet fighter. This was a swept-wing development of the Hawker Sea Hawk. Hawker built a single P1081 prototype, flying it for the first time on 18 June 1950, only days before the outbreak of the Korean War. The war accelerated the Australian requirement for modern jets, and the P1081 proved to have an impressive performance and would very likely have been a match for the MiG-15 if it could be developed and produced in time but by the end of the year the Australians were doubtful about 'the indefiniteness in relation to the local production of the Hawker P1081 fighter (for which latter project it is probable another type will have to be substituted...):'⁵² Indeed, another jet fighter was substituted: an F-86 variant powered by a British Rolls Royce Avon engine, built under licence by the Australian Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation, but this aircraft arrived too late for service in Korea. Deliveries of the British De Havilland Vampire jet to Australia were, in 1950, also experiencing delays so the Australians selected the Gloster Meteor as the only British jet fighter available for service in Korea within a reasonable timeframe. The Australian government, therefore, took the decision to purchase Meteor F8s to replace 77 Squadron's F-51Ds.⁵³

The P1081 programme came to a final end with the loss of the prototype on 3 April 1951, and the death of test pilot Squadron Leader T.S. Wade. The cause of the crash remains unknown, but, ironically, evidence from the crash investigation has led to some speculation that Wade was trying to duplicate the performance of the F-86, which he had recently flown in the United States, by trying to break the 'sound barrier' in a dive.⁵⁴ The P1081 affair sums up the inability of the British aircraft industry to provide cutting-edge technology aircraft to both its own and its Commonwealth partners' air forces in Korea. And, if true, Wade's effort to go supersonic in the P1081 underlines the point: Wade was trying to emulate the capabilities of an American jet already in service, in the sole example of a British jet never likely to see service.

Although an improvement on the F-51D, the Meteor, which entered service with 77 Squadron in April 1951, was to prove something of a disappointment for the RAAF in Korea. As the first jet fighter to enter service with the RAF, the Meteor had seen combat at the end of the Second World War. The Meteor F8s sold to the Australians had a higher performance than their Second World War forbears, but the aircraft did not prove the equivalent of the F-86 or indeed the P1081. A series of evaluation flights against an American F-86 suggested that the Meteor might be a capable adversary against the MiG-15, but these trials turned out to be misleading as at altitude the MiGs were far superior and a series of losses to MiGs by RAAF Meteors flying escort missions led to the withdrawal of 77 Squadron's Meteors from MiG Alley and their removal from the air-to-air role.⁵⁵

2 Squadron's conversion to more advanced jet aircraft was much slower than that for the RAAF's 77 Squadron and the South Africans were obliged to soldier on with their F-51s until the last months of the war. This generated something of a crisis in relations between the South African government and the United States as, from early 1951, the South Africans threatened to ground 2 Squadron if the USA did not soon re-equip it with jet aircraft. According to the South African ambassador to the United States, G.P. Jooste, the South African minister of defence Frans Erasmus had assured 2 Squadron that every effort would be made to replace their F-51s with jet aircraft, yet neither Britain nor the United States felt able to supply such aircraft before 1953. In October 1951, Jooste insisted to the US under-secretary of state James Webb that the United States must supply jet aircraft to 2 Squadron by the first quarter of 1952, or South Africa would

cease combat operations until the jets arrived. Webb told him that the South African squadron would be re-equipped at the same time as US squadrons still using the F-51 and he 'did not see how it could be possible to do more than this...'⁵⁶

Meanwhile, 2 Squadron's air crew were not even privy to the threat to withdraw their aircraft. Their commanders did not approve of the government's threat and kept the details from the squadron, nor did they believe withdrawal to be acceptable to 2 Squadron's pilots. 2 Squadron's Commanding Officer, Commandant Dick Clifton and Senior South African Air Liaison Officer with the USAF in Japan, Colonel Toby Moll, drafted a signal to SAAF HQ protesting the decision, which they believed was effective in reversing it, though the Americans believed that it was they who had been able to talk the South Africans out of this drastic step.

With the prospect of increased F-86 production, the USAF finally took the decision to convert all squadrons still flying the F-51, including 2 Squadron SAAF to the F-86.⁵⁷ On 27 December 1952, 2 Squadron flew its last missions with the F-51 and the 18th Fighter Bomber Wing began conversion to the new type.⁵⁸ This was completed in March 1953 with the first South African operational sortie with the new aircraft taking place on 22 January.⁵⁹ Returning to operations, the South Africans flew a series of escort missions before returning to the ground attack role, with much happier results than the Australians when they first converted to the British Meteor.

Commonwealth naval aircraft

The situation was perhaps even worse than that for land-based aircraft with regard to the production of naval aircraft for Commonwealth forces. At the end of the Second World War the Admiralty had rejected jet aircraft on aircraft carriers in favour of continued concentration on piston-engine aircraft. Two jet fighters did enter service in the early 1950s, the Supermarine Attacker and the Hawker Sea Hawk but their development followed the model described above and was very slow. The attacker was a very conservative adaptation of a piston engine design, originally intended for the RAF, which entered service with the Fleet Air Arm in August 1951 in limited numbers. It would have a short service life and was never deployed to Korea. The more capable Sea Hawk would not enter service until right at the end of the war.⁶⁰

The naval strike aircraft deployed to Korea were exclusively piston-engine types. Two of them were of Second World War vintage: the Supermarine Seafire fighter and the Fairey Firefly attack and anti-submarine aircraft, while the Hawker Sea Fury fighter was first flown in 1944 but did not enter Fleet Air Arm service until 1946. The United States Navy and Marine Corps also made extensive use of Second World War or just post Second World War piston engine aircraft such as the Vought F4U Corsair and the Douglas AD Skyraider, but as we have seen the US Navy also operated the Panther jet extensively and the AD was a far superior aircraft to its closest British equivalent in Korea, the Firefly. Five Royal Navy squadrons and one Royal Australian Navy Squadron operated the Firefly from British and Australian carriers during the War. The Seafire was a development of the Spitfire, first flown in 1936. The naval variant was first delivered to the fleet in 1942. 800 Naval Air Squadron operated this type of aircraft aboard *HMS Triumph* for a short period before the aircraft were withdrawn in favour of the more modern Sea Fury. An improvement on the Seafire, the Sea Fury was still outclassed by the MiG-15. Despite this, it has been credited as the first piston-engine fighter to shoot down a MiG-15 though this claim has been disputed.⁶¹ The Seafire and Firefly were hampered by limited range in the early Commonwealth naval air operations and were confined to combat air and anti-sub patrols over the fleet until the longer ranged Sea Fury and modified Firefly Mk5s were introduced.⁶²

Commonwealth carrier air power was well integrated between the Royal and Royal Australian Navies, facilitating the smooth alternation of British and Australian carriers in Task Force 95. Both British and Australian carriers had virtually identical air groups and the carriers of both nations were similar vessels. All four British carriers that flew strike missions in Korea were Colossus class light fleet carriers while the single Australian carrier *HMAS Sydney* was a *Majestic* class light fleet

carrier, a development of the Colossus class, acquired from Britain. *Sydney* was a new ship representing the introduction of carrier air power in the RAN for the first time and the British had been closely involved in the establishment of the new Australian Fleet Air Arm.

Coalition warfare and commonwealth air operations

Commonwealth air and naval air forces were successfully integrated into the UN (US) command. Commonwealth naval forces were already well-placed to do this as the Royal Navy's Far East Fleet, including *HMS Triumph* had engaged in a joint US-UK naval exercise in March 1950. They were, therefore, already conversant with US Navy practices and the Commonwealth carriers cooperated smoothly in combined Task Forces with US carriers off the coasts of Korea. While Commonwealth naval commanders chafed at what they saw as the excessive bureaucracy and formality of the US Navy and its practice of command afloat, and they sometimes questioned the strategy of the air war, they largely kept their reservations to themselves, and in truth had little power to influence that strategy in any case.

77 Squadron RAAF had, of course, already been a part of the US commanded occupation forces in Japan before its commitment to the war. Both it and 2 Squadron SAAF acted under US command in Korea and performed missions within the US tactical air control system established in Korea, often cooperating with American forward air controllers. This system took time to establish; on only the second day of 77 Squadron operations on 3 July 1950 a flight of eight of the squadron's aircraft attacked 'targets of opportunity' assigned by the USAF resulting in 'a catastrophic attack' on ROK troops between Osan and Suwon as a result the erroneous estimation of the presence of a North Korean convoy by the US Fifth Air Force operations officers.⁶³ This was an issue that affected all UN aircraft and not a function of coalition warfare. Over time the Americans improved their target identification procedures, introduced airborne controllers and perfected a Joint Operations Centre to coordinate UN air strikes.⁶⁴ While the Commonwealth land-based contribution to the UN air campaign was, of course, relatively small compared with that of the United States, the RAAF and SAAF squadrons secured excellent reputations with their American counterparts for professional quality and determination. Commonwealth naval air contributions to the UN air campaign were equally valued by the UNC. Though similar in size to those of the land-based squadrons in terms of the number of aircraft involved and technically inferior to US naval airpower, Commonwealth naval aviators offered capabilities to the UNC unmatched by any country other than the United States itself.

Conclusion

There was, in the early 1950s, a shared interest within much of the Commonwealth in its preservation as an economic and military power and as an alternative power centre to the USA of sufficient strength to influence US policy. Commonwealth states did not fully subscribe to containment doctrine and they did not see Korea as their particular responsibility. Given that their resources were stretched in Malaya and because of straightened economic circumstances there was, therefore, little fundamental enthusiasm in Britain and the Commonwealth to become involved in the Korean War. Nevertheless, Britain and its closest Commonwealth allies saw participation in Korea as necessary for the achievement of their collective objectives. For it to be effective, that contribution would need to be seen to be timely, operationally effective and visibly impactful in the eyes of the USA. Commonwealth air and naval air units were available for early deployment to Korea and they were seen as an especial signifier of Commonwealth military-technical expertise.

However, the developing military situation in Korea made the provision of ground forces inevitable, and the limited air assets committed by the Commonwealth, while contributing positively

to the operational objectives of the UNC also illustrated the weaknesses of Commonwealth air-power which flew in the face of the institution's self-image as a technological superpower particularly regarding military aviation technology.

The consequences of the post war financial crisis on British defence production can be discerned in this period. British contributions were most impressive in terms of technology and equipment that had existed or was entering service in 1945, for example the Nene jet engine and the visually impressive but obsolescent aircraft carriers. The general need for newer and more numerous British equipment was illustrated in the provision of funds by the US to the Danish and Netherlands governments to buy British Centurion tanks, new in 1945, under the Mutual Defence Assistance Act to alleviate a general shortage of US equipment for allies.

In general, Commonwealth air and naval air forces were well integrated with each other and performed effectively within the demands of coalition warfare alongside US and other allies. South Africa's independent and arm's length policy towards the Commonwealth represents something of an exception, but 2 Squadron SAAF made an effective contribution to UN operational objectives while fulfilling their own quite separate national objectives.

The Commonwealth air Campaign in Korea was revealing of the distance between aspiration and reality in 1950. There was certainly international demand for a third force in world affairs outside the superpower conflict and with a separate voice in the non-communist world. The Commonwealth provided the only realistic focus for such a grouping, though this ultimately proved unrealistic for reasons which were on display in Korea. The evidence is sufficiently ambiguous to suggest that this failure was not absolutely inevitable, however.

Notes

1. The air campaign has been covered in the context of individual contributors, for example in the British and Australian official histories of the war: Anthony Farrar-Hockley, *The British Part in the Korean War*, 2 vols. (London: HMSO, 1990, 1995); Robert O'Neill, *Australia in the Korean War, 1950-1953*, 2 vols. (Canberra, The Australian War Memorial and the Australian Government Publishing Service, 1991, 1995). In the South African case the national contribution to the war was exclusively aerial and is dealt with in great operational detail in Dermot M. Moore's D.Lit. thesis, 'The Role of the South African Air Force in the Korean War, 1950-1953' (University of South Africa, 1982), subsequently published as Dermot Moore and Peter Bagshawe, *South Africa's Flying Cheetahs in Korea* (Johannesburg: Ashanti Publishing, 1991). An analysis focused on the Commonwealth air campaign as a whole has not hitherto appeared.
2. The RAF did commit two units of World War Two era Sunderland flying boats, 88 and 209 squadrons, but they were based in Japan and flew air sea rescue and long-range reconnaissance missions.
3. See Francine McKenzie, *Redefining the Bonds of Commonwealth: The Politics of Preference* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2002).
4. Paul Kennedy, *The Realities Behind Diplomacy: Background Influences on British External Policy, 1865-1980* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1981), 335.
5. Economic Cooperation Administration Special Mission to the United Kingdom, *The Sterling Area: An American Analysis* (ECA: London, 1951), 14.
6. Robert Barnes, *The US the UN and the Korean War: Communism in the Far East and the American Struggle for hegemony in the Cold War* (London: I.B. Taurus 2014), 25.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Carl P. Parrini, *Heir to Empire: United States Economic Diplomacy 1916-1923* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 1969), 13.
10. H. Duncan-Hall, *History of the Second World War: United Kingdom Civil Series, War Production Series, North American Supply*, (London: HMSO, 1955), xii.
11. William C. Malallieu, *British Reconstruction and American Policy, 1945-1955* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1956), 22.
12. Lord Keynes, 'Our Overseas Financial Prospects', 13 August 1945. *Documents on British Policy Overseas Series I Vol. IV* (London: HMSO, 1986), 35-7.
13. M.M. Postan, *History of the Second World War: United Kingdom Civil Series: War Production*, (London: HMSO, 1952), 366-70.
14. A.N.O. 'Day of Reckoning: British Economy and the End of Lend-Lease' *The World Today*, i (1945), 190-1.

15. George C. Herring, 'The United States and British Bankruptcy, 1944-45: Responsibilities Deferred', *Political Science Quarterly*, lxxxvi (1971), 279.
16. Correlli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (Stroud: Allan Sutton, 1984), 592.
17. Allowing for periodic pauses in the schedule, the last payment was made by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, in December 2006.
18. UK Parliament *Hansard*, House of Lords, 138, Columns 782-4, 'Anglo-American Financial Arrangements', 18 December 1945.
19. Philip Gannon, 'The Special Relationship and the 1945 Anglo-American Loan', *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, xii (2014), 12.
20. Robert Skidelsky, *John Maynard Keynes: Fighting for Britain, 1937-1946* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 433.
21. Gannon, 'Special Relationship', 13.
22. David Hobbs, *The British Carrier Strike Fleet After 1945* (Barnsley: Seaforth Publishing, 2015), 10.
23. Brian Lane Herder, *British Pacific Fleet 1944-45: The Royal Navy in the Downfall of Japan* (Oxford: Osprey, 2023), 5.
24. David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the 20th Century, 2nd Edition* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 157.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*
27. Derek Wood, *Project Cancelled: A Searching Criticism of the Abandonment of Britain's Advanced Aircraft Projects*, (London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1975), 40.
28. Fox's book was entitled *The Superpowers: The United States, Britain and the Soviet Union – Their Responsibility for Peace* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1944).
29. Anne Deighton, 'Britain and the Cold War, 1945-1955', in Melvyn P. Leffler & Odd Arne Westad (eds.) *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 114.
30. Colin G. King, 'The Korean Episode, Historical Anecdotes, 77 Squadron RAAF In Korea 1950-1953' (unpublished book) chrome-extension://efaidnbmninnibpcapjcgclcfindmkaj/https://raafansw.org.au/docPDF/77SQN_KOREA_1950-53_COL_KING.pdf, accessed 20 Aug. 2024, 36-37, 42.
31. Hobbs, *British Carrier Strike Fleet*, 36.
32. These armoured decks provided excellent defence against Japanese kamikaze attacks in marked contrast to US carriers with their wooden decks, but the American ships proved more easily adaptable for the new aircraft.
33. Note that Britain had several carriers while Canada and Australia had one each.
34. Peter C. Hunt, *Coalition Warfare: Considerations for the Air Component Commander* (Montgomery, AL: Air University Press, 1998), 18.
35. O'Neill, *Australia in the Korean War*, Vol I, 224 and Vol II, 529.
36. CAB 128/18/1, 3 July 1950.
37. CAB 128/18/10, 25 July 1950.
38. Farrar-Hockley, *The British Part in the Korean War*, Vol I, 135.
39. Ian McGibbon, *New Zealand and the Korean War*, 2 vols. (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1992, 1996), Vol I, 97-101.
40. O'Neill, *Australia in the Korean War*, Vol I, 191-4, 208-9, 226-7.
41. McGibbon, *New Zealand and the Korean War*, Vol II, 310-12.
42. *Ibid.*, Vol II, 129, 191, 152.
43. *Ibid.*, Vol II, 315; Hunt, *Coalition Warfare*, 16-17.
44. Ian van der Waag quoted in Antonio Garcia, 'The South African Air Force in Korea: An Evaluation of 2 Squadron's First Combat Engagement, 19 November until 2 December 1950', *Historia*, lxxvi (2021), 23-47, 43.
45. Robert F. Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea, 1950-1953* (Washington D.C.: Office of Air Force History, United States Air Force, 1983), 219; 222-8.
46. Hunt, *Coalition Warfare*, 13-14.
47. Moore and Bagshawe, *South Africa's Flying Cheetahs*, xi, 63.
48. T. H. White, Agendum for Cabinet, 4 Dec. 1950, 2 [National Archives of Australia], A4639, 236, 32.
49. A story recounted in James Hamilton Paterson's popular book of the same name: *Empire of the Clouds: When Britain's Aircraft Ruled the World* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010).
50. Wood, *Project Cancelled*, 40.
51. Tony Butler, *British Secret Projects: Jet Fighters Since 1950* (Hinckley: Midland Publishing, 2000), 35.
52. White, Agendum for Cabinet, 4 Dec. 1950, 3, NAA, A4639, 236, 32.
53. *Ibid.*
54. Christopher Budgeon, *Hawker's Early Jets: Dawn of the Hunter* (Barnsley: Air World, 2021), 99-102, 108.
55. O'Neill, *Australia in the Korean War*, Vol II, 368-70.
56. *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), The Near East and Africa, 1951*, Vol V, Doc. 795, Memo of Conversation by Under Secretary of State (Webb) [Washington], 23 October 1951, 4579-82.
57. Moore and Bagshawe, *South Africa's Flying Cheetahs*, 141-142; Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea*, 498; *FRUS, 1952-54, Vol XI, Part 1*, Doc 543, Memo by Armistead M. Lee and Musedorah Thoreson of the Office of British Commonwealth and Northern European Affairs [Washington], 16 September 1952, Summary of Current United States-South African Problems, 3133-4.
58. Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea*, 638; Moore and Bagshawe, *South Africa's Flying Cheetahs*, 173.

59. Moore, 'The Role of the South African Air Force in the Korean War', 388, 394, 403; Moore and Bagshawe, *South Africa's Flying Cheetahs*, 179.
60. Wood, *Project Cancelled*, 42-3; Budgen, *Hawker's Early Jets*, 117.
61. Rowland White, 'Sea Fury - A New Perspective on a Famous Dogfight', Britain's Small Wars, https://britains-smallwars.com/campaigns/korea/page.php?art_url=seafurydogfight, accessed 20 August 2024.
62. Hunt, *Coalition Warfare*, 15.
63. Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea*, 86.
64. O'Neill, *Australia in the Korean War*, Vol II, 305; King, 'The Korean Episode', 42.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Ian Horwood is a Senior Lecturer at York St John University where he has taught History, American Studies and War Studies at both undergraduate and postgraduate level since 1994. He holds a PhD in history from the University of Leeds, an MA in history from the University of Missouri-Columbia, USA and a BA in politics and modern history from the University of Manchester. His principal areas of academic interest are in United States military history, airpower history, and the wars in Indochina. i.horwood@yorks.ac.uk

Christopher Price is an economic and international historian of the 20th century, whose PhD on the political economy of British pre-WW2 re-armament won the British International History Group's prize in 2000 and was published as *Britain America and Rearmament* with Palgrave-Macmillan in 2001. He is Senior Lecturer at York St John University where he has taught History American Studies and War Studies since 2011. He taught previously in the Department of Economics and Related Studies at the University of York and in the Department of History at the University of Liverpool. His main interests are political, economic and military history in the 20th century, especially British and US history in the period surrounding the Great Depression, the two World Wars and the Cold War. He received his MA and PhD in history from the University of York. c.price@yorks.ac.uk