

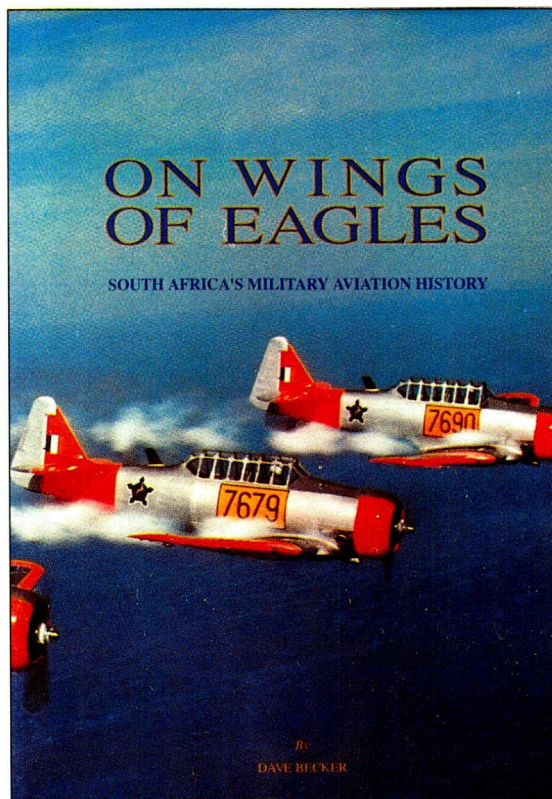
one does not always agree with the arguments presented in the book, however, they are always sound and well motivated which is more important than whether they may be appealing or not.

As far as the contents of Williams' book are concerned, the focus of the work would seem to fall largely on De Gaulle's rise to fame and power during the Second World War as the leader of the Free French. Illuminating aspects of his life during this period are brought to the fore, most notably his uneasy relationships with Winston Churchill and the other Allied leaders as well as within the upper echelons of his own Free French. Useful insight is also provided into the general's private life and reveals a side to the man which differs quite vastly from his authoritarian public image. This is not intended to imply that Williams does not cover De Gaulle's life in full as *The Last Great Frenchman* begins with his childhood in Brittany and ends with his death 1970.

The book itself is a hardback, ensconced in a very eye-catching and attractive dustcover. Complete with illustrations, index and extensive source notes this is not only a good read but a valuable and accurate reference work as well. A very wide range of sources were consulted including primary records from both official archives and private collections. What is unfortunately lacking are translations to the numerous and important bits of french which appear at frequent intervals throughout the work. This can be rather frustrating for someone whose French is as appalling as mine is, particularly if the reader is trying to follow the text as closely as possible.

In the final analysis what sets the book aside from other De Gaulle biographies is probably its emphasis on De Gaulle's military life and the rise of the Free French. It should be pointed out that while this might be considered a serious and detailed biography it is nevertheless, highly readable and provides an enriching and educational experience.

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ON WINGS OF EAGLES; SOUTH AFRICA'S MILITARY AVIATION HISTORY

Dave Becker
Walker-Ramus Trading Co
South Africa (Pty) Ltd, Durban : 1993
288 pages
illustrated

With this book, Major Dave Becker has addressed an important hiatus in the military aviation history of South Africa. *On Wings of Eagles* is the first all-inclusive history of the South African Air Force to be published since 1970, when the SAAF (mistakenly!) celebrated their golden jubilee.

The 1970 publication, *Per Aspera ad Astra*, was nonetheless a useful brochure and embodied the first attempt to present the entire history of the SAAF within one cover. It was, however, too superficial and far too 'commemorative', and, by 1994, had become hopelessly outdated.

Major Becker wrote the publication now under review to bridge that gap and has in part succeeded in doing so. It is, however, unfortunate that *On Wings of Eagles* has many shortcomings of its own and that while it will be welcomed by those devoted to the in and outs of aircraft, it will not be received with equal applause by historians.

Firstly, the writer might have devoted more space to the story of the people who flew the craft, the influence of the craft on the lives of the pilots and how the craft were used to influence the lives of others. After all, history has to do with human action and interaction. The recording of flying times, sortie tallies and aircraft specifications in isolation from the course of history, begets a rather sterile account.

Secondly, *On Wings of Eagles* does not give a strategic appreciation of the role of the South African Air Force in any one of the eras addressed by the chapters. Little or no discussion is made of the role played by the SAAF in South Africa's foreign policy, in rescue operations and humanitarian help. In short, issues which may be perceived to be less glamorous have generally been avoided or relegated to a few lines of text.

The chapter division follows a very traditional periodization. Unfortunately, the chapters titles used by many writers of history have become uninspired and predictable. While all are guilty, I think all also look forward to the demise of humdrum captions such as "World War I", "The Mediterranean Theatre", "The Korean War" and "The Sixties and Seventies". The choice of original (and inspired!) titles which still remain informative, is difficult. This is, however, something which most writers on South African military history need to re-consider.

Practically half of the chapters deal with the Second World War. This not only provides an imbalance but gives undue attention to an era which has already received an inordinate amount of attention. The Ambrose Brown trilogy more than adequately covered the SAAF during the Second World War and unless new material comes to light or a major new interpretation is offered, little more need be said.

While on this point, one may mention that it is a pity that the writer did not undertake more in-depth archival research. Much of the archival sources detailing the history of the South African Air Force from its humble origins as an Army directorate through to the recent past, have been left largely untapped. The question of the possible despatch of first a squadron and later on a wing, to the Middle East during the 1950s is not covered by the writer. The Anglo-South African defence agreements were undoubtedly one of the highlights of the immediate post-war era; the SAAF being an important instrument in South Africa's Cold War policy.

The 'Bibliography' is numbered with the chapters; and photographs, which would appear to

have been in excess, have been used to form another chapter.

On Wings of Eagles has been written for aircraft enthusiasts. It is packed full of photographic shots and will provide hours of light entertainment.

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