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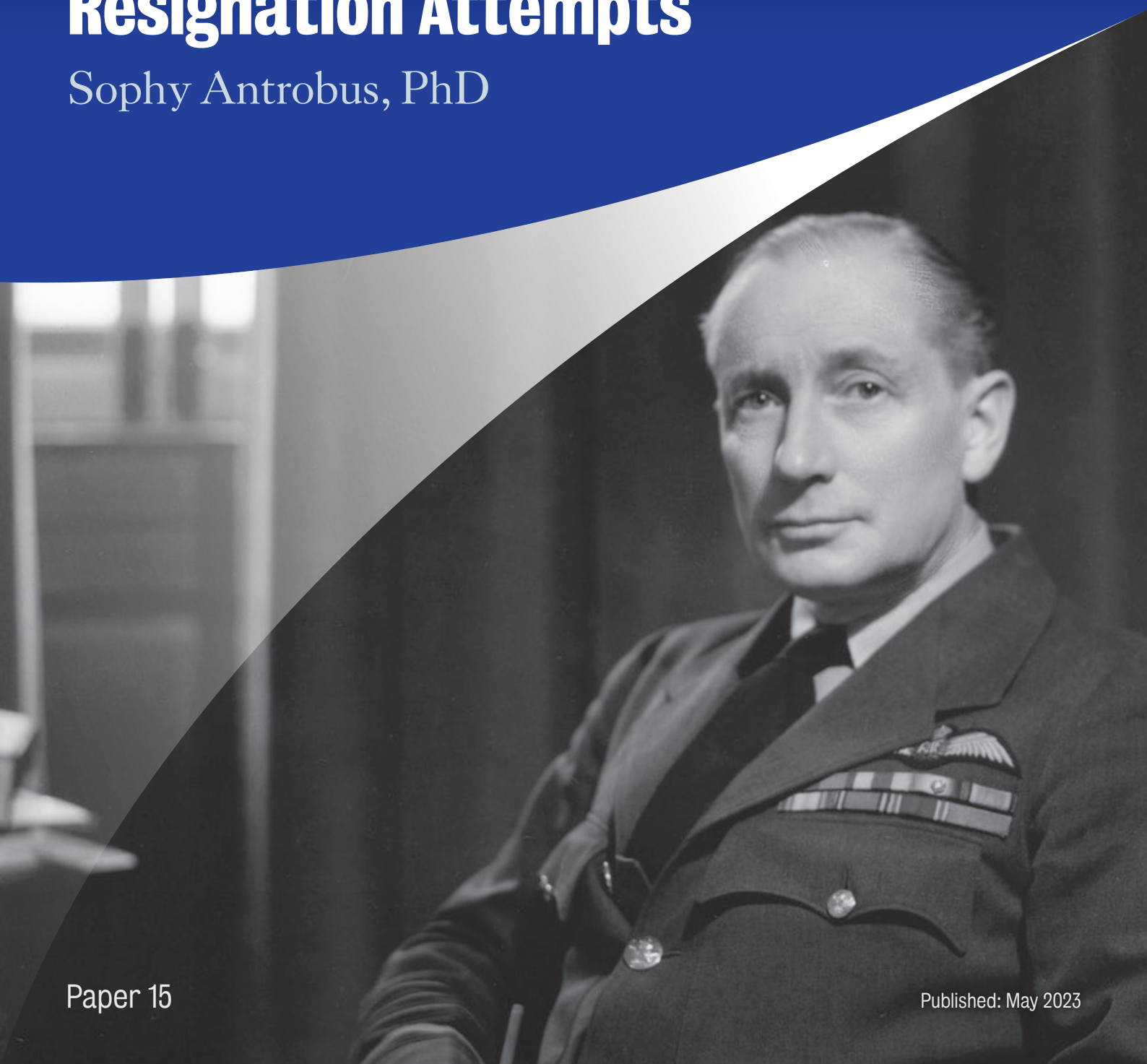

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About the Freeman Air and Space Institute

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The Institute is named after Air Chief Marshal Sir Wilfrid Freeman (1888–1953), who was crucially influential in British air capability development in the late 1930s and during the Second World War, making an important contribution to the Allied victory. He played a central role in the development of successful aircraft including the Spitfire, Lancaster and Mosquito, and in planning the wartime aircraft economy – the largest state-sponsored industrial venture in British history.

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Preface

The Freeman Air and Space Institute is named after Air Chief Marshal Sir Wilfrid Freeman (1888–1953), who was crucially influential in British air capability development in the late 1930s and during the Second World War, making an important contribution to the Allied victory. This paper marks the 70th anniversary of his death on 15 May.

After learning to fly in France in 1913, Sir Wilfrid joined the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) in time to be deployed with the first batch of British aircraft sent to France at the start of the First World War. He was awarded the Military Cross during the battle of Neuve Chapelle in 1915, making him one of the first RFC officers to be so honoured. In April 1918, he transferred to the Royal Air Force (RAF) upon its creation, where he was appointed the first Officer Commanding No. 2 (Training) Group. During the inter-war period, he would continue to rise rapidly through the ranks of the RAF.

In 1936, as rearmament ramped up, he joined the Air Council as air member for research and development responsible for procuring new aircraft. He thus played a central role in the development of many successful aircraft – including the Spitfire, Lancaster, and Mosquito –and in planning the wartime aircraft economy, which remains the largest statesponsored industrial venture in British history. He was also at the helm when many of the most significant aircraft of the Second World War were selected and, soon after his appointment, made the first order for the Spitfire.

He served under Lord Beaverbrook at the newly created Ministry of Aircraft Production, which was established by Winston Churchill when he became Prime Minister. The Minister and Freeman had a difficult working relationship as Beaverbrook railed against 'the bloody Air Marshals' and sullied relations with the Air Ministry; as a result the airman tried to resign twice.

Freeman was given his wish finally in November 1940, when he became Vice-Chief of the Air Staff at the Air Ministry. In this role, he made an enormous contribution to the war effort. Two notable examples include his role in the creation of the Pathfinder force and his unwavering support in the development of the US-built Merlin Mustang. As Chief Executive of the Ministry of Aircraft Production from October 1942 (having left the RAF) until his retirement at the end of the Second World War, he continued to encourage ongoing innovation including into the development of Britain's first jet fighter, the Gloster Meteor.

About the Author

Dr Sophy Antrobus researches contemporary air power in the context of the institutional, cultural and organisational barriers to innovation in modern air forces, in particular the Royal Air Force. She joined the Freeman Air and Space Institute from Portsmouth Business School at the University of Portsmouth where she was a Teaching Fellow in Strategic Studies. She completed her PhD at the University of Exeter in 2019. Her thesis researched the early politics of air power and networks in Whitehall in the inter-war years.

Prior to her PhD, Sophy served in the Royal Air Force for twenty years including in Iraq and Afghanistan and a tour with the Royal Navy. She is a Fellow and elected member of the Council of the Royal Aeronautical Society; she also chairs its Learned Society Board. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and co-founder of the Defence Research Network for postgraduate and early career researchers.

Acknowledgement

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Introduction

On 10 May 1940, Winston Churchill replaced Neville Chamberlain as Prime Minister, an event which would not only change the course of the Second World War, but also Wilfrid Freeman's work as Air Member for Development and Production (AMDP). Churchill was strongly critical of the rearmament process and lack of aircraft available in the early part of the war. Accordingly, he created a new Ministry of Aircraft Production (MAP), which Freeman and his team were transferred to from the Air Ministry.[1] The Prime Minister chose two of his long-time friends, Archibald Sinclair and Lord Beaverbrook, as Ministers of Air and Aircraft Production respectively. They may not have expected that they would all come into conflict within weeks.

Freeman had been appointed as AMDP in a 'sudden reshuffling of the Air Ministry ... as the result of the terrific rush of re-armament' in June 1938.[2] Air Vice-Marshal Arthur Tedder was appointed as his Director-General of Research and Development at his request; as Freeman put it 'I knew and trusted Tedder ... I didn't feel like taking on the job unless I could have him'.[3]

Both men would find working with their new minister a challenge, and the tale of Freeman's attempted resignations deserves reappraisal due to Dr Stephen J Marsh's PhD thesis, 'The Air Ministry and the Bomb Dropping Problem'.[4] This includes important research into an astonishing argument during which Beaverbrook swung behind Freeman in the face of attacks from Churchill, all due to disagreements over bombsights for aircraft. His work complements my research in the RAF Museum's archives and the Parliamentary Archives; combining both allows for a new appraisal of the two men's relationship over the tempestuous summer and autumn of 1940.

The Curious Story

The saga, in the context of Freeman's role, began before the MAP had been created, at The Bombsight Design Conference held on 22 December 1939. In attendance was Frederick Lindemann, a close friend of Churchill who had been on a crusade to promote the need for a stabilised bombsight since the First World War.[5] The bombsight was important as it dictated bombing tactics and affected bombing accuracy. For aircrew to use a bombsight to drop a bomb on a target more accurately, Lindemann strongly believed that bombsights needed to be stabilised to reduce errors induced by roll, direction of approach and pitch. In the aftermath of the December conference, he lobbied Tedder (who chaired the conference) as part of this campaign but was politely rebuffed. At this time, Lindemann was Churchill's head of the statistical section and acted as his personal scientific advisor at the Admiralty; his influence over Churchill continued on the latter's elevation to No 10 Downing Street.[6]

In early June, not long after this elevation, Churchill started an investigation into progress made after the conference and, in particular, 'the decision to urgently proceed with the stabilisation of automatic bombsights'. Churchill put it to Sinclair and then Beaverbrook, 'How is it that only one bombsight was converted? I should be very glad if you would look at the files, and ascertain who was responsible for stifling action.'[7] Churchill clearly wanted a scapegoat for the delay of the Stabilised Automatic Bombsight (SABS), triggered by Lindemann's lobbying, and directed his Personal Assistant, John Peck, to comb the relevant files for an answer. This first investigation took place between 30 June and 16 July and found the Director of Armament Development (Air Commodore J O Andrews) primarily responsible.[8]

Marsh details the communications following this finding which involved both Beaverbrook (who pointed out that the relevant activities had taken place before the creation of the MAP) and Sinclair (who roundly defended Andrews' role as 'peripheral').[9] On 10 August 1940, Churchill decided to set up an informal inquiry, to be led by a High Court Judge, a fascinating prioritisation of a continuing witch hunt in the middle of the Battle of Britain no less! Almost certainly coincidentally, on the same day, Freeman made his first attempt to escape from the MAP and from Beaverbrook.

Beaverbrook, who had been appointed by his long-time friend Churchill, invested his considerable energies in shaking up the aircraft production system. Opinions are still strongly divided on the effectiveness of his tactics, compared with the efforts of, for example, Cyril Newall, Chief of the Air Staff at the outbreak of war, and indeed Freeman.[10] Air Chief Marshal John Slessor talked about 'the inevitable dislocation of the Beaverbrook regime.' Meanwhile, Colonel John Moore Brabazon MP, who would replace Beaverbrook as Minister of Aircraft Production in 1941, recalled 'he [ran] the Ministry with a very high hand and very autocratically.'[11] Beaverbrook's leadership style and combative approach soured relations between him and his Air Marshal.

Beaverbrook had asked Freeman in August 1940 to comment on his proposed reorganisation of the MAP the previous week which included a virtual demotion of AMDP. Beaverbrook intended to remove the production responsibilities from Freeman, leaving him with research and development. Freeman responded:

> Four-and-a-half years ago Research and Development were my responsibility, but more than two years ago I was also given the additional responsibility of Production ... a small section ... was built up in two years to the present organisation and production became my main preoccupation.

He went on to point out that given the reduction of research and development activities with the outbreak of war, he felt that those responsibilities could be shouldered by Air Vice-Marshals Tedder and Hill. As a result he continued: 'I therefore formally ask that I may return to the Air Ministry for duty with the Royal Air Force.'[12] While Beaverbrook replied that he could move if a suitable post could be found, Freeman would remain as AMDP into the autumn.

Meanwhile, Churchill had written to the Lord Chancellor requesting the services of Mr Justice Singleton to carry out an inquiry on the bombsight issue, which was:

> To examine into the causes of delay in converting the 2,600 A.B.S. Mark II into a stabilized bombsight in accordance with the recommendation of the Conference on Bombsight Design held at the Royal Aircraft Establishment on December 22, 1939: and to report upon whom the responsibility for any avoidable delay rests.[13]

Before Singleton had initiated the inquiry (on 16 September), Freeman had again aired his frustration with Beaverbrook, this time in much more candid terms.

On 6 September, he wrote to Beaverbrook asking 'to go without any such condition' which had essentially required the availability of a post suitable to his 3-star rank at the Air Ministry. His reasons included a disagreement he had with the Minister over the creation of an Army Air Force. Beaverbrook, regularly petitioned by Brabazon on this issue, was clearly taken by his old friend's suggestions.[14] But Freeman strongly disagreed. He also expressed his disquiet at the 'quarrels which seem to take place incessantly' between the MAP and the Air Ministry, going on to write: 'I do not understand your policy of non-co-operation with the Air Ministry'. And he also laid out that, 'I disagree with you on so many other points of policy that it would be preferable, I believe, if someone who was more in line with your views, should hold this position now occupied by me.'[15]

Beaverbrook responded without accepting the proffered resignation and defended himself saying that 'relations are very good [between the Ministries] ... We get on quite happily'. He continued by claiming that on some occasions where there had been disagreements between the Ministries, he had been following Freeman's advice against his own judgment. He concluded: 'I must say that I think you have made as many difficulti[es] for me at the Air Ministry as I have made for myself.[16] The evidence from the archives shows a relationship at its nadir between the Minister and his Air Marshal.

Yet, less than two months later, Freeman was to get his wish and return to the Air Ministry, and the exchanges on this occasion between him and Beaverbrook could not have been more fulsome. In his letter of 4 November, on hearing he was to be posted back to the Air Ministry as Vice Chief of the Air Staff, Freeman wrote to his Minister:

> Had it been left with me I should have elected to continue to serve in your Ministry ...
>
> Your kindness to someone who must have appeared slow to understand and appreciate your methods I shall remember with gratitude. Nor shall I forget the energy, courage and decision with which you have tackled the difficult problem of aircraft production. Without the ever increasing flow of aircraft from the A.S.U.'s for which you have been entirely responsible, our pilots could never have won such resounding victories.
>
> It has been a great privilege and an abiding lesson to serve under you, and, if, at any future date I can serve you again in any capacity, I shall indeed be grateful for the opportunity.[17]

Beaverbrook's letter to Freeman on the same day was similarly gushing:

> I am so sorry that you are leaving us.
>
> This Ministry is being weakened by the departure of one who, more than any other man, gave the Royal Air Force the machines whose superior quality won the vital battles of this summer.
>
> To your vision, more than any other factor, we owe the victories that saved our country.
>
> And I, the Minister, have a sharp personal regret at losing a colleague whose gifts I have so many reasons to admire.
>
> To me, our association has been a very pleasant one. Looking back on it, I recognise that I must give you thanks for many things.
>
> For an immense technical knowledge placed freely at my disposal. For a wisdom and experience that lighted the way for me. For a patience and kindness that dealt gently with my defects.

> For all this I am more than grateful. And deep is my regret that I can no longer avail myself of talents so various and valuable nor enjoy a working companionship of so much charm.[18]

Although it may just be that these exchanges were so warm due to relief at their parting, the ongoing SABS saga offers evidence that leads to an argument here for a very different interpretation. It appears that Churchill's inquiry brought Beaverbrook and Freeman together in an unexpected turn of events over a short period of time that autumn.

Over the course of September and October, Singleton conducted his inquiry into SABS at the direction of Churchill, and on its first day he had his opening meeting with Freeman. Freeman 'made it clear that he was not prepared, within the context of an informal inquiry, to make any statement the content of which might affect another officer' and 'that the other serving RAF officers were likewise against the informal Inquiry'. He then provided 'a terse one page summary of the bombsight programme for Singleton' later that day.[19]

Marsh then records the contents of a letter Freeman wrote to Singleton the following day, which reveal Beaverbrook's support of his airman:

> At the time of the sinking of the Royal Oak in Scapa Flow the then 1st Lord of the Admiralty told the House of Commons that he did not intend to establish a judicial inquiry with a view to assigning blame to individuals because 'such a course would impose additional burdens upon those who are engaged in an intense and deadly struggle and, as many may well think, not wholly unsuccessful struggle'.
>
> I would only add that, acting I believe on the same principle, my Minister, Lord Beaverbrook, supports the attitude I am taking.[20]

Given just eleven days had elapsed since Freeman had outlined how he disagreed with Beaverbrook 'on so many points' and Beaverbrook had replied accusing Freeman of being the troublemaker, it is interesting that on this point of principle the Minister was prepared to stand by his Air Marshal. The evidence shows that Beaverbrook had not warned his friend, the Prime Minister, in advance that he was going to support Freeman in his stance.[21]

Churchill, riled by the defiance of both serving officers and Ministers, pulled out the ultimate card, a threat to set up a formal Inquiry,

> under the Act of Parliament passed in 1921 enabling Tribunals to set up with full power to take evidence on Oath, and send for persons and papers. I should regret this, as it will be necessary to state to Parliament the obstruction to the ascertainment of facts with which His Majesty's Government have found themselves confronted.[22]

Faced with such a threat, which Churchill sent to both Sinclair and Beaverbrook, both Ministries were forced to comply with Singleton's inquiry. This he completed on 15 October 1940, though the report he produced did not provide the scapegoat that Churchill (and by inference Lindemann) had so prized. Churchill decided to sit on the report rather than circulate it further. It was not until Beaverbrook intervened, two weeks after the decision on Freeman's departure, and wrote on 19 November, asking for the report, that this changed.

This timing is interesting given the evidence provided in the Parliamentary Archives, for it was also on 19 November that Tedder, still in post at the MAP, wrote to Beaverbrook about conversations initiated by the Minister about Tedder's attitude and demeanour. Tedder outlined an earlier conversation where he had revealed that he had thought Beaverbrook felt that for 'the past two or three months ... I was not in tune with you'. He then referenced a conversation on 18 November when he wrote:

> You told me you did not think that a man who was unhappy in his surroundings could give full value at his work. I asked you then whether the fact was that you wished to get rid of me. Your referred again to my being 'unhappy' ... [if] you wish me to leave your Ministry, that is a matter for you and you alone, and I will go without question to whatever post the Secretary of State may think fit to send me.[23]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Tedder wrote just six days' later to Sinclair at the Air Ministry that 'The present administration of the Ministry of Aircraft Production is based on force and fear and threats are the very essence of its direction'.[24]

When Churchill provided the Singleton report to Sinclair and Beaverbrook, the former responded positively but the latter replied, on 6 December, with the following indictment of Tedder specifically:

> The responsibility for delay in relation to the stabilised bombsight rests with the Secretary of State, the Chief of the Air Staff and their agent, Air Vice Marshall [*sic*] Tedder. The issue is not determined by neglect to produce. It depends entirely upon the failure to carry out an endurance test. Mr. Justice Singleton missed the point for the want of technical experience.[25]

Beaverbrook had also impugned the Head of the Air Ministry and the Chief of the Air Staff at the time (Kingsley Wood and Air Marshal Newell) and Marsh understandably asks why Tedder, but not Tedder's boss, Freeman, had been singled out for Beaverbrook's opprobrium. It is possible that their rapprochement, likely caused in part by Beaverbrook's stance in supporting Freeman when Singleton's inquiry was launched, explains this course of events.[26]

Conclusion

Marsh's investigation into the bombsight campaign of Lindemann, which appears to be the causal factor in Churchill's obsessive desire to find a suitable scapegoat for a perceived failing in the approach to SABS after the December 1939 Bombsight Design Conference sheds new light on the Freeman–Beaverbrook relationship. Of course, the SABS issue was important but finding a scapegoat was possibly less necessary or constructive at that time. There are multiple references to the difficulty the two men had with each other, born out by their coruscating exchange of letters in early September 1940. But then something shifted and until now the dots have not been fully joined.

It appears that Beaverbrook's snub in supporting Freeman over the SABS inquiry, without informing Churchill in advance, contributed to a transformation in their relationship. As any very senior officer will testify, a Minister going out on a limb on the side of their senior military representative instead of their Prime Minister (and close friend) is a highly unusual move. One can only surmise that this instilled Freeman with a renewed sense of respect in Beaverbrook. Their effusive exchanges on the occasion of Freeman's final release from the MAP in November 1940 read differently in the light of this analysis.

Freeman returned to the MAP in 1942 as a civilian and its Chief Executive. His relationship with his minister, John Llewellin, was very different.[27] As the *Daily Mail* reported: 'Freeman has been given virtually supreme control of MAP tho' Llewellin is still political head.'[28] Freeman remained in this post until his retirement in 1945, perhaps occasionally reflecting on the chaotic machinations of the summer and autumn of 1940.

Endnotes

1 Brian Brinkworth, 'On the Planning of British Aircraft Production for the Second World War and Reference to James Connolly', *Journal of Aeronautical History*, no. 2018/09 (2018): 270.
2 Charles G Grey, *A History of the Air Ministry* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1940), 280.
3 R Owen, Tedder, p. 115, quoted in H. Montgomery Hyde, *British Air Policy between the Wars 1918–1939* (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1976), 422.
4 Stephen J Marsh, 'The Air Ministry and the Bomb Dropping Problem: Bombsights, Scientists, and Techno-Military Invention, 1918–45' (Ph.D., King's College London, 2018).
5 In January 1918 he presented a report titled 'The Chief Causes of Error in Bomb Droppings from Aeroplanes', referenced in Marsh, 118.
6 https://www.oxforddnb.com/display/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-34533?rskey=UdzmCS&result=2 (accessed 4 May 2023).
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9 Ibid, 134.
10 Paul Beaver, *Spitfire People: The Men and Women Who Made the Spitfire the Aviation Icon*, 2015, 127–28.
11 Lord Brabazon, *The Brabazon Story* (London: W. Heinemann, 1956), 201; John Slessor, *The Central Blue: The Autobiography of Sir John Slessor, Marshal of the RAF*, First edition (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1957), 40.
12 Parliamentary Archives, BBK/D/171, Minute from Freeman to Beaverbrook, 10 August 1940.
13 Marsh, 'The Air Ministry and the Bomb Dropping Problem: Bombsights, Scientists, and Techno-Military Invention, 1918–45', 135.
14 RAF Museum, AC 71/3 MISC BOX 7, Correspondence with Beaverbrook 1940–1942.
15 Parliamentary Archives, BBK/D/171, Minute from Freeman to Beaverbrook, 6 September 1940.
16 Parliamentary Archives, BBK/D/171, Letter from Beaverbrook to Freeman, September 1940.
17 Parliamentary Archives, BBK/D/171, Letter from Freeman to Beaverbrook, 4 November 1940.
18 Parliamentary Archives, BBK/D/171, Letter from Beaverbrook to Freeman, 4 November 1940.
19 Marsh, 136.
20 Ibid, 137.
21 Ibid, 138.
22 Ibid, 138.
23 Parliamentary Archives, BBK/D/171, Letter from Tedder to Beaverbrook, 19 November 1940.
24 Vincent Orange, *Churchill and His Airmen* (London: Grub Street, 2013), 138.
25 Marsh, 139.
26 The argument has also been made that Freeman felt he should remain due to the importance of his work but hoped that this would be under a new minister which conflicts with this hypothesis, Anthony Furse, *Wilfrid Freeman: The Genius behind Allied Air Supremacy, 1939 - 1945* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2000), 155.
27 Though Llewellin moved on fairly soon after Freeman's arrival.
28 Parliamentary Archives, BBK/D/171, report of *Daily Mail*'s viewpoint, undated.

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