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Between Barons and Wolves

British and German Tactical Command in the First Air War, 1914-1918

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ABSTRACT

This thesis outlines the experience of tactical command in the British and German fighter aviation branches in the First World War. It is based on primary and secondary accounts, as well as modern leadership scholarship to guide the study of command. The study considers the assessment of an official historian of the American Expeditionary Force, William Sherman, that 'patrol leading became the most important factor in determining air supremacy' and that tactical command was the decisive factor in British dominance in fighter aviation in late 1918. It considers the qualities of success and the systems of command between the German and British air forces, and determines that they were orientated towards very different goals. It argues that the German system elevated expert pilots into command as part of a defensive aerial effort that created a specialised, elitist organisation, while the British undertook an offensive strategy that necessitated the growth of a large conventional force. While the systems of command were very different, some traits were shared amongst the successful commanders regardless of nationality. Neither system can be determined superior as they served different purposes in pursuit of different ends. The British prioritised strategy at the expense of tactics, while the Germans prioritised tactics at the expense of strategy. While the air war developed and expanded through 1915, 1916 and 1917, the Germans were able to use their more agile and efficient organisation to retain a level of competitive parity against the Allies, even as their forces were increasingly outnumbered. By 1918 the tides had dramatically shifted and the British had managed to improve the quality of their fighter force without compromising on their over-arching policy of expansion. It is concluded that while the standards of patrol leadership differed between the British and German air forces, neither was clearly superior and that tactical command was only one of many essential elements that determined the final balance of British superiority in the air.

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