

Interview with Colonel John Andreas Olsen

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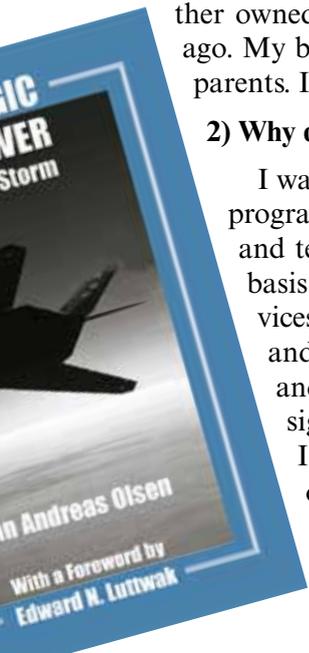
You have written and edited many books on air power, becoming one of the most important authorities in the area of air power studies. However, our readers do not know a lot about you. Could you tell us more – among other things, to provide background on your books?

1) To begin with, could you tell us a little about your upbringing?

I was born in Stokmarknes, Norway, a small town on the north-west coast, well north of the Arctic Circle. I spent most of my first eighteen years there, except for a three-year spell in Melbourne, Australia. I took an interest in schoolwork, especially mathematics, geography and history, and played football for the local team. My father is a watchmaker, and he and my mother owned a watch- and jewellery boutique until they retired some years ago. My brother and I had a very good upbringing with caring and loving parents. I could not have had a better childhood and youth.

2) Why did you decide to join the Air Force?

I was initially attracted to the Royal Norwegian Air Force's two-year programme that offered a combination of military leadership training and technical education. I thought the combination would be a good basis for whatever I decided to do next. Also, of the three military services, I thought the Air Force was the most technologically advanced, and I still believe that is the case. I was not interested in aircraft per se and decided to specialize as a radar technician. During my first assignment at Sørreisa radar station in Northern Norway, 1989-1992, I came to appreciate the opportunities that the Air Force had to offer, so I stayed.



3) You also had the opportunity to pursue academic studies, in part while you were already on active duty in the Air Force. Can you tell us about them?

I received a BA in electronic engineering from the technical college in Trondheim in 1994, an MA in Modern British Studies a year later from the University of Warwick and then a PhD in History and International Relations from De Montfort University. Although I enjoyed engineering – and have used its systematic flow-chart problem-solving methodology ever since – I discovered I was much more interested in strategic studies in general and warfare in particular. During my MA studies I decided to get back to England at the first opportunity to complete a PhD. After two years at the Air Force's Materiel Command, I signed up for a doctoral program.

4) Why did you decide to work on the Gulf War? A great deal had already been published and what happened in that conflict seemed quite clear. Also, the Balkan war was raging in Europe and strategists were talking more about CAS than about strategic bombing.

My MA thesis focused on UK involvement in the Gulf War of 1991, Operation Granby, and specifically on national politics and media, not on air operations per se. When I discussed the possibility of pursuing a PhD with my supervisor, and said I wanted to focus on the utility of air power in a recent campaign, he advised me to avoid centring my work on an ongoing conflict, such as the Balkans. This was good advice. When I applied for a PhD grant from the Royal Norwegian Air Force I made the case that air operations in the Gulf War of 1991 would offer valuable lessons that in turn would be relevant to teaching at the Royal Norwegian Air Force Academy. Early on in my research I became fascinated by the strategic air campaign and the ideas of Colonel John A. Warden, so I decided that my PhD thesis would focus on the strategic air campaign in Desert Storm and how it affected the Iraqi regime and Saddam Hussein's decision-making apparatus. I had access to the USAF officers who planned and executed the air offensive and to Iraqi generals who had defected to London during my period of study, 1997-2000. I also had the opportunity to meet the former chief of intelligence, General Wafiq Samarraï, and other senior Iraqi officers and officials who gave me unique insight into how the air campaign was viewed from 'the other side of the hill'. After I had completed my PhD I spent three years teaching at the Royal Norwegian Air Force Academy and turned the manuscript into my first book, *Strategic Air Power in Desert Storm*, published in 2003.

5) Since almost 20 years have gone by since the publication of the book, would you alter any of your conclusions?

I still believe that the strategic air campaign against the Iraqi regime was very effective, especially when combined with control of the air and the tactical air campaign against Iraqi tanks, artillery and troops, but it would have

been even more successful if the Coalition had possessed a better understanding of the inner workings of the Iraqi regime. John Warden's Five Rings Model and his effects-based approach, when adapted to the realities of any given war and based on insight into the opponent's political-social-economic-military constructs, can have an enormous impact. I believe this will be even more true in future wars than in the past, as situational awareness and precision technology continue to improve. A leadership-centric campaign requires a solid understanding of how the opponent's state and society function – a genuine net assessment. If such a campaign is based on an accurate analysis of the regime of interest, air assets can have a disproportionately greater effect when applied against the leadership, key nodes and high-value targets as opposed to a strictly battlefield-oriented approach.

6) Can you draw some generally applicable conclusions from the Gulf War, or were the conditions of that conflict unique?

It was the 'Perfect Storm' in many ways: the U.S. political and military leadership established and acted on clear and achievable objectives; the Iraqi leader was incompetent as a wartime commander; the U.S.-led Coalition forces were exceptionally well prepared and professional; the Joint Force Air Component Commander (JFACC) had all the air assets he could have hoped for; and he (General Charles A. Horner) was blessed with air planners who understood the strategic as well as the tactical application of airpower. In wars of the past, the commander had to manage shortages; in this one the Coalition enjoyed the management of riches. It also demonstrated for the first time that air power could be the leading element in a war, that a war strategy can be based on what air power can achieve, and that game-changing technology can be turned into a game-changing strategy when applied in conjunction with innovative thinking. The emphasis on systemic paralysis and strategic effects as opposed to traditional destruction and attrition made a difference by ensuring relentless pressure while avoiding unnecessary casualties and collateral damage. The air campaign also demonstrated an alternative to the then-standard AirLand Battle approach. Desert Storm remains the most successful air campaign in modern history.

7) You insist on the importance of pursuing systemic paralysis and strategic effects rather than just military attrition. The strategic level of war seems to be especially important for your work. You even edited a book on strategy with Colin Gray. Do you think strategy is the most misunderstood level of war in the Western military world today?

Most Western militaries understand the tactical and technological levels of war well. Military officers are masters of technology and innovative tactical manoeuvres. What's more, a large amount of literature on international relations, diplomatic art and statecraft gives scholars within that discipline insight into the political and grand strategic levels of war. So students of

warfare have adequate knowledge about the *ends* and the *means* of war, but less about the *ways*, because we do not sufficiently understand the strategic and operational levels of war. As a result we have a weak link in the ends-ways-means nexus, because very few focus on military strategy and the operational level. This is why I contacted Professor Martin van Creveld about collaborating on a book about the evolution of operational art and Professor Colin Gray on a book about the practice of strategy. The books were designed to help military officers and scholars better comprehend the strategic and operational levels of war. I learned a lot from working with these two professors.

8) How do you remember working with Colin Gray?

He was a superb scholar and he was in many ways the intellectual leader of our times on military strategy. He inspired others to think and write – and to think again! – whether they agreed or disagreed with him. He offered insights into the links between air power and strategy in what I consider one of the best books in the field, *Airpower for Strategic Effects*. He was great to work with – very honest, dedicated and always willing to help. He was an encyclopaedic source of knowledge about warfare, never short of an anecdote and he had a great sense of humour. It was a real pleasure to get the chance to work closely with him on the strategy book and I will be forever grateful for his chapter in *Airpower Reborn*, a book that focused on the strategic concepts of colonels John Warden and John Boyd. He had very strong views on the strengths and weaknesses of both men's ideas. I was very sad to hear that he passed away last year, after he had struggled with cancer for some time.

9) By the way, who are the authors, scholars or theorists who have influenced you most?

In general, I have been most influenced by the works of Basil Liddell Hart, J.F.C. Fuller, Michael Howard, John Keegan, Edward N. Luttwak, Martin van Creveld, Colin S. Gray, John R. Boyd and H.P. Willmott. In terms of air power thinking specifically, I would single out John A. Warden, David A. Deptula, Richard T. Reynolds, Charles A. Horner, Alan Stephens, Richard P. Hallion, Philip S. Meilinger, Benjamin S. Lambeth and Tony Mason.

10) How did your career progress? Are there any particular moments you especially like to remember?

I have tried to pursue a military and academic career simultaneously. I have been very lucky in my assignments and never had a bad one. I remember fondly my time as Dean of the Norwegian Defence University College and Head of Strategic Studies from 2006 to 2009, the following two-and-a-half years as Deputy Commander and Chief of the NATO Advisory Team at NATO HQ Sarajevo and my two years as Director in the Department of Security Policy in the Norwegian Ministry of Defence, 2014-2016. The time

in Bosnia and Herzegovina, when I was working on operational issues with a focus on defence and security sector reform, was very special. I had the opportunity to speak about NATO and BiH's road to joining the Euro-Atlantic partnership throughout the country and meet with the national leadership. We held seminars in every single municipality in Republika Srpska, as well as in the majority of municipalities in the Federation, but the most challenging aspect of course was finding ways to engage with the Bosnian Serbs on future NATO membership. Some of them were very confrontational and emotional, but I enjoyed these battles tremendously. My current assignment as Defence Attaché to the United Kingdom and Ireland offers a unique opportunity. My wife and I have enjoyed our time in London tremendously; it is our favourite city. It has been said that if you are tired of London you are tired of life. My favourite football team, Liverpool, has had some exceptionally good seasons lately which has added delight to living in a country that takes the Beautiful Game so seriously. On a more professional note, it is extraordinarily rewarding to work on improving bilateral relations between Norway and the United Kingdom and to operate in such a vast international diplomatic community. I will acknowledge that I have been very impressed with the French officers during my tour.

11) You have published a series of books on air power that were sponsored by the Swedish National Defence University. They deal with many aspects of air power (historical, leadership, sociological and geographical, European and global) and your editing of the Routledge Handbook of Air Power is kind of unique! Even if you do not think that these books contain rigorous lessons to learn, you do seem to believe that the utility of airpower is highly situational and the books represent an incentive to think rather than recipes for success. What are the most important points you would like to emphasize?

I was a Visiting Professor at the Swedish National Defence University from 2008 to 2019. It is a great workplace and I had the chance to contribute to closing what we considered gaps in the air power literature. I began a journey of publishing books on air power history, operations, theory and leadership. My motivation is that military professionals must explore the historical record to identify what succeeded and what failed in the past, and must translate those experiences into principles and 'best practices'. These publications are intended to help them develop a rounded understanding of our air power profession, not to advocate a specific theory or doctrine. The series of books is intended to inspire officers to think holistically without fearing or favouring any single viewpoint, and not simply to look to the past. The main message is the importance of ideas and of officers developing concepts and strategies rather than merely focusing on technology and tactics. In order to do that they need literature that covers the depth, breadth and context of air warfare. I was honoured when I was asked to edit the *Routledge Handbook of Air*

Power, which is a kind of confirmation that air power has become an academically respectable field of study. The book explores *why* political leaders have come to regard air power as their instrument of choice to deter and if necessary coerce adversary regimes, *what* air power can and cannot accomplish as a tool of national strategy in the ever-demanding and ever-changing international security landscape, and *how* air power should be studied to gain an appreciation of its complexity and its influence on war and peace.

12) What are the turning points in the history of aerial warfare?

World War II was crucial, because we witnessed the application of air power on a scale and scope never seen before. It had a major impact on the outcome of the war in several theatres. Undeniably, the invention of nuclear weapons has influenced political and military thinking tremendously. The Cold War did not involve any spectacular ‘turning point’ applications of combat air power, with the exception of Israel’s 1967 war and signs of brilliance in 1973 and 1982, but Operation Desert Storm truly was a master class in air warfare compared to any application of military force since the Second World War. It set new standards for what the public, politicians, and all military services expected from airpower and it represented a new phase in the evolution of military operations, capabilities, and effectiveness. It combined new revolutionary technology (stealth and precision) with innovative effects-based concepts. It was the first-ever test of assigning a JFACC – a single air manager. Air power has performed well in later campaigns, especially in Operation Allied Force over Kosovo in 1999 and the initial high-intensity phases of Operations Enduring Freedom in 2001 and Iraqi Freedom in 2003, but these were building on the success of the Gulf War of 1991 rather than new ‘turning points’.

13) What should never be done when using air power?

Political leaders and military planners often base their assumptions on abstract notions and mirror imaging. History shows that at times states enter wars without clearly defined achievable objectives. Decision makers need to appreciate that even the most robust and capable air weapon can never be more effective than the strategy and policy it is intended to support. The Vietnam War, especially Operation Rolling Thunder from 1965 to 1968, provides a good case study of how NOT to use air power in particular and military force in general. It showed that one should avoid long-distance micro-management, avoid complicated rules of engagement and avoid air engagements not governed by an overall strategy. It also showed that politicians and military leaders have to be honest with the media and the people they serve and that a military operation must have a clearly defined chain of command. The gradualist and incremental tit-for-tat drizzle approach did not work; air power should be applied strategically, decisively and effectively.

14) You have also edited books on NATO. Does that mean that the series of books on air power is finished? Are there some aspects you would still want to deal with?

When I arrived in London as defence attaché the Norwegian Ministry of Defence agreed to publish a series of books on the importance of NATO. I contacted the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) and we agreed that I should produce a trilogy in its Whitehall Papers series that would contribute to a more informed discourse on security, foreign and defence policy. The results were *NATO and the North Atlantic* (2017), *Security in Northern Europe* (2018) and *Future NATO* (2020). In tandem with the publications, I presented these books at seminars in more than twenty capitals, covering most of Europe and North America. I lectured in Paris twice – and each time there were very candid and perceptive discussions on the future of the Alliance. I might write more about NATO, and I will definitely write more about air power. As we speak I am about to complete an article on the leadership of General Chuck Horner, focusing on the man, the pilot and the commander.

15) You have also taught air power to political and military elites. How do you define air power with them? Is it easy to teach them about this topic, or do you feel there are a lot of misunderstandings?

I find that there is a general interest when the focus is on air power's role in national policy, international relations and statecraft. It is important to frame lectures or seminars so that they offer perspectives on the political purpose, strategic meaning and military importance of air power. I get a fair hearing when emphasising how warfare has changed over the last few decades and why airpower has become a prominent factor in modern war. These audiences also show interest when I talk about the people and personalities behind the ideas and when we together try to translate theory into practice. Very few are interested in purely academic views; theory must be applicable to action. In general, students of warfare do not understand modern air power. Even air force officers struggle to gain a proper appreciation of this phenomenon, because they are still overly focused on technology and tactics rather than wider perspectives of air power. Many Western nations have fifth generation aircraft but they do not have fifth generation air force organisations and fifth generation air power doctrines.

16) You are Norwegian, and one of your neighbours is Russia, which has renewed and impressive air power means. But your books have very few chapters about Russian or Chinese air forces. Don't you think these two countries have alternative views of air power that could be very useful to study?

Both these countries are becoming more and more air power savvy and their mind-sets and values are very different from those common in Western countries. A brief examination of Russian and Chinese combat air

power trends gives reason for concern. We know that both countries invest in new capabilities and that they give priority to equipment, training and increasingly complex and advanced exercises. Both are moving away from the ground-centric view of air power as primarily an auxiliary contributor. You are right; my books focus primarily on U.S. and Western air power, although I have included chapters on both Russia and China in *Global Air Power* and the *Routledge Handbook of Air Power*. More in-depth studies are needed because the more we study and learn about Russian and Chinese aerospace power the better prepared we will be to develop credible deterrence and capable defences. We can then engage in a more meaningful dialogue and even promote cooperation on matters of common interest. From a policy perspective we should pursue a dual track approach of deterrence and defence on one hand and dialogue and détente on the other; the air power conversation should be framed within that construct.

17) By the way, what is the role of air power in hybrid warfare?

You could make the case that air power is the backbone of hybrid warfare for two reasons: in terms of deterrence to avoid escalation beyond sub-threshold activity, and in terms of ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) and potential follow-up with precision strikes. In these scenarios, real-time information is key to proper decision-making processes and air power can strike with extreme precision over long standoff distances on very short notice. If you know where something is you can hit it, although that does not necessarily mean that you should. Looking to the future, and drawing on historical examples from Afghanistan in 2001, Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011, the combination of real-time ISR, precision strike and Special Forces can be a very powerful tool to deal with a myriad of asymmetric scenarios. Collaboration between air power and Special Forces has enormous potential, especially in grey-zone scenarios of various sorts.

18) When we consider air power, it is often through the lens of American literature, and that is the perspective of a superpower. But what does air power mean for a country like Norway, which can only operate a couple of fighter squadrons? How can you make the best use of your assets?

The United States IS an air power; the rest of us have some degree of it. NATO is designed for U.S. leadership; without the U.S. there is no NATO. Thus, the way the U.S. develops – politically, economically, militarily and socially – is of utmost importance to friend and foe alike. Norway has been a member of NATO since 1949 and we consider ourselves NATO's eyes and ears in the north. To have a strong defence, and contribute to NATO's purpose and missions, we have decided to invest in 52 F-35As. That is a considerable commitment for a nation of a little more than five million people but a necessity given the size of our country and its particular geographic location. The new F-35 offers Norway a unique military capability,

as well as flexibility. It can contribute to three of the four main air power missions: control of the air, ISR and precision strike. The more we use the F-35 the better we will come to understand its revolutionary capabilities. The investment allows us to have state-of-the-art aircraft as well as interoperability with many of our closest allies. We are also purchasing P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft to replace our P-3C Orion and overall we are investing in air defence, radars and helicopters. We contribute a C-130 Hercules to the operations in Mali and our pilots are very professional. All in all, the Norwegian Air Force can be a player where and when needed. As part of a larger Alliance, this is a very solid point of departure for defending king and country.

19) How do you see the future of air power?

In comparison to land and sea warfare, I think the role of air power will become ever more important in both deterrence and other military missions. The UK Ministry of Defence's Combat Air Strategy is an ambitious vision for the future, designed to preserve national advantage and maintain choice. Its conceptual approach to finding a new aircraft to replace the fourth-generation Typhoon, epitomized by Team Tempest, offers one glimpse into the future. This new affordable aircraft – whether manned, unmanned or a combination thereof – is set to operate alongside the UK's F-35Bs. Maintaining the ability to gain air superiority over peer opponents will remain paramount. Western nations need to invest in new platforms and weapon systems and increase automation of command and control – that is, take full advantage of capabilities offered by the Fourth Industrial Revolution and then match those with appropriate concepts aligned to the notions of strategic effect, systemic paralysis and systemic empowerment. The future of air power lies just as much in the intellectual as in the technological realm.

20) Do you see the rise of drones, and the new importance of space and cyber, as important developments that could change the nature of air power?

New technology and new concepts might change the character of air warfare, but not its underlying nature, not the fundamentals. I think air power as we know it today will continue to evolve, including manned fighter-bombers as well as drones. As we continue to develop drones we must never lose sight of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), especially the concepts of legality and legitimacy and the principles of military necessity, proportionality and human rights. The politically desirable and technologically possible must never be allowed to trump IHL. The same applies to space power, which is more than a linear extension of air power. It is a domain in its own right and we will need to expand both our logical approaches and our imaginative capacities to understand the new role of space in war and peace. Cyber is a new domain as well, and it is a wild card that we have yet to fully

comprehend. We cannot think of space and cyber in the same way we think about the three classical domains, because their ramifications lie outside the areas normally considered within scope of the traditional military mind. To ensure we make full use of these domains we must explore inter-service, inter-departmental and cross-domain concepts; we need to learn how to think differently while adhering to IHL. Throughout this process, we must realise that lateral thinking and imagination are just as important as scientific logic and military knowledge.

Thank you very much, John.