

OBITUARY: Sir Victor Goddard

AIR MARSHAL Sir Victor Goddard was that rare combination, a visionary who was also supremely a man of action.

He was personally responsible for saving the British Expeditionary Force at Dunkirk. The Belgian armed forces chief had informed Lord Gort, Commander of the British Force, that the Belgian army and navy were about to surrender to the Germans and leave the British defenceless. Gort asked the then Group Captain Goddard to get to London somehow to arrange evacuation for his 250,000 men.

To avoid being shot down by the French, Goddard took off at night, from a ploughed field near Dunkirk in a crashed Ensign aircraft with no seats. To avoid being shot down by the English because he had no password, he circled in the Channel until dawn. Flying on to London, he met by chance an old friend, Air Commodore Archie Boyle. He persuaded Boyle to get him entry to the underground war headquarters, where he forced his way into a meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff — just in time to hear the Chief of the Naval Staff say that six destroyers were all that could be sent to Dunkirk to evacuate non-combatants.

Goddard interrupted the Joint Chiefs and insisted that an armada of small boats be sent to rescue the entire army (an idea which occurred to him as he spoke) and gave the correct location for the rescue. He was expelled from the meeting by a scandalised Vice-Chief of the Air Staff. But his wild plan was adopted and he was commended, and the army at Dunkirk was saved.

A possibly even more important contribution to his country, and a major factor in winning the war, was Goddard's remarkable counter-espionage coup of 1937. A visiting delegation of German dignitaries had come to Britain to seek an alliance with Britain at the urging of the pro-German Brown House Group.

The idea was that with Britain's control of the seas and its colonial resources, and Germany's envisaged control of Europe, together the two countries could rule the world. Pretending to be pro-Nazi, Goddard fed the visiting World War I ace Udet with disinformation. He convinced Udet, who had been entrusted with the technical plans for the new Luftwaffe, that Germany should not build four-engine bombers. Udet swallowed this, but committed suicide when he realised he had been hoodwinked and that Britain had achieved a "bomber edge" by building the very four-engine bomber which he had been persuaded to abandon.

Goddard's resourcefulness came into service on a later occasion when he visited Washington as Chief of the Air Staff for New Zealand. The US Joint Chiefs turned down his desperate plea for aircraft to defend against a possible Japanese invasion. But the notorious Anglophobe Admiral King, Chief of US Naval Staff, unexpectedly supplied him with all the naval fighter planes he wanted. King then took him aside and whispered conspiratorially: "And I guess after the war you fellas will want to fight for your freedom." In order to get his planes, Goddard had to allow King to think that he was an oppressed colonial who would one day



rebel against the British yoke. He did this with the same unruffled level-headedness that characterised all the most hazardous situations of his long and colourful career.

The word "blimp" was originated by Goddard during the First World War. As commander of a new airship which didn't quite fit its hangar, he stood beside an inspecting officer one Sunday who, due to the unusual proximity of the airship, reached up and flipped its envelope. "Oh," said Goddard, "it went 'blimp'!" So the airship was called "The Blimp" by its crew, and the word spread through the navy and was taken up by the public eventually. "Blimpish" and "Colonel Blimp" were then in turn used to describe officers or officials full of hot air.

Goddard was also a profound thinker and a theorist of warfare. In June 1942 he stressed in a public speech that "wars can only be won by offensive action." He always analysed strategic values and was convinced that the German invasion of Russia only failed because it had been held up for a month by the defence of Greece and Crete. Similarly, he believed, "The sending of our army to France was typically British; disastrous, but, by virtue of it having been done, strategically a triumph. For it was Hitler's plan that there should be a walkover and no battle of France. Russia was to have been next on the list; not France and Britain."

His approval of individualism in officers showed in his opinion after the war that Lord Dowding was "by far the most important British commander of the entire war". Dowding later became a close friend, as were Lord Trenchard and many other distinguished figures.

In 1959, Goddard crystallised his theories of warfare and deterrence in a brilliant monograph dedicated to Trenchard, *The Enigma of Menace*, which puzzled many readers because he believed in the eventual triumph of non-aggression in the world, but in the meantime was a champion of nuclear deterrence. He was a founder of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, whose aims of studying deterrence he strongly supported.

Goddard was devoutly religious, but held to a philosophical interpretation of Christianity. In 1977, he wrote to me advocating "a new reformation which has a neo-platonic tincture. I think that Jesus would have liked that. Plotinus is certainly someone who should be much better known, particularly

amongst Christians." He became one of the few disciples of the British philosopher E. Douglas Fawcett, who died in 1960 and had a unique but little noticed theory of cosmic imagination as the universal principle behind material phenomena.

Fawcett and Goddard were firm believers in reincarnation, and together they considered themselves fighters against scientific materialism and "the nadir of philosophy" as represented by Bertrand Russell.

Goddard's many lectures and papers on these subjects were unpublished except for a single popular book, *Flight Towards Reality* (1975), which was written in blank verse disguised as normal prose.

A series of uncanny events after Fawcett's death in 1960 led Goddard to take an interest in spiritualism, which he had previously despised, and the apparent evidences of Fawcett's keeping his promise to communicate to Goddard from beyond the grave constitute one of the eeriest and most convincing cases for survival. Various mediums whom Goddard did not know suddenly sent him accounts of "interviews with Fawcett" revealing details of Fawcett's death-bed scene known only to Goddard, who was alone with him when he died.

Goddard experienced possibly the most famous "slip through time" ever recorded in history when in 1936 he flew over the near-derelict site of Drem Airfield in Scotland in a heavy storm. He suddenly saw in bright sunlight a meticulously accurate vision of the airfield as it was to be four or five years later, with the yellow mono-planes which had not yet been designed being wheeled out by mechanics in the brown overalls which had not yet been adopted.

Another premonitory experience in Shanghai at the end of the war saved his life in a subsequent air crash and was the basis for a popular film *The Night My Number Came Up*. Goddard's personal experiences so convinced him of deeper underlying realities that, through Baron Palmestiera, the Swedish ambassador to London (who had been instrumental in locating Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony* by clairvoyant means, lost in a steel box in an old mansion), he joined the Council of the Centre for Spiritual and Psychological Studies in London and for over two decades was a leading force in guiding sensible esoteric studies in Britain through a variety of groups and societies.

He approached these subjects with all the good sound sense which he had shown in his military career, from which he had retired in 1951 (retiring in 1954 as Principal of the College of Aeronautics). Goddard's wartime exploits are recorded in his last book, *Skies to Dunkirk: A Personal Memoir* (1982).

Both his military and his religious/philosophical friends held him in the deepest affection and admired his unique combination of warmth, good-humoured charm and open-mindedness with the practicality which made him impervious to all nonsense.

Robert Temple

Robert Victor Goddard, born 6 February 1897, died 21 January 1987.