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DEFENSE OFFICE OF PREPUBLICATION AND OFFICE OF SECURITY REVIEW

Interview With NO CLASSIFIED INFORMATION FOUND

Sir John Slessor Jun 21, 2017

by Alfred Goldberg

June 12, 1963

Q. When did the RAF start thinking in terms of a nuclear deterrent force?

A. Bomber Command had been a very high priority component among British defence forces for a long time--since long before the war. Along came the jet engine and made all war bombers obsolete almost overnight. It didn't occur to anybody in the RAF or in the other two services that we shouldn't have Bomber Command, and we just took it for granted that it must be re-equipped with the most modern aircraft and weapons. We were much criticized later when we ordered all three V-bomber types. I insisted on it because we had ordered three types of bombers before World War II, and if we had ordered only one we would have taken the wrong one, as it turned out. I didn't want to take a chance on that happening with the V-bombers. My attitude was that Bomber Command was a vital and essential component of the RAF and had to be reequipped with modern bombers. We did not attach by any means primary importance to the idea of an independent nuclear deterrent at that time. The Future Strategy Paper of 1952 was the key document in the development of the nuclear deterrent. There was never any suggestion by the Chiefs of Staff that we shouldn't have the V-bomber force. There were differences over the size of the force, but not over whether we should have it. I had always kept in mind the certainty that we would get cut from whatever we asked. The figure we originally wanted was higher than 240. Then it was cut to 240, and eventually we got 180.

I was criticized by my own chaps for not asking for more. The idea of the bomb as a deterrent started very early--I think right after Hiroshima.

Q. When did the RAF start applying pressure for the development and production of nuclear weapons?

A. I don't know.

Q. What were the first aircraft designed with nuclear weapons in mind?

A. The three V-bombers were the first really designed for nuclear weapons. The Canberra wasn't.

Q. Did the Army and Navy seek to find a nuclear role for themselves in the years 1945-52?

A. I don't think so. Those were the days when Vannevar Bush was writing in his book about how ridiculous it was to think of having intercontinental ballistic missiles and nuclear shells for guns.

Q. Did the other services balk at the size and cost of the V-bomber force?

A. There was always competition among us for funds. In my day we were very close together, and although there was not enough for us all, we arrived at a very reasonable compromise in the Future Strategy Paper.

Q. Was there a large gap between the development of the first atomic device and its testing at Monte Bello?

A. I don't think so. I don't remember any deliberate holdup of the testing. We weren't in all that hurry then because we didn't have the vehicles to carry the bomb in anyhow. There is no doubt about our not feeling the pressure, thanks to the U.S. nuclear shield.

Q. What role did the RAF have in the decision to develop the bomb?

A. Our job was primarily with the bombers. I had personally quite a job selling the V-force to Churchill.

- Q. Did the explosion of an atomic device by the Russians in 1949 affect RAF strategic and technical thinking?
- A. I can't remember any discussion about it at the time. We assumed it would happen sooner or later and were a bit surprised at how soon. Of course it had an effect on everybody's thinking.
- Q. Were major decisions on bomb-carrying vehicles--aircraft, rockets, etc.--delayed pending the development of the bomb?
- A. Not to my recollection. We were pressing hard all along to go ahead with production orders for V-bombers.
- Q. Was there any assistance from the United States in the development of the bomb?
- A. I don't know.
- Q. Did the American offer of test facilities in 1952 contain security restrictions that were unacceptable to the British Government?
- A. I can't remember anything about that.
- Q. Was there any opposition within the RAF to the proportion of resources allocated to Bomber Command?
- A. No, I don't think so. I can't remember any opposition.
- Q. When was the Future Strategy Paper written?
- A. The paper was dated, I think, April 1952. Churchill said it was one of the most imposing state papers he had ever seen. It was approved by the Cabinet in June, I think.