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R.A.F. PERILS

THE THIRD SERVICE. By Air Chief Marshal Sir Philip Joubert de la Ferté. (Thames & Hudson. 21s.)

By H. E. BATES

ANY illusion that "The Third Service" is simply a collection of surface facts, gathered together to form a history of the Royal Air Force from a personal point of view, is dispelled by Sir Philip Joubert as early as possible in this book and with all frankness.

"The book is intended," he says flatly, "as a study of inter-service jealousies and the perils they incur and as a warning to the British people of the risks that are involved in allowing these jealousies to obscure sound judgement." It is offered as "an explanation as to why the air services stand as they do today and to show the dangers and stresses from which they are still suffering."

The very brevity of the history of the Royal Air Force makes it unique. No other fighting Service in the first half century of its existence has ever progressed so swiftly from amateur enthusiasms and pained experiment to adult power; none in Britain has ever had the deathless distinction of fighting its first really important battle, a victory as important as Trafalgar, in full view of a great many of these islands' inhabitants. No other fighting formation has ever been offered, in so short a time, weapons of such flexible, devastating, terrifying or visually beautiful mechanical power. And, most important of all, no other has been able to change so drastically or in so short a time accepted concepts of military strategy and naval power.

It is therefore small wonder, as Sir Philip Joubert points out, that its struggle to achieve and maintain an independent existence, the priceless legacy from Trenchard, should have been long watched, and should still be watched, by covetous Naval and Army eyes. It is very difficult to grasp, as he says, that after less than half a century a new Service has reached a point where it can supersede four centuries of existence, by the Navy, as the "Sure Shield," or be something more than merely ancillary to the Army, with its rigid traditions and concepts of land power.

But whether we like it or not, overwhelming air power, as exemplified by the atom bomber or rocket missile, is with us and must be accepted; and however distasteful or frightening it may be to all of us, the perennial talking-point of world powers, of politicians everywhere, is no longer of naval tonnage or cannon fodder, but of the power of a single aircraft carrying, to the remotest destinations, a single bomb.

This, broadly, is Sir Philip Joubert's case: that the battle of

Whitehall, fought for the most part by admirals no longer seaborne and supported in the Army by "a very solid body of opinion among its leaders that air power is really only an ancillary to land power," is again in full swing—a battle that, if it were won by the traditionalists, might well mean the virtual disappearance of the Royal Air Force as an independent fighting Service.

It is vastly to his credit that he never overstates this case, but presents it always with fair zeal, pungency, considerable wit and a certain dry charm, backing it up everywhere with a special knowledge of inside facts. In addition he offers the no less alarming conclusion that the Royal Air Force, smothered on the one hand by "a mass of theoreticism and Civil Servants" and on the other by "that vast ganglion, the Ministry of Supply," is at present hopelessly ill-equipped, both in the matter of aircraft and men.

It is, of course, natural that an officer who first flew with the Royal Flying Corps in 1913 should be biased in favour of the Service to which he is devoted; but it is also typical that his vision, still fresh and flexible, should extend far beyond Service affection and his active day. Those who saw Tele vision's vigorous and admirable series "War in the Air" will know something of what to expect from "The Third Service."

First Folio

MR. WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S COMEDIES, HISTORIES & TRAGEDIES:
A Photographic Facsimile of the First Folio. (Yale: Oxford. £4 4s.)

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JOHN HAYWARD