CHAPTER 4

THE POST WAR ERA

RETURN TO PEACE

The achievements of the aircrew during the Second World War laid down the foundations of the modern RAF. Today’s Service is very much the product of the post-war years: after all, two-thirds of the RAF’s life has occurred since 1945.

The immediate task in 1945 was to return to normal, peacetime conditions and the RAF was faced, for the second time in its history, with the problems of adjusting to peace after a major war. Abroad, the RAF played its part (alongside the Army, the Royal Navy and other Allied forces) in the vast clearing up operations in Europe, the Middle East and the Far East. Prisoners-of-war were brought home, basic essentials like food, clothing and medical care delivered to those in dire need, and some sense of order and stability was achieved out of the chaos of war. At home, the RAF had to demobilize its huge force of over 1,000,000 as quickly and smoothly as possible. The run-down of the RAF was more orderly and gradual than it had been in 1919 but, even so, discontent at poor conditions and the seemingly slow rate of repatriation led to a strike by airmen at RAF Seletar in Singapore and other disturbances at RAF Drigh Road, Karachi. By April 1947, however, just under a million men and women had been demobilized and overall strength was less than 300,000.

Though Britain ended the Second World War as one of the victorious Allies, the country was almost bankrupt after the vast outlay of national resources during the War. The first years of peace were blighted by rationing and an austerity which exceeded that of the war years. Severe financial problems coupled with the debilitating effect of nearly 6 years of war made the task of redirecting the nation’s war-making capacity to meet civilian peacetime needs very difficult. Alongside the draw-down of the RAF’s strength, and in spite of the financial and economic problems, plans were made to re-equip the RAF with modern jet aircraft and atomic weapons: in 1947 the Government decided, in great secrecy, to develop a British atomic bomb which could be delivered by an RAF jet bomber.

While the shooting war was over, a far more sinister form of world tension, known later as the ‘Cold War’, began to manifest itself, firstly in Europe and then throughout
the World. For Britain, the existence of the Cold War and her reaction to it was further complicated by what can be seen as one of the dominant factors of strategic policy post-1946 - the withdrawal from Empire and overseas areas of influence. However, at least until the mid-1960s, Britain attempted to maintain a role as a major world power. During the 1950s and early 1960s Britain carried out her obligations around the world and the RAF was heavily committed to many operations in support of law and order. By the late 1960s, however, Britain was forced by limited defence resources to reappraise her obligations. The RAF, together with other British forces, pulled out of nearly all the traditional, long standing overseas bases in the Far East and Middle East.

WITHDRAWAL FROM OVERSEAS COMMITMENTS

Far East Headquarters Badge, Andover Light transport aircraft introduced in the 1950s, 216 Squadron Comet Mk 4, 99 Squadron Britannia over Kilimanjaro 1960
The start of the large scale withdrawal from overseas and a much greater concentration on Europe was announced in 1968. British forces were to be withdrawn from Malaysia, Singapore and the Persian Gulf by 1971 (Aden had been given up as a base in 1967). Once those withdrawals were completed the Government stated that “no special capability for use outside Europe will be maintained” since “Britain’s defence effort will be concentrated mainly in Europe and in the North Atlantic area”. In November 1971, the Far East Air Force was disbanded and withdrawal from the Persian Gulf completed in December the same year. Residual forces were left in Hong Kong (until 1999), Cyprus and Malta (withdrawal from the latter was completed in 1979). With such reductions and with the absence now of any apparent need for strategic airlift on a large scale to the Far East and Middle East, the RAF transport force was reduced by half with the withdrawal of the Comets in 1975, the Britannias and Andovers in 1976 and the Belfasts in 1977.

Last Belfast to depart Gan

Family of RAF Sergeant disembark at Singapore from SS Ordunda
This pattern affected not only the size and shape of the RAF; it altered its postings and way of life. The accompanied family passage by troopship to the Far East and Middle East was replaced by air trooping on RAF or charter aircraft. This was followed by a move towards unaccompanied short tours of duty at isolated bases, until nearly all overseas bases and outposts had disappeared. After the mid-1960s, the focus was towards a concentration of British military forces in Europe (both in the United Kingdom and on the continent of Europe) as part of the defence of Western Europe, through the NATO Alliance, against a perceived threat from the Warsaw Pact led by the Soviet Union. At the same time, successive Governments carried out a reshaping of the defence forces.
FORMATION OF THE CENTRE

A restructured, unified Ministry of Defence was formed in April 1964 which increased the trend towards the central direction of defence and trimmed the independent powers of the 3 Services. The Air Ministry became the Air Force Department of the Ministry of Defence; the Air Council became the Air Force Board; and the Secretary of State for Air became the Minister of Defence for the RAF (later to become the Parliamentary Under-Secretary (RAF)).

‘National Service’ (conscription) was abolished in 1960 and the 3 Services once again became regular and volunteer forces. The RAF became smaller but at the same time it began to cost more. The increasing complexity of, and expanded time-scale for, the design, development, production and in-service life of new aircraft was matched by the need for training to a much higher level of skills both in the air and on the ground. Escalating costs, examples of unsuccessful developments and several traumatic cancellations of projects became quite frequent in the post-1945 period. Governing all defence plans and policy was the overriding determination of successive governments to reduce the expenditure on defence to a smaller proportion of the gross national product - from about 7% in the 1960s to something around 5% in the 1970s and 1980s.

The RAF was not immune from the factors that changed Britain after 1945 - shifts in political power, economic forces and social values. It is against this background of controls and restraints that the often confused and diverse pattern of operations and organizational changes of those post-war years must be seen. If the first RAF was demobilised in 1919, and the second in 1945-46, it was the third RAF that emerged after the end of the Second World War that had to face the challenges of a peacetime Service.
THE POST WAR ERA

THE GROWTH OF COLONIAL NATIONALISM

Though peace had come after 6 years of world war, there were many signs that the post-1945 world would be far from peaceful: waging peace was to be as demanding a task for the RAF as waging war had been. After 1945, in countries which became known as the Third World, (especially in Africa and the Far East) the twin forces of communism and anti-colonialism found a ready breeding ground as colonies sought independence and nationalism grew. While the roots had been planted earlier, the Second World War in which the colonial nations of Britain, France and Holland had been temporarily forced out of their colonies by the Japanese, had encouraged the local populations to seek nationhood. Now the twin forces, frequently so entwined that it was impossible to see which was which, challenged existing authority. Britain, as an old colonial power, became deeply involved, either to ensure that a transition from colonial rule to independence went smoothly, or to assist newly independent governments to stand on their own feet by giving economic and military assistance. Britain also wished to maintain a military presence with overseas bases as part of a world-wide system of alliances.

Britain continued to have extensive post Imperial world-wide commitments after the Second World War. The demands of the Cold War further increased those commitments; a system of alliances to contain communist expansion - NATO in 1949, the South-East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954, and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) in 1955 - became the corner-stone of overseas defence policy. Although Britain was giving up colonial power in the 1960s, this did not lessen the extent of the commitments since there were still obligations or special responsibilities by treaty to the remaining overseas territories and to the newly independent nations. RAF operations since 1945 frequently involved direct action in small-scale, limited ‘brushfire’ wars - Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus and Kuwait for example. While the commitments were, by and large, met, they placed a severe burden on the financial and economic resources of Britain as well as seriously overstretching the capabilities of all her forces.

OPERATIONS 1945 - 1979

THE BERLIN AIRLIFT 1948-49

Although the situation in the colonies was often volatile it was in Europe that the deterioration in the world’s political stability was first seen. Even during the last year of the Second World War, the fundamental differences between the Western Allies and the Russians were becoming clear and cooperation did not survive the peace for long. In
May 1945, Churchill referred in a telegram to President Truman to an ‘iron curtain’; in March 1946, as ex-Prime Minister, he made the famous speech at Fulton, Missouri that, ‘From Stetting in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of Central and Eastern Europe’. Post war Germany was divided into East and West Germany by the Inner German Border. East Germany was controlled by the Soviet Union and, within East Germany, lay Berlin. Berlin itself was divided between the 4 Allied Powers, America, Britain, France and the Soviet Union.

The Cold War had started in Europe. In February 1948 the Russians engineered a communist take-over in Czechoslovakia that showed the rest of the world how the Red Army’s gains in the war were to be consolidated. In April the British Chiefs of Staff decided that future plans were to be based on the assumption that Russia was the potential enemy. In June the Russians closed the entire road, rail and water routes linking West Berlin (the 3 sectors controlled by Britain, France and the USA) with the 3 western zones in Western Germany. For the 3 Allies to accept this blockade as a fait accompli would have meant the loss of Berlin as a free city and their foothold in East Germany. The only way in which 2 million West Berliners could be kept alive was to carry food, coal and raw materials in by air using 3 air corridors that linked the western zones to Berlin. The Russians made no attempt to block these. Code-named ‘PLAINFARE’ by the RAF, ‘VITTLES’ by the USAF but known to history as ‘The Berlin Airlift’, this operation succeeded in keeping Berlin supplied until the blockade was lifted in May 1949.

The RAF used its Dakota force, the York (developed as a transport aircraft from the Lancaster bomber), which eventually carried over half of all cargoes flown by the RAF, and the new Hastings (just then coming into service). The York and Hastings could lift 8½ and 9½ tons, respectively, against the Dakota’s 3½ tons and even Sunderland flying boats (which were able to land on the Havel in Berlin until it froze over in the winter) were pressed into service.
The Berlin Airlift air corridors

Yorks at Gatow (242 Squadron York foreground), First Dakota of a wave Op PLAINFARE
The United States Air Force (USAF), in its first major operation as an independent service, began by using its C-47s (Dakotas) but then replaced them with a large fleet of over 200 C-54 Skymasters, each capable of lifting 10 tons, which greatly increased the weight and volume of freight carried in flight. In addition, a variety of civilian charter aircraft such as Tudors, Liberators, Halifaxes and Bristol Freighters from 25 different companies, supplemented the effort.
As the number of aircraft available increased, the monthly tonnages of food, raw materials and equipment flown into Berlin continued to grow with the airlift becoming a 24-hour operation. The aim at the start was to supply Berlin with some 200 tons per day; at the height of the operation about 8,000 tons per day were delivered by the combined force and on Good Friday 1949 an incredible 12,940 tons were flown in. Between 26 June and the end of July 1948 the combined US-British total was 70,410 tons in 14,036 flights; by December 1948 it had doubled in only 16,486 sorties; while in May 1949 a record 250,834 tons were flown in 27,717 flights in the one month. At the height of the airlift, over two-thirds of the total freight taken in was coal (the Dakotas were used almost exclusively for coal carrying) and just over one-fifth was food. Dehydrated foods kept Berlin alive, a German cartoonist produced a cartoon of a stork arriving with a package labelled ‘Dehydrated baby; soak for 20 minutes in warm water’.

Such a build-up of the airlift demanded effort on the ground as well as in the air. RAF and army construction teams built airfields at Celle and Fassberg, which were used by both USAF Skymasters and RAF Yorks and Dakotas though they were under RAF
control. American and French engineers built a completely new airfield at Tegel in the French sector of Berlin, using the rubble that still remained from the Allied bombing. In late November 1949 Tegel came into use as Berlin’s third airfield (the others were Templehof in the American sector and Gatow in the British sector of the city).

Above all, the airlift was a triumph for the air traffic controllers. Using the 3 air corridors into Berlin, the great majority of aircraft flew in via the southern and northern routes and returned via the centre one. Navigation within the corridors was aided by medium-frequency radio beacons and Eureka radar beacons on the northern and central routes, with ground controlled approach (GCA) installations at most airfields. The control of the entire operation was so efficient that aircraft were landing in Berlin at intervals of 3 minutes (good weather) and 5 minutes (bad weather). Only one approach was allowed; it was a most demanding schedule requiring the highest degree of professional skill in the air. With so many different types of aircraft flying at different speeds and heights, not to say the problems created by a European winter, the aircrew and controllers achieved a remarkable safety record.
The RAF-USAF effort was controlled by a Combined Airlift Task Force commanded by an American general, who had previously commanded the wartime transport operation over the ‘Hump’ from Burma into China, with the AOC of No 46 Group as his second-in-command. The majority of the aircrew were, in fact, veterans of either the ‘Hump’ flying or bomber missions over Germany. At one stage an attempt was made to make the airlift an impersonal, business-like civilian organization to the detriment of the morale of the aircrew. Only when squadron and Service elements were reintroduced did morale improve and sustain the operation which required so much endurance and professional skill.

In May 1949 the blockade was lifted, but the airlift continued until October to build up stocks in the western sectors of Berlin. By then the RAF had flown in a total of 394,509 short tons of cargo (more than one-fifth of the USAF effort) in 65,857 sorties at a cost of 18 servicemen killed in 5 fatal accidents. The Berlin Airlift was a remarkable achievement of sustained and successful flying, of RAF - USAF co-operation and of the contribution that air power could make to keep peace. However, it was also a major strategic defeat for the Russians.
OPERATION FIREDOG - THE MALAYAN EMERGENCY 1948-60

Just as the Berlin crisis broke, and the airlift began, Britain became deeply committed to a campaign in the Far East that was eventually to become the model for conducting counter-insurgency warfare. During the Japanese occupation of Malaya during the Second World War, the Allies had supplied arms, equipment and a few men to support the resistance war waged against the Japanese by the (mainly Chinese) Malayan Communist Party (MCP). Men like Spencer Chapman, who wrote ‘The Jungle is Neutral’ (still a classic on living and fighting in the jungle) were parachuted in or landed by submarine to help organise the anti-Japanese effort. At the end of the war communists had begun to exploit nationalist feelings throughout colonial SE Asia and the MCP refused to hand in their weapons retiring instead back into the jungle to plan their next campaign. This was to free Malaya from British colonial rule. The MCP controlled a field army of insurgents, the Malayan Races Liberation Army (MRLA), so called in an attempt to win popular support. Most of the insurgents, 95% of the armed terrorists, were Chinese, born in that country and owing little loyalty to their adopted country. Indians and a few Malayan extremists comprised the other 5%. In June 1948 they struck; terrorist attacks were made on rubber plantations and tin mines (the foundations of the Malayan economy), government property and civilians both British and Malay. A state of emergency was declared and Britain became involved in the longest campaign fought by British forces since the Napoleonic Wars. It was to be a ‘long, long war’.

155 Squadron Whirlwind drops RAF Regiment/Malays

Operation ‘FIREDOG’ was a civil and military campaign aimed at isolating the communist insurgents from the local support which was vital to their survival. A prerequisite of a guerrilla warfare is the support of the local populace to shelter and sustain
the guerrillas. It was intended to keep the MCP on the run and eventually flush them out of the jungle. The very nature of this type of counter-insurgency warfare was exacerbated by the climate and terrain of Malaya (70% of which consists of jungle-covered mountains sparsely inhabited by indigenous peoples and linked only by jungle track and river). The major task had to be met by forces on the ground, in this case, British and Commonwealth troops aided by large numbers of Malayan Police and Home Guard units.

Malay policeman October 1951

A Valetta being loaded, Royal Army Service Corps despatchers with load in a Dakota July 1950

The role of the Far East Air Force (FEAF), with its headquarters in Singapore and bases in Malaya, was to support the police, army and the civil government, and was vital to the success of the entire campaign. The complex nature of that air support is clear when the number of sorties flown by various types of aircraft is examined. Surprisingly, perhaps, the Auster spotter planes exceeded all other types; Valetta and Dakota transports amassed the next biggest totals,
to be followed by Lincoln bombers and Whirlwind helicopters. In all, 31 different basic types of aircraft in 36 versions were engaged in ‘FIREDOG’ over 12 years.

RAAF Lincolns RAF Tengah August 1952, Auster Mk IV

Constant reconnaissance and good intelligence were the keys to success on the ground. The Austers, which were both manoeuvrable and reliable, carried out visual reconnaissance; they flew low enough to spot signs of new trails or other movement in the jungle. The Austers, like the Single and Twin Pioneers, which were also used, came into their own because they could get into and out of short landing strips in jungle clearings. The Pioneer could land on a 150-yard strip and climb steeply out of the tree-covered valleys. The larger transport aircraft, the Valetta’s and Dakotas, kept the troops in the jungle supplied by parachuting supplies in on a regular weekly or daily basis.
SAS troops were also deployed and supplied by air. Army and police patrols frequently spent weeks in the jungle relying entirely on the air for supplies. The jungle forts manned by police and Army could only be supplied from the air either by the Pioneers or larger aircraft. The Valetta’s were also used for psychological warfare - dropping leaflets and, fitted with loudspeakers, broadcasting inducements to guerrillas to surrender. Simple as it may sound, the psychological warfare of leaflets and broadcasts proved to be very effective.
In many ways, the most enduring work of all was that of the helicopters. The first Casualty Evacuation Flight was established at RAF Seletor in Singapore in April 1950 with Dragonflies - the first attempt by the RAF to use helicopters operationally in a combat area. Subsequently, in February 1953, No 194 Squadron became the first RAF helicopter squadron. By the end of November 1954, the Dragonflies had completed nearly 6,000 sorties. Between 1954-58, No 194 Squadron, re-equipped with Sycamores, flew some 34,000 sorties from its base at Kuala Lumpur. In Malaya, while originally used for casualty evacuation, the helicopter subsequently became invaluable as a troop carrier moving patrols quickly around the jungle, conducting relief sorties of jungle weary soldiers and helping them to win the support of the local populace, without whom there could be no good intelligence. Helicopters were shown to be the most important innovation in air transport during FIREDOG but there were never enough of them to meet all the demands placed on them.
Air strikes against the insurgents in the jungle generally achieved little obvious effect. If hard intelligence was forthcoming, then the piston-engined Brigands and Hornets (later replaced by jets - Vampires and Venoms), supplemented by 4-engined Lincoln heavy bombers, carried out attacks on suspected hide-outs or food dumps but inhabited villages were never shelled, bombed or strafed. This was an important factor in winning the hearts and minds of the locals. During the air war in Malaya it was air transport that made the decisive contribution to the final defeat of the guerrillas in the jungle.
Gradually the hold of the insurgents was broken and more and more areas were declared safe. Malaya became independent in 1957, although the Emergency did not end officially until 1960. About 400 hardcore communists never came out of the jungle established themselves on the Malaysia-Thai border. Operation FIREDOG brought peace and independence to Malaya and sustained its friendship with Britain. Without the effective employment of air power, the success on the ground would have taken even longer and might not have been so secure.
THE POST WAR ERA

THE KOREAN WAR 1950-53

Because of commitments in Malaya, Britain made only a limited contribution to the Korean War. The United Nations, largely at the instigation of the USA, decided to give military support to the South Koreans when North Korean forces invaded them in June 1950. In the event, the UN forces were primarily American, although British Commonwealth forces were the third largest contingent to serve with the UN forces. The North Koreans were defeated but in the winter of 1950-51 Chinese communist army and air force intervention led to a bitter struggle and a stalemate around the thirty-eighth parallel (38° N latitude) until an armistice was agreed in July 1953.

Charlie 88 Squadron taxys on Iwakuni Roads October 1950

The RAF element of the British forces involved was limited to three squadrons of veteran Sunderland flying boats for maritime reconnaissance patrols against sea-borne incursions and movements around the coast. A Royal Australian Air Force squadron flew Meteors, originally in the air fighting role until it was seen that they were outclassed by the MiG-15s (some flown by Soviet pilots) of the Chinese Air Force, and then in the ground attack role, alongside USAF F-84 Thunderjets and USN Skyraiders. The Red Chinese Air Force, incidentally, gave notice that it was the third most powerful air force in the world. The F-86 Sabres of the USAF took on the MiG-15s in the first large scale, all-jet fight for air superiority in air power history. Ironically, the MiG-15 prototype had first flown in 1947 with Rolls-Royce Nene engines sold to Russia when Anglo-Russian relations were still good. (The MiG-15 and its successors, the MiG-17 and MiG-19, were all manufactured on a greater scale than any other jet fighter in history). RAF pilots, on loan to the USAF, did, in fact, fly F-86 Sabres but the RAF at this time lacked a swept-wing fighter that could be of any use in the air battle and so its contribution could only remain small.
Although the RAF’s contribution to combat operations was limited to Sunderland patrols, the Transport force was involved in trooping flights between the UK, Japan and Korea. The first Hastings flight left RAF Lyneham on 19 September 1950 carrying reinforcements from the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders. Casualty evacuation flights were also undertaken, bringing home not only British wounded but those of other nations in the UN force.
KENYA 1952-56

While the Malayan Emergency remained in progress, the RAF was frequently called upon to support British troops involved in trouble spots around the world during the 1950s and 1960s. In the emergency created in Kenya by the Mau Mau rebellion (1952-56), the RAF operated in a role similar to that in Malaya but on a much reduced scale. So scarce were RAF resources to support the ground troops that ageing Harvard trainers were given Browning machine guns and 8 x 20 lb anti-personnel bombs to go into action against the Mau Mau. But it worked and the Harvards continued to play an important role throughout the 4 years of the Emergency. They were supplemented by Bomber Command Lincolns and ground attack Vampires from Aden, but offensive action was limited just as it was in Malaya.

Harvard trainer, Vampires return from a rocket attack on Mau Mau, April 1954

SUEZ 1956

In October 1954, Egypt abrogated the treaty whereby the British Army and the RAF were ceded bases in the Canal Zone until 1956 with the possibility of extension beyond that date by negotiation. Withdrawals therefore began to bases in Cyprus and Aden, which were to become the major centres of the British military presence in the Middle East. In the summer of 1956, just 3 months after the British withdrawal had been completed, a major crisis broke. Increasing Communist Block military aid to Egypt, the declared Egyptian intention to nationalise the Suez Canal in retaliation for the withdrawal of financial backing by Britain and the USA for the Aswan High Dam and, in particular, the threat of a second war between Israel and her Arab neighbours, Egypt, brought the Cold War and big power politics into the Middle East. Britain and France, both with
commercial interests as well as strategic reasons for wanting freedom of movement in the Suez Canal, concentrated military, naval and air forces in Malta and Cyprus while diplomacy tried, but failed, to solve the crisis. Suez in 1956 was the largest, in terms of numbers and the firepower deployed, of all the British limited war operations. Operation ‘MUSKETEER’, the British and French sea-borne invasion supported by parachute forces to occupy the Canal Zone, was launched from Malta and Cyprus at the end of October - beginning of November.
RAF Valiant crews de-brief after raid over Egypt

The RAF’s task was to attack Egyptian airfields and prevent the Russian built MiG-15 fighters and Il-28 bombers of the Egyptian Air Force from interfering with the invasion. Within 2 days, the Egyptian Air Force had been effectively put out of action; Canberras and the first of the RAF’s V-bombers, the Valiant, carried out high-altitude precision bombing; low flying Canberras, Venoms and French fighter-bombers completed the destruction of the Egyptian Air Force on the ground, including most of its 120 MiGs and 50 Il-28s. Both the sea-borne and the airborne assaults were successful. Hastings and Vallettas, based in Cyprus, dropped British paratroopers on Gamil airfield. Nine transport aircraft were hit by anti-aircraft fire but none were lost. In the whole air operation, RAF casualties were just 3 officers and one airman killed, with no wounded or missing; 2 RAF aircraft were lost, one through enemy action and one as the result of an accident.

After 7 days, a cease-fire was announced and United Nations forces took over in the Canal Zone. Britain was unable to withstand diplomatic pressure which, coupled with America’s implacable resolve not to support the UK and France and financial pressure on the pound so great, made withdrawal the only possible outcome. Suez was a diplomatic defeat for this country and a clear indication of the end of an era; the old Imperial power that could go-it-alone now assumed a somewhat smaller, but at that stage not yet defined, role in the world. While the military operations were successful, they too had shown deficiencies in bomber techniques and base facilities; they had also re-emphasised the need to expand the air transport force.
Cyprus, as well as providing the main base for the launching of the Suez operations, was itself torn by a campaign of violence launched by EOKA guerrillas led by Colonel Georgios Grivas in the late 1950s. The objective of EOKA was the unity of Cyprus with Greece. As in Malaya, the helicopter proved invaluable in supporting the ground forces hunting EOKA in the mountains. 284 Squadron equipped Sycamore helicopters pioneered the techniques of night flying and landing troops by abseiling down ropes from a hovering helicopter. In addition, it dropped food, ammunition and stores as well as evacuating 222 casualties from the hills and forest areas. During its 2 years service in security operations (1956-58) 284 Squadron had, in the words of Field Marshal Lord Harding, the Governor and Commander-in-Chief, ‘contributed more to fighting terrorism on the island than any other single unit’.

284 Squadron Sycamores carrying Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry in Cyprus during emergency

KUWAIT 1961

Twin Pioneer
In 1961, Cyprus, which had become an independent republic within the Commonwealth, was one of the main bases from which British military forces were flown into Kuwait when Iraq threatened to seize the small oil-rich sheikhdom. Ground attack Hunters and Beverley transports from Aden were the first to arrive but the major RAF task was to lift an entire parachute battalion from Cyprus to Bahrain and one complete Marine Commando from Aden to Kuwait.

Within 6 days all British forces were in position and they continued to be supplied by air. In all, nearly 10,000 men and 850 tons of freight were airlifted. The impressive show of force deterred Iraq from any hostile move and demonstrated the mobility that air power had given to British ground forces. It also showed again that the RAF needed more, and larger, transport aircraft. While successful, the size of the airlift had seriously stretched the RAF’s transport forces both in the Middle East and in the UK.
Belvedere Kuching 1963-4, Supply drop over Belagan Borneo, RAF Regiment camp jungle strip Borneo, Argosy drops fuel to security post in jungle, Victor Mk1 over Malaya 1965, Twin and single Pioneers Sepulot 1965

When Indonesia threatened the newly created Malaysia (Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak) in 1963, British ground and air forces once more were called into action in SE Asia. Air defence and reconnaissance of the entire Malaya, Singapore and Borneo area was carried out, ground attack Hunters were deployed from Singapore to Kuching and Labuan in North Borneo, and the helicopters (Whirlwinds, Wessex and Belvederes) and the short range transports (Beverleys and Pioneers), operating alongside the tiny Royal
Malaysian Air Force, provided mobility for the British, Commonwealth and Malaysian troops in the jungles. As a further deterrent, detachments of Canberras and V-bombers were sent to Singapore. By 1966 the confrontation had fizzled out. It never went beyond a local conflict, but it had shown the efficiency of Allied and inter-Service cooperation. It had demonstrated yet again, in that part of the world and in those conditions that air power was indispensable to help the forces on the ground both to defeat the enemy and to win the hearts and minds of the local population.

THE ARABIAN PENINSULA: RADFAN 1964

Britain attempted to bring some political stability to South Arabia by persuading the various Arab Emirates and sheikhdoms of the area to form a Federation of South Arabia in 1962. The RAF’s responsibilities through Air Forces Middle East (part of the unified Middle East Command which extended from the east cost of Africa to Bahrain in the Persian Gulf) were to defend Aden and the new Federation from outside attack as well as to maintain internal civil order along with the Federal forces. With active support from Yemeni forces, an armed revolt by tribesmen in the Radfan, a mountainous area west of Aden bordering on the Yemen, broke out in the spring of 1964. Reinforcements had to be flown out from the UK by Transport Command to deal with the situation. Ground attack Hunters provided the close support for the troops on the ground (Federal, British Army and RAF Regiment) and as they attacked the rebel strongholds in the mountains, helicopters, particularly the twin-rotor Belvederes, provided the tactical mobility, so essential in such terrain. The efficiency of the cooperation between the
Hunters and the forward troops was such that the troops were able to call for Hunter
strikes against the tribesmen’s positions only 25 yards from their own positions. By
October most of the tribes had given up and some semblance of law and order returned,
at least for a short time.

Wessex 78 Squadron, Wadi Taym area South Arabian Federation

No37(Field)Squadron manning a piquet post during Radafan ops
EVACUATION FROM ADEN 1967

In 1967, Air Support Command, which had replaced Transport Command, with its new range of strategic and tactical transport aircraft – Comet 4s, VC10s, Britannias, Belfasts and Hercules - was called upon to evacuate Service families and British troops from Aden which had been the major British base in the Middle East. The evacuation began in May and lasted until the final withdrawal in November, proving to be the largest airlift operation since the Berlin Airlift. Britannias, Belfasts and Hercules operated an increasingly effective shuttle service between RAF Muharraq in Bahrain Island and Aden in August, September and October. Then between 5 and 30 November every type of transport aircraft in Air Support Command combined to make a final lift of 6,000 troops and 400 tons of equipment from RAF Khormaksar. The final withdrawal was accomplished smoothly and without violence (covered by a strong Royal Navy task force). It brought to an end the British connection with the port of Aden, which had been established by the East India Company as far back as 1839, and the RAF’s own connection which dated from the First World War when it had been used as a primitive landing strip for aircraft operating against the Turks.

Britannia and Hercules

OPERATION AGILA - RHODESIA 1979-80

Following a political settlement of the long guerrilla war between the Rhodesian forces and those of the Patriotic Front, the RAF supported the Commonwealth Force which monitored the ceasefire agreed as the precursor to elections for a new government in what was to become Zimbabwe. The RAF’s task looked deceptively easy on paper - fly
in the force and sustain them there - but turned out to be a much more complex one undertaken against a background of ever changing transport requirements and a volatile political setting in which the possibility of a breakdown of the ceasefire arrangements was never far away.

The Monitoring Force grew to over 900 men. To supplement the VC10s and the Hercules which airlifted troops and their equipment (12 Army helicopters and 312 Land-Rovers, as well as 6 RAF Puma helicopters) the USAF provided some C-5 and C-141 transport aircraft. Once in Rhodesia, the monitoring teams were flown into all parts of the country, most often to the remotest areas, and both they and the Patriotic Front forces, who were required to assemble in certain designated areas under the terms of the ceasefire, were supplied with food and all other equipment by air; any other form of transport had become unsafe as a result of the war. Both Hercules and the Pumas had to achieve a much higher flying rate in practice than anticipated, operating from and into widely dispersed airstrips over a largely unfamiliar and featureless terrain. The Hercules began by air-dropping supplies but later, as security improved, were able to land; the Pumas took on casualty evacuation in addition to their regular tasks of moving men and supplies. VC10s and Hercules successfully completed the withdrawal of the Monitoring
Force after the elections, again supplemented by USAF C-5s. The entire operation lasted barely 4 months but, with good engineering and movements support on the ground, had shown that the transport force could be both flexible and respond to the unexpected.

Hercules at Salisbury Rhodesia

HUMANITARIAN OPERATIONS & EMERGENCIES

In addition to the vital role played by the RAF in many limited brush fire actions around the world, it has been a traditional part of air operations since 1945 that the RAF has brought aid to the civilian population whenever it has been needed. The most obvious example has been the part played by the RAF Search and Rescue organization – originally set up for the recovery of aircrew - which, mainly by helicopter but with the assistance of Mountain Rescue Teams and Marine Craft Units, saved thousands of people from rocks, cliffs, dinghies and ships around British coasts and brought injured climbers to safety from mountainous areas, particularly Snowdonia and the Highlands of Scotland. In a typical year, from the 9 stations where they maintained a readiness of 15 minutes by day and 1 hour by night, RAF helicopters responded to 924 incidents. For incidents beyond helicopter range, Search and Rescue was carried out by fixed wing maritime patrol aircraft such as the Shackleton. Further afield, the RAF was called upon to fly food, clothing and medical supplies into areas struck by natural disasters: hurricanes in British Honduras (1961): cyclones in East Pakistan (1970) which took 20,000 lives, earthquakes at Agadir in Morocco (1960) and Nicaragua (1972), and famine in Kenya and Somalia (1961-62), Nepal (1973) and Mali in West Africa (1973).
Since 1945, British forces rarely had a time when there was not some form of operation in progress somewhere around the world. In these limited wars the Army carried out the brunt of the fighting. The task of the RAF was to use air power selectively and effectively in support of the ground operations; tactical support and air transport forces were the essential contributions of the RAF in these operations.
The operational RAF of the post-1945 world had been in constant action at some time or other around the world but as in the inter-war years, peace was only relative. True, the RAF played little or no direct part in the 3 major wars between 1945 and 1982 - the Korean War, the Arab-Israeli Wars and the Vietnam War - where air power was extensively used and, in some cases (the Arab-Israeli War of 1967 for example), was even more decisive than it had been in the Second World War. But wherever British forces were involved, the RAF was able to demonstrate the flexibility and mobility of air power as a vital part of success in limited war operations. In particular, the parts played by the helicopter and other air transport forces were often the most important contribution of the RAF. While this kind of flying did not have the same instant success or failure of more offensive air operations and was certainly seen to be less spectacular, it did place high demands on the endurance and skill of those engaged in it. Without that kind of skill, the ground forces would have found their task so much more difficult and costly. World-wide basing may have greatly diminished since the late 1960s, but the RAF can be justifiably proud of its peacetime achievements over this period.