eighty years of service
A History of the

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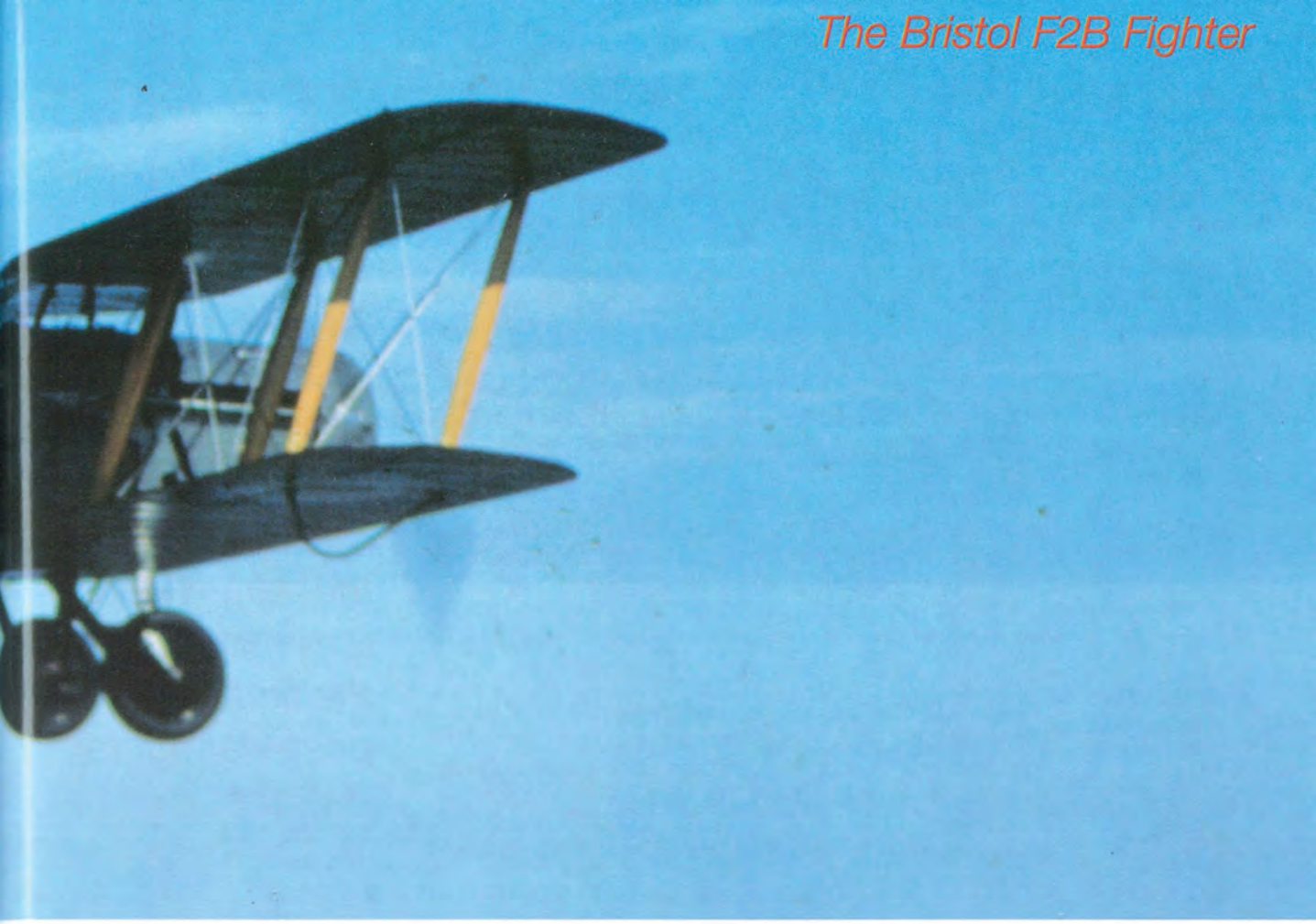
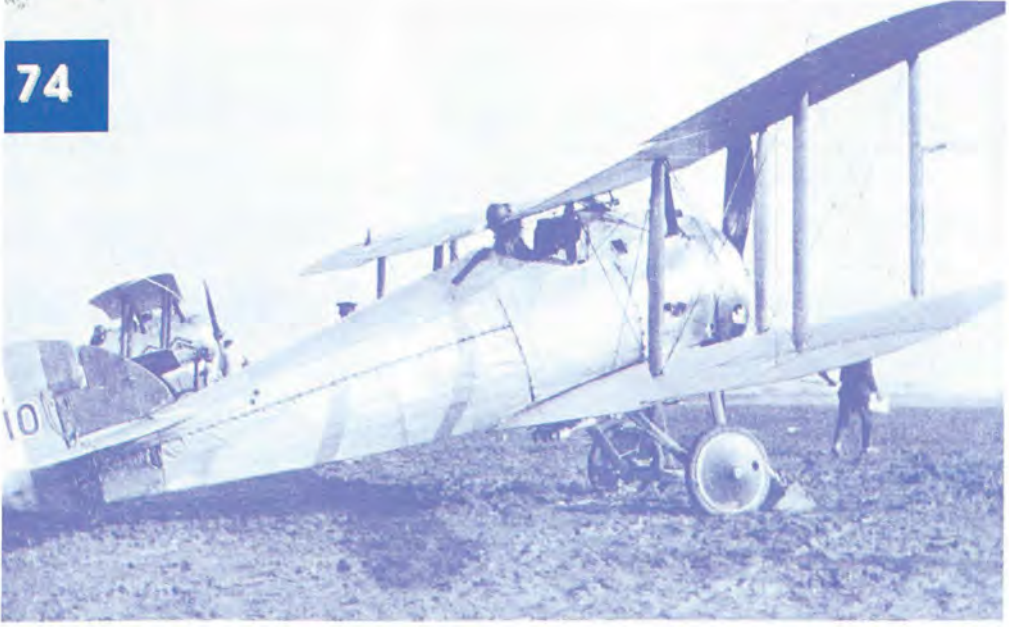


The Bristol F2B Fighter

Royal Air Force, 1918-1998

In April the Royal Air Force celebrated 80 years of service. Although this is a relatively short time compared to the length of service of the Royal Navy or the British Army, those 80 years witnessed an amazing growth in the capability and employment of air power. Through two World Wars, a difficult inter-war period, the uneasy Cold War, through to the present day coalition operations, the Royal Air Force has played a major role in the development of world air power.

The first official recognition of the enormous potential offered by air power came in 1911 with the formation of the Air Battalion of the Royal Engineers. Spurred on by the rapid growth of military aviation in France and Germany, the Air Battalion formed the nucleus of a new, expanded organisation created on 13 April 1912, the Royal Flying Corps. Originally consisting of fewer than 20 qualified pilots, the Corps was established with separate Military and Naval Wings, a Reserve of



The Sopwith Snipe was a worthy successor to the Camel and was still in use with the RAF in the early 1920s until replaced by the first of the post-war fighter designs

Officers, a Central Flying School and the Royal Aircraft Factory. The Naval Wing soon went its own way in both its concept of operations and its equipment and was officially retitled the Royal Naval Air Service in July 1914. The Military Wing in the meantime concentrated on developing its primary role of reconnaissance for the Army, playing an increasingly important role in a number of manoeuvres and trials.

In August 1914, while still in its infancy, the RFC was plunged into war, taking all available aeroplanes (63 in all) to France to support the British Expeditionary Force. Over the next four years the RFC gradually built up its strength and experience at no little cost in personnel and equipment. Although reconnaissance remained its major role, the Corps added new fighting aeroplanes like the DH2, Sopwith Camel and the SE5 to protect its vulnerable observation aeroplanes from the German Air Service. The precarious balance of air superiority over the Western Front swung back and forth throughout the war, the RFC's most desperate struggle occurring during the spring of 1917 when the Corps lost 316 pilots and observers during a single month.

The new service

The development of British air power during the First World War was far from smooth. Beset by problems of administration and supply and faced with the technical difficulties inevitable with a new technology, the organisation of the British air services became a constant source of public and Parliamentary attention. Many of these problems were related to the diverse, often conflicting, requirements of the War Office and the Admiralty. Thoughts about a unified, independent air arm were voiced as early as 1916 but the final impetus was given by the poor response by the Royal Flying Corps and Royal Naval Air Service to the German Zeppelin and aeroplane raids on England in 1916 and 1917. Shocked into action, the Government approached General Smuts to investigate and advise upon the future direction of British air power. The end result was the creation of the world's first major independent air arm, the Royal Air Force, which came into being on 1 April 1918 under the command of Major General Sir Hugh Trenchard, known to many as the 'Father of the RAF' .

The new RAF was created at the height of the great German spring offensive of 1918 which threatened to push the Allied armies all the way back to Paris and force a capitulation. That this was not achieved was due in no small way to the part played by the RAF in blunting the German advance and then in supporting the subsequent British counter-attack in the summer. Fierce fighting continued throughout 1918 despite severe weather which often turned airfields into quagmires. Newer aeroplanes continued to replace older types. The Sopwith Snipe and the Dolphin, both introduced in 1918, were a match for any of the German fighters and the DH9A was probably the finest day bomber of the war.

Although the concentration of effort fell quite properly upon the campaign in France and Flanders, the RAF and its predecessors were also engaged in air operations in many other theatres between 1914 and 1918. British airmen fought successful campaigns in Palestine, Iraq and the Mediterranean and took part in minor actions in India and East Africa. Home defence and anti-submarine operations in the North Sea were also important roles for the air services.

A major innovation in the application of air power in 1918, and one which was to have far-reaching consequences, was the creation of the RAF's Independent Force. Intended specifically for the strategic bombing of enemy territory, its main targets were military and industrial installations, railways and airfields. Although the material results of the Independent Force's operations were meagre when compared with later bombing campaigns, the effect on the enemy's morale was significant. Day raids by DH4s and DH9s and night raids by the large Handley Page 0/400s penetrated as far into Germany as Frankfurt and Stuttgart and plans were well advanced for the Handley Page V/1500 to bomb Berlin when the Armistice curtailed the air offensive in November 1918.

Growing pains

With the end of the First World War and as a consequence of the country's economic situation, the RAF was virtually demobilised. From a strength of over 22,000 aircraft and some 300,000 officers and men serving in November 1918, the RAF was reduced to about 4,000 aircraft and 35,000 personnel over the next 12 months. Trenchard almost had to start from scratch to rebuild the RAF on a peacetime basis. That in itself was difficult enough but he also had to fend off successive attempts by the Admiralty to return control of the 'Naval' squadrons to the Royal Navy, thereby threatening the RAF's already precarious independence. In fact, the ship-borne squadrons of the Fleet Air Arm remained administratively a part of the RAF until 1937 when they were finally transferred to the Royal Navy. A chronic shortage of funds for defence also served to make the immediate post-war years a most difficult period for the junior service.

Small though the RAF was compared to its wartime strength, there was still plenty of work for it to do. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s the RAF was involved in a succession of small-scale campaigns and emergency actions overseas. In 1919 it was in action in Russia, Egypt and Afghanistan. The following year, air power was successfully used in Sudan, Somaliland and Mesopotamia. Rebel forces in the North West Frontier of India and in Iraq, Kurdistan and Aden were particularly troublesome during the 1920s, requiring a number of policing or air control actions to be mounted. Until 1937, more than one-third of the RAF's front-line squadrons were based overseas protecting the outposts of the British Empire and gaining valuable operational experience in the process.

The pioneering years

However, not all the RAF's achievements during the inter-war years were concerned with warlike activities. Although the technical development of aviation had been accelerated by four years of war, it was almost entirely concerned with the making of more efficient fighting machines. Any thoughts of developing the great potential offered by air transport had, of necessity, to wait for the end of hostilities in Europe. As civil aviation barely existed as such in 1919, it fell to the RAF, having the required equipment and experience, to pioneer Britain's early air routes.

The RAF has always had a major investment in the anti-shipping role and the Vickers Vildebeest of 1933 could carry an 18-inch torpedo but only at a mere 90mph!

The first requirement was to set up an air mail and staff transport service between London and Paris during the Peace Conference in 1919. Using mostly bomber aircraft, the RAF then pioneered an air mail service between Cairo and Baghdad in 1921. This entailed crossing the Syrian desert by following a ploughed track which was sometimes obliterated by sandstorms and floods in the rainy season! In 1925 a route from Cairo to Kano was flown and in the following year the first of what became an annual flight from Cairo to the Cape was made by four Fairey IIIDs. Flying boats were also used extensively on long-range flights and were especially useful in opening up the routes to Egypt, India and the Far East. Many of the air routes pioneered by the RAF were later handed over to Imperial Airways which became responsible for the development of international commercial aviation.

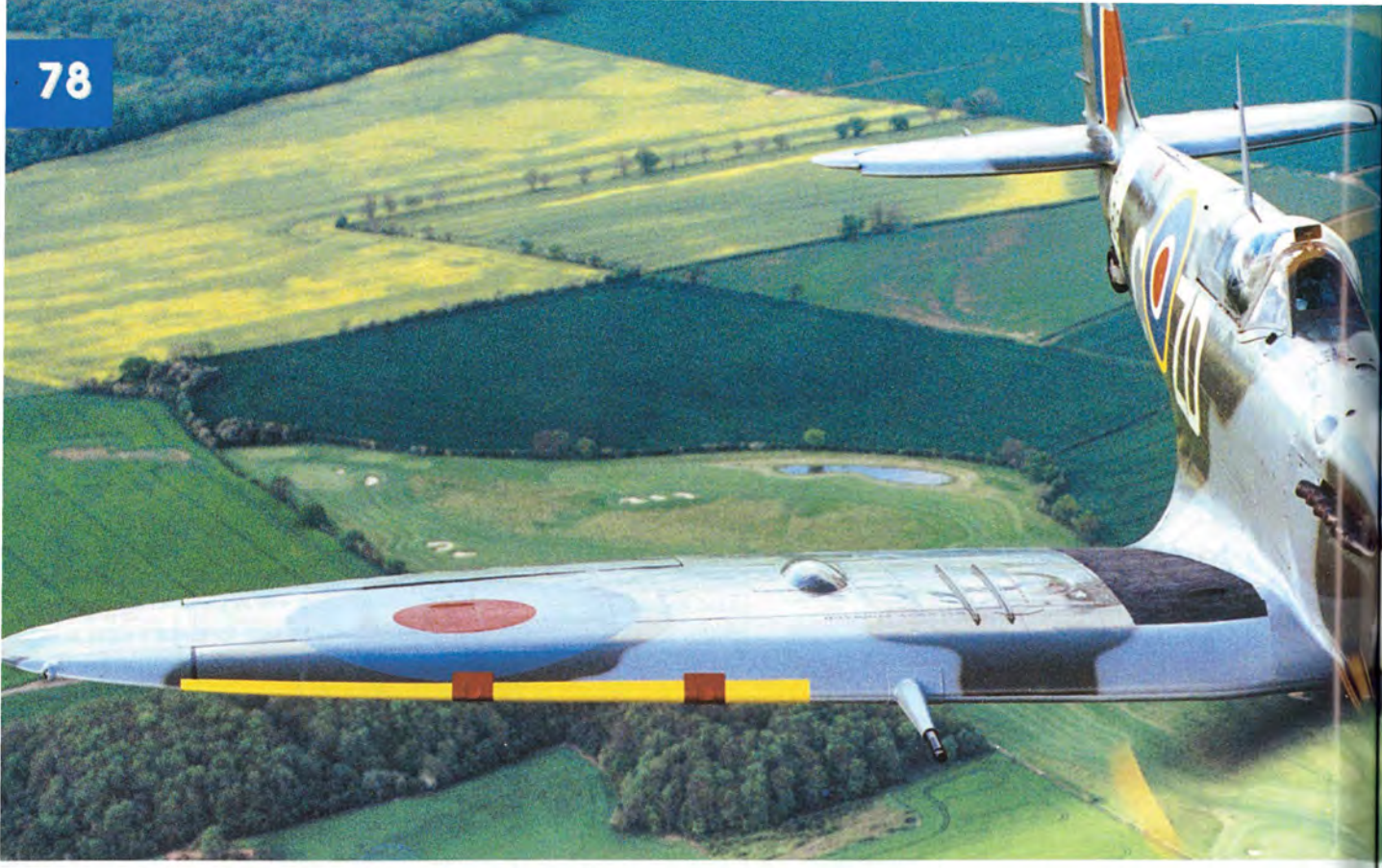
In these pioneering days the RAF gained a number of long-distance air records, culminating in the World Distance Record for non-stop flight in 1938, which was won by 2 crews flying Vickers Wellesleys from Egypt to Australia. In addition to providing useful publicity, these flights were valuable in proving the viability of long-range air reinforcement. Several other air records fell to the

RAF during the inter-war period. In 1927 the RAF High Speed Flight was formed to win for Britain the coveted Schneider Trophy, a feat which it accomplished in 3 successive races, thereby retaining the trophy forever. A few days after the final victory in September 1931, Flt Lt George Stainforth gained the World Air Speed Record in a Supermarine S6B flown at 407 mph. This aircraft and its superb Rolls-Royce engine were to have a profound effect on fighter aircraft design in the years that followed. Finally, in 1937, the RAF also took the World Altitude Record during a research programme undertaken at the Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough with a specialised Bristol 138A monoplane which reached 54,000 feet.

The North American B-25 Mitchell typifies the many excellent types supplied to the RAF by the USA during the Second World War.

Aside from the record breakers, the technical development of ordinary service aircraft during the 1920s and 1930s was painfully slow. Indeed, as late as 1926 the RAF was still equipped predominantly with First World War designs and three of these, the Avro 504, Bristol F2B and DH9A, soldiered on into the early 1930s. The fighter aircraft of this period, although undeniably beautiful with their silver doped fabric painted in colourful squadron markings, offered little improvement over their ancestors of 1918. So strong was the reliance on the outdated biplane design configuration that

the RAF's last biplane fighter, the Gladiator, entered service in March 1937, only 9 months before the Hurricane, the first of the 8-gun monoplane fighters. In bomber design, too, the large biplane bombers like the Virginia and the Heyford gave way only slowly to newer types such as the Hampden and the Wellington. With the introduction of improved aircraft came other technical developments, the most important of which was the invention and employment of radar as part of Fighter Command's early warning system. Developed later for other applications, radar was to have a crucial effect on the outcome of any future air war.



Expansion for war

Throughout the 1930s the resurgence and rapid growth of military power in Germany had become an increasing cause for concern. As a response in 1934 the first of a succession of Expansion Schemes was announced for the RAF. As the international situation worsened, the Schemes demanded more and more and soon outstripped Britain's industrial capability. In 1936 the home commands were reorganised in preparation for a massive increase in strength. In the same year the RAF Volunteer Reserve was formed to raise extra pilots and to supplement the Auxiliary Air Force and Reserve of Air Force Officers which had been set up in the 1920s. The Munich crisis of September 1938 provided an added impetus to the Expansion Programme and helped move the RAF closer to a readiness for war.

There is no doubt that when war finally broke out in September 1939, Britain's armed forces were still far from being fully prepared. Numerically inferior, the RAF also lacked the experience of modern aerial warfare which the Luftwaffe had acquired during the Spanish Civil War. It was indeed most fortunate that the so-called 'Phoney-War' period provided 8 months of badly needed breathing space in which to build up strength and re-equip with new aircraft types. During the German Blitzkrieg which devastated France and the Low Countries in May 1940, the RAF fought valiantly against great odds and provided air cover from airfields in France and England for the retreating British and French forces. The losses were enormous, amounting to about half of the RAF's frontline strength, and would have been even greater had not Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding insisted that his fighters be conserved for the defence of the UK.

The Battle of Britain and the Bomber Offensive

The RAF's magnificent defence against the German onslaught during the Battle of Britain is now legendary. Against odds of four to one, Fighter Command's pilots and groundcrews operated their

The Supermarine Spitfire was built in greater numbers than any other British aircraft and served with RAF operational squadrons between 1938 and 1951

Spitfires and Hurricanes, often beyond human endurance, to defeat the Luftwaffe and put an end to Hitler's plans to invade Britain. Helped by radar and an efficient system of aircraft control from sector stations like Biggin Hill, Hornchurch and Tangmere, Fighter Command withstood each successive wave of German bombers and their Messerschmitt fighter escorts despite serious damage to many airfields and a growing shortage of experienced pilots. Victory, when it came, was by a very narrow margin indeed. Although the Luftwaffe lost a total of 1,887 aircraft and over 2,600 airmen, the much smaller Fighter Command lost 1,023 fighters with 537 pilots killed. It took many months to replace these grievous losses and rebuild the Command in terms of both strength and experience.

Fighter Command's brilliant performance during the daylight fighting in the Battle of Britain could not, however, be reproduced in the subsequent German night offensive against towns and cities in the South and Midlands. By the middle of 1941 the Blitz had visited many parts of England, causing particularly severe damage to London, Southampton, Portsmouth and Coventry. The RAF's night fighter forces and equipment at this stage were totally inadequate and it was not until the radar-equipped Beaufighters and Mosquitos entered service that any real defence against night raids could be offered.

The summer of 1940 may have been the 'finest hour' for the fighters but that of the bombers had yet to come. In September 1939 Bomber Command had fewer than 400 operationally ready aircraft, including many obsolescent Hampdens and Battles. It fell to the more capable Wellingtons and Whitleys to carry the offensive to Germany for the first 2 years of the war. Like the Luftwaffe, Bomber Command soon gave up daylight raids and operated mostly at night and even then suffered severe losses. The first of the RAF's 4-engined bombers, the Stirling, entered service in February 1941 and was joined soon after by the Halifax and then by the Lancaster a year later. By the middle of 1943 the 4-engined 'heavies', using rudimentary forms of electronic warfare equipment, were bearing the brunt of the bomber offensive.

Coastal Command and overseas operations

Just as important as the Battle of Britain or the bomber offensive was Coastal Command's struggle against the U-boat. From the day war broke out through to VE-day, the Command's Sunderlands, Hudsons, Liberators and Wellingtons waged an unremitting and initially unrewarding war against the deadly submarines which threatened Britain's lifelines. Through technological developments such as the Leigh Light and ASV radar, and through the immense determination and tenacity of its aircrew, Coastal Command played a major role alongside the Royal Navy in defeating the submarine menace. By May 1945 the RAF had destroyed 186 German submarines while air power as a whole accounted for around 50% of all U-boats sunk at sea during the Second World War.

Elsewhere in the world, commitments were considerable. In the Middle East and North Africa, after initial setbacks, the RAF played a major part in defeating the Axis forces. A brilliantly coordinated and executed close air support and interdiction campaign in support of the Eighth Army drove Rommel's army into the sea, thus securing the Mediterranean for the Allies. The invasion of Italy, using the once-beleagured island of Malta as a forward base, marked a further milestone in the war and illustrated the increasingly close cooperation between the RAF and the United States Army Air Force.

In the Far East, the swing from the defensive to the offensive was a little later in coming. The fall of Malaya and Singapore had been a major blow and the RAF was hard-pressed to offer any effective resistance to the well-equipped and relentless Japanese invasion forces. After re-equipping with more modern aircraft, including Spitfires, Hurricanes, Mosquitos and Thunderbolts, the RAF fought back alongside the USAAF and eventually annihilated the Japanese air forces in Burma. A major feature of the air war in the Far East was the extensive use of transport aircraft, mostly American-built Dakotas, to resupply troops at forward bases in the jungle. This experience in airborne operations would later be of great value during the fight to regain a foothold in Europe.

Invasion and victory

In Britain, preparations for the invasion of Northwest Europe were proceeding with Bomber Command, the US 8th Air Force and the newly-formed Allied Expeditionary Air Force's fighter

The Avro Shackleton maritime patrol aircraft was a development of the Lincoln bomber and served from 1951 to 1971 as the RAF's main ASW aircraft until replaced by the Nimrod

bombers blasting railways, bridges and other lines of communication throughout Northern France. During D-day itself the RAF flew 5,656 sorties, encountering little opposition from the Luftwaffe. The subsequent break-out from the beach-heads and the advance across France and the Low Countries was helped by Spitfires, Typhoons, Tempests and Mustangs which were called in whenever resistance was encountered. A series of airborne operations dropping paratroops or landing troops by glider were also mounted, although the operations at Arnhem illustrated that mistakes could be made even at this late stage of the war. Counter-measures against Hitler's V-weapons also engaged the RAF's attention at this time. The V-1 Flying Bomb was dealt with by fighters and anti-aircraft guns and by the destruction of their launch sites, but the only way to stop the V-2 rocket was to bomb the production facilities and hinder their movement by rail.

The last 2 years of the war had seen Bomber Command grow into an immensely powerful force of some 2,000 bombers. In conjunction with the US 8th Air Force, which commenced its daylight offensive from Britain in August 1942, Bomber Command took the war right into the heart of Germany, destroying military and industrial centres at great cost to itself. In fact, of the 70,253 RAF aircrew killed or missing during operations in the Second World War, no fewer than 47,293 were from Bomber Command. The contributions of the RAF to the final victory were as many and as varied as were the people who made up its ranks. In addition to men and women from Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and other parts of the Commonwealth, many thousands came from the occupied European countries, Poland and France in particular, to swell its ranks.

Although there was not such a drastic reduction in the strength of the RAF in 1945 as there had been in l919, the Service still had to make major readjustments from war to peace. Britain still had many overseas commitments which were expensive to maintain and there was now a new danger, the so-called 'Cold War' policies which emanated from the Soviet Union. Added to this, the invention of the atomic bomb radically changed defence strategy and would eventually reshape the post-war RAF into a leaner, yet more powerful force. In other areas of technology, too, changes were on the way. The RAF's first jet-powered aircraft, the Meteor, had already entered service before the end of the war and by 1952 Fighter Command was completely re-equipped with jets. In 1951 the Canberra, Britain's first operational jet bomber, entered service and was followed 4 years later by the Valiant, the first of the mighty V-bombers.

Post-war operations

As in the I 920s, the immediate post-Second World War period saw the RAF involved in a number of actions overseas. The Berlin Crisis of 1948 was the first example of the Soviet Union's confrontational tactics with the West. In response to the city's isolation by the Russians, the Allies airlifted over 2.3 million tons of food, coal and other supplies from the Western Zone to Berlin. The RAF's Dakota, York and Hastings transport aircraft made a major contribution to the airlift, as did a very effective ground movements organisation which ensured the efficient flow of aircraft and freight.

Problems in other parts of the world also occupied the RAF in 1948. In Palestine, the end of the British Mandate and the subsequent creation of the state of Israel was accompanied by fighting between Arabs and Jews, with the RAF caught in the crossfire. In Malaya, a serious uprising by communist-inspired rebels caused an official State of Emergency to be declared which lasted for 12 years. The RAF played a major part in defeating the terrorists in their jungle and mountain hideouts during Operation Firedog. It was in Malaya that the Services first made extensive use of helicopters for troop transport and casualty evacuation. Ground attack aircraft and even heavy bombers were also used to great effect during the long campaign. The RAF's part in the Korean War was confined mainly to coastal patrols by Sunderland flying boats and the movement of troops and equipment for the British Army units fighting in Korea, although a number of RAF pilots did take an active part in the air war whilst attached to American or Australian squadrons.

In other trouble spots, too, the RAF was back in action during the 1950s. In Kenya its aircraft were surprisingly successful in combating the elusive Mau-Mau terrorist gangs and in Cyprus another limited air campaign was mounted against the EOKA guerillas whose mountain retreats were captured by troops delivered by helicopter. In contrast to these lengthy but small-scale actions, the British and French airborne assault and capture of the Suez Canal in October 1956 gave an opportunity to employ the full range of capabilities and was accomplished with the minimum of casualties.

In service with the RAF during the 1970s and 1980s the McDonnell Douglas F-4 Phantom eventually replaced most of the RAF's Lightning squadrons

The 1957 Defence Review which, amongst other things, prematurely predicted the demise of the manned aircraft in favour of the missile, was a major blow. It did, however, highlight Britain's role in NATO which, since its formation in 1949, had played an increasingly significant part in the defence of the Western world. One of the material benefits of NATO membership was the supply of American aircraft to the RAF under the Mutual Defence Assistance Programme which in many ways was similar to the wartime Lend-Lease Scheme under which thousands of American aircraft were supplied to Britain. The 1957 Defence Review also reaffirmed the assumption of the nuclear deterrence role by the growing V-force which, by May 1962, consisted of 21 squadrons of Valiants, Victors and Vulcans. This force provided Britain's prime nuclear deterrent until 1969 when the Royal Navy's Polaris-armed submarines took over the commitment. Throughout the 1950s and subsequent decades the RAF's role in Germany in support of NATO became of paramount importance.

Throughout the 1960s the RAF continued to demonstrate its abilities by responding to a series of conflicts and emergencies within Britain's contracting sphere of international influence. A crisis between Kuwait and Iraq in 1961 was nipped in the bud by a rapid build-up of British forces in the Persian Gulf. Rebellions in Brunei and Sarawak in 1962 were put down by British troops flown in and supported by the RAF. A 4-year period of 'Confrontation' with Indonesia started in 1963 with the RAF protecting Singapore and Borneo from armed insurgents. Tribal and political unrest in Oman and the Aden Protectorate were subdued thanks largely to the RAF. The massive air evacuation of British servicemen and their families and civilians from Aden in 1967 was just one of several evacuations performed by Transport Command in the post-1945 period. In addition, many relief operations and 'mercy missions' were flown during this period, especially in Africa, Central America and the Far East where flood, famine and storm damage caused severe hardship to the local populations.

Against this background of almost constant activity, the RAF was attempting to modernise its equipment, although Government cuts in defence spending forced the cancellation of several projects and orders during this period. The Lightning replaced the Hunter as the main air defence fighter in the early 1960s and was itself supplemented by the American-built Phantom in 1974. The world's first operational vertical take-off and landing aircraft, the Harrier, entered service in 1969 and has since provided valuable experience of this unique and very flexible form of air power. Following the order and subsequent cancellation of the TSR2 and the F-111 to supplement the V-bombers, the Royal Navy's Buccaneer was adapted to RAF requirements and proved to be a very effective low-level strike aircraft. In the maritime role, the Nimrod replaced the Shackleton which had been in service since 1951 but the transport fleet was cut drastically following the withdrawal from long-range overseas commitments so that by 1977 the Britannias, Comets and Belfasts had all gone, leaving just the Hercules and VC 10 in service. An overall reduction in size and the consolidation of roles also resulted in a more simplified command structure. The eight major home commands which

had existed prior to 1967 were reduced to just Strike Command and Support Command in the UK with RAF Germany being the only surviving overseas formation.

Compared to the previous 50 years, the 1970s and 1980s were decades of peace and stability for Britain. Overseas commitments outside of NATO were reduced to a low level but still had to be planned for and occasionally put into operation when the need arose. A small force of Harriers and Pumas were deployed to Belize in 1975 due to tension with neighbouring Guatemala, and Wessex helicopters have only recently been withdrawn from policing duties in Hong Kong following its return to Chinese authority. A squadron of Wessex still remains in Cyprus supporting British forces as part of a wider United Nations presence. The Falklands War of 1982 saw RAF Harriers operated from the aircraft carrier HMS Hermes, while a single Chinook heavy-lift helicopter performed nigh incredible feats of airlift for the Army. In addition to the units with the Task Force, the RAF also set up a massive airlift of supplies to the 'forward' base at Ascension Island and provided strategic reconnaissance of the South Atlantic. Many noteworthy flights were made during the 10-week war, including five 7,700-mile bombing missions by Vulcans and several extreme-range ferry flights by Harrier reinforcements flying direct from Ascension to the Task Force. None of this would have been possible without the efforts of the Victor tanker force. Today, RAF forces remain based at the airfield at Mount Pleasant to guarantee the future security of the islands.

The commitment to provide emergency relief has also continued. The rapid response to the Mexico City earthquake and the Ethiopian famine are but two examples. The RAF's capability to provide humanitarian aid has fallen largely on the air transport force, especially the Hercules Wing based at Lyneham, as well as the helicopter squadrons based in the UK and Germany.

The 1980s saw a much-needed re-equipment of the RAF's front-line squadrons, headed by the introduction of the multi-national, multi-role Tornado. The Tornado replaced a number of older aircraft, including the Vulcan, Jaguar, Buccaneer, Phantom and Lightning. The Tornado GR1 strike version entered operational service in June 1982 while the air defence Tornado F.3 became operational in November 1987. The Tornado will remain the RAF's main front-line type well into the next century. The early variants of the Harrier have now been replaced by the much improved Harrier GR.7 night attack version while the Boeing Sentry AWACS aircraft has greatly enhanced the UK's air defence system.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 drew a massive response from a coalition of allied nations led by the USA with Britain providing a significant proportion of the forces involved. RAF Tornado fighters were among the first allied aircraft to be deployed to Saudi Arabia and these were later joined by Tornado strike and reconnaissance aircraft, Jaguars and Buccaneers. The operational aircraft were supported by Victor and Tristar tankers and RAF helicopters and Hercules supported ground forces in the desert. When the air war commenced on 17 January 1991 the RAF played a full part in the neutralisation of the Iraqi Air Force and air defence system and in the hunt for Scud missile launchers.

The tri-national Multi-Role Combat Aircraft programme eventually produced the Tornado which in its GR1 version equips most of the RAF's front-line offensive squadrons

During the 1990s the British armed forces have been the subject of a number of studies and initiatives which have resulted from the need to ensure that the ever-tighter defence budget is spent to the best possible effect. The ending of the Cold War has not resulted in the expected 'Peace Dividend' but it has had a major affect on the RAF, the most obvious being the reduction of deployed forces in Germany. All areas of the RAF have experienced either cutbacks, restructuring or privatisation during the past few years with an emphasis on reducing expenditure on the support areas so that front line forces can be maintained to the highest possible standard.

Despite the demise of the Cold War, the RAF has been called upon to play its part on the world stage in the 1990s, not just as part of the coalition in the Middle East but in Bosnia and Rwanda. RAF transport aircraft, helicopters and offensive aircraft have supported the United Nations' operations in Bosnia since the early days of the conflict and remain a vital part of the allied force which monitors the region. Following the Rwandan civil war, the RAF provided both humanitarian aid to refugees and air reconnaissance to track the movement of refugees into Zaire. RAF forces continue to be deployed to Turkey and the Persian Gulf to monitor Iraq's military capabilities and intentions.

The RAF has come a long way from its humble beginnings as the RFC in 1912 and its stormy rebirth in 1918. It has made a major contribution to success in two World Wars and in numerous lesser conflicts. It has survived the ravages of politics and economic recessions. It has grown in strength and stature through times of great adversity and uncertainty to become one of the most respected and capable air forces in the world today. It was born in war and has been engaged in some form of conflict for 55 of its 80 years but its role today and in the future is to maintain the peace which has been won at such enormous cost by previous generations. To do this it must maintain a strong and effective posture achieved through a combination of first-class leadership, thorough and realistic training and advanced technology. It is with this in mind that the Royal Air Force looks forward to another 80 years of service.