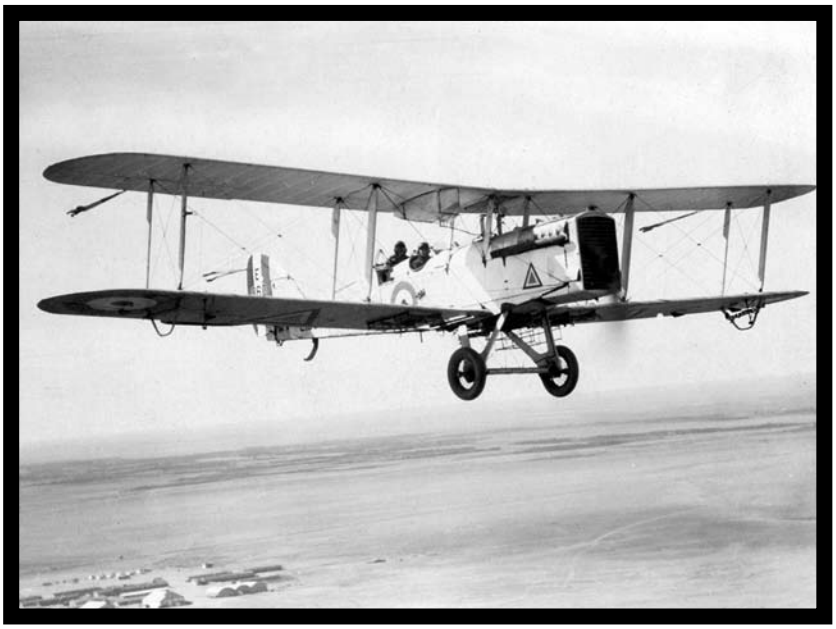

A DH9A ('Ninak') of No 84 Squadron over Shaibah, Iraq

Ruling the Empire out of the Central Blue

The Royal Air Force and Counter-Insurgency (COIN) Operations in the Inter-War Period

By Dr David Hall

The history of the Royal Air Force throughout the inter-war period is inexorably linked to two distinct paths of development: strategic bombing and imperial policing or air control.1

In 1919, the former was little more than a revolutionary theory for waging future high intensity war without having to either engage in or endure the horrific campaigns of attrition characteristic of much of the recently ended fighting on the Western Front. The latter was a cost-effective application of air power in response to a growing number of post-war security problems around the Empire. At a time when the government slashed the defence budget, and questioned both the affordability and the military necessity of an independent air force, air control and imperial policing ensured the survival of the RAF.

Air Marshal Sir Hugh Trenchard, the Chief of the Air Staff (CAS), proved to be an able champion for his Service. In RAF circles the story was often told in legendary form and acted out in pantomime. The air force was the beleaguered maiden, the army and the navy were the dragon and its mate, and Trenchard was St. George.[2] Sadly, there was a lot of truth behind this imagery. Throughout the 1920s and at least the first half of the 1930s, the RAF did wage a desperate fight in Whitehall just to survive. Writing about this period at a much later date, Marshal of the RAF Sir John Slessor wrote: '... the fact is that during the formative years we were literally battling for the life of the RAF against the forces of military reaction'.[3] Trenchard, to his credit, saw very clearly that if the RAF was to remain an independent Service it needed not only a strategic justification but also an immediate, visible and practical role.

The senior Services had always assumed that the independent air force was an aberration of the last war and that it had nothing to contribute to the traditional imperial responsibilities of the armed services during times of European peace. Their feelings about the post-war RAF were clear: the sooner it was broken up the better. Trenchard remained defiant. He was determined to keep the RAF alive and independent. His rationale for maintaining a separate air service rested on his firmly held conviction that neither the War Office nor the Admiralty had either the ability or the desire to advance the development of air power properly. Responding to one of many General Staff memoranda, which claimed that air forces were nothing more than an appendage of the senior services, Trenchard wrote:

> *The nation that considers and develops its air forces as an auxiliary arm to the older services will suffer a rude awakening if faced by a nation which has recognised that the air may become a primary medium of war and has developed its air power accordingly*.[4]

In his endeavours to work out the RAF's salvation, Trenchard found an unlikely ally in Winston Churchill, Secretary of State for Air and War, and the very minister originally appointed to 'close up' the new service. Significantly, Churchill also had a keen interest in the British Empire. He worried about the long-term state of imperial security in the light of the government's drive for economy and the savage defence cuts. Churchill saw in air power the great possibility of a marriage between economy on the one hand and the maintenance of law and order around the empire on the other. Should it work, he believed that small numbers

of aircraft and local levies might be substituted for large numbers British troops and expensive garrisons.[5] Trenchard too had given serious thought to a similar imperial role for the fledgling RAF. In a memorandum dated 14 August 1919, the CAS pointed out the large scope that existed for independent air forces to carry out small imperial policing operations more economically and more expeditiously than ground forces.[6] Over the next four months a series of memoranda passed between Churchill and Trenchard in an attempt to work out the details. Together they produced a scheme for controlling native populations in underdeveloped areas by using small mobile forces that combined aircraft, armoured cars and local levies. By early December their work was complete. A Command Paper was published and Churchill presented its contents to both Houses of Parliament.[7]

Air control and home defence were to be the twin pillars of the RAF's peace-time raison d'etre. Trenchard had not given up on the strategic bombing role. It was the core of the independent air force's original mandate, and he believed it would play a predominant role in European warfare in the future. In the meantime its development would have to wait. By accepting new imperial responsibilities the CAS had wisely elected to operate within the government's new guidelines of economy. Success in this role to a large degree preserved the RAF's independence during the early twenties.[8]

British Somaliland, 1919

The RAF's first opportunity to demonstrate its new imperial policing role came at the end of 1919 in British Somaliland (now Somalia). Since

DH9s of Z-Force at Berbera

the 1890s colonial administration in this British protectorate had been threatened by the political ambitions of a charismatic Muslim cleric Said Mohammed Bin Abdulla Hussan, more colloquially, if unfortunately, known as the Mad Mullah. Before the 1914-1918 War the British Army mounted four punitive expeditions against this religious fanatic and his following of up to 10,000 Dervishes. All four had proved to be expensive and inconclusive. Each time the Mullah survived to resume his violent practices against his fellow countrymen and British rule alike. During the Great War the British government ignored the problems in Somaliland but in 1919 it resolved to settle accounts. The Army, however, was not so enthusiastic. Reluctant to become involved in yet another protracted imperial venture, the War Office submitted an exaggerated estimate of the cost of a further punitive expedition: an expeditionary force of two or three divisions at the cost of several million pounds. Sir Geoffrey Archer, the Governor of the Protectorate, suggested an alternative approach.[9] He proposed the use of air forces as a costcutting measure and as a way to reduce to a lower scale the number of British soldiers required for the operation. His plan called for the deployment of

a joint force that included one RAF squadron working in collaboration with the local gendarmerie regiment, the Somaliland Camel Corps and a battalion of the King's African Rifles. The General Staff scoffed at this suggestion. They claimed that such a campaign would be a total failure and that ultimately the Army would have to be called in 'to rescue [the] aeroplanes and clear up the mess' in extremely unfavourable circumstances.[10]

Ignoring the complaints made by the War Office, the Air Ministry and the Colonial Office decided to press ahead with their plans for the up-coming joint campaign. In January 1920, a RAF detachment, including one flight of six DH9 reconnaissance/light bombers and a further flight of six DH9s in reserve, concentrated at Berbera under the command of Group Captain R Gordon. Known as 'Z Force', the limited number of RAF aircraft began operations on 21 January with a series of surprise raids on the Mullah's forces, bombing and strafing both them and their traditional stone forts. These few RAF aircraft struck a powerful psychological blow against the Mullah's own headquarters and drove his harried forces out of their fortifications. By mid-February the dispersed Dervish forces had been rounded up by the troops of the Somaliland Camel Corps and the King's African Rifles. Although the Mullah himself managed to escape with a few followers into neighbouring Abyssinia he never set foot in the Protectorate again. The campaign had been a complete success and it was accomplished at an astoundingly low cost of only £84,000.[11]

Iraq 1920-1932

Less than a month after Z Force's stunning success in Somaliland the RAF was offered five to six million pounds to accept full responsibility for policing Mesopotamia (Iraq) and Jordan. Turkish designs on the region, escalating financial costs of maintaining authority, worryingly high casualty returns, and the RAF's recently proven success, convinced the government that it should continue the experiment with air control. Two years would pass before the Air Force assumed this leading role but during the interval the government stayed the course on its far-reaching decision to hand over the main responsibility for Iraq to the RAF. The transfer of authority proceeded despite extreme War Office opposition, including the General Staff's desire for a 'total and immediate evacuation' of the region rather than accede to the new RAF mandate.[12] Policing the empire soon became the main effort of the small RAF. In 1921, the front-line strength of the RAF numbered some 19 squadrons. Five were based in the UK (four army co-operation squadrons and one fighter squadron) and the rest were deployed around the empire. Of the RAF's remaining fourteen squadrons, five were stationed in Egypt, four each were deployed in India and Iraq and one was posted out to the Far East.

On 1 October 1922, the RAF took over control of all British military forces in Iraq.[13] Under the command of Air Vice-Marshal Sir John Salmond, the joint force consisted of eight RAF squadrons and four RAF armoured car companies, 15,000 Iraqi levies and police, and six Indian army brigades and supporting troops. The financing of these substantial ground forces came from the Iraqi state treasury and the Indian state military budget respectively. Thus, when the government announced

that all British army forces had been pulled out of Iraq at great savings to the taxpayer it was technically telling the truth on the financial benefits of 'substitution'. Land forces, however, along with the force multiplying effect of flexible air forces, played a major role in maintaining order in Iraq throughout the whole period of the British mandate.[14]

Sopwith Snipes of No 1 Squadron near Hinaidi, 1923

RAF operations against Kurd and Arab rebels were more extensive and varied than the simple bombing attacks of Force Z on overawed Somalis. Independent bombing attacks against enemy strongholds played their part but Salmond's squadrons also supported British and Indian troops in major brigade strength battles against well-armed and determined Iraqi insurgents. RAF operations throughout the 1920-1923 rebellions had much more in common with large-scale conventional war than merely repressive air policing. The air forces were engaged in fairly constant reconnaissance and bombing missions in support of the ground forces, flying troops and supplies into troubled areas, and the world's first air evacuation. In September 1922, in what was then an unprecedented air operation, RAF Vickers Vernon transports and DH9s lifted some 70 British troops and civilians, friendly local leaders and one dog out of harms way from Sulamaniya to Kirkuk. Taken altogether, air operations in Iraq were very cost effective and decisive in crushing the insurgents and, after the rebellions, in pacifying the region. Salmond, not surprisingly, was promoted to Air Marshal in recognition of his considerable achievements. Trenchard was also well aware of how important Salmond's successful command in Iraq was to the future of an independent air Service in Britain.[15]

The Colonial Office too was pleasantly surprised with the results, and it referred to the policy of air control in Iraq as being 'a conspicuous success'.[16] This latest triumph with air substitution encouraged the government to pursue further use of the RAF in similar circumstances in Aden, Palestine and Trans-Jordan, Egypt and the Sudan, and the North-West Frontier of India. Although the degree of overall military success enjoyed by the RAF varied considerably from region to region,[17] the resultant savings in manpower and treasure was a significant achievement.[18]

Air Control Policy and Practice in the 1920s and 1930s

Punitive expeditions to bring allegedly savage and often rebellious natives back into line were a brutal though long-established method of controlling the many disparate parts of the empire. When aircraft were added to the arsenal of Britain's imperial garrisons they provided a force multiplier: air substitution increased the repressive powers of imperial policing to the most remote and inhospitable rebel safe-havens. Extended range and greater reach were also accomplished with fewer forces thus enhancing security at lower costs in both British blood and treasure. The early experiments with air control in

Somaliland and Iraq proved to be a very effective means of projecting military power and maintaining a delicate balance of peace and stability in the more politically fractious parts of the Empire.

For many, however, air control was nothing more that blunt and brutal bombing operations. In 1921, Wing Commander J. A. Chamier wrote about the new repressive powers of air policing in the RUSI Journal: 'The attack with bombs and machine guns must be relentless and unremitting and carried on continuously by day and night, on houses, inhabitants, crops and cattle'.[19] He emphasised the brutal and indiscriminate nature of such attacks, accepting the fact that their sheer brutality had both physical and, perhaps more importantly, psychological benefits in bringing about a swift end to troublesome insurgents and terrorists. 'The threat alone in the future', Chamier concluded, 'will prove efficacious if the lesson is once properly learnt'.[20] Air control was in effect strategic bombing writ small.

The tactical environment of colonial policing did indeed seem to substantiate a key theoretical principle of strategic bombing – enemy morale was vulnerable to aerial bombardment. Early air control operations against local bandits and native rebels had proved that a short and sharp air attack often was enough to force them to surrender. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, RAF operations in the Middle East and the Asian Sub-Continent repeatedly demonstrated the devastating moral effect of bombing on ignorant natives and simple tribesmen. Practical experience acquired from these imperial air operations was further extrapolated by J.M. Spaight to demonstrate the value of psychological attacks on large populations by mass bombing and to justify the continued independence of the RAF. Independent bombing operations 'would paralyse the enemy's higher administration and weaken his will and capacity as a national organism to continue the struggle'.[21] By 1927 strategic bombing theory and practice had gone full circle in the laboratory of imperial air control.

Assessment and Conclusion

By successfully establishing for itself a role in Imperial defence, and having persuaded the politicians of its potential value as an economic force, the RAF survived the initial threat to its independence. Nevertheless, as late as 1921 the Army still maintained operational control over a full seventy-five percent of RAF squadrons;[22] and the policy of substitution had so poisoned relations between the two services that the Army was determined to seek the abolition of the separate air force once and for all. The General Staff severely criticised the two major roles claimed for the RAF by the Air Ministry. They insisted that aircraft would be exploited to the full only when grafted onto the well-established and war-proven stocks of the older services. They also questioned the financial expense of maintaining a separate Air Ministry, and called for a searching enquiry to review future air administration and expenditure.[23] Trenchard could barely contain his anger over the War Office's latest attacks. In a draft letter to his Minister he wrote:

... one cannot argue with an Army officer [Field Marshal Wilson] who cannot see beyond the walls of his office, who cannot realise the value of mechanical appliances in substitution of manpower; who thinks

in mere masses of men, who has no conception of the value of speed and time ...[24]

Trenchard never sent the letter nor did he reply in any official capacity to Wilson's numerous slurs or his outrageous attacks on the RAF. Instead, Trenchard prepared for the pending budgetary review. Before the Geddes Committee the CAS made sweeping claims for the efficacy of air power. The Admiralty and the War Office countered with their joint claim that eliminating the RAF would provide economies. Sir Eric Geddes disagreed with the senior Services and in his report he confirmed the need for maintaining an independent air force. Moreover, whilst the Committee recommended cuts in all three services, those directed at the RAF were less drastic, and they were to come at the expense of army and naval co-operation squadrons.[25]

The promise of imperial policing 'on the cheap' had served its purpose and maintained the RAF's continued independence thereby safeguarding strategic air forces and offensive air operations as key components in Britain's national defence. It also ushered in the era of joint expeditionary operations conducted by small and overstretched British forces in an increasingly hostile and unsettled world. The RAF continued to play its part in policing the Empire throughout the 1930s but the impact of these operations on the development of air control (counter-insurgency) doctrine and policy was restricted to local stations, the operational diaries of a few squadrons and the personal scribbling of a small number of enthusiastic junior air force commanders. With Hitler's rise to power in 1933, both the British government and the Air Staff turned their attention to the more pressing matters of home air defence. July 1934 saw the promulgation of the first of eight air expansion schemes tabled between 1934 and 1939, with the National Government announcing an initial increase in the size of the Metropolitan Air Forces from 52 to 75 front-line squadrons. A further 53 squadrons were to be raised over the next five year, thereby increasing the size of the home RAF to 128 front-line squadrons. Two years later on 14 July 1936, a direct result of the air expansion schemes, the Air Council re-organised the RAF into four functional commands: Bomber Command, Fighter Command, Coastal Command and Training Command. Two additional commands were formed in 1938, RAF Maintenance Command and RAF Balloon Command, with the latter deploying some 1,500 barrage balloons by the outbreak of the Second World War. An Imperial Air Command was not considered and even army co-operation had to wait until December 1940, six months after the disastrous Battle of France, before Army Co-operation Command was formed under the command of Air Marshal Sir Arthur Barratt. Some sixty years would pass before the RAF would develop a comprehensive doctrine and an appropriate command structure to apply the full potential of air power on counter-insurgency (COIN) operations.

Notes

1 For a brief history of the RAF during the Inter-War Period see AP 3003 'A Brief History of the Royal Air Force' (Norwich: HMSO, 2004) chapter 2, pp.49-90. See also Norman Gibbs, Grand Strategy v.1 (London: HMSO, 1976) chapters XIV and XV; Sir Charles Webster and Noble Frankland, The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany v.1 (London: HMSO, 1961) pp.1-65; Malcolm Smith, British Air

Strategy Between the Wars (Oxford: OUP, 1984); Sir Maurice Dean, The Royal Air Force and Two World Wars (London: Cassell and Company, 1979); and Sir John Slessor, The Central Blue (London: Cassell, 1956) chapters II and III.

2 Sir M Dean, The Royal Air Force and Two World Wars p.34.

3 Liddell Hart Papers 1/644: 'Some Personal Reflections by MRAF Sir John Slessor' (September 1964) p.6.

4 The National Archives (henceforth TNA) AIR 8/2 Remarks by the Chief of the Air Staff on War Office Memorandum, 30 May 1921.

5 Martin Gilbert, Winston Churchill v.IV, 1917-1922 (London, Heinemann, 1975) p.197; also see David E Omissi, Air Power and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force, 1919-1939 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990) pp.16, 19-21.

6 Trenchard Papers: MFC 76/1/35 - Memorandum by CAS on Air Power and Imperial Defence, 14 August 1919.

7 Cmd. Paper 467, 19 December 1919.

8 TNA CAB 24/131 and 132 Interim Report of the Committee on National Expenditure CP3570, Dec. 1921 and Geddes Report CP3692; Air Commodore C F A Portal, 'British Air Control in Underdeveloped Areas', in Eugene Emme (ed.) The Impact of Air Power (Princeton, NJ: Van Nostrand, 1959) pp.351-362; Jafna L Cox, 'A Splendid Training Ground: The Importance to the Royal Air Force of its Role in Iraq 1919-1932', Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History v.8, no.2, January 1985; and David E Omissi, Air Power and Colonial Control pp.21, 29.

9 TNA AIR 2/12 Reports on Air Control (1920-1933); and AIR 10/1367 Notes on the History of the Employment of Air Power (1935).

10 Wilson to Trenchard in Andrew Boyle, Trenchard (London: Collins, 1962) p.367.

11 TNA AIR 5/846 Operations Against the Mullah in Somaliland, chapters 1-2; Trenchard Papers: MFC 76/1/357 - Lecture III 'Operations 1919-1919 - Somaliland and the North West Frontier', pp.1-2; John Ferris, The Evolution of British Strategic Policy 1919-1926 (London: Macmillan, 1989) pp.63-64; H Montgomery Hyde, British Air Policy Between the Wars (London: Heinemann, 1976) pp.90-91; and David E Omissi, Air Power and Colonial Control p.15.

12 Jafna L Cox, 'A Splendid Training Ground: The Importance to the Royal Air Force of its Role in Iraq 1919-1932', p.165.

13 Trenchard Papers: MFC 76/1/357 - Lecture IV 'Operations 1919-1939 - Aden and Iraq', pp.2-5; John Ferris, The Evolution of British Strategic Policy 1919-1926 pp.66, 74, 87; and David E Omissi, Air Power and Imperial Control pp.29-37. For a short account of Salmond's imaginative use of air power in Iraq see H Montgomery Hyde, British Air Policy Between the Wars pp.120-127.

14 Iraq was granted independence in 1932.

15 Mark Jacobsen, ''Only by the Sword': British Counter-Insurgency in Iraq, 1920', Small Wars & Insurgencies v.2, no.2 (August 1991) pp.323-363; Jafna L Cox, 'A Splendid Training Ground: The Importance to the Royal Air Force of its Role in Iraq 1919-1932', pp.157-184; James S Corum and Wray R Johnson, Airpower in Small Wars. Fighting Insurgents and Terrorists (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2003) pp.54-57; and AP 3003 'A Brief History of the Royal Air Force' pp.64-66.

16 Leo Amery, Colonial Secretary, in Jafna Cox 'A Splendid Training Ground', p.175.

17 For critical assessment of RAF air control in the empire during the interwar years see James S Corum and Wray R Johnson, Airpower in Small Wars. Fighting Insurgents and Terrorists chapter 2, pp.51-66, 81-86; David Omissi, 'Technology and Repression: Air Control in Palestine 1922-1936', The Journal of Strategic Studies v.13, no.4 (December 1990) pp.41-63; David E Omissi, Air Power and Colonial Control chapters 5-8; and Derek J P Waldie 'Relations Between the Army and the Royal Air Force 1918-1939', PhD Thesis, King's College London, 1993, chapters 2, 5-7.

18 In 1928, Winston Churchill, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, described air substitution as 'a great achievement', in H Montgomery Hyde, British Air Policy Between the Wars p.229.

19 Wing Commander J A Chamier, 'the Use of Air Power for Replacing Military Garrisons', RUSI Journal no.66 (February/November 1921) pp.210.

20 Ibid.

21 TNA AIR 8/87 'The Doctrine of Air Force

Necessity' by J M Spaight (1927).
22 John R Ferris, The Evolution of British Strategic Policy 1919-1926 p.83.
23 TNA CAB 5/4 CID Paper 150-C, 28 September 1921.
24 TNA AIR 9/5 Letter from the CAS to Secretary of State for Air, September 1921.
25 TNA CAB 24/131 and 132 Interim Report of the Committee on National Expenditure, CP3570, December 1921 and Part I of the Geddes Report CP3692; and John R Ferris, The Evolution of British Strategic Policy 1919-1926 p.90.
26 See David Ian Hall, 'Lessons Not Learned: The Struggle Between the RAF and the Army for the Tactical Control of Aircraft and the post-mortem on the defeat of the BEF in France 1940', in Geoffrey Till and G.D. Sheffield (eds.) The Challenge of High Command in the British Armed Forces (London: Macmillan, 2003) pp.113-125.
27 See Harry Kemsley, 'Air Power in Counter-insurgency: A Sophisticated Language or Blunt Expression?', Contemporary Security Policy, Vol.28, No.1 (April 2007) pp.112-126.

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