Evacuation by Air: The All-But-Forgotten Kabul Airlift of 1928-29

By Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Roe

In 2010, the Royal Air Force (RAF) undertook a hazardous mission to evacuate British nationals from Libya, North Africa. The rescue effort was a complete success; all willing and entitled British civilians were evacuated safely and no aircrew or aircraft came to any real harm. Eighty-three years earlier, the RAF undertook another risky air evacuation to save hundreds of embassy staff from several countries, along with their families, after inter-tribal strife spread into civil war in Afghanistan. This time the destination was Kabul. This article exposes the political background behind the evacuations, the actions of the threatened British Legation and the skill and determination of the pilots and crew involved in the little known, but extraordinary, evacuation of Kabul 1928-29.

I submit that the history of these evacuations [from Kabul] constitutes a record with which the Royal Air Force can justifiably be satisfied. The efficiency and determination of the officers, non-commissioned officers and men were well tested, and I am proud to recall that it was not found wanting.

Sir Geoffrey Salmond

Introduction

In February 2010 the Royal Air Force (RAF) undertook a hazardous mission to evacuate British nationals from Libya, North Africa. Staging from the Mediterranean island of Malta, C-130 Hercules transport aircraft, supported by E-3D Sentry AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System), landed in Tripoli International Airport and remote desert airstrips to rescue workers stranded in the country's capital and oilfields, as the state plunged into a bloody civil war. Despite occurrences of small arms fire, which on one occasion entered the cockpit of an aircraft and bounced off a pilot's helmet, the rescue effort was a complete success; all willing and entitled British civilians were evacuated safely and no aircrew or aircraft came to any real harm.[1] On conclusion of the tri-Service operation, Prime Minister David Cameron stated: 'I'm sure the whole House [of Commons] will want to put on record its thanks to all those who have made the rescue effort possible; to the skill of the RAF pilots, and to all those involved from all three Armed Services; to our diplomatic service, and to all those who put themselves in harm's way to help our people leave safely.'[2]

Eighty-three years earlier, the RAF undertook another risky air evacuation to rescue hundreds of embassy staff from several countries, along with their families, after inter-tribal strife spread into civil war in Afghanistan. This time the destination was Kabul,[3] the ancient walled city on a grassy plain some 6,000 ft above sea level that Alexander the Great passed through in 330 B.C. while en route to India.[4] The operation, flown over two-months and in some of the worst weather on record, through the 10,000 to 14,000 ft snow-capped mountains of the Hindu Kush, was to pass in the annals of history as the first major airlift of officials and civilians from one country to another.[5] This article exposes the political background behind the evacuations, the actions of the threatened British Legation and the skill and determination of the pilots and crew involved in the little known, but extraordinary, evacuation of Kabul 1928-29.

A Chaotic and Ever-Changing Political Situation

The catalyst for events in Kabul was seemingly innocuous. In 1927 King Amanullah of Afghanistan, an engaging and amiable sovereign, decided to undertake a seven-month 'Grand Tour.' Visiting India, Egypt, Italy, France, Germany, the Soviet Union, Turkey and Iran, he was spellbound by Kemal Ataturk's innovations in Turkey and Shah Riza's advances in Iran.[6] Accompanied by his influential young queen, Souriya, he also visited Britain, staying at Claridge's, and was warmly received by the King and Queen at Buckingham Palace. Greatly impressed by what he had seen throughout his tour, particularly the emancipation of women, the King was determined to push forward a number of sweeping Western-style social reforms

in his own country. Ignoring, or perhaps not truly cognisant of the deep religious fervour of his subjects and their ultra-conservative traditions, he implemented a series of changes that put him in direct conflict with many powerful elements of society and in direct opposition to Muslim practice.[7] Martin Ewans, a former Head of Chancery in Kabul, cautions: '… he had also lost all conception of the bounds of the acceptable, and when he returned to Kabul in July 1928 (driving his newly acquired Rolls-Royce all the way from Teheran), he promptly set in train the events that were to lead to his early downfall.'[8]

Opening new schools, implementing additional taxes, abolishing *purdah* (females were no longer required to wear a veil over their lower faces when in public), creating the first Afghan parliament, eliminating polygamy, setting a minimum age for marriage and the compulsory wearing of European-style dress (including homburg hats) for all inhabitants and visitors to Kabul, generated extreme bitterness, humiliation and fury.[9] Other measures, particularly the increased limitation of the powers of the mullahs (holy men, educated in the scriptures of Islam), a raise in land revenue and the lengthening of the period of conscription, amplified his unpopularity still further. 'By attempting to curtail the influence of the mullahs, he antagonised the most powerful force in Afghan life. To unveil their women was against their religion, and when he attempted to emancipate them his various measures precipitated on to already troubled waters a torrent of hostility which finally engulfed him.'[10] Forcibly expressing his determination to impose modern ideas, he was often photographed standing in front of a large picture of the American aviator Colonel Charles Lindbergh. Afghans openly denounced Amanullah as a *kafir* (infidel or non-believer), and spread rumours that he had renounced Islam and embraced Catholicism.

Unrest spread and open rebellion took hold of the country.[11] This was sparked off by the deeply religious and fanatical Shinwari tribe (literally 'Green Lords'), in the Khyber area, who were ordered to adopt European dress, pay taxes (which they had never done before), and to send a quota of their young females to Kabul for education. The tribe rose to a man and was subsequently joined by the Afghan Mohamand tribe. They first invested Dakka, and took up a position on the main road from Kabul to the Khyber. Next, they attacked Jalalabad on 19 November, plundering the royal palace and British consulate, cutting off the city's water supply and closing the Peshawar-Kabul road (which cut-off the British Legation in Kabul from road and telegraph communications).[12] Such actions were perhaps not unexpected. 'Among the Afghans theft is more or less praiseworthy, according to the skill and daring shown in its perpetration, and to the success in the subsequent evasion of pursuit.'[13] Despite contrary counsel, Amanullah's ill-judged response was to bomb the rebels from the air, employing vintage Afghan Air Force D.H. 9s piloted by white Russian refugees. The deployment of aircraft flown by 'infidel' pilots to crush faithful Muslims inflamed the situation still further, resulting in outrage and widespread rebellion.

In the north, a charismatic and opportunist Robin Hood-style leader, Bacha-i-Saqao (literally the 'son of a water-carrier'),[14] but more widely known as Habibulla Khan, rounded-up a *lashkar*

(tribal war party) of some 3,000 disaffected tribesmen and conducted a surprise attack on Kabul on 14 December 1928. His objective was to kill the King and set up an alternative administration of his own.[15] Meeting only token resistance, Habibulla captured forts to the north-west of the city before advancing on the Asmai Heights. At just after 15:30 hrs, the rebels, pouring down the road from Kandahar, passed His Majesty's Legation, Kabul with its large colony of British and British Indians of both sexes. Rebuilt in 1926, after Afghanistan had gained independence, the Legation, situated away from the other foreign embassies, was a 'magnificent building, some three-and-a-half miles outside the walled city [of Kabul], and set in gardens and grounds of twenty-three acres.'[16]

Fearing for the safety of the Legation staff and their families, the Minister, Sir Francis Humphrys, ordered the large iron gates closed immediately. Fortunately for the residents, the tribesmen did not attempt to break in. Under the protection of the Union Flag, as the Afghan guard had fled, Humphrys, armed only with a plentiful supply of tobacco, confronted Habibulla through the gate, who, on a white horse, happened to be passing the entrance. Making it absolutely clear that they were guests of the Afghan people and had nothing to do with politics, Humphrys asked Habibulla to respect the Legation and leave them alone. The amiable outlaw assured the Minister in an impassioned dialogue that no harm or looting would come to those inside the Legation, stressing that he had no quarrel with foreigners. Humphrys had no reason to disbelieve Habibulla, but remained cautious. A man of considerable experience, Humphrys had already held a number of political appointments on the North-West Frontier, commencing in 1904, and knew the tribal mindset well. He also served as a pilot in the newly-formed RAF in 1918, before becoming Political Agent to the Khyber and subsequently Deputy Foreign Secretary to the Government of India. Such experience was to prove invaluable in the weeks ahead and his foresight paid off.

> Humphrys … had already anticipated possible danger to the Legation and its inhabitants when the first rumblings of rebellion against Ammanulla's reforms were evident weeks before the actual uprising, and on 3 December had approached [Air Vice Marshal Sir William] Geoffrey Salmond [RAF commander in India] with a request for an air mail service [bi-weekly] to Kabul to maintain communications, and with plans for a possible evacuation of the Kabul Legation's personnel, necessarily by air.[17]

Agreeing to Humphrys' proposal, Salmond took stock of the assets available to him in India. The only suitable aircraft immediately under his command were 24 two-seater World War I vintage D.H. 9As (from 27 and 60 Squadron) and 2 general purpose Wapiti machines 'on trial.'[18] The nearest aircraft designed for carrying passengers were 10 portly twin-engined Vickers-Victorias of 70 (Bomber) Squadron stationed in Iraq.[19] However, it was not known if the aircraft would be able to take off with a heavy load from the airstrip at Kabul, 6,000 ft above sea level, and then climb to a height of 10,000 ft shortly afterwards. The only large transport twin-engined aircraft in India, the Handly Page Hinaidi Heavy Transport machine J7745,[20] piloted by Flight Lieutenant D.F. Anderson, was in Baghdad on 'special duty,' conveying Sir Denys Bray, the

Foreign Secretary, to India. Salmond immediately requested that the Hinaidi return to India but, due to engine trouble, it was replaced by a Vickers-Victoria, piloted by Squadron Leader R.S. Maxwell, a dashing World War I fighter ace of exceptional ability. After a 2,800 mile journey that required numerous re-fuelling stops en route, the aircraft arrived at Karachi on 17 December and proceeded to Quetta the following day to conduct trials (the airfield at Quetta was at the same altitude as Kabul and the surrounding topography was similar to Kabul's). The aircraft demonstrated, once everything unnecessary was jettisoned, that its performance was up to the task ahead.[21] Salmond immediately asked for reinforcement airlift.

On the ground, the situation in the Legation was tense. *The Times* recalls: 'It appears that the first rebel attack on Kabul was followed by several days' sharp fighting, during three days of which the British Legation and its occupants were exposed to considerable danger. The buildings were repeatedly hit by bullets; the Military Attaché's house was accidentally hit and wrecked by a field-gun shell from an Afghan battery that dropped short.'[22] Humphrys recalled stoically:

> We have all had charmed lives. My house looks like a radiator in places. Between the two windows of my upstairs study – on extreme left of photograph I sent you of Legation – there are forty bullet holes. None came through the window, in front of which I was constantly moving. On the other hand many came through my bathroom window, one hitting my shaving glass and singeing my moustache, while a shell missed my head by 9 inches and lodged in the wall. Others had more hairy experiences.[23]

Despite very heavy cross-fire, the Legation continued to function relatively efficiently. Nevertheless, communications were almost nonexistent using the Afghan wireless (a regular medium for communiqués to India) and a rebel cordon, established between the city and the Legation, prevented routine movement. This prompted the Legation to arrange white sheets and turbans on the lawn to form the following message: 'DO NOT LAND. FLY HIGH. ALL'S WELL.'[24] Humphrys had rightly predicted that an RAF aircraft would be tasked to investigate the Legation's wellbeing after an orderly got through the battle lines to Kabul and sent a telegram stating that the Minister wished to evacuate all women and children as soon as possible. The interrupted message, broken off in the middle, was dated 16 December. The following day, all official communications were cut and Humphrys turned to an amateur wireless set, tapping out an experimental S.O.S. that, amazingly, was received in India on the evening of 17 December. Salmond realised that no time could be lost in trying to re-establish communications with the Legation.

On 18 December an unarmed[25] D.H. 9A (known as a Ninak) of 27 Squadron, piloted by Flying Officer C.W.L. Trusk, flew a reconnaissance mission over the Legation, with the aim of dropping a Popham Panel set[26] for the purpose of ground/air communication via Morse code. The flight distance of 280 miles there and back over snow-covered mountains restricted the loiter time over the Legation to just 15 minutes in order to preserve fuel for the return flight. The RAF

deemed that it was impossible to land anywhere in the mountainous country over which aircraft would have to fly on the return journey. The Ninak arrived over the Legation at 1,500 ft and quickly identified the warning message which was clearly visible on the lawn. However, the buildings looked deserted. Having dropped the first half of the Popham Panel set, 22-year-old Leading Aircraftman G. Donaldson, the wireless operator seated behind Trusk, recalled:

> So Trusk said: "I am going to fly very low, and see if you can see any light in the building." So we got right down near the ground, really, and we tried to see in the windows. The windows were boarded up, because they had been smashed, I suppose. Anyway, I dropped the other half of the Popham Panel.
> I turned round to speak to Trusk – and he was covered in black oil. He said: "We've been hit! I'll have to land!"[27]

Not recognising that the rebels had captured the forts on either side of the Legation, the Ninak became the target of accurate rifle fire from tribesmen on the ground, who no doubt thought it was one of Amanullah's aircraft. Hit in the engine sump, the aircraft attempted to gain height to achieve 'voltage' to employ the rudimentary radio to issue a warning (the aircraft had a small generator on the wing that required 'slipstream' to generate the 1,200 volts required for transmitting). While climbing, Donaldson tapped out the message: 'Been hit. Radiator burst. Landing Sherpur.'[28]

Fortunately, Sherpur airfield was still under the control of the 'friendly' Afghan Air Force and was only two miles from the Legation. After landing at the airfield, the crew saw how lucky they had been – the aircraft was punctured by 14 bullet holes, the tyres were shot away and Donaldson had a bullet hole in his Sidcot flying suit.[29] Unsure of their fate, the crew were promptly arrested, accused of being spies and placed under special guard. After a short period of rough handling and confinement, Trusk and Donaldson were taken to see the camp commandant, '… a big, fat chap, in an ordinary jersey, and balaclava helmet, and a bandolier round him.'[30] Dismissing all allegations of espionage outright, the commandant invited the crew to lunch in his office and the atmosphere at once became good-humoured. Over the next few days, with safe treatment promised but by no means guaranteed,[31] Trusk and Donaldson did their best to get news of the British Legation through contact with the other Legations and also tried to establish communications with India by means of the Afghan wireless and land line. During their attempts, a message got through to India stating that clearance had been obtained from the Afghan Government for an aircraft to land at Sherpur. Wisely, the request was not endorsed by Salmond, suspecting that any aircraft flying so close to Kabul could unhinge any negotiations with the Afghan Government that Humphrys might be undertaking at the time. After repeated attempts, Trusk and Donaldson, accompanied by an Afghan interpreter from the Afghan Air Force, managed to reach the surrounded Legation. This involved a dangerous journey through no-man's-land, moving when the firing between the opposing sides stopped. At the Legation, Donaldson hooked-up a long-wave

wireless transmitter, salvaged from their aircraft and employing a battery from Humphrys' Rolls-Royce, to re-establish a radio link with Peshawar and Miranshah. This shaky connection proved invaluable.

Salmond was already aware of the situation on the ground. After Donaldson's brief message was received in Peshawar on 18 December, Salmond sent another reconnaissance aircraft that same afternoon.[32] Unsure if the first Popham Panel set had been received, Flight Lieutenant A.R. Prendergast was instructed to drop a second set on the Legation. The aircraft was heavily fired upon once over the locality, but saw the Union Flag flying and a message on the lawn: 'Don't land. All's well.'[33] Salmond now knew that the Legation was safe, but that the delegation was situated in the middle of opposing forces, and that Humphrys did not want aircraft to land at Sherpur or anywhere else. The following morning a Ninak, piloted by Flight Lieutenant Pelly, conducted another reconnaissance mission over the Legation. The same message was displayed on the lawn and a Popham Panel message confirmed: 'Sherpur Aerodrome Unfit. We are confined to the Legation.'[34] Conditions were still tense on the following day, but the situation started to improve. Subsequent pilots confirmed that it was still too unsafe to land and aircraft continued flying at high altitude. Despite the dangers, pilots dropped an Aldis lamp (used for signalling),[35] a wireless transmitting set and miscellaneous items (including butter, coffee, meat and vegetables)[36] into the Legation by parachute.[37] The Legation continued to display No. 12 on the Popham Panel (come again tomorrow).

Afraid that the security situation would change, Humphrys took advantage of a notable shift in the fighting on 22 December. After a number of counterattacks, Amanullah's forces managed to force the rebel force to retreat ten miles north-west. This made it possible for Humphrys to contact the beleaguered city of Kabul (the high road between the Legation and the city was now open to traffic) and regain reliable communications with India. 'Accordingly, he immediately sent a message requesting full evacuation to commence next day, using the nearby Sherpur airfield which was now in the hands of Amanullah's forces.'[38] Salmond's response was to dispatch a Wapiti with a radio for reconnaissance purposes to confirm that aircraft could land at Sherpur, the Vickers-Victoria troop carrier piloted by Maxwell and Pilot Officer Beasley, and three D.H. 9As to recover baggage early on 23 December. The evacuation had the endorsement and support of the Afghan Government.

The Kabul 'Run' Begins

The following day news reached London that the evacuation had started. Leaving Sherpur airfield at 09:45 hrs, the first passengers, seemingly none the worse for their air journey, arrived at Peshawar at 11.30 hrs.[39] 'The party consisted of four English women, three young English children, four Indian women, four Indian maidservants, and five young children, making a total of 20.'[40] Although many of the passengers were infants, this was a remarkable feat since it had been preciously decided that the normal load for the Vickers-Victoria would be only ten passengers. It later transpired that Lady Humphrys, the daughter of Sir Harold Arthur Deane,

who had himself been First Chief Commissioner of the North-West Frontier Province, was on the first airlift. Expressing deep thanks to 'our splendid Air Force,' she remarked: 'We did the journey from Kabul in record time, without a single bump.'[41] After the initial evacuation, further flights took place on 24 and 26 December, despite intense firing around the Legation. Shortly thereafter, the aircraft at Salmonds' disposal were augmented by two additional Vickers-Victoria from Iraq and by the Hinaidi.[42] The additional aircraft helped, and by 1 January 1929, a total of 132 people and baggage had been airlifted back to India despite a heavy fall of snow in Kabul.[43] Passengers included French and German ladies and the wives of some of the members of the Turkish Military Mission in Afghanistan.[44] In addition, the RAF flew in a spare engine and two fitters into Sherpur to fix Trusk's aircraft on an outward journey from Risalpur. Owing to the mistrust of the Afghan authorities every care was taken not to give any cause for suspicion. *The Times* notes: 'That the Afghans thought that advantage might be taken of the air operations to spy out the land is shown by the fact that on landing in Kabul all machines were closely inspected to see whether cameras were carried, but the Afghans found their suspicions baseless.'[45] By 1 January Humphrys happily wrote that all the women and children had been evacuated.[46]

After the successful evacuation of the women and children, the RAF weekly airmail service continued. Amanullah granted permission for this on 9 January. The Russians, not prepared to regard the immediate future of Afghanistan as secure, had already evacuated their women and children in Kabul northwards using the commercial air service. However, the situation on the ground was about to change strikingly. Chaz Bowyer notes:

> Within a week … Habibulla's tribesmen had gained a victory over Amanullah's troops and were once more investing Kabul, including regaining control of Sherpur airfield. Then, on 14 January, Amanullah abdicated and fled the scene by car towards Kandahar [in his Rolls-Royce], renouncing his throne in favour of his elder [self-indulgent] brother, Inayatullah Khan. The latter, closely besieged in his own palace, with his garrison force outnumbered by nearly four to one, reigned for merely three days and on 17 January, on condition that he, his family and a small party of faithful officials might be evacuated by RAF aircraft, Inayatullah was handed over to the Amirate of Afghanistan (the rebel leader Habibulla, who had already styled himself Amir).[47]

On 18 January, in bitter weather conditions, Squadron Leader Maxwell and Flight Lieutenant R Ivelaw-Chapman[48] flew to Sherpur airfield in two Vickers-Victorias. Although Sherpur was now in rebel hands and the two opposing armies were only 400 yards from each other, Habibulla allowed Ivelaw-Chapman to evacuate Inayatullah, other male members of his family and his court officials – a quality of mercy unusual in Afghanistan. Maxwell flew out Inayatullah's harem of ten wives and concubines. Both aircraft landed safely at Peshawar at 15:30 hrs.[49] The exiled court then proceeded by train and cars to join Amanullah at Kandahar. When the half-brothers united, Amanullah formally cancelled his abdication, again proclaiming himself King, before finally seeking asylum in Italy.[50] 'The same day Sir Francis Humphrys decided to close the Legation, resulting in all other embassies and legations to decide to evacuate Kabul completely.

Habibulla [who at no time displayed any personal animosity to the British] permitted two aircraft to land daily and one airmail aircraft to land on Wednesdays.'[51]

On 29 January two aircraft took off from Risalpur for Kabul in testing conditions; only one aircraft was to reach its destination. Ivelaw-Chapman's Vickers-Victoria (J7926) suffered the only double engine failure of the evacuation, caused by solid ice forming in the petrol filters. The aircraft was flying westward at about 10,000 ft, just inside Mohmand territory and about 30 miles east of Kabul, when first one and almost immediately afterwards a second engine faded. Ivelaw-Chapman recalls the incident:

> Nothing that I could do would get them [the engines] going again. Losing height rapidly I turned off course towards the Kabul river valley in the hope that I might find some less forbidding terrain than that immediately below me. But long before I even caught sight of the river I realised that I could not possibly reach it and that I should have to land somewhere, and that pretty soon. At that moment I spotted a piece of ground a mile or so ahead which looked slightly less precipitous than its immediate surrounds and I headed for it. As I glided towards it I could see that it was far from flat and boulder-strewn. But with no engine-power, losing height rapidly and the rocky side of a mountain as the only alternative I decided to 'have a go.' As I came up to it I found I had to 'side-slip' off my remaining height if I was not going to overrun this tiny 'plateau' which was only about 60 yards long and less in breadth. On three sides it dropped away steeply for a couple of hundred feet. Having got into about the right position I stalled my Victoria on to the ground from a height of about 10 ft – or, in less technical language, I deliberately lost all flying speed so that the aeroplane would drop by its own weight and more or less stay put where it arrived. The impact of course broke up the undercarriage and stove in the underbelly of the Victoria but did us no more damage than to bruise [Flying Officer A.R.S] Davies' knee. We were very lucky![52]

Quickly surrounded by a mob of heavily-armed and wildly-gesticulating Afghan tribesmen, Ivelaw-Chapman and Davies were initially mistaken for the hated Russians. The reason for this only came to light later; the tribesmen associated *khaki* with the British forces but, as it was winter and both pilots were wearing blue RAF uniform, the tribesmen had believed that they were Russians. Despite producing both a 'ghoolie chit' and a government note, as well as trying to explain their objective in pigeon Urdu, tempers did not calm down until a man (Noor Mahomed Khan) wearing a military-looking greatcoat arrived on the scene.[53] Posting sentries on the aircraft, the 'Brigadier' led the crew off the mountainside to a neighbouring village for green tea and *chapáttis* (flat cakes of unleavened bread, cooked over a *tauwa*, or flat piece of iron).[54] Concurrently, he allowed them to dispatch a letter explaining the situation. The letter was given to a messenger on horseback who left for an unknown destination.[55]

Receiving a response the following day, Ivelaw-Chapman and Davies, mounted on ponies and with a heavily armed escort, travelled 25 miles or more to the camp of 'General' Ali Ahmed

Khan at Jagdallak.[56] Here they spent six days detained as political prisoners in a so-called rest-house. Conditions were basic and time passed very slowly; Ivelaw-Chapman composed crossword puzzles and arithmetical problems to keep Davies amused. On the fourth day, a reliable tribesman, one of 20 *sowars* (horsemen) sent out by the British Political Agent in the Khyber Pass, found the stranded pilots. The following day another tribesman visited the aircrew, this time from Kabul, with a letter from Humphrys and some fruit and cigarettes. The very next day they met 'General' Ali Ahmed Khan, who informed them that they would be moved by road to India. *The Times* reported simply:

> According to a Reuter telegram from Delhi, Flight-Lieutenant [Ivelaw-] Chapman and Flying Officer Davies, belonging to the Victoria aeroplane which came down at Sarobi, in Afghanistan, on January 29, have been located and are being brought to the Barikad rest-house, on the road between Kabul and Jalalabad.[57]

When they reached the consulate in Jalalabad, after a trying journey in a Chevrolet van, Ivelaw-Chapman and Davies found that the British consulate there had been forced to evacuate. Fortunately, the Consul, Khan Sahib Mohammed Jehangier Khan, were under the protection of the Pir Sahib of Baghdad, a devout and respected elderly religious leader, who lived in a fort about eight miles out of town. Arriving at the fort, the aircrew were welcomed right away by the Consul – a cheerful Muslim, six and a half feet tall and 26 stone in weight – and by the Pir Sahib's entourage. Meeting the Pir Sahib the following evening, 80-years-old but still active-minded, he advised strongly against trying to return to India via the Khyber Pass, due to the severity of the fighting there. Safe transit via the usual route was out of the question. The crew returned to their guest-tent, pitched in an orange-grove, to consider Pir Sahib's guidance.

The following morning reconnoitring the neighbouring countryside on horseback, Ivelaw-Chapman located a flattish piece of ground two miles away from the fort which, with work, could be made into an emergency airstrip. The pilot recalls: 'That night I wrote a letter to Sir Norman Bolton the Chief Commissioner in Peshawar, in which I asked that a Vickers-Victoria [due to its robust undercarriage] should be sent to my roughly prepared landing strip in a week's time to ferry the two of us back to India.'[58] Sending the letter by a reliable runner, Ivelaw-Chapman also requested that an aircraft, passing en route to Kabul, should fire off a Very light whilst in the vicinity of Jalalabad to acknowledge receipt of his proposal. Approximately four days later, this occurred, much to the delight of the stranded crew. The Very light provided a renewed vigour to improve the airstrip. Under the watchful gaze of Ivelaw-Chapman, the Pir Sahib's men cleared the area of major boulders and levelled out the surface, despite the ground being used as a regular battlefield by local tribesmen to settle disputes. Ivelaw-Chapman recalls: 'We had many interruptions of this sort during which I took cover in a near-by "fort" or, when in a more intrepid mood, at the top of an orange tree.'[59] By the end of the week, the airstrip was ready to receive aircraft.

Instead of the solidly built Vickers-Victoria requested, the aircraft that was sent to rescue the pilots was a relatively fragile Bristol F.2 B Fighter (known as a 'Biff' or 'Brisfit'), escorted by two

other aircraft.[60] The inevitable happened and the rough, undulating terrain proved too much for the tail-skid and rear end of the aircraft, which buckled on landing; the Pir Sahib now had another mouth to feed, Flying Officer Hancock. Over the next few days, with the assistance of a local carpenter and the leg of a broken chair, the aircraft was repaired for take-off. Concurrently and frequently interrupted by inter-tribal skirmishes, work was undertaken to improve the landing strip.[61] With Davies' bruised knee in need of medical attention, Hancock and Davies returned to Peshawar with a note from Ivelaw-Chapman stating that he should be recovered in seven days' time, allowing him sufficient time to improve the airfield. *The Times* reported:

> Flying Officer Davies, one of the two British airmen stranded in Afghanistan on Sunday, has been brought to Peshawar today in a small aeroplane piloted by Flight Lieutenant Hancock. The aeroplane could not carry more than two persons; consequently Flight Lieutenant [Ivelaw-] Chapman is remaining at Sultanpur, near Jalalabad, where he was detained by tribesmen who wanted a ransom for him. An aeroplane is to leave Peshawar shortly to bring him away.[62]

Over the next week Ivelaw-Chapman worked on the airstrip, before being recovered to Peshawar on 18 February by Hancock.[63] Ivelaw-Chapman recalls: 'This time it [the Bristol Fighter] landed without incident and forty minutes later I was drinking beer in Peshawar Club. Then to the joyful application of a razor and a toothbrush, last used three weeks earlier.'[64] However, only days before, *The Times* cautioned:

> There is, however, some anxiety in Service circles that the lives of airmen should be risked so much, as it is realized that the tribesmen are likely to detain all airmen who land when there is a chance of substantial ransom. It is also felt that other pilots' machines are likely to be endangered before the rescues from Kabul are completed, as flying conditions are still bad and are not likely to be better for a month.[65]

Despite the concerns raised in *The Times*, the apprehension for the wellbeing of the downed aircrew and deteriorating weather conditions, the evacuation continued unabated with almost daily rescue flights to Sherpur airfield, whenever the weather made landing possible. This was made more achievable by the arrival of five more Vickers-Victorias in quick succession throughout February. Chaz Bowyer recalls: '… the D.H. 9A and Victoria crews continued their doughty efforts to evacuate Legation staffs, despite having to endure in their open cockpits dawn take-off temperatures as low as minus-20 degrees Centigrade on occasion, and a constant struggle to attain a 6,000 feet altitude by use of full throttle; the lowest height required to allow them to fly through the mountain ranges peaking at 10-15,000 feet en route.'[66] With requests for assistance pouring in, on 8 February nearly 40 passengers, piling on blankets and coats to keep warm during the flight, were flown to Peshawar. They included two Afghan *sirdars*, couriers of the Kabul Foreign Ministry, nine Persian and five Turkish women and children, an Australian and 20 British Indians.[67] Seven days later 43 passengers

were flown out of Kabul, including 32 British Indians, four Turks, three Germans, three Persians and an Afghan courier.[68]

With temperatures dropping by the day and mindful of the reason for Ivelaw-Chapman's forced landing the on 29 January 1928, the RAF implemented measures to reduce the possibility of any further mishaps. They immediately overhauled the refuelling and storage arrangements at Risalpur and took the following precautions:

- All fuel was filtered twice before being passed into the tanks.
- On completion of the day's flying, all petrol filters were cleaned, and tanks filled up overnight.
- Before proceeding to Kabul, each aeroplane carried out a short test flight, flying for a few minutes on each tank, then landing, before all petrol filters were cleaned.
- In addition, an interpreter was carried on each flight in the event of a forced landing.[69]

Meanwhile, circumstances at Sherpur airfield also posed significant challenges. 'Sir Geoffrey said that Squadron Leader Maxwell told him that one of the favourite "jokes" of the Afghan soldier was to advance towards him, pointing a gun, and at the last moment to fire it up in the air! Every journey was a test of self-control and good humour for our unarmed pilots and crews.'[70] Despite the ever present dangers, the evacuation proceeded with a degree of regularity until 20 February.[71]

Although the government had by now decided to withdraw all the Legation staff as a measure not of panic but of precaution,[72] the cruel Afghan winter was to delay activities.[73] On 22 February Flight Lieutenant Anderson reported that he was unable to take off in the Hinaidi as the snow was too deep on the airfield in Kabul. As a consequence, the Vickers-Victorias following him were instructed to return to base immediately. Over the next few days, Humphrys, aware that the political situation was fragile, mobilised every available means of clearing the runway. This included local tribesmen, camels and even a few elephants to sweep and trample a runway 600 yards long and 20 yards wide. On 24 February the airstrip was reported fit for Vickers-Victorias. Four aircraft took off from Risalpur and arrived at Sherpur, rescuing a total of 27 passengers without incident. This completed the rescue of the French and Italian Legations, and a number of civilians. All that remained was Humphrys and his staff, and it was decided that the operation would be concluded in one day.

On the morning of 25 February, seven Vickers-Victorias, accompanied by the Hinaidi, crossed the snow-covered mountainous frontier for the last time. Leaving Risalpur at 07:45 hrs, they landed one-by-one, keeping their engines running, at the protected airfield. The sound of gunfire was ever-present as Habibulla's opponents began their bid to dethrone him and the city was in flames. Humphrys, carrying the Legation's Union Flag under his arm, led a small party of evacuees on foot to Sherpur airfield to meet the aircraft. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the last to climb aboard the waiting aircraft, ready to take them from danger to safety, were

Trusk, Donaldson and Humphrys. Flying over a route of sinister memories,[74] with few easily discernible landmarks, the aircraft landed in the orderly security of India at 12:30 hours. *The Times* reported simply:

> Sir Francis Humphrys, the British Minister to Afghanistan, together with the remaining members of the British Legation, arrived here at 12:30 p.m. to-day by aeroplane from Kabul. This completes the work of evacuation undertaken by the Royal Air Force, and carried out successfully, in spite of many difficulties.[75]

The following day *The Times* cautioned: 'To the principal passenger [Humphrys] no doubt the withdrawal was a bitter necessity, since it represented an admission that his life's work of the last few years has been shattered. He recalls that it was seven years yesterday [26 February] since he assumed his post, driving through the flourishing city and gardens of Jalalabad, which yesterday morning, seen through his glasses was a heap of dusty ruins.'[76]

Overall, the RAF had evacuated a total of 586 men, women and children from many nationalities and conveyed 24,000 lbs of baggage[77] over 84 active sorties during the worst weather on record.[78] The total number of miles covered during the evacuations, without the benefit of modern-day navigational aids, was 28,160 (increasing to 57,438 if all journeys, including those of the Vickers-Victorias from Iraq to Risalpur, are included) through the unpredictable and treacherous air currents of the Hindu Kush. In the course of two months only one Vickers-Victoria aeroplane, J7926 piloted by Ivelaw-Chapman, was lost and the engine of one D.H. 9 machine, piloted by Trusk, was scrapped. More importantly, not a single life was lost during the two months' operation. Receiving numerous telegrams of best wishes, Humphrys responded to a congratulatory note from Trenchard with the following message:

> Many thanks kind message we owe everything to magnificent achievements of RAF.
>
> Francis Humphrys
> *Peshawar*

Conclusion

The evacuation by air of the British Mission from a country which had no recognised government, and from a capital which controlled only a few square miles of territory, was regarded as clear-cut evidence that the British Government had upheld its policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. It also demonstrated its friendship by avoiding any situation in which ground intervention, on behalf of its representatives, could have inflamed matters, and by ensuring that all aircraft had undertaken their duties totally unarmed. This achievement, as one historian has noted, 'could hardly have been undertaken by the Army without precipitating a fourth Afghan war.'[80] Moreover, the Vickers-Victorias, although primitive and of wooden construction, had proved to be an agreeable instrument of humanity and hope on the world stage, and had not been found wanting.[81] The evacuation –

a purely civil one – won the RAF a reputation for humanitarian operations it still enjoys today. Equally, the daily reconnaissance flights over the Legation afforded hope and optimism for the beleaguered inhabitants. The D.H. 9As and Wapitis were a tangible expression of the RAF's readiness to reach the stranded personnel and gave a signal that the British Empire was standing by ready to help.

The operation also proved the resourcefulness and mobility of the RAF. The evacuation involved the three commands of India, Iraq and Egypt. India drew heavily on the air resources in Iraq to perform a task just across her border, while, in Iraq, temporary shortfalls were covered almost immediately by similar aircraft flown from Egypt, part of Middle East Command. Egypt in its turn was reinforced from Great Britain. The rapid reinforcement of Vickers-Victorias from Iraq took on average five days per aircraft to reach India, demonstrating the growing operational agility of the RAF. Moreover, the evacuation of Kabul was the first opportunity in the RAF's history for mutual cooperation between the different geographical air commands of the Empire. In so doing, Trenchard's vision of an independent Air Force, spanning the world, was coming true. It was a signpost of the utility and nimbleness of airpower almost every bit as significant as the Berlin Airlift of 1948.

However, the outstanding element of the evacuation was that 268 men, 153 women and 165 children were rescued by the RAF unharmed, apart from one German lady, who inadvertently walked into a propeller.[82] In ungainly aircraft and flying in open cockpits, in some of the worst weather conditions outside the Artic Circle, the skill of the pilots, defying rest and comfort, supported by dedicated crews, mechanics and riggers, accomplished a marvel of airmanship under the most testing conditions. The ability of the ground crews to prepare the aircraft each day, with practically no workshop facilities and only a handful of stores and spare parts, was equally as remarkable as the skill of the pilots. The Prince of Wales, talking as Honorary Secretary of the Empire Flying Services, paid tribute to the evacuation during a dinner at the Institute of Transport:

> The Royal Air Force have performed a historical achievement. They have conveyed 586 in 84 aeroplanes [active sorties] without a single mishap to passengers over mountainous country in the depth of winter at an average height of 10,000 ft. Conditions have always been difficult, and for the last two days almost insuperable on account of the heavy fall of snow.
> That is a very great tribute to our Air Forces.[83]

Unsurprisingly, such an amazing feat drew considerable public admiration and state acknowledgment. Chaz Bower recalls in *RAF Operations 1918-38*: 'Recognition of the RAF's splendid achievements took the form of the award of Air Force Crosses (AFCs) to Squadron Leader Maxwell, Flight Lieutenants D.F. Anderson and Ivelaw-Chapman, and Flying Officers Trusk and Anness; while Leading Aircraftsman Donaldson [the only enlisted man] received an Air Force Medal (AFM).'[84] Additionally, in the summer of 1929, Humphrys and his wife

were decorated side-by-side at Buckingham Palace; perhaps the first time in history that a husband and wife had knelt before the King. Humphrys, for his coolness, ardour and diplomacy, became a Knight Commander of the Order of Saint Michael and Saint George (KCMG). Lady Humphrys, in recognition of her courage, became a Dame of The British Empire (DBE). Humphrys' untiring faith in the RAF's growing ability had not been misplaced.

Notes

[1] 'RAF Pilot on Libya Evacuations,' available at: **http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/DefenceNews/PeopleinDefence/RafPilotOnLibyaEvacuations.htm**

[2] 'Prime Minister Praises Military Effort in Libyan Evacuations,' available at: **http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/DefenceOperations/PrimeMinisterPraisesMilitaryEffortinLibyanEvacuations.htm**

[3] Kabul is: 190 miles from Peshawar through the Khyber Pass; 230 miles from Kohat through the Kurram; 320 miles from Kandahar via Ghazni; and 450 miles from Quetta.

[4] P. Sykes, *A History of Afghanistan* (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1940), 64.

[5] In 1922, 19 Kurdish and Assyrian Levies were airlifted from Sulaimaniya to Kirkuk, Iraq to deal with political upheaval. However, this was solely a troop movement within the confines of one country.

[6] A full overview of Amanullah's visit to London can be found in R. Wild, *Amanullah: Ex-King of Afghanistan* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1932).

[7] 'A German Account,' *The Times*, 22 January 1929.

[8] M. Ewans, *Afghanistan: A Short History of Its People and Policies* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), 130.

[9] *The Times* cautioned: 'King Amanullah's main perplexity is that he has the roughest of rough material on which to work, and it is probable that in his anxiety to see his people prosper and to adopt Western ways he has gone a little too fast and far in his initial experiments.' 'The Kabul Legation,' *The Times*, 24 December 1928. See also: 'Winter As The King's Ally,' *The Times*, 19 December 1928.

[10] A. Baker and R. Ivelaw-Chapman, *Wings Over Kabul: The First Airlift* (London: William Kimber & Co. Ltd., 1975), 38-9.

[11] *The Times* suggested that 'the crux of the matter has been the recent failure of the Afghan regulars,' highlighting that the military budget 'has been so diminished that his [Amanullah's] troops have long and notoriously been in arrears of pay.' 'Winter As The King's Ally,' *The Times*, 19 December 1928.

[12] The Shinwari tribe were reported to have made three demands: (1) That no foreign Legation should be permitted to remain in Afghanistan; (2) That no more Afghan students should be sent abroad to study and; (3) That a party of 15 Afghan girls who had been sent to complete their education in Turkey should be recalled. 'The Rescue from Kabul,' *The Times*, 28 December 1928.

[13] T.L. Pennell, *Among The Wild Tribes of the Afghan Frontier: A Record of Sixteen Years Close Intercourse with the Natives of the Indian Marches* (London: Seeley & Co. Ltd., 1909), 25.

[14] Bacha-i-Saqao only robbed the rich and the Government – but left the poor alone.

[15] 'Afghanistan,' *The Times*, 19 January 1929.

[16] A. Baker and R. Ivelaw-Chapman, *Wings Over Kabul*, 33.
[17] C. Bowyer, *RAF Operations 1918-38* (London, William Kimber & Co. Ltd., 1988), 191.
[18] The Bristol Fighters did not have the range to reach Kabul. In contrast, the Wapiti's 550 hp nine-cylinder, radial, air-cooled Jupiter engine offered superior performance and range.
[19] The Vickers-Victoria was a high commonality troop-carrying variant of the Vickers-Virginia bomber. The original Vickers-Victoria – J6868 – was flown in August 1922 and the first 15 production Victorias, made of wood and designated Mark III, were ordered in May 1925. They were designed to carry 20 soldiers with their kit.
[20] Handly Page Hinaidi J7745 was a unique aircraft. It started life as an HP-24 Hyderabad Night Bomber, manufactured by the Handley Page Company of Cricklewood, Middlesex. It was modified, through the installation of two air-cooled Bristol Jupiter engines and became the prototype Hinaidi. The aircraft was capable of carrying twenty passengers with little comfort.
[21] The test load was 3 hours petrol and a useful load of 1,600 lbs. Landing and take-off were satisfactory. The take-off in a very light wind was 400 yards and the aircraft climbed well. During the subsequent evacuation flight, loads up to 2,200 lbs. were carried.
[22] 'The Rescue from Kabul,' *The Times*, 28 December 1928.
[23] A. Baker and R. Ivelaw-Chapman, *Wings Over Kabul*, 63.
[24] Ibid., 62.
[25] The aircraft had been stripped of all armaments, including crew sidearms, except for a Very signal pistol, in order not to provoke the Afghans in the event of a forced landing. This was the case for all flights involved in the evacuation.
[26] The 'Popham' Panel owed its original name (arising in the 1914-1918 war) to an RAF officer who at the time of the Kabul evacuations was Air Vice Marshall Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, the Air Officer Commanding RAF in Iraq. First introduced in 1918, the panel weighed roughly 12 pounds and consisted of a sheet of dark blue American cloth about 10 feet by 8 feet with a white 'T' shape stitched to it. Branching off this were white panels, numbered 1-9. By exposing specific combinations, messages could be sent to the aircrew operating above.
[27] A. Baker and R. Ivelaw-Chapman, *Wings Over Kabul*, 67.
[28] Ibid.
[29] *The Gazette of India*, Extraordinary, 7 October 1929, 138.
[30] A. Baker and R. Ivelaw-Chapman, *Wings Over Kabul,* 69.
[31] Accommodation was provided in the 'Café Wali,' a 'hotel' in the centre of Kabul.
[32] All subsequent aircraft carried 'pamphlets' which were dropped over the major areas of disturbance, explaining the humanitarian mission on which the RAF were engaged, and conveying a warning against acts of aggression against the British Legation and Consulates.
[33] A. Baker and R. Ivelaw-Chapman, *Wings Over Kabul*, 75.
[34] Ibid., 76.
[35] The lamp was wrapped in the latest papers, which were the first the Legation had seen since 8 November 1928.
[36] 'Story of Kabul Fighting,' *The Times*, 5 January 1929.
[37] The aircraft, used in the operation to drop an Aldis lamp, piloted by Flight Lieutenant

Smetham, was hit nine times. One of these broke a flying wire, but the aircraft returned to Kohat safely.

[38] C. Bowyer, *RAF Operations 1918-38*, 193.

[39] The initial phase of the evacuation involved walking through the battle zone to the Italian Legation, before transiting the short distance to Sherpur airfield by car.

[40] 'The Kabul Legation,' *The Times*, 24 December 1928.

[41] 'Story of The Rescues,' *The Times*, 27 December 1928.

[42] 'More Rescues From Kabul,' *The Times*, 31 December 1928.

[43] 'The Renewed Fighting in Afghanistan,' *The Times*, 11 January 1929.

[44] 'More Rescues From Kabul,' *The Times*, 27 December 1928.

[45] 'Kabul Legations,' *The Times*, 4 January 1929,

[46] A. Baker and R. Ivelaw-Chapman, *Wings Over Kabul*, 117.

[47] C. Bowyer, *RAF Operations 1918-38*, 193.

[48] Later Air Chief Marshal Sir Ronald Ivelaw-Chapman, GCB, KBE, DFC, AFC.

[49] 'Afghanistan,' *The Times*, 19 January 1929.

[50] During his 'Grand Tour' of Italy, Amanullah was invested with the Collar of the Annunciation by King Victor Emmanuel. As a 'cousin' of Italy, his request for asylum could not be refused. He died in Italy in 1960.

[51] I.M. Philpott, *The Royal Air Force: An Encyclopedia of the Inter-war Years, Volume 1, The Trenchard Years 1918 to 1929* (London: Pen & Sword, 2005), 146.

[52] A. Baker and R. Ivelaw-Chapman, *Wings Over Kabul*, 140.

[53] Every pilot carried a 'ghoolie chit' and a government note which stated: 'To the Friendly, Brave, Religious Nation, You are well aware of the fact that Britain has been friendly towards Afghanistan since a long time, and wished the country and its people well. She has always desired the progress of the country and its people for the good of both lands. Britain never intends, so long as her Embassy in Kabul and her consulates in Jalalabad and Kandahar are secure according to Islamic and international practices, to interfere in the Afghan Rebellion. If the British Embassy and Consulates are violated by the people, the British Government would take any retaliatory action they would choose, and exact compensation for any damage or damages to their personnel, their buildings and the possessions thereof.'

[54] It later transpired that Noor Mahomed Khan was a 'Brigadier' in part of the Royalist Army loyal to Ali Ahmed Khan. He was apparently in the 'quartermaster branch' and was out 'touring' the villages to obtain supplies for the main army.

[55] *The Times* reported: 'The deserted machine was found after three days' search by one of several D.H. 9 aeroplanes of the Royal Air Force. A small tent, apparently unoccupied, was pitched beside the machine. The D.H. 9 flew over the villages of Sarobi and Doaba, but could see no trace of the missing pilots and no sign from the villagers.''More Kabul Rescues,' *The Times*, 4 February 1929.

[56] A. Baker and R. Ivelaw-Chapman, *Wings Over Kabul*, 143.

[57] 'More Kabul Rescues,' *The Times*, 4 February 1929.

[58] A. Baker and R. Ivelaw-Chapman, *Wings Over Kabul*, 151.

[59] Ibid.

[60] *The Gazette of India*, Extraordinary, 7 October 1929, 152.
[61] Ibid.
[62] 'The Troubles in Afghanistan,' *The Times*, 14 February 1929.
[63] 'Rescues From Kabul,' *The Times*, 19 February 1929.
[64] A. Baker and R. Ivelaw-Chapman, *Wings Over Kabul*, 156.
[65] 'Position of British Airmen,' *The Times*, 15 February 1929.
[66] C. Bowyer, *RAF Operations 1918-38*, 194.
[67] 'R.A.F. Flights to Kabul,' *The Times*, 8 February 1929.
[68] 'Position of British Airmen,' *The Times*, 15 February 1929.
[69] Through the agency of the Chief Commissioner, North-West Frontier Province six Pathan volunteers were obtained and dispatched for this duty.
[70] A. Baker and R. Ivelaw-Chapman, *Wings Over Kabul*, 173.
[71] 'R.A.F. Flights to Kabul,' *The Times*, 21 February 1929.
[72] And at the same time to assist in the withdrawal by aeroplane of the French, German, and Italian Diplomatic Missions.
[73] 'Withdrawal From Kabul,' *The Times*, 25 February 1929.
[74] The aircraft followed the traditional route of the Khyber Pass. It was often said that every stone of the pass was soaked in the blood of battle. In the winter 1842, the British lost nearly an entire column of 4,500 men in their retreat from Kabul to Jalalabad. The memory of this retreat was always in the minds of the British Army afterwards. E. O'Ballance, *Afghan Wars: Battles in a Hostile Land* (London: Brassey's, 2002), 29-49.
[75] 'Back From Kabul,' *The Times*, 26 February 1929.
[76] 'Kabul,' *The Times*, 27 February 1929.
[77] Passengers on evacuation flights were allowed to bring along only one suitcase each. For an adult this was to weigh no more than 20 pounds; a child was entitled to a 15 pound travel case. To overcome this restriction, passengers dressed in multiple layers of clothing.
[78] Of note, of the 586 personnel evacuated only 23 had British nationality; 344 were British Indians and the remainder came from 11 different foreign citizenships. C. Bowyer, *RAF Operations 1918-38*, 196-7.
[79] A. Baker and R. Ivelaw-Chapman, *Wings Over Kabul*, 178.
[80] M. Barthop, *The North-West Frontier: British India and Afghanistan* (Poole: Blandford Press, 1982), 168.
[81] This was despite their Service 'ceiling' being several hundred feet lower than the Kabul aerodrome upon which they had to land.
[82] Although the propeller was broken, the lady survived the incident. The damaged propeller was replaced by the one on Flying Officer Trusk's machine, and the aircraft returned to Peshawar the same day. *The Gazette of India*, Extraordinary, 7 October 1929, 140.
[83] 'The Prince on Transport,' *The Times*, 15 March 1929.
[84] C. Bowyer, *RAF Operations 1918-38*, 197. Of note, Donaldson was subsequently commissioned. See also *The Gazette of India*, Extraordinary, 7 October 1929, 146-148.