Viewpoints

Air Power and Coercion: The Royal Air Force and Operation Bolton, 1997-2000[1]

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Introduction

In the mid-1990s the RAF's principal commitment to Operation SOUTHERN WATCH comprised a detachment of six Tornado GR1s based at Prince Sultan Air Base (PSAB), Saudi Arabia. Theirs was overwhelmingly a reconnaissance mission; there were no weapon releases, they faced few specific threats from the Iraqis, and the Southern No-Fly Zone was rarely violated. By mid-1999 the situation was very different. The PSAB commitment had been taken over by F3 interceptors and the GR1 detachment had doubled in size and was based at Ali Al Salem in Kuwait. The detachment was structured for both reconnaissance and offensive operations, and weapons were regularly released, for the detachment now faced numerous, continuous and specific threats from the Iraqis and constant challenges to the No Fly Zone. This pattern of activity would continue right through to the launch of Operation TELIC in 2003.

What had happened in the interim? The answer, at least from the RAF's perspective, was Operation BOLTON. What follows is a brief summary of the Air Historical Branch history of BOLTON, and some consideration of the more general lessons that might be drawn out of the RAF's experiences. BOLTON is something of a forgotten operation, yet it provides a very informative illustration of how political leaders sometimes seek to employ air power coercively, and of the many and varied challenges that this approach may generate at the operational and tactical levels.

Central to the story was UNSCOM, the United Nations Special Commission established to supervise the elimination of Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and longer-range

missiles in the aftermath of the first Gulf War. UNSCOM and the IAEA presided over the destruction of very large quantities of weapons and their supporting industrial infrastructure during the early 1990s, but it was an uphill struggle, and verification often posed insuperable problems. In time, UNSCOM came to suspect that the Iraqis were operating an elaborate concealment system designed to hide documents, computer records and possibly WMD or related equipment; in 1995 this was confirmed by Saddam Hussein's son-in-law, Hussein Kamel, following his defection to Israel.

Thereafter, UNSCOM considered it had little option but to target the concealment mechanism; predictably enough, this change of direction provoked strong Iraqi opposition. Moreover, as it threatened to extend the weapons inspection process into the indefinite future, it incurred the displeasure of countries like Russia and China, who were hoping to profit from the removal of economic sanctions against Iraq. Such international consensus as had formerly existed on Iraqi disarmament now began to break down. These developments assumed crisis proportions in October 1997, when UNSCOM issued a hard-hitting report describing how their activities were being hampered by non-co-operation and concealment by the Iraqi authorities.

In considering possible military responses, it is interesting to note that PJHQ did not conclude that there was a clear requirement for more offensive aircraft in theatre, even if hostilities actually broke out. Sufficient assets were already deployed. The view that more offensive platforms should be sent to the Gulf reflected the government's position that Iraq was unlikely to succumb to diplomatic pressure unless it was backed by force. The visible deployment of more offensive assets was considered to be the best way to emphasise this threat.

Equally, if offensive aircraft *were* to be despatched, PJHQ's preferred option was that they should be land-based Tornado GR1s. However, this pre-supposed the availability of a base from which offensive operations could be mounted; it was doubted that the Saudis would allow attack missions to be flown from their soil. It was in this context that PJHQ suggested sending an aircraft carrier with a mixed force of RAF Harrier GR7s and Royal Navy FA2s. Although it was fully recognized that the capabilities of this force would be more limited, the presence of GR7s in the Gulf would at least present a credible threat to Iraq. Early in November, HMS Invincible was diverted to the Mediterranean and 1 Squadron was placed on reduced notice to move.

In the meantime, relations with Iraq continued to deteriorate, and UNSCOM ultimately withdrew their inspectors in mid-November. The UK formally initiated Operation BOLTON on the 14th. UK objectives may be summarised as follows:

> Political objectives: resume effective UNSCOM operations, ensure the safety of remaining UNSCOM personnel, and keep unanimity within the UNSC and the Arab world

sympathetic towards UN aims. The use of force might be contemplated in support of these objectives.

Military objectives: support the political objectives by deploying and sustaining sufficient military forces, in concert with the US and other potential coalition partners, to coerce Iraq into compliance, or to respond with military action in the event of Iraqi attacks upon Coalition forces.

Strategic End State: restore the authority of the UN in Iraq with the resumption of UN weapons inspections with no preconditions.

An approach was now made to the Kuwaitis to establish whether they could provide a base from which UK aircraft could fly offensive missions against Iraq. They were found to be very enthusiastic, but the UNSCOM dispute had apparently been settled by the 20th, so the GR1 deployment was postponed for the time being. However, it was agreed that Invincible would set sail with the GR7s on board, both for training purposes and to keep UK options open in the event of further problems with the Iraqis. By the start of December, UNSCOM was indeed reporting renewed difficulties.

In the meantime, a base reconnaissance of Kuwait was completed and it was firmly established that a GR1 detachment could deploy to Ali Al Salem. This now became the MOD's preferred option and it was duly recommended that Invincible should return to the UK. Unfortunately, this proposal was not supported by the Foreign Office, where it was felt that the withdrawal of the carrier might suggest a lack of UK resolve to adversaries and allies alike. It was furthermore contended that the deployment of land-based aircraft to an airfield so close to the Iraqi border might be unduly escalatory. Initially, then, Invincible remained in the Mediterranean.

In January 1998, with the UNSCOM crisis steadily deepening, the government shifted its stance and decided that the UK should adopt a harder line. The MOD therefore recommended sending Invincible through the Suez Canal and deploying the GR1s to Ali Al Salem; a decision on Invincible was particularly important because of the time involved in her transit and in work-up activity once she reached the Gulf. Her move was finally sanctioned on the 15th and she entered the canal on the 18th. The diary maintained by 1 Squadron describes how the sun rose that day to reveal desert on either side of the ship and a large number of Egyptian T-64 tanks lining the canal – a clear reminder of how easily it could be closed. She finally entered the Straits of Hormuz on the 24th. A few days later, the GR7s began training integration flying, and they flew their first SOUTHERN WATCH sorties on the 29th, employing simulated attack profiles.

On 6 February the GR1 deployment to Ali Al Salem was finally approved, heralding an all-out expeditionary effort into what was, at that time, an extremely austere base environment. An interim operational capability was established there in less than a week. A review of UK

postures subsequently recommended that the carrier-borne GR7s be withdrawn and that the Ali Al Salem GR1 detachment be raised to 12 aircraft.

Despite the build-up of forces in theatre, the aim was still to support the diplomatic effort, but the possibility of live hostilities was of course inherent in this approach, and it appeared unlikely that if Iraq were bombed, UNSCOM would afterwards be readmitted. The government therefore agreed that if armed force were used and Saddam Hussein still did not allow UNSCOM inspections, he would be held at risk of further military action if he attempted to recreate his WMD capability again. The Americans must have had to address the same issue at this time, but their position was somewhat different. There was in fact a growing frustration in Washington over the extent to which policy was being dictated by the cycle of confrontations between the weapons inspectors and the Iraqi authorities, and the Clinton administration was evidently less daunted than the British government by the prospect of developing a strategy in which Iraqi disarmament was important but no longer central.

Faced with the enlarged US and UK military presence and under intense diplomatic pressure, Iraq appeared to capitulate. On 23 February the UN Secretary General and the Iraqi Foreign minister, Tariq Aziz, signed a memorandum of understanding that paved the way for the renewal of UNSCOM and IAEA activities. It therefore seemed that the strategy of diplomacy backed by the threat of force had been successful.

In May, the Americans began drawing down their forces in the Gulf, and this offered the UK scope to withdraw at least some of the GR1s. There were now 24 of these aircraft in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Turkey (on Operation NORTHERN WATCH), and the RAF were becoming concerned about the sustainability of this commitment on the eve of the GR1-GR4 upgrade. But while there was an operational requirement to maintain a GR1 detachment at Ali Al Salem, there remained a *strategic* need to keep at least some British combat aircraft at PSAB. So it was proposed that the GR1s be consolidated to a force of just six aircraft at Ali Al Salem, while F3s took over the PSAB commitment. This proposal was first tabled in mid-June 1998; yet the F3s did not deploy to PSAB until February 1999 and the GR1 force at Ali Al Salem was not reduced until January 2000, and then to eight rather than six aircraft.

How can this be explained? Initially the MOD's preferred course of action did not secure unanimous government support. There was concern about the fact that the reductions would take place in mid or late July, for the head of UNSCOM was due to visit Iraq early in August and a further dispute appeared highly likely. In the event, there was another confrontation even before the visit, so the GR1s stayed where they were. So began the sequence of events that led inexorably to Operation DESERT FOX in December. After an extended period of argument, both within the UN and between the UN and Iraq, the Iraqis finally suspended all co-operation with the weapons inspectors on 31 October. However, well before that, the movement of American assets out of theatre had been halted. Early in November the build-up of US forces

began again, and steps were taken to deploy more UK personnel to Ali Al Salem, and to move reconnaissance operations there from PSAB.

Once again, the Anglo-US concept was 'diplomacy backed by the threat of force', but it was now thought more probable that hostilities would actually break out. Consequently, there was closer consideration of the potential consequences of war, including the likelihood that Iraq would not readmit UNSCOM. With this in mind, it was agreed that air strikes would be partly designed to contribute to the goal of disarmament by reducing Iraq's WMD concealment and regeneration capability, and its ability to threaten neighbouring countries. The aim of any military action would be to coerce Iraq into compliance with its UN obligations, but the desired military end state would be to weaken Saddam Hussein politically and militarily, and to set back his WMD programme substantially. Then, even if UNSCOM were not immediately reinstated, the position would be preferable to one in which Saddam was allowed progressively to curtail UNSCOM's activities. At the same time, it was recognised in London that the US had a wider objective of maintaining credibility. The threat of force would lose much of its value as a diplomatic tool unless the Americans demonstrated that they were actually prepared to use it.

On 14 November, coalition forces were literally on the very point of commencing operations (under the name DESERT VIPER) when word came through that the Iraqis had once more agreed to co-operate with UNSCOM. Again, military action was placed on hold while further deliberations took place within the UN. UNSCOM returned to Iraq on the 18th, but the crisis was renewed almost immediately, and it is clear that the Americans concluded at this stage that military action was inevitable, and perhaps even desirable. And if air operations were to be mounted against Iraq, they wanted them to be complete by the start of Ramadan on 20 December. A further series of intrusive UNSCOM inspections, which inevitably ran into forthright Iraqi opposition, ultimately helped them to meet this time-scale.

On 15 December, UNSCOM reported to the UN that Iraq had not provided full co-operation and had in fact imposed new restrictions on the weapons inspectors. The inspectors were withdrawn on the 16th, and Operation DESERT FOX began that evening. In part, the operation targeted industrial sites linked to WMD or prohibited missiles, but stockpiles, suspected stockpiles, or dual-capability sites were not attacked. The other main targets were the security forces involved in regime security and the concealment mechanism, higher command and control, the Republican Guard, economic targets related to illegal oil exports, and Iraqi air defences. Over four days, more than 600 sorties were flown by approximately 300 combat and support aircraft; 90 air-launched cruise missiles and 600 other air-released munitions were employed, along with 325 TLAMs. RAF GR1s flew 28 attack sorties during the operation, releasing 52 bombs. Two Bahrain-based VC-10 tankers were also involved, along with a Nimrod R1, which operated out of Kuwait International Airport.

Lack of access to key parts of the US planning process makes it difficult to assess the operation's achievements in relation to its objectives. The vast majority of selected targets

were hit, and the campaign was assessed to have destroyed much industrial plant required for Iraq's missile programme, as well as a variety of other locations associated with prohibited weapons production or concealment. But the targeting of the Iraqi regime, the military high command, and the security forces upon which they relied most heavily reflects the fact that DESERT FOX had as much to do with sending political signals as with the degrading of WMD-related facilities. Essentially, it issued a blunt warning to Iraq (and also other pariah states) by demonstrating that a US-led coalition had the capacity to strike all the key pillars of the regime if it continued to pose a direct and tangible threat. On the 19th, President Clinton declared that UNSCOM would no longer be the focus of American policy towards Iraq; instead, the US and her allies would pursue a strategy of containment via a number of different routes.

In the immediate aftermath of DESERT FOX there was a dramatic upsurge in Iraqi activity in the southern and northern no-fly zones, including new SAM deployments, SAM launches and violations by Iraqi aircraft. London and Washington responded with a demarche threatening Iraq with a military response, and a so-called 'tit-for-tat' cycle began. By August 1999 there had been 200 violations of the no-fly zones since DESERT FOX, and 300 SAM launches; Iraqi AAA had also become very active and there had been numerous SAM radar illuminations. The coalition had responded on 92 days, attacking 300 targets with 1,070 bombs; RAF Tornados had hit 23 targets (with many more individual aiming points) expending 85 bombs. In the UK, the MOD was less than happy with this situation. Much of the initiative appeared to rest with Saddam Hussein, and it seemed probable that an aircraft would be lost sooner or later, or else that there would be a major collateral damage incident. But there was no obvious solution beyond seeking to maintain operations that were effective, but low in intensity and media profile.

There was at least now scope to replace the PSAB GR1s with F3s, and the swap finally took place in February. Scaling down the GR1 detachment at Ali Al Salem proved to be far harder. With the GR1 to GR4 upgrade in progress, it was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain overseas commitments and meet aircrew training requirements in the UK. To the Air Staff, it appeared that too many aircraft were deployed and that too few were available at home, and it seemed likely that operational standards would suffer as a result. A proposal to draw down the detachment to eight aircraft was tabled in September but once again fell foul of political and diplomatic developments. By this time, negotiations were under way within the UN to create a new weapons inspection organisation to replace UNSCOM, and to produce an SCR linking weapons inspections to the termination of sanctions against Iraq. Once more, it was argued that the premature withdrawal of aircraft might suggest a lack of UK resolve to nations such as Russia and China, who were arguing for an unconditional end to sanctions. The draw-down proposal was resubmitted in November following the appointment of a new Secretary of State for Defence – Geoff Hoon. But another month went by before the UN passed Resolution 1284, which created UNMOVIC, and only then was ministerial authorisation to withdraw four GR1s from Ali Al Salem finally granted. They duly returned to the UK on 25 January 2000. The scene was now set for the final three years of the RAF's contribution to operations over the southern no-fly zone.

Conclusions and Lessons

Relatively little has been written about the operation that the UK called BOLTON, and the few histories that have been published inevitably tend to focus on DESERT FOX rather than the broader UNSCOM crisis. Consequently, DESERT FOX is not always considered in its correct context; lack of context in turn leads historians to draw the wrong conclusions. One of the most widespread misconceptions is that DESERT FOX failed because it did not coerce Iraq back into co-operation with UNSCOM. Yet, by December 1998, there was in fact little expectation that military action would achieve this end. At the same time, it must be kept in mind that the broader strategy of backing diplomacy with the threat of force appeared to have worked on at least two earlier occasions during the UNSCOM crisis.

A second common contention is that DESERT FOX destroyed the international consensus on Iraqi disarmament. Yet this claim simply does not stand up to close inspection. The truth is that such international consensus as had previously existed disintegrated progressively during the later 1990s, and not as a result of any single identifiable historical event.

No less questionable is the claim that DESERT FOX lacked any clear political objective. The view in Washington was that, well before DESERT FOX, the Clinton administration had effectively lost control over policy towards Iraq, which had deteriorated into a series of uncoordinated ad hoc responses to confrontations between UNSCOM and the Iraqi authorities. The tail was wagging the dog. DESERT FOX's political objective was to restore at least some control and direction to US policy. In part it was also designed to show that when the US underpinned diplomacy with the threat of force, the threat was not an idle one.

Then there is finally the argument that the West faced a worse situation *after* DESERT FOX than before. The problem here is the underlying inference that some kind of perfect solution was on offer. It was not, and the situation that prevailed before DESERT FOX was obviously very far from ideal. It made little sense to found policy towards Iraq on the disarmament issue, when at least two if not three of the permanent five members of the UN Security Council had so obviously lost interest in it. The reality is that both positive and negative results were bound to follow from any available course of action.

Much of the criticism is thus unwarranted. But we do at the same time see during BOLTON a series of attempts by the political leadership in the US and UK to use air power to send signals to Iraq and indeed other countries. This approach tends to be viewed with scepticism by air power scholars and practitioners alike, but it would be hard to contend that their opinions exerted much tangible influence in 1998, and we may therefore legitimately question whether they are likely do so in future. Rather, the key calculations about how signals should be sent and about how they would be received were made by Downing Street and the Foreign Office. MOD concerns did not feature very prominently in their order of priorities, and MOD recommendations only shaped UK policy to a limited degree. If Operation BOLTON does nothing else, it provides an illuminating insight into the realities of UK crisis management at that time.

One illustration is provided by the protracted eighteen-month delay involved in reshaping deployed RAF forces in the interests of longer-term sustainability between June 1998 and January 2000. But HMS Invincible's deployment at the end of 1997 offers the most obvious example. Some commentators afterwards put a positive spin on Invincible's role, stressing how she had been able to 'poise' en route to the Gulf. In actual fact, by December 1997, the MOD would have preferred to withdraw Invincible completely. However, because of the time involved in her transit, key decisions on her despatch had to be taken far earlier than would have been the case for land-based aircraft, and this inevitably then shaped the available options further downstream. The MOD found itself committed to a course of action that soon appeared suboptimal, but which it could not actually change for several months. Not the least of the problems was the extended period of poise itself, which offered only limited training opportunities to 1 Squadron's pilots. Skill fade became a real concern, the fading skills being precisely those that would be needed if the pilots ever reached the Gulf.

It is furthermore difficult to identify any compensating advantages from Invincible's despatch. While it is frequently claimed that the use of carriers eliminates requirements for host-nation support typically associated with land-based aircraft deployments, and by no means always guaranteed, in BOLTON the essential base facilities for the GR1s were made available immediately by Kuwait, mirroring UK experience over many years. The simple truth is that when the UK conducts military operations overseas, it is invariably in response to threats of both global and regional dimensions. On this basis, it can virtually be taken for granted that one or more states in the theatre of operations will feel sufficiently at risk to welcome foreign aircraft onto their airfields with open arms.

Equally, it is a fact that Invincible's deployment could not have been effected without the acquiescence or active collaboration of other states. The movement of an aircraft carrier, complete with a force of offensive aircraft, into a busy and confined stretch of water such as the Persian Gulf, requires at least the passive acceptance of the surrounding countries, if not their active support. The Egyptian government had to agree to Invincible's transit through the Suez Canal, and she later required actual harbour facilities for several days, when it became necessary to dock so that radar unserviceabilities could be rectified. In the absence of this remedial action, Invincible would have been unable to discharge even her most rudimentary tactical functions.

Of the other main lessons from the operation, coalition warfare issues became prominent in November 1998, when communication broke down following the cancellation of DESERT VIPER. The subsequent transformation of DESERT VIPER into DESERT FOX was largely conducted by the Americans; the British were unable to inspect the revised plan until very late, and uncertainties remained afterwards about the reasons for the selection of particular targets and, more broadly, about what the air campaign was intended to achieve. Alliance cohesion is evidently something that requires continuous and extremely careful management.

On a more positive note, the initial GR1 deployment to Ali Al Salem illustrated the importance of expeditionary air capabilities and the extent to which they had been developed within the RAF since the first Gulf War. And the results of DESERT FOX proved useful for the RAF in drawing attention to the fact that more effort and resources had to be committed to training with the TIALD pod-Paveway bomb combination. Resources had been stretched in this area despite the fact that the laser-guided Paveway II was essentially the UK's weapon of first choice throughout the 1990s. TIALD-Paveway training was thus not merely a tactical question; it was an issue of operational and possibly even strategic significance. However, after DESERT FOX the decision was taken to procure more pods and to improve training provisions. As a result, aircrew proficiency in the use of TIALD and Paveway had improved significantly by the time Operation TELIC was launched in 2003.

Notes

[1] This paper is an unclassified summary of the classified Air Historical Branch narrative entitled *The Royal Air Force in Operation BOLTON*.