The Royal Air Force and the Irish War of Independence 1918-1922

By Reverend Dr (Squadron Leader) David Richardson

Biography: The Reverend Dr (Squadron Leader) David Richardson is a graduate of the universities of Edinburgh, Belfast, Trinity College Dublin and King's College London, and a contributor to the Cambridge Dictionary of Irish Biography. Ordained in the Church of Ireland, he has served 10 years as a chaplain in the RAF. Operational experience includes two tours of Afghanistan and a recent deployment on Op SHADER, working with both air force elements in Cyprus and training teams in Iraq.

Abstract: Although the Royal Air Force was involved in active operations in Ireland between 1918 and 1922, this has attracted comparatively little scholarly interest; the scant secondary literature on the subject tends to suggest that air operations were of tangential relevance to the War of Independence. Drawing extensively on British and Irish primary sources, including accounts by combatants on both sides, this dissertation seeks to demonstrate that air operations in fact had a distinct impact on the conflict. Although there were admittedly numerous shortcomings in the application of air power in Ireland, it will be argued that by the summer of 1921 the RAF had been closely integrated into British security operations, and had a significant effect on the activities of the Irish Republican Army.

Introduction

In the autumn of 1923, some two decades before the battles of Alamein and Singapore made them household names, Bernard Montgomery and Arthur Percival engaged in correspondence concerning their recent campaign service in Ireland. Of aircraft, Montgomery had this to say, 'These were really of no use to us, except as a quick and safe means of getting from one place to another….the pilots and observers knew nothing whatever about the war, or the conditions under which it was being fought, and were not therefore in a position to help much'.[1] Subsequent histories of the Irish War of Independence have tended to echo Montgomery's verdict that the Air Force was of limited utility.[2] In particular, most of the limited academic interest in the RAF's Irish deployment has focused on the vexed question of arming aircraft in Ireland, to the relative neglect of other aerial operations. Nor has much work been done to analyse how the IRA actually viewed the Bristol Fighters and Airco DH9s droning overhead.[3] The Bureau of Military History in Dublin contains a considerable number of IRA accounts on the subject, which have received little attention from historians in the decade since their release.[4]

By offering an account of air operations across the period from 1918 to 1922, using a range of British and Republican sources (including some previously unpublished private papers), this paper will argue that the airmen contributed rather more than Montgomery allowed. By 1921 the Royal Air Force had, in fact, become a central and highly effective element of the Crown forces in Ireland.

Military aviation first appeared in Ireland in September 1913 when seven aircraft were briefly detached from Scotland on a training exercise.[5] A more permanent presence was established after the outbreak of the First World War, when new airfields were required across the United Kingdom to train the expanding Royal Flying Corps. Although Ireland was primarily regarded as a training facility, a number of anti-submarine patrols were also flown from the west coast.[6]

By 1918, the political situation in Ireland was in a state of flux as the third Home Rule Act remained in suspension, and the shock waves of the 1916 Rebellion continued to reverberate. Even as those first aerodromes were under construction, the Royal Air Force was already being employed on security duties, seeking to observe the Irish Volunteers drilling in the Dublin hills. As an Irish nationalist activist later recalled, 'when we could be seen from the Phoenix Park, an aeroplane would be sent over to try and find out what we were doing...Captain Cullen would have the men so arranged when the plane came over that she could not find us'.[7] Nor was the activity limited to observation. Flight Lieutenant Edward Taylor was sent to patrol the Irish countryside searching out Sinn Fein gatherings and records that 'we dived upon the motley crowd, endeavouring to break up the meeting'.[8] This tactic was not invariably successful; as one eyewitness recorded at Eyries in Cork in the summer of 1918, the crowd simply 'jeered and booed' at the low flying aircraft.[9] However, even at this inchoate stage of the conflict, the RAF was having an impact. Patrick Kelly of the Irish Volunteers records how an aircraft scattered his

unit on parade and subsequently co-operated with ground forces to ensure the detention of some suspects.[10]

The newly appointed Viceroy, Lord French, was certainly in favour of employing air power against the developing threat of armed nationalism as early as April 1918. In a letter to Lloyd George, he advocated that aircraft armed with bombs and machine guns would 'put the fear of God into these playful young Sinn Feiners'.[11] Although it would take almost exactly three years until military aircraft in Ireland were permitted to carry lethal ordnance, aviation was able to fulfil numerous other roles in the interim. Two squadrons were despatched to Ireland in the spring of 1918 and were tasked on communication and reconnaissance.[12] Within six months of French's letter, plans had also been drawn up to use aircraft in the event of disruption to the postal system, operating alongside mobile columns and overflying outlying garrisons on a daily basis.[13] Thus even before the end of the First World War, the RAF was beginning to acquire a defined role in the British security plan for Ireland.

The armistice of November was swiftly followed by a General Election, which in Ireland saw the pre-war mandate of the Irish Parliamentary Party overturned by a Sinn Fein victory. Clearly, the Irish question could not be resolved by simply defrosting the Home Rule Act that had been placed into cold storage in 1914. The new parliamentarians refused to assume their seats at Westminster and established their own conclave in Dublin on 21st January 1919. In an entirely unrelated development, a group of restive Irish Volunteers in County Tipperary chose that morning to ambush a cartload of gelignite en route to a local quarry, killing the pair of Royal Irish Constabulary escorts. Although this was but one of a growing number of attacks on the RIC, the chronological coincidence has proved irresistible to historians, who tend to regard the shots at Soloheadbeg as the opening of the War of Independence.[14]

It was by no means apparent at the outset that Britain was about to be embroiled in a major campaign; the Irish Republican Army, as the Irish Volunteers were increasingly being called, initially conducted low-level attacks that were 'sporadic and directionless'.[15] The British Government had plenty of other distractions to deal with; peace making at Versailles, civil war in Russia, and unrest in Iran being just some of the concerns facing the Cabinet. In the face of this, ministers 'did their best to avoid Irish affairs altogether', and management of the developing crisis was left, at least initially, in the hands of the sclerotic British administration in Dublin Castle.[16] However, even as the IRA campaign intensified, the Cabinet's interest in Ireland was intermittent at best; not until the spring of 1921 did Lloyd George fully engage with the Irish situation.[17]

At the same time, Britain was trying to divest itself of the huge armed forces it had amassed.[18] The Royal Air Force, formed a bare seven months before the end of the war to deal with a specific German threat, was especially vulnerable with the advent of peace.[19] In January 1919, the Air Ministry was disestablished as a separate department, and as the year wore on the RAF was trimmed of some 90% of its personnel.[20] Faced with swingeing defence cuts, the

leadership of the Army and Navy were not overly solicitous for the welfare of their young rival. Indeed, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff opined that 'the sooner the Air Force crashes the better'.[21] The strategy adopted by Sir Hugh Trenchard, Chief of the Air Staff in 1919, was 'to preserve the vital essentials of a skeleton force whilst giving way on every possible detail on which he felt that expense could be saved'.[22] It was against this backdrop of a distracted Government and a shrinking military capability that the RAF conducted its campaign, and these factors help explain many of the decisions that were subsequently made.

As 1919 wore on, the IRA campaign was initially focused on obtaining weapons, generally from lightly defended police barracks; one early raid in March also netted a substantial haul of arms from RAF Collinstown, just north of Dublin.[23] Under the RAF 'Defence of Ireland Scheme', all Royal Irish Constabulary and military units were instructed to select aerial dropping stations close to their headquarters to facilitate communication by air mail.[24] The scheme also adumbrated proposals for the RAF to work in close co-operation with the Army in Ireland, carrying out reconnaissance and patrols, with the especial aim of deterring IRA training meetings on Saturdays and Sundays.[25] One pilot later recalled patrolling the Wicklow Mountains, firing Very lights to indicate the location of IRA activity.[26] Some additional aircraft were transferred across the Irish Sea and initial steps were also taken to consolidate the various fragmentary RAF units in Ireland into two effective squadrons.[27] Aerodromes were retained in Dublin, Fermoy in the south and Oranmore in the west, together with a number of additional landing grounds.[28] Although an RAF inspecting officer noted that 'no particular animosity' had yet been evinced against the RAF, by the summer the 'hopeless, defenceless state of …aircraft ...and living quarters' had become apparent.[29] The lessons of Collinstown had clearly not been learnt and special instructions were issued to RAF personnel for the securing of arms.[30]

Despite limited resources, the RAF had been continuing to conduct useful activity in early 1920. British policy during the conflict tended to veer uneasily between conciliation and coercion, and opted for the latter in the aftermath of an attack on the Viceroy. The RAF thus found itself involved in the Crown's efforts to curtail Republican activity.[31] A proscribed Sinn Fein demonstration in County Armagh had been carefully choreographed to mislead the RIC, who set off on a false scent. However, the real location of the gathering had been identified by an aircraft which then dropped a message at Blackwatertown barracks, enabling the police to carry out a raid.[32] Regular reconnaissance reports were also issued, helping to build up the general intelligence picture for the Crown forces by recording such phenomena as the appearance of large crowds.[33]

Group Captain Bonham-Carter, the new local commander, was determined to expand the role of the Air Force in Ireland still further, however. In a letter to Trenchard, Bonham-Carter gave a useful *tour d'horizon* of RAF activity in the early spring of 1920. Personnel were engaged in conducting spring drills, weeding out surplus stores, and improving airfield defences, in addition to occasional patrols for the Army. A great deal of time seems to have been spent simply tidying up detritus from the war; 'the work of closing stations and straightening up the

aftermath is dispiriting'. Aviation activity was restricted by the fact that many of the pilots based in Ireland had not yet trained on the Bristol Fighter, which was becoming the preferred type for local use. Many of the local Army units were also composed of new recruits who were simply not ready for the demands of working with aircraft. Bonham-Carter was anxious to achieve more, and even devised a plan for potential nocturnal flights, dropping flares to deter IRA units attacking police barracks.[34]

As the year passed, there were encouraging signs of a developing liaison between the Air Force and the Army, which Bonham-Carter sought to foster. In April, 2 Squadron advised the local Fermoy brigade in advance of a reconnaissance mission and offered to drop information if anything significant was discovered.[35] The Army was also actively seeking aerial assistance; for instance, the general commanding troops in Kerry sought to develop a landing ground and petrol dump at Killarney or Tralee to enhance access to air services. The carriage of an Army officer as an observer was also suggested as a way of enhancing coordination between air and land.[36] The aerial mail service was enhanced throughout the south west of Ireland, although at least one successful attempt was made to dupe aircraft into dropping military mail on to an IRA-constructed receiving station.[37] Liaison work developed with all three brigades in the area, and by late summer a programme had been drawn up for practice with Popham Panels, a basic ground-air signalling system.[38] It seemed as if real progress was being made in the employment of air assets in Ireland.

However, those assets were proving rather fragile in the Irish environment. By August 1920, only one aircraft was serviceable at Oranmore airfield in Galway, which meant that the aerial mail service and 'anti Sinn Fein operations' suffered accordingly.[39] Bonham-Carter wrote to Trenchard for assistance, expanding on the RAF's situation. Breakdowns and forced landings were common, and pilots were beginning to 'grouse' about flying the increasingly unreliable Bristol Fighters. The repairs unit was patching up machines which really required a proper overhaul, whilst the weather conditions on the west coast were quickly degrading even the newest aircraft.[40] In a splendidly blimpish response to the pilots, Trenchard opined that 'this sort of grousing started in France' but nonetheless agreed to try and despatch some more aircraft to Ireland.[41] Pleading that Bonham-Carter was 'practically at war', he urged the RAF's Director of Equipment to send more machines across.[42] As it turned out, however, this would not be the end of the matter. Trenchard's absence from the office one day in late September would result in the shortcomings of the RAF's Irish operation being closely scrutinised by a Cabinet minister.

General Tudor, the police commander in Ireland, had travelled to London to ask for more resources from the Secretary of State for War, Winston Churchill. Although Tudor had apparently only intended to discuss the provision of armoured vehicles, the discussion also ranged over the role of aircraft in Ireland. Churchill may have raised the subject, as he had recently commented on the potential for employing the RAF against IRA members found drilling, 'using ...no more force than is necessary to scatter and stampede them'.[43] In Trenchard's absence that day, aviation advice was provided by the Air Secretary, Group Captain Scott.

He was ill-prepared to answer Churchill's probing questions, such as why only half of the three dozen aircraft in Ireland were in working order.[44] In a subsequent letter to Trenchard, Churchill urged that the RAF dredge its reserves to provide fifty effective aircraft in Ireland, and personally charged the Chief of the Air Staff to 'give the Irish position a searching overhaul yourself'. Churchill also despatched the Air Secretary to Ireland on a tour of inspection to establish the facts.[45]

This must have been a galling development to Trenchard, who had after all been taking steps to reinforce Ireland before Churchill intervened. From previous experience, the airman felt that the minister 'had an imagination... too strong for comfort and... tended to be swayed by the last devil's advocate he happened to meet'.[46] Nonetheless, he responded to the political pressure; ten additional Bristol Fighters were made ready immediately and quickly despatched across the Irish Sea.[47]

Bonham-Carter quickly produced his own justification to Trenchard to explain the embarrassing serviceability record. Many of the aircraft were stored in canvas hangars which proved less than resistant to Irish weather conditions, whilst aircraft log books had not been properly kept, with deleterious effects on maintenance schedules. A shortage of spares and technical personnel such as fabric workers further exacerbated the situation. Bonham-Carter also explained that the RAF had been seeking to meet a rising Army demand for aviation services, whilst conducting its own reorganisation from its wartime footing.[48] It should be noted that the RAF was not the only service in Ireland to be afflicted by mechanical problems; the summer of 1920 had also seen a high rate of breakdowns in the Army vehicle fleet.[49] Even so, given that he had offered similar pleas for the parlous condition of the Irish detachment six months before, Bonham-Carter was effectively admitting that his command had failed to address some fundamental issues.

Meanwhile, Group Captain Scott had crossed to Ireland with Tudor and submitted his report on 28 September, exposing even more shortcomings than Bonham-Carter had admitted to. Scott visited most of the RAF estate, and found the aerodrome at Fermoy to be hazardous for aviators and ill-equipped for all, with most of the men living in tents. Overall, the station was 'squalid to the last degree'. Simply adding more aircraft to the Irish roster would not resolve matters, as there was nowhere to put them.[50] Some mitigating circumstances were pleaded by Air Vice-Marshal Steel, Director of Operations and Intelligence. Arguing that the excessive number of machines out of service detected by Churchill's census was a temporary affair, Steel felt that the arrival of the promised repair unit would greatly enhance aircraft availability.[51]

Nonetheless, the state of military aviation in Ireland clearly left a lot to be desired, and Trenchard convened a special meeting to discuss Scott's findings. After a lengthy discussion of just what powers would be required to cut down trees at Fermoy aerodrome, the conclave considered the matter of aircraft serviceability. Some of the problems had been caused by industrial action in mainland Britain which interfered with the flow of military supplies to

Ireland, such as heavy aircraft equipment. In Trenchard's view, however, unserviceable aircraft were not necessarily a bar to operations. After all, it had been acceptable to fly machines during the War when not airworthy, and the 'present position practically amounted to War'. The Chief of the Air Staff also dismissed the complaint that the RAF stations in Ireland had lacked technical advice; 'Officers in Units should be able to look after this themselves'. Had complaints been made about RAF rations in Ireland, Trenchard would presumably have commended the consumption of cake. Some progress was at least made by the close of the meeting in agreeing to look into alternative means of transporting materiel to Ireland, such as military shipping.[52] Given that the most senior commanders of the Royal Air Force had been gathered to discuss affairs in Ireland, it was hardly a decisive outcome. This was due in part to a lack of enthusiasm for Irish operations, but also to severe financial constraints. The Treasury had made it quite clear to Trenchard that extra money would not be granted to support 11 (Irish) Wing – any expenditure would be borne from the RAF's standard budget.[53]

A further meeting on Ireland was held within a few days, with Bonham-Carter in attendance. Trenchard was loath to spend more money than necessary on improving RAF Fermoy and wanted to know if the Army would still require support from the airfield in three months' time. Given that Fermoy was the principal aerodrome in one of the most contested areas of Ireland, and that the conflict showed no sign of ceasing, this should have been a fairly safe assumption. Trenchard did call Bonham-Carter to account for failing to give an accurate picture of how acute the stores shortage had been, and instructed him to 'see that all the Officers were doing their work'. The Chief of the Air Staff had been particularly exercised by the inefficiency of the squadron commander at Fermoy, and dismissed Bonham-Carter's defence that he was new in post. Nor did Trenchard feel that Irish conditions were an excuse for poor aircraft husbandry, pointing out that machines had been field-stripped and overhauled in France. The meeting effectively concluded with a consensus that there were no facilities for a further squadron to be housed in Ireland, but replacement aircraft would be provided whenever possible.[54]

In early October, Trenchard wrote to Churchill to summarise the state of military aviation in Ireland. He argued that the serviceability figures which had so shocked the minister were atypical, but admitted that more aircraft in working order were required. The Air Marshal did suggest that Churchill's proposal for fifty aircraft was unrealistic, given the difficulties of maintaining and housing such an increased number of machines. Trenchard was especially resistant to Churchill's proposals to denude training establishments of airmen and aircraft, pointing out the impact this could have on the developing air force. Only one squadron remained in Great Britain for use with the Army, and even that had been depleted to augment Ireland.[55] Clearly, Trenchard had limited room for manoeuvre in resolving Irish matters, given the paucity of resources at his disposal. However, matters in Ireland had been allowed to drift and Churchill's enquiries had uncovered a number of shortcomings which should have been addressed by local commanders. Although the campaign against the IRA continued until the following summer, there were to be no more summit meetings on Ireland in Trenchard's office.

The immediate political pressure had been satiated, and some basic remedial work had been done, but the work in Ireland never really fired Trenchard's imagination. Army co-operation, the primary focus of the Irish squadrons, was not an aviation role that the air chief favoured; indeed, he had considered returning this capability to the Army in order to concentrate on more offensive roles.[56]

Some of Trenchard's lack of enthusiasm can also be explained by the contention over the arming of aircraft in Ireland. Although first raised by the Viceroy in 1918, the idea was taken up again by Bonham-Carter soon after his arrival in Ireland in March 1920. In a letter to the Chief of the Air Staff, he suggested that in due course the RAF might be allowed to take 'more drastic measures' against the Irish insurgents, employing bombs and aerial gunnery.[57] No response from Trenchard is recorded to this request, but developments in another theatre provide an insight into his views.

In the aftermath of events at Amritsar, when aircraft had fired on a crowd at Gujranwala to lethal effect, the RAF commander drafted a response to the India Office which recommended that, given the difficulty of identifying targets from the air; 'the use of aircraft in industrial unrest or risings for several years to come should be definitely confined to reconnaissance and communication purposes'. Offensive air power could only be considered against obvious 'murder and arson' in an area where 'the majority of the inhabitants are definitely hostile'.[58]

Trenchard's concern for discrimination was understandable; it was clearly not in the interests of the fledgling air force to repeat the Indian experience. Bonham-Carter received Trenchard's memorandum in May, but within three months had apparently discovered circumstances which would allow the employment of armed aircraft in Ireland.[59] A mail lorry had been ambushed by the IRA, and during the ensuing gun battle an RAF aeroplane flew past. The aircrew considered that their weapons could have been used to decisive effect, without 'any question of the innocent suffering with the guilty'. Bonham-Carter pleaded this case to the Air Ministry, asking that the memorandum be altered to permit aerial engagement if 'the rebels could be clearly distinguished'.[60]

A reply was drafted by the Director of Operations and Intelligence at the Air Ministry, pointing out that the General Officer Commanding in Ireland could issue orders to this effect, but warning against the 'possible misemployment of aircraft'.[61] The letter was not sent in the event; the surviving correspondence on this subject shows that senior military and Government figures in London were generally chary of endorsing requests from Dublin for airborne weapons. It is particularly noteworthy that the Irish and Indian documents are interleaved in the same Air Ministry file – there was clearly an anxiety about recreating Gujranwala in Galway. However, the pressure to arm RAF aircraft was growing as the Irish military and police commanders became involved in the debate. In August 1920, General Macready, the Army commander in Ireland, wrote to his superiors in the War Office, asking that Trenchard's memorandum be amended to allow the use of ordnance against identifiable assailants.[62]

Although the War Office did not hasten to reply, the concerns of General Tudor were being thoroughly discussed at the Air Ministry.

In the course of his September discussions in London, General Tudor had asked that aircraft be armed, as he felt that the existing unarmed patrols were an insufficient deterrent to the rebel forces. Group Captain Scott, the Air Secretary, initially made some objections on the grounds of distinguishing friend and foe, but came up with some compromise solutions. These included RAF stations in Ireland conducting regular target practice as a demonstration of capability, and painting British lorries with coloured roundels to facilitate discrimination from the air.[63]

After his inspection visit to Ireland, Scott had more suggestions which included the occasional use of machine guns, 'the very greatest pains being taken to ensure that no mistake is made … Bonham-Carter said that he had two or three really careful and reliable pilots who could be trusted not to fire unless they were certain that they were attacking Sinn Feiners'. The remaining careless and trigger-happy pilots could presumably have been employed on Scott's other scheme which involved designating the Wicklow Mountains as an RAF bombing range, where the echoing detonations could demonstrate the potential of air power.[64]

Scott's rather offbeat efforts to find a way of employing armed aircraft found scant support from his superiors in the Air Ministry. The Director of Operations and Intelligence argued that it was difficult to find clear opportunities for the use of weapons, and the RAF should focus instead on communication and reconnaissance work in Ireland.[65] Trenchard was in complete agreement with this, arguing that the use of armed aircraft would simply leave the IRA 'annoyed and exasperated without being impressed'. Any resulting 'mistakes' would result in a press campaign against 'irresponsible pilots', whilst downed aircrew might find themselves at the mercy of an incensed populace. The Chief of the Air Staff also adduced previous military experience to prove his case, arguing that road strafing in wartime France had little impact in reducing enemy traffic.[66]

Macready had in the meantime renewed his petition to the War Office, further adumbrating circumstances in which aerial firing could be employed with confidence. In the General's view, aircraft responding to road ambushes in isolated country could do so with impunity as the 'open hostility of the assailants' would be obvious, 'even to a man in an aeroplane'. In more populated areas, crowds could be dispersed by dropping warning leaflets before opening fire.[67]

The matter was discussed at the highest military level when Trenchard met with the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir Henry Wilson. The airman pointed out that even Macready's isolated roadside battle would by no means offer a pilot clear and undisputed targets. Dropping pamphlets before opening fire was also unreliable, as there was no guarantee that the information would fall where it was intended; pilots could be opening fire on people who had received no warning. Given the damage that could be caused from 'a runaway gun', Trenchard decried Macready's proposed policy as 'ineffective and highly dangerous.'[68] Wilson and the War

Office followed Trenchard's line, considering that the proposition entailed enormous risks of public opprobrium with little military gain. This is illustrated by a memorandum from a Colonel Braine opining that 'the whole responsibility would be placed on..a very young air officer with plenty of dash and keenness but perhaps little idea of responsibility or judgement'.[69] Patronising and stereotypical as Braine's statement may have been, it perhaps contained an element of truth. Finally, at the end of October, Macready obtained his official answer from the Army Council. Authority would not be given for the arming of aircraft, as concerns of discernment, accuracy, and communication precluded 'the exercise of that delicate control which is necessary'.[70] Within six months, however, the issue of arming aircraft would again be back on the agenda, albeit with a different outcome.

Indifferent weather had delayed the despatch of more Bristol Fighters to Ireland, but the squadrons were slowly building up strength, albeit by denuding British home defence and Army co-operation squadrons.[71] By late October, Bonham-Carter was also able to advise Trenchard that progress was being made on enhancing Fermoy aerodrome, whilst an extra hangar was due to arrive at Oranmore within the week.[72] The improvements soon began paying dividends in operational output.

For instance, intelligence officers had noticed that Dennis Galvin was leading a rebel band near Kanturk who tended to muster on Thursdays for activity on Fridays – the brigade requested aerial reconnaissance to monitor Mr. Galvin's activities.[73] Army brigades were also submitting requests for missions such as low flights at random times to detect ambushes.[74] In addition to the quotidian task of mail carriage, reconnaissance was also carried out for illegal drilling, and damage to communications, whilst thousands of leaflets were dropped with descriptions of wanted men. In one notable episode on 13 December 1920, three DH9 aircraft from 100 Squadron worked with 16 Brigade in Tipperary. An area of three square miles was sealed off and searched by police, soldiers, and Auxiliaries, the aircraft co-operating with ground forces through the use of Very lights and dropped messages. Wireless transmissions from the aircraft were used to update the squadron headquarters.[75]

One especially positive development was the circulation of a memorandum in February 1921 by 6 Division in Cork. The authors of the document were keen to ensure that aircraft were used in a manner that kept pace with rebel tactics, the key issue being effective ground to air communication. This proposal was considered by 2 Squadron in Fermoy, who set out a sample list of signals involving Klaxons and Very lights.[77] The brigade operating in Kerry had also been considering these issues, and decided to use a method of reporting map references that had been used in the War; this established practice should, however, have been revived long before the spring of 1921.[78] Air power was at least being used with increasing care and planning.

One of the arguments that had been advanced by Tudor, Bonham-Carter, and Macready in the debate over the arming of aircraft was the fact that the IRA would not be intimidated for long

by unarmed machines.[79] However, there is clear evidence to show that the insurgents took the RAF seriously despite its lack of offensive capability. As early as 1918, the Irish Volunteers had experienced something of air power's ability in reconnaissance and learned to take avoiding action.[80] Although early attacks on RAF stations may have simply been part of the IRA's weapons harvesting campaign, as the war progressed the Republican forces considered that aircraft themselves were worth destroying. When machines had forced landings in the Irish countryside due to mechanical failures, it was not uncommon for the local Republican forces to attack the guard force and incinerate the unfortunate biplane.[81] At least two aircraft were spotted by rebel forces on railway wagons and burned in transit.[82] These attacks may of course have simply been part of a general campaign to destroy British materiel, similar to the burning of military laundry.[83] By January 1921, however, it was clear that the IRA had begun to specifically target aircraft, as orders were issued to local commanders to log known air routes and snipe machines 'at least once weekly if flying low'.[84]

In early February 1921, a group of IRA volunteers in County Limerick had the opportunity to put this order into execution. Six separate Republican statements concerning the incident have survived, and provide a credible account. An aircraft flying low over Kilfinane, apparently in mechanical difficulty, was fired on by an IRA column and subsequently landed, with bullet holes in the petrol tank.[85] The laconic British account of the incident makes no mention of hostile fire whilst the rather diffident insurgent records state that 'it was never learned whether the 'plane came down directly as a result of the I.R.A. fire'.[86] Whatever the ultimate cause of the aircraft's demise, the pilot had sufficient time to make good his escape towards the local town to seek help, leaving the hapless observer, Flying Officer Mackey, to face the advancing IRA.[87] The aircraft was set on fire and Mackey became a guest of the Irish nation, although his silk socks and light shoes were ill-suited for his marshland trek with the IRA column.[88] The observer, who was 'a very likeable person and fairly well educated for an Englishman', spent several days in the company of the rebels, and promised at least one of them a flight when the conflict was over.[89] Mackey's hosts ensured that he was provided with boots and he commented that the IRA was 'far different...from what he had been led to believe'.[90] Whilst this exercise in Anglo-Irish understanding was going on, the RAF was making its own efforts to recover Mackey, dropping leaflets and even smoke grenades on a local town to encourage his release.[91] These efforts had no apparent influence on the IRA decision to free Mackey, who was deposited unharmed at Charleville railway station, complete with a letter from his captors assuring the RAF that he had been held against his will.[92] Some genuine rapport does seem to have been established between the airman and his captors – on a subsequent visit to the area with local security forces, Mackey did not betray his erstwhile hosts.[93] Despite the rather picaresque flavour of the airman's adventure, however, there were some sinister undertones. British troops burnt a local house as a reprisal after Mackey's capture, whilst at least one of his guards had suggested his execution.[94]

Although this was the only episode where IRA ground fire may have been a factor in bringing down an aircraft, insurgent units persisted in their efforts.[95] There are also numerous examples

of IRA units withholding anti-aircraft fire to avoid detection, whilst various instructions to Volunteers urged the need for camouflage and concealment from aerial observation.[96] Kautt has argued that the IRA showed a 'disproportionate' reaction to aircraft, and states that unarmed machines posed little real threat to the rebels.[97] However, the IRA reaction was hardly excessive – Republican leaders simply had a healthy understanding of the dangers posed by RAF reconnaissance.

In the spring of 1921, as rumours grew of a planned general uprising in Kerry, Macready decided to renew his argument for the arming of aircraft.[98] In a letter to the War Office, he argued that the situation in Ireland had changed since the autumn of 1920. The IRA was now operating as 'large commandos' and developing 'minor military engagements' rather than small ambushes. Macready did propose that armed aircraft should be confined to the martial law area of south west Ireland, in cases where 'a definite action was taking place, or when an aeroplane itself was fired at'.[99]

In an echo of the October correspondence, the War Office again sought the views of the Air Ministry, enquiring whether Trenchard's views had changed. For their part, the War Office felt that the changing circumstances in Ireland might now permit the use of armed machines under strict conditions. The issue was not simply a matter of inter-service consultation, however; 'if we agree together on any modification it will have to receive the sanction of the Cabinet ...since whatever we do in Ireland we will have to meet severe criticism from various quarters which would be particularly aggravated...by some unfortunate mistake'.[100]

In contrast to the comparatively drawn out debate of 1920, the operational tempo in Ireland ensured that the discussion proceeded with brio. Macready wrote to Sir Henry Wilson, citing the Kerry divisional commander's desire to have aircraft equipped with bombs and machine guns immediately.[101] British intelligence indicated that the suspected imminent general rising would afford an opportunity to engage substantial rebel forces in open conflict – an ideal arena for air power.[102] The War Office accordingly sought a rapid reply from the Air Ministry, stating that 'the matter has now become very urgent'.[103]

Although the Royal Air Force still inclined to Trenchard's views, the airmen were prepared to concede that in the martial law areas 'a state of war may ...be considered to exist'. This meant that air assets would no longer be supporting the civil power but providing support to an Army commander in a campaign.[104] The general thrust of the letter was that the RAF would use weapons if the Army was responsible for issuing the necessary orders.

This understanding was emphasised at the political level when the Minister for Air, Lord Londonderry wrote to the War Minister, Sir Laming Worthington-Evans on the subject. Londonderry pointed out that the Air Ministry had altered its views only at the request of the Chief of the General Staff. Indeed, the peer wanted reassurance that 'this has been done with your full knowledge, and that you are prepared to support the policy in Parliament should

the question arise'.[105] Worthington-Evans quickly responded that no aircraft were to be armed 'without my express direction, as this is a matter for the Cabinet'.[106]

The issue was debated at a Cabinet meeting on the following day. The politicians were under no illusions regarding the 'great risk of death and injury to innocent people' that could result from the use of aircraft weapons. However, they were also aware that Macready was 'fully alive to the risks and his personal responsibility in the matter' and was still pressing his claim. In the event, the Cabinet decided that the General could draft instructions for the use of armed aircraft, with the caveat that weapons were only to be used when operating with land forces. Macready's plans would have to be approved by Lloyd George, who could bring them before the Cabinet again if he chose.[107]

Five days after the Cabinet meeting, Lloyd George gave his approval without further discussion.[108] Increasingly desperate to solve the Irish question, allowing the use of aircraft weapons was simply a step beyond the 'official reprisals' the premier had already authorised.[109] Brigade commanders could now approve aerial weapons in rural areas, although bombs were only to be used on 'effective targets', such as thirty men in close order. Any orders issued were to include clear objectives and limits for the operation. Even then, the pilots bore a heavy responsibility for opening fire, and should be prepared to break off or delay attacking if in doubt.[110] This was hardly *carte blanche* for the use of aerial firepower but allowed some opportunity at least to prove French's hypothesis of 1918.

Bruited though it had been, the 'Kerry Rising' never materialised. The permission to use aircraft, however, remained in force. The records of the Irish squadrons show that occasional requests were made by the local brigades for the provision of armed escorts, such as 16 Brigade's desire to have aerial support on an 'official reprisal' operation.[111] The neighbouring brigade requested support two days later, asking for armed aircraft to 'engage any rebels seen' near Bandon.[112] Given the sheer amount of effort which had gone into acquiring this permission, however, it was to be employed on comparatively few occasions. The Royal Air Force in Ireland was, nonetheless, developing its role and proving highly effective, with or without weapons.

A key development had been the fostering of even closer relationships with the Army. The early work in developing ground-air signalling through Klaxon horns and Very lights was paying dividends, ensuring that aircraft co-operated more effectively with land forces. Each Brigade headquarters had an RAF liaison officer, who was able to advise on the capabilities and limitations of air power, leading to 'much closer and more useful co-operation'.[113] A clear example of this was the development of aerial escort procedures for military trains, marking carriage roofs with identifying white crosses, and establishing a Very light code for communication between the aircraft and the train.[114] Evidence from the IRA archives suggests that the presence of aircraft had a notable deterrent effect on railway ambushes. Thus Seamus Finn, a member of a County Meath column, later recalled how he and his comrades ordered a

'general retreat' from a carefully planned attempt to blow up a troop train when spotted by the escorting aircraft.[115]

Trenchard was, however, unimpressed by the activity in Ireland, commenting that 'it seems to me that the work done in Ireland is very, very little'.[116] The air chief scrawled these words on an RAF minute sheet just days after his return from the Cairo Conference.[117] This gathering of Imperial leaders had endorsed Trenchard's view, based on the success of a 1920 air campaign in Somaliland, that air patrolling and armoured cars offered a cost-effective means of controlling Britain's colonial badlands.[118] Indeed, one commentator argues that the Cairo Conference 'probably saved the RAF from extinction'.[119] By comparison, the work in Ireland of mail runs and support to Army operations was rather mundane and never really aroused Trenchard's enthusiasm. For the Chief of the Air Staff, the future role of RAF lay rather in air-centred operations than as an accessory to land and sea engagements.[120]

Whatever Trenchard's feelings may have been, the Irish squadrons were proving increasingly effective in operations alongside ground forces. In the first week of April alone, for instance, aircraft thwarted a planned ambush, advised troops of numerous damaged railways and bridges, escorted prisoners, dropped supplies and patrolled roads. In an impressive feat of co-ordination, aircraft were employed in relays to assist the Kerry Brigade, dropping reports at pre-arranged locations.[121] A party of Royal Fusiliers operating in a remote RIC barracks in Kerry were also sustained for some weeks by rations dropped from aircraft.[122] A high level of activity continued throughout the month into May, including the dropping of propaganda pamphlets, transporting spares for an armoured car, and assisting with round-ups of suspected rebels. RAF reconnaissance skills even earned a grudging tribute from the IRA, who realised that effective aerial observation had diverted a patrol from a freshly demolished bridge.[123] In one particularly ambitious operation, four aircraft worked together on a reconnaissance mission following an ambush in County Galway. For remote garrisons with no access to wireless telegraphy, 'aeroplanes were the only means of getting news through'.[124] Aerial photography was also proving useful in identifying IRA dugouts and tracks in mountainous areas, leading on at least one occasion to the capture of ammunition and bandoliers.[125] This capability was initially limited to 100 Squadron operating on the eastern coast, an unfortunate restriction as the airborne cameras would have proved highly useful in the wilderness areas of the south west.[126]

Although the British administration had long sought to underplay the IRA campaign, by June 1921 the Lord Chancellor finally admitted that 'a small war' was going on in Ireland.[127] One of the most obvious manifestations of this were 'drives' throughout rural Ireland, involving large numbers of Crown forces sweeping through an area searching for IRA units. By the summer of 1921, these operations made considerable use of aircraft. The effectiveness of these drives has been called into question by some historians, who argue that few rebels were actually caught by these means.[128] However, the IRA took such operations very seriously and ordered its members to constant vigilance against drives; although few Volunteers may have been captured, their operational freedom was drastically curtailed.[129]

The RAF records for June 1921 certainly record a great deal of activity in support of drives. On June 6th, for instance, aircraft were involved in separate operations across Kerry, Galway, and the Midlands, dropping information to the advancing troops. On the following day, aircraft were in action again over Lough Allen in the west, working with police who wore special covers on their caps to facilitate identification from the air. Armed assistance was also given on occasion, including the dropping of 20lb bombs for 'moral effect', whilst aircraft searching for an IRA formation 'fired into the wood where they were supposed to be, but no one was seen'. These operations across open country were arguably the ideal opportunity to employ aircraft weapons, yet the month of June saw only four bombs and 147 rounds of ammunition expended.[130] It is therefore unsurprising that only one insurgent account mentions RAF gunfire, when a County Clare column remained in hiding as the low-flying aircraft which had followed them strafed vegetation nearby with its machine gun.[131] Aircrew recorded withholding fire on one occasion in Cork as the men in their sights 'were not in action against Crown forces'.[132] The carefully drawn rules of engagement meant that most crews would return home with their magazines intact. However, whilst the Royal Air Force did not have much occasion to bring its firepower to bear, the numerous IRA accounts of this period illustrate that aircraft still had a very significant effect.

Thus Con Leddy, a member of the Cork IRA, recorded a cross-country retreat following a gun battle at Ballyduff, seeking to elude an aircraft which pursued his unit over five miles of open country.[133] Elsewhere in the county, Thomas Barry's column was detected by the RAF and 'had no option but to withdraw'.[134] Drawing on the expertise of a former British serviceman in the column, John Bolster's unit also left their firing positions when spotted by an aircraft.[135] Michael Brennan, a commander in East Clare, similarly records how aerial reconnaissance forced his men into cover.[136] The RAF also played a key role in the capture of Timothy Considine and Joe Toohy, circling overhead until ground forces arrested the duo.[137] Quartermaster John Feehan of the Western Division sacrificed his new hat in his haste to elude a searching aircraft, realising that detection could mean the capture of the Connemara Active Service Unit.[138] Commandant Sean Gibbons found that his sentries had 'quite a lot of trouble' from aircraft, and his unit was unable to break cover on account of the 'plane activity'.[139] High in the mountains of the west, Martin Conneely and a colleague also found their progress impeded by the RAF; 'our only danger was the plane, which at times skimmed quite close to the mountain tops'.[140] Nor was the city safe from aerial observation, as the weapons smuggler Peter Gough discovered in north Dublin.[141] One of the IRA's leading commanders, Sean Moylan, even records how the RAF presence effectively interdicted his column's food supply on one occasion.[142] These samples from a rich vein of IRA memoirs clearly illustrate that air power had made an impact.

Even as the drives swept across large tracts of rural Ireland, secret negotiations were in hand to find a political settlement, and a truce was arranged from 11 July.[143] It was by no means obvious at the time that the cease-fire would last, and British forces continued to train for operations. Air power was integral to this process; within a week of the truce the Army units in

south-western Ireland were already seeking ways of enhancing air-ground liaison still further.[144] Throughout the summer of 1921, troops and aircraft trained together, concentrating particularly on effective communication with Popham panels.[145] Aerial reconnaissance was an ideal way to monitor the on-going activity of Republican forces; thus on 13 August, a patrol from 100 Squadron discovered numerous encampments across the Dublin region.[146] RAF aircrew also spotted IRA 'fortifications and works' in the Wicklow Mountains, and treated British intelligence officers to flights over the capital.[147]

One consequence of the Anglo-Irish Treaty eventually concluded in December 1921 was that the withdrawal of aircraft began before the month was out.[148] Trenchard certainly anticipated that 'all the Royal Air Force will be very shortly out of Ireland'.[149] As it transpired, however, elements of the RAF would remain for almost a year as Ireland disputed the political settlement. Although most of the personnel and machines had left by the end of March 1922, General Macready thought it 'imperative' to retain an aerial capability.[150] Fearing 'more or less open warfare' on the frontier between Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State, the General wanted at least four aircraft available to cover the evacuation of British forces from Dublin.[151]As a precautionary measure, no troop trains during April were permitted without an aerial escort.[152] Working on the assumption that an outbreak of hostilities could make Baldonnel aerodrome unusable, plans were prepared for a highly mobile RAF detachment with a workshop lorry and portable hangars.[153]

The small RAF detachment, now concentrated at Collinstown in Dublin, continued its regular duties of escorting troop trains and carrying military mail as the British military presence in southern Ireland drew down.[154] There was an upsurge in activity in late June as IRA units opposed to the Treaty occupied the Four Courts in Dublin and fatally wounded Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson outside his London home. To the British administration, it appeared as if Michael Collins' Provisional Government was unable to keep militant Republicanism in check, and the fate of the Treaty hung in the balance. Under pressure from London, Free State troops attacked the Four Courts, but failed to penetrate the masonry walls, even after the British garrison in Dublin provided Collins' troops with artillery.[155] Winston Churchill, now Colonial Secretary, was increasingly anxious to bring matters to a conclusion, commenting that the 'consequences of a failure may be fatal'.[156] To expedite the defeat of the rebel troops, Churchill offered Collins the use of aircraft painted in Free State colours, but flown by RAF personnel, to drop bombs on their stronghold.[157] Accordingly, Bonham-Carter ordered aircraft to be made ready, fitted with a variety of 'good sized eggs'.[158] Trenchard had initially endorsed the scheme in principle, bar the camouflage ruse which he deplored. However, even as preparations proceeded he decided that the plan was politically mistaken and would 'wreck the discipline of the air force'.[159] Whatever the internal consequences may have been for the RAF, the bombing of central Dublin by thinly disguised British aircraft would have been a gift to Republican propagandists. Mercifully for future Anglo-Irish relations, Rory O'Connor's garrison surrendered before the bombers could launch.

The threat to the RAF from ground fire remained, and anti-Treaty forces attacked a cross-border mail flight on at least one occasion.[160] At least the requirement for a permanent aircraft presence in southern Ireland was rapidly diminishing as British forces withdrew into Dublin. The Irish RAF headquarters relocated to Aldergrove in September, whilst the aerodrome at Collinstown was evacuated on 1 November.[161] However, even as the last vehicle convoy crossed the border into Ulster, a small RAF presence remained in the Irish capital. Based in Phoenix Park, half a dozen airmen maintained a landing ground and wireless equipment for Macready's headquarters.[162] Only as dusk fell on December 14th, in the closing phases of the British departure, were the last RAF personnel withdrawn.[163]

There were undoubtedly failings in the application of air power in Ireland; one egregious error being the drawn-out discussion over the arming of aircraft. The Cabinet's failure to develop a consistent Irish strategy lay at the root of this, by leaving military officers in Ireland to implement the Prime Minister's 'erratic coercion policy' as best they could.[164] Trenchard's original advice to use aircraft in unarmed roles was sound and should have sufficed; a great deal of nugatory work would have been avoided.

The staff work expended on discussing aerial weapons would have been better spent considering aircraft cameras; the IRA did not fear destruction from the air so much as detection. As a writer for the Republican military journal *An T'Oglach* expressed it, 'the best means the English have at their disposal for locating our standing positions, strong points and dumps in the country is the aerial photographer'.[165] This insight was not sufficiently appreciated by the RAF until late in the conflict, and a specialist photographic unit was not deployed to Ireland until the summer of 1921.[166] For Trenchard, seeking to justify the continued existence of his infant service, the RAF role in Ireland was not a central concern. Uninspired by the supporting role of the Irish squadrons, he tended to take a reluctant interest only when importuned by Bonham-Carter or pressed by Churchill.

A high level of air-land integration had been achieved in the Great War, but much of this had been allowed to lapse by 1920.[167] Basic issues such as common map referencing between air and land units could have been resolved at a much earlier stage of the operation. Again, this echoes a wider malaise; co-ordination between the Army and the Royal Irish Constabulary was similarly slow in developing.[168] The piecemeal British approach to security in Ireland, with no overall strategy or commander, did little to foster co-ordination between the various force elements.[169]

Despite these caveats, however, there is much evidence to suggest that the Royal Air Force accomplished a great deal in Ireland. Montgomery's scepticism was certainly not shared by General Macready, who came to regard Bonham-Carter as 'his most trusted divisional commander'.[170] Brigade commanders described the RAF in equally glowing terms, commending the airmen's efforts in co-ordinating the work of ground forces.[171] By the time of the Truce in 1921, air power had become an integral part of British military operations in

Ireland. As the history of the 6th Division noted, the Irish experience demonstrated 'of what great use planes could be in all guerrilla operations'.[172]

Although Townshend contends that there was 'little military contact with the RAF and little development of ideas', this is not borne out by the evidence.[173] As the conflict progressed, the Army and Air Force worked closely in tandem to refine suitable techniques for Irish operations. The 1921 monthly resumes of RAF activities in Ireland are liberally peppered with references to requests from the Army for aerial assistance, whilst aviators and soldiers frequently trained together.[174] The lessons of air-ground integration may have taken some time to learn, but they were well applied. By April 1921, aircraft escort had 'been found to be the best means of preventing ambushes on either roads or railways', and the squadron diaries record almost daily co-operation with troops and police.[175] It is surely a testament to the utility of the RAF that the Dublin garrison maintained access to air services right up to the withdrawal in December 1922.

Evidence from the IRA also indicates that aircraft had a definite effect on Republican activities throughout the War of Independence. The IRA developed a healthy respect for the reconnaissance capabilities of the RAF, and members were reminded that 'the most dangerous thing was being observed by...aircraft'.[176] Michael Brennan, the commander of Republican forces in County Clare later commented that the 'addition of [more] aeroplanes and armoured vehicles would have made short work of us'.[177]

Indeed, it was perhaps the quondam enemies of the Royal Air Force who paid the ultimate tribute to its effectiveness in Ireland. As an insurgent leader, Michael Collins had admired the British use of air power, and his new Provisional Government wasted little time in acquiring an aerial capability of its own.[178] Once again, the skies of south-west Ireland witnessed Bristol Fighters engaged in reconnaissance, leaflet dropping, railway patrols, and occasional armed attacks.[179] Perhaps Collins understood better than Montgomery that, when dealing with an insurgency in Ireland, pilots and observers were in a position to offer a great deal of help indeed.

Notes

This article is an abridged version of a dissertation undertaken as part fulfilment of the Master's Degree in Air Power at King's College London, submitted June 2013. Sources marked NAUK are drawn from the National Archives at Kew, whilst archives prefixed RAFM refer to the holdings of the Royal Air Force Museum. The Bureau of Military History (BMH) archives in Dublin are accessible online at **http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/**.

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[147] NAUK AIR 5/214, 'Operations Carried out by No. 11 (Irish) Wing During September 1921', 17 October 1921.
[148] NAUK AIR 5/186, Bonham-Carter to Air Ministry, 20 December 1921.
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[150] NAUK AIR 5/186, Bonham-Carter to Air Ministry, 22 March 1922; Bonham-Carter to Air Ministry, 29 March 1922; Hayes *op.cit*., pp.60-61.
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