Viewpoint

A View from Whitehall

By Mr Peter Hudson CB

Biography: After war service in the Royal Navy, Peter Hudson joined the Air Ministry in 1947. From 1948 to 1951 he was Private Secretary to the Permanent Under Secretary (PUS), the civilian member of the Air Council. From 1953 until the end of 1961 he served in the Air Staff Secretariat. He was a student at the Imperial Defence College in 1962. Shortly after returning to the Air Ministry he was posted to the MOD central staff, and in 1969 to the Cabinet Office. In 1974 he joined the Air Force Board as a Deputy Secretary.

Abstract: This paper offers a valuable personal insight into a senior Air Ministry civil servant's perspective during the Government's deliberations in the late 1950s on the effectiveness of the RAF's V-Force. It places the V-Force into the context of financial pressures on the Air Ministry, criticism of the UK's nuclear posture and examines UK-US relations in the period 1960- 62. The Air Ministry successfully argued the case for the continued operational effectiveness of the V-Force, despite often being isolated in debates over the V-Force's vulnerability on the ground and airborne efficacy.

Introduction

In 1950, as Private Secretary to the PUS at the Air Ministry, I became involved in the processing of a manuscript produced by the new CAS, Sir John Slessor, setting out, for what I believe was the first time, the role, build-up and deployment of the proposed strategic bomber force of 240 aircraft. How that strategy came to be accepted by the Government wasn't merely down to the fact that Jack Slessor could write and think faster than his colleagues; his overwhelming advantage, it seems to me, was that he could, at a time when NATO was little more than a paper concept, point to a Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) appreciation, that the Soviet armies were capable of reaching the Channel ports in X days, and ask his colleagues what they would propose to do about it.

But, despite Slessor's success in his years as CAS in establishing the nuclear deterrent as the essential feature in our national strategy, attacks on it, most significantly by the other Services, had, by 1960, become pretty intense. In fact, in 1960, it was by no means a foregone conclusion that the V-Force, as such, would continue in existence for that decade at all.

By the late 1950s I was head of the Air Staff secretariat division concerned with long-term planning. When the House of Lords was having one of its annual defence debates I was summoned to attend the First Lord, Lord Carrington, who was to be in charge of the debate. I had provided him with that part of his speech which dealt with the nuclear deterrent. The discussion was all very amicable but when we came to a paragraph claiming that the cost of the force was no more than 10% of the Defence Budget the First Lord said, by way of commentary, that the Admiralty had produced a paper showing how much could be done to improve conventional capabilities if the V-Force were given up. He turned to the Admiralty briefers to confirm this, only to be met by a lot of clearing of throats - I was not meant, I gathered, to be told about this….

The other big change by 1960 was that in the preceding years we had been compelled progressively to abandon our 240 aircraft target, ostensibly as a result of external criticisms, which we had resisted. I fear though, that we should have been obliged to cut the planned force even without such pressures.

One of my jobs was to concert a cost assessment of the department's long term plans over a five, and later a ten, year period, and to help work out ways in which they could be adapted, if necessary, to be acceptable to ministers, including the Minister of Defence in Storeys Gate, and to the Chancellor. This was all part of obtaining agreement to the next year's Estimates, and hence the cash with which to continue in business.

Even though the Defence Budget was at that time, in terms of GDP, about three times larger than it is now, the pressures were intense. Apart from world-wide commitments, we had a highly ambitious equipment programme outside the strategic nuclear field - not only the TSR2,

but two aircraft which would not look out of date today - a high subsonic V/STOL transport, the HS681, and a very advanced version of what was later to become the Harrier.

Figures for those aircraft appeared of course only in the later years of the costing, but much more immediate in its effect was the US Mutual Defence Assistance Program. Under it the US paid for weapons destined for the defence of the NATO area, provided that they were additional to what we would have bought for ourselves anyway. This aid certainly enabled the RAF to punch above its weight. Some hundreds of Hunters were acquired under the programme and the USAF would have been prepared to do the same for the ill-fated Swift. The downside was that even though the Americans picked up the bill for the aircraft and their spares, the other running costs - airfields, personnel, etc - came out of Air Ministry Votes. These, and other inevitable pressures on the Budget – cost-escalation over the whole field and emergencies of various sorts - would alone have compelled us to lower our sights and by 1960 our planned 240 had shrunk to 144.

More importantly, critics of our nuclear posture were becoming more vocal. We had for several years clung to a painfully agreed JIC appreciation that 1963 would be the midpoint of the period in which the air threat to this country would change from being predominantly from aircraft to predominantly from missiles. That mantra had implications for both our defensive and our offensive postures. Moreover, various Soviet moves, from the first Sputnik onwards, together with increasing doubts about the viability of BLUE STREAK,[1] led ministers to decide to set up a committee which was in the event to examine our whole nuclear stance. This committee, the British Nuclear Defence Study Group (BNDSG), was to play a crucial part in our story from its inception in 1959 until it was pre-empted by the Nassau Conference decisions of December 1962.

The Group had the Permanent Secretary of the MOD as its chairman, with members from the Treasury, the Service Departments and the Ministry of Aviation. VCAS, Edmund Hudleston, was our representative. Its first task, which proved to be more political than military, was to consider the future of BLUE STREAK. It came to the somewhat curious conclusion that the weapon should continue in development 'provided that a fire-first weapon is acceptable.' It was curious, because every member of the Group knew that a fire-first weapon was *not* acceptable. Anyway, after a few more twists and turns, not unrelated, I suspect, to the known views of Duncan Sandys, BLUE STREAK was in due course cancelled.

Before dealing with the Group's deliberations on the V-Force, I need to deal with one key element: early warning. During 1958, some very informal links were established between my branch and the General Counsel of the USAF - a lawyer who masterminded their overseas negotiations. Our first exchanges on early warning (which succeeded talks we had previously held on the Thor missile agreement) concerned a system called MIDAS, under which it was proposed to place a vast cloud of steel needles in orbit to act as a radar reflector with which

[1] The **de Havilland Propellers** Blue Streak was a British **medium-range ballistic missile** (MRBM), and later the first stage of the **Europa satellite launch vehicle**. Blue Streak was cancelled without entering full production.

Soviet missile launch sites could be kept under surveillance. Fortunately for the future of space exploration, this scheme proved to be a non-starter.

The second scheme, floated soon after, concerned BMEWS. The deal was similar to that for Thor. In return for providing the site, carrying out the construction programme and meeting the UK running costs, including manning, at Fylingdales, we would be given full access to the data we needed. The aim, which was achieved, was to have a fully reliable system operational by 1963.

The detailed negotiations went smoothly. We had our own Works and Lands Departments in those days, so that all the action was under one roof. I remember that when the Treasury queried the works costs it was explained that with radars of such range the base had to be stable, 'not like that building, for instance,' pointing to County Hall over the river, 'that goes up and down with the tide.' As of course it does.

The upshot, so far as the V-Force was concerned, was a bargain that benefited both sides, enabling us to show that we would have, by 1963, a warning system that would give us a minimum of four minutes' notice of a land-based missile attack.

It was a natural consequence of the close relations between the two air forces that the Americans looked first to *us* for a BMEWS site in this part of the world. It was lucky for the V-Force that they did. If the station had been sited elsewhere - and they had had in any case to approach the Danes (over Thule) - we would not have had such a strong claim to receive vital early warning data, and we would certainly not have been able to provide it for ourselves.

Now, back to the BNDSG. In parallel with the BLUE STREAK discussions, the validity of the V-Force as a deterrent was being questioned. The key virtue of the manned aircraft over BLUE STREAK - that it could take off under positive control on radar warning - was accepted. But the Group, and its working parties, argued at length on two immediate questions - could the force be pre-empted, and could it reach its targets? The Air Ministry was usually in a minority of one in the arguments, and we were fortunate in having Teddy Hudleston as our representative on the main Group. I was lucky to be part of his briefing team, which consisted of the late lamented Digger McGill (Director of Bomber Ops), Jock Henderson (our scientist) and me.

The first of these disputed points - vulnerability on the ground - required us to show that we had enough warning time in which to react. At first it seemed doubtful whether the four minutes which BMEWS would give us would be enough - its primary role was, after all, that it gave the *US* bases up to half an hour. But the development of QRA by Bomber Command, and the robustness of the Vulcan, in particular, in the low level role, enabled us to leap that hurdle.

The second concern - reaching the target - entailed some vigorous argument about low-level penetration, stand-off weapons, both actual, like BLUE STEEL Mk 1 and Hound Dog, and

projected, like BLUE STEEL Mk 2 and Skybolt. Broadly speaking though, we were able to show that, until the SLBM threat became real, possibly not until the end of the decade, the V-Force would remain a valid deterrent. And so it continued in the front line in the strategic role until 1969.

It was a near thing. Despite our relative success in the BNDSG, its chairman, Sir Robert Scott, separately minuted the Minister of Defence in July 1961, without the Air Ministry's knowledge at the time that, 'the time has come to consider……giving up control of British nuclear weapons and their delivery systems…..and negotiate the best terms possible with the Americans in return for handing over control to them.' This advice was rejected, but the fact that it was given at all is an index of the cross-currents running at the time.

My story ends with the arguments about Skybolt and Polaris which preceded the Nassau agreement, when as Jack Slessor said, two politicians and a zoologist decided on the future of British strategy without any help from the Chiefs of Staff. The Air Staff had from the first been keenly interested in acquiring Skybolt, and at Camp David in March 1960 the two governments had agreed that, if it proved technically feasible to develop the weapon, we could buy it. The two air forces were, for different reasons, enthusiastic about the arrangement, but the US administration was divided as the months went by. In the summer of 1961 the Defence Counsellor of the US Embassy took the extreme measure of taking me out to lunch to emphasise the doubtful status of Skybolt in the US R&D programme. This of course I faithfully reported, but there were conflicting noises coming from elsewhere in Washington. There were questions over Skybolt; but equally there were question marks over any other solution to the problem, which the BNDSG next addressed, of maintaining a British deterrent in face of a submarine-launched missile threat.

The problem was to devise a second strike force which would be credible in the virtual absence of early warning. The Air Staff, in seeking a feasible RAF alternative to Polaris, concluded that we needed a force capable of maintaining a constant air patrol, implying an aircraft with a designed-in high utilisation rate, that is, of the order of 250 hours a month. Hence the decision to field for discussion a force of thirty-six VC10s, each able to carry four Skybolts. It was not until December 1962, at the Kennedy/Macmillan summit at Nassau, which was dominated by the consequences of the US decision to cancel Skybolt, to the great embarrassment of the British Government, that a conclusion was reached. By this time I had moved on, and my only personal knowledge of the event comes from a very informal lunchtime debriefing from the then ACAS(OR), Christopher Hartley, who was at Nassau. It is clear that, in bidding for Polaris, the Prime Minister skilfully deployed all the arguments, notably the difficulties created for him by the cancellation of Skybolt. The unique record which Richard Neustadt has assembled of those discussions shows convincingly that, without that cancellation, it is unlikely that we would have been able to acquire Polaris, and later Trident, on anything like the terms agreed. Another example, perhaps, of the law of unintended consequences.

Section 2:

Case Study: The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962