AIR POWER IN BRITISH SOMALILAND, 1920: THE ARRIVAL OF GORDON'S BIRD-MEN, INDEPENDENT OPERATIONS AND UNEARTHLY RETRIBUTIONS

By Brigadier Andrew Roe

Biography: Brigadier Andrew Roe is the Director of the Higher Command and Staff Course & Assistant Commandant (Land) at the Joint Services Command and Staff College, Shrivenham. He is a graduate of the United States Army Command and General Staff College, the School of Advanced Military Studies and the Higher Command and Staff College. He holds a doctorate from King's College London and is the author of two books and numerous articles.

Abstract: Mohammed Abdullah Hassan, who fought a tenacious twenty-year irregular campaign against multiple foreign powers, gained a special place in British military aviation history due to the success of a self-contained RAF expedition employed against him in British Somaliland in the winter of 1919-1920. This was one of the first counterinsurgency operations conducted by the RAF and was proposed by Air Marshal Sir Hugh Trenchard, Chief of the Air Staff, as a cheaper, swifter and lower risk alternative than ground forces. The historical imprint is that the campaign lasted only three weeks and cost less than £100,000. However, this impression, that air power alone was responsible for the success of the campaign, ignores some of the more nuanced contributory factors which will be explored in this paper.

The magic of the Mad Mullah, that had for so long held his followers together, was useless against the magic of the bird-men above.

Henry A. Rayne, *Sun, Sand and Somals*

It is true, as Mr. Jardine [Secretary to the Administration, Somaliland, 1916-21] points out, that this result [the final overthrow of Dervish resistance] was not due entirely to the Air Force. But it is certain that, but for the hopes we based on the co-operation of the airmen, the campaign would never have been undertaken, and that they contributed greatly to its success.

Viscount Milner, quoted in *The Mad Mullah of Somaliland*

INTRODUCTION

On 1 September 2014 Sheikh Ahmed Abdi Godane, a feared but reclusive and bookish jihadist, with a love of verse, was killed by a targeted US airstrike in the Lower Shabelle region of southern Somalia. The US had placed a seven million dollar bounty on his head in 2012. At the time of his demise, Godane, also known as Mukhtar Abu Zubair, was the spiritual *Amir* (leader) and tactical head of the ruthless al-Qaeda-linked al-Shabab group, and one of Africa's most cold-blooded radical leaders. A renowned storyteller and lyricist, he personally oversaw intelligence gathering and controlled most of the group's decision making. He claimed responsibility for the July 2010 bombings in Kampala, Uganda and also purportedly oversaw the September 2013 Westgate Mall, Kenya massacre in which 67 people were killed.[1] Of note, he managed to unite young tribesmen in southern Somalia under the banner of an extreme Islamic ideology – an unadulterated Salafi *jihadi* (holy war) doctrine – despite having no personal tribe, sub-tribe or clan affiliations in the area.[2]

Fluent in Arabic and Somali, Godane was a hypnotic speaker, with a clear comprehension of the past. He understood the reach and power of modern communications, and had a rare ability to focus on common enemies, rather than internal divisions. But, of significance, 'When he spoke, he used poetry. One of his favourite poets was Mohammed Abdullah Hassan, dubbed the 'Mad Mullah' in the West but a big hero for Somalis because he fought against British colonial rule'.[3] Godane considered the Mullah a spiritual idol. Others took inspiration from him too. During the US occupation of Mogadishu in 1993, resistance leaflets issued by anti-American Somali fighters quoted sections from a poem written by the Mullah about Colonel Richard Corefield, a British political officer who was killed by his followers in battle. Although brutal and tyrannical, the Mullah was admired for his stubborn insurrection, courage and expressive eloquence.[4] He provided a focus for rebellion and an asylum for wrongdoers. Prior to the start of his *jihad* against the British in 1899 he wrote: 'Unbelieving men of religion have assaulted our country from their remote homelands. They wish to corrupt our religion … Our aim is to cleanse the land of the unbelievers.'[5]

The Mullah, a tall, thin, dark-skinned man with a small beard and dark eyes, gained a special place in British military aviation history due to the success of a self-contained Royal Air Force (RAF) expedition employed against him in the winter of 1919-1920. This was one of the first counterinsurgency operations conducted by the RAF. Prior to 1919 the Mullah had fought a tenacious 20-year irregular campaign against multiple foreign powers (British, Italian, French and Abyssinian (Ethiopian)). These actions occurred primarily in Italian and British Somaliland. The latter, a Protectorate ultimately administered by the Colonial Office on the 'Horn of Africa', was an arid, stony plateau of some 68,000 square miles, which occupied the north-eastern corner of the horn. It had an average length of approximately 400 miles and a depth inland varying from 70 miles in the west to 100 miles in the centre. The coastal region is bereft of all vegetation, less a few scattered thorn bushes and ant hills. The heat is merciless and the glare of the sun blinding. Inland, conditions are more favourable. Varying elevations (averaging about 3,000 feet above sea-level) permit grass, box-trees and acacias on the highland slopes.[6] Thorn-scrub and aloes provide cover and camouflage against attack. Richer foliage, which borders many of the *wadis* (ravine or channel that is dry except in the rainy season) offers solid shade and greater concealment.

Ground communications in British Somaliland were confined to camel tracks and ancient desert trails. The water supply is scarce, with wells often 20 to 30 miles apart. The only favourable time for military operations was between November and April, when the north-east monsoon influences temperature and rainfall. In the early 1900s the region was thought to contain approximately 300,000 migrating nomadic herdsmen and their families.[7] These tribesmen were seen as conservative, proud and handsome people.[8] They also possessed great personal courage. This amounted to foolhardiness in the heat of battle, resourcefulness in reconnaissance, abnormal endurance on the march, cheerfulness under adversity and reasonable horsemanship and marksmanship.[9] The martial spirit of the Somali was legendary:

> *In 1912 a Somali crawled to Berbera with a bullet wound in his leg and a spear wound right through his body. When the doctor probed the first, the patient gasped, 'Do not worry about that, but please have a look at the spear wound; it hurts me when I laugh'.*[10]

British Somaliland was useful because it supplied the nearby British Indian outpost of Aden with beef and other provisions. Aden was essential for Britain because it was on the 'short route' to India.[11] Steady trade with the costal tribes was important, but nothing more. Britain's real interest in Somaliland was marginal. No attempts were made to administer the lawless hinterland. *Pax Britannica* was only imposed around the occupied coastline. Rarely did the government reach into the interior. Motivated by a complex mix of factors, the Mullah raided military outposts and Abyssinian tribesmen who crossed into his professed lands. He also looted settlements and caravans, carrying off livestock,

and collected taxes by cruel means. His aim was to expel Christian colonisers from Muslim lands, unify the various tribes into a state and restore to the Somalis a more extreme interpretation of the Muslim faith.[12]

The Mullah's activities kept the region in turmoil. Petty and often futile raiding against tribes friendly to the British was *ubiquitous*. Unsurprisingly, his actions brought him into regular conflict with his fellow countrymen. Most Somalis rejected the Mullah's ideas because of their negative effects on them.[13] However, after repeatedly preaching his message in the high scrubland plateau of the Haud, and through a blend of '... terror, militant Islamism, anti-colonialism, and superstition ...,' the Mullah accumulated a growing following.[14] By 1899 he had established a force of over 5,000 tribesmen, of which about 1,500 were mounted.[15] Most were lightly-armed with spears, swords and rudimentary shields for defence. Only 200 were equipped with a mixture of antiquated and modern single-shot and magazine firearms. The majority of these tribesmen viewed him as the leader of the faithful against the infidel. But some joined his ranks simply to avoid being attacked themselves. I. M. Lewis notes the moment at which trouble began:

> *On 1 September, 1899, the British Counsel-General for the coast received a letter from the Sayyid [an Arabic honorific title denoting descendants of the Islamic prophet Muhammad] accusing the British of oppressing Islam and denouncing those who obeyed or co-operated with the Administration as liars and slanderers. The letter also contained the challenge: 'Now choose for yourselves. If you want war, we accept it; but if you want peace, pay the fine.' The Counsel-General replied by proclaiming Sayyid Muhammand [sic] a rebel, and urged his government in London to prepare an expedition ... Thus the opening moves in the long-drawn out conflict were completed ...*[16]

But the timing of Hassan's growing rhetoric was troublesome, with the Boxer Rebellion in China and the Boer War in South Africa being higher priorities for London than the Horn of Africa. With a lack of an immediate reaction from the British, many Somalis concluded that the Mullah was the chosen man and his rebellion worth supporting.

The British, however, could not leave the Mullah to his own devices for too long. Organised expeditions over the years harassed, dispersed and defeated the Mullah's forces, known as 'Dervishes',[17] but he consistently escaped to form the core of another group of raiders.[18] Four classic military campaigns occurred from 1901 to 1905.[19] These accounted for 400 British and over 1,000 colonial troop fatalities, at a cost of just over £3 million in early 1900s' prices.[20] The first operation occurred in May 1901, but only succeeded in temporarily pushing the Mullah out of British territory. There was a second expedition against him in 1902, with a third in 1903, in which the Abyssinian Army cooperated.[21] Neither engagement led to a decisive result. The fourth campaign

followed in 1904. This time, despite defeating his force with 7,000 fighting troops and forcing him to retreat, the Mullah rejected the opportunity of permanent exile, instead becoming a fugitive. Each campaign ended in disappointment. Despite the superior firepower of the British (including the use of the Maxim and Stokes guns), the Mullah consistently evaded capture.[22] Moreover, there was never a tangible objective to attack and the Mullah frequently took refuge outside of British territory.

But repeated military activity did result in a so-called 'peace accord', which remained largely in place until 1908.[23] However, renewed trouble resulted in further low-level military activity, which occurred in 1912, 1913 and 1914. But there were other factors at play during the period. In 1909 the Liberal government in London prohibited a new campaign on the grounds of cost. As a result, weapons were issued to friendly tribesmen to enable them to defend themselves. This was seen as a cheaper alternative to providing physical security. The consequences were disastrous. Andrew Gordon notes: '... the temptation to settle old scores with the windfall weaponry proved irresistible, and mayhem ensued.'[24] Thousands of tribesmen were killed.[25]

Throughout the early 1900s not only did British attempts fail to capture the Mullah, but he achieved a number of notable successes. On 17 April 1903 a force, consisting of forty-eight men, 2nd Sikhs and a company of 2nd Battalion King's African Rifles, under Local Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Plunkett, Manchester Regiment, was routed at Gumburru.[26] The fight lasted two hours. There were no survivors. The Mullah also enjoyed a victory at Dul Madoba, a ridge twenty-five miles south east of Burao, near the centre of the Protectorate, on the 4th of August 1913, killing thirty-six British troops (including the commander, Colonel Richard Corefield) and injuring a further twenty-one in an ambush in deep bush.[27] As a result of this action, the British withdrew their protection of the local tribes to the area around the port of Berbera. Indeed, the Government considered relinquishing responsibility for the Protectorate altogether, but decided otherwise.

During the Great War, with operations put on hold due to other priorities, the Mullah controlled over half of the British colony. The Somaliland Camel Corps was responsible for keeping him in loose check during this period.[28] However, his successful leadership and organisation confounded British attempts to control his activities. He proved repeatedly to be an able administrator, a quick-witted and elusive guerrilla leader, and a persistent thorn in the side of the colonial administration. He evaded capture by hiding in caves, enduring personal hardship and crossing vast swathes of desert with minimal supplies. At various stages, few knew about his exact whereabouts and he avoided watering-holes and other dangerous places. *The Times* noted the Mullah's holistic approach:

> *He gave an organised band of followers what they wanted – food, women, and loot; and with that mobile force he could extract a terrible vengeance on tribes that had sided with the English – as many of them preferred to do. He claimed a*

religious mission that sanctified the life of raiding that was otherwise acceptable to the Somalis as a natural and amusing mode of existence.[29]

By 1919 the continuing state of lawlessness in the hinterland of the Protectorate posed a constant source of anxiety to British rule in Somaliland. And, more widely, it occurred in a bleak post-war economic climate. An unemployment rate of twenty-three per cent was crippling the British economy and the mantra of the day was economise by any means possible.[30] The cost of sending in another expensive expedition to disperse, capture or kill the Mullah was deeply unpopular. Deploying large-scale expeditions to maintain order was becoming unduly burdensome. Not only was there no guarantee of success, but estimates from the Chief of the Imperial General Staff of the day, Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, suggested that a force of at least two divisions, costing several million pounds, would be required. This included the construction of roads, railways and fixed bases to maintain order. Of equal concern, the operation was expected to take months to complete and would occur at significant risk. Tenuous supply lines, little hope of reinforcements, shortages of fresh water and the fear of being caught in dense scrubland, where firepower would count for little, were all very real hazards.[31] It is perhaps unsurprising that supply and transport officers were often seen as the key to success.[32]

Air Marshal Sir Hugh Trenchard, Chief of the Air Staff, who had long visualised imperial policing as an important role for the RAF, offered a cheaper, swifter and safer (lower risk) alternative than ground forces. To deal with the Mullah, he proposed that the RAF should assume responsibility for the entire operation. 'The army, he added, would not be needed; local colonial forces in British Somaliland would be quite sufficient'.[33] This was seen as a direct threat to the British Army, with its centuries of experience and primacy in such activities; resistance was fierce. Aircraft were seen by many as useful, but only as an attachment to ground forces in a subordinate role. Several in the War Office remained ruthlessly opposed to the initiative. Some even went as far as to predict a likely outcome, with soldiers being required to clean-up the mess. Trenchard, with the Air Staff behind him, stood his ground and readied a self-contained air component.

Detailed plans suggested to Winston Churchill,[34] who had a personal interest in using new technology to help with policing the Empire, that the option was viable. With Churchill's support, and the Prime Minister's approval, the RAF was tasked with planning and leading the campaign to eradicate the Mullah once and for all. However, since the end of the Great War, the RAF had suffered a near terminal decline in aircraft and personnel. This was a rare opportunity to help preserve the RAF as an independent service, especially when the Army and Royal Navy favoured carving up the air service. It is little surprise that Andrew Boyle, one of Trenchard's biographers, suggests: '[Somaliland] ... beckoned like a beacon when there was least hope'.[35]

The RAF's future, to a degree, depended on their success against the Mullah. However, the real issue was whether aerial bombing alone would be adequate to enforce area authority and security, or whether bombed locations would still require ground forces to act in concert. Although the finer detail of the air operation is little understood, the outcome of the campaign is well-known. At minimal cost, the RAF bombed the Mullah's Dervishes into submission and collapse between 21 January and 18 February 1920. By so doing, they solved a problem which had tormented the Protectorate for twenty years. Although the Mullah escaped over the border his power base was destroyed.[36] Dervisham, as a cause, was at an end.

The employment of air power in British Somaliland is important for five reasons. First, it was a well-timed demonstration of the growing capability and flexibility of the new air force, created from a consolidation of the Army's Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Navy's Air Service wing. Second, it highlighted a new role for the RAF in 'policing' the Empire.[37] It provided proof, to some, that air power could substitute for ground forces, and could do so at a significantly reduced cost and with very few British casualties. It was, therefore, a significant turning point in the history of Imperial policing, setting the pattern of air policing – and colonial control – for the next twenty years. Third, it helped guarantee, at a time of significant threat, the survival of the RAF as an independent service. Fourth, it served as a useful early model for the kind of military missions that western governments conduct today in what is sometimes called the 'forever war' between Islam and Christianity.[38] There are strong parallels between present-day extremist struggles in the region and the campaign waged by the Mullah. And finally, as air power is often used to strike high-value targets, it highlights that past *jihads* can become inspirations for new leaders, wars and struggles. Every modern Somali knows about the Mullah and he serves as a stimulus to many.

Having set the scene, this article now looks in detail at the employment of air power in British Somaliland in early 1920. It describes the arrival of the RAF, the employment of air power and the immediate lessons learnt from the campaign. But, of note, this was a twenty-year effort that only included air power in the last few months. The Mullah was considerably weakened by 1920 and the local troops placed against him had achieved a notable state of proficiency. It was only his shift from raiding tactics to elaborate fixed stone defences – rendering his force more vulnerable to attack – that gave his pursuers the upper hand. The Mullah now offered immovable locations and tangible military objectives that could be targeted and struck. 'This was partly a prestige thing, but he was worn out and growing old, and his days of agile campaigning were over.'[39] And the British brought a new and previously unseen technology to the battlefield: air power, in the form of a flight of two-seat de Havilland DH9a (DH9a) light bombers. At long last, an operation, on a very modest scale, was deemed appropriate.[40]

THE ARRIVAL OF GORDON'S BIRD-MEN

The decision to use air power against the Mullah resulted in the formation of an independent, self-contained RAF expedition. This was designated 'Z' Unit for secrecy and its address was simply 'Middle East'. The force, working direct to the Air Ministry, comprised of a flight of flimsy, open cockpit DH9a aircraft fitted with B.H.P./Galloway engines, as well as six spare machines, ten Ford light trucks, two Ford ambulances, six trailers, two motorcycles, two Crosley light trucks, thirty six officers and one hundred thirty eight other ranks.[41] Its role was to attack the Mullah, his followers and his stock, with an aim of dispersing them and destroying his stone forts. In the event that air power proved successful, the rounding-up of the Mullah's followers would be undertaken by the Somaliland Field Force. This consisted of tribal policemen, the Somaliland Camel Corps, the King's African Rifles and the 1st/101st Grenadiers (Indian Army).[42] At this point, independent operations would end and the aircraft of 'Z' Unit would cooperate with the colonial forces of the Protectorate (i.e. a ground operation assisted by the RAF).[43] The advance party, including the unit's commanding officer, Acting Group Captain Robert Gordon CMG DSO, his deputy, the principal medical officer and a number of airfield construction personnel, departed England for Egypt on 25 October 1919, via the commercial shipping routes.[44]

After a short stay in-country, the party departed for Aden. Derek O'Connor recalls part of the journey: 'In Aden they transferred to an Arab dhow that took them, after an uncomfortable crossing, to the port of Berbera in northern Somaliland'.[45] Before landing on 21 November 1919, the airmen changed into civilian clothes, disguising themselves as 'oil experts'. From the outset it was realised that secrecy would be one of the keys to the success of the operation. The plan was to mislead the locals that Gordon and his team were in fact geologists and part of a widely-publicised oil drilling operation. Douglas Jardine, a long serving (1916-21) secretary to the Somaliland administration, who later wrote an authoritative history of the campaign, recalls: 'Prior to his [Gordon's] arrival, the local administration had been at pains to disseminate a report that the long projected oil-boring operations were about to begin. Consequently when the advanced party arrived in *mufti* [civilian attire, or having removed their flying badges] ..., camouflaged as oil magnates, the native mind readily associated their doings with the necessary preliminaries to mining operations'.[46] The plan worked. Nearly a month was spent selecting suitable sites for airstrips without arousing undue suspicion.

Berbera, one of three largest towns on the coast, was quickly confirmed as the main base for operations and a Repair Park. A working party of 300 coolies and 200 native women were engaged in clearing the airstrip (400 yards by 200 yards) of loose stones, sand and bushes. Sand and stones were swept into heaps and transported by camel to the beach. On 24 November Gordon proceeded by steamer to Las Khorai with a view to selecting an advanced airstrip to raid the Mullah's headquarters at Jid Ali and Medishi. But after three days' investigating the local area it was deemed unsuitable.

Strong winds, which blew for six hours practically every day, raising a continuous dirty brown sandstorm some 200 to 300 feet high, and the difficulties of landing stores on the open beach proved to be major factors in his decision.[47] But Gordon's time spent scouting the area was not wasted. He established a suitable natural landing strip, together with a small stock of petrol and oil, which was later used successfully for a forced landing.

With Las Khorai suboptimal, Gordon turned his attention to Eil Dur Elan, 100 miles east-south-east of Berbera, as a possible alternative.[48] He reached the location on 6 December and discovered a suitable site about half a mile from a supply of running water. But other alternatives were required should the Mullah escape south to his mountain fortress at Tale, in the south-eastern corner of the Protectorate, after having been displaced from the north of the country. Gordon identified appropriate sites at Burao and Eil Dab. But these were deemed too far for camel transport to convey the usual 'portable' canvas Royal Engineers hangars for protection against the extreme climatic conditions. Therefore, to help shield aircraft at both locations, wind screens, 50 yards long by 12 feet high, were constructed over the coming weeks. These were capable of protecting 3 machines each. In addition, rush matting was used to protect the fuselage and tail unit from the direct sun.[49] With work progressing at all sites, the main body was called for by telegram.[50] This had departed Victoria Station in the early hours of 13 November, proceeding to Alexandria via Boulogne and Marseilles. Now assembled in Egypt, it left for Berbera on *HMS Ark Royal*, an aircraft-carrying vessel which had been lent by the Admiralty. This contained all the aircraft, vehicles, manpower, replacement parts and 800 tonnes of supplies. The ship departed Alexandria on 21 December and arrived at Berbera nine days later.[51]

Unloading commenced at once. Aircraft construction started on New Year's Day 1920 and eight days' later the first three machines were tested in the air, eight in all being ready by 19 January 1920. All pilots and observers were expected to be present when their 'compasses were swung', with the deviation card being fitted firmly to the dashboard of each aircraft. As the country was not well surveyed, great emphasis was placed on compass courses.[52] It was at roughly this time that Flying Officer T.A. Thornton was attached to the Staff of the Officer Commanding the Somaliland Field Force to act as a liaison officer. His role was to counsel on all matters concerning aircraft, the selection of landing sites and the communication between aircraft and troops.[53] By 17 January the aerodrome at Eil Dur Elan was complete with stores and personnel. On the same day, *HMS Clio*, carrying the Political Officer, Mr H.M. O'Byrne, departed Berbera to inform the local Italian authorities at Alula of the impending operation and to request assistance if the Mullah escaped across the border in that direction.

Eight aircraft departed Berbera for Eil Dur Elan on 19 January. One had no option but to turn back due to engine trouble, eventually arriving the following day. Therefore, by

20 January, everything was ready for the operation and five aircraft conducted a reconnaissance to the north-east to 'learn the country'.[54] The first raid was carried out on the following day (known as 'Zero Day') by six aircraft against the Mullah's hutments and stock in the Medishi area, 12 miles north-west of Jidali. The region was practically un-surveyed and the issue maps were inaccurate and unreliable. Pilots were simply given a large square on the map to indicate the area to bomb. Governor G.F. Archer, Commissioner and Commander-in-Chief, observed their departure:

> *I watched the machines turning up at dawn and their departure in close formation at 7 a.m. to deliver the first aerial attack on the haroun [fort] at Medishi. It had been impossible to reconnoitre beyond Eil Dur Elan from the air beforehand owing to the paramount need for security, to ensure the ultimate attack came as a complete surprise.*[55]

However, because of cloud cover and the difficulties of an unmapped country, four of the airplanes failed to reach the location (although all aircraft were seen approaching by the Mullah).[56] Instead, they bombed the stone stronghold of Jid Ali Fort and animal stock in the surrounding country. Single line ahead formation was used over the target. Only one machine reached Medishi successfully, bombing the encampment. Douglas Jardine recalls:

> *... when six machines were seen approaching, the Mullah was at a loss to know what they might be. Anxiously, he enquired of his advisers. A few guessed the truth, but hesitated to communicate their guess for fear of the death that was the recognised punishment for the bearer of evil tidings. Some, with the Oriental's native penchant for flattery, suggested that they were the chariots of Allah come to take the Mullah up to heaven. A certain Turk suggested that they were a Turkish invention from Stamboul come to tell the Mullah of the Sultan's victory in the Great War ...Then the first bomb fell.*[57]

The remaining machine was forced to land at the emergency landing strip at Las Khorai due to engine trouble.[58] It was subsequently confirmed that the initial bomb dropped on Medishi killed a prominent *Amir*, Hassan's uncle and chief councillor, ten riflemen and singed Hassan's clothes. The total casualties of the day, from eight 20 lb. copper bombs and two full panniers of Lewis machine-gun fire, amounted to some twenty killed and twenty wounded. The attack had taken the Mullah entirely by surprise. He was unaware of the expedition against him and the existence of British aircraft. Post the attack he took refuge in a cave 15 miles to the north-west. However, the operation was deemed a disappointment; the Mullah was still at large.

The bombing of Medishi, Jid Ali and the surrounding area continued on 22 and 23 January. Aerial attacks occurred twice daily. One report recalls:

> *Yesterday 22nd afternoon 2 machines got properly into MEDISHI, 24 bombs and 600 or 700 rds of ammunition from about 800 ft. They were apparently concentrating previous to moving about 2,000 head of camel also were located moving East towards JID ALI about 5 miles East of MEDISHI, these were also shot up. Direct hit also on large fort. Not many Dervishes seen.*[59]

It was assessed that aerial action, including machine-gun fire, caused severe casualties (both Dervishes and stock) and resulted in many fires amongst the bush wood huts. These were scattered around the forts. But the Dervishes remained defiant and persistently returned fire. Aircraft dropped Arabic leaflets over the various settlements, offering pardon to all who surrendered and reminding tribesmen that the 'arm of the government is long'. These had minimal impact. However, by 24 January aerial reconnaissance suggested that Medishi and Jid Ali, as well as the country within a radius of 30 miles, was deserted of any large bodies of Dervishes or stock.[60] Aerial photographs helped confirm that the Mullah's forces were now scattered and in hiding. The cameras used for this task were the L.B. Type Vertical and P. Type Oblique. The latter was seen as the best because it was hand operated, manoeuvrable and an oblique picture of a fort gave a better impression of its 'possibilities of resistance of attack' although the results suffered from the heat and the impure nature of the water supply.[61] [62] Gordon recalls: 'From this [information] it was deduced that the Mullah had commenced his 'trek' south. I was of the opinion that the moment had arrived to conclude the semi-independent action on the part of the Air Force and divert activities to close co-operation with the troops of the Somaliland Field Force, who had meanwhile been taking up position to intercept the Mullah in a flight which it was anticipated that he would make when bombed out of his northern strongholds.'[63] Combined operations, therefore, started on the morning of 25 January.[64]

From 25 to 30 January combined operations occurred with two elements of the Somaliland Field Force. First with the Somaliland Camel Corps, with one and a half companies of 1st/101st Grenadiers, who were operating from El Afweina in an easterly direction. Second with the Somaliland Camel Corps, who were advancing in a westerly direction from the neighbourhood of Mussa Aled, some 45 miles to the north-west of Jid Ali. Support included the transfer of patients by air ambulance, locating troops of each force (and communicating their position by dropping messages) and conveying despatches between commanders. Smoke signals and ground signs were used frequently during routine operations. Great care was taken to identify any force static or on the move. In addition, aerial reconnaissance of Medishi and Jid Ali continued, and isolated groupings of Dervishes were attacked by bomb and machine-gun. A preliminary aerial bombardment of Jidali occurred on 27 January, with many defenders hastily evacuating their positions. Moreover, after the capture of Baran by the King's African Rifles, aircraft used the location as a forward landing strip. On 28 January, after only minimal resistance, Jid Ali Fort fell, aerial bombing playing a key role. The following

day Fort Galdaribur was bombed, together with the native huts surrounding it, but few Dervishes were seen.

The tide had turned decisively in favour of the military operation. On 30 January an important Dervish Sheik gave himself up at Jid Ali and, at the same time, reports suggested that the Mullah was heading for his mountain fortress at Tale. It was clear that, once again, he had temporarily evaded the net set to catch him. But all was not lost. Gordon had previously prepared an emergency landing ground and defensive post at El Afweina for just such an eventuality. Aircraft which departed Eil Dur Elan on 31 January on reconnaissance were ordered to land there. Subsequently, ponies belonging to the Mullah's baggage column were located near Daringahuje and attacked from the air, from as low as 100 feet.[65] It later transpired that the column consisted of the Mullah's personal followers, mostly his headmen, wives and sons. The Mullah himself was only three miles away hiding in a *nullah* (a steep narrow valley).[66] By 1 February the Camel Corps arrived at El Afweina and continued the pursuit. The following day, the first aerial reconnaissance of Tale fortress occurred, the Mullah's formidable mountain stronghold, 270 miles south-west of Berbera. This included taking a number of detailed aerial photographs. Up to this point, knowledge of Tale had been gleaned solely from descriptions of the fortress given by deserters. It was now clear that the stronghold was constructed of a stone perimeter (12-14 feet thick at the base and about 6 feet at the top), with an elaborate system of guard-chambers and bastions. Three forts of significant height (50-60 feet) and strength covered the citadel. On the same day a large Dervish convoy, estimated at 1,500 camels, 500 cattle and 500 sheep and goats was attacked with bombs and machine-gun fire, five miles north of Berwaise.

> *Touch [contact] was now established by aeroplane with the friendlies under Captain Gibb, who were operating against Tale from the neighbourhood of Gaolo, some fifteen miles to the south-west of Tale. This was a most important task, since the friendlies were quite in the dark as to what was happening in the north: efficient co-operation between detached forces has always been the greatest difficulty which military expeditions in Somaliland have had to contend with in the past owing to the lack of means of communication.*[67]

On 4 February three aircraft departed El Afweina, which was now the advanced operating base, to bomb the fortress at Tale. Three direct hits with 112 lb. high explosive bombs and four direct hits with 20 lb. copper bombs occurred on the fort itself.[68] One direct hit with a 20 lb. bomb damaged the Mullah's private stronghold, situated just outside the perimeter of the large fort. But the material damage done was negligible. In addition, a number of hutments (known as *waabs*) were set on fire with incendiary bombs, fanned by a north-easterly wind, and any inhabitants were effectively engaged with machine-gun fire.[69] Despite the severity of the attack the Dervish garrison bravely returned fire. For the next few days only reconnaissance and

inter-communication work was undertaken in support of the Somaliland Field Force, still in pursuit of the Mullah. It was at this point that Captain Gibb's tribal rifles intercepted the Mullah's convoy and rushed and captured Tale. Simultaneously, the Camel Corps destroyed the Mullah's personal following, which had escaped from the fortress. With this, the campaign ended and on 18 February the aircraft returned from their forward locations back to Berbera. However, 'Z' Unit personnel did not leave British Somaliland until April 1920.[70] Taking a reflective view, Gordon concludes:

> *The demoralisation caused by the suddenness of attack from the air was vividly exemplified by the comparison which can be drawn from the taking of Baran Fort by the King's African Rifles, and the precipitate flight of the Dervishes from the fortresses of Medishi and Jid Ali after they had been bombed.*
>
> *In the former case Baran was not subjected to an air attack, and only fell to the King's African Rifles when surrounded and heavily bombarded with Stokes guns, and not until the last defender was killed. Medishi and Jid Ali on the other hand, stronger forts in every way than Baran, were abandoned almost immediately after the air attacks. The utter demoralisation caused is further typified by the fact that quantities of rifles were left behind – an absolutely unheard of occurrence in any former campaign against the Dervishes.*[71]

To acknowledge the level of military activity, the African General Service Medal with clasp 'Somaliland 1920' was awarded to those personnel who served during the campaign in the sphere of operations.[72] But, more importantly for the fledgling service, the experience in Somaliland paved the way for a wider role for the RAF to help garrison the British Empire.

CONCLUSION

This was the second time that air power had been used successfully in Africa within four years, but on this occasion as the main instrument of attack.[73] Operating at extreme length, 'Z' Unit provided a tangible symbol of the might, reach and power of the fledgling service. It was a first-rate example of the potency of aircraft in such circumstances. Moreover, air power provided near real-time intelligence to the Somaliland Field Force. With regular surveillance from the air, colonial forces were able to harass the Mullah beyond the point of survival.[74] However, unexpected aerial attack, deep in the Mullah's heartland, did not create conditions of utter demoralisation that were wished for. Nor did they deliver a knock-out blow. The Dervishes learnt the precaution of travelling at night and lying low during the day. But, in the brief space of twenty-three days of active operations, it helped dislodge the Mullah and his followers from their strongholds and drove them towards waiting ground forces. It could, therefore, be argued that the RAF bombed and machine-gunned the Dervishes into a state of collapse. Deep and persistent attacks played a key role in the campaign's overall

success. The only downside was that the Mullah was not captured or killed. He escaped south, finally settling in Imi, on the upper reaches of the Sabelle River in Abyssinia. Nevertheless, he departed British Somaliland as a refugee, without possessions and power.[75] He died of influenza in December 1920. He was believed to be 56-years-old.

Although credit is primarily given to the RAF, as the main instrument of attack and arguably the decisive factor, this was far from an independent action or a single-service campaign. The lead baton of responsibility passed between the RAF and the multi-ethnic colonial army on 25 January. Although the reconnaissance and bombing missions of the RAF were the main effort, the campaign was a cooperative undertaking between air and ground forces. Andrew Gordon provides a useful précis of the wider joint and multinational activity at play:

> *Synchronised land operations reached across hundreds of miles of the protectorate's eastern hinterland, with HM ships providing the wireless hub (until the Army's portable gear failed). Tribal levies occupied strategic wells to block the Mullah's most likely lines of escape: eastwards down the Nogal valley, and southwards into the Ogaden. Bombay Grenadiers secured the site for an advanced airstrip at Eil Dur Elan. KARs [King's African Rifles] pushed southwards from Las Khorai. And 100 sailors from the sloop [gunboats] Clio and Odin assaulted and demolished a fort near the north coast. But the work-horses (or dromedaries) of the campaign were the SCC [Somaliland Camel Corps], whose tasks were to find and 'fix', but not unduly alarm, the enemy for the RAF, and then follow up the bombings with assaults or pursuits as necessary.*[76]

Yet it was often perceived differently and each service saw in Somaliland what it wanted to see.[77] Most believed that the use of air power was the tool that had independently opened the seemingly impenetrable lock in Somaliland. In one short campaign, the monotonous similarity of results over the last two decades had been changed. Importantly, the campaign lasted only three weeks and cost less than £100,000; operations were finally believed to have cost in the region of *circa* £83,000 in early 1900s' prices. The case for air-policing the Empire, backed by a small, mobile ground force, and the necessity for an independent Air Force was demonstrated, although little emphasis was placed on the fact that most sorties were flown in support of ground forces. Underscored by Trenchard at every occasion, this oft-cited assumption was never really challenged.[78] Acting Lieutenant Colonel Ismay notes: '… no-one in Whitehall had the desire or knowledge to question [this supposition].'[79] And, of course, this approach was not a worked-out doctrine yet.

But impressions are remarkably persistent. People embraced the notion that air power alone was responsible for the end of Dervisham and rejected any evidence that contradicted this position. Little consideration was given to Hassan's move to

fixed defences or the reality that Dervish numbers had declined from some 6,000 fighting men in 1913 to less than 1,000 by late 1919. Six years of effort on the part of the administration to build up the power and influence of the tribal leaders was another important factor often overlooked. There were, unsurprisingly, dissenters and a considerable divergence of opinion existed. Sir Henry Rawlinson, commander of all troops in India, highlighted that independent air action had lasted only a few days. Instead, he considered the sustained and determined ground pursuit the most important aspect of the overall campaign. Others suggested that without intelligence supplied by the Army, secured over many months of activity, the RAF would have lacked worthwhile targets. Likewise, Douglas Jardine notes:

> *... it is with the very greatest reluctance that I have felt compelled to question the truth of the legend that the twenty-one-year-old Dervish problem in Somaliland was only solved by the use of aircraft ... Such a legend is dangerous in the extreme, leading, as it has done, to a belief in some quarters that the savage peoples of Africa and Asia can be controlled from the air and that the troops and police on whom we have relied in the past should be replaced in whole or in part by aircraft. Such extravagant conclusions are certainly not justified by the air operations in Somaliland, nor, I am told, by our experiences in India and Iraq.*[80]

Over the coming decades, the position softened in some quarters. Air control implied that aircraft were used as the primary arm, but usually supplemented by extensive ground forces, according to particular requirements. James Corum notes that: '... RAF accounts of air-control operations written in the 1930s tended to minimise the army part of the operations and magnify the role of air power, so the role of the army in the RAF's account of air control gradually faded.'[81] Even by 1959, Wing Commander Norman Macmillan posits simplistically and mistakenly in a *Times* article that: 'In 1919 'Ginger' Bowhill [chief of staff and second-in-command of 'Z' Unit[82]] swiftly and economically quelled the Mad Mullah in the first demonstration after the war of air power control.'[83]

However, there were a number of unblemished positives from the campaign. Air power's inherent flexibility was exploited in Somaliland. Air transport played an important role, enabling the Governor to continue political dialogue during and post hostilities. Air Chief Marshal Sir Glenn Torpy notes:

> *... it was noted that the ability of aircraft to take the British Governor to visit all the main tribal chiefs and inform them of the Mullah's defeat less than 48 hours after it had happened had also been an important factor, so air transport also played an important part as well.*[84]

The Governor travelled to Tale on 15 February to decide a number of questions needing settlement, such as the disposal of a large number of Dervish prisoners who had fallen

into British hands and the temporary occupation of new territory.[85] He also used the opportunity to thank the Camel Corps and others for their excellent work during the operation and to discuss with them matters of administrative and political importance. A report of the time noted: 'This exhibition of the potentialities of aircraft created the most profound impression on all the Akils and tribal leaders assembled there.'[86]

The campaign also witnessed the use of one of the world's first air ambulances. 'Z' Unit deployed with its own medical team, commanded by Wing Commander W Wyrell DSO of the RAF Medical Service. One of the DH9a biplanes was modified as an air ambulance to enable the swift evacuation of the sick or injured.[87] A coffin-like structure was built within the rear fuselage, allowing a stretcher case and attendant to be enclosed during flight. It had its own challenges. The rudder control was slow, the aircraft lost speed quicker than the standard machine on landing and pilots experienced great difficulty in keeping the aircraft straight on manoeuvring the aircraft on the ground.[88] The aircraft was first used on 1 February to convey an officer who was seriously ill from El Afweina to Eil Dur Elan, where he was successfully operated on in an advance hospital of 10 beds. Captain James Godman, Corporal Edward Linnington and Aircraftman Second Class Sleath were all evacuated by air ambulance from Eil Dur Elan to the port city of Berbera, which contained a base hospital of twenty-five beds. Five others were evacuated by air over the period 15 to 24 February, but none were admitted to hospital.[89]

DH9 Air Ambulance.

But there is possibly another message that can be taken away from this campaign. As Damian O'Connor implies in 'The Lion and the Swallow', perhaps implacable enemies have to be hunted until their total disappearance – rather than applying clemency in the hope that they may learn or transform into better ways.[90] Dervisham only collapsed after two decades of attrition against a determined, resilient and implacable foe. By the end of the operation they were reduced to prey and their capacity to resist was negligible. With this consideration and many other lessons in mind, Churchill asked Trenchard to plan a much more ambitious project: the policing of Mesopotamia, modern-day Iraq. This was a challenging task, especially as the situation was extremely unstable. Despite the speed and mobility of aircraft, controlling dispersed tribal and religious groups by air power over a vast desert area was to prove anything but straightforward. However, 'Z' Unit's deployment to Somaliland proved to be such a successful model that it became the standard across the far reaches of the British Empire in the interwar period. Even today, high-tech US drones and aircraft operate over Somalia hunting for *jihadists*. Like the Dervishes before them, al-Shabab continues to pose a major security threat.

NOTES

[1] https://issafrica.org/iss-today/what-changes-for-al-shabaab-after-the-death-of-godane, accessed 20 February 2017.
[2] http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21617067-despite-death-its-leader-shabab-dangerous-ever-shabab, accessed 20 February 2017.
[3] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-29034409, accessed 20 February 2017.
[4] Poetry has a long tradition in Somalia and has historically been used to vent hatred against occupiers. It provides a valuable window on motives and ambitions and is a useful rallying cry. The Mullah, like Godane, was a master lyricist and used his skill to great effect. Moving poems, underpinned by inspiring words and haunting descriptions, helped galvanise his followers.
[5] 'Umar Isa 1965', p. 59, quoted in Martin, B. G., *Muslim Brotherhoods in Nineteenth-Century Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 182.
[6] *The Times*, 'Somaliland and the Somali: Difficulties of Development', 13 March 1928.
[7] Jardine, D., *The Mad Mullah of Somaliland* (London: Herbert Jenkins Ltd., 1923), pp. 16-17.
[8] *The Times*, 'The Somaliland Campaign: Italian Operations on African Desert Frontiers', 10 August 1940.
[9] Jardine, *The Mad Mullah of Somaliland*, p. 28.
[10] *The Times*, 'The Mad Mullah: A Twenty Years' Struggle', 8 May 1923.
[11] Lewis, I. M., *A Modern History of Somalia, Nation and State in the Horn of Africa* (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1980), p. 40.
[12] Gordon, A., 'Time after Time in the Horn of Africa', *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 74, No. 1, January 2010, pp. 109-111.
[13] O'Connor, D., 'The Lion and the Swallow: The Somaliland Field Force 1901-20', *RUSI*

Journal, Vol. 151, No. 5, p. 69.
[14] Gordon, 'Time after Time in the Horn of Africa', p. 110.
[15] Lewis, *A Modern History of Somalia*, p. 69.
[16] *Ibid*, p. 70. * the author cites Jardine, *The Mad Mullah Of Somaliland*, p. 43.
[17] The term described the acceptance of the Salihiya Order.
[18] *The Times*, 'The Mad Mullah: A Twenty Years' Struggle', 8 May 1923.
[19] The Mullah surrendered to the Italian authorities at Illig in 1905, where he was treated with respect. However, his inactivity did not last long.
[20] Longoria, M. A., 'A Historical View of Air Policing Doctrine: Lessons From The British Experience Between The Wars, 1919-1939' (Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama: School of Advanced Airpower Studies, 1992), p. 20.
[21] *The Times*, 'The 'Mad Mullah' Again: Anglo-Italian Operations', 16 February 1920.
[22] Grey, C. G., *A History of the Air Ministry* (London: Unwin Brothers, 1940), p. 173.
[23] Lewis, *A Modern History of Somalia*, p. 72.
[24] Gordon, 'Time after Time in the Horn of Africa', p. 139.
[25] WO/32/5828, Proposal for the Final Overthrow of the Mullah, General and Political Situation in Somaliland.
[26] *The London Gazette*, 'Narrative of the Action at Gumburu', 7 August 1903, pp. 4975-76.
[27] *The Times*, 'Sir Geoffrey Archer', 04 May 1964.
[28] Formed in March 1914, the Somaliland Camel Corp, a unit of the British Army based in British Somaliland, was designed to maintain order in the Protectorate. It replaced the Somaliland Camel Constabulary.
[29] *The Times*, 'The Mad Mullah', 8 May 1923.
[30] Mackey, R. R., 'Policing the Empire: How the Royal Air Force won its wings in the Middle East', *Military History*, Vol. 24, No. 5, July/August 2007, p. 28.
[31] Water and its absence were the dominating factors, and the small parties of natives could travel farther without water than British columns.
[32] *Supplement to the London Gazette*, No. 32107, 1 November 1920, p. 10597.
[33] Millar, R., *Boom: The Life of Viscount Trenchard, Father of the Royal Air Force* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2016), p. 250.
[34] Secretary of State for War and Air, January 1919 to February 1921.
[35] Boyle, A., *Trenchard* (London: Collins, 1962), p. 368.
[36] Torpy, G., 'Counter-Insurgency: Echoes from the Past', *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 152, No. 5, October 2007, p. 19.
[37] Bowyer, C. *History of the RAF* (Greenwich, CT: Bison Books, 1977), p. 51.
[38] i.e. the on-going battle of wills and beliefs between western governments and Islamic extremists.
[39] Gordon, 'Time after Time in the Horn of Africa', p. 140.
[40] Jardine, *The Mad Mullah of Somaliland*, p. 261.
[41] Skoulding, F. A. 'With Z Unit in Somaliland', *The Royal Air Force Quarterly*, July 1930, p. 390.

[42] *Supplement to the London Gazette*, p. 10590.
[43] The Somaliland Camel Corps, 700 rifles; a composite battalion, 6th and 2nd King's African Rifles, 700 rifles; a half battalion, the 1st/101st Grenadiers, Indian Army, 400 rifles; an irregular Somali tribal levy, 1,500 rifles; and 300 illaloes (armed irregular troops).
[44] AIR 5/1310, RAF Operations in Somaliland, p. 5.
[45] O'Connor, D., 'The Hunt for the Mad Mullah', *Aviation History*, July 2012, p. 45.
[46] Jardine, *The Mad Mullah of Somaliland*, p. 263.
[47] Skoulding, 'With Z Unit in Somaliland', p. 391.
[48] *Ibid*.
[49] AIR 20/570, Somaliland Air Operations 1919-20, Report, p. 20.
[50] Wireless communications were finally established between Berbera and Eil Dur Elan on 31 December 1919.
[51] *Supplement to the London Gazette*, p. 10591.
[52] AIR 5/1312, Z Unit Somaliland, Operation and Organisation Orders – Orders for Pilots and Observers.
[53] *Ibid*, Orders for Flying Officer T.A. Thornton, Berbera, 02 January 1920.
[54] AIR 20/8895, 'Z' Unit Somaliland, No. 8, Military Standing and Operation Orders, Summary of Movement of Aircraft Sent to C.O. S.F.F., El Afweina, dated 18 February 1920.
[55] O'Connor, 'The Hunt for the Mad Mullah', p. 45.
[56] *Supplement to the London Gazette*, p. 10592.
[57] Jardine, *The Mad Mullah of Somaliland*, p. 266.
[58] Skoulding, 'With Z Unit in Somaliland', p. 392.
[59] AIR 20/8895, Z Unit Somaliland No. 8, Military Standing and Operation Orders, Correspondence between C.O.Z. and C.O.S.F.F.
[60] AIR 20/8895, Z Unit Somaliland No. 8, Military Standing and Operation Orders, Summary of Movement of Aircraft sent to Colonel G.H. Summers.
[61] *Supplement to the London Gazette*, p. 10593.
[62] Skoulding, 'With Z Unit in Somaliland', p. 395.
[63] AIR 20/570, Somaliland Air Operations 1919-20, Report, p. 5.
[64] AIR 20/8895, Z Unit Somaliland No. 8, Military Standing and Operation Orders, letter dated 25 January 1920.
[65] AIR 5/13/3, 'Z' Unit, Somaliland, Operation Orders and Reports (Intelligence), 'Following carried out since my cable of 30 January 1920'.
[66] Jardine, *The Mad Mullah of Somaliland*, p. 271.
[67] AIR 20/570, Somaliland Air Operations 1919-20, Report, p. 7.
[68] *Supplement to the London Gazette*, p. 10595.
[69] Skoulding, 'With Z Unit in Somaliland', p. 393.
[70] *Ibid*, p. 394.
[71] AIR 20/570, Somaliland Air Operations 1919-20, Report, p. 8.
[72] This was declared to be that portion of the Protectorate lying east of a line drawn due south through Ankor on the coast to the southern border of the Protectorate.

[73] Roe, A.M., 'Air Power in Darfur, 1916: The Hunt For Sultan Ali Dinar and The Menace of The Fur Army,' *Air Power Review*, Volume 20 Number 1, Spring 2017.
[74] O'Connor, 'The Lion and the Swallow', p. 70.
[75] *Supplement to the London Gazette*, p. 10597.
[76] Gordon, 'Time after Time in the Horn of Africa', p. 142.
[77] Omissi, D., *Airpower and Colonial Conflict: The Royal Air Force 1919-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 15.
[78] Michael Longoria notes at the start of Chapter Three: 'Trenchard seized an opportunity and used the Somaliland experience as proof that airpower could substitute for ground power, and could do so at a significantly reduced cost'. Longoria, M. A., 'A Historical View of Air Policing Doctrine: Lessons From The British Experience Between The Wars, 1919-1939' (Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama: School of Advanced Airpower Studies, 1992), p. 19.
[79] Hastings, L., Ismay: *The Memoirs of General Lord Ismay* (London: Heinemann, 1960), pp. 34-35.
[80] Jardine, *The Mad Mullah of Somaliland* p. 280.
[81] Corum, J., 'The Myth of Air Control: Reassessing the History', *Aerospace Power Journal*, Winter 2000, p. 70.
[82] *The Times*, 'Sir Frederick Bowhill', 14 March 1960.
[83] *The Times*, 'Middle East Air Force: Link in Chain of Allied Defences', 01 September 1959.
[84] Torpy, 'Counter-Insurgency: Echoes from the Past', p. 19.
[85] *Supplement to the London Gazette*, p. 10596.
[86] AIR 20/570, Somaliland Air Operations 1919-20, Report, p. 9.
[87] Of note, the medical team were absolved from all responsibility for sick and injured native personnel.
[88] AIR 5/13/3, 'Z' Unit Somaliland, Report on D.H.9.D. 3117, Ambulance Machine, Flown in British Somaliland.
[89] Scholl, M. D. and C. L. Geshekter, 'The Zed Expedition: the world's first air ambulance?, *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, Volume 82, November 1989, p. 680.
[90] O'Connor, 'The Lion and the Swallow', p. 73.