High Flying Agents and Mystical Technology: Air Power, Bush Warfare and The Nuers, Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 1927-1928

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Abstract: Many of the small-scale actions undertaken by the RAF in the interwar years fail to feature highly in historical works on the evolution of the RAF or air power. Some were simply too small in scale or duration, too remote or unavoidably overshadowed by more significant events to recount. As a rule, modern-day research has largely ignored them. One such example is the use of a flight of No. 47 (B) Squadron against the Neur tribesmen of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan in 1927-1928. This was a complex operation, with air and the Sudan Defence Force working closely together. It was to last well over a month and consisted of two separate, but sequential, actions. Events are worth recounting as, not only do they demonstrate the flexibility of air power, they also help expose the realities of its, at times, controversial application in Colonial Africa.

Introduction

Great as was the development of air power in the war on the Western front, it was mainly concerned with aerial action against enemy aircraft and co-operation with other arms in action in which land or sea forces were the predominant partner. In more distant theatres, however, such as Palestine, Mesopotamia and East Africa the war has proved that the air has capabilities of its own.

'On the Power of the Air Force and the Application of that Power to Hold and Police Mesopotamia', March 1920[1]

It must not be forgotten we were still very angry with the Nuer for murdering Fergusson Bey.

F. D. Kingdon

Challenging Times and Emerging Opportunities

The Royal Air Force (RAF) faced momentous change in the years following the Armistice of 11 November 1918. The return to peaceful conditions in Europe resulted in reductions to all three Services, but particularly to the RAF. Apart from a limited number of squadrons in India and the other overseas garrisons, the RAF almost ceased to exist. 'This was perhaps inevitable', recalled Squadron-Leader John Slessor in an article titled 'The Development of the Royal Air Force', published in 1931. He went on to clarify his assertion:

> The Air Force had no peace policy nor tradition. The threat from the air, which had been largely instrumental in calling it into being a unified Service, had disappeared with the disruption of the German Air Force, while the possibility of a similar menace coming from any other direction naturally then seemed inconceivable.[2]

Even so, the physical change was immense. In late November 1918, the RAF consisted of 185 squadrons, 30,000 officers, 263,000 other ranks and 22,000 aircraft. Within two years the number of squadrons had reduced to 28 (of which 21 were overseas), 3,280 officers and 25,000 other ranks.[3]

The challenge faced by the Air Ministry was essentially twofold. First, it had to build a regular Service out of the remains of the wartime RAF, whilst simultaneously cooperating with the Navy and Army in a number of peacetime activities and widely-scattered campaigns across a vast Empire. Second, it had to engage in the continuing *mêlée* to maintain the independence of the force. All of this had to be undertaken at minimal cost, with only a

[1] AIR 1/426/15/260/3, Air Staff, 'On the Power of the Air Force and the Application of that Power to Hold and Police Mesopotamia', Mar 1920.
[2] Slessor, J. C., 'The Development of the Royal Air Force', *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 76, Feb-Nov 1931, p.324.
[3] 1X/5/9, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Achieves, King's College, London.

handful of trained staff, no permanent list of personnel and whilst exploiting the economies of peace. Fortunately, direction was at hand. Based on the assumption that there would be no major war in Europe for the next ten years, the blueprint for the RAF's long-term success came in the form of a 7,000 word White Paper. This was titled 'The outline of a scheme for the permanent organisation of the Royal Air Force'.[4] Drafted and redrafted at Chief of the Air Staff's request, it was published in December 1919.[5] It became a model for other air forces around the world.[6] The principal foundations on which the Service would shape itself were: first, reducing the number of operational squadrons to the minimum necessary to meet overseas commitments; second, maintaining a small force in the United Kingdom as a reserve; and third, concentrating the remainder on perfecting the training of officers and men, thereby creating an efficient cadre capable of expansion should the need arise.[7] Underpinning the document was emphasis on maintaining the independence of the new Service. The scheme was approved by Parliament and work to restructure the RAF began in earnest in 1920.

The RAF was soon to get an unforeseen helping hand from troubles in the Middle East. During the Summer of 1920, a full-scale rebellion occurred among the tribesmen in Mesopotamia – the 'cradle of civilisation' and Britain's most troublesome new mandate.[8] Some 130,000 tribesmen were involved, of whom perhaps half were armed with modern rifles. Despite a robust military response, the country remained volatile throughout 1921 and 1922.[9] This proved to some to be an example of the 'Army's inability to nip trouble in the bud …', or to contain it.[10] It also presented compelling evidence that any genuine measure of administration based on traditional methods of force would involve the maintenance of large military garrisons. This was deemed unsupportable under the stringent economic conditions of the time. The total casualties for the insurrection were 875 British killed and missing, and 1,228 wounded. Arab losses were estimated at 8,450 killed and injured.[11] 4,800 British and 24,500 Indian army troops were dispatched to the Iraq Mandate to reinforce the 102,000 imperial troops already stationed in Mesopotamia, as well as two additional RAF squadrons. The financial price tag of the enterprise shocked the British government. Military operations alone had cost the treasury 40 million pounds. Understandably, a new approach was called

[4] 'Permanent Organization of the Royal Air Force', note by the Secretary of State for Air on a Scheme Outlined by the Chief of the Air Staff, H.M. Stationary Office, London, dated December 1919. See **https://archive.org/details/PermanentOrganizationOfTheRoyalAirForce1919**.

[5] The Chief of the Air Staff was Hugh Trenchard.

[6] Millar, R., *Boom: The Life of Viscount Trenchard – Father of the Royal Air Force*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2016), p.246.

[7] Mahoney, R., 'Trenchard's Doctrine: Organisational Culture, the 'Air Force Spirit' and the Foundation of the Royal Air Force in the Interwar Years', *British Journal for Military History*, Vol. 4, Issue 2, Feb 2018, pp.143-177.

[8] Iraq as of 1921.

[9] O'Connell, J. F., *The Effectiveness of Airpower in the 20th Century: Part 1 (1914-1939)*, (New York: iUniverse, 2007), p.182.

[10] Kingston-McCloughry, E. J., *Winged Warfare: Air Problems of Peace and War*, (London, Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1937), p.240.

[11] Jacobsen, M., 'Only by the Sword: British Counter-Insurgency in Iraq, 1920,' *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, No. 2, Aug 1991, p.357.

for to control Mesopotamia and a bold proposal to employ air power, in substitution for the Army and in a policing role, was put forward.[12]

The British government welcomed the idea. The brainchild of Winston Churchill,[13] then Secretary of State for the Colonies, and Trenchard, the scheme was endorsed at the Cairo Conference on 12 March 1921. The daring approach saw the Air Ministry shoulder the burden of the internal order of Mesopotamia, on a system based on air power as the primary striking force, supported by a relatively small force of soldiers on the ground. This consisted of four armoured-car squadrons, braced by British, Indian and locally recruited troops.[14] The annual cost of the proposal was forecast to be just £3-4 million.[15] Despite strong-willed opposition from the Army,[16] the trial was initiated at the end of 1922 and the political situation in the country steadily improved, although tribal banditry and heavy fighting was not uncommon. Brigadier-General P. R. C. Groves underlines the clear fiscal benefit of the approach:

> … the most striking result of the substitution of air control for military control in Iraq was the immense economy effected. In 1920, when there was a general rising in Iraq, the military expenditure for defence amounted to no less than £38,500,000. In 1921 it was nearly £21,000,000. In 1922 the Air Force took over control, and by 1925 the expenditure had been reduced to four million. Of recent years it has averaged less than a million and a half.[17]

The experiment – increasingly known as 'air control' – proved to be a success in Iraq and appeared to suit the myriad police problems common to a violent tribal society.[18] It employed the RAF (only eight squadrons of fighters and light bombers) as the primary arm to support the political administration in maintaining peace at an acceptable cost. Governed by clearly defined rules, its success depended on high-grade intelligence, combined with an intimate knowledge of the habits, mentality and aims of the local inhabitants.[19] This allowed the RAF to conduct operations with an accuracy that seemed sometimes superhuman to the tribesmen.[20] Aircraft enabled remote or inaccessible areas to be reached within hours and

[12] Roe, A. M., 'Flying In The Blazing Sun: Air Control, District Intelligence Officers And Mixed Results', *British Army Review*, No. 159, Winter 2013-2014, p.64.
[13] Churchill had previously been Secretary of State for Air (15 Jan 1919-1 Apr 1921); therefore, he was intimately involved in the creation of the RAF and was a strong supporter for the substitution policy.
[14] AIR 19/109, 'The Development of Air Control in Iraq', October 1922.
[15] Salmond, J., 'The Air Force in Iraq', *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 70, No. 479, 1925, p.485.
[16] Orange, V., *Churchill and his Airmen: Relationships, Intrigue and Policy Making 1914-1945*, (London: Grub Street, 2013), p. 64; Millar, *Boom*, p.256.
[17] Groves, P. R. C., *Behind the Smoke Screen*, (London, Faber & Faber Ltd., 1934), p.287.
[18] The policy of assigning responsibility for defence of a region to the Air Ministry.
[19] Thomas, M., 'Bedouin Tribes and the Imperial Intelligence Service in Syria, Iraq and Transjordan in the 1920s', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 38, No. 4, Oct 2003, pp.539-561.
[20] However, the reality was that most bombing attacks were often inaccurate and heavy-handed. Roe, 'Flying In The Blazing Sun', p.65.

proved effective against the tribesmen, who judged the strength of an administration by its ability to deliver punishment without delay when misbehaviour occurred. However, air control was not invulnerable to criticism. The RAF had to defend itself against the charge of inhumane and callous methods of warfare, especially when a Labour government came to power in 1924. Even so, air control was extended to other areas where conditions were deemed similar, including Trans-Jordan.[21] From its establishment in 1922, a combination of aircraft and armoured cars successfully subdued both intertribal lawlessness and Wahhabi raiders from Saudi Arabia.[22] That same year the Air Ministry assumed control of Palestine (part of a single mandated territory with Trans-Jordan). By 1925 the military garrison consisted of only a single cavalry regiment, a company of armoured cars and a squadron of aircraft.[23] In the Spring of 1928, the Air Ministry assumed responsibility for the defence of the Aden Protectorate, Britain's longest and concluding application of air control, creating 50 landing grounds near all the main centres of population. Air policing – albeit under Army control – was also employed successfully on several occasions on the North-West Frontier of India, for example in 1925, 1927, 1928 and throughout the 1930s.[24]

Elsewhere, air power had already proven its utility. In 1916, a small detachment of B.E.2c biplanes, operating at extreme range from their original base location, were employed against Sultan Ali Dinar, the one-time official Government agent for the Darfur region of Sudan. Air power played a key role throughout the operation, helping to reconnoitre and attack the Sultan's position.[25] Four years later, air power was used against Mohammed Abdullah Hassan, better known as the 'Mad Mullah' of British Somaliland. This became a clear example of the value of air policing and military economy. It proved swifter, cheaper and a lower risk alternative to the use of large ground forces. It also helped bring to an end a 20-year-long resistance. The historical imprint is that the campaign lasted only three weeks and cost less than £100,000.[26] There were more positive headlines to come. The Afghan rebellion of 1928-29 resulted in a risky air evacuation comprising of 84 active sorties to save hundreds of embassy staff from several countries, along with their families and 24,000 pounds of baggage, after inter-tribal strife spread into civil war in Afghanistan.[27] In ungainly aircraft, in some of the worst weather conditions outside the Arctic Circle, the skill of the pilots, supported by dedicated

[21] Slessor, 'The Development of the Royal Air Force', p.332.
[22] Towle, P. A., *Pilots and Rebels: The Use of Aircraft in Unconventional Warfare 1918-1988* (London: Brassey's, 1989), p.24.
[23] Omissi, D. E., *Air Power and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force, 1919-1939*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1990), p.44.
[24] Cloughley, B., L. W. Grau and A. M. Roe, *From Fabric Wings to Supersonic Fighters and Drones: A History of Military Aviation on Both Sides of the North-West Frontier*, (Solihull, Helion & Co. Ltd., 2015); Slessor, J., *The Central Blue: Recollections and Reflections*, (London, Cassell & Co. Ltd., 1956), p.52.
[25] Roe, A. M., 'Air Power in Darfur, 1916: The Hunt for Sultan Ali Dinar and the Menace of the Fur Army', *Air Power Review*, Vol. 20, No. 1, Spring 2017, pp.8-24.
[26] Roe, A. M., 'Air Power in British Somaliland, 1920: The Arrival of Gordon's Bird-men, Independent Operations and Unearthly Retributions', *Air Power Review*, Vol. 21, No, 1, Spring 2018, pp.74-93.
[27] Baker, A. and R. Ivelaw-Chapman, *Wings Over Kabul: The First Airlift* (London: William Kimber & Co. Ltd., 1975).

crews, mechanics and riggers, accomplished a marvel of airmanship under the most testing conditions.[28] The Middle Eastern campaigns and wide range of miscellaneous, but essential, colonial duties were key to shaping the fledgling RAF. They were also strengthening the hand of the Service at each turn and the future independence of the RAF was secured by 1925.[29]

While such activities are largely well known to air power enthusiasts, almost forgotten are a number of smaller actions undertaken by the RAF in the interwar years. These were often not necessarily viewed as successful, or instructive when selling the virtues of air control. Some were simply too small in scale or duration, too remote or unavoidably overshadowed by more significant events to recount. As a rule, they do not figure highly in historical works on the evolution of the RAF or air power. And modern-day research has largely ignored them. One such example is the use of a flight of No. 47 (B) Squadron against the Neur tribesmen of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan in 1927-1928.[30] This was a complex operation, with air and the Sudan Defence Force working together. It was to last well over a month and consisted of two separate, but sequential, actions. The first against Gwek Wonding, the recalcitrant witchdoctor of the Lau Nuers, and the second directed against the Nuers of Lake Jorr, and those associated with the murder of Captain Fergusson, the District Commissioner on 15 December 1927. Events are worth describing because not only do they demonstrate the flexibility of air power, under conditions of considerable difficulty and hardship, they also help to expose the realities of its application in Africa and its mixed reception. They also highlight the danger of air power simply being an auxiliary to land forces. Moreover, they are useful in other ways. As Neville Parton cautions wisely, unless practitioners '… have an understanding of what has gone before – what has worked, and perhaps more importantly what has demonstrably not – [they] have nothing on which to base [their] decision making'.[31]

The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and the Troublesome Nuers

The African native is in a far more primitive stage of advancement than the Arab or the North-West Frontier tribesmen …

TNA/PRO Air 9/59

In early 1899, an Anglo-Egyptian agreement reinstated Egyptian rule in Sudan, but as part of a condominium, or joint authority, exercised by both Britain and Egypt.[32] The agreement designated territory south of the twenty-second parallel as the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. Initially, the colonial government favoured indirect rule, which allowed the British to govern

[28] Roe, A. M., 'Evacuation by Air: The All-But-Forgotten Kabul Airlift of 1928-29', *Air Power Review*, Vol. 15 No. 1, Spring 2012, pp.21-38.
[29] Killingray, D., "A Swift Agent of Government': Air Power in British Colonial Africa, 1916-1939', *Journal of African History*, No. 25, 1984, p.432.
[30] No. 47 (B) Squadron's motto is: '*Nili nomen roboris omen*' (the name of the Nile is an omen of our strength).
[31] Parton, N., 'In Defence of Doctrine … But Not Dogma', DDefS (RAF) Discussion Paper, Oct 2007.
[32] On the whole Sudan was arguably the most successful and altruistic of all Britain's colonial ventures, from which Britain gained very little and the Sudanese people, over time, a great deal.

through indigenous leaders. For good reason, southern Sudan's inaccessible, unproductive and undeveloped provinces received little official attention. But British policy in the region was about to change. Prior to 1919, the Government's approach towards the southern provinces – less perhaps the maintenance of law and order – was largely passive. Beyond 1919 and into the 1920s, influenced by the Egyptian Revolution,[33] the Government became increasingly active and interventionist.[34] However, unlike in the north, where early transition from military to civilian administration had occurred, the management of the south was dominated by the military and a martial approach. This brought the Government into regular contact with the 'children of the swamp' – the Nuers. The Nuers of southern Sudan were a troublesome and belligerent tribe, easily roused to violence. Disturbances, petty-skirmishes and misbehaviour, resulting in punitive action, were frequent. There was always a new generation of young warriors keen to assert themselves. The tribesmen remained resentful of foreign interference and influence, and disregard for Government orders was commonplace.

In total, there were approximately 400,000 Nuer tribesmen. The majority lived in the swamps and open, clayey savannah of the Upper Nile Province. This was a remote, mysterious and unknown land. But there were smaller sections in Bahr el Ghazal and the Nuba Mountains provinces. *The Times* noted: 'Their territory is one vast flat plain of cotton soil intersected by parts of the Bahr el Ghazal, Bahr el Jebel, Zeraf and Sobat rivers and cut up by numerous swamp khors'.[35] Nuer land extended over some 20,000 square miles. The rainy season, which lasts from early May until late November, resulted in areas of the plain being flooded and covered in dense green grass. This grew to six to eight feet tall. There were very few trees. Throughout the period the country was virtually impassable. Towards the end of January grass fires, started by the tribesmen, swept across the plain, leaving a scorched, bare and deeply-fissured surface. This helped facilitate cattle movement and offered good grazing; new grass shoots, which grew readily, provided excellent food for livestock. It also allowed easier access to water. Beyond March it was difficult to obtain water except from the major rivers and larger pools.[36]

The Nuers were viewed as independent, elusive and warlike. They had no predominant leader. Each of the sections, or clans, had its own hereditary chief – a sacred person, but without administrative authority. This lack of tribal homogeneity and the fractious nature of clan politics helped lessen the likelihood of the sections combining for warlike purposes. But it also increased the difficulty of administration for the Government. This was further complicated by

[33] The Egyptian Revolution of 1919 was a countrywide rebellion against the British occupation of Egypt and Sudan. It was carried out by Egyptians from different walks of life in the wake of the British-ordered exile of the revolutionary Egyptian Nationalist leader Saad Zaghlul, and other members of the Wafd Party in 1919.
[34] Abdel Rahim, M., 'The Development of British Policy in the Southern Sudan 1899-1947', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 3, Apr 1966, p.227.
[35] *The Times*, 'The Nuers: Difficulties of Control', 11 Feb 1928.
[36] Evens-Pritchard, E. E., 'The Nuer of the Southern Sudan', pp.73-80. Available at **https://www.uio.no/studier/emner/sv/sai/SOSANT1000/h14/pensumliste/evans-pritchard_the_nuer.pdf**.

a lack of an actual, active chief's influence. In its place, *kujurs*, witchdoctors or medicine men, had the greatest power over the young, hot-headed warriors. These individuals rarely came into contact with Government officials, of which there were no more than four or five to cover the territory. Tribal warriors were armed with spears, shields and clubs. They also had access to modern rifles that came from Abyssinia. As a rule, they lived a semi-nomadic existence, moving far and wide with their livestock during the dry season, before returning to their villages at the start of the rainy season.[37] Edward Evans-Pritchard notes in *The Nuer* that: 'Cattle are their dearest possession and they gladly risk their lives to defend their herds or to pillage those of their neighbours'.[38] The warriors covered and defended their precious animals at all costs. They placed very little value on their village huts or crops (millet or maze). Although primitive, the Nuer was a formidable foe.

The Arrival of Air Power and its Early Use

The hunter who is tracking an elephant does not stop to throw stones at birds.

African proverb

There were no military aircraft in sub-Saharan Africa prior to 1914. Aircraft first reached Khartoum in 1914, and by 1916 air power was deployed in campaigns in South-West and East Africa. These operations in far-off and thinly populated territory quickly proved the utility of aircraft.[39] Despite a 1919 plan for a permanent RAF base in Nigeria, Sudan was chosen in its place following the early employment of air power against the Nuers in 1920. However, it was not until 1927 that a squadron moved permanently to Khartoum. The squadron was viewed principally as an insurance against a revival of Mahdism, the influence of Egyptian nationalism or a mutiny of locally-recruited troops. It also contributed to Britain's dominance of the Middle East and the defence of the Suez Canal. However, in a country where ground movement was difficult, aircraft offered speed, long-range and the ability to cross hills, grass plains and swamps uninhibited, linking together the scattered units of the Sudan Defence Force. In 1927, No. 47 (B) Squadron moved to Khartoum and in December of that year it replaced its ageing DH.9As in favour of Fairey IIIF (mark IVCs – J9053-J9077), a two-seat, land-based general purpose aircraft.[40] Featuring composite construction, it was very strong and, although it lacked the power to allow tight turns without the loss of height, it was an effective platform with good rough-field and short-field performance. Nevertheless, due to the fear of criticism for attacking some of the most primitive and defenceless people within the Empire, air power was generally limited to supporting ground operations. The conditions for air control in Sudan were viewed as far from ideal and operations against the Nuers were going to help reinforce this perception.

[37] *The Times*, 'The Nuers', 11 Feb 1928.
[38] Evans-Pritchard, E. E., *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), p.17.
[39] Killingray, 'A Swift Agent of Government', p.430.
[40] Mason, F. K., *The Fairey IIIF: Profile Number 44*, (London: Hills & Lacy Ltd., 1965), p.4.

In the 1920s, the Nuers were viewed as an un-administered, superstitious and truculent tribe. M. W. Daly recalls in *Empire on the Nile* that '… their history of relations with the Sudan Government [was] a long chapter of misunderstanding and neglect punctuated by official violence and popular mistrust'.[41] For example, in late 1920, a government patrol was sent against the Gaajok and Gaajack Nuer east of the Sobat. The sections had rebelled and raided their neighbours. The assembled force included a detachment of two aircraft flown in from Egypt, known as 'H Unit'.[42] It based itself at a crude airstrip at Nassar. Initial air patrols revealed that the campaign was not going to be straightforward. Not only was it difficult to identify the tribesmen in the swamp, but the natives were not frightened by the sight of DH.9As overhead. However, regular low-level bombing and machine-gun attacks took their toll on the tribesmen. Working in combination with ground forces, which increasingly targeted food stocks, the combined effect resulted in peace negotiations. Air operations ended on 23 May. The force had employed 165 bombs, 50 incendiary bombs and 7,000 machine-gun bullets. The human cost was severe but there were no RAF casualties. Nevertheless, 'H Unit' did not have it all its own way. One aircraft crashed due to mechanical problems, and a fire at Nassar on 18 February destroyed the workshops. The remaining aircraft crashed during take-off on 3 March and was only replaced on 1 April.[43]

The deployment was judged a success and the only observation from the ground commander was that more aircraft should have been deployed to prevent gaps in air cover due to accidents or mishaps.[44] The official Air Report states:

> The moral effect was tremendous … enhanced by the accuracy of the attacks – information gleaned showing the casualties inflicted on people and stock to have been severe – there is no doubt that this type of warfare will produce excellent results even if carried out when less favourable conditions render accurate bombing more difficult.[45]

The effect of air power was deemed instantaneous and decisive. It helped set the conditions for its future application; often more aligned with the Army's doctrine of maximum lethality rather than the RAF's minimum force ethic.[46] However, the operation resulted in no long-term political solution and relations between the political authority and the Nuers remained strained. Activity, thereafter, took a more cautious and less heavy-handed approach, steered by those with greater cultural and linguistic understanding of the region. It reflected the

[41] Daly, M. W., *Empire on the Nile: The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan 1898-1934* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.399.
[42] **https://weaponsandwarfare.com/2018/07/19/imperial-policing-in-the-interwar-era-i/**
[43] Groves, *Behind the Smoke Screen*, p.282.
[44] Renfrew, B., *Wings of Empire: The Forgotten Wars of the Royal Air Force, 1919-1939* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2015), pp.60-63.
[45] TNA, AIR 20/680, 'Report on Operations, South East Sudan, 1921'.
[46] Longoria, M. A., 'A Historical View of Air Policing Doctrine: Lessons from the British Experience Between the Wars, 1919-1939', Thesis, School of Advanced Airpower Studies, Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, May 92.

reality that trouble was generally abating, tribes were settling their own differences internally and taxes were being paid. It was also an indication of the skill and influence of the district commissioners and medical practitioners.

But trouble was often fomenting and some tribesmen found a life without conflict dull. Moreover, without the ability of the chiefs to control the hot-headed tribesmen with traditional executive powers, maintaining tribal peace was a significant undertaking.[47] Trouble often erupted and needed addressing.

The Lau Nuer Operations

I fear that Messrs. Pok and Gwek
Will shortly get it in the neck
And that an overwhelming shock
Is due to Messrs. Gwek and Pok.

Then let us mourn the bitter wreck
In store for Messrs. Pok and Gwek
When we administer the knock
To Mr. Gwek and Mr. Pok.

Punch magazine

The next notable flare-up occurred in 1927. This resulted in operations against the Lau Nuers in the triangle between the Nile and the Sobat. Its roots were deep and loosely attributed to '… a conspiracy of witchdoctors – *kujurs* – who are suspicious of the progress of peaceful administration.'[48] Unrest came to a head when a progressive policy of road building through Lau territory resulted in a number of *kujurs* establishing followings of dangerous tribal warriors. But interestingly, there is also a suggestion that the confrontation between the government and the Nuer, that began to foment in late 1927, was triggered by one of the district administrators, as a means of compelling the government to commit more resources to the region.[49] The individual in question was C. A. Willis, known as 'Chunky'. Willis was posted to the Upper Nile Province as Governor in 1927 from the Intelligence Department in Khartoum, where he had spent the previous decade as both Assistant Director and Director. Although a prodigious writer of reports, his objectivity and judgement were questionable.[50] He had failed to provide advanced warning of the army mutiny and the White Flag League Revolt of 1924 while stationed in Khartoum.[51] These were factors that resulted in his posting to one of the least developed provinces in the Sudan. Willis portrayed the Nuer prophets, or witchdoctors, as men of war whose influence had to be eradicated. By removing the prophets, many of whom refused to acknowledge British authority, his view was that hereditary chiefs could emerge and administrative progress could take root.

[47] Daly, *Empire on the Nile*, p.400.
[48] *The Times*, 'The Sudan Murder: Rounding up the Rebels (R.A.F. in Action)', 20 Jan 1928.
[49] He had already persuaded Khartoum to allocate money for the development of the province, the most important grant coming from the Egyptian Government for the examination of irrigation schemes.
[50] Daly, *Empire on the Nile*, pp.400-401.
[51] The White Flag League was an organised nationalist resistance movement of Sudanese military officers, formed in 1923-24, which made a substantial early attempt toward Sudanese independence.

His particular dislike was a 45-year-old chief called Gwek (the frog) Wonding, of the Lau Nuer. Gwek was a fitting moniker for, as he got older, he developed misshapen arms and legs, a stubby body and a short toad-like cranium. Wonding's power over his followers was said to originate from a large hand-built 60 foot high earthen 'pyramid', or *bieh*, in the centre of his village, Dengkur.[52] The conical earth mount, exceptionally smooth, built of cattle dung, clay and cotton soil, was adorned with coloured stones, ostrich eggs, feathers, ivory, and other talismans.[53] It was visible for miles around and commemorated his father, Ngundeng Bong, also a celebrated witchdoctor. Wonding objected to a new road being constructed in tribal territory and forbade tribesmen to support any construction activity.[54] He was suspicious of its role and utility. Gradually fomenting trouble, Wonding stated forcefully that: 'The Lau know not how to make roads …' in a chiefs' meeting.[55] Later, he was the first to show open defiance. The political authorities viewed him as anti-government and truculent. The timing of the project may also have been an irritant to him; it appeared to clash with the time the Nuer normally cleared their fields for cultivation.

Based on troubling reports[56] that Wonding planned to kill Percy Coriat, the District Commissioner, on his return from leave in England, and raise the Nuer in rebellion, Willis had already persuaded Khartoum to authorise a patrol among the Lau in the dry season of 1928. But grounded in former allegations about Wonding, which turned out to be fabricated, the Governor-General was cautious and suggested that Coriat meet with Wonding and attempt to establish ground truth. If that failed, and only then, would force be used. However, unbeknownst to Coriat, military preparations were in the advanced stages and there appeared to be an irreversible momentum to re-test offensive air action in Sudan in order to determine its utility in tribal administration. Despite the Governor-General's wish, Coriat was only allowed to go to Abwong to discover the extent of Wonding's support. He was not permitted to meet him. He arrived in Malakal by air on 20 November 1927, arriving at Abwong by steamer seven days later. Once there, he conducted a number of meetings with go-betweens and local tribal visits. These were misinterpreted by the tribesmen as preparation for war with the Nuer. Attempts to obtain Wonding's submission failed. As a result, hundreds of bulls were sacrificed at the pyramid, which the tribesmen believed would give them strength over the invader, and war drums were beaten. Some tribesmen evacuated their homes and travelled to the Government Posts at Abwong and Duk Fayuil for safety.

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[52] Deng is the Dinka name for the Great Spirit or Godhead. Kur in Nuer means war or anger. Therefore, Dengkur means 'God of war' or the 'Wrathful God'.

[53] *The Times*, 'The Sudan Murder', 20 Jan 1928; Renfrew, Wings of Empire, p.192.

[54] Johnson, D. H., *Empire and The Nuer: Sources on The Pacification of The Southern Sudan, 1898-1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p.198.

[55] Coriat, P, 'Gwek, The Witch-Doctor and the Pyramid of Denkgur', *Sudan Notes and Records*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 1939, p.231.

[56] Some of these were undoubtedly anti-Wonding reports from Nuer tribesmen. Inter-clan fights were commonplace in the region. Truth was routinely manipulated or misinterpreted.

Moreover, two less well known witchdoctors, Char Koryom and Pok Keirjok, accompanied by some tribesmen, joined Wonding in staunch support.[57] There were reported to be 1,000 tribesmen ready to fight any incursion into tribal territory.

Prompt action was deemed necessary. It was decided that Wonding should be removed from the Lau Nuer, that his followers should disband and return under the authority of their tribal chiefs, and that the pyramid at Dengkur should be destroyed. In addition to ground forces, it was recommended that aircraft cooperate with Sudan Defence Force troops in attaining their objectives. One flight of No. 47 (B) Squadron, with accompanying ground personnel, was allocated to support 60 rifles of No. 7 Infantry Company, Equatorial Corps from Malakal, a detachment of engineer troops from Khartoum and forty mounted police. This was thought to be a robust force to deal with the evolving situation. Preparations for military operations were now advancing at pace. A forward operating base was established 17 miles south of Malakal, close to the junction of the Khor Filus with the Sobat River. This included the establishment of a suitable landing ground for the RAF. By 17 December, the flight, complete with ground personnel, bombs and stores was established.[58]

The following day Coriat, who had been appointed political officer to the patrol, announced that the number of warriors in rebellion had risen from 1,000 to 4,000. Possibly only half of these possessed rifles. Concentrations of recalcitrant tribesmen had now advanced within 10 miles of Nyerol. In light of the developing situation, the RAF was tasked to bomb Dengkur on 18 December. Coriat informed a number of chiefs that only cattle camps would be attacked and that women and children should remove themselves from the area. This allowed the tribesmen to relocate their families and as much of their movables and livestock to a place of safety in order to avoid casualties. This reflected air control doctrine which sought to disrupt everyday life by the minimum application of force. However, logistic challenges resulted in the hoped-for aircraft not being available in time. Coriat was only informed at 02:00 hours on 18 December that the attack would not occur.[59] This was a frustrating start, and the day of the initial raid passed with no aerial activity at all. Tribal road gangs immediately downed tools. To help regain prestige, a more ambitious demonstration was planned for the following day. On the morning of 19 December[60] aerial action occurred, but no tribal information was received as to the effects of the activity until 23 December. Aircraft repeatedly circled and attacked the pyramid, the first planes arriving in the morning in time to interrupt the sacrifice of an ox. However, their incendiary bombs failed to set fire to the surrounding village and most of the ordnance dropped missed the pyramid; perhaps a reflection of the poor bombing skills

[57] Coriat, 'Gwek, The Witch-Doctor and the Pyramid of Denkgur', p.233.
[58] CAB 4/18, CID 903B, 'Operations in the Sudan (Dec 1927-Feb 1928)' – despatch from His Majesty's High Commissioner for Egypt and the Sudan, covering a Report by the Governor-General of the Sudan, p.2.
[59] Johnson, *Empire and The Nuer*, p.201.
[60] CAB 4/18, CID 903B, 'Operations in the Sudan (Dec 1927-Feb 1928)', p.3.

of the crews. Subsequent bombing and machine-gun raids against the pyramid occurred, achieving holes in the mounds.[61]

Over the period 20-21 December the RAF carried out offensive operations against Dengkur, Ryr, tribal concentrations and cattle herds.[62] Thereafter, aircraft flew over the territory several days running, machine-gunning any concentrations of men or cattle they could find. It was hoped that the loss of the latter would be severely felt. 'Further action was then suspended to enable the political officer to discover what moral and material damage had been caused by these air attacks.'[63] Results were mixed. The material damage was very small except against cattle herds. Tribal morale, however, was plummeting and enemy concentrations were lessening. Coriat reported that the total casualties caused by the RAF were only one man killed and several cattle slayed.[64] However, the plan to bomb the pyramid to discredit Wonding's authority had fallen short. It was hoped that the 20 pound bombs carried by the Fairey IIIFs could destroy the earthen mound; proof that the Government had the stronger power. The pyramid stood tall.

With aerial action continuing, thought turned to the structure of the punitive patrol and the need for a dedicated reserve. To bolster the ground force, the Talodi Company, Camel Corps, was ordered to move to Khor Filus. Moreover, as a result of Captain V. H. Fergusson's murder (discussed below) and the necessity of a second patrol against the Garaluark Nuers, reinforcements were sent from Khartoum to act as a general reserve at Malakal. With the addition of No. 1 Company, Cavalry and Mounted Rifles, on 26 December and the appointment of Captain J. R. Chidlaw-Roberts M.C. as Officer Commanding the Lau Patrol, the ground force, known as Patrol S.8, was ready and started to move deeper into Nuer territory. In support, air reconnaissance was carried out over the Faddoi area on 27 December. The following day, aviation attacked herds of cattle on the Khor Filus with bombs and machine-gun fire. Severe loses were inflicted. It was during a strafing run that one of the pilots, Flight-Lieutenant A. J. Rowe, was wounded in the left thigh, after a number of tribesmen opened fire on the attacking aircraft. Normally, rifle-fire was widely inaccurate, but a lucky shot hit the intended target. Rowe managed to fly his aircraft back to Khor Filus – but took no further part in the operation. By the morning of 30 December, after a difficult march, the slow-moving punitive patrol reached Dengkur. Following preliminary bombing by the RAF, the patrol entered the village which was deserted, but showed some signs of rushed evacuation. The arrival of ground forces had the effect of frightening Gwek and dispersing any remaining warriors.[65] With the younger tribesmen seeking sanctuary in the

[61] Johnson, D. H., 'Colonial Policy and Prophets: The 'Nuer Settlement', 1929-1930', *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*, Vol. 10, 1979, p.12.
[62] CID 903B, 'Operations in the Sudan (Dec 1927-Feb 1928)', p.3.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Johnson, *Empire and The Nuer*, p.201.
[65] CID 903B, 'Operations in the Sudan (Dec 1927-Feb 1928)', p.4.

territory of neighbouring tribes, all that remained were women, children and the old. With no tribal attacks and a number of chiefs submitting, organised resistance had effectively come to an end.[66] Gwek's village was burnt. Thereafter, the raiding column was unable to find any large concentrations of Nuers to fight. Due to repeated aerial activity, the tribesmen had scattered widely, seeking sanctuary in remote areas, where the troops were unlikely to follow, or had sought refuge among their tribal neighbours.

Although organised resistance had come to an end, small pockets of rebellion continued. On 7 January the RAF undertook offensive action against the Ket area, west of Fadding. This resulted in a section surrendering and starting work on road construction. Four days later the RAF was in action again, this time bombing cattle camps south of Fathai. It was on this day, 11 January that Char Coriam, one of Wonding's chief supporters, surrendered with 100 warriors and 18 rifles, after seeing a RAF aircraft fly over his camp.[67] Events had now effectively come to a close. Patrolling in the local area only resulted in a few prisoners. The ground force started to recover and reconstitute for future actions around Lake Jorr, and the RAF refocused on the adjacent operation against the Garaluark Nuers. However, the result was far from satisfactory. Despite relative peace returning to the area and over 100 miles of rudimentary road constructed, the pyramid at Dengkur was still standing and Wonding had evaded capture, along with many of his followers. Something had to be done. Attempts to pursue and capture Wonding by No. 9 Company, Equatorial Corps, failed. But the witchdoctor was now a fugitive with no following. Importantly, he no longer resided in the Lau area, though his exact whereabouts remained unclear. Attention now turned to destroying the pyramid.

The plan was to destroy the pyramid on 8 February in the presence of as many Lau chiefs as possible. Engineers spent a week digging a tunnel into the base of the structure, in which to place a charge of high explosive. It was hoped that the demolition of Wonding's spiritual authority and stronghold symbolised the downfall of the influence of witchdoctors. Come the day, 34 Lau chiefs listened to Coriat as he explained to them that he would make the pyramid disappear. 'They were told to keep their eyes on the Pyramid which would vanish with a reverberating bang …'[68] With a theatrical gesture, he dropped a handkerchief to the ground to initiate the explosion. Unfortunately, the result was underwhelming. The wind blew the sound of the explosion into the distance and only a puff of smoke and a few lumps of earth falling down the side of the pyramid indicated that the explosion had occurred. When the dust settled, only the top of the mound had been removed; the base remained frustratingly intact.[69] Coriat notes, however '… if one could judge from their expressions, the

[66] *The Times*, 'The Sudan Murder', 20 Jan 1928.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Coriat, 'Gwek, The Witch-Doctor and the Pyramid of Denkgur', p.234.
[69] CID 903B, 'Operations in the Sudan (Dec 1927-Feb 1928)', p.4; Johnson, 'Colonial Policy and Prophets', p.13.

effect was adequate.'[70] It was subsequently announced that the pyramid had been destroyed. With most troops now withdrawn from the area, a company of mounted rifles were tasked to march through the Gaweir country, between Khor Filus and the Zeraf River. They were glad to leave the area. The ground force suffered terribly from mosquitoes and plagues of flies. Fevers were common and all British officers suffered from malaria and dysentery.

It was not until the following year that Wonding finally met his maker. During a Nuer attack on a Sudan Defence Force and police patrol on 8 February, near the site of the Dengkur Pyramid, the tribesmen were repulsed and pursued by unremitting cavalry. Wonding, three other witchdoctors and 14 warriors were killed, but Pok Karajok, who helped lead the attack, escaped. There were no government casualties in the incident and the symbols of office Wonding had inherited from his father, including a ceremonial rod of wood and metal called the *dang*, were confiscated. *The Times* reported '… although since last year's operations Gwek [Wonding] had been a fugitive with few adherents, his final disappearance should go far towards a peaceful settlement of the turbulent Nuer area under the administrative measures now in progress'.[71]

Garaluark Nuer Operations

Air action commenced on the 24th June and was immediately effective, so much so that on the 3rd February the Governor reports that 3,900 natives and 7,000 head of cattle had surrendered. Further surrenders a matter of time owing to dispersal … Moral effect of bombing has broken any hostile spirit.

Extract from a report by Officer Commanding the RAF, Garaluark Nuer Patrol

On 15 December 1927 Captain Vere H. Fergusson (known as 'Fergie Bey' or 'Fergusson Bay'), the District Commissioner of the Bahr-el-Ghazal Province, a Greek merchant (Andria Panagopoulos)[72] and 16 Dinka carriers were murdered by Nuers at Lake Jorr, 25 miles north of Shambe. *The Times* reported that: 'So far as is known at present the murder occurred while cattle taken by the Nuers from the Dinkas were being restored to their owners. The murderers are followers of Chief Garaluark of the Nuong tribe.'[73] No political significance was attached to the murders. However, the reality was more grisly and would prove to be a catalyst for wider events. To abridge the account, Fergusson arrived at Lake Jorr by steamer in the course of his routine duties. Attempting to restore cattle stolen from the Dinka tribe, he had arranged to meet the Nuer chiefs at a post approximately 400 yards inland. 'The presence of a large number of Nuers caused no suspicion, as the people had been called in for the purpose of checking the population lists'.[74] Fergusson was debating business with Panagopoulos when

[70] Coriat, 'Gwek, The Witch-Doctor and the Pyramid of Denkgur', p.234.
[71] *The Times*, 'Defeat of Nuer Malcontents: Notorious Wizard Killed', 14 Feb 1929.
[72] *Sunday Times* (Perth), 'Trouble in the Sudan: Punitive Expedition Leaves Khartoum', 18 Dec 1927.
[73] *The Times*, 'Officer Murdered in the Sudan: Sequel to Cattle Thefts', 17 Dec 1927.
[74] *The Times*, 'Tribal Treachery in the Sudan: Capt. Fergusson Stabbed to Death', 19 Dec 1927.

he was suddenly attacked by a Nuer youth, who hurled a spear towards him. The spear, which hit, barely penetrated and Fergusson threw it back. He was then attacked savagely by other tribesmen and died on the spot. Panagopoulos was stabbed to death while rushing towards Fergusson; 16 servants and Dinka carriers, as well as two Arab merchants were also killed. The others present, pursued by the Nuers, reached the safety of the steamer and managed to escape. The ship's engineer kept the tribesmen at bay with a shot gun, while the mooring ropes were cut. It was an ungainly escape. Subsequently, it was noted that: 'There had been no reason to suspect treachery. No grievances were known, and there had been no warning of trouble.'[75] Events were about to focus on Nuers around Lake Jorr.

It was believed, erroneously as it later transpired, that Chief Garaluark was the inciter, and that all the Nuer in the Lake Jorr area were simmering in revolt. Detailed intelligence, however, was to prove sketchy and difficult to obtain. This was a remote, inaccessible and complex area. Although some judged the impending operations against the Nuers more as police measures than as military operations, the force gathered was robust and capable of operating in difficult country against a tenacious foe. F. D. Kingdon helps explain why a large and capable force was necessary:

> Nuer were credited with the most advanced tactics, such as lying up in the long grass, firing the grass as we passed through, and night attacking behind a screen of cattle or even women and children, and no one knew enough to discredit these opinions.[76]

The ground force consisted of No. 1 Company, Equatorial Corps, No. 6 Company, Equatorial Corps and a detachment of engineer troops from Khartoum. No. 4 Company, Equatorial Corps from Wau was also placed at readiness and No. 1 Company, cavalry and mounted rifles from Shendi was ordered to Malakal as a general reserve. The force gathered at three locations and was supported by numerous tribal carriers, servants, guides and interpreters. Major L. C. Bostock M.C. was appointed to command the patrol and Captain H. F. Kidd M.B.E. was appointed as political officer. The object of the operation was to bring the enemy to action, to arrest those responsible for Fergusson's murder, including Chief Garaluark,[77] to destroy their villages and to capture or kill all their cattle. This was a challenging ask. The terrain was difficult, on many occasions soldiers were waist deep in water, and local administration had completely collapsed with the murder of Fergusson. To complicate matters further, there were linguistic difficulties, mapping was inaccurate, illness inevitable and tribal politics were challenging. Moreover, 'The task of separating the innocent from the guilty … [was] rendered difficult by the mode of thought of a primitive people which regards responsibility for crimes committed

[75] Ibid.
[76] Kingdon, F. D., 'The Western Nuer Patrol 1927-28', *Sudan Notes and Records*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 1945, p.173.
[77] On 29 December Chief Garaluark gave himself up and was taken to Shambe under escort. He was subsequently imprisoned at Malakal, the capital of Upper Nile Province, only to be released in 1935.

by individuals as falling on the whole community'.[78] Some efforts were made to reassure the tribesmen that only punishment of the guilty was sought. But the realities on the ground appear to paint a different picture.

Three columns,[79] known collectively as Patrol S.9, departed on 2 January 1928. Advancing simultaneously from different points to Lake Jorr, they cautiously made their way towards the objective, burning thatched settlements and killing cattle as they progressed; the Army's use of maximum destruction was widely accepted. There were multiple challenges *en-route*. Attacks of tsetse, mosquito and red ant made life particularly unpleasant. Night-time camps swarmed with flies. Danger also came in the form of venomous snakes and lion and crocodile attacks. On top of that there was native hostility towards the columns, the realities of typhoid, and localised attacks were common. Rapid assaults and swift retreats were frequent, and the tribesmen often relied upon their capacity to recover to complex and inaccessible country at pace. On arrival in the Lake Jorr area on 5 January, small parties of enemy ambushed the columns, but were quickly driven off. Three hundred cattle were killed in the attacks. The effect of the continuing operations was to drive the rebellious elements, including their highly prized cattle, to a number of out-of-the-way and inaccessible islands in the swamps. It was viewed as impossible for troops to negotiate the swamps without sinking up to their necks in water. Boats were also useless, due to the height and thickness of the papyrus grass. F. D. Kingdon recalls: '… no one felt inclined to follow them up, nor did it appear to be any use. This was not as defeatist as it sounds, as anyone who has seen the Sudd area will agree'.[80] With the tribesmen confined to a relatively small area, the ground columns were used to cordon off the area and to provide rallying points for those tribesmen who wanted to avoid being bombed. A *cordon sanitaire* was set. It was now the role of the RAF to bring operations to a close by inflicting maximum casualties – in direct opposition to air control doctrine and its minimum force ethos.[81]

With a local landing site constructed on dry ground at Thurnum, some four miles south-west of Lake Jorr, Wing-Commander G. R. M. Reid D.S.O. M.C., with two aircraft, arrived at Lake Jorr to investigate the use of air power. An aerial reconnaissance of the swamp satisfied Reid that air action was feasible and would achieve positive results. Arrangements were immediately put in place to employ the RAF in the area, subordinate to the patrol commander. The complete flight, include supporting personnel, was established at Thurnum by 23 January. In preparation, the RAF sought to put in place an elaborate system of ground to air signals and, in time, various attempts were made to get aeroplanes to pick up written messages. But they proved unsuccessful, especially as the signals were frequently changed, '… and what stood for 'more bombing required' one day meant 'Nuers coming in well' the next day'.[82] Aircrew also

[78] *The Times*, 'The Sudan Murder', 20 Jan 1928.
[79] Shambe column, Luell column and Adok column.
[80] Kingdon, 'The Western Nuer Patrol 1927-28', p.177.
[81] CID 903B, 'Operations in the Sudan (Dec 1927-Feb 1928)', p.4; Johnson, 'Colonial Policy and Prophets', p.6.
[82] Kingdon, 'The Western Nuer Patrol 1927-28', p.177.

considered their safety, especially as the reputation of the Nuer was for unthinkable cruelty – especially against foreigners.

> They suggested we should give the pilots a letter to any Nuer who might find them if they made a forced landing, offering a large reward if the pilot was brought back unharmed to the Government. It might have been a good idea if any of the Nuer had been able to read, and if any of us had been able to write Nuer.[83]

Aerial bombing started on 24 January and focused principally on the cattle camps or *murahs*, which were clearly visible from the air on the patches of dry land in the swamp.[84] By this time the tribesmen were suffering from a severe lack of food and unrelenting insect bites. Young calves were also dying and many of the cattle were suffering from thrush, resulting from standing continuously in water. On 14 and 15 January the RAF systematically and repeatedly bombed the tribesmen and their cattle. The impact was significant. It resulted in 200 cattle being captured and numerous warriors sending messages to indicate their willingness to surrender. William. A. Porter, who was the inspector of agriculture in the area, but seconded as Political Officer to No. 1 Company, Equatorial Corps, for the operation, noted simply in his diary:

> Jan 24th. Two aeroplanes seen bombing Nuer murahs E and SE of Amair from 06:00 hours till 08:00 hrs …
> Jan 25th. Two aeroplanes seen bombing Nuers in swamps SE of Amair from 06:00 hours till 08:00 hours. Aeroplanes circled over Amair landing ground and one came down to within 2 feet of the ground in order to inspect …
> Jan 26th. No aeroplanes seen this morning. Native officer with two sections and all the carriers and surrendered Nuers went out at 06:00 hours and returned at 14:00 hours with 8,000 rolts dura, having continued the burning of surroundin[g] villages …
> Requested that our desires re bombing be put out by a ground signal.[85]

It was clear that the terrifying psychological and physical impact of air power was having an effect. However, some Nuers learnt the art of dispersal and concealment. Warriors hid in the jumble of tall dense green vegetation, watercourses and bogs. There were often only fleeting glimpses of them during the day. And even if the aircrew received detailed and timely information of a concentration, the tribesmen quickly dispersed when they heard the sound of aircraft overhead. Becoming increasingly air-minded, the warriors never assembled in large groups and confined most of their activity to the hours of darkness, where they could move with a degree of impunity. Moreover, when the opportunity presented itself, the tribesmen

[83] Ibid.
[84] CID 903B, 'Operations in the Sudan (Dec 1927-Feb 1928)', p.6.
[85] Quoted in: Barltrop, R., 'Lessons from the Past? Approaches to Conflict and Peace in Sudan, 1899-1955' Luce Paper, University of Durham, Institute for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, Durham, 30 Jun 15, p.9/24.

were not afraid of fighting back or taking aim at the aircraft overhead. But facing repeated harassment, particularly the bombing of their prized cattle, which were impossible to conceal from the air, the RAF quickly broke down tribal resistance. Surrenders became increasingly commonplace.[86] By 26 January the Nuer resistance had culminated.

William Porter provides a chilling tally of the 'particulars of killed and captures' during the wider operation from his column's perspective: 18 Nuers killed; 371 Nuers captured and surrendered; 400 cattle killed; and 1,076 cattle captured and surrendered. He does not stipulate the number of villages burned and ransacked, but at least seven settlements were razed to the ground.[87] Ultimately, the tribesmen came to the conclusion that they had had enough and they were defenceless against the impact of air power. Even so, isolated pockets of disaffected tribesmen attempted to break through the cordon and escape with their cattle. These suffered terribly from rifle fire.[88] Loyal chiefs cooperated in the task of helping to arrest the men directly responsible for the murder of Fergusson. But even this task proved difficult. For example, Gargek, a suspected ringleader and malcontent, was wounded while resisting arrest and managed to escape his captors. Nonetheless, sufficient evidence was gathered to demonstrate the complicity of Chief Garaluark in the murder of Fergusson. 'By the 3rd February …' the official report notes '... 9,000 men, 3,000 women and children, and 7,000 head of cattle had been surrendered, or captured …'[89] The patrol was deemed a success, but the murderers remained free. With operations coming to a close, and the flight of No. 47 (B) Squadron returning to Khartoum, via Malakal, on 5 February 1928, a company of the Equatorial Corps, led by a native officer, marched through the country of the Bul Nuers, on the border between the Bahr-el-Ghazal and Kordofan Provinces, with a view to showing the flag in the district. A second company remained behind to supervise the building of a causeway at Lake Jorr. It was not until 1929 and 1930 that two men were convicted of killing Fergusson.[90] Both were publically hanged; one on a gallows transported by steamer and lorry to his village.[91]

By 15 February 1928, *The Times* reported simply that:

> The operations against the Nuers in both the areas affected are virtually at an end, and the troops, with few exceptions, are returning to their peace stations, while the R.A.F. aeroplanes which have been cooperating are already back in Khartoum.[92]

[86] TNA/PRO Air 20/681, Operations Reports on S8 and S9 Patrols, Dec 1927-Mar 1928.
[87] SAD 700/11/7-15, 'Diary of Number 1 Company'.
[88] *The Times*, 'Sudan Murder: End of Punitive Operations', 15 Feb 1928.
[89] CID 903B, 'Operations in the Sudan (Dec 1927-Feb 1928)', p.6.
[90] A memoir by Fergusson was published posthumously under the title *The Story of Fergie Bey* (London: Macmillan, 1930).
[91] Johnson, D. (Ed), 'Governing the Nuer: Documents in Nuer History and Ethnography, 1922-1931', by Percy Coriat, *JASO Occasional Paper*, No. 9, 1993, p.xliii.
[92] *The Times*, 'Sudan Murder', 15 Feb 1928.

The total count of Nuer dead from both operations was assessed to be well over 200.[93] This included women and children. With no ability to distinguish between combatants, non-combatants, the young and the old from the air, operations were routinely reported in broad order 'bulk' numbers. But this was not the end of matters. The cold shadow of operations against the Nuers in 1927-1928 was long. This was not to be a *tour de force* of the application of air power. And criticism of the RAF's failure to make a lasting impression on the tribesmen was answered in London:

> … Trenchard let it be known that what Huddleston [General Officer Commanding Troops in the Sudan] and 'some of the political officers' had 'wanted all along was a stand-up fight with the Nuers which they thought necessary to secure their complete subjection'. He, for his part, saw the chief value of air power 'in a place like Sudan', as morale, to convince recalcitrants that opposition was hopeless.[94]

The Nuers never felt that opposition was a lost cause. Life was certainly not a burden to the warriors and many were happy to endure inconvenience and discomfort. Further unrest and rebellion in the following years would emphasise this. Moreover, events underlined a reoccurring theme of the time: a lack of understanding of the role of air power and the fundamental difference in approach between the RAF and the Army. As details of the operations became clearer, the Air Ministry '… contended that the Sudan authorities 'regarded the air arm from the point of view of its effectiveness in inflicting casualties … instead of … as an arm' that should 'achieve its results mainly by affecting' the enemy's morale.'[95] Success was measured in the number of casualties inflicted, by killing as many natives as possible belonging to the rebellious Nuer sections. It was a valid and perhaps uncomfortable criticism for some. There was a need for restraint in the use of aircraft; the keen edge of air power is easily blunted by misuse. As a result, the Air Council requested that any future use of air power be conducted in a humane manner, involving minimal casualties and the precise application of force. From their perspective, the value of the RAF in Sudan was not in support of punitive columns, conducting 'humdrum'[96] raid and scuttle operations, although it was acknowledged that it would be necessary to support ground formations on such activity. Instead, air power in Sudan was Britain's safeguard against a revival of Mahdism and facilitated country-wide communication and influence. It was also there to intimidate Khartoum's small, but vocal, and increasingly influential intelligentsia which opposed British rule.[97]

[93] TNA/PRO Air 20/681, Operations Reports on S8 and S9 Patrols, Dec 1927-Mar 1928.
[94] Daly, *Empire on the Nile*, p.401.
[95] Ibid.
[96] FO 371/13873, 'Memorandum on the Use of the Air Force', 20 Jun 1928; CID 904B, 'The Use of the Air Arm in the Sudan', 6 Jul 1928.
[97] Renfrew, *Wings of Empire*, p.192.

Conclusions

The more you know about the past, the better prepared you are for the future.

Teddy Roosevelt

The employment of air power against the Nuer tribesmen received mixed reviews. On the one hand, a flight of No. 47 (B) Squadron operated with great skill over difficult and unfamiliar terrain, far from its base location in support of two sequential ground patrols. Rudimentary aircraft came through a severe test of climate and working conditions with notable aplomb. Moreover, the Fairey IIIFs helped enforce a broad, temporal moral effect on the tribesmen, provided a degree of interruption to everyday tribal activity and delivered a swift and salutary lesson in punishment to the Nuers. This all occurred in a remote and inaccessible area of the Upper Nile Province that was often virtually impossible for ground troops to penetrate. In a country with very few roads and even fewer railways, the flight offered operational reach, flexibility and tactical lethality. Aircraft underscored the 'long arm' of the Government and its growing technological muscle. It is little surprise that the flight received considerable praise from those on the ground:

> The aircraft were without a doubt the deciding factor of the patrol. Without them the operations might have dragged on for weeks, if not for months. There is no doubt that they struck terror into the Nuers and completely unnerved them. The Nuers thought that they were safe from the Government, and being bombed and machine-gunned was a great shock. The utility of aircraft for communication purposes cannot be exaggerated.[98]

On the other hand, air power failed to have a lasting moral effect on the tribesmen – particularly the young firebrands. There was no end to Nuer resistance, the influence of the *kujurs* remained and Wonding roamed free. The flight seemed unsuccessful as a '… quick, clean, incisive sweep of a surgeon's knife in cutting out a cancerous growth'.[99] Tribesmen learned quickly to be air-minded and to conceal themselves. They also developed effective work arounds. But their cattle were easy prey and increasingly seen as the Nuers' Achilles heel. Tribal life became increasingly problematic, but never intolerable. Predictably, the indiscriminate bombing and machine-gunning of the tribesmen drew considerable criticism, on both ethical and political grounds. Its employment was not judged as a more humane instrument for punishing tribal misbehaviour than a traditional punitive ground expedition. If anything, air power delivered violent and terrifying punishment from above, without an ability to 'feel' its way on the ground. Therefore, the lasting results of the use of air power in early 1927-1928 are difficult to determine and they contributed towards a growing conclusion that Sudan was not a textbook showground for air control. This was a position compounded

[98] Extract from a report of Major L. C. Bostock M.C., Officer Commanding the Garaluark Nuer Patrol, quoted in CID 903B, 'Operations in the Sudan (Dec 1927-Feb 1928), p.7.
[99] Kingston-McCloughry, *Winged Warfare*, p.254.

by civilian officials who wished to retain control of Sudan's defences and not hand them over to the RAF.

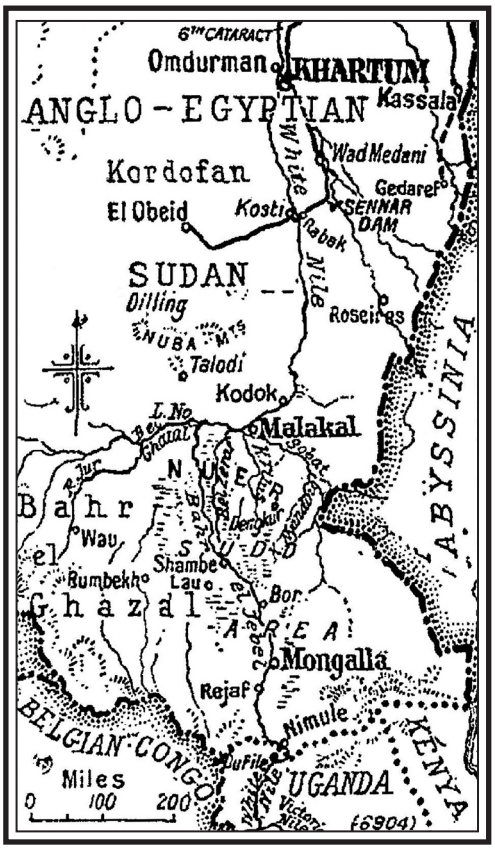
Operations against the Nuers, however, illustrate some of the frictions between civil and military authorities in southern Sudan. Fundamentally, they reveal the difference in approach between the Army and the RAF; one thinking tactically, the other thinking strategically. The Army wanted to inflict excessive casualties on the Nuers, as a punitive measure, pacifying them via force in a concentrated area. In contrast, following air control doctrine, the RAF hoped to create in the minds of the tribesmen the belief that they were being confronted with a weapon against which they could not retaliate. The goal was to secure a change of heart with the minimal use of force, via the dislocation of everyday life. It also sought to bar the tribesmen from having a fight on 'equal' terms. Unsurprisingly, the RAF was often criticised for dispersing the tribesmen and not allowing ground forces to inflict heavy casualties on massed warriors. But not all aircrew shared this utopian doctrinal view. Those at the coalface sometimes wanted unrestricted use of offensive air power – seeing any limitations as a foolish waste of capability and firepower. Civilian administrators saw matters very differently. They were horrified at the concept of bombing primitive and defenceless tribesmen, but often failed to recognise the destructive effect of slow-moving punitive patrols, which were also expensive in men, material and money.

To complicate matters further, the RAF flight was auxiliary to the Army patrol commanders and the employment of air power was often well-defined by those on the ground. Indeed, in the Garaluark Nuer operations, local forces deliberately constrained and blockaded the tribesmen in a small area, handing the RAF the baton for the final violent *coup de grâce*. In many ways, it was akin to shooting fish in a barrel. The RAF commander, Wing-Commander Reid, would no doubt be aware that such widespread tribal destruction – i.e. perceived tactical success – would result in a state of famine and deprive the tribesmen of their livestock, thereby creating the very conditions which would lead to further lawlessness. He would probably also recognise that it would increase bitterness towards the Government, rather than creating a lasting peace. And risk the RAF of being accused of being inhumane, due to the 'unsporting' asymmetry of using aircraft against primitive tribesmen. Complex relations between the different Services and a lack of understanding of how to best integrate air and ground efforts also led to miscalculations, distrust and degrees of suspicion. This was further compounded by the RAF's view that air power should be used for a higher dimension, not principally in support of raid and scuttle patrols.[100]

Undermining both operations was a fundamental lack of a comprehensive approach to the south. Military operations were not followed by much needed aid and an administrative policy that would eliminate the root causes of unrest. A vicious circle ensued, with a degree of

[100] Daly, *Empire on the Nile*, p.401.

suspicion that some officials even hankered after traditional ground confrontation with the Nuers. This was further compounded by a lack of accurate tribal intelligence and an unfamiliarity of the political aspects of the problem. Only Percy Coriat spoke the tribal dialect and had a deep understanding of the Nuers.[101] Much was lost in translation and an unfamiliarity of the needs and ambitions of the tribes was *ubiquitous*. Moreover, the operational level – where strategic ideas are turned into tactical realities – was completely absent. This was campaigning by rote and jointery was in its infancy in Sudan. It is perhaps worth leaving the last word to F. D. Kingdon: 'The operations would, no doubt, now be called one of the bad old patrols, but it should not be forgotten that such patrols made the southern Sudan safe for civilian officials. At least they taught me the dangers of one-man rule however efficient, and that an offensive patrol should always be avoided at almost any cost. Like all war it does nearly as much harm as good.'[102]



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[101] It was during the rains of 1922, cut off from all other British government officials that he learned to speak Nuer. He also took the unprecedented, and never repeated, step of staying in his district during the rainy season, establishing many ties of personal friendship and learning the ways of the tribesmen.
[102] Kingdon, 'The Western Nuer Patrol 1927-28', p.178.