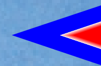
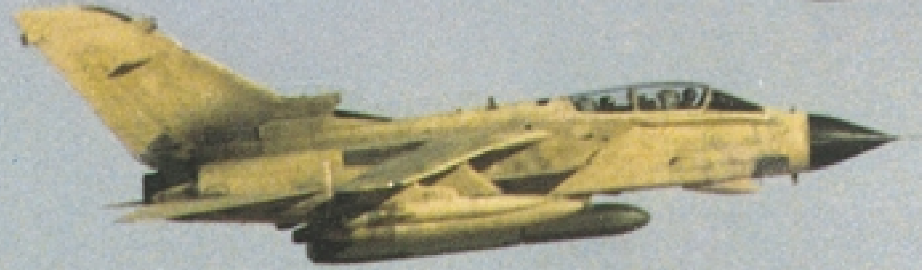


The Myths of Air Control and the realities of Imperial Policing



The concept of 'air control' has long had considerable appeal to advocates of air power from its inception in the cash-starved days immediately after the Great War through to present times when the more extreme exponents of our art cite it as an early example of air power 'doing it alone'.[1] The term 'air control' is almost invariably used to refer generically to the activities undertaken by the Royal Air Force in the far-flung corners of the Empire in the inter-war years. Notwithstanding the existence of several worthwhile studies on the role of air power in these areas, many myths have arisen over the intervening years. Some of these myths were deliberately generated at the time, either to inflate the omnipotence of air power, or to denigrate it. It has been the subject of academic research in its own right and has long been a popular subject for journal articles and staff college papers as will be evident from the footnotes to this paper.[2] Part of the debate has been healthy, but some is less so as generalisations have often been made in order to draw modern parallels where none exist. The use of Iraq as a common venue can be positively unhelpful. The distaste, or embarrassment, felt by some authors over the Imperial aspects of the subject and the period does little to aid understanding.

This paper seeks to outline the wider geo-strategic issues that were extant when air policing was in vogue with appropriate reference to the political priorities and niceties of the time. These latter factors will inevitably acknowledge the inter-Service rivalries – particularly for funding. The paper will also examine the various facets and the realities of air policing. As Sir John Slessor makes abundantly clear in *The Central Blue*,[3] these roles extended far beyond the traditional concept of air control,

encompassing a wide variety of tasks and missions more in tune with modern concepts of the utility of air power; these included routine patrolling, delivery of men and supplies, reconnaissance, medical evacuation and famine relief. The paper will not go into huge detail on the actual process, or the tactics used in 'air control'. Nor will the paper cover all areas of the Empire. Finally, the paper will look at what, if any, lessons can be drawn from these operations and the often acrimonious debate that surrounded them.

THE GEO-STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT AND THE ROLE OF AIR POWER

As has already been suggested, the continuing struggle against Saddam Hussein tends to focus the mind of the modern analyst towards Mesopotamia as the central example of air policing in general and air control in particular. The reality is that the wider issues implicit in air policing were applicable from Great Britain and Ireland through Palestine and Africa to India. The political situation was different in each region as were the strategic imperatives. It should therefore go without saying that the missions facing Imperial forces (not just the British troops) were different, as were the threats.

Key to an understanding of the environment of those lean years is an overview of the economic situation. By mid-way through the First World War it was evident that the material costs would be unprecedented. The countries on whose territory the war was fought clearly endured the costs of the physical destruction of hundreds of thousands of homes and farms. Similar havoc was wrought on miles of roads, railways and telegraph lines. Livestock was slaughtered and vast tracts of land rendered unusable for agriculture. The actual monetary value of the munitions expended was greatly exacerbated by the hidden costs involved in refiguring industry onto a wartime footing and then returning it to peace – turning ploughshares to swords and then back again does not come cheap. These costs escalated rapidly with the unprecedented application of science and technology into areas such as shipbuilding, tanks and the aircraft industry. Shipping losses were huge. The human costs were horrendous with 8 million servicemen killed, 7 million permanently disabled and a further 15 million wounded in some way. Civilian casualties

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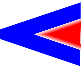

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amounted to at least 5 million with many times that in Russia. The monetary cost has been estimated at $260 billion which equalled 6.5 times the world national debt accrued from the end of the 18th Century to the outbreak of the War.[4]

Britain lost 6.3% of her male population (723,000) a significant proportion of whom were from the social elite (28% of those going up to Oxbridge in 1910–1914 died in the War).[5] The manpower requirements had caused Britain to draw deeply from the resources of the Empire as well as from home – nearly one third of British manpower came from abroad. Not only were India and the Dominions galvanised by the need to provide troops; the pace of industrialisation in these countries was also considerably accelerated. There was inevitably a price to pay with food shortages, inflation and consumption of raw materials resulting in a concomitant need for closer British control. These factors in turn fuelled discontent.

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The macro-political costs of the conflict were therefore significant. Labour disputes contributed to the growth of nationalist movements, accelerating moves towards self-determination. Clamour for democracy found voice in the mass parties that were being formed. A rather bizarre combination of German anti-colonial propaganda, American idealism and Oxbridge educated lawyers (preaching the virtues of self-determination[6] back in their own countries) fanned the flames of revolution from Mesopotamia to Egypt and beyond to India.[7]

Thoughts in Whitehall in 1919 would have been largely shared between domestic matters and concern over the Empire – Europe was by no means as central as it was to become in later years. A combination of wishful thinking, economic necessity and opportunism gave rise to a defence policy based on there not being a war in Europe for the foreseeable future – ten years or more. All planning was therefore based on this premise. The primary function of the Army would be Imperial policing and maintenance of law and order at home for the next decade.[8]

By 1916, it was evident that the Great War would see an end to the Ottoman Empire. Britain and France therefore completed a secret agreement partitioning the former Turkish provinces. The resulting Sykes-Picot Treaty of 1916 set up planned zones of influence with either independent Arab states or confederations thereof 'under the suzerainty of an Arab chief'. In their respective areas of influence, Britain and France would have 'priority of right of enterprise and local loans' and would be the sole suppliers of advisers or 'foreign functionaries at the request of the Arab State or Confederation of Arab States'. Britain was absolutely determined that its routes to India would not be jeopardised by instability, misrule or foreign intervention (Turkey or Russia). Furthermore, increasing dependence on oil reserves with the wane of the age of steam meant that the region was, even then, taking on its own strategic importance. But it is evident that the chosen *modus operandi* was not just a simple acquisition of territory – economic activity and strategic stability did not require such a blunt approach. The League of Nations mandate resulted in Syria and the Lebanon going to France; Mesopotamia and Palestine went to Britain. The theory was that Britain or France would act as if they were guardian (to a child) while the League acted as a Board of Trustees.[9] Under international law, however, the mandate was not merely annexation.[10] Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations expressed the degree of responsibility of the mandatory power as 'the well being and development of such peoples form a sacred trust for civilisation'. The mandated territories were effectively self-governing, even though they received considerable 'political support' from the mandatory authority.[11] In practical terms, as is evident from Sir John Salmond's description below, this was how business was conducted. In the case of Iraq, this method of self-governance provided a transition from the days of Ottoman to Britain relinquishing its mandate in 1930 on formal independence – albeit as a formal signatory to the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty. Inevitably, this Treaty in Iraq and its companion six years later with Egypt, did little to meet the more extreme demands of Arab nationalism.

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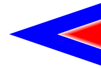

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Stability in the middle-east was inevitably complicated by the Jewish question. The Balfour Declaration of November 1917 pledging a future Jewish homeland was plainly incompatible with the rising demands of Arab nationalists. Nor was the situation eased by President Wilson's utterances on self-determination. Neither these fine sentiments, nor the Treaty of Versailles, brought concrete gains for Arab nationalists or wider stability. Repatriation of thousands of British troops at the end of the War meant that the region would remain at best volatile.

Great Britain and Ireland

It may seem questionable to start a consideration of Imperial air policing with the home front. But the reality has always been that events at home have considerable priority and solutions devised will have some primacy. The popular perception of a loyal and motivated domestic population wholeheartedly supporting the war effort as the Great War drew to its successful conclusion tells, at best, only part of the story. Coal and rail strikes were almost commonplace. Conditions in the munitions factories were such that strikes were frequent with, on one occasion, tank production grinding to a halt.[12] Contributory factors included allegations of profiteering, seemingly arbitrary transfers of personnel between factories and the ever-

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increasing demands of the draft. Support for the small, but active, Communist Party was evident. Notwithstanding the rather dubious sympathies of some its members, the armed forces were used to uphold a political and social order that was no longer immutable. As early as December 1917, aircraft were used to drop leaflets to aero-engine workers urging them to end their strikes.[13]

Euphoria following victory was short lived in the economic conditions of the time. After the War, a major rail strike threatened to disrupt totally the postal system in Britain. Aircraft were used to fly urgent despatches to 76 administrative centres thereby ensuring that contact was maintained between the police and central government. In an early example of the use of air power in information operations (or psyops) copies of *The Times* were distributed to administrators in the provinces. This exercise was repeated during the General Strike of 1926. Bombers from 9 and 58 Squadrons delivered 1,377,000 copies of the *British Gazette*.[14] In some areas, hostility to the middle classes, and their reading proclivities, was so great that bundles of newspapers had to be dropped from the air.

By the summer of 1920, two squadrons of aircraft had been deployed to Ireland. Mail drops were carried out along with regular patrolling duties. The presence of aircraft had something of a deterrent effect on the Irish Republican Army. Frustration over the flexibility of the terrorists was such that there were frequent calls for armed aerial intervention – Churchill had demanded the use of aircraft against Sinn Fein members involved in drill in order 'to scatter and stampede them'.[15] Such requirements were strongly resisted, not least by Trenchard himself.[16] This may have been because he could see that a successful outcome was unlikely and he was unwilling to attract the criticism for his air arm that would inevitably follow. In the event, armed patrols were eventually sanctioned, albeit under strict regulation, and few hours were actually flown.[17]

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Mesopotamia[18]

The fall of the Ottoman Empire and the widespread rise of nationalism that followed threatened Britain's trade routes to and from India. Stability could not, however, be guaranteed by diplomatic means alone and garrison forces were required in many critical locations. Notwithstanding the evident potential for trouble, Churchill as Secretary of State for War and Air warned that the garrison in Mesopotamia would

have to be cut from its existing level (25,000 British and 80,000 Indian troops).[19] His attempts to find novel, and cheap, solutions fell on ground as stony as the desert. Even after the first round of cuts, the garrison was still costing over £18 million per year. In mid-February 1920, Churchill asked Trenchard if he would be prepared 'to take Mesopotamia on'. The deal would involve the reduction of the standing garrison to 4,000 British and 10,000 Indian troops, but with an Air Officer as C-in-C and an extra £5 million on the air estimates. The Air Staff plan envisaged ten squadrons mainly based around Baghdad.

Arab nationalism spread during 1920 with a revolt in Syria followed by public protests in Mesopotamia. Reinforcements had to be brought – at considerable cost – from India. Order was subsequently restored by methods that probably made the activities of the paramilitary Black and Tans in Ireland seem rather tame. The efficacy of air power was hotly contested with army accusations that the use of aircraft had been instrumental in provoking the crisis. Trenchard countermanded that deployment of sufficient air power would have had the necessary 'morale effect' to prevent the rebellious outbreak.[20] Admittedly with the benefit of hindsight, Lt Gen Sir Aylmer Haldane, who had been C-in-C in Mesopotamia at the time of the rising, stated;

> *'I must not omit to state that I had a few aeroplanes, which during the insurrection were increased by a squadron. Those available did invaluable work and, had I had sufficient at the outbreak of the rising I am inclined to think that it might have been possible to stifle or perhaps localise it.'*[21]

It is worthy of note that Haldane had agreed to speak at RUSI because he had 'been struck by the almost complete ignorance regarding the occurrences' in Mesopotamia after the Armistice. That lack of knowledge had not been reflected by an absence of rhetoric!

With doctrinal and practical disputes running continuously between Army and Air Force it appeared as if compromise would be impossible. Churchill, however, still needed to reduce costs. He held a conference in Cairo in March 1921 at which a system of 'air control' was proposed. After the inevitable round of bickering, his proposals went before the Cabinet in August 1921 with the suggestion that eight squadrons take over the policing duties in October 1922. They would be supported by 2 British and 2 Indian battalions, 3 companies of armoured cars and various ancillary units. (On the due take-over date there were actually 9 battalions.)

Air Vice-Marshal John Salmond took over as AOC in less than auspicious circumstances. The Turks were threatening the northern province of Mosul and the Kurds were fighting a guerrilla war in Sulaymaniyah. A small-scale bombing attack on Turkish positions achieved striking success that was quickly capitalised on by Iraqi levies.[22] The air control method was very much a joint operation involving considerable co-operation between air and land assets, often with the Royal Air Force ferrying troops, dropping supplies and evacuating the wounded – as well as bombing. By May 1923, Salmond had achieved what Maurice Dean has described as a 'tremendous victory'.[23] For those unfamiliar with the 'finer points' of air control, a part of Salmond's despatch to Trenchard gives the details and is repeated below:

'No action is ever taken (wrote Salmond) except at the request of the British civilian adviser on the spot, and only after this request has been duly weighed by the (Iraqi) Minister of the Interior and by the British Adviser and by the High Commissioner (in Baghdad). Even after a request has passed this three-fold scrutiny, I have on more than one occasion, as the High Commissioner's chief Military Adviser, opposed it on the military grounds that I did not consider that the offensive action which I had been asked to take would lead to the result desired; and His Excellency has always acceded to such advice on the acknowledged basis that I am more perfectly acquainted with the effects it may be expected to achieve…

It is a commonplace here that aircraft achieve their results by their effect on morale, and by the material damage they do, and by the interference they case to the daily routine of life, and not through the infliction of casualties. The casualties inflicted have been most remarkably small. A tribe that is out for trouble is well aware when the patience of Government has reached breaking point; and negotiations inevitably end in what is in effect an ultimatum in some form or other. Complete surprise is impossible and the real weight of air action lies in the daily interruption of normal life which it can effect, if necessary for an indefinite period, while offering negligible chances of loot or of hitting back….

It (air action) can knock the roofs of huts about and prevent their repair, a considerable inconvenience in winter time. It can seriously interfere with ploughing or harvesting – a vital matter – or burn up the stores laboriously piled up and garnered for the winter. By attacks on livestock, which is the main form of capital and source of wealth to the less settled tribes, it can impose in effect a considerable fine or seriously interfere with the actual sources of the tribe – and in the end the tribesman finds it is much the best to obey the Government.'

Occasionally the house or fort of a rebel leader like Sheikh Mahmud would be selected as a target of individual attack and this called for a high degree of bombing accuracy. Otherwise it was unnecessary, and indeed undesirable, to inflict serious or extensive damage. The object was really the air blockade of the recalcitrant village by means of intermittent light attacks, which were never delivered without due warning to the villagers so that they could leave their dwellings. After they had surrendered, troops or police would be flown in, with medical staff, to restore order, stop looting, treat the sick and the injured, distribute food and rehabilitate the area generally.'[24]

By 1925, air control had effectively maintained the British influence in Mesopotamia – at a significantly reduced cost. It had also contributed considerably to the survival of the RAF

Success in Mesopotamia was influential in convincing the Salisbury Committee that the

fledgling Service should remain in being. The acrimony between Army and Air Force remained bitter at the highest of levels with inevitable comments on the primacy of the bayonet (from Lord Derby the Secretary of State for War) as well as accusations of brutality. MRAF Sir John Slessor cites Sir John Salmond with approval in pointing out that casualties on both sides were considerably lower under air control.[25] The relative impunity with which aircraft could operate was a constant feature in the lists of virtues – particularly in comparison with cumbersome land operations.[26] By 1925, air control had effectively maintained the British influence in Mesopotamia – at a significantly reduced cost. It had also contributed considerably to the survival of the RAF. The euphoria surrounding these two rather momentous statements should not detract from the reality that it was the broader concept of air policing – allied with conventional diplomacy at ground level – that had stabilised a potentially disastrous situation. We pretend at our peril that air did it alone!

Palestine

The situation in the second mandate – Palestine – was somewhat less emotive on the military front, because the War Office did not consider the region to be as strategically important as Mesopotamia. There was therefore less resistance to Churchill's proposal to extend air control in this area. Furthermore, the survival of the new Service would not be guaranteed by the actions of the single squadron that Churchill proposed to send. During the Jaffa riots of 1921 some bombs were dropped to protect Jewish Settlements from Arab raids. An AOC took Command in May 1922, but by the mid-1920s, patrolling borders was the main occupation.[27] Again political influences and economic factors played their parts. Article 4 of the 1922 Mandate for Palestine established a 'Jewish Agency' as the appropriate 'public body for the purpose of advising and co-operating with the Administration of Palestine in such economic, social and other matters as may affect the establishment of the Jewish national home and the interests of the Jewish population'. Over the period of the inter-war years Jewish immigration increased with the population growing from 11% in 1922 to 30% in 1940.[28] The authorities had the task of balancing Arab nationalist aspirations with this influx from Europe and Asia.

Increased Jewish immigration in 1928 caused tension in Arab circles which was followed by attacks on Jewish settlements. The garrison at that stage had been reduced to aircraft, armoured cars and police. Inevitably, they were unable adequately to police the urban rioting. Air power was used for patrolling outlying areas, defending convoys, attacking looters and flying reinforcements. Further riots in the mid-1930s again had to be suppressed on the ground and control (and Command) passed to the Army. Air power continued to be used until the end of the mandate, albeit largely in a support role.

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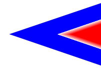
India

The defence of India, and more importantly its borders, was a matter of critical importance to Imperial Britain. Although internal unrest was of considerable concern, and aircraft were used briefly in this role, the Air Ministry was at its most active in defence of the Frontier. There was no real attempt to coerce the indigenous tribes into accepting Indian administration, the priority was maintenance of stability – in effect an early form of peacekeeping. Air power was used in force in operations in 1925 with more than 2,000 hours flown and over 150 tons of bombs dropped.[29] Trenchard immediately proposed that the existing six Squadrons be increased to ten, with a corresponding reduction in battalions. This was not accepted, and sporadic action continued. Further proposals in 1929 met similar results. Beyond the usual Army resistance, the nature of Imperial life in India ensured that little progress could be made. The government of India was loath to embark on the risky course of entrusting vital Frontier defence to new-fangled aeroplanes – particularly if the *quid pro quo* was widespread unemployment among Indian Army officers and a reduction in their treasured policy of road building. Although Trenchard had negotiated direct access for the AOC to the Viceroy, the Royal Air Force was a lowly 23rd in the rigidly adhered to order of precedence.[30] 'Bomber' Harris – as one of the Squadron Commanders – wryly made the point that having to follow the Army pack mule transport made the going rather heavy! Furthermore, the local air staff comprised 15 officers in marked contrast to the hundreds in the Army HQ in Delhi. Harris's frustration over lack of resources and poor tactics led to him being so disillusioned that he resigned from the Service; only Salmond's intervention stopped him from settling in Rhodesia as a farmer.[31]

There was therefore little prospect of Trenchard achieving air control primacy on the Frontier. Those actively involved in operations were consistently frustrated by the overly prescriptive rules imposed by conservative (i.e. out of date) army headquarters staff. Slessor was also adamant that closer co-operation was essential between the squadrons and the troops that they were supporting.[32] Again air operations went far beyond mere bombing raids against mountain tribesmen. The efficiency of their operations, however, was often hindered by the age, condition and obsolescence of the equipment.

The Realities of Imperial Air Policing Operations

The first point that must be re-emphasised is that Britain, its Empire and the majority of her allies were in relatively dire economic straits at the end of the Great War. The War itself had wrought considerable financial and physical damage. Technology, and the rising of cost of mobilising manpower, had made armed conflict, and the prevention thereof, expensive propositions. The Great War had also encouraged the spread of nationalism and increased social expectations. The era of imperialism was ever more rapidly coming to its close. The negotiations leading up to Versailles, coming as they did on top of fine promises made, or imagined, in the heat of war raised expectations that could not be met. Self-determination was to remain a source of hope for nationalists and a bane for those charged with administering empires on decreasing budgets. The requirements for Imperial defence, as well as for policing operations, were therefore increasing rather than the other way round.



The struggle for their due share of the defence expenditure has always been high on the military list of priorities. It is not at all surprising therefore that both the Navy and the Army would resent every penny spent on the third arm

Government defence policy centred on this role in the absence of a credible European threat; as neither a resurgent Germany nor a return to animosity with France seemed likely, national affinity for matters of the Empire could take priority.

Imperial policing was a major, if not the most significant, defence task for all three services. The Army, along with Imperial forces and locally raised levies was constantly involved. The Royal Navy was charged with protection of the sea and trade routes. It was only natural that the fledgling Royal Air Force would seek a role in the work at hand. The centrality of these tasks to the *raison d'etre* of the armed forces is hard now to grasp with our later focus on home defence and then NATO. But it is evident from the biographies of the RAF's senior leadership that such postings were regular occurrences.[33]

The struggle for their due share of the defence expenditure has always been high on the military list of priorities. It is not at all surprising therefore that both the Navy and the Army would resent every penny spent on the third arm. It is equally unsurprising that Trenchard and his senior colleagues would employ all means to ensure its survival. Whilst this is well-trammelled ground, it is important to note that what was in dispute was not the immediate use of air power. What was contentious was that the Royal Air Force needed to exist as a separate Service in order to provide that capability at the front line. At the time, it appeared that this could only be justified if air power could claim outright primacy with its own people as the C-in-C, or with independent access to the political authority of the country or mandate concerned. Anything less than this would have undermined the chances of survival. This is not the same as more recent arguments advocating that air power can 'do it alone'. Nor do many of the 'air control' arguments rest on the use of the bomber acting against strategic targets – although this was suggested from time to time (for example, over Kabul). Ironically, the real debate was not about air power doing it alone – it was more about air in the lead. This can best be illustrated using the expression of 'air control' as meaning air as supported commander – i.e. in control of the whole operation.[34]

To the modern reader, who has almost certainly joined his or her own Service and remained largely within its 'stovepipe' of influence – or at least within its 'comfort zone', the prospect of an airman taking direct control of all operations may seem strange. This, in part, reflects a noticeable tendency on the part of airmen to feel uncomfortable at the prospect of disposing of the assets of the other Services.[35] The senior Royal Air Force officers of the inter-war years would have had less compunction in such matters. The vast majority started their military careers in the army and would have been trained accordingly. Trenchard, for example, served in India in the Royal Scots Fusiliers where he proved himself to be an excellent horseman.[36] Similarly, Dowding joined the Army as an artilleryman and Salmond served in the West African Frontier Force.[37] Slessor's four years at the Army staff College at Camberley would have given him more than a mere insight into operations. Taking responsibility for the joint force would present few problems to such men.

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Familiarity with the *modus operandi* of the other Services is much easier to achieve – especially at the operational or tactical level. First hand accounts, from the likes of Slessor, illustrate the extent to which the Services could act in harmony, when there is a willingness to make full use of the potential of air. Harris's experiences show the dangers of relegating air to an under-resourced and dormant support role. This has a clear resonance with many operations today.

Much of the contemporary debate on the efficacy of air control was at the military strategic level – rather than at the tactical where problems could, theoretically, be relatively easily resolved. Part of the acrimony stemmed purely from the airmen's need to secure command positions in the scramble for the survival of the Service. Relinquishing these positions of power was anathema to the Army, both for reasons of pride and to prevent the new arm gaining a toehold. Modern controversy over 'star counts' again has some resonance. The debate went far beyond the confines of these issues, even though they almost certainly underlay much of the controversy. Nor did the discussion revolve solely around the military efficiency of a given arm in any one situation – although this was contested on many occasions. The ethical and moral aspects of the situation were frequently mobilised – often with little attempt at veiling the underlying hypocrisy.

The air method was often criticised as being brutal and that it caused resentment on the part of the victims. There were frequent accusations of 'indiscriminate bombing'. Sir Henry Wilson, as Chief of the Imperial General Staff, spoke in rather contemptuous terms of 'the bomb that falls from God knows where and lands on God knows what'.[38] Another line of rhetoric that holds some resonance in the aftermath of Kosovo! Slessor goes to some lengths to convince his reader that the attacks were neither indiscriminate nor brutal. He also points out that the rules extant in one theatre of operations allowed the, presumably rather brutal and fairly indiscriminate, shelling of villages, but did not countenance air attack. No one would pretend, however, that accidents did not occur or that many bombs did miss their targets. But the environment in which the operations took place was comparatively Hobbesian – life was brutal, uncomfortable and relatively short.

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Modern Lessons?

If one is to attempt to draw modern lessons from the British military (not just the Royal Air Force) experiences of Imperial policing, it is important to strip away the rhetoric and look beyond the internecine bickering. Many of the lessons at the grand strategic level merely reflect the economic and political realities of an Empire in terminal decline where commitments and responsibilities continue to have to be met with declining resources. To suggest that any military force, let alone air power, can instantly resolve the problems of self-determination is either naïve or demonstrative of wishful thinking.

The lessons drawn also have to be viewed in the context of their times when the Empire was central to British foreign and domestic policy. This may not have universal appeal in these days of political correctness, but they were the reality of the day. At the military strategic level, what could have been a healthy doctrinal debate over the best use of military force in a vast range of potential scenarios rapidly degenerated into a morass of dogma. If one modern lesson is to be drawn from the period of Imperial policing and air control, it is the avoidance of such a futile debate.

To a lesser extent, this applies at the operational level where there was, in modern parlance, the distinct risk of spending more energy in deciding who was to be the ‘supported’, and who was the ‘supporting commander’ than in concentrating on the

If one modern lesson is to be drawn from the period of Imperial policing and air control, it is the avoidance of such a futile debate

military task in hand. The second significant, and related, lesson at the operational level also involves the avoidance of dogma – particularly at the extremes of the spectrum where advocates either suggest that air power ‘can do it alone’ or that only the bayonet can triumph. Commanders and their teams, of whatever cloth, need to be aware of each other’s doctrine and must be comfortable with capabilities and limitations. From the airmen’s perspective, there is more to modern air power than just precision weaponry. This may sound like a truism, but so much of the debate on the inter-war role of the Royal Air Force has centred on air control – to the exclusion of other tasks – that it is worth reiterating. Slessor stressed the point that aircraft were used extensively in direct co-operation with land forces; in reconnaissance duties; patrolling convoys; photographic survey and map-making; civilian evacuation; medical re-supply and evacuation; anti-slavery patrols; famine relief; fishery protection; troop transport; and the development of air routes. The lesson that advocates of air power should be drawing from this list is that the ubiquity and flexibility of air power renders it a key asset to any commander. Many of the tasks facing us today chime with the roles enumerated by Slessor, reminding us that the missions in the core capability now termed combat support air operations are under-resourced at our peril.[39]

Any discussion on lessons learned, or as has become more fashionable – lessons identified, must be tempered with the acknowledgement that lessons are more often forgotten. Those that are remembered must be applied with the precision of a

legal precedent – only in directly equivalent circumstances. Trenchard was well aware at the time that what was good in Mesopotamia may not be directly transferable to, say, an urban environment in Ireland or Palestine.[40] What is often more important than expecting lessons to be transferred from theatre to theatre is the accumulation of experience based on credible analysis of events. If the aftermath of an incident is dominated by rhetoric and recriminations the emotion of the moment is more likely to lodge in the memory than the analysis. Rhetoric is therefore best left to journalists and armchair pundits.

The spectrum of conflict is as wide today as it was in the inter-war years. There was an implicit danger at the time that the rhetoric necessary to ensure the survival of the fledgling Service would be internalised during the formulation of the strategy needed to counter the emergent Nazi Germany. Notwithstanding the personal experiences of officers who subsequently joined the Air Staff, the linkage between 'air control' and emerging strategy has not been proven.[41] The range of works covering British inter-war strategy tends to emphasise the role of the bomber in relation to cities and industry rather than tribesmen.

Finally, the advocate of the 'air power can do it alone' school would be well advised to read Trenchard's paper to the Imperial Defence College – 'The War Object of an Air Force'. In this seminal work, Trenchard expressed the inevitability of aerial bombardment in the war of the future, and that this was likely to be done without scruple and that it would not be restricted to the zones of opposing armed forces. In language that is a far cry from the lessons of the colonial wilds, Trenchard went on to state that:

> *'..attacks will be directed against any objectives which will contribute effectively towards the destruction of the enemy's means of resistance and the lowering of his determination to fight. These objectives will be military objectives. Among these will be comprised the enemy's great centres of production to every kind of war material, from battleships to boots, his essential munitions factories, the centres of all of his systems of communication and transportation, his docks and shipyards, railway workshops, wireless stations, and postal and telegraph systems.'*[42]

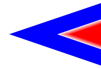
Trenchard does not rule out air-to-air combat, nor does he preclude attacks on air bases; he just points out that these will not necessarily be the vital areas. Most importantly, Trenchard states that he has no wish to imply that:

> *'Air by itself can finish the war'.*

NOTES

1 Whilst not necessarily extreme, see the views expressed in Carl Builder, 'Doctrinal Frontiers', *Airpower Journal*, Winter 1995, pages 1- 6., and Major Marc K Dippold, 'Air Occupation: Asking the Right Questions', *Airpower Journal*, Winter 1997, pages 69 – 84. The role of air power in general and in the far-flung corners of the Empire was a regular subject in the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI). In addition to the notes below see also Wg Cdr J A Chamier, 'The Use of the Air Force for Replacing Military Garrisons', JRUSI, LXVI, 1921, page 205; Gp Capt J A Chamier, ' Strategy and Air Strategy'; Flt Lt C J Mckay, 'The Influences of the Future of Aircraft on Problems of Imperial Policing', JRUSI, LXVII, 1923, page 274.

2 For serious works on the subject the reader should start with either David E Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force 1919 – 1939*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1990 or the relevant chapters in Philip Anthony Towle, *Pilots and Rebels: The Use Aircraft in Unconventional Warfare 1918 –1988*, Brasseys, London, 1989.



3 MRAF Sir John Slessor, *The Central Blue: Recollections and Reflections*, Cassell, London, 1956, page 53 *et seq*.
4 All figures taken from Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 – 2000*, Fontana, London, 1989, page 360.
5 David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the 20th Century*, Longman, London, 1991, page 105.
6 Self-determination is a dangerous phrase with connotations of breaking down or reforming supposed nation states. A plethora of International Law textbooks deal with the subject, as does the author's unpublished M Phil thesis, *The Impact of the Dissolution of Yugoslavia on the International Law of Self-Determination*, University of Cambridge, 1995.
7 Kennedy, *ibid*, page 369.
8 See for example John Charmley, *Churchill: The End of the Glory*, BCA, London, 1993, page 163.
9 Lawrence James, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire*, Abacus, London, 1998, page 399.
10 See M N Shaw, *International Law*, third edition, Cambridge, 1991, page 156 and Ian Brownlie, *Principles of Public International Law*, fourth edition, OUP, Oxford, 1990.
11 See for example the King-Crane Commission Report, 28 August 1919.
12 Described in Martin Gilbert, *Churchill, A Life*, Heinemann, London, 1991, pages 392 – 393.
13 Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control*, page 40.
14 Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control*, page 41.
15 Gilbert, *Air Power and Colonial Control* page 422.
16 Andrew Boyle, *Trenchard*, Collins, London, 1962, page 370.
17 Omissi quotes 10 out of 338 in April 1921, *Air Power and Colonial Control*, page 43.
18 In the hope of detaching events in the inter-war years from those of today, Meopotamia has been used in preference to Iraq.
19 Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control*, page 21.
20 Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control*, page 24.
21 Lt Gen Sir Aylmer Haldane, 'The Arab Rising in Mesopotamia', *JRUSI*, LXVIII, 1923, page 68.
22 Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control*, page 32.
23 Sir Maurice Dean, *The Royal Air Force and Two World Wars*, Cassell, London 1979, page 37.
24 Salmond to Trenchard, 29 September 1923; Trenchard Papers, C11/27/143/2.
25 Slessor, *The Central Blue*, page 67.
26 Group Captain A E Borton, 'The use of Aircraft in Small Wars', *JRUSI*, LXV, page 310.
27 Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control*, page 44.
28 Martin Gilbert, *Israel: A History*, Doubleday, London, 1998, page 50.
29 Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control*, page 48.
30 Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control*, page 49.
31 Dudley Saward, *'Bomber' Harris*, Sphere Books, London, 1984, page 32.
32 Slessor, *The Central Blue*, page, 122.
33 For a brief survey, the reader could worse than glance through Air Commodore Henry Probert, *High Commanders of the Royal Air Force*, HMSO, London, 1991.
34 For those military readers unfamiliar with this concept it is laid down in some detail in Joint Warfare Publication 0-10, *United Kingdom Doctrine for Joint and Multinational Operations*, paragraph 538.
35 See Lt Col Howard D Belote, *Once in a Blue Moon: Airmen in Theatre Command, Lauris Norstad, Albrecht Kesselring, and their relevance to the 21st Century Air Force*, Cadre Paper No 7, Air University Press, Maxwell AFB, July 2000.
36 Boyle, *ibid*, page 35 et seq. Whatever the shortcomings of Boyle's biography, some of the anecdotes make entertaining reading. These include a clash over polo with the young Winston Churchill whose gamesmanship did not endear the future Prime Minister to the future CAS. Trenchard also had a knack of subsidising his own polo through the judicious buying and selling of ponies.
37 Probert, *ibid*, provides details on most senior leaders.
38 Slessor, *The Central Blue*, page 66.
39 AP 3000 *British Air Power Doctrine*, third edition HMSO, London, 1999, Chapter 8. The concern that these operations are downplayed was made by USAF General John Jumper in the aftermath to Operation Allied Force in 'Kosovo Victory – a Commander's Perspective, *Royal Air Force Air Power Review*, Winter 1999, Vol. 2 No 4, page 2.
40 Boyle, *ibid*, page 371. See also Malcolm Smith, *British Air Strategy Between the Wars*, Clarendon, Oxford, page 30.
41 See Smith, *ibid*, page 43. H Montgomery Hyde, *British Air Policy Between the Wars 1918 – 1939*, Heinemann, London, 1976, page 167 & 224. Phillip S Meilinger, 'Trenchard and 'Morale Bombing' : The Evolution of Royal Air Force Doctrine before World War II', in *The Journal of Military History*, Vol 60, No 2, page 265. These references tend to be 'negative' in that each provides an opportunity to prove the case that is not taken.
42 Reproduced in full in Sir Charles Webster and Noble Frankland, *Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany 1939 –1945*, Vol IV, HMSO, London, pages 71 – 83.

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