Some Experiences of

No 6 Squadron in the Iraq Insurrection, 1920

An essay by an officer attending the Third Course at the Royal Air Force Staff College, 1924-1925

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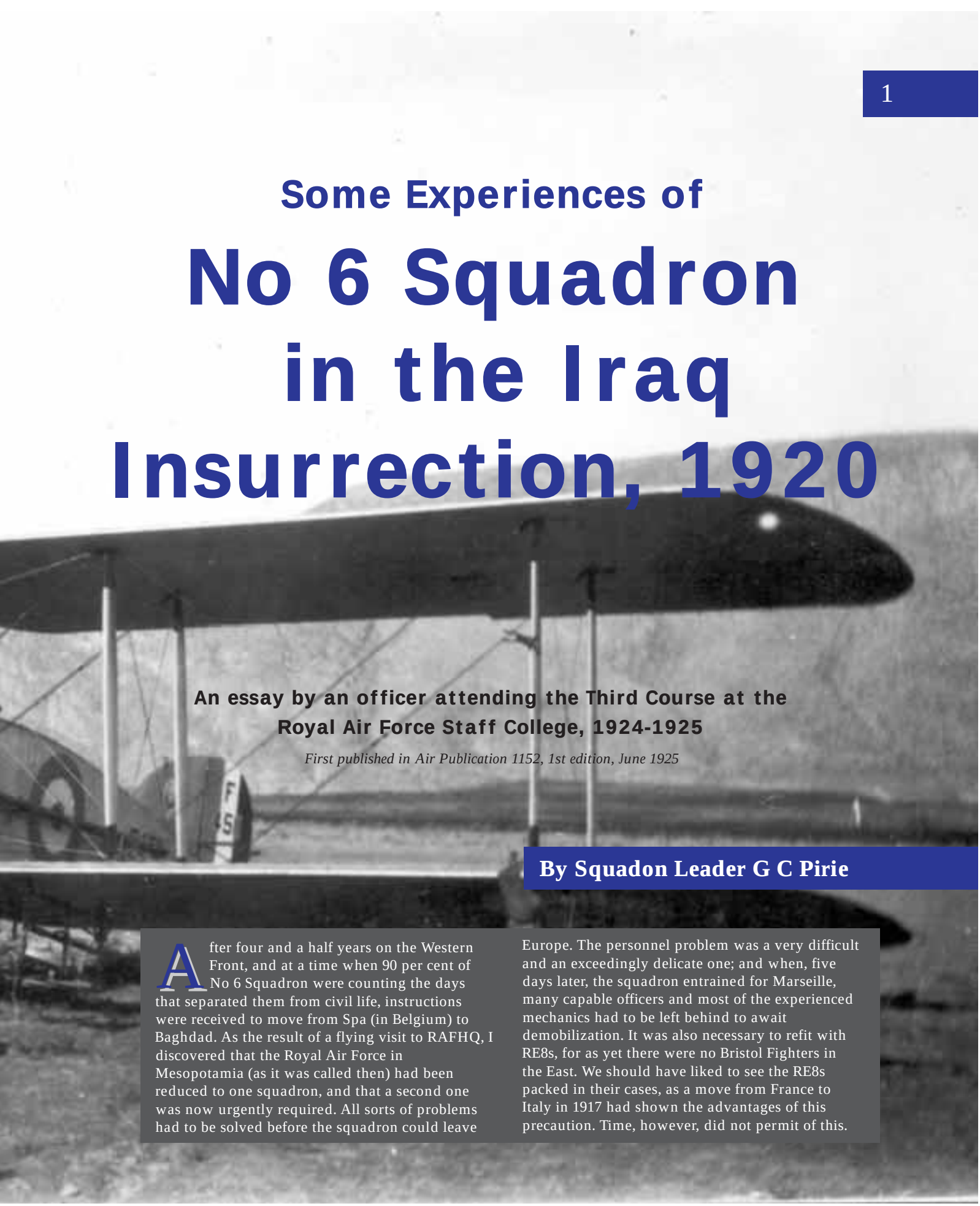

By Squadon Leader G C Pirie

After four and a half years on the Western Front, and at a time when 90 per cent of No 6 Squadron were counting the days that separated them from civil life, instructions were received to move from Spa (in Belgium) to Baghdad. As the result of a flying visit to RAFHQ, I discovered that the Royal Air Force in Mesopotamia (as it was called then) had been reduced to one squadron, and that a second one was now urgently required. All sorts of problems had to be solved before the squadron could leave Europe. The personnel problem was a very difficult and an exceedingly delicate one; and when, five days later, the squadron entrained for Marseille, many capable officers and most of the experienced mechanics had to be left behind to await demobilization. It was also necessary to refit with RE8s, for as yet there were no Bristol Fighters in the East. We should have liked to see the RE8s packed in their cases, as a move from France to Italy in 1917 had shown the advantages of this precaution. Time, however, did not permit of this.

Within 96 hours of landing, over one hundred of the squadron were in hospital, suffering from sand fly fever

A speedy train journey to Marseilles and a fast voyage in the 'Malwa' to Port Said filled us with hopes that we might arrive at Basrah before the hot weather set in, and have our machines in the air within a month of leaving Spa. These hopes, alas!, were shattered by an order to disembark at Port Said, and proceed by train to Suez rest camp, as the situation in Egypt at the time was causing the gravest anxiety. After three weary weeks in this camp, we re-embarked and landed at Basrah in mid July, 1919.

Mesopotamia seemed to be quite a peaceful country, although the ravages of war were visible everywhere. Lieutenant General Sir George F McMunn KCB KCSI DSO was Commander-in-Chief, and had a force equal to about four divisions. Wing Commander O T Boyd OBE MC AFC was in command of the Royal Air Force, which consisted of No 30 Squadron and an Aircraft Park.

To those acquainted with the conditions under which we worked at Tanooma (Basrah) and with the climate for which Basrah is noted, it will not be a surprise to learn that within 96 hours of landing, over one hundred of the squadron were in hospital, suffering from sand fly fever. Not a single rigger was left, and the fact that within a week, six RE8s had been erected and flown successfully, speaks well for the rest of the squadron. But the machines had been so carelessly packed that it was only by depleting the others of necessary parts that it was possible to build eight complete machines in all. The remainder had to be re-embarked and shipped to Baghdad.

Early in August, after the squadron had recovered from the effects of fever, we moved to Baghdad. As it turned out, there was no urgency for our arrival and so for a little while there was every opportunity for the personnel to become accustomed to the peculiar flying conditions of the East.

No 30 Squadron was much dispersed. One flight was at Kasvin (in Persia), another at Mosul, and the third at Baghdad. Towards the end of August, 1919, one flight of No 6 Squadron moved to Bushire, a very pleasant winter station, 500 miles South-East of Baghdad. Shortly afterwards, another flight was dispatched to Dair-es-Zor, 350 miles North-West of Baghdad; and only a few days later half the third flight had to reinforce No 30 Squadron's detachment at Mosul, where conditions were becoming unstable and the outlook threatening. Only two machines were left at Baghdad for inspection duties.

Early in the Autumn, it became evident that some sinister anti-British influence was at work. Our reception in the bazaars, in the towns and villages, and by the tribes appeared less cordial than it had been. The natives ceased to accord the respect due to the Political Officers, and failures to pay taxes and to carry out orders increased in number. To us, who moved among the tribes a good deal, this attitude of the natives was obvious. To the Army in general it was not so apparent. At this time, and indeed all through the insurrection, a close liaison existed between the High Commissioner, his staff, and the Royal Air Force. Sir Arnold Wilson carried out most of his inspections by air, and this enabled pilots to form an intimate acquaintance with the habits, customs, and superstitions of the natives, and to realize their attitude towards Great Britain and the occupation of their country.

The months of October and November saw a further reduction in the forces garrisoning the country. The Royal Air Force, too, was a dwindling force. The claims of demobilization were absorbing the majority of the pilots and mechanics. Machines were becoming worn out, and there were no reinforcements coming out, either of personnel or equipment. GHQ did not appear to realize the seriousness of this state of affairs; nor did the violation of the principles of war appear to concern them as far as the Air Force was concerned. The principle of concentration was consistently ignored. The Royal Air Force made an effort to concentrate as many machines as possible at Baghdad, but with little success. As the result of a chance meeting with the British Minister at Teheran, permission was obtained to withdraw half the flight from Bushire. He insisted on the retention of three machines there, although there was really no call for them at all. Two machines attached to No 30 Squadron at Mosul were recalled, and only two machines were left at Dair-es-Zor. Finally, by 1 December, 1919, No 6 Squadron had three.

An incident, which was probably the precursor of the insurrection, occurred on the Upper Euphrates

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about this time. It was a gigantic piece of bluff on the part of our enemies, but much to the astonishment of the originators of the plot, it succeeded.

About 10 December, at Dair-es-Zor, which was garrisoned by two very efficient armoured cars, and two RE8s, in addition to a few levies, one of our RE8s was flying around the village early in the morning, when the pilot noticed, about 10 miles to the North, a horde of Arabs approaching the town in some semblance of order. They numbered about 2,000, and when he arrived over them, they fired at him, so he returned to inform the Political Officer at Dair. Shortly before noon, the crowd arrived at the gates of the town, headed by the firebrand Ramadhan Shalash. It was quite a peaceful arrival.

Ugly signs of impending hostility were not lacking, and by nightfall on the day after our arrival the tribes were closing in around the village

Ramadhan Shalash asked to see the Political Officer, and informed him that he had come to take over Dair-es-Zor 'as arranged'. There had, as a matter of fact, been some talk of handing over the town to the Sharifian Government, but no instructions had reached our garrison. The Political Officer explained this to Shalash, who agreed to wait outside the town until such time as instructions were received from Baghdad.

Meanwhile a signal was sent to Baghdad, and an RE8 set off for the capital, where the pilot was able to explain the situation. The resultant decision was to evacuate Dair, as we could not possibly defend it. Ramadhan Shalash accordingly entered the town next morning, and we retired to Abu Kemal. Our retirement was wrongly interpreted by the tribes, and probably there were other influences at work to lead them to believe that we were retiring under pressure. Although no untoward incident occurred during the march to Abu Kemal, ugly signs of impending hostility were not lacking, and by nightfall on the day after our arrival the tribes were closing in around the village. Abu Kemal is, however, well laid out for defence. The Serai is bounded on the East by the Euphrates and on the West by a piece of high ground which serves as the aerodrome, whence machines can be taxied into the Serai at night for shelter. No fears, therefore, were entertained for its safety, but the decision not to re-occupy Dair was a fatal one. Our lines of communication began to cause us anxiety. On the 19th, convoys coming from Anah were sniped at, and the irregular forces under the leadership of Ramadhan Shalash were reported to be about to move on the village. The acting Commander-in-Chief flew up from Baghdad and reviewed the whole situation himself. Despite the impossibility of reinforcing the position, and the insecurity of the lines of communication, it was decided to remain in our present position pending receipt of instructions from HM Government.
One or two cavalry and Indian infantry detachments were collected from outlying posts and dispatched to Abu Kemal. Colonel-Commandant F E Coningham CB CSI CMG DSO, who was destined to play a very large part in quelling the insurrection, was sent there to take command, and a flight from the squadron was now stationed there. Beyond carrying out a reconnaissance every second day, the machines were idle. The precarious nature of our communications, especially at this time of year, and the dearth of suitable transport made it impossible for us to maintain the detachment properly, and their operations were limited by the number of bombs that could reach the aerodrome. It was forbidden to use the machines located at Baghdad as a means of supply. When a suitable target did not present itself on the Upper Euphrates, GHQ could not allow a concentration of machines in that area for the day, fearing to be left without any aircraft at Baghdad.

The ultimate result of six weeks of spasmodic operations with our base at Abu Kemal was a further withdrawal to Anah, which was soon in a state of siege. Col-Cmdt Coningham well appreciated the situation when he left the village

The flight at Anah carried out petty raids, and made unprofitable excursions to bomb tribes at Wadis, which, when located, were found to be deserted

after a few days' occupation, and established his headquarters two miles west of it, on a piece of ground previously selected as an aerodrome. The supply difficulty was still serious, but arrangements were now completed for special convoys to leave once a week for Anah with bombs and aircraft spares. Very little could, however, be done to ease the situation, as the tribes operated in small bodies and did not belong to any particular section.

Fayad Beg, a shaikh with tremendous influence in the desert in ordinary times, did all he could to restrain the hostile feelings of his people, but foreign money and our loss of prestige as the result of continual retirements were factors which were very difficult to overcome. Fayad Beg was a very intelligent and interesting man. He had been educated at Constantinople and had lived in England in his early days.

One night at Anah, a terrific storm arose. So fierce was the gale, and so blinding the sand, that the officers and mechanics were unable to find their machines, although they were sleeping only 500 yards away. The aircraft had been securely pegged down, and when the storm subsided, they were still secure. But a closer examination next morning revealed the fact that every plane was broken and two of the four machines had broken their backs. Very little could be done till spare parts arrived. Meanwhile, under the supervision of a sapper officer, the building of semi-circular breastworks, three feet high, round each machine for future protection was commenced. These walls saved many machines from destruction by the storms that month. Two RE8s were at once ordered to replace the damaged ones at Anah, but it was no easy matter to send spares up for the damaged ones. The condition of the track to Anah rendered it impossible to dispatch even a tender for the relief of the flight. In the end, the services of some Ford vans were procured from a local MT Company. Each van carried two planes. After the convoy had been almost washed away, crossing the Euphrates at Fellujah, it encountered a very severe storm, and an aeroplane flying to Hit discovered it 15 miles North of Fellujah, with all the vans lying on their sides. Happily no damage was done to the planes, and after many vicissitudes, Anah was safely reached next day. Such incidents were typical of the difficulties we had to overcome. Meanwhile, the flight at Anah carried out petty raids, and made unprofitable excursions to bomb tribes at Wadis, which, when located, were found to be deserted. During all this time, the squadron was becoming more and more depleted of personnel. By the end of April, only seven officers and 70 airmen remained, and there were six machines serviceable. In the operations on the Upper Euphrates, there had been a lavish expenditure of machines. Early in April, 1920, No 30 Squadron began to re-equip with DH9As. It was, however, a slow process, and it was many weeks before even one flight could be completed.

During the first week in May, it became only too apparent, how seriously the situation was developing. Turkish ex-officers were known to be living with the tribes in the Shinafiyah district, and it was becoming clear that the period of the Ramadhan was quite likely to lead to a serious outburst of anti-British sentiment. Already at Rumaithah, one of the local sheikhs was suspected of passive disobedience. The Civil Commissioner himself, realizing the gravity of the situation, had laid in a six months' stock of provisions. People laughed at the idea, but as events turned out, he was not far wrong.

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Unexpected relief in that anxious period came to us from the direction of Anah. There, operations quietened down, and the flight was withdrawn and permission obtained to withdraw the remainder of the flight stationed at Bushire. About this time too, there arrived from England a big draft for the Royal Air Force in Mesopotamia. To No 6 Squadron, eight officers and 60 airmen were

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posted. Unfortunately, only a few days later, four officers and 40 airmen left for home. Still, even this was an improvement although two new pilots both 'wrote off' an RE8 on their first flights.

Slowly but surely the Royal Air Force was preparing for the inevitable conflict. By 1 June 1920, there was concentrated at Baghdad the whole of No 6 Squadron, although only eight machines were serviceable. The new pilots had had sufficient experience in the country to be absolutely reliable, and the morale of the squadron was high. The Aircraft Park, after almost a whole year of inaction was once again ready to produce several machines a month. No 30 Squadron, busily engaged at Mosul and Kasvin had one flight at Baghdad. These three units did not total many machines altogether but they formed an efficient force. The state of the country was one of tension and uneasiness. Outwardly there were no signs of hostility, but one felt instinctively that all was not well. Lieutenant-General Sir J Aylmer L Haldane GCMG KCB DSO was now in supreme command. Sir Arnold Wilson was still acting High Commissioner, and Wing Commander (now Group Captain) C S Burnett CBE DSO commanded the three air force units in the country.

On the evening of 4 June, rumours began to fly about; the next morning the news of the Tel Afar incident became known. It was felt by many that this must be the signal for a general rising. As it turned out, there was no further trouble for four weeks, although the intervening period was a very disturbing one.

By 15 June, the conditions of the Squadron had improved enormously, for there were now six Bristol Fighters and five RE8s serviceable. The new pilots and airmen continued to do well and the outlook was bright. The Ramadhan was proceeding without incident and hopes ran high that the danger of a general rising might be tided over. But on 30 June, the storm broke, for that evening, a W/T message arrived from the Political Officer, Diwaniyah saying that the train from Basrah was 24 hours late; that he had been unsuccessful in getting into touch by telephone with Rumaithah, and that a friendly Sheikh had come in to say that Rumaithah was about to be surrounded. A few minutes later, there arrived a W/T message from the garrison at Samawah, with the information that a train bound for Baghdad had found the line cut, 10 miles North of Samawah, and a party who attempted to repair it, had been fired on. The train had therefore, returned to Samawah and had been sniped at, all the way to Barbuti Bridge. In view of this, orders were at once issued for a reconnaissance of the district to be made at dawn next day.

At 0400 hours, a machine left for Diwaniyah where the local Political Officer was first interviewed. No additional information could be obtained, and the pilot set out for Rumaithah, flying at 500 feet. He found the railway line intact, and everything appeared quite normal at Rumaithah. Landing quite close to the village, he was about to switch off his engine, when a crowd of 200-300 Arabs appeared a few hundred yards in front. They rushed towards the machine, firing as they advanced. In a moment, however, the aeroplane was off the ground, and when the pilot had reached 1,000 feet, the whole countryside appeared thick with apparently hostile Arabs, and the machine was hit in several places. The pilot wrote a note and dropped it into the Serai, where there were about 300 Indians lining the walls but not firing. The machine then turned south, and surprised a party of Arabs trying to tear up the line at Saiyia. Several other parties were scattered, and the pilot being short of petrol, landed at Samawah, seeing that it was quite safe to do so. Major Hay, who was in command there, was quite certain that this was the beginning of the expected rebellion. When the pilot took off after lunch he was heavily fired on before he had got to 500 feet, and when he landed at Diwaniyah he found that events had moved rapidly since the morning. The tribes were beginning to close in on the river towns from the southwest and our communications with Hillah were being threatened.

In order to appreciate the situation clearly, the very central position and the immense importance of Baghdad must be fully realised. From Baghdad there radiate five main routes, viz:

1. Baghdad— Basrah via the Tigris
2. Baghdad — Basrah via the Euphrates
3. Baghdad — Cairo via Ramadi and/or Hit
4. Baghdad — Angora via Mosul
5. Baghdad — Teheran via Karind, where all the British Officers' families were for the hot weather (These are the lines of communication)

A disaster was averted, firstly by the heroic resistance of certain British and Indian troops, many of whom died at their posts, and whose deeds are unrecorded; and, secondly, by the work of the Royal Air Force, too many of whose exploits are also unrecorded

During the insurrection, four of these five routes were closed by the insurgents. The only one that remained open was the first and at all times previously it had been the most insecure. In fact, it was fully expected that it would be the first to be cut in the event of internal trouble.

I feel certain that the seriousness of the insurrection in Mesopotamia in 1920 has never been realised in this country. The reason is probably a common one. Things went wrong. Mistakes were made, and forces employed often too small to achieve their object. A disaster was averted, firstly by the heroic resistance of certain British and Indian troops, many of whom died at their posts, and whose deeds are unrecorded; and, secondly, by the work of the Royal Air Force, too many of whose exploits are also unrecorded.

A detailed account of all the interesting incidents that occurred, and of the experiences of individual pilots, would be impossible to chronicle here, but a few events may be of value.

The weather at the time was very trying. At Baghdad, the shade temperature was between 110° and 118°. Even at dawn it was quite a feat to fly through the hot belt (from 500 ft to 1,500 ft) without losing too much water from the radiator. The new RAF authorities believed at first that it was impossible to fly after 0800 hours owing to the heat, and it certainly was difficult, until a tropical radiator was improvised. GHQ, on the other hand, required flying at all times, although they did suggest an extra ration of ice to keep the radiators cool.

The first stage in the campaign was an endeavour to relieve Rumaithah. Ever since it had been cut off, the Royal Air Force had kept up bombing attacks, twice daily, on targets in its vicinity. Intelligence, however, was bad, and it was left to us to select our own targets. Those days were very tiring. We would leave Baghdad at about 0400 hours and fly to Diwaniyah. There we would consult the Political Officer and the garrison Commander, and then proceed to Rumaithah. While one machine took messages off the Popham Panel in the Serai, the remainder of the flight bombed and machine-gunned any gatherings seen near by. After replies had been dropped to the Panel messages, the flight would proceed to Samawah, where the garrison was encamped on the aerodrome. Filling up our machines there, was a laborious and unpleasant task, for we had to sit on the top planes of the Bristol Fighters and fill the tanks from five gallon tins. The fierce hot wind from the North blew much of the petrol on to our clothes. These, consisting as they did of a pair of shorts and a shirt, were no protection against the scorching and stinging pain of evaporating petrol.

After a hasty lunch, which we had brought with us, we used to load up with bombs and proceed to attack the tribes West of Samawah.

This accomplished, we returned to Samawah, fixed on more bombs and started on the homeward journey. Practically every afternoon at this time, a tremendous sandstorm began to blow about 1400 hours. Through this we had to fly — no simple matter. Even at 8,000 feet, the sand swirled about the machines, and only by straining one's eyes to the utmost, could the winding course of the Euphrates be followed. It was almost impossible to control an aeroplane under these conditions, and when we all descended over Rumaithah to see that the garrison were all right, and to bomb the gatherings near by, we felt more than anxious about the ability of the machines to stand the buffeting of the storm. Landing at Hillah on the homeward journey to report, we usually arrived at Baghdad at about 2000 hours — long and trying days, but inevitably so, in view of the shortage of machines and pilots.

The type of bomb generally used for these operations was the 25 lb Cooper bomb. It was found that this kind gave the best results for the targets were either personnel or lightly constructed shelters. The number of bombs carried used to vary with the time of day. In the cool hours of the morning it was possible to carry eight bombs provided that there was no other load to be taken. But almost every morning there was food, or

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ammunition, or stores to be carried to the various garrisons and this reduced the number of bombs taken. On the mid-day flights, it was often just possible to get off with two bombs, so that the average weight of bombs dropped per day was small — about 250 lb in all. The results, however, justified this policy, for while the Arab did not seem to mind very much what weight of bombs was dropped, the continual visits disturbed him considerably. The actual damage to material was small.

On 8 July we were told, while lunching at Samawah, that Rumaithah had reported by helio that they had just had a protracted fight with a party of about 500 Arabs who had attacked them. The enemy had been beaten off, but the garrison were getting anxious about their ammunition. Four of us immediately set off for Hillah. We knew Diwaniyah were anxious about their supply of SAA, so did not attempt to get any boxes from them. Just as the machines were about to land at Hillah, it was noticed that the aerodrome was being attacked. There was no alternative but to fly on to Baghdad where each machine was loaded with two boxes of SAA on the bomb racks. It was, however, too late to do anything more that day. Next morning three machines set out specially for Rumaithah, and dropped three boxes on the garrison. One fell inside the Serai, unfortunately killing a Naik, and the other two fell just outside, and were recovered later in the day.

The next day as we were on our homeward run, the garrison at Rumaithah reported that they were running short of food. All that night, along with the local supply officers, we endeavoured to devise a suitable method of packing food and dropping it from the bomb racks. After many ways had been tried, six large sacks were filled with chapattis, dates, ghee, flour, salt, medical comforts; these sacks were enclosed within others for safety. In the early grey of the dawn it was a quaint sight to see these six Bristol Fighters leaving the ground with their enormous sacks of food. The first day's efforts were not too successful. Three sacks fell in the Serai, and the other three stuck on the bomb racks and fell off several minutes later.

Meanwhile, on 6 July, a small column under Lt Col McVean had set out from Diwaniyah to relieve Rumaithah, but the force was inadequate for this purpose, and not even the efforts of No 6 Squadron were of any avail. It has to be acknowledged that on this occasion, the only one in the history of the insurrection, co-operation with aircraft was not very successful. This was due to two causes, firstly, because the operation was so urgent that no arrangements could be made beforehand, and secondly because on 9 of July, aeroplanes watched his force being surrounded but were not able to convince him of his danger until it was almost too late. When at 1400 hours that day, he gave the order to retire, four machines for three hours under the most adverse weather conditions acted as his flank and rearguards, and drove off, wave after wave of well-led tribesmen seeking to cut him off. It is no exaggeration to say that the whole column would have been massacred had it not been for the efforts of these aeroplanes.

There was now a period of waiting while General Leslie concentrated a force sufficiently large to undertake the relief of Rumaithah. Meanwhile the garrison was becoming perilously short of food, and it was impossible to expect the Royal Air Force with its few machines to carry out its normal role and feed the garrison as well. Even without being called on to feed the garrison, we were unable to cope with all the demands that were being made. The numbers in the Serai had increased to over 500, owing to an influx of refugees. A novel plan was conceived. We warned the garrison of our plan by dropping operation orders on them the previous day.

On the day of the operation, 12 July, five Bristol Fighters from No 6 Squadron, reinforced by two old RE8s and two DH9As from No 30 Squadron set out in formation. One machine dropped two 112 lb bombs in the middle of the village. The remainder, one after the other, dropped four 25 lb bombs on the houses round the Serai, from about 300 ft. This caused a panic in the village, and the inhabitants rushed out into the countryside, where they were attacked with bombs and machine-gun fire. Meanwhile the garrison made a sortie and succeeded in collecting 20 sheep and 12 goats, in addition to enough chickens and other food to sustain them for three weeks. This, of course, solved the food problem until the relief took place.

By 17 July, Col-Comdt Coningham was on his way from Diwaniyah with a force of about 4,000 of all

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arms for the relief of Rumaithah. The country between these two places is ideal for aeroplane co-operation, and for almost the whole distance it was possible to land beside the column. The Column Commander, after his experiences on the Upper Euphrates, relied entirely on his aeroplanes for reconnaissance. After several days fighting, during which period well constructed trenches were captured, the Column reached Rumaithah, withdrew the garrison, and retired to Diwaniyah. The tribesmen followed, but constant bombing attacks on their homes and on them, ensured that they kept at a respectful distance.

While these operations were in progress, the garrisons at Kufa and at Kifl had been practically isolated, and on the 24th had occurred the unfortunate disaster to the Manchester Regt on the Rustumiyah Canal. Wildly exaggerated statements, which it was impossible to discount, now began to be broadcasted throughout the country. No sooner had this phase of the crisis occurred, than it was reported one evening that Kut was surrounded. A post on the Dyalah had been sniped at, and a large party of hostile horsemen had been seen 10 miles North-East of Kut. The news was not unexpected. The Muntifik tribes in the area between the Hai and the Tigris are always a cause of anxiety, and it was indeed surprising that they had not already risen.

Never have I seen anxiety written to plainly on anyone's face as it was on those of the Civil and Military authorities on the receipt of this news. If it were true, it meant the complete isolation of Baghdad and a long and bitter siege. Two machines were immediately sent out to make a reconnaissance. It was a terribly hot evening and both pilots had already done 7 1/2 hours' flying that day. They found the garrison at Kut in a state of panic and the bazaar full of the wildest rumours. They reconnoitred the country around Kut at 500 feet for over an hour.

There was not a sign of human life anywhere, except at two places where one machine landed while the other circled overhead. Neither of the two parties could talk any language known to the pilot but they appeared quite peaceful, and had only four rifles between them. They had large flocks of sheep with them and had been shooting gazelle. This probably accounted for the shots heard, and the concentration seen. This information was negative but absolutely reliable, for there was no possibility of concealment. About the 25th an arrangement was made by the Political Officer in the Hai area with the Muntifik confederation. This arrangement guaranteed (if this were possible) the security of the Tigris tribes (the Bani Lam and Bani Rabia) quiet. This was an immense relief, and one of the most marvellous features of the insurrection was the comparative security of this line. Barges were constantly sniped at, and occasional fire fights took place between the armed guards on the barges and the tribes, but nothing more serious happened.

Slowly, however, the insurgents were gaining confidence, and even in the bazaars in Baghdad there was a look of contempt and a sneer on the faces of the buyers and sellers. Serious delays had occurred in sending off reinforcements to Diwaniyah and it was now cut off and surrounded by the tribes.

This news spread like wild fire through the country, and now on the Lower Euphrates, events moved rapidly. Before assistance could reach Samawah it was cut off and besieged by several thousand tribesmen. There was however an element of luck in the situation of the besieged camp. Inside it was quite a fair-sized piece of ground and this was used as an aerodrome. The camp was also on the river. It was impossible to relieve the detachment there for some time, but with the assistance of the Royal Air Force the garrison was able to hold out. Every day we took quantities of food and SAA, while they in return were able to give us bombs, for a large stock had been brought in by the last train before the line was cut. With the bombs we were able to raid the hostile encampments in the vicinity. It was therefore considered safe to leave the garrison isolated to wait for the day many months ahead when a relief force could be dispatched from Basrah.

Luckily, on the Upper Euphrates, an agreement was arrived at whereby Ali Sulaiman undertook to garrison Hit until such time as it could be reoccupied. Both Ali Sulaiman and Fayad Beg remained loyal to us all through the insurrection, and our troops although isolated were safe enough at Ramadi and Fellujah.

Still, the situation was bad, for Baghdad, the seat of government and the garrison town of the country

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was practically isolated. Sixty miles south was the Hillah garrison also virtually cut off. Eighty miles south-west a detachment at Kufa was besieged in the Serai. Near Kufa a small force at Kifl was similarly situated. Seventy miles west of Baghdad was Fellujah, isolated but with friendly tribes close by. One hundred miles north, Samarrah contained a small detachment; while at Karind, 130 miles to the north-east, the wives and families of the garrison had only a company of young soldiers to protect them. Precarious communication to Basrah existed via the Tigris, but the amount of river transport available was insufficient to cope with the supplies required. Only in actual fact was Baghdad not besieged. From Khadimain there emanated a steady stream of seditious propaganda which found its way into the Baghdad bazaar, and poisoned the minds of those whose support had previously never been doubted. Sites were selected around Baghdad for a series of earthworks, and work was begun on them at one. This was about 29 July, and within a fortnight 40 brick blockhouses were completed on the perimeter of the city. They were located at 1/2-mile intervals and were manned day and night.

Our inner aerodrome was surrounded with barbed wire, and before a machine could take off, a way had to be cleared in the wire in order to gain access to the outer aerodrome. On several occasions natives were caught armed with tins of petrol and matches near the sheds; and at times the aerodrome was sniped. There came a day when every able-bodied white man was called up, armed with a rifle and required to defend the capital. The nights were reminiscent of France. All night long, the sky on the perimeter of the defences of Baghdad was illuminated by Very lights sent up by the garrison. Intermittent rifle and Lewis gun fire broke the eerie silence of the night. It was unsafe to sleep on the roofs as usual, and one often heard the thud of a bullet hitting the mud walls of our bungalows.

It was now realised that Diwaniyah must be evacuated and after all the preparations had been made for what must inevitably be a desperate venture, Col-Cmdt Coningham left the town with a very long railway train on 30 July. As was expected, the retreat was a harassing operation. The pace of the column was limited by the speed of the train that had to be taken to Hillah. All the rails had been torn up and the sleepers removed by the rebels. Consequently, progress was only possible half a mile at a time, for the rails over which the train had passed had to be lifted and relaid in front. Time was also an important factor, for no supplies of water could be obtained after leaving Diwaniyah until the Jarboyah Bridge, 30 miles north, was reached.

The aeroplane co-operation was most efficient. Four machines of the squadron were released from all other duties in order to remain with the column. Communication was of course excellent, for it was possible to land beside the column the whole time. When the column was halted, waiting for the next bound of the train, there were always two aeroplanes on the ground ready to deal with any threat on the flanks or rear. When it moved, aeroplanes acted as a rearguard and bombed and attacked with machine-gun fire the enemy on the flanks and rear. Even with this assistance the peril to the column was considerable, as the numbers of hostile tribesmen had risen to 6,000 or 7,000. After eight days, Hillah was reached, but the terrible anxiety caused by this harassing retreat under a pitiless sun, left few of the column fit for further action, until many days had passed.

In the midst of these operations, about 2 August, the Baghdad-Hillah railway was cut at Babylon and next day at Mahmudiyah. Working parties repaired these breaks and for a few days the presence of an armed guard on each train prevented any further incidents. But even this service broke down and within a week of the first cutting of the line, all communication with Hillah, except by air and wireless, ceased entirely and the intervening country became unpleasantly hostile.

Simultaneously with the closing of the Baghdad-Hillah route, there was a rising of the tribes along the Baghdad-Quaraitu line, and the rails were torn up. Stations were burned down, and all intercourse except by air with the wives and families of the British garrison was stopped.

Operations for the relief of our besieged garrisons and the crushing of the insurrection began about the third week of August. A column set out for Hillah, accompanied by a trainload of sandbags, SAA, water and supplies. Every half-mile it stopped, and after repairing the line, erected a

circular blockhouse of sandbags. This was a slow, tedious and uninteresting operation and required little air assistance, for there was very little opposition. About 19 August, this column met a similar column, which had set out from Hillah, and the railway was opened again. 120 blockhouses each manned by five soldiers rendered the operation of the railway secure.

About this time the Aircraft Park completed the erection of three Bristol Fighters and four DH9As. No 84 Squadron were beginning to operate, and they now relieved No 6 Squadron from the arduous task of co-operating with the Samawah garrison from Baghdad. And as additional Bristol Fighters were becoming available in No 6 Squadron, our days became less tiring.

For the remaining days of August, much less work was required of the Royal Air Force. Punitive columns had gone out to retake the Hindiyah Barrage which had passed into Arab control early in the month, and to relieve the post at Jarbuiyah, which it was found unnecessary to hold in the meantime. Little air co-operation was required for those expeditions, and the very tired pilots and mechanics were enabled to rest after their strenuous exertions of the past two months.

It was now decided to reopen the route to Karind. It had been left alone since its isolation, except for a daily visit by air. It was a pleasant break for the weary pilots, for with Baghdad sweltering under a shade temperature of about 115°, it was a great joy to fly to the east for an hour and a quarter, and land at Karind, 3,000 feet high, with a shade temperature of about 95°, and always a cooling breeze. The relief of Karind and the subsequent evacuation of the families to England was carried out without incident, and required only the usual aerial co-operation. One night a late reconnaissance forced a pilot to land beside the relieving column, where he had to sleep. During the night he was badly bitten by a jackal, and another pilot flew up in the morning and took him straight to Basrah where he caught a boat for Bombay next day. By any other method, it would have been a week's journey.

There were now few aerial operations until the second week of October, when a column set out to relieve Kufa. For many weeks Kufa had been visited three times weekly by an aeroplane, which dropped bombs on the enemy surrounding the garrison, and food supplies on the garrison itself. Messages were taken off the Popham Panel, and operation orders dropped as required.

Aeroplanes co-operated most successfully. The Column Commander relied almost entirely on them as flank guards. Such was the nature of the country here that it was possible to give him five to six hours warning of any impending move against the column. On one flank, guards were necessary as the country is covered with camelthorn, and negative information not always reliable. Aircraft were also very successful in rounding up the retreating Arabs, and as a result, the column had very few casualties. Many of the insurgents were killed by fire from the air. Early in the morning of 17 October, the outskirts of Kufa were reached, but the road into the town passes through a maze of palm trees. I have seldom known such close co-operation take place as on this occasion. Low flying aeroplanes, by means of signals, kept our advanced infantry in view, and bombed and machine-gunned the gardens ahead. One hour of this was more than enough to put to flight a force of Arabs, estimated at over 2,000 strong.

In the action which ended in the capture of Tawairij aeroplanes did excellent work with bombs and machine guns on the fugitives from Kerbela.

Towards the end of October, the Baghdad-Hillah-Fellujah area was much denuded of troops and aeroplanes were most effectively used to keep the peace. Daily flights took place over the disaffected areas, and although no troops were stationed nearer than Hillah or Baghdad, no further incident occurred. Those demonstration flights consisted of as many machines as it was possible to muster, for the idea that one or two aeroplanes could overawe the Arab, had gone for ever. This was a valuable lesson and was not lost sight of.

On 1 December, a large column set out from Hillah to join up at Rumaithah with a column that had set out from Samawah, which had just been relieved. At Diwaniyah, a halt for a week was made to carry out punitive expeditions in the Daghara and Afej regions. Those were spectacular operations. The column would leave Diwaniyah at about 0200

hours. Aeroplanes, leaving their base so that they would arrive over the column when its outposts were 1/4 mile from the village to be attacked, would swoop down on it, drop 30 or 40, 25 lb bombs and pour hundreds of rounds of SAA into it. Panic-stricken, the inhabitants fled, and in a few minutes the column would enter the village without a shot being fired. The usual procedure then was to drive towards Diwaniyah all the flocks and herds, setting fire to all that was left. This had a most salutary effect on the tribes north of Diwaniyah.

South-west of Diwaniyah the tribes were very slow to hand in their rifles and continued to preserve a rather contumacious attitude as regards compliance with the terms of the peace. Here again aeroplanes were most useful. They were employed to bomb the villages of the recalcitrant tribes. Some of them were very stubborn, and continued to hold out. The nights at this time were clear and the moon was full. Hardly anyone in the squadron had flown by night, and no one had done so in Mesopotamia or on a Bristol Fighter. But one evening six machines flew after dinner, and then for 60 hours the villages belonging to the refractory tribes were bombed incessantly. This was too much for them, and they submitted, having the distinction of being the last to give in.

This was the end of the insurrection, as far as active operations were concerned. Subsequent air attacks were delivered for purposes of control under conditions which approximate to these that now exist.

The past six months had been a very full half-year's flying for the squadron, which acquitted itself splendidly. The earlier part of the insurrection, although not the most serious part, had been more full of incident, and reflected greater credit on the squadron. From 30 June to 21 August six pilots and six Bristol Fighters had been practically the total available force, and the pilots had averaged 4 3/4 hours daily for that period. The first six Bristol Fighters in the country had done equal service, and there was not a single forced landing that was not due to enemy action. There were of course other machines available, for No 6 Squadron had on an average six Bristol Fighters and 5 RE8s serviceable. The flight of No 30 Squadron at Baghdad averaged 3 DH9As and two RE8s serviceable. But the RE8 was so unreliable owing to lack of engine spares and to trouble with the oiling system, that it could not be employed on important operations, while the DH9As were fully employed keeping in touch with Samawah.

As I have already stated, the seriousness of the insurrection in Iraq was not realised at home. The GHQ at Baghdad realised it, only when every approach to the capital had been closed except the Tigris line, and that was the only one that had previously given trouble. It was thought inevitable that it would share the same fate. But Ali Sulaiman and the tribes on the Upper Euphrates remained loyal, and their influence on the Muntifik confederation, combined with the work of the Royal Air Force saved a disaster.

One lesson from this period stands out above all others, and though it is not a new one, it is continually being neglected. At all times, it is absolutely essential for the civil administration and the three services to work in harmony and in sympathy with each other. Each must understand thoroughly and be personally acquainted with the other. We can do much to achieve this end, especially in the East, where the great distances between units and individuals prevent much association except by air. The efficiency of the Royal Air Force in Iraq in 1920 was largely due to the assistance given by officers of the other services, by political officers, and by certain sheikhs, all of whom were personally acquainted with the squadron officers before the Insurrection broke out.