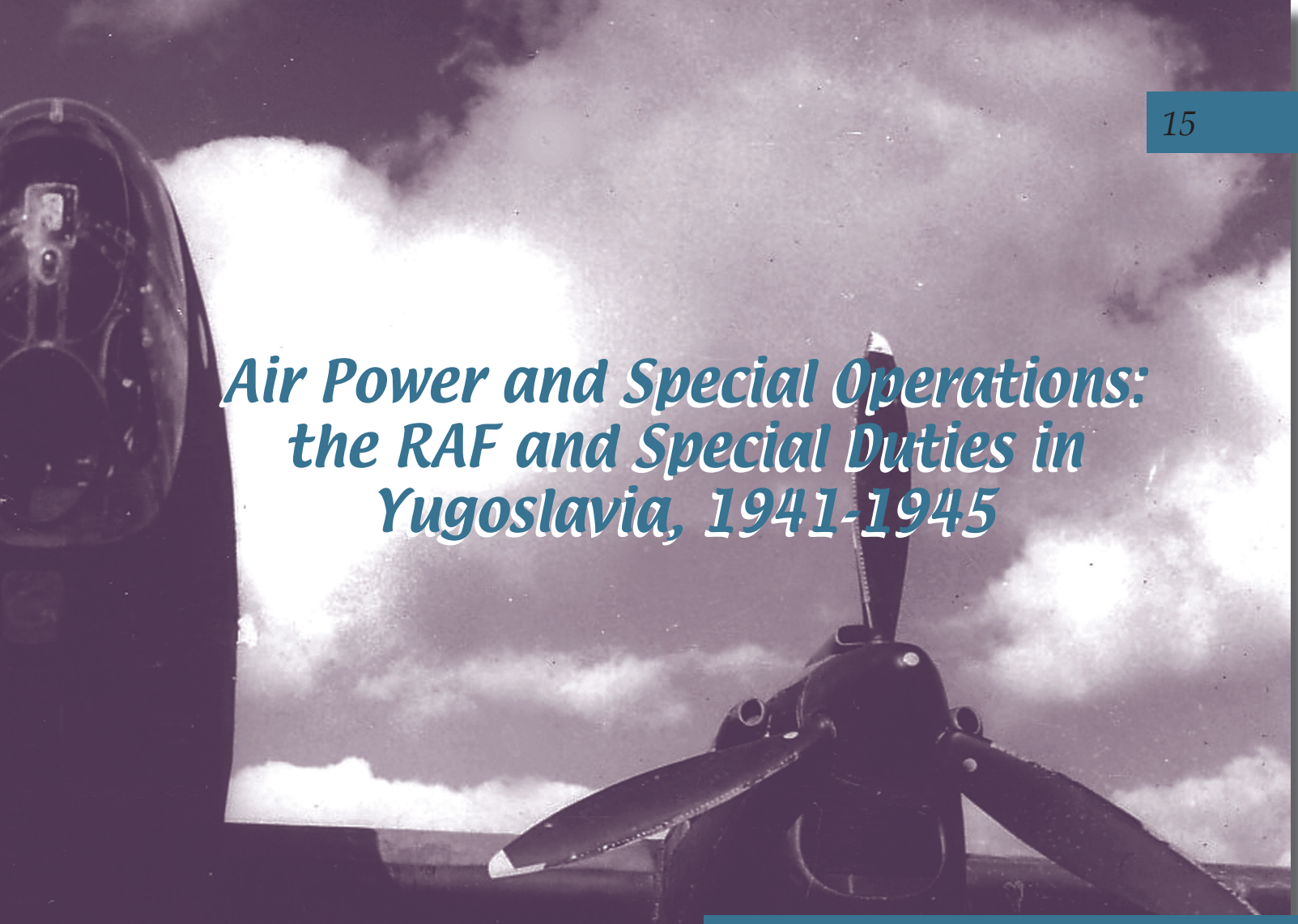


Air Power and Special Operations: the RAF and Special Duties in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945

By Dr Seb Ritchie

The provision of air support for special forces and other covert organisations has received only limited attention from historians of the Royal Air Force. A lack of open source material and other security restrictions inevitably poses major problems for those researching more recent operations, so that such work as has been undertaken has tended to focus on longer term history — chiefly the Second World War — which is no longer subject to security constraints. However, popular interest in clandestine or 'cloak-and-dagger' warfare has ensured that the wealth of documentary evidence available on so-called 'special duties' (SD) flying during the war has mainly been incorporated into tactical level histories. These reveal much about the bravery and expertise of SD aircrew, and about the activities of such organisations as the Special Operations Executive (SOE).[1] But they tell us little about the higher direction of SD operations — about their place within Allied strategy or about command, control and administrative issues. At a time when special forces (or, in US parlance, special operations forces) are being ever more intensively employed, there would thus seem to be good reason to reconsider some of these issues and to study the way in which they have been addressed by the RAF in the past.

SD operations were undertaken by the Allied air forces in all theatres to a greater or lesser extent between 1939 and 1945, but they were nowhere more important than in the former Yugoslavia. Indeed, without air power the Allied influence in Yugoslavia during the war would have been at best minimal, and at worst non-existent.

267 Squadron Dakota in Yugoslavia

From 1942 to 1945 the Allied air forces infiltrated agents and supplies to Yugoslav resistance groups, at first by parachute drops and later by landings at makeshift air strips. They were largely responsible for establishing the presence of both SOE and the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) in Yugoslavia, and the supplies they brought into the area made an important contribution to the Partisan insurgency against Axis forces of occupation there. In short, Yugoslavia provides a perfect case study for an analysis of the higher direction of SD air operations.

However, the story of SD flying in this theatre is made more intriguing by a number of puzzling contradictions and discrepancies, which emerge from even the most cursory comparison between the surviving documents and the limited quantity of published literature.[2] For example, it is clear that there are widespread misconceptions concerning both the volume and apportionment of the Allied SD effort that have been heavily coloured by debates about the respective merits of Yugoslavia's rival resistance movements, the communist Partisans, under Tito, and the royalist and largely Serb Chetniks under Mihailovic. Supporters of the Chetniks often imply that the Allies favoured the Partisans in the allocation of airborne supplies, and that these supplies were ultimately of critical importance in transforming Tito's movement into an effective fighting force, capable of challenging the German occupation and imposing communist government on Yugoslavia after Germany's defeat. According to David Martin, for example, "by October 1943, Tito had become the monopolistic beneficiary of the greatly augmented Allied support that had become logistically possible after the collapse of Italy".[3]

Yet the official records demonstrate that the Partisans had barely received any supplies from the Allies by October 1943, and that they obtained only a trickle before April 1944, by which time they were already well established as the stronger of the two resistance movements by far. Recent research on British clandestine operations in Croatia is particularly illuminating in this regard. The Partisan force in Croatia was the largest in Yugoslavia. It controlled a considerable tract of territory that was strategically important to the Allies by virtue of its proximity to both Italy and Austria. And yet it is clear that the volume of airborne supplies reaching the Croatian Partisans was miniscule until the spring of 1944. Before that, in periods of good weather, they might have hoped to receive one aircraft load per week — a negligible volume of stores in relation to the many thousands of guerrillas in the region. In November and December 1943 they received nothing at all.[4]

This obvious contradiction becomes more interesting still if the documented aspirations of the British government and of both SOE and SIS are considered. For example, Churchill's official biographer has shown that from the early months of 1943 he attached the very highest priority to increasing the quantity of supplies reaching the Yugoslav Partisans.[5] And yet the evidence from Croatia suggests that almost a year passed before his hopes were fulfilled on a significant scale. How can this delay be explained? Why did it prove so difficult to supply by air one of Europe's largest resistance forces until the final year of the Second

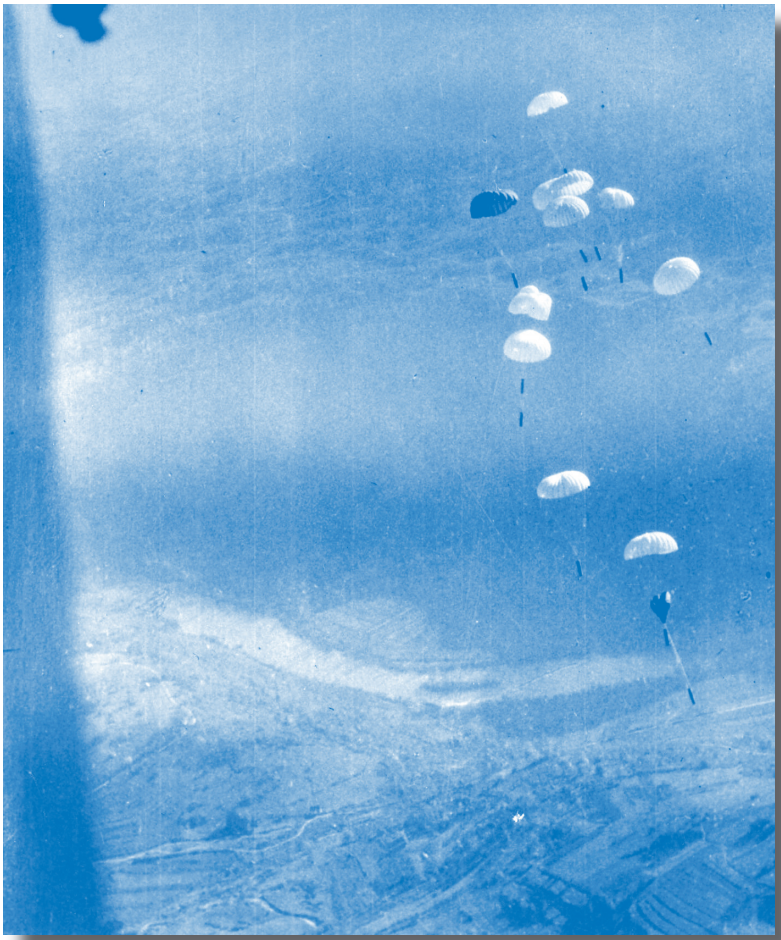
The Adriatic was far too close to Italy for seaborne supply to be a safe proposition. The only alternative was the air

World War in Europe? The aim here is to address this question, and to show how and why the more serious obstacles to airborne supply in Yugoslavia were finally overcome. The story sheds some interesting light on the enduring characteristics of air operations in support of covert organisations, as well as on the more general subject of military air transport.

* * *

Yugoslavia became an important focus for British special operations and intelligence gathering during the first year of the Second World War.[6] But no detailed plans were formulated for clandestine operations there in the event of an Axis occupation. By the time German and Italian forces invaded Yugoslavia in April 1941 SOE and SIS had set up new headquarters in Cairo which were soon made responsible for running agents into enemy territory in south-eastern Europe. But any hopes of re-establishing a presence in Yugoslavia were confronted by two fundamental problems: first a chronic shortage of reliable intelligence about conditions inside the country, and second the impracticality of conveying agents or supplies to the northern Mediterranean. The presence of a resistance movement — the Serb Chetniks — was not confirmed until the end of 1941, so the question of supplies only began to arise thereafter.[7] Clearly, the Adriatic was far too close to Italy for seaborne supply to be a safe proposition. The only alternative was the air.

An air drop to Yugoslav Partisans



Unfortunately SOE and SIS soon found that the Royal Air Force was very poorly placed to assist them. There is no evidence in the British archives to indicate that the RAF undertook any significant planning or preparation for SD operations in the years immediately preceding the outbreak of the Second World War.[8] A few officers with an expertise in SD from the First World War were still serving (or were recalled) in 1939. The most influential was Air Commodore Lionel Payne, who effectively acted as senior liaison officer between the RAF and SIS between 1941 and 1945.[9] But the RAF otherwise developed no doctrinal, training or equipment infrastructure to support SD in the rearmament years. This was not entirely unreasonable, of course, for SOE, which created a very much larger demand for air transport than SIS, was only formed in 1940 as a direct result of Germany's occupation of Europe — an eventuality that could not reasonably have been foreseen in the late 1930s.

More generally, the RAF's air transport infrastructure was also deficient at the start of hostilities. Yet it would be simplistic to suggest that the problems encountered in supplying the Yugoslav resistance by air merely reflected the RAF's neglect of air transport. Although it is often argued that the British Air Staff shunned co-operation with the Army between the wars, emphasising instead the independent role of air power, air transport was an integral part of inter-war RAF operations in the Middle East, where Army units were moved regularly by aircraft to potential flashpoints such as Iraq and Transjordan.[10] It is true that the RAF paid far less attention to air transport in the metropolitan

theatre, but this was partly because the Army made hardly any demand for it.

The RAF had very few transport aircraft at the beginning of the Second World War. The need to combine combat and lift capabilities in parts of the empire had spawned so-called bomber transport aircraft in the 1930s with limited carrying capacity, but there were no dedicated transport aircraft. The slow growth of commercial aviation in interwar Britain was partly to blame. The two best known military transport aircraft of the period, the C-47 Dakota and the Junkers JU-52, both originated in civil aircraft designs.[11] Yet neither of these aircraft could have assisted with the provision of airborne supplies from Egypt or North Africa to Yugoslavia, for they lacked sufficient range when heavily laden. Hence even the gradual emergence of a dedicated RAF transport fleet in 1941, largely equipped with Dakotas, did not solve the problem of supplying the Yugoslav resistance.

In fact, the only aircraft capable of supplying Yugoslavia from the Middle East were the larger multi-engined bombers. Suitably converted medium bombers such as the Wellington were just capable of bringing agents and some stores from Egypt or North Africa to southern Yugoslavia. But only the newer four-engined bombers promised to provide the combination of both range and lift needed to convey supplies to the region as a whole.[12] Inevitably the demand for such aircraft was very high. In northwest Europe Bomber Command represented the sole means by which Britain could wage war directly against the German homeland. But the Command was too small to execute this role effectively in the first years of the war and lacked sufficiently capable aircraft.[13]

In 1942 the large-scale production of new four-engined bombers such as the Lancaster and Halifax at last offered Bomber Command the enhanced capability it needed to expand the strategic offensive against Germany. But a range of commitments — Coastal Command, the Middle East, operations against French docks and harbours — continued to limit the number of aircraft available for strategic bombing.[14]

A Halifax drops supplies to the Partisans

Understandably, then, the Command did not take kindly to proposals that its all-important heavy bombers should be made available for SD.[15] The RAF and the clandestine organisations found themselves in direct competition for the same equipment. The RAF consistently opposed the diversion of aircraft to SD on the grounds that Bomber Command's operational capability would be impaired, while SOE maintained that they could not fulfil their directives from the Chiefs of Staff (COS) unless the necessary transport aircraft were made available.[16] It should be noted at this stage, however, that SOE's founding directive envisaged only a fairly limited role for them and insisted that their plans should be kept in step with the general strategic conduct of the war. In other words, while irregular warfare had a vital role to play, SOE's activities should ultimately complement and certainly not impede the broader prosecution of hostilities. Moreover the directive

was largely concerned with limited scale sabotage and subversion operations of a type likely to make far more restricted demands on air transport than the supply of guerrilla armies.[17]

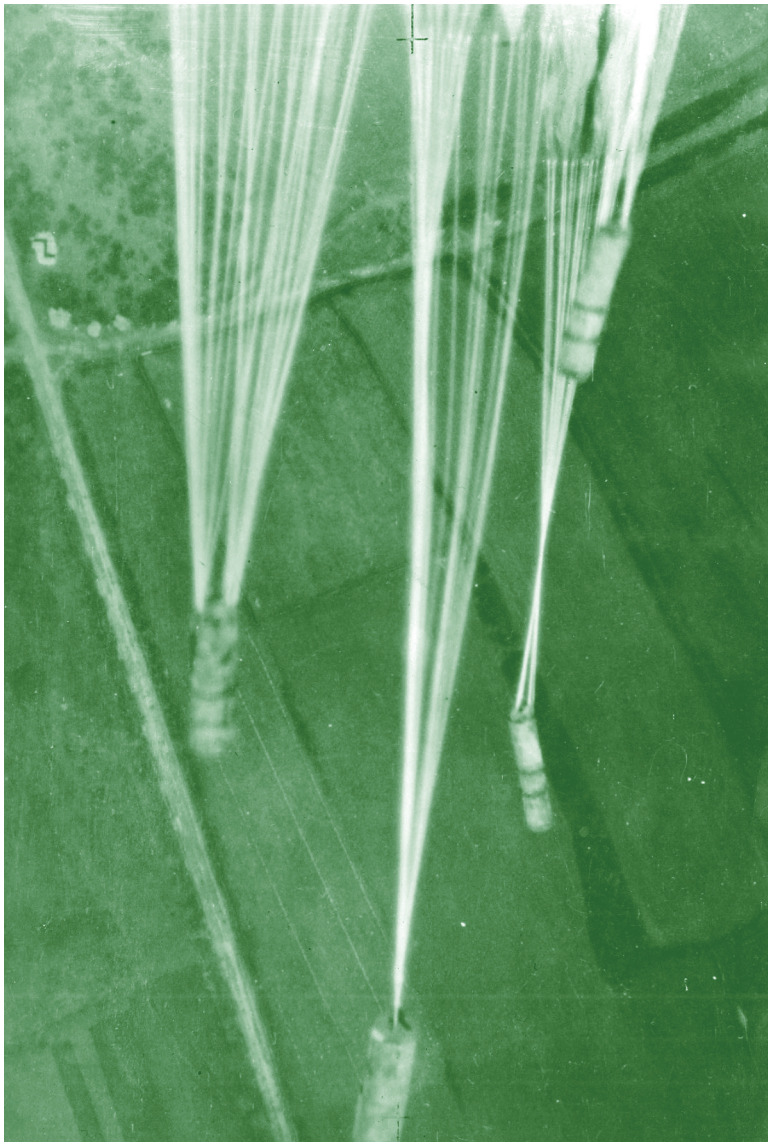
As SD missions were usually confined to moon periods, it seemed at first that there might be scope for aircraft and crews to be shared in any given month, so that they undertook SD sorties during moon periods and afterwards resumed routine flying.[18] But SOE and SIS soon began to demand the permanent allocation of aircraft to SD, for the temporary reversion of aircraft and trained air crew to normal duties often placed their operations in jeopardy. Expert SD air crew might be lost during bombing operations, while aircraft might become unserviceable or due for major inspections when they were required for SD missions. Less time would be available in non-moon periods for training.[19]

The provision of SD aircraft first became an issue in the summer of 1941 in connection with SOE plans for operations in northwest Europe, at a time when there was still only one flight of aircraft allocated to SD in Britain.[20] But the focus of the debate then shifted to the Mediterranean. During the later months of 1941 it became clear that a substantial resistance movement had emerged in Yugoslavia. SOE and SIS immediately sought to establish contact with these forces, and demanded air transport for the infiltration of both agents and supplies.[21]

The RAF's inability to respond is graphically illustrated by one particular fiasco involving early SIS proposals to mount air operations from Malta and Egypt. In September 1941 SIS advised the Minister of State in Cairo of their interest in mounting clandestine air drops into the Balkans from Malta, and in 'dropping or parachuting personnel, stores and pamphlets . . . from Egypt to Greece, Crete, [and] Yugoslavia'; they also envisaged 'landing or collecting agents and stores off enemy coasts' employing flying boats or sea planes. They were hoping to base two aircraft in Malta and two in Egypt for these purposes.[22] In the absence of suitable British seaplanes or of land-based aircraft, the RAF rather improbably assigned four Heinkel 115 seaplanes (formerly the property of the Royal Dutch Air Force) to Malta for SIS operations. The first was lost on only its second flight, while the second was destroyed at its moorings during an air raid in February 1942 without flying a single sortie, and neither the third nor the fourth ever reached Malta.[23] Four converted Whitley bombers positioned in Malta to supply the Yugoslav resistance suffered a similar fate.[24]

By the beginning of 1942 the first British field officers to reach Yugoslavia (who were infiltrated by sea) had joined the Chetniks.

Parachute-dropped supplies



Partisans and civilians are evacuated from Yugoslavia

This was important, because airborne supplies could not commence until Allied liaison officers were located in the field. Field officers were required to identify and prepare drop zones and landing grounds, to organise reception committees, to relay resistance requirements to headquarters, and to manage the distribution of stores. Their presence encouraged SOE to develop more ambitious plans for supporting the Chetniks, which were reinforced by a plea for assistance from the Yugoslav government-in-exile, then located in London.[25] The Air Staff recognised the importance of providing at least some assistance to the Chetniks. As the Air Ministry's Deputy Director of Plans remarked: "Surely this is a golden opportunity to help ourselves and our Allies, to worry the Hun, and to give encouragement to other small nations now under German domination."[26] Soon afterwards, too, the COS issued a new and more expansive directive to SOE, which specifically tasked them with 'organising and co-ordinating the action of patriots in the occupied countries', although insisting that they should 'avoid premature large scale risings of patriots.'[27]

Yet the precise role of the Yugoslav insurgency within Allied strategy was not defined, and the scope for supplying the Chetniks in any case remained very limited. The Air Staff eventually decided to form an SD Flight of four Consolidated B-24 Liberators within 108 Squadron (based at the Nile Delta), known as X Flight. X Flight would afterwards shoulder virtually the entire burden of the SOE and SIS infiltration and supply programmes to Yugoslavia and other Mediterranean countries until the spring of 1943. Enemy air defences were not particularly effective in the Yugoslav theatre; only 18 SD aircraft were lost there throughout the war.[28] But SD missions had still to be conducted at night, and were only flown nightly in moonlit conditions. Their success was dependent on highly accurate navigation — by map-reading and dead reckoning — and good visibility: many operations were aborted because aircraft failed to locate their reception committees, or because of adverse weather, particularly between October 1942 and March 1943, and serviceability also became an increasing problem. The aircrew of X Flight discharged their duties with extraordinary courage, determination and skill; they deserve a history of their own. But they could only provide the most limited and ineffectual support to the Chetniks.[29] Any hopes of enlarging the SD Liberator force were frustrated by the burgeoning global demand for the aircraft — from the USAAF, from Coastal Command (Liberators played a crucial role in the Battle of the Atlantic), and from the RAF Commands in both the Middle East and Far East, which required them for conventional bombing operations.[30] Nor was it possible to supplement or replace the Liberators with British-built Halifax bombers for many months, as a number of serious teething troubles with the aircraft had to be resolved before it could be considered for overseas service.[31] The Lancasters were of course all required for Bomber Command. Not until October could the Air Ministry offer to provide six converted Halifaxes to augment the Liberator flight, but their arrival was delayed until February 1943, and their first operational sorties were only flown in March.[32]

The volume of supplies reaching the Chetniks remained small, then. But it is far from certain that a more ambitious supply programme would have furthered the Allied cause significantly

Large numbers of enemy troops were being held in the region, but the principal source of resistance was the Partisan movement in north-western Yugoslavia

during 1942. Indeed the winter of 1942 produced a crisis in British policy towards Yugoslavia and a serious split within SOE, as doubts emerged in their Middle East section concerning Mihailovic's commitment to fighting the Axis. By January 1943 there was mounting evidence that his forces were not engaged in very active resistance, and there were even indications that they were collaborating with the Italians. Large numbers of enemy troops were being held in the region, but the principal source of resistance was the Partisan movement in north-western Yugoslavia, which was not as yet in contact with the Allies, and which consequently had received no supplies at all.[33] There was no question at this stage of abandoning Mihailovic completely. Much of the SOE hierarchy continued to favour the Chetniks over the Partisans, and in any case it was the declared policy of the British government to support him. But there was an obvious case for backing the Partisans too. So SOE began tabling demands for still more aircraft, arguing that an increase in supplies would enable Mihailovic to contemplate more overt resistance, and give much needed assistance to Tito's followers. Their Middle East staff were able to present proposals to this effect directly to Churchill when he visited Cairo in January 1943.[34]

A Halifax drops supplies to Partisans

The changing Allied perception of Yugoslavia's resistance groups did not in itself lead directly to a decision to enlarge the air supply programme. Of greater importance were broader developments in the Mediterranean and beyond, which created a more tangible strategic rationale for Allied intervention in Yugoslavia. By the beginning of 1943 the desert war was moving west, the conclusion of the North African campaign was in sight, and the Allies were devising new strategies for opening a second front in mainland Europe. Following the Casablanca conference in January 1943, plans were drawn up for the invasion of Italy through Sicily (Operation 'Husky'). The implications of Operation 'Husky' for British policy towards Yugoslavia were indeed profound. At the grand strategic level, Stalin was infuriated to learn that there would be no Anglo-US landings in France in 1943. Hence, for reasons of Alliance cohesion, Churchill now looked to encourage resistance activity in south-east Europe in the hope of drawing Axis forces away from the eastern front.[35] At the same time it seemed likely that

the Allies' progress in Italy could be materially assisted by the presence of a large, capable and active resistance movement in adjacent areas. Thus, as a direct result of the decision to launch 'Husky', the north-western Yugoslav territories of Croatia and Slovenia assumed a new significance in Allied thinking. Both bordered Italy, while Slovenia additionally shared a common frontier with Austria. The region was also vital to Axis communications across south-eastern Europe.[36]

The Partisans were known to be responsible for virtually all resistance activity in Croatia and Slovenia.[37] Churchill therefore decided that it was vital to establish formal contacts with Tito's movement, and simultaneously sought to increase the volume of airborne supplies to the Yugoslav resistance as a whole. A powerful triumvirate consisting of the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, and the Minister of Economic Warfare (who controlled SOE), now began to press the Air Staff very hard to provide more heavy bombers for SD in the Mediterranean.[38]

In February 1943 the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal, agreed to provide an additional four Halifaxes, bringing the total SD fleet in the Middle East to 14 aircraft — a single squadron now numbered 148.[39] The reports recently received on the Partisans clearly influenced this decision; presumably the Air Staff expected that by providing four more Halifaxes, which were capable of reaching Greece and south-eastern Yugoslavia, they would give SOE more scope for using the Liberators — boasting superior endurance — over the Partisan territories further north. Yet the situation was soon made more complicated by a further COS directive to SOE, tasking them to encourage resistance activity further east, particularly in Greece, to bolster Allied deception operations designed to divert German attention away from Sicily and Italy.[40] Reviewing the situation in Yugoslavia, the COS in the meantime upheld the existing Allied strategy of supporting Mihailovic, and although they decided to send agents to make contact with the Partisans, a decision on whether to despatch supplies to Tito was deferred until they had reported.[41] This came as music to the ears of those senior SOE staff who were determined to maintain Allied backing for the Chetniks. In April they duly presented a further request for aircraft to the COS, claiming that the Chetniks controlled around 100,000 troops, a number that 'could be increased to 250,000 if arms, equipment and British staff officers could be delivered in sufficient quantities . . . SOE's inability as yet to supply the resistance groups in Serbian territory with a reasonable proportion of arms and

Squadron Dakotas in Italy

An injured Partisan is off-loaded from a Dakota

equipment they demand has so far prevented the establishment of a controlling Allied influence over General Mihailovic'. Six of their 10 Halifaxes were to be used to supply the Greek resistance, leaving the remaining four for Mihailovic. But the serviceability of the four ageing Liberators was now said to be so low that no significant airlift capacity was left for the Partisans.[42]

The Air Staff hesitated once more. By this time they were clearly coming to suspect that the fulfilment of apparently limited SOE requirements was only serving to encourage demands for still more aircraft. They might also have been forgiven for questioning whether additional aircraft were really warranted, given the prevailing uncertainties over the internal situation in Yugoslavia, the contradictory signals being received from SOE, and the fact that, at that time, there were still no Allied officers with the Partisans. But the Air Staff instead — no doubt wisely — chose not to immerse themselves in the intricacies of Yugoslav politics and clung to the broader argument that SOE requirements had to be balanced 'against the strategical background of the bombing of Germany and the Anti U-Boat war'. As the Director of Plans wrote, 'they have reached a position which is, I consider, not unreasonable in relation to the strategic importance of the U-Boat war and the bomber effort'.[43] Hence the Air Staff continued to rely on the COS's ultimate stipulation that SOE activities should support the broader thrust of Allied strategy; in other words they should not divert resources from conventional air operations.[44] By 1943 SOE clearly had stronger grounds for demanding air resources than they had possessed in the previous year. Yet the relative importance of their work, compared with more conventional military activity, was still not properly defined.

In April the first SOE reconnaissance teams made contact with the Partisans in Montenegro and Croatia, and discovered that they were a far larger and better organised force than Allied appreciations had hitherto suggested.[45] They were soon followed by SOE liaison officers. As formal links with Tito had now been established, as liaison officers were now in the field, and as the Allies now possessed bases in Libya and Tunisia – far closer to northwest Yugoslavia than Egypt – there was at last more scope for organising an air supply programme using British bombers like the Halifax. SOE duly renewed their efforts to obtain more aircraft. They argued that while supplies should still be targeted primarily at Mihailovic, closer contacts should also be established with the Partisans 'with a view to encouraging their resistance to the Axis'. It was suggested, rather optimistically, that if a significant volume of supplies could be sent to Yugoslavia the Allies would improve their chances of securing the co-operation of the main resistance movements and of co-ordinating anti-Axis activities there.[46] Again, Churchill was supportive, and on 22 June he minuted the COS:

> *I consider that at least a dozen [more aircraft] should be placed at the disposal of the SOE authorities for this, and that this demand has priority even over the bombing of Germany.*[47]

An injured Partisan is carried off a Dakota

A further 12 Halifaxes were therefore made available to form a second Squadron – 624 Squadron; – and a new Wing, numbered 334 Wing, was created to supervise SD work in the Mediterranean.[48] These additional aircraft were expected to enlarge the supply programme to Yugoslavia to an estimated 150 tons per month — an impressive feat, judged by earlier standards. But unfortunately those standards were now dramatically revised. The Prime Minister declared that the despatch of 500 tons per month was desirable by September 1943.[49] In response the Chief of the Air Staff agreed to provide four more Halifaxes, and offered to divert to the Middle East another 10 that were due for delivery to SD squadrons in Britain. He made it plain, however, that he strongly opposed the reallocation of further aircraft from Bomber Command to SD. "Desirable as it may be to maintain and foster SOE activities", Portal wrote, "we must bring the problem into focus with the whole strategic picture".[50] It is notable that Churchill chose not to press SOE's requirements over those of Bomber Command again at this stage.

In August the Quebec conference gave priority status to assisting the Balkan resistance movements and to the provision of aircraft to supply them. Yet throughout the second half of the year weather and other constraints limited airborne supplies to both the Chetniks and the Partisans to an average of only 45 tons per month.[51] What this meant in terms of supplies to the Partisans alone has already been described but it is worth reiterating: in optimal weather and moon conditions the largest Partisan formation in Yugoslavia could expect just one supply aircraft per week in this period. In anything other than optimal conditions they invariably received nothing. It was against this background that a momentous change occurred in British policy towards Yugoslavia. In July, Churchill decided to despatch his own personal emissary to Tito — Brigadier Fitzroy Maclean. And although Maclean's mission employed SOE's operational infrastructure, it was otherwise entirely independent and responsible to Churchill alone.

After arriving at Tito's headquarters in September, Maclean spent his first months in the field gathering information and preparing an infamous and decisive report recommending Allied support for the Partisans alone, and the abandonment of Mihailovic and the Chetniks. Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of Maclean's analysis of the Yugoslav resistance (and it remains highly controversial to this day), his report must also be seen as an attempt to balance limited resources and extensive commitments. Far from proposing that Tito should become the monopolistic beneficiary of an immense volume of airborne supplies, Maclean very sensibly sought to concentrate available air transport capacity on the resistance movement that seemed most likely to contribute to Allied strategic objectives, — namely, the Partisans. Not only were they more numerous than the Chetniks, and more actively engaged in operations against German forces of occupation; they were also located in territories bordering Italy and the Third Reich itself. By contrast, the Chetniks were very largely confined to Serbia and Montenegro.[52] To have continued supplying the Chetniks at this time would have involved the wasteful diversion of scarce resources to an organisation that was both poorly placed and disinclined to contribute much to the Allied cause. Maclean's report reached Churchill in the second

week of November at a time when the Prime Minister was again acutely unhappy about the air supply situation. Italy's capitulation in September left Yugoslavia's Dalmatian coast largely undefended and it was quickly occupied by the Partisans. To Churchill, who had long been advocating a forward Allied strategy in south-east Europe, it seemed that the initiation of a far more ambitious programme of support for the Partisan insurgency at this time could bring very significant dividends, but the opportunity passed and by December the Germans had overrun much of the coastal area. Churchill was simplistically blaming this disappointing reversal on the Allies' failure to keep Tito's armies supplied when Maclean's report, extolling the merits an enlarged pro-Partisan strategy, landed on his desk.[53] It subsequently accompanied him to the Sextant conference in Cairo, with Roosevelt, which in turn laid the ground for the Teheran conference with both Roosevelt and Stalin.[54] The report was also considered by the COS in mid-November 1943, and Mihailovic received no further Allied supplies thereafter.[55] Most of the Allied liaison officers located with the Chetniks were withdrawn early in 1944.[56]

Pack horses are loaded into a Dakota

* * *

In the ultimate expansion of the Allied air supply programme to Yugoslavia in 1944 it is possible to identify many of the themes that have recurred in this paper so far. The precise role of the Yugoslav Partisan insurgency within Allied strategy was now more clearly defined than before. At the Teheran Conference at the end of November 1943 it was agreed that all possible help should be given to Tito and his followers, the aim being to maintain pressure on Germany across Europe in the lead up to Operation 'Overlord', or in Churchill's words, 'to stretch the enemy to the utmost'.[57] Allied leaders envisaged increasing supplies of arms and equipment, clothing, medical stores, and food to the Partisans, and commanders were directed to furnish whatever air support was considered necessary to achieve this aim.[58]

Yet the issue of prioritisation was still left open. SOE duly attempted to translate the Teheran objectives into specific air transport requirements, preparing a statement which showed that the 32 aircraft then available for all Balkan operations could deliver a maximum of 278 tons of supplies per month. By contrast, they asserted that the COS had tasked them to supply 680 tons per month. Thus, assuming these figures were correct, more than double the number of aircraft then available for SD operations in the Balkans was required. It transpired, however, that the target figures were of dubious validity: SOE were ultimately forced to admit that they had been 'calculated' from a recent COS directive, but the precise basis of their calculations is not recorded. Subsequently the Chief of the Air Staff yet again emphasised the detrimental effect

that the proposed transfer of aircraft would have on Bomber Command, then in the most desperate phase of the so-called 'Battle of Berlin'. Although he promised a small increase in transport capacity, it fell far short of SOE's requirements.[59]

Fortunately the pervasive obstacle of range — and hence SOE's problematic dependence on converted heavy bombers — was on the point of being eliminated once and for all. After the Allies landed in mainland Italy they secured air bases in the Brindisi area, from which dedicated transport aircraft and converted medium bombers could easily reach northern Yugoslavia fully laden.[60] The necessary transport aircraft were not immediately forthcoming. Beyond the established SD fleet in the Mediterranean, under the control of the C-in-C Middle East, the RAF managed to provide one Dakota squadron. A very much larger (American) air transport fleet was controlled by the Commander-in-Chief Allied Forces Headquarters in the western Mediterranean, but this was at first unavailable for SD. The answer lay in the unification of Allied command in the Mediterranean under SACMED, which was also approved at the Sextant conference in November.[61] Some 60 Dakotas from the 62nd American Troop Carrying Group were then made available for SD in the entire Balkan area, along with 36 Italian aircraft. The Dakotas introduced an entirely new dimension into air operations in support of the Yugoslav resistance, for they were the first Allied supply aircraft capable of landing in the field.[62]

SD operations from Italy to Yugoslavia did not start until January and were initially still seriously impeded by two factors. The first was the weather, which was particularly poor in early 1944;[63] the second was the small scale of Allied reception arrangements. Few additional liaison officers were infiltrated into Yugoslavia between October 1943 and March 1944 so that when, in the latter month, really large-scale supply drops and landings suddenly became possible, Allied planners were unexpectedly confronted by the unpleasant realisation that there were not enough trained reception personnel in the field.

Partisan headquarters in Croatia provides a perfect illustration of the problem. Major Owen Reed, the Allied liaison officer at the headquarters, worked for SIS and was infiltrated into Croatia in October 1943 with a two-man team and with instructions to work alongside an SOE mission at the same location. In November his SOE counterpart left the mission, and was not replaced; in January one of Reed's subordinates joined the Partisans and was likewise not replaced. Reed was left to represent both SIS and SOE at the mission with a staff of just two radio operators and, predictably enough, he soon found himself massively over-burdened with work. This was the situation when, on 14 March 1944, he received a signal from Italy asking 'for saturation point [of] numbers [of] containers and packages, i.e., how many do you estimate you can receive [in] one night should mass sorties be laid on?' Reed was obliged to point out that there could be no mass drops to Partisan headquarters Croatia until his staff was enlarged.[64]

Poor weather and inadequate reception arrangements served to restrict airborne supplies to the Partisans to an average of just 84 tons per month in the first quarter of 1944.[65] But then the weather improved and

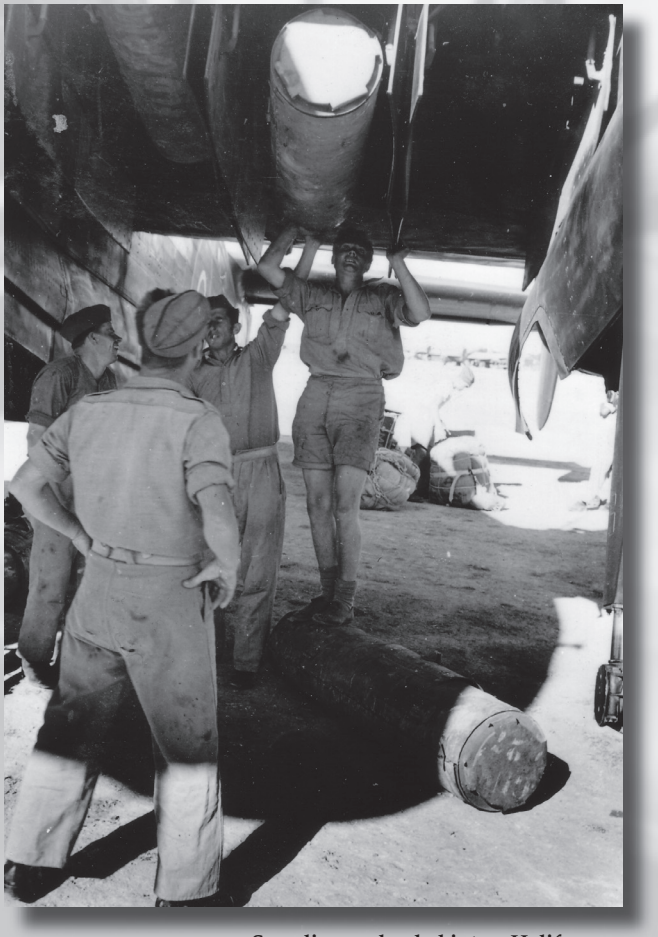
Partisans' flare path, Topusko

more Allied personnel were sent into the field. A formal British military mission to Yugoslavia assumed the role hitherto played there by SOE and, as the mission was staffed by regular soldiers, the pool of manpower available for deployment as field liaison officers increased substantially. As a result, the few Allied missions already located with the principal Partisan headquarters could be augmented by sub-missions attached to smaller formations. The RAF also became involved in reception provisions. The Balkan Air Terminal Service (BATS) sent specially trained personnel into Yugoslavia to help field officers with the location, preparation and operation of landing strips.[66] Large-scale daylight supply missions with fighter escorts began at the end of March, allowing available aircraft to be utilised throughout the month for the first time. Such missions became the norm in June after Allied air strikes against German airfields around Zagreb virtually eliminated the Luftwaffe as a fighting force in the region.[67]

Against this background, the second and third quarters of 1944 witnessed a spectacular rise in the volume of supplies reaching the Partisans: between 900 and 1,000 tons of stores per month were delivered throughout this period. There were mass drops and mass landings, which also provided the opportunity to evacuate vulnerable personnel — the wounded, women and children. During these six months nearly 13,000 people were brought out by air from Yugoslavia. So it was that air support to the Yugoslav resistance at last came to fulfil the most optimistic aspirations harboured by Churchill and the covert organisations since 1942.[68]

* * *

This paper began by posing the question: why was it so difficult to supply the Yugoslav resistance movements by air? A few answers may now be suggested. On the outbreak of the Second World War the RAF was poorly prepared for SD operations, and more generally for air transport. But the scale of wartime SD requirements could not reasonably have been foreseen before 1940, nor could the demands of SOE or SIS in Yugoslavia have been met by a dedicated air transport force before Italy's capitulation in September 1943. Until then, only converted four-engine bombers could fulfil this task. Although their large-scale production coincided with the growing demand for SD aircraft for the Mediterranean in 1942, few could at first be diverted from bombing operations. Indeed, no British-built heavy bomber was allocated to SD in the Mediterranean until October 1942 and no SD sorties were flown by British



Supplies are loaded into a Halifax

heavy bombers to Yugoslavia until March 1943. The aircraft available for SD were only gradually augmented thereafter. From the first positive identification of a Yugoslav resistance movement in 1941 through to the establishment of a virtual air bridge from Italy to Yugoslavia in 1944, there

was a continuous struggle between the covert organisations — principally SOE — and the Air Staff over the allocation of these aircraft.

In so far as the directives given to Bomber Command and SOE were contradictory where the allocation of aircraft was concerned, there were no obvious rights and wrongs in these arguments. However, it is important to remember that SOE was originally formed to support British strategy by conducting sabotage and subversion in enemy-occupied territory, and this limited measure of their task unquestionably coloured the Air Staff's position in the early stages of the debate; SOE was not at first assigned the far more ambitious objective of sustaining large guerrilla armies, with all the resource implications that implied. Even when they broadened SOE's directive to encompass such activities, the COS still did not intend that SOE's work should in any way lessen the impact of conventional military operations by, for example, diverting much-needed aircraft away from the strategic bombing offensive or the Battle of the Atlantic. And although the Air Staff sometimes appeared to be guarding their resources somewhat jealously for bombing and other operations, it is also true that SOE periodically made demands for aircraft that they were unable to employ to good effect. Bad weather, poor visibility and inadequate reception arrangements in the field all impeded SD operations from Egypt and North Africa to Yugoslavia, and delayed the initiation of supply sorties from Italy.

The fact is that until 1943 Yugoslavia simply did not assume a level of strategic importance to the Allies that might have justified the allocation of more heavy bombers to SD. Only the decision to invade Italy enhanced the importance of special operations in this theatre and resulted in the provision of more aircraft, after Churchill and other senior government ministers brought pressure to bear on the Air Staff. At the same time it focused Allied attention on the Partisans, who were by far the most important resistance force in Croatia and Slovenia, close to the Italian frontier. But Allied strategic aspirations, notably those of Churchill, at first ran far ahead of practical possibilities. The numerous constraints already described in this paper prevented any very significant expansion of Allied supplies to the Partisans for almost a year. Throughout 1943 Tito's forces were very largely sustained by weapons and ammunition taken from surrendering Italian troops following Italy's capitulation, rather than by supplies received from the Western Allies.[69]

At the end of 1943 strategy at last became more closely aligned with operational feasibility. At the Teheran conference the Allies agreed to support the Partisans (as well as other resistance groups in Western Europe) in order to stretch German forces to the limit in the months before Overlord. The first step towards operational feasibility was taken when Allied air bases were established in Italy, drastically reducing the distance of SD missions to Yugoslavia. Large numbers of transport aircraft — chiefly Dakotas — were then made available for SD operations, and ground reception arrangements in the field were belatedly expanded. Allied air supremacy subsequently permitted continuous daylight operations to be conducted when weather conditions improved in the spring of 1944. Then, and only then, was it possible to deliver a significant volume of airborne supplies to the Partisans.

Within military circles it is almost a truism to say that there is never enough air transport. This is partly because air transport resources are ultimately finite, but it is also because air transport has a way of generating its own demand. The RAF unquestionably began the Second World War with inadequate numbers of transport aircraft, but the transport fleet was steadily enlarged as hostilities progressed, and was by 1942 being augmented by the very much larger fleet of the USAAF. Yet there was never enough air transport: long before specific lift requirements had been fulfilled, new and more ambitious plans emerged, which required still more aircraft. Some of these plans were fully justified by the results achieved — for example, the use of airborne logistics to support Allied armies during the liberation of northwest Europe after June 1944, or to sustain Slim's Fourteenth Army in Burma from 1944 to 1945. Others — particularly large scale airborne operations such as 'Market Garden' and Varsity —

were arguably both extravagant and unnecessary. More than 2,000 aircraft and gliders were employed in the first 'Market Garden' air lift on 17 September 1944, yet it is still frequently maintained that the operation failed because insufficient transport aircraft were available on that day.[70] It would be interesting to know precisely how many aircraft would have been required to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. It repeatedly fell to the Air Staff to inject some realism into this process, as they did, for example, by opposing the formation of a second British airborne division in 1942-43, at a time when the war effort was already stretched to the limit.[71]

The story of the Allied air forces' SD operations over Yugoslavia in the Second World War provides another — albeit far smaller — illustration of this basic pattern. To this day, writers sympathetic to Mihailovic are fond of reiterating SOE's wartime contention that his inactivity resulted in large part from the Allies' failure to keep his forces adequately supplied by air. Clearly, very few aircraft were allocated to SD in the Mediterranean theatre during 1942, but this was at a time when the only suitable aircraft were desperately needed for general bombing operations, for Coastal Command, and for the USAAF. Subsequent well-intentioned efforts by the Air Staff to build up the SD fleet were simply greeted by demands for more, and still more transport aircraft. When the Air Staff sought to balance these demands against the broader requirements of the Allied war effort, Churchill repeatedly intervened on SOE's side. Yet despite SOE's protestations the enlargement of the SD fleet did not produce a very marked improvement in the supply position for many months, because the availability of lift capacity was not in itself enough to ensure that supplies were actually delivered. The lesson is crystal clear: optimistic claims about 'what it might be possible to achieve if only there were more air transport' must be treated with caution. The Air Staff were entirely correct to vet rigorously SOE's repeated requests for more aircraft.

Otherwise, this story contains two basic messages for those with an interest in the provision of air support for special operations. First, the place of special operations within overall strategy must always be established and agreed at the very top level; no room should be left for doubt or dispute about the contribution they are required to make, relative to conventional military activity. This in turn should provide the basis for determining the apportionment of resources, air assets included. In the Second World War the Allies' failure to specify the relationship between special operations and broader strategy until mid-1943 was primarily responsible for the friction that characterised SOE's earlier dealings with the Air Staff. Second, the experience of the Second World War demonstrated that special forces and other covert organisations must have at least some dedicated air transport facilities — thoroughly prepared in peacetime for use in war — and also suggested that these facilities are unlikely to be obtained on the cheap. To the RAF, with its doctrinal emphasis on centralised command, the entire concept of a dedicated SD fleet seemed to imply the undesirable division of resources into 'penny packets'. Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris himself referred to the SD squadrons as 'Mr Dalton's private air force' [72/73] and Portal often questioned the wisdom of assigning aircraft permanently to SD on the basis that they spent much of their time parked around airfields awaiting the right moon periods or weather conditions, or the organisation of reception arrangements in enemy territory. "What is in dispute", he wrote in April 1942, "is whether we can afford to devote their overheads entirely to this special task and get no dividend during the three weeks in the month when they can do nothing."[74] However, as we have seen, experiments in re-tasking aircraft during such periods proved unacceptable to SOE and SIS for quite legitimate operational reasons. The need to maintain at least some dedicated air assets for units like the SAS has since been accepted by the RAF, but still with the caveat that the assets concerned may if necessary be re-apportioned elsewhere.[75]

Notes

[1] Typical examples of this literature include Hugh Verity, We Landed by Moonlight: Secret RAF Landings in France, 1940-1944 (Ian Allen, 1978), KA Merrick, Flights of the Forgotten (Arms and Armour, 1989) and, from a more autobiographical perspective, Wing Commander John Nesbitt-Dufort, Black Lysander (Jarrolds, 1973).

[2] The literature on Allied special operations in Yugoslavia is far too extensive to list comprehensively here, but it can broadly be divided between autobiographies and academic studies. Autobiographies written by those involved stretch from Fitzroy Maclean, Eastern Approaches (Jonathan Cape, 1949) to FWD Deakin, The Embattled Mountain (Oxford University Press, 1971) and on to more recent personal accounts such as Franklin Lindsay, Beacons in the Night: With OSS and Tito's Partisans in Wartime Yugoslavia (Stanford University Press, 1993), and Peter Wilkinson, Foreign Fields: The Story of an SOE Operative (IB Taurus, 1997). From within the academic community research has advanced significantly since the release of the first official British records on wartime Yugoslavia into the National Archives in the 1970s. Important recent contributions to the historiography are Simon Trew, Britain, Mihailovic and the Chetniks, 1941-42 (Macmillan, 1998) and H. Williams, Parachutes, Patriots, and Partisans: The Special Operations Executive and Yugoslavia, 1941-1945 (Hurst & Company, 2003). On the more general history of SOE, see MRD Foot, SOE in France (HMSO, 1966) and SOE in the Low Countries (St Ermin's Press, 2001); and Charles Cruickshank, SOE in the Far East (Oxford University Press, 1983). Secret Intelligence Service activity in Yugoslavia is less well documented but has recently been analysed in detail in Sebastian Ritchie, Our Man in Yugoslavia: The Story of a Secret Service Operative (Frank Cass, 2004) and John Earle, The Price of Patriotism: SOE and MI6 in the Italian-Slovene Borderlands During World War II (The Book Guild, 2005). Many of these accounts provide useful insights into the importance of special duties air operations, but little detailed coverage of air supply or infiltration issues.

[3] David Martin, The Web of Disinformation: Churchill's Yugoslav Blunder (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1990); extract quoted in http://www.meltingpot.fortunecity.com /grenada/543.

[4] Sebastian Ritchie, Our Man in Yugoslavia, pp.76, 88.

[5] Martin Gilbert, Churchill Vol. VII, Road to Victory, 1941-1945 (Heinemann, 1986), p.319.

[6] Ritchie, Our Man in Yugoslavia, pp.42-43.

[7] FH Hinsley, EE Thomas, CFG Ransom and RC Knight, British Intelligence in the Second World War, Vol. 3, Part 1 (HMSO, 1984), pp.137-138.

[8] AHB file II/17/7, Special Duty Operations in Europe (unpublished official narrative, 1946), p.3. The first aircraft were set aside for SD work in the summer of 1940, when 419 Flight was formed at North Weald.

[9] TNA Air 1/2387, AH No. 228/11/53 (3rd Course), memorandum entitled 'My War Experiences', by Flight Lieutenant LGS Payne, undated.

[10] On RAF air transport operations between the wars see C. Cole and R. Grant, But Not in Anger: the RAF in the Transport Role (Ian Allan, 1979), chapters 5-8.

[11] Sir Maurice Dean, The Royal Air Force and Two World Wars (Cassell, 1979), p.80.

[12] AHB file II/17/7, Special Duty Operations in Europe, pp.10-11.

[13] John Terraine, The Right of the Line: The Royal Air Force in the European War, 1939-1945 (Sceptre, 1985), p.266.

[14] Ibid., p.470.

[15] TNA Air 20/7962, AOC-in-C Bomber Command to CAS, 28 March 1942.

[16] TNA Air 20/7954, appreciation on SOE Activities in 1943 by ACAS (P), 28 April 1943, prepared for COS (43) 98th meeting.

[17] TNA Air 20/7954, COS (40) 27 (0), directive entitled 'Subversive Activities in relation to Strategy', 25 November 1940.

[18] TNA Air 20/7962, CAS to DCAS, 1 April 1942.

[19] AHB file II/17/7, Special Duty Operations in Europe, pp.15-16.

[20] Ibid., pp.6-7

[21] TNA Air 20/7962, COS (41), 390th meeting, minute 6; AE to Prime Minister, 7 December 1941; Prime Minister to CAS, 9 December 1941.

[22] TNA AIR 40/2605, ISLD to Minister of State, 28 September 1941.

[23] TNA AIR 40/2659, RAF Resources made available to SIS, 1939-1945.

[24] TNA Air 20/7962, HQ RAF Malta to Air Ministry, 4 January 1942; Plans 1 to D of Plans, 19 January 1942.

[25] TNA Air 20/7962, COS (42) 215, 13 April 1942.

[26] TNA Air 20/7962, DD Plans (O) to D of Plans, 3 February 1942.

[27] TNA Air 20/7954, COS (42) 133 (0), 12 May 1942.

[28] TNA Air 2/8336, History of Special Operations (Air) in the Mediterranean Theatre, p.13.

[29] TNA Air 20/7975, annex to COS (43) 44, 11 February 1944. Between February 1942 and January 1943 just 25 supply sorties were mounted to Yugoslavia.

[30] TNA Air 20/7962, COS (42) 141st meeting, 6 May 1942; TNA Air 20/7975, annex to COS (43) 106 (0), 7 March 1943.

[31] TNA Air 20/7962, ACAS(P) to ACAS(I), 26 April 1942.

[32] AHB file II/17/7, Special Duty Operations in Europe, p.14.

[33] TNA Air 20/7975, annex to COS (43) 44, 11 February 1944.

[34] TNA Air 20/7975, COS (43) 44, note by the Secretary, 11 February 1944, and accompanying annex.

[35] Williams, Parachutes, Patriots, and Partisans, pp.117-118.

[36] Hinsley et al, British Intelligence in the Second World War, Vol. 3, Pt 1, pp.141-147; Gilbert, Churchill VII, pp.318-319.

[37] TNA Air 20/7975, annex to COS (43) 44, 11 February 1944.

[38] TNA Air 20/7975, COS (43) 76 (0), letter and memorandum from the Foreign Office, 20 February 1943; Mideast to Air Ministry, 22 February 1943; COS (43) 44, note by the Secretary, 11 February 1943; COS (43) 94 (0), minute by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Economic Warfare, 22 February 1943.

[39] TNA Air 20/7975, COS (43) 82 (0), 25 February 1943, note by the Chief of the Air Staff; COS (43) 106 (0), Secretary of the COS to the Foreign Office, 7 March 1943.
[40] TNA CAB 80/68, COS (43) 142 (0), memorandum entitled 'The Balkans', 20 March 1943.
[41] Hinsley et al, British Intelligence in the Second World War, Vol. 3, Pt 1, pp.143-144.
[42] TNA Air 20/7954, SOE activities in 1943, appreciation by SOE, based on the directive issued to SOE by the Chiefs of Staff, 21 April 1943.
[43] TNA Air 20/7954, Appreciation on SOE Activities in 1943 by ACAS (P), 28 April 1943, prepared for COS (43) 98th meeting.
[44] AHB file II/17/7, Special Duty Operations in Europe, p.17.
[45] Deakin, The Embattled Mountain, pp.211-213.
[46] TNA Air 20/7975, COS (43) 336 (0), annex 1, Lord Selborne to Prime Minister, 18 June 1943; annex 2, memorandum by SOE entitled 'Situation in Yugoslavia', 18 June 1943.
[47] TNA Air 20/7975, Prime Minister to General Ismay, 22 June 1943.
[48] AHB file II/17/7, Special Duty Operations in Europe, p.57; TNA Air 2/8336, History of Special Operations (Air) in the Mediterranean Theatre, p.12.
[49] TNA Air 20/7975, COS (43) 135th meeting (0), minutes of a War Cabinet staff conference, 23 June 1943.
[50] TNA Air 20/7976, CAS to S of S, 23 July 1943; note by the Chief of the Air Staff, 24 July 1943.
[51] AHB file II/17/7, Special Duty Operations in Europe, Appendix I.3.
[52] FO 371/37615, report by Maclean entitled 'The Partisan Movement in Yugoslavia', 6 November 1943.
[53] Gilbert, Churchill VII, pp.557-558; 561-562.
[54] Williams, Parachutes, Patriots, and Partisans, p.186.
[55] Hinsley et al, British Intelligence in the Second World War, Vol. 3, Pt 1, p.156.
[56] Williams, Parachutes, Patriots, and Partisans, pp.204-209.
[57] Gilbert, Churchill VII, pp.564-565, 571.
[58] AHB file II/17/7, Special Duty Operations in Europe, p.62.
[59] Ibid., pp.79-82.
[60] TNA Air 2/8336, History of Special Operations (Air) in the Mediterranean Theatre, p.5; TNA Air 20/7954, report by Air Commodore Payne, 13 October 1943.
[61] AHB file II/17/7, Special Duty Operations in Europe, pp.58-60.
[62] TNA Air 2/8336, History of Special Operations (Air) in the Mediterranean Theatre, pp.5, 11, 12.
[63] Ibid., p.12.
[64] Ritchie, Our Man in Yugoslavia, pp.78, 86.
[65] AHB file II/17/7, Special Duty Operations in Europe, Appendix I.3.
[66] TNA Air 2/8336, History of Special Operations (Air) in the Mediterranean Theatre, p. 17.
[67] Ibid., p.12; Hinsley et al, British Intelligence in the Second World War, Vol. 3, Pt 1, p.166.
[68] AHB file II/17/7, Special Duty Operations in Europe, Appendix I.3.
[69] Williams, Parachutes, Patriots, and Partisans, pp.173-176.
[70] AD Harvey, Arnhem (Cassell, 2001), p.37.
[71] Lieutenant-Colonel TBH Otway, The Second World War, 1939-1945, Army: Airborne Forces (War Office, 1951), pp.93-94.
[72] TNA Air 20/7962, AOC-in-C Bomber Command to CAS, 28 March 1942.
[73] Hugh Dalton, as Minister of Economic Warfare, was at that time the Cabinet Minister responsible for SOE.
[74] TNA Air 20/7962, CAS to DCAS, 1 April 1942.
[75] See, for example, Royal Air Force Operations, Second Edition (Air Warfare Centre, 2000), chapter 6, section VIII, para 4.