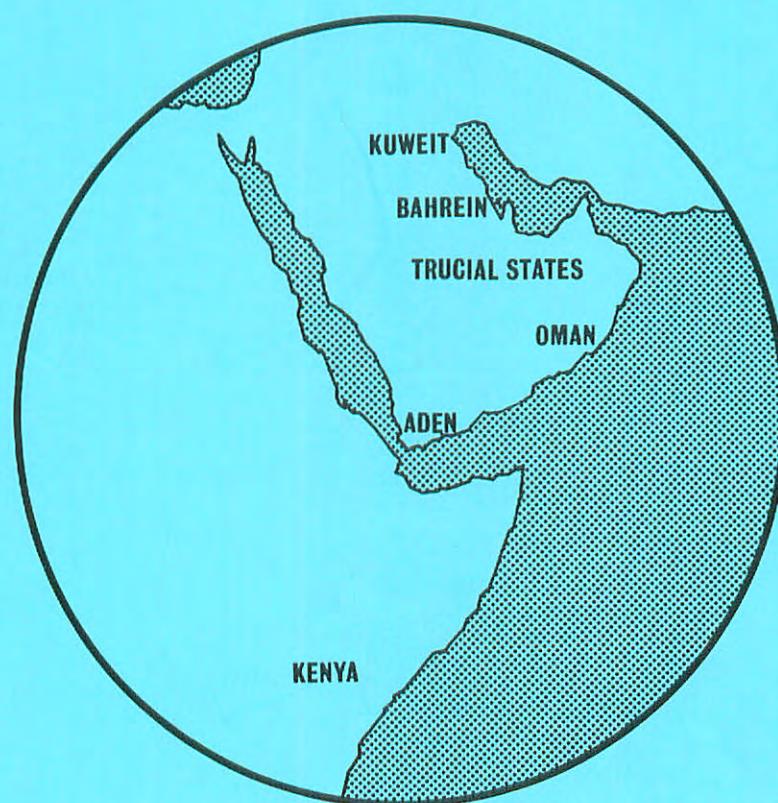


THE RAF IN THE POSTWAR YEARS

THE RAF IN THE MEDITERRANEAN AND MIDDLE EAST 1945-71

Part II: The Southern Tier

Air Chief Marshal Sir David Lee, GBE, CB



Ministry of Defence

AIR HISTORICAL BRANCH (RAF)
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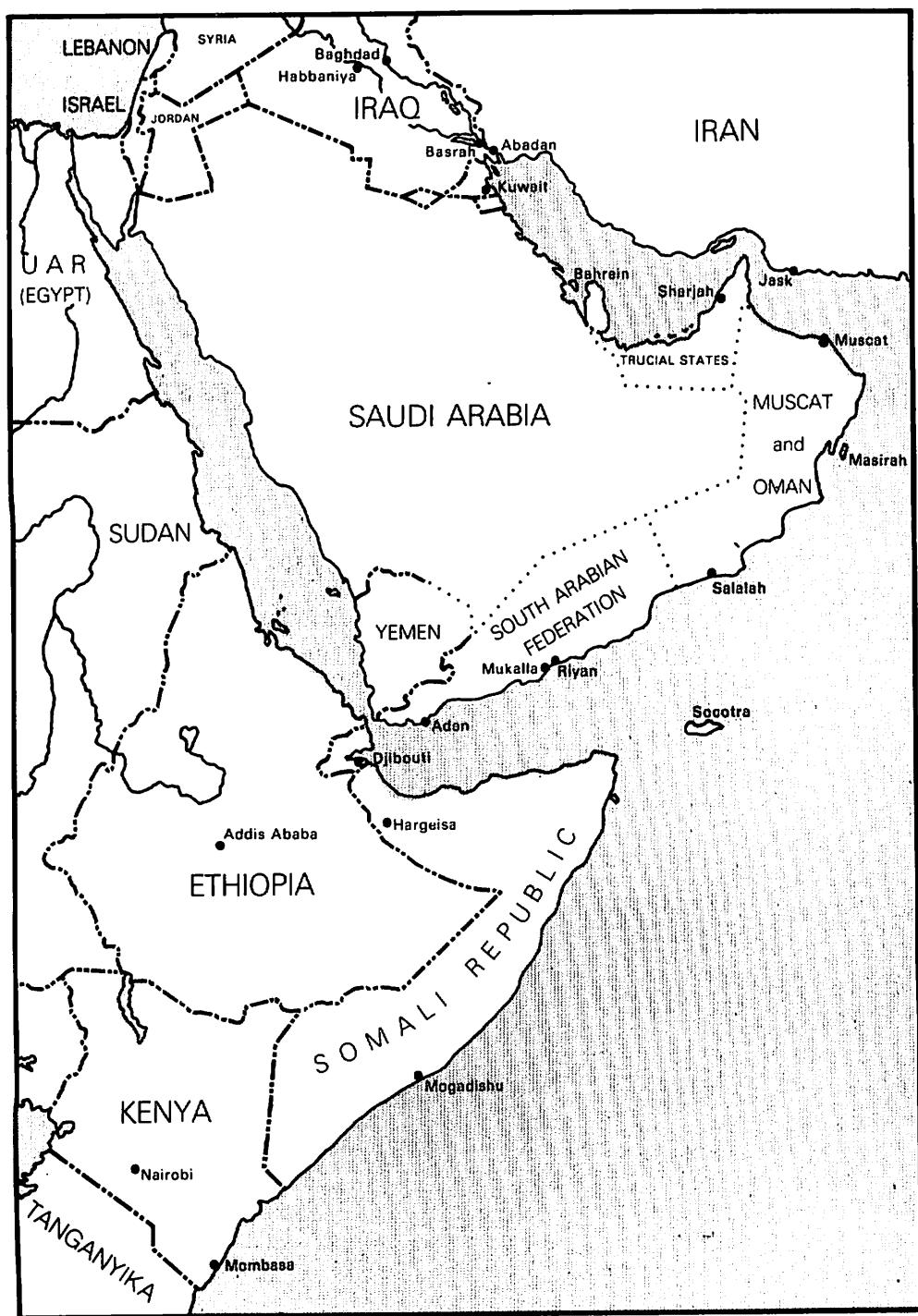
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THE RAF IN THE MEDITERRANEAN AND MIDDLE EAST 1945-71

PART II: THE SOUTHERN TIER



Map I. The Middle East

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EDITORIAL NOTE

The Southern Tier is the first of a series of studies which will survey Royal Air Force operations in the years since the Second World War. For convenience, these operations, vast in scope and varied in kind, have been approached either by role (bomber, fighter, maritime, transport) or by theatre (Germany, the Middle East, the Far East), each being the subject of separate studies. Taken together, they will provide a broad, general picture of the work of the RAF at home and overseas since 1945.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

As a result of political developments in the eastern Mediterranean during the 1950s, the British military command in the Middle East was divided into two separate organisations: Near East Command based in Cyprus and Middle East Command controlled from Aden. It has proved convenient therefore to study RAF activity in these areas since the end of the Second World War in two parts - the Southern Tier comprising the East African and Indian Ocean territories, Aden, the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf; and the Northern Tier, made up of Egypt, Iraq, Palestine and Cyprus.

Once Britain had been denied her base in Egypt - and the Anglo-Iraq Treaty had been abrogated and events had taken their course in Palestine - it was plainly impossible for her to carry out her responsibilities in the area east of Suez from a base in the Mediterranean. And even without these developments the turbulent events in the Arabian Peninsula, East Africa and the Persian Gulf during the decade from 1955 to 1965 would, of themselves, have probably created the need for a separate military command in the area. When the new Middle East Command was created in Aden in 1961, its area of responsibility stretched for some 3,000 miles from Dar-es-Salaam to Kuweit and encompassed some of the most desolate and undeveloped areas in the world.

D J P L

ABBREVIATIONS

AFME	Air Forces, Middle East
AFG	Air Forces Gulf
APC	Armament Practice Camp
APL	Aden Protectorate Levies
BFAP	British Forces, Arabian Peninsula
CBFAP	Commander, British Forces, Arabian Peninsula
DZ	Dropping Zone
FRA	Federal Regular Army (Aden)
JOC	Joint Operations Centre
KPR	Kenya Police Reserve
LST	Landing Ship Tank
NLF	National Liberation Front (Aden)
RATG	Rhodesian Air Training Group
RP	Rocket Projectiles
SAS	Special Air Service
SOAF	Sultan of Oman's Air Force
STOL	Short Take-Off and Landing
TOL	Trucial Oman Levies
TOS	Trucial Oman Scouts
WAP	Western Aden Protectorate

THE AFTERMATH OF WAR

The closing stages of the Second World War necessitated the concentration of the RAF firstly in Central Europe and subsequently in the Far East with the inevitable result that the Middle East, and notably the southern part of it, was largely denuded of operational squadrons. The tide of war had swept past leaving a stagnation of empty airfields and installations but with the controlling headquarters more or less intact and many thousands of technical and administrative officers and airmen with little or no operational role to play and faced only with the disheartening prospect of clearing up the chaos of war. Most of these personnel were on 'wartime only' engagements with the result that the autumn of 1945 found them anxious to get home and demobilised before their more fortunate colleagues in the United Kingdom obtained the best civilian jobs. It had been neither possible nor prudent to begin to run down the Middle East organisation before Japan was defeated: not only were Japanese submarines active in the Indian Ocean but the reinforcement routes to the Far East lay across the Arabian Peninsula and East Africa. However, the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki concluded the war with such unexpected suddenness that the problems of repatriating vast numbers of personnel from the other side of the world with a sadly depleted merchant shipping fleet were formidable and could certainly not be solved as rapidly as Service personnel desired.

Three operational squadrons only remained in the theatre when hostilities ended, together with scattered detachments of an Air/Sea Rescue squadron, three small Meteorological Flights and a handful of communications aircraft. The three squadrons were 249 Squadron equipped with Baltimores at Eastleigh, 621 Squadron with GR Wellingtons and 114 Squadron with Bostons, both at Khormaksar. All these aircraft, if not old by normal standards, had been prematurely aged by rugged wartime service: the Baltimores and Bostons were American Lend-Lease aircraft which were destined to be released at the end of the war and, even if retained for a while, would inevitably suffer from a severe shortage of spares as US sources dried up. It was perhaps fortunate, therefore, that there was little active work for the three squadrons beyond routine training and communications flying concerned with the closing down of the many non-flying units and detachments throughout the theatre.

Small though this force was for the size of the region, it was reduced by the middle of 1946 to one squadron. Post-war reductions in Europe had thrown up large numbers of surplus Mosquitos and it was decided to use these wherever possible to re-equip squadrons which had American aircraft. Although theoretically a sound solution, it ignored the fact that the wooden construction of the Mosquito was far from suitable either for extremely hot, dry conditions or humid, wet conditions. In accordance with this policy 249 Squadron exchanged its Baltimores for the Mosquito FB 6 towards the end of 1945 and, still at Eastleigh, worked up to operational proficiency by fulfilling many photographic survey tasks in East Africa. In June 1946 the squadron was moved to Iraq which had been completely denuded of squadrons, but the climate proved too much for the aircraft which had to be grounded with severe wood shrinkage after a brief period. Similarly 114 Squadron exchanged its Bostons for the Mosquito FB 6 at Khormaksar. It was

somewhat more fortunate with its aircraft than 249 Squadron, but even so, the Mosquito disliked the Aden climate with the result that the squadron was quickly re-equipped again as soon as the Tempest became available. It was most unfortunate that the Mosquito, which had such a magnificent war record, should have been exposed at the end of its life to conditions for which it had not been designed and was unsuitable. However, it filled an important gap between the release of American aircraft and the arrival of more suitable all metal designs.

The third of the theatre's squadrons, 621 Squadron, remained at Khormaksar only until October 1945, being employed almost entirely on transport duties as the need for maritime reconnaissance had virtually disappeared: only an occasional search for a ship in difficulties or a missing aircraft required the use of the Wellingtons in their primary role. Being due for early disbandment, the Squadron moved up into the Mediterranean - to Mersa Matruh - and thence to disbandment.

Throughout the closing months of 1945 and most of 1946, the repatriation of time-expired men provided the main occupation for many of the stations which were not closed down. Transport Command surveyed and brought into use a route to the Far East which made use of the three small stations along the South Arabian coast, namely, Masirah, Salalah and Riyan, which gained for them the title of 'route stations' and established in Aden a major staging post. Every transport aircraft that could be spared worldwide was pressed into service on this and other repatriation routes, to counter the shortage of shipping and to get the men home rapidly. Headquarters 115 Wing (Transport Command) was transferred from Khartoum to Sheikh Othman in Aden and took over control of this airlift which continued unabated until about the end of 1946. This steady flow of men from all three Services through the Arabian Peninsula stations on their way home gave rise to the feeling among RAF personnel that the other two Services were receiving priority in both repatriation and demobilization. So strong was this impression that the AOC Aden raised the issue with Headquarters, Middle East, and it was then admitted by the Government in London that, to some extent, the release of RAF personnel was being held back in view of the need to use every available RAF transport aircraft and the facilities of many RAF airfields to make good the shortage of suitable shipping for repatriation purposes. The AOC was thus able to give an accurate, if not always acceptable, answer to every man in his Command.

Despite the contention by many airmen that their release was unduly delayed, the process of repatriation moved on with such speed that personnel were being removed from units faster than those units could be wound up and closed down, and faster than regular and National Service airmen could be sent out from the UK to take over. The inevitable result was a serious shortage of manpower and much imbalance between the various trades. This made the task of disposing of the millions of tons of equipment, and the thousands of aircraft and transport vehicles, and dismantling of installations extremely difficult. It was well into 1947 before the RAF in the Southern Tier could be said to have cleared away the debris of war and reorganised for its peacetime role.

Fortunately there was negligible operational activity during this period to distract the commanders from their heavy administrative tasks. So widespread had been the ramifications of World War II that no territory or tribe, however small or remote, had escaped its effects. Internal feuds and local problems were forgotten in the preoccupation with the major conflict being waged by the Great Powers. So absorbing had been the spectacle that a period of euphoria was bound to follow while the world returned to normal.

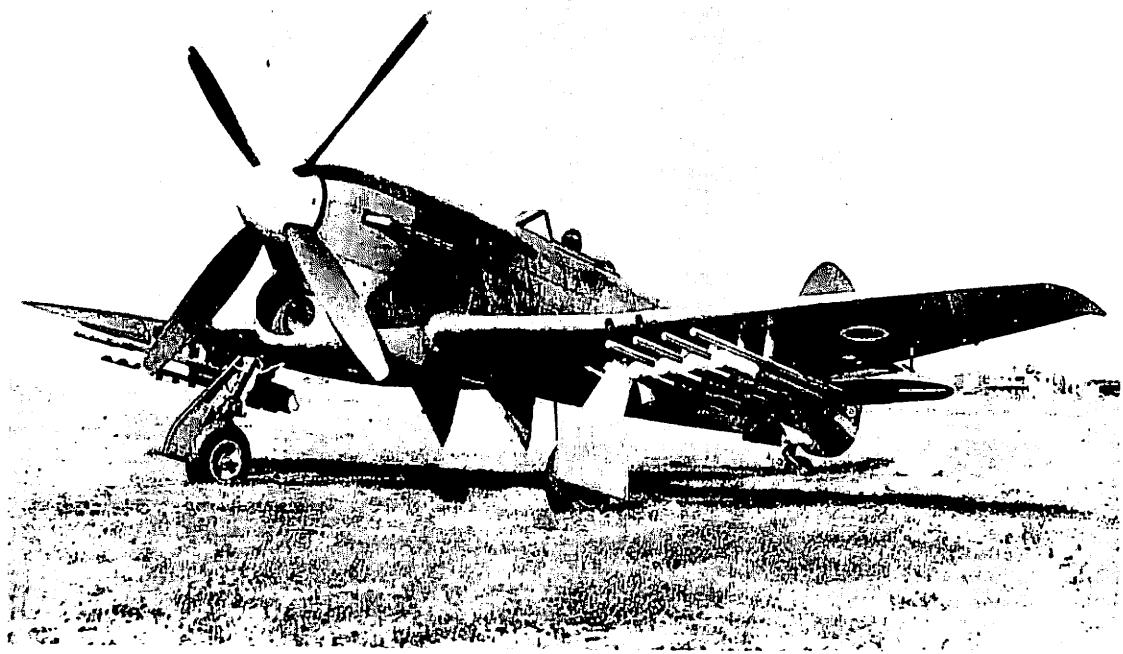
STIRRINGS OF UNREST

Thus it was 1947 before signs of internal unrest began to appear throughout the region. The granting of independence to the Indian sub-continent gave impetus to the tide of nationalism and to the desire for independence which was flowing through so many colonial territories. In East Africa the beginnings of what eventually became the Mau Mau uprising of the 1950s were discernible, and disputes over the Ogaden grazing grounds were creating much dissension between Somaliland and Ethiopia. Life in Aden and its Protectorates was seldom entirely peaceful and sporadic tribal dissidence increased. Around the barren coastlines of the Arabian Peninsula and the entrance to the Persian Gulf, troubles began to beset the Sultan of Muscat, beginning with the short-lived occupation of the coveted Buraimi Oasis by Saudi Arabia, and leading to the uprising by Omani rebels against the Sultan's authority. In the Gulf itself, the protection of Britain's sources of oil became an ever increasing commitment until the threat to Kuwait from Iraq culminated in the crisis of 1961.

Had it been possible to forecast, from the initial rumblings of unrest in 1947, that such widespread trouble would affect the whole theatre for the next twenty years, the RAF would probably not have been allowed to reduce to a single operational squadron, particularly as air power was to play an important part in every phase of future events. In 1947, however, the crystal ball was cloudy and the developments in the Northern Tier, with the Palestine situation and the increasing hostility of Egypt to the British military presence, tended to be the focus of attention.

It was the Western Aden Protectorate (WAP) - that habitual cauldron of tribal unrest - which provided the scene for the first outbreak of dissidence, in 1947. By this time 114 Squadron, with its complement of Mosquito FB 6s had changed its number plate and taken over that of 8 Squadron. This was a logical step as 8 Squadron, which had served at Khormaksar for the whole of its pre-war life, had recently been disbanded in the Far East where it had been sent for a brief period of wartime service. 8 Squadron thus came home to Aden where, in fact, it served continuously for a further twenty years until the final British departure. The tribal operations in 1947 took place in the Dhala area and proved to be well within the capability of the Aden Protectorate Levies (APL) and 8 Squadron to control. Haidara, the rebellious son of the Amir Nasr of Dhala was besieged in a heavily constructed fort on the Jebel Jihaf, a 7,000 foot plateau close to Dhala. The operation to deal with Haidara was noteworthy for the first use of 60lb

rocket projectiles (RP) against a solidly built fort, the walls of which were more than $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet in thickness. The semi-armour piercing heads of the RP created an immense amount of damage, but were not quite man enough for the job. However, an excellent lesson was learned, namely, that fully armour piercing heads were essential against such solid targets. The accuracy of the attacks was excellent and this relatively small operation set 8 Squadron well on the road to becoming one of the most accurate and experienced rocket firing squadrons in the Service, with squadron averages usually measured in feet rather than yards.



Tempest VI of the type used to equip 324 Wing,
6, 8, 213 and 249 Squadrons

The Tempest VI was becoming available at this time and 8 Squadron was one of several Middle East squadrons to be equipped with this rugged single-engined fighter-bomber in place of the Mosquito which had proved a less than satisfactory stop gap. Although the squadron was yet to receive another twin-engined aircraft - the Brigand - there is no doubt that the highly manoeuvrable single-engined single-seat fighter-bomber type proved to be not only the most accurate and steady firing platform under the circumstances in which 8 Squadron operated, but also the best aircraft to penetrate the deep gorges in which so many of the targets were situated. The high speed and fleeting target presented by a small fighter-bomber had the additional merit of making it less vulnerable to small arms fire from the ground.

Some indication of the intensity of a punitive operation, when one became necessary, can be judged from that which was launched against the Mansuri tribe in the Dhala area in October 1948. The action lasted for only three days, but 8 Squadron flew a total of 107 hours on rocket and bombing attacks in that brief period with no more than seven pilots available. 468 RP were fired, resulting in 202 direct hits on target with an assessed average error of 18 feet. It is hardly surprising that the WAP tribes learned to heed the warning leaflets which were invariably dropped shortly before every attack, and also learned to regard the appearance of a Tempest with great respect.

Dependence upon a single operational squadron proved satisfactory as long as the calls upon the RAF remained at a low level, but if unrest occurred in more than one part of the region simultaneously, reinforcement from outside was essential. For this purpose, plans existed for aircraft from 324 Wing, then based at Khartoum and containing three Tempest squadrons, to reinforce 8 Squadron. The first occasion on which these plans were implemented was in August 1948 when the Wing despatched 213 Squadron to Mogadishu to be on hand should an outbreak of rioting in Somaliland require offensive action. This former Italian colony, together with the Ogaden, remained under British administration after the Second World War until such time as a United Nations solution for these territories could be reached. It was the decision to return the Ogaden, the traditional grazing grounds of nomadic tribes, to Ethiopia which brought a sharp reaction, accompanied by rioting, from the Somalis.

213 Squadron carried out many flag waving sorties and a number of fire power demonstrations in preparation for the withdrawal of British troops from the disputed area, which was accomplished without bloodshed during September. The Tempest displayed its long range capability on this occasion by flying some unusually long reconnaissance sorties for a single-seater, one such flight exceeding $4\frac{1}{2}$ hours duration. 213 Squadron returned to a new base at Deversoir, in the Canal Zone, on 20 October after a highly successful detachment which had demonstrated the adequacy of the reinforcement plans. One would have expected a requirement for air action in Somaliland to have been met from HQ RAF East Africa, but so complete had been the post-war rundown that only a few communications aircraft remained at Eastleigh. However, Eastleigh did install signals equipment at Mogadishu for the control of 213 Squadron and generally provided all the necessary supporting facilities.

By the end of 1948 the strength of the RAF in East Africa had fallen to a mere 548 personnel, concentrated almost entirely at Eastleigh. With the rapid reduction of the Service as a whole, it was inevitable that any theatre which was operationally peaceful should bear the brunt of the severe cuts. Eastleigh, however, remained busy as it was an important transit airfield for aircraft en route to Rhodesia and South Africa, both of whose air forces were largely equipped with British aircraft. The opportunity was also taken to carry out complete aerial surveys of the region and the Photographic Reconnaissance Mosquitos of 13 Squadron and the Lancasters of 82 Squadron used Eastleigh for the purpose. The airfield was also the terminus for a number of scheduled transport flights from the Middle East and the UK.

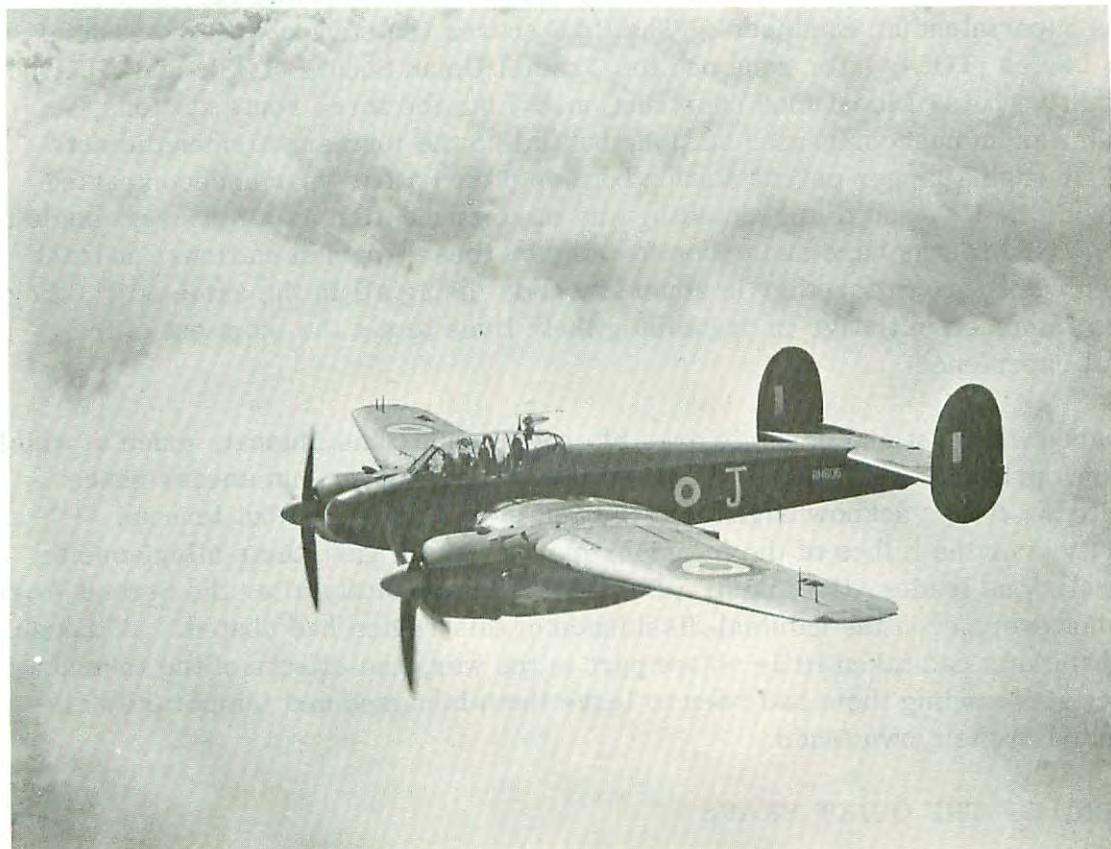
During the next two years the personnel strength declined to an all-time low figure of 267 by the end of 1950, all concentrated on the airfield and including the emasculated Air Headquarters, East Africa. Eastleigh thus became virtually the last stronghold of the RAF in East Africa and, as future events were to show, it was fortunate that this valuable station was not given up altogether as could easily have been the case, so severe was the demand for defence reductions.

Back in Aden the post-war reductions had also continued unabated although somewhat less drastically than in East Africa. Nevertheless Khormaksar, as we have seen, had been reduced to 8 Squadron and a Communications Flight. RAF Steamer Point was reorganised around Headquarters, British Forces in Aden and was gradually converted into the centre of administration for all three Services, and the RAF continued, as in pre-war years, to provide many of the common domestic and technical facilities. It was the beginning of what later became known as the 'agency' system whereby one Service provided and administered certain common user requirements for all the Services, e.g. barrack equipment, food, cold storage, housing, etc. The development of this economical arrangement made Aden the logical base for the first experiment in 'unified command' some 12 years later, in 1960.

The three 'route stations' - Riyan, Salalah and Masirah - which had been brought into prominence by the urgency of repatriating men from the Far East were placed under the control of Khormaksar. Commanded by a Flight Lieutenant with an establishment of one other officer and about 50 airmen, these small stations were not, at that time, self accounting. All personnel were held on Khormaksar's strength and rotated through that station at intervals of about six months. Consequently the route stations provided an unusual and, in many ways, rewarding experience for many airmen. Conditions were primitive, but the climate, particularly on Masirah island, was somewhat more congenial than that of Aden, and the small isolated communities tended to foster an excellent spirit.

Sporadic operations in the WAP, and also in Somaliland, increased in frequency during 1949 and 1950 and this coincided with a decision to re-equip 8 Squadron with the Bristol Brigand, a new light bomber which had been selected for a number of overseas squadrons. The first operation in which it was used occurred in August 1949, necessitating the destruction of a solidly constructed fort which had been illegally built by the Yemenis on the Aden side of the Yemen border at Nagel-al-Marquad. The fort was destroyed efficiently but it was at once apparent that the Brigand was less manoeuvrable in the wadis of the WAP than the Tempest, and that the squadron would need to develop new tactics. It was also immediately apparent that an establishment of eight aircraft was insufficient for the many duties which 8 Squadron had to perform. Being a new design and a twin-engined one at that, it was expected that the Brigand would be a more difficult aircraft to maintain in the exacting conditions of Aden than its single-engined predecessor. Furthermore, it was wasteful to use the Brigand for many tasks in the Protectorates which were well within the capability of less sophisticated aircraft. Consequently a second Flight of 8 Squadron was formed, equipped with a number

of Ansons and appropriately named the Protectorate Support Flight. Not only was this sensible step a relief to the Brigand Flight, but it greatly reduced the calls upon the Aden Communication Flight whose scheduled services and special communication sorties around the Command fully utilised all the available flying hours.



Bristol Brigand of the type used to equip 8 and 84 Squadrons

No mention has so far been made of post-war activity in the area of Muscat, Oman and the Persian Gulf. Until the middle of the 1950s these regions came under the control of AHQ Iraq and were therefore part of the Northern Tier of the Middle East. It was not until the withdrawal of the RAF from Iraq became imminent in 1955 that the transfer of responsibility for the Gulf stations to Aden took place. However, the five years following the end of the Second World War were quiet throughout the region. No squadrons were located in the Gulf which was dependent upon the slender resources of the Iraq stations. As elsewhere, it was a period of reduction and clearing up the debris of war. Many small detachments which had operated facilities concerned with the protection of the military reinforcement route through the Gulf and Persia to Russia were wound up and only the two RAF stations at Bahrein and Sharjah remained to fulfil the peacetime role. The RAF station at Bahrein, situated on the island of Muharraq and joined to Bahrein island by a road causeway, was developing as an international airport, shared with the

RAF on a joint user basis. The runway, navigational aids and other flying facilities were, therefore, good, but the RAF domestic and technical accommodation was primitive in the extreme. The discomforts of life at Bahrain were only exceeded by those of Sharjah which, during the immediate post-war years was extremely uncomfortable. Sharjah, although at times a busy operational station, retained a natural surface runway until the 1960s. With the increasing performance of aircraft the maintenance of this runway became an unenviable responsibility for the Superintending Engineer. The RAF shared the station with the Trucial Oman Levies (TOL), later renamed the Trucial Oman Scouts (TOS), and all lived in primitive huts of local mud construction. Like the three route stations, Sharjah was an unaccompanied station, but unlike the former, airmen did not rotate through a larger parent station but completed a one year unaccompanied tour from the UK, and this counted by way of compensation as a full overseas tour of duty. If life was hard and uncomfortable on these Arabian stations, at least the men were thrown together in adversity and, 'being all in the same boat', they showed immense initiative in organising their lives to get the most out of the unusual experience.

Throughout the vast and desolate area of central Oman and Muscat, much of which was appropriately titled Rub-al-Khali - the Empty Quarter - an uneasy peace prevailed. It was acknowledged that the Sultan of Muscat had but tenuous authority over the tribes of the interior, most of whom gave their allegiance to their religious leader, the Imam. During and immediately after the Second World War, however, even the habitual dissidence of this region had abated. Although the inhabitants had taken little active part in the war, the effects of the immense conflict surrounding them had been to leave them bemused and temporarily disinterested in their own feuds.

THE END OF THE QUIET YEARS

The quiet years which followed the war continued until about 1951. 'Quiet' was, as always in this region, a relative term and the period contained a good deal of muscle flexing around the Arabian Peninsula and in East Africa, which gave a broad hint of events to come. Everywhere was to be seen a growing hostility to colonial domination, a contempt for treaty relationships and objection to the stationing of foreign troops in the homeland. Britain could be thankful that she had been allowed these few years in which to repatriate and demobilize her wartime forces and to redeploy for peace. Whether, in the light of subsequent events, the reduction of the Royal Air Force in the Southern Tier to one operational squadron of eight aircraft, and a handful of communications aircraft, was wise is a matter for conjecture. Admittedly, the emasculated framework of a command structure was retained and, as we have seen in the case of Somaliland, effective plans for reinforcing the region from the Canal Zone existed. Rapid expansion could, therefore, be achieved without much difficulty, but the sheer size of the region and its lack of surface communications placed a considerable strain upon the few Ansons, Austers, Dakotas and Valettes which made up the three Communications Flights. In addition to fulfilling their normal role, they were frequently called upon to assist 8 Squadron in various operational tasks,

such as reconnaissance, leaflet dropping, photography and supply dropping. These unarmed and relatively slow aircraft were occasionally hit by small arms fire, particularly in the WAP and, in all but name, were operational.

For twenty-five years, from the end of 1951, the Royal Air Force was continuously engaged in some form or other of operational activity in the theatre, but fortuitously it was rare for hostilities to be taking place in more than one part of the theatre at the same time. As will be shown this enabled a very small force to be maintained as a 'Garrison' air force but with a high degree of mobility which allowed the flexibility of air power to be impressively demonstrated in peacetime, as it had been with such great effect in various wartime theatres.

MAU MAU

It was in East Africa, the area in which the RAF had been reduced to little more than token representation, that trouble first became evident. The earliest manifestation came in the form of labour unrest both in Kenya and Uganda over pay differentials between African workers on the one hand and Europeans and Asians on the other. The disaffection was fostered by the Kikuyu tribe who nurtured an entirely different grievance concerning large tracts of agricultural land which they erroneously believed had been taken from them by European settlers. Although



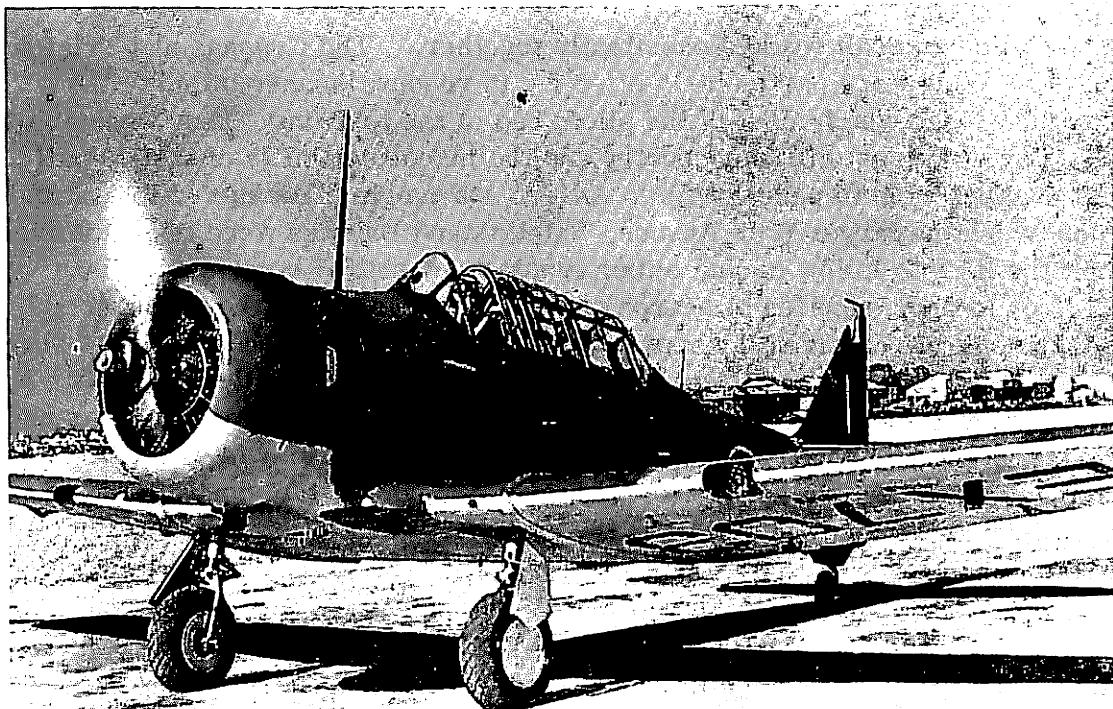
Searching for the tracks of Mau Mau terrorists in the Aberdare
(Soldier Magazine)

the land had been legally acquired and paid for, with deeds properly drawn up, by the settlers, the Kikuyu continued to regard it as their own property, to be returned if and when they needed it. If East African officials had understood the illogical, but nevertheless traditional Kikuyu attitude towards land, it is conceivable that the vicious Mau Mau campaign could have been avoided.

As early as 1948 and 1949 the RAF flew leaflet dropping sorties over various Kikuyu strongholds and over Kampala, in Uganda, using aircraft of the Communications Flight from Eastleigh. 8 Squadron Tempests were brought from Aden and, with Lancasters from 82 PR Squadron, carried out a number of demonstration flights, or flag waves as they were called, over selected centres of unrest. But it was not until 1952 that the period of terror and violence which has become known as the Mau Mau campaign started in earnest. The beginnings of the secret Mau Mau organisation are lost in obscurity and the words 'Mau Mau' themselves mean nothing in any known dialect: some think that they are merely a code name, others that they are an anagram of the Kikuyu words 'uma uma' meaning 'out out!'. The Mau Mau enlisted its supporters by coercing Kikuyu tribesmen to submit to an oath-taking ritual which was not difficult to impose upon an unsophisticated and highly superstitious people. Violence of a particularly horrible kind was directed initially against Africans only, particularly those who either refused to take the oath or who subsequently contravened it. No less than 59 such Africans were murdered between May and October 1952, and so serious was the situation that a State of Emergency was declared on 21 October, a date which marks the official opening of the campaign. All known Mau Mau leaders, including Jomo Kenyatta, were taken into custody and some were immediately flown up to the Northern Frontier Province in Ansons of the Communications Flight. This Flight, comprising two Ansons, one Valetta and one Proctor was the only RAF flying unit then in East Africa, but the Kenya Police possessed a valuable Police Reserve Air Wing of light civil aircraft, commanded by an ex-RAF Wing Commander and based at Nairobi West civil airfield. This Wing was immediately mobilized and was to prove invaluable throughout the Emergency.

However, this handful of unarmed aircraft was totally inadequate to meet the calls for reconnaissance, leaflet dropping, casualty evacuation and communication sorties. In addition the need for accurate and discriminate offensive air action became evident and this requirement was met in a novel way. The Rhodesian Air Training Group was in process of winding up at the time and, early in 1953, it was decided to use some of the Harvards thrown up by the RATG, fitting them with front guns and light series bomb racks, to form a special Flight for offensive use against Mau Mau. 1340 Flight was thus formed, initially with four Harvards, in Rhodesia and flew into Eastleigh for training on 23 March 1953. After a brief period of working up the Flight was deployed up country to Mweiga to join the Police Wing on a small but adequate airstrip close to the main operational areas which were broadly the Aberdare Forest region and the jungle country around Mount Kenya. The effect of the declaration of a State of Emergency and the relentless pressure on the terrorists from Army and Police which followed it caused the Mau Mau gangs to retreat to these two densely forested areas to re-group under new leaders hastily appointed to replace those apprehended by the

Government. From the jungle hideouts the gangs sallied forth to pillage and murder Africans and Europeans alike. Some appalling atrocities were perpetrated on isolated farms and in villages and it soon became clear that the extermination of the gangs would be a long and costly business.



Harvard of the type used to equip 1340 Flight

In these circumstances it was decided to form a new military command in Kenya, specifically to control the forces which were being rapidly built up to deal with the situation. Although the Governor retained his overall responsibility as Commander-in-Chief, it must be remembered that only one sixth of Kenya was affected by the Emergency: some delegation of operational control was therefore advisable and General Sir George Erskine was appointed to the new command, with the title of Commander-in-Chief, East Africa.

As the land forces increased with the arrival of several more British infantry battalions from the United Kingdom, it became increasingly possible to confine the terrorist gangs to the densely wooded areas of the Aberdares and Mount Kenya and, under these circumstances, General Erskine realised that air action could be used to greater advantage than had previously been practicable. 1340 Flight was doubled in size to eight Harvards and the Commanding Officer of Eastleigh - at that time Group Captain D J Eayrs - became the overall commander of all air

forces committed to the campaign, including the aircraft of the Police Air Wing, whose own CO - Wing Commander Robin Johnson - assumed tactical command in the operational area. He operated from a Joint Operations Centre established on the Mweiga airstrip. From that moment land/air operations were planned and executed on traditional lines and a long campaign of attrition commenced.

RAF and Police aircraft worked excellently together. The Cessnas and Tri-Pacers of the Police Wing were particularly effective in reconnaissance owing to the intimate knowledge which most of the pilots had of the terrain. They were able to identify targets in most difficult country and the manoeuvrability of their small aircraft enabled them to penetrate into valleys and jungle clearings at low altitudes, tasks for which the larger RAF Ansons, Valettes and Dakotas were less suitable. This left the RAF to follow up and either to attack identified targets with the Harvards or to drop supplies to search parties on pre-arranged dropping zones. Much of the operational area lay above 7,000 feet which placed considerable restriction upon the smaller and lower powered aircraft: even the Harvards not infrequently found themselves committed to a land-locked valley and many were the stories of extremely narrow escapes from disaster in their determination to press home an attack. In spite of these hazards, many of the most effective patrols were carried out at night when the camp fires of the terrorists tended to betray their positions.

This 'cat and mouse' campaign continued throughout 1953 and it became evident that the unrelenting pressure on the gangs was having the desired effect, particularly in the Aberdares where small bodies of troops were maintained in forest locations, supplied by air and supported by strikes which could often arrive within a few minutes of a suitable target being reported back to Mweiga. So successful were General Erskine's tactics that he was allocated a further brigade of two battalions which was flown out to Eastleigh in a fleet of RAF Hastings, civil Yorks, Hermes and Argonauts. The great value of Eastleigh was apparent when it was called upon to handle 41 four-engined aircraft and 1,300 troops within a period of a few days. Quite apart from the congestion on this relatively small station, the problems of maintaining its red dirt 'murrum' runways with the constant pounding received from heavy four-engined aircraft were immense. It says much for the Air Ministry Works Directorate staff that, throughout the four years of the Emergency, Eastleigh airfield was never unserviceable for more than a few hours at a time, after unusually heavy rains.

The addition of the two battalions of 49 Brigade brought General Erskine's forces up to their peak strength of eleven battalions, 21,000 Police, the Kenya Regiment, the Kikuyu Home Guard and the Royal Air Force. The operational pressure could now be intensified and it was decided to step up air action once again. 1340 Flight was working at maximum intensity: during the month in which 49 Brigade arrived, its eight aircraft flew 332 offensive sorties, dropping 2,555 x 20lb fragmentation bombs and firing 97,760 rounds of ammunition. It was clear that the 20lb bomb, which was the only one which the Harvards could carry, was not powerful enough for effective use in the jungle: it had been designed primarily for use against bodies of men in the open and, in consequence, had little penetrating power. In

order to try out the effect of heavier bombing a request was made for some of the Lincolns of Bomber Command to be diverted to Kenya from their periodic detachments to the Canal Zone which were known as 'Sun Ray' detachments. Initially two Lincolns were sent to operate from Eastleigh and so successful were their trials against jungle targets that, at the end of 1953, it was decided to maintain a detachment of six Lincolns at Eastleigh, drawn from Bomber Command squadrons in rotation. As can be imagined, it was to prove an unusual and most instructive diversion for the crews of these squadrons who found the climate of Kenya and the operational activity much to their liking.



Lincoln of 61 Squadron, Bomber Command, on
Mau Mau operations

The stepping up of air action necessitated better land/air co-ordination than had hitherto existed, with the result that a new Joint Operations Centre incorporating a number of Air Staff officers was set up at GHQ East Africa. This in turn postulated a need for more comprehensive photographic reconnaissance if the Lincoln effort was to be accurately and economically directed. After an unsuccessful attempt by the Lincolns themselves to provide the required information by vertical photography, a permanent detachment of two Meteor PR 10s was established at Eastleigh with the necessary processing and interpretation facilities alongside the JOC. Finally, tests were made with speech broadcasting or 'sky shouting' over the jungle using Austers and a Pembroke equipped with powerful

loud speakers, as used with great success in the Malayan campaign. Although this form of psychological warfare was to be successful later in the campaign, the terrorist gangs were not yet receptive to it in 1953, but the potential was available to be used when needed. Thus, the beginning of 1954 found the following aircraft committed to the campaign, and this force was to remain more or less unchanged throughout:

- Six Lincolns detached from Bomber Command
- Eight Harvards of 1340 Flight
- Two Austers and one Pembroke for 'sky shouting'
- One Sycamore helicopter for casualty evacuation
- Four communications aircraft
- Thirteen KPR Wing light aircraft

1954 was notable for the successful use of the medium bombers. The detachments drawn from all the Lincoln squadrons in Bomber Command in turn operated entirely from Eastleigh, and each detachment returned to the UK after about two months thus ensuring that no major servicing had to be undertaken away from the home base of the aircraft. As was to be expected, there was considerable political sensitivity about bombing on such a heavy scale, despite the appalling atrocities perpetrated by the Mau Mau gangs at every opportunity. Consequently the strictest control was necessary to ensure that centres of terrorist activity were identified accurately and that the programme of bombing was confined to these targets. This control was achieved by delineating Prohibited Areas to which bombing was restricted after the security forces had taken precautions to ensure that no innocent persons were in them. By September 1954 the intensity of bombing had risen to a peak: in that month the Lincolns of 214 Squadron flew 159 day and 17 night sorties, dropping 2,025 x 500lb bombs and firing no less than 77,850 rounds from their turrets. So successful were the results judged to be that the Commander-in-Chief gave priority to the bombing over ground operations for a period of four months in preparation for a major land forces sweep through the Aberdare Forest region planned for the end of the year. With their hideouts suffering from intensive air attack and with the area ringed with alert troops, the Mau Mau gangs began to surrender in increasing numbers and their stories as they left the jungle indicated that morale was being seriously affected by the bombing. As the security forces began to gain the upper hand in the Aberdares, General Erskine switched attention to the region around Mount Kenya and the same tactics were followed.

By a stroke of good fortune early in 1954, the Commander-in-Chief of the Mau Mau forces in the Mount Kenya area, 'General China', was slightly wounded and captured during a skirmish. His subsequent interrogation disclosed a great deal about the organisation that supported Mau Mau forces in the field. This took the form of a Passive Wing which operated in Nairobi and other towns and villages and supplied all the needs of the forest gangs. The information gained from 'General China' permitted a major operation to destroy the Passive Wing to be

mounted. On 24 April 1954 no less than 25,000 men of the security forces launched the operation in Nairobi. 30,000 Kikuyu were interrogated in the city alone, of whom more than 16,000 were detained. After Nairobi other main centres of population were similarly treated and, in a matter of weeks, all support for the gangs had been stopped and they were left to fend for themselves in the forest. The RAF could play little direct part in this clean up of the Passive Wing, although a number of RAF Police and RAF Regiment personnel did participate. Indirectly, however, assistance was given by intensifying the bombing and harassment of the gangs to allow the maximum number of troops to be released for the operation in the towns, and to compel the Mau Mau to keep on the move and to use up their valuable supplies.

After one final intensive effort by both ground and air forces during the early months of 1955, it was clear that the successful destruction of the Passive Wing organisation had broken the power of the forest gangs and the time had come to start mopping up by means of large-scale sweeps through the operational areas. The bombing effort by the Lincolns was reduced until the final attack took place in June: the detachment was then run down to four aircraft and, although they remained available for a few more months, they were allowed to participate in other operations as far distant as the Western Aden Protectorate. Similarly the photographic reconnaissance effort was reduced, a welcome move as the two Meteor PR 10s detached from 13 Squadron had, during an eight-month period, taken the majority of the photographs which resulted in no less than 250,000 prints being made and distributed for target planning and other intelligence purposes.

General Erskine had pursued a relentless offensive policy and, before handing over to Lieutenant General Sir Gerald Lathbury, he told an assembled audience of RAF personnel of the great success and economy of the bombing campaign. Had this air action not been taken, he declared, he would have required another brigade of infantry or three regiments of artillery: neither would have achieved such good results, and both would have been more expensive. This was a valuable vindication of the air effort expended which had not been without its critics in London.

Psychological warfare began to come into its own as morale among the gangs showed signs of cracking: the 'sky shouting' Pembrokes and Austers were used on every possible occasion, supported by leaflets calling upon the Mau Mau to come out of the forest. Some of those who had surrendered earlier were trusted to go back to persuade others to give themselves up. These tactics were increasingly successful, and it was soon possible to withdraw 1340 Flight from Mweiga back to Eastleigh and on 30 September 1955 it was disbanded as quickly and unobtrusively as it had been formed exactly $2\frac{1}{2}$ years earlier. It had provided an excellent lesson in versatility, in adapting a standard training aircraft for an operational role by simple modification, and thus avoiding the need to bring in expensive and sophisticated fighters. The Police Reserve Wing also removed the light armament which had been fitted to its Cessnas and Tri-Pacers and reverted to its usual roles of reconnaissance and supply dropping after playing an invaluable part in the campaign.

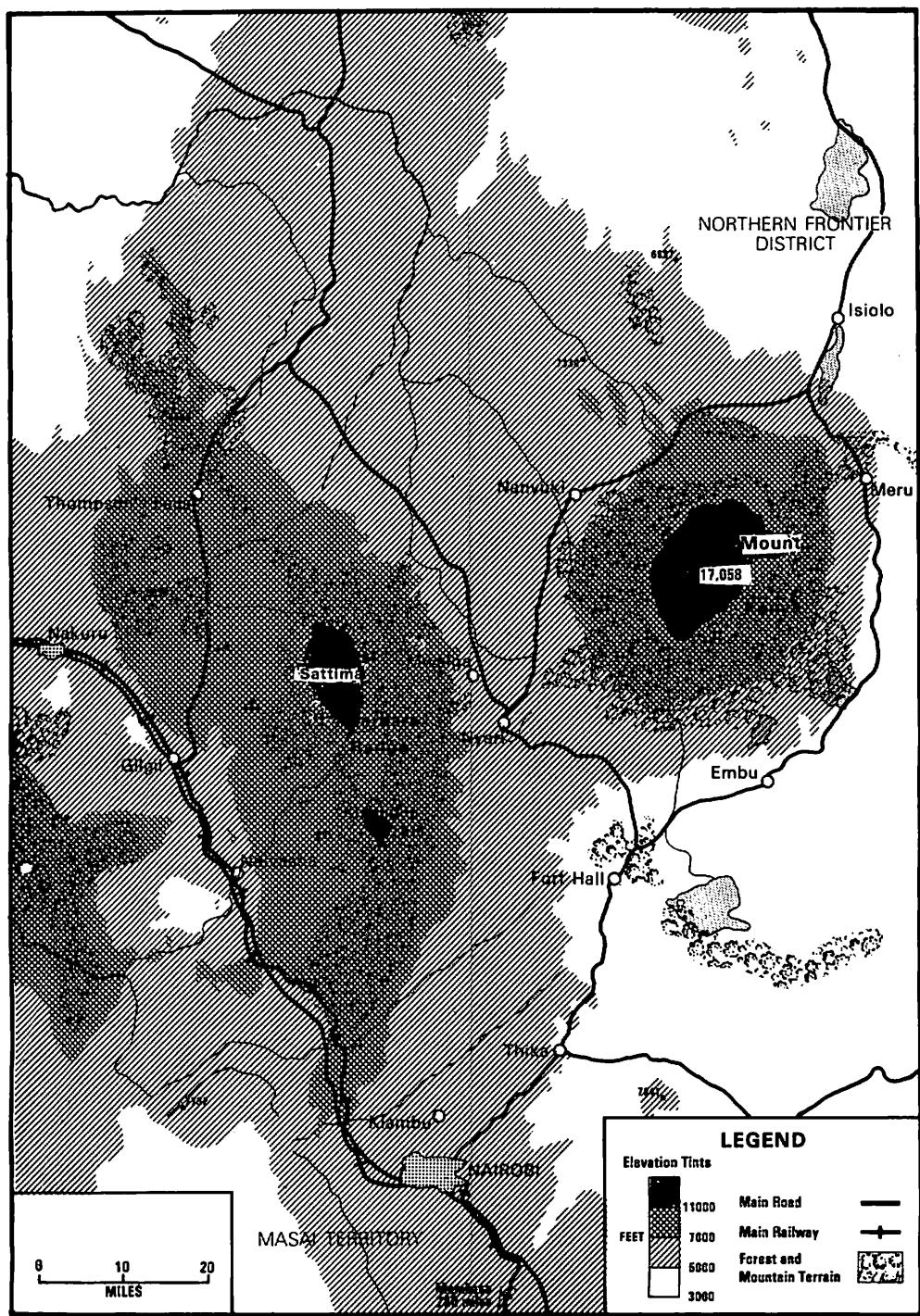
Although final mopping up operations continued a little longer, the end of 1955 marked the conclusion of the main RAF participation. The end was as indeterminate as the beginning: there was no surrender and no victory parade. The State of Emergency which was not, in fact, terminated until 12 January 1960, simply dissolved imperceptibly into a condition of peace and normality. For the Royal Air Force it was the end of another internal security episode in which the Service had combined smoothly with the land forces who had set the pattern of operations. Prior to these operations the RAF in East Africa had been reduced to insignificance, but Eastleigh had been retained and its value as an air base confirmed, a fact which was to be remembered with gratitude later when East Africa was to become the base for part of Britain's strategic reserve.

TRUCIAL OMAN DISPUTES

While the Mau Mau campaign was being fiercely fought out in Kenya, the quiet post-war years in the Arabian Peninsula had come to an end. It was within the 82,000 square miles of Muscat and Oman, and the Trucial States, that trouble involving Britain in general and the Royal Air Force in particular first flared. The boundaries between Saudi Arabia on the one hand and Oman and Abu Dhabi on the other had never been precisely drawn and agreed. Britain and many other countries tended to regard the Riyadh Line, which had been offered to King Ibn Saud in 1935, as the frontier but there were countless variations of this line used in negotiations from time to time. For three quarters of a century the exact whereabouts of the frontier in such barren and featureless desert were unimportant but the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia changed the situation completely, particularly as prospecting teams believed that the Trucial States and parts of Oman possessed considerable quantities of oil.

Within the general problem of frontier demarcation, the oasis of Buraimi posed a particular problem. The oasis consisted of eight small villages, six of which belonged to Abu Dhabi and two to the Sultan of Muscat. The whole complex forms a 'desert crossroads' with a plentiful water supply and is regarded as a main point of entry to central Oman from the ports of the Trucial coast.

As King Ibn Saud gradually moulded the kingdom of Saudi Arabia into its present form after the First World War, he became more and more attracted to gaining an outlet on the Persian Gulf near the Trucial coast, and also a point of entry to Oman. Thus the oasis of Buraimi, particularly after the discovery of oil in its vicinity, became an important strategic focus. During the early 1950s inconclusive boundary discussions took place between Saudi Arabia and Britain and the stalemate was only broken when, on 31 August 1952, a Saudi Arabian government official, Turki-bin-Ataishan, accompanied by an escort of 40-80 armed men arrived at Hamasa, one of the oasis villages in Muscat territory, having violated Abu Dhabi territory on his way there.



Map II. Mau Mau affected area of central Kenya

Although it would have been easy enough to throw out the intruders by force and the Sultan was prepared to do so, the British Government counselled against such action in order to avoid bloodshed and a serious deterioration of relations with Saudi Arabia. Instead a force of Trucial Oman Levies (TOL) moved from Sharjah into the Abu Dhabi part of Buraimi and a Flight of Vampires from 6 Squadron at Habbaniya moved to Sharjah. During the following few weeks the Vampires flew a number of low-level sorties over the oasis and a Valetta dropped leaflets urging the villagers to remain loyal to their rulers, and to repulse the blandishments of the invaders. Not unexpectedly this action was met with strong protests from the Saudis who proposed a standstill agreement while boundary negotiations continued. The British Government reluctantly agreed to this proposal but not only did Saudi Arabia's extravagant demands make any form of settlement impossible but Turki used the hiatus to ingratiate himself further with the Buraimi tribes.

Negotiations dragged on with no success, but steps were taken to reinforce the TOL from Aden and consideration was given to a more permanent deployment of aircraft to Sharjah. The Vampire had two disadvantages in these circumstances - its endurance was too short for the task and its low-slung jet efflux played havoc with the natural sand surface of Sharjah's runway. Lancasters were considered as an alternative but availability was the problem here: the only ones in the Command were the PR Lancasters of 683 Squadron which were engaged in a survey task in Iraq and Persia. When completed the squadron was due to disband. There were maritime Lancasters in Malta and a number still in Bomber Command. While various alternatives were being considered, an RAF Armoured Car squadron was despatched from Iraq to reinforce the TOL, and the Vampires of 6 Squadron continued to fly occasional sorties over the oasis.

As it became clear that Turki was not going to leave Buraimi as the result of negotiation, other methods of ousting him were considered. The use of force was again discarded and it was decided to blockade the oasis in an endeavour to prevent supplies reaching the Saudi party. Although a costly and time consuming solution, it was hoped that it would demonstrate Britain's determination, meanwhile leaving the offer of arbitration open. A glance at the map might give the impression that the oasis was an impossible place to blockade. That, however, was not quite true. All supplies had to travel either by slow camel caravan or by the few available and suitable vehicles using a limited number of defined tracks through the desert. The task of keeping these tracks under surveillance was tedious but not impracticable, but it would have to be undertaken from the air so great were the distances involved. And so a form of aerial blockade was decided upon, based on the inspection of every caravan track within 200 miles of the oasis at least once in seven days. All suspicious sightings would be reported by the aircraft to strategically placed detachments of TOL and RAF armoured cars which would intercept and interrogate the suspects.

The blockade was initiated at the end of March 1953 using the Vampires of 6 Squadron, assisted by a number of Valettas and Ansons from the Communications Flights at Bahrein and Khormaksar. The old Sharjah bogey of runway erosion quickly raised its head as the Vampires began intensive operations. As an experiment four Meteor PR 9s from 208 Squadron in the Canal Zone were tried out and, although their efflux caused less damage to the runway, they still created an extremely difficult maintenance problem for the Resident Engineer and his airfield staff. In addition it soon became evident that the short endurance of the jet fighters made it almost impossible for the few aircraft available to cover the area required by the blockade plan.

By the end of April a decision to use maritime Lancasters from 37 and 38 Squadrons in Malta had been made and four aircraft took over the Meteors' task, based upon Habbaniya, but operating from Sharjah. The blockade called for 180 hours flying per month, and this could be achieved by the four Lancasters with some assistance from Valettas and Ansons. It was, however, a major diversion of NATO maritime aircraft whose presence was needed in the Mediterranean and, not unnaturally, the Air Staff was irritated not only by the diversion of aircraft to an unaccustomed role, but by the departure from the well tried and proven principles of control by air which the blockade necessitated. In spite of the heavy expenditure, of flying hours, the British Government clung to the hope of resolution of the Buraimi problem by negotiation and refused to allow any form of offensive air action after the customary warning by leaflets, a method which had previously proved both effective and economical in many theatres.

The Lancasters could not be spared from the Mediterranean indefinitely and a better solution had to be found. An assorted collection of Valettas and Ansons, and the occasional PR Lancaster from 683 Squadron filled the gap left by the return of the 37 and 38 Squadron aircraft to Malta in July until a welcome decision was made to form a new Flight of Ansons to undertake a somewhat reduced blockade proposed by the Political Resident, Persian Gulf. The limited endurance and slow speed of the Ansons made it desirable to economise in flying hours by rehabilitating a disused airstrip on the Trucial coast to the west of Abu Dhabi, at Tarif. The Ansons could refuel and, if necessary, stay over night at Tarif, thus prolonging the reconnaissance flights which were replanned to suit the new aircraft. Thus did 1417 Flight come into existence at Bahrein in September 1953, with an establishment of five Ansons and one in reserve. The dull and fatiguing routine of blockade flying continued into 1954. Little was seen and there appeared to be no serious attempts to break the blockade. The Buraimi area is one of the hottest places in the world and the hot weather of 1954 was particularly trying. The discomfort of flying the low-level reconnaissance was intense and there was little air conditioning for the troops at Sharjah and none at Tarif. Consequently the news that Saudi Arabia and Britain had agreed to withdraw their respective forces from Buraimi except for a small party of 15 policemen, while arbitration took place, was greatly welcomed when it was received in July. The Tarif detachment retired to Sharjah and 1417 Flight stood by at Bahrein while the negotiators struggled on

throughout the remainder of the year without discernible success. In fact there were indications early in 1955 that the Saudi detachment at Buraimi was being reinforced beyond the agreed ceiling of 15 men, and there were also reports that Turki-bin-Ataishan had been seen with an armed party inside Central Oman, well to the south of the oasis near the villages of Mug shin and Shishur.

At the request of the Sultan of Muscat, who was disturbed by these reports, reconnaissances of the Riyadh Line were initiated, and carried out by Valettas from Aden which, using Salalah for refuelling, were better placed to undertake the flights than the Ansons of 1417 Flight. Nothing was seen on these flights although that was no guarantee that frontier violation was not taking place. It would have been easy to miss seeing a small party in the vast, desolate sand hills of the Empty Quarter. What was clearly identified, however, was the build up of the Saudi party in Buraimi and this, coupled with the procrastination of the Saudi negotiators, hardened Britain's attitude to a point at which it was decided to mount a swift operation to expel the Saudi party from the oasis without further delay. Although such action would undoubtedly arouse diplomatic fury, it was hoped that the isolation and relative unimportance of the oasis in world affairs would make this short lived.

A small Tactical Air Headquarters was set up under a Wing Commander at Sharjah on 25 October 1955, less than twenty-four hours before the operation took place. Two Lincolns, on detachment from 7 Squadron of Bomber Command, two Valettas, two Pembrokes and two Ansons from 1417 Flight were allocated and the Venoms of 6 Squadron were placed on call should offensive air action be required, although this was not expected. Two parties of TOL entered Buraimi before dawn on 26 October and shortly afterwards, a Valetta and a Pembroke landed on Buraimi airstrip, the former to bring out prisoners and the latter to evacuate casualties. The operation went according to plan and the Saudi detachment capitulated after some show of force, the leader being wounded in the leg while trying to escape with a tin box which was later found to contain 150,000 Rupees.

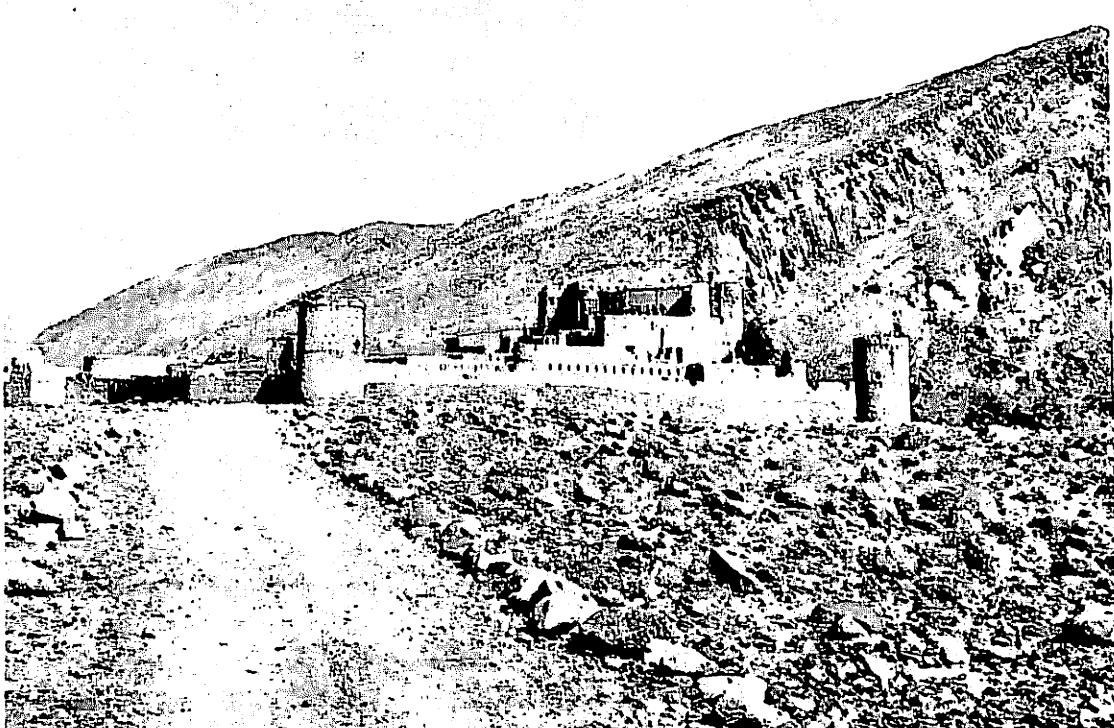
There was no reaction from Saudi Arabia to this swift stroke but Lincolns maintained reconnaissance patrols to the west of the oasis for some time to cover the most likely approaches, and the TOL at Sharjah were temporarily strengthened with a British infantry company flown in from Bahrein. The operation ended with the Saudi party being transferred to Bahrein and then flown back to Saudi Arabia in a civil aircraft.

DISPUTE IN CENTRAL OMAN

After her failure to gain control of Buraimi, Saudi Arabia, using the old pretext of the disputed boundary, directed her attention towards central Oman and encouraged the religious leader of the tribes, the Imam Ghalib, in his opposition towards his rightful ruler, the Sultan of Muscat, which had for many years made the Sultan's authority in the desolate interior of the country almost negligible. But the Sultan, doubtless encouraged by the success at Buraimi, and by the support given to him by Britain considered the time ripe to tackle the Imam and to impose his authority upon the interior.

The Imam, with his brother Talib and his two most faithful lieutenants, was known to be at Nizwa. The Sultan proposed to march on Nizwa with his own forces and expected to be able to oust Ghalib and his followers with little opposition. Britain supported this plan and offered to hold one squadron of the TOL on short call at Sharjah with Valettas to fly them to Nizwa as reinforcements if needed. The Pembrokes and Ansons of 1417 Flight would also be available, as would fighters of 6 Squadron should offensive air action be needed.

Nizwa was duly occupied on 15 December without serious opposition and the Imam capitulated and retired to his village nearby. Unfortunately his brother, Talib, escaped the net and fled to Rostaq where he had a considerable following and, although the Sultan's forces followed him up and invested Rostaq, he again escaped into the mountains and was to become the Sultan's chief adversary in the event which followed. 1417 Flight carried out reconnaissance and other tasks during this operation and were the first aircraft ever to land at Nizwa on a roughly cleared strip which proved extremely hazardous for the pilots but which was later transformed into a passable airfield. Neither the TOL (who now changed their name to Trucial Oman Scouts (TOS)), nor the aircraft of 6 Squadron were needed, and the Sultan enhanced his authority considerably in the important Nizwa area.



A typical fort in central Oman. (Soldier Magazine)

However, Talib was still at large, and it was at this point that Saudi Arabia invited him to a conference at Damman, the outcome of which was the founding of an Omani Liberation Army and the offer to train Talib's followers in guerrilla warfare at Damman, an offer which many Omanis accepted and which caused the Sultan much trouble thereafter. Meanwhile the air patrols along the Riyadh Line were taken over by a detachment of Lincolns, whose presence proved so valuable that they were formed into an independent Flight - 1426 Flight - based temporarily at Bahrein. The value of their work lay in the fact that early suspicions about border violations continued to be heard and on at least one occasion oil prospecting parties were identified within Oman territory and had to be warned off by leaflet. The deadly dull task of flying up and down the imaginary line continued throughout 1956: the eye strain caused by peering down into the glare of the desert for several hours at a time was considerable, and to this was added the excessive heat and turbulence at the low height at which the patrols had to be carried out. The task would have been more endurable had it been enlivened by interesting sightings, but itinerant camels formed the bulk of the movement seen.

It was not until June 1957 that events again stirred in central Oman. On the 14th of that month, Talib was reported to have landed on the coast near Muscat with a quantity of arms and land mines. With several hundred followers he moved into the mountainous region of the Jebel Kaur where he occupied a number of fortified towers. The Sultan attempted to dislodge him using only tribal levies and the task proved too difficult with the result that the Sultan was compelled to fall back upon Nizwa and was again in some danger of losing control of Oman.

Britain was placed in a quandary: she was reluctant to become deeply involved in the Sultan's affairs and to commit British forces to assist in his operations. If, however, the Sultan lost control of central Oman, Saudi Arabia would be quick to follow up the advantage gained by her protege, Talib, and might make a fresh attempt to seize Buraimi. As the heavily built fortified towers occupied by Talib were the likely targets for attack, British assistance would have to be in the form of offensive air action and, fortuitously, this type of action was likely to arouse less comment than the commitment of British troops. There was also available much experience, particularly in the Aden squadrons, of attacking this type of target. With some reluctance, therefore, the British Government decided to support the Sultan with a force of Venoms and Shackletons from Khormaksar, the action to be under the control of the Commander, British Forces, Arabian Peninsula (CBFAP) who had taken over from the AOC Iraq control of all operations in the Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf.

Venoms from 8 and 249 Squadrons with four Beverleys (which were new to the theatre), two Shackletons and a Valetta assembled at Sharjah and Bahrein. Photographs of all the fortified towers thought to be occupied by Talib's followers were taken by the Shackletons, followed by visual checks from the Pembrokes to see whether the Sultan's distinctive red flag was being flown from any of them. A plan was drawn up to attack the towers at Izki, Nizwa, Tanuf, Birkat al Mauz, Bakhla

and Firq with Venoms on successive days, commencing on 24 July after leaflet warnings had been dropped by Shackletons 48 hours in advance of each attack. Each attack was carried out as planned by ten or twelve Venoms. Their rocket attacks were extremely accurate and, although all the towers were not destroyed, they were made completely uninhabitable. As soon as this phase was completed, an area thought to harbour most of the dissidents was proscribed and patrolled continuously by Venoms and Shackletons, firing at all movements within the area. The effect, after about a week, was to compel Talib and about 1,000 followers to concentrate in a small area bounded by Nizwa, Firq, Tanuf and Bakhla, with the Sultan's forces closing in upon it.

On 7 August an operation against the area of concentration was launched by ground forces with full air support from Sharjah. Two columns of the Sultan's forces carried out a pincer movement meeting at Birkat al Mauz. The Sultan's flag reappeared over the liberated villages but, once again, Talib and some of his chief followers eluded capture and disappeared into the fastnesses of the Jebel Akhdar (green mountain), a formidable feature rising to 11,000 feet, honeycombed with steep tracks and wadis and quite impassable for any kind of vehicle.

Furthermore, a plateau which averaged 9,500 feet above sea level contained a number of villages which were friendly to, or intimidated by, the rebel leaders.

It soon became evident that not only Talib, but also his brother the Imam Ghalib had taken up a position in the village of Saiq on the plateau which dominated the southern approaches to the mountain. On 25 September a determined probing operation supported by one Shackleton was mounted. The patrol was held up by intense rifle fire which the Shackleton subdued with accurate cannon fire, permitting the patrol to retire down the mountain to Tanuf. Dislodging the rebels was going to be a difficult task, and a pause ensued while a loose blockade was imposed upon the plateau villages.

The pause lengthened into months during which Talib became more and more venturesome, attacking villages below the jebel loyal to the Sultan and mining roads and tracks. At least one major attack was launched by the Sultan's forces, on the village of Habib, heavily supported by Venoms and Shackletons, but the terrain proved too difficult for the available forces. Harassment and attrition by air action and artillery was decided upon as the only alternative to a large-scale infantry assault with the participation of British forces which Britain was understandably reluctant to commit. Two 5.5 inch medium howitzers were provided from Aden and the Muscat forces trained to fire them. Their range of 17,000 yards was sufficient to cover the plateau villages from the valley below and a daily firing programme was initiated. This was closely co-ordinated with attacks by Shackletons operating from Masirah and, for the first time, dropping 1,000lb bombs on cultivation, water supplies and the irrigation system upon which the inhabitants of the jebel depended. Venoms from Sharjah continued their harassing patrols and a 'sky shouting' Pembroke dropped leaflets and broadcast to the villagers. Intermittent night bombing was included in the programme to prevent cultivation and the repair of water systems being carried out in darkness.

The hot weather of 1958 came and went and, although those who lived on the jebel suffered considerable hardship and Talib was compelled to retire to the mass of caves higher up the mountain, there was no capitulation. Stalemate existed and it seemed unlikely that these tactics would win back the Jebel Akhdar for the Sultan. They also bore hardly upon the villagers on the plateau, many of whom were loyal to Talib only because of severe intimidation.

In September 1958, the Commander, British Forces, Arabian Peninsula, submitted a plan to London for an assault on the jebel using two British battalions, artillery and heavy air support, but it was turned down and the air action intensified. In one week alone, Shackletons dropped 148 x 1,000lb bombs and 43 sorties were flown by naval aircraft from HMS Bulwark in the Gulf of Oman. As the year drew to its close the morale of the villagers was seen to be collapsing and there were many reports that they were pleading with the Imam to release them from the miserable conditions under which the sustained air attack was forcing them to live.



Soldiers of the SAS Regiment talking to bedouin tribesmen in Oman.
(Soldier Magazine)

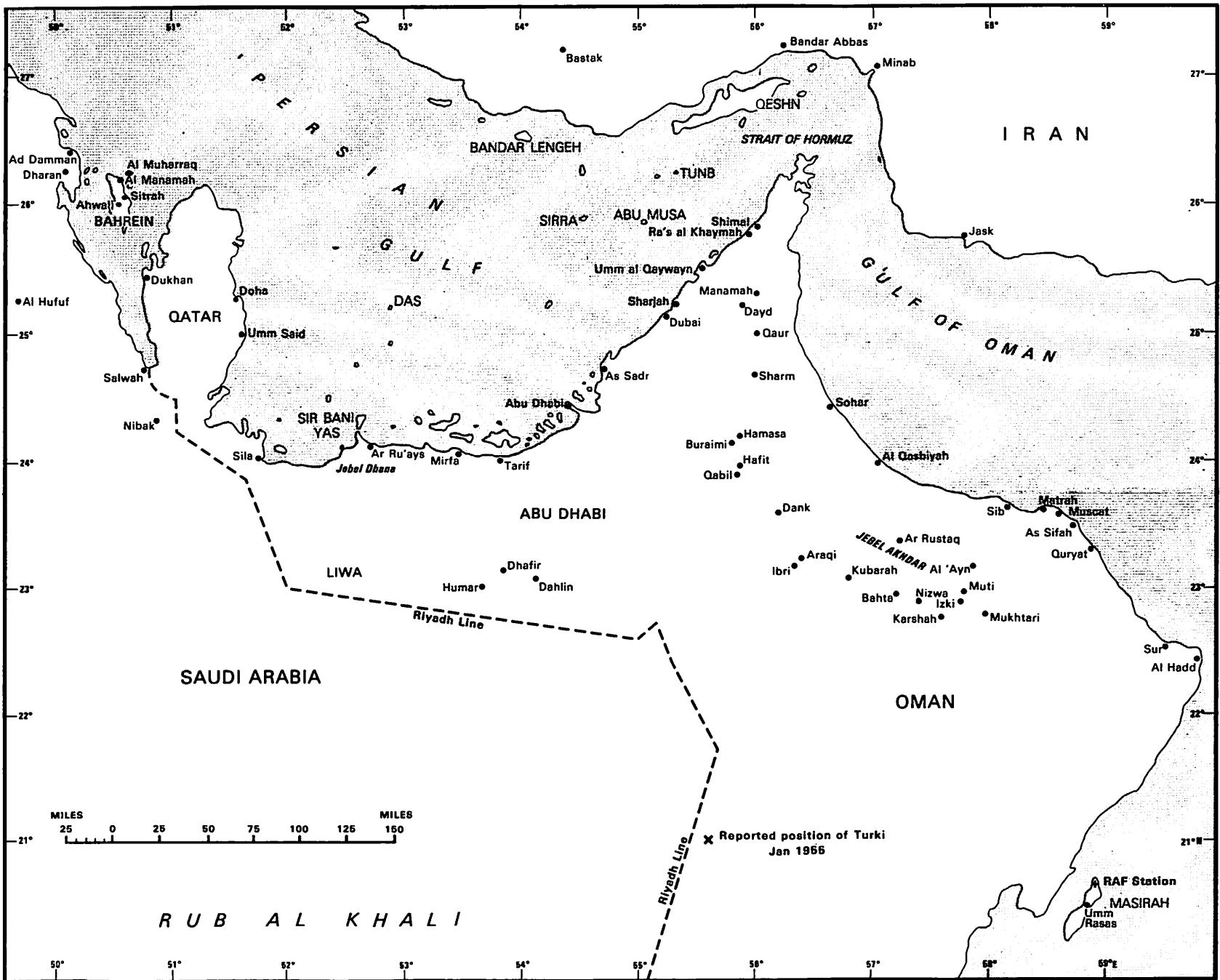
Under these circumstances a new plan involving the use of a small number of Special Air Service (SAS) troops to scale the mountain and lead the Sultan's forces up to the plateau was drawn up by CBFAP. It was known that 22 SAS Regiment was available, having completed a tour of duty in Malaya, and the heavy scale of air support needed could be found mostly from within the Command. This plan was approved, with considerable relief at the relatively modest resources required.

The operation began early in December with probing patrols by a squadron of 22 SAS Regiment to find the best approach to the plateau. The hazards of the terrain were immense, as were the dangers from ambush and sniping: so much so that a second SAS squadron was called in to increase the size of patrols and improve security. Throughout these early phases, Shackletons carried out heavy attacks on caves, sangars and machine gun positions, each Shackleton carrying 12 x 1,000lb bombs with fuzes to suit various types of target. Venoms were equally active and gave close support to the patrols when held up by hostile fire.

Early in the New Year all was judged ready to assault the mountain and initially to capture the three plateau villages of Habib, Saiq and Sharayah. SAS troops led the assault on the night 26/27 January 1959, reaching the plateau before dawn where they met 130 villagers and six combatant rebels who surrendered. The three villages were occupied within a few days and no serious opposition was met. But, once again, the leaders had escaped, through the mountains to the north. Their caves showed signs of hasty retreat and arms, ammunition and many documents were left behind. For some weeks it was not known where Talib and his compatriots had gone and the Sultan's forces combed the jebel without finding them. Subsequently reports filtered through that they had reached Saudi Arabia, presumably by sea from the Gulf of Oman. On this occasion their escape was unimportant: the Jebel Akhdar was in the Sultan's hands and could be held without great difficulty. An airstrip for light aircraft and helicopters was built on the plateau at Saiq and this effectively opened up the jebel and enabled assistance in rehabilitating the villagers to be provided on a large scale.

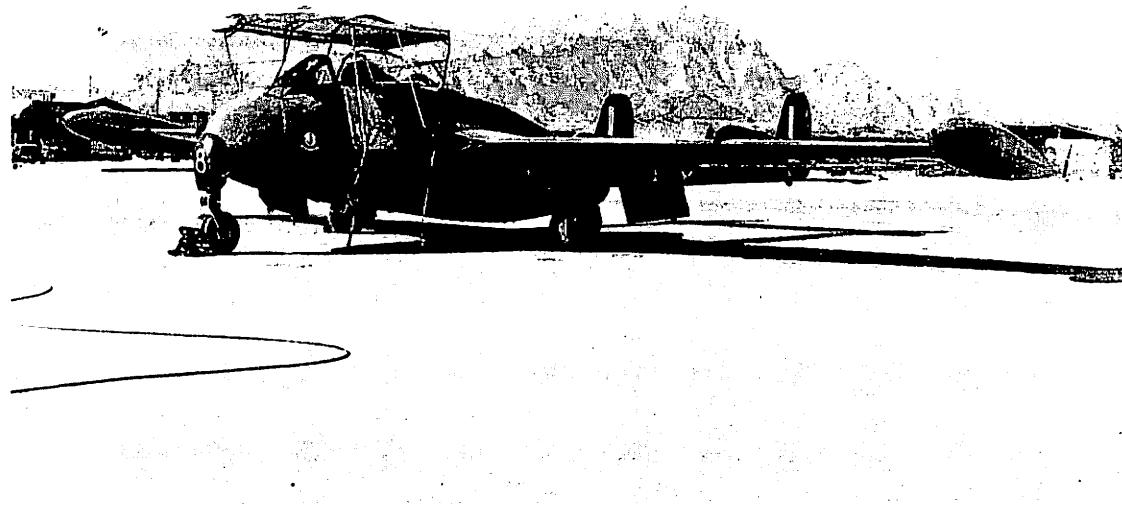
The Royal Air Force had played a notable part in the long drawn out operations, the main effort being provided by the Shackletons of 37 Squadron which dropped three and a half million pounds of bombs, and the Venoms of 8 Squadron which flew 1315 sorties and fired 3,500 rockets and 27,000 rounds of 20mm ammunition. Logistic support by Beverleys, Hastings and Valettes of 84 Squadron and Pembrokes of 152 Squadron and 1417 Flight was equally impressive. Although the final assault upon the Jebel Akhdar undoubtedly required the tough expertise of 22 SAS Regiment, it could not be undertaken until the necessary preparation and 'softening up' had been completed by the RAF. As the Royal Navy and the Royal Marines participated actively at times, the Oman campaign can accurately be described as a joint operation.

Map III. Trucial States and central Oman



EXPANSION IN ADEN AND KENYA

By the time that the Oman campaign was completed early in 1959 significant developments had taken place in Aden and Kenya and, in order to trace these developments, it is necessary to go back to 1953. In Kenya the Mau Mau campaign was beginning and this has already been described. In Aden there were signs that dissidence in the Protectorates was on the increase after the 'quiet years'. 8 Squadron was still the only operational squadron in the Southern Tier when, early in 1953, it received its first jet aircraft - the Vampire.



Venom of 8 Squadron with improvised sun canopy

Conversion from the twin piston-engined Brigand to the single-seater jet-engined Vampire was a fundamental change for aircrew and ground personnel alike. Owing to the provision of only one Meteor T 7 for dual instruction, and certain shortages of spares and ground handling equipment for the new aircraft, it took the squadron four months to become operational on them. However, the re-equipment was greatly welcomed. Although the Brigand had been satisfactory as far as reliability was concerned, the squadron establishment of only eight aircraft was inadequate and the aircraft lacked simplicity and manoeuvrability, two desirable qualities in

the rugged conditions of Aden. On re-equipment 8 Squadron was given twelve Vampires, later increased to sixteen, thus giving the unit far greater flexibility for its various tasks. Opportunity was taken of a quiet period during the hot weather of 1953 for the squadron to take its new aircraft to the Armament Practice Camp (APC) in Cyprus where it reduced its rocket firing average error down to 9.4 yards and its shallow dive bombing figures to 26.7 yards, a much better standard than had ever been obtained with the Brigand and convincing proof that, for accurate attack of pinpoint targets in difficult country, the single-seater rocket firing fighter was the ideal firing platform. During the squadron's temporary absence at the APC, 32 Squadron from Deversoir acted as a standby for Aden and, in fact, spent a few weeks at Khormaksar.

1954 saw a resurgence of dissidence in the WAP which was largely brought about by encouragement from the Yemen backed by Egypt. A government fort had been built and manned by government guards at Robat, in the Wadi Hatib, in an endeavour to quell the continuous sniping and feuding in the Audhali Sultanate close to the Yemen border. Several operations on a considerable scale using the Aden Protectorate Levies (APL) supported by 8 Squadron had to be mounted to relieve Robat. A number of APL soldiers were killed in these expensive operations and it became abundantly clear that a great deal of help in the form of arms and ammunition was coming across the frontier in the Dhala area.

In October 1954, the Governor of Aden was surprised to receive an invitation from the Yemen to attend a conference at Taiz. For a while some slight relief was felt in the Wadi Hatib and the year ended quietly. It had been a busy one and 8 Squadron had flown 1,670 hours on active operations, dropping 1,684 x 500lb bombs and firing 2,936 rockets and more than 121,000 rounds of 20mm ammunition. The respite was, however, brief and attacks against Robat and other forts in the Wadi Hatib were resumed early in 1955. Robat was exacting too high a toll: instead of providing a calming influence as intended, it seemed to be provoking the tribes, notably the Rabizi, and encouraging Yemeni support. A major operation was therefore mounted from the airstrip at Ataq using British troops from 51 Brigade in Egypt to support the APL. 8 Squadron had the assistance of a detachment of four Lincolns from 49 Squadron, Bomber Command, which had just been released from operations against the Mau Mau. A number of Venoms, with which 8 Squadron was shortly to be re-equipped, also participated for the first time in WAP operations. One interesting development was the dropping of marker bombs by the fighters for the benefit of the Lincolns whose crews were unfamiliar with the intricacies of the WAP landscape. At the conclusion of this operation, all government forces were withdrawn from Fort Robat and the Wadi Hatib, the abandoned fort being subsequently blown up by the Shamsi tribe as an act of defiance. This episode illustrated the difficulty of penetrating and pacifying the WAP without adequate roads and good communications and with an ill-defined and disputed frontier with the Yemen.

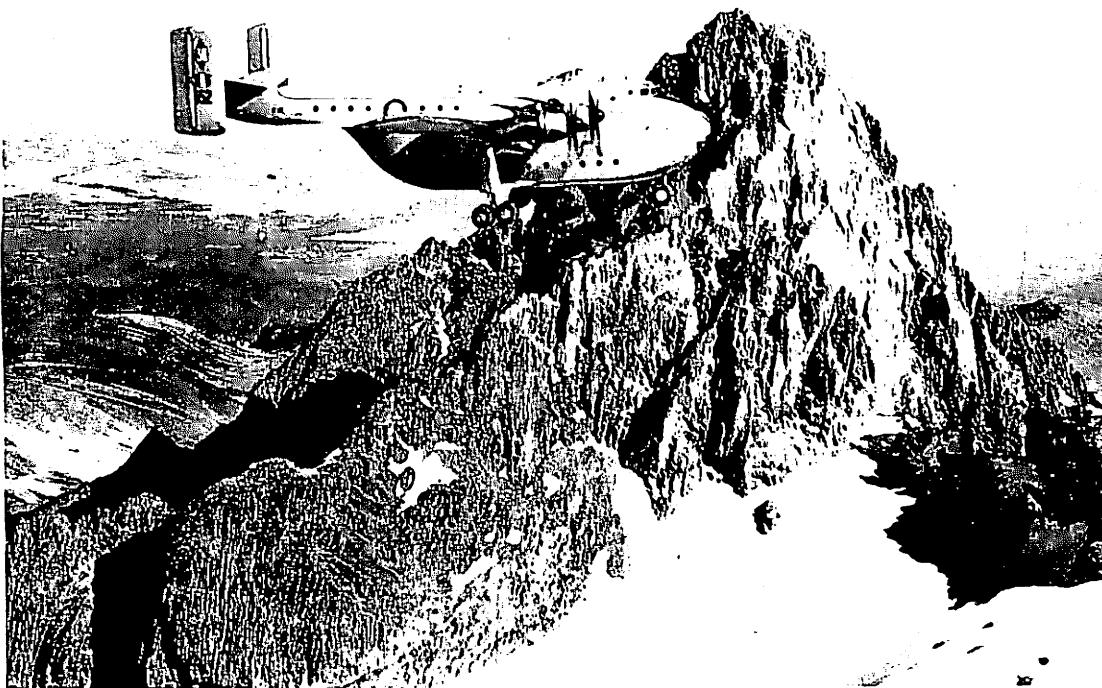
At this time events in the Eastern Mediterranean, and particularly Egypt's increasing hostility to the British bases in the Canal Zone, were causing concern

to the military planners. Britain was gradually withdrawing her forces from Iraq and it was evident that a political 'air barrier' was being created between the northern and southern parts of the Middle East Command, making it ever more difficult to control forces east of Suez from headquarters in the Mediterranean. Furthermore events in Kenya, Oman, Somaliland and Aden were creating a need for more British forces in those areas, the old policy of reinforcement from the Mediterranean being now less practicable.

From these considerations sprang the decision to locate part of Britain's Strategic Reserve in Kenya. Although the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf were the more likely operational areas for such forces, it would be extremely difficult to accommodate them in either Aden or the Gulf whereas Kenya offered excellent facilities, a good climate and suitable training areas. Transport Command's growing force of strategic transports could always be made available at short notice to lift the troops to an operational area. From this basic decision stemmed a whole series of developments, many of which concerned the Royal Air Force.

The Arab/Israel war and the Suez crisis of 1956 served to accelerate the build up of forces in both Kenya and Aden: the centre of gravity of Middle East Command was beginning to shift to the Southern Tier. By the end of 1956 Aden, in addition to 8 Squadron which now had 16 Venoms, had gained 78 Squadron (6 Twin Pioneers), 1426 Flight (8 Valettes, Pembrokes and Sycamores) and 20 Wing of the RAF Regiment containing 58 and 66 Field Squadrons. All these units were stationed at Khormaksar and a long period of severe overcrowding commenced. Despite an intensive building programme, it was more than four years before every airman could be housed in good air-conditioned accommodation: several hundred had to suffer the discomforts of sleeping on the open verandahs of the old barrack blocks until 1961. Similarly the technical accommodation was totally inadequate, with servicing being carried out in intolerably hot, dusty conditions for several years. Fortunately Eastleigh had been retained and a new civil airport for Nairobi was opened at Embakasi, containing certain facilities for the RAF. Khormaksar was thus able to obtain some relief by sending aircraft down to Nairobi for major servicing and for storage.

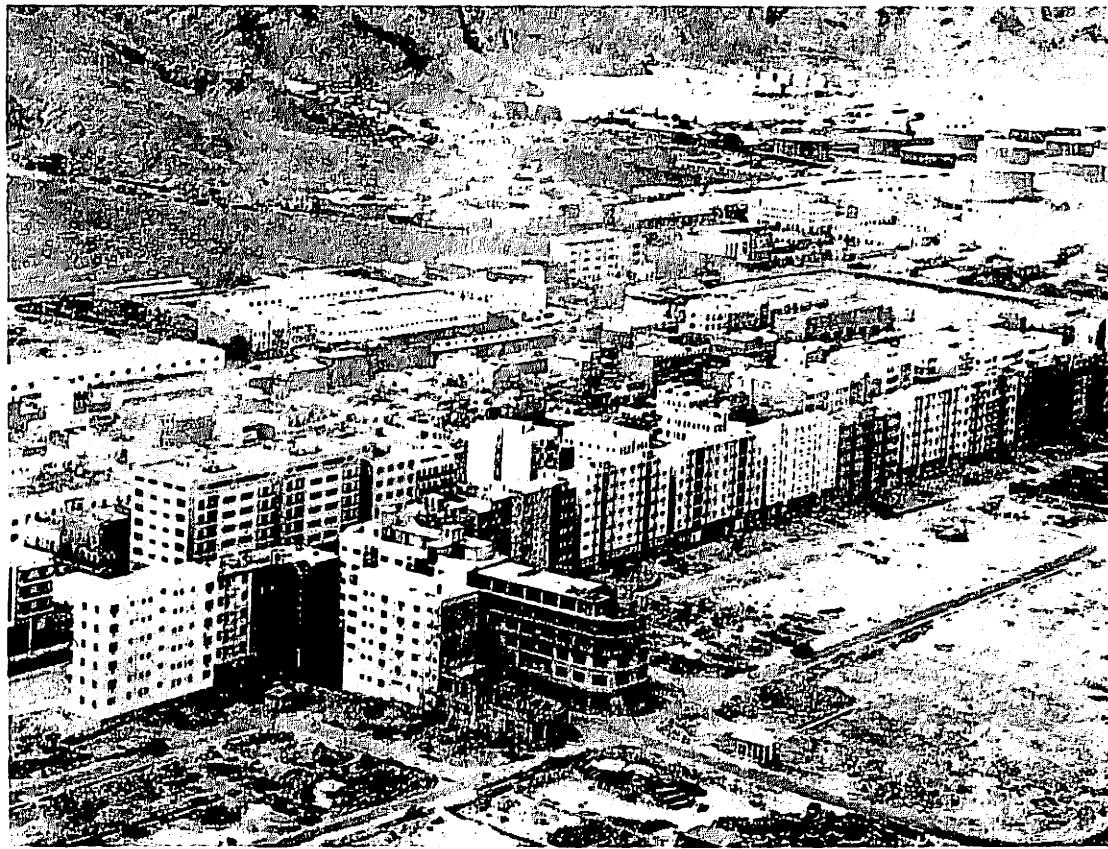
As the Strategic Reserve element in Kenya was built up into HQ 24 Brigade and two infantry battalions with associated artillery engineers and other supporting arms, the need to provide aircraft for its training arose. 21 Squadron (4 Twin Pioneers) was formed in the United Kingdom and flown to Eastleigh, specifically to provide support for 24 Brigade. A second Day Fighter/Ground Attack squadron was also considered desirable for the theatre and 208 Squadron with 12 Venoms was located at Eastleigh/Embakasi. Finally 30 Squadron (6 Beverleys) was transferred to Eastleigh from Dishforth to provide the heavy lift for 24 Brigade's vehicles and equipment.



Beverley of 30 Squadron over the peak of Mount Kenya

Further expansion at Khormaksar brought 84 Squadron (6 Beverleys) to complete a powerful heavy lift force and 37 Squadron was formed with four Shackletons to replace the valuable Lincolns of 1426 Flight. Thus in the space of three years the strength of the RAF under the Commander, BFAP, had grown from a single fighter squadron at Khormaksar and a handful of communications aircraft into a force of some nine squadrons distributed between Khormaksar, Eastleigh and Bahrein.

The problem of accommodation generated by this expansion, particularly in Aden, reached crisis point in 1959. The extremely limited building resources of the Colony were quite unable to satisfy the needs of a huge programme for constructing domestic, technical and administrative buildings of all kinds. It was the provision of adequate married accommodation which caused the greatest outcry and received much unwelcome publicity. Aden had always been a fully 'accompanied' station for the RAF and, for a small force with a modest percentage of married personnel, that created no problem. But the influx of thousands more airmen at a moment when the married content of the RAF was rising rapidly swamped the available



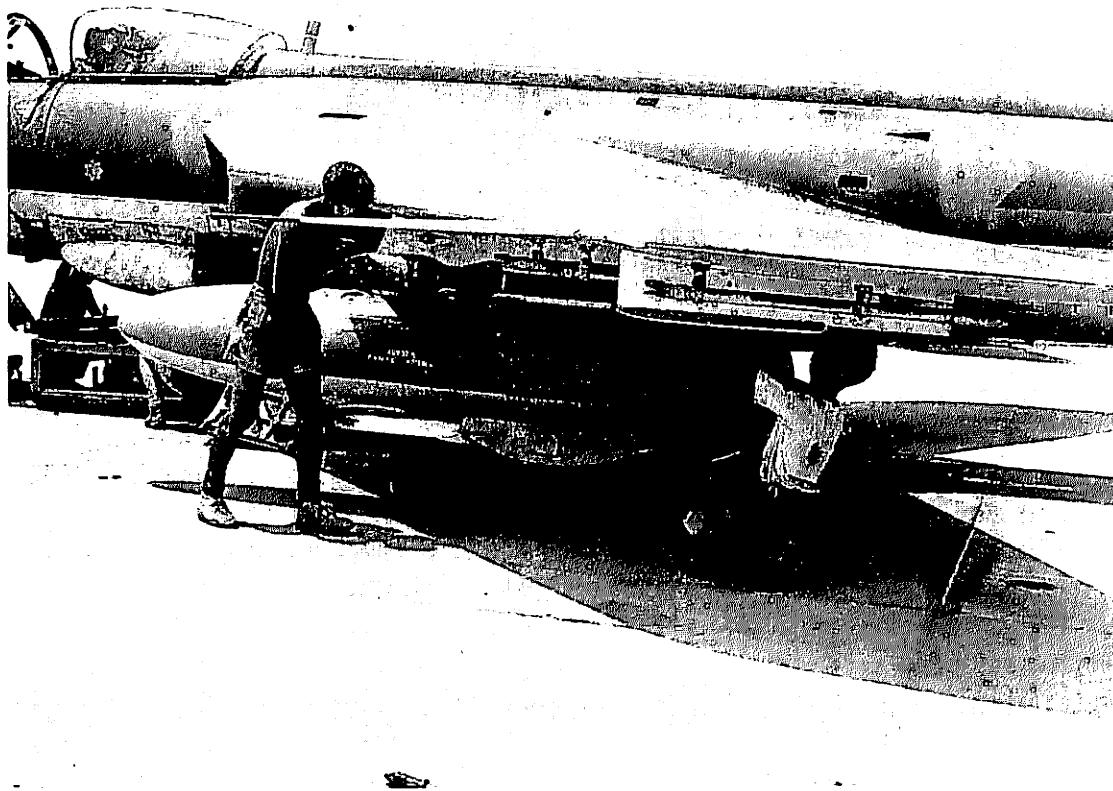
Flats built for Service families on the
Maala Straight, Aden, 1961

resources, and resulted in many families having to live in most unsuitable flats and houses in Crater, Sheikh Othman and Maala. As a result of the publicity which resulted in a debate in the House of Lords, the AOC managed to obtain additional funds with which to subsidize airmen who could not afford the rents of suitable accommodation. It was thus possible to set a standard, and all private accommodation was inspected against this standard. Even so, the situation remained less than satisfactory until about 1961 when the force could at last be considered adequately housed. Various expedients had to be adopted such as varying the length of tours of duty from two years 'accompanied' down to one year 'unaccompanied', keeping as many men as possible away from Aden on detachments and making the fullest possible use of the more congenial conditions in Kenya to carry out major servicing of Beverleys and Shackletons.

It was fortuitous that this period of intense development coincided with a relatively quiet operational phase. The Oman campaign was concluded early in 1959 and activity in the WAP remained at a low level during that year and 1960. One Venom crashed in Yemeni territory near Harib in July 1958, the pilot being killed. It was almost certain that he had been shot down by a 12.7mm anti-aircraft gun firing across the border into the Protectorate. In general, however, Yemeni

activity was much reduced in comparison with earlier years, and no large-scale operations took place. It was in these circumstances that the decision to re-equip both 8 and 208 Squadrons with the Hunter FGA 9 was made. The Khormaksar squadron converted first, in October 1959, quickly followed by 208 which converted to the new type in the United Kingdom and flew its Hunters back to Nairobi.

With the two fighter squadrons operational on Hunters and the remainder of the force reaching its full potential with the completion of most of the technical facilities, attention was directed to the situation in the Persian Gulf where increasing concern was being felt over the security of Britain's oil supplies, and those of Kuwait in particular.

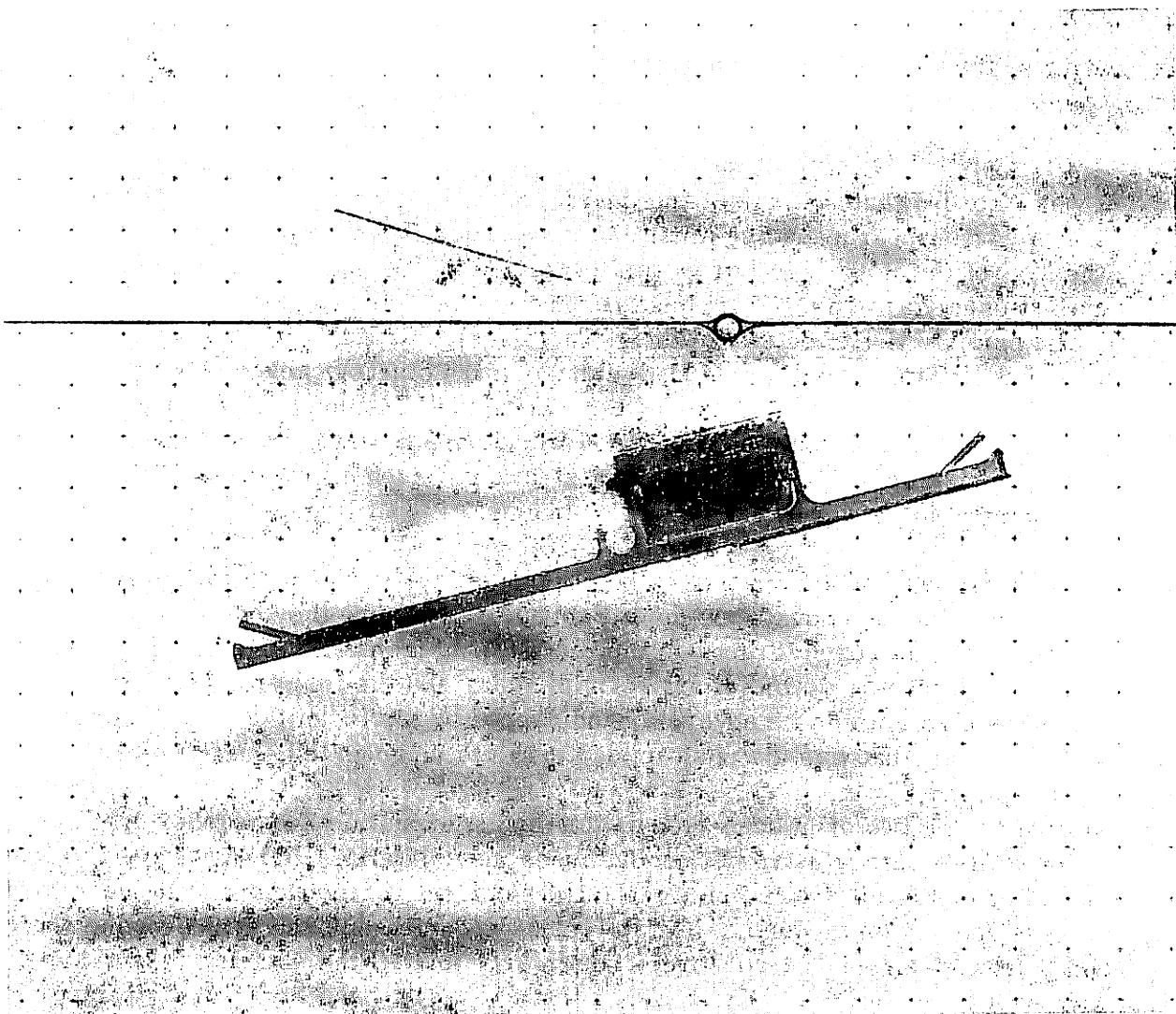


Arming the 3-inch rockets of a Hunter FGA 9

THE KUWEIT CRISIS OF 1961

Britain had stood in treaty relationship with Kuweit since 1899, more than 30 years before oil was discovered in that tiny Arab state of 7,400 square miles with a population of 733,000. When oil was discovered, it was natural that Britain should become one of Kuweit's chief customers and this made the commitment to defend Kuweit and her oil against aggression the primary responsibility of the British forces in the Arabian Peninsula.

By 1961 it had become clear that the original 1899 Agreement was no longer consistent with Kuweit's international status, and negotiations for its termination began. On 19 June 1961, an Exchange of Notes was signed in which the relationship between Britain and Kuweit was defined. Among other clauses was one under which Britain undertook to go to Kuweit's aid if requested and it was this commitment which created the need for a high priority plan to be drawn up and the necessary forces to be readily available to assist Kuweit at short notice.



Kuweit New airfield - 125° F in the shade

Revision of Britain's relationship with Kuwait produced an immediate reaction in neighbouring Iraq whose Prime Minister, General Kassim, angrily proclaimed on 25 June, that Kuwait properly belonged to Iraq, being part of the province of Basra under the defunct Ottoman Empire. His proclamation was repeated on 14 July and followed by the movement of troops and armour south from Baghdad towards the Kuwait border. The threat had to be taken seriously. The vulnerability of the tiny oil state was such that it could be overrun in a few days by Iraqi forces and no time could be wasted in waiting to see whether Kassim's threats were merely bluff.

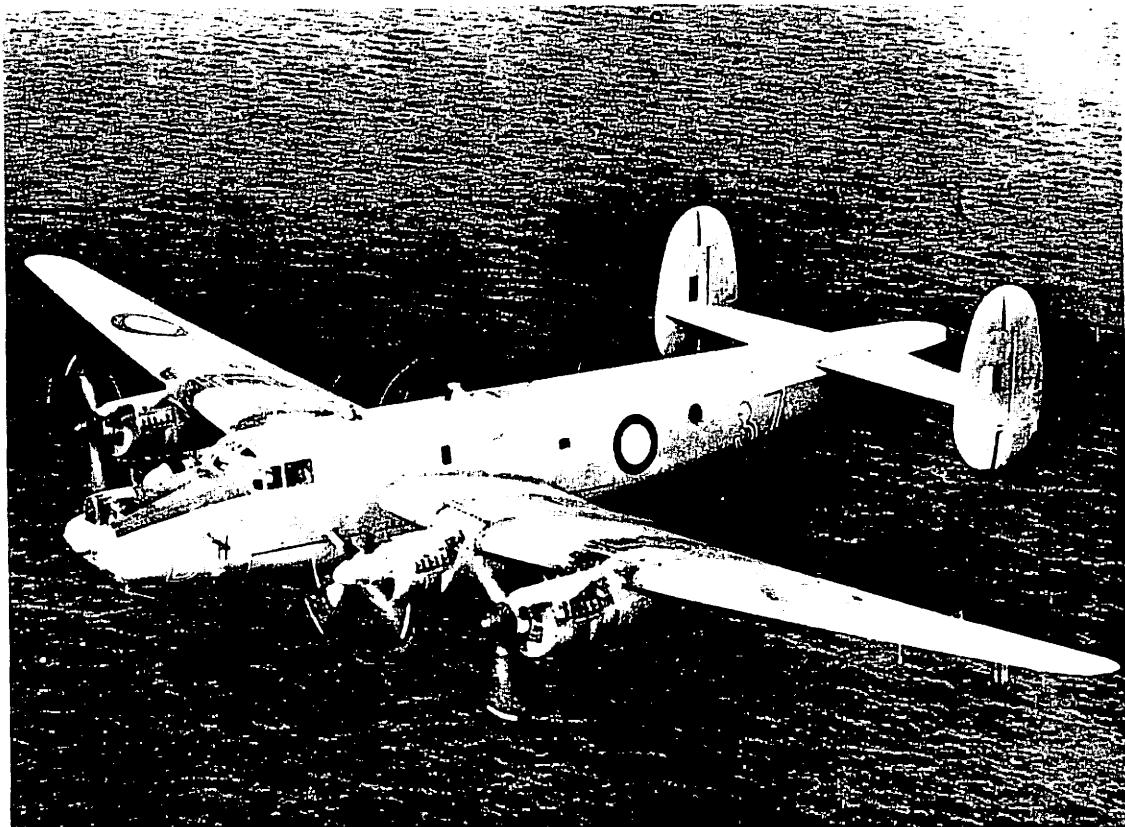
The intervention plan of the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East Command, the first of the unified commands and recently set up in Aden under Air Marshal Sir Charles Elworthy, was based upon receiving four days' warning of any aggression against Kuwait. So precipitate had been Kassim's proclamation that it aroused considerable scepticism in British Intelligence circles with the result that a 'wait and see' policy was adopted which frittered away the warning period required by the plan. The inaccessibility of Kuwait, bearing in mind that British forces in the numbers required could not be held closer than Aden, Nairobi, Cyprus, the United Kingdom and Bahrain, was such that some period of warning was essential if intervention forces were to have the opportunity to concentrate and enter in strength.

It was intended that the bulk of the land forces should be provided by 24 Brigade from Kenya, spearheaded by a parachute battalion flown into Kuwait from Cyprus. The task of the Royal Air Force was to provide air defence and a strike capability against enemy armour. For these purposes 8 and 208 Squadrons were very high on the priority list to enter Kuwait. The massive airlift needed was to be provided by Transport Command Britannias and Comets, backed up by the AFME (Air Forces, Middle East) force of Beverleys and Valettes. Strike aircraft for interdiction targets would be provided from Germany and Cyprus (Canberras) and Aden (Shackletons). Clearly the concentration of such a force would take time and the need for a warning period was obvious.

As the warning period appeared to be slipping away, the AOC took the precaution of moving 8 and 208 Squadrons up to Bahrain from where they could, in an emergency, just reach targets on the Kuwait/Iraq frontier with long range tanks fitted. Kuwait was devoid of any form of radar and the Hunters operating in the air defence role would be severely handicapped by the lack of control facilities. Nevertheless, that was the position and it had to be accepted.

After a day or two of intense speculation during which the Commander-in-Chief ordered preparatory moves by other forces including HMS Bulwark from Karachi, the Ruler of Kuwait asked Britain to fulfil her treaty obligations and to move forces into his country on 30 June. The Ruler had become seriously concerned at the continued movement of Iraqi forces southwards and all the portents of an invasion of Kuwait were visible. There was no time to be lost and the C-in-C decided that the parachute battalion could be flown into Kuwait direct from Cyprus the following

morning and landed, as a parachute drop did not appear necessary. At the same time 42 Commando RM, would land from HMS Bulwark and, after securing Kuwait New Airfield, would call in the Hunter squadrons from Bahrein.



Shackleton of 37 Squadron patrolling off Kuwait

At this crucial point a totally unexpected factor presented itself; one which had not been allowed for in the plan and which took Whitehall and Middle East Command completely by surprise. Both Turkey and the Sudan refused permission for the RAF aircraft carrying troops to Kuwait to overfly their countries. The immediate effect of this was that the C-in-C could no longer count upon the parachute battalion arriving in Kuwait in time for the initial landing on 1 July. The ban also meant that Transport Command aircraft flying from the UK to Aden and Nairobi to lift the bulk of the follow-up force could only fly by a circuitous route through Central Africa, making the distance from the UK to Kuwait no less than 7,000 miles.

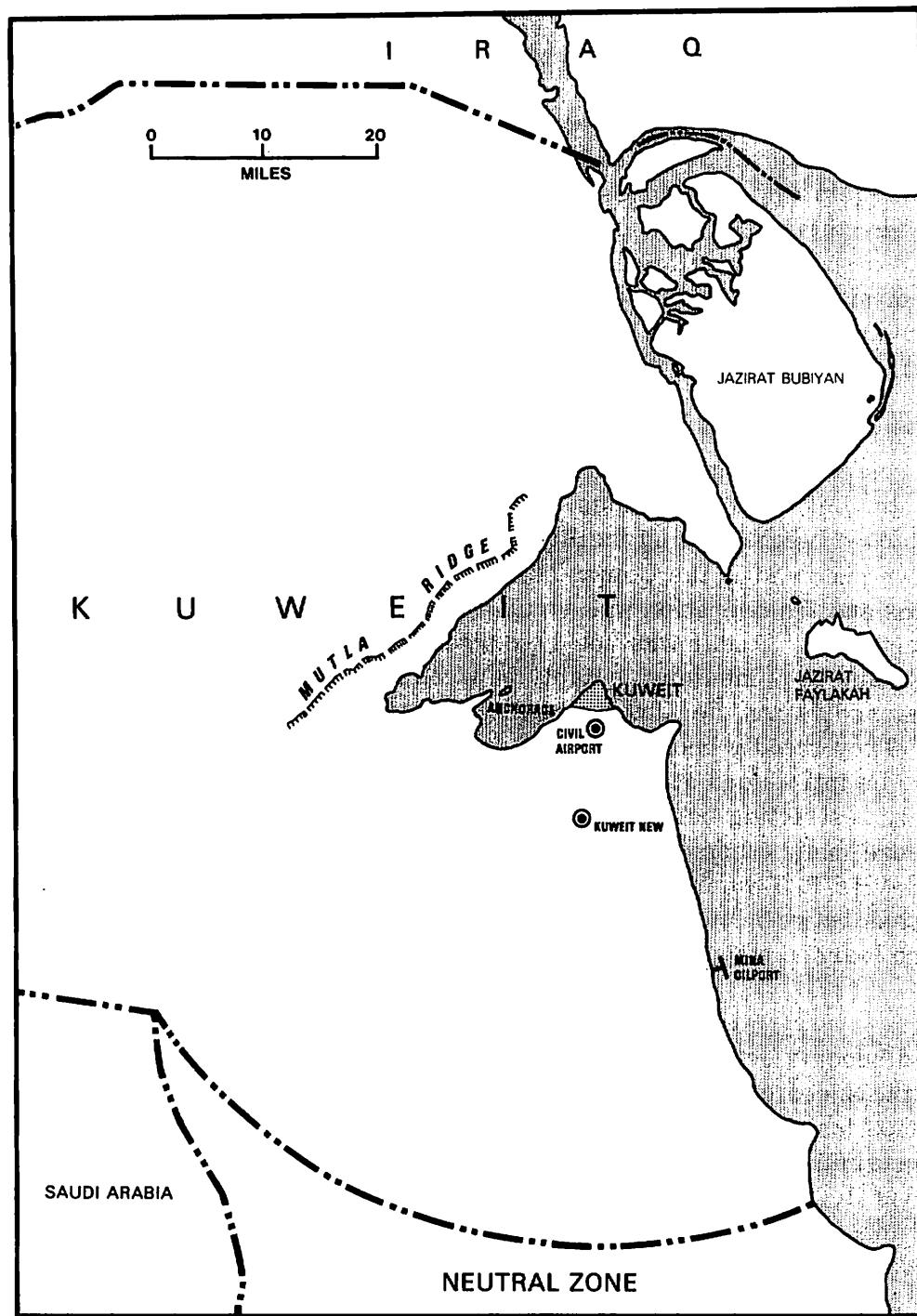
Sir Charles Elworthy was placed in a quandary: to delay sending aid to the Ruler was unthinkable, and yet 42 Commando with a handful of tanks and two Hunter squadrons was a far from adequate initial force. The nearest additional troops were 45 Commando RM in Aden and two companies of Coldstream Guards in Bahrein. However, during the night 30 June/1 July both the Sudan and Turkey

lifted their overflying ban but Turkey insisted on night flights only. Although this did not allow the parachute battalion to reach Kuwait as planned, it did accelerate the arrival of Britannias in Aden and thus permit 45 Commando to be lifted and flown up to Kuwait earlier than expected. Many of the Britannia crews were sent straight in from Aden without rest after a long flight from the UK, far exceeding the permitted hours on duty, but this was an operational emergency which justified breaking the rules.

On the morning of 1 July, 42 Commando landed as planned from HMS Bulwark by helicopter at Kuwait New Airfield, followed immediately by 8 and 208 Squadrons which flew in from Bahrain. 45 Commando began to arrive from Aden during the day and the first elements of the parachute battalion from Cyprus that night. The Turkish restriction to night flying only meant that no transport aircraft, not even a Comet, could complete the return journey to Kuwait during darkness, and aircraft were compelled to face the hazard of remaining on the ground at Kuwait during daylight hours waiting to return to Cyprus the following night. Thus the build up of the parachute battalion was much slower than planned.



8 Squadron leaving Aden for Kuwait



Map IV. Area around Kuwait

The first hurdle was surmounted - an initial force was ashore - and the build up continued by both air and sea. The weather in Kuweit was appalling with intense heat, blowing sand and bad visibility. Rarely during the first few days was visibility above 400 yards and the Hunters and Twin Pioneers had great difficulty in navigating to their objectives in the flat featureless desert. One Hunter pilot was killed when he dived into the ground while endeavouring to identify a forward military outpost. This was clearly a case of disorientation in bad conditions. At Kuweit New an airman was killed through walking into the propeller of a Britannia in dust and darkness.

With no opposition from Iraq the build up was completed by 9 July, by which date a total of 5,691 personnel of all Services had been put into Kuweit, with many hundreds of tons of equipment and stores. The Transport Command airlift was a most notable achievement, not only for the number of personnel and tonnage of stores carried, but also for the efficiency of the planning and execution of the airlift in the face of many difficulties and hazards. The lift was carried out by a fleet of 14 Britannias, 12 Beverleys, 27 Hastings, and three Royal Rhodesian Air Force Canadairs.

As mentioned earlier the absence of radar was a serious disadvantage. Initially great dependence rested upon the somewhat limited radar of HMS Bulwark, later relieved by that of HMS Victorious. A mobile Type SC 787, a light equipment which lacked height-finding facilities, was erected in Kuweit but, as it had only just been received in the Command, its efficient operation was delayed by teething troubles and the operation was virtually over by the time it was functioning satisfactorily. Radar was not the only form of communication which was inadequate. Point to point links, notably between Bahrein and Aden had always been sparse and, when the Kuweit crisis occurred, were in process of being improved. They rapidly became overloaded and the procedure known as 'MINIMIZE' had to be introduced at an early stage. This was an arbitrary procedure for severely restricting both the number and the precedence of signals traffic. There were many other difficulties in communication: for example, RAF aircraft used VHF R/T whereas the naval aircraft had UHF which effectively prevented any speech between them, but all these drawbacks were surmounted and many lessons were learned which subsequently helped to improve inter-Service communications.

By mid July it had become evident that Iraq either did not intend to invade or had been deterred by the speed of the British reaction. In order to demonstrate that no permanent occupation of Kuweit was intended, the C-in-C began to withdraw his forces while retaining the ability to build them up again should a threat reappear. 8 and 208 Squadrons flew down to Bahrein whence one of them returned to Aden and proceeded to exchange standby duties in Bahrein with the other at two monthly intervals. The Canberra squadron, which had remained at Sharjah throughout the crisis, returned to Germany and most of the Transport Command aircraft were released to their normal duties.

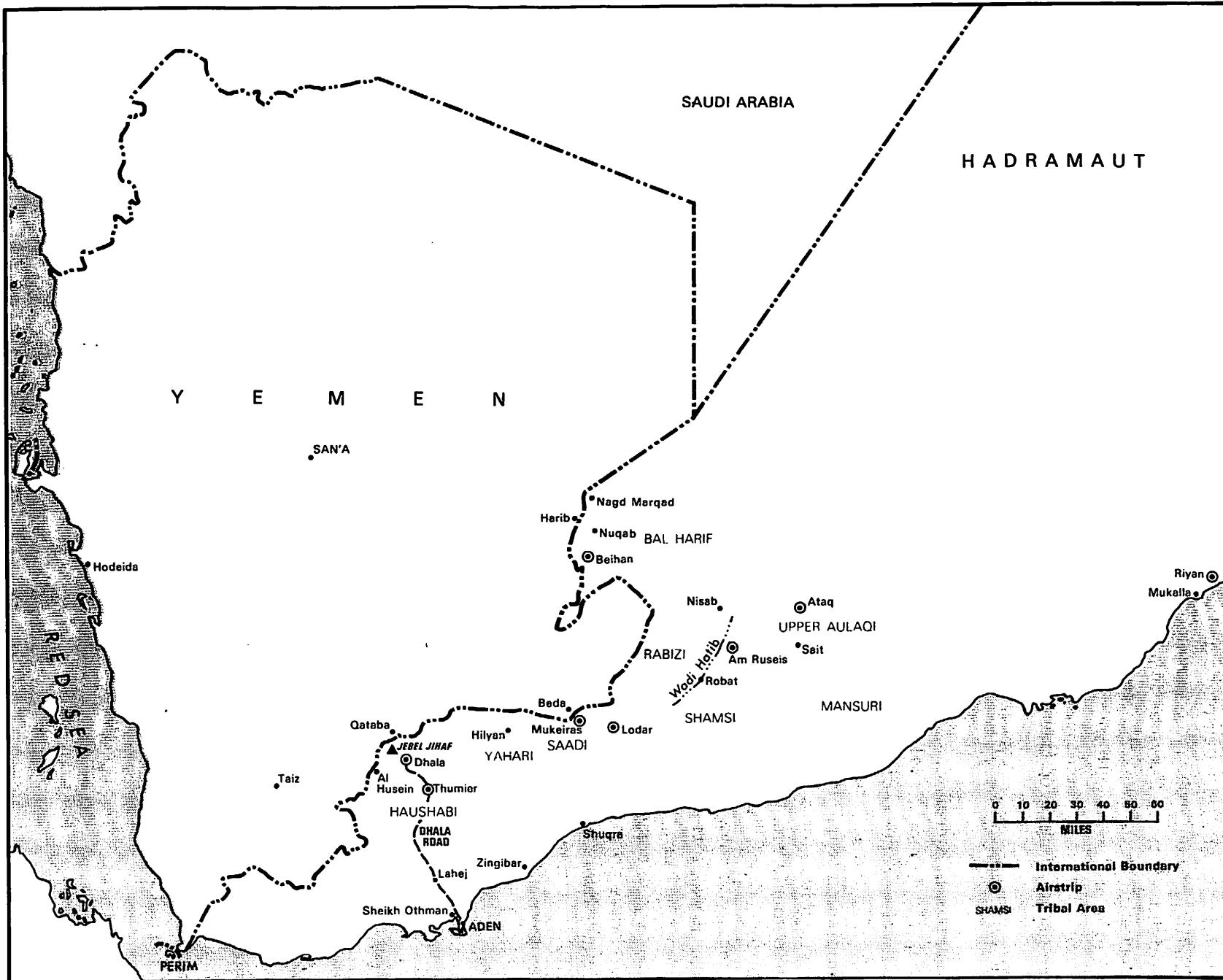
No fighting at all had taken place and the crisis turned out to be one of the most realistic and comprehensive movement exercises that could possibly be imagined, exercising all three Services in an atmosphere of complete reality. But more important than that was the fact that Britain had fulfilled her treaty obligation to the Ruler of Kuwait with impressive speed and proficiency. It had also enhanced Britain's image in the Arab world and relations with, for example, Saudi Arabia, were greatly improved thereafter.

THE LAST YEARS IN ADEN

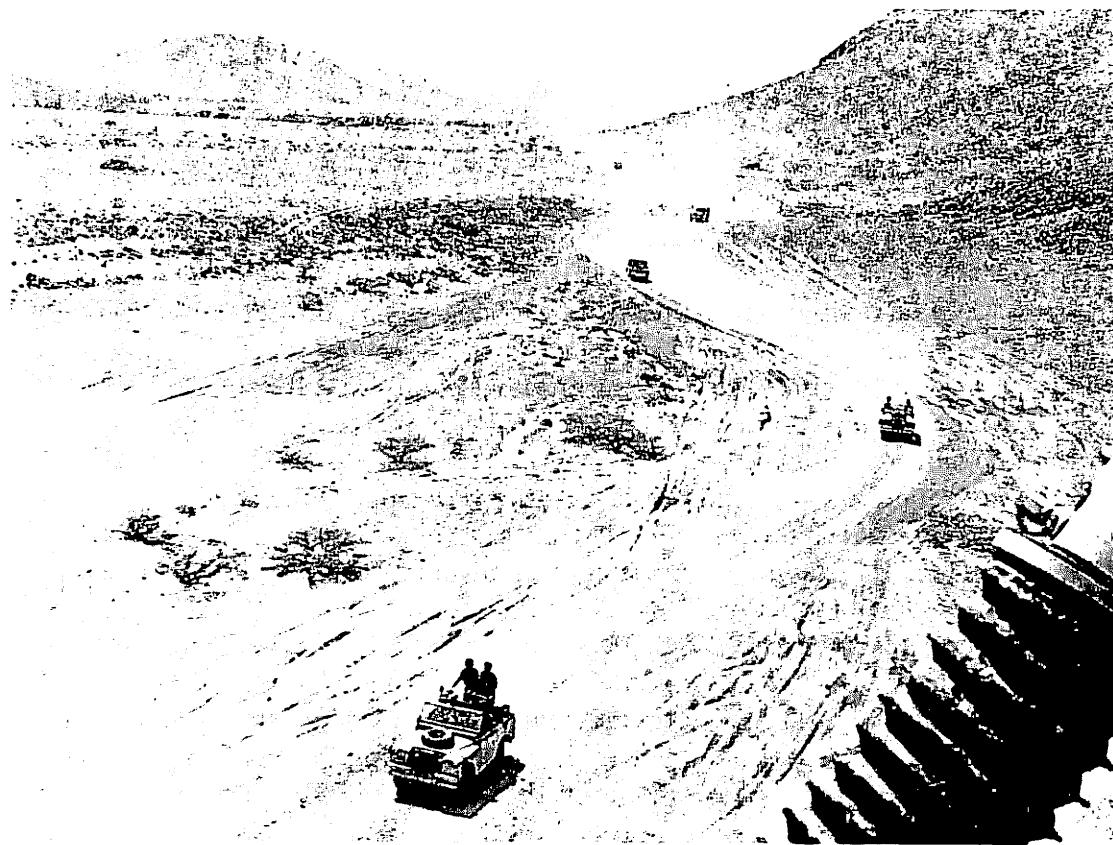
The crisis in Kuwait was followed by a breathing space lasting for about two years, during which operational activity throughout the Command remained at a relatively low level. Some redistribution of RAF resources took place, necessitated partly by the requirement to reduce the forces in Kenya as the three East African High Commission territories gained their independence, and partly by the need to remain poised for a rapid re-intervention in Kuwait. One of the more interesting developments was the reorganisation of 8 and 208 Squadrons, comprising 32 Hunter FGA 9s and 4 Meteor PR 10s into a single tactical Wing with the facility to send detachments anywhere in the Command at short notice. Entitled the Khormaksar Wing, it was formed on that station at the end of 1961 when the Aden building programme had progressed so far that suitable accommodation could be found for it. However, so congested was Khormaksar that it was essential that part of the Wing was always away on detachment, a condition which fitted in well with the need to maintain Hunters always at Muharraq (which had by now become the new title for the RAF station at Bahrain). Although climatically the exchange of Nairobi for Aden gave no pleasure to 208 Squadron, full employment in its proper role in the Arabian Peninsula more than compensated for the move. The Beverleys of 30 Squadron and the Twin Pioneers of 21 Squadron remained at Eastleigh to provide the essential training and heavy lift for the brigade until some time after the independence of Kenya.

By the middle of 1962 Khormaksar had become one of the largest and most complex stations in the Royal Air Force. It housed 3,000 officers and airmen, and some seven squadrons. Its 1,000th married quarter had been completed and its single runway regularly accepted 5,000 movements per month. The security problem was intensely worrying as the runway and the dense tangle of technical and domestic buildings made it a prime target for sabotage, as well as providing a considerable fire hazard. The 75 square miles of Aden Colony into which were packed 220,000 inhabitants and a conglomeration of military establishments did not permit any dispersal of Khormaksar's aircraft or other resources.

Map V. Aden and the Protectorates



It was under these conditions that the situation began to deteriorate. In September 1962, the old Imam of the Yemen died. His son who succeeded him was overthrown by a coup one week later which resulted in a republic being formed under President Sallal. From that moment hostile propaganda against Britain was stepped up, accompanied by fierce attacks on the radio against the Federation which Britain was endeavouring to form within the Aden complex. A number of unidentified aircraft crossed the Yemen border and attacked villages in the Beihan area with rockets, causing several casualties. A frontier patrol by Hunters was immediately laid on from dawn to dusk daily which effectively discouraged further violations, but no aircraft were intercepted. From photographic reconnaissance of Yemen ports, it became evident that arms were flowing into the Yemen from Egypt: in every possible way short of invasion, a determined effort was being mounted to undermine Britain's authority and to sabotage her plans for the future of Aden Colony and the Protectorates. The short breathing space which had followed the Kuwait crisis was over, but it had allowed the RAF time to redispouse its forces and to complete the works services which they required. The force was fully operational and ready for action.



Convoy entering the Radfan

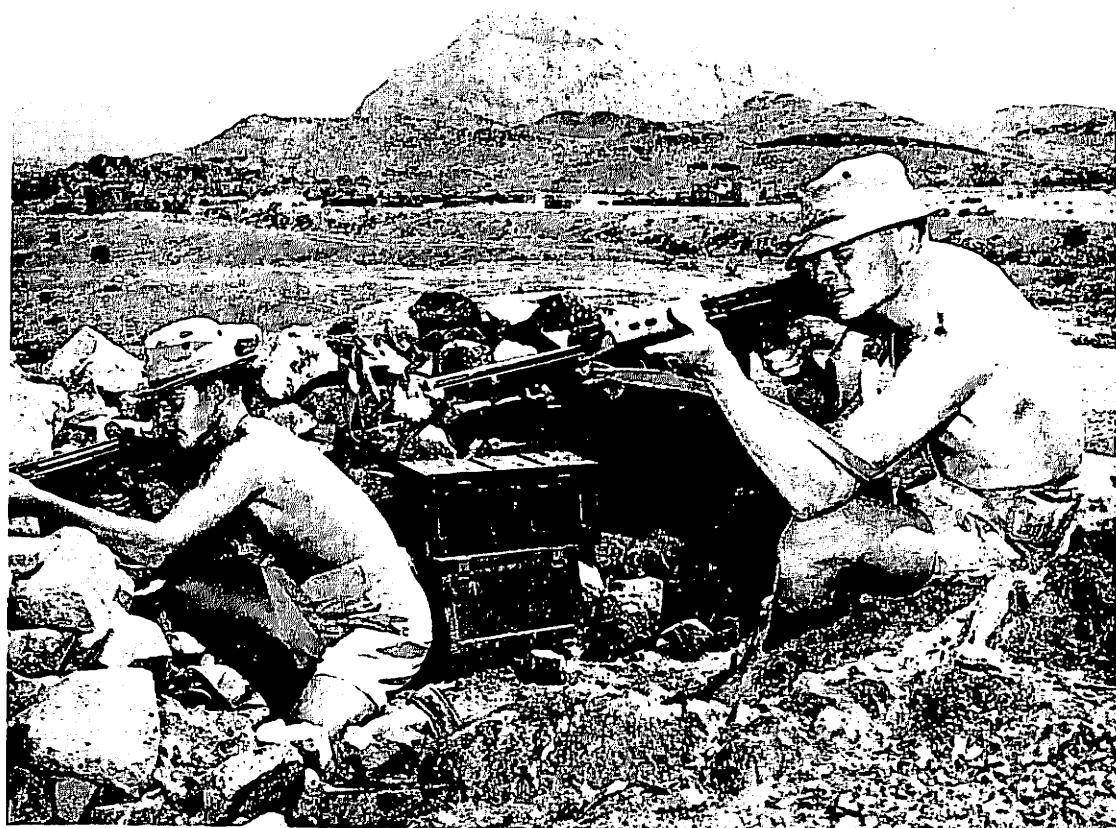
Action was not slow in coming and it took the form of a fiercely fought campaign in the Radfan, a pitiless region adjoining the Dhala road where the accepted rule was 'an eye for an eye', and where the Quteibi tribe had always regarded it as their right to pillage and exact tolls from the caravans which passed along the Dhala road. Britain's endeavours to stop the pillaging and looting of caravans provided excellent material for Yemeni and Egyptian propaganda, and an excuse to reinforce and encourage the dissident Radfan tribes. Subversion in Aden Colony which, under the new Federal organisation, changed its title to Aden State, was on the increase. This was sharply brought home to the authorities on 10 December 1963 when a grenade was thrown at the High Commissioner's party on the civil apron at Khormaksar, resulting in the death of the High Commissioner's Assistant, George Henderson, who died attempting to shield his master. An Indian woman was also killed and 53 people injured.

Reaction to this outrage was immediate. A State of Emergency was declared throughout South Arabia, the frontier with the Yemen was closed and 280 Yemeni 'undesirables' were deported from Aden. 57 members of the Peoples Socialist Party were arrested on suspicion of being involved in the bomb incident. But these measures were not enough and the time had come to take a firm stand against terrorism both in Aden State and up country. A large-scale operation 'Nutcracker' was planned to sweep through the Radfan area to force the withdrawal of 12 named dissidents and to demonstrate government authority.

Nutcracker was launched on 4 January 1964, with three battalions of the Federal Regular Army (FRA) (a new name for the old Aden Protectorate Levies) and some British tanks, artillery and engineers. The RAF were to play a major role not only in giving close support to the advancing ground forces, but in lifting many of them into their positions and re-supplying them thereafter. For this task Belvedere helicopters of 26 Squadron, assisted by four Naval Wessex, would be available from Khormaksar. After an initial setback when one Belvedere was hit by small arms fire while delivering its load of troops, the operation continued with the Belvederes positioning artillery in forward positions, leaving much of the troop movement to the Wessex which were smaller and less vulnerable to fire from the ground. The positioning of 105mm howitzers on the most precipitous firing positions - and usually pointing in approximately the required direction - was an unusual and extremely skilful task at which 26 Squadron excelled after a little practice. This unique method of positioning artillery enabled the guns to be placed on advantageous sites which were totally inaccessible by any other means. The hostile tribesmen showed remarkable courage, even under heavy air attack, and their sniping was accurate and telling, causing a number of casualties and considerable delays to the advance of the FRA up the Wadi Rabwa, which provided the main approach to the heart of the Radfan from Thumier, the government base on the Dhala road. Some of the supporting fire from the Hunters was so accurate and so close to the FRA troops that they were occasionally hit by spent cartridge cases ejected by the aircraft firing above their heads.

The planned sweep was completed by 15 January, whereupon the engineers constructed a rough road up the Wadi Rabwa. The object of the operation had been

successfully achieved and the area was lightly garrisoned by the FRA. Unfortunately the success was short lived: by March the resources of the FRA were being overstrained by renewed attacks on their posts, ambushes and constant sniping at their patrols. By the time Hunters could be called in from Khormaksar, the fleeting targets had disappeared. The FRA were compelled to withdraw to Thumier whereupon the Radfan was immediately reoccupied by dissident tribesmen.



Men of 37 (Field) Squadron, RAF Regiment,
defending Thumier airfield

Encouraged by this success the Yemeni backed tribes became increasingly aggressive and more Yemeni aircraft violated the frontier, including a severe attack with both bombs and machine guns on the village of Bulaq near Beihan. In retaliation for this piece of audacity, eight Hunters destroyed the Yemeni fort at Harib, just across the frontier in the same area. One anti-aircraft gun and several vehicles were destroyed in the vicinity of the fort and some excellent photographs taken by Meteors of the Reconnaissance Flight of 8 Squadron showed that Harib fort had been rendered totally uninhabitable.

It was decided that still further military action was essential to quell the insurgency before it got out of hand. A powerful force, which became known as Radforce, was assembled comprising 45 Commando RM, a company of 3rd Battalion, the Parachute Regiment, two FRA battalions, a battery of 105mm guns, an armoured car squadron and a troop of Royal Engineers - in all a light brigade group. The air support available consisted of the two Hunter squadrons, the Shackleton squadron, six Belvederes of 26 Squadron, the Twin Pioneers of 78 Squadron and two Scout helicopters with some Austers and Beavers of the Army Air Corps. Behind this force were the Beverleys, Argosies and Valettas of the medium range transport force, should they be needed.

The operation planned for this force was on a much larger scale than Nutcracker and was intended to occupy the fertile Wadi Taym and to drive the rebels out of the whole Radfan area. A dominating feature, known as Cap Badge, overlooked the wadi and this was selected for capture by the parachute company. It was intended to drop them on Cap Badge from a Beverley, but the party which set out to select a DZ was ambushed and pinned to a hillside by sniper fire for a whole day while Hunters repeatedly attacked the snipers' positions. Eventually the reconnaissance party broke out, but only after losing their CO and one other man. A further attempt to mark a DZ by helicopter also failed when the Scout helicopter was hit twice and forced to return to Thumier.

Thus, by the morning of 1 May when the operation was timed to start, it was evident that the area was strongly held by rebel forces and that the plan would have to be modified. 45 Commando had already advanced up the Wadi Rabwa but, because the paratroops had been unable to occupy Cap Badge ahead, the Commando paused in possession of two focal areas to the rear of Cap Badge, suitably named Sandfly and Coca Cola. The plan was changed and a new infantry battalion, 1 East Anglians, came up from Aden to relieve 45 Commando, thus freeing the Marines to scale Cap Badge by night, which they accomplished without serious opposition. Possession of this feature allowed the parachute troops to move on into the Wadi Taym, entirely supported by Hunters as the 105mm guns had also been held back by sniper fire and were still positioned at extreme range. The Hunters were magnificent and maintained continuous attacks on the rebels all day, often within 150 yards of the British troops. After 30 hours of unabated action, all objectives in the Wadi Taym were achieved.

In spite of the success of this operation, the Radfan rebels were not defeated. Being experts in guerrilla warfare and fighting in their own territory, they retired from one position to another when the opposition became uncomfortable, and they could rarely be made to stand and fight it out.

As the advance continued, the troops became more and more dependent upon air supply, sometimes by parachute drop but more often by Belvederes and some Naval Wessex which had now joined the force. The Belvederes in particular suffered considerable engine trouble due to sand and dust ingestion, a difficult problem in the Radfan area which was somewhat alleviated by treating the landing

pads with oil to lay the dust. It was however, a problem which troubled 26 Squadron throughout its period in the Command.



Belvedere of 26 Squadron resupplying the
Royal Marines in the Radfan

Several new infantry units were added to the force and two rough airstrips were constructed in the Wadi Taym. After a short pause for consolidation, the force swung right-handed down the Bakri Ridge and made for the highest area in the Radfan at Qudeishi. With the rebels challenging at every vantage point and the Hunters and Shackletons attacking them without respite, a slow but satisfactory advance continued. In due course the Jebel Huriyah, a formidable 5,500 foot peak which had never been climbed by a European, came into sight. This peak dominated the whole of the Radfan, and would clearly be the last vantage point of the rebels. Its capture proved as difficult as was expected but, after 'softening up' by Shackletons and accompanied by very close support from the Hunters, the leading elements of the force reached the summit by night on 10 June, their task being facilitated by Shackletons dropping flares behind the peak to silhouette the summit and produce a simulated moonlight effect while the troops approached in

total darkness. From the summit the lights of Aden could be seen glittering 40 miles away, and the Radfan had been conquered.

This did not, however, signal the end of the campaign - far from it, as Government forces and the RAF were occupied at varying degrees of intensity in that region for a further two and a half years. Some of the aircraft performances during the short operation are impressive. For example, five Army Scout helicopter pilots carried out no fewer than 7,200 high altitude landings between April and September (an average of one every $8\frac{1}{2}$ minutes). On several occasions Belvederes lifted 150mm howitzers on to positions well above their operational ceiling by skilful handling and airmanship. Wessex helicopters from HMS Centaur flew 90 sorties on the first day they were committed to the operation. The performance of the strike aircraft can best be summed up in the words of a well-known writer on the campaign:

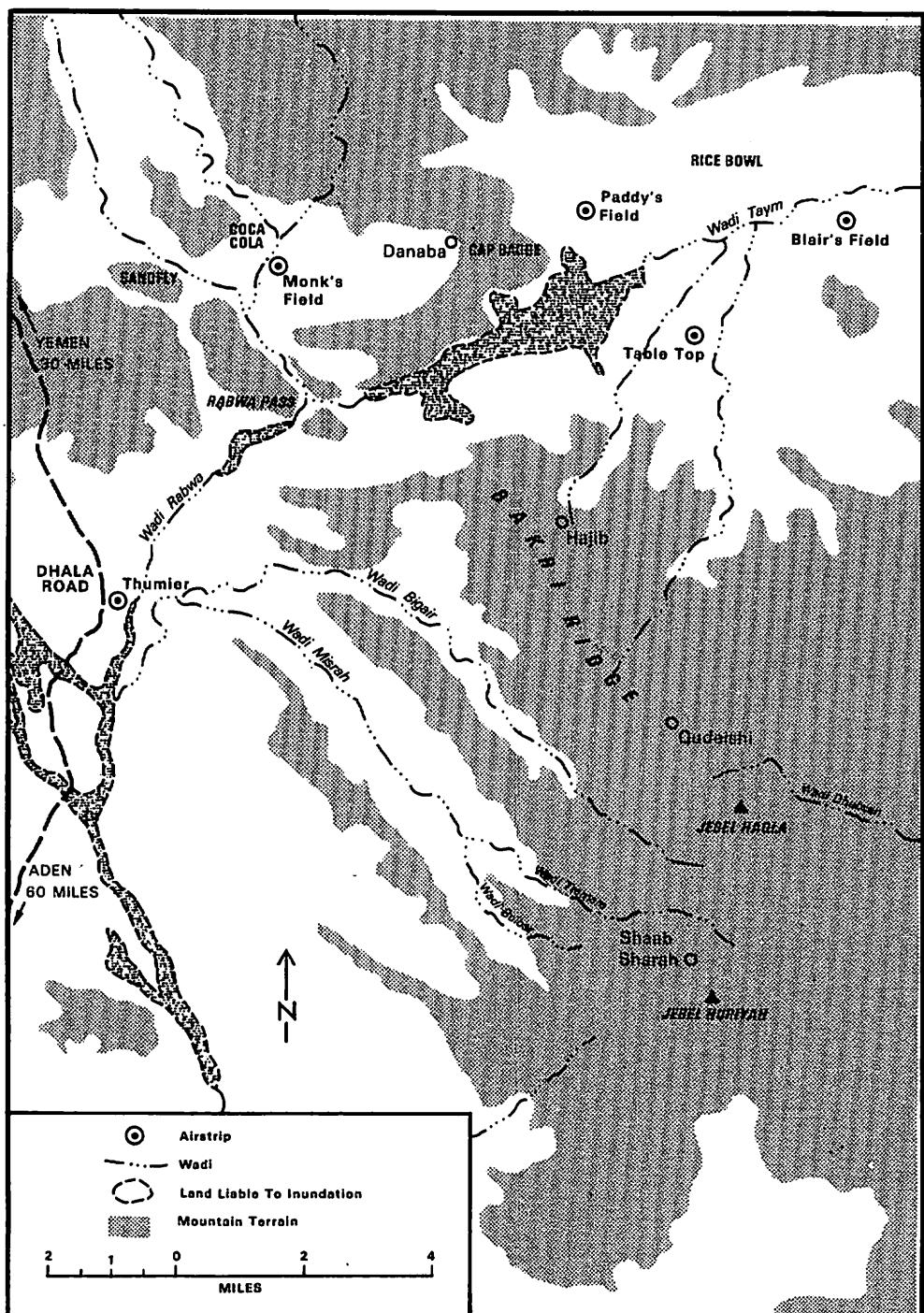
'The strike aircraft of the RAF were superb, brilliantly handled and always on the spot within minutes. The closest liaison was established with the ground forces, who had complete confidence in the air support provided.' (1)

The setback to the Radfan rebels resulted in Yemeni and Egyptian pressure being switched to the urban area of Aden State. It had already been announced in a Defence White Paper of February 1964 (2) that independence would be granted to South Arabia 'not later than 1968', and the rival political parties thus had a specific date by which to attain their aims. Impetus was given to the mounting tide of terrorism, and the next three years saw a terrible increase in the most savage incidents leading to a virtual breakdown of law and order.

As the situation deteriorated, some disposition of RAF units was made in an effort to reduce personnel and to move out of Aden units not essential to the internal security operations. Instead of moving from Eastleigh to Khormaksar as had been intended, 30 Squadron, still equipped with six Beverleys, was deployed to Muharraq where it could undertake the routine supply of the Gulf stations. 84 Squadron, also with six Beverleys, remained at Khormaksar but detached two of its aircraft to Eastleigh to fill the gap left by the move of 30 Squadron. As many aircraft of the Hunter Wing as could be spared from Khormaksar were kept on detachment in the Gulf, and comprehensive plans were made to disperse Khormaksar's remaining aircraft to the 'route stations' and Sharjah should the security of the airfield be seriously threatened. Located as it was on an isthmus with the sea at one end of the runway and Aden harbour at the other, with British barracks and installations on the two remaining sides, Khormaksar was not difficult to defend but it was susceptible to sporadic mortar attack, the densely packed aircraft offering an inviting target. One method of reducing the vulner-

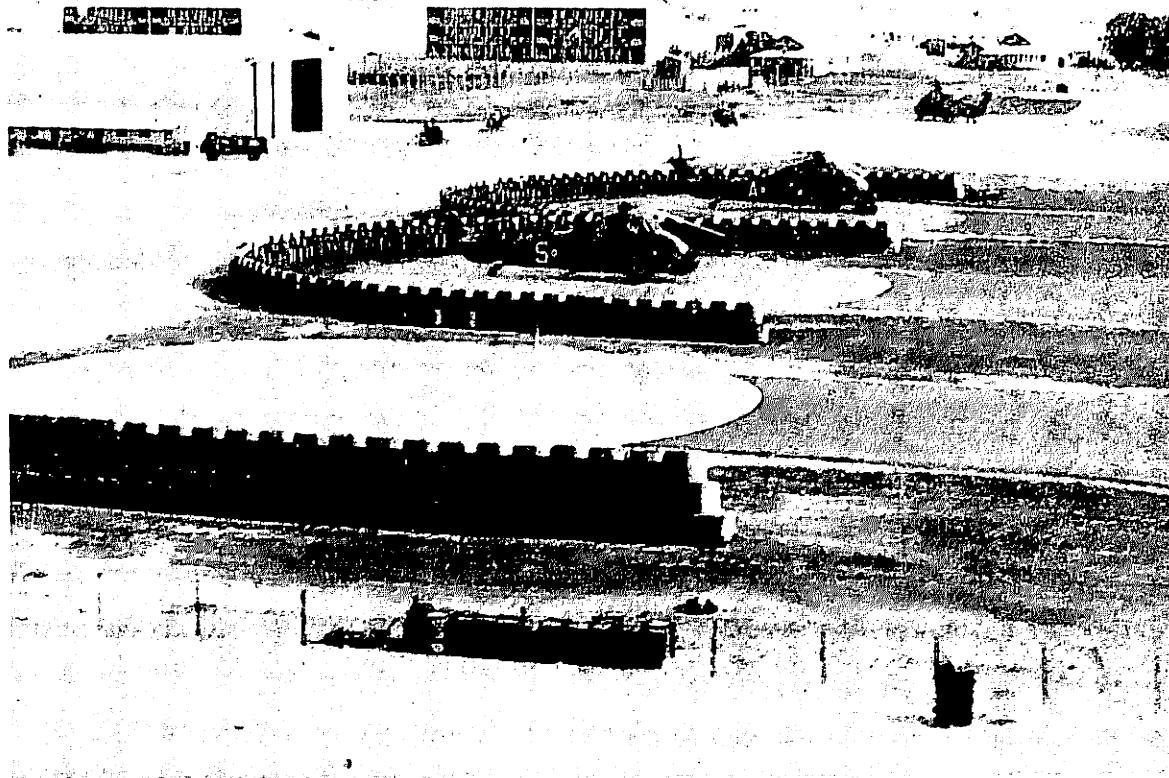
(1) Julian Paget, Last Post: Aden 1964-67

(2) Command 2270



Map VI. Area of Radfan operations

ability of aircraft was to build revetments from old 40-gallon fuel drums filled with water. This offered some protection from mortar bomb or grenade splinters and made good use of the thousands of empty drums which had accumulated on the airfield.



Revetments made from empty oil drums filled
with water at Khormaksar

1965 saw a steady increase in the terrorism, and consequently the casualties. Owing to their deployment in relatively well protected areas such as Steamer Point and Khormaksar, RAF casualties were light and fortunately the 9,000 Service dependents in hirings and quarters were not a primary target for the terrorists. Nevertheless their presence caused much anxiety and their freedom had to be severely restricted, which made life very burdensome.

The RAF could not play a major role in internal security which, by September 1965, required three full scale infantry battalions where one had previously sufficed. However, helicopters were used to move small bodies of troops to the scene of incidents extremely rapidly - with as little as three minutes warning - and the Twin Pioneers dropped leaflets and reconnoitred troublesome areas.

At about this time 26 Squadron disbanded and its Belvederes were transferred to the Far East in HMS Albion, where they played a notable part in the Borneo campaign. 78 Squadron gave up its Twin Pioneers and re-equipped with the Wessex which satisfactorily filled the gap left by the Belvederes. 21 Squadron moved up to Khormaksar from Eastleigh as the newly formed Kenya Air Force became operational, thus ensuring that some 'Twin Pins' remained in Aden where they had proved invaluable.

Early in 1966, it was officially announced (1) that Britain did not intend to maintain a military base in Aden after South Arabia had become independent. The effect of this statement was, if anything, to increase the terrorism as the three political parties in Aden stepped up their efforts to wrest power from the authorities. It was also an encouragement to both Egypt and the Yemen to stir up as much trouble as possible. Egyptian MIG fighters violated the frontier and the border patrols by Hunters had to be increased. By this time the airstrip at Beihan had been lengthened to take Hunters and this development in conjunction with a mobile radar at Mukeiras enabled a close watch to be maintained along the frontier. Operations in the Radfan continued and Wessex, Beverleys and Twin Pioneers were kept busy as the ground forces in the Wadi Taym had to be maintained almost entirely by air.

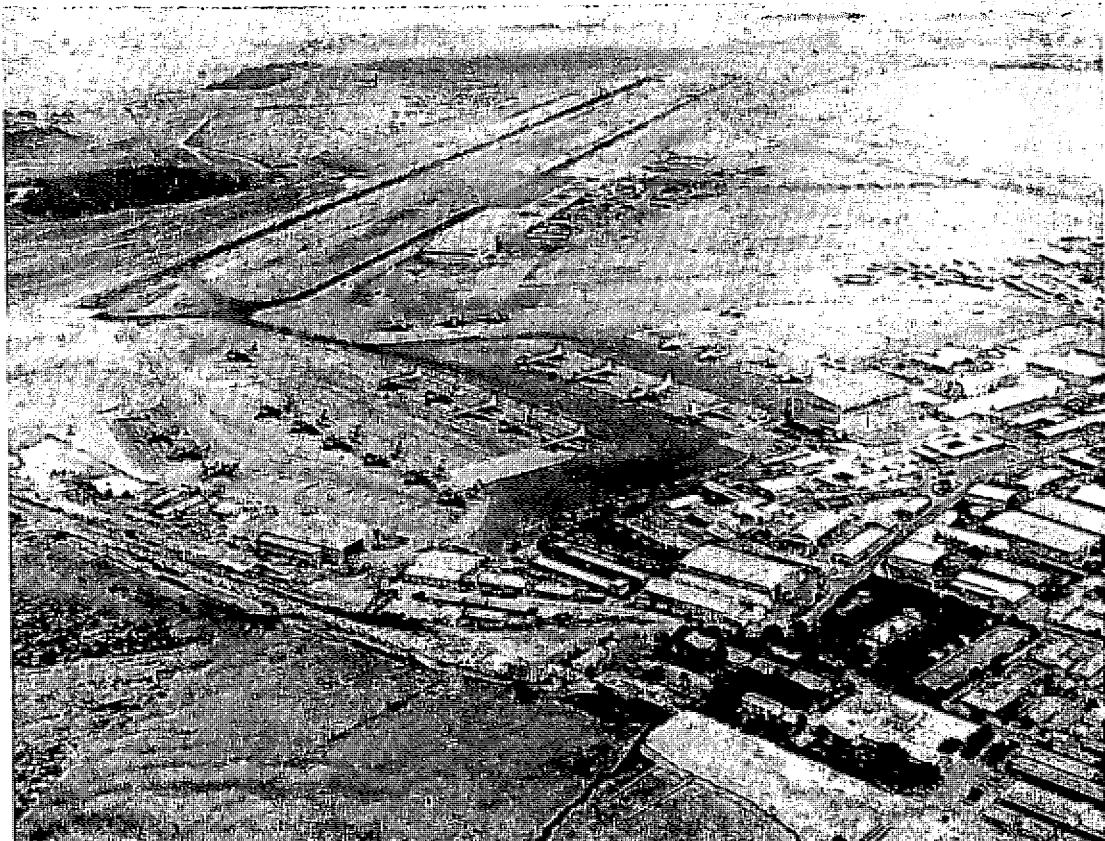
By the end of 1966 incidents in Aden State had risen to 80-100 per month, many of them resulting in fatal casualties to Service and civilian personnel. A firm decision was made to accept no more Service families, and to start to repatriate the 9,000 in Aden from March 1967. It was becoming all too clear that, unless a full-scale battle with many casualties was to take place, Britain would have to withdraw her forces from Aden by the end of 1967, if not sooner.

And so the last chapter of Britain's occupation of Aden began. It had already been decided that the forces in the Gulf, notably at Muharraq and Sharjah would be somewhat strengthened from those withdrawn from Aden - in sufficient numbers to fulfil the commitment to safeguard Kuwait. The indications were that the Gulf commitment would need fighter/ground attack aircraft, medium and short range transports and helicopters. As 208 Squadron (Hunters) and 152 Squadron (Twin Pioneers/Pembroke) were already in the Gulf, a balanced force could be built up from Khormaksar by moving up 8 Squadron (Hunters), 84 (Beverleys to re-equip with Andovers), 105 (Argosies) and 78 (Wessex). Of these 105 Squadron would disband at Muharraq as soon as 84 had become operational on Andovers.

It was intended that this force should be operational in the Gulf during the final phase of withdrawal from Aden, and available to support the departure should it have to be conducted under fire, which was not unlikely. As units were moved, so was control of them to be transferred to the Gulf until eventually a new command organisation, of which the RAF element would be Air Forces Gulf (AFG), superseded Middle East Command. These plans were completed by the end of 1966 and the run down of RAF installations and stocks in Aden began to gather momentum.

(1) Defence White Paper: Command 2901

There was a firm determination to leave behind nothing that could possibly be removed - it was bad enough that many millions of pounds worth of buildings had to be left, most of them relatively new.



View of Muharraq airfield during the
evacuation from Aden, 1967

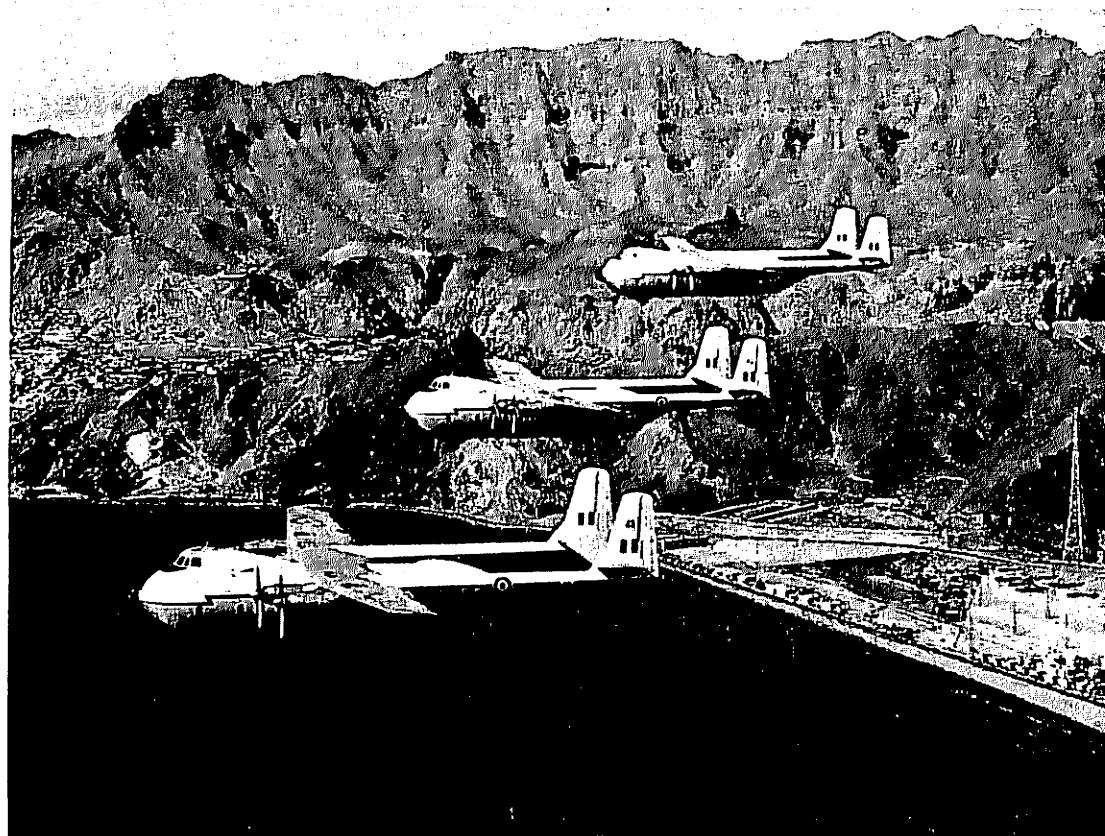
The evacuation of the families started on 1 May 1967, by which time the numbers had dropped through natural end of tour wastage to 6,605. Even so, it was a formidable figure and it says much for the RAF Movements staffs that the repatriation, at a rate of about 200 per day, was completed with the greatest efficiency by 20 July, ten days earlier than planned. Every family was met at Gatwick and helped to its destination which, in a surprising number of cases, was the new station to which the head of the family would be posted when he returned home.

While the families were leaving Aden, the six-day war between Egypt and Israel took place and, as already mentioned, anti-British feelings were exacerbated throughout the Command. Law and order in Aden had virtually collapsed and the

security forces had assumed control from the local Police. Serious riots took place in Crater and Sheikh Othman and by about July it became simply a matter of withdrawing as quickly and in as good order as possible. The British Army handed over its responsibilities to the South Arabian Army (yet another title for the old FRA), first up country and then on the fringes of Aden State itself. The squadrons began to leave Khormaksar as planned and the major installations were dismantled and shipped out where possible. There was a particularly heart-felt sigh of relief when 114 Maintenance Unit closed down in August. It had been the most congested and vulnerable establishment in Aden, and a terrible fire and sabotage risk.

As the year progressed there was much confusion over the final date of departure. Eventually it was fixed at 29 November 1967, after considerable vacillation which did not upset the planners who had kept their plans flexible to the end.

By a stroke of good fortune the last two months were relatively quiet: the two main political factions had finally slogged it out and the National Liberation Front (NLF) had triumphed. The South Arabian Army, which had hitherto been neutral, swung over to its support and all resistance to it collapsed. Under these circumstances the NLF was content to cease harassing the British forces and allow them to leave without opposition.



Argosies of 105 Squadron leaving Aden

The AOC transferred his flag to Bahrein on 27 October which signalled the end of AFME, but he remained ready to return should trouble arise. A massive airlift of the remaining forces was arranged through Bahrein to the UK, concentrated into seven days and using the VC 10s, Belfasts, Hercules and Britannias of Air Support Command. There were approximately 3,700 people to be brought out of Aden by air, a relatively easy task to accomplish in seven days. This would allow the whole programme to be accelerated if fighting broke out. Precautions were taken to ensure that no aircraft had to be left at Khormaksar with engine trouble: this was ensured by using in the final phase only aircraft which were capable of taking off unloaded with one engine out of use.

The airlift went off without a hitch. All the passengers were made up into 'chalks' of 25 men, usually drawn from the same unit. Each aircraft carried a fixed number of 'chalks', e.g. Britannias carried four, and each 'chalk' remained as an entity throughout the whole journey to the UK via Bahrein - a simple and efficient system which worked extremely well and minimized the chances of individuals going astray en route.

When the airlift was completed, the Meteor FR 10s of 8 Squadron had the privilege of being the last RAF aircraft to leave Khormaksar. The squadron had spent more than 40 years on the station with but a few months' absence in the Far East during the Second World War, and it was entirely appropriate that some of the squadron's aircraft should remain on their home station until the end.

A Naval task force, headed by HMS Eagle, had formed up outside Aden harbour during the airlift. This task force was destined to cover the last few hours of the withdrawal and to take off 42 Commando RM by helicopter. The Commandos had the final task of handing over the airfield, thus bringing to an end 128 years of British rule in Aden and, for the RAF, 48 years occupation of Steamer Point and Khormaksar. HMS Eagle remained in Aden waters for a further nine hours before leaving South Arabia to her independence at midnight on 29 November 1967.

WITHDRAWAL FROM THE PERSIAN GULF

During the period between the Kuwait crisis of 1961 and the departure of British forces from Aden six years later, the forces in the Gulf, at Bahrein and Sharjah, were maintained at a level sufficient for a rapid return to Kuwait, the protection of which continued to be Britain's highest priority commitment in the theatre. The RAF element of this force consisted of 152 Squadron, which was the resident squadron with its mixed complement of Pembroke and Twin Pioneers, the latter being maintained as a Flight at Sharjah to facilitate the mobility of the Trucial Oman Scouts. In addition, a squadron of Hunters, usually drawn from the Khormaksar Wing but occasionally supplied from 38 Group in the UK, was maintained at Muharraq together with a detachment of three Beverleys from 30 or 84 Squadron. Two PR Canberras, drawn from 13 Squadron in Malta, were also detached to Muharraq to maintain a close watch on the Kuwait/Iraq frontier for any signs of violation. As this task did not always occupy the full capability of the

Canberras, the opportunity was taken to survey some of the more remote and badly mapped areas of Oman.

As the land forces permanently stationed in the Gulf had also been considerably strengthened by the addition of a battalion at Muharraq and an armoured car regiment at Sharjah, there was a greatly increased requirement from these units for air training of all kinds, particularly as, for several years, the battalion was drawn from the Parachute Brigade and needed the services of the Beverleys for parachute training.

These increases more than doubled the RAF strength at Muharraq: it rose to over 1,000 men and the overcrowding became as acute as it had been at Khormaksar. In some respects it was more serious as Muharraq lacked Aden's large, old fashioned barrack blocks with wide verandahs on which airmen could be accommodated in emergency. On the other hand, all the huts at Muharraq were air conditioned so that the airmen, although over crowded, were at least protected from the worst of the heat and dust. A large-scale building programme was approved and went ahead rapidly so that, by about 1963, Muharraq was a reasonably comfortable station once more. Sharjah was similarly improved, although the RAF expansion there was not significant: perhaps the most important development on this station was the overdue construction of a permanent hard-topped runway. It was laid alongside the original sand runway which was left as an emergency facility should the new one be blocked by an accident. It was the operation of Canberras from the old runway during the Kuwait crisis which finally persuaded the authorities that a natural surface was no longer acceptable for intensive use by modern jet aircraft.

Masirah, which until the closing phases of the Oman campaign in 1969 had been no more than a small staging post, also assumed greater importance after the Aden withdrawal. Britain held the airfield on a 99 year lease from the Sultan of Muscat and, being 30 miles off the coast of Muscat, its security of tenure was better than that of, say, Sharjah. Masirah was, therefore, a 'natural' for further development and so, as in the case of Sharjah, it was provided with a 9,000 foot tarmac runway and the old hatted RAF camp was completely rebuilt and modernised. Facilities for unloading supply ships were improved and, in all, some £3M were spent on the station.

Very little operational activity disturbed these years of rebuilding in the Gulf. There was, however, some evidence that the training of Omani rebels in Saudi Arabia had recommenced. The effect of this was first seen in Dhofar, the province around Salalah on the South Arabian coast, where rioting and incidents directed against the Sultan of Muscat took place in mid-1963.

Towards the end of the following year the constant surveillance of the Kuwait/Iraq border by Canberras of 13 Squadron revealed concentrations of Iraqi armour close to the frontier. 208 Squadron was brought to 30 minutes readiness at Muharraq and 30 Squadron's Beverleys were prepared for a rapid airlift of the Parachute

Regiment, also at Muharraq. The situation did not, however, develop and the troops and aircraft were stood down after four days. There was a reality about the incident which helped to keep the Gulf forces on their toes.

The situation in Dhofar gave increasing cause for concern as 1965 gave way to 1966. Britain was naturally most anxious to avoid involvement in another long and expensive campaign in Oman. A company of the resident battalion at Bahrein was sent to safeguard the airfield at Salalah where the handful of RAF personnel were very exposed and vulnerable. Other than that, the operations against the Dhofar rebels were left to the Sultan's forces. Part of his air force (SOAF) moved down to Salalah from Muscat which brought its Provosts and Beavers within comfortable range of the operational area.

Continuing to maintain a low level of activity, the forces in the Gulf entered 1967, the year of the withdrawal from Aden. Although, as we have seen, the Gulf was to be further reinforced with units from Aden, there was no certainty that Britain would remain for long in the Gulf. Various Defence statements indicated a change of policy, notably Britain's intended withdrawal from the Far East and massive reductions elsewhere. Although at this time the Gulf was not mentioned specifically, the writing was on the wall and a severe restriction was placed upon all new building projects at Muharraq and Sharjah.

Muharraq played an important part in the final airlift out of Aden, as described earlier, and the new command organisation gradually assumed control from the reducing Middle East Command. Temporarily, Muharraq reached a personnel strength of more than 1,700 RAF personnel, and all the old overcrowding, which the new building programme had only just solved, began again. During the height of the Aden withdrawal, in November 1967, Muharraq handled 728 aircraft which involved the processing of 24,000 passengers and 2½ million pounds of freight. The job was superbly done, but it was a great relief to see the last of Air Support Command aircraft leave with a full load for Lyneham.

No sooner had the second expansion in the Gulf reached its peak than further rationalisation of the squadrons began, designed to provide the balanced force which it had been decided to leave in the new Command. In January 1968, 105 Squadron disbanded and the Argosies, which had taken over so effectively from the Beverleys in the Command, were flown back to the UK to swell the Argosy pool there. It was not, however, the end of this useful transport in the Gulf as a number of them were provided on detachment from time to time. 84 Squadron completed its re-equipment with the Mark 1 Andover at Sharjah. This proved quite a formidable task: not only the aircraft but most of the aircrew and ground personnel were new to the theatre and there was little or no previous experience of operating STOL aircraft from the primitive airfields and strips, and in the excessive temperatures of Muscat and Oman. The conditions brought to light several weaknesses in the aircraft and engines and, in particular, the tendency of the engines to surge on take-off at high temperatures. 84 Squadron had many difficulties to contend with in its first few months with the Andover, but they were all overcome in due course.

Finally the Wessex of 78 Squadron, which were among the last aircraft to leave Aden, were mostly ferried to Sharjah by naval vessel or by LSTs. A few accomplished the long flight round the coast with frequent refuelling stops but the majority went by sea. After behaving impeccably in Aden, the engines of the Wessex gave trouble in the dustier conditions of the Gulf and great care had to be exercised when siting landing pads for them, hard rocky sites being preferred to loose sandy ones.

1968 and 1969 were years of intensive training for this newly constituted force, with the accent on inter-Service exercises. Muharraq had developed into an extremely busy staging post with the demise of Khormaksar and it was rare for the Movements staff to handle less than 10,000 passengers in a month. Aircraft from the home Commands made great use of the Gulf stations during flight refuelling exercises, lone rangers (1) and reinforcement exercises to the Far East.

Further developments in British defence policy were in the offing and it became clear that Britain wished to encourage autonomous states, such as Kuwait, Abu Dhabi and Muscat to develop their own air forces and to relieve the RAF of some of their commitments in the Gulf. Indeed, it became evident before long that Britain wished to withdraw all her regular forces from Bahrain and Sharjah, leaving only individual officers and NCOs to assist in the training of State forces. Masirah and Salalah, however, it was hoped to retain under the existing treaty arrangements with the Sultan of Muscat who, in the event, was to be the subject of the next crisis in the theatre.

On 23 July 1970, the Sultan was overthrown by his son, the 29-year-old Qaboos-Bin-Said, a young man who had served in the British Army but since his return home had been kept locked up by his father. It was virtually a bloodless coup, the old Sultan escaping to the protection of the RAF at Salalah, whence he was flown to Bahrain and then on into exile in London. Qaboos was pro-British and anxious to preserve the treaty relationships, but also determined to liberate his country from the almost medieval bondage imposed by his father. Britain was not averse to these changes and looked forward to a more responsible government in Muscat with less calls for assistance in internal affairs.

The end of 1971 had, by now, been fixed as the time for withdrawal from the Gulf stations and the rundown commenced at the beginning of that year. 84 Squadron gave up two of its Andovers, moved from Sharjah to Muharraq and absorbed the Gulf Communications Flight, an eminently sensible piece of rationalisation as the Communications Flight had been hard pressed to fulfil its commitments since losing its Pembroke some months earlier due to severe corrosion. 8 and 208 Squadrons began reluctantly to reduce their combined Hunter strength to a small residual number by the withdrawal date. This phased programme led to the disbandment of 208 Squadron in August - a sad ceremony although it was known that the squadron was to be reformed on a new type in the UK.

(1) These were long range individual training sorties for aircraft of Bomber Command to exercise navigational and other flight techniques.

And so the rundown continued: 84 Squadron disbanded, but only temporarily, the few Shackletons left Sharjah as did the Wessex of 78 Squadron. Eventually only eight Hunters of 8 Squadron were left as a final air defence element and, as Sharjah closed down on 14 December 1971, they flew out in two Flights of four aircraft on their way home to the UK. 8 Squadron had certainly hung on to the end in both Aden and the Gulf and it remained only for the transport aircraft of Air Support Command to take out the last officers and airmen from Muharraq immediately after the Ensign was lowered for the last time at 1500 hours on Wednesday, 15 December 1971.

But the departure from the Gulf had been very different to that from Aden. Farewell guest nights had been held at which the local Rulers and dignitaries had been present. Gifts and tokens of esteem had been exchanged and the last Belfast left in an atmosphere of cordiality and goodwill which has continued to this day.

Ministry of Defence

AIR HISTORICAL BRANCH
1978

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