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CONTENTS

OPENING ADDRESS – Air Chf Mshl Sir David Cousins	7
THE NORTHERN MEDITERRANEAN 1943-1945 by Wg Cdr Andrew Brookes	9
AIRBORNE FORCES IN THE NORTH MEDITERRANEAN THEATRE OF OPERATIONS by Wg Cdr Colin Cummings	20
DID ALLIED AIR INTERDICTION LIVE UP TO EXPECTATIONS IN THE ITALIAN CAMPAIGN 1943- 1944? by Wg Cdr ‘Archie’ Spence	37
MORNING Q&A	55
THE BALKAN AIR FORCE by Wg Cdr ‘Jeff’ Jefford	63
AIR POWER AND SPECIAL OPERATIONS: THE RAF AND SPECIAL DUTIES IN YUGOSLAVIA, 1941-1945 by Dr Sebastian Ritchie	81
THE RAF IN COUNTER-INSURGENCY WARFARE: BRITISH INTERVENTION IN GREECE, 1944-45 by Sqn Ldr Alexander Zervoudakis and Dr Christina Goulter	104
RAF REGIMENT NORTH MEDITERRANEAN OPERATIONS 1943-1945 by Air Cdre M S Witherow	133
SPECIAL DUTIES OPERATIONS – THE POLISH DIMENSION by Wg Cdr Colin Cummings	147
CLOSING REMARKS – Air Chf Mshl Sir David Cousins	160
THE AEGEAN CAMPAIGN – A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE by Tony Ross	161
BOOK REVIEWS	173

SELECTED ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Anti-Aircraft
AAA	Anti-Aircraft Artillery
AI	Air Interdiction
AK	<i>Armia Krajowa</i> (Polish Home Army)
AMP	Air Member for Personnel
AMT	Air Member for Training
CAS	Close Air Support
COS	Chiefs of Staff
DAF	Desert Air Force
DZ	Dropping Zone
EAM	<i>Ethniko Apeleftherotiko Metopo</i> (National Liberation Front)
ELAS	<i>Ellinikos Laïkos Apeleftherotikos Stratos</i> (Greek People's Liberation Army)
ELG	Emergency Landing Ground
FAC	Forward Air Control(ler)
FLOT	Forward Line of Own Troops
IAD	<i>Istrebitl'nyi Aviatsionnyi Diviziya</i>
KKE	<i>Kommounistikó Kómma Elládas</i> (Greek Communist Party)
LOC	Lines of Communication
LRDG	Long Range Desert Group
LZ	Landing Zone
MASAF	Mediterranean Allied Strategic Air Forces
MiD	Mention in Dispatches
OPLA	<i>Organosi Prostasias Laikoy Agona</i> (Organisation for the Protection of the People's Struggle; the acronym also means 'weapons')
ORBAT	Order of Battle
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
PFF	Pathfinder Force
RCDS	Royal College of Defence Studies
SAF	Strategic Air Force(s)
SBS	Special Boat Section (later Squadron, later still Service)
SD	Special Duties
SIS	Secret Intelligence Service
SOE	Special Operations Executive
TAF	Tactical Air Force(s)
TNA	The National Archives

**THE SOFT UNDERBELLY
(THE NORTHERN MEDITERRANEAN 1943-45)**

RAF MUSEUM, HENDON, 8 APRIL 2009

WELCOME ADDRESS BY THE SOCIETY'S CHAIRMAN

Air Vice-Marshal Nigel Baldwin CB CBE FRAeS

Ladies and gentlemen – good morning – good to see you all.

As always, a sincere thank you to Dr Michael Fopp and his splendid staff here at the Museum. As I always say, we could not do without them.

Before I introduce our Chairman for the day, a word about our title – The Soft Underbelly. While explaining, during a face-to-face meeting with Stalin in Moscow in August 1942, the attractions of a Mediterranean campaign, in the absence of a Second Front in the west that year, Churchill illustrated his concept by comparing Europe to a crocodile, which he sketched, with a soft underbelly. The image was so vivid and convenient that he subsequently used it elsewhere and it became permanently associated with the Prime Minister's strategic overview.

Our Chairman today, Air Chf Mshl Sir David Cousins, was a Lightning and Buccaneer pilot in his youth (and more importantly for us, was the Personal Staff Officer to our President Sir Michael Beetham during the Falklands War). He commanded Laarbruch in RAF Germany in the early 1980s which, at the time, was operating Tornados and Jaguars. Amongst other appointments he was Commandant of the RAF College at Cranwell, and SASO at HQ Strike Command. He completed his RAF career as AOCinC Personnel and Training Command and a member of Air Force Board as AMP. When he retired in 1998, he spent eight years as Controller and Chief Executive of the RAF Benevolent Fund, and in August last year he became the Honorary Air Commodore of No 7630 (Volunteer Reserve) Intelligence Squadron.

So, with all that in his background, he must be well qualified to lead today's seminar.

Sir David, you have control.

OPENING ADDRESS

Air Chf Mshl Sir David Cousins KCB AFC BA

Ladies and gentlemen, good morning. It is a great privilege to chair today's meeting. Having said that, I am very conscious that my credentials for doing so are pretty thin. Although I have been a member of this society for several years, my participation has been somewhat passive, and my only significant contribution to the Second World War was to have been born during it! But I am here today for two reasons. First, the persuasive powers of the Society's Chairman, and secondly to my increasing interest in studying the campaigns of that war. The latter stems, at least in part, from hearing of the experiences of my father who had, in common with many others, what might be described as a pretty tough war.

He was in the 2nd Battalion, Coldstream Guards and, as such, he fought in Tunisia and throughout the Italian campaign. It always seemed that the Guards Brigade was pitched against Germany's best and, having sustained a very bad head wound at Cassino, he considered himself very lucky to have survived. Sadly, my father died early and I never had an opportunity to ask him many of the questions that I would love to ask him now – and, of course, to have told him how very proud I was of him. In the context of today's seminar, therefore, it was interesting to find, when rummaging through one of those inevitable boxes in the attic the other day, some notes, made a few days after he had been trying to fight his way into Cassino. Here is a short extract which says:

'Our next attack, on the 15th of March (this would have been 1944) was preceded by another terrific aerial bombardment by over 500 bombers. This attack lasted eight days and, when it was abandoned, our troops had suffered over 4,000 casualties (and it is, I think, sobering to reflect on that statistic in a modern context). The aerial bombing has proved a mixed blessing on this occasion. Undoubtedly it has caused great damage to the Germans but, morally and physically, it has made a shambles of Cassino. This shambles was an embarrassment to our side almost equal to the damage inflicted on the enemy. The town was impassable to tanks and several New Zealand tanks



Intensive bombing rendered Cassino town impassable to tanks.

were stuck in the ruins and remained there as armoured pill boxes until we finally captured the town.’

Now I am quite sure, knowing my father, that this was less a criticism of air support than the candid, and immediate, observations of a beleaguered and very tired infantryman. But you can, I am sure, imagine the sort of questions that I would have liked to ask him now about what he said then.

I do not, of course, expect to hear specific answers to my questions about Cassino, but I am quite sure that many other aspects of air operations in the Northern Mediterranean are going to be explored and that, by the end of the day, we shall all be the richer for that.

THE NORTHERN MEDITERRANEAN 1943-1945

Wg Cdr Andrew Brookes



Having gained a degree from Leeds University, Andrew Brookes completed his flying training in 1968, subsequent tours providing experience on Victors, Canberras and Vulcans. He held appointments in Hong Kong, at HQ Strike Command, at the Greenham Common cruise missile base, with the Inspectorate of Flight Safety and the DS at Bracknell. He is currently the Aerospace Analyst at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. He has written a dozen aviation books, his Air War Over Italy, for Ian Allan, being of particular note in the context of this seminar,

Setting the Scene

Today, the battle for the Northern Mediterranean is largely forgotten. Yet at its inception it was no sideshow. Chronologically, the invasion of Italy was a sequel to the conquest of Sicily, but in grand strategic terms the two events were widely separated. The fall of Sicily marked the end of the opening stage of the Second World War. The invasion of mainland Italy initiated a new, offensive phase which climaxed in the final defeat of Germany. Up to the fall of Rome in June 1944, the Mediterranean was *the* major theatre of Anglo-American war operations. The emphasis shifted once the Allies landed in Normandy and began island-hopping across the Pacific, but while the struggle for Italy became of secondary importance after OVERLORD, there was nothing second rate about the contest so far as the Allied soldiers were concerned. In just one campaign in 1944, the US Fifth Army sustained 32,000 battle deaths, just short of the number of American servicemen killed during the entire Korean War. The most decorated American soldier of the Second World War – Audie Murphy – earned many of his citations in Italy.

Desert Song

It was under Dwight Eisenhower, as Allied Commander-in-Chief in North Africa, that the British and Americans first learned how to

integrate action by land, air and sea. A major architect of such 'jointery' was Air Chf Mshl Sir Arthur Tedder who by early 1943 had become Air CinC for the whole Mediterranean theatre. The decision to create Mediterranean Air Command (MAC), taking in all the Allied air forces from one end of that sea to the other, made perfect sense as they were all fighting the same war. It was interdiction in various forms by heavy bombers, constant attacks by medium bombers to disrupt and demoralise ground forces, close air support from fighter-bombers against pinpoint targets such as tanks, constant photo reconnaissance, fighters covering the whole thing, and air supply/casualty evacuation which combined to drive the Axis out of North Africa. This use of the *whole air force* to support the Army was to underpin the Normandy invasion in 1944, but there was the small matter of Italy to get out of the way first.

In early 1943 the charming and genial Harold Alexander, fourth son of an earl and youngest general in the British Army back in 1937, was made Eisenhower's deputy and ground commander of the Allied armies fighting the North African campaign. American forces joined the battle for North Africa because Roosevelt insisted that some sort of operation must be launched in 1942, but while the Americans were hell-bent on invading across the English Channel in 1943, the British preferred to wear down the enemy by naval blockades and strategic bombing until the Third Reich collapsed under external and internal pressures. To be blunt, US planning staffs regarded British plans for the defeat of Germany as leisurely and indecisive. There was an American suspicion that British operations were geared to maintaining the integrity of their Empire, and that American soldiers would be duped into picking British political chestnuts out of the fire, not least around the Mediterranean and the Balkans.

At the Casablanca conference held in January 1943, the Combined Chiefs of Staff agreed that the Mediterranean should be fully opened to release shipping for the cross-Channel invasion, and to provide bases from which Allied bombers could attack the German-controlled economic base. While it was agreed that operations should be continued to divert German strength from the Russian front, to wear down the German war machine in general, and to force the collapse of Italy, there was no wish to get drawn into an Italian land campaign. It was assumed that once the Mediterranean had been opened and Sicily

taken, the weight of Allied sea and air power would be enough in themselves to force an Italian collapse.

By the time the Combined Chiefs met again in May 1943, and General Alexander's forces had overcome the last Axis resistance in North Africa, there was neither the time nor the shipping available to launch a cross-Channel invasion in 1943. Unless Mediterranean troops were left to kick their heels for a year while the Russians continued to fight single-handedly, something had to be found for them to do. As Churchill put it so appositely, the Allies would be 'a laughing stock if, in the spring and early summer, no British or American soldiers were firing at any German or Italian soldiers.' Combatants and statesmen alike were fixated on helping Marshal Stalin to win the war, and in 1943 there was no theatre other than the Mediterranean where this could be done.

Airmen coveted airfields on the Italian mainland from where they could reach out to attack central and south eastern Europe, but it was arguable that if Allied strategy aimed to tie Germans down while launching bomber raids, this could be done just as effectively by seizing Corsica and Sardinia. It is hard not to conclude that the impetus to carry the battle into Italy and to free Rome was as much emotional as strategic. Certainly when the Allied armies landed in Sicily on 10 July, nobody had yet decided where they were to go next.

Sicilian Prelude

After the failings in North Africa, the German Mediterranean Air Fleet was divided into two separate commands – Southeast Command covering Greece, Crete and the Balkans, and *Luftflotte 2* encompassing Italy, Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica and part of southern France. Simultaneously, *Luftflotte 2*'s HQ, which hitherto had shown itself lamentably wanting in ability and energy, was strengthened by the arrival from Russia of the capable but tough Field Marshal Wolfram von Richthofen. The Red Baron's cousin had commanded the Condor Legion at the end of the Spanish Civil War, and had fought in the Polish, Flanders, Balkan and Russian campaigns.

Between 8 and 10 May 1943, a few days before the Tunisian surrender, a formidable three-day air attack was made on the small island of Pantelleria athwart the narrows between Tunisia and Sicily. Known as the 'Italian Gibraltar', Pantelleria became famous as the

first instance of a substantial ground force surrendering to massive air power alone. The smaller island of Lampedusa fell likewise after an air attack which started at dawn. By late afternoon the Allies had flown some 450 sorties and dropped around 270 tons of bombs at which point the Italian commander tried to surrender to an amazed RAF sergeant who had been forced to land his air-sea rescue aircraft on the island's airfield with engine trouble.

The Axis had nineteen principal airfields in Sicily plus a dozen newly constructed strips of lesser importance, and from 15 June 1943 in Tedder's words, 'a crescendo of attacks on the enemy's airfields was launched'. An engagement on 5 July between US Fortresses and about 100 German fighters could not disguise the fact that, for all intents and purposes, the *Luftwaffe* was defeated before the Allied invasion of Sicily began. Allied troops landed on Sicily five days later. Covering the US 3rd Infantry Div going ashore on the Licata beaches were American Warhawks launched from Pantelleria airfield.

The Allied counter-air campaign was so successful that only twenty-five German aircraft remained on Sicily by 18 July. Given free rein, the day fighters and fighter-bombers of the Twelfth Air Force left the roads of Sicily blocked with burning trucks and seriously hampered Axis movements. Approximately 1,000 heavy and medium bomber sorties were flown against key supply nodes, terminal ports and Italian west coast marshalling yards with the aim of blocking Axis efforts to reinforce Sicily.

Back in January 1943, Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden had reminded the Commons that Mussolini had sent aircraft to participate in the Battle of Britain and the British had 'as much right to bomb Rome as the Italians had to bomb London [*and we*] should not hesitate to do so with the best of our ability and as heavily as possible if the course of the war should render such bombing convenient and helpful.' On the morning of 19 July, after warning leaflets had been dropped, 156 Fortresses, 144 Mitchells and 117 Liberators bombed the Lorenzo and Littorio railway yards at Rome. In the afternoon, 117 Marauders escorted by US Lightnings hit Ciampino North and South airfields. Churchill had been happy to sanction the bombardment of marshalling yards so close to the Eternal City because daylight precision bombing was portrayed as being quite accurate. But a few bombs fell wide and unintended 'collateral damage' was inflicted on

the ancient basilica of San Lorenzo-Without-The-Walls with its Twelfth Century frescos, and the headstone of the poet John Keats.

By the end of July the Allies had twenty-one Sicilian airfields back up and running, and forty squadrons based on the island. Over 100,000 Italians became prisoners of war, but the Germans remained skilful and obdurate throughout. It soon became clear that the exit point for remaining Axis troops would be Messina, less than three miles from the Italian mainland. Allied air forces made Messina their prime target, and by 8 August the port was reduced 'to a condition much the same as that in which it had been left by the earthquake of 1909.'¹ Yet in among the rubble, the Germans – well supported by their remaining Italian allies – managed to evacuate an estimated 60,000 men and nearly 10,000 vehicles with 94 guns and even 47 tanks.

This 'Axis Dunkirk' was made possible by a formidable anti-aircraft *Flak* barrier. Although German air elements in Sicily had been neutralised, *Luftwaffe* ground units comprising 30,000 personnel remained largely intact. Among them were some very powerful ground defence units which threw up an intensive wall of metal described as 'heavier than the Ruhr'.² On 1 August, Air Mshl Coningham told Tedder he 'considered that the Messina area flak was now practically prohibitive for all aircraft except the heavy bombers.'³

Nothing less than the use of B-17 Flying Fortresses with their Norden bombsights would be necessary if the Allies were to succeed in preventing an evacuation by air action, but on 11 August Coningham released the B-17s so that they could be used against strategic objectives in Italy and to exploit the situation on the mainland. Tedder had been pushing for a maximum strength strike on Rome which he believed might drive Italy from the war.⁴ Axis evacuation from Sicily became a daylight operation on 13 August, which was discovered only hours *after* the entire B-17 force struck Rome's marshalling yards that afternoon. The heavies were then forced to stand down for four days, by which time the evacuation was completed. For those who were more attracted to bombing capital cities than exposed lifelines, Gen von Vietinghoff, subsequently supreme Army commander in Italy, made the telling observation that without the men rescued from Sicily, 'it would not have been possible to offer effective resistance on the Italian mainland south of Rome.'⁵



*Generalfeldmarschall Albert
Kesselring (Bundesarchiv)*

The fall of Sicily came as the *coup de grace* to the Italian third of the Axis. *Il Duce* was deposed and arrested on 25 July and three weeks later, formal negotiations were opened in Lisbon with the Allies on behalf of the new regime.

‘If the worst comes to the worst,’ said Hitler to his advisers, ‘the Italian peninsula can be sealed off somehow. It is of decisive importance for us to hold the Balkans: oil, copper, bauxite, chrome, above all security, so there is not a complete smash there if things get worse in Italy.’⁶ Seventeen days after the clearing of Sicily, the British Eighth Army made its crossing of the Straits

of Messina. This was a diversion: the main amphibious assault, by Gen Mark Clark’s US Fifth Army, came in the Gulf of Salerno. On 8 September the Italian government surrendered unconditionally. The German CinC, *Generalfeldmarschall* Albert Kesselring, was left to pick up the pieces.

The Soft Underbelly

Albert Kesselring joined the Bavarian foot artillery wherein he gained valuable experience of manoeuvre operations during the First World War. His natural gifts for administration and organisation were such that in 1933 he was moved across to the newly emergent *Luftwaffe* to become chief administrator and then Chief of Staff. He commanded *Luftflotte 2* during the invasion of the Low Countries, and his performance was so outstanding that he received his Field Marshal’s baton after the fall of France. While masterminding the first true carpet bombing campaign against Malta, Kesselring capitalised

on his friendly and approachable style to sustain a working relationship with all manner of sensitivities and egos. He was always photographed wearing a cheerful grin, and Kesselring's men responded to their genuine Laughing Cavalier by nicknaming him 'Smiling Albert'.

Eventually, Hitler decided that all of Italy should be placed under a single command, but he prevaricated between Kesselring, who was keen to fight the Allies as far south as possible, and Rommel, who argued for holding the line much further north. In essence, Rommel was against making a stand where the Allies could exploit their maritime superiority to outflank the German defences whereas Kesselring, always air minded, saw the importance of keeping Allied heavy bombers as far away as possible from the Reich. In the end, Hitler opted for Kesselring and his never-failing optimism, leaving Rommel to assume a new role in Normandy.

Allied strategy in Italy had two aims – 'to eliminate Italy from the war and to contain the maximum number of German forces.'⁷ The mixing of a political with an ill-defined military aim was not ideal, nor were recurring Anglo-US disagreements over the relative importance of the Italian front. To Stalin, Churchill had likened the effort in the Mediterranean to an attack on the 'soft underbelly' of a crocodile.⁸ Victory in Sicily fired up the British to press forward around the whole Eastern Mediterranean, both to suck more German troops into the region, to reduce the numbers opposing the cross-Channel operation, and to entice Turkey to enter the war on the Allied side. The US Chiefs on the other hand pointedly re-christened the cross-Channel invasion OVERLORD to reinforce its pre-eminence, and they were particularly insistent on priority being given to the invasions of Normandy and the South of France in 1944. British talk of soft underbellies, and an implied reluctance to meet the Germans head-on, were seen as examples of Limey back-sliding and prevarication.

Nonetheless, inter-allied and inter-service co-operation was tried and tested. Commanders had proved themselves in North Africa, since when they had enjoyed the fruits of ULTRA intelligence. Once the Allies were firmly established in Sicily, Axis ground forces only appeared to stand a chance if the *Luftwaffe* could keep Allied air power off their backs. But this was never to be. *Luftflotte 2* never had the time or opportunity to make good its losses in both machines and

experienced personnel given the more pressing claims of other fronts. In the twelve months after July 1943, German front-line Mediterranean air strength shrank to 475 aircraft, while the Allies expanded their strength throughout the whole Mediterranean to some 7,000 aircraft supported by 315,000 air and ground crews by the end of 1943. From mid-1943, Axis forces endured what John Terraine described as, 'the misery of trying to fight under a canopy of hostile air power; and this was to be the German soldier's hard lot for the rest of the war in the West.'⁹ The Pantelleria experience implied that prolonged and continuous air attack would inevitably degrade ground force morale, especially as established air power wisdom was that, 'if we lose the war in the air, we lose the war and lose it quickly.'¹⁰ On the face of it, therefore, the campaign against the 'soft underbelly' of the Axis should have been over by Christmas 1943. But because the crocodile had a hard shell all over, events did not work out that way.

Afterthoughts

On 1 April 1945, the Allies had 12,482 aircraft in-theatre of which 4,393 were front-line types, as against some 130 serviceable Axis aircraft which were often forced, like the Argentineans during the 1982 Falklands campaign, to operate at the limits of their range. Time prevents me from covering the Italian campaign in detail but if you want to know about Anzio, the bombing of Monte Cassino or the fall of Rome, please buy my book!*

What finally killed off Axis resistance was the successful interdiction campaign. Allied air strove to maximise blocks north of the Po to hinder the retreat of any enemy formations that might get across the river. All railway lines, including the one leading to the Brenner Pass, now being a shambles, emphasis was placed on road bridges over the Adige and Brenta rivers in north eastern Italy. With the bridges destroyed, Germans north of the Po attempted to use thirty-one ferry crossings over the Adige, but patrolling DAF and MASAF fighters made any large scale crossings virtually impossible. The last aircraft to drop bombs at night in the Italian campaign was a Boston of No 55 Sqn captained by Plt Off M Vracaric, who bombed a road-rail crossing near Gemona at 22.30hrs on 30 April.

* Brookes, A; *Air War Over Italy* (Ian Allen, London, 2000).

In the opinion of Gen von Senger 'it was the bombing of the River Po crossings that finished us. We could have withdrawn successfully with normal rearguard action despite the heavy pressure, but owing to the destruction of the ferries and river crossings we lost all our equipment. North of the river we were no longer an army.'¹¹ The scenes which greeted Allied units as they closed up to the Po confirmed how great the German disaster had been. Some 54,000 German troops had surrendered by 24 April, while round-the-clock air attack and increasingly heavy artillery fire as more and more guns came into range created funeral pyres of burnt-out and twisted vehicles at all crossing sites and along the roads leading up to them. The great air interdiction campaign stretching back to July 1944 ensured that the Po and attendant Reno and Panaro rivers became graveyards for von Vietinghoff's divisions. Only independent air power could have done that.

Yet after Salerno it took twenty months of arduous campaigning, costing 313,495 Allied casualties, including future US Senate Leader Bob Dole, before the Germans were forced to surrender. Some lessons are still applicable to warfare today. First, the terrain of peninsular Italy was quite unsuited to the wide-ranging mobile battles fought in North Africa or Russia. Its mountainous spine and narrow coastal plains, containing numerous fast-flowing rivers, favoured defenders and demoralised attackers. There were fifty-odd rivers on both flanks north of Salerno, and the Germans used them all to make the conflict, in Senger's words, 'resemble the static fighting of the First World War.' German troops become adept at edging backwards from river to river, or crest to crest, while operating on interior lines to keep contact with industrial and administrative facilities in the north.

Then there was the weather. Men soon learned to forget the sunny tourist brochures, none of which mentioned that winter in the high mountain regions of the Abruzzi could be so severe, and the snowstorms so dangerous, that troops would sometimes descend *towards* the enemy in order to survive. During the first assault on the Gustav Line, the US Fifth Army lost nearly 40,000 in battle *and* 50,000 from the weather. In deep snow or mud where nothing on wheels could move off roads, military existence was no *dolce vita*.

Kesselring became a master of the shrewd defence, but it was more than just holding ground. The pressure the CinC brought to bear on his

subordinates 'was colossal as he moved tirelessly from place to place, driving, urging and cajoling in his determination to exact every morsel of work and ingenuity from weary men and to make the best of the relatively limited resources at his disposal'.¹² Gen Lucas noted the commitment of the German elite in his Anzio diary: 'We have taken between six and seven hundred prisoners since we landed. Most of them are down in spirits but not so the Hermann Goerings. These people are very young, very cocky, very full of fight, and believe they are winning the war . . .' Kesselring the Airman may have lacked aeroplanes but Kesselring the Motivator still had much to offer.

From September 1943 to May 1945, over 865,000 Allied operational sorties were flown, delivering over half a million bombs after January 1944. But it cost 8,011 aircraft, some carrying up to eight aircrew. It was all in marked contrast to Operation DESERT STORM which saw a major military power crushed for the loss of just 22 Allied aircraft and 366 US Army casualties.

Several broad conclusions can be drawn from the Italian campaign. First, there was the importance of selecting and maintaining the aim of the campaign. Gen John Harding, Alexander's Chief of Staff from January 1944, believed that 'the diversion of troops from Italy to the South of France in the autumn of 1944 was the biggest strategic blunder of the war.'¹³ It is arguable that Mark Clark's diversion three months earlier to free Rome was *the* weak link in an otherwise admirable air-land campaign: it lost the 1944 'weather window' and extended the Italian campaign by a year. Either way, both instances proved that immense air power could only do so much to offset inappropriate tactics or wishful strategy. Far too often, as Tedder signalled to Portal even before the landing at Salerno, 'there is a tendency to consider the Italian chicken as being already in the pot, whereas in fact it is not yet hatched.'¹⁴

Kesselring and his commanders often commented on the overwhelming nature of Allied air superiority but they never let it crush them mentally. 'Smiling Albert' possessed immense authority and ability, and he was to prove an outstanding CinC, despite lacking a conventional background for the role. Even his long-time opponent, Harold Alexander, felt moved to write after the war that although Kesselring was 'often out-manoeuvred he never accepted defeat and . . . though he could be out-thought, he could only with the greatest

difficulty be out-fought.¹⁵ Notwithstanding subsequent technological developments since 1945, mountains, rivers, foliage, foul weather and human flair still remain potent frictions in the workings of air power in war. As they are for British forces fighting in Afghanistan today!

Notes:

- ¹ Richards, D and Saunders, H StG; *Royal Air Force 1939-1945*, Vol II, p322. Denis Richards told the author that while he wrote the Sicilian section, all subsequent sections on the Italian campaign came from Hilary Saunders' pen.
- ² Shepperd, G A; *The Italian Campaign 1943-45*, (London, 1968) p69.
- ³ Air Historical Branch (AHB), *The Sicilian Campaign*, p80.
- ⁴ Mark, Eduard M; *Aerial Interdiction: Air Power and the Land Battle in Three American Wars* (Center of Air Force History, Washington DC, 1994) pp71-2.
- ⁵ Vietinghoff, H; *The Campaign in Italy*, 1947, ch 6, p2.
- ⁶ Führer Naval Conference, 14 May 1943 (*sic*).
- ⁷ TNA CAB 88/12. Combined Chiefs of Staff Memo 242/6 of 25 May 1943 (Final Report on the TRIDENT Conference).
- ⁸ Churchill, W S; *The Hinge of Fate* (London, 1950) p393.
- ⁹ Terraine, J; *The Right of the Line* (London, 1985) p570.
- ¹⁰ Quoted in Basic Aerospace Doctrine of the United States Air Force, Manual 1-1, vol 1, 1992, p9.
- ¹¹ TNA Air 41/58. AHB Narrative, *The Italian Campaign, 1943-1945, Vol II; Operations June 1944-May 1945* quotes, on p349, Senger in an extract drawn from an Interrogation Report dated 4 May 1945.
- ¹² Macksey, K; *Kesselring: German Master Strategist of the Second World War* (London, 1996) p184.
- ¹³ Shepperd, *op.cit.*, p.x.
- ¹⁴ Tedder, A; *With Prejudice* (London, 1966) p462.
- ¹⁵ North, J (ed); *The Alexander Memoirs*, (London, 1962) p39.

AIRBORNE FORCES IN THE NORTH MEDITERRANEAN THEATRE OF OPERATIONS

Wg Cdr Colin Cummings



Colin Cummings served in the Supply Branch for 31 years. After a series of station tours, mostly in the Far East, he spent a significant element of his service involved with IT systems, both within the Supply Branch and in the Directorate of Flight Safety, and eventually became the first Supply officer to manage an aircraft Support Authority (the Jaguar). Author of a series of books on aircraft accidents, he still holds an RAFVR(T) commission and is a member of the

RAFHS committee.

This presentation will examine some aspects of the employment of airborne forces in the invasion of Sicily in July 1943, Operation HUSKY, before considering briefly Operation DRAGOON, the airborne assault on southern France in September 1944, and Operation MANNA in Greece a month later. Although US forces were, numerically, the more significant players in both HUSKY and DRAGOON, they will be referred to only where they relate directly to the British commitment. Similarly, the ground actions fought by the airborne troops are beyond the scope of this, essentially ‘air’ paper. For those with an interest in military history, however, the invasion of Sicily is well worth further study, since the lessons taught were to form the basis of later airborne operations – although it is evident that teaching a lesson is not the same thing as learning from it.

The Casablanca Conference

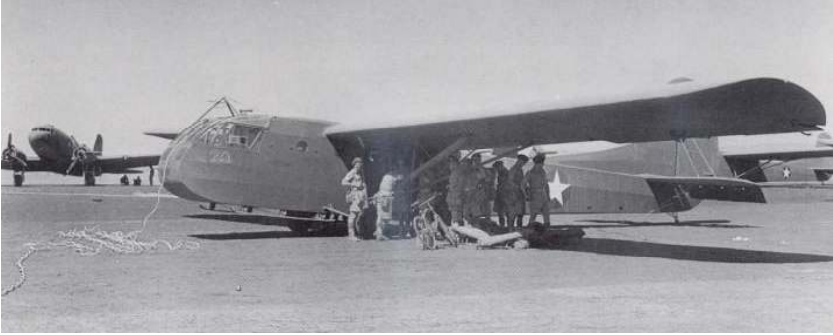
In January 1943, with the British 8th Army advancing rapidly from the east through Tropolitania and the British 1st and US 7th Armies closing on Tunisia from the west, Roosevelt and Churchill met at Casablanca to decide on their next moves. Among the outcomes were reaffirmation of their commitment to the defeat of Germany and Japan, in that order, and an acceptance that, despite the pressure being exerted by Stalin, it would be too hazardous to attempt a cross-Channel invasion of France in 1943. Instead, it was decided to afford

priority to clearing the Mediterranean for shipping and, once the North African campaign had been completed (which would not be until May), to employ the large number of troops that would then become available to invade Sicily, which would threaten Italy and oblige the Germans to reinforce the mainland by drawing off troops from the Eastern Front, thus providing the Russians with some relief.

Sicily – Planning and Preparation

In addition to his appointment as deputy to the CinC, General Eisenhower, Sir Harold Alexander was given command of all ground forces involved in Operation HUSKY and overall responsibility for planning the enterprise. The plan was inevitably bedevilled by numerous problems and there were several iterations, all of them rejected by General Montgomery as having been ‘devised by staff officers with no battle experience, under ‘slack’ leadership going right to the top’ – by which he meant Alexander. About the only thing Montgomery and his arch-rival, General George Patton, agreed on was that Alexander was a ‘fence sitter’. Eventually Montgomery descended on Eisenhower’s HQ – as one account put it – ‘like Christ come to cleanse the Temple’. Montgomery, for his part, recounts that he cornered Eisenhower’s chief of staff: Walter Bedell-Smith, in the toilet and agreed the outline plan as they faced the porcelain!¹

This outline plan envisaged a seaborne assault by elements of the US 7th Army on the south west coast of Sicily, whilst the British 8th Army would go ashore on the south east coast. An airborne assault was proposed for the US sector of operations but it was only later that a similar task was found for the emerging British airborne forces when Maj Gen George Hopkinson, who had recently been promoted from command of the Air Landing Brigade to GOC 1st Airborne Division, pressed for his troops to be given a role. Without reference to his predecessor, who was now Eisenhower’s airborne forces adviser, Hopkinson contended that his parachute and glider borne troops could make a significant contribution to the assault and Montgomery accepted his proposal. It would seem, however, that Hopkinson had little awareness of the complexities involved in planning airborne operations and, particularly, of the limitations that would be imposed by the lack of experience and inadequate state of training of the available glider pilots.



An American Waco CG-4 Hadrian with troops of 1st Border Regt at Froha in June 1943.

When Lt-Col George Chatterton, who commanded the Glider Pilot Regiment, saw the plans which Hopkinson had signed off he was extremely concerned about almost every aspect of the proposal. The first, and biggest, problem was that there were no gliders in theatre at that stage, and the only solution to that one appeared to be the acquisition of the standard American assault glider, the Waco CG-4 Hadrian. Secondly, the plan envisaged a night assault by crews who were barely trained in any sort of night flying – let alone a four-hour transit flight over the sea into Landing Zones (LZs) that were likely to be contested.

Furthermore, the LZs were considered to be unsuitable, because:

- the approach, from over the sea, was to ground that sloped upwards towards a hilly area;
- the fields were obstructed by sizeable rocks, boulders and trees
- and the whole area was criss-crossed by stone walls and ditches.

Chatterton and the air adviser, Gp Capt Tom Cooper, protested strongly against the adoption of the plan but both were overruled. Chatterton expressed his concerns directly to Hopkinson, but received a very frosty response. He was given 30 minutes to reconsider his position, with the thinly disguised warning that failure to come on-side would result in the man who had been largely responsible for the formation and training of the British Glider Pilot Regiment being sent home and replaced by someone more compliant. Since he felt that he could not honourably abandon his crews, Chatterton reluctantly

agreed to the plan.

In considering how he might make the best of the hand he had been dealt, Chatterton realised that the American glider could not carry the six-pounder anti-tank gun *and* its towing vehicle and that each gun and tractor would therefore require a pair of Wacos. It needed little imagination to foresee the guns arriving at one LZ, whilst their tractors landed at another several miles away. The solution to this would be to use the much larger British assault glider, the Horsa, but there were none in North Africa.

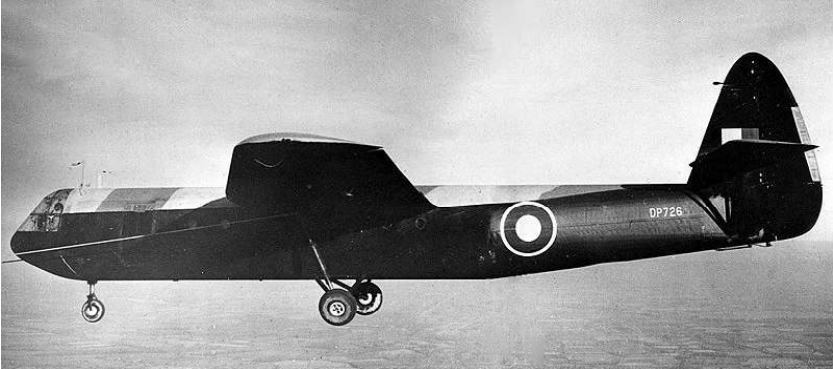
A request for Horsas to be flown out was initially rejected by the Air Ministry as being completely impractical. This was not actually the case, however, as Sqn Ldr Arthur Wilkinson (a Flight Commander on No 295 Sqn and the leader of the gliderborne attack on the heavy water plant at Rjukan in November 1942) had been working on the problem for some time, including conducting long range glider towing exercises to determine the implications of towing a Horsa the 1,300 miles from Portreath to Salé in Morocco. The most obvious problems to be addressed were:

- The establishment of the Halifax's fuel consumption in varying conditions related to altitude and the weight of the glider.
- Improvements to the aerodynamic performance of the Horsa.
- Fatigue issues for the glider pilots over the duration of a 10 hour flight
- Routing – the Bay of Biscay was patrolled, by both sides, and in early June a BOAC Dakota had been shot down by Ju 88s.

Wilkinson's problems were compounded by the fact that he was, at first, the only qualified Halifax pilot on the unit and his remit included conversion training for another dozen, who then needed to be further trained in glider towing.

Eventually, by removing unnecessary equipment from the Halifax and fitting overload tanks, increasing total fuel capacity to 2,400 gallons, it was determined that the combination could achieve a still air range of 1,500 miles with a 200 gallon reserve. The fatigue issues were solved by providing each glider with three pilots.

The commitment having been formally accepted (and identified as Operation BEGGAR by the Army and TURKEY BUZZARD by the RAF), the first four, of a planned thirty, combinations left Portreath at



The Airspeed Horsa.

first light on 3 June 1943. Two reached Salé without incident and one turned back, because it had encountered poor weather. The tow rope of the fourth broke, obliging the crew to ditch. The glider quickly filled with water but stayed afloat, its fin providing a useful marker; the crew inflated their dinghy and were rescued later that evening. For Staff Sgts Dennis Hall and Tony Antonopoulos their twelve-hours in a dinghy was but a taste of things to come. By 14 June, they were back on task, with Staff Sgt Conway as the third pilot, but on this occasion they were intercepted 100 miles north west of Cape Finisterre by a pair of FW 200s which shot down the Halifax tug. Again Hall and Antonopoulos took to their dinghy but this time they were adrift for eleven days before being rescued by the crew of a Spanish trawler. Both men received the AFM.

A further tug and glider combination was lost on 27 June but for the twenty-seven Horsas which reached Salé, the journey was barely half complete. The next stage was to ferry the aircraft to Tunisia, which was accomplished in two stages, a 400 mile leg to Froha, followed by a further 600 miles to Sousse. Two gliders were forced to land while in transit, one of which was retrieved and subsequently used during the Sicily invasion.²

A couple of dozen Horsas would do little more than cover the requirement for some of the anti-tank artillery and *coup de main* parties, so the substantial shortfall in airlift would have to be made up by significant numbers of Waco gliders to be supplied by the Americans. These arrived in packing cases and it fell to the glider

pilots themselves to assemble them, under the supervision of US Army engineers.

A complication with this 'flat pack' approach was that each glider came in five crates. Since numerous contractors had been employed to build the aircraft, there were variations in quality control and the shipping arrangements were such that the crates were often separated in transit and rematching the bits proved to be a problem. Ingenuity eventually triumphed, however, but, as one glider pilot is said to have commented, 'Perhaps we should just strap the bloody wings on and jump into action like that Greek bloke!'

No British pilots had any experience with the CG-4 at this stage, so a party of Americans was attached to train them. Once type conversion had been completed, the programme was extended to embrace tactical and night flying. All of this was accomplished by dint of much hard work and close co-operation between British and US personnel. Indeed when the final operation was flown, a group of about a dozen American glider pilots flew with the British and one, Flight Officer Samuel Fine, was cited for bravery in the ground fighting which followed. This citation was, somewhat churlishly, rejected by the British authorities but, by way of consolation, Fine was presented with a maroon beret and British glider pilot wings.

Despite the training that they had undergone, the widespread lack of combat experience of glider operations meant that the pilots were still ill-prepared for what lay ahead and, crucially, there had been no opportunities to practise being released over the sea.

Sicily – The First Phase

To clear the way for the initial assault on, what Churchill liked to call, Europe's 'soft underbelly', it was first necessary to take the island of Pantelleria. Following an intensive bombing campaign, when troops went ashore on 10 June, as Operation CORKSCREW, white flags were already flying. The Italian garrisons on the islands of Linosa and Lampedusa also capitulated with little resistance.

The concept for the first phase of the airborne assault on Sicily (Operation LADBROKE) had originally involved either a parachute *or* a gliderborne assault because it was not clear at the time how many gliders would be available and thus whether the landing would be undertaken by 4th Parachute Brigade or 1st Air Landing Brigade.

Eventually, however, the number of gliders permitted the first phase to be conducted by a reduced Brigade comprising two battalions, 2nd South Staffordshire and 1st Border Regiments, together with some elements of engineer, medical and support troops. The only artillery being deployed by the gliders were half a dozen six-pounder anti-tank guns, belonging to the infantry battalions.

The first phase, as planned, involved the landing of a *coup de main* party, consisting of two infantry companies of the South Staffs on the night of 9/10 July. They were to seize and hold a crucial bridge, the Ponte Grande, until the main force landed two hours later to neutralise a coastal battery before pressing on to the bridge where the remainder of 2nd South Staffs would hold it and allow the Border Regiment to cross and take the town of Syracuse by 0530 hrs on 10 July. A force of eighty Wellingtons was to bomb Syracuse to coincide with the Border Regiment's advance. In addition, Bostons of No 326 Wg and No 3 Wg SAAF were to drop 620 dummy parachutists in the vicinity of Catania.

The eight Horsas were to be towed by seven Halifaxes and a single Albemarle. The 136 Hadrian gliders of the main force were to be towed by twenty-seven Albemarles of No 296 Sqn and 109 C-47s from the 60th and 62nd Groups of the USAAF's Troop Carrier Command.

While it was not intended to fly in tight formations, the British and Americans adopted rather different approaches to air navigation in that each RAF tug crew included a navigator, whereas the Americans tended to have a navigator only in the formation leader's aircraft and the others simply followed.

The lack of experience in release over the sea has already been mentioned but there were to be several other issues which had an impact on the success of this operation.

- There was a general lack of night flying experience amongst the glider crews.
- The weather, which had been generally favourable during the limited training period, deteriorated before the start of the operation and the tug and glider combinations encountered strong winds and turbulent flying conditions.
- The weather affected the release parameters for the gliders;

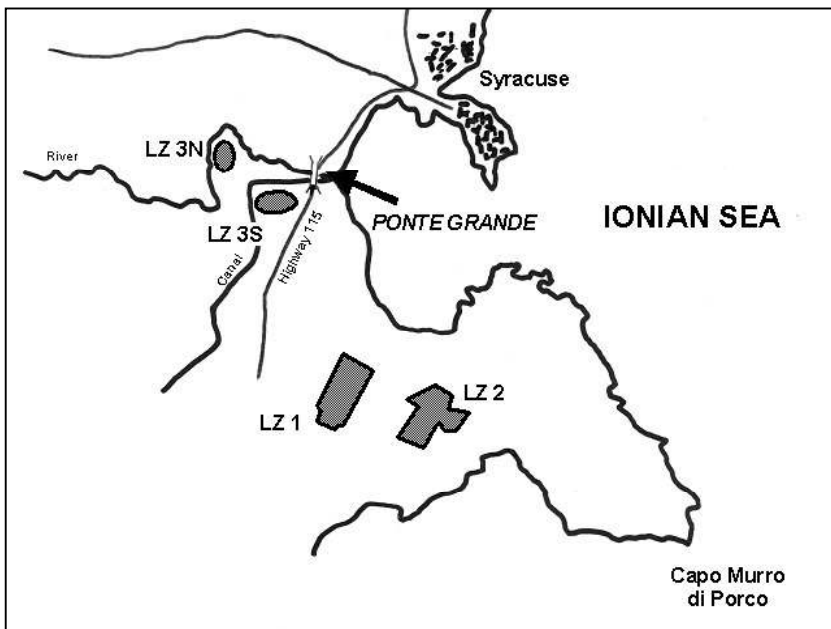
since the wind was coming off the shore, cast off needed to be either closer to the beach or at a greater height.

- The Waco's handling characteristics were very different from those of the Horsa. The former had a shallower glide angle and the techniques for carrying out an assault landing were unfamiliar to the crews.
- The attack had been planned to take place during a moonlit period, but no one had factored in an eclipse which took place at a critical point.
- Tug-to-glider communications were primitive or non-existent. In some cases, sabotage – traced to an Italian-American technician – resulted in the communications cable being cut, whilst some of the gliders had to make do with a field telephone, the cable of which was threaded through the tow rope. Fortunately, it had been appreciated that the tow rope stretched and adequate lengths of extra telephone wire had been provided. Even so, these arrangements were worthy of W Heath-Robinson.

The combinations took off from six desert airstrips in the vicinity of El Djem and Goubrine and flew eastwards between the islands of Linosa and Lampedusa to the southern tip of Malta, which was marked by searchlights. From there they turned north east until they were abeam Cape Pasero on the southern tip of Sicily, then north to the offshore cast-off position just to the south of Syracuse. The Horsas were aiming for LZ3 North or South and the follow-up Wacos for LZs 1 and 2. The outbound distance was some 400 miles and the flight time about 4 hours.

Despite the high winds, the flight to Malta was generally without incident. However, after turning north things began to go awry and the formations broke up. The wind, which had been blowing at 45 mph, abated to about 30 mph and at 2210 hours the first seven gliders released their tows about 3,000 yards offshore just south east of Capo Murro di Porco.

The arrival of the first serials alerted the defences and searchlight and anti-aircraft batteries became active, the hostile reception being aggravated by reduced visibility due to the wind whipping up a dust cloud.



Operation LADBROKE – the assault on the Ponte Grande.

The deteriorating situation caused alarm amongst some of the tug pilots and confusion began to prevail. Since all of the tugs succeeded in returning to their departure airfields, with only a few having sustained superficial damage, it is evident that *Flak* had not actually represented a particularly serious hazard. Nevertheless, many of the tug pilots had deviated from their planned tracks, forcing their gliders to cast off too far from shore or at the wrong height. Others were towed all the way back to Africa and some were released miles away. One even ended up in Sardinia! Having landed safely, the crew and passengers of another unloaded their Jeep and were preparing to drive into the fray when a voice from the darkness demanded to know their intentions. The leader of the team replied that they were going into action, only to be informed, somewhat caustically, that he was on Malta and, since his glider was blocking a runway, would he kindly remove it.

Some of the gliders which were released as planned were engaged by AA fire and one, loaded with Bangalore torpedoes, exploded whilst



Some of the Op LADROKE CG-4s landed successfully, but many more came down in the sea.



another crashed into a ditch on the LZ, all but one of those on board being killed. A single Horsa, piloted by Staff Sgt Denis Galpin, reached LZ3 South and it was largely due to the determination of the thirty men aboard, led by Lt Lennard Withers, that the Ponte Grande was captured and held for much of the following day. Galpin was subsequently awarded the DFM – the first to a glider pilot – and Withers, cited for a DSO, received an MC.

The final tally indicated that sixty-nine Waco gliders had ditched, with three Horsas and seven more Wacos missing and also presumed lost at sea. Only forty-nine Wacos and five Horsas had reached Sicily. Maj Gen Hopkinson had been one of the many men who had been

dumped in the water. He was picked up by a destroyer commanded by an officer with whom he had rowed at university. Sadly, he did not survive for long, however, as he was killed in Italy a few weeks later.

The casualty roll for this part of the Sicily invasion makes sobering reading: seventy-two glider pilots killed or missing, including several USAAF pilots, and 296 soldiers of 1st Air Landing Brigade confirmed drowned or missing believed drowned. If the sixty-one soldiers killed in action on the ground are added to this figure, having committed 2,075 troops to the operation, the two battalions of the Air Landing Brigade had suffered 17% fatalities, whilst the Glider Pilot Regiment had lost 26%.

Sicily – The Cancelled Second Phase

The second airborne operation was planned to involve 2nd Parachute Brigade dropping from 102 USAAF C-47s, with twelve Wacos and six Horsas, bringing in a variety of vehicles and a battery of six anti-tank guns. The aim of this assault was to take an important bridge near Augusta but, after considerable confusion, the operation was abandoned shortly before take-off because the ground forces had already overrun the area.

The following night, the crews of a pair of No 296 Sqn's Albemarles were each detailed to drop twelve SAS parachutists as part of Operation CHESTNUT. Although both teams were delivered, the raid itself was not a success, and one of the aircraft, flown by the Squadron Commander, Wg Cdr Peter May, failed to return.

Sicily – The Third Phase

Following the cancellation of the airborne attack on Augusta, the next operation was the assault on the Primasole Bridge near Catania. As Operation FUSTIAN, this was planned as a brigade strength attack by 1st Parachute Brigade, commanded by Brig Gerald Lathbury. The brigade's three battalions would be supported by most of an anti-tank battery, a Field Sqn RE and a Parachute Field Ambulance. The addition of 21st Independent Parachute Company, an Army Film and Photo Section, two naval gunfire support teams and a forward observation officer brought the total strength to about 1,900 men. As was now the custom, and an arrangement which would obtain for the rest of the war in Europe, the delivery of the parachute troops was



An Armstrong Whitworth Albemarle glider tug.

vested mainly in the crews of the USAAF Troop Carrier Command, although some pathfinders and other specialists were dropped by the RAF.

The parachutists were to be dropped from 116 C-47s. Eight Hadrians and five Horsas were to be towed by Albemarles and six further Horsas by Halifaxes. Airspeeds varied from 125 mph for the Albemarles to 145 mph for the Halifax/Horsa combinations and, with the Horsas carrying a 6,900 lb payload, a 400-mile tow would be pushing the twin-engined Albemarles to the limit of their performance.

Despite having lost its CO the previous night, No 296 Sqn put on a maximum effort and those aircraft not towing gliders were scheduled to carry SAS troops or parachute pathfinders.

It was decided not to bomb the area prior to the airborne attack so as to preserve the element of surprise. The plan of attack envisaged one battalion seizing and holding the bridge whilst the other two deployed north and south to protect and guard its approaches.

The operation began satisfactorily with most of the paradropping and glider towing aircraft taking off, although some serials were late. One tug crashed on take-off, however, and its glider was then too late to join in and several others had tow ropes break or became unstable and had to be released.

The route followed was broadly similar to that previously flown by the LADBROKE sorties a few nights earlier. On this occasion, however, the American aircraft carrying the paratroops used the RAF technique of flying in loose streams of up to eleven aircraft, as



The Primasole Bridge after its capture.

opposed to their previous practice of flying in Vics of five.

A few nights previously, the US 82nd Airborne Division's second lift to Sicily had encountered serious trouble when their aircraft had been fired on by the naval task force, which had been subjected to heavy air

attack throughout the hours of daylight, making its gunners extremely trigger happy. Of the 144 C-47s in the stream that night, twenty-three had been shot down, of which six had not yet dropped their parachutists. Sixty further aircraft had sustained damage and five had turned away without dropping. Ninety-seven paratroopers were listed as killed or missing and 132 wounded. To this tally must be added sixty aircrew killed and thirty wounded from the 52nd Troop Carrier Wing.

Urgent steps were taken to ensure that this episode was not repeated and 'safe lanes' for the incoming British lift were defined and notified to the ships lying offshore. Nevertheless, as the aircraft approached Sicily they were fired on but the blame was not entirely one-sided, since some of the aircraft had strayed outside the safe lanes. The need to take evasive action, coupled with damage to many aircraft meant that the timing of the landings was thrown into disarray, with for example, the pathfinders arriving *after* the gliders for whom they were supposed to mark the LZs.

When the aircraft turned inland they were subjected to further anti-aircraft fire from the enemy who, in anticipation of further landings, had strengthened their defences. Further evasive action as the transports ran up to the DZs resulted in chaos inside some of the aircraft and this prevented the paratroops from untangling themselves in time to jump and seventeen aircraft returned with some or all of their troops still on board and a further twelve crews claimed they could not reach or identify a DZ.

The figures for those who actually dropped were also disappointing. Only thirty-nine aircraft dropped their troops onto or within ½ mile of their DZs and forty-eight more dropped outside that radius. Eleven aircraft were shot down, three of them before they could drop their troops.

The glider landings were also disappointing. Four Horsas landed on their LZ while three more Horsas and four Hadrians landed intact but off the LZ. Two Horsas and four Hadrians crashed on landing and two Horsas and a Hadrian were lost at sea. Of the RAF tugs, two Albemarles and a Halifax were lost. The latter was flown by Sqn Ldr Wilkinson, probably the most experienced glider tug pilot in the RAF.

Sicily – The Aftermath

So what conclusions were drawn from this first major deployment of British and US airborne forces? From the Allied perspective the results had been rather less than satisfactory. The soldiers who confronted the enemy had fought well enough; the problem was that so few of them had been able to, because they had been dropped in the wrong place – or had failed to arrive at all. Perhaps less aware of these failures, the enemy took a more positive view, since they saw in the attack a resurgence in the use of airborne assault, a tactic that had fallen out of favour following the heavy German losses on Crete two years previously.

Many specific lessons were drawn from the Sicily experience:

- Use of the Waco glider had revealed a number of deficiencies:
 1. The floor tended to distort on landing, making it difficult to unload.
 2. The nose section offered little protection to the pilots, making broken legs a considerable hazard.
 3. Loads broke loose on landing due to the inadequacy of the tie-down arrangements.

By contrast, the Horsa had proved to be far more robust and practical and the later Mk II, which introduced a hinged cockpit section, would make loading and unloading even easier.

- To avoid their becoming separated, it was essential that an artillery piece and its tractor be carried in the same aircraft.
- It was an air force responsibility to land the airborne forces in

the right place and at the right time. It followed that it was essential that pathfinder teams were dropped ahead of the main force with appropriate means of marking DZs and LZs.

- The success of airborne forces operations was dependent upon air force competence in all of the associated techniques, notably navigation – which implied dedicated role-related training.
- It was axiomatic that realising the two previous aims could be achieved only if the air force and army trained together.
- Resupply of airborne forces in the immediate aftermath of a landing had to be automatic, since communications were too unreliable and the system too unresponsive to support a selective call-forward approach.
- Since airborne forces were lightly armed and lacking in organic heavy weapons, it was essential that they be provided with close air support, and the means to control it.

In the aftermath of Sicily, the initial reaction amongst senior Allied commanders was to conclude that massed airborne attacks were simply not worthwhile and there was a move towards restricting them to small scale raids. Before these opinions had hardened into policy, however, the situation was reversed when, in September 1943, Gen MacArthur took the coastal town of Lae in New Guinea by launching a pincer movement involving a seaborne assault and troops landed by parachute inland at Nadzab. Although the landing had been unopposed, this successful employment of paratroops restored faith in the concept and airborne forces were subsequently used on a relatively large scale in Normandy, at Arnhem and in the crossing of the Rhine.

Operation DRAGOON

It will be recalled that 2nd Parachute Brigade's participation in the assault on Sicily had been cancelled. It had been retained in theatre, however, and was subsequently employed as infantry in Italy. When the bulk of 1st Airborne Division was repatriated to the UK, the brigade became an independent unit, eventually being withdrawn from the line in May 1944.

At the beginning of June a raiding party of about sixty men was parachuted behind enemy lines to disrupt enemy forces withdrawing from the Gustav to the Gothic Lines. This raid, Operation HASTY,

was successful, although heavy casualties were sustained.

The strategic plan for the invasion of Europe had envisaged an attack through southern France in support of the break out from Normandy – Operation DRAGOON, which was launched in August 1944. Besides a seaborne landing between Fréjus and St-Raphaël – about 20 miles south west of Cannes – an airborne assault was included with the aim of taking and holding the area between La Motte and Le Muy, thus blocking a German reinforcement route from the north. The airborne force comprised 2nd (Independent) Parachute Brigade and six battalions of US Army parachute or gliderborne infantry with supporting arms. Designated 1st Airborne Task Force, the whole group was approximately the size of an airborne division.

To move the British paratroops plus a Light Battery and an Air Landing Anti-Tank Battery, the air plan allocated 125 C-47s from the 51st Troop Carrier Wing plus 35 Horsas and 26 Wacos. The force was to take off from five airfields in the vicinity of Rome and, because of high ground in the target area, the para drops and glider releases were to be at an unusually high 1,500 to 2,000 feet above ground level.

Unfortunately, the weather deteriorated and some of the tug and glider combinations had to orbit off Corsica. Having insufficient endurance, the aircraft towing the heavy Horsas were compelled to return to Rome where, through the intervention and initiative of Maj W H Ewart-James, they were rapidly refuelled and relaunched. That aside, the operation was successfully accomplished with few casualties.

In early September the brigade returned to Italy where it was warned for service in Greece where, as Operation MANNA, it was to secure an airfield and then move on Athens to restore law and order. An initial drop was made on the airfield at Megara on 17 October but, undertaken in a 35 mph wind, the first company to arrive suffered numerous casualties. Fortunately, they were able to get a message through to the rest of the brigade which postponed their arrival until conditions had improved.

Before concluding, it should be recorded that it was an RAF responsibility to train parachute troops. This obligation was discharged in-theatre by No 4 Middle East Training School, which, operating first in Egypt and then Palestine from 1942 onwards, trained, among others, the three battalions of 4th Parachute Brigade



Hadrians being loaded for Operation MANNA.

and sundry SAS troops. When that unit closed down in 1944, the task was transferred to Italy where No 4 Parachute Training School provided similar facilities at Gioia del Colle until 1945.

In closing, it is acknowledged that the airborne operations conducted in the Mediterranean theatre were relatively small beer when compared with the multi-division assaults mounted in north-west Europe but they did demonstrate the flexibility and potential value and, and just as importantly, some of the limitations, of airborne forces. As noted at the start of this presentation, however, while experience taught many lessons – not all of them were learned.

Notes:

¹ The quotations and anecdotes in this paragraph have been drawn from Whiting, Charles; *Slaughter over Sicily* (London, Leo Cooper, 1992) pp63-64.

² This exercise was repeated, as Operation ELABORATE, between 15 August and 23 September when a further thirty Horsas were ferried to North Africa. Again there were losses, to both tugs and gliders, but twenty-seven reached their destination safely.

DID ALLIED AIR INTERDICTION LIVE UP TO EXPECTATIONS IN THE ITALIAN CAMPAIGN 1943-1944?

Wg Cdr 'Archie' Spence



Fraser (aka Archie) Spence joined the RAF in 1981. His flying experience, as a navigator, embraced air defence Phantoms and Tornados, instructing at No 6 FTS and on secondment to Dhahran, and air-to-air refuelling in VC10s. His ground appointments have included posts at HQ 2 Gp and at Shrivenham. He is currently stationed at Lyneham as OC Operations and Force Headquarters.

For the purpose of this presentation, Air Interdiction (AI) is defined as 'air action conducted to destroy, disrupt, neutralise or delay an enemy's military potential before it can be brought to bear effectively against friendly forces'. Although air power had been employed on missions of this type since WW I, the term AI first came into general use during the Italian campaign of WW II.¹ While it is recognised that the strategic bombing campaign against industrial targets by heavy aircraft (such as the B-17 Flying Fortress) in Europe had a distinctly AI flavour, its impact was far beyond the battlefield and is excluded from this essay. However, when these same aircraft were employed against interdiction targets within the Italian theatre, they played an identifiable role and are included in this analysis.

Throughout this study, research preference has been given to documents dating from the immediate post-war period compiled by the Air Historical Branch (AHB) including some translations of German papers and interviews. Where possible, both expectations and results have been drawn from these contemporary sources. Following an introduction to AI strategy in Italy, this essay will consider AI in five sequential operations: HUSKY; AVALANCHE; SHINGLE; STRANGLE and DIADEM. In each case, expectations will be defined and an assessment of success derived both from a mixture of contemporaneous Allied judgements and the impact as perceived by the Germans.

This paper will reveal that AI doctrine and capabilities were not

fully understood at the commencement of this campaign and that expectations were excessively optimistic. However, as experience grew, a better understanding of the art-of-the-possible developed, resulting in a more mature and realistic application of this pivotal aspect of air power. Ultimately, as will be demonstrated, AI came very close to meeting expectations but fell short of its full potential.

AI Strategy in Italy

Colonel Klaus Strange (German Movements Control, Italy) recognised the importance of secure lines of communications (LOCs) for both protagonists in the campaign:

‘Sea traffic was important to the Western Powers as rail traffic was to Germany. The shipping routes were the arteries by which the Allies delivered the supplies on which their lives depended; the railways were the nerves by which vital impulses were brought to the German prosecution of the war. Thus it was a matter of life and death for both sides to maintain their supply-lines in order’.²

For the Allies, a successful AI campaign required a comprehensive understanding of the Italian rail network. Throughout the length of the country, the geography required that all lines passed over numerous bridges, viaducts and tunnels offering many vulnerable points which could be exploited.³ Additionally, multiple nodes were identified as essential target sets by Professor Zuckerman, scientific advisor to Air Chf Mshl Sir Arthur Tedder, Commander of the Mediterranean Air Command. In his report, ‘Air Attacks on Rail and Road Communications’,⁴ Zuckerman contended that owing to the limited accuracy of tactical attacks, the best method of disrupting the rail system was through the strategic effects produced by carpet bombing critical nodes, like marshalling yards which contained concentrated sub-target sets of locomotives, rolling stock and repair facilities. He further contended that a more tactical approach, of cutting individual lines, would require a much greater weight of effort to achieve the same disruptive effect. He did, however, acknowledge that such tactical missions had their place: ‘railway and road bridges are uneconomical and difficult targets, and in general do not appear to be worth attacking except where special considerations demand it in the

tactical area'.⁵ In sum, Zuckerman suggested that strategic results would outweigh such immediate tactical benefits for less effort, but recognised that the delay between strategic cause and battlefield effect would make it difficult to prove this definitively. However, through an analysis of the Messina to Sicily Ferry Service, he was able to demonstrate a month-on-month reduction in the flow of materiel to Sicily; in July 1943 it was just 10% of that observed in January.⁶

While Zuckerman's findings represented a valid theory, derived from detailed analysis of air interdiction results in Italy during 1943, it must be considered within the context that it was written. During the period of his report, the Germans were pouring men and materiel into Italy and thence onward to Sicily on a vast scale. Zuckerman's assertion that the railway system became 'inadequate to deal with the enemy's military needs',⁷ would seem to be validated by the German High Command in July:

'... in view of the great difficulties regarding supplies for a relatively small German force on Sicily, it cannot be expected that we shall be able to hold the island indefinitely (the main reasons for the difficulties are: the low traffic-capacity and the vulnerability of the railways in Southern Italy; the uncertainty of sea transport and the possibility of a blockade of the Straits of Messina)'.⁸

However, even before Zuckerman's proposals were published, considerable opposition to his theories was evident; critics accused him of overstating the difficulty of destroying bridges while underestimating the time required to repair them.⁹ Additionally, Brigadier General Partridge (XIIth Bomber Command) proposed that it might 'be possible for the enemy to move the relatively small amount of traffic needed for military supply without using extensive marshalling yard facilities'.¹⁰ In substantiation of this proposal, German records show that only 5% of peacetime capacity was required to maintain a static defence,¹¹ and in such instances, the military trains were often marshalled well away from traditional railway centres. Thus, two schools of thought developed, those in favour of Zuckerman's 'transportation theory' and those who backed an 'interdiction plan' that concentrated on cutting railway lines. From an analysis of this controversy one thing is clear, a combination of the

two schools could bring about the tactical success required at the front and the strategic paralysis of the entire German supply system in Italy. Certainly as the campaign progressed the Allies possessed sufficient assets for both tasks and developed the technical expertise to conduct the former with sufficient accuracy and economy of effort.

Operation HUSKY

Operation HUSKY, the invasion of Sicily, commenced on 10 July 1943 and the Allied Armies rapidly gained control of the island, pushing the defending forces into the north east, from where they withdrew across the Messina straits to mainland Italy. While months had gone into the planning of HUSKY, the decision to follow this with an invasion of mainland Italy was formulated rather more quickly. Plans to counter a German evacuation were not really considered until 31 July when the possibility of evacuation first came to light and it was not until 3 August that General Alexander (Deputy Commander-in-Chief) was persuaded, by ULTRA-derived¹² information, to take action. Signalling his naval and air commanders, ‘. . . you have no doubt co-ordinated plans to meet this contingency’¹³ his expectations were of a joint interdiction of the evacuation. He was to be severely disappointed, as neither Admiral Cunningham nor Tedder had any such contingency plans.¹⁴

As the Army was in no position to overrun the German retreat on the ground, and the Navy was unable to contend with it at sea (owing to well-founded concerns relating to significant coastal defences)¹⁵ the whole responsibility fell to the Air Component – namely Air Mshl Coningham’s Tactical Air Force (TAF). Intelligence analysts of the time correctly calculated that the Axis evacuations would be made at night, ideal operating conditions for the Wellingtons of the Strategic Air Force (SAF). This nocturnal AI effort did indeed disrupt the evacuation (Operation LEHRGANG), so much so that the Germans were forced to cross the straits by daylight from 13 to 16 August.

This, however, is where Coningham’s gravest error of judgement was revealed. On 11 August, he had released the SAF’s B-17s, which he had had on hold for nearly a week, from their commitment to join the interdiction effort. Doubtless he was under pressure to release them for strategic tasking at the earliest opportunity and he considered that, as the German evacuation was expected to be conducted at night,



The Wellingtons of the North African Strategic Air Force, like this Mk II of No 104 Sqn, effectively denied the Germans the use of the Straits of Messina by night. (MAP)

his TAF assets were best placed for the task. He was right, but the successful night AI so harassed the enemy that they were forced to recourse to daylight operations to maintain their momentum.

Following the switch to daylight operations, a staff officer of the TAF wrote that ‘the immense concentration of the flak on both sides of the narrows makes it impossible to go down and really search for targets with fighter-bombers. It also greatly restricts the use of light bombers’.¹⁶ What Coningham really needed for a comprehensive AI effort against the retreating forces were the B-17s that he had recently relinquished. These aircraft were configured for daylight operations out of the reach of the *Flak* that hindered the lighter TAF forces. By a twist of fate, on 13 August, just as Coningham’s intelligence staff were advising him of the Germans’ switch from night to day, the entire B-17 force was conducting a determined raid on rail targets in Rome, part of a greater interdiction campaign on the mainland. For reasons that remain obscure, but which probably relate to logistic and crewing issues, the B-17s remained unavailable until 17 August, by which time LEHRGANG was complete.¹⁷

Without doubt, other errors of judgement were made in all three environments. In his book, *Air Interdiction in Three Wars*, Eduard Mark suggested that, ‘the cautious, even plodding, strategy pursued by the Allies in their conquest of Italy made the success of LEHRGANG possible, if not certain’.¹⁸ To judge the failure of this interdiction as a purely air failing is premature. This was an operation conducted on

land, sea and air, yet the final responsibility for defeating LEHRGANG fell solely to air power. With a better approach to joint planning, success would have been far more likely. Had the Allied command recognised the strategic impact of a successful German withdrawal earlier, B-17s could have silenced the coastal guns allowing the navy to enter the straits. Additionally, with greater direct air support, the Army could have advanced with more vigour on land.

The jury is still out on this issue, just one of the controversies surrounding the Italian campaign. What is certain is that the overall interdiction effort on forces retreating from Sicily did not live up to expectations. However, these expectations were late in being articulated and overambitious in relying entirely on air power for this crucial task. The 60,000 troops and 13,700 vehicles evacuated would soon be confronted again on the mainland, while the 40,000 tons of supplies shipped back would provide a cushion against subsequent Allied AI endeavours during Operation AVALANCHE in September.

Operation AVALANCHE

While Churchill had always favoured follow-on enterprises in the Mediterranean, it was only the strategic delay to Operation OVERLORD that finally enabled him to convince Eisenhower to press their advantage with an invasion of Italy. Approved in July 1943, Operation AVALANCHE (amphibious landings at Salerno) commenced on 9 September. Expectations were high, with both the Americans and the British too readily accepting that the inevitable fall of the fascist Italian regime would cause the Germans to withdraw their forces from Italy following major Allied landings.¹⁹ For AVALANCHE, the air forces were instructed to 'isolate the battle area'.²⁰ While air and sea routes were all but sealed owing to air activity, the isolation of land LOCs was a tougher nut to crack. Having failed to capture any significant enemy forces on Sicily, great hopes were originally held of cutting off the German armies in 'the toe of the boot' and preventing them from escaping.

German records indicate that significant disruption of the Italian rail network was being experienced by August 1943.²¹ However, there were generally sufficient supplies for replenishment and even for the building-up of a reserve.²² Most of this still travelled by rail (albeit in a disrupted manner) supplemented by limited coastal shipping;

additional supplies had also been recovered during LEHRGANG. However, fuel supplies were critical at this stage, and when distribution was disrupted, it had a predictable effect on the ground battle as, despite sufficient stocks in the rear, localised shortages persisted. The Germans attributed these shortages to the Allied air interdiction effort on the road and rail networks.²³

The German 10th Army under Vietinghoff bore the brunt of AVALANCHE. The AI campaign on mainland Italy had continued almost unabated since the beginning of the year and, prior to the landings, great care had been taken so as not to highlight the amphibious objectives. Although Vietinghoff was established in the area prior to the invasion, his forces were not as well supplied or as mobile as he would have liked. His Chief of General Staff wrote at the time that:

‘. . . the first decisive consequence [*of the Allied AI effort*] was that the traffic on the roads was delayed considerably as a result of the enemy air supremacy and the fuel which would have enabled the armoured and motorised formations to reach the battlefield in good time could not be delivered to them. For this reason, 16th Panzer Division had to continue the battle alone longer than had been intended and reinforcements arrived by small instalments’.²⁴

In his own study of the campaign, Von Vietinghoff recalled that at the end of the first day of fighting, he was not dissatisfied with the situation:

‘In spite of great Allied superiority, 16th Panzer Division had managed to prevent the enemy from gaining any substantial initial successes . . . the first units of the 29th Panzer Division were expected during the coming night . . . and, if they arrived in time, there was hope of a favourable outcome’.²⁵

However, his study subsequently acknowledged that the shortage of fuel at this time was ‘an important, perhaps decisive influence on the course of the battle at Salerno’ and that it caused even the most advanced reinforcement units of 29th Division to be delayed by 36 hours.²⁶ By 14 September, the last reinforcements had arrived, but intensive Allied air attacks made movement on or towards the



For AI or CAS missions a Kittyhawk could carry a 1,000 lb bomb on the centreline and a 500 pounder under each wing.

battlefield extremely difficult; by 16 September a German withdrawal had been approved.

At Salerno, the delayed arrival of key German units was pivotal to the ability of the Allied landings to be fully established and exploited. Perhaps for the first time, the effect of AI was immediately apparent at the tactical level. While there would always be calls for additional Close Air Support (CAS) in such situations, it was AI that most impacted on the enemy's ability to resist. Complete isolation of the battlefield may not have been delivered, as was sought, but sufficient disruption and delay was created to generate space and time in the Allies favour. However, that the Germans retreated at their own pace is perhaps the greatest indictment of the failure of AI to stem the flow away from the battlefield.²⁷ Although the enemy was not trapped in the 'toe', as had been hoped, nor the battlefield isolated, the enemy was prevented from bringing his forces to bear at the beachheads at a rate greater than which could be handled by the landing forces. In these terms AI proved invaluable at Salerno. Similar success would soon be called for again further to the north at Anzio.

Operation SHINGLE

The AI campaign in support of Operation SHINGLE (the amphibious landing of two divisions behind the Gustav line at Anzio)

aimed to retard the advance of German divisions from the north towards the Allied beachheads²⁸ in line with a general confidence that 'AI could cripple Italy's railroads sufficiently to make a major [*enemy*] concentration impossible'.²⁹ A general Air Directive was issued on 30 December '... to attack enemy communications in such a manner as to impose maximum disruption to enemy supply lines to the battle area and to support the ground and naval operations by every means possible from the air'.³⁰ Any critique of this air operation must be judged against the fact that only twenty-three days were available for detailed planning and that preparatory AI strikes commenced just two days later.³¹

Air aspects of SHINGLE were enabled by the extensive airfield structure captured from the retreating Germans in the south of Italy, Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica; at the peak, 2,903 aircraft participated.³² There were three phases to the Allied AI plan: from 1 to 14 January, a disruption of rail communications in central Italy combined with deception operations in the north; from 15 to 21 January, an all-out effort to isolate the battle area by increasing attacks on both railways and roads north of Rome and those leading to Anzio; and from D-Day (22 January) onwards, a continued isolation of the battle area. Throughout, the TAF was focused on targets in central Italy while the SAF concentrated on targets to the north.³³

Owing to Allied AI of roads and railways, Major General Wolf Hauser recalled that the first counter-attack, planned for 28 January, was delayed until 3 February.³⁴ This timing coincided with a period of bad weather that reduced the ability of air power on either side to influence the battle. When the weather improved, control of the air was heavily contested by the *Luftwaffe* with significant tactical successes being made by German ground forces. However, the Allied deception to the north resulted in some German doubt and was a key factor in this initial success not being pressed home immediately.³⁵ Regardless, by 12 February, the Germans held master positions for an all-out drive that, if successful, would cut the Allied beachhead in two and prevent their evacuation. The main problem for the Germans was to build up sufficient forces to carry their plan forward.³⁶ To counter this, AI played a critical role. The second, and largest, German counter-attack on 16 February (in which Hitler demanded the elimination of 'this abscess' in three days)³⁷ showed early promise but



The AI campaigns in Italy were joint operations shared between the US 12th AF and the DAF. This bombed-up P-47D was with the 66th FS, 57th FG at Grosseto in 1944.

by 19 February shortages of ammunition, water and reinforcements had taken their toll. Exhausted, the enemy withdrew on 20 February to reorganise;³⁸ a clear indication of AI affecting his plans. The final counter-attack commenced on 28 February but ‘[the] stubborn resistance of Allied ground forces and the damage and delay caused by air attacks had blunted the force of the attack. ... From [*I March, the*] German strategy could be perceived to have shifted gradually from the offensive to the defensive’.³⁹

During SHINGLE, it was apparent that the AI campaign was having an effect, as the prolonged attacks on the Germans’ logistic tail constricted their availability of fuel and ammunition. Indeed, retrospective statistics suggest that the Germans were only able to fire one artillery shell for every 12-15 of the Allies.⁴⁰ ‘The third major landing on Italian soil had been executed and, like its forerunners, had only been secured by a narrow margin’.⁴¹ Thus, SHINGLE failed to achieve the rapid success desired by Churchill. However, AI proved to be a decisive factor in slowing the German counter-attacks and reducing their ferocity; AI had created that ‘narrow margin’.

In his report on SHINGLE, the Air Commander-in-Chief, General Baker, concluded that ‘military critics have not appreciated what air

forces can and cannot do and the true influence of the weather in placing a ceiling on their capabilities'. Baker's final observation was that the better weather in the spring would allow the containment of German divisions in Italy and 'so cut them up that they will be of little use elsewhere'.⁴² Operations STRANGLE and DIADEM were planned to do just that.

Operation STRANGLE

Operation STRANGLE marked the watershed between Zuckerman's 'transportation strategy' and the alternative 'interdiction strategy'. Central to STRANGLE was 'an attempt to force the Germans into retreat by attacking their railroads at about 100 miles from the front so as to increase the strain on the enemy's already inadequate motor transport'.⁴³ The directive of 18 February 'Operations in Support of DIADEM [including STRANGLE]' sought to break the Italian stalemate solely through an aerial siege of the Gustav Line to the point where the 17 to 20 German divisions in the south of Italy became insupportable forcing a withdrawal to at least the Pisa-Rimini line.⁴⁴ In deference to Zuckerman, the SAF would continue to target six rail-centres in the north of the country, but tactical forces would switch their main effort to cutting enemy LOCs.

This switch of main effort can be explained by a maturing intelligence analysis that recognised that: the marshalling of military trains was seldom conducted in marshalling yards; the vast stocks of engines and rolling stock rendered attacks against them irrelevant; and that the enemy's static defence was still being supplied, despite 8,258 tons of Allied bombs being dropped on marshalling yards over the preceding nineteen weeks.⁴⁵ Additionally, technical advances now rendered bridges vulnerable to less than 200 tons of bombs compared with 500 to 1,000 tons during the period of Zuckerman's study.

STRANGLE commenced on 19 March, when sufficient tactical aircraft became available for the revised concept of operations. Certainly, on 20 March, the Germans noted a change in AI tempo and tactics, particularly with respect to the fighter-bomber contribution.⁴⁶ The intensity of these tactical attacks resulted in significant disruption along much greater lengths of track owing to precision attacks on bridges, trains, track and the electrical and communications supply systems. Whereas the strategic bombing effort had been fairly



A Kittyhawk of No 112 Sqn taking off from Cutella on a fighter-bomber sortie in 1944.

predictable, owing to the limited target sets, the fighter and medium bomber threat was omnipresent resulting in disruption over the entire rail and road networks, creating the need for a much more reactive and responsive repair system. Critically, it also demanded that gaps in the lines be linked by motor transport, thus eating into precarious fuel reserves.

With Allied air supremacy by day, it was only at night or during bad weather that German logistics could regenerate. During this period, it was recognised by the Germans that ‘. . . all these troubles arose from the new air offensive. The difficulties multiplied and seemed to become insurmountable’.⁴⁷ However, in a typically resilient manner, additional railway engineers were imported and an improved air defence infrastructure was created, resulting in occasional logistic respite when traffic was kept moving for hours, or even nights, at a time.⁴⁸

The TAF report on STRANGLE concluded that ‘there was no doubt as to the complete tactical success’.⁴⁹ However, despite this tactical acclaim, strategic hopes that air power could be employed unilaterally to isolate the battlefield and force a general retreat were not fulfilled. The German perception of the combined effects of strategic bombing, tactical interdiction and armed reconnaissance of STRANGLE was less debatable; the capacity and manoeuvrability of the German 10th and 14th Armies fell severely short of their

expectations and they were concerned that their supplies would prove inadequate once the predicted Allied spring offensive commenced. By the start of Operation DIADEM, German stocks of critical items were still at a lower level than those planned for the start of STRANGLE, two months previously.⁵⁰

Operation DIADEM

In a letter sent to Air Chf Mshl Portal (Chief of the Air Staff) during the height of STRANGLE, Air Mshl Slessor (Deputy Commander Mediterranean Allied Air Forces) stated:

‘. . . we have now made it impossible for the Hun to act offensively, as he did against the [*Anzio*] beachhead in February. But we have not yet succeeded in making him pull out, and I don’t think we shall by air action alone: what we have done . . . is to make it impossible for him to resist successfully, a determined and sustained offensive by the ground forces’.⁵¹

Operation DIADEM was conceived to fulfil this requirement by ending the stalemate in Italy and capturing Rome. The Air Component was required to ‘render it impossible for the enemy to maintain his forces on [*the Gustav*] line in Italy in face of a combined Allied Offensive’.⁵² In AI terms, therefore, it differed from STRANGLE in that the effort was conducted in co-ordination with a ground offensive which placed additional consumption demands on the Germans. While the Germans had sufficient logistic support for a static defence, it was calculated that the additional 1,000 tons per day required to oppose the Allied ground offensive would generate a critical situation, especially with respect to fuel, which would curtail German mobility near the front.⁵³ However, by concentrating their offensive on a narrow frontage, the Allied scheme of manoeuvre failed to fully exploit the German motor transportation crisis, despite the increased demands of heavy fighting.

Conceptually, DIADEM was a continuation of STRANGLE, though the interdiction line increased to 140 miles in depth to further increase the demands on the fragile motor transport and fuel situation. Additionally, and in accordance with the ground advance, AI was required to interdict forces retreating from the front. In this realm, intensive patrols of armed reconnaissance aircraft added to the action



Among the heavier types involved in the AI campaigns were the Baltimores of the Desert Air Force. (MAP)

ensuring a continual harassment across the battlefield by day.⁵⁴ The ability of the enemy to conduct re-supply at night or in bad weather, by both land and sea routes, had long been recognised but the Allied air forces were poorly placed to improve the continuity of their AI action. While improved tactics, incorporating flare-dropping aircraft, were successfully employed, filling the AI void at night was inadequately resourced; only four squadrons of Bostons and Baltimores, plus the occasional Wellington, were assigned to these duties.⁵⁵

In terms of expectation, DIADEM certainly broke the stalemate of the campaign and great advances were made by the Allies; Rome fell on 5 June. However, compared to the promise recognised previously, AI during DIADEM appears disappointing at first glance. All the lessons from previous operations had been applied, technical advances had been incorporated and these factors, combined with contrived battle consumption ought to have rapidly produced the predicted collapse of the German logistic system. However, while the under-resourced night effort was partly to blame, the absence of total and immediate collapse should not be considered as a failure of AI but as a malfunction of the joint planning process, which failed to marry together the ground and air plans, to best exploit the AI induced motor transport crisis. Although DIADEM lived up to expectations, disappointingly, AI failed to reach its full potential, despite all the building blocks having been recognised.

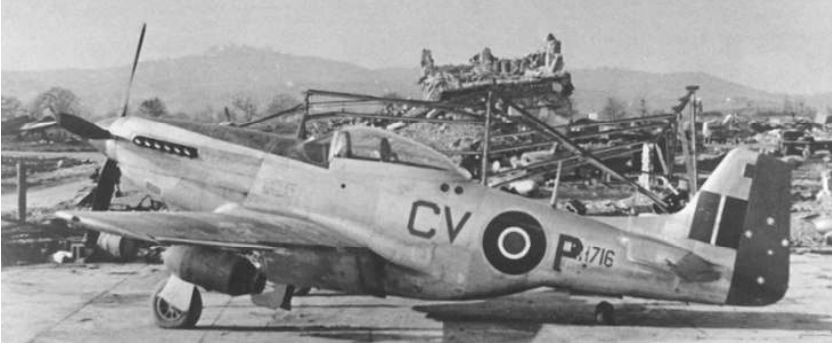
Conclusion

The modern understanding of AI was born in the Italian campaign and it was required to mature very rapidly. Initially, excessive expectations were made of it while it was undergoing tactical, doctrinal and technological growth.

Early in the campaign, Zuckerman's theory was influential in determining target sets and provided a methodical and logical structure to the initial AI effort which sought to stem the strategic flow of forces into the theatre in general and Sicily specifically. During HUSKY, the need for a joint approach to interdiction planning was revealed as the Germans successfully evacuated Sicily with minimal losses in broad daylight. Although the limitations of unilateral AI were highlighted by this failure, faith in its potential remained, as evidenced by the increasing demands placed upon it in subsequent operations.

AI in AVALANCHE and SHINGLE revolved around delaying and disrupting German advances towards vulnerable bridgeheads. Such amphibious operations presented the enemy with an immediate need to counter attack as strongly and rapidly as possible. In both cases, the key to success was to win the logistic competition to build sufficient forces faster than the enemy. At Salerno, it was the AI induced delay and disruption of the 29th Panzer division that really foiled the Germans' ability to counter attack and repel the landing. At Anzio, it was a general reduction in the fighting capacity of the Germans in and approaching the battle area that eventually won the day – but only just. In both cases, AI failed to completely isolate the battlefield as had been expected, but its delaying contribution was central to Allied survival.

The nature of AI during STRANGLE and DIADEM was different as the Germans were entrenched in static defensive positions. Here, AI effort was aimed at depleting German fighting capacity and restricting their freedom of manoeuvre to such an extent as to force a withdrawal. In both operations, AI proved capable of inflicting significant disruption to the flow of goods into the area, but isolation remained an elusive expectation. The anticipated spontaneous German withdrawal under the combined pressure of AI and land offensive (a wholly realistic expectation at this stage) failed to materialise as rapidly as



By 1945 most Allied fighters based in Italy were carrying bombs, like this Mustang of No 3 Sqn RAAF.

expected, owing to the limited front that the Germans had to defend and supply.

In his summary of the Spring Offensive (dated 18 June 1944), Slessor recognised the things that AI could not be expected to do:

‘It can not by itself defeat a highly organised and disciplined army. ... It can not enforce a withdrawal by drying up the flow of essential supplies. ... It can not prevent entirely the movement of strategic reserves to the battlefield. ... In short, it can not absolutely isolate the battlefield from enemy supply or reinforcement’.⁵⁶

Armed with these realisations, it is evident that the expectations of AI in the Italian campaign were overambitious and perhaps even impossible. However, within a co-ordinated joint effort, AI held great promise.

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Notes:

- ¹ Sallager, p1.
- ² AHB Translation, Vol 10 – VII/100, p 8.
- ³ *Ibid* p 9.
- ⁴ AHB Narrative, Vol I, Appx 19.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ AHB Translation Vol 10 – VII/100 p 5.
- ⁹ Mark, p 94.
- ¹⁰ AHB Narrative, Vol I, p 308.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² Top Secret, deciphered intelligence gleaned from German Enigma transmissions.
- ¹³ Mark, p 67.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ A study of the naval losses in the Dardanelles in 1914 would explain his concerns.
- ¹⁶ Mark, p 74.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp 71-72.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p 77.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p 84.
- ²⁰ AHB Narrative, Vol I, p 142.

- 21 AHB Translation, Vol 10 – VII/100 p 2.
22 *Ibid*, p 4.
23 *Ibid*, p 7.
24 *Ibid*, p 7.
25 AHB Translation, Vol 10 – VII/97 p 15.
26 *Ibid*, pp 12-13.
27 AHB Narrative, Vol I p 145.
28 *Ibid*, pp 237-238.
29 Mark, p 114.
30 *Ibid*, p 238.
31 *Ibid*, p 237.
32 *Ibid*, p 259.
33 *Ibid*, p 240.
34 AHB Translation ,Vol 10 – VII/99 p 7.
35 AHB Narrative, Vol I, p 254.
36 *Ibid*, p 255.
37 *Ibid*, p 258.
38 *Ibid*, p 263.
39 *Ibid*, pp 266-267.
40 Mark, p 137.
41 AHB Narrative, Vol I, p 268.
42 *Ibid*, App16.
43 *Ibid*, p 148.
44 *Ibid*, p 149.
45 *Ibid*, p 149.
46 AHB Translation, Vol 10 – VII/100 p 14.
47 *Ibid*, p 15.
48 *Ibid*,
49 AHB Narrative, Vol II, p 21.
50 Mark, p 190.
51 Terraine, p 594.
52 AHB Narrative, Vol I, p 326.
53 Mark, p 184.
54 AHB Narrative, Vol II, p 11.
55 *Ibid*, p 25.
56 AHB Narrative, Vol II, Appx 5, p 1.

MORNING DISCUSSION PERIOD

Desmond Koch. I have recently been reading Alan Whicker's account of his experiences with an Army Film and Photo Unit in Italy, in which, incidentally, his observations on Cassino, pretty much mirror the notes written by Sir David Cousin's father.¹ What interested me, however, was his description of the Anzio landings. The American general in command succeeded in getting his troops ashore but they then failed to break out of the beachhead. I think that Churchill referred to his having hoped to fling a wildcat ashore whereas all he got was a stranded whale. Whicker makes the point that one of the problems was the lack of secure landing grounds, which made it difficult for the RAF to provide air cover. Could the panel comment on that?

Wg Cdr Brookes. The main conclusion that has emerged from the Anzio experience, if you read some of the specialist analyses of what happened, is that we should never attempt amphibious landings again. They argue that it is a deeply flawed concept when undertaken against an opponent as competent as the Germans. The defenders obviously controlled the terrain, and were familiar with it. They were well aware that the Allies might attempt an amphibious assault. There are only so many places where such an undertaking is feasible and the Germans could identify these as well as anyone. They also understood, that, once they were ashore, the Allies would be vulnerable because, as Archie Spence has pointed out, they would be dependent upon external maritime resupply, whereas the Germans had more secure internal lines of communication. So, being prepared, men like Kesselring and Vietinghoff were able to move quickly to seal off the beachhead, making the whole enterprise a close run thing.

Extending this a little, there is, I think, a temptation to use specialised forces and concepts, like parachutists and gliders and amphibious troops, simply because you have them. One could say the same about the RAF and JP233. It was hardly the ideal weapon to use against Saddam Hussein's airfields, but it was what we had. There is, I think, an internal pressure within the military to find a means of employing force elements that will be lost if a use for them cannot be identified. Thus, it could be argued that, some operations, perhaps Arnhem for instance, were not so much a tactical initiative as a means

of preserving the concept of parachute troops. And amphibious landings are a case in point.

Wg Cdr Spence. I would just add that the lessons learned at Anzio were predominantly 'land' oriented. Primarily that, if you do attempt an amphibious landing, then it needs to be followed up very aggressively – and that lesson was well taught in WW I at Gallipoli. With respect to Anzio, the delay in exploiting the beachhead gave the Germans time – and time is a very valuable commodity. It permitted them to redeploy troops and to create the logistic chain necessary to maintain them with relatively little interference from Allied air because of the insecurity of the landing grounds within the beachhead and the difficulty of providing them with fuel, bombs and ammunition by sea.

Wg Cdr John Stubbington. For Archie Spence – what was your perception of the difference in the degree of reliance that the strategic and tactical air forces placed on visual, as distinct from any kind of radar-assisted, target acquisition?

Spence. I'm afraid that I would need notice of that one. My study focused on the degree of success or failure that attended the interdiction campaign, rather than the means employed.

Stubbington. Perhaps I could expand on the background to my question. It seems to me that there has been a great deal of nonsense written about the accuracy of air-delivered munitions and I believe that visual target recognition was almost invariably an essential prerequisite for success. The accuracy of wartime radar-assisted methods, like GEE or OBOE, were simply not capable of achieving the desired objectives.

Wg Cdr Jeff Jefford. With specific regard to today's seminar, neither OBOE nor GEE was available in the Mediterranean theatre, so, apart from a handful of H2S-equipped Halifax pathfinders, most attacks, both strategic and tactical, would have had to have been carried out visually.

Sebastian Cox. There is indeed, as John suggests, a lot of nonsense talked about GEE and OBOE, mostly in the context of the strategic air campaign. Critics like Anthony Grayling, who has written a recent

book on bombing cities,² often fail to understand the technicalities that they are dealing with.

What GEE *could* do was to enable some aircraft to find the middle of a specified city, within the range of the GEE chain, permitting Arthur Harris to take out, say Essen, for example, by using area bombing. What GEE did *not* provide was precision targeting. Not even precision targeting in Second World War terms, which is something quite different from what we mean by precision targeting today.

OBOE, on the other hand, did, to a limited degree, allow precision *marking* of a target. But the system could be used by only a small number of aircraft and, like GEE, it was range limited, so its use was dependent upon how far forward you were able to deploy your transmitters. The contribution that OBOE made to the strategic bombing campaign was that, by marking a target accurately, it could assist in focusing the effects of an attack. Thus it was possible, for instance, to take out a number of oil refineries in western Germany – still fairly large target complexes, but small by comparison with an entire city. But, because of OBOE's limited capacity and range, it was simply not possible to do this all over Germany, which is what most of the critics don't understand. Furthermore, even when it was employed, the Main Force was still reliant on visual aiming at the OBOE-laid marker, and that meant that you had to be able to see it. If the weather, or some other factor, intervened to obscure the marker, or if the marker had not actually been placed accurately, the raid would still fail to hit that precision target.

Gp Capt John Kennell. I have been interested in the Italian campaign ever since I was Air Attaché in Italy in the late 1990s. I would certainly agree, with Wg Cdr Spence, that air interdiction was very important in the Italian campaign, but I wonder whether the air superiority that we had, might not have lulled the Allies into neglecting co-ordinated defence and counter-air operations. Although very few in number, as Andy Brookes explained, the German Air Force achieved noteworthy successes out of all proportion to its size in carrying out virtually unopposed attacks on such vital targets as a US supply convoy moored in Bari harbour, including one ship, laden with mustard gas, that blew up with devastating consequences for both the

fleet and the town. I would also cite the attacks by German bombers on capital ships moored off Salerno and the Anzio beachhead using radio-guided bombs. These got through almost unopposed, apart from anti-aircraft fire from the ships themselves. Were we unduly complacent, or did we just not have the necessary capability?

Brookes. Picking up your last point, about anti-aircraft fire, I think that we forget ground-based air defences at our peril. On the way in today I noticed the Bloodhound by the main gate. What has the RAF got today in the way of ground-based air defences? Nothing – it has spent all of its money on hi-tech fighters which are very glamorous, of course, but how will they fare against anyone who has a ‘double-digit’ SAM?³ If you can obtain and deploy late-generation Russian ground-based defensive missile systems, you will control the air. If that had been the case in Iraq, the outcome would have been very different – and it still could be in Iran or even Afghanistan. I think that we have still not yet learned that if one of today’s so-called asymmetric opponents can get hold of some former Soviet missile systems, he will control the skies.

And I think that we could learn something from the Germans too, with their *Flak* batteries. Their 88mm gun was just as effective against tanks as it was against aircraft, so in Italy, as elsewhere, the *Luftwaffe*’s artillery units were dual-roled, flexible and very efficient. I think that we were far too rigid, too compartmentalised. Did we talk to the Navy about the threat from Fritz X bombs? I am still not convinced that we have a firm grasp on this sort of thing today. What I am sure about, however, is the threat represented by those double-digit SAMs. They are frighteningly potent and can effectively neutralise even the most sophisticated of aeroplanes, including the B-1, the B-2 and our own Typhoon.

I suspect, however, that we may not have given as much thought to this sort of thing in WW II as we do today. After all, we could afford to lose 8,000 aeroplanes in Italy – and still win!

Wg Cdr Archie Spence. I certainly concur with your assessment of the potential threat. We currently have thirteen Hercules in Afghanistan. I do not lose any sleep at night over the fact that we don’t have any Typhoons protecting them. What does worry me is that anyone can go out and buy a double-digit SAM these days – and we

can't afford to lose *one* Hercules, let alone 8,000 aeroplanes.

Air Cdre Mickey Witherow. I should declare an interest here, as I am an ex-Director of the RAF Regiment. I would make two points. First, the British Army of WW II had its 3.7" anti-aircraft gun, which was almost identical to the German 88mm. Nobody really knows why but, probably through sheer lack of imagination, it was never used in the anti-tank role.

My second point is that the only currently significant British surface-to-air missile is the Rapier. The RAF, having formed and operated its anti-aircraft artillery units very successfully during WW II and after, up to and including the Falklands campaign and both Gulf Wars, finally gave up its air defence role and transferred its Rapiers to the Army. Since it was originally created to defend RAF airfields, this withdrawal of such a fundamental capability seems to me to run counter to the basic philosophy which has underpinned the Regiment ever since its inception. But, that aside, no replacement weapon appears to be on the cards at the moment, although we very nearly acquired Patriot. A cadre of Regiment personnel was trained on Patriot before the first Gulf War but the war didn't last long enough for it to be deployed. So, Bloodhound and Thunderbird have gone; Patriot never arrived; we were even offered Hawks at one stage – at a very good price too, but we turned them down. In short, I don't think that the RAF, indeed the whole British military establishment, has ever really understood the importance of ground-based air defence. The statistic that I always used to quote was from the Vietnam war when some 80% (I think it was) of American aircraft lost were brought down by guns of less than 100mm calibre.

Mike Meech. I believe that, apart from being difficult to fight over, the terrain at Cassino involved significant radio communication problems, and the field telephone lines would obviously have been pretty vulnerable. We know that there were incidents involving bombers attacking friendly troops, which raises the question, were forward air controllers used at Cassino and/or if they were, did they experience problems with communications?

Brookes. I think that the important thing to understand about Cassino is that there were no German troops in the monastery itself. The



Impassable to tanks, the ruins of Cassino town were the scene of much hand-to-hand fighting.

German strong point was the town of Cassino. There were certainly artillery spotters on the hillside directing the German guns but the Allied commanders couldn't be *sure* that the monastery wasn't being used. From the contemporary accounts, you can read of the debate between those who argued that there was no need to damage the monastery by bombing it, and local commanders who declined to commit their troops in the face of the looming malevolent presence that dominated the battlefield. It was a moral dilemma but, in the end, in order to neutralise the threat, whether real or imagined made no difference, the monastery had to be taken out.

Spence. I didn't really examine close air support in any depth, and I can't be specific about Cassino, but, as with air interdiction, close air support certainly evolved rapidly during the Italian campaign. Forward air controllers, both on the ground and airborne in Austers, were certainly used, as were cab rank patrols with armed aircraft waiting to be called in to deliver a strike. Indeed, these techniques, which were later exploited very successfully in north west Europe, were largely developed in Italy.

Kennell. Just to clarify a little what happened at Cassino. When it

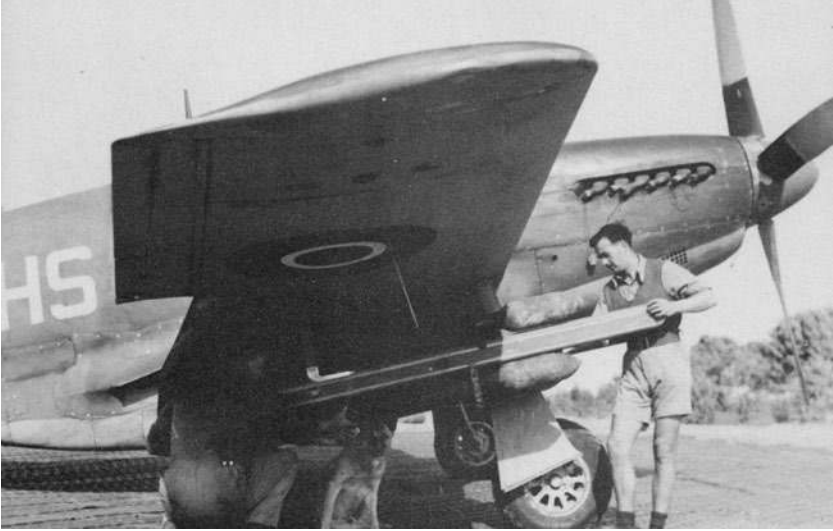
was eventually decided to take out the monastery, it was done mainly by the USAAF and the raid on the monastery itself was a very successful high precision attack. A few days later, however, when the attack was directed against Cassino town, some American formations that were new in theatre bombed the wrong place – a town some 25 miles away – and other bombs fell on Allied forces, including a New Zealand, I think it was, headquarters. So the problems were inexperience and a lack of ability, particularly with respect to navigation.

Sqn Ldr Colin Richardson. I would like to question the way that air interdiction was actually carried out. I saw formations of medium bombers, like Marauders and Mitchells, dropping huge numbers of bombs from medium altitude onto a railway line. Whereas later, in north west Europe, we were using rocket-firing single-seaters taking out point targets. Would that not have been a better way of doing it in Italy – open stretches of railway line, away from air defences and perhaps attacking locomotives?

Spence. The German records relating to the last two Operations that I mentioned, STRANGLE and DIADEM, specifically noted that the Allied fighter-bombers flying armed reconnaissance sorties were doing just that, and wreaking havoc in the process, taking out individual lines, trains and so on. This scattergun approach, inflicting widespread damage was actually having a greater effect than focusing on the large marshalling yards.

Jefford. I think that it's worth pointing out that the 3-inch rocket didn't become available as a ground attack weapon until the spring of 1944. It was first used against shipping in 1943 but it was March 1944 before No 6 Sqn's rocket-firing Hurricanes arrived in theatre, and even then they were assigned to operating over Yugoslavia. So, because the fighters available to the Desert Air Force, the Spitfire and Kittyhawk, were never cleared for the carriage of rockets, the only practical options for tactical work were bombs and bullets delivered by medium bombers or fighter-bombers. It was not until quite late in the war that rocket-firing Mustangs began to appear in Italy.

But, while fighter-bombers could deliver a relatively precise attack, they were only useful against small point targets; you still needed



A rocket-armed Mustang III of the DAF's No 260 Sqn in 1945.

medium bombers to attack larger or more substantial objectives – like a marshalling yard, a supply dump, an airfield or a bridge. And this was not confined to Italy, of course; the A-20s and B-26s of the UK-based US 9th Air Force did the same sort of thing in north west Europe, as did the RAF with the Mitchells and Bostons of its 2nd TAF. I would say that there were probably more similarities than differences between the way that tactical air operations were conducted in Italy and in France.

Notes:

¹ Whicker, A; *Whicker's War* (London, 2005).

² Grayling, A; *Among the Dead Cities* (London, 2006).

³ During the Cold War, NATO assigned each new Soviet weapon system an appropriate prefix and an individual identification number, thus the surface-to-air missiles of the 1960s began at SA-1 and moved on through SA-2, SA-3 and so on, each one reflecting an advance in capability such that by the time that the 'double digit' SA-10 and upwards were being deployed in the 1980s and later, they represented a formidable threat.

THE BALKAN AIR FORCE

Wg Cdr Jeff Jefford



'Jeff' joined the RAF in 1959 as a pilot but (was) soon remustered as a navigator. His flying experience included tours with Nos 45, 83 and 50 Sqns and instructing at No 6 FTS. Administrative and staff appointments involved sundry jobs at Manby, Gatow, Brampton and a total of eight years at HQ Strike Command. He took early retirement in 1991 to read history at London University. He has three books to his credit and has been a member of the Society's Executive Committee since 1998; he is currently editor of its Journal.

Most of what I have to say has been culled from the 'official history', copies of which are held by the AHB and at Kew, and almost certainly, here at Hendon as well.¹ A little unusually, this volume was compiled immediately after the war by the staff of HQ Balkan Air Force, rather than in arrears by AHB, so it lacks a degree of historical perspective. It also lacks any maps. It is known that a set of supporting maps, but probably only one set, was prepared and despatched to HQ Mediterranean Allied Air Forces in 1945, but I have no idea what happened to them. So, let us begin.

Having landed on the Italian mainland in September 1943, within two months the Allied advance had been held at the Gustav Line and there it stayed until Cassino fell in the following May, permitting Rome to be taken in June 1944. Meanwhile, while the land campaign had stalled, taking advantage of bases on the east coast and on the Foggia plain, the air forces had been able to carry out raids, not only behind the German lines in Italy, but on a much wider scale. The Rumanian oilfields were a prime objective, of course, but heavy bombers also attacked targets in Southern Germany, Hungary and Bulgaria and, much closer to home, tactical aircraft began to engage the enemy in Yugoslavia and Albania.

With the weather improving in the spring of 1944, operations over the Balkans intensified, highlighting problems arising from the complexity of the Command and Control structure. So far as air was

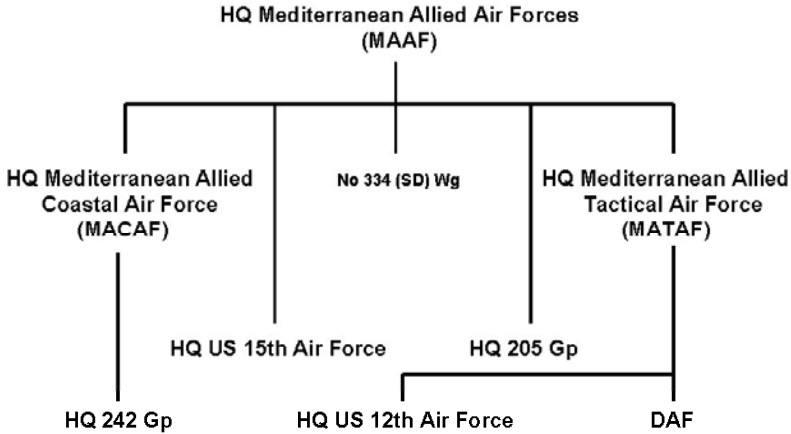


Fig 1. The overall command and control structure governing the employment of the air forces in Italy in mid-1944.

concerned overall command (and direct control of the Special Duties Wing) was exercised by HQ Mediterranean Allied Air Forces (MAAF). But, as indicated by the *much* simplified wiring diagram at Figure 1, there were a lot of players on the field. The tactical elements were the three in the bottom row. Of these, the US 12th AF tended to operate on the west coast of Italy, in support of Mark Clark's US Fifth Army, with its focus later shifting to the south of France, so its combat units saw little (if any) action on the other side of the Adriatic – although its 60th Troop Carrier Group was heavily involved in the Balkans, its C-47s delivering many tons of supplies, either by parachute or by making hazardous landings on rudimentary airstrips.

Nevertheless, one can see that there was considerable potential here for crossed wires and/or folk getting in each other's way. But, even more to the point, the air forces in Italy were there to fight the Germans *in* Italy and, while operations over the Balkans might well be desirable, and even productive, they were also a diversion of effort. What was needed was a subordinate air HQ to co-ordinate all British, American and Italian trans-Adriatic air activities. On 22 May (1944) HQ Mediterranean Allied Air Force signalled the Air Ministry to request the establishment of such a formation.

This bid was given added urgency by Operation RÖSSELSPRUNG – the so-called Seventh (and last) German anti-

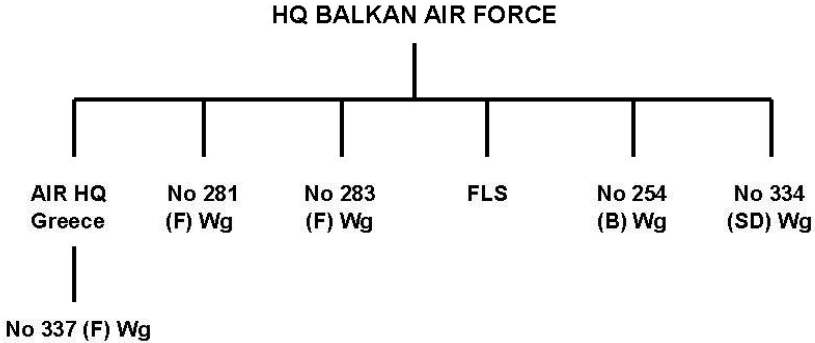


Fig 2. The structure of the Balkan Air Force.

Partisan Offensive, which aimed to eliminate the Yugoslav Partisan movement in Bosnia. It culminated in an airborne (parachute and glider) assault on Tito's HQ at Drvar on 25 May. The attack was unsuccessful, in that it failed to kill or capture Tito, who, along with key members of his staff, was picked up at Kupreško Polje and flown out to Bari in a Russian Dakota on 3 June. This German activity had provoked a major reaction by the Allied air forces and between 25 and 30 May more than 1,000 sorties had been flown by No 242 Gp, the Desert Air Force and the US 15th Air Force during which 93 German and Croatian aircraft had been destroyed, mostly on the ground.

The hierarchy responded to HQ MAAF's request very rapidly and a new air HQ, initially to be known as G Force, was authorised to form on 1 June. The title of 'G Force' survived for less than three weeks and on 19 June it was restyled HQ Balkan Air Force – or BAF for short.²

It was envisaged that BAF would have a newly-created four-squadron fighter wing, the existing Special Duties Wing and the three Baltimore squadrons of No 232 Wg which was to be donated by 242 Group. Although the transfer of No 232 Wg was clearly stated to have been the original intention, there is no indication in any of the related ORBs that this ever happened. What did happen was that, in addition to the Special Duties squadrons of No 334 Wg, HQ BAF acquired two, rather than one, new fighter wings, Nos 281 and 283, along with a new light bomber wing, No 254 and its ORBAT continued to expand, its composition by the end of the year being as at Figure 2



*AVM William Elliot
AOC BAF*

(FLS stood for Fighter Liaison Section – the rather curious umbrella title coined to cater for the Italian fighter squadrons that were assigned to BAF).

HQ BAF was located at Bari with most of its combat squadrons eventually settling at Campomarino and Canne, with, later on, the occasional detachment to the island of Vis. The broad functions of the new formation were initially stated to be:

1. Operational and administrative control of all RAF formations operating over the Balkans.
2. Co-ordination of operations undertaken by the USAAF and the Italian Air Force over the Balkans.
3. All SD operations.

To spell this out in greater detail, the AOC, AVM William Elliot, had two directives – one from the British War Cabinet, defining his relationships with other theatre commanders, the other from HQ MAAF spelling out his specific responsibilities as an air commander.

The situation was still quite complicated, however, as, despite the loss of its subordinate formation (HQ 242 Gp, which disbanded in September 1944), the Coastal Air Force retained responsibility for maritime reconnaissance – tracking shipping movements in the Adriatic – while the Desert Air Force continued to interdict enemy seaborne resupply. AOC BAF was to be directly responsible for all other air operations *in* the Balkans, and in Greece, including the coasts of the Ionian Sea and the Adriatic – with particular reference to the air defence of Tito's HQ on the island of Vis. To do all that he could use his own forces and any others that might be assigned to his operational control from time to time.

Against this background, close co-operation, co-ordination and

deconfliction would be essential – and it didn't stop at air forces. AOC BAF was also charged with co-ordinating land and naval activities in the Adriatic. Other than troops, including an RAF Regiment element, deployed to defend Vis, there was considerable reluctance on the part of the locals to having British forces on the ground in Yugoslavia – in essence, they were suspicious of the long term aims of the British imperialists. Nevertheless, army (and RAF Regiment) elements did get ashore from time to time and these expeditions required both naval and air support. Elliot was therefore charged with setting up, within his HQ, 'a combined operations room, intelligence centre and inter-communication centre'.

Within this facility BAF's own staff worked alongside personnel from the other concerned organisations. That is to say:

- a. Flag Officer Taranto and Adriatic and Liaison Italy (FOTALI), RAdm Charles Morgan, who, although he stayed at his own HQ at Taranto, was permanently represented at Bari by a Captain RN and
- b. Brig George Davy's HQ Land Forces Adriatic, which was collocated at Bari and had just been created by redesignating the former Force 266 and
- c. close liaison was to be maintained with Maj-Gen William Stawell's HQ Special Operations Mediterranean (SOM) which was also in Bari and much of whose air support was provided by Elliot's No 334 Wg.

In order to ensure that all air operations functioned smoothly, contact was maintained with all of the other formations who might be operating in or through BAF's patch – primarily HQs Coastal and Tactical Air Forces, including the Desert Air Force, HQ 15 AF and HQ 205 Gp.

My mention of General Stawell's HQ SOM is the last time that I shall refer to Special Duties, as another speaker is going to deal with that aspect. Similarly, someone else is going to speak about Greece, so I shall make no further reference to the activities of No 337 Wg.

Having stressed that C2 was quite complicated on 'our' side of the Adriatic, and that the AOC had to deconflict naval and other activities, his life was made no easier by the situation on the far side. Yugoslavia was an artificial political entity created by the need to impose some



Having flown to Bari non-stop from Beltsy in Moldavia, the long-range Yak-9DDs of the 236 IAD escorted, under the nominal control of HQ BAF, Soviet C-47s operating in support of the Communist Partisan forces in Yugoslavia from August to November 1944.

sort of order on the regional power vacuum left after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires in 1918. Yugoslavia's uncomfortable mix of ethnic, linguistic and religious communities made for an inherently unstable arrangement and this was reflected in the nature of the anti-Nazi resistance movements which were made up of equally disparate groups, some of which were not above fighting each other. All of which, could make life difficult for the Allies who, whenever possible, preferred to do things on a legal basis – diplomatically speaking. The problem was to identify someone with whom you could actually conduct meaningful diplomatic negotiations.

There had been a Yugoslav Government in exile since 1941 but its notional head, the young King Peter II, had joined the RAF and the ministerial rump was hardly able to influence domestic matters materially from London. By the time that the Balkan Air Force came into being it was already clear that, from the point of view of beating the Germans, Tito was the best bet and in June 1944 a merger of the *de jure* royalist government with the communist Partisans was stage-managed to create a *de facto* government. In effect, having grafted on an exiled minister or two, the Allies recognised Tito's team on Vis island as the national leadership.

So much for the background. What of the resources? The twenty-two units that constituted the combat element of the Balkan Air Force are summarised at Figure 3 – although not all at once; at its peak

Unit	Air Force	Type	Period
No 6 Sqn	RAF	Hurricane	Aug 44-VE-Day
No 32 Sqn	RAF	Spitfire	Jul 44-Sep 44
No 39 Sqn	RAF	Beaufighter Marauder	Jul 44-Jan 45 Jan 45-VE-Day
No 73 Sqn	RAF	Spitfire	Jul 44-VE-Day
No 213 Sqn	RAF	Mustang	Jul 44-VE-Day
No 249 Sqn	RAF	Spitfire Mustang	Jul 44-Sep 44 Sep 44-VE-Day
No 253 Sqn	RAF	Spitfire	Jun 44-VE-Day
No 351 Sqn	Yugoslav	Hurricane	Sep 44-VE-Day
No 352 Sqn	Yugoslav	Spitfire	Aug 44-VE-Day
No 13(G) Sqn	RHAF	Baltimore	Jul 44-Nov 44
No 335 Sqn	RHAF	Spitfire	Sep 44-Nov 44
No 336 Sqn	RHAF	Spitfire	Sep 44-Nov 44
No 16 Sqn	SAAF	Beaufighter	Aug 44-VE-Day
No 19 Sqn	SAAF	Beaufighter	Aug 44-VE-Day
No 25 Sqn	SAAF	Ventura Marauder	Aug 44-Nov 44 Nov 44-VE-Day
10 ^o Gruppo Caccia	Italy	Airacobra	Sep 44-VE-Day
12 ^o Gruppo Caccia	Italy	Airacobra	Sep 44-VE-Day
20 ^o Gruppo Caccia	Italy	Spitfire	Sep 44-VE-Day
28 ^o Gruppo Bombardamento	Italy	Baltimore	Dec 44-VE-Day
102 ^o Gruppo Caccia	Italy	MC202	Nov 44-Feb 45
132 ^o Gruppo Bombardamento	Italy	Baltimore	Nov 44-VE-Day
155 ^o Gruppo Caccia	Italy	MC205	Nov 44-Feb 45

Fig 3. Combat units assigned to HQ Balkan Air Force.

strength eighteen of these units were operational. The second column is of particular interest, as it illustrates that the Balkan Air Force was a remarkably polyglot organisation, its ORBAT including units of the RAF, the South African Air Force and the air forces of Greece, Yugoslavia and Italy – plus the Poles and Americans who flew in the Special Duties units.

Even more remarkably, for several months two squadrons of the



Representative of HQ BAF's striking power, one of No 6 Sqn's rocket-firing Hurricane IVs.

Red Air Force, one of Dakotas and one of Yak-9DDs, flew from Bari under the auspices of HQ BAF. The degree of control that could be exerted was merely nominal, however, as the Russians 'asked much and gave little [*and*] left virtually no records on which to base any realistic account of their activities.'³ That said, often escorted by the Yaks, the Soviets are known to have mounted almost 400 Dakota sorties in support of the Partisans, of which 315 were successful, landing 396 tons in-country and delivering a further 630 tons by parachute.

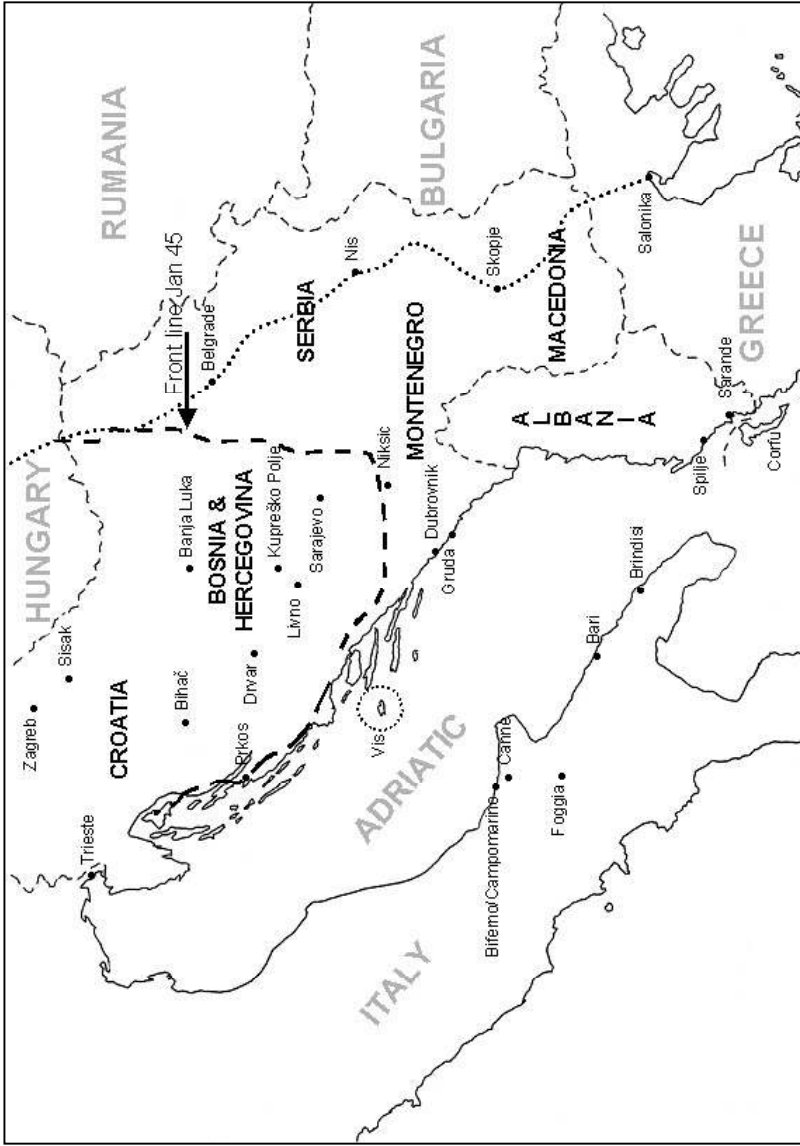
If the nationalities assigned to BAF were varied, so were the aircraft types – ten of them – and, the Yaks aside, some rather exotic ones among them. The Hurricane was somewhat dated as a fighter by 1944 but in the relatively benign air combat environment of Yugoslavia, where there were few marauding Messerschmitts, they had a new lease of life in the ground attack role. Flying Mk IVs, armed with the 3-inch RP, No 6 Sqn generally flew with just four rockets under the starboard wing, balanced by a fuel tank under the port, while the Yugoslavs of No 351 Sqn preferred to trade range for firepower and carried four rockets aside. Rockets, and cannon, were also the main armament of the three squadrons of Beaufighters so it is clear that the Balkan Air Force's core function was ground attack.



One of the Macchi C.205s of the Italian Co-Belligerent Air Force with a pair of the P-39s with which, along with Spitfires, they were replaced.

For static targets it had a force of light and medium bombers, initially Venturas and Baltimores and later Marauders. The force structure was balanced by a fighter-bomber element flying Spitfires and Mustangs for more strafing and to engage the *Luftwaffe* as and when it put on an appearance.

The Italian contribution is interesting. When Italy surrendered in 1943 most of the air force re-aligned itself with the Allies, although a substantial element, the *Aeronautica Nazionale Repubblicana* (ANR) remained loyal to the fascist cause and continued to fight alongside the Germans in the north. The so-called Co-Belligerent Air Force, was quite significant in size, although most of its domestically produced aircraft were not really world class. That is not entirely true of the later Reggiane and Macchi fighters but they were built at plants that were still in German hands, and powered by Daimler-Benz engines, so some difficulty was encountered in keeping them serviceable. To solve the spares problem, it was decided to re-equip most of the Italian units with British and American aircraft, Baltimores in place of the



Italy, the Adriatic and Yugoslavia indicating most of the locations to which reference is made in the narrative.

legacy CANT and Savoia-Marchetti bombers, and P-39s and Spitfires replacing the fighters.

This turned out to be only a partial solution, however, as the aeroplanes were *very* second-hand. In fact the Spitfires were third-hand having been used by No 249 Sqn and then the Yugoslavs of No 352 Sqn before being delivered to the 20th *Gruppo*. Of the first fifty-three Spitfires taken on charge, the Italian mechanics could make only thirty-three serviceable. Much the same was true of the ex-RAF Baltimores and the hand-me-down P-39s supplied by the Americans. Nevertheless, the Italians persevered and they would eventually contribute a substantial number of operational sorties.

A word about the opposition. The *Luftwaffe* in Yugoslavia was small and largely concerned with anti-Partisan activities. Its strength fluctuated, with bombers being drafted in on a temporary basis to support specific offensives. There was a token air defence force, a handful of Bf 109s and FW 190s plus some obsolete fighters, including Fiat G.50s and Morane 406s, flown by the Croatian Air Force. But from a German point of view, it was all about, what today we would call, counter-insurgency operations and for that it needed tactical reconnaissance aircraft, light bombers and ground strafers.

Most of the effort was provided by *Nachtschlachtgruppe 7* which could usually field about twenty Ju 87s and fifty or more Hs 126s, He 46s and Fiat CR42 biplanes. As a result there were relatively few air-to-air engagements and in the ten months that the Balkan Air Force was operational its pilots claimed only 37 aerial victories – ie not including aircraft destroyed on the ground (31 over Yugoslavia, one over Albania and five over Greece) and of those only four were single-engined fighters, the majority being relatively innocuous Henschels, Fieslers, Fiats and transport aircraft.

But, if the *Luftwaffe*'s fighters were not much of a threat, its anti-aircraft guns most certainly were and *Flak* represented a considerable hazard. While there must always be some doubt about the accuracy of the 37 victories credited to Allied fighter pilots (because such claims often turn out to have been on the optimistic side) there can be no doubt about the losses sustained – and those amounted to no fewer than 254 aircraft (*see Figure 4*). So, despite the lack of opposition in the air, operating over the Balkans was clearly no cakewalk. The reduced loss rate between December and February was largely a

	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Total
Spitfire	6	12	16	15	4	4	2	5	8	4		76
Mustang	5	8	4	12	5	8	4	5	10	8		69
Beaufighter	4	14	7	12	1	2	2	3	2	2		49
Hurricane		1	3	5	7			5	1	7		29
Airacobra					6	4				1		11
Baltimore	1	1		1		1		1	1	3		9
Macchi			7		1							8
Marauder										1	1	2
Ventura					1							1
Total	16	36	37	45	25	19	8	19	22	26	1	254

Fig 4. Losses sustained by BAF – mostly to Flak.

consequence of a reduced sortie rate, due to the winter weather, which turned Italian airfields into quagmires, and the relatively low losses sustained by Venturas, Marauders and Macchis reflect the comparatively short periods of time during which these types were committed to operations.

So if all of that provides the background, what of the nature of the operations?

When the Balkan Air Force was created, the overall position in Yugoslavia was that the Germans occupied the coastal strip and the major towns and controlled the Lines of Communication that linked them whereas the Partisans held the, often rugged, countryside and from there carried out attacks on German installations and attempted to interfere with German movements.

During June 1944, while HQ BAF was still getting its act together, it co-ordinated the efforts of the squadrons of the Desert Air Force and No 242 Gp that operated over the Adriatic and Yugoslavia. The first operations undertaken by the Balkan Air Force itself were mounted on 1 July, armed recce missions by fighter-bombers that resulted in the claimed destruction of one lorry plus two damaged (between Bihač and Livno), three locomotives destroyed and oil tanks left burning on the railway line between Sisak and Zagreb.

It was a relatively low-key start but the tempo increased rapidly, as on 29 July when Land Forces Adriatic launched a commando raid on Spilje in Albania. Preceded by a pre-dawn bombardment by destroyers of the Royal Navy, the Balkan Air Force provided an umbrella of fifty Spitfires from first light until withdrawal at 1430hrs plus tactical recce

inland to a depth of 10 miles from the beachhead.

There had also been significant anti-shipping activity during July, including attacks on harbours with five schooners sunk or damaged. In all the Balkan Air Force had flown more than 900 sorties during the month, claims including 11 aircraft destroyed and 16 damaged (mostly on the ground, although two air combat claims were lodged on the 20th following a clash with the *Luftwaffe* over Montenegro) plus 58 MT vehicles and 59 locomotives destroyed and many more damaged. It had not been all one-sided, of course and sixteen aircraft had been lost: six Spitfires, four Beaufighters, five Mustangs and a Baltimore.

It seemed likely that this would become the standard pattern of operations, specific strikes in support of Partisan offensives, attacks on coastal installations and fighter sweeps, but on 23 August the Rumanians suddenly capitulated and the following day Rumania declared war on Germany. That really rattled the Germans who were obliged to start redeploying their forces in Yugoslavia towards the east, since what had previously been a totally secure hinterland had, overnight, become a very vulnerable rear area.

To hinder their efforts, during the first seven days of September, the Allies mounted RATWEEK, the aim being to close down all road, rail, sea and air links in Yugoslavia, Albania and, to some extent, Greece. This tactical air offensive, during which the Balkan Air Force alone accounted for 66 railway engines, 109 wagons and 322 MT vehicles destroyed and about twice as many damaged, was backed up by some 120,000 Partisan troops and the US 15th Air Force (which dropped some 3,000 tons of bombs in the course of mounting 1,373 sorties) while the Long Range Desert Group and the Special Boat Service destroyed an important bridge near Gruda and attacked coastal targets near Dubrovnik.

Just as this week-long onslaught ended, there was a spectacular event in the north Adriatic where the 51,000 ton liner *Rex* was reported to be at sea and it was believed that the Germans were going to use her as a blockship by scuttling her in Trieste harbour. She was attacked by rocket-firing Beaufighters of the Coastal Air Force in the morning and by a wave of Balkan Air Force Beaufighters in the afternoon. The ship was struck by more than 100 rockets and eventually beached, listing heavily and on fire. Rather a sad end for such a magnificent ship. This was not the only activity at sea, of



Siebel ferries were frequently engaged by Allied aircraft patrolling off the Dalmatian coast. Despite their clumsy appearance, their heavy defensive armament of cannon ranging from 20 to 88mm in calibre made them dangerous targets.

course, and in the course of September the Balkan Air Force had sunk twenty-five vessels and inflicted damage on another forty-four. These ships ranged from coastal schooners via 500 ton motor vessels to a 3,500 ton tanker and included a number of the Siebel ferries to which reference is often made in accounts of actions in the Adriatic. The Siebel ferry was a very handy, purpose built vessel, essentially two pontoons joined by a deck and powered by a BMW engine. Easily capable of transporting a heavy tank, they were well-provided with both light and heavy AAA.

Meanwhile, RATWEEK had achieved its aim of seriously inhibiting the enemy's ability to move and he was never really able to catch up with all the repair work that was necessary. But, following the defection of Rumania at the end of August, things were moving very fast politically and, after a week's uncertainty, on 9 September Bulgaria also switched sides, joined the Allies and declared war on Germany.

This had changed the whole situation and the picture became more sharply focused. It was particularly sharply focused for the Germans whose forces in Greece were now very vulnerable with their main line of communication, the railway running north through Serbia and on to Budapest, now seriously threatened along its entire length. In addition

to retreating from the Red Army and the Bulgarians advancing towards Yugoslavia from the east, to avoid being cut off in the south, the Germans were obliged to begin withdrawing from the Aegean and Greece. These troops, and others moved across from Albania, were used to defend the railway between Skopje, Nis and Belgrade while yet more were redeployed further north, all of which involved a substantial regrouping of German forces in Yugoslavia – a difficult exercise because of the damage that had just been, and continued to be, inflicted on the communications infrastructure.

There was little let up, of course, and throughout September the heavy bombers of the 15th Air Force and 205 Group, now relieved of the necessity to maintain attacks against the Rumanian oil fields, hit marshalling yards while the Balkan Air Force interdicted the railway line itself, attacking bridges, locomotives and rolling stock.

Tito left his HQ at Vis on 18 September to join his troops who were now advancing on Belgrade. In a joint operation with the Red Army, the Partisans took the city on 20 October. Tito's offensive had been supported throughout by the Balkan Air force which had flown just shy of 2,000 sorties at a cost of 45 aircraft.

The other significant event in October had been the liberation of Corfu. This operation provides an example of the kind of diplomatic problem that I referred to earlier. There was no recognised political authority in Albania. Good King Zog was long gone; the previous Italian occupiers had been displaced by the Germans and there were now two significant local factions competing for control. In the event Enver Hoxha's communists would come out on top but, in the meantime, there was no one from whom to seek permission, so the Allies simply mounted Operation MERCERISED unilaterally. Covered by Balkan Air Force Spitfires and Beaufighters, British troops landed in the vicinity of Sarande on 22 September. The town and its harbour were taken on 12 October (see page 138-139) and the remaining Germans on Corfu surrendered on the 19th, although a substantial element of the garrison had succeeded in getting off the island.

The main feature of November was the effort expended on disrupting the attempt to extricate the German 21st Mountain Corps from Albania and Montenegro and pull it back into Bosnia. This was a long drawn out affair and it was mid-January before a battered and



A rocket-armed Beaufighter X of No 16 Sqn SAAF, with, in the background, a pair of No 213 Sqn's Mustang IVs.

much-depleted force, now lacking most of its heavy equipment, finally succeeded in reaching the comparative safety of Sarajevo.

By that time, Tito effectively controlled the southern and eastern half of Yugoslavia – Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro and most of the Dalmatian coast, with the British still reluctantly administering Albania until they could decide to whom they should give it. That left the *Wehrmacht* still holding Croatia and a dwindling area of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

For the remaining four months of the war, the Balkan Air Force continued to support Tito's offensives but it is worth noting that this was not always easy, partly because of the awful winter weather that turned Italian airstrips into quagmires, but also because of C2 problems. Reference has already been made to Tito's reluctance to having British troops on the ground, although he was content with RAF personnel, as he perceived them to be affording him tangible support, as distinct from 'establishing a presence'. Until he left Vis in September 1944, liaison over tasking, nomination of targets and so on, had been fairly straightforward. But this became more difficult after he left. The problem was that Tito ran a very tight ship and his Corps Commanders in the field sometimes felt unable to make significant tactical decisions without reference to Belgrade. Unfortunately, internal Yugoslav communications were somewhat primitive and the system could sometimes lack responsiveness.

Nevertheless, operations continued without respite. Hurricanes



Yugoslav Hurricanes of No 351 Sqn operating from Prkos in 1945.

operated from Niksic for two weeks in December, while harrying the retreating 21st Mountain Corps, and Spitfires and Mustangs made increasing use of the, by now secure and relatively well-founded, airfield at Vis to stretch their fuel. Indeed on 25 January 1945 No 352 Sqn's Spitfires moved to Vis permanently – Yugoslav pilots were now flying from Yugoslav soil.

Meanwhile, at the end of October, the British had proposed the establishment of a base on the mainland – on the Dalmatian coast at Zadar, to include an airfield at Zemunik, but this had run into the customary Yugoslav reluctance to entertain troops on the ground. That said, Tito was content to host SBS and LRDG raiding parties and even to allow naval vessels to use the existing port facilities at Zadar, although, even then he was suspicious about the size of the shore-based administration that the RN appeared to require.

In the event the only concrete result of all this negotiating was that it was agreed that a landing ground could be established at Prkos and, as Operation ACCOMPLISH, this was laid out between 3 and 7 February. It was promptly brought into use by detachments of fighter-bombers and on 26/27 February Hurricanes operating from there

carried out RP attacks against shipping, at night – which must have been quite exciting. On 12 March No 351 Sqn moved its Yugoslav Hurricanes from Italy to Prkos where, during April, they were joined by Nos 6, 73, 253 and 352 Sqn.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the disintegrating German perimeter (Bihać fell in March followed by Banja Luka and Sarajevo in April) the intensity of operations continued to increase, peaking in April when the Balkan Air Force alone mounted 3,693 sorties. That said, while I have talked a lot about the Balkan Air Force, because that was my assigned topic, it should be clearly understood that it did not fight this campaign alone. I have made passing reference to the involvement of the other air forces stationed in Italy but I should make it very clear that, with HQ Balkan Air Force co-ordinating and deconflicting their efforts, the heavy bombers of the RAF's No 205 Gp and of the US 15th AF and the fighter-bombers of the Desert Air Force had all operated over Yugoslavia and/or the Adriatic, as had the Coastal Air Force, throughout the campaign.

Although *Flak* was still taking a toll, by 1 May it was almost all over. That day, after a dummy attack by Hurricanes, a flotilla of twenty-five assorted vessels in the Gulf of Trieste hoisted white flags rather than trying to fight it out. Also on the 1st, Yugoslav tanks reached Trieste itself, one day ahead of the New Zealanders and thus realising Tito's aim of staking a claim to the city. Targets were now increasingly sparse and the BAF flew only twenty-two sorties on 7 May and just six on the 8th – the day that the Partisans entered Zagreb, the Croatian capital.

On VE-Day the AOC, AVM George Mills since 22 February, was formally relieved of his responsibility for trans-Adriatic operations and his command promptly began to contract. The HQ itself finally disbanded on 15 July – but not before it had recorded its own account of its achievements – of which this has been but a summary. It is often said that history is written by the victors – and that was quite literally the case in this instance.

Notes:

- ¹ TNA Air 23/1508.
- ² TNA Air 10/3929. Secret Organisation Memorandum 1432/44.
- ³ TNA Air 41/58, Appendix 25.

AIR POWER AND SPECIAL OPERATIONS: THE RAF AND SPECIAL DUTIES IN YUGOSLAVIA, 1941-1945

Dr Sebastian Ritchie



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books – Industry and Air Power, and Our Man in Yugoslavia: The Story of a Secret Service Operative.

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

SD operations were undertaken by the Allied air forces in all

theatres to a greater or lesser extent between 1939 and 1945, but they were nowhere more important than in the former Yugoslavia. Indeed, without air power the Allied influence in Yugoslavia during the war would have been at best minimal, and at worst non-existent. From 1942 to 1945 the Allied air forces infiltrated agents and supplies to Yugoslav resistance groups, at first by parachute drops and later by landings at makeshift air strips. They were largely responsible for establishing the presence of both SOE and the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) in Yugoslavia, and the supplies they brought into the area made an important contribution to the Partisan insurgency against Axis forces of occupation there. In short, Yugoslavia provides a perfect case study for an analysis of the higher direction of SD air operations.

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

Yet the official records demonstrate that the Partisans had barely received any supplies from the Allies by October 1943, and that they obtained only a trickle before April 1944, by which time they were already well established as by far the stronger of the two resistance movements. Recent research on British clandestine operations in Croatia is particularly illuminating in this regard. The Partisan force in

Croatia was the largest in Yugoslavia. It controlled a considerable tract of territory which was strategically important to the Allies by virtue of its proximity to both Italy and Austria. And yet it is clear that the volume of airborne supplies reaching the Croatian Partisans was miniscule until the spring of 1944. Before that, in periods of good weather, they might have hoped to receive one aircraft load per week – a negligible volume of stores in relation to the many thousands of guerrillas in the region. In November and December 1943 they received nothing at all.⁴

This obvious contradiction becomes more interesting still if the documented aspirations of the British government and of both SOE and SIS are considered. For example, Churchill's official biographer has shown that from the early months of 1943 he attached the very highest priority to increasing the quantity of supplies reaching the Yugoslav Partisans.⁵ And yet the evidence from Croatia suggests that almost a year passed before his hopes were fulfilled on a significant scale. How can this delay be explained? Why did it prove so difficult to supply by air one of Europe's largest resistance forces until the final year of the Second World War in Europe? The aim here is to address this question, and to show how and why the more serious obstacles to airborne supply in Yugoslavia were finally overcome. The story sheds some interesting light on the enduring characteristics of air operations in support of covert organisations, as well as on the more general subject of military air transport.

* * *

Yugoslavia became an important focus for British special operations and intelligence gathering during the first year of the Second World War.⁶ But no detailed plans were formulated for clandestine operations there in the event of an Axis occupation. By the time German and Italian forces invaded Yugoslavia in April 1941 SOE and SIS had set up new headquarters in Cairo which were soon made responsible for running agents into enemy territory in south-eastern Europe. But any hopes of re-establishing a presence in Yugoslavia were confronted by two fundamental problems, first a chronic shortage of reliable intelligence about conditions inside the country, and second the impracticality of conveying agents or supplies to the northern Mediterranean. The presence of a resistance movement

– the Serb Chetniks – was not confirmed until the end of 1941, so the question of supplies only began to arise thereafter.⁷ Clearly, the Adriatic was far too close to Italy for seaborne supply to be a safe proposition. The only alternative was the air.

Unfortunately SOE and SIS soon found that the Royal Air Force was very poorly placed to assist them. There is no evidence in the British archives to indicate that the RAF undertook any significant planning or preparation for SD operations in the years immediately preceding the outbreak of the Second World War.⁸ A few officers with an expertise in SD from the First World War were still serving (or were recalled) in 1939. The most influential was Air Commodore Lionel Payne, who effectively acted as senior liaison officer between the RAF and SIS between 1941 and 1945.⁹ But the RAF otherwise developed no doctrinal, training or equipment infrastructure to support SD in the rearmament years. This was not entirely unreasonable, of course, for SOE, which created a very much larger demand for air transport than SIS, was only formed in 1940 as a direct result of Germany's occupation of Europe – an eventuality that could not reasonably have been foreseen in the late 1930s.

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

The RAF had very few transport aircraft at the beginning of the Second World War. The need to combine combat and lift capabilities in parts of the empire had spawned so-called bomber-transport aircraft in the 1930s with limited carrying capacity, but there were no dedicated transport aircraft. The slow growth of commercial aviation in inter-war Britain was partly to blame. The two best-known military transport aircraft of the period, the C-47 Dakota and the Junkers Ju 52,

both originated in civil aircraft designs.¹¹ But it should be born in mind that neither of these aircraft could have assisted with the provision of airborne supplies from Egypt or North Africa to Yugoslavia, for they lacked sufficient range when heavily laden. Hence, even the gradual emergence of a dedicated RAF transport fleet in 1941, largely equipped with Dakotas, did not solve the problem of supplying the Yugoslav resistance.

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

In 1942 the large-scale production of new four-engined bombers like the Lancaster and Halifax at last offered Bomber Command the enhanced capability it needed to expand the strategic offensive against Germany. But a range of commitments – Coastal Command, the Middle East, operations against French docks and harbours – continued to limit the number of aircraft available for strategic bombing.¹⁴ Understandably then, the Command did not take kindly to proposals that its all-important heavy bombers should be made available for SD.¹⁵ The RAF and the clandestine organisations found themselves in direct competition for the same equipment. The RAF consistently opposed the diversion of aircraft to SD on the grounds that Bomber Command's operational capability would be impaired, while SOE maintained that they could not fulfil their directives from the Chiefs of Staff (COS) unless the necessary transport aircraft were made available.¹⁶ It should be noted at this stage, however, that SOE's founding directive envisaged only a fairly limited role for them and insisted that their plans should be kept in step with the general strategic conduct of the war. In other words, while irregular warfare had a vital role to play, SOE's activities should ultimately

complement, and certainly not impede, the broader prosecution of hostilities. Moreover the directive was largely concerned with limited-scale sabotage and subversion operations of a type likely to make far more restricted demands on air transport than the supply of guerrilla armies.¹⁷

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

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

The RAF's inability to respond is graphically illustrated by one particular fiasco involving early SIS proposals to mount air operations from Malta and Egypt. In September 1941 SIS advised the Minister of State in Cairo of their interest in mounting clandestine air drops into the Balkans from Malta, and in 'dropping or parachuting personnel, stores and pamphlets . . . from Egypt to Greece, Crete, [*and*] Yugoslavia'; they also envisaged 'landing or collecting agents and stores off enemy coasts' employing flying boats or seaplanes. They were hoping to base two aircraft in Malta and two in Egypt for these purposes.²² In the absence of suitable British seaplanes or of land-based aircraft, the RAF rather improbably assigned four Heinkel 115 seaplanes (formerly the property of the Royal Norwegian Air Force) to Malta for SIS operations. The first was lost on only its second

flight, while the second was destroyed at its moorings during an air raid in February 1942 without flying a single sortie, and neither the third nor the fourth ever reached Malta.²³ Four converted Whitley bombers positioned in Malta to supply the Yugoslav resistance suffered a similar fate.²⁴

By the beginning of 1942 the first British field officers to reach Yugoslavia (who were infiltrated by sea) had joined the Chetniks. This was important, because airborne supplies could not commence until Allied liaison officers were located in the field. Field officers were required to identify and prepare drop zones and landing grounds, to organise reception committees, to relay resistance requirements to headquarters, and to manage the distribution of stores. Their presence encouraged SOE to develop more ambitious plans for supporting the Chetniks, which were reinforced by a plea for assistance from the Yugoslav government-in-exile, then located in London.²⁵ The Air Staff recognised the importance of providing at least some assistance to the Chetniks. As the Air Ministry's Deputy Director of Plans remarked, 'Surely this is a golden opportunity to help ourselves and our Allies, to worry the Hun, and to give encouragement to other small nations now under German domination.'²⁶ Soon afterwards, too, the COS issued a new and more expansive directive to SOE which specifically tasked them with 'organising and co-ordinating the action of patriots in the occupied countries', although insisting that they should 'avoid premature large scale risings of patriots.'²⁷

Yet the precise role of the Yugoslav insurgency within Allied strategy was not defined, and the scope for supplying the Chetniks in any case remained very limited. The Air Staff eventually decided to form an SD Flight of four Consolidated B-24 Liberators within 108 Squadron (based in the Nile Delta), known as X Flight. X Flight would afterwards shoulder virtually the entire burden of the SOE and SIS infiltration and supply programmes to Yugoslavia and other Mediterranean countries until the spring of 1943. Enemy air defences were not particularly effective in the Yugoslav theatre; only eighteen SD aircraft were lost there throughout the war.²⁸ But SD missions had still to be conducted at night, and were only flown nightly in moonlit conditions. Their success was dependent on highly accurate navigation – by map-reading and dead reckoning – and good visibility; many operations were aborted because aircraft failed to locate their

reception committees, or because of adverse weather, particularly between October 1942 and March 1943, and serviceability also became an increasing problem. The aircrew of X Flight discharged their duties with extraordinary courage, determination and skill; they deserve a history of their own. But they could only provide the most limited and ineffectual support to the Chetniks.²⁹ Any hopes of enlarging the SD Liberator force were frustrated by the burgeoning global demand for the aircraft – from the USAAF, from Coastal Command (Liberators played a crucial role in the Battle of the Atlantic), and from the RAF Commands in both the Middle East and Far East, which required them for conventional bombing operations.³⁰ Nor was it possible to supplement or replace the Liberators with British-built Halifax bombers for many months, as a number of serious teething troubles with the aircraft had to be resolved before it could be considered for overseas service.³¹ The Lancasters were of course all required for Bomber Command. Not until October could the Air Ministry offer to provide six converted Halifaxes to augment the Liberator flight, but their arrival was delayed until February 1943, and their first operational sorties were only flown in March.³²

The volume of supplies reaching the Chetniks remained small, then. But it is far from certain that a more ambitious supply programme would have furthered the Allied cause significantly during 1942. Indeed, the winter of 1942 produced a crisis in British policy towards Yugoslavia and a serious split within SOE, as doubts emerged in their Middle East section concerning Mihailovic's commitment to fighting the Axis. By January 1943 there was mounting evidence that his forces were not engaged in very active resistance, and there were even indications that they were collaborating with the Italians. Large numbers of enemy troops were being held in the region, but the principal source of resistance was the Partisan movement in north-western Yugoslavia, which was not as yet in contact with the Allies, and which consequently had received no supplies at all.³³ There was no question at this stage of abandoning Mihailovic completely; much of the SOE hierarchy continued to favour the Chetniks over the Partisans, and it was in any case the declared policy of the British government to support him. But there was an obvious case for backing the Partisans too. So SOE began tabling demands for still more aircraft, arguing that an increase in supplies would enable Mihailovic

to contemplate more overt resistance, and give much needed assistance to Tito's followers. Their Middle East staff were able to present proposals to this effect directly to Churchill when he visited Cairo in January 1943.³⁴

The changing Allied perception of Yugoslavia's resistance groups did not in itself lead directly to a decision to enlarge the air supply programme. Of greater importance were broader developments in the Mediterranean and beyond, which created a more tangible strategic rationale for Allied intervention in Yugoslavia. By the beginning of 1943 the desert war was moving west, the conclusion of the North African campaign was in sight, and the Allies were devising new strategies for opening a second front in mainland Europe. Following the Casablanca conference in January 1943, plans were drawn up for the invasion of Italy through Sicily (Operation HUSKY). The implications of Operation HUSKY for British policy towards Yugoslavia were indeed profound. At the grand strategic level, Stalin was infuriated to learn that there would be no Anglo-US landings in France in 1943. Hence, for reasons of alliance cohesion, Churchill now looked to encourage resistance activity in south-east Europe in the hope of drawing Axis forces away from the eastern front.³⁵ At the same time it seemed likely that the Allies' progress in Italy could be materially assisted by the presence of a large, capable and active resistance movement in adjacent areas. Thus, as a direct result of the decision to launch HUSKY, the north-western Yugoslav territories of Croatia and Slovenia assumed a new significance in Allied thinking. Both bordered Italy, while Slovenia additionally shared a common frontier with Austria. The region was also vital to Axis communications across south-eastern Europe.³⁶

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

In February 1943 the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir

Charles Portal, agreed to provide an additional four Halifaxes, bringing the total SD fleet in the Middle East to fourteen aircraft – a single squadron now identified as No 148 Sqn.³⁹ The reports recently received on the Partisans clearly influenced this decision; presumably the Air Staff expected that by providing four more Halifaxes, which were capable of reaching Greece and south-eastern Yugoslavia, they would give SOE more scope for using the Liberators – which boasted superior endurance – over the Partisan territories further north. Yet the situation was soon made more complicated by a further COS directive to SOE, tasking them to encourage resistance activity further east, particularly in Greece, to bolster Allied deception operations designed to divert German attention away from Sicily and Italy.⁴⁰ Reviewing the situation in Yugoslavia, the COS in the meantime upheld the existing Allied strategy of supporting Mihailovic, and although they decided to send agents to make contact with the Partisans, a decision on whether to despatch supplies to Tito was deferred until they had reported.⁴¹ This came as music to the ears of those senior SOE staff who were determined to maintain Allied backing for the Chetniks. In April they duly presented a further request for aircraft to the COS, claiming that the Chetniks controlled around 100,000 troops, a number which ‘could be increased to 250,000 if arms, equipment and British staff officers could be delivered in sufficient quantities . . . SOE’s inability as yet to supply the resistance groups in Serbian territory with a reasonable proportion of the arms and equipment they demand has so far prevented the establishment of a controlling Allied influence over General Mihailovic.’ Six of their ten Halifaxes were to be used to supply the Greek resistance, leaving the remaining four for Mihailovic. But the serviceability of the four ageing Liberators was now said to be so low that no significant airlift capacity was left for the Partisans.⁴²

The Air Staff hesitated once more. By this time they were clearly coming to suspect that the fulfilment of apparently limited SOE requirements was only serving to encourage demands for still more aircraft. They might also have been forgiven for questioning whether additional aircraft were really warranted, given the prevailing uncertainties over the internal situation in Yugoslavia, the contradictory signals being received from SOE, and the fact that, at that time, there were still no Allied officers with the Partisans. But the

Air Staff instead – no doubt wisely – chose not to immerse themselves in the intricacies of Yugoslav politics and clung to the broader argument that SOE requirements had to be balanced ‘against the strategical background of the bombing of Germany and the Anti U-Boat war.’ As the Director of Plans wrote, ‘they have reached a position which is, I consider, not unreasonable in relation to the strategic importance of the U-Boat war and the bomber effort.’⁴³ Hence the Air Staff continued to rely on the COS’s ultimate stipulation that SOE activities should support the broader thrust of Allied strategy; in other words they should not divert resources from conventional air operations.⁴⁴ By 1943 SOE clearly had stronger grounds for demanding air resources than they had possessed in the previous year. Yet the relative importance of their work, compared with more conventional military activity, was still not properly defined.

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

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

A further twelve Halifaxes were therefore made available to form a

second squadron – 624 Squadron – and a new Wing, numbered 334 Wing, was created to supervise SD work in the Mediterranean.⁴⁸ These additional aircraft were expected to enlarge the supply programme to Yugoslavia to an estimated 150 tons per month – an impressive feat, judged by earlier standards. But unfortunately those standards were now dramatically revised: the Prime Minister declared that the despatch of 500 tons per month was desirable by September 1943.⁴⁹ In response the Chief of the Air Staff agreed to provide four more Halifaxes, and offered to divert to the Middle East another ten that were due for delivery to SD squadrons in Britain. He made it plain, however, that he strongly opposed the reallocation of further aircraft from Bomber Command to SD. ‘Desirable as it may be to maintain and foster SOE activities’, Portal wrote, ‘we must bring the problem into focus with the whole strategic picture.’⁵⁰ It is notable that Churchill chose not to press SOE’s requirements over those of Bomber Command again at this stage.

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

After arriving at Tito’s headquarters in September, Maclean spent his first months in the field gathering information and preparing an infamous and decisive report recommending Allied support for the Partisans alone, and the abandonment of Mihailovic and the Chetniks. Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of Maclean’s analysis of the Yugoslav resistance (and it remains highly controversial to this day), his report must also be seen as an attempt to balance limited resources

and extensive commitments. Far from proposing that Tito should become the monopolistic beneficiary of an immense volume of airborne supplies, Maclean very sensibly sought to concentrate available air transport capacity on the resistance movement that seemed most likely to contribute to Allied strategic objectives – namely, the Partisans. Not only were they more numerous than the Chetniks, and more actively engaged in operations against German forces of occupation; they were also located in territories bordering Italy and the Third Reich itself. By contrast, the Chetniks were very largely confined to Serbia and Montenegro.⁵² To have continued supplying the Chetniks at this time would have involved the wasteful diversion of scarce resources to an organisation that was both poorly placed and disinclined to contribute much to the Allied cause.

Maclean's report reached Churchill in the second week of November at a time when the Prime Minister was again acutely unhappy about the air supply situation. Italy's capitulation in September left Yugoslavia's Dalmatian coast largely undefended and it was quickly occupied by the Partisans. To Churchill, who had long been advocating a forward Allied strategy in south-east Europe, it seemed that the initiation of a far more ambitious programme of support for the Partisan insurgency at this time could bring very significant dividends, but the opportunity passed and by December the Germans had overrun much of the coastal area. Churchill was simplistically blaming this disappointing reversal on the Allies' failure to keep Tito's armies supplied when Maclean's report, extolling the merits of an enlarged pro-Partisan strategy, landed on his desk.⁵³ It subsequently accompanied him to the SEXTANT conference in Cairo, with Roosevelt, which in turn laid the ground for the Teheran conference with both Roosevelt and Stalin.⁵⁴ The report was also considered by the COS in mid-November 1943, and Mihailovic received no further Allied supplies thereafter.⁵⁵ Most of the Allied liaison officers located with the Chetniks were withdrawn early in 1944.⁵⁶

* * *

In the ultimate expansion of the Allied air supply programme to Yugoslavia in 1944 it is possible to identify many of the themes that have recurred in this paper so far. The precise role of the Yugoslav

Partisan insurgency within Allied strategy was now more clearly defined than before. At the Teheran conference at the end of November 1943 it was agreed that all possible help should be given to Tito and his followers, the aim being to maintain pressure on Germany across Europe in the lead up to Operation OVERLORD, or in Churchill's words, 'to stretch the enemy to the utmost'.⁵⁷ Allied leaders envisaged increasing supplies of arms and equipment, clothing, medical stores, and food to the Partisans, and commanders were directed to furnish whatever air support was considered necessary to achieve this aim.⁵⁸

Yet the issue of prioritisation was still left open. SOE duly attempted to translate the Teheran objectives into specific air transport requirements, preparing a statement which showed that the thirty-two aircraft then available for all Balkan operations could deliver a maximum of 278 tons of supplies per month. By contrast, they asserted that the COS had tasked them to supply 680 tons per month. Thus, assuming these figures were correct, more than double the number of aircraft then available for SD operations in the Balkans was required. It transpired, however, that the target figures were of dubious validity: SOE were ultimately forced to admit that they had been 'calculated' from a recent COS directive, but the precise basis of their calculations is not recorded. Subsequently the Chief of the Air Staff yet again emphasised the detrimental effect which the proposed transfer of aircraft would have on Bomber Command, then in the most desperate phase of the so-called 'Battle of Berlin'. Although he promised a small increase in transport capacity, it fell far short of SOE's requirements.⁵⁹

Fortunately the pervasive obstacle of range – and hence SOE's problematic dependence on converted heavy bombers – was on the point of being eliminated once and for all. After the Allies landed in mainland Italy they secured air bases in the Brindisi area, from which dedicated transport aircraft and converted medium bombers could easily reach northern Yugoslavia fully laden.⁶⁰ The necessary transport aircraft were not immediately forthcoming. Beyond the established SD fleet in the Mediterranean, under the control of the C-in-C Middle East, the RAF managed to provide one Dakota squadron. A very much larger (American) air transport fleet was controlled by the Commander-in-Chief Allied Forces Headquarters in

the western Mediterranean, but this was at first unavailable for SD. The answer lay in the unification of Allied command in the Mediterranean under SACMED, which was also approved at the SEXTANT conference in November.⁶¹ Some sixty Dakotas from the American 62nd Troop Carrier Group were then made available for SD in the entire Balkan area, along with thirty-six Italian aircraft. The Dakotas introduced an entirely new dimension into air operations in support of the Yugoslav resistance, for they were the first Allied supply aircraft capable of landing in the field.⁶²

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

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

Poor weather and inadequate reception arrangements served to restrict airborne supplies to the Partisans to an average of just 84 tons per month in the first quarter of 1944.⁶⁵ But then the weather improved and more Allied personnel were sent into the field. A formal

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

Against this background, the second and third quarters of 1944 witnessed a spectacular rise in the volume of supplies reaching the Partisans: between 900 and 1,000 tons of stores per month were delivered throughout this period. There were mass drops and mass landings, which also provided the opportunity to evacuate vulnerable personnel – the wounded, women and children. During these six months nearly 13,000 people were brought out by air from Yugoslavia. So it was that air support to the Yugoslav resistance at last came to fulfil the most optimistic aspirations harboured by Churchill and the covert organisations since 1942.⁶⁸

* * *

This paper began by posing the question: why was it so difficult to supply the Yugoslav resistance movements by air? A few answers may now be suggested. On the outbreak of the Second World War the RAF was poorly prepared for SD operations, and more generally for air transport. But the scale of wartime SD requirements could not reasonably have been foreseen before 1940, nor could the demands of SOE or SIS in Yugoslavia have been met by a dedicated air transport force before Italy's capitulation in September 1943. Until then, only converted four-engined bombers could fulfil this task. Although their large-scale production coincided with the growing demand for SD aircraft for the Mediterranean in 1942, few could at first be diverted

from bombing operations. Indeed, no British-built heavy bomber was allocated to SD in the Mediterranean until October 1942 and no SD sorties were flown by British heavy bombers to Yugoslavia until March 1943. The aircraft available for SD were only gradually augmented thereafter. From the first positive identification of a Yugoslav resistance movement in 1941 through to the establishment of a virtual air bridge from Italy to Yugoslavia in 1944, there was a continuous struggle between the covert organisations – principally SOE – and the Air Staff over the allocation of these aircraft.

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

The fact is that until 1943 Yugoslavia simply did not assume a level of strategic importance to the Allies that might have justified the allocation of more heavy bombers to SD. Only the decision to invade Italy enhanced the importance of special operations in this theatre and resulted in the provision of more aircraft, after Churchill and other senior government ministers brought pressure to bear on the Air Staff. At the same time it focused Allied attention on the Partisans, who were by far the most important resistance force in Croatia and

Slovenia, close to the Italian frontier. But Allied strategic aspirations, notably those of Churchill, at first ran far ahead of practical possibilities. The numerous constraints already described in this paper prevented any very significant expansion of Allied supplies to the Partisans for almost a year. Throughout 1943 Tito's forces were very largely sustained by weapons and ammunition taken from surrendering Italian troops following Italy's capitulation, rather than by supplies received from the Western Allies.⁶⁹

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

Within military circles it is almost a truism to say that there is never enough air transport. This is partly because air transport resources are ultimately finite; but it is also because air transport has a way of generating its own demand. The RAF unquestionably began the Second World War with inadequate numbers of transport aircraft, but the transport fleet was steadily enlarged as hostilities progressed, and was by 1942 being augmented by the very much larger fleet of the USAAF. Yet there was never enough air transport: long before specific lift requirements had been fulfilled, new and more ambitious plans emerged, which required still more aircraft. Some of these plans were fully justified by the results achieved – for example, the use of airborne logistics to support Allied armies during the liberation of north-west Europe after June 1944, or to sustain Slim's Fourteenth Army in Burma from 1944 to 1945. Others – particularly large-scale airborne operations like MARKET-GARDEN and VARSITY – were arguably both extravagant and unnecessary. More than 2,000 aircraft

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

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

Otherwise, this story contains two basic messages for those with an interest in the provision of air support for special operations. First, the place of special operations within overall strategy must always be established and agreed at the very top level; no room should be left for doubt or dispute about the contribution they are required to make, relative to conventional military activity. This in turn should provide the basis for determining the apportionment of resources, air assets

included. In the Second World War the Allies' failure to specify the relationship between special operations and broader strategy until mid-1943 was primarily responsible for the friction that characterised SOE's earlier dealings with the Air Staff. Second, the experience of the Second World War demonstrated that special forces and other covert organisations must have at least some dedicated air transport facilities – thoroughly prepared in peacetime for use in war – and also suggested that these facilities are unlikely to be obtained on the cheap. To the RAF, with its doctrinal emphasis on centralised command, the entire concept of a dedicated SD fleet seemed to imply the undesirable division of resources into 'penny packets'. Air Chf Mshl Sir Arthur Harris himself referred to the SD squadrons as 'Mr Dalton's private air force'⁷² and Portal often questioned the wisdom of assigning aircraft permanently to SD on the basis that they spent much of their time parked around airfields awaiting the right moon periods or weather conditions, or the organisation of reception arrangements in enemy territory. 'What is in dispute', he wrote in April 1942, 'is whether we can afford to devote their overheads entirely to this special task and get no dividend during the three weeks in the month when they can do nothing.'⁷³ However, as we have seen, experiments in re-tasking aircraft during such periods proved unacceptable to SOE and SIS for quite legitimate operational reasons. The need to maintain at least some dedicated air assets for units like the SAS has since been accepted by the RAF, but still with the caveat that the assets concerned may, if necessary, be re-apportioned elsewhere.⁷⁴

Notes

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

² The literature on Allied special operations in Yugoslavia is far too extensive to list comprehensively here, but it can broadly be divided between autobiographies and academic studies. Autobiographies written by those involved stretch from Fitzroy Maclean, *Eastern Approaches* (Jonathan Cape, 1949) to F W D Deakin, *The Embattled Mountain* (Oxford University Press, 1971) and on to more recent personal accounts such as Franklin Lindsay, *Beacons in the Night: With OSS and Tito's Partisans in Wartime Yugoslavia* (Stanford University Press, 1993), and Peter Wilkinson, *Foreign Fields: The Story of an SOE Operative* (I B Taurus, 1997). From within the academic community research has advanced significantly since the release

of the first official British records on wartime Yugoslavia into the National Archives in the 1970s. Important recent contributions to the historiography are Simon Trew, *Britain, Mihailovic and the Chetniks, 1941-42* (Macmillan, 1998) and H Williams, *Parachutes, Patriots, and Partisans: The Special Operations Executive and Yugoslavia, 1941-1945* (Hurst & Company, 2003). On the more general history of SOE, see M R D Foot, *SOE in France* (HMSO, 1966) and *SOE in the Low Countries* (St Ermin's Press, 2001); and Charles Cruickshank, *SOE in the Far East* (Oxford University Press, 1983). Secret Intelligence Service activity in Yugoslavia is less well documented but has recently been analysed in detail in Sebastian Ritchie, *Our Man in Yugoslavia: The Story of a Secret Service Operative* (Frank Cass, 2004) and John Earle, *The Price of Patriotism: SOE and MI6 in the Italian-Slovene Borderlands During World War II* (The Book Guild, 2005). Many of these accounts provide useful insights into the importance of special duties air operations, but little detailed coverage of air supply or infiltration issues.

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

⁴ Ritchie, *Our Man in Yugoslavia*, pp76, 88.

⁵ Martin Gilbert, *Churchill Vol. VII, Road to Victory, 1941-1945* (Heinemann, 1986), p319.

⁶ Ritchie, *Our Man in Yugoslavia*, pp42-43.

⁷ FH Hinsley, EE Thomas, CFG Ransom and RC Knight, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, Vol. 3, Part 1 (HMSO, 1984), pp137-138.

⁸ AHB file II/17/7, *Special Duty Operations in Europe* (unpublished official narrative, 1946), p3. The first aircraft were set aside for SD work in the summer of 1940, when 419 Flight was formed at North Weald.

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

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

¹¹ Sir Maurice Dean, *The Royal Air Force and Two World Wars* (Cassell, 1979), p80.

¹² AHB file II/17/7, *Special Duty Operations in Europe*, pp10-11.

¹³ John Terraine, *The Right of the Line: The Royal Air Force in the European War, 1939-1945* (Sceptre, 1985), p266.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p470.

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

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

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

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

¹⁹ AHB file II/17/7, *Special Duty Operations in Europe*, pp15-16.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp6-7

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

- ²² TNA AIR 40/2605, ISLD to Minister of State, 28 September 1941.
- ²³ TNA AIR 40/2659, RAF Resources made available to SIS, 1939-1945.
- ²⁴ TNA Air 20/7962, HQ RAF Malta to Air Ministry, 4 January 1942; Plans 1 to D of Plans, 19 January 1942.
- ²⁵ TNA Air 20/7962, COS (42) 215, 13 April 1942.
- ²⁶ TNA Air 20/7962, DD Plans (O) to D of Plans, 3 February 1942.
- ²⁷ TNA Air 20/7954, COS (42) 133 (0), 12 May 1942.
- ²⁸ TNA Air 2/8336, History of Special Operations (Air) in the Mediterranean Theatre, p13.
- ²⁹ TNA Air 20/7975, annex to COS (43) 44, 11 February 1944. Between February 1942 and January 1943 just 25 supply sorties were mounted to Yugoslavia.
- ³⁰ TNA Air 20/7962, COS (42) 141st meeting, 6 May 1942; TNA Air 20/7975, annex to COS (43) 106 (0), 7 March 1943.
- ³¹ TNA Air 20/7962, ACAS(P) to ACAS(I), 26 April 1942.
- ³² AHB file II/17/7, Special Duty Operations in Europe, p14.
- ³³ TNA Air 20/7975, annex to COS (43) 44, 11 February 1944.
- ³⁴ TNA Air 20/7975, COS (43) 44, note by the Secretary, 11 February 1944, and accompanying annex.
- ³⁵ Williams, *Parachutes, Patriots, and Partisans*, pp117-118.
- ³⁶ Hinsley et al, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, Vol. 3, Pt 1, pp141-147; Gilbert, *Churchill VII*, pp318-319.
- ³⁷ TNA Air 20/7975, annex to COS (43) 44, 11 February 1944.
- ³⁸ TNA Air 20/7975, COS (43) 76 (0), letter and memorandum from the Foreign Office, 20 February 1943; Mideast to Air Ministry, 22 February 1943; COS (43) 44, note by the Secretary, 11 February 1943; COS (43) 94 (0), minute by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Economic Warfare, 22 February 1943.
- ³⁹ TNA Air 20/7975, COS (43) 82 (0), 25 February 1943, note by the Chief of the Air Staff; COS (43) 106 (0), Secretary of the COS to the Foreign Office, 7 March 1943.
- ⁴⁰ TNA CAB 80/68, COS (43) 142 (0), memorandum entitled 'The Balkans', 20 March 1943.
- ⁴¹ Hinsley et al, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, Vol. 3, Pt 1, pp143-144.
- ⁴² TNA Air 20/7954, SOE activities in 1943, appreciation by SOE, based on the directive issued to SOE by the Chiefs of Staff, 21 April 1943.
- ⁴³ TNA Air 20/7954, Appreciation on SOE Activities in 1943 by ACAS (P), 28 April 1943, prepared for COS (43) 98th meeting.
- ⁴⁴ AHB file II/17/7, Special Duty Operations in Europe, p17.
- ⁴⁵ Deakin, *The Embattled Mountain*, pp211-213.
- ⁴⁶ TNA Air 20/7975, COS (43) 336 (0), annex 1, Lord Selborne to Prime Minister, 18 June 1943; annex 2, memorandum by SOE entitled 'Situation in Yugoslavia', 18 June 1943.
- ⁴⁷ TNA Air 20/7975, Prime Minister to General Ismay, 22 June 1943.
- ⁴⁸ AHB file II/17/7, Special Duty Operations in Europe, p57; TNA Air 2/8336, History of Special Operations (Air) in the Mediterranean Theatre, p12.
- ⁴⁹ TNA Air 20/7975, COS (43) 135th meeting, minutes of a War Cabinet staff

conference, 23 June 1943.

⁵⁰ TNA Air 20/7976, CAS to S of S, 23 July 1943; note by the Chief of the Air Staff, 24 July 1943.

⁵¹ AHB file II/17/7, Special Duty Operations in Europe, Appendix I.3.

⁵² FO 371/37615, report by Maclean entitled 'The Partisan Movement in Yugoslavia', 6 November 1943.

⁵³ Gilbert, *Churchill VII*, pp557-558; 561-562.

⁵⁴ Williams, *Parachutes, Patriots, and Partisans*, p186.

⁵⁵ Hinsley et al, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, Vol. 3, Pt 1, p156.

⁵⁶ Williams, *Parachutes, Patriots, and Partisans*, pp204-209.

⁵⁷ Gilbert, *Churchill VII*, pp564-565, 571.

⁵⁸ AHB file II/17/7, Special Duty Operations in Europe, p62.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp79-82.

⁶⁰ TNA Air 2/8336, History of Special Operations (Air) in the Mediterranean Theatre, p5; TNA Air 20/7954, report by Air Commodore Payne, 13 October 1943.

⁶¹ AHB file II/17/7, Special Duty Operations in Europe, pp58-60.

⁶² TNA Air 2/8336, History of Special Operations (Air) in the Mediterranean Theatre, pp5, 11, 12.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p12.

⁶⁴ Ritchie, *Our Man in Yugoslavia*, pp78, 86.

⁶⁵ AHB file II/17/7, Special Duty Operations in Europe, Appendix I.3.

⁶⁶ TNA Air 2/8336, History of Special Operations (Air) in the Mediterranean Theatre, p 17.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p12; Hinsley et al, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, Vol. 3, Pt 1, p166.

⁶⁸ AHB file II/17/7, Special Duty Operations in Europe, Appendix I.3.

⁶⁹ Williams, *Parachutes, Patriots, and Partisans*, pp173-176.

⁷⁰ AD Harvey, *Arnhem* (Cassell, 2001), p37.

⁷¹ Lieutenant-Colonel TBH Otway, *The Second World War, 1939-1945, Army: Airborne Forces* (War Office, 1951), pp93-94.

⁷² TNA Air 20/7962, AOC-in-C Bomber Command to CAS, 28 March 1942. Hugh Dalton, as Minister of Economic Warfare, was at that time the Cabinet Minister responsible for SOE.

⁷³ TNA Air 20/7962, CAS to DCAS, 1 April 1942.

⁷⁴ See, for example, *Royal Air Force Operations*, Second Edition (Air Warfare Centre, 2000), chapter 6, section VIII, para 4.

**THE RAF IN COUNTER-INSURGENCY WARFARE:
BRITISH INTERVENTION IN GREECE, 1944-45**

**Sqn Ldr Alexander Zervoudakis and
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‘After a few days every time the British aircraft came around and flew low over the streets, the Elasitas started knocking at the doors and begged be let in. I heard them often enough shouting ‘Open the door madam, open the door... the aircraft the aircraft...’ They were terrified...’

Eyewitness living in Agamon Square area;
from a report in the newspaper *Kathimerini*

In the autumn of 1944, British forces became involved in what was ostensibly a peace enforcement and stabilisation operation in Greece, only to find themselves in the midst of a full-blown attempt by the Greek Communist Party to usurp power by force. By October, through a vicious civil war conducted whilst the Axis was occupying the country, it had managed to control most of the countryside. The communists’ ultimate objectives were the urban centres, especially Athens, in a bid to consolidate power and present the Allies and the Greek Government in Exile with a *fait accompli*. Britain was faced with the dilemma of allowing Greece to be controlled by the Communists, and the Greek Government to be defeated, or intervening to safeguard the Government and create the right

conditions for democratic governance and elections, as well as a free and fair referendum for deciding the question of the status of the Greek Royal House that had been poisoning Greek politics since 1914. At the time, only a small land force could be spared from the Italian campaign, and it became apparent very quickly that this was not sufficient. The British land force, amounting to two brigades, was surrounded in the centre of Athens, and air power was called upon, first to interdict Communist Lines of Communication, reinforce and re-supply the besieged troops, and then to provide Close Air Support. In today's parlance, the Royal Air Force proved to be remarkably 'agile, adaptable and capable'. It was highly responsive, extremely flexible, and did its job with minimal collateral damage, in what was a complex and ambiguous urban environment. British forces, generally, had a very steep learning curve throughout the campaign, but, in the end, what was achieved was a text book piece of joint counter-insurgency warfare and urban warfare in which air power proved to be the key enabler.

The origins of British involvement in what is generally considered to be the 'second round' of the Greek Civil War is a complex subject.¹ However, a brief outline of the main features of the period between 1941 and 1944 is required in order to understand how the Communists gained such a stranglehold over Greece and came so close to victory, and why Britain became involved.

After the end of the disastrous Greek campaign of 1941, Britain maintained a presence in Greece, in the form of SIS and SOE operatives. Greece was divided between German, Italian and Bulgarian areas of occupation. All Axis powers lived off the land and imposed a brutal occupation. Contrary to perceived wisdom, resistance in Greece started early. After the initial shock of defeat and occupation, by the fall of 1941 resistance movements had sprung up all over Greece. In areas occupied by Bulgaria this was almost immediate, as Bulgaria was a long standing foe with territorial objectives at the expense of Greece. In central-southern Greece intelligence gathering networks in support of the Allied effort existed in major town and ports as well as a fairly developed, but vulnerable, escape and evasion network. Armed resistance in the mountains developed slowly from the end of 1941. With the exception of non-communist resistance groups in eastern Macedonia and Thrace, where

the occupying power was Bulgaria, in the rest of Greece the main resistance movements were interested mainly in post-occupation and post-war Greece. Another interesting phenomenon was the fact that the main groups were anti-royalist, or at least republican, in political outlook. The SIS was active in Greece but it was the arrival of SOE that speeded up the development of the main resistance organisations.

Greece was important to British grand strategy and its future foreign policy for a number of reasons. Apart from the immediate wartime imperative, to keep German forces tied down in the eastern Mediterranean, there was also a longer term concern over Soviet domination of the Balkans and Greece. By the time that the first SOE missions were parachuted-in in late 1942, a number of different resistance movements were already in existence. The two that dominated the picture were the Republican EDES², and the Communist ELAS³. With hindsight, one of the biggest mistakes made by SOE, both in Greece and elsewhere, was to support Communist resistance movements. However, at the time, Britain was seduced into thinking that they would provide the most credible guerrilla forces. By the time that SOE had realised that ELAS was hard-line Communist, and had a longer term political agenda, it was too late.

ELAS and its political front, the EAM,⁴ were both controlled by the Greek Communist party, the KKE.⁵ Following a standard world-wide-practised communist tactic, the organisation had the appearance of a broad coalition of anti-fascist forces. EAM/ELAS appealed to nationalism for its recruiting but, as time went by and its true nature became obvious, recruitment became coercive with subtle but intense indoctrination. ELAS benefited from Allied air drops and was also able to move quickly to benefit from the Italian capitulation. By October 1944 ELAS had large formations, a military structure and an abundance of weapons that included mortars and mountain howitzers. The KKE's strategy was for the domination of the resistance movement. This was to be done by coercion and amalgamation of all other groups. Those that resisted were to be eliminated. The objective of this was for ELAS to be the only armed force at the moment of liberation. The force the KKE was building was not to be wasted in attacking the occupying forces. ELAS avoided clashing with the occupiers and often left the population at the mercy of Axis reprisals.

In pursuit of this strategy, the KKE initiated the Civil War in

March 1943, believing that the arrival of the Allies was imminent. In order to ensure that ELAS would be the only credible armed force, the KKE attempted to subvert the Free Hellenic Forces in North Africa and the Levant. The EAM/ELAS leadership was a mixture of hard-line communists with long experience of underground work. They were experts in political manipulation and traditional communist agitprop. They were also able to present a patriotic face and blame the collapse of Greece in 1941 on the King, the dictator Metaxas and the old political order.

The military leadership was a collection of self-taught guerrillas who were ruthless to the point of wholesale murder (like Aris Velouchiotis⁶) and a small number of republican officers, like Colonel Sarafis, who had experienced war as far back as 1922 and had distinguished themselves in coup and counter-coup plotting in the Greece of the inter-war period. Finally there were a few former junior officers who joined EAM/ELAS after the humiliation of 1941. The only truly military mind in ELAS was Col Makridis, a KKE member since the early 1920s, who was able to join the Greek Army and rise through the ranks, gaining substantial military experience on the way. ELAS' military expertise was minimal but sufficient for executing a ruthless civil war during the Occupation. What it lacked in professionalism it supplanted with ideological ruthlessness and a belief in its predetermined victory. These skills were not very useful when ELAS was called upon to attack and destroy Greek Army and Gendarmerie units and subsequently the British Armed Forces.

The other main Resistance group was EDES, led by the republican Zervas, who distinguished himself in the coups of the inter-war period. The difference was that Zervas was anti-communist. Another republican movement that sprang up in central Greece was EKKA,⁷ led by Lt Col Psarros. Both EDES and EKKA had a large number of Greek Army officers that had experienced the 1940-41 campaign and EDES, in particular, was keen to attack the Axis.

In the spring of 1943, during what is considered by many to be the 'first round' of the Greek Civil War, ELAS set about eliminating all other resistance movements in Greece and by mid-1944 only EDES remained in any numbers. There are a number of lessons to be drawn from this experience. It was felt that SOE operatives going into Greece, and other countries under occupation, did not need political

briefings before they deployed. The Foreign Office did not want the 'military types' to interfere with what they saw as their preserve. This turned out to be a very serious mistake. Any type of involvement in Greece was always going to be highly politicised, because that was just the nature of the beast. The SOE mission in Greece was able to ascertain EAM/ELAS's political agenda and the intelligence it gathered from 1942 onwards provided the British with, at least, some understanding of the Communist insurgency a few years later.⁸

In the first half of 1944, after the end of the first round of unrest that spread within the Greek Armed Forces in the Middle East, where certain units mutinied, the political establishment united in the face of EAM/ELAS's onslaught against non-communist resistance movements. The arrival of a Soviet advisory team in Greece to work, allegedly alongside the western Allies, alarmed the British and, as early as May 1944, Churchill advocated diverting 5,000 British troops from Italy in order to prevent a Communist takeover in Greece when the Germans eventually began to withdraw. Code-named Operation MANNA, this was referred to at the time as 'reinforced diplomacy', and was to be supported by three RAF squadrons and an RAF Regiment unit. The RAF's functions were to be: 'Air Defence of Athens, assistance to the Army in the field of law and order, disarming German forces, attacks on hostile shipping in the Aegean, and any German evacuations.'⁹

The Germans duly withdrew from Greece between August and November 1944, and, were only harassed by resistance teams led by OSS and SOE operatives. For ELAS, the moment had arrived for its next and final step to power. In early September 1944, as ELAS tried to take control of the Peloponnese, there was a wholesale massacre of innocent civilians in the north-west of the peninsula, in Pyrgos, which prompted the first landing of British troops. The massacre lasted for 48 hours, and there were very few male survivors. Accounts from British War Diaries are very graphic and very affecting; they refer to the Greek survivors kissing the boots of Special Boat Service (SBS) personnel and Royal Marines who secured the area.¹⁰

As the SBS and Marines proceeded towards Athens, they found that Greek hospitality slowed them down more than the Germans did. The Greek population had been terrorised and starved by both occupation forces and the Civil War for most of the previous three

years, but they gave everything they had. This was a civilian population existing right on the edge. Britain deployed two brigades (drawn from 2nd Parachute Regiment and 23rd Armoured Division) on 13 October 1944.¹¹ British troops, commanded by Lt Gen Ronald Scobie, found the Communists well entrenched in Athens. ELAS forces had secured most of the countryside, with EDES pushed to a small enclave in Epirus. In Macedonia, non-communist organisations had either gone underground or had been wiped-out. In Athens, before the arrival of the British, ELAS had fought a vicious war against non-communist groups, the Athens Police and the Gendarmerie. All of this was going on whilst the Germans withdrew north almost unhindered. Greeks were fighting Greeks in night-time assassinations in order to eliminate potential military and political rivals. In October 1944 the KKE's forces controlled 70% of Greece and had a strong presence in Athens. The population lived in fear of the final communist takeover as ELAS' secret police, the OPLA,¹² kept control. The arrival of the two British brigades, and subsequently of the Greek National Government and the Free Greek Forces, were seen as a double liberation.

As Allied forces drove the Germans north, their presence in the main cities permitted a start to be made on reconstruction and the provision of humanitarian aid. There was initially a widespread dilution of UK forces with the main concentration in Athens and smaller detachments in Salonika and Patras. The overall result was that the deployed forces were configured for, what we might call today, peacekeeping rather than for fighting an insurgency.

The national unity government that was formed was a mixture of pre-war politicians and EAM figures. The PM, George Papandreou, was a liberal, known to be anti-communist, who had witnessed at first hand the Civil War during the occupation. The most urgent security issue, and the one that was guaranteed to attract KKE opposition, was the disbandment of all armed bands (resistance movements) to which the KKE objected, unless the Greek Army and the Gendarmerie were disbanded as well – for the KKE neutralisation of the Free Greek Armed Forces was critical to its acquisition of power. Other vital elements were the elimination of EDES and taking over the cities. For this to be achieved all conflict with British forces was to be avoided. When the order to 'demobilise the armed bands' was signed on

2 December 1944, the KKE/EAM ministers promptly resigned, bringing down the government. At that point ELAS put its plan into action.

ELAS' plan for taking control of Athens, described as the third round of the Civil War, started with the withdrawal from the city of its HQ 1 Corps, which was done during the night of 3 December. Main ELAS units that had been brought south from central Greece started entering Athens. It also enforced a KKE-instigated general strike and called for a demonstration in the centre of Athens for 3 December. Concurrently other ELAS units moved into position in the rest of Greece and prepared for the final offensive against EDES. The demonstration, which had been banned, ended in tragedy as police and demonstrators exchanged fire killing a number of the demonstrators.

The communist attempt to take power in Athens may be broken down into five phases. The first was the outbreak of hostilities from November to 8 December 1944. The second was the build up and preparation of the British and Greek forces to resume the offensive between 8 and 17 December. The third phase involved limited offensives conducted between 17 and 28 December. The fourth was the final offensive from 28 December 1944 to 5 January 1945 with the fifth phase, the pursuit from 5 to 15 January.

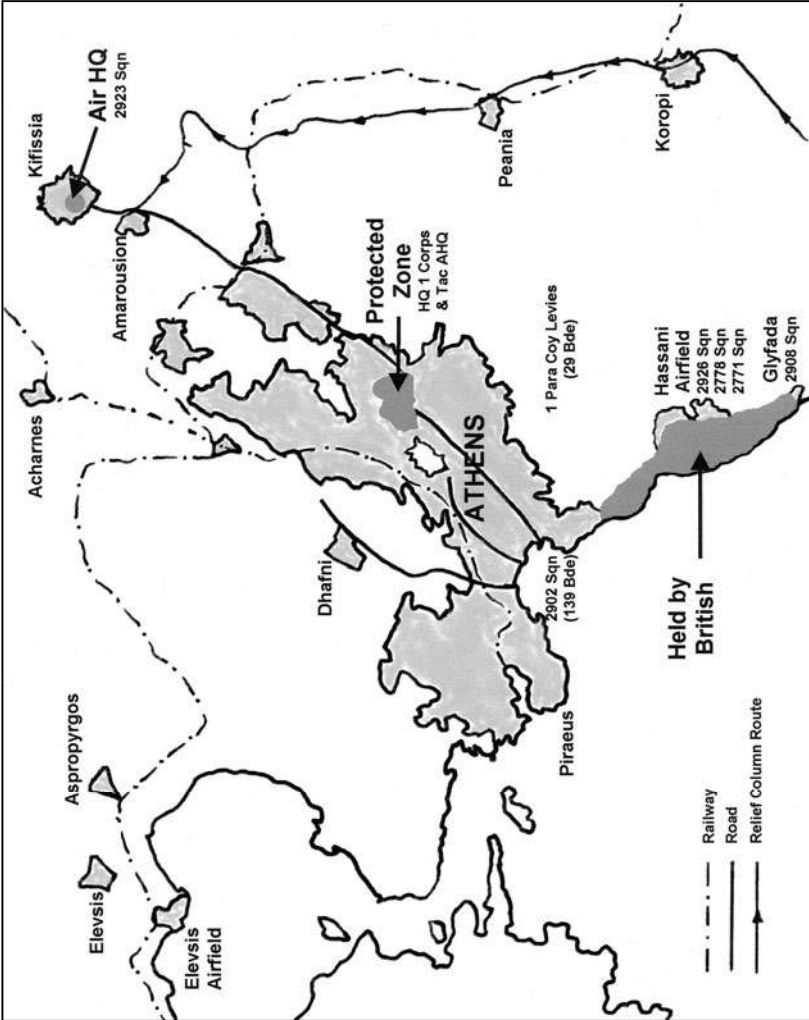
At the outset of hostilities ELAS had a force of about 22,000 with 15,000 in the Athens area. The British Empire and Allied troops comprised 23 Armoured Brigade, 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade, 139 Infantry Brigade, 5 Indian Infantry Brigade, 4 British Infantry Division and 3 Greek Mountain Brigade. The initial RAF presence in the Athens area comprised No 94 Sqn (12 × Spitfire Vc), No 108 Sqn (12 × Beaufighter VI), No 221 Sqn (12 × Wellington XIII) as well as the staff of AHQ Greece Communications Flight (Austers) and the RAF Regiment. These would later be joined by No 73 Sqn (Spitfire IX) and, from 15 December, No 40 Sqn SAAF (Spitfire V) and No 39 Sqn (rocket-armed Beaufighter Xs) plus additional RAF Regiment units, including the Paratroop Company of the RAF Iraq Levies.

On 3 December, there were militant demonstrations in Athens, and the police force had difficulty containing ELAS violence. Shots were fired during the main disturbance, and although it is still unclear as to who actually fired the first rounds, the Communists blamed the police

for the escalation in violence. The RAF Regiment stepped in and played a crucial role in containing the violence using armoured cars but, when a number of civilian protesters were killed, the signal was given by ELAS for a coup. The next day, General Scobie ordered ELAS to leave Athens and the surrounding countryside. But that night an ELAS force of over 5,000 personnel advanced on the city, taking over most police stations and other key government buildings. When dawn broke next morning, the average Athenian began to get a flavour of the Communists' ruthlessness. Naked bodies were found dumped on the side of the road, and most had been ritually mutilated (the cutting out of hearts was a common political statement). Faced with this situation, General Scobie had no alternative but to order British troops into action. The stated objectives were to drive all insurgents out of Athens, and to restore law and order.¹³

The 5th of December saw the first direct involvement of the RAF, reconnoitring and interdicting ELAS lines of communication in and out of Athens. Although ELAS had control of most of the countryside at this stage, they were extremely vulnerable to air attack, and their ability to move was, therefore, largely confined to the hours of darkness. They were also very short of motorised transport, so only their most important logistics travelled by this means, while general stores and food were transported by horse or mule, and sometimes by ELAS fighters themselves. There was a conscious effort by the RAF to interdict ELAS lines of communication out to a distance of 70 miles in order to isolate the battlefield, and make the insurgency 'wither on the vine'. This was feasible because the Royal Navy had a number of vessels, including HMS *Ajax*, exercising sea control and the RAF was also performing anti-shipping operations in the eastern Mediterranean. As a consequence, ELAS vessels had difficulty circumventing the blockade.

Long range aerial reconnaissance was carried out at least once a day from 5 December, with a particular focus on the approaches to Athens from the north and from the Peloponnese, and a picture of ELAS supply routes and supply dumps soon became apparent. This was relatively straightforward in the case of motorised and horse-drawn transport, because the road infrastructure was limited to a handful of main arterial routes feeding into Athens. The same can be said of the Greek rail network, which was limited to one principal



The Athens area circa 8 December, showing the disposition of RAF Regt units; there were additional pockets of British troops at other locations throughout the city.

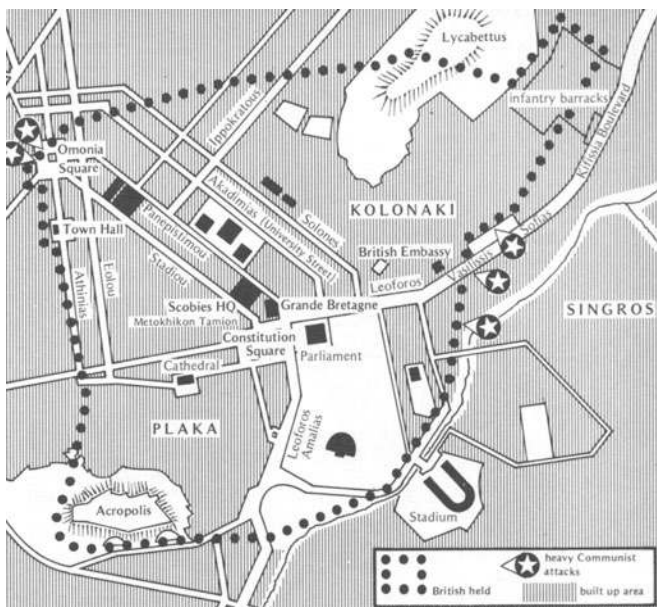
north-south rail line and, because very little rolling stock remained by 1944, most having been plundered by the German occupation forces, movement by rail was comparatively rare.¹⁴

By 6 December, not only had the Communists secured the countryside around Athens, but British forces found themselves surrounded by what were described as 'very thorough and determined' ELAS forces in the centre of Athens, inside, in effect, a protected zone which measured 2 miles by 1.5 miles.¹⁵ The only means of re-supply was via tank and armoured car convoys back and forth along a single roadway to Hassani airfield, 5 miles to the south-east (Hassani subsequently became Athens Airport). This road was subjected to mortar and artillery fire, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and captured German mines laid under the cover of darkness.

By 11 December the besieged British and friendly forces had less than three days' supply of ammunition left. It was increasingly obvious that an alternative had to be found and the RAF was called upon to mount a major re-supply and airdrop operation, beginning on 12 December. This permitted troops to secure and hold the ground around Athens, especially the crucial lines of communication to the sea at Phaleron Bay. At this stage, ELAS forces were in complete control of the main port of Piraeus, so any friendly shipping had to offload over the adjacent beaches at Phaleron.

The successful airdrop over a seventeen day period increased troop numbers by 2,719 personnel, provided 831 tons of ammunition, and 291 tons of stores. This allowed the first offensive action from inside Athens, which was supported by an increased air presence. The number of squadrons was increased from three to eight (now including two additional Spitfire units, and two Beaufighter squadrons, one of which was armed with rockets).

This reinforcement enabled friendly land forces to take the initiative in a number of zones in the centre of the city and, perhaps most crucially for the long-term success of the campaign, the air re-supply operation also brought in much needed food supplies. British forces were compelled to feed the local civilians who were caught inside the 'protected zone', and after the insurgents cut off electricity and water supplies to the centre of the city, the plight of these civilians became very serious, especially as the winter of 1944 was particularly harsh. The provision of soup kitchens throughout the city centre



The Protected Zone.

proved to be a major ‘hearts and minds’ coup for the British forces, and the RAF, in particular, came to be identified with this humanitarian relief. The RAF was referred to, generically, as the ‘winged saviour’, and this positive view of the air force was reinforced as the campaign developed, because the RAF was also seen increasingly to be providing day-to-day security.

These two factors, in tandem, did much to turn local opinion against the Communist insurgency, and consolidated the average Athenian’s view of the British presence, namely, that British forces were there to support the legitimate Greek government and to preserve democracy. It is an important early example of air power’s ability to have a positive influence; it is usually assumed that only ‘boots on the ground’ can achieve ‘hearts and minds’ successes.¹⁶

However, the military situation was still finely balanced, and between 18 and 20 December, ELAS attempted a counter-offensive. Although this was beaten back in most quarters, the significance of the Communist action was that the AHQ, which was located in the north-



Beaufighters heading north over Constitution Square on VE Day. The large building is the Parliament; to the left of the square is the Hotel Grande Bretagne, the Officers Mess during the battle of Athens; the building at bottom left housed the Joint HQ. AHB(RAF)

eastern suburb of Athens called Kifissia, was overrun by ELAS.¹⁷

This appeared to spell disaster for the British effort. However, in the longer term, it sowed the seeds of success. The capture of the AHQ compelled a complete conceptual rethinking of air support in the campaign. A temporary AHQ was initially located near the coast, but then a combined Advanced and Rear AHQ was collocated inside the principal British HQ within the ‘protected zone’, and this took over the burden of air planning and tasking. This new AHQ was connected to the main airfield five miles to the south-east via secure VHF radio. A Joint Air/Land planning team began to think about the urban context in three dimensions. Air Liaison Officers got inside the heads of their Land opposite numbers, and *vice versa*. Together, they developed a Joint Plan for clearing the centre of Athens. It was a ‘hot house’ environment in the Joint HQ, largely the result of its besieged



The Hotel Cecil (AHQ Greece) after its capture by ELAS forces. The Hotel defences had consisted of a rudimentary barbed wire perimeter plus a Bofors gun at the main gate (off the picture at the bottom) and three 20mm cannon. (From Prisoners of ELAS, Ed G Cathorne and the Padre, Nov 1947)

kinetic effects of persistent air power over the city were also investigated.¹⁸

This work was done against a backdrop of overriding concern for the safety of Greek civilians and the potential for ‘blue-on-blue’ incidents. Until mid-December, the conflict was largely guerrilla in nature, with hand-to-hand fighting being the norm, very often in close proximity to civilians, and the fluidity of the battlespace precluded most Close Air Support. However, from this point onwards, ELAS forces coalesced within reasonably well defined areas of the city, and the firepower advantages of air power could be brought to bear. Nevertheless, the boundary between ELAS fighters and innocent civilians was typically measured in terms of the boundary between one house and another and, therefore, the RAF crews had extremely rigorous Rules of Engagement. They were not permitted to attack buildings unless there was absolute certainty that they contained insurgents, and targets had to be verified by friendly troops on the ground. Physical damage was to be kept to a bare minimum, and so high explosive ordnance, especially bombs, was used sparingly. If bombs had to be used, approval had first to be sought from General

setting, but the planning product proved just how much could be achieved by staffs under pressure.

Whereas the RAF had been largely reactive to Army requests for assistance up to this point, the Air Force Liaison Officers were increasingly at the forefront of discussions over the ‘art of the possible’, given the air support on offer. In fact, the best work on effect was performed by the RAF from the third week of December onwards. Not only were the subtleties of kinetic effect thought through, but the non-

Scobie, who was extremely sensitive to Communist accusations of indiscriminate aerial attack.

In most cases, 25lb armour piercing rockets and cannon were used in preference to bombs or high explosive 60lb rockets (which also proved more difficult to aim). Aircrews also found that in areas which required attention to detail, cannon and machine gun fire were preferable to rockets or bombs. Aircrews increasingly showed a preference for getting in 'close and personal', using visual confirmation of targets, in order to ensure hits. It is important to emphasise here that this was by no means a low threat operating environment. The insurgents made good use of former German and Italian AAA, which they positioned on the tops of buildings, and they also used snipers. In response, Spitfires and Beaufighters adopted oblique attack angles and flew at roof top height. Although no aircraft were lost to AAA or sniper fire, direct hits were scored on aircraft, and AAA fire was often reported to be very accurate.¹⁹

The period from 17 December to 1 January saw a major offensive by British forces to clear ELAS from the centre of Athens and secure the port at Piraeus. The offensive was characterised by HUMINT-led²⁰ close air support, the third new major role for the RAF. Local knowledge was used to pin-point insurgent positions. This was crucial because, just like any classic insurgency, many ELAS fighters were wearing civilian clothing. This was particularly the case with those insurgents recruited locally in Athens, who formed part of the Auxiliary ELAS. Meanwhile, other ELAS wore battledress which was difficult to differentiate from British khaki uniforms, so there was a premium on specific guidance from the ground, either from British forces, so as to avoid 'blue-on-blue', or from the local Athenians. Only the local Greeks could differentiate between insurgents and innocent civilians, and such intelligence was almost 100% reliable.

By December, most Greeks were sickened by the extent of Communist atrocities, and were only too happy to help British forces. Conservative estimates from the period suggest that upwards of 10,000 Athenians had been killed by the Communists in the space of three months. The massacres were the result of a deliberate campaign of eliminating the 'class enemy'.

It was OPLA and Auxiliary ELAS units that arrested, interrogated and then murdered men, women and children and then covered up the



A mass grave of victims of the EAM/ELAS' arrests, probably photographed in January when the bodies were being exhumed for identification. Having witnessed the evidence represented by the graves, and heard the blunt and outspoken views of the troops, a pro-Communist TUC delegation, in Greece to investigate the actions of British forces, changed its mind and subsequently provided robust support for the actions taken by the British government in Greece. The mass killings by the EAM/ELAS/KKE during the insurrection in December 1944 and January 1945 remains a politically charged, and to a certain extent taboo, issue in Greece today.

atrocities in mass graves. Most died directly at the hands of ELAS. Later in the campaign, other Greeks were kidnapped and used as human shields and hostages. The retreating ELAS treated its captives, who were regarded as the 'class enemy', in the most appalling manner in what amounted to 'death marches' across Greece. Most captives were never to be seen again. Precise and timely guidance from the ground, via locals, was also crucial in the urban environment because it was difficult for the aircrews to differentiate between buildings.

This is where the RAF's performance was particularly impressive. Aircrews performing urban CAS had no prior experience in this role, but were able to achieve great precision and timely effect, with very little collateral damage. Aircraft held in a 'cab rank' above the city could respond within three minutes of a call from British troops on the ground via radio links. Some squadrons were performing upwards of twenty-five sorties per day, which meant that some crews were flying at least twice a day and sometimes more. Some crews, especially in the Beaufighter squadrons, were

flying almost continually throughout the daylight hours because of the aircraft's endurance. Rest periods were a rarity during December and the first week of January.

The assault on some Communist positions was relentless because of the persistence of the air power on offer. Some buildings, such as the main KKE HQ and various ELAS HQs, were subjected to round-the-clock attacks by air and ground forces acting in concert. Although aircrews reported hits and damage done to these and other buildings, it became increasingly difficult to assess the exact contribution made by aircraft, as air effect tended to be erased as time went on because of the damage done by tank and artillery fire. However, it is known that a persistent air attack on an ELAS HQ on 17 December resulted in forty insurgents being killed and another forty being seriously injured due to the blast and fragmentation effect of rockets penetrating the outer walls of the building. Thereafter, the armour-piercing rocket projectile became the weapon of choice when insurgent strongholds had to be attacked, because it was seen as an effective weapon but one which minimised collateral damage.²¹

By late December, the insurgents had found to their cost the extent to which the RAF could provide persistent air power. One of the most remarkable innovations was the use of Leigh Light-equipped Wellingtons to provide illumination for operations at night, in concert with troops on the ground. The Leigh Light was used more commonly in Coastal Command for hunting submarines at night, but crews on the Wellington squadron deployed to Athens thought through the problem of night illumination over the city. Flares had been used, but failed to provide the consistency of illumination required. ELAS insurgents came to realise that they could not operate by day or night without interference, and the constant harassment, especially from the air, led to psychological pressure on the insurgents.

Like most insurgents, ELAS preferred to operate under the cover of darkness, but relentless attacks by day and night denied them any respite. ELAS fighters taken prisoner and captured documentation confirmed that the Communists' morale took a steep dive in the last week of December. Whereas morale had generally been high in most sectors in the middle of the month, with some fighting in Piraeus being described as 'fanatical, to German proportions', morale among locally-recruited insurgents fell away sharply. These were Auxiliary

ELAS, and their lack of training and general experience began to show. The same sources also confirmed that the Communist hierarchy was also extremely concerned about recruitment and their ability to sustain operations. Logistics were intermittent by the end of December, thanks in large part, to the ongoing air interdiction, but the chief concern was the casualty rate among the insurgents.

Although precise figures for ELAS losses are not known, an estimate made at the time by the British HQ was that the insurgents were losing ten people to every one British casualty. At the time, 212 British personnel were listed as killed, including two RAF men, with forty-two officers and 415 other ranks missing. One post-war estimate suggests that final British casualties amounted to 237 killed, and 2,100 wounded, so it is reasonable to suppose that ELAS lost in the region of 2,500-3,000 killed during the December-January fighting, out of a total force of 35,000. ELAS had an estimated 11,000 casualties in total, and 13,278 were taken prisoner (although the latter figure was felt to be inflated by civilian suspects who may not actually have been involved with ELAS).²²

Persistent air power over Athens also had the benefit of picking up vital pattern-of-behaviour intelligence. Like almost all other Communist insurgencies, ELAS lapsed into routines, and what was of particular benefit to British Military Intelligence was the fact that the Communists also recorded their activity, tactical and operational objectives and lessons learned on paper. Captured documentation was, thus, used to corroborate what aerial reconnaissance had established. These two sources of intelligence were then merged with HUMINT. This was 'All Source' intelligence analysis at its finest, and, by the end of December 1944, British forces often had an hour by hour understanding of insurgent movements, and, most importantly, could predict the insurgents' next moves. Standing reconnaissance by Spitfires and Beaufighters over the centre of Athens was considered to be 'invaluable' in building up a real-time picture of the battlespace and was, therefore, regarded by the British HQ as the most important source of intelligence. It was noted that aerial reconnaissance could obtain information on any part of the battle area within two to five minutes, and that the almost continuous reporting done by civilians could be confirmed immediately. Although civilian reports were almost always well intentioned, they were sometimes inaccurate and

often late, so aerial reconnaissance proved to be an important means of economising on Army effort. The Army was also of the opinion that aerial reconnaissance, by maintaining a continuous watch for enemy guns and mortars, kept insurgent activity to a minimum, and aircraft such as the Beaufighter, which could stay on station for a number of hours if required, was a particularly valuable asset in this respect.²³

The persistence of this air reconnaissance over Athens had another important impact. The insurgents came to associate reconnaissance aircraft with kinetic effect, as the two effects of reconnaissance and attack were usually close in space and time. This was increasingly the case during December, as reconnaissance aircraft were often armed, and performed their own attacks. Unless insurgent groups were particularly conversant with aircraft types and their potential weapon loads, they could never be absolutely certain whether an aircraft overhead was purely benign or not. Therefore, by the end of the month, *any* type of aircraft tended to have a coercive impact.²⁴

By the last week of December 1944, the levels of precision attack achieved by aircrews were such that insurgents would often flee from buildings, abandoning their weapons, if they knew that an aircraft was in the vicinity. Local civilians reported that ELAS fighters would run down a street, banging on doors, begging for shelter until the danger of aircraft attack had passed. A week later, 'shows of force' by aircraft were, on many occasions, sufficient to compel insurgents to give up without a fight.

A number of important observations may be made here. First, 'shows of force' worked because the insurgents came to understand the kinetic air power effect which could be brought to bear against them. Second, the way in which 'shows of force' ultimately had the same effect as physical attack (causing insurgents to disperse or give up) meant that the British forces could reduce the amount of destructive effect as the campaign progressed. The identification and subsequent exploitation of these factors was an important development, because it reinforced General Scobie's stated policy – that British forces had intervened to preserve democracy, and to provide security and humanitarian relief for the local populace. Scobie repeatedly emphasised the importance of the British forces keeping their word, and stressing that they were in Athens to deal with the

insurgency and that every care would be taken to minimise collateral damage.

During the last week of December, the main fighting was occurring in the port area, Piraeus, and around the northern approaches to Athens city centre. Some of this fighting was still characterised by fanatical defence of positions. On 24 December, for example, three Spitfires were compelled to make thirty attacks on a building in the Lykabettus area of the city before they could dislodge the insurgents. In the port area, because insurgent positions were by then well defined, British forces were able to apply 'Joint Fires'. For the first time, on 21 December, Spitfires were used to perform gun-ranging for HMS *Ajax*, which was called upon to shell insurgent strongholds. Mopping up attacks were then performed by the same aircraft. In other air attacks, rocket-armed Beaufighters hit insurgent positions in close proximity to friendly forces, which allowed the army to capitalise on the shock effect of the air attacks by immediately following up with tank or artillery fire. Both air and ground reports testified to the 'high degree' of precision achieved by aircraft in these attacks on strongpoints, and how the morale of British troops increased as a result. The boost in morale came about, in large part, because this was the first time that British land forces had held the initiative and been able to establish an offensive tempo. Important observations were made, especially about the psychological benefit of aerial attack for the morale of one's own land forces.²⁵

The limited offensive operations which became feasible during the last days of 1944 produced important results. A large part of south-west Athens had been cleared of insurgents, and the retaking of the port area was within sight. 'All Source' intelligence analysis was also showing that some insurgent units were retreating from the city, and that ELAS was trying to decide whether to make a final stand in Athens, in the hope of forcing a decision, or to withdraw into the surrounding countryside. General Scobie's staff believed that the latter course of action was the most probable, and this proved to be a correct judgement. HUMINT- and IMINT-derived* reports showed that most of ELAS began to withdraw to the outskirts of Athens between 26 and 27 December. Armed with this intelligence, General Scobie decided to

* IMINT – Imagery Intelligence (ie at the time, a photograph). Ed.



Scottish Independent Para Brigade troops clearing houses behind Koumoundourou Square. Intersections, like this one, were often mined and covered by ELAS snipers.

increase the tempo of operations, with the aim of clearing the south-east of Athens. The British push began on the night of 27/28 December, driving eastwards from the centre of the city. In the district of Kaisariani, referred to by the Communists as 'Little Stalingrad' and where they resolved to fight to the death, ELAS suffered heavy casualties, and scattered units retreated into the hills.²⁶

By 31 December, combined British and Greek forces (including the Hellenic 3rd Mountain Brigade and other Greek security forces) had established a continuous front in the northern suburbs of Athens and down to the sea. Pockets of determined resistance remained in areas such as Piraeus, but, in general, the insurgents had been forced out into the open. Whereas the insurgents' tactics in the urban setting had previously denied the full application of air power, artillery and tank support, direct firepower could now be increasingly brought to bear. General Scobie's stated aim now was to 'establish law and order and protect the population against further incursions by ELAS.'²⁷ It was emphasised that all operations had to be governed by the necessity of 'giving full protection and good feeding to any portion of the population as soon as it was liberated'. This was another highly successful 'hearts and minds' initiative which was sustained for several weeks.

However, because of the limitations imposed by the numbers of troops available, it later became apparent that it was difficult to maintain offensive operations while simultaneously undertaking humanitarian relief. General Scobie estimated that he would need another one-and-a-half divisions to be able to discharge both functions, and he called for the establishment of a Greek National



*Not dealt with at any length in this paper, but air transport was another significant role undertaken in Greece, not least the support of the RAF personnel who had been captured when the Air HQ at Kifissia was obliged to surrender (see pp144-146). Here a Halifax of No 148 Sqn is dropping supplies to a column of RAF prisoners being forced to march towards Thessaly in January 1945. (Picture from *Prisoners of ELAS* edited by G Cathorne and the Padre, Nov 1947)*

Guard. This is when the force multiplier effects of air power became apparent again. The tempo of operations could be sustained through the use of aircraft, and during the first week of January, Spitfires and Beaufighters were used for armed reconnaissance and attacks on ELAS motorised transport and troop concentrations. Conservative estimates done at the time suggest that 118 motor vehicles were destroyed in these attacks, and ELAS forces were compelled to move on foot. Meanwhile, Wellingtons, which had been employed for night illumination over the city, were now tasked with leaflet dropping, both to reassure the local populace that the insurgents were in retreat and to put psychological pressure on ELAS forces. By 5 January, the insurgency was broken, and ELAS withdrew wholesale into the hills north and west of Athens.

As the most bitter fighting occurred in and around Athens, the fact that the ELAS uprising was widespread throughout Greece is often overlooked. ELAS forces had either captured, or threatened to capture, a number of other urban centres, including Patras and Salonika. After

it was deemed safe, some land forces were diverted from Athens to these other centres. Aircraft continued to support these land forces by flying armed reconnaissance sorties and providing cover for armoured units. Most aircraft were connected to the land forces via VHF radio, and aircrews provided valuable advanced warning of ELAS ambushes and dispositions. By 12 January, British land forces were still engaging with ELAS units as far south as the Peloponnese and as far north as Lamia. However, the fighting fell off rapidly during successive days, and on 15 January, a general ceasefire was declared. Under the terms of a truce signed at Varkiza, ELAS was to withdraw completely from Attica, the northern part of the Peloponnese and for 30 miles beyond Salonika. There was to be an exchange of prisoners, and ELAS was to hand in all its weaponry and disband. Meanwhile, Britain agreed to maintain a garrison force in Greece, sufficient to guarantee law and order, until such time as the Greek National Army, the Royal Greek Air Force and the Gendarmerie could be brought up to strength.²⁸

The Army's verdict on air support, and the RAF in general, was effusive. General Scobie wrote to the AOC in theatre, Air Cdre Tuttle, in the following terms:

'The rebels in Attica have now been completely routed. The success the Army has achieved in these operations is due very largely to the magnificent work of all branches of the RAF, work which has perhaps been more vital to the Army than in most other operations our two Services have undertaken together.

When the rebellion broke out, III Corps was not only very weak in troops but had hardly any ammunition with which to fight, since it had come to Greece almost on a peace footing. Without the continuous support given from the air, our troops would have had difficulty in holding out until reinforcements arrived. It was air transport which saved a dangerous situation in the first few days by bringing in an Infantry Brigade, ammunition and other much needed stores . . .

Will you convey to all ranks under your command the thanks of myself and my troops. Our thanks are due not only to those who fought in the air but also to the RAF Regiment, to the

ground staffs of whom so few had to do so much and to many others . . . The RAF have certainly helped the Army on a greater scale in other operations, but the help they have given here has never been bettered.²⁹

The success of air power in this counter-insurgency campaign is best encapsulated by the RAF's latest motif: 'agile, adaptable and capable'. The air force was able to adapt quickly to operational imperatives, by switching from its original role (supporting the Army in 'law and order') to a variety of roles, some of which were performed simultaneously: Air interdiction, aerial reconnaissance, air transport and urban close air support. The latter was a completely new experience for most of the aircrews, especially as they were required to perform urban CAS in accordance with unique Rules of Engagement and concerns over collateral damage. The rapid change from one role to another attests to the capability, resolve and courage of the aircrews concerned. But perhaps the most impressive facet of this campaign was the new thinking which underpinned these operations. The experience was unique, and required innovative tactics and processes. Many important lessons were learned, lessons which the RAF (and USAF) feel that they have 'discovered' in recent operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.³⁰ The most significant lessons were these:

- a. Air power is the key enabler and force multiplier in counter-insurgency warfare because of its flexibility, speed of response and ability to deliver weapons with precision.
- b. Air mobility provided by air transport is key to defeating an insurgency because of its ability to position manpower where it is required, in a timely fashion.
- c. Success in counter-insurgency warfare, especially in the complex and ambiguous urban environment, is dependent on reliable and timely intelligence. An insurgency must be defeated in detail, and so there is a requirement for intelligence of a sufficient granularity which allows for an understanding of networks and unit strengths. In contrast to some other counter-insurgency experiences, especially that of the Americans in Vietnam, the British HQ staff understood the importance of ORBAT analysis,

even when dealing with ‘guerrilla forces’.

d. Air power can have a decisive impact through non-kinetic as well as kinetic means. Although some demonstration of kinetic effect was required at first, it was appreciated that ‘shows of force’ could be used as the campaign developed. This permitted an important reduction in the number of weapons employed and, therefore, destructive effect, which it was realised always looks disproportionate in the urban setting.

e. Because of concerns over collateral damage, it was felt important to use weapons which had sufficient, but not excessive, destructive force. Machine guns, cannon and armour-piercing rockets were favoured over bombs and other explosive ordnance.

f. The provision of humanitarian relief, coupled with day-to-day security, was identified as an important ‘hearts and minds’ factor in counter-insurgency warfare. The Greek example demonstrates that air power can have a potent impact in this context, which runs contrary to the currently accepted wisdom that only ‘boots on the ground’ can have such influence.

g. Persistent air power over the battlespace had a number of benefits, including suppressing insurgent activity, providing imagery intelligence, including picking up insurgent patterns of behaviour, and raising the morale of friendly forces.

h. Measurement of effect must be thought through extremely carefully. In this campaign, success was ultimately measured by the ability of local Greeks to go about their daily business without fear of being killed or captured by insurgent forces. Although attrition inflicted on ELAS forces was used as a numerical yardstick of campaign success, and was identified as an important measurement, General Scobie placed most emphasis on the local population’s freedom from fear and want, combined with consent of the Greek government and wider population.

i. The shortage of Land forces in this campaign demanded the use of different strategies to compensate for the shortfall, and the Air instrument was able to deliver many of the results normally associated with Land forces. Therefore, it can be argued that air

power can often be used as a substitute for land power, and the use of air power early in a campaign may radically reduce the requirement for land forces in some scenarios.

j. The campaign fulcrum (and the turning of the tide in favour of the British led effort) was the creation of the Joint HQ, and collocation of Air and Land planning staffs.

The British involvement in Greece had been a success. One of the many delegations sent to Greece by Churchill concluded that had British forces not intervened, there would have been a 'wholesale massacre in Athens'.³¹ However, some writers believe that this victory was only a 'victory of a sort' because the Communists were not finished off and they made a third bid for power between 1946 and 1949.³² But what such criticism overlooks is the fact that, had there been no British intervention in December 1944, Athens would have fallen to the KKE at that time. It would then have been very difficult and, politically, probably impossible, for Britain to have intervened after the event.

The British experience of 1944-45 provided some of the doctrinal foundations for the new Greek armed services and allowed them to develop their own operational solutions to the challenges that lay ahead.³³ Credit for the British success must also be given to a number of key personalities. Both the Supreme Allied Commander, Mediterranean, Field Marshal Alexander, and the GOC in Athens, General Scobie, made some important judgements on the nature of the conflict at an early point.³⁴ But, in particular, General Scobie's insistence on protecting the local populace while dealing decisively with the hard-line insurgents proved to be a text book piece of counter-insurgency warfare. Few commanders since have managed to balance so well the classic conundrum of 'hearts and minds' activity having to sit alongside kinetic effect. His was the original '3 Block War'.³⁵ His commander's intent was always clearly articulated, simply because he was very concerned about getting this balance absolutely right.

However, Scobie found himself overwhelmed, with inadequate staff to take the offensive whilst at the same time dealing with the political and strategic side of the campaign. Lt General Hawkesworth was appointed GOC X Corps, given a battle-experienced staff and

given charge of the operations in the Athens area under Scobie's overall command. This division of labour allowed for a comprehensive approach, both political and military, to be applied in Greece, and in Athens in particular.

Finally, the British effort had the benefit of clear political direction and support throughout the campaign. Churchill had taken a robust stance from as early as May 1944, warning of a Communist takeover and calling for the diversion of forces from Italy when the Germans began to withdraw from Greece. When General Scobie asked for reinforcements, Churchill met those requests, and when the truce was signed between British forces and ELAS in January 1945, Churchill provided guarantees to Greece in the form of a garrison until such time as the Hellenic government felt that the newly created Greek armed forces and gendarmerie could meet any subsequent Communist challenge.

Clear political direction and support throughout a campaign are vital for victory in any conflict, and where they have been lacking in counter-insurgency scenarios of the past, failure has invariably followed. This was certainly true in the war in French Indochina and in the American period in Vietnam. In wars of choice, as many counter-insurgency scenarios have been for the West, clear political direction and support become even more important. In the absence of that clear direction and support, crafting the appropriate strategy, or strategies, becomes difficult, and the military instrument can become overly focused on operational and tactical level campaign success. In Greece, during 1944-45, the political objective was very clear, and the military instrument crafted the appropriate strategy to achieve that objective, and that strategy was clearly articulated to all of General Scobie's subordinate commanders, including the AOC, Air Cdre Tuttle. In many respects, this campaign has a very modern feel, because a variety of instruments were used to achieve the objective and, most importantly, all of these instruments worked together according to a unified strategic plan.

Notes:

¹ The best accounts remain E C W Myers, *A Greek Entanglement* (London, Cassell, 1955); Nigel Clive, *A Greek Experience, 1943-1948* (Wilton, Michael Russell, 1985); N Hammond, *Venture into Greece* (London, 1983); Bickham Sweet-Escott, *Baker*

Street Irregular (London, Methuen, 1965); C M Woodhouse, *Struggle for Greece, 1941-1949* (Hurst and Company, London, 1976); *Something Ventured* (London, Grenada, 1982); *Apple of Discord: a Survey of Recent Greek Politics in their International Setting* (London, Hutchinson, 1948). See also: Christina Goulter-Zervoudakis, 'The Politicisation of Intelligence: the British Experience in Greece, 1941-1944' in Martin Alexander (ed) *Knowing Your Friends: Intelligence Inside Alliances and Coalitions from 1914 to the Cold War* (Frank Cass, London, 1998), pp165-194.

² EDES (*Ethnikos Demokratikos Ellinikos Syndesmos*, or National Republican Greek League).

³ ELAS (*Ethnikos Laikos Apeleftherotikos Stratos*, or National Popular Liberation Army).

⁴ EAM (*Ethnikon Apeleftherotikon Metopon*, or National Liberation Front).

⁵ KKE (*Kommounistikó Kómma Elládas*, or Greek Communist Party).

⁶ Aris Velouchiotis – real name Athanassios Klaras (1906-1945). Born near Lamia and a trained agriculturalist, joins the Communist Party in the 1920s. Served in a disciplinary unit at Kalpaki in 1925. First arrested in 1930, he spent the next six years in and out of prison and internal exile. In 1939, most probably under Party direction, signs a 'declaration' renouncing communism. In 1940-41, he reorganised the KOA (*Kommunistiki Organosi Athinas* – the KKE's Athens section.) and in 1942 became a *Kapetanios* of ELAS in Central Greece. Once a guerrilla leader, Aris started with ruthless efficiency to dominate the guerrilla forces. Groups that did not accept amalgamation in ELAS were destroyed and once in the ranks of ELAS there was no way back. Put simply, you were in or dead. He had no problem in generating and pursuing civil war and his cruelty, as well as that of his immediate forces, was legendary. The atrocities committed either under his direction or by his troops helped not only to polarise the countryside but sent some into the hands of the Germans who were more than happy to supply weapons for auxiliary forces that would free German units for other duties and, in particular, their withdrawal from Greece. Responsible for the destruction of EDES in Epirus in December 1944, he had helped achieve almost total domination of most of central and north-western Greece by ELAS/KKE. By the time of the Varkiza Agreement, he was feared by non-communists, but was also a difficult man for the Party Leadership to manage. He allegedly disagreed with the Party line and in February 1945 crossed into Albania. He returned to Greece clandestinely in May 1945 and was hunted down by the Greek Army and Gendarmerie in the mountains of central Greece. Condemned and excluded from the Party for adventurism in June 1945. He is finally killed by the Greek Army on 16 June 1945. Since his death and, in particular after, 1974 Aris has, in the eyes and memories of many in the KKE and the wider Left, been 'rehabilitated'. His actions, crimes and excesses have faded away; instead the image of a harsh but heroic revolutionary is painted with a fair amount of mythology. He was a charismatic leader whose cruelty and blind party loyalty helped to create the nightmarish climate of fear and hatred that saw the so-called 'white' backlash in 1945-46 and, in certain parts of Greece, became the chief recruiting sergeant for the German armed 'auxiliary' forces.

⁷ EKKA (*Ethniki Kai Koinoniki Apeleftherosis*, or National and Social Liberation).

⁸ Myers, *op cit*; Clive, *op cit*; Woodhouse, *Apple of Discord*; Goulter-Zervoudakis, *op cit*.

⁹ Air Historical Branch (RAF), RAF Narrative, *The RAF in the Maritime War*, Vol VII, Part 2, Mediterranean, 1944-45, p769.

¹⁰ TNA WO 204/1985. Message from Mideast to Freedom, 11 Sept 1944; Baerentzen, L (ed) *British Reports on Greece, 1943-44* (Copenhagen Museum Tusculanum, 1982), p140 (Report by Wallace to Leeper, 31 July 1944).

¹¹ *The RAF in the Maritime War*, pp767-778; War Office, British Historical Section, Central Mediterranean, *Operations of British Troops in the Insurrection in Greece, December 1944-January 1945* (hereafter *Operations of British Troops*), pp2-3.

¹² OPLA (*Organosi Prostatias Laikoy Agona*, or Organisation for the Protection of the People's Struggle; the acronym also means 'weapons').

¹³ *Operations of British Troops*, pp6-8.

¹⁴ *The RAF in the Maritime War*, pp831-832.

¹⁵ This has a direct parallel with the 'Green Zone' in Baghdad, where friendly coalition forces were compelled to establish in 2003 a secure zone around the principal government buildings. Similarly, the means of re-supply down a single roadway between the centre of Athens and the airfield at Hassani has direct equivalence to 'Route Irish' between the Baghdad Green Zone and the international airport.

¹⁶ *The RAF in the Maritime War*, pp780-806. See also: *Operations of British Troops*, Appendix A-7, Message from 3 Corps HQ, 8 Dec 1944, p2.

¹⁷ The AHQ was located in Kifissia because this was adjacent to the principal Greek Air Force base at Tatoi. The Germans had also used it as its air HQ during the occupation, and most of the infrastructure left behind was still serviceable. This location would not have created any difficulties had the Greek involvement been one of peace enforcement and stabilisation, as had originally been envisaged.

¹⁸ *The RAF in the Maritime War*, pp 788, 791-832.

¹⁹ War Office, British Historical Section, Central Mediterranean, *Operations of British Troops*, Appendix A-18, 'HQ LF and ML (Greece): Directive No.3, dd. 19 Dec 1944'; *The RAF in the Maritime War*, p837. The insurgents used concentrated Light and Medium calibre AAA, and German MG42s.

²⁰ HUMINT (Human Intelligence), intelligence derived from operatives or local populace.

²¹ *The RAF in the Maritime War*, pp791-793, 824-843. See also Foreign Office, *Documents Regarding the Situation in Greece, January 1945* (London, HMSO, 1945), 'Greece No.1, 1945'.

²² *Operations of British Troops*, p52. See also: Appendix A-20, 'Future Operations to Clear Athens and Piraeus', 25 Dec 1944; Appendix C, p83; Smith, E. *Victory of a Sort: the British in Greece, 1941-46* (London, Robert Hale, 1988), p213.

²³ *Operations of British Troops*, Appendix A-20, 'Future Operations to Clear Athens and Piraeus', 25 Dec 1944. See also *The RAF in the Maritime War*, p831.

²⁴ *The RAF in the Maritime War*, pp830-846.

²⁵ *The RAF in the Maritime War*, pp837-840.

²⁶ *Ibid*, pp844-845; *Operations of British Troops*, Appendix A-20, 'Future Operations

to Clear Athens', 25 December 44. See also pp45-46.

²⁷ *Operations of British Troops*, Appendix A-20, 'Future Operations to Clear Athens', dd. 25 December 44. See also: pp49-50, and *The RAF in the Maritime War*, pp852-853.

²⁸ *The RAF in the Maritime War*, pp863-868.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p868.

³⁰ The unclassified nature of this article precludes reference to most of the current 'lessons' documentation. Although the latest USAF *Irregular Warfare* doctrine is not as comprehensive as anticipated, some sections incorporate findings from the American 'lessons identified' process, with particular reference to operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. USAF Air Force Doctrine Document 2-3, *Irregular Warfare*, 1 August 2007.

³¹ Quoted in Smith, E. *Victory of a Sort: the British Involvement in Greece, 1941-46*, p220.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ For the best discussion of British influence in Greek doctrinal development, see Tim Jones, 'The British Army, and Counter-Guerrilla Warfare in Greece, 1945-49', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol 8, No 1 (Spring 1997), pp88-106. See also: M Campbell, E Downs and L Schuetta, *The Employment of Airpower in the Greek Guerrilla War, 1947-1949* (Concepts Division, Aerospace Studies Institute, Air University, Maxwell AFB, 1964), pp62-63; TNA AIR 46/62. 'Report on Anti-Bandit Operations', 15 May 1947; TNA WO 202/951. 'Report 38, Period 21 Nov 1948-20 Feb 1949'.

³⁴ Air Historical Branch (RAF), *Report by the Supreme Allied Commander Mediterranean to the Combined Chiefs of Staff: Greece, 1944-1945* (London, HMSO, 1949), p10.

³⁵ General Charles Krulak, former Commandant US Marine Corps, articulated a notion of '3 Block War', whereby friendly forces would be faced with high end warfighting and 'hearts and minds' activity, and everything else in between, all within the space of three urban blocks.



Two ionic images – the Acropolis and a Beaufighter.

RAF REGIMENT NORTH MEDITERRANEAN OPERATIONS 1943-1945

Air Cdre M S Witherow



Commissioned into the RAF Regiment in 1956, Mickey Witherow's service included stints in Aden, the Gulf, Libya, Belize, Northern Ireland and Germany. He commanded No 26 Sqn, No 3 Wg, the Regiment Depot at Catterick and in 1963 he was the first Regiment officer to attend the RCDS; staff appointments included stints at both Ramstein and Rheindahlen, and as Director of Personnel (Ground) and Director RAF Regiment. After leaving the RAF in 1990 he joined Coutts Consulting Group, retiring as its Director of Information Technology in 2001.

Introduction

In creating the RAF Regiment in February 1942 the RAF invented a revolutionary concept in support of air operations; one which, in a major war, could only be developed in action. If North Africa was a test-bed, then just seventeen months into the Regiment's existence, the North Mediterranean might be seen as advanced flight-testing. For example, light AA squadrons (as opposed to flights) had emerged only in May 1943 and the first Wing HQ was formed on Sicily, both developments born of operational necessity. The RAF learned the hard way, with its fledgling Corps in at the deep end.

The Invasion Of Sicily – Operation HUSKY

Operation HUSKY, the invasion of Sicily in July 1943, included twenty-three RAF Regiment squadrons, both light anti-aircraft (armed with single-barrelled 20 mm [*mostly Hispano*] cannon) and field (or heavy infantry) units the 'heavy' element being armoured cars, 6-pounder anti-tank guns and 3-inch mortars. Two such AA units landed on Sicily at first light on 10 July, other units following over the next few days, although some AA units lost their primary armament to enemy action at sea, delaying their deployment.

Until May 1943, RAF Regiment AA had consisted of *ad hoc* AA Flights attached to individual flying squadrons operating in North

Africa's mostly unobstructed desert spaces. Whilst operational efficiency greatly improved when squadrons were formed, new and unforeseen problems arose in Sicily, where the enemy exploited rugged terrain screening, denying the guns reaction time. Moreover, because 20 mm ammunition came in a non-self-destructing HE/ball mix, falling shot presented a hazard to our own forces, especially on airfields. For example, shot from Lentini (East) destroyed and/or damaged several Spitfires on the ground at nearby Lentini (West). Blanket restrictions were therefore imposed, emasculating the squadrons and resulting in casualties to the gun crews, especially at Catania and Lentini, where sixteen Regiment gunners were killed and thirteen wounded as enemy attackers realised certain lines of approach were tabooed to AA defences.

Consequently, new engagement procedures were urgently devised whilst the need for effective command of grouped, but autonomous, squadrons resulted in the creation of the first Wing HQ and an organic local warning system. Eventually there were eight wings in theatre and AA 'blue-on-blue' incidents dropped markedly.

The components of the RAF Regiment force had been drawn variously from the UK, North Africa and the Middle East and this give rise to a number of problems. For instance: Sicily was malarial, but UK-sourced units had no anti-malarial prophylaxis; the Regiment's radios were too few and incompatible between the three different sourcing theatres whilst unit armament and equipment scales, and even manpower establishments, were not standardised RAF-wide.

Fighting In The Front Line

Mainland Italy was invaded on 3 September (Operation BAYTOWN), the day Italy capitulated. Twelve RAF Regiment units (three field and nine AA) landed over the next three weeks. They advanced immediately to Taranto and Bari, defended several airfields on the Foggia plain and steadily advanced with the RAF. Meanwhile, No 2906 Field Squadron landed at Salerno, protecting an Intelligence group capturing enemy equipment whilst under fire. The squadron then captured Capua airfield before crossing Italy to the Foggia plain, whereafter it was assigned to lay ground/air markers ahead of the FLOT to prevent air to ground blue-on-blue incidents in the main battle-line. By the end of 1943, thirteen AA and seven field squadrons



RAF Regt 3-inch mortars in action – Monte Cassino.

were in Italy, with others on Corsica, Sardinia and Sicily.

However, the Anzio landings in January 1944 strained Allied resources. The USAAF asked for and received an RAF Regiment field squadron to protect their forward technical Intelligence teams. The squadron landed with the American assault, later entering Rome with the US Army vanguard; becoming some of the first British troops into the city.

At the British Army's request, two field squadrons were then sent to 2nd (NZ) and 4th (BR) Divs respectively, for the battle of Cassino in April/May 1944. Whilst at first sight two independent company-equivalents, in Command-level terms, may seem insignificant in a divisional Order of Battle, these squadrons were (and to this day remain) substantially more powerful than a normal infantry company. Because they are equally deployable, independently or together, they have to be self-contained for fire-support, transport and communications. Thus they were twice as large as an army company and had substantially more firepower than two full companies. In



A 40mm Bofors on the Foggia plain in 1943.

September 1944, another squadron was attached to the Life Guards, later transferring to Skinner's Horse (Indian Army), for forward patrolling jointly with the Lovat Scouts. This squadron was delighted to be asked by the derring-do Lovat Scouts 'to be less dashing in your activity, as you are causing the enemy to move reinforcements to the area.'!

When the Gothic Line was first breached, the squadron joined the 27th Lancers in an assault-crossing of the River Uniti and the capture of Ravenna, before bolstering the Canadian line between two Canadian cavalry regiments on the right flank. They were later relieved in the line by 2788 (Field) Sqn from Cassino. To this point, members of No 2788 Sqn had already won an MC, five MMs and nine MiDs, plus a United States Bronze Star.

Then, in September, No 2744 Sqn was tasked to lay ground/air markers for our aircraft supporting the continuing Gothic Line battle, whilst the squadron's armoured cars provided, for the first time, the FACs for Allied Air Forces. Two of the squadron's officers, one seriously wounded in the process, won MCs and a corporal an MM.

The Dodecanese Islands – Operation ACCOLADE

The Dodecanese campaign, Operation ACCOLADE, originated as an *alternative* to Italy. Under the original plan, some 20,000 fighting troops, with commensurate naval and air resources, were to take the islands of Rhodes, Scarpanto, Leros and Cos. Of these, only Rhodes had good air and port facilities. Cos had a basic airfield, a fortified port and three crude airstrips. However, despite the invasion of Italy now being under way, Churchill still insisted on a parallel, but much reduced, all-British ACCOLADE for strategic and political reasons which Roosevelt would not support.

On 9 September, Major the Earl Jellicoe, was parachuted onto Rhodes by night to negotiate the island's surrender but the 8,000 Germans there interned the 33,000-strong Italian garrison and Jellicoe only narrowly escaped. Next day, the plan was approved, with Samos added but Rhodes and Scarpanto (also with a German garrison) dropped. On 13 September Jellicoe, commanding a Parachute Commando force, landed on Cos unopposed. The Italians surrendered and landings began on 14 September on all three islands. Fewer than 6,000 officers and men of all three Services landed. Jellicoe's men departed.

Cos, thirty miles long and about five wide, was unique because of its airfield at Antimachia. The RAF therefore landed only on Cos, where No 74 Sqn RAF and No 7 Sqn SAAF (both Spitfires) and RAF Dakota ground crew were the air element. Their personal weapons were revolvers and Sten guns. The nearest RAF airfield was 400 miles away on Cyprus. However, the fortified Italian port on Cos was found to be dilapidated and the coastal guns were completely unserviceable.

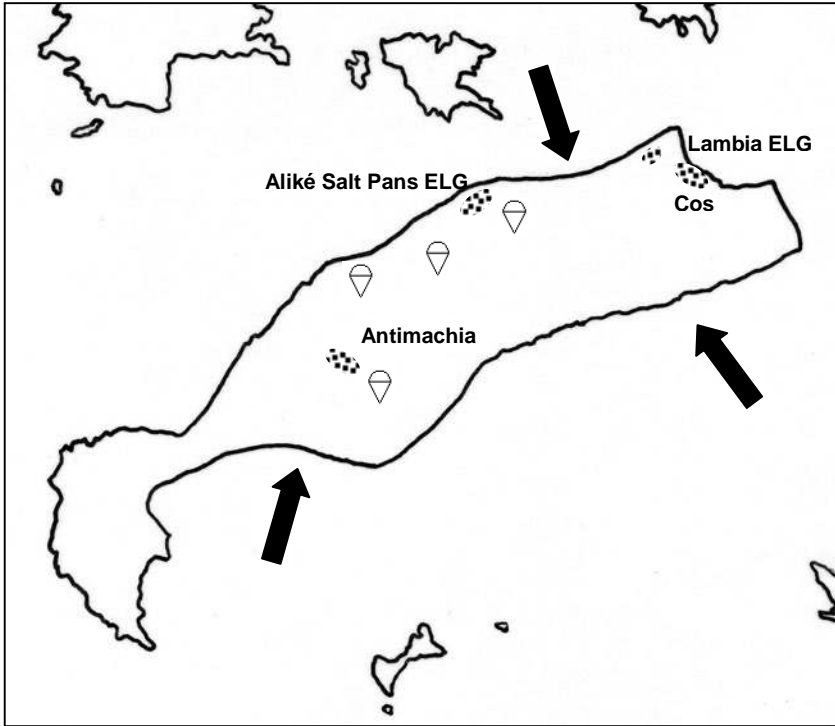
Two incomplete RAF Regiment units (Nos 2909 (LAA) and 2901 (Field) Sqns) landed on Cos, although detachments from No 2924 Sqn provided shipboard AA protection for small supply vessels to Cos from Castelrosso, eighty miles south-east of Rhodes.

The main Cos infantry force was a battalion of The Durham Light Infantry (DLI), whose CO was overall Commander. Two Army 40 mm Bofors AA batteries were assigned, but whilst their advance party landed in the first wave, the main force came later, landing only five guns out of a potential of thirty-two. Two flights of No 2909 (LAA) Sqn RAF Regiment arrived by air with their Hispano guns

during 15/16 September, deploying at Antimachia. However, they had been disgracefully ill-prepared in Palestine. Many of the men had been drafted into the squadron directly from basic training and they had never exercised at unit level. Their guns had been delivered to the unit in August and September, but had not even been proof-fired. Most of the men were untrained on the weapons, the crews being issued with Hispano instruction manuals for study en-route to battle! Neither squadron ever received their vehicles, support weapons or any maps, nor was provision made for casualty replacements. Worse, the Squadron Commander was denied permission to move with his unit; he was required as a substitute Staff Officer at HQ! He, however, deliberately misinterpreted a clause in a written order and, switching the final consignment of guns for his unit from sea to an airlift, he took another of his officers, also precluded from the battle by a superior HQ order, and went to Cos with the guns. Arriving just before the main enemy assault, he fought with great flair and courage, being seriously wounded in the process.

An intense German counter-air assault began on 16 September. Several aircraft, equipment and supplies, including the reserves of 20 mm ammunition were destroyed, despite heroic efforts by the RAF and SAAF Spitfire squadrons, as well as the AA units. However, Antimachia was on a rocky plateau with the Hispanos on an exposed peripheral ridge. It was impossible to dig the guns in and there were no sandbags, so rock splinters enhanced the enemy's firepower. Moreover, the Hispano could not be depressed to the horizontal, let alone shoot downhill, a necessity because of their elevated position.

Eventually, between 20 and 26 September, American aircraft were sent from Italy to attack Rhodes, Crete and German shipping, allowing a brief respite for running repairs and replenishment, as well as permitting the provision of some reinforcements. By 20 September, No 2909 Sqn had received all twenty-four of its guns and most of its manpower, but only 66% of No 2901 (Field) Sqn had arrived, by sea, without heavy weapons or vehicles or even maps and with only two of its officers, both of them junior. The Commander Cos fatally ordered their piecemeal deployment as sub-units on the minor airstrips and at Cos town/harbour, clearly not grasping the need to secure Antimachia at all costs. The lessons of Crete only two years earlier had either passed him by or, like so many officers of his generation, he simply



Cos – Final Dispositions and the German Assault.



German seaborne landings



German parachute landings



British troops:

Antimachia – Elements of Nos 74 Sqn RAF & 7 Sqn SAAF and 1 Coy DLI with 11 × Hispanos (2909 Sqn RAF Regt) & 18 × Bofors (RA).

Aliké Salt Pans ELG – Elements of Nos 74 & 7 Sqs plus section of 2901 (Fld) Sqn.

Lambia ELG – HQ & 1 Coy DLI plus elements of Nos 74 & 7 Sqs with 8 × Hispanos & 9 × Bofors.

Cos – HQ & 1 Coy DLI plus elements of Nos 74 & 7 Sqs with 8 × Hispanos & 9 × Bofors.

did not grasp the significance of the Air weapon in modern war. At the end of the month, the total British Forces on Cos comprised 1,100 Army, 235 mixed RAF/SAAF plus 229 RAF Regiment. However, the next day, 1 October, all air facilities were completely knocked out and the last few Spitfires were damaged beyond repair.

Lacking maritime surveillance, the island was surprised at dawn on 3 October by a German all-arms Battle Group, 2,000 to 3,000 strong, landing by sea at three separate points on Cos, simultaneously with co-ordinated air attacks and parachute assaults against Antimachia and the minor airstrips. The field squadron, ill-deployed and unsupported, fought hard but was overwhelmed. However, the AA squadron, as a coherent unit and with its officers at Antimachia, continued to fight both a ground and AA battle simultaneously, using their guns to remarkable effect in both air and ground actions. Their tally of enemy aircraft was two destroyed, two 'probables' and two damaged. The guns were redeployed during the day as the tactical situation changed and fought until all were destroyed or out of ammunition. Likewise the Army guns. Thereupon, they fell back to Cos town, where the DLI was still holding out, now led by Major H M Vaux, who had taken command after the CO had been seriously wounded at the start of this final battle.¹ Fighting continued intensely for 36 hours, to the last round, when the defenders surrendered. However, isolated groups, including several RAF Regiment officers and men, soldiers, aircrew and others, resisted for some days, harrying the enemy from the hills and assisting the Special Boat Section (SBS) to evacuate a considerable number, including seventeen of the RAF Regiment, whilst three other Regiment men and a small number of soldiers escaped to Turkey in a rowing-boat. Nine RAF Regiment had been killed. The Germans lost eighty dead on Cos in the land battle and about 2,000 altogether in the short campaign, including their casualties on Leros and Samos and their air and shipping losses. Three thousand

¹ Major H M Vaux, DLI, was promoted after the war to lieutenant-colonel for his command of the hopeless battle. Subsequently, at the time of the post-war expansion in 1950, he transferred at his own request to the RAF Regiment. He became a group captain but in 1953, whilst commanding the RAF Levies (Iraq), he was killed in an air crash in Iraq. In 1970, the Vaux family brewery at Durham presented a Young Officer's Leadership trophy to the Regiment in his memory. The first officer to win it retired three years ago as an air vice-marshal.

British prisoners were taken altogether in this episode and 115 allied aircraft had been lost. Of the 200 RAF Regiment prisoners taken from Cos, 195 were wounded; a very high percentage. The victorious German Commander on Cos visited and congratulated his prisoners on their courage. This is an excerpt from an official report, written by a British Army Intelligence Officer who was among those who escaped:

‘I was on Antimachia airfield from the first day . . . and saw the RAF Regiment arrive and go into action. For close on two weeks, through many ground-strafting raids, their 20 mm guns were our only defence. . . . In almost every raid the unprotected gun crews suffered casualties from fighters or tail-gunners. . . . The gun-teams . . . were determined to fight their guns, no matter how easy a target they were for ground-strafting 109s. We will all remember them for their unflinching cheerfulness, their determination to fight their guns to the end and their great courage.’

In 1948 two MMs and seven MiDs were eventually awarded to the former 2909 Squadron (after a bitter fight by the former OC 2909 Sqn with the Air Ministry, which he won only after his discharge from the RAF!). Here is the account of one of the MM actions:

‘LAC Tucker’s fellow-Hispano crewman was killed beside him by a strafing Ju 88. This aircraft was seen to circle deliberately for a second pass against the same gun, only to be shot down in flames by Tucker. He then fought his gun single-handedly against many other strafing and infantry attacks for another 36 hrs, during which he damaged two Me 109s. When his gun was put out of action, he continued to fight with his rifle. Throughout, Tucker was suffering acutely from malaria and from several serious bomb and splinter injuries, eventually collapsing from blood loss, fever and sheer exhaustion. He survived, to be flown with the other wounded, shortly after capture, to the mainland, for a prison-train journey to Germany. En-route, he tore the barbed-wire off the cattle-truck ventilation-window and, leading four fellow Regiment prisoners, jumped train and set off for the Turkish border. Five



A 40mm Bofors of No 2914 Sqn at Prkos – February 1945.

days later, his debilitated condition forced him to abandon the mountain route he had chosen and telling his group to adhere to it, he took a lowland route. He was captured, but the others all got home.’

The Balkans

In June 1944, the Germans held all the Dalmatian islands, except Vis and Lagosta. No 2932 Sqn was sent to Vis to defend the airstrip for RAF use. They were joined by No 2825 Sqn, and both units were trained for Commando operations. An RAF Regiment parachute squadron called ‘Celyforce’, after its OC, Sqn Ldr H Cely-Trevilian, became a clandestine long-range coastal raiding force, working with the SBS. All were under command of Wg Cdr J Simpson, OC 1321 Wg. Their success led to a second such ‘special duties’ wing, also with three squadrons under command.

At this time the RAF Levies (Iraq) were not part of the RAF Regiment, but already a number of RAF Regiment officers were posted into the Force wherein all Company and Battalion Commanders and their Deputies were British Army officers, with Iraqis as the Platoon Commanders. In Albania, the Kurdish-manned No 1 (Parachute) Company of the RAF Levies (Iraq) seized the German-held Hill 246, a rugged, rocky peak dominating the port of Sarande, to deny the enemy the option of evacuating Corfu by sea. Its surprise assault was so swift that after a brief fight, ninety-six

surviving Germans surrendered, without any losses among the Levies. However, the attack had run well ahead of the pre-planned naval and RAF fire-support. Lacking ground/air communications, the Company Commander sent a Kurdish officer to Brigade HQ to cancel the supporting fire, but he was shot and wounded by a British Army sentry. His shouts for help resulted in a belief that the enemy had repelled the attack. Consequently naval gunfire and RAF aircraft were called in at once, inflicting more than twenty Levy casualties, including some British officers. One of these, Fg Off (later Gp Capt) J T O'Sullivan used to claim in later years that being attacked by all three British Services in one day must surely have made him an expert in Combined Operations! The group captain was, however, very keen thereafter on maintaining sound communications between any and all friendly forces in action.

Greece

In September 1944 a 450-strong composite force of Special Boat Section, Long-Range Desert Group, Royal Marines, infantry and No 2908 (Field) Sqn RAF Regiment, plus a specialist RAF Regiment mine-clearance group, was formed to seize an airfield at Araxos, in the Peloponnese, and then fight its way as necessary to Athens; inevitably under command of the ubiquitous, and by now Lt Col, Lord Jellicoe! After securing Araxos, they liberated Patras with some vicious fighting, where the Regiment's 6-pounder anti-tank guns sank two enemy E-Boats that intervened. Jellicoe's Force eventually entered Athens on 14 October 1944.

Half of No 2908 Sqn was immediately sent north to join yet another special force, composed of a battalion of the Parachute Regiment and a detachment of the SBS. In an action to destroy a German cliff-top position at Kozani, just inside Yugoslavia, one of the squadron's armoured cars, acting as rear-guard, was hit by several rounds from a German 37 mm anti-tank gun. Both the car commander and the driver, LAC Wingate, were seriously wounded. Wingate counter-attacked, however, fighting his way through the ambush in his severely-mauled vehicle with his dying officer, in the process preventing the enemy anti-tank gunners from warning their colleagues. The Commando raid succeeded and Wingate was awarded an MM for gallantry under fire. He recovered and advanced rapidly to



Canadian-built Otter Light Reconnaissance Cars of the RAF Regt on patrol in Athens – late 1944.

sergeant.

In December war broke out between British forces and ELAS, the military wing of the Greek National Liberation Front, the EAM. Six RAF Regiment squadrons were in Greece now, plus a (Kurdish) RAF Levies (Iraq) Parachute Coy, attached to HQ 28 Brigade in Athens. All were under Command of Wg Cdr Simpson and No 1321 Wing RAF Regiment, the Special Forces Wing, which was collocated with AHQ Greece. Three of its squadrons and the Iraq Levies had recently defeated a heavy ELAS attack on the RAF base at Hassani, south of Athens and likewise at the port of Piraeus.

AHQ Greece, with some 400 officers and airmen, was established in three hotels and assorted other buildings in Kifissia, north of Athens. When No 1321 Wg arrived there, Wg Cdr Simpson advised the Air Commander immediately that the urban HQ site was indefensible and that the HQ should move. His advice was disregarded and No 2923 (LAA) Sqn (by now armed with nine Bofors guns and four Hispanos) was ordered to Kifissia and, to Simpson's horror, instead of letting him bring in more of his own Regiment units, 100 miscellaneous RAF tradesmen were drafted in, as a 'defence supplement'. Simpson's vehement protestations were ignored, but with time running out, he prepared the best defence possible,



RAF Regt Otters heading up country towards Salonika.

involving the entire HQ, members of which were largely armed with pistols and Sten guns and tactically untrained.

The Bofors too were quite unsuited to close-quarters urban warfare, the crews being especially vulnerable to trained guerrillas, of which ELAS had plenty. Nevertheless, every Regiment man was well-trained and battle-experienced, the guns were deployed to best effect in the circumstances and road-blocks were set up on strategic approaches.

On 18 December over 1,000 well-armed ELAS, supported by artillery and mortars, attacked AHQ. Meanwhile, Army HQ in Athens treated it as a minor incident. Only after 24 hours was the seriousness of the situation realised and a relief column despatched. This comprised: eight heavy tanks, twelve RAF Regt armoured cars and an RAF Regt AA squadron in infantry mode. By this time, however, the enemy had cut the approach routes, mining choke-points and destroying bridges. In poor weather and by night, air-dropped supplies of food and ammunition landed behind the enemy lines. By night, the Partisans infiltrated the defended area and dynamited buildings, knocking out all the AA guns, killing or wounding their crews. Ammunition ran out and the defenders capitulated. There were eleven

killed and forty-six wounded. The relief column eventually arrived four hours after 532 RAF prisoners had been led away to ill-treatment in captivity until the civil war ended in late January. Churchill wrote a very curt memo to Sir John Slessor, Commanding the RAF in the theatre on 2 January and ordered FM Alexander, CinC Mediterranean, to investigate. There was an Inquiry, but no courts-martial, and Wg Cdr Simpson was Mentioned in Despatches.

After Kifissia, three RAF Regiment field squadrons were very glad to participate with No 139 (Inf) Bde of the British Army, in destroying ELAS in Athens.

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SPECIAL DUTIES OPERATIONS – THE POLISH DIMENSION

Wg Cdr Colin Cummings

This last presentation of the seminar summarises the involvement of Special Duties (SD) crews in one of the less well-known, but very significant, campaigns conducted in, or perhaps from, the Mediterranean theatre and one which was to have long-term political repercussions – the uprising in Warsaw in August and September 1944. As a precursor to that, however, we should first consider the WILDHORN sorties flown by No 267 Sqn earlier in that same year.

The Poles of the Brindisi-based No 1586 (SD) Flt had been delivering supplies and agents to the resistance movements in their homeland, and elsewhere, since February 1944 but their Halifaxes and Liberators lacked the ability to handle pick-ups. What was needed was an aircraft that could fly into and out of a relatively short airstrip while having sufficient performance to permit it to fly to Poland and back with a worthwhile payload and to complete the round trip within the hours of darkness.

As was so often the case with air transport problems during WW II, the answer, was the ubiquitous Dakota. By 1944 several squadrons were operating them in the Mediterranean theatre, among them No 267 Sqn, nominally a general purpose transport unit but one which often provided crews and aircraft for one-off operations.

On 15 April 1944, the first WILDHORN sortie was flown from Brindisi into a clover field near Lublin. The Dakota, which had been fitted with eight additional fuel tanks, was flown by Flt Lt Edward Harrod. His co-pilot was Fg Off Boleslaw Korpowski, an experienced SD pilot, attached from the Polish-manned No 1586 Flt, who had been shot-down over France and made a successful ‘home-run’. The sortie succeeded in delivering two couriers and bringing out five high value personnel, including General Stanislaw Tatar, the Deputy Chief of Staff of the *Armia Krajowa* (AK) – the Polish Home Army. The aircraft was only on the ground for about fifteen minutes during which it encountered some problems with soft ground, a tendency to become bogged down while standing still, followed by a difficult take-off.

Having proved the concept, a second sorties was flown some six weeks later. On this occasion, the captain was Flt Lt O’Donavan and



Dakotas of No 267 Sqn at Bari.

his co-pilot, again drawn from No 1586 Flt, was Plt Off Jacek Blocki. The sortie, escorted, as was the first WILDHORN, for part of the way by a pair of Liberators, delivered two senior officers to a field at Zaborów near Tarnów and after only six minutes on the ground it took off with three passengers. Perhaps because of their sensitivity, there is little reference to these missions in No 267 Sqn's Operations Record Book, although the Polish Air Force history is more forthcoming, as is Blocki's autobiography.*

The third WILDHORN operation was probably the most important of these sorties and it also came the closest to failure. The landing strip was the same one as had been used for the previous trip but the load to be brought out was extremely valuable. Following the RAF attack on the experimental establishment at Peenemunde, the Germans had moved their rocket development programme to Mielec in Poland. The Blizna artillery range was rapidly expanded and exceptional security arrangements were implemented – all of which served to attract the attention of the AK.

When the test firings began, the Germans deployed teams to retrieve the wreckage of rockets which had failed. On 20 May 1944 a relatively intact V2 fell into a swamp. Before the Germans could find it, the Poles had camouflaged the site so successfully that the search was eventually abandoned. A few nights later, it was dragged from the swamp by three pairs of horses and spirited away to be dismantled and

* Blocki. Jack; *First Tango in Warsaw* (Square One, Upton upon Severn, 1997).



Kazimierz Szrajter

examined. In due course London was informed of this major coup and WILDHORN III was mounted to collect detailed drawings and some parts of the salvaged missile.

This time the Polish co-pilot was Kazimierz Szrajter, another special duties pilot, with over ninety sorties to his credit, and the captain was a New Zealander; Stanley Culliford. The escorting Liberator was flown by the co-pilot from WILDHORN I – Boleslaw Korpowski on the final sortie of his third tour. On the outbound flight to Poland, the aircraft carried four Polish officers and nineteen suitcases of special equipment.

The two aircraft flew together until just before nightfall, when the Liberator turned off to proceed on its own task. Navigation was hampered by haze until a positive pinpoint was obtained as the Dakota crossed the Danube. The Hungarian Plain was crossed at about 7,500 feet as it was believed that German night fighter radars were badly affected by ground returns below 8,000 feet. The wireless operator was able to assist in the construction of fixes by taking bearings on radio transmissions from German airfields. A final turning point over the Carpathian Mountains was reached almost on ETA and the aircraft descended rapidly towards the airstrip. As it transpired, enemy troops had been camped nearby that morning and two aircraft had actually been using the strip for circuit training during daylight hours.

While approaching the airstrip, which had not been marked as previously briefed, the Dakota passed over a road along which a large military convoy was moving. Nevertheless, having been obliged to carry out an overshoot, the aircraft landed successfully off its second attempt. Once on the ground, the aircraft was rapidly off-loaded and reloaded and was ready to depart within minutes. It was then that the trouble started.

At first the parking brake would not release and after this had been resolved, the aircraft still declined to move, even with full power applied. Reasoning that the brakes had seized, the captain decided to

cut the hydraulic pipes, but this did not help. Several bouts of frantic digging, encouraged by the indomitable Szrajter, followed and the aircraft, now with no brakes, finally broke free – and proceeded to go round in circles. By using differential throttles, Culliford eventually managed to get the aircraft lined up for take off. Wet ground meant that the first attempt to get airborne had to be abandoned and the second only just succeeded with the Dakota narrowly clearing a ditch as it was pulled off the ground at 65 mph.

The undercarriage was still a problem, as it could not be retracted because the hydraulic fluid had bled away. The pilot's report merely states that the reservoir was recharged 'with all available fluids' until sufficient pressure was obtained to permit the undercarriage to be pumped up by hand. To ensure the aircraft's safety, it was imperative that it should be clear of Yugoslav airspace before daylight. Now 65 minutes behind schedule, this meant that corners had to be cut, putting the aircraft dangerously close to known night fighter hotspots. Fortunately, no serious challenges were made and the aircraft arrived at Brindisi, where a brakeless landing was made on a runway that was still under construction.

For Culliford there was a DSO, with the briefest of citations, and for his navigator and wireless operator a DFC and DFM respectively. The Poles were also generous with their awards and Culliford received the *Virtuti Militari* and was further rewarded by them many years after the war.

The Warsaw Uprising

The Poles had sound reasons to be cautious in their dealings with the Russians. For example, the massacre of several thousand Polish officers and others at Katyn in 1940, the annexation of a large part of Polish territory and the arrest or disarming of Polish AK forces who had assisted the Soviets in some recent battles had all served to show the likely direction the Russian leadership would take in their handling of Polish sovereignty after the Nazis had been driven out.

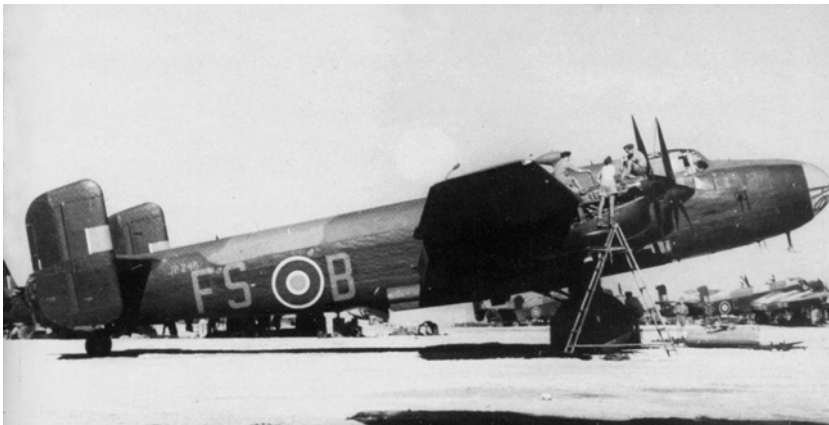
With the Red Army approaching the Vistula and urging the Home Army to rise up, the prospect of retaking their own capital must have been almost irresistible and, the kudos that would accompany success would stand the post-war Polish cause in good stead. In pursuit of this ambition, the AK, through their exiled government in London, had

asked the British for various forms of assistance. Most of these were completely impractical or could not be supported, even if the initial request could have been met. For example, the AK had wanted the Polish Air Force fighter squadrons in the Mediterranean to be redeployed to operate from airfields near Warsaw. Apart from the difficulties involved in getting them there, it would have been impossible to resupply them with the fuel and ammunition required to sustain them in combat; nor was there any means of protecting the force on the ground while operating from what was still German-occupied territory. Another request, that the UK-based Polish Parachute Brigade should be dropped into Warsaw, was also impractical as it would have required more than 100 Dakotas, even if these could have been deployed far enough forward to give them the necessary range without having to sacrifice payload for extra fuel.

It was against this background that one of the men flown into Poland by WILDHORN III was Lt Nowak, a Polish courier bearing memorised instructions and advice from the Polish Government in exile as to the level of support that could realistically be expected in the event of an uprising against the German occupation. Unfortunately, the die was already cast. Nowak's intervention was too late to influence the Home Army's commanders and the uprising in Warsaw began on 1 August.

Although surprise initially favoured the insurgents, a firm German riposte was not long in coming and the Russian intervention, upon which success had been critically dependent, was withheld on Stalin's orders. Furthermore, the intransigence of the Soviets was such that they even denied landing and refuelling facilities in Soviet territory to British and Americans aircraft attempting to provide the Poles with some, albeit limited, sustenance.

On 2 August the Polish ambassador in London informed the Foreign Secretary that the uprising in Warsaw had begun and requested help and supplies. The request was passed to the senior British air commander in the Mediterranean, Air Mshl Sir John Slessor, who was presented with a dreadful dilemma. He knew that Warsaw could not be supported by the forces available to him without active Soviet participation and he understood the difficulties involved in operating over eastern Europe and the dangers associated with supply dropping at low level over a defended built up area, as opposed



A late production Halifax II (Srs Ia) of No 148 Sqn at Brindisi.

to the customary remote rural areas. Furthermore, the moon, which was often a vital factor in SD operations, was full at the time, which made it a serious hindrance. It was clear to Slessor that any attempt to support the Warsaw uprising was unlikely to succeed and equally clear that it would lead to significant losses of aircraft and their crews.

Slessor sent CAS an appraisal of the situation but was told that he must comply. Weather and other factors prevented operations being mounted until the evening of 3 August, when fourteen aircraft, drawn equally from No 148 Sqn and No 1586 Flt, took off from Brindisi. Amongst the pilots flying that night was Szrajer, back in the more familiar cockpit of a Liberator, after his WILDHORN excursion and flying his 100th sortie, the last of his third tour.

The outcome was predictably tragic. One Halifax, returned early with problems with its defensive armament but crashed on landing and was destroyed. Another suffered an engine failure and was obliged to jettison its load while another brought its load back, having failed to identify the DZ. Four of No 148 Sqn's aircraft simply failed to return, leaving the squadron with just one commissioned pilot, four serviceable aircraft and only one fully effective crew, who were on the point of completing their tour. Of the fourteen sorties flown, only three had been successful, at the cost of five aircraft. Slessor informed CAS that he would not permit operations of this sort to continue at that phase of the moon, but political pressure exerted by the London



A Liberator VI of No 34 Sqn SAAF.

Poles, forced him to relent and on two successive nights he permitted the Poles to operate small numbers of aircraft and these returned without loss.

Eleven aircraft, drawn from No 148 Sqn and the Polish flight went back to Warsaw on the night of 12/13 August; seven made successful drops but a number of aircraft were damaged. The next night seven aircraft were scheduled to fly but three failed to get airborne; one returned early and only two actually delivered their loads. By this time the situation on the ground was becoming increasingly confused and it was difficult to know if the supplies were being received. Furthermore, the smoke and fires made it increasingly difficult to identify the DZs and the low levels at which the aircraft needed to operate to achieve success placed them and their crews in great danger.

It was decided to supplement the effort being made by the SD squadrons by employing some of the Liberators of No 205 Gp, specifically those of No 178 Sqn and Nos 31 and 34 Sqns SAAF.

Incidentally, it is worth observing that neither the bomber nor the SD units were exclusively dedicated to events in Poland. Support of the Warsaw uprising was being conducted alongside offensive missions in support of the landings in the south of France, which also



Scoreboard on a Liberator VI, BZ865, of No 1586 Flt. Of the twenty-five flags, twelve are Polish. A later photograph shows that this aeroplane went to Poland on at least six more occasions.

took place in August, and the routine resupply of Partisan movements in northern Italy and the Balkans.

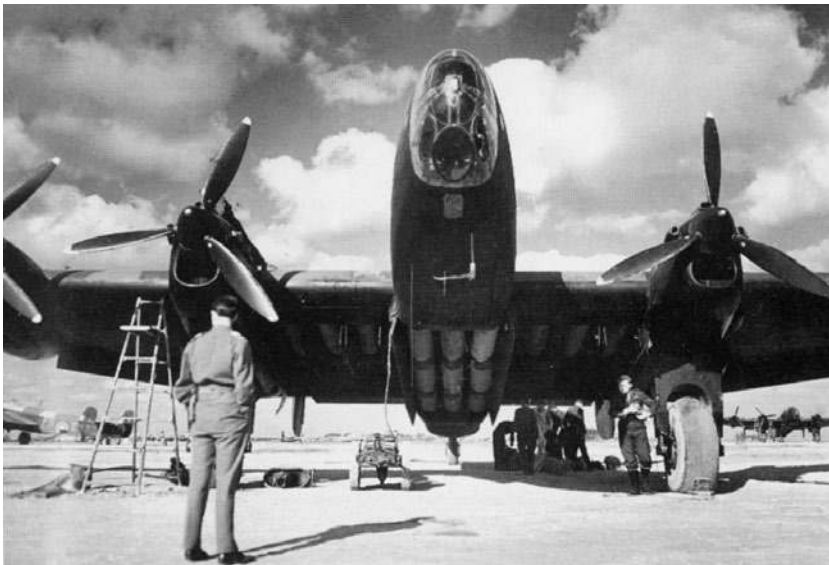
The newly committed squadrons operated alongside their SD counterparts for the first time on the night of 13/14 August and again the next night. Of the fifty-four aircraft tasked over these two nights, twenty-nine managed to reach the city and drop their loads but about a third of these missed the AK enclaves. Twenty aircraft missed the city altogether and almost all returning aircraft sustained damage of some sort. Eleven aircraft had been lost, with few survivors among their crews. Among those who died was Zbigniew Szostak, a most experienced SD captain who, at the start of the uprising, had made an impassioned plea to the RAF crews to try their hardest to bring relief to his countrymen.

One remarkable story emerges from the first night's operations by No 31 Sqn. A Liberator was approaching the target when the aircraft was attacked by a night fighter and subjected to heavy *Flak*. The pilot

ordered the supply containers to be jettisoned short of the target and commenced an evasive climbing turn to starboard. An AA shell struck the port outer engine, putting it out of action and the co-pilot feathered the propeller. The aircraft was then 'coned' by about a dozen searchlights and subjected to further AA fire, which the captain attempted to avoid. Then, without a word to the rest of the crew, he left his seat, donned his parachute and baled out! The co-pilot, 2/Lt Robert Burgess, whose experience in the Liberator was negligible, took the controls and flew the aircraft away from the target area. It was difficult to control, however, and a damage assessment revealed problems with the hydraulics and other systems, which made it unlikely that the aircraft would be able to make it back to Foggia. The navigator; Lt Noel Slead and the bomb aimer; Sgt Allan Bates, assisted Burgess, with Bates assuming the role of co-pilot. Following a crew conference it was decided to attempt to reach Allied territory, rather than abandon the aircraft. For the next several hours the crew encountered and dealt with additional problems before making a wheels-down forced landing in Russian-held territory. There were further adventures at the hands of the Russian authorities but the crew was eventually taken to Moscow on 19 August. After a few weeks in the Soviet capital, the crew was flown to Cairo on 4 September and repatriated to South Africa a month later. For their efforts, Burgess was awarded the DSO, the only such award to a second lieutenant in the SAAF, whilst Slead received the DFC and Bates the DFM. The citation for their joint awards may be of interest, if only for its remarkable brevity. It read:

'One night in August 1944, these officers and airman were second pilot, navigator and air bomber of an aircraft detailed for a vital supply dropping mission. In the operation great difficulties and considerable danger were faced and the skill, bravery and fortitude displayed by these members of aircraft crew set an example of the highest order.'

It is perhaps appropriate to record that the other members of the crew, who were all RAFVR personnel were: Sgts I G Payne, D E D Lewis, J S Appleyard and W Cross. It is known that the pilot became a POW immediately following his departure from the aircraft but what happened to him subsequently is not recorded.



A full load in Halifax was fifteen containers; nine in the bomb bay and three in each of the inner wing cells.

Operations continued but the results being achieved were negligible when compared to the requirement and there were high percentages of failures and aborts. In order to assess the situation, Slessor needed to know the minimum daily quantity of supplies needed to sustain the AK enclave in Warsaw. This was eventually calculated to be ninety containers, which equated to fifteen Halifax loads. That assumed, of course, that all fifteen Halifaxes would actually deliver their cargoes, which was never likely to be the case. For example, over one four-day period, from twenty-six sorties despatched, it was known that only seven loads had actually been dropped over the city – and of those, it was not known how many had actually been retrieved by the AK. Even the Polish crews were now being forced to admit that they were being sent to almost certain death if they continued to fly over Warsaw at 600 feet.

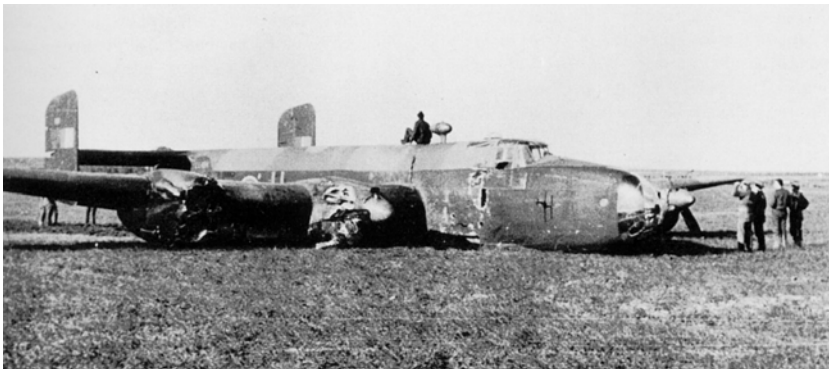
In view of the unacceptable loss rate and uncertainty over the quantities of supplies that were actually reaching the Home Army, Slessor suspended further flights to Warsaw itself on the grounds that they were militarily unjustifiable but he did permit sorties to be flown

to DZs in the Kampinos Forest and occasionally to others even closer to the city. Nine aircraft went out on the night of 15/16 August; five of them made good drops. The following night eighteen aircraft went to the Warsaw area; four were lost to night fighters and two to *Flak*.

By now aircraft and aircrew availability was becoming a problem which could no longer be ignored and ten replacement Halifax Vs were received along with some new crews. The depleted Poles of No 1586 Flt, for instance, were reinforced by several crews diverted from No 300 Sqn in the UK but in just two nights four of these crews failed to return. But non-operational factors were also having an adverse impact on the effectiveness of the campaign, including aircraft being lost or damaged in training accidents, two more crews being lost in a crash when one was screening the other. Receipt of a second batch of Halifax Vs was delayed because they had first to be overhauled, including replacement of their Merlin XX engines with Merlin 22s, because the former had a high failure rate (a problem that was eventually traced to faulty bearings being installed during overhaul). A third injection of eight Mk Vs was flown out from the UK in early September.

As the moon began to wane during the second week in September, operations to Warsaw were resumed and twenty aircraft, mostly Liberators, attempted drops using a high level technique from heights varying from 11,500 to 14,000 feet at an IAS of about 150 mph. However, weather conditions and smoke over the city impeded these drops and the returning aircraft encountered heavy *Flak* east of the city. Nos 34 and 148 Sqns each lost a crew while the Poles lost three. For this Warsaw received just seven loads of canisters and two more dropped in the Kampinos Forest to the west of the city. A few nights later, the Poles sent a pair of aircraft one of which failed to return.

Throughout the agony of the Warsaw uprising, the Russians had flatly refused to allow allied aircraft to land on their airfields, even if damaged or carrying wounded; nor would they assist with supplies themselves. Evidence from returning crews suggested that they were even being fired on by Soviet AA guns and sometimes pursued by their night fighters. Churchill drafted a joint Anglo-American letter to Stalin to the effect that US aircraft operating from the UK would be sent to assist the Poles and that they would land in Russia, with or without permission. Roosevelt demurred, however, partly because



A downed Halifax V of No 148 Sqn.

Stalin was being so obdurate and partly because he did not wish to hazard the possibility, being negotiated at that time, of the US being granted access to air bases in Siberia from which to bomb Japan. As a result, the letter was never sent. Nevertheless, when the fighting in the city was almost over, the Russians relented and agreed to refuel supply-dropping aircraft under the arrangements already in place for Operation FRANTIC, the shuttle-bombing of Germany staging through airfields in the Ukraine. On 18 September, after a false start on the 15th, the US 8th AF sent 110 B-17s, escorted by P-51s, to the city where they made a high-level drop of 1,248 containers, but only about 250 of these were retrieved by the defenders.

This mass drop was almost the final chapter in the air support for Warsaw, with just a few more sorties being flown during the rest of September but by then any hope of making a difference was long gone.

The AK forces in Warsaw capitulated on 2 October after 63 day's fighting. The exact cost will never be known but 15,000 insurgents became prisoners, 10,000 were killed, as were some 200,000 civilians and 17,000 Germans. Those parts of the city not destroyed in the fighting were demolished by the Nazis.

During the two months of the insurrection the Polish SD flight had lost 18 aircraft and 16 crews, whilst the RAF and SAAF units had between them lost a further 21 aircraft and 20 crews. These 39 aircraft and 36 crews had been lost in the course of flying a total of just 172 sorties; a clearly unsustainable loss rate of more than 20% in both



Warsaw – the aftermath.

cases.

In November 1944, No 1586 Flt was increased in size and redesignated as No 301 Sqn which continued to fly supply missions into Poland until March 1945. However, the Soviet advance eventually rendered these sorties redundant and the squadron was withdrawn to the UK where it re-equipped with Warwicks and Halifax VIIIs.

Many Poles blamed the British Government for failing to provide more help for the uprising but, even if it had been practical to do so, deploying the Polish Parachute Brigade and Polish fighter squadrons to Poland, where they could not have been sustained without Russian co-operation, would have been a tragically pointless gesture. The Russian stance is easy to understand, of course; it was a deliberate ploy to destroy – or, rather, to allow the Nazis to destroy – the Polish Home Army, thus removing a major obstacle to a post-war communist

takeover.

Perhaps the final word on the futility of the exercise can best be left to Sir John Slessor, who, speaking after the war and still deeply affected by these events, said that it had been:

‘[a] story of the utmost gallantry and self-sacrifice on the part of the aircrews, RAF, South African and above all Polish: of deathless heroism on the part of the Polish underground army fighting against desperate and increasingly hopeless odds in the tortured city of Warsaw and of the blackest hearted, coldest blooded treachery on the part of the Russians. It led to the fruitless sacrifice of some 200 airmen . . . it is usually considered easy to be wise after the event but Yalta and Potsdam were after the events of August and September 1944.’

CHAIRMAN’S CLOSING REMARKS

Air Chf Mshl Sir David Cousins

I am very conscious that, having had our carefully constructed timetable extended by a fire alarm, we are now rapidly approaching the rush hour so I will make my closing remarks very brief.

What I really want to say is to reiterate our thanks to the Museum and, especially, to our presenters for providing us with such a fascinating and varied range of lectures, eloquently delivered and with some splendid slides, all of which certainly opened my eyes and I suspect yours too. I must also thank you, the audience, for supporting the society so loyally.

It is very difficult to pull the threads together from such a diverse range of subjects as we have considered today but there is one epitaph that comes to my mind. While Churchill may have used his metaphor of the ‘soft underbelly’ to promote a Mediterranean strategy, my sense is that, for those who actually had to carry it out, it was anything but. A sentiment, with which many of you may agree – and I know that my father certainly would have.

Thank you – and have a safe journey.

THE AEGEAN CAMPAIGN – A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

by Tony Ross

Background

Following the surrender of Italy on 8 September 1943, both Churchill and Hitler turned their attention to the Balkans and the Aegean. The beautiful Aegean Sea is almost completely landlocked. Bounded on the north and west by Greece and on the east by Turkey, its southern approaches are guarded by mountainous Crete and Rhodes and studded with hundreds of picturesque small islands.

The Germans were already strongly entrenched on the Greek mainland, where they had between six and seven divisions, with four further divisions dispersed over the islands of the western Aegean, including Crete. Their only weak point lay to the east in the Dodecanese, a group of islands, including Rhodes, off the coast of Turkey which had been garrisoned by Italian troops since 1912.

From Churchill's point of view, possession of the Dodecanese, hopefully with Italian co-operation, would offer glittering prospects. The Turks might even be impressed enough to abandon their benevolent neutrality and actually join the Allies.

Turkey would bring 46 divisions and well placed air bases to the Allied cause. This would threaten the whole of Germany's flank in south-east Europe while control of the Dardanelles and Bosphorus would open an easier southern supply route to Russia than the dangerous and costly Arctic convoys. Churchill failed, however, to convince the Americans, who feared that such a venture might slow the advance in Italy and even siphon off forces destined for the invasion of north-west Europe.

General Wilson, commanding land forces in the Eastern Mediterranean, reported directly to the Joint Chiefs of Staff in London but AOCinC RAFME, Air Mshl Sir Sholto Douglas, was subordinated to Air Chf Mshl Sir Arthur Tedder's HQ Mediterranean Air Command,¹ which was collocated with General Eisenhower's Headquarters in Algiers. Naval forces were similarly controlled from the Western Mediterranean by Admiral Cunningham. As the overall Commander-in-Chief, therefore, Eisenhower could veto any proposals for the strengthening of the air and naval forces needed to support a Dodecanese invasion.

Following an exchange of signals between the British Chiefs of Staff and Eisenhower, the latter made it clear that, while he could provide the troops required for an Aegean operation he lacked the shipping necessary to meet the proposed timeframe and could not provide the airlift needed for a parachute assault or to escort the transport aircraft.² In short, therefore, the British were left to go it alone, with woefully inadequate forces, operating over extended and vulnerable supply lines and with insufficient fighter cover.

With the British forces having established a foothold on Cos, the question was revisited at a Commanders-in-Chiefs Conference held at La Marsa on 9 October 1943 when the choice, in its essentials, came down to 'Rhodes or Rome?' – the decision was in favour of Rome.³ The outcome was inevitable. Having managed to occupy most of the Dodecanese islands for a while, the Germans inexorably closed in on the small Allied enclave and only ten weeks after the invasion had started, they had been driven out of the Aegean.

Churchill had, however, gained one advantage. The Germans were compelled to deploy no fewer than ten divisions across the Aegean to deter any further Allied invasions. Now it was their turn to have long and vulnerable supply lines to support garrisons on isolated islands.

Objectives

The aim of subsequent operations in the Aegean was to weaken the German island garrisons by disrupting their lines of communication, principally through the use of air power. The key targets were mobile – well defended convoys, large single supply vessels, landing craft, lighters, inconspicuous wooden caiques and Ju 52 transport aircraft – but fixed installations, including harbours, airfields and radar stations, were also attacked. Other tasks included armed reconnaissance, providing air cover for Allied shipping, seeking out and destroying U-boats and escorting launches infiltrating agents. The breadth of missions ranged from a single aircraft intruding over an enemy airfield at night to as many as seventy aircraft making a set piece attack on a large convoy. No two operations were the same.

In his book *Royal Air Force At War*,⁴ Air Chf Mshl Sir Christopher Foxley-Norris (OC 603 Sqn during the second half of 1944) wrote of the Aegean Campaign, 'It was a serious and often hazardous campaign, with a major objective which was eventually attained. But

it had a highly individualistic flavour, was never dull, routine or monotonous. If all campaigns were the same, war might become dangerously and deplorably attractive and entertaining.’

In a more serious vein, however, he also pointed out that the heavy casualties in anti-shipping squadrons resulted from a fundamental flaw in their armament. The aircraft had to point directly at, and usually overfly, a heavily defended target at low level. At the end of 1942 the Air Ministry had calculated that the chance of completing an anti-shipping tour was 17½%. The likelihood of surviving two tours dropped to just 3%.⁵

Resources

The Allied Air Forces in the Eastern Mediterranean included elements from many nations. The force structure fluctuated a little, due to newly assigned squadrons arriving and others being posted away, and there were some changes in the types of aircraft being operated, but the following summary includes the most significant participants.

The RAF fielded four squadrons of Beaufighters – Nos 47, 227, 252 and 603 Sqn. The first of these was armed with torpedoes, the others with rockets. For escort duties, the British also provided fighters on occasion, but, even with drop tanks, the Spitfires of No 94 Sqn were unable to range much further north than Crete, and No 213 Sqn’s Mustangs were available for only a few weeks in mid-1944 before the squadron moved to Italy. Other critical RAF contributions were provided by the photographic reconnaissance Spitfires, later supplemented by Mosquitos, of No 680 Sqn and the electronic intelligence gathering Wellingtons of No 162 Sqn.

The South African Air Force was represented by the Baltimores of No 15 Sqn, the Beaufighters of No 16 Sqn, and the Marauders of No 24 Sqn and the RAAF by the Baltimores of No 454 Sqn and Venturas of No 459 Sqn. Between November 1943 and February 1944 this force was supplemented by the formidable 75mm cannon-armed B-25G Mitchells of the USAAF’s 379th BS and, until they left for Italy in May 1944, yet more Baltimores of No 13 (Hellenic) Sqn. All of these units operated from airstrips along the coast of Cyrenaica, principally the complexes at Berka and Gambut.



A Beaufighter X, NE 400 of No 603 Sqn, being serviced in the open at Gambut. (A E Ross)

Ground Conditions

Since I served with No 603 Sqn, I can offer a first-hand reflection of conditions at Gambut 3, which was a typical example of a North African landing ground. It was perched on the edge of a shallow escarpment some 10 miles inland from the Mediterranean and over 400 miles from Cairo. To the east, south and west stretched hundreds of miles of sandy desolation littered with the debris of the recent fighting – burnt out tanks, lorries and aircraft and abandoned guns. Over 200 miles to the north lay Crete and, beyond it, the Aegean over which the squadron was to operate.

The natural surface was uneven so, to improve the landing ground, bulldozers had been used to level a stretch of ground over which a thin layer of tarmac had then been laid to form a single runway. This exercise had produced a reasonably flat airstrip, but it had also broken up the compacted surface crust and exposed the loose sand underneath. As a result, anything more than a slight breeze raised clouds of dust which hovered sullenly over the camp whilst the surrounding desert lay clear and unruffled. This cloud provided a useful, although hardly welcoming, landmark for returning aircraft.

As is so often the case, while the aircrew could try to relax between sorties, there was no respite for the groundcrews. There were no covered maintenance facilities, so all servicing had to be carried out in

the open, often during severe sand or rain storms. Shortages of ground equipment meant that fitters were often obliged to balance precariously on empty oil drums in order to reach the engines.

Operations

What follows is an impression of the nature of operations in the Aegean theatre. Because it is based largely on personal experience, it inevitably focuses on the activities of the Beaufighters and, specifically, those of No 603 Sqn, but a very similar account could be written by anyone who flew with any of the other squadrons operating in the anti-shipping role.

As a theatre of operations, the Aegean was unique. It possessed some of the most beautiful scenery in the world. If the weather was fine, we could enjoy the blue sea, studded with countless small islands with white-painted villages, churches and windmills. Most sorties were not rigidly planned. We were free to rove, seeking out supply vessels at sea or hiding in sheltered inlets, and, with luck, one might come across a Ju 52. If no significant logistic targets had presented themselves by the end of a patrol, rather than take our rockets home, we would attack an airfield or a radar station.

While this may sound almost idyllic, our missions were not without their difficulties. To reach the Aegean, it was necessary to cross 240 miles of, often stormy, sea. Directly across our path lay Crete – 160 miles long with mountains rising up to 7,000 feet. To the east of Crete were the almost equally mountainous islands of Scarpanto and Rhodes. To the north-west was the heavily defended Greek mainland. There were eleven enemy airstrips in the Aegean, some housing Bf 109s, the Beaufighter's most formidable opponent. Enemy radar cover was adequate, and, if detected, fighters could be quickly scrambled to intercept our incursions.

To avoid detection, rather than fly across Crete, patrols would enter and leave the Aegean via the straits at either end of the island and we always flew well below the radar screen. That meant at about 100 feet. Any higher and you risked being seen on radar, much lower and your slipstream left a wake on the water which could be easily seen by patrolling enemy fighters. If the sea was calm, it could be very difficult to judge the aircraft's height and there was a significant risk of flying into the sea. No 603 Sqn lost an aircraft and crew in just this

way during a shipping strike south of Melos on 5 July 1944. One of its Beaufighters was seen to hit the water, bounce 30 feet into the air, crash back into the sea and burst into flames.

Because we were operating beyond the range of fighter escorts, the Bf 109, with a speed advantage of about 60 mph, represented a substantial threat. That said, the Messerschmitts did not hold all of the cards because they were seriously outgunned, a 20 mm cannon and a pair of rifle-calibre machine guns versus the Beaufighter's four 20 mm cannon plus the sting in the tail represented by a hand-held, rearward firing .303" Browning.

OC 603 Sqn, Wg Cdr Ronnie Lewis, had previously commanded No 504 Sqn (Spitfires) in the UK and he introduced some fighter-style operating procedures aimed at providing mutual cover within a formation. A typical four-aircraft offensive sweep now involved two pairs flying in echelon some distance apart. If one pair was attacked the other would make a beam to quarter attack on the fighters. Faced with eight 20 mm cannon the Bf 109s would invariably break off. In most cases that would be the end of the engagement, because, despite their speed advantage, it would take the Messerschmitts some time to catch up with the retreating Beaufighters and they often appeared reluctant to head further out to sea in their single-engined aeroplanes. We also suspected that many of the German pilots were relatively inexperienced; the best were in Italy, north-west Europe and Russia.

Since the end of 1943, in order to increase its striking power, No 603 Sqn had been armed with three-inch rockets having either 25 lb armour-piercing or 60lb high explosive warheads. Unfortunately no one had told us how to use them. After one aircraft had fired a salvo across the airstrip while taking off and another had them explode under its wings the CO decided that we would have to find our own solution.

He detached Flt Lt Pat Pringle (my pilot) and me to the Delta where we persuaded the Engineers to build a full size 'ship' in the desert from empty oil drums. We then spent a week firing at it from different distances, heights, speeds and dive angles. We recorded everything and drew up countless graphs until we were satisfied that we had tabulated the interplay between all of these variables and were thus able to define a selection of ideal launch parameters for use by the squadron. In recognition of our Herculean labours I designed a



The badge and motto applied to the port side of the nose of NE400 to reflect the crew's scientific analysis of the behaviour of the three-inch RP.
(A E Ross)

badge for our aircraft. The motto, *Incerti quo fata ferant* (Uncertain where the Fates bear us), from Book Three of the *Aeneid*, seemed appropriate for the Aegean, across which Aeneas and his companions had sailed after the fall of Troy.

As Christopher Foxley-Norris pointed out, no two operations were the same, as the following representative sorties taken from my log book illustrate. On 27 January 1944, four of us took off on an offensive sweep over the islands of Syros and Mykonos. We encountered three Ju 52 floatplanes escorted by four Ar 196s – two-seater, twin-float seaplanes capable of about 200 mph and intended for inshore maritime reconnaissance. They were actually quite manoeuvrable and a fixed armament of two 20 mm cannon, plus a pair of flexibly-mounted machine-guns in the rear cockpit, made them respectable makeshift fighters. Nevertheless, two of the Ju 52s were quickly shot down in flames and the third ditched near the island of Delos. Despite spirited resistance, the four Arados were also destroyed but not before they had seriously damaged one of our Beaufighters which later ditched.

There was a surprising sequel to this encounter. Some ten years later a German architect presented a silver cigarette box to the squadron. He explained to me that he had been leading the formation of Ju 52s, each of which had had twenty-one soldiers on board. Eleven survivors from his aircraft had scrambled into dinghies. We swept over them as we left and he was sure that we were going to open fire. He was so grateful when we did not that he was determined to express his gratitude. Later the son of another survivor sent me a cigarette lighter bearing the crest of their squadron.

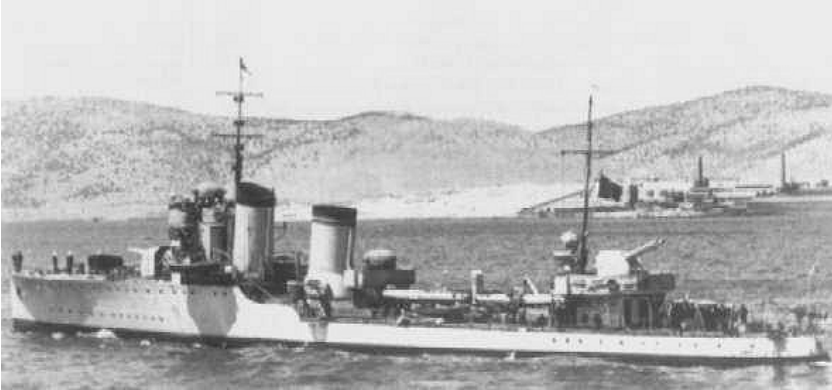
On 22 February 1944 three Beaufighter squadrons joined together to attack a heavily defended merchant vessel off the north coast of

Crete. The MV *Livenza* was being escorted by two large corvettes. It was sailing between the mainland and the fortified island of Dia. Heraklion, the main airfield on Crete, was only 5 miles away and there was massive cover by Bf 109s and Ar 196s. The convoy was within reach of the heavy anti-aircraft batteries on the mainland and not far from the lighter guns of Dia.

The Beaufighters entered the Aegean between Crete and Kassos, turning west they skimmed the water for nearly 70 miles, just out of sight of land, until Dia came into view. No 227 Sqn then climbed to engage the fighter cover while No 603 Sqn flew straight across the convoy firing rockets and cannon at the ships' anti-aircraft gunners. This disruption of the defences provided No 47 Sqn with the ability to make the steady, level and relatively unhindered approach that was an essential prerequisite if their torpedoes were to be launched successfully. They were – the *Livenza* sustained several hits and was later confirmed to have sunk. A corvette was set ablaze and two Arados were damaged. The cost was three Beaufighters, all of them from No 227 Sqn.

With the coming of spring the weather had improved enough for the squadron to try night operations. The plan was for an aircraft to fly along the north coast of Crete to Heraklion and lie in wait until a Ju 52 came in to land. Once the landing lights were switched on, it was expected to be an easy target. At the same time, while the Beaufighter's ASV radar was not accurate enough to permit a ship to be struck in complete darkness, if a vessel was encountered we had calculated that there would be enough moonlight to enable us to make a visual attack.

On 8 March, we set out on our long, lonely journey towards the eastern end of Crete. In the absence of any electronic aids to navigation, accurate dead reckoning was essential. The rocky promontory of Crete eventually loomed up in the darkness and we turned west to fly along the north coast, keeping as low as the night visibility permitted. The moon was rising and casting a long silver path across the quiet dark waters. The island of Dia (almost due north of Heraklion) could just be seen on the right when the radar showed traces of something on the water. We banked away in a wide arc down moon so that whatever was in the water would show up in the moon path whilst the aircraft itself would be in the darker part of the sky.



The Italian destroyer RM Francesco Crispi. Later taken over by the Kriegsmarine as TA15, she was sunk, at night, by a single Beaufighter of No 603 Sqn on 8/9 March 1944; refloated, she was eventually scuttled on 8 October.

Having relocated the target on radar, we began to stalk it.

Suddenly there were dark shapes ahead – two large vessels in line-astern steaming towards the harbour. Once more we swung away, this time to make a carefully planned attack. The correct height was reached. The ‘Mickey Mouse’ was set for a salvo at 800 yards and the dive began. The range closed. The glowing rocket exhausts streaked ahead and a bright yellow light suddenly appeared on the leading vessel. We pulled sharply away to starboard to avoid silhouetting ourselves against the moon. As we resumed our attack position, flames were already leaping high into the air from the doomed vessel. Another attack was made on the second ship, this time with cannon since all the rockets had gone. Some hits were observed, but in the darkness the damage could not be assessed. Intelligence later confirmed that a destroyer, the *Francesco Crispi*, (commandeered by the Germans after the Italian surrender), had been sunk.

On 13 April I was flying in one of four Beaufighters when we were attacked by three Bf 109s 6 miles south of Cape Matapan. The No 2 in the other section was straggling and was promptly shot down by one of the fighters while the other two engaged the leader’s aircraft and damaged it. Our section made a beam to quarter attack on the Messerschmitts which broke away and returned to base. Ronnie

Lewis' tactics had worked exactly as advertised, but we still considered ourselves to have been very lucky. Three '109s, operating only a few miles from their base, should have been quite capable of shooting down four Beaufighters operating at the extremity of their range.

By the summer the constant attacks on shipping and transport aircraft had left the German garrisons very short of supplies. A large convoy was therefore assembled at Athens and set sail for Crete. It consisted of four merchant ships, all flying barrage balloons to discourage attacks by low flying aircraft. It had a formidable escort of four destroyers, four corvettes and a pair of E-boats. Air cover was provided by all available Bf 109s and Ar 196s.

While the convoy was being shadowed throughout the day by Australian Baltimores of No 454 Sqn, a large force was being briefed to carry out an attack. Seventeen Baltimores of Nos 454 Sqn RAAF and No 15 Sqn SAAF along with a dozen Marauders of No 24 Sqn SAAF were to carry out a medium level bombing attack. Their route was to take them directly across Crete, which meant that, by avoiding the usual large dog-leg, it would be possible to provide an escort of twenty fighters, Spitfires of No 94 Sqn with long-range tanks and No 213 Sqn's newly acquired Mustangs.

Meanwhile twenty-six Beaufighters would be entering the Aegean at low level through the straits at the eastern end of Crete to fly along the coast and strike the convoy immediately after it had been bombed, when there would be maximum confusion.

The rocket attack on the merchant vessels was to be carried out by eight aircraft of No 252 Sqn. Eight aircraft of No 603 Sqn would go in first to neutralise the anti-aircraft defences on the starboard side, while another six from No 16 Sqn SAAF would do the same on the port side. Close escort and top cover was to be provided by four Beaufighters of No 227 Sqn.

The attack was a complete success. *Sabine* and *Gertrude* were left stationary in the water. *Tanais* was ablaze. Several of the escorts were damaged. One Bf 109 and two Arados were destroyed. Reconnaissance the next day found *Gertrude* in harbour blazing. There was no sign of *Sabine*. A day later Marauders and Baltimores bombed the harbour, sinking *Gertrude* and a destroyer.

Christopher Foxley-Norris was right. No two operations were ever



The 2,300 ton German freighter Sabine (previously the Italian Salvatore) under attack off Crete by Beaufighters of No 252 Sqn on 1 June 1944. She sank later that day. (V Cashmore)

the same.

Outcome

By the autumn it was clear that the Germans would soon be obliged to withdraw from Greece. The Caserta Agreement of September 1944 had placed all resistance forces (including ELAS) under British command and a month later British troops landed in Greece. The German garrisons in the Aegean islands were now completely isolated and responsibility for providing air support to the forces charged with their capture passed to the newly formed AHQ Greece. The Aegean Campaign was over.

Notes

- ¹ HQ Mediterranean Air Command was renamed HQ Mediterranean Allied Air Forces (MAAF) with effect from 10 December 1943, Tedder being superseded by Lt Gen Ira Eaker in January 1944.
- ² TNA Air 41/53. AHB Narrative *Operations in the Dodecanese Islands, September-November 1943*, p6.
- ³ *Ibid*, p29.
- ⁴ Foxley-Norris, Sir Christopher; *Royal Air Force At War* (London, 1983) p92.
- ⁵ TNA Air 20/2859. Memo, AMT/M/1680 dated 16 November 1942 from AMT, Air Mshl A G R Garrod to selected addresses.



MILITARY LIBRARY RESEARCH SERVICES LTD

MLRS Books was founded in 2004 to satisfy a demand for reprints of military items of historical interest, including documents, manuals, pamphlets and maps. While most of the material in the company's catalogue, some 700 items to date, is already in the public domain, much of it can be accessed only by visiting one of the handful of archives which happen to hold copies.

In the specific context of the RAF, MLRS already reprints many items from the RAF Museum's collection at Hendon and in 2009 it contracted with the Ministry of Defence to reproduce selected material held by the Air Historical Branch (AHB). The latter will eventually include all of the AHB 'narratives' relating to the RAF's activities in WW II, including the various campaign histories. Some of the AHB material is also being made available on the website of the RAF Centre for Air Power Studies (www.airpowerstudies.co.uk) where one can already peruse, for instance, the first two (of an eventual eight) volumes devoted to 'The Campaigns in the Far East' and four (of five) volumes covering 'The Liberation of NW Europe'.

These documents are entirely unedited, indeed, being facsimiles, they feature hand-written amendments and marginal comments made prior to projected publication – although in most cases they never were published. Much of the material generated by the AHB is available at The National Archives, of course, but researchers may consider that the inconvenience of a visit to Kew, not to mention the cost of travel and photocopying, is more than offset by the purchase of a facsimile. As an example, it would cost £52.80 to make a personal loose-leaf A3 photocopy of the 264-page Vol II of the Campaign in the Far East; the equivalent A4, bound (softback) MLRS reproduction is listed at £28.00.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Escape from Germany. The National Archives, 2009. £12.99.

Sqn Ldr Aidan Crawley, an ex-PoW who had made a number of escape attempts himself, was commissioned by the Air Historical Branch to research and write an account of the escape infrastructure as it evolved in the context of the Germany of WW II. He completed the task in 1951 but the document carried a Confidential classification which precluded its publication. An edited edition appeared commercially five years later but the full text was not released until 1985. Since then it has been available in The National Archives (*née* The Public Record Office) at Kew, but catalogued under 'Air Publications and Reports' as AIR 10/5725, rather than in the AIR 41 series, which covers 'AHB Narratives and Monographs', which is where one (or at least I) would have expected to find it.

There is an ongoing campaign aimed at making the various works prepared by the AHB over the years more readily accessible (see page 172) and *Escape from Germany* is a beneficiary of this initiative. It is a chunky 392-page softback with a small photographic insert providing twenty images. The content is logically arranged and presented in three parts. The first addresses circumstances and techniques and covers background topics ranging from the psychological impact of being imprisoned, via the problems that had to be overcome in making an escape, to the organisation that was necessary in order to succeed. It goes on to examine the specifics of the escape 'industry' describing the methods used to derive intelligence and to produce maps, food, clothing, tools and much else. The second part of the book deals with the various camps in which airmen were detained and provides accounts of the escapes made from them, with particular attention being paid to the twenty-nine that resulted in successful home-runs. The final section of the book deals with the evacuations of the last few months of the war and the privations involved in these forced marches.

Some of the individual exploits have been described at much greater length elsewhere, eg in *The Colditz Story*, *The Wooden Horse* and *The Great Escape* and Oliver Clutton-Brock's *Footprints On The Sands Of Time* provides more detail on many aspects but, despite its having been written some sixty years ago, the information in *Escape*

from Germany is quite sufficient to provide a reasonably comprehensive overview. That said, this reviewer has no particular expertise in the field of escaping, and there may well be some esoteric aspects that are not covered. The narrative does not, for instance, deal with the establishment and work of MI9, or have much to say about evasion (because, to be fair, evasion is a separate issue), but a ten-page Introduction by Graham Pitchfork papers over that crack and *Escape from Germany* will, I think, tell the layman, even a relatively well-informed one, pretty much everything else that he is ever likely to need to know. And at the price, this one is a bargain.

CGJ

The Flyer by Martin Francis. Oxford University Press; 2008. £28.50.

The old adage of ‘never judge a book by its cover’ strikes a chord when presented with a copy of *The Flyer* by Martin Francis. The public appetite for books about the RAF in the Second World War remains voracious, as any visit to a bookshop testifies. *The Flyer* may appear at first glance to be yet another biography, or even hagiography, of that period. This initial impression is certainly fostered by Eric Kennington’s dashing image of Flt Lt A Taylor DFC and two bars on the cover.

This book, however, is emphatically not of that genre. The author has perceptively spotted a niche in the market. He has established that no one appears, thus far, to have studied RAF aircrew in the wider social and cultural context of that period. The result – as sixty-two pages of amplifying notes, bibliography and index testify – is a scholarly work that should commend itself to most members of the RAF Historical Society.

If there is a ‘health warning’ to be issued, it is simply that this book may appeal less (especially at £28.50 a copy) to those looking for an easy ‘page-turner’ on a long and tedious cross-continental flight.

Neither is this a book that panders to the vanities and elitism of aircrew in general, although Martin Francis readily acknowledges that the British public in 1939 ‘was spellbound by the martial endeavours of the flyboys . . . and their apparent good-natured charm and dashing style’. Rather, this book served to stoke up the dying embers of this reviewer’s social science studies by setting out to analyse the broader issues of gender, class, emotions and mythology of wartime aircrew.

The author achieves this diligently in eight well-researched, analytical and well-crafted chapters which address such issues as the status of aircrew at the outset of WW II, what bonded them together, their romantic and married life, their struggle with fear, and the ambivalence of aircrew as both chivalrous warrior and brutal killer. In a particularly poignant and compelling chapter, Martin Francis deals with those who suffered physical and psychological problems (like the 'Guinea Pigs'). He concludes with the issues that confronted aircrew as they returned to civilian life at the end of the war.

In an attempt to broaden the appeal of this essentially academic book, OUP trails the thought on the flyleaf that the book's conclusions, *inter alia*, have implications for the history of gender in modern Britain. Possibly so. This reviewer was more struck by comparisons with his own Service experience having joined the RAF some sixteen years after the end of WW II. For instance, one of the factors that appealed at the time was the much-vaunted claim that the RAF was meritocratic and more concerned with character and technical competence than by the social exclusiveness of the other two Services. As Francis adroitly points out, the problem was that at the time 'most senior commanders identified good character in terms of their own experience in private schools and elite universities'. That at least has changed in the contemporary RAF.

But the book's enduring utility is in presenting a detailed study of the RAF at a time when the romance of flight held the British public in its thrall. Despite continuing high attendance at contemporary military airshows, this romantic notion has undoubtedly been attenuated by the banal and routine exposure of civil aviation today.

For those who take a serious interest in the history of the RAF, however, this book could be shortlisted on birthday and Christmas wish-lists.

Sir David Cousins

Swift to Battle No 72 Fighter Squadron RAF in Action, Volume 1, 1937 to 1942 – Phoney War, Dunkirk, Battle of Britain, Offensive Operations by Tom Docherty. Pen & Sword, 2009. £19.99.

There is no doubt that the author has approached his subject with a great deal of enthusiasm and has put in a lot of effort. He has undoubtedly read his way through the Form 540s and the content of

Volume 1 (a 256-page hardback with 225 B&W illustrations and one map) is accurately reflected in its extended title. It would appear though, from his Preface on p8, that his original idea has been somewhat modified, as it is stated there that the first volume of two would record the history of the squadron between 1917 and 1942 and that the second volume would cover the period 1942 to 1961. From the inside cover of the dust jacket it would now seem that Volume 2 will tell of the period 1942 to 1947 and Volume 3 follow on with 1947 to 1961.

It is a pity that what would seem to have been the original plan (1917 to 1942) was not followed to the extent that the squadron's history during WW I could have been covered in far greater detail. As it stands, it has been dealt with in less than a page of text followed by ten rather randomly selected photographs. There is much of interest in the early years 1917-19 and it is far from difficult to research. Indeed there is also a considerable amount of material available on the helicopter years 1961-2002, including much of an unclassified nature in the squadron archives on the period in Northern Ireland from 1969.

The story from 1937 to 1942 has a narrative structure which is both clear and logical; the author's linking text, in which he comments upon contemporary events in the wider world, is interspersed with frequent passages in italics which are clearly the words and memories of pre-war and wartime squadron members and which are valuable in themselves but could have done with a bit of pruning. Given that the stated purpose of the book is to act as a work of reference for fellow historians, one would have expected an indication of the source of the italicised material, but this information is lacking. For example, are the quotes from Bill Rolls from his book *Spitfire Attack* which was published by Kimber in 1987?

There is considerable detail in the book with regard to daily activities, combat deaths and injuries, postings in and out, individual actions and aircraft serial numbers (both British and German). All German words and designations in the text are in italics but not all are explained to the uninitiated, such as this reviewer, eg *1/KuFlGr406*, *Aufkl Gr Obdl* or *Seenotflugkdo 3*. There are some nice little anecdotes which serve to give a flavour of life on the squadron and help to lighten a text which tends to be a bit on the stodgy side – I liked the tales of make do and mend during the Battle of Britain, see pp107-108

and also the rather heart-warming story of the downed Stirling crew on p196.

Overall it is a worthy effort which certainly adds detail to the story of one particular squadron. However is there enough really interesting and significant material to justify a work of three volumes on a mere twenty-four years out of a squadron history of more than ninety – no matter how distinguished it is? I would tend to think that it would have been better to edit the vast amount of information to which the author refers and to have produced a single more tightly written volume of perhaps 300 pages covering the whole of the squadron's history. This would have brought a much greater degree of self-induced discipline to the process, which would, I think, have been of benefit.

A good example of the need to weed out material is the photographs. There are more than 200 of these and very many of them could have been left out with no detriment to the book at all. A large number are not only repetitive in nature but are also very poorly reproduced. I could list these but it would be rather tedious, suffice to say my imaginary 300 page book could have 60-70 really good photos from the large number to which the author is fortunate enough to have had access.

There are eleven appendices, which provide a considerable amount of useful information.

Some quibbles: p24, Sir Hugh Dowding was an Air Chief Marshal in 1937, not MRAF Lord; p74, AVM Keith Park did not have a knighthood until 1942; p81 Lord Trenchard had been a MRAF since 1927; p225 Appendix 7 is mistitled.

Guy Warner

Master Bombers by Sean Feast. Grub Street, 2008. £20.

In 2006 Grub Street published *Heroic Endeavours* (which I have not read) in which Sean Feast provided an account of an air raid on Cologne carried out by Nos 35, 109 and 582 Sqns on 23 December 1944. It was a small scale (only thirty aircraft were involved) daylight attack but the anticipated cloud cover failed to materialise. Due to this, and other factors, six aircraft failed to return – a 20% loss rate. It would seem that, in the course of researching that book, the author made contact with a number of veterans of No 582 Sqn and that this

provided the inspiration, and much of the material, for *Master Bombers*.

This second book, a 304-page hardback, is a variation on the theme of a squadron history. It is self-evident from its designation that No 582 Sqn was one of those short-lived, high-number, WW II-only units. Formed within No 8 Gp at Little Staughton on 1 April 1944 from elements drawn from Nos 7 and 156 Sqns, its crews were already Pathfinder experienced. As a result, the new unit was operational almost immediately and it flew its first mission on 9/10 April. In the course of the next twelve months the squadron would launch 2,157 sorties and deliver some 8,000 tons of bombs, at a cost of 168 lives and thirty-nine Lancasters. After VE-Day the squadron spent a few months repatriating PoWs from Germany and troops from Italy before disbanding on 10 September 1945.

Since the squadron's story was so brief, it was not essential for the author to adhere to the classic chronological convention and, while most of its operational activities are covered, he has chosen to concentrate on personalities, permitting him to record the previous experiences of some of these men. This approach also facilitated his broader aim, which was to focus attention on the exploits of the Pathfinders in general, an eventual posting to No 582 Sqn serving as the link between his chosen individuals. The exercise has worked very well and, while appropriate use has been made of the unit's F540 and the citations for decorations and awards held in the archives at Kew, the book's strength lies in the author's having been able to interview, and/or study the log books of, twenty-one of the men who flew with the squadron. What I found particularly pleasing is that these stories reflect the experiences of all aircrew categories; seven of them were pilots but the accounts of their exploits are balanced by those of four air gunners, four navigators, two flight engineers, a wireless operator and a WAAF controller.

So far, so good, but there is a down side. While the author is clearly devoted to his subject and he can certainly write, he is not too familiar with air force lore. As a result, one is obliged to do the occasional double-take when confronted by Stradwell (for Stradishall), Mileham (for Millom), Bishops court (for Bishops Court), Verey (for Very), diheydral (for dihedral) and leavers (for levers!), No 26 OTU at Leighton Buzzard (for Wing) and the CFS being at

Cranwell. There are more – there is no such rank as LAC2; the standard bombsight was the Mk XIV (not XVI); there is no ‘s’ in aircraftman; the unit numbered 1481 was a (Bombing) Gunnery Flight (not a Gunnery School); Peter Wykeham-Barnes was never CAS; Bennett’s successor as AOC 8 Gp was AVM Whitley (he didn’t become Air Marshal Sir John until 1956); and I will take a lot of convincing that anyone ever flew Bothas in Canada. I could go on – and on, but that is, I think, sufficient warning of the sort of pitfalls that the reader will encounter. That said, there is one other anomaly worthy of mention. Among his published sources, the author cites *Carried on the Wind* and *Flying Through Fire*, both by Sean Feast; I have been unable to trace a copy of the first of these and the only *Flying Through Fire* of which I am aware is by Geoffrey Williams.

I fear that, by pointing out these problem areas, I will have created the wrong impression. Having become aware that a book does contain errors, I believe that a reviewer has an obligation to point this out, but the fact that there are some inaccuracies does not necessarily mean that a book is fundamentally flawed. This one certainly is not. Having written a squadron history myself I am only too well aware of how difficult it is to sustain a reader’s interest while attempting to describe a succession of incidents/sorties/combat that are, in their essentials, almost identical. Feast is a journalist by trade, rather than an historian, and it shows. He can hold your attention – at least, he did mine.

CGJ

A Pathfinder’s War by Flt Lt Ted Stocker with Sean Feast. Grub Street, 2009. £20.

I think that it is reasonable to see the 206-page *A Pathfinder’s War* as the third volume of a trilogy having No 582 Sqn as its common theme. As one of a number of individuals described in *Master Bombers* (see above), just ten pages were allocated to Ted Stocker, whereas he is the central character in this latest book. It is written in the first person, giving it the appearance of a self-penned autobiography, and, since some passages appear in both books, it seems likely that the basis of the content had indeed been written by Stocker, perhaps even before *Master Bombers* was being drafted. But it is quite evident that Sean Feast has had a substantial influence on what eventually appeared between the covers of *A Pathfinder’s War*.

This has had a significant impact on the ‘tone’ of the book, making it a bit of a bumpy ride – or perhaps read. The problem is that the first-hand account is frequently punctuated by passages summarising the careers of individuals whose orbits passed through the arc of Stocker’s own career, and equally tangential injections of operational data, much of it almost certainly drawn from the (unaccredited) works of Middlebrook and Everitt and/or Chorley. While these discursive episodes have the positive effect of assisting his co-author in his admirable aim of publicising the exploits of Pathfinders in general, they also serve to interrupt the flow of Stocker’s story. This sort of thing may not trouble all readers, of course, but I was frequently distracted by the Stocker/Feast interfaces, which are not always seamless – I can’t, for instance, believe that someone with more than 3,000 hours of airborne time under his belt would write (on p24) of a pilot attempting to make a false landing?

Even with that caveat, however, I would still unhesitatingly recommend this book. Why? For two reasons. First, because, despite my reservations, it is not badly written and, oddly enough, it is largely free of the kind of annoying inaccuracies that are so prevalent in *Master Bombers* (although my maths indicates that ten guineas a week would have been thirty shillings a day, not three – p184).

The second, and more important, reason is that Ted Stocker’s story is such a remarkable one. A pre-war Halton/Cosford apprentice, by then a corporal, he became aircrew in 1941. One of the earliest airmen to be recognised as a flight engineer, he flew in that capacity for the rest of the war, completing a remarkable 105 sorties with Nos 35, 102, 35 (again), 7 and 582 Sqns, a little less than half of them on Halifaxes, the rest on Lancasters – and no fewer than 85 of them with the PFF. Surviving (and Stocker assures us that that is the right word – and he is equally adamant that the dominant factor affecting survival was luck) for that long, made him an expert in his field and he was decorated with a well-earned DFC and, unusually, especially for a flight lieutenant (he was commissioned in 1943) and a non-pilot to boot, a DSO. Along the way we are given some insight into the role of the flight engineer, the most unsung of aircrew categories, and it may come as a revelation to some to learn just how much reliance was eventually placed upon them. This was especially the case within the PFF where they often assumed responsibility for visual bomb aiming

and even, on occasion, actually broadcasting instructions to the Main Force when flying with the Master Bomber.

After the war, Stocker took part in a three-Lancaster tour of Brazil, led by Sir Arthur Harris, before transferring to Transport Command where he soon acquired an 'A Cat', but in 1948-49 he achieved his long-term ambition by becoming a pilot. In 1951, after a tour on Lancasters with Coastal Command, he was selected to become a member of the team that was sent to the USA to convert to, and ferry back to the UK, the first Neptunes for the RAF. Unfortunately, he lost his aircrew medical category in 1956 and left the Service to pursue a career which eventually embraced a variety of aspects of applied engineering.

The book's subtitle claims that Stocker's tale is 'extraordinary'. It is, and it is well worth reading.

CGJ

High Stakes, Britain's Air Arms in Action 1945-1990 by Vic Flintham. Pen and Sword 2009, £40.

This book does what it says on the tin. It charts the involvement of the RAF, Fleet Air Arm and Army Air Corps from 1945, as the dust of WW II was settling, right the way through to 1990 (if you believe the front cover) or 1995 (if you believe the flyleaf). The fact that no one on the Pen and Sword editorial team picked up on this typo discrepancy got me slightly worried, but it did not detract from the overall majesty of the book.

Vic Flintham is a general aviation pilot who has researched post-war military aviation for many years. This book is obviously a labour of love and I believe Vic when he writes that it comprises a lifetime in the accumulation of data and the sifting of facts. I liked the way in which he begins the chronicle with a chapter on immediate post-war 'colonial' actions, from Greece in 1944 to the North-West Frontier of Pakistan in 1947. You won't get much text on campaigns and you will need to be up to speed on longstanding troublesome folk such as the Faqir of Ipi, but there are some cracking illustrations throughout and good lists of RAF orders of battle and deployments.

The next section covers ideological confrontation from Iran to BRIXMIS in Berlin, followed by chapters dealing with colonial conflicts in the 1950s, the airborne nuclear deterrent, the Middle East

in the 1950s and '60s, humanitarian aid, peacekeeping and conflict avoidance, territorial confrontation, homeland security and finally, the Middle East up to Operation DESERT STORM in 1991. There is lots of good detail and lists here, drilling down to British nuclear weapons and their yields. There are gaps. The Netherlands East Indies 1945-46 section make no mention of the RAF mutiny because personnel weren't allowed to go home to be demobbed, nor does the Palestine section underline the fact that 1949 was the last time an RAF pilot in an RAF aircraft was shot down in air-to-air combat. When it comes to 'sniffing' the atmosphere after other nations' nuclear tests, Vic says that the RAF 'lacked any upper-air sampling capability [from 1957] to 1973.' All those Chinese and French post-test clouds that I flew through in my Victor B2(SR) while on No 543 Sqn must have been my imagination.

I put such 'gotchas' down to the huge canvas that Vic attempts to cover. His enthusiasm for his project is infectious and I did enjoy looking at his illustrations. I also learned a lot that I did not know before, although the text could be rather shallow. This book is a major work of reference but as such it would have benefited greatly from having an index. There is a lot of good information in here, but would I spend 40 of my hard-earned British pounds on it? Probably not.

Wg Cdr Andrew Brookes

Upward & Onward by Bob Cossey. Pen & Sword, 2008. 327pp. £25.00

Upward and Onward is a 327-page biography of Air Vice-Marshal John Howe CB CBE AFC written by the secretary of the 74 Squadron Association. Bob Cossey has a number of books to his credit, including two studies of No 74 Sqn's activities. Perhaps as a result, the flow of this one is often interrupted by a pause to share a peripheral fact that his research has garnered, and which he just cannot bear to ditch – like the colour of the eyes on the Caterpillar Club badge! Nevertheless, the story at the core of the book is gripping enough to withstand these diversions.

A South African, Howe, began his flying career in the SAAF, flying seventy-five P-51 sorties with its No 2 Sqn in Korea (one of fourteen appendices lists all of the unit's 95 aircraft and their fates). On returning home, having been exposed to the relatively widespread

integration practised within the USAF, he became increasingly disenchanted with domestic racial policy and in 1954 he resigned and moved to the UK to join the RAF. He was not alone, of course, a year or two prior to this Phil Lagesen (whose name Cossey mis-spells – not the only error of this kind) had done much the same thing.

After a stint as a QFI, Howe was posted to No 222 Sqn to fly the shiny new Hunter but the RAF decided to exploit the expertise that he had acquired working as an FAC during a three-month ground tour extension of his time in Korea and he was attached to No 42 Cdo in that capacity for the Suez affair. After more Hunter flying with No 43 Sqn he was selected, as a newly-promoted squadron leader, to introduce the Lightning into service in 1960 as OC 74 Sqn – some readers may recall the squadron's show-stealing turn at Farnborough in the following year.

Perhaps inevitably, the author tends to focus on No 74 Sqn and the Lightning but this does rather unbalance the narrative. While many members of this Society will be familiar with the aircraft and station life of the RAF of the 1950s and '60s, it would, I think, have been worth expanding a little on the more mundane, and thus less-well recorded, business of staff appointments at MOD and sundry HQs, and to the trials and tribulations of Staff College. Howe's time on No 54 Course at Bracknell, for instance, gets just a paragraph and a half (although the lecture syllabus is reproduced in full in another of those appendices). Nevertheless, this serves to record his disdain for the then Secretary of State for Defence (Dennis Healey) who told the Course that defence policy was on track and that programmes were not under threat. A week later they were all cancelled – farewell TSR2, P1154, etc provoking Howe's quoted comment: 'How can you ever trust a politician when they do such dishonourable things?'

His staff work in the late 1960s/early '70s gets similarly short shrift, with just a page to cover almost three years as DDOR(4), and he imparts to his biographer that he didn't like the job since 'it involved nothing but paperwork and, more to the point, the people at MoD weren't his type of people.' I hope his contemporaries in Main Building can ride the punch.

Having already undertaken a staff tour in the USA, Howe returned in 1968, to familiarise himself with the F-4, prior to introducing the Phantom into the RAF as the first OC 228 OCU. The next major

milestone was passed in 1973 when he was appointed to command RAF Gütersloh – ‘the best posting of his career.’ Thereafter it was back to the mundane, first the RCDS course, which is dismissed in half a page (but with his dissertation on the lessons of the air war in Vietnam and their applicability to the Central Front reproduced in full as yet another appendix), followed by Commandant of the Royal Observer Corps, command of the Southern Maritime Region, and a final dual assignment as Commandant General RAF Regiment and Director General of Security RAF.

Not a bad run for anyone, but one can perhaps detect just a tinge of regret in the final paragraph when he observes ruefully that, ‘I suppose I may have made Air Marshal if I had been able to resist the urge to speak my mind . . . in short, I would have progressed further if it hadn’t been for me!’

As a biography, this study is a mixture of over-zealous detailing (Appendix N provides a description of every aircraft type that Howe flew, even if only once, along with the associated dates from his log book) and rapid skimming over areas that might have benefited from a longer look. But the enthusiasm for the flying game in general, and the raw excitement of operations in Korea, and at Suez in particular, give the book a flow and energy that firmly offset those troubling inaccuracies.

Air Cdre Phil Wilkinson

Immediate Response by Major Mark Hammond DFC RM. Michael Joseph; 2009. £17.99.

Given the unpopularity of the invasion of Iraq and the continuing controversy surrounding the legality of the attack and the events which followed, it is perhaps unsurprising that few written accounts have reached the bookshelves. Operation HERRICK; the involvement in Afghanistan is, on the other hand, spawning an increasing number of books, some of which are well worth reading.

Inevitably, the majority of published accounts relate to land operations but several do address aspects of the air war. This one, a 303-page hardback (featuring sixteen pages of photographs, two maps and a cutaway drawing of a Chinook), covers the contribution made by the RAF’s Support Helicopter force, at present comprising almost exclusively Chinooks drawn from the three squadrons based at

Odiham. The author of this account's being a Royal Marine officer, highlights the fact that the force is manned by men and women from all three Services and, moreover, that the aircraft are operated under the aegis of the Joint Helicopter Command.

Major Mark Hammond's *Immediate Response* deals mainly with his deployment to Helmand province in 2006 when he participated in some of the most difficult operations supporting the army at obscure locations such as Sangin and Kajacki whose names have since become more familiar. Hammond tells his story in a 'no holds barred' manner and he conveys clearly the whole gamut of emotions, thoughts and fears associated with placing oneself deliberately in harm's way. The account is first-hand, gut-wrenching stuff as Hammond describes the problems of operating a Chinook in the inhospitable terrain of Afghanistan. He also describes some of the tactical issues arising from working closely with the forces of other nations whose SOPs may be significantly different from one's own.

This story will leave no one in any doubt about the difficulties being faced in this conflict and it is a book that needed to be written for the benefit of those at home who might have little appreciation of what is going on in Helmand.

Unfortunately, the book has a serious downside; it is written in the language of the gutter and, whilst strong language will inevitably be a feature of 'everyday speak', the book takes profanity to extremes and completely unnecessarily. Furthermore, a lurid list of the names used to describe parts of the female anatomy and a several-page 'strop' about an army officer who used the crew's toilets add nothing to the narrative and, in my judgement, serve to detract from what is a serious subject. Hammond could have conveyed the essentials of his story in a different way but, nonetheless, I hope people who pick up the book will see beyond the liberal use of the bad language to what is an extremely interesting and enlightening tome.

Wg Cdr Colin Cummings

Flying Freestyle by Squadron Leader Jerry Pook MBE DFC. Pen & Sword; 2009. £25.00.

Flying Freestyle is an extension of Jerry Pook's earlier reminiscences, which were published in 2007 with the self-explanatory title of *RAF Harrier Ground Attack Falklands*. The new

book is a mixture of observations, some light-hearted, some serious, covering his time in a variety of fast-jet cockpits, thus providing an entertaining insight into a unique flying career. His considerable experience embraced the Hunter, Harrier, F-104 Starfighter and Tornado GR. Pook's writing style is easy to absorb and his tale embraces his solid family upbringing, his selection for Cranwell and his subsequent flying career, which came to an end after 28 years, when he lost his medical category. His assessments of his own strengths and weaknesses are forthright, emphasising that he saw himself as a rebel (hinting, perhaps, at a degree of overconfidence), a characteristic that is sometimes invoked in the narrative to justify occasional incidents of indiscipline and aggression. However, these were typical traits in the young fighter pilot of the 1960s so, in that respect, Jerry Pook was little different from his contemporaries.

His descriptions of life on a Hunter squadron in the Middle East and on the Harrier in Germany contain several exaggerated references to, as he saw it, a pervasive drinking and socialising culture and use slang terminology which may not be understood by those outside the single-seat brotherhood. Improvisation and judgement of risk are to the fore and to an aviator more familiar with crew duty time, check lists and 'cockpit management' this may read like a description of a flying club manned by cowboys. However, it was these forceful characteristics and the use of initiative, imagination and improvisation which enabled the RAF's Harrier pilots to perform so well in the Falklands ten years later.

It is evident from his description of his exchange tour with the RNLAf, flying the F-104 at Volkel, that he was impressed by his host service, its people and the way in which his Dutch counterparts lived, both professionally and socially. He worked hard to become fluent in the language and to harmonise his lifestyle with that of his hosts, while drawing comparisons with his RAF experience. He sees the 'Zip', as the F-104 was known politely to his Dutch hosts (impolitely as *De Oude Dame* – The Old Lady), as a fine aircraft which, although maligned in its earlier days in NATO, had settled down to perform well in the all-weather tactical reconnaissance role. He has particular praise for its equipment and performance at low level, although he would have preferred to have had a Martin-Baker ejection seat, rather than the Lockheed model. His views on the operation, organisation

and equipment of the RNLAf are broadly positive and he draws a few unfavourable (and sometimes inaccurate) comparisons with the Harrier GR3 whose UHF radio, for example, was never the world's most reliable means of communication.

After his tour as a Harrier Flight Commander, which included the award of a DFC for active service in the Falklands, he began to become disillusioned with some aspects of the RAF and, in particular, the frenetic life of the Harrier Force so he sought an alternative cockpit in which to pursue his love of flying. This took him to the Trinational Tornado Training Establishment where he found the pace to be more measured and he adjusted easily to his new role as an instructor. His previous experience on the Starfighter, with its pilot-interpreted radar, was an advantage, as most of his Italian and German colleagues had come from similar backgrounds. During his tour at Cottesmore he was made an MBE but he eventually decided to seek a job in civil aviation.

Having acquired the appropriate license, within a few weeks of joining a charter airline, he concluded that he had made the wrong decision. His request to rejoin the Service was granted and he was soon back instructing at Cottesmore. Sadly, however, he was diagnosed with a serious medical condition and he was obliged to undergo open heart surgery, followed by a lengthy period of recuperation during which he experienced severe psychological problems which he describes with refreshing honesty. He remained at Cottesmore as a Tornado simulator instructor until his eventual retirement. He soon secured a civilian post as a Harrier simulator instructor where his extensive experience of fast-jet operations gave him a substantial degree of authority and credibility. His spirit of adventure continued to be whetted by sailing and he sustained his enthusiasm for flying by taking up gliding.

The RAF got its money's worth from Jerry Pook. If you have read neither of his books, I would suggest that you read *Flying Freestyle* first, as it provides an overview of his entire career and thus sets his more specific account of the Falklands campaign in perspective. Single-seat fighter pilots may well wish to purchase a copy but I can recommend *Flying Freestyle* as a good read for anyone with an interest in military aviation.

Gp Capt John Heron

ROYAL AIR FORCE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Royal Air Force has now existed for more than ninety years; the study of its history is deepening, and continues to be the subject of published works of consequence. Fresh attention is being given to the strategic assumptions under which military air power was first created and which largely determined policy and operations in both World Wars, the inter-war period, and in the era of Cold War tension. Material dealing with post-war history is now becoming available under the 30-year rule. These studies are important to academic historians and to the present and future members of the RAF.

The RAF Historical Society was formed in 1986 to provide a focus for interest in the history of the RAF. It does so by providing a setting for lectures and seminars in which those interested in the history of the Service have the opportunity to meet those who participated in the evolution and implementation of policy. The Society believes that these events make an important contribution to the permanent record.

The Society normally holds three lectures or seminars a year in London, with occasional events in other parts of the country. Transcripts of lectures and seminars are published in the *Journal of the RAF Historical Society*, which is distributed free of charge to members. Individual membership is open to all with an interest in RAF history, whether or not they were in the Service. Although the Society has the approval of the Air Force Board, it is entirely self-financing.

Membership of the Society costs £18 per annum and further details may be obtained from the Membership Secretary, Dr Jack Dunham, Silverhill House, Coombe, Wotton-under-Edge, Gloucestershire. GL12 7ND. (Tel 01453-843362)

THE TWO AIR FORCES AWARD

In 1996 the Royal Air Force Historical Society established, in collaboration with its American sister organisation, the Air Force Historical Foundation, the *Two Air Forces Award*, which was to be presented annually on each side of the Atlantic in recognition of outstanding academic work by a serving officer or airman. The RAF winners have been:

1996	Sqn Ldr P C Emmett PhD MSc BSc CEng MIEE
1997	Wg Cdr M P Brzezicki MPhil MIL
1998	Wg Cdr P J Daybell MBE MA BA
1999	Sqn Ldr S P Harpum MSc BSc MILT
2000	Sqn Ldr A W Riches MA
2001	Sqn Ldr C H Goss MA
2002	Sqn Ldr S I Richards BSc
2003	Wg Cdr T M Webster MB BS MRCGP MRaES
2004	Sqn Ldr S Gardner MA MPhil
2005	Wg Cdr S D Ellard MSc BSc CEng MRaES MBCS
2007	Wg Cdr H Smyth DFC
2008	Wg Cdr B J Hunt BSc MSc MPhil

THE AIR LEAGUE GOLD MEDAL

On 11 February 1998 the Air League presented the Royal Air Force Historical Society with a Gold Medal in recognition of the Society's achievements in recording aspects of the evolution of British air power and thus realising one of the aims of the League. The Executive Committee decided that the medal should be awarded periodically to a nominal holder (it actually resides at the Royal Air Force Club, where it is on display) who was to be an individual who had made a particularly significant contribution to the conduct of the Society's affairs. Holders to date have been:

Air Marshal Sir Frederick Sowrey KCB CBE AFC
Air Commodore H A Probert MBE MA

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