

The RAF in Command: The Policing of Mesopotamia from the Air

By Captain Paul Horne

At the conclusion of the Great War the fledgling Royal Air Force faced a new struggle for survival. Having existed as an independent service for less than seven months it was naturally at great risk in the new, rapidly demilitarising world in which it found itself with the Army and the Royal Navy keen to revert to the pre-war, two Service, status quo. The Royal Air Force needed to justify its existence and quickly. To the RAF's hierarchy Imperial policing seemed to offer the most immediate and cost effective method of demonstrating the RAF's continued utility and securing their hard won independence. This article examines the circumstances which lead to the RAF taking command of security within the British Empire's newest mandate, Mesopotamia, and how they went about the task; both in the air and on the ground.

Introduction

At the conclusion of the Great War the British Government found itself in an unenviable position; four years of war had brought the nation to the brink of bankruptcy. Its arms race was now turned into a race to disarm as treasury sought to slash its expenditure on the armed forces. A restive public put pressure on their political masters as they sought to return to some semblance of normality following four long years as a martial society. The pace at which the Government went about demilitarising was relentless:

“In 1919 [defence spending] was about £604 million a year; a year later the level had dropped off to £292 million. In the succeeding year, the level fell to £110 million. The rapidly declining budget caused severe force reductions. The three and one-half million man force in 1918 was 800,000 in 1919; and by 1920 the figure stood at about 370,000. In just under 23 months the British military structure had been reduced by at least... 89 percent.”¹

However, following the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire the British Government found that its own Empire had expanded to include the troublesome region of Mesopotamia. In 1920 there were over 60,000 British and Indian troops garrisoning Mesopotamia at considerable cost to the treasury and when, in the summer of 1920, the simmering political tensions in the region boiled over into full scale revolt even this vast force was unable to put down the offensive. The revolt was eventually suppressed at a cost of 1,040 killed and missing soldiers with a further 1,228 wounded but it

had required the re-enforcement of the garrison by nineteen Battalions of the Indian Army and a further two RAF Squadrons.² Moreover the fiscal cost of the campaign sent shockwaves through Westminster:

“In order to maintain control of a minor colonial mandate with little strategic value, British military operations had cost the treasury 40 million pounds, considerably more than the British had spent in supporting the Arab revolt against the Turks in World War I.”³

Such enormous expenditure in men, material and money contrasted sharply with the RAF's recent success in the British Somaliland campaign against the 'Mad Mullah' Said Mohammed Bin Abdulla Hussan and his 10,000 Dervish followers. Here a joint force consisting of "one RAF squadron working in collaboration with the local gendarmerie regiment, the Somaliland Camel Corps and a battalion of the King's African Rifles"⁴ succeeded where the army had failed on numerous previous occasions and drove the Mullah out of the British protectorate once and for all, capturing or finally dispersing his followers; all at the relatively negligible cost of only £84,000.

Policing the Empire by air was an attractive prospect to both the RAF and the Government; for Lord Trenchard, the Chief of the Air Staff, it offered him the opportunity to carve out a new role for the RAF which would ensure its survival and prevent it being broken up and returned to the two senior services who were resentful of the claims this young upstart made upon the defence estimates. For the government the benefits of such a scheme were tangible fiscal gains

as the estimated cost of garrisoning Mesopotamia would fall from £25 million a year under the army⁵ to the £5 – 6million that was being offered to the RAF to take on the task.

The RAF took command of all British military forces within Mesopotamia on 1st October 1921. This force, under the command of Air Vice-Marshal Sir John Salmond, was composed of “eight RAF Squadrons and four RAF armoured car companies, 15,000 Iraqi levies and police and six Indian army brigades.”⁶ As we can see, Sir John Salmond had a vast array of troops at his disposal, the majority of which were land based rather than airborne. Nonetheless, it was, naturally, his airborne forces which would shape the most radical changes in the policing of this unstable land.

Mesopotamia’s insecurity stemmed from three main causes; the continued overtures being made by the Turks towards the Mosul region; the unsettled and potentially rebellious Kurdish tribes in the north and the marauding desert tribes and raiders from Njed in the south. Such diverse and overlapping threats to security created a complex political and military landscape for the RAF to operate in. In addition to these pressures junior commanders received no formal doctrine to support their new venture of air policing within a state until 1924 and the guidance given to them prior to this was often “more policy orientated than... operationally orientated, and from an air commander’s view would have been considered constraints on air actions.”⁷

Nonetheless, the RAF quickly adapted their operations to best confront the challenges that they

faced and they had a number of methods at their disposal. Chief among their uses of air power were offensive bombing (with or without the support of ground troops), punitive strikes, interference and propaganda.

The first real challenge to the RAF’s authority came in 1922 as the Turks crossed the border and entered the disputed Mosul province:

“Imperial troops were defending the area, but were having a rough of it when the RAF began attacking Turkish outposts in November 1922. The bombing campaign intensified in December, and in February 1923 a combined air-ground campaign effectively ejected the last remaining Turkish forces from the area.”⁸

The RAF had secured a resounding victory for the much maligned policy of air policing; by operating in close concert with ground troops they had acted as a force multiplier and enabled a victory that ensured the border between Mesopotamia and Turkey was no longer in dispute.

However, this type of all out offensive action was rare during the RAF’s tenure policing Mesopotamia; more usually the RAF policed its mandate using a combination of punitive strikes and interference. Punitive strikes were an old and well known method of policing the Empire and had in the past followed a reasonable set pattern: a rebellious tribe would transgress in some way shape or form, a mobile column of varying size would march or ride out to the tribal centre where they would burn crops, destroy encampments or villages and possibly killing any rebels who were foolish enough to make a stand.

Such expeditions were undoubtedly

successful but they were slow and manpower intensive too. The speed and the reach of a small force of aircraft meant that “air control meant substituting aerial bombardment for the traditional ground-based punitive expedition”⁹ and this smaller, faster force was by no means less destructive:

“within 45 minutes a full-sized village... can be practically wiped out and a third of its inhabitants killed or injured by four or five planes which offer no real target and no opportunity for glory or avarice.”¹⁰

The potential to launch such a rapid, violent response ensured that the tribal regions soon appreciated that the government’s retribution would soon follow hot on the heels of any transgression. Indeed the extended reach and speed meant that punitive raids could be employed to punish offences that would have previously been deemed too minor to launch a ground expedition:

“in several instances [the RAF] bombed tribes who refused to pay their taxes... Once tribes got the message that the British were really serious about paying taxes, fiscal cooperation seems to have been the order of the day, and tax compliance in Iraq reached a satisfactory level.”¹¹

Whilst these punitive air expeditions were at least as lethal as their predecessors mounted by ground troops the RAF began to develop its doctrine of ‘interference’. Sir John Salmond had realised “that aircraft achieve their result by their effect on morale, by the damage they do, by the interference they cause to the daily routine of life and not through the infliction of casualties.”¹²

It was the ability of the RAF to strike at the same tribe or village, day after day for an indefinite period, with relatively little risk to aircrew, which made interference so effective:

“the real weight of air action lies in the daily interruption of normal life which it can affect, if necessary for an indefinite period, while offering negligible chances of loot or of hitting back... [air action] can knock the roofs of huts about and prevent their repair, a considerable inconvenience in winter time. It can seriously interfere with ploughing or harvesting – a vital matter – or burn up stores laboriously piled up and garnered for the winter. By attacks on livestock, which is the main form of capital and source of wealth to the less settled tribes, it can impose in effect a considerable fine or seriously interfere with the actual sources of the tribe – and in the end the tribesman finds it much the best to obey the government.”¹³

Such interference quickly brought recalcitrant tribes to order as they realised the harsh consequences facing their families should this harassment continue. However, in stark contrast to the punitive raids mounted by ground troops, air action also reduced the residual resentment felt towards government forces through sound use of intelligence and propaganda both during and after the action.

The RAF utilised the junior officers of its ground forces for the purpose of intelligence gathering. These officers acted as the military attaché to local political officers or governors¹⁴ and “it was their duty to familiarise themselves with the district to which they were accredited in such a manner that, should air operations suddenly be required, they would be

enabled to make such arrangements as were necessary to ensure that aircraft found their correct targets.”¹⁵

Having then identified their targets leaflets would be dropped the transgressors spelling out in clear terms what they had done wrong, what action the government intended to take and how they might avoid this action. If this initial attempt to avoid violence failed leaflet drops and propaganda from loudspeakers fitted to the aircraft continued to emphasise “the peaceful intent of the British demands and stressed the futility of resistance against the impersonal, invulnerable and ubiquitous air force”¹⁶ throughout the bombing or interference campaign.

The RAF’s use of air as a means of delivering propaganda both before and during these operations was complemented by the use of aircraft after a campaign “as a means of positive contact with the former enemy: doctors were flown to the remote sites when needed, natives were evacuated to large medical facilities if required, messages were delivered from one local chief to another in the course of normal flying duties and similar acts of good faith were performed.”¹⁷ Such acts had a great deal of influence upon these recently pacified communities and served to reinforce the positive benefits of accepting government rule.

Whilst air policing was able to punish and even rehabilitate recalcitrant tribes in Mesopotamia, air power alone was seldom enough to influence or quell more organised and hard-line resistance. When, in 1923, the Kurdish leader Sheik Mahmud and his followers began

a guerrilla campaign which sought to re-establish Kurdish autonomy or even independence, the attempts to put down this insurgency by air power alone were unsuccessful and the aircraft of the RAF had to take a supporting role:

“The RAF bombed Suliamania [the Kurdish capital] for many months without noticeable effect on the morale of Mahmud and his supporters. In the operations against Mahmud, the air force cooperated with the army and police columns trying to corner the rebels. The army columns were often mounted as light as possible. The primary role of the RAF in such operations was reconnaissance, and in this role the aircraft proved fairly effective. When the British/Iraqi troops cornered the rebels, the RAF provided heavy firepower in the form of close air support.”¹⁸

This tough and politically motivated opposition had shown that air power alone could not overcome formidable opposition. Nonetheless the RAF were able to adapt their tactics and assume the subordinate role within the combined air/ground campaign which eventually defeated the Kurdish uprising and forced Sheik Mahmud into exile. Such versatility highlights the fact that the RAF’s developing doctrine of Air Control was not firmly rooted in the concept of bombing one’s enemies into submission and aircrews could adapt their tactics to best suit the nature of each individual threat.

By 1925 it was clear that Air Control had been successful in policing Mesopotamia and the critics back in the United Kingdom had been silenced. Indeed, plaudits flooded in from every quarter. Henry Dobbs, the High Commissioner, boasted that

“Air Control has been so brilliantly, magnificently successful that it has far outstripped the expectations of the Cairo Conference of 1921”¹⁹ whilst the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Leo Amery, was of the opinion that “a general rising against the government was almost inconceivable.”²⁰

Whilst many observers in the United Kingdom saw Air Control as being exclusively exercised by the bomber it is important to remember that “Air Control occurred when the Air Ministry assumed responsibility for the defence of a particular region of the empire”²¹ and the RAF’s successes in policing the tribes in Mesopotamia was as much to do with the successful integration of ground troops into their operations as it was their ability to launch successive, rapid and long range strikes.

It is worthwhile examining the role the RAF’s method of targeting played in their successful policing of Mesopotamia. Traditional utility targeting is perhaps best epitomised in Col. John Warden’s Five Concentric Rings (Fig. 1)

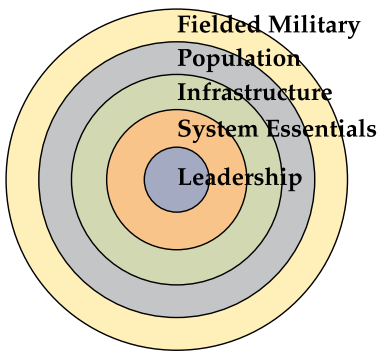


Fig. 1²²

Col. Warden selected five general areas or

systems that he believed were key centres of gravity to exploit any foe. The systems Warden picked were: leadership, organic essentials, infrastructure, population and fielded military force. One could envisage this model as a series of five concentric rings with the most important element at in the centre and progressively less important ones moving outward. A way to think about defeating an enemy was to attack the concentric circles from the inside out. That is, disable the most important centre of gravity first and work outward to less important rings.

Such a theory would have appeared radical to an Air Force formed amidst the bloody attritional slog of the Great War. Indeed the RAF’s early campaigns in Mesopotamia against the Turks seem to have conformed to this doctrine of chipping away at the outer layers of the circle. Nonetheless, the RAF seem to have attempted to strike at the ‘centre’ of their enemy with their bombing of Suliamania during their campaign against Sheik Mahmud, although with little success. It must have become quickly apparent that such utility based bombing was unsuited to their objectives in a country such as Mesopotamia. Utility targeting has the best effect whilst utilised in interstate conflicts rather than against the disparate tribes and ethnic groups that made up Mesopotamia.

However, the RAF did make considerable progress in moving away from a purely attritional doctrine throughout their time in Mesopotamia. As we have seen, although capable of inflicting grave casualties the RAF moved towards an interference based policy of policing. Such a policy more closely resembles the modern model of value

targeting (Fig. 2)



Fig. 2²³

Value targeting's aim is that "while eliminating or in some cases even ignoring the utility of [the enemy's] warfighting tools, to attempt to change their behaviour by holding their more highly valued but 'lower' and stronger needs at risk."²⁴ Such a system well suited the RAF who were, by and large, policing a people with no real warfighting tools which posed a suitable target. By striking at their 'safety and security needs', along with their 'belonging and social activity needs', by means of their interference campaign the RAF were targeting and denying that which the recalcitrant tribes valued highly – the ability to conduct their daily routine according to their own needs or desires.

There were of course criticisms of Air Control chief among these was the assertion that Air Control had only a transitory effect and that it lacked the ability to hold and dominate ground. Another was that "Air control was never as effective as advertised, and it could not provide answers to the political causes of colonial insurgencies. Except in the case of minor policing, airpower served mostly as a support arm to ground forces."²⁵ I believe these criticisms

are somewhat misguided, the RAF were not in Mesopotamia to solve the ethnic problems of this young nation but to police it in a manner that enabled it to be administered effectively and their inability to dominate ground was made up for by their ability to strike further, more quickly and more continuously than ground troops alone and with far less risk to those aircrews involved.

These aircrews also acted as a force multiplier in their engagements in support of ground troops. Their ability to conduct reconnaissance and give Close Air Support gave the ground forces the advantage on many occasions. It is also important to note that the task of policing Mesopotamia fell to the RAF – not just its aircrews. The system of intelligence networks, the propaganda campaigns, the armoured car squadrons, the development of the doctrine of interference and the close air/ground relationship all had an important part to play in the RAF's policing mandate; indeed one must question whether a police force modelled around the older empire model would have fared as well.

Such a ground led campaign would have certainly cost more in men and money; throughout their ten year tenure policing Mesopotamia the RAF lost only fourteen aircrew killed by enemy action and eighty-four wounded²⁶ and within a year of taking control they "had reduced British expenditure in the region from about £23 million to around £4 million"²⁷ and this is the crux of the issue – the RAF were despatched to Mesopotamia with two objectives; one of their own making and one of the Government's. The latter was to

police the mandate at a cost which would be acceptable to the British people – which they achieved beyond a shadow of a doubt. The former was to secure a role for themselves, and their survival as a separate service, amid the post-War cost-cutting and demilitarisation. Here again the RAF achieved a resounding success, securing once and for all their future as a fully independent service.

Notes

- ¹ Longoria, MA, *A Historical View of Air Policing Doctrine: Lessons From the British Experience Between the Wars, 1919 – 1939* (Alabama: Air University Press, 1993) p. 7/8
- ² Corum, JS “The Myth of Air Control: Reassessing the History,” *Aerospace Power Journal* (Winter 2000) p. 3
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Hall, D, “Ruling the Empire out of the Central Blue: Royal Air Force and Counter-Insurgency (COIN) Operations in the Inter-War Period” *Air Power Review*, 10:2 (2007) p. 71
- ⁵ Towle, PA, *Pilots and Rebels: The use of Aircraft in Unconventional Warfare, 1918 – 1988* (London: Brassey’s, 1989) p.15
- ⁶ Hall, D, “Ruling the Empire out of the Central Blue: Royal Air Force and Counter-Insurgency (COIN) Operations in the Inter-War Period” *Air Power Review*, 10:2 (2007) p. 71
- ⁷ Longoria, MA, *A Historical View of Air Policing Doctrine: Lessons From the British Experience Between the Wars, 1919 – 1939* (Alabama: Air University Press, 1993) p. 21
- ⁸ Ibid p. 20
- ⁹ Corum, JS “The Myth of Air Control: Reassessing the History,” *Aerospace Power Journal* (Winter 2000) p. 4
- ¹⁰ Salmond, Notes on the employment of the air arm in Iraq cited in

Corum, JS “The Myth of Air Control: Reassessing the History,” *Aerospace Power Journal* (Winter 2000) p. 5

¹¹ Corum, JS “The Myth of Air Control: Reassessing the History,” *Aerospace Power Journal* (Winter 2000) p. 6

¹² Salmond, correspondence file in AIR/338 taken from Longoria, MA, *A Historical View of Air Policing Doctrine: Lessons From the British Experience Between the Wars, 1919 – 1939* (Alabama: Air University Press, 1993), p. 21

¹³ Salmond to Trenchard, 29 Sep. 1923: Trenchard Papers, C11/27/1432 taken from Gray, PW, “The Myths of Air Control and the Realities of Imperial Policing” *Air Power Review* Vol. 4 No. 2 (2001) p. 44

¹⁴ Hoffman, B, *British Air Power In Peripheral Conflict, 1919 – 1939*, (Santa Monica: RAND, 1989) p. 15

¹⁵ Glubb JB, *War in the Desert: An RAF Frontier Campaign*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1960)

¹⁶ Dean, DJ, *Air Power in Small Wars: the British Air Control Experience*, handle.dtic.mil/100.2/ADA215899

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Corum, JS “The Myth of Air Control: Reassessing the History,” *Aerospace Power Journal* (Winter 2000) p.6

¹⁹ Omissi, DE, *Air Power and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force 1919 – 1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990) p. 35

²⁰ Ibid p. 35

²¹ Longoria, MA, *A Historical View of Air Policing Doctrine: Lessons From the British Experience Between the Wars, 1919 – 1939* (Alabama: Air University Press, 1993) p. 2

²² Wijninga, WW and Szafranski, R, “Beyond Utility Targeting: Towards Axiological Air Operations,” *Air Power Journal* Vol. 3 No. 2 (2006) p. 139

²³ Ibid p. 143

²⁴ Ibid p. 147

²⁵ Corum, JS "The Myth of Air Control: Reassessing the History," *Aerospace Power Journal* (Winter 2000) p. 13

²⁶ Parsons, DW, *British Air Control: A Model Application of Air Power in Low-Intensity conflict?* handle.dtic.mil/100.2/ADA215899 p. 9

²⁷ Omissi, DE, *Air Power and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force 1919 – 1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990) P. 36

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