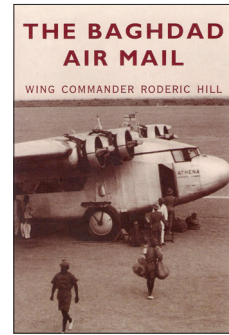


## Book Reviews



# The Baghdad Air Mail

By Wing Commander Roderic Hill

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Reviewed by Flight Lieutenant Chloe Bridge

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**Biography:** Flight Lieutenant Chloe Bridge is an officer in the Personnel Branch serving at the Headquarters of No. 1 Group at RAF High Wycombe. She recently commenced a Dowding Fellowship with King's College London.

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### Introduction

Who knew that a personal account about transporting mail in the 1920s could be so intriguing, captivating and relevant to a 21st Century audience? Wing Commander Roderic Hill's *'The Baghdad Air Mail'* offers readers a fascinating insight into the development of the RAF's desert air mail service between Cairo and Baghdad. First published in 1929, the book provides a detailed historical account of one man's perspective of operating and living in the Middle East. With similar environmental challenges that are still experienced today this account will appeal to those that have or are currently serving overseas and also aviation enthusiasts.

Wing Commander Hill was Officer Commanding 45 Squadron which operated the Vickers Vernon aircraft around the Middle East in the 1920s. Hill later became Commander-in-Chief of Fighter Command during the Second World War and after retiring from the RAF became Vice-Chancellor of the University of London in 1953.

Hill's *'The Baghdad Air Mail'* delivers a unique snapshot of history which conveys what life was like for an RAF Pilot on the mail route. Hill's own aim was to present personal narratives

so that readers could visualise and understand the conditions in the Middle East in the 1920s. He achieves this by utilising a number of British comparisons to describe the route. In one example Hill handily superimposes the entire mail route over an imaginary route in the UK from Penzance to the Shetland Islands giving readers scale and perspective.

The book is 238 pages long and well organised. It is essentially split into two distinct parts. The first part, roughly a third of the book, focuses on the development of the air route from its early conception in 1921. Here the history and operation of the route is also described.

The first part also has Hill meticulously describing a number of Middle Eastern cities which can be confusing to understand due to the sheer volume that are cited. However, with the inclusion of sketch maps, readers can become acquainted with locations quickly. The cities will be familiar to modern readers, examples being Fallujah, Mosul and Ramadi. Key descriptions of these places can be valuable to historians given that the locations and the surrounding areas have witnessed multiple wars and conflicts since the 1920s.

Hill changes focus for the second part of the book, describing in detail his personal flying experiences of six mail trips and rescue flights. Some accounts highlight how dangerous early flight was and the risks involved. These stories are easy for the reader to follow as Hill has already framed the context of the air mail route from the first part of his book, thus keeping the reader actively engaged. These personal experiences are so graphically described that readers can visualise themselves with Hill on his journeys. A whole chapter is dedicated to Hill's visit to a local Sheikh which provides a good depiction of British interactions with the local indigenous population.

Throughout the account Hill intertwines his narrative with small vignettes that give a unique perspective of life in the Middle East. He goes into detail about food, dodging dangerous desert creatures and listening to the 'rugger' scores over the wireless radio, especially when the RAF beat the Navy. He also describes eager crowds waiting at aerodromes for their valuable personal mail to be delivered. With the introduction of the air route, mail would only take a few days from London to Baghdad when previously it would take nearly a month. Although modern day technology such as the Internet allows instant communication, the delivery of mail, especially during Christmas time, still produces an excitement and anticipation with those serving overseas. Some modern day readers would certainly be able to relate to these vignettes.

After reading the account one cannot help but reflect on Hill's narrative. He was writing at a time when the RAF was early in concept and operating in a new and hospitable environment, but where innovation was crucial and at the forefront. The balance between risk and achievement is clear, not only for the newly created independent RAF but also for personnel serving in the Middle East. A balance that still faces individuals and commanders today.

The style and scale of this account makes 'The Baghdad Air Mail' a good read not only for those that have or are currently serving overseas but also aviation enthusiasts. It is historically interesting, gripping and provides a unique snapshot of RAF life during the 1920s. Modern day readers will be able to follow and enjoy this account. It is clear that Hill has a passion for aviation and storytelling which makes this book intriguing, captivating and relevant to a 21st Century audience.



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