Caught in the Middle
Air Combat between Israel and the RAF

By Sqn Ldr B T Williamson Retd

Since the end of Second World War, only six RAF aircraft flown by RAF pilots have been lost in air-to-air engagements; the most recent was on 6 November, 1956 when a Syrian Gloster Meteor F8 shot down an English Electric Canberra PR7 over Syria, killing one of the crew. The other five aircraft were shot down by a Canadian and three Americans, flying as volunteers for the Israeli Air Force, during three confused and controversial encounters between former comrades in arms in the skies over Israel and the barren Sinai Desert.

The background

Britain's active involvement in the territory that now encompasses the state of Israel began in 1917, when the British Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour, issued a declaration that promised a national home for the Jews in Palestine, provided this did not harm the existing population. With the end of the Second World War, as the full horror of the Holocaust was uncovered, the majority of the surviving European Jews attempted to make their way to Palestine, despite Britain's best efforts to maintain the status-quo between the Arabs and the Palestinian Jews. Britain's attempt to restrict the mass influx of Jews into Palestine during this period was to be the cause of great bitterness in the years ahead. By 1946, the 80,000 British soldiers, along with 12 RAF Squadrons or detachments in the region, became the target for Zionist terrorists. This culminated on 22 July, 1946 when Irgun terrorists blew up the HQ of the British Army, located in the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, killing 91 people and injuring a further 45.

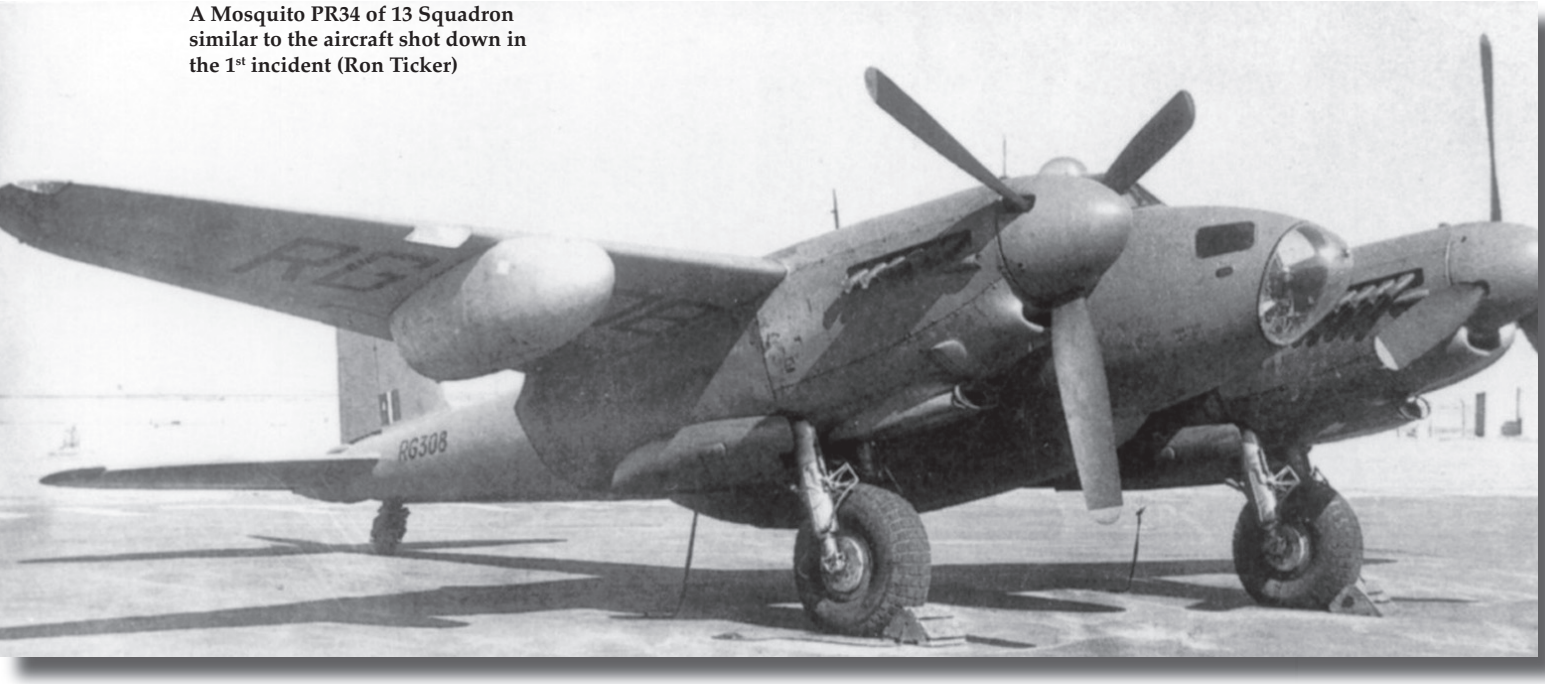
On 29 November, 1947 to the horror of the Palestinian Arabs, the UN General Assembly passed the Plan of Partition by a two-thirds majority, formally dividing up Palestine and creating a home for the Jews — Britain, as the Mandatory power, abstained in the vote and was required to remove all its forces from Palestine by

midnight 14 May, 1948. This decision resulted in increased fighting between the Jews and Arabs that rapidly increased in bitterness. Finding themselves caught in the middle of this conflict, 208 Sqn flying Spitfire FR18s were called on to attack Jewish forces that had engaged British Army units. The British forces were glad to see the back of Palestine and by 14 May, 1948 happily withdrew to established bases in Cyprus and the Egyptian Canal Zone, leaving only a small British garrison in the Haifa enclave to cover the final departure by sea of the remaining British personnel.

The War of Independence

On 14 May, 1948, David Ben-Gurion declared the new state of Israel whereupon the five surrounding Arab states immediately pledged to crush this emergent nation as quickly as possible. The only really effective Arab air force arrayed against Israel was the Royal Egyptian Air Force (REAF) equipped predominantly with British aircraft, the most effective being a number of Supermarine Spitfire Mk 5s and LF9s. The newly formed Chel Ha' Avir or Israeli Air Force (IAF) in comparison consisted of a ragbag collection of old transport aircraft and lacked any effective fighter aircraft whatsoever. The REAF made the most of this opportunity and mounted raids on Tel Aviv and other major towns knowing they would encounter only ground fire. Early on the morning of 22 May, 1948, the REAF attacked the RAF detachment at Ramat David airfield, where it was covering the British withdrawal, probably mistaking the airfield for one occupied by the IAF. The early morning raid caught the pilots of 208 Sqn recovering from the after-effects of an exuberant Dining-In Night, during which it had been decided to destroy the Officers' Mess to prevent it falling intact into the hands of the Israelis. The first attack destroyed two Spitfires of 32 Sqn and damaged a number of others, but without loss of life; a second attack shot up a Douglas Dakota as it was landing, killing two of the crew, as well as destroying a hangar and killing two airmen, whilst a third attack did little damage. However, by the second attack the RAF had mounted a standing patrol over the airfield and by the end of the third attack, a total

A Mosquito PR34 of 13 Squadron similar to the aircraft shot down in the 1st incident (Ron Ticker)



An IAF Spitfire LF9 of the type used in the 2nd and 3rd incidents

of five REAF Spitfires had been shot down, one by ground fire from two RAF Regiment Bren gunners, Sgt Atkinson and AC Waind. Fg Off Cooper and Fg Off Bowie both shot down one REAF Spitfire each and Fg Off McElhaw accounted for the two others — Cooper & McElhaw would later be involved in another incident on 7 January, 1949. The Egyptians later claimed that their aircraft had indeed mistaken Ramat David for the IAF base at Megiddo and even had the cheek to complain that their aircraft in the 2nd and 3rd raids had been shot down — understandably this incident did little to foster good relations or the exchange of information between the REAF and the RAF. On 23 May, 1948, as the final elements of the RAF left Ramat David and moved to the relative safety of Cyprus and the Canal Zone, the fighting between Israel and the surrounding Arab states increased in intensity.

The 1st Incident

As the fighting between Jews and Arabs continued, the RAF was tasked to keep an eye on developments and soon mounted almost daily overflights of the Sinai desert and Israel using de Havilland Mosquito PR34 aircraft of 13 Sqn from Kabrit in the Canal Zone. The unknown high-flying aircraft frequently made contrails as they flew over Haifa and Ramat David that were seen from the IAF bases, and became known to the IAF as the 'shufti kite'. Eventually, on 20 November, 1948 when the 'shuftykeit' was sighted over Galilee heading in the direction of Hazor, a guitar-strumming Carolina hillbilly named Wayne Peake hurriedly got airborne from Herzliya, flying one of two IAF North American P-51 Mustangs that had recently been re-assembled following their arrival in crates from the USA. Peake was a highly experienced USAAF fighter pilot, who had flown many combat missions over Germany during WW2 and was one of a number of non-Jewish Americans who eventually flew as volunteers for the IAF.

The Mosquito PR34 VL 620, callsign Graphic III, had departed Fayid at 1100hrs on the routine overflight of various Middle East countries, including Palestine that took place every 48hrs. The intelligence gathered from these missions helped inform a plan known as 'Barter', which entailed the UK going to the aid of Transjordan under the terms of the Anglo-Transjordan Treaty.

After leaving the Canal Zone, the aircraft climbed slowly towards Trans-Jordan then landed at RAF Habbaniya in Iraq to re-fuel. After departing Habbaniya the Mosquito should have climbed to maximum altitude whilst heading for northern Palestine, before turning south along the coastline allowing it to photograph various Israeli airfields. Meanwhile, after climbing up to around 30,000ft, Peake was guided towards the unarmed Mosquito by a South African volunteer pilot, Sid Cohen, who was tracking the aircraft with a pair of binoculars. However, because of a faulty oxygen system on the P-51, Peake was having difficulty seeing clearly. Finally, after struggling to find the aircraft, Peake eventually descended and intercepted the unarmed PR34, at 28,000 ft over Israel, and apparently incorrectly identified the aircraft as a Handley Page Halifax bomber.

Probably because the daily sorties over Israel had become almost routine and the RAF believed that the IAF lacked an aircraft capable of intercepting the PR34, the crew of pilot Fg Off Eric Reynolds and his navigator Fg Off Angus Love failed to spot the P-51 slowly closing from their rear. Peake finally got within range and opened fire, pouring 45 rounds into the Mosquito and observing strikes on the aircraft as well as the beginnings of a fire in the port engine. After a short second burst the guns on the P-51 jammed. Initially, the fire from the six .50 Brownings appeared to have little effect and the Mosquito continued on course. Then the aircraft turned out to sea, losing altitude to around 20,000ft probably in a futile attempt to escape, when it suddenly exploded and crashed off Ashdod, killing both the crew. Why the Mosquito was operating at such a comparatively low altitude, when it was capable of flying at 36,000ft where it would have been almost invulnerable to interception by the P-51, has never been explained. Also, considering that the P-51s had been unloaded in August, before becoming operational in October, the fact that the RAF were completely unaware that the IAF had obtained the P-51s, points to a singular failure in the British intelligence system. Finally, it is now known that ministerial approval for the overflight of various Arab countries and Israel was never sought, and these were authorised by the RAF C in C in theatre to provide the only

The area of the British Mandate in Palestine (Crown Copyright)

real source of intelligence on activities in that area. Given the recent history of the area, it was agreed that his decision was not unreasonable, nevertheless, the CAS, ACM Tedder, ordered a halt to further overflights until the appropriate ministerial approval had been obtained.

More fighter aircraft arrive

The IAF had to address its lack of fighter aircraft and slowly the first few Avia S-199s, Czech built versions of the Messerschmitt Me-109 that were purchased by Israeli agents in Czechoslovakia, began to arrive and were quickly pressed into service attacking advancing Arab forces. As the aircraft began arriving in Israel, with them also came a variety of foreign volunteer pilots, known as 'Machal' — volunteers in the War of Independence. Some were Jewish idealists with a genuine passion for defending the new state of Israel, some were adventurers who just wanted to fly, whilst others just needed a job and were not too bothered about the fairly basic pay — therefore it would not be unreasonable to describe some simply as mercenaries, although this description is always avoided by Israelis when describing the 'Machal'. However, none of the new IAF pilots liked the Avia S-199, nicknamed 'The Mule'. The Mule was powered by the Junkers Jumo 211F 12-cylinder liquid cooled engine, married to a large three-bladed wooden propeller, intended for the Heinkel He-111H bomber. The combination of engine and propeller generated far too much torque and this, together with the narrow track undercarriage, made the Mule very prone to ground looping when taking off or landing. Overall, many pilots considered the Mule was almost as dangerous to themselves, as it was to the Arabs and, with the REAF quickly replacing any Spitfires they lost, the IAF knew they had to acquire a more effective fighter — like a Spitfire. In their quest they managed to build one Spitfire from scrap parts left behind by the RAF and they also acquired a number of ex-RAF Spitfire LF9s from Czechoslovakia. The Czech Spitfires had originally been supplied by Britain to form the nucleus of the new Czechoslovak Air Force. But when Czechoslovakia came under Soviet domination, they came under pressure to dispose of the aircraft and replace them with Russian aircraft; eventually a total of 76 Spitfires would be sold to Israel by Czechoslovakia. These Spitfires, along with the Avia S-199s, formed 101 Sqn of the IAF and, together with a steady influx of experienced foreign pilots, gradually increased the IAF's capability. However, the REAF were also flying Spitfire LF9s with similar markings to the IAF LF9s and RAF Spitfire FR18s and the confusion this caused was almost certainly the primary reason for the second incident between the IAF and RAF.

The 2nd incident

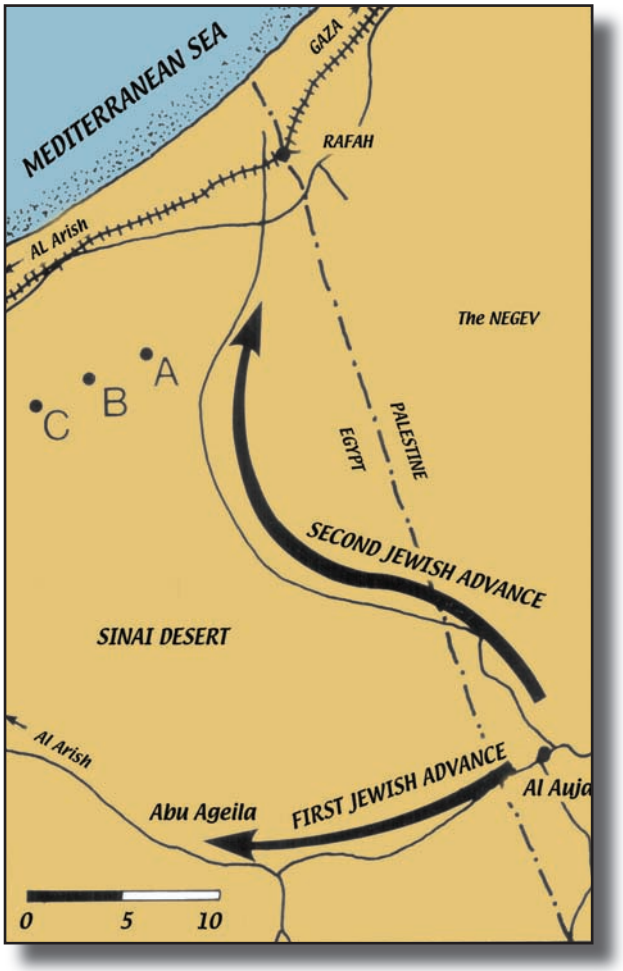
On the evening of 5 January, 1949 the Israeli leaders were informed that the Egyptian government had agreed to a ceasefire to take effect at 1600 hrs on 7 January, 1949; due to an astonishing foul-up in communications this information was never actually passed to the British forces in the Canal Zone. However, at this stage Israeli ground forces had already advanced over the border into Egyptian territory in the Sinai. On January 6, 1949, the AOC RAF Mediterranean and Middle East, Air Marshal Sir William Dickson, following orders from the Chief of the Air Staff, decided to continue to monitor the situation at the frontier between Egypt and Israel. As a result, 208 Sqn were told to prepare four Spitfire FR18s, to escort two Mosquito PR34s of 13 Sqn, who would undertake a reconnaissance sortie along the border. After the aircraft returned and reported that they had observed Israeli ground forces towing a captured REAF Spitfire along the Al Auja-Rafah road towards Israel, Sqn Ldr Morgan of 208 Sqn decided to task a further four Spitfires from his squadron to carry out an additional reconnaissance in this area the next day. The Spitfires were under strict instructions to avoid combat, unless they were attacked.

At 1115hrs on 7 January, 1949 the four Spitfire FR18s of 208 Sqn, flown by Fg Off Geoff Cooper, the formation leader,[1] with his No 2 Pilot/II Frank Close,[2] together with Fg Off Tim McElhaw and his No 2 Pilot/II Ron Sayers, got airborne from Fayid and headed for the Al-Auja-Rafah area in northeast Sinai. Despite some later reports to the contrary, the aircraft were fully armed and capable of returning fire. The formation had been clearly briefed not to cross the frontier into Israel;

however, it had also been made clear that any information they obtained if they 'accidentally' strayed over the border somewhere along the featureless desert, would be most welcome. It should also be remembered that, as Israeli ground forces were now positioned inside the Egyptian border, any route along the Egyptian side of the actual border would, at some stage, involve over-flying territory now occupied by Israeli ground forces. As the formation approached Abu Awiegila, the aircraft split into two sections, Cooper and Close descended to 500ft, with McElhaw and Sayers acting as top cover at 1,500ft. The planned route, along the expanse of desert that constituted the Egypt / Israel border, comprised a number of turning points and it would have been very easy for the formation to have inadvertently penetrated the border. It is now clear that the formation did briefly penetrate Israeli territory, along the Al Auja-Rafah road, as it searched for the REAF Spitfire last sighted being towed towards Israel. Eventually the RAF Spitfires headed back towards the area of Rafah, inside Egyptian territory. However, the RAF formation was unaware that some 15 minutes earlier 5 REAF Spitfire LF9s of 2 Sqn had attacked an Israeli armoured column in that area, setting three trucks on fire. A lack of communication between the REAF and the RAF, a result of the incident on 22 May, 1948, had ensured that the RAF formation was completely unaware that REAF Spitfires would even be in the area. Attracted by the smoking vehicles and curious to discover what had happened, the four RAF Spitfires turned towards the scene of the attack. As they approached the vehicles, Cooper and Close dropped down below 500ft to take photographs of the incident, whilst McElhaw and Sayers continued to provide top cover at 1,500ft.

The sound of the approaching RAF Spitfires alerted the Israeli soldiers who, fearing another attack by the REAF Spitfires, were understandably quick to open fire on the aircraft with machine guns, hitting both Cooper and Close. The Spitfire flown by Cooper sustained only slight damage and he rapidly pulled up to gain height, but Close's aircraft, which had flown very low to get good close-up photos of the burning vehicles, was badly damaged; he also pulled up to gain height but, with his aircraft on fire, he had no option but to bail out. During the descent, Close's feet got caught in the rigging lines of the parachute and he landed on his head, breaking his jaw. Cooper, looking back, saw Close bail out from his stricken aircraft and watched as he eventually landed some 10 miles inside Egyptian territory. Meanwhile, McElhaw and Sayers decided to drop down from providing top cover to see for themselves what had happened. Whilst the three surviving RAF Spitfires were concentrating on seeing what had happened to Close, two IAF 101 Sqn Spitfire LF9s, also alerted by the columns of black smoke from the burning vehicles, arrived on the scene.

Leading the two IAF Spitfire LF9s was a dour, highly experienced Canadian volunteer pilot, John Fredrick McElroy. McElroy had flown with 249 Sqn RAF during the defence of Malta in 1942, shooting down five German aircraft and being awarded the DFC. He later claimed two more German aircraft over Normandy in June 1944 and one more a month later, receiving a bar to his DFC; he eventually ended the war with a total of 13 enemy aircraft destroyed. At a loose end after the war, McElroy was recruited specifically to fly the IAF Spitfires because of his considerable experience on the aircraft. Flying alongside McElroy was an American volunteer pilot, Chalmers 'Slick' Goodlin. Goodlin had learned to fly before WW2 and in 1941 had travelled to Canada to enlist with the RCAF and join the war against the Germans. During military flying training in Canada, he so impressed his colleagues with his flying ability that they gave him the nickname 'Slick'. During WW2 Goodlin was a flight instructor in Canada, then completed a combat tour in England flying Spitfires alongside RAF squadrons, before transferring to the US Navy. Released from active duty, Goodlin joined Bell as a test pilot in 1944. Following the death in a crash of the initial Bell X-1 test pilot Jack Woolams, Goodlin accepted a lucrative verbal agreement from Bell and became, at just 23 years of age, the prime pilot for the experimental X-1. Goodlin went on to make no less than 33 flights in the X-1 between Sept 46 and June 47. However, in June 47, when the initial subsonic testing of the X-1 was complete and responsibility for further test flights of the X-1 was taken over by



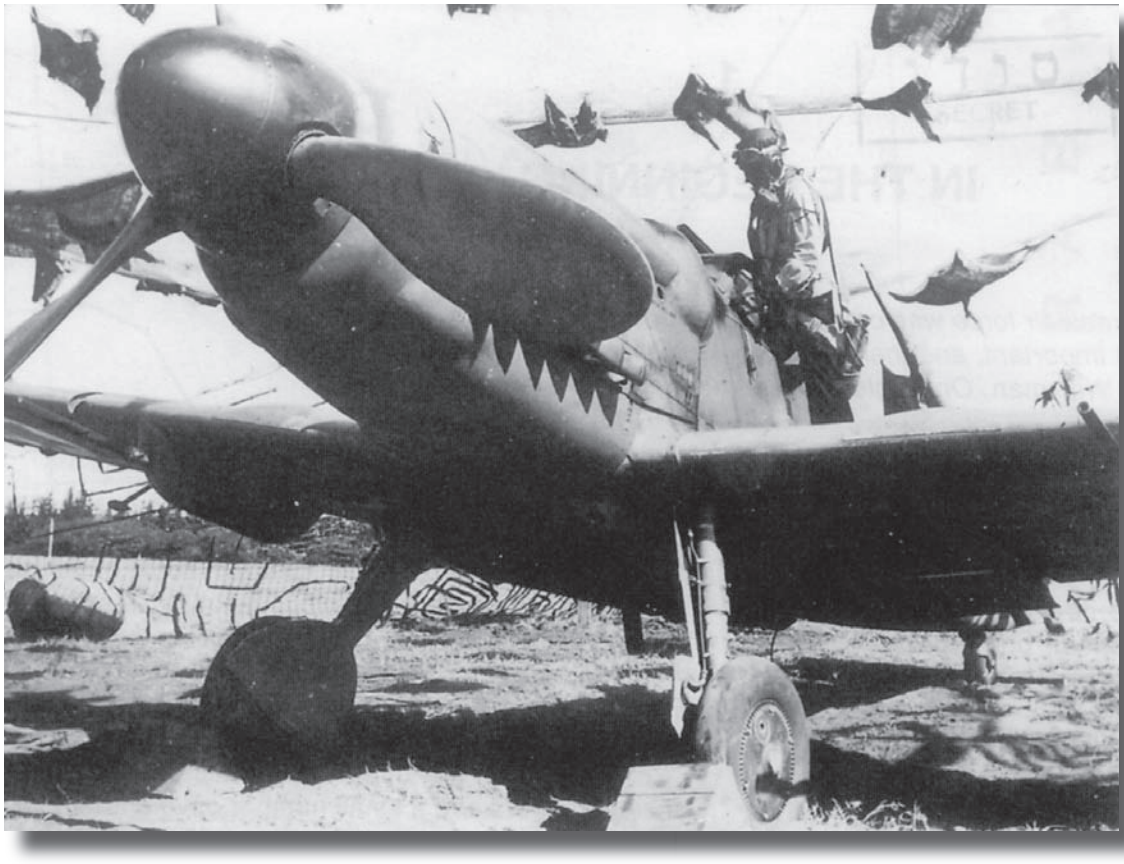
Location of crashed Spitfires – 7 Jan 1949, during the second incident. A. Close & McElhaw; B. Sayers; C. Cooper

the US Army Air Force (AAF), they were unwilling to continue the expensive verbal contract for test flights that Bell had previously agreed with Goodlin. Aggrieved by what he considered to be a breach of faith, Goodlin quickly tendered his resignation. Following his departure, an unknown AAF captain, Chuck Yeager, immediately took over as the test pilot for the X-1, later becoming the first man to break the sound barrier in the X-1, before going on to become the most famous test pilot in history and the man recognised as possessing 'The Right Stuff'. After leaving Bell Goodlin found himself looking for work and was eventually recruited by Joseph Berg, a Hollywood producer, to fly as a volunteer for the IAF.

Describing the encounter a number of years later McElroy stated that on the fateful day 'It was pretty uneventful for the first 20 to 25 minutes of the flight. And then, all of a sudden, I said to Slick — he was on my left wing — I said, 'Look at that smoke over here to the left, on the ground.' It seemed to be about eight to ten miles away. We were a good 40 to 50 miles south of Faluja. It was right on the front line and there were three columns of smoke — pretty heavy black smoke — going up about 1,000ft. So I said 'Come on, we'll turn and have a look at this.' And as we got closer, I said 'My God', we could see trucks burning, we could see a couple of light armoured vehicles and a number of jeeps. We saw no airplanes at the time. And then I saw four Spitfires going in, they were strafing. They had three vehicles on fire.'

The Spitfire's flown by McElroy and Goodlin were still fitted with a fairly standard RAF radio and they heard the excited chatter of the RAF formation as they discussed the loss of Close, but failed to connect this situation with the incident they had stumbled across. Not expecting to come under attack, and preoccupied by watching Close descend in his parachute, the three RAF pilots probably mis-identified the two IAF Spitfires turning behind them as being part of their own formation. The IAF Spitfires pounced on the formation, assuming they were actually REAF Spitfires and responsible for the attack on the Israeli column. According to McElroy, 'There were no markings on the Spitfires. Two of them were heading in an easterly direction and there were two that had gotten out of sight in a dive. They were diving and we lost them, so I warned Slick to watch out and we got over the convoy.'

McElroy latched onto the Spitfire flown by Sayers and immediately opened fire, again according to McElroy 'Slick was right beside my wing, he'd crossed over on the starboard side and I pulled another turn and turned south to see if we could pick up the other airplanes. Slick moved over to my left and just as he did I yelled, "*There's an enemy*



This is the Avia S-199, a combination of the Me-109 fuselage with the engine and propeller from a Heinkel He-111H (IAF Museum)

aircraft at 12 o'clock, right in front of us!" They were about 3,000ft lower than us, so we stuck our noses down and Slick moved off to the left and started firing. We were right on top of them. They pulled up right in front of us and I blasted one, I guess from about 200yds and saw many explosions all around the engine and cockpit — I knocked a few pieces off his wings. They'd just pulled out of this dive, they didn't see us at all, they didn't know we were even in the area. I broke off, looked at Slick, he had disappeared from view, but I saw an airplane going down off my left, it was on fire and smoking, in a fairly steep dive around to the left.'

Sayers was probably killed at the controls, as his aircraft quickly went into a power dive and hit the ground about three miles West of where Close's machine had crashed. McElroy then switched his attention to the aircraft flown by McElhaw, dropped in behind him and opened fire. According to McElroy "I took a quick look around, behind and above, nothing behind me at all and I looked over and saw another airplane off about 2 o'clock to me - just off my right and slightly below. I took one look and saw it wasn't one of ours by the markings, ours had the tails painted with big red and white stripes. I looked for the red and white tail markings of our airplanes, they were all marked the same and they showed up many miles away. It wasn't one of ours, so I dropped my sights on him, it was about 400yds and I let fly. I got strikes all over him, right down the fuselage and the engine, and I didn't wait around, I just broke off. I got a good burst in, probably about

three to four seconds, which is a fairly long burst and well clobbered with cannon and the .50 calibre. I broke off, looked around, but couldn't see Slick." The first thing that McElhaw knew was a call on the R/T from Cooper saying that he had an aircraft on his tail, then suddenly his aircraft was struck by bullets along the fuselage and engine. It was quickly obvious to McElhaw that he needed to part company with his aircraft and he bailed out, landing about five-six miles west of Close's aircraft.

Whilst McElroy was shooting down Sayers and McElhaw, Goodlin engaged the final aircraft flown by Cooper. Goodlin recalled "There was a fiery explosion from John's target and my quarry poured on the coal with me in pursuit. We broke out of a sandy mist at 10,000ft, but I could not gain close proximity to the Spit 18 due to lesser power in my Spit 9. At about 16,000ft the Spit 18 rolled over and dived back towards me at an impossible deflection angle, with machine guns blazing and exhaust smoke rolling out under both wings. I immediately engaged my opponent in an old-fashioned dogfight scissors. The Spit 9 proved to have better manoeuvrability and I was able to get into an ideal firing position. I saw strikes on my opponent's engine cowl just before he rolled over and bailed out about ten miles south of Al Arish. I only recognised the RAF roundel after the Spit 18 had fired on me, when we were in the scissors engagement and I had no alternative but to fight back to save my own bacon."

Sayers remains were later recovered by Egyptian troops and buried in the desert, close to the remains of his aircraft. Cooper landed safely after suffering some wounds to his leg during the engagement and, after walking for a while, he was picked up by some Bedouins who took him to a border post manned by some Arab troops. Then after being transported by camel to Al Arish, he was handed over to the Egyptian Army, who treated his wounds before putting him on a hospital train back to Ismailia and the RAF. McElhaw and Close were captured by Israeli troops and were eventually taken to Tel Aviv for interrogation.

McElroy and Goodlin returned to Hatzor, executed a victory roll over the airfield, and landed. After they had landed, Goodlin told McElroy that the aircraft they had shot down had been British Spitfires. McElroy remembered he replied "Oh no, you're crazy. The British wouldn't be down there, that's behind our line. Now where this convoy was on fire . . . where the strafing around was going, was behind the Israeli lines . . . I would say, roughly three to four miles behind the Israeli front lines. And that's the first thing I knew they were even down that way. I never noticed any markings on them. I knew they weren't ours and that's all I needed." Although their colleagues were initially sceptical of their claim to have shot down three RAF Spitfire FR18s, this was soon confirmed when news of the capture of McElhaw and Close was received by telephone.

The 3rd incident

Just after lunch, when the four 208 Sqn Spitfires had failed to return to Fayid, it was obvious that something had happened. The commanding officer of 208 Sqn quickly decided to launch another formation of Spitfires to search for the missing aircraft and understandably wanted an escort from the Hawker Tempest squadrons on the base. However, the Tempests of 6 Sqn had only recently landed, following the return of the Tempests of 213 Sqn that had landed sometime earlier and all the pilots had already stood down to their Mess. After some urgent phone calls a suitable number of Tempest pilots from 213 Sqn and 6 Sqn were rounded up and a rapid briefing took place whilst the planes were hurriedly prepared by the available ground crew.

Eventually at around 1500hrs, four Spitfire FR18s of 208 Sqn, led by Sqn Ldr Morgan, took off to search for the missing aircraft and, after rendezvousing with the Tempests over Fayid, they headed for the border. The Spitfires flew in the lead at 500ft, followed by seven Tempests of 213 Sqn led by Gp Capt A F Anderson, OC 324 Wg, acting as medium cover at 6,000ft, together with another eight Tempests of 6 Sqn led by Sqn Ldr Denis Crowley-Milling[3] providing rear top cover at 10,000ft. To balance up the aircraft numbers, Pilot/III Douglas Liquorish of 6 Sqn was ordered to join the 213 Sqn formation. Then, near Rafah, Anderson suddenly noticed a formation of aircraft diving to attack his section

of aircraft and immediately ordered a break to starboard. However, when the 213 Sqn Tempests engaged the attacking aircraft, they suddenly discovered they were unable to return fire.

The four attacking aircraft were IAF Spitfires led by Ezer Weizman[4] a native Israeli who served in the RAF during the WW2, but only received his wings in 1945 after the war was finished. As his wingman Weizman had Alex 'Sandy' Jacobs, who was born in Palestine of British parents and who also served with the RAF in WW2. The two other pilots were American volunteers, Bill Schroeder and Caesar Dangott, both of whom had flown with the US Navy in WW2. As he dived towards the formation, Bill Schroeder singled out a Tempest flown by Plt Off David Tattersfield of 213 Sqn, a young, inexperienced pilot who had only been on the unit a couple of weeks. Tattersfield was probably concentrating on just maintaining formation and if he did see any Spitfires turning behind the formation, like Liquorish, he had every reason to assume they were friendly. Turning in out of the sun, Schroeder quickly got on the tail of the Tattersfield and opened fire. Tattersfield was probably killed instantly, as his aircraft was seen to turn over on its back almost immediately and dive vertically down to crash onto the desert floor and burst into flames.

As soon as he heard Anderson's warning, Crowley-Milling, flying top cover, led his section of aircraft down to attack the IAF Spitfires — their aircraft's guns operated correctly and they were able to return fire. However, when the Tempest pilots attempted to jettison the drop tanks they were carrying, to increase the aircrafts manoeuvrability, the lever used to jettison the tanks could not be moved. It was later discovered that the release pins were too heavily loaded to be released, because the ground crew had over-tightened the cradle arms after each sortie to ensure the tanks were held firmly in place. A general melee now took place between the remaining 14 RAF Tempests and the four IAF Spitfires — Weizman soon managed to obtain some hits on a Tempest flown by Pilot/III Douglas Liquorish. Flt Lt Brian Spragg of 6 Sqn, an experienced and highly competent pilot,[5] later recalled 'My section broke, rather than turned with me, leaving me on my own. Next minute I had an Israeli on my tail. I tried to drop my tanks, but they wouldn't come off. The Spitfire turned up in front of me and I gave him three or four quick bursts.' Caught up in the middle of this melee were the four Spitfire FR18s of 208 Sqn and it was soon obvious to these pilots that their colleagues in the Tempests were treating all Spitfires as hostile, until proved otherwise. A couple of the RAF Spitfire were fortunate not to be shot down by their own side, before a frantic call for all RAF aircraft to 'waggle their wings' allowed them to be clearly identified. Soon the IAF Spitfires realised the danger of their situation and disengaged, quickly retreating back over the border into Israel where the RAF aircraft were forbidden to follow, bringing an end to the engagement.

After landing at Hatzor, Weizman discovered his Spitfire had suffered some minor damage from the guns of Spragg, but this was quickly repaired. The remaining Tempests returned to Deversoir where, despite damage to the tail fin, propeller and main spar, Liquorish managed to land his aircraft safely. It was discovered that two other aircraft, flown by Pilot/II MAR Heald and Pilot/II EG Waddington, of 213 Sqn, had also suffered damage from bullet strikes. In the subsequent discussions that took place between the RAF pilots involved, it was clear that many had confused the red-painted spinners on the Israeli Spitfire LF9s, with the red-pained spinners of the RAF Spitfire FR18s, whilst others had managed to distinguish the Israeli Spitfires, because of the red and white stripes painted on the aircraft's rudders. The next day 208 Sqn painted their spinners white, together with a white band around the rudder; however, this only made the aircraft more similar to the REAF Spitfire LF9s and would have caused even more confusion if a further engagement with the IAF had occurred.

The accidental dispatch of aircraft into a battle zone with unserviceable guns also came in for considerable criticism from the survivors of the engagement. A number of the Tempests were found to be overstressed, either by exceeding their maximum speed whilst diving away from an attack, or whilst spinning with the long-range drop tanks attached. It goes without saying that

when news of the earlier loss of the four 208 Sqn Spitfires also became known, emotions amongst the RAF pilots ran very high. Before long all available Tempests and Spitfires were armed up and ready to take off and destroy any IAF aircraft they encountered, together with the airfields they were operating from. However, despite the pleas of the squadrons involved in the two encounters, AIR HQ refused to authorise any retaliation. There are persistent rumours that certain members of 208 Sqn later extracted their revenge on the IAF by shooting down any IAF aircraft they encountered, including a number of transport aircraft and that this was subsequently hushed-up to avoid escalating the situation. However, these rumours have never been publicly confirmed by anyone on the squadron at that time.

Back at Hatzor, many of the pilots of 101 Sqn were also decidedly unhappy with the day's events. Almost every pilot had either flown with or alongside the RAF during WW2 and the general view was that the RAF would not allow the loss of five aircraft, and the death of 2 pilots, to go unpunished and would probably attack Hatzor at dawn the following morning. That night, in anticipation of the impending attack, a number of the IAF pilots headed off into Tel Aviv to get drunk at their usual haunts, having decided that if the RAF did stage an attack then they would offer no resistance. However, not everyone adopted this policy and at dawn a number of IAF pilots were strapped into the cockpits of Spitfires, ready to repel the retaliatory attack that never appeared.

The aftermath

The British reaction to these incidents was supplied by the Foreign Office, who forwarded to the Israeli Government a demand for compensation for the loss of personnel and equipment in the incidents.[6] Even the Air Ministry was only slightly more robust and issued the following statement: 'In view of these unprovoked attacks, our aircraft have now been instructed to regard as hostile any Jewish aircraft encountered over Egyptian territory'. The day after the attack the pilots of 101 Sqn sent a message to 208 Sqn as follows: 'Sorry about yesterday, but you were on the wrong side of the fence. Come over here and have a drink sometime. You will see many familiar faces.' Considering that the unprovoked attacks by 101 Sqn had cost the lives of two RAF pilots,

Tattersfield's wreckage — the Tempest F6 shot down by Bill Schroeder in the 3rd incident (Israeli Government Press Office)

together with the loss of four aircraft, it was hardly surprising that the RAF pilots involved failed to take such a light-hearted view of the incident. A subsequent RAF investigation confirmed that all four Spitfires of 208 Sqn had crashed within 3nm of a point 15nms west of the border with Israel, well within Egyptian territory. However, when an RAF salvage team arrived, they could only find the wreckage of the Spitfires flown by Cooper and Sayers. It was later confirmed by local Arabs that the Israels had visited the four crash sites, removed various parts and then buried the other aircraft. It was assumed, correctly, that the Israelis had captured the two missing pilots and taken them back over the border into Israel. The team also discovered the wreckage of the Tempest flown by Tattersfield, which had ended up north of Nirim, four miles inside Israeli territory. The Israelis had buried Tattersfield near the wreckage and his body was removed and later reburied on 11 January, 1949 in the British War Cemetery at Ramleh — at the service, in a gesture of reconciliation, six members of the IAF carried his coffin. The two pilots captured by the Israelis, McElhaw and Close, were interrogated in Tel Aviv and received a number of visits from 101 Sqn pilots, including McElroy. Close was allowed to talk to various press correspondents, who quoted him as saying the formation had crossed the border into Israel. However when this was reported the Air Ministry issued a statement saying that the RAF formation were under strict instructions not to cross the frontier into Israel.

Several weeks later Tattersfield's father received, via the Air Ministry, an anonymous letter about the death of his son. In the letter (believed to have been written by Bill Schroeder who had shot Tattersfield down) the author stated that the first formation of RAF Spitfire's had been strafing Israeli troops before they were shot down. In the actual incident, he stated that the Spitfires were loaded with bombs and were heading for Israeli bases when they were attacked. It's clear that the author had confused the actions of the REAF Spitfire LF9s with those of the RAF Spitfire FR18s, and mistook the long-range drop tanks on the Tempests for bombs. Nevertheless, it's also very apparent from the tone of the letter that the author deeply regretted his role in the death of Tattersfield. Of his role in the second incident McElroy later said "We certainly regretted it. We didn't want to get mixed up with the British. However, as I've explained to many people, we were flying and fighting for the Israelis. There were aircraft, at the time it didn't matter whose they were to me, attacking Israeli vehicles and Israeli personnel. It was our job and our duty to stop it and that was the only way we could stop it. It was too bad, as I say, but we had no indication that the British were in the area."

Close and McElhaw were soon released by the Israelis and placed on a ship heading for Cyprus where they were re-united with their comrades of 208 Sqn. However, to prevent them becoming involved in another encounter with the IAF, they were quickly posted back to the UK. All those involved in the incident were required to give evidence at the official RAF Court of Enquiry into the incident, held on 27 January, 1949 at RAF Fayid and led by AVM JN Boothman ACC Iraq. Although a summary of the finding exists, in accordance with normal policy, a complete copy of the final report, with appropriate witness statements, has not been retained on the de-classified file.

The questions

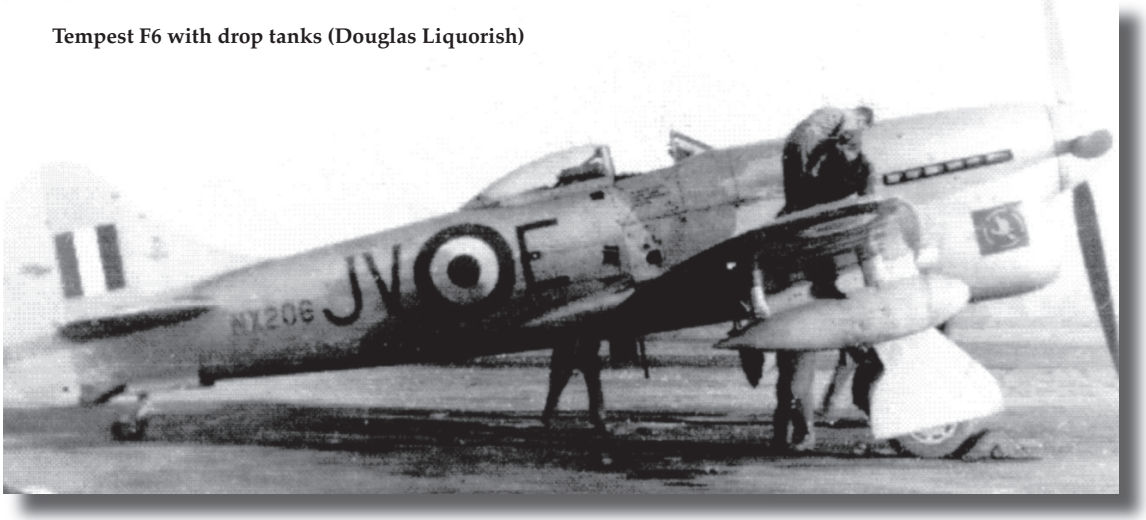
After reviewing these incidents, a number of obvious questions need to be addressed. The most obvious is whether in the second incident McElroy and Goodlin knew the Spitfires they were attacking were RAF and not REAF. On balance I think that they probably did genuinely mistake the RAF Spitfires photographing the burning Israeli vehicles, for the REAF aircraft that had actually made the attack. Goodlin has admitted that they heard "excited English chatter on the R/T", presumably discussing the shooting down of Frank Close, before they attacked, but they failed to understand the significance of what was being discussed. Although the RAF aircraft's spinners were painted in a similar fashion to the REAF Spitfires, the RAF FR18s were a much larger aeroplane than the Egyptian LF9s. However, the difference would not have been obvious at range in poor visibility, even to experienced pilots like

McElroy and Goodlin and, as the formations merged, the 'red mist' of anger probably clouded any further attempt at establishing their correct identity. Goodlin has admitted that he recognised the RAF roundel on one aircraft, but only after the aircraft had fired on him and he was then forced to continue the attack to save himself.

In the third incident, a number of the pilots in the Israeli Spitfire formation must have known from the start that the aircraft they were attacking were RAF Tempests, rather than REAF Spitfires. Firstly, the Tempests were considerably different to the REAF Spitfire LF9s, although the REAF had actually 'borrowed' a single Tempest from the Iraqis. Douglas Liquorish[7] clearly remembers seeing a formation of Spitfires pass down the port side of the 213 Sqn formation at around 7,000ft, about half a mile away. He then ignored the aircraft, assuming they were just another formation of RAF Spitfires and, like the rest of the formation, didn't see them turn in behind the Tempests and attack out of the sun. Secondly, it should have been obvious to the Israelis that the RAF would mount a sortie into the area in search of the missing Spitfires. Certainly, Ezer Weizman has admitted that he was "keen for just one more victory to finish up the war", and didn't seem particularly concerned which country the aircraft actually belonged to. As far as the IAF pilots involved were concerned, it appeared to be a question of shoot first and positively identify later. In Weizman's defence, given the fragile state that Israel was in and the limited number of IAF fighter aircraft, he knew that any aircraft they encountered were either Arab or RAF and probably thought that alone justified an immediate attack. However, it's stretching the imagination to believe that Weizman didn't clearly identify the aircraft as Tempests and knew full well that the aircraft belonged to the RAF. Who else in that region could have put together a formation of aircraft of eight Tempests? The loss of the RAF aircraft and pilots in the 2nd and 3rd encounters are often described as examples of the 'Fog of War'; however, I believe that although the 2nd incident does fall into this category, the 3rd incident was simply an unprovoked attack. Although Weizman appears to have positively relished the opportunity to get one over on the RAF, it's doubtful that, in retrospect, all of his colleagues were quite as enthusiastic; if he was the author of the letter, then certainly Bill Schroeder deeply regretted his involvement.

Was there also a degree of arrogance in the higher echelons of the RAF who believed that nobody in the region would dare attack a formation of RAF fighters? On paper the Spitfire LF9 was no match for the Spitfire FR18 and more especially the Tempest. However, as has so often been the case in air-to-air engagements over the years, a more manoeuvrable aircraft, aggressively flown by experienced pilots staging a surprise attack,

Tempest F6 with drop tanks (Douglas Liquorish)



Weizman's Spitfire — the Spitfire LF9 flown by Weizman in the 3rd incident

can frequently prevail against larger formations of more powerful aircraft, containing some less experienced pilots, particularly if hit and run tactics are employed. Nevertheless, in the third incident had all the Tempests been able to get rid of their drop tanks and return fire, the IAF Spitfires would not have escaped so lightly — so luck was most certainly on their side that day. The inability of the 213 Sqn aircraft to return fire was almost certainly caused by simple human error. Although it has often been reported that it was official policy for aircraft guns to be uncocked, I have failed to discover any evidence of this order in the de-classified file.[8] Certainly, we know that 6 Sqn and 208 Sqn had loaded and cocked guns, which would have contravened such an order, so I believe there is a much simpler reason. The Tempests of 213 Sqn had landed earlier than 6 Sqn and, as part of the after landing checks for obvious safety reasons, the squadron armourers would routinely have uncocked the aircraft guns. In the later rush to depart, for some unknown reason, the evidence suggests that the 213 Sqn armourers simply forgot to re-cock the guns. Luckily, as they landed later, the armourers of 6 Sqn hadn't got around to un-cocking their Tempests guns when the order to get airborne again was received and so their aircraft were able to return fire when they later encountered the IAF Spitfires.

What might have happened had the RAF been allowed to immediately retaliate against the IAF following the two incidents? Had the will been there, then there is little doubt that the RAF could easily have decimated the small embryonic IAF, destroying most if not all of their available aircraft and their aviation facilities. This in turn would have left the skies clear for the REAF and might have resulted in the war between Israel and the surrounding Arab states re-commencing, with the IAF having lost control of the skies. However, provided sufficient IAF pilots had survived an attack by the RAF, its probable that, thanks to their already well established supply chain, the IAF would have been able to quickly replace their aircraft and eventually restore their supremacy in the sky, regardless of how many aircraft had been destroyed by the RAF.

Many years later, Gp Capt Anderson probably spoke for all those involved when he expressed his expert opinion on the 3rd incident by commenting that 'This fantastically misplanned operation afforded a lively illustration of how an unbeaten Air Force appears able, at the drop of a hat, to disregard every lesson learned in five and a half years of victorious total war. It was remarkable that only one aircraft was lost, considering that we were sent off unarmed to meet aircraft of greater manoeuvrability in a highly confused area of operations. It is, however, only fair to remark that nobody concerned would have willingly allowed further aircraft from 208 Sqn to enter the operational area without some form of cover — even though it was a total bluff. This presumably explains the event, even if only partially.'[9]

Throughout aviation history, air-to-air engagements have frequently been confused encounters; these three incidents were no

exception and nobody will ever be able to establish the precise details of what actually happened. It's rather ironic that, during the War of Independence, the RAF were attacked by both protagonists, with lives being lost as a result, despite attempting to remain neutral — the almost inevitable result of getting in the middle of someone else's war. It's also a rather surprising fact that the second REAF Spitfire shot down by Fg Off Tim McElhaw on May 22, 1948, is the last occasion that an RAF pilot in an RAF aircraft shot down another aircraft in an air-to-air engagement - an unusually long time ago, particularly considering the numerous conflicts that the RAF have been involved in over the intervening 56 years.[10]

This article is dedicated to the memory of Fg Off Eric Reynolds, Fg Off Angus Love, Pilot/II Ron Sayers and Plt Off David Tattersfield — Per Ardua ad Astra. The author has donated all the proceeds from this article to the RAF Benevolent Fund.

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Notes

1 Cooper retired as an air commodore and became the aviation correspondent for The Daily Telegraph.
2 At this time in the RAF, Pilot/I equated to WO, Pilot/II equated to FS and Pilot/III equated to Sgt.
3 Later Air Marshal Sir Denis Crowley-Milling, KCB, CBE, DSO, DFC.
4 Weizman became a legendary Commander of the IAF and finally the President of Israel.
5 Conversation Spragg - Williamson 23 Dec 03. Flt Lt Brian Spragg had flown Typhoons with 257 Sqn in WW2, later flew F-86 Sabre's in Korea and retired as a wg cdr.
6 No compensation was ever paid by Israel.
7 Conversation between Liquorish & Williamson - 14 Nov 03.
8 PRO AIR 19/587 – Attacks on RAF PR aircraft 1949.
9 Letter from Gp Capt A F Anderson DSO DFC RAF Retd to the AHB dated 16 Feb 75.
10 The rumours regarding an RAF Javelin of 60 Sqn downing an Indonesian C-130, together with the 20 Sqn RAF Hunter manoeuvre kill against an Indonesian MiG-17 in the mid-1960's are both unconfirmed. The infamous 92 Sqn F4 v 31 Sqn Jaguar incident in Germany on 25 May 82 was an unintentional & uncontested blue-on-blue and therefore doesn't count!