

Air Forces Middle East

The R.A.F. at work from Kuwait to Africa

AIR FORCES MIDDLE East is unique in that it forms part of the first British united command headquarters to be set up. The principle of a joint command structure was established in Britain in April 1964 with the formation of the unified Ministry of Defence, but the unified command of British Forces in the Arabian Peninsula—Middle East Command, as it is now known—was formed as long ago as 1959.

The Commander-in-Chief, at present Lieutenant-General Sir Charles Harington, is appointed by the Minister of Defence from one of the three Services in rotation and, on his appointment, ceases to have any responsibility to his own Service. He has the power to make use of any of the single Service staffs and facilities when necessary, although in many cases joint staffs (e.g., Planning, Intelligence) exist with representatives of all three Services working together.

Middle East Command, and thus Air Forces Middle East, is responsible for the area stretching from Kuwait and the Persian Gulf in the north, across the Arabian Peninsula to the whole of east and south Africa, and across the Indian Ocean as far as Gan—a vast parish that includes everything from the arid deserts of Arabia to the tropical forests of Africa, the snow-capped peaks of Kilimanjaro and Mount Kenya, to the even heat of "the empty quarter" where temperatures reach 150 deg. F., and thousands of square miles of open sea. Such diversities of terrain and temperature make great demands on men and machines alike.

Historical

The first Royal Air Force formation in Aden came into existence during World War I when, in 1917, a Henry Farman Flight was formed for reconnaissance duties against Turkish forces then operating in the territory. The importance of the



A.O.C. Air Forces Middle East is Air Vice-Marshall J. E. ("Johnnie") Johnson, who was Britain's top-scoring fighter pilot in World War II

aeroplane was quickly recognised, both for administrative as well as tactical purposes. Surface transport in those days was, basically, the camel and in parts the terrain was, and still is, virtually impassable; even today R.A.F. aircraft provide services which could never be provided by surface transport.

In 1928 the Aden Flight was replaced by No. 8 Squadron, which came to Khormaksar from Iraq, and apart from a brief period after W.W.II this squadron, which now flies Hunter FGA.9s, has been based at Khormaksar ever since; in fact, Aden would not be the same without No. 8.

By 1934 the R.A.F. was doing a great deal of work on behalf of the Aden Government, and as many as thirty landing strips had been prepared throughout the Protectorate. In those days the R.A.F. was providing the only medical help available in many parts of the country, and this

"flying doctor" service has been carried on ever since.

During World War II an Aden Protectorate Support Flight was formed to take on responsibilities for the interior regions, and by 1953 had been equipped with Austers and Ansons. A Communication Unit was also formed at Khormaksar during the war, but soon grew to a squadron and eventually operated scheduled flights to Nairobi, Khartoum and Fayid.

Although the importance of the R.A.F. in Aden had been recognised, it was nevertheless slow to develop, for even ten years ago it was thought that the main R.A.F. base in this theatre would be in Kenya. When that idea fell through, Khormaksar developed at an alarming rate and today is the busiest, and one of the biggest, R.A.F. stations in the world.

Role of A.F.M.E.

Air Forces Middle East provides the air power for Middle East Command. Its function is to support Army and Navy units in Aden and Africa and the Persian Gulf, and to support the Federal Armed forces "up-country" in their police task of maintaining law and order throughout the Federation. The transport aircraft of the Command maintain regular scheduled services between Aden and Africa, and Aden and the Gulf, as well as to the staging posts of Riyan, Salalah, and Masira long the southern coast of Arabia.

Tactical aircraft provide regular reconnaissance throughout the command, both inland and over the sea, and are always ready to help in keeping the peace between tribes and ensuring the safety and security of the trade routes. Constant training and exercises ensure that A.F.M.E. units can react quickly in an emergency, as was proved during the Kuwait crisis (see *Air Pictorial*, February 1962, pp. 40-1) and during the East African mutinies.

East Africa

The first R.A.F. formation in Kenya was established at Nairobi in 1938, and two other flying stations were formed near Mombasa in 1940-41. Aircraft operating from these bases played a valuable part during the war, especially in the maritime field, and many detachments from the Commonwealth Air Forces worked alongside the R.A.F. at that time. As well as coastal recce. and convoy escort, bombing missions were mounted from East African bases against Italian-held airfields.

With the independence of Kenya, the R.A.F.'s days in East Africa are virtually over. Eastleigh near Nairobi, still houses No. 21 Squadron, flying Twin Pioneers in support of the Kenya Armed Forces; but No. 30 Squadron with Beverleys has now moved to Muharraq. This squadron played a valuable part in the East African mutinies, an operation which showed, incidentally, what can be achieved by a "joint" command.

Although the Tanganyika Rifles were the first to mutiny, the first call for British military assistance came from the Prime

Vickers Vincents of No. 8 Squadron, which unit has served in Aden almost continuously since 1928. Some of the Vincents were still in use in 1942





Hunter FR.10 XF460 of No. 1417 Flight swoops down a valley in the Radfan area (RIGHT) and banks round its target

Minister of Uganda, when the Uganda Rifles followed suit three days later. Mr. Obote's call for help was met literally within hours, for it was 9 p.m. on 24th January 1964 that a force of Shackletons, Beverleys and Argosies, from R.A.F. Khormaksar and R.A.F. Eastleigh took off for Entebbe Airport with men of the Staffordshire Regiment and the Scots Guards. This was only three hours after the Services had been warned that there might be a call for help.

Later that same night, there was a hint of further trouble in Tanganyika, and by first light the following morning, some 350 Royal Marine Commandos, who were based in Aden, were being flown ashore from H.M.S. *Centaur* by R.N. Wessexes, and Belvederes of No. 26 Squadron, based at Khormaksar, which had been detached to the carrier a week before.

The complete airlift was achieved in only 70 minutes. At the same time, it was

decided to fly some of the Commandos to the scene of the first mutiny in Tanganyika, and again, at absolutely minimum notice, another force of three Beverleys, an Argosy and a Shackleton was detached to Dar Es Salaam from Khormaksar. However, the reputation of the flying British strike force had preceded them and the mutineers had laid down their arms peacefully by the time the aircraft arrived—surely the first time in history that a mutiny has been quashed by reputation alone!

Khormaksar

Khormaksar is the busiest R.A.F. airfield in the world, and the hub of all the flying in the Middle East. Three-quarters of the Command's aircraft are based there, and as an example of the sort of task which it faces, its own transport force of about two dozen aircraft flies 2½ million passenger miles and 1 million ton-miles every

No. 1417 (F.R.) Flight

NO. 1417 (FIGHTER Reconnaissance) Flight, part of the strike wing at R.A.F. Khormaksar, Aden, has a double birthday this year, celebrating the 25th anniversary of its original formation, and its 2nd since re-forming at Khormaksar in March 1963. The unit was originally formed as No. 417 General Reconnaissance Flight in 1940, receiving its present number in 1941.

In 1942 it flew experimental Wellingtons and subsequently became No. 172 Squadron engaged on anti-submarine work in the Bay of Biscay until the end of the war. The flight reappeared in 1953 in Bahrain, for reconnaissance work, but was again renumbered, to become No. 152 Squadron. The present 1417 Flight was formed at R.A.F. Khormaksar in March 1963 from the fighter reconnaissance element of No. 8 Squadron.

Its work is varied and exacting, requiring specialist training and highly skilled flying. Photographs are taken from the Hunter FR.10s flying at a speed of about 450 m.p.h. and a height of between 50-250 ft. Pilots are required to find and photograph various targets such as buildings, arms and ammunition dumps and dissident hideouts. Photographs are frequently required to supplement existing maps.

Pilots gain a great deal of information about their targets visually as they flash past, which can be reported by radio. While the pilot is being debriefed, cameras are rushed from the aircraft and the film developed in the flight's mobile photographic darkrooms. Negatives are ready within 15 minutes of the aircraft's return and first prints are coming off in under 30 minutes—the record is 17 minutes.

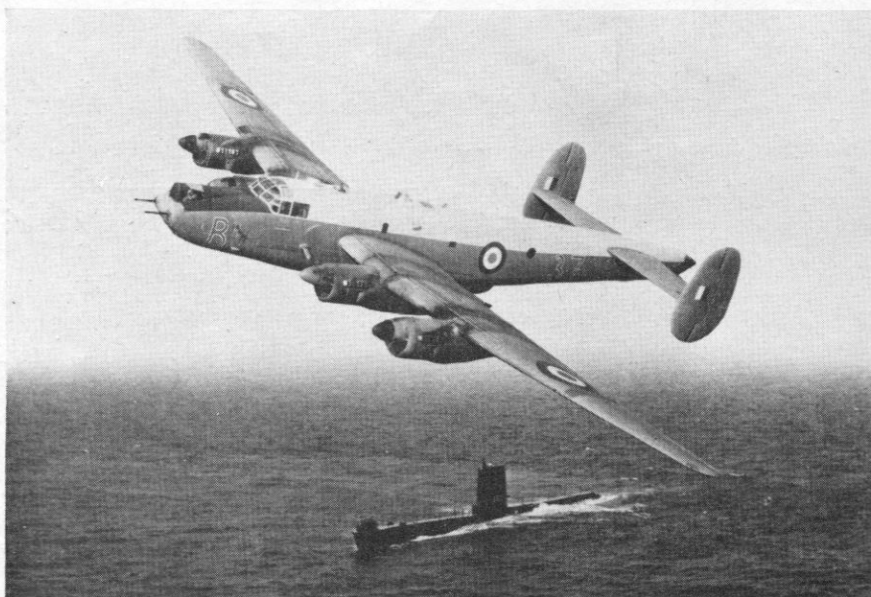
During 1964 the flight provided valuable support for ground and air forces in the Radfan operations, making 314 photographic sorties, of which 205 were in the Radfan area. Over 800 films were used and 18,500 prints produced.

Beverley XH121 of No. 84 Squadron with scorpion badge on nose. Two of No. 84's Beverleys are at present on detachment to Eastleigh, Kenya





A 26 Squadron Belvedere delivers R.M. Commandos to Little Aden



ABOVE: A 37 Squadron Shackleton on exercises with H.M. submarine Alliance

BELOW: The Middle East Communication Squadron's Hastings and one of its two Dakotas. The squadron was formed at Heliopolis, Egypt, in 1944



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month. Khormaksar is also a "Joint-User" airfield, and the R.A.F. provides airfield, navigational, meteorological, and communication facilities to the many civil airlines which fly to Aden. This means that Khormaksar handles an average of over 6,000 air movements a month, with aircraft types ranging from Boeing 707s and Comets, to Hunters and helicopters.

Khormaksar handles not only the operations of its own squadrons, but also the staging of some Transport Command route flights. It is also responsible for up-country airstrips in the Federation of South Arabia, and the route stations along the coast, up to the Persian Gulf. With so many aircraft passing through Khormaksar, the Air Movements staff play a vital part in the work of the Station, particularly when special operations have to be mounted. A Mobile Air Movements Section has been formed which is ready, at a constant 24-hours' notice, to move to any part of the Command.

Transport units

Flying units at Khormaksar are grouped under three wings: *Short Range Transport Wing*, which comprises No. 78 Squadron (Twin Pioneers), No. 26 Squadron (Belvederes), the Middle East Communication Squadron (one Hastings and two Dakotas, and now receiving two Andover CC.2s), and the Search and Rescue Helicopter Flight (Whirlwind HAR.10s); *Medium Range Transport Wing* with No. 84 Squadron (Beverleys) and No. 105 Squadron (Argosies); and *Strike Wing*, described later.

The Twin Pioneers have proved ideal for short-range transport work in this Command, their exceptional take-off and landing performance enabling them to use many of the small desert airstrips which are inaccessible to other aircraft. No. 78's main role in Aden is the short-range support of British Army units and the Federal Regular Army. The Twin Pioneers came into their own during the combined operations against the dissident tribesmen of the Radfan area in 1964, for they were the only conventional aircraft at the beginning of the operations which could land on the 400-yard desert airstrip at Thumier, site of the Radfan Headquarters. In about two months, these 78 Squadron aircraft flew nearly 600 operational sorties, taking in about 300,000 lb. of supplies and carrying over 3,000 troops, as well as carrying out supply drops to troops on isolated features.

A most important aspect of No. 78's work has been casualty evacuation. Hardly a week passes without an aircraft being called out to some remote place to bring a sick or injured Arab back to Aden for treatment in the R.A.F. hospital at Khormaksar beach. No. 78 was presented with its Squadron Standard on 11th February; a history of the squadron appeared in *Air Pictorial*, April 1961.

The newest squadron to join R.A.F. Khormaksar is No. 26, with Belvederes.

AIR PICTORIAL

Since No. 26 arrived in Aden in 1963 it has earned the reputation of being the Command's "odd-job" squadron. It has carried a wide variety of odd loads, mostly underslung, which have included road-rollers, electric cookers, tractors and ploughs, 105-mm. guns, Land-Rovers, and a 40-ft. pole. These helicopters have proved very useful for the rapid movement of troops over difficult terrain and, in fact, on to otherwise inaccessible hill tops.

The squadron has also worked closely with the Royal Navy, and many of its pilots are now expert in making deck landings on aircraft-carriers. No. 26 played an important part in the deployment of Commandos from H.M.S. *Centaur* into Tanganyika during the East African mutinies, and more recently during the Radfan operations when the Belvederes were flying up to 5,000-ft. peaks in temperatures of 130 deg. with frightening thermals. In one month No. 26's helicopters carried well over 1,000,000 lb. of supplies, as well as 1,000 passengers and fifty casualties in something over 600 operational sorties.

The main task of the Beverleys of No. 84 Squadron is also the supply of up-country garrisons, and this squadron, in various roles, has been in the Middle East for a great part of its life. Again the short take-off and landing characteristics of these aircraft make them ideal for use in this sort of territory, as they can carry immense loads into very small and rough airstrips.

Beverleys have for a long time had regular detachments to Bahrain, where they have trained with the Parachute Regiment on paratrooping and supply-dropping exercises. The Beverleys also played their part in the Radfan operations, once the airstrip had been extended by No. 5004 (Airfield Construction) Squadron. In the first two weeks of their participation, they took over 200,000 lb. of freight and mail into Thumier as well as some 500 passengers.

No. 105 Squadron, the second Argosy squadron to be formed in the R.A.F., completed its trials in Aden in record time in 1962 and now maintains regular scheduled flights to Bahrain, *via* the route stations, and to Africa. Since its arrival in Middle East Command in June 1962 No. 105 has flown over 3 million miles and carried over 10 million lb. of freight throughout the Middle East. Its crews have recently been training in the air-supply role.

Strike Wing

The main responsibility of Strike Wing at R.A.F. Khormaksar is to provide an effective defence for Aden and the Federation from outside attack and to maintain internal order within the territory in support of Federal Forces. There are two squadrons (Nos. 8 and 43) of ground-attack Hunters in the Wing and one (No. 208) in Bahrain, as well as No. 1417 (Fighter Reconnaissance) Flight with Hunter FR.10s, and No. 37 Squadron with Shackleton MR.2s. As well as internal

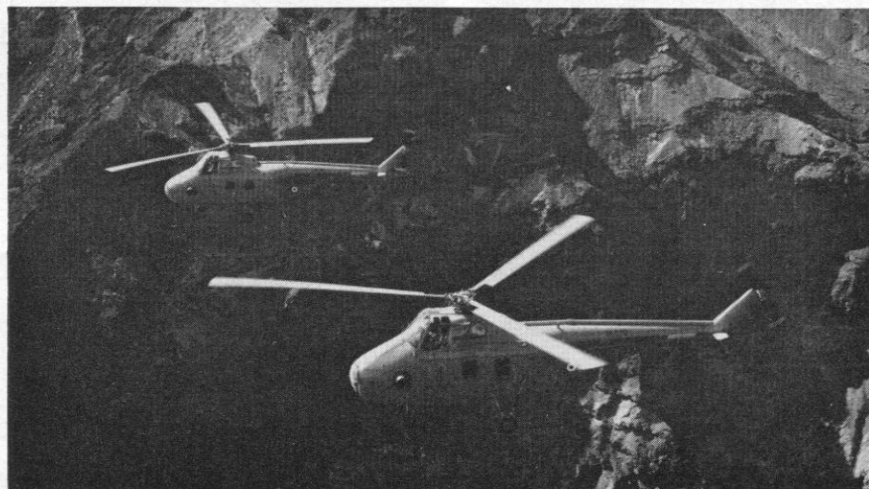


No. 78's STOL Twin Pioneers have proved ideal for "up-country" work



ABOVE: No. 105 Squadron Argosies have already flown over 3 million miles

BELOW: All-yellow Whirlwind HAR.10s of the Search and Rescue Flight



A.F.M.E. . . .

security, Strike Wing also provides an important Search and Rescue facility which may take aircraft of No. 37 Squadron way out into the Indian Ocean, across the deserts, or the plains of Africa.

Hunter operations from Khormaksar are rarely seen by the people of Aden as they take place mainly in the more remote-up-country areas, but many a disgruntled tribesman has been sent hurrying back to his village at the sight of a pair of low-flying Hunters. A small Ground Liaison Section of Strike Wing provides a vital link in the briefing of the Hunter pilots (who are at a constant state of readiness) in the intricacies of the many tribal feuds and warlike tendencies which occur from time to time within the Federation. The nearness of the Yemen border is another good reason for maintaining constant patrols in these remote and desolate regions. The Hunters were in action, in support of the ground forces, during the Radfan operations, the pilots earning high praise for their skill and accuracy in mounting rocket and cannon strikes against enemy strongholds.

The aircraft of the Hunter squadrons are regular visitors to the Persian Gulf, and indeed units of Strike Wing may be called upon to operate anywhere within the sphere of operations of Middle East Command. They are the "sharp end" of Air Forces Middle East, and must therefore be ready and able to go anywhere at any time.

The Shackletons of No. 37 Squadron fly for long gruelling hours on reconnaissance duties, both up country and at sea on maritime exercises with elements of the Royal Navy east of Suez. No. 37 has been with A.F.M.E. for about eight years, and a major commitment has been search and rescue, a task in which it is helped by the helicopters, and also by the launches of the small Marine Craft Unit attached to Khormaksar and the volunteer Mountain Desert Rescue Team.

For many years, Britain had no diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, and therefore could not obtain clearance for over-flying that country. This meant that,

in order to fly from Aden to Bahrain, our aircraft had to fly right round the coast, a journey which takes an Argosy the best part of twelve hours, against the 4½ hours needed to make the journey direct. Therefore route stations were necessary where aircraft could land for fuel. There are four of them, at Riyan, Salalah, on the island of Masira, and at Sharjah.

R.A.F. Riyan, with a strength of two officers and thirty airmen, is the smallest of the route stations, and the nearest to Aden, about 270 miles along the coast. It is a collection of small white buildings, and a sandy airstrip in the centre of a shallow scrub-covered desert surrounded on three sides by high mountains. Apart from refuelling Service aircraft flying along the South Arabian route, Riyan also handles a large number of civil aircraft *en route* from Aden to the Eastern Aden Protectorate.

Sultan's Air Force

The staging post at R.A.F. Salalah is about 650 miles east of Aden, in the Sultanate of Trucial Oman, and enjoys periods of regular although light rain, a phenomenon rarely seen in Aden itself. Again, the main task of the men at Salalah is to tend to the needs of transit aircraft, both service and civilian. They enjoy very friendly relations with the Sultan, who lives in Salalah and who has his own Air Force.

Operating Provost and Beaver aircraft, the Sultan's Air Force is manned and run by R.A.F. officers, seconded to the Sultan's Armed Forces. The Air Force has been in existence now for about four years, and its versatile aircraft can operate in about twenty-two different roles, including rocket-firing, photography, bombing, supply dropping, passenger transport and casualty evacuation.

Throughout the Oman, which skirts the Indian Ocean for 840 miles from the Aden Protectorate to the Trucial States, the Army and Air Force have built almost a hundred desert airstrips so that now the Sultan's troops can be flown almost anywhere in the Sultanate within an hour. Pilots working with this unusual Air Force often have to work alone, for long hours,

especially on trips into the interior, perhaps to pick up a sick Arab, when they have to service and refuel their own aircraft and frequently sleep in the desert under the wing of their aircraft.

The next staging post to be reached after Salalah, going the long way round, is on the desert island of Masira, at the foot of the Persian Gulf. Although a very important part of Air Forces Middle East, Masira is perhaps better known for the fact that it boasts the only railway in this part of the world.

The R.A.F. Station at Sharjah (which once had the only golf course in the world with square holes) is about 300 miles from Bahrain, in the midst of the richest oil fields in the world, and thus plays a vital part in the defence of British oil interests. Apart from its role as a staging post for flights to Bahrain, Sharjah has its own Communications Flight of Pembrokes, as well as receiving regular detachments of Beverleys and Hunters from Aden.

R.A.F. Muharraq (until recently known as R.A.F. Bahrain) also enjoys these regular visits, the main object of which is to support the Army Units which make up British Land Forces, Persian Gulf, an integral part of Middle East Command. Although these regular detachments may not be very large, Air Forces Middle East demonstrated to the world at the time of the Kuwait crisis that it can move with lightning speed when the need arises, moving troops and strategic forces in strength to defend our oil interests, and those of our allies.

Seething Rally

WAVENEY FLYING GROUP are holding an all-day air rally at Seething Airfield, near Norwich, on 23rd May. A flying display has been organised for the afternoon, including a special aerobatic display, demonstration of the Beagle Wallis Autogyro, helicopter flying displays, formation flying and a special visit to Norfolk by Lewis Benjamin of the Tiger Club with his "Standing on the top wing" flying display act. Further information can be obtained from Mr. James Hoseason, Broadland House, Oulton Broad, Lowestoft.

SPECIAL!

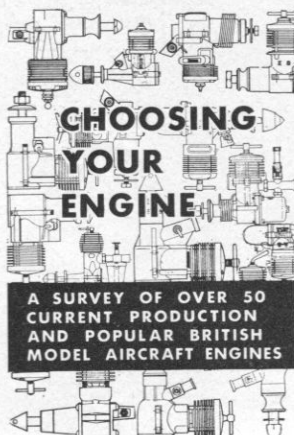
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