Army Flying

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"The eagle suffers little birds to sing,
And is not careful what they mean thereby."
SHAKESPEARE—*Titus Andronicus.*

THE LEADING ARTICLE in the March issue of *Air Pictorial* posed the question "How many air forces?", and plainly answered "One". Throwing the Royal Navy the R.A.F.'s speed-boats, and the Army the R.A.F. Regiment and a Bloodhound or two, the author of this article totally abolished the aviation of these two senior services and put the Royal Air Force right back in the flying business. The Fleet Air Arm is perhaps old and established enough to smile at such reactionary assaults, but the nature of Army flying is not so widely known that we soldiers can afford to ignore them.

Arguments and fallacies

The arguments of that March article went something like this:

"A single flying service, the R.A.F., was formed in 1918, and thereafter successfully competed with tasks in support of the other services. In spite of this, two other flying services, Naval and Army, have been permitted to develop. Air power, and the direction of centralised aircraft from one task to another, is a subject well understood by the R.A.F. who, given full control of flying and a predominant say in air matters, could avoid such wasteful decentralisation of aircraft as is practised by the Army Air Corps and eliminate compromises, controversies and delays in aircraft development."

There are major fallacies in these arguments. In the first place it cannot be seriously maintained that R.A.F. support of the Navy and the Army was, between the wars and later, entirely satisfactory. Had this been so, the Fleet Air Arm would never have reverted to the Navy and the Army Air Corps would never have been formed. So far as the Army was concerned, the R.A.F.'s first obvious failure was in the field of observation. "Observation" is a close and intimate requirement of soldiers, but R.A.F. methods were clumsy and slow, and dissatisfaction with them led directly to the Air Observation Post flights. Here Gunner pilots, under Army operational control, flying Auster aircraft from strips in the battlefield, carried out observation and fire control by normal gunner methods.

Their presence encouraged Army commanders and staffs to use light aircraft for other purposes, notably for free movement of individuals about a ground-congested battlefield, and thus ushered in the Liaison flights. And, in the post-war years, when all other worthwhile armies were expanding their light aircraft units and introducing helicopters, the R.A.F.'s reluctance to follow suit made it inevitable that the Army should assume full control of its aviation.

A Royal Armoured Corps helicopter pilot has the same tactical instincts as the armoured car Troop commander with whom he is in radio contact

Another major fallacy in the arguments of the March article was the assumption that flying constitutes a homogeneous and separate activity suitable for a separate service to control. At one end of the flying scale there is perhaps the supersonic fighter, packed with electronics, the pilot a man of split-second skills and reactions and with high technical knowledge, but yet dependent on the continuous skills of many others; at the other end is the horse jumping a fence. The R.A.F. has never claimed the horse, nor would they claim the new mechanical horse, the ground vehicle with a jump-capability. But what of the next up the scale—the hovercraft, and other ground-pressure vehicles? These, too, may basically be Army ground vehicles, with the ability to cross bad ground on air-bubbles instead of tracks. If they are used, it will be for the most commonplace roles in Army units and headquarters which it would be farcical for a separate service to perform.

And so we arrive at the helicopters, performing the same functions for an Army as do its ground vehicles, but in circumstances where use of the third dimension is indicated. None of these vehicles (leave the ground though they may) have much in common with the R.A.F.'s fighter, bomber, reconnaissance and transport aircraft.

One might well ask why aerial vehicles are chosen as a subject for rationalisation; why not boats, rubber dinghies, and battleships alike? Why not land vehicles, guns, radio? Why not radar, an expensive and complex commodity in short supply, competed for by all the services as aircraft were in 1917?

The truth is that it is not equipments which should be "rationalised" but roles. Those conducting the Sea Battle, the Land Battle, the Air Battle, should in each case have in their organisation and under their control the means to fight their battle. Air power, won by concentration, is the basis of the Air Battle, and unless this is won by the Air Force, it cannot help or protect the other services. The Army's light aircraft, however, and the R.A.F. helicopters which are cross-country vehicles in the Army's battles, play no more part in the struggle for air power than do the Army's ground vehicles. A Royal Armoured Corps helicopter pilot edging forward between two roads covered by armoured cars, has the same background, tactical instincts, and mentality as the armoured car Troop commander with whom he is in radio contact. Both are in a different world from the Lightning or Canberra pilot.

Once the essential truth has been absorbed that the Army light aircraft is just another kind of vehicle, the futility of keeping such vehicles under central control, and "switching from one area to another", must be apparent.

Three dimensions

A modern army fights in three dimensions—not because of any revolution in warfare, but because in recent years the means have appeared to allow it to do so. To enable it to make use of this third dimension and fight its land battle it needs:

(a) Aircraft to strike offensively, both in the interdiction and close support role.
(b) Reconnaissance over enemy territory.
(c) Supply by air when appropriate or necessary.
(d) Battlefield aircraft.

The first three of these requirements are directly dependent on air power, and cannot be met in conditions of air inferiority.

Battlefield aircraft could be defined as aircraft which are based in the Army's tactical battle zone, and employed tactically in the Army's battle. They will be mostly helicopters and include:

Air observation posts, lifting pilots or

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other observers to better positions to observe.

Liaison aircraft, moving individuals about the battlefield, particularly commanders and staffs, technicians and casualties.

Anti-tank aircraft, to deploy reserve weapons and if necessary act as their firing-platforms.

Assault helicopters, to carry about a section of infantry in assault, patrol, protection, or reinforcement roles. They could also be used for emergency forward supply. At present British helicopters of this type, in contrast to the other three types of battlefield aircraft and to the practice in the armed forces of comparable countries, are Air Force-manned.

These four classes of battlefield aircraft have almost every factor in common. They must fly really close to the ground, making use of natural cover, the pilot finding his way by map-reading rather than conventional navigation. They share the same strips or helicopter landing zones, the same methods of concealed-approach thereto, and the same methods of concealment and camouflage. Their common problems are vastly different from those of other aircraft; their own field guns rather than the enemy's A.A. guns are their chief danger, and evasive-action is closely tied to the topography. These aircraft must share early-warning arrangements, control, and communications. Because they operate in the midst of an army in battle they must conform to Army methods of movement, deployment, concealment, and defence.

These battlefield aircraft should clearly be manned and operated by one service, and that service the Army. Their operations demand a feeling for Army tactics which cannot be acquired by an R.A.F. pilot or technician on a restricted helicopter tour. The author of "How many air forces?" deprecated a system which required an Army pilot to return to his parent arm after a couple of years' flying, but it is just this alternation of regimental and flying tours which makes him an effective Army pilot. How much more illogical is a system which gives an R.A.F. pilot two years in a 38 Group helicopter squadron, and then, when he is on the fringe of knowledge of army organisation, tactics and needs, replaces him for career-reasons by, say, a fighter pilot with all to learn again.

The most dangerous implication of R.A.F.-manned battlefield aircraft is that of divided control in the forward area. Joint-service operations always involve some delay, and at the front end of the battle the smallest delay could be fatal. In the best case R.A.F. commanders might place their pilots unreservedly under Army formation commanders; it is hard, however, to see this arrangement persisting in the face of the latter's acceptance of a high casualty-rate. In the worst case the Army would go into battle with helicopters and crews upon whose organisation, equipment, training and morale they had had no influence.

The future

It would seem inevitable that rationalisation, when it comes, will be rationalisation of battlefield aircraft as part of the field army to which they tactically belong. There would appear to be no logical argument to prevent the assault helicopters from becoming Army-manned and operated now, but, one suspects, a mere manpower-accounting difficulty. Surely our strong Ministry of Defence could solve this?

Further problems, however, loom ahead: the VTOL fighter-reconnaissance aircraft, which could qualify as a battlefield aircraft; and rationalisation of transportation, including transport aircraft. Let us hope that the full integration of the Services arrives before these new problems plague us too far.

Between flying men, particularly those of our three Services, there is the warmest camaraderie and respect. It is to our mutual advantage that this should be fostered and enlarged, and *Air Pictorial* does us all a disservice by this recent article. Might not the Air League now recognise that the aircraft has, like the motor car, become a vehicle of all the Services, and might they not strive to encourage and support flying men of all kinds and in all uniforms?

Concealed approach—by a Sioux, edging forward barely off the ground

Open Day at Middle Wallop

ON 10TH JULY the Army Air Corps Centre at Middle Wallop, near Andover, Hants., held its Open Day, during which it demonstrated most effectively its equipment and capabilities. Flying began with a race between seven very dissimilar aircraft—Sioux, Scout, Skeeter and Hiller UH-12B helicopters, and fixed-wing Chipmunk, Auster AOP.9 and Beaver. This was won by the Skeeter, of the Advanced Rotary Wing Flight, but the contest was quite evenly balanced.

Pilots of the Elementary Fixed Wing Flight gave an impressive formation display of aerobatics in Chipmunks, and there was a lively piece of crazy flying in an Auster by an "alleged" Press photographer who took off before the pilot who was supposed to fly him home could get in. For the most part, though, the Army demonstrated its conviction that the ability to fly close to the ground is vital if one wants to stay alive in wartime conditions.

Austers sped at speed under 12-ft.-high wires, helicopters spent most of their time at "haystack" height, and it was noticeable that the Sioux directing imaginary artillery fire popped up for the briefest useful look before sinking to near-ground safety again. In this connection, it was interesting to hear the view that some of the heavy helicopter casualties the Americans have been suffering in Vietnam might be due to operating at the wrong height—neither low nor high enough, but just at the right height for Vietcong "flak" is how our informant put it.

Tactical demonstration

The main event of the day was a simulated assault on a "Middle Eastern" fort and "hostile tribesmen". Troops were flown in by Scouts which came in low and skidded a considerable distance along the ground before disgorging. Other Scouts, some armed with fixed machine-guns and one with a movable M.G. firing through the port door space, did some strafing as a preliminary to the advance of further ground forces, armoured cars and artillery coming into the picture. A "hostile aircraft" (an Auster) was driven off by ground fire and disappeared behind some un-Arabian trees to explode on unseen, unverified impact with the ground. Beavers carried out a supply drop, and Sioux were everywhere, performing A.O.P., casualty evacuation, and staff-movement tasks.

The U.S. Army also took part in the battle, providing a Sikorsky H-37B Mojave to bring in heavy loads and a Grumman OV-1 Mohawk for ground attack.

Other items included a display of glider

TOP LEFT: *Alouette II XR232 at speed. The type is still in use in Germany and British Guiana*

TOP RIGHT: *Sioux XT154 sets off from the apron. Fifty have already been delivered by Agusta and Westland's have started licence production of more than one hundred*

LEFT: *Helicopter training is undertaken by Bristow's Hiller UH-12s (All photos: J. D. R. Rawlings)*

The Skeeter AOP.12 is still used by some units in Germany

Scout AH.1 XP884 gets down to operational level

aerobatics by Maj. J. Evans of R.E.M.E., a mass fly-past by twenty-four helicopters, and a demonstration of free-fall parachuting by men of the 22nd Special Air Service Regiment.

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Army Aviation at present consists of the Army Air Corps Centre at Middle Wallop, four wing headquarters (one in each of the four main theatres—U.K., Germany, Middle East, and Far East), six squadron headquarters, and twenty-five flights, one of which is independent. The primary tasks of Army aircraft are local reconnaissance, the direction of artillery fire, staff-movement to assist command and control in battle, and light transport, including casualty evacuation.

Light helicopters are now being integrated into certain major ground formations of the Army and these are flown by pilots of the regiment concerned. Designated "Platoons" (or "Troops" if the Royal Armoured Corps is the parent body), these each consist of two or three Sioux—although some units in Germany will use up the fleet of Skeeters—and represent the basic front-line unit. They are independent of the Army Air Corps, which is itself part of Army Aviation.

Under a new scheme, which is now being implemented, each field formation headquarters has an Army Air Corps flight to serve the H.Q. itself and any unit in the formation. Each flight consists of five Scouts—or Alouette IIs in the case of some units in Germany. Alouettes are also at present operated by No. 27 Flight in British Guiana.

At theatre headquarters level there is a Scout flight and a fixed-wing flight of eight Beavers, which are used to reinforce the field force as necessary; these flights are manned by the A.A.C. or in some cases the R.A.S.C.

Present strength of Army Aviation is 215 first-line aircraft (excludes trainers and other non-operation types) and this figure is expected to rise to 300 in the next few years. Types now in use include Scout, Skeeter, Alouette II and Sioux helicopters, Beavers, some Auster AOP.9s, and Chipmunk T.10s for basic training. In addition, nineteen civil Hiller UH-12Bs and 'Cs are operated by Bristow Helicopters Ltd. (part of the B.U.A. organisation) under an Army pilot-training contract. Bristow's are also responsible for the operation of the Basic Fixed Wing Flight, which employs twenty-four Chipmunk T.10s.

The Auster AOP.9 and Beaver AL.1 are the only operational fixed-wing aircraft still in use with the Army