



AIR CONTROL DOCTRINE - MYTH OR REALITY

One of the most contentious areas of debate about air power concerns the notion that aircraft can substitute for ground forces in enforcing government authority when combating an insurgency. Up until relatively recent times there has been attention paid, principally within the United States Air Force, to arguments that such a doctrine might be relevant to the situation America has found itself facing in a number of small wars. The basis of the case in favour of this application of air power rests on the apparently successful experience of air control, or 'air method', operations enjoyed by the Royal Air Force during the third decade of the twentieth century.

When confronted in 1919 with a renewed incursion by followers of a charismatic Muslim cleric dubbed the 'Mad Mullah', who had been causing persistent problems for the colonial administration in Somaliland (now Somalia), the British decided to reinforce the large number of ground troops required to contain him with some aircraft. By January 1920 a single RAF squadron of DH9a light bombers had arrived, and these were promptly used to bomb the mullah's adherents out of the stone forts they occupied. The heavy casualties caused by these raids within days put the insurgents to flight. For the next three weeks the army, supported by the RAF with reconnaissance as well as bombing, hounded the mullah back across the border into Ethiopia. For a cost of £77,000, air power was seen to have ended a problem which had bedevilled British authority in the area since 1899.

On the back of this astonishing success, hailed as the "cheapest war in history", the RAF found itself charged

in 1921 with policing another empire hot-spot—this time one that was considerably more politically-charged and dangerous. Iraq's population was seething with unrest, particularly in the Kurdish north which was under the hostile influence of the former colonial power, Turkey. On 1 October 1922, Iraq was placed under its first Air Officer Commanding, Air Vice-Marshal Sir John Salmond, who brought with him eight RAF squadrons of DH9s, Bristol Fighters and Vickers Vernon transport aircraft. The previous army force (33 infantry battalions, 6 cavalry regiments) was reduced to a brigade of four battalions of British and Indian troops and four companies of armoured cars manned by RAF personnel.



Colonial policing from the air

(RAAF Club, London)

Salmond immediately found his hands full in the province of Mosul, where a Kurdish rebellion had already broken out. He mounted the world's first air evacuation, using his bombers and transports—all 18 of them—to lift out British servicemen and civilians, as well as friendly local leaders, from Sulamaniya to Kirkuk. During the first months of 1923 the situation was still unresolved, but when he realised in May that the Turks were preparing to move against him with

superior forces, Salmond decided to seize the initiative. Employing a combination of judicious bombing and rapid troop lift by air he restored order to the endangered areas. Pacification had taken just five months and cost about £8 million—far less than the £20 million that the War Office estimated would have been required for the army alone to do the job. British casualties had been one man killed and 14 wounded.

The success of these first two instances of air control operations naturally led to the same tactics being

employed elsewhere around the British Empire, most notably in Transjordan (Palestine), Aden, and on the North-West Frontier of India. A border dispute with Yemen in 1923 ended with the death of just one British officer, a single aircraft lost and a bill for £8,567. Colonial Policing (or ‘Col Pol’ as it was called) became a central plank in the case for the RAF’s existence as an independent service, a proposition under concerted challenge by the army and navy at the time. The doctrine also underwent a degree of development and refinement.



In 1933, the RAAF was again evacuating refugees from Mosul

The idea of coercive bombing of civilian populations, in particular, became highly controversial, especially in what were notionally constabulary-type operations. The practice was begun of providing the residents of targeted areas with advance warning of the consequences of non-compliance with government directives, a measure which supposedly ensured that the killing of women and children was minimised. Thus the concept of the “inverse blockade” was born, whereby normal life was disrupted while villagers stayed away from their homes and crops until told that it was safe to return. Such were the notions of humane conduct of warfare in the 1920s and 30s.

In reality, the success of the air control doctrine was exaggerated. Because of the political and economic climate which spawned the concept, during which the RAF was forced to find a rationale for its existence at a time of heavily curtailed defence spending, the claims made for air power were probably far too high. The delivery of warnings to targeted communities were not invariably given in remote localities, so the “humaneness” of operations was often suspect. The claimed accuracy of bombing against specific houses within villages was

almost certainly false, hence claims of minimal violence and damage were similarly misrepresented.

Above all, air control never involved the RAF acting solely on its own; in almost every case, these operations were conducted in close conjunction with ground forces—in truth, they were invariably joint operations. If anything, the emphasis placed on air control carried a significant penalty for Britain, by distorting the distribution of the RAF to Egypt and other remote parts of the empire, and causing emphasis to be given to building a force of light bombers which left the RAF quite unfit for other roles. Even the savings achieved were something of a myth. While British Army units were usually withdrawn, their place was taken by Indian troops—a shift of financial expenditure which the Indian Government greatly resented. And finally, the coercion entailed by RAF attacks might have suppressed rebellion for a time but it rarely ended the conflict, certainly not in Iraq, Palestine or the North-West Frontier.

- *Air control was largely a response to a particular set of circumstances in which the RAF found itself after World War I, and which do not necessarily translate to later times and places*
- *Although cost effective as an additional measure available for colonial policing, air control was never as successful or economical as its advocates claimed*
- *The doctrine of air control and substitution of air for ground forces provide a more compelling case for joint operations than for an air power-alone solution*

“In the development of air power, one has to look ahead and not backward and figure out what is going to happen, not too much what has happened.”

– Brig.-General William (“Billy”) Mitchell,
US Air Service



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