

DEBATING THE AIR ESTIMATES

Britain's New Radar: Transport and Trooping

IN the House of Commons, on May 9, the debate opened on the Air Estimates for 1957-58. The Secretary of State for Air, MR. GEORGE WARD, explained that although the money which Parliament was being asked to vote for the R.A.F. (£49,070,000) was £10 million more than last year, the true expenditure covered by the Estimates would be less by about £19 million.

Our force of Valiants, he continued, was complete. The Vulcan O.C.U. was operating and squadrons would soon form, while the Victor O.C.U. would form later this summer. V-bombers would continue to play their part after the ballistic missile had entered the Service. By the end of the year almost all our day-fighter squadrons would have been equipped with Hunter 6s; the proportion of Javelin squadrons was building up in the all-weather force; and development of the P.1 was going well. The Fireflash missile had started Service trials on the Swift 7 and acceptance trials of Firestreak would start later in the year. The Firestreak should greatly increase the killing power of Javelins and P.1s.

Technical progress in the last five years had revolutionized and simplified the problem of control and reporting. The heart of our latest radar defence chain was a high-powered radar acting both for early warning and control. The commander of the defensive forces could now have before him an instantaneous picture of threatened attack some hundreds of miles beyond our coasts. The number of radar stations we needed was smaller, and new plans would result not only in a reduction in the number of sites but in manpower; and, added Mr. Ward, "we have not nearly finished."

For long-range transport the Britannia 253 would take the main load; 13 were on order and more would follow. The first should come into the R.A.F. next year. For the present we must rely on Comets 2s and Hastings; eight Comets were already in Transport Command and the other two would be delivered very shortly. The Comet squadron was about the same size as B.O.A.C.'s former Comet 1 fleet. The reliable Hastings would carry 44 troops over a stage-length of 1,500 miles and had a very useful freight capacity. As the Britannia entered service the Hastings would become a medium-range transport, in which rôle we could plan to have several squadrons for some years. The Comet, with a slightly greater range than the Hastings, would remain in the long-range force. For movement within overseas theatres we should rely largely on Beverleys, supplemented by Hastings. The Beverley, a large number of which were on order, could carry more than 90 troops over medium distances. We also needed a number of smaller aircraft for movement within tactical areas—for example some twin-rotor helicopters; and the Twin Pioneer would supplement the Pioneer. In terms of passengers carried at any one time there had already been a two-fold increase within Transport Command during the past twelve months. It was hoped that in about three years' time the effective air transport capacity available to the Service would be nearly three times what it was today.

The Minister went on to a statement on air trooping, pointing out that to ensure flexibility and economy Government policy had been to invite independent operators to carry out the task, and carriage of military personnel represented about 65 per cent of their passenger activities. Before a contract was let, method of operation, routes, crew qualifications, navigational facilities and loads were examined and approved by the M.T.C.A. The standards were those applied to B.E.A. and B.O.A.C., and were above those required by statute. Since 1951 independent operators had carried well over 600,000 passengers, and during that period there had been five accidents involving loss of life. Since the same date, on the routine movement of passengers on scheduled services between theatres, Transport Command had carried about 100,000 passengers in addition to making many *ad hoc* trooping flights. From all those flights the only fatal accidents were one at Lyneham in 1954, when one member of a Valetta crew was killed, and the accident to the Beverley at Abingdon this year.

It had often been argued, said Mr. Ward, that safety would be improved if more modern types of aircraft were in use, but he did not believe that this was true. The suggestion had been made that there should be an inquiry by an independent committee—drawn from outside the R.A.F., the Civil Service and the aviation industry—into present policy on military air transport and air trooping. He had discussed the matter with the Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation, but the Government, having carefully examined this proposal, must reject it. They accepted full responsibility for their policy in all matters and were answerable not to any *ad hoc* committees of inquiry, but to Parliament.

The Government completely rejected the suggestion that their trooping policy was directly or indirectly endangering life unnecessarily. People should think more seriously before making such serious charges, which cast the gravest reflections upon the competence and responsibility of British air transport companies and upon the safety and reliability of British aircraft. They rejected completely all such imputations. He [Mr. Ward] had already given some explanation of the air safety standards which were required in the operation of trooping flights by the independent companies. Moreover, examination of the findings of air accident investigations entirely vindicated the confidence which the Government had in the safety standards which were required for air trooping, in the efficiency with which air transport operators, whether the Corporations or the independents, implemented these requirements, and in the aircraft themselves.

In the safety record of Transport Command, continued the Minister,

there had been no deterioration over the last six years; indeed, there was some improvement. The records of the independent airlines and the Corporations were both most satisfactory. Naturally, the Government very much wanted to bring modern aircraft, such as the Viscount and the Britannia, into the trooping field, not because there is any question of the safety of the older types, but because they wanted to take advantage of the greater economy, speed and other operational advantages, including passenger comfort, of the more modern ones. For this reason, they would like to let contracts for longer periods than they had so far been able to do, because civil operators could only finance the re-equipment of their companies with modern types if they were given a guarantee of their use over a reasonable period. But the difficulty was to forecast long-term trooping requirements on a sufficiently firm basis.

The future of the three Britannias being built to the order of the M.O.S. was now being examined, added Mr. Ward. These were for trooping, particularly to the Far East. Tenders from independent operators would be invited in the very near future.

The Minister then turned to manpower, recalling that the Minister of Defence had estimated that the three Services might have a surplus of between 5,000 and 7,000 officers and a similar number of warrant officers and N.C.O.s. The R.A.F.'s share would be considerably less than one-third of the total. To those who would have to leave the Service prematurely it was intended to give fair compensation. The improvement in regular recruiting had been maintained, but not enough women were being recruited to retain the W.R.A.F. at its present strength.

POINTS FROM THE DEBATE

MR. GEOFFREY DE FREITAS (Lab., Lincoln) was distressed to read that the coming of guided weapons had been greeted by an Air Ministry statement that there was no reason to expect startling changes in the R.A.F.'s career or trade structure. How, he asked, could the structure of a Service which was designed for manned aircraft not be drastically changed to meet the training, maintenance and operational needs of guided weapons?

MR. P. B. LUCAS (Con., Brentford and Chiswick) agreed that the publicity and advertising which would have to be undertaken by the Service would be most important. It was something which should be treated almost on a commercial basis. He was bound to say that the publicity arrangements of the Air Force had recently shown a great improvement.

MR. GEORGE WIGG (Lab., Dudley) made reference to a Handley Page Conway-Victor, an improved Avro Vulcan, the Avro 730 supersonic bomber and the Avro 731 scale model. He quoted detailed figures for aircraft orders, which he said had been compiled by the quality of diligence.

A. CDRE. A. V. HARVEY (Con., Macclesfield) said that the P.1 was only "partly supersonic." He would say that the Americans had nothing like our V-bombers, or as good; nor, as far as he knew, had the Russians. These bombers were absolutely supreme in altitude, range and speed.

GOVERNMENTAL INSPECTION

Mr. C. I. Orr-Ewing, O.B.E., M.P., Under-Secretary of State for Air (wearing hat), and Mr. Julian Amery, M.P., Under-Secretary of State for War, arrived at R.A.F. Station Valley, Anglesey, in a de Havilland Devon of Transport Command on May 7 to inspect guided-weapon establishments in the vicinity. (Valley itself is understood to house a unit of Swift F.7s engaged in development and indoctrination trials with Fireflash, and the island will also have surface-launched-missile sites.)

