NOTE ON THE METHOD OF EMPLOYMENT OF THE AIR ARM IN IRAQ

The following note, signed by Lord Thomson, presented to Parliament, has now been issued by the Air Ministry:

1. It should in the first place be appreciated that defiance of the administration by tribes in Iraq is a result of disorder which is in many cases the result of personal vendettas between tribes. It is only when this has failed, or it is judged that the resources of the police will be inadequate for a particular situation, that any appeal for assistance is made to the Air Officer Commanding.

2. The Air Officer Commanding (who exercises operational control over the military forces in the country) in such cases considers whether the best means of assisting the Government to procure obedience to its orders. His policy is to make continuously increasing use of the Iraq Government's own forces. On other occasions Native Levies (which are partly officered by British regular officers) are employed, and, where conditions are suitable, armoured cars in cooperation with local forces have been used and have restored without bloodshed situations which would otherwise have inevitably resulted in serious disturbances with their attendant loss of life. These different ground forces are known to have the air arm behind them in cases of need, and this knowledge is a powerful factor for peace. Air action, however, is only used in the last resort, and no air operations are in any circumstances initiated except at the request of the local British civil adviser acting in concert with the local Iraqi Administration, and after that request has been considered and approved in succession (a) by the Minister of the Interior in the Iraqi Government and his British adviser, and (b) by the High Commissioner.

3. The Air Officer Commanding in scrutinising any request for the employment of the air arm makes full use of the rapid means of transportation which aircraft afford. In this respect, consultation is secured between local British advisers and intelligence officers and the political and air authorities at Baghdad.

4. This may be illustrated by reference to some operations undertaken in November, 1923. The Iraqi Governmend of a large administrative area on the Euphrates, his British adviser having decided that a certain district most inaccessible by reason of its close intersection by water channels and because of the entire absence of any track suitable for wheeled or even moderately convenient for pack animals was definitely out of hand and could not be brought under administration by peaceful methods. It was a district which the establishment of an Arab kingdom, which had remained untouched by and intolerant of government since the insurrection in 1920, and in which consequence fighting and forays against more peaceable districts, with extensive resultant loss of life and damage to property, were of frequent occurrence.

5. The Government decided that this state of affairs could not continue, and that, in the interests of the peaceful development of the country, order must be enforced in this turbulent district.

6. The local British Adviser being of the opinion that force would be required, advised the Minister of the Interior to this effect. After consultation there, the problem was forwarded to the High Commissioner, who in turn asked the Air Officer Commanding to prepare such measures as would be suitable for dealing with the district if the expectation of continued defiance proved to be realised.

7. The next step was for the High Commissioner himself to proceed to the Government Headquarters concerned, and to confer there with the local officials. Special service officers with a knowledge of local conditions, together with the Iraqi Governor of the district, his British Adviser, the local Government, and in some cases, the local tribesmen, were also taken by air to Baghdad for consultation with the Air Officer Commanding, who himself also made a reconnaissance of the whole district from the air at a low altitude.

8. The recalcitrant chiefs were formally summoned to the Provincial Headquarters, and were warned that severe measures would be taken if the summons was not obeyed. As they refused to come in, bombing was then authorised, and took place over a period of two days. The surrender of many of the headmen of the offending tribes followed, and a force of mounted police was enabled to enter the area and destroy a large number of the forts, the existence of which had led inevitably to the continual unrest and fighting described above.

9. The alternatives to the employment of the air arm in backward countries of poor communications and with a wide scattered population are, firstly, an occupation by ground forces so complete as to put out of the picture of the operation any hope or temptation to resist Government authority. Occupation on this scale would involve large numbers of troops and heavy expenditure. It is relevant to mention that after the rising in 1920 a fully-equipped Imperial troop had been unable effectively to control the area in which the air action referred to in paragraph 8 above took place.

10. The employment of the air arm in lieu of ground forces provides a method of control more effective and less costly in life and suffering. Air action can be taken swiftly at the focus of trouble and before the disturbance against which it is directed has time to permeate a larger area. It has the immense advantage that compared with the slow movements of ground forces over unfamiliar country the air arm can spread more easily to the tribesmen no chance for retaliation by ambush or concentrations against small ground forces.

11. Other considerations which it is important to realise are that:

(a) In many cases where the air arm is employed the desparch of a few machines to disturbed districts suffices to secure submission to the Government without any necessity for actual offensive action from the air, though the effect of warning patrols of this kind obviously rests upon the recognition by recalcitrant tribesmen of the fact that stronger measures are in reserve.

(b) Bombing is only resorted to in answer to open armed defiance persisted in after warning of the consequences of defiance has been given and explicit notice issued that air action will be taken unless submission is made. The object of these notices is that the tribesmen can be made to see that the flame of unrest and assists all the disaffected elements to rally to each other. The process of restoring order by ground expeditions often requires long lines of communication which are themselves liable to attack or may involve, as a protection against concentration in the rear of the column, destruction of entire villages and confiscation of livestock. In any case the sum of casualties both to the tribesmen and to the troops and followers of the column is normally considerable.

(c) Apart from the military aspects of its employment, the ubiquity of the air arm serves as a constant reminder over wide-spread areas of the existence of the Government of the country, and this in itself has a tranquillising effect. In this connection the following extract from the recently published Report on Iraq Administration (Colonial No. 4, June, 1924) is of interest:-

"Without air transport the niceties of administration and military touch are impossible with other existing means of travel in Iraq, and the effect of the employment of the Air Arm in Iraq during the six months under review has been the introduction of this inestimable asset. By its means it has been possible to achieve a highly centralised yet widely understanding intelligence which is the essence of wise and economical control."