

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 in Iraq and resultant disorder are in by far the great majority of cases dealt with by police action alone. It is only when this fails, 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 all the military forces in the country) in such cases considers which are 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 co-operation 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 way personal 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 Governor of a Liwa (*i.e.*, an administrative area) on the Euphrates and his British adviser had 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 wheels 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 even before the establishment of an Arab kingdom had given considerable trouble to the Turkish authorities, which had remained untouched by and intolerant of government since the insurrection in 1920, and in which in consequence inter-tribal 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, for the protection of the neighbouring tribes, and 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 consideration 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 Commandant of Police and the British Police Inspector of the Area, 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 minds of disaffected elements 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 infantry division of Imperial troops had been unable effectively to control the area in which the air action referred to in paragraph 8 above took place.

The second alternative is the maintenance of strong ground garrisons in particular centres from which columns of adequate strength can be sent out to lawless areas. Ground forces operating under these conditions in backward countries are notoriously confronted with many difficulties. They have to struggle towards their objectives through difficult country. The line of their march spreads the area of disturbance. The necessity of preparation for an expedition in itself spreads 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.

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 it offers to the tribesmen no chance of loot or retaliation by ambush or concentrations against small ground forces.

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

(1) In many cases where the air arm is employed the despatch 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 efficacy of warning patrols of this kind obviously rests upon the recognition by recalcitrant tribesmen of the fact that stronger measures are in reserve.

(2) Bombing is only resorted to in answer to open and 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 yielded. The effect of these notices is that the tribes are enabled in many cases to withdraw from the area concerned, and the compulsion exercised by the use of the air arm rests more on the damage to morale and on the interruption to the normal life of the tribes than upon the number of actual casualties, which, for the reasons explained above, fall below what would be caused by ground expeditions in the same circumstances.

(3) 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 :—

" . . . The effectiveness of air control would be only partially considered if mention was omitted of its value as a threat and as a means to close co-ordination and co-operation of administrative effort over an immense area ill-provided with other means of communication. An aeroplane or formation of aeroplanes, either employed for the purpose or on some administrative duty, can be seen in the air by a widely-spread population and provides an effective reminder to many of the existence and power of Government.

" Without air transport the niceties of administration and military touch are impossible with other existing means of travel in Iraq, and perhaps the greatest achievement of Air Control 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."