



QUICKSTEP

Air Aspects of the Joint Mobility Exercise

ILLUSTRATED WITH "FLIGHT" PHOTOGRAPHS

THE ancient Atlantic republic of Olandia, for purposes of plot, was the scene of the joint R.A.F./Army operation which, code-named Exercise Quickstep, took place last week. Headed for Olandia, some 500 officers and men of the 24th Infantry Brigade journeyed in fact to Idris Airport, Libya, where they promptly took appropriate local action against agents and guerillas of the Kingdom of Grab, Olandia's unpleasant neighbour, before returning to the United Kingdom and critical newspaper headlines.

The job of R.A.F. Transport Command was to carry these troops from Lyneham and Abingdon direct to Idris, using Comet, Beverley and Hastings aircraft which, to experience the problems of a larger-scale operation, were each to make two journeys. The exercise began on the night of Sunday, February 16, and was completed by the following Friday.

Apart from reserve aircraft and crews, the Transport Command units involved comprised four Hastings from No. 24 (Commonwealth) and No. 511 Squadrons, Colerne; one Comet of 216 Squadron, Lyneham; and four Beverleys from 30 Squadron, Dishforth, and 47 and 53 Squadrons at Abingdon. Speaking at Lyneham before the exercise, Air Marshal Sir Andrew McKee, the A.O.C.-in-C., disclosed his Command's present aircraft strength: this consists of 24 Beverleys, 10 Comets and 30 Hastings, with 20 Britannia 250s on order. Approximately one-quarter of the Beverleys and one-half of the Hastings fleet would normally be operating outside the U.K. at a given time, Air Marshal McKee said, and an overall serviceability rate of 75-90 per cent could be assumed.

Quickstep was only a very small exercise, the air marshal emphasized, but it would be of great value in developing the techniques required for air moves at short notice to any part of

Idris Airport, Libya, is the scene of this line-up of Beverley, Hastings and Comet aircraft engaged in Exercise Quickstep. R.A.F. station commander at Idris is W/C. W. Stapleton.

the world. There was no significance in the choice of Tripoli as a destination, apart from the facts that there was in existence an R.A.F. staging-post there, and that the area was suitable for the troop exercises on arrival. The advance notice given to the Army and R.A.F. units had been five days. This period, according to Brig. R. G. F. Frisby, commander of the 24th Infantry Brigade, was rather less than the Army would "normally" expect for a fire-brigade operation of this type.

A forecast of fog over North Africa (which did not in fact occur) caused the start of the operation to be postponed by six hours. For Brig. Frisby and members of his staff the exercise began in earnest with a take-off by Hastings, the first to leave Lyneham, at midnight on Sunday. For the attendant corps of journalists, some two dozen strong, it began with a 3.50 a.m. call and a four o'clock breakfast in the airfield buffet. Nothing, it seemed, could be more earnest than that.

After a 5.30 take-off, however, the journalists had the better deal, with a smooth, 3½-hour flight from Lyneham to Tripoli in Comet XK 696 captained by S/L. G. C. McCarthy. Just before 9 a.m., or 11 a.m. local time, we crossed the Libyan coast and over the white, sunbaked city of Tripoli, the precisely ruled fruit groves and the garish orange sand, to touch down at Idris Airport and taxi over to the R.A.F. section of the apron. As cameras, typewriters and tape recorders were being unloaded from the Comet, we saw Land Rovers, trailers, equipment packs and the Army emerging from the first of the Beverleys. Reinforcements for Olandia had arrived—during the hottest February day at Idris for many years.

At short intervals, the remaining Beverleys and Hastings landed. Scheduled flight times for these types were nine and 7½ hours respectively. By mid-afternoon the first stage of the airlift—just under 300 troops, seven tons of equipment and six Land Rovers with trailers—had been completed, and brigade headquarters had been set up at Azizia barracks outside the city.

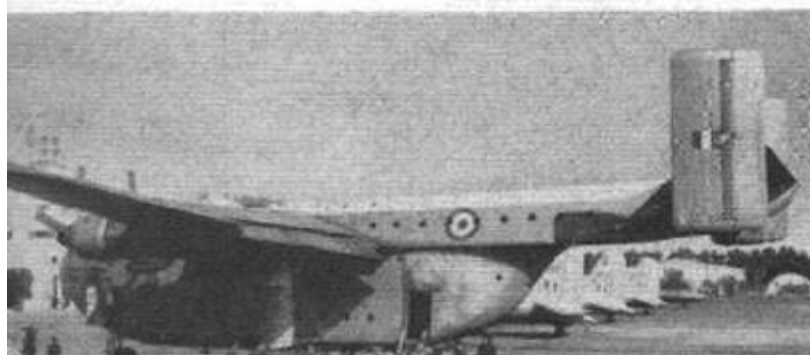
Early the next morning, *Flight* arrived by Army Land Rover in a cloud of dust: at a small sand airstrip near Gurji barracks just outside Tripoli. An Auster 7 had just landed and was taxiing in, and an Army captain was shouting to a camouflaged truck "Where is the adjutant's tea? I want it brought out to him now." This gentleman introduced himself as Capt. P. L. R. H. Wilkinson, commanding No. 2 Section of No. 8 Independent Recce Flight of the Army Air Corps, and in turn introduced Maj. R. H. Matthews, commanding officer of the *Flight*.

Normally based at Idris Airport, the *Flight* comprises two sections each of three Auster 6s, and is attached to the headquarters of the Army's Tripolitania District. For Exercise Quickstep No. 2 Section was working with the 24th Infantry Brigade, whose headquarters at Azizia barracks were nearby; while No. 1 Section, commanded by Capt. G. F. P. Williams, was in reserve and available for airfield defence at Idris. Adjutant and qualified flying instructor of the *Flight* is an R.A.F. officer, F/L. R. C. Moring, who now emerged from the dual Mk 7 to accept his cup of tea.

Eventually, I was told, the *Flight*'s two sections would operate fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters respectively. No. 2 section was in fact representing the helicopter rôle during the exercise, and its jobs included providing top cover to armoured-car patrols, general reconnaissance with Brigade representatives, and aerial search for road-blocks, gangs of guerillas, and any disturbances or riots. The pilots, and the strip, were in H.F. radio contact both with Brigade headquarters and the field units with whom the Austers were working on particular sorties. The Austers also carried Plessey PTR 61E V.H.F. sets for airfield and R.A.F. communication.

The newly completed strip at Gurji, which measures 360 yd x 30 yd, lies across a bulldozed area used also as a polo pitch and sports ground. Its sand surface is soft and loose at present, but is expected to pack down hard after a period of exposure to rain

Left, the first Beverley to land at Idris begins to unload troops (a view from the Comet which followed her in). Right, G/C. T. N. Stock and A. Cdre. R. A. C. Carter of Transport Command watch unloading operations.



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and the local ghiblie wind. Prior to the exercise it had been used by the Flight for flying training and as a pick-up strip for use by Tripolitania District (Tripdist) headquarters at Azizia.

Present strength of the Flight is approximately 56 officers and men. In the past—up to the formation of the Army Air Corps on September 1 last—all pilots have been artillery officers, but the first infantry-officer pilot to join No. 8 Flight was expected later that week. The process of changing from R.A.F. to R.E.M.E. aircraft ground crews is a gradual one, and ground servicing at present is very much a joint operation.

My visit to the Army Air Corps was completed with a rear-seat flight in an Auster 6 flown by Capt. M. J. Page, who already that morning had flown a 2½-hour sortie escorting an "armoured column" (which looked suspiciously like one Land Rover) to Homs, some 100 miles away. While the sturdy infantrymen of the King's Own Royal Regiment and the York and Lancaster Regiment were dealing with guerrilla raids on uranium convoys, the kidnapping of a temperamental opera singer and other serious matters, we were to fly to a certain area ahead of "our" troops and look for the enemy.

We found no enemy. From a height of 500ft (climbing to 1,000ft over the search area), however, we obtained an excellent detailed view of the Tripolitanian countryside; and a clear idea of the value of the airborne element in internal-security operations of this nature. A number of Army vehicles were buzzing along the roads; obviously the fight was still going strong, although the local camels looked very bored indeed.

During our flight the wind had veered and strengthened, and the approach at Gurji was over a line of high trees to a landing



Ground crews camouflage one of the Austers (with Tripdist badge on the cowling) after taxiing in during the exercise.

strip. After several attempts we decided that our war was not as urgent as all that, and diverted to Idris. The Army was at that time interrupting its war to throw a Press luncheon party at an officers' club near Headquarters—which was unfortunate, since we were 20 miles away at Idris, but at least I was on the spot to visit Transport Command.

The first task of the exercise had been the move itself. At Idris, a small transport-support staff headed by G/C. T. N. Stack was responsible for ensuring that the Libyan end of the airlift ran smoothly, and it was in this group's mobile operations centre that W/C. R. J. Dempsey, G/C. Stack's deputy, described its work for me. The operations centre was located in the station education block and, with the temperature outside in the 80s, boasted a large log fire.

Most of the staff of the transport support group were from Transport Command headquarters at Upavon, and their work was divided into the three spheres of operations, movements, and servicing. Planning, briefing and movements specialists are among the officers permanently attached to the group; other specialists co-opted for this operation were extra movements officers (to enable shift working) and a technical officer.

The group had arrived at Idris one day ahead of the troops, and were established in three places on the station. Overall planning and control was exercised from the mobile operations centre already mentioned; the mobile servicing flight was located in a hangar near the aircraft dispersal; and the mobile air movements section rejoiced, and perspired, in an Auster packing case on the edge of the apron.

In the operations room the current and planned activity was displayed on two boards, one a normal operations table and the other a turnaround-times diagram. Planned payload for the Beverley on the 1,500-mile flight was 13,500 lb and 47 passengers; the Hastings carried 10,000 lb or 37-40 passengers; and the Comet 37-40 passengers. Beverley payloads on the first outward flight, however, were reduced because of extra fuel necessary to cover possible diversion to Benina. For the return journeys after coup-



An Auster 6 of No. 8 Independent Recce Flight takes off from the sand airstrip at Gurji on a support sortie.

tion of the exercise where it was not essential to complete the flight in only one stage, an increased payload would be carried and a refuelling stop at Ystres or Luqua would be accepted if necessary. The entire outward troop-movement had taken 21 sorties, while the return flights would total 18.

Only snags experienced during the outward flights had been a return to base by one Beverley following radio failure over France; and a two-hour delay in the arrival of another Beverley which had landed with technical trouble at Ystres on its second trip. Some of the turnarounds at Idris, which averaged 2½ hours, had been slowed down by a failure of a Shell bulk fuel-installation pump. Headwinds during the previous night had caused the Abingdon-bound Beverleys to plan 1½ hr for the return flight.

From their packing-case headquarters, the men of the mobile air movements section were handling the problems of load and unit calculations, passenger and load manifests, passenger briefings and the supervision of the unloading and loading of equipment. Most of the actual unloading of the Army equipment had been carried out by the troops themselves, supervised by movements specialists.

One other R.A.F. unit—No. 215 Squadron, which operates Pioneers from Dishforth—was represented, if not directly involved, in Exercise Quickstep. Its commanding officer, S/L. G. F. Turner, and another of the squadron officers were acting as staff air advisers to Brig. Frisby at his Azizia headquarters during the operation.

Unique in being the only R.A.F. squadron permanently attached to the Army, 215 does in fact normally work with the 24th Infantry Brigade, whose headquarters are at Barnard Castle, Durham. Although on this particular exercise use was made of the local Army Air Corps Flight, 215's Pioneers would if necessary be dismantled, loaded into Beverleys and transported overseas to work with the troops in a similar manner.

This, then, was Exercise Quickstep, completed as scheduled by Friday of last week. The Army and the R.A.F. had gained experience of the snags which could arise in this sort of operation. Certain British newspapers had concluded that the concept of a mobile strategic reserve was a myth. Another had extrapolated at length from Quickstep to Middle-East politics, and its sale had been banned in Tripoli. Britain had honoured her Treaty obligations to Oleandria, and all was well. K. T. O.

Looking down on the airstrip, which is used also as a sports ground, from one of the Army Air Corps Austers.

