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MONDAY, 8 NOVEMBER, 1920.

*Air Ministry,
5th November, 1920*

The Secretary of State for Air has received the following Despatch from Group Captain R Gordon, CMG, DSO, in command of the Royal Air Force Expedition to Somaliland, describing events between September, 1919, and February, 1920:

*Headquarters,
Royal Air Force,
in Somaliland
Berbera,
May, 1920*

Sir,

I have the honour to forward a report on the Air side of the operations in Somaliland in January and February, 1920.

These operations consisted of:

- (a) An Air Force operation with the assistance of Military Forces.

(b) A Military Operation assisted by the Royal Air Force.

2. Opportunity was taken to test the theory that the moral effect of the new arm, with its power to carry out, without warning, a form of attack against which no counter measures could avail, would so disperse and demoralise the Dervish following that troops would be enabled to capture the Mullah's stock and destroy his forts.
3. The preliminary plan of campaign, as decided on in late September, was to use Las Khorai as a base to raid the Mullah's Headquarters at Jodali and Medishi. At the same time a subsidiary line of operations through Burao and Eil Dab was also agreed on in case the Mullah broke for the interior of the country.
4. The success of the expedition was so dependent on preliminary measures taken that, after a period spent on organising a force in London, I proceeded on 25th October, 1919, with a large portion of my staff to Egypt. After a short stay in that country, I left with my PMO and Aerodrome Construction Officer for Somaliland, and arrived there on 21st November. Since secrecy was essential, it was given out that we were prospecting for oil. On our arrival at Barbera, I proceeded at once to select a suitable site for the Base aerodrome and camp, and make arrangements for the ground so chosen to be levelled and cleared of stones.
5. On November 24th, 1919, accompanied by my PMO and Aerodrome Construction Officer, I proceeded by steamer to Las Khorai with a view to selecting a suitable aerodrome for use as an advanced Base in accordance with my previous plan. After three days' stay there I decided that Las Khorai was not suitable for the purpose for which I had intended it by reason of the great difficulties which would be presented by the landing of stores on the open beach from native boats. In addition the Monsoon blew for six hours practically every day, which, besides absolutely precluding the landing of stores being made on the beach, raised a continuous form of sandstorm some 200 feet high. As the site at Las Khorai which I had reconnoitred might, and actually did, prove of assistance in the case of a forced landing, I established a small stock of petrol and oil there.
6. Having been disappointed in my selection of a suitable site for a good advanced landing ground at Las Khorai, I decided, after conferring with His Excellency the Governor and the Officer Commanding Troops, Somaliland, to proceed to Eil Dur Elan to reconnoitre for a possible advanced Base there. I reached Eil Dur Elan accompanied by an escort of the Camel Corps on December 6th, and discovered a suitable site about half a mile from a supply of running water.
7. In order to provide for the alternative line from which it was decided to operate should the Mullah escape south to his mountain fortress at Tale after having been ousted from the north of the country, I had sites reconnoitred at Burao and Eil Dab, and work of preparation commenced.

8. As preparation on both the Eil Dur Elan and Burao Eil Dab lines were so well advanced by December 12th, I decided to cable at once for the main body of the expedition, which was assembling in Egypt, to be sent on to Berbera in HMS "Ark Royal". This aeroplane-carrying ship had been lent by the Admiralty for the purpose of transporting the personnel and aeroplanes in one complete shipment – a feat which would otherwise have been impossible.
9. HMS "Ark Royal" left Alexandria on December 21st and arrived at Berbera on December 30th, 1919, and unloading was commenced at once. As the facilities for handling ships' cargoes at Berbera were of the most primitive nature, recourse had to be made to various improvised means. A large open lighter, completely decked in with ships' hatches, proved invaluable for the unloading of aeroplanes and vehicles, and, thanks to the whole-hearted assistance rendered by Commander P Waterer, RN, and the ship's company of HMS "Ark Royal", the whole of the aircraft material, transport and stores was discharged in a very short space of time.
10. The erection of the aeroplanes was commenced on the 1st January, 1920, and by the 8th of January the first three were tested in the air.
11. The Director of Public Works, Somaliland, rendered invaluable service by making the camel tracks from Berbera to Las Dureh fit for light motor vehicles, and by the 17th the aerodrome at Eil Dur Elan was complete with stores and personnel except for those who were to fly from Berbera.
12. The eight aeroplanes which had been erected started by air from Berbera for Eil Dur Elan on January 19th, but one had to turn back owing to engine trouble, and eventually arrived the next day. By January 20th, therefore, everything was ready for the operations, which were timed to commence on January 21st.
13. The first raid was carried out on January 21st by six machines from Eil Dur Elan against the Mullah's hutments and stock in the Medishi area. By reason of clouds four machines failed to reach Medishi, but bombed Jid Ali Fort and stock in the surrounding country with good results. One machine found Medishi successfully, and bombed the encampment there. The remaining machine, however, was forced to land through engine trouble at Las Khorai, on the sea coast.

It was afterwards confirmed that the bombs dropped by the machine which attacked Medishi killed the Amir, on whom the Mullah was leaning, and actually singed the Mullah's clothes.
14. Combined operations were carried out during January 25th, 26th, 27th, and up till 30th, and consisted chiefly in keeping touch with the two portions of the Somaliland Field Force: (a) The Somaliland Camel Corps, with one and a half companies of 101st Grenadiers (Indian Army), operating from El Afweina in an easterly direction; and (b) the Somaliland Camel Corps who were advancing in a westerly direction from the neighbourhood of Mussa Aled some 45 miles to the north-west of Jid Ali.

Keeping touch consisted of locating the troops of each force and communicating their position by dropping messages on the Officer Commanding the Somaliland Field Force, and also in conveying despatches between the commanders of the two forces and the headquarters of the Somaliland Field Force, to which end temporary landing grounds had been constructed at El Afweina and Las Khorai. By this speedy means of communication the movements of the two forces were co-ordinated and information was rapidly passed.

Latterly, after its capture by the King's African Rifles on 24th January, machines were able to land at Baran, at which place the headquarters of the King's African Rifle force were established.

In addition, close reconnaissance of Medishi and Jid Ali was continued, bombs were dropped and machine-gun fire directed on the small isolated bodies of Dervishes and stock which were located in the vicinity. After the very slightest resistance, followed by the head-long flight of its defenders, Jid Ali Fort fell on 28th January to the King's African Rifles. The bombing from the air and latterly the Stokes gun bombardment had been too much for them.

On 29th January, Galibariboa Fort, built on the lines of Jid Ali Fort, was bombed, together with the native huts which surrounded it. Some stock was observed, but few Dervishes.

On January 30th, an important Dervish Sheik gave himself up at Jid Ali, and, at the same time, reported that the Mullah had broken south on 29th January, and was making for his mountain fortress at Tale. The Mullah had, therefore, eluded the net which the Camel Corps, operating from El Afweina, had set for him. The Officer Commanding the Somaliland Field Force at once decided to give chase, and I took immediate steps to arrange the most effective co-operation by the Air Force in this plan.

15. I had previously prepared an advanced base at El Afweina in case operations should move south into this part of the country, and I now placed it in full commission. Aeroplanes which left Eil Dur Elan on 31st January on reconnaissance were ordered to land there.

On this day the ponies belonging to the Mullah's baggage column were located near Daringahuje and attacked by aeroplane with bombs and machine-gun fire. Numerous ponies were killed and the remainder stampeded in a northerly direction. Deserters who came in afterwards reported that this column which had been attacked consisted of the Mullah's own personal following, consisting of most of his headmen, his wives and his sons, and it was the greatest piece of misfortune that the Mullah himself was not located and hit on this occasion, as he was about three miles away hiding in a nullah.

On 1st February, the Camel Corps arrived at El Afweina, and continued in pursuit of the Mullah. The first air reconnaissance over Tale fortress was carried out on this day, and a large Dervish convoy, estimated at 1,500 camels, burden and otherwise, 500 heads of cattle, and 500 sheep and goats was attacked with machine-gun fire and bombs, about five miles north of Berwaise.

The convoy was thrown into complete confusion, and set off in disorder in an easterly direction; its location being reported by dropping a message containing the information to the Camel Corps, who were then some ten miles distant to westward.

Touch was now established by aeroplane with the friendlies under Captain Gibb, who were operating against Tale from the neighbourhood of Gaolo, some fifteen miles to the south-west of Tale. This was a most important task, since the friendlies were quite in the dark as to what was happening in the north: efficient co-operation between detached forces has always been the greatest difficulty which military expeditions in Somaliland have had to contend with in the past owing to the lack of means of communication.

The hospital aeroplane, with which the expedition was supplied, was first employed on this day in conveying an officer who was seriously ill from El Afweina to Eil Dur Elan, where he was successfully operated upon.

The next day was spent in reconnaissance and in carrying information to Captain Gibb and his friendlies at Duhung to keep a look-out for the Mullah, who was still reported to be on his way south, and the following day in preparing the aeroplanes for a big raid on Tale Fortress. On 4th February, three aeroplanes left El Afweina to bomb Tale Fortress. Three direct hits with 112lb bombs and four direct hits with 20lb bombs were obtained on the large fort itself, and one direct hit with a 20lb bomb on the Mullah's private fort, situated outside the perimeter of the large fort. Waabs, or native hutments, outside the forts were set on fire with incendiary bombs, and, fanned by the north-easterly wind, the conflagration became general. In addition, the inhabitants of the waabs and the forts were heavily and effectively engaged with machine-gun fire.

16. For the next few days after this only reconnaissance and inter-communication work between the various detachments of the Somaliland Field Force, which was still in pursuit, were carried out in order to give them time to close in on Tale and reap the fruits which, after our experience of the results of bombing Jid Ali and Medishi, might reasonably be expected from further bombing attacks.

These were, however, rendered unnecessary, since Captain Gibb's friendlies intercepted the Mullah's convoy and rushed and captured Tale, while the Camel Corps, in a magnificent pursuit, destroyed the Mullah's personal following, which had escaped from that fortress.

With this striking success the campaign was ended, and, on 18th February, the machines flew back to Berbera.

17. The demoralisation caused by the suddenness of attack from the air was vividly exemplified by the comparison which can be drawn from the taking of Baran Fort by the King's African Rifles, and the precipitate flight of the Dervishes from the fortresses of Medishi and Jid Ali after they had been bombed.

In the former case Baran was not subjected to an air attack, and only fell to the King's African Rifles when surrounded and heavily bombarded with Stokes guns, and not until the last defender was killed. Medishi and Jid Ali, on the other hand, stronger forts in every way than Baran, were abandoned almost immediately after the air attacks. The utter demoralisation caused is further typified by the fact that quantities of rifles were left behind – an absolutely unheard-of occurrence in any former campaign against the Dervishes.

Tale itself, a fortress which would have otherwise cost many lives, and occupied a long time to take, fell in practically as simple a manner.

18. It is noteworthy that two days after the fall of Tale, which is a mountain fortress some 270 miles south-west of Berbera, His Excellency the Governor of Somaliland was conveyed there by aeroplane, and was thus enabled to thank the friendlies for their excellent work during the operations, and also to discuss with them on the spot matters of administrative and political importance. This exhibition of the potentialities of aircraft created the most profound impression on all the Akils and tribal leaders assembled there.

19. I wish to acknowledge the help and sympathetic support which I always received from His Excellency the Governor of Somaliland, who invariably showed the utmost resource and energy in assisting me with the solution of the many and varied problems with which I was confronted. My relations with the Somaliland Field Force were of the utmost cordial nature throughout, and I am deeply indebted to Colonel G H Summers for the assistance which, through his long experience of Somaliland and its peculiar conditions, he accorded me at all times. The constant understanding which prevailed between us was a most important factor in the attainment of smooth working throughout, and particularly in the combined operations which followed in the air attack.

The success achieved by the Air Force engaged in these operations I owe to the zeal and efficiency of my staff, and to the unfailing loyalty and support of all officers and men under my command. The conditions under which the Air Force were operating were unique, and that the many difficulties were successfully overcome is a tribute to all concerned. I have already submitted under a separate cover the names of the officers and other ranks of the Royal Air Force whose services I would specially bring to your notice.

I have the honour to be,
Sir,
Your obedient servant,
(Sd) R GORDON,
Group Captain,
Commanding "Z" Unit, Royal Air Force

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A modified DH9 being used to transport a stretcher-bound casualty with "Z" Force in Somaliland, during 1919