



**Air Power,
Counter-insurgency
and Influence:**

the British experience during the period 1945-1976

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Central to counter-insurgency (COIN) operations is the notion of influence, which is defined in United Kingdom (UK) doctrine as: “The power or ability to affect someone’s beliefs or actions; or a person or thing with such ability or power.”¹ Influence is a product of all military activity. The audiences to be influenced are numerous, including the adversary, the officials of the target state, holders of opinion on the international stage, and the domestic electorate.² Conducting influence is a complex task, but provides significant advantage. British doctrine describes influence as a contest which the adversary is likely to go to great lengths to win. Outgunned in conventional terms, adversary focus of attention will likely shift to influencing selected opinions, fighting “in a virtual battle space of ideas.”³ There is a paradox surrounding kinetic attacks, known as “propaganda of the deed,” within an influence campaign. For the insurgent, prosecuting successful attacks against us gains credibility and reinforces his support base. However, our military attacks against adversarial targets represent short-term tactical success that is often transcended by longer-term, negative effects such as reinforcing support for the insurgent cause.⁴ Such second-order effects can be the by-product of well-intentioned activity. Nevertheless, tragedies such as civilian deaths are routinely exploited in insurgent messaging and have the potential to undermine our own domestic support base. Even so, air power can provide decisive effect in COIN operations. For instance, air mobility “provides significant asymmetric advantage to [COIN] forces, enabling commanders to rapidly deploy, sustain and reposition land forces throughout the theatre.”⁵ Furthermore, aeromedical evacuation attends to both the physical and morale

component during COIN; it serves to extract and treat wounded troops, but also provides an assurance for other servicemen, underpinning morale, as well as assuaging the concerns of the domestic electorate.⁶ This paper will demonstrate that air power has played a pivotal role in influencing audiences during historical British COIN campaigns. Illustrative examples will be drawn from Malaya, Aden, and Dhofar, and will include activity which has influenced the British effort beneficially as well as detrimentally. Finally, enduring lessons will be drawn from the period outlined, and their relevance will be mapped to contemporary operations.

The Malayan Emergency of 1948–1960 comprised the Malayan Races People’s Liberation Army, an insurgent group which aspired to independence. The jungle terrain that greeted British troops in Malaya was particularly difficult to traverse. A mountainous landscape climbing to around 7000 feet (2140 metres [m]), tree-top canopies reaching 150 feet (46 m), and entangling secondary jungle, with temperatures exceeding 90 degrees Fahrenheit (32 Celsius), all made it a challenging operating environment for UK forces.⁷ Perceptions of the role that the Royal Air Force (RAF) played in overcoming such an environment are mixed. J. Newsinger, in his book, *British Counter-insurgency: From Palestine to Northern Ireland*, disregarded the RAF’s contribution to success in Malaya by stating that “[o]ne factor that was of little importance in the conflict was air power.”⁸ For him, “air power” encapsulated nothing beyond traditional bombing operations. However, early on in the Malayan campaign, the British hierarchy dictated that minimum force would be a central theme running through the UK approach to COIN; inextricably linked to this decision was to be a restriction on the kinetic natures of air power.⁹ Notwithstanding such constraints, the evolution, adaptability, and agility of air power evidenced a far greater contribution from the RAF to the Malayan campaign.

Routine activity was greatly assisted by the advent of helicopters into operations as the Sikorsky S-55, S-51 and Westland Whirlwind variants were introduced into the jungle. Patrols were subsequently able to cover larger areas and maintain the initiative against their adversaries. As well as routine transit assistance, helicopters engaged in casualty evacuation tasks for British troops. Jordan explained that, notwithstanding limitations resulting from payload capacities and climatic conditions, helicopter assistance negated laborious treks through the jungle, which would have otherwise involved carrying casualties on stretchers. The benefit of aeromedical evacuation by helicopter in Malaya was significant, totalling approximately 5000 evacuations by the end of the campaign. Importantly, the speed of evacuation meant that recovery was quicker, not to mention being accomplished at all in some otherwise impossible situations. Consequently, “casualty

evacuation by air became a vital component in operations.”¹⁰ However, this was more than an improvement in the tactical dimension of the Malayan campaign. Such an evolution was a significant ease on commanders’ planning considerations; no longer would they be required to commit large teams to evacuate casualties. Profoundly, troops embarking on patrols had an assurance that their chances of survival if injured were greatly enhanced. Thus, the influence effect of aeromedical evacuation underpinned the morale component of the Army’s fighting power.

An added benefit to the RAF’s aeromedical evacuation capability was its utility to assist injured civilians. British medics operating within patrols would treat civilian casualties, and, when required, would arrange for extraction to more comprehensive care by RAF helicopter. Jordan linked this activity to the famous “hearts and minds”



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approach being employed by the British at the time.¹¹ General Sir Gerald Templer, High Commissioner and Director of Operations from 1952, described the Malayan campaign in terms of a psychological battle, arguing that “the shooting side of the business is only 25 per cent of the trouble and the other 75 per cent lies in getting the people of this country behind us.”¹² He perceived the campaign as a competition for the consent of the people, which hinged upon provision of security in the broadest terms. Therefore, the benefit of aeromedical evacuation, allied to the important task of extracting wounded soldiers from the battlefield, provided considerable advantageous effects. This nascent air power capability, when applied to civilian casualties, was central to how Templer defined campaign success. Fundamentally, air power was used to prosecute an influence campaign with people at its heart. The question was whether the British would be able to repeat such a successful campaign using air power in a COIN environment in future operations.

Contrasting the successful prosecution of widely welcomed jungle aeromedical evacuation activities in the Malayan Emergency was the Aden campaign that began in the early 1960s. Aden was a strategically important location for Britain due largely to its proximity to the Suez Canal and key Arabian states. Nevertheless, this importance had been unmatched by British investment in the region, resulting in an unsettled populace. Security in Aden had thus far been enforced through the “Air Control Scheme”; a system whereby air power, predominantly kinetic attacks, was used to discipline tribes which had defied British authority.¹³

In 1964, British troops were deployed to the Radfan region to confront the threat posed by two insurgent groups: the National Liberation Front and the Front for the Liberation of South Yemen. The region was described as almost untouched by the twentieth century. Mountainous and seemingly

inaccessible, the Radfan was perceived as vital ground and was to be occupied by British forces. Air power proved invaluable as helicopters ferried troops and equipment in a bid to gain the high ground.¹⁴ The role of helicopters in delivering supplies remained important throughout the campaign, but attacks from the air were also of particular significance to the British effort. Indeed, some argue that the utility of air power in neutralizing insurgent attacks reduced the ground footprint of UK troops and thereby prevented escalating casualty figures, mitigating any associated political and public backlash.¹⁵ However, the use of air power at Radfan was not confined to its positive effect. The RAF conducted activity at the heart of the “ground proscription” strategy. The aims of ground proscription were:

- to make life so unpleasant for the tribes that their morale is broken and they submit; and
- to draw them into a militarily unfavourable position so that we could inflict heavy casualties.¹⁶

All sign of human activity in the proscribed areas was subjected to attack, including strafing and rocket fire. Moreover, “[t]heir crops were destroyed ... and their houses blown up.” The attacks were comprehensive, with Hunter jets expending “2508 rockets and nearly 200,000 cannon rounds, while the Shackleton bombers dropped 3,504 20-lb [pound / 9-kilogram] anti-personnel bombs and 14 1000-lb [454-kilogram] bombs and fired nearly 20,000 cannon rounds.”¹⁷ This approach was perceived by some as akin to a colonial era strategy for dealing with “tribal resistance,” when in fact what was in train was an insurgency. Clausewitz posited the fundamental strategic question: “The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgement that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish ... the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something

that is alien to its nature.”¹⁸ Aiming to starve the insurgents into submission, the result of ground proscription was to drive the insurgents underground. The short-term result was assessed as a victory militarily. In terms of influence operations, the first-order effect, although possibly unpalatable to 21st century readers, achieved a first-level order of military success inasmuch as insurgent activity appeared to dissipate. However, the British strategy was unsupported by similar political energies necessary for more permanent stability.¹⁹ Furthermore, such tactics were out of step with international opinion.

Crucially, air operations had served to dislocate insurgents who consequently established bases elsewhere. Additionally, planning was conducted without consideration for the likely reaction of the various audiences. The British public were highly critical of the use of air power to conduct bombardment in order to proscribe areas. Such tactics were perceived as not in tune with the British way in warfare.²⁰ Influence should have been at the heart of the Aden campaign, not least because the perceptions of surrounding oil-producing states such as Saudi Arabia were strategically important to Britain.²¹ Air power scholars, such as Kemsley, remind us of the psychological effect that air power can have on an adversary. He argued that within the context of COIN, air power can be used to affect both “constructive and destructive” action. The fundamental difference between these actions “is said to be dependent upon the effect desired *after* the operation is completed.”²² Described by some as a British equivalent of the American failure in Vietnam, the Radfan campaign was widely criticized both at home and abroad including by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly.²³ The British use of air power in Aden can be assessed as destructive as it contradicted long-term aims and contrasted with wider opinion. The use of air power in Aden did achieve influence; but not positively in a way conducive to long-term stability in the region or in a way to enhance

Britain’s geo-strategic reputation on the world stage. Fundamentally, the use of air power was at the heart of the UK failure as it was the vehicle by which Britain’s approach to the conflict was epitomized in the eyes of the various audiences.

Three years after the Aden debacle, the British were involved in another COIN campaign as the Sultan’s Armed Forces of Oman were unable to deal with a growing insurgency. In 1970, a small British unit, including Special Air Service (SAS) troops, was dispatched to Dhofar to assist with the deteriorating security situation that some argued found its origins in the British failure in Aden just a few years earlier. The strategic importance of Dhofar was assessed as acute, as the rising insurgency was perceived as representing the threat of expanding Communism in the entire region.²⁴ One particular battle within the Dhofar campaign evidenced the advantage of air power as an agent of influence within a COIN environment.

The morning of 19 July 1972 saw a massed insurgent assault upon SAS positions, including the gendarme fort of Mirbat. Cloud cover initially prevented the Britons from receiving air support while the insurgents were aided by mortar and artillery fire from a mountainous feature known as the “Jebel.” Even when the SAS troops appeared to have stifled the attack, the rebel’s advance continued. However, as the weather improved, British air power was launched and was able to affect the balance of the fighting. Close air support from Strikemaster aircraft conducted rocket and cannon fire attacks on the advancing insurgents, and SAS reinforcements were brought in by helicopter to bolster defences. This interjection of air power worked to repel the insurgent attack. Second-order effects were achieved as the success was communicated to the civilian population of the capital, Salalah. The perceived legitimacy of the Sultan was thereby strengthened as he had been seen as restoring law and order. Longer-term

stability was achieved in part by the work of the civil aid teams, which were able to provide the social functions required to satisfy the needs of the population. Schools and medical facilities were among the improvements that ensuring security in the region facilitated.²⁵

The role of British air power in July 1972 was central to an operation that provided the necessary security for subsequent stability measures to be implemented and thus achieve strategic objectives. Newsinger argued that the tactical victory achieved by a combination of British Special Forces and air power was transcended by the more profound benefits of success. He linked the performance with the wider narrative of Britain's performance in pivotal world events, a continuation of imperial performance which outlived expectations.²⁶ In so doing, British air power contributed to influence on the grandest scales, whereby second- and third-order effects far surpassed the not insignificant first-order effects. Furthermore, air power's utility in Dhofar provided a historical referent against which to measure the efficacy of air power on current operations.

In attempting to highlight contemporary relevance to the historical lessons of air power's role in influence within COIN operations, we find that themes do exist. "The People" are consistently highlighted as the key battleground within COIN campaigns. Kitson argued that "[t]here has never been much doubt that the main characteristic which distinguishes campaigns of insurgency from other forms of war is that they are primarily concerned with the struggle for men's minds."²⁷ The contemporary operating environment is such that influence remains a dominant characteristic of warfare, and thus must be a paramount consideration within our planning. Indeed, commanders must "develop coherent and comprehensive plans to specifically defeat the insurgent in the virtual world as well as in the physical domain."²⁸ Implicit is the need to understand the nature

of the contemporary operating environment. Widely accessible, 24-hour media coverage with accompanying permanent scrutiny is just one dimension that offers challenges as well as opportunities for air power. The accessibility by which UK audiences receive images of ongoing operations in Afghanistan is much enhanced by experiences in Malaya in the 1950s, and so the public is far more aware of the nature of activity in which British troops are engaged. Accordingly, effective influence activity is pivotal in achieving success in COIN environments, and recent history has provided us with examples of how air power has contributed. In distilling the three experiences highlighted above, the first lesson is that, although all tactical activity *influences*, the nature of air power intensifies its potential for influence. Whether it be the impact of the advent of aeromedical evacuation or the ground attacks as part of a ground proscription mission, the influence message is powerful. Intended or not, audiences will be influenced by air power.

The effect of air mobility on ground troops is a significant enabler to COIN operations. It assists with traversing difficult and dangerous terrain, and crucially, facilitates physical links between counter-insurgent and civilian. On all levels, this action thwarts the insurgents' own influence campaign. Furthermore, helicopter support on current operations serves, *inter alia*, to distance troops from the improvised explosive device threat while maintaining the



operational focus on securing the support of the population. The dominant COIN narrative prescribes a ratio of 20 counter-insurgents to every 1000 members of the civilian population.²⁹ However, pressures on troop numbers frequently result in deployments falling far short of this ideal; helicopter support serves to attempt to neutralize this shortfall by complementing ground troops with mobility. Air mobility also nurtures the morale component of our forces as it provides evidence of higher support and concern for the welfare of soldiers. Moreover, domestic support for the COIN campaign is strengthened by such capabilities. Indeed, the discourse surrounding air mobility assets to the current campaign in Afghanistan is frequently used by the British media to measure the level of political commitment to the operation.

Aggressive use of kinetic attack to deny areas to insurgents in Aden was perceived as an anachronistic strategy even in the 1960s. Even though such attacks were directed at a specific tactical goal, they resulted in a significant level of unintended consequences. Not only did they serve to alienate the target population from the UK deployment, but they also undermined vital wider international support for the campaign. Currently in Afghanistan, such attacks are perceived as disproportionate by many, and any interpretation of excessive force becomes ammunition for the insurgents' own influence campaign. A more acceptable use of air power to deny insurgent activity over recent operations has been non-kinetic shows of force. Such tactics allow the benefits of timely presence to disperse insurgent activity; this has been proven on recent operations where insurgents have learned to associate the presence of aircraft with an imminent attack on their locations. Clearly, the danger exists that solely using shows of force would similarly programme the insurgent with the message that we are unprepared to conduct kinetic attacks. Therefore, a balance must be struck whereby kinetic attacks are prosecuted sparingly. Such a measured approach satisfies

the need to neutralize insurgent aggression, bolster the confidence of the civilian populace, and acknowledges the desire for restraint from domestic audiences. Moreover, such courageous restraint is coherent with the intent of higher command in theatre.³⁰


Notwithstanding the potential negative impact of excessive use of force, there are occasions when the desired effect calls for kinetic action. Importantly, such operations in Dhofar demonstrated effect far beyond tactical utility, crucial though it was. Close air support of ground troops can be a "contact" winner, can shatter the insurgents' cohesion, and will and can illustrate resolve to the civilian populace with absolute clarity. Moreover, it can enable the necessary security climate within which political and social reconstruction can occur. Additionally, close air support in COIN works at the tactical level by providing visible evidence of joint action and underpinning the morale component of the fighting force. These three historical examples have illustrated that success within the influence battle is underpinned by cohesion in joint operations. Jordan argued that such "jointery" as part of a wider comprehensive approach is key to defeating insurgencies.³¹ Furthermore, these examples, together with experiences on contemporary operations, have amplified the need to understand the environment within which air power is employed. Thus, the role of intelligence gathering and overall situational awareness³² ought to be seen as a sine qua non for COIN operations.



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In conclusion, this paper has sought to examine the effectiveness of air power in British COIN operations in Malaya, Aden, and Dhofar. It has conducted this task through a lens of influence, acknowledging that air power was a significant tool with the potential to achieve much within the influence battle. The Malayan Emergency witnessed air power's role in influence operations as the advent of aeromedical evacuation greatly enhanced the British performance. The campaign was a success as the role of air power played a central role in complementing the "hearts and minds" approach. Influence underpinned all helicopter activity, as troops, civilians, the British public, and the insurgents drew their conclusions from the air power supported insertion of British forces into the Malayan jungles. Unfortunately, the role of air power in the Aden campaign was at the heart of British influence activity, which ultimately prevented success. By using aggressive kinetic tactics to deny ground, the British cause was weakened and support was lost. However, UK experience in Dhofar demonstrated that kinetic action did have a decisive role in the influence dimension of COIN. Influence activity pervades all natures of warfare, but is particularly crucial in COIN campaigns, which are judged as battles ultimately concerned with the minds of populations. Air power has a key role to play in what is considered the overriding priority, on which success rests, in the current International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operation in Afghanistan:

Think of COIN as an argument to earn the support of the people. It is a contest to influence the real and very practical calculations on the part of the people about which side to support. Every action, reaction, failure to act and all that is said and done becomes part of the debate. The people in the audience watch, listen and make rational choices based on who can better protect them, provide for their needs, respect their dignity and their community and offer opportunities for the future.³³

British air power has produced effects which have led to mixed results since experiences in Malaya. Recent historical experiences provide references, which, when applied in context, offer enduring frameworks for the utility of air power in COIN influence activity in the contemporary operating environment. Such influence activity has been proven to be indispensable, rather than optional, during COIN campaigns. Influence is fundamental to winning the consent of audiences, in particular the civilian population, and air power has a major role to play in such environments. 

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Abbreviations

COIN	counter-insurgency
RAF	Royal Air Force
SAS	Special Air Service
UK	United Kingdom

Notes

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4. Ibid., 3-11.

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