

Date and Hour. Aeroplane Type and No.

12.55

GLADIATOR

11.11.38

L 7621

13.15

K 8013

11.11.38

14.05

K 8013

11.11.38

PALESTINE POLICEMEN



LEFT: SQUADRON LEADER HECTOR MCGREGOR COMMANDED 33 SQUADRON IN PALESTINE, FOR WHICH HE RECEIVED THE DSO. HE WAS LATER KNIGHTED AND BECAME AIR MARSHAL DOUGLAS MCGREGOR

BELOW: GLADIATOR MK.IIS OF 33 SQUADRON AT ISMAILIA, EGYPT, SHORTLY BEFORE THEY RETURNED TO PALESTINE. THE NEAREST AIRCRAFT WAS FLOWN SEVERAL TIMES BY SQUADRON LEADER MCGREGOR IN DECEMBER 1938 MOD

Prior to World War Two, 33 Squadron's Gloster Gladiators sortied from dusty bases to police dissidence and rebellion

Words: Andrew Thomas

To help manage new post-1918 colonial obligations – former Ottoman holdings such as Palestine, Transjordan and Mesopotamia – the RAF was required to assist garrison forces by providing air policing. It was a role for which a fledgling force, seeking to justify its continued independence, had proven more than capable, quelling unrest in India, Afghanistan and Somaliland from the air.

By 1936, the increasing influx of Jews fleeing Germany into British-administered

Mandatory Palestine resulted in growing resentment among the Arab population. Protests became increasingly violent, culminating on April 15 that year, with the fatal ambush of a Jewish convoy

near Nablus. With two drivers killed, several Arabs were killed in reprisals the next day and, as more blood was shed, it became apparent the government was being targeted.

Emergency powers were introduced, and a national strike was declared, and so the RAF was called on to support garrison units. As the situation deteriorated, in mid August, a detachment of Hawker Harts of 33 Squadron, under OC 'A' Flight, Flight Lieutenant Sabine, was flown into Gaza from Amman.

There, it formed an air striking force with aircraft remaining at immediate readiness to support any incidents. From Gaza, 33 Squadron took over all routine patrols and reconnaissance commitments for

'SouBrig' (Southern Brigade). One aircraft was also kept on immediate call for short-notice tasking.

On September 3, four Harts were detached to Ramleh and immediately conducted patrols east of Tulkarm, where 6 Squadron had been engaged earlier in the day. A typical task came on September 14, when three Harts escorted a convoy from Bersheeba to Jerusalem. Another reported a blown bridge near the Dead Sea the following day. On October 13, a Hart flew a dawn reconnaissance of the southern

Dead Sea, in co-operation with the 8th Hussars.

Locating a band of armed Arabs, a robust action – combined with some judicious bombing – stabilised the situation to the extent that at the end of the month 33 Squadron

was released and was able to return to Egypt in mid November.

Air cordons

At Ismailia, in March 1938, 33 Squadron replaced its Harts with Gloster Gladiators and retrained in the fighter role for the defence of the Suez Canal. However, by this point, there was, in effect, a civil war in Palestine, waged between Arab and Jew.

During the summer, Gladiators of 80 Squadron had been detached for aerial policing but, on September 26, 33 Squadron's 'C' Flight – four Gladiators flown by Flying Officer Bolingbroke, Pilot Officer Foster and Sergeants Vale and Tebbs – was detached to Ramleh to replace

“There was, in effect, a civil war in Palestine, waged between Arab and Jew”



LEFT: HAWKER HARTS OF 'A' FLIGHT, 33 SQUADRON, OVER PALESTINE DURING THE 1936 DETACHMENT MRS SABINE



LEFT: 33 SQUADRON HARTS AT GAZA IN 1936, FROM WHERE THEY SUPPORTED THE SOUTHERN BRIGADE M W PAYNE

80 Squadron. The ground party was flown in by a 216 Squadron Vickers Valentia transport. At the end of the month, Squadron Leader Hector McGregor took command as the Ramleh detachment became increasingly active.

On October 1, reacting to an emergency call for air support, Foster, Vale and Tebbs scrambled and attacked a group. The trio's strafing runs caused 12 casualties among the dissidents, though one Gladiator was hit in the tailplane by rebel fire. Thereafter, the callouts became regular, with Foster and Tebbs in action two days later, strafing insurgents and inflicting seven casualties.

Gladiators also acted as a visible deterrent and provided top cover to convoys moving through hostile areas. Another task was 'air cordon', where aircraft would orbit a village as it was searched by ground forces or the Palestine Police, to prevent likely rebels slipping away. On October 18, a much larger-scale effort was flown above Jerusalem's Old City, which was sealed during a cordon-and-search operation.

In another incident that day, Pilot Officer Bull Vale scrambled from the strategically important Haifa and strafed a group, causing two

casualties. A subsequent scramble made by three Gladiators later in the day proved uneventful, though. Flight Officer Foster was to have a busy day on October 21, first responding to a call from ground forces at Maithalun, where his attack inflicted two casualties. He was later in action at Jaba, causing two more rebel casualties, before Pilot Officer Lynch and Sergeant Laverack arrived and claimed an additional two.

After this spurt of action, the situation became more routine for 'C' Flight's pilots. Between then and November 4, they conducted numerous but uneventful convoy escorts and reces as well as covering a train.

Squadron Leader McGregor and additional aircraft had by now arrived in theatre. These reinforcements were useful as the tempo of operations increased. Gladiators were busied supporting a major operation by the 7th Division and, at dawn on November 5, Pilot Officer Booth and Sergeant Tebbs mounted an air cordon of Halbul, a suspected rebel village, ensuring no one left as the troops moved in. This cordon remained in place for much of the day, enforced by pairs of Gladiators.

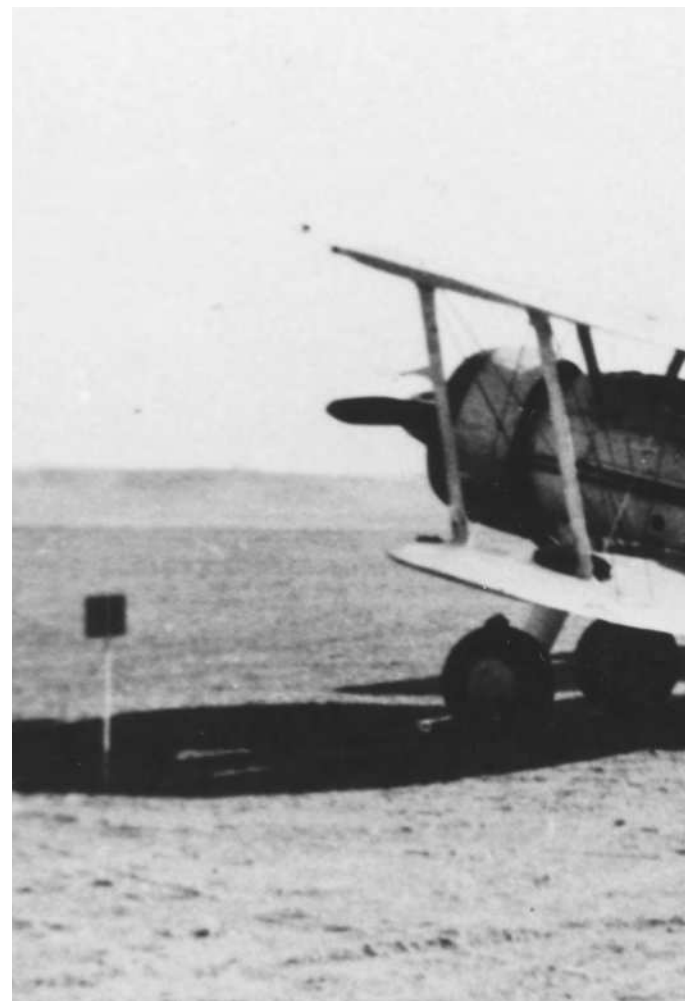
During another sortie, over Bala the next day, McGregor (in K8013) flew his first cordon operation.

Under fire

Counter-insurgency operations were no sinecure. During a later sortie that day, Laverack's aircraft was hit and he force-landed in a wadi, where his aircraft overturned. Extricating himself with some difficulty, having suffered serious injuries, he managed to reach Bala three hours later, where he was transferred to a hospital.

The day after Laverack was downed, 33 Squadron's eight Gladiators transferred a short distance to Lydda airport, because heavy rain had made Ramleh unusable. They would operate from Lydda periodically during winter.

From there, on November 10, McGregor in K8013, along with Flying Officer Bocking, Pilot Officers Booth and Lynch, and Sergeant Tebbs conducted an air cordon at Beit Furik, near Nablus. However, again, well-aimed rifle fire proved a problem. As a result of sniping, Tebbs' Gladiator was hit. Crashing, he was critically injured





“Laverack’s Gladiator was hit and he force-landed in a wadi, where his aircraft overturned. He extricated himself with some difficulty, having suffered serious injuries”

ABOVE: SQUADRON LEADER MCGREGOR, IN HIS PERSONAL GLADIATOR, LEADS A SECTION OVER THE ANCIENT CITY OF JERUSALEM DURING THE CORDON OPERATION OF OCTOBER 18, 1938 33 SQUADRON RECORDS

LEFT: LINED UP AT RAMLEH, GLADIATOR I K8054 WAS FLOWN REGULARLY BY SGT COTTINGHAM IN 1939 VIA R L WARD



DESERT GLADIATORS

and, although rescued, he died a few days later.

Arthur Tebb's was 33 Squadron's first operational fatality. The CO noted in his logbook: "Cordon Beit Furik. Tebb's crashed – sent Foster back to report. Band armed Arabs (approx 80) left village. Fired approx 1,600 rounds. Casualties not known, estimated above 15-20."

He was back overhead in the afternoon: "Returned Beit Furik after refuelling. Band now dispersed – five casualties."

Further air cordons were mounted in co-operation with the 7th Division, including a large operation around Jericho on November 13, and later the villages of Abu Dis and Beit Gajan. On November 25, the squadron flew cordons west of Jerusalem, where there was considerable action.

That morning, Pilot Officer H G Hudson attempted a forced landing near Al-Maliha after being hit by rifle fire. Attempting to put his damaged Gladiator down as best he could, onto rough terrain, he crashed and was killed. On November 28, during a reconnaissance sortie to Haifa, Pilot Officer Charles Dyson was fired on by two Arabs and, returning fire, he hit them both.

On December 1, intelligence reported that a large rebel band

RIGHT: FLT LT ALBERT BOCKING (SHOWN HERE WITH 45 SQUADRON) RECEIVED THE DFC FOR HIS ACTIONS OVER PALESTINE DND/RCAF



BELOW: GROUNDCREW RE-ARM THE UNDERWING .303 BROWNING MACHINE GUN ON GLADIATOR MK.I L7616 AT RAMLEH 33 SQUADRON RECORDS



had congregated in the Hebron area. Despatching six aircraft, 33 Squadron inflicted significant casualties. Later in the month, the squadron provided five pairs of aircraft to support a large drive against Hebron – a first foray into direct army co-operation for the squadron, a role usually fulfilled by the Hawker Hardys of 6 Squadron.

A trio of Gladiators and a lone Hardy attacked insurgents at the village of Bani Na'im on December 18. Fresh aircraft rotated on that station through to dusk, when Pilot Officer Rumsey's aircraft was hit and he was wounded. The following morning, Squadron Leader McGregor receded the area, strafing the rebels again, while Pilot Officers Booth and Starrett with Sergeants Smith and Brown engaged another group in Haris.

The action continued over the next few weeks, pausing for a short break for Christmas, though, on December 27, patrols over hostile villages resumed, with McGregor leading the first patrols. Again, on New Year's Eve, he led nine pilots

on a sortie 'pinning' rebel forces in Umm al-Tut, Jalqamus and Yasid in the last action of the year.

Since arriving at Ramleh in late September, 33 Squadron had accrued more than 1,800 flying hours, fired nearly 100,000 rounds, and claimed around 125 rebel casualties. However, two of its pilots had been killed, and two more were wounded.

Final operations

The combined operations had been largely successful in pacifying the area, such as on January 12, 1939, over Safferin. Flight Lieutenant Alfred Bocking spotted a dozen Arabs attempting to break out and dived into attack. His Gladiator was hit on almost every pass, but his strafing killed five dissidents and drove the others to cover. Bocking remained overhead, maintaining his patrol until ground units arrived to detain the survivors.

The effect of such sorties was that, by the end of January, the dominance of the Arab rebels in the countryside had been broken.

Air power strongly contributed to subsequent insurgent activity in Palestine amounting to little more than occasional sniping. That did not mean Palestine did not have a sting in its tail, however – Pilot Officer John Poynton was killed when his Gladiator (K8038) crashed just southwest of Gaza, near Deir al Balah.

In late April, 33 Squadron returned to Egypt. Among the awards bestowed for service during its period in Palestine was a DSO to McGregor, the DFC to Bocking and Bolingbroke and a DFM to Sergeant Goodchild. However, a resurgence in rebel activity saw a detachment return to Ramleh, from where, on June 6, Pilot Officer Charles Dyson and Sergeant Len Cottingham made successful attacks during an emergency callout, in concert with 6 Squadron.

One Gladiator was severely damaged by rifle fire on June 19, as Sergeants Vale and Taylor flew a sortie to pin rebels in the village of Deir al Qurantal. Later, Pilot

RIGHT: SGT BILL VALE FLEW WITH 33 SQUADRON THROUGHOUT ITS OPERATIONS IN PALESTINE, AND PARTICIPATED IN ITS FINAL ACTION THERE ON AUGUST 19, 1939. HE LATER FLEW IN GREECE WITH 80 SQUADRON W VALE/VIA B CULL



FAR RIGHT: SGT LEN COTTINGHAM SAW EXTENSIVE SERVICE IN PALESTINE WITH 80 SQUADRON BEFORE TRANSFERRING TO 33 SQUADRON IN 1938 VIA C F SHORES

Officer Dyson continued the action with 6 Squadron.

Occasional sorties continued throughout the summer, with Arraba cordoned on August 18 by Pilot Officer Down and Sergeant Goodchild, while Pilot Officer Foster responded to an emergency north of the area. This action was repeated the following day, when Bolingbroke and Vale strafed armed men, causing three casualties.

This was 33 Squadron's final action before the outbreak of World War Two, during which its Gladiators would once again be thrust into the thick of things, this time against the Italians in Libya. ●

BELOW: BY THE TIME 33 SQUADRON RETURNED A DETACHMENT TO PALESTINE IN MID 1939, MOST OF ITS AIRCRAFT, SUCH AS L7619, WORE TACTICAL CAMOUFLAGE VIA ANDREW THOMAS

“Air power strongly contributed to subsequent insurgent activity in Palestine amounting to little more than occasional sniping. That did not mean Palestine did not have a sting in its tail, however”

