

See Log Book entry 26th December, 1954 Mau Mau Operations

In 1953 a wave of terrorism in Kenya had reached serious proportions. At that time I was Commanding Officer of No. 49 Squadron, equipped with Avro Lincoln Heavy Bombers. In November, 1953 the Squadron was on a month's detachment at Shallufa in the Canal Zone, Egypt completing its annual armament practice exercises. Shortly after arriving, I received a personal visit from SASO, Middle East, who informed me that General Erskine, C-in-C East Africa, was complaining about the inadequacy of the RAF in Kenya where the Mau Mau terrorist activities were in full swing, and the action moving uncomfortably close to the Cities, particularly Nairobi, the Capital.

The small 25 lb bombs being dropped by the Harvards were no deterrent, and the General was pressing for bigger aircraft capable of dropping larger bombs. SASO suggested that three Lincolns should be loaded up with 1000 pounders and flown to Kenya on a purely temporary basis and reporting to General Erskine direct. As so frequently happened in those days, the temporary duty stretched to a year with the whole Squadron being based at Eastleigh.

This tale, however, is not about the Squadron's activities, but relates to an exciting trip in a Piper Pacer aircraft flown by a pilot of the Kenya Police Air Wing. During my tour, I took the opportunity of flying at the 'sharp end' with both the Harvard Squadrons and the intrepid aviators of the Police Air Wing. I had had an invitation from the Kings African Rifles to visit M'Weiga, a forward post on the edge of the forest. There, on a small and very bumpy landing strip, I was introduced to a Major Bearcroft, who very kindly offered to take me on a routine smoke-marking operation to guide the attacking Lincolns onto a known Mau Mau hide in the Aberdare Mountains.

Major Bearcroft was an unusual pilot, to say the least, for he only had one hand. Where the right hand had been was a hook with interchangeable attachments. He flew the aircraft with a clip on the stick, leaving his good hand free to operate the throttle and other ancillaries. He not only dropped the smoke markers but also added his own contribution to the war by dropping hand grenades. His method was to fish a grenade out of his briefcase which not only contained the grenades but also his sandwiches and other private belongings.

He would pull out the grenade with his left hand, put it to his mouth, and extract the safety pin with his teeth and spitting the ring on the cockpit floor. Holding the grenade catch down with his good hand, he would then fumble with the cockpit window release and in quite a hairy operation manage to slide back the window, still with the grenade in his hand, do a steep turn over the target and lob the grenade out. I found this somewhat disconcerting for he had given me no warning except to say that he 'fought his own war'. When I realised what he was doing I kept a sharp eye on the proceedings which, to my utter consternation, was to be repeated twice more. I had visions that if he accidentally dropped the grenade we would both be scrabbling about the cockpit floor, with limited time at our disposal.

When we landed, I thanked him for an interesting flight and said how much I enjoyed his technique of dropping the markers at tree-top height. We parted with a left-handed hand shake and my first pint never touched the sides!

When General Erskine found out that I was a native of Jersey, he revealed to me, in the strictest confidence, that he was about to become the next Governor of the Island and could I fly his heavy gear to Jersey. I jumped at the chance for it meant that I would be the first pilot to land a Lincoln at Jersey airport.

See Log Book Entry, dated 26th December, 1954.
How I flew under a Jersey Man on Mount Kenya

On this particular day I had been briefed to bomb a Mau Mau hide on Mount Kenya, which had been designated a prohibited area for the duration of the emergency. It was an unusual assignment in so far as the terrorists were operating in an around Nairobi and the surrounding British farming community, although it was known that one or more Mau Mau gangs were hidden up in the forest covered slopes of Mount Kenya. Intelligence reported that several detachments of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, one of which was commanded by Major Terry Troy (subsequently Brigadier T.M. Troy OBE.), a native of Jersey, were on patrol in the area.

As the exact positions of the detachments were not known, we were warned not to drop any bombs above an altitude of 13,000 feet as the patrols would be above that height on surveillance missions.

The flight was a routine affair. We located the hide and dropped a string of bombs across the target, where there were obvious signs of recent activity in the forest. Major Troy, from his vantage point, was able to observe the whole operation below him, little suspecting that the pilot of the aircraft was an old school pal and also a native of Jersey. The sequel to the bombing was to cause some discomfort to him and his soldiers, but that is best described by the Brigadier, in his own words.

“In addition to the patrols mentioned above, a number of ambushes had been laid astride game tracks, outside the bombing area, in the hope of catching terrorists fleeing from the bombing. In the event, the soldiers lying in wait were suddenly and frighteningly faced by very enraged wild animals charging down the game tracks as they fled from the bombing. Impressed as they were by the accuracy of the RAF bombing, the soldiers’ language, as they hurled themselves off the tracks deep into the surrounding undergrowth, was highly expressive.”

Sadly, it has to be admitted that there were many animal casualties from the bombing, but the rumour is quite unfounded that our agile Brigadier was last seen shinning up a tree faster than the first rhino’ which came thundering up the track.