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THE BRISTOL BRITANNIA ON HOT-WEATHER TRIALS IN NORTH AFRICA

This is Jungle War from the Air against the Mau Mau

By Wilfred Nussey

THE two-year battle to sweep Mau Mau terrorists from the jungles of Kenya is being won from the air. From dawn to dusk giant Lincoln bombers and Harvard fighters of the Royal Air Force are dropping tons of high explosive into the dense, sickeningly green bamboo forests of the Aberdares and Mount Kenya, on the Mau Mau hideouts and camps which were once sanctuary from the determined patrols of the Security Forces.

THE terrorists are being constantly harried, forced to move as the drone of aircraft engines passes overhead for fear of being blasted by bombs and whining cannon shells—driven into the open and the waiting guns of troops. The once formidable gangs of Mau Mau are being dispersed. Some of them manage to escape the vigilant hunters outside the forest and to trickle into Nairobi, where there has been a sudden outbreak of gangsterism once again. This added trouble in a city weary of killing and subterfuge is adequate proof of the Royal Air Force's success.

The six Lincoln bombers being used and their seven air crews are of the 214 (Federated Malaya States) Squadron. The Harvards are in the R.A.F. 1340 Flight—formed especially for the Emergency in Kenya. Their role in the bitter war is a vitally important one, for without them the terrorists would never be flushed from the bamboo forests. These forests are so dense that it takes foot patrols hours to hack their way across 100 yards, all the while they are easy targets for the terrorists, more adept at moving through the closely-packed bamboo stems.

Never See Targets

THE pilots and crews never see their targets. They are always obscured by the frothy roof of the jungle, but the location of each is known to within a few yards. They are revealed by stereoscopic aerial photography, Mau Mau informers and the foot patrols that occasionally stumble across them.

As they are found they are methodically marked on the large map covering one wall of the operations room at Nairobi's Eastleigh airport.

The entire bombing area, containing all the targets, is marked off in red. These sections of the jungle are prohibited to the ground forces until they have been thoroughly bombed with the huge 500-pounders of the Lincolns and the small but highly effective 20-pounders of the Harvards—and raked with shells and machine-gun bullets.

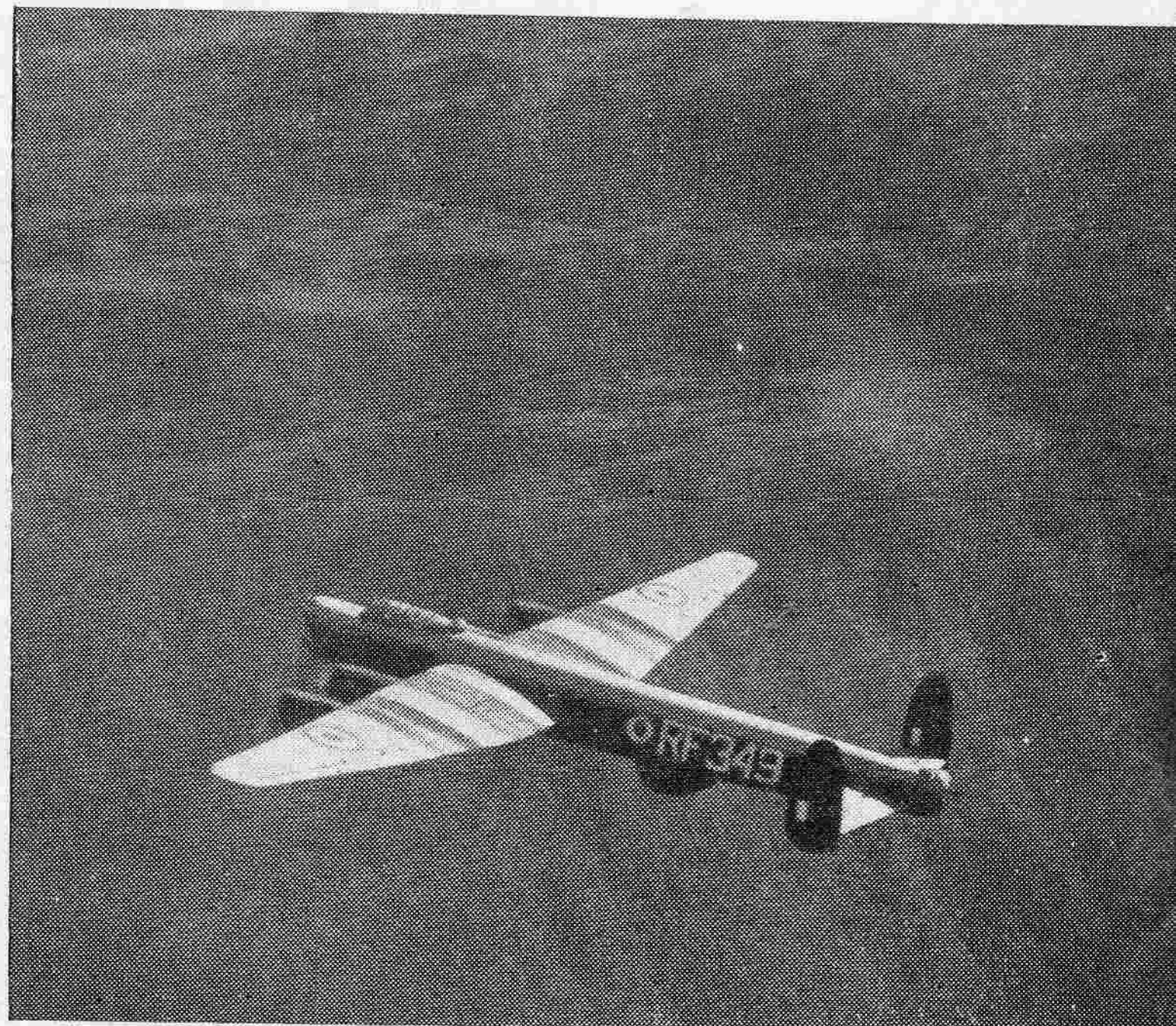
THE air operations that are being conducted in Kenya against the Mau Mau are very different from the activities of the S.A.A.F. in the Northern Frontier District of Kenya in World War II. Then the J.U.86's, the Battles and the Hartebeeses from Isiolo, Wajir and Ndege's Nest, had to fly over desert.

To-day's air war in Kenya is over the none-the-less hazardous jungle.

One lesson that has been common to both campaigns is the efficiency of the smaller planes. In World War II in Kenya the Hartebees played a notable part. Against the Mau Mau, Harvards are in a similar role.

Flying conditions over the target areas are the most hazardous in Kenya. They are in dense, unfriendly bush with a mass of tortuous, treacherous air currents above: a real test to the pilots accustomed to the low-level countryside of England.

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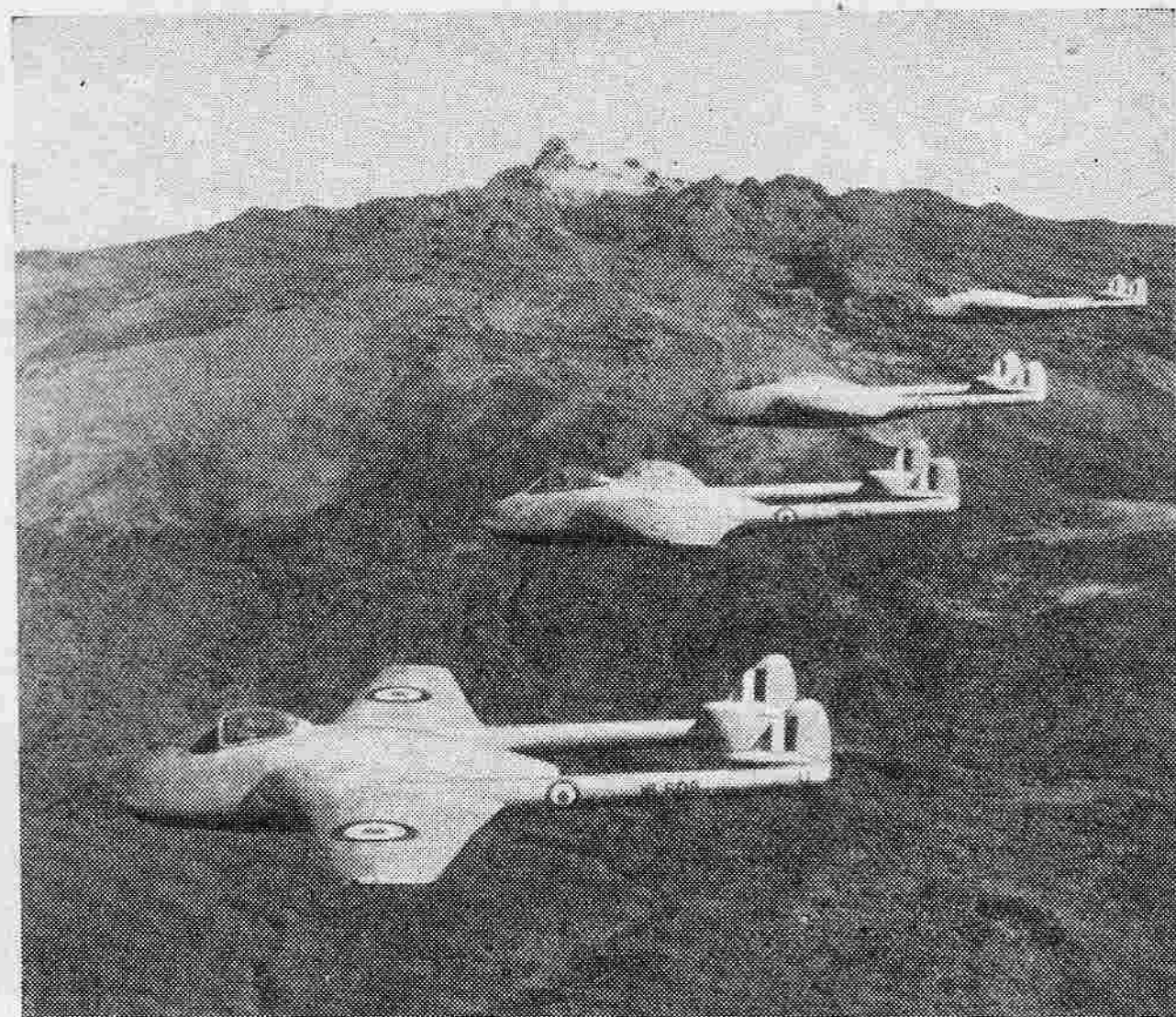


● A Royal Air Force Lincoln bomber flying over mountain country in Kenya.

The average altitude of the rolling hills and winding valleys is about 9,000 feet and the crews invariably have to use oxygen above 10,000 feet. The Lincolns are more fortunate: their ceiling is considerably higher than 10,000 feet and they have no trouble except when on the higher slopes of Mount Kenya. But the Harvards are more restricted. They drop their bombs from a few hundred feet and then swoop in to strafe from treetop level, the pilots hurling their little aircraft in an out of the steep valleys.

Treacherous Weather

THE weather is among the most treacherous in Africa. I flew in a Lincoln to the target under a cloudless, brilliant sky. There were a few clouds when we began the bombing run. When we turned to head for base we had to fly across cloud all the way. The sky sometimes fills with cloud in as little as ten minutes.



● With 17,000-ft. Mount Kenya for a background, Vampire jet fighter-bombers of the Royal Air Force operating against the Mau Mau in Kenya are seen flying over rugged country.

To add to the hazards, the entire Aberdares and Mount Kenya have only recently been mapped, and there are still many errors in those maps.

Before the Emergency the existing charts showed only occasional rivers, with a few contours and even those were questionable. One outcrop in the Aberdares, used by pilots as a starting point for bombing runs for nearby targets, is actually two miles distant from the map-reading. Crews soon discovered this, however, otherwise many bombs would have been wasted or possibly dropped among our own troops.

Baling out over the jungle will really be dangerous, if it ever becomes necessary. In the rarified air ordinary parachutes will drop their wearers at speeds far too great, and even if they do land successfully they will have to face the Mau Mau patrols.

Recently three Harvards flying low hit a sudden downdraught and plunged one after the other into the bamboo. Although they had parachutes, they had no time to use them. Fortunately, all three pilots escaped and were found by a Security Forces patrol.

The Target

TO see for myself what bombing in Kenya is like I flew with the Lincolns and the Harvards. I sat in the nose turret of a great bomber, next to Flying

Officer Roy Mills, navigator, bomb-aimer, and surrounded by perspex walls. Twenty minutes after take-off we were flying over Fort Winchester, a small road-building centre surrounded by the vast forests and right in the heart of Kenya's number one danger spot. Roy Mills, who had been lazily watching the patchwork of fields in the Kikuyu Reserve slip past, was busy with his navigational instruments, carefully plotting the course and speed at which the pilot had to fly to pass directly over the target—a small red-pencil circle on the map.

The Lincoln banked gently over the fort. I saw the occupants far below waving to us. The plane levelled out and the four engines roared steadily as we headed 1,000 feet above the ground straight across the bush. Roy plugged in a bar of fuses; took the trigger in one hand. There was silence in the aircraft, except for the engines' hum and the steady ticking of a timer.

Roy did not use the bombsight. Exactly fifteen seconds from the Fort the target was below. Roy crouched forward holding the trigger.

"Bombs away" he said quietly. Through a hatch behind me I saw seven of the 500-pounders slip quickly from the gaping bomb-bay. Behind us seven puffs of dirty white smoke billowed from the bamboo. We could not hear the explosions.

Flight-Sergeant Jock Ross, an ex-dam-buster of the famous R.A.F. 617 Squadron, swung the Lincoln smoothly round and we timed off again from another angle. Again the seconds ticked slowly past. Roy pressed the button and the last seven of the huge bombs dropped silently.

We banked steeply and lost altitude. We circled wide and flew low across the target, marked by a cross of jagged clearings in the bamboo, revealing raw, red gashes in the fertile earth.

Machine Gunning

THE Brownings clattered suddenly as we swept past and the .5 cannon shells shot in a stream of tracers from the nose and tail turrets into the bamboo surrounding the craters near the underground hideout. There might be terrorists surveying the damage. The clods of earth and bamboo stems were easily visible as we flew low.

The pilot put her into a climb and she rose steeply, free of the 7,000 pounds of steel and high explosive. We dipped in salute at the occupants of the lonely but heavily-armed Fort, and turned for base and a cup of tea in the "ops" room.

This then, is the daily routine of the Lincolns. Bombing accurately with monotonous regularity, in treacherous country where it is a supreme test of skill to handle a four-engined Lincoln, and taking off on missions two or three times a day.

Although the bombers are never shot at by terrorists, they have other equally dangerous hazards. Recently a Lincoln was cruising straight and level on her bombing run, with the big 500-pounders, timed to explode on contact, raining from her. There was a sudden terrific blast from below and shrapnel tore through the fuselage. Two engines stopped dead, the wires cut when a chunk of steel raked the side of the cabin, and the engineer slumped in his seat, fatally wounded. Apparently one of the bombs had exploded and the blast or shrapnel had detonated another bomb that was still falling.

Usually the bombs are timed to explode 25 seconds after striking. They bury themselves deep in the soft earth and their effect is slightly minimised because the blast is mainly straight up. But they still clear a thirty to forty yard diameter of forest.

Killed Through Curiosity

AT times Mau Mau's own curiosity has killed them. Bombs are dropped that are set to burst several hours later. The terrorists gather around the menacing bulk of steel, debating what to do with it. When it

explodes all that remains of them is an old rifle or a piece of clothing.

The Lincoln's, now commanded by Squadron-Leader K. R. Bowhill, are one of the terrorists' greatest horrors. Captured Mau Mau still talk in fear of the time, shortly after the Lincoln's arrival in Kenya, when one 500-pounder landed right in a gang which was being followed by a spotter aircraft. Twenty-nine gangsters were killed outright.

But the Harvards are equally feared, if not more so. They are successors to the R.A.F. Vampire jets which were withdrawn a few months ago because their high speed made strafing in very mountainous country difficult.

The roar of the Harvards, which slink up on their targets in and out of valleys, have a great psychological effect on the Mau Mau as the Vampires' sudden, ear-splitting scream, their cannon fire and their rockets.

Squadron-Leader C. J. St. J. Jeffries, O.C. of 1340 Flight, is probably the most experienced pilot with the R.A.F. in East Africa. Like the rest of his team, he smiles with slight condescension at the mention of the "straight-and-level boys" with the Lincoln's, but realises their value against the terrorists.

17 Years Old

S/L Jeffries' Harvard is 17 years old but still going strong. Pieces of paint have been scraped from its silver fuselage by flying shrapnel from the dangerous little 20-pounders he drops.

Flying with him is an experience I have never had the equal of. We took off in formation with Flying Officer Mike Holmes, the O.C.'s Number Two, and headed for the Aberdares just high enough to make the people below us invisible. All the way there Mike Holmes kept his wingtip slightly above and at an even distance away from the O.C.'s.

The bamboo forests look far more dangerous from a Harvard than from a high-altitude Lincoln. I could see clearly the trees in the valleys at the riverside, the leaves on the bamboo tops. The two little Harvards flew parallel, their 20-pounders dropping alternately across the target and over a distance of a few hundred yards. In Harvards the pilots can find the targets to within two or three feet.

The bombs disappeared into the bamboo. We saw nothing of the first four. The fifth from Mike Holmes's plane must have hit something. There was a sudden blast, audible above the screaming of the Harvards' engines, and tall bamboos collapsed slowly inwards.

The sixteen bombs were dropped and the Harvard swung up so violently I was forced down hard into the seat. We shot down in a dive, heading straight for the fast approaching mass of bush, tangled vines and bamboo. S/L Jeffries levelled off steadily and swung a few feet above the bush, below the crests of the surrounding hills, while the Browning clattered under the wing, spitting a stream of fire. The Harvard swooped up again and turned for another strafe while Mike skimmed the treetops below, pouring slugs into the bush. Again and again the two manoeuvrable little aircraft dived, swooped and twisted like a pair of swallows above a nest of flying ants.

All Over

THEN suddenly it was all over. The ammunition was finished and we turned for home—but not as the Lincoln's do. All the way the two aircraft flew at hedge-hopping level, in and out of the valleys, roaring across the crests of the ridges, once skimming under the branches of a tall bluegum tree. As we roared a bare three feet above a coffee plantation we saw three Natives dive into the coffee. Instantly the two Harvards shot skywards and turned to "buzz" the patch with propellers



● This aerial photograph of a bomb "dropped" from an R.A.F. plane exploding in dense forest country gives an idea of the difficult nature of the terrain.

at fine pitch. It is scarcely surprising the terrorists fear them so keenly.

As we sped on a farmer's wife waved from her stoep. Again the Harvards turned and rolled and swooped above the house while the entire family appeared to watch. With a final waggle of wings they were off again, rising higher only at the outskirts of Nairobi, then dropping straight in to land without preliminary circling.

But the low flying is not merely horseplay. It is done on orders, deliberately to instil the fear of the devil into the terrorists and to boost the morale of farmers and Native loyalists. Once S/L Jeffries's Harvard skimmed over a Native village and a youngster took a pot-shot with a bow and arrow, without even reaching the plane.

The O.C. turned fast, and the youngster probably still remembers the "buzzing" he got from the screaming Harvard.

Big Effect

THE little bombs from the Harvards have proved their effect. Some time ago the Harvards strafed and bombed a gang. Recently a Mau Mau was captured wounded, and a piece of shrapnel from a 20-pounder was removed from him. He told the police that 28 of his gang of 30 had been killed by the "big mosquitoes." The Harvards have had the same results as the Hartbees of the SAAF in the Abyssinian campaign.

And so, day after day, the war in the air goes on. Civil aircraft landing at Eastleigh airport share the airstrip with long, sleek bombers and deft little fighters. It is a common sight to visitors touching down at Eastleigh to see a plane laden with bombs waiting to take off, or taxi-ing past the terminal.

And day after day the terrorists feel their sting. Once they tried to make use of the Lincoln's. They lit fires at night near herds of buffalo in the Nyeri area, and collected the consequent meat the following day. But the aircrews are wise to their every trick now, and the Mau Mau are beginning to realise it. Those captured from the jungle are haggard with starvation and lack of sleep, and tremble at the sound of aero engines.