



## THE ROYAL AIR FORCE AND KUWAIT



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### Introduction

In January 1899 an agreement was reached between Kuwait and the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom agreed to pay an annual subsidy to Kuwait and take responsibility for its security. The Anglo-Ottoman Convention of 1913 confirmed Kuwait's status as an autonomous region within the Ottoman Empire. The defeat and collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War One, however, led to an unstable situation.

In 1920 border disputes led to warfare between Kuwaitis and the Ikhwan tribes from Nejd. At first it was the Ikhwan who were victorious but in October they raided Jahra and were defeated. Sheikh Salim al-Mubarak Al-Sabah of Kuwait claimed to be in control of all territory in a radius of 140 kilometres from the capital but Abdul Aziz ibn Abdul Rahman ibn Sa'ud claimed that the borders of Kuwait did not extend beyond the walls of its capital. The British Government, unwilling at first to intervene, confirmed that it recognised the borders laid down in the 1913 Convention. Eventually the British Government sent warships to protect the Kuwaiti capital and RAF aircraft dropped copies of a communique to the Ikhwan tribesmen. This helped create an uneasy truce between the two countries and established a no man's land.

The 1921 Cairo Conference, chaired by Winston Churchill, established Iraq as a kingdom under King Faisal within the British Mandate. The Royal Air Force was tasked with maintaining peace in the country; it took command with effect from 1 October 1922. In the same year Sheikh Ahmad al Jabir succeeded Salim as Sheikh of Kuwait and the Uqair Conference formally established the borders between Iraq, Kuwait and Nejd. The borders were in reality lines on a map and had no meaning on the ground. Hostility between tribes on both sides of the Iraq-Nejd border led to repeated cross-border raids; the construction of fortified police posts in Iraq merely helped increase tension in the area.



Ploughing



Shipbuilding in Kuwait



Arabs gathering at a well



The market place



Kuwaiti men ready to defend their country

### **Akforce**

On 4 December 1927 a small raid took place near Jal-al-Yah in Kuwait. The raid led to a request by the Sheikh of Kuwait on 13 December 1927 for the RAF to undertake air patrols over his territory. On 30 December the British Government agreed but banned bombing over Kuwaiti territory. Raids from Nejd into Iraq continued during December and the High Commissioner felt that Ibn Sa'ud was unable or unwilling to prevent the raids. On 3 January 1928 the British Government permitted air attacks to be taken beyond the frontier against Nejd tribes and Akforce was formed on 8 January 1928; its first action was to force tribes to leave the border regions.

On 27 January a party of Ikhwan raided Kuwaiti tribes in the vicinity of Shiqqat ar Ruwaisat. The Sheikh of Kuwait immediately despatched a column to attack the raiders which they did on 28 January near Al Riqai. When Akforce learnt of the raid aircraft were despatched, scattering the raiders and forcing their retreat.

Rumours began to be received on 16 February of the possibility of an attack on Kuwait. On the same day the Sheikh of Kuwait asked that reconnaissance over his territory should continue in expectation of a raid. On 17 February HMS Emerald proceeded to Kuwait and put ashore a party of Royal Marines to protect the capital. It later assisted by relaying wireless messages between RAF units and headquarters. Arrangements were also made to send aircraft and armoured cars into Kuwait. Bad weather prevented aerial reconnaissance but the rumours grew until the attack came on 19 February, near Jarishan. Aircraft attacked the raiders until contact with them was lost on 22 February. On 24 February the RAF attacked the raiders' camps at El Safa. As a result of the desert action RAF aircraft and armoured cars didn't arrive in Kuwait until 27 February. By then, however, the Sheikh of Kuwait had received warning from Ibn Sa'ud that he could no longer control the Ikhwan tribes and that they had called a Jihad against all non-Ikhwan. This was a potential force of 50,000 men although logistics would probably limit raiding parties to no more than 4,000. No action was reported until the end of March when information was received of a possible attack. Aerial reconnaissance was increased and activity noted.

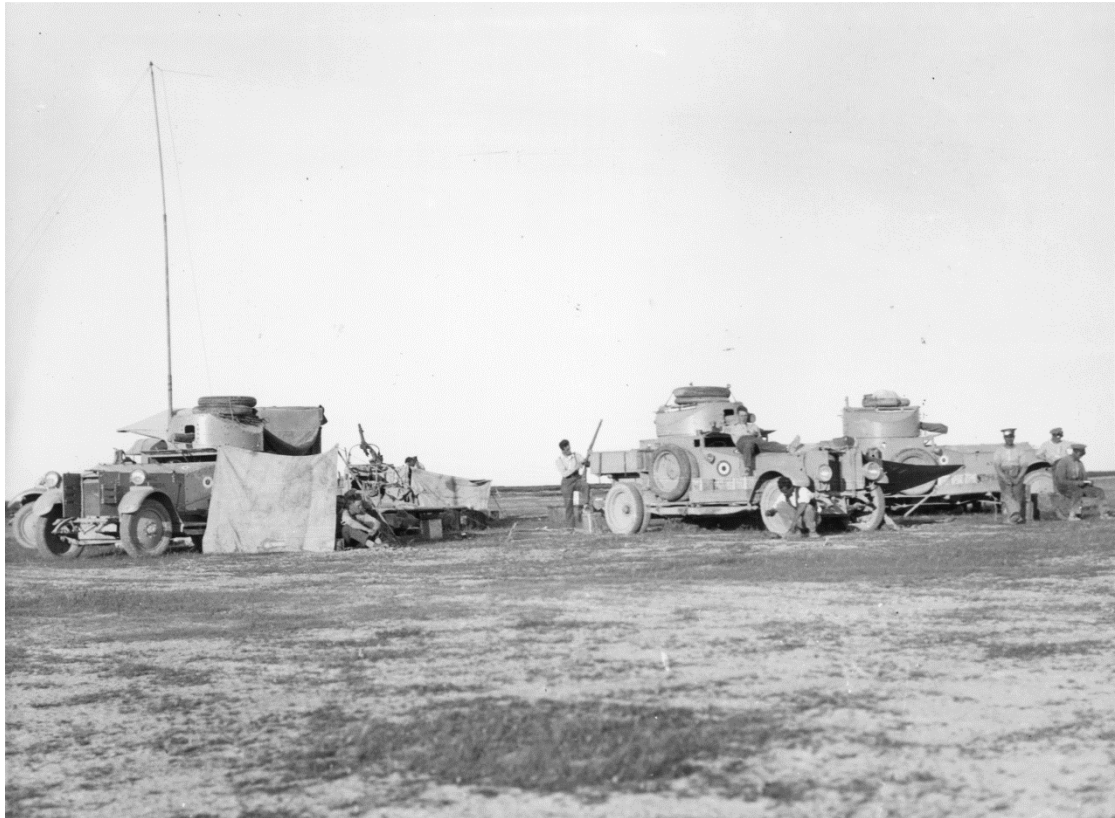
On 4 April Ibn Sa'ud agreed to meet a representative of the British Government at Jeddah. It was reported that he had met with the leaders of the Ikhwan tribes before leaving for Jeddah. By 10 April it was apparent that Ikhwan forces had gathered but were now dispersing. Although the Jeddah Conference was postponed Ibn Sa'ud gave his written undertaking to restrain tribes from raiding. As it was apparent that he had restored some form of control over the tribes cross-border flights were stopped. RAF detachments were withdrawn and on 3 June 1928 Akforce was disbanded.



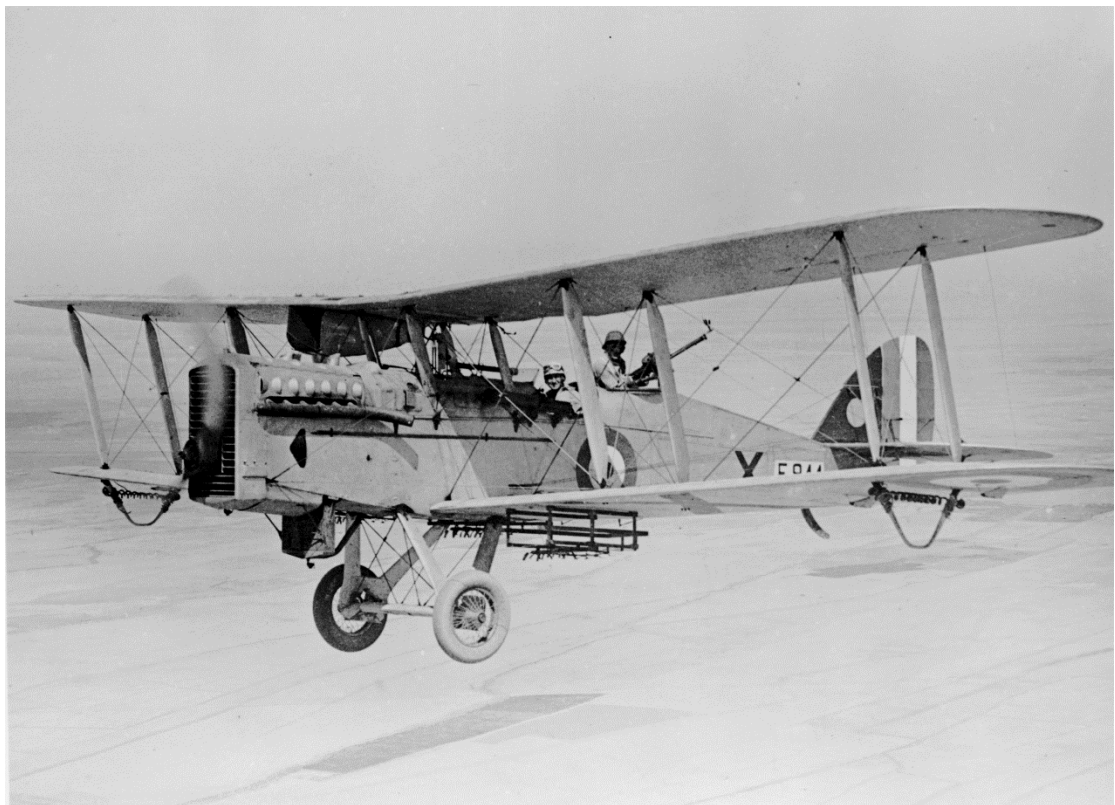
Kuwaiti forces were held in high regard by the British



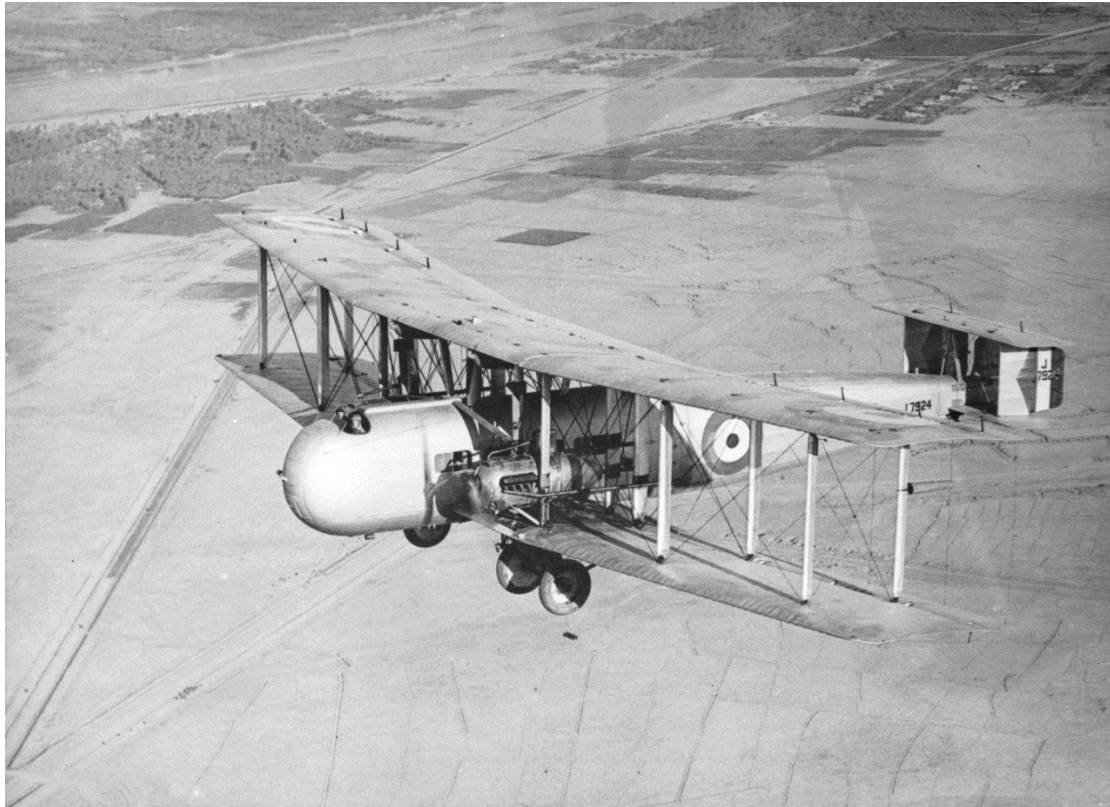
HMS Emerald sent Royal Marines to protect the Kuwait capital and helped relay wireless messages between RAF units



A column of RAF armoured cars in the desert



The DH.9a was the main aircraft type available to Akforce



The Vickers Victoria was used as both a bomber and transport aircraft

### Continued Unrest

A period of relative peace followed during which negotiations with Ibn Sa'ud continued. Unfortunately no agreement was reached by August 1928 and rumours of possible raids began to grow. On 27 December rumours were received of a raiding party which was found on 29 December and attacked. Minor raids continued in January 1929; on 21 January an American missionary was killed and in a separate incident a British Officer was attacked, indicating the presence of a hostile group in Kuwait. The main target of the raid had been Iraqis in Kuwait and despite RAF patrols the raiders escaped. At first the Iraqi tribes withdrew but the need to graze their animals forced them to return, despite the risk of attack. On 24 February approval was given for RAF armoured cars to enter Kuwait to defend the Iraqis. Other units moved to forward positions in Iraq, ready to repel raids.

On 3 March 1929 400-500 Ikhwan attacked tribesmen near the Kuwaiti capital. RAF aircraft and armoured cars headed for Kuwait, found the raiders north of Warah and attacked. The threat of serious attack was lifted in April when news was received of a crushing victory by Ibn Sa'ud against the Ikhwan tribes and

the few remaining incidents were handled by the Iraqi Police. The cross-border raids ended with the death or capture of the Ikhwan tribal leaders in 1930.



Faisal Ed Dowish, leader of the Mutair tribe, after his surrender in January 1930



The Westland Wapiti replaced the DH.9a at the end of 1928



RAF armoured cars were invited back to Kuwait in 1928





The camp of Ibn Sa'ud at Khabari Wadha, January 1930. At this meeting Ibn Sa'ud promised the British he would prevent further raids into Kuwaiti territory

Iraq gained independence in 1932 and assumed responsibility for its own security. The Royal Air Force, however, continued to maintain bases in the country. Kuwaiti forces, although small, were held in high regard and the RAF still sought to fulfil its obligations to assist them if required. In 1940 a Defence Plan was devised; attacks on Kuwait by Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Iran were considered unlikely but internal unrest was a possibility.

On 1 April 1941 the Iraqi Government of 'Abd -al-Ilah was overthrown by a coup and replaced by the pro-German Government of Rashid Ali al-Gaylani. He sought to use the Iraqi Army and Air Force to expel British Forces but, despite assistance from the German and Italian Air Forces the coup was defeated and the former Government re-instated. If it had been successful it might have placed the independence of Kuwait at risk.

### **Supermarine Spitfire Vb W3630 Kuwait**

The collection of money to pay for military aircraft began in World War One. Funds were raised around the world and aircraft named to highlight the generosity of the donors. When the Second World War started fundraising began again; the Spitfire funds of 1940 were very popular in Britain and overseas.

The Gulf fighter fund donated £50,000 which paid for 10 Spitfires for the RAF. The money came from the Arab, British and other communities though the British representative in the area. One of these aircraft was W3630 Kuwait.

W3630 entered RAF service with 54 Squadron at Hornchurch on 27 July 1941. Despite being damaged several times it remained in service with various fighter squadrons until it passed to the Central Gunnery School and was used for training. It was placed in store on 31 October 1945 and finally sold as scrap in 1948.



Sergeant Graeme Holt Fenton on 54 Squadron in the cockpit of W3630



Pilots of 124 Squadron in front of their Spitfires at Gravesend, 1942; W3630 was used by the squadron at this time

### Visit to Kuwait, May 1944

Wing Commander Michael Frederick Anderson had been a pilot with 604 Squadron Auxiliary Air Force at Hendon before the war and was with the squadron during the Battle of Britain. In February 1944 he was posted to RAF Shaibah and assumed command on 14 March 1944. When he took over the station was home to 115 and 119 Maintenance Units and an aircraft erection unit. The latter unit was responsible for the re-assembly of Spitfires which had been delivered by ship and were destined for the Soviet Air Force.

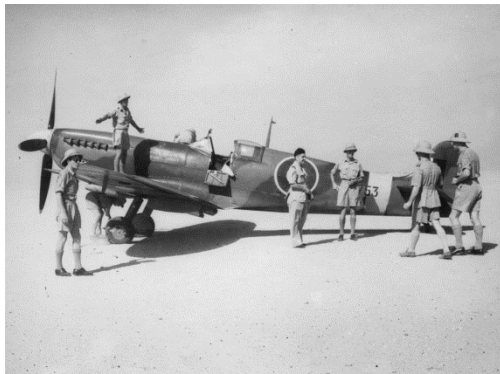
Although Anderson made many flights to Kuwait one entry in his log book differs from the others. On 21 May 1944 he flew to Kuwait in a Dominie for the demonstration of a Spitfire. He was accompanied by Squadron Leader Alexander (O/C 119 Maintenance Unit) and Flight Lieutenant Sands (I/C AES) and they were met by Mr Cornelius James Pelley, Political Agent in Kuwait. The Spitfire MJ753 was flown by test pilot Flight Lieutenant Weber and named "Wahra Kuwait" especially for its demonstration to the Sheikh of Kuwait. The aircraft was eventually sent to the Soviet Air Force and its final fate is unknown. Anderson stayed in Kuwait until he flew to Bahrain on 23 May and on 1 June he relinquished command of RAF Shaibah.



Spitfire IX MJ753 "Wahra Kuwait"



The Kuwaitis surround Spitfire IX MJ753 "Wahra Kuwait"



The RAF personnel with Spitfire IX MJ753 "Wahra Kuwait"



The RAF officers are introduced to the Sheikh



The arrival of the Kuwaitis



The Sheikh waiting to climb into the cockpit of Spitfire IX MJ753 "Wahra Kuwait"



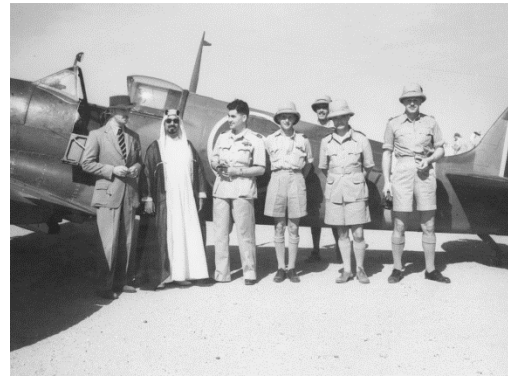
Kuwaitis surround Spitfire IX MJ753 "Wahra Kuwait"



Mr Cornelius James Pelley and Wg Cdr Michael Frederick Anderson demonstrate the cockpit of Spitfire MJ753 to the Sheikh



The Sheikh of Kuwait ready to climb into the cockpit of Spitfire IX MJ753 "Wahra Kuwait" with Cornelius James Pelley (Political Agent, Kuwait) stood on the wing



Left to Right: Mr Cornelius James Pelley, Sheikh of Kuwait, Flt Lt Weber, Wg Cdr Michael Frederick Anderson, Sqn Ldr Alexander and Flt Lt Sands



The Sheikh of Kuwait with Cornelius James Pelley stood near

### Postwar

When World War Two ended British forces in Iraq continued to ensure the security of Kuwait. The Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1930, however, was due to expire in 1957. It was unpopular in Iraq and could not be renewed so the RAF began to reduce its forces in the country while helping to modernise and train the Iraqi Air Force. In July 1955 control of RAF Habbaniya, Britain's main airfield in Iraq, was handed over, followed in 1956 by RAF Shaibah. Some RAF personnel remained in the country, however, and it was planned that RAF aircraft would be regular visitors from bases in Bahrain, Sharjah and Oman. What wasn't realised at the time was the effect this policy would have on the security of Kuwait.

The Anglo-French invasion of Egypt in 1956 caused anger among Arabs, damaging relations between Arab countries and Britain. It also made Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt a hero among some Arabs. King Feisal II of Iraq was seen as a puppet of Britain and in 1958 he was killed during a military coup. Brigadier General Abdul Karim Qassim took power and the remaining British forces were forced to leave Iraq. Qassim sought assistance from the Soviet Union which helped make Iraq's armed forces the largest in the region

The British Government recognised the damage its actions had caused. On 19 June 1961 an Exchange of Notes between Kuwait and the British Government terminated the 1899 agreement and recognised Kuwait as an independent country. General Qassim publicly laid claim to Kuwait on 26 June 1961, as part of the Ottoman province of Basrah. Iraqi forces then proceeded to move to Basrah, close to the Kuwaiti border, in preparation for a military parade to mark Iraq National Day. Britain was still prepared, however, to help protect Kuwait.



In 1952 and 1953 Lancasters of 683 Squadron helped produce accurate maps of the Arabian Gulf