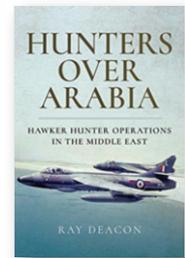


BOOK REVIEW:

Hunters over Arabia: Hawker Hunter operations in the Middle East

by Ray Deacon

Pen and Sword Aviation: Barnsley, South Yorkshire; 2019; 380 pp; ISBN 9781526721501 (hardcover); RRP \$79.99; Ursula Davidson Library call number 957 DEAC 2019



Hunters over Arabia provides an in-depth account of the operations performed by Royal Air Force Hawker Hunter squadrons policing the desert wastelands and high mountain ranges of the Middle East from eight airfields in South Arabia from 1960 to 1971.

I am very pleased that a book has been written about the Hawker Hunter and its role on operations. It is a beautiful aircraft and, on an occasion when I had a chance to fly one, I found it a delight to fly. The author, Ray Deacon, grew up in South-East London and studied at William Penn Technical School before joining the Royal Air Force (RAF). His career in the RAF included service in Aden, where he lived for two years, working on a front-line operational squadron equipped with ground-attack and fighter-reconnaissance versions of the Hawker Hunter aircraft. He left the RAF in 1967.

British occupation of Aden commenced in 1869, providing a refuelling stop for shipping on the Britain-Far East route. A treaty agreement between the United Kingdom, Aden and the rulers of states surrounding Aden in the nineteenth century resulted in the formation of the Protectorates. With it came a British responsibility to maintain a peaceful state. In the 1960s, this responsibility extended over South Arabia, Muscat and Oman, the Trucial States, Qatar and Kenya, with the importance of Aden bought into sharp focus with the discovery of oil in the Persian Gulf and the nationalisation of the Suez Canal in 1956.

To maintain the peace, Great Britain established Middle East Command. Its area of operations extended from Mombasa in Kenya to Bahrain, a distance of approximately 2500 miles (4200 kilometres) – about the same as the distance from west to east across Australia – a significant challenge. It comprised elements of the Army, Air Force and Navy. The RAF deployed three fighter ground-attack Hunter squadrons; a flight of photo reconnaissance Hunter aircraft; a squadron of Shackleton bombers and various transport squadrons and support flights.

Hunters over Arabia describes the work of Middle East Command and, in particular, provides an excellent insight into the use and flexibility of airpower and its ability to police a recalcitrant population in a rugged, remote and inhospitable region. The warring activities and resultant unrest caused by inter-tribal disputes and insurgent rebels railing against British colonial rule were contained with the liberal employment of air power. This was achieved by showing a presence of fighter aircraft flying low and fast over the area, known as “flag waving” operations, and, when necessary, by direct air strikes against insurgent strongholds. Air power had the advantage of delivering the

necessary application of force over long distances within short time frames.

These activities have a remarkable parallel to the operations flown between World Wars I and II by the RAF in Somaliland, Iraq and Aden, when airpower was employed in close co-operation with land forces against dissident forces, and was supported by an effective intelligence system. In the 1960s, air power enabled the size of the land force to be limited to one brigade.

The author captures the repetitive nature of the conduct of operations for over a decade in South Arabia, including aircraft deployments, weapons range practices, escort duties for land convoys, flag waving sorties, gunnery and rocket strikes and redeployments. In doing so, he conveys both the tedium and the excitement of conducting remote operations in an inhospitable and unforgiving environment.

At one stage, in response to an emerging politico-strategic crisis, the squadrons were deployed over a distance of 1300 miles (2200 kilometres), from Aden to Kuwait, to deter Iraqi forces from invading Kuwait – another interesting parallel in history.

The operations were not conducted without cost. During the period under review, 21 Hunter aircraft were destroyed and 12 pilots were killed. There is detailed commentary describing the nature of the accidents and the causes of those losses.

Throughout, Ray Deacon makes reference to the Operations Record Book in which all squadron flying operations were recorded. Given that the level of information provided throughout the book could be confusing, the author takes care to ensure that the reader is aware of the aircraft type, role and task undertaken when describing operations. Nevertheless, the book tends to read much like a squadron log.

Hunters over Arabia is well populated with colour and black and white photographs of the aircraft engaged in the operations. There are a few maps of the area of operations; however, given that there is a constant referral to aircraft activities and strikes against dissidents in various locations, a series of large-scale maps would have provided a much better context for the reader.

There is a fairly liberal use of acronyms throughout the book; however, the author has provided a useful glossary of terms.

Hunters over Arabia is a beautifully presented book that perhaps may not appeal to a wide readership, but will have a strong appeal to those who have been associated with flying operations and those who have a developed interest in military aviation activities.

Bob Treloar