

## Naval Staff History

### Middle East Operations, Jordan/Lebanon – 1958, Kuwait - 1961

This volume includes histories of two separate crises in the Middle East: the first in 1958 across the whole region as well as north Africa, and the second in 1961 as a result of an Iraqi threat on the sovereignty of the recently independent Gulf state of Kuwait.

The history covering the 1958 crisis is entitled 'Jordan/Lebanon' but in fact covers a wide range of operations to aid western-supporting regimes in the Middle East and Maghreb following announcement of the United Arab Republic merging Nasser's Egypt with Syria (p. 3), and the overthrow of the Hashemite royal family in Iraq (pp. 5-6). Not only did British and US forces provide support to the Christian-led government in Lebanon (pp. 3-5), and to the Hashemite monarchy in Jordan (pp. 10-14, 17-18, 20-22), but it also landed troops in support of King Idris of Libya (pp. 8-9, 14-16), stationed additional warships in the Gulf in case of disturbances in Kuwait (pp. 18-20), and undertook air support to operations in Oman (pp. 22-23). Having to provide forces for five separate operations stretched the Royal Navy to the limit. Occurring in the shadow of the Suez crisis two years' previously, the Royal Navy did not feel able to transport troops through the Suez Canal into the Red Sea, thus resulting in a reliance on troops already East of Suez (p.18). In this respect the operations justified the recent decision to focus British overseas naval forces in the Indian Ocean region at the expense of the Mediterranean and the later decision to move the navy's amphibious squadron from Malta to the region East of Suez. The operations also called upon a large number of ships (a total of four carriers were used across the period of the crisis) and they also showed up some of the shortcomings in the existing contingency plans, not least in the practical difficulties of organising international overflight permissions for airborne forces (pp. 11 and 33), and issue of the plans existing in isolation and therefore not taking account of the forces needed if multiple plans had to be activated at once (p. 35). Communications – verbosity and poor inter-service co-ordination being especially apparent – proved to be a particular issue, as did the propensity of high-level bodies in London to issue over-prescriptive orders that served to complicate rather than support the local commanders' tasks (pp. 10, 28, 31-32). This history also emphasises the confusion and mistakes that can occur in a short-notice complex operation across many theatres, and it closes with an optimistic comment from the Commander-in-Chief East Indies that at least the operations had made fewer mistakes than those two years ago at Suez and hopes that future operations might make fewer mistakes still (p. 35).

The next major operation in the region occurred three years later in the Gulf, and is dealt with from page 39 onwards of this volume. The threat to Kuwait was as a direct, but delayed, result of the Iraq revolution of 1958: the new leader of Iraq, General Kassem, declared Kuwait to be merely a province of Iraq in June 1961 (p. 44). This was accompanied by worrying troop movements by the Iraqi military so it was decided, after some delay, to initiate the plan to support Kuwait: Operation Vantage (pp. 44-50). Although the 1961 crisis differed in many respects from that of 1958 – it required the reinforcement of one friendly government, not five – a number of the issues that had caused problems previously, re-appeared but in a more serious form. Operation Vantage had relied on the swift despatch of airborne troops to provide most of the reinforcement force. However, equivocation by the British government for a few days, coupled with further delay as overflight permissions were sought, and only belatedly given by Turkey, meant that a credible force to defend the small sheikhdom could not have been flown in at the time it was most needed (pp. 46-47, 50-52, 58-61, 87-88). However, the situation was saved by the fortuitous presence of the newly converted Commando carrier, HMS *Bulwark*, with 42 Commando embarked in transit from Suez to Singapore and within quick sailing distance of the Gulf (pp. 52-58). Iraqi forces did not, in the event, attack Kuwait so the forces deployed were presumably a sufficient deterrent force, but as in 1958 significant aspects of the

operation exposed weaknesses in British planning and implementation. One of the most significant problems was, again, communications: in particular amongst the three services and their different procedures, terminologies and approaches (pp. 73-75, 77-82). The small and ageing HMS *Meon*, a frigate that had been effectively disarmed and turned into an amphibious command ship, proved one of the most important ships in the operation, her numerous HF transmitters and receivers gave her the only capacity within the naval forces to communicate effectively between forces at sea and on land (pp. 62-63, 88).

Both of these histories have important conclusions that might have had an impact on the 1966 Defence Review – in which it was decided that land-based air intervention forces were sufficient for global operations and aircraft carriers would no longer be needed. However, the histories were not completed in time to play any part in the review. The Naval Historical Branch, primarily focussing on completing the staff histories of Second World War operations, appear to have been commissioned to write the histories at some point in 1965 (see N/NHB reference at bottom of p. ii), but they were not issued until September 1968, by which time not only had the decision to withdraw carriers been made, but also the decision to withdraw most forces from East of Suez, including the Gulf, thus lessening their immediate practical utility further. Despite this, these two histories do provide concise and useful summaries of largely forgotten operations that highlight both the effectiveness and the complexities in using military forces in the conventional deterrence role a long distance from the home base.

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