

TOP SECRET
COPY NO 11

HEADQUARTERS, AIR COMMAND, SOUTH EAST ASIA

BRIEF HISTORY OF CLANDESTINE AIR OPERATIONS IN THE SOUTH EAST ASIA
THEATRE OF WAR.

(Written and Compiled by Squadron Leader G. L. Coleman).

PERIOD 1ST JUNE, 1942 TO 31ST AUGUST 1944.

GENERAL

1. The history of clandestine air operations in this Theatre falls into three distinct phases:-
 - (a) Operations by aircraft of the Air Landing School from 1st June, 1942 to 31st May, 1943.
 - (b) Operations by No. 1576 S.D. Flight, Chaklala, from 1st June, 1943 to 31st January, 1944.
 - (c) Operations by No. 357 S.D. Squadron, Digri, from 1st February, 1944 to 31st August, 1944.

In addition, there were a number of beach infiltration operations by Catalina aircraft of both No. 240 G.R. Squadron and No. 628 S.D. Squadron based at Redhills Lake, Madras.

Operations by Aircraft of the Air Landing School, 1st June, 1942 – 31st May, 1943.

2. After the withdrawal of our fighting forces from Burma early in 1942 it became urgently necessary to obtain intelligence of the enemy movements in preparation for their anticipated attack on India. Infiltration by agents overland into Burma was a long and arduous task calling for very highly trained jungle trekkers. Consequently, in May 1942 a proposition was put to the Air Staff at A.H.Q. India by I.S.L.D. to drop agents by parachute.
3. The proposition was approved by the Air Staff and during the following month a Hudson of the Air Landing School, then at Delhi, proceeded to Dinjan, Assam, to carry out the first clandestine air operation from India. Two agents were dropped at night by moonlight and, from the R.A.F. standpoint, the operation was a complete success.
4. Stringent security measures were requested by I.S.L.D. which resulted in no official R.A.F. record of this operation being kept. In fact, throughout the twelve months that Air Landing School aircraft were used for this work no detailed information was kept either at the School or at Air Headquarters.

5. This initial success caused I.S.L.D. and G.S.I.(k) (later to become Force 136) to plan a series of operations of a similar nature, to be carried out during the moon periods of the ensuing months. Unfortunately, unsuitable weather conditions, and the difficulties of operating single aircraft from A.L.G's 1,300 miles from base severely handicapped the R.A.F's co-operative intentions. Nevertheless, out of the ten sorties attempted between 1st June, 1942 and 31st May, 1943, six were entirely successful.

Operations by No. 1576 S.D. Flight, Chaklala, 1st June, 1943 – 31st January, 1944.

6. The successes obtained by the pilots of the A.L.S. encouraged the Clandestine Services to plan air operations on an ever increasing scale. It was obvious that small detachments of aircraft from the A.L.S. would be quite inadequate for regular monthly operations. Also the primary role of the School would be adversely affected by the continual withdrawal of aircraft and crews.

7. Therefore, on 1st June, 1943, No. 1576 S.D. Flight consisting of 6 Hudson Mark III aircraft was formed at Chaklala under the command of Squadron Leader J. R. Moore, who had been serving as Chief Flying Instructor at the Air Landing School.

8. The directive to No. 1576 Flight instructed all concerned that the Unit had been established with the object of providing resources for the operations required by I.S.L.D. and G.S.I.(k) without prejudice to the normal functions of the Air Landing School. All R.A.F. responsibilities for undertaking the training and operations required by these organisations, henceforward, devolved upon No. 1576 Flight. The normal forward bases used by aircraft of the Flight was Dum Dum airfield at Calcutta. Once operations had been approved the planning and execution of the air side became the responsibility of the Flight Commander.

9. The range of the Hudsons Mark III, even when fitted with overload bomb bay fuel tank, restricted operations for all practicable purposes to areas in Burma. Adverse weather conditions prevailing over Burma during the S.W. Monsoon, and the necessity for conducting all operations by moonlight due to navigational difficulties, placed further restrictions upon the scale of operations.

10. During the first four months after the formation of No. 1576 Flight weather conditions over Burma were particularly bad. Only four operations were attempted during this period, two in June and two in August. In June one agent was successfully dropped and in August a container was released. The two other sorties were abortive.

11. In October 1943 three Hudsons attempted eight operations involving nine sorties. All were completely successful from the R.A.F. standpoint.

12. November, 1943 proved a bad month from the weather point of view. Only four operations were attempted of the twelve requested. Two of these four sorties were successful.

13. The need for extension of operations to areas outside Burma was fully appreciated and, after long negotiation, the addition of three Liberator Mark III to the establishment of 1576 flight was agreed to by Air Ministry in November, 1943. In addition, it was agreed that nine Catalina aircraft due to arrive from West Africa should be earmarked for special operations.

14. The three Liberators arrived modified to M.E. S.D. requirements which were considered unsuitable for the type of native agent peculiar to this theatre. Lengthy experiments were put in hand to modify the aircraft with a slide exit similar to that on the Hudsons.

15. Six operations by Hudsons were attempted in the December 1943 moon period, all of which were successful. January, 1944, however proved a blank month as unfavourable weather prevented any operations being attempted.

Operations of No. 357 S.D. Squadron, 1st February, 1944 – 31st August, 1944.

16. On 1st February, 1944, No. 1576 S.D. Flight was re-formed as No. 357 Squadron. Liberators 6; Hudsons 3; Catalinas 6 plus 3. "A" Flight, consisting of Liberators and Hudsons, were to be based at Digri, and "B" Flight (Catalinas) at Redhills Lake, Madras. The aircraft establishment was initially filled with Liberators 3, Hudsons 7 and Catalinas 4.

17. It was soon apparent that it would be impossible to operate Flights consisting of fundamentally different aircraft and situated 900 miles apart under one Commander. Therefore, Air Ministry approval was obtained to throw off the Catalinas as a separate Squadron to be known as No. 628 S.D. Squadron.

18. No. 357 Squadron was not installed at Digri until 20th February, 1944 but the Hudson aircraft operated from Dum Dum during the moon period from 5th February to 17th February, 1944. During this time, although only four nights were available, they successfully attempted eight sorties.

19. March 1944 was an epoch making month for S.D. Operations in this theatre. Firstly, six modified Liberators were delivered to No. 357 Squadron and carried out the first two clandestine operations to Siam. Both were successful although two attempts were required in one case. Secondly, this month saw the largest air effort yet put into clandestine operations in this theatre. Twenty three sorties were despatched of which twenty were successful from the air standpoint. Unfortunately, this success was marred by the loss of a Hudson which crashed in Kokang on the Burma/China border killing five of the six crew. This was the first aircraft lost on S.D. operations in this Command. Thirdly, Flight Lieutenant Graham, 357 Squadron's Medical Officer, although he had not previously dropped from an aircraft, volunteered to be parachuted to the rescue of the only surviving member of the Hudson crew, who was seriously injured. The rescue was successfully accomplished and the doctor was awarded the D.S.O. for his gallant action.

20. In April, 1944, an attempt was made to stage a Liberator operation to French Indo-China using Kunming as an A.L.G. The attempt met with disaster. One aircraft fully loaded made a wonderful forced landing on the tiny fighter strip at Fort Hertz. The second aircraft, after being reported missing, was eventually found to have crashed in North China killing 13 R.A.F. personnel. This was undoubtedly due to inexperienced crews attempting what is accounted to be one of the most difficult flights in the world – over "the Hump" from India to China. On other operations Hudsons claimed six successful sorties out of eight and Liberators five successful out of six.

21. During the May 1944 moon period, seven out of eleven Hudson sorties were successful but only five out of twelve Liberator sorties achieved success. One Liberator crashed on return twenty minutes flying time from base due to lack of fuel. Bad weather, including electrical storms and 10/10ths cloud was experienced by most crews during this month's operations.

22. Monsoon weather was at its worst during June, 1944 resulting in only six Hudson and one Liberator successful sorties out of fifteen and nine attempts respectively. Thirteen of these sorties were directed to one particular area but only one aircraft was able to deliver its load due to 10/10ths cloud over the D.Z. Similar conditions were experienced in July, 1944 resulting in three successful out of nine attempted Hudson sorties. Liberators only made two sorties both of which were successful.

23. Owing to monsoon conditions no operations could be carried out from base during the August, 1944 moon period, but a number of emergency sorties from A.L.G's were successfully carried out. In addition Liberators continued to ferry P.O.L. and stores into Kunming for future operations. Hudsons made three sorties from Dinjan, Assam; two of which were successful, one from Kylhet and one from Kunming.

Operations by Catalina Flying Boats of Nos. 240 & 628 Squadrons from 22nd April, 1943 to 31st August, 1944.

24. The first Catalina Flying Boat S.D. operation in this theatre was attempted by two boats of No. 240 G.R. Squadron on 22/23rd April, 1943. both aircraft were stripped of special equipment and one carried a small bombload to carry out a diversionary raid. The landing attempt was unsuccessful owing to a heavy swell in the selected alighting area. However, a second attempt on the night 25/26th April proved entirely successful. The second aircraft circled Tavoy to bomb the airfield as it had done on the previous attempt.

25. Lack of submarine transport for agents coupled with the obvious advantage in speed caused the clandestine organisations, particularly I.S.L.D. to plan a large number of Catalina operations following the initial success. However, G.R. Catalinas were fully committed in their normal role and it was not until January, 1944 that a second operation of this nature was attempted.

26. On the 15th January, 1944 two Catalinas of No. 240 Squadron set out for Island¹ off the S. Burma coast to carry out I.S.L.D's operation Buzzard. The operation was successfully completed despite the fact that the starboard blister of the landing aircraft was smashed and she had to take off with two feet of water flooding the blister compartment. The Catalina was nearly three hours on the return journey before most of the water had been baled out. The agents put ashore for this operation were successfully picked up by Catalinas of 240 Squadron on the night of 14/15th February, 1944. Both operations were excellently carried out.

27. Although formed on 1st February, 1944, No. 628 Squadron did not attempt its first S.D. operation until May 1944, mainly due to bad sea and weather conditions in the selected target area. On the night 2/3rd May, a number of agents with kit were put ashore in the Bangkok area. a reconnaissance on 10/11th May failed to make signal contact with the party. During the same month a S.O.S. was received from an I.S.L.D. party in the Bassein area of Burma. A Catalina was sent to their rescue but was unable to make contact although remaining waterborne for over two hours whilst an I.S.L.D. Officer went ashore in an endeavour to find the fugitives.

28. Monsoon conditions prevented further flying boat operations until September, 1944.

Conclusions

29. The demands for air transport for the Clandestine Organisations for their operations has ever been in excess of the amount which could be conveniently allocated. However, future plans of both the R.A.F. and the Organisations have now been aligned and it is hoped that, with the co-operation of all concerned, clandestine air operations in this theatre will reach proportions at least comparable to those in other theatres of war.

30. Detailed chronological lists of operations are attached at Appendices "A", "B" and "C", to certain copies.

(J. P. McConnell)
Brigadier General (USAAF)
Senior Air Staff Officer
Air Command, South East Asia.

12 Jan 45

¹ Name of the island is not given in the record.