(Reference C.P. 296 (23).)

The decision of the Sub-Committee on National and Imperial Défence referred to in the attached Paper and the dissent of the Secretary of State for War thereto, are contained in C.P. 299(23), which is now with the printers and will be circulated as soon as ready.

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2 Whitehall Gardens, S.W.
29th July, 1923.
C.P. 296 (23).

THE CABINET.

THE RELATIVE STATUS OF THE ARMY AND THE ROYAL AIR FORCE.

MEMORANDUM BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WAR.

My colleagues will have noted that I registered my dissent from the decision arrived at by the National and Imperial Defence Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence, who refused to consider the transference of the military side of the Air Ministry to the War Office. This decision will have to be ratified by the Cabinet, and I make no excuse, therefore, for asking them to read the attached paper, which gives the views of the General Staff, and which was submitted to the National Defence Committee (N.D. 40). Although there may be political reasons for not abolishing the present Air Ministry, I venture to think that, as a logical statement of the General Staff’s case, the paper is unanswerable. If, however, after reading it my colleagues ratify the decision of the Committee, I need not assure them that I, and all connected with this Office, will do our best to co-operate loyally with the Air Ministry. I believe, however, that the present system, quite apart from its being most uneconomical, will inevitably break down in time of war, and that the present decision, if allowed to stand, will only perpetuate what was found to be fatal in time of war, namely, division of command.

D.

THE WAR OFFICE,
28th June, 1923
This memorandum was written on the receipt of a request from Lord Salisbury, dated 20th April, 1923, to the Secretary of State for War, to consider—

"any questions affecting the co-operation or control of military and air forces, which require an authoritative decision."

Lord Salisbury's request invites discussion of the fundamental principles on which the relationship of our military and air forces should be based. The question of co-operation cannot be taken up until the question of control is settled, i.e., until it is decided whether or not it is in the interests of efficiency and economy, in peace and war, that the Air Force should be controlled by an independent Air Staff functioning on terms of equality with the General Staff, carrying equal weight in counsel, taking action as a principal, and comprising in itself all the machinery required for the independent control of the Air Force in peace, and for independent command in war.

The experiment of an independent Air Staff and Air Force has been in operation in Great Britain for the past five years. No other Power has adopted this organization. It has proved a costly experiment, and convincing proofs of its success will be required to justify its continuance.

The origins of the experiment are difficult to trace. The foundations of the separation were laid under cover of a war period so critical that the process passed almost unnoticed until at the end of the war the fait accompli of the separation was disclosed, and tacitly accepted by a war-weary Government and public. The General Staff, however, did protest on grounds of unsoundness of the principle (vide C.I.D. papers 139—C of 25th May, 1921, and 159—C of 4th February, 1922).

Since then, the General Staff, while conforming to the experiment in a spirit of the closest co-operation, have not changed their convictions.

We, definitely, do not see the necessity for an Air Force with an independent Ministry and organization to support it and an independent staff to control it. We base this view on the results of the past 5 years of separation (which will be dealt with later) and on the following fundamental principle:—

The Air Force is a supplementary force. Action in the air or from the air can do no more than contribute to the victory of one side or the other; it cannot by itself achieve or consolidate victory, though it may be essential to victory. The surface of the earth on which we live is the decisive plane; the Army and Navy have each their distinct sphere of action on that plane, while the Air Force is supplementary to both in a secondary plane.

We regard, in fact, the Air Force as a new arm, and not as a new service; and while we admit that it is an arm of such importance and capable of such development that it requires a specialized staff to deal with it, we consider that the staff should be subordinate to, and part of, the General Staff and Naval Staff in proportion to the extent to which each will have to use this arm.

If this supplementary status of the Air Force is accepted as a principle (and it is so accepted by all other Powers) it is illogical to confer on the staff and administration of that force either equality in counsel with the elder staffs or a co-equal and independent existence.

In analysing the principle, we have considered air action in war under four headings:—

(a) The action of air units which form an integral part of military and naval formations.

(b) The action of air forces (additional to those in (a)) acting in close co-operation with military and naval forces in a theatre of war.

(c) The action of independent air forces operating in minor and possibly distant theatres of war in fulfilment of special air missions.

(d) The action of large air forces operating in a main theatre of war at a time when the air situation temporarily dominates the ground situation as a whole.

These headings cover all air action as now visualizable.
As regards (a), it is an axiom of the General Staff and of the Naval Staff, that air units forming an integral part of military formations and of fleets must be at the absolute disposal of the Commander in chief. No other arrangement is possible.

As regards (b), the action of air forces co-operating directly with military or naval forces in a theatre of war must obviously be subordinate to the plans and strategy of the Commander concerned and must be under his control. Divided control in any theatre is not compatible with the efficient conduct of operations. This again is a statement of admitted fact. These air forces are as integral a part of the central reserve in the hands of General Headquarters in the Field as are the air units in (a) of the formations to which they belong.

As regards (c), the action would either be isolated, punitive or preventive action, or action undertaken in a secondary theatre in support of the military plan of campaign in the main theatre. In either case it is supplementary to the military or naval strategy as a whole. It is not sufficient that action of this isolated character should be subject to the co-ordinating control of the Cabinet; it must be subject to expert control by the staff responsible for the war on land or sea as the case may be. Otherwise, there will always be the danger of the side show being given precedence over the main issue, and of independent air operations being launched which would react unfavourably upon the military situation, either by the initial diversion of resources to a secondary objective or by the production of results (either through success or through failure) leading to the diversion of resources and effort.

As regards (d), the only case that can be visualized at present is that of home defence against air attack. There are those who foresee a period at the commencement of a European war during which an intensive struggle in the air over the home area will paralyze all other activities. We regard this as an extreme view, but accept it for the purposes of argument. The home area includes not only these islands but the fringe of sea surrounding them within the range of action of land machines based on Great Britain; and home defence includes offensive action against enemy aerodromes within attacking distance of Great Britain. Who is to be responsible for preparing for this action and for carrying it through? Is it so distinct and specialized a task that an independent Air Staff and Air Ministry should be maintained to cope with it? We do not consider that it is. Home defence is a single problem, in which naval, military, and air forces all have their part. The respective spheres of activity and responsibility of the War Office and Admiralty are clearly defined and do not overlap; and in both (but principally in the military sphere) air forces will be required. But there is no separate air sphere. Home defence is a normal problem of modern war well within the competence of the General Staff; it is not a technical air problem calling for technical control. It is only an air problem to the extent that the aeroplane will at times be the principal arm employed by both sides, which requires only that the General Staff should include officers thoroughly trained in air fighting, and that the General Staff as a body should be as familiar with the capabilities of the aeroplane as with those of other weapons at their disposal. As things are now, the sound locators, searchlights and anti-aircraft guns which work with the aeroplane are Army organizations, as is also the air defence school which promulgates the policy. There must be undivided control and responsibility in the military sphere, and it does not seem to us sound to give this control to an independent staff specializing in the use of one particular weapon. Also there must be continuity; the same authority must be responsible for the conduct of operations from the preparation to the peace, and this authority cannot be a body of specialists.

To all four headings, therefore, we consider that the principle of the supplementary status of the Air Forces applies. We cannot visualize air action in the military sphere, except as part and parcel of the general strategic plan for which the General Staff is responsible; nor can we consider air fighting except as an extension of ground fighting. At some future time (which is not yet in sight) the effectiveness and scope of aircraft in war may so develop as to enable air forces to replace armies. But this, when and if it comes, must be a gradual process, and the adjustment of the control to meet the change will follow as a domestic development within the General Staff. There is no need to form a rival staff to take over the control.

To turn now to the experience gained by the past five years of separation. The main features of the experiment as far as the military sphere is concerned are (e) the building up of an Air Ministry and Air Staff; (f) the handing over to Air Commanders under the Air Staff of the supreme command in certain regions abroad, and (g) the dependence of the Army on another department for the provision of its essential air force units.

As regards (e) we are forced to conclude, from actual contact, that this has been a
most extravagant process. The needs of the Air Force, both political and military, coincide in nearly all respects with those of the Army, service for service, department for department, branch of staff for branch of staff. All these have therefore been duplicated. It is difficult to see why all these needs could not have been met by grafting an Air Staff branch for branch on to the War Office Staff under the Army Council, and by fitting Air Force Commands into the chain of Army Commands. The Air Force can never free itself from its administrative dependence on army lines of communication and army ground protection in the field.

As regards (f), our experience of independent Air Force and Air Staff command has been limited to Iraq and Palestine. These experiments have not yet been put to the test of war, but from such experience as has been gained the General Staff see no grounds for changing their original opinion that the system is fundamentally unsound. Air Force control cannot be established in an area until the Army has prepared the way and made the establishment of the vulnerable air force ground bases and installations possible. The Army must put the Air Force in. The taking over by the air authorities entails the entire substitution of one control by another—an extravagant process. When in position and possession the Air Force still requires troops to guard its ground installations and to consolidate the results of its operations. If an Air Force enclave is attacked and invaded, military reinforcements have to be called in to deal with the situation, and, if things go wrong, to cover the withdrawal of the Air Force. The commitment, therefore, as far as its liabilities are concerned, is a military rather than an air commitment. Army control is necessary to put the Air Force in, and ultimately to bring them out; sandwiched between these two phases is a period of Air Force control when Air Forces, supported by ground troops, quarter the country. We consider that economy, efficiency and continuity of policy would be better assured by the maintenance of military control throughout, more especially as the air control period is, in reality, a policing rather than a fighting interlude.

As regards (g), the disadvantages from our point of view are obvious, and do not require enlargement here.

The above gives the view of the General Staff on broad lines. Finally we must indicate the system of organization and control of the British Air Forces which we consider would produce the greatest efficiency at the least cost.

Briefly stated it is as follows:

(a) The air units which are an integral part of the fleet and air formations (including probably lighter-than-air formations), capable of co-operating with the fleet on the high seas, to be under the Admiralty...

(b) The air units which are an integral part of army formations and air formations, required to co-operate with the Army (including air forces allotted to the general pool for war and to home defence), to be under the War Office.

(c) Civil aviation, research, experiment and supply to be under the Air Ministry, which, relieved of all responsibility for the employment of air forces in peace and war, could be much reduced.

Each of the three departments (Naval, Military and Civil) would estimate for its own air requirements, the whole being co-ordinated by the Committee of Imperial Defence before presentation to Parliament.

We claim no originality for this system, which follows closely that which has been adopted and tried out by the French with such success. Our problem is not, of course, the same as the French problem; we are not self-contained; our world communications are vital to us, and our Navy is our first line of defence; but, in proportion, as greater dispersion of force is forced on us, by so much more must we avoid sub-division of control.