

By Nick Watts, Great North News Services Correspondent

You can't help feeling that the RAF is enjoying the Libyan situation, just a little bit. Before and immediately after the SDSR, the inter-service back biting got to the point where the other two services were asking what all those fast jets were for? History as Mark Twain once said, doesn't repeat itself but sometimes it rhymes. Many may remember that the Nott defence review which threatened to do damage to the Royal Navy was followed by the Falklands war. Now along comes a situation which the RAF must be hoping will drag on, and on, and on. Just like the Iraqi no fly zone which endured for 12 years.

The MOD briefing given in London this morning by the AOC of No 2 Group Air Vice Marshall Phil Osborne went to great lengths to stress to the assembled media just how professional / flexible the aircrews were being and how the utility of air power was just what was needed to enforce the UN's resolution 1973. There was some reference to two RN warships in the Mediterranean and to the Tomahawks which had been fired by HMS Triumph, but the story was undoubtedly about Typhoon and Tornado.

In fact the RAF has every reason to be flagging this as operation "told you so" as the utility of the Tornado has been amply demonstrated by the mission from Marham to strike targets in Libya, a round trip of some 3,000 miles. The Harrier had neither the endurance nor the weapons carrying capability to undertake such a mission. The absence of any naval aviation has not been a show stopper. The Treasury must be watching this with great interest.

The unspoken story, however, is a bit more worrying. We learnt that the Tornados were re-fuelled in flight by Tri-star and VC 10 tankers, both venerable aircraft. We have also learnt that the aerial surveillance has included such assets as the Nimrod R1, which provides signals intelligence, and the sentinel which provides ground surveillance. Both of which are due to be withdrawn from service. The replacements for all of these assets are not yet ready. Neither the Tankers, nor the replacement Boeing 707 style Rivet Joint electronic surveillance aircraft which are due to replace the Nimrod R1. The Sentinel and the RAF's AWACS aircraft were able to assist the USAF locate and rescue the aircrew from their crashed F 15 Eagle.

The logistic support for this operation has been provided by the RAF's C 17s and the C 130s of the transport fleet. How much additional pressure is this putting on the airbridge to Afghanistan? It must be hoped that the advocates of air power will take heart from these developments and renew their case both with the MOD and the Treasury, so stave off some of the cuts demanded by the SDSR. The RAF is now involved in one enduring medium scale operation and a small one at the same time. No doubt the aircrews are working very hard, but the RAF must be at or near its operating limit. If the UK is going to be a player on the world stage, there cannot be any scope for further reductions in the front line RAF, and some of those announced must be re-visited.

There is just time to stop all those P45s going out!

