



DIRTY WORK

THE TRUTH ABOUT THE RAF & CHEMICAL WEAPONS

PART ONE : INTER-WAR "ANNOYANCE & FRIGHTFULNESS"

The RAF's historical relationship with chemical weapons is one sheathed in a patina of mystery and, at times, controversy. But what are the actual facts when it comes to the Service's use of unconventional and alternative aerial weapons? **VIC FLINTHAM** opens a two-part series with an examination of the evidence relating to the RAF's inter-war period



PHILIP ARRETT COLLECTION

THE ROYAL AIR FORCE has been vilified both in respect of the nature of its so-called conventional bombing operations and its use of controversial "chemical" weapons. Conventional bombing, whether as part of air control against villages in Iraq or firebombing Hamburg during the Second World War, has been the subject of countless tomes and doctoral theses. Less well-documented, however, has been the actual or claimed use of dedicated chemical warfare by the RAF.

Is there a difference between bombs and "chemical" weapons? There are probably only two weapons employed by the RAF, apart from propaganda leaflets, that have *not* involved the use of chemicals in some way. These were "whistling aerial darts" and "calthrops" (or "crow's feet"), the latter being small spiked metal tetrahedrons designed to disable animals or puncture tyres. For the rest, they either use chemicals as a propellant (bullets) or as an explosive or incendiary filling (bombs, mines, depth charges or torpedoes) or both (shells and rocket-projectiles). The chemical weapons that are the subject of this series are gases or liquids designed to incapacitate, maim or kill, or to destroy unwanted pests and cultivation as a result of some action other than explosion.

GAS!

The first reported use of chemicals in RAF warfare post-1918 was in Russia in 1919. The British had intervened on the side of White Russians against Red forces, both in south and north Russia, and it was in fighting in the north around the Dvina river south of Archangel that the RAF dropped debilitating bombs. There had been some concern that Red forces were using captured German gas shells, three having been reported as fired at Shredmehenga on January 27, 1919. In retaliation

ABOVE *The de Havilland D.H.9A, known affectionately as the "Ninak", was introduced into RAF service in the last six months of the First World War and went on to become the Service's reliable workhorse all over the world for the next decade. This example, J9124, was operated by No 30 Sqn, which flew the type in Mesopotamia/Iraq throughout the 1920s.*

Winston Churchill, then Secretary of State for Air and Secretary of State for War, arranged shipment of a quantity of shells filled with a new agent, diphenylamine chlorarsine (DM), which was not lethal but incapacitated troops for some hours. Numerous trials using the gas from ground-based dispensers showed that in the windless forests it would not drift, so the RAF was reluctantly pressed into dropping the gas in improvised bombs. In his plans to develop his front, sent to the War Office on June 6, 1919, Lord Ironside, the Commander-in-Chief, had euphemistically included reference to the intended use of gas:

"Advance against Plesetskaya by purely Russian forces employing new smoke screen, which will be no danger to non-combatants. Our position on [Pechora] railway will thus be strengthened, and any operations to push us back prevented while my main forces are at Kotlas."¹

The first raid using the

Lord Ironside was attached to the Allied Expeditionary Force to fight the Bolsheviks in northern Russia in September 1918. Despite having limited use of air power, he was forced to abandon the White Army in late 1919.

