

Operation El Dorado Canyon

THE BUILD-UP The first real indication in the United Kingdom that the Americans did indeed have contingency plans for an air strike against Libyan targets can be traced back to mid-March, when the US 6th Fleet provoked a reaction from Colonel Gaddafi's forces by exercising in the Gulf of Sirte (illegally claimed as territorial waters by the Libyans). Three 2ndBW KC-10A's were flown to Mildenhall (91712 on 19.3, 91710 and 40192 on 23.3), as was an additional 9thSRW KC-135Q (80089 on 22.3), but these aircraft had been released by 29.3 when tension in the southern Mediterranean was reduced following the completion of the US Navy exercises.

With the benefit of hindsight, the transit through Mildenhall overnight on 8/9.4 of 55thSRW RC-135V 14842 and RC-135W 24139 was probably the first sign of the events to come, while two 17thRW TR-1A's are believed to have been deployed from Alconbury to Ramstein (and perhaps beyond) by 12.4. The more obvious signs of unusual activity to follow came with the massive increase in air-to-air refuelling assets at Fairford and Mildenhall. This began with the arrival at Fairford from mid-afternoon onwards on 11.4 of the four KC-10A's which comprised the detachment at Zaragoza in Spain: 91713 (2ndBW), 91949 (22ndARW), 30076 (22ndBW) and 40186c (unmarked, should be 2ndBW). Activity at Mildenhall commenced later that afternoon with the arrival of KC-10A's 91950 (22ndARW) & 50031c "City of Goldsboro" (68thARG) from Sigonella, while 30079, 30082 (both 2ndBW) and 50029c, 50030c, 60027c (all unmarked, believed to be 68thARG) came in later that evening from the USA. General Gabriel (USAF Chief of Staff) flew into Mildenhall the same day aboard AFSC C-135C 12669 which arrived from Brussels via Heathrow, while the 67thARRS at Woodbridge prepared to move half of its operation to Italy.

Significant arrivals on 12.4 were limited to the appearance at Mildenhall of KC-10A 30075 (2ndBW) from Barksdale AFB mid-afternoon. 67thARRS HH-53C's 95784, 95796 and 95797 left Woodbridge for a refuelling stop at Lyon-Satolas that morning, followed by HC-130N's 95826 and 95827 during the afternoon which flew direct to Naples, while several people who were en-route to an editorial party in Little Cressingham that evening reported a significant amount of activity at Lakenheath with many of the shelters open and several 48thTFW F-111F's carrying out ground engine runs.

Sunday 13.4 saw the total number of KC-10A's in the country nearly doubled, most of the new arrivals landing from the USA during the morning "curfew" period. Fairford received 20193, 30078, 30080 (all 22ndARW) while Mildenhall gained 91710, 91712, 30077 (all 2ndBW), 20191 (22ndARW), 40190c (unmarked, should be 2ndBW) and 40191c, 50027c (both unmarked, should be 22ndARW).

One further KC-10A arrived at Mildenhall from the USA on 14.4 in the shape of 40188c (unmarked, should be 2ndBW), making a total of 16 aircraft on the ground there for an hour or two prior to the transfer of 91950 to Fairford. KC-10A 90434 (2ndBW) flew from Aviano to Fairford during the day, making the following tanker assets available for that night's activity:

Fairford	KC-10A	90434, 91713 both 2ndBW; 91949, 91950, 20193, 30076, 30078, 30080 all 22ndARW; 40186c no marks.
	KC-135A	63600 2ndBW; 63615 19thARW; 71419 92ndBW; 71439 92ndBW; 72602 7thBW; 91471 380thBW; 00364 410thBW; 38000 22ndARW; 38018 410thBW; 38880 509thBW.
Mildenhall	KC-10A	91710, 91712, 30075, 30077, 30079, 30082 all 2ndBW; 20191 22ndARW; 50031c 68thARG; 40188c, 40190c, 40191c, 50027c, 50029c, 50030c, 60027c all unmarked.

Mildenhall KC-135A 63603 2ndBW (no fin-band, ex-376thSW); 63653 92ndBW; 80037 410thBW; 80056 92ndBW; 80073 96thBW; 80079 unmarked (ex-376thSW); 91501 92ndBW; 10295 97thBW; 10298 379thBW; 38022 416thBW; 38878 5thBW; 38884 410thBW.

KC-135E 71501 Washington ANG.

KC-135Q 80050 380thBW; 80094, 80117, 80125, 91513, 91520, 00342 all 9thSRW.

Mildenhall also gained 58thMAS C-12F's 40163, 40164 and 40166 which were very active on missions from here over the next couple of days.

THE LAUNCH The first aircraft to leave Fairford in support of the strike against Libya was 22ndARW KC-10A 30080 which took off at 1812Z, followed over the next thirty minutes by (in order) KC-10A's 20193, 30076, KC-135A's 38018, 63615 and KC-10A 40186, while KC-10A 91713 took off at 1934Z and was followed by 30078 at 2054Z and 91949 at 2055Z. The KC-135A's are believed to have been used to refuel some of the KC-10A's as both of them returned to Fairford at about 2115Z, followed by KC-10A 40186 at about 2300Z, concluding the evening's activity there. Fairford's launch is presumed to have been entirely in support of the five 42ndECS EF-111A's dispatched from Upper Heyford to provide the attacking force with ECM capability. One EF-111A returned, having been used as an airborne spare, while another completed the journey to the operational area but was held clear as a reserve, leaving three to take part in the attack. We have no details of the aircraft involved.

Departures from Mildenhall commenced c1745Z with the launch of six KC-135A/Q's, comprising (in order) 63603, 38878, 80050, 80073, 38884 and 10295. One of the based UC-12B's then managed to nip in for a landing during a very short break in activity, but an inbound Sherpa was forced to divert to Bentwaters as the KC-10A's began to follow the KC-135's out. Their launch started c1800Z with (in order) 30077, 50030, 50027, 91712, 60027, 50031, 40191, 20191, 91710 and 50029. Some of them were seen overhead the field shortly after take-off, having formed with flights of four F-111F's from the 48thTFW, a total of 24 F-111F's having departed Lakenheath as the tankers were becoming airborne from Mildenhall. We have managed to identify 20 of the fighter-bombers and from this information it appears that each of the 48thTFW's four squadrons was tasked with providing six aircraft for the operation:

492ndTFS	'LN' blue	F-111F	02394, 02396, 02406, 10893, 21445, 40177.
493rdTFS	'LN' yellow	F-111F	02382, 02386, 02404, 02415, 10889, ?????.
494thTFS	'LN' red	F-111F	02389, 02405, 02413, 02416, ?????, ?????.
495thTFS	'LN' green	F-111F	02363, 02371, 02390, 40178, 40183, ?????.

The fourth aircraft to depart in each of the six cells was used as an airborne spare and these six F-111F's subsequently returned to Lakenheath between 2030Z and 2130Z, although in the case of the second cell it was actually the lead aircraft which came back with an unspecified problem and the spare was used for the mission.

A seventh KC-135A (80037) followed the KC-10A's out of Mildenhall and there was then a break in activity until after midnight local time, when some of the tankers began to return. KC-10A 50027 landed c2340Z and was followed in quick succession by 91712, 50031, KC-135A 80037 and finally KC-10A 60027 c0015Z. Two more KC-10A's departed, comprising 40190 c0015Z and 40188 c0100Z, while an unidentified KC-135A landed c0115Z (we missed its departure, probably two or three hours earlier to act as an emergency fuel supply for the returning tankers given above).

The US Navy contribution to the strike comprised eight A-6E's and six F-18A's which were launched from CV-43/USC Coral Sea between 2200Z and 2320Z plus six A-6E's and six A-7E's which were launched from CV-66/USC America between 2245Z and 2315Z. The A-7E's and F-18A's were to be used in the SAM suppression role while the A-6E's would be used for the attack itself. Other aircraft from their respective Carrier Air Groups were also involved in a supporting role (F-14A's and F-18A's providing top-cover, KA-6D's providing air-to-air refuelling, E-2C's providing AEW, etc) but we have no confirmed details for these.

THE ATTACK Forced for political reasons to fly out over Lands End, across the Bay of Biscay and down the eastern side of the Iberian peninsular before entering the Mediterranean area via the Straits of Gibraltar, the F-111F's had to

make four (silent) refuellings each from their attendant tankers before reaching the coast of Libya. With the USAF contingent approaching from the west and the US Navy carrier group holding off to the northeast, the two forces were given geographically separated targets although both attacks were co-ordinated to commence at the same time. The F-111F's were to hit targets in the western (Tripoli) area, comprising the Al Azziziyah barracks, the Sidi Bilal training area and Tripoli airport, while the A-6E's were to hit targets in the eastern (Benghazi) area, comprising the Al Jumahiriya barracks and Benghazi airport.

The attack started at 2354Z with the EF-111A's commencing their jamming role and the US Navy A-7E's and F-18A's beginning HARM and Shrike missile attacks against radar and SAM installations. Simultaneous single-pass attacks by eight F-111F's on the barracks and training area near Tripoli and by twelve A-6E's on both targets in the Benghazi area commenced at 0001Z, while five F-111F's followed to attack Tripoli airport between 0007Z and 0011Z. Ordnance used during the strikes comprised 2000lb laser-guided bombs and 500lb high-drag gravity bombs (F-111F's), 500lb and 750lb gravity bombs (A-6E's) as well as the HARM and Shrike missiles (A-7E's and F-18A's). All of the US Navy aircraft reported clear of the Libyan coast at 0013Z en-route back to their respective carriers, but one F-111F (02389) failed to report "feet wet" and SAR forces were alerted at 0015Z to search for a possible missing aircraft. A VQ-2 EP-3E is reported to have been one of the aircraft involved in the search operation, but nothing was found and the effort was terminated at 0300Z on 16.4.

As can be seen from the attack aircraft totals, two A-6E's and five F-111F's suffered airborne aborts and failed to see action (all pilots had been directed in advance to abort if any system was not working properly when they reached their assigned target areas). The 'Coral Sea' fighters were all back aboard ship by 0046Z and those from 'America' by 0053Z while confirmation that F-111F 02389 was missing came at 0114Z upon completion of the first return-leg refuelling by the waiting KC-10A's. Pentagon press releases infer that it was one of the thirteen aircraft which reached the target area and was not lost en-route (as initially suggested).

During the long return leg to the UK, one of the F-111F's was forced to divert at 0316Z due to engine overheating problems and was reported safely on the ground at Rota in Spain at 0424Z (this aircraft returned to the UK late on 16.4). The first of the sixteen remaining aircraft landed safely at Lakenheath at 0630Z and the last to land (02406) did so at 0752Z, while eight KC-10A's returned to Mildenhall over the same period, comprising (in order) 40191, 20191, 40190, 50029, 50030, 30077, 40188 and 91710. Six of these (all except 40188 and 40190) were the tankers which stayed with the F-111F's throughout their mission. The four EF-111A's returned safely to Upper Heyford while their supporting KC-10A's returned to Fairford. 30076 landed there c0415Z and was followed by 91949 c0520Z, 20192 and 30080 c0700Z and finally 91713 and 30078 by 1000Z.

POST-STRIKE An immediate requirement following the completion of the attack was for damage assessment, to be carried out by photo-reconnaissance. The task fell to UK-based aircraft once again, this time to the 9thSRW SR-71A detachment at Mildenhall. The supporting tanker launch commenced at 0130Z with the departure of KC-135Q 91520 followed by KC-10A 30079, while further tankers took off between 0300Z and 0320Z and comprised (in order) KC-135Q 80125, KC-10A 30082 and KC-135Q's 00342, 80094. SR-71A 17980 departed at 0400Z, followed by 17960 at 0515Z, the first time that both aircraft had been airborne at the same time since Det.4 was established at Mildenhall and the first time that operational use had been made of KC-10A's on such a mission from the UK. A third supporting KC-10A (30075) departed at 0639Z and the two Blackbirds returned at 0835Z and 0948Z respectively. Early on 17.4 the Pentagon admitted that difficulty had been experienced in obtaining adequate photographic coverage of the two target areas due to problems with the weather, and this is no doubt the reason why both SR-71A's carried out identical missions on 16.4 and 17.4. Satellite reconnaissance was probably out of the question due to the recent launch disasters. General Gabriel departed for Andrews AFB aboard C-135C 12669 at 1152Z on 15.4, probably with the results of the first two Blackbird missions.

All five assigned targets were successfully hit, Sidi Bilal less so than the others although a considerable amount of damage was still caused there. The DoD confirmed on 8.5 that three bombs fell on civilian areas in Tripoli (explaining

damage caused to the French Embassy) and that the most likely source of these was the F-111F which was lost. Two of the bombs dropped by A-6E's in the Benghazi area are also known to have fallen accidentally on civilian areas. Several Libyan aircraft were hit at the two airports; at least one IL.76 was destroyed and others damaged by the F-111F's during their attack on Tripoli, while the A-6E's destroyed four MiG.23's, two Mi.8's and an F-27 at Benghazi and caused further damage to other MiG.23's, Mi.8's and a Libyan Arab Airlines Boeing 727 at least.

DISPERSAL OF FORCES The US forces maintained a high state of readiness over the following week in case another strike was required. The KC-10A fleet remained intact at Fairford until 22.4, which appears to have been the date on which the decision not to carry out any further action was taken. 50028c (unmarked, should be 2ndBW) arrived there that day, but 90434, 91713 and 40186c all departed for the USA. 91950 left on 23.4 while the remaining six aircraft departed on 25.4. Interesting arrivals at Fairford early on 15.4 were 305thARW KC-135A's 80124 and 80126, joined by 80018 on 22.4 (see MR197). They arrived from elsewhere in Europe and must have been involved in some capacity in operation "El Dorado Canyon"; the last time these modified KC-135A's put in an appearance in the UK was at Mildenhall during the 1980 Iranian crisis (see N448-450/80). All three returned to Grissom AFB on 25.4.

The KC-10A fleet at Mildenhall was maintained at fifteen aircraft until 26.4, although 20190 and 20192 (both 2ndBW) arrived during that period to replace 91712 and 50027c which returned home. Four aircraft (50029c, 50030c, 50031c and 60027c) left for Seymour-Johnson AFB on 26.4, while 91710, 40188c and 40190c returned to Barksdale AFB the following day. The remaining aircraft drifted away over the next few days until only two (30077 and 30079) were still present by the evening of 1.5. Finally, 552ndAW&CW E-3C's 00139 and 30009 passed through Mildenhall 3-5.5 on their way back to the USA and are known to have operated in the eastern Mediterranean area (probably from Cairo-West) throughout the previous couple of weeks.