Introduction

> [E]ager to get out of Cambridge for a few hours, I bought a Triumph motorcycle and began to ride into the flat countryside to the north of the city, a realm of fens and watercourses that vaguely resembled the landscape around Shangai. Behind the hedges lay forgotten wartime airfields, from which the bombing offensive against Germany had been launched, but there were new and larger bases where nuclear bombers were parked in their fortified dispersal bays. American military vehicles patrolled the runways, and the stars and stripes flew from the flagstaffs by the gates. Chryslers and Oldsmobiles cruised the country lanes, sudden dreams of chromium, driven by large pensive men and their well-dressed wives, who gazed at the surrounding fields with the confident eyes of an occupying power. From their closely-guarded bases they were preparing England, still trapped by its memories of the Second World War, for the third war yet to come. Then the atomic flash that I had seen over Nagasaki would usher these drab fields and the crumbling gothic of the university into the empire of light.

The words are those of J.G. Ballard,[1] damaged seer of the new atomic age. As ever with Ballard's semi-autobiographical writing, recollection cannot be taken at face value, but his dystopian vision brings into focus much of what this book is concerned with. The bleak East Anglian airfields to which the American strategic forces were deployed. The sleek aluminium bombers parked across the concrete aprons (fortified revetments derived from his fertile imagination, coming many years later to the initially ill-protected bases). The American airmen, so often bemused by the detached, bucolic England in which they found themselves. The lurking fear of apocalyptic nuclear assault.

How did these things come about? Of the many aspects, sentimental and material, of the Anglo-American 'special relationship', the least well-known is that which began with an agreement, in the summer of 1946, to enable the United States Army Air Forces (from 1947 the United States Air Force – USAF) to launch an atomic strike on the Soviet Union from airfields in England. That agreement reflected the assumption that

conflict between the United States and an expansionist Soviet Union could occur in the years immediately following the Second World War. Given the Soviet preponderance of conventional forces on the continent of Europe, if such a conflict occurred it would be prosecuted by the use of the atomic bomb against the Russian heartland.

Agreed informally, seemingly casually, and under conditions of the utmost secrecy that summer, within a few years the decision to permit the deployment of the atomic bomb to Britain locked in British military planners as ambivalent and poorly informed supporters of the United States' plans. Britain had become, and remained, an important location for the forward deployment of the medium bomber forces of Strategic Air Command (SAC) and, from 1960, the Thor Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile With the introduction of the long-range B-52 and the intercontinental ballistic missile Strategic Air Command was able to strike targets in the Soviet Union from the United States – the Zone of the Interior (ZI) as it was mysteriously known. At that point, the value of Britain as a strategic, as distinct from a tactical, base by the USAF diminished and came to a close in the mid-1960s.

This book provides an outline history of that American presence. It deals exclusively with the USAF strategic forces, and not with the tactical elements placed in Britain for a theatre conflict. The distinction between strategic and tactical is blurred at the edges, although Jimmy Doolittle's succinct adage that that tactical bombing is 'about breaking the milk bottles' and strategic bombing about 'killing the cow' goes to the heart of the matter. In practice, the distinction was embodied in the types of aircraft available and the tasking of the units to which they were assigned. We are dealing, then, with the presence in Britain of the large, medium bomber aircraft of Strategic Air Command – the B-29 and B-50 Superfortresses, the B-47 Stratojet – and, peripherally, the Thor missile. The work covers the arrangements made for the placement of these forces and the relationships that developed with the British hosts. It is a political, as much as an operational, history.

The book has both a method and a thesis. Being the kind of historian that I am, the method came first, and the thesis emerged from it as a result of more than a decade's collection of and reflection upon a mass of archival material. The particular claim I would make for the method is that it enabled me to bring together two types of source – American and British – that are rarely brought into juxtaposition. There is of course a vast amount of truly excellent published historical research on the United States national security policies, on America's rise to preponderance as the foremost nuclear power and on the expression of that power through the creation of Strategic Air Command. Equally, British

researchers have created a field of scholarship in the nuclear history of the UK that is of the highest standard. Yet few have examined the relationship, the interactions and interconnections of these two nuclear histories. I tread in the footsteps of those few.

To do so required an open-minded exploration of the archives on both sides of the Atlantic. For the United States, the resources of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) at College Park, Maryland and in the Presidential libraries; the Library of Congress; the Air Force Historical Research Agency at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama and the Air Force History Research Office at Bolling Air Force Base in Washington, DC; the incomparable National Security Archive at George Washington University. In the UK, the National Archives at Kew and the RAF Museum library at Hendon were of obvious importance. Interesting discoveries at any one of these sites led me to pursue its correlative on the other side of the Atlantic, sometimes discovering useful confirmation, sometimes discovering papers that threw a different light upon the same episode, sometimes – more often perhaps – discovering nothing.

It would, of course, be a mistake to treat any of these sources as incontestable. The written record is subject to a range of omissions and distortions. Equally, the archived interviews with retired senior officers, used extensively in this book, raise the familiar problems of oral histories. In common with the rest of us, public officials have a propensity to reinterpret their past through the convenient lens of the present. *Old Men Forget* was the teasing title British statesman and writer Duff Cooper chose for his autobiography. Forgetfulness, though, is less of a problem than the fact that old men *remember*: they remember partially, both in the sense of incompletely, and in the sense of often glossing their recollections in ways that emphasise their own significance in the events of their time.

Bearing these caveats in mind, my inescapable conclusion from the research was that this aspect of the 'special relationship' looked dramatically different when viewed through the American and the British lenses. That conclusion, as it emerged from the files, came gradually to shape the thesis that emerged from the research. While it would be a travesty to present this as a story of dominance and submission, it becomes clear that at every stage the initiative lay with the United States, simply because Americans had the clear and unambiguous understanding of their national security interests that the British lacked. The British – ambivalent and equivocal – simply responded to American overtures, sometimes eagerly, sometimes reluctantly, sometimes in apparent absence of mind.

Here, then, is the story that unfolds in the chapters that follow. The book opens with 'Searching for bases', and that chapter deals with the initial decision to create an American atomic capability on British soil. The establishment of a US atomic strike capability in England arose from early war planning, and was sought as a vital strategic priority. Success in this endeavour flowed from the informal agreement between the two air force chiefs, Carl A. Spaatz and Sir Arthur (later Lord) Tedder. And the nature of that personal relationship, based on the trust and respect fostered when they worked together during Operation Overlord just two years earlier, was of major consequence. It enabled atomic base rights in England to be gained through an entirely informal arrangement, in striking contrast to those that the United States made elsewhere in the world. Once the deal had been struck between these two former comrades, construction work commenced without delay, and secret nuclear installations were fully operational within two years.

Chapter 2, 'Deploying to England', explains how, with the infrastructure for an atomic strike in place, a series of visits and deployments by American aircraft followed to build up an accepted presence and rehearse operational procedures. These visits predated the Berlin crisis of 1948, when the much publicised arrival of three groups of B-29s on the East Anglian bases was taken as a token of American determination to defend Europe. Seen as nuclear sabre-rattling, the Berlin deployment was nuclear bluff. That infrastructure was, however, put to use in the next major crisis in the summer of 1950, and enabled the deployment of atomic-capable aircraft, along with 30 Nagasaki-type 'Fat Man' bombs, lacking only their fissionable cores, to English bases soon after the outbreak of the Korean conflict. If the order to attack had been given, those last vital components would have been released for immediate transport to Britain.

Chapter 3, 'Here to stay?', recounts the tangle of logistical, financial and political considerations that materialised as the USAF began to bed down in England. The nature of that presence was shrouded in ambiguity. Was it to be indefinite, or even permanent, as senior American officers envisaged? Or was it just a short-term expedient, as British ministers and officials seemed to hope? In its forceful push to develop new bases for a continuously expanding presence, the United States seemed to provide the answer to that question. From the outset, the East Anglian airfields, close to the North Sea and lying outside the coverage of Britain's south-east oriented air defence screen, were judged vulnerable to pre-emptive strikes by the Soviet Air Force. Additional locations were required, and through the early 1950s the US developed and further improved a number of centrally located air bases primarily in

the south Midlands, bringing them up to modern heavy bomber standards, with secure storage for nuclear weapons. In so doing, the financial arrangements for these developments tilted away from equal partnership towards American funding as the UK struggled to pay its way in the world and chose to rely on American largesse.

In order to achieve the formidable atomic 'force-in-being' that Strategic Air Command became, aircrews and ground crews alike were pushed to the limit. Chapter 4, 'Rehearsing for war', shows how combat training and rehearsals, already intense in the period of the initial deployments, became progressively more so as one generation of bomber aircraft gave way to the next. Such was the rapid pace of technical change in the machinery of warfare that SAC's B-29s, underpowered and far from reliable, were soon supplemented, and then largely replaced, by the B-50, a much improved variant of the earlier aircraft. A qualitative leap was made in 1953 with the deployment of SAC's new swept-wing high-speed B-47s, the last medium bomber to be regularly rotated through the English air bases. Deployed in large numbers, and with an increasing proportion poised in alert posture – 'cocked' in SAC's unequivocal terminology – the B-47 represented the fullest expression of the American strategic presence in Britain. It was complemented by the decision in 1956 to deploy Thor missiles across the eastern counties of England. While the original deployments of the big, slow, propeller-driven bombers had not excited much alarm amongst the British public, the public tolerance of the USAF presence now began to fray. The expansion of that presence across yet more airfields in middle England, the arrival in large numbers of the B-47s and the supposition that they would be carrying the new thermonuclear weapons fuelled the fear of a nuclear accident, resurgent anti-Americanism and the emergence, at the margins of public opinion, of a movement of nuclear resistance.

Public attitudes apart, Chapter 5, 'Difficult relations', deals with the relationships between American and British officers and officials through this period. For some on both sides, the strain of managing the relationship was at times all too apparent. At no point were British concerns about American intentions entirely assuaged. At no point were American concerns about British reliability and commitment entirely absent. The resident command in England was the 3rd Air Division (later reconstituted as the 3rd Air Force), an offshoot of US Air Forces in Europe (USAFE). As the local command, the 3rd Air Division, and its European-based parent, placed a premium on diplomacy and good relations with the hosts. Back in Omaha, SAC commanders saw the relationship with the British as too cosy, insufficiently 'aggressive' and as a continuous impediment to maximising the effectiveness of their

strike force. When the 7th Air Division was created within SAC as its British-based operational arm, two major USAF divisions entered a period of what might be kindly described as creative tension. And at 7th Air Division and SAC headquarters alike, impatience with the 3rd Air Force's carefully nuanced diplomacy spilled over into irritation with the British hosts themselves.

The issue of survivability loomed large in the minds of both British and American officials and officers. Chapter 6, 'A vulnerable island', recounts the losing struggle to frame plans and deploy forces in a way that would enable the British Isles to be sustained as a forward base in time of war. The Soviet acquisition of an atomic capability, coupled with the rapid growth of the Soviet Air Force's medium and long-range bomber regiments put a premium on securing USAF bases from attack. Had an attack come, it would have been catastrophic. Highly secret assessments, made both before and subsequent to the development of thermonuclear weapons, established that few would survive and Britain would become, in the antiseptic language of war planning, 'untenable' as a base. Unsurprisingly, doubts emerged as to whether the UK would be prepared to accept the risk of annihilation, or instead renege on the alliance. Even before that point, there was little indication that the British government was prepared to commit its own resources to effective defence against such a threat.

Chapter 7, 'Defending the strategic force', shows that while such a commitment to shared defence was implicit in the acceptance of the US nuclear presence, what Britain was prepared to provide fell well short of the need. The thinly stretched and obsolete RAF air defences required increasing supplementation by American fighter aircraft. British inability to meet the costs of defence ensured that outdated and fragmented radar cover could not be improved. And, the possible vulnerability of SAC bases to sabotage tended to be discounted by British officials. So sanguine was the 1945–50 Labour government about the Soviet threat that it chose to grant export licences for what were then state-of-the-art jet engines to the Soviet Union. Insouciant in the face of American protests, Britain provided the means to power the MIG-15 fighter and the fast IL-28 light bomber, soon to be the principal threat to the UK air bases. USAF officers saw building up the Soviet Air Force while depriving RAF Fighter Command of the best equipment as worse than an abdication of responsibility. Yet British governments, unlike their RAF commanders, continued to rest easy about the air defence of the UK. When the severity of the threat came eventually to be fully grasped in Whitehall, the response was to accept that the British Isles were essentially undefendable, that fighter

defences squandered scarce resources, and that reliance could be put only on nuclear deterrence.

British political perceptions of the importance of the American strategic presence were entangled with the UK's own nuclear aspirations, as explained in Chapter 8, 'Towards atomic partnership'. Once the UK began to emerge as a nuclear power in its own right, what had begun as an informal basing arrangement eventually matured into a wider, if still unequal, partnership between SAC and RAF Bomber Command. Successive British governments pushed ahead in pursuit of atomic independence through their own programmes for civil energy and atomic weapons. Their determination to establish nuclear independence was pursued doggedly in the teeth of American resistance to what was seen as a dangerous – because strategically vulnerable – proliferation. American policy was to try to dissuade the British from this development while offering incentives to deeper cooperation through at first tentative, and then increasingly firm, offers to supply American atomic weapons to the RAF. The culmination of this twin-track bargaining was something of a British triumph, with the success of the domestic atomic bomb, and the later thermonuclear programme, prompting the resumption of Anglo-American cooperation.

As Chapter 9, 'Borrowing the bomb', shows, providing American weapons to the RAF bridged the gap between Britain's nuclear aspirations and achievement of full operational status as a nuclear power. The weapon supply programme, though, had a long gestation period, bedevilled as it was by implementation problems and coloured by elements of injured pride. For, however deeply valued, there was a sting in the tail of this arrangement. While it was a key element in what British ministers described proudly, if ambiguously, as *inter*-dependence, making American nuclear weapons available to the British was not unconditional. The USAF and the Armed Forces Special Weapons Project (AFSWP) retained control of the hardware and set their own security conditions. British aircraft carrying American weapons were assigned to NATO, and fell under the control not of British ministers, but of SACEUR, the Supreme Allied Commander.

The frustration of being kept in the dark about US war plans had tantalised British officials and the Air Staff throughout the early Cold War years. They had foregone the opportunity to forge an agreement about the use of the air bases at the time of the Spaatz–Tedder agreement. Chapter 10, 'Consenting to nuclear war', documents the long struggle to rectify the situation and regain influence over an American decision to launch a nuclear strike upon the Soviet Union from British soil. Agreement to share the decision to put such a plan into operation

and so commit the UK to war was not easily secured. While British governments insisted that they should consent to the use of the bases before US forces went nuclear, this aspiration to consent had to be reduced, in the face of American stonewalling, to mere consultation, perhaps to no more than a right to be informed. It took more than a decade of diplomacy before a concordat was reached and the British could claim to be accepted partners in deterrence – doomed, of course, should deterrence fail and war come.

There was really only one way of squaring this fatal circle, and that was through full partnership in any such action. Chapter 11, 'Strike hard, strike sure … and strike together?', narrates the emergence of joint operations between the two strategic forces, SAC and RAF Bomber Command. That partnership, once established, provided a degree of shared knowledge and interdependence. While rift and reconciliation had coloured the political relations of the two powers during and after Suez, fraternal relations at the military level continued uninterrupted through that period as the two air forces moved progressively towards operational integration. It found most dramatic expression in the joint USAF/RAF control of the Thor missiles placed in the UK in 1960, but by that time collaboration between the two air forces extended to joint strike planning and shared targeting, a closeness that required acceptance of RAF operational integration into the US war plans. Collaboration came close to being tested during that apogee of Soviet nuclear brinkmanship, the Cuban missile crisis. While the decision to launch their nuclear forces would have rested separately with the two governments, there can be no doubt that their two air forces, with their targets pre-allocated and their routeing pre-agreed, would have struck together, realising at last the earliest aspirations of Anglo-American partnership in the atomic age.

Such is the sketch of the events covered in the chapters which follow. I am under no illusion that they will be viewed very differently by different readers. Those who harbour prejudices about American global strategy will think them confirmed by that country's urgent and purposive approach to the exploitation of Europe's 'offshore aircraft carrier'. For their part, American readers might be surprised by the confusions and contradictions of British decision-makers in the early Cold War years, by their unreadiness to engage with the facts of their own geo-political location. Consider the contrast: in their preparedness to contain Soviet expansionism through encirclement with strategic bases, the United States demonstrated unambiguous resolve and clear values. While accepting a part in this global role, the British response was nonetheless characterised by equivocation in its expression, by ambiguity of purpose

and by ambivalent impulses towards both ally and adversary. In that respect, the 'special relationship' was profoundly asymmetrical.

Note

1 J.G. Ballard, *The Kindness of Women*, London, HarperCollins, 1991, p. 71.