

OPERATION BAHARI

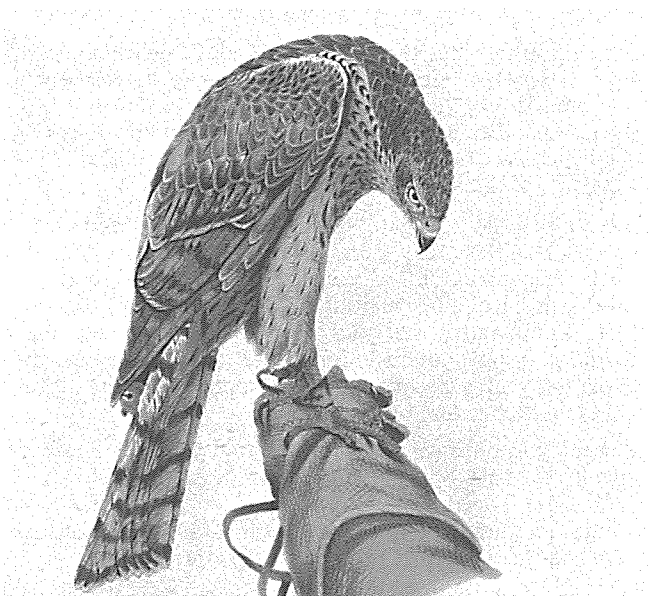
By MARTIN COLE



The Falcon



The Bustard



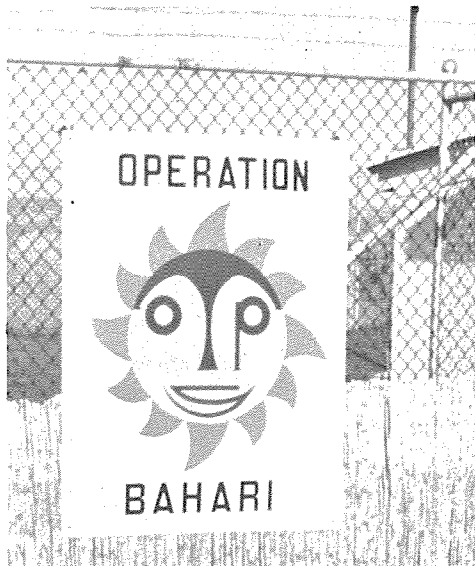
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At Torrejon the falcons are kept within a compound with lawn and individual perches a foot or so high, each in a shallow pool of water. Major Tom Lewter shows a falcon, one leg secured to the perch by a short strap, allowing freedom to the pool. On the right, TSgt Herrera, the falconer, holds "Marina," one of six at the Base, with heavy glove and strap. The falcon remains leashed and with hood in place over the beak until released for the hunt.

In a routine refueling mission for the crew of one Strategic Air Command KC-135 taking off in October 1967 from Torrejon AB, the huge Stratotanker strained under a full load and full power, lifted finally, and began a gentle climbing turn for an appointed rendezvous somewhere over Spain. There was the usual tenseness of takeoff mirrored in the pilots' faces, and now that they were getting airborne the tenseness would vanish, and smiles would replace the looks of concentration. The giant wheel trucks were being tucked into wing wells, the vast undeveloped terrain around Torrejon, looking much like western America, was moving their way on a slow but endless conveyor belt. Up to that moment it was a normal takeoff, a hundred similar takeoffs flown before. With wheels locking up and the gaining of altitude, the situation was, according to fly-boy jargon, "Money in the bank."

Then — For the briefest instant the sunlight into the cockpit was blocked with fluttering brown-and-white missiles; a second later the sun was there again but seen through a blood-spattered windscreen, and peeling off the plane's forward skin were bits and pieces of birds. The 'Little Bustards' had struck again.

The Little Bustards — the scourge of the Torrejon runways had struck before and done serious damage to aircraft, and there had been numerous near misses, all of which the Stratotanker pilots knew, but they were not thinking of those incidents just then, what with power dropping off in two engines. With plenty of sweat and prayers, they managed to bring the big tanker back for a safe landing. The story had a happy ending, but it could well have been otherwise.



The damage to the tanker was to cost the taxpayers \$80,000 for repairs. But now the jeopardy of takeoffs and landing, not only to aircraft but to the lives involved, convinced the Sixteenth Air Force the hazard could no longer be ignored, and something would have to be done. The Wing Safety Officer began a study of ways and means to eliminate the danger. The problem as verified, was that the Torrejon area was a natural nesting habitat for the duck-like birds, and that their estimated number, although varying with the seasons, ranged from 10,000 to 30,000 inhabitants. Moreover, they often flew in flocks of 500 or more, and aircraft held no terror for them. A common sight at Torrejon AB was seeing a bustard 'glued' to the cement runway, preening itself with undisturbed nonchalance beneath the wing of a jet warming up. They were completely oblivious to the deafening noise.

Wild schemes of elimination were considered, and as quickly rejected. Schemes such as using poison, and the use of the M-79 grenade launcher — actually one test was made with the M-79. Fortunately, from an ecological standpoint, sober thinking prevailed, for no one wanted to bring about the extinction of the Little Bustards. What was needed was a solution whereby the birds would be asked to leave, with the threat of dire consequences if they didn't. The order was a big one. Simply put, how do you get such a message across to the feathered creatures.

Luckily, a tailor-made solution was available and from no farther away than Dr. Felix Rodriques de la Fuente, a well-known Spanish naturalist and authority in falconry. He pointed out that the presence of active falconry would in effect deter the bustards from hanging around the Torrejon runways. Declared Dr. de la Fuente, "Bustards have been the natural prey of falcons since both evolved on earth, and the former will not remain long in areas frequented by the peregrines."

Dr. de la Fuente's interest prompted the USAF officials to turn to him. Negotiations were begun, and a contract was signed April 1, 1968. The project would be known as Operation Bahari. (Bahari is Spanish for falcon). Under the terms of agreement, Dr. de la Fuente would provide Peregrine falcons (the same species used by the Air Force Academy as their official mascot), hire a full-time professional falconer and assistant, who, under Dr. de la Fuente's guidance would train and care for the falcons. The Air Force's responsibility included the furnishing of a falcon lair on the air base, and one Air Force NCO to be trained as a falcon handler. By rotating the NCO's, this would give the Air Force the trained airmen it would need should it decide eventually to expand the program elsewhere, or take over the operation in Spain after the current arrangement terminated.

During the first four months of the contract, Dr. de la Fuente and helpers captured ten young falcons in the mountains of Spain, and began their training. This training period lasted until August 1968 when the falcons were assigned to aggressive operations. Aggressive flights continued on a daily basis up to the present time.

The method of operation Dr. de la Fuente employed was little changed, if any, to methods used during the Golden Age of Falconry that prevailed between the years 1100 and 1600 throughout Europe. Hawking then was the sport of kings and noblemen, when falcons went to battle and attended court, when falcons as royal gifts were more prized than jewels. Falcons and hounds made inseparable companions for men of high birth, and it was the use of hounds as hunting companions that made the falcon so effective.

The art of falconry then, as now, is a step by step interplay between hunter and the hunted. With the bird dog at his heels, the hunter removes the leather hood from the falcon's head, then releases it with an upward swing of arm. The falcon, in long circling sweeps, immediately gains an altitude of at least five hundred feet. Height is essential for the falcon, who with speed and force of momentum in its dive, kills or badly injures the prey

on contact. With eyes probably eight times keener than a human, the falcon keeps pace overhead as the hunter and dog approach the ground-covering that harbors the quarry. Where large flocks are flushed, such as Little Bustards, there are a thousand puffs of dust as they streak from the hidden sanctuary of tall grass.

As the frantic bustards arise on whirling wings, the sharpeyed falcon peels out of its holding pattern and with wings partially folded streaks down like an F-4 Phantom hitting a bridge. With eyes bright and beak slightly ajar, talons rigid and tight against the breastbone, and nail-like spurs protruded, sharp and poised, the wind rushes past the wings as the diving speed builds up; yet hardly a feather is ruffled.

Having selected a luckless bird before peeling off, the distance closes, faster and faster, until — contact! A flutter of brown-and-white feathers scatter in the wind as the falcon's talons clench tight; then holding the dying bird in a tight grip, the falcon brings it to ground.

"Diving from 500 feet up, they're two pounds of lightning death to any quarry they hit," declares SSgt Roy Crawford, who served an NCO apprenticeship. Pointing to scars imprinted in the thick leather glove a handler wears, he emphasized the razor sharpness of a falcon's claws. "When in a dive," Crawford added, "the falcon is capable of killing almost anything that flies."

As predicted by Dr. de la Fuente, the instinct for self-preservation reduced the Little Bustard population around Torrejon AB to a point of being negligible. This was especially evident by a comparison of bird sightings before and after Operation Bahari was put into effect. Comparative statistics show that there were nine strike incidents against aircraft during the year preceding the Bahari Program, and subsequent to the implementation of the program there have been no bird strikes.

It would seem that once the areas was cleared of Little Bustards the falcons would have outlived their usefulness, but such is not the case. Because Torrejon has long been a nesting habitat, the bustards have a natural inclination to return, and there are always just enough returnees to make hunting a daily operation.

The falcon operation widened its range of activity until the hunters were working a circle of forty miles radius. Dr. de la Fuente, reflecting on Operation Bahari, stated that, "Today, we can affirm with absolute confidence that any airport that can be dangerous for aircraft because of the flocks of Little Bustards invading its runways can be completely emptied in just a few weeks if a good team of falconers carries out a biologic control operation."

TSgt Demacio Herrera, an airman working with the falcon team, offered this example. "We had a sighting of 27 bustards some distance away from the base. We took the falcons there, got one, the others left, and haven't come back."

The success of Operation Bahari spread. After a full report was sent to the Pentagon, the idea was adopted in England where they too had a bird-strike problem. The use of falcons was employed at six bases there. On a world-wide basis in the 1960's to early 1970's, some sixty pilots were killed from bird-strikes. The experiences at Torrejon AB bore out the need for a humane method of control where wild fowl problems prevail.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

1. Leonberger, MSgt Loren B. "The Taloned Threat," *Airman Magazine*, February 1972.
2. 401st T.F.W., USAF. "Operation Bahari Bird Control Program, Torrejon Air Base, Spain, Through Falconry," undated.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Retired reserve officer Martin Cole spent five days at Torrejon Air Base during a trip to Europe in 1972 and while there Major Tom Lewter, USAF Operations Officer, acquainted Cole with the Operation Bahari program. Cole's story is based on first hand observation, and the official report furnished him by Major Lewter.