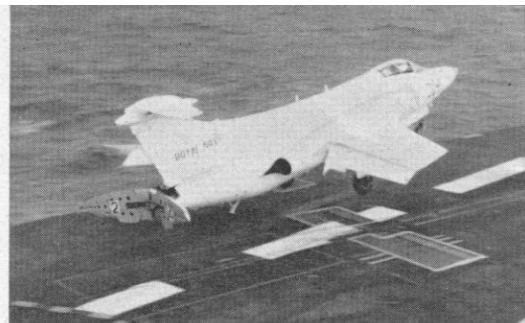


OOOF!—A 736 Squadron Buccaneer S.1 touches down prior to bolting on a D.L.P.



BOLTER—Another Buccaneer S.1 of No. 736 going round again after a D.L.P.

A visit to H.M.S. "Ark Royal"

by J. D. R. Rawlings

Author's photos

H.M.S. *Ark Royal* HAS just taken up station East of Suez, relieving H.M.S. *Victorious* whose squadrons have been busily engaged in and around Malaysia. But before this "Ark" spent seven months in the Home Fleet, having been recommissioned in November last year. With the Navy's carrier fleet so stretched these days, it is unusual for any one carrier to stay so long in Home waters, and we accordingly took the opportunity, with the kind co-operation of the Ministry of Defence (Navy) and the Captain, officers and men of *Ark Royal*, of re-acquainting ourselves with current carrier practice.

The ship had just had a short refit, during which time no major modifications were undertaken, the vessel being sufficiently up-to-date for the commission envisaged. The first task of any carrier upon commissioning is to work up its own Air Group to top operational pitch; although each unit will have been working up at its shore base, it is still necessary to translate this experience to the carrier deck and to get the different units working together as a team. By the time of our visit things were working very smoothly and a high intensity of operations could be performed.

Ark Royal's Air Group includes No. 803

POINT OF NO RETURN—An 849 Squadron Gannet AEW.3 goes off the end, past parked Scimitars and a Sea Vixen

Squadron with Scimitars, which she had taken aboard from Lossiemouth for strike duties. This is the Scimitar's operational swan-song, being the last operational commission in which it will be used in a strike role. It is fitting that No. 803 should be the squadron to undertake this task as it was the first operational Scimitar squadron, going aboard *Victorious* in September 1958. For defence, and additional strike duties, No. 890 Squadron has returned to *Ark Royal*, having served in her on a previous commission; No. 890 still flies Sea Vixen FAW.1s at present. The anti-submarine side is taken care of by No. 815 Squadron with Wessex HAS.1s, but this squadron was still ashore at Culdrose at the time of our visit. In common with all fleet carriers, "Ark" also had a flight of Gannet AEW.3s aboard to give extensive early-warning radar coverage. In this case it was No. 849 Squadron, "C" Flight, whose aircraft now are adorned with a gorgeous zebra on the fins. Lastly, there is the Ship's Flight of two Westland Whirlwind HAS.7s and, while in Home waters, a courier Gannet AS.4.

Deck landing practice

The co-ordination of all these units into a closely working whole is not accomplished overnight and, as mentioned, this is the first call on the ship's time and energy. But having a carrier in Home waters provokes many others to make the utmost use of her presence. Thus, as recorded in last month's issue, deck-landing and catapult trials have been flown with Buccaneer S.2s as part of their development programme. In addition,

the Royal Navy's shore training establishments make extensive use of the carrier for D.L.P.s (Deck Landing Practices) and these have to be fitted in with the ship's own operational training programme. During our stay aboard, with the ship operating off South Wales, many sorties were flown by Gannets of the H.Q. Flight of No. 849 Squadron at Brawdy and by Buccaneer S.1s from No. 736 Squadron, Lossiemouth, operating from Yeovilton for the purpose of the exercise.

Flying programme

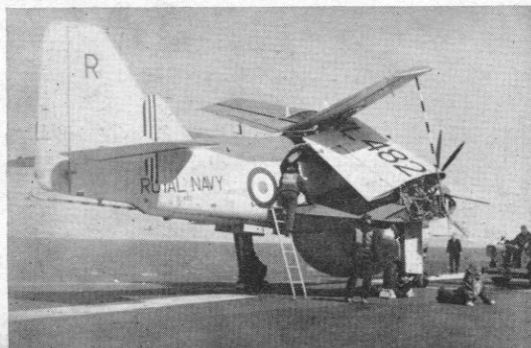
A flying day aboard a carrier is a long one, with Flying Stations commencing at 06.00 hrs. and the first flying beginning an hour later. From then on there is little let-up, although there may be an occasional half-hour break due to positioning with the land-based aircraft. Also, of course, occasional short breaks are needed for refuelling as this could not be done with flying in progress. To illustrate this we record the proceedings for an early afternoon during our visit:

- 13.50 Launch 1 Whirlwind (Plane Guard)
- 14.00 Launch 2 Gannet, 1 COD, 4 Vixen; subsequently recover Whirlwind
- 15.00 Launch 1 Whirlwind
- 15.10 Launch 3 Scimitar
- 15.15 Recover 1 COD, 4 Vixen (some opting Bolter circuits prior landing)
- 15.50 Launch 4 Scimitar, 1 Gannet
- 16.00 Recover 2 Gannet, 4 Scimitar (some Bolter circuits); subsequently recover Whirlwind

This was the pattern until the last two Gannets and Scimitars had been recovered at 21.00 hrs. Then the hangar crews began the task of preparing the aircraft for next morning's 06.00 hrs. Flying Stations.

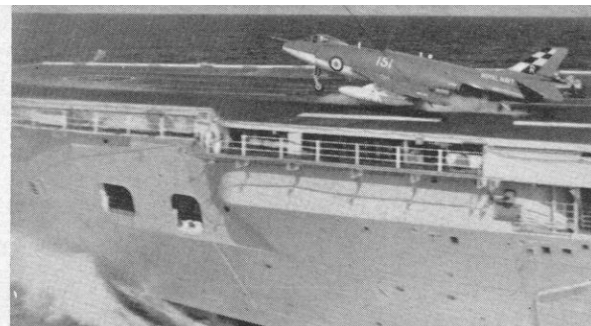
So, when considered in one piece, *Ark Royal* and other R.N. carriers each add up to neat little independent air forces, always

ZEBROID—Gannet AEW.3 (LEFT) of 849 "C" Flight with zebra on fin and black and white stripes. HOME AND DRY—An 803 Squadron Scimitar (RIGHT)





HERE COMES THE MAIL—The COD Gannet arrives from St. Mawgan with the morning mail, newspapers and a couple of V.I.P.s



ON HIS WAY—An 803 Squad 01 Scimitar starts its push off the port catapult

mobile, able to appear at the right spot at the right time. One of the advantages of the carrier from the strategic point of view is that it can be deployed in this way and, with a number of such carriers, maximum flexibility can be employed throughout the world. At present Britain's carrier strength comprises the fleet carriers *Ark Royal*, *Eagle* and *Victorious*, backed up by the smaller *Centaur* and *Hermes*, and the two commando carriers *Albion* and *Bulwark*. However, of these ships, only *Eagle* and *Victorious* will be able to take the next generation of aircraft ordered for the fleet—viz., the Phantom—and *Victorious* is already nearing the end of her operational life. In the 1970s the Royal Navy will have a new 50,000-ton carrier, but this one ship will not greatly offset the loss of flexibility which the Fleet Air Arm has brought upon itself by ordering the Phantom. When one tries to look ahead at the prospective carrier needs in the years ahead two factors stand out: first, the likelihood of increasing numbers of brushfire wars in different parts of the world; and secondly the emergence of China as a nuclear power, which will inevitably bring the very real prospect of limited or all-out nuclear war to the forefront again.

Smaller carriers

In the first case what one would feel was needed was surely more rather than fewer carriers, in order to cope with varying numbers of incidents in different corners of the globe. In most cases the brushfire war does not require, or make use of, the full technical niceties provided in the newer bigger carriers, and generally speaking the smaller carrier (*Centaur*, *Hermes*) would seem still to be more than sufficient for this task. In the second case, that of nuclear war, then putting all one's eggs into one or two large and vulnerable baskets makes the "Opposition's" task of completely eliminating the Fleet Air Arm much simpler.

One cannot help feeling that the Fleet



INTO WIND—Ark Royal turns to launch a strike. The carrier is obviously vulnerable when launching or recovering; some modern submarines can travel faster submerged than the carrier can on the surface

Air Arm has taken a vitally wrong step in going for fewer and bigger carriers and more sophisticated types of aircraft aboard them, at the same time rejecting the possibility of VTOL. Given, say, two or three smaller carriers for each of the present fleet carriers and equipping them with A.S.W. helicopters, VTOL strike aircraft and VTOL interceptors, the Fleet Air Arm would be able to sail into the 1970s ready for either type of challenge with a flexible fleet dotted around the world, with always at least one carrier within easy reach of any trouble spot, and the total carrier force much less vulnerable to enemy attack by diversity of numbers. Individual carriers would also be less vulnerable because, being

equipped with VTOL aircraft, the only time the ship would have to turn into wind and steam a steady course would be when launching and recovering the single early-warning Gannet—a vastly different problem for an attacking submarine from that posed today when, as we saw during our visit to *Ark Royal*, the carrier may be committed to steering a steady heading for as much as half an hour at a time in order to launch or recover a full-blown strike and escort.

Although one would like to be proved wrong, one cannot help but feel that by taking the decisions it has the Fleet Air Arm has, in effect, signed its own death warrant.

PLANE GUARD—Whirlwind about to let down level with "Ark's" stern before other aircraft land on

RECOVER ONE VIXEN—An 890 Squadron Sea Vixen FAW.1 nicely set to take the first wire

