

Bulwark's New Air Group

A visit is paid to HMS Bulwark operating off the Scottish coast during her first Amphibious Work-up.

Bulwark recently returned to the Fleet and effectively doubled Britain's anti-submarine carrier (CVS) force overnight. Like her near-sister-ship, HMS *Hermes*, she is primarily engaged in contributing to the NATO Maritime Force's deterrent anti-submarine group, but both warships still retain their Amphibious warfare capability (LPH). *Bulwark's* Air Group is made up of Sea King HAS2s and Wessex HU5s, the proportion depending upon her role at the time.

However, *Bulwark* was not always a helicopter carrier. When she commissioned in October 1954, she was one of the 'Centaur' Class of Light Fleet fixed wing carriers and her first deck landing was made in February 1955 by an Avenger from 703 NAS. The next year saw *Bulwark* engaged in the Suez Operation when her Air Group was kept busy flying support missions for the forces ashore. In 1959, the ship was taken in hand by the dockyard at Portsmouth for conversion into the first RN Commando Carrier. This conversion meant the removal of the catapults, arrestor gear, mirror landing sights, etc. and the updating of the accommodation and helicopter facilities. After recommissioning in 1960, *Bulwark* then spent the next sixteen years in deployments to the trouble spots of the world with police actions in Aden, Borneo and East Africa. In later years the ship was assigned to a NATO role before being put into a state of Preservation by Operation at Portsmouth. In fact, this was something of a reprieve (see *Airfix Magazine*, April 1976) because it had been originally believed that the ship would go into Reserve. In January 1978 it was decided to bring *Bulwark* forward for operational service. *Bulwark* was recommissioned in February 1979 and completed her work-up and Operational Readiness Inspection in late May.

For the Amphibious work-up, 45 Royal

Marine Commando was embarked by helicopter from their depot at Arbroath and flown out to *Bulwark* by 846 Squadron with 826's Sea Kings providing the heavy lift capability for the 1 tonne Landrovers and 105 mm Light Guns. Also embarked were three Westland Gazelle AH1 light liaison helicopters from the Commando Brigade Air Squadron detachment at Arbroath (see *Airfix Annual for Aircraft Modellers 1978*).

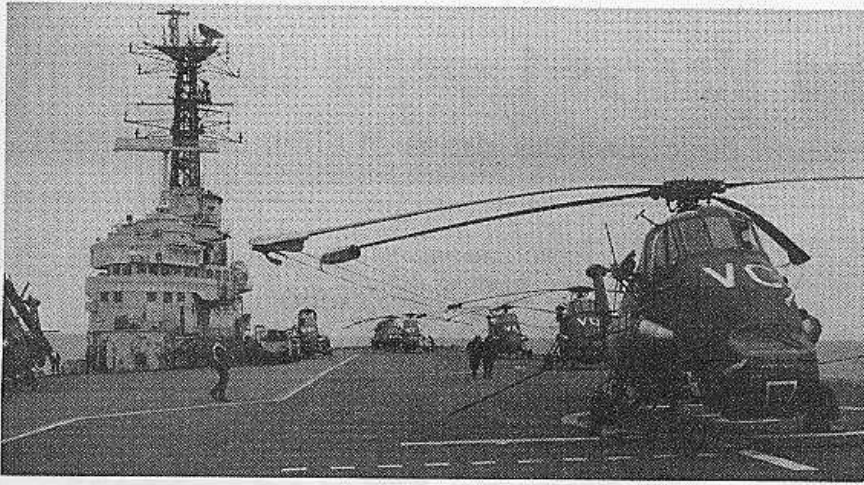
Various tasks have had to be reassessed now that more space has been given over to *Bulwark's* anti-submarine role, as well as retaining the Sea Kings for self-defence during Amphibious operations. The marines, who were new to *Bulwark*, had to be taught the 'route', the way from their messes to the

helicopter embarkation point, where white and red surcoated marshals were waiting to guide the 'sticks' to their respective aircraft. The most convenient way to bring men up on to the flight deck is via the aircraft lifts from the hangar deck below — quite a dramatic sight! Vehicles are also marshalled on the flight deck for despatch ashore and to assist this the flight deck is divided into two longitudinally. The flying area is coloured dark grey whilst the park on the starboard side is painted green. There are eight spots for the helicopters, the larger Sea Kings have necessitated the loss of one spot from the original Commando deck layout.

The Air Group currently consists of two naval helicopter squadrons: 826 Squadron

Above: Sea Kings of '825 Naval Air Squadron' — composite 824 and 826 — are embarked as *Bulwark* passes under the Forth Bridge on passage to Rosyth after the JMC, (HMS *Bulwark*). **Below:** A visiting 'yellow peril' from the Royal Air Force at the former Naval Air Station at Lossiemouth in the shape of a Sea King HAR3 of 202 Squadron, RAF. Not unlike the Navy's variant, this handsome machine was carrying out deck landing practice in May (HMS *Bulwark*).





Left: Bulwark's flight deck looking aft. The Wessex HU5s of 846 NAS are ranged on the operational area of the flight deck. Note the lashings and the starter line plugged into helicopter VC in the foreground.

was originally embarked with Sea Kings in HMS *Eagle*, then in HMS *Tiger*, which, as it happens, was the previous command of Captain George Brewer, Royal Navy, *Bulwark's* new commanding officer. Although very much engaged in the anti-submarine role, the squadron is also highly trained in Commando lift and as has already been mentioned, can negotiate heavy load lifting as well as marine assaults. The aircraft are painted matt blue-grey with matt dark grey interiors and gloss white wheel wells. The squadron badge is a seahorse holding a down turned trident and is carried on both sides of the aircraft's cabin. As the aircraft embarked are Mark 2s with anti-FOD guards, the seahorse has recently been put on the port side of this guard. The tail code is of course B but the individual aircraft codes have remained the same as when the squadron was aboard *Tiger*. The best source of decals for an 826 Squadron aircraft is Modeldecal Set 49 which carries the markings for XZ571:140 except for the B tail code. The provision of an anti-FOD guard is possible using plasticard and with reference to photographs of the subject.

846 NAS is normally based at RNAS Yeovilton and boasts about a dozen green

painted Wessex HU5 helicopters with the squadron fuselage code of V. The squadron's St George and Dragon badge is worn on the cowling a little aft and below the main rotor, and the 'Junglies' now display the B tail code. 846's tasks beside troop carrying and the lifting of light underslung loads includes armed close support, with air to surface missiles plus cabin mounted guns, and medical evacuation. 846 Squadron will be re-equipped with some Sea King HU4s in 1980 for heavy-lifting.

During a recent Joint Maritime Course, *Bulwark*, then in the CVS role, augmented

her Sea Kings with those from *Ark Royal's* old squadron, 824. The resulting air group called themselves '825 Squadron'!

The ship also carries four LCV(P) landing craft to transport men and supplies ashore and these craft, stored on davits aft, are manned by Royal Marines of the 7th Assault Squadron, permanently attached to the ship.

Bulwark's future is assured until at least *Hermes'* first Sea Harrier deployment in early 1980s. We shall be seeing *Bulwark's* Air Group feature more and more on the Naval scene.

Representative aircraft

XZ571:140/B	Sea King HAS2	826 NAS
XV655:142/B	Sea King HAS2	826 NAS
XT456:VA/B	Wessex HU5	846 NAS
XS513:VP/B	Wessex HU5	846 NAS
XX411:X	Gazelle AH1	3 CBAS (45 RMC)

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Right: All set to go up on the after lift is one of the retro-fitted Mark 2 Sea Kings. To save space and hence allow more helicopters to be carried, the Sea King, like the Wessex has folding rotors and tail unit. **Below:** Flying operations on the flight deck of *Bulwark* as she steams off the Scottish Coast. So far, during her 'new' career, *Bulwark* has managed to complete all her tasks on or even before time (*HMS Bulwark*).

