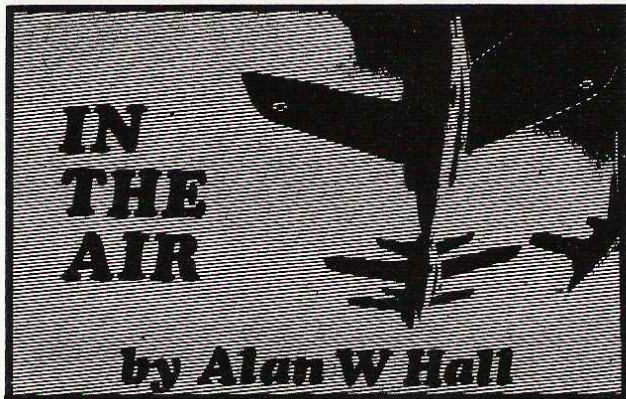


BY the time you read this, HMS *Eagle* should be on her way to the Far East for another commission protecting British interests in that part of the world. Before the carrier, the Royal Navy's largest, finally left home waters she took on her air group and spent several weeks working up to full operational efficiency. I was able to see part of these trials, including the arrival of the first aircraft on board.

Arriving at Devonport dockyard on a very wet and overcast morning I joined big 'E' before she sailed. HMS *Ark Royal*, at present undergoing an extensive refit, was berthed close by and like *Eagle* will be capable of taking on board the first of the Navy's Phantoms when these become available in the not too distant future.

Leaving harbour was accompanied by the full ceremonial occasioned by this time honoured tradition. The Royal Marine band, naval guard of honour and the firing of a salute accompanied the slow and cautious route taken by the big ship as she negotiated, with the help of tugs, the narrows round Plymouth Hoe. Once out into Plymouth Sound and past the breakwater the ceremonial gave way to a flight deck full of aircraft handlers striking down the three Sea Vixens on board and preparing the ship to take on the helicopters from RNAS Culdrose.

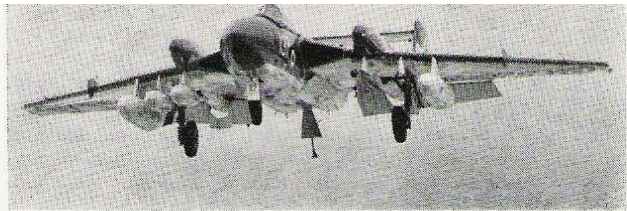


HMS *Eagle's* air group consists of three squadrons and a flight. The fixed-wing element, No 800 Squadron with Buccaneer 2s, No 899's Sea Vixens and the Gannet AEW3s from 849 Squadron could not be taken on board until the Wessex HAS1s of 820 Squadron had arrived to provide the essential plane-guard aircraft which is always present when fixed-wing aircraft are flying.

The helicopters arrived shortly after leaving Plymouth. The whole squadron flying in close formation weaved around the ship, their blue and yellow anti-submarine colour schemes merging with the grey of the English Channel as they went further away. Once on board, their rotors were folded and they disappeared below decks on one of the two lifts.

The carrier had to find some better weather before the rest of the air group could come aboard. Steaming at 25 knots she headed out from Plymouth until later in the afternoon, with clearing skies, the first Sea Vixens of 899 screamed low overhead and turned to make the first landings of fixed wing aircraft in the ship's new commission.

Eagle's aircraft were widely dispersed at shore stations throughout the country whilst the ship was undergoing her refit. The Buccaneers were at Lossiemouth, the Sea Vixens at Boscombe Down and the Gannets at Brawdy. To join all these together, provide suitable weather both at the departure point and over the carrier, and make sure that the ship was prepared to take them on board was a major opera-



Top: Hook trailing, a 899 Sqn Sea Vixen comes in over the round down to make a perfect touch-down. **Above:** *Eagle's* recent major refit has much altered her from her original appearance. Note the new steam catapult set in the angled deck, the prominent Type 984 '3-D' radar nacelle, and the enlarged island. Aircraft are parked forward in 'Fly One' to leave angled deck clear for next landing.

tion. Diversionary airfields were set up at Brawdy and St Mawgan and were used by one or two aircraft which, for one reason or another, could not join the ship.

To photograph the arrival of the aircraft on board I took up a position behind the deck landing sight. It proved to be as close as I ever want to get to the sharp end of a jet aircraft as the wing tips passed close to my left ear accompanied by the most fearsome noise from the twin jets. The Deck Landing Officer told me later that several of the pilots from 899 had not done a live deck landing before, although they were fully proficient at doing the same thing on the simulated deck of a shore station.

Each pilot did several 'bolters' or touch and go landings before making a final touch-down. Deck landing practice has to be followed up religiously by naval pilots and, standing on the edge of the seemingly minute flight deck, the reason for this requirement became only too obvious. Although *Eagle* is over 800 feet long the landing area is just over half of this and Navy pilots have to be able to maintain a constant accuracy in their flying to be able to pick up one of the five deck arrestor wires stretched across

Below: Wessex HAS1 of 820 Squadron touches down.



the narrow confines of the stern.

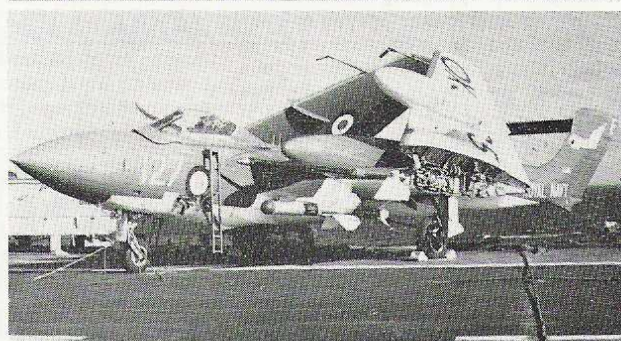
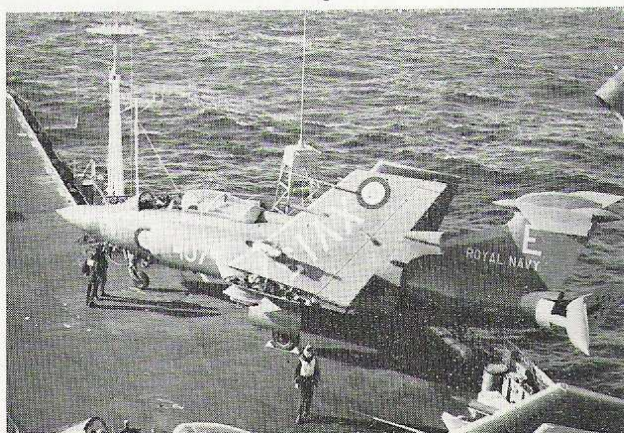
The flying programme on board a carrier starts early and ends late. Pilots think nothing of flying three or maybe four sorties a day. The first aircraft were launched at 07.00 on the following morning and this rate continued until late the same evening when the first night flying took place. A typical launch consisted of four Buccaneers, four Vixen, three Gannets, two Wessex on ASR duties and the plane-guard 'chopper' sitting close to the stern. In between all this the COD Gannet was dispatched to Brawdy with the day's mail and passengers. Aircraft took part in exercises which included air-to-air interceptions for the Vixens, bombing for the Buccaneers and anti-submarine and patrol work for the Gannets and Wessex. Both the Gannets and the Vixens left the immediate area but the Buccaneers stayed to bomb the splash target trailed from the stern of the ship with practice bombs.

The destroyer HMS *Aisne* accompanied *Eagle* for the whole time I was on board. Later in the day she came alongside to take on stores and then exercised 'tow forward' with the carrier. With a Force 4 wind blowing and a choppy sea this was no easy task and whilst the aviators had a rest the destroyer managed to take the carrier, which was twice its own size and several times its displacement in tow. I didn't envy the seamen on the smaller vessel in their task of handling wet lines in a sea which constantly washed the decks. To complete the exercise a fleet replenishment tanker came alongside and fuel was transferred.

When flying resumed I took a spare seat on the plane-guard Wessex and spent an hour watching and photographing the landings and take offs. During the launching operations the Wessex flies close to the ship's side to observe that each aircraft is hooked on to the catapult correctly. It is also in the right position should an aircraft have an engine failure and land in the sea. Similarly during landings the chopper hovers in the seven o'clock position to the carrier's course and the two crewmen watch the aircraft landing and report whether or not the hook is down. One of these two crewmen is a fully equipped and qualified diver. In the event of an aircraft ditching he would leap into the sea and attempt to release trapped aircrew under water.

The day was completed for me by watching the night flying operations from the carrier's talk-down radar station. The controllers marshalled the aircraft from about 20 miles out and a very close landing pattern was maintained. I was surprised at the speed at which aircraft could be recovered in darkness. There was little if any difference between day and night operations as far as this was concerned and the five controllers and two ratings who manned the radar dis-

Below: *Buccaneer 2 of 800 Squadron parked forward of the island. Bofors mount and director, which were sited here when Eagle was built, have been removed to provide extra deck space.*



Top: *Yellow-vested director guides a Buccaneer on to the port catapult, sited in the angled deck. Note emblem of 820 Squadron on Wessex in foreground. Above: Fully-armed Vixen of 899 Squadron ranged on the flight deck ready for a sortie.*

plays were obviously keen and efficient in their work.

After being with the Fleet Air Arm at sea, one is forced to re-echo the question, why are carriers being phased out of active operations in the mid-seventies? Each one of Britain's four carriers, *Ark Royal*, *Hermes*, *Victorious* and *Eagle* are in themselves neat and highly efficient little air forces capable of moving fast at the right time to prevent or quell the many minor conflicts that constantly seem to keep our forces fully occupied. Indonesia, Aden, the Israeli war, Hong Kong are but a few examples of what I mean. The RAF, equally efficient, but with fixed bases cannot hope to provide the same flexibility of operation as the FAA carriers can and yet there seems to be no way of getting the policy makers to see this. If Britain withdraws from Aden and the Far East there will be even more reasons why aircraft carriers should be retained. With what might be hostile nations in time of conflict, Britain will be entirely without any fixed base from which to operate. How could British aircraft reach the west coast of Africa for example without carriers?

Perhaps the fault lies with the Navy itself. By going for the single major carrier which was cancelled in the last Defence White Paper the planners may have signed their own death warrants as far as naval aviation using fixed winged aircraft is concerned. Perhaps a lesson could again be learned from the Israeli war where simple-to-operate types of aircraft licked a totally superior force which surrounded their country. Should not the answer be to go for small carriers using VTOL aircraft such as the Harrier or its derivatives? A smaller unit, costing less, without the addition of the superb computerised equipment now coming into service and operating the 'simple' type of aircraft in the VTOL role, is to my mind the answer.