

Royal Navy Fixed Wing Carrier Operations since 1948.

This Paper provides a brief outline of 18 events, crises, conflicts and deterrence, in which fixed-wing aircraft carriers were deployed in support of UK Government policy since 1948. They show that the availability of First Echelon sea-based tactical aviation adds immensely to the nation's overall deterrent capability. On several occasions no other form of intervention was initially possible. More significant is the inability of potential aggressors to deter the deployment of aircraft carriers into areas supposedly dominated by land-based aircraft. The myth of vulnerability is belied by experience.

Palestine 1948

Aircraft from HMS *Ocean* covered the final evacuation of British forces from Palestine in May 1948. Land-based aircraft had already been evacuated and only carrier-borne naval aircraft were capable of providing the protection required.

Korea 1950-53

HMS *Triumph* joined the USS *Valley Forge* to strike at North Korean targets shortly after N Korea attacked the South in June 1950. The British aircraft carriers *Triumph*, *Theseus*, *Glory* and *Ocean* provided all the UK's tactical strike and fighter operations throughout the 3 years of the war. Land-based air involvement was limited to transport flights into safe airfields and some flying-boat MPA patrols in the open ocean off Japan. Carrier aircraft flew thousands of effective sorties.

Suez 1956

This was a combined assault on Egypt by British and French carrier-borne and land-based aircraft. In the British operations, the RN deployed 3 fixed-wing carriers, *Eagle*, *Albion* and *Bulwark* plus 2 helicopter carriers, *Ocean* and *Theseus*. Because of their ability to gain better position, the strike carriers reacted more quickly to calls for offensive air support than land-based aircraft in distant Cyprus and Malta. Despite only having one-third of the total British strike fighters embarked, RN strike fighters flew two-thirds of the strike sorties and their aircraft spent longer over the target area. Land-based aircraft had long transits from their bases, carried less weapons and could spend little time on task, most of that at high level to conserve fuel.

Levant 1958

US/UK assistance sought to protect Lebanon and (land-locked) Jordan against Iraqi aggression. *Eagle* provided support for airborne and amphibious forces deployed into theatre. RAF transport aircraft flying British troops into Jordan were protected by carrier-borne fighters since land-based fighter bases were too far away for their aircraft to be effective.

Korea 1960

UN forces including an RN carrier deployed to the Yellow Sea on exercises aimed at deterring the North from launching a renewed attack on the South. Deterrence succeeded. There was no land-based air involvement since no land-bases were close enough.

Kuwait 1961

British forces deployed to Kuwait to defend it against threatened Iraqi aggression. HMS *Bulwark* arrived with 42 RM Commando within 24 hours (since good intelligence had put her in the right place) and used her helicopters to deploy and support them. British troops were flown into Kuwait by RAF transport with only what they stood up in – they had to requisition vehicles and wait for RN amphibious shipping to bring in more. Strike carrier HMS *Victorious* took several days to arrive with her battle group from the South China Sea but brought the ‘complete package of power’ that subsequently dominated the area. A single RAF Hunter squadron had deployed to Kuwait from Bahrain but lacked fuel, ammunition, spares and most of all GCI radar coverage other than that provided by *Bulwark*. RAF transport was being used to fly in troops and so none was available to support the Hunters which left once *Victorious* arrived. The need for the RN to support land-based aircraft led to the second commando-carrier, HMS *Albion*, being fitted with better surveillance radar (Type 965).

Confrontation with Indonesia 1963-66

Britain and the Commonwealth supported the Malaysian Government against Indonesian aggression and deployed forces from all 3 Services. The Far East Fleet provided a considerable deterrent against Indonesian escalation and the presence of its strike carriers posed a threat that Indonesia could not counter. Carrier and air group transits of high-visibility international waters such as the Sunda Strait added to their deterrence value. Land-based air could not provide such a visible deterrent.

A decisive role in support of the Royal Marines and Army was played by the Navy's Commando Helicopters flying several thousands of hours operating from *Albion* and *Bulwark* in succession and mostly from Forward Air Bases ashore in unusually demanding conditions over a period of 4-5 years.

The Air Force had a presence of Whirlwind and Belvedere helicopters and Twin Pioneers. But the RAF's refusal to delegate operational control of helicopter tasking to the Ground Commander and the strict observance of RAF aircrew duty time or monthly aircraft flying hours limits were great obstacles to their effectiveness. In contrast Naval helicopter squadrons had great rapport with the Army and Royal Marines and applied practical exceptions to such limitations.

The Commando Ship gave invaluable back up for the aircraft deployed ashore and incidentally was the main form of lift for RAF helicopters from Singapore to Borneo.

East African Mutinies 1964

Following a mutiny by Tanganyikan Army units in January 1964, Britain was asked to provide assistance. HMS *Centaur* was at Aden and embarked 45 RN Commando, 16/5 Lancers with their vehicles and 2 RAF Helicopters in addition to her normal air group. The subsequent assault was 'a model of how flexible carriers are and how quickly they can act'. (Another example of RAF being taken into action by an RN carrier.) *Centaur* was capable of launching her normal air group although at times it would have been a 'squeeze'.

Defence of Zambia 1965

Following UDI by Rhodesia, the Zambian Government requested air defence arrangements from the UK. HMS *Eagle* was positioned from 23 November to 7 December 1965 pending the arrival of land-based fighters.

Beira Patrol 1965-66

Followed on from Zambia assistance above. Britain undertook to enforce UN sanctions preventing tankers from entering Beira with oil for Rhodesia. Only carriers could search the vast areas of sea involved in the months it took land-based air to build up an MPA base and deploy aircraft to it. *Eagle* and *Ark Royal* were both involved for considerable periods at sea.

Aden 1967

British forces were evacuated from Aden in November 1967 covered by an RN task force off shore. RAF aircraft were among the forces evacuated and therefore relied on RN carrier-borne aircraft for their defence while they did so.

Belize 1972.

A show of strength by Buccaneers from *Ark Royal* prevented a threatened invasion of British Honduras (Belize) by Guatemala. Land-based air was too far away and could do nothing.

South Atlantic 1982

Carrier/ship-borne strike-fighters (Sea Harrier) and helicopters were fundamental to the success of the campaign which would not have been possible without them. Significantly the RAF Harrier needed carriers/*Atlantic Conveyor* to get them into action.

Kuwait 1991

USN carriers played a big part in the coercive all-arms forces that drove Iraqi forces out of Kuwait; HMS *Ark Royal* operated in the Eastern Mediterranean in a containment role that was not, in the event, used.

Bosnia/Former Yugoslavia 1992-96

RN and USN carriers operated in support of UN and NATO operations in the former Yugoslavia. Carriers were able to position clear of weather which sometimes limited RAF and coalition operations from land bases. The UK Government ordered one carrier to be available constantly in case it proved necessary to withdraw British forces under fire - since land-based aircraft could not guarantee to do so and did not have the valuable mix of fighters and helicopters close to the scene of action.

Sierra Leone 2002

HMS *Illustrious* provided air support in the form of armed reconnaissance missions and a national command centre for British forces that rescued UN forces in Sierra Leone providing a secure base that could not be located or attacked by the terrorists ashore.

Iraq 2003

HMS *Ark Royal* operated in her alternative LPH role with Sea Kings and RAF Chinooks embarked to land RM commandoes on the Al Faw Peninsula. Later, Sea Harrier FA2 fighter aircraft assisted the U.S. Navy in enforcing the no-fly zone over Iraq.

Libya 2011

But for the withdrawal of HMS *Ark Royal* and the Royal Navy Harrier GR9 squadrons (SDSR 2010), Britain could have supplied in theatre, rapid response, fighter combat offensive air support for the Libyan Operation - as supplied effectively by the French and Italian aircraft carriers and the USS *Kearsage*. Instead, British rotary wing air power was deployed to great operational effect in HMS *Ocean* in the form of the Apache helicopters of the Army Air Corps (flown by both AAC and RN pilots) and the Sea King AEW helicopters of the Royal Navy. These resources provided the 24/7 offensive air support that was not available from land-based air situated 600 nautical miles from the theatre of action.

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