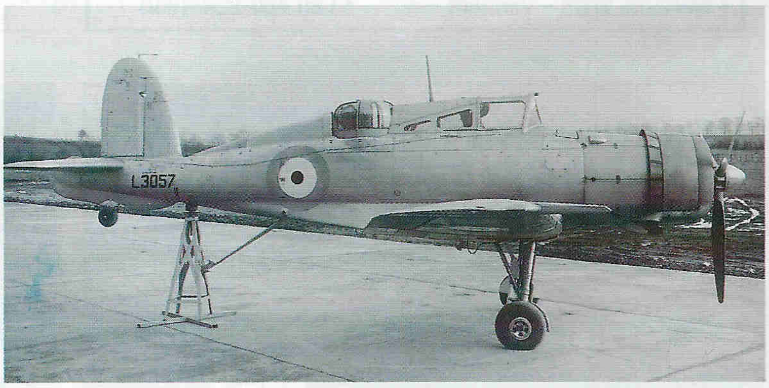
It Seemed Like

IN ARABIAN LEGEND, there is a bird of incredible size and phenomenal power. This is the Roc. Whoever thought it was a good idea to apply that name to Blackburn's two-seat shipborne turret fighter was probably hoping for too much from the aircraft.

Along with the Boulton Paul Defiant, the Roc was doomed by its very concept. The notion of a turret fighter was to apply massive and intense fire-power into the side of a bomber using the recently-developed four-gun power-operated turret. The vision was that such fighters would slash their way through the anticipated streams of enemy bombers attacking cities, or fleets.

The weight of the turret and its accessories would considerably hamper the capabilities of the single-engined, two-seat fighter but its agility and performance were lesser requirements. What was needed was the ability to cruise alongside any of the bomber types that could be expected as opposition in the early 1940s.

OPPOSITE PAGE: ***Roc Is of 759 Squadron, based at Eastleigh, Hampshire, in the mid-1940s. They exhibit three combinations of the fairings around the turret. 'E' in the foreground has both retracted, the middle aircraft both deployed and 'O' at the back with only the rear one lowered. All are fitted with practice bomb carriers under the wings.*** KEY-GORDON SWANBOROUGH COLLECTION



The first Roc, L3057, showing the arrester hook in lowered position and substantial pitot boom on the starboard wing. BLACKBURN

No forward-firing guns were built into the Defiant or the Roc. Only the Defiant entered operational service. The RAF fighter proved effective for the shortest of periods as a day-fighter. Once the Luftwaffe appreciated what they were up against, their fighters adopted head-on intercepts and the game was up. The Defiant did go on to a relatively successful night-fighter role.

OUT-MODED AND OUT-SOURCED

Blackburn responded to Specification O30/35 with a modified version of its Skua dive-bomber (see page 87). It featured a wider mid-fuselage to take the turret and a tiny 'radio room' for the gunner/wireless operator. Fore and aft were retractable fairings to give some streamlining when it was not in use. The Perseus XII that powered the Skua was also used on the new turret fighter.

A production order for 136 Rocs was placed in April 1937, well before the first flight. Blackburn had enough on its plate with the Skua and the Botha reconnaissance bomber/torpedo bomber, and sub-contracted production to Boulton Paul – which manufactured the turret – at Wolverhampton.

As it was derived from the Skua, there was no prototype as such. The first example, L3057, had its maiden flight on December 23, 1938. Production ceased in August 1940.

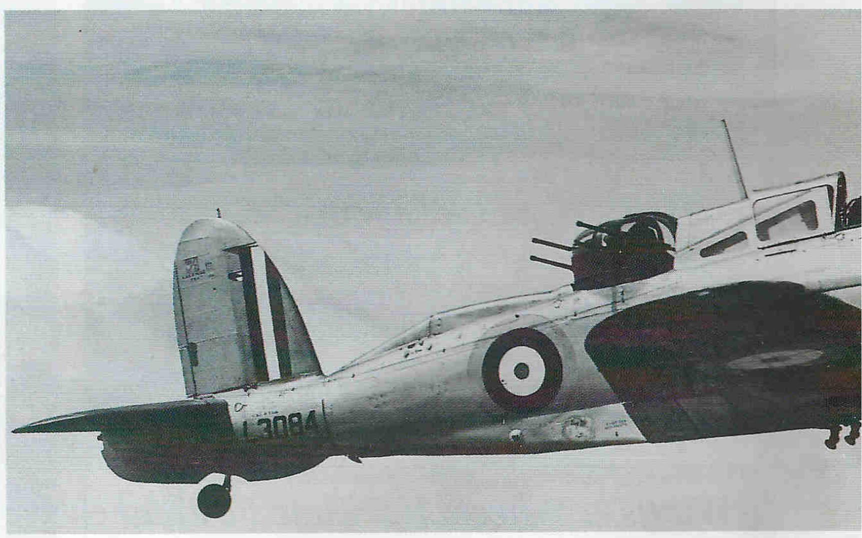
The first unit to receive a Roc I was 806 Squadron at Eastleigh, near Southampton, in September 1940. There had been doubts about the suitability of the turret fighter for fleet operation and the combat debut of the Defiant sealed the Roc's fate. The Fairey Fulmar and the Hawker Sea Hurricane quickly eclipsed the type and Rocs were swiftly and easily converted to the target-towing role. By late 1943 they were out of service, ironically replaced by the more capable Defiant target-tugs.

FLOATPLANE FIGHTER

From the very beginning of the specification that gave rise to the Roc, it was determined that all of the production aircraft would have the ability to become floatplanes. All the Rocs were built with attachment points to take the large twin-floats that were to be built in volume at Blackburn's Dumbarton plant, near Glasgow.

The first machine to try them out was the third and last example built by Blackburn, L3059. This was tested at the Marine Aircraft Experimental Establishment at Helensburgh, further down the

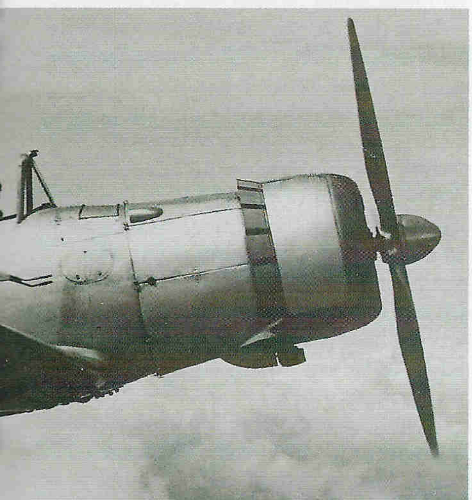
ABOVE: ***One of the last Rocs to be built, L3186 was delivered in June 1940. It was fitted with a fixed turret giving the observer a fabulous field of view during gunnery practice.***



RIGHT: ***L3084 under flight test. The glazings behind the pilot were for the tiny 'radio room', where the gunner would begin and end his sortie. Delivered in August 1939, it was converted to a target-tug and was still extant in late 1945 at Eastleigh.*** BOTH BLACKBURN

a Good Idea...

Blackburn's Roc turret fighter never saw operational service with the Fleet Air Arm. Bob Dunn describes its change of career

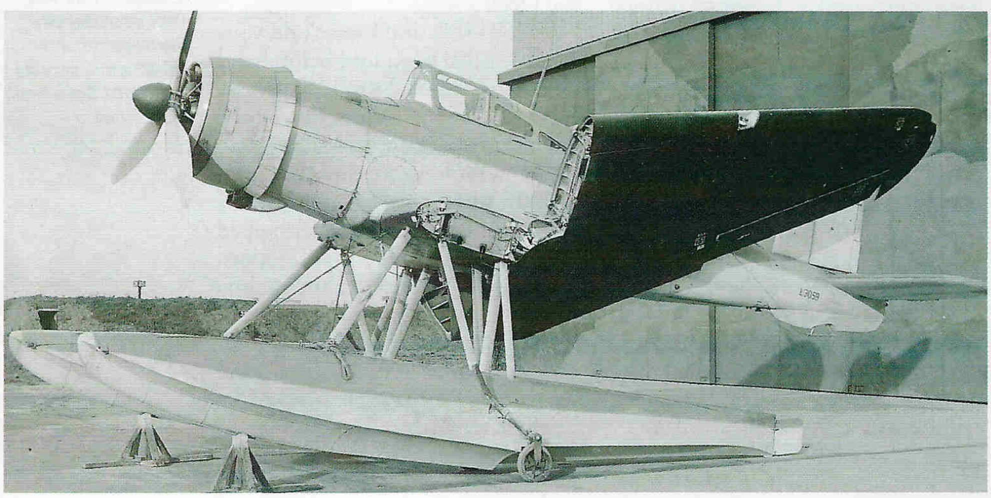


Clyde from Dumbarton. Beset with controllability problems, L3059 crashed on take-off early in the test programme, on December 3, 1939.

Two more floatplane fighters followed – the 'prototype' Roc L3057 and the first one built by Boulton Paul, L3060, in 1940. The turret fighter as a land-based option was out of favour, and the somewhat cumbersome floatplane version showed little promise.

One more floatplane was converted, however. L3174 was issued to Helensburgh in March 1942. This was to test the floatplane as a target-tug in an attempt to bring gun-laying training to the fleet in more remote areas. Trials continued until the autumn, by which time L3174 was 'de-booted' and returned to land-locked status.

Designed to carve through multiple targets, the Roc – probably thankfully – never got to realise its intent. Ironically, it ended up in the sights of many an anti-aircraft gunner as a target itself.



The ill-fated first Roc floatplane, L3059.

Taking it t

Mervyn Spencer Doe describes a high-tension air test in a Skua

AS MOST of the Fleet Air Arm aircraft of the day were two-seaters, it was common place, for a Leading Air Mechanic like me, to go up, for an hour or two, on air test. We thought nothing of it.

It was a June morning in 1942 at Speke Airport, Liverpool, I belonged to 776 Squadron, and my mate and I had fitted a new accelerator delayed action pump to the Bristol Perseus XII sleeve-valve radial of a Blackburn Skua. I ground tested the engine and was satisfied that it was OK. I signed the Form 700 and called for a pilot to air test it.

The Skua was a dive bomber, and may I say was, in its day, a good aircraft. It was designed, and built by the Blackburn Aircraft Company and, was the first aircraft in the war to shoot down an enemy aircraft. (See page 87.)

The test pilot turned out to be 'Mad Middy', a former Midshipman, recently promoted to a Sub Lieutenant. As the senior mechanic, he came over to me and said "OK then, let's go up!" We climbed aboard, we had no parachutes, only a 'Gosport' helmet with a speaker attached.

"I will nurse it, for ten minutes, or so, then take her up to 15,000ft or more, if she'll take it!"

PERFECT DAY

It was a beautiful morning, without a cloud in the sky. There was no wind, everything was still. Visibility was extreme. Just the perfect day!

We took off in the direction off the River Mersey and headed for the Wirral peninsula and the River Dee, in the direction of Chester. The pilot was in touch with me from the start, there was a basic instrument panel in front of me, an altimeter and a rev counter.

The pilot said, "I will nurse it, for ten minutes, or so, then take her up to 15,000ft or more, if she'll take it!" "OK!" I said, noting we were over the Dee estuary with Chester to our left.

We were going round in circles and climbing. We continued like this for about a quarter of an hour or so. I saw that we had reached 15 or 16,000ft.

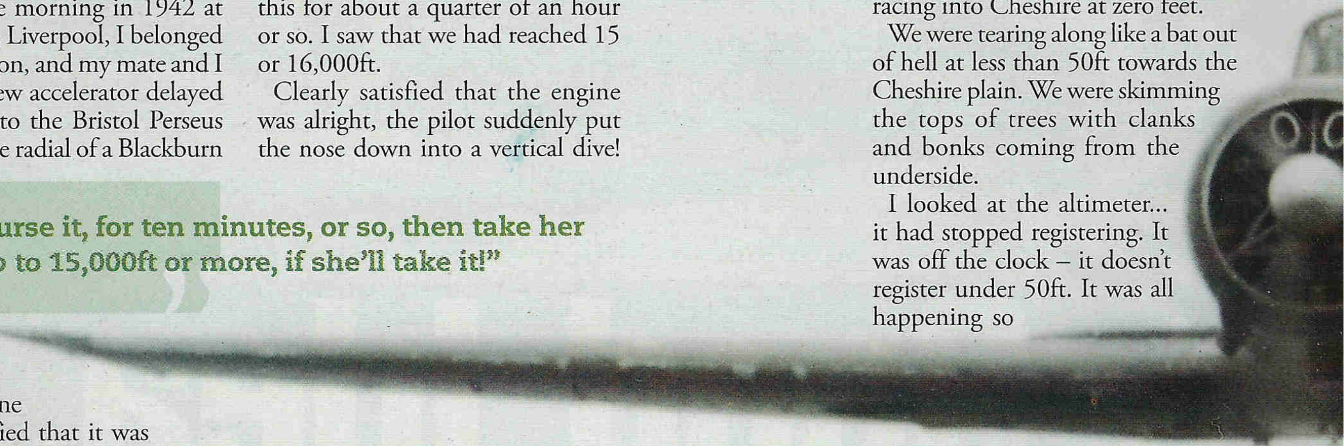
Clearly satisfied that the engine was alright, the pilot suddenly put the nose down into a vertical dive! He could have said "Watch out, here we go!" or "I'm just going to put her into a dive, to see if she's OK", but no!

I quickly looked at the altimeter, we were going down fast, the engine was screaming! I thought, this is what she was built for. Everything was happening so quickly. Down! Down! We went faster and faster in the direction of the Dee, which was wide at this point. The Wirral was to our right. It started to occur to me that we were going to have a watery grave… we were going straight in the Dee!

I didn't black out! I wasn't nervous at all, if I had been told beforehand what he intended, I would have been 'all for it'! Down! Down! Down! We fell out of the sky…

I kept looking at the altimeter, 6,000ft then 5,000ft! The water looked suddenly close I unstrapped myself, disconnected my 'Gosport' helmet and searched for the canopy above, ready to slide it back.

The altimeter was down to 1,000ft – we were still in a vertical dive. "Here we go then!" I thought. I just had a brief glance at the water coming up at me when, at the very last second, he pulled her out of the dive.



A camouflaged Skua II presenting the sort of profile it would while 'attacking' warships in the Mersey Estuary with 776 Squadron during gunnery training. KEY-GORDON SWANBOROUGH COLLECTION

Skua IIs of 803 Squadron in 1938. In the foreground is L2889 - this was lost over Norway on September 9, 1940 while serving with 801 Squadron. BLACKBURN

BAT OUT OF HELL

In the seconds that followed, I hit the seat with a bang. I was flung so hard, that I can't express what happened, one minute, I was ready, to jump – to abandon the aircraft – next we were racing into Cheshire at zero feet.

We were tearing along like a bat out of hell at less than 50ft towards the Cheshire plain. We were skimming the tops of trees with clanks and bonks coming from the underside.

I looked at the altimeter… it had stopped registering. It was off the clock – it doesn't register under 50ft. It was all happening so quickly, so I kept glued to what was ahead.

At no time did the pilot get in touch with me, or did he regain height, he was enjoying himself. I knew that he loved low flying, but one thing I knew, sooner, or later, we'd have a 'prang' – something would happen.

We saw cows in a field, we took a dive straight for them, they scattered in all directions – that put them off their milking! Then he swung over on one wing, we slipped *between* the trees. There were several clanks and bangs as we cut off any branches in our path.

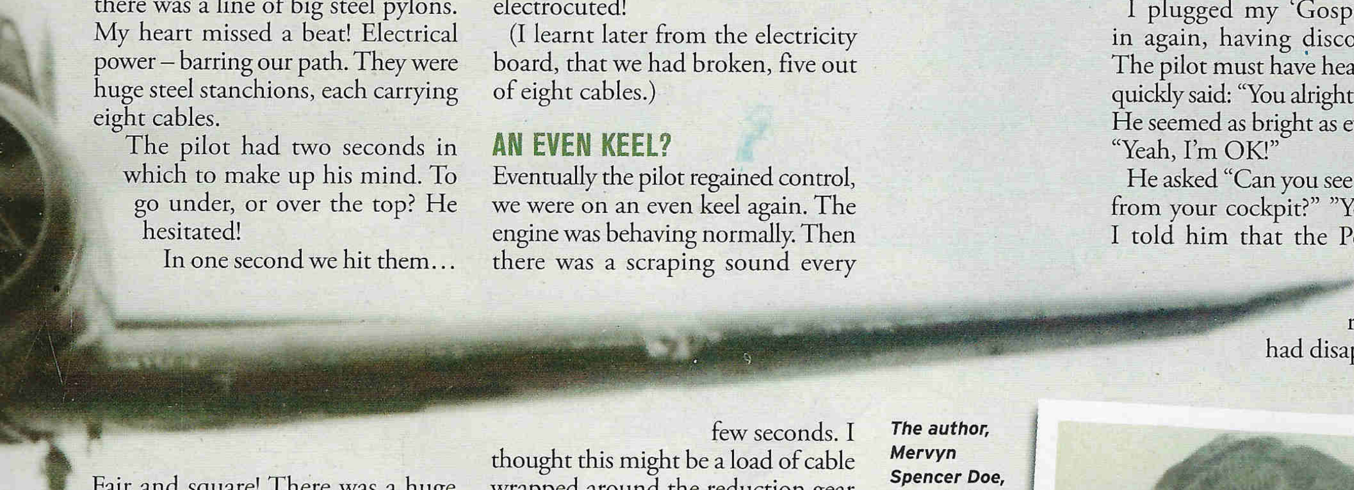
Then he saw a man riding a bicycle away from us. In a second we were on to him. I turned round in my cockpit, just a glimpse, to see what the clatter was, his bicycle was doing a figure of eight. He couldn't believe that an aircraft had flown out of the trees, straight for him!

He and his cycle turned over, into the ditch at the side of the lane. We were creating havoc. Something was bound to happen – and it did!

UNDER? OVER? OR THROUGH?

We came to a hill. Up until then we had flown over flat land at anything

o the Wire



below 50ft. So, 'Mad Middy' continued to fly as we were, he thought he would follow the contour of the hill.

As we came over the summit, running parallel with the ridge, there was a line of big steel pylons. My heart missed a beat! Electrical power – barring our path. They were huge steel stanchions, each carrying eight cables.

The pilot had two seconds in which to make up his mind. To go under, or over the top? He hesitated!

In one second we hit them… Fair and square! There was a huge bang and a flash. It was blinding! I bent over… I put both my arms up to protect myself. The whole 'kite' and the area around was lit up.

We were going upwards, about 200ft, or more, like an arrow from a bow! Then we came clattering downwards. I couldn't see anything, but this flash. I was groping in the cockpit, looking at my feet. I knew instinctively, that we were an all-metal aircraft – but we hadn't been electrocuted!

(I learnt later from the electricity board, that we had broken, five out of eight cables.)

AN EVEN KEEL?

Eventually the pilot regained control, we were on an even keel again. The engine was behaving normally. Then there was a scraping sound every few seconds. I thought this might be a load of cable wrapped around the reduction gear (just behind the propeller).

The instruments were reading as usual, the altimeter was still 'off the clock', engine temperature was OK, oil pressure was alright; there was no magneto drop.

Suddenly the 'kite' went out of control. I thought for a moment we were going into a loop but we got back to an even keel again. The pilot had his hands full, keeping everything under control.

I plugged my 'Gosport' helmet in again, having disconnected it. The pilot must have heard me, as he quickly said: "You alright back there?" He seemed as bright as ever, I replied "Yeah, I'm OK!"

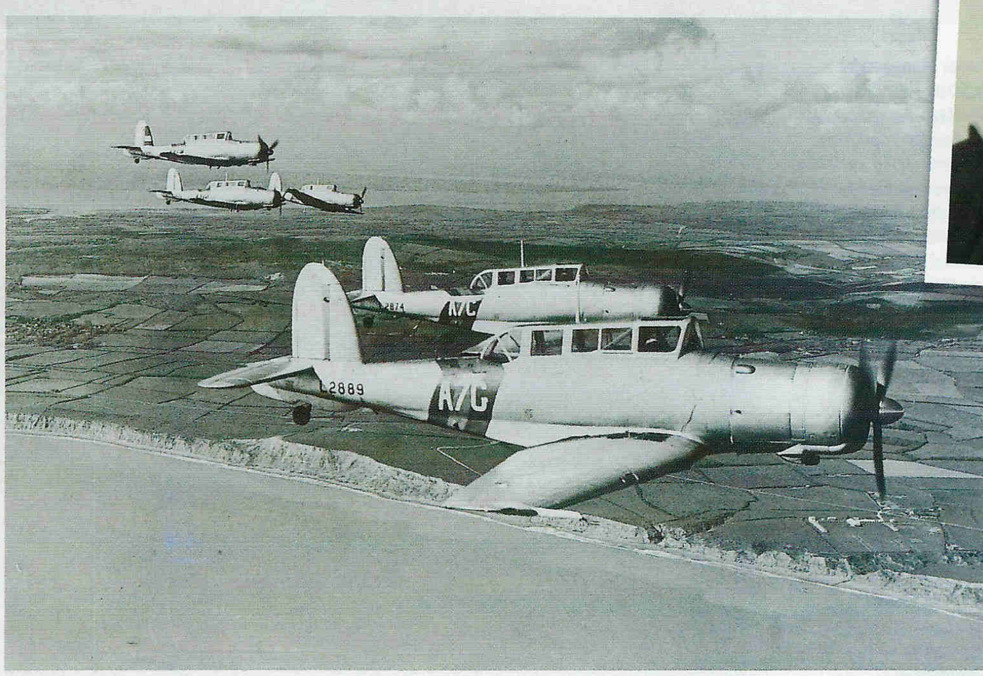
He asked "Can you see any damage from your cockpit?" "Yeah", I said. I told him that the Perspex over my head and the radio aerial had disappeared. He mumbled something about the damage, then said, "the cowlings look as if they are coming off, the cables went inside the engine."

The aircraft was now flying more or less straight, though she seemed to wobble now again, then there was that 'scraping' noise.

ONE GREEN!

In the meantime we were crossing over the Wirral and then over the Mersey. Finally we were back at

The author, Mervyn Spencer Doe, served with the Royal Navy 1936-1942 and the Fleet Air Arm, 1942-1946. VIA AUTHOR



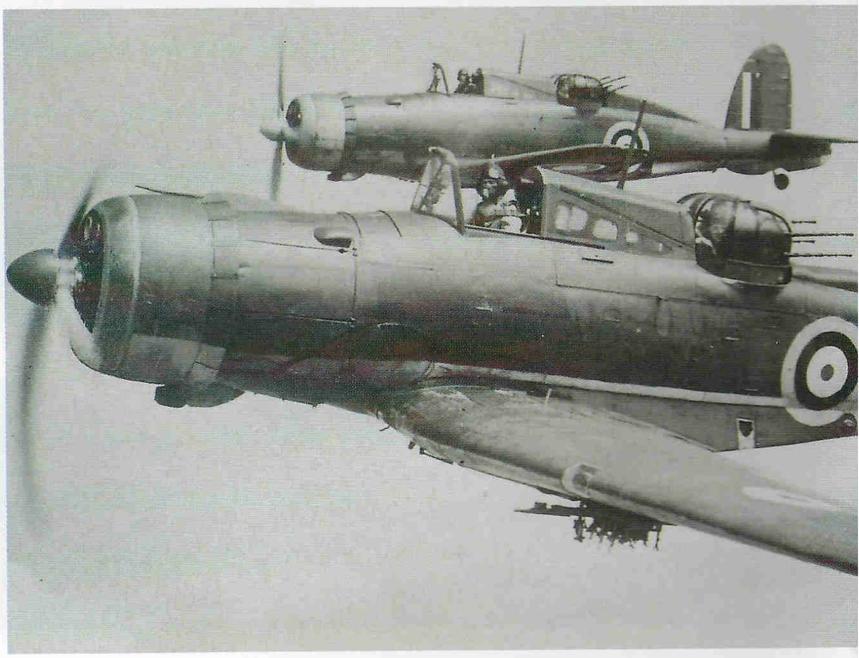
Speke, making our final approach to land.

Two green lights should come on, but only one did. The pilot landed to the left of the runway, on the grass. We waited for the aircraft to lose speed – we were down.

One undercarriage leg wouldn't come down, so, we fell over on to that wing. The Skua slithered to a halt. I had pulled the hood back as soon as the aircraft stopped and was the first out, in case of fire.

I said nothing to the pilot, I just walked round the aircraft and saw the damage done. The cockpit hood in the front of the pilot was smashed, the wings were damaged; the propeller had several feet of copper cable wrapped round it, and the reduction gear likewise behind it, the engine cowlings were nearly hanging off in the front, and the

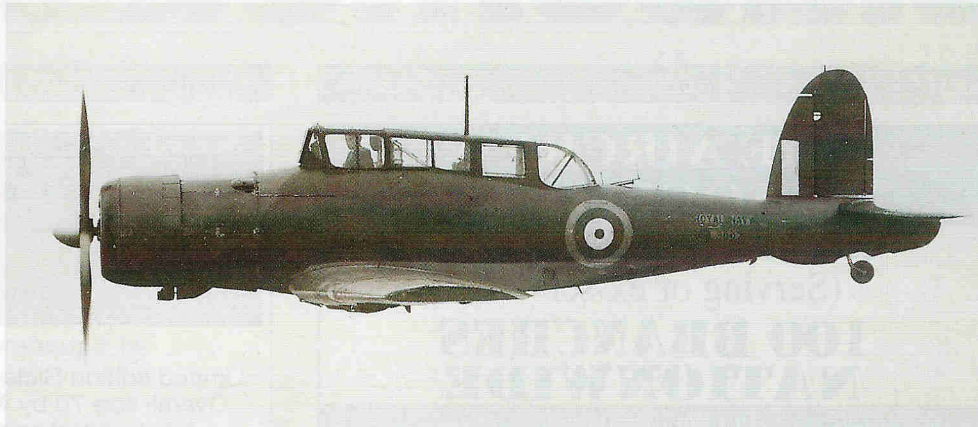
Built in mid-1939 L3007 was used initially for trials with red stripe markings reportedly to assist in ease of spotting in a ditching! Later - camouflaged! - it joined 800 Squadron on 'Ark Royal' and shared in the destruction of several Italian Air Force aircraft. BLACKBURN



A pair of Rocs of Eastleigh-based 759 Squadron, mid-1940. In the foreground is L3118 which served with 776 Squadron at Speke December 1941 to May 1942. KEY-GORDON SWANBOROUGH COLLECTION radio aerial had been cut off, just aft of my cockpit.

What with the port oleo leg collapsing, she was a write off. She would be taken off for scrap.

I ignored the pilot and made for the Squadron Office, in no mood to speak to anyone, except the Commander. I left the fire brigade to look after the aircraft and the crowd that had gathered.



In mid-1941 L3007 was converted to a target-tug and posed for a series of air-to-air shots in December, when it was serving with 757 Squadron at Worthy Down, Hampshire. In March 1944 it joined 776 Squadron at Speke.

RECKONING

I knew I would have to make a written statement, which I did. I realised, that I was the only witness to what had happened.

One thing, which stood out in my mind, was that I was lucky to survive an impact with high-tension power cables in an all-metal aircraft.

In the meantime, complaints from the electricity board, police, farmers, hospitals and all sorts of people in the area came flooding in. It snowballed and grew out of all proportion.

The cows didn't milk. One lady had a baby, she was so frightened, by the flash and the noise. One farmer asked: "Hadn't we got something better to do, than just joy-riding around the countryside in an aeroplane?"

The Court Martial was held at Burtonwood airfield, near Warrington. I was the key witness. The prosecuting officer said to me, "Do you know what this is?" He put an altimeter in my hand. I said, "Yes sir, it's an altimeter."

He went on "you said in your statement that altimeter had gone 'off the clock'. What do you mean by that?" I said: "I meant that the needle was at 'zero', it had stopped registering – it doesn't register under 50ft!" He said: "Do you mean to say, you were flying at *under* 50ft?" I said "Yes sir", "definitely, definitely" That said it all!

The court was adjourned, when we returned, the sword on the table was pointing towards the accused – guilty! He was cashiered from the Royal Navy, lost all pay, pensions and allowances, etc. He never apologised to me, ever, but justice was done!

A line-up at Southend. In the foreground is Carvair G-APNH, conversion No.11, flown in 1965. KEN ELLIS COLLECTION

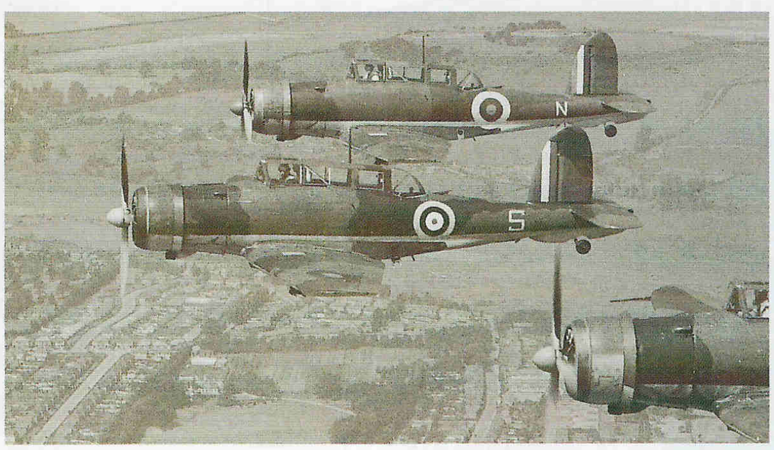
After the 'prang'

Not long after the 'high-tension' Skua flight, Mervyn Spencer Doe was given a special assignment within 776 Squadron. He was transferred to the staff of the Commander-in-Chief Western Approaches, Admiral Sir Max Horton DSO. He was based within the famous Liver Buildings on Liverpool's waterfront, amid the docks complex and 776 Squadron looked after his personal DH Dominie X7508. For a while, the C-in-C also had an Armstrong Whitworth Whitley at his disposal and Mervyn and another air mechanic looked after that. The FAA operated a small number of Whitleys for general duties, mostly GR.VIIs, and they were chiefly used by 734 Squadron at Worthy Down, Hampshire.

Post-war, Mervyn worked for Aviation Traders at Southend Airport, Essex. This was one of the companies set up by Freddie (later Sir Freddie) Laker who died on February 9, and we paid tribute to him in the April *FlyPast*. Aviation Traders produced the radical Carvair conversion of the Douglas C-54 or DC-4 for car ferry work.

Mervyn writes: I was one of the first men to work on the Carvair. Freddie and I went into the hangar and climbed aboard a DC-4. He said 'I want the fuselage cut at the 17th stringer, I said 'Right!'. Me and another mechanic started cutting. I worked on three Carvairs and went up on her maiden flight – she flew beautifully."

That first machine was former C-54B G-ANYB and it first flew on June 21, 1961. Mervyn worked on the prototype and the next two Carvairs, before moving to Norwich in 1962. Aviation Traders went on to convert 21 Carvairs.



Two Skuas of 759 Squadron, providing gunnery services out of Eastleigh, Southampton, in mid-1940. In the foreground is L2928, originally delivered to 801 Squadron in April 1939. BOTH KEY-GORDON SWANBOROUGH COLLECTION