This month our Spotlight assesses an immediately identifiable machine from the Fairey stable that was developed for the Royal Navy’s Fleet Air Arm in the years following World War Two. Distinctively equipped with a double turboprop engine driving two contra-rotating propellers, the Gannet was an unusual machine earmarked for a specific purpose – fulfilling a joint anti-submarine and strike requirement. The prototype first flew on September 19, 1949 and made the first deck landing by a turboprop aircraft, alighting on HMS Illustrious the following June. Some aircraft were adapted to carry a suite of electronic countermeasures equipment, while others were built to replace the Douglas Skyraider in the airborne early warning role. With exclusive features and artwork we reflect on a versatile Cold War warrior.
Andrew Thomas explains how the Fairey Gannet delivered an airborne anti-submarine capability for the Royal Navy and other air arms

Appropriately named after the elegant diving seabird able to pursue its prey underwater, the Fairey Gannet resulted from a Royal Navy (RN) requirement revealed by Specification GR.17/45 in 1945. Detailing the need for a tandem-seat carrier-borne anti-submarine (AS) search and strike aircraft, both Blackburn Aircraft and Fairey Aviation Company submitted proposals – the B-54/Y.A.5 and Type Q, respectively. After examining these the Ministry of Supply, in its typical non-committal way, ordered two prototypes of each blueprint on August 12, 1946.

Converting kerosene to noise

After initially considering the Rolls-Royce Tweed as a suitable powerplant, Fairey turned to Armstrong Siddeley, which was in the process of developing the ASM-1 turboprop. Standing for Armstrong Siddeley Mamba, further work developed this concept into the Double Mamba ASM-3. Comprising two engines mounted side-by-side, both were linked to a common gearbox driving contra-rotating propellers via an individual drive shaft. This meant each unit could be shut down independently, and the airscrew feathered when on patrol to increase endurance – despite the aircraft having the appearance of being single-engined. As well as this, the use of a co-axial arrangement for the props eliminated the asymmetric handling problems associated with single-engined flight in a twin, therefore making single-engined deck landing safer. Additionally, the powerplant was designed to run on kerosene or diesel from the outset, which helped eliminate the need for high-octane petroleum spirit or AVGAS on board aircraft carriers. Ground-running trials of the innovative engine began in 1948 as
construction of Type Q prototype, VR546, gained pace at Fairey’s Hayes facility in west London. Once completed, the aircraft was moved by road to the Ministry of Aircraft Production’s airfield at Aldermaston, Berkshire, and it was from here that chief test pilot, Gp Capt Gordon Slade, took to the air in the inverted gull-winged machine on September 19, 1949. Rival Blackburn’s YA.5 flew for the first time the next day. Following its debut flight the Gannet, as it would soon be known, was noted to have handling issues and numerous aerodynamic flaws. Damaged while attempting to take off in November that year, it was March 1950 before it flew again; small alterations to the elevators, ailerons and rudder during this downtime reportedly resolved the issues. The prototype, flown by Lt Cdr G R Callingham, undertook the Gannet’s first deck landing on HMS Illustrious on June 19 that year; it was also the first ever by a turboprop aeroplane. Development work continued with the first flight of the second prototype, VR557.
During the early April 1954, 703X Flight at RNAS Ford, Hampshire, received four airframes (WN347-WN350) for intensive service flying trials. The Gannet’s tricycle undercarriage and position of the cockpit drew praise for deck landing, particularly when combined with the recently introduced angled deck and mirror landing system. That June, WN344 was sent to the Royal Canadian Air Force’s Central Experimental and Proving Establishment at Namao, Alberta, for cold weather trials, with another to Khartoum, Sudan, for warm weather evaluation in November. However, engine compressor issues led to a temporary grounding of RN Gannets in August.

Finally, on January 13, 1955, Gannet AS.1 WN350 was delivered to 826 Naval Air Squadron (NAS) at RNAS Lee-on-Solent, Hampshire, under Lt Cdr G F Birch to begin replacing its weary Fireflies. It was considered fully equipped with the arrival of aircraft WN364 two weeks later. With crews spending several weeks converting and working up to an operational standard, 826 spent a short period using HMS Eagle’s deck for carrier training. The unit soon embarked on the ship on June 4 and sailed for the Mediterranean where it participated in several exercises with the carrier until August. Clearing the decks to make way for a squadron of Westland Whirlwinds, 826’s Gannets flew back to the UK via Gibraltar and France, arriving back at Lee in mid-September.

The squadron soon re-joined the ship in the Moray Firth, Scotland, before heading into the Norwegian Sea for NATO’s Exercise Sea Enterprise. Having pioneered the Gannet into operational service, 826 NAS disembarked back to Lee-on-Solent in mid-November, where it was disbanded after just 11 months (it wasn’t unusual for naval air squadrons to exist for only a short period, with most usually disbanding at the end of a cruise and reforming for another).

From its initial operations the Gannet AS.1 proved to be a sturdy machine and well suited to various tasks, including surface surveillance and anti-submarine warfare (ASW). The type offered maritime commanders several options with its ability to strike targets both on land and at sea. Not only that, its large weapons bay could accommodate a wide range of stores – including marine markers, directional sonobuoys, 250lb (110kg) or 500lb (225kg) bombs, depth charges or acoustic torpedoes. Underwing hardpoints also allowed the Gannet to carry 250lb bombs, depth charges or up to 16 rocket projectiles; the latter could be fitted with different warheads, most of which were easily capable of penetrating a submarine’s hull.

**Increasing numbers**

With a steady flow of aircraft arriving off the production line, more Gannet squadrons were quickly formed, with the next being 824 NAS in February 1955. Replacing its ageing Grumman Avenger AS.4s, the unit joined HMS Ark Royal that October for a tour in the Mediterranean. Following suit, 820 NAS under Lt Cdr Desmond Cassidi received its first Gannet at RNAS Eglinton, Northern Ireland, on March 7. Heading to the carrier HMS Bulwark for an exercise during September, the aircraft became the first of the type to operate in the Far East while embarked on HMS Centaur through January 1956. Reforming on July 4, 1955 as an anti-submarine unit equipped with the AS.1, 825 NAS was followed in November by 812 NAS – the latter carrying out its first cruise in spring 1956.

The last of the initial Gannet squadrons to stand up was 815 NAS commanded by Lt Cdr J P David at Eglinton – the type becoming its last fixed-wing mount before transferring...
to helicopters. Despite teething troubles during its work up, which included a period on board Bulwark for Exercise Dolphin and deck landing training with Ark Royal, 815 was deemed fully capable by day and night come June 1956. Heading to the Mediterranean, Norway and the US later in the year, the unit participated in several large-scale exercises.

Having completed the re-equipment of regular squadrons, the Gannet AS.1 was issued to the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve in February 1956 with 1840 and 1842 NAS at Ford (known as the Channel Air Division) sharing a pool of aircraft. Most of these airframes were placed into storage just under a year later, following the withdrawal of reserve flying units.

The first Gannet AS.4 took to the skies on April 12, 1956. Fitted with an uprated engine and other enhancements, the first examples were delivered to 824 NAS at RNAS Culdrose, Cornwall, six months later. Working up with the improved aircraft, the unit embarked with HMS Albion in late January 1957 for a Mediterranean deployment. That month, 814 NAS reformed at Culdrose to become the first to operate with the AS.4 from the start.

Before joining HMS Eagle’s Air Group. Replacing its AS.1s, both 825 and 815 NAS received their initial AS.4s in December 1957. Re-embarking on Ark Royal a month later, 814 sailed once more to the Mediterranean to exercise with the US 6th Fleet – including cross-deck training, which allowed its Gannets to operate from the Forrestal-class aircraft carrier USS Saratoga. Returning to British waters, 815’s Gannets disembarked to Culdrose in early July where the squadron disbanded, followed by 814 in September after its return from the Mediterranean.

On April 20, 1959, 810 NAS reformed under Lt Cdr A McK Sinclair at Culdrose where it worked up with six Gannet AS.4s, before flying to Gibraltar in June. There the unit joined HMS Centaur’s somewhat obsolescent air group, which included Hawker Sea Hawks and de Havilland Sea Venoms, and flew several exercises in the Mediterranean.

The unit then went on to operate underwing hardpoints also allowed the Gannet to carry 250lb bombs, depth charges or up to 16 rocket projectiles...”
proceeded to the Far East, via Aden and onto Australia, before returning home in April 1960. As the last seagoing Gannet ASW squadron, 810 NAS participated in numerous naval exercises, including a visit to the Swedish capital Stockholm. Arriving back at Culdrose in July, the unit was disbanded – ending the Gannet’s submarine-chasing career.

Hunting bandits

During the mid-1950s, British Forces in Cyprus were battling with the Greek/Cypriot EOKA paramilitary organisation, which was fighting to overthrow British rule of the island for an eventual union with Greece. In an attempt to stem the flow of arms being smuggled to the radicals, the local waters were closely patrolled by RN and RAF assets searching for gun-running vessels. Despite the presence of RN ships and patrols by Malta-based RAF Shackletons, there was an urgent requirement for a short-range maritime type to be based in Cyprus. In March 1956, 812 NAS at Eglinton was split to create 847 NAS under the leadership of Lt Cdr W C Martin. Equipped with three Gannet AS.1s, the small unit left for the Mediterranean on April 5 and was established at RAF Nicosia three days later. From there, Gannets immediately began daily policing of the approaches to the island’s small harbours, looking for suspicious vessels attempting to covertly transport arms and explosives to EOKA. The patrols were tasked by the island’s Joint Operations Control Centre and were usually flown in co-operation with RN patrol vessels. If one of 847’s crews deemed a seagoing craft suspicious, fast patrol boats would be directed to intercept and board them. While tasked with a patrol on February 2,
1957, Gannet WN357 suffered an engine failure while being flown by the CO, and was forced to ditch, though happily the MV ‘Armst’ soon rescued the rather soggy crew.

In May 1958, Lt Cdr R W Hawksworth DSC assumed command, and the following month three Gannet AS.4s arrived to replace the AS.1s, to continue 24-hour patrols. As the Cypriot situation stabilised in 1959, the security campaign was gradually run down and, with it, the need for 847’s specialised capability. Thus, at the end of November, 847 NAS departed Cyprus and was disbanded following its arrival home on December 1. The unit had amassed nearly 1,700 operational sorties during its stay in Cyprus.

Short lived

The activities of 825 NAS were typical of all Gannet units during the mid-1950s. Re-commissioned at Culdrose under Lt Cdr J R C Johnson with eight Gannet AS.1s on July 4, 1955 the unit progressed towards operational readiness through participation in Exercise Beware, followed by deck landing training on HMS Bulwark. By the end of the year, it was deemed fully operational and joined the carrier HMS Albion on January 10, 1956. Sailing to Singapore, the ship and aircraft conducted training exercises in Aden, Bombay (today’s Mumbai), and Colombo (Sri Lanka) while en route. Taking part in Exercises Sea Dragon and Monsoon, Albion’s stay in the Far East was relatively brief of British Aircraft Constructors show at Farnborough, Hampshire. Mid-way through January 1958, the squadron detached to RAF Hal Far, Malta, for three months’ training with the Mediterranean Fleet. Shortly after arriving in the area, Lt Cdr Ron Leonard DFC took over as CO and led the unit through the rest of the period, culminating in Exercise Augusta in April. However, this proved to be $25’s swansong with the Gannet’s, on April 29, as it was disbanded a few days after returning to Culdrose. The unit re-formed on August 16, 1960, this time with Whirlwind HAS.7s.

Down under

While looking for an ASW capability for its new aircraft carrier, HMAS Melbourne, the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) turned to the Gannet – 36 of which were ordered, comprising 33 AS.1s and three T.2 trainers. In early 1955, Australian personnel arrived at Culdrose for training. With conversion progressing, the RAN re-formed two squadrons at the Cornish base – 816 Squadron under Lt Cdr B G O’Connell and 817 commanded by Lt Cdr J A Gledhill, supplied with an initial batch of AS.1s. After working up, the Gannets were loaded onto Melbourne for exercises across Australian and Southeast Asian waters. Tasked with operational and conversion training on board Melbourne, 724 Squadron took delivery of the three T.2s and several AS.1s.

Once deck qualified, both frontline squadrons regularly deployed on board the carrier for exercises across Australian and Southeast Asian waters. In the late 1950s, while operating off the Malayan coast, RAN Gannets flew operational
surveillance and reconnaissance sorties during the Malayan Emergency until its de-escalation in 1959. By then, operational Gannets were concentrated into 816 Squadron – 817 having disbanded in August the previous year.

During joint exercises with the USN, their submariners usually detected the Gannet’s ECKO search radar early in an engagement and acted accordingly. However, they were baffled when they were still detected – even while submerged. This carried on until the ‘Aussie’ crews pointed out that in the clear waters of the Pacific a high-flying Gannet could often see a submarine visually. During one exercise a mystery sub’ was spotted. Failing to identify itself, it disappeared at high speed, meaning that it was probably a Soviet vessel shadowing the war games.

During the Indonesian Confrontation between 1963-66, 816’s Gannets embarked on Melbourne and flew patrols off the Malay Peninsula and north Borneo while searching for Indonesian infiltrators. Aircraft from 816 were also responsible for escorting the fast transport ship HMAS Sydney during the initial deployment of Australian forces to Vietnam on May 7, 1965. However, 816 Squadron was disbanded on August 25, 1967 and the mighty Gannet withdrew from RAN service after just a decade of valuable service.

**Other exports**

After the 1955 decision to re-equip the Federal Republic of Germany, the air arm of the newly constituted navy, the Bundesmarine (Federal Navy), was initially formed around two wings or Marinefliegergeschwader (MFG).

Each comprised a strike unit and an AS patrol squadron. The Gannet AS.4 was selected for the latter task and 15 airframes, plus a solitary T.5, were ordered. After forming in May 1958, MFG 1 crews – commanded by Korvettenkapitän Richard Left – trained with the RN at Eglinton, after which they flew their new aircraft to Jagel in northern Germany. Tasked with patrolling the western Baltic, the unit often searched for Soviet submarines snooping in the area. Soon afterwards MFG 2, under Fregattenkapitän Werner Klümper’s command, was established at Keil to cover Germany’s northern coastal area and assumed the responsibility for training. In October 1961, restructuring resulted in MFG 1’s Gannets being transferred to MFG 2, while the technical elements deployed to Sylt – a small German island in the North Sea’s Frisian archipelago. However, this was a temporary move. By the end of April 1963, MFG 2 relocated to the rebuilt airfield at Nordholz near Cuxhaven, Germany. The following year it was split, leading to the formation of MFG 3 ‘Graf Zeppelin’ led by Fregattenkapitän Paul Kriebel in June. Originally tasked with the ASW role using Gannets, the first of that type’s replacements – the Breguet Br.1150 Atlantic – arrived in late January 1966. The Gannets were retired on June 30, having flown more than 10,000 hours in West German service.

Fairey’s other Gannet customer was Indonesia. In January 1959, the Southeast Asian country ordered 17 Gannet AS.4s and a pair of T.5s, for its yet to be finalised naval aviation command; it would become known as the Angkatan Laut. Having several crews already trained in the UK, the aircraft were eventually operated from Sourabaya, a port city on the island of Java, with its AS patrol squadron.

Indonesia considered the type ideal for patrolling its coastal waters and myriad islands, but increasing tensions with Britain over the formation of the state of Malaysia led to conflict in Borneo. With several embargos placed on the country, including spares, it is believed the Gannets were withdrawn from service in 1965. Very little else is known of the type’s service with the country. It is believed one AS.4 was lost when it crashed into a mountain, killing all three crew. A number of preserved examples still exist today in Indonesia.
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Submarine Detective

This month’s Andy Hay artwork provides examples of the colours and markings of Fleet Air Arm anti-submarine Fairey Gannets.

This Fairey Gannet AS.1, XA391/321/B, is portrayed in the scheme it wore with 820 Naval Air Squadron in 1956. The aircraft ditched into the sea the following year while operating from HMS Bulwark, and was judged as Category ZZ (total loss, clearly unrepairable or beyond economical repair) on September 25, 1957 with a little over 375 flying hours ‘on the clock’. The crew, Lt A R Robinson, Lt G W M Thompson and Leading Telegraphist (Air) M E A Loades all escaped unharmed.

Gannet AS.4s replaced the AS.1s of 820 NAS that year, and the unit flew the type until it disbanded on April 29, 1958. It re-formed at Culdrose on August 16, 1960 as a rotary squadron with Westland Whirlwind HAS.7 helicopters.

ALL ARTWORK
ANDY HAY-2019
The Royal Navy (RN) realised its Douglas Skyraider AEW.1s, which had only entered service in 1951, would be obsolete by the end of the decade given the type's 1940s vintage. In response, Fairey took its already successful Gannet and completely redesigned the fuselage, in a bid to replace the obsolescent piston-engined 'raider in the airborne early warning (AEW) role, incorporating the latter's bulbous AN/APS-20F radar. This Gannet conversion was initially planned as a stopgap until a new purpose-built system arrived, but it went on to serve for almost two decades – and rapidly became one of the most widely utilised types in the RN’s inventory.

Those clever Brits
Developed by General Electric, the AN/APS-20 search radar first entered service with the US Navy (USN) in 1945. The APS-20F variant chosen for the AEW Gannet, as one operator recalled: “…was a pulse radar and thus very susceptible to clutter from weather or sea returns. The latter was the ‘mush’ in the centre of the scope and was affected by the sea state and increased with the aeroplane’s altitude. The radar had a practical range of about 100 miles and the lead operator was always adjusting the tilt of the scanner, the gain of the receiver and the aircraft’s height to get the optimum picture. “There was no height-finding capability, but you could get an indication, depending on the tilt angle set, and once you had a ‘paint’ of an aircraft you played [with] the controls to maintain contact. While close to the coast with a rough...
sea, and perhaps with electronic countermeasures jammers in use, it could be hard work to keep a workable picture. However, although somewhat antiquated we made it work quite effectively, especially in warmer climates. During one exercise a visiting senior US officer commented that only the Brits, “…could take a 1940s radar, plumb it into a 1950s airplane and make it work in the 1970s!”

Making it work
With the addition of an uprated Armstrong Siddeley Double Mamba 102 turboprop, the exhausts were shortened, while the undercarriage was lengthened to accommodate the radar housing. Other modifications included a larger vertical stabiliser to combat instability from the addition of the radome. The type’s original three-man crew was retained; however, the two rear cockpits were removed, with the observers being housed in a cramped cabin aft of the wing, accessed via small, hinged hatches. Inside the compartment, each observer had a 7in (18cm) radar scope. The systems and radio controls were situated between them. Trained in AEW reporting and fighter control, every observer also learnt the art of surface surveillance, shadowing and strike direction. The radar was later integrated with an AN/APX-7 Identification Friend or Foe set and equipped with an AN/ART-28 Bellhop datalink, which fed the Gannet’s radar picture back to the carrier. Although unarmed, the original underwing hardpoints were retained for the carriage of external fuel tanks to increase endurance.

The AEW Gannet, which was originally to be called Albatross, was developed through the mid-1950s by Fairey at its West London facility in Hayes, where the first prototype, XJ440, was built. Moved five miles (8km) by road to RAF Northolt, it was from there that noted test pilot Peter Twiss performed its maiden flight on August 20, 1958. At the beginning of September that year, with just 11 hours’ flying time and duly painted in Royal Navy colours, the aircraft (then designated AEW.3) was demonstrated to the crowds by Twiss at Farnborough, Hampshire.

The first production example, XL449, flew the following month and in all 44 examples rolled out at Hayes during seven years of production.
With the initial deck-landing trials programmed to take place towards the end of the year, XJ440 ‘trapped’ aboard the light fleet carrier HMS Centaur on November 18; testing continued into December.

COD Couriers

To sustain a carrier at sea, each ship usually housed a Carrier On-board Delivery (COD) asset – a task fulfilled through the 1960-70s by the Gannet. Five AS.4s (XA430, XA454, XA466, XA470 and XG790) were modified for the role, with one attached to each operational seagoing 849 NAS Flight. When within range, COD Gannets would fly ashore and collect or deliver small high-priority spares, personnel and - above all - mail in the bomb bay or in small underwing panniers. At least one aircraft would be allocated as the Admiral’s Barge for the Flag Officer Aircraft Carriers. The last example, XA466/777/LM, was withdrawn from 849’s HQ Flight on June 26, 1978 and is now exhibited at the Fleet Air Arm Museum, RNAS Yeovilton.

Gannet COD.4 XA430 was converted to the courier configuration for service with 849 Squadron during 1968 and used as a spares source in 1972.

KEY COLLECTION

Fairey test pilot Peter Twiss takes off in Gannet AEW.3 prototype XJ440 for a demonstration flight at the 1958 Farnborough show, barely two weeks after its maiden flight.  
P H T GREEN

A superb study of Gannet COD.4 XA466/777/LM when serving with HQ Flight 849 Squadron, flying from Lossiemouth shortly before withdrawal in 1978. It is now displayed in Yeovilton’s Fleet Air Arm Museum.  
KEY COLLECTION
the HQ Flight received its first Gannet (XL474), with Lt Cdr P A Woolings’ C Flight taking delivery of its initial example, XL471, before joining the newly commissioned carrier HMS Hermes that July. In the same month Lt Cdr Levy’s B Flight converted from the Skyraider and joined the Gannets aboard HMS Victorious in October for a work-up period in the Mediterranean. In January 1961, A Flight left Ark Royal, before returning to sea aboard Centaur in April for a cruise to the Far East where, ironically, it relieved Victorious.

While in the Far East, 849’s Gannets usually disembarked to either RAF Keflavik or Tengah while the ship was docked in Singapore, or RAF Kai Tak when off Hong Kong. When operating from land bases, the aircraft would typically exercise with locally based units and assets, as well as others from its air group.

At the end of June 1961, Victorious was rushed to the Persian Gulf in response to Kuwait’s plea for protection from the new Iraqi regime. Named Operation Vantage, B Flight’s Gannets were thrown into action almost immediately on arrival, to monitor the integrity of Kuwait’s airspace against any possible Iraqi intruders. When on task and acting as an AEW ‘barrier’, the Gannet usually cruised on one engine – alternating them every 30 minutes or so. Leaving Hermes in August, C Flight was soon back at sea on board Ark Royal in November. With command passed to Lt Cdr J F McGrail in February 1962, the squadron was presented with the 1961 Bambara Trophy for flight safety two months later. Sadly, and somewhat ironically, just after being bestowed the honour the unit lost three aircraft in two separate incidents. On April 9, a pair of AEW.3s – XL499/426/H of B Flight and XP197/414/CU of the HQ Flight – collided while undertaking a nocturnal exercise with RN destroyer HMS Corunna, killing all six aircrew. Later that month, Lt B T Jones of C Flight died when Gannet XP198/430/R fell overboard after Ark Royal’s third arrester cable malfunctioned. After being rigged incorrectly, the wire failed to remain in the aircraft’s hook, causing ‘198 to fall off the edge of the deck; the observers, noted as Lt Neale and S Lt Frost, both survived. The following month Lt Cdr Robertson led B Flight aboard Hermes as Victorious steamed back to the UK.

**Global reach**

During early 1963, A Flight, while on Centaur, exercised with several RAF units off the coasts of Aden and Kenya, while sending detachments ashore to Khormaksar and Embakasi (today’s Jomo Kenyatta International Airport). Meanwhile in the Far East, B Flight began mounting operational patrols from Hermes as the so-called Indonesian Confrontation began to gain momentum. Surveillance sorties were flown to locate ships and aircraft attempting to infiltrate the Malay Peninsula with guerrilla forces, as well as into the Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah in Borneo. With Hermes relieved in June, C Flight and Ark Royal continued operations. The previous month, A Flight had left Centaur and in August boarded Victorious, which had since joined the Far East Fleet. Then, having left Hermes in September, B Flight moved to HMS Centaur in December for a year-long deployment in the east, where the tempo of operations against the Indonesians had increased dramatically. However, when Ark Royal entered refit in November 1963, C Flight was sent to
Culdrose where it remained largely shore-based for the next 12 months. This pattern continued through 1964 with at least one, sometimes two, carriers deployed to what was known as East of Suez. During May however, 849’s HQ and C Flights participated in the Jubilee Review of the Fleet Air Arm (FAA) at RNAS Yeovilton, Somerset, before His Royal Highness, the Duke of Edinburgh. The RN’s fifth strike carrier, HMS Eagle, was coming to the end of its lengthy modernisation in 1964, which led to D Flight – under Lt Cdr D W Besley – being re-formed on September 3. Arriving on the ship in December, the outfit left for Seletar on January 13, 1965 and commenced operations. The previous month, Lt Cdr ‘Lofty’ Nash’s A Flight had left Victorious for Culdrose.

In January 1965, however, the squadron’s shore base changed to RNAS Brawdy in Pembrokeshire – 849 arrived in style with an impressive mix of eight Gannet AEW.3s and six T.5s in formation. Lt Cdr Mike Rawlinson assumed command shortly after the move, and ten days later sent C Flight to embark once again on Ark Royal for a Far East cruise.

From Brawdy, HQ Flight’s Gannets carried out daily training sorties in St George’s Channel and around the southern Irish Sea. Consisting mainly of AEW ‘crosstell’ exercises (transmitting target information between various units), fighter control and radar shipping plots, this was all part of the operational conversion for new crews. The flight also participated in numerous naval and air defence exercises.

However, the formation of D Flight created a shortage of AEW.3 airframes. Disembarking Victorious to Brawdy, A Flight was temporarily disbanded to alleviate the shortage and in mid-September, B Flight was also disbanded with HMS Centaur being placed in reserve.

Tensions rise
Following the Unilateral Declaration of Independence by the Government of Rhodesia in November 1965, a British blockade was mounted to prevent oil supplies reaching the rebel colony via the Mozambique port of Beira. Frigates patrolling the approaches were supported by a carrier when possible. Known as the Beira Patrol, Ark Royal and Eagle were assigned the role in 1966, with the Gannets of 849’s C and D Flights bearing the brunt of the taskings. Individually, both elements arrived back at Brawdy in June and August that year. Meanwhile, A and B Flight had been re-formed under Lt Cdr Nash and Lt Cdr Cobb respectively for deployments aboard Victorious and Hermes. However, C Flight was disbanded later in the year when Ark Royal started a lengthy refit, but not before being awarded the Boyd Trophy for outstanding performance during its blockade participation. The flight was never to be re-formed, with the government dictating the withdrawal of the fixed-wing carriers.
Airborne Early Warning

October 2019

FLYPAST 115

(including the flight), was tasked with covering the final removal of UK forces from bases in the Persian Gulf. Eagle was withdrawn on returning home and D Flight disbanded on January 26, 1972.

Continuing to operate from Ark Royal, B Flight was taken over by Lt Cdr Iain Neale and in October 1972, gained royal distinction when HRH The Prince of Wales flew in a Gannet on a familiarisation sortie. The aircraft, XL500/042/R, subsequently sported a crowned red dragon on the fin. In 1973 the flight disembarked to numerous US bases, while Ark Royal exercised with the US Navy off the North American East Coast in 1973. The ship and its air group continued undertaking operational and training flights – including a spell with NATO’s Striking Fleet Atlantic through the mid-1970s when the Cold War was at its height.

On return from its final deployment to the US on board Ark Royal in April 1978, B Flight flew to RAF Lossiemouth on November 27. There, less than a month later, 849 NAS was disbanded. The AEW.3 was withdrawn after 19 years’ frontline flying with the Senior Service, effectively closing the fleet’s ‘eyes’. This became all too apparent just four years later in the South Atlantic, when the Falklands War began and the Royal Navy was without carrier-based airborne early warning to protect its task force.

from service. This marked the beginning of a long drawdown for 849 NAS.

In 1966 the HQ Flight participated in several exercises, including a period on HMS Hermes, and in August was placed under the leadership of Lt Cdr A W Roberts. In March 1967 the flight provided radar surveillance, and photographic evidence of the effectiveness of Buccaneer S.2 strikes on the stranded tanker SS Torrey Canyon, which had run aground off the Scilly Isles (about 26 miles [42km] from the Cornish coast) and was leaking crude oil.

Throughout this period Gannets continued to operate from strike carriers, with B Flight flying onto Hermes in September 1966 for a deployment East of Suez. The following year, in company with Eagle and D Flight, it covered the final British withdrawal from Aden during November 1967. B Flight disbanded when disembarked to Brawdy in February 1968; its place in the carrier’s air group being passed to A Flight the following May. Remaining with Hermes until it too was withdrawn from service, A Flight disbanded on July 14, 1970.

Political plunder

The policy to withdraw the carriers meant the fleet air defence and strike tasks were passed to the RAF. Therefore, 849 NAS began a series of exercises to acquaint its crews with the AEW role in October 1969. Sending three HQ Flight Gannets to RAF Binbrook, Lincolnshire, the crews established a system of integrating control of English Electric Lightnings, via ground-controlled intercept radar and AEW. During this period, the HQ Flight also began training RAF navigators, to prepare them for the formation of its Shackleton AEW.2 unit, 8 Squadron.

On January 5, 1970 command of the re-formed B Flight fell to Lt Cdr Geoff Maltby and it joined the modernised Ark Royal. The flight embarked for the first time on May 4, initially with a cadre of four Gannet AEW.3s (XL482/041/R, XL494/042/R, XP229/043/R and XP199/044/R) along with a sole COD.4 (XA466/040/R). When Brawdy was relinquished by the RN in 1971, 849 moved north to RNAS Lossiemouth on the Moray coast of Scotland. Increasingly, the service was then focused on large-scale NATO exercises in the Atlantic. But Eagle conducted one last cruise to the Far East during 1971. The air group, which included D Flight, took part in exercises with the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation and ANZUK forces in Malaysia; the latter was a tripartite force formed by Australia, New Zealand and the UK to guarantee the integrity of Malaysia and Singapore. The ship, and by implication the whole air group (including the flight), was tasked with covering the final removal of UK forces from bases in the Persian Gulf. Eagle was withdrawn on returning home and D Flight disbanded on January 26, 1972.

Continuing to operate from Ark Royal, B Flight was taken over by Lt Cdr Iain Neale and in October 1972, gained royal distinction when HRH The Prince of Wales flew in a Gannet on a familiarisation sortie. The aircraft, XL500/042/R, subsequently sported a crowned red dragon on the fin. In 1973 the flight disembarked to numerous US bases, while Ark Royal exercised with the US Navy off the North American East Coast in 1973. The ship and its air group continued undertaking operational and training flights – including a spell with NATO’s Striking Fleet Atlantic through the mid-1970s when the Cold War was at its height.

Political plunder

The policy to withdraw the carriers meant the fleet air defence and strike tasks were passed to the RAF. Therefore, 849 NAS began a series of exercises to acquaint
**Electronic ugly duckling**

The increasing complexity of maritime warfare in the 1950s led to ship-borne radar operators being required to work with their own radar and communication equipment unfastened by enemy jamming. After a period of evaluation, 831 NAS was formed at Culdrose on May 1, 1958 under Lt Cdr W J Hanks with a miscellany of aircraft – including ECM-equipped de Havilland Sea Venoms – to provide a training capability. Initially given the Gannet AS.1 for pilot and crew familiarisation, A Flight received its first specially modified Gannet AS.4 variant. The trainer first flew in August 1954, and the RN received its first example early the next year. Used primarily for conversion training, most frontline squadrons had at least one on strength for different duties, including periodic check flights. Several T.2s were later converted to T.5 standard and new-build aircraft were taken on strength by 849 NAS’s HQ Flight, as it became responsible for AEW training. Like all other Gannet versions, the trainer was fully equipped for deck landings.

**Fairey Gannet AEW.3 statistics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Powerplant</th>
<th>1 x Armstrong Siddeley Double Mamba 4 turboprop, 3,875 equivalent hp (2,890kW)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crew</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length</td>
<td>44ft (13.4m)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wingspan</td>
<td>54ft 4in (16.57m)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Height</td>
<td>16ft 10in (5.13m)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gross wing area</td>
<td>490sq ft (45.5m²)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loaded weight</td>
<td>25,000lb (11,400kg)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max take-off weight</td>
<td>26,000lb (11,973kg)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Performance**

- **Maximum speed**: 217kts (402km/h)
- **Range**: 700 miles (1126km)
- **Endurance**: 6 hours at 120kts
- **Service ceiling**: 25,000ft (7,600m)
- **Armament**: No offensive armament carried
- **Avionics**: Air search radar, AN/APX-7 interrogator-responder, AN/ART-28 Bellhop
- **Powerplant**: 1 x Armstrong Siddeley Double Mamba 4 turboprop, 3,875 equivalent hp (2,890kW)
- **Crew**: 3
- **Length**: 44ft (13.4m)
- **Wingspan**: 54ft 4in (16.57m)
- **Height**: 16ft 10in (5.13m)
- **Gross wing area**: 490sq ft (45.5m²)
- **Loaded weight**: 25,000lb (11,400kg)
- **Max take-off weight**: 26,000lb (11,973kg)

**Gannet schooling**

The T.2 was developed for conversion training, with AS.1 WN365 transformed on the production line to become the prototype. Fitted with dual controls and a periscope in the second cockpit, so the instructor could see forward, all the radar and other non-essential equipment was deleted. The rear cockpits, however, were left in situ to carry two passengers. Production was interspersed at Fairey’s Hayes facility with that of the AS.1, and 38 examples had been constructed by the end of the run. These were followed by nine new-build T.5s based on the AS.4 variant. The trainer first flew in August 1954, and the RN received its first example early the next year. Used primarily for conversion training, most frontline squadrons had at least one on strength for different duties, including periodic check flights. Several T.2s were later converted to T.5 standard and new-build aircraft were taken on strength by 849 NAS’s HQ Flight, as it became responsible for AEW training. Like all other Gannet versions, the trainer was fully equipped for deck landings.