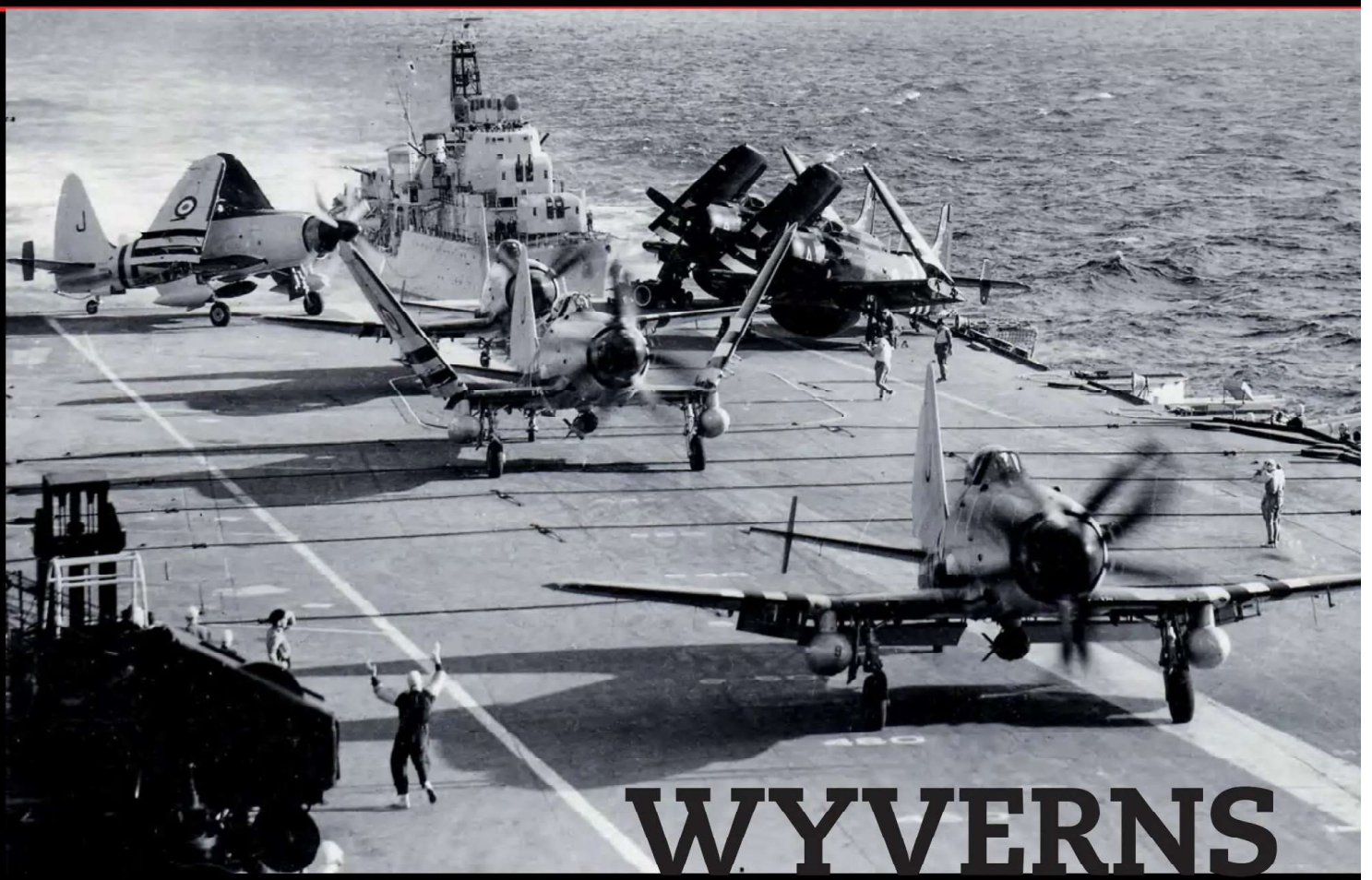


WYVERNS OVER THE CANAL

The 1956 Suez Crisis gave the Westland Wyvern, the Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm's rather unusual post-World War Two carrier-based strike fighter, its brief moment of glory – as Andrew Thomas explains

The words unconventional and Westland Wyvern go hand in hand. Originally designed as a piston-engined carrier-based torpedo fighter, it first took to the skies as the TF.1 on December 12, 1946 – Westland's famed test pilot Harald Penrose, sitting high in the humped fuselage, doing the honours from Boscombe Down in Wiltshire. Somewhat ungainly looking, yet elegant, it was powered by a 2,690hp Rolls-Royce Eagle piston engine that drove a large contra rotating propeller, each of four blades. Six months later the turboprop powered TF.2 had flown – the Eagle having been replaced by a 4,030ehp Rolls-Royce Clyde. And while production examples would ultimately use the 4,110ehp Armstrong Siddeley Python, the combination of airscrew and untried powerplants resulting in a lengthy gestation period, it was some seven years between the type's maiden flight and the establishment of its first operational squadron.

As it was, the definitive, and main production, was the S.4. First flying in May 1951, this strike fighter variant boasted four wing-mounted 20mm Hispano V cannon, and the ability to carry up to 16 3in 60lb rocket projectiles (RP-3) on underwing rails, or up to 3,000lb bombs across the under wing and fuselage racks.

Starting life as the TF.4, the Air Ministry ordered 50 examples in October 1948 – the first seven (serials VW880-VW886) being taken from the last batch of 20 TF.2s. With another 37 examples ordered (13 in December 1950, 13 in January 1951, and a final 11 in February 1951) this variant was built across four production batches: VZ745-VX799, WL876-



Above
With their wings unfolding, a quartet of Wyverns – each armed with a single bomb under the fuselage – taxi forward on 'Eagle's deck moments before launching a strike in support of Operation Musketeer during November 1956.
Via V Flintham

WL888, WN324-WN336, and WP336-WP346. Finally entering operational service in May 1953 with No. 813 Naval Air Squadron (NAS) at RNAS Ford in Sussex, No. 827 NAS followed suit in November 1954. By then, in line with the Fleet Air Arm's (FAA) shift in nomenclature the 'TF' – or 'Torpedo Fighter' – designation had been dropped for 'S' for 'Strike'. However, come November 1955, both '813' and '827' had been disbanded. That same month, two new Wyvern squadrons appeared at Ford – No. 830 and 831 NAS being reformed on the type on the 21st.

Mediterranean tour

Designated a Torpedo Strike Squadron, No. 830 NAS was led by Lt Cdr Vyvyan Howard, with Lt Cdr Bill Cowling the Senior Pilot, and Lt John Dumphey the Air Engineering Officer in charge of the maintainers. The squadron's Wyverns were distinguished by Deep Maroon spinners and fin fillets – the latter carrying a single diagonal Golden Yellow stripe, while those of the senior pilot's aircraft boasted two, and the CO's had three. Having worked the squadron up, Howard (who had been shot down and captured during the Royal Navy's ill-fated 'Kirkenes Raid' in Norway on of July 30, 1941, and went on to be incarcerated in Stalag Luft III during which he assisted with both the 'Wooden Horse' escape and the 'Great Escape') led '830' aboard the *Audacious*-class strike carrier HMS *Eagle* on April 16, 1956, for a tour of duty with the Mediterranean Fleet. As events transpired it was to prove a very eventful commission. Apart from brief periods ashore in both Malta and Gibraltar, it remained embarked for the rest of the year.



In addition to his squadron's nine Wyverns (reportedly, WL888, WN325, WN326, WN328, WN330, WN336, WP337, WP338, and WP341), *Eagle*'s Air Group then comprised the Hawker Sea Hawk FGA.6s of both Nos. 897 and 899 NAS, the de Havilland Sea Venom FAW.21s of No. 892 NAS, the Fairey Gannet AEW.2s of No. 812 NAS, and the four Skyraider AEW.1s of 'A Flight' No. 849 NAS. Also on board was a pair of Westland Whirlwind HAR.3 operated by the Ship's Flight across a multitude of roles, including search and rescue (SAR) – something No. 830 NAS pilots would later be grateful for.

Although Britain had begun withdrawing its forces from Egypt during May the previous year in line with the Anglo-Egyptian Agreement of 1954, tensions with the Nationalist Government led by the revolutionary, self-proclaimed leader of Arab nationalism, President Gamal Abdel Nasser, remained very tense. This was exacerbated by the withdrawal of a promised US$270m funding from the United Kingdom and United States for the then new Aswan High Dam project – this being triggered by Nasser's apparent growing ties with the Soviets. In reprisal for this on July 26 Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal. One of, if not the most important key trade route between Europe and Asia, the canal was the property of the Egyptian government. However, European shareholders, primarily British and French, owned the concessionary company, which then operated it.

With preparations for an Anglo-French intervention, dubbed Operation Musketeer, to capture the canal beginning, they soon gathered pace when the Royal Navy (RN) increased its presence in the area – including the arrival of the *Eagle*, the *Centaur*-class light strike carriers HMS *Albion* and *Bulwark*, and the *Colossus*-class light fleet carriers HMS *Ocean* and *Theseus*.



Above
HMS 'Eagle' – seen here with her Air Group embarked around the time of Operation Musketeer in 1956, the Wyverns of No. 830 Naval Air Squadron visible towards the rear – was a key element in the British response to the Suez crisis.
KEY Collection

Equipped exclusively with the Whirlwind HAS.22s of No. 845 NAS, the latter pair would go on to deploy the first-ever helicopter-borne assault troops the world had seen. With the carriers falling under the RN's Carrier Task Force led by Vice Admiral Manley Powers, the French Navy contributed two more carriers – the Independence Class *La Fayette* and the former *Colossus*-class *Arromanches*.

With *Eagle* having been on station with the Mediterranean Fleet for several months, the Air Group was deemed fully worked up. However, to increase its "attack potential" the Gannets of '812' were replaced by additional Sea Venoms from '893' – the jets arriving on board on August 17, 1956.

With the planned operation requiring the neutralisation of the Egyptian Air Force (EAF) – in particular its much feared fleet of Mikoyan-Gurevich

Left
A fine study of Wyvern S.4 WL888/J/374 unleashing a salvo of 3in 60lb rocket projectiles during No. 830 Naval Air Squadron's Mediterranean work up with the Eagle Air Group – prior to Operation Musketeer.
W H Cowling via B Cull



Above
A quartet of No. 830 NAS Wyvern S.4s airborne from HMS 'Eagle' in September 1956 – the type's ungainly appearance more than evident! From the bottom, they are WN338/J/372, WN325/J/373, WP341/J/376, and WP337/J/378, all of which participated in Suez operations.
Via V Flintham

Right
Wyvern WL888/J/374 forms the backdrop for this photograph of No. 830 NAS officers. From left-right, front row, they are Lt King, Lt Dumphy, Lt Cdr Howard, Lt Cdr Cowling, Lt Barras, and Lt Roddick, while Sub Lt Webster, Lt Humphries, Sub Lts Scott and Parsons, Lt McCarthy and Sub Lt McKern can be seen left-right at the back.
W H Cowling via B Cull

MiG-15s (NATO reporting name: *Fagot*) – ahead of airborne and amphibious landings to seize control of the Canal, it was decided that the Wyverns would carry either a single 500lb or 1,000lb bomb on the fuselage centreline, and either long-range fuel tanks or rockets carried underwing. This offered planners a degree of flexibility with taskings. As part of the preparations, all participating aircraft had broad Black and Yellow identification stripes painted on them.

With the Task Force leaving Malta on October 26, and heading east towards war, the realisation for the aircrews that "this was for real", came with the issue of .38 revolvers, escape maps, Khaki uniform, and gold coins to be used as hard currency for bribes or payment to buy food, shelter, and safe passage if shot down behind enemy lines, to sew into their belts!

Action stations!

Operation Musketeer opened during the final hours of October 31 when RAF bombers attacked several Egyptian airfields. With daylight breaking, land-based RAF and carrier-based fighter-bombers continued the offensive. As a result, '830' gave the Wyvern its first taste of combat with six aircraft, each carrying a 1,000lb bomb and led by the CO in two 'vics', attacking – ironically – the former FAA airfield at Dekheila, near Egypt's principal seaport city of Alexandria. With Howard the first to bomb, one of his pilots later recalled: "Typically of the man who was never one to do anything by half measures – that bomb hit right in the centre of the intersection of the two runways, effectively putting it out of action!" Lt George Barras, who was also on that first strike, noted: "The initial run inshore was a nervous time, with little knowledge of what air opposition there might be. In the event, the attack, virtually unopposed, was repeated... top cover during the attacks was provided by Sea Hawks from '897' and '899' Squadrons."

Concentrating their attacks on the runway intersections, at least five 'thousand pounders' dropped by the Wyverns found their mark, preventing any of the dispersed MiG-15s from getting airborne. Despite three bombs hitting one intersection, and two another, it was quickly assessed that the north-east/south-west runway remained usable. Flying another two strikes with six aircraft in each against Dekheila, '830' ended the day having dropped 18 bombs, and expended 420 20mm cannon rounds; records show its Wyverns also carried out several 'recce' runs across the target area.

"No. 830 gave the Westland Wyvern its first taste of combat with six aircraft each carrying a 1,000lb bomb"

Keeping the pressure up

The Wyverns were back in action the following morning with five aircraft hitting Dekheila at 0720hrs – their bombs exploding on, and around, a large hangar that was effectively destroyed. The assessment of the success against the EAF resulted in a "switch of emphasis" – an attack at midday being launched against tanks and vehicles sat in the Egyptian Army's main transport and logistics depot at Huckstep Camp in the western suburbs of Cairo. With six of the squadron's Wyverns launching off the *Eagle* first, the resultant raid was considered a big success with not a single bomb or rocket falling outside the target area. Lt Barras recalled: "For this attack we again used 1,000lb bombs. There was a fair amount of flak, and I had a hangup." When Sea Hawks arrived for a follow-up attack, it was reported that "the western part of the vehicle park was obscured by smoke and flames caused by '830' when they had attacked an hour previously". With another two strikes carried out during the day, each with five aircraft, the Wyverns dropped a similar number of bombs on the huge depot. Another of the participating pilots was Lt Bob King who thought it the most memorable of his 11 missions during the brief campaign. He said: "We flew in 'Battle 4

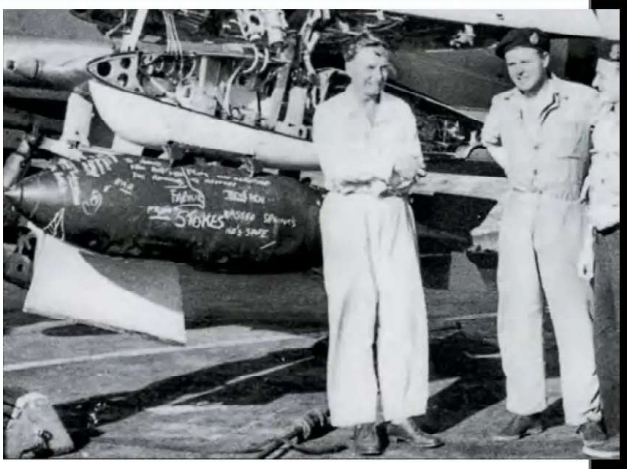


Formation' at about 15,000ft so that we would have sufficient range for the sortie. There was quite a lot of gunfire but none of our aircraft were badly hit, although a couple did sustain light damage. The return to the ship was carried out at extreme low level along the Nile Delta, and I shall forever remember the terrified look on the faces of Egyptian villagers. Those who have heard several Wyverns together at low level and high speed will know what a frightening sound they made."

Air strikes against Egyptian targets continued on November 3, and with the threat from the EAF MiGs all but neutralised, attacks switched further to communication and transport targets – specifically, the Damiata (Gamil) Bridge. A solid stone structure to the west of Port Said at the northern end of the Suez Canal, it was the only northern road link from the Nile Delta to the Canal. At 0700hrs *Eagle* launched half a dozen Wyverns, again each armed with a single 1,000lb bomb, against the bridge. Achieving several near misses that damaged the structure's foundations, they also hit a nearby radar site. However, when Lt Dennis McCarthy in WN330/J/379 was diving down to attack the bridge, his engine was battered by ground fire and badly damaged. He realised he was in trouble when he saw one of his props race over the top of his canopy. He recalled: "I got rid of the bombs as quickly as I could and levelled out heading out to sea... I lost about 200kts coming out of that dive – it was like hitting a brick wall!"

With smoke and heat starting to fill the cockpit, and with the damaged Python losing power, he steered the crippled aircraft towards the Mediterranean Sea, while the rest of the formation provided cover. Some three miles out to sea, he was forced to eject. Pulling the handle for his Martin-Baker Mark 2B seat, he was hurled out of the aircraft – thankfully clearing the Wyvern's tail. If surviving that wasn't enough, almost as fast as he scrambled into his life raft, Egyptian shore batteries then opened fire on him – although the covering Sea Hawks promptly silenced them. After an uncomfortable hour-and-a-quarter in the water, McCarthy was picked up by one of *Eagle*'s SAR Whirlwinds, flown by Lt Cdr Peter Bailey. The RN's first loss of the campaign, McCarthy, although bedraggled, was none the worse for his experience.

Undeterred by this loss, at 1030hrs six Wyverns returned to the same area at low level with one pilot claiming a direct hit on the bridge. With another four aircraft mounting a further attack mid-afternoon, a direct hit caused further damage to the structure. By the time the CO of '899', Lt Cdr Arthur Clark, returned to the ship from his final sortie, he reported that one third of the bridge at the western end had been destroyed.





Above
Unknown maintainers take a moment to pose while preparing a Wyvern for its next mission from 'Eagle' during Operation Musketeer. Note the visible 'thousand-pounder' carries suitably defiant messages to Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser.
W H Cowling via B Cull

Above left
A trio of Wyvern S.4s of No. 830 NSA, including WN325/J/373, closest, and WN330/J/379 are readied for flight on HMS 'Eagle'. The latter aircraft was shot down by Egyptian ground fire while being flown by Lt Dennis McCarthy on November 3, 1956.
Ministry of Defence

A moment of truth

That night *Eagle* withdrew west to refuel and replenish – as well as carry out much needed repairs to a catapult. It also provided the chance for Barras and Sub Lt Peter McKern to be flown ashore by a Skyraider to RAF El Adem in Libya where they collected a pair of waiting Wyverns (VZ758/J/376 and WN329/J/370). Bolstering the squadron's number to ten, their arrival came just in time, for as the carrier steamed back to its station off Egypt early on November 5, elements of the British Army's 16 Airborne Brigade dropped onto Gamil airfield just west of Port Said, while the French Army's 2me Regiment Colonial Parachute Regiment (RCP) dropped east of the town. Immediately after the drop, standing 'Cab Rank' patrols of fighter-bombers from both land bases in Cyprus and the carriers were mounted ready to hit any troublesome enemy positions.

The Wyverns of '830' Squadron contributed to this continuous air cover throughout the day – taking positions up over Gamil and Port Said. With its first patrol of five aircraft launching from *Eagle* at 0705hrs, they were called in to make bomb and rocket attacks on a coastguard barracks that was proving particularly troublesome. While the first strike damaged it and knocked out several anti-aircraft gun emplacements, the barracks remained standing. With the aircraft returning to the *Eagle* safely, some three hours later another five made further attacks – successfully hitting both gun and mortar positions that had been set up in a nearby cemetery. The barracks, a solid concrete structure that had been turned into a formidable strongpoint full of enemy troops, was holding up the advance.

The Wyverns were called in to





Top
Still wet following his ejection over the Mediterranean, Lt Dennis McCarthy – second from left – is seen here moments after arriving back on the deck of 'Eagle' on November 3, 1956. On his right is Lt Cdr Vyvyan Howard, OC No. 830 NAS. Via B Cull

Above
Lt Dennis McCarthy sits perilously close to the edge of the flight deck on 'Eagle' in WP338/J/377 following a training sortie over the Med shortly before the start of operations over the Suez. Via B Cull

Far right
Lt Cdr Bill 'Smokey' Cowling was the Senior Pilot with No. 830 Naval Air Squadron during the Suez Crisis. W H Cowling via B Cull

demolish it. At 1440hrs, Lt Cdr Bill 'Smokey' Cowling, flying the CO's aircraft WN328/J/371 led another strike towards it. As rockets had proved ineffective, Cowling went in low flying through a veritable hail of small arms fire and, as he said afterwards, he "lobbed a 500 pounder through the window!" The official report, using somewhat more prosaic language to describe the attack, reported: "Bombs on western two blocks. West block probably destroyed next block badly damaged by bomb and R/P. 20mm on third block. Ground explosion from west building."

The enemy fire was intense – as Cowling later recounted: "I was hit by small calibre stuff but was not aware until pulling away. Funny noises – like impellor blades disappearing out of the jet pipe! The engine went into the 'Red' and I decided to get as much height as possible and get away from the land. In the event I got up to 1,200ft and had to throttle back as all the indications were that the engine was about to break up. I started screaming 'MAYDAY!' The carrier acknowledged. So did Jim Summerlee who was the rescue helicopter pilot. I pulled down the face-blind which activates the explosive under the seat. I ejected about five miles off the coast of Port Said. Everything worked perfectly." With remarkable coolness, Bill Cowling had ordered his wingman, Sub Lt 'Scottie' Scott to photograph the ejection and record his 'moment of truth!' Summerlee and Cowling, colleagues from a previous squadron, celebrated his safe return later that evening. During the day the squadron had dropped 17 bombs, fired 176 R/Ps, and expended more than 2,000 cannon shells.

Curtain call

The following morning, November 6, the amphibious landing led by Royal Marines Commandos, under the watchful eye of the fighter-bombers went in at Port Said. The Wyverns first contribution came at 0930hrs when six were launched, and having established their patrol under control of the amphibious HQ ship HMS *Meon* – a *River*-class frigate – were called on to attack Egyptian troops with cannon and rocket fire. Fire was also called against a pair of gun emplacements, but having identified the target, they had believed them to be friendly! Following several confirmatory calls to ensure they were Egyptian, they were attacked. Flying that day, Barras said: "I flew on the second wave, armed this time only with ten R/P and the standard 20mm cannon. Attacks were called by ground controllers, and it was rather like bees around a honey pot with the numbers of aircraft waiting to be called in." Through the day the Wyverns had once more fired a considerable amount of ordnance. Expecting more of the same the following day, news came that under intense international pressure a ceasefire had been declared with effect from midnight.

In all, *Eagle*'s squadrons had flown 621 combat sorties during the brief campaign of which '830' had contributed 79. Having commanded the squadron through it, Howard later recalled: "It was a very small area to operate and after a few days we were competing for the same targets with the other aircraft from the British and French carriers – it was like Piccadilly Circus! It was an exciting time." Subsequently, Howard was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross "in recognition of gallant and distinguished services in the Operations in the Near East from October to December 1956". He died in September 2022, aged 102.

After having successfully bloodied the Wyvern, No. 830 NAS sailed for home with *Eagle*. Disembarking on January 3, 1957, it was disbanded just two days later having lived up to its Motto: 'In via gloriae' (In the way of glory)





Although of poor quality, this image shows the moment of truth as Bill Cowling ejects from Wyvern S.4 WN378 over the Mediterranean on November 5, 1956. W H Cowling via B Cull