WW1 Siemens replica

Flying Flea
Blackburn Skua
Vickers Vildebeest
Canberras over the USSR
Air Ministry Specification O.27/34, issued on December 12, 1934, was the product of some debate on the type of aircraft to succeed the Hawker Nimrods and Ospreys then in service with the Fleet Air Arm. The need was for an aircraft capable of more than one role; both dive-bombing and fighter attributes were required. This dualism was considered essential, given the limited room within the aircraft carriers of the day and the mediocre level of funding available at the time.

The perception of compromise, and which role should take precedence, varied. It was acknowledged that it would prove impossible to produce a design combining both first-class interceptor and dive-bomber characteristics. The Royal Navy’s own preference was for the dive-bomber role, which was considered a telling offensive tool against enemy aircraft carriers. At the same time a reasonable performance as a fighter (in the context of enemy shipboard fighters, at least) was expected.

Avro, Blackburn, Boulton Paul, Hawker and Vickers competed for O.27/34. The Blackburn offering, designed by G. E. Petty, was preferred; and in April 1935 Contract 400778/35 was awarded by the Air Ministry for two prototypes, known as the B-24. The first prototype, serialled K5178, flew for the first time from Blackburn’s Brough premises on February 9, 1937, piloted by Flt Lt A. M. Blake. It was exhibited at the Hendon RAF Display on June 26 of that year, and at the SBAC Show at Hatfield two days later.

This aircraft was powered by an 840 h.p. Bristol Mercury IX air-cooled radial engine, and its Alcud flush-riveted fuselage featured two watertight compartments, one beneath the pilot, the other behind the observer/gunner’s position, to provide buoyancy in case of ditching. The airframe was specially reinforced to withstand catapult launches and arrested landings. The two crew were accommodated in a long enclosed cockpit, the compartment of which was also watertight up to the glass itself. Two integral crash pylons were installed. Visibility from the forward-placed cockpit was good, while the gunner’s canopy tilted to afford protection from the slipstream when the defensive armament was used.

The wings, also of Alcud construction, were arranged in three watertight sections, the outer panels tapering and fitted with detachable upswpt tips. Dive flaps of a modified Zapp type were situated under the wings at the rear of the main spar, and were operated as the...
flaps were lowered. Their purpose was to shorten take-off, steepen the glide and limit speed during the bombing dive. Of necessity the wings were folding, and a retractable undercarriage was installed. The armament of four 0.303in Browning Mk II machine-guns was installed in the wing leading edge, a movable Lewis Mk IIB gun being provided for the observer/gunner. The ailerons were fabric-covered and had inset hinges and mass balances.

The metal-clad cantilever tailplane and fin had fabric-covered elevators and a horn-balanced rudder, again using inset hinges. Most of the tailplane and all of the elevator area was situated aft of the rudder trailing edge to ensure quick recovery from spins.

Bombing capability consisted of a single 500lb semi-armour-piercing bomb mounted on a retractable ejector arm recessed into the fuselage underside, plus eight 30lb practice bombs carried on racks below the wing.

Following its public debut, K5178 received a name — Skua I — from the Air Ministry and then travelled to the Aeroplane and Armament Experimental Establishment (AAEE) at Martlesham Heath for trials which proved favourable, the aircraft being easy and pleasant to fly. The second prototype, K5179, which arrived at Martlesham in late 1938, featured a nose lengthened by 2ft 4½in, a modification adopted on all subsequent Skuas, and upturned wingtips. This aircraft was also Mercury-powered.

1936, six months before K5178’s first flight, a reflection of the very urgent need for a naval dive-bomber. The production aircraft, Skua IIs, were powered by the Bristol Perseus XII 890 h.p. sleeve-valve radial engine driving a three-bladed, two-position de Havilland propeller. Other minor changes were a strengthening of the upturned wingtips and a modified tailwheel oleo.

Trials and delivery

The first Skua II, L2867, first flew at Brough on August 28, 1938, piloted by Fit Lt H. J. Wilson; and together with L2968, the second example, it travelled to the AAEE during September for assessment.

Deliveries of the Fleet Air Arm’s first operational monoplane began during late 1938, when Nos 806 and 808 Sqn, then at Worthy Down, began to exchange their Nimrods and Ospreys for the new type, before embarking on HMS Ark Royal. Two further squadrons formed; No 801 based on the carrier Furious, and No 806 at RNAS Eastleigh.

By the time the Skua entered service, the programme was more than a year late compared with the plan originally contemplated in 1934; the aircraft was outsized as a fighter, although it gained a reputation as an accurate dive-bomber under favourable circumstances.

Even so, a disappointing start was made to the Skua’s wartime career. On September 14, 1939, shortly after the outbreak of war, three aircraft from 803 Sqn took off from Ark Royal to assist the steamer Foulard Head, torpedoed in the North Sea by the German submarine U-30. Pressing home their attack against the crash-diving U-boat and
armed only with tiny 30lb Cooper bombs (universally regarded as useless), two of the three Skuas flew too low before releasing their weapons. In the subsequent blasts both were damaged and forced to ditch, the observer/gunner in each case being killed. Ironically the U-30 then took both pilots prisoner, the first FAA PoWs of the war.

However, the Skua also made history as the first British aircraft to shoot down a German type. This took place on September 25, when a flight of Skuas of 803 Sqn embarked on Ark Royal to escort the battleships Nelson and Rodney, carried out a search for three marauding Dornier Do 18 flying-boats. The crew of L2873 found a single Do 18 at low altitude and forced it to land on the sea, where its crew surrendered. The Skua’s pilot was Lt B. S. McEwen and Plt Off Brian Seymour was the observer/gunner.

By October 1939 the Ark Royal had joined the search of the South Atlantic for the Admiral Graf Spee, but in January 1940 it returned to disembark its Skuas at HMS Sparrowhawk, the Naval Air Station at Hatston, near Kirkwall in the Orkney Islands. Numbers 800 and 803 Sqs then assumed responsibility for fighter cover over Scapa Flow being commanded by Capt R. T. Partridge RM and Lt W. P. Lucy RN respectively.

The end of the “Phoney War”, and the Norwegian campaign between April and June 1940, provided a platform for the Skua to give of its best, and its greatest success came with the sinking of the German cruiser Königsgberg in Bergen harbour at dawn on April 10. Strong and efficient German forces seized Bergen on April 8 and occupied the harbour with two light cruisers. Accordingly, 12 Wellingtons and 12 Hampdens were sent to attack, but failed to score a single hit. The Königsgberg, slightly damaged by an earlier action, remained in Bergen while repairs were planned.

A tall order

Meanwhile, the senior observer of 800 Sqn, who had flown with the reconnaissance force over Bergen on April 9, returned swiftly to Hatston, where it was agreed that the two Skua squadrons would attack the Königsgberg before she put to sea. Two problems emerged as plans were drawn up. The 330-mile crossing was at the limit of the Skua’s endurance, and the flight called for absolutely error-free navigation. Also, the squadrons were unpractised at actually dive-bombing — there had been no recent opportunities — but these two concerns were put aside. Five Skuas from 800 Sqn, and 11 from 803 were used in the attack, which achieved complete surprise. It is thought that three of the 500lb bombs struck the Königsgberg, while a fourth detonated alongside as she was listing. In less than an hour the Königsgberg sank; she was the first major warship to be sunk solely by a bombing attack. Only one Skua failed to return.

The element of surprise, and the absence of either aerial or ground-based opposition, contributed greatly to the Skua’s success at Bergen. Its next dive-bombing mission, again undertaken by 800 and 803 Sqs, re-embarked on Ark Royal, took place against the battle-cruiser Scharnhorst, moored in Trondheim Roads, on June 13. It proved a bloody failure. Heavy flak from the Scharnhorst and surrounding craft (including the Admiral Hipper), as well as attacks from an umbrella of German
Right, a Skua about to take the wire during a carrier landing, with arrester hook lowered and flaps fully extended.

fighters, destroyed eight of the 15 Skuas. Only one bomb struck the battleship; and that failed to detonate.

No 801 Sqn also operated from the Ark Royal during the Norwegian campaign, but many Skuas were lost over the period as they were forced in desperation to act as fighters against the enemy's bombers, which were actually faster—or, worse still, against his fighters. Some were ditched, having failed to find the aircraft carrier after their mission. Two landed in Sweden and were interned by the authorities; some were shot down; others were abandoned at their temporary Norwegian land bases. The survivors mostly returned to Scapa, but 801 Sqn was seconded to RAF Coastal Command. Based at Detling in Kent, 801 participated in the evacuation from Dunkirk, operating its Skuas as fighters and attacking tactical targets.

Thereafter, 801 participated in a number of varied operations. Its aircraft bombed the enemy installations at Cap Gris Nez. Operating from Furious, they attacked enemy shipping in and around Norway. They undertook protection of convoys, and stood by to attack the Scharnhorst and Gneisenau at Brest. Following an enemy air-raid at RAF St Eval during the spring of 1941, which destroyed most of 801's Skuas on the ground, the squadron re-equipped with Sea Hurricanes.

Meanwhile, their losses made good, 800 and 803 Sqs re-embarked once more on the Ark Royal and joined Force "H" based at Gibraltar, providing cover for the Malta convoys. They also shepherded RAF Hurricanes flown off the Ark Royal and the Argus, bound for the air defence of Malta.

The final classical dive-bombing attack made by the Skua was against the Vichy French battleship Richelieu at Oran in September 1940, again involving both 800 and 803 Sqs. Once more, because of considerable flak and aerial opposition, and bearing in mind

Right, a Skua lands on HMS Courageous during training exercises in the North Sea, 1939. Below, factory-fresh Skuas outside the Blackburn works at Brough in 1939.
line life of the Skua came to an end. The remaining examples were mostly set

the massive armour of the Richelieu itself, the operation was a failure. Three
Skua were lost.

By the summer of 1941 Fairey Fulmar Is had re-equipped Nos 800 and 806
Squns, while Nos 803 and 801 Squns had
adopted Sea Hurricanes, and the front-