



SKYRAIDERS OF No. 849 SQUADRON

By ARTHUR PEARCY, Jr., ARAeS.

The Douglas Skyraider, one of the longest-lived airplanes and certainly one of the most versatile of the century, served also in the Royal Navy in the decade from 1951 to 1960. Fifty of the AD-4W version, with the search radar installation and fitted for a crew of three, went to Great Britain under the MDAP program. These became, under the RN system, model AEW.1, and served until replaced by the more modern Fairey Gannet, AEW.3, in 1960.

As with most "SPAD" Drivers, the flyability, performance, and comfort of the type built up a dedicated cadre of per-

sonnel who served with the airplanes of No. 849 Sqdn., well remembered to this day. Even a poem has been dedicated to the marking of "B" Flight, consisting of the Bee and not a Wasp.¹ Its versatility was aptly demonstrated during the Suez crisis of 1956 when it was found that, if one observer was left out, it was possible to stack 1,000 cans of beer in the cabin; it thus became a great boon to the thirsty troops ashore. This particular group of Skyraiders, of the 3,180 built over a period of twelve years (and 28 variations), has been of interest because of its service experience in the Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm, and because even today some of these have gone on the Sweden for an extension of life.² For an airplane type that began late in World War II, with production cutbacks almost immediately following the end of the hostilities, a shot in the arm during the Korean War, and a further resuscitation for the Vietnam War, it is a long life indeed.

During 1943 there was written a British staff requirement for an early warning radar set to be installed in aircraft, but it was 1944 before the Anglo-US Scientific Project Committee revived interest in the area. American interest had been stimulated by the successful attacks of Kamikaze suicide aircraft on US naval units. Originally these suicide aircraft were conventional fighters and bombers loaded with bombs, and flown into the target. Later the pulsejet pro-



PRIMUS VIDEO

The Unit badge (insignia) of No. 849 Squadron, Royal Navy.
FALL - 1970

The above photograph shows No. 849 Squadron complete, a rare occasion, circa 1956, with one Skyraider from each of the flights. A, B, C, and D, in the background at RNAS Culdroe. The squadron plaque includes Battle Honors, 'Okinawa 1945', 'Japan 1945' and 'Palembang 1945'. The officer in front is the Commanding Officer, Lt. Cmdr. Denys Hugh Fraser, RN. (Photo - Royal Navy)



"417," WT965, "A" Flight, No. 849 Sq., representing all proper markings for the type, visiting at Blackbushe October 1957. (Photo — Author)

pelled Baika aircraft came into use, a specially designed suicide bomb, launched from a parent aircraft and equipped with a warhead. With the advent of the Baika, losses of ships mounted so much that even the great resources of the U.S. found it difficult to maintain the invasion fleets which were being used to advance up the Pacific island chain towards Japan.

For large task forces, the U.S. Navy found it was not feasible to maintain sufficient standing combat patrols to intercept all low level attackers within the time afforded by ships' early warning radar. A ring of destroyers was used to give early warning of incoming raids, but the distance of this protective fence was limited; the greater distance of the destroyer screen from its protegee fleet, the greater the circumference, and the more destroyers required. To provide radar cover on a screen of 60 miles radius, not less than 10 destroyers were required, with practically no overlapping of radar cover.

The Japanese tactics in reply to this move were to knock out a couple of the radar destroyer pickets and then attack the main force, which without Combat Air Patrol (CAP) or

mutual fire support was vulnerable. So the stage was set for the coming of the Airborne Early Warning aircraft; one small aircraft and three men being far more expendable than one destroyer and 200 men.

In June 1944 the task of developing electronics for the AEW aircraft was assigned to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The requirement was for an equipment with sufficient power to detect a destroyer at 200 miles, the ability to detect low flying aircraft at the maximum range capable within this power output, and for the radar picture to be relayed to the air control ship's Air Direction Room (ADR).

It was the US intention that the crew of the AEW aircraft was to have an entirely passive role; they were to fly the aircraft to the allotted barrier, and to switch on and operate the equipment as ordered. But all interpretation of the radar picture, and the action resulting from that interpretation, such as fighter direction was to be made and directed by the personnel in the control ship's ADR.

In January 1945 the first AEW airplane flew, a Grumman

Coincidental return of seventeen of No. 849's Skyraiders to Culdrose from carriers photographed over Land's End, Cornwall. (Photo — R.A. Mersom)





"302" and "303" photographed in 1953 with early RNAS Culdrose code, "CW." Markings not yet standardized with No. 849 Sq. (Royal Navy)

TBM Avenger. By May 1945. 35 AEW Avengers were in the Pacific but the war ended without their participation.

The U.S. Navy continued the development of the AEW airplane with the Douglas Company in the immediate post-war years, and by 1951., the MDAP program provided for fifty of the AD-4W models to go to the Fleet Air Arm. The Skyraider had, by this time, gone through much of the experimentation phases and the Fleet Air Arm was in a position to make an operational evaluation. The first of the airplanes went to No. 778 Squadron for training of personnel, and ultimately to No. 849 Squadron for operations.

No. 849 Sqdn. was a WWII unit formed in August, 1943 at the US Naval Base, Squantum, Mass. with twelve new TBM Avenger airplanes. Its first Commanding Officer was Lieutenant Commander K.G. Sharp, R.N. After three months' familiarization the squadron embarked in HMS KHEDIVE for the Transatlantic journey to the naval base at Scapa Flow. Enroute, at the Naval Air Station, Hatston (Orkney Is.) four Wildcats were temporarily added to the strength. In February, 1944 an anti-submarine course was undertaken by the Squadron at Maydown and Eglinton in

Northern Ireland, followed by a squadron work-up at Machrihanish, Scotland.

Operational at last on 20 April 1944, No. 849 began its long association with Cornwall by moving to Perranporth. Anti-submarine patrols with an occasional strike and E-boat hunt were made under the direction of RAF Coastal Command. On one of the last armed reconnaissance patrols in August, 1944 three armed minesweepers and four landing craft were sighted leaving St. Malo harbour. Since specific orders forbade attacks on shipping in the harbour, the CO led the aircraft away until the small force was out of the harbour and then attacked. One landing craft was sunk and one minesweeper damaged in return for one damaged Avenger; the Observer of that airplane died on the return journey to Perranporth.

So ended 849's European activities. Barracuda aircraft in the Far East were to be replaced by Avengers and to facilitate this, 849, 854 and 857 Squadrons embarked in HMS RAJAH and sailed for Ceylon in September 1944. No. 849 Squadron came under the command of Lt Cdr D.R. Foster, R.N.V.R.

No. 849 Sqdn at full strength with seventeen Skyraiders, lined up at RNAS Culdrose, circa 1955. (Photo - R.A.J. Mersom)



The work-up for the new role took place at Katukurunda, Ceylon. Aircraft modifications were carried out aboard HMS RAJAH, and at Cambatore, and the complement of airplanes was increased to twenty-one. By December, after a very dull and hard worked stay at Katukurunda everybody was relieved to embark in HMS VICTORIOUS. No. 849 was to be the ship's torpedo-bomber/reconnaissance unit.

Operation LENTIL, code name for attacks on Japanese oil refineries at Pangkalan. Bandon and Palembang, was mounted on 4 January 1945. The raid was a big one. and eventually 48 Avengers from 820, 849, 854, and 857 Squadrons attacked with great success. The only casualty was when the senior pilot of 849 ditched on the way and was picked up with his crew by a destroyer only five miles from the enemy coast.

Another visit to Ceylon, and then the fleet sailed for Operation MERIDIAN. This was the code for attacks on oil refineries at Palembang again, which has become one of the Squadrons Battle Honors. After a long flight over enemy territory, opposed by Tojo's, Nick's and Oscar's, the target area was reached, and found to be heavily defended by flak and balloons. Despite the opposition the air group bombing was effective and accurate, so that all major targets were destroyed in two raids; the third, though planned, was cancelled. Japanese claims were 100 aircraft downed and 16 probables for 14 of their own aircraft lost, but No. 849 had in fact only five aircrew killed or missing. The Squadron was awarded one D.S.O., two D.S.C.'s, and two D.S.M.'s, plus three mentioned in dispatches.

HMS VICTORIOUS went briefly to Australia, where No. 849 went ashore at Nowra NAS in February and re-embarked in March. The ship went closer to Japan, and the British Fleet joined US forces to undertake Operation ICEBERG. Strikes on airfields and shore installations were carried out until May. The ship returned again to Sydney in June, and finally went, in August, to join in the victory operations with strikes against the Tokyo area. Thus the war ended for No. 849. Sqdn. VICTORIOUS stopped briefly at Australia, where the Squadron left its Avengers, and returned to the United Kingdom. No. 849 Sqdn, was disbanded on 31 Oct. 1945.

Following the training period, in which No. 778 Sqdn. integrated the, new AD-4W Skyraiders into use. No. 849

No. 424, WV106, of "D" Flight from HMS CENTAUR at Royal Naval Air Station Brawdy, Pembrokeshire.

(Photo-by author)

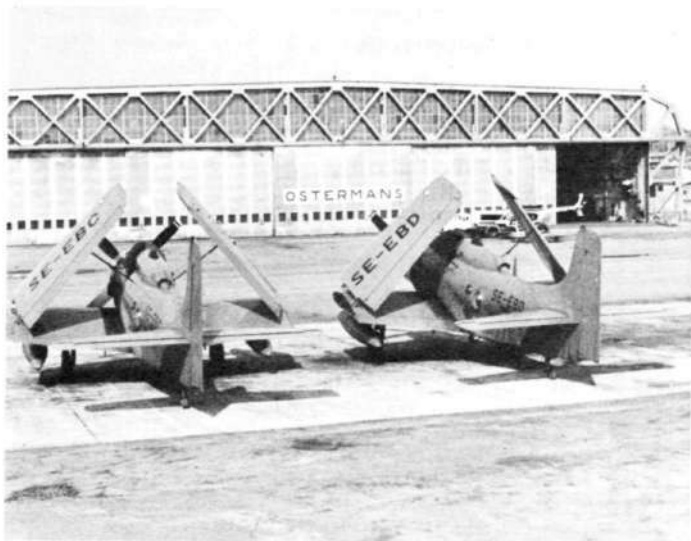
Sqdn. was reactivated at RNAS Culdrose, Cornwall, in July 1952. Its airplanes were now designated type AEW.1, and the Squadron used operational techniques similar to those of USN VAW squadrons. No. 849 became unique in that it was the first AEW squadron in the Royal Navy. The Sky-raider was unique in that it was the last piston-engined aircraft (except helicopters) to serve with the Fleet Air Arm. It was possibly the heaviest, 25,000 pounds loaded weight, and certainly capable of the greatest range — 3,000 miles.

No. 849 consisted of a Headquarters Flight, shore based, and four operational flights which embarked on carriers for exercises as required. Each of the flights had four airplanes and five complete crews, or 16 officers and 62 enlisted ranks. The flights were self-contained for deployment either ashore or afloat, and usually commanded by a Lt. Commander or Senior Lt., either a pilot or observer. When not at sea the flights returned to the shore base and continued training and maintenance. When working to capacity the Operational Flying School, at the Headquarters base and under the command of the Squadron Executive Officer, had six pilots and nine observers undergoing training. The observer course was to last 21 weeks, with 123 hours flying and 420 hours of ground instruction. The pilot course was likewise of 21 weeks duration, with 180 hours spent in flying and 350 on ground instruction.

The accompanying photographs show numbers of the AEW.1's at various periods in the decade of use. The original complement of twenty was augmented by another thirty from the US Navy, and these were assigned and reassigned many times over to detachments aboard the various carriers, ALBION, ARK ROYAL, BULWARK, CENTAUR, EAGLE, and VICTORIOUS. In January 1953 RNAS Culdrose changed codes from CW to CU, and in a major reorganization of Fleet Air Arm codes in 1956 the series 300 airplane codes changed to 400 series. These, plus the many carrier assignments, resulted in a very wide range of identification numbers being assigned, with some airplanes having up to as many as six designations during its service life.

There were remarkably few casualties; WT963 and WV183 crashed within three days of each other, WV183 on ALBION on 9 Feb. 1960 and WT963 in a field near Exeter on 12 Feb. The balance of the airplanes, except two, were





SE-EBC and SE-EBD at Stockholm, May 1970. Colors now orange with black lettering, black propeller with two white and one red stripe at tips. Wing-fold lock bars red. Black radio transceiver housing atop fuselage fairing. (Photo—Roland Poehlmann).



SE-EBA of Svensk Flygtjänst AB, first of the twelve ex-Royal Navy AEW.1s to appear in civil markings. "Guppy" radome entirely discarded, tail hook and many other items of RN operation removed. (Photo - Scottish Av. No. NR/4/1025/962)

used up for spares, or were in the Aircraft Holding Unit, RNAS Abbotsinch in 1962. Accidents occurred to "A" Flight on the EAGLE in June and November 1956, and to "B" Flight on VICTORIOUS in September and November 1959.

In late 1962 and early 1963 twelve of the AEW.1s were procured by Sweden for use as tow-target airplanes, and these were flown to Prestwick for refurbishing by Scottish Aviation. Ltd. WT987 and WT951 were flown from RNAS Culdrose and the others came from Abbotsinch. A temporary registry, G-31, followed by a dash number, was assigned to each airplane for the flight to Prestwick, and upon delivery to Sweden these were changed to the Swedish registrations. Two more, ex-WV182 and WV185 were delivered to Sweden for spares.

Thus the long-lived AD Skyraider is still flying. No. 849 Squadron is likewise still flying, now based at RNAS Brawdy, Pembrokeshire, and is currently under the command of Lt Cdr R.M. Scott, RN.

ROYAL NAVY DESIGNATIONS

When the airplanes came to the Fleet Air Arm they were assigned Royal Navy serial numbers, plus an airplane code number within the squadron, painted on the fuselage in large numerals. Though the RN serial number did not change during the service life of the airplane, the fuselage code number changed frequently as each airplane was detached to flights aboard the various aircraft carriers. In the following table of RN serial numbers vs. airplane codes, the codes are not entirely in chronological order.

Code letters, standing for the Carriers or Shore Stations, accompanying the code numbers were:

A and Z - HMS ALBION	E and J- HMS EAGLE
B - HMSBULWARK	O and R - HMS ARK ROYAL
C- HMS CENTAUR	V- HMS VICTORIOUS
AC - RNAS ABBOTSINCH	CU and CW - RNAS CULDROSE

"415", WT121, displayed in the Fleet Air Arm Museum at Yeovilton, Somerset during a Royal Navy Open Day.

(Photo—Aviation Photo News)





WT965 paused for repairs or modifications to its radome, absent in this photograph. The Squadron Badge was placed on the center port side cowl flap. (Photo — Arthur Percy collection)

Right, "324", WV179, lands aboard a Royal Navy carrier in typical (and desirable) attitude. (Photo — Fleet Air Arm Museum)

"332", SL500, a Fairey AEW.3 Gannet touches down on HMS HERMES, July 1966. Gannet replaced Skyraider in 1962. (Photo-Royal Navy G570)



RN S/N	CODES ASSIGNED 1951-1960	Temporary Registry	Sweden Regis.
WT097	418,429/C, 450/A, AHU		
WT112	415, 418, AHU		
WT121	326(D), 428/B,415/CU Note 1		
WT761	301/CU, 410/CU Note 2		
WT849	413/J, HQ, AHU		
WT944	301/CW/CU, 301/J, 411, 418/R, AHU, 418/O(B)		
WT945	302/CW/CU, 302/J, 429(D), 433, 453, AHU		
WT946	303/CW/CU, 303/J, AHU	G-31-10	SE-EBG
WT947	411,453, AHU	G-31-11	SE-EBI
WT948	307/CW, 307/J, 414/J, AHU		
WT949	308/CW, 308/J, 415/J, 414, AHU	G-31-5	SE-EBB
WT950	309, 311/CW, 311/J, 413(B), 416, 417/O, AHU	G-31-7	SE-EBD
WT951	309/CW, 309/J, 309/V, 431,451	G-31-2	SE-EBM
WT952	312/CW, 418/O(B), 424/A, AHU	G-31-4	SE-EBA
WT953	313/CW, 417/J, 417/E, 421/E		
WT954	310/CW, 310/J(A), 310/E, 417/E, AHU		
WT955	315/CW/CU		
WT956	314/CW, 315, 420/O, 416, 418/E, AHU		
WT957	317/O, 430/R, 419/O(B), 425/A, AHU		
WT958	317/CU,421/O	G-3108	SE-EBE
WT959	413, 415/J, 423, 424/A, AHU	G-31-9	SE-EBF
WT960	316/O,413/(B),420/O(B), AHU	G-31-13	SE-EBH
WT961	302/CU, 411/CU, 421/O(B), 417/J, AHU	G-31-6	SE-EBL
WT962	423/A, 443/A, AHU		
WT963	313/CU, 411/CU, HQ, crashed.		
WT964	325/(D),428/J		
WT965	423/Z, 426, 417/J(A), 417/E		
WT966	302/CW/CU, 411/CU, 415/E, 419/E, 427/A, 452/A, AHU		
WT967	304/CU, 426/C, 442/C, AHU		
WT968	303/CU, 412, 422/Z, 423/C		
WT969	321/CU,321/Z		
WT984	414/CU, 414/J		
WT985	416/E, 420/E, 414/E, 414/CU		
WT986	CU,416/J(A)		
WT987	462/CU, 416/CU, 416/J(A), 410/R	G-31-3	SE-EBL
WV102	305, 320/CW, 423, 426, 416, AHU		
WV103	318, 323/CU, 410		
WV104	319/CU		
WV105	320/Z(C), 414/J, 418/CU		
WV106	427/C, 416, 424/C(D) Note 1.		
WV107	322/Z, AHU		
WV177	321, 413/CU, 425/Z		
WV178	319/Z, 424/Z, 417/CU, 428		
WV179	324/CU(D),432/V, AHU		
WV180	429/CU, 319/Z, 429/Z		
WV181	415/J, 421/R,430/V, 430/A, AHU	G-31-13	SE-EBK
WV182	427, 428/A, 451/A, AHU		Spare
WV183	426/CU, 419/R, 433/V, 426/A, crashed.		
WV184	421		
WV185		AHU	Spare

AHU = Aircraft Holding Unit, RNAS Abbotsinch

Note 1: WT121 and WV106 are preserved in the Fleet Air Arm Museum at RNAS Yeovilton, Somerset.

Note 2: WT761 is also the number for a Hawker Hunter.

The AD-4W's allotted to Great Britain under the MDAP program were U.S. Navy serial numbers:

124080	124103	124122	124771	126846	127922
124085	124104	124124	124772	126849	127942
124086	124107	124761	124774	126866	/127961
124097	124110/124116	124765	124777	126867	
124101	124121	124768			

REFERENCES:

- ¹ The Profile No. 106 by Harry S. Gann, "Skyraider," prompted Lt. R.A.J. Merson, RN (Ret) to write the following poem commenting on the Wasp (sic) insignia of "B" Flight.

*The Sky is known both far and wide
With Squadron cyphers on its side.
In 849 our flights did roam
Four flights at sea, HQ at home.
Four flights of four, a letter for a name
A through D, each one gained fame.
On each cowl there was a letter,
"B" Flight went just one better.
Placed right there for all to see
There is no Wasp, it is a BEE."*

- ² The 28 variations are described in Jackson, B.R. *Douglas Skyraider*. Fallbrook, Calif.: Aero Publishers, 1969.

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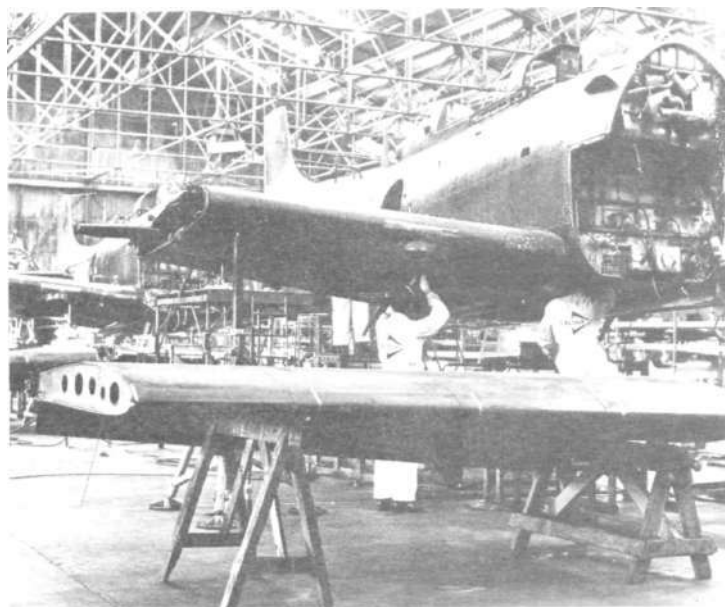
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Refurbishment of AEW.1 Skyraiders, after nearly twelve years of service in the Royal Navy, took place at Scottish Aviation Ltd. at Prestwick Airport. The airplanes were then flown to Sweden for use as tow target airplanes. Some were photographed in operation recently in Sweden, extending the useful life of the World War II design well into the third decade. (Photo-Scottish Aviation Ltd. No. NR4/1049/1162 (5))

Below, the Bee insignia applied to "B" Flight airplanes.

(Photo-RN)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Arthur Percy, Jr. had the unique experience of serving with the USAF as a civilian in Project Native Sun from 1954 to 1958 on Douglas C-47s with the 7531st Air Base Squadron. His introduction to aviation began in 1932 in seeing Alan Cobham's air circus, and has carried through to this day. He is now an Air Traffic Controller at RAE Llanbedr, North Wales, as is his wife Audrey. Interested mainly in Lend-Lease aviation history, Arthur is now dedicated to the DC-3/Dakota series and is working on books covering this famous airplane as well as other articles for the *JOURNAL* of AAHS, including the RAF Washington (Boeing B-29), and the P2V Neptune. Arthur and wife both have many friends in the U.S.A. and make frequent visits on vacation.