



Cold War Buccaneers

The Buccaneer was an important element in the overland, maritime and nuclear strike roles with the RAF. Dr Kevin Wright speaks with **Air Cdre Ben Laite** (ret'd) about his experiences as commander of 208 Sqn from 1981 until 1984

On January 1, 1981, newly promoted Wg Cdr Ben Laite was appointed as the commanding officer of 208 Sqn, flying Buccaneer S.2Bs from RAF Honington in Suffolk. His first flying post had been in 1965 as a navigator on Vulcans. In 1970, he transferred to Phantoms and, over six years, was assigned to II(AC), 6 and 41 Sqns. After two tours at Headquarters RAF Strike Command and an RAF Staff College course, he took up his post with 208 Sqn.

"As well as all the flying, being CO means you have to run the squadron: looking after the aircrews, groundcrews and engineers, the admin, planning and other responsibilities," he recounted. "It was one of the biggest challenges and most exhilarating periods in my RAF career."

To ready himself for his return to flying, Wg Cdr Laite undertook a ten-week navigator's refresher course at RAF Finningley, Yorkshire from February 1981. After some initial Dominie T.1 sorties, he

concentrated on low-level flights in the Jet Provost. As he described: "After some time away from it, I thoroughly enjoyed being back into low-level visual navigation, relying on maps and stopwatch."

On June 16, 1981, he went to 237 Operational Conversion Unit (OCU) at Honington: "Initially, a few of the OCU staff seemed a little wary of a squadron CO who had not flown the Buccaneer before. That soon disappeared when they saw that I was experienced in low-level visual navigation, having previously done so in the Phantom's back seat. It was just a change of aircraft, not role.

"I was asked how the Buccaneer differed from the Phantom. In the back of the Phantom, on take-off 'the boy in front' engaged reheat and everything happened very rapidly. It only calmed down again as we were going through 3,000ft and 350kts. In the Buccaneer, I watched the Air Speed Indicator as the pilot opened up the throttles. We slowly went through 60, 70, 80, 90kts with the end of the runway rapidly approaching and we slowly got airborne. However, once the Buccaneer was in the air, we could stay at low level and high speed for an hour-and-a-half. This was somewhat longer than the Phantom's endurance at low-level.

"The OCU certainly threw their Buccaneers around more than we did the F-4s, but it was a steadier ride. It felt like all my previous Vulcan and Phantom experience fell into place on the Buccaneer.

There was a lot to learn, but it was very stimulating and I was at least used to flying in a two-man crew!

"In the Phantom, I occasionally suffered from air sickness, but not in the Buccaneer. One huge advantage was that its [Buccaneer] rear seat was offset to one side of the pilot, so I could see over his right shoulder. We got a bit of a view forward to see what was coming. This was far better than just being able to look out of the side, as in the Phantom. [However] I felt the F-4's radar in ground attack mode was far better than the Buccaneer's.

"Overall, the back of the Buccaneer had the reputation of being an ergonomic slum. Many pieces of equipment had been haphazardly added to it at different times during its

Main photo: The Buccaneer was in its element at low level Crown Copyright, MoD

Right: Wg Cdr Ben Laite being welcomed to RAF Lossiemouth by the station commander, Gp Capt Peter Oulton, when 208 Sqn moved from Honington to the northerly base Crown Copyright, MoD

Below: The vast expanses of Canada provided excellent training for 208 Sqn during a Maple Flag exercise Crown Copyright, MoD



career. You needed to have your wits about you to move your hands to the right place at the right time, but that was all part of the challenge."

Completing his OCU course on November 27, 1981, Wg Cdr Laite took command of 208 Sqn in the neighbouring hangar at Honington. His new squadron consisted of 15 two-man crews, 120 groundcrew, ten Buccaneers and three Hunters. "I got a good handover from Graham Pitchfork – he loved the Buccaneer and was really enthusiastic about it," Laite said. "I stepped into a good team. The flight commanders were a good bunch, all very experienced on the Buccaneer. Two were former F-4 Phantom crew members as I was.

"I hit the ground running. An early challenge was to build 'street cred' with the existing team. This was extremely demanding flying and they wanted to be sure that I was up to the mark. I soon flew several sorties with the flight commanders and our Qualified Rating Examiner. Later my new regular crew pilot joined me and we often flew together."

In January 1982, while he was still settling in, 208 Sqn underwent its NATO Tactical Evaluation (TACEVAL). ▶





Two-seat Hunters were loaned to the Buccaneer squadrons while the latter type was grounded due to wing fatigue issues. When flying resumed it was decided the Hunters should be permanently assigned to the units Dr Kevin Wright

A key Buccaneer capability was its wartime nuclear role. Laite said: "We did all the required tactical stuff during the week. On the evening before the TACEVAL's final day, we were told to re-arm the aircraft for their nuclear role and expect 'Release' sometime later – all simulated, of course. We had ten aircraft ready to go the next day, although the weather at Honington was terrible. The point of a TACEVAL was to test our preparedness for war. So, despite the weather, all ten of us launched when ordered."

The nuclear WE177B weapons would have been delivered using a toss bombing technique. Flying at low level, a Buccaneer would have climbed steeply and released the bomb before turning away and diving back down to low level.

"On return to Honington from an excellent sortie, we were told the weather was below limits but that we could make one attempt to get in. I was in the lead aircraft and we made one approach but had to overshoot and all ten of us diverted to nearby Mildenhall. But we got the top rating for the TACEVAL so it worked out.

"Dedicated to the low-level attack role, we had little defensive kit apart from our Westinghouse ALQ-101 ECM pods. Training in the UK, we were usually restricted overland down to a 250ft minimum altitude. During our normal low-level training sorties we frequently made a First Run Attack on one of the east coast weapon ranges, which were cleared of other traffic for us. We reached the designated Initial Point and then ran straight in, dropped our practice bomb and headed onto the next training target. We didn't even wait for a score – they gave it to us when we got back to base.

"We sometimes added in an airfield attack which had to be pre-arranged. We frequently used Coltishall, Marham and Wattisham, occasionally St Mawgan. Arriving as two pairs – or a four ship – we ran at low level straight down their runway, simulating dropping our weapons, hoping no one had seen us on an air defence radar. This was an effective tactic at the time and would have been even more so if we had a specialised area denial weapon such as the JP233 available, like the Tornado later used."

NORWEGIAN ADVENTURES

Wg Cdr Laite gave an insight into 208 Sqn's role if the Cold War had heated up: "Our wartime assignment was to NATO's Allied Forces North [AFNORTH]. We expected to be deployed to Norway, most likely to Bodø or Bardufoss airfields, or potentially Denmark.

"We regularly trained in Norway, a minimum of two detachments every six months. Named 'Furbelows', we flew across the North Sea to Norway, did some low-level work and landed. The following morning, we completed a 1hr 30min low-level sortie. In the afternoon, we flew another short low-level sortie before a high-level return to Honington.

"During October 1982 we took the whole squadron to Bodø for a fortnight practising low-level attack missions within Norway. It was a different operating environment to the UK. We had to quickly get used to the local air traffic arrangements, as many Norwegian airfields handled mixed civilian and military traffic. We had some restrictions but, we could usually fly low level pretty freely. The biggest danger were power lines that sometimes stretched across fjords. We were not used to these, so we had to be extra-careful.

"During winter, the Norwegians did not clear the ice from their runways – it became the runway surface. It made landings and take-offs quite interesting at times. On one occasion, a pilot applied the Buccaneer's parking brake as he awaited take-off clearance. He then applied power and departed for a high-level transit home. As he touched down at Honington, his two

Ben Laite's Buccaneer escorting Vulcan B.2 XM571 to Gibraltar to become the station's gate guard Via Naval Eight/208 Sqn Association



main wheel tyres burst because the parking brake was still on. On take-off from Bodø, his locked wheels had simply slid over the iced runway!"

The Buccaneers also had to regularly practise other skilled manoeuvres: "We did a lot of air-to-air refuelling, mostly with the Marham-based Victors. The Buccaneer had its own buddy-refuelling capability. We attached a wing-mounted pod containing a hose and drogue to refuel other aircraft and that gave us extra operational flexibility. We sometimes topped up from a Victor, which then headed home, and then we buddy-refuelled the other Buccaneers as required. It made it possible for us to vary the way we mounted attacks and did not always have to rely on another tanker rendezvous.

"Practising low-level fighter evasion was important for us, too. We called Binbrook for the Lightnings, or one of the Phantom stations, tell them we would be in a designated low-flying area at a specific time and ask if they wanted to put up a 'bounce.' This fighter affiliation training was pre-authorised and saw defenders mount combat air patrols [CAPs] as they attempted to intercept us and get into firing positions. We kept a lookout for them and scattered when we spotted them, re-forming further on [the route]. It added excitement and realism to our training. If fighters were not available, we used our own squadron's Hawker Hunters.

"When the Buccaneers had been grounded in February 1980, following an accident that revealed wing fatigue issues, the Buccaneer squadrons were allocated two-seat Hunters from the OCU to allow limited pilot continuation training; they had some similar flight instrumentation to the Buccaneers. After the grounding was lifted, we were permitted to retain them, which worked very well. The Hunter's side-by-side seating meant, as a navigator CO, I could get a ride in a Hunter and have a good view of how our crews were performing, or do the bouncing!"

NEW HOME

Almost two years into his command, Laite received news that the squadron's days were apparently numbered: "During autumn 1982, we were informed [that] our Buccaneers were to be moved to Lossiemouth, joining 12 Sqn in the maritime role on July 1, 1983. The intention was to move our aircraft there and become 216 Sqn.

"This caused morale at 208 to drop significantly. By then, I had become accustomed to being CO of a fantastic Buccaneer squadron. We started making arrangements for the move but, as these progressed, there were delays in the introduction of the Tornado GR.1 into squadron service.

"The Tri-national Tornado Training Establishment [TTTE] at RAF Cottesmore and Honington based-Tornado Weapons



Two 208 Sqn Buccaneers on the RAF Honington flightline Dr Kevin Wright

Conversion Unit were turning out pilots and navigators. It was decided to use the Honington Buccaneers in a sort of 'mop up' operation to give the new crews some continuation training until more Tornados became available. Although a different aircraft, it was a similar role as it involved low-level weapons delivery. We didn't really have enough Buccaneers to do that effectively, but we just got on with the task.

"As for the move to Lossiemouth, eventually the RAF recognised it made good sense to retain 208 Sqn rather than effectively creating a 'new' unit. When that was announced, morale went sky high again.

"One of last things we did in the overland role was ultra-low-level attack training during a Canadian Maple Flag exercise at CFB Cold Lake in Alberta. There we got extremely realistic training with opposition like the USAF's new F-15As. It seemed a bit ridiculous as we were about to switch to the maritime role, but it was such a good opportunity we couldn't miss it.

"Before going to Canada, prior training required participating crews to successfully complete six sorties over Scotland, down to the specially authorised 100ft above the ground. While maritime squadrons were cleared down to 100ft, that was over the sea, not land.

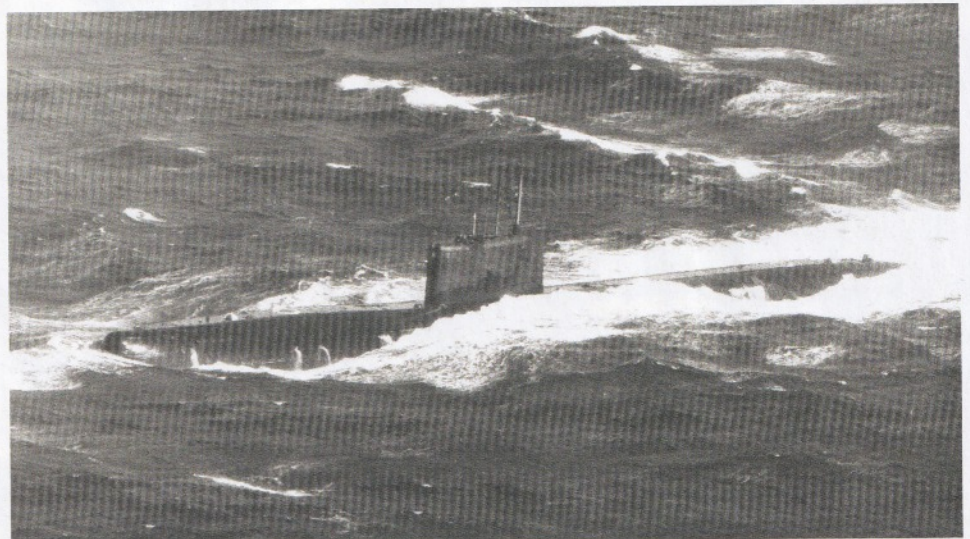
"We set off to Maple Flag in late April 1983 and experienced two weeks of fantastic training, flying as low and as fast

as possible, trying to avoid the F-15s. It was amazing and stimulating and we were good at it. The F-15 pilots said they could see us below them, but were unable to attain firing positions with a firm lock on us without their simulated missiles hitting the ground first. The ground-based radars didn't stand a chance. They never saw us until we flew right over the top of them – we were always in their ground clutter.

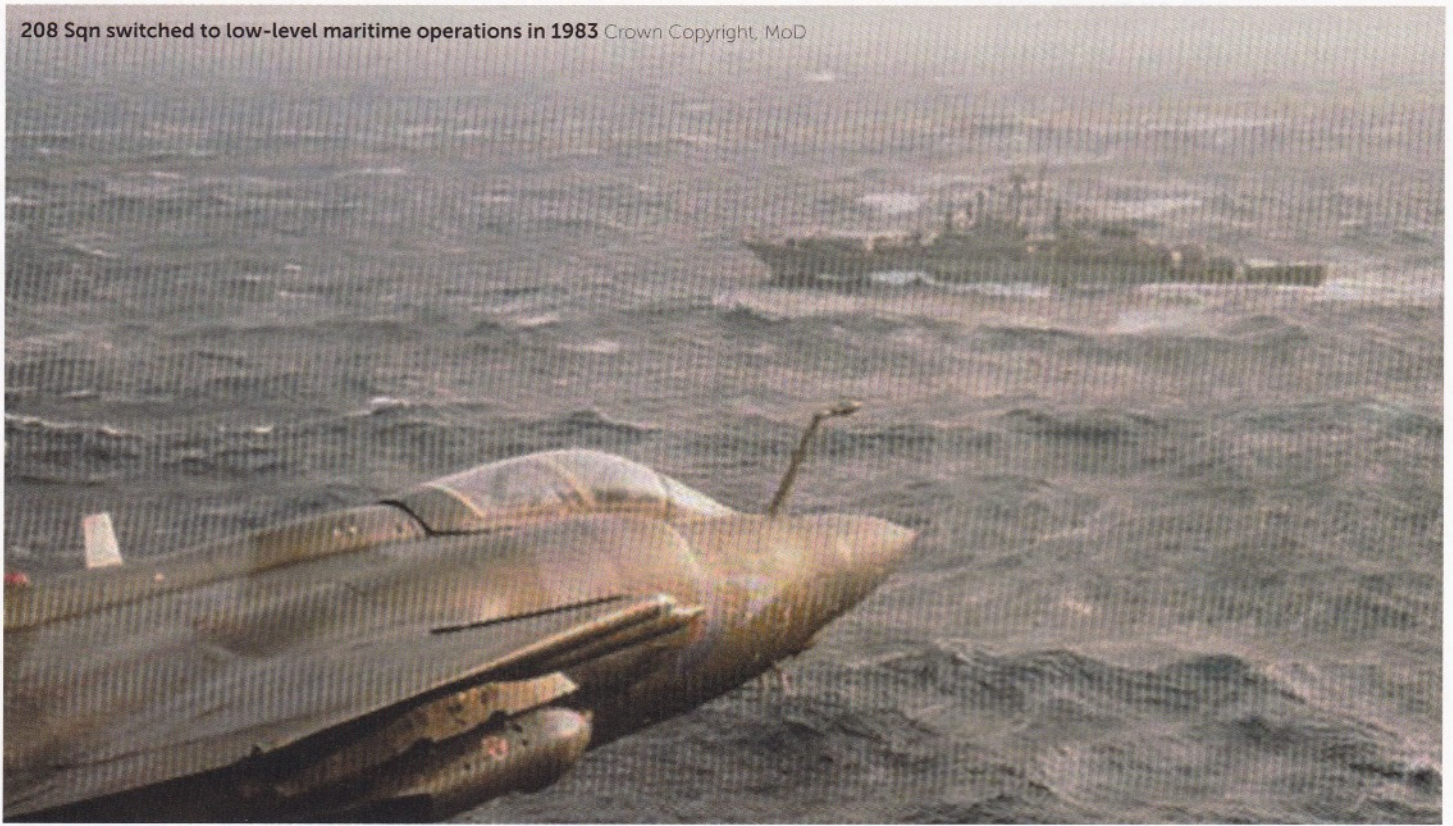
"On our return, we began our maritime training. We started the move to Lossiemouth and led a three Buccaneer formation there on July 5, 1983. We took some of our 208 crews from Honington to join former Lossiemouth 12 Sqn crews, who had been intended to form the nucleus of the re-formed 216 Sqn. Instead, they provided our core maritime experience base. Our training was intensive, as we learned to fly down to 100ft over the sea, relying on our radio altimeters. At that altitude and high speed, there was little room for error."

208 Sqn took part in combined navy and air force Joint Maritime Courses and were occasionally sent to intercept and photograph Soviet vessels. These included a *Kirov* class cruiser and a *Tango* class submarine.

In 1979, the RAF had acquired a number of AN/AVQ-23E Pave Spike laser targeting pods, to enable the Buccaneer to drop Paveway II laser-guided bombs (LGBs). As Laite explained: "We adapted our Pave ▶



As part of the squadron's maritime role it was sometimes tasked with photographing Soviet Navy vessels such as this *Tango* class submarine Crown Copyright, MoD



Spike target designation techniques for use against ships. It was the navigator's task to 'lase' the target aiming via a screen positioned between his knees and a hand control. This was positioned awkwardly, slightly behind your right elbow! It was quite tricky to use, especially when the Buccaneer was pulling 2-3g. We learned to use the Pave Spike equipment as part of our squadron weapons training.

"For ship attack profiles, we often used a six aircraft formation, working in threes, running in at low level. We headed towards a predetermined position to pick up final instructions from a controller on board a Nimrod maritime patrol aircraft. Closing in, we activated our Blue Parrot anti-ship radar. Two of the six Buccaneers were 'Spikers', carrying the laser designation equipment. Closing at 100ft and 540kts at 15 miles from the target, we performed a 'banana split', as everyone turned outwards and adopted slightly different headings – three to the right and three left, holding the heading for 45 seconds. Then the two pairs of bombers turned back towards the target vessel, while the two 'Spikers' continued turning away but maintaining laser illumination of the ship. The bombers all arrived from different directions and gave the ship multiple, simultaneous threats. The Spikers continued lasing the target, while the other Buccaneers pulled up and each released their four 1,000lb LGBs and made a rapid exit.

"It was a risky tactic and probably would have led to heavy wartime losses. This was an interim tactic pending introduction of the Sea Eagle missile, which arrived in 1985, just after I left 208 Sqn."

In the midst of 208's role change, conflict erupted in Lebanon again. On

September 8, 1983, with Wg Cdr Laite as detachment commander, six Lossiemouth Buccaneers and crews deployed to RAF Akrotiri on Cyprus for Operation Pulsator. They provided a quick reaction air support capability for a small British Army contingent in Beirut, part of a multinational force temporarily operating in Lebanon. On September 11, two pairs of Buccaneers, working in co-ordination with the aircraft carrier USS *Dwight D Eisenhower*, mounted the first low-level 'show of strength' flights over Beirut. For these 40min missions, the Buccaneers were fitted with ALQ-101 pods, AIM-9 Sidewinder missiles, designator pods and four 1,000lb LGB retard bombs in their internal bomb bay, as well as chaff/flare dispensers for extra protection. The operation lasted until March 26, 1984, when the Buccaneers returned home, having flown 734 hours on Pulsator-related missions but no operational attack sorties.

In April 1984, 208 Sqn was on Gibraltar and training in its maritime attack role. The following month, on May 9, Ben Laite and another Buccaneer flew a unique mission escorting an RAF Vulcan on its final flight to the island. Piloted by the Gibraltar air commander, it became the airfield's gate guard.

Wg Cdr Laite handed over command of 208 Sqn to Wg Cdr J A Ford on July 6, 1984. He retired from the RAF as an Air Commodore in 1998, after tours as the Director of RAF Cranwell's Department of Air Warfare, the Station Commander of RAF St Mawgan, Assistant Commandant of the RAF College and a final appointment as Deputy Director of the Personnel Management Agency for Officers and Airmen Aircrew. **AN**



Gibraltar was a frequent training location for Buccaneer maritime operations Crown Copyright, MoD

A line up of 208 Squadron Buccaneers. Ben Laite commanded the unit from 1981 to 1984 Key Collection

