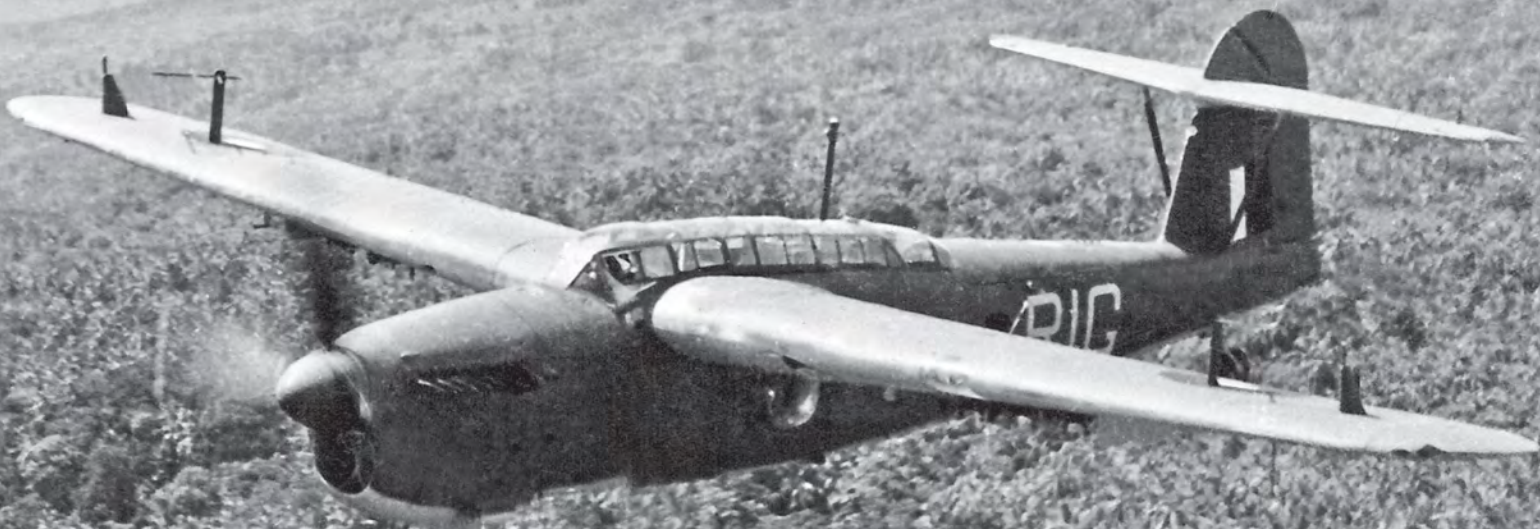


# VENGEANCE in the Far East

As the Second World War drew to a close, two of the Royal Navy's new light fleet carriers were going to war — and spearheading their strike capabilities were squadrons equipped with the much-maligned Fairey Barracuda

WORDS: MATTHEW WILLIS





**T**he Fairey Barracuda torpedo and dive-bomber is an aircraft with an undeniably poor reputation, yet much 'common knowledge' about it is based on myth or exaggeration. One of the most abiding of these myths is that Barracudas, underpowered and too short-ranged in hot climates, were unsuccessful in the Far East and consequently replaced in the British Eastern Fleet by Grumman Avengers. This does not accurately reflect the full picture, and Barracudas played a large part in the Royal Navy's plans for the war in the Pacific and the final defeat of Japan in late 1944 and 1945. Foremost in these was the new 11th Aircraft Carrier Squadron, including HMS *Vengeance* and 812 Squadron, and HMS *Venerable*, with 814 Squadron.

Several Barracuda squadrons had operated successfully with Fleet carriers in the East Indies from spring to autumn 1944, taking part in a number of raids. Immediately following attacks on Nancowrie Harbour in the Nicobar Islands, however, the Barracuda units were quickly pulled back to India and Ceylon, their place taken by Avengers. This was not, however, entirely a result of the aircraft's performance in the theatre — in fact, further Barracudas were soon to be on their way. A powerful force of carriers with no fewer than four squadrons equipped with Barracuda IIs had reached the Far East and was ready to join the fight when Japan surrendered, and more were due to follow.

A new series of light fleet carriers had been initiated in 1942. These ships were based on the design of the Illustrious class but were slightly

smaller and more lightly armoured, with machinery similar to that used by cruisers. They were intended to be quicker and cheaper to build than the main fleet carriers, but capable of operating in a similar manner. Ten Colossus-class vessels were then under construction or complete, with another six of the improved Majestic class also laid down.



A task group based around four of the new carriers was to be formed for combat in the Far East. In fact, some squadrons withdrawn from the theatre in 1944 were earmarked for a return with these vessels. The 11th Aircraft Carrier Squadron (ACS) under Rear Admiral C. H. J. Harcourt was established with *Colossus*, *Venerable*, *Vengeance* and *Glory*, each carrying a single Barracuda squadron. The unit was to have been a full part of the British Pacific Fleet — the 11th ACS was due to join the 3rd Fleet in Task Force 37 — and among the missions slated were raids on Truk and Formosa.

The longest-serving Barracuda unit, 827 Squadron, was attached to HMS

Squadron, explained the preparation made by the Barracuda units and their journey out to the Far East: "The squadron officially formed on 1 June 1944... We left Crail [in Fife] at the beginning of September, then crewed up with our full crews, our observers and air gunners — up to that time we'd mainly been doing pilot training. And when we got the crews, we then started doing more training, which involved the navigators, and the observers and the air gunners. We learned to do fighter evasion and various things like that.

"We were stationed at Burscough, which is just inland from Southport; we were there 'til the beginning of November. We then went up to a place called Fearn way up in the north-east of Scotland, miles from anywhere."

At Fearn, otherwise known as HMS *Owl*, the Barracuda squadrons continued intensive training. This included formation flying at low level over the Cromarty Firth and dive-bombing training using floating targets off Nigg Sands. "We had several accidents; we lost quite a few people in the training role", Dickson said. "And of course the Barracuda didn't

**ABOVE: Barracuda PM861/B1G bombing up at Malta ahead of a training mission, as part of the 11th ACS's preparations en route to the Far East. The standard bomb dollies would not reach the Barracuda's high wing, so bombs had to be raised via a winch on the upper wing, by a cable that ran through the mainplane.**

**OPPOSITE: A Barracuda coded R1G of 814 Squadron flies above the Ceylonese jungle. The 11th Aircraft Carrier Squadron Barracuda units disembarked on Ceylon in June 1945.**

ALL PHOTOS VIA MATTHEW WILLIS

## *'Barracudas played a large part in the Royal Navy's plans for the war in the Pacific and the final defeat of Japan'*

*Colossus*, the first of the new carriers. Other Barracuda squadrons assigned to light fleet carriers of the new task group were 814, 837 and 812.

The carriers belonging to the 11th ACS worked up as they headed to the Pacific. John Dickson, a pilot with 812

have all that good a reputation as a safe aeroplane."

One such exercise on 13 July ended disastrously. During a training flight involving close formation flying at 1,000ft above the Cromarty Firth, one aircraft struck an air pocket and



**ABOVE: HMS Vengeance at Gibraltar during the 11th ACS's long voyage east. On deck are the Barracudas of 812 Squadron and the Corsairs of 1850 Squadron, as well as some Seafires or Spitfires, possibly for delivery in the Mediterranean.**

collided with a Barracuda flying beneath it. The pair crashed into the sea, and the pilot and TAG (telegraphist-air gunner) in the upper cockpit of the lower aircraft, and the entire crew of the upper one, were killed instantly. The observer, slightly better-protected within the fuselage of the former machine, survived. This was Sub-Lt Sagg, a former Cambridge scholar, who was seen by the remaining aircraft to climb out onto the wing before collapsing. He was picked up by a rescue boat, and described as being "black and blue". The squadron never saw him again and it was assumed that he had died — in fact, he survived, but had broken his back and would not be fit to fly in time to re-join the

squadron. The five crew members killed were buried at Invergordon. Even given the Barracuda's reputation for crashes in training, the loss of five personnel in one incident must have been devastating for the remaining men of the unit.



"The ship that we were going to join, though we didn't know it at the time", said John Dickson, "was HMS Vengeance, which was one of the new light fleet carriers. Called the *Colossus* class, there were four initially. And these four carriers each carried one Barracuda squadron and one Corsair squadron. That's what we were — we

were going to be a fleet of four light fleet carriers. The last of the four, HMS *Glory*, was always a little bit behind us. For some reason, she was a little bit late. She didn't really catch up with us until we got to Australia.

"The carriers should have been ready, as we now know, in about November, and we were ready to join them by then. But there was trouble at the shipyards or something like that. Our ship was not in fact commissioned until the new year, 1945, and we didn't join it until the end of January 1945. So we were at least two months behind schedule."

In fact, most of the Fleet Air Arm squadrons with the 11th ACS were ready before their carriers. The

**RIGHT: Members of 814 Squadron, now in tropical gear, pose in front of a birdstrike on an 11th ACS Barracuda in 1945, apparently a large raptor which could have done significant damage had it hit somewhere more vulnerable.**



Barracuda units were left conducting more deck-landing training, or anti-submarine warfare in European waters, while they waited for the ships. Finally, on 12 March 1945, HMS *Vengeance*, along with the other three carriers, left the Clyde escorted by six destroyers. The squadron sailed around the north of Ireland, heading towards Gibraltar. A week later, *Vengeance* arrived in Malta. “We were there for a while”, said John Dickson, “and were still there on VE Day.”

Along with the other squadrons of the 11th ACS, 812 continued its work-up while at Malta. This included training sorties over Sicily, escorted by its ‘partner’ unit, 1850 Squadron with its Corsairs. Unfortunately there were further losses. A Corsair went missing, and one of the Barracudas involved in the search failed to return. Training reflected the evolving nature of the war. This included the rapidly dwindling number of major Japanese surface units, which caused some consternation.

Recalled Dickson, “While we were on our way out, around the time of VE Day or a bit before, we were told we could forget everything we’d learned about torpedo-dropping, believe it or not. We’d only been doing it for nine months. We were told that there wouldn’t be any need to drop torpedoes because there was nothing left to torpedo. We had to concentrate purely on things like dive-bombing, mine-laying and anti-submarine work.”

The 11th ACS continued its journey to the east in June, with a stop at Katukurunda on Ceylon. “We eventually got to Ceylon, or Sri Lanka as it now is, and then started fiddling about with RATOG”, John Dickson said. Barracudas tended to use rocket-assisted take-off gear (RATOG) on short-decked escort carriers. Presumably given the type’s more marginal load-carrying ability in hot climates, it was felt that the boost provided by the rockets would help get off the deck better. “We didn’t actually get to Australia until about a month before the war ended. We didn’t know that, of course! And we didn’t go straight into any sort of action there, because at that time the biggest problem that the British Pacific Fleet was having — not only us, the Americans too — were the attacks of the kamikazes.

“Nobody told you this — we assumed they were just oddbods who did silly things — but they were a full organisation. Obviously you could shoot them down if you could find them, but if they got through the defences the only way you were going to stop them was by anti-aircraft fire. All our ships went into dock in Sydney to get their anti-aircraft weapons multiplied. We had another bit of a break while the ship was in dock having all these extra guns shoved on

it. And while all this was happening, the Americans were dropping [the] atomic bombs.”

Two days before the eventual Japanese surrender, 812 Squadron hurriedly re-embarked on *Vengeance*. The crews were briefed for a raid on

moon and you could see the target in the moonlight. We practised like mad doing night dive-bombing. I think if we’d had to go into action, if the Yanks hadn’t dropped the atomic bombs, I’m sure we would have been attacking land targets on shore, probably dive-

## ***‘Dive-bombing at night — not too many people did much of that, but we did. We practised like mad’***

Truk, and were fully expected to take part in the final assault on the Japanese islands.

The men of 812 had prepared a novel but challenging method of improving the survivability of raids against heavily-defended shore targets. John Dickson explained: “Dive-bombing at night — not too many people did too much of that, but we did. We learned to dive on a target that was illuminated either by flares — we had to drop flares — or if you were lucky you might have a nice big

bombing them at night. And that way we might have survived.

“So, there we were, and [the war was] over before we knew where we were. But, looking back on it, it was a good job they did drop the atomic bombs because I don’t think we’d have lasted very long.”

When the Japanese surrendered on 15 August 1945, the new Barracuda squadrons’ plans changed. Instead of carrying out hair-raising night dive-bombing raids, they were re-tasked to support the liberation of Hong Kong.

**BELOW: An 814 Squadron Barracuda coded R1V peels away from the cameraship. The Barracudas of the 11th ACS were evidently looking rather battered and grimy even before reaching their eventual destination.**



**RIGHT: Barracuda PM963/371/A of 812 Squadron on *Vengeance* heads a three-ship formation during its spell in the Far East, as shown by the national markings that have been changed to the British Pacific Fleet version.**



On 31 August and 1 September, the aircraft of 814 Squadron from HMS *Venerable* took part in the bombing and strafing of Japanese launches, which it was feared would stage a suicide attack on the Allied fleet. These were the last offensive sorties against Japanese forces. Furthermore, the end of the war meant more work in restoring peace and order.

John Dickson recalls: "Our sister ship *Venerable*, and our sister squadron 814, didn't actually go into action as such, but there were a lot of pirates whizzing about in junks, and they had to be suppressed. The Japanese, of course, had officially surrendered on 15 August, although perhaps some didn't want to surrender or didn't know."

He added that, at the end of the war, "we immediately were off up north and we went and took the surrender in Hong Kong, which was a very, very

interesting period of time. And up there until the end of December, we did a certain amount of flying, from Kai Tak". Although *Venerable* had arrived a little earlier, *Vengeance* was still in time to witness the official surrender of Japanese forces on the island. Evidence of the carrier's role can still be seen in the Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club, which displays a plaque commemorating its re-opening by men of HMS *Vengeance* in September 1945.



The end of the war curtailed the formation of the new aircraft carrier squadrons that were to have followed the 11th ACS to the Far East. Those belonging to the 22nd Carrier Air Group, for example, had completed their work-up by August 1945 and all their aircrews were on embarkation

leave when Japan surrendered. At this point, the five new air groups and their squadrons were all disbanded, with the date of closure retrospectively moved to VJ Day.

Of those Barracuda units that were not disbanded, many quickly converted to different types more suitable for peacetime 'policing' duties in Far Eastern waters, such as the Fairey Firefly.

HMS *Vengeance* and its squadrons remained at Hong Kong until the end of the year, when they returned to Australia. "We came back down to Sydney at the beginning of January 1946", John Dickson said, "and we went off on leave for three weeks, which was well overdue by then. We didn't have any leave at the time of VJ Day. And when we came back from leave, the Barracudas had all gone, thank goodness. We took over

**BELOW: A Barracuda on HMS *Venerable*. The deck crew appear to be working to disengage the arrester wire from the aircraft's hook or tailwheel.**





some Fireflies and we then continued working up with them, which was quite fun.”

It’s likely that the Barracudas ended up being pushed off the deck of a carrier into the sea. After the switch to Fireflies, *Vengeance* transferred from the British Pacific Fleet to the East Indies Fleet and sailed for Ceylon, where 812 Squadron stayed until July before re-embarking and heading for home.

“At this time, everything was changing, and the war was over”, John Dickson concluded. “People were coming home to be demobbed. It was only because I was so young that I was still left with the squadron. In fact I was the only aircrew officer to serve in the squadron from the day it formed, 1 June ’44, to the day it disbanded, which was 12 August ’46.

“We never actually got operational — it sounds extraordinary. I flew 326

hours on Barracudas, which is an awful lot. There aren’t too many people who flew them for that amount of time.

The squadron officially formed in June 1944, and we spent until VJ Day out in the Pacific. Although we were a fully worked-up operational squadron, the only actual operations we ever flew were a few anti-submarine patrols when we were on our way out to the Far East.”

aircraft in any concentration — it is reasonable to expect that it would have had much to contribute had the war continued. Moreover, the new Barracuda V, with its more powerful Griffon engine and larger wings, was then in development with the Far East theatre in mind, though it would be cancelled on the war’s end. Barracudas continued to equip the Fleet Air Arm in strike and anti-

**ABOVE: Corsair IVs of 1846 Squadron providing a close formation escort for a Barracuda II from 827 Squadron. This shot was in fact taken not in the Far East, but off South Africa in early 1946. AEROPLANE**

***‘Pirates were whizzing about in junks, and they had to be suppressed. Some Japanese didn’t want to surrender or didn’t know’***

The Barracuda had proved successful during its first spell in the Far East, and despite its shortcomings — together with the obvious relief of its crews not to have to face Japanese

submarine roles until 1952. HMS *Vengeance* lasted longer still, serving with the Royal Australian and Brazilian Navies, finally being decommissioned in 2001.

