



COASTAL



A brief way to describe the Bristol Blenheim's RAF career would be 'all theatres, all roles'. Born as a bomber, it quickly became a fighter and went on to carry out a wide range of training and support duties. Often forgotten amid the type's incredible achievements, the Blenheim carved out an important niche with Coastal Command.

Pending the formation of dedicated shipping protection units, the Lockheed Hudson-equipped 233 Squadron formed a fighter flight with the Blenheim Mk.II in October 1939. Based at Leuchars, Scotland, a trio of Blenheims from the stopgap outfit took off eastwards on the 18th for an offensive patrol. Their objective was a point some 90 miles (144km) east of Leuchars – in machines lacking wireless and floatation gear.

As 233 Squadron pioneered the Blenheim as a 'coastal fighter', four more units – 235, 236, 248 and 254 Squadrons – began forming with the long-nosed Mk.IVf and

on February 27, 1940 they were transferred to Coastal Command. Luftwaffe aircraft were occasionally encountered, mainly during patrols over the North Sea. With the opening of the offensive in May, Blenheim units were drawn into other operations, effectively returning to Fighter Command control for a time.

The coastal Blenheims were largely engaged in defensive operations during the Dunkirk evacuation and the Battle of Britain. At this time, Fg Off Reg Peacock of 235 Squadron found considerable success, becoming the sole Blenheim fighter 'ace'.

EARLY SUCCESSES

Coastal's Blenheims saw some maritime action through the summer of 1940 with 236 Squadron driving off marauding Heinkel He 111s while escorting a destroyer force on July 11. The unit settled in at St Eval, Cornwall, and was in combat over the Bay of Biscay several times.

On September 25, when Plt Off Graham Russell and his crew were off the Channel Islands, they spotted Oblt Stelle's Dornier Do 18 'M2+EK' which he engaged on the starboard quarter: "...smoke seen to come from rear engine. The Do 18 was now down at sea level and flying slowly. Another attack was made from astern without result. A beam attack was made, and the enemy machine crashed into the sea."

In October 1940, Bircham Newton-based 235 Squadron celebrated its first anniversary in fine style. A party was held at the Norfolk station during which 108 gallons of beer was consumed.

As the Battle of Britain ended, the coastal fighters resumed long-range tasks and on November 3 a section from 248 Squadron led by 20-year-old Flt Lt E H 'Sam' McHardy had a fight with He 111s off Norway. He almost certainly hit an aircraft of I/KG 26 – this crashed at Hevmland, killing Uffz Mendler and his crew.

Fg Off Russell of 236 was

Above
Blenheim IVf L9394 of 248 Squadron at Dyce, early 1941. 111 SQUADRON RECORDS

Left
Plt Off E H 'Sam' McHardy of 248 Squadron was one of the most successful 'coastal' fighter pilots and later served in 404 Squadron.
E H MCHARDY

FIGHTERS

BLENHEIMS SAW CONSIDERABLE SERVICE ON LONG-RANGE SHIPPING PROTECTION SORTIES, AS ANDREW THOMAS OUTLINES



Above
 Blenheim Mk.IF L8716
 of Coastal Command's
 first Blenheim fighter
 unit, 233 Squadron.
 RAF BIRCHAM NEWTON
 RECORDS

Below
 A 404 Squadron crew
 board Blenheim IVf
 Z6245 at Dyce on
 the evening of May
 17, 1942, to escort an
 attack on the cruiser
 'Prinz Eugen'. PAC

successful again during the autumn as his air gunner, Sgt Eric Pert, recalled: "I replaced a gunner on an established crew and we got caught in a box barrage over Brest, to sight a Hipper class cruiser in the harbour. We also flew over an enemy convoy and shot down its escorting Do 24 and passed an Me 110 returning from Falmouth – we ignored each other – but came home full of shrapnel holes and with our observer badly wounded.

"I am pleased to say that the rest of my flying did not follow such an intensive pattern. My pilot, who had previous success, was awarded the DFC."

The number of coastal fighter

units gradually increased, one being 272 Squadron at Aldergrove, Northern Ireland. Although Bristol Beaufighters began arriving in early 1941, for some units it was Blenheims that continued to bear the brunt through the year. Two crews were lost by 272 on March 10 – Plt Off van Weyenbergh's in Z5752 and Z5722 flown by Plt Off Chandler are believed to have collided in the poor weather.

NORWEGIAN ACTION

In May 1941 the Canadian-manned 404 Squadron formed and it moved

with its Blenheims to northern Scotland for operations off Norway. The Canadians claimed their first success on December 18 when Wg Cdr Woodruff was in action against a recce aircraft east of the Shetlands.

His report read: "Ju 88 sighted flying at 200ft away from Blenheim. Three 3-second bursts from front guns and thick white smoke was seen from both engines of e/a

[enemy aircraft], much more from port engine. E/a claimed."



COASTAL BLENHEIM ARMAMENT



Canadian 404 Squadron formed in April 1941 with Blenheim IVfs, flying the type until January 1943 when Beaufighters arrived. The unit was mostly based in northern Scotland or the Shetland Islands during its Blenheim era. Armament on the Mk.IV fighter was a pack of four 0.303in Browning machine guns under the centre section plus another two machine guns in the turret BOTH PAC

Soon afterwards, flying from Sumburgh in the Shetlands, 404 supported Operation Archery, a commando raid on Vaagso, Norway. The Blenheims flown by Plt Off Pierce and Sgt McCutcheon intercepted a trio of Messerschmitt Bf 109s and gamely attacked, claiming a 'probable', one damaged and one 'possible.' By January 1942 several new units had received the Blenheim IVf, albeit temporarily, for coastal fighter duties. At Leuchars, 489 Squadron RNZAF (Royal New Zealand Air Force) flew them pending the arrival of torpedo-bombers while at Dyce, near Aberdeen. 143 Squadron had also received them – in place of



"Ju 88 sighted flying at 200ft away from Blenheim. Three 3-second bursts from front guns and thick white smoke was seen from both engines..."



Beaufighters. Neither unit saw any action with Blenheims.

In a major engagement on May 16, half a dozen of 404's Blenheims escorted a torpedo-bomber attack on the cruiser *Prinz Eugen*. Later, Sqn Ldr McHardy recalled: "As we neared the enemy coast, there right ahead was the *Prinz Eugen* churning though the sea with a destroyer in every quarter in close attendance. The Beauforts went straight in with us on their tails and, when the first aircraft were getting into range to drop, all hell was let loose as a huge barrage of anti-aircraft fire burst in the sky all around."

The Blenheims also tangled with the escorting Bf 109s, but managed to extricate themselves. It was not until the spring of 1943 that 404 re-equipped with Beaufighters. Finally its obsolescent Blenheim fighters could go into honourable retirement. ●

Above
No 143 Sqn replaced its Beaufighters with Blenheims in 1943.
VIA J D R RAWLINGS

Left
The New-Zealand-manned 489 Squadron was one of the short-lived coastal Blenheim IVf squadrons. In the foreground is N3603.
VIA ROGER HAYWARD

Below left
Plt Off Graham Russell (right) and crew of 236 Squadron marked up their victories near the gunner's cockpit of Blenheim IVf V6078. On the left is air gunner Sgt Eric Pert and in the centre is the observer, Sgt Ken Hutchings.
ERIC PERT