

Going to war

During the early part of hostilities, Ensigns went often into harm's way



ABOVE: The camouflaged G-ADSR *Ensign* running its engines at Whitchurch airport, three miles south of Bristol city centre, in 1941. AEROPLANE

When Imperial Airways went to war, the fleet of available aircraft it passed to the Air Ministry numbered 82, of which 12 were 'E' Class Ensigns. Operating out of Croydon, the Ensigns were withdrawn after official instructions were issued on 31 August stopping all continental services. They were quickly flown to Coventry and then on to RAF airfields where ground crews were waiting to load men and equipment bound for their war stations in France. The first casualty was not due to enemy action – in December 1939, on a flight to Doncaster, *Euterpe* ran off the end of the runway at Chipping Warden, Northamptonshire, and wrecked its undercarriage.

Camouflaged overnight, the Ensigns were soon hard at it. On 15 December 1939, G-ADSR *Euterpe* carried out a forced landing at Bonnicksen's aerodrome (later known as Leamington), where it displayed its hastily-applied camouflage pattern. One of the oldest captains employed on the

Ensigns was Capt H. H. Perry, who flew his aircraft to a big field near Reims in support of a Fairey Battle squadron. Disembarking, the RAF contingent of ground crews, with their stores and equipment, looked around the empty countryside in bewilderment. They asked where the hangars, stores, the mess and so forth were. Perry laughed and said somebody would be along during the afternoon to guide them – by then he had returned with a second load.

The Ensign captains remarked on the smoothness of the organisation. Much of the credit went to a body called National Air Communications, a convenient title for the co-ordination of all civil activities for the furtherance of the war effort. The Air Navigation Restriction Order, which came into force on the outbreak of war, prohibited any civil flying over the United Kingdom without a special permit. All unnecessary civil flying was curtailed abruptly, but useful air services were grouped together under the National Air Communications plan. Gathered

under this umbrella were 18 internal airlines that placed their organisation, fleets and personnel at the service of the Air Ministry.

On 25 April 1940 the No 24 Squadron, RAF crew of Ensign G-ADST *Elsinore* was tasked with flying to Evanton in Scotland to pick up a load of high explosive and return to Perth. The plan was to fly to Norway, make a dawn landing on the frozen lake between Åndalsnes and Dombås and blow up the railway line near Dombås, preferably in one of the tunnels. Waiting at Perth for visibility to increase from 100 yards, the crew was glad to hear that the mission had been cancelled. They were to have flown to the frozen lake, crash-landed on the ice, abandoned the aircraft and gone to blow up the railway line – they would not have had enough fuel to return anyway!

Ensigns G-ADST *Elsinore* and G-ADTB *Echo* were collected from Bircham Newton, Norfolk on 11 May 1940 and flown south to be attached to No 24 Squadron's E Flight at Hendon.

But most of the available air transport capacity was tasked with getting men and supplies to France.

On 10 May 1940 the Germans had unleashed their Blitzkrieg across the Netherlands and Belgium. National carriers KLM and Sabena flew their aircraft over to the UK, while the NAC fleets were called upon to rush supplies to British forces in France, the captains and aircrews working around the clock, some making several flights a day. For the first time they were flying completely un-armed airliners into war-infested skies. Cargoes varied, but the bulk comprised food and ammunition for troops. They flew back and forth, day and night. Between trips, some crews just took a bath and changed their clothes before setting off again for France, such was the priority of the situation.

Capt G. R. Buxton flew an Ensign to Merville on the night of 22-23 May to take food to an isolated band of British soldiers in the area. En route back to England the aircraft was shot at by a trawler in the Channel. On

Armstrong Whitworth Ensign



which was getting ready to take off with its doors open.

Flying across France, the formation came under intense anti-aircraft fire. Two aircraft were shot down near Calais, Capt Hoare being killed and surviving crew members taken prisoner. His Ensign, G-ADTA, badly shot up over Calais, Capt S. T. B. Cripps (a Royal Flying Corps pilot in the First World War) came across the Channel on three engines. Another cut out over Folkestone, but he managed to land at Lympe on two engines and one wheel. The aircraft in the rest of the formation, although damaged to some extent, reached home safely.

Undeterred, Capt Alan Andrew, who had already flown an Ensign to Merville, took off again that afternoon to ferry fully-charged aircraft batteries to Rouen to keep the Hurricanes flying. The squadrons were engaged in such heavy combat that their batteries soon ran down and there was insufficient time to re-charge them. Rouen was subjected to some bombing while he was on the ground, but he delivered his load and got away safely.

It was of vital importance that the route to Paris was kept running as long as possible. On 1 June, Capt G. R. Buxton flew G-ADSX *Ettrick* to Le Bourget, where he and his crew were enjoying their lunch when the Luftwaffe came and bombed the airfield. More than 300 bombs were dropped on the airport, partially destroying many of the buildings and killing 200 people in the adjacent village of Le Blanc-Mesnil. Buxton went down into the restaurant cellar but removed himself when the building received a direct hit, a water main burst and smoke was sucked down from the fires above. Passengers waiting to be embarked into the Ensign were quickly shuffled into the shelter but the last man to enter, a French porter, was killed. Arriving above ground, Buxton was almost hit by a falling bomb and wounded in the thigh. He climbed aboard the Ensign, and finding he could handle the controls thought he could take off, but the French authorities did not agree as time-bombs littered the airfield. It was a tough decision to make, but *Ettrick* was abandoned where it stood.

With Le Bourget almost out of action, the terminus was shifted first to Guyancourt, then to Tours. At Tours the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, and his French counterpart Paul

Reynaud were pacing back and forth in deep discussions.

All this took place against the background of the rapid German advance across the Low Countries. Confusion and desperation were everywhere, panicky rumours abounding that the Germans were about to over-run the airfields. The most urgent task was to get as many key men as possible back to the UK. The NAC organised the small number of aircraft at its disposal to fly back and forth to the limit of their capabilities. The pilots overflew villages and towns in the midst of bombardment, their roads and lanes filled with refugees fleeing before the German might. They landed on airfields in turmoil, looking for fuel with which to top up and make it back to the UK – each aircraft was laden with people from nose to tail, often taking off vastly overweight.

One Ensign, piloted by Capt Cripps, was ordered to fly to Nantes to pick up a party. When he landed he found no-one there – the airfield was covered in burning aircraft. For some reason his co-pilot jumped out to grab an abandoned bicycle. They took off but, not wishing to return empty, had heard of the evacuation of Jersey and flew there instead, filling the Ensign with refugees and flying safely back to Exeter.

On 17 June a small contingent air fleet was organised to help evacuate an RAF squadron from an airfield near Lyon. The intention was to refuel at Bordeaux and Marseille on the way, Bordeaux being the most northerly French airfield they could use. Capt Perry flying an Ensign was the first to arrive at Bordeaux – he spent some time taxiing back and forth across the airfield trying to get some fuel out of somebody, getting none and damaging his tailwheel in the process. By this time, all the other aircraft were arriving – Ensigns, DH86s, a DH91 Albatross and an RAF Bristol Bombay, all looking for fuel amid the confusion. Capt Perry gave up and went into a shack to get a cup of coffee. Inside he met his son, and on enquiring as to what he was doing there he received the reply, "Same as you, Dad". He was later reported missing on an operational RAF flight.

The determined Capt Perry took things into his own hands when a French officer told him France had capitulated. He taxied over to a fuel dump, and as there was no-one around proceeded to

fill up the Ensign just before an angry French bowser crew found out and came running over. It seemed pointless to push on to Lyon, and he went across to the Bombay to ask its crew how things stood. They were part of the squadron he had been sent to help, and had been the last aircraft to leave. Some of the captains decided to press on, only to turn back at Marseille; short on fuel, they landed again at Bordeaux, where most of the aircraft were destroyed by the Germans. Perry realised that things were getting out of hand as French aircraft were coming in from all directions, putting down where they could with crashes mounting rapidly. Despite the broken tailwheel, he managed to get his Ensign off and made it home without further incident.

Another Ensign to arrive at Bordeaux that confusing morning was flown by Capt L. V. Messenger. He was on his way back to Britain after delivering Cabinet minister Sir Samuel Hoare to Madrid, but had been refused overnight accommodation there and stopped over at Lisbon. Still with no knowledge of the French surrender he arrived at Bordeaux. Messenger managed to get some fuel and, after filling every corner of his aircraft with RAF men, took off. He found the Germans bombing Nantes, so flew into cloud and duly reached home soil.

With the conflict in the Low Countries virtually over, the Ensigns were placed at the disposal of RAF Fighter Command from June 1940. At that time it was gearing up for the Battle of Britain. No matter how the command's squadrons were dispersed, there were insufficient fighters to cover the whole of the east and south coasts. Guesswork and a little bit of ingenuity resulted in squadrons being rushed to fill these gaps. With them flew the Ensigns carrying ground crews, aircraft starting equipment, ammunition and other essential engineering gear. Sometimes the Ensigns arrived and off-loaded just in time for the fighters to get airborne and engage the enemy.

As the command's strength increased, so such 'cat-and-mouse' games became less necessary, and gradually the Ensigns were withdrawn. National Air Communications, having served its purpose, ceased to exist. The surviving Ensigns were returned to BOAC at the end of 1940.

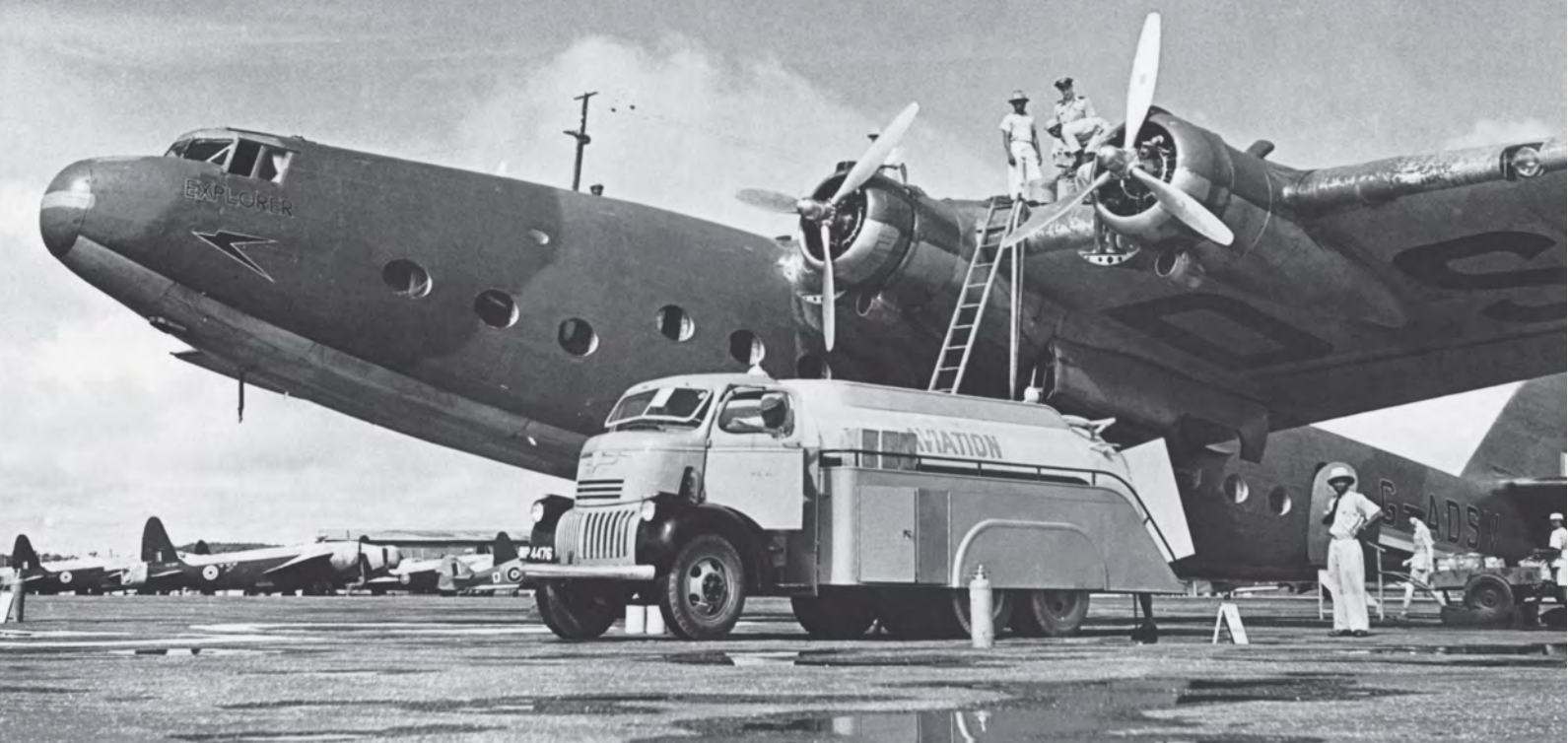
landing he immediately joined another formation about to start out with food and ammunition for the same destination. Escorted by a Hurricane squadron, the formation reached its objective without mishap. A formation of Messerschmitts appeared in the overhead, and was quickly engaged by the Hurricanes. Buxton said, "It lasted about 20 minutes with aircraft all over the place, some coming down, pilots bailing out, and all the time the crews continued to dump supplies from the Ensigns."

Two more Messerschmitts came in low out of the sun and carried out a strafing attack. Ensign G-ADSZ *Elysean* was raked from wingtip to wingtip by three Bf 109s, caught fire and burnt out. Many of the other aircraft were damaged and holed, but a quick inspection revealed that they were still able to fly. Capt J. M. H. Hoare and First Officer Tettenborn, who had just seen their Ensign destroyed, climbed into a de Havilland DH86, while their radio officer jumped aboard Ensign G-ADTA *Euryalus*

Armstrong Whitworth Ensign

In the Middle East

BOAC carried on Ensign services overseas in spite of hostilities



ABOVE: Accra, from which location RAF aircraft were ferried to Cairo, saw many BOAC Ensign movements in wartime. This is G-ADSV Explorer being refuelled. Visible in the background are several Wellingtons and a Miles Master. AVIATION-IMAGES.COM

From 1942 the nine surviving Ensigns were operated by BOAC on transport duties in the Middle East and Africa, extending their routes to Calcutta in 1944. Modified to withstand the climate, the aircraft had gradually been flown out from Britain, this not without incident. Taking off from Bramcote, Ensign G-AFZU *Everest* flew to Portreath in Cornwall, from where on 9 November 1941 it left on its next leg to Lisbon. However, over the Bay of Biscay it was attacked by a Heinkel He 111, which damaged the starboard wing with gunfire. In trying to evade the enemy bomber, pilot Capt V. E. Flowerday dived the Ensign to sea level and returned to Portreath, after which it went back to Bramcote for repairs.

G-AFZV left the UK on 1 February 1942 en route to Bathurst, Gambia, via Gibraltar. Two extra fuel tanks lashed to the cabin floor contained 1,010 gallons to supplement the normal

load of 1,064. Only 200 miles out from Bathurst, the port inner engine began to run rough and was losing oil to such an extent that it had to be shut down and its propeller feathered. Not long afterwards the port outer started to give trouble. The pilot, Capt W. B. Houston, made an emergency wheels-up landing about a mile from the French West African coast. The aircraft was abandoned and the crew picked up by a Short Sunderland of No 204 Squadron.

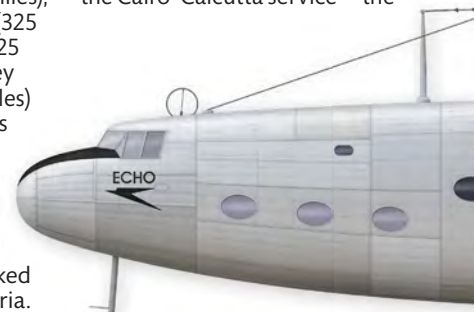
The Ensigns were placed on the route from Asmara via Khartoum to Lagos. Asmara was the eastern terminal, built by BOAC, and the Ensigns used the depot as their engineering base. The type's speed and load capability were of pre-war standard and production had not been continued – the spares situation could thus become critical, leading to aeroplanes being grounded for some time. However, they proved of great value in the mid-to-late war years as the largest landplanes in theatre.

The Ensign was an asset on the so-called Takoradi run, returning crews who had ferried aircraft out from Accra to Cairo. This was a journey of approximately 3,800 miles, taking five days and 20 flying hours in all weathers. The route and thus the mileage could vary, but a delivery pilot recorded that, on 21 October 1943, he travelled in Ensign G-ADTB from Almaza airport in Cairo to Wadi Halfa (550 miles) and then on to Khartoum (450 miles), taking six-and-a-quarter hours. The following day he boarded G-ADSS and flew to Al Fashir (490 miles) then El Geneina (200 miles), Maiduguri (650 miles), Kano (325 miles) and Apapa or Lagos (525 miles), completing the journey the next day to Accra (370 miles) after adding another 14 hours 20 minutes.

G-ADSR *Ensign* was damaged when its undercarriage was accidentally retracted on 4 September 1942 while parked at Apapa aerodrome in Nigeria. It was repaired and put back into

service. The aircraft continued to fly until its C of A overhaul in September 1944, when it was discovered that the damage sustained was more extensive than previously thought. Insufficient manpower was available to repair it, so the overhaul was abandoned and the airframe scrapped on 3 January 1945.

With the battle for Africa over in May 1943, the Mediterranean was again open for Allied shipping and the trans-Africa route lost its importance. The Ensign fleet, now based in Cairo, was transferred to the Cairo-Calcutta service – the



Armstrong Whitworth Ensign

route for which it had been designed in the first place.

The Ensigns were based at Almaza, Asmara, Lagos and Karachi after 1943, but the punishing trips to India with only five or six machines available began to wear the aircraft down. That and the lack of spares caused lengthy groundings while parts were made, and the use of inferior materials resulted in incidents. The most important difficulty was the fact that the GR-1820-G-102A version of the Cyclone engine had gone out of production and spares were virtually unobtainable. Pilots were beginning to complain about the Ensign's poor rate of climb, which, coupled with the unreliability of the autopilot, made flying the machine extremely tiring. This, combined with the wing fabric becoming slack due to the heat and moisture in the region, made for some pretty hectic flying.

A notable flight was arranged involving G-ADSS *Egeria*, which had a large Union Jack painted on the fuselage aft of the cockpit windows. It was flown from Lagos to Léopoldville in the Belgian Congo in order to deliver an engine for Short Empire flying boat G-ADUV *Cambria*.

A number of mishaps occurred, such as on 27 May 1944 when *Elsinore*, flown by Capt M. W. Haddon, was on its way from Mauripur near Karachi to Jiwani. On reaching its destination the captain discovered that the port undercarriage leg had become jammed, and as the aircraft was low on fuel he elected to go for a belly landing. The high wing layout allowed this to be carried out without much damage to the aircraft apart from the fuselage under-surfaces.

En route from Delhi to Jodhpur on 22 March 1944, G-ADSR *Ensign* was hit by a large bird only 15 minutes after take-off. Upon inspection it was found that the bird had opened up the fabric



ABOVE: *Explorer* circles prior to landing at Khartoum, Sudan. AVIATION-IMAGES.COM

around the port tailplane. This led to the Ensign briefly becoming unserviceable. On 11 October 1944 another bird flew into the port mainplane of *Elsinore* on a flight from Delhi, putting it out of use for a time.

It was during these 'down-times' that interesting and unofficial modifications appeared. Not all were used in their entirety but some good came of their application. One such was in 1944 when replacement parts were becoming scarce. G-ADTB *Echo* was fitted experimentally with a Lancaster tailwheel. It was found that this had the effect of increasing the landing run because of the reduced drag of the tail, which was raised by 9in when on the ground. Records do not indicate whether further Ensigns were altered in this way, but there is the possibility that other aircraft were so modified as they came in for overhaul and/or repair.

During overhauls in 1944-45 the Ensigns' wartime camouflage was removed, reverting to their pre-war natural metal finish. After the end of the war the type was gradually phased out, and BOAC decided in late 1945 to return all the surviving Ensigns to the UK. To

this end John Lloyd from Armstrong Whitworth and an engineer from BOAC went to Cairo to assess the state of the aircraft. The Ministry of Civil Aviation asked BOAC to fly one of the Ensigns home so a cost estimate could be made for re-conditioning and the fitting of Cyclone 208A engines to replace the 102As fitted in 1941.

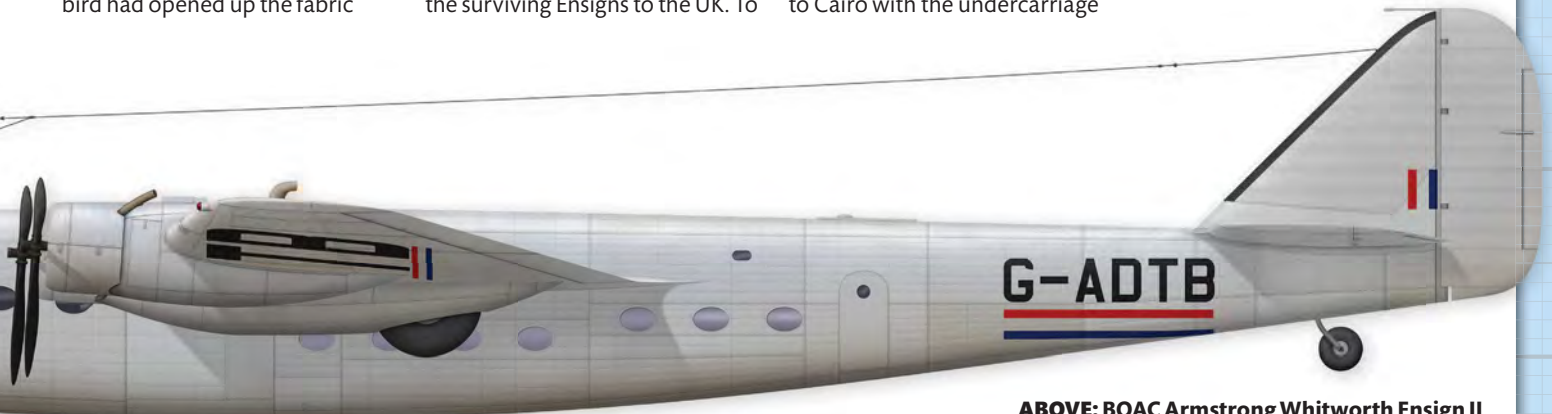
Seizing the chance to end its expensive Ensign operation, BOAC informed the Ministry that the last Indian service would leave Calcutta on 1 January 1946, and that after it terminated in Cairo on 4 January the airline would arrange to fly as many as possible of the Ensigns back to Britain for evaluation. G-ADSW *Eddystone* was the first to depart from Cairo, doing so on New Year's Day, but unfortunately when it arrived at Castel Benito in Libya the starboard undercarriage leg refused to lock down. Having tried various methods to release the wheel, the pilot, Capt S. G. Blackaller, elected to make a wheels-up landing. This he did successfully. The aircraft was deemed repairable and, following makeshift repairs, was flown back to Cairo with the undercarriage

locked down. After repairs it flew back to the UK on 3 June 1946, the last of the Ensigns so to do. *Ensign* and *Euterpe* were scrapped at Almaza as they had already been stripped of parts to keep the rest of the fleet flying.

Arriving at Hurn the aircraft were stripped of all usable equipment before they were delivered to AST at Hamble. At least two companies, one being British European Airways, showed interest in buying the Ensigns, but this waned upon discovering the estimated cost of bringing them up to a suitable post-war standard. As no further interest was shown they were sadly broken up for scrap during March and April 1947.

Despite its wartime service in 1940 and in the Middle East, the Ensign could not be classed as a success. The airframes were kept serviceable only at great expense and by the end of the war were virtually worn out, this at a time when one had flown only 3,720 hours. Even considering plans to refurbish the survivors, they could not have lasted for long. It was sad end to what might have been a promising airliner.

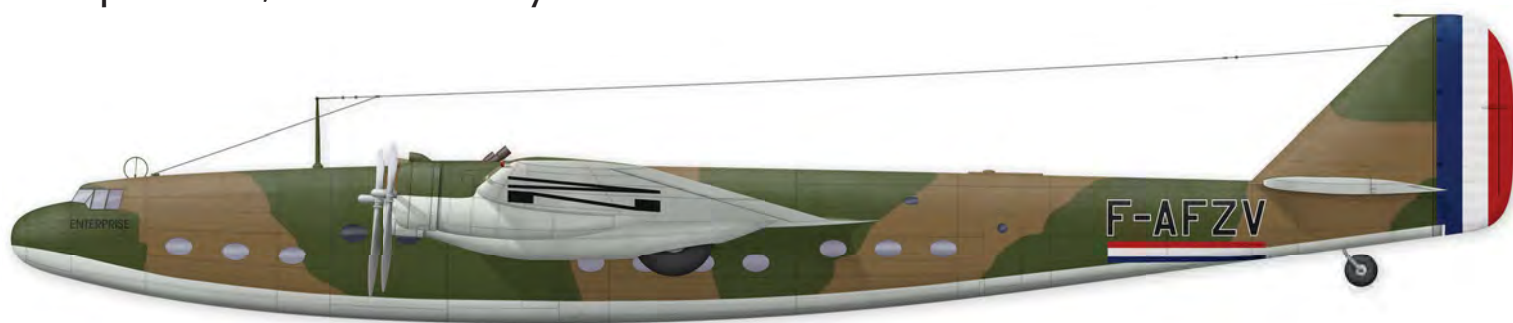
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ABOVE: BOAC Armstrong Whitworth Ensign II G-ADTB *Echo*. CHRIS SANDHAM-BAILEY

The Ensign in foreign service

Ensigns found their way into use with a small number of overseas operators, sometimes by circuitous means



ABOVE: Armstrong Whitworth Ensign II F-AFZV Enterprise. CHRIS SANDHAM-BAILEY

INDIA

Plans in 1939 by Indian Trans-Continental Airways to use four Ensigns came to nothing. Delays caused by modifications and other malfunctions resulted in their never reaching India, and by 1940 the idea were abandoned. As early as 1937 new registrations and fleet names were allocated, but it appears that only one actually received Indian markings, VT-AJG being painted on to G-ADTA just before its first flight. It is possible that the letters VT-AJH were applied to *Endymion* while it was still in the final stages of construction and before it was camouflaged, but it emerged as G-ADTC. VT-AJE and VT-AJF were not used and none of the names were taken up. The Indian certificates of registration for VT-AJG and VT-AJH were not cancelled until 12 April 1946.

The aircraft involved are listed at right.

IN FRENCH HANDS

On a flight from Bramcote to Bathurst in Gambia, G-AFZV *Enterprise* encountered

difficulties and had to force-land on a beach in French West Africa. A safe landing was made, after which all codes and secret papers on board were burned, except those indicating that the crew were civilians. The Cyko de-coding machine was smashed up and buried in the sand.

Upon examination G-AFZV revealed the slight buckling of a bulkhead and some distortion amidships, while the entrance door had to be opened with force. The radio officer was able to make contact with Bathurst and report the aircraft's location, which was near Cap Mirik and a town called Nouakchott in Mauritania (later the country's capital upon independence). The RAF sent a Sunderland from No 204 Squadron, piloted by Flt Lt E. M. Ennis, to

pick the crew up. When it arrived overhead, a message was flashed to the Ensign crew by signal lamp telling them to go to the beach. Two dinghies were sent from the Sunderland, which had anchored about 300 yards off-shore. All the luggage had to be left behind due to heavy seas, but in almost complete darkness the Sunderland took off, arriving in Bathurst a few hours later.

French mechanics at Nouakchott and Dakar repaired the Ensign and it served the French as a hospital aircraft at Dakar. Initially just the prefix of its registration was altered, becoming F-AFZV, but this was later changed to F-BAHD, with Air France titles painted on the nose just aft of the cockpit windows. Air France pilots Foulachier and Melerand flew it to Vichy-held

metropolitan France, and in 1942 they took it to the Centre d'Etudes en Vol du Ministère de l'Air at Marignane for flying trials and general inspection. Edward Bret, the centre's test pilot, flew it in November of that year. He did not finish all the tests before the German occupation of Vichy France, but did state that the Ensign was very pleasant to fly.

LUFTWAFFE USE

F-BAHD returned to Air France, but the occupying Germans decided that they wanted the Ensign, and *Enterprise* duly became the property of the Reichsluftfahrtministerium. It was supposedly re-engined with Daimler-Benz powerplants and test-flown extensively before being allocated as a transport for senior officers. Little else is known about this part of its history. An RAF reconnaissance photograph taken during the winter of 1942-43 shows an Ensign on Toulouse-Montaudran airfield, but, unfortunately, the registration is not distinct enough for further confirmation.

British registration	Indian registration	Fleet name
G-ADSS	VT-AJE	<i>Ellora</i>
G-ADSU	VT-AJF	<i>Everest</i>
G-ADTA	VT-AJG	<i>Euryalus</i>
G-ADTC	VT-AJH	<i>Etah</i>