

Book Reviews

Vulcan Boys – From the Cold War to the Falklands: True Tales of the Iconic Delta V-Bomber

By Tony Blackman

Reviewed by Dr David Jordan

Introduction

The Avro Vulcan, one of the trio of 'V-bombers' which carried Britain's nuclear deterrent for just over a decade until the Polaris submarine entered service with the Royal Navy has become something of an icon of the once-considerable British aviation industry. The aircraft's distinct delta wing, impressive performance – notably its being rolled immediately after take-off by the test pilot Roly Falk at the 1955 Farnborough airshow – added to its lustre in the eyes of aviation enthusiasts and the wider public (often at the expense of the other two V-bombers, the Vickers Valiant and Handley Page Victor). If it needed further reinforcement, the Vulcan's reputation as a British aviation 'great' was secured on the cusp of its retirement with the long-range bombing and suppression of enemy air defence (SEAD) raids conducted as part of Operation Black Buck during the 1982 Falklands conflict.

As a result of this, the Vulcan is hardly ill-served in terms of aviation literature. This ranges from extensive coverage in Humphrey Wynn's excellent official history of RAF nuclear deterrent forces, books clearly aimed at enthusiasts and even dedicated magazine issues. Tony Blackman's book therefore adds to a considerable corpus of literature dealing with the Vulcan, and this might, at first sight, raise the question of whether it offers anything new to an already-impressive array of literature. The answer is that it does, and although it is clearly aimed at the general reader rather than being a more 'academic' book, it should not be dismissed simply as 'another book for spotters'. Blackman is a former Avro test pilot, thus

entirely familiar with the subject matter, and has pulled together a series of reminiscences by those who flew the aircraft with the Royal Air Force. It is this which makes the book stand out, since unlike many others covering the same subject, it serves as a useful oral history not just of the Vulcan, but of the RAF bomber force during the Cold War.

There are sixteen chapters outlining the Vulcan's career, all of them offering something of interest. The first three look at Vulcan test flying. Unlike many accounts, which would have been provided by pilots, the first chapter is from the perspective of an observer and the second an Air Electronics Officer. The first contribution from a pilot comes in chapter 3, looking at the use of the Vulcan as a test-bed for the Rolls Royce Olympus engine type which powered Concorde. The book then considers flying the Vulcan from the point of view of the pilot and co-pilot, the navigators (of which there were two – radar navigator and 'nav plotter'), and another account from an Air Electronics Officer. This latter chapter is of interest, since it covers the Vulcan's often forgotten roles in Maritime Radar Reconnaissance and the sampling of nuclear tests.

The book then moves on to address the use of the Blue Steel stand-off nuclear missile. While Chris Reid's account of his time flying Blue Steel armed Vulcans is entertaining, it must be said that the chapter does not go into much detail which is new, and it is a shame that more material on this role was not incorporated. This is followed by a consideration of the Tactical Evaluation (TACEVAL) process as seen through the eyes of Vulcan crews; again, this is an interesting insight into an often-forgotten and not fully understood area of the RAF's life in the Cold War period, and it is a shame that no more than four and a half pages could be found for the recollections about this process of two aircrew and one engineering officer. Accounts of training in North America, including at Red Flag exercises are covered next, followed by an interesting insight into the Strike Command detachment at Offutt Air Force Base in the United States. Again, the reader is left wishing there were a little more detail, since this aspect of the RAF's operations during the Cold War is rarely, if ever, mentioned in any secondary source material.

All of the above Chapters provide something of interest and help to add to our understanding of how the Vulcan force operated during the Cold War period. It is, though, the next three chapters which really add value to the book, since they cover the Falklands conflict of 1982. Much has been written about Operation Black Buck, and it must be said that much of the material is deeply unhelpful. There has been a tendency amongst historians and commentators to concentrate upon the first of seven Black Buck sorties (two of which were aborted before they reached the Falklands) and to offer limited commentary about Black Buck Six, which was forced to land in Brazil after its refuelling probe broke, precluding its return to Ascension Island. This has been accompanied by a narrative deeply critical of the raids (often characterised as 'the RAF trying to get in on the act' in a selfish bid to avoid a public relations disaster of being seen to have failed to take part in the war, an accusation which the official record proves to be pernicious nonsense) for their perceived lack of success in completely

closing the runway at Port Stanley. The airmanship involved in the raids is usually given some, almost grudging, respect from the critics, but the chapters in this book help to demonstrate that there was far more to the Black Buck raids than mere service propaganda, even if they do not tell the complete story.

We are given brief but compelling insights into the challenges of establishing a forward operating base at Ascension for the Vulcan, the planning process for the Black Buck raids (including the formidable challenge presented in the provision of air-to-air refuelling) and – most interestingly – David Castle’s account of Black Bucks Five and Six, with the latter ending up in Rio de Janeiro for the reason noted above. This chapter gives clear insight into the challenges of conducting SEAD operations at range, using an extremely functional (‘hastily cobbled together’ would be an alternative description) fit for the AGM-45 Shrike anti-radar missile and concludes with an entertainingly dramatic account of the Vulcan’s unscheduled arrival in Rio - complete with a description of how the insistent and increasingly distracting demands from Rio’s Air Traffic Control for flight details were ended by the claim that the flight had originated in Huddersfield, leading to puzzled silence as the Vulcan made its approach – and thoughts on the subsequent unscheduled stay in Brazil.

The book ends with an account of the Vulcan’s final task in the RAF, namely as an interim refuelling tanker, a role it fulfilled until the VC10 tanker variants entered service, and a concluding piece looking at the preserved airframes. For the academic studying air power, this last chapter is not particularly useful, but for a book that is primarily intended for a general readership, it is a fitting conclusion.

Overall, any assessment of *Vulcan Boys* written for a journal such as *Air Power Review* has to note its limitations as a purely academic source. Yet to focus on this aspect is to miss the point of books such as this. Those who study air power and who do not have a service background can only benefit from reading the sort of material presented by Tony Blackman, since it provides rich (if often all-too-brief) insight into the RAF, service culture and gives a broader sense of how practitioners went about the day-to-day business of military aviation. *Vulcan Boys* is, therefore, a useful addition to the corpus of literature on air power and of interest to more than just the stereotypical ‘spotter’ community because of the information that it imparts.

This article has been republished online with Open Access.

Ministry of Defence © Crown Copyright 2023. The full printed text of this article is licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0. To view this licence, visit <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/>. Where we have identified any third-party copyright information or otherwise reserved rights, you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned. For all other imagery and graphics in this article, or for any other enquires regarding this publication, please contact: Director of Defence Studies (RAF), Cormorant Building (Room 119), Shrivenham, Swindon, Wiltshire SN6 8LA.

 **ROYAL
AIR FORCE**
**Centre for Air and
Space Power Studies**

OGL