

# THE LITTLE AVIATION MUSEUM

## *Workbench notes*

### BLACKBURN SKUA II IN 1/72 BY NOVO (FROG)

(June 2001)

Like most naval air forces, the British Fleet Air Arm languished well behind ground based air forces when it came to new developments in aeronautical technology. Well into the final years of the 1930s it's main aeroplanes were biplanes while on the land all-metal monoplanes became the order of the day. In April 1935 tenders were called for prototypes for the FAA's first all-metal monoplane combining the roles of fighter and dive bomber and Blackburn won the competition with its B-24 model called the Skua (a diving bird of prey). For its time and for carrier service it was an almost revolutionary aeroplane with flaps, retractable undercarriage and a variable pitch propeller. The first Skua flew on 9 February 1937 and began service tests in June that year, orders for 190 Skuas were placed six months before that first flight. The first production aeroplane, the Skua Mark II, first flew on 28 August 1938.

The entire production run of 190 Skuas was delivered between October 1938 and March 1940 and the first ones were delivered to the FAA by the end of 1938. They began flying with 800 and 803 Squadrons on *HMS Ark Royal* and later 801 Squadron on *HMS Furious*. By the beginning of World War II they had also equipped shore based 806 Squadron. By then it was fairly obvious that the Skua was not satisfactory for the role as a fighter so its primary role became that of a dive bomber.

The high point of the Skua's operational career came on 10 April 1940 when 16 aeroplanes from 800 and 803 Squadrons attacked and sank the *Königsberg* at Bergen and all but one returned safely. Eleven days later, however, the Squadrons lost most of their Skuas in an attack on Narvik. Skuas were involved in the fighting during the German occupation of Norway early in the war and aeroplanes of 801 Squadron flew fighter cover during the evacuation of Dunkirk.

The Skua's vulnerability meant it was withdrawn from front line service in 1941 but they remained in service as target tugs and on general training duties. Their passing from service was hardly lamented, they had been a sturdily built but relatively slow and underpowered aeroplane. As



a dive bomber they were probably as good as any but, despite their success in sinking a German cruiser early in the war, they were too vulnerable to attack so by 1941 they were replaced by more useful types.

If the Skua had proved to be a relatively useless aeroplane the Blackburn Roc proved even more so. It was basically similar to the Skua but, like the Boulton Paul Defiant, it was equipped with a four gun turret mounted behind the pilot. Fortunately the Roc was never engaged in operations and it faded from the scene fairly quickly.

This is one of the old Frog kits that went to Russia in the 1970s to be moulded under the Novo label. Whether you find this kit under the original Frog label, the later Novo label or the current label of some eastern European manufacturer the best thing that can be said for it is that it looks more like a Blackburn Skua than most other model kits. It is typical of the Frog kits of the late 1960s, a relatively good overall shape and not much else to recommend it. One of these days a eastern European manufacturer is going to make a nice new Skua kit and this old one can be tossed into the rubbish bin of history. But until then... I'd got the bug to make a little collection of dive bombers and since the old Novo kit is the only one around at the moment I decided to give it a go.

Looking through the reference material I could easily find easily I came across an article on modelling the Skua in an old issue of *PAM News* which explained in some detail how to rectify the faults with the Frog kit. It proved to be very useful and if you really have to make a Skua I'll give you a copy of the article because you'll end up with a very odd looking thing if you make this straight from the box.

The two major problems are the wings which are  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch too narrow and the engine which is very poor. The first problems was overcome by rebuilding the wing with laminated plasticard to bring it to the right width and also with new wing tips to suit (I was tempted to use the wings from the Pavla Roc but the wingtips are the wrong shape and anyhow I still hope to make the Roc one of these decades). The solution to the problem with the engine is to throw it out (it's hardly good enough to keep in the spares box) and replace it with one from the Airfix Blenheim kit. This may seem a bit excessive but I'll probably be able to pick up a new Blenheim kit at a swap-meet cheaply one of these days.



There were also other little bits and pieces that had to be done such as putting something (anything!) in the blank space which is the cockpit, cutting a hole in the lower fuselage for the bomb housing, finding a new tail wheel, a new air inlet, pitot tube, landing lights, bomb crutch and arrester hook, a new exhaust, etc. It turned out to be quite an elaborate exercise and if I hadn't once had AMS real bad I certainly wouldn't have been able to do all the work necessary to making the Skua model halfway decent.

Then it came time for the painting and colours. If I'd had my airbrush running I would have been tempted to paint the model in the pre-war aluminium scheme but since this had to be a hand painted job I had to go with camouflage colours that were apparently applied to Skuas around 1940. The only useful decals I could find were the ones that came with the kit which are more than basic and so old that they required a lot of effort to go onto the model at all - and then started to peel off as soon as my back was turned. (They put a MA rating on my room at this point). I'm not sure that the colours the instructions suggest come anywhere near being an accurate representation of what the real aeroplane would have looked like but they are the best I could find to go with the decals.

All in all it's a pretty ordinary model made from a more than awful kit, but making something good out of it would have been a major effort. And you how I feel about that. But despite (or perhaps because of) all these problems I'm quite happy with the end result.



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