

Lockheed Cyclone FGA.1 XV978/G, 601 Sqn, RAuxAF RAF North Weald, Essex, 1977

By Colin Ovens

Kit: Esci F-104C



In 1957, the Royal Auxiliary Air Force was disbanded: a part-time, volunteer air force was increasingly seen as an expensive luxury. The costs of bringing RAuxAF equipment up to date and re-training its personnel were considered prohibitive; so the RAuxAF stood down. By the early 1960s, with the perceived Soviet threat to Western Europe and the UK increasing, UK air defence was increasingly reliant on the impressive Lightning (the Javelin was an ageing- and limited- asset). Lightning deliveries were slow; the RAF required an interim, simple, "off-the-peg" interceptor to augment its strength, and perhaps a limited revival of the RAuxAF could provide the aircrew.

The Air Ministry looked to the USA, seeing that the F-104G seemed a convenient answer- being built in five European countries, obtaining spares should be easy. However, by the mid-1960s, the European manufacturers' order books were full- which would place the UK at the back of the queue, (Canadian and US production had ceased in 1963 and 1966 respectively). Furthermore, buying sufficient brand-new airframes was too expensive. Why not buy second-hand Starfighters?

The USAF was not over-impressed with its Starfighters. They were not suitable for the air defence of the continental US. The F-104A was short on range, having no IFR capability. Being VFR-orientated, it was not an all-weather interceptor, even though its climb performance was superb. The more versatile, multi-role, F-104C/D versions were equipped with a probe and drogue IFR system, as used by the RAF. These aircraft (77 built, 363 cancelled), were operated solely by the 479th TFW, and were about to be retired, with some airframes being re-assigned to the Puerto Rico ANG. This aircraft could be a useful second-hand "stop-gap", and would be fairly cheap. If the part-time PRANG could operate it- then why not two revived RAuxAF Squadrons..?

In January 1966, the UK agreed to purchase thirty F.1 (F-104C) and five T.2 (F-104D, two-seat) airframes from the USAF. By then, however, the RAF's operational requirements had changed. The RAF was now deemed deficient in air-to-ground assets; Harrier was still under development, and the multi-role Phantom would not enter RAF service until mid-1968, and it was ultimately destined for air defence, supplanting the Lightning.

With the F-104G's air-to-ground role with the West German Luftwaffe in mind, the newly-constituted Ministry of Defence now saw its F-104C/Ds in a similar role, and usefully contributing to developing future tactics, until Harriers and, later, Jaguars were available in sufficient numbers. (The USAF's 479th TFW used its F-104Cs for ground-attack in Viet Nam- losing 14.)

The thirty F-104C and five F-104D airframes, named Cyclone in RAF service, were to be further optimised for ground-attack by BAC. Deliveries to BAC at Warton of the Cyclone F.1s, now re-designated FGA.1 (XV969-XV999), and Cyclone T.2s (XW700-XW704), began April 1st, 1967.

- Intakes were "anti-iced".
- Both versions were adapted for UK stores, including Matra 155 rocket pods (with eighteen 2.7" rockets), and British 1,000lb bombs, as well as CBL5100 practice bomb carriers.
- The single 20mm M-61 Vulcan rotary cannon of the F-104C was retained, as was both versions' AIM-9 Sidewinder capability- but wing-tip tanks were the norm.
- Fire-control radar was replaced by Autonetics F-15A NASARR (North American Search and Ranging Radar) as per F-104G.
- British UHF and IFF replaced the USAF systems.
- The inertial navigation system of the F-104G was installed.
- Martin Baker Mk.4 seats replaced the Lockheed C-2 seat (West German Starfighters had the M-B Mk.7).



After trials at A&EE Boscombe Down, the Lockheed Cyclone FGA.1 and T.2 entered service in May 1968 with No.601 (County of London) Squadron, RAuxAF; No.604 (County of Middlesex) Squadron, RAuxAF, followed in June. RAF North Weald hosted both units, within No.38 Group, RAF Air Support Command.

Initially, Cyclones carried the standard dark green/dark sea grey/light aircraft grey scheme, replaced in 1973 by a wrap-round dark green/dark sea grey; "type D" national markings were replaced by tactical red/blue markings during 1973. Underwing serials, barely visible beneath the small wings, went in 1977- the Cyclones, by several years, were the first airframes to lose them. Both squadrons prominently displayed their traditional insignias on their aircraft.

With Jaguars and Harriers in service, the end was inevitable. RAF North Weald's Cyclone Wing disbanded on March 31st 1978; the airframes were scrapped at RAF Kemble- the Cyclone had served well. Many thought it the wrong aircraft- saying the MoD should have purchased second-hand F-100 Super Sabres, as being far better for ground-attack. Others advocated the Hawker Hunter as the being the best (cheapest) choice, and available without recourse to the second-hand market... but...the MoD always knows best..!

Model Notes

- Kit is the elderly 1/72 ESCI F-104C (purchased at the 1981 Mildenhall Air Fete- for £2.15); all the decals instantly fragmented in water!
- White-metal Martin Baker Mk4 seat is by Aeroclub.
- Resin CBL5100s are from Airkit Enterprise.
- Remove Before Flight tags by PP Aeroparts.
- Etched brass ejector seat handle by PP Aeroparts.
- Acrylic camouflage paint by Mig Jimenez.
- Decals were sourced from various Modeldecal sheets.
- Final varnish is Micro Flat.
- Vallejo Filler tried to "cure" enormous sink marks on wings...
- ...and much cursing those enormous sink-marks, by me!!