

THE BANSHEE

Introduction

This article is intended as a very brief overview of the seven years of the Banshee's existence between 1955 and 1962; its beginning, challenges, people, major activities and its retirement. The Banshee became the Royal Canadian Navy's first, and only, operational all weather jet fighter/interceptor aircraft. The article will only cover the highlights of the Banshee and its major activities.

Regrettably, space does not permit the telling of more than a couple of the thousands of stories involving the Banshee and the hundreds of people involved. A note at the end of the article will guide the interested reader to a pair of wonderful references where many of the stories can be found, and which were invaluable resources to supplement the dimming memories of the scribbler of this sketch.

The Beginning

In the late 1940's - early 1950's, naval planners turned their thoughts to a replacement for the marvellous but ageing Sea Fury. The evolving Cold War and the Korean War, along with technological advances in aviation, which dramatically increased the threat to the fleet and to Canada, dictated that a quantum leap in air defence capability for the Royal Canadian Navy was essential.

The principle attributes of a replacement fighter were decided. It must be an all weather jet powered interceptor which could be operated from shore and a Canadian aircraft carrier, and be capable of: destroying reconnaissance aircraft before they could discover the presence of the fleet; destroying attack aircraft which were attacking the fleet; and conducting ground attack activities in support of ground forces. It was assumed that the carrier based capabilities would also be applicable to land based operations.

A parallel operational requirement study into the need for a replacement aircraft carrier incorporated, amongst many other considerations, the required operating characteristics of a fighter replacement and resulted in the acquisition of HMCS Bonaventure with key new capabilities including an angled landing deck, a more robust arrestor wire system, a stabilized mirror landing aid system and a steam catapult.

The Aircraft

After a comprehensive search, the United States Navy F2H3 Banshee was selected as the replacement aircraft. It was a development from the F2H2 which added a lengthened fuselage, allowing for a radar detection and attack system plus an increased fuel capacity. The principle drawback of the upgrade was that the engines were unchanged – the loss of performance of a much heavier aircraft with the same amount of thrust was a

The first group of Banshee pilots trained on all weather intercept techniques and learned to fly the Banshee with USN squadrons during the summer of 1955. Most of those pilots are shown here in a photo taken at the MacDonnell plant in St. Louis about a year later. They were led by Lt. Cdr. Bob Falls, the first RCN Banshee Commanding Officer.

The Squadrons

The first squadron to receive the new Banshees was VF 870. VF 871 changed from Sea Furies to Banshees a



year or so later. Each squadron was assigned 8 aircraft. The usual good natured rivalries prevailed between the squadrons. A couple of years later, for a variety of reasons involving low serviceability, the lack of spare parts, crowding in the carrier etc. the two squadrons were melded into one, VF 870, with 12 aircraft. A Banshee was also assigned to VX 10 for modification testing and evaluation purposes.

Carrier Operations

(Lots of good photos available. Nice ones on pages 120 & 164 of Carl Mills book,

The first few Banshees were flown by Canadian pilots from Quonset Point, Rhode Island to Shearwater in late 1955. As expected, they were in awful shape. And the only maintenance expertise was contained within VF 870.

The first few months were a frantic time of fix/test fly – fix/test fly over and over again until, finally, after superb efforts by the maintenance crew, the Base maintenance support group and Fairey Aviation, the Banshees were in fairly good shape and sported their distinctive new paint schemes. As Bob Falls said, "It was a tremendous feat of skill and dedication" for the maintenance team to get all the systems working and the aircraft flying again successfully.

Finally, by the end of 1956, the aircraft, pilots, maintainers

and logistics systems were considered capable of commencing carrier operations. HMCS Bonaventure had recently been commissioned and flight deck trials had been successfully completed.

The Banshees were a tight fit on "Bonnie". The arrestor gear was pretty well stretched to its maximum capability. At least one wire (No.6) had to be removed as the combination of the Banshee's landing speed and weight plus the relatively short length of the landing area resulted in the very real danger of the aircraft going over the side after landing.

And the catapult was also sorely tested. Even with the aircraft fairly lightly loaded, the catapult had to be pushed to its maximum and some wind over and above the ship's speed was required for a successful launch. However, flight deck operations proved to be workable, but extreme accuracy on the part of the pilots was constantly required, and the flight deck activities had to be ever so carefully orchestrated.

There were other challenges with "Bonnie". With both Banshees and Trackers, plus the rescue helicopter "Pedro" embarked, the ship was not only bulging with aircraft, requiring complex scheduling and manoeuvring to conduct flight operations, but the quantities of spares needed to compensate for frequent repairs were enormous requiring every nook and cranny of available space for storage.

Intercept Operations and The Sidewinder

The air intercept and destruction capability was the most important of the Banshee's activities. A great deal of time was expended practicing this critical task, from both Shearwater and Bonaventure. However, the aforementioned power limitations, and the lack of a serious air-to-air weapon capability seriously hampered the ability to satisfactorily perform this role.

The answer, it was hoped, lay with the Sidewinder, an infrared guided rocket missile with a range of from about ½ to 5 miles being developed for the USN. It passed its acceptance testing and was made available to the Canadian navy a couple of years after the Banshee was acquired. Proper launch racks were acquired (2 per aircraft) and fitted to the Banshee. The result was a quantum leap in the Banshee's intercept and destruction capability.

The Banshee suddenly became much more capable than the Canadian Air Force's CF 100 which was far more powerful but only had pods of conventional rockets which had to be fired at very close range. The Banshee, for the next few years, played a significant role in the protection of the North East, and routinely conducted successful interceptions against the CF 100, B 52, and B 47s.

The relatively mild weather at Shearwater occasionally

resulted in the tasking of Banshees to fulfill NORADs air defence responsibilities when other airfields in both Eastern Canada and the north-eastern USA were shut down by bad weather and/or icing conditions.

The Sidewinder was normally only used as a dummy rocket (no warhead or propellant, just an active guidance system) for practice. Occasional live firings were arranged at Key West, Florida against towed targets during annual deployments for night intercept training.

One live firing, however, merits its story here. On one cruise, a Banshee ditched after a cold Catapult shot in the Irish Sea. The Banshees were offloaded and flown to the Royal Navy base at Yeovilton in southern England. The Sidewinder was brand new and the Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm were anxious to see it demonstrated. They simply did not believe its advertised capabilities.

After some debate during which the RN offered to 'rent' us some remote controlled Fairey Fireflies with infra red emitters on the wingtips to simulate jet engines, and our Naval Headquarters refused to provide any financing, the RN were so desirable to 'see it in action' that they offered three of the targets free, figuring they would only cost them a bit of gas and oil.

The first firing was a failure. The RN personnel gleefully gloated. Our investigation quickly revealed that the missile had been fired too close to the target thus the guidance system was not fully enabled until the Sidewinder had passed the target.

The next three flights were totally successful, destroying the three Fireflies with one missile each. The RN could not quite believe their eyes and offered two more targets. These, also, were totally destroyed with one missile each. At this point, the RN suddenly became believers and shut off the supply of the expensive target aircraft. We were all a very happy and proud bunch.

Ground Attack

The naval air fighters had always had an excellent working relationship with the army, and this continued with the Banshee. Ground attack sorties with guns, rockets and bombs were flown frequently at the Chezzetcook range east of Shearwater and annually at Rivers, Manitoba on annual training exercises. A number of exercises took place in CFB Gagetown and were flown from both Shearwater and Bonaventure. The aircraft proved to be a fine platform for ground support activities.

The Grey Ghosts – The Fun Part

Fighter pilots are forever anxious to demonstrate their skills to the general public as well as to their fellow military friends and families. Formation flying is one of those skills which can best be demonstrated. Accordingly, time was found in the very busy operational readiness exercise schedule for formation practice and demonstrations.

With their great color schemes, and the smoke making capabilities invented by the ever helpful technical personnel, the Grey Ghosts, as they soon became known, were a great morale booster for squadron personnel and a hit with the public. The Grey Ghosts, while never organized as a permanent aerobatics team, became well known, and were widely respected, particularly in Atlantic Canada, but also in many parts of Eastern Canada.

Other Activities

Many other flight activities were conducted by the Banshees. Air to air combat (including dog-fighting) was constantly practiced. Air to air gunnery was an occasional treat. Low level navigation exercises were necessary to support ground attack activities. Instrument flying was constantly practiced. Instrument rating re-qualifications, safety drills and survival training were regular features of the readiness training.

The list seemed endless and the requirements of the operational readiness standards required seemingly endless repetition. Throughout all, the technical crews and logistical staffs were sorely challenged to provide sufficient hours, but they came through magnificently.

The Sad Part

Flying fighter aircraft and conducting carrier operations are both inherently dangerous occupations and the combination can be even worse. We lost some very fine people to quite a few deadly Banshee accidents, and nearly lost quite a few more.

The causes were numerous. Mechanical failure (a wing broke off during a high speed low pass) killed one pilot. Oxygen deprivation at altitude caused a death and the loss of the aircraft. A flight deck accident killed another. An instrument malfunction (compass) is thought to have resulted in the loss of a pilot. Pilot error also resulted in a few deaths. A flight deck crewman died when the cannon of a Banshee on the flight deck went off while being cleared after a gunnery exercise.

Bird strikes, slippery runways, slippery flight decks and pilot error resulted in several accidents from which the pilots, fortunately, escaped. And, of course, any flight deck activity on an aircraft carrier is always considered an accident waiting to happen. For example, the previously mentioned cold catapult shot at night resulting in the loss of the Banshee, but the safe recovery of the pilot. However, these dangers were always considered present and were taken into account. The Banshees continued to

operate fairly successfully.

The Ending

All good things must come to an end. In the early 1960s, it was becoming more and more apparent that the overcrowding of Bonaventure seemed to be becoming more and more of a challenge. The Banshees were becoming more and more difficult to maintain as it was getting older and parts were more difficult to come by. And technological advances of potential enemy aircraft were indicating a further quantum leap in the operational requirements for a fighter/interceptor.

Not the least of the concerns, by far, was the obvious conclusion that, to operate a bigger and better fighter, a far larger, more capable and, of course, far more expensive (to acquire and operate) aircraft carrier would be a necessity.

Accordingly, the decision was made to retire the Banshee during the summer of 1962, almost 7 years since it had first arrived in Shearwater. While eminently logical, it was a sad day for those involved with fighters in the Canadian navy. In spite of its challenges, the Banshee did its job well and was much loved by both pilots and maintainers.

The Banshee did not go out quietly. It featured in a number of ceremonial fly-pasts which were seen by many in the Halifax – Dartmouth area. It also featured in not a few “beat – ups” of Shearwater for the faithful technicians and others who loved them.

One of the last events was the flight of the “Last Punch”. The squadron technical staff prepared a Banshee with as much of its weight as possible removed, gave it the smoothest wax finish possible, filled it with only about a half – hour’s worth of gas, and asked the squadron test pilot to give it a go to see if it still had some guts. Indeed it did! It climbed to over 50,000 feet very nimbly. Then, when flipped over and pointed straight down with full power, it easily reached, and stayed at, its terminal velocity of Mach .96. Further, it handled like a dream in aerobatics and the necessary high speed pass or two over Shearwater. Thus the Banshee saga ended.

There were a couple of final flights after the squadron officially disbanded. One Banshee, the Last Punch, was flown to Calgary for display in the naval museum there. Another was flown to Ottawa for display in the National Aeronautical Museum. One more Banshee was kept. It was mounted on a pedestal at Shearwater for several years until finally it was rescued from the elements and now resides in the fantastic Shearwater Aviation Museum

Thus fighter aviation in the Royal Canadian Navy was no more.

A Tribute

A debt of gratitude is owed to all those who were involved with the Banshee, whether aircrew, technicians, aircraft carrier personnel and a whole host of supporters. One person, however, stands out as a superb example of inspirational leadership, superb talent and consummate professionalism. I will 'plagiarize' a few comments made by Michael Whitby who prepared an extensive biography of him. That person is Robert Hillborn Falls, known to all as "Bob" Falls, and "widely believed to have been the most admired and respected naval aviator in Canada's post WWII era."

In spite of many difficulties, he "guided training programs for the new aircraft, led the squadron in day and night landing qualification programs on HMCS Bonaventure and established operating parameters for the fighter onboard the carrier." And "VF 870 has successfully introduced jet fighter operations into our fleet. This distinction has come as a triumph of fighting spirit over much adversity encountered on their way".

Bob Falls continued to pursue a distinguished career both in naval aviation and the navy in general, culminating in his appointment as the Chief of the Defence Staff as a full 4 star Admiral and, following his retirement from that job, as the Chairman of the Military Staff at NATO Headquarters.

His leadership was instrumental to the success of the introduction of the Banshee into the RCN, and he inspired all those with whom he served, many of whom later achieved senior positions in both commissioned and non commissioned ranks. He died in November, 2009. He will be remembered.

Afterword

Fighter Aviation may no longer exist in the Canadian Navy or in the maritime element of the Canadian Forces, but it does exist in the aforementioned museums, in memories and in print. Two superb books have been produced which tell, in great detail, many of the stories of the Banshee. The first, entitled "BANSHEES in the Royal Canadian Navy", by Carl Mills and the Bansheerites, is a wonderful collection of history and stories of the Banshee era.

The second, entitled "CERTIFIED SERVICEABLE", edited by Peter Charlton and Michael Whitby, with support from Editor Emeritus Leo Pettipas, contains a significant section on the Banshee which, along with the rest of the book, is well worth reading.

These two books, along with several excellent others which discuss Canadian naval aviation from different perspectives, are available at the gift shop in the museum at Shearwater. Again, the scribbler of this short history is

most grateful, both as an active participant in most of the Banshee era, and as your scribe, to those who have dedicated so much time and effort recording memorable historical events which would otherwise have been forgotten.