



VIA AUTHOR

LEFT One of very few photographs taken of the “lash-up” of a Martel missile on the starboard outer wing pylon of a No 232 OCU Victor at Marham in 1982. The Argentinian invasion of the Falkland Islands in April 1982 led to the conception of the Victor as a “Wild Weasel” — the colloquial name for an aircraft specialising in suppressing enemy air defences.

Victor / Martel

FROM V-BOMBER TO WILD WEASEL?

The role played by the Avro Vulcan in neutralising Argentinian radar defences with Shrike anti-radiation missiles during the Falklands conflict in 1982 is well-known. Much less so is the plan hatched — and quickly abandoned — to equip a Handley Page Victor with a Martel missile to perform the same “Wild Weasel” mission. **THOMAS WITHINGTON** investigates

to deliver it. A year after that historic Cabinet Committee meeting, the Air Staff invited industry to tender designs for such an aircraft. It needed to have a range of 2,500 nautical miles (4,600km), a cruising altitude of 45,000ft (14,000m) and be capable of carrying a 10,000lb (4,500kg) bomb. Avro submitted its Type 698 design and Handley Page its H.P.80. The sophistication of these designs, destined to become the Vulcan and Victor respectively, meant that both would be some years from entering service. The Air Staff would therefore need a stopgap until the Avro and Handley Page designs would be ready; this arrived in the form of the Vickers Type 660, which ultimately became the Valiant.

The Valiant was the first of the RAF’s “V-bombers” to enter service, No 138 Sqn at RAF Wittering becoming the air arm’s first “V-Force” unit when it received its first Valiant B.1s in July 1955. The Valiant was followed into service by the Vulcan B.1 in May 1957 when No 83 Sqn was activated at Waddington. The final member of the V-Force triumvirate, the Victor B.1, entered operational service with No 10 Sqn at Cottesmore in April 1958. That the V-bombers could rain destruction of biblical proportions on to their targets in the Soviet Union, courtesy of their nuclear weapons, was in no doubt. The problem these aircraft would face was getting there intact.

SOVIET AIR DEFENCES

The vulnerability of cities to strategic bombing, as demonstrated in both the European and Pacific theatres during the Second World War, and the awe-inspiring power of *Little Boy* and *Fat Man* above the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, was not lost on the Soviet leadership. Like the USA had with scientists like Wernher von Braun, the Soviets snapped up German boffins at the end of the Second World War. Matching the emerging science of rocketry with the vulnerability of Soviet cities and strategic targets to nuclear attack prompted Moscow to invest heavily in air defence.

Perhaps taking a cue from the Luftwaffe’s wartime Kammhuber Line nocturnal air-defence system and the RAF’s Dowding System, the Soviets had learned important air defence lessons from the recent conflict. It was not enough to have fighters, and now surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), that could intercept bombers; also needed was a state-of-the-art radar system to detect and track hostile aircraft. Sector Operations Centres (SOCs) — in which the air situation in a specific

ARE YOU SITTING comfortably? Then we will begin. In order to tell the story of how the RAF’s Handley Page Victor strategic bomber almost became a “Wild Weasel” anti-surface-to-air-missile platform, we must journey back to the smog-filled austerity of Britain’s immediate post-war years. With its economy shattered, population exhausted and global role diminishing, there was at least some prestige on the horizon beyond the James Bond novels of Ian Fleming.

The government of Prime Minister Clement Attlee had seen the atomic bomb and liked it. The UK had a chance to join its American ally and give the Soviets pause for thought by possessing the world’s most powerful weapon. Behind closed doors somewhere in Whitehall on January 8, 1947, the secret GEN-163 Cabinet Committee, comprising six ministers, with Attlee at the helm, made the decision that the UK would have a nuclear deterrent.

Ballistic missiles were still some years away. This meant “The Bomb” would need a bomber