



First V-bomber clad in camouflage is this Victor B.2 of 139 (Jamaica) Sqn, landing at Wittering with its limpet-like Blue Steel underneath

## THE STEEL IN THE BLUE

### Last Week's Glimpse of the V-force

BY ROBERT R. RODWELL

*"Flight International" photographs*

ONE Victor B.2 bomber camouflaged in shades of green and brown over its topsides stood out like a one-armed bandit in a Salvation Army hall among a number of other Victors, five Vulcan B.2s and a lone Valiant in the detergent extra-brightness whiteness standard to V-bombers, at RAF Wittering on Tuesday last week. With an all-white Blue Steel stand-off missile snuggled, marsupial fashion, to its white belly, it made a searing take-off in front of the Secretary of State for Air, the AOC-in-C Bomber Command, other senior officers and a large party of pressmen, Argosy-delivered from Northolt, to manifest a new V-force capability—low-level strike with stand-off missiles. We've had grass-mowing Valiants, rolling Vulcans, toss-bombing Victors at SBAC displays—always thrilling but not entirely convincing. But now the Air Minister, Mr Hugh Fraser, and the AOC-in-C, Air Marshal Sir John Grandy, strongly urged us to accept that we have—crewed, in service, ready—latter-day Victors and Vulcans, with attendant missiles, able to approach high, sneak in low and separate at heights well below defensive radar beams, the Blue Steel to continue to target close to the ground. It gives us, in the language of these deterrent times (and of Mr Fraser), "an expanded range of options."

The new option has been proved in a number of "100 per cent effective" low-level firings of Blue Steel at Woomera, the Press was told, and Bomber Command was in part trained for the low-flying role and would become more proficient at it as the year wore on. Some modifications to Blue Steel are needed to convert it for low-level firing but they are not extensive and the missile's range is affected not at all. Carrier aircraft range is reduced, of course, but the AOC-in-C was quick to point out that the intention would

not be to fly an entire mission at low altitude but to come down when it was tactically advantageous to do so. The modifications necessary on the aircraft were negligible in the extreme, the Air Minister hastened to add; they could easily be done on V-bomber stations during the course of normal maintenance and their cost, in relation to defence costs generally, was "miniscule."

V-bombers will be camouflaged in the scheme carried by the dun-topped Victor displayed, to suit them for the low-level mission. The white birds stood out rather clearly against the ground, Air Marshal Grandy remarked, but topside camouflage would be no disadvantage at high altitudes, for there the V's have nothing above them.

Last Tuesday's occasion was ostensibly a visit to 139 (Jamaica) Sqn, commanded by Wg Cdr J. G. G. Beddoes, which is the first Victor B.2 unit to convert to Blue Steel from free-fall weapons; Vulcan squadrons have been flying with the missile for about two years and 139's Victor-flying neighbour at Wittering, 100 Sqn (Wg Cdr M. M. J. Robinson), is in process of transition now. But in fact the presence of the Air Minister, the AOC-in-C and visiting Vulcans turned it into something more—a detailed briefing about Bomber Command here-and-now, given in the atmospheric setting of the large operations centre, with a kidney-shaped table and pea-bulb writing lamp attached to the right arm of every chair. During Air Marshal Grandy's presentation a succession of fact-laden diagrammatic slides flashed on the screen; "flashed" is the word, for they were a sore trial to those pressmen whose shorthand note has not withstood the rust of time.

Briefly, but cogently, we were taken over common ground.