

QUARTERLY NEWS

WINTER 2021/22

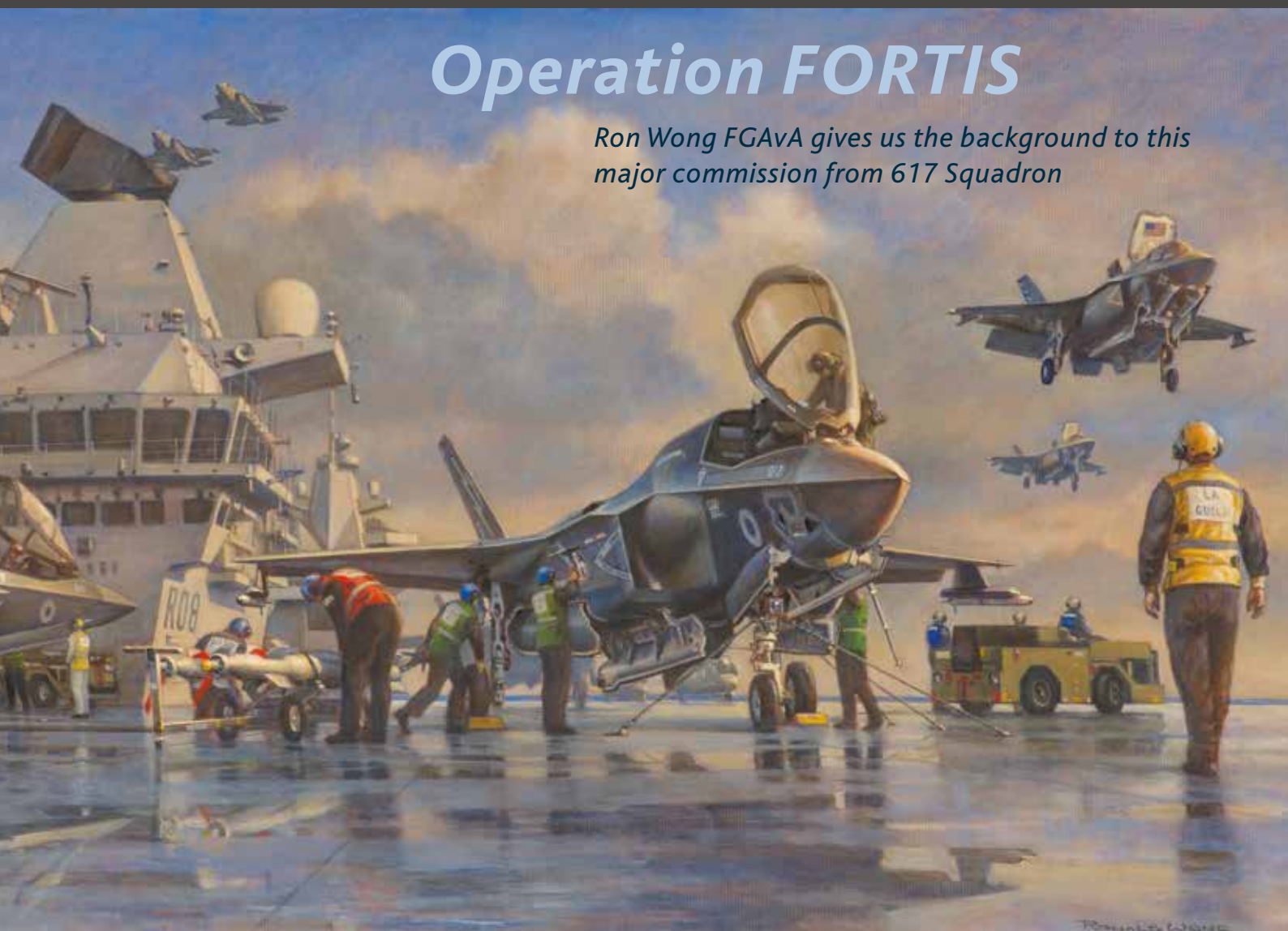


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Operation FORTIS

Ron Wong FGAvA gives us the background to this major commission from 617 Squadron



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.....Somewhere out in the vastness of the Pacific Ocean the deck of HMS Queen Elizabeth is teeming with activity. Teams of deck crew in their colour-coded uniforms go about their assigned tasks: servicing and re-arming the F-35B Lightnings as they return from their sorties...

No. 617 Squadron at RAF Marham commissioned this painting to commemorate their deployment to the Indo-Pacific region on Operation Fortis during May-December 2021 as part of UK Carrier Strike Group 21 (CSG21), a British-led multinational naval force. It was the inaugural deployment for HMS Queen Elizabeth and the largest single deployment of the new 5th-generation F-35 fighter aircraft. From the North Sea out to the Pacific Ocean, the strike group engaged and exercised with friendly nations all along the way, flying over 1,000 sorties.

I had initially contemplated an aerial view comprising both aircraft and ships, along the lines of my previous painting Blue Water Force (Guild Annual 2019) but the squadron quickly indicated their preference for a more involved, human dimension. This has been a noticeable recent trend, with my last 2 commissions...from a US Fighter Squadron and from RAF Cranwell, both opting for feet-on-the-ground viewpoints with people as a central element in the compositions. The drawback is these perspectives usually entail a magnitude more work than the good old plane-in-the-cloudy sky scenarios!

So a busy deck scene it was to be. With grey aircraft on a big grey ship. Light and perspective effects will need to be used to the full here to make it work. I studied intensively the information and images provided by the officers at 617, and that available in the media, of both the planes and the ship. And arrived at a mental checklist for the painting:

The F-35B Lightning II

The STOVL version of the fighter had to be central in the composition. Up close and personal. And British. As the deck was shared with a unit of US Marine F-35Bs at least one American counterpart had also to be featured somewhere.

The Lightning II (aka the JSF) is hardly the most glamorous looking of fighter jets, it's "stealth" requirements giving it a rather chunky appearance. In common with other stealth designs (F-22, B-2) they

display complex patterns of differing reflectivity on their surfaces, presumably the areas of RAM (radar absorptive material) marking the jagged edges and joins. Tricky to paint, but along with other fiddly details (all those hatches and doors!) they can and do add interest and character to an otherwise rather bland exterior.

In keeping with their low radar cross section (RCS) operational mode the Lightnings carry no external loads in the painting. However, in deference to a sponsoring company they would show defensive ASRAAMs beneath their wingtips.

HMS Queen Elizabeth (RO8)

Both the faceted twin towers, unique to this new class of aircraft carrier, needed to be visible in the painting (I once queried this design feature, and was informed that they actually reduce drag!). I was impressed by the sheer numbers of deck crew circulating with their colour-coded tunics and headgear, which provided a welcome touch of colour for the scene.

The landing areas are marked out along the port side of the deck, and visible (from above) by the engine burn marks on them. Returning jets would overfly the carrier along the starboard side, circle to port some distance ahead and recover to deck in hover mode, Harrier-style. How to get all that on to the plate? Clearly a wide-angle perspective was needed which took in both sides of the carrier deck. And a low horizon as well as accentuating the central jet would make space for the aerial activity above. A preliminary drawing (fig.1) showed that the perspective should work.

The fluid part of the equation was positioning all the humans in the scene. Initially I had the disembarked pilot greeting the crew chief in the center of the composition, with other crew to be somehow arranged all around without getting too much in the way of the central fighter jet. Then it was suggested that a bomb trolley (with Paveway IVs) and its attendant armorers could be included in the scene, as well as the refueling team dragging up their hose. These ousted the pilot from his central location in the composition to an elevated one, egressing the cockpit behind that awkward forward-hinged canopy. The pilot would leave his plane only after the expensive jet had been firmly chained to the deck, so that at



least obviated the need to show the chain gang around its wheels.

By that point I had proceeded from pencil on paper to canvas (24 x 36 ins.) underpainting (fig.2). To the right side was further added the balancing foreground figure of a yellow-vested Senior Aircraft Handler, his back directing our attention back into the picture, and in the background a green tow truck with its crew awaiting the pair of American jets hovering in from port (fig.3). On the other side another parked 617 Squadron F-35B is being attended to in its bay, as another "stick" of the jets is incoming high above to starboard.

I was now instinctively resisting inserting any more aircraft and figures into the already complicated scene, but decided to allow a distant hint of the Merlin helicopters also on board, just visible from underneath the main jet.

With the elements of the painting in place, the other consideration was the overall atmosphere and unifying mood in the painting. Looming Monsoon cloud and haze above the ocean, along with oblique lighting from a low Sun, judiciously applied, should serve to bring all that hardware into relief. A final touch was to perk up that opaque foreground decking with a special effect.... a rain-spattered reflective surface giving that slightly other-dimensional feel.

The creation of this painting was remotely co-ordinated with the squadron at every step, and full approval for the finished work (fig.4) was received electronically from on board the nation's flagship still somewhere out in the South China Sea. An edition of prints was organised to celebrate the squadron's return.

Ronald Wong FGAvA



Fig.4

Ron's careful consideration of the overall lighting, colour and reflections in the on-deck water give a strong feel of time and space. Placing of the figures was crucial part of the composition.

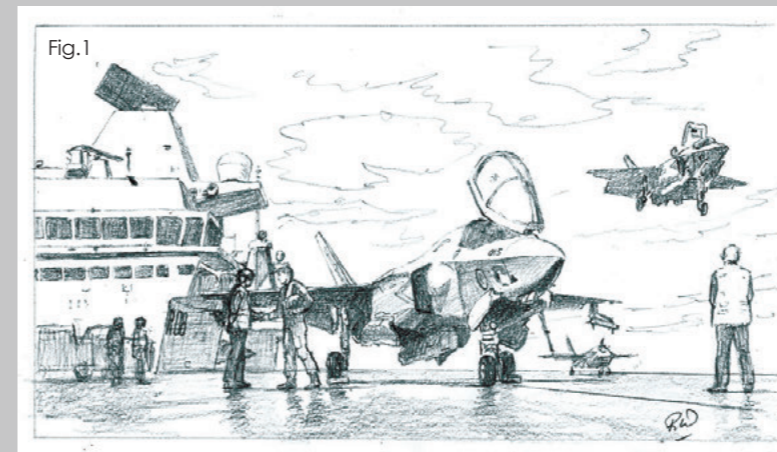


Fig.1



Fig.2



Fig.3

Three development stages:
Fig.1 - preliminary pencil sketch working it all out
Fig.2 - sepia underpainting
Fig.3 - painting in progress
Fig.4 - Finished painting - top