David Baston

Born 1.7.1942.
Life story extracted from Imperial War Museum recorded interview.
Available online at www.livesretold.co.uk

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The recorded interview from which this life story is extracted, with acknowledgement and thanks, can be heard online at the Imperial War Museum website here: https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80034580

1. Childhood

David, could you tell me where and when you were born, please?

London, 1st July 1942.

And a little bit about your background?

My father was in the army. I had an absolutely idyllic childhood. My parents bought the most beautiful place in the Brecon Beacons, where my sister and I had an absolute ball. I knew I didn't want to join the army, because I had seen a fair bit of what my father had done, and painting bits of coal white I didn't really think was much fun. So I decided to join the navy.

What about your education?

I went to Sherborne School in Dorset. I had a housemaster called Abe Gourlay, who was the most stunning intelligent and kind man. Once again I had an absolute ball. I did not work hard enough, spending my time playing rugby and cricket.

And then having decided to join the navy, I had to pass the Civil Service exams. I was booked in to a crammer but much to everyone's surprise I passed without having to go!

What were the sort of educational requirements for the navy at that time?

You had to have a certain number of O Levels, including English and Maths. Then you took the Civil Services exams in St.Mary's Mansions in London – this huge hall, with dusty air and sunlight coming through filthy windows – with hundreds of other people. By some fluke I passed.

And how old were you when you had to do that?

Seventeen.

You mentioned some of your reasons for joining the navy. Were there others?

Well in 1947 my father had a job commanding the garrison in Gibraltar, and he arranged for me to visit various visiting ships. For example the HMS Amethyst came back from the Far East full of holes. It all struck me as rather a glamorous existence.

And at that stage did you have any interest in flying?

No I had no interest in flying, and there was none in my family. The closest I got to flying was making big gliders out of balsa wood at school and fitting them with Jetex engines and lighter fuel which went off with a great whoosh and burst into flames.

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2. Joining the Navy

Britannia Royal Naval College, Dartmouth

What was the next stage?

You have to go and do interviews, at HMS Sultan in Portsmouth.

What sort of things do you think they were looking for?

Self confidence, leadership, the ability to think on your feet. They gave you silly tasks such as crossing an imaginary river with two oil drums and piece of rope, and that chap has a broken leg. And in the evenings they mix with you in the bar and see if you are suitable. Then there was an interview with the Admiralty Interview Board.

So you have your interview. Do you have to report at a certain time.

I got a letter telling me to report to Dartmouth at a particular time. I missed the train and was late – arriving by taxi instead of being marched up the hill. I was allocated to be a seaman allocation – driving ships. We were the last of the COST scheme (Casual Officers Scheme of Training!). It was followed later by the Murray scheme, which required everyone to specialise, for example in torpedo or anti-submarine.

You were issued with a grey or brown trilby hat, which you were expected to wear when you went into town to make you look respectable. They gave us a great form with dozens of specialisations. Our particular cabin of six were rather stroppy. We decided to cut up the form, scrumple up each bit of paper, and put them in a trilby and pick them out. Whatever we pulled out we would write down on the form. A great chum of mine pulled out Gunnery Officer and has been a gunnery officer ever since. I pulled out Helicopter Pilot. But all these specialisations wouldn't take place at Dartmouth. At Dartmouth you would get general training as a seaman officer, and then go off to get your specialist training.

But our year was so social that lots of us failed the final examinations, and Dartmouth put on an extra term to try to get more to pass out. I, and others also failed the second exam. This was because the system was that the assessment by the civilian academic teaching staff carried weight equal to that by the naval officers on the staff. So I was hauled up and was told you are no longer required – or so I thought.

How was your day divided up, and what were the things you had to do?

First thing in the morning you got up at crack of dawn and ran down to the jetty and rowed a cutter across the Dart then ran back up the hill, got changed and had breakfast. Then lectures, parade drills, rifle drills. You were allowed ashore two nights a week. We were paid nine shillings a day, on which I was able to run an old Land Rover. A lot of it was classroom work. In the afternoons there was sailing, or driving power boats, which I loved. We used to race the Dartmouth One Designs and then the Fireflies and Redwings. If we won we would be plied with lots of beer and have a naval bus to take us back again. Very satisfactory.

What subjects did you have to cover in the lectures?

Maths, physics and mechanics. There was a bit of English throw in but it was mainly the technical bits. I could never get my head around physics. I remember one question. You have a railway truck weighing ten tons, you let it go on a slope and it hits four similar railway wagons; how far will those four wagons go? My answer was instead of messing around with slide rules, let the wagon go and measure it. That answer did not go down well at all.

Was naval history taught?

Not really. Very little that I recall. You picked that up as you went along. There were pictures of naval history on the walls at Dartmouth.

What about the social side? The skills you would need to be an officer?

There was an amazing woman at Dartmouth called Miss Buller who dealt with that. If anyone used their knife to shovel their peas she was onto them like a ton of bricks. If you were lined up to go ashore you had too wear jacket, trousers and tie. You would be inspected by a midshipman, who would tell you not to wear black shoes with a brown suit. You were taught to conform, so that you could go to a drinks party and behave in a way that would not embarrass you or your captain. They did not stamp on your character at all, in fact they rather tried to encourage it. Their view was that if you have bowl of baked beans it is better to have one that jumps up, and you can slap it back. That is better than having to put your hand in to find the baked bean.

They were not trying to stifle individuality?

No. They wanted people who would show initiative. One day we were going to collect our rifles for parade ground drill from the armoury. The instructor had left the keys in the gate to the armoury. So when we came out with our rifles we locked the door into the armoury and threw the keys into the flower bed. So the senior instructor had to collect the spare keys and let the infuriated instructors out. They

came out like a swarm of wasps and gave us a hard hour's parade drill. We couldn't stop laughing. We had a lot of fun.

We used behave very badly, but with good manners. One night we took the cannon from in front of the wardroom, and set it rolling down the hill. We recovered it with my land rover. The pin had fallen out of the wheel, but I used the marlinspike on my naval pocket knife instead of the pin. Some while later I flew to Dartmouth in a Hiller helicopter and found my knife was still in the cannon, so I reclaimed it.

Another thing was someone wanted to get rid of an old car – a Rover. Somebody got into the driver's seat and drove it by gravity down the hill. Our plan was to then push it off the dock into the river. It was the middle of the night, and we had all been drinking. As we were about the push the car off the dock there was a cry from down below, and it turned out there was a yacht tied up, which was about to have the car land on it. So we had to drag the car back, and pushed it along to the ferry slip and let it off down the ferry slip. A police turned up and helped push. Urged to push harder he explained that the rear wheel was on his boot. The next day they police turned up at the college, and were satisfied when we bought tickets to the Police charity ball. You didn't have to go, but you had to buy tickets. There were lots and lots of things like that.

What happened next?

Having failed the exams for a second time I was withdrawn from naval training. I thought. I thought I was a civilian. My now brother in law had a particularly pretty Swedish girl friend. So we decided to go to Sweden so that he could see his girl friend. And hopefully fix me up with another Swedish girl – which did not happen!

So we drove the old Land Rover to Tilbury, where it was craned up into the hold of a Swedish Lloyd ferry and off we went to Sweden.

We drove back through the continent. My sister, who is mad as a hatter to this day, flew to join us, and we came back together. My sister was small enough to sleep across the front seats, another in the back, and two of us in a tent. We collected a road sign, and some traffic cones, and survived the exhaust falling off.

When I got home my mother said you are still being paid by the navy, and every few days someone rings up from the Ministry of Defence asking where you are. So I rang the Ministry of Defence and was put through to an admiral who explained I was still in the navy, and he had found a piece of paper saying I wanted to be a helicopter pilot. That sounded fun, because I had always liked things mechanical.

The admiral said there were not courses immediately available, so he was going to send me to sea until one was available. A junior officer had broken his leg and they needed someone at Lochinvar in Scotland, to join the minehunter HMS Shoulton

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3. HMS Shoulton

HMS Shoulton.

I arrived by train in the middle of the night, walked up the gangplank and found the watchkeeper fast asleep. He woke up and showed me to a cabin, where there was a spare upper bunk. I went to sleep. I woke up and went to breakfast. There were five officers including the captain who asked what I was doing there. I explained that I had been sent to join his ship. He had one question: do you play poker? I said yes, and he said I would fit in well.

Because the Shoulton carried experimental equipment which was being repaired there was nothing for us to do, so we played poker all morning, fortified with alcohol in the form of Horse's Necks. (Editor's note: Brandy and ginger ale).The navigating officer was Australian, and a great character. Because the Shoulton was not going anywhere for the next few days he decided one morning to go home to Rosyth. This was by way of a converted Motor Fishing Vessel, which was used for moving people around. It had a warm coke stove down below; he decided to go to sleep, reckoning that the bump when the MFV arrived at Rosyth would wake him up. But it did not, and he woke up to find he had returned to Lochinvar. Undaunted he re-joined us and called for more poker and Horse's Necks.

By this time I had my shotgun on board, as did some others. Lochinvar bordered a great estate. So what we did was to get the midshipmen from the minesweepers to go in a great arc through the estate and drive the pheasants over the dockyard wall. We shot them down and hung them up to age before eating. This operation was not popular with either the owner of the estate or the dockyard police.

I was allowed to help drive this ship. It had four engines, and propellers within the rudders to it was very manoeuvrable. Unfortunately I drove between buoys and got all four propellers tangled up with rope. The four clearance divers leapt backwards into the water, shouting 'Well done Mr Midshipman!'.

The ship was very special, with its experimental equipment. We had specialists from the underwater research centre at Portland on board most of the time. They sometimes went off in remote controlled rubber boats, which we had fun

misdirecting by changing the Dymo labels on the control panel. The sonar was amazingly powerful. It could find a single beer can on the sea bed.

We went for a weekend to Bruges, and then Shoulton went down to Portland. I was the correspondence officer, so I was in charge of all the money, and in charge of measuring each month the temperature of the magazine. As we had no gun or ammunition in the magazine, I didn't bother to do this. This triggered endless correspondence.

The money had to be inspected by the base supply officer, who would call to inspect our books and to look at the cash. This was kept in a tobacco tin. We opened the tin. In the tin were lots of IOUs written by officers on bar chits. He said you can't do that! I said, would it be alright it there was a cheque in there? He said yes, so I said I would write a cheque to cover the IOUs, but that did not please him at all.

Then it was off to flying training.

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4. Learning to Fly Fixed Wing

The Chipmunk.

We went to Linton on Ouse in Yorkshire to fly Chipmunks.

Is it a case that before flying a helicopter you learn to fly a fixed wing aircraft?

Yes, helicopters are hugely expensive to fly, whereas a light fixed wing aircraft is cheap to fly, almost like running a car. Learning to fly a fixed wing aircraft shows the instructors whether you have the basic aptitude for airmanship – keeping a good look around, and acting sensibly when things go wrong.

I did get very airsick at first, but got over it. My instructor a brilliant Gannet pilot was very understanding, and if I felt airsick he would stop aerobatics and switch to half an hour of navigation dumping the sick bags on Yorkshire..

Once we were able to fly solo we got up to all sorts of pranks. One was to take the Chipmunk as high as you could, and then plunge towards earth at maximum speed. Someone got their Chipmunk up to 13,800 feet – far higher than you were supposed to go, and where you really need oxygen. Then he would plunge down vertically at a speed far above the permitted maximum limited only by propeller speed..

Basically we had a great time at Linton on Ouse in spite of the Crabs.

How did the instructors take you through your training?

You have to pass ground school before ever you go up in the air. You need to learn all about the aircraft. You are taught how to check the aircraft on the ground, then all the start up checks. Then you have to learn to taxi – not easy with a tail wheel aircraft as you cannot see ahead and have to zig zag. Then endless take offs and landings.

The Chipmunk was very simple, very nice to fly. Landing is the most complicated element – it is a great feeling if you get all three wheels touching down perfectly and simultaneously.

What was soloing like?

When your instructor thinks you are good enough, you do two circuits with the instructor, then he gets out, and you do a circuit solo. It is an amazing feeling to be allowed to go off and do these things on your own. Once you have soloed they get on to teaching you navigation and aerobatics. There was no GPS, but there was rudimentary radar so if you got lost you could ask radar to take you home.

What are the main navigation features you use?

Roads. In the Arctic in the dark you would follow a snow plough, because they are always on roads.

So I passed the Chipmunk thing satisfactorily, and then went down to Culdrose, in Cornwall, to start the helicopter flying training.

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5. Learning to Fly Helicopters

Hiller helicopters.

I joined 705 Squadron at Culdrose in Cornwall in 1963 for my helicopter flying training. We flew the Hiller E, a small bubble. Not easy to fly, which is a good thing for a training aircraft. I had never sat in a helicopter in my life. We had a great senior pilot who took me to solo.

The first time I sat in the bubble and took off, I fell in love with it in seconds. I just absolutely loved it. You could see everything. You could open a window to let the draught in. It is the nearest thing to being a bird, if a little more noisy.

The Hiller was very sensitive. The manual throttle control was quite tricky. You have to concentrate, particularly on landing. There is danger of over-controlling, which is bad news in a helicopter. You need to be very gentle.

Your throttle is on the end of your collective lever. As you raise the lever you open the throttle. You have to put on rudder to prevent the aircraft turning. Then you gently move the cyclic lever. Sounds simple but it needs a bit of coordination.

How do they teach you?

They first say follow me on the controls. So by following the movements of the instructor you get a very good feel for what you need to do. You do take-offs, hovering and landing. Again and again. Then you do engine-off landings, with auto-rotating. They don't do engine-offs any more with modern helicopters. Because we wrote off more helicopters doing engine-offs than we lost in real engine failures.

In auto-rotation you can steer but cannot increase the pitch of the rotor blades, or they will fold up. I loved engine-off landings.

What is night flying like in a helicopter?

The Hiller did not have a full panel of instruments, so you could not do full night flying. That had to wait until we were on Whirlwinds.

Do you take off straight up?

Yes. Only exception is if you have a heavy load and are on flat land you can take off rolling forward at up to 30 knots.

Were you by now convinced that your career lay with helicopters?

Absolutely. You lived free in the wardroom. You had no living expenses. So you had lots of money. And there are lots of pubs in Cornwall. We had a fabulous time. I was 18 or 19, and still a midshipman.

And after the Hiller?

We moved on to the much bigger Whirlwind 3 and the Whirlwind 7. The Whirlwind 3 had an American engine and an electric starter. The Whirlwind 7 had a cartridge starter, which often did not work. It was a bastard to start, particularly when it was hot.

The rotor speed gauge was the staff of life in the Whirlwind 7. You had to keep it between 210 and 213 rpm.

The Whirlwind is a big ugly bastard, four wheels, and big bulbous nose. The dashboard looked something out of World War Two. No warning lights. Sudden silence was the best warning you got. You would climb up the side and in through a sliding window. In the far east we would put a foot out, and get a draught up your trouser leg. You could see nothing to the left.

The later Whirlwind 9 had a different engine (much lighter and more powerful) and was a delight to fly.

How do you learn instrument flying?

The windows on your side are blanked out, so you can only see the instruments. You constantly scan the instruments, but that is something you do in normal flying anyway.

Can your body mislead you?

Yes. It’s called disorientation. It is very frightening. You really think you are in a screaming abdab dive to the right. But what you have to do is to ignore that and believe the instruments. If you do that, your disorientation will go.

A modern airliner will fly you to Singapore without your touching it. But you still have to watch it all the time.

What were the other elements of training you had not done on the Hiller?

Instrument flying, night flying, low flying, winching, and operations over the water.

What about low flying?

After 705 Squadron you get your wings and move to an operational squadron. At 705 you learn to fly the aircraft. In an operational squadron you learn to use it.

About a quarter of the people who start flying training fail the course, even though they all passed initial aptitude tests. The reasons they drop out are numerous. They don’t like it, they are insecure, they are frightened, their wives don’t like it, they find it too difficult.

I was very proud to get my wings, and was promoted to Acting Sub Lieutenant.

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6. Operational Flying Training

We then went on to operational commando flying training in 847 Squadron , also at Culdrose. They had sandy coloured Whirlwind 7s. We would go off and camp on Dartmoor, learning operational flying. You have your own weapon which you have to learn how to clean and fire. You lift loads slung under the helicopter. You would practise low flying, to avoid being seen by the enemy**.**

What kind of capacity did it have to carry people?

It really depended on how much fuel you had. If you filled it up with fuel you could hardly get it off the ground. Usually we would carry a crew man plus four or five troops. Carrying troops near Farnborough I was pushed onto the ground by the downdraught from the helicopter in front. The troops were trained to jump out as soon as we landed. So they jumped out, and with less weight the helicopter went up into the air again, leaving the troops in completely the wrong place.

How do you do underslung loads?

A Haflinger truck under a Wessex 5 on HMS Albion.

There is only one rule. Don’t press the release button before you are supposed to. They couldn’t lift much; the biggest thing they could pick up was a Citroen 2CV truck which we carried on HMS Albion.

In Borneo I lifted a concrete mixer which was too heavy a load. I just got it off the ground, and put it back down again. It turned out they had removed the engine to reduce the weight, but had put the engine in the back of the helicopter.

How do you do formation flying?

With great care. You must not get too close. With fixed with aircraft you step down. With helicopters you step up for better visibility. You position yourself so you can see the first pilot's helmet. You normally formate at one rotors distance. The leader needs to fly gently.

During the operational training, is there an ethos being put across to you?

Commando helicopter flying had the most amazing esprit de corps. Although they work hard, they really play and fly hard. They were big squadrons. In 848 Squadron we had about 24 aircraft and 30 pilots. Everyone was so young, even the Senior Pilot was young. We had the most tremendous time. They pay you to fly wonderful machines, with the best maintainers in the world, and send you all over the world. The commando maintainers are the very best, because they need to do it in the arctic, in the tropics, in the jungle, in the desert. And they are absolutely brilliant.

It's just a wonderful club of great people. There was a tremendous can do attitude. An RAF pilot came back for secondment to the navy for a second time. He said the RAF has a book of rules that tells you what you can do. The navy has a book of rules that tells you what you can't do. Otherwise you can do what you want. It is a totally different way of looking at it.

That was exactly the attitude we had. If someone asked you to do something, you would say OK and do it. There was not much laughter in the RAF; they were all terribly serious.

Later in 707 Squadron my wonderful commanding officer said to me: You have my total authority to do anything, based on common sense. He didn't say don't upset people, don't fly low, don't set fire to the piano at RAF Valley (which we did!).

I was 21. The navy gives you a lot of responsibility at a young age.

Is there a danger of over confidence?

Yes there is. When you have done 500 hours or 1000 hours, you start to think you can do anything. But you can't. You learn from mistakes. The lovely thing about the navy was that mistakes were accepted. If you hit a tree when landing they would say, that's alright, we'll change the rotor tips, and we'll all learn from that mistake. There was no official enquiry or report. So the whole squadron would learn from any mistake a pilot made. It's good to make mistakes provided nobody gets killed.

The lessons learned can be something that happened to someone else?

Yes. When I was commanding a squadron and someone made a bad mistake I got him to give a lecture. He gave a very good presentation, and we all learned from it.

Did you have any training for flying into confined spaces?

Yes. There was a farmer's field surrounded by trees, which we used for practice. The winch man is useful for looking where your tail is. In Borneo you sometimes had to place your tail between two trees. The crew men were a terrific breed of people, committed and helpful. But they would sometimes tie your shoelaces together when you were sitting up front and they were sitting in the back. Which creates an interesting moment when you come in to land.

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7. Becoming a Junglie

In Borneo the Whirlwind had been replaced by the Wessex 1. It was a bit long in the tooth. Its most exciting feature was its starter, powered by rocket fuel. They sometimes exploded, and had on one occasional killed someone.

It had auto stabilisation, and stick trim. If you took your hands off it would keep flying. Much easier to fly than the Whirlwind. A gas turbine engine with pots of power. They had been out in Borneo with 845 Squadron from 1962.

So I qualified on the Wessex I, and got an instrument ticket on it.

I was then appointed to a vacancy in 848 Squadron. It was to be equipped with the Wessex 5, which had two engines and was more advanced.

Did the two engines make it a safer aircraft?

No necessarily. If you have two things there is twice the chance of something going wrong. And the control systems make for further complication and risk of problems.

The Wessex 5 conversion was quite fun, because no pilot's notes had yet been published. The conversion just consisted of three flights, including instrument flying certification on the third flight.

They were wonderful things to fly, with so much power. For example if you were lifting a Land Rover and one engine failed, you didn't need to dump the Land Rover, the other engine just doubled its power output. It was wonderful over the jungle, because if you lost one engine you just carried on with the other.

Then 848 Squadron was formed in June 1964. We did displays at Farnborough and Biggin Hill. At Farnborough we lived in a wonderful army mess called the Red House. The Triumph motor cycle company had rashly lent each pilot a purple scooter to get around, which was great fun. The army were so good to us. They looked after us amazingly. One senior officer mentioned at breakfast that he had seen tyre marks on the big table on the landing. I explained that we had set up a scooter obstacle course through this wonderful country house, with planks leading up to furniture. We rode right over all the dining tables and jumped off the end. He did not mind.

I fell off my scooter on the way to Farnborough. We were doing a wing formation of about 15 scooters on the main road, closing together when oncoming traffic

came. I arrived pouring blood from my arm. Our Senior Pilot called for brandy and a toothbrush, and scrubbed at the wound. I t worked fine, but I still have the scar.

The Farnborough Air Show was great fun. Lots of helicopter displays, bangs and explosions, which wouldn't be allowed today. We simulated flying troops into a battle, with smoke and flares.

From Farnborough we did an exercise on Salisbury Plain to fill the gap between Farnborough at Biggin Hill.

We had Wessex 5 aircraft parked in a line on Salisbury Plain. The grass was very dry. One of our number had a wet start, flames came out of his exhaust, and the grass caught fire. He managed to get away on one engine, and people beat out the flames. Another of our number flew low between two woods, but failed to notice the electricity cable strung between them. The Tidworth camp was without electricity for some time, having a cold Sunday lunch and the falling cables set fire to the grass again.

We then moved on to the Biggin Hill Air Show. By this stage we had 24 aircraft. Approaching Biggin Hill, our commanding officer was leading this diamond formation of 24 aircraft. He was about to cross the main runway, when air traffic said no. The CO said there was no way he could turn away. In the middle of the formation one of the aircraft ran out of fuel because its pumps were not correctly set and dropped out of the formation.

We got our scooters out of the backs of our helicopters, and drove in formation (ignoring proper procedures) down the main runway. We went on, with our scooters, to the Biggin Hill mess. They were holding a cocktail party to which we had not been invited. But we went anyway, and livened things up considerably.

The display went well, and we had more fun with the scooters. One of our pilots, Mike Smith, had got the knack of riding a scooter while sitting on it backwards. As the Red Arrows were taxiing out, Mike decided to do his backwards stunt between the parked aircraft. The crowd went wild with appreciation.

Then we had to embark on Albion and go to the far east.

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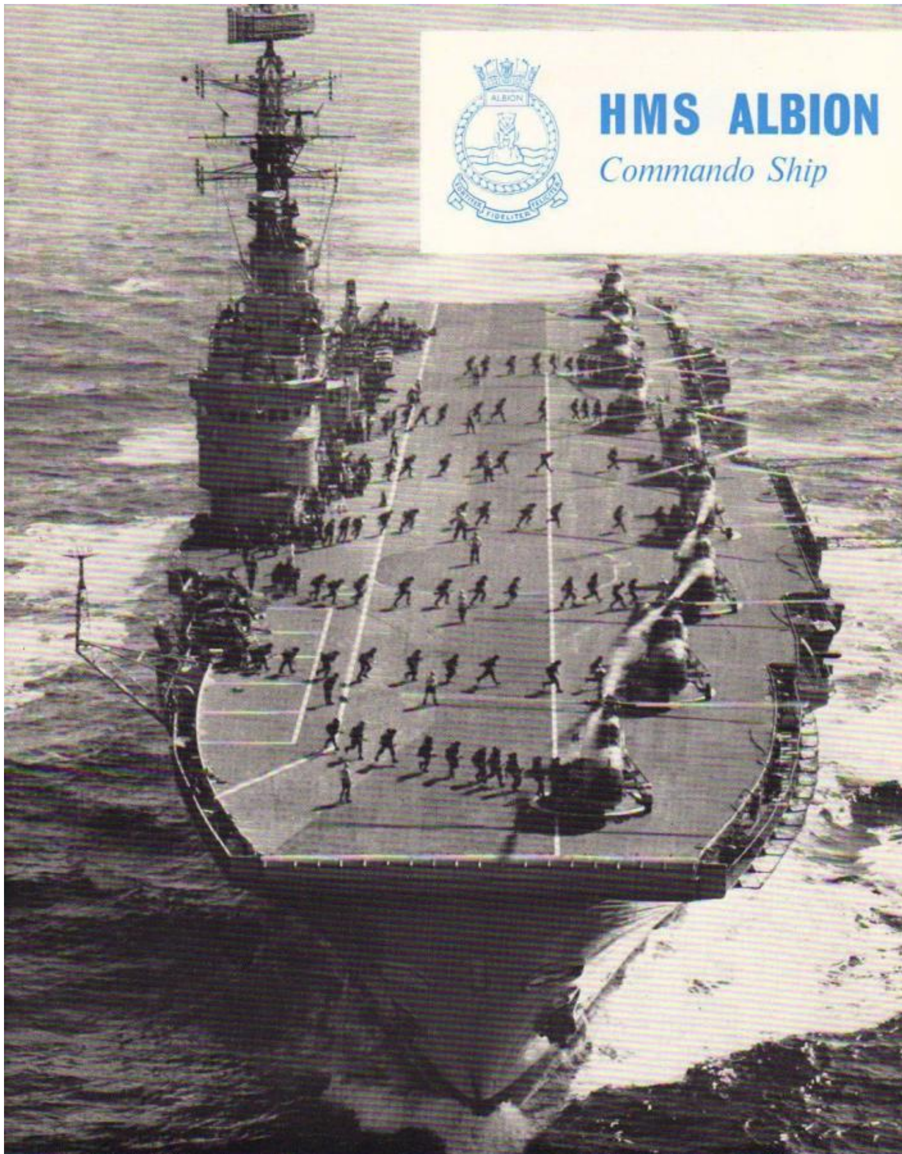
8. HMS Albion



I joined HMS Albion in June 1963. It was a lovely ship, really really friendly. There were a lot of locally employed personnel from Hong Kong. They ran the mess and the galley and the laundry. The did shoe repairs and made shoes, and there was a chap who could run you up a suit in 24 hours, all on board.

We sailed off through the Mediterranean and through the Suez Canal. We were one of the first British warships to go through the Suez Canal after the Suez conflict.

We got to Aden, which was pretty unpleasant even then, with people rolling hand grenades about the place. We flew up into the Radfan, directly from the ship. We would transport troops from one base to another.

It was very hot and very dry. I don't think the Wessex 5 had every done any hot weather flying trials, and could be very difficult to start when it was very hot.

You could buy anything you liked, with an English cheque. But the cheque was never cashed, because an English cheque was regarded as valuable currency. So I

bought a Pentax camera and some binoculars, and never had to pay for them because my cheques were never cashed. I did not know this at the time and wished I had bought much more.

Did you have to take any precautions?

Yes, we went round in Land Rovers with wire netting over the top in case anyone threw something explosive at you. And you had to keep a good look out for any problems.

There was a fine sea front club we and the RAF officers made use of. The swimming was protected by a shark net. But when we put divers down inside the shark net they found lots of sharks that had got in through a hole in the netting. Luckily nobody got eaten by a shark.

Photo taken in Mombasa during visit by HMS Albion.

Then we went to Mombasa, in Kenya, for a run ashore. We flew up in the game reserves to help with an elephant count. We were visited by the press, and I was asked to take a journalist up on a trip along the beach. We flew so low that people jumped out of their boats in alarm. The newspaper reported this, and sent a copy to

our senior pilot, the rather fierce but very fair Pete Deller. Luckily the petty officer in the squadron office decided to intercept it, and Deller never heard about it.

Photo taken in Singapore during HMS Albion's tour.

Then to Singapore, where we were doing a handover from 845 Squadron, from whom we were taking over. I think 845 Squadron had somewhat gone native, with their command structure rather breaking down.

The handover was marked by a big cocktail party, which then transferred to the local club. Our CO decided that that all 30 pilots, in the evening mess kit, should march in step in single file along the diving board into the swimming pool, which we did.

Then back on board Albion, which sailed to Borneo.

We put aircraft into Sibu, which had an airport, and some to Nanga Gaat, which was an inland jungle clearing 90 miles from the sea. We did three months, in rotation at Sibu, Nanga Gaat, and Singapore. There were limited spare parts, so when we were

in Singapore there was very little flying. Our working day, which mainly involved sitting in the crew room reading newspapers, ran only from 8.30 am to noon.

Singapore was a wonderful place in those days. You could get into Singapore very cheaply using a pirate taxi. The streets were crammed with outdoor food stalls selling delicious food. The parties were fantastic.

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9. Borneo

Parachute drop at Bario. Wessex 5 of 848 Squadron in the foreground.

Nanga Gaat was 90 miles from the sea, and our supplies were dropped in by parachute by Beverley aircraft. Sometimes they missed and dropped our supplies into the jungle, where we had to retrieve them. As best we could.

In addition to the Wessex 5s we had one Whirlwind 7 at Nanga Gaat. In those hot and humid conditions it could hardly get off the ground.

The maps were unbelievably awful, with hardly anything on them. They had biro dots and names of places. We were taken up by pilots from 845 Squadron who

showed us the routes. As references you used what you could – a mountain in the distance, a dead tree, maybe a small settlement. But you learned very quickly.

Flying in Borneo was terrifically exciting. And the place was absolutely beautiful. You are zipping along just above the trees, and you can see these Hornbill and other enormous birds. I wish I had taken more interest in birds in those days. You would land in a tiny clearing, and the natives would run out and greet you. To them a helicopter had become absolutely normal. But many had never seen a bus or a car.

Our local tribe were the Ibans, who were delightful people. There were also nomadic Poonans, who were the most kind and generous people you could possibly meet.

We never got shot at, as far as we know, and by and large we got away with it. Probably more by good luck than judgement. The main problem was the weather. First thing there would be mist, which would clear by about 10am, when we would do our flying. Then in the afternoon storms would build up, followed by absolutely torrential rain. The rain is so heavy it could strip off the rubber leading edge of the helicopter rotors.

We trained up Ibans to work for us. They were absolutely brilliant, for example at building huts for us. We had pet monkeys and all sorts of other stuff. Because we were a bit of an outpost, so we got some good visiting entertainers including the comedian Frankie Howard and Shirley Abecair playing a Zither.

We had some interesting flying. I remember on episode with Mike Smith who was a brilliant pilot. He was a lieutenant and I was a sub-lieutenant. One of the interesting things about low flying over the jungle is that you really need to look out for dead trees, which are difficult to see against the greenery.

We got an emergency call to recover who had injured himself while they were hacking their way through the jungle. In those days the Wessex 5 only had a 90 foot winch, and the trees were two hundred feet high. We stopped on a river bank, and Mike went into the back with the crew. We managed to zig zag through the branches and got Mike onto the ground.

We decided that trees need to blown down, so we flew to a nearby Gurkha camp where we knew they would have explosives. We returned with explosive and detonators (which we put in our flying suit pockets) and lowered them down. Then another soldier got injured so we needed to get both out. We had a stretcher, and we tied it to the hook at the end of the winch with a rope, about 100 feet long, which we used for the message bag. Mike strapped himself into the stretcher, and I tossed bombed him into hole in the trees and with the extra length of the rope lowered him down to the ground. He did not much enjoy the flight hanging 100ft under the helicopter on the end of a rope spinning wildly. We then got the injured soldiers out on the stretcher. We particularly enjoyed flights to the Gurkha camps, which would be clearings on which we could easily land. When you landed a Gurkha steward would appear with a silver tray on which were two iced beers, one for the pilot and one for the crew man. They really did look after us very well indeed.

In bad weather was it a matter of just finding anywhere without trees to land?

Yes. The rivers were good, and you could usually land on a river bank and wait there until the weather improved.

At Nanga Gaat there was a junction of two rivers. We had an aluminium assault boat with a big outboard on the boat, which we could use for water skiing. We also used it for fishing. Our technique was to put some explosive and two stones in a biscuit tin and throw it into the river. There would be a big explosion, and lots of fish would come up, which made us very popular with the natives.

So that was the flying in Borneo. It was really great. Four aircraft, six pilots, twenty or thirty maintainers, living in the middle of nowhere. The morale was just fantastically good.

We had the second base at Sibu, where some people brought their wives out. Amazingly it had an Olympic sized swimming pool. Sibu had a proper airport with a control tower.

Were there any medical problems?

No, not really. You were expected to take daily salt pills. Strangely one of our pilots had to go back to the UK because he could not sweat. And that can lead to death.

You had a lot of responsibility for a young man.

Yes. We always flew single pilot, just you and the crew man. We didn't fly with two pilots. So that was a lot of responsibility.

Who had responsibility for the loading?

The Wessex 5 was so powerful you could be pretty flexible about what you shoved into it. The most torque you were supposed to pull was 3200. But in a crisis you could pull up to 4000.

Was there a marked difference in Borneo between what naval pilots would do and what RAF pilots would do?

Enormous difference. The RAF pilots would only do what they had been briefed to do. If an RAF helicopter turned up to collect two people, and we asked if they could

take a third, they would say no. Even if we pointed out they were not up to their maximum load, they would still not take a third person if they had not been briefed to do so.

Would the RAF not fly in certain conditions?

They were definitely more safety conscious.

Was the confrontation winding down by the time you left?

Yes. I left before HMS Albion, flying back to the UK in a Britannia. I had been told that I was going to be a search and rescue pilot at Culdrose.

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10. Search and Rescue

Search and rescue Whirlwind.

We flew the Whirlwind 7, we kept them warm as you cannot engage to rotors unless the oil temperature is above 50C, and we could get airborne within a minute. You always had two aircraft on the line, and two pilots. So you spent a lot of time playing Uckers (a jungle version of Ludo), and Euchre, a Cornish card game.

Our flight commander, Tony Thurston, who flew during WW and was a fantastic man, told me two things which I have never forgotten. Firstly, if you've got nothing to do don't do it. If we had nothing to do he would tell us to go home. And dull people find dull places; if you are not enjoying what you are doing it is entirely your own fault.

So there we are at RNAS Culdrose flying Whirlwind 7s. There would be one pilot, a crew man, and a free diver. You would hover over the person to be rescued, and the diver would jump out from about ten feet. You could also lower him down the side of a cliff.

We had a kid who was swept out to sea on a Lilo, and the coast guard asked us to pick him up. So we went there and the diver jumped out, the kid was winched up and the Lilo was winched up. We always stabbed the Lilo, as you don't want someone else to see it and report it . Our Commanding Office then got a letter from the kid's father complaining that we had damaged the Lilo. The CO wrote back saying he would be pleased to deduct the cost of the Lilo from the cost of the rescue (some thousands of pounds). He heard no more.

What kinds of incidents required rescue?

Oh, lots of things. People who had fallen down a cliff. People who were standing too close to a stormy sea and got swept away. Small boats that got into difficulties. We tended to leave dead people to the lifeboats, who were more experienced dealing with corpses.

Were you busiest in the holiday season?

Yes. But the winter could be interesting, because sometimes the wind was too strong to allow you to start up the rotors. So we would start up the rotor inside the

hangar and then taxi out of the hangar with the rotor turning. Exciting! Very satisfying rescuing people.

Do you have particular patterns for searching?

Yes, you do follow patterns. And you have two crew in the back, one looking left, one looking right, and you are looking ahead. It is amazingly difficult to find people in the sea. Our divers always had the top of their hood dayglow red. We used to try to persuade civilian divers to have red hoods. Seeing someone in a black diving suit is impossible.

While I was there we got the Whirlwind 9, which was brilliant. Compared to the Whirlwind 7 it had an engine which was much lighter and much more powerful. It was also much quieter. It was so light and smooth and responsive; you could just put one finger on the top of the cyclic stick and move it a quarter of an inch in any direction.

Westland Dragonfly.

I did the search and rescue job for almost two years, and enjoyed every minute of it. We got an old Dragonfly helicopter going and flew it to the Scilly Isles. We came back with loads of daffodils. It began to fail, and there were no spare parts available. But there was one in the Yeovilton aircraft museum. They agreed to swap ours for theirs, which worked fine.

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11. Becoming an Instructor

I had been promoted to Lieutenant in 1965. And I went off to do the instructor's course in 1967. It was in the middle of the foot and mouth crisis, with heaps of burning dead cattle around the place.

You do the instructor's course with the RAF at Ternhill. While we were doing the course, a Whirlwind of the Royal Flight, with six or seven people in it, lost its rotor head and fell to the earth like a stone, killing everyone. And Royal Flight aircraft are always fitted with new parts, never re-conditioned. They discovered that the person who had turned the main steel shaft on a lathe had left his tool on one place just too long, and had left a burn mark on it. The burn mark had turned into a stress fracture, and killed the lot of them.

Then all Whirlwinds were grounded, and we had to go onto the Bell 47 Sioux helicopter like in the MASH TV programme. It was wonderful to fly, and you could do anything with it.

The course was really quite good fun. There was lots of snow, and the Sioux has skids under it, no wheels. So you could go tobogganing in the helicopter.

The RAF were very good. But they had strange habits in the mess. Before dinner you had to have a glass of sherry. You had to wear a tie. So we got psychedelic kipper ties made, which shocked them but conformed to the habit. A lovely army officer, who died eventually of alcoholism had an enormous purple American car. You could get eight people into it. We called it the Purple People Eater and used to go off in it to night clubs. Amazing.

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12. Commando Training

Having successfully completed the instructor's course I went back in 1968 to Culdrose to join 707 Squadron - the commando training squadron. We were giving operational training on the Wessex 5 to pilots who had completed their basic helicopter training and now needed to learn how to work the aircraft, how to use it.

We would go off and live on Dartmoor with Royal Marines, and we'd got up to RAF Valley for mountain flying, and we would do landing practice on ships.

Can you tell me about deck landing?

Flying a helicopter is not as difficult as everyone thinks. Once someone can land a helicopter on a circle on the airfield, you can do the same thing on a ship. On a small ship such as a frigate it can be quite tricky. Deck landing is perfectly fine if the weather is fine. But on a carrier like the Albion or the Bulwark the bow and the stern could be rising and falling thirty or forty feet. So you don't land at the ends in that weather. You use the centre spots. You are guided by a man waving his arms

on the deck. Mainly to give you a wave off if you need to go round again. And to look at the aircraft to make sure nothing has fallen off. At night they have illuminated wands. Visibility in the Wessex was not good, particularly to the left. Spatial awareness is everything, just like driving a car. Some of the people we dropped from training didn't have spatial awareness; they are a danger to themselves and to other people.

Tell me about mountain flying.

We would stay in the mess at RAF Valley, taking two or three aircraft. They are not very big mountains, but if you have winds of 60mph, you can get a lot of turbulence. We had a lot of fun there, blowing up the mess piano and that kind of thing.

You have to train people to look out for the turbulence around mountains. You can find yourself going up without power, or being driven down by downdraughts when you are at full power.

The social life at RAF Valley was remarkable. We were there with an RAF Lightning squadron. They were tremendous chaps. One of them had a birthday. The party involved lots of drink. After dinner we were going to have a sing song around the mess piano. We thought the pianist hit a wrong note, so we dropped a thunderflash into the piano, which caught fire. So we pushed the piano out onto the patio. It was well ablaze, and the fire engine had to come round. The Lightning squadron had to pay hundreds of pounds for a new piano and new carpeting. They asked if we would contribute, so I got a ten pound note and a five pound note and encased them in solid clear plastic to make a kind of statue. We next saw them in Malta, and presented the statue to them.

We also did exercises on Dartmoor, which is impossible to navigate in bad weather, because it all looks the same. The pilots had to look after themselves in a tent, and keep their weapon clean. They had to look after their aircraft, and look after their maintenance team.

Were failures mainly inability to multi-task?

There were hundreds of reasons why pilots might fail. Sometimes just attitude. My criterion was - would I be happy to ride in the back of a helicopter driven by one of these pilots? If the answer was no, I would fail them. Later, I was challenged by a Commander (Air) who told me to give one of these pilots another ten hours, to try to get him up to standard. I said no, I and my instructors are not going to fly with him. If you want to fly with him go ahead and do it. He was furious, but his boss (who was a friend of mine) told him to get back in his box, and that was that.

So that was 707 Squadron, which was tremendous fun. We used to go on exercises, for example to Germany. At that time the Wessex had only one radio, with twelve fixed frequencies. We were going to call in to Portland to re-fuel, but ran into dense cloud. The resulting entry into cloud of five aircraft was quite exciting. I popped out of the top if the cloud and just missed a Scimitar! The air traffic controllers at Portland were amazing. They realised we didn't have their frequencies, so they changed theirs and got us all down one after another in a neat line astern.

As we were setting off for France the left hand door fell off and dropped into a nature reserve. So we landed and picked it up, and my co-pilot, the deputy engineer officer had to spend the rest of the trip holding the door on.

When we arrived in the Netherlands, the weather was so bad we had to spend some nights in a hotel. The naval liaison officer from the Hague said that our accommodation and food was paid for, but no drink had been paid for. The hotel manager said that is no problem. I will give you the main course and the pudding, but no soup, no bread, no butter, and you can drink as much as you like. So we had a very social few days, which included taking part in a very jolly chimney sweep's wedding with everyone in tall black top hats. I walked through a glass door at the hotel; I did no damage to myself, but the door was a write off.

The exercise involved a lot of tanks, and we were supposed to be taking them out with missiles. The exercise had to finish early because they ran out of the millions of pounds of compensation they paid to German farmers for destroying their land with tanks. We discovered that you could fill a sick bag with flour and drop it in through the top of the tank as they make so much noise they have no idea there is a helicopter overhead. This makes a great mess inside the tank and makes them very cross!.

We got back safely to Culdrose, after nearly running out of fuel over the Netherlands. Everyone learned a lot from it.

Then I got sent back to 848 Squadron.

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13. HMS Bulwark

HMS Bulwark.

This was not HMS Albion, but its sister ship HMS Bulwark, known as the Rusty B. It took us to the Caribbean, where we had a lot of fun. It was showing the flag.

You would have a big exercise cross decking with the Americans. We would do rocket firing on a live range. We also fired pistols and rifles. The Wessex 5 had an armament platform on the side of the aircraft, and rocket pods which had fourteen rockets on each side. And wire-guided SS11 rockets. A crew member would steer it with a joystick.

Back in England at Castle Martin range in Pembrokeshire, doing live firings we would get hold of shotguns and fly over the Colonel's shoot, shooting pheasants out of the side of the helicopter. We always came back with a brace of pheasants.

On the Bulwark we also did the Mediterranean and Expo 70 in Japan. It involved exercises and parties. There was no fighting going on in 1970. It was really a social occasion.

We could get sixteen helicopters on the deck of the Bulwark, with 4 foot tip clearance between rotors. You had to take off carefully, except for Jimmy James who took off uncarefully and hit the aircraft behind him with his tail rotor, and rolled off the side of the ship with ten Dutch marines in the back. He bobbed about in the ocean but nobody got hurt and they all scrambled out OK. He went in quite spectacularly.

And was there one Royal Marine commando on board?

Yes. With vehicles, guns, support, the whole shebang. You have probably seen pictures of the marines streaming across the deck, then you all took off. We did exercises all over the place, sometimes detached to an American ship in the North Sea. We were doing landings in Norway, but when we took off in the dark, we flew off towards Norway, but there was no Norway. They were 20 miles away from where they said they were. After than we had one of our officers on the bridge all the time checking up on their navigation. And of course all the American ships are dry. Machines dispensing grape juice. I ask you. Ships are full of cockroaches, so we organised cockroach races on the wardroom table.

Towards the end of the exercise the marines would want you to drop an underslung trailer into the sea. That enabled them to write off everything they had lost, claiming it had been in the trailer.

We had lightweight Land Rovers, where you could take the doors and the rest off, to reduce their weight. But it wasn't much good if you put the things you had taken off in the back of the Land Rover.

Would you every occasion to jettison a load?

If you had an emergency and had to land quickly, you would put the load down on the ground and land beside it. I never ditched a load on purpose except pianos. Bulwark had a delightful Commander. The wardroom had a piano. In those days it wasn't plastic furniture in the wardroom. It was armchairs, and a proper mahogany bar, and an electric fire at each one. One night we were partying at sea and decided the piano had played a bum note. So the piano was ripped apart and all the bits, other than the big metal frame, were fed out through a scuttle into the sea. We carried the big metal part up onto the quarterdeck, in our mess undress, and heaved it into the sea.

We told the Commander we would replace the piano, and found one near Yeovilton. We painted the piano in black and green camouflage colours, like a Wessex and flew it back on board, underslung under a helicopter. We used to play it; it had one note which didn't work but that didn't matter. When the ship went in for a bit of maintenance the Commander had the piano done up by the dockyard. It was painted white, with gold trim and candle holders. When we realised it was the same old piano, we ripped it up again and threw it into the sea.

We did things to pianos all over the world. The helicopter detachment on HMS Tiger trashed the piano and threw it over the side. So the helicopter squadron promised to deliver a new piano. The ship got the ship's band out, with the senior officers, to welcome the replacement piano. The helicopter pilot hovered alongside, with the new piano in a net under the helicopter. He then dropped it into the sea. The offers on HMS Tiger were furious. Lots of fun!

Is there a particular ethos of jungly pilots within the Fleet Air Arm?

Yes. They do have a fairly light hearted view of things. They are basically party animals, and enjoy themselves.

So that was HMS Bulwark in 1970. We went all the way to the Far East, to Expo 70 in Osaka, Japan. We discovered that the Portuguese had a brilliant pavilion where they served free Madeira and tapas all day. So we stationed ourselves there.

(Interrupted by sound of the dishwasher bleeping).

Like we have listed buildings, the Japanese have listed people, national treasures. There was this wonderful singer and dancer who was a national treasure, who visited us on board.

Then back to the UK in August 1970.

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14. Teaching Senior Officers

After 848 Squadron I was appointed to Culdrose again, to 705 Squadron, teaching senior naval officers to fly helicopters. They were fixed wing pilots, but the number of fixed wing pilots in the navy was being reduced as fixed wing was being phased out. It was a fascinating job because they were lovely, lovely people. There was an Irish Captain I taught who had a great sense of humour; we laughed until we cried.

We didn’t get the senior officers to the stage of flying solo. But we did go instrument flying with them and did a bit of winching. It opened their eyes, because flying a helicopter in cloud is a lot more difficult than flying a fixed wing aircraft in cloud.

When I didn’t have any senior officers I joined the search and rescue lot, which is a great job.

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15. Flight Deck Officer

The next thing that happened was that the appointment officer came down to Culdrose and said. I know what we are going to do with Baston. We are going to send him to Bulwark to be the Flight Deck Officer. I thought, oh God, it is a non-flying job, standing on the flight deck waving your arms around. But I decided that I would throw myself into the job and really go all out to enjoy it.

My Mini Moke being unloaded in America.

As it happened a great friend of mine, Peter Craig, was going to be Commander Air, and my boss. I asked him if I could bring my Mini Moke on board, so we have something to run around it. He asked the Captain who said I could bring the Moke on board if I could find a space nobody else is using. I found that in the roof of the carrier there was deep beam stowage, with carriages hanging on wheels. The carriages were not used, because one of my colleagues on HMS Albion had tragically been killed while in one of the carriages. And it turned out that the Moke fitted exactly into one.

We were going on a great long tour, around the east coast of the USA, the Caribbean, and the Mediterranean. It was great having our own transport, the only problem being insuring it in the USA. Which I managed to arrange at our first stop in Florida. The Americans were puzzled by the Mini Moke. They thought it was a golf cart, and shouldn't be on the highway. One day a policeman drew up alongside me in a huge police car, he said you cannot take a golf cart on the freeway. I said

it’s not a golf cart, it’s a Moke. I said to show you it’s not a golf cart I will race you to the next traffic lights. The lights changed, and the Moke shot off, to a terminal velocity of about 90mph. The huge six litre police car, with automatic transmission, was left far behind. When they caught up they said “Nevr ever do that agai” whilst roaring with laughter. So that was quite fun.

Another time it was wet and dark, and I had the roof up. There were four of us in it in our greatcoats, on our way to the US navy officers’ club for a party. We must have missed a red light, and were overtaken by a police car with wailing siren. A policeman got out with a gun, and another policeman got out with a gun. They went round to the left hand side, and said ‘Out of the car, you shot a red light!’. My companion said ‘I’m not the driver!’. The policemen were amazed to find the steering wheel was on the right hand side. They fell about laughing, and led us to the naval officers’ club.

The Moke was absolutely brilliant. We had a lot of laughs with it. We took it all over Malta, where my wife came out to join us. I also owned a speedboat with a big outboard on it. The Commander Air and the Captain agreed I could bring the speedboat aboard Bulwark. In Malta we also borrowed a landing craft, and decided to have a massive barbecue in a quiet bay. People were water skiing behind the landing craft on a circular wooden board.

While this party was in full swing and very smart launch arrived flying an RAF ensign. Our dentist suggested we take the landing craft and the speedboat and get alongside the RAF launch and board it and steal the RAF Ensign. It turned out the launch belonged to the Commander in Chief Near East, who happened to be an Air Marshal. Our Captain took the flak and had to go in sword and medals and apologise in person for his officers’ behaviour. It was very funny. And that was a very good party.

The wardroom was absolutely fantastic. We had a brilliant Ops Officer, and a wonderful Ops 2, Alastair Ross. He and I shared a cabin. One evening we were having a bit of a party after dinner, but Alastair had rather too much too drink and went to our cabin and went to sleep in the bottom bunk. We decided he needed waking up, so we got a sheet of newspaper and dipped the end of it in lighter fuel and then went down very quietly to the cabin so as not to wake him up. There he was lying on his back snoring. We lit the paper and held it just by his nose. We shook him to wake him up, and all he could see was flames. I have never seen anyone shoot around a small cabin at such speed. Years later he was my appointer, and he wrote to me saying I bet you regret setting fire to me in Bulwark. That was great fun.

One of the great laughs was that if someone annoyed you, you whipped the pockets off his shirt. One evening this was done to someone. He went to change, and came back with a new shirt. Again his pockets were whipped off. This happened about six times, then he just stood there with no pockets on his shirt. His tormentor said – why aren’t you going back to get another shirt. He said ‘because you’ve run out’. He had emptied his tormentor’s drawers of all his shirts. It was just so funny.

The First Lieutenant was a bit tiresome, because he wanted us to play a board game, which we didn't want to do. So we decided to play a game with him and tie him upside down to one of the pillars in the wardroom with tape, and leave him there for a long time. He was not amused.

The Flight Deck Officer job was actually a lovely job. You are in charge of the flight deck and the hangar. All the people who drive the heavy flight deck machinery, all the people working in the hangar, come under you.

We had a commando embarked. The commando had a rather pompous person. He formed up his commando on parade on the flight deck, and they were still there when we were supposed to start flying. So I went up to him saluted, and politely asked him if he could remove the marines, because we needed to start flying. He said nothing. And continued to say nothing, when I asked him a second and a third time. Then he said, through clenched teeth, 'Do not talk to an officer when he is on parade'. So I told a petty officer driving one of the tractors, a lovely man, to move it forward. He said 'No, I'm not going to do that sir'. So I asked him to get down, and I got up on the tractor myself. They are huge things, weighting twenty tons, which can go very slowly. So I very slowly drove this tractor, with a Wessex on the back of it, through the marines' parade. The major was furious. I explained to my boss what had happened, and he was OK with what I had done. The only problem was that the major did not speak to me again for the whole commission. That was awkward because there were practical reasons why he needed to talk to me. So he did it through an intermediary.

The Royal Marines have their own artillery with their own commando trained artillery officers. They have no colours, no flag on a big pole, because their guns are the colours. They treat the guns with great respect, and do not like anyone to sit on them or move them around. I made sure that my people respect this, and was accordingly on very good terms with the artillery officers.

I made my number with the Captain extremely well. On our American trip, we had a Royal Marine Colonel on board, in charge of the Royal Marine commando. He had a big black staff car with a flag on the front. Our Captain had a rather shabby lightweight Land Rover. So I went to the transport section in the dockyard and asked if they could lend us a staff car for a few months. They said yes they did have one, with a flagpole and all. The Captain was delighted.

A great job. Long hours, hard work. Out in the fresh air. I drove all the flight deck machinery, tractors and fork lift trucks.

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16. Yeovilton and Singapore.

I then went to Yeovilton. The commando squadrons had moved from Culdrose in Cornwall to Yeovilton in Somerset. We had bought our house by the beach in Cornwall for £4,000 and we sold it a few years later for £22,000. And we bought a lovely farmhouse near Yeovilton.

In 1973 I joined 846 Squadron. It was a very small squadron with only four aircraft. It did trials. We had six pilots. A hilarious fellow called Boag. And Bill Sample, who was so funny. He killed himself subsequently in a jet aircraft when his student stamped on the wrong rudder pedal on take off and it rolled and burnt. We all had the same view of life. Two didn't fit – the commanding officer who was forever in his office and hardly ever flew. The other person who didn't fit in was the senior pilot, who was very short and very pompous. So short that he was called "Trackless as his bum wiped out his foot prints in the snow!

One of the trials we did was on early night vision goggles. They were not very reliable, and it was scary. We also did things like painting the aircraft with different colours of camouflage to work out which was best.

After 846 I was appointed for the third time to 848 Squadron, who were in Singapore. We did big exercises and the Far Eastern cocktail party circuit. We had an absolute ball. We ran modified tropical routine, where you turn up late and leave early.

Soon I was promoted to Lieutenant Commander, and went back for a short while to 846 Squadron as Senior Pilot. This was to give me something to do while they thought about what I should do next.

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17. The Arctic

My appointer arrived. He said I am sending you up to be Senior Naval Officer at Bardufoss, which is 250 miles north of the Arctic Circle. I said, ‘Hang on, I’m a hot weather pilot, I know nothing about the cold’. He said that is exactly why we are sending you there. He explained that hitherto the Senior Naval Officer only went up there for three months, and couldn’t really take charge. So the place was being run by a senior rates mafia, some of whom were not very pleasant. So I said, OK, sir. But I said those three rates have to go before I get there. He agreed.

I turned up at Bardufoss and found everything in chaos. The crews were not taking the proper safety equipment on the aircraft. It was all very sloppy.

The Norwegians were very kind to us. They knew I was the first to be doing the job permanently. The other thing that kept them onside was that we had unlimited duty free drink. And the cost of drink in Norway is unbelievably high.

The Wessex could fly down to minus 32 degrees. You had to pre-warm the gearbox. All the maintenance was done in the dark, in the cold, outside. Not in the hangar. Because I thought we should train to do it in any circumstances.

We lived in a warm but basic concrete block, and ate in an old boiler house. The electric cookers hardly worked. They were from ships. But in ships it is 440 volts. And they only had 220 volts. We managed to get some wonderful gas cookers sent

up. We ate like kings. And we made a hut into a nice wardroom, with pictures on the walls, and a bar. We all sat down at once for dinner, with candles in candlesticks. We got the living conditions so much better.

The flying was absolutely stunningly good. There are huge great mountains in north Norway. We used to do day flying from about 11am to 1pm. Then night flying in the dark between 2pm and 4pm. Then we would go night skiing. It was unbelievably beautiful.

What are the differences between flying in the tropics and in north Norway?

One of the first things you all do is an Arctic survival course. You live like a survivor with your Bergen pack. You are out there for three or four days. You have to make a shelter. When you are carrying commandos you musn’t put the heating on because the snow on their clothing would melt and they would get wet. We had electrically heated gloves and socks, although I never needed them.

There is something called white-out. When it is all white you get totally disoriented. You can see the instruments, but you cannot make out anything outside. To give

you a reference you would fly over the landing point and drop a pack there. Then you come around and you know the size of it, so you can judge your distance. Sometimes you would see what looked like a small rock, but when you got to it you found it was the size of a double decker bus.

You've got to be careful in the cold because you can burn yourself badly. The coldest I got to was minus 44 degrees. The oil in the gear box would freeze.

And because it is such a mountainous area the weather can change at the flick of a finger. There is the danger of pressonitis. If the weather is getting bad, don't press on. Land while you still have time and still have visibility, and put yourself in a survival situation. When the weather clears, fly on another little bit. Then land again. Hop, hop, hop.

The Wessex was fitted with something called a cold running nose door. The theory was that without the cold running nose door the engine would stop in about three minutes. For the first year we used the cold running nose door, but were always getting icing damage on the blades of the turbines. So I got four standard nose doors sent up in crates to Norway. We put them on. And we agreed we would fly with those doors in snow, provided that we could see 1200 metres. And we stopped losing engines. Which saved a lot of money. Being there more than one year I had the time and the ability to get that sort of thing done.

The social life up there was wonderful. The Norwegian helicopter squadron up there were delightful. We go over to them for a beer afternoon, and they would come over to us. We started using a bit of minor explosive to jolly things along. They had a piano in their crewroom, which didn't last very long. A tin of lighter fuel and a thunderflash seemed to sort that out. They thought it was hilarious. We'll get another one.

We played Russian Egg. You get a tray of eggs, and they are all boiled, bar one. And what you do is we all stand in a line, ten of us, each holding an egg. On a shout of go, everyone slams their egg on their forehead. One gets covered in raw egg. The

Norwegians thought it was very funny and said they must have a go. We said, fine, here is another tray of eggs. But when they slammed them into their foreheads, all their eggs were raw. The Norwegians laughed uproariously, covered in egg from head to foot.

We also wanted a piano up there. I had a spare piano at home. I got it to Yeovilton. The RAF wouldn't take the piano because it wasn't on their manifest. So we boxed up the piano and marked it engine spares. And they took it. When it arrived in its box, we attacked the box while it was still on the Hercules ramp. They were furious. That piano had a chequered career. The Norwegians damaged it quite badly. And it wasn't really playable any more.

Every year there is a huge international exercise. I thought it would be a good idea to set a challenge for the visitors. We got the piano slung under a Sea King helicopter, and put it right on the peak of a nearby mountain. We then challenged all the other countries there, that there would be a bottle of whisky for the squadron that could get the piano down. The Americans couldn't do it. The Germans could not get it down. The RAF had a go and couldn't get it down. Eventually the Norwegians got it down, by lowering people in snow shoes. The Norwegians took it back to their place. We blew it up, but it was not completely destroyed. We mounted a raid to recover it. The Norwegians got it back again and bolted it to the side of a hangar thirty feet up in the air. We got it back again. The Norwegians recovered it, and entombed it in concrete so nobody could steal it again.

It was great fun. A big learning curve for me. Very rewarding. You just have to look out for the numerous wires slung across mountainsides and valleys. We lost a helicopter and three people were killed when it ran into a wire.

How many people were you in charge of there?

About thirty or forty. Pilots, students, maintenance people. I did four years. I was due to do three, but my successor got killed in the wire crash, so they asked me to stay on for another year.

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18. More Search and Rescue

Then I got sent to 781 Squadron at Lee on Solent as Commanding Officer of the search and rescue flight. Four pilots, four Wessex, our personal coast guard in the crewroom. A brilliant job if you love low flying. You never get reported for low flying if you have Rescue painted across your aircraft. We would fly over to the Isle of Wight, and if you saw a barbecue you could land on the beach and join in and then take off again, hoping the aircraft would start.

There were some very expensive yachts. They would wave a bottle of champagne, so we would hover over them and lower a bag on the winch, and they would put the bottle of champagne in the bag.

We covered from Swanage, all along Sandbanks, the Solent, all round the Isle of Wight, and on too Littlehampton. Portsmouth Harbour, Chichester Harbour. It was good to help people out. Bad weather made it even more exciting. You have a duty pilot, and a standby pilot, 24 hours a day.

I did the job for 18 months. Lovely job, I enjoyed that.

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19. Commanding a Training Squadron

Then I was appointed to Yeovilton to 707 Squadron, the Wessex training squadron, in command. This was a dream job for me. Living close to work. I took over the Squadron from a chap who was really really going for promotion. When I took over I knew they were flying weekends. I said we are not going to fly Saturdays and Sundays. If it means some engineers have to work Saturdays or Sundays they will be given equivalent time off within two weeks. I also said that if the engineers had nothing to do on a particular day, they could go home.

What does the role of a commanding officer entail?

You run the Squadron in the way you want to do it, but within the rules. Small changes can have a huge and beneficial effect on attitudes.

When I joined 707 Squadron the Commander Air at Yeovilton was a great guy, who let you get on with it. He was succeeded by an anti-submarine pilot who did not understand the attitude of the junglies. He kept endlessly phoning my Senior Pilot harassing him about aircraft taking off a few minutes late, or taxiing without the lights on. My Senior Pilot asked if I could get him off his back – in a training squadron you have to have this sort of flexibility, because some students may not get their procedures right, and need to do them again which causes delays. So I went to see the Commander Air (who was a rank above me) and said that if he wanted to run my squadron he could fucking well do so, and I was going home. And I went home. The Commander Air was incandescent and reported all this too the Captain (his boss). He was a good egg, who I knew well. He used to cycle around the airfield; he cycled over to see me and asked what had been going on. I explained. The Captain said he would have a word with the Commander Air. Thereafter the harassing stopped and there was silence. So that worked out alright.

What's the role of the Senior Pilot?

He does all the work. He devils away making sure that everything is organised and carried out. The Commanding Officer can sit around and read Country Life.

Were all your pilots instructors?

Yes. There's a weapons instructor. A operational flying training officer. An instrument rating instructor. You end up with a rounded pilot at the end of it.

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20. Sunk in the Falklands War

The Atlantic Conveyor.

An interesting thing happened halfway through my time in 707 Squadron, in 1982. You may remember there was the Falklands invasion. Our squadron was left out of it, because they needed to continue to train pilots. One day we were at a pony club event with the children, when I was summoned over the Tannoy to return to Yeovilton post haste.

I found that 707 Squadron was to be re-formed as 848 Squadron, and we were going to embark for the Falklands on Atlantic Conveyor. We embarked and off we sailed. The wonderful captain had been sunk twice in World War Two. They were wonderful, they gave us stores clothing, wellington boots, everything we needed.

Flying off the ship was strange. There were two landing spots one on the foredeck, and a tiny landing spot on the back deck. The clearances were about three feet, which is not very much when the ship is heaving about. I did one night landing on the aft deck, and I decided never again.

We got to Ascension Island, where we caught up with 845 Squadron. We set off south, and were flying around transferring loads between ships in the task force. There were some hairy moments. One time I was winching up the master of one of the merchant ships in the task force to take him to a briefing on another ship. The weather was rough, and when he was half way up the ship was hit by an enormous wave. The water shot up and completely enveloped the helicopter. The port engine stopped, and the starboard engine (whose computer had been damaged by the water) went into runaway up. That is when it runs away uncontrollably too full power. The crew in the back were surprisingly calm. I decided to try and re-start the port engine, in which I thankfully succeeded. I staggered back to the Atlantic Conveyor, shut down the starboard engine, and landed using the port engine only. So that was good.

Then on the 25th May it got a lot more interesting.

On board the Atlantic Conveyor, it was a grey miserable evening, with a bit of a swell. The ship did not have naval radio, so we were not well informed about what was going on. We were in the bar, and the Cunard officers were buying us drinks to wish us well for the next day. Then the warning bell for an air raid warning went off.

Over on the starboard bridge was the captain of the Atlantic Conveyor, the naval captain, and myself with a loader. There were ships and aircraft going in all directions, just like a film set. Then suddenly the Atlantic Conveyor shook. And very quickly indeed that smoke started to appear. It turned out that two Exocets had been fired, and had both hit the ship. It is thought that the naval ships, including the carrier, were protected by distracting chaff. But we were not. The Atlantic Conveyor was a massive container ship, with the hold packed with everything – vehicles, stores, oil, everything you could think of. 12 people, about ten percent of the ship's complement, got killed in the initial impact.

Smoke started to come out of the vents from the main space of the ship. We had no idea that there was a flaming inferno in the inside of the ship. It was pretty clear that we could not contain this fire. You could feel explosions and whumps coming from inside the ship. HMS Alacrity came alongside us, nudged up to our starboard side,

pouring water all over the Atlantic Conveyor. As the fire developed they were ordered away, because of the perceived risk that Atlantic Conveyor might explode.

Painting of the Atlantic Conveyor on fire.

The captain made the decision that it was time to get people off the ship in good order. We had two aircraft airborne at the time – a Wessex and a Chinook.

We also had one Wessex on the flight deck, but there was no way of getting it off among all the fires. The captain took the decision to abandon ship. I went down one deck, to get my rubber goon suit and my mae west. Then one had to get down 90 feet from the bridge to the main deck. We got to the main deck, where a lot of people were milling about. They had one-time survival suits and Board of Trade life jackets. Thos life jackets are potentially lethal if you jump into the sea without

having put them on properly, because they can ride up and break the back of your neck. We had a couple of people die because of that.

We had had comprehensive briefings on how the big life rafts work. The life rafts were jettisoned over the side, and automatically inflated. The painters (ropes) on the life rafts were the right length for a warship, about 30 feet. But the deck of the Atlantic Conveyor is fifty feet above water level.

There were rope ladders down the starboard side. Not the port side because that was where the missiles had come in. Some people jumped fifty feet. Most people sensibly went down the rope ladders. I got half way down the rope ladder to find there was no more rope ladder, because the hull of HMS Alacrity had cut the rope ladders. So I had to free fall the last 25 feet, which was fine.

One of my Royal Marine crewmen was there, in a dinghy which he had cut so that it was horizontal in the sea. He said ‘Come on board sir’. So I did, and I stood up and all these other dinghies were at semi angles. I had my aircrew knife in my flying suit, and I explained to the others where the knives were in the dinghies. We needed to cut all the dinghies free, and tie them together to make a big raft. People were tired and cold because they were not wearing flying suits. So we had quite a job getting them into the dinghies. But we managed to do it. There was quite a swell going, which made it dangerous at the stern. When the stern rose it sucked you under it, and when it fell it fell on top of you. So you had to be careful.

A couple of the dinghies were loose and drifted away. I think they were picked up by the Lancelot or one of the other Royal Fleet Auxiliaries that had come to pick up survivors. Around this time the captain of the Atlantic Conveyor and the naval captain climbed down the ladders on the outside of the superstructure, then down the rope ladders. The captain, Ian North, was working his way around a dinghy, when he disappeared and was never seen again. I think he must have had a heart attack, which was not surprising in the circumstances.

HMS Alacrity.

The next thing that happened was that HMS Alacrity started to fire gun lines towards the dinghies, to help pull them away from the Atlantic Conveyor. They had their floodlights on and pulled us towards them. We had a couple of dead bodies which were transferred first.

When I was climbing up, my hands were so frozen I couldn't hold on, and fell back into the sea. I found myself next to the ship's diver, who said 'Can I help you sir?'. Which he did, for which I was most grateful.

Meanwhile the Atlantic Conveyor was a spectacular sight, enveloped in flames and smoke. The Alacrity were absolutely marvellous. They dried us out. Everyone was given clean clothing and a huge tot of rum. I was put into the cabin of the ship's flight captain. I slept on the floor there.

An hour later they suggested we go up on deck to look at the Atlantic Conveyor which had turned into a remarkable firework display.

We had to make lists now of everybody that's we had on board, so that we could work out who had survived and who had not survived. Yeovilton ran the most incredible welfare system. Mustard. Brilliant.

Now we were an embarrassment to everyone. We had no aircraft, no kit, no nothing. My biggest regret was that I lost my camera and about twenty rolls of film. All gone.

There was a BP tanker down there called the British Tay. The aim was to put us on the British Tay. They flew us over their by Wessex, one at a time. The people at the British Tay could not have been nicer. Everybody got a set of BP overalls. We had to stay down there for a bit until the British Tay had unloaded all its oil and was empty. These tankers were a target for the Argentineans, who flew Hercules over them and dropped a kind of barrel bomb.

At this stage the command said, are there any people on board who would like to stay down here. Nobody volunteered. We had no aircraft so there was nothing I could do. So we went back to Ascension Island. We had a most moving service to remember the dead. I was taken up Green Mountain – a tall mountain with tropical jungle in the middle of the island.

Then an RAF VC10 turned up, and flew us back to Brize Norton. First off were the civilians, for whom we had the greatest respect. Then the RAF. Then we came off. It was very moving. A lovely sunny day. My wife Gina and our two daughters were there (in their school uniform).

We flew back to Yeovilton. It was a very hot sunny day, and we stopped about 150 yards of hot concrete away from the buildings. Our squadron staff officer, a fiery redhead called Clare Taylor, walked all the way across that concrete to greet us with a hug. And you have to remember that her husband Nick Taylor was the first Harrier pilot to be killed in the Falklands. It was a truly brave and amazing thing to do. What a Lady.

We were told to take a week's leave, which we did. Gina had been told I had survived in a phone call. We had about a fortnight's leave. The thing I found very very difficult was watching the rest of the war on the telly. One of my best friends got killed later in the war. After it was all over the aircraft came back in dribs and drabs, and 848 Squadron turned back into 707 Squadron.

We were very lucky that none of the naval Jungly pilots got killed in the Falklands war.

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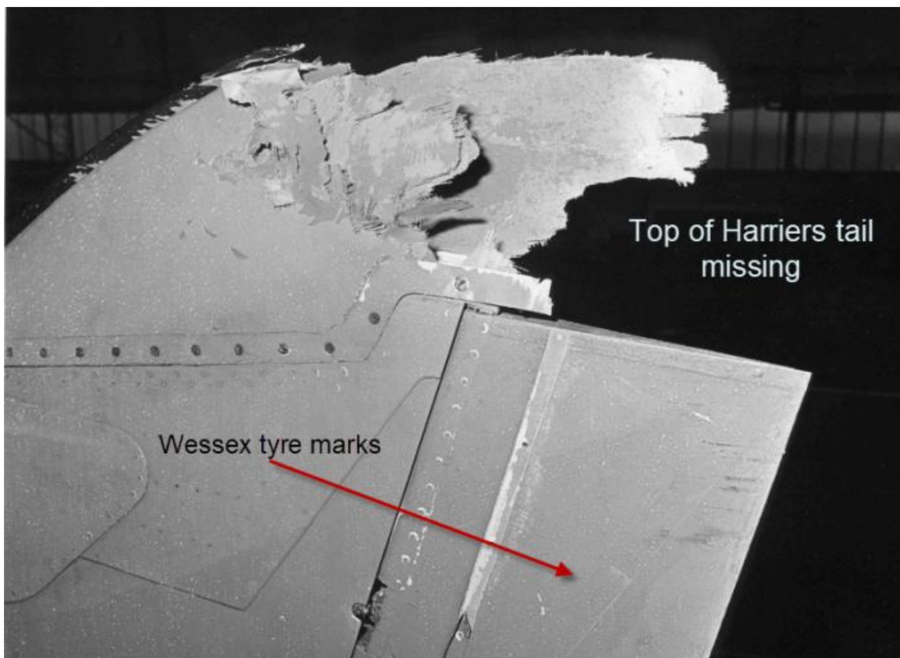
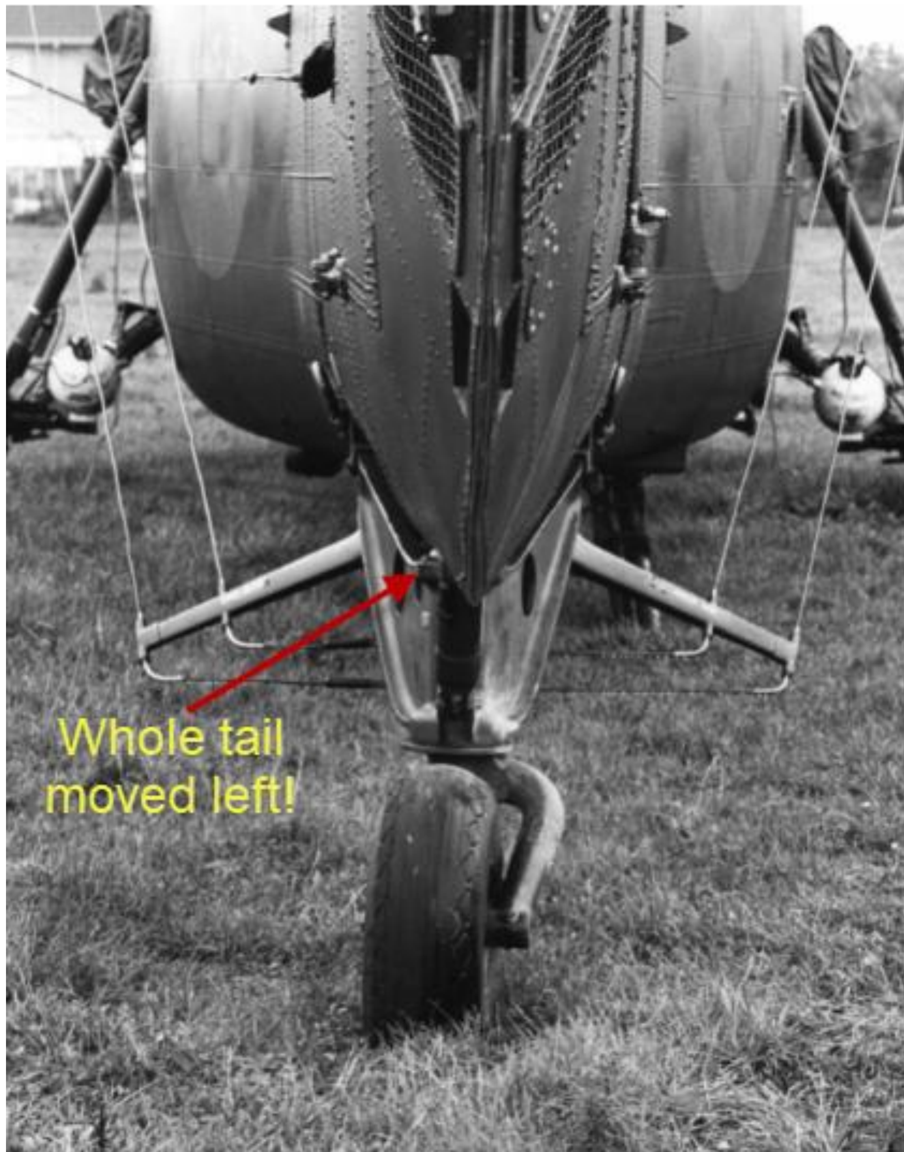
21. A Lucky Day



One Friday I was assigned to fly instrument flying at lunchtime. I would have preferred to go to the pub or go home. It was pouring with rain, low cloud, dreadful weather. We were heading north from Yeovilton into training areas near Wells, when there was suddenly the most enormous bang. I had never heard anything like it. The aircraft yawed to starboard, about 45 degrees. And in a flick of a finger it went to what I estimated to be about 60 degrees nose down. This is not what Wessex are supposed to do. I was now in cloud in a very very unusual attitude.



I thought something had broken big time. I very gently looked at the instruments and got it level, because it was accelerating towards the ground at a quite frightening rate. I put out a Mayday call on the radio. We weren't on radar but they knew roughly where we were.

Air traffic control said do you want guidance back to Yeovilton, and I said certainly not, there's something very wrong here and I'm going to put it on the ground as soon as I can.

So I did a gentle circular descent, and came out of the cloud at about 200 feet, right over the Fox and Hounds pub in Charlton Adam, so that was a bit of a bonus. There wasn't room in the car park, so we landed in the field next to the car park. And we didn't know what had happened, and got out of the aircraft. Normally when there is a big bang it is because something has happened at the front, perhaps a buzzard has got into the controls.

We climbed up and looked into the rotor head, and couldn't find anything wrong. I thought this is very strange.

The Fox & Hounds pub, Charlton Adam.

Anyway we went into the pub, but the problem was we had no money. They kindly lent us £5 and we had a couple of pints. I thought we had better ring Yeovilton. However the rain had taken the pub's phone out, so we had to go and plead to use the phone of a rather grumpy man in a nearby cottage.

I got through to Yeovilton, who thought we had died. They explained that they had received a call from a very excited American pilot of a Sea Harrier, who said, over an over again, 'We hit a helicopter, we hit a helicopter'. So it transpired that there had been a mid air collision between a jet and a helicopter at 2000 feet in cloud, and it was a miracle that we had survived. We borrowed another £5 and had a few more pints. The accident people arrived, and looked over the helicopter and couldn't find anything wrong with it. Then a bright soul looked at the tail, and saw that it, and the tail wheel, was seriously damaged from the collision with the Sea Harrier.

The Sea Harrier was a vertical take-off and landing (VTOL) naval jet fighter.

So that was a very lucky day, and I am one of the few people who have survived a mid air collision between a jet and a helicopter – in cloud!!

It turned out that one of the air traffic controllers had made a mistake, and misdirected the Sea Harrier. The accident enquiry panel decided that he should lose his qualification, which would have ended his career. I thought that was completely unfair. My view is that you should learn from mistakes, not punish mistakes. Anyway I put on my best uniform and went to the Admiral and said he should get his qualification back, to which the authorities agreed.

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22. Promotion

I was asked in 1983 to set up something called CHOSC the Commando Helicopter Operations Support Cell. This was to sit on top or alongside the commando helicopter squadrons, to look after all their logistics, transport and support. It is now called something else, and has a Captain and bout eight Commanders. We just had one Lieutenant Commander and three Lieutenants.

Every time the helicopters deployed anywhere, I would go along and sit in the command tent with the Brigadier and the Brigade Major. We went all over the place, to Germany and to Norway a lot. I did that job for almost three years.

It was then decided that I should go to HMS Ark Royal as Lieutenant Commander Flying, the number two in Ark Royal. It wasn't really the kind of job I wanted, but I tried to make the most of it. I went on a training course, and just after that I heard that I had been selected for promotion to Commander.

I then went off as the Fleet Air Arm drafting Commander in charge of all the drafting of the ratings in the Fleet Air Arm. I had a fantastic team, who got the computer system to work an absolute treat. We played a lot of tennis and cricket, and had the odd party. We livened the place up, getting four foot square photographs of aircraft and putting them down the corridors. I lived at Seaford House, a lovely country house right on the Solent. We arranged with the catering manager that we would forego the soup and other fripperies, but have magnificent main courses.

We used to play a version of croquet called Jungle Croquet. You were allowed to do a full golf swing. It is amazing how far you can hit a croquet ball that way.

At the end of 1988 I said this isn't a real job, and you don't need a Commander here. I was now coming up to retirement, and got hold of my appointer. I said I am coming up to my last job, could it be in the west country. He said what about the recruiting officer in Bristol. I had a marvellous team who were most entertaining. In those days we had recruiting offices all over the west, from Aberystwyth, through Cornwall, and the south coast.

So that was the end of my service career.

How do you feel now about your naval career?

I adored every minute of it. If you are a junglie pilot they give you this bloody great big aeroplane, with the best maintainers in the world, and they tell you to fly as low and fast as you can all over the world. With a pretty cavalier attitude, but hugely professional. And a tremendous sense of fun. We never stopped laughing. Even down in the Falklands. It was just unbelievable fun.

You were awarded the Air Force Cross?

It was in 1980. It was for sorting out the Arctic. It was for services to Naval Aviation. Quite an honour. The Queen pinned it on me. I am very proud of that.

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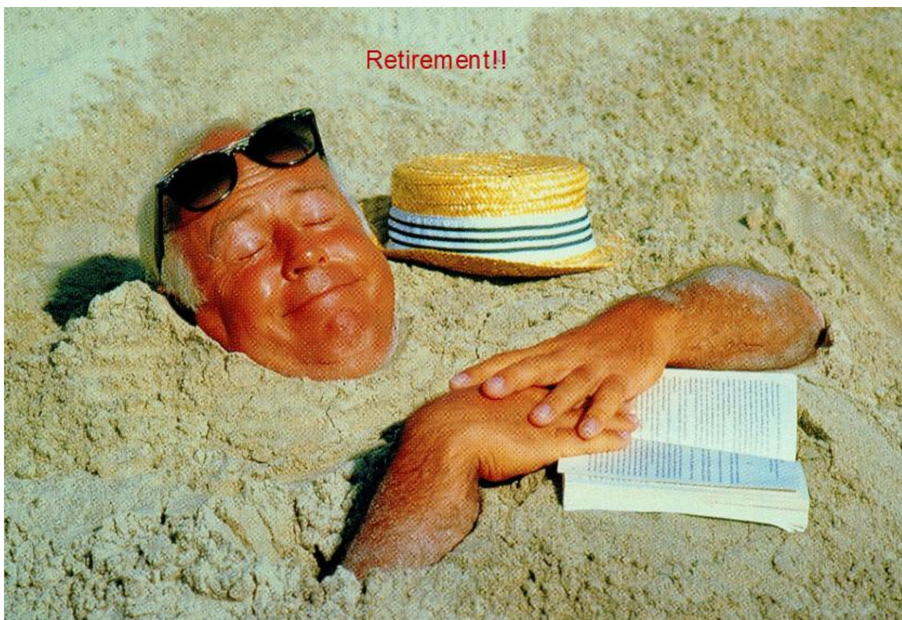
23. Retirement.

David Baston constructed in retirement a remarkable propellor-powered tricycle, which went at considerable speed along country lanes. A kind of horizontal helicopter. Asked for background to the project, he said ‘It seemed a good idea at the time’. It is still running well.



He also relaxed.