

## Continuing our brief history of RAF Honington, Part 3.

### The Royal Air Force returns to Honington and the start of the 'Cold War'.

Following the departure of the American Army Air Force from Honington in February 1946, the base returned to Royal Air Force patronage and an uneasy peace ensued throughout Europe. Uneasy because, following the defeat of Nazi Germany, that country was occupied and divided up by the

Allied nations with sectors held by Britain, France and the USA in the west and south and the Soviet Union in the north-eastern sector. Berlin, the historic German capital, fell 100 miles inside the Soviet sector but was also divided between the allies meaning that there was a pocket under western-control within the Soviet occupation zone.



Whilst the fascist ideology of Hitler and Mussolini may have been defeated, its place had been taken by the new threat of communist expansion, led by the Soviet supremo, Joseph Stalin. Many people who had become 'trapped' within the Soviet zone of occupation were attempting to flee to the west – indeed, this migration had commenced before the war ended as the Soviet troops invaded from the east. The Soviets imposed strict separatist rules throughout their area of influence and over the ensuing years a chain of fences and walls stretched from the Baltic to the Adriatic – none more famous than the 'Berlin Wall' dividing that beleaguered city (although the actual wall itself was not built until 1961).



This division of Europe led Winston Churchill, (that man again!), to coin the phrase 'Iron Curtain' during a famous speech he made during a visit to America in March 1946. Tension increased as the Soviets used economic and belligerent methods in an attempt to usurp total control over all of Germany. Various attempts were made to obstruct the communication routes into Berlin from the Allied zones. This all came to a head when, on 18<sup>th</sup> June 1948, the introduction of the new Deutsche Mark currency was announced and by 24<sup>th</sup> June the Soviets had severed all road, rail and canal routes into the city. The following day the Soviets also stopped their own supplies of food to the West Berlin people. In order to avoid the mass starvation of the inhabitants, the Allies were forced to consider the air-freight of much-needed



US C47 'Skytrains' are unloaded at Berlin's Tempelhof airport during the Berlin Airlift "Operation Vittles"

supplies – the Soviets had 'made available' three air corridors into and out of the city. On 25<sup>th</sup> June the order to commence 'Operation Vittles' was given and the Berlin Airlift began.

Meanwhile, back at Honington, the pace of activity had stepped up. On the return of the airfield to RAF usage, it was allocated to RAF Transport Command and was used for aircraft repair and maintenance – much as it had been for the American bomber fleet. The Berlin airlift resulted in a heavy workload for the maintenance crews as they struggled

to keep the Command aircraft in the air to relieve the starving Berliners. The airlift was only

expected to last for a few weeks but continuing Soviet pressure meant that it lasted until 12<sup>th</sup> May 1949 – the fact that it lasted throughout the harsh winter meant that the freight tonnages were vastly increased as the demand for coal had to be factored in to the deliveries. Initial estimates required 2,000 tons of food per day - but this could be reduced to 600 tons if 'dried foods' were



Avro York of the RAF of the type that was maintained at Honington.

substituted. However, by August, 4,500 tons were being flown in daily by 1,500 flights. As well as deliveries of foodstuffs, other supplies were required which increased the daily requirement to 4-5,000 tons per day – but these were summer demands. With the arrival of winter, the demand for coal was 6,000 tons per day – all of which had to be unloaded promptly to enable the quick turnaround of the aircraft. The shortage of labour became an increasing problem that was resolved by the Berliners themselves. On one occasion twelve men unloaded 10 tons of coal in 5 minutes and 45 seconds using only shovels!

The Soviets had expected the Allies to give up the exercise quite quickly and were reluctant to



Handley Page Hastings C1 of the type maintained at Honington. This particular aircraft, TG528, actually took part in the airlift and has since been restored at the IWM, Duxford.

intervene militarily – the flights were humanitarian and not military by nature which gave them little leeway to interfere. So it was that on 12<sup>th</sup> May 1950 they admitted 'defeat' and the blockade was lifted. Between them, the USA and Britain had delivered over 2.3 million tons of freight, (2/3rds of which was coal), on 278,228 flights to Berlin. At the height of the airlift, a plane landed in Berlin every 30 seconds.

Honington had played its part in the exercise by helping to keep the aircraft serviceable but the Suffolk base was about to see yet another change of occupancy.

By 1950 Honington was under the control of Bomber Command again, initially as a bomb storage and disposal station and it was during this period that its occupying unit, the 94<sup>th</sup> Armament Maintenance Unit also became responsible for the construction of the new high security 'Special Weapons' storage and maintenance site at nearby RAF Barnham, (see the earlier feature about the 'Secret Life of Barnham Camp' in the Easter 2015 issue - [No. 6]). The RAF was joining the jet bomber age and Honington was earmarked for upgrading to suit and much of this work was carried out whilst 94MU were still in residence. A major feature of the upgrade was the laying of a new 9,000 foot concrete runway to take the forthcoming heavier aircraft and the construction resulted in Rymer Lane becoming a 'No Through Road'. Previously the Lane had continued almost due East to Green Lane which passes the base main gate as can be seen in the aerial photos in earlier instalments. The aerial photograph shown here, illustrates the new road layout which necessitated a diversion around the south-western extremities of the base.



With the upgrades complete, Honington became a 'flying' base again when English Electric Canberra bombers of 10, XV, 44 and 57 Squadrons moved in during 1955. The Canberra was a British first-generation jet medium bomber and was an immediate success. First flown in 1949 and in production throughout the 1950s in a variety of forms; predominantly in the tactical bombing and reconnaissance roles, it continued to fly with the RAF in the latter role until 2006! It was sold to many countries and built under licence by some including the USA who built it as the Martin B57 in modified form and three special versions of which are still in service today with NASA for meteorological work. As stated, the Canberra was a *medium* bomber and as such it did not



have a bomb bay large enough to house the first generation atomic weapons that were available and in store at Barnham.

With the partitioning of Europe still going on apace, elsewhere in the world trouble was brewing. President Nasser of Egypt took it upon himself in 1956 to nationalise the Suez Canal, the critical shipping link between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean, and invaded the surrounding territory. The Israelis invaded Egypt, closely followed by French and British forces, in an attempt to restore western control of the vitally important Canal and depose Nasser.

Honington Canberras from 10 and XV Squadrons were soon in action flying from forward bases on the islands of Cyprus and Malta and dropping conventional weapons in support of the ground forces. This counter-invasion soon brought condemnation from the USA, the Soviet Union and the United Nations and the Anglo-French and Israeli forces had to withdraw with much loss of face.

As mentioned here, the British atomic bombs of the time were too large to fit the bomb bay of the Canberra but new bigger and heavier bombers were coming into RAF service – the ‘V’ bombers. The first of these, the Vickers Valiant, entered RAF squadron service in 1955 and saw active service during the Suez crisis when Valiants operating from Malta dropped conventional bombs on Egyptian targets. (This was the only time that any of the ‘V’ bombers carried out hostile bombing missions until an Avro Vulcan bombed Stanley airport during the Falklands war in 1982.)

In November 1956 Honington became a nuclear bomber base when 7 Squadron reformed with Valiants in the strategic (nuclear) bomber role. On New Year’s Day 1957 they were joined by the Valiants of 90 Squadron in the same role. 199 Squadron also flew from Honington with a mixture of Valiants and Canberras in the Electronic Counter-Measures, (ECM), role.



The Valiants were less advanced than the other two ‘V’ bombers; the Avro Vulcan and the Handley Page Victor, which entered RAF Squadron service in September 1956 and May 1957 respectively. These later V-bombers increasingly assumed the nuclear deterrent and bombing role from the Valiants and, as part of a new strategic philosophy, mid-air refuelling became widely available and many of the Valiant fleet were converted to the airborne tanker role –

Honington's 90 Squadron Valiants being modified accordingly in 1959. 199 Squadron, with its mixture of aircraft types, was disbanded in December 1958 but the 'C' flight Valiants went to RAF Finningley where they became the nucleus of 18 Squadron. By now, all the Canberras had left Honington.

New Year 1959 heralded a new shape and sound in the skies over Honington when 57 Squadron arrived with their Victors in the Strategic bombing role.



They were joined in September 1960 by the Victors of 55 Squadron shortly after the Valiants of 7 Squadron had relocated to RAF Wittering. The Victor was a much more 'futuristic' shape than the Valiant although perhaps not as distinctive as the delta-winged Vulcan, (known fondly as the 'Tin Triangle'), which was never permanently based at Honington. Together, the V-bomber fleet maintained a nuclear deterrent during the early days of the 'Cold War' – including one of the most critical times during the Cuban Missile crisis in October 1962. The 'Four Minute Warning' was a common topic of discussion for many years and V-bombers would be waiting by



the end of their runways, with nuclear weapons on board, while their crews sat in full flying clothing in an adjacent hut waiting for the call into action. They needed to get into the aircraft, start the engines and get airborne within that time frame. Whether or not they would have had a base to come back to was a moot point.

A further complication had come about in 1960 with the shooting-down of CIA pilot Gary Powers in his U2 spy plane over Russia which heralded the new generation of surface-to-air missile defences. The V-bombers had been designed and for operating at high-altitude but this new threat forced a re-think of tactics. The V-bomber force now switched to low altitude, terrain-following operation which saw the fleet losing their all-white colour scheme in favour of a new grey/green camouflage scheme.



Low level flying brought about a new problem as such usage incurred high stresses on the airframes due to turbulence and manoeuvring. The first signs of trouble were seen with the Valiants which were found to suffer with fatigue-cracking of the main wing spars. The change of function of some Valiants from the low-level bomber role to medium-level tanker or high-level reconnaissance operation alleviated the problem to some degree, and some modifications were made to strengthen the 'better' aircraft, but the problem persisted and worsened so that by January 1965 all Valiants were permanently grounded.

Having lost its Valiants, Honington's 90 Squadron was disbanded in April leaving only the Victors of 55 and 57 Squadrons at the base but they were relocated to Marham in April and December that year where they took on a new role as tanker Squadrons. The skies over Honington fell quiet again as the base was placed in 'reserve' for conversion to receive the General Dynamics F-111 that the RAF was proposing to purchase from the US as a replacement for the cancelled TSR-2 project. (See the article about the Honington 'Gate Guard' in issue 4.) Like many other 'bright ideas' this came to nought and apart from use of the base married quarters to accommodate evacuees from the Aden Emergency in 1967 it was 1968 before aircraft were again operating from Honington when the Buccaneers moved in – which we will look at, along with the later Tornados in the next instalment.

As a footnote here, I have already mentioned that the Vulcan fleet were never permanently based at Honington, but a Vulcan was the last V-bomber to fly over the airfield when on 25<sup>th</sup> September 2014 XH558, the last airworthy Vulcan in its final flight of the season, engaged in a 'Cold War Tour' around bases that had been 'home' to the V-bombers. Those of us who were

fortunate enough to see it were treated to a mini-display by an iconic aircraft that symbolised an era of heightened East-West tension and the men and women who served in our defence. Sadly XH558 herself was to have only one more flying season before being permanently grounded like all the others before her.

*(Here are a couple of photos I took of the 'Tin Triangle' that afternoon.)*



