

Ken Coburn's DGEng BUGLE

My Life Story (with hopefully a few more years to go)

I was born and bred in the north of England, a small town called Prudhoe-on-Tyne, 10 miles west of Newcastle. I attended local schools and managed to gain nothing more than a "school leaving certificate" – which meant that I had successfully left school!



Fortunately, while in my final year, my headmaster encouraged me to take the RAF apprentice entrance exam and assigned one of the teachers to give me additional tuition. I passed the exam, and at the age of 15 years set off with a little suitcase and a great deal of trepidation on the journey to RAF Halton, near Aylesbury, where I was to spend 3 years being trained as an aircraft instrument fitter.

On leaving Halton, I was posted to RAF Finningley on Vulcan B2s. I was at RAF Finningley for 5 years and enjoyed the work on one of the RAF's most high tech aircraft.



From 1957 to 1969, during the dark days of the Cold War, the Avro Vulcan was the main British contribution to the NATO strategic nuclear deterrent. For 24 hours-a-day, 7 days-a-week, RAF

Vulcans and their crews stood on "Quick Reaction Alert", to take off within 2 minutes in the event of a Soviet attack. Vulcans were equipped to carry the British hydrogen bomb, code-named "Yellow Sun", which had a power of 1 million tonnes of high explosive, or a nuclear-tipped cruise missile called "Blue Steel". However, no British bomber ever flew with a live nuclear weapon; the deterrent strategy was a success. The only time the Vulcan was used in anger was during the South Atlantic Conflict in 1982, when Vulcans, each supported by 13 Victor air-to-air refuelling tankers, flew 7 missions from Ascension Island to the Falkland Islands. These raids captured the world record at the time for the longest-ever bombing mission: a return journey of nearly 8000 miles (12,500km), taking 15 hrs 45 mins. During this tour at RAF Finningley I met my wife, Marlene, and was married in 1963.



I was posted to RAF Luqa, Malta, in 1966 where I worked on Canberra PR9s. My wife followed shortly afterwards with our first child, Jayne Louise, who was born in 1966. Life in Malta was idyllic - short working days in the summer months and lots of time to spend on the beaches. The Maltese were very friendly and pro

British and there was much to see on these islands that were steeped in history. There was time for other things too as whilst serving in Malta my son, Philip Michael, was born in 1968.

On completion of a 3-year tour in Malta, I was posted to RAF Little Rissington where I was placed in charge of the aircraft avionics maintenance section which was responsible for all avionics maintenance on the Chipmunk, Varsity and Jet Provost training aircraft based at that Unit. In the space of 12 years I had gone from high tech Vulcans to low tech training aircraft. Hence by 1971, when I had reached the rank of Chief Technician and was nearing the end of my 12-year engagement, my intention was to leave the RAF and gain 'licenses' and seek work in the aircraft industry.

However, my boss had other ideas and he suggested that I apply for a commission. I got through the officer selection process at RAF Biggin Hill by lying about what newspaper I read (I read the Daily Mail but said I read the Daily Telegraph) and was offered a commission in the Engineer Branch. And so I 'signed on' again. I was 30 years old and most of the other trainees at RAF Henlow, who were there to learn how to march and how to conduct themselves as officers, were just out of their teens.

After completing the 3-month basic officer training course I was posted to RAF College Cranwell where I completed a 3-year engineer officer training course and attained a Higher National Diploma in electrical engineering. It was during this period at RAF Cranwell that I found time to take up the sport of gliding which would lead eventually to me becoming a qualified gliding instructor.



On completion of engineer officer training in May 1974, I was posted to No 1(Fighter) Sqn, RAF Wittering, which flew Harriers, to take up the post of Junior Engineer Officer. It was a satisfying but tough existence, much of the time living out of a kit bag and occasionally under canvas in sub-zero temperatures during winter exercises. There were fun times too though, like when Shirley Bassey visited the squadron to record her Christmas show and she brought along her 'nancy boy', complete with handbag, much to the delight of the groundcrew. During my 15 month tour at RAF Wittering I flew a number of times on training missions in the 2-seat version of the Harrier.

I then served 3 years in Germany from 1975 to 1978 accompanied by my family. I was the electrical specialist officer on the Harrier Command Engineering Investigation Team - first at RAF Wildenrath and then at RAF Gutersloh when the Harrier squadrons moved to the latter operating base in 1977. During this tour, the family began their keen interest in skiing. I also played a significant role in helping to form the Pegasus Gliding Club at RAF Gutersloh and subsequently acted as Treasurer until I left the Unit.

I left Germany in 1978 and took up an appointment in the Ministry of Defence Procurement Executive, London, where I was responsible for the management of RAF Phantom F-4 aircraft avionics programmes. On my return from Germany I also enrolled in a self-study programme with the Open

University which culminated in the award of an Honours (First Class) degree in 1985.



Despite its attractions, a civil service type job in London was not what I joined the RAF for and so I was glad to leave London and the 3-hour per day round trip commute to take up an appointment in 1982 at RAF Marham as the Senior Engineer Officer of No 617 (Dambuster) Squadron. The squadron was being reformed with Tornado aircraft and it was my responsibility to work up the engineering support organisation to reach operational standard. On reaching operational status the squadron was chosen to represent the RAF in the USAF Strategic Aircraft Command bombing competition at an air base in South Dakota, USA. The squadron managed to beat a number of teams from the USA and Australia in its first outing, much to the surprise of the more experienced teams. It was great fun too over the 3-month period of the work-up and competition. There was much to see in the surrounding area, including Mount Rushmore and the Black Hills of Dakota, not to mention the local golf course.

In March 1985 I was then posted once again to the Ministry of Defence Procurement Executive - this time as the avionics specialist officer on the Harrier GR5 programme. During this period, following the award of my Open University degree after a 6-year period of study, I applied successfully for membership of the Institute of Electrical Engineers and the Royal

Aeronautical Society, becoming a Chartered Engineer that same year.



In 1986, after one year in the Harrier GR5 Programme Office, I escape from London again and took up appointment as the Officer Commanding Engineering Wing at RAF Leuchars, Scotland. As the senior engineering officer on the base, I was responsible for second-line engineering maintenance of the Unit's Phantom F4 aircraft. My wing comprised a complement of 15 officers and 750 engineering NCOs and tradesmen to support this task.



In addition, I was responsible for the engineering standards of 3 Phantom F-4 air defence squadrons, a Whirlwind Air-Sea Rescue Unit and the Rapier missile-equipped RAF Regiment squadron that were based at RAF Leuchars. Other duties included a period of one year as the President of the Officers' Mess Committee during which I was responsible for running the Mess and for officiating at Mess social functions and formal dinners. I also took the opportunity to fly on Phantom training missions, including a flight to Cyprus.

It was during this tour I took a more serious interest in playing golf, as the St Andrews Old Course was nearby, which led to the privilege of becoming a guest member of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club at St Andrews. I recall many occasions having lunch in the members' dining room followed by glasses of port in the club lounge, which overlooks the first tee/18th green, dreaming of teeing off in the British Open. The nearest I got was playing golf with some of the less discerning members and achieving a handicap of 24.

After completing just over 2 years at RAF Leuchars, I was posted in 1988 to the United Kingdom Military Projects Office, Washington, USA where I completed a 3½ year tour as head of the Ministry of Defence's aircraft programme and technical liaison office. My prime responsibility was for the Harrier programme and, as a consequence, my office worked closely with Naval Air Systems Command, the British Embassy and a number of US-based British contractors and many US defence contractors. To a lesser degree, I also had responsibility for UK/USA technical liaison on Phantom F-4 and Hercules C-130 aircraft programmes.

It was a great tour for me and my family. The time difference helped: because of the time difference, the UK tended to close down around 12 o'clock USA time so there was not a great deal of work related activity to do in the afternoons. Many friendships were forged over there which have lasted to this day. Even my son Philip was taken by the country and he got a job with a software company, met an American girl, Joey, and married her in the autumn of 1995. Marlene and I travelled to many States, including Hawaii, during my tour and we were sad when the time came to leave.

On returning to the UK in February 1992, on promotion to the rank of group captain, I was appointed as Assistant Director Harrier II at the Ministry of Defence Procurement Executive. It was back to London and the chore of commuting every day to work but the dedicated band of people I worked with kept me sane. The Harrier Office's main responsibility was the development and procurement of the Harrier T10.



It was at this time I met Roger Jones (my boss), Ted Woodgate, John Judd, Tom Miller and Peter Whitehorn who have been regular attendees at the annual DEng reunion. If I've forgotten to mention anybody who regularly attends the DEng reunion it's down to old age catching up on me.

There was little prospect of doing anything else for the remainder of my engagement (to age 55) and so when I was offered early redundancy from the RAF (along with thousands of others in the Government's cost-cutting exercise) at the age of 51 I decided to call it a day after 33 years service (36 if you include boy service as an RAF apprentice).

Shortly after leaving the RAF, Marlene and I moved to Alresford in April 1995. I initially worked as a self-employed consultant (KC Consulting Services), advising aerospace companies on defence procurement and marketing strategies. When the work dried up I joined DERA (later to become Defence Science and Technology Laboratories) at Farnborough as an applied research

project manager for a (then) secret stealth programme.



I worked there on a 3-day per week contract (leaving Mondays and Fridays free for golf) until I retired in December 2006.

On retiring from paid work, I got involved more with the management of my local golf club (Alesford GC), working on the club's computer systems and on committees. In 2009 I was invited to become vice-captain and then captain in 2010.

Traditionally, the captain nominates a charity for his year and I chose *Help for Heroes*. Well over £8,000 has been raised, which included £300 donated at the last DEng Reunion.

Until recently, my wife, Marlene, was a part-time lecturer and co-ordinator in Information Technology at Basingstoke College of Technology. We have 3 grandchildren - 2 boys in the UK and 1 boy in the USA (where our son lives). We enjoy relatively good health, considering our advancing years and so life is good. Hopefully, therefore, I will be around long enough to enjoy many more DEng reunions.

Ken Coburn.

A personal 'thank you' Ken for all the hard work you put into 'Help the Heroes' project. I can confirm that it is much appreciated by the chaps in uniform. (Ed)

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