

**XM655 keeps a low profile, hiding away  
before the Spring EGR.**



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## **The Chairman's Introduction**

Mike Pollitt

Following the resignation of our long serving Chairman, Charles Brimson, for personal reasons, I was surprised to be invited by our committee to step up from being a member of your aircrew to becoming acting Chairman. I say acting Chairman as the position had to be ratified by my election at this year's AGM. So, I'm pleased and honoured to say that I was elected rather than ejected.

I should like to thank Charles for his excellent reign as Chairman of 655 MaPS. He achieved a great deal during his 8-year tenure and maintained XM655 in taxiable condition by overseeing the acquisition of new engines, a superb new paintwork job and many safe and successful Wings & Wheels events. Thank you so much Charles for all your efforts on 655 MaPS behalf. I must also thank the MaPS committee and members for their vote of confidence in me and I look forward to working alongside them all in the future. I have agreed to continue as Chairman at least until the 2018 AGM or until a more suitable candidate



appears. I am particularly conscious that MaPS is very much an engineering project and that the aircrew contribute a significant but very minor role in this operation.

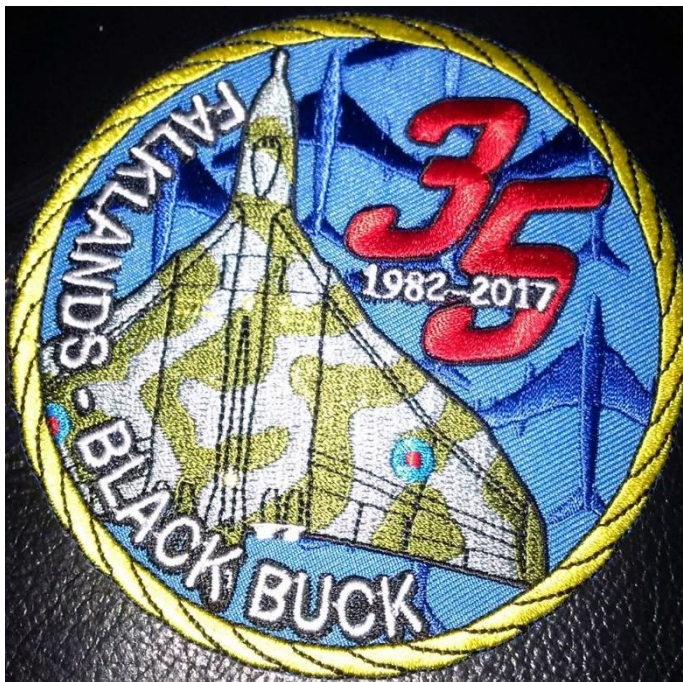
I should also like to welcome Anne-Marie Walduck to the committee as Secretary following Avril Magill's resignation from this appointment. I am pleased to announce that Avs has kindly agreed to continue as Membership Secretary. Anne-Marie has been an extremely keen volunteer since joining us about 18 months ago. To my knowledge, Anne-Marie has only missed one Saturday at Wellesbourne during this period and was certainly there throughout the whole four day Easter period this year. I certainly thank Avs for all her work as Secretary and her partner Bry for all his wonderful airframe endeavours and for his superb painting of the airframe, a truly talented man. They will be sadly missed at Wellesbourne but we hope to see them there at some future events.

This year we have some major refurbishment projects in the pipeline. We may accomplish another paintwork renewal with the help of Derek Powell, who you will recall was our original 655 MaPS chairman and Fred Barter an honorary member and long-time friend and volunteer with XM655. Many thanks to Derek and Fred, who certainly surprised me with their offer of assistance. Also, we intend to remove the H2S Scanner to investigate its inoperability and we have placed an order to replace one of the missing pair of No1 fuel tanks. I hope I haven't stolen Eric's

thunder with that announcement but undoubtedly Eric will have much more detail in his report.

There remains an uncertainty about Wellesbourne airfield's future but little has changed since December 2016 and airfield businesses are planning for the long term now and have made their first lease payments to Littler Investments.

As you will undoubtedly know this year is the 35th anniversary of the Falklands Conflict. Roger Bowen, our Vice-Chairman, has produced a tremendous patch to commemorate the anniversary, available soon from our new on-line merchandising store. We intend to hold a Members' Day on 20 August this year with the Falklands Conflict very much the theme of the event. We have invited Barry Masefield and John Lyons who were both important participants in the campaign to speak on Members' Day about their experience at the time; Barry as AEO on two Black Buck missions and John who was a member of the engineering team at Wideawake Airfield on Ascension Island. They are both very interesting and entertaining speakers so I do hope you will be able to join us. Clearly, the event is in its early planning stage but we have the airfield manager's agreement to place XM655 on the taxiway adjacent to our ASP with the intention of carrying out a 4-engine ground run (EGR).



On Sunday 14 May we conducted two EGRs to check the systems and for volunteer practice, which went very successfully. Anne-Marie, Eric and Isi crewed the first start with Roger acting as crew chief and later Anne-Marie, Eric and Tim crewed a second start again with Roger acting as crew chief. This also included a check of the nose wheel steering, the nose wheel had been placed on grease plates. It was noted by Eric that the nose wheel traversed slightly more to the left than the right but was not of significant concern to prevent some aircrew taxi training in the afternoon. Therefore, after lunch Nick Dennis as P2, Barry Masefield as AEO and with me in the left-hand seat completed four figures of eight on Runway 23/05. For the first time that I can recall in over 20 years of operating XM655 all the Powered Flying Controls, the pitch dampers and yaw dampers came on line and so there were no main warning lights on and 3 black MIs staring at me.



I couldn't believe it and later learnt that they had all come on-line during the first and second EGRs of the day and Anne-Marie had photographed it for posterity!



Interestingly, with Nick Dennis as captain and me as the pilot being checked out by his Sqn QFI, Nick and I flew XM655 one dark night in 1979 from RAF Waddington. Never did we think that almost 40 years later we would be taxiing that same aircraft once again.

Now on an entirely different note, may I on behalf of all members of 655MaPS wish one of our volunteers Robin Whittle many congratulations on his recent wedding to Elizabeth Boswell. On behalf of 655MaPS we wish them every happiness in the future.

In every organisation, it is the people who are the most important element and so it is with MaPS. We are blessed with some excellent and very skilled people such as Eric Ranshaw, Roger Bowen, Tim Deeley, Len Hewitt, Ben Tapp and James Pritchard on the engineering side ably assisted by Bob and Isi Jackson, naturally. John Lyons, one of our new volunteers is also picking up the ropes on the engineering front as is Matt Wardrobe who recently celebrated his 21st birthday. Many Congratulations to you Matt from us all and we look forward to you being with us for many years to come.

Talking of young people Ben Tapp seems to have been with us for many years but aged only 17 years his experience belies his age. He started at MaPS when he was 11 years old and clearly his experience of driving our huge tug has helped him pass his driving test this year. Many Congratulations to you Ben and good luck with your A Level examinations this year. We are also indebted to Damaris Tapp, Kay Prestidge and Anne-Marie Walduck for their loyal support to the cause and for all their



hard work behind the scenes too. There's always a risk that I've forgotten a well deserving volunteer who has pitched up to help us nearly every week and if that is the case I'll endeavour to make up for it in the next newsletter.

Finally, I am honoured to be your new Chairman and I look forward to meeting those members who have recently joined us at Wellesbourne over this coming year and indeed seeing old friends there too – often I hope.

## **Engineering Report**

Eric Ranshaw

Most of our recent activity seems to have involved electrical problems of one sort or another. The most time consuming of these has been the Airborne Auxiliary Power Plant (AAPP) which began failing to come on-line early this year. The unit would run up ok following the work we had done on the starting system after the last Wings and Wheels, but was not generating sufficient voltage. Exchanging the Transformer Rectifier Unit which controls the AAPP output made no difference, so our attention was turned to the alternator. Unfortunately, this can only be accessed by removing the complete unit, and as we don't have a stand designed for it, the first step was to fabricate a frame to fit on one of our Olympus stands in which we could support the AAPP. We then removed and dismantled the unit to gain access to the alternator.



The alternator was removed and examined, and the only fault found was that the field brushes were rather tight in their housings due to an accumulation of carbon dust. They were cleaned up and the spring tensions were measured and found to be ok. We then re-assembled the AAPP and refitted it to the aircraft.

Unfortunately, all this work had produced no result as the fault was still present. Since then, much head-scratching and testing has revealed an earth fault on one of the output cables from the AAPP where it passes through a tube over the starboard jet pipes. As this will be very difficult to access, we are presently working on running a temporary external cable to prove conclusively whether this really is the root cause before we embark on a major cable replacement.

Another area which has been receiving a lot of attention has been the intercom system, specifically the connections for the co-pilot. For some time we have been getting a much weaker, but also inconsistent, output for the P2 seat compared to the rest of the system. This involves gaining access to a maze of wiring under the pilot's floor. Removing various junction boxes and cleaning many dozens of connections has achieved some improvement, but we still have more work to do to make the system fully reliable again. Accessing the intercom wiring has required the removal of various other components, and there has been one unexpected benefit of this work. Removing and replacing the multiple connectors on the various components has had some cleaning effect on the connections, and as Mike has

reported in his introduction, the pitch damper system has started working and indicating properly for the first time in many years.

We reported in the last newsletter that we had removed the two old No.1 fuel tanks from the fuselage over the nose wheel bay. They were returned to the manufacturer, GKN Aerospace, for examination, but unfortunately they were too badly deteriorated to be repairable. This is not surprising as they had been kept dry for many years due to leaks. GKN have now quoted us for manufacturing new tanks, and we have decided to go ahead. We have initially ordered one tank, which we will confirm we can successfully install and commission before we commit the funds for the second replacement. The reason that we need to have these tanks serviceable relates to the management of the aircraft centre of gravity. You may recall that some years ago XL319, the Vulcan at the North East Aircraft Museum, was badly damaged when it sat on its tail due to the weight of snow on the wings.



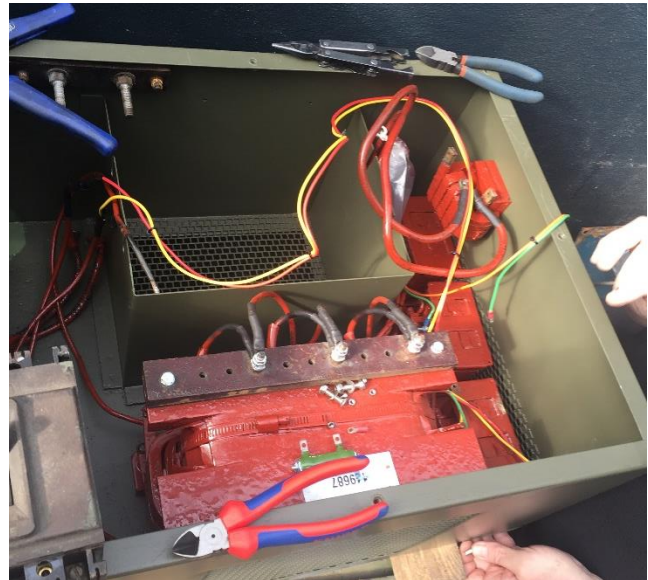
To help guard against this risk, we always keep the centre of gravity well forward during the winter months using the disposition of the aircraft fuel. Only the No.1 and No.2 tanks are forward of the main landing gear, so presently we are dependant on the serviceability of the No.2 tanks to be able to achieve this. As they get older, we feel it is prudent to also have the No.1 tanks available in case of future problems with the No.2 tanks.

We were unfortunate with our planned Spring EGR which was due to be held over the Easter weekend. We were forced to postpone the event at short notice due to problems with our Houchin Ground Power Unit (GPU), which suddenly refused to generate any electricity whatever on the day before the event. The fault proved to be an open circuit in a rheostat which uses voltage from the engine batteries to provide the initial excitation for the alternator. Once this had been found, we were

able to make a temporary fix which allowed us to provide systems demonstrations for our many visitors, and we had a new rheostat manufactured (plus a spare) for the final fix. As Mike reported, the Spring EGR was eventually completed very successfully in May.



The 28 volt DC Transformer Rectifier which we removed from the Houchin GPU last year has been receiving attention whenever people can be spared from more pressing problems. We have had the large transformer rewound and the other components overhauled, and replacements have been obtained for the twelve large diodes. Re-assembly is ongoing and we hope to be able to refit the unit in the GPU very soon. Although our home-made TrolleyAcc has served us well in the interim, it is actually a 24 volt unit rather than the 28 volts expected by the aircraft systems. It is therefore only partially successful in supporting the aircraft battery, which will have a much easier time once the 28 volt supply from the GPU is restored.



Our hydraulic rig, which is used for testing aircraft hydraulic systems, is powered by a Coventry Victor engine which has become increasingly difficult to start in recent years. This is now the subject of an ongoing overhaul, probably the first real attention it has had since it arrived in Wellesbourne many years ago. Once this has been completed, we will be able to continue our investigations into the nose wheel steering deficiencies mentioned by Mike in his introduction.

## Visits to XM655

Damaris Tapp

The year started slowly, as few organisers are brave enough to commit to bringing up to 24 people for a visit in January. However, the month was still a very exciting time with two visits from a heavy metal band who organised a photo shoot with XM655. They obviously appreciate historic settings, as a previous photo shoot was at the Didcot Railway Centre. Despite the serious looks for the camera, they were all great guys and we had lots of fun helping them get the best shots possible, health and safety permitting!

Another fun day early in the year was when we were able to celebrate the 10th birthday of William Leedham with three of his friends, organised by his father, Stewart. As well as a cockpit tour and being shown round the rest of the Vulcan, we had the chance to sing Happy Birthday to William, who had brought this wonderful Vulcan birthday cake.



We have had several of our usual regular visits recently and are very grateful to the Spice Group and Neil Grant, along with the Bugatti Owners Club (due to visit us in July) for all their support. We must be doing something right, as visitors sometimes return and bring their own groups with them. One such was the Usk Valley Classic Car Club, who visited us all the way from South Wales, with their organiser bringing another group in June.





Two more regular visitors, whose organisers we also know well and like to class as our friends, were the SLK World, pictured here, and the Bristol Flight Sim group.



Lisa of SLK World is a busy lady, who has not only brought several car clubs to visit XM655 on the pan, but has also supported Wings and Wheels, all while raising money for Children's Charities through the Sporting Bears Motor Club. The Flight Sim organiser, Richard, is well qualified to help with the groups he brings, having been a crew chief on 101 Squadron (during the Vulcan era!) and having flown in '655 more than any other Vulcan.

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Another returner was a fly in from the Booker Aviation Touring Group. As is so often the way, the weather was uncooperative, but they were able to make it over, although somewhat delayed. We were delighted they made it but, under the circumstances it was probably all for the best that it was a slightly smaller visit than some!

We always love showing youngsters around and have had several Air Cadet Squadrons visit us over the years. The latest was 2120 (Witney) Squadron and we are grateful to David McCulloch, one of our regular volunteers and a Civilian Instructor with 150 (Oxford) Squadron for hosting the visit. Before visiting XM655, the cadets were shown around the Wellesbourne Wartime Museum and the airfield's control tower. Many thanks to the Museum for opening up specially and to the tower for explaining how they operate. On reaching the Vulcan they were also shown around a Cessna 152 belonging to the South Warwickshire Flying School. Again, our thanks to their members who took the time to show the cadets the flight controls and systems, putting into practice the theory they learn on the squadron.

We were also delighted to host the local Scouts from Pillerton, who were visiting to help achieve their Scouting Air Researcher badge. We have been promised an invitation to their final presentation and are looking forward to that very much, along with seeing their finished fact book and models.

Two car clubs are worthy of mention; the Jaguar X300 Forum and the Enthusiasts of British Motor Vehicles (pre-1985), bringing their cars for a photo shoot under the Vulcan at the end of the visit. The latter group had an extra celebration, it being the organiser's 40th birthday. Sadly, no cake this time but, possibly for the best, no singing of Happy Birthday, either!



As a first, when we ended up with a free Saturday at short notice, we opened the visit up for booking via Facebook. This worked so well, with a full attendance and a waiting list, that we repeated it a few weeks later. If you would like further information about joining a future visit, please contact me via email ([visits@xm655.com](mailto:visits@xm655.com)). One family enjoyed the Saturday visit so much that they came back the following day to watch our EGR from the cafe.

It is always good to keep in touch with people who have visited and I was delighted to hear from Ron Vears, who had visited us with the Petersfield Aero Modellers Club last September. At the time he had mentioned he was working on a model of XM655, built to a plan designed by Tony Nijhuis (a well-known scale model aircraft designer), with a wingspan of 1.24m (49inches). The airframe is constructed from balsa and plywood, covered with glass cloth and epoxy resin, and finished with Humbrol acrylic and weighs only 2.3kg (5lb) without batteries. Thrust is provided by four electric motors driving four 50mm 10-bladed fans. Two 14.8v 4-cell LIPO batteries located in the wings provide power for the motors, radio equipment and retracting undercarriage. Hopefully, we will be able to unite the model with its full-size counterpart soon.



Finally, I would like to thank all our volunteers who help with visits, with a special thanks this time to Mike Pollitt and Steve Clarkson. Mike has always been a great help with group visits but, since taking over as chairman, has become a fixture for cockpit tours - much to the delight of our visitors. Steve has recently joined XM655, having brought plenty of experience as a volunteer with XM603 at Woodford. He has quickly become our most versatile tour guide, already having covered talks on

the Cold War and the Falklands and, I am promised, being quite happy and prepared to cover more general Vulcan history, in particular that of XM655, and the cockpit tours - if Mike ever gives him the chance!

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## **A Volunteer's Tale**

John Lyons

'Volunteering' is, as the dictionary tells us, the altruistic giving of one's time freely and without financial reward. It is something that was certainly anathema to anyone serving in the military. Even finding oneself in the position where one might even be invited to volunteer for anything could to be described as carelessness.

As young aircraft maintenance techs in the 1980's Royal Air Force, our mission in life was to avoid finding ourselves in such compromising positions; indeed, the verb 'to volunteer' didn't feature within the lexicon of any self-respecting airman. And yet now, as I find myself, on most Saturdays, standing on a windswept, freezing cold, Wellesbourne Airfield some 37 years after I had taken the Queens shilling, I have to ask myself how it is that the concept of 'volunteering' had somehow become acceptable and, moreover, that I would actually put myself forward, voluntarily!

Until just a few short months ago Saturdays for me meant not going to work, an opportunity to tinker about in the garage, or to push the lawn mower about or, if I was really unlucky, being forced to accompany my wife on a shopping trip.

So instead of such blissful pottering, I now find myself transported back to my youth, playing about with aeroplanes, banging my head on the 'sticky-out' bits and looking generally confused whilst a troop of real - and highly able - volunteers, far more skilled than I, work their magic on XM655.

I had, when I first joined the '655 society, told myself that I would keep my RAF past as a closely guarded secret. To do otherwise could set unbounded expectations. Expectations that I might just know what I was doing and that the club had in its midst another new member who would help to fix things when they went wrong. Even worse, they would find out that I was a hoax; not a Vulcan chap at all but someone from the world of Handley Page Victors! Best to keep shtum I thought, it would be best to say nothing and feign ignorance

Well that plan lasted about as long as it took for a kettle to boil for no sooner had I been passed a cup of steaming tea, than I was asked when it was that I worked on Vulcans. "I didn't" I replied "I worked on.....Victors!"

Damn it! I'd been rumbled and they were never going to let me live it down.

I thought I'd better come clean and tell them where I'd come from before I fell headlong into the hole I was digging for myself.

For me, tinkering with aircraft started back in Spring 1980 after having taken the shilling and headed off to Lincolnshire and RAF Swinderby - no doubt a housing

estate these days but back then it was the recruits' basic training centre where young men were reprogrammed into the military way of life.

It remains a mystery to me as to how I managed to find Swinderby; it really is or I should say was, in the middle of nowhere. I don't think I had ever been to such a bleak and desolate place in my life. I vaguely recall that the station had one or two hangers and a smattering of brick buildings but the place seemed to have more than its fair share of single-storey wooden huts. It would have come as no surprise to me to learn that the film 'The Great Escape' has been filmed at RAF Swinderby; it would have only needed a couple of lookout towers and a few rolls of barbed wire and it would've been the real deal. Steve McQueen would have fitted in perfectly!

Swinderby was the place where I had to learn several new key skills - getting told off for uncommitted crimes, standing patiently still while someone shouts abuse at you, how to march up, down and across a parade square, ironing and polishing just about everything - and that means everything - shoes, teeth, floors, the lavs, windows, doorknobs, coal. Nothing escaped from being buffed up with industrial quantities of 'Polish, Floor, Wax, Liquid, Airmen for the use of'.

Within minutes of arrival we were introduced to our allocated drill instructor who was going to turn us into proper military people, 'all shiny and smart' or, or as was more probably the case, we were simply there to be used as a source of sadistic pleasure for some real nasty pieces of work. In our first encounter the drill instructors - DIs - called us 'gentlemen'. That was the first and only occasion we would be treated with any such pleasantness. I guess that there must be some learned academic or leading psychologist out there who will assure me that this sort of training is good for us but at that time we really felt as though we had been sent to this place for the personal gratification of this chap who spoke, or rather shouted in incomprehensible 'tongues'.

Attener.....hun ! By the le.....eft....., kweeee..... eeeeeek march ! I think he shouted 'left', 'right', 'left' before his language changed to something entirely meaningless but it would have taken a brave soul to say 'pardon?'. "Airlip, airlip, airlip, hite, hip.....airlip, airlip, airlip, hite, hip"! I think we caught the gist of the grunts for he seemed to be briefly contented.

I've no idea what the DI looked like. I would never recognise him if our paths were to cross outside this military bubble; his eyes were covered by the peak of his cap which somehow have been modified to lie flat across his forehead to the point where the base of the peak was touching the top of his nose. I've got no idea how he could possibly see where was going nor to whom he was directing his invective laden insults. He probably didn't care.

Thankfully we were only expected to play this game for six weeks or so before being dispatched to our specialist trade training centres. One can imagine our relief when, after spending what seemed like a lifetime of torture and creating mirrors out of otherwise matt linoleum floors or having ones bedding thrown out of the windows, we were packed off to the No1 School of Technical Training, better known in those days as simply 'Halton'. A much more civilised place where we were shouted at only on special occasions and certainly not at weekends.

Halton was a great place. Not only were there girls there but also the student population was a mixture of green, wet behind the ears recruits - or 'smallies' as we were called - mixed up with a hefty contingent of old lags. At least they seemed like old lags to us new boys. These seasoned airmen had joined the RAF a few years earlier, they had completed their basic engineering courses, spent some time up at the sharp end and had now returned to Halton for more advanced training, otherwise known as their 'fitters' course. To us freshmen, these chaps were the 'business', they were so grown up and street-wise. We needed to learn from them. Or they needed to learn from us if Sergeant Lumsden, our drill instructor, had his way.

Lumsden, despite it being the middle of August, must have thought that all of his Christmases had come at once. It was a beautifully sunny day and two squads of students were happily marching in opposite directions on one of the camp roads and were about to pass each other, right in front of where Lumsden was standing. He was poised, sharpening his gaze and staring straight ahead like a lion about to pounce on an unsuspecting prey. These were not any old squads but one comprised of brand new, shiny recruits, freshly picked from the Swinderby orchards and the other, a slovenly ragtag gaggle of old lags back at Halton for their fitters course.

"Halt those men!" barked Lumsden pointing at both squads and, with a few stamps of the feet and shrieked orders, the two groups came to a stop, no more than ten feet apart.

Lumsden wasted no time in grabbing the senior man from the old lags course, a chap called SAC Davies. "You lot are a disgrace" he boomed. "Your shoes are filthy, your uniforms haven't seen an iron, well certainly not one which might have had electricity running through it, and your faces look like you weren't standing anywhere near the blade when you shaved!" Lumsden was having a field day. Pointing across at us he continued "Now just look at those airmen over there, why can't you look like them?" It was at this point that Lumsden's experience failed him - in big way. "Go on Davies, go over there" he said, gesturing in our direction "Go and ask them how they manage to look so smart whilst you lot look like an old bag of mouldy spuds!"

And with that SAC Davies came bounding across the street towards me like a dog returning a recently thrown stick. Pointing towards Sgt Lumsden Davies started with a quizzical tone, "excuse me I've just been chatting with the Sergeant over there and he's put it to me that you might have some handy tips about shoe care that you may be prepared to share with me and my colleagues and, whilst we're here chatting, perhaps you might offer me some advice about ironing; what type of appliance you use. Is it a Morphy Richards or perhaps a Phillips? My mate Mike over there swears by the Phillips models but I simply can't get along with them, the leads are always too short don't you think?" Sergeant Lumsden was apoplectic! Steam and assorted fluids were spurting out like the old Flying Scotsman just pulling away with a hundred coaches in tow.

That exchange outside Halton's newsagents set the tone for the next couple of years or so; it was to be a game of cat and mouse between the drill instructors and the students. It was our principle purpose to be dreaming up new ways to try the patience of the drill instructors. There was always something new to stress the arteries

of the DIs, the wearing of bright green day-glo socks during the morning march from accommodation to the schools was guaranteed to induce a 'hissy fit'. One could almost forget that the RAF's purpose in sending us to Halton was to learn our trades and to become something almost useful.

Leaving Halton was a sad day for us all; we had been such a happy band of brothers. Some of our number had fallen by the wayside en route either because they'd changed their minds about technical trades or the RAF had changed their minds for them. On completion of our course we were issued with our new Junior Tech badges and dispatched off into the big wide world. For me, that meant Victor Aircraft Servicing Flight (ASF) at RAF Marham, affectionately known by the old sweats as 'El-Adem with grass'.

I'd never seen a Victor before nor anything quite that big. At Halton we'd played about with Jet Provosts and Hunters plus the occasional Whirlwind helicopter but never anything with quite so many engines as a V-bomber. They're huge and nothing had prepared me for it.

After reporting to Station HQ I was sent across to the sheds to meet my new Chief Tech. It was late into the afternoon on a cold November day and already dark outside. Inside the gloomy hangar were these two enormous Victors, parked tail to tail with their massive dihedral tail planes almost reaching the roof. One of them was running its systems from its ground power unit making the hangar incredibly loud and it was to that aircraft that the Chief was leading me. He shouted up at the cockpit door "Steve, get down here, I've got your new lad!" Steve was to be my new corporal and he immediately called me up into the cockpit. I can't forget the first impressions in that cockpit, the unmistakable smell of old aircraft cockpits - probably a mixture of old rubber, oil, fuel, leather, electrical equipment - and what appeared to be a galaxy of indicator lights. With the cockpit so dark, I felt as though I was surrounded by indicator bulbs in every colour imaginable. I thought 'hells bells, how on earth will I ever learn to work on this lot'.

Of the two surviving V Bombers, the Victor was, for some, but certainly not for me, the ugly duckling. I don't think that it ever caught the public affection in the way that Vulcan has perhaps because, to a large part, it didn't seem to feature much at air shows and it had long dropped its bombing role as they were converted into tankers. I think that, to this day, many people will scratch their heads as they try to recall what the Victor actually looked like. But we loved it. Looking at it face on, with its futuristic cockpit, big hungry, earth swallowing intakes and a dihedral tail that looked straight out of a Dan Dare comic, it was a mean, menacing looking machine. I'm sure that the 'star trek' writers could have used it as the basis of a design for a Klingon battle cruiser.

I'd only been at Marham for about five months when a few of us 'ASF' types were called in to see the Chief to be told that we were being sent away to support a 'task force'. We didn't know where, just that we were told to pack a few things and prepare ourselves to be taken to Brize Norton. We knew that there was trouble in the Falkland Islands so it didn't take any serious brain power to work out we that we must be part of an operation to put things right.

That night we must have studied our atlases for hours but try as we might we couldn't figure out where exactly they'd hidden the Falklands. They had to be somewhere near Scotland. Maybe we weren't looking properly or the islands weren't large enough to be included on our maps of north west Europe.

We left Marham first thing the following morning and after a few hours bouncing around in one of those old RAF buses, the ones which seemed to be nothing more than a wrought iron box plonked onto four wheels with seats to match, we poured ourselves out into the 'Gateway' building at Brize to await our flight to heaven knows where.

Back at Marham, the ASF chief was incandescent with rage. "Twenty-five years I've been in this air force, man and boy. Not once have I seen any action and as soon as there's a sniff of a job on I'm not wanted!". It was quite simple really, the two Victor squadrons had their own chiefs, what they were short of was Junior Techs to do as they were told.

It wasn't long before we were, with vodka and orange drinks in our water bottles, trotting up the steps onto a VC-10, affectionately known as the 'first class goes'omey bird' (the 'Herc' was second class). For this leg, we were accompanied by a couple of racks of sidewinder missiles which had been stowed up at the front end and, having them on board meant that the pilot wouldn't allow any smoking, although that instruction was reversed within half an hour of getting airborne as just about everyone couldn't go more than a few minutes without a fag. As we taxied towards the runway, a young stewardess walked down the aisle carrying a fist full of safety pins and their 'remove before flight' tags. Steve, my corporal grabbed the girl's arm and asked her where she'd found all of the safety pins. "I took them off those pipes up at the front" she replied "it says here that they need to be removed before flight". In a flash, Steve had grabbed the pins and, rising from his seat, he blurted out "not this flight love! Come on fellas, let's get these safety pins put back into those sidewinders!"

We eventually headed off from Brize, not north but south, arriving several hours later at what we eventually learned was Dakar Airport in Senegal. We certainly weren't allowed in the terminal building. Our aircraft was parked in a remote part of the airport and we were allowed to briefly go and stretch our legs in the hot and sandy earth at the edge of the airfield before being reboarded for the next leg to Ascension Island.

The first job upon landing at Wideawake Airfield on Ascension was to unload the VC-10. Clearly the RAF had forgotten to send down its usual contingent of baggage handlers! We were all bleary eyed and in need of our beds but first things first, we needed to get our kit off the aircraft and stow it, together with ourselves, onto a clanky old lorry which would, slowly drag itself off up the hill towards the middle of the island. Heaven knows how it made it; every bend required the driver to change down through the gears to get it into 'first' and at each drop of the clutch, we prayed aloud that he'd find a gear before we rolled off backwards down the hill.

Ascension Island has an area of about 34 square miles, something close to a fifth of the size of the Isle of Wight. An airfield consisting of little more than a runway and a tiddley pan was located to the South West and, in the centre of the island sat the



Two Boats settlement at the foot of Green Mountain, an extinct or dormant volcano. The Two Boats site at which where we were accommodated, initially in tents but later in a hut, was to be our home for the next two or three months - provided of course that the transport lorry remained serviceable.

In the timeline of earth's geological history, Ascension is a fairly new volcanic outcrop and as such, the surface underfoot is largely clinker. The place was used a testing ground for the Apollo Lunar Rover Vehicles and it was very easy to see why with its rough and largely barren terrain, not the sort of ground on which to take a tumble as you could easily be torn to shreds! On the upside, there didn't seem to be much risk of being eaten alive by anything particularly nasty as one might expect on a desert island but there was quite a population of pretty large and, at times, inquisitive, land crabs. These crustaceans could easily find their way into anything - and they did. It was not uncommon for the RAF lads to stuff them into the sleeping bags of their unsuspecting colleagues with the expected hilarious consequences.

The following morning saw the return of the clanky truck to take us back down the hill to the airfield. I'm not sure whether the downhill journey was any less perilous than the uphill. Our worries about the gears and the clutch had been replaced with equal concerns about the state of the brakes.

Safely and miraculously delivered to Wideawake we were met by an unbelievable, and as I write in 2017, probably unrepeatable sight. It was as if the RAF were putting on an airshow involving more aircraft than you would see at Heathrow at the start of the holidays.



Everything seemed to be there - just about all the Victors we had, at least two Vulcans plus detachments of Harriers, Phantoms, Nimrods and Hercules; the pan was absolutely stuffed full.

A small village of tents had been set up on the edge of the pan which would serve as a makeshift HQ including engineering, stores, briefing and planning areas and of course, catering.

Those of us from Victor ASF at Marham were divided into two smaller groups and assigned to one of each of the 24 on / 24 off aircraft engineering shifts. It was to be very hard work.

Back at Marham and in more normal times, we would generally see just a small handful of Victor sorties on any one day but here we were told that each of the Blackbuck - and other missions - were to involve about fourteen sorties with most of the aircraft taking off in the first of several waves throughout the night and into the following day.

Getting these aircraft prepared was a formidable task because, quite simply, the aircraft didn't want to 'play nice'; there was always something going wrong and, as often as not, that 'something' would relate to the refueling 'Hose Drum Unit' (HDU) otherwise known as the 'hoodoo'. The HDU was a bugger to fix, we'd have to manually drag the refueling hose out under the rear of the aircraft checking for the expected indications on the Nav-Rad's control panel upstairs in the cockpit; all the time whilst screaming through the headset at your mate outside asking him to report on what he could see - if he was awake! The brake motor controlling the Victor's refueling hose was adjusted using tiny potentiometers mounted in the HDU control unit and adjusted with watchmakers' screwdrivers; just the tiniest of movement could mean the difference between the hose deploying or refusing to budge at all. As the aircraft accelerated down the runway we could be seen with our fingers crossed, hoping upon hope that the HDU would 'behave' itself.

It's hard to put into words the most incredible, audible and visual scene which unfolded at the launch of each of the Blackbuck missions - the queueing procession of V-Bombers, nose to tail, moving ominously along that pitch-dark, dusty, congested pan, the anti-collision lights blinking in the darkness casting their red flashes across the airfield, the night wands of the marshallers who could just about be picked out in silhouette against the dazzling taxi lamps and the ear-piercing, hell-raising, banshee howl from the engines as the armada raced down the runway and into the night sky. The runway was just a few yards from the pan and there was to be no escape from the earth-shaking noise as the Royal Air Force set off on these remarkably audacious and daring missions.

During Operation Corporate, the codename assigned to the British military operations in the Falklands War, the Victors were to fly over 3,000 hours in approximately 600 air to air refuelling sorties; an incredible achievement.

It wasn't all hard work and no play. There would be down time to enjoy ourselves when off shift. Time and space doesn't permit me here to expand fully upon the various antics we got up to when not crawling up jet pipes or testing dodgy contactors hidden above the bomb-bay fuel tanks; nor can I give a proper

coverage of the struggle to change flight instruments whilst hanging upside down in cockpits which had been transformed into Swedish saunas. I can, however briefly share just the one anecdote about Corporal Gordon and his love life.

Whilst most of us would write home to our loved ones - or indeed to girls who we might hope would become our loved ones, it turned out that Gordon, despite his claims to the contrary, didn't have a girlfriend nor, we suspected, had he ever met a girl.

Now at that time the tabloid newspapers back in the UK had embarked on a campaign to entertain 'our boys in the South Atlantic' and this would involve the newspapers encouraging girls to write to us using the free air mail papers or 'blueies' as they are known.

Most of the blueies would be relayed via Hercules to the troops and sailors further south but a small batch would be held at Ascension for us to read and reply to with tales of derring-do (or not!).

Until then, Gordon hadn't been receiving any mail at all. Much to Gordon's annoyance, we'd gone through the entire alphabet in cutting out cardboard letters and posting them in his pigeon hole in the mail tent and we needed fresh ideas to keep the line going. We started writing to the girls on Gordon's behalf and with unbounded imagination when it came to the content, including marriage proposals and invitations to activities that would make even the most ardent 'Romeo' blush. Within just a couple of weeks Gordon was receiving more fan mail than the entire line up of Duran Duran - although for reasons I can't explain, he didn't seem too pleased with all the attention.

By mid July, for us ASF lads, our time on Ascension drew to a close and we were to be loaded onto a Hercules for the very long slog, via Dakar to Lyneham. Our flight departed Ascension first thing in the morning after what was supposed to be just a few farewell drinks up at Two Boats on the night before; drinks which had, it turned out, included a large bottle of rum we'd won in the raffle. Only heaven knows how we managed to get ourselves on board the aircraft, that memory has sadly gone forever along with the mother of all hang-overs, but we certainly cannot forget the incredibly warm and grateful welcome we received in the wee small hours as we touched down at RAF Lyneham.

"Right you lot, grab your kit and....."

## **Picture Credits**

The cover picture is by Shaun Thomas.

The picture of XL319 on page 6 is ©2010www.SACarr.co.uk, and the picture of Wideawake Airfield on page 17 is from the flying-tigers.co.uk website.

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## **Financial Report**

Eric Ranshaw

This is the report for the last financial year, as approved by the elected auditor, which was presented and adopted at the AGM held on 6<sup>th</sup> May 2017.

### **FINANCIAL REPORT OF 655 MAINTENANCE AND PRESERVATION SOCIETY** **for the financial year 1st April 2016 to 31st March 2017**

	<b>Current Year</b>	<b>Prior Year</b>
<b><u>Income</u></b>		
Casual Donations	3,994.80	6,171.41
Organised Visits	5,947.03	5,945.00
Member Donations	1,660.29	789.55
PayPal Donations	279.54	495.98
XH558 Collections	0.00	2,272.10
Membership Subscriptions	8,642.32	8,890.11
Sale of Merchandise	10,997.80	14,792.51
Run Day Income (Last)	15,417.71	25,590.06
Run Day Income (Next)	0.00	2,183.00
Interest	41.50	36.78
Xmas Lunch	705.50	698.55
Photoshoot	0.00	4,583.44
Members Day	712.05	0.00
Sale of IBCs	0.00	50.00
Memorabilia Sales	971.00	
	<b>Total 49,369.54</b>	<b>72,498.49</b>
<b><u>Expenditure</u></b>		
Merchandise Purchase + Postage	7,325.49	7,499.79
Aircraft Spares & Repairs	5,015.60	1,979.94
Aircraft Fuel	5,888.40	102.90
Run Day Expenses (Last)	5,596.55	4,533.01
Run Day Expenses (Next)	26.40	226.39
Ground Equipment	2,644.56	825.19
Ground Equipment Fuel	397.18	580.23
Membership Expenses	1,470.38	1,564.28
Domestic Consumables etc	162.93	351.34
Office costs	526.39	422.33
Insurance	533.75	527.25
Utilities	1,672.49	581.91
Building Improvements	2,024.27	790.05
Event Equipment	0.00	1,088.29
Tools, Consumables etc	3,565.87	1,948.55
Volunteer Equipment & Training	1,241.52	
Public Relations	241.55	507.11
Xmas Lunch	732.40	704.24
Photoshoot	0.00	280.52
Members Day 2016	1,341.00	4.69
XH558 Donations	0.00	1,050.00
Memorabilia Sales Costs	123.40	
	<b>Total 40,530.13</b>	<b>25,568.01</b>
<b><u>Surplus/(Deficit)</u></b>	<b>8,839.41</b>	<b>46,930.48</b>