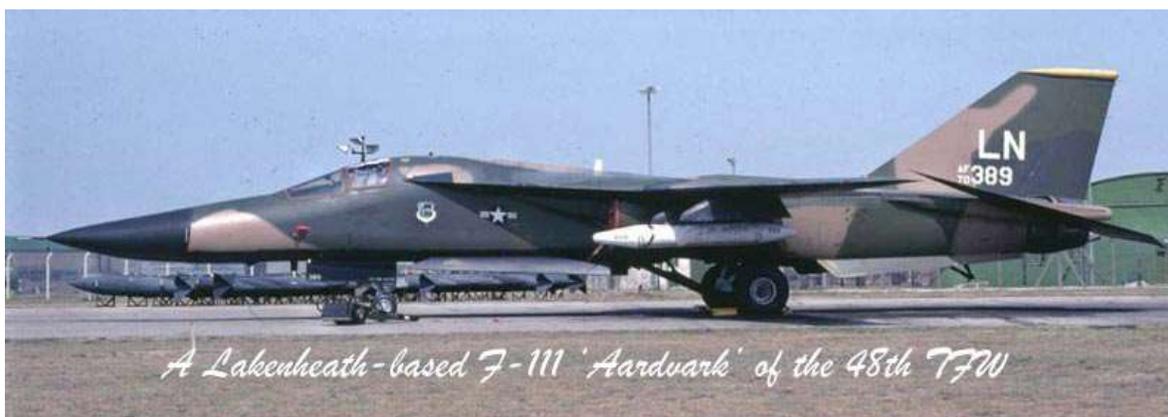


Continuing our brief history of RAF Honington, Part 4a.

The Buccaneer Years

(I had originally planned that 'Part 4' would include both the Buccaneer and the subsequent Tornado years but lack of time to research and space in the 'Rag' to tell the tale has meant that I have had to separate the two periods. Apologies for this but the Tornado years will appear in the next issue of the Rag.)

As was mentioned at the end of the last instalment; following the departure of the 'Vee' bombers, RAF Honington was placed in 'reserve' for conversion to accept the American-built General Dynamics F-111 super-sonic swing-wing bomber. Like many Government decisions, the purchase of these aircraft was cancelled, (like the planned TSR-2 before it and which the F-111 was planned to 'replace'), although F-111's were a frequent sight in local skies as the USAF 48th Tactical Fighter Wing operated these aircraft from Lakenheath from 1977 to 1992.



With the 'loss' of the F-111, the base was scheduled to receive the 'unwanted' Hawker Siddeley (Blackburn) Buccaneer. I say 'unwanted' because, although previously 'offered' to the RAF as a replacement for their Canberras in the low-level role, the Buccaneer was originally designed as a low-level ship-borne attack aircraft and indeed many of the later RAF Buccaneers were redundant Royal Navy aircraft that became surplus following the reduction in the Navy aircraft carrier fleet. *(For a more detailed history of the Buccaneer, and especially the example that sits as a 'gate guardian' at Honington today, refer to my article [Buccaneer XK526](#).)*

So it was that in November 1969 the first Buccaneers arrived at Honington and deliveries continued during the early 1970's. A number of Squadrons flew Buccaneers from Honington over the following years as we shall see. After a period of inactivity, 12 Squadron was reformed and operated in the anti-shipping role as part of the SACLANT, (Strategic Air Command Atlantic), division under NATO command for the defence of the sea lanes around the European coast whilst armed with nuclear and conventional high-explosive weapons. From 1974 they were also equipped with the 'Martel' non-nuclear anti-shipping missile. The squadron moved to RAF Lossiemouth on the Moray Firth in 1980 where they continued in the same role.

XV Squadron, who had previously been Honington residents when they flew the Canberra, returned and reformed with Buccaneers in 1970 but left shortly after to take up their role as part of SACEUR, (Strategic Air Command Europe), under NATO control to defend against potential Warsaw Pact invasion of Europe from their new Base at RAF Laarbruch in Germany.



On 1st March 1971, No. 237 Operational Conversion Unit was re-formed at Honington to provide the necessary training for crews who were 'new' to the Buccaneers. Such units taught the flight characteristics and operational use of the aircraft and the weapons it carried. In October 1984, it too transferred to Lossiemouth before being disbanded in 1991 when its role was taken over by the Buccaneer Training Flight attached to 208 Squadron.

During 1972, 809 Naval Air Squadron who alternated between HMS Ark Royal when it was at sea and Lossiemouth, (which was at that time a Royal Navy Air Station), 'lost' their home base when it was transferred to the RAF and consequently moved to Honington when ashore. This brought a change of aircraft colours to the local skies until 1978 when the Squadron was disbanded and the aircraft subsequently handed over to the RAF and used to form the RAF's 216 Squadron in 1979 at Honington. However, 216 Squadron were very brief residents and after only one year, the squadron's aircraft, weapons, personnel, equipment, assignment to SACLANT and its maritime strike role were taken over by 12 Squadron and relocated to Lossiemouth.



208 Squadron re-formed at Honington in 1974 assigned to SACEUR in the low-level strike role and equipped with the WE-177 nuclear weapon. The squadron remained at Honington until 1983 when it joined 12 Squadron at Lossiemouth in the anti-shipping role. It continued in this role until late 1993 when it relinquished its nuclear weapons and was one of the last squadrons to operate the Buccaneer before it went out of service in 1994.



As with most military bases, there was much 'to-ing and fro-ing' of squadrons, personnel and aircraft between airfields but in 1984 the last Buccaneer left Honington - except the one that still guards the main gate!

Whilst carrying out the research for this instalment, I came across an unexpected 'find' when I discovered that, between April 1971 and April 1972, Avro Shackleton long range maritime patrol and 'search and rescue' aircraft of 204 Squadron were briefly resident at Honington.



The Shackleton was based on the Avro Lincoln bomber, itself a descendant of the wartime Lancaster, and had four Rolls Royce Griffon 'piston' engines driving contra-rotating 'double' propellers which gave the aircraft a distinctive sound when in flight. Whilst long-lived in RAF service, in use until 1991 in a variety of roles, it was never-the-less an antiquated design which perhaps gave rise to it often being described as "50,000 rivets flying in loose formation"!

*One for the ladies!
Buccaneers were painted pink for use in the Gulf War
as camouflage in the desert environment.*



In the next instalment, (Part 4b !), we will look at the Tornado years.