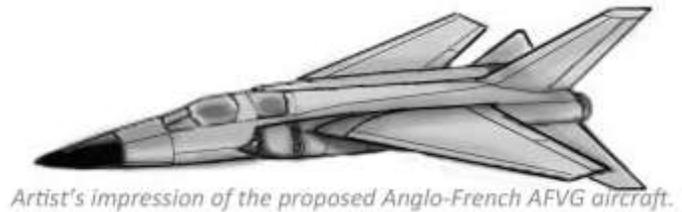


Continuing our brief history of RAF Honington, Part 4b.

The Tornado Years

(As mentioned last time, 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 meant that I had to separate the two periods. This time we will take our delayed look at the Honington Tornados.)

We concluded the previous episode of our tale when the last Buccaneer left Honington in 1984 but to 'set the scene' for the next phase we need to wind the clock back to the 1960's. At that time, the United Kingdom had cancelled the procurement of the TSR2 and the US-built F-111, as previously discussed, but still needed replacements for the ageing Vulcan and Buccaneer strike aircraft. At the same time, aeronautical engineers were looking at variable-geometry, (or 'swing-wing'), designs - as used on the F-111. These gave the manoeuvrability and cruise-efficiency of 'straight' wings with the speed-capability of swept wings. Britain and France had initiated the AFVG, (Anglo French Variable Geometry), project in 1965 but the French pulled out two years later. Britain continued to develop the project and sought new partners to achieve it.



Whilst several other nations initially showed interest, ultimately it was only Britain, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands who, in 1969, eventually agreed to form a multi-national company, Panavia Aircraft GmbH to develop and manufacture the MRCA - or Multi-Role Combat Aircraft as it then became known. (The following year the Dutch withdrew from the project citing that the aircraft would be too complicated and technical for their needs.) The new company was owned 15% by the Italians and 42.5% each by Germany and Britain. Similarly, the production of the various parts of the aircraft were also shared out - Britain built the nose and tail; Germany, the centre fuselage; and Italy, the wings. The engines were of Rolls Royce design and manufactured by a separate tri-national company.



As indicated by the MRCA acronym, the Tornado was to be a 'Jack-of-all-Trades' with various versions and adaptations to suit the differing requirements of the partner nations. In broad terms, the Tornado IDS, (Interdictor/Strike), versions were operated variously by all three partners in the ground attack, reconnaissance and the anti-shipping roles - RAF designations; GR1, GR1A and GR1B respectively, although following mid-life upgrades some were re-designated GR4 and GR4A as appropriate. The Tornado ECR, (Electric Combat / Reconnaissance), version was built for, and used by, the Germans and Italians. The Tornado ADV, (Air Defence Variant), was an Interceptor variant developed for the RAF and designated F2 and later F3 and some of the latter were modified to carry out the ECR function for the RAF. The IDS versions were easily recognised as they had a longer 'nose' to house the radar. In the mid-1980's a contract was signed with Saudi Arabia which saw a sizeable number of Tornados being sold to, and operated by, the Royal Saudi Air Force, RSAF.

The first Tornado prototype took to the air on 14th August 1974 in Germany and the first production aircraft was delivered to the RAF on 5th June 1979. The first aircraft for all three partner nations assembled at RAF Cottesmore in Rutland where the Tri-national Tornado Training Establishment, (TTTE), was formed in 1980, becoming active the following year. The unit provided training for Tornado pilots of the respective Air Forces until its disbandment in 1999. Their training initially consisted of four weeks 'ground' training followed by nine weeks flight training. The unit 'patch', shown here, incorporates the 'red, white and green' of the Italian flag; the 'black, red and yellow' of the German flag and the 'red, white and blue' of the UK Flag



Whilst Buccaneers were still resident at Honington until 1984, as recounted in the last instalment, a new shape was to be seen in the skies around the airfield in 1980 as Honington became home to the Tornado Weapons Conversion Unit, (TWCU). RAF pilots who had been taught to *fly* the Tornado, were

now taught to *fight* with it - firing weapons and dropping ordnance in the Military ranges in the North Sea. In addition to the new shape in the skies, there were also some new shapes on the ground as the first of the arc-roofed Hardened Aircraft Shelters, (HAS), were constructed on the base and which are a familiar sight to us at Rymer Court today. These shelters were designed to



withstand a direct hit from a 500lb bomb; a near miss by a 1000lb bomb; and to provide a modicum of protection in the event of a nuclear, chemical or biological attack. It would appear that these shelters were only used for the Tornados - perhaps the old Buccaneers were deemed 'expendable'!

As more pilots were trained to operate the Tornado and more aircraft became available, it was nearing time for the Tornado to take up an active role within the RAF. So it was that in August 1982, IX(B) Squadron, who had once flown Vickers Wellingtons from Honington, reformed here to become the world's first *operational* Tornado Squadron with their nuclear weapon-equipped GR1 aircraft. The Squadron stayed here until 1986 when they moved to RAF Bruggen in Germany as part of the NATO force. (IX Squadron are now based just 'up the road' at RAF Marham and are still flying Tornados.)



Meanwhile, in 1983, the Honington TWCU became 45 (Reserve) Squadron made up of the instructors and the unit's Tornados and would become 'active' in the event of hostilities. As the Tornado strength grew, XIII Squadron who had been flying Photo-Reconnaissance Canberras from RAF Wyton before disbandment in 1982, were reformed at Honington with GR1A Reconnaissance Tornados on January 1st 1990. These aircraft were equipped with the new and somewhat embryonic reconnaissance equipment designed to exploit the night and all-weather capability of the Tornado by using a unique system of infra-red sensors and video recorders.

As 'Operation Desert Shield' developed into 'Operation Desert Storm' in mid-January 1991 in what we now know as Gulf War 1, six of these aircraft were deployed to Saudi Arabia where, during the first nights of the War, the Tornados discovered several of the elusive mobile 'Scud' missile sites. Their success gave rise to their now-famous 'Scudhunters' nickname. By the end of the War these 'recce' Tornados had flown 128 missions - all at night and at low level.



Back at Honington, other XIII Squadron crews were 'working-up' with the new Tornado/TIALD combination. TIALD was the acronym for the Thermal Imaging and Laser Designation system used to 'see' and then 'mark' targets for other Tornados to attack with laser-guided bombs. A total of 72 successful TIALD missions were flown before the end of hostilities. Whilst a detachment of XIII Squadron aircraft were involved in enforcing the 'no-fly' zone in southern Iraq when peace returned, the Squadron continued its peacetime training back at Honington.

Around the same time, the RAF in Germany was being 'wound down' and the three Tornado Squadrons which had been based at Laarbruch were disbanded at the end of 1991. One of these was XV Squadron and for reasons best known to themselves, on 1st April 1992(!), Honington's TWCU / 45 (Reserve) Squadron became 15 (Reserve) Squadron before they packed up and moved to RAF Lossiemouth in Scotland in 1993. The following February XIII also moved 'up the road' to Marham and so all flying from Honington ceased - well, nearly all!

A newly vacated airfield with a long runway in good condition can be a boon when runways at other bases need repairs or resurfacing. And so it was that at various times other Squadrons have made Honington their temporary home. The Marham Tornados 'holidayed' here for a few weeks and even the American Air Force made a brief return visit when the Lakenheath F15s moved in for a while. At other times, Harrier 'jump jets' have used Honington for 'dispersal' exercises. There are also rumours that it will be used again!!!

As an 'aside' here and as mentioned earlier in this instalment, the Royal Saudi Air Force also played a part in Honington's history. The Saudis had long been customers of the UK arms industry but the order for around 120 Tornados was only one part of a massive order and to be paid for by the delivery of 600,000 barrels of crude oil *per day* - although many of the details seem to be buried in the Westminster vaults. Having agreed the deal, the Saudis wanted aircraft quickly so a number of aircraft destined for Britain and Germany were redirected to the Gulf. Furthermore, the aircraft were of no use without aircrews so a number of their airmen 'jumped the queue' at the TTTE between October 1985 and early 1987 before performing a similar 'trick' at the Honington TWCU. As the Saudi Tornado force grew, they grew into a formidable force who played a major role in the Gulf War.



In our final part of the Honington story, we will look at its use up to the present day.