

# RAF Honington

## Part 5

### Bringing the Story up to Date

With the cessation of flying activities and the departure or disbandment of the resident squadrons, RAF Honington was to take on a new role. In June 1994 the base was handed over to the RAF Regiment and all RAF Regiment basic, advanced, field and air defence training was relocated from earlier homes at RAF Catterick in Yorkshire and RAF West Raynham just up the road in Norfolk.



Originally formed by Royal Warrant in 1942, the Regiment drew 66,000 personnel from the former airfield Defence Squadrons and was tasked with the seizure, security and defence of airfields to enable air operations to take place. Aircraft spend most of their time on the ground and this is where they are most vulnerable - both from air raids and attack by enemy ground forces. Similar to the formation of the flying units, the Regiment was made up of a number of 'Flights', 'Squadrons' and 'Wings'. A typical Squadron was made up of a Headquarters Flight, three Rifle Flights, (Infantry - for want of a better term), and an Air Defence Flight, (usually equipped with Hispano 20mm cannon or Bofors 40mm anti aircraft guns). There was also usually an Armoured Car Flight to provide increased mobility and wider area coverage. Several Parachute Squadrons were also formed to assist in the seizure of airfields and 11 Squadron currently based at Honington is the only Squadron to retain this function. Obviously at the



time of the Regiment's formation, detailed planning was underway for the invasion of Europe which was to come two years later. Such plans would necessitate the capture and protection of forward airfields for the advancing forces. A '*raison d'etre*' for the Regiment to this day.

In 2004 Honington also became the Headquarters for RAF Force Protection which controls Force Protection Wings stationed at various bases around the country - and overseas when required. Formed around an RAF Regiment Squadron, each wing has a number of different units under its control. These would usually include RAF Police, RAF Intelligence and other such support staff. (As you may be aware, No. 3 Police Wing, RAF Police moved into Honington in 2015 - 3PW make up 25% of the total RAF Police strength.)



RAF Honington is the main centre of Force Protection with around 2000 permanent staff - either military or civilian - but this number is continually boosted by large numbers of personnel undergoing training at any one time. Basically the base can be split into three functions; operational, training and support. The station is home to nos. 1, 11, and 15 Squadrons of the RAF Regiment, (11 Sq. being the 'parachute-capable' Squadron mentioned earlier). The last major operational unit at the base is the Joint Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Regiment - a joint unit comprising a detachment of the 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Tank Regiment along with 27Sq. RAF Regt., which provides specialist NBC, (Nuclear, Biological and Chemical), for all three Services, (Army, Navy and Air Force).

The Training Wing undertakes all initial training for RAF Regiment personnel, a large part of which is basic gunnery training. This is augmented with training in such varied skills as First Aid and basic NBC procedures. More specialised training for NCO's and Signals staff is also provided. The Support Wing provides operations, engineering and administrative support. Honington is also home to a Regional Rehabilitation Unit and provides musculoskeletal rehabilitation services to service personnel within the Eastern Region.

Some of you may remember the fuselage of an aircraft being transported by lorry down Rymer Lane and a number of signs springing up giving directions to "Exercise Diamond Dragon" in June,



2015. There were also many military vehicles, both British and American, along with numerous ambulances and fire engines all converging on the base - many via our lane. This was a joint exercise incorporating elements from many departments - both military and civil.

The "highly improbable" (?) scenario was that a USAF C17 cargo plane transiting UK airspace developed a serious fuel leak and attempted to divert to the base at Lakenheath. Unfortunately, adverse weather meant that the pilot was forced to attempt a landing at Honington where the aircraft crashed on approach. To make matters worse, the plane was carrying two nuclear weapons

one of which was disrupted in the ensuing fire causing a 'simulated' release of radioactive contamination. Such an event would require assistance from many disciplines and this was reflected in the exercise. In total twenty-two agencies participated in the exercise and ranged from the Ministry of Defence, the Atomic Weapons Establishment, US Department of Defense, local and county Councils, the NHS, the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, (DEFRA), and the Food Standards Agency - the latter presumably to ensure that the Tea-Wagon was up to the required standard!





So what was the outcome? The official (public) report subsequently released by the MoD, (and easily available on the Internet if you look), raises a few interesting points and I will mention one or two here. You have probably heard it said that Britain and America are two nations *separated* by a 'common' language - this was apparent during the exercise as the terminology varied in some critical areas. The hot weather during the exercise meant that at one point only one of the laptop computers was working - and that did not have some of the required software on it! Following the 'hazard' briefing given by the MoD, the Civil Emergency Services were reluctant to enter the cordoned area around the 'crash' scene. In total, the report lists 29 lessons learnt and the exercise was considered to be a success.



I have used 'Exercise Diamond Dragon' as an insight into what goes on at Honington today. In the times in which we live there are many dangers and threats around us and the military arms will always be at the forefront to protect us in one way or another. For them to carry out their task they must train, train and keep on training and such exercises put their training into practice - if only in simulated scenarios.

When we see helicopters and other military aircraft flying low over the base - and us - or when we hear small arms fire, we should bear in mind what they are doing for us. (Not too sure about the occasional sound of bagpipes, though!)

I hope you have enjoyed this series about the history of RAF Honington and that you have learned a few things along the way - I know that in carrying out the research for these articles, I have learned many new things but space has often precluded me from adding more.