

# Mike Church - First Posting

## A CLANDESTINE RIGGER

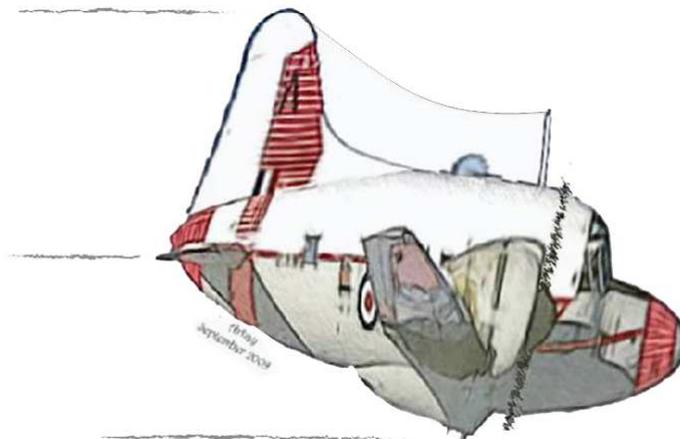
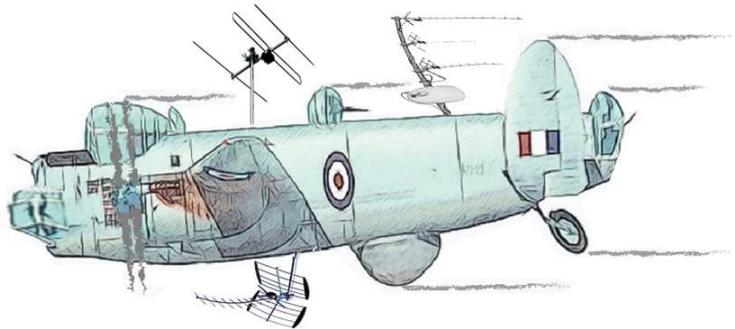
On posting from Halton I reported to the general office at RAF Watton in Norfolk, (The first of my four Norfolk postings!), early in September 1959.

RAF Watton was a permanent RAF station opened in 1937 and first used as a light bomber airfield. During World War II it was used by both the RAF and United States Army Air Force. At first it was the home of various RAF Bomber Command squadrons until used by the United States Army Air Forces Eighth Air Force as a major overhaul depot for B-24 Liberator bombers and as a weather reconnaissance base. The airfield is located approximately 9 mi (14 km) south-southwest of East Dereham. After the war the airfield was returned to the RAF and in the early 1990s handed over to the British Army. In 1995 it was closed and put up for sale.

After the usual procedures, I was directed to my place of work, RIF.

RIF was short for Radio Installation Flight which, as a brand new rigger, seemed very strange. Things got even weirder when I found out that the flight, which occupied one whole hangar, only had two trades employed in it, Airframes and Avionics.

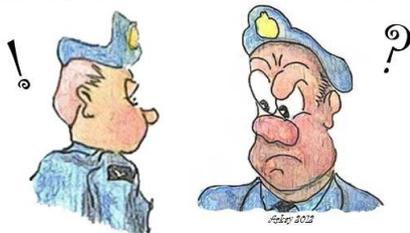
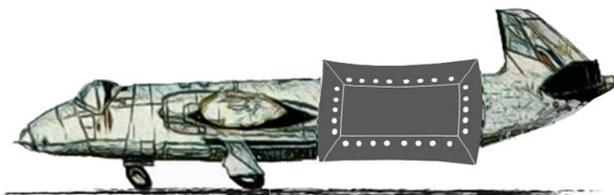
Then I found that the aircraft in the hangar were Canberras, a Varsity and a huge Lincoln bomber - all operating in the role of Eavesdropping & Electronic Countermeasures.





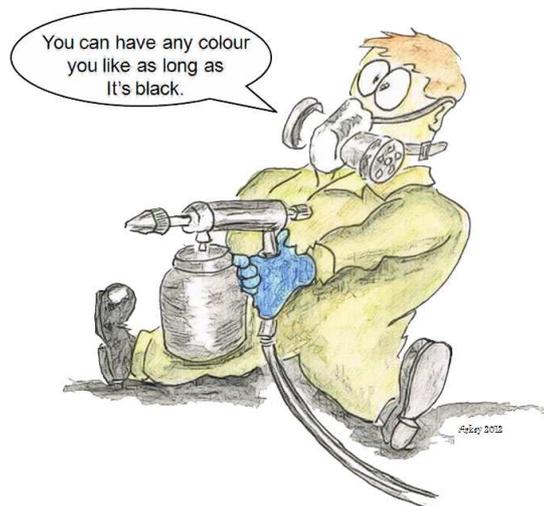
It turned out that the flight was installing electronic equipment for these aircraft. All very secret and not at all what I had expected when I got my posting notice. I had become a Clandestine Rigger.

Over the next 18 months or so, I had to manufacture, one-off items such as equipment racks, cockpit layout changes, fitting cooling scoops for the equipment and all manner of light alloy, sheet metal work.



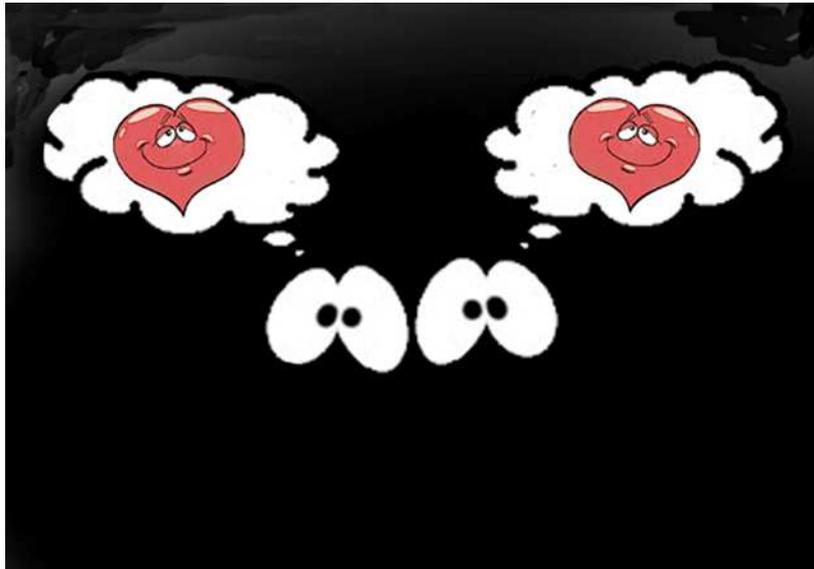
Quality was, as with everything aeronautical, extremely important. Checks were constantly made to ensure that everything was manufactured to specification. Measurements were checked and, at times, queried.

Once these had been manufactured, I had to go to the corner of the hangar where there was a small paint bay and spray the items myself with etch primer and matt black.



This was NOT what the tin basher instructors in basic and advanced airframes at Halton had told us. It was more like, "You must learn to do this but you will never have to do it after pass-out!" The work was very experimental.

I remember one evening that one of our Lincolns, out over the North Sea on exercise, accidentally blacked out Anglia TV for a part of the evening's viewing!



### TV Blackout



A friend of mine, who had an ancient Standard motor car, replaced the rotten and rusty boot lid on the car with a single sheet of L-72 light alloy which had bought in Norwich. As we were using exactly the same material, all the time, in the hangar and, as he lived out and drove past the guardroom twice a day he made sure that the receipt for the sheet of metal was always in the car in case there was one of the occasional snap checks by the snoops. He never got stopped even as he had never got round to painting the boot lid!

As was normal every so often you had to do hangar key orderly and, as the camp was strictly 8am to 5pm for nearly all sections, you had to ensure you had booked a late tea. One summer evening, walking round the airfield side of the hangar on my usual final check, I heard a vehicle coming up the taxiway and, upon looking round, was gob-smacked to see an American aircraft tug pulling a Lockheed U-2 spy plane backwards with a number of guys in US fatigues sitting on the tractor. It wheeled round the corner of the hangar and, by the time I had got to the corner (I was nose).

The plane was lined up on the runway with the pilot aboard. Shortly afterwards, (I wasn't going to tea with a chance like this was I?), the plane started up and soon rolled part way down the runway and rotated into a climb that I wouldn't see again till I worked on Lightnings. The wing tip stabiliser wheels were jettisoned and dropped back on to the runway and soon it was gone.



Seeing this made me realise that the half of the adjacent hangar to ours, called the "High Altitude Flight", was a two aircraft base for the spy planes.



I later found out that these aircraft were sometimes also flown by RAF pilots. Obviously, all departures were made either early or late in the day when there were few spectators.

For my last year or so before my posting to Tengah, I was transferred to the Aircraft Servicing Flight, where I found myself helping to do the first Major inspections on our two DeH Comet 2s as well as, later, maintenance on other aircraft types. All previous Comet major inspections had either been done at Lyneham by DeH Working Parties or at the factory. However, due to the very secret condition of our aircraft they could not be done at the manufacturer's facility. Once we had completed the first aircraft, the whole major team was called to the flight line, loaded on to the Comet and taken on the first three hour air test. That made you think about all the jobs you had done on the aircraft over the previous weeks!



Eventually my time at Watton came to an end and I found myself on a very conventional bomber squadron in the Far East, a far cry from my unconventional first posting.

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