

David McCandless (432) – Post Halton - Potted History

July 1964 – Jan 1966 – RAF Ballykelly – with Terry Croft. Initially, I was on Station Flight then Shackleton ASF with a detachment with 203 Sqn to RAF Changi Jul-Oct 1965 to assist 205 Sqn with their Borneo commitment. So, that involved a month at Labuan (with the mossies and Asian toilets and stone fish in the water) but on the way there by Shackair, I did get the unique opportunity en route to fire 3 short bursts of the Shack's nose guns as we passed over the South China Sea. During the early days of that detachment to Singapore, my PWR came through for Helicopters in Kai Tak but because I was unable to return to take it up, it went to the next person on the list that happened to be Terry Croft who was still at Ballykelly and able to take it up. So soon after I got back to Ballykelly, I got the one Terry was destined to get 37 Sqn in Aden.

See www.37Aden.co.uk for more about my time there.

Jan 66 – July 67 (Close of Aden) – RAF Khormaksar. On arrival on the squadron, I met up with Pete Evans. Initially, my first detachment was in Feb 66 to Salalah and soon after my return from that on 16 Mar 1966, Pete, Myself and multiple other members of the squadron were told to pack for a short detachment to a secret destination. Early morning (cool air), almost half of the squadron including Pete Evans embarked on 3 of our 4 Shacks (coded X,Y & Z) for our secret mission.

Mar-Aug 1966. That was Majunga, Malagasy Republic, via a 3 day stay-over at Silversands, Kenya. We landed in Majunga on 19th March 1966 to start off the Beira Patrol after Ian Smith declared UDI in Rhodesia. That short detachment lasted until August 66 before 38 Sqn from Malta took it on and all of 37 returned to Aden and guard duties. Before that though, I had met and in the July become engaged to Christiane after which the RAF shipped me back to Aden sharpish in case I actually married her. That I did but it was a struggle to get back to Majunga when the sqn was not by then operating there. That's another story.

1 Oct 1966 – Suffice to say, despite my Gen App to get married being refused by my Sqn Commander, I overcame the 'threats' & married Christiane in the cathedral in Majunga with the then detachment commander a Wing Cdr Burgh of 38 Sqn agreeing to stand in for my UK-bound father and the guys from that sqn attending the reception in the Grand Hotel. However, because of the escalating terrorist situation in Aden Christiane had to stay in Majunga (with me remaining in Aden) until I could get her Indulged back to UK. I managed that via a Britannia Indulgence in July 1967 via Cyprus where she was off-loaded for a duty pax for 3 days in the aircrew hotel at her own expense.

Promoted to Cpl on 29 March 1967 at RAF Khormaksar.

Aug 1967-Aug 1968. After I returned ShackAir with 37 Sqn's 4 aircraft (via Tehran, Cyprus, Malta to St Athan) when Aden closed in 1967, I was posted to RAF Halton, Airfield Maintenance Flt looking after, fixing and finishing off/restoring ready for next lot of apprentices like us to trained on. This gave me the super opportunity to play with the cockpit classroom as part of the Hercules sleeve-valve engine inhibiting process before I finally dismantled the whole facility. Also, had a go at ground running the Vulcan we all witnessed landing one sport afternoon in 1964.

During this year (1968) at age 23, I also passed my Maths & Science GCE's to bring it up to 5 to allow me to apply for a Permanent Supply Commission (16 years or age 38) – the only one I could with just 5 GCEs. However, before I could find time to apply, I was head-hunted by a desperate Station Ed O – a FO Laurie McCucheon - to teach GCE Maths and by Apprentice 'Schools' (Kermode Hall) to teach basic Maths (Arithmetic, Fractions, Decimals, Algebra and Indices/Logarithms) over 6 weeks to 60 pre-entry Riggers (2 classes of 30) who had failed the entry exam with 20% or less to join the 213th entry. The idea was they would take the same exam again after 6 weeks and those that then got less than 60% would drop out and the rest attested. As a corporal (rest were Flt Lt with one Chf Tech), I was allocated the 60 lowest-scoring deadbeats with a pass prediction after 6 weeks of less than 10% Actually 60% passed much to the Flt Lt Ed O's embarrassment as none of them matched my success rate.

In 1968, on the basis of that, I was offered a job as an engine's cpl instructor in the workshops and that's what I did for the next 6 years teaching piston engines, advance piston engines and systems. Also, just as I became an instructor, I asked my Flt Sgt about day-release to get the ONC I had failed during our training on Tech Drawing. 'No Way' because there was a long waiting list of existing instructors for Day Release. So I applied for a Permanent Commission as a Supply Officer. In those days you had to get to Biggin Hill via your AOC. At that interview, he asked me why I was not seeking to be an Engineering Officer. Even though, I explained that Engineering was my passion but I could not gain the necessary ONC (minimum) because the waiting list for day release was about 2 years, because of my high assessments as an engineer, he still refused to let me use that as an excuse and told me to come back with an ONC. On my RTU, I was called in to see my Flt Cdr for a debrief at the end of which he handed me a pre-approved Enrolment Form for Day Release at Aylesbury College for a 2-year Mechanical & Electrical ONC course with a warning not to fail. I did better than that came top & won all the prizes in both years. In 1972, at age 27, now with an ONC, I reapplied for a permanent commission but this time for Engineering. By the time I got to see the AOC, I had started the 2-year HNC course and despite having a good ONC the AOC told me to come back with an HNC of the same quality.

In 1974 – at age 29 - with an HNC – having won the prizes again – and now a time-promoted sgt - the AOC told me that having been away from the frontline for 7 years, I was out of touch and needed to get some modern aircraft experience in to be accepted as an EngO of my maturity in years. On RTU I applied for a posting to any modern aircraft squadron and within 2 weeks was posted to 226 Jaguar OCU at RAF Lossiemouth. Over the next 2 years I lapped up this challenge and gained 2 C-in-C's commendations as well as a promotion to Chf Tech on the first competitive promotion board after they did away with time-promotion.

1976 – at age 31 – along with promotion to Chf Tech - came a posting to the Phantom OCU at RAF Coningsby as a Shift Chief and latterly as the OCU Eng Coord. However, after 2 years at the OCU, I fancied a return to my lovely Jaguars at RAF Bruggen so applied for an overseas posting there. To my horror and utter dismay, almost by return came a PWR for Harriers at RAF Gutersloh. When queried PMC said there was no mistake putting me on the one aircraft I was not conversant with in an active 'war zone'. I wrote to my ex- CO at Jaguar OCU who had put me up for 2x C-in-C's commendations, asking him to intervene who was then the OC Bruggen – Gp Capt 'Jonny' Walker. He came back to me saying he too was astounded by the posting but that there was nothing he could do as there was an urgent operational overriding need for an ATechP chief on 4 Sqn and I was given a window of 1 May-30 June 28 to be there.

1978 – at age 33 – Being a 'good soldier' and wishing to meet this urgent operational need my country had of my services, I decided to get to 4 Sqn first week of May. I left Christiane behind in AMQs at Coningsby and hurried to RAFG. After a quick arrival to all but the Sqn, I finally arrived there in uniform where the SEngO, Sqn Ldr Richard Fletcher welcomed me as a Chf Tech with gusto Until, that is, he found out I was ATechP , when he said, *'They have not sent me another Engines Chief? What am I to do with you?'* So, I just put on a pair of denims and got stuck in as a cpl's helper – a cpl I had taught at Halton as a Sgt and had marked down too because of this scruffy look that reflected in the finesse of this work. He had not changed and I still had to get him to clean up locking wire and split-pin ends after each job he did. Anyway, I reported my SEngO's remarks to Gp Capt Walker who had been fobbed off with 'urgent operational requirement' when there obviously was none. Next I knew, My SEngO called me into his office with the remarks, *'Well, Chief, you do have friends in high places who speak highly of you. So I am going to give you the most demanding job for a SNCO on the engineering side of the Sqn – you are to be A-Shift's Eng Coordinator in place of my desperately-needed electrical chief – starting now. And by the way PMC have undertaken to return you to Jaguars at the end of this tour'* So for my 3 years on 4 Sqn Harriers I was a Shift Coord and Eng Controller on field deployment for a site of 6 Harriers.

1980 - I was also the Coord for Maple Flag 5 a tri-Sqn (1,3,4) 6-week detachment to Cold lake in May 1980, during which Mt St Helens erupted in British Columbia and the ash cloud prevented all flying for 5 days so we did a 4 day 1000 mile round trip of the Canadian Rockies. Other detachments where I had the engineering 'lead' were 2x Decimomannu and a magnificent trip with a couple of FLM's to meet one Harrier at the 1980 Strasbourg air show where a bottle of Bacardi + a box of King Eddies offered to the MT Section provided us with 24/7 transport into town and a taxi service back at all hours.

I absolutely loved that coord job and the challenges it presented despite the loss of 3 pilots and subsequent Boards of Enquiry that saw me warned on 1 occasion to 'get a solicitor' for something I coordinated, knowing it was wrong, on F2988s. The SEngO rescued me from that as I had highlighted the signing abnormality to him and he had told me to accept it. Despite the risks, the coord job continued to get me good assessments.

1981 – Age 36 – Saw PMC meet its Jaguar promise and it returned me to UK, with a posting to JSF, Coltishall where I became i/c a Minor Team and project lead for Butt Strap fuel leaks that were plaguing the fleet. I did that for 2 years until I was promoted to FS - the only chief promoted - in 1983 and posted to 231 OCU with an extension of service to 55.

1983 – Age 38 – I arrived at 231 Canberra OCU, RAF Wyton in May 1983 to find myself running a team of 90 supporting 12 Canberras on pans situated across the runway from the main camp and next to 25 Bloodhound Sqn. I was also the Sector commander for exercises.

1985 – Age 40 – The CO called me in to let me know that, even as a newly promoted FS my assessments were soaring in the 9s with the odd 8 and consequently I would be a WO – at the top of my tree - in next 2 years or so. Consequently, he was removing me from his list of candidates being assessed every 6 months as having potential for commissioning.

1985 – Age 40 – Not to be written off – on leaving the CO's office, I went straight to P1 and applied for a Branch Engineering Commission for which I was accepted* and started training at RAF Cranwell in July 1985. **What goes around comes around ... who was the Sqn Ldr on my selection Board at Biggin, none other than Laurie McCutcheon the FO Education Officer I had helped out in 1968 who asked me 'easy' questions or ones she knew I could answer.*

1986 – Age 41 –After going through Cranwell's 18 week training TWICE because of a sprained ankle on the last 'camp' first time around and failing to get 3 successful 'leads' and after spending an age on Medical Holding Flight, I graduated from RAF Cranwell as a FO with a posting to 'F' Flt RAF North Luffenham – the GRSC's Aerial Erectors with 'F' Flt previously run by WO's of their trade. However, I got stuck in, wrote them a database to monitor IUKADGE corrosion and found them a hard-working great team to command. I stayed there until 1990.

1986 – Bought my first house in Somersham to provide stability for Christiane, and especially my son & daughter as they were in their formative years leading up to GCEs.

1988 – Sold my first house and moved to a house in St Ives where I still live.

1990 – Posted to EWAU as OC Installation Flt in 4 Hangar where my team was responsible for coordinating the refitting of 51 Sqn Nimrods - off a Kinloss Major - with the secret stuff. This saw us having to undertake a special fit during 1st Gulf War with 150 people in 5 different groups needing access to the aircraft (power on/power off) that came back to us with, of all things, an engine problem and a fuel leak. I originally successfully plotted work stints using MS Project software printed on A0 printers from Swanton Morley with daily start of day 'O' groups. Had a few glitches because the Sqn saw it as their aircraft with the engine problem and fuel leaks needing to be priority. A chat soon put that right. End story that Nimrod made it to Iraq and did a great job for our Tornado strikes.

1991 – Oct – Age 46 - Whilst on holiday in St Lucia for our 25th wedding anniversary, I fell ill with stomach pains & on my return I was diagnosed with bowel cancer - Dukes B - and whipped straight round to RAFH Ely where a very skilled Indian Sqn Ldr completely removed the tumor and 13 inches of my big bowel but in case any cells had floated free he advised 6 months of adjunctive chemotherapy that I undertook daily for 1 week per month at PMRAFH Halton.

Note: I remained cancer free until 2 years ago when after a screening check a colonoscopy found some naughty nodules that had to go. So they then took a bit more of bowel and left me with 'Henry', a Tesco special – a bag for life -but histology reckons they got it all, so well worth the sacrifice of never needing to sit on a public toilet.

1992 – On return to what had become EWAD (a Division of RAFSEE rather than a badged autonomous squadron) , I became PMAvEng in Bldg 186 and responsible for tasking my old Inst Flt with special fits mainly for N Ireland notably with Hele-Tele and the GPS for the SAS C130.

1994 – Because of my database/IT skills I was head-hunted by my old boss at EWAD Wg Cdr Dave Eighteen, who had moved on to be the lead of the Command Market Testing Team where his first job was to try and find a private company to undertake, under contract, the functions of the Ground Radio Servicing Centre so North Luffenham could be closed. For that, whilst based mainly at RAF Brampton, my daily job was back at RAF North Luffenham creating the Statement of Requirements (SOR) and designing a database to deal with it all.

1997 – RAF North Luffenahm closed by RAF but Army moved in. GRSC moved to Sealand, Language School to Chicksands and Aerial Erectors to RAF Leeming.

1999 – Nov – Brampton Bldg 350 – Part of the MGDA – I led a 3-man team of developers to create a number of utility databases that could interface with existing databases in Support Command/DLO to check them for Millenium Bug issues. All issues were fixed.

2000 – Mar 29th - Retired at age 55 – Dined out at RAF Wyton but retained Mess membership and still go there for Battle of Britain and Pathfinders Dining In events.

2000 – Retired straight into business – McSoft(UK) Ltd – set up whilst in last year of service as permitted by QR 973.

2009 – Joined local Speedwatch in attempt to address some of the local speeding in residential 30 limits.

2014 – Got kicked out of Speedwatch by the Assistant Chief Constable after being set up by a civilian (ex-Met police officer) for being too demanding of the Police to do more to support those of us doing their job for them.

2015 – Set up Community Roadwatch(UK) CIC www.roadwatch.org.uk (CRW) to help others make their community roads safer for all and do what Speedwatch cannot or will not do.

2022 - Become the Admin of the Cromwell Probus Club www.cromwellprobus.co.uk where ex-business people meet socially for lunch once a month at Slepe Hall. Ongoing.

2024 – CRW & Probus commitments take up most of my time but I still have time to grow chillies & tomatoes in the greenhouse I built in 2000 when I retired.

THAT'S IT ... PHEW !!