

DENYS HEYWOOD

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1966 Hawaii - embarking in a Vulcan bomber for the next leg of a round the world operational sortie

In March of 1944 I was in my last year at boarding school and asked permission to go and volunteer for flying duties, my intention being to join the Fleet Air Arm. I went to Burton-on-Trent but, after a fruitless search for the Royal Navy's Recruiting Office, I came across the Royal Air Force's Recruiting Office and volunteered for aircrew. Having been put on the Reserve I entered Caius College, Cambridge, as an undergraduate in the autumn of 1944. I was called up in March 1945 and started training as a pilot, flying Tiger Moths and Harvards.

I got my 'Wings' in 1946 and then went to an Operational Training Unit flying Spitfires. A posting followed in 1947 to 32 Squadron flying Spitfires in Palestine, our main role at that time being to search for Jewish illegal immigrant boats trying to get to Palestine.





In the cockpit of a Spitfire

After the Mandate ended, the Squadron moved to Cyprus and I was posted to Habbanya in Iraq, where, after a short spell as an ADC I joined 249 Squadron flying Tempests. At the beginning of 1949 the Squadron moved to Egypt to join the two other Tempest Squadrons forming 324 Wing.

Tempest Mk VI



Another pilot and I were detailed to fly the Squadron Harvard aircraft from Habbanya to Deversoir in the Canal Zone in Egypt. However, we had engine problems en route and eventually crash-landed on a lava-coated mud flat in Transjordan.



We were then surrounded by fierce-looking armed tribesmen who turned out to be members of the Transjordan Frontier Force, and who were happy to guard the

badly damaged aircraft. We were taken to a nearby oil pipeline station manned by English engineers, and were very well looked after by them until we were picked up by an aircraft and flown on to Deversoir.



20 May 1949

A little later in 1949 I had brake problems on landing, the Tempest somersaulting and landing upside down just after touch down. My left hand was crushed between the windscreen and the gunsight and I lost some fingers plus other minor damage. Surgery and a brief spell in hospital at Fayid followed, after which I returned to flying duties on the Squadron.

In the middle of 1950 I was posted back to the UK and joined 247 Squadron at Odiham in Hampshire flying Vampire fighters.

The Venom was developed as a fighter/bomber from the Vampire which was the RAF's second jet aircraft. The first was the Meteor which carried out early test flights from Enstone and Barford airfields near Deddington.

Venoms in aerobatic formation



Later in the year I completed a course to become an instructor on gunnery and bombing. A posting followed in April 1952 to the Operational Conversion Unit at Stradishall, Suffolk, as a Flight Commander Instructor on the Gunnery Squadron flying Meteor fighters. During this period I had a brief detachment to the Fleet Air Arm flying Sea Furies on *HMS Illustrious* and also two Light Fleet Carriers, *HMS Triumph* and *HMS Glory*. A further detachment followed to 56 Squadron flying

Meteors from Waterbeach, near Cambridge, to assist them with some flying problems they were having. Then another brief posting to another staff job at Headquarters Fighter Command at Bentley Priory.

In May 1954 I joined 112 Squadron at Bruggen in Germany as a Flight Commander flying the Sabre which was an American aircraft and the first operational supersonic aircraft in the Royal Air Force. This period was the beginning of the Cold War. In April 1956 the Squadron was re-equipped with the Hawker Hunter (background).



In June 1956 I was promoted to Squadron Leader and posted to Celle in Northern Germany to command 94 Squadron flying Venom fighters. Celle was only about 20 miles from the East German border, and Communist MIG fighters could be seen patrolling their side of the border - a very hot Cold War. In September 1957 94 Squadron was disbanded in company with many other squadrons when the then minister decided that manned aircraft were not the right way to go, with emphasis being put on rockets.

After a Staff Course in 1958 I was posted as the Staff Officer responsible for Flight Safety at Headquarters 13 Group, which controlled the northern fighter group. This posting lasted until the end of 1960 and I then attended Staff College at Bracknell during 1961, followed by three years at the Air Ministry in London. During this time a very good friend, who trained with me, was the Chief Instructor at the Empire Test Pilot's School at Farnborough, and he arranged for me to fly many interesting aircraft.



Vulcan bomber

In the middle of 1964 I was promoted to Wing Commander and started refresher flying via Jet Provosts, Meteors, Canberras and finally the Vulcan at the Operational Conversion Unit at Finningley in Yorkshire, followed by a posting to command 617 Squadron, the Dambusters, at Scampton in Lincolnshire. It was the height of the Cold War, and we carried the Blue Steel Ballistic Missile with a megaton warhead. At that time every V-Bomber squadron had one aircraft permanently ready to go, and frequent Quick Reaction Alerts (QRAs) were practised by the stand-by crews.



Our operational target was Leningrad, now called St Petersburg, and our route would have taken us north to near the Arctic Circle and then south at low level through the northern end of Norway and across Finland. We would not have had enough fuel to return home after the attack but this fact was not really an issue because there would have been nothing to return to. Some rather vague survival areas were designated, but I do not think any of us really considered this fact seriously for obvious reasons.

A 'Lone Ranger' training sortie over Labrador and Alaska. Blue Steel weapon is in the bomb bay but it is fitted with a dummy warhead

In 1967 I was appointed as the Supreme Allied Commander Europe's (SACEUR) representative on the Joint Strategic Planning Staff, which was located at USAF Strategic Air Command Headquarters at Offutt Air Force Base, Nebraska, USA. Whilst there I was promoted to Group Captain but remained in America until the end of 1970.

The first half of 1971 was taken up with the Air Warfare course at Manby in Lincolnshire. Then some refresher flying on the Vulcan and a conversion course to the Hercules prior to an appointment as Group Captain Flying at Akrotiri in Cyprus. This was the biggest flying base the RAF had in the world and was home to six squadrons - two Vulcan, a Lightning, a Canberra, a Hercules/Argosy and a Whirlwind Helicopter Squadron; this was a super flying time in a super location.

The appointment ended in August 1973 and a posting home followed, with a course lasting five months at the Royal Naval College, Greenwich. At the conclusion of this Senior Officers' War Course I was supposed to remain at Greenwich as the RAF Director. However, a difference of opinion with the naval element of the Directing Staff resulted in the cancellation of this appointment and a posting as the Senior Officer in charge of Administration at the Bomber Group Headquarters at Bawtry, near Doncaster. And there I remained until I retired in September 1976.

The following is a list of the 44 different aircraft I have flown. Many aircraft had variants of the same type so I have put the number of variants flown in brackets.

Ansons (3), Argosy, Auster (2), Balliol, Beaver, Canberras (2), Cessna 410, Cherokee, Chipmunk, Comanche, Dakota, Devon, Harrier, Harvard, Hercules, Hunters (4), Hurricane, Javelin, Jet Provost, Lancaster, Lightning, Lincoln, Lockheed T33, Lodestar, Meteors (6), Mosquitos (2), Oxford, Phantom, Piston Provost, Prentice, Proctor, Sabres (2), Sea Fury, Sea Prince, Spitfire (2), Sycamore, Tiger Moth, Valetta, Vampires (3), Venoms (2), Ventura, Viscount, Vulcan, Whirlwind.'

Editors' note:

Denys died in October 2010. At his funeral his brother-in-law recounted that his peers gave Denys the nickname of 'Heinz 57' because of the very large number of aircraft he had flown. In fact he flew 62 different aircraft including variants. Flying a 'variant' was, of course, not just a matter of climbing into a cockpit and looking to see where the handbrake was; it required the pilot to be formally trained and qualified before he flew it. From my own discussions with my contemporaries who were naval airmen we think that this very extensive list of aircraft flown has to be some sort of peacetime record - if one can call the Cold War peaceful.