

Iain Gillespie

Rob Forsyth



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On the flight deck of his Nimrod aircraft
'somewhere' over the Mediterranean

Iain commissioned as a Pilot Officer in 1963 and joined 206 Squadron at RAF Kinloss as a co-pilot on the Shackleton Mk 3 in 1965. In 1968 he was posted to 205 Squadron, RAF Changi, in Singapore as a Crew Captain flying the Shackleton Mk 2.

He was posted back to the UK in 1969 to become a Qualified Flying Instructor (QFI). From 1971 to 1975 he returned to Maritime Patrol operations at RAF Kinloss, initially as an instructor in the Nimrod aircraft simulator, and then as a Nimrod pilot in 120 Squadron. He remained at Kinloss for the next 13 years in a variety of appointments before becoming a Crew Captain in 206 Squadron; in his own words:

'Basically I was a "Cold War warrior" shadowing the Soviet surface and sub-surface fleet; the Soviets had a deliberate habit of being very active at inconvenient times like Christmas or Easter. I also took a small part in two minor wars. In 1967 206 Squadron was detached to Singapore to carry out surface surveillance in the seas around Indonesia, during what was known as the "Confrontation". Much later, in 1982, I was attached again to 206 Squadron for the Falklands Conflict. This involved flying long range patrols of the sea lines of communication from Ascension Island, round the Falklands and back to Ascension. One of these flights, which lasted nearly 19 hours, was the longest maritime patrol in history, 8,453 nautical miles. These flights required in-flight refuelling, a capability that the Nimrod did not have until the Falklands crisis; it was fitted and the crews trained to use it in a couple of months. It is interesting to note that during World War II, one of my old squadrons, 120 Squadron, flew patrols of up to 24 hours, without in-flight refuelling, in the Consolidated Liberator!'

In 1984 he became an Air-to-Air Refueling Instructor. His own words merely hint at the skills required for this dangerous manoeuvre: 'It is difficult to describe the feeling of flying an 80-ton aircraft at 300 mph, not only in close formation with another even bigger aircraft, but attached to it by a 6 inch diameter fuel hose; it was a bit like teaching a son/daughter to drive a car in the outside lane of a crowded motorway at high speed.'

In 1988 he returned to a training role on the Nimrod Operational Conversion Unit at RAF St Mawgan but, after the Berlin wall came down and the Cold War was won, the Nimrod force was concentrated at Kinloss, where he served until he retired from the service in 1996 as a Squadron Leader. After he left the RAF he continued to fly as an instructor at Oxford Airport until 2009.