

B CREW RAF MARHAM 1982



SITUATED ON THE EDGE of the fens in Norfolk, the airfield at Marham has its origins way back in the very beginnings of military aviation. Following construction in 1915, it saw service as a Royal Flying Corps (RFC) aerodrome during the Great War, both as a home defence airfield and a flying training unit. In 1919 it was closed, but sixteen years later work started on construction of the RAF Station we know today.

The airfield resumed operations in 1937 and flying continued throughout the Second World War, during which thousands of bombing missions were launched, and the Station was attacked several times by enemy aircraft. Despite only having grass strips for runways, the Wellingtons, Stirlings and Mosquitos operated with devastating effect, and during the latter stages of the conflict RAF Marham was a main operating base for elite 8 Group Pathfinder Force (PFF) Squadrons.

After the war, having now had new concrete runways laid, Marham continued to operate in the role of a bomber station, and in 1956 became part of the RAF's V-Bomber Force, operating Valiants and later Victors. Long after the other V-Bombers were retired, Marham still flew Victors in the air to air refuelling role until they were finally retired in October 1993.

One aircraft that didn't survive to that date however, was XL232. Following construction at the Handley Page factory at Radlett, near St Albans, it was delivered to the RAF on 13 March 1962 as a Victor B2 bomber, capable of delivering a Blue Steel nuclear stand-off missile, or up to 35 x 1000lb bombs. As military technology advanced and new cold war policies evolved, Polaris submarines were subsequently introduced to take over the country's nuclear deterrent; and so in the early seventies XL232 was converted to a K2 Tanker,

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thereafter being operated by 55 Squadron based at Marham. The Victor tankers played a pivotal role in almost all the RAF's strategies at that time, and Marham's squadrons were kept busy refuelling all kinds of aircraft. During the Spring and Summer of 1982 the aging tanker was deployed to Wideawake airfield on Ascension Island where she flew many missions in support of Operation Corporate before, during, and after the liberation of the Falkland Islands.

On Friday 15 October 1982, having recently returned to her Home Base in Norfolk, XL323 was on Quick Readiness Alert (QRA) standby, fully fuelled up with 55 tons of AVTUR. At eleven minutes past eight, the Air to Air Refuelling standby crew were scrambled, and out on the dispersal XL323 became the centre of activity for the ground crew assigned to her. Even in her grey and green camouflage pattern, the large ungainly-looking airframe was clearly silhouetted against the autumn fenland landscape, her red navigation lights flashing to show she was under power. With her bulbous nose and big high tail she cut a menacing figure as the laborious pre-flight checks were carried out. The crew quickly boarded their plane, and ground crews stood by for the engine starts looking to get her airborne as quickly as possible. The Phantoms or Lightnings looking after the air defence of the UK were relying upon her to provide the extra fuel necessary to enable them to carry out their mission.

Across the grass in the Fire Section, it was just another day shift for B Crew. Sgt Alan Greaves and his crew diligently carried out their daily checks, and prioritised the various tasks that would have to be carried out before the weekend. Fuel tanks were replenished, air tanks drained and other fluid levels checked. The big Cummins diesel engines were run up and gear-boxes toggled to ensure the Mk 9's were ready to respond immediately. When the crew were satisfied that all the vehicles, systems and equipment was serviceable, the kettle was boiled for the first brew of the day.

By this time XL323 had taxied out to the threshold of Runway 24. There, she was visually inspected by the Runway Controller who spotted nothing untoward. The Captain then lined his aircraft up into wind, and the roar of her four Rolls Royce Conway engines echoed across the countryside as the throttles were opened by the co-pilot. Cleared for take-off the Captain released the brakes at precisely 0848, and the big lumbering aircraft started her last fateful take-off run.

Shortly after she started to roll the crew heard a loud muffled **bang** from the rear of the aircraft. At a speed of approximately 35 knots the captain ordered 'Abort' and applied the brakes while the co-pilot closed the throttles. Eye-witnesses saw flames shoot forwards then backwards from the starboard engines; the Runway Controller reported hearing a loud "whoompph" and saw flames torching from the upper port fuselage aft of the wing trailing edge.

On board the Victor, the Nav Radar checked the rear of the aircraft through the lower periscope and was horrified to see nothing but a sheet of flame. He advised the crew that a rapid evacuation would be necessary. By the time the aircraft was brought to a standstill, having rolled 850 feet, a serious fire had developed between the port wing trailing edge and the fin root. The Captain ordered the crew to evacuate, which they did through the cabin door. Although the main engines were shut down by the pilots, in his haste to escape the fire, the Air Engineer failed to shut down the Airborne Auxiliary Power Plant (AAPP) or switch off the special feeders. Once clear of the airframe, the crew joined the Runway Controller who had abandoned his caravan for a safer position upwind of the burning Victor. Meanwhile, the incident was witnessed by the Local Controller in the Air Traffic Control Tower, who immediately hit the crash alarm.

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Down in the Fire Section, the initial reaction of “*not another bloody practice*” was soon dispelled when the firefighters reached the bays and saw what was happening out on the runway. In the words of SAC Richard Czykita, a crew member of Crash 2 that day, “*The enormity of the situation hit us like a freight train*” and no doubt more colourful language was uttered by others rushing to their crew positions. No time was wasted, and within 90 seconds the two Mk 9’s and TACR 2 were deployed on the nose of the aircraft, attacking the fire with mass foam production from the cabin area. With branch-men deployed adjacent to the cabin door, the NCO IC Crash 1 and the Crew Commander entered the cockpit to attempt to shut the engines down, make the ejection seats safe and ensure nobody was left behind in the burning aircraft. Unfortunately, what they thought was a running engine was in fact the AAPP which they were unable to shut down.

Outside the aircraft cabin, the firefighting efforts continued even though the woollen crash kit worn by the branch-men was already scorched brown by the fierce heat. The cabin was vacated safely, but after three minutes of foam production both Mk 9’s were close to empty and had to withdraw to an Emergency Water Supply (EWS) tank to replenish. With the absence of any fire-fighting media the fire continued to burn out of control for the next ten minutes. Rich “Trotsky” Czykita recalls “*The heat by this time was so intense that the foam was breaking up as soon as it hit the flames!*” Again the vehicle tanks were emptied as foam was pumped onto the burning hulk, and again the crew had to leave the scene to replenish at the EWS tank.

The first local authority fire service (LAFS) appliance arrived from Kings Lynn shortly afterwards. By this time the pall of black smoke could be seen from 15 miles away, and as the fire continued to rage further pumps were summoned from Downham Market, Watton, Massingham, Dereham and Swaffham. Over three-quarters of a mile of delivery hose had to be run out by the LAFS firemen to get an adequate supply of water to the Mk 9s where the RAF crews were working at the sharp end of the operation. Meanwhile fire-fighters from Norfolk Fire Brigade assisted the RAF lads in manhandling the vast amount of 25 litre foam-liquid drums needed to sustain the foam production. As well as transporting them to the crash combine at the scene of the fire, they also had to be physically lifted onto the roofs of the major foam vehicles and poured into the tanks; exhausting work at any time.

Shortly afterwards it became obvious that the fire was too big to extinguish with the resources available, and the fire-ravaged airframe was well beyond saving. The Station Commander, Group Captain Price, ordered the crews to withdraw and allow the stricken Victor to burn. From the relative safety of 200 yards, the exhausted fire-fighters watched while the blaze once more raged out of control. In the words of Richard Czykita: “*Like a huge beached whale the aircraft finally gave up; the port undercarriage collapsed and began to burn with even more ferocity*”.

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When the fire spread forwards and took hold of the cockpit there were a number of minor explosions, and then the ejection seats detonated. SAC Czykita recalled “..... *this was a truly amazing sight; they soared some sixty feet up into the air before landing exactly where we had been standing just minutes earlier!*”

Half an hour later the fire started to die down and the crews were once again redeployed to fight it for the final time. At 1330 hours the fire was extinguished and the crew commenced damping down operations which continued throughout the afternoon and evening.



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The subsequent enquiry established that a low pressure turbine disc in No 4 engine had disintegrated, and some of the fragments then punctured fuel tanks in the fuselage and bomb bay both causing and igniting massive fuel leaks. Had it happened after take-off the consequences would certainly have been immeasurably more serious. As it was the aircrew all escaped unhurt, and there was nothing anyone could have done to save the aircraft.

In the event, B Crew worked heroically in the face of massive odds. Speaking to the Eastern Daily Press, Norfolk’s Deputy Chief Fire Officer, Mr Maurice Johnson, said that the

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fire was fairly well under control when he arrived. He praised all the crews in attendance and stressed how the incident demonstrated the excellent liaison between the RAF Fire Service and Norfolk Fire Brigade and proved the value of emergency drills which were carried out from time to time. *“It all went very, very smoothly”* he said. Mr Keith Livermore, Divisional Commander at Kings Lynn echoed these sentiments and added that he had never before seen such an intense aircraft fire. *“... there was one tremendous centre of flame”* he said.

Although there were no medals won that day, the response to the incident was undoubtedly carried out in the finest traditions of the RAF Fire Service so hence their inclusion here.



RAF Firemen in attendance:

Sgt Alan Greaves
Cpl Trevor Box
Cpl Steve Ireland
Cpl Dave Jenner
Cpl Mick Goupillot
SAC Andy Gurr
SAC Jock Reilly
SAC Stewart Bell
SAC Richard Czykita
SAC Ian Smith
SAC Geordie Watson
SAC Phil Stanley
SAC John Buchanan
SAC Gordon Ball
(Apologies for any omissions)

Sources:

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