

Those “Garries” and other Reminiscences

By 2568087 Doug Tilbury

Having spent 16 weeks at Weedon training to be an Engine Mechanic turbine training on Rolls Royce Derwent 8 engines I was posted to Waterbeach.

On arrival I reported to Flying Wing HQ, was passed on to 56 Squadron HQ and then to “B” Flight. At the desk was Flight Sergeant “Wacker” Waterman. “What trade are you” he bellowed “Engine Mech” I replied. “Thank goodness for that” or words to that effect was his response. “You’re a fitter from now on, can you drive?” I nodded. “Right then report to the MT section at 07.30 each day and from now on you book out ‘B Flight Garrie”, which I did for the next 18 months.

I was now a squadron bod! Given a piece of paper each morning with a list of Meteor Mk 8’s to be towed out onto the airfield dispersal area. The Meteor weighed 7 tons, towing was in bottom gear, low range at 4 mpg, sometimes filling up twice a day. The petrol tank was situated under the driver’s seat.

When two to four aircraft had been scrambled, I would chase after them with bods on board, down the “peri” track at about 60 mph.

Aircraft now on standby engines running we then had to attach a multi-plug under the aircraft not without some difficulty as the exhaust from the engines was against us. The pilot was by now in contact with 11 Group HQ awaiting final instructions. We stayed with them until take-off. B Flight “garrie” was a series 1 Land Rover with headlights behind the radiator grill.

A point of interest in 1953, of about a dozen or so airmen on B Flight I was the only one with a current driving licence. Today nearly everyone learns to drive at the age of 17. As a farm boy I was driving tractors at the age of 14 so was experienced at reversing trailers. On that subject having towed the aircraft out on to the field, the next job was to tow out the mobile batteries for starting up. I was permitted to tow four at a time. At the end of the day if there was one about, I would pull 8 or 10 to save time as I was always last to leave the aircraft. Having been refuelled and parked in the hanger for the night, the last job of the day was to return the garrie to the MT Section. Sometimes I didn’t get my evening meal until well after 1800 hours, luckily the cooks were aware of this and I was usually allowed to help myself.

I enjoyed driving the garrie but my real job was a fitter refuelling and servicing the engines on V - Victor and X -Xray which kept me busy.

56 Squadron led the flypast at the Queen’s Coronation in 1953 with our station’s flight Hurricane piloted by Wing Commander Paddy Barthrop as lead aircraft.

We became quite concerned when aircraft were overdue. 40 minutes flight time for a Meteor was extreme. I remember on one occasion when on a wet morning with low cloud "B" Flight lost a sortie of 4 Meteors. They flew over us concerned for their return but were eventually diverted to Duxford, couldn't locate it. Ran short of fuel and ejected.

There were no fatalities, in 1953 the RAF lost 146 Meteors in accidents, their weakest points were the leading edge of their wings which would sometimes detach between engine and fuselage causing the aircraft to crash,.