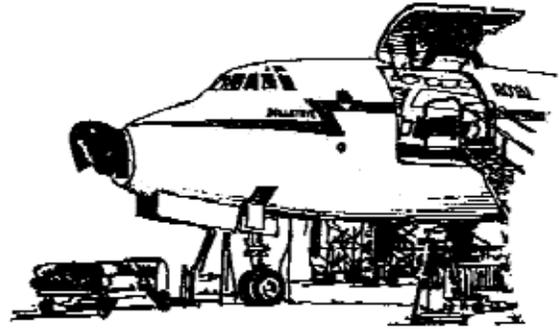


# A Short History of the RAF Britannia



## Birth of the Britannia

Even as the Hastings was still in its prime as a 99 Squadron aircraft, thoughts were turning to a replacement that would take advantage of aeronautical development and better meet the strategic air transport needs of the future. The Bristol Aircraft Britannia was to be the choice. If a conception date has to be determined for the totally military Britannia then it might be seen as July 1956 when the Chiefs of Staff set up the Bingley Committee (chaired by Rear Admiral A N C Bingley, the then Fifth Sea Lord and Deputy Chief of Naval Staff (Air)), to make recommendations on the inter-service requirements of the future air transport force.

In mid-1957 the air transport force consisted of 20 Hastings, 10 Beverleys, 5 Comet 2s, 11 Vallettas. In an emergency this fleet could be supplemented with 30 Maritime Shackletons and 29 civil aircraft normally engaged in routine trooping. It was considered that this force did not match the possible demand and that an up-date was required.

It is worth considering the backdrop to these deliberations. The Royal Air Force was concerned with the emergence of the thermo-nuclear bomb and acquiring its delivery system, the V-Force. Military emphasis had changed from the post-Korea threat of major war to the prospect of a prolonged period of maintaining delicately balanced forces to secure peace. There were clear signs that conflicts of a lesser nature were to be our concern, with a continuing commitment to global affairs. Mau Mau in Kenya and terrorism in Malaya and Cyprus were but precursors of problems to come. Suez had demonstrated the sensitivity of world affairs and the Hungary uprising clearly showed the substance of the Iron Curtain. It was in this atmosphere that the Bingley Committee was making its recommendations on an air transport force that would allow us to meet our possible commitments far and wide, and that with an intended smaller, but more mobile Army. They completed their task in January 1957.

The fleet required was to be defined by the task that it was likely to have to perform i.e. to fly forces from all three Services to the Far East within seven days. The Army's Spearhead Brigade would need 54 Britannia sorties for the move to Singapore; the Navy reinforcement would require 12 Britannia sorties. The RAF requirement would be to support the move of four V-Bomber squadrons, which would take 34 Britannia sorties. If all this was to be done in seven days then a force of 64 Britannias would be required! It was decided that this could not be afforded so half that number was proposed, it being accepted that only essential elements would be moved in the first week and that it would take a further three weeks to complete the lift. The Committee wholeheartedly recommended that the Britannia was the aircraft most suited to the task and that the required number should be ordered with all haste. The Royal Air Force had in fact ordered sufficient aircraft for one squadron in January 1956 after the abandonment of the purpose-built strategic air transport project, the Vickers 1000. Nevertheless, the choice of the Britannia was debated again by the Air Council when it considered the Bingley findings and set them alongside the alternatives of Comet 4s and Vanguards. The Britannia came out a clear winner with its ability, in the military version, to carry freight or passengers (or a combination of both). There was much debate revolving around a civil consortium operating half of the ordered aircraft. There was also a plan to order but store some of the aircraft. This idea was scrapped and the final outcome was that two squadrons would be equipped with ten aircraft each. It was the intention that the first squadron should be formed by April 1960 and both be operational by the end of the year. The



On a damp day, 'Roll Out' of one the Mk 1s. Note how black propeller blades are a feature of these early models.

final fleet total of 23 aircraft evolved as the result of the decision to add the three Ministry of Supply aircraft, which had been ordered in anticipation of the civil consortium idea. These three aircraft were designated the 252 Series and served in the Royal Air Force as Britannia C Mk2s.

The C Mk 1s were the 20 specifically ordered for military service and carried the tag of the 253 Series. The essential difference between them was the freight carrying capability. The former were only intended as passenger aircraft. The latter had a freight door and a strengthened floor capable of supporting full cargo loads. So the threshold was reached of 99 Squadron being re-equipped with the Bristol Britannia.

## Delivery

On 19 March 1959, at Royal Air Force Lyneham, Wiltshire, at 1752 hours, the first Britannia C Mark 2 XN398 arrived from the manufacturers base at Filton. The aircraft was captained by Squadron Leader John Owen, who had been the RAF Britannia Project Officer at Filton, and was destined to be a Flight Commander on 99 Squadron. Also on board as Navigator, was Flight Lieutenant A J L (Bill) Hickox, who recalls that disembarkation from the aircraft was delayed due to the absence of the necessary steps. Agitated at the non-arrival of the steps, John Owen grabbed the escape rope located at the aircraft's front door and launched himself into space. Unfortunately he had omitted to attach the rope to a D-ring on the door frame; consequently he landed heavily and broke a leg. After being given first aid he was stretchered away and was never seen on the Squadron again. Ironically, he later joined the Accident Investigation Branch!

The arrival of this aircraft opened a chapter in 99 Squadron's history that was not to close until December 1975.

This covered a period that was to see the demise of the Commonwealth, as it had been, and the UK's increasing commitment to NATO and Europe. The Britannia was introduced to support a smaller but more mobile army and provide an ability to respond rapidly to global demands. It was terminated as our sphere of influence contracted.

The period included involvement, in some way or other, in the majority of the events in the Free World of that time and the maintenance of the fragile peace through the regular exercise of our military plans. Contingency plans, continually revised and held in reserve in case of some international crisis, relied heavily on the Britannia fleet and were put into action on many occasions, because of natural disasters, political unrest and the like.

The prestigious nature of a fleet of twenty-three 'shiny' aircraft must not be underestimated, so that period also included many 'showing the flag' flights and the Britannia did a considerable share of the associated VIP flying.

Underlying all this was training and practice; so successfully completed that the fleet never suffered a flying accident, which involved the loss of life or serious injury in the whole of its operations.

The first 253 Series, designated the Britannia CMk1, was XL 636, which was flown in 4 June 1959 and was the centrepiece, flanked by 404 and 398, for the official handover ceremony on a breezy 9 June 1959. Mr Peter Masefield, Managing Director of Bristol Aircraft Ltd. formally handed over the technical documents of the aircraft to Wing Commander J O Barnard OBE, the Officer Commanding No 99 Squadron. In December 1958, at RAF Lyneham, crews had been posted out of 99 Squadron to 24 and 36 Squadrons to make way for their Britannia trained replacements awaiting the arrival of their new aircraft. The training they were receiving was quite unlike any aircrew instruction that had been experienced before. The Britannia was seen as a far more complex aircraft than its predecessors; it was indeed the first transport aircraft to use electrical systems so extensively. Gone were the levers, cocks and other manual devices. They were replaced by switches, operating relays to activate and control the various systems.

The conduct of the fire drill neatly illustrates this. In the past the action in the event of an engine fire required some considerable exercise and coordination of the hands over various controls which, through the necessities of engineering, were situated in what seemed to be random locations on the flight deck. Not so the Britannia. With the use of electrics the actual disposition of the final components was no longer a controlling factor. Thus the fire drill was reduced to closing a throttle, pushing an illuminated propeller feathering button and then going up a column of five switches and one button, set out in the required order. The column was clearly designated by another illuminated red light.

This is a simple example of Britannia electrics, as many a flight engineer would be quick to point out. Because of these technical advances it was considered necessary for the engineers to do an electrical 'lead-in' course at Melksham before they joined the pilots and navigators for a manufacturer's course at the Bristol engine factory at Filton and then an airframe course at the nearby Bristol Aircraft Training School.

An indication of how the entry into service of the Britannia had been anticipated is the diary of one of the first 99 Squadron flight engineers, Master Engineer A N 'Mitch' Mitchell:

26 Jun 57	Electrical Lead-in Course
6 Jan 58	Filton Course Pt I
6 Oct 58	Filton Course Pt II
2 Mar 59	Commenced 20 hours flying with BOAC at Hurn
1 Jul 59	Started screened flying at Lyneham on XN 404

- two years plus, training!

The follow-up to the Filton course was the flying element provided at Lyneham by ATS(B) - Air Training Squadron (Britannia), the aircraft distinction being necessary as there was also an ATS(C) - the Comet trainers.

To return to the delivery of XN 398 on 19 March 1959, 11 April saw it on the first training flight to El Adem, near Tobruk. This was to be the beginning of the aircrew and ground crew becoming accustomed to operating the aircraft. A second flight to El Adem took place on 16 April and a third took in Nicosia as well. An early example of the interest that the Britannia was to arouse during its service came from an unusual quarter. Their Majesties the King and Queen of Libya inspected the aircraft at El Adem on 13 June.

## Settling In

The major task for the Britannia fleet was going to be the support of our garrisons in the Middle and Far East - an aircraft would leave daily to fly to Singapore. To begin with this was via Libya, Aden, the Maldiv Islands in the Indian Ocean and then to the Royal Air Force station on Singapore Island, adjacent to the notorious wartime gaol - Changi.



The atmosphere of the preparation of a Britannia for a route departure has been totally captured here. 520 occupies the spot, to the west of the Terminal Building, traditionally reserved for the daily 'Changi Slip' (Singapore) aircraft. Note the aircraft's raised freight door and the load on a 'scissors truck'. Black propellers indicate that this is an early photo as does the absence of barrack blocks in the far background. The second Britannia is being loaded using a Britannia Freight Lift Platform (BFLP)

It was, therefore natural, that one of the first proving flights should be along this 'Changi Route'. This took place from 6-17 July 1959, combining aircrew training with the familiarisation of ground crew.

Factory deliveries continued through the summer, XL 637 and XL 638 followed their pathfinding brother 636. A measure of the novelty (and pride?) in the RAF's new acquisition can be assessed by the events of 3 September. XL 638, especially cleaned and polished, flew to Cranwell to be present for the Chief of Staffs of the Commonwealth Forces' Annual Conference. The aircraft inspection was led by Admiral of the Fleet, Earl Mountbatten of Burma, the Chairman of Committee. (Some years later he was to complete his last official duty with the assistance of a Britannia flown by 99 Squadron). Lord Louis was followed by a train of Generals, Admirals and Air Marshals of Britain, Canada, Ghana, Australia, Pakistan, Malaya and others. In all, 125 very senior officers inspected the aircraft and questioned the crew. This perhaps can be seen as the prologue to the drama that was to be enacted in the next sixteen years which, in some way, would involve the Britannia and all those countries - and many others. It is an insight into the pressure of those times that, after the visitors had departed, the aircraft left for Lyneham to carry out a night flying training detail.

XL 637, not to be outshone, was slipping away to Australia under the command of Squadron Leader Wally Gray. The purpose was to support, in some style, the Valiant bombers from RAF Wittering attending the Queensland centenary celebrations. Antipodean excursions continued with a Britannia flying to New Zealand in support of three Vulcans for the opening of the new International Airport, Rongati.

*'During the period 8 to 14 December 1959, a 99 Squadron Britannia (Special Flight 6040 captained by Flying Officer Whiteight and Pilot Officer Haley, transported 1,231 passengers between Lyneham - Luqa - Idris - El Adem - Alconbury. An interesting feature of this operation was that a total of 1,179 passengers was moved in eleven lifts.'*

This news item speaks volumes, demonstrating the intention of using the potential of the Britannia to the full. Arithmetic gives that 107 plus passengers must have been carried per flight. The cabin capacity in Pilots' Notes is given as 108 passengers at 39' pitch i.e. that distance between each seat back and 113 troops at 36' pitch. So this operation was done on limits. Imagine how loads like this must have seemed after the Hastings.

The first round-the-world flight (in eight days!) took place between 16 and 23 December. XL638 was captained by Flight Lieutenants 'Rip' Kerby and Tom Goddard. The latter established a reputation over the years for taking a teapot en route with him and flying in his raincoat if it was a bit chilly! The route was Nicosia, Karachi, Changi, Darwin, Fiji to Christmas Island. Here, happy tour-ex servicemen, from this nuclear bomb test site, boarded with the prospect of being home in time for Christmas. The aircraft was suitably decorated for the occasion by the crew! The route home was via Vancouver, Montreal, to Lyneham. All this done in eight days - another example of using the aircraft to its limits, acknowledged by the media, as its return to base was covered by TV and the national press.

So concluded 1959, the inauguration year for the Royal Air Force Britannia. In it can be detected the difficulties and the challenges. But it can be sensed that there was a real pride of the Service in its new possession. But underneath the glamour was a gritty intention to use this new tool to the maximum. The next year was to see that determination being put to the test.

## The Fight Is On

In the 1960s the 'Wind of Change' was blowing and the demand for independence from the

African States was gaining a momentum which had not been totally anticipated.

Some signs of unrest in this situation led to the Commander in Chief British Forces, Arabian Peninsular, calling for the 1st Battalion Duke of Wellington's Regiment. Seven Britannias with twelve crews took them to Nairobi and they were then placed on a twenty-four hour standby at the disposal of the Commander in Chief. 99's Operational Record Book (Form 540) records that 'operational flying was not required and little was done except continuation training'.

So the Britannias first 'Operation' turned out to be a bit of a damp squib. It perhaps should be pointed out for future reference that an 'Operation' is the real thing in military parlance. Aid is required somewhere for something and it is given the utmost priority. If the event or situation can be anticipated then a 'Contingency Plan' may well have been prepared for it. 'Exercises' might specifically practise these contingency plans or similar.

A reminder that Cyprus had been a trouble spot for many years is given by the item in the Lyneham Globe. In February, a 99 Squadron Britannia transported the Colonial Under-Secretary, Mr Julian Amery, for his talks with Cypriot leaders. The tenseness of the situation can be judged from the fact that the departure for Gatwick was delayed twice, due to last minute attempts at mediation.

Cyprus was to be a constant port of call for the aircraft. Post-war cries from the Greek Cypriots for 'Enosis' (Union with Greece) and from the Turkish element for partition, had resulted in many years of terrorism, mostly aimed at British servicemen. Now, agreement was being reached on granting of self-government. The Republic of Cyprus was to be formed with British sovereignty being retained over the two military base areas at Dhekhelia and Akrotiri. The maintenance of this foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean would require a considerable amount of airlift.

Also, Akrotiri became firmly established as our staging post to the East. Additional activity came from the failure of the formation of the Republic to provide a peaceful settlement between Greek and Turk and there were many occasions, over the subsequent years, when peace-keeping forces were required and action to protect our Servicemen and other British Nationals. All in all, Britannia crews were to spend a lot of time on the island. In March 1960, the Britannias contributed towards the largest RAF/Army exercise ever to take place outside the United Kingdom; a sign of the newly acquired potential. Exercise 'Starlight' was a Strategic Reserve air mobility trial. Transport Command airlifted the 1st Guards Brigade Group and ancillary units nearly 2000 miles to El Adem in North Africa. Four Britannias of 99 Squadron and 17 Hastings of Nos.24, 36 and 114 Squadrons, from Colerne, operated a shuttle service between Lyneham and El Adem. On 10 March, 'D-Day', the strategic lift of troops, equipment and vehicles began. Daily, until 20 March, three Britannias each carrying 110 men and two Hastings loaded with vehicles, touched down in North Africa. The Britannias changed crews there, illustrating the intention of keeping on the move an aircraft of such newly acquired lift potential. The summary of the Britannia effort for this demanding test was that 4000 troops were moved; there was one sortie every eight hours out-bound. For the return, 39 sorties were flown in less than five days with only 12 crews and 10 aircraft. This was a fine demonstration of the new capabilities of the Strategic Transport Force and its powerful new tool - the Bristol Britannia.

Flag waving continued when a contingent, led by the then Secretary-of-State for Air, the Rt Hon George Ward, attended the 150th Anniversary Celebration of Argentine Independence; how subsequent events put another colour on events of the past! The detachment consisted of a Comet from 216 Squadron, two Vulcans from 101 Squadron, all supported by a Britannia of 99. There was, however, another aspect to this flight, and of a sort for which the Britannia was to establish a noble record, and best described as 'Mercy Flights'. Just prior to the Argentine celebrations, the Chileans suffered a devastating earthquake. British firms in Argentina joined together to provide help and collected clothing, medical supplies and food. It was then decided to make it a totally UK effort and use XL659, on the ground having arrived for the celebrations still to come, to transport the supplies to Santiago. Two flights were carried out. These completed and the festivities over,

the aircraft proceeded to Montevideo, Rio de Janeiro, Bogata and Caracas.

This chapter on 1960 concludes with a return to the starting topic of Africa. The Belgian Government granted independence to the Congo at the end of June 1960. Very shortly chaos reigned, Katanga Province declared itself an independent state; there was a mutiny by many members of the Congolese Army, tribal friction and looting. The new Congo Government called for United Nations' help to restore order. Ex-99 Air Quarter Master Sergeant Peter Phillips describes how the Britannias then contributed:

*'A detachment of two aircraft, four crews, ground servicing party and an Ops Officer operated at Accra. The task was to take Ghanaian troops and police of the UN Force into Leopoldville and bring refugees out. These included European missionaries who had fled for their lives from their stations in the interior. My logbook tells me that Flight Lieutenant Ted Millson took 491 to Accra from Lyneham on 18 July, Accra - Leopoldville - Accra on 19 July and 518 Accra - Nairobi on the 25th to join the 99 Squadron detachment already at Embakasi. Incidentally, there was a Comet 2 operating at Accra also and books on the events of that time refer to the Comet taking Patrice Lumumba to New York to the United Nations. Ted's crew was called out to undertake this task but the navigator had 'gone to ground' downtown! I recall being driven around the nightspots of Accra trying to locate him, without success. The Comet was used, so a chance to put 99 Squadron and the Britannia on that page of the history books was lost!'*

As with many UN operations, their essence is persistence and the Britannias were back in Accra to assist with the evacuation of European civilians from Leopoldville and again in January and June 1961, to transfer UN troops. So 1960 left an African legacy for 1961. An appropriate note on which to leave 1960 is the delivery of XM497 on 2 December; the Britannia fleet was now complete.

## Operation Vantage

The Britannia's first flight behind the Iron Curtain took place in May 1961. The Regimental Band of the Argyle and Southern Highlanders was flown to Moscow for the British Trade Fair. The Russians decreed that for all such flights the aircraft had to stage through an airfield outside their border, Copenhagen in this instance, and pick up an English speaking Aeroflot navigator and radio operator to monitor their progress. No chances were taken! The aircraft was only on the ground at Moscow for two hours.

By now, both 99 and 511 Squadrons were operational, fully equipped and manned. As they had grown, their potential had been partially tested by the various events over the past eighteen months. Now, in July 1961, was to come, as if ordained by an unseen hand, their true "Baptism by Fire". This was Operation "Vantage", the provision of military aid to Kuwait.

As early as 1899, Kuwait entered into treaty relations with Great Britain and, in 1914, was recognised as an independent state under British protection, a situation that was maintained until 1961. These treaties were of importance to us to safeguard the main source of our oil supplies. Kuwait's northern border with Iraq was agreed in 1923. In 1961, the standing of Kuwait internationally clearly indicated that it should be independent and this was agreed on 19 June. In this agreement a close relationship was to be maintained and Kuwait requested, and Great Britain agreed, that if assistance should be required it would be provided. Only six days later such help was needed! Iraq claimed that Kuwait belonged to them and started to move forces towards the border. Operation "Vantage" was launched.

The first Britannia involvement was the commandeering of an aircraft on the Singapore route, as it passed through Khormaksar, Aden to assist immediately Air Force Middle East's

Beverleys and Vallettas, which were hard pressed with the preparatory moves. The operation called for the movement of troops and other personnel, tanks and armoured cars into Kuwait to secure the airfield. Two Hunter Squadrons would also fly in. The Britannia role would be the long range work from Cyprus, Aden and Kenya.

The destination was not the fully mapped old Kuwait Airport, for which the normal aeronautical information was available, but Kuwait New - the partly completed, modern replacement for the old airfield. All that existed was the runway and dispersal areas. Added to the lack of airfield information was the fact that there was no diplomatic clearance to overfly the countries en route and no weather forecast for the destination.

The Britannias flew along for five hours, with no navigation lights and maintaining radio silence until in Kuwait itself and in contact with the controllers at the airport. The early crews had to ask them the position of the new airfield! "From our overhead, steer 180 degrees for 18 miles." They were also given the weather. "Strong wind, blowing sand, visibility about one mile, temperature 40 degrees centigrade!"

But the job was done. Air Chief Marshal Sir David Lee GBE CB wrote later in his book "*Flight from the Middle East*":

*'The flexibility shown by Transport Command in switching aircraft and routes to suit the changing circumstances was quite outstanding with the result that, by 4 July, the maximum number of transport aircraft had been concentrated where needed and committed to the airlift.'*

The final object was achieved in that the ground force was established in time to deter the potential invaders.

Having achieved its deterrent aim, it was considered diplomatically unsound to retain such a large force in Kuwait and from 20 July onwards withdrawal commenced and standby situations created in Bahrain and Cyprus to establish the necessary vigilance.

A suitable postscript to "Operation Vantage" is

the VIP crew for the visit to Gambia by TRH The Duke and Duchess of Kent photographed on the steps of Government House. The provider of this 'treasured possession' is Master Engineer Cliff Regan who is right at the back, centre.



provided by Air Chief Marshal Lee:

*'The crisis over Kuwait produced what could be described as `the operation that never was'. The plan . . . was fully implemented but not a shot was fired and in the event it turned out to be perhaps the most comprehensive, realistic and valuable movement exercise ever carried out by the three British Services . . . In retrospect, intervention in Kuwait . . . was highly satisfactory in that it complied fully with the terms of Britain's agreement with Kuwait and brought assistance to the Ruler quickly and efficiently. It may have prevented the annexation of Kuwait by Iraq, although this will never be known with certainty.'*

## A Busy Year Continues

VIPs featured large in the life of the Britannia, especially in the early days when it was very much a prestige symbol. Great pride was taken by the ground crew in the preparation of the aircraft. A VIP trip could be centred around one person or several, expanding, as often happened with the capacity of the Britannia, to a considerable number. April 1962 provides an example of the latter with what became a recurring commitment, to convey staff and students of the NATO Defence College on their tour of Southern Europe. On the 3rd XM398 positioned at Le Bourget for VIP Flight 1051. The 72 students from 14 nations were flown to Lisbon, Malta, Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Athens, Naples, Rome, Turin and back to Paris.

A smaller party, but making up for lack of numbers with their top rank, was conveyed on a tour in August/September 1962. Fourteen staff and students of the Imperial Defence College (IDC) visited 14 major cities in East and West Pakistan, India and Ceylon. With such a small number it was possible to divide XN392 into a sitting room, dining room and cocktail area. For the IDC party, the tour was a very strenuous one, their time on the ground being completely occupied with visits, presentations and receptions. Therefore they came to regard the flying time as a very welcome breathing space.

Another VIP flight for the year was "Royal". Their Royal Highnesses The Duke and Duchess of Kent were flown to Kampala for the Uganda Independence celebrations.

In November, 99 Squadron's Flight Lieutenant John Bourn captained an aircraft to collect His Excellency, the British Ambassador, Sir Frank Roberts, from Moscow. In those tense days, this was done in an atmosphere of mistrust. It was insisted that a Russian Navigator and Signaller be on board the aircraft for the overflight of Russian territory. They emplaned at Copenhagen. Doing a radar approach with height information being given in metres using an altimeter graduated in feet was a bit tricky!

In the same month a Britannia carried the support party for the Vulcans participating in the flypast at the opening of the British Empire and Commonwealth Games at Perth, Australia. The Britannia was being proudly used.

Away from the glory, more down to earth activities were in progress. In the case of one, "down to mud" would be a more suitable phrase. This was the 16 Para Brigade Group joint Greek exercise at Larissa, midway between Athens in the South and Thessaloniki to the North. Part way through, a two-day downpour completely washed out the tented RAF Detachment and much ingenuity was required by the Britannia ground servicing party to secure a dry bed.

Two world trouble spots caused "The Whispering Giant" to adopt its aggressive role. In October, a conflict arose between Chinese and Indian troops on the North East frontier and the Indian government requested a supply of small arms. So some legalised gun running was done to Palam Airport, Delhi by two Britannia aircraft. The arms arrived rapidly as a crew change was established through Sharjah in what is now the United Arab Emirate. This was repeated at the end of November.

The second problem occurred in what was in those days, the British Protectorate of Brunei, North Borneo. Rebels had seized hostages and the Shell oil refinery at Seria was under threat. Two aircraft were pulled off the Changi Slip, at short notice, to fly personnel and equipment to Labuan.

Exercises, VIPs, special flights, "showing the flag" and the constant demands of the Changi crew change - some part or all of this was now the routine of Britannia life. But the real thing was still the "Operation" with trouble flaring up in some part of world which needed the swift and the distance swallowing capability of our Strategic Transport Force.

Such a situation occurred in July 1963. A deterioration in security in Georgetown, British Guiana (now Guyana) on the Northern coast of South America, had arisen with riots after a long general strike. Operation "Pedal" was declared and the 2nd Battalion The Green Jackets plus supporting personnel, 500 men in all, were flown out.

Military transport flying has always been conducted in an environment subject to the vagaries of national whim. Problems of lack of permission for overflight in times of tensions have to be overcome. Alternative routes is the only solution. One such route was known as the Cable Route, a largely over the sea path with island stops from the UK to the Far East. The first steps to establish another such route commenced on 10 July 1963; it was to become known as the Westabout Route. This made the not unreasonable assumption that we were likely to be supported in most of our matters by the United States of America; so a route was established, and exercised over the years, which would allow us to reach the Far East, flying westwards, and only using airfields under the jurisdiction of the USA.

The first Westabout Route was established via the "Top of the World" USAF Base at Thule in Greenland, Elmendorf Air Force Base (AFB), near earthquake prone Anchorage, Alaska, the US Navy facility on Midway Island in the Central Pacific Ocean, the scene of the 1942 battle that was to be the turning point of the Pacific War. Then to the AFB on Guam, the Southernmost island of the Mariana Islands, a series of volcanic mountain peaks and uplifted coral reefs in the Eastern Pacific which form a chain Southwards from Japan. From there, the more familiar territory of Singapore could be reached. This route to the Far East, and its successors, was to be regularly exercised during the 99 and 511 Squadrons' lifetime with the Britannias. It was to free us of all the chains of restricted overflight, albeit at some extra cost in time and money. It was also to provide many a ground and aircrew with a bit of variety in their route activities.

In October 1963, No 64 (F) Squadron with their night/all weather Javelin fighters flew to give demonstrations, advice and training to the Indian air defence formation. The three weeks joint exercise went by the name of Exercise "Shiksha", an old Sanskrit word meaning education or learning. The aircraft flew out via Cyprus and Bahrain with in-flight refuelling being provided by Valiant tankers. In support along the route and flying the men and materials were the Britannias. The Britannias claimed an air transport record in November 1963, the longest military airlift ever undertaken. Seven aircraft flew the 1st Battalion, Royal Ulster Rifles the 12,000 miles from the UK to Australia to take part in an exercise with the Australian Army.

Bardufoss was to be a constant ingredient of Britannia operations. This airfield, situated in Northern Norway, was used as the airhead for many Army air mobility exercises, its hinterland providing a very suitable environment for the Army to train in its European role. In the Summer of 1963, Exercise Barfrost II took place and the Britannias positioned No 43 Commando, a total of 640 personnel, 15 Land Rovers, 15 half ton trailers and 30,000 lbs of freight without hitch to this remote airfield well within the Arctic Circle.

A congratulatory message appeared in mid-January 1964 from the Commander-in-Chief Transport Command, Air Marshal Sir Kenneth Cross KCB CBE DSO DFC:

*'We are now approaching a lull in the sustained airlift to Cyprus which, for Lyneham, has meant a continuous effort since Christmas Eve. Congratulations to all ranks on completion of*

*tasks as planned and ordered.'*

Fighting had again broken out between the Greek and Turkish communities in Cyprus and six Army units and three armoured car squadrons were flown out.

East Africa was another trouble spot. Towards the end of January 1964 there was a call for troops to Nairobi due to local forces' mutinies. The lift initially involved 12 aircraft and numerous changes of crews and a good deal of standbys in a familiar location, the Spread Eagle Hotel just outside Nairobi. This was an old hunting lodge style place that had seen better days.

In May 1964 it was planned that the Westabout Route to the Far East, surveyed the previous year, be now tested. The scenario was that six Britannia loads were urgently required in the Far East and overflights of various Middle East countries had been prohibited to us. The plan was that two aircraft would position additional crews and ground crew plus equipment at Thule, Greenland; Elmendorf, Alaska; Midway and Guam islands. Then the lift would start with the six aircraft leaving at two hourly intervals. Marked on a map, the staging posts looked like stepping stones to the Far East so, not inappropriately, the exercise was given the title of "Travelling Causeway".

All was set. The first positioning aircraft had just arrived at Thule, full of the air and ground crews, when the word came, "Go no further, return to Base!" The exercise was cancelled. Troops were required in Aden.

This was the continuing trouble in the area which was to last many years and lead to our eventual withdrawal. Rebel tribesmen in the Radfan area of the Western Aden Protectorate, encouraged and supplied by the Yemenis across the border and the Egyptians, were challenging the authority of the Federal government with the aim of enforcing the British withdrawal and the collapse of the South Arabian Federation. Continual reinforcement made RAF Khormaksar the most active and congested Station of the day.

British Guiana reappeared on the Britannia scene in May. During these years, civil unrest had only been kept marginally at bay with the presence of British troops. Once again reinforcements were needed as the Government was threatened. Five aircraft were required for the lift. Exercise "Travelling Causeway", as it was relaunched in July. All was placed in position and the six aircraft departed Lyneham at two hourly intervals. In spite of the distances involved, the complicated organisation and the unfamiliar routes and staging posts, five of the aircraft arrived in Singapore within 15 hours of each other. The sixth had a propeller fault and was delayed on Midway.

So far in 1964 the Britannia had reacted to troubles in Cyprus, East Africa, Aden and British Guiana. It was now to respond to the situation in Malaysia. Indonesia opposed the formation of Malaysia with the merging, in 1963, of Sarawak and North Borneo with Malaya and Singapore. Indonesian President Sukarno declared a "Crush Malaysia" policy, which developed into "Confrontation", a military and economic harassment. Starting with guerrilla raids of Sarawak and Sabah, there followed, in September 1964, landings of small units in Malaya. This resulted in a massive reinforcement of the British Forces, which occupied almost the entire effort of the Britannia fleet.

In October the Britannias took on the responsibility for the trooping flights to Cyprus and Malta. These flights were to be a continuous commitment for the rest of the Britannia years; three times per week, flying families on posting to and from the Eastern Mediterranean. For the first time in their lives, the three Mark 2 aircraft (XN392, XN398 and XN404) came into their own. These were the three airframes that had had a chequered start to their Service career. Having been built to a civilian specification, for instance no strengthened freight floor, they arrived in the RAF via the Ministry of Supply, the original intention being that they should be operated on our behalf by a civilian company. Alongside their compatriots, the fully military Mark 1s, they had limitations. Although they were fitted with a freight door, the lack of a strengthened floor and the fact



Earl Mountbatten of Burma with the crew of XN404. Wing Commander Roy Jenkins is on the VVIP's right.

that some of the toilets and the galley were placed amidships, meant that their conversion to freight role was not practical. So, the lack of a general requirement for a totally passenger Britannia meant that they had spent their time being used almost entirely for training - and the occasional VIP flight. The advent of the "East Med" commitment meant that the Mark 2s came into their own.

The schedule became a favourite one with crews, although there was an initial hurdle to overcome, an 11pm departure!

It had been the intention, with the modernisation and expansion of the air transport force, that a smaller Army should be just as effective through it having the facility to be deployed rapidly by air. That this was being achieved had been amply demonstrated with the alerts of the year so far. It was confirmed in October and November with air mobility exercises to New Zealand and Barbados.

The former was an exchange of British and New Zealand units. To achieve this, crew changes were set up at Winnipeg, Honolulu, Guam and Fiji for the destination, Whennapai, near Auckland. It is recorded that there were a number of unservicabilities for the return run in November.

Exercise "Rum Jungle" saw the carriage of the 1st Battalion, The Worcester Regiment to Barbados to board Royal Navy ships for Dominica for jungle training. 1964 was the hardest year yet for the Britannias.

## The Rest of The Sixties

1965 saw the increase of "Confrontation" in the Far East and the build-up continued. Eleven flights were required in January to fly the Hong Kong based Gurkhas to Borneo. A mythology was to be built, and maintained over the years, that flying in the United States was difficult. Perhaps it was just a ploy to ensure the maintenance of flights with a difference - States Trainers. These were a regular feature over the years, and the first was flown in February taking in New York and Chicago. There was a distinguished first passenger, the Chief of the Air Staff? The aircraft Captain was also distinguished in his own right, Wing Commander Roy Jenkins AFC, OC 99 Squadron.

18 July 1965 saw XN404 ready for Flight 1097 to take the Chief of the Defence Staff, Earl Mountbatten of Burma, on the last official visit of his Service career. It was a little like old times as the Britannia Captain was Wing Commander Jenkins who had been Lord Louis' personal pilot in the past. The first leg was a direct flight to Aden. Stepping from the aircraft the CDS was greeted by a 19 gun salute, a Hunter flypast and a Guard of Honour provided by all three Services. Six hours later the VIP was being winged to the next engagement at Addis Ababa where he was to be the personal guest of His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Haile Selassie. The aircraft arrived over the airfield in a horrendous thunderstorm and it was inevitable that the "Doors Open" time would be delayed. Later the crew was congratulated on their timing. It meant that the arrival ceremony took place during the only dry spell of the afternoon!

The Britannias had inherited the strategic transport role from the Hastings, which had been a stalwart for many years. But the latter did not let go and continued to fly in other roles. One of these was parachute training. In the summer of 1965, an aircraft engaged in this task broke up in the air and all on board were killed.



A scene that was to dominate 1966 for Britannia people.

The Hastings were immediately and permanently grounded. This raised a task for the Britannias as there were still Hastings operating short range supply flights in the Far East. A Britannia plus crew was detached to Changi for several months to carry out these tasks.

The Squadron history seems to go very quiet for the latter part of 1965. Perhaps there was premonition. Something was around the corner and as the year progressed and Christmas approached, past records showed that this was the time for the Britannia fleet to get booted and spurred. Oil was to be the preoccupation.

Southern Africa had been in an uneasy state for a number of years with the delay of equality for the Black Africans. Rhodesia (previously Southern Rhodesia) was much troubled by these demands and there had been political unrest and disturbances. After an unsuccessful federation with Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) and Nyasaland (Malawi), ending in 1963, Rhodesia was once again a colony but one demanding independence. The British Government, supported by the United Nations, was seeking a constitution, fairer to the Africans, before granting that liberty.

The white demand for independence, maintaining the existing constitution, gained strength with a favouring result from a 1964 referendum and the re-election in 1965, by an overwhelming majority, of Prime Minister Ian Smith on a platform of white minority rule. In October discussions between the two governments ended in a stalemate and it was now seen as inevitable that the Rhodesians would take the law into their own hands and unilaterally declare independence. This duly happened on 11 November. The British government took their case to the United Nations declaring that rebellion had taken place and demanding UN action in the form of economic sanctions. This received general support and there followed the freezing of assets in the UK, blocking of Rhodesian exports and an oil embargo.

Landlocked Zambia was badly affected by all this and one form of relief was an agreement to supply the country with oil. With no sea port and very poor road communications, other than South to Rhodesia, the only way of accomplishing this was to be by air. Zambia also felt under some military threat and asked for assistance with air defence. The latter request was satisfied by the positioning of one of our Javelin squadrons at Lusaka airport. This also necessitated the provision of radar and communications and guarding provided by the RAF Regiment. The Britannia concern was to become known as "The Oil Lift". The first hint that something was afoot came with the positioning of a number of aircraft and crews in Nairobi at the end of November 1965. They were placed on standby. Things quietened, the immediate defence needs of Zambia had been satisfied and the aircraft and crews returned to the UK. Even as they returned the situation was changing and they were met, on arrival, with the news that the oil embargo was on. A plan evolved that the Britannias were to operate from, Zambia supportive, Tanzania, immediately. So, on 21 December 100+ Britannia air and ground crew proceeded to Dar es Salaam to form the Oil Lift Detachment which was to last until 31 October 1966, having flown in excess of 10,000 hours.

Six aircraft and twelve crews formed the air side; fifty technicians and air movements staff made up the balance. Things were quickly established. At Lusaka the Javelins were ensconced. They had discovered the sub-standard nature of the airfield; if they did not fly each day (or, at the least, move their aircraft) they started sinking into the concrete! Ndola was a similar airfield 180 miles to the North of Lusaka and the pattern was to be that we would fly alternate loads-to each of these.

There was some nervousness on the part of the Tanzanians in being party to this oil enterprise. This was heralded by the instruction to fly in civilian clothes and culminated in the withdrawal on 4 January to Nairobi.

Nairobi was to continue as our springboard to Zambia for the rest of the lift. The six aircraft flew two sorties a day carrying 56 x 44 gallon drums on each. The lot of the crews was to be on "earlies" (0500 take-off) or "lates" (land Nairobi 2200). The lot of the ground crews was to have a very drawn out day punctuated by three bursts of intense activity.

With its door sill over 10 feet from the ground, loading freight on a Britannia always

presented a challenge and this was certainly so when the load was to be 56 barrels. The only practical way was two at a time by fork lift; but one of the "Laws" of Air Transport is that if a fork lift is manoeuvred often close to an aircraft then, sooner or later, one of the forks will pierce the skin! A technique was developed to reduce the inevitability of this. The forklift was prepositioned below the freight door. It would lower its forks to the ground and two drums rolled on. With the forks now tilted back, they would be raised to the sill; there, with a gentle tip, they would be rolled into the aircraft. The empty forks would be then lowered for the process to be repeated. For unloading the procedure was reversed. A tilt as the barrels reached the ground was used to give them some impetus, which was seized upon by the local labour to keep them rolling to the lorry at the perimeter. It can happily be reported that the method stood the test of time and skins were not penetrated by forks!

As the aircraft taxied in, the Air Quartermaster would be unchaining the barrels. With all this, remarkable turn round times were accomplished - twenty minutes from landing to take-off was the record.

The military Mk1 Britannias had a reinforced freight floor, which was tough but not rugged enough to stand up to, the ravages of oil barrels. The rims could cause considerable damage and was part of the cost counted at the end of the day.

We were not alone in this oil relief. It is recorded that, by the end of February, 2,243,584 gallons had been air-lifted by the joint Royal Air Force, Royal Canadian Air Force and civilian contractors.

So, for 1966 a fair percentage of the Britannia fleet settled into a routine of three-week detachments in Nairobi punctuated with other miscellaneous activities. The Oil Lift officially ended on 31 October 1966 by which time the Britannia had flown in excess of 10,000 hours.

In May 99's mercy role had been exercised when eleven British victims of an Ascension Island road accident were flown home.

1967 was withdrawal year. It was now the intention to pull out of Aden and, as tension increased, the evacuation of Service families began in May. W for Withdrawal Day became 29 November. Much flexibility was required and there was a great possibility that the final pull out would be under fire. It was intended that the week long main lift would start nine days prior to this. Leaving the last two days free for any possible tactical withdrawal. Together with the Belfasts, VC10s and Hercules, the crews of 99 and 511 Squadrons with their Britannias assembled at Bahrain. In the event the lift of passengers and freight went smoothly. There was a cost, which hung over the Britannia fleet. In early October, during the build up, Britannia XL658 ran off the end of the Khormaksar runway into the shallow water - and mud. The 99 Squadron crew had experienced difficulty in selecting reverse thrust during the landing run. Only minor injuries ensued but the aircraft had to be destroyed as it constituted an obstruction on the approach to the runway - and time was short. Thus was lost the only RAF Britannia and that one would have been recoverable given a normal situation.

At this time 99 Squadron celebrated its 50th anniversary the event being attended by many past members.

The Britannia world was shrinking. The well trodden transport ground at Nicosia was abandoned and all activity concentrated at Akrotiri. Of larger proportion was the decision announced in 1968 to withdraw from Singapore and the Persian Gulf.

UDI-bound Rhodesia's Prime Minister Ian Smith's holding the world at bay was coming to an end.

A number of talks were being held and 99 Squadron ferried him from Ascension Island to Gibraltar for talks aboard HMS Fearless with Prime Minister Harold Wilson.

The death knell of the Britannia fleet was probably first sounded loud and clear in 1969 when the Defence White Paper declared our future concentration of defence effort in Europe with NATO.

Ever since the re-establishment of the Army as an attempted peace keeper in Northern Ireland in the early 60s, the Britannias had the task of unit changeovers, aeromedical evacuation

Station Commander, Group Captain Croucher marks the occasion of the last Lyneham route departure with a bottle of 'bubbly' for the crew. Captain Jimmy James accepts the bottle. To his right are copilot John Caskie and navigator Tony Bennett. Just a part of flight engineer Mike Hobbs is to be seen. Sadly, in spite of research, the ground crew cannot be identified.

and resupply. With most of the troops coming from Germany, "Banner" runs between Gutersloh and Aldergrove became a regular Britannia activity. In 1969, the violence had much increased and many flights were required, some at short notice.

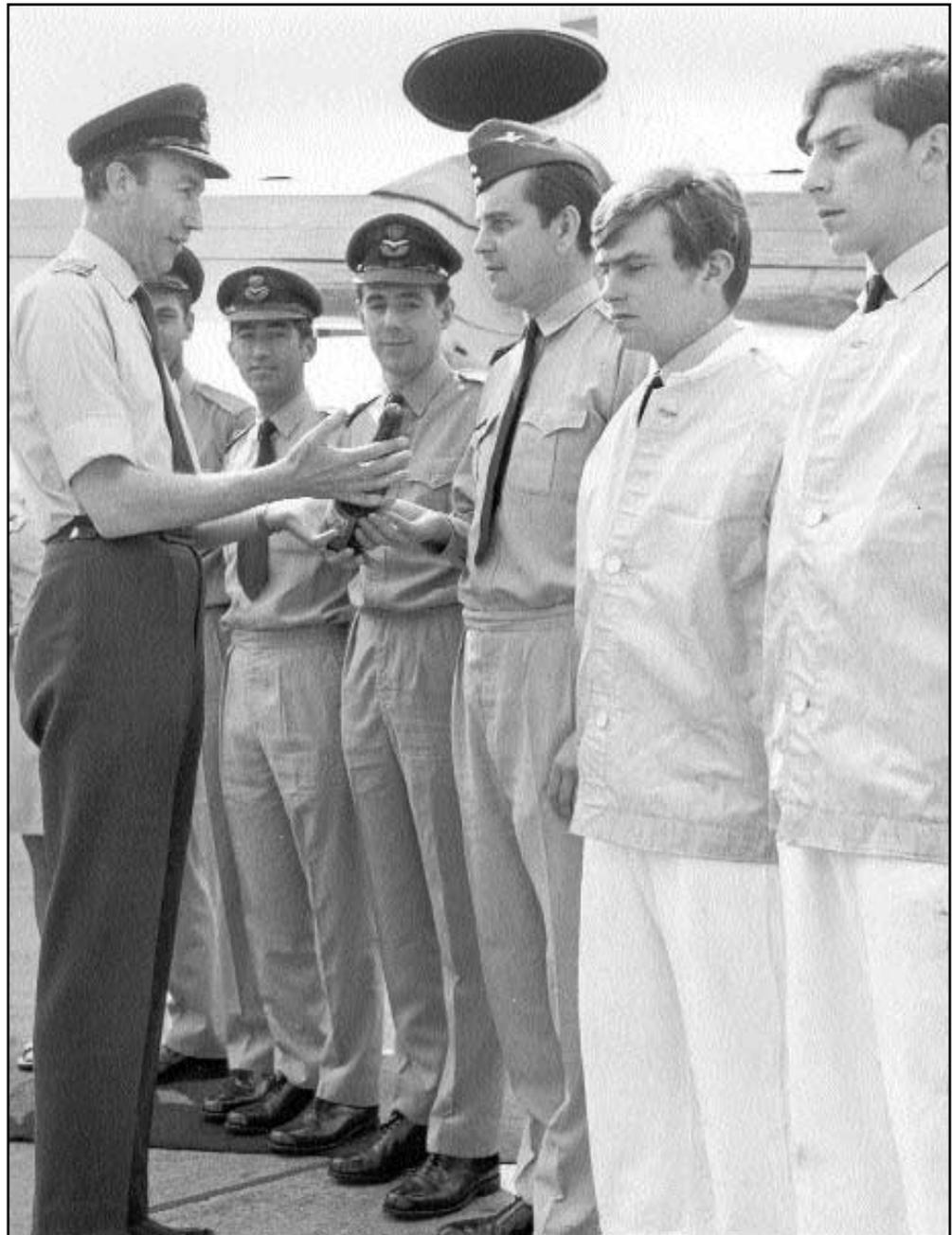
The standard Britannia crew consisted first of a captain, who would be "experienced". The lowest level that this reached was in the latter days of the aircraft's service when pilots came straight from training to be co-pilots. Some of them, after their third tour, became captains.

Generally captains had done two or three tours previous to their co-pilot tour on the Britannia (very few people went straight into the left hand seat) followed by a captaincy. This had been the tradition. It has to be said that when it was broken by the first tour co-pilots, they did extremely well.

The navigator again usually had experience of other aircraft, as did the engineer. But, again, recruits came straight from training as the awe of the aircraft, which was so strong in its early days, gradually eroded.

The fourth member of the crew was the signaller. The Britannia came into service when long range communication was conducted by Morse Code on HF radio and the signaller was, thus, a vital crew member. Sadly for them, a technical development (SSB) enabled long range communications to be conducted by voice - and pilots could speak! It was in 1969 that the signallers started being removed from crews on a route by route basis.

Finally there were those vital members "down the back". In the early days Air Quartermasters had no formal status - and no aircrew brevet. They had been generated from previous transport days when it had seemed a good idea to take along an extra "hand" to help with the loading, look after the passengers - and the food. This had become established to some



extent at the time of the Britannia's introduction and was an opportunity open to airmen of the Equipment Branch. However, returning to the early awe of the Britannia, several Master (Warrant Officer) Pilots were early AQMs! In 1962 it was decided that the responsibilities deserved proper recognition and the aircrew trade of "Air Quartermaster" was formally established and an aircrew brevet approved. Later, better to describe their role, the trade was renamed Air Loadmaster. The Britannia witnessed a progression in passenger care with the introduction of Air Stewards. These were Corporals recruited from the Catering Branch for just one tour, executing their waiting skills in the air. The concept of this was received with some reserve. It proved very successful and survives to this day.

## Moving Time

Royal Air Force Lyneham had been the home of 99 Squadron ever since 1947 - for 511 a lesser time. 1970 was to see the end of this long run. It had been decided that Lyneham should be the Hercules base and that the Britannias move to RAF Brize Norton alongside the other long range strategic transport aircraft, the VC 10s and the Belfasts. There were some misgivings about this. Lyneham fitted comfortably, rather like an old shoe. For the Britannia re-equipment, purpose-built Squadron accommodation had been provided. At Brize Norton Squadron members felt like poor relations reflected in the much inferior squadron buildings, which were located on the non-domestic side of the airfield. But resilience is an aircrew feature and before long the Squadron was comfortably settled in.

The move had been carefully planned and route flying continued almost unabated. Over the period of the move, aircraft would depart on route from Lyneham and return to Brize Norton. The last route aircraft departed Lyneham on 15th June 1970.

1970 was a busy year. It started with some pomp when an aircraft of 99 Squadron conveyed the band of the Royal Scots Greys to celebrations in connection with Chile's celebration of its 150th year of independence. Withdrawal was a continuing feature and, without a great deal of regret, El Adem, which was a long standing staging post and exercise airfield in North Africa, was evacuated. Westabout reinforcement of the Far East was exercised. The routing for this was Gander, Newfoundland; Offutt AFB, Nebraska; McClellan AFB, Sacramento; Hickham AFB, Honolulu; Nandi, Fiji; Guam then the final destination Changi.

Further attention was paid to the Far East. The intended withdrawal from the region was approaching and reassurance was being given that the area was not being totally abandoned.



Turnround time at Gibraltar.

Treaties would be honoured. Exercise Bersatu Padu, in which five nations participated from April to August, demonstrated how effectively and quickly support could be provided. 99 and 511 Squadrons played its part in the massive positioning and recovery required and the necessary re-supply. Training was carried out in the conditions likely to be met in contingency reinforcement after withdrawal.

For most of its Britannia years 99 Squadron had a distinguished Polish pilot as one of its captains. Fit Lt (later Sqn Ldr) 'Wed' Wedrychowski had experienced more challenges by the

time he was 21 than most people experience in a life time. An appropriate task arose for him in May 1970.

The Polish wartime leader, General Anders, famed for the Monte Cassino epic, had died in London and it was his wish that he should be buried with his fallen comrades at the site of the battle. No 99 Squadron was honoured by being tasked with the carriage of the coffin and mourners to Rome, and Flight Lieutenant Wedrychowski was selected to captain the flight. His crew was Flying Officer Manktelow, Flight Lieutenant Halbert, Flight Lieutenant Lawson, Sergeant Westaway, Sergeant Kelling (WRAF) and Corporal Mallon. The selected aircraft was polished and spruced up until it shone like a "brand new Britannia".

The flight was tasked via Gatwick to Rome/Fiumicino. On the day of the flight, Gatwick was inundated by aircraft as a result of a French Air Traffic Service strike and would not accept the Britannia. However, the harassed airport manager was eventually persuaded that the mission was important and sensitive, and the Britannia was permitted to join the throng of aircraft at Gatwick, albeit at a later time than planned.

The departure from Gatwick was slightly delayed due to air traffic congestion along the French airways, but the flight got underway in time to make "doors open" time at Fiumicino. In the early stage of the flight the captain prepared his VIP passenger address-message in a language quite unlike the "Blackpool English" he professed to speak, and eventually delivered it through the public address system to the bereaved family and the remainder of the party which included three Generals, three Bishops, an Ambassador and the Guard of Honour. Bearing in mind the solemn occasion, the crew - the Air Quarter Masters in particular - made a very worthy effort to ensure a comfortable flight; and judging from the compliments subsequently received, they had succeeded. Arrival at Rome/Fiumicino was on time. The Britannia was met by a Guard of Honour from the Italian Army, Navy and Air Force. Flight Lieutenant Wedrychowski and four members of his crew were invited to accompany the VIP party to Monte Cassino for the interment ceremony. The following morning came a long drive to Monte Cassino.

The Monastery itself presented a most imposing sight with almost a sheer vertical approach. It is on record that in the initial Polish attack on the peak only forty survived out of eight hundred. Nearly two thousand Poles died in the attempt, but they did not capture the monastery. On arrival at the top, the party was confronted by a most impressive view of thousands of crosses, stark reminders of the bitter fight for Monte Cassino. After the ceremony, came the long road journey back to Rome followed by the return flight to the United Kingdom.

Many times in its history, the RAF Britannia had rescued British Nationals from sticky situations throughout the world. One such event took place in June. An aircraft was re-routed from Cyprus to Beirut to pick up refugees from Amman. Among the passengers was Squadron Leader P R O'Connor DFC RAF (ret'd) who had been CO of 99 Squadron from May to September 1944! The next month there was another rescue, following a coup d'etat in Muscat and Oman, His Highness Sultan Said bin Taimur, Sultan of Muscat and Oman was flown on an special aeromedical flight from Cyprus to Brize Norton. 1970 concluded with yet another Far East exercise - "Sunflower".

Past members of 99 and 511 Squadrons, who served when they fulfilled a role different from their latter-day transport tasks, might muse on the different life style, to theirs, of Britannia aircrew. Whilst the way of life might have seemed glamorous to many, especially with the publicity that would surround the more exotic flights, there was much routine hard work. The constant demand on men and machines was the "Changi Slip". Up to September 1971, when our rundown of forces in Singapore had reached a level not to require it, an aircraft left daily for Changi, changing crews in Aden (later the Persian Gulf) and Singapore. This meant that the aircraft was out and back in three days. For the crews it meant a planned ten days away but because of delays this could stretch up to three weeks. The average Squadron member would complete one of these most months. Then there were shorter times away, the Mediterranean trooping flights,

movement of BAOR units, Norway exercises - Gibraltar, Sardinia. Exercises could range the world. Flights in North America became more commonplace as the years passed. So the month's line against each name would be fairly full with route flights.

Then there was training. Britannia-equipped 99 and 511 Squadrons inherited what had become the traditional training pattern for transport squadrons. Monthly continuation training, in the air and the simulator, was carried out at squadron level. Then each squadron member would, at an interval dependent on the "Category" he held, present himself to the examiners for a "recat". For pilots this consisted of a day and night flying test, simulator check and ground examination. There was also a check during a route flight. The instant pass/failure nature of this was replaced, in later years, by a Periodic Refresher Training scheme. A squadron crew would spend a fortnight together, under OCU instructors, being retrained; and their new category was assessed at the end of the period.

Reaction was an essential ingredient of this modern and effective transport force so two crews were always available at six hours notice. Other standbys would be instituted, as circumstance demanded. There was also a Duty Working Crew who would carry out air tests and other odd jobs.

Add all this together - route flights, monthly training, duty crews - then there were station duties, leave, courses - even the odd bit of sickness - and each month was pretty full. In the early days tour lengths were the traditional 21/2 years. The nonsense of this was realised after a while and most people completed at least five years on the aircraft; many, with a spell as instructors say, much longer.

So there was a marked degree of stability by Service standards. Buying of houses became a satisfying domestic feature. Whilst a lot of time was spent away from home, the policy when back at base was not to hang around the Squadron if there was nothing to be done. All this



A passenger's view of the approach to Kathmandu.

added up to a busy life, but one with which most squadron members were very content.

## The End in Sight?

1971 was a Royal year for Brize Norton. Her Majesty The Queen visited on 12 March. A 99 Squadron crew was presented to Her Majesty.

As well as the Singapore rundown, 1971 saw our withdrawal from Bahrain. RAF Muharraq had been our staging post in the Persian Gulf for many years. It even sported dedicated transit accommodation for transport crews, Britannia House.

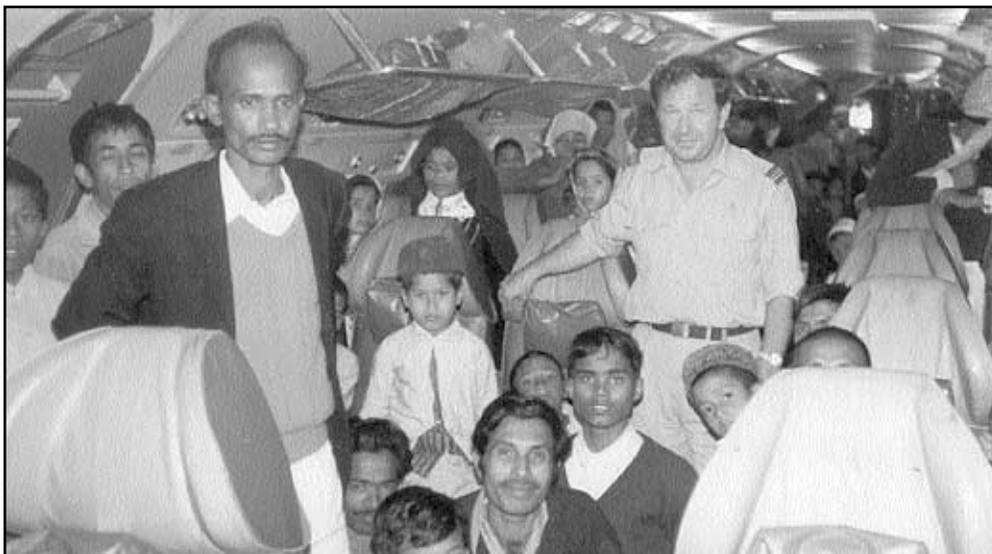
Part of RAF life is inter-Squadron rivalry. Even though 99 worked so closely with them, 511 was a constant target. But, perhaps, the prime target was the old Lyneham compatriots, 216 with their Comet 4s. They had remained at Lyneham and were now a dedicated VIP flying squadron. There was a lot of 99 delight when, in September, there was a callout for an aircraft to go to Thessalonika to transport the Commander in Chief Air Support Command to Naples and thence to the UK when his Comet became unserviceable!

Uneventful hours of flying from one point to another produced many boredom breaking crew activities. One such event took place on a Gutersloh flight in October when the Captain, Copilot, Navigator and Engineer calculated that the total of their RAF service was 112 years! There is a point here for readers of the wartime and immediate post-war period when it seemed the belief was that if you flew beyond the age of 40 you would crash! Fifty five was now the Specialist Air Crew retirement age and most flew to this point.

Yet another withdrawal area was Malta. Led by Prime Minister Dom Mintoff, the mood was for the British to go. Talks took place throughout the year with Lord Carrington, the Minister of Defence, over the future of the island's military bases and the Britannia was on constant call as the VIP transport. Lesser mortals were also conveyed as the evacuation of military dependants was accelerated.

There was a further Royal connection for 99 in March. HM The Queen visited Mauritius and a Britannia conveyed the Royal Mauritius Standard and members of the press. For many years there had been a route diversion with a difference for Squadron members. Every three months an aircraft on the "Changi Slip" would be extended to Osan, Korea. This was to exchange the UN Honour Guard of the UN Peace Keeping Force, a long left over legacy of the Korean War and the disputed 38th Parallel.

The UK's declared greater involvement in NATO, with a decreasing global role, was tested



Norman Rose amongst his 'Operation Lucan' passengers.

in September "Strong Express", a huge European exercise. Also in September there was yet another Command structure change, which reflected the change in our defence philosophy. The title "Transport Command" had disappeared in 1967 when it was recognised that one Command should embrace all elements of "Air Support". Under the one commander would

not only be the strategic and tactical aircraft but also the offensive support which then included Harrier and Phantom aircraft. This smoothed the control of all these elements in their co-operation with the Army. The necessity for this was no less in 1972 but it was decided to have a single Operational Command within the Royal Air Force and Air Support Command was absorbed into Strike Command.

The story and traditions of the Gurkhas are familiar. One feature is the recruitment with days of walking to the recruiting centres. Later followed a demanding land and sea journey for the lucky few and their dependants. It was decided that this aspect should be alleviated with the provision of an airlift. From 1972 the crews of 99, along with their 511 compatriots, manned a three month detachment in Hong Kong dedicated to this task. An element of it was that en route to Kathmandu the aircraft had to refuel at Calcutta. The Indians were incredibly sensitive about such flights with military overtones and insisted on them being operated to a very tight schedule in order to stay within the diplomatic clearance given. For this reason, on the three mornings that the aircraft were scheduled to depart Hong Kong, two aircraft would be prepared and ready to go. It is known that the Gurkhas recognised the service given. The signal that closed the detachment in 1975 was sent by the Major General, Brigade of Gurkhas to the Britannia Detachment at Hong Kong in December:

*'Time and tide waits for neither man nor fine old aircraft and we are all sad that the three year Gurkha connection with 99/511 Squadrons and the Britannias is now to end. Literally thousands of Gurkha servicemen and their families have happily, safely and comfortably spanned the airspace between Hong Kong, Brunei and Kathmandu during this time. One of the outward and visible signs that your aircrews got satisfaction from this challenging operation was the fact that before arrival in Kathmandu they would, when changing into plain clothes, put on those kukri tie-pins which became, we believe, their special pride. We would like you to know that this small touch and its underlying thought was not missed by a single one of your passengers to whose respect for your aircrew was thereby added an unspoken but heartfelt bond of comradeship. Thank you all.'*

Publicity can be good or bad. Both surrounded an activity of 99 Squadron in January 1972 when an aircraft flew into Cairo to collect some of the Tutankhamen treasures for exhibition in London. That such a responsibility was thus placed received due media attention. However, sensation was later made of the occasion by the "News of the World" which alleged that the mythical Tutankhamen Curse had taken its toll of the crew. Indeed some misfortunes had occurred but no more than the average bad luck. These were magnified out of all proportion - and the effect was heightened further by the addition of manufactured incidents.

## A Time of Gloom

The story so far tells how the Britannias were called upon to support a great variety of tasks throughout the world. One of the strangest of these occurred in 1973. Britain was in dispute with Iceland over territorial waters and the associated fishing rights. This resulted in many skirmishes between British fishing vessels and Icelandic gunboats. The Royal Navy attempted to police the area. Airborne surveillance provided vital intelligence and the maritime Nimrod aircraft were hard pressed to keep up the constant watch. This reached a point in July when it was decided that the Britannias could ease the situation by flying some of the patrols.

Aircraft were detached to Kinloss. The normal Britannia crew was supplemented by a Nimrod Captain and Navigator and four observers. Sorties over nine hours long were flown with six hours on task reporting the positions of our own fishing vessels and hostile patrol boats. It was

reported that the results obtained were far better than expected. The task continued into August resulting in a very busy month. 2517 hours were flown.

October brought a complete change of scene and the sad business of moving people as a result of war and political and religious difference. East Pakistan had fought for its independence from West Pakistan for a number of years and now with it established as Bangladesh there were 160,000 POWs and refugees in the 'wrong' country. Thousands of Bengalis in Pakistan wanted to be in Bangladesh. Equally non-Bengalis in Bangladesh felt they should be in Pakistan. The UK had agreed to assist in the UN repatriation scheme and Operation Lucan was launched. Four crews and two aircraft were established at Karachi to fly two round trips per day to Dacca. Later the collection point was Chittagong. Up to 136 passengers were carried and they were in an appalling state. Many crew members were badly affected by the plight of these people. The detachment ceased in February 1974 and in its time it moved over 16,000 people from Pakistan to Bangladesh and nearly 14,000 in the opposite direction.

1974 brought economic gloom with the three day week. Fuel was short and this affected the amount of flying done. But July made up for this when the situation in Cyprus deteriorated to the point when it was decided to evacuate all dependants and any British Nationals who wished to leave. This extended, as the situation worsened, to include holidaymakers of a variety of nationalities caught up in the chaos. It was a maximum effort for 99 and 511 Squadron crews. Facilities at Akrotiri were stretched and after minimum time on the ground, the flight back to the UK would commence. The situation was complicated by the fact that the Brize Norton runway was being resurfaced and all operations were in and out of Fairford. With just 14 hours rest, crews were off again to collect another full passenger load. In all nearly 1600 people were air lifted. One aircraft was a "Stork Special". Medical staff were carried and all the pregnant women and those with young babies were brought on the one aircraft. A "Pet Special" was also required! The unsettled East Mediterranean situation continued to affect aircraft routings through the year. After a long standing ban, overflight of Egypt was negotiated in order to overcome some of the difficulty.

The sad news of 1974 was the defence cuts proposed by the then Labour Government. They confirmed our closer involvement with NATO and reduction of global commitments. Many reinforcement forces would not be required. All this spelt out a cutback of the air transport force; the final reduction was subsequently declared as one half and this would include the Britannia fleet.

In January 1975 the Air Officer Commanding in Chief Strike Command, ACM Sir Dennis Smallwood, visited the Squadrons at Brize Norton to give brief details of the effects of the defence cuts. The news was that the rundown of the Britannia force would start in April and be complete by March 1976. This duly happened with the aircraft disappearing one by one to Kemble where they were stored pending sale. As the number of aircraft decreased, accompanied by the posting out of aircrew, it became no longer viable to run two Squadrons and a pool of aircrew was formed under the command of the last CO of 99 Squadron, Wing Commander Geoff Bowles.

The last operational Britannia task was a trooping flight for the Gurkhas to and from Nepal in December and the final ceremonial task was on 8 June 1976 with the laying up of the 99 Squadron Standard at the Royal Air Force College, Cranwell.

So a chapter in Royal Air Force history closed. 99 and 511 Squadrons, after a long and noble history were no more. The Britannia era provided a fitting finale to their distinguished record.

But 99 was to rise again! It is now Globemaster equipped at RAF Brize Norton.



It is almost as if the compatriot VC10 could not bear to watch the sad occasion of the disbandment parade.

There is available a full history of the RAF Britannia.

Go to [www.keyhambooks.freemove.co.uk/kb012.htm](http://www.keyhambooks.freemove.co.uk/kb012.htm) for details.