

Harding Keith

Group Captain Keith Owen Harding RAF (rtd)

Born: 10 December 1937, Khartoum, Anglo Egyptian Sudan

School: Barnstaple Grammar School

Married to Penelope Jane, 2 children, son and daughter

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RN Career: BRNC Dartmouth, (Vincent) Jan 1954 - Autumn '54.

MN Career: Radio Officer, Jul-Nov 1966,

RAF Career: Nov '66-Dec'90 Pilot

MEMOIRS

I followed my eldest brother to Dartmouth and was very happy there for one and a half terms. It is still a mystery to me why I should have enjoyed such rigorous routines. But the PTI's noticed my inability to touch my toes and at that point it was off to Stonehouse hospital for weeks of tests and eventually the decision that I was not fit for naval service. I was still keen to go to sea so applied to numerous shipping companies to become a cadet/apprentice. None of them would accept me because I was then over sixteen so I did a Radio Officer course and went to sea in a coaster, SS Essexbrook. She had been launched in 1912, 1700 tons, coal fired and staggered around the North Sea mainly carrying coal. The captain and first mate were Geordies, the second mate Latvian, the engineer (there was only one) was Spanish, the sailors Indian throw outs from reputable companies and the stokers Arab. The captain didn't trust the Indians on the wheel in narrow waters so when a pilot came on board I used to take the wheel but continue maintaining a radio watch through a long lead to the radio cabin. One Thames pilot commented "All you need now Sparks is a broom up your arse and you could sweep the deck". It was rather different from Dartmouth!! I even tried stoking but I wasn't a natural at it and I didn't have a batman to wash my clothes afterwards. It was mainly a fascinating change from my previous ways of life but, young and foolish though I was, it was obvious, even to me, that this was not a serious long term career.

I then did something that was even more foolish, you might think. My sister's husband, an RAF flying instructor on exchange with the Dutch Air Force, was killed in an air collision. I had never thought of joining the RAF but it occurred to me that it must be quite an exciting pastime so why not? There was no reason why I should tell their Air Ships about my previous naval experience. All went well and to my surprise I was selected for pilot training. Years later I learnt from a reliable source that the RAF did know about my departure from the RN but the RAF surgeon who accepted me was an old enemy of the RN surgeon who discharged me. He was supposed to have said "The man always was a fool – nothing wrong with the lad". By this stage of my career I knew enough about inter-service rivalry not to disbelieve the story. My mother was not amused by this unexpected turn of events but after I had survived training in Canada, which she never thought for a moment that I would, she became accustomed to the idea and she liked the colour of the uniform.

My career followed a rather unusual pattern and by 1964 I was serving at RAF Luqa in Malta on a ground tour as Station Intelligence Officer, OC RAF Police Flight and Station PRO as well as Mess Accountant, all jobs for which I was decidedly unqualified. But as luck would have it I came across an officer from my Dartmouth Term, Peter Marden, whose ship was briefly in Malta on her way home from the Far East. We have kept in touch ever since. Peter as many of you will know was a member of the Flotilla until recently and when I moved to the area 11 years ago he invited me to a lecture with an aviation interest. I enjoyed the evening and was invited to another. I cannot remember whether he or I suggested, half-jokingly, that as a

sort-of ex-RN Officer I should join the Flotilla. The Chairman at the time could not think quickly enough of a convincing objection.

And that, Gentlemen and Ladies, explains something that you have always wondered about: why do we have a bloody crab in the Flotilla?

You may now be wondering how I spent the 34 years of my RAF service, that is other than the three year ground tour swanning it in Malta. Put simply my main aim was to go from flying tour to flying tour and when that was impossible to stay as far away from RAF authority as possible and definitely far away from staff posts. In this I would claim to have been unusually successful. I called my technique "tactical volunteering". After flying training in Canada I flew Shackletons based in Singapore and then Ballykelly, then after Malta, two tours flying helicopters based in UK and Germany. Then tactical volunteering was really tested. As Staff College appeared inevitable I judged that the Air Secretary would be only too happy if I volunteered to go to Sandhurst and didn't infect Bracknell. He was delighted. At Sandhurst, as long as I polished my shoes and turned up on time for lectures most of my errors were forgiven on the basis that I was a crab so what do you expect? The only problem I had there was when a Ugandan student at the end of a discussion which became rather technical asked "what is this thing radar". The instructor, who was a cavalry officer, was clever enough to say "well Keith should know about these things, he will explain" Difficult when you don't have a Navigator or Air Electronics Officer at hand.

Following Staff College a staff tour, probably MOD, was normal but all was not lost. A new post, RAF Liaison Officer, School of infantry, had been established. No one in the Air Secretary's Branch had a clue what this RAFLO was supposed to do (or cared) so I had a blissful two and a half years being driven over Salisbury Plain in a Ferret Scout Car looking like Rommel and calling in ground attack fighters for simulated attacks on infantry exercises, giving lectures about the terrifying effects of the real fighter attacks and enjoying a three week equitation course with the Household Cavalry at Windsor.

Having established my credibility as a rider (I was described in my course report as "good in stables" which presumably qualified me as a groom) the next obvious tour was a year at HQ Northern Ireland as Air Support Officer Northern Ireland. My role here, as I saw it, was to ensure that the helicopters of all three services provided the best possible support for the army. This included finding new tasks such as destroying bridges by dropping concrete blocks on them to prevent the IRA sneaking over from Ireland (which worked) and blowing up suspect cars left on country roads with an explosive charge suspended from a 500 foot strop (which was not allowed because trials proved that it was as likely to destroy the helicopter as the car). It was a very interesting tour.

It was easy to convince the Air Secretary that after this stressful (joke!) time with the army I needed a break so he sent me to the Joint Forces Staff College in Norfolk Virginia. It actually was the idlest eight months of my career. So I was now ready to command 33 Sqn at RAF Odiham. During my two year tour, which I managed to get extended by six months, the Squadron provided a four aircraft detachment to Belize for half of the year and to NI for the other half and took part in regular exercises in Germany, Norway and elsewhere in Europe. Obviously I spent considerable time visiting the chaps and joining in the flying.

My next three posts, which all provided escape from conventional staff jobs, were: Defence and Air Attache in Oslo, OC Ops Wing and Deputy Station Commander at RAF Odiham and Deputy Chief of the British Commanders'-in-Chief Mission to the Soviet Forces in Germany (BRIXMIS). Explaining the later would take far too long but a photo is attached and I suggest that if you are curious you resort to your computer. It is all there, or most of it.

My final tour, caught at last for a staff job but never MOD, I went to 38 Gp at RAF Upavon as Group Captain Transport and Helicopters. At least I could fly a helicopter occasionally and fly on some of the more interesting transport routes. Retirement came in 1990 and seven years as Defence Adviser with Westland Helicopters. I hope that this rather long "Dit" at least demonstrates that not all RAF pilots, when not flying, sit in MOD doing nothing but trying to pull a fast one on the RN. As if we would!!



My farewell lunch in our mission house in Potsdam, East Germany, May 1988 with some of the KGB officers who monitored us. They presented me with this model of a Soviet fighter which they said that they “had noticed that I had taken particular interest in”.



Dining with Peni my wife next to me

