

Lieutenant Commander Michael William (Mike) Tothill Royal Navy (1935-2021)



Mike Tothill was born in Cockwood, a village on the Exe estuary in South Devon, and brought up in a small house 2 miles away in the hamlet of Easton. He attended Cockwood Primary School and then Teignmouth Grammar School where, although obviously very bright, he was not a great academic, devoting himself mainly to those subjects he enjoyed – mainly games, where he excelled, and maths.

Mike left school at 16 having completed O Levels and joined the Royal Navy at HMS FISGARD as a Radio Electronic Artificer on 10th September 1951. During the late 1950s he served at a number of long forgotten Naval Air Stations including Worthy Down (HMS AERIAL) and Ford (HMS PEREGRINE). In 1960/61 as a “Tiffy” First Class he was part of the engineering team on 814 Squadron who at that time were based at RNAS Culdrose flying Whirlwinds. During his time on 814, they embarked in HMS HERMES for her first Commission to the Far East. Notable runs ashore include Aden, Colombo, Singapore, Hong Kong and Subic Bay in the Philippines. Further jobs ensued at Culdrose before Mike was selected for promotion to Sub Lieutenant on the Special Duties List in February 1965.

His first appointment as an officer was at RNAS Portland as the DAEO of 737 Squadron. He then joined 829 Squadron as HQ Air Engineer Officer before moving to the Aeroplane and Armament Experimental Establishment at Boscombe Down in Wiltshire to serve on the staff of 22 Joint Special Trials Unit as the Senior Naval Officer on the Martel Missile project that went on to equip both RN and RAF aircraft. The Lieutenants’ Greenwich Course followed, before he rejoined 829 Squadron as the Roving AEO. His role here was to provide HQ engineering assistance to the Senior Maintenance Ratings of the very large number of embarked Wasp flights. Many a short-notice requirement would come in that would necessitate his assistance in such “awful” places as the West Indies, South Africa and Gibraltar. There followed a deployment to the west coast of the USA and Canada as the AEO of the AUTEK Trials Team embarked in RFA ENGADINE, the purpose of which was to trial the Mk 46 Torpedo prior to introduction into UK service and involved trials in the Bahamas and on the eastern side of Vancouver Island using Sea King, Wessex 3 and Wasp helicopters. Further roles included: Deputy AEO of 706 NAS at

Culdrose; on the Aviation Staff of Flag Officer Carrier and Amphibious Ships (FOCAS); and as a desk officer on the staff of Head of the Aircraft Department (Navy) within the MOD's Procurement Executive. In November 1980 he joined 737 Squadron once again, this time as the Air Engineering Officer. 737 Squadron was the last squadron in the RN to operate the Wessex 3 helicopter, conducting Observer training and also parenting the last remaining Wessex 3 Flights at sea in HMS ANTRIM and HMS GLAMORGAN. It was during his tenure here that the Falklands War took place. Mike left 737 in Feb 83 on disbandment of the squadron and retirement of the Wessex 3 from RN Service. Mike's last appointment in the Navy was as Head of Workshop Practice at RNEC Manadon, and he retired in August 1985. After the Navy, Mike had roles as the General Manager of Jersey European Airways, later to become Flybe, and then as an Independent Financial Advisor.

On leaving the Services, he took up golf and became the Vets Captain at the Warren Golf Club in South Devon. By this time, he was living once again in Cockwood in the house next door to where he was born. Here, he was a larger than life contributor to village life including being the Secretary of the Cockwood Green Committee, where he was instrumental in securing the lease of the green for the village. Always a "party animal" he lived life to the full.

Mike met his wife Joy, when she was in Devon with her parents on holiday following the war; she was 11 and he was 14. He proposed when Joy was 17 and a year later they married in London. Together they had 3 sons of whom he was immensely proud: Nick (a retired Pusser Captain); Mark (a Chartered Accountant and CFO) and Simon (a Chartered Surveyor and Development Director). He was also a much-loved grandfather to 7 grandchildren.

Mike was diagnosed with Vascular Dementia in 2019, a dreadful progressive disease. Following a period in a care home, he died in the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital on 18th August 2021 aged 86. The funeral took place on 13th September at St Mary's Church at Cofton; the church in which he was christened and confirmed. He was laid to rest in St Mary's churchyard alongside his parents and grandparents.