

Mike Shorter writes....

My father, Alfred Shorter, who died in 2003, used to find pleasure in recording his thoughts in his later years and I remembered he had a few lines about the TSR2 which are below.

At the time he was I suppose a contractor as he was working for Vickers Supermarine at Woolston in Southampton. The men from Vickers would join coaches at Woolston and travel to Weybridge each day. The days were long and hard but there were compensations.

Father did not work all his life in aircraft and started as a butcher boy but the war for all its bad side also produced some benefits for lucky people. He was soon recognised as suitable for work in the REME and following the war became a motor mechanic but was recruited by Follands at Hamble and then by Vickers at Woolston as a fitter and became skilled at it.

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At the time we were so busy on the TSR.2, they were also building the first VC10. It must have been about 1964 when the prototype (VC10) took off from Weybridge. They had to make erect huge diffusers at the railway embankment end of the runway because there was a fear that when the wicks were all wound up, the jet efflux might blow a passing train off the tracks. About two thirds along the runway they painted a yellow strip about ten feet wide across the runway. That was the point of no return. The pilot could not abort after he had passed it. Takeoff time was to be at 17.30. Fortunately, I was on days when this took place. The whole works turned to watch including the office staff. I found it to be very exciting. It was a big aircraft in its day, and all were tensed up when he run up the four big jets on his tail and released the brake. It quickly gathered speed and to our surprise, had only travelled half the distance to the yellow line when the nose

went up and the aircraft followed it. It roared up at an angle of forty-five degrees and the noise of the jet engines was awesome in its intensity. It was a very welcome thing when Rolls-Royce brought out the big fan jets. They cut the noise down considerably.

After various flight trials, and by the way, that prototype had no seats in it, but was packed with electronic recording equipment that did the most marvellous things, even to record the stress on the skin of the plane, they found that the de-icing layout in the leading edge of the tail plane was not efficient enough. So a mod had to be carried out. The VC10 had a high tail plane fitted on top of the rudder fin. There were two hangars specially built for these aircraft, and these hangars were called the Cathedral and the Abbey. When scaffolding was erected to work on the tail plane, one was working 48 feet up. We carried out the mod on several tail planes. It was called the Piccolo mod because of the pipes we installed that had holes drilled in them giving the effect of that instrument.

It was all very interesting work there. As I said, I had been travelling up there for three years, when suddenly, on a Thursday night we went in to get the coach and Jack Pollock, the senior foreman was waiting for us. He said dramatically, "Go back home. It's all over. You won't be going back there any more." We were astounded at the announcement. I said to him, "Hang on a minute Jack. What the hell is this all about?" "It's Wilson. He's cancelled the project". Wilson was Prime Minister at the time and I had felt for some time that he wanted to cancel the TSR2 and buy the American F1-11. Well, he'd done it. Nevertheless, at that moment I was not concerned with the cancellation of the TSR2. "So we won't be going back to Weybridge any more, eh Jack?" I asked the foreman. "No nipper, it's all finished". "What will they be doing with our tools up there. Raffling them?" I put the question to him as sarcastically as I could. That point apparently had not occurred to all my mates. There was nearly a riot. "I think you had better get some transport laid on Jack. I've two boxes of my own tools up there. If Vickers don't mind me putting in a bill to replace them, then forget it. If not, get the transport." He dashed off to do some phoning

and we just hung around until the transportation arrived. Then off we went and sorted out all our gear, returned to the store stuff we had signed out, and when we were ready, came on back. I think it took us the best part of the night.

When we got back there was someone there waiting for us to tell us what to do. I had to report back that night. When I got there, a chargehand by the name of Joe Davis was in charge. He told me that he had no work for me only rough grinding. I just shrugged my shoulders. There was a separate building for that job. It was a boring and dirty job, and I was working over there on my own. I could now see the way the cookie was going to crumble. They wanted me to hand my notice in. On the other hand, I knew that if they had no work for me they would be forced to make me redundant, and I therefore would be due for some redundancy pay. So I stuck it out. I went down there every night and worked on my own in the cold doing a rotten job. Then, after about a fortnight Joe came to me and said that he had a job for me. Great, says I. I asked what it was. He told me in the machine shop. I played the innocent. "What fitting do they want done in the machine shop Joe?" I asked, all innocence and sweetness. "It's not fitting. It's on the machines", he told me. I looked at him for a second or two and told him that if he looked at my record sheet he would see that I was employed as an airframe fitter, not a machine minder. He countered that by saying that was all the work they had. If I didn't do that, I should be made redundant. "So be it, Joe. You let me know". I went over to the grinding bay.

Sure enough, the next night I had my redundancy notice. I was paid the princely sum of £250, which was rather a lot of money in those days. I left there and went straight down to Fleetlands, the Royal Naval Aircraft Yard at Gosport, and got another job. It was overhauling the self same Scimitars we had built.