

Background

In 1951 I was a penniless apprentice with an engineering company in Braintree in Essex. I had done my 'porridge' at the local technical college and unlike most pupils at the time I was actually interested in my studies. In my spare time I went cycling with Braintree Wheelers and during the week I also used to play the violin, mostly to myself and to some extremely tolerant neighbours.

However, King George VI must have heard me play and decided that it would be far better if I were employed mending the aircraft of his flying club. For some reason, which eludes me, it was named the RAF. I was sent to a place called RAF West Raynham in Norfolk to practice getting frostbite. Never really took to the place. They had aeroplanes but they didn't have those great big fan things on the front of the wings, they had tubes that pushed them along that looked like vacuum cleaners. They had been designed by some eccentric English boffin called Whittle, ignored by his illustrious superiors in the Ministry of Defence, who considered them to be unworkable.

In 1953 King George's daughter, Liz, decided that I had done enough damage to her flying club and they would prefer to mend their own aircraft themselves in future, so they sent me to a place called civvy street. As a veteran she sent me a little badge with a note of thanks signed by a cleaner in Whitehall, some fifty-four years later, in recognition of my services for keeping my bed-space nearly clean and almost tidy.

I returned to making useful mechanical things out of bits of metal at the company I had been apprenticed, from where I had been press-ganged into the RAF flying club, some two years earlier.

Being involved with Liz's playthings such as the Meteor, Vampire, Venom, Swift, Hunter, DH110, Avro's 707 (A,B and C) and great big things called Victor, Valiant and Vulcan. I wanted to stay involved with aviation developments.

Marconi's

I joined Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Company after being released from my apprenticeship and joined their Aeronautical Division to participate in designing radio sets for aircraft at Writtle. One of the aircraft was something called the TSR2. There was also another thing called the SST, it was later named Concorde. Because of their speed and range a particularly powerful transmitter was required to enable the pilot, Flash Gordon, to keep in touch with his bookmaker whilst looking out the window at the scenery. I was required to do the mechanical design bit, in between getting married, having two children and playing golf.

Visit to Weybridge

To put a powerful transmitter of 1kW output into a little box the size of a brown ale crate, posed a few headaches. I was

having design problems of getting the waste heat away. I had a contact in Vickers DO but we were restricted to what we could say over the 'phone. I needed to talk with him directly and arranged to go down to Weybridge to discuss the problem.

It was not easy to get to Vickers by rail from Basildon, the new location for Aeronautical Division, so I whispered in the ear of one of our drivers, Bill Smith, to see if he could concoct an excuse to take me there. This he did and we set off. Bill, as a driver, had picked up an enormous number of Green Shield stamps from garages and had a kitchen full of the latest household gadgets. Another food mixer, perhaps?

On arrival at Vickers we were required to submit our names for vetting. After a while the security man with Green Shields shares came back saying that Mr Smith could enter but they were not very happy with me and consequently was not allowed in. However, my contact came out to see me and we resolved the problem in the foyer.

He said that if I told him how much air I needed he would arrange for it to be supplied. He also said that it was likely to be Russian air being plentiful and very cold. He also said there might be the outside chance of picking up trace elements of nuclear dust, but not to worry unduly about that, the costs would be refunded with a post-dated cheque from our politicians in their nuclear bunkers.

Cancellation

Shortly after, the government decided to cancel the TSR2 development contract and ordered the aircraft to be cut up into little pieces, but that did not include our Marconi equipment. During my ten-year period with Marconi's Aeronautical Division and after, I was to see the British aircraft industry destroyed and our engineering expertise given away. There were arrangements called 'Reciprocal Technology Agreements' where information seem to flow only in one direction, I must remember to look up the definition of 'reciprocal' again, perhaps it was me that got it wrong?

Our Leaders

We must however recognise that our politicians are blessed with far superior intellects and impeccable moral leadership than we humble engineers, having been trained from birth to respect their judgement at all times, without question. We must thank them and to extend our heartfelt thanks for the services they provided and their infinite wisdom in economising a national asset to into oblivion.

I'm not very good at names so, if someone can name the politician, who cancelled the TSR2 development, please tell me. Also I would also like to know the names of 'civil' servants who agreed to give away all our hard-won aviation expertise to others, with nothing coming back in return.

Some small benefit.

The transmitter design was successfully completed and eventually a version was produced for commercial airline use.

The Marconi designation of this unit was the AD470 probably because the previous number taken out in the sales book, was No 469 – it is pictured below.

Mike Lawrence

