

Paddy Searle's Service Story

As told to Di Gorringer

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Paddy (Russell) Searle

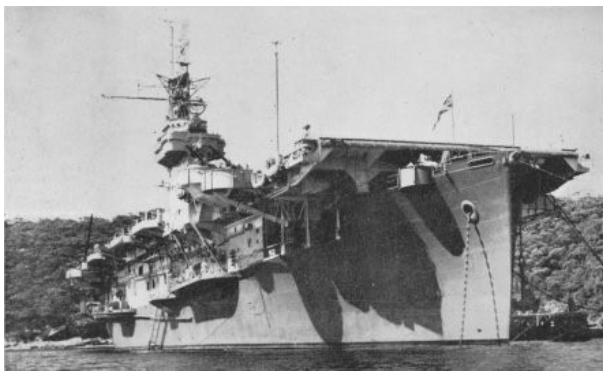
On 4 March 1941, just before his 16th birthday, Paddy joined the Fleet Air Arm straight from school. He wanted to be an ERA (Engine Room Apprentice) but they took the first 100 for ERAs and the rest including Paddy, went to be Air Artificer apprentices. It was a three year training which he completed in June 1944. He went to a couple of air stations in the UK before going to the Pacific, fighting the Japanese. A peace treaty was made in August 1945 after atom bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. (No one at the time thought about the long term effects of radiation.) Paddy went on a troop ship, HMS Dear Sound which plied between Hong Kong and Sydney. In fact it was an old meat transporter which the Americans had converted into a 10,000 ton aircraft carrier so it had a large fridge on board holding plenty of ice! Paddy worked in the aircraft component repair shop. A favourite eating place in Hong Kong was the China Fleet Club Restaurant which served hot and cold meals at very low prices. The menu said 'Ladies can use the restaurant'. Breakfast cost \$1.70, Tiffin (like brunch) was \$2.20 and a Special Dinner was \$2.70, all very cheap as \$1.30 HK dollars was worth a £1.

In December 1945, Paddy transferred to HMS Speaker, escorting convoys from Sydney to Hong Kong. That job lasted 6 months before HMS Speaker returned to



Hong Kong restaurant

the UK to be decommissioned before it was returned to the USA to be broken up. Just before leaving the Pacific in 1946, a whole squadron of Corsair aircraft was thrown overboard into the Coral Sea because they were 'surplus to requirements' and the space was needed to carry food and other resources to the UK. Paddy says that the fuel was removed before they were dumped. Paddy was one of the last to leave the ship. Only a skeleton crew was left on shore at Helensburgh and Paddy was the ship's postman. This was how he got to know a young lady working at the post office very well and he wrote to her for several years! On leaving the ship, Paddy acquired a magnificent set of tools which he was encouraged to take from the tool store as they would otherwise have been thrown out. He still has them today. He also found a large wad of postal orders in the ship's safe but has no idea what happened to them.



HMS Speaker in Sydney



Ditching a Corsair

After this he was due some leave but probably only two weeks, before joining the Lee-on-Solent Royal Navy Air Station aged 21. He had to take a conversion course on aircraft engineering at RAF Hednesford in Staffordshire near Cannock Chase. Every Wednesday afternoon was recreation, so the guys would run out to Holly Bank Pub on Cannock Chase, have a sing-song around the piano which Paddy played, have a beer and run back to camp. No one ever twigged where they had been!

Paddy's next posting in January 1948 was to Culdrose in Cornwall which had opened as a base in 1947. He worked on an Oxford squadron as a maintenance engineer. Then in August 1950 he joined HMS Theseus en route

for south west Japan based at the port of Sasebo for the Korean War. The ship went on operation in the Yellow Sea for two weeks at a time. Paddy was with 807 Squadron servicing Sea Fury engines, before returning to Japan for a week's rest. The men were able to go ashore and found some very good eating places.



Hawker Sea Fury – Britain's last piston-engine fighter

On ship, the engineers would stay clear of the deck because marines on board would provide a band for ceremonial occasions. As they came up on the lift to the deck, they would be playing 'A life on the ocean wave'. The reason the engineers stayed out of the way was because if the ship had docked in a port, the band had to play the British National Anthem, the national anthem of the country they had docked in and also that of every man-of-war ship anchored in the harbour. It could take some time!! Their finale was to play 'A life on the ocean wave' again as they went back down on the ship's lift. HMS Theseus was relieved by another carrier so Paddy returned to the UK in June 1951 this time to Lee-on-Solent working in the workshops doing odd jobs. In 1952



he was at back at Culdrose in 759 Squadron servicing Vampires and Meteors for the naval air fighter school.

De Havilland Vampire

By summer 1953, the runways at Culdrose were found to be sinking so the Navy decided to transfer the Fighter School to Lossiemouth on the Moray Firth near Inverness, where they arrived in October 1953. They stayed in this lovely spot until 759 Squadron was disbanded in October 1954. On one occasion Paddy tried to get to John O'Groats so that he could say he'd been both there and to Lands End, but they had a puncture at Wick so decided not to continue without a spare tyre. In the summer he played cricket in the Highland League; matches started at 3pm and Paddy remembers batting at 10.45pm in daylight at Strathpepper! As there were insufficient hours of darkness in northern Scotland, night-flying exercises had to be done at Ford in Sussex. As a result of playing cricket he saw quite a lot of the Highlands. A fantastic day was spent at the Braemar Highland Games with the Queen present but you had to like bagpipes as they played all day.

When the squad disbanded, Paddy moved to Abbotstown near Paisley, Glasgow. Christmas 1954, at a children's party, he met his wife Margot, who was a beautiful blonde-haired Leading Wren. Paddy was called in to play the piano and was dressed up as a clown. He invited Margot to the Mess Christmas Dance that evening but she hadn't a clue what he looked like! Nevertheless she turned up and fortunately recognised his laugh. They were married on 17 September 1955 and had 44 happy years together.



In May '55 Squadron 810 was transferred back to Lossiemouth to work on Sea Hawks. Engineering-wise it was difficult. The engineers had to have all their spanners around their necks on pieces of string because if one

dropped into the engine, the only way to get it out was to take out the whole engine! Whilst there, he did a trip in January 1956 to Hong Kong and the Philippines servicing Sea Hawks on the aircraft carrier HMS Albion which was taking part in exercises with the American Fleet.



Restored Hawker Sea Hawk flying over Yeovilton, July 2010



810 squadron in the Grand Harbour, Valetta, Malta in June 1956

They returned in May expecting to be disbanded in June, but they were told to assemble at the canteen in Lossiemouth where the Captain informed them they were being sent to Suez as another squadron due to be sent had not been 'worked up' (fully completed). When she heard this his wife was not pleased!! So Paddy went to the Suez Campaign on HMS Bulwark. The aim was to stop Egypt taking over the Suez Canal. The British army went ashore and could easily have overrun Egypt but the Americans intervened in support of Egypt and it was all over in over in about 10 days.

Paddy returned from Suez in December 1956 to the Royal Naval Air Station at Culdrose, Cornwall, joining 849 Skyraider Squadron in January 1957.



Douglas Skyraider

During the war, large numbers of apprentices joined the Navy but by the end of the '50s there were far too many Air Artificers in the Fleet Air Arm so they offered 'mis-employment' which meant men doing jobs they hadn't been trained for. Paddy volunteered to go to the Royal Naval Dockyard in Chatham, Kent where he did 'planned inspections' on Type 21 and Type 45 Destroyers. He didn't know anything about them but had a schedule or check-list to follow! By this time he was a Chief Air Artificer with 10 years experience so he was offered a brand new house in married quarters and was there 18 months. He had a great time living it up and attended superb garden parties hosted by Admiral Durnford Slater who looked after his men well. He

remembers playing cricket for the Borstal Officers Cricket Club at Rochester Borstal. In 1960 he had to revert to the Fleet Air Artificers, but was given a choice of stations so returned to Lossiemouth to the Air Holding Unit.

It was here that he was told that his work would be with the Aircraft Holding Unit (AHU) working on Hawker Hunter Trainers and De Havilland Sea Hornets. This continued until April 1961 when he was sent to the Hawker-Siddeley works at Leavesden in Hertfordshire for a course on the Gyron Junior engine which was to power the new Buccaneer Strike Aircraft which was shortly due to enter service in the Fleet Air Arm. This aircraft was designed to fly just below the speed of sound at very low levels and was capable of delivering nuclear weapons.



Blackburn Buccaneer landing on HMS Ark Royal

In May 1961, he went to Brough near Hull in Yorkshire to do training on the actual aircraft at the Blackburn Aero Company Works. In late 1961 the Buccaneers came into service, so Paddy was transferred to 700Z Squadron of Buccaneers for intensive flying trails. He continued this work until April 1964 when he was drafted to RNAS Yeovilton (HMS Heron). Here he was on Station Flight working on Hunter Trainers or on other types of aircraft that flew in on visits from time to time. This included the Swordfish, the type of aircraft he worked on at RNAS St Merryn (HMS Vulture) in 1944 near Padstow. By now Paddy was looking forward to leaving the Fleet Air Arm in May 1965 having completed 25 years service so he and his wife decided to buy their first house in June 1964, a three bedroomed semi-detached house in Martock, so that they would have time to sort things out before his release date.

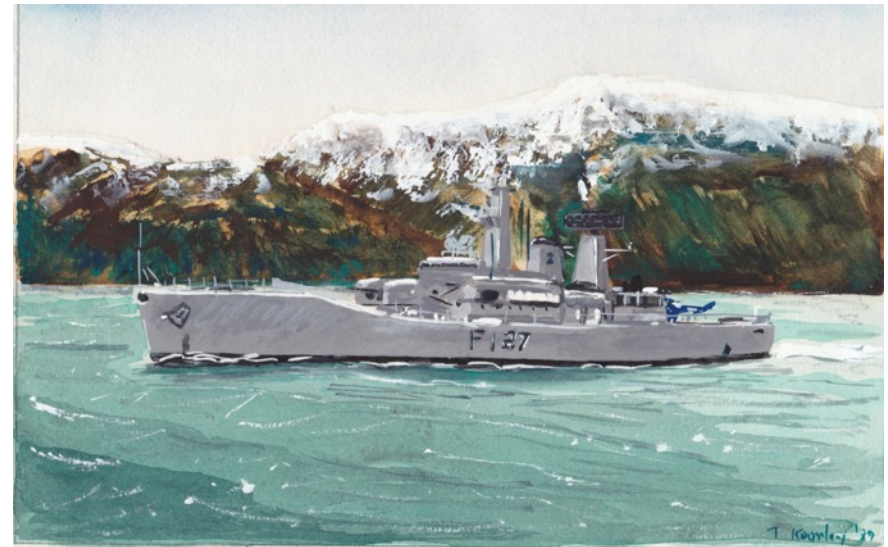
However another adventure lay ahead. In July 1964, he was drafted to RNAS Portland (HMS Osprey) to work on the Shelduck Pilotless Target Aircraft Squadron that would be going on a goodwill trip to South America on board HMS Penelope, a 2000 ton frigate to try and sell Sea-Cat Missiles to the Chilean and Brazilian navies. He duly sailed on board HMS Penelope in August 1964 from Plymouth in company with HMS Tiger, which carried the flag of Admiral Sir Fitzroy Talbot, HMS Lynx, the Royal Fleet Auxillary ship Black Prince and HMS Odin a submarine. The first stop in South America was in Venezuela at the port of La Guaira on the Atlantic coast. The ship's company was taken by coach to Caracas for two days. The president of KLM, the Dutch airline, lived there and they were all entertained at his luxury house and garden!

The next stop was at Barranquilla in Colombia where the ship's company were invited to visit various families with strict instructions to behave well and not to get drunk or they would not go ashore again! Unfortunately one seaman did get drunk and never left the ship again. Paddy's group visited a businessman who owned a factory making beer and soft drinks. The ship then went through the 50 mile long Panama Canal to the Pacific Ocean. Paddy's father went through the canal on December 16th 1916 on Admiral Jellicoe's flagship when he was serving as coxswain to the Admiral.

The next port of call was Callao in Peru, the port for Lima the capital. Whilst there, they did exercises with the Peruvian navy. Paddy's job was to put the pilotless aircraft on the rocket launcher and adjust the revs by hand, tuning the carburettor until it reached peak revs. He then had to slip out before the device rocketed off into the Pacific. The missile was radio controlled. The ship's company fired at the missile but were not allowed to hit it because the missiles were too expensive to replace and they only had 5 on board. The pilotless aircraft descended by parachute into the sea, and it was recovered, stripped down and re-built, engine included, ready for the next day!

At Valparaiso in Chile they did the same exercise to demonstrate the use of Sea Cat missiles. Unfortunately whilst there, Paddy was bitten by a dog and underwent three weeks of anti rabies injections, not very pleasant as they were into the stomach. They encountered a Force Eight Gale in the Roaring Forties winds of southern Chile but the passage through the Strait's of Magellan to

the Atlantic Ocean was fairly sheltered. The painting shows HMS Penelope going through the Strait in November (summer) with heavy snow covering the mountains. At their foot is the southern-most town in Chile, Punta Arenas, where the ship docked for a couple of days. The ship's company were treated very well by the residents many of whom were descendents of the original Scottish settlers.



HMS Penelope off the Magellan Strait

The ship was due to visit Buenos Aires in Argentina, but because the Argentineans were making noises about the Falkland Islands, they gave it a miss and went on to Montevideo in Uruguay. The last port of call was Rio de Janeiro where they went to see the huge statue of Christ on Corcovado Peak, which overlooks Sugar Loaf Mountain and the city. It is accessed by rail but from 710 metres (about 2500 feet) there is a superb view across the city.

The ships arrived home a week before Christmas so Paddy enjoyed spending Christmas with his wife and children. In his absence his wife had had central heating installed so the house was warm and cosy. He re-joined RNAS Yeovilton in January 1965 on Station Flight and in May 1965 was drafted to HMS Victory (Portsmouth Barracks) for release. Having left the navy, he was fortunate to get a job with Westlands Helicopters where he remained for another 20 years before retiring in February 1986.