

A PERSONAL MEMORY OF HARRIER - XZ 133



XZ 133 was a GR 3 delivered new to 233 OCU at Wittering on 9 July 76. After shakedown flying, she was transferred to No 1 Sqn (co-located at Wittering) in Feb 77. Around Nov 77 (whilst No 1 was heavily involved in Belize) this aircraft developed a starboard intake integral fuel tank leak which the Engineering Authority decided was within squadron resources to repair, but it was decided locally that 233 OCU had more resources to do the work.

Repairing integral fuel tanks does not involve chewing gum and forcing it into leaking rivet heads, but involves several hundred man hours of work gaining access to the inside of the tank and sealing from within. When I arrived as S Eng O to 233 OCU in Feb 78, XZ 133 was at the back of the hangar, wing off and engine out, and had become a 'hangar queen' having been robbed of many parts to keep others serviceable.

I banned further robbing and nominated a team of 2 (SNCO + fitter) to work on this aircraft (at weekends if necessary) and to get it serviceable by Jun 78. Initially unpopular, the decision was quietly welcomed that somebody had grabbed the problem by the nozzles (to coin a phrase) to get this 18 month old aircraft back to flying.

Whilst the fitter got on with accessing and resealing the tank, the SNCO (who also oversaw the work) identified and ordered new spares to replace those that had been robbed and that team worked their hearts out, backed up by other trades as required.

After 4 months, the aircraft had been repaired and rebuilt and was put out for ground runs and system checks which were encouragingly fault free, so the aircraft was put forward for air test by the Unit Test Pilot. By this time the whole station had become interested and a number of silent wagers were placed that after a major rebuild there would be a raft of snags to sort out.

My team received its just reward when the UTP returned after a 45min air test and declared no snags - fit for squadron use! Unheard of in the Harrier world, the kudos of 233 OCU rose somewhat and received a special letter of thanks from the squadron boss.

The aircraft continued with the OCU for 5 years before it went again to 1 Sqn in 1982 for service in the Falklands campaign. It survived that detachment and now hangs in the IWM major display hangar at Duxford.

A good enough reason to finally build a model of XZ 133!

Stay safe all

Arthur
May 20