

## All those years ago

I wondered why I was standing outside this Oldenburg hotel waiting for Helmut, our guide for the day to arrive. And I had persuaded Julie to join me on this journey back to the 1950's. Well at least it was not raining and that was a big improvement on our previous few days in Berlin.

Many years ago, back in the 1950s, I had spent 17 months just up the road at what was then RAF Oldenburg. I had learnt through the Internet that the old camp was still there and there was a thriving society keeping the old flying day memories alive. Helmut was there right on the dot and we were on our way at last. On the way up to the camp I was able to say what I remembered about the layout and it turned out that over all those years very little had changed. Through the gates and there on the right was the guard room, to the left the building that housed the medical cleansing room was still there but we were told that it was the barber's shop while the German Air Force were occupation. Station headquarters was there right in front of us but it did not now have the air of menace about it that it did all those years ago when Big Jim was in residence. Not a nice man!

Helmut gave us the full tour. We drove down the runway which was in good condition ending up at the old hangers. No 20 squadron's hanger had been turned into a theatre and the week we were there a series of classical concerts were held in the building. The two hangers that had been my old working place, I was originally on 26 squadron but transferred to 14 with the coming of the Hawker Hunter, were now being used by local companies for storage. There had been changes around the place. New, 22 in total, Hardened Aircraft Shelters had been built around the airfield as part of a NATO requirement but the ASF hanger was still there and the control tower looked exactly as it did the day I left Oldenburg in 1955. Something that I cannot remember from my time but our hosts told us that a special parade ground had been laid for the visit of Princess Margaret back in 1954 for the colour presentation to 20 squadron. A special toilet had also been built for the Princess somewhere in the control tower, at great expenses, but it remained unused on the big day.



Our next port of call was the Oldenburg Base Museum. There we saw the collection that the members of the society had got together over the years. There were many photographs including a display board of when the RAF had been in Oldenburg all housed in what was the fire section headquarters. It was also been the home of the stations aircraft assimilators, a luxury that pilots did not enjoy during my stay on the camp. Each of the rooms had a different theme including one showing the early flying days of Oldenburg and others devoted to ejector seats and aircraft armament. The society got together twice a week to talk and I would have joined myself if the journey had not been quite so difficult.

Julie and I now went back to the camp entrance to walk the route that I had taken so often returning to my temporary home. We went around the left hand side of SHQ and now we were alongside what used to be the main football pitch on the camp. During my time I can remember Oldenburg had an excellent team with Ken Leek and Ron Hooker, who both went on to bigger things, the stars of the team. Members of the RAF Regiment squadrons based on the camp, mostly Scots, gave the team its aggressiveness. On the other side of the playing area we could see the old Astra cinema. I can still remember films that I saw there, A Kid for Two Farthings and The Ladykillers and watching them again on television has always reminded me of those days of long ago. The swimming pool we were told was still there but no longer usable. We walked past the old cookhouse, what rubbish we were dished up there, and the biggest treat of the day block 72 was still there. That was my home when I was on 14 squadron and the outside had not changed at all. I have a photograph taken outside that building back in 1956. Helmut told us that during his time on the camp it had been used by the Military Police. It was something special to see it all again and to see how little it had changed.

Back at the end of the Second World War Canadian troops had been the first into Oldenburg. Fortunately there had been very little war damage to the city. Almost



immediately the base was handed over to the British. The supposed menace of the Eastern Block meant that the allies built or extended existing German airfields as an answer to possible Soviet expansion and aggression. A concrete runway was built at Oldenburg replacing the old grass one and all this work was done in great secrecy with no local labour being involved. No 20 squadron was the first to arrive at the station

in July 1952 with their Vampires. In 1953 they converted to F86 Sabres. In August 1952 they were joined by 26 squadron with their Vampires soon to be re-equipped with the F86 and then in 1956 14 squadron arrived from Fassburg. All three squadron now converted to the Hawker Hunter. In 1957 the RAF quit the base being replaced by the German Air Force. The German Airforce continued to fly out of Oldenburg until the mid 1990s. Initially they were equipped with the F86 Sabre, then in 1966 Fiat G91 and when they left Oldenburg the flying wing was equipped with the Alpha-jet. The pulling down of the Berlin wall meant that the confrontation with the Eastern Block was at an end. Oldenburg together with a great many other airfields in Germany had become an expensive luxury. The airfield now belongs to the state government I believe and I am sure they would welcome a way of shedding the financial responsibility for the site. Even the Oldenburg Air Museum is on a short lease renewable every three months so they must feel very vulnerable. Other ex RAF airfields have been sold off to developers bur Germany is unlike England not in desperate need of land for building. I would say that the future of our old camp is uncertain.

One real disappointment was that the Grunewald (the Grunie) had gone. Our old watering hole had been pulled down in the 1970s. The road out of town which I remember as very much a country road has now been developed way beyond the camp gates. We went into town but that certainly had changed and there was nothing there that rang any bells for me.

After Oldenburg we caught a train up to Sylt, across the causeway to the island. I was



there air firing with the squadrons back in the 1950s. There is still an airfield there but now it is used by civil airlines. I should have remembered about the weather that far north. It poured with rain most of the time we were there and did the wind howl! I looked for what back in the old days we called “bare arsed beach” but could not find it on our travels around the island.

To be honest you would have had to be mad to be out in that weather without your kit on! I had thought about going back to Germany for quite a few years and for that one day in Oldenburg I was a young lad of 20 again. I wonder what became of my old pals from Oldenburg. Where are you now Tony Papini, Malcolm Wilson and Bill Robertson from 26 squadron? Are Derek Sharp, Norman Crenall and Colin Lord from 14 squadron still above ground? Maybe they will read this note!

Our two hosts for the day Helmut Friz and Udo Reinsch looked after us wonderfully well. I cannot recall drinking so much coffee in a morning. I am sure they enjoyed us being there and they would welcome any 1950 Oldenburgers who visited the camp. There is an Oldenburg website for those interested [www.fliegerhorst-oldenburg.de](http://www.fliegerhorst-oldenburg.de). It is in German but you cause Google to translate and it is full of information

Germany was impressive! Everything worked as it should and if there was a problem it would be sorted very quickly. That has not always been our experience when travelling. But you would not go there for the weather!