



The National Service (Wales) Collection 1947-61/63) created by Age Cymru Dyfed, has been made possible thanks to The National Lottery Heritage Lottery Fund.

Date of interview: December 2025

Location: Llangwryfon

Interviewer: Neil Davies

Camera: Hugh Morgan



Michael Warren

aged 88 years

Llangwryfon, Ceredigion

Royal Air Force - 1955 to 1957

“ I have vivid memories. It only seems like yesterday.”

Methodology

This account largely relies on Mike's memories, which were captured during a conversation with the author at Mike's home. The author has cross-checked Mike's recollections with additional sources of information to create an enhanced picture of his National Service experience in the RAF. Where Mike is quoted, the author has summarized some content in order to bring clarity and brevity to the content. The narrative accompanies two video films of the interview and begins below at film 1.

Background

Mike was born on 28th February 1937 in the town of Wath upon Dearne, which is about 5 miles north of Rotherham in Yorkshire. The town lies upon the South Yorkshire coal field, which led to coal being the dominant industry and the main reason for the population expanding in the 20th century. The coal industry was also the reason for the canal and railway line, which was essential for transporting materials and product.

Mike was raised by his mother and father, who worked as an Engineer at the Gas works. He has an older sister.

Mike attended the local Grammar school and faired rather well, leaving at 16 years of age with 6 'O' levels. The one subject in which he didn't achieve the O' level grade, English language, would become relevant later in his RAF career.

Upon leaving school, he began his working life as a trainee Accountant for the National Coal Board. His place of work was about 10 miles away near Doncaster. In addition to his daytime work, 3 nights per week he travelled the 9 miles to Barnsley technical college, where he studied Accountancy.

In the 1950's when young men reached the age of 18, they were liable to be conscripted into the military for National Service. The Ministry for National Service would publish regular notices, which required men born between certain dates to register for National Service. At the age of 18 years, Mike was duly registered.

In common with most National Service candidates, shortly after his 18th birthday, a letter stamped with the official OHMS* lettering dropped through the letterbox. Inside were orders to report to the local National Service office.

*On Her Majesty's Service

"...and then the letter arrived and I was invited to join Her Majesty's forces!"

Mike wasn't fazed by this development.

"Well, you expected it. It was the norm. I was instructed to travel to Sheffield, attend this office and be interviewed. I went to the RAF people and that's where I ended up."

It seems that in his case, there was a choice of which branch of the armed forces to choose. Mike wasn't interested in the Army, and the Navy didn't appeal to him. His preferred option was the RAF. At some point there was a medical assessment.

“There was some sort of a medical. You know the old story about standing there and coughing.”

Once it was determined that he was indeed destined for the RAF, instructions were given to report to a ‘reception centre’. Here, the recruits were issued with uniform and on occasion held back a short time, until a training school was ready to begin a new course for National Servicemen.

“I think I was given some sort of a token that got me on a train to Cardington in Bedfordshire. They kitted you out and then sent you off to one of the training camps.”

He remembers being issued with his RAF uniform. There was some humour involved.

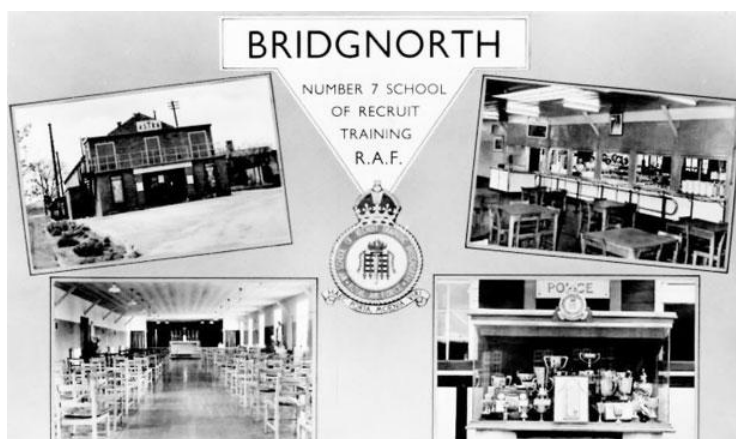
“The beret they gave me must have been in stock since before the war. It was decidedly faded. I looked different to all the others. So, I bought a dye, dyed it and it was still different to all the others! It had a bit of a greenish tint to it. But nobody said a word. I got by with it all that time.”

National Service

From RAF Cardington, Mike and some fellow recruits were transported to an RAF training camp near Shrewsbury for basic training. This course took place at RAF Bridgnorth, Shropshire.

RAF Bridgnorth

The station dated back to the early days of World War Two and was experienced at training new entrants. When Mike arrived in 1955, the station was home to number 7 Recruit training school. The RAF basic training course for National Servicemen was eight weeks.



This postcard dates back to the period when National Service recruits were trained at Bridgnorth.

Image - aboutbridgnorth.com

Arriving for basic training was a big step in the National Serviceman’s journey. This was now the RAF proper and the serious business of turning civilian into serviceman began. Many National Servicemen expected the training to be influenced by RAF aircraft or flying operations. However, as Mike explains, the reality was rather different.

“It’s only 8 weeks. A lot of nonsense. Whitewashing stones along the side of the path and quite a bit of marching.”

Mike recalls an occurrence, that will be all too familiar to National Service Veterans.

“We were told that we were going to have our accommodation inspected. If it was good, we’d all get a 48-hour pass. We worked hard, polishing and scrubbing. The Officer arrived and he pulled out a table or chair. He stood on it and put his finger on a beam by the ceiling. There’s dust....48-hour pass gone!”

A notable experience for recruits is the sheer variety of people from all over the country that arrive for training. Mike’s observation was no different.

“There were a few Scottish lads, and the Scots played the English at football. They were too good for us!”

Most recruits remember their instructors. Some characters that trained National Servicemen were notorious. Perhaps products of a post war Britain out of step with society today.

“Eventually you pass out. I remember when we finished, Corporal Amoss, who was a bit of a tyrant, became a nice person. We all went off to the football match. It was Wolverhampton Wanderers versus Spurs I think at Molineux. We had a drink or two afterwards. He was a good guy.”

Mike recognizes that the instructors had a job to do and is able to be philosophical about their treatment of the raw recruits.

“You got very firm orders, with a bit of a threat to it. If you don’t do this, you are in for it. But it’s all a game.”



A typical barrack room which was home to RAF National Servicemen in the 1950’s. This is similar if not identical, to the room Mike was accommodated in during training.

Image courtesy
www.midcenturychap.com

Once basic training was over, the RAF assigned recruits to a particular trade.

“Eventually they give you a trade. I’d been training as an accountant, so it made sense that I wasn’t going to go into one of the more practical trades. So, I became what’s known as a ‘Clerk Progress’.”

Trade training

In 1955 the primary school for training airmen and women in administrative duties was located at RAF Credenhill, Herefordshire. Situated on the western outskirts of the city of Hereford, RAF Credenhill was a non-flying station and home to various training schools and permanent staff.

Recruits destined for 'Clerk Progress' duties would require further education in mathematics, graphs and statistics. The training course at Credenhill was designed to bring the new Clerks up to the standard required for them to become operational.

Mike skirts over his time at Credenhill, which maybe indicates that the training wasn't the most technical or productive. The regime was less austere than at Bridgnorth, but he was still exposed to the 'BS', which is a common term used in the military to describe cleaning and polishing.

"Because I was a Clerk, they sent me to an office to polish the floor! But yes, I did some sort of training. In fact, I did a bit of typing."

Once qualified as a 'Clerk Progress' Mike was on the move again.

"Eventually you get your posting. It was the Middle East. We were given a ticket to get on a train, and I went with another 3 or 4 lads. Off we went to a place called Innsworth."

The visit to RAF Innsworth was the beginning of a long journey.

RAF Innsworth

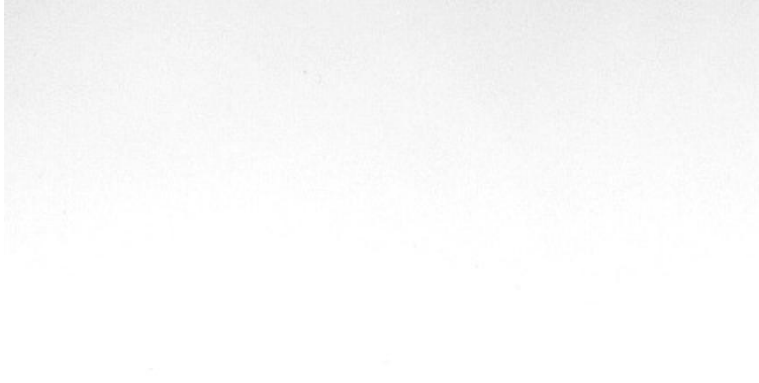
The station is situated 30 miles southeast of Hereford, on the northern edge of the city of Gloucester. It dates back to World War 2 and was an important staging point for RAF personnel preparing for a posting overseas.

"They kitted us out with Khaki, lightweight stuff for a hotter climate. Then back to Hereford, and then I remember another train journey to London. I spent a night in London and then caught a bus to a place called Blackbushe."

Overseas

Blackbushe airport was a major transport hub in the 1950's. Situated in northeast Hampshire, servicemen and women fortunate enough to avoid troopships, would fly out of the UK via Blackbushe airport.

"They put us on an aeroplane, which was a Handley Page Hermes and the next time it landed was in Malta."



A Handley Page Hermes at Blackbushe airport in 1954. Mike flew out on a Hermes airliner. Was it this one ?

Image RuthAS - Own work, CC BY 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=6384041>

Although the airliner landed in Malta, this wasn't yet the end of his journey.

"Then it took off again and landed in the 'Canal Zone' in Egypt. For 3 nights I slept in a tent."

Although the stay in Egypt was only for 72 hours, Mike has a vivid memory from it.

"I remember I saw this amazingly bemedalled high ranking Egyptian officer. I've always wondered if it was "Nasser"that I was looking at."*

*General Nasser served as President of Egypt and was widely accepted as the leader of the Egyptian revolution that eventually led to independence.

Mike's journey across the middle east continued.

"Anyway, we were put back on another aeroplane. I think it was called a 'Valetta'. It landed in the North African desert at a place called El Adam, a couple of more places and eventually it landed in Tunisia. Then it hopped over to Malta, where I was sent to a place called Ta' Qali."*



An RAF Vickers Valetta transport aircraft. Mike flew throughout N Africa on one of these busy aircraft.

Image courtesy of 'Aerocorner'

Malta - RAF Ta'Qali

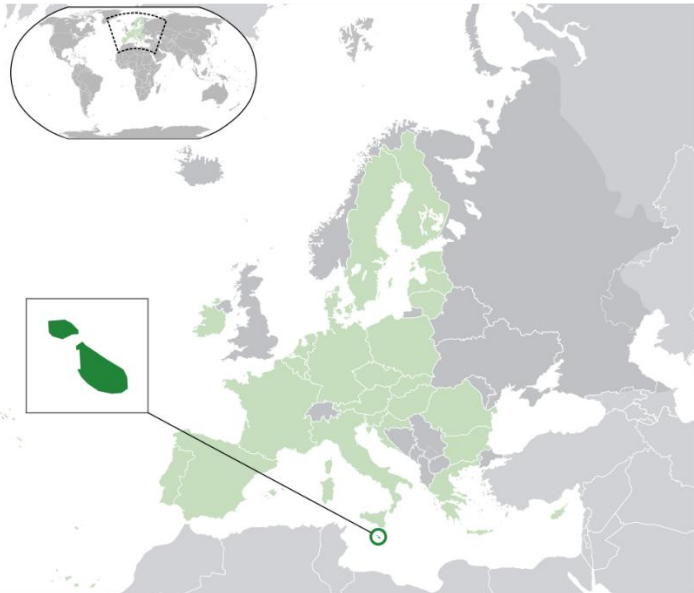
Dating back to World War two, Ta'Qali was an airbase that remained operational after the end of the war. When Mike arrived, it was home to 32 squadron flying the De Havilland Venom fighter bomber.



An RAF de Havilland Venom fighter bomber. Mike became familiar with the sound of these jet engine aircraft taking off and landing.

Image courtesy of Wikipedia

After an elongated journey, Mike had reached his destination. An RAF station on a Mediterranean island over two thousand miles away from the UK.



Malta. Famous for its George Cross, awarded for resisting the Axis powers during WW2. Below - 32 squadron crest.

Image courtesy of Wikipedia



"I joined 32 squadron as a 'Clerk Progress' 1 week before Christmas 1955. Ta'Qali is just under the hill, where Rabat and Medina are."

Mike remembers some RAF colleagues from Ta'Qali

"Flight Sergeant Ibbotson, who was from Hull, and a rather distant Flight Lieutenant, called Flight Lieutenant McDonald. He had a little office a few yards away, but you seldom saw him. I worked there for 18 months."

Mike is able to explain what his role as 'Clerk Progress' for 32 squadron involved.

"32 squadron had got mark 1 de Havilland Venoms. Twin tailed fighter bombers. What the work involved was.... any aircraft, the components in the aircraft, have got a time span and then whether they're in good condition or not they are replaced. They have repairs too. All this was decided upon by Flight Lieutenant McDonald, Flight Sergeant Ibbotson and the Flight Sergeant that was over with the squadron. My job was to record it in the logbook that each aircraft has."

Mike is referring to the form known as a F700. These were highly important documents and if not correctly maintained, may potentially result in faults and safety issues being missed. This could in turn place both the aircrew and aircraft at risk. His workplace was near to the aircraft, so he could see engineers and technicians working on the Venoms.

“The office I was in was near the hangar, literally yards away.”



RAF F700, otherwise known as an Aircraft Servicing Form. Mike’s job as a Clerk progress was to ensure each aircraft’s F700 was meticulously maintained. This is a 1957 example.

Image - Ebay

Mike fully appreciated the aircraft and felt part of the squadron.

“Frequently there was the noise of jet engines being worked up. I must say that ever since then, I’ve had an interest in aircraft. If one comes over, I rush out and see if I can see it and know what it is. It’s never a Venom!”

Maintaining the records of all aircraft operating from the station was a task. 32 squadron were probably operating at least 12 Venom fighter bombers. Despite this however, there wasn’t enough work to keep everyone busy all week.

“What I would say is that there simply was not enough work to fill the time and I spent a lot of time just wishing the time away. If I have one big complaint about the RAF that’s it.”

On this issue, he hits on a common theme, repeated by many National Servicemen who served in the latter half of the 1950’s. Personnel strength was high in both the Army and RAF, but conscription continued unabated. In time, the debate in the House of Commons led to a reduction in the numbers of young men conscripted into the armed forces. This would eventually lead to the end of conscription in 1961. It must be remembered however, that during this period, National Servicemen continued to be put into harm’s way in countries where unrest and revolt against British rule continued.

Fortunately, RAF Ta'Qali did find some extra tasks for its erstwhile 'Clerk Progress'.

"Another job that was interesting. I received in the post lots of photographs of aircraft from different countries. Particularly Russian ones. The photographs were taken from various angles. The pilots would come in and borrow a book of photographs, to study them. When they are up there in the air and they see an aircraft in the distance, it helps them recognize what they are dealing with."

In fact, what Mike was doing was collating aircraft recognition manuals. This allowed RAF aircrew to improve their knowledge of the various aircraft flown by other countries. Early recognition of Warsaw Pact aircraft in particular, enhanced the RAFs' effectiveness when operating against other air forces. It was of course, the period known as the Cold War, which pitted NATO against the Soviet Union. A real east versus west scenario.

"I had so much time on my hands, I used to look through these photographs and I'd think to myself, I was the best aeroplane identifier in the air force!"



A page from a RAF aircraft recognition manual from the Cold War period. Mike was in charge of collating and managing the such manuals at RAF Ta'Qali in 1956.

Image courtesy – dearoldblighty.com

When possible, Mike and his friends would explore the historic towns situated nearby.

"We wouldn't go by the guardroom but over the wall and walk up the hill on a bit of a track. If you went across the airfield over another wall, you'd go into the town of Mosta. It's famous for its church and dome, which received a German bomb during the war. It crashed through the dome onto the church below."

The airmen were given a much-welcomed week's leave. How to spend your week off, depended on where each individual was based.

"At some stage you're given a weeks leave. So, me and a Scottish kid from Lockerbie went over to RAF Luqa, the big base on Malta. It's the airport these days. There were two

squadrons of Shackletons, Marine Reconnaissance. We found a Squadron Leader and told him we had a week off. ...' could he entertain us?"

(Video film 1 ends)

(Video film 2 begins)

The two airmens plucky enquiry paid dividends.

"He put me in one aeroplane and my friend in another and off we went. For two days we flew around the Mediterranean, just above sea level photographing shipping. You took a panel out of the side and a camera appeared, roaring by these ships."

The extended flying adventure turned into a memorable experience.

"They dropped a target on the water, then blew it to smithereens with a machine gun. They dropped another target and roared over it, dropping marker bombs. At one stage I actually got to sit for a few minutes in the co-pilot's seat."

An amazing time that ended with a grand finale.

"Eventually when he did come back to Luqa he didn't just land. He did what's called circuits and bumps. You'd land, roar down the runway, take off again, round in a circle and have another go. Probably up to half a dozen times. I was two days doing that. It was wonderful."

Mike had struck gold with a good Squadron leader that valued ground staff and fostered team spirit within the RAF. It is likely that he flew with 38 Squadron, which were operating Avro Shackletons on maritime duties from RAF Luqa.

Clearly the two young airmen determined to make the best of their weeks leave because they managed to fit in another little adventure.



An RAF Avro Shackleton equipped for Maritime Reconnaissance missions, photographed in 1955. Mike spent two enjoyable days flying on a very similar aircraft.

Image courtesy Wikipedia

"Something else we did. We got on the ferry to Gozo. This was long before the tourist trade. There was one hotel on Gozo, and it was called 'The Duke of Edinburgh' because he'd actually stayed there. We had a couple of night in The Duke of Edinburgh hotel in Gozo and that was my week's leave."



The Duke of Edinburgh hotel, Gozo photographed in 1955. Mike enjoyed a short break in this hotel.

Image courtesy of Facebook

After twelve months Mike was promoted to Senior Aircraftsman. This may have coincided with the weeks leave described above. In any event, developments in the Middle East now played a part in Mike's posting in Malta.

"In August 1956 the Suez crisis cropped up and 32 squadron flew away. I think they went to Amman in Jordan. All the Armourers and Fitters went. I suppose the logbooks went with them. A few of us who were not that vital were transferred off the squadron and onto the camp."

The ill fated Suez campaign had a dramatic and long-lasting impact on United Kingdom foreign policy. The short campaign involved thousands of UK service personnel, across all three branches of the armed forces. Troops were flown out to the Middle East and Mediterranean from the UK. RAF squadrons were re deployed and the Royal Navy sailed a formidable Task Force to support operations in the Suez canal zone. Malta became an important staging post and Mike witnessed a considerable increase in activity.

"Other squadrons came in. Probably three or four. They came in for a few weeks then went. I remember they were mainly Gloster Meteor squadrons."

Mike was witnessing the build up of British Forces, as the military planners prepared for the conflict. When it eventually began in October 1956, the campaign lasted for a mere 9 to 10 days. Offensive operations ended rather abruptly, which resulted in UK forces beginning a long withdrawal from the middle east.

Meanwhile at RAF Ta'Qali, an event occurred which proved to have a significant impact on Mike's present and future careers.

"Work had finished for the day. Two very young fresh faced Pilot Officers appeared at the door, looking for SAC Warren. 'Would you come with us please.'

This unexpected request was an order, not a request. Mike was more than a little concerned.

"They took me to this office and explained. The library had been shut and locked in semi darkness for all the time that I had been there. These two guys were education officers,

and they wanted the library opening. They'd looked at the personnel records and they picked me. 'Would I volunteer to be the new Librarian ?' Well, I did, yeah."

This was an opportunity too good to miss. Mike dedicated himself to opening the library and this is what occurred. It didn't prove to be the busiest building on the station, but he was happy enough.

"So, I sat there waiting for young airmen to come and borrow books. But they weren't interested in reading. But what do you do when you're surrounded by a few hundred books with nothing to do ? You read don't you and that I'm grateful for because I discovered the joy of reading. I discovered authors I've liked ever since."

Indeed, Mike made good use of his time as a Librarian and uncovered a new world.

"I remember reading 'The Grapes of Wrath' by John Steinbeck. I discovered Ernest Hemmingway 'For Whom The Bell Tolls and various others. This carried on after I left."

However, it wasn't only the door to the station library that the officers opened for Mike.

"They talked to me about what I was going to do when I was demobbed. I knew that I was not cut out to be an Accountant. They suggested I became a teacher. But there was a snag. I hadn't got English. So, they fixed me up with a Flight Sergeant who had an office in Valetta. Once, twice or three times a week I jumped on a bus and had English lessons with the Flight Sergeant. Ultimately exam time came around. I sat on a flat roof in the middle of Malta, with bottles of Schweppes orange brought to us and sat the exam in the fresh air and sunshine and passed."

Sometime after passing the English O level examination, Mike's posting in Malta drew to an end. He flew back to the UK, and his National Service came to an end.

"So, I went back and was demobbed."

Life after National Service

Mike returned to his native Yorkshire and the small town of Wath upon Dearne.

"I went back to the Coal Board, but I applied to go to college. I had an interview and I got into a college at Padgate, near Warrington. I qualified to be a teacher and that's what I was until I took early retirement."

Mike had a long career in teaching. He spent the majority of his time teaching secondary school pupils.

"It was a large secondary modern school in the Doncaster authority. I taught Geography. I loved Geography, ever since I was a school kid. My father brought me an atlas home from work one day. I remember sitting with my atlas looking at names like Guatemala and thinking it would be wonderful to go there. I still love maps."

Mike's teaching career spanned 27 years, until ill health forced early retirement.

"I started teaching in 1961 and I taught until 1988."

Towards the end of his teaching career, he diversified into Craft and Design. This resulted in a period of 12 months teaching in York. The subject covered artistic material, micro electric work, jewellery making and wood working. Mike enjoyed the subject, especially the woodworking, which developed into a lifetime hobby.

Mrs Warren

Mike's story isn't complete without mentioning his wife, Sheila.

"Sheila was in the year below me at school."

Although he didn't know her at school, they became aware of each other at a local youth club. A holiday with this club brought them together.

"That particular year, the club had a holiday in the Isle of Wight, which we both went on. We clicked and we've been together ever since."

When he was in the RAF at Ta'Qali, they wrote to each other. Sheila was thoughtful enough to send Mike a little treat.

"When I was in Malta, a letter would arrive with a cigarette in it that Sheila had sent!"

Moving to Wales

Sheila and Mike had two sons, Timothy and John. John moved to Wales and in 2000. One time, whilst John was away, Mike and Sheila minded his home. The couple fell in love with the area and decided to move to Wales. The move happened in 2003, when they found a suitable home in Ceredigion. They have lived in and loved Wales for 22 years.

"22 years living here has been a bit of a holiday! We fell in love with Wales completely."

-
- All rights including publishing rights to this article are owned by Mike Warren, or his immediate beneficiary in the event of his death.
 - Publishing rights to material sourced to complete this document, remain with the original publisher and most grateful thanks are expressed to the following sources of information which helped to build this story:
 - Wikipedia
 - www.aboutbridgnorth.com

- www.midcenturychap.com
- www.wikiwand.com
- dearoldblighty.com
- aerocorner.com
- ebay.co.uk
- Facebook



Casgliad y Werin Cymru
People's Collection Wales
www.casgliadywerin.cymru
www.peoplescollection.wales

