



Air Chief Marshal Sir Michael Armitage, who has died aged 92, began his long RAF career as a Halton Apprentice, one of “Trenchard’s Brats” under the scheme established by Lord Trenchard in 1920. Thirty-eight years later he was promoted to air chief marshal to be a member of the Air Force Board, one of only two former apprentices to achieve such distinction.

In 1972 Armitage headed for Malta to assume command of the RAF station at Luqa. The RAF had maintained a permanent presence in Malta for many years, but following the island’s independence in 1964, a 10-year Agreement on Mutual Defence and Assistance was agreed.

Over the following years, relations became increasingly difficult and it did not last beyond the end of the 1960s, when the recently elected government of Dom Mintoff insisted on a revision of the agreement. This left Britain with little option but to plan for the withdrawal of its forces from the island. With no resolution of the difficulties forthcoming, Mintoff ordered the British to leave by March 31 1972 and withdrawal of the RAF units began at the end of 1971.

The full impact of the withdrawal, not least on the island’s economy and employment, was grave, and Mintoff recognised this and the need to review the impact. This resulted in an agreement, reached on March 26, to extend the offer of base facilities until 1979. Luqa’s resident squadrons soon returned and the RAF facilities were re-activated.

The base was home to a squadron of Canberra reconnaissance aircraft with wide-ranging commitments in the Middle and Near East and in Africa. Another squadron operated the Nimrod on maritime patrol sorties throughout the Mediterranean, which monitored the activities of the Soviet Navy’s Black Sea Fleet. Luqa was also the host to many RAF and Nato squadrons participating in major air and maritime exercises.

Armitage took up his post in the spring of 1972. In addition to maintaining the operational efficiency of the two squadrons he had to oversee an extensive programme to refurbish the large RAF facilities. During the Turkish invasion of Northern Cyprus in July 1974, his aircraft flew reconnaissance sorties to monitor activities on the island and the surrounding area.

He maintained his flying currency on the Canberra and enjoyed giving and receiving hospitality with his people. For his services in Malta, he was appointed CBE



*Armitage after just landing a Jaguar*

Michael John Armitage was born on August 25 1930 and educated at Newport Grammar School, Isle of Wight. He entered the RAF's Apprentice School at Halton in 1947, where he excelled, and trained as an airframe fitter. He was awarded the Elliott Memorial Prize for his final essay, a portent of things in the future. As one of the top students to graduate he was given a cadetship at the RAF College, Cranwell, where he trained as a pilot, and was commissioned in April 1953.

After converting to jets, he joined 28 Squadron in Hong Kong flying the Vampire, one of the RAF's first jets into service. Flying from the congested airport at Kai Tak, the nimble jet fighter was ideal for patrols along the Chinese border and the defence of Hong Kong.

On his return to Britain he qualified as a flying instructor at the Central Flying School before spending the next few years instructing student pilots to fly the Vampire and the Jet Provost.

In 1966 he began the first of a series of appointments in Germany, becoming the personal staff officer to the Commander-in-Chief RAF Germany and Commander of the Second Allied Tactical Air Force, Air Marshal Sir Denis Spotswood. The taciturn and serious Spotswood was a hard taskmaster, and some fell foul of his high expectations, but he thought very highly of Armitage.

Armitage remained in Germany, and in late 1967 took command of 17 Squadron, one of three RAF Canberra squadrons, which specialised in low-level tactical reconnaissance by day and by night. No 17 was based at Wildenrath, near Mönchengladbach, one of four RAF airfields

in the “Clutch” area west of the Rhine. In December 1969 he oversaw the withdrawal of the long-serving Canberra as the squadron prepared to receive the Phantom.

After two years on the directing staff of the Joint Service Staff College at Latimer, he was promoted to Group Captain and left for Malta.



*Air Chief Marshal Sir Michael Armitage inspecting recruits at their graduation at RAF Halton*

During 1975, Armitage attended the Royal College of Defence Studies before heading to MoD to be the Director of Forward Plans in the Air Force Department. Here he was concerned with the long-term future of the service. This required drafting appropriate concept papers that looked 10 to 20 years ahead, which in the troublesome political and economic circumstances of the time presented numerous obstacles and difficulties. He also drafted speeches for the then Chief of Air Staff, who went on to be Chief of Defence Staff, and Armitage continued to provide drafts until he left for his next appointment.

In 1978 he returned to Germany, this time as Deputy Commander at HQ RAF Germany, where he had responsibility for the day-to-day running of the four large operational bases and their squadrons of new generation combat jets.

In 1980 he became the senior RAF member on the staff of the Royal College of Defence Studies (RCDS) before taking up an appointment in the defence intelligence staff in the immediate aftermath of the Falklands War.

Three years later he was promoted to the newly-created post of Chief of Defence Intelligence, responsible for the collection and analysis of military intelligence. Armitage was also responsible for co-ordination of intelligence activities throughout the armed services. The

main focus remained issues relating to the Cold War, but out of area operations, such as the Falkland's situation, attracted increasing prominence.

As head of defence intelligence he joined the heads of the other intelligence agencies at the weekly meetings of the Joint Intelligence Committee, which advised the government on issues that required operational, planning or policy action.

In 1985 Armitage was appointed to the Air Force Board as the Air Member for Supply and Organisation responsible for all the support, maintenance, supply and organisational aspects of the RAF.

In January 1988 he took up his final appointment, a return to RCDS as the Commandant, a post he found particularly stimulating. He retired from the RAF in April 1990. He was appointed KCB (1983).

Throughout his RAF career, Armitage thought deeply about military strategy, and he had a wide interest and understanding of politico/military issues. Many of his appointments provided the opportunity to pursue and develop this special interest.

In retirement, he was much sought after as a lecturer on air power, defence and military history topics. He was a prolific writer and was a co-author of *Air Power in the Nuclear Age* (1984). He also wrote *Unmanned Aircraft* (1988), *The Royal Air Force: An Illustrated History* (1999, third edition), and he edited *Great Air Battles of the Royal Air Force* (1996), as well as contributing to many professional journals.

Armitage was fascinated by the Far East, and he received many invitations to give lectures on cruise liners sailing in the area. He was chairman of the Museum of East Asian Art in Bath from 1996 to 2000, and together with his wife was an active member of the Bath and County Club.

Armitage never forgot his time as an aircraft apprentice, and he retained close links with the establishment. In 1980 he was made the patron of the newly formed Aircraft Apprentice Association, a post he held until his death. He rarely missed a reunion or the AGM and frequently assisted at VIP events. He lamented the decision in 1994 to discontinue the apprentice scheme. It was his wish that his ashes be spread in the grounds of the Halton village church.

Michael Armitage's first marriage was dissolved and in 1970 he married Gretl Steinig, who survives him with two sons from his first marriage. A son and a daughter predeceased him.

**Michael Armitage, born August 25 1930, died December 25 2022**