

BLOODY ELECTRICIANS



During my sojourn in the RAF as an aircraft electrician one of the niggling problems that I found was the "feeling" between engine airframe trades and the "ancillary trades" radio, electrical instruments, armourers.

The engine/airframe types had always been the groundcrew in the "good old days" (in their eyes). you know biplanes, ! puttees and bags of "bull...." After all they were paid slightly more than us in the then trade structure of the Royal Air Force and I suspect that they felt rather threatened at the introduction of ancillaries into squadron life.

One old timer said to me "These pioneer aircraft are far too complicated electrically, when I worked on Siskins/ Gamecocks etc. they just had a dynamo with a propeller on the wing" (complicated ????? blimey you couldn't find anything more basic !)

Now as I have mentioned before on 209 squadron in Malaya we were equipped with the incredibly slow Single Pioneer and its big brother the Twin Pioneer (known as the twinpin)

I remember once there was a big panic in the squadron, an engine sergeant approached me,,, "Cpl Shelvey, your bloody fire warning has gone off and caused one of the twinpins to force land on an emergency airstrip in the ulu!" ALL MY FAULT OF COURSE !

Perhaps I should explain, the Alvis Leonades engines of the twinpin were protected by a "firewire" system .

It was a thin copper capillary tube about four feet long which was wrapped around the danger spots on the engine. If the engine overheated it caused the explosive substance inside the tube to expand and push out a plunger which operated a micro switch to illuminate a warning light in the cockpit.

Well, that was it, I quickly put together what I thought was necessary, new firewire system, wiring lamps and the ubiquitous tool bag, and accompanied by the constantly bickering whinging sergeant (engines) giving out the same old line "it must have been an electrical fault" we set off in another twinpin.

The emergency airstrip was in the middle of the jungle, in fact you could say that it was in the middle of nowhere. As we circled overhead I could see the two aircrew (pilot & nav.) sitting on the ground disconsolately staring up at us. We landed and approached the two stranded aircrew.

The pilot and navigator were initially quite friendly, but after having been assured by this expert engine sergeant that it was just an electrical fault I noticed that the atmosphere became distinctly frosty.

I lost no time and was up the ladder, cowlings off and a quick decco to see what was up.. during this time I couldn't help noticing that the sergeant had lit the hexamine stove, opened the compo rations and sitting down comfortably kept up a scurrilous diatribe about electricians to the assembled officers, He then settled down to a brew-up ... I of course was not invited !

Well you've guessed it, it wasn't an electrical fault at all - the electrical warning system had worked perfectly. In fact one of the exhaust manifolds on top of the engine had blown off causing hot (very hot) gasses to flow over the wing. It was a lucky thing that the aircrew had flow "by the book" cutting the faulty engine and landing immediately.

As soon as I had informed the sergeant he spat out his tea and cursed --- he had made the tea with curry powder !

Martin Shelvey