



Royal Air Force Locking Apprentice Association

Newsletter

Serial 23

June 1999

Going . . .

Going . . .

(wait for it) . . . **Gone!**

BY CHARLES HART

On Saturday 19 June 1999, a small ceremony was held in Grove park in Weston-super-Mare where around 21 officers and airmen paraded in front of the bandstand to mark the handover of the Freedom of Weston to Town Mayor, Councillor Ron Moon. The Ceremony was small because the number of personnel now at Locking is only just above the finger count. In fact there were more airmen in the Central Band Contingent than actually on parade and guess who's bus broke down, delaying the ceremony by 15 minutes.

The Freedom of the Town was originally presented to RAF Locking in 1957 in the form of an illuminated scroll and this was enhanced later in 1981 when the Town presented the Unit with a Freedom Sword. Many previous Station Commanders attended the Ceremony among which were the respective recipients of the scroll and sword. These were Air Vice Marshal Kington-Blair-Oliphant and Air Commodore Harrington, both now retired, who no doubt had fond memories as they watched the items being handed back to the Mayor to be held in "safe keeping" and "perpetuity" by the Town until such time as the RAF returns to Weston!

The Current Station Commander, Wing Commander John Morgan, said in his address that RAF Locking had been most fortunate to

be situated on the outskirts of such a friendly town and one where the rapport between townspeople and servicemen and women had remained high for a period now approaching 60 years. He noted that many airmen whilst in training had met and later married local girls and therefore had a root in the Town. In a similar vein, Councillor Moon said that it was a sad day and a significant era in the Town's history; it was losing a good neighbour whose connection had been good and strong for 60 years - a long time.

After the ceremony a reception was held in the Combined Mess at Locking where the North Somerset Council and former station commanders were entertained. This was the last official Station function before the Mess finally closes on 30 June. There are two small unofficial functions to go before closure but after the end of the month the Station will house very few staff and will quickly diminish to some RAF Police and the guy who holds the bunch of keys. However, there is one growth area and this is that MOD Abbeywood will be making greater use of the quarters.

As to the future, who knows? The Station could still become an army training unit but no decisions have yet been reached.

EDITORIAL

Later in this issue there appears an article which the author reckons may cause some controversy, because it takes a slightly different view of how good apprentice training really was – shock horror!

I have to say it rang some bells with me, and when I began to think a bit more about it, I recalled conversations which I have had in the past about the apprentice experience in general. Let me hasten to say that, like the author of “Relevant Training?” (page 4), I wouldn’t have missed it for the world. But was it all really quite the way that we sometimes like to portray it in our worst nostalgia-ridden moments?

Of course it was tough at times, and those that came through it all apparently unscathed are justified in modest self congratulation. But what of those who couldn’t (or wouldn’t) take it. What damage was done to them?

I remember one particularly poignant conversation with a group at North Luffenham about four years after passing out. Included was another ex app who had been a couple of entries behind me. We were discussing the merits of our various routes into the Air Force, me extolling the virtues of the apprentice system. The other guy surprised me by saying that he had hated every moment of his three years, and the bully-boy regime had all but destroyed him. He wasn’t what anyone would call “soft”, and in fact had been quite prominent on the sports field.

More recently, talking to some of my own entry (and I hope they won’t mind me saying this) there was quite a strong feeling that the somewhat distorted environment of Locking had left some psychological scars which still have an effect even to this day.

Has any one any comments on this ... for or against?

Wanted, budding journalists

Although I have enjoyed every moment of producing the Newsletter, the time has come for me to let it go to a willing volunteer – preferably one who is better at spelling than me!

The reason for this is two-fold. Firstly, I am about to embark on a year long study project which is going to take all of my spare time.

Secondly, this is my 12th edition, and although I try hard to keep it fresh, even I can recognise that there a certain predictability about each new issue is beginning to creep in! It is time for a change, and the Millenium is as good an excuse as any other.

So folks, please form an orderly queue at my post box, and get your application in early! I will give whatever help I can, and all problems can be resolved. I have certainly enjoyed such good support from both the committee and the membership at large, that the job really isn’t a chore. It has been good fun, and I have made many new friends along the way. Give it a try!

Sparky Posted

Along with all the other personnel at Locking, Sgt Sparky McDougall, the Station’s donkey mascot, awaited his probable final posting with some unease. There was a rumour going round which ran along the lines that, since he has given sterling service for some 20 years, he ought to be barbecued and served up at an all ranks party.

Happily, we can report that he has retired at the age of 22 years and is in the care of Mrs Gwen Garfield of Crossways Farm, Eastertown some 10 miles South-West of Weston. Mrs Garfield has in fact looked after Sparky for the past 18 years so they know each other well. He still appreciates the occasional polo mint so when you write to him he asks that you enclose a tube or two. As a footnote, Sparky’s uniform and tack have been presented to the RAF Museum, Hendon.

Committee Report

General.

The Audit has been completed and all is ok. Despite the quite unprecedented spend of last year we are still solvent with finances in a healthy state.

AGM.

The plan for the AGM is as follows: The AGM is to be held on Saturday 25 September 1999 as advised in the last Newsletter. The event will be at 'Dance and Partyscene,' in Whitecross Road. Briefly, the programme will run as follows; on Friday 24 Sep there will be the usual informal Meet and Greet in Grand Atlantic Bar at 8pm. On Saturday 25 September the reunion will commence at 11am and we will, hopefully, get permission to open the bar at 1130. At 1pm a buffet lunch will be served after which we shall go upstairs for the AGM which is timed to start at 2pm. At around 4pm tea will be served after which you can go and rest before the evening dinner dance. This will commence at 7pm for 7-30. The Committee decided on one change in the format. At last year's function, the lunchtime bar dispensed drinks without payment. We decided that this year we would still subsidise the bar but members will have to pay a reduced price for their alcoholic drinks. The price of dinner dance tickets which have remained stable since 1993 will also rise to £15.

Amendment Proposals to the Constitution.

If you feel or believe that we could improve or adjust the way in which we conduct the Association now is the time to start thinking about the changes you would like to see. So any members wishing to forward proposals to amend the Constitution are invited to contact the Secretary. There has to be a closing date and this year it is by the end of July.

RAFLAA Trophy.

The Trophy is proving to be a problem due to communications difficulties with Cosford. Hopefully this will iron itself out over time and we shall have a routine established with the Unit whereby our President does the honours at a suitable Cosford ceremony. Meanwhile this year's presentation should not be a problem. We hear that it will probably go to a local person so we may be presenting it at the AGM as normal in September. This will be confirmed in the next Newsletter.

Committee Changes.

As outlined at the last AGM, 6 of the Committee are required to stand down because their 3 year period of office will have been completed. The important posts becoming vacant are the executive ones, ie. the Chairman, Secretary and the Membership Secretary. The Meeting again agreed that these Committee changes must be staggered and, in order to achieve a smooth transition when someone new takes over, the executive positions should have nominated deputies. Both the Chairman and the Secretary have served more than 6 years now. Being founder members they were even operating before they were elected so they ought to be replaced soon before enthusiasm and ideas wane. Volunteers are therefore urgently required to move the Association forward into the 21st century. Your Association needs you and the Secretary will be delighted to discuss the duties and responsibilities of the Committee positions with enquirers. For those who would like to assist in the running and future development of the Association a proforma is enclosed. No-one will be tossed into the deep end and you can sit by Nellie for as long as you feel is necessary before taking over. This is an important request. Please think about it - your Association needs you.

Relevant Training ?

(By Brian (Dai) Davies 76th Entry)

Brian writes in from his shangrila in Mallorca with the following piece. He said in his letter that it may cause some contention and stir up a few people, but insists that it reflects the opinions of many ex-apps over the years who have discussed the issue with him, and he feels that it will probably ring a few bells with others when they read it. From the Editor's point of view it will hopefully provoke some response!

Brian also sends his regards to any 76 and 77 Entry people, and says that he will try and make the AGM and re-union in September.

The ex-apprentice's sometimes crude approach to radio servicing on operational stations in the 1950s, was much to do with the three year training course that while building up future RAF SNCOs, consistently failed to train them to be good technicians.

The apprentice training at Locking, contained considerable pieces of instruction time spent on matters that would have been necessary to him in the RAF of the 1930s, but contained very little relevance to the 'modern' Air Force of the 1950s.

Theory and practical skill for building radio coils and capacitors, the capability to build a basic superhet., relearning calculus, 'leadership' training that was nothing of the sort, detailed theory on the Foster-Seely discriminator and other outdated basic circuits, were just a few of many things taught to fill out a young apprentice's three years. Even in those days, we wondered on the relevance of the many archaic matters we were required to learn at Locking, and designed to turn us out as valued technicians

Throughout the RAF, many SNCOs dreaded the posting in of an arrogant young ex-app to their sections. They thought they knew everything after three years of arduous training, Few realised that in the 1950s, much of their instruction had been on obsolete or obsolescent equipment and systems, that were very little preparation for what was in actual operational use.

The really useful ex-app was the one who quickly realised in the first month of his initial posting, that he had a Lot to learn about the real RAF.

That the technical aspect of his Locking course contained only basic knowledge for the servicing of radio equipment.

He quickly saw that he knew very little of the majority of equipment and systems that he was expected to service. He had to rapidly teach himself, frequently with the help of short service mechanics, themselves usually short on valid training.

In the Ground Wireless tradegroup, during my first operational year as a junior technician and corporal, I was expected to know all about NDBs (Non Directional Beacons, many just newer than spark transmitters), the ubiquitous Pye mobile sets, Air Traffic Control Communications systems, the UHF transmitters and receivers, UHF DF systems, not to mention many pieces of American equipment. All of which we ex-apps. had never heard of, never mind experienced.

Then there was equipment covered by the infamous Locking 'Fam' (familiarity) Courses. "Of course you wont need to know much about these as they are not going to be around long". Famous last words. As many were in use at the late 1960s and one, the airfield's CR/DF system was still in use in the 1970s - all given a 3 or 5 hour Fam. Course each to prepare the apprentice for the outside world.

The theory that the ex-app. would rapidly hone his basic knowledge to a fine edge after passing out of Locking, failed to realise that

on operational stations in the Ground Wireless trade there was never the manpower, experience or time for much post graduate training. As a corporal on two stations out of three (in one and a half years), my superior was a telegraphist sergeant!

So for years the ex-app struggled to maintain equipment he should have been trained on properly in the first place. Tenacity (that *was* taught at Locking) and good luck played a big part in the survival of the 1950s radio fitter.

Even as an experienced (and overworked) sergeant in 1965, I found it impossible to get a basic course at Locking or other RAF school on semiconductor theory and servicing, even though they were being introduced into service at a rapid rate. The Air Publications or maker's handbook covering them were barely adequate.. At the 'pointed end' servicing the airfields of Akrotiri and Lyneham, there was practically no time for other than the very basic training to keep equipment going. Good thing the pilots never knew!

As a corporal instructor at Locking for nearly four years and a Chief Tech. technical author at RTPS North Luffenham for nearly five years, I with other enlightened technicians (mostly ex-apps), tried to right the training errors of our masters.

Speaking for myself, I succeeded (according to my annual assessments).

Surprisingly much of the 'out of date' wireless principles taught in the 1950s became relevant to me in the mid 1980s. After I left the RAF and became a technical public relations consultant. One of my clients was GPT (designers and manufacturers of the ultra modern System X telephone exchanges used world-wide). Much of modern glass fibre and its component technology is closely related to wireless theory as taught at 1950s Locking, and I was able to understand the modern developments relatively easily much to the surprise of the boffins at GPT's experimental base.

I don't knock the value of my apprentice training at Locking, I would not do it again, but no way would I have missed it.

FABEA Meeting

The Federation of Apprentice and Boy Entrant Associations will be holding its annual meeting around July this year and the Committee have approved the attendance of 2 members.

Last year we discussed the possibility of a mutual bi-annual social event in London and we expect to hear of the likely costs and involvement of Associations.

Also discussed last year was our future involvement in the Armistice ceremony at the Cenotaph and Royal British Legion march past each November. This year the Whitehall event will be held on 14 November and the assembly will be at 9am – an early start. A Federation contingent is being proposed as a better alternative to individual associations taking part; i.e. numbers equal clout. However, we have no idea at the moment how much interest and enthusiasm there is to become part of this fine tradition of remembering those who made the ultimate sacrifice for their Nation and enabled us to write this in English and not German. Before we make an application to the Royal British Legion we need an estimate of the number of places needed. So, again, we have included a small proforma on page 13 for you to provide us with the information that you would be interested in taking part in the ceremony.

APPS ON THE WORLDWIDE WEB

George Burville (90th) has written in with a very comprehensive report on his website which is doing sterling service in keeping Apprentices and Boy Entrants in each other's and the public eye. There isn't room in this edition for more than this brief mention (apologies for that George) but a fuller article will appear in the next issue. Any one who is interested is urged to visit the site at it's new address (since 25 May):

<http://www.appbe.com/>

That Reminds me

Tony Hatten, 93rd

Two articles in the last Newsletter have moved me to put pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard), the first by Dave Croft on The Madness at Buchan, and the second by Chris Horn reminiscing about the '74 Cyprus coup. Dave mentions in his article that whilst at Buchan he shared a room with an ex-app, probably 93rd, who was called Dougie. Although he couldn't remember his surname he did remember that Dougie was (is?) quite a character. This character, I'm certain, was Dougie Blackburn. He and I, together with many others - Andy Anderson, Gary Lattimer, Martin ('Bongo') Drew, Michael ('Bernie') Furness - to name a few, went through the three years at Locking together sharing a wooden hut in 'D' Squadron on the site where 5 Block is now situated.

We went through many trials and tribulations together, not the least being because Dougie (and Bernie, but that is another story) owned a car. That is no great revelation today, but back in the early '60s most people only dreamed of owning a car. Being an apprentice *and* owing a car was almost unheard of. True, the car was only an old sit-up-and-beg Ford Popular but it did start, and it did run. Stopping was another matter! That didn't seem quite so important then as it does now. Apps were not allowed cars, so Dougie kept his variously on the National Servicemen's car park and in a nearby civilian garage.

I well remember Dougie driving me from Weston Super Mare to Margate where we were staying with my parents for a long weekend. It took at least six hours and we got hopelessly lost in London. So far I can vouch for the truth, but the next bit may have been coloured by time. When Dougie was 'hiding' the car on the National Servicemen's car park he obviously did not have the relevant pass and inevitably the RAF Police (bless them !!) found out that the car belonged to an apprentice. After many threats and much posturing by an LAC (acting Cpl) policeman,

full of self-importance and bovine excrement, a deal was struck whereby Dougie did not have 'the book thrown at him' on the proviso that the policeman in question was allowed to use the car whenever he wanted and that Dougie would pay for the petrol.

There is also a story that on taking a car load of 93rd out in the car, with Dougie driving, it was agreed that they should duck down out of view as they went past the guardroom and out of the main gate. Unfortunately, on the shout of 'duck' Dougie also ducked down and the apparently empty car passed by the guardroom and hit the stanchion of the main gate - even if this is not wholly true I'm sure, as with most stories, there is an element of truth somewhere.

After leaving Locking in 1962 I lost touch with most of those I had shared the billet with, but I did bump into Dougie a couple of times over the years. The first time was in Episkopi SNCO's mess when he was part of the relief force sent out during the '74 coup, and again on a wet Sunday morning in Lincoln where I had gone to escape, for a few hours, the rigours of IOT at Cranwell. I bumped into Dougie and his wife by lucky chance on the street, but it was cold and raining (when isn't it in Lincolnshire?) and it was not really the right opportunity to renew old friendships, so we chatted for only a few minutes. That was 20 years ago now - wherever you are Dougie, I wish you well, and thank you Dave Croft for bringing up memories from the past that I remember with much affection.

The second item concerned Chris's memory of taking frozen chickens around RAF Episkopi (it was then !) married quarters during the aftermath of the '74 Cyprus coup. I was also part of the team taking round the seemingly unending supply of chickens. My memory is that it was a shipload of frozen food destined for the NAAFI storerooms but the

coup and the disruption of the power supplies forced the NAAFI to get rid of the chickens before they started to spoil. I also heard that they were a gift from a business man who, hearing that food was running short, diverted his cargo from wherever it was bound to Cyprus for the servicemen. Both of these are probably wrong but rumours abounded at the time and we were ready to believe anything.

About the same time as the 'frozen chicken' episode, I was sent with a few others and a couple of 3 tonners, under UN escort, to Limassol to empty the NAAFI store of booze and cigs. Rather naïvely, we were ordered to load only *unopened* cases. No orders were given as to what to do with the *opened* cases. (Here I plead ignorance, take the 5th or whatever else is necessary to ensure that just in case it is still on the files, any crime that may have been committed is not blamed on me.)

The mention of the Turkish Refugee camp at Happy Valley brought back many memories. Like Chris, the all-pervading smell and the Turkish louts, laughing at us sweating in the sun putting up tents for them to use, are vivid memories, as is the look of terror on their faces when, after a rumour swept through the camp that a Greek police convoy was on its way to 'get' the Turkish males, an old lorry with a defective silencer, travelling down the hill into the valley, started backfiring. He who laughs last

actually got on very well with both Greeks and Turks, and sometimes wonder what fate dealt up for the two Turkish 'tea boys' who worked at 12 SU Satellite Station, and who were deported, much against their wishes, to Turkey. In their own way they were both splendid gentlemen. One, Sheffik, had been in the police force and had, at one time, guarded Sir Hugh Foot. He had a letter signed by the good man which he proudly showed to everyone. Unfortunately, he always referred to him as Sir Huge Foot. The other, Mehmet, was the only man I ever saw genuinely fast asleep leaning on a broom. Thank you, Chris, for the

memories that I share with you of Cyprus, when a new Alfa Romeo AlfaSud cost just under £1000, Episkopi was a busy RAF Station and kebabs in Limassol cost about £2 with free kokinelli!

Finally, how sad to read that No 1 Radio School came to an end on 1st October, even though we knew it was going to happen. I have the proud boast that my father served at Locking during the last war, my mother was a WAAF during the war and met my father at Locking, I served at Locking as an apprentice in the 50's/60's, as a SNCO instructor in the 70's and as OC Specialist Training Squadron in the 90's (following in Charles Hart's footsteps) and finally, my son, also in the RAF, has attended two courses at Locking. I would not wish to be thought of as living in the past, but equally I would not wish to be accused of forgetting an RAF Station that was instrumental in giving many of us the start in life that makes us a cut above those who did not experience life in the apps.

May Dinner Dance

Despite a disappointing response, the Dinner Dance went ahead on the 1 May. It was a close run thing, however, since the committee were on the point of cancelling because only about thirty tickets had been sold a week before.

Eventually, after some frantic phoning around, a few more members signed up, and on the night thirty eight sat down to the customary roast, followed by dancing at Dance and Party Scene. Because of the low numbers, we stayed on the first floor level for dining and dancing.

It has to be said that the 99th contingent were easily the major group there with ten plus wives attending. For once the old 'uns formed the supporting entry!

Although a larger number would have been nice, the party was enjoyed by all.

Once again thanks are due to Margaret and George Ring for the splendid organisation.

AN APP AT LARGE

(By Brian (Dai) Davies 76th Entry)

A double whammy! Brian's previous article arrived in soggy Weston in April from the sunscorched Mediterranean, but this one was earlier by a month. I make no apologies for including both in this issue of the newsletter since it is most worthy (the Tech Author training shows, Brian!) and in any case the letter would have been a bit thin without it.

The real loser this time is Brian, since in his covering letter he makes the point that

"... being a bit off the beaten patch here in Mallorca (although it does have its advantages) the Newsletter is welcome and I wish more would contribute."

Unfortunately you have read at least half of this one before somewhere. But a grateful thanks any way.

The Royal Air Force had never forgiven me (so I thought then at the end of my apprentice training) for causing my officers so much agro., because I kept slipping away at weekends to my parent's home in Bristol. So they pronounced judgement.

On requesting a station in the West Country, in their infinite wisdom I was given a posting to the north of Ireland, to RAF Ballykelly and left forthwith proudly wearing my new inverted J/Ts stripe, and carrying my worldly goods in a kitbag,

The excitement of travelling so far by myself to Liverpool for the ferry, then the trip across to Belfast and being able to buy a pint of beer legally, was stimulating and fitted the arrogance typical of all new ex-apps.

Arrogance and innocence — not a good mixture as I decided to walk from the dockside to the railway station. Perhaps I should have been briefed or at least read the newspapers at Locking! Anyway I learnt very quickly at first hand, that walking through Belfast's back street terraces, even in those days and alone in British uniform is NOT A GOOD THING. The Catholic area I walked through was hostile to say the least, and eventually a sympathetic housewife darted out of her house and advised me to stop dawdling and get to hell out of the area.

On arrival at Ballykelly, people were incredulous at my tale, and for my sins (and

obvious survival skills) I was sent to work at Barnalt transmitter site just a few miles across the moor from the Irish border. It was a typical IRA target and just before my arrival its aerial masts had been damaged by the boyoo's dynamiting activities.

When I saw Barnalt's two rings of thick barbed wire, network of trip flares, machine gun tower and seven armed RAF Regiment guards during daytime and fourteen at night I came to the conclusion that the RAF had got its own back!

Life soon got into a pattern, as I was put in charge of two N/S mechanics on shift work, when all other shift leaders were corporals. And the fun of frequent forays into Londonderry with its strange foreignness and superb drinking atmosphere was a welcome change to Weston-super-Mare on a wet winter night.

'Differentness' was added to by being regularly trained in firing Sten guns and later Stirling and armed night guard duty. Also when visiting the transmitter station's Receiver and CRDF outsites one carried a toolkit in one hand and a cocked submachine gun with back to back taped magazines in the other. (Who is this guy Rambo anyway?)

Shooting incidents even in 1957 were fairly frequent in Northern Ireland and the B-Specials were particularly trigger happy. One balmy Quiet summer's night, coming back from a dance in Londonderry, I was reclining in the back seat of a friend's car and with the other

four in a well beered mood of relaxation, when someone said wasn't that a red light? It took a few more yards before we realised it was a road block light, and the car screeched to a halt. Being tipsy and not stupid we froze in our seats.

There is nothing more sobering than the cold tip of a machine gun pressed to the side of your forehead. We were ordered, hands above our head to 'take the position' facing the car, as we were searched. When the seven special police were satisfied who we were, they told us we had been just about to pass the last 3 policeman the checkpoint, and they were just going to open fire when we stopped. This was no tall story, as the week before, five navy personnel from the nearby base had been shot at in a similar occasion, two were killed and the others wounded.

Its amazing how people adapt to living in a hazardous situation and this did not stop us often venturing into the Republic or risking our young necks in foolhardy exploits. One such being five of us being confronted by an Ulster Constabulary officer in the back yard of a pub in nearby Limavady. One of us well imbibed lads, was new to the province and became somewhat cheeky to the policeman. After about a minute of this embarrassing scene, the policeman took out his pistol and threatened to 'take us in' the foolish lad not being aware of life in Ireland mocked him and was more than a little surprised when three rounds were fired to the ground near his feet. We dispersed quietly back to camp.

Just as I was getting settled to not using the bookmakers near Ballykelly's main gate, having lost my shirt a final time, and got a date with a blond Irish beauty in Dublin, just four and a half months after passing out of Locking they gave me my corporals stripes, (sympathy probably because I was a J/T doing a corporal's job). My boss said they want you in St Eval in Cornwall in three days, and by the time I had sewn on my new stripes, it left no time for my Dublin date. Wonder how long she waited?

Apprentice Memorabilia

At the committee meeting on 4 February the disposal of the remaining Apprentice memorabilia was decided, and the following actions have now taken place.

- * Three filing cabinets containing records of Apprentices and other training at RAF Locking together with one box of Apprentice memorabilia have been transferred to RAF Henlow by kind arrangement of the Chairman Joe Holroyd.
- * Two boxes of photographs are now in the safe keeping of David Price (102 entry) at his home.
- * Boxes of Entry photographs (except 76th) together with associated albums have been lodged with Peter Crow (95th).
- * The 76th Entry box of photographs is in the care of Neil Castle.

All the contact details of the custodians can be found in the Member's Handbook.

Green Satin

While on a visit to Lincoln for the 94th reunion, **Colin Clayton** was browsing through the window of a second hand shop and couldn't believe his eyes. There amongst a load of junk was a Green Satin indicator. Going inside he asked how much "that thing" over there was. "Oh, you mean the Green Satin indicator? £10, but there is a better one round the back for £15."

In a daze Colin handed over £15 and had to carry the damn thing through the centre of Lincoln back to the hotel. He had forgotten how heavy it was.

"What on earth are you going to do with that?" asked his wife. Her tone suggested that it was not going to have pride of place in the house, Nostalgia is not what it used to be!

His grand son was more enthusiastic, so Colin will probably give it to him. When he is Colin's age in 2050 he may be proud to have an antique from the Cold War. Colin reckons that *he* would be proud to have a part from a 1902 aeroplane worked on by *his* grandfather!

The RAF's Secret Aircrew

by Dave Croft (65 Squadron)

Another frequent contributor, Dave has sent this in article, but unfortunately I can't do it full justice. It was accompanied by several photos and a graphic or two. Thanks to a combination of poor original photo quality, scanning and multiple photo copying in the production process they were unuseable. We tried to get round the problem by emailing the original scan, alas without success.

If anyone can cast more light on the murkey world of the "secret aircrew", I would be pleased to hear from you ...

During the Radfan Operations and Indonesian Confrontation of the 1960's there was a need to highlight the role of the British and indigenous Armed Forces actions against the insurgents attempting to take control of these respective countries. The role required some political bias, and in particular, emphasis was to be made of the superiority of modern air power in localised operations. In this respect propaganda coverage needed to be made from operational aircraft, but the use of WWII style War Correspondents was deemed to be uneconomic. Besides, with reporting restrictions removed it was considered that HM Government could be caused embarrassment when an all too common cock-up occurred.

It was at this stage that RAF planners considered using serving airmen, in addition to their chosen roles, as extra aircrew to cover the operations against the insurgents. Although little, if anything, is known about the Radfan role of these 'secret' aircrew there has been some 'leakage' over the Indonesian/Borneo coverage. Selection of operational correspondents was from 'Q' fitters on 65 Squadron based at Seletar in Singapore. These 'unfortunates' were ex-apps, who with a promise of accelerated promotion, found themselves on a base that was over-staffed by over-qualified fitters for whom the only way to realise their ambitions was to move on and away from the job as rapidly as possible.

Therefore for the selected few were offered the opportunity to gain accelerated rank to sergeant, but as aircrew not as fitters! For these few 'volunteers' the temporary category of aircrew **War Correspondent** was written into Queens Regulations. For these new aircrew a brevet was designed, based upon those worn by non-pilot category, as a single wing with a laurel surrounding the letters 'WC'

Needless to say, those that sported the brevet in the Sergeants Messes quickly assumed the collective title of "Boggies". This caused much upset to the normally insensitive ex-'Q' fitters.

A normally indulgent MOD (Air) being aware of the volunteer role of these men therefore decided to move them away from the common crowd and billeted them in hastily erected huts surrounded by a high wire fence, with their own RAF Police in the recently drained swamp area adjacent to 65 Sqn (SAM). This was a good move by the RAF as the "boggies" now wanted ... and were entitled to wear the aircrew brevet!

Training commenced on a variety of aircraft ... Belvedares (66 Sqn) Whirlwind Helicopters (110 Sqn), Valettas (52 Sq) and Twin Pioneers (209 Sqn). From the start the volunteers had to learn new writing skills and how to perform in the confines of an aircraft. They quickly found that the large foolscap Stationary Office writing books were too cumbersome and loose sheets on a clipboard difficult to use in draughty aircraft. They tried resorting to etch-

a-sketch pads which showed promise but were restrictive in content. Frustration mounted until someone recalled a Snowdrop using his police notebook and writing up the contents of a conversation with an ainnan to the effect that he was a 'two faced bastard'. The size and page content of the notebook seemed ideal but the police seemed reluctant to release a few for trial operations.

A few quiet words in the right place brought about the release of the notebooks and the reason for the Snowdrops reluctance to release them became evident on the inside cover of each notebook was a list of the correct spellings of words (and meanings) likely to be of use in further proceedings, for example:

Ape or baboon – a derogatory word used by airmen to describe the Flight Sergeant i/c RAF Police Flight

Bastard – to question the origins of your parentage

Derogatory – not being very kind to you

Rock Ape – a member of the RAF Regiment (Note: not RAF Firemen)

Snoop – a derogatory word used by airmen to describe a member of the RAF Police Flight

Snowdrop – a complimentary word used by airmen to describe a member of the RAF Police Flight

Virgin – the SWO's daughter(s)

Woman – a member of the opposite sex (to a male) or a derogatory term used by technical trades airmen to describe their beloved Warrant Officers

Further misunderstanding occurred in the respective messes on social nights. As a result of imbibing copious quantities of Tiger beer unusual happenings affected peoples thinking patterns and the ability to converse clearly. Two examples related to me exemplify the above.

In the first, a rather well spoken sergeant aircrewman (obviously on the path towards a commission) asked a group of inebriated SNCO's "to direct him towards the WC's" and

he was subsequently directed towards the swamp!

In the second case a drunken RAF Regiment sergeant dragged his simian hulk, knuckles trailing across the floor, towards the earstwhile group to mutter

"pish mate, I wanna pish, where's the bogs?"

Now this was one hell of a sentence for a 'Rock Ape' and consequently the word 'bogs' became rather drawn out to sound to the inebriated group as though he had said "boggies". He also was directed to the swamp where some time later the duty dog handler patrolling the WC's accommodation area was drawn to his presence by grunting sounds and the sight of him wrestling with the police dog! The Snowdrop had recently returned from detachment to Borneo and thought he had come across an Orang Utan! He was still not convinced when the main camp Snowdrops arrested the Rock Ape and attempted to interrogate him, unsuccessfully, back in the guardroom. Success eventually came when a Regiment officer was brought over from RAF Changi to act as an interpreter!

Note... so far the reader of this may have drawn the opinion that Rock Apes are not well thought of in the RAF. Nothing could be further from the truth! Why I have a friend who was a navigator on Shackletons who told me how the crew of his particular aircraft befriended two Rock Apes on one of their frequent detachments to Gibraltar and wanted to bring them back to the UK.!

Throughout the confrontation the WC's performed their tasks well and HM Government was well pleased. However all good things must come to an end and eventually the aircrew rank of War Correspondent was abolished with orders from above that the brevet was to be removed from uniforms. A grateful government (and Air Staff) permitted the SNCO ranks to be retained and the task of finding suitable posts for these ex-aircrew was started. Integration back within 65 Squadron was deemed unsuitable so they were packed

off to the UK with postings to remote radar bases such as Saxa Vord, Benbecula, Buchan, Boulmer and Patrington. It was felt that that should they be unwise enough to mention their previous role as temporary aircrew they would not be believed as anyone stationed at one of these bases must be mad anyway!

However rumours did abound and the story was confirmed by a friend of mine from the 97th Entry (the Official Secrets Act prevents me from naming him!) who was with me on 65 Sqn. He disappeared part way through his tour and I once thought I saw him go into the Sergeants Mess, but then decided I was imagining it (heat stroke!) as he had been a corporal when I recently worked with him on the Bloodhounds. Other members of the squadron mentioned seeing him in the adjoining compound at times, and of occasionally passing the time of day with him. But we learnt nothing about what he was doing off-squadron. He put me in the picture when we met up by chance at the Changi transit hotel on our way back to the UK. Gentle interrogation aided by alcohol revealed the

whole story that evening, with a sincere request that I keep the story to myself. Like I said who in their right minds would believe it?

However now that some 30 years have passed I can pass on the story, as told to me, of the RAFs secret aircrew, and this I have recounted above. Should any one doubt that these temporary aircrew existed, there was written evidence (despite the Official Secrets Act) in the watch logbooks of the radar bases they were posted to.

When writing up the watch log, your bog-standard fitter put down the facts in a concise, albeit at times disjointed, manner. On the other hand the ex-WC gave away his recent past by writing up the watch log in glowing, flowing terms – written works of art! A trawl through these past log books will reveal that not even the Official Secrets Act can mask the existence of the role of these ‘Q’-fitters-cum-aircrew who, by their very training, were able to meet the challenges the Air Staff placed upon them with comparative ease.

Well done RAF Locking!

CALLING ALL MUSICIANS

In a previous newsletter Bob Finlayson (99th) suggested a one-night-only rebirth of the Incas – to those unfortunate enough not to have been at Locking in the early ‘60’s, these were a very talented group made up mainly of apprentices. It was suggested in the last newsletter that maybe a group of ‘Golden Oldies’ could be formed, to entertain at a re-union dance.

A short while ago this idea emerged once more from Dick (Scriv) Scrivener (96th) in the form of an email:

I've just got round to reading the March newsletter, well I have been away a lot this year. The bit that caught my eye was the idea of making some music, as at the last two 96th entry reunions Pete Hall and myself have played a short set at the dinner dance; and though I say it myself a friendly audience seemed to appreciate our efforts. We were helped by the rhythm section of the band to deliver some prehistoric rock 'n roll, Pete is a good guitarist and I can strum and sing. The best and worst bit is rehearsal the afternoon before the performance.

My imitation Gibson is now gathering dust, so if there has been any response to the idea, I am interested - Weston is not too far from my home in South Somerset.

So how about it guys? Scriv's email address is richard@podio.freemove.co.uk

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