

Patrick Lyford - National Service at Bawdsey 1953

I was one of the “lucky” erks who was pre-selected for O.C.T.U. before being called up for National Service. Consequently, on Thursday 19th January 1956, when I walked through the rain down that long road at R.A.F. Cardington from the Guardroom to the arch bearing the legend “Welcome to the Royal Air Force”, I was able to look forward to a more privileged National Service life than most National Servicemen, who felt in that place anything but welcome!

We must have been one of the first intakes to be pre-selected, for our Corporal announced that he wasn’t sure just how to approach us “You might just come back one day and be my officer”. So he arranged for our uniforms to be issued on the following Monday, which meant that they would not be tailored until the following Wednesday, which meant that we would not be able to do coal fatigues. Oh dear, what a pity! He was also extremely apologetic about Reveille each day – “Sorry to wake you up, gentlemen!”

During the course of that week we were issued with our number (“Sir, 2784234”) pyjamas airman, boots ammunition and shoes airman, brushes hair and brushes shoe, pants under, socks, towels and housewife (pronounced “Huzzif” – “the only woman the Air Force will give you for free, gentlemen”), we were shorn (“the Royal Air Force does not care what you have underneath your hat, gentlemen, but we do not like to have anything showing”), we had our photographs taken for the 1250 identity card, sitting in pews with our numbers on boards before us like convicted criminals. We were confined to camp and spent most of our spare time trying to get the tortoise stove to stay alight long enough to give out something resembling heat, shrinking our berets airman into a better shape than that provided by the manufacturers and producing that see-your-face-in-the-toecaps shine on our boots airman with spit, polish and a red hot teaspoon without burning the stitches! Why did those boots have to be made with knobbly leather instead of nice shiny leather?

A week after arrival at Cardington, we entrained for Liverpool, where we spent the night on straw-filled palliasse in the miserably depressing Crimea Barracks in Crosby, which must have been built for the army at the time of that war and had not changed much since then. Several pints of Threlfalls Bitter failed to induce any sense of cheer or well-being. The following day we embarked on the Isle of Man Steam Packet for Douglas Isle of Man, from which port we entrained on the narrow gauge railway to Ramsay and thence by road to R.A.F. Jurby, which was to be our home for the next three months.

Warrant Officer Paddy Webb and his bicycle were our constant companions on Course 50 Red One. We learned all about QR’s and ACI’s, we learned Section 40 by heart (“conduct prejudicial to good order and discipline” – “he threw down his rifle and said ‘I will serve no more, you may do what you wish’ or words to that effect. I therefore charged the accused”). We bulled our boots and the billet floor, but we drew the line at burnishing the drawing pins on the notice board and probably lost many OQ’s (Officer Quality Points). We froze under canvas on the beach at the Point of Air in a howling gale in March. We had char and buns in the bus which appeared every evening in the road outside the station. We wore our Jurby caps when out of uniform in case we bumped into Flight Lieutenant Tull, or Thacker of The Regiment. We were very envious of the Short Service Student Officers because they were paid a guinea a day, whereas we National Service Officer Cadets could only draw 4 shillings a day from which was deducted 4 shillings a week for the Soldiers, Sailors and Air Force Association (SSAFA), leaving us the princely sum of 24 shillings to spend on haircuts and carousing in the Mess.

Practical jokes abounded. W.O. Webb had his bicycle hoisted to the top of the flagstaff. We were summoned from our beds to the Astra Cinema one night at 2a.m. to hear a lecture from the Commandant. When he did not arrive, one keen Student Officer took it upon himself to telephone the Commandant to remind him – no OQ's for him that night!

After three months, we took our final exams and most passed. Those who didn't pass were mostly re-coursed and went through the whole course again, this time in more clement weather! Those who passed out were inspected by Lord Sempill and marched off with bayonets fixed and band playing. My pay rose to half a guinea a day (10/6d or 52 pence in new money!) as an Acting Pilot Officer. Our postings came through and of course the Royal Air Force did its best to get them wrong. Qualified accountants who had asked for the Accounts Branch were posted to the R.A.F. Regiment. Would-be Rockapes became accountants. I was unusually lucky – I asked for Fighter Control and Bawdsey as my first choice and, against the odds, I got it!

We had several Warrant Officers on the OCTU course, including W/O's Jim Gresham and Bob Willis, pilots from the Station Flight at R.A.F. Northolt. After passing out, they persuaded their fellow pilots at Northolt to send up a flight to bring them back down to civilisation. The flight plan was filed "to collect Lord Elpus from R.A.F. Jurby" – unfortunately the CO Northolt heard of the flight and turned out the Welcoming Party. Sadly for the CO, and for Bob and Jim, Lord Elpus was not on the flight!

A short attachment at R.A.F. Langtoft in Lincolnshire was followed by the Fighter Control Course at R.A.F. Middle Wallop in Hampshire. We attacked the incoming Red Squadrons on plotting table exercises. We actually flew Practice Interceptions (P.I.'s) in Balliols flown by 288 Squadron (nicknamed The Bad Boys' Squadron as, rumour had it, they had all committed some dreadful misdemeanour). One Flying Officer WRAF was rather disconcerted when her pilot turned 1800 by doing a half-loop and roll-off-the-top instead of the usual Rate 1 turn. She made a comment to the pilot who said "Say again" and thumbed the RT transmit button. Into the cabins down below came her dulcet tones "Please don't do that, it makes me feel all funny!" We actually had a Type 15 Radar which, it was rumoured, had been used in the Western Desert during the war – it reminded one rather of part of an abandoned chicken coop!

My pay rose to fifteen shillings a day (75 pence!)

And then to Bawdsey. After checking in with the Adjutant, Flying Officer Doreen Jarrett, I went up the drive to be confronted by the extraordinary first sight of the grey stone front of the Mess. Just inside the front door was a table on which I left my cards (one for the PMC and Officers, the other for the Commanding Officer). Corporal Scotty Scott, the Bar Steward then took me to my room. It was all very civilised and rather like a very exclusive country club!

Next day I went down the Hole for the first time. I left my 1250 in the Guardroom and went down the stairs and along the upper corridor to the Chief Controller's Cabin. I was on A Watch with Flight Lieutenant Crawshay-Williams ("Crasher Bill") in the Chief's chair. First, and most important, was a visit to the Officer's Rest Room and coffee and introductions to the rest of the Watch and the first of many time-wasting games of Cribbage.

Who was stationed at R.A.F. Bawdsey?

The C.O. when I first arrived was Wing Commander E P "Hawkeye" Wells, who had distinguished himself on night fighters during the war. Sadly, by this time his eye was not so hawkish and he had to view the Ops board from the Chief Controller's cabin through a pair of binoculars. Nevertheless, he was extremely popular and his Dining Out was Memorable! After a game of cricket in the Ante-Room, during which several windows, used as wickets, were broken, he was towed off the Station in his car. He was followed as C.O. by Wing Commander D L Norris-Smith.

Senior Administration Officer, Squadron Leader Taylor, I remember as Duty Officer one day visiting the Airman's Mess and receiving a complaint that the fish had bones. He sat down alongside the complainant and filleted the fish! What service. Senior Operations Officer was Squadron Leader "Knocker" Noyes.

Accounts Officer Flight Lieutenant Angus McLeod, who enjoyed his beer and whisky, could always be relied on to win a crate of beer or bottle of whisky in any Mess draw. All I managed to win was a pair of plastic coat hangers in the Sergeants Mess draw – they broke when I first hung my coat!

Others included:

Fighter Controllers Vic Southon, Dave Riordan, Ron Brunt, Fred Penny who had flown Spitfires in the war, Derek Day, Dennis King, newly returned from 2nd TAF, Ron Alenius, Frank Fauchon (a large man with a very small Austin 7 Ruby)

Radar Supervisors Barbara fForde, Kay Dunn and Pam Klein (so keen on flying that she had an altimeter and air speed indicator in her car), John Simpson, Andy Andrews

Andy Anderson was our resident and very Scottish Rockape, assisted by Corporal Denyer, who did everything by numbers, even opening the Armoury door for the A.O.C.'s Inspection by numbers (Hand in pocket two three, take out keys two three, insert key in lock two three, open door two three...)

Geoff Moseley the Education Officer went walking in Yugoslavia and nearly caused a Diplomatic Incident by getting himself arrested by the Yugoslav Authorities on a charge of Spying!

John Barker was the C.O. of the VHF transmitter station across the water at Trimley

At the risk of breaking the Official Secrets Act (I'm sure the Russians knew anyway!) we had a Type 7 metric radar with its large and inaccurate banana-shaped blip, a Type 14 centimetric with its bog of Permanent Echoes and Type 13 nodding height finder which was usually unserviceable; fortunately we also had an American FPS-6 height finder which was far more reliable. The Type 80, with its greatly improved performance, was only just coming into service and had not made its appearance at Bawdsey before I was demobbed. The four great 300ft-high Chain Home towers still stood, although the arrays had long since been removed. The view from the top of the towers was amazing!

At that time of the Cold War the R.A.F. was well up to strength and there seemed to be no shortage of aircraft to control. Among the squadrons we controlled in 11 Group were 111 with Hunters at North Weald, 64 and 65 with day (NF8) and night Meteors (NF11 & NF14) at Duxford, 54 with all-weather Javelins at Odiham, 513th and 514th Fighter Pursuit Squadrons USAAF with F86D Sabres at Manston. The Americans had so much (for the time) electronic wizardry in their aircraft that they used to abort at the slightest malfunction. Navigation was a problem if place names were not accompanied by country – “Paris where?” “Paris France”. “Ah Roger!” They were great characters and invariably brought suitcases full of their duty frees when visiting us – our bar profits suffered but we did not. On one occasion we celebrated Kay Dunn's 21st birthday with them in great style. Some weeks later I was controlling a pair of F86's and one pilot asked “How are you off for Wheelbarrows?” This was not one of the usual codes, such as “Gravy”, “Jugs”, “Angels” etc and I had to ask the Chief Controller to translate. He didn't know and passed it up to Sector who passed it to Group who passed it on to USAAF who gave permission to transmit in clear. By this time everyone was listening in. “Do you remember that great party when we wheeled Kay Dunn downstairs in a wheelbarrow?”

I had one of those never-to-be-forgotten moments one Sunday afternoon, controlling a Spitfire and Mosquito from the Civil Anti-Aircraft Co-Operation Unit (CAACU) doing PI's – I could almost smell the nostalgia!

There used to be a Borstal colony up at Hollesley Bay, from which the young offenders used to abscond with monotonous regularity. This necessitated the immobilisation of the entire transport fleet by removing essential parts from each unit – a time consuming and unpopular operation.

We introduced the United States Air Force to Dining In and Guest Nights, inviting officers from Bentwaters and Woodbridge. Low-flying and Highcockalorum they though GREAT and demanded to go round again, despite painful close encounters

with the Mess furniture. Anthony Eden was at this time having his problems with President Nasser and the Suez Canal, and petrol was rationed and in very short supply. We envied the Americans with their enormous gas-guzzling cars and their drivers parked outside the mess all night, engines running to keep the heaters going (this was the time of the Suez crisis and petrol was rationed)! We were invited back to their Officers' Club and were somewhat surprised when their CO removed his clip-on bow tie after dinner and laid it carefully alongside his plate, followed by all his officers. R.A.F. Horsham St. Faith presented them with a ceremonial cannon made from a beer crate and length of drainpipe. It was wheeled into the Officers' Club with great ceremony and a thunderflash was fired from its barrel. Our transatlantic friends thought this GREAT and the Duty Officer was despatched to the armoury to bring further supplies of thunderflashes. A bag of Maltesers was dropped into the barrel after the second thunderflash and produced a peppering of holes in the rather insubstantial Club wall; this the Americans thought GREAT and the Duty Officer was despatched again to bring in further supplies of Maltesers from their PX. By the time they had run out of thunderflashes and Maltesers, there was little left of the wall but everyone thought the evening had been GREAT!

What an incredible place Bawdsey Manor was and, indeed, still is! Built in the 1890's by an industrialist named Sir Cuthbert Quilter, it was bought by the Air Ministry in 1936 for £24,000 and became the first R.A.F. operational radar station a year later in 1937, after the early Watson Watt experiments up the coast at Orfordness. It had some 104 rooms – I held the mess inventory but never counted them. Very few rooms were on the same level and every external aspect of the Manor was different – Gothic, Victorian, Elizabethan, Flemish, Oriental. It was said that the architect committed suicide when he saw what he had designed! Running along the cliff face was a path with tunnels and alcoves looking out over the North Sea. The sunken garden at the rear of the building was said to be haunted and certainly it felt very eerie on a full-moonlit summer night. We had a full-sized billiard table, a small Chapel, the holy-of-holies cipher room where the Orderly Officer had to compose a secret cipher each evening telling Group of the state of the warning lights on the Chain Home Towers! Some secret but it was good practice! If Bawdsey had a drawback, it was that it stood on the wrong side of the Deben Estuary – a night out in Felixstowe necessitated the use of Albert's bus and the Bawdsey Ferry, an open fishing boat which stopped running at 2245 and was bitterly cold and wet in winter! An enforced stay overnight at the Ferry Boat Inn was not recommended!

If you spent time at Bawdsey Radar Station or have stories to tell about events in and around the station please do get in touch with us!