

Memories

George Edwards has stirred me into literary life to contribute to his new book on the RAF Fire Service. Much of what I have to write has been aired before, but I feel this is a good vehicle to collate some of my anecdotes and service recollections in one volume. I suppose the final spark to get typing was reading Ron Shearn's potted history. Like Ron I am a Somerset man; born in Bridgwater on the River Parrett.

Recruited in Exeter, and kitted-out/sworn in at RAF Cardington in 1953, I did my recruit training at RAF West Kirby on the Wirral not a million miles from Liverpool. We used to visit the Grafton Rooms Dance Hall in the City, as well as the Tower Ballroom in New Brighton, which was a regular haunt for servicemen of the day. It was the start of the 'Teddy-Boy' era and because of the bad reputation for trouble they attracted, the door keepers at the Grafton Rooms used to measure the length of their drape jackets to decide if they were a Teddy-Boy and unfit for admission. In any case I suppose the velvet collars, drain-pipe trousers and thick crepe soled shoes (Brothel Creepers) were a dead give away. The other essential was the thick hair slicked back into a centre parting at the back the so called DA (Ducks Ass). We airmen were not allowed to wear civilian clothes anyway, so had no problem gaining entry in our Best Blue complete with the regulation short back & sides which was gleefully inflicted upon us during square-bashing.

I remember one particular night when I was heading back to the railway station to catch a train back to camp. It was a cold one, so to keep out the chilly Mersey wind and to keep my ears warm; I turned up the collar on my uniform Great Coat. Minutes later I was accosted by two burley RAF Policemen, and promptly charged with being improperly dressed.

Two days later I was arraigned before my Flight Commander. Unusually (because ignorance of Queens Regulations and Air Council Instructions was not considered a defence) he accepted my plea of "*I did not know turning up my collar was wrong*" but was nevertheless duty-bound to punish me in some way. I was quite a good cross-country runner in those days, so to teach me a lesson he said I would not be allowed to run for my intake against RAF Bridgnorth on the coming Saturday. As previously intimated, this was a cold winter and the punishment turned out to timely in the extreme. I have fond memories of going to Anfield instead to watch Liverpool play Blackpool, Stanley Matthew's and all. We were on the opposite end to the Kop and so to be strictly neutral I shouted "Come on the Pool!!"

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RAF Sutton on Hull was a great little station and we had the bonus of learning the Fire Trade; at the end of that training I felt very fit, and ready for anything. The Health & Safety implications of Sutton if applied to present legislation would be horrendous. No cosmetic smoke in the smoke chamber. No smoke chamber in fact, I seem to remember it was a room at the end of the drill shed where smouldering damp straw was used to simulate fire and smoke conditions. We had the wonderful Remote Breathing Apparatus which consisted of a face piece and 38 feet of corrugated rubber hose. Under-running, re-rolling and carrying wet 120 foot single-jacket canvas hose with brass couplings did wonders for the biceps. Practice Crash Fires were tackled with just CO₂ as a knock-down agent, completely useless agent in the open on all but a flat calm day. To add an element of realism the directing staff used to thunder-flashes in an inverted foam compound drum with complete disregard to the ensuing danger. The explosive effect was extremely effective but the bottoms of the bins were blown some 300 feet into the before scything back down like lethal Frisbees.

The “Protective Clothing” was a joke too. We wore denims that fit where they touched, welly-boots, a leather jerkin and asbestos gauntlets. All this was topped by a 1914-18 war helmet fitted with an asbestos cloth face piece incorporating safety-glass visor.

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My first operational posting was to A & AEE Boscombe Down, the abbreviation stands for Aeroplane & Armament Experimental Establishment. What could have been better for a new Fireman and a new Airman? Biggles eat your heart out!

Practically every aircraft then in service, or about to enter or leave the RAF were in evidence, plus the Fleet Air Arm machines. I had my first flight in an Avro Anson and had to draw a parachute from Safety Equipment. After the flight I went to the door, placed my parachute on the floor, then after jumping out picked it up by the rip cord instead of the carrying strap. It only partly deployed thank goodness, and I staggered back to the Para Packing department with a bundle of silk which cost me two shillings to have repacked.

In addition to our aircraft, the Americans had ten engined B36 bombers on the base (six turning and four burning). Legend had it that one B36 overshot Boscombe’s main runway and after crashing through the perimeter fence, crossed the Salisbury Road and demolished a haystack. One of the firemen recalls the comment of the American pilot on leaving the aircraft. *“There’s a lot of god-damned hay about for the time of the year”*.

Our WO was Mr Denny. Fresh out of training and accompanied by one other new fireman I arrived at the section with my Blue Cards. Apparently on his own in the Fire Section, the said WO Denny took us out into the yard and proceeded to question us on the use of fire extinguishers and actions in the event of a fire. Of course our answers were faultless which cheered him up. He then said “What Trades are you?”

“Firemen Sir!” we replied cheerily.

This had the effect of inducing an immediate attack of paranoia in the man.

“Why the blankity blank blank did you not tell me?” he enquired.

Well being new airmen at our first station with our first Blue Chit how were we to know that Fire Section applied to all trades on arrival?

Mr Denny had the last laugh though. When we had completed the arrival procedure and reported back he had some equipment familiarisation training ready for us. Amongst other things we had to polish the solid brass collecting heads, the solid brass and copper Knapsack Tanks and not least the big brass Five Way Selector Wheel on the Austin Domestic.

We had lots of minor incidents but nothing major. I learned to drive on the Bedford water bowser which was reasonably powered and responsive. For foam production we had 45 Monitors, 44 Conversions and WOT1s would you believe? These were supplemented by both Austin and Fordson Gas trucks, an Austin Domestic, and a Karrier Bantam with a 30 Gallon Foam mounted on the flat-bed

with boxes either side for extinguishers. We also had three Jeep Crash Rescue vehicles, a Ford, and two Wileys. The Jeeps were great fun, almost indestructible in fact. We turned one over in the snow, heaved together to get it upright, and it carried on without a problem. Driving the 45 monitor was a challenge though. The steering wheel was an enormous wire spoked affair, but any connection between its title and function (turning the wheels) was pure chance. It was woefully under powered with a 30 HP V8 engine, and the brakes were abysmal. However, with acceleration of 0 to 40 eventually, the need for the brakes was arbitrary. The distributor for the engine spark plugs was placed at the front of the V 8 block behind the radiator, and subject to moisture ingestion (no WD40 in those days).

Boscombe Down was of course on the High Ground of Salisbury Plain and consequently all roads out were down hill to Amesbury and other villages. I only ever did one trip in the 45 Monitor down that hill as a passenger and it frightened me fartless. We received one of those new fangled Mark 5 tenders before I left; a paradigm shift on all the other trucks which had been with us for at least 10 years.

The gas factory at Porton Down was adjacent to Boscombe, and many of the National Servicemen strapped for cash underwent the experiments for a small pecuniary gain. As it has transpired *in for a penny in for a problem in later life*.

I got my kicks from the Hop and got drunk for the first time in my life. We used to sleep in the section and my rowdy behaviour attracted a passing RAFP patrol. Alas, I spent the night in the cells. It is worthy of note that next morning I saw the first flight from Boscombe Down of the English Electric P1 (Lightning) through the bars.

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Boscombe was part civilian and part service, and when the civvies took over we were all posted out. I went to RAF Innsworth arriving on AOC's Inspection day. Walking through the rows of identical wooden huts in FSMO (Full Service Marching Order), that's all the webbing; big pack, small pack, ammunition pouches, water bottle, bayonet, frog, plus great coat and kit bag; I ran slap bang into the path of the advancing AOC's entourage. Not the smartest airmen in appearance or brain power, I did not have the nous to do an about turn. I tried a salute, which did not please the SWO, then they examined me closely and discovered that I was a scruffy irk. I managed to slink off and tucked away a service lesson.

WO Jones was in charge at Innsworth though we only ever saw him on Pay Day. After only three months there I was PWR'd for FEAF/Singapore, but when the posting came it was changed to Hong Kong.

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I arrived at Kai Tak in January 1955, after 28 days at sea on Her Majesty's Troopship Asturias. Asturias was one of the bigger and better Troop Ships on the route (28,000 tons), with the RAF accommodated in cabins, and the licentious soldiery on Troop Decks. My wife joined me in Hong Kong after my 21st Birthday, having travelled out on the same boat. We went home in the same vessel with a new daughter and after 56 days at sea each we have never considered a modern cruise holiday since.

The Sunderland Flying boats were ever present, and one of my first duties was manning the Fire Floats (we had two, a broad beam and a narrow beam converted pinnacle/sea plane tenders). Before a Sunderland landed or took off we would 'snore' (Marine Craft Speak) up and down the Kowloon side of the bay to clear the Sampans, Junks and other sundry vessels. Sometimes, as with other fire appliances, the Fire Floats were misused to ferry people (VIPs mainly) across to Hong Kong Island with the fireman performing the "let go for'ard" and Boat Hook Drill (All very RN).

The Americans also operated amphibious aircraft into Kai Tak, notably the Catalina and the Grumman Privateer. 28 Sqn were flying Vampires and latterly Venoms at RAF Sek Kong and had donated their Mk23 Spitfires (5 bladed propeller version) to The Hong Kong Auxiliary Air Force. 80 Sqn were resident at Kai Tak flying DH Hornets (A single seat fighter version of the Mosquito). There were a couple of Bristol Beaufighters on Target Towing Flight, and many Commonwealth visitors, principally Avro Lincoln bombers of The RAAF in transit to and from the Malayan confrontation. American F86 Sabres would drop in on their way to Korea with their US giant freighter of the day the Globemaster. All of the National Carriers operated into Kai Tak using Douglas DC 4, DC 6 or latterly 7C, and Lockheed Constellations. The first Bristol Britannia arrived late '56. Cathay Pacific were in their infancy at that time flying Convairs. RAF Transport Command were operating Avro York's for long haul, and we had the odd Vickers Valetta shunting between Hong Kong and Singapore, Ceylon, and Car Nicobar (Bay of Bengal).

We maintained a full Crash Crew in those days attending to all military aircraft, while the Chinese manned airport brigade looked after the civil side. Our FS was Paddy Scullion, the corporals Mick Mooney and Ray Grinstead, and we had a Sgt Labouchardier in transit; he sold me a dodgy watch from that well known jeweller 'Flog It & Scarper'. There was also Sgt Frank Leiberman, a Liverpudlian. Names I remember from the LAC's were Pete Jeffery's, Geordie Warwick, Taffy Chant, Jock Kerr, Jock McCaffery, Jim Greaves, Harry Gorman, Yorkie Paley and Ted Adnams.

I don't remember why but we all seemed to move to RAF Sek Kong in the New Territories adjacent to the Chinese Border; probably when the airport fire service assumed cover for all aircraft. Incidents at Kai Tak were few and far between but there were a few memorable prangs:

- A 28 Sqn Vampire veered off the runway and crashed into the Nissan huts next to the Corporals Club. A Gurkha soldier sleeping in his bed was killed along with the pilot.
- Another Vampire taking off towards Lion Rock over the bomb dump had an engine failure, slid over the public road, and ended up in the large Nullah (monsoon drain).
- A fully fuelled Venom armed with 8 rockets crashed on take off into the Marine Craft area. Miraculously the airframe remained in tact and no fire resulted; the pilot was the Station Commander. I arrived at his side pretty quickly to aid his escape, and he told me to go away in basic Anglo Saxon. Obviously solicitous of my welfare.
- One Vampire ploughed into the top of the Ti-Mo-Shan Mountain inland and behind Sek Kong.
- There was the apocryphal tale of an American P2V57 Neptune (Maritime Reconnaissance a/c) landing. On engaging reverse pitch to slow down the starboard engine parted company with the aircraft. The Kai Tak Fire Legend said all the aircrew were out before the thing stopped rolling!

The old firemen were always relating the horrible details of 'Prangs' they had attended and of mangled and charred human remains. Perversely, it was with some relief to be blooded in this gruesome experience. My first was at a Vampire crash which landed in a Paddy Field on the approach to Sek Kong and caught fire. Our foam tender, the 1945 Monitor, was unserviceable and we had rigged up a replacement. This consisted of a large trailer pump towed behind the 500 gallon water bowser, with the suction hose passed back over the pump into the filling manhole on top of the bowser. We had two knapsack tanks full of foam compound and two Foam Making Branch Pipes. As I'm sure you're all aware the essence of crash fire fighting is speed, and a rapid application of foam in sufficient quantity to suppress the blaze. So without our specialist foam tender we were ponderous in the extreme in getting our equipment to work. Consequently we were unable to suppress the fire, and soon ran out of water. Sadly the pilot was killed on impact, and in company with another fireman I was asked by the CO if we would recover the body.

The aircraft had been armed with 20mm cannon shells and as the heat reached them, the cases exploded with a soft firework-like bang. The projectiles were lobbed without force, but it was certainly enough to make you duck. Our protective footwear was bog-standard rubber welly boots (polished of course), and as we entered the crash area to retrieve the mortal remains, I felt rather warm in the foot region. I later realised that the Duralumin components making up the airframe had melted and solidified into a large and hot ingot under our feet. We lifted the body part remaining (torso and head) out of what was left of the cockpit, and transferred it to an asbestos blanket. As we rolled the body over the contents of the abdominal cavity fell out, all pink and bubbling, with that unmistakable *Rich Roast Pork* aroma, the heady steam rising into our faces.

From then on we were able to hold our own in the crew room, but the mental picture of this and subsequent fatalities, lives on. It's a pity we were not allowed to be traumatised in those days; I could have bought a yacht with the compensation.

I don't suppose any RAF fireman ever stopped to consider the possibility of danger to life and limb, and the outcome from our actions, with the possible exception of one erstwhile colleague, and here I digress wildly. At Khormaksar (Aden) in 1966/67 a Hunter lost his "Donk" late on the take off run and was speeding toward the water between the end of the runway and the Little Aden Causeway. He retracted his gear and slid into the shallow water digging the aircraft into the sand in the process.

When the day's intensive flying had died down, the engineers wanted to recover the aircraft which of course was still fully armed and fuelled. As duty Crew Chief I was in attendance with Crash 1 and a Mk6. The engineers could not deploy any of the standard tracked crash recovery gear into the sea and wanted to make a hole through the wing to secure a cable hook to tow it out of the water. The Sqn Ldr Eng asked if we had any gear that could punch through a Hunter main plane. If we had a road drill at that time we might have had a chance, but the only cutting gear we had was the pneumatic saw designed for cutting the thin skin on passenger aircraft. The Sqn Ldr Eng insisted that we cut into the wing with this (A double layer 18 SWG duralumin!). I told him this would be useless but he persisted and so I donned the air bottle back pack and prepared to saw. Everyone was conscious of the danger of heat/sparks from this operation and cognisant of the fuel in the wing tanks and the 30mm cannon rounds.

Accordingly they all retired a decent distance except one of my crew who would assist, I told him to get clear and was about to start when I looked to my right and saw my colleague kneeling down on the extreme wing tip with his fingers in his ears!!!

The pneumatic air powered saw was apparently used for its intended purpose on one occasion at Khormaksar. An Ace Freighters DC7 had completed its landing run and was taxiing clear when smoke was seen from the nose of the aircraft. The aircraft stopped and the fire crew discharged a CO2 extinguisher upward into the nose wheel bay, the only opening. The smoke continued so it was elected to use the said saw to take a tin opener type cut into the fuselage above the nose wheel. A three-sided cut was completed and the crew were in the process of rolling up the skin like the lid of a sardine can when a furious flight engineer exited the DC7 and came running to the front. He produced a square shanked winding handle, connected it to a spindle/opening in the nose and wound down the aircraft battery, which was on two cables and a tray; this was the source of the fire. Whoops!!!

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Meanwhile back at the plot...

On return to UK from FEAF I was posted to Maintenance Command at RAF Wellesbourne Mountford in Shakespeare Country. This station was the home of the RAF Airfield Construction Branch Squadrons 5001 to 5004, with a Plant Training Depot at nearby RAF Claverdon and a storage and repair facility at RAF Church Lawford near Rugby.



As the result of all the practice excavations and earth moving at RAF Claverdon, a large pond had been created. In the middle was a Notice Board saying "Loch Claverdon". Underneath was another board with the wording "Notice!!" "Do not throw stones at this notice!"

Many Polish Officers continued to serve after the war, and often changed their names by deed-pole to an acceptable anglicised title. However, they had not entirely mastered English and its colloquialisms. At Wellesbourne one Polish Officer, Sqn Ldr Beale was the S ad O (Senior Admin Officer); and he called me at the Fire Section one day to say that the Command Fire Officer was paying me a visit.

"Thank you Sir" Sez I in my best Somerset accent. "What's he on?" (this sounded like WASEON)

"What does zees mean?" He asked, "Waseon?"

I explained that it meant '*why is he coming, what is the nature of his visit?*'

"I don't know Waseon" he said and put the phone down.

I never met another Polish Officer until years later at RAF Fairford (1973). I was the Concorde Flight Sergeant and we occupied the old American Domestic Section while the Airfield was manned by a separate Cat 6 Crash Crew. Our Concorde vehicles would sometimes travel on the Concorde apron/taxi way on our side of the airfield, and having no other station-based aircraft except Concorde this did not present a problem. Well not until we had a new (Polish) Air Traffic Flt Lt posted in. On his first day on duty he called the Concorde Fire Section to ask what our DP was doing on the airfield.

We explained that this was our normal route and we did not cross or go near the runway. Being a rather irascible fellow, he replied

“I don't care; I want to know every time you encroach onto the airfield manoeuvring area.”

This seemed a bit absurd as the time of all aircraft movements were known hours in advance. Bob Plumb was the Sergeant Crew Commander at the time and he and I agreed that the ATC Officer should be informed of all movements.

In no time at all the squawk box was red hot with inconsequential info, on even the slightest vehicle movements. After about two hours of this farcical tirade our Polish ATC colleague lost it.

After a ‘nothing’ message he exploded and said **“I don't want to know you go for Bloody Peeees!!!”**

....So we did not tell him anything else and he did not ask.

Wellesbourne was also home to the RAF School of Photography. I recall one day the Station Warrant Officer (SWO) at Wellesbourne ordering me to bring my ladder to the front of Station Head Quarters.

On arrival he produced a surveyor's tape measure, and told me to pitch the ladder against the flag pole and measure its top-most height from the ground. I politely pointed out that there was a pin/bolt/pivot at the bottom of the pole and it could be lowered gently to the horizontal position to measure it.

He looked at me as though I was out on day release from the “Funny Farm” and said:

“Corporal, I want to know its height not its bleeding Length!!”

It was rumoured at the time that the same SWO was present at a Sergeants Mess Meeting where it was proposed that the Mess purchase an expensive chandelier to enhance the entrance hall in what was a just a large converted Nissan Hut.

“Its all very well spending all this money on a chandelier,” he declared forcefully “but who in the mess can play one?”

Legend had it that some SWOs were not very bright, attributing the trend to the fact that they were predominately ex-Bedding Store Corporals in the Admin Trade Group. I recall the SWO at RAF Kai Tak asking the Fire Section to come and water his newly-planted flowers outside headquarters. The fireman taking the phone call pointed out that it was raining.

To this the SWO replied

“You've got a bloody Poncho ‘avent you?”

By 1961 The RAF Regiment had taken us under their wing, and I elected to go for the advance trade of Gunner/Fireman which would be rewarded with the pecuniary gain of two shillings per day. There followed several courses; basic, junior and senior gunner instructor, First Aid, and the NBC (Nuclear, Biological & Chemical Warfare) course at Winterbourne Gunner in Wiltshire. I was then mustered as a Gunner/Fireman qualified to Junior Technician, staying at Wellesbourne for a very pleasant tour.

I remember well the occasion I was summoned to HQ to see the Station Commander and wondered what it could be for. I was the only fireman at the station at this time and when I left the Section I made an occurrence book entry “*Cpl Davey to SHQ*”

The CO said “Congratulations you are promoted.”

The next Entry in the occurrence book read “*Sgt Davey returns to Section.*”

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As a Gunner/Fireman I could now be employed in either capacity and my next posting was to 15 Field Sqn RAF Regiment at Changi in Singapore. I arrived there with another convert, Sgt Ray McIntosh, and we duly presented ourselves at the Sqn HQ which was a remote camp at Telok Paku on Changi Beach. The Sqn Ldr CO had us in together and gave the shortest arrival speech of my career.

It went something like “*I expect my NCOs to shoot, swim and drive better than the men*”

Not all at the same time I was thinking.

He posted not long after, and his successor had served in Burma during WWII, was the holder of the MC, and every bit the professional.

I remember one evening the Squadron was assembled on our parade square under the short Singapore twilight, in readiness for a pre-detachment briefing of some sort. We were lined up by Flights awaiting our CO who was attending an Officers Mess formal function. Eventually he alighted from his Land Rover in full mess kit, complete with a red silk-lined cape of some description.

As he approached one of my airmen, a Glaswegian, said in a gruff stage whisper....

“Fuck Me it’s Captain Marvel”

This was the time of the Borneo Confrontation and detachments to Brunei, Kuching, Tawau and Labuan followed, together with one in Gan. I attended a Jungle Warfare School Small Arms Instructors course at Kota Tingi, and went on exercises in Malaca, Butterworth and Frasers Hill in the Cameron Highlands, all in Malaya.

Of the 30 Months tour I did something like 15 months away from my wife and family in Singapore. Before the end of that tour we had the chance to revert to our former single trade and I became a Fireman once more. However my jungle days weren’t over and a second RAF Labuan detachment followed, this time to take charge of the small Fire Section there. Apparently despite there being Main Operating Bases at Changi, Seletar and Tengah, they could not find a Sgt Fireman from anywhere else in Singapore who was available to go. I landed in Labuan in a 48 Sqn Hastings, and as I went down the steps I met the man I was relieving coming across the pan; non other than Sgt Dennis McCann. We often recount this episode on Fire Reunions.

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No5 Flying Training School (FTS) at RAF Oakington was the next stop. Time has dimmed the details but I had a married quarter at the station and had managed to move in with my family before I was due to arrive for duty. It was a brilliant July sunny morning at 5 am when I discerned a tapping on the

bedroom window. There was an airman outside throwing gravel at the glass.

I opened the window and he said “Mickey Finn Sarge. You are to get your crash Kit on, bring an overnight bag and report to the tower at once”

“I haven’t arrived at the station yet” I told the lad.

“I know” said the messenger “But the Flight Sergeant says you must come in”

I got to the tower and climbed the stairs to local where the controller said

“Where have you been?”and in almost the same breath. “That's your aircraft on the Left, ‘T’ for Tango.”

So it was back to the pan and across to a Varsity that was waiting with engines running. I climbed up the steps into an empty fuselage and the door was closed pretty quickly behind me. We taxied out and took off. In about 10 minutes we landed again at what turned out to be RAF Stradishall. After taxiing in, the doors were opened and 3 more firemen entered in crash kit. They slumped down in the fuselage and we resumed our flight.

No one had ever told me what Mickey Finn was, and I had no idea where we were going. Conversation with my erstwhile colleagues was impossible, so once we had levelled off at the top of the climb I worked my way forward over my now sleeping companions to the cockpit. There I found the Captain in the left hand seat smoking a pipe, and a 5 FTS student on the right covered in maps.

“Where are we going?” I shouted above the Radial Roar.

“Persia” said the Captain.

Before returning to the fuselage, I took a quick look at the compass and noted we were flying west. I had a small diary with me with World Maps in it, and reckoned Persia was in the East. It was all a bit unreal, 682 Davey on a *Mickey Finn mission to the Middle East.

Half an hour later we landed at RAF Pershore in Worcestershire.

Oakington was the only station I ever got caught for a Church Parade, a rare event for any fireman. It was Remembrance Sunday service in the village, and a very memorable one for me. The Admin Sgt was running the affair, ushering us into the church with traditional military efficiency. When one hapless airman walked into the chancel still wearing his peaked cap, the Admin Sgt came up to him and whispered “Git your ‘at orf in the owse of the Lord, c * * t”.

At RAF Oakington in 1966 the heating ducts around the station became home to a colony of free breeding feral cats. The RSPCA or some other humane animal organisation provided us with steel trap cages to place in the ducts and hopefully catch the moggies. This job fell to the Firemen.

* Mickey Finn was a Bomber Command operation where all the V Bomber strike force in the UK would deploy from their own stations to remote units assuming that a hostile nuclear attack was imminent and their own locations would be prime targets.

The "Pest Control" officer came into the section one morning and asked SAC Paddy Tipper ...

"Any luck last night?"

"Yes Sor" Sez Paddy. "We got a ginormous black one"

"Was it wild" enquired the Flying Officer?"

"Well it wasn't very happy Sor" was Paddy's reply!

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A twelve month unaccompanied tour ensued, during which I have already alluded to one incident of many.

It's 1966 and I'm posted to RAF Khormaksar in the British Protectorate of Aden, the busiest RAF Station ever. At the time there was an increasing terrorist threat from FLOSY (The Front for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen) so Khormaksar had a Rock Ape (RAF Regiment) Squadron detached in for specialist reaction in and around Aden. From time to time they would search areas of the camp, including the large number of Adeni Arabs and Ethiopian civilians employed therein. The Fire Section shared a compound with Air Traffic Control which was surrounded by a chain link fence and barbed wire, complete with a guarded gate entry.

One day the Regiment descended on our compound in force, and made all the civilians stand against the perimeter fencing with arms up and legs spread. Fire vehicles used to be equipped with a battery powered loud hailer as part of the SST kit, and one fireman decided to take advantage of that to create his own amusement. Taking in the scene before him, he grabbed the loud hailer and after hiding himself in the Crash Bays made the following broadcast:

"As you can see by the bodies on the wire, we run a tough camp here"

The Regt Squadron Leader was not amused.

However, that was just a typical example of the service humour, and the way airmen were in the days before political correctness.

I remember one day the airfield at Khormaksar was attacked with improvised mortar bombs. As a result of this attack contingency plans were drawn up and the job of locating any resulting craters in the sand fell to the firemen!

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Khormaksar closed in 1967 and my first tour at Brize Norton followed, then a tour on recruiting duties. I was posted to Edinburgh and subsequently to a new "C" Class office (1 man) in Taunton, Somerset, just eleven miles from my birth place! I struggled with the local patois in Scotland, particularly the Fife Miners dialect, but was right at home in Taunton though. (Oooooooooooh Arrrrrr).

From there it was back to Brize Norton as a Flight Sergeant where I was given the job of OIC Concorde Fire Contingent at nearby Fairford. I recall during this tour Sappho Bird Scaring equipment was introduced into the RAF, and our WO at Brize, George Bartlett, attended a heads of section brief someplace before passing the gen on to us. George described the apparatus and how it was to be mounted in a DP Truck. He explained the ornithological research carried out and the making of bird distress call tapes to disperse the flocks.

He then told us what he called the “*Modus Operandi*”; it went something like this:

- The ATC controller will ask for a Sappho run to a location on the airfield.
- The DP driver will go to the location and position his vehicle upwind of the birds he is to scare.
- He will select a tape appropriate to the predominant species present, and play it over the vehicle loud speaker system. This will cause the birds to become airborne.
- The flock will then be dispersed with an explosive cracker cartridge fired from a Very Pistol

I think we were all enthralled by George's description of the system and then he ruined it all with his final remarks.

“There is only one problem with this equipment and expense” he said.

“What's that Sir?” a member of the audience asked.

George's reply has me tittering to this day. “The birds hear the truck coming and fuck off!”

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A brief posting to RAF West Raynham in 1974 before I met the *real raison d'être* for the “Cold War”, Royal Air Force for the first time in RAFG and the Eastern outpost of Gutersloh.

West Raynham is a pretty remote spot in the Norfolk hinterland where a visit to Swaffam's Saturday Market the best (if not only) thing to happen each week. We were accommodated in a Married Quarter at RAF Sculthorpe, an American Base. The AMQ was a large bungalow and my most vivid memory of it is the heating system. It had two oil fired boilers either of which would have powered a Mersey Ferry. Each room was heated by hot air entering at ceiling level, a concept which defies hot air its natural propensity to rise! Consequently you had to fill the top of the room first resulting in a hot head and cold feet. My American Neighbours were paying a lot less for the oil than us so this was not a problem for them to keep pumping and defy the laws of physics.

One advantage of living with the Yanks was that at least we had a high level of security with the Air Police (AP) patrolling 24 hours a day. On my way off base one day I was driving slowly I thought when I was stopped by an Armed AP Officer. What I'd thought was a weapon was in fact a speed gun.

Very politely, he said “Pardon me Sir, did you know you were driving at 23 MPH in a 15 MPH zone?”

Being my usual flippant self I said “I wondered why I felt dizzy”.

He either ignored or did not appreciate my sarcasm, and said “I will have to give you a citation”

“Thank you very Much” Sez I, thinking that a citation was the same as been cited for bravery and not a summons!

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Back to Germany

Category 6 Crash crews has just been upgraded to include Flight Sergeant “Chiefs” and loads of Corporals (we had 15), to go with the new shiny Mk9s, which we had sprayed a delicate tone of Matt Cow-shit green. Thinking of this tone-down colour scheme reminded me of an incident at Kinloss some years later where a Mk9 draped in olive drab had responded to an incident on the public roads and at the “wash up” The firemen had complained at the lack of priority with other traffic having only the small blue light and a not-too-loud siren. The Flight Safety people got hold of this and I seem to recall a letter from Command proposing “Conspicuity Trials” to make the trucks more visible on the public road.. Guess what? Yes we painted them red once more!

Gutersloh was a great station where, come to think of it, everything was toned down and festooned with barbed wire and sand bags up the wazoo. We had an excellent mix of personnel, both British and locally employed civilians. Warrant Officer Morrell was a firm and fair leader who originated from Devon and possessed all the associated countryman’s lore and values. I shared an office with him and his home-spun philosophy for 2 years. He thrived on sayings like “Never associate yourself with a failure”, and "he never did of his own volition".

However, in 1976 when a high ranking government official visited the Station, we staged a quick knock-down fire demo on an old Hunter fuselage. This had been meticulously rehearsed right down to having lines drawn for stopping positions and the crowd viewing area. On the day, the event was perfect and the minister was greatly impressed. When he said what a wonderful vehicle the Mk9 obviously was, the Flt Lt Fire Officer proudly volunteered the information that the truck could also produce foam on the move. Buoyed by the VIP’s encouraging remarks, his impetuous enthusiasm then went further still, and before Jack could step in offered a demonstration there and then.

I believe the driver was Geordie Donaldson but the man wielding the monitor remains a mystery? Ron Brown? The truck circled away from the watchers, came back from the down-wind side, and produced foam on the move toward the VIP assembly. I am sure Mr Morrell thanked the Fire Officer in appropriate fashion when he eventually caught up with him and the prominence following their rapid retreat from the snow storm!

At RAF Gutersloh we occupied an old Luftwaffe Fire Station which was built on two floors. From the upper level you had a commanding view of the airfield. I remember one fine day myself; Warrant Officer Jack Morrell, the Sqn. Ldr SATCO, and one FS Tom Dolman were there looking across the runway toward the bomb dump. Tom was a Derbyshire Man and an ex farmer I believe. He had a “lived-in” sort of face and very forthright manner; human sensibilities were certainly not part of his management style. A very likeable man and truly one of the most unforgettable characters you would ever meet. As we were stood Tom spotted a Fire Vehicle on the far side of the airfield which as Crew Commander he should have been aware of, but obviously was not.

“What's that poxy truck doing over there?!” He exclaimed.

“What Truck?” Asked the SATCO in polite reply

“That poxy Mk 7”, replied Tom, then continued “Your eyesight must be bad Sir if you cant see that, you must have played with yourself when you was a Boy!”.

The Warrant Officer, SATCO and I stood there agog.

Tom continued unabated. “Do you know Sir; I never played with myself until I was 23...

I got my brother to do it!”

After a year at Gutersloh I made my first trip to HQRAFG at Rheindahlen and thought I was in a different theatre of operations. All the buildings were painted in pastel shades, there were acres of well mown lawns and blue swimming pools in the sports areas; the only wire was holding up the Tennis Nets! The extent of the difference between Sharp End and cushy Headquarters was driven home when I went to visit the Resident Fire Prevention NCO who shared accommodation with the GDT staff at Command Regiment Training Team; all of their NBC suits were on hangers inside full length plastic suit-covers with the names stencilled outside. Definitely for show not for blow!

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I enjoyed Gutersloh, but all this pleasure has to be paid for. My next posting was RAF Machrihanish which I had always thought was in the Persian Gulf. I was going on promotion to Warrant Officer and quickly deduced that was the only way they got WO's to go there.

The Mull of Kintyre sounds a romantic location and one of our neighbours, Sir Paul McCartney, wrote a song about the place during my tour. You soon discover that there is no easy access. By road, with your worldly goods was the logical choice, although Logan Air (Yogi Bear) flew puddle jumpers from Glasgow. I suppose a sea passage from Glasgow may also have been possible; or from Ardrossan via the Isle of Arran and across to the Mull. Anyway, by road you had to drive north from Glasgow on the A82 through Dumbarton along the western shore of Loch Lomond to its northern end at Arrochar. From there its left and a climb up on the A83 though a wee bit hill and glen and the Argyle Forrest, peaking at the rocky junction with the Dunoon Road at a place called “The Rest and be Thankful”. Then it's on to Inveraray at the top of Loch Fyne, and onward to Lochgilphead and all the way down the long peninsular through Tarbert to Campbeltown. The further south you drive on the exposed west side of the Mull you note that the vegetation is rather sparse and the few trees there are grow parallel to the ground. Where you do pass through pleasant wooded areas adjacent to the road you have to be aware of the Kamikaze Sheep.

A fellow WO posted to Machrihanish some years after me (John Knight) was also the CMC of the Sergeants Mess. New plans for the Sergeants Mess had been drawn up and he was asked to give his opinion. The Lady Architect from London was apparently extolling the virtues of her design and asked John what he thought. Looking at some symbols on the plan for the front elevation he asked her what they were and she said

“Trees”

Ever the helpful one, he then took the lady outside the existing Mess and asked her if she could see any like species.

After a year I decided that Machrihanish was not for me, and requested Premature Voluntary Release (PVR) from the RAF. As part of the deal a last tour posting to RAF West Drayton LATCC (London Air Traffic Control Centre) was offered and gratefully received. The RAF part of the site consisted of the Operations Centre for all the early warning and surveillance radar in the UK, and the School for Fighter Controllers. I had wondered what could possibly require a Warrant Officer where there was just a small domestic section with a Mini-Bedford tender. However, the RAF and LATCC were accommodated in a common separated brick building, which because of the incredible number of computers, electronic wizardry and cables, was extremely complex. It had a myriad number of floor and ceiling voids, and hundreds of cabinets which were protected by individual fire detectors. I seem to recall there were over 1000, so when you weighed up the consequence of a fire which could disrupt the Nation's Air Defence and Air Traffic Control you realised the enormous responsibility. I had a very able Sgt who would crawl through floor and roof voids to see where they came out or went in through floor traps and inspection hatches to fight any remote fires. Breathing Apparatus was an automatic given and we trained at the London Fire Brigade HQ, Southwark Bridge.

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In preparation for my discharge I bought a house in Hull but my RAF days were not over quite yet. I was "Head-hunted" for the job as WO Trade Standards at Catterick which I accepted withdrawing my PVR. My boss was Flt Lt John Gregory. John was a big heavy-jowelled man who had attracted the service nick name of Captain Pugwash. Earlier in his career, when stationed at Lossiemouth, he was in a bad car crash with his wife, and suffered serious injury after which he piled on the weight and was apt to be likened to "A hippopotamus in disruptive pattern clothing". Prior to the accident he had enjoyed sport and played tennis for the RAF.

John was the boss of both the Fire and Gunner Trade Standards teams. One of the Gunner Flight Sergeants on the team used to bring his dog, a Golden Labrador, to the office from time to time. I recall one occasion this FS had been in to see John Gregory to hear his annual assessment, which apparently was not very good. About 10 minutes later the dog wandered into John's office, sat on the mat in front of his desk, looked him in the eye and did a whoopsie on the mat! His Masters Voice I suppose.

I enjoyed Trade Standards and RAF Catterick was a lovely station with its very own river. We had some funny incidents with the trainees, and an excellent rapport with the instructors. One Sgt instructor came to my office after his course had taken the final written paper and asked how many had passed. I told him we were still marking and asked why he wanted to know. He said the course photographer was waiting.

I said we were not yet sure of the final pass figures but told him to warn the photographer not to fit a wide-angle lens; a remark I'm sure he enjoyed sharing with his students.

From Catterick came an unsolicited posting to the Rock of Gibraltar. The border with Spain was closed at this time (1982) so driving out there meant I had to go from Algeciras to Tangier on one Mediterranean Ferry and from Tangier to Gib on another, the famous Mons Calpe. It was the time of the Falklands War and the normally sleepy Gib had become an important staging post and support base, with C130's landing and taking off round the clock. Built into the side of the Rock and around

the busy harbour, the town was like a small UK settlement and you soon got to recognise many of the citizens. An uneventful and happy two years ensued.

The CO was an Air Commodore, most unusual for any station and exceptional with RAF Gibraltar being so small. The reason lay in its NATO status with the other military commanders (Army & Navy) being at least "One Stars". In common with the other prominence, the Air Commander had a large house half way up the Rock where he could survey the straights, the town, and the ancient harbour where so much history has been made over the years. A road to the top of the rock, which also had access to see the Barbary Macaques (Rock Apes), ran adjacent to his bungalow from which a private cul-de-sac led uphill to his front door patio and veranda area. The resident army battalion at the time were the Duke of Wellingtons West Yorkshire Regiment.

The Air Commodore was John Pack, and I remember his wife Shirley telling us of an occasion when she and her husband were entertaining several dignitaries including the Bishop of Gibraltar. They were sitting on the veranda overlooking the bay having pre-dinner drinks, when they became aware of a squeaking sound coming up the drive. The sound was that of a children's pushchair being guided up the steep ramps by one lady, with another older woman and two children walking beside. They were all sweating profusely in the dying heat of the day and from the effort of climbing the hill. As they came adjacent to the house one of them asked in a broad Yorkshire Accent

"Excuse my Luv!!",

"Is this reet way t'monkeys?"

Because I had opted for the two year tour instead of three I had disrupted the Posting Plans for WOs at Records Office. As a result, they got a sulk on and sent me to RAF Kinloss. This was my third Scottish tour; many "Jock Firemen" never even managed one! Notwithstanding, Kinloss was a good station for three years and included the mandatory detachment to RAF Mount Pleasant.

I was the last "Fire One" to enjoy the Contractors Camp at MPA before we occupied the new RAF accommodation. The runway & main paved parking areas were complete with other manoeuvring areas, dispersal for the aircraft from Stanley, roads and access routes still under construction.

The Contractors Camp, or "Bronx" as it was later to be known as, was a maze of identical wooden huts with interlinking corridors, completely enclosed against the South Atlantic weather. The dining room was reached within the same complex, and the food from Kelvin the Caterers was exceptional and abundant. Female civilian staff were everywhere for cleaning and dining: they were affectionately known as Kelvin's Kittens. I had established a good rapport with the Kelvin Staff and before we moved to Service Catering I was able to liberate many frozen lobsters to my store for future use. When we eventually moved into a combined Sgts and Officers Mess, the RAF cooks were happy to do me the occasional Lobster Thermidor.

The Fire Section had seemingly limitless supplies of bread rolls and bacon from Kelvin's, which were delivered by one of the JCB drivers we called Worzel Gummidge. The smell of bacon butties pervaded the air around the Fire Section/Ops Complex, and often contractors and other people in the Ops area would drop in for a morning snack.

On the other side of the airfield, the brand new Crash Fire Section was a splendid building full of shiny fire trucks and the initiatives to make it a "home from home" by the lads in post were excellent; the

“York Stone” fireplace in the crew room being an example. The walls were hung with ex Argentinean FN rifles.

The biggest drawback was the up-slope from the crash bays to the taxi-way and the restricted view from the control room windows. With the onset of winter, ice and snow covered the incline which made forward acceleration difficult with poor traction on the big heavy Crash Trucks. Of course the airfield was usually BLACK when the ground was WHITE and so there was no need to leave the bays!

The domestic Truck was positioned on the admin/accommodation site and was housed in the Contractors Fire Section, a (One Welsh Man) canvas shelter. A brand new domestic section came into being toward the end of my tour and was taken over by my successor, Steady Eddie (Ward)

Looking from the Crash Bays control room windows up the slope, the surface of the ATC access road and runway beyond was at eye level - all you saw were the rudders of the larger aircraft. This was very pertinent in one instance. Mrs H Jones, wife of Col H Jones VC of the Paras, and other bereaved wives had been on a visit, and were leaving on the afternoon Tri-Star. As it passed the control room on its take off run, a large trail of flame was apparent from the tail engine. It looked like a Doodlebug or a plumbers blow lamp (for those who don't remember Doodlebugs!). The duty local controller shouted “Abort!! Abort!!” to the Captain who engaged an automatic system on that aircraft which brought it to a safe stop. The reason for the flames was a strong cross wind component, and incomplete combustion. We deployed in that same wind and had to surround the front of the aircraft with our trucks to enable the gangway to be positioned without being blown down the runway.

Another snag was the total inadequacy of the Crash Alarm. The designers/specifiers must have worked in a Public Library Quiet Room. It was a single high pitched whistle audible only to dogs. I explained to the Electrical Contractors still on site that a crash alarm was meant to summon up the blood and make the hairs stand on end. They apparently had never seen a Submarine picture or heard a Klaxon horn, but I think they changed it in the end.

Early in the piece I travelled down to Stanley on the unfinished hard core road with its “Skull & Crossbones” signs and the warning words “Slow Minefield”. I had a romantic pre-conception of a quaint settlement, but on arrival the Islands’ capital proved to be a real culture shock. At first sight the brightly coloured “wriggly tin” roofed dwellings, and the heavy peat smoke atmosphere, looked like the result of a multiple fog-induced pile-up between lorries carrying paint and corrugated iron.

And so onto RAF Stanley, to meet the incumbent boss (FS Fred Woods) and the “Trumpton Fire Brigade”. The collection of containers and lean-to shelters which formed the Fire Section was rudimentary in the extreme, but it became evident that this section was all about function not form. I was immediately aware of the high level of cheerfulness, and enthusiasm for the main task of RHAG Phantom recovery.

I was to return with a TACR 2, Fred Woods and the Falklands Fire Chief, whose name I do not recall, to provide cover for the last Phantom to leave Stanley.

One last trip to “town” during my tour was to help Fred celebrate his wedding anniversary by having dinner at The Upland Goose hotel. We had the signature dish of Upland Goose, which tasted of fish, obviously a reflection of the unfortunate the bird’s diet. We had arranged to spend the night in the RAF Coastel, an experience for me but home again for Fred.

I had taken over from Trevor Chambers, now regrettably dead, who in turn had been preceded in post by Alan Quail and Ken Leverett. Trevor Chambers was a real Gentleman. As part of the incumbent WO's remit, RAF Ascension and South Georgia were to be visited during his tour. Following his trip to ASI, Trevor he was returning to MPA in a "Fat Albert" (Hercules) which suffered an engine failure somewhere over the South Atlantic. They diverted into Rio de Janeiro during carnival week and he enjoyed a stay in a hotel on the Government. He knew I was to follow him to MPA and sent me a postcard from sunny Rio to a snow-bound Kinloss.

I only know of one WO who visited South Georgia during his tour, one Peter Lee, also sadly no longer with us. I think Peter said he had been winched ashore in foul weather.

One day, while sitting in my MPA office, a Tri-Star Pilot came to see me for fishing tackle. I was somewhat gob-smacked until I was informed that I had inherited the title of "Fishing Officer", and that we kept the gear in the section together with maps of the best fishing areas. Kenny Leverett had set this up, being a keen angler himself he had sent a steady supply of sea trout etc. back to BZN his own station via the Tri-Star fish vans.

When everything was moving up from RAF Stanley it was intended to cull all the cats which had become personal pets during the occupation; ostensibly to prevent a proliferation of pussies at MPA. The firemen "Spirited" one tabby moggie away from Stanley to MPA ahead of the hunt. The lads christened it "Napalm" I don't know why but would hazard a guess that it had dropped a few nasty "Bombs" in its time. The boys made it a home in a cardboard box with his name painted on it.

One fine day, the cat found itself in its box in the crew room doing what cats do best, when a phone was placed on top of the box. Following the afternoon Tri-star landing, an FNG (Falklands New Guy) fireman found his way to the section and was alone in the crew room with the box/cat/phone.

The established hands had observed this situation through the Georgian-wired viewing panels in the crew room door, and one bright spark then called the crew room phone from another extension in the Section.

The FNG detects the ringing and looks around, but no one comes to answer so gingerly he picks up the receiver on top of the cats box, and sez rather timidly.

"Fire Section"

"Hello" sez the Wag, "Is the cat in?"

The FNG locates puss in the box and replies

"Yes, but he's asleep!"

"OK" sez the wag, "I will Call Back."

Everybody fall about!

I did the obligatory "Bimble" out across the scrubland past the "Great Britain Hotel". We past many Bennies, and loads of sheep on our way to Bluff Cove, Fitzroy, where we saw the Sir Tristram RFA memorials. My companions were Sgt Kevin Cook a 6 footer with a stride to match, and a fit young

firemen who loved fell walking in the UK who had come prepared with the proper boots and backpack. After some 15 miles round trip I was feeling my 50 years and happy to catch a Land Rover back to MPA.

My early work consisted almost entirely of “Take-over Boards” with WTW and LMA PSA officials plus the normal RAF Representatives. The Army maintained a Force Fire Officer in Stanley at the HQ, known as COMBRIT some such acronym. He was a three piper and attended all the boards with me. I found him to be helpful, knowledgeable, and unpretentious, but he was succeeded in post by the antithesis of that ilk. This guy had been a Sub Officer in the old AFDFS at RAF Syerston, and graduated to Officer Grade in the Army Fire Service. From day one he adopted a very superior attitude toward all things non-commissioned and RAF in particular. He told me one day that he intended to do all future Fire Prevention inspections at RAF MPA, because RAF FP Training was worthless. He, on the other hand, had attended Moreton-in-Marsh, and was the real deal. I was incensed and relayed his intention to my Wingco Admin. Together we advised the RAF Fire Staff at High Wycombe of his aspirations. I think they saw this as establishment building for the pongos and his trying to take over an RAF base was a non starter. I was immediately created Force Fire Officer South Atlantic; and the Army chappy returned to wooden huts and sand buckets. The rest as they say is hysterical, except that all of my erstwhile colleagues that followed me to MPA did not think so.

The PSA officials in MPA were given honorary RAF rank/status as were the Met Men. On returning from my visit to Ascension I met a PSA man in the departure lounge I knew as George from our work on take-over boards. He was going back south after a trip home.

“Hello George” says I, “Where are you sitting?”

“Seat 4a” he replies.

“Is there any room near you?” I ask,

“Its empty, only a party right at the front of the aircraft” he says.

I ask the movers if I can be seated adjacent to George and they say sorry we do not allocate seat numbers. So I pick up a blank boarding card and a marker pen and write “Seat 4f”. I forgot to mention that this was a British Airways 747 and on mounting the gangway I was ushered into First Class. George was on one side of the wide body and I on the other. George had got his seat at BZN because he was RAF Group Captain equivalent, I had no idea. My Sqn Ldr Ops was on the same flight back and was somewhere back in “Steorage”. The Party at the front of the aircraft was Air Chief Marshal Sir Patrick Hine and his ADC. I had met the BA crew on the beach the day before and we shared a barbecue and beer. The engineer asked if I would like to observe the take off from the flight deck and I accepted with alacrity. Wideawake airfield has a 9000 foot runway over a hill. Lining up the aircraft for take off just after dusk there were 3000 foot of lights and then a space between the volcanic hills at each side of the runway. This prompted the obvious remark between the pilots “Bloody short runway”.

I continued my tour at MPA into mid winter (June/July) with snow every day and the biting chill factor. When the small outstations closed all the TACR 2s came back to Mount Pleasant, and I had one for my personal transport. As mentioned, the Officers shared the Sgts Mess until their mess was ready and at cease work they would park their Land Rovers out in front and it became known as the Land Rover Owners Club. My Range Rover was a real piece of one-upmanship! However, a bored fireman

either at MPA or Kelly's Garden had cleverly altered the RANGE ROVER sign on the front bonnet to read HANG OVER, which could well have been more appropriate.

The only real excitement during my sojourn was a fire on Lively Island, spotted by ATC early one evening. We loaded the light pump, suction and delivery hose, the generator and floodlight from one of the MkXIs onto the Rescue Sea King, and flew into action. Sgt Roy Bastable, SAC's Gordon Smith, Kiki Dee, Fran Neary, Neil Bateman and Liam Rippon were successful in extinguishing the fire, but we were called too late to save the Farm Building. Gordon Smith is still serving as a civilian and as I write is the Chairman of the RAF Fire Services Association.

Without any obvious reason I found the tour quite exhausting. Maybe it was the twelve hour days and seven day working, with none of the usual UK respites and diversions. I was certainly glad when my turn came to leave. However, fate had one last trick to play.

The RAF Tri-Star Fleet had recently been purchased from Pan American Airways via BA and modification at Marshalls of Cambridge, who incidentally removed the in-flight movie capability (soon to be restored). Anyway, for whatever contractual reason, there was a BA Engineer resident at MPA during the initial service of the aircraft.

Now my shiny Tri-Star was on time, all prepared and ready to go, when the said engineer did a fuel sample and apparently our machine had too much anti freeze additive in the AVTUR. This is metered-in automatically with the fuel. The RAF crew were not too worried about this, but the Civilian Engineer would not approve. Consequently, all the fuel in the aircraft had to be pumped out to bowsers, transported to Mare Harbour, and fresh fuel brought back. It took something like seven or eight hours to complete this task, and all the while the aircrew were running out of duty time. We had left the mess after breakfast and said our good-byes, so our return at Lunch time was of course greeted with the customary service "Schadenfreude". We got away in the end, but only just..

After Kinloss it was back to Gibraltar in 1987 for my last productive posting. The sunny climes of Gib were followed by a posting to RAF Bentley Priory/Stanmore Park for the last eight months of my service. There, I was introduced to the Apple Mac computer and Desktop Publishing whilst a member of the RAF Regiment & RAF Fire Service Training Development Support Staff. This proved a useful place to be while preparing my CV and completing a required project for the Plymouth Safety Officers Course I attended as part of my resettlement program. I sent out three CVs for potential jobs, got two interviews, and one job.

I screwed the first interview when a member of the board asked such cloth-eared questions that I said "*for goodness sake give me one on sport!*"

I worked from home for the next ten years in Construction, Health & Safety, and latterly some Fire Assessment jobs and was self-employed for the same company, Willis Corroon in Abingdon. I would send in my invoices for payment of completed jobs and had established a good rapport with the accountant, a Lady Called Lorna. She had the most beautiful "Pam Ayres" accent and was the source of one of my most embarrassing Moments.

Lorna had accompanied the bosses from head office to meeting I attended. She was Black; and I had no idea from her accent on the phone.

When shaking her hand I was clearly gob-smacked and I stuttered

“Lorna, you don't sound so tall on the phone”

She gave me a wonderful smile and in that rich Oxford accent said; “You buggerrrr you Steve”.

When the OAP kicked in I called it a day, not wishing to pay half of my joint incomes in tax.

The rest as they say is Hysterical!