

Member No 10 – Graham Kennedy

Graham Kennedy was a founding member of the RAF & Defence Fire Services Association and a close friend of past Presidents Keith Penfold and Dennis McCann. Sadly, he died in August of this year but since then it has come to light that Graham had started to write his RAF memoirs. Despite not being complete, his jottings give us an insight into what life was like in the RAF Fire Service in the early 1950s. Here is Graham's story.



Chapter 1 - Enlistment

On February 18 1952, I left my Parents and the comforts of home to begin my long journey to enlist in the RAF. It all began with a trip to Birmingham and the Office for RAF Recruiting, where travel warrants were issued for Bedford by train. This was a slow but pleasant journey, picking up other recruits en-route until we reached Bedford. At the station we were met by, strangely enough, Bedford QL lorries on which we were taken to RAF Cardington for the fun and games of enlistment, swearing-in, aptitude tests, kit Issue, inoculations and all the other nausea associated with joining up. After a week there we were again taken by lorry to the station to board the train for RAF West Kirby. On arrival there we were greeted by our Drill Instructors, who proceeded to bawl and shout at us before we had even vacated the trucks from the railway station. On leaving Cardington we had been told to pack our crock mugs on top of our kitbags for easy access; however, the DIs thought it would be fun to hurl all our bags down from the truck head -first, thus smashing everyone's mug to bits. They then gleefully told us that it was a chargeable offence to



be without a mug. Such was our introduction to the horror of life under the merciless control of Corporal Parkinson, the DI in control of Hut D3, Flight 144. The wooden huts were not exactly 5 Star either, with just a single cast-iron coal-burning appliance for which we seldom had enough fuel. It was a windswept and bitterly cold situation, making life for the twenty-six Prisoners - or AC2 Recruits as we now known, rather different to the one that we had all left at home. However, like everyone else in the mob, we took the balling and shouting, the endless marching, rifle drill and kit inspections in our stride; hanging out for the arrival of the day every recruit dreams of, the Passing-out Parade.

I must confess that I can recall little of the actual Parade; except for being a bit miffed that no one from my family was able to attend. However, I do recall that despite eight weeks of horrible grub; probably due to food rationing, and all the other deprivations we endured, we all looked, and certainly in my case, felt as fit as butchers' dogs. We were so pleased to be granted our freedom that we forgave our DIs their sins, and parted as friends, thanking them for making airmen out of a shower of Civvies. So, with hand-shaking and farewells made, it was goodbye to West Kirby and off home for a few days leave before the next hurdle - the Fire-School at RAF Sutton on Hull.

Chapter 2 – Trade Training

It was 7 May 1952 and after a rather tedious train journey to Hull, I then took the bus which conveniently stopped at the main entrance to RAF Sutton-on-Hull. This was to be my home for the next six weeks. My first impression was favourable - it looked a doddle compared to West-Kirby; particularly the brick-built accommodation with indoor ablutions. When everyone had checked in and introduced themselves, we were greeted by our Instructors, Cpls Grant and McCabe, who both seemed to be very friendly, and made us all feel at ease. What a difference to the reception we got at Square-bashing!

The Intake was divided into two classes of about twenty, and each of us was issued with a RAF Form 619, - otherwise known as a Notebook! All fellow old wrinklies will remember the first page; which in my book, dated May 8, 1952, was headed CHEMISTRY OF FIRE; and so began Course 68A. The entry had been split into two groups - presumably to ensure efficiency, and quite possibly to create an aura of competition between A and B Flights in such events as Hydrant Drill. This took the form of an hilarious and chaotic attempt to run out three lengths of canvas hose, connect a one Inch brass nozzle, and shout – “WATER ON!” I do not think that either team made much of a success of it at the first attempt, and as for the Hose-reel Carts - do not ask! However, they say that practise makes perfect, and we most certainly had plenty of it over the next few weeks. It was all good for encouraging team work, and during the course, a lot of friendships were formed - many of which were destined to last for years to come.

The late Ken Lowthorpe was a good team player who I got on with very well. We managed to stick together through Driver Training at Lytham-St-Annes, and eventually flew out to Egypt on the same Hastings, along with other Course 68 lads such as Ruebin Morton and [Wiggy] Higginson; both of whom ended up Aden. I never saw Ken again until the first Association Meeting at Shoreham in 1995.



An amazing coincidence occurred in 1956. On leaving the RAF I started a job at the Austin Motor Company as a Fireman, and who should turn up to start on the very same day but Ruebin Morton! Thankfully we were on the same shift, so it was almost like old times, but after the RAF I was becoming bored with the very tedious routine of endless patrolling the huge industrial complex, and seldom seeing daylight. Soon after I decided it was time to return to the job I trained for, having previously won a scholarship to the School of Furniture in Birmingham.

As for Higginson, the last time I saw him was when we said cheerio on the airfield at Khormaksar. That was a moment that will stay with me forever. Having said goodbye to my friend I found myself having been dumped on the airfield alone, to watch the two Bedford pick-ups vanish into the heat-haze. I had no option other than to follow the advice that had been shouted to me from the Corporal driver of the Steamer-Point wagon. “Head for that building over there!”, he told me, pointing to a transit office in the hazy distance. It looked an awfully long way to walk carrying two kit-bags in the oppressive heat that Aden was notorious for, and it was at that moment I felt that it was time for Mum to sell the pig and buy me out !

However, I eventually made it to Transit Office, albeit in a hot, sweaty and dishevelled state, only to be informed that I had been sent to Aden due to a cock-up by Air Movements. I was then directed to an empty twenty-six bed Nissen Hut where I dumped my kit on the nearest vacant bed and promptly crashed out for a much needed kip. After that, there followed four days in tents with the added misery of guard duties and fatigues, plus horrible grub. Nevertheless, it was quite a treat to be able to lounge about with no one to bother me at times and I had found the mess, though in that heat all I fancied was fruit salad. This was available in large metal containers from which you helped yourself to with the aid of large ladles. However, after three days skiving I was rumbled, and told that I should have stayed at Khartoum, where some of my training mates had deplaned.



And so it was that on the seventh of August 1952, I boarded a Valetta aircraft and left Khormaksar for the five hour trip west back up to MEAF4, as it was in those days. Flying at six thousand feet over Ethiopia was as bumpy a flight as I can ever remember, so it was with some relief that the next rather gentle bounce meant that I had finally arrived where fate had originally intended I should be.

Chapter 3 - The Sunny Sudan

It was now over 50 years since Corporal Jones of the Walmington-on-Sea Home Guard had been threatening the Mad Mahdi's whirling dervishes and fuzzy wuzzies with his cold steel, but in 1952 Khartoum was still under Anglo/Egyptian rule. The Airfield there was quite small by modern standards, a typical 1920s job with only two runways – 06/24, and 09/27. The small Control Tower housed a Sudanese Civvy controller and a couple of meteorologists, and next to the tower was a structure to provide some protection from the terrific heat that Sudan is noted for. This consisted of six tall steel posts topped with corrugated sheets, which I was reliably informed was designed to protect the CO₂ Gas cylinders on the Gas Truck and 45 Monitor. Under this we managed to squeeze the entire crash-combine, which in those days comprised of a Jeep with a Cpl/driver and Fireman, and behind that the Gas Truck and 45 Monitor parked side by side, and further back still a Bedford 500 gallon water bowser. The crews had to suffer the extreme heat when in the vehicles, rather like toast under a grill! Due to the sun, there was little relief to be found outside the canopy either, so it was not much of a choice. RAF Khartoum was a main staging post between Cairo and Nairobi as well as numerous other parts of the Empire, so could get quite busy at times. When aircraft were on final approach to land, the Controller would appear on his balcony to shout CRASH-CREW OUT! On hearing this we would deploy the vehicles out to the intersection of the runways where we waited until all was clear. With the absence of radios, a green Aldis Lamp was used to give the signal to return to the Tower.

The accommodation blocks were of single-story brick construction, with corrugated roofing and those on the rest of the camp were the usual layout of 26 beds, with an NCO bunk at each end. The Fire Section however, was divided into an office, store, and 6 rooms with a tiled veranda which ran around the perimeter. This was often used for sleeping on, as it was cooler than inside; no air-con. In those days!

Unlike the International Airport that stands on the site today, RAF Khartoum was a rather small and compact outpost. The Station Headquarters building was next to the main gate, and was a rather impressive structure reminding one of Foreign Legion Forts of the past. Opposite the entrance was the Parade Ground come Cricket Pitch, which was flanked on either side by the Mess and NAAFI. A medical centre lay behind a hedge, but was a very modest affair; then add to that the MT Section and a couple of hangers and that was about it. The SNCO IC the Fire Section

was Sergeant Joe Proctor, a Scot, who was a firm but fair Boss. Joe was aided by Cpls Len Smith, a Geordie; and Jim McGee, an Irish lad who was my first crew chief. I was his number two on the Jeep on my very first day on an airfield, which was a proud day for me. Prior to that I had been on domestic duties along with other new lads, while we learned the Camp layout and did such jobs as painting and re-filling 2 gallon Soda Acids and Foam Extinguishers, and even a 30 gallon wheeled monster which was much fun to set off! It was during this period that my old mate from West Kirby and Sutton-on-Hull, Danny Glasscoe turned-up. He had been back-coursed at Sutton because one Sunday afternoon after the pub closed a few of us played football in Queens Gardens. Our Best-Blue tunics used to form makeshift goals, and Danny received a bad ankle injury, hence the delay. However I was pleased to see an old pal, and we became great mates, both electing to serve double tours at Khartoum. After six months service us old sweats were awarded our LAC propellers, which came with an extra shilling per day. There were no SACs on the section, it being a relatively new thing under the revised Trade Structure, so I decided to apply for the trade test, which I duly passed in December 1952. Since little was known about the test, the written element was posted in from elsewhere, and when it came to doing the Practical test two Warrant-Officers had to be flown up from Aden to assess me on such things as aircraft marshalling, using the Very-Pistol, plus various other practical tests which I quite enjoyed. All this must have cost the RAF a fortune, but more importantly it meant another shilling per day to me, which together with our local overseas allowance of two shillings and nine pence boosted my pay to the dizzy sum of thirteen and nine per day -LOADED! However, it transpired that I was unable to hold the rank until having served one year.

The three months needed to meet this requirement soon passed and I was quite enjoying life on a rotation of crash crew, crash-relief and domestic duties. Then one day Sergeant Proctor told me to



get my SAC rank sewn onto all my kit, and prepare to take on the job of IC crash-crew, since by then we had lost both Corporal Len Smith and Jim. McGee. The British were to grant provisional independence in March 1954, so we were helping to train Sudanese Firemen to take over airfield crash/rescue duties and in common with other trades, not all Tour-ex.staff would be replaced. And so it was that, with some trepidation I took over the wheel of our old World-War 2 Willys Jeep, with the logo of "I/C Crash-Rescue" prominent on the upstand below the windscreen. Danny Glasscoe was my number two, whilst old-hands like Jim.Eaglesham and Colin Davill manned the Fordson 45 Monitor, Austin CO₂ Gas-Truck and the Bedford 500 gallon Water Bowser. After a brief few words of advice from Sergeant Proctor and a rare smile which I hoped meant good luck, it was off to the airfield in my new job.

Our airfield was also home to Sudan Airways, whose offices were in the same Hanger area as our Air Movements section. Despite being kept busy, their three DC3 Dakota aircraft, as well as their De-Havilland Herons and Doves were all well maintained and always immaculate. Apart from these, we had a regular flow of RAF

Hastings and Valleta aircraft transiting through, as well as the Tropical Experimental Unit from Boscombe Down. The variety of new aircraft from there made our job more interesting as we needed to examine them for means of access/escape etc. The Canberra Jet Bomber, still secret at the time, was awesome. Giving it our close attention we were struck by the absence of any means of escape for the Navigator; the Pilot and Engineer both having Martin-Baker ejection seats, the first I had seen since Fire-School. It also provided me with a chance to do something useful when after re-fuelling, the ground crew managed achieve a start-up fire in the port engine. As usual a wheeled appliance holding two twelve pound CO₂ bottles was handy so I discharged both into the engine, and all was well.

Camp life could be pretty tedious unless you were into sport. Fortunately I was mad on football but in that heat it took a few weeks to acclimatise, leaving only the modest sized swimming pool for a swim or game of water-polo. Here, there was a problem as I could not swim! Finding me sat in the shallow end for a cool-off one day, Johnnie Stevenson assured me that he could soon teach me to swim, and despite my doubts, with his encouragement the day soon came when I swam my first width. I could never thank my pal enough for that, and took to swimming at every chance I had. There was no Camp Cinema, so RAF lads were obliged to walk to the Army Cinema at South Barracks. This was a few hundred yards toward the Nile, in fact the open-air screen, with it's loose rows of bamboo chairs was called THE BLUE NILE. At the rear of the seating was a Bar selling India Pale Ale or Gin and Tonic. On the rare nights that it rained it was hilarious, as we would all sit cheering at a chance to cool off. The walk back to camp took us through the Tented Camp of the Askaris, Sudanese troops who provided our camp perimeter and airfield security, they were a friendly bunch and always good for a laugh.

Sadly that is all Graham wrote before he passed away on 7 August 2020