

INTO THE REAL WORLD – John Leeson

On the 7th June 1956 I arrived at M.T.E., Site 13, R.A.F. Warton. As well as housing the School of Hygiene, M.T.E (Medical Training Establishment), as its name indicates, undertook the trade training of nursing orderlies and hygienists. Having a civilian qualification, I was posted to the headquarters flight to await a permanent posting. That wait was to last about a month as I eventually left on 1st July

My time at Warton therefore, in common with other hygienists in my position, was really spent in filling in time. A, no doubt cynical, warrant officer gave it as his opinion that we worked about one hour a week. In common with all other medical personnel, I now wore the two brass collar badges that identified us as such and distinguished us from the rest of the R.A.F.

Coming straight from basic training the culture shock was profound, and thoroughly enjoyable. The whole camp was much smaller than West Kirby and we were a smaller unit within the whole. The School of Hygiene was a small, specialised element within the R.A.F. with a common ethos and therefore characterised by informality and friendliness. We were all from the same sort of background and therefore spoke the same language. All hygienists at the camp at any one time, in total about 6 junior technicians and a few senior N.C.O.s, were instructors at the School.

In common, no doubt, with other sections in the services, the Medical Branch had its own "in" jokes - in our case, some collective nouns. For example, a group of Wing Commanders was a flush of W.C.s.

While on the subject of officers; it was well recognised among the other ranks that the higher the rank the more relaxed the holder tended to be about position and status. An illustrating story, no doubt apocryphal, concerned an erk walking through the camp one dark winter night. Seeing a figure approaching he asked, "Got a light mate?" The other person took out his lighter and on lighting it, the gold braid on his cap revealed him as the C.O., a Group Captain. The erk was suitably taken aback and started to apologise. "That's all right," said the Group Captain, "Just thank your lucky stars I'm not a pilot officer."

Holding 14, the billets were smaller than at West Kirby and, of course, with very little to do, the days were more relaxed. An (unofficial) cup of tea in bed at 7.00am woke us in time for breakfast. Most days were spent pottering about in the Hygiene building and drinking tea. This, the building that is, contained an excellent exhibition room and museum, providing visual aids and models dealing with all aspects of service hygiene and health. Much of our time was therefore devoted to expanding these exhibits - from the initial drawings to making and final painting of the models.

A chilling aspect of the medical museum was the many, many photographs of pilots; smart in their working blues (no. 2 Home Dress) but with their heads missing. In the panic of an emergency each had ejected before detaching the cockpit cover which, in those days, was a necessary preliminary.

Much of our time was also occupied with gardening - digging, weeding and tending the flower beds on the station. Recognising our particular skills we were also occasionally, and often at very short notice, pressed into service as lecturers. My one excursion into this field was a lecture on the housing provisions of the Public Health Act 1936 to a class of four.

We worked a five day week, including Saturday morning. Wednesday afternoon was theoretically sports day when we could participate in a range of sports. In practice we were left to our own devices. Whether it was a sport or not, one afternoon was spent in tent pitching - just for the practice!

Another afternoon was spent watching some films on rodent control. They were being shown to some sergeants on a course but a couple of us staff J/Ts joined them. The pleasure for us, again after basic training, was in watching those sergeants being marched away as a squad while we just ambled away.

The real cinema showing proper films (I remember Richard Burton in a blond wig as "Alexander the Great,") was in the neighbouring town of Kirkham. The nearest village to Site 13 was Freckleton. I attended the Methodist church there for those few weeks and, again, received a warm, unaffected welcome into their fellowship. After evening service the group of us from the camp were invited to one of the member's houses for supper and talk. Lancashire means mills of course and I recall one such evening when the woman who's house we were in explained to us, with samples, the manufacture of corduroy. Nothing particularly remarkable in that you will think. It does show the easy thoughtful welcome those good Lancashire folk extended to a variety of lads far from their homes.

Having lived in south London through the war, suffering the bombing (our house had been badly damaged in an air-raid) and watching the aerial dog fights, I was delighted to be informed, on the 11th June, that I was to be posted to the Headquarters of Fighter Command at Bentley Priory with, probably an onward posting to either No.11 or No.12 Group. A hygienist was either a Command or Group posting, having the duty to inspect and report on the subordinate units. The domestic site of Fighter Command headquarters was at Stanmore Park which, to sweeten the pill even further, was on the Bakerloo line and therefore easily accessible for regular weekends at home.

This is to get ahead of ourselves though. The School of Hygiene continued on its relaxed way for those remaining weeks. I had a further taste of domesticity when a couple of us did some baby-sitting for the C.O. of the School of Hygiene - comfortable sofas, T.V. and a supply of sandwiches and biscuits. I spent the time letter writing while my companion prepared a lecture on the Physics of Heat.

My time here was coming to an end though and on the 1st July I departed for the big wide world of the real R.A.F. Like homing pigeons though, we were all to return to the parent loft. All hygienists within the U.K. attended conferences at the School of Hygiene in each February and August.

On 3rd July I arrived at R.A.F. Stanmore Park. I knew, even before reaching the camp that I had arrived at a different quality of R.A.F. experience from that "enjoyed" at training establishments. There, waiting outside the underground station with his car, was sergeant Lawton to meet and transport me the remaining distance to camp. We never had sergeants meeting us individually with transport in basic training.

There was an inevitable ritual on arriving at a new unit, for which one was allowed a couple of days before actually starting work. To be accepted and recognised as on the strength one had physically to visit and sign on at each of its constituent elements - guard room, sick quarters, bedding store, central admin., and pay, etc.; reversing the procedure on leaving. This joining process was facilitated in my case by the aforesaid sergeant Lawton conducting me around the camp. Perhaps he didn't have that much to do. While thus engaged he explained the new five day week operation; suggesting in my case that I could return to camp on Monday mornings; a suggestion I was not slow in adopting. These weekends were further facilitated in that, shortly after arriving at Stanmore, the need to fill in a leave pass for weekends was dispensed with. My regular Monday mornings therefore saw me leaving home at 6.00am and arriving back in camp at 7.30am.

As a Junior Technician I was treated as a corporal for many purposes. As at basic training each billet had two rooms at one end, each occupied in this case by two corporals, or in my case, one corporal and a J/T. This room was furnished with a double tiered bunk, a table and chair, an easy chair, wardrobes and lockers and a wash basin. Luxury - private comfort and no trekking across icy wastes to wash and shave.

As a quid pro quo for this luxury, I performed the duties of orderly corporal on a rota. This essentially involved raising the Union Jack, accompanied by the orderly officer and guard, in the morning and lowering it at sundown. We also had to remove personnel and lock up various recreational buildings at night and give those who needed it, an early call in the morning. This usually meant the cooks. I can therefore confirm from my personal experience that the reputation cooks had in the R.A.F. of having the scruffiest and most untidy billets was entirely justified.

My time at Stanmore Park included 5th November. My room mate persuaded me to go with him to the traditional bonfire and fireworks. As we went, with eyes not yet accustomed to the dark, we approached a knot of chaps who, just then, lit a firework. Everyone scattered. Those in front of me jumped forward and those behind, backwards. With nowhere else to go, I went sideways, straight into a trench left by builders. It was about four or five feet deep with muddy water in the bottom and I hit it square on.

Each day we were bussed to and from Bentley Priory and the day's work. Bentley Priory was a huge stone built mansion set in extensive grounds and had apparently once been the home of Lady Hamilton of Lord Nelson fame. More recently it was the centre from which our contribution to the Battle of Britain had been co-ordinated.

Our medical section was located up in an attic of that large house. In addition to two of us national service hygienists there was, inter alia, a flight sergeant whose name I cannot

now recall. Even though I cannot recall his name, he left an indelible impression. During the war he had served for a time on air sea rescue launches. In fact, as he proudly told us, he had a small (very small) part in the film "The Sea Shall Not Have Them", which had been partly filmed at his station on the south coast – R.A.F. Bawdsey.

When work was slack, which often seemed to happen, he would entertain us by reproducing small boat operations. He used to stand at the window as if in the wheelhouse of a launch and issue orders in the role of the skipper in casting off, getting under way and proceeding to sea. While the start was trouble free, it wasn't long before all sorts of disasters intervened, concluding with invariably, the vessel sinking and all hands abandoning ship while the flight sergeant's commands became increasingly more strident and panic stricken. It really was a bravura comic performance and always reduced us to fits of laughter.

It was said, although I cannot vouch for it, that he was engaged in this performance at the open window one summer day when the phone rang. The voice at the other end said, "Ah, skipper, I can't get this boat away, the damned davit's stuck." It was the A.O.C. from his office on the floor below. Its a good story anyway.

My limited time at Bentley Priory was drawing to a close with a further posting. Postings in the services were the subject of much anguished and/or ribald adverse comment. Well, the medical branch of the R.A.F. did its own postings and, in my experience, got it right. My next posting, as a south London boy, was to No.11 Group at R.A.F. Hillingdon, ie., Uxbridge. A friend of mine, Maurice Duffield, who lived in Norfolk was posted to No.12 group at Cambridge and covering East Anglia and another of our number who hailed from Edinburgh was posted to No.13 Group at Newcastle. I discovered all this when I returned to the School of Hygiene for one of those conferences.

What else those conferences accomplished, apart from a nice relaxed jolly for a few days, is now lost in the mists of time. I suppose that the cohesion and uniformity of operation that they encouraged among people who spent the rest of their time in professional isolation had value in itself. The only discussion I recall that generated any heat was whether we could or should be issued with raincoats. The only rainproof garment routinely issued to other ranks was a cape-groundsheet. The most superficial knowledge of the average serviceman's pre-occupations will indicate the commonest use planned, but I suspect rarely executed, for this piece of equipment. As we were often in the public eye, travelling around our areas on public transport, we felt that they did little for the R.A.F's, or indeed our, image. Whether cold or wet, we invariably wore our great coats.

Much of my time at Bentley Priory was occupied in learning the R.A.F. way of doing things; administratively that is - their filing system, stock letters for various purposes, standard forms of course and the relevant A.M.O.s (Air Ministry Orders). This monotony was relieved by a return visit to R.A.F. Cardington to take a Photometer (to measure the light in buildings) back for re-calibration. What a difference a few months familiarisation with service life and a change of status makes.

A rather odd visit on 30-31st October and while at Fighter Command H.Q., was to R.A.F. Woodbridge which, in spite of its name, was an American air force (USAF) flying station in East Anglia. Some senior N.C.O.s complained that they were being bitten in their billet. Well, I went and looked around and talked to those concerned. The trouble was that they couldn't produce any of the offending biters so, having experienced something of the relaxed way our transatlantic cousins operated and offered some general advice, the visit just fizzled out and I returned to civilisation.
