

In the DAZE of National Service.

An overview of Service Life in the 1950's.
Some of the events in the service life of
3139859, Aircraftman Barnhurst. 1953-1956



When I received my 'call up papers' for National Service I was quite excited. Since before I joined the Air Cadets at school, I had been besotted with flying. And so, along with many others I made my way to RAF Hednesford in Staffordshire, one of the Royal Air Force's 'boot camps'. The first couple of days went by in a bit of a haze; go there, come here, collect that, not forgetting, 'get your hair cut'! Meeting some of your new fellow intake could be a bit of a shock. We were a real mixture, from 'Del Boy' to 'Mummy's Boy'; I like to think that I was somewhere between the two. Accent, dialect, and course language were all something to get used to. This was certainly not like home! I quickly realised that I had just joined the 'university of life'.

When I had been through the initial induction 'ceremonies' and had my issue of kit, airmen for the use of, in true military language, I was moved up to an earlier intake. This was due to my time in the Air Training Corp as it was considered that the rough edges had been knocked off of the likes of myself, as I knew how to march, salute and suchlike. The downside to this was that I had to meet another new lot of fellow sufferers; but what a bunch they were, they knew the dodges, and how to skive; but it was not difficult to fit in. With this group there seemed to be more men missing from duties than ever went on parades.

At the end of the course we were assigned our respective trades for the rest of our time in the Air Force. As I had failed the eyesight test for aircrew I applied for and was told I would get Air Traffic Control. It was about this stage that I thought it might be in my best interests to sign on for three years. This would mean that I would be 21 when I came out; a far more significant age in those days, and I would then be eligible to transfer to civilian aviation. And so it was that I became an Aircraftman second class, Operations Clerk. But to where would I be posted?

When my posting came through it was to RAF Watnall. My only trouble then was that I could not find an airfield of that name. Where was I off to? It transpired that RAF Watnall was the home of the old Battle of Britain Control Centre for 12 Group. The entire Operations were all underground; not an aircraft in sight, not even at the Main Gate!

RAF Watnall was part of our Cold War defences covering all aircraft movements in the Eastern half of England from the Wash to Scotland, which included 'enemy aircraft' from Russia. The first thing I was 'asked' to do was sign the Official Secrets Act.

Watnall was a fantastic camp; just enough people of various trades solely to keep us functioning 'below stairs' 24 hours a day. Apparently the camp had won the Jolliff Trophy for catering many years on the trot and although it was not quite home cooking it was good. At least I wouldn't starve.



Obligatory photo for my Mother!

It did not take long to settle into a routine of work, plus trips to Nottingham, the nearest large town, and finding the next village dance and when is it taking place. This together with weekend passes back to London, either by train when in funds or hitch hiking in uniform when not, made for a very enjoyable time. Three years of this would suit me down to the ground. I should have known that the RAF didn't work that way.

While I was home on leave in January 1954, I got a telegram to say that I was being posted overseas to Singapore. Leave soon became embarkation leave. My Mother was less than happy about it, My Father said "he will be fine", and my girlfriend wanted to get married! Didn't I have enough to think about as it was, without the threat of marriage at such a young age? I soon found myself on my way to RAF Innsworth in Gloucestershire, the Overseas Transit Camp. It was freezing bloody cold that winter! There was no hot water unless it was boiled on the stove, if you could find some coal, coke, or wood!

An old WW2 'erk' who said that he had served with Douglas Bader, kept us amused with endless verses of Eskimo Nell, which seemed appropriate in view of the weather. Within the week we were all kitted out with tropical gear and told we were not needed until the following Monday morning, and still some idiot asked "does that mean we can go home for the weekend?" As nobody had either permission or passes those of us close enough to home went for it. If we didn't get back in time we could always serve our time on board ship!

After a train journey to Southampton we boarded the Empire Orwell for our 'cruise' to Singapore. Bunks were assigned with the RAF on the upper decks and with the army units further down, some at the waterline level. Some did not even have a porthole to look through! We were all packed in and hoped that we would not have to get out in a hurry.



H.M.T. Empire Orwell (17,362 tons)

Some were seasick before we got past the Isle of Wight, but although I was taken poorly I was sent to the sick bay with suspected malaria, and we hadn't even got as far east as Gibraltar! This was not so bad as there was just myself and another chap, with six QARANC (Queen Alexander Royal Army Nursing Corp) nurses to look after us. It was very pleasant going through the Med and Suez Canal sitting on the top deck with the married families, enjoying the view but it couldn't last and I was declared 'fit' when we got to Aden.

When I got back to my bunk, there was not much to do as all the jobs had been assigned. The most exciting thing was, when in the middle of the India Ocean all the engines stopped during the dead of night. We all awoke with a start and thought that someone must have fallen overboard. Never heard what it was all about, but we were able to witness a fantastic tropical storm a long way off as we approached Colombo in Ceylon, as it was then. After a day ashore it was on to Singapore. 'It ain't half hot Mum' comes to mind, because it was!

After docking and spending a night at the transit camp I arrived at RAF Changi, the base that the Japanese had used as a Prisoner of War camp, as well as Changi Prison, on the surrender of Singapore in 1942.

It was very much as it had been then, when it was the Roberts Barracks as used by the army, and in block 151, which had been used as a dysentery wing by the PoW's, there were still traces of the religious Murals that had been painted by Stanley Warren, one of the P o W's. One of these could still be seen showing through the white wash used to cover them up. All new arrivals were curious to see what was left of the murals, much to the annoyance of the chaps who lived in block 151 to have all these 'tourists' coming around.



The only Mural visible in 1954.

What I did not know until much later, I was now part of Operation Firedog, the code name for air operations in Malaya. My 'office' was in the Control Tower, an old building rather like a bungalow, built on the highest part of the airfield next to the gun emplacements built before World War Two. The guns faced out to sea where the main threat was expected to come from; however the Japanese attacked down Malay from the north.



The Old Tower at RAF Changi

The tower was not very 'high tec'. We did not even have our own water on tap! We were supplied via a water bowser each day. However a new Tower was in the

planning stage. But before that was completed I had to work on going on leave to Australia. This was not going to be easy as security clearance needed to go to the Experimental Rocket Range at Woomera, which was near Adelaide, would be essential. When I asked S/L Rolls our C.O. his view was "You'll be lucky. But if you can get the clearance you can go." That's all I needed to know. Fortunately, when I signed the Official Secrets Act at RAF Watnall and was vetted from there; that was a help. After some months and much wheeling and dealing it was on. And so one Monday morning I found myself on the 3.45am flight to Australia in a Transport Command Hastings. After a very interesting overnight train journey from Adelaide, I went on to spend a month with my cousin and her family, who lived at Ringwood, outside Melbourne.



Flinders Street Railway Station

I got to go panning for gold on the Yarra River, see many sights and visit my first drive-in cinema. That was one of the better parts of my service life.

Soon after I got back to RAF Changi I got a 'Dear John' letter from my girlfriend back in England. She had married a chap that she met at a Billy Graham religious revival meeting. The letter was duly pinned up on the barracks notice board along with all the other letters chaps had received from the girls back at home who had found somebody else while we were away. It was a rather common happening I am sorry to say.

When I got back from Australia it was not long before our new tower was complete, together with our own water system. One surprise was that we found that we had acquired a lot of new friends, once they learned that we had an air conditioning system! That was a real luxury.



The New Tower

This life of luxury was not to last long as I was soon posted to RAF Tengah, another airfield on the far side of Singapore Island. Unexpectedly I was posted not to the tower but rather to the Flying Wing Operations Section. Not being too sure what to expect, I was very pleasantly surprised to find that it was the centre of operations of all air attacks against the Malayan Communist Party. I can't say that my time in the Royal Air Force was boring.

From here I was able to fly on familiarisation operations and as supernumerary crew in Lincolns of 148 Sqdn, No.1 Australian Sqdn. as well as local flights. Also a couple of trips in B 29's of the USAF, one of which had a coca cola machine in the rear area!



With 148 Squadron on raid on Jahore.

We had an armed guard at each entrance to our office 24 hours a day, and there was a very strict security system in play. One day we had a visit from the A.O.C. (Air Officer Commanding Far East Air Force) who came during some 'war games' which were being held. He asked if his photographer had arrived, 'not yet' was the reply. When he did turn up we checked his 1250 (Identity card) to find that it showed that

he was a senior aircraftman but he was wearing corporals stripes. If he had been planted as a trap by the A.O.C. we were not going to be caught out like that; so we had him arrested and taken to the guard room.

There was merry hell to pay when the A.O.C. found out because the recently promoted photographer had not had his 1250 updated. Fortunately he was the one who got it in the neck while an annoyed A.O.C. grudgingly acknowledged that we had kept our eyes open.

While leave was always declared to be a privilege and not a right, there was no chance of going to Australia this time. Most places had leave centres, but the problem there was that you would see many of the same servicemen you knew back at camp. There was no question of six month tours of duty in those far off days. You were there until your tour was done.

Going on leave to Penang, an island just off the north coast of Malaya, necessitated drawing arms and ammunition from stores to defend the train from attack by the Communist Terrorists during the journey. I wish that I had had more time on the firing range at basic training. What a way to start a 'holiday'. Leslie Thomas's book 'The Virgin Soldiers' is a very fair representation of such events.



Leslie Thomas with some Veteran National servicemen.

From early in the campaign, or emergency as it was called, a Dakota made regular flights over the jungle broadcasting messages from loud speakers under the fuselage to the MCP to give up fighting. Later on leaflet drops were also used. These were still in use in my time. Around late 1955, there was a concentration of leaflet drops to encourage the terrorists to give up fighting; in the shape of Safe Conduct Passes. It was said that these were distributed at the rate of 15 million a month!

There was some success but never enough and so the fight continued for a few more years after I left.



A safe conduct pass

There was so much going on that I was almost sorry when it was time to go home; almost but not quite. In fact I became 'time expired'; that is to say I should have been sent home already but my replacement had not arrived. It got to the stage that I was told that I had a flight out with just a couple of hours notice. My mates had to pack most of my personal gear and have it sent by sea. The plus to this was that I was flown home by civilian airline with a number of married families. We stopped at some very nice hotels along the way, the Top Hat Hotel in Beirut being one of them. Three nights by air was better than three weeks by troopship!

And so it was that I landed at RAF Northolt, made my way to central London where I was met by my father for the final part of my trip. I enjoyed some leave and caught up with my friends who refused to walk down the road with me when for the first year I insisted on wearing an overcoat in June because I was cold. It had never been cooler than 70 degrees for the past two years. On 5th May 1956 was put on the reserve list until August 1958, time done!

What did I think of it all?

Looking back, I would not have missed it for the world. It was a great education in so many ways. I had had lots of experiences, met lots of people, seen and done many things and visited many places in many countries. At just over 21 how else could I have achieved that? Further more think what I had to look forward to; a new job and a new girl friend!

Some 50 years later I went back to Singapore together with my wife and a number of fellow members of the RAF Changi Association, and so much had changed that I hardly recognised the place. RAF Changi had all but been demolished with just Block 151 preserved to commemorate the P.O.W.'s



The restored Murals in 2006.

Stanley Warren had been persuaded to come back to Singapore in 1963 to restore his Murals.

Our old airfield was now an International Airport with a fantastic tower and I expect they had air conditioning. But I doubt they had as good a time as I did!

PER ARDUA AD ASTRA.

“Through Adversity to the Stars”

The motto of the Royal Air Force

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