

EXPERIENCES OF A NATIONAL SERVICE MAN IN THE 1950's

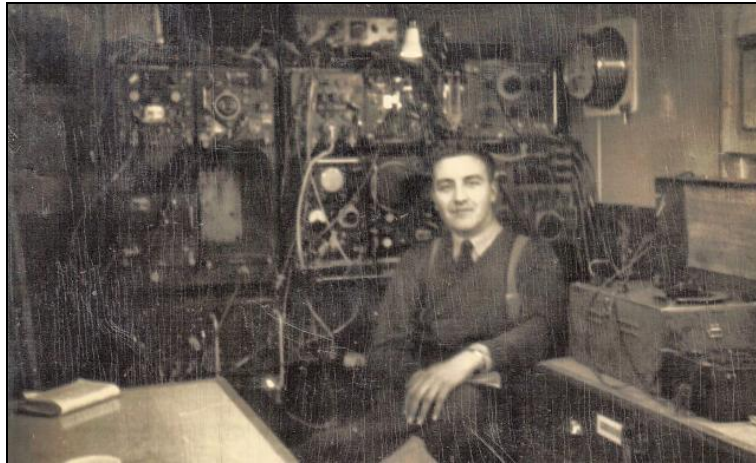


*RAF West Kirby Basic Training Camp 1955
David Hall is seated second from the right*

In August 1955 I had completed a five year apprenticeship in the Printing Trade at the age of 21. My employers had insisted that I finished my apprenticeship before doing my National Service which I had been exempt from for 3 years. I had applied to join the RAF as my father had served in the Royal Flying Corps in the first World War. I received my call up papers telling me to report to RAF Cardington where I was to be kitted out. From there I was taken by train to RAF West Kirby in Liverpool to do my basic training. What a shock to the system that was. Upon arriving at our billet we were confronted by a Corporal Douglas who set out to put the fear of God into us. None of us were used to being shouted at and intimidated. The purpose was to install discipline, and the first few weeks were very difficult. We spent hours polishing our boots and cleaning our equipment. There we learnt to fire a rifle, go over assault courses, camp out under bivouacs on Altcar Sands in the middle of winter and 20 mile route marches trying to find certain locations on a field map. Cook house duties were peeling potatoes, preparing vegetables and washing up dirty pots and pans. All in all it was quite an experience.

Eight weeks after I had finished my basic training I was posted to RAF Worth Matravers in Dorset to be trained as an RAF GEE Radar Operator. Arriving in Worth Matravers for the next six weeks I was taught everything about how electronics worked on the Radar System. At the end of the course having passed the tests, I was posted to 459 Signals Unit Bomber Command who were based at RAF Wythall on the outskirts of Birmingham.

GEE Radar was the system the RAF used during World War 2 and was still being used then in 1955. The transmitters and generators were built into special vehicles and were completely mobile. This was to prevent them being targeted by the enemy. At the beginning of the bombing raids over Germany in World War 2 many of the bombs missed their intended targets. So GEE radar was invented to overcome this problem. Two separate transmitters would transmit a signal from separate locations and where the signals converged the bombers would release their bombs over the target. The bombers had special receivers built into the planes to identify the signals so as to know when they were over the target and release their bombs.



Gee Radar at RAF Camphill 1956

The Radar Unit was situated in vehicles in the middle of the playing fields in RAF Wythall, but because of its location the signal was interfering with the TV signals in the Birmingham area. So we had to leave there and a special site was constructed at RAF Camphill right out in the countryside in Staffordshire. There was no living accommodation on this site so we were billeted at RAF Ternhill in Shropshire, which was an aerodrome where pilots learnt to fly. The unit was split in to three shifts and each day we were taken by lorry to the Radar site that was 14 miles away from the aerodrome. One shift would start at 9am until 12am. The next would work from 12am until 1700 pm and then the early shift came back on from 1700 and stayed on air until all the flying was over This usually went on until 3 am in the morning. We had to get the all clear from Bomber Command headquarters at High Wycombe. before turning the transmitters off for the night. Once the flying was over we were taken by lorry back to RAF Ternhill, but one person was left on site to run up the generators and equipment ready for flying next days. It was at RAF Ternhill that I completed my National Service.



459 Signals Unit Billet RAF Ternhill 1956

I have some wonderful memories of my time in the RAF. I had many experiences and I made many friends. In Liverpool we used to cross the Mersey on the ferry and go to the Army, Airforce and Navy Club at the weekend. I went to see *Everton* play

football at Goodison Park.



Billet Blocks RAF Ternhill 1956

In Worth Matravers at the weekend we would go to the local dance in Swanage and be taken back on the Liberty lorry to camp after the dance. I remember going with the camp football team to Dorchester where the home team who were unbeaten at home lost by a contentious penalty decision and the ref locked himself in the changing room and had to be rescued by the local bobby. Some weekends we would take the ferry from Swanage and go to the pictures in Bournemouth.

When I was at RAF Wythall a local coach company used to lay on a coach to London each weekend and drop us off at the White City. The coach then left White City at 12 o'clock every Sunday night and as we set off the driver would dim the lights and put on the radio and we would listen to the top twenty tunes on Radio Luxemburg arriving back at the camp about three in the morning. Whilst I was in Birmingham I went to Aston Villa's ground to see a football match and also saw Birmingham City play Chelsea in a cup tie at Birmingham's ground.

Finally at RAF Ternhill one of my friends had a BSA Bantam motor bike and on our days off we would go on his bike and tour all around the beauty spots of Wales visiting Rhyl and Llandudno. On many occasions when I had a weekend pass I would put my uniform on and hitch-hike down to London and come back by train.

I look back on my life now and think how lucky I was to have had all these experiences. It was a case of having to stand on your own two feet. You were issued with a railway ticket and you had to find your own way to the camp. Each place you went to you found yourself in a different situation. Meeting new people and different surroundings I managed to overcome them all and feel very privileged now that I had the opportunity to do all these things.