

# **THE ROYAL AIR FORCE**

## **THE NATIONAL SERVICE EXPERIENCES OF SEVEN AIR SIGNALLERS**

**1951-1953**

**Some of the recollections of**

**David 'Flash' Arnold**

**David 'Dai' Parsons**

**John 'Kendal' Usher**

**Brian 'Peth' Petherbridge**

**Fred 'Manchester' Harrison**

**Gordon 'Titch' Toplis**

**George 'Geordie' Webster**

**seven of many who were called up in October 1951, to serve for two years  
of  
National Service in The Royal Air Force**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

We are seven ex-National Servicemen out of twelve who in October 1952 successfully completed Air Signaller Course NS12 at RAF Swanton Morley. We were awarded our aircrew brevets, promoted to Sergeant Air Signaller and allocated to either Bomber Command on operational squadrons or to Coastal Command. Those going to Coastal Command received sonics and gunnery training at St. Mawgan on Lancasters, followed by a conversion course to Shackletons at Kinloss, before joining an operational squadron at RAF St. Eval in Cornwall.

We all feel very fortunate to have been in the 12 who survived the NS12 ordeal from some 40 who started out with such enthusiasm the previous October. It was one of the hardest experiences that most of us have ever undertaken and yet one which we would hate to have missed. In fact we all consider that our National Service gave us the most fulfilling two years of our lives.

After settling down in civvy street after National Service we were so busy following our own careers that it was over forty years till we met again.

Following a chance meeting at a wedding between sisters of Fred and John, and the resulting numerous telephone calls, six of us along with five wives (George hasn't got one and says he's being more selective than we were !) assembled at Rothley Court Hotel in Leicestershire in September, 1993. We have since met at least once each year and in 1995 attended a most moving and spectacular ceremony at the closure of RAF Swanton Morley.

Brian Petherbridge, now living in Spain, has joined us on one reunion, contributed to this document, and been visited by various members of the group. Tom Mac Swan, an eighth member of NS12 and living in Essex, has still to make a presence but we're in touch with him and hope that someday he'll let us have his personal recollections of his RAF service and turn up at a re-union. Of the four other graduates of NS12 Geoff Fuller is, sadly, deceased, and to date we have been unable to trace the remaining three.

We feel that we should record the events that we remember from 1951 to 1953, partly for our own purposes and partly for our families, who must wonder sometimes what magic in our twenties could have been so strong as still to affect us now, as we approach our seventies.

The detailed records of our early training period together are mostly thanks to David Arnold's diaries and to his wife Barbara, who was his girl friend at the time and has finally agreed to release the least interesting parts of David's love letters.

## 2. SELECTED FOR AIRCREW

National Service Aircrew Statistics.

The Korean War in 1950 led to a required tenfold increase in aircrew which necessitated the selection of a limited number of National Servicemen.

The Aircrew Selection Centre at Hornchurch, in the four years from April,1951 to March,1955 dealt with an intake which included 13,818 N. Service candidates as follows; Accepted: 5964 (2,714 Pilots; 1,617 Navigators; 944 Signallers; 295 Engineers: 394 Gunners) Rejected 7,854. Of those accepted a pass rate of 30% is probably optimistic.

As with most RAF National Service personnel, introduction to service life began at RAF Padgate and on 9th October 1951 we assembled there as part of Intake 41, Aircrew Flight 7, and were assigned to Hut 302.

At this stage it was heartening to know that having volunteered for aircrew at our initial interviews we had been successful in the preliminaries. Only later was it to dawn on us that we were at the bottom of what was going to be a very slippery upward slope.

The first two weeks were very hectic, what with reveille at 6.00am, blanket folding instructions, issue of uniform, photographs, and receipt of our RAF service numbers, which had to be stamped on all our kit down to knife, fork and spoon.

Once your kit had been stamped with your number it became a chargeable offence to have any item not suitably identifiable. Not too difficult to stamp your number on most replaced items, but the knife, fork and spoon (irons) proved an impossible challenge. This was soon realised by the smart alocs who would leave the canteen suitably positioned behind an unsuspecting "sprog" (new entrant). As you left the canteen there were two galvanised tanks of water about two feet deep. The first contained very hot water, near to boiling, into which you dipped your irons to remove the grease, and the second contained cold water for rinsing.

It was whilst negotiating the hot water tank that the unsuspecting came to grief. A quick nudge on the elbow of the arm holding your irons and, hey presto, as your hand came in contact with the very hot water, your fingers opened by instinct and your irons descended rapidly to the bottom of the tank, you might think lost forever. But not at all: irons stamped with your number were an essential part of your kit. So what you had to do was return to the canteen in the evening when the tanks were cleaned and pay the cook-house staff an exorbitant sum for the return of these essential bits of kit. You had to learn quickly in the services to survive !

Most of the time at Padgate was taken up with drill and fatigues. There were occasional free moments when one could visit the camp cinema which had regular live shows. Two up and coming comedians called Bob Monkhouse and Peter Goodright entertained us on one such visit.

After two weeks at Padgate we caught the train to Hornchurch for aircrew selection tests. These took 3 days to complete: medicals, interviews, written and aptitude tests and God knows what else, before returning to Padgate to await the results.

Shortly after our return we were told to assemble on the parade ground to hear what our future held ... a daunting experience for most, but rather less so for those of us detailed for

cleaning duties in the Admin. Building the previous evening, who had 'stumbled on' the files containing our results !

Most of our group had been assessed as 'suitable' for training as Pilot or Navigator if we signed on for four years, or as Air Signaller for National Service. It wasn't an easy decision for us, as Pilot and Navigator training meant we would go on officer training first, which we all rather fancied, and the thought of a Pilot's wings was very attractive.

A down-side of any aircrew training for National Service personnel was that failure at any stage of our course meant that we would finish up on some mundane job for the remainder of our two years as there would be no time for retraining on other aircrew duties.

However, some of us had brothers and sisters who had been in the war who insisted that we *must not* volunteer for *anything*, even if it looked good, being a basic principle of all military service, and in the end we happily settled for the National Service Air Signaller option.

Those of us going forward to aircrew training were now issued with lightweight boots as there would be only very limited time for 'square bashing'. We were also issued with a green disc to go behind our hat badge, indicating aircrew cadet ... we all felt very superior !!

Early in November we left Padgate for Driffield, which was to be our temporary home until sufficient numbers were assembled to make up a full complement for our initial training course at RAF Compton Bassett.

Although we were AC2's no longer, our more impressive title of Cadet Signaller didn't bring an increase in pay, which remained at 28/- (£1.40 per week, or 20P per day) gross !!

We were persuaded that even this amount of money could lead to riotous living and that 10/- (50p) per week should either be invested for us in a Post Office bank account or sent home to our parents. Most of us sent it to our mothers, leaving us with 18/- (90p) per week.

There were, however, certain other deductions, undisclosed at the time, such as compulsory subscriptions for sports and potential barrack room damages. Later, during flying training, we were to discover a further possible penalty: picking up a parachute by its nice shiny handle would cost us 2/6 for repacking. Trailing aerials would become another later potential pitfall - forget to wind it in prior to landing and bang would go another 12/6 !!

We spent nearly a month at Driffield going through a regular ritual of drill, fatigues and lectures. Drill now involved rifles, which we found should not be referred to as 'guns', should not be parked with the end of the barrel on the ground and should not be carried under the arm like a shotgun. More useful information given to us was that VD could only be caught from lavatory seats by Chaplains, Squadron Leaders and above, and although we didn't know what VD was or where else it might be caught, we all slept better at nights and were happier on the toilet for knowing this!

After 4 weeks at Driffield it became time for us to be moved on to form the next course at Compton Bassett. The C.O. himself came with us to the railway station to wave us off, touchingly shouting to one lad, "Put your hat on Airman, before somebody sees you !" and at 7.39am we were on a train to London en-route to the softness of Wiltshire.

### **3. INITIAL TRAINING ..... AT R.A.F. COMPTON BASSETT**

#### **Hut 1W50, Signallers Initial Training Wing, No.3 Radio School**

This was to be our home for the next 14 weeks.

Our first day consisted of lectures by the CO and the Chaplain followed by the now ritual FFI (Free from Infection) inspection. It was here that Brian Petherbridge introduced some lightness to the occasion. As the Medical Officer, accompanied by a Sergeant, passed down the line of our naked bodies the hawk-eyed Sergeant came abruptly to a halt having noticed a rash on Brian's groin. Pointing to the rash he asked, "How long have you had that, airman?"

Poor Brian, not having noticed the rash, and thinking the Sergeant was referring to something much more important and of which he thought he should justly feel proud, answered, "All my life Sergeant." Naturally everyone fell about, and FFIs were never the same again!

Training now began in earnest with 4 hours a day learning the morse code.

As you passed the classroom you would hear all the students chanting "dit dah is A, dah dit dit is B" and on through the alphabet. You would even wake up in the morning reciting it.

As training progressed, our ability to interpret, receive and send signals in the morse code was to prove the difference between success and failure, although learning Morse was interspersed with lectures in other such subjects as Basic Electricity, Maths, English, Geography, RAF Organisation, Admin. and Current Affairs.

After 2 weeks we were tested in morse at 4 words per minute (wpm) and a week later at 6-8 wpm. We were also tested regularly in the other subjects, with the one causing the biggest problem for most being 'Basic Electricity' ... all about volts, amps and ohms, and smart electrons which when warmed could fly through metals and valves, rectifiers and further such devices which, when collected together in a certain way, could become a radio.

All this was alleviated by turns on all night guard duty consisting of 2 periods of 2 hours each. The less conscientious of us retired for a kip to the warmth and comfort of the 'Other Denominations' Chapel, the door to which was conveniently left 24 hours unlocked.

We were housed in Nissen huts with one round iron stove in the centre of the room. The stove was easily the most important facility in the hut, especially in the very cold winter of 1951-52. When properly going with its draft door fully open and plenty of fuel on it that would burn, it could be made to glow red all over and the hut was very snug. Fuel was the problem. There was never enough coke, so that finding things that could be burnt was a major initiative test for every hut, and became easily the chief occupation for the lads out on guard duty, who would sometimes come across scrap furniture, etc., whilst on their rounds.

On one occasion the Corporal appeared at the end of our hut with two chair legs in his hands demanding the return of the rest of his chair. All he could get from the residents was, "Never seen it Corp!!"

Our use of the very limited supply of coke was controlled by a sort of 'time-rationing'. We were allowed to put coke on the stove only up to 9.00pm and it was expected that from 'lights

out' at 10.30pm we would be kept warm by being in bed.

Geordie's bed, or 'pit', was directly in line with the stove, with just sufficient room for two people to pass. On one particularly cold night, long after 9.00 had gone by and fearing death by refrigeration in the early hours, Geordie, encouraged by "Go on Geordie" from those more distant from the stove, ladled on a generous but illegal helping of coke.

Some time later he was awakened, conscious of having very warm feet and a drowsy voice asking why smoke was coming from the bottom of his bed. With some alarm he leapt out of bed and found that his mattress had crept to within six inches of the stove, creating what are technically called 'flash over dimensions'. Geordie's vocabulary had become greatly enriched since joining the RAF and he made good use of it at that moment. He drew the mattress away for inspection when it promptly burst into flames. With a squawk of terror he dropped the mattress back and out went the fire, only to re-light when he lifted it up again. The crisis was eventually overcome with the help of the billet's fire bucket. It was, however, immediately superseded by something of far greater impact in the arrival of the orderly corporal, attracted by the commotion. He peered through the smoke and steam in some bewilderment before noticing that the sides of the stove were glowing a cherry red. Looking ostentatiously at his watch, he said, "Who's been feeding 't fire?" "Me, corporal", Geordie volunteered. "What for?" demanded the corporal, revealing his intelligence. "General consent of the billet," says Geordie, not wanting to take all of the can. It seemed to do the trick, as with a "Get back into bed lad and let's have no bloody more", the corporal departed.

George drifted off to sleep, his feet gradually welding to the wet blanket.

We were all driven by a desire to pass the course and remain with our colleagues, as failure was dealt with in a very drastic fashion.

Tests took place every Tuesday on morse (gradually increasing speed), basic radio, WT procedures and aircraft electrics.

On every second Thursday afternoon all courses would assemble at 3.30pm in the camp cinema. A brief talk was given to us on progress in general and then there was a reading of "the list". The names were read out of those cadets who had not reached the necessary standard. They left the cinema, collected their kit, spent the night in another billet and left the camp the following morning, never again to be seen by their colleagues.

What happened to them was a subject of constant conjecture, but the favoured rumour was that they went to RAF Innsworth and were then posted to menial jobs, washing bogs and painting coal and ropes in the clean colour of white for the rest of their service.

The great tragedy was that they lost the prospect of flying, lost their friends and lost any chance of promotion. In short, they went into what we felt was a kind of trash bin.

Classes finished at noon on Saturdays, leaving the afternoon free to catch the local bus into Calne where there was a Forces canteen run by the Salvation Army. On Sundays we would lie in bed listening to "Forces Favourites" and requests to and from the WAAFs on the camp. 'Wheel of Fortune', sung by Kay Starr, was top of the Hit Parade and her voice would always send Titch Toplis into raptures.

The White Horse near Compton Bassett (the one carved into the limestone hillside, not the pub) was another favourite place to visit at the weekend.

At the end of our three months of Initial Training we sat the final exams, the all important morse test now at 12 wpm. We got the results and the following day we were let out on one week's leave.

Those who had passed were to report to No.1 Air Signallers School, Swanton Morley, to the great delight of Flash whose hometown of Thetford was within cycling distance.



#### 4. FLYING TRAINING ..... AT RAF SWANTON MORLEY

We of NS12 were billeted in Room 7, Eastchurch House.

This was a great improvement on Compton Bassett: a brick building, not corrugated tin, with central heating and a pleasant outlook onto a large grassed area.

##### 4.1: Basic Training

Our programme of work now became, if anything, more intensive than it had been at Compton Bassett, but it was at the same time more obviously related to the job we thought we were being trained to do and this brought added interest.

Morse now occupied us for 2 hours each day, alongside basic radio, airborne radio and radar, aircraft electrics, flying safety procedures, signals organisation, drill, ground combat, PT and 'synthetics'. The last of these required that each of us was shut in a box in which Air Signallers' duties were simulated, and we worked with the T1154 (Transmitter) and R1155 (Receiver), contacting ground stations and obtaining fixes, as if under operational conditions. Engine noise was relayed over loudspeakers and we were able to communicate over the intercom with the 'pilot'. It all gave us a taste of what things would be like in the air ... but without the risk of being airsick or getting lost.

The routine of the whole programme was only interrupted by a spell of intense 'Bull' prior to the arrival of the C in C Sir Hugh Walmsley, followed two days later by an AOC's inspection. Everyone in the billet skated on 'pads' made of bits of blanket, to keep the floor shiny, and any transgressors were left in no doubt if they failed to comply.

Pressures were handled in a variety of ways with little interference from the station hierarchy.

On one occasion "Flash" agreed to jump into the station water tank for a shilling from everybody. After checking that all present had paid, he duly took the plunge, fully dressed in his Best Blue, for a total subscription of 18 shillings. He went right under the water with his beret floating on the surface, clambered out and walked back to the billet dripping wet, holding tightly to his money.

Fred was also seen running round the square in his pyjamas late one night for no apparent reason. He has since denied all knowledge of this, but these short spells of insanity *did* arise and appeared to relieve some of the tensions now building up.

Six weeks into the course and the testing was on again, every two weeks. We received slightly more sympathetic treatment now: first time failures were put back into the following course. But fail once again and it was the chop, and late entry into the trash bin !

Finally the day came that we had all been waiting for – the flying !! - to be issued with flying kit, consisting of helmet, goggles, oxygen mask, overalls, sheepskin-lined flying boots, silk gloves, wrist watch (a very good and accurate Longines watch) and another kit bag.

We dressed up as soon as possible to have our photographs taken on the airfield at the rear of

Eastchurch House. The results didn't quite match up to the intrepid aviator image we had hoped to project, but the process didn't half give us a boost !

Two weeks later we were airborne for the first time in an Anson. Three cadets went up at a time, each doing an exercise which, although we should have been able to know more or less where we were from looking out of the window, consisted of a fix from the DF station at Bircham Newton and a few DF loop bearings. We each did 10 three hour trips at the rate of 2 or 3 a week, but it was the first of these that is still the most distinctly remembered. After all the previous work done in the classroom, and despite persuasion that the tap of a morse key in the air could be heard on the ground, it was a quite stunning experience to find that our dots and dashes *were* received, translated into a sensible message and rewarded by an intelligent response. It was nothing short of magic, and convinced us that the theory worked !

There were of course still a few small problems, more for some than others, with flying kit. Parachutes were cumbersome things to cart around. They used to be collected by us from the stores before flights, and more than once the innards would come out when they weren't supposed to do. We all remember Dai Parsons, who remembers it better, weighed down by all his belongings, trying his best to stroll nonchalantly from the store with about ten yards of string and silk dragging on the ground behind him. He had to bundle it all up and return it, and pay his half-a-crown for a replacement.

Dai was, really, a very well-behaved person when he was young. He would have been the last member of NS12 to go looking for trouble but occasionally it found even him !

An item in the weekly routine of Swanton Morley was 'Padre's Hour': one session per week of religious instruction. Padre's Hour is remembered by most for the effort required to keep awake, sitting in a comfortable armchair in a very warm room and listening to the local clergyman. On one occasion Brian and Dai decided to take a chance and miss the Padre's Hour in order to do a bit of extra revision in the billet. Suddenly they heard the sound of someone climbing the stairs to their room, and hid themselves behind the lockers. On entering the billet the Corporal D.I. (Drill Instructor) noticed Dai's beret on his bunk and the two were discovered. The outcome was 3 days of jankers for the pair of them, subsequently extended to a week for parading with 'dirty webbing' !

Dai was one of a group of Swanton Morley cadets 'selected' to take part in a 'major research exercise', to test the effectiveness of the East Anglian security services. The lads were proud to be picked for this, which amounted to being taken off late at night in lorries into the Norfolk countryside, dropped in remote parts, and having to find their way home again without being caught by a 'massive' force of civilian and military police, army personnel and 'volunteers'. Each was given a small compass, some biscuits and a bottle of water, and away they all went, to be dropped off in groups of three and four. Soon it started to rain, which turned into a storm, but Dai's group made very good progress, keeping off the main roads and now and again slinking across fields. At around 3.00am they ran into difficulties, soaking wet, up to their knees in mud, and suddenly surrounded and attacked by what Dai describes, depending on how many pints he has drunk, sometimes as hundreds and sometimes thousands of turkeys. They won their battle with the turkeys but were finally caught at about 4.00am when they bumped into a policeman, or more truthfully gave themselves up, and they heard later that the security forces had been awarded high marks.

After the successful completion of our Basic Stage air training we moved onto Proctors for the Applied stage.

## 4.2 Applied Training

This consisted of 11 two hour flights, just one cadet and a pilot. The Proctor was less sedate than the Anson, especially in the hands of the Polish pilots, obviously trying to keep up their air combat skills in readiness for World War 3. Very few cadets completed this part of the course without coming close to being air sick. Many *were* sick, and *all* carried sick-bags !

Titch Toplis recalls a trip not to be forgotten when he informed his pilot (F/Sgt. Wingfield) just before take off that it was his birthday. "Then I'll give you a day to remember," says the pilot. All started quite well and there were no problems with the exercise. Once completed, however, Mr. Wingfield decided to pay his brother-in-law a visit in his houseboat on the Norfolk Broads.

After a few low level runs followed by some very tight turns Titch had little option but to reach for his brown sick-bag. Apart from losing his early breakfast the trailing aerial disappeared, having wrapped itself around some projection on the Broads. Luckily the aerial broke, but radio communication became lost. Fortunately Wingfield decided to take responsibility and on landing he said he had forgotten to ask for the aerial to be wound in, and he paid the 12/6 himself. Better value for Titch than an hour or two on the dodgems at a fairground !!

Fred Harrison also flew with F/Sgt. Wingfield but his best memories are of the fun-loving Polish pilots. These boys were always anxious to get the formal work done and the trailing aerial wound in, so that they could be off for a game. Fred remembers one who liked to fly along what the Lincolnshire Fenland people call 'dykes', long and very straight channels of water draining the flat farmland, where the little aircraft could skim along the water below the level of the fields on either side. He recalls an occasion where his pilot bobbed up the little Proctor from such a dyke and went for a tractor pulling a plough, pursued by a flock of birds, presumably seagulls. As the aircraft closed in on this party the farmer jumped out of his tractor and laid himself flat on the ground. The tractor chugged on without driver and the birds disappeared, probably back to the sea and fed up with worms.

The trailing aerial was wound in prior to this little diversion, but not long after NS12 left Swanton Morley there was a report of a cow being killed by an aerial left out, and another of an aircraft crashing when the aerial became tangled round some electricity lines.

One afternoon we were all marched off to sick bay for the infamous jabs. As we lined up in the corridor awaiting our turn Hickman was expounding to Dai about the size of the needle, and how he was used to giving injections to his diabetic mother so didn't have any worries about what was to come. We then marched into the room at which point Hickman fainted, collapsing on top of Dai. Following the jabs, and their varying effects on the recipients, the billet was very quiet that night, apart from an odd shaking bunk from the shivers !

Bill Hickman was a 'regular' in the RAF, not a National Serviceman, a noisy but likeable Yorkshireman who was regraded to NS12 from a Direct Entry course DE62, for whatever reason we never knew. He had some musical interests so was befriended to some degree by Geordie. The two of them got into the way of attending Sunday services at the local village church, and in hymn singing Bill would bawl out the tenor lines and Geordie the bass.

After two or three weeks of this the vicar was obliged tactfully to request them both to pipe down as the rest of the congregation were quite unable to keep their minds on the melody for the infernal din the two were making.

Bill used to play the bugle in the camp band and one day left his RAF-issued instrument on his bunk whilst he went out for a few minutes. George was drawn to it like a magnet. The mouthpiece was permanently attached to the bugle by a short chain and Geordie had only been handling it for a few seconds when the chain snapped. Geordie sheepishly laid the instrument back on Bill's bunk but wasted no time in confessing to Bill on his return what had happened. Bill's face flushed with anger. "Tha knows summat?" he spat, "If Ah left me dick on t'bed, tha'd bloody well play wi't bugger!"

Geordie was also very friendly with Geoff Fuller, no longer with us unfortunately. Geoff had been a member of the English National Youth Orchestra and was an accomplished violinist. He would practise for hours in the drying room and have long musical discussions with Geordie, and to quote Geordie, "But Geoff always *knew* what he was talking about !"

An interesting event at Swanton Morley was 'the ditching drill', when we were all taken by bus, complete with our swimming trunks and life jackets, to a remote open air swimming pool out in the country. The pool was green with algae, and we presumed it must have been a sort of historic monument, probably last used for a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Norfolk gentleman's party. We proceeded to go through the drill which consisted of jumping into the pool off a rotten diving board, trying to right an upturned dinghy and then climb in ... quite a thing to do for non-swimmers in the party, even with a Mae West. It was difficult enough to do for everybody under the prevailing conditions, but we all agreed that trying to do it in the North Sea in wartime must have been horrendous and hopeless.

So far as water experiences in Norfolk are concerned, we only had one other that we remember, from a summer-day visit on a bus to Yarmouth. It was quite a good day, but with the pubs closed and the dancing ended we were left with an hour or so to kill until the bus set off back to Swanton Morley at about midnight. It was such a fine night that we went onto the sands and out to where the sea was breaking, for a paddle. Only one of us had swimming trunks with him, but no-one was in sight, the water was tempting, and we all dropped our clothes on the sand and went fully in. Turning to come back out we could see, silhouetted against the lights of the distant promenade behind them, a horde of people, mostly couples, yards from the water's edge, watching us. They remained where they were as the one with trunks came out, changed, threw in the trunks to another, and so on until the last one was out, and then, show over, they all slowly shuffled off.

Luckily the bus had waited for us, but the other passengers weren't happy at all, and we were still more than damp when we got home to Swanton Morley.

Whilst on the theme of emergency procedures no Air Signaller will ever forget the phrase P.A.T.C.A.S.A.T.N.I. This was the slogan one remembered for the information to be sent out with a distress call, decoded as follows:

Position And Time, Course And Speed, Altitude, Type of aircraft, Nature of Distress, Intentions of pilot.

Thankfully, nobody in NS12 at Swanton Morley was required to send a distress, or SOS call, but a few remember an occasion whilst airborne in their Proctors when an 'Emergency' message was received, which is one category down from SOS and is signalled as TTT or, to us, dah dah dah.

Dai Parsons very well recalls receiving this high priority message, instructing all aircraft to return to base immediately. This was a big moment for Dai. He instantly passed the instruction to his Polish pilot, who nodded receipt and calmly carried on with his aerobatics. In due course, on their return, it turned out that none of the aircraft had obeyed the message, and all the cadet signallers were called before the Wing Commander to be asked how they should have responded. Beyond telling him they had advised their pilots to go home none of them had a clue, and they were all severely chastised. Dai thinks it was all a trap !

As the final exams approached (morse speed now 18-20 wpm) we began to feel the pressure and no one wanted to fail now having come so far. We all had our hearts set on the Air Signallers brevet, and the money, and the three stripes that went with it. If *they* wouldn't impress the girls back home then nothing would. Those who felt the need went to extra morse lessons in their own time, freely given by the Instructors. There was a very strong feeling of comradeship amongst us now and everyone did his best to help another. Fred (Manchester) lost his father at this stage and on his return from the funeral everyone assisted him to catch up on his lost work so that he wouldn't have to drop back a course.

There was also a feeling that apart from having to be up to scratch on work, personal smartness and good conduct might be taken into account by those assessing us. One member of NS12 called Wallach, who had worked for Marconi before his National Service, knew more about electronics than all the rest of us put together. He did, however, struggle a little with the dreaded morse, needing some help, and he worried a bit about keeping tidy. He got it into his head one Friday evening that he'd left it too late to have his hair cut for the next day's regular Saturday morning parade, and might very well be put on a charge.

In any crisis such as this there is always a good samaritan ready to help, and on this occasion it was Fred (Manchester). "I'll do it", he volunteered. "I used to cut my dad's hair and this'll be no problem." Someone shot off like a rabbit to the next billet to bring back a pair of clippers that one of the lads there owned, and Wallach, against his better judgement, was soon seated on a chair in the centre of the room, surrounded by an audience, which included a few from next door, all eagerly awaiting the evening's entertainment.

A comb and scissors came into play to support the clippers and all went well to begin with, but as Fred warmed to his task, encouraged by advice and sometimes active assistance from one or other of the audience, and shouts for 'more off the left', 'now more off the right', Wallach's hair became shorter and shorter until very little indeed remained. "A Masterpiece", acclaims Fred, stepping back to admire his work. On looking in the mirror, however, Wallach was not awfully impressed, and made it very clear to everybody that he would have preferred jankers !

The unfortunate ones who **got** "jankers" were also taken in hand by the whole course and helped with their kit-cleaning, etc, trying to ensure a faultless turnout for a poor soul at his next Guardroom parade.

As might be expected, other minor recreational and entrepreneurial pursuits were needed, and found, to balance the social work and the general grind going on at this time. Beer and wine were not for us such sources of pleasure, escape and relief as they are now for young men of the same age. Looking back at ourselves, nearly 50 years on, it is in more a spirit of wonder and surprise than admiration that we view the innocence of our behaviour when we were 20.

The Autumn of 1952 was a good time for mushrooms on Swanton Morley's grass airfield. There were thousands, and in our spare time we were all out collecting them and putting them into big plywood tea-boxes, to be taken and sold in London by the lads who lived there and went home for weekends.

We tried cooking some, although we had no proper facilities for this in the billet. The method we used was to heat up an electric iron from a light socket, hold it upside down, place some butter from the NAAFI on the upturned bottom, and balance the mushrooms on it. They tended to slide about a bit and some fell off, but we ate a lot and they were very good.

Fortunately, all twelve of us left on NS12 made it to the passing out parade, and the previous evening was spent sewing press studs onto our tunics and the Signallers brevets issued to us, to simplify the process of popping them onto us when formally presented the next day.

In October 1952, now exactly one year since that nervous arrival at Padgate, the big day had finally arrived and the whole station was on parade.

At the head of the Parade marched NS12, chests bursting with pride, led by the station band and Rebecca, an ass, the Air Signallers School mascot, dressed up in all her finery.

After 12 months of seemingly endless endeavour we were presented with our brevets by Air Commodore Widdowes DFC, and the evening of our presentation was spent sewing on our sergeants stripes before a quick drink for some, a little more for others, down at the Paper Makers in the village.

The following day we all received our postings which had its special touch of sadness. This marked the splitting up of the NS 12 'family', after being together, eating, sleeping, working and playing, 24 hours a day for the past 12 months.

No recollection of Swanton Morley over these 12 months would be complete without a mention of F/Sgt Coley. He was in charge of discipline at Swanton Morley and by repute had put the fear of God into every Cadet Signaller before they ever arrived on camp. Either NS12 was very disciplined or very lucky, since no real confrontations with the F/Sgt come to mind. As happened with all courses our course leader Jock Kinnaird, a bit older than the rest of us, was politely requested on our arrival, and during our inevitable drill, to 'halt that squad' !

After being berated for several minutes in the most colourful language we were sent on our way again with the words ringing in our ears, "You're marching like a lot of school girls with their knickers hanging down !" He also had a habit, when we thought we were smartly standing to attention in our neat ranks, of coming up very close to one of us and saying, 'You look like a donkey's foreskin stuffed with soldiers' buttons !'. We used to think he must have spent far too much time looking at Rebecca. Very oddly, by the end of the course we had all grown to respect F/Sgt Coley and had found he was more a father figure than ogre at heart, but simply didn't want it to be known !

Gordon Higgins (NS15) recalls how some 15 years after leaving the RAF, and then a Bank Manager in the City of London, he was on his way home via Liverpool Street station when he saw coming towards him a white cheese cutter and heavily ribboned uniform with a gold Station Warrant Officer's crown on the sleeve. It was Mr. Coley, now in the Corps of Commissionaires, and Head Messenger for a large Company in the City.

Gordon found himself, after all those years, standing to attention and wishing he'd paid more attention to his appearance when leaving home that morning !

So, farewell to Swanton Morley.

Geordie, John and Brian were to report to 199 Squadron Bomber Command, RAF Hemswell.

Flash was to go to No.7 Squadron, Bomber Command, RAF Upwood.

Fred, Dai and Titch Toplis along with other members of the course were to go to St.Mawgan, Coastal Command, for further training on gunnery and sonics equipment. Their training was mainly on Lancasters before going up to Kinloss for conversion onto Shackletons and finally getting operational with 220 Squadron at RAF St.Eval.

Titch Toplis escaped much of this and followed a 'personalised' route, as he explains later.

The disappointment at splitting away from ones colleagues of 12 months was softened a little by the thought of now becoming very rich. From cadet signallers we were now sergeants and about to receive the princely income of 17/- per day plus 3/- flying pay (whether you flew or not). Surely £7 per week would open up all sorts of new opportunities!

## **5. OPERATIONAL SERVICE .... INDIVIDUALS' RECOLLECTIONS**

### **5.1: BOMBER COMMAND**

#### **5.1.1 John Usher's Recollections: 199 Squadron, RAF Hemswell**

On October 29, 1952, Geordie, Brian and myself arrived at RAF Hemswell, excited at joining an operational squadron at last but with a certain amount of anxiety. After reporting to the

Admin Office, we were shown to our accommodation before being taken to meet Flt/Lt MacGillivray, OC "A" Flight. We then met Squadron Leader Ward, the CO of the squadron, before being introduced to the other aircrew members of the squadron.

The pilots were: F/Sgt Nash DFC, a Canadian with a very dry sense of humour who always had his own interpretation of W/T procedures. He referred to most people in authority senior to himself as "Slant eyed Mongolian bastards". I never did find out what he had against the Mongolians. There were two further Flight Sergeant pilots, Nicholson and Timewell, both experienced WW2 Bomber pilots who also commanded the respect of everyone on the Squadron.

Apart from F/Lt MacGillivray the other commissioned pilots were F/Os Gifford and Bishop.

199 Squadron had a complement of 6 Lincoln aircraft and one Mosquito and operated as a Radar and Electronic Counter Measures (RCM/ECM) squadron. The objectives of the squadron were to confuse enemy radar and to jam enemy operational frequencies. These objectives were achieved by dropping "window" in set patterns from the aircraft and activating electronic jamming equipment. Flights were usually of 5 – 8 hours duration and more often than not at night.

The squadron was well known for its specialist capabilities, particularly on voice jamming and providing radar counter measure cover for the Marker and Main Force squadrons on major exercises.

A crew consisted of a pilot, navigator, engineer and 3 signallers (one radio operator and two special operators).

After being shown round a Lincoln by one of the regular signallers I made my first operational flight on November 3rd, my 20th birthday, in Lincoln WD122 as a special operator, with F/Sgt Nicholson as pilot.

After a few weeks I settled down as a permanent member of F/O Clifford's crew, taking in turns the duties of radio op. and special operator.

Life in the Sergeants Mess was a comparative luxury after the training and discipline of a Cadet Signaller. We now had our own bedrooms, waiter service in the dining room and a comfortable lounge and bar to while away the evenings, some of them more hectic than others. We were even treated with some respect, now that we had three stripes: all quite foreign to us.

The crew room, pre-flight briefings, the roar of 4 Merlin engines on take off, flying out over the North Sea at night, de-briefings, bacon and eggs on return in the early hours and then collapsing into bed: these were moments we had only seen in films before, and now we were part of it - what a great and glamorous experience it seemed !

Dances in the sergeants mess were also a great social event when girls were brought in by coaches from the surrounding Lincolnshire villages. Determined to impress, and not to rely entirely on a suitable intake of Double Diamond, Brian and myself decided to take dancing lessons in Lincoln on Saturday afternoons. My wife expresses doubt, even to this day, that I have ever had dancing lessons, but if she'd tried me in 1952 she would know better !

Anyway, after three or four lessons we felt that we now had sufficient expertise to sweep the Lincolnshire lasses off their feet. Not so! Either they weren't ready for the Fred Astaire technique or more probably we were not as good as we thought. We did, however, now have



greater self-confidence for our occasional sorties from the Mess bar to the dance floor.

Most of our flying was on exercises such as Ack Ack and Naval demonstrations, along with the usual annual exercises when all the services were involved. Other exercises involved jamming the fighter control centres in the UK which apparently were very successful.

Few incidents of note occurred during these flights, save for the odd warning light indicating low oil pressure on a particular engine. This usually meant “feathering” the suspect engine and returning to base....quite frightening the first time but after once or twice it became an acceptable operational hazard. In fact if it happened early in the exercise on a night flight it was greeted with some satisfaction as it meant we could return to base for an early night.

Brian Petherbridge probably had the most exciting experience when, returning late at night from an exercise, his aircraft’s undercarriage hit the BABS wall, bringing in the ‘undercarriage not locked’ warning light. Brian recounts the story more fully within his own section of this document.

One of these exercises I recall was when live bombs were being used, the target being Heligoland off the Southern tip of Denmark. Being an RCM squadron we didn’t carry bombs. The night in question was very cloudy with more than its share of thunder and lightning. The lightning did however create sufficient light to see other aircraft all around us, heading out over the North Sea. The experience became the more frightening when I noticed a blue-ish glow surrounding our navigator, and it crossed my mind that we might have been taken over by Martians !! However, I found out that it’s a phenomenon known as St. Elmos fire, caused by the presence of static, which makes my experience on that night understandable in view of the conditions that prevailed at the time.

I shudder to think what the experience would have been like with flack exploding all around !

In February 1953, after de-icing the aircrafts’ wings the squadron took off from snow-bound Hemswell and after a seven and a half hour flight touched down in sunny Libya at RAF Idris.

This was the start of a month’s exercises with the Mediterranean Fleet: a great experience and a chance to get our knees brown. Most of the exercises were over the Med. with frequent sightings of the aircraft carrier HMS Eagle. We also spent some time on low flying exercises over the North African desert, much to the consternation of the inhabitants.

On one occasion, after completing our exercise the empty “window” boxes were passed through an inspection hatch into the bomb bay. We then proceeded to carry out low level bombing runs adjacent to a remote Arab encampment in the desert, depositing the empty cardboard boxes around the area. No doubt once it was realised that this was not a real bombing raid the boxes would be found a use!

It was a great surprise in the mess one evening when I walked “Flash” who had landed at Idris en-route back to the UK from Shallufa in the Canal Zone. An excuse for a drink or two was always welcome !

After Idris we went on to Gibraltar for what should have been a week, but due to an engine failure was extended for our crew. Obviously the engine fitters who flew out from the UK to fit a new engine were in no hurry to complete the job. This gave us some time to explore Gibraltar and relax in the sun before returning to cold damp Lincolnshire on 11 March 1953.

Some light relief from the usual run of exercises came in September when our crew took a Lincoln up to RAF Kinloss as part of a Battle of Britain display. As the mess was full with other visiting aircrew our crew stayed in a hotel in Forres nearby. I had hoped to meet up with other members of NS12 who had been at Kinloss on Shackleton conversion training but I missed them by two weeks.

On other occasions we would flight-test Lancasters before they were flown by civilian pilots to Ireland for scrapping.

This life continued until my demob in October 1953, and I must say I found it very difficult to settle back into civvy street after the security and comradeship of the RAF. On more than one occasion I seriously considered re-enlisting.

Probably as well that I was not aware that 199 squadron aircraft and crew featured in the film "The Dambusters" the year after I left.

### **5.1.2 George Webster's Recollections: 199 Squadron, RAF Hemswell**

John has already set down his personal recollections of RAF Hemswell and the work that we did there. Some of these are my recollections too, which it would be pointless to repeat, but there are others of my own that he hasn't reported.

He doesn't mention that on our arrival at Hemswell in the Autumn of 1952 there was no immediate room for us in the Sergeants Mess. We were placed instead in an annex just inside the Station's main gates. This required a 3 or 4 minutes' walk each morning across the playing fields to the Mess for breakfast.

John and I were in one room, with Brian Petherbridge housed further along a corridor, and the ablutions we shared also along the corridor. One tenant of the annex kept a stripped-down motor bike in one of the two baths, leaving just the other available for normal purposes.

John was always first up in the morning, and although Brian and I weren't much behind him he would be halfway through his breakfast by the time we reached the Mess. Despite our attempts to beat him to breakfast we never actually managed it.

It was a habit of mine to hold a slice of bread on one hand and spread my butter on it, to every last square millimetre, with the other. This enthralled Brian, who was convinced that I had served an apprenticeship as a bricklayer ! I gather that other members of NS12 had the same habit at the time and like me still haven't lost it. It was probably picked up during our time in the RAF because we didn't have side-plates, and it seemed to us more hygienic to butter our bread whilst held on our hand than on the bare table.

John doesn't say how very cold the room was that we shared as the winter of 1952 drew in, and I was determined not to endure the coldness I had suffered the previous winter. But all that we had to heat our room at Hemswell was a 500 Watt electric fire ... less heat-generating than the coke-stove had been at Compton Bassett.

After a 72 hour pass, and using my newly acquired knowledge of electricity, I brought to our Hemswell room a second 500 Watt element, two strips of Meccano with 5 holes in each and some small nuts and bolts. By removing the element already in our fire, and fitting the

Meccano strips vertically by their middle holes to each terminal, I was able to reconnect the two elements to the top and bottom of each strip respectively. Hey Presto, we now had a 1000 Watt fire. Fuses in plugs were non-existent in those days. However, 1 kw was enough to burn off the reflective material from the back of the fire, so from the point of radiated heat I was back to square one !

Winter gave way to the spring of 1953, and one fine afternoon I was casually looking out through the mess window when two characters ambled out to the newly prepared cricket square. All they carried were a pair of wicket keeper's gloves, a ball and some wickets. The wickets having been placed in the ground to mark the pitch, the wicket keeper positioned himself about 10 yards behind the stumps and the bowler paced himself out some 30 yards beyond the opposite stumps, so that the two of them were separated by around 60 to 70 yards. I smiled to myself, remembering my school days when we had pretended we were England fast bowlers and would pace ourselves out a similar length of run-up.

I watched as the bowler ran up to the wicket and released the ball at such a speed that its flight was hard to follow. Taking greater interest now, I watched again as the action was repeated. The bowler approached like an Atlantic breaker, culminating in his climb into a great taut star shape and his release of the ball at blinding pace. Then it dawned on me that I had seen this action, and this broad backside and mane of black hair before. This bowler was Fred Truman, doing his National Service like us, and having secured a cushy number within the Sports Section of RAF Hemswell.

As a member of a Radar Counter Measures (RCM) Squadron most of my flying time was spent on exercises of between 6 and 8 hours, so that flying hours soon built up. John has already said that a crew consisted of pilot, engineer, navigator, radio operator and two 'special operators'. The grandiose title of special operator often fell upon the Signallers, which meant that we had to learn how and when to switch radar jamming equipment on and off, interspersed with the disposal of packets of 'window' lobbed down a chute at 10 second intervals or whatever, so that an ability to count was a distinct advantage ! These taxing operations allegedly threw into confusion anyone regarding us as hostile and trying to follow us on his radar. The 'window' apparently caused his radar screen to be covered by a multitude of dots, but I never actually saw this myself at the receiving end.

The loading of the 'window' is worth a mention. Each packet of the stuff was about the size of a packet of tea and there would be about two dozen of these in a large cardboard box. On each exercise we would require around 50 of these boxes, which because of their weight had to be stored as close as possible to the main spar of the aircraft to avoid undue tail-heaviness at take-off. Once airborne the boxes all had to be moved back to the rear of the aircraft because that was where some brilliant designer had situated the dispersal chute. The shifting process had to be completed before we reached 10,000 feet, for at altitudes greater than this our movement around the aircraft became hampered by our being tethered to an oxygen pipe. Getting rid of the empty boxes could be a problem and I never knew what happened to the ones we brought back. Most exercises involved some time over the sea, when you opened the rear door and threw the empty boxes out. It was some time before I found out that this was the way it was done, when I flew with a seasoned regular. It took me quite a few hesitant trips to the open door and a lot of gazing down through fresh air at the water thousands of feet below me before I finally felt competent to get rid of rubbish in this way without following it out myself.

Major incidents in the air were very few. On one occasion I was sat at my usual position below the aircraft's mid upper hatch. The stately Lincoln bomber was lumbering down the runway and as it reached lift-off speed there was suddenly a roar of mighty wind above my head as the hatch came off, almost instantly matched by more wind-noise below me as a momentary and involuntary malfunction of the sphincter took place. I snapped my head backwards and looked upwards to an unrestricted view of the stars, and the hatch was now well on its way to decapitating some poor soul on the ground. After gaining a little composure I reported the incident to the pilot, Bob Nash, who much to my dismay decided to carry on with the exercise !

Diversions were commonplace because of the notorious Lincolnshire fog. On 19 August, 1953, we took off at 2030 hours in Lincoln WD122, along with a lot of aircraft from various other bases for a prolonged exercise called 'Momentum' over mainland Europe. After midnight, fog enveloped most of the U.K. and the majority of the aircraft were diverted to Wunsdorf in Germany where WD122 landed at 0050 hours.

The Sergeants Mess was rapidly becoming crowded as plane after plane landed at regular intervals. There was nothing for it but to stretch out on the lounge floor now in darkness and try to sleep until morning. Sleep, of course, was impossible, as more and more crews found their way into the Mess and tried to find space on a floor that was already an overfull bed, but we got through the night and on the following morning I tracked down an old school friend who was doing his National Service based at Wunsdorf.

Next day we took off for home at 0950 hours, arriving back at Hemswell at noon, and I climbed down from WD122, my flying career as a National Serviceman at an end.

Summarising the 2-year experience I had, from scratch, acquired sufficient skill to help manage a warplane, spent 312 hours in flight braying away at a morse key or, quite officially, scattering silver paper to the four winds to mess up the task of one or other poor sod on the ground trying to find out what we were doing and where we were going, from a radar screen.

It doesn't seem much but I'm glad to have had the experience. I often think back to the day I first registered for National Service and was undergoing interviews and medical tests. A kindly gentleman suggested that I should, of course, apply for aircrew training, being an ex-Grammar School boy. I looked at him as if he had become unhinged. The very thought of flying frankly appalled me and a lengthy debate ensued, raging on my part and soothing on his. Fear of the unknown can be a powerful impediment to progress and personal development but thankfully, on that day, this man won his argument with me.

Would that I were able to shake this man's hand now, after all the years that have gone by, for talking me into something that was very good.

### **5.1.3 Brian Petherbridge's Recollections: 199 Squadron RAF Hemswell**

John and Geordie bring back to my mind many things about our time at Hemswell that I had forgotten. I can, however, add bits to some of the things they have said, and there are a few elements of my own personal experience that might be worth recounting.

I remember very well two other pilots not mentioned by John and George, although we all flew with them from time to time: Sergeant 'Chips' Carpenter and Pilot Officer, later F/O, Honour. Sgt. Carpenter was well nicknamed 'Chips' due to the sizeable one he had on his shoulder regarding those who held the King's (later Queen's) Commission. One of his more minor reactions to authority was persistently to wear his Sergeant's stripes only partially sewn on ! Another of his more significant reactions occurred during our Lybian detachment when we regularly had to cease our jamming operations while the Royal Navy took lunch !

During one of these periods, generally used by the aircrews for a little sightseeing, Chips Carpenter decided to take a close look at Mount Etna. On this occasion we had a commissioned navigator flying with us and he warned Chips not to fly too close due to the possibility of up-draughts, even though Etna had been dormant for a considerable time. Needless to say this provoked an immediate reaction from Chips and I have lived off the story of my experience of flying inside the crater of Mount Etna ever since.

John mentions sightings of HMS Eagle during our exercises with the Mediterranean Fleet. It was many years later when I learnt that an old school friend of mine had been a Fleet Air Arm crew member on HMS Eagle at the time and he well remembers the 'Brylcream Boys' playing what he called 'silly buggers' when one of the Lincolns flew alongside with its undercarriage down as if intending to land on the carrier.

So long as no Customs and Excise official gets access to this I can recall a certain member of crew who, upon our return to Hemswell from Idris, anticipating a possible problem with Customs, opened our rear hatch and jettisoned some rolled up Lybian rugs on our final approach. I never heard whether or not these rugs were successfully recovered, but knowing Lincolnshire farmers it's more likely that they're still covering the floor of a farmhouse.

For the other pilot, F/O Honour, I believe that he, and his crew, were killed in a crash some time after our period of National Service was completed.

Quote; (On a training sortie over Germany on the 26 June 1955, WD131 flown by F/O Hughie Honour was hit by a USAF jet fighter which came out of the cloud underneath the Lincoln, slicing off one of the bomber's wings, giving the crew no chance.)

Flt. Sgt. 'Tim' Timewell, whom John mentions, also left a lasting impression on me. He, before retraining as a pilot, had been a parachute instructor, and proudly wore his parachuting brevet *behind* his lapel.

Two very different occasions in Tim's company remain in my memory. A quite sobering one was upon returning from an exercise called 'Jungle King' on the night of 19 March, 1953 in Lincoln WD 126, when as we were coming in to land there was a tremendous jolt through the aircraft. Tim had the presence of mind to abort the landing and overshoot on full power. One possibility considered was that we had hit a bus travelling along an adjacent road. However, after contacting the control tower and telling them that we had an undercarriage warning light glowing, they instructed Tim to fly low and slow over the tower for them to attempt to assess the condition of our undercarriage with the aid of a bright signal lamp. After a couple of passes they asked Tim to try an even lower and slower pass. This provoked a quite strong verbal response from Tim which in brief reminded them that we were not a !!!! helicopter ! At this point, over our R/T came the calming voice of our Station Commander, Group Capt. J.H. Searby, (of Dambuster and Peenemunde fame), who had been awakened from his bed and informed of the difficulty we were experiencing. Various options were quietly

considered and the conclusion Tim reached was that we should attempt to land ... not that there were many options ! He gave each crew member the choice of staying with him or jumping out, in which case he would climb to a suitable height where we could parachute down into the darkness of Lincolnshire night. We all decided to stay where we were.

Having been instructed to switch off all equipment I, having nervously and fumblingly switched off the radio, etc., proceeded to the prescribed crash position for the Wireless Operator, only to find that a Squadron Leader Navigator (a non-crew member) had beaten me to it. He was sitting, rearward facing, against the main spar, and after some hesitation I proceeded to sit in his lap, thinking I would perhaps get a little greater protection from him as a buffer. At the final approach when the instruction 'Brace! Brace!' came, I think I overdid my reaction a little for the officer later reported that he had been unable to speak for ages through having all his breath squeezed out of him by a certain 'Widget' Signaller on his knee!

The landing proved to be one of the smoothest I had ever experienced, thanks to Tim, but as he was reluctant to apply wheel brakes due to the uncertain condition of the undercarriage, he steered off the runway onto the surrounding grass. We kept on rolling and, under instructions from the more experienced crew members, we jumped from the rear hatch and, in turn, kept placing our parachute packs under the rear wheel in an attempt to slow old WD 126 down. All ended well, but I must confess that during the experience I more than once wished I had enlisted as a cook or something !

It transpired that the obstruction we hit during our initial landing attempt was a very solidly built stone enclosure used normally to accommodate a Landrover-mounted BABS system.

The cause of the incident was initially considered as having been 'pilot error', but it was later established as having been due to a maladjustment of the system of airfield lights, which by means of coloured beams showed the pilot whether his approach height was correct. I cannot remember the name given to this system.

On a lighter note, the second occasion with Tim Timewell that I recall was a group visit in his company to the Theatre Royal in Lincoln. The theatre at this time was achieving a little local notoriety for its 'girlie' shows (quite tame ones by present day standards). We became seated in the front row for the event and it soon transpired that Tim had brought with him some strips of aircraft fabric. His trick was to tear a piece of this stuff as the girls landed in the splits they were doing just in front of us, which caused their eyes to open extremely wide, much to the amusement of the audience. It stopped the show for a few minutes for the theatre manager to come onto the stage and call for order, although he was half-smiling.

I have memories of other antics, mostly airborne, that bring me pleasure.

It was considered good housekeeping to return from RCM work with a clean aircraft. Having dropped the 'window' referred to by John, the rear of the aircraft would be littered with empty 'tinsel' containers, together with their plywood lids. The practice was, when returning over the sea, to open the rear hatch and throw out this debris in order to keep 'well in' with the ground crew, who didn't like the chore of clearing all this stuff out when we landed. One night, however, when our chore was almost complete, it was noticed that there were the lights of some large town below us and we realised that we had got well inland from the sea. We were quite sure that a complaint would come to the Station for the air raid we had unwittingly committed, from the Mayor or somebody, but there was never a squeak.

Another more alarming incident occurred during a long night return from an RCM exercise. I was one of the RCM operators, who were virtually passengers during return flights. On this occasion we were in a particular aircraft with an aileron which over a period of time, due to a slight hydraulic leak, would gradually droop. It became normal practice to call this to the attention of the pilot, who didn't have a clear view, so that either he or the flight engineer could correct it.

This night I had been dozing, using the wheel covers as a bed at the back of the aircraft, when I needed to go to the Elsan just forward of the rear turret, and on my way I noticed that the faulty aileron was drooping quite excessively. After returning to my sleeping position I called the pilot on my intercom but got no answer, from him or anybody else. I made my way forward past the other RCM operator who was, as I had been, asleep. I went further forward to find the radio operator, also asleep, and on to the navigator, asleep too. Further forward again I went, to find the remaining two, including the pilot, like everybody else in the aircraft, out to the world !

I gently prodded the pilot into life, gave him my message, went back to my own bed, and our flight home continued without anything further being said.

Since then I have considered the Bermuda Triangle as anything but a mystery !

Away from the flying I must mention another character at Hemswell, one Sergeant Potter, a first class armourer. He was the member of the Mess who could always be relied upon to keep the bar open to unearthly hours, and when it did finally close to be at the front of a line-up outside the grille.

It became an item of Mess gossip that he had enjoyed a modest win on the football pools, and so booked a week's leave and retired to his room with 'several' (the number varying in the reporting) crates of beer. He was sustained during his sabbatical by his colleagues taking him some solid nourishment, in which he apparently showed little interest.

When our new Station Commander arrived (Gp. Capt. Searby – already mentioned) he introduced, among other innovations, a weekly 'Family Night' in the Sergeants' Mess, at which it was required that those using the Mess should wear civilian clothes.

The first of these Family Nights was notable for the absence of Sgt. Potter, who was apparently 'sans civvies'. The second was, however, graced by him and, it was alleged, he had attended a jumble sale. To describe his dress is quite a challenge. His trousers were what used to be known as 'grey flannels' and must have started their life on a schoolboy, for on Sgt. Potter they reached no further down his legs than four inches from his ankles.

His jacket had been Harris Tweed, and made to fit someone at least 3 stones lighter than Potter. Shirt, collar, tie, socks and shoes were, naturally, RAF issue. And so Sergeant Potter was able to continue his normal routine in the Mess, even on 'Family Nights'.

I notice that Geordie comments on the presence of A/C Truman at Hemswell. I should say that, whether it is true or not, it became reported that all Size 10 cricket boots in the Sports Store at the Station were ripped away at the point where the big toe is located !!

#### 5.1.4 David Arnold's Recollections: RAF Upwood

The same day I arrived at Upwood I discovered that I was down for a night flight. I went to the briefing and it was just as I had seen it in the films - collect a parachute, Mae West and code book and off to the dispersal. It was dark and I had never been inside a Lincoln before. I managed to find the head phone and oxygen sockets but then spent twenty minutes trying to find the light switch. It was all very different from the Anson and the Proctor.

That night we dropped bombs on a range two miles from my home at Thetford. The Bomb Aimer missed the target but managed to leave our house intact.

I enjoyed life on the squadron, my own room, waited on by WAAFs in the mess and no drill instructors bawling at me. I did, however, miss my mates from NS12 but gradually got to know the other aircrew in the Sergeants mess.

Exercises were usually carried out along with many other aircraft doing simulated bombing over Germany. There were long periods of radio silence so it was all quite easy. Occasionally I would get a D/F or Consul bearing to keep the Navigator happy, and I recorded the generator voltages in the log every half hour !

After landing we were debriefed, given coffee with a tot of rum, breakfast and then to bed.

After 2 months the squadron left Upwood for Shallufa in the Canal Zone. Extra fuel tanks had been fitted in the bomb bays to avoid refuelling en route. For the final 4 hours of the flight I was rather concerned that I was receiving no replies to my transmissions. I discovered on landing that the trailing aerial was wrapped around the tail fins and that the Air Sea Rescue people at Malta were considering starting a search.

Egypt was quite a cultural shock for someone who had never been abroad before. We all wanted to see the Pyramids but unfortunately Cairo was out of bounds. King Farouk had not long been deposed and General Neguib had his eyes on the Suez Canal. There was a certain amount of anti-British feeling and attacks on service men were not uncommon. We were issued with side arms to be worn outside the camp. As an afterthought we were also given one bullet each with strict instructions to use it only in a dire emergency and not on one of the persistent shoe-shine boys !

We flew every other day (or night) doing bombing and air to ground firing at targets out in the desert. We also flew up and down the Canal having mock battles with meteors who came in much too close for my liking, causing me to remove my head very speedily from the astrodome.

Our days off were spent visiting Fayid and Ismailia or waving to ships passing through the Canal. We also flew to Cyprus for a weekend. This was before General Grivas and EOKA came on the scene.

At the end of February 1952 we returned to England via Libya and on entering the mess at



RAF Idriss, who were there but two of my old NS12 colleagues, John and Geordie.

We finally arrived back over fog-bound Upwood with only two engines working and after two unsuccessful attempts to land we were diverted to Dishforth in Yorkshire. We left Dishforth, returned to Upwood by train and then went on a week's leave.

Two months later with the sizing down of Bomber Command many National Service aircrew were sent to finish their time on ground duties. I was fortunate enough to be given another flying job with the HQ Bomber Command Communications Flight at RAF Booker near High Wycombe. I arrived at High Wycombe and rang the RAF station. Shortly afterwards a nice young WAAF arrived to pick me up in a Standard Vanguard and conveyed me to the Sergeants mess at HQBC. The mess was more like an old folks home: the elderly occupants came to breakfast in carpet slippers and our boiled eggs were fitted with knitted tea cosies to keep them warm.

After breakfast I was collected by a WAAF and taken to Booker airfield. The Comms. Flight consisted of a few Ansons, Oxfords, Chipmunks, Proctors and a Devon. Their tasks were to fly VIPs to airfields throughout the country for AOC's inspections etc.

Only one Anson had W/T installed and after my first flight it went for a major service and never returned.

From then on I flew as Navigator, map reading at 2000ft or below the cloud, whichever was the lower. It was an easy life, take off at 9.0am, an hour's flight, lunch in a Sergeants mess and back in time for tea.

On non-flying days I gave morse lessons to the pilots.

The Sergeants mess was very small, there being a master pilot, three flight sergeant pilots, two civilians who serviced the aircraft, and myself.

We helped ourselves at the bar and put the money in a tin box. At weekends I usually got a lift on a flight to an airfield within hitching distance of home at Thetford. On one occasion I managed to get a flight to Blackpool, so could spend the weekend with my girlfriend Barbara before flying back to RAF Booker on the Sunday.

When time came for demob I was sorry to leave and shortly after returning home I heard an aircraft circling low overhead. I went outside and saw that it was an Anson from Booker - I waved and it waggled its wings before flying off - all very nostalgic.

## **5.2 COASTAL COMMAND**

### **5.2.1 Gordon Toplis's Recollections: RAF St. Mawgan & RAF Pembroke Dock 'Here & Everywhere'**

Initially, after leaving Swanton Morley, I went to St.Mawgan with the rest of the course, spending 3 months doing around 20 flights at low altitude over the sea with radar the main exercise, but including bombing and sonics.

I was fortunate, with 7 other Signallers including Geoff Fuller, an original NS12 member, to spend 3 days in Gibraltar on exercises.

Following our return to St.Mawgan myself and three others (Taylor, Thomas and Wallach) became detached from the rest due to an excess of numbers for the conversion course to Shackletons at RAF Kinloss.

The four of us were diverted to Pembroke Dock for a month to await the next intake. This month became 6 months, when I was lucky enough to become a member of a Sunderland Flying Boat squadron.

201 Squadron, motto Hic et Ubique - "Here and Everywhere", consisted of five aircraft and was considered the elite.

The Sunderland was unique in that it was the only British military aircraft which was twin decked, used primus stoves in the galley, permitted the crew to smoke, and best of all had a flush toilet !

Life at Pembroke was very relaxed for the first two months. Then, with the Korean war in progress, a Sunderland was lost off Southern Japan which meant that a replacement had to be flown out to Singapore. Our crew consisted of 2 pilots, 2 navigators, 2 engineers and 3 signallers. I became the third signaller, and I believe I might be unique as a National Serviceman in serving as an Air Signaller in a Sunderland.

The trip to Singapore was via Malta, the Canal Zone, Bahrein, Karachi and Ceylon.

We stayed in Singapore for two weeks before returning to the UK by BOAC Constellation, accompanied by General Templer, C in C the Far East Command.

Two months later I was eventually sent to RAF Kinloss but unfortunately had to return home after two days due to a bereavement.

By the time I had completed the Shackleton conversion course there was very little time left for operational duties on a squadron.

My recollection of the Shackleton is that it was a noisy aircraft. I also clearly remember being unable to find Rockall on the aircraft radar, and being invited by the pilot to join him in the cockpit to be shown Rockall immediately below !

**5.2.2 Fred Harrison's Recollections:     RAF Lichfield; RAF St. Mawgan;  
  RAF Kinloss;   RAF St. Eval**

**(drawing upon & including the recollections of David (Dai) Parsons where  
the two served together with Coastal Command)**

It's evident from the recollections of Gordon Toplis, and to a lesser extent the other members of NS 12, that because of the shortness of our 2-year period of service in the RAF most of it was spent in training. Most of us, beyond our training, spent nearly as much time as gap-stoppers, or in 'idling' or 'waiting' as we spent as regular members of operational squadrons.

I was no exception, although apart from a period immediately before our demob in October, 1953, Dai Parsons and I were probably as fully occupied as any.

With the others in NS12 we became officially 'qualified' as Air Signallers on 14 October, 1952, having logged flying time of 55 hours and 25 minutes: 33 and a bit hours in Ansons and just over 22 hours in Proctors. It wasn't much, but it had required 22 flights to do it. I reckon at least another 60 hours would have been spent in listening to what we had to do, putting kit on and taking it off, waiting and walking about.

My posting from Swanton Morley was to No. 6 Air Navigation School at RAF Lichfield, along with our NS12 Course Leader, Jock Kinnaird. It was another 'fill-in' posting for a few weeks until Coastal Command became ready for us at RAF St. Mawgan in Cornwall.

### **At RAF Lichfield**

Our job at Lichfield was to crew the aircraft being used for the cadet navigators. It did feel to be a bit of a step-up from being a cadet myself only a few days earlier, but I remember very well wondering, privately of course, whether I was up to it. It was quite a lift to find that the Lichfield cadets, who were all Pilot Officers, were extremely respectful. They called everybody in the aircraft 'Sir', including me: a bit of flattery that I guessed was an expression of part of their officer-training .... a strategy for getting the maximum possible help from anybody regarded as faintly likely to be able to give it !

The aircraft mainly used at Lichfield was the Wellington. From 20 flights that I made in 22 days between 24 October and 14 November, 1952, 16 were in Wellingtons, 3 in Valettas, and 1 in an Anson.

After the Proctor at Swanton Morley, the Wellington seemed a massive aircraft. It was also an interesting vehicle, in that you got into it from underneath, at the front, up a ladder. Then you hoisted yourself up through the second pilot's position into the body of the aircraft. There was no fixed seat in this position, but one that dropped down from the starboard side, with a bar above it by which you could pull yourself up and swing yourself back and onto your bottom on the floor of the compartment. I remember thinking that this might have been a design feature to ensure that you couldn't get out of the aircraft without being seen by the Pilot. On our flights I believe there was only one Pilot, and it was sometimes my job on take-off to get into the drop-down seat to hold the throttle levers forward for him when we were taking off, which at the time gave me a greater feeling of power than it gave the engines !

There was a second exit near to the back of the aeroplane, a sort of trap-door in the floor that you came across when you went through a partition between the relatively snug front compartment of the aircraft and the sparse, dark, desperately cold rear compartment that contained the Elsan toilet. It was so cold around the Elsan that you couldn't really *do* anything when you got to it, even though you were frightened to death in the darkness, which should have helped. For myself, I stopped bothering to go to the Elsan altogether after stepping through the partition one night to find the trap-door open, flapping up and down against the floor. I guess it opened inwards, for had it been outwards I should have gone through it, I suppose into the bomb bay, or worse still out into the fresh air for a long drop.

It was the pattern for us at Lichfield to attend our briefing around tea-time, led by our pilot and accompanied by our two navigator cadets. The cadets knew in advance what they would be required to do, but the briefing would confirm the route we would take, the expected weather conditions, etc. For me, the job would be to obtain radio bearings and position-fixings, as checks against the findings of the cadets from astro-fixes. These astro-fix exercises meant that we had to get to an altitude at which stars could be seen, so that the cadets could do their work, although we should by no means be entirely reliant on them.

Whether or not it was simply because of the time of year, in October, or the unusually lousy Autumn weather in 1952, it proved quite difficult to find stars for the navigators, and the Wellingtons had to ascend to great heights for clear skies... 16000 feet and more, too far off the ground and often too stressful a climb for the old engines. It brought discomfort for the crew also, requiring us to wear oxygen masks all the time, and to plug into fresh taps when moving around the aircraft. The navigator cadets were the worst off, positioned as they were at the rear of the compartment where there was virtually no heat in the air that reached them through the blowers. I remember one night feeling especially sorry for the two of them when condensation on the outside of their masks had frozen as it formed and made thick icicles, reaching down to their tables and fastening their heads firmly to their maps.

I think it would be fair to say that the Wellingtons at Lichfield were on their last legs, and it was rumoured that the pilots were trying their best to see them off by catching their wings on hangars, etc., whilst taxi-ing ! It was very rare for all the aircraft that went out on the regular navigator-training trips to come back to Lichfield at the end of the exercise. In my own case the 5th of my 16 trips, on 30 October, 1952, was curtailed by the failure of an engine after half an hour and we made an early return to base, changed into another aircraft and went off again. The following night, on 31 October, we landed at Lyneham after half an hour, again through engine failure, and were ferried back the next day in an Anson.

It was so bad that after Lyneham I started, like others, to carry a small parcel of shaving kit, pyjamas and underpants on all my flights. However, it was another two weeks before I needed them, on 13 November, when some very stormy weather indeed caused us to be diverted on our return in the night to RAF Shawbury. We all found our landing here very interesting, into a wind of over ninety miles an hour, and we watched intently through the windows as the aircraft sort of plopped down, without any forward movement, onto the runway. It had been so engrossing that I had left the trailing aerial out, but thankfully when we became parked and I was able to get out myself and look underneath I found it lying neatly on the tarmac, no doubt due to our almost static landing, and I wound it in by hand ! Nobody knew.

The next day, 14 November, was to be the final active day of my posting at Lichfield, and my last task was to help get our Wellington the short distance home from Shawbury.

Our minds were occupied by thoughts of the previous night's events, and in wondering how the aircraft that had not come to Shawbury had got on in the storm. I was interested especially in Jock Kinnaird's experiences, for he and I had swapped crews and aircraft at the briefing, arising from a mix-up over our names on the crew rations-bags ! It was therefore rather a shock to me to find on our return that Jock's aircraft, which but for the rations-bags I should have been in, had crashed in a field in trying to land at Lichfield. Fortunately all members of the crew had escaped without serious injury, but the aircraft was a total wreck. It had come to ground in a field, skidded between trees that had knocked off large sections of its

wings, and had tipped onto its nose, but not set on fire. Still, I felt thankful for rations-bags !

Recently, at an NS12 Re-Union at Buxton, we met a farmer from Lichfield who remembers this crash, for it was in one of his fields that it happened !

### **At No.1 School of Maritime Reconnaissance, RAF St. Mawgan**

Cornwall wasn't at its best when we arrived in the late Autumn of 1952, but Christmas was coming and the Hut that I moved into was fine. There weren't the severe restrictions on coke for the stove as had applied at Compton Bassett, but the stove was the same model as had been provided there only some 8 months earlier, which seemed years.

Four of us shared the Hut ... a Sergeant Pilot named Brennan, whose Christian name we never knew but was called Brenn by everybody, including himself; Geoff Fuller, Jock Kinnaird and me. I remember us all getting on extremely well and the Hut was a very happy place to be.

The object of our placement at St. Mawgan was to get us up to speed on the various tasks required of us in Coastal Command ... submarine detection and the procedures of attack and destruction, including radar finding and homing devices, sonar buoys, flares of 7 million candle-power, bombs, depth-charges and .303 machine guns, 4 to a turret, each firing 1200 rounds a minute. It was the air signaller's job to manage most of this equipment, in addition to the radio, five of us in a crew, together with two pilots, two navigators and two engineers. The radio was now a really essential item of equipment. Up to this point in our training we had always been over or close to land and the pilots had been in VHF voice contact with ground-agencies. Now, many miles out over the sea, things were different. The morse key and the morse code really, at last, came into their own, and it was upon these that we now depended most for our communication and, in the absence of the sun or stars, the certainty of our knowledge of where we were and where we were going.

Throughout the deep winter of late December, 1952 to mid February, 1953, whilst not going as very far from land or spending as long at once in our aircraft as we were later to do in Shackletons, we acquired many new skills. Our flights were mostly of only five to seven hours in duration, but they were interesting. We worked with real submarines, and on one occasion, on 20 January, along with other aircraft we escorted the Home Fleet through the Bay of Biscay on its way to the Mediterranean. The Fleet made a very lovely sight, all sprawled out in a large V Formation with HMS Vanguard at its Head: a picture which on its own made up for all our earlier slogging over valves and rectifiers, and hours reciting 'de-dah is A', etc. We patrolled round the Fleet for our stint of some six hours, keeping in VHF radio contact, and on breaking off to go home, tired and ready for bed, we made our last call to Vanguard just to say we were off and wishing them well. A reply came asking us to wait, and then asking us to repeat the last two words of our message ... the Naval boys were very keen indeed on all the formalities, even when we were only saying 'Good-night'!

One of my most memorable experiences at St. Mawgan is my introduction to the guns. On 6 January, 1953, it became time for me to shoot the requisite 1200 rounds from the rear turret of Lancaster K, which I had worked out ought to have been capable of accomplishment in 15 seconds for anybody. For me, I thought, it would be easy and very soon over.

I had never been in the rear turret of the Lancaster, and just the process of getting to it was harder than I had expected. You had to drag yourself on your belly along many yards of plastic-covered cushion to get to the turret which, when I reached it, was waving about quite a lot more than I had thought it would do. Then you had to squeeze through a narrow opening into the plastic dome on the very tail of the aeroplane and climb up into the seat of the turret, a thing rather like the seat on a very old-fashioned mowing machine, springy and made of iron. Once in the seat you had to tell the pilot that you were there, privately frightened to death by the waving motion. In the sea there was a target, a thing like a square sail, bobbing about in the waves, which you were to attempt to fill with holes.

On reaching this perilous position I was supposed to let fire with my four guns, but first had to turn the turret to 90 degrees of our line of flight in order to avoid shooting off our trailing aerial. I found the instrument to turn the turret and sure enough we went round, but the opening I had entered by was left with nothing but the fresh air beyond it and, more importantly, just behind me, with a big draft. Generally, I was very far from comfortable.

Meanwhile, the aircraft, piloted by one Pilot Officer Alexander, a nice chap, sitting in comfort at the front, was driving round in a circle to let me get in my shots.

I lined up the guns onto the target and fired, but all that I got were three or four plops and loads of blue smoke, and then the guns jammed. There was a gadget in the turret, a sort of hook, that was provided for just such an eventuality, to fish out the jammed bullets in the four guns. I used this tool, cleared the four jams, and got ready to fire again. The same happened as before, and voices had started to come down my headphones to ask if I had finished, and whether we were now in a position to move on ! I decided we must have had war-time ammunition, probably damp !, for the same thing happened each time I fired, and I was quite worried over the time this job was consuming. We went on flying in circles round the target many times, but my efforts in the turret became no more fruitful although the turret was very full of acrid blue smoke, even with all the wind behind me. Finally, not wanting to hold us up any longer, I put an end to my struggle, pulled up the belts of ammunition by hand, threw them through the opening behind me, advised Mr. Alexander that I had finished, straightened the turret and slid back down the long passage to safety and comfort.

I was eventually graded 'Average' as a gunner, but I have always felt myself to have been a fraud, and wondered what on earth it must have been like for the war-time air gunners under the added pressures of bullets and other missiles being aimed at them.

In all other respects I was very happy with my performance as an Air Signaller, and having clocked up just over 199 flying hours at St. Mawgan I felt ready to proceed to RAF Kinloss for a conversion course to Shackletons and fuller tuition in the art of warfare over the sea.

### **At 236 Operational Conversion Unit, RAF Kinloss**

We went from St. Mawgan to Kinloss by train in March, 1953, and I remember very well this 24 hour rail journey, the longest I have ever experienced in Britain. It came clearly to mind in Autumn, 1998, when in Aviemore with David Parsons, who had made the long journey with me when we were 21. We looked at the single track railway and recalled our view of this place from the train forty five years earlier, at dawn, on the way from Newquay to Forres.

We were coming in 1953 to Kinloss to the Shackleton, the latest maritime reconnaissance aircraft in the Royal Air Force and for many years after, and here we were again in 1998, this time with others of our NS 12 pals, on our way again to Kinloss to see how the Shackleton compared with the Nimrod, its present-day successor.

I see that Gordon Toplis remembers the Shackleton as a 'noisy aircraft', but of course he compares it with the Sunderland he was in, no doubt with his feet up on an easy chair with a fag on and a cup of tea, waiting for his egg and bacon to finish frying on the primus stove.

The Shackleton wasn't quite so luxurious, but to me, after the Wellington and the Lancaster it was like a present day Jumbo ... roomy and warm, spacious, with some bunks, although I never had the pleasure of using one, and a small galley with an oven where you could warm your food.

The object of Kinloss was to familiarise us with the Shackleton and its equipment. We were only there about five weeks but this involved quite a lot of flights, in my case 22, mostly of short duration ... 2 – 3 hours or so ... with my longest being of 10 hours. Each flight provided us with a concentrated task, in addition to our work with the radio, in radar bombing runs or in managing the sonics equipment or in gunning ! The guns in the Shackleton were the best we ever used, 20mm cannons, big fat heavy bullets, and all working !

There was a practise range that we visited on the Scottish east coast on some sands near Tarbat Ness. The aircraft would circle the target and we would be required to shoot at it, but only while passing through the small arc of our circle where there was open sea beyond the target. The reason for this was that no shells or bullets had to be at risk of ricocheting from the target area into places where they could hit people or buildings, although there weren't many of either on the sands below us. My crew made two visits to the gunning range, on 17 and 18 April, 1953, and on both occasions the pilot was F/Sgt. 'Chalky' White. The whole crew took great interest in the shooting exercise, but the two or three signallers who actually had to do it watched each other's performance like hawks, for in all these things there was quite a competitive spirit.

I remember standing halfway up into the mid-upper turret that we used, watching Tom Mac Swan having his turn. He waited obediently for the start of the shooting arc and Chalky White's message to start. Away went the shells, which seemed to take an age before throwing up spurts of sand to show where they had landed so that you could move the guns to bring shells nearer to the target, knowing that at any second Chalky would shout again that the shooting arc was completed, and to stop. Chalky shouted to MacSwan, and swore quite a lot, but Mac, too intent on his purpose, *couldn't* stop ! I have wondered how it was that he didn't shoot off the rear of the aircraft as we scooted straight out over the sea and away from the early sunbathers and sandcastle-makers, if any, on the beach that day.

We had another enlightening experience one day when the guns were fitted up so that instead of ammunition we fired film, run when we pressed the triggers, at a Spitfire sent up to pretend to attack us. All of us had a go at this from the Shackleton, which was great fun, and in due course we were gathered together to see the film run through, to find out how many hits on the attacker each of us had achieved. It took about an hour to see the film through, to establish that the Spitfire hadn't been hit at all. Indeed, the Spitfire only appeared in the film about three times, just small parts of it at the edges of the screen, with no bit of it remotely near the area where shells would have gone. You might think it would have come a little

closer !

Apart from such disappointments, Kinloss was altogether a productive and pleasant place for us to be. Social activity off the Station was quite limited, but the food was brilliant, the air was fresh, we experienced the special lightness of the night which is a feature of northern Scotland, and each morning and I believe evening we had some haunting distant music from a bagpiper to wake up the Station and send it to sleep !

### **At 220 Squadron, Coastal Command, RAF St. Eval**

We came to St. Eval in early May, 1953, at long last onto our own operational squadron. This was what all the preparation of the previous eighteen months had been about, and on our return to Cornwall after leaving Compton Bassett in February we were now looking for a sunny summer and perhaps a war.

We were immediately put into regular crews and the captain of my crew was Flight Lieutenant Bryant. I was to make 36 flights in 220 Squadron, and 19 of these were with Mr. Bryant. He was a person I liked very much on first meeting, and came to respect enormously: a first class man and an excellent pilot. Indeed, the whole crew got on together extremely well, as I later found was the case with virtually all crews.

There was great humour in the aircrew, but a real sense of purpose too, and co-operation and industry. I have thought about this a lot over the years and I believe these rare features of an aircrew are due to the total dependency of each member on the others for staying up.

Of course this requires that the members have enough sense to *recognise* their inter-dependency, which might explain why the RAF gave us intelligence tests. Civil Airline crews recognise it, as do civilized passengers, which is why they are always so friendly and polite toward the stewards and would do *anything* for the pilots. Those passengers currently putting civil aircraft at risk by their hooliganism do it not because they are drunk but, I believe, because they are dense.

At St. Eval my first couple of flights were of short duration, an hour or so, for bombing and gunnery. Then came an Air Sea Rescue flight which occupied about three hours.

Air Sea Rescue was and still is a very important function of Coastal Command, less than sufficiently appreciated by members of the public. I was pleased to hear a recent ASR success story from the lads at RAF Kinloss, when we visited the Station in September, 1998. A small boat had disappeared off the east coast of India, was found and survivors rescued by the crew of a Nimrod that went out from Scotland to search the area.

This kind of work was part of our work too, in 1953, but not over such great distances. Crews and aircraft were, as they still are, constantly on standby to respond to an emergency as reported. We would have a crew, by rota, out on the airfield perimeter ready with all their kit for immediate take-off. A further back-up crew would be ready too, confined to the Station in case needed.

Surrounded by water, Cornwall is by its very nature a place where disaster at sea is a fairly regular occurrence. Since it is also a place crowded by visitors with little to do but play in the



sea or look out at it, there are vastly greater numbers of reports of disasters than actual occurrences, no doubt often arising from booze and tricks of the light. It was not unusual, therefore, despite best checks on reports, for an ASR mission to be called off just before take-off, if you were lucky, or just after, if you were not.

It was not possible for the Shackleton to jettison fuel, nor to land with tanks full of it, because of the weight. Once off the ground an aircraft caught in these circumstances would have to be flown around to use up fuel before it could come home, and it took some 4 hours to use up enough ... sufficient to get to Italy or thereabouts, I used to think, or to run my motor bike for the rest of my life.

I was involved twice at St. Eval in such aborted ASR missions. I can't remember what we did on one of these occasions to occupy ourselves until we could return, but I very clearly recall the second, on a beautiful sunny day. We followed every line of the coast of the south west peninsula, in and out of all the cracks and inlets, matching up what we could see through the windows to the changing picture on our radar screen. I remember feeling how easy it would have been to produce the first maps if only the same technology had been available.

Somewhere across the fat section of the south west, between Gloucester and Southampton, there was a nudist estate which the pilot knew about and which it was voted we should visit since we were passing by. Radar was abandoned and there were eleven heads looking out as we passed quite low over this estate ... sufficiently low to blow the leaves off any modest sunbather ... but speaking for myself, I didn't see much ! I know it crossed my mind that, had I been a nudist down there, the sight and sound of this great white aeroplane passing over at tree-height would have made me think about putting my clothes back on and clearing out.

We did have some genuine ASR operations, the biggest of which was from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> of August when a U.S. Airforce B36 had disappeared over the North Atlantic. Very many Shackletons from Squadrons throughout the U.K. became engaged, along with U.S. aircraft. My own and David Parsons' crew were out for 15 hours on the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, stopping over in Ballykelly and returning to St. Eval on the 9<sup>th</sup>, but the massive search was to no avail and no trace of the lost aircraft was found. Such are the most tiring and very saddest experiences of Coastal Command aircrews.

Alongside such diversions we had regular work to do, always over the sea, much of the time at an altitude of 50 feet, scouring the water for things and working with ships and submarines ... trips having a duration up to 15 hours. Some of these would require a submarine to go out a very long way from Plymouth, half way to America I used to calculate, so that we could go out to find and carry out exercises with them. We used to think quite a lot about this and the poor submariners who would need to go chuffing off on a Monday to get to our arranged search area by about Wednesday, and then spend another two or three days coming back. Occasionally Wednesday would be a foggy day, or some more serious intervention would prevent us from keeping our appointment, and the submarine would be radioed to say we couldn't come, a real case of being 'stood up'. On such occasions we would go to the pub, think about the sailors and feel sorry for them, and be thankful we hadn't joined the Navy !

The sea wasn't lonely all the time. We would have contact with Merchant ships which were always very friendly, and I have a special memory of a meeting we had with the American Passenger Liner United States in the final stage of the crossing it made to England to win the Blue Riband for the fastest ever voyage. We flew round the ship, very low, on a lovely sunny

day, with people on it waving to us and then we spotted, on an upper deck at the rear of the ship, Winston Churchill standing quite alone looking up at us and giving us his famous wartime V-sign. This gave us all a great lift !

Within a few weeks of joining 220 Squadron the routine of regular operations was interrupted by two unexpected, but both interesting and different eventualities.

The first of these was a requirement for us urgently to become expert in formation flying in order that St. Eval might provide nine Shackletons for the Royal Air Force Coronation Review in June, 1953. These nine would be joined by a further nine Shackletons from Squadrons at Ballykelly and Aldergrove in Northern Ireland, so that a flight of eighteen would, on the due date, be among the very many aircraft to go down The Mall in London and over Buckingham Palace.

Our contingent of nine aircraft was drawn, three each, from Nos. 42, 206 and 220 Squadrons, all at St. Eval, to be led by Squadron Leader Laband, Commanding Officer of 220 Squadron.

I became 'borrowed' by S.Ldr. Laband from my regular crew captain, F.Lt. Bryant, to join his crew to prepare for the flypast, and through the middle of June we made eight practise flights, mostly over the sea near to Cornwall but on a couple of occasions going round the route for the actual flypast later in the month. This was quite good fun, especially being in the leading aircraft, and the wonderful sight and sound of the group of nine massive aeroplanes would be a small bonus for the Newquay & District holidaymakers that month.

I learnt another lesson during these flypast practises, about the 'levelling influence' of an aircrew across its membership. I remember sitting down at the back of our Shackleton during one of our flights, which we all used to do as a break from our work, when I was joined by S.Ldr. Laband. It wasn't often that we got to talk informally with our Squadron CO, but here we chatted about our personal backgrounds and what I thought I might do when my National Service was over. We smoked two or three fags together, which was strictly not allowed, and put our dog-ends down the flare chute, in the way two kids might have done down a toilet in the school lavatories.

As the flypast practises were going on, a report came round that 220 Squadron was to send, also during June, four Shackletons to Malta on what was described as a 'Fair Isle Mission'. This would leave the Squadron just the three aircraft needed for the Coronation Review, and I reluctantly concluded that I should be counted out for Malta.

However, I was wrong. I flew my last practise flight with S.Ldr. Laband on 23 June, and at 9.25am on the 26th I was back in F.Lt. Bryant's crew taking off for Luqa. Seven hours later we were in Malta and by tea-time I was with my NS12 pal Dai Parsons, out of one of the other Shackletons, in our coolest clothes and wondering what we should do that evening.

Tom Mac Swan was also present from NS12, and there were a few others from our time at Swanton Morley. One was a very tall fair-haired lad called John Askew who had, I think, been with a police force before being called up, and another called Guissler. I remember these in particular as being present because the five of us hired a Morris Minor together to get around Malta, the war-time George Cross Island, and I still have our photographs.

We were in Malta for three weeks, and although we enjoyed the whole of our National

Service I believe these were the best three weeks of our service in the Royal Air Force. The climate was brilliant and the place itself was really interesting, especially to those who, like me, had never been further abroad than the Isle of Man, and Dai hadn't been beyond Neath !

The second flight that my crew undertook after our arrival at Luqa was an Air Sea Rescue patrol on 30 June, 1953, along part of the route of a Comet aircraft that was carrying H.M. Queen Elizabeth over the Mediterranean. We were six and a half hours on this task. We didn't actually *see* the Royal Comet but we had voice contact with it ... with the pilot, not the Queen ... when it entered and left the sector we were patrolling. Nobody in the crew begrudged the time spent on this task, for had any mishap been encountered by the Comet we should have been on-site ready to give immediate assistance

Our mainstream work also was interesting ... a lot of radar on day and night exercises in which we searched for submarines, homed in on them and tried to straddle them with small bombs, putting down sonar buoys when they submerged and tracking their movements below the water.

We had really great fun on some of these exercises. For example, we found on day-exercises that because of the clarity of the Mediterranean water we could actually *see* a submarine below the surface. There it would be, a big grey fish, sneaking around and changing its directions at low speed, minimising its engine noise to evade the direction-finding ability of our sonar buoys whilst we watched it through our windows. We went on dropping the sonar buoys, but there was no need !

When such exercises were over there were RAF launches standing nearby which would run in to pick up the buoys, which I understand cost £200 apiece. The crews on these launches tended to show off a bit and would zoom around at high speed to get the buoys, the fronts of their boats high out of the water and their hair blowing. On one occasion we watched as a launch went flying for a buoy beyond a submarine that was coming up to the surface. We could see all this, but the lads on the launch couldn't. Someone in our aircraft asked the pilot if we should tell them on the launch what was happening, for we could speak to them, but the conclusion from a quick vote across the crew was that it would be best for us not to interfere.

Up popped the front of the submarine just yards ahead of the little boat and there was great splashing of foam as the launch went into reverse and then stopped dead...just wagging from side to side in the water !

I was once telling this story soon after my demob and return to my junior Civil Service job in London, at the hostel in Lancaster Gate where I lived, and one of my colleagues was able to finish it because his brother had been in the crew of the launch ! Apparently it had been towed quietly back to Valetta for repair to its engine.

On night exercises over the Mediterranean you couldn't, of course, *see* the submarine you were looking for, whether under the surface or on top, and searches were entirely dependant upon radar. This is based upon directed electronic signals being rebounded from the objects they encounter. Sometimes, when the signals struck a ship, for example, you would see on your screen an elongated white blip, or in the case of a large vessel you would receive a better picture of its shape, sufficient to be able to identify its type. But when the signals struck small objects you would just see a white dot. This is what you would see if the signals struck the conning tower of a submarine, with a very small blip indeed being shown if they

struck a periscope. You had circles on the screen marked in miles, so that you would know how far away from you the object was, and since the scanner on the aircraft that sent out the signals rotated you knew the bearing or direction of the object from where you were.

It was, and still is, the custom of people living near the shores of the Mediterranean to go out at night in their fishing boats. They do this from Malta, or did in the 1950s in very large numbers, and some of them would go out quite a long way, often in very tiny boats indeed. Some of them, and one in particular if he is still alive, will very clearly remember the night of 2 July, 1953, when he must have believed his time on earth was up.

Tom Mac Swan was on our radar, looking for H.M. Submarine 'Talent', which had come rather nearer the coast than usual at about 12 miles, no doubt to hide among other objects, and here was Mac Swan trying his best to find it and direct us onto it, so that we could 'bomb' it. I stood behind him as he sat glued to his screen on which there were literally hundreds of little white dots. The crew were getting fed up, wanting to go home to their beds, and poor Mac Swan just could not decide which dot was a conning tower. Under great pressure from lots of voices down the intercom he settled on one of the dots and started to home us onto it. In we went, lower and lower, skimming over the sea just clear of the water, with him reciting the bearing and the distance. I felt really sorry for him, seeing what he was up against as he tried to remain confident because he dared not be otherwise, sweating at his rotten situation. Down from some 25 to 5 miles distant we came, then 4, 3, 2, 1 mile, and then our flares went up, each of 7 million candle-power, pom-pomming into the sky, lighting up the whole of the sea for miles around, and the Malta coast, and finally the one small figure of the poor fisherman, lying in the bottom of his little boat. He must have believed then, and must believe still, that the Angel of Death had come for him that night ... and missed him !!

It might be wondered how I should have come to know that sonar buoys cost £200 apiece, or why I should have been interested in their price, and I'll say why. It was the custom when we left St. Eval on an exercise for one of the Navigators to go down into the nose of the Shackleton and look through a little window into the bomb bay to check that our stuff was all in place and secure. He would also operate a test of the electronic release circuits, and the pilot would open and close the bomb bay doors to check that they were working too. On one occasion, these checks having proved satisfactory, as they usually did, we flew off into the distance to the point where our exercise was due to be conducted, to find when we got there that we no longer had *anything* in the bomb bay !! Nobody had a clue where all the stuff had gone ... sonar buoys, small bombs, etc., but we presumed they had fallen out when the checks had been made as we left the coast. As far as I know, no complaints were ever lodged by anybody over having been hit by anything, but curiosity led me to ask how much our lost bits and pieces had been worth and I was told that sonar buoys cost £200 each. I don't know what the little bombs were worth !

## **6: THE FINAL GOODBYE TO RAF SWANTON MORLEY**

In September, 1994, six of the seven of us from NS 12 whose recollections are reported here, along with nearly 300 more ex-Air Signallers and Air Electronic Operators (AEOs) sat down to a re-union in the Sergeants Mess at RAF Swanton Morley. The event had been organised by Gordon Higgins (NS 15) and a most memorable re-union it turned out to be.

Partly as a result of the 1994 turnout, we and very many others were again at Dereham in Norfolk on Saturday, 6 September, 1995, in order to be present at the ceremonies of the closure of RAF Swanton Morley.

The day dawned with low cloud and a touch of rain, clearing by lunch time for an afternoon of brilliant sunshine and a remarkable flying display by many of the very oldest and the most recent RAF aircraft, from Tiger Moths to Harriers and the quite stunning Red Arrows.

This was a day for every emotion: interest, excitement, pride and sadness. Among the many

hundreds of former servicemen and women present, and civilians from the surrounding villages, were to be found some who had been employed at RAF Swanton Morley in every one of the 55 years of its operation. All had come to pay their last farewells to a Station which figured very prominently in their hearts and memories.

Our own little group of six, half of the number who successfully completed Course No. NS12 and a quarter of the number who had started it, had come here in the Spring of 1952 as cadets to No.1 Air Signallers School and by late Summer had left. But here we were again 43 years later almost feeling as if we had not been away. It was probably here more than anywhere else that lasting friendships, and even our characters, became formed. This was where we had experienced our first flights, in an Anson and a Proctor, learned the discipline of hard work, the benefits of co-operation, the harsh consequences of failure, and the value of well-earned reward in the form of our much coveted Air Signaller brevet ... and of course the Sergeant's stripes that came with it, and the pay !

These were the thoughts that flooded through our minds on this day, although we found time for more practical things: climbing onto a Proctor aircraft and inspecting Room 7, Eastchurch House, where we had lived together for seven months, and concluding that it wasn't up to the high standard of spit and polish in which we had left it in 1952.

The day ended with two most moving ceremonies to mark the Station's closure. As the Ensign was being lowered for the last time to the strains of the Royal Air Force band playing 'The day thou gavest Lord is ended', there came from behind us the last flying Blenheim, 'The Spirit of Britain First', performing a single low pass over the silent crowd before disappearing into the distance. This was a moment never to be forgotten, especially by those who had served at Swanton Morley in the early months of the war of 1939-45, when the Blenheim was among the first aircraft to operate from here.

Finally came the March Past by Air Signallers and AEOs, supported by the band of the RAF College, Cranwell. Once again, after 43 years, and many more years for some, we marched here, saluted by most senior Royal Air Force Officers, chests full of pride as they had been at our passing out parade in 1952. The eyes of most of those who marched, and watched, were full of tears, as the airfield rang with spontaneous applause from the gathered crowd.

Missing it all was Rebecca who, no doubt, would be enjoying the ceremony from her donkey paradise in the sky, and will be wondering still why it was that none of us served jankers for being out of step on this day.

## **7: FORTY-SEVEN YEARS ON**

### **A Postscript from Gordon Toplis: A Shared Conclusion**

By October, 1953, Bomber Command was reducing in size with the introduction of the V Bomber force, and consequently fewer aircrew were required.

National Service aircrew had played an important role in bridging the gap of aircrew requirements for both the Korean war and the period between piston-engined aircraft and the

jet-age.

Coastal Command, however, was to go on with an ever increasing surveillance role, not only in submarine detection but also in patrolling the skies as an early warning detection agency for unidentified intruders. In addition, its search and rescue missions have saved the lives of countless servicemen and civilians who, without it, would have perished in the lonely seas.

As ex National Service aircrew we all still feel very privileged to have had the opportunity to fly not only with pilots and navigators having WW2 experience but also in such historic aircraft as the Wellington, Lancaster, Lincoln, Sunderland Flying Boat and Shackleton.

So far as the seven of us who were in NS 12 are concerned, what we have written here is true. We are proud of what we did and unashamed of the errors we made whilst doing it. We did our best, and we are very proud of the Royal Air Force for what it gave us in return: some very happy memories and relationships with each other that remain not weakened by time.

We meet at least once each year, almost always near to one of the RAF Stations that we remember very well, and we shall go on doing so for as long as we are able. We have been given most generous receptions at Stations we have visited and have joined the lads who are learning to do what we used to do, in their simulators and on their aircraft, even at times giving them the benefit of our experience!

**We are all available for further active service at a moment's notice**

David Arnold  
Fred Harrison  
David Parsons

George Webster

Brian Petherbridge  
Gordon Toplis  
John Usher

**SPRING, 2001**