

ANY OLD IRON by John Redfern

One Monday morning the 'Buffer' called me into his office and closed the door. He usually did whenever he had a problem. I knew it wasn't for a bollocking because he never gave one to any of his lads. "JR, I've got the mother and father of a problem"? He said in a resigned sort of voice. "I've asked you in because I know that you have a few connections that may be able to help"? "Anything you need Buffer just ask, you know that, don't forget, we are all your lads here"? The Buffer or 'Barrack Master' to be exact was Chief Petty Officer 'Buck' Taylor. One of the Royal Navy's 'Old School', a Seaman Gunner who had joined the Navy as a Boy Seaman back in 1916 and had been with Lord Jellicoe at Jutland. 'Buck' had seen service at 'The Battle of the River Plate' and Dunkirk. The North Atlantic, Russian and Malta Convoys. The Normandy landings on D Day before going out to the South Pacific against the Japanese. He had a chest full of medal ribbons but was a most modest man. Everyone adored 'Buck' he was admired and respected by both Officers and Ratings alike and I never heard an adverse word against him. 'Buck' only had a few months left in the Service and had been sent to the RNAS Stretton, HMS Blackcap to finish his time near his home in Liverpool with a preference draft.

"JR, I know you are a bit of a lad but with your connections you may be able to help me out. I also know that you can keep a lid on things"? "Come on Buffer, spit it out, I can't read your mind now can I"? "Well, like a bloody fool I have gone and promised the Commander that we would be able to dismantle the old Laundry building and strip it out. The job had been promised to a 'civvy' firm but they want to charge us the earth to do it and in desperation I promised the old man that my lads could do it."? He said sadly. I found myself asking him. "Why can't we do it then, what's the problem"? The Buffer glared at me. "Have you seen the bloody place it's immense and the heavy machinery inside, we simply haven't the resources to do it"? Said the Buffer shaking his head. "Assuming we could do it, where do we dispose of all the gear"? I asked him. "The Old Man doesn't give a shit what happens to it you can either dump it or sell it, It's probably worth nothing anyway. It hasn't been used for ages that's probably why the Contractors want to charge so much"? Buck handed me the keys. "You go and have a look, see what you think and let me know the worst"? It really hurt me to see the Buffer upset and it may me more determined to get the job done for him.

The old Laundry block on Ark Royal Site would have been a hive of industry when the Base was fully operational. It was quite a large structure made of concrete with typical wartime steel framed windows and roughly the size of a couple of 'Nissen' huts. Unlocking the huge padlock on the front door I stepped inside. Flicking the light switch I was relieved to see that the electricity was still on. The large room bore evidence to suggest that it had been hurriedly abandoned. The unusually high ceilings were crisscrossed with steel girders which I thought may be useful to lift the heavier items. There were large galvanised steel sinks still bright and shiny and clothes presses. Two large circular boilers which at first I thought were cast iron but in fact were copper. Whistling aloud to myself I remember thinking that they would be worth a few quid. I couldn't believe my eyes as I saw a row of large clothes driers. In an adjacent outer room was, would you believe a small oil fired 'Donkey Boiler' presumably for use in the event of a power cut. There was a large amount of copper piping and brass fittings which would also fetch a few pounds. I could not conceivably believe that 'The Boss' really wanted to ditch all this stuff unless of course he was pushed for time to de-commission the Air Station. I remember thinking "So the rumours

are true about Blackcap closing down”? Realising that the majority of this equipment was still capable of functioning, I thought I had died and gone to Heaven when I thought of the potential here. Being a kind of mercenary chap I thought of the wonderful opportunity which had literally fallen into my lap and the old saying of ‘Fortune Comes To He Who Waits’ never rang truer. My second thought was how the hell am I going to dismantle and move all of this stuff without help. My third thought was how I would eventually dispose of it all.

Further exploration of the building revealed several other smaller storerooms revealed wooden storage racks and various oddments of more copper pipes and brass fittings. There was another locked Nissen hut at the rear which presumably was a storeroom and similarly filled with copper, lead and brass fittings. Good grief, and Scrap Metal Dealer would have apoplexy if he saw this little lot I remember thinking. Wait a minute, Scrap Metal Dealer, where have I heard that before, let me think a moment. I’ve got it, my Cousin’s friend from Manchester, the one with the luxury yacht on the Canal, Frank, what’s his name. Yes that’s the guy, I wonder if he would be interested. Realising that swift and decisive action must be taken at all costs otherwise the initiative will be lost. Quickly relocking the doors and hopefully their valuable contents I decided to telephone Frank immediately. A quick phone call to my Cousin at his Club and Frank’s number in Manchester, I settled down in the now deserted Buffer’s Office. With a slightly trembling hand I dialled the number and after a few moments a man with a strong Mancunian accent answered. “May I speak to Frank please”? I asked rather timidly. “This is Frank, who is that”? He demanded. I introduced myself and to my relief a chuckle at the other end told me that he did not mind me calling him. “Hello there kiddo, nice to talk to you, your Cousin is very proud of you now what can I do for you”? I explained the task to him in some detail and asked if he would be interested. To my amazement Frank said that he would be very interested indeed. Trying hard not to show my excitement I enquired about delivery and prices. “Another loud chuckle at the other end “Wait a minute kiddo, hold your horses, I haven’t even seen the goods yet just give me a minute will you”? I heard a muffled conversation with someone else in the room and moments later Frank came back on the line. Realising I should perhaps take the initiative I said “I’ve got the written consent from the Commanding Officer to dispose of the stuff Frank so there shouldn’t be a problem should there”? Another little chuckle came from Frank. “It’s not that kiddo, I’m just thinking of the best way to deal with this and to suit you that’s all”? He answered, still carrying on his conversation with the other person in the room. Finally Frank replied. “Look JR, just give me your phone number and I will get back to you in a few minutes OK”? I replaced the phone hardly daring to believe what I had just done.

For the next few minutes I hardly dared to breathe and when the phone did eventually ring I almost fell off my chair to answer it. Trying to sound casual I answered “Buffer’s Office Blackap”? Frank’s unmistakable voice soon reassured me that everything was on track again. “Look kiddo, this is what I’m suggesting to make it easier for you. I’m going over to my boat on the Barnton mooring the day after tomorrow. How about I drop in about lunchtime and have a look see as I have to know exactly what is involved is that OK for you”? He enquired. “That sounds great Frank I will arrange a pass for you and meet you at the main gate you can drive straight in”? “Sounds good to me and I’m looking forward to it”? Said Frank hanging up his phone. Thinking to myself “So far so good, now for a little homespun philosophy” As ‘Buck’ came back to his office. I handed him the Laundry keys and grinned at him. “You’ve bloody cracked it haven’t you, I can tell, are you going to let me in on it or not”? Enquired a very relieved Buffer. “It’s best that you don’t know the details as you can’t drop in the shit then can you”? I replied. The Buffer reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a bottle which contained about a half of Bourbon. He looked at it wistfully

"I'm getting a bit low so we might as well see this off shall we"? He enquired grinning back. His subtle hint reminded me that I had not spoken to my contacts at the nearby USAF Base for over a week now. "Is there anything that you need me to do or what equipment you will require"? As Buck casually as he took a sip of his Bourbon and savoured it. "Well Buffer, I will need at least three lads from our Party and exclusive use of the 15 cwt pick up and occasional use of the 3 tonner. I'm going to need 'The Genny' a couple of pneumatic drills and at least two of the wheeled 'Bogie' trucks. A large ratchet hoist, blocks and tackles and general tools"?. "Anything else"? Said the Buffer draining his glass. "Only plenty of luck and God's Blessing a Tail Wind and a 'Visitor's Pass' for the day after tomorrow and I will also need a written copy of the Boss's instruction for disposal in duplicate please"? "Why in duplicate"? Enquired Buck. "Well we are going to need one to keep aren't we"? I grinned as he disappeared. "I'll call and tell the 'Old man' he will be dead chuffed" Called the Buffer over his shoulder.

The next thing I had to do was pick three blokes whom I could really trust and would not ask too many questions. That in itself posed no problems and after some thought I decided to use Paddy, Dutch and Johnno and later that day I took them aside to explain that we were on to a 'nice little earner'. "Who do we have to kill" was the combined reply which convinced me that I had chosen wisely. Explaining the intricacies of the job but omitting the financial details and swearing them to total secrecy for fear of 'Dipping out a Real Stinker' we worked out an operational plan.

Just before noon I picked up Frank's 'Visitors Pass' from the Regulating Office and went outside the Main Gate. Frank's blue Bentley was parked just down the road and he was already waiting to greet me warmly. Climbing into the front seat of the sumptuous vehicle and secretly wishing it were mine we drove the remaining 100 yards to the Main Gate where the Sentry checked us through after recognising me and giving me 'one finger' in return I stuck out my tongue and he grinned as he swung open the gate. "Takes me back to my Army days". Said Frank as he gazed around the Parade Ground and adjacent buildings. I had already picked up the Laundry keys so we drove through the now almost empty Accommodation Blocks. Opening up the front door and switching on the light Frank looked around the room with a practised eye and smiled. "Oh yes kiddo I can certainly use most of this stuff, the coppers, sinks and driers". Strolling around the building and inspecting it room by room he nodded approvingly at the huge amounts of copper, lead and brass fittings. "I didn't realise that you had so much stuff here"? Said Frank. "Is that a problem then Frank"? I enquired anxiously. Frank gave a deep laugh. "Not at all kiddo, not at all". He answered as I gave an almost audible sigh of relief. "We can dismantle it but where will we deliver it to"? I enquired. "I've been giving that some thought". Said Frank. "It just so happens that I have a small scrap yard here in Warrington near to the Railway Sidings which I often use to get stuff over to Manchester or Liverpool, now if you could deliver it there everything would be much easier"? Said Frank in his matter of fact way. I was dying to ask the question "Just how much is all this stuff worth Frank"? I managed to blurt out.

"Well kiddo, there are two ways to do this. We normally weigh the stuff and base it on the current price of whatever scrap metal is at the moment. The other way is to agree on a price here and now and shake on it."? I thought about all the complications of lugging the stuff out just to have it weighed and priced. "OK Frank, now I've got three other guys helping me here and it won't be easy so what is your best price"? Frank pondered for a few moments before answering. "Well kiddo as it's you and as your Cousin is one of my very best mates I figure about a grand and a half should be about right don't you"? Well Frank

taking everything into account and bearing in mind the current price of copper and the condition of everything in here together with the fact that I've got to split it three ways, I figured about two grand would be about right don't you"? Frank looked at me sharply through knitted eyebrows. He wrinkled his forehead and paused for another awful moment. Suddenly his face took on a broad grin. "How did I know you were going to say that"? He laughed. "OK it's a deal" Taking my hand in a vice like grip we shook hands and within 10 minutes the old Laundry was signed sealed and delivered. I invited Frank back to our Dining Hall for a most welcome lunch of steak and kidney pie followed by treacle pudding before a delighted Frank made his departure. "I will phone you later". Was his parting shot as his Bentley with a 'toot on the horn swept through the Main Gate and off towards Warrington.

Back to the Buffer's Office and to seek out my companions and inform them that we had three days, four at most to complete our task and the sooner we get going the sooner we would get paid. Ignoring teatime we set out to begin our task by removing all the copper, brass and lead fittings and loaded them on to the pick up which we then covered and sheeted down just in case of bad weather and to avert prying eyes. As it was just about time to 'Secure' for the day I telephoned Frank to say that the first load would arrive at his Warrington Yard tomorrow morning. A familiar laugh at the other end of the telephone told me that Frank was delighted. "It just so happens that I will be in Warrington around 10am tomorrow as I have an appointment in Northwich so I might as well 'Square You Up'. "Fine by me Frank I will see you then.

The next day at 10 am on the dot we arrived at the Depot just as Frank's blue Bentley drew up beside us. Immaculately dressed as usual Frank, smiling as usual came over and shook hands. "You know JR, this is really good stuff, how many more loads today do you think you can manage"? I fixed him with a hard stare. "You are bloody joking aren't you, we've already busted our balls to deliver this lot." "Steady on, I'm only joking, you have done well as it is. I've already sold the dryers and galvanised steel sinks". I could not believe that things had already moved so quickly since yesterday. I remember thinking that these Scrap Metal Dealers do not hang around. "Time is money kiddo, time is money and another day is another dollar if you know what I mean and speaking of which"? Frank fished in his inside coat pocket and produced two brown envelopes. "This is what we agreed yesterday and as I will be away and won't be seeing you again for a while, there is a little bonus for you and the lads". Frank handed me the two envelopes which I quickly stuffed inside my coat pocket. The look of surprise on my face caused Frank to remark. "Look kiddo, you have done me a big favour and if you can get the rest of the gear down here by the week-end that would be great. I made a decent profit and that is to show my sincere appreciation. I promised Frank that we would do our best. As I walked him towards his car I could not help but ask "You must have done well out of it you old bugger"? He simply laughed and tapped his nose. "Trade secret kiddo, let's just say that the Donkey Boiler was worth maybe two grand on its own. The copper boilers and dryers say another couple of grand at least and the copper, brass and lead maybe another couple of grand give or take"? I shook my head in disbelief and admiration. "You crafty old bugger". I said as he roared with laughter. Frank's parting shot as he climbed into his car. "Remember JR it's not what you know but just who you know"? He said tapping his nose with his finger.

Deciding not to open the envelopes for the time being I placed them in my locker's secret compartment. The graft then began in earnest. The galvanised units were fairly easy but the copper boilers had to have the hinged lids removed then winched up onto the

overhead girders. Luckily the large double doors of the Laundry allowed us to drive the lorry almost into the building itself before lowering them onto the back. Due to the sheer weight it required two separate journeys to complete this task. The rest presented little problem apart from the Donkey Boiler which had to be towed behind the three tonner at a speed of no more than 20 mph. in order to get it to Frank's Yard in Warrington. After three days hard slog and to the delight of the 'Buffer' the old Laundry was no more. Everything had been cleared and the keys handed back. Vehicles and equipment returned to store and secure compounds. As everything was sweet I decided to open Frank's envelopes in private. The larger stapled foolscap one contained the agreed two grand. The smaller contained £200 together with a little note from Frank which read simply. 'Whenever you are out in the great unknown and feel a hand on your arse that aint your own, it will be mine. With grateful thanks. Frank'. The lads were delighted to received their share of £500 apeice whilst I felt that I had earned the extra bonus. As for the Buffer, 'Old Buck', he retired a few weeks later. We gave him a quite magnificent send off from the Main Dining Hall. The Captain and Officers, 'Chuffs and Puffs' and Ratings all paid their respects as practically everyone had bought him a bottle of his favourite tipple which he promptly poured into a 'Pussers Rum Fanny' for an impromptu 'Tot Session' As for 'His Lads' on the Buffers Party, we had our own 'Special' touch by placing a decorated toilet seat from the old Laundry around his neck inscribed 'CPO 'Buck' Taylor Buffer to the Nobility'. We then all pulled him on a trolley holding my little gift of a bottle of Bourbon, through the Main Gates of Blackcap for the very last time to a waiting Taxi and to resounding cheers and 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow' AND SO SAY ALL OF US and there was not a 'dry eye' in the house. His lads were so overawed by the occasion that I felt obliged to take them down to the 'Thorn' for drinks on me.

IT ALWAYS PAYS TO DO SOMEONE A GOOD TURN RATHER THAN A BAD ONE..... HOW I MISS 'GOOD OLD BLACKCAP'