

BANJO'S BIKE

I busy buffing up the floor in the Senior Rates Mess one morning at RNAS Lee-on-Solent or HMS Daedalus in 1953. I had recently arrived from HMS Curlew, St Merryn where I had been on an Armourers Course. Not wishing to be an Armourer I had requested to come off course before 'Final Exams' Several of my colleagues had also decided that a 'Bombheads Course' was not for them and had made similar requests to be repatriated. As a result 7 of us were returned to Daedalus hopefully for re-categorisation. In my particular case I was joined by my big oppo Bill Bailey and lodged in 'Lee Pool' with all the other misfits and guy's waiting for Draft Chits to God knows where.

I had subsequently been recruited by one of my old CPO's as Senior Rates Messman. Not the menial job that every Junior Rate seemed to hate. On the contrary I loved it and had already created quite an 'Empire' by thoroughly spoiling the 'Chuffs and Puff's with those little luxuries which were only afforded to Officers. Naturally enough one had to be in the know and as I had the Senior Rates Messes I could almost control supplies and commodities in order to obtain reciprocal favours. Cooks and Stewards were my particular oppos together with anyone else who could be useful to our 'Cause' and make life generally more pleasant for everyone. It was probably at 'Lee' when I developed a complex concerning Officers in particular 'If they did not need to know then don't tell them' I can honestly say, without any disrespect to any of my Officers, that in all my service with the Royal Navy this maxim served me well. Together of course with the ability to look one in the eye and lie magnificently.

Happily buffing away at the deck in the Senior Rates lounge and whistling to no one in particular other than the musical hum of the electric polisher which suddenly cut out and stopped. Looking back at the power point I saw that the culprit was none other than Petty Officer Cook 'Banjo' Bartram holding one end of the electric lead in his hand and grinning like a Cheshire Cat. 'Banjo's' grin was unmistakable anyway as the gaps in his front teeth were reminiscent of the proverbial NAAFI piano, 'One Black, One White and One Missing' My immediate reaction was hostility as I had a very tight schedule as usual and was running a little late. 'Banjo' and I were on very good terms as he like most of his staff was actively involved in 'Our Empire'. "Come on Banjo, play the bloody white man I've got the Senior Rates 'Stand Easy' eats to prepare yet"? Looking around nervously Banjo enquired "Do you want to buy my motor bike"? Banjo's bike was legendary, no one had ever seen it running. In fact no one had ever seen it as it was hidden underneath a green tarpaulin in the Senior Rates Car Park. Rumours had it that the bike was an old heap but no one could verify this. "What do I want with a bloody motor bike"? I asked, sounding a bit agitated but realising that Banjo must be desperate to seek me out during working hours. Something in my brain which always seemed to give me a reminder when a potential deal was imminent.

Deciding to test my theory I decided to play a waiting game. "Banjo old son, can you please give me a look after 'Stand Easy' I'm really pushed right now"? I pleaded looking at my watch. "OK JR, see you then" Grinned Banjo as he replaced the plug into the socket and disappeared. As I was just about finished anyway, I stowed away the polisher and busied myself preparing the urns for the Senior Rates 'Stand Easy'. My mate 'Wiggy' had just delivered a tray of hot sausage rolls which I knew would be demolished in minutes. During 'Stand Easy' I happened to mention to one of the 'Squadron Tiffies' 'Banjo's Bike' and to my surprise he said that one of his killicks had serviced the bike recently. "You will

need to speak to L/A 'Whistler' Woolner, he did the service on Banjo's bike and should be able to fill you in with all the gen on it"? Replied the Chief 'Tiff' as 'Out Pipes' sounded and the lounge emptied like magic. As I was clearing away and tidying up Banjo appeared in front of my 'Pantry'. "Well" he said emphatically. "Well What"? I replied trying to sound disinterested. "Do you want to buy my motor bike"? Demanded Banjo. "Why should I want to buy a motor bike when I could just as easily buy a car"? Their followed one of those awful silences before Banjo replied. "Well you could use it on the Base here to get around". I must confess that Banjo had just hit a nerve. I really needed transport to fulfil my current obligations on site and to generally get around. "How much do you want for it assuming it will ever run again"? I enquired sarcastically. "What do you mean run, I turned the engine over yesterday". Said Banjo looking rather hurt. "How much Banjo"? I said firmly this time. Another awful exasperating pause. "Twenty five quid". Said Banjo folding his arms resolutely. "Is it taxed and insured"? I asked. "Well", said Banjo hesitating, "It's insured but not taxed". Replied Banjo confidently. "How Come"? I asked. "The Road Tax has expired" replied Banjo nodding his head. "OK Banjo, I'll tell you what, if you tax it and include me on your insurance I will buy it for twenty five quid". Without a moments hesitation Banjo replied "OK done, it's a deal I'm going into Fareham tomorrow and I will take care of the details.

It subsequently transpired that I became the owner of a 1939 Velocette 350cc motor cycle and sidecar, a WW2 Dispatch Rider's crash helmet and a leather Pilot's helmet with goggles with which Banjo had been dubbed as 'George Formby' or 'Biggles'. Seeking out 'Whistler' Woolner to check out the machine who fortunately knew just about every type of engine imaginable, it would seem that I had made a very good deal indeed. The acquisition of this machine and sidecar enabled me to establish and maintain our lucrative side line' and business interests for the next few months. The dreaded 'Finger of Fate' which called me to the 'Drafting Commander's' Office just after Christmas and in early 1955 when I was apparently compulsory posted to an AH 3's Course at HMS Siskin, Fort Rowner, Gosport required an immediate assessment, reluctance but obvious disbandment of a most lucrative 'Empire' There was only one thing left to do and that was to 'Auction' my motor bike. The venue was to be, naturally, the Senior Rates Mess on Friday 'Social Night' what else? Tickets were £1 each and limited to no more than 2 per person (Joke) and went like a bomb. The winner was announced by the Captain's wife and to add respectability and perhaps legitimacy to the proceedings I managed to recoup the sum of almost £150. A relatively small beginning to what was to become even more lucrative in the years to come.

I WONDER WHAT HAPPENED TO BANJO'S BIKE ?