

BUDDY CAN YOU SPARE A TANK OF GAS

By John Redfern

My days at the RNAS Stretton, HMS Blackcap near Warrington, Lancashire were both eventful and lucrative. The opportunity to make a few quid was seldom far from the minds of 'The Buffer's Party' and were sometimes very difficult to resist. With our 'Party' being entitled to 'Blue Special Duty Station Cards' it could be almost likened to Count Dracula being placed in charge of a blood bank.

At this time during the 1950's Blackcap had practically ceased to exist as a former front line operational Fleet Air Arm base. The Squadrons had long gone and the personnel complement had been greatly reduced. The base was being slowly run down prior to de-commissioning. For a short time Blackcap had been the home of 767 Squadron nicknamed the 'Clockwork Mice' and consisted of a few old aircraft such as Firefly's, or Firebrands in fact anything capable of flying circuits around the airfield circuit. These aircraft were used to train the Deck Landing Control Officers or 'Bats' and they performed DLP's or 'Touch and Goes'. With the recent invention and installation of the 'Angle Deck' and 'Mirror Landing Systems' on all Aircraft Carriers the DLCO's were gradually becoming obsolete.

The hangars and airfield paraphernalia were being demolished and sold off to private contractors under the watchful eye of 'The Buffer's Party'. As an illustrious member of this elite party and together with two oppos I was instructed to carry out a systematic and accurate inventory of everything on the Airfield including hangars, shelters, storerooms and the like and classify the items into two categories, namely, 'For Sale to Civilian Contractors' or 'Disposal or Destruction' This detailed inventory was to be completed on a daily basis and submitted to the Base Administration Staff under the direct instructions of the Station Commanding Officer who had naturally delegated this responsibility to 'The Buffer'

As the Buffers Party could come and go very much as they pleased their movements were usually ignored. This of course paved the way for most of them to make a few quid from 'perks' which varied from the routine chores with perhaps a little embellishment, to the more 'chance your arm' ones. Many of the Buffers Party had their own particular 'scams'. The Buffer had a 'Smallholding' nearby where he kept pigs, chickens and a fairly large well stocked allotment which was tended by one of the local old gentlemen. The pigs were fed luxuriously by 'gash' and surplus food which one of us carted down every day to boil up in the copper to make 'swill'. A few of the other lads supplemented their income by painting and decorating or domestic improvements to married quarters accommodation. Others had a firewood, coal and coke delivery service. We also had a fresh meat market on Fridays especially for the men residing off base. One of our mottos being 'If you need it we can get it' or 'If you don't want it we can shift it'.

There were several others which helped to swell the coffers and boost a poor Sailors pay. I enjoyed a wonderful working relationship with the men on the nearby USAF Base who provided just about anything one would need and included tinned foodstuffs from the Base PX. Toys for the kids direct from the USA or bases in Europe were flown in on their almost daily shuttle flights. I also had a sort of 'antiques' business too as the 'Yanks' were always anxious to take something back to the States from the 'Old Country' and I was always glad to do my bit for Anglo American relations.

The Buffer, bless his old heart, loved American Bourbon and I usually managed to scrounge him a bottle every week to keep him quiet. All our activities were mutually beneficial to all concerned and everyone generally turned 'a blind eye' as none of them were considered harmful. I also had a daily run to a local Bookmaker to place bets from our base. My contacts at the USAF Base were their two Supply Sergeants whom I regarded as 'Definitely Dodgy' or 'Handled With Care' Their nicknames aptly were 'Hymie The Fink' and 'Angie The Wop'. Both were extremely important as their base was fully operational at this time and 'anything' which moved 'on' or 'off' the Base had to go through them. They controlled absolutely everything and their Commanding Colonel and his Officers relied on them completely. They controlled 'Operational Stores' and 'Base Personnel Requirements' and could get 'anything' at a price. Although they were disliked intensely my relationship was more or less pretty good but kept very much at a respectable distance. Unfortunately they both had rather a nasty side to their nature which included a hatred of all Officers which I felt was rather stupid.

They ran 'illegal gambling' on the Base which they controlled like 'Mafia' with whom they were rumoured to have connections back in the States. By comparison I was absolute 'small fry' and I always chose to let them believe this fact. The USAF Base personnel had a 'Ration Card' which allowed them to purchase goods from the PX or their version of our NAAFI. They could purchase absolutely anything and were allowed two 40 ounce bottles of spirits every fortnight and as much beer or wine as they wished. Hymie and Angie managed to get hold of a spare 'Ration Card' from an Officer who had returned to the States and I used to have a monthly order of Blackcap requirements which were delivered at a pre arranged rendezvous. My regular order was 2 bottles of either Jack Daniels or Jim Beam Bourbon a case of Schlitz and a case of Budweiser beer. Occasionally I could get hold of the odd case of strong German beer. I was able to supplement these supplies from other sources or from guys who unofficially sold their liquor allowance. I was also able to get hold of items such as Gebharts Chilli, the finest I've ever tasted, real American coffee and many other items not available in British shops. Trade between the Bases was flourishing and even an unofficial visit by one of their fuel Bowsers to unload some spare octane from our airfield tanks one week end apparently went completely unnoticed by everyone including me.

It is said that all good things must come to an end and in my case this was rather abruptly and the details rather unsavoury. Fortunately the situation was later resolved and a much better and happier liaison restored. The unscrupulous 'Angie' and 'Hymie' were victims of their own greed and stupidity which eventually caused their downfall and I am pleased to say that the 'Buffer's Party played a small part in it as did the 'Yanks' on their Base who loathed the pair intensely. It hardly bears thinking where the 'long knives' actually came from and who wielded them and it caused some considerable speculation. Perhaps no one will ever know.

I got to hear of this particular incident from one of my other American friends on the Base. It appeared that one of our Junior Officers at Blackcap had for some reason or another, got himself involved with the unsavoury American Sergeants 'Hymie' and 'Angie' over a rather large gambling debt. The Officer concerned was a really decent sort and highly regarded by everyone at Blackcap. I approached the two Supply Sergeants and even offered to 'square the debt' but they steadfastly refused which merely reinforced their hatred of all Officers. Realising the now obvious fact that if ever this got out and became public knowledge it would have finished the Officer concerned, desperate measures were called

for. A rather mysterious chain of events rapidly followed which were quite unexplainable and will forever remain so. It seems that the Commanding Officer at the USAF Base received an anonymous telephone call to the effect that his Base Supply Sergeants, ie 'Hymie' and 'Angie' were involved in a 'High Level Scam Operation' involving United States Government Property'. No one ever discovered the source of this information but rumours suggested it may have originated from a 'Police Special Branch' source. As this information was swiftly acted upon as it breached US Federal Regulations, both the Sergeants were arrested and appeared before a hastily convened 'Courts Martial' and within 48 hours, flown back to the United States where they were committed to the Military Prison at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. An official enquiry at both bases later concluded that the Supply Sergeants had acted together and completely alone, thereby exonerating everyone from the respective Bases in any blame. This of course came as a great relief to everyone with connections or a 'foot in both camps'. I am pleased to say that with two weeks replacement Supply Sergeants had been flown in from Germany to 'sort out the mess' and I soon received a polite telephone from them to re establish liaison between our respective bases.

I HAVE BEEN ASKED MANY TIMES 'JUST WHO DID MAKE THAT TELEPHONE CALL TO 'SPECIAL BRANCH' ?