

DOG - GONE

Isn't it strange how Matelots and particularly 'Handlers' always seem to have that inbuilt ability to spot an opportunity to make a few quid or to use an Americanism, 'Make a Fast Buck'. In my particular case whilst stationed at the RNAS Stretton or HMS Blackcap these opportunities frequently arose due to my liaisons with the USAF at their nearby base of Burtonwood. 'The Yanks' bless their hearts were extremely gullible and simply easy pickings if one were to really try and exploit their kindly nature. Fortunately for me my dealings were always good and pretty well up front. The reason for this was mainly due to my close friendship with the Base's two 'Top Supply Sergeants' who were responsible for practically everything from equipment, supply logistics, operational stores and personnel requisites. I had a flourishing trade in 'Antiques' to name but one of my perks. We used to frequently exchange goods usually for reciprocal favours.

I was enjoying my morning coffee at 'Stand Easy' when the telephone rang in the Buffer's Office. Picking it up I recognised the voice at the other end as 'Sherm' Brewster one of the Supply Sergeants at the USAF Base and perhaps one of my best oppos along with his other Supply Sergeant Steve Marcowicz. "What's up Sherm and what can I do you for"? I enquired pleasantly. "Don't you laugh now but Steve and I have bought a dog". "What sort of a dog"? I found myself asking. "Well I guess it's sort of a Greyhound" Sherm replied a little hesitantly. "Bloody hell Sherm it's either a Greyhound or it's not can't you tell the difference"? "Well, the guy we won it from said it was a Champion Pedigree" Said Sherm quite positively. "Whoa there old son, wait a minute now, what do you mean, you won it"? "Well, Steve and I won it in a Poker Game". Sherm replied with a little more confidence. "What do you buggers intend to do with this dog"? I enquired sarcastically. There was a momentary pause before Sherm replied "We're gonna race it of course what else"?

The next ten minutes were spent enquiring the extent of their knowledge about Greyhound Racing and their care and training. "Ah well that is where you come in. Steve and I kinda figured that you'd give us a few pointers"? Alarm bells suddenly began to ring. "Where is the dog now and what are you feeding it"? I felt obliged to ask Sherm. "Don't worry old buddy the dog is fine the dog is in kennels at the Enlisted Men's Quarters and one of the guys on the Air Police Canine Section is keeping an eye on things. We've got it all figured out"? Sherm replied. "Say why don't you come over and we can grab a couple of beers at the NCO's Club. I'll leave a pass for you at the Gate and you could have a look see for yourself, say around 7.30pm"? Sherm answered reading my mind.

Hanging up the phone I shook my head sadly and in total disbelief. How on earth could those two Colonial idiots think of such a thing, they must be out of their minds as I knew that their remaining time over here was limited and they had to return to the States quite soon and to take on a Racing Dog was quite ridiculous?. Pausing for a moment to reflect that we had enjoyed some really good times together and made a few quid too. I had developed a very lucrative sideline in a number of things. There were 'The Antiques', 'China Figurines' from the Potteries. The latter being extremely popular as my Mother and several members of my family were actively involved in the industry and were allowed to purchase items from their 'Factory Shop' at a greatly reduced price of course. Sometimes when I returned from week-end leave I was laden like a camel. The 'Yanks' absolutely adored these 'Figurines' and the demand often outweighed the supply.

True to form Sherm and Steve met me at the Main Gate where a huge American 'Snowdrop' complete with white spats and a .45 Colt revolver on his hip beckoned me through. Off we went almost whispering until we were out of earshot. "Why are we all whispering"? I enquired. "Well, you just don't know who is listening around here and Steve and I are not exactly sure whether all this is on the 'Up and Up' yet"? Sherm whispered. Sitting down in a quiet corner of the NCO's Club or 'The Rod and Gun Club' sipping our beers. The saga of the Greyhound began to unfold and it soon became quite obvious that my American buddies here were the unwitting victims of a 'Scam' or if you pardon the pun 'Bought a Pup'. It appeared that Sherm and Steve had been just two of the hapless members of an off base rather large week-end 'Poker Game'. These games were of course strictly against regulations and had been since the Wartime Bomber Crews were in residence on base. These games were highly organised and in view of the often large sums of money being won and lost they were outlawed and any USAF personnel found gambling were immediately sent back to the United States in disgrace. I have to say that I was extremely surprised that Sherm and Steve had actually taken part in this activity.

In view of the strict regulations governing gambling these games took place off base and usually in some private house nearby and some hefty sums of money had been involved to such an extent that the local Constabulary had been alerted. These venues were so secret that the venue was not usually known until a short time before the game. It subsequently transpired that both Sherm and Steve had enjoyed a massive winning streak and that one of the locals in order to cover his bet, offered the Greyhound as stake money. The man claimed that the Greyhound, purchased quite legitimately from the owner and had won several races in the Manchester area and was quite valuable. I raised a quizzical eyebrow at this point which brought worried looks from the two. A short walk from the NCO's Club to the enlisted men's quarters I found myself stroking the most gorgeous brindle greyhound bitch I have ever seen. She had a quite distinctive white blaze on top of her head and really was a superb animal.

For the next two hours I did my best to try and explain to Sherm and Steve the rudiments of Greyhound Racing in general and in particular, that in addition to being an almost fanatical sport the control of animals, breeding and licensed tracks was strictly controlled by Regulations. Another form of the sport was Whippet Racing in the North of England and referred to by some as 'Rag Racing' Many of these meetings were held on Sunday mornings and a great deal of money could change hands. This simplified form of racing involved two people and a dog. One of them would hold the dog whilst the other waited at far end of the agreed distance ready to 'Wave a Rag' when the dog was released. The theory was that the dog would run towards the person waving the 'Rag' At a given signal all the dogs would be released at the same time and the winning dog would grab the 'Rag' first. Betting at times could be quite fierce and sometimes quite unscrupulous tactics would be employed. One of these was to slip a rubber band around the nose of the dog to prevent it from grabbing 'The Rag' the winner of course would be agreed upon beforehand by the respective dog owners thereby cheating the Bookmakers. As these meetings were illegal gatherings it was not uncommon to see members of the local Constabulary acting on a tip off, raid the meeting causing all the participants to 'Leg It' quickly.

My two American colleagues listened to my disclosures gained from the 'University of Hard Knocks Fountain of Knowledge' in total awe as I emphasised to them in simplistic terms that they would be like proverbial 'Lambs to the Slaughter' at their obvious lack of knowledge in such matters and that they would be completely out of their depth by persons

who had been born and bred into this 'Dog Racing' community. A number of alternatives were discussed including me racing the dog for them, which I rejected completely as my intimate knowledge of such matters for once, let me down. I did however suggest they seek the professional advice of someone more learned than myself and who could be trusted enough to keep his mouth shut and to my relief Sherm and Steve readily agreed. I did suggest that they should sell the dog but as they had really been bitten by the 'Racing Bug' they were quite adamant.

There is a well worn adage in my book which roughly translated means 'If I do not happen to know something, I will always find a person who does'. In this particular case the Landlord of 'The Thorn' John Sutton was that very person. The Thorn almost bisected the two halves of the RNAS Stretton and was the watering hole for many of the Base personnel during its heyday. The Thorn was a popular meeting place and in my case was a sort of 'Halfway House for Highwaymen' John thought the world of the lads at Blackcap, after all they provided the bulk of his livelihood trade for many years and it just happened that he like many of the local publicans knew a little about everything. When the question of Greyhounds and Whippets arose, his face lit up in a knowing kind of way. It transpired that his father and grandfather before him had forgotten more about the subject than I would ever know and it was my turn to listen rapturously to John's tales concerning it. During our conversation his advice and words of wisdom made me a little uneasy and I decided that caution would be well advised. A friend of John's who just happened to be a member of the local CID was none other than a Detective Sergeant Porter. Commonly known by the sobriquet of 'Bobby' because of his many years on 'The Beat' before reaching his exalted rank in the plain clothes branch. Bobby was a larger than life character who enjoyed a drink or several particularly if they happened to be free. I had met him a couple of times at various local hostleries and he had regarded me with something of a beady eye look that I decided to give him a wide berth.

It seemed that 'Bobby' was something of an expert when it came to Greyhound and Whippet Racing although where and when he raced them was anyone's guess. Wherever it was I doubt very much whether his Superintendent would have approved. For me this could well prove to be something of a 'Trump Card' in my search for information. Asking John if he could put the word out that there was a potentially Champion Greyhound currently a secret location, whose owners would be interested in a race or two. Realising that this would be too good an opportunity to miss for some of the local 'Fanciers', it seemed a relatively simple matter to 'bait the hook' and wait for a bite so to speak.

The bite was not long in coming but not quite in the way I had envisaged for the following day when I called in again at the Thorn, John whispered in my ear "Bobby Porter is in the Smoke Room and wants to see you"?. He ushered me into the deserted Smoke Room and introduced me to a huge man whom I recognised immediately. Bobby was large by any standards, florid in complexion, several chins and massive hands like dinner plates, one of which he smilingly extended in my direction. "Bob, this is JR from the Base, he is a regular fellow and knows the ropes a bit"! To my amazement Bobby replied, " I have heard about you and it seems like we know some of the same people". I was not quite certain how to take this remark so I ignored it. Sitting down at a nearby table John placed a couple of pints of best bitter in front of us. Bobby wrapped a huge hand around the handle and took a long pull at his beer before replying. "Now then JR, I understand that you are the representative for a couple of chaps who have a Greyhound to run, is that right"? " Er, not quite Mr Porter, I am just friendly with a couple of chaps who have recently bought a

pedigree Greyhound which they want to race and as I know absolutely nothing whatsoever about such things I promised to ask around for them". "Do you know these men very well"? Bobby enquired taking another pull at his pint. "I know them fairly well and think they are decent blokes and they simply asked if I could enquire on their behalf that's all, why do you ask"? Bobby drained his glass and indicated to John that he needed a refill. "Well JR, it's like this, a very good friend of mine owns a valuable Greyhound bitch which he intended to race and breed from her but she has been stolen"! I almost choked on my pint as I desperately fought to regain my composure and thoughts. "No Mr Porter, I'm quite convinced that the chaps I know would never resort to such a thing". "Are you quite positive of this"? Bobby enquired fixing me with a steely gaze the way that only Coppers do. "I would stake my life on it that they would never do anything like that Mr Porter" I replied firmly. Bobby pulled his chair closer. "I will be perfectly straight with you now JR, have you by any chance seen this dog at all"? He said fixing me once again with the kind of stare which makes the hairs on the back of your neck bristle. Deciding to bluff it out, I took a long pull at my pint before answering and trying not to give too much away. "Yes Mr Porter, I have seen the dog briefly just once"? I replied, this time fixing him with a stare. "Describe her to me then"? Bobby almost demanded. Taking another long pull at my pint and almost causing him apoplexy I slowly replied. "Well, let me see. I'm not too sure whether it was a bitch or a dog but the animal I saw was brindle with a white blaze"

Bobby's eyes gleamed in triumph. "I bloody well knew it, it's her, where is this dog right now"? He demanded. I stared hard at him. "I honestly don't know. I simply have a phone number to telephone if I hear anything" I replied hopefully convincingly. "Look here JR, you realise I could probably lift you for aiding and abetting and being an accessory to stealing the dog"? Said Bobby now sounding quite menacing. Deciding to take the initiative, I stood up and looked down at him. "I don't think you can Bob as I have nothing whatsoever to do with this dog at all, I just know the two chaps who own it that's all, my conscience is quite clear and I don't think you can prove otherwise do you"? "They bloody well stole her then didn't they"? Bobby insisted. "No they did not, these men are not thieves and they won the dog in a card game fair and square by all accounts"? I thought for a moment Bobby was going to explode. "A bloody card game"? He almost bawled. I cut him short before he could continue his ranting. I held up my hand to stop him saying anything further. "That is all I am prepared to say on the matter just now"? Bobby's attitude suddenly softened. He smiled and said softly. "Do you think you can get her back, as a favour to me, you see she is owned by one of my senior officers and as I am up for promotion I certainly wouldn't want anything to interfere with that, if you know what I mean. It would stand me in good stead as he is desperate to get her back and he will do anything. He has already offered a reward of £250 as she is so valuable"?

"Fair enough then Bob, as it appears that I am the only contact that you've got and together with the fact that I do not wish for my two chums to get into any trouble, I will try and get the dog back for you"? I told him. "What do you want me to do then JR"? "Just back off for a couple of days and give me some slack, leave me your telephone number and one more thing. If any of your CID mates try and interfere and bullshit me then the deal is off is that quite clear Bob"? Bobby held out his hand again and smiled. "I think we understand each other don't we? I promise you JR you do this for me and I will never forget it"? "Just one more thing Bob before you go, leave the reward money with John behind the bar here, no questions asked and leave the rest to me"? We departed all smiles but underneath I was quite angry. Realising that there was no time to be lost as Sherm and Steve could be in real trouble if Bobby got wind of things.

In desperation I telephoned the USAF Base. There was an agonising wait before Sherm's voice answered. "What's up old buddy"? He enquired cheerily. Listen up pal, you and Steve have only gone and got yourselves a stolen Greyhound"! There was an awful silence before an incredulous Sherm answered again. "What do you mean, stolen, the guy we won it from seemed an OK kind of guy, I don't understand"? Replied a now very much shaken Sherm. "Just listen Sherm, this dog belongs to someone very big with a local crime connection and they are asking a lot of questions, you have to get rid of the dog fast, do you understand what I am saying to you"? "You bet your goddam life I do, just wait till I tell Steve he will go bananas just what the hell are we going to do, you've got to help us out buddy"? On hearing this I felt just a little bit relieved as I had thought of a perfect way out of this awkward situation. "Look Sherm, ring me tomorrow morning around 1000 and I will have some more news for you OK"?

The following morning at 'Stand Easy' in the Buffer's Store the phone rang. It was Sherm and Steve was beside him, both were almost in a state of panic. "Listen you guys and listen well. I've thought of a way to get you both out of this mess. I've found the owner of the dog. Now when do you guys ship out back to the States"? There was a momentary silence before Sherm answered. "We move out in two weeks time why"? I decided to over dramatise my plan just a little and trying hard to stifle a smile I replied. "If the owner finds out you have the dog you will never make the flight home if you get my drift"? "Holy Shit" came the two voices simultaneously at the other end of the phone. "What are we going to do"? Sherm enquired. "Listen guys, I know a fellow who can return the dog to the owner with no questions asked. No one will know that you had it in the first place and no one will get hurt"? "That sounds great JR, we'll do whatever you say"? ". Just one more thing boys I know we are pals but this guy wants fifty quid to return the dog and no questions asked is that OK with you"? I enquired casually. "Gee thanks JR, that sounds great and we are off the hook yes"? Replied Sherm breathing an obvious sigh of relief. "That's right boys and no one will be any the wiser for it". "OK then guys, this is the deal. I want you to bring the dog to me here, tomorrow lunch time at 1300 exactly I will meet you at the entrance to the North Camp. You give me the dog and fifty quid and then bugger off as quickly as you can is that clear"? "Yes that's a Roger JR"? Replied Sherm and Steve. "Just one more thing, give me an hour to set this up and when you call me back I will simply say 'It's On or it's Off' have you got that"? "We got it that is another Roger JR" They both replied.

My very next phone call was to John at 'The Thorn' "Has Bobby left anything for me"? I enquired. "He certainly has, you've only just missed him, he left a couple of minutes ago"? Replied John. That's good I thought to myself I didn't want to run into him just yet. "By the way John have you still got that old kennel in the back yard near the bottle store"? "Yes, why"? He asked sounding puzzled. "No reason, I'll see you later tonight."? My next call was to Sergeant Bobby himself. Fishing in my wallet for the number he had left me I dialled it. Almost immediately a male voice answered " Warrington Police, Duty Sergeant speaking". I found myself asking for Detective Sergeant Porter. Seconds later his recognisable gruff voice answered "CID, DS Porter"? "Hello Bob, it's JR here" I replied. "Hello JR nice to hear from you, have you got some good news for me and did you get my envelope"? He enquired pleasantly. "Yes Bob, I have some very good news and at 2pm sharp tomorrow I shall have some even better news for you". "That is excellent" Replied Bobby. Sounding almost beside himself. "I can't thank you enough JR for what you have done" "That's OK Bob, I will have to be quick, be at the 'Thorn' at 2pm. sharp tomorrow speak to the Landlord John who will have what you want. I'm sure I will see you sometime, so goodbye for now"? I hung up and carefully considered my next move. A quick phone call to the 'Yanks' to say

"It's on for tomorrow". Now for a quick shower and change into civvies, a swift pint in the Thorn and maybe the 'Pussers Bus' into Warrington. As I walked into the Bar John handed me a brown envelope. "Aren't you going to open it" He enquired. "Why, I know what is in it" I replied cheekily. "John, will you do me a big favour tomorrow"? "That depends" He replied suspiciously. "It's nothing sinister I just want you to meet Bobby Porter by the back gate to your yard. Don't say anything just take him to the kennel. I promise I will explain later to you OK"? "Fair enough JR I know nowt" Replied John with a wink and a tap on his nose. "Mum's the word Eh".

The following day at 5 minutes to 1 I stationed myself at the unmanned main gate of the Base's North Camp. Moments later the familiar Jeep of Sherm and Steve drew up alongside. They jumped out quickly and opened the rear tail gate to reveal the little beauty herself happily wagging her tail. Her lead was quickly handed to me by Sherm and at the same time Steve thrust a bundle of currency wrapped tightly in a rubber band into my other hand. In a flash both men leapt back into the Jeep and with a quick " We'll call you later"? drove off in a cloud of dust the way they had come. I tiptoed carefully along the hedgerow making my way towards the side gate of 'The Thorn'. Quietly opening the gate I could see that the yard was empty. So far so good, I thought to myself as I made for the kennel just a few yards away. There was a bowl of fresh water outside and the dog eagerly dashed towards it. Seizing my chance I clipped the dog lead onto the metal wandering chain. Giving my four legged friend a reassuring farewell pat I retraced my steps backwards and out through the gate again making my escape without discovery. I had scarcely gone 50 yards before I heard the dog barking loudly. Resisting the urge to scarp and establish the obvious I decided to slip into the pub by the main entrance as I would normally at this time of the day so as not to arouse suspicion. The Landlord's wife Joyce was behind the bar and greeted me with her usual smile. "Hello JR how are you"? She enquired pleasantly. "Top drawer Joyce, as usual, what's going on outside"? I asked her. "I don't know but everyone has disappeared, something about a missing Greyhound I think" She answered furiously polishing a glass. To coin an old phrase and embrace a golden opportunity that 'discretion was the better part of valour' I quickly finished my pint and left by the side door. Grabbing my trusty 'Pusser's Red Special' I pedalled like mad towards the main camp for a belated 'Tot' and Lunch.

It was around 1400 when I got back to the 'Buffer's Store' the reception was almost hostile from the lads. "Where the f.....g hell have you been, the phone has been red hot and every bugger has been after you for something"? " Who was it rang"? I enquired pleasantly. "Well, there was John at the 'Thorn' for a start, then there was some Yank up at Burtonwood and I couldn't understand a bloody word he said" Said another. I picked up the phone and rang John at the 'Thorn' first. "Guess what"? He bellowed, "Some bugger has only left a bloody Greyhound tied up in my yard. The bloody thing has been barking it's head off and Bobby Porter has just taken it home. The daftest thing was when I asked him about it he told me to ask you". Trying hard not to laugh I managed to say. "Calm down John, I will be in tonight and explain everything OK"? Another quick phone call to Sherm and Steve at the USAF Base found a very relieved and grateful pair of Supply Sergeants who could not wait to tell me that their 'Draft Chits' back to the States and 'Civvy Street ' had been brought forward one week. Promising to see them both before they left I assured them that the 'Local Crime Boss' was delighted with the outcome and had decided not to take the matter further and that they were 'Off The Hook'

Time for one last call to the 'Nick' and Detective Sergeant 'Bobby' Porter who was absolutely 'Over the Moon' as was his Chief Superintendent who apparently owned the dog called 'Lovely Laura'. "I can't thank you enough JR for what you have done and the reward money was well spent. Do you know how much that little dog was worth"? Bobby enquired. "I haven't the faintest idea Bob, how much"? There was a chuckle at the other end of the phone. "Well JR, not counting stud fees she would be worth at least £2,000 of anyone's money". I was almost speechless. "Are you still there JR"? Asked Bobby still chuckling. "You crafty old sod Bob". Was all I could think of. "Remember JR, if there is ever anything I can do for you in the future, you only have to ask". Replied Bobby as he replaced the phone. "I'm sure I can think of something" I muttered to myself. A few days later I saw that Sherm and Steve had a wonderful send off from Blackcap and Bentwaters naturally enough in the 'Thorn' where John and his wife Joyce did us all proud with a most splendid party and buffet. At it's conclusion, there was not a dry eye in the house and to top it all was a surprise visit from the newly promoted Detective Inspector 'Bobby' Porter. I did make my peace with the Landlord John who took everything in good part when I told him the full story. "One thing that has puzzled me John since this affair, how on earth did you remember to leave a bowl of fresh water near the kennel that day"? John looked puzzled. "I always leave a fresh bowl of water for the customer's dogs when their owners are in the pub, otherwise they don't get a drink at all. Now tell me honestly JR did you have anything to do with that bloody Greyhound"? I smiled at him. "Maybe just a little bit John but I know a man who did".