

LADIES & GENTLEMEN – ‘IN THE RED CORNER’

Stand Easy's in the Buffer's Party Office at HMS Blackcap or the RNAS Stretton back in the 1950's were more of a Social Gathering than a short break for a cup of tea. Every day at 10.15 am seemed like an AGM as it seemed like everyone from their own particular 'part of ship' was represented. Perhaps it was more to do with what was on offer than just tea. For a start there was real ground coffee, courtesy of the nearby USAF Base. In addition, there were cakes and sandwiches and occasionally 'oggies' or sausage rolls were found on the 'Bill of Fare'. It had been known for the odd Senior Rate to wander in just about 'Scuttlebutt Time'

It was hardly surprising really as the 'Buffer's Party' or to be more precise, the 'Barrack Master's Party' had their fingers in just about every pie there was. As usual I was engrossed in the 'Telegraph' with one ear on the proceedings, just in case something financial advantageous should manifest themselves. "What do you think JR"? Someone asked. "About what"? I Enquired. It transpired that the discussion involved the local 'Village Hall' needing funds to complete a major restoration. Many of the villagers and old Ships Company had enjoyed the Dances and Socials on the Base at the 'Slipstream Club' but as this once venerable institution had recently closed it's doors for ever, the Village Hall was the venue for the usual 'Saturday Night Hop', so perhaps it was only fitting that we should be asked to support the project. My immediate question was of course. "How much do they need"? "Well, it seems that the roof will cost at least five hundred quid." Someone else replied. "You could donate that yourself JR"? Someone else suggested amid laughter.

Having already disposed of the 'Why', the additional questions posed were 'How, What and Where'. As I at one time or another been either directly or indirectly involved in 'Social' functions and the odd financial enterprise, I suppose it was a perfectly logical question to ask. Having unanimously agreed in principle to support the venture I respectfully asked to a temporary postponement of any arrangements until I had the opportunity of making further enquiries. The reason for this request was mainly to allow me to place the Senior Rates Mess Daily Bets. The office emptied like magic leaving my pal Jock to man the telephones and hold the fort.

Several suggestions had already been put forward including Dances, Raffles, Sporting events involving our pals 'The Yanks' who were always included in our plans as they had been greatly involved many times in the past. I felt that on this occasion something quite unique and a 'one off' were called for. At such times of crisis I inevitably telephoned my cousin Ray who ran an extremely successful 'Working Men's Club' about 20 miles away and who had some marvellous contacts some of whom I had already done business with in the past.

Acting on Ray's usual sound advice I telephoned a mutual friend Frank, an extremely wealthy Scrap Metal Dealer from Manchester. Frank was a larger than life character and if he happened to take a shine to you, nothing was impossible. Frank absolutely adored my cousin and I got on well with him too mainly due to some profitable dealings in the past. "How much do you want Kiddo"? Laughed Frank in that unmistakable gruff Mancunian accent of his. I explained exactly what it was for and I guessed around £800. "In that case Kiddo I will get some of the lads to make a donation, you've already met some of them so you can count on at least a grand. I'll leave the money with John at 'The Thorn' will that suit

you”? Thanking Frank most sincerely I had a secondary thought. “By the way Frank, I would like your advice on how to organise a ‘Wrestling Match’ at the Base here”? There was a loud chuckle at the other end as Frank answered. “You need to talk to my old mate Morrie Burman, he runs all the Wrestling in Liverpool and Manchester. He owes me a couple of favours so if I give him a call and get him to ring you will that be OK”? “Absolutely perfect Frank thank you”. “Look Kiddo, I’ve got to dash now so if you’ve got any problems just give me a bell OK”? I felt quite elated when I hung up the phone. I don’t know why Wrestling even cropped up at all. Perhaps it’s because it was all the rage throughout the Country at this time.

Jock, Paddy and I together with a few of the other ‘Buffer’s Party’ were still conducting a daily survey and inventory of the old Aerodrome and remaining items which had been left for final disposal. All the abandoned, obsolete and wrecked aircraft, minus ‘compass alcohol’ had gone for scrap some time ago. The massive hangars were now completely deserted, apart from the huge empty fuel containers and diesel tanks which still had to be disposed of at some stage. As we surveyed the scene we could not help but dwell on the fact that up until a comparatively short time ago, this Operational Air Station would have been alive with the daily routines and the general hustle and bustle. As each Squadron had dispersed and each hangar systematically cleared and its massive hangar door closed for the last time and padlocked. I could not help but imagine just how many people these huge hangars would actually hold. Ah! Now there’s a thought to consider, how about holding the Wrestling in one of the hangars, well, perhaps one of the smaller hangars”?

In the meantime, our allotted task for the moment completed, Jock and I returned to the Main Base as it was almost ‘Tot and Lunch Time’. Back in the Buffer’s Office the telephone rang shrilly. Jock picked it up to answer and immediately called out. “It’s for you JR, some guy called Burman”. I almost leapt to the phone. “Hello Mr Burman, so good of you to call”? The voice at the other end chuckled. “ Frank, asked me to call you. Any friend of Frank’s is a friend of mine, what exactly can I do for you.”? He enquired. I explained our situation and hopes to fund raise and told him that Frank and his business colleagues had already agreed to contribute”. The voice at the other end chuckled again. “In that case, I guess I will never hear the last of it if I don’t do something for you will I “?

Mr Burman went on to explain, unofficially of course, that he had a ‘Pool of Wrestlers’ under contract who appeared at all of his venues, for which of course, he had the sole franchise. Much to my surprise he even disclosed that all of the bouts in his fights were ‘Pre Arranged’. “You mean, they are fixed”? I asked rather naively “? Another chuckle at the other end of the phone. “I would prefer it if you used the word ‘Pre Arranged’, the reason being quite simply that each Wrestler was paid the same money and the bouts were averaged out on a weekly basis to ensure that they were all paid the same at the end of each week. “You mean the guys know beforehand who is going to win”? I asked still incredulous. Still yet another chuckle from Mr Burman at the other end of the phone. “Absolutely, how else do you think that the guys can make a bit of money by side betting just to improve their earnings. Of course the Bookies don’t know so that is how we make a few quid.” He replied. “But that’s bloody illegal Mr Burman isn’t it”? This time a laugh. “You bet your’e bloody life it is but who the hell knows”? He added.

“Look young man, Frank obviously thinks the world of you so this is what I’m going to do for you is this. I will let you use my contracted Wrestlers absolutely free of charge. You will of course have to pay their Match Fee plus expenses which will be around eighty quid. I will

waive my commission as a favour and my contribution to a good cause is that fair or not"? He asked. I was flabbergasted, I simply could not believe it. "Now I will leave you my number and you just let me know the details as soon as you can and leave the rest to me OK"? I replaced the telephone. My mind was in an absolute whirl and thinking to myself, the possibilities are unthinkable. Making a mental list I thought of possible snags. First of all I simply had to sound out the situation. My next port of call was the Senior Rates Mess President who had proved invaluable in such situations as this. Explaining the idea in principal, he promised to have an unofficial word with 'Jimmy The One' just to 'sound out the situation'. The very next day a delighted Chiefs Mess Pres told me to put in a request for 'Permission to hold a Fund Raising Event to Support Local Charities' in one of the old aircraft hangars. I did this immediately and as a result my Divisional Officer spoke to me at some length regarding it. I omitted of course the finer points of the arrangements between Morrie, Frank and myself just in case things might be misconstrued. The following day rather surprisingly my DO said that the Commanding Officer had agreed and I was to go ahead with the arrangements and keep his Office informed of events.

Another visit to the smaller of the hangars revealed that fortunately the electricity and power were still connected and therefore the overhead strip lighting would be adequate enough even with the doors open. The question of seating however would present a major problem. Our entire complement at the base at this time was no more than 500 or so chairs of the tubular kind with every possible source having been raided. There was therefore, no other alternative other than to scrounge from other sources which included the USAF Base, (Where else) local Church Hall and even John's Wedding Room at the 'Thorn' was systematically raided. The magnificent overall total was 800 chairs and at that point I decided that enough was enough. The next issue was of course the date and following much searching August 30th was decided upon which of course just happened to be a Bank Holiday when a full house should be guaranteed. The Captain's Secretary was duly informed and almost expired on the spot when told that the Fund Raising would in fact be a Charity Wrestling Contest. However, as the Captain had already given his approval we were told to go ahead with the arrangements.

Things seemed to move pretty quickly after that and I was soon on the telephone again to Mr Burman with all the details. "Just one question young man"? He interjected as my obvious enthusiasm had temporarily run away with me. "What about the Ring"? I was poleaxed "Oh! Shit, I'd completely forgotten that". Another famous chuckle from Morrie. "Frank said you would forget that". He chortled. "Don't worry son I will get it over to you in plenty of time, I'll even send over a couple of my Riggers to help you install it, how about that"? He countered. "Wonderful, absolutely wonderful MrBurman, how can I ever thank you"? I managed to stammer. " Now listen JR, I'm going to tell you something now. If you want to make a few quid on the side. My lads know who's turn it is to win, now if you wish to make you arrangements with them that is up to you. I have already spoken to them and they know the score. If you want someone to win just tell them. I know there will be Bookies there on the day and if you 'Screw Your Nut' you can make a killing if you know what I mean"? Morrie replied. "In the meantime, I will get a few posters done and even put em up for you OK"

Morrie, Bless his heart, was as good as his word for two days later the posters began to appear all over the place. There were even a stack of them waiting for me at the 'Thorn' together with one of those familiar brown envelopes from Frank. Meanwhile the chairs had begun to arrive in dribs and drabs and little by little the hangar had started to take shape.

Morrie's crew had arrived and with the assistance of the redoubtable 'Buffer's Party' the ring was erected and the chairs arranged into rows with the Captain and his Officers and their wives occupying ringside seats. Morrie's posters were indeed, colourful and attractive and featured such 'dreadnoughts' as 'The Masked Monster' (Crewe) V 'Young Snowball' (Birmingham), 'Dave Adonis' (Manchester) V 'The Irish Assassin' (Belfast), 'Judo Al Devis' (Manchester) V 'Ice Man Morris' (Newcastle), 'Phil Martinez' (Stoke) V 'Ludo Caruso' (Italy). The Main Feature being a 'Tag Contest' between the 'Big Bad Pye Brothers' Bill and Reg V Don Cutler and Alby Thomas (London). Admission £2 pay at the door and all proceeds to charity.

The great day dawned and we were all up early putting the final touches to what promised to be a fine day. We had about half a dozen of the 'Buffer's Party' on duty and stationed at strategic points. Scouse had provided one of his very 'Special Buffets' for the Officers, VIP's and their wives in the now defunct former 'Slipstream Club' nostalgically opened perhaps for the very last time and with the kind permission of the Captain. The Bar facilities being provided by John from 'The Thorn'. Paddy, Jock and Dutchy were stewarding whilst I was madly dashing from Club to hangar on the PO Chef's motor bike. The Captain had very generously agreed to allow all the remaining stock from the Club to be 'disposed of' and this seemed a fitting and appropriate occasion to do so.

The Wrestling was due to commence at 1400 and by 1330 most of the audience was already assembled and availing themselves of the free beer provided by John. Whilst the VIP's and Officers and wives were enjoying the informal cocktail party in the club I was showing the Wrestlers to their Dressing Rooms in one of the old Squadron Lecture Rooms which had both showers and toilets attached. Whilst they were changing we agreed on who was going to win their respective bouts. Jock, who was taking the gate money, informed me that all the seats had now been taken and the Bookies were operating outside the hangar rear entrance. I noticed that their odds were evens on the 'masked man' and 2-1 the remainder. Checking my slip of paper on which 'only I' knew the results. I immediately placed a £25 accumulator with all the Bookies and instructing Jock and Paddy to 'watch them like a Hawk' as there was probably a 'nice little earner' for all the lads at the end of the day. I quickly dashed over to Dutchy at the main door who handed me a bundle of notes which I quickly counted out and handed to the Captain in a 'brown paper sack' which modestly contained "£1500 pounds and which our delighted CO was happy to present to an equally delighted Chairman and Secretary of the Village Hall Community Fund which greatly exceeded the amount originally envisaged and enabled them to almost completely rebuild the hall, which the Captain later re opened.

The lads of the 'Buffer's Party', including Paddy, Jock, Dutch and Scouse and as a direct result of the generosity of the Bookmakers all received a welcome 'Ton' each for all their splendid efforts on the day, whilst I also found myself on a nice little earner too of a relatively substantial sum most gratefully received.

WHICH SIMPLY GOES TO SHOW THAT IT IS NOT WHAT YOU KNOW BUT WHO YOU KNOW

