

MISS MOLLY AND THE MINISTRY MAN

It was certainly bad news for everyone and no mistake when the 'Buffer' called all the lads into the office one morning after 'Turn To'. He solemnly read out the official letter from the MOD. Turned to us all and said quietly "Well lads, it looks very much like we will all have to forego our 'Little Perks' from now on as they are sending a Ministry guy here on a fact finding tour". Gasps all around greeted this announcement. "That's truly bugged it up for everyone then 'Buffs' has it"? One of the lads enquired sadly, echoing the feelings of everyone in the room. The astounding news came as a gut wrenching blow to everyone in the 'Buffer's Party' who had literally created their own little financial empire.

The RNAS Stretton or HMS Blackcap to give it's proper name was formerly the home of the Fleet Air Arm Operational Air Station during the war. Sadly the old place was being de-commissioned and run down before being either sold off or re-allocated to another MOD outlet. The 'Buffer's or Barrackmaster's Party' had been given the scheduled task of assisting the civilian contractors to systematically dismantle and itemise everything on the Base and Aerodrome as either 'For Sale to Approved Contractors' or 'For Destruction' Equipment and rolling stock from the massive hangars and derelict aircraft had already disappeared. The Shelters and Bunkers some of which had been used as storerooms were slowly being emptied. The Ships Company and general complement at the base had practically gone overnight as the respective Squadrons and personnel had been drafted to other locations.

The task of the 'Buffer's Party' was vitally important in this operation as they provided all the necessary manpower to accomplish this task. At the same time the opportunity to make a few honest quid either with the contractors or by one's own devices. All the lads had their own particular perks which varied from painting and decorating, furniture removal (sale or destruction) gardening, general repairs, domestic fuel supplies, road mending and general re-instatement. Even the Buffer had his 'little acre' smallholding in 'no man's land between the airfield perimeter and the nearby Farmers, on which he kept a few pigs and chickens which had proved quite lucrative from time to time. The smallholding was looked after generally by an old boy named Rueben who had been around for ever. He was a dear old boy in his 70's who had been a Groom/Ostler on the late Earl's estate on which part of the airfield was situated. Rueben did odd jobs around the base just to supplement his pension and as everyone knew and liked him he could come and go very much as he pleased, rather like the 'Buffer's Party' We were generally ignored and many 'blind eyes' were turned at our activities, which was just as well as we operated the general principle 'If anyone, whatever rank or rating needs anything or anything done' we either supplied it or did it with no questions asked. This was the system and no one 'rocked the boat'

The news of the coming of this 'Whitehall' chap caused great concern within the 'Party' as he was an unknown quantity and therefore a possible threat. "Do we know what his brief is Buffer"? Someone asked. The Buffer consulted the official letter again. "It seems like he has been instructed to compare the Base Layout with the Ordnance Survey Map and in general to oversee that the de-commissioning is going according to procedure and that all personnel have been instructed to give him their fullest co-operation"? The Buffer intoned sadly. "What exactly does it mean Buff's"? Another of the lads enquired hesitantly. "Well lads, in a bloody nutshell. it means that his visit is very much down to us and he will want to see everything believe you me I know these buggers they are like terriers after a rat in a

shit pile". "Do we know when he is coming Buff's"? Someone else asked. Another scan at the letter which now lay open on the Buffer's desk. "The day after tomorrow and he is due to be away again two days later. JR, you, Paddy and Jock had better look after him as you know where all the 'fiddles' are". He said sarcastically as all the lads went about their tasks leaving the Buffer, Paddy, Jock and myself to discuss the final points. The jangling of the telephone interrupted our deliberations. I picked it up. The almost exasperated voice of the President of the Senior Rates Mess said. "JR, I've got a most obnoxious civvy here who has ID claiming he is from the MOD and that he should be in the Officer's Mess and not here"? Realising immediately that this Ministry chap in the Buffer's letter had arrived somewhat prematurely, perhaps in the hope of 'catching everyone at a distinct disadvantage', I decided to ring my buddy, the Wardroom Hall Porter, known to everyone in the Buffer's Party as 'HP' (Hall Porter) who agreed that due a slight oversight and obvious administrative error, he should indeed be in the Wardroom and not the Senior Rates Mess.

The Ministry man apparently lost no time in proving that he was about as popular as King Herod at a Jewish Christening and I decided that a little bit of crawling was definitely on the calendar if only to 'suss things out'. Making our way to the Wardroom we introduced our selves. The Ministry Man was a Mr Pettigrew who for some reason or another decided that he was entitled to at least Lieutenant Commander status wherever he went. We all saluted him as one man and informed him that we had been assigned to ensure that his visit was unhindered. From the outset, none of us were impressed with his attitude at all which could only be described as arrogant to everyone. Particularly when my polite request "Where would you like to start first Sir and when."? Was met sharply with, Wait here a moment and I will get my maps". HP looked Heavenwards as if to seek Divine inspiration and whispered quietly to me "Watch out JR, he is a Pig's orphan and no mistake, tell the lads to watch their backs with this one"?.

Mr Pettigrew returned moments later and spread a Site Map across a nearby table. Jabbing a bony finger he indicated a spot on the map. All of us peered intently and realised that he was indicating the Buffer's 'No Man's Land' smallholding. "What's this"? He said sneeringly as both Paddy and Jock looked at me for an answer. "This Sir, is an area of disputed land which is only really a swamp area which no one seems to worry about". Was all I could think of at that precise moment, suddenly feeling quite ill at ease. "I would like to inspect this site tomorrow morning at 10 am."? We all looked at each other, which did not go unnoticed by Mr Pettigrew. "Is there a problem"? He asked smiling malevolently. "None at all Sir, except just to remind you to bring your rubber boots". I smiled back in the rather forlorn hope that he might possibly reconsider and to fear for the Buffer's little 'smallholding secret' might finally be discovered and all the activities of the 'Buffer's Party be at last exposed. "I will meet you there at 10 am tomorrow sharp as I have a lot to do". He snapped.

"What the bloody hell are we going to do"? Enquired Paddy over a pint in the 'Thorn' later that evening. "I think our little earners are doomed"? Opined Jock gloomily. "We will all be 'over the wall' if he finds out". Moaned Paddy, referring to a stint in the Royal Naval Barracks Detention Quarters, Portsmouth. I inwardly shuddered to think of the consequences and indeed, the possible sentences which we all might be liable for. "Be quiet, you moaning buggers, we are not done yet, are you going to let some jumped up little Whitehall shit put everything we have all busted our balls for in jeopardy"? I reminded them angrily. They both looked at each other before answering in unison. "You bet your bloody arse we aren't." They replied grinning. "Right then lads, Until tomorrow "? I suggested as we drained out glasses.

It was pouring with rain as Paddy, Jock and I in the Buffer's Landrover, made our way down to his smallholding hardly daring to anticipate the outcome of our meeting with Mr Pettigrew whom we had all decided to dislike intensely. Cursing the weather and all Civil Servants in general we approached the 'Piggery' to discover that Mr Pettigrew had almost slid off the path in his Humber Hawk which I noticed bore RN licence plates. Mr Pettigrew was not dressed for the occasion at all and was at the rear of the vehicle surveying his predicament. His car had obviously skidded on the treacherously muddy road and had stopped just short of a slurry pit having been saved by a small hedge. Stopping our Landrover well clear of his vehicle, an idea suddenly flashed through my mind. "You two go along with everything I say OK. I hissed as we clambered out. Approaching a now very distraught Mr Pettigrew who was desperately trying to reverse his car but only succeeding in spinning the rear wheels deeper and deeper into the mud. " Don't just stand there, give me a hand you can pull me out easily"? He snarled. This was our opportunity. " Leave this to me lads" I said with obvious glee.

"I'm sorry Sir, as your car is a Naval vehicle regulations state quite clearly that this is reportable accident and must be properly dealt with". "What the hell are you talking about man, just pull me out"? "I'm sorry Sir but I can't I will have to inform the base and call out an approved garage to tow you out". Mr Pettigrew was not pleased at all and clambered out of his car. We could see he was covered in mud having attempted to pull himself out by means of a rope onto the rear undercarriage. Anyone who has knowledge of a Humber Hawk and at least one ton of British workmanship, will know exactly what I am saying. Mr Pettigrew who had no raincoat, was merely getting wetter and wetter and madder and madder. "Don't just stand there do something"? He almost screamed. I stepped forward "Look Sir, It seems that you have trespassed on private property and in my subsequent report I shall have to mention this fact, now to avoid any further embarrassment to yourself in any possible and subsequent enquiry, I have a good friend who owns a garage and can quite easily solve this problem for you." Mr Pettigrew, now almost speechless and soaked to the skin, stammered. "Enquiry what enquiry"? "I'm sorry Sir but our CO is a stickler for regulations and you would not wish me to do anything improper or underhand would you"?

Mr Pettigrew's attitude suddenly changed. "Just look at me, I'm soaked and covered in mud, how am I going to explain all this and what about the car"? He wailed. I suddenly felt as though we had the whip hand and to emphasise this I turned to Paddy and Jock "What do you think lads, shall we help this bloke out or not"? Jock and Paddy looked at each other, trying hard not to stifle a grin. "Well, I dunno about that JR, regulations are regulations and if it got out that we with held an official report, we'd all be in the shit wouldn't we "? There was a painful silence as we stepped to one side and pretended to confer. Moments later we returned to Mr Pettigrew. "If you promise to say that you were never here on this pathway and we get your car out and get it checked out and cleaned up for you and we get you a bath and tidy up so that no one would be any the wiser, what would you say"? Mr Pettigrew now saturated and completely demoralised almost yelled "I agree, just get me out of here please"? Realising that it would be quite impossible to get the Humber out with the Landrover I told Paddy to telephone our pal 'Oily' Wragge at his garage nearby and explain the situation. Meanwhile we put a now thoroughly miserable Civil Servant in the back of our Landrover. Luckily the public telephone was nearby and during the next 20 minutes we had a st enlightening conversation regarding the merits and failings of the Naval Discipline Act which were strongly emphasised. An oilskin clad 'Oily' arrived in his crane pick up truck and examined the scene. A quick conversation confirmed

that there were no serious problems and that the Humber could be hauled out. We hooked up the crane chain to Mr Pettigrew's car and slowly started to winch. Little by little the Humber began to move and gradually eased itself out of the hedge and onto the pathway. It was then a comparatively simple matter to wind the car onto the ramps on Oily's truck. "I will check with you in a couple of hours"? I whispered to him as he clambered into his truck "Make an invoice out for £50 quid and we'll split it"? He waved and he was on his way splashing along the river of mud now cascading down the path. Once inside our Landrover I turned to Mr Pettigrew. "If you would now like to trust us Sir, we will get you a hot bath, get your clothes washed and dried for you and your car sorted out and no one will be any the wiser will they Sir"? I said winking at Paddy and Jock "Any the wiser". They both echoed, impersonating Laurel and Hardy our favourite comedians. "What happens now"? Enquired Mr Pettigrew, still not quite sure of the situation. We looked at each other and simultaneously said "Miss Molly of course.

Miss Molly was a pure diamond and adored by everyone on the 'Buffer's Party'. She lived in a cottage nearby. She idolised all Sailors in fact she was quite besotted with them. Molly was a matronly lady aged around 30 very pretty and had qualities which a man would die for. Homely, excellent cook, spotlessly clean and above all a truly wonderful sense of humour. Molly was unmarried and had lived with her parents in this little cottage. Sadly they were both no more and Molly often held open house for some of the lads on the Base. She was affectionately known rather unfairly as 'The Best Port in a Storm' We had spent many a 'cracking' week-end at Molly's and had enjoyed the company of herself and a couple of her chums at Barbecues, 'Wine Evenings' and such like. Molly, bless her was a most obliging sort on most occasions.

Arriving at Molly's cottage a few minutes away we were all greeted with a lovely smile and a 'Hot Toddy' for which we were most grateful. I took her aside and spoke to her for a few moments. A broad grin followed by "I will take extremely good care of him until you get back". She promised, whispering and don't hurry back giving me a sly wink. A very muddy and totally confused Mr Pettigrew looked quite pathetic as we left the cottage to clamber back into the Landrover. "What did you whisper to Molly"? Paddy and Jock demanded. "I simply told her that Mr Pettigrew was a Sailor in need of a bit of comfort" We all roared with laughter. Back at Oil's Garage Mr Pettigrew's car was fortunately undamaged and we managed to hose all the mud from it. Collecting the car and invoice from Oil'y we decided to return the Landrover to the Buffer's Compound and quickly grabbing Paddy's camera when the Buffer's voice stopped us in our tracks. "Where are you buggers off to he demanded I thought I told you to look out for that bloke from the Ministry"? "It's OK Buffer, everything is in hand and it will all come out in the wash, I promise you." Leaping back into Mr Pettigrew's car we drove slowly back to Molly's cottage a couple of miles away. We quietly drew up outside and parked. Carefully opening the back door we tiptoed through the kitchen when we heard voices and giggling coming from the bathroom. The door was slightly ajar and I peeped in. The sight which greeted my eyes caused me to smile. I whispered to Paddy. "Get that bloody camera ready and on a count of three in we go OK"? Both Paddy and Jock nodded and Paddy raised his camera. "One, Two, Three" I whispered again "Now in we go". Jock pushed open the door as Paddy and I strolled into the bathroom. I don't know who was more surprised, Mr Pettigrew's jaw dropped as Paddy clicked the camera.

Both Molly and Mr Pettigrew were naked as 'Jay Birds' and splashing happily in the soapy bath. Molly pretended to be surprised "You are all looking at nothing you haven't seen before. She scolded us. As for Mr Pettigrew, he was completely speechless. Molly

stepped daintily out of the bath as I gallantly handed her a dressing gown and tugged at the bath plug. The bath quickly drained as did the colour from Mr Pettigrew's face as Jock threw him a towel. There was complete silence for several seconds before Mr Pettigrew managed to stammer. "This must look terribly bad gentlemen but it's not quite what it seems you know"? "Of course not Sir". I said stonily "What say you lads "We fully understand Sir, after all we are all men of the world aren't we"? Meanwhile Molly was ironing Mr Pettigrew's clothes which she solemnly handed to him and which he gratefully scrambled into. "Your car is ready and waiting outside and we will drive you back to the Wardroom and by the way Sir you owe me £50 for the repairs" I handed him Oily's invoice. He glanced at it and fished inside his wallet. Without a word he handed me five £10 notes. Perhaps we can go now Sir"? I suggested as we all made our way through the kitchen again. Giving Molly a playful slap on her backside I handed her a £10 note. She kissed me on the cheek . "He wasn't a real Sailor at all was he"? She enquired smiling.

On the way back a now extremely embarrassed and worried Mr Pettigrew asked. " I hardly dare ask what happens now gentlemen he stammered nervously"? "Nothing happens at all Sir providing that you conclude your visit here with a favourable report and a copy of it to the ' Barrackmaster' today for our Base at Blackcap and you return from wherever you came albeit a sadder but infinitely wiser man in the knowledge that no one else will ever know, is it a deal Sir"? I asked holding out my hand. A secondary pause, a rueful smile perhaps and a handshake for all of us. Reaching the Wardroom and getting out of the car we bade Mr Pettigrew farewell and a safe journey.

It was just after 'Secure' and 'Libertymen to Clean' when the Buffer dashed into the office where Paddy, Jock and I were having a brew. Waving a piece of paper excitedly he shouted "That bloke from the MOD who came to check up and worry the life out of us"? "What about him then Buffer"? We all chorused. "Well this letter says he has completed all his enquiries satisfactorily and as everything is in order he feels that there is no reason for him to remain". "That's bloody good news lads isn't it"? The Buffer glared at us hard. "I don't suppose for one bloody minute that any of you buggers had anything at all to do with it did you "? We all looked at each other innocently. "I shouldn't think any of us would be able to convince a bloke like that at all would we lads"? I enquired pleasantly as Paddy and Jock nodded their heads vigorously.

**AND IT CAME TO PASS THAT ALL PERSONNEL
RESUMED THEIR LAWFUL OCCUPATIONS WITHOUT
FURTHER HINDRANCE**

