

## THE APPLETON BASE ACES VERSUS THE BURTONWOOD BULLETS USA

“Oi, JR, come and look at this lot here”? the surprised voice of one of my ‘Buffers Party’ mates made me swing around in hopeful anticipation. We were at the time engaged in the systematic inventory of everything on the old aerodrome formerly known at the RNAS Stretton or HMS Blackcap. Sadly the once famous wartime base was finally in the throes of de commissioning. The aircraft had gone and the Deck Landing Control Officer’s School of 767 Squadron nicknamed ‘The Clockwork Mice’ had been replaced by the innovation of the ‘Mirror & Angle Deck’ thus rendering them obsolete.

The Buffers Party had the overall responsibility of stocktaking and arranging disposal of everything ranging from accommodation block equipment on the domestic side and including the once heavily populated Squadron Hangar areas and storage depots. A detailed list of items was then handed to the Administration Section and on the authority of the Commanding Officer, instructions for final disposal were issued. The final destination of the respective items, were either for ‘Sale to Contractors’ or ‘Destruction’.

The Base at the time still maintained an active Fire Station and Control Tower which was used as a ‘Diversion Airfield’ mainly for the USAF Base nearby. The ‘Buffers Party’ basically controlled practically everything ‘In and Out’ which was an ideal opportunity for everyone to make ‘A Few Quid’ without too many questions being asked. It was therefore essential that close contact be maintained with the USAF Base as it became mutually beneficial to both parties. Many of the Americans were in their final stages of enlistment and waiting to be shipped back to the States and therefore anxious to obtain souvenirs and such like.

As I had already enjoyed a most enjoyable and mutually beneficial financial arrangement with many of the ‘Yanks’ I was anxious that this should continue and did everything to ensure that their requirements were met. In this vein my main contact had always been the strong friendship between myself and their Supply Sergeants. Unfortunately two of them purely for reasons of greed and plain stupidity had been caught in breach of United States Military Regulations and were currently enjoying a spell in the Federal Prison in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Their subsequent replacements had been posted from Germany and were an entirely different proposition. They were absolutely wonderful guys but ‘As Green As Grass’ and really great friends with who we had enjoyed a trouble free relationship. In situations like this as in the European Forces of Occupation there were many opportunities to make ‘A few bucks’ but I always stopped short, as did my colleagues, of direct dishonesty preferring to take the initiative or opportunity when it arose.

Bearing this very much in mind at all times the ‘Buffers Party’ continued with their daily tasks meticulously compiling and scrupulously listing everything as per instructions. My attention having been drawn to my colleague’s shout as we were engaged in the search of a disused Sub Surface Air Raid Shelter, I noticed that he had discovered a pile of at least 30 bicycles hidden under piles of wooden slats. “What the bloody hell do we do with these he enquired”? “Leave it with me I’ve got an idea we can have a bit of fun with them” I replied. It was ‘Stand Easy ‘ time and an ideal opportunity for our usual discussion. “Come on JR, what about these bloody bikes are they worth a few quid or not”? enquired one of the lads. I grinned “Have any of you buggers ever heard of ‘Cycle Speedway’?” I

asked. There was a long silence before one of the lads piped up "Yeah, I have, they used to have tracks on the bomb sites in London just after the War, it was something to occupy the kids". Another silence "You've only just got it spot on mate" , I enthused. The next quarter of an hour was spent in describing the finer points of 'Cycle Speedway' which had been derived actually during the Blitz when cleared bomb sites had been used for the kids to race their bikes against each other just like the real 'Motor Cycle Speedway'. In fact I was a member of a team back in the Potteries in the early 50's and was able to substantiate everything that had been said. The bikes were usually old 'bone shakers' and made up from other odds and ends. They were stripped of mudguards and brakes and consisted simply of wheels, frame, handlebars and pedals. Teams of eight, two from each side in every heat lined up along a white line at the start. The elaborate starting mechanism consisted of two pieces of wood and an elastic band. When the Starter released the band everyone pedalled like crazy towards the first bend. Once safely negotiated, pedal like mad again to the next bend and so on until the four laps were completed. The winner earned three points, the runner up two points and the third placed one point. The rules were basic, no pushing, shoving, bumping or boring. I spent many happy hours involved in this delightful sport which was eagerly contested and highly competitive with proper leagues and administration, trophies and sponsorship.

"Right then, that's it , we will form a team and challenge everyone". "Who the f..k are we going to challenge then"? scoffed another of the lads. "How about the Yanks"? suggested someone else"? Another painful silence then a big cheer erupted. "Yeah, the Yanks, they will go for it won't they JR"? someone enquired. I thought about it for a moment . " I'm pretty sure they will, I'll give Sherm a ring but what will we play for"? Another momentary thought before the suggestion "A couple of barrels of beer come on lads it's only an excuse for f...ck's sake, let's do it"?

As Sherm and I just happened to have some rather pressing business already we arranged to meet elsewhere in the meantime. During our meeting Sherm was extremely enthusiastic as I explained the rules briefly. "I can't envisage any problem whatsoever, say can't we go the whole hog and make it an 'Event' and maybe get the Colonel and your CO to put in an appearance. I thought for a moment, " Leave that with me Sherm, I'll have to dwell on that one a little"? His parting shot stung a trifle. "Our Colonel would go for it like a shot" He added sarcastically.

Having repaired or modified the repatriated pedal cycles by replacing handlebars with aluminium conduit and streamlining by removing mudguards and any other surplus equipment, we decided to construct a track on the airfield perimeter behind the Fire Station where some of the concrete runway dispersal area had already been removed. Several loads of brick shale and shingle from demolished buildings had been laid out in roughly an oval shape measuring some 80 yards by 20 yards in the shape similar to a regular 'Speedway Track' Courtesy of the 'Buffers Road Roller' the track was sanded, dampened and finally flattened. Several practice runs were made which decided that we were just about invincible. I decided to take the 'bull by the horns' and spoke to the Captain's Secretary outlining our proposals and that such an activity would relieve the general monotony, carefully adding that the USAF Base Commanding Officer had enthusiastically supported the idea. Within the hour, as I hopefully predicated, our CO had given his blessing and complete support also with his wishes that the day go well.

As the arrangements were concluded a final meeting was called naturally at the 'Thorn' as the Landlord rightfully claimed 'On a Point of Order' that he was providing the free beer he ought to be allowed on the organising Committee and furthermore he would consult with the Breweries to see what else he could scrounge to make the day more attractive. Preliminary enquiries revealed that the 'Yanks' had some 'pretty dark horses' in their line up and it was therefore decided that some kind of 'diversionary tactics' should be employed to 'noble' the Yanks. Naturally our illustrious Landlord who was to supply the 'free drinks' denied any part in the proposed 'skulduggery' and so Paddy and I decided to take the initiative. The forthcoming event was billed as the 'Cycle Speedway Challenge of the Century with the 'Appleton Navy Aces representing England and the Burtonwood Bullets representing the United States for the Eagle Trophy'. I thought that Sherm, in charge of advertising, had gone just a little over the top this time. As the venue was on private land and not MOD property it was open to the general public and easily accessible along a cart track. The match had been arranged for weekday evening commencing at 1800 sharp.

It transpired that during one of our 'Stand Easy's', Paddy still happened to have a couple of gallons of what must be described as a concoction of 'Aircraft Compass Alcohol' fermented 'rum and potatoes' and pure and simple 'Irish Pocchine'. It was decided to introduce this mixture, surreptitiously into the barrels of beer during the proceedings to come in the hope that it may possibly 'impair' the apparently superior Americans. I have to say, at the outset, that I did not actually witness this deed taking place, merely the result.

By 1700 on the day the 'Yanks' arrived in their customary splendour, lorries and jeeps plus vehicles of all shapes reminiscent of their General George Patton crossing the Rhine several years before. I shook hands warmly with Sherm who promptly handed over several cases of Budweiser and Schlitz to add to our already ample supply of intoxicants. Realising from past experience the American's natural ability for a challenge, I requested that our lads resist the temptation for 'strong liquor', preferring instead the 'traditional English ale, without realising that Paddy had already added his 'Christmas Rocket Fuel' A general 'stirrup cup' so to speak and then a customary briefing by both the American Colonel and our Commanding Officer perhaps with a hint or premonition of the things to come, departed with dignity, having opened the proceedings.

The 'Buffer's Party' as usual, had really excelled themselves by creating a quite perfect track to race on and had even marked out the boundaries in whitewash. The only possible concern I had was over the very impressive but completely improvised starting mechanism. On an apparently harmless set of posts were fixed a rather vicious looking set of elastic tapes mounted on an equally dangerous spring. Should an over zealous rider attempt to 'Beat the Start' he would be almost decapitated. This was forcibly pointed out during the testing of the mechanism. Also extremely impressive lap markers had been placed and a very effective sound system was in operation from the Emergency Incident Caravan borrowed for the day.

The 'Yanks' simply had to dress for the occasion with a highly colourful array of coloured silk Squadron windcheaters which completely overshadowed our boys in their Pussers sports shirts, number eights and seamens jerseys and various flight deck skull caps. The Beer Tent next to the Control Caravan had been set up and already stocks were getting a real hammering. It had provisionally been agreed to race over 18 heats with a break after 9 but I had serious doubts that most of the competitors would last that long. Our

tactics varied from slight infringements of the rules to downright skulduggery in view of our apparent inferiority. I had suggested one or two spectacular crashes just to 'slow the Yanks down just a little' but to make it look good for general effect. This advice was really hardly necessary as some of our team had in training already, demonstrated a quite unscrupulous side to their nature. It was not long before the Medics on both sides were in action as the competition hotted up.

As the free liquid libations liberally fortified by Paddy's 'Octane' inevitably took its toll the crashes became more frequent and we were in grave danger of running out of riders, still desperate to 'Have a Go' and indeed machines. As I remember, the scores although somewhat academic and have long since disappeared through the mists of time, were quite close and as the daylight began to fade and the alcohol available began to diminish, it was, if only for safety reasons decided to officially abandon the proceedings and declare 'An Honourable Draw' and that everyone should re-convene back at 'The Thorn' public house.

The site was quickly cleared as was the remains of the liquid refreshment by the noble efforts of the Fire Station Crew who decided that they had a moral obligation to conclude the proceedings. The combatants retired bloodied perhaps but definitely unbowed, many of them plastered and limping in every sense of the word, to the safe haven of the Thorn where a most enjoyable and less strenuous evening was enjoyed by everyone concerned.

Many and no doubt still enduring friendships were forged that day which, to say the very least, was extremely eventful. As for the 'All Time Cycle Speedway Championship of the Entire World', it was never completed so no one will ever know if the 'Appleton Aces' or indeed the 'Burtonwood Bullets' were the better team.

As for the bicycles which started all this, well that is quite another story and suffice to say that for the remaining machines, I managed to get a fiver each when I delivered them to 'Clinker' Moye's Blacksmith's Shop a few days later, with no one any the wiser.

**NEVER, EVER KNOCK AN IDEA UNTIL YOU HAVE PERSONALLY TRIED IT FIRST**