

# THE BIG BLACK BEAST FROM BURTONWOOD BASE

Morning 'Stand Easy's were always a must back at HMS Blackcap, the RNAS Stretton back in the 1950's as they represented a bit of a 'social gathering' of anyone and everyone in the 'Buffer's Party'. When business matters were openly discussed rather reminiscent of the popular American TV series 'Sergeant Bilko' to whom we were often compared.

In addition to the usual tea, coffee and biscuits, sausage rolls and even 'oggies' were often on the menu making the gatherings extremely popular among the many who simply felt that they simply had to just 'drop in'. Apart from the daily business it was an ideal opportunity for 'scuttlebutt'.

The main topic naturally was business and financial prospects and how we could all improve our own Bank balances legitimately and without arousing too much suspicion. The main thing going for us was of course that the Base, once a wartime operational aerodrome was slowly being de-commissioned and run down. The Buffers Party were an integral part of this operation and were responsible for practically everything ranging from building demolition, furniture removal and clearance, painting decorating, gardening and re-instating, bricklaying and even road mending. There were of course civilian contractors in evidence but nothing escaped the attention of the Buffer's Party and the opportunity to 'make a few dollars'. Bearing this in mind it would be fair to say that if anyone, regardless of rank or rating, needed anything, our illustrious 'Band of Brothers' could provide it.

These extra curricular activities were usually mutually beneficial to all concerned and were completely harmless. Needless to say that many 'Blind Eyes' were turned and sources of supply and contacts were always jealously protected. One of our main sources was the nearby USAF Base where items not available in the UK could be obtained via perhaps a little clandestine activity and on the 'buddy to buddy' basis. Two of my most valuable chums being the two Supply Sergeants at the base.

One morning 'stand easy' a very excited member of our party burst in to announce "Guess What?" Almost as one man we all swung around to face him in eager anticipation fully expecting that gold or oil had been located in the nearby village. "I've just passed my driving test" he yelled. Loud groans followed by "Is that bloody all"? as we all returned to what we had been doing moments ago and a now demoralised guy sheepishly poured himself a cup of coffee mumbling to himself.

The conversations returned to normal. "We really ought to get ourselves some transport" someone suggested. "We've already got transport in the Buffer's Party" someone replied. "No, I mean transport that we can use to go ashore in" Eventually someone enquired "What do you think JR, you've got all the contacts, what about it"? Without looking up from my morning paper I promised to give it some serious thought.

A couple of days later with perhaps more luck than judgement I found myself talking to my old buddy Sherm, one of the Supply Sergeants at the USAF Base when the subject came up again during our 'economic importance' conversations which took place quite often. I mentioned that one of our chaps was looking for a car when Sherm casually mentioned. "Well, it so happens that there is a motor vehicle right here on the base which

the Colonel would be delighted to get rid of". He went on to describe that the previous owner had returned 'Stateside' and had left the vehicle for anyone to use and as it was a 'gas guzzler' it was too expensive to run and it simply remained where it had been left in the enlisted men's compound.

"What kind of vehicle is it Sherm?" I inquired. There was a long pause before Sherm replied "I'm told it's a V8 Pilot" he announced. "What's that again"? I asked. "I said it was a Ford V8 Pilot and a hell of a beast too". he repeated. "How much Sherm"? I asked carefully. as Sherm launched into the 'Tech Spec' that all Technical Supply Sergeants are indoctrinated with. "Cut the crap Sherm, how much"? Another pause before Sherm answered " Aw gee JR it's a freebie just get the damn thing off the base, it's your's" Thinking there might just be a catch I asked a now very hurt Sherm "You are serious then Sherm are you"? " Sure as hell JR we're buddies are'nt we, just let me know when you want to pick it up and I will have it gassed up for you, see you soon".

I found myself thinking. Sherm is a pretty regular guy, I will take a chance. During the conversation Sherm had indicated that the car had no tax or insurance and had been driven on US licence plates which I had already decided to keep as the local Police were extremely lenient with both US and British Forces. I already had a plan of action and I telephoned a chum who was part owner of a nearby garage who by strange good fortune just happened to be a Police Vehicle Examiner. I gave him Sherm's telephone number and he promised to collect the car and tax and insure it.

At morning 'stand easy' a couple of days later I explained to the lads what I had done and they were absolutely delighted. I also explained that it would cost them all £25 each to purchase a share in the car and that anyone wishing to opt out of the scheme could do so provided the others 'bought his share'. There were no shortage of takers and we had to restrict membership to eight 'owner-users'. The ensuing excitement was almost fever pitch as they anxiously awaited their prize. I had planned a quick visit to the garage to check on my chum's progress but first decided to telephone him. The garage was partly owned by a local businessman and my pal Pete Wragge whom I had nicknamed naturally enough 'Oily'. Pete was a superb mechanic who had enjoyed an Apprenticeship with Rolls Royce at Crewe. 'Oily's' opening words on hearing my voice were quite simply "Have you got a car mate or have you got a sodding car", he boomed. He went on to describe my prospective purchase in glowing terms. "She is an absolute beauty and in cracking order too, she runs like a bloody Spitfire and if ever you want to sell it just let me know"? I arranged to see him later that day.

I simply could not believe the sight which greeted me when I called at 'Oily's' garage later that day. A magnificent shiny black bullet like limousine like something out of Al Capone's Chicago simply gleamed in the morning sun. I simply could not believe that Sherm could let something as beautiful as this escape. The car was quite breathtaking both inside and out and I found myself incredulous that anyone could leave a vehicle like this without a word to anyone. 'Oily' grinned. "It must have cost you a f.....g bomb" he said admiringly "My offer still stands, any time you want to part with her just let me know". he added. I examined the car hardly daring to touch her. The interior smelled of clean leather and was immaculate. "What can I say Oily, how much do I owe you". "Well now let's just see"? said Oily disappearing into his office and producing a sheaf of papers. "Now, I've got you down as the owner and on my company block insurance, it will be cheaper that way, I've taxed her for another quarter and she has got British plates. I've given her a quick once

over, not that she needed it mind and a bit of a vacuum and polish, shall we say fifty quid and quits”? “Done mate” I exclaimed as we spit on our hands and shook. “Now how about a spin” ? grinned Oily. “Thought you’d never ask” I grinned back. The next half hour or so was one of the most exhilarating I have ever experienced as we absolutely zoomed around the almost uninhabited country lanes at terrifying speed. I need not have worried as Oily was without doubt one of the best drivers in the County and even his Police colleagues were aware of this. Stopping at a country pub a few miles away we reflected over a quiet pint. “You reckon I’ve got a good deal then Oily”? I felt bound to ask. “Good deal, I’ll bloody say you have, I dare not ask what you paid for it but whatever it was it was worth every penny, there’s hardly any miles on the clock, there’s just one thing”? “What’s that”? I asked suddenly alarmed “ Where the f.....g hell are you going to get the proper fuel to run her”? I paused to have a little pull at my pint. “You just let me worry about that” I winked at him.

Back at ‘Blackcap’ in the North Camp Car Park the ‘Buffers Party’ were all assembled and waiting as I drew up in the ‘Beast’. admiring gasps greeted us as they all took turns to inspect, admire and sit in her. “Bloody Hell JR, this must have cost you a small fortune, how did you manage to get this”? were just a few of the admiring comments. “Gentlemen”, I managed to finally say amidst the tumult. “ I want your cash now so that I can pay my end of the deal which is simply this, we all have an equal share and I will have no other responsibility apart from the fact that the insurance and overall ownership remains with me until such time that I either go on draft or my share is bought by someone else as we originally agreed. We can have a ‘gentleman’s agreement’ over a pint and a handshake or I can ask the Chief Scribe to draw up a ‘common contract’ whatever you decide. There was a long and almost painful silence before someone ventured “What the hell, we are all bloody mates after all aren’t we”? A loud cheer followed and a unanimous suggestion that we all go to the ‘Thorn’ for a pint. The question of suitable fuel for the ‘Beast’ naturally arose when it was realised that there was a small pocket of un-repatriated aircraft octane in a hitherto locked and abandoned hangar way out on the extreme dispersal area and away from prying eyes and perhaps less understanding people.

From that moment on it transpired that the legend of ‘The Black Beast of Burtonwood Base’ was born and indeed nurtured. Frequent trips to Liverpool, Manchester and all the Lancashire Mill Towns were commonplace. There was not a Police Traffic Car on the entire East Lancs road which did not admire this car and even refuse to compete in a speed chase with it for fear of embarrassment. The car was frequently overloaded with stranded Sailors desperate for a lift back to Blackcap but that posed little problem for the ‘Beast’ her sheer strength and power were equal to anything on those many trips. One by one the owners of the ‘Beast’ departed from Blackcap, each selling his share to the others until finally and almost reluctantly perhaps, I sold the ‘Beast’ to a delighted Oily for £500 before my final departure to HMS Victorious currently awaiting my pleasure at Customs House Jetty in Pompey Dockyard in the Spring of 57’

**IT’S FUNNY HOW SOMEONE ELSE’S RUBBISH SEEMS TO COME IN USEFUL**