

THE RETURN OF THE SEVEN

Following a self aborted 'Bombheads' Course at HMS Curlew or RNAS St Merryn, Cornwall, in the Autumn of 1953, together with seven of my 'Course' oppo's including Bill Bailey and Del Elder I returned to whence we came, in a manner of speaking that is. In a blue 'Pusser's Bedford Tilly' hired especially for the day, we all piled in, each with kitbags, hammocks and holdalls and ready for the long trek back to 'Good Old Lee-on-Solent' the Fleet Air Arm's ancestral home. Fortunately, the journey and a very understanding 'civvy driver' was memorable as we made several stops for liquid replenishments or toilet requisites on the way. Some of us were quite sad to be leaving 'Curlew' where we had made some good 'oppos' countless great runs ashore in Guzz, Padstow, Newquay and numerous other West Country watering holes during our few months sojourn there.

Along with a number of other 'misfits' gash hands and guys simply waiting for a draft chit, on arrival at 'Daedalus', we were placed in 'Lee Pool'. There were a few more disgruntled potential 'Other Trades' already in 'The Pool' some of whom were awaiting re-categorisation to another trade whilst the others were simply keen to return to 'Civvy Street'. The remaining four of the 'Curlew' crowd accepted re-categorisation without further fuss and were almost immediately drafted to complete their new 'Trade Training'. Bill, Del and I however steadfastly refused to be rushed into anything despite the suggestive interrogation by a quite delectable Wren Personnel Selection Officer. Her overtures 'cut no ice' whatsoever with us and Del in particular was quite determined that the RN was not for him and had made it abundantly clear to everyone that he was prepared to 'work his ticket' if need be. Bill and I were in no mood to be 'fobbed off' with any old trade much to the annoyance and frustration of the PSO, consequently we decided to play a 'waiting game' and simply 'hang in there' and see what happens.

It would appear that our fame as excellent Messmen had gone before us, for whilst awaiting a draft from St Merryn, Bill and I were assigned as 'Senior Rates Messmen'. Realising immediately the great potential of such a good number we made the job into an art form by providing the kind of 5 star treatments that a 'Chuff and Puff' could only dream about. Completely dispelling the viewpoint of most junior rates that 'Chuffs and Puffs' were all a bunch of bastards, Bill and I enthusiastically threw ourselves into the job. Essential contacts already firmly established with anyone and everyone who really mattered, namely the General Mess Party, Buffer's Party, Cooks, Stewards and no one's usefulness was overlooked. Having overcome these obstacles we set about making ourselves indispensable to the Senior Rates thereby guaranteeing a prolonged stay at Daedalus. Such talents honed at 'Curlew' had already proved successful and Bill and I both agreed that we should use the same methods here. The logic was amazingly simple, .by providing the 'Senior Rates' with those little luxuries to which only Officers had hitherto been entitled, which included extra laundry, room fresheners, lavender polish on the decks, real 'beeswax' polish on furniture,

'Dog Watch Sarnies', Birthdays etc and even placing bets with a local Bookie whom we used to meet either near the Married Quarters or the 'Bluebird Café' nearby. The favours were reciprocated purely on the basis that if any of our oppo's required anything in return we were able to provide it by virtue of the fact that the Senior Rates controlled most of the commodities needed. A simple request to a Chief or Petty Officer in charge of a particular part of ship was met with "I'll give you a chit". I'm sure you get the picture from here.

This kind of service was most appreciated by everyone in the Senior Rates Messes and there was little doubt that the 'Mess Pres' and his Committee were aware of this and the relationship between 'Us and Them' was perfect and most respectful. In our trusted position which carried a much in demand 'Blue Special Duties Station Card' Bill and I could virtually come and go very much as we pleased and in consequence of this we were able to build 'Our Little Empire' without any difficulty at all. Our daily routine seldom varied. We would turn to every day promptly at 0700 and lay tables in the Main Dining Halls. Then prepare an urn of tea, coffee and bacon 'butties' for the RA men returning from ashore together with the daily papers in the Lounge area. By 0830 Breakfast would be over and Bill and I would grab a quick bite ourselves before clearing, cleaning and re laying the Dining Hall for Lunch. Then there were the dormitories and cabins to clean and polish together with the Lounge and TV areas. At 1015 we would have urns of tea, coffee and a selection of biscuits for 'Stand Easy' in the Lounge. No boots, overalls or dirty work clothing was allowed in the Lounge at anytime. On occasions there would be sausage rolls or 'oggies' provided by one of my best pals, none other that Leading Cook 'Wiggy' Bennett. 'Wiggy' like many of my future oppos proved to be a real diamond and a quite indispensable member of 'Our Organisation' which rapidly flourished and comprised of like minded men such as Bill and I.

A chance meeting a few weeks earlier with a local Farmer named Sid whom Bill and I had met whilst we were on 'Security Patrol' on the airfield perimeter. Sid was truly an amazing character who by virtue of his own family businesses and local contacts was able to provide us with almost anything from delicious 'Home Brewed Scrumpy' to joints of beef, pork, bacon, you name it. Sid was a quite remarkable man by any stretch of imagination. He was a real Hampshire countryman through and through. Born in the early part of the 20th century and one of a large family of brothers who had lived in the same village all their lives apart from the two World Wars which had separated them. Sid himself had served his country in the Hampshire's from the outbreak of war in 1939 until he was demobilised in 1946. All were farming stock as had been their forebears and the farms and lands had been handed down and still remained within the family. Sid and his family owned several farms and businesses which included Dairy's, Butchers Shops. Smallholdings, Market Gardens in fact just about anything connected with rural activities. In just a few short weeks Sid and I had struck up a firm friendship and had already introduced the 'Senior Rates Messes' to the delights of 'Sid's Scrumpy' I had introduced him to the respective Chief Chefs and Stewards in the hope of prospering his outlets and we had already begun a flourishing trade in a 'Week End Meat Market' and raffle originally for R.A. men and others living out of Daedalus but soon became popular with guys on week end leave.

Just as I thought we had got it made Bill casually announced that he had requested a return to 'Station Security Guard' I was unhappy at losing my mate but he informed me that he had met a bit of 'essence crumpet' just up the line and it would suit his interests better to return to a 24 on and 24 off 'Watch Keeping Routine' so it was no contest really. Del suddenly disappeared like a puff of smoke. No one seemed to know where he was at all or whether he had 'jumped ship' or 'gone over the wall' but I never ran into him again. As I was now shorthanded I went to see the 'Mess Pres' to see about getting some help in running the Senior Rates Messes and he very kindly obliged by getting me three guys on 'daily part of ship' working. He also increased my monthly salary to a fiver, not that I needed it as I was making quite a bit on the side, particularly from our Bookmaker who paid me two shillings in the pound for the bets that I took for him every day when we met for a quick cup of coffee in the 'Bluebird Cafe just around the corner from the Base and away from prying eyes. As I had a 'blue card' the Gate Staff were used to me visiting quarters off Base and

usually ignored me. Trade and prospects continued to improve and 'Wiggy', the killick Chef decided that he could do with a few quid extra and had a good idea for a nice little earner. In view of this I approached a couple of the Squadron 'Chuffs and Puffs' with his idea to supply 'Bacon and Sausage' sarnies for morning 'Stand Easies' and 'Sausage Rolls' for afternoon 'Stand Easies'

The proposal went down like a bomb and part of the deal was that a couple of the Squadron 'erks' would renovate the Chief Chef's old Velocette motor cycle and sidecar which at the time was reclining underneath a tarpaulin sheet at the rear of the mess car park. It was also agreed that they would provide fuel. They soon had the machine up and running and we were able to begin our 'Sarnie Service' at half a crown for two bacon or two sausage sandwiches. The delivery service fitted perfectly with our routine as the Senior Rates helped themselves in their main lounge whilst I filled a large basket, put it into the sidecar and away around to the hangars. Trade was always brisk and slightly preceded the NAAFI van which only provided Tea, Sticky Buns and nutty. After a few hectic months we were advised to be a little more discreet as the NAAFI had complained and questions were being asked where our supplies were coming from. We managed to successfully overcome this by producing receipts and counterfoils from Sid and the purchase of a few four pound loaves from Mess Funds which were of course quickly replaced, in theory anyway, with a chit from the 'Mess Pres'

We soon became involved in the Social activities within the Senior Rates Messes by assisting in their weekly Social Evenings when wives and girlfriends got together for a drink, chinwag or a dance or two. These events were eagerly anticipated by everyone and soon Birthdays or Anniversaries were an excuse to hold a 'Social'. One of the most popular without doubt were the 'Scrumpy and Oggie' evenings when everyone turned up in smocks, trousers with string around the legs, straw hats and all the gubbins. Everyone had to speak with a West County accent which of course varied from borderline Geordie to Welsh depending on how drunk you happened to be at the time. Sid, of course provided the 'Scrumpy' and the meat for the 'Oggies' and everyone pitched in with the buffet type food. The music was provided by a huge music centre and amplifier and an almost inexhaustible supply of records. Occasionally we had 'Banjo Bartram and his Hillbilly Folk' or in other words one of the PO Chef's and his group who were, by the way extremely good and immensely popular particularly their splendid rendition of 'The Good Old Mountain Dew' which called for several encores. Occasionally good old Sid gave me the odd leg or two of home cured Ham which was by far the best I have ever tasted and which I used to 'raffle off' at the Social Evenings or which I sometimes used on the buffets. The 'Mess Pres' and his Committee had a golden rule that everyone should claim their full monthly cigarette coupon allowance of five coupons even if they were non smokers. He also insisted that everyone in the Mess should draw their 'Daily Rum Ration' even if they did not drink it. These two items became invaluable when it came to 'Reciprocal Trading' and providing luxuries for them. This saw the introduction of my famous 40 oz bottles which once contained 'Daddies Sauce' but when empty contained 'Neaters' As this stock accumulated I was able to have an impromptu 'Rum Issue' on Birthdays or in the 'Dog Watches' when I would introduce 'Wobbly Coffee or Kiy'

During the cold winter of 1953 it became necessary to light the 'Pot Belly' fires in the dormitories and permanently keep them fuelled. This meant that the normal issue of coke had to be supplemented by additional supplies. This problem was solved by old Sid who arranged a delivery of four extra cwt bags each week for services rendered thus enabling

the sleeping quarters to remain as 'warm as toast'. There is absolutely no doubt that the Senior Rates lived 'The Life of Riley' during my time with them and this stood me in good stead for the future as I met up with several of them again during my service who were able to afford me their personal recommendation when the choice of 'Messman' was contemplated by respective Committees and which I took full advantage of whilst on 'Albion' and 'Victorious' during the subsequent years. Ah, well, ce'st la vie and all good things must come to an end if only temporarily for me as a summons one day called me yet again to the office of the Drafting Commander and Personnel Selection Officer. The subject matter for discussion was of course inevitable.

"Well just what are we going to do with you"? He enquired pleasantly after summarily rejecting completely my "I'm perfectly happy where I am Sir" he solemnly announced in stentorian tones as if reading from a script. "Ah yes but unfortunately the Royal Navy does not regard 'Messman' as a selected occupation therefore we must select something more suitable for you mustn't we"? He droned. As if inspired he enquired "Would you like to be a Steward"? "No thank you Sir". "How about a Chef"? "No thank you Sir". "We have already been through the alternatives within the Fleet Air Arm haven't we"? "Yes Sir we have, several times" I replied glancing at the Personnel Selection Officer who looked decidedly uncomfortable. "Have you considered changing Branches maybe to the Royal Marines"? He enquired casually. "No thank you Sir" I replied politely. "Now look here, a chap with your background and education shouldn't go around wasting his time as a Messman" He said scornfully. "I happen to like my job Sir". I said hopefully. "Damn it all man just what are you going to do for the next the five years, I simply do not understand your thinking" Well Sir, from the very first, up at Bramcote I was considered suitable and qualified to be a Photographer, I even had the opportunity to exchange with another Rating who did not wish to be one and the powers that be still disregarded my request, do you consider that to be logical or even fair Sir"? "Well I, it's not for me to question the decision made by someone else of higher authority" Spluttered the Commander who seemed at a loss as to what to say next.

"There is an Aircraft Handlers Course commencing the day after tomorrow at HMS Siskin, Fort Rowner, Gosport Sir"? Suggested the PSO rather hopefully. The Commander fixed me with a steady gaze and with a hint of triumph said. "That is it then lad, you will be on it so you had better get your skates on hadn't you"? Realising the futility of further argument I saluted and marched out. My gloom brightened a little when I bumped into Bill a short time later that day. "I've been looking for you everywhere"? He grinned. "Guess what"? He said, still grinning. "You've won the pools". I replied sarcastically. "I've got a bloody Draft Chit" Said Bill. "So have I". I replied rather drily. "Where to"? Enquired Bill. "Siskin, Gosport AH3's Course". I replied. "That's funny, so have I" Grinned Bill again. We looked at each other and burst out laughing "Can't I ever bloody go anywhere without you"? I said as we slapped each other playfully. "HMS Siskin eh, Fort Rowner eh, well at least we will be a bit nearer Pompey". Well, I guess I'd better get my gear together, another day, and another dollar tomorrow. Maybe I can still make a few quid there. I thought to myself as we wandered back to the Senior Rates mess to break the news and make a few phone calls

CONFUCIOUS MIGHT JUST HAVE SAID IF YOU ARE ON A GOOD RUN OF THINGS, KEEP RUNNING

