

THE 'FASTEST YARD'

It was after teatime when half a dozen of the 'Buffer's Party' lads and I walked into our local The Thorn in Appleton village. They flopped down into their seats almost exhausted. "I'll get em in lads" I announced as I went up to the Bar where the Landlord was talking to a customer. "Pints all round please John and whatever you are having". "Bloody hell JR what the heck have all you lot been up to, you look about done in"? He declared shaking his head sadly. A weary chorus nearby echoed "You bloody name it and we've done it"? Eager hands grabbed at the glasses from the tray which I had just brought over and as one man they practically drained them in one. "Strewth, you buggers were certainly thirsty I'd better pull another lot and you can have these on me"? John replied as the remaining contents were immediately dispatched at his rare invitation.

The 'Buffer's Party' or 'Permanent Ship's Company at the RNAS Stretton alias HMS Blackcap were currently heavily involved in the 'De-Commissioning' of the former Fleet Air Arm's Operational Air Station. Their instructions were simply 'Everything must be accounted for and classified into two categories, 'Sale to Potential Contractors' or 'Destruction'. Each detailed weekly inventory and work schedule was rigidly and regularly scrutinised by the Base Administration Team and their instructions carried out to the letter. As far as the Buffer's Party were concerned they almost had a 'Green Light' to go ahead on the basis that 'If someone did not have to know, then why bother to tell them'. It would be fair to say that Blackcap was an extremely 'easy ride' as most of the personnel based there were either scheduled for demob or between 'Draft Chits' It was also generally known and indeed accepted that if anyone whatever their rank, rating or status required anything at all then the 'Buffer's Party' could provide it. No one knocked it or rocked the boat and life generally was sweet for everyone.

John brought over the refills and the man at the bar came to the table with him. "By the way lads this here is Bert Rigby the new Brewery Rep from now on as he has just taken over from Duggie Peel"? The stranger and the lads exchanged welcome nods as he pulled up a chair. "Mind if I join you lads"? enquired Bert pleasantly together with an offer to provide the next round which seem to meet with unanimous approval. "John tells me that your old club on the base used to be a hive of industry at one time"? He said taking a sip from his glass. John at the bar and was busy polishing recently washed glasses enthused "By God lads, those were the days and no mistake, we had some wonderful times then didn't we eh"? He said wistfully. The subsequent conversation involved mainly the good and prosperous times at the base when it was a fully operational wartime aerodrome when hundreds of servicemen and women were stationed there.

"What happened to old Duggie then Bert"? One of the lads enquired. "The last I heard he had moved down to the Southampton area to be nearer his daughter now that he's retired" Replied Bert. "He was a good un was old Duggie" said someone. "He certainly was". Agreed another. "I expect JR will miss him as they had a few good deals together, didn't you"? Grinned another as he nudged me giving a sly wink. "What brings you out here in the sticks then Bert"? I enquired pleasantly, trying to change the subject. "Well, it's like this, my Brewery are keen to try and get the old traditional pub games back and I'm just really sounding out things"? Replied Bert suddenly getting a little more interested.

"It's funny that is" Shouted John from the Bar, "We've just started to arrange matches with the Yanks down the road and the locals have'nt we lads"? Murmurs of agreement brought further discussion. "We had one here the other week when we gave the proceeds to that little old dear down the road who had a fire in her house, you remember don't you JR"? I winced at the very thought and glared at John who suddenly decided that he had something else to urgently attend to. The stark reminder that John had unwittingly donated £100 of mine to that very charity made me almost break out into a cold sweat.

Bert meanwhile had momentarily disappeared and had returned with two large glass objects which appeared to be ornaments. One was about 3 feet long, fluted at one end and with a rounded glass ball at the other. The second object was a workman's boot cast in a glass mould. "Anyone know what these are"? He enquired cheerfully. I indicated the fluted glass and said "I think that is a yard of ale, that is of course when it is full. My cousin has one behind the bar of his club for show". "That is perfectly correct". Chortled Bert "They are both in fact the same thing and contain the same amount which is roughly". "Two and three quarter pints" Interrupted John as he came back behind the counter. Bert went on to explain to a now captivated audience, that years ago a popular source of entertainment in the real old 'drinkers pubs' were competitions to see who could drink the fastest yard of ale. "What was the record"? Someone enquired. "Well the fastest I've ever seen was 18 seconds and it was done by a bloke on one of the old canal barges down in the Midlands". There was complete silence before someone whistled "That is bloody impossible, I don't believe it". "Neither do I". Said another voice. before John interrupted again. "I know someone who can beat that easily and I've seen him do it twice" He said smugly. Snorts of disbelief from the lads before John announced "It's true and I won fifty quid on him both times".

"Come on John, who the bloody hell can beat that time"? Someone enquired and even Bert looked quite stunned. "Are you certain about that John" He enquired pleasantly. "I can honestly swear on the good book that there is a man from this village who can do it". He refused to be drawn further into the conversation but it certainly made me think hard. Paddy, my oppo from the 'Buffer's Party' nudged me slyly "Are you thinking what I'm thinking"? He whispered. I nodded. "I'm way ahead of you mate" I replied, an idea already taking shape in my mind. "I'll be back in a minute" I whispered as I made a beeline for John behind the bar who made a frantic attempt to escape. "I figure that you owe me John after that stunt with the £100"? I growled at him. "Tell me the name of this bloke"? "I can't tell you other than that you know him well"? He gasped "But I will write it down, then I've said nowt have I"? John grabbed a piece of paper and scribbled on it hurriedly and handed it back to me. I casually glanced at it and then smiled. John tapped his nose with his finger. I folded the paper, slipped it into my pocket then re joined my companions who were being enthralled by Bert's most entertaining tales. Paddy glanced at me. "What was that all about then."? He enquired "I know you, you bugger, you are up to something"? I turned to wink at him and tapped my nose. "I'll tell you later", I whispered.

Later that evening Paddy and I resumed our conversation which was roughly based on just how much we could clean up on the information that I had received. There was to be another of our now regular 'Traditional Pub Games Evenings' which had so far proved a tremendous success with the Americans and locals alike and had already cemented public relations immensely. I outlined my plan to Paddy which if successful might just prove to be a 'nice little earner. The success of my plan depended on exactly just how much pressure I could apply to the person who's name I had been given and I had just the lever to do it.

A telephone call to my pal Sherm, one of the Supply Sergeants at the USAF base for one of our regular chats mainly to discuss the general requirements of his base personnel and vice versa. These conversations were essential in order to ensure the harmonious and prevailing smooth running relationships between any successful business associations. During our conversation I reminded him of our now regular 'Traditional British Pub Games Tournaments' which the 'Yanks' as we did, thoroughly enjoyed. Sherm and I had a private gentleman's agreement between us that in order to 'make a few dollars' we should 'pool' our information and knowledge in order to gain a slight pecuniary advantage should there ever be any betting or wagers on the outcome. This had been extremely beneficial to both of us in the past and we both saw no reason why this should not continue.

It would be fair to say that Sherm was totally mystified with the 'Yard of Ale' contest but none the less quite intrigued as his Base had to my personal knowledge, a number of quite legendary drinkers who could hold their own in any company and therefore should not be regarded lightly. Sherm promised to make some enquires and let me know. I should perhaps point out here and now that my experience with Americans and their capacity to consume tremendous quantities of alcohol is considerable particularly so with 'strong liquor'. The situation with British Beer however, is a slightly different proposition and was with this in mind that I formulated a plan but first I had to ensure that our lads would win. Glancing at the scrap of paper which the Landlord had reluctantly given me, I gave a little quiet chuckle. "That old sod owes me a favour and it is time to collect". One more telephone call to make and that should do it one way or the other I muttered to myself.

Minutes later I rejoined the lads who were being royally entertained by Bert who turned out to be quite a character after all. He was an accomplished Pianist who had enjoyed some professional successes a few years ago and we lost no time in engaging his services for the forthcoming 'Pub Games Evening'. It was my turn to nudge Paddy. "If everything goes to plan we should be on a nice little earner with the 'Yard of Ale Race' just remember we have an extra team member on the night that's all"? Paddy nodded. "By the way, we've picked this Saturday night starting at 7pm. OK"? Said Paddy. It was my turn to nod in agreement.

Everyone was in the Thorn by 6.30pm and the 'Games' were already well under way. Old Bert was thumping away on the piano and thoroughly enjoying himself. I had arranged for Bert and the Landlord John to organise and announce 'The Yard of Ale Contest' and the betting was fierce. The Yanks were convinced they were on to a winner with their Sergeant Pat Mulcahy a massively built New York Irishman and I for one would not have liked to have met him on a dark night. I kept looking at my watch anxiously. "Where is my man"? I kept repeating until I spotted him just about to help himself to a pint. "No you bloodywell don't" I hissed "But I'm bleeding parched, oi've only just finished work" Bleated the unmistakable Brummie voice of none other than our illustrious Blacksmith, the redoubtable, the one and only 'Clinker' Moyes.

Turning to Sherm who was making 'Book' for the event "What odds on my man here Sherm"? Sherm turned and looked contemptuously at Clinker. He laughed and said "I will give you 10-1 and it's a shame to take your money". "OK put me down for £50" I yelled above the din. Soon it was time for the 'Yard of Ale Contest' and Bert and John took up their positions as Referee and Time Keeper. After 4 turns each the Yanks were ahead with an incredible 18 seconds whilst our lads were on 20 seconds. A tap on my arm by an extremely agitated Clinker "Oim bloody parched o thirst ere an oi aint ad me bleedin tea yet

neither” He moaned. Right, this is it I thought. “Sherm I want to put my man on next”. I bawled. “OK JR, Mulcahy get your Irish ass up here right now, your’e on next” Grabbing Clinker’s arm “Come on Clinker your’e on now” I hissed. John handed over the ‘Yard’ to the huge American and amid loud cheers began to drink as the counting started 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, seconds and gone, unbelievable. The Yanks were going wild as John and Bert called for ‘Respectful Hush Please Ladies and Gentlemen’ “Give it ere”? an impatient Clinker said irritably grabbing the newly filled ‘Yard’ “Ready, Go” called Bert. John had hardly began the count which reached 9 before Clinker had drained the glass completely and even smacked his lips. The Thorn fell silent, you could have heard a pin drop before everyone apart from the Yanks went absolutely mad. Sherm turned to look at me hard “You shit” He bawled “That guy’s a damn ‘Ringer’ and you knew”? “How on earth would I know that Sherm I have never seen him do it before and I don’t think anyone here has either”? I felt John muttering under his breath “Apart from me that is” I finally convinced Sherm that it was simply a fluke as he disconsolately pushed a handful of notes into my hand.

The remainder of the evening was almost an anti climax as the crestfallen Yanks looked shell shocked. “Just to show there is no hard feelings and in good faith let me buy your guys a drink”? I said to Sherm. Handshakes all around and the ‘Games’ carried on. “Good job your tip was good John and Clinker was on form” I said to the Landlord. “You reckon”? whispered John “I’ve seen him do it a bit quicker than he did tonight”? I looked hard at him and my mouth gaped open but no words would come out. I looked around the pub but Clinker was nowhere to be seen. Seeking out Sherm again I said “I guess that makes us about quits for your ‘Kansas Ploughboy’ then does it Sherm”? Referring to their ‘Ringer’ in the ‘Drawing Match’ some weeks earlier. He smiled ruefully “Until next time Buddy, until next time but let me in on this one will you”?

I WONDER WHAT ELSE WE CAN CHALLENGE THEM AT