

Watchfield in the 1960's – A Reminiscence

You can't just lose an airfield – but try as we might – we couldn't find it.

Nostalgia is powerful emotion. It lured my wife and I across the world from our New Zealand home to England to visit many of the places remembered from our younger days.

I was keen to see Watchfield again, hoping to relive some of the times spent there as a soldier in the early sixties. In particular I was looking forward to seeing the old airfield on which I had been stationed and around which I had enjoyed many country walks.

Unbelievably it seemed to have disappeared and we ended up in some sort of industrial or commercial estate where I imagined the airfield to have been. I say unbelievably because I remember Watchfield as a tiny village, completely dominated by the airfield. You can't just lose an airfield – but try as we might – we couldn't find it.

The first time I saw the camp, early one misty winter morning in November 1960, it reminded me of fighter stations during the war. I pictured pilots lounging in chairs outside their huts, playing cards, waiting for the siren to sound. I could almost smell the tang of aviation fuel in the air and hear the growl of Merlin engines.

I fell in love with the place almost immediately.

Spread over several hundred acres, flanked on two sides by country roads, the airfield was grass covered, gently contoured, and of sufficient size to allow small aircraft and helicopters to land. A sealed perimeter track ran around its southern edge, on which stood three large hangers, their roofs almost obscured that morning by the low cloud. Between two of them stood a short squat control tower.

The camp, clustered in one corner of the airfield backing onto the Highworth road, consisted of a collection of concrete huts, offices, stores and barrack rooms. It had a slightly forlorn look about it, as though the motley collection of buildings could have done with a good scrub and brush up. Here and there small clumps of grass poked through the cracks in the tar seal. Brightly painted white stones surrounding the huts only served to heighten the impression of superficial neglect.

The Officers Mess stood in one corner of the airfield on the far side of one of the boundary roads. In common with the rest of the camp, it had a run-down look. It consisted of several small concrete buildings joined together by covered walkways. The small garden surrounding it was unkempt and there was more evidence of grass sprouting up through the cracks in the carpark. But if the place looked a little decrepit, the welcome was warm and friendly.

The civilian mess manager greeted me at the door.

Mr Meadows was every inch the gentleman's gentleman. Dressed in a dark suit, a bulky version of Jeeves with an impressive array of double chins, he had a distinctly butlerine presence. He dispensed deference and kindness in equal proportions.

To describe the building as ramshackle would be an overstatement, but it was quite unlike any other mess I had seen. The walls were distempered, the carpets frayed at the edges and the plumbing, which clanked ponderously from time to time, had seen better days. The ante-room was furnished with a number of elderly armchairs which

sagged alarmingly. In the dining room stood a single long table flanked by a dozen or so folding chairs. A pair of incongruous batwing doors led to the kitchen from which a continuous clatter could be heard at mealtimes. (The kitchen staff, National Servicemen who had their own mess, availed themselves happily of our rations. On one occasion during breakfast one of them was heard to observe loudly 'Some bastards eaten all the eggs').

There was a small bar which kept delightfully elastic hours and a 'drying room' which housed a permanent selection of old socks and rugby gear. It was the only warm room in the place. There was no central heating and all the rooms were equipped with ancient wood stoves. These were tended by a civilian batman who stoked them up first thing in the morning and again at the end of the working day. For the most part they either glowed red-hot and were a menace to life and limb or they sulked, refused to ignite and belched thick smoke.

In spite of its obvious drawbacks, the mess had a comfortable, homely feeling. It reminded me of a well used and much loved dog basket. It was home to about a dozen living-in members. The senior was a Major whose main claim to fame was that he was once referred to in the Regimental magazine as a 'bottle scarred old veteran.' Whether this was a Freudian slip or a genuine proof reading error, we never discovered. Another inmate who remains indelibly in my memory was a young Captain who occasionally roamed around the corridors in the early morning playing his trombone.

There were two Companies at Watchfield. 47 Company RASC, an operational unit and 22 Company RASC, a training unit. Both came under the control of 1 AASO (Army Air Supply Organisation) commanded by a Lieutenant Colonel. There was also a Heavy Drop Maintenance Platoon, RAOC whose task it was to service and maintain the heavy drop platform equipment.

A sole Flight Lieutenant on detachment from RAF Abingdon manned the control tower. An amiable and laconic young man, he spent most of his time cleaning his Morris Minor which he housed in a small garage in the tower. Four or five times a week the telephone rang and he dashed up the stairs, talked an aircraft in and then returned to his beloved car. His job must have been the sinecure of all sinecures in the RAF at the time.

The Air Despatch units throughout the world had their beginnings in the Burma campaign. Later they did sterling work in the Malayan Emergency and in Borneo. Airborne for 365 days of the year, flown by RAF personnel and manned by army aircrew, they re-supplied troops in the jungle by parachute. They played a huge part in the maintenance of morale, supplying everything from rations to ammunition, from mail delivery to NAAFI supplies.

I had been posted to Watchfield as an instructor at the Air Despatch Training Wing, a part of 22 Company. The Wing was housed in a couple of huts on the fringe of the airfield, next to the control tower. One served as an office, the other as a classroom. Soldiers learned the rudiments of packing airborne supplies, loading aircraft, and completing trim sheets. The practical side of the training took place in one of the large hangars. Three tables, each about fifty feet long, were used for parachute packing. Behind them was a full size wooden mock-up of an aircraft cargo floor on which trainees learned the principles of tie-down and load distribution. They were also taught how to prepare and rig one ton containers, the standard heavy load.

The flying sorties from RAF Abingdon formed the most important part of the basic training. Trainees put theory into practice, flew to Watchfield, and completed an

live drop before returning to Abingdon. The round trip took about an hour and trainees were required to carry out forty such sorties to qualify for their 'wings'.

There were two main aircraft types.

The Hastings, the workhorse from which the lighter loads were dropped was a large four engined aircraft designed as a troop and freight carrier. It wasn't a popular aircraft with despatch crews. Built before the advent of the tricycle undercarriage, it had a tailwheel. This meant that the freight compartment was on a steep angle rising sharply up towards the flight deck making the loading of heavy supplies extremely difficult, and sometimes hazardous. Even though the aircraft floor was fitted with roller conveyor, it was no easy task to push loads weighing anything up to five hundred pounds up the slope. Despatchers had to be strong and fit.

The other aircraft was the Beverley. Designed specifically for the delivery of air supplies and parachutists, it was a huge cumbersome brute. A bulbous freight compartment hung beneath the huge wings and in flight it resembled a pregnant elephant as it lumbered awkwardly across the sky. It was used for the delivery of heavy drop platforms.

These were designed to drop equipment such as field guns, bulldozers and vehicles. (At one time a less sophisticated version had been used in the jungle to drop pack mules and horses. The sedated animals, if a little bemused, usually reached their destination safely). The platforms were installed on roller conveyors in the freight compartment and, once over the drop zone, were pulled out by an extractor chute. Once clear of the aircraft a cluster of large parachutes, each sixty feet in diameter opened and the whole contraption drifted to earth.

On the whole the platforms were reliable, but on one occasion I remember watching a drop when the secondary parachutes failed to deploy. The load was a fully equipped Land Rover. The free falling platform hit the ground with a thunderous boom which made all the windows in the camp rattle. When the dust cloud eventually cleared all that remained was a cavernous pit at the bottom of which lay the wrecked vehicle, about four inches high at its tallest point.

Accidents were rare, though not unknown. A single engine Pioneer on final approach clipped the top of a tall hedge and ended up balanced inelegantly on its nose in the long grass. The embarrassed pilot, fortunately unhurt, sank a breakfast beer in the mess to steady his nerves. The aircraft was a write off.

On another occasion a novice paratrooper landed uninjured on the NAAFI roof, inadvertently breaking a leg as he jumped to safety.

In addition to lectures, the course syllabus included a number of training films, which, as a person with no mechanical aptitude whatsoever, I grew to dread. The projector was old and temperamental. More often than not it broke down squirting yards of celluloid out of its rear end, much to the delight of the 'squaddies,' who would break for a smoke while I wrestled with the writhing celluloid. Eventually, as the most junior instructor I was sent on a projectionist's course from which I emerged even more confused by the intricacies of the brute than I had been on arrival. I never did get the hang of it.

I particularly recall an old, grainy, black and white film of the Arnhem operation. It included footage of wooden Hausa gliders towed through the night by Dakotas. On landing many of them breaking up like matchwood as they scythed through barns and farm buildings at the edge of the drop zones. Each carried a full load of paratroops. It was remarkable that any of them survived to fight. No doubt that historical footage survives in an archive somewhere.

The social life of the Mess centred largely on a number of excellent pubs in the area. Our favourite was 'The Plough'. About half way between Faringdon and Shrivenham, it became almost a second home to officers from both Watchfield and from the nearby Royal Military College of Science. There, night after night we used to play darts and made many good friends amongst the locals. George and Mary Field who ran the place, were more like honorary parents than publicans, and they treated us with great kindness. Often on Sunday lunchtime after the pub had officially closed they would invite us to lunch with them. Mary was a superb cook and we would sit down to a roast of gargantuan proportions, supplemented by frequent trips to the bar to refill our glasses.

The pressure of work in those days was never great and we were free on most weekends. As a young Lieutenant I used to 'moonlight' by working for George on the smallholding which was attached to the pub. One of my tasks was to look after the hedge and ditch which ran alongside the Shrivenham road. George paid me in free beer.

One Saturday morning a large black staff car pulled into the car park. It carried a four star plate, denoting a full General. If my memory serves me correctly, the occupant was the Chief of the Imperial General Staff on his way to deliver an address to the RMCS. The Plough car park provided a convenient place to buckle on his sword, an essential part of military full dress. As he stepped out of the car, he saw me, in my full glory as a 'hedger and ditcher' and spoke a few cheerful words to me.

Such is the power of military discipline that it took all my presence of mind not to spring to attention with my billhook. Instead I made 'Oh, aar', noises such as I believed befitted my rustic appearance, and sighed with relief when he got back into the vehicle and drove off.

Other social outlets included The US Airforce Hospital at Burderop just outside Swindon. We were honorary members of their mess and they invariably treated us with typical American friendliness and hospitality.

From time to time we would go further afield to Oxford where there was an 'Empire' theatre. It specialised in variety shows, two hours of undemanding entertainment with music, comedy and lines of leggy chorus girls. (We used to try to pick them up in the pub next door to the theatre after the show). The increasingly widespread advent of television in the early sixties put paid to the old variety theatre, so I guess in a way that were privileged to see it before it finally died.

Then there was 'Dirty Dudley's' restaurant. I forget exactly where it was, somewhere in the Faringdon area I think, well off the beaten track. From the outside it looked like a barn. Inside the dining room, dim, dark and full of trestle tables, had the soft, comforting ambience of a cow byre. It was as though a chuckle of chickens might wander in at any moment to Hoover up the scraps. In spite of the fact that it must have been the most insanitary restaurant in Southern England (Dudley himself had a fragrance all his own), he served the most exquisite roast duck, and we adored it.

Another favourite haunt was the 'Trout' at Lechlade, which had the reputation of being the first pub in England to serve chicken in a basket, a dangerously Continental concept in the 1960's.

Sadly all good things must come to an end. The constant turnover of personnel is one of the uncertainties of military life, soldiers seldom remaining in one place for more than three years. Our commanding officer was an amiable soul who treated his command as being secondary to his passion for fly-fishing. Replaced by a younger,

unmarried officer of the 'eager beaver' variety, his first action on assuming command was to declare our beloved mess 'an absolute pig-sty'.

It was closed and abruptly demolished as though it was a blight on the landscape (which in fairness I suppose it was) and we were moved to the RMCS.

Roberts Hall was a vast red brick building, rectangular, stark and totally devoid of any character. The ground floor consisted of a number of huge 'communal' rooms, bar, ante-room and so forth.

The dining room reminded me of one of those vast ballrooms you see in period dramas. At one end there was an enormous canvas in oils depicting the retreat from somewhere or other, or possibly the advance to somewhere or other. A vast convoy of men dragging artillery pieces, wounded comrades and other detritus of warfare, stretched into the distance. At the head of the column, seated on his charger, an officer with a vaguely puzzled expression consulted with a fellow holding the horse's head. Underneath some wag had written 'Who's got the map?'

Rapidly jerked back into the realities of military life with its rules and rituals (Lounge suits for dinner on weeknights, sports jacket at the weekend, formal dinner once a month in Number One Blues, non-elastic bar hours etc.) we mourned our lost lifestyle. Watchfield was never quite the same again.

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