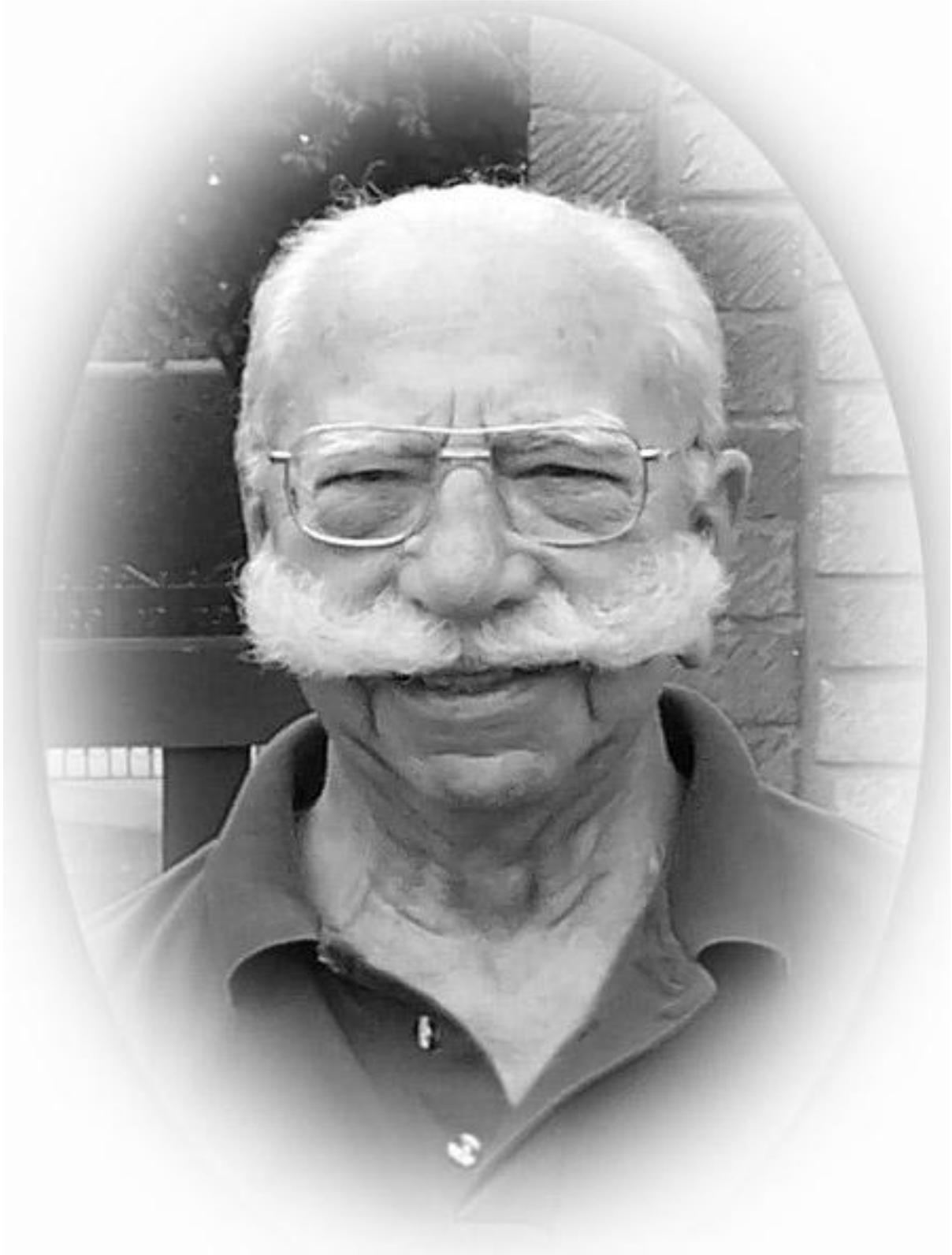


WARRANT OFFICER RONALD J (SMOKEY) FAIRHURST



A true legend of the RAF Fire Service, read Smokey's first-hand account of his remarkable career:

I enlisted at the Bolton recruiting office early in 1940 after which I was called up to RAF Padgate to be 'sworn in.' From there I was called up to 10 RTC (Recruit Training Centre) at Blackpool for basic training on the Wireless Operators/Air Gunner's course. Six weeks into the course several of us on the flight were involved in a training accident, which unfortunately affected my eyesight, bringing it below aircrew standard. As a consequence I found myself posted to RAF Pershore in deepest Worcestershire.

At that time Pershore was still in the process of being built, and on arrival I was confronted with a sea of mud, filled with large hunks of construction machinery and hundreds of 'Wimpy' workmen. However, after a period of walking in, sleeping in, and damn near eating mud, the airfield was finally completed. The billets became habitable, hangers were built, runways laid, and all the other thousand and one things needed to open an airfield were completed.

We soon became operational and the aircraft flew in. These were Wellingtons (affectionately known to us as 'Wimpies') and were to form 23OTU (Operational Training Unit). Designed by Barnes Wallis these were large twin engine bombers, with crews of 5 or 6 to each aircraft.

In those days there was no formal 'Fire Section' so fire cover was provided by a 6 man 'Fire Piquet'. This was formed by airmen being detailed from the various sections on the station. They received about 4 hours training from a SNCO who had been on a short fire course which I believe was at RAF Cranwell. The Fire Piquet manned a Crossley FWD crash truck which held 300 gallons of water, and 25 gallons of a foam compound called 'Saponine'. This consisted of pure liquid soap which was lovely for washing shirts and sheets etc.



1940s Crossley Foam Tender

The Fire Piquet was changed weekly, so it was quite a haphazard affair but on the plus side it ensured everyone on the Unit knew how to set up a hydrant and run out a line of hose. Eventually the "powers that be" recognised in their wisdom that a permanent full time fire section was required to meet the flying commitment, and as I had been in the Auxiliary Fire Service before joining the Royal Air Force, I quickly became a member of our newly formed Fire Section. In no time at all we had a Sergeant, two Corporals and a full section of twenty men.

When RAF Pershore became fully operational 90% of the aircrews were from overseas countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealander, South Africans and various others making for a very mixed bag of personnel. We had many incidents, some very serious, some absolutely hilarious; but this was only to be expected with so many young chaps who were mostly in their late teens and early twenties, each full of their own invincibility, hurling huge lumps of metal around the skies. My fellow firemen and I learned rather rapidly and coped reasonably well; at least none of us were shot at dawn! Mostly, we learned our trade through trial and error, and I think we became quite efficient. All in all I spent 3½ happy years at Pershore, during which time I attended a formal fire course at RAF Weeton, but it was not without its ups and downs.

In September 1942, I was involved in a rather bad incident and finished up in the Queen Victoria Hospital at East Grinstead for nearly six months amongst the legendary [Mc Indoes 'guinea pigs'](#). This was quite an experience for a fireman!

On return to Pershore I was promoted to Corporal and became NCO IC B crew. This was quite an elevation in status, and the increase in pay did not go amiss either. Many incidents happened in the following months; the following are just a couple of the less serious ones.

- One day we were called out to a village outside the unit where a 'Tiger Moth' had crash landed, finishing upside down in a pub yard. We arrived to find the pilot hanging upside down in his harness, complaining bitterly that he was soaked in high octane. However we cut him free and after he had been carted away, the landlord of the pub invited us in for a drink.
- Another one with a much more entertaining note, was when we were called out to the WAAF Quarters at 4AM one lovely summer morning to remove a very large sow from a Static Water Tank. We completed the rescue with an audience of lots of lovely scantily clad young ladies cheering us on. This also had a lovely consequence, as sometime after the 'WingCo' called me into his office and on behalf of the farmer who owned the sow, gave me a large £5 note, as it had farrowed nicely and produced lots of little piggy's. This was shared among the section and we had a bit of a "do", beer was only about sixpence a pint in those days so it went a long way!!

Early one morning I was sat in the office wondering when the tea bucket would be around when the phone rang. The message I heard was "*Command Fire Officer here. There is a Corporal required at RAF Valley, would any of your Corporals be interested in the posting there? With the possibility of promotion after a probationary period, ring me back ASAP*". I

went to the door and shouted as loud as I could, but there was no answer, the fact that the Crash Tender bay was a few hundred yards from the living quarters was unfortunate! It was not my fault that no one heard me, I rang the CFO back and told him I would have to take this task on my own!

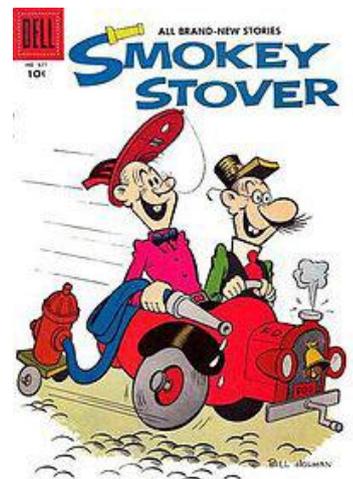
I arrived at RAF Valley, to be really thrown in at the deep end. I was suddenly NCO IC of a full Fire Section, with all the administration jobs, duty rosters, leave roster and crash details etc, which I had never had been involved in before. However, I must have got something right along the way, for after three months I was wheeled into the Group Captains office and marched out proudly with a third tape!

The SWO (of whose kind I had spent most of my time at Pershore avoiding like the plague) escorted me into the Sergeant's Mess, explained the mess rules, and bought me a drink at the bar. A new life had begun, I sat down to my first meal with a knife and fork laid out on a pristine white clothed table and a very pretty young lady asking me "Would I like soup to begin with?" What a lovely world I had entered!

The war had progressed and the "D-Day" invasion of the 'Fortress Europe' had begun. We were one of the Atlantic Ferry Terminals for the USAAF. B17s, B24s, (Fortresses and Liberators) also Marauders, Mitchels, Lockheed Lightning's and A26 Invaders; you name them we got them. They were serviced, refuelled and then flown from Valley to the operational stations around the UK. There were some hairy moments and some strange ones too, like the time when an engine fell off a Liberator and landed on the railway line that ran through the middle of the camp. This held up the London to Holyhead boat train which pleased a lot of the Yanks, as instead of travelling on to Holyhead and having to walk a long way back to camp, they just got off the train and walked across the fields to their billets.

It was while at Valley I was first given the name of "Smokey". The Yanks came up with that, after a cartoon in one of the American comic strips at the time, 'Smokey Stover' the Fire Chief. And it appears to have stuck to me ever since.

I was really settling in and getting things organised, then the phone rang again. Once more it was the Command Fire Officer, but this time a different one, a Mr Johnson who asked me if I would like to join an 'inspection team'. I knew that "inspection teams" did not do any work, they just went round finding things wrong and telling other people to put it right!



There followed a winter cruise (at high speeds to avoid 'u-boats') across the Atlantic on the "ANDES" until we almost touched New York. We then did a smart 180 degree turn and sped back across the ocean, and we eventually arrived in the dead of night at the safe haven of Freetown Harbour, in sunny Sierra Leone. Sunny except for the fact that it was throwing it down, and did so for the next three weeks; so I did what every good "Coasty" did, I bought an umbrella!

I was actually posted to AHQ Freetown, as a member of the Command Fire Staff. The full team consisted of Mr Johnnie Johnson who held the honorary rank of Flt Lt and yours truly!

We were to visit Maiduguri and Fort Lamy, (where?) we found them (right at the top of Nigeria, turn slight left at Kano and you can't miss them!) we would be calling at Accra, on the Gold Coast now Ghana, Abidjan on the French Ivory coast, Lagos, Ekegja, Appapa, Port Harcourt, Jos and Kano all in Nigeria. These "exotic" sounding places were small staging posts stretching all down the west coast of Africa and up through the centre of Africa to Khartoum and on to Egypt.

From there it was on to the North African front of Tubruk, Ben Gazi and El Alamein. Spitfires, Hurricanes and other fighter aircraft were shipped out to West Africa, built up and then flown, in short stages for refuelling up to the war front.

Though the fighting was over in North Africa, these stations still had to be inspected. Some of these units were very small by this time (in fact I was told that one unit was so small the Station Commander was only an L.A.C!). The inspections did not take too long, we usually had to wait a few days before the next available transit aircraft. Some of the places we explored are perhaps not for your delicate ears; some were quite exciting and some very illuminating (very!).

At Maiduguri, on the southern border of the Sahara Desert, we really lived it up. Johnnie had managed an invitation to a luncheon party at the District Commissioner's residence. It was all very 'plus fours and bay window white shirts' affair. A temperature of about 90°, a really substantial lunch, and several large G&T's later, all helped to create an overall sense of well being! The boss then insisted that we took a walk around town! This was the walled town of Maiduguri, all built of dried red mud. The sun reflected off these buildings and the heat was unbelievable. So with great reluctance and much complaint, I staggered along to be met with a sight that was certainly a life-time experience.

As I found out later, the Hausa and Fulani tribesmen, who roam the southern Sahara desert, bring their camels, goats, donkeys, sheep, wives and children, in fact everything, about twice a year to a huge market and general 'Ram Sam'. It was fantastic sight literally thousands of animals and people dressed in their tribal costumes, swirling around in a cloud of dust and noise that is really beyond description.

We dived into this merry throng and began to carry out our 'secondary duties'; ie we began 'shopping'! One of the perks of these inter unit/inter country flights was that various goods and items were available in some places and not in others. This covered lots of 'goodies' highly coveted by the lads who never got more than a few miles from their bases. On each trip we were deluged with requests to bring this back and that back and we did our best to get the desired items. In fact, sometimes the aircraft was so full of goodies there was hardly room for the pilot to squeeze in.

The last scheduled trip in Nigeria was to Fort Lamy which actually was a real French Foreign Legion fort, and the airstrip was situated on the only dry bit of the land in the middle of many square miles of marshland called Lake Chad. We were trying to sort all this out

when the real mother and father of all sandstorms blew up (yes I know, I know, a sand storm in the middle of miles of swamp, I couldn't believe it either) However it was still blowing when we were due to leave and the aircraft was grounded, so we were stranded.

Eventually it was decided that we could join a convoy of French Legionnaires travelling overland to a place called Dikwa, and then on to Maidugerie to catch the next transit out. That journey was a tale in itself, but we survived it before finally flying back to Freetown with the promise that we would be static for a while.

Three days later we were informed "*go north young men*" first to Takoradi, then on to Bathurst in the Gambia, then onto further points up the chain. 'Tak' was no problem. We gave ourselves a day off at Bathurst where we lunched on the veranda of the Central Hotel while we watched a cricket match on the grassy town square.

Later on in the week we had to inspect the installation of the "Base Line Foam Induction System" in the bulk fuel storage tanks at the Sunderland flying boat station at 'Half Die' way up the river Gambia. This had to be finished that day as we had an air passage booked for the following morning, perhaps what I should have mentioned before, was the small matter of the end of the "War in Europe" had been officially announced earlier that day! Yes it was "VE" Day, so we thought we should finish the job early and get back to Bathurst smartly. Back at the Mess we arrived to find everyone in, shall we say an emotional state!! They just had to be, all the beer had been disposed of.

From there we went to Dakar in French Senegal; it was only a short flight and we arrived to find the place in a complete state of madness! They were dancing in the haystacks, they were dancing in the ricks. Joy was unconfined (and her sister wasn't doing too badly either), so we were out on the town, to join in the celebrations. The local French people took us to their hearts and treated us well. The liberated free French were certainly free and **very** liberal!

Have you ever flown in a Dakota the morning after a gigantic three day thrash? When we landed we saw the Foreign Legion fort. This was at Port Etienne, on the border between Mauritania and the Western Sahara. The Legion was there to stop cross border traffic, why?

The Fort was there and it added much to the Mess facilities. The Flt Sergeant caterer evidently went up to the fort now and again with crate of corned beef, and came back with a large carboy sized bottle of rough red wine that was the legionnaires daily ration.

We returned to Freetown.

I unpacked my bag and prepared to rest on my laurels for a while. Orders came from high above; this time I had to settle for the SASO, (Senior Air Staff Officer) which I suppose is fairly high. "*Pack your bag again and get the next transport to RAF Jui.*" This was the Sunderland flying boat base right at the top of Freetown creek.

The MU hangar there was laid out with rack after rack of hoses, couplings, breechings, extinguishers, thousands of refills, and ten trailer pumps and I had two qualified store men and about six African labourers to do the donkey work which involved testing all the hoses

and checking that all the couplings screwed together. I finally returned to Freetown with reams and reams of paperwork. Then, after it had been checked by AHQ staff, I was told to return to Jui to supervise the disposal of the equipment. So off I went to be met by the O.C of the MU, who told me a 'Bomb Scow' (a RAF harbour vessel) would be at the dock the next morning and a truck would be at the hangar to take the equipment to it. Once we got it all on board and into a deep part of the river it was ditched over the side!

Things had been happening at very high levels. AHQ was to move to Accra on the Gold Coast, and to be re-sited on the USAAF base there. Mr Johnson was due to return to the UK, and I was to fly to Accra immediately to take over the USAAF fire trucks and form a RAF Fire Section.

I lived on the Yankee base and tasted 'food' again, instead of 'rations'. I had steak, instead of corned beef, potatoes instead of yams, ice cream instead of bananas and real coffee. I actually began to take an interest in life again. After a slow start a few more 'bods' were posted in and with about 20 members of the West African Air Corps (all from the local population). The intricacies of the Yankee trucks were finally mastered, Dodges, Chevies and rather a large beast called a 'Mac' A lot of training had to be done, perhaps one of the hardest was to convince the West African Air Corps lads that the shiny new boots they had been issued with were for protection when fire fighting, and not solely for wearing back in their villages to impress the local beauties!

Eventually we became operational on a not-too-busy airfield; there were two Dakota transits, one north one south, each day. A twice weekly 'Sabena' transport to the Belgian Congo, and the odd VIP aircraft. This routine carried on till at last 'VJ Day' arrived and our thoughts turned to the 'BOAT'. Some more than others, who let it be known. Eventually I was on the 24hour train trip to Kumasi and Takoradi and then the 'Boat' home to England. I was posted to Woodbridge in Suffolk where on my arrival I was presented with my 'Crown'.

During the war RAF Woodbridge had been a 'crash landing airfield' for damaged aircraft returning from raids over Germany, France etc. It had 3 parallel runways a mile long and judging by the number of wrecks in the scrap dump it had been very well used. We carried on using it for emergency landings, hydraulic failures, no brakes; also under carriage problems etc. Whilst I was there the airfield was used for lots of experimental flying, and testing newly designed aircraft. The first delta winged 'Swallow' (a fore runner to the Vulcan), was flown by Geoffrey de Havilland. Also, the new Bristol passenger planes Hermes and Hastings were tested there. We were actively involved in filling large tanks in the fuselage with water for weight ballast which was dumped shortly after takeoff, and they would land and the whole procedure would be repeated again, day after day.

We also manned the "FIDO" installation, I loved that acronym ('Fog, Intense, Dispersal, Of'), a hangar at the end of the runway which housed 10 Coventry Climax fire pumps, these pumped hundreds of gallons of 100 octane through pipes that ran either side and the length of the runway. This sprayed out of thousands of small holes and when ignited created two lines of flame the length of the runway, the heat created lifted the fog and left that runway clear for a safe landing.

We only used the FIDO once in 'anger' while I was there; a Dakota filled with army bods was returning from Germany, on a very dark and foggy night. We lit the FIDO, the whole system worked like clockwork and they landed safely.

It was during this time a lot of Jamaicans had been enlisted into the air force and we had several at Woodbridge at the time. A couple of them who had been very naughty and were under close arrest, had somehow managed to escape. Bob Man and I were detailed to go down to Ipswich docks to see if they had attempted to board ships there. We were both armed with revolvers and proceeded to board various boats to ask if they had seen any rather dark looking gentleman hanging around.

On one boat we went to the crew room, asking if they had seen anyone. Bob tried to explain who we were and pulled out his revolver to emphasise his point. Then suddenly there was a mass exodus as the crew disappeared out through portholes and doors. The Captain called the local police and asked for their assistance in getting rid of the two lunatics who were attempting to shoot his crew!

After a rather interesting 9 months at Woodbridge, the very bad winter of early 1947 hit us and the runways began to break up, and the whole unit moved across Suffolk where we opened RAF Lakenheath which had been on a care and maintenance basis since the war had ended. There we became officially a Master Diversion Airfield. We remained an MDA until 1948 when the 'cold war' heated up and 3 squadrons of B29's of the USAF arrived and I was back with American Air Force again This time as I/C of a combined RAF and USAF Fire Section.

This was the start of a very busy three years. Thankfully no major incidents took place, although at one period it got a little tense. A Daily Express reporter wandered across the Airfield from the Brandon road and placed stickers with "Blown up" printed on them, on about 10 of the B29 Super Fortresses. All hell broke loose. Within two days, two squadrons of the RAF Regiment, a company of the Green Howards, a company of the Sherwood Foresters and a company of the Parachute Regiment arrived on the unit and erected tented camps in any available space that could be found for them.

Every aircraft was guarded by 3 Americans, each with a rather large nasty looking gun, which they did not hesitate to point at you if you got within a 100 yards of their planes. Needless to say we kept as far away from them as we could. The British troops guarded the airfield perimeter until hundreds of workmen arrived and built a barbwire fence around the entire airfield. We carried on under very strict security, and managed to get used to showing our ID card every three or four feet; at least that is what it seemed like.

In 1951 the USAF took over the Airfield completely and I was posted to RAF Hemswell in Lincolnshire, and so back to RAF flying again. We had three Squadrons of Lincolns; 83, 97 and 199 ECM, and two squadrons of Mosquitos; 109 and 39. Hemswell was a very busy airfield and many incidents took place while I was there. One day we had 6 Mosquitos returning from a training flight, and unbelievably they all suffered a fuel problem, and all 6 tried to land at the same time! They landed all over the airfield, on the perimeter track, on the runway and on the grass. Luckily they all managed to get down in more or less one piece.

Another unusual incident was when a Lincoln tipped its wing against a concrete block house and ended up lying across the main Lincoln to Scunthorpe road. When we arrived, we were met by what seemed like hundreds of airmen bailing out of every orifice of the aircraft. It eventually turned out that the aircraft was going to an air display at RAF Leuchars and as it was a 'Grant' weekend lots of clever 'Jocks' had scrounged lifts to Scotland.



Avro Lincoln of the RAF

The Lincoln had completely blocked the road, so the CO ordered it to be removed immediately no matter how it was done and told us to cut it in two pieces and drag them to either side of the road. Another incident that was rather a personal one, and stands out in my memory, is that in 1952 King George VI died at Sandringham and many worldwide members of Royalty and High Dignitaries were due to fly into RAF Marham. I was detailed to go there immediately and take over the crash line. The CO told me at 1100 hrs, and by 1130 I was airborne in a Mosquito. Almost before I had time to adjust my oxygen mask I was landing at RAF Marham! There I was briefed by the Station Commander as to what my duties would entail. After 5 days I returned to Hemswell, this time on a very slow train! Shortly after my return I received a letter from H.Q. Bomber Command thanking me for my part in the arrangements in accepting royal visitors at RAF Marham.

In October 1955, after 9 years on the Bomber Command Stations I was posted to MAEE (Marine Aircraft Experimental Establishment) at RAF Felixstowe. I was to take charge of the 'working up' trials of a new type of fire boat, designated 'P81'. This was being designed to cover the new 'Princess Flying Boat', a large passenger carrying flying boat able to fly worldwide. The fire boat was double hulled (the space between the two hulls were used as foam compound tanks) and had a large 1000 g.p.m. marine pump which supplied 4 monitors, 2 forward 2aft. The propulsion gear was completely strange to us, it had 2 discs that revolved under the hull and each disc had featherable blades that pointed downwards, so that as the discs revolved and the blades feathered we could steer the boat forwards, backwards, diagonally, sideways, in fact every which way up, and hopefully not down. We spent many happy hours in Felixstowe harbour and at times creeping up on the Harwich to the Hook

ferry, and probably scaring the lives out of the passengers when jets of foam shot up alongside them.



Princess Flying Boat

There was another reason why Felixstowe was a very happy posting for me, I married my wife, Glad, who I had met at Hemswell, and became a 'liver out' and lived in a 'house' instead of a 'bunk' in the mess. However all these good postings come to an end too quickly; the Princess Flying boat was cancelled and my lovely boat with it, and I was posted to RAF Oakington, in Cambridgeshire.

I arrived there to find lots of Vampires flying round in circles, which was a novelty after being away from an active airfield for 18 months. We covered two airfields, RAF Oakington and RAF Gravelly, where Vampire Pilots were trained, and it was a very busy period but happily incident free.

After 18 months I was given my marching orders again; this time to the Antipodes no less, I was being sent to the Atomic Test Range at Maralinga in South Australia, a desert posting north of the Nullarbor Plain. It was 750 miles from the nearest town, and was manned by the three British and the three Australian Services (army, navy and air force), as well as civilians from Health Physics the atomic test community. It was a fantastic mix of trades and skills to cover all the specialised tasks that we were called on to perform.

Under the official secrets act details of some of them cannot be spoken about even now, sounds awfully dramatic, but that's the way it goes. In fact some of the buildings were so out of bounds that if they had caught fire we were not allowed to enter them and had to be left to burn! Fortunately nothing happened along those lines while I was there. There were lots of bush fires which at time were very, very interesting! (a quarter of a mile of fire front can be a little intimidating). However, with the help of the Royal Engineers with their bulldozers, and the Royal Navy chaps we coped, and the only things damaged were the local flora and fauna!

Our main task was covering the trigger mechanisms, this consisting of standing by the explosive firing area dressed in full nobby gear and masks, while the scientists let off rather loud bangs. Then we would rush in and put out the bush fire they had started, before Australia went up in flames. After 12 months in the Aussie bush/desert, with just a 4 days jolly in Adelaide in the middle, I returned to the UK and England. I was posted to the School of Fire Fighting at RAF Sutton-on-Hull as a Supervisor/Instructor, and while there I attended an instructor's course receiving an A1 Merit. After 7 months at Sutton, the whole unit closed down and we moved to RAF Catterick.

There we had a whole airfield to ourselves, with lots of room to hurl our trucks around and to set fire to lots of different aircraft fuselages which were ferried in specially for us to set ablaze and put out in our many different ways. Thousands of gallons of contaminated octane were always to hand to give us lots of practice, so we poured and lit to our hearts content, until one day someone surprised us.

We had a Javelin fighter on the pan which had been prepared for a Crash Fire Exercise and we poured 4x45 gallon drums of fuel around and under the aircraft. As it turned out, and very luckily for us, the fire was going to be lit using a Very Pistol. We stood back and the Very was fired, but as it ignited the fuel there was a massive explosion and the Javelin leapt about 10 feet in the air. It was so violent that we were thrown about 20 feet from the Pan!

After the exercise was over, an investigation was carried out, and we discovered that some bright spark at the Fuel Depot had shipped in ten drums of Avpin, a highly explosive engine starter fuel. We never heard officially what happened at the Fuel Depot, but I did hear that someone had got his wrist slapped rather seriously!

During this period I had attended another Instructors Course and Instructor Supervisors course at RAF Uxbridge. Back at RAF Catterick I taught the Regiment Officers Fire Courses, SNCO Courses and developed the Cross Country Driving Course, with Aircraft Fuselages hidden in the Woods and on the opposite side of the River Swale to add to the confusion!

Altogether I had a very happy time at the School at RAF Catterick in great company, which included Tom Woodburn, Ron Shearn, Bob Brean, Bill Ross, Jock McCaffery and lots of other stalwarts of the RAF Fire Service.

After 5 years at the School I was posted to RAF Laarbruch in Germany, once again taking charge on an Active Airfield, where we had two Canberra Squadrons. As this was in the

Cold War period, Laarbruch had a QRA commitment which included lots of TacEvals, and the hooter sounding off in the small hours of the morning all too often.

This meant fully manned crash crews at all times until the Exercise was over, with all sorts of problems thrown at you that had to be sorted out in double-quick time. The results of the incidents were assessed by members of the TacEval team made up of officers and NCOs from all NATO countries and could be positively hilarious at times. One incident which was a bit dodgy at the time, but amusing afterwards, was about a Canberra on QRA (Quick Reaction Alert) which had developed a leak in the fuel tank above the bomb bay. And AVTUR was pouring over the weapons in the bomb bay. The aircraft was parked of course, beyond the 'No Go Line'. This in turn was guarded by a USAF 'Snowdrop' and a RAF 'Snowdrop' and both had orders to shoot anyone crossing the 'No Go Line' unless escorted by and authorised by an American Officer. Somehow though, this order seemed to go by the board that day, so when someone had to go into the bomb bay and plug the leak and wash fuel away who do you think got the job of doing that?

On return to the UK I was posted to RAF North Coates on the east coast; a complete change of territory on the cold foggy coast of Lincolnshire. No aircraft just static surface to air missiles sitting pointing to the skies.

Then after 11 months there, in Sept 1969 I was promoted to Warrant Officer and posted to RAF Scampton, where we had three Vulcan Squadrons 617, 83, 27, and the Vulcan Conversion Unit. The fire section was a rather large one which consisted of 4 Mk6's, 6DP2's and 2DP1's and as far as I can remember a section of 60 firemen and 4 SNCO's.



This is Smokey's own photograph of the Crash Trucks at Scampton with a Vulcan in the background

This was a very busy period of my RAF life, the Vulcan bombers were armed with the 'Blue Steel missile' and we always had 4 fully armed Vulcan's on permanent QRA the Blue Steel missile was fuelled by HTP (High Test Peroxide) which was rather dangerous stuff. If you looked at it sideways it burst into flames and if any form of contamination got in the equipment used to handle it, it ignited spontaneously. It was stored in stainless steel tanks and the buildings and areas where the work was carried out were constantly flooded with running water. Around the dispersal areas there were large tanks of water, where if anyone was splashed by the HTP they could immediately be immersed.

Once one of the ground crew chaps was splashed with the stuff but as it was raining at the time his uniform was rather wet, it was not noticed. However, a while later when he was in the dining hall his battle dress jacket dried out and burst into flames!

There were lots of incidents at Scampton, some minor, some rather hairy. There was one when a Vulcan landing in a very strong crosswind shed one of its bogies, which then shot across the airfield, hit the corner of the control tower and finished about 20 feet in front of the crash bays. In those days as I have said the unit was on constant readiness alert, and from time to time we were involved in what we call a 'Generation'. This consisted of the QRA aircraft dispersing to different airfields around the country, and so a fully manned crash crew had to be sent out to these airfields to cover the Vulcan flying.

One Thursday evening the hooter sounded and the system rolled into action. All the necessary took place and another Generation began, which lasted until the next afternoon when we received the 'stand down'. We were just winding up, when suddenly the hooter sounded again; what was happening? We all doubled back to our prearranged slots expecting to hear the worst. Then a tannoy announcement! It was a full stand down the Blue Steel was finished as the UK's primary nuclear deterrent and the Navy had taken over our duties. The Polaris submarine was now the UK's main defence in the cold war.

However, the Vulcans kept flying so we designed a new Fire Station next to the Control Tower, with proper vehicle bays, crew accommodation and workshops, and we carried on with the normal airfield crash cover.

Then in August 1970 I was posted to RAF Luqa, Malta to the Joint User airfield and looked forward to the next three years in the sun! Several notable incidents took place during the Malta tour; one when an Italian Air Force Fighter that crashed on takeoff and smashed into the airfield boundary fence and a solid Maltese stone wall. This jammed the cockpit canopies and trapped the pilot and navigator inside. Sgt George Masterson and 2 Corporals broke into the cockpits and rescued the two air crew, for which George received a Queens Commendation for Bravery and the two Corporals receive a C in C's Commendations.

Another potentially bad accident was when a fully loaded Air Malta airliner with 80 passengers and crew arrived at 0430hrs showing only 2 greens, and after flying around to use up fuel it finally landed and deployed the escape chute. Luckily, only a very few passengers received minor injuries, and although the undercarriage caught fire it was soon put out. The passengers, through the Air Malta airline, sent a letter to the station Commander thanking the Royal Air Force Fire Service for the most excellent handling of a potentially tricky situation.

In 1971, on a quiet Sunday afternoon I looked through the window of my married quarter and saw the sky turning black with lots of queer stuff blowing about. It turned out to be a tornado sweeping across the airfield; it had lifted a Shackleton Bomber in the air and smashed into 2 naval helicopters on the dispersal. The crash crew saw this happen from the crash bays and immediately set off to see what they could do, but when they met the tornado half way over, it stopped them in their tracks with the ferocity of the wind.

There was nothing they could do at dispersal, and when they returned to the crash bays they found the wind had completely ripped off the corrugated iron roof from the crash bays and rolled it up like a sardine can lid. It had then crashed it down on the crew room at the rear of the bays. Consequently, by answering the call to the dispersal, their absence had certainly saved lots of injured, if not the lives of the crash crew. This meant of course that a new Fire/Crash Section had to be built, but on New Year's day afternoon 1972 Mr Mintoff the Prime Minister (or was it president?) waited until we were recovering from the night before, and over Malta radio waves told the British to "GERR OFF" He very kindly allowed 7 days for the British forces to get off the island, (very good of him).

It was decided by the powers that be that all the families (wives and children) would be evacuated by the end of the week. Then started a fantastic period of activity, throughout the nights and days that followed, the whole unit rang with the noise of packing crates being delivered, and hammering of nails in the wooden boxes. This was also being done around the island for the personnel who lived in hiring's. Then the Army and Navy lads collected all the crates, and took them to the docks in Grand Harbour to be shipped home. Lists of names and dates of departures were issued and aircraft began to fly in to take the family's home, it really was a most efficient and smooth operation.

VC10's and Britannia's swooped in and out and by the end of the week all the families had departed and we servicemen were left with the job of winding up the presence of the British armed forces in Malta. This was after a stretch of 150 years tenure when it became a British Colony after the removal of Napoleon in 1814.

It had been agreed that a period of 3 months would be sufficient to wind up the services establishment on the island, and there was only 35 of us servicemen left. There was ATC, Movements and Fire Services to keep the airfield open for our own aircraft and of course the civilian air movements. On the 28th March the last of us were to be lifted off by naval helicopters, and taken to HMS Bulwark, a naval aircraft carrier, and sail home to the UK. However, with only 3 days left to go, our friend Mr Mintoff signed a further agreement for the British services to remain on the island till 1979.

So, we unpacked our bags, and began the task of putting everything back together again. Equipment began to flood in slowly more bods and families arrived back and I was asked if I would like to remain in Malta. If I had accepted I would have had to complete another full tour of 3 years which was awkward. I only had 3 years to complete my service to retirement after 35 years, and I had to think about a house purchase and civilian job; so I turned the offer down and returned to RAF Scampton, hopefully to begin my transition civilian life.

However, life in the 'mob' never went that smoothly, we had put down a deposit on our future home just outside Lincoln, then true to service bloody mindedness I was posted to RAF Gan, I was not chuffed, but I went, and having bought myself an umbrella again, began sweat it out in the sun once more. In truth I cannot say Gan was an onerous task, I had some good Flight Sergeants in Glyn Tow, John Sanders and Wilf Longmire, who took the weight of my shoulders and made the job a lot easier. Then of all things, I had to catch pneumonia, on a tropical island!!!!. On the plus side that allowed me to have 14 days sick leave, and through the good offices of the Wg Cdr Ops, to break my tour with 10 days back in the UK.

On my return to the UK I was posted to RAF Fairford to take charge of the Fire/Crash section covering the Concorde flight test program. This was a really wonderfully interesting period! The flight testing of the Concorde was really fascinating and generally trouble free. There were or two instances when our hair stood on end. Once when on takeoff, a Concorde was moving along the runway rather rapidly, when the reverse thrust clamshell shields suddenly operated on the port engines, which resulted in the pilot aborting the take off and finishing up on the taxiway with large dense clouds of smoke pouring from the undercarriage. The crash crew swung into action and got on with cooling everything down.

On another occasion we were called out to the Concorde hangar to find lots of people rushing about shouting "this" and "that" it turned out the container of the engine starting fuel was leaking on Concorde 002, which was up on jacks. The engine starting fuel was rather dangerous stuff and the hangar was reeking of the fumes, so the only thing to do was to open the doors at both ends and let the breeze take over. Luckily no one had attempted to move any electric switches as a spark might have meant that 002 would have 'taken off' without needing a runway!!



Concordes at Fairford

Another incident happened one early summer evening there was an extra strong cross wind on the runway, Concorde 004 landed and veered across the grass and came to rest on the taxiway. Brian Trubshaw, who was piloting the aircraft at the time exited the aircraft by means of the Crash Landover ladder. Then when he examined the aircraft he found out that

one of the undercarriage securing struts was swinging free, and asked us to use our ladder to rig up a 'jury strut' until the ground crew arrived to secure it properly. On examination later on, it was found that as the aircraft had landed, the cross wind had caused serious over-strain on the undercarriage. this caused a lot of concern and the technicians had to put their thinking caps on rather smartish.

The posting to RAF Fairford for the last 18 months of my service was a really enjoyable ending to my 35 years career as a member of the Royal Air Force. On my retirement from the RAF I joined Hawker Siddley Aviation as Chief Fire Officer, and was based at Bitteswell in Leicestershire. At that time they were servicing Vulcan's, Shackletons, Hunters, Buccaneers, the Red Arrows Gnat aircraft, and later on built up the first Red Arrows Hawks. So it was the same trucks, same job, only thing different was the colour of uniform! That went from blue to black, so I slipped back into civilian life quite effortlessly. Then British Aerospace was formed and I stayed with them as Chief Fire Officer until 1983 but decided that I had been attached to the end of a telephone 24/7 for long enough so finally hung up my boots and retired gracefully. Now that I had given up trying to save the world from going up in flames, Glad and I moved back to Lincolnshire, to settle in Welton, just a couple miles from RAF Scampton. I became an Honorary Member to the WO'S and Sergeants Mess there so kept in contact with the Red Arrows and the service in general.

So after a long and happy career in the Royal Air Force I can truthfully say I would do it all over again. As the years advance (all too quickly!!). I still have many many happy memories of the wonderful friends I have met and cherished over the years with whom I have been proud to serve. That I thought was end of my connection with the Fire Service. Then the RAF Fire Association was formed and I became a member (No 35), and attended many reunions around the country. Out of the Blue came an invitation from Buckingham Palace, to a Luncheon hosted by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, I had the privilege, along with Wilf Longmire and Keith Penfold and our wives to represent the Many Many Firemen who had served in the Air Force over the years, (on the occasion of the Anniversary of the end of the 39/45 war) for which I thank the Association. This really was the icing on my cake and I retire happily.

Sadly, Smokey passed away in April 2011, I hope you enjoyed reading his story

Dave Kirk

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