

APPRENTICE MEMORIES-By Paul Tuffery

The following item has been reproduced from the book 'Over and Out- A History of RAF Locking' by Squadron Leader Ray Tillbrook.

Who will forget the Apprentice Mess? Those long queues of hungry apprentices waiting to have food unceremoniously dumped on their plates by bored duty junior apprentice servers and the after meal ordeal of washing one's irons and china mug in a tank of boiling water without being scalded in the attempt. One lost count of the number of irons that slipped through the mesh of the rinsing basket to be lost forever beneath the bubbles of rising steam.

"Greasy Joe"

The cooks that catered for the apprentice wing seem to have been chosen for their belligerence rather than for their catering skills. Who will forget the corporal cook, Greasy Joe, whose oily features always seemed to be as unwashed as the splattered cook's uniform that he always wore. I remember one poor apprentice who had the temerity one morning to ask him for a boiled egg. 'Who the devil do you think you are?' shouted Joe, 'you can have fried egg or scrambled egg like everyone else - boiled egg never'. After a few days of this the apprentice not to be beaten, broke into the Mess one dark night and boiled every egg in sight! The look on Greasy Joe's face the following day as he tried to crack tray after tray of pre-boiled eggs was a joy to behold. In comparison, the civvy members of the Mess were delightful and in our senior year ensured that our illicit late breakfast club was always provided with freshly cooked eggs and bacon. Despite our frequent requests, the coke machine was never moved outside the Mess which resulted in many a late night break in just to put one's money in the slot and sneak out with an armful of orders. Every time I passed the guardroom and saw the 'guilty' doing their jankers I used to think there but for good fortune!

Summer Camp

An undoubted highlight (although not appreciated by all) was the Summer Camp at Penhale Sands where for a week we slept under canvas and played at being boy soldiers. The mock battle where opposing Red and Blue teams fired blank ammunition and threw thunderflashes at each other was taken extremely seriously by our Rock Ape mentors. They were definitely not amused when Tony Cotter although eliminated' and out of ammo continued to aim his gun at the opposing team shouting out in his cultured voice 'Bang! Bang' every

time he pulled the trigger. The cross- country trek was also an experience not to be forgotten. After stumbling across crater-filled fields our team decided to take a short cut along a railway line. I will always remember the astonished looks on the faces of the people on the platform as we marched up the platform ramp, along the platform and disappeared into a tunnel at the other end leaving the refrains of our rugby songs hanging in the air.

Senior Entries

In the days that we joined the apprentices as young sprogs, the senior entries ruled the roost and No. 1 radio training School suffered the worst excesses of 'Tom Brown's School Days'. We were expected to shout 'senior man present' and jump to attention whenever a Senior Entry apprentice entered the billet. In addition we were subjected to Senior Entry full kit inspections where the inspected sprog could expect to have dust smeared on his face and his kit thrown about while being subjected to verbal abuse. You considered yourself lucky if all that was found was a 'spot' on your china mug which resulted in it being smashed on the bottom rail of your bedstead. Fagging was considered the norm and fags, on being summoned to a Senior Entry billet, were expected to salute whatever passed as a mascot (usually positioned above the tannoy speaker) as they entered the door. To fall foul of a Senior Entry member was to invite disaster for kangaroo courts were held to judge 'offenders' and mete out bizarre punishments. Even the NAAFI was no escape as one could be dragged into the 'Senior Entry Only' room and be forced to stand on the table and sing a song amidst a great deal of barracking. What proved to be the final straw for the 90th was the perpetual night raiding which resulted in individuals being dragged from their beds (pits) and suffering other forms of harassment including being asked if one wanted to buy a battleship! Enough was enough and the 90th retaliated and raided the Senior Entry', the first Junior Entry in all of Locking's history to have the guts to do so. Retribution from the Senior Entries came swiftly. We were in the NAAFI at the time and wondered what the crashing noise could mean. We soon found out. Our billets were totally wrecked, our highly polished floors ruined by hob nail boots and bicycles and our beds dismantled and thrown about. Some unfortunate members of the 90th were still on the roofs of the huts recovering bits of their beds long after midnight. Still we had made out point and as far as I can remember we were never raided again.

Come the end of term, we were marched en masse to 2T block where we queued up for hours for train passes to our home towns before being put on buses to Weston-super-Mare Railway Station. Once there, we were herded on to special trains. It was a major operation that none of us appreciated. It was not uncommon to see apprentices who had made other holiday arrangements make a rapid escape from the non-platform side of the train and disappear over the tracks. On one occasion a group of escaping apprentices hid in a solitary stationary carriage which to their dismay was coupled up and ended up in Patchway.

Drill Instructors

'Beetle' wasn't the only DI to end up with an aerial bike. Remember Linus the Irish DI whose accent was so thick that it was difficult to understand him? He was one of nature's least loveable characters and the more he was wound up the less intelligible he became. We obtained much pleasure in 'misinterpreting' his commands on the parade square and delighted in the resulting chaos. His bike ended up one night 'flying' from the overhead heating pipe by the NAAFI.'

Arms' Pollard was famous for the length of his limbs and one Christmas the 90th presented him with a double-arm RAF pullover!

One day 'Flapper' Atkinson inconsiderately blocked the road by commanding our junior entry to open order as I was approaching on my bike. Not to be deterred, I continued on my way and cycled right through the flight. 'Flapper' went berserk and for a moment I thought he was going to have a seizure. 'Bbbbb***** 90th... R-r-r-r-report t-t-t-t-to me tomorrow morning. I'll p-p-put you on a fizzer' he stammered. I duly reported but fortunately he failed to turn up!

Padres

To save our souls, Locking provided a variety of Padres whose backgrounds were as varied as the churches they represented. By far the most colourful was Padre Schofield an ex- professional magician who could always be counted on to put on a good show at our YMCA Christmas concert. He was famous for using a ventriloquist dummy in his children's Sermons. This practice incensed a member of his civilian flock who sent him a letter accusing him of being the

'son of the devil'. Schofield took mischievous delight in promptly mailing a response commencing Dear Father... ..'

Church clubs also provided an ideal way to meet apprentice seeking teenage daughters from married quarters. This served to satisfy two desires the first of winning female companionship, the second, the chance of an invite home and 'feet under the table' for Sunday lunch. The latter was often the most favoured objective.

Cars and Motorbikes

I will never understand why it was illegal for apprentices to own cars and motorbikes once they'd reached the national qualifying age. Perhaps they were afraid of us all driving off never to return. Despite the ban, vehicles were stashed away. John Gray had a superb Wolsley garaged in Weston while Tony Petter garaged his Standard Ensign in the 'Boggies' (National Service) Wing right on the base! Many a night we drove up and down 'Skid Row' while I took my first driving lessons without even leaving the camp-wonderful!

Finally, it was all a long time ago since we burnt our boots (to obtain a good shine), burnished our cap badges on the back of mats, slithered about with squares of blankets on our feet (to keep the linoleum gleaming) and starched (some even sewed) creases in our uniforms. It must all seem a bit bizarre to today's airmen (who probably wouldn't know a 'housewife' or a 'button-stick' if they saw one). Nevertheless, as we swung our bumpers to the Everly Brothers', wake up little Suzie' and Presley's 'I wanna be free' we shared a lot of experiences (and very often the same suit). This and the high standard of technical training we received stood us in good stead later on. Looking back it's amazing how much we packed into those three years and the bond forged between us kept us together in later service and long after.