What Did You Do in the Cold War Daddy?

By John Crabbe G3WFM

It's sixty years ago, 1950, that I received the dreaded OHMS letter telling me to report to RAF Padgate in Lancashire. In case you are too young to know, all males who reached the tender age of 18 years and provided they hadn't got flat feet or some other excuse were required to serve King and Country for eighteen months (later two years) called National Service.

I had previously joined the ATC (Air Training Corps) and had been interested in aircraft and flying since I had witnessed the actions of the RAF in the Battle of Britain as a boy at school. I was very eager to get in the RAF and as a member of the ATC, it gave me an advantage. So on the morning of call up I together with about 70 other young men, caught a train at Euston Station, with a one-way travel warrant, to Warrington in Lancashire. On arrival there, we were herded into some RAF trucks (garries in RAF slang) for the trip to RAF Padgate about three miles out of town.

The first two weeks were fairly easy being fitted out with uniforms etc. The only thing they asked you was your hat size, which seemed to be the standard for every other bit of clothing. I have never worked that one out, but it seemed to be ok provided you were a fairly standard size, which I was, fortunately. But tough on anybody who was tall and thin or short and fat. There were several unfortunates, who were marching around in their civilian coats for weeks before they were finally fitted out. We were issued with two uniforms, one a working dress, RAF blue trousers and battledress top, and our best blues, which was blue trousers and a fitted tunic with brass buttons, which was fitted by a local tailor. He must have made a fortune with 70 odd recruits every week!

Finally, I was issued with a service number mine was 3124209, which you forgot at your peril. After a few days of form filling, photo taking, for your pass (Form 1250) and some medical assistant sticking great big needles in your arms, we were sent to our recruit training centres. A lot of the sprogs (RAF slang) were sent off to other camps dotted around the Midlands and North, but about 200 of us were marched off to the other side of the site to No.8 Flight B Squadron, No.1 Recruit Training Wing and with some apprehension as rumours abounded about suicides taking place in the ablutions. But I never found any.

Well looking back at it now, I would say that it made a present day prison seem like a holiday camp compared with the discipline we had to endure and we hadn't committed any crime, yet. Nobody had heard of The Human Rights Act then! We were billeted in draughty WW II wooden huts with two smoky coke stoves for heating, provided you could get near them, and its always cold and raining in that part of the North in the winter. Each hut had about 35 beds with steel lockers beside them, and everyone had to keep his bed space spotless and floor highly polished. This was done with a block of wood covered in polishing cloth with a handle attached. The task was helped by one bod (slang again) standing on the block and another pulling him along the floor. It was a tradition that the last occupants deliberately left the floor in a bad state, so the new sprogs had a hard job just as they had.

In charge of each hut was a corporal (two stripes on arms), and were called DIs (drill instructors). These individuals seemed to be picked for their sadistic characteristics, a mixture of a school prefect and a prison warder, one had to obey their every command including fetching them cigarettes from the NAAFI (service canteen). There were two equally nasty sergeants (three stripes on arms), who made sure the corporals kept up the pressure. I was slightly better prepared than others as I had done a bit of drill in the ATC, so did know what was expected.

Life seemed to comprise of six hours of square bashing (drill on the parade ground) interrupted by three hardly edible meals and some well earned sleep which was terminated by the sound of a wake up call through the PA system at 6am every morning six days a week. Nevertheless the combination of regular exercise and three meals made us all very fit, some for the first time in their lives!

The only relief in all this was a 48hr pass half way through the eight weeks course when everybody dashed home for a well-earned rest. Fortunately, the RAF did pay the fare for this as the pay was a pitiful 28 shillings (£1.40) a week with full board provided of course.

The final four weeks were as before except for some more interesting lectures on aircraft recognition, rifle shooting and weapons training. This consisted of firing .303 Lee Enfield rifles on a 25yd range. Who said you can't miss at that range? This usually made me deaf for two days afterwards as nobody seemed to have heard of ear defenders then! The other weapon was an automatic gun called a Sten gun. This was a crudely made machine gun manufactured cheaply during the war and occasionally jammed or made mincemeat of your little finger if you let it stray into the breach block. We were warned to keep the gun pointing towards the target all the time in case it went off by itself whereupon the shout went up "HIT THE DECK". There were also plenty of periods of PT (physical training), usually first thing in the morning, in shorts, with the temperature close to freezing.

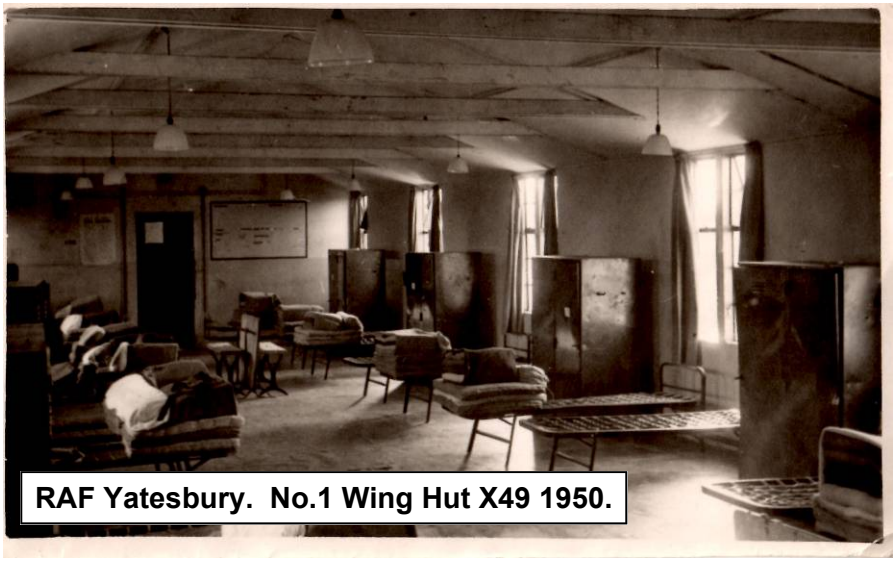
At last, recruit training came to an end with a final passing out parade. By then we were quite a smart lot and there was a competition for drill competing against the other training flights. I think we came third, but I must say we did our best and were quite proud of our achievement.

The final test was to decide what trade you were to take up for the rest of your service. I wanted to be aircrew, but during the medical exam, it was found that my eyesight was not good enough, so I asked to be trained to be a radio mechanic as I had been interested before and had been building sets and had just made a TV set out of ex-gov't parts. I had to take a short multiple-choice test to see if I was up to standard, which I passed OK. After a couple of days we all received our postings and, much to my delight, I was to report to No.2 Radio School, RAF Yatesbury in Wiltshire. Off we went home for the weekend and the next week I boarded a train at Paddington looking forward to a much more interesting time.

The train from Paddington stopped at Chippenham and I changed to a small push-pull train, pulled by a 0-6-0 GWR pannier tank engine. This took me to its terminus at Calne; the whole branch disappeared with the Beeching axe in the 60s. Here there was the usual Garry to take about six of us to RAF Yatesbury.

The camp was situated in the middle of the Wiltshire Downs about four miles from Calne and the only way to get anywhere was to hitch a lift. This was very easy as the main A4 Bristol to London main road went right passed the camp. The camp covered an area about a mile square with rows and rows of the usual wooden domestic huts, many lecture and workshop huts, a cinema and the usual parade ground. There were two wings, one for radar mechs and fitters and one for wireless mechs.

On arrival I was told I would be in the wireless wing, so with my kit bag, full of all my worldly possessions, slung over my shoulder, I found my billet that was to be my home for six months. When I entered I couldn't believe it. There were the usual row of iron beds and lockers but behind them were pipes. It was CENTRAL HEATING! Also no more running out in the cold and wet, there were corridors connecting the huts to the ablutions. No more stoking up the smoky stoves and no more dashing outside to the loo in the morning.



RAF Yatesbury. No.1 Wing Hut X49 1950.

The floors in the billets looked as though they hadn't seen polish for weeks, which after the last eight weeks, it looked to us like sloppiness. However we chose a bed space and unpacked our kit into the locker when the door burst open and in walked a corporal who lived in the room at the end of the hut. We all stopped what we were doing and stood to attention as we had been told to do if any NCO or officer entered. He immediately said stand easy and sit down and said in a quiet

voice that he was in charge of the hut and would be one of our instructors on the course. He seemed very friendly and said parade next morning outside the hut was at 0830hrs and then left. This was a very civilised time indeed and we were free to go were we liked provided we stayed on camp. This was turning out to be a holiday camp compared with our last camp.

Next morning we were awakened by the usual distorted sounds of the wake up call, but at 0730hrs not 0600hrs as before and dressed and waited outside to march to breakfast, but a voice from one of the many erks (airman) said “We don’t march here you sprogs”, so we wandered up to breakfast with our irons (knife fork spoon and mug).

Now down the road at Calne there was a large factory churning out sausages from the local farms called Harris’s. You can no doubt guess what was on the menu most days and sometimes with bacon. The tea was not like mum makes as it came from an enormous urn in the corner, and rumours went round that it was spiked with some chemical to damp the passions of 500 or so young men with frustrated desires!

After returning from breakfast we packed up our beds in the usual RAF style, two sheets sandwiched in-between three rolled up blankets and placed neatly on top of three biscuits. These were not pinched from the mess but were three square shaped mattresses that were placed on your old iron bed, whose springs were almost touching the floor after countless erks had slept on them over the years. The camp was built in about 1936 as a school for Wireless Ops and Air Gunners in larger bomber aircraft and I often wonder how many made it back to base.

On parade we went and lined up, once again we were the only smart looking ones, the other huts residents stood around chatting to each other until an elderly looking warrant officer called us to attention. These ranks were usually fierce looking characters that seemed to rule the whole camp, but not this one. He reminded me of an old school headmaster waiting for his retirement and so in a quiet voice “fall out tonight’s guard” whereupon six airmen shuffled out to the front.

Guard duty consisted of two hours wondering round the classroom area with a chair leg as a weapon in case anyone was trying to break in and steal the radios etc, I can’t think why they would then, but some of it would be worth a mint now amongst the vintage radio enthusiasts. Our corporal asked if anyone had been in the ATC, so I said yes, so he said right you can be Class Leader. This was a fairly easy job which involved looking at the program pinned up on the Flight Office and after breakfast marching our class to the various classrooms and workshops.

The course lasted six months, the first half learning about radio and electrical theory and the second practical work on aircraft radio and workshop techniques. I really took to all this of course having been making radios and listening on the short waves since I was a boy of 14yrs old at school.

Looking back now, I think it was the happiest days in my service in the RAF. There were some negative aspects of course; some morning parades and fatigues (usually cleaning the stale food out of large cooking pots in the cookhouse, not forgetting spud bashing). This was not too bad as the spuds were poured into a great big machine rather like a washing machine filling it with water and switching on the motor. Great fun was had by lifting the lid when it was spinning and showering the nearest bod with dirty water. We didn’t wear our uniform of course, but denim overalls, which we were issued with beforehand.

Another diversion from the interesting course was sports afternoon every Wednesday. You had to choose a sport, so I chose cross-country running, not that I was any good at it, but it meant that you could get out on the camp and wander over the downs. As soon as you got out of sight of the camp you could take a leisurely stroll for an hour and return to the camp, there were no NCOs with you as they returned to camp as soon as you disappeared over the hill!

I soon found out that one of the sports encouraged by the RAF was aero modelling, so next weekend leave I had, hitching a lift back to London on the A4 road, I brought back to camp my partly built model aircraft. So next sports afternoon I lined up at the gate with the parts of my plane in my hand and when asked what sport I was doing I said “aeromodelling” and was let through the

gate and over the downs. I did get the plane flying together with a couple of willing helpers who also said they were aeromodellers, which was a good 'skive'.

The next few weeks were spent learning about ohms law, reactance of inductors and capacitors, valve theory, superhet's, and basic valve transmitters and even a little bit of algebra and geometry. There were four sessions of lectures in the morning with a break for cha and wads (tea and a bun) and three sessions in the afternoon. Sometimes experiments were carried out in the labs to demonstrate what you had learnt in the classrooms.

At the end of 12 weeks we all had a weeks leave and after returning started on the practical work of servicing aircraft radio gear.

On the other side of the camp there were two large hangers with several old aircraft fuselages in them. Inside them were complete radio installations, usually T1154 transmitters and R1155 receivers. These were the types of radio used in RAF aircraft in WW II and were still being used up to 1955. You could buy them at the surplus shops in the West End for about £5 each, but now you would have to pay £100 or so! There was also an intercom amplifier so that all the crew could talk to each other and antenna installations on the top of the fuselage.

We had to practice installing and tuning up this equipment during planned servicing periods. These were time intervals when certain operations were carried out on the radios and then other trades e.g. instruments, did their jobs. There wasn't room in the fuselage for everyone at the same time. Later periods were taken up in the workshops with sawing, filing, drilling tapping and soldering.

This practical work carried on for the next 13 weeks when the day came for the passing out exams. This was a multiple choice exam, a bit like the old RAE, and the night before a lot of swatting took place and I was very popular with everyone asking me questions as they thought I knew it all! I was ok on the theory, but not sure about the equipment as it was the first time I had worked on it. Looking back now, I should have charged tuition fees!

After the exam, there was a practical test. One of these was to tune up a BC211 heterodyne wave meter to a specific frequency by beating the VFO with a 100Kc/s crystal and calibrating it according to a chart of frequencies. I put the phones on and switched on and nothing! A warrant officer standing behind me said, "Why don't you try switching on laddie?" This equipment was made in the USA and the switch was upside down, so once I flicked the switch upwards, all was well.

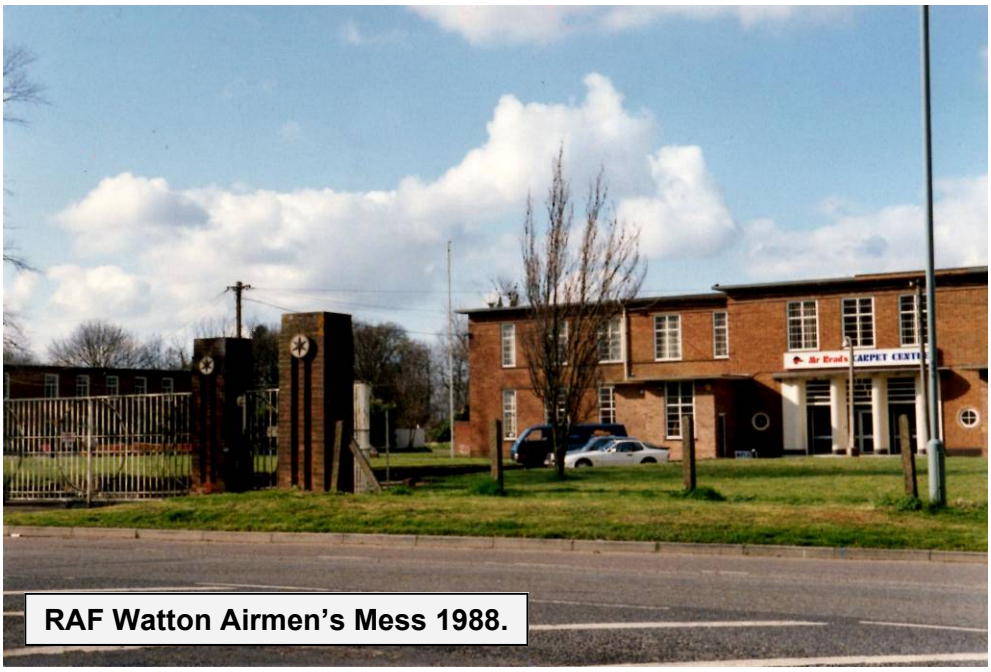
Another test was to find a fault on a R1155 receiver and repair it. Well you can imagine the state of these receivers after many trainees had been at them! Finally we had to solder a wire onto a terminal and then give it to the same warrant officer who put his foot on the terminal and pulled hard on the wire. If it held you were ok, if it broke, you did it again until it didn't.

After a week we got our results and I passed as a Leading Aircraftsman. This meant I could sew a two-bladed prop badge on each arm and everyone who passed sewed sparks badges on their arms. This also meant our pay went up, as we were now tradesmen. Everyone who was in a radio trade wore this badge with pride as it was considered to be one of the elite occupations.

The last thing we received was our postings to an operational RAF station, which was RAF Watton in Norfolk and so off we went on leave after saying good-bye to some very good friends we had made.

After my leave I took the train from Liverpool St. Station to Thetford in Norfolk, where once again I caught an old 2-coach branch line train to Watton. Beeching also axed this line since the only people using it were service personnel. There were dozens of airfields in East Anglia at the time all left over from WW II and some reactivated in the early 50s because of the threat from the East.

The aerodrome (RAF Watton) was only about a mile from town and on arrival I found a modern brick-built camp with barrack blocks built with four two-story barrack rooms all joined together with ablution blocks. It was built about 1938 to a standard design for RAF aerodromes in preparation for the imminent war.



RAF Watton Airmen's Mess 1988.

There were four large hangars for servicing aircraft and a mile-long tarmac runway built by the US 8th Air Force during WW II.

Unfortunately, all new entries were not to enjoy the comforts of the barrack blocks, but were to be billeted in huts about a mile down the road. However all occupants of them were issued with a standard RAF blue bicycle, which was like the old style policemen's bike. Yes policemen used to patrol their beat on bikes if you're old enough to remember. So every morning it was a mile ride to get your breakfast and then ride to work at the hangar workshop.

Fortunately it was summer and so there was no problem stoking up stoves. I was only there for about four weeks before I got a place in the blocks.

After reporting to the Squadron office we were told to report to Fl. Lt. Black of the Radio Warfare installation flight. There were four of us posted here at that time and we entered his office and saluted. He told us that the station was the Headquarters of 90 Group, Central Signals Establishment and we were in the Radio Warfare Squadron responsible for fitting out new Avro Lincoln aircraft with Radio and Radar jamming equipment and as this was a secret project we would have to sign the Official Secrets Act. This sounded very important and it looked like we could be in for an interesting time. He introduced us to the flight sergeant in charge of the workshop and went back to his office.

AVRO Lincoln RAF Odiham 1952.

While I was in there I saw something I recognised. In the corner was a TV set made out of old WW II radar units exactly as I had made back home. You viewed the picture on a 5 inch green screen, which was used in the wartime navigation aid called GEE. The flight sergeant who was a RAF trained engineer and, although a supporter of RAF rules, was always willing to discuss things with you unlike many of the NCOs we had before.

He told us that we would be installing and servicing radar jamming gear and also possible flight-testing. This was interesting work except that since the commanding officer was an air commodore we had to do a parade every week, which was a distraction from the serious work. But that's the way the forces work, more interested in the spit and polish!

The equipment we were working on had codenames, Mandrel, Dinah and Carpet. Mandrel transmitted from 26 - 200Mc/s and consisted of an 832-valve oscillator driving an 829 double tetrode PA giving about 20W output, Dinah was similar but tuned to 200 - 400Mc/s and about 5W output and Carpet had a lighthouse triode oscillator in a tuned cavity covering 400 - 1000Mc/s. All these were grid modulated by a wideband noise source. The powers were small but when the aircraft was flying at 20,000 feet it could devastate the display on the ground radars. Years later I found an article in the QST from Jan 1946 describing all this, available on the surplus market in the US! So why was the RAF still using it?

Well after WW II the powers that be had disbanded most of the jamming squadrons, but there was still a lot of equipment left over and when the cold war started these squadrons were re-instated, but there was no new equipment available. All these sets were designed to cover the wartime enemy radar frequencies but I am not sure if the Soviets used the same.

Apart from servicing the jammers, we had to cut and fit wire antennas attached to the top of the fuselage at the feed point and walk along the top of the aircraft and attach the ends to the tops of the fins. This was a hazardous job about 15 feet above ground, especially in winter. We worked in teams of four wireless mechs; each team had its own aircraft to look after, there being about 6 aircraft in our flight. As I was a Leading Aircraftsman I was put in charge of my team, and had to sign the Form 700 saying all was well. The lads were good at their job and as the radio was not essential to the safety of the aircraft it was not too difficult.

The equipment was mounted on vibration-proof racks along the inside of the fuselage just behind the Wireless Operator and powered by engine driven generators which fed 80V at 2000c/s. The reason for this high frequency was so that the iron in the transformers could be kept small and the weight less.

We each took it in turns to go up for the flight tests and so these were my first flights in the RAF after about nine months of service. The flights lasted about 1hr flying along the Norfolk coast while we checked all the tuning and output settings. This also gave the pilots a bit more flying time in their logs and sometimes they would fly low along the beach scaring the bathers. Not sure who was more scared them or me!

One day after flying, we returned to our billets and turned on the radio, which I had built from a design in Practical Wireless from ex-govt. parts to hear that National Service had been increased to 2yrs. This was because the communist North Korea had invaded South Korea, and our forces were being sent there. So all the National Service bods were not too happy, I had over another year to do, but a big joke for the regular men who signed on for 5yrs. The government did however give us the same pay as the regulars for the last six months. Around about this time I took a trade test and passed, so I was promoted to a Senior Aircraftsman and a bit more pay.

Every autumn we took part in full scale exercises involving our aircraft, the ground defence radar and the Navy radar at sea. This would involve our aircraft being in the air sometimes for 6hrs flying at max altitude and by this time there would be special operators on board for the jammers. We had to work in shifts sometimes overnight in order to fit up the aircraft with different jammers and to tune them to different frequencies. The whole station was involved in this and we were working under simulated wartime conditions. After a couple of days our Flt. Sgt. (Chiefy in the RAF) got reports back that our jammers were having little effect.

So our officer I/C told us to investigate and report back. The lads in our team found that all the sets had been mistuned and were not giving out much power, and we suspected that the operators had been knob twiddling. We reported this to Chiefy and he said, "Ok next time you can fly as special ops". We asked "What with their pay?" They were NCO ranks of course as the RAF had always had NCOs or officers as the crews. Chiefy said he would look into it, but said was it not in King's Regulations, but we could have extra meals and extra leave.

Before the flights we went to the mess and had a flying breakfast, this was eggs and bacon, potatoes and a flask of hot coffee for the flight. Then off to a briefing to tell us what the task was. I then went to the stores to draw out a flying suit, parachute harness, and clip on parachute. Over this lot was something called a Mae West, a life jacket, because we would be flying over the sea, a helmet, with mic. and earphones and oxygen mask. With all this lot we were driven to the aircraft. I used to sit up in the observation dome sticking up on top of the fuselage. This was a good place because I could see all the other aircraft and I didn't have anything to do until we got to the target area.

Our team had previously installed and tuned up all the transmitters so I was confident that everything would work. The crew were; pilot who sat on the left of the cockpit, flight engineer to the right, navigator behind the pilot, wireless operator behind him and me behind him.

All the aircraft started up engines and taxied on to the runway one-by-one. The pilot got the all clear and the throttles were opened and with a roar we shot down the runway. At this point I thought this could have been a scene from WW II films of Bomber Command. We lifted off and joined the others in formation, we climbed and the pilot told us to check our oxygen masks, we would be flying at 20,000ft. The noise was deafening, as there was no soundproofing although I had the helmet on. I was usually deaf for a few days afterwards and there was no pressurization, which didn't help my ears.

Our target was a fleet of Navy ships out in the Bay of Biscay, so when the navigator told me that we had arrived I had to switch my oxygen supply over to a portable bottle so I could move forward and switch the jammers on and make sure they were all putting out power. After about an hour we turned for home and I switched everything off. It was not easy moving about in the cramped fuselage and sometimes I caught my flying suit on something, but I managed to return to my observation seat and plug in the oxygen and the intercom. We returned to base and after landing went to a debriefing and then a good meal and a rest. We didn't have to wear parachutes all the time but made sure they were nearby ready to clip them on. Most of the crew just threw them in a heap on the floor, but I kept mine close by.

Reporting back to the workshop we heard the results were 100% successful and the Navy invited us to go on board the next trip to see what happens when they were jammed. So a party of about 30 of us went down in a bus to Portland where we went on board an old aircraft carrier "Indefatigable" and sailed out through the Bay of Biscay. Sailing with us was a battleship and another carrier.

HMS Indefatigable 1951.

The sea was very rough and you couldn't go on the flight deck for fear of being blown off. The meals were a bit greasy and several of our group had to make a dash for the side making sure it was on the opposite side from where the wind was blowing! We saw their radar screens on the day of the exercise and it was very effective.

After about a week we returned to Portland and back in the bus to Watton. Life after this returned to normal and was fairly quiet except for a flight up to Lossiemouth in Scotland when we had to take our ground crew team and equipment to operate some jamming exercises from there. This time we didn't fly on them because I think the Special Operators had learnt not to twiddle!

Some quiet afternoons my friend and I, both interested in short wave listening, got pairs of headphones and went out to our aircraft plugged in the auxiliary 24V power supply and operated the R1155 HF receiver at the Wireless Ops position. We had to use that supply because you were on a fizzer (charge for breaking a law) if you used the aircraft batteries on the ground. We spent the afternoon listening to the local hams on 80metres on AM, not many on sideband then.

Other activities were evening trips into Norwich by Gharrie, bribing the driver to get there in the shortest possible time. There were about 25 of us hanging on for dear life; it's a wonder we didn't turn over around winding country roads. There was plenty to do there, cinemas, a dance hall and I learnt to drive a car, the lessons were 10/- (50p) per session in a new Ford Anglia around the town. We found the locals to be very friendly and I made friends with a girl who worked at the local chocolate factory, so I was well supplied with chocolate! As so often happens in the forces, I was posted to RAF Lyneham soon after so I don't know what happened to her, hope she's still not waiting for me!

This final posting was to the Transport Command station where all the service personnel, including army, were sent out overseas. And it still is. This time a Middle East country was threatening to take over the Suez Canal, and so the Army was sent out.

I took the train to Wootton Basset, still in the news now for rather sadder reasons, and when I got to the camp the mess was full of women and children having their meals. They were families of service people evacuated out of the country because of the emergency. There was a shortage of accommodation on the camp and we were sent to another camp that hadn't been used for some time. It was cold and we didn't get to bed till after midnight. Next morning we were driven back to camp and found we would be servicing the comms equipment on the transport aircraft. There was a shortage of these aircraft and there were many civilian aircraft hired and I saw Dakotas, DC-6s, Hastings and I even saw a Junkers 52 built in Germany and used for dropping parachute troops in WW II.

I worked on servicing American radio equipment made by Collins and one day the flight sergeant and I were trying to get a radio compass receiver working when the aircraft started loading with soldiers with their rifles and the engines started up. Eventually the Navigator said don't worry we can do without it, so we jumped off quickly and off the aircraft went. I didn't fancy being sent out to the desert without my shorts and sun helmet!

After about three weeks I got a message to report back to my home station at Watton, as my two years was up. Reporting to the squadron commander he looked at my service record he said, "You have a good service record would you like to sign on and carry on your work here?" I thought about it and then also thought about those wasted hours on the parade ground, and said "No thanks sir". After three days of form signing, to make sure I didn't owe anybody anything, I finally got my release papers signed and I walked out of the gate a civilian again!

Looking back at my service, I had had some good flying experiences and above all, some excellent training in radio, which got me a good job in the electronics industry and a great interest in amateur radio.

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