

‘ENGLAND EXPECTS’

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It was the Royal Air Force that claimed me. I was in fact given the choice of the army or the air force. Due to my love of aeroplanes, I opted for what I saw as the lesser of two evils. My call-up papers ordered me to an RAF recruitment centre at Padgate in Warrington, Lancashire. After a long train journey further north than I had ever ventured, I was greeted on my arrival by driving rain and biting cold wind.

Standing shivering and alone with nothing familiar for comfort aside from a few belongings in a small suitcase, this Jewish mummy’s boy was in shock. I recognized grimly that I was going to have to get used to following the barking orders of fearsome commanders; forget any idea of privacy; endure physical training; and survive on horrible food for the foreseeable future. The comfortable, creative world of the advertising man seemed more alluring than ever now that it was so far out of reach.

The regulation greatcoat and battledress, with which I was kitted out, hung off my slight frame comically. The heavy boots that I was given only served to make my thin legs look even skinnier.

Suitably attired, all the other new recruits and I were taken to our respective dormitories. These rooms were nothing like a home from home. They were cold and functional, furnished only with row upon

row of iron hospital type beds with nothing more than a rough woollen blanket and a lumpy cushion on each of them. Each boy was allocated a small plain cupboard in which he could store his few belongings. The other recruits in my dormitory were a bunch of roughneck kids who had travelled there from various parts of the country and in whose company I felt pretty uncomfortable.

Mealtimes too offered little comfort. When the time to eat arrived, hundreds of young conscripts, including me, would be herded towards an enormous canteen. There the queue would snake for miles out of the door. The wait to reach the counter was interminable. My stomach would be aching for something to eat by the time I finally got to the front. At the counter would be a couple of uniformed guys unceremoniously slopping ladlefuls of grey, lumpy stew on to tin plates. The stew did not taste any better than it looked. It was virtually inedible. The only thing that saved me from malnutrition was the large plate filled with lumps of cheese that would always sit at the end of each table. Every mealtime, I would try to swallow a few spoonfuls of the gruesome stew or kidneys before giving up and filling my pleading belly with bread and cheese. This remains a favourite snack of mine.

My experience at Padgate lasted for a couple of weeks, after which the new recruits were sorted. Each of us was to be sent to a different posting where, we were told, we would undergo training in a specific area. The rank I was given was aircraftsman second class (AC2). When I was told that I was to be sent to the equipment branch in Little Walden, near Saffron Walden in Essex, I had no idea what this meant. I soon discovered that the equipment branch was the place where everything needed by the air force during a war was stored and dished out: aeroplanes, bombs, uniforms and so on. My stint there was due to last for two months. There I would be given training in equipment, as well as square bashing and all the usual physical RAF training.

The equipment centre had been an American air-force base during the war. When I arrived, I discovered that it was full of jeeps, spare parts

and food that the Americans had left behind when they had gone home at the end of the war.

After I had been at the equipment branch for around a week, I was ordered to line up directly opposite the office of our commanding officer, alongside hundreds of my fellow recruits. Feeling nervous I stood to attention, praying that my uniform was in order and my boots were polished to the commanding officer's exacting standards. When he emerged, he strode towards us before standing imposingly before the line of quaking young recruits. The CO's sharp eyes looked us all up and down one by one. After a minute he barked some words.

"AC2 Trubnick!"

At first it did not register than he was shouting my name.

"AC2 Trubnick!" he called out for a second time.

He is calling me. (The penny had dropped.) What the hell have I done? I walked towards him anxiously and saluted.

"Come into my office immediately," said my superior sternly. I almost died on the spot. I must have done something terribly wrong to be summoned like this in front of everybody. The other recruits were dismissed while I, with my head bowed, followed the commanding officer into his office.

"Take a seat," said the CO. I was relieved to take the weight off my legs, which were now shaking so badly I thought they might not support me for much longer.

"Well, boy," said the CO, "I see from your notes that you are an artist." Strange thing to say. What's that got to do with anything?

"Yes, Sir," I replied.

"Can you do lettering?" the fearsome CO continued with the thread. "Were you taught how to do it?"

"Oh yes, Sir," I answered. Perhaps I was not heading for a court martial after all. "I am a lettering artist, Sir."

"Good man," said the CO. "I've got a job for you."

Waves of relief washed over me, as the CO explained that he wanted

me to report to him the following morning when he would explain to me what I had to do.

The job was to make a large sign (roughly six feet high) from planks of wood, to paint it white and then to write clearly on it in large red letters: Beware of Aircraft Using this Airfield.

“Can you do it?” the CO asked.

“Yes, of course,” I replied confidently. This would be easy and I would prefer to do this than square bashing any day. With the help of a few other men, I started to put the wood together and make this enormous sign. After several days this basic structure was ready to paint. I wanted to spin this part out for as long as possible. The CO did not realize that I could probably have knocked this paint job out in about five minutes, but I had decided to give him the best job that I could possibly do. It took weeks.

While I was employed by my CO to paint this sign, I got to lie in bed every morning while my fellow recruits rose each day at the crack of dawn to attend their physical training sessions. Bliss! I became quite friendly with the CO, who turned out to be not nearly as terrifying as I had thought at first, and I was gently ribbed by the others in my dorm for being his favourite.

But the sign painting could not last forever. After a few weeks, I reported to my CO that the job was finished. He was delighted with my work (I had done an exceptionally good job of it) and rewarded me with five shillings that he took from his safe. “That’s from me to you for doing a good job,” he said with a wink, as he handed over the cash. It turned out that this was not the end of the matter. Over the following weeks I was tasked with creating several more signs. This pleased me greatly, as I was more than delighted to escape the horrible physical training and would have done anything to get out of it.

One of the runways at Little Walden was filled with rows and rows of jeeps, more jeeps than I have ever seen before or since. There were hundreds of these vehicles, abandoned by the Americans and now

belonging to nobody in particular. When I was painting the signs, one of these jeeps was assigned to me so that I could easily carry materials from one part of the air-force base to another.

The jeeps were not the only things left by our generous American cousins. An enormous aircraft hanger was filled to the brim with tins of pineapple, ham and other delicacies, as well as many large jerrycans that each held about two-and-a-half gallons of petrol. Little Walden was only a few miles from my parents' home in Clapton in East London. (They had moved back to the city from Maidenhead by this time.) Each weekend I was allowed to travel home to see them. Not one to waste an opportunity, I would pack up my jeep with tins of all kinds of food and jerrycans full of petrol. Then I would take these home for my mum and dad, who were overjoyed to receive such luxuries when rationing was still in force.

Unfortunately not all my time in the RAF was so pleasant. One of the worst tasks that I was given was to help clear out an RAF unit that was in the process of being closed down. The unit had, among other things, a lot of old mattresses that had to be moved. Along with some other poor, unfortunate national servicemen, I spent days moving these sweat drenched, bug infested mattresses, which were only good for the bonfire. It was such a horrible and insanitary task that I felt sure I would catch something from doing it.

Despite the sometimes unsavoury duties, my RAF career was shaping up to be better than expected. After several months at Little Walden I became friendly with some of the officers and, as a result of this friendship, was offered the temporary position of clerk at the Central Drafting Office. It was here that all the national servicemen's postings were processed. A recruit could be posted to any place in the world where the British had a military presence.

One day a posting landed on my desk that was of some interest to me. It was for one AC2 Trubnick. This poor unfortunate character was being sent to South East Asia Command in Tokyo.

I had not wanted to leave home at all; I certainly had no desire to move to Japan. For some time I sat sweating over this document, my world imploding. What was I going to do?

As luck would have it, that same day another posting arrived on my desk for someone else in the same category as me. This posting was to the headquarters of Fighter Command, in Stanmore, Middlesex. I sat with one of these postings in each hand for a long time before plucking up the courage to speak to my commanding officer.

“This is *my* posting,” I had become pretty friendly with the guy by this time and thought he was a reasonable chap, “but they want me to go to Tokyo. I really don’t fancy going over there.” I looked up at him hopefully before continuing. “There’s this other guy who’s being posted to Bentley Priory in Stanmore. That’s not far from my home. Do you think there’s any chance that we could switch them?”

I have often wondered if that poor chap enjoyed his stint in Japan. A few weeks later I boarded a train to Bentley Priory in his place.

Originally built in 1766, this beautiful old country house and grounds had enjoyed a glorious history. Over the previous couple of hundred years it had played host to Pitt, Wellington, Canning and Sir Walter Scott to name but a few. The house’s latest guest, one Frank Trubnick, was determined to make the most of his time there.

With my background and training in equipment, I was deemed a suitable candidate for the position of manager of the stationery store at Bentley Priory. Here all the paper, drawing pins and inkwells for Fighter Command were stored. Anybody in Fighter Command who required stationery would have to come to me. Consequently I became well known to many people.

Life in the stationery store, with its familiar and comforting smells of paper and ink, was a world away from my first days as a green new recruit. It was a relaxed and relatively pleasant place to work. More importantly it was my domain, which I could manage and organize the way I wanted to.

With the move to Bentley Priory came a promotion. I was given the higher rank of corporal. Together with my elevated status I was given my own living quarters. No longer would I be surrounded by the odour of dozens of other men's old boots and hair polish; no longer would I have to endure the indignity of a lack of privacy. Life at Bentley Priory was shaping up nicely.

One day a large and unexpected crate arrived at the stationery store. I had no knowledge of what was in it. All I knew was that it had been sent to my store from a US-Air-Force base that had closed down. Curious, I set about prizing the lid open to see what was inside. The crate was filled with hundreds of small, unlabelled cardboard boxes. The boxes were identical, each being about 12 by six inches in size. What could the mysterious boxes contain? Eagerly, I pulled one out and opened it. I chuckled as the contents were revealed. Each box was filled with a number of US-military-issue condoms. They came with a simple note stating that they were, 'surplus to requirements'. The crate held thousands of these rubbers, and I had no idea why they had been sent to me or what I was expected to do with them. It was an odd dilemma, but I soon found a solution: I gave a box of condoms out with each order that I received for stationery supplies.

The RAF guys loved to play games and practical jokes. My generosity with these condoms sadly backfired when one evening I climbed into bed, lay my head on my pillow and, to my horror, felt it explode beneath me. I was soaked in liquid, and so was my bed. Without my knowledge, one of the chaps had got into my room. He had then replaced my pillow with one of these robust condoms, which he had filled with several gallons of water. It was the shock of my life, and the result was a soggy bed and nowhere to sleep. It is a good job that I never discovered who was responsible.

I was the proud owner of a moustache even in those days. My father and one of my two brothers had both worn handsome moustaches, and I was happy to follow in the family tradition. Mine was a glorious,

large moustache (a Flying Officer Kite moustache), which I trimmed and cultivated and took great pride in.

One night I went to the mess with a few of my pals and had a few drinks too many. At closing time I staggered back to my quarters, slumped on to my bed fully clothed and fell into a deep sleep that was infused with strange, drunken dreams.

The canteen at Bentley Priory closed for breakfast at nine o'clock sharp. Every morning, all the men would go screaming out there at one minute to nine to ensure that they did not miss out on their morning meal. No doubt because of the alcohol, I woke up late. Just before nine, I rushed out of my room hoping to make the canteen before the doors were locked. I did not stop to wash, shave or even look in the mirror. If I missed my breakfast, I knew I would not get a chance to eat or drink until lunchtime.

When I walked into the canteen everybody turned to look at me. Some started to nudge each other and point; some of them started to giggle. I guessed that I must have looked dishevelled from the night before, so I proceeded to get my breakfast and hope that it would numb my dreadful hangover. Nobody said a thing, although the guys continued to laugh and gesture as I ate my meal. Finally, after I had finished, one of them piped up. "Frank," he said, "did you have a wash or brush your teeth this morning?" The others collapsed with laughter. "Did you have a shave this morning, Frank?" he went on. I shrugged my shoulders. Then he said finally, "Frank, you better have a look in the mirror." I went back to my room to find out what all the fuss was about. The source of their mirth was as plain as day. While I had been out for the count, one of these scoundrels had shaved half of my moustache clean off.

At Bentley Priory my free time was filled with big band concerts and football matches. One of the most famous big bands in the country, the Ted Heath Band, regularly came to play to the troops. On several occasions bandleader Ted invited some of us to Hammersmith Palais

to enjoy the wonderful sounds of the trumpets and saxophones, played with immaculate style. The Hammersmith Palais was a great venue for dancing and meeting girls, and I loved it.

I had become hooked on football at the age of seven by my brother-in-law, Simon, who was married to my sister Gertrude (Gertie). Simon and Gertie lived near to my house in the East End. Sadly they were not able to have children of their own but, as I was the baby of the family, they treated me like their son, taking me everywhere they went. It was Simon who took me to my first football match. Simon was a Spurs supporter, so it was inevitable that they would become my team. At seven I began going to White Hart Lane to watch every home game they played. I have remained a loyal and ardent Spurs supporter ever since. (Years later, in 1961, my undying support for my team would pay off when I watched Spurs win the double. This was a fantastic sporting moment in my life, perhaps only topped by the glorious day when England beat West Germany to win the World Cup in 1966. Again, I was there at Wembley Stadium to watch it as it happened and soak up this historic moment in English footballing history. Looking back I realize how lucky I was to be there—especially as it was a moment that, over 40 years on, has yet to be repeated.)

Simon encouraged me to play football, as well as watch it, taking me to the local park to learn the rules or just kicking a ball around with me in the street. Gradually I built up some skills and discovered that I enjoyed playing football as much as I loved watching others play the beautiful game.

A few years later a close friend of mine, Alf Fogel, saw me play and invited me to join the football club that he ran in St John's Wood—the Wooders. The team was in one of the local Sunday leagues and I soon became one of its regular players. I like to be modest about my talents, but I have to say that I became pretty good. This was in part due to my natural ability to run really fast, which served me well as a right winger. As an attacking player I often got the glory of scoring goals.

Being a decent and experienced footballer by the time I arrived at Bentley Priory, I decided to try out for its football teams. I earned a place right away.

We would regularly play matches against other servicemen. Our team often won and we were always at the top of the league of teams from all the forces. This was not too surprising, as we were blessed with not one but two successful Scottish football players—Johnny Paton, who played for Celtic and Chelsea football clubs, and Tommy Brown, who played for Ipswich Town.

My interest in aircraft had not diminished during my time in the RAF. I still loved to see their huge, shiny bodies as they sat on the tarmac, resplendent in their green and brown coats and with their perfectly proportioned wings and tails. The bombers in particular still attracted me. I was in awe of their beautiful destructive power. Seeing these aircraft close up was a pleasure and a privilege. Seeing them take to the skies was like watching the most elegant dancers take to the stage. I would never fulfil my secret dream of becoming a fighter pilot, but when I was given the chance to fly in a Lancaster bomber I grabbed it.

Pancho was the rather obvious nickname of a pilot of Argentinian origins who was based at an airfield near Godalming in Surrey. I was seconded to this airfield for three months while at Bentley Priory, and Pancho and I became quite friendly during this period. One day he asked me if I would like to go up with him in the Lancaster bomber. This was the great prize that I had coveted since I was a boy. I nodded eagerly, delirious with anticipation.

A Lancaster bomber is a big aeroplane. In the nose of one of these aircrafts is a turret equipped with machine guns, which would be manned during battle. Underneath the turret is a clear perspex window through which the men charged with directing the bombs could view their targets. To gain a good view, these men had to lie face down in a cramped space for the duration of the flight.

“The place to be is in the bomb bay,” said Pancho, as we climbed

aboard. I duly lay down above this window and prepared for take-off.

As the ground fell away beneath me I started to feel nervous. The aircraft rose higher and higher, as I was stuck looking down at the diminishing earth below. After a few minutes I could hear Pancho saying something, his voice barely audible over the roar of the engines. "We're going across the Channel!" I finally deciphered the words.

Pancho altered the plane's course and we headed for the coast. The landscape changed rapidly beneath me. Houses, fields, roads appeared in my field of vision and disappeared moments later. Suddenly the green, brown and grey landscape disappeared entirely, and all that I could see below was blue. We were over the English Channel. I started to relax for a moment as I watched the mesmerizing shifting blues of the sea below. Then suddenly I felt the aeroplane jerk. Its nose tilted downwards, and I hung on for dear life as we flew closer and closer to the waves at high speed. I feared that Pancho had lost control of the aircraft, and my heart started racing as we hurtled towards our watery graves. When we were just feet from the surface of the ocean, the skilful pilot leveled the plane and glided merrily. I could almost taste the salty water on my lips as we skimmed the waves at 200 miles an hour while I lay in position, terrified and immobile. "Get me out of here!" I screamed, but I had to wait for what seemed like an eternity until Pancho finally lifted the aircraft back into the safety of a higher altitude. I felt sick and more scared than I have ever felt in my life, but what an experience!