

## *Hinton-in-the-Hedges*

*Campaign medals, more work, promotion, a scam detected,  
Victory in Europe, becoming a father, and released at last*

### **Jan 1945 to April 1946**

I arrived at my new R.A.F. Station at Hinton in the Hedges late on January 2<sup>nd</sup> 1945 on a dark and very cold day. The Station was a reserve American aerodrome for their B17 (Flying Fortress) Bombers and it had the very large 'A' type layout for the runways and it was now being used for a Radio Vehicle Storage Unit (R.V.S.U.) with about 6-8,000 Specialist Radio and Radar vehicles parked on the runways. I saw the Orderly Sergeant who took me to some wooden huts just outside the main gates of the camp, and after leaving my kit, he then took me to the Sergeants mess for a meal. I was introduced to the Warrant Officer in charge of the Service Dept, who told me that we had about 200 men and 25 women (W.A.A.F.'s) working in the very large hangar and he would be making me in charge of the final servicing in the morning.

This was a very large mess and it took a bit of time getting used to the U.K. system so after about 2 hours, I made my way to my quarters and settled myself in to the room at the end of the Barrack block. I woke early next morning and after breakfast at the mess, I joined the rest of the staff to our hangar at the end of about ten large Hangars.

I was surprised to see three lines of lorries of all shapes and sizes, lining up to enter the hangar and about thirty waiting at the other end to get taken to another dept. Inside the hangar was a low loader trailer, with sides and roof made into an office for four clerks and the W.O. in charge. There were four windows along both sides and desks and filing cabinets for each of the clerks. One thing I found odd was that two clerks faced one side of the trailer while the other two faced the opposite side, but as it would not be my problem, I let it slide.

Looking around the hangar, I saw two raised ramps about two feet wide and three feet six inches apart where the lorries and trailers would be

driven to be greased and underneath inspections would be carried out. This would be my department with about twenty five airmen and eight W.A.A.F.'s who would be masking off windscreens, lamps etc and then pressure waxing them for seaboard travel.

The system was that there would be a request for a Radar Station overseas, and it would depend on the size of the unit on the number of vehicles required (a Commitment). This could range from two Radar aerials, one generator, one container lorry with cathode ray equipment, one office container and one runabout 15 cwt, to a large unit with many aerial units, a large generator, many container units, Brockhouse trailers and assorted lorries for the unit transport. Vehicles were pulled off the runways as the commitment came in and sent to 'Minor Repairs' where they would be checked over for mechanical faults, then tested and then put into the 'Servicing' line to be greased etc and then sent to the next hangar for the electrical section to check.

They left this section and moved to the 'Radar' unit and finally to the admin unit for completion. Should any vehicle fail to pass the check, it would be withdrawn and a new vehicle put in its place, the faulty vehicle being put in the 'Major Repair' line for rectification. If this happened in our dept, it was easy to put another lorry to the front of the queue but if it was the last department, everyone then had to put priority on this vehicle to keep it in it's proper allocation. This unit was run on a conveyor line system and at times it could be very frustrating when you discover that every vehicle on one 'commitment' had been changed in the various departments.

We used to send out about 35 completed vehicles every day but in actual fact about 50 had gone through the system. At the end of my first day I felt that I had a reasonable idea of the way things were being run. As each vehicle was sent off the line, a clerk would check the chassis number and then this would be double checked against the master list and the vehicle sent to the next dept.

After returning to my room, I wrote some letters and then returned to the Sergeants mess for my meal, and settled down with the other N.C.O.'s in my department. Once again, the order of priority in the mess, the seating arrangements, the Station Warrant Officer who was treated like God and

seeing a large number of female members in the mess was an unusual experience.

The following morning I woke up to see three feet of snow outside and already the camp snowplough had been out to clear the roads in and around the camp. When I got to the hangar, the first job was to clear the entrance and exit so that work could start. The vehicles having been parked for several months on the runways proved difficult to start. We did have a small 'pusher' tractor that got most of them running and it was amazing to see the lorries and trailers going up the ramps and not falling off at the top. As the lorries get near the top the drivers lose sight of the end of the ramp and it is just a case of keeping the wheels straight until they level off and get to the end.

As two vehicles could be serviced at a time, there were two sets of grease guns and two sets of gear oil pumps, but because no holes had been made in the wall of the ramp, the hoses had to be removed after each vehicle had been serviced. This caused a small delay each time and if the hoses had been left on the ramp, the lorries passing over them would have severely damaged them. I suggested to the W.O. in charge that we should contact the works dept to have the necessary holes made and the hoses could then be kept inside the two ramps. At the end of the day this meant that two more units could go over the ramps without the job of removing and replacing the hoses.

My new bride had gone back to work at her factory and after two weeks I was able to get a long week-end pass to visit her. I had checked out the possibility of getting a 'living out' allowance and found that if I could get accommodation nearby, I would be entitled to it and I could have my wife with me. I started to look for accommodation, but because of the number of military units nearby this proved difficult.

## **Campaign medals**

After about three weeks, I was in the mess one evening when the Orderly Room Sergeant asked me if I would meet the Station Warrant Officer for a chat. He said that he thought that I had just returned from overseas service and asked where I had been. I told him that I had served in North Africa, Sicily, Italy, Corsica and Southern France. He asked why I was improperly dressed and not wearing any medal ribbons. At that time I was

not very keen to put medal ribbons up, but I pointed out that I had only just been re-kitted and that there were no ribbons available at the reception camp for all of the medals due. He said that I should put up the ones that I had, but as I only had the Defence Medal ribbon, I would still be improperly dressed. I noticed that he only had the Defence Medal and the Palestine Medal (this was for the Palestinian rebellion in 1937) and it proved that he had not been overseas during the Middle East campaigns.

He called the equipment Sergeant and the Orderly Room Sergeant over and told them to get the necessary medal ribbons for me. The ribbons arrived about a week later and I made up a 'bar' and pinned them on to my tunic, leaving them capable of being transferred to my 'battle dress' on my change of uniform. When he saw me that night, his face dropped a bit when I arrived with the four campaign ribbons and the Defence Medal.

There was no segregation between the sexes so being one of the first to come to the unit from overseas, lots of the 'girls' wanted to know what the medals represented and after a short time I realised that one W.A.A.F Flight Sergeant was coming to the table that I was sharing with the others from the M.T. section rather more frequently than any of the others. One of the lads said that she was a man-eater so I told him that she would be unlucky, because I had just got married and that I was looking for accommodation in the area, and that my wife would be living with me. This W.A.A.F. then turned her attention to the other Flight Sergeant on the major repairs section. Although he was married, his wife stayed in London but this 'lady' got her claws in and broke up the marriage

A Lancaster coming back from a raid on Germany just before dusk had missed his destination to his own aerodrome and seeing our camp, thought he could land but at the last moment, saw the lorries and tried to abort without success and crashed nearby.

Seven crew members lost their lives at this crash and during the night I had one of my nightmares once again, and the Sergeant in the opposite room came in to see what the noise was about. I had to tell him about it and asked him to keep quiet.

I was able to get accommodation in the nearby village and I brought my wife to our new 'home'. We had a Social evening in the mess every last Sunday in the month and the members could invite girl friends, wives or

other guests, so on my first occasion, I took my wife to the mess and introduced her to my colleagues, when up came Ruth, the 'man eater' and said " I am sorry that you have decided to come to this area, because I was going to set my cap at him". The air became a little chilly but she was told that we had been together for almost seven years and that it would take more than the efforts of someone like her to split us up. Exit Ruth.

## Promotion

Our Warrant Officer had been posted away from the Station and 'Sandy' Sandford, (the Other Flight Sergeant) was promoted W.O. in his place. He had only been in the job for 5 weeks when he was struck down with meningitis and almost lost his life This meant that I was now promoted to Warrant Officer and my job was now to control the whole of the Hangar. A new Sergeant was posted in to take my place and a Corporal was promoted to Sergeant from the major repairs section. One of my first jobs in the 'office' was to re-arrange the desks so that all the clerks looked out of the windows to see what was going on in the workshop. This prevented the zigzag walk to get to my desk at the end of the trailer, and also it saved the girls from having to turn around when they passed paper work from one to another.

We had six Jamaican airmen and a Jamaican Corporal working in a small hangar outside the main workshop, and their job was to fit container bodies on to the various chassis as required. There seemed to be occasions when the commitments were held up waiting for these vehicles so I decided to investigate. Their job was to cut slots in the three inches by three inches lengths of timber to miss the rivets on the chassis, paint them with green paint, lay them on the chassis, and with the aid of a crane, set a container on and bolt them down with 'U' bolts. It appeared that they would wait until a lorry came in, cut the slots, paint them and wait for the paint to dry. Because we only had three types of lorry to fit containers to, to me it seemed reasonable to make three sets of timber, paint them and mark them for the specific vehicles and mark them as templates, then cut two sets in readiness for the time when a lorry came in. Reluctantly, they carried this order out.

About 2 weeks after this there was a hold up so I went around to investigate, and found that one man was 'sick' and two had gone for a

haircut after lunch. It is now four thirty p.m. and they should have returned, so I rang the camp barber and was told that they had left at 2.30 pm. I left the major repairs Sergeant in charge and visited the Jamaicans billet and found the two absentees asleep on their beds. I put them on a charge and on the following day I had them all working from 6pm until 9 pm to make up enough timbers for the next lorries coming in. I stayed with them and I had the whole gang working, the Corporal complained and said that the others had done nothing wrong. I pointed out that they were a team and they enjoyed the privilege of working on their own and that as he was in charge of them, therefore they were all responsible

I had a phone call from the Station Warrant Officer asking if I was alright, because he had heard over the grapevine that there may be trouble for me. I assured him that everything was under control and when the job was completed, I called at the mess to tell him. I never had any trouble after that.

## **A scam detected**

As a result of this, I had an information board made, about four feet by three feet, with tapes fitted horizontally and vertically to take stiff card tokens giving details of all of the staff. It was segregated into departments, and then into leave, sickness, and courses and off station duties. In this way I could see if any staff were away from duty without having to ask each head of department. I suddenly remembered seeing on daily routine orders just before I took over the hangar, that two new Fitters had been posted to the unit and one had a Polish name ending in ..'ski.' and I could not see his name on the board. I checked back issues of the orders and found the entry and went to the orderly room to see if they had been posted away again. Not having been posted away, I checked with Pay Accounts and was told that they had been with the unit for six weeks and had attended three Pay Parades.

I asked them to put a note against their names and when they collected their pay, they were to signal the Service Police who would be attending and then they could be brought to me for checking. When they arrived they said that they were working at the M.T. Section but they could not recognise this section. They had been working a scam, and had been leaving camp every morning and doing a 'con' trick in Banbury, only

coming back to camp to sleep and collect their pay. They found that twenty-eight days in the Detention centre was not as easy as working.

The end of hostilities in Europe came on May 6<sup>th</sup> 1945 and there was a National Holiday for two days. In the village where I was 'living out' there were Street Parties, sports for the children, trimmings and Christmas lights around the houses (seldom seen since the war started) and a real feeling of relief that it was over.

My wife and I went into Banbury that night, in spite of being five months pregnant, and the streets were crowded with people. There were supposed to be over one hundred public houses in Banbury and every one seemed to be full. There were Servicemen from all nations mixing with the locals and everyone was dancing in the streets. Some musicians came into the squares and were playing their hearts out and we finally returned home at about 10 pm.

## **Victory in Europe**

We had a special 'V.E.' (Victory in Europe) Day Parade in camp and every dept had to march their staff to the headquarters where the Saluting Base was held. The Commanding Officer and several Senior Officers from Group made speeches and only emergency staff were on duty

After the initial euphoria died down, the reality came home, and we realised that the war in the Far East was still at its height. For our part, we had thousands of vehicles standing on our runways that had to be disposed of and the Far East would not need all of them. We continued with our commitments as usual but discussions were going on the way that the Station would be 'run down'.

It was on August 16<sup>th</sup> 1945 that the news came through that the war in the Far East was over. Two new bombs had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan and had completely destroyed these cities. It was the new atomic nuclear bombs that were so terrifying that no one knew of the consequences to come. My wife burst into tears at the news and said over and over, " My baby will be born in peacetime, now".

There seemed to be an anti-climax around the camps and the towns, wondering just how things would proceed, how would we be able to afford

to repay the 'Lease Lend' to America, how would we be able to rebuild the destroyed cities, and would we all be the same in "civvy street".

Now that the war was over, my main job now was to get the vehicles in and get them checked to go to the Auction sales. There were no longer any 'commitments' the lorries were just removed from the runways and checked for serviceability, and then passed to the other departments for the removal of the specialist equipment. From about forty vehicles a day, we were now putting through about sixty five, because there was no longer a delay to make sure that all the vehicles were in their correct order. As time went by the numbers were increased to seventy-five vehicles daily.

Details were now coming out about release dates. Having joined at the outbreak of war I would be in one of the early Servicemen to be released. It was arranged by years of service and age, with men who were disabled leaving on the first release. I was placed in Group 28 and groups 1 to 15 were the first to be released in January 1946, groups 16 to 25 in February, groups 26 to 35 in March, groups 36 to 45 in April and there after in groups of 10 monthly.

## **Becoming a father**

Our son was born in September 1945 in a hospital ten miles from Northampton. As we were classed as 'Military' my wife could not go to the Maternity Hospital in Banbury about seven miles away, but the train had to cross two main railway lines and the journey could often take up to an hour to get to Banbury. From there we had to get another train to Northampton, and then catch a bus to the hospital. It was a good job that my son waited until we reached the hospital before coming in to the world.!

Early in September, I had been lucky enough to be able to rent a house from a local lady who was joining her husband in Rhodesia. This made life much better and we were able to begin to set ourselves up as a family, instead of being guests in another person's home. There were times when I was Orderly Officer and would have to stay in camp throughout the night, but after a while I had a system that I would do all the duties up until 11 pm. Another Warrant Officer would take over until 7.30 am, when I could carry out the change over, and when he was on duty, I would do his

duty from 5.30 pm until 11 pm which would allow him to meet his girlfriend for the evening.

## **Released at last, but..**

When my time came for release, I was told that I would have to go for a Medical at R.A.F. Halton, because I had several 'Accidents', and I had been suffering from severe headaches at times. They wanted to make sure that I would not be making a claim for injuries in later life. Before I could be discharged, I had to have a meeting with the C.O. and he asked me if I would like to sign on again for a further three year period. I told him that I wanted to leave the service after six and half years, and also that I had heard that a posting was in the Group for a Warrant Officer Fitter, M.T. to go to the Far East. There were only six of us in the Group with those qualifications; three were in the Medical category C3, which meant that they could not go overseas.

Sandy Sandford had recently returned to duty and would be unfit, which left just two of us and I had returned from overseas three months before the other W.O. Knowing the R.A.F. I was sure that I would be the one to go. The C.O. gave me a good reference when I left and I had to travel to Uxbridge to get my release. I had taken my new family home on a long weekend leave just a few weeks before.

At Uxbridge we were quickly cleared of the admin dept and then we returned all kit except one of our uniforms and then we went in for our civilian suits. I chose a plain Grey double-breasted suit and a light mac, but some of the suits were real 'spiv' outfits. I picked up my pay and release papers and as I walked out of the gate, I looked back and saw the ensign flying over the Parade Ground I had a feeling of nostalgia. I would miss the comradeship that I had enjoyed over those years, the discipline and even the hardships, but I now had the job of starting a new life. I took the tube to Paddington and then the main line to Bristol and Minehead.

In the train I started to think about the future. In one of my worst periods, I could have willingly killed any German in sight and talking to the Padre, he said a remarkable thing. He said, "In times like this, war makes animals of us all. It is up to us just how we react to it". I wondered, had I changed like that? Would I be able to adapt myself to my new life and responsibilities? I thought of all of the disciplinarians that shouted in the

ears of the recruits, how they bullied them and seemed to delight in making them feel useless.

I had mixed emotions as I travelled in the train. I was excited at being 'free', but I realised that now I had responsibilities, there was no-one to back me up if things went wrong, no 'Kings Rules and Regulations' to refer to. During those first five years, I had seen things no one should have seen. I had entered the R.A.F. as a boy and in those short years I had become a man, hardened to all that life could throw at me. Would I have changed so much in that time? Would I be able to settle down to the humdrum civilian life? I did not feel that I had changed, but...?

Although I had been released from the R.A.F. I had not been discharged and I was placed on the Reserve, available to be called up at a minute's notice if hostilities broke out again. It would require an Act of Parliament to discharge all the War-time Servicemen.

I had 104 days leave before being released from the R.A.F. and on occasions when I was in uniform, friends would come up to me and say "You home on leave again?" and this happened on several times after I had just returned from four years of overseas service. Now I am one of the crowd and people pass me by in the street.

We visited my new in-laws and friends and I went to see my pre-war employer, because the Government had decreed that all ex servicemen could apply for their pre war jobs and the employer was bound to re-instate, even if this meant that the last person employed had to leave. This was to ensure that ex-servicemen would not be forced to sell matches on the street as in the First World War.

I was fortunate that my old employer said that he would be pleased to see me back in his employ again. I found that my rate of pay would be exactly half of my pay in the R.A.F. and before I accepted I decided to look around first and also there was the problem of housing. In the end, I decided to return to my old job and try to get a house locally and at the end of one month's leave I returned to work

I now realise that 'ONE MAN's WAR is over and I have to start another episode in my life.