

Entry into the RAF

War is declared, and he immediately join the RAF. Then there is basic training...

September 9, 1939

My war started during the summer of 1939, when I had finished my apprenticeship as a Motor Mechanic and I was serving my final year as a Journeyman in a West Country seaside town. I was working from 8.30am until 10.30pm on 3 days per week and on 2 of the 3 shifts on Sunday because of the lack of seasonal staff during the very short summer season.

Several of my friends in the Motor Trade had become dissatisfied with these conditions and had joined the R.A.F. as regular airmen, and during the summer, always appeared to be home on leave, and boasting about the very good times they were having at the Taxpayers expense. It was then that I decided that I would join them when I was fully qualified.

My girlfriend, Eileen, who was also working in the garage as Cashier/bookkeeper, accepted my invitation to visit the Valley of Rocks in North Devon on the first Sunday we had free, on my motorbike. The first Sunday we had free that summer was on September 3rd 1939 and as we were strolling along the streets of Lynmouth, we saw a crowd of people standing outside one of the café's, listening to a broadcast by the Prime Minister, Mr Neville Chamberlain and we decided to join them. We were just in time to hear the end of that fateful speech when he said "...and I have to tell you that we are now in a state of War with Germany".

Eileen and I were unable to comprehend the look of shock and alarm on the faces of the older people, some of whom had probably been in the first World War, and as far as we were concerned, it was just a case of "us" going over there and give the Germans a bloody nose and it would all be over. However, we decided to continue our 'day off' and to visit all those places the Travel Agencies said were a "Must" It was during our walking around these beautiful surroundings that I decided that I would

join the R.A.F. right away. I was sure that my employer would need to reduce the staff, so on Friday of that week, I travelled to Bristol to the Recruiting Office and made arrangements to enlist on Saturday the 9th September 1939.

I had a very sheltered upbringing in a small village where my Grandfather owned the local Sawmill and the Agricultural contracting business. It was said that he owned half of the village and “fathered” the other half. Like all villages, everyone knew everybody’s business.

I arrived at the Recruiting Office early on the Saturday Morning but I was disappointed to learn that there were no vacancies for aero-engine fitters, the trade that I had selected for my career. I was told that I could enlist as a Driver and then re-muster when I arrived at my next R.A.F. Station. The Recruiting Sergeant explained that all Recruiting Stations had a fixed quota of vacancies and his office had used all of their allocation. Foolishly, I listened to him and joined as a driver.

During that Saturday, many other ‘volunteers’ arrived and in the afternoon, a Corporal was ordered to escort about 20 of us to R.A.F. Station, Uxbridge, by train and underground, arriving at approximately 9pm. We were welcomed by the duty staff and then given a snack, but before being taken to our tents, we had to go into a large hangar and under-go respirator drill and Air Raid Warning Drill. Although the War was only 6 days old, there had been several Air Raid Warnings, all of them false, but we were advised to take them seriously.

On Sunday September 10th 1939, we were all paraded in front of a large hangar, our numbers having grown into several hundreds by this time, and we were separated into groups of about twenty, and we were allowed into the first section to get our details checked.. Hessian screens separated the different sections we would be visiting, so that we were unaware what was going on in the next section. After names, addresses, next of kin, previous employment etc were taken down, we were then given our Service number and we were told that we would keep that number for life. From this section we were moved to the next department for medical checks, which included vaccination, inoculation checks. I had not been vaccinated or inoculated (since childhood) and my anti-tetanus was out of date, so the Medical Officer rubbed his hands when he saw me. I pointed out that my parents had been opposed to vaccination and

that was the reason for my lack of treatment. I was told that I had to have the injections, but I could complain later if I did not want them. It would be too late then.

Our next visit was to the F.F.I. (free from infection) dept and we were told that on the command "drop 'em", we had to drop our trousers to the floor for the Medical Officer to inspect. This mass inspection of all things personal was new to me, and like the rest of the group, I was very embarrassed.

Our next visit was to the kit store and five of us were allowed in at a time. Five Corporals manned the counter, with two airmen behind each to issue the required goods. We handed over our last copy of our 'records' and the Corporal called out "Bags, Kit, One, Tunics, Blue, one, size 12, Trousers Blue, one size 14, Coats, Great, one size 17, and so it went on until the list was complete. We were stuffing these items into the kit-bag as fast as we could and then the Corporal said, "Sign here". And then "Next" and we were ushered out into the bright sunshine.

I arrived at R.A.F Uxbridge in a Celanise silk shirt, Silver Grey Trousers with 24 inch Bottoms, suede shoes and Brylcreemed hair, and on this very hot Sunday, I had to carry this load of kit back to the tent with an arm which was beginning to get very sore.

In the tent, we stripped out our kitbags and decided to try out our uniforms. Mine fitted well, but some made their wearers look as if they were deformed. The kit we did not need was put back into the kitbag, leaving the Greatcoat until last. We packed up our civilian clothes in the large Brown paper bag we had been supplied with, addressed it home and settled down to writing letters home to parents and girl friends. We now realised that it was 4 pm and that we had missed lunch, but from the reports from the others unlucky enough to have tried it, we didn't miss much. Letters written, three of us decided to post them before exploring the Station and not knowing where the pillar box was, we asked a 'regular' who pointed to the Guard Room, diagonally across what we thought was a tarmac car park.

We started to walk in a straight line to the guardroom, when a very loud voice shouted at us to come to him. We noticed that he had three stripes on his arm and he said, "Run around this square three times. Now,

double.” We did not like his tone but we had been told that Sergeants were a law unto themselves, so we started to run. Half way around on the first lap, we dropped to a walk, only to hear his voice shout out “Double” and we set off again. I had not worn boots since I was in the Infants school, and the uniforms were thick and hot. As we passed the Sergeant on the first lap, he fell in alongside us and kept ranting on at us to go faster. He fell out at the next corner and when we arrived on our last lap completely exhausted, he said “Do you know why you had to run around the Square?”

“No” we replied.

“That Square is the Parade Ground, and when you see the R.A.F. Ensign flying, you do not walk on it at all. Do you understand?”

“Yes”.

“Yes what?”

“Yes Sergeant.”

“That’s better. You have just learnt your first lesson. Make sure that you do not make any more mistakes.” And with that he turned on his heels and marched away.

As we proceeded to the post box, we all began to wonder if we had done the right thing by volunteering, but as it was too late to change our minds, we decided to keep our eyes open in future.

The following day we paraded outside the hangar again, this time for an inspection to see if our uniforms fitted. As the Sergeant went along the lines, he detailed some to go to the stores to exchange ill-fitting uniforms and the others to the camp barber for a haircut, me included.

The ‘Hairdressing Salon’ consisted of five chairs, five barbers and some stools for the waiting clients to sit on. The barber in front of me was addressing his client and I listened in amazement at the chat.

“You f*****g rookies come in here with your hair down to your f*****g ankles, plastered with f*****g grease and you ask for a f*****g trim.” The electric clippers were going full blast during this tirade, and the barber addressed his colleague at the next chair. “Look at this f*****g grease on

my comb and my clippers. It'll take a f*****g month to get them clean again." With that he dusted the back of the man's neck with a grubby towel and said "next". Although I could swear with the next man, I had never heard such an outburst as this before. Maybe I was a bit too naive.

When we met outside the 'Salon we could hardly believe our eyes. There were no mirrors inside, and the results of our first free haircut, it looked as if a gang of Australian sheep shearers had arrived and that we were their sheep.

One of the airmen who had arrived with fairly long curly hair, well styled at the back, now looked as if he had spent six years in prison, and he was crying his eyes out. I do not think that I have heard any young man swear so much in such a short space of time.

In the afternoon, we were advised of our postings the next day to our Basic Training Unit situated about ten miles south of Grimsby, and on arriving at the nearest Railway Station, we found a lorry available to take our kitbags, but we had to march the three miles to the camp.

For the next eight weeks, it was Parade Ground drill in fours, change to P.T. kit for P.T., change to sports kit for football, long distance running etc Every day it was four or five changes of clothes and in the evenings we were shown the correct way to fold our blankets for inspection, how to arrange the whole of our kit, how to make up our webbing equipment, making sure that the straps were wound inwardly to be kept tidy. Then all the beds had to be moved to the centre of the floor and the battleship lino had to be washed and then polished to a very high shine. If the Corporal was not satisfied he would throw a bucket of water over it, and it would have to be done again.

The coke scuttle had to be filled to exactly four inches from the top and the stove could not be used until November 1st and it had to be kept spotlessly clean. One of the lads had removed the coke and he had burnt a lot of waste paper in the stove. He cleaned the stove and replaced the coke, and although the stove looked alright, he had forgotten the soot under the lid. When the Corporal saw it, he picked up the coke scuttle and threw the contents all over the highly polished floor. We all spent a further two-hour cleaning the floor and the stove, but now there was not enough coke to fill the scuttle. We took the top layer of coke out of the

scuttle, folded some paper and the put the coke on top until it was exactly 4 inches from the top.

We never received any praise from the N.C.O.'s, we were always the worst set of recruits they had ever seen. The only redeeming feature was that all the N.C.O.'s in the huts were saying the same things to their recruits. After we had finished our Basic training the Parade Ground drill was changed from fours to threes, a much easier system of drill.

Our postings to our Trade Training Units came in and I was posted to Blackpool, where we were billeted in the hotels. I then felt that service in the R.A.F. was not so bad after all. Here we were given theoretical and practical training on the driving and maintenance of R.A.F. Transport and we drove everything from motorcycles to Queen Mary Articulated lorries and after three months I was posted to a small Aircraft Salvage Unit near Horsham in West Sussex. Once again we are billeted in civilian homes in a six mile radius from the camp, because the unit comprised one large hanger, 4 wooden office blocks, an M.T. (mechanical transport) workshop, and a large field to take the scrap and park the lorries. At the time there were five Thorneycroft Coles Cranes, about forty Queen Mary Artics, ten high loader artics, three staff cars and about 10 vans for the crash crews.



I was allocated as second driver on the crane where the experienced driver taught me the correct way to operate the crane mechanism.. Our job was to go to any aerodrome or site where an aircraft had crashed and to load it on to the lorries after it had been dismantled. If it was repairable it was returned to the factory, or if it was a write-off, it would be taken to our unit where all the useful parts could be removed and sent for recycling.

For me, the war was about to get serious