

## *Return to the UK*

*Old uniforms, new kit, adjusting to changes in the UK, start of leave, going home, reunions, five days to plan a wedding, a honeymoon and a new posting*

### **December 1944**

Arriving at R.A.F. Wheaton, I was billeted in one of the single rooms in a large wooden Barrack Block, together with about thirty other airmen in the main room.

I got up early and after breakfast I made my way to the telephone box outside the Guard Room and telephoned my fiancé at her factory in Wiltshire. After telling her that I was now in the U.K. and well, we had a short chat about meeting at Bristol and going home to our respective homes as soon as I was cleared from the Station to go on leave. I would know more about my future plans after I had been checked-in by the Admin people and that I would write that night. Arrangements had already been made with her firm to have immediate leave when I came home so I asked if she would get that organised immediately.

As I left the telephone box, two Corporal Service Policemen were waiting to speak to me and they asked for my number, rank and name. After giving them the details, I asked why they needed it and they said that they had to escort me to the Guardroom.

Having a great dislike for the power of the Military Police, I asked why I had to go to the Guardroom and in any case they were not of a high enough rank to escort me. They told me that I was improperly dressed and as this Station was a Recruit Training Station I was setting a very bad example. They told me that the Sergeant in the Guardroom had ordered them to escort me in, so I told them to stay where they were and I went into the guardroom on my own. The Sergeant was at his desk looking at some papers and ignored me so I said, "Who is in charge Sergeant?"

and he replied after looking up "I am". "Well stand to attention when you are speaking to a superior Officer and why have I been told to report to you". "Because you are improperly dressed and setting a bad example. Look at your great coat, it's a disgrace, your buttons look as if they have never been polished, you are wearing Khaki battle dress and you are wearing shoes." I am now very angry and say "Everything I am wearing is R.A.F. issue. I have just come from the Middle East after four years of front line service. We wear Khaki battle dress because it doesn't show up as much as blue, our buttons and badges are made of plastic and cannot be cleaned or polished, my greatcoat has seen the battle scars of war, and shoes are normal issue overseas".

He shifted uneasily and said "Well I'm sorry chief (A familiar term for Flight Sergeants) but this is a Recruit training depot" and before he could carry on I told him that I was not a Red Indian and he would address me by my correct rank.

I then told him that about one thousand other airmen had returned with me and we would be re-kitted after all of our details were taken but in the meantime, he would have to ignore our state of dress. I asked to see the Orderly Officer to complain about his action and I was told that he was with the Commanding Officer and would not be available until after 11 am. I didn't often 'Pull rank' but this man's attitude really annoyed me.

I also told him to tell all of his staff not to approach any of these people from the rear, because like me, they had all been on an unarmed combat course, and we are all a bit sensitive when approached from behind.

I reported to the hangar where we would be giving all of our details, and I contacted the Flight Lieutenant in charge and explained what had happened. He immediately contacted the C.O. and the necessary instructions were given to prevent any further occurrences.

The hangar was laid out with a raised platform at one end and five lines of chairs stretching to the back of the hangar. Behind the dais, there were five very large sheets of paper with a copy of the forms at our seat. The Officer explained that in order to get everyone seen to as quickly as possible, he would show the large copy on the wall, and we would have to fill in the details on our own small copy. On each aisle there would be an admin clerk who would help anyone with a difficulty and as each form was

completed, it would be put into a folder for collection at the end of the session. In this way, one thousand airmen could be checked in the same time that it would take to check fifty through the orderly room. Any errors could be checked individually the next day. It took three hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon to complete the session which included units served overseas, medical problems, courses undertaken, injuries due to enemy action, dates of promotions, medals due and present trade. This session completed, we were told to report again the following morning for medical examinations and injections. In the afternoon we would be having a re-kitting session.

I wrote to my parents and my fiancé that evening telling them that I would be having four weeks leave when I left this station and that I was hoping that we could arrange our wedding within that time. The next day, we all had our medicals and I am sure that the medical Officers get commission on the number of injections they give. I had my injections before I left Italy, but I still had to have another tetanus and typhoid jab.

As the medicals took so long, our re-kitting had to be put off until the next day. After getting our new uniforms we had to sew on stripes and fit crowns to our sleeves on battle dress and 'Best Blue' and our new greatcoats. The buttons and badges had to be polished and then we looked a bit like the 'rookies' in the station. The last day was spent being told of the changes that had taken place in the U.K. during our absence. I was amazed at the stringent rations for the civilians, the change of our money to pounds, shillings and pence, instead of piastres, lira, francs and British Military Currency. We would no longer have to do a mental calculation every time we purchased anything.

My biggest shock was being told how to treat our American and allied troops. My feelings were that they were guests in my country and should act as guests and that I should not have change my lifestyle for them. We were also reminded that we drive on the left hand side of the road in the U.K.

## **Leave starts, and going home**

We were told that we would be going on our leave the next day, one weeks leave for every year spent overseas. I rang my fiancé and told her that I would be leaving at 8am from the same railway station that I left in

December 1939. I was in Blackpool in 1939, so I could give that date and location without giving out information that would be 'useful to the enemy'.

On a cold and rainy day, we were given our travel Warrants to our destination and then taken by trucks to the railway station at Blackpool. We left about ten minutes late and after about an hour we were stopped for some time between two stations. The guard eventually came around and said that Crewe Station had been bombed and that we would have to reverse back the track when the signals could be arranged, and we would have to take a cross-country route to Birmingham. We eventually got to Birmingham, but we had to change trains because the driver would not be able to return to his starting point in order to take his train out the next day.

We had to wait some considerable time for the next 'troop train' to come from the north but we made our way to Bristol and arrived at about 6pm. I struggled into my very heavy backpack and going to the goods van I was just in time to see my kit bag being thrown on to the platform. I picked it up expecting to see liquid dripping out of it but my packing proved to be efficient. As I walked along the platform, I saw my fiancé coming along the platform, looking in all of the windows hoping to see me. I just shouted out her name and she immediately looked up and ran towards me. I think we were glued at the lip for some time, and she told me that she had been waiting since eleven am that morning, as she was told by the railway staff that a Blackpool train should arrive at mid-day. Every train that came from the Midlands had been checked and at 5.30 pm the porter said that all Blackpool scheduled trains had gone but one train coming for the northeast was due at 6pm.

He suggested that there may have been a change of trains at Birmingham and after waiting all day, another half hour wouldn't matter. We went into the canteen for a cup of tea and a sandwich while we waited for the train to take us to Taunton. Neither of us seemed to stop talking but I still can't remember what we said. We caught the connection to Taunton and then we had to change trains again for Minehead. We managed to get into a non-corridor compartment, and then started to calm down and try to sort our agenda for the next few days.

My parents lived about seven miles from Minehead and my fiancé's parents lived in Minehead, so we got off the train three stops before the terminus, and showing my travel warrant, the ticket collector said that one of my uncles was coming to collect me from one and half miles away. When the ticket collector phoned about my arrival he was told that it would be about half an hour before he would be there, so I said that we would start walking and that would save time. We walked about three quarters of a mile and my backpack seemed to be getting heavier by the minute. My kit bag was also heavily packed, so we decided to rest by a low wall above the local river. It is now 10pm and my uncle comes along with his car, he turns around and then we go back to my parents' home. We have the usual family re-union for the long lost son and after a hot drink we have a long talk about the past four years.

I did not want to go into the details because they were still fresh in my mind. It was nearly midnight when we decided to go to bed and as I walked around the room, I hit my head against one of the old elm beams and almost knocked myself out. I had forgotten that I had grown about four inches in the last five years and the cottage was a seventeenth century thatched cottage with a very low ceiling, and I could no longer walk around without ducking my head.

Instead of my usual wake-up time of 6.30am, this morning I slept until 8 am and I had a strange feeling that something was wrong. It was completely dark, being double summer time in the U.K. but it was also very quiet. Even at 6.30 am in camp. there was always some noise, troops marching to early morning duty, lorries starting, but today there was only a strange 'squawking noise' something never heard around the camp. When I became fully aware of my surroundings, I realised that it was the rooks in the trees behind the house.

## **Planning a wedding in five days**

I dressed and visited my fiancé in her bedroom and then went down to get us a cup of tea. My mother was busy getting my young sister off to school and my father had already gone to work at the firm's premises next door. He would be back for breakfast at 9 am. I took the tea up to my fiancé and we stayed talking for a while and I laughed and said that my mother always said that the only way that I would go into a young woman's bedroom, was through a wedding ring.

I washed and shaved, polished the buttons on my uniform and then we all had breakfast when my father came in. We told my parents that we were going to see about getting a Special marriage licence and then my mother told me that she had deposited enough coupons with the local tailor to make me a suit when I came home and I could go to him and get measured that day. My fiancé and I decided to walk to the nearest bus or train station to go to Watchet that was about two miles away.

When we got there, we found that we would have to wait at least two hours for a train or a bus, so we decided to walk the rest of the way to the tailors. We asked if the suit could be made within the week because we were getting married as soon as we could get it arranged.

We then went to Minehead by train to meet my prospective In-laws again. We had a good chat with the family and then went to get the special licence, to see the vicar at the Church and then to see the restaurant for the reception. We managed to get everything arranged for Thursday, the fourteenth of December and went around to see one of our old friends who had been ill with cancer. She was delighted to see us, but said that on that day, she had to go to hospital in Exeter for treatment and would it be possible to arrange it the day before. We saw the caterers, but Wednesday was a half-day and could we arrange it for Tuesday. We saw the vicar, and he agreed for Tuesday in six days time. From then on it was a constant round of visits, telegrams to relatives who were far away, getting the bridesmaids together for fittings, getting the wedding dress checked and making sure that the wedding cake was o.k.

When we saw it, we were very disappointed. It had been made about seven months before and it had soya almond paste that had turned the white icing yellow. There were two tiers but the person who had made the cake said that if we could get some more icing sugar, she could re-ice the bottom tier and decorate it in time for the wedding but would be unable to do the top cake. We had no choice but to agree.

Our time was taken up travelling between the two families and getting things organised and I don't think I have ever worked so hard in my life. I went for a fitting for my suit on the Friday and it was promised for Monday mid-day. We went to Church on Sunday Evening and the announcement by the vicar that a young couple were getting married on Tuesday and would every one come along. A few of our friends came to us after the

service and asked if we would mind if they took over the duties of decorating the Church for the wedding. We had forgotten all about this and we gratefully accepted, and I think that I could have kissed them all for being so thoughtful. My fiancé was one of the Founder Members of this Free Church and they were so pleased to see that we were being married there, especially as I had been away for over four years.

The 'faraway' relatives arrived on the Monday morning and there was a great re-union and everyone wanting to know 'what it was like'. I only wanted to forget about the war and to enjoy my freedom from all things military. We didn't have time for a 'girlie night or stag night' and in the evening I took my fiancé to her home so that she could be ready for her 'big day' the next day. I returned to my parents' home by 8 pm and met one of my elderly aunts who was the type who could wheedle any information from you that you would have preferred to be kept quiet.

I had met her son (my cousin) who was in the army when I was in the canal zone and we had many chats, so she kept saying "Our Roy was the same as you, he didn't want to talk about the war either but he did say when he met you, that..... " and before I realised it, I was talking about the things I would have preferred to have been left unsaid. At least my parents were happy to hear about some of the things that had happened.

## **Wedding day**

I woke early on Tuesday the 12<sup>th</sup> December 1944, and after breakfast I kept myself busy polishing buttons and cleaning my shoes because I was getting married at 11 am in uniform. When I had finished, the relatives had arrived and there was so much taking place and with them all fussing around to get ready I decided to walk up into the large garden at the back of the house and looking in to the river, I was watching the trout dashing up and down the stream. I suddenly became aware of someone standing behind me and of course it was my aunt again. "You are not having second thoughts, are you?" she asked. I said, "Having seen all the fuss today, I certainly don't want to go through this again, it's easier to get married". The wedding cars arrived and my uncle, who was my Best Man, came to collect me and we arrived at the Church 3 minutes late. Going into the Church, I was amazed to see that it was completely filled and walking along the aisle, I felt like a midget until I got to the front pews.

I had only been to one wedding before and that was when I was 9 years old and although we had been to the vicar to rehearse the ceremony, I still couldn't remember everything I had to do. The vicar was elderly and very short of breath, so when he came to the part "Wilt thou take this woman to be thy ever loving wife....." he took a very long pause to regain his breath, I thought that it was my time, so I said "I will" and suddenly I got a sharp dig in the ribs from my new bride, and a whispered 'Not now'. Unfortunately all of the congregation heard me and I never lived it down.

We travelled to the reception a short distance from the church and after the meal and the speeches, I suddenly thought, 'I had just signed a contract for a job for which I had received no training, I had no previous experience, and that I had promised to look after and support someone else's daughter for the rest of my life.'

My new brides brother had come to our rescue for the honeymoon. We had tried to book hotels but being winter time and war time, no hotels were open in December, so he offered us his home in London, his wife would stay in Minehead, he would take us to his home and the next day, he would go to another part of London to stay with his sister-in-law. We could then stay as long as we liked.. We had a wonderful time and I took the chance to visit my Landlady at Horsham and then we walked around to the old camp. It was still working and as we were watching the cranes and low loaders leaving for another job, the C.O. came out and spoke to us. I told him that I was on the unit in 1940 and he wanted to know where I had been during the last four years.

He also invited us into the camp and meet the staff, but our train would be arriving soon to take us back to London, so I had to refuse the offer. We returned to Victoria Station and went to a show in the West End that night and as we came out of the theatre, we found we were in a typical London 'Smog'. Getting to Croydon, we walked to our 'home and the fog was so dense that we walked about half a mile past our street and then had to retrace our steps. We had great difficulty finding the street but decided to pick out some definite landmarks for future reference.

The honeymoon was over all too quickly and Christmas was upon us. We shared our time between the two families and on New Years Eve, my new posting came through, it was to a station called Hinton in the Hedges, a small hamlet with a church, a pub and about twenty houses, about 3 miles



from the nearest village and about seven miles from the nearest town of Banbury.