

Chapter 17

RAF Halton - 21st Entry

As I have already said, I reported to Halton accompanied by my father. I was dressed in tropical kit, ie. khaki shirt and shorts, and the overcoat bought in Gibraltar. After a short discussion, my father handed me over to the Sergeant Major 2nd class in charge of "C" Squadron 2 Wing. This, I believe, stood me in good stead. I appeared to others to be a 5', 5" stone weakling. I was, however, tougher than I looked but, at that stage did not let on. I was shown a bed in a barrack room which was centrally heated and highly polished. It was a good job that it was heated as there was snow on the ground outside. I sat there bewildered on the bed which had no springs and pulled in and out. It was called a McDonald bed; I believe he must have been a sadist. The mattress consisted of three biscuits. The first move was made by one of the other lads who said it was supper time. We lined up at the cookhouse for soup in a pint mug and a piece of bread. As it happened, the Orderly Sergeant who was present, was a technical man and a jolly good chap. He beckoned to me to go with him into the kitchen where he instructed the cook to give me a couple of huge sandwiches filled with roast pork. I took them back to the barrack room and shared them with two or three of the lads, an action which did me no harm at all.

McDonald beds could be tipped up and, although it was standard practice to play this trick on all newcomers (after all I had arrived at least a month after the others), I heard them whisper about it when I got into bed; they felt so sorry for me that they decided to leave me alone. I lay tight, breathed a sigh of relief, thought of home and went to sleep. The following day I was sent to the hospital for a medical. As I have said, I was 5ft tall and weighed 5" stone wet through. The doctor put me through an extensive examination, couldn't find anything wrong, but also couldn't believe his own findings so sent for another doctor for a second opinion. In the end four doctors decided that I was fit! Next came the fitting out. Everything was OK except the working greatcoat which was second hand and so long that it nearly touched the floor. It took me a long time to get that replaced. Why on earth we had to wear Pantaloon and Puttees, I have no idea. Not long after that, I was detailed to attend the dentist. I drew the short straw and was seen by an Army dentist nicknamed the "Mad Major", although actually he was a very good dentist in terms of skill. I opened my mouth at about 9.00 am and closed it at about 12 noon. In

that time he had, taken out two back teeth with anaesthetic, filled five large teeth without and broken several needles and at least two glasses. Each time he broke anything, he swore then promptly apologised. Finally he patted me on the back, told me that I was a brave lad and that was that. It put me off dentists for years.

As I was being Sworn In, I was asked if I agreed to be vaccinated to which I replied "No". The Corporal then said "In that case you can't get Sworn In then". At that I changed my mind and agreed to be vaccinated. The Swearing In ceremony was then completed but, funnily enough, I never did get vaccinated. Thus, I became a U/T Metal Rigger.

I can only generalise about Halton as throughout term time life was much the same day by day. Being nearly two months late, I had a lot of catching up to do both at school and workshops. At school I was put in the top class, R1, and spent the whole term catching up. I took a midterm exam and ended up in the bottom class, R6. At the end of the year, another exam and I got back into the top group in R2. Throughout the three years at Halton, the teaching was excellent and the teachers top class. A Pass at the end gave me an Ordinary National Certificate, although none of us was told that at the time.

I was in 2 Wing which was divided into A, B and C Squadrons. Each of the Squadrons was controlled by a WO II and a Flight Lieutenant. After a couple of months our WO II was replaced by an excellent man called Paton. He was the best non-technical man I came across during the whole of my time in the RAF. With him in charge we won drill competitions and, as a consequence, got some extra holiday weekends as a reward. One funny incident with him happened on a very hot Summer's day. A friend of mine and me put on white shirts under our tunics and went out to drill. In those days tunics buttoned right up to the collar which meant that the shirts were not visible. However, on this particular day, Mr Paton decided that we would drill without tunics so, in a sea of grey-shirted apprentices, were two white-shirted chaps! Much embarrassment. He just sent us off to change, no charges. Sensible chap, he knew how to differentiate.

Each day we marched eight abreast accompanied by a drum and trumpet band down Bulbeck Hill to the Workshops or School. At Workshops, I had more catching up to do. The first year was basic training involving the making of various objects so we learned to file, hacksaw etc. The first job was a cube followed by a hexagon fitted into a lump of cast iron. Thus, we learned about micrometers and verniers. My instructor was a

civilian, Mr Britten. A Sergeant instructor in an adjoining section saw that I was in trouble reaching the vice so brought me a footstool to stand on! I met him years later when I was Technical Adjutant at Husbands Bosworth. He walked into my office as a Flying Officer. I felt then that I really had caught up. Over the three years Metal Riggers learned to make sheet metal fittings, welding, tin bashing, heat treatment of metals, plating and, of course, the art of rigging an aeroplane. We also learned to use fabric and about doping. There was also a metallurgy course which was very interesting. From time to time throughout the course, we had to make test jobs which were always some sort of metal fitting involving calculation, bending allowances and so on. There was always a test job on the passing out exam. We spent a month on the aerodrome course during which my time in the Scouts came in handy as I knew all the knots for picketing aircraft etc.

We were also given a flight in an Avro 504N during which the pilot handed over control to the pupil. When my turn came round, I didn't hear him say "You take it" so it was no wonder that the aircraft wallowed about all over the place. He wasn't impressed with my flying skills at all. I



AVRO 504N

I wasn't either as I didn't know that I was supposed to be flying the thing. I had one other flight at Halton when some of us lined up and a Sergeant Pilot took us up one by one. At the end of the line was a Service Policeman, not a favourite species! When the pilot got to him he said "Sorry, I've finished for today". At the time we thought it funny but, on reflection, it was cruel as it made him look a fool.

Every year there was a Parent's Day when, among other things, the parents were shown the wonderful food being prepared. I don't know whom they thought they were kidding! Anyway once a year we did have good food. On that day there was usually an air show and once a few well-known flyers gave an exhibition; they included Winifred Spooner and Amy Johnson. Winifred was friendly and gave autographs but Amy was rather remote.

Sports facilities at Halton were splendid. I got into the Wing Hockey team and the Squadron Cricket team. The Flight Sergeant in charge of the Cross Country team wanted me to join the Wing team but I preferred Hockey. I can't remember seeing any Soccer played there although there was plenty of Rugby. The playing facilities were excellent

with lovely Cumberland Turf stretching over many acres. There was an athletics track. I tried but wasn't good enough.

Church facilities were good but rather spoiled because we had to parade in pantaloons and puttees, be inspected and then forcibly marched to the relevant Church. I was Church of England at the time and went to an evening service which was voluntary. During the third year I was confirmed. Our Padre was a Wing Commander Walkey, an excellent chap who lived in Wendover with his family. Sunday evening was open house to anyone who cared to walk to Wendover and partake of tea and buns at his house. His son was, I think, at University and a good athlete who subsequently went out to South Africa as a Missionary and was killed.

For the first eighteen months the 21st Entry was Junior Entry and the 18th the Senior. Juniors were paid about 3/6d a week and seniors 5/-. The real pay was 7/- and 10/- respectively and the difference was saved and paid out as a lump sum when going on holiday. The Senior Entry provided the Leading Boys who acted as "prefects", one to each room. A number of us in our Entry were selected to make up a "Model Room" thus giving the impression that we would become Leading Boys. Most did but not me and my friend Jim Batho. We, apparently, were regarded as Model Pupils but not promotion material. During our time, boys were also made Corporal and Sergeant Apprentices. I think that they thought it was the way to a Cadetship but it didn't always work that way and many were disappointed. To attain a Cadetship, it was necessary to be good at both School and Workshops.

I suppose that you could say that Medical facilities were OK, particularly the hospital, but going sick with minor ailments was a nightmare. I was twice detained with 'flu and kept away from School and Workshops. The result was a stay in Sick Quarters polishing the floor and generally having a miserable time. In theory one could be sent to bed but I never heard of anyone being so lucky.

A surgeon at the hospital was trying to see how small an incision he could make when removing an appendix. I think his record was ½". Seven of the boys in my Squadron, including Jim Batho, decided they needed the operation and were duly operated upon. They got three weeks sick leave which was a real bonus.

One task which we had was to study a particular subject, referring to library books, and produce a book which had to be handed in at the end of the Schools Course. Each boy had a different subject which meant that a lot of reading was required and there was no way to cheat. Being the last one in the Entry, I got the rather boring subject of "Four Eminent Victorians". I picked two scientists plus Gladstone and Disraeli. The result was quite good and I filled a complete exercise book, however the subject had no particular interest to me. Now, with the benefit of hindsight, and knowing a little more about the peculiarities and hypocrisy of the Victorian age, I could have chosen different people and made the project much more interesting. I doubt however, whether I could have got hold of any reference books which would have outlined the dirt, drudgery and cruelty which lay beneath the veneer of Victorian England. Dickens should have been one of my choices. At the end of the last year, we took the final School and Trade exams. The School exam covered Maths, English, Engineering Drawing (based on term work), Theory of Flight, Materials and Structures. The pass mark was 60% which I obtained quite easily. The Trade Tests covered, amongst others, Basic Rigging and a Test Job. The pass marks were: LAC - 80%, AC1 - 60% and AC2 - 40%. I was tenth in the Entry but only got 72%. I was disappointed to pass out still playing "Catch Up".



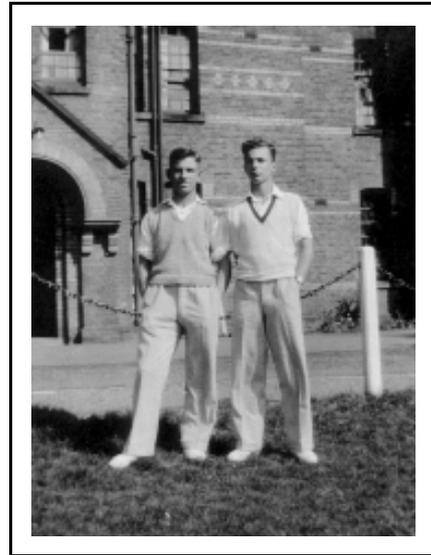
Halton House
Built for Alfred de Rothschild between 1879 and 1883
Used as the RAF Halton Officer's Mess

Things I shall never forget about Halton

- *The truly rotten and inadequate food.*
- *Corporal Grinter - a Service Policeman who hated Apprentices.*
- *The Blacksmithing course where the Corporal in charge, who had a lovely tenor voice, sang "It Happened in Monterey" on and off all day long.*
- *The Wing Raids across the drill square from No 1 Wing and on your own Senior Entry.*
- *Cutting Grass with a dinner knife.*
- *Wearing Pantaloon and Puttees.*
- *Being issued with three items of each piece of clothing, towels etc., but not being able to wear or use one set, which had to be permanently on view in our locker.*
- *Having to carry a silver knobbed stick when in our Walking Out Uniform.*
- *The high standard of Warrant Officer and Technical SNCOs and the low standard of Disciplinary Corporals.*
- *Me, demonstrating somersaults in the barrack room.*
- *The regular reading out of King's Regulations.*
- *Early on, being taught Logarithms by a friend, Jim Smith, in the barrack room as part of my "Catching Up" period. I saw him again at Silverstone when he was a Flight Lieutenant pilot.*
- *Saveloys and peas, the only food I liked.*
- *The radio operated by a chap in our room by the name of Wadsworth. He linked each bed with a line round the heating pipes. The terminal block at each bed was an Army hard tack biscuit. We each had a set of earphones (Aunt Rose gave me mine).*
- *Winning a football sweep in my room. Whoever won had the job of running it. I won seven consecutive weeks after which everyone decided it was not worth running!!*
- *The riots in the dining room when there was no jam for tea. However, did they manage to run out of jam?*
- *Going home to Hounslow and taking a friend of mine, Frank Swain, instead of going to the Hendon Air Show, where we were supposed to be. As a result I met Perle.*
- *Learning to play Billiards with Jim Batho.*
- *The NAAFI girl hanging, topless, out of the top of the canteen. She was sacked the next day.*
- *Trying to clean the greasy cookhouse tins in tepid water.*



Jim Smith & Me



Frank Swain & Me

- *Mum, Dad and Betty visiting on Parent's Day with Betty wearing an eye patch as she had a sty.*
- *Our feeble attempts to learn about sex. No official information was available. It was a case of learning by degrees.*
- *Two of us ordered to clean out the garage of a Flight Lieutenant's house and knocking over a foam fire extinguisher covering one of the house walls. It took us forever cleaning it off.*
- *My Aluminium Test Piece starting off as about 5" x 5" and, after my efforts, ending up in perfect shape about 3" x 3".*
- *My disappointment that we didn't get to use the gymnasium despite it being well equipped.*
- *My Mum's weekly food parcel. I was the only boy so privileged.*
- *The welcome which Mum and Dad gave to my friends when I took them home on long weekends (Once or twice a term).*
- *Being bellowed at by the Wing Warrant Officer 1 for walking in the front door of the Sergeant's Mess. This was early on.*
- *The farewell tendered by Grizelle (the AOC's daughter) whilst we were all waiting for the bus to take us to the Railway Station at the end of our three years. Although well intentioned, saying, quote, "Will you be sorry to leave?", unquote, showed that she didn't understand at all how we felt.*

The passing out parade being over, we were able to put down our choice of Stations. I got my first choice, Northolt, which was only ten miles from home at Hounslow. So started a new life.