

Chapter 21

Conversion Course - RAF Henlow

It was here that the "Grippo" gang started but more of that later. Henlow was a most uncomfortable place to be in that one half of the men there were experienced ex-Apprentices, all LACs, and the other half were raw recruits. There was a so called Disciplinary Squadron Leader there who was in charge of both as regards Administration. The two did not mix and it almost got to riot proportions. It was resolved when the Squadron Leader was posted as a result of the Conversion Course Senior entries and the Flight Sergeant Discipline applying for postings back to their respective units. This was obviously a serious situation because a lot of time and money had been spent on training. Apparently, before I got there, one demonstration had been the placing of pairs of Best Boots on the road beginning at the Guardroom and going in a long line through the camp. During the time I was there, I was given seven days defaulters for having dirty buttons. I was due to lose my leave as a result but one of George Ritchie's Entry hatched up a plot.

He had a letter coming which purported to be from my fiancée. This was on pages two and three, page one would have given the game away. I have forgotten whose letter it really was but anyway the CO seemed happy enough to let me off as my conduct had always been good. The story was that I was going to Wales to get engaged. I actually got to Wales but not to get engaged. I went with George on my



**George Ritchie, Betty Turner,
Betty Smith, Bea & "Tuck" Tuckfield**

motor cycle to his friend Tuckfield. They put the motor cycle in the front room for safety! When we left, the whole village of Ynysybwl turned out to wave us off. The people in the coal mining villages were smashing; on one occasion, I came to a village, skidded and over I went and about fifty people rushed to pick me up.

Technical training at Henlow was excellent with first class instructors. Although we went to school, the exam didn't count towards the pass result. It was a good job really because I failed the electrical exam! I think that I was still fed up as no-one at that time had replaced Perle with whom I had been close friends for nearly three years. I was a bit silly I suppose.

When George Ritchie's Entry was still at Henlow our favourite place to go was Bedford where I learned to row on the River Ouse. On Sunday evenings a band would play on a raft moored on the river and lights everywhere lit up the scene. It was during this time that I took George home. On the way we would call in at Highbury and watch The Arsenal.



Betty Turner & George Ritchie

Afterwards we would have tea in a nearby café then on to home. That was how George got to meet my sister Betty. In the meantime I had sold my motor cycle. Some reorganisation must have taken place because we moved from the huts where we had been housed to permanent buildings and our part became No 1 Wing. After this, Henlow began to settle down and I got more involved with people in my Entry. The last thing I can remember George and me doing before he left was to play a joke on Tuckfield. We went into Marks and Spencer in Chatham and asked the girl at the corset counter for a pair of corsets. When she asked what size, we said any size would do. Poor girl, she was most embarrassed. When we returned to camp, we left them as a present in Tuckfield's room. I think everyone in the room tried them on.

In our Entry we had a chap who was a beautiful pianist so we went out in the evenings looking for pubs with a piano. We would then start a sing song. If I recall rightly, the usual drink was Brown Ale.

We also went to a lot of local dances where I sometimes danced with a girl who had ambitions to be a chorus girl. She was an excellent dancer but rather a plain girl and I have no idea how she got on.



**Betty Smith on the left
Our first meeting**

Whitsun 1936 arrived and we were due for leave. A chap asked me if I would make up a foursome on, I believe, Whitsun Bank Holidays; I said yes and as a result I met Betty Smith, a meeting which was to change my life. We went to Maidstone with the idea of going on the river. This we did and also had a decent meal; in fact we had a really pleasant day. That was the beginning. The chap who introduced us said that Betty was not the sort of girl to mess about with but was one to marry. As it turned out his statement was prophetic, but in a curious way it slowed me up. I felt that I had to be sure so our early meetings were tentative with the odd walk, dance etc.

thus the relationship took some time to take off. Back at camp on the course things went on with all sorts of silly things happening. For instance, one chap had an imaginary Sea Lion in a suitcase under his bed. We used to take it on parade with us, leaving room for him in the ranks. The discipline NCOs wondered what on earth we were playing at. Then there was the "Grippoo" gang which was connected to not panicking when you were told to hurry up. I was "Grippoo" and my pal was "Gippo". It was all rather silly but I took it with me to Biggin Hill with me and became "King Grippoo", which was my nickname for a long time.

During my tentative period with Betty, I went on holiday with Mum, Dad, George and sister Betty to Whitstable. It was probably July/August and the first night, George and I went up to the park at Tankerton where they were running a dance outdoors. We met two girls and I arranged to meet mine the following day. She was Joan Court whose father owned two chemists' shops, one in Tankerton and the other in Canterbury. They were fairly well off and Joan had been to Public School. She was a quiet girl and I was not in love with her but liked her as a friend. Her parents invited me to meals and she paid one visit to Carlton Avenue in Gillingham.



Joan Court

Back at Henlow I had bought a 1924 Austin 7 Sports, the bonnet of which was held in place with a strap. The car went very well but I had a terrible job with the tyres. Mr Court thought that the car was a bit dangerous and he was probably right but I had a lot of fun with it. The friendship with Joan didn't last and in the meantime I had picked up with Betty. I passed out as a Fitter 1 in March 1937 and was posted to Biggin Hill. Before I was posted, I sold the car for £10 but not before I had taken another chap to Gillingham for a fee of 5/- return. On the return journey one of the rear tyres split into two and disappeared into the night. I finished the last twenty miles on the wheel rim. Prior to that episode I once got onto the North Circular Road and on a roundabout lost my sense of direction. Instead of going round forward, I went round backwards; after the second circuit was nearly complete, a policeman's voice out of the darkness said "I am sure you are lost, can I help?". He put me on the right road - a true gentleman.