

Moving On

David Gibbs

(Article from *A Miscellany of Merriott Memories*)

In spite of my sticky-out backside and my shiny suit, my dancing must have been pretty impressive because before long my courtship of Pat, the pretty girl from South Petherton, began. Two evenings a week were reserved for night school in Yeovil but most of the others, come rain or shine, saw me whizzing down over Park Hill on my trusty, drop-handle-bar bicycle, on dark nights the glimmer from my dynamo lighting the road for a few yards ahead of me, en route to see her. Memories of quiet walks on starlit nights along car-free country roads, Saturday to Yeovil pictures, and summer Sunday bus trips to the coast on Huthings and Cornelius or Ernie Giles' Venture busses come to mind.

Cycling to South Petherton night after night wasn't too bad. The spin down Park Hill was a good starter. Before no time at all I'd be pounding along the flat at Sockety, sometimes running the gauntlet of the barking dogs of the local Isaacs gypsy family who used to regularly pitch their caravans and carts on the verge alongside the road; sometimes through shallow flood water further along just before the bridge over the stream. Then up through Stratton, straight out on to a virtually car-free A303, down to Cemetery Corner and on into the village. It used to take me about fifteen minutes.

The ride home was much harder and took longer. There was no need to rush. I'd avoid pedalling as much as possible, freewheeling down through Stratton, past the Royal Oak where sometimes on a Saturday evening boisterous singing might be heard, on past the post office, around the corner by the Swedish timber houses, by Blake's farm and on into the dark night. Away from Stratton, as I pedalled along I often used to sing, at the top of my voice, the only place I knew where I could do so without upsetting people. Of course, if the gypsies were in camp I didn't sing. Even so, the dogs would still bark, the tethered horses would shy a little, and the good folk still sitting around the dying embers of their campfire would exchange a hollered goodnight greeting.

I used to keep pedalling until I reached the first telegraph pole at the bottom of Park Hill, then always I got off my bike and walked up the hill to Sandy Hole. On one summer night, one of those where it refuses to get properly dark, as I rounded the next bend, a few yards ahead I could see a family of badgers playing in the roadway. I froze, and for some time I watched them bustling around. They were the first badgers I had ever seen. Eventually I made a slight noise and they instantly vanished, back into the set high in the bank alongside. I think that set I passed on so many late evenings without seeing any sign of a badger is still there.

But of course, these somewhat carefree times couldn't last forever. Soon my apprenticeship was at an end and National Service beckoned. Life was about to change. In fact, it would never be quite the same again.

I was called up to serve in the Royal Air Force, an 'erk'. I was a most reluctant erk. Understandably so, for I was soon to be engaged to Pat and I didn't want to leave her, or worse still, lose her. After being together for almost three years, a parting of two years didn't bear thinking about. Also, having just completed my five-year apprenticeship I had started to earn a man's wage of over seven pounds per week. My wage as a serviceman would be just twenty-eight shillings per week. Thus any patriotic desire to serve queen and country was non-existent.

But in spite of all the advice about how to '*swing the lead*' - perhaps by pretending you wet the bed or had flat feet - if you were medically fit there was no way to avoid conscription. Serving an indentured apprenticeship enabled me to delay the fateful day for three years, but they still got me in the end. Even before I had completed my apprenticeship the dreaded letter in the brown OHMS envelope arrived, together with a rail travel warrant, instructing me to attend for a medical examination at Exeter. I was just one of many young men from all over the West Country who found themselves dropping their pants and coughing for various doctors that day. I was declared fit, more or less. My eyesight was not one hundred per cent; I was short-sighted and had recently started to wear glasses. This meant returning to Exeter a week or so later to see an eye specialist. Alas, he saw no reason why I should not be called up.

A few days later, I received yet another letter in a brown OHMS envelope, another rail travel warrant, and instructions on how to get to RAF Cardington in Bedfordshire. I was to report for duty on October 19th, just one month and three days after my 21st birthday.

On that morning it was raining. Before my father had left for work he gave me the last-minute instructions of an old soldier, which basically boiled down to '*mind what thees get up to and don't volunteer for anything*'. Shortly after, with a few personal possessions in a small brown case, I bid farewell to my mother and caught my usual early morning lift to Yeovil with Edwin Taylor. He dropped me at the bottom of Hendford Hill and I walked to Yeovil Town station where Pat was waiting for me, having caught the early morning bus from South Petherton. We were both very sad and somewhat tearful. We caught the shuttle train to Yeovil Junction where I would then catch the London train.

When the London train steamed into the station, we kissed goodbye. I left Pat standing on the platform and climbed aboard. I stood in the corridor, window down. Words were not easy to find. Tears were unavoidable. As the train pulled out from the station, we waved until we could no longer see each other. It was truly a bittersweet experience.

I was in no state to go and sit in a carriage so I stayed in the corridor. In any case, my father who at that time was employed by Scott's Nurseries and was working at Bradford Abbas, a village on the rail route, had said to look out for him. Sure enough, as the train rushed through the Dorset countryside, there he was, a lone figure in the middle of a vast field, waving for all he was worth. I held up my tear-stained handkerchief and let it flutter in the wind until he, too, was out of sight.

Collecting myself, I made my way into a carriage where there was an empty seat. The upholstery struck me as being rather plush; so much so that I feared it might be a first-class carriage and not third-class. I asked a businessman sitting in the corner if indeed it was first-class. No, he assured me, it wasn't. I mention this to illustrate just how unworldly I was for even though I was twenty-one years old I had little or no experience of travelling on a train.

Moreover, this was only the second time I had travelled to London, the only other occasion being by coach on a school visit seven years earlier.

I arrived at Waterloo some two or three hours later. I descended down into the underground and, after an anxious study of a wall map, worked out how to get to St Pancras mainline station. Within minutes of arriving there, an RAF corporal approached me. Was I heading for Cardington? Yes, I was. Right then, join that lot over there. As other young men came up the escalators, having travelled there from all parts of the British Isles, they too were rounded up. We were already in the Royal Air Force. Later we boarded a special train, en route for Bedford where buses were waiting to take us on to nearby RAF Cardington.

At Cardington, I found myself in Flight 7, Hut 27, sharing my new address with a couple of dozen other lads. The first night, sitting forlornly on my bed, I wrote my first letter to Pat. I wrote again the next day and again the day after that. She wrote to me by return and thus we began a daily routine we were to keep up, with very few exceptions, throughout the whole of the two years we were parted.

My new companions and I spent just four or five days at Cardington and in that time we were introduced into the ways of the military. We marched everywhere, rather inexpertly, as we had not yet set foot on a parade ground. We learnt how to address NCOs - '*Yes, corporal! No corporal!*' - and how to recognise and salute officers. We all had a very-short-back-and-sides haircut, far shorter than anything I suffered at the hands of George Sprake when I was a nipper. We were issued with two uniforms: a 'best blue' and a 'hairy blue', the former for parades, the latter for everyday wear. We also received underwear, shirts, socks, ties, towels, boots, shoes and other personal kit, and also a kit bag to keep it all in. Finally, we were each given a large sheet of brown paper and string and told to parcel our civilian clothes and send them back home.

A few days later, we were bussed back into Bedford and put aboard a train for Warrington in Lancashire en route to RAF Padgate where we were to undergo eight weeks of 'square bashing'. For the final leg of the journey, from the railway station to the camp, we were herded into covered lorries.



The NCOs who tried to scare us, and did

As the lorries drew to a stop inside the camp, all hell was let loose. A considerable number of drill instructors, mainly corporals but also one or two sergeants gave us an unforgettable welcome. We were shouted at, insulted and generally harassed - frightened to death, in fact - from the moment our new hob-nailed boots hit the tarmac. The objective soon became clear: you are in the Royal Air Force now and you do exactly what you are told when you are told. And so we did.

The accommodation at Padgate was typical of most UK military establishments at that time: long wooden huts, beds for twenty-two people, one big and one small locker per bed. Built during the 1940s for wartime use, they were old, draughty and cold - there were just two coke-burning stoves, one either end of the hut. Every morning, we were required to fold our blankets and sheets into a pack and to sweep and clean our own bed space. We also had to partake in a joint cleaning effort every Friday evening -

'bull night', as it was known - when we polished and shone our hut until it resembled that shown below. You can just about see the bed packs and the personal equipment laid out in a predefined pattern on each bed. In addition, we spent hours polishing brass buttons and the toecaps of our boots and became skilled at adding knife-edge creases to our trousers in readiness for inspection.



Hut ready for inspection

But by the end of our eight weeks of basic training, most of our rough edges had been worn away. Physically, most of us were fitter than we had ever been or were ever likely to be. And we marched like guardsmen, or so we thought, and what is more we even took a perverse pride in doing so.

That Christmas, whilst I was home on leave and as long planned, Pat and I became engaged. We caught the bus to Yeovil and bought the rings we exchanged in Herbert Whites, the jeweller in Princess Street. But our joy at being together again was short lived for in January I was due to report to RAF Kirkham, near Blackpool to start trade training as an airframe mechanic. The course lasted twelve weeks.



RAF Padgate, the end of square bashing. I am in the front row, far left

Toward the end of trade training we began to anticipate where our next, permanent, posting would be. There were numerous possibilities: the UK, Germany, trouble spots such as Cyprus or Malaya, or perhaps Christmas Island down in the Pacific, where they were carrying out atom bomb tests, with long-time disastrous results for the men involved many of whom contracted cancer as a result. My preferred posting would have been RAF Chivenor, North Devon, for this would provide the best opportunity of getting home at the weekends, but any UK posting would have been better than an overseas posting. Unfortunately, this was not to be. I was posted to RAF Bruggen, Germany, to a fighter squadron equipped with Hunters, to be a member of the ground crew.

After a few months in Germany, in July 1956 I returned home on leave for ten days. It was long awaited and rapid in passing. The following Easter, in 1957, Pat came over to Germany. She travelled by ferry to the Hook of Holland where I met her. She stayed with a corporal friend of mine who lived with his wife and baby son in married quarters that were part of the Bruggen complex. By taking the remaining leave I had due to me either side of the Easter shutdown, we were able to enjoy two weeks together.

Shortly after this pleasant interlude, with the advent of guided missile squadrons many of the conventional aircraft squadrons were being disbanded, amongst them 112 Squadron. For a while, an early demobilisation seemed a possibility. Alas, not so. Surplus ground crews were being sent home to the UK to re-train as firemen!



RAF Bruggen, replenishing compressed air supplies



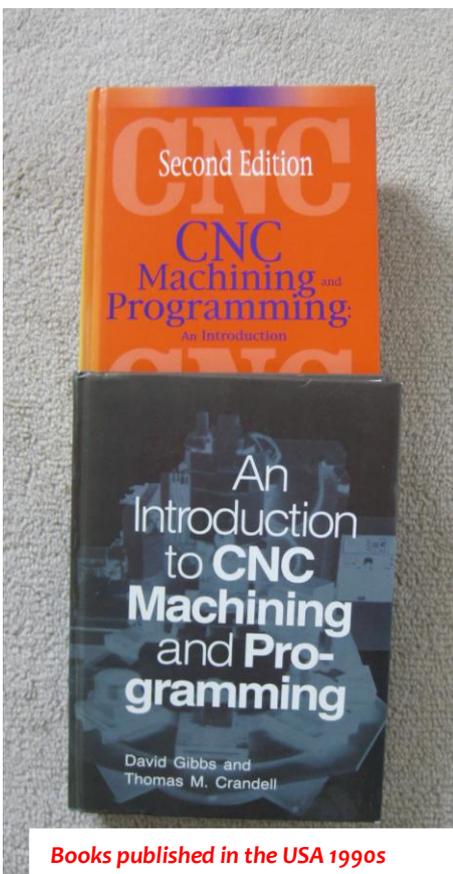
RAF Bruggen, replacing a canopy. I'm standing in the cockpit

But by the time I was due to go, Asian flu struck the camp in a big way. The sickbay was overflowing and I numbered amongst those struck down. By the time the epidemic had passed, I had insufficient time left to serve to enable me to complete the fire-fighting course. Thus,



Books published in the UK mid-1980s

with no Hunters on the station any more, I was assigned to the so-called Station Flight, which consisted of a Canberra bomber (formerly used to tow target drones for the Hunters to fire at) and one or two light aircraft. My final days were spent carrying out the occasional maintenance tasks and 'skiving', as only time-wasting servicemen know how. Time went slowly, but demobilisation crept steadily nearer and in mid-October I eventually arrived at RAF Innsworth, not for a fire-fighting course but to undergo the demobilisation process. This was completed on the 19th October 1957, exactly two years after the day I was called up. I had done my bit. A week or so later I returned to work at Westland's, as a draughtsman.



Books published in the USA 1990s

Two months later, on December 21st, Pat and I were married and we left our respective villages for pastures new, taking our dreams and ambitions with us. Pastures new included Yeovil and Bridgwater for a while, and then Wokingham, in Berkshire. Our dreams and ambitions for me resulted in a progressive career of draughtsman, lecturer in mechanical engineering and technical author, whilst Pat became a long-serving school secretary.

We have one son, Ian, who is married to Sarah, and one grandson, Thomas, so the survival our particular branch of the Gibbs family name is set to continue a while yet. However, although Ian was born in Taunton, our links with Somerset and with Merriott appear to be almost at an end. You may wonder, therefore, why the village continues to mean so much to me. Well, family ties and frequent visits mean that I have never really lost touch, but that might not be the complete answer. In south Wales, they have a saying: *you can take the boy out of the valley but you can't take the valley out of the boy*. Substitute 'valley' with 'village' and that might well provide a better explanation.

Or is it because, quite simply, the roots run deep?