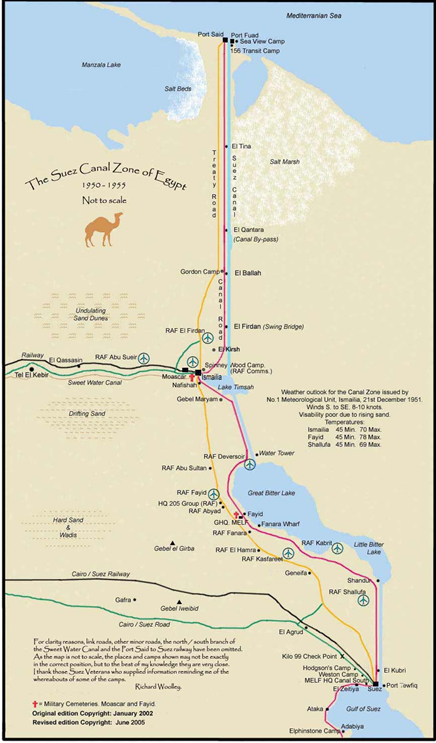
http://britains-smallwars.com/Canal/hist.htm

The Suez Canal Zone



**A short modern history 1950-1954**

The best and perhaps the most complete history of the Canal Zone during this time frame is best described by the man who not only was the General Officer Commanding the British Forces there but played the major role in securing a treaty with Egypt for the pull-out of British troops and the maintenance of all of the huge bases and workshops there.

In his memoirs " A Most Diplomatic General ", The Life of General Lord Robertson of Oakridge, (By David Williamson) this very clever and complex man describes in detail the very difficult task of obtaining a treaty with the nationalistic and anti-British Egyptian Government negotiators.

Because of the length of the chapter involved, it was not possible to include everything but most of the important parts are included. Some points were copied verbatim and other points summarized. In doing this we have tried to get as much information as possible and without taking anything out of context.

In 1936 the then Egyptian Government signed a treaty with the British Government giving the British a base in the Suez Canal Zone. The Egyptians feared the Italians and their Fascist Government and what was happening in East Africa. Having the British there gave them security and in return the British received a huge base in the Mediterranean with control of the world's busiest waterway. This treaty was for twenty years and would expire in 1956, when all British troops would leave the Canal Zone.

When General Lord Robertson took over as G.O.C Middle East, he inherited the huge base and workshops plus command of 20,000 troops (Army and RAF personnel). The Korean War was taking place, and there was a general fear that the Russians would invade the Middle East through Turkey, leaving the Middle East oil producing nations open to attack, and Western Europe without oil.

Britain and the United States wanted Egypt to join a southern front against Russia. The Arabs, especially Egypt, were still smarting after their defeat by Israel, a war which the Arab nations could have won if they had co-ordinated their efforts. The Egyptians were not only anti- Israel but anti British Imperialism

On June 1950 Mussadiq, Premier of Persia, (now Iran) nationalized all the oil facilities of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, especially the huge oil installations in Abadan.

The only troops in the vicinity were those of the 1st Infantry Division stationed in the Suez Canal Zone. These men were put on a six-hour alert to move en masse with their equipment to Abadan. The operation would be called "Midget'. This standby was changed to a 72 hr alert, and finally cancelled.

Back in 1949 the Nationalist Government in Egypt wanted to revise the treaty with Great Britain and have the British leave the Canal Zone before the treaty was due to expire in 1956, to them the sooner the better. Britain wanted to stay until it ended and then phase out the bases. General Lord Robertson put it this way; "For Britain to leave Egypt would place a serious restraint on our ability to defend the Middle East in event of a war". There seemed no solutions

The Nationalist (Wafd) Government of Egypt started fomenting trouble in the Canal Zone (mainly to cover for their own inefficiencies and blundering), with government sanctioned demonstrations and defamatory articles in the Egyptian press against the British. The British retaliated by putting most cities and towns out of bounds to British troops and direct control was assumed over the whole Canal Zone.

It was decided that this huge base couldn't be left to the Egyptians, who were technically inept, and on the strength of that the British decided to stay until 1956. The fact that the British Government had backed down from the Persian Government encouraged the Egyptian Government to finally cancel (unilaterally) the treaty of 1936 and declare a union with the Sudan under the Egyptian Crown.

Trouble (fomented by Cairo), erupted in the Canal Zone, with stabbings, riots, vehicles overturned and burned. Egypt shut down the railways and roads, and withdrew labour from the Zone. Britain flew in the 3rd Infantry Division and the 16th Independent Parachute Brigade bringing the troop strength up to about 80,000. The British forces were now capable of occupying Cairo and Alexandria.

The Egyptians soon targeted the water filtration plants near Suez (the main source of drinking water for the Canal Zone) blowing up and severely flooding the plant. To prevent this in future, a number of mud huts were destroyed and the Egyptian Government exploited this for propaganda purposes.

As a result of this British vehicles were attacked on the Old Cairo Road outside Ismailia. British troops moved out into the desert beyond the Canal Zone perimeter. Operations 'Flail" and "Rodeo" were set up as plans to attack and occupy Cairo and Alexandria (the Delta).

Large numbers of Egyptian troops had moved into the Delta and Alexandria. There was also a chance that the Egyptian division in the Southern Sinai could attack us from the other side.

As a result of attacks on our vehicles and military personnel, as well as the riots in Ismailia and an armed police force in their midst, the British Army set about disarming the Egyptian police. In January of 1952, the British Army finally set about removing them. After a pitched battle, in which four British soldiers were killed and thirteen wounded, the Egyptians suffered 42 killed and 800 detained, and finally order was restored to the city of Ismailia. Small attacks and sniping continued.

In 1953 the chance of settlement improved considerably. Egypt decided not to insist that the Sudan was part of Egypt. The Republican Government under Nasser and Neguib were willing to try a political union between Egypt and the Sudan. These men were in power now and had sent King Farouk into exile in July 1952.

Negotiations with the newly established Revolutionary Government in Cairo was a long drawn out process and the Egyptians weren't above instigating a few attacks on British military personnel and property hoping to speed up the negotiation process.

A lot of proposals were put forward. Things like joint Anglo-Egyptian control, with British technicians teaching the technically incompetent Egyptians. Churchill insisted that the British troops left in the Canal be armed and in uniform.

To duplicate this enormous base, workshops, camps and RAF bases would mean enormous expenditure; was Britain willing to spend this amount of money to relocate?

The War Office, and the Foreign Office wanted a settlement soon. They were willing to offer British and American economic and military assistance, a gradual withdrawal of most, but not all, the British troops in return for maintenance of the bases and workshops, with the assistance of several thousand technicians. This would allow a quick return of Allied forces in event of a war. Egyptians, in turn, would join the Middle East Defence Organization.

To conclude the Anglo-Egyptian negotiations it was brought down to three points;

Case A: UK keeps control and 5000 technical personnel there.

Case B: UK leaves a small staff to supervise these installations.

Case C: Only a few inspectors would be left.

Lord Robertson, would try for case .A

The negotiating Team would be as follows;

1) Ambassador to Egypt Sir Ralph Stevenson

2) Co Delegate General Lord Robertson

From the start, the Egyptians started playing games. They broke the negotiations off when it was discovered that the US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was on a State Visit to Egypt and they hoped that there was a chance that he would take their side against the British, but it didn't happen.

The Egyptians now insisted that the entire base be under Egyptian control and that their Government have full control. In spite of their brave words they were not prepared to resort to force.

Talks again broke off and General Lord Robertson left for talks with Churchill. He had to somehow overcome the Egyptians natural reluctance to allow the British to re-occupy the base in case of war.

Great Britain needed an agreement because of the expense of other overseas commitments and even if we did stay until 1956, or re-occupy the Canal Zone without local co-operation, the base would be useless. At this point three courses were open

1) Tell the Egyptians to go to hell, which would result in an all-out war and the resulting expense.

2) Clear out lock, stock, and barrel.

3) Reach an agreement with Egypt.

By mid July 1953, the first unofficial meeting between the two sides came at a meeting at a dinner party at the house of the Pakistani Charge d' Áffair. Lord Robertson let the other side know, informally, what British policy was. It was that Britain's right to re-enter the base should be automatically reactivated if a major war broke out or if there was an attack or a threat of aggression against Egypt or any other of the Arab countries, including Turkey and Persia.

Two weeks and four meetings later there was no breakthrough. The Egyptians, under President Nasser, were proving to be formidable negotiators. There was a stalemate. The British armed forces would have to occupy the Delta and be targets for terrorists' attacks.

The press and outspoken speeches by politicians on both sides seemed to exacerbate the situation. There was no pretence of co-operation. Lord Robertson advised that the best Cabinet Minister be the one who sells the British/Egyptian Agreement to the press and the British public

Lord Robertson, over the months of negotiations, had developed a healthy respect for the Egyptian negotiators. Although at times they were ruthless, they were determined, lived austerely and put Egypt first.

The British final proposals were delivered to the Egyptian Government and no further talks were arranged. The second phase of the talks had been concluded.

Talks were concluded the following summer, with Nasser completely in charge and the Agreement was signed on the 27th July 1954, with the subsequent Treaty on 19th October 1954.

"The base was to be maintained by British and Egyptian technicians and it was to be reactivated in the event of an attack on Egypt, the Arab League or Turkey"

Anthony Eden told Lord Robertson that it couldn't have been done without him. Anthony Head confirmed the Agreement.

Lord Robertson was the only one to attend the ceremonies in Cairo to mark the final withdrawal of British forces from the Canal Zone and he attended as a counterweight to Shepelof, the Russian Foreign Minister.

John (Jock) Marrs

----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**The Royal Army Service Corps in The Suez Canal Zone**

'The Wagoner's deliver the goods but pay a high price'

Since the end of WWll (and during it,) the Royal Army Service Corps has been involved in every conflict involving the British Army. During the 1951-1954 'Emergency ' in the Suez Canal Zone, 50 soldiers of the Corps gave their lives for Crown and Country, making it the highest casualty rate of any Corps/Regiment stationed in this theatre of operation during the time-frame mentioned.

At that time the choice of vehicles for delivery of supplies, ammunition and troops were the 3-ton Bedford OY's and QL's. Both types of these vehicles were the workhorses of the British Army, highly reliable but unfortunately also highly vulnerable, due to the fact that they were slow and very lightly armoured. Drivers were armed with a Sten gun, which was a close combat weapon suitable for house-to-house street fighting, but in the case of sniping or ambushes this weapon mostly proved completely useless.

Other drivers were killed or severely injured by being deliberately run off the road and into either a Wadi or the Sweet Water canal by much heavier Egyptian vehicles, added to this were the anti-tank and anti-personnel mines, usually disguised in the many piles of Camel dung that appeared in abundance along the main roads. A warning appeared at regular intervals in all Company part 1 orders informing every driver of this hazard. Only when clerks and off-duty drivers were roped in to 'ride shotgun' did things improve, this did not stop these incidents, but snipers were now within range of the escorts. Ambushes, especially on the Tel-el-Kebir to Cairo road and the Tel-el-Kebir to Ismailia road usually brought in the Infantry and Armoured car units on search and destroy missions to

counteract these hit and run ambushes.

Brigadier D.J. Sutton, in his book 'The Story of the Royal Army Service Corps and the Royal Corps of Transport 1945-1982', published by Leo Cooper, London 1983, states, "The British Military Hospital was located outside the Tel-el-Kebir Garrison boundaries on the Zag-a-Zig to Cairo road, just inside the Canal Zone Military boundary. Being thus isolated from the Garrison, walking outside the hospital area was prohibited. Transport was essential for all purposes, to and from 5 BOD for all supplies, the frequent twenty-mile run to Ismailia and the regular picking up of patients and other personnel from Tel-el-Kebir railway station. As the tensions grew and the situation worsened between the British Forces and the Egyptians, armoured scout cars from the Garrison accompanied all vehicles going to and from the British Military Hospital, on other occasions, however, RASC Drivers (and Clerks) rode shotgun, armed with Rifles and pick-helves on their vehicles. The RASC Drivers soon got to know the regular local lads who engaged in anti-British activities, concentrating on the movement between TEK and the hospital, and soon devised tactics to counter these activities." Driver S H Jones who was an RASC Ambulance Driver attached to the RAMC (BMH TEK) typifies the type of dangers faced daily by Ambulance drivers. Driver Jones ran the gauntlet of snipers, ambushes and mines planted by Egyptian terrorists in his many runs between the Hospital, the Railway station and TEK garrison. He spent over two years facing these conditions. The Red Cross visible on his ambulance obviously meant nothing to these thugs.

In the 1st Infantry Div Transport Column RASC, incidents involving 'drive-by' shootings on the Treaty Road by passing Egyptian vehicles, usually took place in the early morning, and by the time the Guard was called out they had gone. Two incidents involving drivers of the column come to mind. In the first incident a grenade was thrown through the window of a QL from a passing Egyptian vehicle, the QL driver calmly picked it up and threw it out of the cab window, earning him a Queen's Commendation. The second incident involved an orchestra and show touring the Zone with a large amount of equipment. Three QL's were required to move it between Garrisons when their show moved around, and on this occasion the rear vehicle that carried their piano and other props had a mechanical failure and pulled off to the side of the road. By the time the convoy found out that the rear vehicle was missing and had notified the local RMP unit they were too late, the vehicle had been stripped and the driver was missing. Sometime later his mutilated body was found in the Sweet Water canal. There were many other incidents in which the Corps was involved, but despite this type of harassment, fuel, food and ammunition was delivered and troops were moved, these drivers did their jobs in the best traditions of the Royal Army Service Corps.

Aye, Jock Marrs

**Canal Zone Casualties**

EGYPT/SUEZ CANAL ZONE, POST WWll DEAD (EMERGENCY 1951-1954)`WGC FACTS.

Analysis of persons interred during the above period in the following War Graves Commission Maintained Cemeteries in Egypt.

CAIRO -NEW BRITISH PROTESTANT CEMETERY

Civilians

15

Civilians -Service Dependents

33

Royal Navy

1

TOTAL

49

FAYID WAR CEMETERY

Click here to view a picture of Fayid War Cemetery

Civilians

28

Civilians-Service Dependents

15

British Army

129

Royal Air Force

48

Royal Navy

3

Mauitian/Seychelles Troops

19

East African Kenya Uganda Troops

23

Civil Security (Blue Caps)

1

Civil Labour

1

Merchant Navy

3

TOTAL

270

MOASCAR WAR CEMETERY

Civilians

14

Civilians-Service Dependents

15

British Army

136

Royal Air Force

16

Royal Navy

3

Mauritian/Seychelles Troops

7

East African/Ugandan Troops

10

Merchant Navy

1

Rhodesian Rifles

1

TOTAL

203

GRAND TOTAL

520

These Statistics drawn from the WAR GRAVES COMMISSION LIST, comparing the MOD list name for name against this list there is a deficit of 41 graves on the WGC list. These graves relate to deaths which occurred before the hostilities began in 1951.

Enquiries reveal that there were other Military graves in the Suez Canal Zone, at the Suez Old Military Hospital Cemetery Circa WW1 and WW11. There is also a further Cemetery at Tel El Kebir. The WGC are fairly certain that this does not contain any dead from the relative period. But will contact if the contrary is confirmed.

There is a vast War Cemetery at Heliopolis of which the aforesaid British New Protestant Cemetery is part. This Cemetery is believed to have over 1000 graves dating back to 1800's Therefore to show the total of MILITARY GRAVES for the period in question, with the exception of those bodies repatriated to the UK and Other

Commonwealth Countries the list must be set out as under.

British Army

265

RAF

64

Royal Navy

5

Mauritian/Seychelles Troops

26

East African

33

Rhodesian Rifles

1

TOTAL

394

Civilian Security Police (Blue Cap Cypriot)

1

Civilian Labour (Cypriot)

1

Civilians

57

Civilians Service dependents

63

Merchant Navy

4

TOTAL

126

GRAND TOTAL

520

These figures are in stark contrast to the figure of 54 quoted from official sources to the press. These figures were forwarded to this website by the "EGYPT 1951-1954 AWARD ALLIANCE "

It should be noted this total does not include those killed an the crash of a "York" aircraft which crashed in Malta when flying to the UK with servicemen who had just completed their term of Service in the Suez Canal Zone. They are buried at Intafa in Malta. It is thought that from inquiries that 48 may have perished in the crash. In all probability the list supplied by theWar Graves Commission does not include 3 British Army Soldiers (Deserters) caught and hanged for the murder of an Egyptian civilian.

All British Units suffered Casualties

When an indepth study is made of the Total "interred " in Military Cemeteries in Egypt (as supplied by the "Award Alliance" Group during the "Emergency") in 1951-1954 it can be seen just how dangerous a place the Canal Zone was during that time- frame, especially for British civilain and dependents of British Servicemen (a total of 120 of which died) and for unarmed British Servicemen of all ranks "out of camp." It was also especaially dangerous for officers of all ranks,(of all units) especially with a reward of 100 Pounds Egyptian on their heads (Cap badges were delivered as proof) In those days that sum was equivalent to 1 1/2 years wages for the average Private soldier. The British Authorities finally evacuated dependents of servicemen, back to the UK and to Cyprus (which was safe at that time and for at least 3 more years). A troopship with dependents on board was turned around a Port Said on arrival from the UK. Servicemen were allowed to go on board for a short period of time to be with their families, before it sailed with those families back home. A first in the annals of the British Armed Forces.

In a previous chapter, thanks again to the "Award Alliance Group", for Newspapers Articles of the day, this web-site recorded some of the conditions that faced these women and Children before their Mass-evacuation to the UK and Cyprus during the "Emergency".

Cyril Blackburn, after months of research at a number of Archives and Records Offices, including the MoD Personnel Services in Wiltshire, published a list which recorded the the Names of those who died or were killed during the Emergency, Only the names of the Army and and Royal Marines, casualties, are on this list, although the RAF/RAF Regt total casualties are mentioned, so working on the list supplied from both sources (Blackburn/War-Graves Comm) we will start from the following totals:

Royal Navy

5

RAF and RAF Regiment

64

British Army

265

Total

394

killed in air crash

48

Grand Total Servicemen

442

The Army Unit Casualties in descending order are as follows:

Royal Army Service Corp

40

Royal Artillery

31

Royal Engineers

30

Royal Signals

25

REME

20

ROAC

12

The Parachute Regiment

12

ACC

8

RAMC

7

Grenadier Guards

7

Coldstream Guards

7

Lancashire Fusiliers

7

Royal Lincolnshire Regiment

4

Cheshire Regiment

4

Berkshire Regiment

4

Highland Light Infantry

4

East Surreys

4

RMP

3

Beds and Herts

3

Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers

3

Royal Dragoons

2

MPSC

2

Royal Sussex Regiment

2

Int Corps

1

The Royals

1

Scots Guards

1

KOYL

1

RAPC

1

APTC

1

Royal Marine

1

South Lancashire Regiment

1

11 Hussars

1

RNF

1

5 IDG

1

QARANC

1

and Sister Anthony

A closer look at these astounding figures leads to the following conclusions. The Egyptians went after the so-called "Soft" Targets in the following order.

1) Civilians/Married families (Wives, children etc)

2) Servicemen, un-armed and "Out of Camp".

3) Slow Army Lorries (and this accounts for the large number of casualties amongst Drivers).

4) Signals and Engineers, who were on repair duties to Telephone Lines, Power lines, Water Pipelines and those who manned Power plants, filtration Units, Petrol Stations. and operating the Railway Trains and Signals.

5) Cooks and Clerks, on "Escort" duty to convoys. RMP on Police patrol and in their dealings with the ever trecherous Egyptian police.

6)The number of casualties sufferd by the Infantry, Para, Commando, and Armoured Units, came about when they were called in on ambushes of convoys, Police shootings, and terrorist attacks, and when out on the very dangerous "Search and Destroy" raids into villages looking for Terrorists, who were known to be in that area.

A number of Jeeps, Land Rovers and Lorries were Forced off the road by oncoming vehicles, and Despatch Riders, had to watch out for wires suddenly being stretched across the road, at head-height, again responsible for many deaths and injuries.

From the Burial dates shown the vast majority of dearths occurred in ( about 2/3 of the Total)1953, and 1954, some time after the first unsuccessful Medal review. The 48 Service personnel killed in the crash of a "York" Aircraft in Malta,(although this crash occurred in early 1955) and were all returning to the UK after completion of their Service (with the exception of the Crew), All had been in the Canal Zone since 1953 or earlier. Most were NCO's.

Jock Marrs and the Award Alliance Group

-------------------------------------------------------------------

**Locked Up**

An account of being in a military prison

A fellow Suez Veteran has been in touch with us and asked if we would like to include on the Website a story of his time spent in No.50 Military Corrective Establishment at Moascar for falling asleep whilst on guard, and said that he would understand if we refused. He has received his medal, but has always felt ashamed of his time in a Military Prison and this fact put a damper on his joy at receiving his medal.

We know it happened about 50 years ago but he served his time then and we doubt very much if our readers or any Canal Zone Veteran would ever hold this error against him. Therefore we willingly agreed to include his story. We are of the opinion there were many servicemen who fell asleep when on guard duty and were very lucky not to get caught. However he is in good company, our Suez Veteran friend and world famous jazz musician and clarinettist Acker Bilk also spent time in an Army nick for that same reason, he has openly told of this event without detriment to himself.

We firmly believe that all of us must ask the question, why would any young, fit, eighteen year old soldier fall asleep on guard duty when he knew the consequences of such an action as read to each guard by the Guard Commander or Orderly Sgt before going on patrol? Perhaps it could be put down to a combination of things, fatigue brought on by working in the extreme heat all day, food which though filling, very often lacked the nourishment required, and at the same time was often prepared in almost unhygienic conditions resulting in bouts of Dysentery, a nasty affliction from which many of us suffered.

Also the sheer boredom of life in the camps, and for these young men who were nearing sexual maturity, the lack of female company. Finally the discipline, which in some cases could be extreme.

We thank Jim Rushby very much for letting us have his story to include in the History and Recollections section of the website. Jim says if he hadn't at last decided to make known this niggling episode of his service, it would still be troubling him and be rattling around in his head, which it has been doing so for the past 50 years. Jim, hopefully telling this story in the open will get the monkey off your back, we wish you all the very best and ask that you wear your medal with pride; you earned it just like the rest of us.

God Bless you Jim, and your family.

Jock Marrs and Richard Woolley.

March 2005.

Locked Up

A Prisoners Story, by Jim Rushby.

I was called up for National Service in the RASC in September 1953 and went through the usual routine of induction, basic training and trade training before being posted out to Egypt in April of 1954. In common with I think, most National Servicemen, none of the training that I had been given prepared you for what was to come, as an instance, on the very odd occasion that you did a guard in the UK or a fire piquet as it was then called, it consisted of a wander around the camp along with another squaddie armed with a pickaxe handle, here in the Canal Zone you were straight into Active Service with no training or time to get acclimatized and within days of arriving out there you would be taking part in guard duties armed with a loaded sten gun of unknown age or origin, a weapon which I personally had never seen or used before, in fact I had been out there for many months before I was given chance to fire one on the camp ranges, prior to this I had carried out many duties while carrying the weapon, thank God I never had reason to use it. None of this I hasten to add, is an excuse for the events that follow.

On arrival at Fayid having flown there from Stansted in a York aircraft, I was put into Fayid Transit camp for a couple of days before being transported on to 33 SRD at El Kirsh which was the main food storage depot for the Middle East. The depot itself consisted of 29 very large storage sheds each about the size of an aircraft hanger with road and rail services to each one, and I was given a job as a storekeeper in one of the sheds which was run by a civilian. The camp routine consisted of going to work in the depot each morning until lunchtime, then a quick trip to the cookhouse for lunch, back to the billet for a short siesta, then get your kit ironed up and your boots, brasses etc bulled up ready to go on guard mounting about 5 or 5.30pm, a trip to the Armoury to draw your weapon for the night and by 6pm you were in the guardroom and on duty until 6am the next morning. Once you had completed your duty and the guard had been dismissed and you had handed your weapon back in, it was back to your billet for a wash and shave, change into your working gear then down the cookhouse for breakfast and then back on the lorry for the trip back into the depot to start your day job. In theory you then had two nights off duty before you were back on the guard roster, this went on week in week out, with the occasional 24 hour weekend guard duty thrown in for good value.

One night having been placed on guard yet again, the Guard Commander, who I think was a full Corporal, gave me the 6pm till 8pm stag on prowler around the inside of the perimeter wire which meant that my other stag was from midnight to 2am which I always found to be the hardest one as having got back to the guardroom from the first stag it was almost impossible to get any rest before the start of your next one. The rest area consisted of a large tent at the back of the guardroom with about six old iron beds with no mattress, just the springs, and you were supposed to lay on them and sleep while still dressed in all your kit in case of emergency. If you were lucky enough to get any sleep you only just seemed to have shut your eyes before they were rousing you to start again. Come midnight, off I went again with my trusty Sten slung on my shoulder and after wandering along in total darkness along the empty wire for about an hour, being young and stupid I decided just to have a quiet sit down for ten minutes which proved to be a bad mistake, as without meaning to, I fell asleep. I was found asleep by one of the duty NCOs who placed me under arrest and having replaced me with another guard, I was marched off to the guardroom and locked up for the night. Next day I was put up in front of the CO charged with 'Sleeping on guard while on Active Service' and was remanded for trial by Court Martial.

My Court Martial took place at Moascar Garrison, after all this time I cannot recall how many Officers took part in it but the room seemed to be full of them, I seem to think there were three or four acting as judges, another one who was the prosecuting Officer, plus a NS Officer who was supposed to be defending me. I had no other choice but to plead Guilty as charged, there being no excuse for what I had done, but there I stood all of 18 years old being threatened that the end of my world was nigh. I was told that during the war men were shot for this offence, that the last man they sentenced got 25 years and it gradually got down to about 7 years at which time I was marched out while they considered the sentence. After a short time I was marched back into the room and was very relieved to be sentenced to 56 days in 50 MCE Moascar, I was then transported back to El Kirsh and kept in the cells there for a few days while my sentence was confirmed. The cells at El Kirsh were part of the guardroom and were only big enough for about two prisoners. At the time that I was a guest, there was about eight of us in there which meant most of us sleeping in the corridor, we were very fortunate to have an old wind-up gramophone but only had a couple of records, I think one was Guy Mitchell singing "Sippin Soda" and " Cloud Lucky Seven" the other one was Frank Sinatra singing "I've got the world on a string", trouble was our one and only needle was on its last legs, but luckily one of the lads discovered a big thorn bush just outside the guardroom and the thorns worked really well as replacements. All too soon my days of peace came to an end and off I went in the back of the duty truck accompanied by a couple of Regimental Police NCOs whose job it was to deliver me safely to 50 MCE to serve my sentence.

The truck pulled up outside the gates and once I had collected all my FSMO together, the two NCOs accompanied me through the main gate of 50 MCE and for all of us that was the end of piece and quiet. As soon as the first boot crossed the portals the shouting and screaming began and both the NCOs and myself were told to double on the spot and then double over to this large tent where, to the continued screams and shouts, I had to check all of my kit while still doubling on the spot. It was only after all the necessary paper work had been signed were the poor old NCOs allowed to depart, still at the double until they cleared the main gate. Now being in a state of sheer terror at what lay before me I and several other new guests who had also just arrived were doubled over towards the very large imposing gates set in a high stone wall which led into the main part of the camp, it looked almost like the gates to one of the old forts in a Beau Geste film, once inside you could see a very large area of tents and buildings which were surrounded by a very high fence complete with barbed wire and lights. The prisoners lived in blocks of four-man tents with each block being surrounded by high chain link fencing, between two of the blocks was a large area of sand on which stood rows of trestle tables and wooden benches, and being as it was now about 2pm and none of us new boys had had any lunch, we were told to put our kit down and sit at a couple of the tables. We were then each served with a mug of tea, a bowl of porridge with salt in it and a big hunk of bread with a dab of margarine and a small piece of cheese. Stood at the wire of the compounds on both sides of us were lots of the prisoners who all looked half starved and a couple of us managed to pass our bread over to them, next day of course we were stood there with them!

Luckily we were no longer having to double everywhere and the shouting had also eased off. Having eaten we were then led to one of the tented compounds by one of the S/Sgts and told to go find a bed in one of them. This is where my luck really came in as I was approached by two big lads who I later discovered were Irish Guardsmen, who said they had a spare bed in their tent which I could have, those old boys were the salt of the earth, they helped me with my kit, they even cut up pieces of cardboard and boxed up everything that I had to lay out on my bed for inspection every day, they also taught me everything that I needed to know to survive in there, believe me they were true Gents and I owed a lot to them.

Reveille was at 6am and you turned out with your aluminium bowl which you had been provided with, and queued at one of the standpipes to get water to carry out your ablutions, you also queued if needed to use the toilets which if memory serves me right, were completely open air and consisted of a row of poles to sit on with just an open trench behind them. Tents had to be tidied up, beds made and kit laid out for inspection by the Staff who were always called "Screws" (but not to their faces,) the sand around the tent had to be raked and even the aluminium bowl that you had just used for washing had to be bulled with Brasso and sand until it gleamed.

After all these years I cannot remember the whole routine, but I rather think breakfast was at 8am, I know that you all stood by your beds and when the first whistle was blown you had to run out and form up outside your tent, at the next whistle you all came to attention, the next one you all turned to your left and the final one you marched out and took your place at the tables. Breakfast and lunch were similar meals, both of them started with a bowl of salt porridge which after a few days tasted as good as having sugar on it, the fact that you were starving probably also helped with the taste, this was followed by a hunk of bread with a dab of marg and a blob of jam and of course, a good old mug of tea. Lunch only differed in as much as that instead of a blob of jam you got a small piece of cheese with your hunk of bread, the evening meal was always some kind of stew with rice, the meals never varied and stayed the same all the time that I was in there. I don't know how many of you remember the Orderly Officer coming at meal times on camp and asking if there was any complaints regarding the food, I know they used to do it occasionally at El Kirsh, well one of my lasting memories of meal times at 50 MCE was when this Officer did his rounds of the tables while we were having lunch and asking, "Are there any complaints?" and some fool at one of the other tables saying, "Yes Sir, this porridge is a bit lumpy", the poor devil was immediately accused of trying to start a riot and was carted off by two of the Screws and put into one of the sweat boxes that stood out in the open and consisted of a small corrugated iron shed with a tin roof and just a door and no window. I don't know how long the poor bloke was shut in there but in that heat you wouldn't need to be in it very long before it did you a mischief.

During the day we were kept occupied with various lectures, weapon training, the assault course, which lay out the back of the camp, and various other pastimes and general fatigues. One of their favourites was to march us all out into the desert behind the camp making sure that we all took our bowl or a galvanized bucket with us, they then formed us into a great big line and had a gang of blokes digging a big hole at one end and filling the buckets and bowls which then had to be passed along the line to be emptied at the other end at which time along came the empties going the other way, once the heap was big enough they then reversed it and had blokes loading the sand from the heap back in the bowls etc. and we passed it back along the line to refill the hole. All this of course with the sun blazing down on you, great fun.

One of my favourite stories from in there concerns those poor devils who loved a smoke, they were limited to two cigarettes a day one in the morning and one in the afternoon, at each time they were made to sit in two lines facing each other, then one of the screws went along the lines handing out a cigarette to each of them and lighting each one, he then stood there until they had all finished then went along and collected all the cigarette ends. The men became so desperate for a smoke that nothing was sacred, there wasn't a bush in the camp with a leaf on it, they also collected used tea leaves when the screws were not watching, and took leaves out of books to roll their mixtures in. The methods of lighting these cigs was even more ingenious, they would get a piece of cardboard and cut it so that it was about an inch wide, they would then cut a vee in one end so that it had two points on it, on these points they would put a piece of silver paper and then shave a blanket so that they got a ball of fluff which they soaked in Brasso and put between the points, while someone stood "screw up" keeping an eye out for the staff they would then remove the light bulb in the tent which were always on day and night, then push their bit of cardboard into the lamp holder at which time there would be a big flash and hey presto they had their light, and would puff away on their home made cigs, the great bonus of this was that occasionally this trick blew the lighting circuit and we would get a good nights sleep with no lights on. The other method of lighting up was to find someone who wore glasses, borrow them and use them as a magnifying glass which was no problem during the day with the sun right overhead.

One afternoon all of the prisoners were made to form up in ranks out in the open and along came the camp Medical Officer with some of his assistants to give us boosters for our injections, they went along each rank and gave us all one in each arm with what felt like a six inch nail, after they had finished there was a bit of murmuring in the ranks and one of the NCOs shouted out for 'quiet', a voice from somewhere among us shouted B-----ks, and of course all hell broke loose as the staff tried to find the culprit, of course no one was going to own up to it as we all knew the punishment, 'the sweat box', because of this we were all ordered to stand with arms over our heads, boy was that painful, but we all stuck to it and stood out there in the sun for what seemed like a couple of hours before they gave up and let us go.

With most of my sentence served I was called out and told that because of good behaviour while in there I was being given 14 days remission which meant that I would be out in a couple of days. The day before my release I was told to report to the large tent on the outside of the compound to have my kit checked again prior to my release, it was the same scenario that had greeted me on that first day, the doubling on the spot the yelling and screaming but now it didn't bother me anymore, here I was one step from freedom and after the weeks inside I could take it. Next day I was awake bright and early, I think I was washed and tidied before any of the others in the tent had stirred, same old routine as before but today was the day. At the appointed time we all stood by our beds waiting for the first whistle to form up outside, when it came the four of us ran out of our tent and stood in line at which time one of the S/Sgt's came over to me and accused me of being the last one out of our tent and stopped me three days of my remission which absolutely stunned me.

I served my extra three days, did everything I was told and kept my nose clean, again came the day for my release, this time no mistakes as I thought, first one out of the tent everything done by the book, said goodbye to all my mates, came the time for my release, out through the Beau Geste gates freedom in sight, doubled over to the tent to collect my kit, only to be told that I should have gone through the kit check system again the previous day ( not that anyone told me ) and that they were considering stopping some more of my remission, anyway someone up there must have liked me and they relented and let me go. I'll tell you what, you couldn't see my tail for dust, I was doubled out of the main gate straight into the back of the duty truck that had been sent from El Kirsh to pick me up and I was gone. When I arrived at camp I was allowed to go to my billet to put all my kit away and was welcomed back by all my mates who wanted to know all about it, I then had to report to the O.C. and was given a lecture on the error of my ways, in fairness to him though at the end of it he shook my hand and wished me well and then it was back to the old routine of work and the dreaded guard duties. On that first day back, when we went to the canteen at lunchtime I went round the food counter three times, I was absolutely starved, I don't think my mates could believe how much I ate, if nothing else 50 MCE made me the slimmest and fittest that I have ever been in my life.

Life after 50 MCE, well within a couple of months of getting back to camp I was promoted to L/Cpl and put in charge of one of the large sheds in the depot that stored all the food for the East African troops who served alongside us in the zone, a few months after that I applied for a posting to a Port Detachment at Fanara Wharf which I was fortunate enough to get and I finished my time out there.

The sting in the tail from it all was that I had to serve another month on top of my two years to make up for the time I spent in prison, so all the mates that I joined up with were back home in civvy street while I continued to serve Queen and country, despite this I am still very proud to have been there and done it, and even more proud to have a medal to show for it. Finally I would imagine that there will be some people who read this who will think that I got what I deserved, and they will be quite right, the punishment fitted the crime, but also many others who read it will be honest to themselves and think:

"There but for the Grace of God go I"

Jim Rushby. ex: RASC.

© March 2005.

**My Service at RAF Fayid 1953 - 1955.**

by: Alan (Fred) F Merryweather. LAC 4106778

When compiling my family history research into a book some years ago, I thought about George Bernard Shaw's epigram,

"Youth is a wonderful thing; what a crime to waste it on children". My book now includes the words, "I always regret the three years I served in the RAF, wasted because of lack of interest" and as the years roll on I feel the opportunities that I passed up ever more acutely. My story is set down as accurately as I can recall, and as I'm very keen on history and its preservation it has to be warts and all. Overall, it's just a tiny glimpse into the twilight of Empire.

At the London recruiting centre, threatened with the army, I signed on in the RAF for three years starting in August 1952. I square bashed at West Kirby, travelling home midway through the eight-week course on a welcome 48 hour pass. The sight of back-to-back houses in Manchester, where it was raining, was grim, as was the extensive wreckage of the Harrow rail disaster. The treatment meted out by the DIs was severe at times so the best defence against a tough regime was to cluster tightly together in comradeship and unity.

Passing out was followed by training as an Air Wireless Mechanic at RAF Yatesbury, a camp long since returned to farmland. 'Bags of mystery' from the nearby Harris's Sausage Factory at Calne which closed down in 1983, were frequently served in the mess. Then followed a comparatively idyllic few months at Pembroke Dock servicing the equipment of the dozen or so magnificent Sunderlands which floated majestically on Milford Haven, all slowly changing direction at each rise and fall of the tide. Travel home to London by train was achievable even though it was a weary eight-hour journey, but to be posted to the Egyptian Canal Zone was like a one-way ticket to nowhere and a profound shock.

Maybe it was the September of 1953 that we flew from Southend-on-Sea Airport in a Dakota operated by BKS, an airline formed in 1951 by Barnby Keenan and Stevens, later absorbed into British Airways. The crew and attendant wore RAF officers' uniforms, in case of a forced landing in Egypt, we were told. The plane headed for the south of France, near Nice, where the airport was adjacent to the sea. Then on to RAF Luqa on Malta where we stayed the night. It was when strolling in Valletta that evening I first experienced that sweet, sickly smell of olive oil used for cooking mingling with the dust, dryness and heat. Next day, equipped with lunchboxes provided by the Hotel Phoenicia, we took off to fly over the Med to land at RAF El Adem for refuelling. Amid much turbulence, we flew eastwards across North Africa until suddenly the wide green swathe bounding the Nile came into view and we were soon nearing RAF Fayid where we landed. Instructed to get out of the aircraft, we were put onto buses and prevented from getting back into the plane to pick up our hand luggage. I was one of three who were unable to recover our greatcoats and it was to be more than a year before we were re-equipped with them at public expense. On arrival at the transit camp I recall feeling ill looking at some cold lamb on a plate. Was it safe to eat? Flies were everywhere and so, so hot.

RAF Fayid and 216 Squadron. I was sent back to Fayid and after collecting the prescribed signatures against the many places listed on the Arrivals form, became officially on the strength of 216 Squadron, commanded by Squadron Leader Swift. We were billeted in one of the few permanent buildings for Other Ranks throughout the otherwise overwhelmingly tented Canal Zone.

There was the air of disaffection about Two-Sixteen Squadron, (so named as it was originally No. 16 Squadron) and it was known as the Zift - useless, no good. Not too much esprit de corps, plenty of grumbling and sometimes a 'Roll on death; demob's too far away' outlook. Maybe some of this disgruntlement could be accounted for by being On Active Service but not paid the higher rate. Or was it fuelled by a lack of discipline within the Squadron? We walked to work, dressed as we chose, some scruffily. Were we ever lined up for daily registration or inspection? Maybe life was too lax, too informal and perhaps a general smartening up of discipline might have produced a better atmosphere. However, weekly parades on the main square and billet inspections were held every Saturday, I think. Apart from badgering by Flt Lt Trainer to take part in sports activities, there was little organised about our leisure time. He pressed me into basketball the moment I arrived on the squadron and I had to play that afternoon. Something else which didn't make for personal happiness was the arrival of a 'Dear John' letter shortly after I settled in, but I soon got over that.

My job was to check the TR 1154 / 1155 transmitters and receivers, the intercom, direction finders and VHF transmitters. These tricky to tune VHFs were in heavy black boxes which but were later replaced by a much smaller item, easily tuned using a bulb. Indeed, the work I had to do really didn't need my six-months training since anything that didn't work properly was replaced with a similar item from the repair unit. The only serious mistake, I recall, was forgetting to replace the aerial of one of the two VHFs. The other failed when the plane was doing circuits and bumps and had to signal for permission to land by firing its Verey pistol. Nobody inspected the equipment. Family letters which I kept show that this was shortly after arrival and after telling my dad about it, he wrote back very strongly telling me to be more responsible. In those days a father's word was not often ignored.

Work was mornings only in the summer, but shorter working hours in winter plus Monday and Friday afternoons. The rest of the time we were left very much to our own devices. Strangely, no mention is made of the Canal Zone service on the website: http://shop4research.co.uk/history.htm

The atmosphere in the billet was much as you'd expect with around 40 or so young men from all parts of the country thrown together, most wishing to be back home. True there were arguments, rivalries but nothing really serious. North versus South, Scots against the English, a few ruffled red and white rose petals and so on, but one thing united most of them when an argument broke out. They disliked Londoners!

The Squadron operated about 8 Vickers Vallettas, nicknamed 'Pigs', which were used for transport of equipment, and personnel sensibly always in backwards facing seats. Occasionally they were fitted out for paratroop training. The armourer, who also drove the tractor, did this, as the only other servicing task he had was to check the aircraft's Verey pistol. Paratroop operations included painting the floor near the aircraft door with carborundum paste and fitting equipment under the body for dropping canisters.

Airmen of 216 Squadron.

Fly-past of 216 Squadron Vallettas.

Three civilian workers were employed for general labouring, Mahmoud, Chico and Hassan, and another in and around the office block and flight crew rooms. The ever cheerful Hassan who spoke some English, had had some education and always made it clear he was a Palestinian, a cut above the Egyptians. I had no idea then what his nationality meant or why he wasn't living in his own country. Gerry, who sold ice cream from a trolley he pushed around the camp was another Palestinian. Who then realised the significance of their presence in Egypt? Who cared about the poor state of the natives? I was brought up in an age where much of the map of the world was coloured pink and how we acted seemed part of the natural order of things. The political reason for my being there probably never crossed my mind.

The airframe riggers had the most lengthy jobs as their schedule included so many different checks. The engine fitters seemed to have to change ignition harnesses all too frequently, a difficult and dirty task. Two or three very accomplished chippies in civilian life made a spacious crew hut with a small kitchen adjacent out of the packing case of an aircraft wing.

The somewhat flamboyant Flt Lt Newton who was reputed to have flown a Valetta upside down, reckoned that the planes would fly faster if the bodywork were polished. We were set to work using tins of polish drawn from Stores, but they were so old that the suspended cleaning paste had set rock hard, so we poured most of the superfluous fluid away on the sand. Aviation spirit was sometimes used to dry-clean clothes, drawn from the aircraft into a drum. It was a welcome job in summer so as to be able to dip arms in as far as they would go and rapidly cool down afterwards. Not just a very stupid thing to do as the fuel had a high lead content, but doubtless a punishable offence.

On the 18th February 1956 a York aircraft, chartered by the Royal Air Force to take back to Britain servicemen who had completed their tour of duty in the Canal Zone, landed in Malta to re-fuel. Soon after take-off, smoke was seen coming from one of the engines and from a height of 1,000 feet it went into a dive and crashed near Zurrieg, exploding on impact. There were no survivors. On board were two of our colleagues, LAC D Brown from Dundee, and LAC M M J (Taff) Nurse from South Wales.

Taff was a big-boned, friendly hulk of a rugby player. He'd managed to bend the side of his iron bedstead after plonking down on it too hard one day.

Weather. I recall the hot Khamsin blowing in sand and irritating fleas from the Sahara, but not that it was ever very severe or long-lasting and I grew used to summer's heat and still enjoy really hot weather. Part of the secret of enduring hot nights was not to fidget. It was usually too hot underneath mosquito nets so they were seldom used. Occasionally distant lightning could be seen from the direction of the Med, and late one evening many of us clambered onto the billet roof to get a better view of a spectacular storm. The only time in the twenty months that I was there that it rained; there was a rush outdoors to stand in it.

Nasties. There are plenty of unpleasant memories of bed bugs which almost always bit me on the forearms. They could be found in the corners of the bed and bedding and a few drops of Dettol in the bed joints would easily deal with them there, or put them in bright sunlight and they'd swiftly die. Although one of the other squadron billets was fumigated, it was not understood where they came from. Towards the end of my tour I took the risk of prising off the bottom framework of the window nearest to my bed and underneath was a disgusting nursery-cum-graveyard, hundreds of bugs with their ghastly odour. All that had been needed was for the gap beneath the frame to have been sealed. At the end of my tour, when my personal belongings went back in the customary box we were allowed to send free of charge, (made by Neil Thorley now deceased, with my initials beautifully painted by a Scottish driver or clerk on the squadron), I was scared that bug eggs would be carried back home. Fortunately this didn't happen.

A vehicle known as the honey bus was used to empty the latrine buckets, there being no sewage system. The strange thing about it was that although its offensive odour was clearly detected from afar, if standing nearby it so overpowered the senses that it didn't seem to smell at all.

If going for a shower at night it was advisable to take a shoe to kill cockroaches which could be up to three inches long. One day I was standing near Mahmoud, when the only locust I'd ever seen flew past. He grabbed it, tore off its wings and ate it!

Guard and Other Duties. Night guard came round about once every two weeks. In summertime it was a pleasure to be by the perimeter fence and wonder at the vast canopy of unfamiliar stars on welcome cool and moonless nights. In winter the cold nights and brisk wind were feared as although it never froze or snowed, the wind chill factor meant that it was extremely cold. We donned pyjamas and KD underneath working blue and with a greatcoat on top were not very agile but even those layers didn't keep out the cold. The African guards, whose only conversation was "Jambo" had huts to stand in and if on duty at a remote part of the airfield, it was possible to get behind the one to find some shelter. My very first guard duty was a very worrying experience. I saw a York on the runway, sparks shooting out of the exhausts as it revved up prior to take-off, the exhausts glowing white hot in the dark night and I was concerned that the plane might catch fire. Yet something told me that it was not in danger, so I backed away from firing my Verey pistol and so avoided being made to look foolish.

The five squadrons at Fayid had a disproportionate number of NCOs--Sergeant Pilots--and, as they controlled the guard rosters, the chances were quite high of one being in charge at the same time as a guard duty came round. It was always necessary to have a word with the Sergeant Pilot so that our names could be put down for the mobile patrol wagon. If lucky to get this plum duty, the truck would draw up at our billet and we would go inside, returning with our mattresses. That meant that most of the night was spent sleeping whilst the driver stayed awake, repose being disturbed only when the vehicle made a periodic tour of the airfield.

Only once did I guard a part of the perimeter fence near the officer's quarters. Between two guarded areas, there was a searchlight powered by an enormous static diesel engine. It was the duty of guards to start the beast and flash the searchlight around once every two hours. Fortunately, my fellow guard was an engine mechanic so he knew how to get it going. The handle could not be turned without releasing some of the pressure in the piston chambers and to do this the long rod with a series of plugs lying alongside the engine, had to be lifted until the motor fired into life. The bar was then slammed down to seal the chambers. After doing as required, we lit up cigarettes despite that it was forbidden to smoke on duty and that the Officer of the Guard was a known martinet. Suddenly, out of the darkness a figure appeared.

It was he.

After the usual identification exchanges we were accused of smoking. We denied it. After the second time he repeated his accusation, my experienced colleague hit the diesel's exhaust with his rifle butt very hard and a shower of sparks flew out. I can still hear his words. "That's what you saw, Sir." he said, and the officer turned on his heel and went away without saying a word. I wonder if this became one of the stories he told in his mess?

Around June 1955, when a York arrived from the atomic testing station at Woomera in Australia, I was ordered with two others to guard the aircraft for 24 hours. This was to be the most wearying day of my life. Naturally I kept under the shadow of the wings and fuselage to avoid the sun, but it was only on a subsequent two-hour duty that I was told to keep at wing-tip's distance from the plane as it was carrying radioactive samples. Nevertheless, I seem to have suffered no ill-effects.

Once I was ordered to be a guard on the bus which carried children to school. This involved drawing a Sten gun from the Armoury with a clip of live bullets. The journey was only a few miles, but being out on the road in any vehicle at any time was always a time of anxiety in case of attack.

Since there was at least one successful attempt to break into the camp and steal from the NAAFI, (or so it was said), and there were active Fedayeen in the Zone, there was good cause to be alert when doing guard duty. But the only time I was really worried was when put on duty at the small wireless station, situated about a quarter of a mile from the main camp. It was a lonely vigil and I clearly recall being able to see distant images of Genevieve on the screen of the open-air cinema at the main camp.

Twice I did the Air Traffic Control guard duty, a very boring place to be on the very small area at the top of the tower. The second time I came very close to catastrophe as I must have dozed off leaning against the pillar of the tower. The sound of footsteps roused me as an officer ran up the ladder and accused me of being asleep. A guard had fired a Verey pistol and I'd not hurried down to report it. By a miracle, the officer was from 216 Squadron, a National Serviceman and he gave me a good talking to, including the then unknown fact that, annually, the Valletta manufacturer awarded the Vickers Trophy to the best squadron flying their planes. Success was based on performance in many areas, probably including flying hours and certainly disciplinary proceedings had an adverse effect, especially Courts Martial. So, for that reason he overlooked my lapse.

I was only once put on Fire Piquet. This duty lasted for a week and seemed to consist mainly of sitting around waiting for something to happen. It did, but I was too slow to get on the fire tender so had to run to the airfield where a petrol-electric set used to power a huge vacuum cleaner was on fire near to an aircraft. Someone thought that the chromium plated exhaust, multi-hued due to the high temperature, needed cleaning and he'd applied a fuel-soaked rag to it.

A hazy memory is of a night exercise and maybe of arms being drawn from the Armoury. It was a couple of hours of chaos. Nobody seemed to have a clear idea of where we were supposed to assemble or what to do.

Only once was I instructed to open up the Squadron buildings for early flying and this needed an early call. It was booked and a white towel was duly put across the bottom of my bed. Unfortunately, the early caller was late, but I signed his book all the same. On arrival, breathless at the squadron buildings, Sqdn. Ldr. Swift was there, furious and he went for me. There was no excuse for having kept him waiting.

Getting a seat on a plane doing circuits and bumps was a fine way of cooling down during the long hot summer days, but twice I went up as an observer looking for the wreckage of a Valletta which crashed on the 2 April 1954, perhaps on its way to or from Habbaniya. This place, rarely heard of nowadays was the main RAF base in Iraq. We flew over the rugged mountainous terrain of the Sinai and other deserts with no signs of life whatsoever. The second time, I was privileged to be in the second pilot's seat, but after flying across the Canal, Flt Lt Keddie believed he could smell aviation spirit so he headed back to base. Unfortunately, my place was then taken by an officer. POR's, (Personnel Occurrence Reports) noticed the number of sorties flown looking for the lost Valletta and it was found in a week or so, as were one or maybe two other untraced planes. The bodies of the crew, Flt Lt K W Brimley, Flg Off B Sherburn and Sgt T O Powell lie in Fayid cemetery, a beautifully maintained place, according to accounts elsewhere on this site.

Advancement. I wasted my opportunities. Destined for a career in the insurance industry the RAF would have paid for tuition and all fees for the insurance exams I later had to take; but I foolishly preferred to laze around. Considering that my job gave me no practical experience of radio it was probably unwise to apply for promotion to Senior Aircraftman (SAC). Later, having doubts about my ability to even pass a test for my current LAC rank, I went to the Trading Standards Testing Section (TSTS) and told the Sergeant that I wished to withdraw. From the top pocket of his jacket he produced pad of forms F.252, the dreaded charge sheets and said that if I didn't agree to take the exam he'd fill one in. So I meekly went away.

Mischief. There was lot of drinking on the camp. Tennants Lager was the usual brew and of course almost everybody smoked. Cigarettes and beer were very cheap. I can't recall there ever being any fights, except that on one occasion, somebody in drink broke off the neck of a beer bottle and became threatening. An occasional folly was to pour beer inside the piano to 'give it a drink'. Frequent targets of too much alcohol were fire extinguishers. I recall several of us once set off a cream-coloured 40-gallon foam extinguisher and were alarmed at the amount that came out of it. But its contents went over the sand and disappeared. Usually jealously guarded by its owners, there was an electric toaster in the billet. This was made from a coil of Eureka high resistance wire fitted into a wooden frame. Bread was placed directly on top of the wire and after few slices had been toasted, the device would catch fire and had to be disconnected from the mains, then dropped into a bucket of water to cool down. Occasionally I would back-tune a TRll55 radio to the same frequency as Radio Moscow and tap out garbage on the Morse code key so as to interfere with their transmissions. For its time, a most extraordinary POR was posted on the notice board. This was that an airman was charged with the offence of buggery with a Sudanese. Mahmoud, our native, once said he was willing to be queeniewallahed by anyone willing to pay.

Rest and Relaxation. Having since met people from other camps who were fortunate to be motivated to take part in things such as forming concert parties, doing theatricals and so on, how I now wish I'd made more effort and better use of my time. Distant Mount Shubra was visited by a few after getting permission to cross the main runway, but I never went. One privilege was to be able to get on a plane to Aden, the objective being to buy duty-free goods there. This meant taking orders from anybody who wanted things like cameras, spirits and clothing, all transactions being paid for in British Postal Orders. On arrival I was stunned not so much by the heat as the humidity. A brass cap badge went almost green in a day. Most of the day was spent there buying. When the shopkeeper saw how much money I had, he started to put the shutters up - with me inside, but I protested and so he took them down again. Everything on the shopping list was supplied and, if he didn't have it, he sent a boy away to get it.

Regrettably I turned down the opportunity of a week's holiday in Cyprus, but I was once given a seat on a plane to RAF Nicosia, coming back with a few bottles of Commandaria. There were other much rarer trips, a training flight to Blighty and back in three or four of days or so, one stopping-off point being Istres in France. Aberdare in Kenya was another occasional destination for the Vallettas.

One day we listened on an aircraft radio as an American Globemaster prepared to land on the longest runway in the Canal Zone. Generally speaking, we were scornful of the Gobs (Gobshites) as they were called. The pilot looking where to land, jokingly said that he could see the panhandle, "But where's the runway?" The plane parked at some distance from the squadrons and the men inside were driven away in buses to the Officers' Mess. These were among the first soldiers en route for Vietnam.

There was a Gramophone Society on the base and through it I managed to track down a piano and some music in a locked hut and tried to improve my playing. In the days when LPs were nearly £2 each, I ordered four which were slightly cheaper as they were duty-free and I managed to hear all of them. Unfortunately on its being sent back home, Customs opened the package and damaged the delicate surfaces of the discs.

Although I didn't go to the entertainment put on by a troupe from Blighty, it was said that the popular singer Donald Peers was infuriated by people in the audience shouting "Quack, quack". So he stopped his performance and said that if people didn't want to hear him sing, he'd go off stage. His hit song was 'By a Babbling Brook.'

Near the Olympia Club was the place to go to for a swim. It was on the banks of the Great Bitter Lake, part of the Suez Canal and there it had a rectangular barrier made from old wooden barges forming a very large swimming pool. It was forbidden to swim without plimsolls as there was a shellfish with a very sharp spine which could produce a poisonous wound, or so it was said. The very first time I went there I was obviously very white (a moon-man) and was accosted by an Egyptian with a monkey on a lead wearing a red Fez. The animal had been taught to get its hand into pockets to steal money. It was another Arab who engaged me in some kind of game with coins, and being raw to the wiles of the natives, I lost money to him. I quickly learned of the tenacity of the natives to do business and how necessary it was to avoid them unless there was something you wished to buy. Offering a ridiculously low price was the best way to be rid of them as anything realistic might signal a wish to trade.

I had a suit made by a tailor in Fayid village but it wasn't a total success as the trousers were a little short and the material poor, but for the occasional evening at the Olympia Club something different from service dress was needed. I recall going to two evening events there. There was a lot of beer but little fraternising between officers and men. The village had a good SPCK(?) bookshop. I bought a Shorter Oxford English Dictionary there and it was only a couple of years ago that it was replaced by a more modern one. One afternoon a slender elderly-looking man dressed in Edwardian-style clothes was pointed out and I was told it was 'Old Bill', one of the announcers on the Canal Zone Radio. His well-spoken voice was frequently heard, and he loved to slowly savour the words 'Johann Sebastian Bach', his favourite composer. (Who was Old Bill and what became of him?) An abiding and pleasant memory of the radio service is of the music played at the close of broadcasting every day. It was a military band playing Evening Hymn and Last Post, the hymn tune Now the Day is Over skilfully intertwined with The Last Post. I've never heard it since.

Changes Accompanying Peace. After the 1955 treaty was signed with the Egyptian government, the security situation calmed down dramatically and conditions became even more relaxed. Chairs, armchairs, even an old settee and a broken-down aircraft seat appeared around some parts of the inside of the perimeter fence so guards were able to take life more easily during each two-hour stint. The treaty also meant we were soon supplied with fresh vegetables and pristine currency. The state of the previous Egyptian currency notes was terrible - filthy and barely recognisable. For smaller denominations of piastres, (known as ackers), as they were in short supply the NAAFI produced red and green plastic tokens.

Another benefit of easier relations with the Egyptians was that a coach tour to Cairo was arranged. This was to be one of the most memorable days of my life as it was such a revelation. Firstly we were taken to the Sultan Hassan Mosque and afterwards to the museum. Tutenkhamun's treasure was an unforgettable sight; there was so much of it. The inner sarcophagus and the three three-sided coverings of the coffin, all covered in beaten gold were something I've never forgotten. Afterwards, a very quick walk through The Garden of Allah where gaudily-coloured, highly-scented bottles of perfume were sold. Finally to Gizah to see the Pyramids and Sphinx. The latter was a disappointment as I knew there was a temple between its paws but had wrongly assumed that 'temple' implied massiveness. Standing by the Great Pyramid, we were invited to pay to see 'the boy,' an old man, run to the top of the pyramid in a given number of minutes which seemed totally inadequate to reach the summit and get down again. A deal was struck with the climber's canny manager and 'the boy' fulfilled his part and was duly paid.

One day a rather ancient-looking plane of the Egyptian air force landed. It was a very strange feeling saluting their officers, our erstwhile enemies.

The AOC's Inspection, early 1955. The Squadron buildings and equipment had to be smartened up and plenty of light blue paint was on hand, some of which was poured onto the sand and covered up. But I missed the Parade as I woke up feeling ill and reported sick. MO's are particularly vigilant over malingerers at such a time, but tonsillitis was diagnosed so I was put into hospital for a week.

The Boycott of the Airmen's Mess in 1955. Being almost omnivorous and not finicky, I didn't find the food all that bad, but there were frequent complaints about it. True, scrambled egg was more like flavourless blancmange, and rubbery mashed potato made from Pom was nowhere near as acceptable as powdered potato is today. Discontent gave birth to action. Word spread that there was to be a boycott of the Airmen's Mess and someone painted in very large letters on the outside wall of the open-air cinema 'BOYCOTT THE SHITHOUSE ON ...DAY'. The action was 100% solid, save for a detachment of about a dozen soldiers who were marched to and from meals. The only other places to get food were at the NAAFI and YMCA which were packed out. The boycott lasted perhaps only a couple of days, but a strange event may have contributed to its collapse. I was at the open-air cinema to see the film Out of the Clouds, a tale woven around Heathrow airport and in one scene a young Jewess was pleading with an immigration officer to be let into England. She said, "We were cold, we were hungry. Do you know what it's like to be hungry?" At this, the audience, who by now were certainly very hungry reacted with an outburst of shouting, laughing and jeering. Shortly afterwards, the names of three or four airmen were read out over the Tannoy instructing them to report to the guardroom. It was commonly believed that they were the ringleaders. The boycott collapsed but the food was much better.

Departure. Demobilisation followed quickly. This was from Longlevens in Gloucestershire where I opted for £100 in lieu of a complete set of clothes. Then the train journey back home to London and the struggle to adjust to civvy street; a free man again. Well, not quite as I was on the paid Reserve for the next two years but among the first things I did on arriving home was to throw away my uniform and other kit. Looking back at these recollections after becoming more responsible - career, marriage, family, some things now seem regrettable. But they can't be changed, simply recorded.

In Wordsworth's words, The child is father to the man, but this man cannot reject his own child; it's a part of me. But things would be so very different were I to be given the same opportunity again.

© Alan F Merryweather

Cirencester, Glos, March 2006.

Thank you Alan for this contribution added to the 'History and Recollections' section of the Website, June 2006.

R Woolley