

National Service

Conscription was called national service in 1948 and was compulsory for young men on reaching the age of 18. My 18th birthday was approaching fast and I was not really looking forward to joining one of the services. One Dinton man who had just completed his service time gave me some very good advice and that was to volunteer and not wait to be called up. The second piece of advice was to ask to serve for three years instead of the required two and this meant that there would be one month's terminal leave making a total time of two years and eleven months. The pay and annual leave were considerably improved and I would be able to specify that I wanted to serve in the Royal Air Force so this advice seemed to make good sense for me.

After interviews and a medical in High Wycombe and Reading it was decided that I should become an Air Wireless fitter although I did want to be trained as an accountant! Having now left my civilian job I then duly reported to RAF Cardington near Bedford (Once the home of the Airship R101), in early May 1953. The first few days were fine, being issued with a uniform and full kit and of course the inevitable close haircut. This act brought tears to the eyes of some of the new recruits. Our civilian clothes were folded and packed into a small suitcase and returned to our homes. Soon we were to swear allegiance to the crown and receive the Queen's shilling. After this the mood changed for the worse, it all turned extremely nasty! The NCOs started shouting and swearing at us from morn till night and we were soon transferred by rail to our training camp near Liverpool.

The drill instructors now had about six weeks to turn us into fully trained and fighting fit servicemen which they certainly did! We were taught to march, stand still, salute and with physical training each day we quickly became like automatons, obeying each order without question. Discipline was very high and so was the punishment for even minor infringements. Training continued each day together with the shouting and swearing! We were taught how to handle and use a bayonet, a rifle and a hand grenade. I am pleased to say that I was never called upon to use these newly found skills in anger. Towards the end of the training period I experienced the worst morning of my life. We were taken into a gas chamber wearing gas masks. The doors were then closed and after a few minutes orders were given to remove the mask from our face. To anyone who has not been into a gas chamber I would like to say to them don't go in! The next few seconds without the mask were horrendous. The doors were opened and we quickly got out into the fresh air. It took several minutes to recover and I never want to do that again!



This is the inside of our barrack room at RAF West Kirby near Liverpool. The well polished floors and the folded up blankets and sheets. The broom handles were frequently scrubbed. No-one stepped on the floor with shoes or boots so that the floor was not scratched. This is how the room had to be left every morning. The washrooms were found through the door at the far end of the room.

Before we left the initial training camp we were called upon to the line the route in LLangollen on the occasion of H.M. the Queen's coronation visit to Wales. Arriving by coach in LLangollen at about 9am. we marched into our positions and stood there until about 5pm. Our only sustenance during the long day was an occasional barley sugar. Clearly we were now very fit. The following day with training over we left the camp for our first leave. We were to be posted to different camps and I never met up with any of these men again. At home my father then told me that after the First World War had ended he eventually had become a drill instructor at the army barracks at Colchester. I never heard my father use bad language and he would not tolerate it in our home.

Leave was soon over and I then reported to the RAF Radio School in Wiltshire where I underwent a nine month intensive training course of radio equipment as used in the aircraft of the day. Discipline was still high but not as bad as the initial training course and there was little or no foul language. Again we lived in billets with about 30 men in each and as there were no cleaners we had to keep the room and the ablutions spotless. There were frequent inspections to ensure that a high standard was maintained. There were exams every six weeks and those failing were removed from the course. I came home fairly frequently and we were now allowed to wear civilian clothes when off duty. On annual leave we were given free return rail tickets. The pay was probably better than in a civilian job as we also received a clothing allowance to replace worn out or damaged items. This allowance was paid quarterly in cash whether we needed it or not.

After nine months at radio school and with the final exams behind us we were then posted to operational airfields. My posting was to another operational station in Wiltshire. The accommodation here was much better and most of us had a single room. There were no civilian cleaners so all the cleaning was carried out those who lived there. One evening each week the whole block was cleaned and each day one man spent the whole morning tidying up when everyone had left for work. I now had almost two more years to serve and I was quickly promoted to a junior NCO leading a team to service aircraft. Clearly there were far too many men to do the allotted work and most of them didn't want to be there anyway. We tried by giving them extra tuition to improve their radio knowledge but this failed due to lack of enthusiasm. They spent most of their day reading the newspapers or playing Bridge. I came home to Dinton most weekends. I did volunteer to go to an airfield in the south of France where some of the British aircraft would call in to refuel or for minor repairs. This was a good opportunity to improve my knowledge of French as all radio communication had to be undertaken in French.

Back in Wiltshire I was asked to escort a prisoner to the military correction establishment at Colchester. To me the prisoner's misdemeanour was minor but he had been found guilty and sentenced to 112 days detention. On reaching Colchester barracks and after delivering the prisoner I spent a couple of hours there and I recalled my own thoughts that my father had been a drill instructor at this very place some 30 years before. I returned to base and hoped that the young offender would never return there after serving his sentence. I knew that the next 112 days would be hell on earth for him!

My two years and eleven months were drawing to a close. I was asked to stay on but marriage was looming and I wanted to return to civilian life and be free of the military discipline and restrictions. I spent a day in the London area receiving a full set of new civilian clothing of my choice and I handed back my military clothes in exchange. My service life in the Royal Air Force was over, never to be forgotten.

Throughout my time in the Royal Air Force the food was first class. We had three cooked meals a day and breakfast was compulsory. There was full medical and dental care on each camp and hospitals were available as and when necessary. Discipline remained high at all times and there were frequent inspections to maintain personal cleanliness. The penalties for transgressions were harsh. Punctuality was essential and no excuse was accepted for lateness. On all camps personnel were encouraged to take part in sport (Wednesday afternoon was sports afternoon) and those who could play a musical instrument (especially a brass band type) were highly regarded. Further education was also provided for those who wanted to attend. Each camp had a cinema, a NAFFI with TV rooms, snooker/billiard tables and dart boards and of course for spiritual guidance there was always the padre. The Salvation Army wagon would call round twice each day for morning and afternoon tea and buns.

People ask 'Was it worth it?', 'Was it a waste of time?', 'Should it be brought back?' I cannot speak for the several million others who did their National Service or the other Dinton and Stone men, but for me, although I did not want to go in the first place and found life very hard initially, it was worth it. My sisters had taught me some domestic skills which proved to be invaluable as there was no-one around to sew a button back on or wash and iron a shirt. I had learned new skills which I would continue to use after National Service. I had learned self discipline and to work in teams supporting each other. Without National Service I would not have joined up and I would have missed out. I tried to make the best of my time there as I hate being bored. I went in as a boy and came home in 1956 a man.