

Wally Galea



It was 11 September 1956. Eagle Airways flight was approaching Blackbushe and losing altitude when I caught my first glimpse of England. We landed and we were taken to RAF Hendon for the night.

In the morning some of us were taken to RAF Halton. On 13 September I signed on. Two days later I was on my way to Locking. There were about 3 or 4 of us and we were met by PO Scott. My first billet was 351 under LA Kermode later hut 353 probably under Pettigrew and much later under Crow from New Zealand. I remember very vividly roommates like Parker, Hodby, Barnes, Freeman, Threlfall, O'Connell, Gillot etc.

Some pranks:- Len Hodby's alarm clock was moved backwards to ring at 5 am instead of 6 am by either Mick Barnes or Roy O'Connell. Poor Len went to breakfast but the mess was still closed. Somebody in our billet did not like being woken up every morning by Len's clock. Another thing I remember is Barnes putting blue blanco on one of us. I remember Pete Murrells cutting our hair. I remember Dave Rodgers singing to Brian Brunt "Brian Brunt, Brian Brunt, silly"

I also remember where some of us lived e.g. Tony Beard from Lewes, Sussex, Les James from Croydon, Keith (Percy) Freeman from Wisbech, Drake from Ilfracombe, Parker from Isle of Arran, Brown from Kent, Murrells from Tunbridge Wells, Johnny Bench from Birmingham.

I remember summer camp at Lulworth Cove. What a beautiful bay that is. I was reluctant to swim so somebody pushed me in. Some songs we sung on the trucks like "We are off to see the wild west show,



the elephant and the kangaroo etc.....", "Sir Jasper....."; these are very vivid. I remember our Shetland pony, Hamish McCrackers, keeping us company on Wing Parades.

I want to say thank you very much to:-

PO Barrett, FO Roach, Flt Lt Fry, Flt.Lt Frew, FO Andrews, Mr Lambard, Mr Crowfoot (these are who I can remember). Their lectures and practicals established a solid base for our future. I also want to mention Sqn. Ldrs Uprichard and Catley, PO Scott, Flt Lt Davies, Flt Sgt Price, Sgt Corde, Cpl Butler and Cpl Whydle for their help and sometimes fatherly support. As I grew older I began to appreciate how valuable Locking was for each of us.

I remember as we were sleeping one night and other nights , I found myself on the floor, tipped out of bed, by the 76th.

When going to the NAAFI I was told, by the 76th to get on the table and sing for them. Maybe they thought I was Fred Astaire. so I sang "Lay Down Your Arms".

I remember saying to Roy O'Connell. "I dont want to swear but I want to say ----- Jack" He always smiled.

My first posting was RAF Horsham St Faith near Norwich. It was a semi operational station, and fairly quiet. There was the occasional aircraft, due to fighter command mod centre, but I was of a ground trade, so I was in RSF, TX, RX and air traffic equip. But in fact I was there because of RAF Hopton. It was near Great Yarmouth, I was told. This reminded me of David Copperfield of Charles Dickens. Every week I went to Hopton, did the DIs, of the TX and RX which were operated by Chatham.

Back at HSF, service life was good, and social life on and off camp was good too. I was a member of the station's hockey team and every week we used to play at various stations like West Raynham, Coltishall etc. While there at HSF we were asked if we wanted to participate in some experiments at Porton near Salisbury so I volunteered and went for about a week. I can

only remember gas masks. The experiments were physical rather than chemical but I think there were some physiological ones as well. I also remember an airman who was Canadian and spoke with an American accent and was in the RAF. In the evening, a few of us played cards and I think that is where I learned the game of Cheat.

Back at HSF we were told that two squadrons from Coltishall were going to be stationed at HSF while repairs were done at Coltishall. When they came, 23 Sqn Javelins and 74, I think, Sqn Hunters, the station was transformed overnight.

There was so much activity everywhere. Night duty in the tower was my favourite. It was a marvellous time. They also brought their WAAFs with them. One night while I was in the NAAFI with my usual friends, one of my friends told me that one of the Sqn girls wished me to take her to her Sqn Ball. and I obliged. If I remember correctly she introduced me to her Sqn Commander and I felt important. After all, I was an outsider, but I had a wonderful time.

Norwich was easy to get to by bus and was very popular with servicemen, as were the Samson and Norwood dance halls. The return journey back to camp was by taxi or on foot. In those days it was safe to walk at night.

Eventually I got my tapes and was sent to Marconi in Chelmsford to get acquainted with new receivers SSB/ISB and FSK and a radio link. My air traffic and airfield equipment, and for that matter, airfield days were numbered. My next posting was going to be RAF Gan. via Innsworth.

On Gan, in March 1961, I was posted to the Communication Centre, which was run by W.O Milham, a kind and gentle person. This was very impressive with modern equipment. We were called CCS and later SCS. There was a large control desk and several ssb/isb and fsk receivers and teleprinters in the same room. In the other rooms were what we called Channelling and VFT equipment where particular users like Traffic Hall etc. had their own particular channels. All the signals then modulated a microwave link HM314/315 to the tx station about 8 miles away called Hittadu. We transmitted to Stanbridge CAF2, Singapore CAF6 and Eastleigh CAF40,

Kenya . Each CAF network, later called DCN, had two txs and two rx's one red and one yellow on different frequencies. Obviously we were on a shift basis and the NCO i.c. watch had the grand title of Technical Superintendent. At first I was with Cpl. Bottomley and then I had my own watch comprising three or four people.

It was an interesting and fulfilling job but at times it was very hectic, especially during severe fading and especially more so during a complete fade-out. All monitoring teleprinters going, phones ringing and checking the rx's tuning (with fading the AFC would not work properly). We used jargon like garbled, solid, QSY, QRN, QRM, ZBZ, ZHN etc. Being responsible for the station's communications with the outside world made me feel proud. We had to bring all our systems and services on line as fast as we possibly could.

Off duty I played snooker, table tennis and learnt how to play chess. I did not like Gan but I was impressed with the number of large frogs or toads, beautiful chameleons and large land crabs. Also the marine life on the reef.

We were allowed only two weeks off the island to go to Singapore and/or Penang. Days before Christmas 1961 we boarded a Hastings to go to Changi. I was near a window and I saw an engine stopped. Just before the point of no return, we turned back to Gan. When we returned we were told there was an emergency alert. Shackeltons were up and the rescue boats were out. There was more than one engine u/s. God helped us that day. At that time I did not think much about it but later on in life I realized the danger. We were put on the next flight but I don't remember if it was a Hastings. We arrived at Changi and made our way by train to Kuala Lumpur and then to Penang to a holiday centre run by the Army.

Penang was a beautiful island. It was Christmas eve 1961 .and there were places with Christmas festivities and lights. One place we were at impressed me because a Chinese person was singing Silent Night. It was a marvellous holiday and it came to an end. A few days quickly pass especially if you are enjoying yourself. Back at Gan I only had another 3 months left. Here I met Alec Gully and Tony Beard .again. They were in my class at Locking. In

March my year was up and my next posting was to RAF Feltwell. Therefore back to East Anglia which I did not mind at all.

On arrival, I started on the wrong foot, actually both feet. I was heading towards SHQ when somebody opened a window and shouted "COME HERE, you are improperly dressed and get those winkle-pickers off ". It was the SWO and I was wearing my civilian shoes! I told him I had left my service shoes behind on Gan . He sent me to stores to buy another pair.

Feltwell was a Thor missile base. We had 4 satellite bases, namely, Shepherds Grove, North Luffenham but the other two I have forgotten. I had maximum clearance to the point where i could enter the silo and touch a missile with my hand and also enter the trailer where there were two officers, one RAF and the other American. Obviously we were only concerned with the ground equipment and nothing to do with the missile itself. A corporal friend of mine talked about LRT - long range theodolite .Their responsibility must have been very great .We were at the height of the cold war.

I did not meet any ex-apps there but my Sqdn Commander was Sqdn Ldr Catley. I befriended a corporal who worked the Astra Cinema projector and sometimes I helped him change from one projector to the othe before the carbon rod extinguished; the film was marked when to change over. I could never watch a film properly. Anyway, we were near Thetford and I remember a forest. Now I wish I had done some exploration of the forest because later on in life I became obsessed with nature. We used to go past Lakenheath and once we entered. It was full of Americans. We went also past Mildenhall but never went in. Off duty I went to Cambridge and sometimes to Norwich with friends .After more than a year I was due to go overseas again and I applied for Malta. Next posting Malta via Innsworth.

Commcen Malta had 4 locations. On a small island called Gozo there was a station called FSS using forward scatter techniques. This transmitted to St Lawrence, Ventnor, Isle of Wight a distance of 1200 miles. There were the usual Channelling equipment and a radio link HM314/315 to Dingli a village in Malta. This was in turn connected to the Commcen which was called RAF Siggiewi and obviously the the tx station was somewhere else,using

DS10 AND12. I was at all four locations. Around me at some time or other were Mick Cheetham 76th, Vic West and Brian 83rd and Woodhouse 85th, both RAF Siggiewi. The actual SCS and the TX stations were underground. In 1966 I married Lilian. Some time before I was due to return to England I became a sergeant.

My next posting was RAF Henlow. At Henlow one married quarter was due to be vacated after a week or so so I had to find lodging for us, and the first one that I found was with an Italian family who were not good hosts. After persevering for a few days we moved into married quarters. The house was lovely and very cosy. The neighbour's children soon befriended my wife and all of them came in and out of the house. I reported to the Sergeant's Mess, my first one, because the one in Malta at RAF Siggiewi was small and had only a few members so it was a case of just hello goodbye.

The one at Henlow was impressive. It was posh like a hotel, the NCOs I met were polite to us and if I am not mistaken there were waiters. On one occasion there was a dinner dance which was unforgettable.

I was in the factory but working in the office chasing signals orders. The Warrant Officer also asked me if I wanted to give some tuition to some of the airmen, and I accepted. Some were keen to learn and others were not. But everything went smoothly. I realised that I enjoyed teaching. I don't know how long it lasted but later I was transferred to another section called EWEF.

This was run by Flt Lt Stoner who I believe was an ex app. Some time later I was told that I was going to Bahrain for about 3 months together with Sgt Taffy Evans and a few of the lads to dismantle some transmitters DS10/12 but first we had to go to Signals Command at Martelsham Heath I think it was. for briefing. There I also met again W.O. Milham, who was on Gan with us before. He was still a pleasant man.

Anyway, when we arrived at Bahrain we were taken to RAF Muharraq, which was our station. Our time there was not at all bad. The Sergeant's Mess was good and what struck me as peculiar was that the TV was Arabic but the sound was via a radio in English.

Who did I meet there but Sgt. Tash Kermode. This was a time for reminiscences. He always wanted to write a book even when at Locking. I asked if he had started the book but he said not yet. I said I should start one. Many years later I started to write one in manuscript, a lot of foolscap pages, but I never got them printed although we had secretaries at the university, and I never tried to get it published, even though it is a good science fiction story. I am mad about sci-fi especially Star Trek Voyager . Anyway I should not reminisce out of phase with time as if I am on Voyager going through a time warp.

Back to Tash Kermode, who was always in a discussion with his friend Sgt. Devlin and who the Arabs around us called Sgt Devil. If anyone is interested Tash was from the Isle of Man and he was a boxer at Locking. The time quickly passed and we said goodbye and we returned to U.K. but I went via Malta to pick up my wife whom I had sent back to Malta until my return.

After arriving at Henlow, not much time was left there and again I was put on the overseas list. I selected the usual 3 choices and I put in for Malta as one of my choices, since this was going to be my last posting, before leaving the service as my 12 years were coming to an end soon. Being in Malta would be handy to have a look around for jobs. When finally my posting came through, they did post me to Malta, so I was lucky. Naturally it was the Commcen again, but this time it was at the transmitter station called RAF Benghaisa.

As usual it was shift work and this suited me fine. Mornings and evenings, afternoons and nights and then two days off, but the first off day was sleeping. During this time my son David and later my daughter Sharon were born. Demob day was getting closer each day and I thought I was happy. No more deep sea boxes, and I could do what I liked. But as time drew closer and closer I had already begun to feel sad.

I terminated my service on 26 January 1970 after nearly 14 years service. I was offered a job at RAF Sealand but I wanted to remain and settle in Malta. But after a couple of weeks enjoying my new found freedom I suddenly woke up to reality. I realised that I should have at least tried to extend my service. Whether I would have been accepted or not I will never

know. We were clothed and fed and looked after by the RAF. To me this equated to an intrinsic value. We were pampered. I am not praising the RAF just because I feel nostalgic but because I had the next 30 years' experience as a civilian. I tried to work for IAL or Cable and Wireless but they preferred younger men due to union agreements so they said. In the meantime I had my family to feed, so I started looking for other jobs. In 18 months I changed five jobs.

I worked for a company servicing yacht equipment and how many times I banged my head in confined places. Another company (if you could call it that) making some installations, A factory called GIE (General Instrument Europe) which was not bad .They made capacitors and tuned ccts, like ifts etc., and they had a lot of test equipment. But there was no future for me. I left after a few months to work in a hotel. I waited until i could find a secure job.

The time came when the University of Malta actually the Department of Physiology and Biochemistry had a vacancy for a laboratory officer to service electronic equipment in the department's labs. There were other applicants but the professor chose me. He understood and appreciated my RAF apprenticeship and above all the Certificate of Service booklet which explained all my RAF work. But I had to overcome one year's probation.

From now on and for the next 30 years it was going to be Beer's Law (not the kind you are thinking) integrated circuits, especially 74 series and operational amps. Since the dept. was in the Faculty of Medicine there were students' labs and research labs. The Prof's research was in Biochemistry and the labs were well equipped with very sophisticated and expensive equipment. Spectrophotometers, centrifuges, recorders, fraction collectors, atomic absorption, Amino Acid Analyser etc. No wonder they wanted somebody in electronics on site. Let me explain something briefly.

Chemists use solutions which need to be analysed. One type is by using a spectrophotometer (Beer's Law) which is about Transmittance and absorbance. $A=2-\log T$. Absorbance is the parameter that is always used. Basically, a cuvette is filled with the solution and placed in the light path between a lamp and a photocell and with expensive equip. through a

monochromator with mirrors, lenses , a prism or grating then on to a phototube and electronic circuits. The uv and visible spectra are used so we talk of wavelength in nanometres. We had equip. from UK (Pye Unicam), Germany (Beckman), US (Gilford), Japan etc. There were manuals in English, German, Italian, and Japanese. But the circuit diagrams were universal. And thanks to RAF Locking I could overcome all servicing problems.

Furthermore, I was expected to build things to upgrade some equip. One spectrophotometer read only transmittance using a meter and they wanted absorbance and a digital readout and later they also wanted printouts. A Philbrick logarithmic module was chosen and a circuit was built around it . It had to be accurate to 3 significant figures after the decimal point. With Holmium filters and a Didymium filter for calibration, the gadget worked excellently.

After some modifications the professor wanted some automation. Biochemists use what is called a fraction collector to collect drops in test tubes from solutions. In our case it was an LKB, modern and digital and expensive. The solution passed through a peristaltic pump via very thin tubing, then fell as drops through a photocell cct at a small height above the first test tube. There were 10 test tubes per rack and 10 racks. The fraction collector could be preset to any number of drops, test tubes and racks. If all the test tubes were going to be filled, then a technician would have 100 tubes to read the absorbance in a spectrophotometer. Only some test tubes would be useful but which?The rest were of no value.

I was asked to build a circuit to provide an absorbance reading together with its corresponding test tube and print the result. We purchased an ADDO X printer. LKB had a small photometer which could be inserted after the pump. I built my "box" using 74 series digital i.cs especially the 7490. I purchased several i.cs from Texas Instruments and I had a lot of Data Books, Data Sheets and Catalogues. Later I started to use the R.S. Catalogue which was about half inch thick until it became about three inches thick by the year 2001. The circuit that I built worked perfectly and the professor was very pleased. In fact when in 1979 the Academic Staff who were not going to conform with Socialism were compelled to leave the University (actually sacked), my professor was one. He told me he was going

to Oxford and he was going to take the circuit boards of my "box" and the circuit diagram with him to Oxford. He said he was going to have one built there. Anyway apart from building things I had to service all faults that cropped up, help my colleagues with medical student practicals help the professor squeeze spinach or beans or whatever to become liquid so that my colleagues (chemists) could prepare for centrifugation etc.

I was becoming popular for work, and I ended up servicing the equipment used by the Faculty of Medicine including the Medical School at the hospital. One of these was the Dept. of Obstetrics and Gynaecology. They purchased a diasonograph which used ultrasound to test pregnant women. This was manufactured by Nuclear Enterprises of Edinburgh.

This was the first of its kind in Malta and some people were afraid to use it, but soon they got used to it. No sooner had it been installed by N.E. than I soon was called for something or other. Anyway I was asked by my professor to go on a course on it at Edinburgh. This opened some memories of U.K. and I accepted. I think this was in 1974. It wasn't only Edinburgh but a few other destinations.

At the beginning of this chapter I mentioned automation and my most complicated project was yet to come. The professor had an XY Coordinate Microscope which measured coordinates of curves on photographic plates produced by an ultracentrifuge using a titanium head revolving at 65000 RPM (in vacuum) etc. The microscope was operated manually. What did I have to do? You guessed. I had to build a unit which could count 6 digits for X, 6 digits for Y plus controlling ccts around the 74192 and these in turn controlled the driving units of two stepping motors from R.S. and the motors would be coupled via a special gearbox which would be provided by P.S.B. of Harrow (another destination). I also had to visit U.K.A.E.A. Harwell and another factory of Nuclear Enterprises Reading. The latter two were on the same railway line from Paddington. How many times did I use this line to Locking?

Back in Malta, the professor wanted some more automation and printouts and at the time the American teleprinter ASR33 was very popular in laboratories and we bought one. I built a couple more gadgets to control

the ASR33 and have nice printouts. Again I reminisced about Commcen, Gan Malta. Politically, Malta was getting from bad to worse. The University was not immune. In 1979 the Academics who were not going to toe the line with the Labour Government were compelled to leave i.e. sacked. My professor was one of these. Research was stopped. Funds dried up. Our Head of Dept. became an Egyptian professor and lecturers were Czechoslovak and Egyptian. The Head was not easy to get along with. To cut along story short we both went in front of the new Rector who was an ex RAF Officer (Education) called Welwyn James. I won my case.

The Czechs were extremely nice and polite. Since I was in the Faculty of Medicine, as was the Medical School (at the hospital) with its various departments, I automatically became their technician. Before I was "requested" now I was "ordered". Anyway at the Dept. where I usually worked the new Head decided. anyway I don't know who decided, that Medical Students should build projects of Physiological concepts and shown by moving lights, bearings, motors or whatever. Nearly all were either electronic or electrical. Guess who had to build these? This proved beneficial to me in the short term because students who became doctors remembered me and sometimes helped me when needed.

Sometime before 1979 Tony Beard and his young daughter visited me. We were both pleased to see each other and talked about old times. Also before 1979, I met P.O. Scott (Scotty) on a beach. He was on holiday with his wife and her sister and her husband who was an RAF officer, a pilot on a Shackelton. I invited them to my house for tea and again we talked about old times (reminiscing). I asked about Sqdn. Ldr. Uprichard and he told me he last met him in Gibraltar and he was a Group Captain. Before that he was a Wing Cdr on a Javelin squadron.

Anyway, after 1979 the work at the university was at a minimum and us non-academics managed to survive. During the lunch hour some of us played volley ball or table tennis and I occasionally played chess. Most times it was table tennis and the fun we had was marvellous. We had competitions and arguments. But alas two of them died young. After some years the Egyptian professor was replaced by a Maltese professor from U.K. and life in our Dept became more civilised.

In 1987 there was a change in government (Nationalist) and the old academic staff who were sacked returned, my old professor and his brother included. But alas they returned with a chip on their shoulder and things were not going to be the same as before. Arguments started to follow and I soon realised that life was becoming unpleasant. I decided to ask for a transfer but as is obvious the professor did not want to release me.

The academics were re-instated with no loss of service and only they and God knew what conditions and/or compensation they were given. Us non-academics had to fight every inch of the way to get a new deal very much later.

I should have mentioned before that we used to have a superannuation scheme and the labour government in 1979 terminated it and the new nationalist government never gave it back to us which meant that on retirement and in my case after 30 years I would not receive a gratuity. In fact on retirement I received nothing whereas our government counterparts, we were all part of the civil service, received large sums of money. So I had to live on the Maltese pension and later at age 65 supplemented by a very small UK pension due to our old graduated pension scheme.

Anyway after a great deal of trouble I managed to get a transfer to Mechanical Engineering because the mechanical eng. students' projects were becoming electronic and apparently they did not get much help, if any at all. This is another long story and I am not going into it. The first project was an A.G.V. (automatic guided vehicle) which proved successful. Then it was water jet cutting, ultrasonic cutting etc. and each year something else was added or modified. Several R.S. stepping motors and drive units were now becoming common in their projects as well as several different types of sensors. One cct I liked to build was around strain gauges. Apart from constructing electronic boxes I had to explain the ccts to them and I was not a lecturer and I did not get anything extra. But at least I was happy and my retirement was not too far away. Some time before I was due to retire I wrote a paper entitled "The Phonocardiogram" which was a requirement to become a member of I.E.E.I.E. and I had to go to the U.K. for assessment. Actually it was an oral test and interview which

lasted more than three hours until I began to perspire and became very exhausted. To select a suitable date for me and for the examiners took about two years and I was in England before the Millennium.

I have two granddaughters, twins called Hannah and Hayley. They are six years old, and they are my daughter's. With the advent of cable t.v. my favourite channels were Animal Planet, National Geographic, T.N.T where I could watch very old films, especially musicals and a local channel which showed several science fiction films like Stargate and Xfiles. But my favourite remains Star Trek especially Voyager, which I could see on Italian TV. Now I bought DVDs. Also BBC Prime to watch Alan Titchmarsh and Gardeners' World. Before I left the university I started reading several catalogues on nature and biology and purchased books and encyclopaedias on birds. I am fascinated by birds and I have a few canaries which I try to breed but was only successful with the common ones. The more exotic ones I have to buy.

I love plants and I used to buy a lot of roses and bulbs every year from the U.K. I have just bought a few lily bulbs from Taunton in Somerset. I don't have a garden but a small yard full of large pots. I have several catalogues and encyclopaedias on plants which I read and looked at every day until my health began to deteriorate but I am still on my feet.