

## MUCH ADO ABOUT PRACTICALLY NOTHING

Now it is shortly after the war finally gets going that I decide to become a hero. I go along to the local R.A.F. Recruiting Centre and fill in an application form, and they tell me to report three days later for a preliminary medical. Well, I march home feeling as if I have already shot down seven Messerschmitts and my chest expands at least another half an inch. I am no longer a common mortal, but an R.A.F.V.R., and anyone who cannot see it in my gait and the steely glint in my eye is looking in the wrong direction.

I am so excited, I lose my appetite for the next few days, but I feel like a mixture of Johnny Weissmuller, Gary Cooper and Joe Louis; and at 6 am on the Wednesday morning I get up and sally forth to the office. All that is missing is my horse and armour.

I am told to wait in a draughty corridor, on a wooden bench, with about fifty other raw recruits, so we think up a lot of new words during the next five or six hours. At last someone in a uniform tells us to strip and gyrate round a cubicled room for the edification of six medicos, who work us over from the scalp down in the fashion of the moving belt system. It is an experience worth missing, but I am passed A.1. for going to the Selection Board. So I go home to wait for notification to report to Uxbridge. On the way I feel like stopping complete strangers to tell them that I am almost in the R.A.F., but resist the urge.

They tell me it will take about six weeks, and I wait with great impatience. Meanwhile, I display a printed R.A.F.V.R. on the windscreen of my car. After a week of this, I am called upon during business hours by two detectives who interrogate me for an hour and succeed in convincing me that I am a murderer with tendencies towards mayhem, arson and espionage. They warn me to watch my step, and demand that I remove the notice, which offends the susceptibilities of a local R.A.F. Group Captain.

Well, only another week passes, and then I find a letter on the mat, franked O.H.M.S., telling me to report to the Recruiting Office again, with toothbrush and pyjamas. I get two day's leave from the firm and go along and there I find half the fellows I'd met before.

We wait twelve hours, and are then placed in the charge of the oldest. He has the necessary papers, all sealed up, and a communal railway warrant for London.

I ask for permission to go by car, so that after the interviews I can get around on a few visits. The O.C. in the office says okay, but does not supply coupons or petrol or expense money. Then we all go off,

It is about 6 pm when I arrive at Uxbridge, and the party has not yet arrived, although streams of raw material are passing through the gates of the camp. So I drive to the station and wait by the barrier for an hour, when I conclude that I have missed the party. So I return to the guardroom.

If I had any sense I would know that they haven't yet arrived, and this is confirmed by the sergeant on duty. So I park the car inside the gate next to a no parking sign, and walk back to the station, which is a mile or so away. When I have waited another hour, I think maybe I have missed them, so back to the camp I go, and find that I am wrong again. It now occurs to me that I am in a condition to make a mess of a large meal, and nobody challenges my right to go into the airman's mess, where they are serving suppers.

At 10.30 my crowd arrives, and we are shown to bell-tents to sleep. We are not used to bell-tents, and I do not find it comfortable with my feet overlapping those of the man on my left and underlapping those of the man on my right. Also, the earwigs make a happy hunting ground of my neck, and it is windy.

At 8.00, we have already eaten and queue up to answer some questions and sign a few forms, just to prove that we really are there in the flesh. About mid-morning we queue up in another part of the camp for the real medical. We are dismissed at tea-time, having accomplished precisely nothing. We haven't a pack of cards amongst the lot of us. Some of us go into the canteen lounge and play chess, others walk around the camp, and the sensible ones retire early.

We rise at six next morning, our ardour definitely dampened, and again queue up for a medical. In the afternoon we begin to filter through the hands of the experts, who take us apart to find what makes us tick over a period of some two hours. There is nothing cursory about this examination, and if any of us has a pimple on the inner curve of the duodenum, it is guaranteed that these sawbones will locate it. What a mincer does to meat is kid stuff compared to what we go through. Head, eyes, ears, nose, throat, chest, back, arms, hands, abdomen, legs, feet, all are minutely examined. There are experiments with columns of mercury, breathing exercises, blind balancing on one leg, machines for measuring range of hearing, test for colour vision, muscle control. It would probably cost a couple of hundred to have a similar procedure under a private physician. And then we relax.

There are six separate places in which this ordeal is carried out, and in the intervals between each, whilst we wait for our turns to arrive, we are called at odd times to appear before the Selection Committee, who attend to the mental examination and determine one's suitability or otherwise for aircrew.

This is really an experience.

When my name is called, I go into a small room and find a couple of R.A.F. Officers seated at a table. They tell me to be seated, and I do so with clammy hands and sweating brow.

"See what you can do with this," says the interrogator disarmingly, "a man drives a car at sixty miles an hour for fifteen minutes, and then at forty miles an hour for fifteen minutes. What is his average speed over the distance?"

"Forty eight miles an hour," I say, and virtually pat myself on the back.

"Why are there 366 days in a leap-year?"

"Who invented zip fasteners?"

"What is the speed of sound?"

"What is the volume of a sphere and inch in diameter?"

"What was the name of the Prime Minister in 1899?" (This was a catch question – he was similarly named at that time as at present: Neville Chamberlain).

Simplify  $\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{1}{4} \times \frac{4}{5} \times 1.3 - 2 \frac{1}{8} / 0.732$

"What is the world sources of supply of petrol and rubber?"

And so on .....

I stagger out, wondering if I am crazy or if they are merely peculiar. After all, I merely want to be an Air Observer and learn how to navigate.

At length, everyone has had his medical and a few have been rejected. We expect to leave for our homes next morning, but we have to wait all that day and half the next to receive our pay from the accounts section – I believe it is 2/- or so per day.

We are assured that it will not be long ere our calling up papers arrive, and having taken the oath of allegiance and being given our Air Force numbers, we depart.

A couple of officers scrounge a lift to the West End in my car, and I return to Kent. This is June 6<sup>th</sup> ...

Three weeks later I call at the Local Recruiting Office to find out if the R.A.F. still requires my services. They tell me it will not be long before I am on the way to glory.

At the end of July I write a brief memo to the O.C. Attestation Board, reminding him that I want to go into the R.A.F. a fortnight later I receive a circular stating that my letter is receiving attention.

At the end of August I write again, quoting his reference number, and a week later I receive a duplicate circular to the effect that my letter is receiving attention. It is about this time that the Air Ministry decides to raise the age limits of various air-crew groups, and I find that I am now eligible for entry as a pilot. This is more my meat, and I decide to remuster. I write a letter to this effect and a week later am advised to report to Uxbridge. I go by car, at my own expense. I have to kick my heels around for a day and a half, and then I am called before the same inquisition.

"It's you, is it?", says the officer who previously had interviewed me. "I remember you! So you want to be a pilot?"

"That's so," I reply, for I can conceive no other reason for my fresh appearance before him.

"Alright", he said. "Good afternoon!"

I drive back to Kent in a state of dementation. This is time valued when the country is at war.

Three days later I am advised to report to Uxbridge for a medical. My original report has been mislaid.

Considering my pocket, I go by train on a warrant. Owing to rail disorganisation it takes five hours to travel sixty miles. When I report to the Medical Board, I am told to go home; they have found my report ...

It takes me nine hours to get back, including three in a siding. I think that military routine is a great institution.

At the end of September I write a sarcastic letter to the same O.C. re my calling up before the war ends.

A week later I receive another circular stating that my letter is receiving attention.

I wait another month, and then I compose a really rude letter. It is a pip. I don't know why I am so eager to rush away from the amenities of civil life and its comforts. But I send off this letter, not appreciating at the time that it is the sort of thing that gives grounds for a court martial. I receive a circular that it is receiving attention.

I give up.

A fortnight later I write to say that if I am ever called up, may I please be given a week's advance notice, in order to settle my business affairs.

I get a reply to this one; they will give me seven days' notice, of course. That is usual with deferred service volunteers.

On the 27<sup>th</sup> November I receive orders to report to Stratford on Avon on the 29<sup>th</sup>.

I am in!

Three months later, when I am no longer a raw recruit, although I still have to see my first aeroplane. I am told by the Flight Sergeant to report to Sick Quarters.

My medical report has been lost, and I have to submit to a thorough overhaul once again. It is becoming really tedious.

Two months later we have to undergo night-vision tests, and it is found that there is no medical report of mine available. I am given a thorough overhaul once again.

Soon after this, my colleagues and I pass our examinations and are drafted into various categories and trades for our specialised training. I am recommended for night fighters, after a remarkable series of alleged psychological experiments, including the fitting of shaped pegs into holes, the doing of three or four entirely different actions at once, decoding codes, listing synonyms, antonyms and answering questions put by a W.A.A.F. some ten years my junior.

I proceed to Elementary Flying Training School, as excited as a cat with its first litter.

It turns out, at the end of six weeks, that Tiger Moths and I do not get on so well together, and I am cast aside to make way for better men. I am recommended for remustering as air observer, and go to a Receiving Station to await posting. For six glorious weeks I lounge beside the sea in the sunshine and wish it would last forever. At least, I am interviewed and accepted for navigational training. But before it can be confirmed, I have to undergo a medical examination, because my case history has been mislaid.

Fortunately, all this is now some time ago. But I wonder; if ever I have to be reclassified, or should I fall really sick, will they find that my medical history sheet is missing?