

AIR CREW TRAINING 1943 - 1944

By Gerhard Heilig

I was documented, kitted out, billeted and inoculated. A few days before joining up I had taken the precaution to visit a barber. On one of our first parades in uniform our corporal inspected the backs of our heads and I was horrified when, along with many others, he tapped me on the back growling "haircut".

"But I've just had a haircut Corporal," I gasped.

"Never mind, haircut!"

It's not for us to reason why ...

I spent three weeks at St. John's Wood going through the various motions of being absorbed into the service and getting generally acclimatized. After working hours and at weekends, being generously provided with passes, I frequently visited my father, the club or met my friends and proudly wore my uniform with the white cap flash of the aircrew cadet. On 17 July my intake was posted to the Initial Training Wing (ITW) at Bridgnorth in Shropshire.

I spent six weeks at ITW doing general things such as square bashing, rifle drill and particular training such as aircraft recognition (just as well to know which side that plane's on!), dinghy drill (how to survive in the drink, not the kind for internal use), Morse and other suitable subjects. It was glorious weather and a grand station. Two occurrences remained vividly in my memory

One day we were doing rifle drill, formed up in a hollow square with the drill corporal at the open end. It was one of those days when nothing would go right and the instructor threatened to keep us at it all day if necessary if we didn't pull our fingers out. At long last we managed to go through the motions from order arms through slope arms to present arms and back again without major mishap.

"Alright you miserable shower, do it once more and you can beat it to the cookhouse for your dinner. Sloooope Harms!"

I flung up my rifle and held out my hands to catch it, but my frantic fingers clutched at empty air and there was a resounding crash as the weapon hit the ground. There was a deathly silence, then the parade dissolved in uncontrollable hysterics and the corporal admitted defeat and dismissed us.

Our flight commander was a youngish Pilot Officer. He was strict as strict could be, but absolutely fair and we adored him. Frequently he would come to our hut, sit on one of the beds and chat with us, the very milk of human kindness. One day, one of the lads asked him what he'd been doing before being commissioned. He hummed and hawed, it was nothing that could possibly be of interest to us, it really was of no importance or consequence, why don't we talk about something else. The more he prevaricated, the more insistent we became. We loved him and there was nothing so insignificant about him that we did not wish to know.

"Alright you chaps, I'll tell you. I was in the service police."

There was a deathly hush, this was utterly unbelievable. Then someone said in a small voice: "You can't have been sir, you're so nice."

Pilot Office Palmer (I think that was his name) laughed. "Well, I didn't want to tell you but you insisted. I fully appreciate that SP's can't hope to get far in a popularity poll, but they are necessary and in fact fulfil a very useful function. Perhaps now you'll realize that some of them at least can be quite human."

He lost nothing in popularity through this confession of his murky past, but it did nothing to reduce our dislike and distrust of the representatives of Service law

and order. Nothing could eradicate their stigma of potential censure or punishment in the eyes of an humble airman. They were not friend and helper like their civilian counterparts but representatives of stern and unwinking authority, spectres to be avoided whenever possible.

On 8 September we heard that Italy had capitulated. My mother and brother had been interned on Italy's entry into the war but occasional letters had indicated they were not badly off. Now German troops were flooding the country and I wondered with anxiety what would become of them.

Ten days later I finished my initial training and received orders to proceed to Number 4 Radio School at Madley near Hereford after the ten days leave now due to me.

I reported to Madley on 30 September for my six months course as a wireless operator. It was a sprawling camp with the various living and working sites widely dispersed around the airfield. Our accommodation consisted of wooden huts divided into rooms, each containing two double bunks. The sole facilities on the sleeping site were lavatories, and in order to wash and shave we had to walk a mile to the messing site. I found myself sharing a room with Tom Harvey and we soon became an inseparable pair. The other two, Ernie Philips and Ted Sissons also chummed up and the four of us formed a close quartet.

Life at Madley was hard and sombre and we all soon wished ourselves far away from this dismal place. In fact, someone had composed our own station song to the tune of Blaze Away: "This is Stalag Bullshit, and we're the Bullshit Fusiliers!" The Noble Duke of York's men had had it easy, they'd merely had to march up the hill and down again; we were footslogging it day after weary day, more often than not retracing our steps at least once in the process. I enjoyed the technical lectures and quickly mastered radio theory and allied subjects, but the average of four hours Morse instruction, six days a week, were sheer hard grind. Our corporal technical instructor was a charming man and excellent at his job, but all the other NCO's left little impression apart from dull to downright unfriendly. I suppose it was unavoidable, teaching Morse was sheer routine allowing no scope to present a scintillating personality, and the ones responsible for good order and discipline had a thankless task and were merely doing their jobs.

In the evenings we would forgather in the NAAFI for a while before tramping back to our huts to bull up our boots and buttons before turning in to rest our weary bones. On Sunday mornings we were spared the blaring of the Tannoy with its relentless urging to rise and shine and we could luxuriate in our spartan beds. In the afternoons we usually took the station bus into Hereford where we could indulge ourselves in the fleshpots of the local Sally-Ann and Toc-H or go to the pictures.

We were given leave from the 18-26 December and on the last day of the year I had my first experience of making like a bird. Our flying classroom was a Dominie, the Service version of the De Havilland Dragon Rapide, accommodating, apart from the pilot, about four pupils, each with his own wireless and an instructor with the unenviable task of helping us establish our first tentative radio contacts. My stomach did not exactly rebel at being heaved aloft but it was, despite my thrill at being airborne at last, distinctly queasy. However, this was the only time I ever felt any discomfort whatsoever, henceforth I gloried in every minute of flying.

A week later I had my second flight but now the weather closed in and severely restricted operations. The previous entry was struggling to get its airtime in and I did not get my third and, as it turned out final flight on the Dominie, until the end of January. The course stipulated a number of trips under supervision in the

flying classrooms followed by solo exercises in a Percival Proctor, but as the weeks passed we had to be content with practice in Harwell Boxes, small cabins containing standard aircraft radio stations, built to simulate live conditions including engine noise. These, as also the Proctors, contained the latest in aircraft equipment, but the Dominies had ancient sets, little removed from the old cat's whiskers. Our course was due to finish at the end of March but it had become obvious that we would never be able to complete our flight training by this time. There also appeared to be a bottleneck further up the line, the entry but one before ours which had completed the course was still awaiting a posting and our chances of escape from Madley looked very remote indeed. But life was about to take an unexpected turn.

Source : Gerhard Heilig