

Chapter 4 - RAF Recruit Training, November and December 1973

I joined the RAF at Shrewsbury Careers Information Office on Monday 5th November 1973. In a process called attestation, I filled in forms, swore allegiance to the Queen, Her heirs and successors, agreed to obey the orders of those put in charge of me and filled in more forms. I also received an advance of pay of £2 – the 1970s equivalent of the Queen's shilling – a rail warrant and 92 pence in travelling expenses.

I had signed for an engagement of nine years regular service as an airframe and propulsion technician, to be followed by three years reserve service commitment. Before starting my professional training, I had to spend six weeks 'square bashing' at the RAF School of Recruit Training at RAF Swinderby, a few miles south of Lincoln.

Three days after attestation, wearing my trusty suit and carrying a battered family suitcase, I left the house to walk to Ludlow railway station for the 9.15 train to Shrewsbury. I avoided tearful platform farewells by saying goodbye to Dad and Brian when they went to work and school respectively, and by persuading Mum not to accompany me to the station.

Wound up in my own excitement, I gave little thought to how she'd be feeling after years pandering to my every need. I just walked away. Of course, she may have been relieved to be shot of me, but I don't think so, and I wish I could turn the clock back to that moment, if only to say, 'Thanks for everything,' before setting out.

At Ludlow station, I exchanged the rail warrant for a ticket to Newark and boarded the first of several trains. As I watched Ludlow Parish Church and the castle disappear behind me, the excitement began to give way to apprehension at what I was letting myself in for.

Ian, the close friend who'd joined the RAF a few years before, had mainly been the purveyor of horror stories, not least because he'd failed his engineering apprenticeship and become a driver. Simon had left for Leicester University and there was no feedback on his experiences yet, and Nick and Andy were staying in Ludlow as agricultural engineering apprentices at a local firm. I wondered if I should have done the same.

At each successive station, noisy groups of smartly dressed teenagers jumped aboard carrying single items of luggage. They sat in huddles, chatting away. I soon realised we were bound for the same destination, but I was too shy to break into the groups and moved from train to train on my own.

Only later did I find out that they knew one another because they'd been attested en-masse at their various careers offices the day after me. I have no idea why I was attested a day earlier, but, in later years, it allowed me to tell them to *get some in*, banter proclaiming that I'd served longer than they had, if only by one day.

At 2pm, my final train pulled into Newark Castle Station and nearly all the passengers stepped down onto the platform. Before we had time to feel lost, we were rounded up by half a dozen NCOs dressed in long greatcoats, shiny shoes and hats with peaks bent down so far over their eyes that they had to tilt their heads back at improbable angles to see where they were going. Tucked under their arms were varnished wooden pace sticks, and I guessed they were our drill instructors. At this stage, with a few passers-by watching proceedings, they were politeness itself, gently cajoling us onto a couple of Service coaches.

After a journey of a few miles, the coaches turned through the main gates of RAF Swinderby and stopped in front of a large building. Out of sight and sound of the public,

the mild-mannered NCOs changed their spots. My diary says they became, *just like in the films*, that is, the Second World War films on which I'd been reared.

Shouting in gravelly, sometimes unintelligible, but always threatening voices, they bullied us off the coaches and into a large hall where we joined another group of teenagers who looked as confused and shell-shocked as the rest of us. In total, we numbered 156.

With no explanation, we were lined up and subjected to a procedure not unlike selecting a playground football team, only in reverse. Rather than picking the tallest and fitter looking, the sergeants and corporals walked among us and pulled out the shortest, those wearing glasses, and others whose reasons for selection were less obvious. Eventually, roughly a third had been shepherded to the far side of the hall. They remained segregated as the remainder of us were split into two groups. We didn't find out what it was all about until later that evening.

In less than five weeks, we were destined to join apprentices from RAF Stations Halton, Cosford and Locking to line the streets of London for the Queen and a visiting dignitary.

It seemed the Queen was not allowed to see short, bespectacled men with zits. This was the only explanation offered for why all those who were five feet six inches tall or shorter, wore glasses or had skin complaints, such as acne, had been pulled aside. They became Number 9 Flight, known to the rest of us as The Leper Colony.

For those of us deemed tall, eagle-eyed and handsome, it was all a big joke. Not surprisingly, those in The Leper Colony found it less amusing, and it did seem a cruel way to start their new careers, especially as they were allowed to take part in the other ten route linings we mounted during our three years at Halton. Why RAF Swinderby felt it should be otherwise is still a mystery.

A friend who'd been in the Leper Colony confirmed this account, adding only that although he completed the full ten route linings at Halton, for the first few he wasn't allowed to wear his glasses, meaning he could see little of what was happening, and what he could see was out of focus. For later route linings, he was allowed to wear his specs, again, with no explanation for the change of policy.

The Leper colony having been selected, we were marched to our barrack blocks and allocated to 14-man rooms. We found a bed, dropped our kit on it, formed up outside again, and were marched away for a haircut - whether we needed one or not.

For me, having worn short hair all my life, a military haircut was no big deal. But many of the others sported hair well down over their collars, down to their waists in a few cases. For them, the visit to the Station barber was a major life crisis.

Part of the problem was the style of cut. We weren't shorn like US Marines or skinheads. At least that would have made us look menacing. No, our hair was left long enough to be worn in a short fringe, or waved in a style that our fathers or grandfathers would have worn. More like the lead in a syrupy Doris Day romance than a teenage rebel.

And just to enhance the experience, the barber cut one side of the victim's head first, giving them a grisly before and after image in the mirror. Those awaiting their turn could only look on in horror, while the newly shorn walked around in a daze, gazing sadly into every mirror and pane of glass they passed. Some did this for weeks.

After this ritual, we were issued with a few items of uniform and fed our first meal in the Airmens' Mess, a dining hall with tens of Formica-topped tables seating up to 20. As

we passed along a metal servery, food from large rectangular metal dishes was dolloped onto our plates by a line of cooks armed with serving spoons or ladles. The meal of red meat, mashed potatoes, vegetables and gravy, was followed by a wholesome pudding and custard. It was designed to give us the 4,000 or so calories a day we'd need to cope with our training.

Unflatteringly, my diary says, *stodge*. Well, it wasn't Mum's home cooking, but I did get used to it, and grow to enjoy it. Although modern RAF messes would emphasise the greater choice on offer, including vegetarian and minority religious options, similar fare would still be on the menu today, especially at training establishments.

After our meal, we were given an hour or so to settle into our rooms. Some spent most of this time marvelling at their new appearance.

That evening, we met our flight NCOs, Sergeant Blackman, a grey-haired, grandfatherly, figure in his late 40s or early 50s, and Corporal 'Piggy' Tonner, a short, stout and pugnacious, ex-RAF boxer in his 30s. They gave us a series of talks on what to expect during our six weeks at Swinderby, and told us in no uncertain terms what would be expected of us.

We were to receive lessons in drill - marching and saluting; general service knowledge - the history and roles of the RAF; ground defence training - nuclear, biological and chemical warfare, shooting, first aid and fire-fighting; physical training - fitness sessions in the gym and organized games; and more drill.

We'd be expected to conform and try hard at everything, and to keep ourselves, our uniforms and our rooms in immaculate condition. To that end, Sergeant Blackman and Corporal Tonner gave immediate demonstrations of essential skills, such as polishing, ironing and bed-making. Demonstrations over, we were allowed to disperse and settle into our rooms.

My hair had darkened to a light brown, but I was still fresh-faced and no more than five feet seven inches tall, so, although I was one of the oldest, I looked - and felt - like one of the youngest. Over the next year or so, I grew to five feet ten inches and bulked up a bit, but on 8th November 1973, I was a bit unnerved by some of the stubbly, streetwise, characters I met. They hailed from as far apart as Devon, North Wales, Eastern Scotland and East Anglia, with the majority being from the industrial north and the Midlands.

Several years later, the Scottish lad, Pete Rosie, went on to fly Nimrod maritime reconnaissance aircraft. He became the Nimrod display pilot and I helped train him to become a flying instructor.

Regional banter began almost immediately, and nicknames such as Taff and Jock were quick to appear, although they became difficult to sustain when the numbers of Welsh and Scottish folk in other rooms became apparent. I became firm friends with someone from a more recognisable minority, a red-haired Lancashire lad, Richard Hough, inevitably known as Ginge.

There were no black faces in our entry, and our room had the only person of non-white appearance, the result of a marriage between an RAF Serviceman and a Singaporean.

Almost a third of the entry was Scottish, and northern and Midland accents made up most of the remainder. There were two from Northern Ireland, one from Ireland, and several from the London area. Only the Devonian and I seemed to have rural accents,

something that was a feature of the rest of my Service career, during which I met relatively few country folk.

I found some of the Scots accents particularly hard to fathom, and it was months before many of us were able to understand a lad from the Outer Hebrides. If we were to see him now, it wouldn't be long before someone said, 'Yen, tway, shree,' in imitation of his piping voice counting to three. On the other hand, everyone took the mick out of my Shropshire burr, including the ladies on the NAAFI wagon. If I ordered a Mars Bar, they delighted in repeating, 'a Marrrs barrr my dearr.'

I'm not sure how much my accent changed over the years. On the few occasions I've heard myself on tape, I've thought I sound like a complete yokel. Many of the people I've worked with over the years have probably thought the same.

On that first day, my state of mind veered constantly between confidence and insecurity.

Having been in the Air Training Corps, the geography and atmosphere of an RAF station were familiar, and I knew a bit about drill and polishing shoes. I was even used to being shouted at by NCOs similar to the Swinderby drill instructors. But their ferocity and vindictiveness was way beyond anything I'd encountered before, and parts of the training syllabus sounded truly daunting. I already wondered whether I was going to stay the course.

Reassuringly, many of my new roommates expressed the same doubts.

My first letter home, written that night, said I was missing everyone, and bemoaned the amount of civilian clothing I'd taken. It seemed I was going to have very little opportunity to wear it.

Three days later, my diary states baldly, *Our corporal is a bastard*. The same epithet is later applied to Sergeant Blackman, but it was the corporals they set on us first.

They taught us all the basic manoeuvres involved in foot drill: standing to attention – heels together, toes angled out at 45 degrees, arms straight down the sides, fists clenched, thumbs to the front running down the seams of the trousers; standing at ease – heels shoulder-width apart, open hands overlapped behind the lower back; standing easy – an infinitesimally more relaxed form of standing at ease; turning, left, right and about – through 180 degrees; and saluting - only for commissioned officers, not NCOs or Warrant Officers – moving the right arm swiftly, longest way up to place the open hand, palm forward, with the fingertips over the right eyebrow for three seconds, before whipping the arm shortest way down to the side again.

Then, finally, marching itself, swinging your arms to shoulder height in an exaggerated walk, naturally moving the right arm with the left leg and vice versa, but with the arms straight, fists clenched, thumbs on top. Complications were added, such as turning left, right and about while marching, and saluting imaginary officers approaching from any conceivable direction.

As anticipated, I found marching relatively easy, and most of those with no previous experience came to grips with it fairly quickly, but some just couldn't do it. Alongside the surprising number who couldn't tell left from right, and kept turning in the wrong direction, or setting off with the wrong foot, were those who, when putting their right foot forward, swung their right arm. This is called tick-tocking and, believe me, it's quite hard to do, unless, of course, you're one of the poor individuals for whom it comes naturally. They suffered a torrid time having the habit beaten out of them.

If you watch the Royal Albert Hall Festival of Remembrance on television, I guarantee that you'll see at least one person tick-tocking, usually a nurse or a member of the reserve forces who has not had the habit thoroughly eradicated by hours of dedicated drill practice.

And as we had our bad habits eradicated, practising for hours on end, Piggy Tonner shouted at us, constantly criticising, never satisfied with our efforts, no matter how much we, or perhaps he, felt we'd improved.

The NCOs all spoke in a style familiar from films, but used words we'd never heard before, like *jildy* for hurry up, or *dhobi* for laundry, learnt during their previous service in the Middle or Far East. Many of their phrases could have come straight from the pen of a comedy script writer: *if you don't swing that arm, I'm going to rip it off and hit you over the head with the soggy end*; or, *if you don't sharpen up, I'm going to stick my boot so far up your arse you'll be spitting out polish for a week*; and many others. There were tens of them, all threatening some form of outrageous physical torture if our performance didn't improve.

Recalled later, in the warmth of our rooms, these gems were very funny, but they seemed far less amusing on the parade square, where, in November and December, it was always freezing, and often wet. All we wanted was for the incessant marching to end. And of course, because 7 and 8 Flights were to parade in front of the Queen, we were kept at it for longer than the Leper Colony. They didn't seem so sad now.

We eventually found out more about what our route lining would entail.

Visiting leaders fly into London Heathrow all the time. But when they arrive for a State Visit, the first thing they usually do is catch a train to Victoria Station, where they're met by the Queen, other members of the Royal Family, Ministers and senior Service officers. Then, they're driven, often in horse-drawn carriages, up Victoria Street to Parliament Square, down Whitehall to Trafalgar Square, under Admiralty Arch and down the Mall to Buckingham Palace. Every ten yards or so, both sides of the road are lined by Servicemen from various Royal Navy, Army and Royal Air Force units.

In the 1970s, many of the Royal Navy and Army units were rotated through these duties, but the RAF was always represented by its apprentices, while the Foot Guards always formed a large part of the Army contingent.

With the apprentices from Halton, Cosford and Locking, we were to line the section of the route from Parliament Square to Trafalgar Square. There, in front of pavements thronged with thousands of sightseers, we would stand in the gutter, facing one another across the street, waiting for the Royal party to pass. We'd each be armed with a Self-Loading Rifle, bayonet fitted but no bullets.

Royal protection was the responsibility of the police constables on and around the route. But we often wondered what we'd do if someone lunged at the royal party as it passed. I for one hoped I'd try and stop the assailant, although the truth was that we were there mainly as adornments, and to prevent our rifles falling into the hands of terrorists, at the time, the IRA.

For our first route lining, on 11th December 1973, the visiting dignitary was President Mobutu of Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo.

We had a month and a few days to go from raw recruits to parading in front of the Queen.

Many of the more demanding, even brutal aspects of military training are based on a system called 'dislocation of expectation'. It can be applied to almost anything, from basic drill and kit cleaning, to advanced leadership training or SAS selection.

Take the example of an exercise involving map reading to a camp site. You and your team push yourselves hard against the clock to arrive in time for a hot meal and rest. But, when you arrive, your instructors tell you the enemy have discovered your location and you have to break camp and travel another five miles. Oh, and by the way, you have to carry all the camping equipment with you.

Most, if not all of your expectations have been well and truly dislocated.

Whatever the changes in military training since I retired, I'm sure dislocation of expectation still features very prominently, because it can be used to build so many qualities, from individual resilience in the face of hardship and disappointment, to group cohesion against the enemy, in the case of training, your instructors.

And nowhere was the system practised more effectively than in the barrack blocks at Swinderby.

Bull is short for bullshit, and encompasses all things in the military to do with cleaning of personal kit or accommodation. A more polite term would be spit and polish. Anyway, The Recruits' Handbook sent to us before our arrival at Swinderby stated, *It can be fairly said that all unnecessary bull has been eliminated from the present training course.*

If ever an expectation was set up to be dislocated, this was it.

The barrack blocks were shaped much like the H Blocks of prisons such as The Maze. The short crossbar of the H contained offices, store-rooms and ablutions – baths, showers, washbasins and toilets, while each long bar contained four large, communal, rooms, two up, two down.

I was in a ground floor room with 13 others, and my bed-space contained a bed, a slim wardrobe and a small, metre-high locker with a drawer and a few open shelves. Kit, including civilian clothes, had to be laid out in the locker and wardrobe in a prescribed manner.

We were responsible for cleaning our rooms, plus the corridor outside, half the ablutions on our floor and halfway up the stairs. This was meant to entail a quick once-over daily, first thing in the morning, to keep the place reasonable, and a thorough clean one evening a week: a Bull Night, which would be followed by an inspection the following morning. But, at Swinderby, we stood next to our beds while our rooms were inspected every morning.

Linoleum floors had to be polished to a bright sheen, as did any brasses and the tiles and porcelain surfaces in the bathroom. And there was to be no dust anywhere. If there was, it was sure to be found by the probing fingers of Corporal Tonner or Sergeant Blackman, or, God forbid, the Flight Commander. If he spotted something the NCOs had failed to find, we were all in for an especially rough time.

For the first few weeks, the block was never clean enough, and we had Bull Night after Bull Night, even taking to tying dusters over our shoes to glide over the floors in the run up to inspections. The smell of floor polish became all pervasive. But to no avail. Our first free weekend was cancelled.

I was homesick and thoroughly cheesed off, but the loss of the weekend was too much for some. They decided to call it a day and leave the RAF at this early stage.

We were surprised to find out that beds had a decorative as well as a practical use. We were allowed to sleep in them at night, but in the morning, they had to be stripped and made up again in a very precise and unusual fashion.

One grey blanket was laid over the mattress and tucked in with hospital corners. The other blankets and the sheets were folded until each was one yard wide and two feet deep. They were then laid on top of one another at the head of the bed in the order, grey blanket, white sheet, white blanket, white sheet, grey blanket. Wound about with a colourful bedcover, the resulting rectangle of bedding should be a yard wide, two feet deep and six inches tall, with perfectly square corners. This was a bedpack, and it was topped off with two smoothed white pillows.

To prevent sagging and ensure the requisite angularity, old hands said we should place wood between each layer of our bedpacks. Luckily, we weren't tempted, because we soon discovered that when a bedpack displeased the inspecting NCO, it would be thrown across the room. The poor chap standing opposite tended to be enveloped in sheets and blankets. Any wooden inserts would have pole-axed him.

Then there was your uniform.

The two skills required to prepare uniforms for inspection were ironing and polishing. Both had been demonstrated by Corporal Tonner on the first night. He made it look so easy, especially the ironing, but for teenage boys, the sight of an ironing board brought on another major life crisis. Not only did we have to iron four shirts, leaving no creases, but also two pairs of trousers, these until the creases front and back were straight and sharp, not multiple and rounded.

In addition, we had to polish two pairs of shoes, one pair of boots, the peaks of our caps and our brass belt buckles. And not just polish in the normal sense of a quick buff to maintain colour, but caress to a deep shine in which you could see, not only your face, but the distant hills. They had to be fit to be seen by the Queen. The fact that she was never going to see our second pair of shoes or our boots made no difference. Everything had to be immaculate.

For footwear, the method of gaining a shine to which I maintained a career-long loyalty is to take a small wad of cotton wool, wet it in tap water – not spit – squeeze most of the water out on the palm of your hand, lightly coat the resulting damp wad with black polish and rub gently over the surface of the shoe or boot in small circles until the polish has been absorbed. Repeat, for hour upon hour, until there is a deep, unblemished shine.

The chief dangers are any form of grease, which can lead to smearing, and grit, even microscopic particles, which can leave small circular scratches. Drill NCOs can see smears and scratches invisible to the rest of the human race.

We also discovered a totally new danger to society. Dust on the small horizontal shelf where the rubber soles of shoes and boots meet the leather uppers: the welts. Sergeant Blackman considered dust in the welts to be a sure sign of a shoddy approach to cleaning, RAF training and life in general.

My diary mentions frequent bull nights followed by four hour polishing sessions. We'd go to bed at 11.30 and get up at 5.30 to continue cleaning and preparing kit. We had breakfast only if we felt we could spare the time, because, by 7.30, bedpacks and kit laid out, we had

to stand to attention at the foot of our beds waiting to be inspected. If not success, we at least expected recognition of the effort we'd put in.

This expectation was nearly always thoroughly dislocated.

Theoretically, there were different levels of inspection: routine and formal, either by the NCOs or the Flight Commander. But, in practice, it didn't seem to matter which type of inspection it was or who did it. We cleaned as thoroughly as possible for all of them, and rarely managed to please anyone.

There were differences though. The inspections by the Flight Commander were quieter affairs, with little ranting, at least until the officer had left. When the NCOs were inspecting, hostile feedback was delivered immediately, and at full volume.

Sometimes an inspection took place while we were at work, and it was several hours before we knew how we'd done. An early sign that the answer was 'badly' was the sight of shoes and boots littering the grass outside the block as we marched towards it. Confirmation came on entering our rooms. Bedding from dismembered bedpacks littered the floor, as did more of our shoes and boots, those that had not been thrown in the rubbish bins. Some had had their toecaps smashed on the metal ends of their beds, causing the polish to crack off, meaning many hours' work to regain a shine from scratch.

A friend corroborated this memory, adding only that the shoes thrown out of his window suffered major damage. He lived on the first floor

My diary and letters indicate that this treatment was unrelenting in the early weeks. It was soul-destroying. But you had to pick yourself up and, hoping for better results next time, do it all over again. And once again, a few of our number, including one of our roommates, decided enough was enough, and withdrew from training. The rest of us bonded into an ever tighter group, one of the main reasons, of course, that the pain was being inflicted on us.

Unless you've been in the Services, or at least their lower echelons, the deference shown to officers must seem very strange. I don't intend to launch into an essay, but there comes a point when, to be truly successful, officers have to earn respect over and above this deference. Recruit training is not one of these points.

We rarely saw the youngish officer who commanded our flight, and we had no idea whether he merited respect for reasons other than his rank. But the mere fact that he held a commission was enough for him to receive our unquestioning deference. We learnt to look through the man to the commission, and defer to that. For the rest of my career, I could call a brick wall sir or ma'am if it held a commission.

In the military, this is necessary, if only to give new commanders time to earn respect. And even if they fail to do so, deference should allow them to perform their leadership function to a minimum standard. But I was prepared to give our flight commander more than the usual benefit of any doubt. In the early days, in my eyes at least, the bright white pilot wings on his chest gave him a god-like quality. Only later did I develop some misgivings about him, doubts that profoundly affected my own approach to being an officer later in my career.

At Swinderby, we were cajoled and bullied into having immaculate kit and upright bearing, and our NCOs maintained similar standards. But some of our flight commanders cut slightly shabby figures, with, by our new benchmark, untidy hair, uniforms and shoes. I saw the same from other officers at many stages of my 32 years' service, and always felt

they were letting the side down. As a result, when I became an officer myself, I tried to maintain a smart appearance. This was especially difficult when wearing a green bag (RAF flying suit), but I must have been one of the last aircrew officers to bull the toecaps of his uniform shoes and flying boots.

I know I didn't make a conscious resolution to do this in those early weeks at Swinderby, but I'm sure it was where the idea originated. It was certainly how I used to rationalise it as a senior officer, when, on Sunday evenings, I didn't always feel like polishing my toecaps for the week ahead.

Although I was one of the older members of my entry, I'd only just started shaving, and some of the younger amongst us had never shaved.

On the first morning, we discovered that bum fluff was no more acceptable than stubble. In the future, everyone was to shave every morning.

It would take some of us days to sprout anything visible, but, somehow, if you omitted to shave, Piggy Tonner could tell. He could also tell if you'd shaved with an electric razor, and this too was unacceptable. You had to wet shave. Skin care specialists would blanch at the results. I rarely cut myself, but some of the others, especially those with the dreaded acne, were always ripping their faces to pieces.

One of my friends relates a story of being stopped by a warrant officer and asked if he'd shaved. When he answered, 'Yes,' the warrant officer growled, 'Did you use a mirror?' On receipt of another timid, 'Yes,' the warrant officer spat, 'Well try using a razor next time,' and marched away.

One incident seems to me to indicate our ongoing transition from civilians into Servicemen. It's not a story to be particularly proud of, but it does make the point.

During my first 18 years in Ludlow, unless I'd played a particularly messy game of rugby or football, I bathed only once a week, and I'm pretty sure I only changed my underwear with the same regularity, or lack of it. As far as I know, all my mates had the same hygiene routine, and I don't remember noticing the smell of those around me. I guess we were all in the same boat; none of us had showers, and my parents only heated enough water for baths once a week, in our case, on a Sunday.

I can't believe my middle class friends and acquaintances at the Grammar School didn't notice my poor hygiene, or that they didn't pass comment. But they didn't; perhaps even they followed a similar routine in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

At Swinderby, the expectation was that everyone would take a daily bath or shower, and change their underwear, if not daily, more often than they had at home. Most of us settled into the routine fairly quickly, realising that with 14 athletic young men in a room, it was very sensible. But every so often, someone had to be encouraged to pick up their soap and towel and head for the ablutions. And some unfortunates just seemed to have body odour problems no matter how often they showered. I shared a room at Halton with one such. He could only avoid verbal lashings by constant bathing and the regular use of a deodorant. Many of us took to using Brut or Right Guard deodorant sprays.

After a few weeks at Swinderby, a lad from another room in our block had earned a reputation for poor personal hygiene through sheer laziness and lack of consideration for others. To be blunt, he stank. He even seemed to think it was funny. In addition, he often failed to put enough effort into either bulling his own personal kit, or cleaning the communal areas. He was forever getting the whole room into trouble.

After failing one particular inspection because of him, his roommates had had enough. We were all invited to witness their solution to the problem.

On entering their room, the miscreant was sat in front of a table behind which sat a fellow roommate wearing a dark blanket and a mop head in a very good imitation of a legal gown and wig. He also gave a very theatrical impression of a judge's arraignment, accusing his roommate of the obvious crimes of poor hygiene and letting down his mates, but adding, 'Making love to a wax facsimile of Mrs Mills.'

I happened to know that Mrs Mills was a rather large pianist liked by my parents. I'd even seen her on television a couple of times. How many of the others had heard of her, I have no idea, but we all collapsed in laughter at the clever turn of phrase. It has stuck with me ever since.

I remember nothing else of the kangaroo court beyond the sentence and its execution. The lad was taken to the ablutions, stripped, placed in a cold bath and washed with scouring powder and stiff bristled scrubbing brushes. Not very edifying, but he never let his room down again at Swinderby, or, as far as I know, during our three years at Halton. Strangely, I don't remember the lad who played the judge at all after this episode; perhaps he left to pursue a career in the law.

The point is that we were learning to police ourselves, making sure individuals didn't let down either themselves or their unit.

Many hours were spent in the gym and on the sports fields, both improving our general fitness and playing games. The Physical Training Instructors always pushed us to exhaustion with runs and/or circuits of various exercises, such as press-ups, sit-ups and star jumps. Some found this aspect of the course especially hard, but I enjoyed it, not only at Swinderby, but throughout my RAF career.

During Ground Defence Training, we learned military skills, including how to dismantle, reassemble, clean and fire the Self-Loading Rifle, and the rudiments of first aid and fire-fighting. But, at the height of the Cold War, a major part of the syllabus was given over to nuclear, biological and chemical warfare training, NBC. This emphasis continued on later courses, and I undertook NBC refresher training and testing at least once a year for the rest of my career.

At Swinderby, they aimed to teach us the theory of nuclear explosions and their aftermath, and how to recognise the signs and symptoms of the various chemical agents that could be used against us: choking and blood agents, and nerve gas. There was little mention of specific biological agents, only a realisation that an enemy could unleash some form of germ warfare. The ultimate aim was to help us survive to launch the aircraft that would take the fight to the enemy.

As our first line of defence, we were issued with protective clothing: camouflaged, all-enveloping NBC suits, special gloves and overboots, and, most importantly, respirators. We learned the buddy-buddy system, the fundamental way servicemen look after one another in all situations. In this instance, it meant checking that our buddy was wearing all his complicated equipment correctly to prevent any contamination getting in.

The culmination of the training was a test of us and our equipment in the CS chamber, a concrete bunker in which CS gas was released. If we'd fitted our kit correctly and learnt our drills, we should be able to minimise our exposure to the gas, although we already knew there was no way we'd be able to avoid it altogether; we'd been told we had

to experience its effects, just to hammer home how important it was to look after our equipment, and especially our respirators.

Immediately you come into contact with it, CS gas makes your eyes water and sting painfully, whilst also making it difficult to breathe and causing you to cough violently. The effects are very unpleasant and only alleviated by fresh air and time, as modern day criminals sprayed by the police will know only too well.

The CS chamber was one of the major tests of character on the Swinderby course. Whether intentional or not, there was a big build up to the event, and lots of stories about just how unpleasant the exposure to the gas would be. On the day, looking like a group of visiting spacemen in our NBC suits and respirators, we filed into the chamber in groups of ten, with two similarly attired instructors. One knelt down and set off – lit – a CS gas pellet, which filled the room with what looked like smoke, while the other guarded the door. I for one was very nervous.

There were three stages at which you could come into contact with the gas. If you were lucky, you avoided the first two.

Firstly, if your respirator didn't fit properly, or had a faulty canister, you felt the effects of the gas immediately the pellet was lit. Those unlucky enough to experience this had to stay put as the panic and pain escalated, holding up their hands until spotted by the instructors, patted on the back and let out. After some time to recover, and some remedial work on their respirators, they'd have to re-enter the chamber with another group.

The second chance to feel the effects came with the changing of the canister screwed into the respirator to the side of your chin. The threads were quite large, but unscrewing an old canister and fitting a new one was not easy, even in the peace and quiet of the barrack block. That morning in the chamber, adrenaline, tension and the presence of CS gas made everything seem that much harder. But, I held my breath, changed the canister first time and blew out to clear any residual fumes, all with the merest whiff of CS.

Inevitably though, some of the others were all fingers and thumbs. They failed to fit the new canister before they ran out of breath and had to inhale. Even then, coughing and spluttering, they had to hold up their hands until one instructor patted them on the back and the other let them out of the door. Once again, they would be given time to recover before being allowed to re-take the canister test with another group.

Finally came the moment the rest of us had been dreading. No matter how successful we'd been so far, there was no escape now. One by one, we had to take off our respirators and shout our number, rank and name until the instructor was satisfied, patted us on the back and let us charge out of the door.

The person before me stuttered over his speech, tried unsuccessfully to pick up where he'd left off as the fumes took hold, and was finally let out before he collapsed.

I took a deep breath, lifted off my respirator and shouted, 'C8019348 Apprentice Technician Powell, corporal.'

With my eyes streaming and my throat burning, I waited for what seemed an age before I felt a pat on the back and stumbled out of the door. Once in the fresh air, I ran into wind trying to blow the gas from my eyes and clear my lungs. I can't remember exactly how long it took to recover. A matter of minutes I think. I'd breathed in much less of the gas than some of the others, but it was enough to last a lifetime.

This was meant to be the only time we'd be forced to feel the effects of CS gas, but we had to do the same drills in a CS chamber as part of our refresher training every year, so

there was always the chance you could be re-acquainted with the horrible stuff. In fact, in later years it became more likely, because they came up with additional actions to perform, such as eating and drinking, decontaminating your respirator, and taking medication.

At some point in the 80s or 90s, CS gas was replaced with something more benign. Thereafter, if your respirator was a poor fit or you made a mistake with your drills, you just received a strong whiff of pear drops. It still made the point, but nowhere near as powerfully as CS. I can't say I mourned its passing.

At Swinderby, as well as the CS chamber and other practical tests in shooting and first aid, we completed written exams in Ground Defence and General Service Training – RAF customs and history. I did well in these, probably because, in contrast to my school studies, I found the subjects interesting, relevant and enjoyable.

In early December, our drill and kit cleaning became increasingly focused on the route lining. We had a final dress rehearsal on 7th December, and left for RAF Halton at lunchtime on the 8th, travelling by train and bus to arrive in the late evening.

Stepping off the bus in the dark canyon between two of Halton's three-storey barrack blocks, with drill NCOs barking the sort of things drill NCOs love barking, it all seemed reminiscent of scenes from the TV series, *Colditz*, being screened at about the same time. My diary calls it, *a bit of a dump*.

We stood out from the other apprentices like a bunch of very prominent sore thumbs. While they were bedecked in colourful badges, hat bands, rank chevrons and Apprentice Wheels, we bore nothing to mark us out as part of the same breed – more of which later. And they were all streetwise, having been in the RAF for a minimum of several months. We, on the other hand, exuded an odour of innocence. They sensed it, the way carnivores sense a tasty meal. We were fair game.

Just to make matters worse, although smart, the other apprentices lacked the glossy sheen to which our NCOs were accustomed. They'd never seen a trainee with a uniform more than 6 weeks old, and interpreted the slightly careworn appearance of the Halton, Locking and Cosford contingents as slovenliness. Worse still, during a break in rehearsals, Corporal Tonner and one of his fellow instructors, Corporal 'Jildy' Smith, marched two of our number up and down in front of the massed ranks of the other apprentices, telling them to note the superior turnout and drill produced in Lincolnshire.

That night, we were raided.

There was very little room-raiding at Swinderby. By the time even the senior flights had finished bulling, sleep was more important than high jinks, and nobody wanted their room or kit trashed before the morning inspections. Where there was the odd sally, I remember fairly friendly affairs, with pillows, lots of laughter and no blood.

The tradition at Halton was somewhat different. At the first shout of *raid*, those quick enough to jump up and confront their attackers with pillows were subjected to a wholly unexpected level of violence that led to cut lips and black eyes. And those that failed to get up quickly enough found themselves upside down, trapped between their bed and the wall, or a radiator. To cuts were added sprains and head injuries, some serious enough to require visits to the medical centre.

Worse still, the medics involved our NCOs. Unused to such things, they escalated everything to the point where those responsible for the mayhem were identified and

charged with assault. Some of our entry had to appear as prosecution witnesses, which made us even more unpopular.

There were no further raids before the route lining, but we knew there'd be trouble when we returned to Halton to begin our technical training in the New Year.

After two more days of rehearsals, 11th December 1973 dawned bright and sunny. At 8pm, several hundred apprentices left Halton for London in a fleet of 13 coaches. Our progress was eased by Police motorcycle outriders who continually raced ahead to block side roads and roundabouts, then overtook and raced ahead again to do more of the same. Being escorted in this way was quite an experience, but increasingly, our attention shifted to the view from the windows.

I'd been through London twice on the way to Biggin Hill. But, on both occasions, I'd taken the tube across town, so I'd seen few of the major tourist sites. Many of the others, probably the majority, had never visited the capital at all, so our excitement mounted as we passed one famous landmark after another.

Eventually, having given us a sight of Buckingham Palace, the buses parked along Horse Guards Road. We disembarked and formed up on Horse Guards Parade, the space to the rear of Admiralty House, Whitehall and Downing Street used for Trooping The Colour - and the Olympic beach volleyball in 2012. At noon, led by the Band of the Royal Air Force, we marched through the arch on the eastern side and into Whitehall. I didn't have far to go, because I was positioned with my back to the Ministry of Defence Main Building, not far from the Cenotaph.

Although I was in the gutter with my heels against the kerb, my pride knew no bounds. The size of the crowds grew steadily, until, at 12.50, we were brought to attention and presented arms in Royal Salute, rifles held vertically in front of our bodies, bayonets fixed.

The first to pass, in a blaze of colour and jangling accoutrements, were two troops of Household Cavalry. They took up the full width of the road, and we'd been told the troopers might try to kick the rifles out of our hands or knock off our hats, so we should tilt our bayonets to make the horses shy away. I followed the advice, but quickly gained the impression that if I was hit by a cavalryman, it would be through incompetence rather than malice. Some seemed barely in control of their horses, and, with the Queen not far behind, they swore like, well... like troopers.

The cavalry were closely followed by an open, horse-drawn coach bearing the Queen and President Mobutu. They passed no more than a few feet from me. I had an unobstructed view that money couldn't buy, and I was being paid for it. Knowing how much people would give for such access, I've always felt privileged to take part in royal occasions, although, at this point, I never dreamt how often I'd come close to members of the Royal Family, or that I'd have two audiences in Buckingham Palace.

Successive coaches contained various Congolese dignitaries, accompanied by the Duke of Edinburgh and Prince Charles, the Duke of Kent and Earl Mountbatten, and the Duchesses of Kent and Gloucester. The coaches were followed by cars carrying government ministers and senior military officers, with a further squadron of Household Cavalry clattering past in the rear, leaving a pungent aroma of horses, and a road littered with dung.

It was all over in a few seconds. The crowds dispersed remarkably quickly and we marched back onto Horse Guards Parade, trying to avoid the piles of horse manure. I was also trying to ignore irrational pangs of guilt at not leaning down to scoop some up for Dad's roses. Before we'd really had chance to take stock, we were back on the coaches and heading for Halton.

Over the next three years and ten more route linings, I discovered there was something very special about being a part of royal ceremonial. The rehearsal process was invariably repetitive and tedious, but the events themselves always engendered a feeling of immense pride, none more so than when, some 17 years later, I stood on Horse Guards again to call in the flypast for The Queen Mother's 90th Birthday Parade.

After our first royal occasion, we snatched a quick meal at Halton and set off for Swinderby, where we arrived at nine in the evening.

We'd been told the Queen was apt to pass comment on the ceremonial if something particularly good or bad caught her eye. Well, we didn't receive royal feedback after this route lining, but the General Officer Commanding London District passed a message, saying, '*Alongside the Household Division, the RAF Apprentices are the professionals of the streets of London*'.

After weeks of being kicked from pillar to post, it was great to hear such praise.

On return to Swinderby, we went to the NAAFI (the airmen's club, pronounced naffey) to watch ourselves on the television news, after which, flushed with pride, my diary says we *sang the senior flight into the ground*.

Singing seemed to play a prominent part in the early years of my RAF career. Not formal singing in a choir, but bar room singing, in joy, or in competition with rival groups, usually with drink taken.

Whether it was a hangover from the First and Second World War, or just something young men did (and perhaps still do), we sang, in the NAAFI, the rugby club and whenever we got on a bus. Although it usually began spontaneously, it was to be expected at some point during any night out, be it with fellow flight or squadron members, or a sports team.

On occasion, the songs could be raucous and rude, the ruder the better, but sometimes, they could be more patriotic or popular, with a real attempt to sing tunefully, even in harmony, for songs like Bread of Heaven or Sloop John B.

The members of Halton Rugby Club were great singers. The Club included many Welshmen, and I learnt at least to mouth many of the popular Welsh language songs, and to sing patriotic English songs, such as Jerusalem and Land of Hope and Glory with great gusto and pride when the opportunity arose.

Singing could also be taunting and confrontational, but I remember it as a substitute for fighting, not a precursor to it like football chants, and it rarely had the ugliness of such tribal goading.

I don't remember any singing during my three years on the Hercules, where we travelled in constantly changing crews of five, passing like ships in the night and rarely coming together as a squadron. But we often ran across fighter squadrons on detachment as a complete unit, singing enthusiastically.

Later, serving as a flying instructor on University Air Squadrons, we often sang, again with a mix of the raucous and rude, and the more tuneful. Even as a wing commander

in the late 1990s, I would joyfully join in, attempting to lead the singing toward the more tuneful end of the Squadron repertoire.

I hope karaoke hasn't totally displaced these spontaneous outbursts.

On our return from London, the NCOs tried to ratchet up the pressure for what should have been the high point of the six-week course, our Passing Out Parade. But, even they seemed to realise that all bar the Leper Colony had already passed their major test by marching before the Queen. So, in the run-up to the Parade, my diary notes more tedium than fear, more sport than drill.

One thing we found out later was that when officers completed a course, they *graduated*, whereas we merely *passed out*. And in the printed programmes for such occasions, officers were accompanied by their *ladies*, while airmen were joined by their *wives*. We imagined the downward progression to a category of apprentices and their *scrubbers*.

Some of the institutional distinctions between airmen and officers, such as segregated toilets and separate doors to enter buildings, would seem absurd today, but I think they owed more to the class system of the early and mid-Twentieth Century than any purely military strictures. Nonetheless, at the time, it reminded me that, as the son of a dustman and an apprentice, I was at the bottom of both the civilian and the military hierarchies.

There were still differences in the treatment of airmen and officers when I retired in 2005, but many of the more ludicrous disparities had disappeared, from the RAF at least.

Over the years, I found that most RAF training courses ended with enjoyable social functions. The message was, if you could survive the pain (intellectual and/or physical) of the majority of the syllabus, the last few days would be good fun. This gave you a target to aim for during the darker days of training, and the events themselves helped foster esprit de corps. Where the end of a course coincided with the run up to Christmas, as it did at Swinderby, this was always a bonus.

Our final few days got off to a cracking start with a dance on the Saturday before the Passing Out Parade. It was attended by the female trainees from a nearby base.

Although the Women's Royal Air Force had been formed in 1949, its members' WRAF acronym was still pronounced Waff, plural Waffs, after the acronym of their predecessors, the Women's Auxiliary Air Force. And, until 1979, WRAFs still did their recruit training at a separate unit: RAF Spitalgate, not far from Swinderby.

During the course of the evening, I got on well with one of the WRAFs. Nothing more than a few dances and a farewell peck on the cheek, with no expectation of ever meeting again, but it earned me more street cred than I'd ever had before, or, if truth be told, have ever had since. She was one of Spitalgate's corporal drill instructors.

I can only say that she was far from the female equivalent of our own Corporal Piggy Tonner. She was young, slim and pretty, and I had no idea of her true identity until later in the evening. Her flight members had told all my mates, but they hadn't told me. Anyway, we had a good time and she left my reputation sky high.

On the Monday, we had our flight party, *a good night*, my diary states. And, on the Tuesday, we had the Airmens' Christmas Dinner, the meal being served by our NCOs and

officers, a Service tradition. It was a jolly occasion with party hats and crackers and lots of banter, and was followed by a cabaret.

After all the fun leading up to it, the Passing Out Parade itself was a bit of an anti-climax. Not because anything went wrong, but because wet weather led to it being held in a hangar rather than on the parade ground. While our instructors had no qualms about marching us up and down in the pouring rain, even they realised it was unfair to make the visiting families suffer while we did it.

Outside on the square, I'm sure the Parade would have been a colourful and enjoyable occasion. Inside a drab hangar, with the music of the band and the shouted orders echoing around the walls, it all seemed disappointingly low key, especially after the route lining in London. My negativity may also stem from the fact that my family didn't attend. Dad no longer drove, and even if they could have afforded the train fare and overnight accommodation, the journey was too long and complicated for them to undertake.

So, on Wednesday 19th December 1973, having successfully passed out of RAF Recruit Training, I travelled home alone, on leave until the New Year, when I was to report to RAF Halton.

I have many of the letters my family sent during the Swinderby course, and over the following three years at Halton. These indicate that all remained well at home. I think this is an accurate reflection of circumstances, because I used to visit frequently for weekends and longer periods of leave, and can recall no domestic dramas or health scares.

My mother was in her father's old house away from the corrosive atmosphere of Dodmore, and a small bathroom annexe was added in 1974, making it much more like a dwelling from the 1970s than the 1930s. Brian became Head Boy of the Secondary Modern School, before doing well in his CSEs and moving up to the Grammar School to take his A Levels.