

SEEMS LIKE YOUR BIRDS HAVE FLOWN

By John Redfern

One morning at 'Stand Easy' in the Fire Station Rest Room at RNAS Stretton or HMS Blackcap during the 1950's all the lads were having their tea, when I called in with a few complimentary sausage rolls from the 'Buffer's Party' when the Fire Officer came in to announce. "Any of you who are off duty this Saturday morning and would like to make a few quid, let me know by lunch time today." "Doing what Boss"? Came the chorused replies. "Well, I've been asked by the local Squire up at the big house and a few of 'The Gentry' if we can provide some 'Beaters' for a pheasant shoot and I know from personal experience that you get 'well lashed up' with a few drinks, big eats and you get paid too". The Boss added as he disappeared leaving the lads, to finish their sausage rolls in peace. There followed a general hubbub of conversation and from the lads who had done this kind of thing before that it was a bit of a doddle and the pay was enough for a good 'run ashore' too. Quite a few of the lads decided they would do it and I agreed to join them. As we handed in our names to the 'Boss' he told us that the 'rig of the day' for Saturday would be simply 'Fire Station Rig' and that 'Pusser's Transport' would pick us up at the main Gate at 9am. And our number had to include at least one Driver.

Saturday morning arrived and the Pusser's Bus patiently awaited us at the Main Gate. about eight of us clambered aboard to the ribald comments of the Duty RPO, Bosun's Mate and Quartermaster which we good naturedly ignored. The general conversation was of course about our task which lay ahead. Arriving some 20 minutes later we saw a number of vehicles already gathered. There were 'Rollers', Bentley's and a few other luxury cars which indicated that 'The Gentry' had arrived and were already taking advantage of the liquid libations provided presumably to "Keep out the morning chill" ? One of our lads remarked drily. We were met by a large red faced man dressed in the customary 'country tweeds' who introduced himself as the Head Gamekeeper. He gave us our briefing. One Driver to remain in the shooting brake at all times with the trailer attached and assist to load the shot birds as they were brought to him. He would then drive the vehicle and trailer back to the Main Hall on the 'Estate'. The remainder, using the sticks provided would 'Beat the Bushes' noisily to 'Flush the Game' up to the 'Guns' following. We would all have a fifteen minute break every hour when the 'Refreshment Vehicle' would follow behind on a pre-arranged route. 'The Beaters' would have a barrel of beer and sandwiches and there would be a half hour break at noon for everyone. There must be at least five Beaters at any one time and his Grace had insisted 'No Crapping in the undergrowth' as there was a 'Portaloo' near to the Assembly Point which meant that we could all happily relieve ourselves in comfort.

Meanwhile, like all good 'Handlers' most of us all carried hip flasks or small bottles of something anyway. A blast on the whistle and we were all away, the 'Beaters' entering into the spirit of things by, 'Oi, Oi Oiing like 'West Country Cider Apple Pickers' and swishing away like demented 'Samurai'. The first hour seemed to go remarkably quickly and we adjusted to this country life quite easily. Perhaps it's because we had been 'nipping at the hip flasks' and we had already had a couple of pints apiece. One of the lads sidled up to me to report "I've sussed the 'Gentry's Booze Waggon'. They've locked the boot but they've only gone and left the bloody Driver's door open so I've borrowed a bottle of Scotch for us to replenish our 'hip flasks'. Flasks duly refilled and the empty bottle returned to the 'Booze Waggon' so as not to arouse suspicion, in case they'd counted them. Bloody Cheek, and us poor Handlers simply doing 'our betters' a favour. I don't suppose for one minute they'd

have noticed anyway. About 2pm. I felt the need to 'relieve myself' at the 'Portaloo'. I noticed that the 'shooting brake' was full to capacity and the trailer was now being used to stack the birds which had been trussed into braces as is the custom apparently. I remember quite clearly having a rather long conversation with the Driver, who incidentally was not one of the Fire Station lads, over a 'Duty Free Cigarette' or two to which he seemed rather partial.

Returning once again to 'The Shoot' the remaining hours seemed to simply fly by and the 4pm. whistle brought everything to a welcome halt. We all mustered back at the 'Assembly Point' to drink what was left of the liquid libation. The 'Shooting Brake' and 'Trailer' had already departed. We all gratefully received our wages with the customary 'tug of the forelock'. Our transport back to Blackcap had already arrived so we piled inside. We were back at Base within 20 minutes a much happier and I have to say wiser bunch.

As we stopped at the Main Gate an extremely irate Duty RPO wearing a rather agitated look waved us down and scrambled onboard the Bus. "Which of you buggers drove the bloody shooting brake"? He demanded. We all looked at each other blankly. "Come on don't bugar around, which of you drove the vehicle with all the pheasants in"? He bellowed with some exasperation and which again met with blank looks. "None of us here RPO, they apparently had their own driver ". I managed to blurt out as the others nodded their agreement. "It seems they bloody well didn't because the entire load of pheasants has bloody disappeared into thin air"? I ventured to suggest to a now quite furious Duty RPO that as we were all present and 'luggage less' it couldn't have been any of us could it now. The now demented RPO almost leapt off the Bus after one of the lads remarked "It seems as though the birds have flown RPO doesn't it"? "Go on all of you just 'Piss Off" He fumed as all the lads managed an ironic cheer. A shower then a couple of pints in the NAAFI Club before the next bus to maybe Warrington, Wigan, Widnes, St Helens, or maybe even Manchester or Liverpool. After all, where else would you manage to sell three hundred brace of pheasants at thirty bob a brace.

PROVIDING OF COURSE YOU ALREADY HAVE AN OUTLET