

THE 'SLIPSTREAM' CLUB

I left HMS Albion in 1956 and received a preference draft to the RNAS Stretton, HMS Blackcap a 'stone frigate' near Warrington, Lancashire (Now Cheshire) Assigned to Fire Station duties with a few of my shipmates from Albion. We were joined by a few more lads who had just completed 'seagoing commissions' on Eagle, Bulwark and Centaur. It was apparent from the outset that 'Blackcap' was slowly being 'run down' as a front line Fleet Air Arm Air Station and was in fact like a few more wartime Air Stations was being 'de-commissioned' prior to be sold off.

Whilst at the Fire Station I was approached by one of the Chief Writers responsible for Base Administration to ascertain if I would be prepared to undertake the general day to day responsibility for the running of the 'Slipstream Club' He and his staff would of course still retain overall responsibility for the club but the general cleanliness, ordering and arranging the occasional events formed the main part of my duties when I was re-assigned to the 'Barrack Master's Party'.

One of the reasons for them asking me was simply the fact that I had some little knowledge of the Licensing Trade as members of my family were actively involved in it. My Cousin operated a very successful 'Working Men's Club' about 20 miles away. As I could not combine my duties at the Fire Station my general 'part of ship' was exchanged for duties with the 'Barrack Master's Party' who operated from the Main Camp area. The common name for my new colleagues was 'The Buffer's Party' and from the very beginning of my new job I immediately realised the tremendous financial potential if one 'screwed one's nut'.

My new Boss 'The Buffer' was the redoubtable CPO 'Buck' Taylor an old Seaman Chief with more than 40 years service in the Royal Navy. 'Buck' was nearing the end of his enlistment and it was customary to offer a final draft chit near to his home to be ready for 'demobilisation' in a few short months time. He was one of life's rare gentlemen and idolised by everyone from Officer's his fellow NCO's but mainly his men whom he always referred to as 'His Lads' He was easy going and as long as he had a couple of bottles of his favourite tippie he was a happy man. He was never demanding as a Boss and preferred to let things 'run themselves' The Buffer had his own little 'perks' as did everyone else in his 'Party' His particular perk was his smallholding a couple of miles away where he kept pigs and chickens and an allotment tended by one of the local old boys who lived nearby. We used we used all the accumulated gash waste food from the galley to feed them. Most of the 'Buffers Party' used to help each other out from time to time and it soon became quite obvious that unless we all consolidated our individual enterprises and became organised we could lose out 'perks wise' that is. During one of our famous morning 'Stand Easy's' the Buffer chaired an impromptu meeting with all 'The Lads' in his party. As I was involved with the 'Slipstream Club' and already had developed some very useful contacts indeed it was unanimously agreed that I would unofficially manage and generally 'keep an eye' on all our interests and see that we were never 'ripped off' I knew Grammar School and HET would come in handy one day.

When I first arrived in the 'Buffer's Party' the standard perks were already well established. Their main objective and 'Remit' in the form of promulgated 'Daily Orders' were the Commanding Officer's written orders in the de-commissioning of the base programme involving civilian contractors supervised closely by the Naval personnel of the 'Buffer's

Party'. As the once operational airfield was systematically being cleared with everything clearly defined as 'For Sale and Disposal by Contract' or 'For Destruction'. In addition to this there was the weekly 'Fuel Run' to the nearby stores depot at Riseley when we collected a load of firewood which we later distributed to houses in the Married Quarters. If we chopped it up then there was naturally a small surcharge which went into the 'Financial Pool'. Having already made the acquaintance of a chap in the Railway Goods Yard nearby he was able to supply me with a few sacks of coal and coke in return for reciprocal favours which in turn allowed us to provide 'Blackcap' with an additional fuel supply on a regular basis.

Meanwhile I had been extremely fortunate indeed to have established good contacts with the nearby USAF Base at Burtonwood where fairly regular visits with the 'Yanks' had now become commonplace and several social events had gone on since the war. The nearby American Base provided a 'stopover' for their military aircraft flying to their bases in Europe and allowed their personnel to obtain regular 'home comforts' which we could only dream about in the UK. The USAF personnel were entitled to a regular 'liquor allowance' of two litres of spirits per month and they each held a ration card to shop and purchase at their PX (NAAFI) on their Base. As my relationship and contacts improved particularly with their Supply Sergeants who practically ran the base, there was very little that I could not get hold of. I even held a couple of ration cards of guys who had returned to the States. As long as I was not too greedy I was able to obtain items such as 'real coffee' and tins of food from the States together with toys and liquor and cigarettes. The latter two being a particular favourite of the Buffer's, which him happy and contented. My own little 'arrangements' included a flourishing 'antiques/object' d'art' sideline and regular trade with the 'Yanks' who were anxious to take a 'little bit of England' back to the States and anything which was likely to 'make a few quid' or involved the civilian contractors. nothing was overlooked no matter how insignificant it may have seemed and everything was discussed at the morning 'Stand Easy's'

Gradually the Buffer's Party became involved in Removals, gardening, grass cutting, decorating and even road repairs. I even had daily contact with a local Bookmaker whom I usually met at our local pub 'The Thorn' which literally divided the two sites 'Ark Royal' and 'Glorious Sites'. The pub was the focal point of most of our activities as it was away from 'prying eyes' and afforded a little more privacy. The Buffer's Party soon got the reputation of 'Anything You Need, We Can Provide' or 'We Can Do The Improbable Immediately, The Impossible Might Take a Couple of Days'. All of our Party carried Blue 'Special Duties' Station Cards which allowed us to practically come and go as we pleased. As our activities were inclined to benefit everyone in general they were largely ignored and many 'Blind Eyes' were often turned. Blackcap was indeed a happy place but at times a little short on entertainment. Many of the Base personnel were RA men and lived ashore and apart from the NAAFI and the local pub there was little to occupy them. It therefore followed the logical request to try and resurrect the 'Slipstream Club' even for a morale boosting short time and to relieve the tedium.

With regard to the 'Slipstream Club' the Chief Scribe and his staff were absolute 'diamonds' as they gave me almost a free hand with regard to organising functions which usually realised a profit to such an extent whenever I had a proposed 'Social Evening' they merely endorsed my requests by simply saying "Just Go for It" or "Let's Try It"?, which I invariably did. Subsequent involvement with the local Breweries therefore was essential and thanks mainly to my Cousin and his advice, I tended to take full advantage of the 'special offers' which from time to time they chose to promote. For example, if they were

attempting to promote the increasingly popular European Lager I would simply threaten to undercut them by obtaining my supplies directly from Germany, courtesy of the USAF 'Airlifts' via the Base at Burtonwood. Similarly I would do the same with any of their forthcoming 'Promotional Evenings' when we had an 'Open Invitation' to attend them. My 'Trump Card' was the uniformed appearance of USAF personnel which swung matters to our advantage on more than one occasion.

The brief re-incarnation of the 'Slipstream Club' at the Base lasted unfortunately for just a few short months. I have to say at the outset, success was due entirely to the involvement with 'The Yanks' who, for some time had, on their own Base introduced the 'Latest Craze From the States', namely 'Discotheques' which for the uninitiated meant, venues where the latest records could be played on sophisticated sound systems in private members clubs and the like. This craze had already spread from New York, Paris and London and really was 'The 'In' Thing' back in those days. These little 'Social Evenings' were very popular with the local girls and one evening when a bunch of us visited a Warrington Dance Hall. There was a local girl vocalist named Edna Savage who was extremely good and singing with the Harry Jarman Band. She later became famous in her own right when she married the 'Pop' singer Terry Dene. At the time Edna worked as a Telephonist with the GPO at their Warrington Switchboard and whenever we held a 'Social Evening' at the Base she used to bring some of her companions to join in the fun.

Prior to this it was decided to renovate the tired old wartime building which had been the 'Slipstream Club'. The Buffer's Party excelled themselves by reclaiming some of the materials recently demolished on the Airfield such as wall panelling, 'Anderson' roofing, new doors. A little concreting and help from the civilian contractors. A new deck and 'quarticine' flooring was scrounged and the remainder of the décor from equally dubious sources. As there was no cellar at the Club we extended one of the old 'de-contam' blocks where the beer was kept ice cold by the ingenious method of regularly hosing down with cold water. Everyone on the Base really 'dug out' to ensure success. The beer pumps were cleaned twice each week and the club was equal to any private club in the area. There was always a buffet and occasionally a 'hot curry' or 'chilli' on the colder evenings. The Breweries contributed the occasional 'freebies' such as barrels of beer, whilst the 'Yanks' on one occasion they managed to scrounge half a dozen cases of Puerto Rican white rum over 100% proof so we arranged a 'Caribbean Evening', with music by a West Indian Steel Band from Liverpool which turned out to be quite memorable as were many others, arranged quickly and at very short notice. The 'Cycle Speedway', 'the Drawing Contest', 'Paddy's Lethal Moonshine', 'The Dwile Flonking'. All were products of 'The Slipstream Club'

The decline of the club, sadly was inevitable, the rapidly depleting personnel, myself included, deciding it's eventual fate and it was therefore considered uneconomically feasible to continue and it's doors were finally closed in early 1957. One can only surmise the possibilities of the overall success of the 'Slipstream Club' had they been fully realised and utilised from the outset but like everything else any venture such as this is largely dependent on the support it receives and with great sadness this 'Legendary' institution and characters faded into Fleet Air Arm History.

THE SONG MAY BE ENDED BUT THE MELODY LINGERS ON

