

Betty Hockey's tale of the "Non Stops" Concert Party

I ran a Southern Command Concert Party for the Forces during WWII, clocking up well over 1600 Shows prior to "D"Day I naturally have fond memories of each one of the New Forest Airfields.

We were rather a large Party of some 16 Artistes and with four Shows meant that we could return to *any* Station four nights in a row without using the same programme. Being well dressed and a very lively show we were in great demand performing around five nights each week. There was never a dull moment. We were called 'The Nonstops' as we ran through complete two hours without stopping for an interval. We found that the best feature as the boys had no excuse to dive off to the bar and not return. Not that they needed *any* persuasion whatsoever to remain, they enjoyed every moment and we were given wonderful receptions and asked to return time and time again.

Beaulieu, Holmsley, Hurn, Ibsley and Stoney Cross were the main Airfields where we gave so many, many shows and 10 ton trucks brought in personnel from the smaller airfields. Mostly Gym or Cinema huts were used as theatres, all pretty grotchy with concrete or wooden floors and either hard chairs or forms for seating. I guess many a bottom ached after solid two hour sitting, but strangely enough no one ever complained.

There were stories to tell of each station. Beaulieu for instance has made me recall how desperately short we were of petrol in spite of there being - and still is - an Army petrol depot nearby in Bournemouth. Not one tot could we ever receive from there, yet two miles along the road where the U S Forces were based, we could have many jerrycans full.

So, for Beaulieu I made a habit of carrying a distilled water container and this would be exchanged for a full load of petrol, mostly aviation which stank to high heaven. This supply would then be used for the cars transporting the Concert Party and the next session I would pull into a Farmer's barn in Sway and exchange it for a couple of chickens. I supposed this transaction could have been called a mild form of Black Market, but then these sorts of things were happening all the time. One had to take *any* advantage of what might on offer - or go without.

Having a pleasant affiliation with the New Forest Police they always jokingly said that 'they would get me one day'. So, coming out of Beaulieu Airfield with my 'loot' one day I spotted the Police car near by at the entrance. Horror of horrors! Did I proceed as if nothing awry, with the windows solidly closed and maybe asphyxiate or did I drive with windows open for them to smell? I do not recall which of the two chances I took but I do know I put my foot down, driving as correctly as possible with one eye on the wing mirror until I got to a bend in the road near the Farm. Then I truly let the car GO, quickly turned into the farm, straight into a barn and then saw them go by thank goodness. Whether they knew or not I shall never know, I guess.

I will leave the story of Holmsley to the last as that was the most poignant of all to relate.

So we come to Hurn with entirely different flavour. The 397th U.S. Bomb Group were stationed there for only a few weeks but they certainly left their mark. By sheer coincidence it turned out to be our I00th Show to the Americans and their I00th Bombing Mission that same night. The show was a busy one with the Air Crews coming and going and when we realised it was their I00th Mission we stayed on after the show to welcome them back. Eerily enough every one of them returned safe and sound without damage. It was truly unbelievable. The Crews were so excited that they circled over the Airfield and let off the very lights in celebration that promptly caught the farmer's field of wheat alight. They were not very popular either, as there were fire engines about all over the place, and Hurn was lit up like many Christmas trees. It was akin to saying 'come on Jerry, we are all lit up waiting for you'. I am afraid they never lived that down and were certainly reminded of it when I arranged for 48 of them to come back some years ago.

This group was typical of the Yanks in all degrees. The night they were to move from Hurn to Normandy they started piling the fleet of many bicycles onto the planes. These bicycles were in most camps for ALL to use to get from one place to another and they thought, I suppose, that they did not belong to anybody in particular. However, they were stopped in time and the bikes taken from the B26 bombers. In revenge they threw each one onto the roof of a hut. They maybe thought that, that if they could not have them, then nobody else will anyway.

Another trick they got up to when they were to throw a party or dance and they needed to contact the Nurses around, so they modelled a series of hankies with notes duly pinned on, then tied a stone to each corner of the hanky. They then had a small scout plane which they would take off and then all these messages fall on Poole, Boscombe and the military Hospital at West Moors.: yes, they never failed to get all the girls they needed.

Ibsley was quite a large Airfield and had many mixed crews. We just loved giving shows there. But as far as I remember there were no specific stories to tell there at that time. But, many years later I meandered around and found the hut which teamed as a theatre and to my surprise in the old derelict dressing room I spotted a theatrical hamper right in the middle of the floor. The place was completely empty, stripped bare with no doors or windows left either. I could not believe my eyes, that after all those years, there stood that hamper full of lovely theatrical clothes. Who had LEFT them there? Why? They had obviously been there for a very long time. As we kept the Concert Party going for well after the War - until 1948 to be precise, naturally these costumes were of great benefit to us. Again an opportunity not to be missed. Did anybody miss them I wonder? I doubt it as they had obviously been forgotten.

Now for Stoney Cross. A very bleak airfield, up high in the New Forest. But the atmosphere as warm as it could possibly be.

I remember so well going there one day and before the Show the boys had asked us to get out there early as they had something in mind. Well, they piled us in Jeeps and there we were stretched out in a straight line wondering what on earth was to happen. With the Yanks one never knew to expect. Then along came a plane taking off, so too did the jeeps and there we all were chasing the plane to see who could get to the end of the runway first before the plane left the ground. I believe they called it 'Asses Chase'.

Another thing those Yanks of Stoney Cross did to get their Girls. They would cruise along Bournemouth sea front in their jeeps, then would jump out, grab a girl, put her in a jeep and away they went to Stoney Cross for the evening or such. Of course the following jeep would then snatch the first girl's friend and so on. They arrived back at Stoney Cross taking bets as to which jeep had the best girls.

The final story of the New Forest Airfields must surely be Holmsley. Very different in context to all the others airfields although we did have some wonderful happy times there.

It was "D Day eve and we gave a show which seemed remarkable considering the seriousness of the situation because everybody KNEW that something vastly huge was just about to take place, though I think few people realised on what scale. It was to be an INVASION of some sort. Naturally under the circumstances we considered ourselves to be honoured indeed to entertain those brave lads at this final devastating night as it turned out to be.

A huge marquee was erected in the bend of road leading to Southampton and we were told that it would be noisy indeed. It sure was. There were trucks, ambulances and tanks rumbling by on the road and on the other side of the marquee the planes were busily taking off. The Aircrews were coming and going and the situation was busy indeed.

Because of so much activity we decided to sing the National Anthem and the Star Spangled Banner BEFORE the show rather than after. We sang the anthem in what appeared to be silent reverence then commenced on the Star Spangled Banner as there were a lot of U.S. Forces there alongside our British Troops. Just after starting those boys 'took it away from us' and sang and sang and sang their hearts out. We

felt helpless and did nothing but just stood there with tears falling heavily from the entire Cast. We really did NOT know WHY we cried, we just did with the enormity of the atmosphere around. Nobody then realised just HOW serious, nor HOW big this night turned out to be. Eventually we carried on with the Show but the atmosphere was intense.

The following morning there was not a serviceman nor truck or tank to be seen. It was as if the earth had been swiped clean by a sharp bayonet. It was then, and only then, after listening to the radio I realised fully what HAD happened that night whilst we all safely slept. I got around to thinking and wondering how many of those brave lads made it that night. How many had to pay the price for our freedom.

If some did not make it, were they maybe humming a tune they had just heard from our show? I would like to think so, BECAUSE THEN, AND ONLY THEN WOULD WE KNOW WE HAD DONE THE JOB WE WERE THERE FOR - THAT OF HELPING TO KEEP UP THE MORALE OF THOSE FORCES. Unfortunately, it is something we shall NEVER know, but I do know that each time I go out to what was - Holmsley Airfield, I can hear those voices wafting in the wind and breeze. It will be something I shall NEVER forget.

I know I can voice for the rest of the Concert Party when I say that each one of us were grateful for whoever 'stuck their neck out' to permit us to be there that final evening. We were privileged indeed.

I have had the privilege also to keep contact with many U.S. Groups and in fun, made an honorary Colonel of two Units of the United States. That of the 22nd U.S. General Hospital, and the 397th. U.S. Bomb Group which was stationed at Hurn Airport. In addition to this I have the much prized and cherished Honorary Citizenship Award to the State of Maryland presented by the Governor of the State with several added citations.

Betty Hockey.