

RAF Hornchurch. (from March 1951 to January 3rd 1953) David Wiltshire

This long established fighter station had been in the thick of the Battle of Britain situated as it was on the Thames Estuary but was now the place where candidates for aircrew selection were tested.

The small building where we were to learn all about the testing procedures and how to carry them out and collate the results was next to our accommodation block and the course, involving about 15 new arrivals started straight away. We were to be trained as Personnel Selection Assessors....what a grand title?

To begin with we were told all about why aptitude tests for aircrew were introduced. In the early days the RAF's selection processes were rather haphazard. If you played Rugby you were considered officer material. If you also rode a horse then you were suitable to learn to pilot a plane. Unfortunately that didn't work out and the number of training accidents brought about a more scientific method of selection which we were to become part of.

I will come to the tests themselves later but at this stage we had to learn how to put over the instructions for each test by keeping strictly to the written words and, in effect, reading them as "deadpan" as possible. Regional accents didn't matter but there was to be no scope for individuality and certainly not to put over the "patter" from memory or in an individual manner. Every day we would have to practice this and listen to the others doing their stuff. The object of course was to make every test the same for every candidate.

The other important aspect of the job was the use of statistics in dealing with the test results. We studied statistical analysis in more depth than was needed but it filled the time. An example of Parkinson's law in practice; that is "work expands to fill the time available for its completion". The most important thing we learned was that every test was allocated a weighting factor considered appropriate for each aircrew category which were, Pilot, Navigator, Engineer, Signaller and Gunner. The test result was multiplied by that figure for each category. Some tests were very important for pilots and a good result in an important test multiplied by the top weighting of 9 gave a great boost to a successful outcome.

At the end of the four week course most of us were posted to The Aptitude Testing Section a few hundred yards away and I was one of them. A couple were sent to recruitment offices in the UK and would be living at home and two others were going abroad to large RAF bases in The Middle East. They would be involved in different aspects of selection.

Aptitude Testing Section.

We arrived in the section and found that our entry was the first by people who were not University graduates or had been deferred to obtain a professional qualification,

So they were all rather older than we were and a number were extremely disaffected by having been told a few months earlier that their service was extended from 18 months to two years . Some had jobs lined up and careers to resume and they were very annoyed. It was due to the outbreak of the Korean war and other emergencies in Kenya and Malaya. That all cut no ice with those affected but at least they were safe in the UK. Many young National Servicemen were killed and injured in these conflicts. The Aptitude Testing Section (ATS) was manned by a Flight Lieutenant, two National Service Pilot Officers, a regular sergeant whose main job was to organise the testing rotas, a very talented electrician to keep the machine tests running and the rest of us, consisting of almost 60 acting corporals. We were given two stripes to give us some degree of authority, not that some of the already serving candidates took that seriously.

The machine tests mentioned were designed to reveal aptitude for certain jobs and the most important ones for would be pilots were the ones involving keeping a wandering white dot in the middle of a square in the centre of a cathode ray tube and a revolving metal cylinder with a pathway of holes over which, using a small steering wheel, you guided a pointer. The holes diverged in number so it was necessary to look ahead and chose the best path. Every connection gained another point on the counter in a box at the top of the room.

The dot in the cathode ray tube was controlled by a rudder bar and joystick. Lights flashed on to put you off. Every time the dot left the box a score was recorded against you.

Other tests involved listening to sets of Morse Code signals and you had to indicate on a sheet whether they were the same or different and square pegs with round tops painted black and white which had to be turned round and out back into their holes. This was designed to reveal finger dexterity and you had 30 seconds to turn as many as you could manage

Written tests were all multi choice and one was considered very important in the selection of pilots. Pictures of aircraft instruments were accompanied by pictures of a plane in various positions. The instruments were showing you which aircraft picture was relevant. That is if you understood what it was all about. You listened to the instructions and you were away with no asking questions.

The Job.

This involved face to face testing with the candidates or marking the test papers and collating the results which were all recorded and also put onto an early punch card system. I much preferred the testing routine and several times found people I knew from school sitting in front of me and they included one of our members, Bill George who was selected for pilot and went on to fly Meteors.

The people I worked with were a very agreeable and, in some cases, eccentric in the extreme. Those whose service had been extended were rather resentful of authority, without doing anything too out of order but they did give our regular sergeant the runaround at times.

Our Flt Lt had an office and wandered around occasionally but quite what he, or the two Pilot Officers actually did was not readily apparent. The POs were both from an acting background, and none other than Ronnie Corbett and Edward Hardwicke, who became very well known for his roles on TV in *The Colditz Story* and as Dr Watson in *Sherlock Holmes*.

In numerical terms we were overmanned but in practice so many of our number were involved in other things that everyone available was needed.

Some would be on leave, others playing sport, playing in the Station Band (which I was able to join) and some on educational courses which were on offer and so popular they had to be rationed.

Music

Joining the Station Band was possible as they ran beginners' classes for those wishing to learn an instrument. I had learned the piano so could read music and I ended up with the E flat Bass Tuba. I worked hard and in late summer I found myself on parade with the band. Belonging to it was quite a commitment as we practised every morning from 8.30 to 10.30, except on Thursday when there was a big parade. We marched on playing a march, played the RAF General Salute while the flag was raised, some bouncy music while the Guard of Honour was being inspected and then marched off usually to our own RAF Hornchurch March.

There were also two other practices in the evening every week from 4.30 to 6.30. The perks attached to band membership in my case were to be excused from being Orderly Corporal and being in the Fire Picket. We also took on some outside engagements and I remember playing at the AOC's inspection parade at RAF North Weald and going by train to RAF Kirton in Lindsey to play at the group sports. Some other outside events were more local

Before I joined up I had started to develop an interest in Classical Music and being so handily placed to get into London I was able to attend concerts at the newly opened Royal Festival Hall and elsewhere and opera, for the first time at Sadlers Wells and Covent Garden.

I have always been so grateful for the opportunities I had to widen my musical world.

Sport.

I had taken up hockey two years before joining up and I played for the station hockey team regularly. We went far and wide in meeting other RAF teams in Cup Competitions including Cranwell, Manston in Kent and Kenley near Croydon as well as matches against service teams around the London area. The players came from a number of sections on the camp and included the officer in charge and a number of players who had learned their hockey serving abroad.

We also had an intersection football league in which our section did well as we had more to choose from than any other.

In the summer I played for the tennis team and mainly in the RAF London League.; We went as far as RAF Benson, well over 100 miles, in a Standard Vanguard pick up truck. Two of us were in the front with the driver and the other four in the open back of the vehicle. Luckily it was a nice day so didn't need to erect the canvas cover. It was before motorways so our trip took us right through London and of course it just couldn't happen today.

Other happenings.

As well as the Aircrew Selection the camp housed a few other activities:-

A Bristol Beafighter aircraft was there and used to pull a target drone over the Royal Artillery range at Shoeburyness. That ended one day in disaster when it had to make a forced landing on the Maplin Sands. The crew of two were rescued and found sitting on the tailplane having a cigarette .

A number of Chipmunk trainers were kept in one of the big hangers. They were needed to enable the many Officers (most involved in interviewing the aircrew candidates) who had pilot qualifications to keep up their flying hours.

The other large hanger was full of emergency equipment like field kitchens and tents for use if the airfield had to house military personnel to keep the London Docks running should there be another dock strike. Two airmen were tasked all the time with sweeping the floor of the hanger to cut down dust which would have caused a fire hazard.

Finally and a fine job for two National Service airman, there was a small pig farm and these two chaps were boiling up pig swill from stuff collected from the canteens. How would that job look on their CVs when looking for work later on?

Final thoughts.

I landed in my job as a Personnel Selection Assessor because I had my Proficiency Certificate from my time in the RAF section of the Combined Cadet Force at school. That entitled me to nominate my trade and I stuck out for it whenever I was asked what I wanted to do.

The section I was in ran very smoothly it seemed and the overall impression I had at the end of my service that I had survived in a type of boarding school but with, arguably, less discipline. The people were such an interesting bunch too so I look back on it with some affection. Would I want to do it again? Definitely not!