

Dear Sally,

When last heard from I was still in England, awaiting shipment to India, but advising that I had more to say about my time at Harwell.

I should explain, I suppose, that Air Force units were characteristically organised into a number of smaller units, called flights. A squadron, for instance, was split into two flights which would share the twenty-four crews and sixteen aircraft. My flight was sent for training from Harwell to a nearby satellite airfield at Hampstead Norris.

But before getting to Hampstead Norris, I should allow a paragraph for my friend, Bill Newman, with whom I had come from South Cerney. We were told on arrival at Harwell that there were two pilots too many for the current course and the Unit administrator, Squadron Leader Snowdon, asked for volunteers to do some painting in one of the hangars. Bill quickly sized up the situation. Spotting the chance of some leave, since the painting would clearly not occupy the two week gap between courses, he volunteered for both of us. The painting turned out not to be too much of a chore. Bill was very adept and did the lion's share, but every fifty minutes or so he would take time off for a smoko. This was not a problem until Snowdon happened to catch him at it.

"Newman", he said, "You'll be on a charge if this happens again; smoking in hangars is highly dangerous."

Bill was from the wheat-fields around Toowoomba and replied; "I appreciate the danger, sir, it's about half as dangerous as smoking in the wheatfields where I come from." But thereafter he took care to move out of the hangar before taking his smokos.

After the painting we took our leave and Bill put his to such good effect that, after accompanying the band at the Gremlin Club in singing "You'll never know just how much I love you" he was given an open invitation

to return which, since he had made a hit with one of the bar girls he was initially keen to accept. But not much grass grew under Bill's feet and, by the time of his next leave, other priorities had intervened.

While Bill was doing this, I was finding some need to assure the folks at home that I was not wasting the opportunity for cultural improvement that West End theatre offered. So I indulged myself by watching such stars as Anton Walbrook and Diana Wynyard in "Watch on the Rhine", Roger Willesey (later of Colonel Blimp fame) and Deborah Kerr in Shaw's "Heartbreak House", Kay Hammond and I think Constance Cummings as that wonderful blond spirit in Noel Coward's "Blithe Spirit", Robert Helpman and Margot Fonteyn in Swan Lake as well as a Somerset Maugham play called Sheppey which delivered some effective blows against the English class system. I rather wish I had gone to Ivor Novello's "Dancing Years". Instead, I went straight from an afternoon performance of Heartbreak House to a rather inferior wartime performance of "The Marriage of Figaro."

All of this must have been too much high culture in too short a time for it broke my spirit. I spent the next day, with almost every other RAAF airman in London it seemed, watching Phyllis Dixey, Britain's first lady of the strip tease, remove all of her garments save the bare essential. And after that, I descended even lower and attended the infamous Windmill Theatre where the ladies of the chorus were allowed to remove even the bare essential so long as they stood stock still while the lights were on. And one of these days I will tell you about the Windmill's unforgettable spoof performance of the "Spectre of the Rose" ballet*.

Getting back to Hampstead Norris, every night there seemed to be a dance somewhere in the vicinity, at villages called Milton and Chilton and the like and every free night after supper (the RAF gave you four meals daily, breakfast, lunch, tea and supper, the latter two being equally frugal) my friends and I would say "Not tonight, definitely not tonight." But

we'd agree to have just one beer in the mess before retiring. Then someone, probably Newman, would say, "Let's see what's on at the New Inn", a tiny establishment which was Hampstead Norris's one pub. We knew what would be on of course; flat beer mild or bitter and Hughie, the village character, who needed no urging to give his version of "If I had my way, there would always be, A garden of roses for you and for me, A thousand and one things I would do, Just for you, only you. If I had my way you would never grow old, And sunshine I'd bring every day. You would reign all alone, Like a queen on a throne, If I had my way."

Hughie's rendition would usually be enough to send us roistering into the night, linked arm in arm, and singing at the top of our voices and not caring who might be listening as we passed those old village houses. But we were heading for Milton or Chilton and lusty singing always seemed to make the distance shorter.

All was not play of course. Shortly into our training I was indiscreet enough to turn up to church parade wearing an old pair of civvy black brogue shoes which I had brought from Australia. As Newman and I had decided we would take the alternative to church, which was dinghy drill on the Thames and the location for this was conveniently coincidental with the Swan Inn at Streatley/Goring I didn't think this mattered. But our Flight Commander, Jimmie James, thought otherwise.

"McCredie,"

"Yes sir."

"Those shoes are unacceptable."

"They're Australian issue," I replied, leading Newman to guffaw and Bos Boswell, an amiable cockney with an inexhaustible repertoire of foul jokes, to comment "Irish brogue?"

But Jimmie muttered, perhaps something like "Smart bastard" and moved on with his inspection of the parade. But, if I'd hoped he might forget the incident I was shortly to be disabused.

We were being groomed for night flying operations over Europe so, once we had gained competence in daylight flying our training would consist mostly of night flying exercises. These had their own hazards; one crew on the course Newman and I had dodged had "gone in" on approach. Briefings for night exercises were always designed to help crews foresee the hazards. So, when our turn came for our first night exercise you might be able to guess who it was that Jimmie picked on to explain what he should do in the event of an engine catching fire, a not unprecedented happening in our ancient crates. This time my ready reflexes deserted me and I stammered something sufficiently unintelligible for Jimmie to say;

"Right McCredie, you just repeat, sentence by sentence as I explain to you what you should do." Red-faced, I had no alternative but to comply.

As things turned out this was one of those strokes of luck which every flyer needs. My lesson had been learnt. Perhaps it was a couple of weeks later when we were on another night exercise that I heard the alarmed voice of Flight Engineer, Jock Campbell who was sitting alongside me in the cockpit;

"Skipper, the starboard engine's on fire."

Looking across I could see orange flames escaping through the joins in the metal engine cowl. With Jimmie's lesson fresh in my mind I feathered the starboard engine propellor and doused the flames with the fire extinguisher, while ordering each crew member in turn to bale out and acknowledge before doing so. This done, it was necessary to follow emergency landing procedures, which were to call

"Hello darkie, hello darkie, hello darkie, this is (aircraft identification number), mayday, mayday, mayday".

As luck would have it I was close to Silverstone airfield (now the formula one race track) where I was given priority to land and managed the single engine landing quite acceptably. Meanwhile T., my navigator, had preferred to take his chances with me rather than bale out and, as I got to the ground I noticed that he was crouching down behind me. Which of us was the more relieved I'm not sure, but the incident did me no harm. The rest of the crew had parachuted safely and I was to receive a green endorsement (commendation) in my log book for this and it is probably the reason why, for the only time in my career, I received an above average rating at the end of a course. But, as Newman and Boswell were also rated above average, it may also have been that Jimmie was a pretty lenient marker.

Another excitement during the course was to carry out leaflet dropping raids over France. The first of these was on the Normandy coast, and quite uneventful. On the second we took the Christmas message to Paris and dropped it at Mantes-Gassicourt, some distance north of the capital.

The carburettors, and the leading edges of the wings of our poor old Wimpey iced up and we couldn't climb any higher than eight thousand feet, which made us vulnerable to even light anti-aircraft fire if we got off course.. This, however, is precisely what we did. T's directions took us over a heavily defended town called Lisieres. The Wellington had a cloth fabric skin drawn tightly over what was called a geodetic fuselage aluminium frame. and the flak for a few seconds which seemed like an eternity made a noise on it which sounded like a boy running a stick along a picket fence. When we got back, after being further off course and caught in searchlights over Portsmouth, we found two holes; one about the size of a shilling (ten cents to you) in the lower fuselage, and a small one in the perspex screen in front of me.

In all of the to-do on the way home, I had forgotten that Dave Griffith (of whom more later) was in the unheated rear gun turret, which he needed to occupy while there was a threat of attack. But I can still hear his plaintive voice over the intercom as we neared base saying "Can I come out now skipper?" It had been cold enough in the pilot's compartment but Dave had nearly frozen. .

On returning from this raid, I retrieved a fragment of one of the leaflets, which had been caught in the bomb bays and sent it home as a souvenir, where it was carefully preserved by your Aunt Marjorie and subsequently handed back to me.

On completion of OTU we were all given leave, which took in Christmas. I spent this in the lovely coastal village of Cawsand/Kingsand, Cornwall with the Nancarrows, old family friends whose hospitality I had frequently enjoyed. Getting back to base I found that Butch Smith, who will feature a lot in the story I have started to tell you, had made himself the object of much ribaldry. Butch had spent Christmas on base. and so had a rather notorious parachute girl, one who wore her souvenirs on a broad leather belt. These comprised the regimental badges and other insignia of those whose scalps, you might say, she had taken. And now, she had added to that collection the wings of a RAF pilot, while Butch had been unable, since the store was closed over Christmas, to replace the wings from his battle jacket. "She took advantage of me while I was pissed" was all he could say.

Having said all of this about Butch I suppose it is necessary to give a progress report on the amatory studies which I had been diligently pursuing since arriving in England. By the time I reached Hampstead Norris you could say I was preparing for my Baccalaureate, well behind friends like Newman who was well on the way to taking out a Masters' degree and Peter S., who would regale us with stories of sleeping in the silk pyjamas of his lady friend's absent

officer husband. If love-making were chess he, at 20, would have been a grand master. For my part, I had got to know a number of girls sufficiently well to be on first name terms and to be writing to them, just in case I should be near Brighton or Whitley Bay or South Cerney again; a rather low key variation on the theme of the sailor who has a girl friend in every port.

But it was very late in my time at OTU that I met Bridget Belinda Barnes at a Friday night Hampstead Norris dance. She was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. Looking back, I can now see it was beauty of a rather austere kind, quite unlike the cheese-cake variety so often seen on the walls of airmens' sleeping quarters, but it appealed to me. Besides there was nothing austere about her voice which was lively and unaffected.

"My friends call me BBB," she said.."

"That's a bit of a mouthful, do you mind if I just call you B."

Her smile was irresistible and the miracles kept coming. Dancing the quick step with her I discovered that not only was she a wonderful dancer but also that under her influence my own normally clumsy footsteps automatically glided into the right position. So then we danced the slow fox-trot, took refreshments during the hokey pokey, resumed for the Lambeth Walk and when she returned to me after the barn dance and we dreamt our way through the goodnight sweetheart finale I was thinking that Christmas was never like this.

But there was a catch. She lived at Newbury which was ten miles away and, although there was a bus to take her home, there would be none to bring me back to base. "Never mind," she said, "you must visit me tomorrow and do come early." I took her address.

I spent that cold December night in a warm glow never before experienced in the dank Nissen hut

which housed us First thing after breakfast I borrowed an old Hercules one speed free wheel bicycle with Edey Coaster braking, which weighed the best part of a hundredweight. So equipped I set off for Newbury. The road from Hampstead Norris to Newbury goes all the way across the Berkshire downs. Survival without frost-bite in the bone-chilling fog which covered the downs on that December morning was possible only because, on reaching the top of each incline, I could coast down the other side with my gloved hands in my pockets. And this lasted for as long as it took to get from base to place. But I did not think of the pain; my mind was conjuring up thoughts of what delights Newbury might have in store.

I arrived at last at a large vicarage style house alongside a church. "Oh hello," said BBB, "you've come to help with the bazaar haven't you? This is Mac" she said to the company. There were two or three of BBB's friends and perhaps ten or a dozen other servicemen all looking as though they too had hoped to be the only suitor. There was no opportunity to see her on her own and I did not much enjoy the rest of my day in Newbury. I would not be in England long enough to try to see her again.

Normally, when you have spent much effort to get somewhere the return journey always seems so much shorter and easier. This occasion was the exception and the strange thing was that I did not lose the beautiful image; nor did I feel anger as I wearily pushed one pedal after the other. But after returning the bike to its owner I avoided company that evening.

It was early January 1944 when we left Hampstead Norris for Blackpool pre-embarkation for India. We were thirteen crews, our draft number was D13K, we sailed from Liverpool on the 13th. January, and arrived in Bombay on 13th. February, 1944. I subsequently left India on 13th December, 1945. Having been born on 13th. August, I was less apprehensive than some about this seemingly malign conjunction of the devil's number. What we all should

have realised was that we were jolly lucky to be escaping from the war over Germany.

I will return next week,

Your loving father.

Jakarta,
15-7-73.

*There is no need to shield the present reader from a description of the Windmill's authentically choreographed and expertly performed act, from the leaping entrance of the dream lover, through the male solo to the pas de deux and that point when the Invitation to the Waltz music goes dah-dit-dah-dit-it-it-it, and the ballerina is hoisted high into the air, given a good shake so that her bodice flies open and two rose-tipped orbs slip out for the delectation... and hilarity...of the audience.