

23. ANTI-AVIATION

We were sent home to UK in December 1951. Audrey had a terrible time in a crowded four-berth cabin with Deborah, 3 and Sue 3 months, and another mother with two small upset kids, during a stormy 8 hour passage from Ostend to Harwich. Meanwhile I had our car, laden to the roof (without my forgotten souvenir broken propeller) to bring over on another and fare* paying ferry. Having no known destination in UK, we had had to arrange with my mother to find us a bungalow to rent near her home. I had not of course by then joined my new unit, 57th HAA Regt at Saughton Camp, Chester so had been unable to apply for married quarters. The Army did not care what one did meanwhile - nor what it might cost! My fault for being married! (* the army did not pay for transport of private cars).

On balance I was pleased to be back to lead a more normal life in the UK having been in Germany since the war, apart from 1½ AOP courses - except for very stringent food rationing* which continued until 1954. A Heavy Anti Aircraft Regiment is certainly to do with aviation, in a macabre sort of way - and an area in which I was totally ignorant. I was soon sent on a radar course at Storrington in Sussex and found the new electronics field fascinating. For all its normal complement of about 600, the Regiment had only a couple of 3•7in HAA guns and one solitary 4•5in in its large box shield standing forlornly on a corner of the parade ground, plus one 4 Mk 6 area surveillance radar and one 3 Mk 7 target acquisition radar. (Normal equipment:- 24 guns with requisite radars and predictor for each troop of four). Our main task however was to make soldiers of two year conscripts, with a little gun drill at the end.

[* civilian, per week:- meat 1s 2d (6p) worth; butter 2oz; bacon/ham 4oz; margarine 4 oz; sugar 8oz; milk 2pts; cheese 2oz; eggs 1; tea 2oz; sweets 3oz; jam 1 lb in 2 months; dried egg 1 packet in 4 weeks; bread ?oz. Potatoes were not rationed; neither were fruit and fish - when one could get hold of them!]

On rare occasions we went up to Leasowe, by the sea on the northern tip of the Wirral peninsula, where we had a state of the art 5•25in gun (just one!) in a large concrete emplacement. Radar fed target information into a computer which continuously drove the self-loading gun to the point in the sky where the target would be when the shell arrived. Totally automatic, all the gun detachment had to do was supply the ammunition - and clean the gun after firing - which it never did. Fantastic scientific stuff. The gun site lacked necessary radar and had one telephone, an old type lacking a dial but connected to a public, non-military, dialling system! I soon learned how to simulate dialling, using the receiver rest like a morse key! (UK Air Defence?)

The Battery Commander, Norman Lane, was another of that very rare species, an army officer with a DFC. He was a decent kindly chap who had to wind himself up to deal with disciplinary matters. A few years after I had left I heard he had committed suicide, but know of no reason. The Adjutant, John Fielding, I had known when he was Adjutant of 3 RHA in the area of Germany administered by 16 Para. For a refreshing change Audrey, the children and I started making friends in the neighbourhood.

In the summer of 1953 I was seconded to run an officers' mess for a Territorial Army camp on the north Wales coast. The TA units changed every fortnight and I met some interesting people. I also had a challenging time negotiating each week with the owner of a St. Asaph pub for liquor supplies, at optimum prices. One learns every trade!

Promotion to Substantive Major would occur on one's 34th birthday, subject to success in the 'Captain to Major' Promotion exam. I was laden with influenza germs while struggling with preparation for the theory papers, but I passed. The practical exam took the form of a TEWT (Tactical Exercise Without Troops). We nine candidates were taken out into the Cheshire countryside and instructed to design an infantry battalion defensive position in a certain area, given relevant parameters and theoretical troop and weaponry availability. There was also an 'intelligence report' on supposed hostile dispositions and activity. Each candidate was required to tackle the problem on his own, drawing appropriate maps and layouts, siting units and weapons. I was a Gunner doing an infantry task - and came first. The other candidates were not only infantry officers but all were instructors at nearby Eaton Hall Infantry Officer Cadet Training Unit!

Poor experiences in 10th Field Regt prompted me to apply for a Long Gunnery Staff Course at the School of AA Artillery in South West Wales. If higher rank than Major was to be denied (and I smarted greatly over that) I would at least acquire some other qualification, authority and credibility - and prove resilience, to myself anyway! At the end of 1955, after the 16 month full-time course, John Hamilton-Jones (son of a General) and I were the only students to achieve a 'B' Grading ('A' was reserved for foreign students, to impress their governments. The truth of this incredible politically based postulation was affirmed when John and I were appointed Instructors in Gunnery at the School.) On my 34th birthday, 30 Dec 1955, I was promoted Substantive Major.

Our family very much enjoyed living at sea-side Tenby as I did my post at Manorbier. But storm clouds were on the horizon. We Gunners were to suffer two near mortal blows.

When India became two countries, India and Pakistan (East Pakistan became Bangladesh later) on gaining independence, the great majority of Indian Army officers, certainly all staff officers and commanders were British - (ignore officers of British Army units stationed in the subcontinent, units soon to be withdrawn). The Indian Army was to be split between two new countries, largely on a Hindu/Moslem basis. The British Labour Government of the time grandly invited all British officers in the Indian Army to transfer to the British Army if they wished.

My friend Hugh Clemas, formerly of the Rajputana Rifles was one such. Those who could not be fitted into a career structure such as that in a county regiment, were to be put into the Gunners - regardless of their knowledge of guns and gunnery! But we too had a structure and often this resulted in our seasoned Captains doing subalterns' jobs. Many ex-Indian Army were pleasant, sociable but useless; their presence seriously damaged our own seniority and career ladders. Very few could be bothered to learn about gunnery - a job for NCOs, not white men with clean hands. (Hugh was not of that ilk). In India they had worked only in the morning and cared not to change their habits. Many quit after being paid off handsomely by the Indian Government. Poor Hugh received an enormous tax bill from Inland Revenue, having failed to consider his timing. Come 1957 and there were already far too many Gunner Officers!

Worse was to come. In 1957 the appointment of Chief of the General Staff was held by an Air Chief Marshall of the RAF. He decreed that all development and deployment of guided missiles would be undertaken solely by the RAF. Only later did he concede the obvious, that surface-to-surface missile delivery would supplement, and in some instances replace, artillery in the field (and ships' gunnery at sea).

Surface-to-air missiles, which were at an advanced stage of development for the replacement of Heavy AA by we Gunners, were to be transferred in their entirety to the RAF (for the RAF Regiment - by tenfold expansion - to operate). Overall defence of the homeland required central strategic planning for which we already had in place the organisation, structure and communications. We had also started to replace guns with missiles and had modernised the radar and control systems deployed for UK defence. Clearly the CGS had also given scant consideration to air defence by and for the army in the field away from UK, or the Royal Navy at sea. His was just expansion of the RAF by political means - at our considerable expense. Some readers may recall the hundreds of HAA guns we Royal Artillery deployed across the country during the war - their manning involved far greater manpower than that of the whole RAF - and did not require to quit the action to refuel!

At a stroke the Heavy AA element, a large proportion of Royal Artillery and still in peace time larger than the RAF, was ditched together with the RA development programme - and the HAA Wing of the School of AA Artillery at Manorbier where I held my appointment. The only AA then left was a Light AA regiment in each division (currently down to one solitary LAA Regt! Hardly viable except as a training cadre).

Duncan Sandys, Defence Minister in a new Conservative administration, like Geddes after the Great War, had to devise what was effectively a redundancy scheme to repair the damage. We Gunner officers were invited to consider our positions. Having been cheated of Staff College and therefore my army career to end at 45, and no higher than Major, I decided to resign my commission, with effect from March 1958, on the not very generous terms offered. I felt it might be easier to change career at 36 than at 45. Audrey had enjoyed army life and was very disappointed - but accepted the logic. A few dud officers were weeded out. To the chagrin of some, a number of highly qualified technical experts were retained. The establishment* of Majors RA alone dropped from 1,350 to 550 in a year. It is now about 300 and falling. (*The layman may not appreciate that the establishment of majors [and other officers] extends beyond the obvious regimental posts. There are headquarters at various levels, numerous supply, repair, scientific and training depots, inter-service liaison, etc). Rapid expansion of the RAF Regiment included none of our redundant experts. Inter-service rivalry gone mad.

Staff College would have presented no problem. My commendation to RHA still stood and my grasp of technical matters was highly developed; after all I had been taken on as an instructor at the end of the solid 16 month Long Gunnery Staff Course. I had also beaten infantry officers in the Captain to Major promotion exam. Irrepressible [pushy] colleague John Hamilton-Jones, my close rival on the course, had been sacked from an AOP course for taking off from inside a hangar. He died a few years ago as a Major General (a division of 15,000 men is a Major General's command).

So we packed our bags and went off to start a new life in Llanfrechfa, Monmouthshire where I put away my uniform and hastened to rectify my ignorance of company administration. Any fleeting thought of flying was erased from my mind - but one never knows.....