

A TRAUMATIC TWO YEARS 1947-1949

In March 1947 the final unit of my service abroad in the RAF I was at Peshawar in the North West Frontier of India, this was a remote spot virtually at the head of the Khyber Pass bordering India and Afghanistan. There have been British Army units in the area for many years - peacetime as well as war - as there has always been friction between the peoples hence the need for a military presence to maintain order. Prior to April 1947 the Kings Own Scottish Borderers were the Army Unit in situ but their time was now up, and they were to be replaced by the 2nd Battalion of the Black Watch. The RAF were there to man the airfield and provide a signals unit as well, hence my presence as a wireless operator. The unit occupied part of the Barrack Block, these were old buildings going back to Victorian times - no windows and the only light came through the doors - very primitive. The beds were very crude solid steel with no 'give' - the framework used to get so hot - temperatures well over 100 degrees - and would burn the skin if touched. The RAF unit was self contained and looked after itself, so we rarely had contact with the Army except for exchange of signals and for air operations.

Now the wars in Europe and the Far East were over the RAF like all other services were in the gradual process of releasing personnel back to civilian life. The system the RAF adopted was to allocate all individuals a release number, the longer you had been in the service the lower your number and the sooner you would be released. Headquarters in London gave release dates and these could vary, dependent on individual trades and whether you could be spared. My number was 55 and as the number of wireless operators was few and far between men with number 55 in other trades were being released before me. However, my 'day' came and the release began.

The first thing was to pass a medical examination. I had not been well for some time and was rather anxious at seeing the Doctor bearing in mind so much was at stake, the worst happened, he would not pass me and I was admitted to the local Army Hospital. At this time the KOSB's (as they were known) were on their way home and the Black Watch were en route from Karachi - marching all the way to Peshawar which was about 800 miles - I was the sole patient in the Hospital. I had plenty of attention from the medical staff but they would not tell me what was wrong until after two weeks they said I had a fast pulse rate, (Tachycardia). Other doctors were brought in to examine me but despite my plea they would not discharge and let me get on my way.

After about 4 weeks or so I began to despair, I had been watching the movements of the nurse on night duty and noticed she went for a meal about 9.0pm in the evenings so I took the opportunity to get into her office and look for my records. Being the only patient it was easy to find and to my astonishment written on top of the page in red ink and capital letters was 'Pulmonary Tuberculosis'. This was an awful shock and I never slept that night wondering what to do next. Imagine the scene, I was the only patient - nobody to talk to, I could not say anything to the nurse because I should not have seen the record, what was I to do about telling Edna and the folks back home.

All this was devastating to say the least, someone at home ought to know but I could not tell Edna or Mom and Dad so I wrote to Will but told him not to tell anyone.

After a few days 2 British Doctors came to see me and told me the bad news and that arrangements were in hand to fly me home by Ambulance Plane. Then the 2 British Doctors returned with an Indian Doctor and gave me further examinations and the Brits decided I had not got TB but the Indian said I had. The Indian was out voted and I was to be discharged to go home in the normal way. I accepted this but felt far from well. The day I left the Hospital the outside temperature was 120 degrees.

Two or three days before I left the Hospital the men of the 2nd Battalion of the Black Watch arrived at Peshawar after their 800 mile march, there were so many casualties mainly with heat exhaustion and the Hospital filled up overnight. Some had to be packed in a bed of ice; others had to drink copious amounts of salt water.

Six weeks had elapsed since I had been admitted to hospital but, now, thankfully, I was able to complete the release procedure for going home.

The RAF Officer i/c of the unit would not give me permission to travel on the train to Bombay on my own. At the time the Hindu and Muslim population was being divided prior to the separation into India and the new country of Pakistan. Prior to the division the two races lived together as a nation but they had to migrate Hindus to India and Muslims to Pakistan which meant they were crossing each others paths and it is now known the bloodshed and loss life that occurred. The area most affected was where the borders met e.g., Lahore and Rawalpindi, one occasion in particular a whole train load of people were killed. The Officer said I would be too much at risk on my own but I was so desperate to get away and after a long argument and plea he gave me my release papers, train warrants etc., but I had to sign to say that it was my responsibility. And so that same day I boarded The Frontier Mail from Peshawar to Bombay.

There were 3 classes on Indian trains and British Servicemen were advised not to travel third class. On this train all the first and second class accommodation had been booked, but I climbed aboard determined to make my way. I noticed a British Army Officer and his family getting into a second class compartment - families could book a compartment to themselves - so I went and told him my plight and asked if I could travel with him and his family and he willingly agreed, there was plenty of room. The journey took about two and a half days and I almost became part of the family. Fortunately we were not involved in any bad feelings throughout the journey but it was noticeable that most people on stations carried some form of defence - swords, knives, rifles, and even hockey sticks! Anything to defend themselves with.

On arrival at Worli Transit Camp, Bombay I was told the boat I was supposed to get had left that morning and the next one was not due for 3 weeks.

During this time my condition became worse, there was a Typhoid epidemic in Bombay, water had to be heavily chlorinated and I developed gastric problems, the only treatment I was offered was castor oil and that was not a lot of help! By this time I was down to 8 stone and not feeling well at all but, at least, I was on the way home. Having to use the toilet at night was a nightmare - there were no lights and to strike a match disturbed all the livestock imaginable off the toilet seat and disappeared down the waterless hole.

On August 7th 1947 I became one of many re pats on board RMS Franconia on the way home. I was never a good sailor and with not feeling well sea sickness soon took over, it was permissible to sleep on deck and this at least gave quick access to the side of the boat when required. Rough seas developed in the Indian Ocean so much so the front end of the boat dipped in the sea and shipped a lot of water, fortunately all managed to hang on but could easily have been washed overboard. I remember a humorous incident at that time, several lads were hanging their heads over the side feeling sick when suddenly Bill Fisher jumped up and ran to the side for the same reason. A strong wind was blowing which caught Bill's vomit and hit the next lad full in the face. Needless to say he too was sick and there were a few choice words around.

After a 3 week journey the boat arrived in Liverpool on August 30th 1947 and to everyone's annoyance it stood out in the Mersey for a day and a half. Eventually we disembarked and were taken by train to Kirkham De mob Centre near Blackpool. For some unknown reason

we were sent home on two weeks leave prior to going through the de mob process. Dad met me at Derby Station and was upset about how ill I looked and then he phoned Mother so as not to shock her, Edna went to Mickleover on the 'bus and I met her.

Before leaving India Edna and I had decided to marry on October 4th 1947 and all arrangements had been made, Banns read at Mickleover and Stapenhill Churches and a reception booked. I returned to Kirkham at the end of my leave expecting to be de mobbed but this was not to be. The first thing was to undergo a strict medical examination; everyone had the opportunity to have an extensive examination depending on what illnesses they had abroad. In my case it did not take long to confirm TB and I was sent to RAF Hospital, Kirkham where several wards were allocated to dealing with TB patients.

In normal circumstances acting service personnel with TB would be discharged to their home Hospital for treatment, but just after the war TB was rife among the civilian population and these hospitals could not cope with the number of cases. Service hospitals like Kirkham were expanded to deal with the surplus. There were several patients of 18 years of age who had volunteered to join the RAF and were found on entry to have TB, but instead of returning them to civilian hospitals they were admitted and treated in service hospitals.

This was about the third week in September and our wedding due on October 4th 1947 had to be cancelled - a very sad affair. I then had to convey the bad news to Edna, Mom and Dad and this was devastating all round. I wonder how ill I would have been if I had been flown home from Peshawar in the first place. Food for thought!

As the weeks went by Edna visited me every two to three weeks staying at an address in Kirkham, Mom and Dad also visited me from time to time, Will and Mary came too on one occasion. Christmas came and went Edna spent most of the time with me.

Various treatments were tried one was to try and restrict the lung by filling the normal partial vacuum in the chest cavity with air, this would have the effect of not allowing the lung to inflate thereby enabling the infected area to heal.

In my case it did not work and I was recommended for alternative treatment at King Edward VII Sanatorium in Midhurst, Sussex. It was now February 1948 and a bed would be available for me at Midhurst in late April and I just had to wait until then.

Edna and I were upset about our cancelled wedding and we wondered if it could be rearranged if I was granted some leave. I spoke to the doctor about this and he was agreeable. The telephone lines became hot, the Church Banns were still valid and despite some difficulty with parents, arrangements were made to marry on March 29th.1948. I was granted 7 days leave but went AWOL for an extra few days. Edna and I spent 4 or 5 days honeymoon at Buxton we did not mind where as long as we were both together. Edna came back with me to Kirkham and we had a painful separation and she had to go home alone.

I was called to Midhurst in late April 1948 and had to travel by train from Preston escorted by a male nurse. It was an extraordinary journey because we had to have a whole coach to ourselves as I was an infectious case. An Ambulance was waiting at Euston to take me to Victoria and for the rest of the journey I had a reserved compartment. It was now the rush hour and people took exception to the compartment being reserved until they were shown the infectious disease notice.

I was shown to a 2 bedded room at Midhurst with a view I shall always remember, overlooking the Sussex Downs. Surgery was organised for May 13th, but changed to May 14th, as no operations were done on the 13th! Unfortunately (at the time) this treatment also failed through excessive internal bleeding and some time in June I was transferred to RAF Hospital Wroughton near Swindon where I was to stay bedridden until March 1949.

There were about a dozen stages from getting out of bed once a day to being able to walk half a mile without feeling exhausted. When told I could get out of bed for the first time my reaction was 'great I can now walk to the toilet', but before I had taken steps to the foot of the bed my leg muscles had gone and I had to get back in bed. It was a slow process but eventually I was able to make progress without any setbacks.

It appeared that although the treatment at Midhurst had technically failed there had been a sufficient healing process to allow me to start to get back to a normal life and in June 1949 I was allowed to go home for 6 weeks trial leave.

Edna and I were overjoyed as may be expected. At the end of July I returned to RAF Hospital Wroughton and after exhaustive tests was cleared. From then all was home sweet home and Edna and I spent our belated honeymoon in Newquay for 2 weeks and so we were able to look forward to a normal life together.

And now in December 1997 Edna and I are planning to celebrate our Golden Wedding on March 29th 1998. If anyone had wanted to lay bets in 1948 whether I would be still alive to celebrate such an occasion I should have wanted odds of 1000 to 1.

Who knows what life will hold, who says miracles do not happen? Someone was standing by me through those traumatic years!!!

GORDON MAN DEC 1997