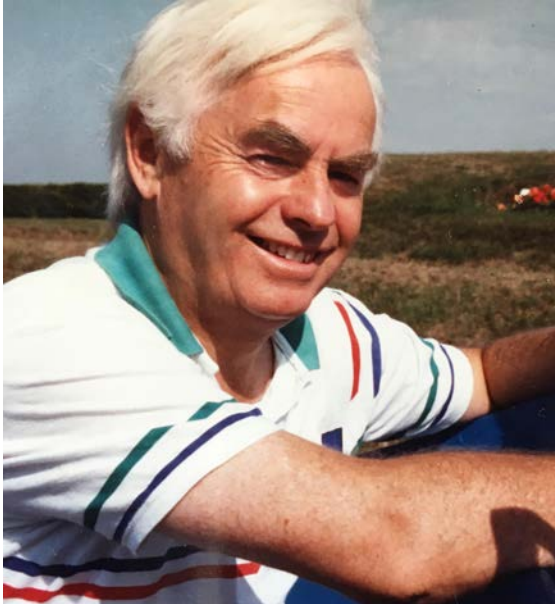


John Burton's DGENg BUGLE

Subject: From Train Spotting to Plane Spotting and Beyond by our old friend and colleague John Burton, (Ex our Quality Branch in St Giles Court)



I grew up in Eastleigh Hampshire which was a Railway Town where thousands were employed in the locomotive and carriage works. I remember clearly being in the town by the bus and rail stations when the end of shift hooter sounded and there was a sea of men on bicycles or walking towards the buses with just one or two cars. My dad was an engine driver and my brother who was nine years my senior and our two older sisters all took jobs connected with the railway. It seemed likely therefore that I would follow suit.

By the age of twelve I was a keen train spotter and had joined the Spotters Club at the Grammar School that I attended where I became the envy of my friends when my dad took me for a ride on the footplate. This was from a goods siding near Southampton Central station to Fawley Oil Refinery and back which was a single track line involving the passing of a `tablet` ensuring signal protection and safety control. (When I think

about it now my dad's action was at no small risk to his job.)

The Spotters Club arranged a visit to the Isle of White where there were 20 special to the island tank engines and we were pleased to be able to spot all 20 of them as we travelled around the island. When we returned to Cowes for the ferry back to Southampton someone asked if we could visit the local airfield and the teacher agreed so we went and I had my first close encounter with an airplane. It was a very nice summer day as we sat on the grass by these lovely aircraft I was immediately taken by them and with the idea of adding plane spotting to my interests. What I did not realize at the time of course was that this was the first step in what would eventually be my career path.

My interest in planes grew in the next few years and included the making and flying of model aircraft of all types rubber and diesel powered and gliders. The best flier I ever made was a glider of Swedish design called Sunnanvind. I took it out to the grass in front of my house to check the trim and hand launched it from shoulder height expecting it to fly about 20 yards. Instead it floated on for about 80 yards and hit the front legs of the horse drawing the milk delivery cart. The horse reared up and trampled on it and shot forward and the cart wheels ran over it. It was a very sad ending that day but all is not lost today as last year I went on line to see if the plan was still available and it was so I bought one and its on my bucket list to build one for my grandchildren. I must make sure there are no New Forest ponies around when we fly it.

As soon as I was old enough I joined the local ATC Squadron and enjoyed my first flying experiences including summer camp at RAF Benson when I flew in a Tiger Moth and the pilot landed at RAF Abingdon to refuel which added interest to the flight. I did not know then that I would later serve at Abingdon in my Service career.

The ATC training included engineering and we had a good instructor on aero engines which I found especially interesting so by the time I left school in the summer of 1952 the engineering path I was to follow was starting to form. The youth employment office in Eastleigh gave me a booklet on RAF Careers which contained a full page photo of Halton Apprentices working on a Rolls Royce Merlin engine and I knew then that was what I wanted to do. I filled in the application form and was called for interview in November. And having been successful reported for duty at Halton on 4th January 1953 where together with more than 200 other young lads became a member of the 73rd Entry.

Those first few days were not pleasant as the weather was very cold, there was a thick layer of snow and for most of us it was the first time away from home, and we were about to sign up not just for a 3 year apprenticeship but also for 12 years service starting from age 18. Quite a commitment for a 16 year old to take on, but having said that I can recall only one boy in the engines group who pulled out in the first 6 weeks as was allowed.

The next 3 years included workshop and airfield trade training. Schools to ONC standard and a lot of military training so that by the time we graduated our passing out parade drill was to a very high standard.

Overall I would say the training was very good not only technically and academically but also for character building.

One highlight I should mention happened in the second year when my best mate and I

decided we should learn to dance so we joined the Court School of Dancing in Aylesbury and had 1/2 hour private lessons. They held open dance evenings on Saturdays so feeling confident we decided to go. That evening I spotted a girl and asked her to dance. (As you can see my train and plane spotting had matured by age 17 to Girl spotting!) Her name is Mavis and this October God willing we will celebrate our 60th wedding anniversary.

After passing out parade we drew lots to decide which RAF Station we would be posted to and I was very lucky to draw Abingdon (which was a bus ride from Aylesbury where my then girlfriend Mavis lived) and after 2 weeks Christmas leave I reported there feeling quite excited and ready to put into practice what I had learned at Halton. Unfortunately the first job I was given to do was laborious and very smelly and certainly not very exciting, but I suppose continued with my character building.

I reported for duty at RAF Abingdon with my Junior Technician stripe gleaming on my arm and was told to report to the Power Plant and Propeller Bays located in B Hanger. Following the usual introductions I was put to work in the Centrifuge bay. Centrifugers were part of the Hercules engine supercharger oil system and my job was to strip them down, scrape out the sludge, wash in the paraffin bath and reassemble for reissue to 2nd Line. The smell of the paraffin was quite hard to eradicate when I got back to the billet for a bath each evening. Luckily after about a month another airman was posted in and I was happy to hand the job over and was moved into the Propeller Bay.

The assembly area for props was and needed to be very clean and I was already familiar with the De Havilland Hydromatic Propellers fitted to the Hastings aircraft. A while later we heard that Abingdon was to receive the new heavy lift transport aircraft the Blackburn

Beverley and I was sent on a 2 week course to Walkden Manchester to train on the new propellers which were much larger and more complex than those fitted to the Hastings.

The Beverley entered service and myself and the other corporal I worked with (I had been promoted) were labelled 'prop kings and took turns in dealing with any Beverley propeller problems at home or overseas.

My second trip abroad was to Bahrain where assisted by a mechanic I would take 2 props to be held as spares for the aircraft that were there on detachment. Because of their size (13ft diameter) the props had to be partly dismantled by removing 2 opposing blades to transport them and then reassembled on site.

On arrival in Bahrain I was told the props were already needed for an aircraft that had failed to unstick from a desert strip called IBRI in the Oman desert. Next day we flew out to IBRI where we landed on just a flat area of desert with a wind sock and a wooden shed. The bent Beverley had ended up off the landing area among some trees with 2 damaged props and a damaged undercarriage, looking very sad. It was about 4pm as we offloaded our gear and spares when a sand storm blew up which I was to learn was a daily occurrence. The sand and dust penetrated everywhere. When the storm abated the Beverley that brought us took off and returned to Bahrain and we were taken some miles away to IBRI itself which was an oasis village. On the edge of the village we were billeted with the army (the Carabonian Rifles) and shared their rations, we were in mud huts that were usually occupied by the local army the Trucial Oman Scouts who were camped under canvas nearby. We were able to use the bathing facilities in the oasis which were unusual, a row of small cubicles with a stream running through. There were small fish in the stream that nibbled your feet as you sat in the water.

We started work early next morning and soon discovered we were unable to work after

11am as the aircraft was too hot to touch. Temperatures were over 50 degrees in the shade. The aircraft carried a Field Repair Kit including special tools and a wing gantry with a block and tackle. Once assembled the gantry was bolted to the wings after panels were removed and could be used to remove an engine as well as the [props as](#) in this case. Having completed the repairs we cleared the path of trees using fire axes so the aircraft could be moved back onto the airstrip. The aircrew arrived from Bahrain and we were told to wait by the wooden shed whilst they completed the air test. We watched as the aircraft started engines and taxied the full length of the airstrip and turned for take off. The pilot selected full power and started its run. As it drew level with us the sand was churning over the wheels and we knew that it was in no way fast enough for take off. It was getting nearer and nearer to the end of the strip and suddenly disappeared in a cloud of dust and sand as the pilot selected reverse pitch to stop the run. He then turned the aircraft round and taxied past us to try another run. This time it travelled a little faster but nothing like the speed we used to watch them take off at Abingdon. Then about 3/4 way along the run it lifted off and slowly started to climb and just clipped the tops of the trees flew around over our heads wiggled its wings as a signal it would not land to pick us up and flew away. We couldn't believe what we had just witnessed and were left drained from the tension of it all. Next day a Pembroke aircraft picked us up and we returned to Bahrain

Arriving back in Bahrain I was told a signal from Abingdon had been received to say I must return on the first available aircraft and I was booked on a Beverley early the next morning. Looking at the air movements chart I said I would prefer the Britannia flight later that day but was denied. The Britannia flight would have taken about 6 hours, the Beverley took 3 days with a full load via Iraq Cyprus Libya and Malta.

Three days after arriving home I was admitted to Radcliffe Infirmary Oxford with Appendicitis, how lucky was I that it didn't happen two weeks earlier!

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(Compiled March 2017)

A very young John Burton.



(You were certainly very lucky John to escape in time. You have really rekindled so many memories for me as I did my National Service at Abingdon working on the Beverley at 1st, 2nd and 3rd line. Lots of trips to Malta, France, El Adam and Cyprus. What fun eh?? Malcolm F H)

