

Chapter 15

My Service career ends

After my three months leave I was posted to RNAS Lee-on-Solent for a flying refresher course. I think flying is rather like riding a bicycle in that once you have learnt you never forget. Even after an interval of over five years I had no difficulty in flying again, despite the fact that during this refresher course I was flying Harvards, Avengers, Fireflies, Barracudas and Seafires, aircraft I had never even seen before, let alone flown. I enjoyed the course immensely and had no difficulty in qualifying.

On 10th November 1945 I was appointed Commander (Flying) and Officer in Charge of RNAS Lee-on-Solent. This was a difficult command and looking back on it, not really suited to someone who had recently completed five years as a PoW. My Navy was still in the early days of the war and I had had no chance to get acclimatized to the great changes that so many war years had imposed on the Services; changes of custom, discipline, outlook, aircraft and a host of other things. In addition it was an awkward command as Lee-on-Solent contained not only the airfield and its flying, but also the Fleet Air Arm barracks housing great numbers of officers and ratings who had nothing to do with the actual flying side. The whole station was under the command of a Commodore RN and the extent of the authority of the Officer in Charge of the flying station (under the Commodore) was not well defined. I like to think I coped quite well, but must confess that I was never very happy in this posting and found at times that my responsibilities lay very heavy on me. Fortunately the Commodore was a man of perception, of great ability and experience, and of great charm. After six months he sent for me and said that he suspected that I was not very happy in my work, though he was generous enough to add that he had no complaints as to the way I had been carrying it out. He added that he liked his officers to feel that they could enjoy their work and that he would be glad to endorse my request for a change if I wished to make one. I have never been able to decide whether or not this was a kind way of giving me the 'sack', but at the time I gratefully accepted his suggestion.

After handing over my command I found myself appointed to number 14 Course at the Empire Central Flying School at RAF Hullavington. This was an extremely advanced course for experienced pilots, ranging from Flight Lieutenant to Wing Commander, drawn from all over the Commonwealth, and sometimes from America as well. They liked to have as varied a pupil population as possible, and never having had a Marine officer before were glad to include me for that reason. The flying was on various types of aircraft and I found myself having to fly twin-engined Bristol Buckmasters, four-engined Avro Lancasters, a Hotspur glider and even the twin-engined Gloster Meteor jet. Having been a single-engined fighter pilot all my flying life this was quite an experience and challenge to me, and it was with great surprise and relief that at the end of the course I learnt that I had graduated with a Distinguished Pass. I was also paid the great compliment of being asked to remain there as a tutor. Well, flying all these strange aircraft was one thing, but teaching other experienced pilots to fly them was different, and I declined the offer and accepted instead a posting to the Directorate of Air Organization and Training in the Admiralty.

I feel I should add in passing that during this very intensive course at Hullavington I also got married! Leave during the course was strictly discouraged but I managed to get a short break on a Bank Holiday week-end. We were married on the Saturday morning, had Sunday and Monday for our honeymoon, and at 0900 hours on Tuesday morning I was due to carry out my first solo in a jet aircraft, the Gloster Meteor. I'm glad to say that all went well, both the honeymoon and the solo, and we are still most happily married, my kindergarten girl-friend and I!

The usual tour of duty at the Admiralty was two years, but I managed to spend three years there. I was living with my wife at Angmering village in West Sussex and commuted to London daily from Arundel station. Hence I had the best of both worlds, a home life and a service life which I found most satisfying and enjoyable. Under my director, a Captain RN, I was responsible for flying training in the Fleet Air Arm and I found the advanced course I had completed at RAF Hullavington of great value. However at the end of three years it was obvious that I couldn't stay for ever and there was a big question mark over my service future. I had been flying or connected with flying for seventeen years, since 1933, and was completely out of touch with my own Corps, the Royal Marines, to which I really should now return. I had been promoted to Major a couple of years previously but didn't fancy my chances of further promotion very highly as a Marine officer. I was then given the chance of turning over to the Navy as a Commander (Air), but felt that at the age of forty it was a bit late in life to change Service. By length of service I had just qualified for a pension and, after talking it over with my wife, decided to 'retire at my own request'. This was granted and marks the end of my service career.

What to do next was the question. It was 1950, the post-war period of rationing and shortages was still in full swing, and there were many, many others like me trying to fit themselves back into civilian life. By this time we had a son and a daughter, aged three and two, and we both craved the peace and quiet of the countryside. Accordingly we bought a small farm of 100 acres at Cross-in-Hand in East Sussex. We knew very little about farming and for the first year or two I had to employ a bailiff. From the start I was determined to master all the farming arts required on this, a dairy farm, and it wasn't too long before I could go solo in everything and was quite capable of doing any of the jobs my staff had to do. At the end of the second year I was able to do without a bailiff and took full command myself. A farm is a marvellous place on which to bring up a young family, and we worked it for the best part of eleven years, building up a fine pedigree herd of Jersey cows and latterly also a 2000 flock of poultry producing hatching eggs for the broiler industry.

There were of course crises from time to time, there always are when you have a hundred head of valuable cattle to deal with, but we coped and became more and more efficient as the years passed. Never in my life before had I worked so hard physically or led a healthier life. Like most small farmers we were always short of capital and I suppose in a way over-staffed. The trouble was that we liked a tidy well kept place and a nicely groomed herd; but neat hedges, clean ditches and sleek cattle are labour-absorbing without bringing in any revenue. The result was that the milking herd seldom did any better than just break even financially, but the poultry flock was a very different matter. Two thousand hens and their attendant cockerels were managed by one girl during the week and myself at the weekends. It was at the height of the broiler boom and when we were picking up 10,000 eggs a week the return for so small a labour force was excellent. I also found poultry keeping on this scale most interesting.

Our children were now in their teens and would obviously soon be leaving home and I was just on the wrong side of fifty and finding the physical work getting a little harder. We decided therefore, regretfully, to sell the farm, buy a small country house with a few acres and continue with poultry only. We bought a very old and very beautiful house with about six acres but before we could get the poultry organized the broiler market began to look less certain and before committing considerable capital to creating our new flock we decided to wait and see how the market developed. We are still waiting fifteen years later [1983]!