

AN AIRMAN REMEMBERS

by Michael Cooke.

The year was 1959. I had been serving at RAF, *West Malling* in Kent for about six months when, one day, I received a telephone call summoning me to the General Office. "Mike, you may be going overseas. Will you fill in this form putting your three choices of posting, in order of preference and let me have it back by next Monday." "Oh" I thought, "here's an opportunity not to be missed."

Somebody had mentioned overseas postings before, saying that why shouldn't I see the world at somebody else's expense. I had three choices, but, where? Living only 40 minutes' motor-scooter ride from home enabled me to go home every Friday afternoon, returning on the following Monday, unless I was detailed for overnight or weekend standby, being a Teleprinter Operator.

I consulted my father who suggested I put down 1) Germany, 2) Gibraltar, 3) Australia. On returning to the station I handed in the form and thought nothing more of it until, about one month later, I received another Telephone call, and, upon presenting myself in the office was told:-

"Mike, you're going overseas."

"Where?" I asked.

"Gibraltar". My heart sank a bit. What did it look like? I thought of it as a huge flat-topped chunk of rock with a few concrete buildings on it and a few iron staircases leading down to the sea. The booklet I was given told me about the apes and that

there was a sort of town there. My thoughts couldn't have been more opposite to what I saw after my first few days there. Having to leave home for two years would take a bit of getting used to but I would, of course, adapt, as, indeed, I did.

"There's no need to jib about Gib" said Brian, our civilian cleaner-cum-assistant telephonist. He was right. On looking back over the last 46 years, Gibraltar has offered me not only a place to come to know (1959-61) but to make friends in and visit twice since (1995 & 2003), staying at the Bristol Hotel on each occasion, and in the same room (208). Working shifts enabled me to spend my off-duty days exploring.

A friend, who had completed his National Service some years previously said "Make friends with your padre."

For me, as a practising churchgoer, this would be easy, so, on the first morning after arriving at New Camp, where I spent my first night, I found Main Street and Wesley House Methodist Church, there being no Baptist Church in Gibraltar. I walked in, made a friend of the minister Rev, John. F. Jackson who was our padre (with whom I have kept in touch ever since, until his death last year), and became their organist for the next two years, taking over from Mrs Sneezum (who ran the canteen, came from Guernsey and was the only "Sneezum" in the Telephone Directory), and playing a lovely little two manual "Bevington" organ which I now believe to be at a school in La Linea. The church had a choir and I still have a tape-recording of the choir concert in the Guild room in November 1960. John sent a copy of this recording to one of the congregation who had emigrated to Australia. The choir was directed by Deryk Nash, an Army Corporal and Minister's son. There were quite a number of Salvationist folk there, having their own Salvation meeting in the morning and joining us in the evening. We held our Harvest Festival on the last Sunday of October each

year. As we sang "We Plough the Fields" I couldn't help wondering what the people of Gibraltar did and put my thoughts into verse in the form of a verse which could be sung between verses 2 and 3 of the hymn.

We gather at the harbour
And watch the ships come in.
With meat and fruit and vegetables
And foods encased in tin.
We thank our Lord of Harvest
For blessing all this store
Which we have now imported
From England's foggy shore.
All good gifts.....etc.

The canteen staff consisted of two men, Frankie and Carlos who made the most delicious chocolate éclairs; and a lady called Maria who worked in the kitchen. She couldn't speak a word of English but very often, after evening activities upstairs, when the front door had been locked and we all had to make our way out via the kitchen into Secretary's Lane, I would say:- "Ola Anna" and she would reply "Ola". Mrs Sneezum used to complain because, in her own words, getting them off the premises in time for the last bus to La Linea was like getting a crowd of Sunday-School children off to a treat! I also remember the beautiful mural on the canteen wall. It seems that a sailor (before my time in Gibraltar) who had worshipped at the church during his time on the Rock and wanted to render a service in return, entered the canteen and asked if he could paint the wall above the bookshelves. Upon being given permission by a rather puzzled minister, he gathered several plant specimens from the Alameda Gardens, set to work, and in a few days produced the wonderful

mural of which I have a slide, but which, unfortunately, was removed when the room became the Jeans Shop and Estate Agents.

Sometimes on a Sunday afternoon, I would walk across to La Linea, spend about an hour there before boarding a bus to Algeciras where I would spend an hour or so, finally catching the ferry back to Gibraltar and walking to Wesley House where I would have afternoon tea consisting of one of Carlos's éclairs, together with a glass of *Supermilk* which tasted creamier than fresh, often buying a carton at a local shop. I was then in time for the evening Service upstairs.

One Sunday evening between the end of the service and our weekly trip on the *Welcome*, the church's own motor-boat, a lady came up to me and asked if I could play Stravinsky's "Soldier's Tale" on the piano. Upon accepting the challenge, I was introduced to another lady by the name of Mrs Watterson of Tower Buildings who was going to stage a week of performances about six months later, at the Calpe Institute, together with "At the Hawks Well" (Author unknown). There followed a six-month schedule of weekly rehearsals at either the D.S.A. hall, or the Police Hall in the dockyard, conducted by Alethea, as she insisted on being known. She is now well into her 80s, lives in Basingstoke and I still send her Birthday and Christmas cards and visit her from time to time.

I remember, also, the piano recital I broadcast from the studio near the cathedral, where the Music School now is. I think it was broadcast live over the Army Network. I also took part in "Desert Island Discs" on the RAF network. One character, unknown to me, went to the Studios and complained because he knew what my choice of music would be. He was sent packing! My choice was my business, he was told. The choice ranged from plainsong through carols and hymns

to Wagner and other operatic composers. A change from non-stop “pop”. There was, probably, a mass exodus or switch-off at North Front that evening.

Friday evening was always meeting night for the 8th Gibraltar Air Scout troop. I was Assistant Cub-master at my own H.Q. that of 32nd Beckenham (Penge Baptist) group, so I had my scout uniform sent out, taking on the same rank “*Baloo*” in Gibraltar for the two years I was here. After troop meeting we scout leaders would repair to Julie’s Café, a dingy little establishment having one 40w bulb every 10 or so metres but whose Spanish Omelettes were out-of-this-world (Apparently Julie died in 1994). One evening, upon leaving the café, upon looking up, I saw what appeared to be a moving star. It turned out to be the *Satelloon*, an orbiting space balloon, which was part of the space satellite programme and coming a few years after *Telstar*. One of our boys, who grew into a fine scout, was Oscar Davis who I believe is, or has been one of the leading lights in the Gibraltar Heritage Trust – so, Oscar, if you are out there somewhere, I would very much like to meet you again!

I also joined the Gibraltar Symphony Orchestra, under Mr Edwards, playing percussion and giving concerts at the New Naval Cinema that was at the foot of the American Steps; also the Theatre Royal. One day we assembled in St Michael’s cave to play one or two pieces and to have our photograph taken by an American Magazine. Not yet possessing the correct attire, I was handed a tuba and told to hide behind it! I visited every cinema on the rock, including the Rialto, and also remember the open-air cinema at the three-way junction at Winston Churchill Avenue, close to the Glamis Estate of Nissen-huts. I did not attend that one because they only showed films in Spanish. When I made my first return visit in 1995, I brought with me the set of 100 colour slides I had taken in 1959 and for three of them was able to set up an exact location by placing the slide over the lens and

looking at it through the viewfinder, superimposing the 1995 scene on it as accurately as possible. Using 2 projectors and fading between them brings home the alterations between these years, e.g. the Caleta Palace Hotel appearing and disappearing as I fade from one picture to the other; also the climbing plant over a wall which turns, magically, into the Jumpers Building. One day I was walking along Convent Place when I happened to look into the window of a shop selling TV sets and noticed that one of them was showing the programme *Tonight*, with Cliff Michelmore, on what is now BBC 1. It was May when the *Sporadic E* activity is strong, this broadcast being received directly from Britain. It faded somewhat from time to time but at least it was there. There was also a spot on the RAF network when we received a late-night programme on the *Light Programme*, now Radio 2, likewise I was able to receive the *Home Service* (Radio 4) on my transistor radio during the mid to late evening.

restaurant, after which I walked along to King's Chapel, hoping to play the organ there. The chaplain met me and said "Certainly, but for only 5 – 10 minutes as there is a service, played for by the organist of the Roman Catholic cathedral." I played for 5 minutes, then walked along to Rosia, returning just as the service was finishing. I sought out the organist, a Cdr J.Ballentine, who looked at me rather closely and said that my face looked familiar. I mentioned every organisation to which I had belonged, without success, until we discovered that we had met in the orchestra, he in the brass section and me in the "kitchen" dep't.

"Michael Cooke" I said.

"Well, Michael, after all these years you haven't changed" (apart from the wearing of glasses). Not bad for a 35 year interval!

Jo and I became firm friends there and then and have remained so ever since. I showed him a slide of a clarinettist, performing at the Corpus Christi procession, that turned out to be John Bado, now well into old age but still playing. He invited me to tea with him and his wife one afternoon and played his clarinet. (He is now playing it in heaven!)

I had read in *Organists' Review* of an *Allen* Computer organ installation at St Andrew's Church of Scotland, so, after the evening service at the Cathedral (In 1970 I was confirmed, embracing Anglo-Catholicism in 1974) I walked up to St Andrew's, played both organs and was invited to play for the Evening Service on the following Sunday. The organ sounded quite reasonable but would not really come into its own until a speaker system was installed in the gallery, thoroughly recommending it if it hasn't already been done.

Alethea had once approached me, asking if I knew anything about how a pipe organ works. The minister (Rev. McEwan) had had to complain about it in a service. I went to have a look and discovered that it had almost completely seized up due to the Levanter getting in through a jammed-open window immediately above. Several notes did not play at all, so I obtained some off-cuts of parachute rubber, a pair of scissors and a tube of Balsa Cement, making new "Purses" for these notes. On leaving the wind on and playing for nearly an hour, the instrument dried itself out and the offending window was later jammed closed! I played the organ again in 1995 and in 2003. The notes were still working! I hope this instrument at best stays where it is, or at worst, moves elsewhere in Gibraltar. It is now historic, there being very few *Cassens Positive Organs* about!

Another memory is that of the time when Miss Discombe, organist of the Anglican Cathedral approached me and asked if I knew anything about the inside

workings of organs. When the Swell-to-Great coupler is drawn, you cannot press Middle C. Sometimes the next note up or down doesn't press. "Sounds like a missile" I thought, dismantled the keyboard, removed a lump of wood about the size of a die from underneath the keys, threw it over my shoulder and reassembled the keyboard. On playing the organ I noticed that one pedal note was a lot softer than the others. Upon investigating I discovered about six copies of the words-only edition of the *English Hymnal* in the pipe. I removed them only to discover that the pipe would not stop sounding (a cipher – in organ jargon). Miss Discombe had had to do something and she did it! I located the motor-box, turned a leather button about a quarter-turn whereupon the book-motor collapsed and the pipe stopped sounding, unless played. "Thankyou Michael" said Miss Discombe, "I had forgotten about that." I occasionally went to the cathedral to tune the Trumpet and other reed stops which went out of tune easily due to the heat; also tuning the Cornopean at Wesley House. I later played for the 0930 Eucharist every Sunday, afterwards walking round to Wesley House for the 1100 service.

Among the friends I have made is one Marie Campbell-Lees who used to be my next-door neighbour in Whitstable. She had to return to the Rock for family reasons but I adopted their cat that lived with me right up to 2004 when it died, aged 14 years. I have visited Marie and Mark (her son) on both occasions.

During my 2003 visit, I noticed a poster on the wall of the Church of Scotland advertising a visit to Great North Rd and other installations inside the rock. I had always wanted to see it but was never able to contact the gentleman who arranged the visits. I was invited by the lady at the church to telephone the indicated number and I had a thoroughly enjoyable trip on my last day, making a friend of John

Murphy who conducted the tour and with whom I still keep in touch, "Once a friend, always a friend" being my maxim.

One evening in 1995, after two attempts, I successfully knocked on the door of 252/6 Main Street, the home of one, Mrs Christine Bacaresi-Hamilton (née Chiappe). Upon her answering the door, I took a step or two backwards and started reciting the first lines of *The Soldier's Tale* (she had acted the part of the princess in Alethea's performances). I got as far as the fourth line when a hand shot forwards, grabbed hold of me with a shout:- "MIKE!", and I found myself sitting in her kitchen telling her all about Alethea's activities, later giving her her Address and Telephone Number which I happened to have with me.

Returning to 1959. One Saturday, Wesley House organised a day boat-trip to Getares Beach, returning at 1200 with the Morning-only people and returning to Getares with the Afternoon-only People. There had been a special arrangement with Spanish customs, making this possible. The evening fellowship visited several sites of interest, such as Cable and Wireless, and the lower St Michael's cave. I have a slide of a macaque sitting on my shoulder eating whatever it would be eating on such auspicious occasions. Alethea and Dick, her husband, would very often repair for a morning visit to Sandy Bay. I would come up behind them and say "Down a Hot and dusty road" which is the first line of *The Soldier's Tale*. I have been known to her as "DWNHTNDSTRD" ever since!

I thought I knew every Sq cm. of the rock, but was mistaken! One evening in 1995 I had just returned to the Hotel when a car hooted at me. "You have left your tripod outside the Siege Tunnels on the upper rock. I have handed it to the warden who is keeping it for you." A very considerate person, (typical Gibraltarian). I returned to the upper rock by way of Theatre Royal steps, Prince Edward's and Willis's Rds.

The warden (thinking I was a tourist on holiday in a strange place) remarked on how quickly I had made the trip, whereas I replied, "If you have lived in Gibraltar as long as I have, you would know all the short-cuts." A bit inappropriate, considering he would have lived in Gibraltar many more years than I have had hot dinners! I then told him of my 1959-61 "training" period here. I then returned via Moorish Castle but took the first turning on the right, Tank Ramp, leading to a road junction with an archway on the right (later discovering it to be Castle Gate), and a road leading downwards. Remembering the golden rule "If it goes downward, go down it. If it doesn't, don't" I went down it, finding myself in Governor's Street and knowing where I was. In 2003 I explored this area as I filmed the rock with a video camera, shooting nearly 2 hours, which I soon hope to edit. I have also recorded several organ pieces on both Cathedral organs using a Minidisc CD recorder. I had attempted, with the permission of Father Rapallo, to play the then almost-unplayable organ in the Roman Catholic cathedral. I spent an hour or so of an evening playing, rather longer one evening when he was going to bed before he remembered I was still there, locked in. I hope one day to be able to play the now restored organ at San Roque.

My parents celebrated their 25th Wedding Anniversary in 1960, so, as a token gesture I borrowed a tape-recorder and made a sound picture of Gibraltar which I still have, recording my playing of the organs of Kings Chapel, St Andrew's and Wesley House. The machine was not in a very good condition, the feed spool sticking, causing a "blip" in the recording which became worse towards the end, so a friend held the reel on a pencil, slowly paying out the tape! I was, however, able to make a good recording using a professional machine and the services of one of our Sergeants whose machine it was, recording both Holy Trinity Cathedral organ and that of Kings Chapel. I still have this, together with two clocks, (both of which still

work although one needs a new suspension fitting); also a transistor radio and several LPs all purchased from Menehem Serruya, 140 Main St. On the evening of my parents' anniversary, I decided to play a practical joke on them. In my weekly letter home I asked them to gather in our lounge on the evening of the great day, sit in a semi-circle with my Grandmother and Aunt who lived next-door-but-two, and to sit in the half-light. I had come to know a certain "medium" living in Gibraltar, and this "medium" would concentrate and try to contact my parents. The "medium" was that of "Telephony". In fact, while I was sitting on a bench in the entrance-hall of the city hall, an operator, somewhere, was trying to put me through and would ring me back when she had connected me. 20 minutes later the bell rang, I lifted the receiver to hear what seemed like ten conversations in Spanish all going on at once, but upon listening very carefully, I could just make out my Father's voice at the other end. I said "Hello", whereupon the operator said "Go ahead please, he is speaking" and then my father and I heard each other. I had intended to try to telephone them and wanted to be sure they would be at home. In 1995, as I lay on my bed in room 208, I lifted the receiver, dialled a number and was talking to my mother just as if she was in the next room, such being the advances in technology during those 35 years.

One memory which must not be forgotten is the visit to Gibraltar of H.M Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother on April 21st 1961. When an airman is on night duty he is excused parades on the first day off, being the rest day. Upon returning to North Front after night shift, I had breakfast, donned my scout uniform and headed for the Scout parade on the sports fields on Queensway, behind the New Naval cinema. She came by, talking to several people, but not including me. In the afternoon I went "Queen Mothering", climbing Willis's Rd to Moorish castle. The streets being lined with people, I made my way up the next ramp, stopping about 10

metres from the corner between Moorish Castle and the Great Siege Tunnels. I was the only person there. Two people came past but they went on to the next level. When the Queen Mother drove past, I aimed my camera and as she waved to me I pressed the shutter. I still have the slide! I slept well that night!

To sum up. This article could well be entitled “An Airman/Tourist Remembers”, there being so many happy memories. Every time I have returned something new has always happened. I have been able to visit many sites which, in 1959, were inaccessible, e.g. the Mediterranean Steps, from where I have able to video Catalan Bay and many other shots of the upper rock; a trip up the rock in the cable car and inside Dudley Ward tunnel (I used to have to show my ID card in 1959 to pass through here). “Gibraltar. Jewel of the Mediterranean; Gateway to the sun; Home from home”. During my 2003 visit I became a life-member of the Gibraltar Heritage Trust (I am also a life-member of the National Trust) and must return more often.

Michael. N. Cooke. 9th May 2005..