



Gibraltar: Challenge, Change & Continuity

The Friends of Gibraltar Oral History Project (1930 to 1970)

Michael Cooke interviewed by Mary Ingoldby on 14th May 2013

Track 1

Michael Cooke served in Gibraltar as a teleprinter operator for the RAF – National Service 1959-1961.

Organist Wesley House Methodist Church;

MC lived in Beckenham; NS was deferred because he was at The Guildhall School of Music followed by The Royal College of Music; joined RAF aged 21 and went to Gibraltar aged 24.

MC Chose to be a teleprinter operator – learnt to touch type; chose RAF because father had been in RAF – keyboard because of piano skills.

Training at a recruit training camp in the UK then appointed to a UK post not far from home and then called up to go overseas, father suggested Germany Gibraltar or Australia. MC allocated Gibraltar.

MI: What did the training entail?

Learning the keyboard and how to touch type; touched typed to music; 12 week course; parades and drilling at training camp. MC enjoyed the training.

MC Wondered what Gibraltar would be like, no knowledge at all about Gibraltar before he went.

MI: How did you get there?

By air – from an RAF station in the UK to North Front airport; landing on a wing and a prayer because airstrip not long; met by RAF bus; MC sent to New Camp for the first night and then up to North Front; place of work was in the old Air Headquarters building (now demolished)

First impressions

I was surprised, greenery lots of it, and the town and it was just like going to somewhere in Wales because the town goes up the hill; go East off Main Street and you start going up and up and get a beautiful b-view from the top of the rock.

MC on continuous watch meaning the office never closed, we did shift work, 4 day shift pattern; Billeted – four beds to a room, electric fire, and a ceiling fan; RAF broadcasting station on site RAF - MC was interviewed for desert island discs and people complained because his choice of music so different – MC chose carols and classical music, others would choose pop music.

Got on very well with room mates; and retained contact with them after NS; Description of building – camp was where the airstrip is now; Meals in the mess downstairs; good food; lemonade which was made from lemonade powder; corporals behind a trellis, sergeants in their own mess in another building;

Work was around the corner in New Camp a bus took us round and brought us back; painted walls and stone floor; There were a couple of teleprinters a very small place;

MC signed the Official Secrets Act as work was confidential.

MI: What you were told about the work?

We weren't told anything very much, given a piece of paper with some writing on it and told 'you type that out'; like a telex with ticker tape; taught to read the ticker tape, occasions when you had to read the tape, you could read the dots; 5 holes - you could get 31 different combinations and also a 30 sec was a blank, the little hole in the middle was for the sprocket wheel – the combinations of the holes represented all the letters of the alphabet and a few punctuation marks

MI: Could you read it now?

I doubt it

MI: Did you have to work quite fast?

They didn't allow for mistakes, our training helped; one day on a switchboard at the training centre; by the time went to camp the switch board had changed to dials;

MI: Were you aware that you would have to sign the Official Secrets Act?

Oh yes, when you sign it you sign it for life

MC speaks about WWII evacuated to Oxford stayed with Uncle and Aunt; father's work during the war;

MI: How political were you?

I didn't even give it a thought; I had to National Service so I got to go and do something and that was it, I didn't connect it with anything like that;

MI: What happened if you made a mistake?

Your responsibility you just corrected it, do the correcting procedure string of eee's error error error and then you type the last word again; we had a supervisor;

You typed one and then the next one, it was continuous; given messages to send; an in-tray of work to do and if it ran out you waited until

somebody gave you something and typed that up, the shifts were about four hours; shifts around the clock; MC had to one or two shifts per day

MI: Did you have a typical day?

I had more variety outside the RAF walking around The Rock; work didn't vary; excused parades if on night duty.

Track 2

Life outside the RAF

Walk around/description of Gibraltar: Winston Churchill Avenue ,The Glamis Estate, an estate of Nissan huts where ordinary people lived (now a block of flats); description of roads; Waterport Market; Spanish buses; taxis - like something out of the 1930s; Casemates Square; Ceremony of The Keys; Main Street was a single track road; Library Street; Cathedral Square; Calpi Institute, Kings Chapel, Governors House, Wesley House; out of city centre through Southport gates; the dockyard to Rosia ; Europa Point; crossing the runway/border; donkey carts; town buses;

Member of 8th Gibraltar Air Scout Group ; uniform; Jumpers Building; Gibraltar television- black and white in Spanish and English; Anecdote about looking at television through a shop window and seeing a direct TV transmission from the UK;

Scouts; used to go to around to Julies every week after the scout meeting - a dingy little shop with a forty watt bulb and we used to have Spanish omelette.

Seeing a Satellite in the night sky;

Joined the Methodist church; Outings with the Methodist Church - going onboard naval ship; a visit to Cable and Wireless- brass switches and polished wood;

Methodist church – MC was a Baptist but there wasn't a Baptist church in Gibraltar. MC speaks about different denominations of Christian Faith; different services.

MC speaks about his family's religion; Anglo Catholicism; description of becoming an Anglo Catholic; liturgy; sacred music ; Anglican church; importance of the church in his life; playing the organ; church life in the UK;

MI: Did your contemporaries go to church?

The people I was with in my room didn't go to church at all;

MI: How do you find out if people are church goers or not?

Being a Christian; speaking about faith to others; reading the bible; meeting his main friends in Gibraltar in the church; Salvation Army;

MI: Were you a teetotaller?

Of yes, always, not so much now as have a glass of wine because of blood pressure;

Drinking culture in Gibraltar; MC didn't see very much at all; didn't get stigmatised; holiday in Madrid; drinking wine; grandmother was strict about drinking in the family; temptation;

Played the organ in the RC cathedral once or twice; the organ has been rebuilt since those days; playing the organ in the Anglican Cathedral; anecdote about Miss Discum (the organists) and a note which was stuck.

Track 3

Catholic church; MC speaks about his upbringing and religion; religious denominations; the mass was in Latin; church in Catalan Bay – Our Lady of Sorrows; church in a Nissan hut outside North Camp (catholic);

Meeting Gibraltarians; didn't know many during his NS except for in the scouts; looking for old friends when he returned to Gibraltar on holiday; New Camp;

MI: Was there a separation between the Gibraltarians and the military?

Relationship was good, Gibraltarians were more British than we are; Arts Festival; definition of a Gibraltarian in the concert programme:

He speaks Spanish and thinks in English

He eats Lomo Fritto and fish and chips

He watches bull fights and play cricket

Going inside The Rock; the only thing you could get into in those days was St Michael's Cave; went up with the fellowship at St Michaels church – outings from the Methodist church;

Lower St Michael's cave was intended to be used as a hospital, workmen excavating another entrance and one of the skips disappeared through a hole in the floor, they realised there was an enormous cavernous system underneath and they opened it up, visits have to be arranged; a show cave; auditorium in the cave;

Gibraltar Symphony Orchestra MC played percussion; half the army band came to play the brass parts; concerts at the New Cinema which used to be at the bottom of the American Steps, the Queens Cinema, the Theatre Royal; all amateur players, light orchestral pieces; a mixture of Gibraltarians and British; Miss Discum the organist at the cathedral, her sister played the violin.

MC speaks about playing the organ in Spain in all the big cathedrals; Spanish organs;

Trips to Spain, Gibraltar, Morocco;

MI: Did you feel at home?

Once I had settled down, when I got to know the people, got to know the church;

MI: Espionage?

Not that I remember; didn't take much notice of it

MI was it very different to England?

MC sent a letter home every week, the Gibraltar weekly bulletin, RAF was just an office, MC's life was in Gibraltar; walking through Gibraltar, walking right around the rock – it took about 3 hours;

MI: Enduring memory of Gibraltar?

The apes; the wild cats; church in Gibraltar today; worshipping at the cathedral; the first impression that comes to mind is walking up Main Street;

MI: Are Gibraltarians British?

Very much so, British with a Spanish connection; Gibraltar dialect; Spanish and English; Catalan bay, from Catalonia of Genoese descent and have their own language;
As British as we are if not more so, bonfires on the queens birthday.

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