

MEMORIES OF SAM MOLD



Sam Mold in 1951

As an ex-Benson equipment assistant (now called suppliers), I arrived at Benson as an AC2 and served there from the end of May 1949 to the end of September 1951. The base was then controlled by Coastal Command, but sometime during my 28-month stay, its control was transferred to Bomber Command. Three detachments to Benson came my way in 1959, and that's where I found out its control had been passed to Transport Command in 1953. I still have some happy memories of the time I spent at Benson after being posted in along with five other colleagues on completion of our square-bashing and trade training at RAF St Athan, where harsh discipline was the norm at parades and inspections, not to mention having to march everywhere. However, we had been told that, on arrival as newly qualified tradesmen at our new Units, we would find life so much easier with none of the inevitable 'bull' inflicted on airmen based at RAF training schools.

This more relaxed lifestyle was what our group of five were looking forward to as we arrived at Benson and the bus from Wallingford dropped us off at the stop outside a large wooden hut - the camp's Salvation Army club. The first sight to greet us was seeing a Sgt barking orders at a squad of airman crossing the main road from the domestic to the technical site - they were marching back to work after their dinner break. That was not what we were expecting, nor did it look or sound like what we were hoping for. We later discovered it was the Kings Flight, the only unit on the Station that had to march between their barrack block and hangar workplace, nor were they allowed to carry their mug and irons (knife, fork & spoon) to work. This elite flight was the only Unit/Sqdn/Section/Flight I ever came across that had an ACHGD (aircraft hand - general duties) drill instructor on its strength. All other DI's were based at RAF Schools of Recruit Training. If my memory serves me correct, Sgt Baker was the KF disciplinarian SNCO. All other DI's were based at RAF Schools of Recruit Training. With the exception of one ACHGD Sgt, all my DI's at RAF St Athan were RAF Regt SNCO's. The only other KF airman whose name comes to mind was Sgt Vaseline (who could forget a name like that?). He was born in Malta and insisted his name was pronounced Va-sell-in. He was in

charge of the KF's Stores and had a Corporal assistant. During my 27 years' service, I never came across a similar arrangement and found that such posts were always filled by a corporal.

On a much smaller scale and functioning out of a wood hut, Benson could boast it had a Sports Store. No doubt, because of his prowess in sport, the Yorkshire (and later England) cricketer, AC1 Fred Truman spent most of his 18 months National Service time running this store. Another well-known sportsman working in the MT Section as a mechanic was Percy Lewis, an amateur featherweight (F/W) boxing champion. He was a member of both the RAF and national boxing teams and won the English F/W titles in 1951 and 1952; also, he was in the England boxing team at the 1952 Olympics held in Helsinki. On leaving the RAF, Percy turned to professional boxing and won the Empire F/W title. In April 1957 he challenged Hogan Bassey for the world featherweight title, but lost the 15-round contest on points.



RAF Benson airfield entrance in 1949

Throughout my time at Benson, the Captain of the King's Flight was Air Commodore Fielden who, in the Thirties, had taught the Prince of Wales (later Edward VIII) to fly; hence his early connection with royalty. The KF comprised just two Vickers Viking passenger planes converted into extra special, luxury VIP aircraft. When required to carry out royal flights, the unpainted Vikings external, aluminium panels had to be hand-polished until they shone like silver. All KF ranks were involved in this task. Another chap I remember from my Corporals' Club days was the KF Cpl air steward who had been trained at Buckingham Palace. On leaving the RAF he had two job offers: join the royal staff at Buckingham Palace, or take on a senior air steward role with BSAA (British South American Airways). He chose the latter.

Other aircraft then operating out of Benson were: one Airspeed Oxford for training and communications, and for air photo reconnaissance operations, 540 Sqn flew PR Mosquito a/c and 541 Sqn flew PR Spitfires. Also, very rarely seen, were the PR Lancasters of 82 Sqn, During my time, 82 Sqn were permanently detached to East Africa to carry out air photo surveys for map making, and were based at RAF Takoradi in the Gold Coast, As and when required, their

Lancasters returned to Benson for specialized maintenance. The nearest I ever got to one of 82 Sqdn's Lancasters was when its retiring O/C, W/Cdr Abrahams, flew one of them back to Benson for servicing, and I was detailed to off-load all his boxed personal effects and furniture, and to find storage space whilst awaiting onward transmission.

Not many airmen who were serving at Benson when I arrived would have been aware that the Coastal Command AOC's official residence was Benson's largest officer married quarter, originally built for the Station Commander. I don't know if the AOC's F/Lt PA lived in the same house, but it became known to me when I was the only airman working in Barrack Stores alongside its civilian staff. That's when I then found out the AOC's PA, without going through the normal channels, always phoned the BW (Barrack Warden) direct if he wanted something. The BW was an ex-RAF stores Sgt, Mr Bill Webb. One day, I was on my own in the BW's office and took the calls when the phone rang. One of the calls I answered was to hear a very strangled accent say: "This is the PA to the AOC." The voice was so affected that this greenhorn AC2 was baffled as to what had been said, so I blurted out: "Who." I next heard "Don't you call an officer Sir!" My cheeky response was, "How do I know you're an officer." The caller then slammed his phone down. When my civilian boss returned I told him that someone who says he's an officer had phoned. Later, the PA phoned back and told Mr Webb of his earlier attempt to make contact, and wanted to know who was that "uncouth youth" he spoke to. My boss stood by me and explained his newly arrived AC2 sprog was still wet behind the ears and did not know what PA meant. I thought his 'uncouth youth' sobriquet, was not something I wished to be tagged with; more so, as I was just starting out on a new career as a storeman.

My stint in Barrack Stores was suddenly curtailed when the Air Ministry decided that, in future, all Barrack Stores staff would be permanently manned by civilians. Because of this new order, I was swiftly moved to the Equipment Section's Tech Store, where my new boss was a very strict F/Sgt. Needless to say, I was far happier working with a civilian boss. Three months after my arrival at Benson I passed the AC1 exam, then waited a further 11 months before I sat and passed my LAC exams at the Central Trade Test Board based at RAF Chigwell in Essex. RAF Records Office had forwarded a recommendation for my promotion to A/Cpl on 15th Sept 1950. It was not an automatic promotion for final approval had to be passed by the Station Commander. As he was on leave, I had to appear before his stand-in: the Wing Commander Admin. The acting Commanding Officer was an Australian from Fremantle who had transferred from the RAAF to the RAF in 1936. Benson's boss i/c Admin was a war hero: W/Cdr Hughie Edwards, renowned for his exploits as a WW2 bomber pilot. Standing in front of the W/Cdr who was reading through my records, I had my fingers crossed that he was going to approve my promotion to A/Cpl; while at the same time, I was being suitably impressed with the medal ribbons displayed below his pilot brevet. What a sight to behold: VC, DSO, OBE, DFC - together with his campaign ribbons. The promotion went through, so how could I ever forget that a recipient of the VC had given me his stamp of approval? Australia's most highly decorated WW2 hero retired from the RAF as an Air Commodore in 1963 and returned to Fremantle. In January 1974, he was appointed state Governor of Western Australia, and ten months later he was elevated with a knighthood.

One insignificant event remembered from my Benson days was the arrival direct from Cranwell of a young sprog officer, P/Off Breakes. At the time, I was a Cpl running the Tech Stores 'Issues & Receipts' counter. I was just about to lock up at closing time when the KF stores Cpl arrived with a barrow load of equipment for return. He well knew our closing time and that prompted me to scream at him every known expletive in the book. I was not aware that a young WAAF was stood behind me. The upshot of my outburst sent her scurrying off to make a complaint to our new arrived P/Off. It was the first time since my training days I was carpeted for a rollicking, and no doubt, the first one this new P/Off had to conduct. Having given him my explanation, he appeared to be more uncomfortable than I was as he stuttered through the process. Twenty years on, I was serving in Singapore as a WO at Tengah. Our station's football team was playing away at Seletar, and because it was a FEAF championship match, I travelled with the team as a spectator. During the game, a guy in civilian clothes approached me for a chat as he recognized me from his time at Benson. It was my old rollicker, P/Off Breakes - now a W/Cdr. We had a good laugh about him having to censure me, an event he well remembered simply because it was the first time he had to carry out a disciplinary procedure. Like a lot of other actions, one always remembers their first time.

My last contact with Benson was in 1959. I had been posted from Abingdon to Transport Command HQ to carry out a job that nobody wanted as it would involve many detachments to all their Stations where a new supply system was to be introduced by a team comprising a F/Lt, WO and Sgt, but that never happened. As a single Sgt I did not have any excuse to get out of this posting, whereas, others deemed qualified for the task were all living in married quarters and claimed their life would be disrupted and could not be subjected to what I had to endure - 20 detachments in the space of seven months. It's a good job such excuses weren't accepted or allowed to happen in wartime. Anyway, in 1959, three of those 20 detachments were to Benson. Firstly, I was sent to a Bomber Command 'V' bomber Station at Gaydon (now the National Motor Museum) to learn their 'Forward Supply' (FS) system HQTC wanted to adopt. On arrival at the HQTC Stations where the upgraded FS system was to be installed, my first duty was to report to the SEO (Senior Equipment Officer), and at Benson, this was S/Ldr Mackie. Three years earlier, over a 15-month period, this chain-smoking SEO had been my boss in Australia, where we were serving with the Air Task Group formed to support Operation 'Buffalo' - the British atomic bomb trials held at the Maralinga nuclear test site. He was the best boss I ever served under. Later, I was sorry to learn that he had died of lung cancer - no doubt caused by heavy smoking.

I must say that out of all the RAF stations I served on in the UK, Benson was most probably my best. I can still remember arriving there ten years after the base was opened and was very impressed with its smart layout and seeing the young trees not yet fully matured. It was also the first time I had seen standard RAF brick-built barrack blocks. Apart from their landscaping value the trees added to the Station, those planted down each side of the hangars would make good camouflage once they were fully matured. I would love to see a photo of them now. At my previous Station, St Athan, there was hardly a tree in sight, though there was plenty of wood to be seen as all the classrooms and accommodation buildings were wooden huts. What a contrast to see Benson - all modern and still looking brand new.



Barrack block in 1949



Interior view of the barrack block

The accommodation blocks at Benson were built on both sides of the parade ground square. My first move was into a block on the far side of the square where all the Admin trades were billeted. The KF and WAAF blocks were in the same area in front of the Sgts' Mess. There were two other accommodation blocks which overlooked the main road that cut through the base on its way to Ewelme. In 1951, a barrack room on the top floor of the block nearest to Ewelme had been selected by the Air Ministry to trial a new furnishing scheme (see photo attachments). Its purpose was to upgrade furniture standards throughout all RAF barrack rooms by introducing curtains, new table and chairs, new hospital-type beds with counterpanes, new metal lockers to replace the old wooden types, plus a mirror and radio set to complete the 'new look' billet.

Admin personnel were moved into this upgraded, newly furnished billet in September, just before the base was opened up for public viewing on the 'Battle of Britain' open day. As Cpl in charge this 'special' barrack room, I was detailed to show visitors how the RAF accommodated their airman. A group of soldiers visiting from their Army barracks at Didcot refused to believe that this was how airmen were billeted (they were not far wrong) and suggested it had been specially prepared just for the 'open day' visit. I had a hard job convincing them otherwise. At the end of the month, I was on a troopship on my way to Singapore, so I never did find out if the new furnishing scheme was adopted as standard throughout the RAF.

68 years have passed by since I first arrived at Benson, and despite my age (87), I am still lucky enough to be able to recall the happy 28 months I spent there. It was a long time ago, but the memories still linger on.

I have two photos from 1953 that have a tenuous link with Benson from the time I served in north Malaya at RAF Butterworth. The resident (and only) squadron based there was 33 Sqn flying De Havilland Hornets. The pilot seated on the L/H side is P/Off F.D. Hoskins. Many years later, 33 Sqn was operating out of Benson flying Puma helicopters, commanded at one time by its O/C: W/Cdr Fred D. Hoskins.

RESIDENT SQUADRON (33 SQDN) PILOTS : March, 1953.



BACK ROW (L to R): Sgt FORROW, Sgt KIRK, Sgt CHEESEWRIGHT, Sgt BOYCE, F/Sgt WILLIAMS, Sgt WALLACE, F/Sgt GEORGE // FRONT ROW: P/OFF. HOSKINS, F/OFF LUMSDEN, F/LI ALDERDICE, Sgdn/Ldr COOPER (C.O.), F/LI SMITH, F/OFF. MELLOR, P/OFF. THOMPSON // FRONT: P.OFF. CARIS.

Pilots of 33 Squadron



Some of 33 Squadron's "HORNET" aircraft line up on the the new East / West runway.

Photographs courtesy of 592096 Sam Mold.

