“IF YOU CAN’T TAKE A JOKE YOU SHOULDN’T HAVE JOINED!”

MEMORIES OF LIFE AS A TRENCHARD BRAT

By

Rob Knotts

84th Entry, RAF Halton

17 September 1956 to 29 July 1959
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With nearly three hundred others I joined the Royal Air Force as an Aircraft Apprentice at RAF Halton on 17th September 1956 as a member of the 84th Entry. We were some of the many thousands of Trenchard’s Brats that passed through the hallowed RAF Aircraft Apprentice training grounds of Halton.

Lord Trenchard, father of the Royal Air Force, founded the RAF Apprenticeship scheme which was launched in October 1919. Selection examinations were held around the country and in January 1920, members of the 1st Aircraft Apprentice Entry, comprising 235 recruits, began their three year apprenticeship at RAF Cranwell, whilst permanent accommodation was being completed at RAF Halton.

The RAF Apprenticeship scheme at Halton came to an end with the graduation of the 155th Entry in 1993. During the 71 years of Apprentice Training at RAF Halton over 40,000 Aircraft Apprentices successfully graduated. Among them is a holder of the Victoria Cross, four recipients of the George Cross. 220 were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and 249 won the Distinguished Flying Medal. Approximately, twenty per cent of Apprentices were commissioned during their service careers, and a considerable number achieved ‘Air’ rank. Whatever their former rank, ex-members of the scheme are very proud indeed to be known as “Trenchard’s Brats”.

Humour was, and doubtless still is, an essential part of Royal Air Force life. I spent 33 years in the RAF. Throughout my service career I cannot remember the bad times, only good ones. Humour offset memories of bad times. The phrase: “If you can’t take a joke you shouldn’t have joined” was constantly voiced in unpleasant and trying circumstances. Humour was important for morale. It certainly acted as a bonding force amongst the apprentices as we adapted to and accommodated the realities of discipline and service life in our formative years. With gentle and self-effacing humour in mind the following captures some of my memories of life as a Brat.

How It All Started

When I was born my father was aged 57. I entered Grammar School at 10 and at 15 gained a sufficient number of GEC ‘O’ levels, including Mathematics, English and a science subject to study for ‘A’ levels. However, at the time my father was 72 years old and could not afford to keep me in sixth form. My uncle had served for 26 years in the RAF, starting as an Aircraft Apprentice at Halton so we had family experience of the life. The title page of brochure advertising life as a RAF apprentice is shown on the left. I had a great interest in aircraft and opted to join the RAF as a Trenchard Brat.
Arriving At RAF Halton

I was brought up in a small village in North Wales. To join the Brats I travelled by train to London arriving in Euston. From there I transferred to Baker Street to catch the train to Wendover.

Arriving at Wendover, all bright eyed and bushy tailed, we were met by RAF staff and transported to RAF Halton by bus, similar to the one shown below.

![Image of RAF Halton bus](image)

A tale exists within Brat circles of would be Brats being met at Wendover by apprentices from the senior entry who escorted them to Halton, first having collected fares for the bus journey. It didn't happen on my journey but it probably had at sometime in the past!

Medical

My first major memory is that of the medical. We were measured, weighed, tested and prodded. Injections were the order of the day with the occasional future Brat turning green and then temporarily departing this world when faced with the sight of a needle.
It Took All Kinds

Brats joined the RAF between the ages of 15 and 17½. They came from all over the UK and parts of the Commonwealth. While I was at Halton there were apprentices from Burma, Ceylon, New Zealand, Rhodesia and Venezuela together with RAF apprentices from many Commonwealth countries. Some cap badges and shoulder flashes are shown below.

Young men between the ages of 15 and 17½ joined as Brats for a 3 year course; they had a commitment to serve for 12 years after reaching the age of 18. We faced our future in different ways. Many were apprehensive, some quietly confident, others smug. A few were cynical, occasionally aloof, at first quite a lot worried bordering at times on being frightened of the future. It took all kinds to be one of Trenchard’s Brats.
Kitting Out

The next event that made a major impact was ‘Kitting Out’. In the clothing stores, an area that reeked of mothballs, we were issued with every article of clothing ‘for the use of’ deemed necessary to sustain and support us through our life at Halton. The Station Tailor made precision measurements of various parts of us that ultimately led to issue of a uniform that was a precision fit!

If The Cap Fits

Like most items of uniform, a lot of work went into making the standard issue RAF beret fit correctly. It could not be just plopped on the head in the hope that it would look after itself. Berets came in all shapes and sizes when we were first kitted out. It took some time to get them moulded to our heads.
Wings and Squadrons

There were three apprentice wings at Halton, each with three squadrons. Each squadron was housed in two six-roomed, three-storey barrack blocks. Two blocks were allocated per squadron to accommodate occupants of numbers 1 and 2 flights.

Members of Number 1 Wing wore a red disk behind the cap badge. Number 2 Wing’s disc was blue and Number 3 Wing’s yellow/orange. SD Caps sported red, blue or yellow/orange hat bands.

A coloured disk behind the Apprentice Wheel Badge, worn on the left sleeve, indicated the Squadron: red was number 1, green number 2 and blue number 3. I was a member of number 1 Wing, 2 Squadron, number 1 Flight.

The Apprentice Wheel Badge, a four-bladed propeller within a circlet, manufactured in brass, was approved on 17 April 1919. It was worn on the sleeve of the left arm. When approved, the apprentice badge was the only RAF metal badge to be sewn on the uniform.

NCO Apprentices

The apprentices had a NCO rank structure. Basically the Leading Apprentice, known as a Snag, was in charge of a room, a Corporal in charge of a landing, a Sergeant in charge of a block and the Flight Sergeant in charge of the Wing. We also had a Warrant Officer Apprentice in charge of the entry.
Outside of normal duty hours the responsibility for maintaining sound discipline in the Wings rested primarily with the NCO Apprentices. While an Orderly Officer and Orderly Sergeant were on call to cover three wings and the rest of the station, NCO Apprentices kept the wheels of discipline and good behaviour well and truly oiled in their respective wings. It says a lot for the Apprentice scheme that it vested and attained such responsibility.

**Basic Drill**

Our first three weeks in the RAF were spent in the ‘Rook Block’ where the initial efforts were made to transform us into some form of elementary Aircraft Apprentices. The first step was to get us marching. As untrained individuals we each had unique, exuberant marching styles, including the dreaded ‘tick-tock’ - right arm plus right leg moving in the same direction and left arm plus left leg moving in the same direction. Individual techniques, if left alone, would present chaos on the parade square.
The aim was to coordinate, harmonise and standardise our efforts to accord with the requirements of the RAF drill manual.

A lot of effort was exerted in teaching us basic drill movements. This involved the Drill Sergeant armed with a Pace Stick and addressing us in a very loud voice. Most instances of being ‘asked’ to be quiet while on parade were quite deafening.

Saluting

One important element of drill involved the act of saluting an officer; that is recognition of the Queen’s Commission. This involved bringing the right arm up smartly with a circular motion to the head, followed by moving the right hand down smartly to the side by the shortest route.
On one occasion within a few days of joining the RAF I witnessed one fellow new Brat facing the presence of two oncoming officers, one to his left and one to his right. You could almost see the 'thinks bubbles' - "What do I do?" Without hesitation both hands simultaneously gave immaculate salutes. Due respect and recognition was given to both officers, albeit this particular approach did not fully accord with the RAF's drill manual.

**Haircuts**

The standard haircut was short back and sides. This was in the time that the Tony Curtis and DA hairstyles were coming into fashion. The modern world looked to longish hair on men; the RAF maintained the short back and sides as its fashion statement.

We had one shilling a month (5p in modern currency) extracted from our pay for haircuts. The drill sergeant made sure that we got value for money. As we became bolder we used to bribe the hairdresser with one shilling not to give us short back and sides. Life was unfair as the drill sergeant continued to make sure that we got value for our money!

**Domestic Chores**

At Halton our mothers were not there with to wash, sew, darn and iron. We had to turn our own hands to these domestic chores. Early efforts were not that successful.
The Mess

Number 1 Wing Mess had three mess halls. Number 1 Squadron Brats were housed upstairs, Number 2 Squadron downstairs and Number 3 in the annex at the side of the Mess.

Feeding hundreds of growing, hungry Brats could not have been an easy task. Doubtless we complained, most likely unfairly. Nevertheless, we seemed to thrive. One thing that does stick out in my mind was that the jam issued always seemed to be ‘Greengage’ in a large tin that sported a WD arrow sign.

Marching to the Mess

During the first few weeks as Apprentices when going to the Mess we had to carry our mug with knife, fork and spoon (collectively known in my Brat time as ‘Irons’) clutched firmly in the left hand behind the back. This left the right hand free for saluting should the need arise.

I witnessed the same mug and irons carrying action many years later when, as an officer, I had to visit a Young Offenders’ prison (at one time known as Borstal) where one of my airmen was a guest of Her Majesty’s Prison Service. I arrived at lunchtime to see a flight of young offenders marching with mug, knife, fork and spoon clutched firmly in the left hand behind the back! To think that I had volunteered to be a Brat with a requirement to carry my mug and irons in such a manner; these young people were certainly not volunteers. At times life has some unusual twists.
Rooms and Pit Space

We lived 20 to a room, with 10 on each side. Our personal domain in that room was limited to our bed space; we called our bed the pit so our domain was the pit space. A locker held some articles of clothing; the drawer in it held our personal effects. We used our locker top as a desk for writing while we sat on the edge of the bed. We had a wardrobe in which to hang our uniforms.

Apprentices stripped their beds every morning, except Sunday, and made a bed pack which was placed at the top of the bed. The bed pack comprised four blankets and two sheets. Three blankets were each folded into a square and the two folded sheets placed between them like a sandwich. The fourth blanket was wrapped around the folded blankets and sheets. The pillow was placed on the top. The bed pack had to be square and neat to pass inspection.

Room Jobs

The Leading Apprentice in charge of the room prepared and issued a list of room jobs against each occupant. They included cleaning the ablutions, toilets, stairs and landings, the barrack block surroundings and the shower to name a few. The junior members of the room had the most unpleasant jobs. The work was carried out each morning before we left for Workshops or School.
Bull Night and Inspection

Friday night was bull night in preparation for inspection on Saturday morning. Windows were cleaned by hanging out of the room concerned; such an action would doubtless not be tolerated in the current Health and Safety climate. Boots were bulled. Dollops of orange coloured floor polish were spread on the floor, rubbed in and then bumpered to produce a mirror-like finish on the brown lino. These activities are just a handful of the overall work undertaken. Come Saturday morning all that we felt like doing was falling asleep which would not have gone down well during the inspection.

The last job on a bull night was a mass exercise of floor polishing with active use of the bumper. Polish, liberally spread over the floor was first rubbed into the lino. The bumper, consisting of a heavy weighted brush on the end of a long handle with old pieces of blanket attached to the bottom, was used to produce a high polished shine on the lino. When polished the brown lino had a mirror like finish and it was essential to keep this finish for the following morning’s inspection. So that we did not scuff the surface we moved around on blanket pads; this activity also helped maintain the polished finish.
The best description that I can give to the action is that it was akin to skating. The action produced visions of a skating champion in the making, or not as the case may be!

**Physical Training**

Every week we were subjected to the delights of Physical Training (PT). Dressed in RAF shorts, coloured a very dark blue, we faced the elements in all weathers under the direction of Physical Training Instructors (PTIs).

One winter’s day when snow was thick on the ground the PTIs assembled members of the Wing on the square; this time we were dressed in overalls and boots. They took us for a cross country run, ending up on the playing fields where we held a massive snowball fight. Gradually two teams developed, one of about 800 apprentices versus the other of about 8 PTIs!

**Sports Afternoon**

Wednesday afternoon was allocated to sports. Opportunities for sport were plentiful; soccer and rugby in the winter, cricket and athletics in the summer. Swimming, boxing, judo, fencing, cross-country running - opportunities seemed endless. Of course if nothing took our fancy and if we could get away with it, a very rare opportunity on a Wednesday afternoon, we could always resort to Egyptian PT.
Barrington Kennett Trophy

Brats competed in the inter-Wing Barrington-Kennett Trophy sporting competitions. Medals were awarded to winners of individual events. The original trophy, now no longer in existence, was a solid silver replica of an SE5 aeroplane crafted by the Goldsmiths’ Company. It was presented to No.1 School of Technical Training in memory of one of the four Barrington-Kennett brothers killed during the First World War. During my time as a Brat those who represented their Wing in the Trophy competition were awarded an appropriate badge; the colour depended on which Wing was represented. An example of a badge and a winner’s medal are shown below.
Points awarded for different games counted towards the trophy. Games included cricket and athletics during the summer; and in the winter football, rugby, hockey, cross-country running and boxing. All the sporting activities were arranged that there are competitive games going on the whole year round. An important feature was that Brats were not competing individually but as part their wings to promote team spirit and esprit de corps.

**Trade Training**

Halton Apprentices were trained as fitters in the trades of Airframe, Armament, Engine, Electrical (Air), Electrical (Ground), Instrument (General) and Instrument (Navigation). Airframe fitters were called ‘Riggers’, engine fitters – ‘Sooties’. Armourers were ‘Plumbers’, electricians – ‘Leckies’ and instrument fitters were ‘Instrument Bashers’.
Trained for servicing and replenishment, repair work or scheduled inspection specialist knowledge, skills and expertise were developed and applied in each trade. Safety was of paramount importance albeit in the early days many instances of how not to do a job emerged. For example, inadvertently touching the terminals of an electrically powered component; such an action certainly straightened the hair.

**Workshops**

Three days of the week were devoted to Workshops where we had lectures followed by practical sessions. Each class held about 20 apprentices. The desks were long wooden structures as shown below. The practical session shown below portray removal of a jet engine turbine. The lecture session shown covers one of a Hunter aircraft’s systems.
**Workshops Test Pieces**

We spent many weeks learning how to use hand tools to shape metal. We measured, marked, sawed, filed, drilled, tapped and gauged metal shapes. The first 6 months of our time in workshops together with the last few weeks were devoted to metal bashing.

In producing test pieces we marked out the required shape on a piece of cold steel plate. After producing lots of iron filings and constantly gauging our effort with a micrometer (test piece dimensions had to be within one thousandth of an inch of the required size) some of us still worried that it might not fit together easily.
School

For one and a half days each week we attended school in what is now Kermode Hall. We were taught Mathematics, Engineering Science, Mechanics, Engineering Drawing and General Studies. Some apprentices gained an Ordinary National Certificate, some studied for City and Guilds while others attained the RAF Educational Certificate qualification.

We faced lots of theory and then attempted to put it into practice in laboratory work where we had to unravel the mysteries of sophisticated equipment and machinery. Also we faced mastering the intricacies of the Slide Rule.

Examinations and Trade Tests

Our training covered both academic and trade subjects. Every year we had to sit examinations in the schools and face the Trade Standards Test Board.

At the end of each trade phase we sat a written examination. At the end of each year we faced the Trade Standards Test Board where we sat a multiple choice questionnaire ("Vote for Joe" paper) and were subjected to an oral board.

As phase tests or examinations approached we ‘genned’. Books were open, brains loaded, questions read and ultimately answers given.
Faces portrayed many expressions during examinations and the boards, from deep thought, to puzzlement, uncertainty and at times sheer panic.
Marching to and from Workshops and School

Members of each Wing marched to and from workshops and the School every day; down in the morning, back at lunchtime, down after lunch and back in the evening. During the dark winter evenings paraffin fuelled lanterns were carried at the front and rear of each flight.

When it rained we donned the all embracing fashion statement – the groundsheet cape.

Greatcoat order was in force from October to March, irrespective of the weather. Frequently we sweltered in greatcoats under the sun. With Spring weather the order was rescinded albeit incidents of marching in snow without the warmth of a greatcoat were occasionally experienced.

Warrant Officer Bollard

One man who doubtless stands out in the minds of many apprentices of my era must be Warrant Officer Joe Bollard, the Station Warrant Officer (SWO). He was the discipline king pin at Halton. He could spot the need of a haircut, pick out an apprentice not swinging his arms and recognise an un-pressed uniform from extreme distances. Each selected erring apprentice had to report to him during lunchtime. This gave the apprentice concerned time to march to lunch, suffer indigestion eating it in the few minutes available before hurrying to keep the SWO’s invitation. Always immaculately turned out, Mr Bollard made a life-long impression on Brats under his charge.
Pay Parades

Bank accounts and cheque books were not available to everyone, and certainly not Brats. Plastic debit/credit card did not appear for many years. We were paid in cash. Pay parades took place weekly; two commissioned officers sat behind a table handing out pay to each individual. One was the paying officer, the other a witness. An accounts NCO studied a large file to determine what each individual received. He called out the Brat’s name together with the amount that he was to receive. Number 1 Wing split the parade into two sections. Those with surname initials A to K were paid on the top floor of the NAAFI. Surnames L to Z were paid in the gymnasium.

The procedure was that a name was called, the person concerned stepped forward stating “Sir” adding the last three digits of his service number. He saluted and received his pay.

My surname meant that I was paid at the end of A to K batch; in fact I was the very last to be paid. I always feared that by the time payment got to me the paying officer would have run out of money.

Rates of pay in 1956 were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rate Description</th>
<th>Gross Pay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 1956 weekly</td>
<td>£1 - 9s - 3d (Approx £1.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaching age 17</td>
<td>£3 - 0s - 9d (Approx £3.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At Graduation</td>
<td>£4 - 8s - 5d (Approx £4.42)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sick Parade

The RAF Medical and Dental services looked after us extremely well. Coughs and sneezes were common Brat ailments. If we felt ill we went on sick parade, reporting to Sick Quarters with our small kit. The M.O. would diagnose the problem and describe a suitable course of treatment. A cold was treated by frequent visits to Sick Quarters to inhale Friar’s Balsam through a large ceramic device.

In 1957 Asian ‘Flu struck the Brat community and emergency sick quarters were set up in barrack blocks somewhere near to the Astra cinema. Recovery took about a week. After a couple of days in bed we were subject to deep breathing exercises in an
effort to clear our lungs. After about half an hour’s exercise I was convinced that I had experienced a serious relapse!

Routine checkups and follow up dental treatment ensured that our teeth stayed healthy. However, increased stress levels when faced with the dreaded dentist’s drill prompted a rigid posture in the dentist’s chair.

**The Padre**

At the top of our wardrobes was a slot to hold card that listed our name, service number and religion. Brats met Chaplains, the Padres, of the Church of England, Roman Catholic and Other Denominations during a weekly Padre’s hour which we had to attend and also at church. Church parades were held on three Sundays of every month.

 Padres were very approachable to talk over personal problems that we might have. In times of family stress, such as bereavements, they helped many a young man accommodate sad news from home.
In the presence of the Padre we would guard our language, albeit there were times when freedom of expression was possibly inhibited by the Padre’s presence.

**On and Off Parade**

As we grew up, both physically and mentally changes appeared. Our confidence increased, our demeanour improved, our appearance became important and our drill quite presentable.

On parade demanded discipline in not moving except when so ordered. Standing still during periods of inspection tested our staying powers; not to move was sometimes extremely challenged if a spider decided to spin its web on an Apprentice’s SD hat and introduce itself by lowering itself onto the Apprentice’s face. Such an experience was not uncommon.

Usually an Apprentice moved around Halton on foot, albeit with the expectation of adopting an appropriate military bearing. Occasionally a lapse would occur which manifested itself in a slouched gait with hands in pockets. However, someone always appeared to be on hand to offer friendly words of advice to the erring individual.
**Colour Hoisting Parades**

Colour hoisting took place every morning with the Orderly Sergeant fixing the RAF ensign to the flag pole and hoisting it. The Orderly Officer saluted as the flag was raised. Just before the ceremony the Orderly Sergeant blew a whistle. Every RAF member in the vicinity had to stand to attention as the ensign was hoisted. Once in place the Orderly Sergeant again blew the whistle indicating that we could carry on with our duties.

The Apprentice Wing paraded once a week for a Colour hoisting ceremony. When the ceremony was complete we proceeded to studies in Workshops or School.

**SD Hats**

The peaked cap worn for parades and ceremonial occasions is called the SD or Service Dress hat. When issued it looked very unattractive with a flat top and a peak that looked like a duck’s bill. The dream was to wear, at a jaunty angle, something that looked like a ‘fifty mission’ hat.
Brats would remove the stiffening ring, bash their hats to curve the top and shape the peak in an attempt to give it a bashed and battered appearance.

**Charges and Jankers**

Punishment was administered if an apprentice committed a minor breach of discipline. The process started with someone being placed on a charge. The alleged offence was entered on a Charge Report (RAF Form No. 252).

An officer heard the charge. The accused was marched into the hearing without wearing a hat; this could be used as a weapon. He was accompanied by an escort, who wore a hat. Witnesses were summoned one by one to give evidence. Also present was the Orderly Room SNCO. Before the officer considered if there was a case to answer the accused was given an opportunity to make a statement.

If the accused was found guilty the punishment handed out might be a few days of restrictions, that is ‘Jankers’, a term for an official punishment. The unfortunate on ‘Jankers’ had to wear full webbing kit and report to the guardroom at various times during the day for inspection by the Orderly Officer. Restrictions also included fatigues, normally cleaning duties, every evening.

A daily schedule in the life of a Jankers’ wallah is outline below:-

- 06.30 Reveille.
- 06.45 Report to the Guardroom.
- 07.45 Colour hoisting parade.
- 13.00 Report to the Guardroom.
- 17.45 Colour lowering parade.
- 18.00 Report to the Guardroom.
- 19.00 Fatigues – usually in the Mess.
- 20.00 Report in Best Blue and full webbing to the Guardroom.
- 21.00 Report in Best Blue and full webbing to the Guardroom.

**Lewis the Goat**

The history behind having goats as mascots at RAF Halton dates back to World War Two when the Royal Welch Fusiliers left their goat Lewis with the RAF Apprentices when they
were sent to the front. The RAF Apprentices adopted the goat and the history continued until 1993 when the last RAF Apprentice entry graduated. RAF Halton still has goat as a mascot.

During the long periods of standing still while on parade my mind wandered to many things. One thought was what if Lewis the Goat broke loose, what would happen?

**NAAFI Break**

We had a break mid morning and mid afternoon where the NAAFI wagon offered refreshments, including the famous (in Brat circles) Nelson. It was a square of very solid bread and butter pudding topped with a layer of pink icing. It was the nearest thing in the 1950s to a black hole – it was so dense. Inevitably there was always a rush to get to the wagon.

**The Astra**

In the days when Television sets were few and far between on camp the Astra cinema, located in a white 1930s building, offered film entertainment and an escape from the daily Brat routine. Always evident was the roar and shouts of “Good Old Fred” as Fred Quimby’s name came up on the credits for ‘Tom and Jerry’ cartoons.
Another recurring incident was the response to a notice being flashed on the screen during a film show. Inevitably it asked the Orderly Corporal to report to the Booking Office. This was always met with a loud response; “He’s Gone to the Pictures!”

**The NAAFI - AKA ‘The Tank’**

The NAAFI gave a respite from swotting and bulling. Known as the ‘Tank’ (origins of the term are unknown) it offered relaxation over a ‘cuppa’, a game of darts or an opportunity play billiards. Every so often the Tank erupted into a good old sing song. Lyrics will not be offered in this document!

Playing darts in Brat circles offered an unusual rule, called the NAAFI rule. If a dart hit the board and bounced back and could be reached by the player standing on one leg, with the foot behind the marker, the player could throw it again. Always have tall Brats in your team!
The Court School of Dancing

Quite a few apprentices in our era were ‘graduates’ of the Court School of Dancing in Aylesbury which was located just opposite the Queen’s Head pub. The motive was straightforward. Being healthy young men we had a natural interest in meeting young ladies. One sure way of doing so was to learn to dance. So we enrolled at the dancing school albeit initial efforts were clouded by having parade ground feet which left many a girl’s toes bruised. However, with unlimited patience on the part of the dance instructors we eventually became passable dancing partners.

At the dancing school romances bloomed and frequently faded. However, a few flourished. One of our entry members married a girl he met at the Court School of Dancing. He retired as a Wing Commander and now lives with his wife in southern Germany.

Civilian Clothes

The 1950s saw the era of the Teddy Boy. Until 1950 the term teenager had not been coined. However, films and television in the 1950s created a new market grouping called teenagers which included the Teddy Boy.

Traditionally Teddy Boys wore the "Drape" a long knee length, single breasted jacket with narrow contrasting lapels and cuffs and plenty of pockets. They wore narrow drainpipe trousers, brocade waistcoats, stiff shirts and bootlace ties. Teds also wore suede, crepe soled shoes which helped with the dance movements of jiving.

Off duty Apprentices were not allowed to wear civilian clothes until 1958 when the rules changed. However, Teddy Boy fashion was forbidden. NCO Apprentices were allowed to wear a suit, senior entry non-NCO Apprentices were limited to blazer and flannels. We certainly were not icons of teenage fashion. Short hair coupled with blazer and flannels readily identified us when off camp in Wendover or Aylesbury. The remainder still had to wear “Best Blue” when off camp.

And So to Sleep

Apprentices lived 20 to a room in large three-storey, six-roomed barrack blocks built on the edge of the parade square. It was a daunting experience living in such surrounds. During my time every room housed members of each entry; nine entries were resident at Halton at any one time. The senior entry members slept at the end of the room, the junior entry members
near the door. As entries graduated members moved up the room to make way for incoming juniors. Lights out were at 10.30 pm at which time it didn’t take long before sleep embraced a room’s occupants, unless Slim Turner exposed us to a ghost story on the camp radio.

Slim Turner was a SIB Corporal in the RAF Police. He lived on base. After duty he operated the camp radio system that was piped through to a speaker in very barrack room. About once a term after lights out he would read a ghost story. Imagine the scene. Each barrack room is shrouded in darkness. Twenty apprentices in each room could not fail to hear the story. Inevitably it related to some ghostly occurrence purported to have occurred somewhere on camp. One I remember involved a ghostly occurrence in a barrack block’s ‘drying room’ where under certain conditions blood could be seen seeping up through the floor while accompanied by the noise of chains being dragged along the floor. After the story even the most macho apprentice in a room would not take an ‘after lights out trot’ to the bog which was near to the drying room.

**Going on Leave**

Apprentices had leave at Christmas, Easter and during the summer. Also we had leave at half term. Most of us travelled home by rail from Wendover station. To move hundreds of Brats from Halton to Wendover station, a distance of about one mile, involved a considerable fete of logistics; we marched to the railway station in manageable sized flights. Motorists must have dreaded the day we went on leave as they tried to negotiate their way past numerous flights of marching Brats en-route to Wendover.
At the railway station RAF Police maintained a presence to ensure orderly behaviour. Most of us travelled to London to catch trains to wherever we lived. From Wendover a steam locomotive hauled a train load of Brats to Amersham where an electric locomotive was coupled to take the carriages to Baker Street in London. There we dispersed to the different London terminals to continue our journeys.

**Musical Apprentices**

Halton has a long tradition of bands. Each Wing had its own Pipe Band to march apprentices to and from the workshops each day. The pipe-band offered opportunities to learn to play the bagpipes, or a variety of drums. Halton apprentices also fielded a brass-band, with a selection of tubas, trumpets and saxophones and drums. Finally there was a corps of trumpeters in each wing, responsible for blowing reveille and lights out, as well as fanfares on pass out parades and similar occasions. Quite a few apprentices became accomplished musicians.
Daily we marched from the Wings to workshops or school and back again; in the morning, back for lunch and out again led by pipe bands and drums to return in the evening. On parade days we also marched to the military band.

**Summer Camp**

In July 1958 we spent two weeks at RAF Woodvale, on Summer Camp. We marched to the railway station at Tring from where we transported to Woodvale halt by train. From there we marched to RAF Woodvale, a coastal airfield in sand dune country, about 6 miles South of Southport, on the Lancashire coast.

Living in 6-man tents for 2 weeks, we spent the days engaged in various pursuits such as route marches, map reading, sport, firing rifles and Bren guns, military exercises by day and night and flying around the local area in Avro Ansons. Off duty we chased the girls in Southport. Liverpool was also nearby but incidents of polio there placed it off limits. Throughout the day we wore overalls, after duty we dressed in uniform. Ablutions were a little primitive.

**Flying**

In the 1950s relatively few people travelled by air. Flying offered a very new experience to most of us. My first opportunity came during our Summer Camp at RAF Woodvale when I, and many others, took to the air for the very first time in a Royal Air Force Avro Anson, registration VP 509. The Anson is shown struggling to get into the air and then chugging its way through the sky.
There were also opportunities to fly at Halton, either by gliding or with flights in DH Chipmunks based at the airfield.

First Flight

Flying demanded that we wore a parachute harness. For our first flight we had to have the customary posed photograph of a ‘would be aviator’. Imaginations probably ran riot with visions of a glamorous future as pilots or aircrew. The reality of the aftermath of our first flight doubtless modified such visions.
The final part of our three year training course covered the ‘Airfields’ phase. The airfield is located near Halton village.

The verb “To Trog” probably originated at Halton. It describes the act of marching without swinging arms, really more of a slouch. On reaching this final phase of our training we were issued with the coveted ‘Trog Mac’, a coat made out of some black plastic type material that had its own very distinctive smell. It was a memorable day when we were issued with them. We were the senior entry and the ‘Trog Mac’ was worn with a degree of arrogance to impress junior entries. The fashion was to have one far too long so that it almost reached the ground. We marched to and from the airfield without swinging our arms, that is we trogged in our ‘Trog Macs’.

In the airfield phase we applied what we had learnt to real live aircraft. The machines faced removal of propellers and engines; they were inspected, armed, repaired, towed and pondered over. We moved aircraft, we marshalled them, we refuelled them. At long last we were within the real live world of aircraft.

Aircraft on the airfield included Mosquitoes, Meteors, Swifts, a Valetta, a Brigand and a Lincoln. In the hangars there were Canberras, Hunters and a Javelin.
The riggers had the opportunity to try their hand at jacking aircraft. For the engine fitters, the Sooties, there was a cockpit classroom. This was a Beaufighter aircraft nose fitted to a shed that offered hands-on engine testing opportunities on Bristol Hercules engines. For each run a ‘volunteer’ had to prime the engine by pumping a ‘Kigas’ fuel pump located in the undercarriage bay beneath the engine. The ‘volunteer’ was encompassed in engine smoke as the engine burst into life and he was then exposed to the powerful airstream. When the engine was running he had to gently withdraw himself from under the aircraft with a propeller spinning within a short distance of his head.
During the airfield phase we had a chance to hone our skills. Armourers removed and fitted 'bang seats', loaded weapons and harmonised guns. Electricians chased wiggly amps. Instrument bashers fitted and tested a multitude of sensors and indicators. Riggers patched holes, fixed flying controls and sorted out hydraulic systems. Sooties changed plugs, removed engines, replenished oil systems and generally got dirty. We all had to try our hand at marshalling aircraft; results could be quite interesting! The phase showed us that some tasks were dirty, some mentally challenging, some physically demanding and that some could lead to frightening situations. In certain cases we made mistakes, and hopefully learnt from them. A SNCO was always on hand to ensure our safety, running towards us to prevent a catastrophe happening; albeit tempted to run away from us if it did!
DH Comet

During our airfield phase DH Comet G-ALYT was delivered to Halton as a training aircraft for RAF apprentices. Flown in by the famous WW2 ex-RAF night fighter pilot Group Captain Cunningham it was doubtless a hazardous operation to land the Comet on a short, grass airfield.

Brat Speak

- Best blue - No 1 uniform.
- Bull - cleaning and polishing barrack room and equipment.
- Boggy – National Service airman.
- Brassed Off – extremely unhappy.
- Charping – dozing or sleeping.
- Dohbi - laundry.
- Egyptian PT – charping on a bed in the barrack room during the day.
- Gen - a person who knew what he was doing – e.g. "you're gen"
- Instrument Basher - ground tradesman responsible for maintaining aircraft instruments.
- Lecky – electrician.
- Plumber – armourer.
- Rigger - ground tradesman responsible for maintaining airframes.
- Rook – brand new Brat.
- Sooty - ground tradesman responsible for maintaining aircraft engines.
- Square bashing - marching and drill on the parade ground or square.
- Tank - NAAFI (RAF Apprentice term).
- Tanner crush - a type of queue formed at the side of the Astra where admittance was only sixpence (a tanner – two and a half pence in modern currency).

The Future We Faced

On 29 July 1959 we graduated and departed Halton as Junior Technicians (a few left as Corporals) to work in the big wide RAF world. Our Apprentice wheel badge was replaced by an inverted chevron indicating our Junior Technician status.
In those days there were RAF bases all over the World. For example, Aden, Borneo, Cyprus, Gan, Germany, Gibraltar, Libya, Malaya, Malta and Singapore. Aircraft were many and varied: Argosies, Beverleys, Britannias, Canberras, Hunters, Meteors, Swifts, Shackletons, Vampires, Varsities, Valiants, Victors and Vulcans, to name a handful. As time progressed other aircraft came on the scene such as Buccaneers, C130s, Jaguars, Phantoms, Tornadoes and VC10s and helicopters such as the Sea King and Puma.

Some aircraft types worked on by members of our entry through their service careers are shown below.

**The Future We Faced Included.....**
Royal New Zealand Air Force

The RNZAF became an independent force in 1937. However, military aviation in New Zealand extends back to 1912 when two New Zealand Army Staff officers were sent to the UK to learn the science of flying.

During WW1 New Zealand flying schools, part-funded by the British Government, trained 250 pilots for service with the Royal Naval Air Service and the Royal Flying Corps. In 1918 the two British air services were merged into the Royal Air Force. Some New Zealanders flew with the Australian Flying Corps.

William Rhodes-Moorhouse, an Englishman of New Zealand parents, won the VC in action over France on 26 April 1915. Other New Zealand airmen received a range of decorations for gallantry in the air, among them Keith Park, who later went on to make his career in the RAF culminating with his outstanding contribution to the Battle of Britain as Air Officer Commanding 11 Group. The RNZAF served with great distinction alongside allies in theatres of war in Britain, Europe, the Middle East and the Pacific.

The RAF sponsored young men between the ages of 16 and 17 for the RAF Apprentice training scheme at RAF Halton (and later at RAF Locking). A total of 64 New Zealand Aircraft Apprentices were trained at Halton during the period 1951 to 1961. A window in St George’s church gives a permanent reminder of the strong link between the Royal New Zealand Air Force and the RAF Halton Aircraft Apprentice training scheme.

Some aircraft types worked on by RNZAF Aircraft Apprentices when they returned to New Zealand in the early 1960s are shown below.
Royal Rhodesian Air Force

Formed in 1935 under the name Southern Rhodesia Staff Corps Air Unit as a territorial unit, the first regular servicemen with the unit went to Britain for ground crew training in 1936.

Rhodeians fought in many of the theatres of World War II. Rhodesian airmen suffered 20 percent fatalities.

A total of 86 Royal Rhodesian Air Force Aircraft Apprentices were trained at Halton during the period 1936 to 1965. One attained ‘Air’ rank in Rhodesia. Rhodesian Apprentices formed part of the 34th, 70th, 71st, 73rd, 76th, 79th, 80th, 83rd, 86th, 94th, 95th, 98th, 100th and 103rd entries.

Some aircraft types worked on by RRAF Aircraft Apprentices when they returned to Rhodesia are shown below.

Royal Ceylon (Sri Lanka) Air Force

The Royal Ceylon Air Force (RCyAF) was formed on 2 March 1951. When the RCyAF was formed a priority requirement was to train local youths as aircraft technicians. Young Ceylonese boys, between the ages of sixteen and seventeen and a half, were recruited as Aircraft Apprentices and sent to the UK to be trained at Halton. The first batch of ten was sent to England less than two months after the Air Force was formed, and thereafter, further batches followed, every four months. Ceylon was renamed Sri Lanka in 1972.

RCyAF/Sri Lankan aircraft apprentices were trained at RAF Halton from 1951 to 1962. Some aircraft types worked on by RCyAF Aircraft Apprentices when they returned to Ceylon are shown below.
Burma (Myanmar) Air Force

The Burma Air Force was formed on 16 January 1947, while Burma was still under British rule. By 1948, the new air force fleet included 40 Airspeed Oxfords, 16 de Havilland Tiger Moths, 4 Austers and 3 Supermarine Spitfires transferred from Royal Air Force. In 1953, the Air Force bought 30 Supermarine Spitfires from Israel and 20 Supermarine Seafires from United Kingdom. In 1954 40 Hunting Provost T-53s and 8 De Havilland Vampire Mark T55s from United Kingdom were added. Burma was renamed Myanmar in 1989.

Some aircraft types worked on by Burma Air Force Aircraft Apprentices when they returned home are shown below.
**Fuerza Aérea Venezolana**

While military aviation started in Venezuela in 1920 it was not until 1947, when the Venezuelan Air Force became an independent service and was renamed "Fuerza Aérea Venezolana" (FAV). During the 1950s large quantities of modern aircraft, Venom, Vampire, Canberra and F-86 Sabre were bought and many new squadrons were established. One squadron of B-25J Mitchell bombers was also operational. Transport aircraft operated included the DC 3 and C54.

Some aircraft types worked on by Aircraft Apprentices of the Fuerza Aérea Venezolana when they returned to Venezuela are shown below.

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**84th Entry Badge**

Each entry designed its own entry badge. Our entry’s badge is shown below.
84th Entry Church Window

In 1997 Rev Richard Lee, the RAF C of E Padre at St Georges Church, Halton at the time, suggested that the RAF Halton Aircraft Apprentices Association (RAF HAAA) encouraged its members to install stained glass windows in the church to commemorate their time as Brats. The RAF HAAA bought into the idea and soon windows, depicting entry numbers, wing colours, entry badges, famous (and infamous!) entry activities and a host of other events were appearing in glorious coloured glass: each telling something of an entry’s time at Halton. Our entry’s window is shown below.

The stained glass window in St George’s church is shown below. Any attempt to reproduce the window as a painting would not do it justice; a cartoon would lower its dignity. Consequently it’s shown as is. It really is a magnificent tribute and memorial to Trenchard’s Brats.
Website http://www.oldhaltonians.co.uk/pages/rememb/windows/windows.htm carries a picture of each of the windows installed in St George’s church with many accompanied by an associated description.

Pictures of the windows installed by the Aircraft Apprentices from air forces overseas, RNZAF, RRAF, RCyAF and Burma are shown below.

The New Zealand window was designed and made in Blenheim (NZ) by photographer and craftsman Graham Brooks. It depicts an active volcano at the top above mist shrouded foothills from which a river flows under a stylised Kiwi and the Red, White and Blue flashes representing the RNZAF. The river continues flowing through the verdant rolling hills and plains towards the sea. The rugby football (separating the years that New Zealand Aircraft Apprentices trained at Halton) is self explanatory.

The Rhodesian window displays in panels at each corner the Rhodesian National flower, the “Gloriosa superb” (also known as the "Flame Lily"). In the centre is shown the Crest of the Rhodesian Air Force whilst beneath a panel displays the Entry numbers of those in which the Rhodesian Apprentices were trained.

The RCyAF panel shows the cap badge worn by Apprentices from Ceylon and the period of time during which Ceylon’s Aircraft Apprentices were trained at Halton.

The Burma panel displays the shoulder patch worn by Burmese Aircraft Apprentices.

**The Queen’s Colour**

The importance of the RAF Apprentice Scheme received recognition by Her Majesty the Queen when No 1 School of Technical Training was honoured with the presentation of The Queen’s Colour. It is the highest award that a Sovereign can bestow on a service formation or Unit for distinguished service. The Queen’s Colour was presented to a parade of 1,700 Apprentices on 25th July 1952 by Her Majesty the Queen in the presence of Lord Trenchard. The
Colour is unique in being the only one in any of the armed Services which is paraded by non-commissioned servicemen, a privilege which usually falls to commissioned officers.

No 1 School of Technical Training Crest

The badge of No 1 School of Technical Training incorporates a symbolic tree of learning derived from the beech trees typical of the Halton area. The motto “Crescentes Discimus” can be translated to mean ‘As we grow, we learn’.

As Trenchard Brats we certainly grew; emotionally, physically and mentally, and we certainly learnt.

Reunions

Since our days as Brats many of us have attended a number of RAF Halton Aircraft Apprentice Association reunions. Group Captain Christine Elliot was appointed Station Commander at Royal Air Force Halton only a few days before the triennial reunion held on 25 September 2010. She was the first woman to be appointed Officer Commanding at RAF Halton.
It must have been a daunting experience to face hundreds of aged juveniles in the form of ‘Trenchard’s Brats’ within a couple of days of being appointed Station Commander. However, Group Captain Elliot faced the challenge with extreme grace, a friendly smile and good humour.

I decided to capture the reunion march past in cartoon form. I sent the original to Group Captain Elliot as a memento. It portrays, with gentle humour, a lengthy march past with some ex-Brats out of step but still giving their best in respect of the Station Commander, as a tribute to Halton and to honour those no longer on parade.

The Last Man Left in the Air Force

Someone recently sent me the following, written by ex RAF Master Signaller P. I. Fisher (an ex Brat) under the nom de plume “Peter Wyton”. I find it extremely amusing.

THE UNKINDEST DEFENCE CUT OF ALL

I’m the last man left in the Air Force,
I’ve an office in MOD
and a copy of Queens Regulations
which only apply to me.
I can post myself to Leuchars
and detach me from there to Kinloss,
or send me on courses to Innsworth,
then cancel the lot - I’m the boss.

I’m the last man left in the Air Force,
but the great Parliamentary brains
neglected, when cancelling people,
to sell off the Stations and planes.
The result is, my inventory bulges
with KD and camp-stools and Quarters,
plus a signed book of speeches by Trenchard
which I keep to impress the reporters.

I’m the last man left in the Air Force,
I suppose you imagine it’s great
to be master of all you survey, but
I tell you it’s difficult, mate.
I inspected three units last Thursday,
As C-in-C ( Acting ) of Strike,
then I swept half the runway at Laarbruch
and repaired Saxa Vord’s station bike.

I’m the last man left in the Air Force,
it’s not doing a lot for my health.
Unit sports days are frankly exhausting
when the Victor Ludorum’s oneself.
On guest nights the Mess is so lonely,
there are times when I wish I was able
to pass the port to the chap next to me,
without seeing it fall off the table.
I'm the last man left in the Air Force,  
my wife says I'm never at home,  
when I'm not flying Hercs, I'm at Manston,  
laying gallons and gallons of foam,  
or I'm in my Marine Craft off Plymouth,  
shooting flares at the crowds on the Ho,  
or I'm Orderly Corporal at Luqa.  
It's an interesting life, but all go.

I'm the last man left in the Air Force.  
I'm ADC to the Queen,  
I'm Duty Clerk at St. Mawgan,  
I'm the RAF rugby team.  
Tomorrow I'm painting a guardroom  
and air-testing numerous planes.  
The day after that I'm for London,  
to preach at St. Clement Danes.

I'm the last man left in the Air force  
and I'm due to go out before long.  
There’s been no talk of any replacement  
and I won’t even let me sign on.  
I hope to enjoy my retirement.  
I've put up a fairly good show,  
and I won’t cut myself off entirely.  
There are always reunions, you know.

© Peter Wyton

Creaks and Groans

Over fifty five years have passed since I became one of Trenchard’s Brats. The years have flown by. On leaving Halton we dispersed to different RAF stations all over the world. Some were commissioned directly from Halton, others later in their service careers. One member of our entry eventually became Station Commander at RAF Halton as the Aircraft Apprentice era came to an end. Many left after twelve years service, some served on until retiring at age 55. Sadly some have taken up their final postings, either through accidents during their service time or through natural causes. For those of us left we’ve moved from being young agile men; we creak and we groan, sometimes we moan and our hearing is not as good as it was. However, we still maintain a sense of humour.

Every so often we have a reunion, many wives attend. Incidents in our lives at Halton are remembered, many times over! The ladies accept that hangar doors will be opened wide and always show a positive interest in our reminiscing. Humour prevails throughout a reunion. We also remember those no longer with us.
Lord Trenchard’s RAF Apprenticeship scheme developed, shaped and moulded many a young man. We broadened outlooks by meeting fellow Brats from all over the Commonwealth. Our training was second to none. Self discipline was instilled, confidence developed and a willingness to accept responsibility was established. We all look back with pride on our time as Trenchard Brats. Three years developed and shaped our minds and characters for whatever we subsequently went on to achieve. Thanks to all those involved in our lives and training. Humour was an essential ingredient of that life; as was often aired: “If you can’t take a joke you shouldn’t have joined!”

Postscript

In my youth I used to draw and paint but always ended up frustrated with my efforts. In my mid 20s I totally turned away from painting and drawing, having found another medium in which to express my creative aspirations; that of woodcarving. In 2003 a friend motivated me to return to the drawing board after a gap of about forty years. I started cartooning in 2009. In developing this document many memories of my life at RAF Halton came to mind.

I have studied the work of many aviation cartoonists. David Langdon, Wren, David Low, Joseph Lee, Bill Hooper, former US Pilot Bob Stevens and RCAF Warrant Officer Ray Tracy are among many whose works have influenced me as I try to develop my own style. I have experimented with a variety of techniques and approaches in portraying my memories. My aim has been to capture and portray whimsical and eccentric aspects of life as a Trenchard Brat with gentle humour. Another forty years and I might get there!

These memories are dedicated to all members of RAF Halton’s 84th Apprentice Entry, to all Aircraft Apprentices and in gratitude to the members of No 1 School of Technical Training responsible for our training. It is an honour and privilege to be a member of the entry and to be one of Trenchard’s Brats.

Rob Knotts
April 2012