

WW2 People's War

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Gosport - 1942

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Background to story: Royal Air Force

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Gosport was a very old station that had been used in the First World War by the Royal Naval Air Service and the Royal Flying Corps. The small grass airfield had been made close by two massive red brick forts, Rowner and Grange that were built between 1850 and 1860. There were hangars near Fort Rowner. It had been bombed in 1940 and 1941. The fort was undamaged but buildings around the airfield had been damaged. Fort Rowner was surrounded by a moat. To gain entry you went across a bridge and then through an arched tunnel. Just inside the tunnel, on the left, was the Guard Room and the tunnel opened out into a large cobbled area or courtyard. Around the perimeter of the courtyard were the fort's inner walls in which there were barrack rooms, a dining room and room used as workshops. I was put in a barrack room in Fort Rowner, the inside of which were similar to parts of the London Underground. There were windows and a door at the courtyard end, and without lights it was gloomy. A passage at the rear of the barrack room led to washing facilities, and I seem to recollect the bowls being lined with lead??. The roof of the fort above the rooms was earth of considerable thickness with grass, bushes, small trees and brambles growing on it. When the sun was on the moat you looked down on parts of it and could see pike swimming about.

When I arrived at Gosport it was a Fleet Air Arm Maintenance Unit and became No 3502 Servicing Unit. Near Fort Grange was an Air Torpedo Development Unit.

After being issued with a tool kit, with another fitter I did a major inspection on an Airspeed Oxford, then some work on Lockheed Hudsons that were going to Gibraltar, after which I was employed in the modification section. We were not fully employed in the modification section, and a good many brooches and lighters were made.

When we were off we would sometimes go to Fareham. Busses used to run just outside the camp. We were lucky to get most Sunday nights off and we often went to Portsmouth or Southsea. Portsmouth had been severely bombed. To get to Portsmouth we would take the ferry from Gosport and the last ferry back was 2230 hrs. On Sunday nights there were band concerts at the Pier Pavilion, Southsea and in the space of three or four weeks we saw Joe Loss, Jack Payne and the Maple Leafs, the Canadian orchestra.

During my time at Gosport I did a few night guards. On two occasions with other airmen, we were taken by Bedford lorry to a Radio Direction Finding Station now known as Radar. There was a village close by the RDF Station and in the village lived our RAF Padre. The Padre had served in the Royal Flying Corps in the First World War, and by nature was

official. He rode an upright bicycle with a rifle slung under the crossbar, and carried a service revolver and a Webley air pistol. He was always taking pot shots with the air pistol and was known as Two Gun Pete. As the Padre lived near the RDF station he had taken it on himself to be partly responsible for its security, and we were warned about him by an Air Ministry Warden who guarded the station during the day. The padre would often turn up when you were on guard. Like everywhere else the village was blacked out and one night after dark the padre spotted light showing in the village. He then went away and returned with a tripod on which was mounted a tube. The tripod was then set up in the area surrounding the RDF building. He then lined the tube up with the light showing in the village, and before he departed said to the guard "I will look through that in the morning and see which house is the offender, and then go and deal with the occupants" The airmen on guard knew what house the Padre lived in and when it got light he then lined the tube up with the Padre's house.

From Fort Rowner you could see in the distance barrage balloons, and quite often a German fighter would come in and shoot them down. One day a Lockheed Hudson went up on air test and took some of the ground crew. A German fighter nipped in and shot up the Hudson, and although it landed safely the Flying Officer air gunner had been killed. I was on his funeral party. There were no more ground crew going for flips after that.

Sometime in July I took a trade test. I never did any swotting and surprised myself and everyone else by getting over 80 per cent, and so I was now an LAC Group 1 Fitter. Before the war nearly all trade tests were taken at RAF West Drayton and I think the local wartime trade tests were easier. Shortly after that in August I received my good conduct stripe for three years service. For that you received three pence a day.

One day we assembled to be addressed by Technical Warrant Officer Howes who read out an Air Ministry Directive which called for volunteers from fitters for aircrew to be trained as Flight Engineers to fly in four engined aircraft, and with a number of others I volunteered. We then had an aircrew medical which only two of us passed. After that we had a simple educational test and I then had an interview with the Station Commander. It was the shortest interview I would ever have in my life. The CO asked how long I had been in the service and I replied "three years, Sir". He then said "Recommended" and that was that. Just after my twenty fifth birthday in September 1942 I was posted with an airman named Tait to No 7 Air Gunnery School, Stormy Down, Glamorgan, S. Wales.

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