

Virgin Airmen



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WE WERE probably all virgins, even though we were eighteen. It was a more innocent age, and of course you didn't "become a man" until you were twenty-one. Though at eighteen you could still be called up to fight for your country and, presumably, die for it too. In fact, nearly four hundred of us National Service men did in places like Korea and Malaya.

National Service, universal conscription of all young men, began in 1947, two years after World War II ended. The reasons were only too apparent. There was Germany to be occupied with 100,000 troops, and Austria too. In the Middle East, there was Palestine to be policed, Aden to be protected, the Suez Canal Zone to be held down—as well as Cyprus, Singapore, Hong Kong, and a chain of lesser military bases. At first it was for a period of one year, but financial crises, the advent of the Cold War, and the Malaya emergency had led to the National Service Amendment Act in December 1948, increasing the period of service to eighteen months.

Not that we understood the background to any of this at that time, except perhaps for a few "barrack-room lawyers." Certainly all we knew in 1951 was that we were here for a year and a half and it was going to be hell. Basic training (what the Americans call "Boot Camp") was just that. Sergeants, corporals, lance corporals shouting at you, nose to nose so that your face was covered with flying spittle, if you walked when you should be running, stepped on the grass if you should be on the parade ground, allowed your shoulders to droop, swung your arms too high—or not high enough—if you had too little or too much blanco on your belt and webbing, had a fingerprint on your brass or couldn't see your face in the toecaps of your boots, which were probably the wrong size and rubbed sore places on your heels and eventually caused blisters.

But that was for six weeks, and, unbelievably, it passed.

I was in the Royal Air force. Aircraftsman 2nd class Michael Duggan—the lowest of the low, a sprog, AC2 plonk, but learning. In an excess of zeal, or probably because I couldn't stand much more of the training camp at RAF Wilmslow, I put down for "Overseas." Someone afterwards told me that that was the best way of ensuring that I remained in England—and so I did.

After square bashing, I was trained as an RTO (Radio Telephone Operator) and later added Direction Finder/Bomb Plotter, which meant that I supposedly knew how to speak on the RT to aircraft and also had memorized the alphabet letter identification names. In those days we Brits had our own system, which started "Abel, Baker, Charlie, Dog, Easy, Fox..." though later we adopted the American "Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, Echo, Foxtrot." My first posting was RAF Bawtry, not far from Doncaster, but for a nesh Southerner like myself, it seemed not far from the Arctic Circle.

It was a bitterly cold Saturday evening, and there were apparently only two of us deposited on Doncaster Station off the London train, bewildered, slightly frightened, I suspect—I know I was, chilled to the marrow after the warmth of the train, waiting, not sure what to do next. We had our haversacks on our backs, and those huge white rucksacks, which contained everything we owned, on our shoulders, with a blue stripe at the bottom and our name and number stenciled on the side.

The other lad was taller than me, dark hair, what I could see of it under his beret, a frown on his face. I went up to him.

"Are you for Bawtry?" I asked.

His face cleared. He smiled. I decided he had a nice face. "Have you come to take us to the camp?"

I owned up that I was in the same position as he was, and we sat down together on a railway trolley, two orphans of the storm. We waited for something to happen, something maybe better than the driving rain with flakes of snow in it, which was what we were being dealt with at the moment. Maybe.

“Michael Duggan,” I said.

“Jim Ross,” he said. “You talk funny, kinda posh.”

I sighed inwardly. He had me there. Product of a middleclass family and brought up in a middle-class suburb of North London and a minor public school, I thought I talked the same way as everyone else. Certainly the same as the announcers on the wireless. But once in the RAF, I realized I didn't. I talked “posh,” and to escape teasing, I knew I had to change. I thought I managed to get some of it out already. One thing I decided to introduce was the use of the words “fuck” and “fucking,” which seemed to be the passwords for most of my peers, verb, adjective, and exclamation. But I knew I was still slightly self-conscious about them and sounded like it. My curses didn't slip out with the practiced fluency of my compatriots.

I attacked. “You talk funny too,” I said. “Where do you come from?”

“Nottingham,” he said. “The town with three girls to every one lad.”

“Fucking lucky,” I said, but I knew it sounded wrong.

He nodded and pulled his greatcoat tighter around him. “We're gonna fuckin freeze soon,” he said. It came out all right with him.

But we were suddenly saved when a shout came from along the platform. “Oi, you fuckin sprog. I'm not fuckin waiting ere all fuckin night.” A corporal, twin chevrons on his arms, appeared under the lamplight. He used his words all right too.

We followed him out of the station. A small lorry was outside. Sitting at the wheel was a sergeant tapping irritably on the dashboard. The corporal got in beside him, and we climbed into the back. We seemed to be the only passengers. The lorry started with a jolt, and Jim and I fell together in a huddle on the floor.

Ten minutes later we drew up at the gate of the camp. The sergeant called us down and we stood, our uniforms covered in dust from the floor of the lorry, at attention. He looked us up and down, obviously not liking what he saw.

“Disgusting,” he said at last. “Next time I see you I want you to be fucking spotless. What do I want you to be?”

“Fucking spotless, Sergeant,” said Jim and I together.

We showed him our ID cards. “3132849 AC2 Duggan,” I said.

“Oh, very lah di dah,” said the sergeant,

Jim introduced himself.

“Take em to the transit hut,” Sergeant said to the corporal. “They'll have to stay there until Monday before I can get them booked in through admin. Show em where they can eat and get em out of my sight.” This last finished in a frightening roar.

The corporal took us off. “Don't pay too much attention to Sergeant Bingham,” he said. “His barks worse than his bite, and he doesn't like guard duty, especially on a Saturday night. I'll show you where you can get a bite to eat and then take you to your quarters.”

He took us round to the back of the cookhouse, where two miserable-looking National Servicemen were peeling potatoes—obviously a punishment for some heinous wrong. The cook looked sour and disagreeable, but he provided us with some spam sandwiches and a mug of sweet tea. Then, as part of the punishment for the offenders, he pointedly showed them what he was doing and equally pointedly excluded them from the “treat” as he gave us (and the corporal) each a doughnut covered with sugar before we were dispatched to the transit hut.

It wasn't, as it happened, a “hut” at all, but up a flight of steps to what once presumably had been the upstairs of a stable. Inside were two beds, one bigger than the other. There was a window that looked

out onto the darkening sky. Two uncomfortable-looking wooden chairs were arranged against the wall. There was no heating and it was bitterly cold.

“Sorry about the lack of a stove,” said the corporal. “Cant have one here, as the whole building is made of wood. Fire risk and all that. I suggest you both sleep in the big bed and use all the blankets. Top to tail, of course, and no larking about.” He winked at us. “Ill collect you in the morning and take you to breakfast. The latrines are in the building opposite.”

He disappeared, his boots clunking down the wooden steps.

We sat on the bed and finished off the sandwiches and doughnuts.

“What did he mean „top to tail?” I asked.

Jim grinned. “You know,” he said, though it was obvious that I didnt. “We sleep at opposite ends, head to tail.”

“Your feet on my pillow?” I asked. “Im not sure Id like that. What if they stink?”

“He thinks it will stop us, er, doin things.” For the first time Jim looked a bit embarrassed.

Innocent as I was, I did have some idea of what “doing things” could constitute. “No chance of that,” I said with what I hoped was hearty sincerity. Id never had a chance of “doing things” with anyone else, male or female, and the prospect was not altogether distasteful.

“Too right,” said Jim, equally convincing.

I peered out of the window. Snow was coming down thickly, almost obscuring the light of the solitary lamp by the road outside. “I dont fancy going out in that to the bog,” I said, using another word Id picked up along the way and which I felt more at home with. My parents, of course, would have used the word “toilet.”

Jim joined me at the window and stared out at the blizzard. “Nor me.”

Greatly daring, I hazarded, “I only want a piss. Ill do it out of the window. No one will see.”

We opened the window, letting in a great blast of cold air and snowflakes. Then, together, we unbuttoned our trousers and pissed into the night, twin arcs blown this way and that by the wind.

“Christ,” said Jim when we had finished, “me todgers frozen. And so am I. Lets get to bed.”

We took the solitary blanket off the smaller bed and laid it onto the larger one. “Well skip the top to tail. Last one ins a sissy.”

Even with that challenge, we didnt exactly throw our uniforms in a heap. When theres an inspection liable at any time of day and night, you dont want your uniform looking like a crumpled shit bag. Uniforms, in the eyes of NCOs, are sacred things, and they have to be hung up, cosseted, and kept pristine. The dust on ours would have to wait until tomorrow, but folding trousers and hanging jackets carefully over the back of the chairs was an essential.

The RAF issued pajamas, so we both put them on, Jim keeping his underpants on, I noticed. I did the same. As I had stopped to see what he would be doing, I was last.

We huddled under the blankets, giggling, Jim poking me in the ribs and muttering, “Sissy”.

“Not,” I said. “Im just polite. Wouldnt keep a lady out of bed before I got in.”

“Who you calling a „lady?”

“If the cap fits.”

We wrestled a bit, muttering alternately, “sissy” and “lady.” Then I felt something happening in my groin, and, not wishing Jim to know I was getting excited, and perhaps be accused of wanting to “do things,” I turned over so that my back was to him.

“Im fuckin knackered,” I said, for once sounding as if I was getting it right. “See you in the morning.”

For a moment there was no sound or movement from Jim, and then I felt his body move toward mine, his front against my back. We seemed to fit well, he being slightly taller than I was. “Just for

warmth,” he said, his breath against the back of my neck. “Gnight, Mike.”
“Mike!” I felt as if I’d been accepted. His body was warm. “Gnight, Jim,” I said. “Sleep tight. Hope the fleas don’t bite.”

I wondered if I’d get to sleep with such an alien, though not unwelcome, presence in the bed with me, but I was tired. It had been a long day. The last thing I remembered was Jim’s arm coming over and holding me, his hand clenched against my chest.
Protected, I slept.

WE HEARD the corporals boots on the wooden steps in spite of the deadening snow. Immediately we were both out of bed, and Jim even had the presence of mind to chuck one of the pillows to the other end.

“Hands off cocks, on with your socks,” said the corporal as he pushed open the door.
And we were already doing that.

Whether Sergeant Bingham had decided that two airmen in a bed wasn’t a good idea or if he’d been prodded by a higher authority to settle the intake of two new ACs, I didn’t know, but immediately after we had had our breakfasts—sausages and tinned tomatoes, bread and margarine with plum jam, and the usual tea (spiked, as the rumor always had it, with bromide to reduce sexual desire— never worked with me)—we were shepherded into a barrack hut.

It was indistinguishable from any other service hut, the inside painted a sort of cream, the floor covered with lino, which was polished and buffed to a high degree, ordinary metal beds down each side, the blankets and sheets folded into the regulation pattern at the head of each bed. Beside each one was a flimsy-looking wooden cabinet in which personal belongings were arranged symmetrically. There was a smell, familiar from square bashing camp, of polish, Brasso, and the healthy sweat of young men. In the middle of the hut was a circular stove. I could feel its heat even from the door. A distinct improvement on the freezing cold of last night’s lodgings. There’d be no excuse, though, for cuddling up to Jim.

The inhabitants, at first sight a seemingly great number but upon later count only a dozen guys, all appeared young and obviously National Service; most looked relaxed and at home from their longer stay. They got to their feet as the corporal entered, standing more or less to attention, but without the alacrity of training camp.

“At ease,” said Corporal Taylor, scarcely needing to say it. “Couple of new lads for you, bringing us up to full complement. Fill ‘em in, will you? We’re off to the range tomorrow.” He turned to us. “There’s two empty beds.” He pointed to the two furthest from the stove, turned, and left.

Such was our introduction to Hut 22, the Bombing Range crew. On the whole, as amiable a bunch of guys as you’d wish to meet. At first sight none stood out except a scrawny, ginger-haired lad who looked about thirteen and spoke with a Scots accent so broad as to be almost incomprehensible. But as they crowded round, more individuals began to stand out, including a tall, spectacularly handsome guy with the nickname Bo (or maybe Beau—I never saw it written down) and a dark-haired, dark-eyebrowed, olive-skinned youth who was called Spic, and didn’t seem to mind. There was no such thing as political correctness in those far-off days.

Gradually the secrets were revealed, both in the hut and later in the NAAFI canteen, where we bought buns, fags, and more tea (presumably unspiked). We were the crew of a live bombing range. Our job was to record the skill and precision of the pilots and bomb aimers who dropped twenty-five pound smoke bombs on a target range some ten miles away from the camp.

They’d been awaiting us to bring them up to the full complement so that the range could be used night and day, seven days a week. Whom they planned to bomb, we didn’t ask and were never told.

There were two crews, each of six men, one under Sergeant Bingham and the other under Corporal Taylor, and we'd take it in turns, week on, week off, to man the range.

"It's a fucking doddle," said Bo. "And usually on our week off we can skive the parades and stuff that the others on the camp have to do."

When we went back to the barrack room, we listened to Radio Luxembourg until Corporal Taylor, who had a small individual room at the end of the hut, shouted, "Switch that fucking row off," and we went to sleep.

And so, on Monday morning, Bo, Spic, a thin, sulky-looking lad with incipient blond curls, not surprisingly called Curly, Jim, and I clambered into the lorry driven by Sergeant Bingham and set off for the range. I was a bit disappointed that we weren't in Corporal Taylor's squad, but I guess I was lucky that both Jim and I were picked for the same shift. It would have been more sensible for the two new guys to be split up, but when do the Services do anything "sensible?"

The actual range was an unlovely place. The snow had melted and left pools of gray water between the tussocks of grass, which were basically what the range consisted of. There was a tall wooden structure at one end built on stilts with two stories above, and in the distance another, not quite so tall. A flight of wooden steps led up the side, giving access to the two levels. On the ground beside the taller building was an arrow painted yellow, and, we were told, somewhere in the middle was a triangle, also painted yellow, which was the target. At night both of these could be illuminated.

The sequence of events was rudimentary. A plane came over, saw the arrow pointing to the target, and dropped its bomb as near to the target as it could. This exploded on landing and produced a column of smoke, or, at night, a flash. The spotters in the two towers focused their "telescopes" on the smoke and read off the bearings. Another guy, on a map of the area, moved two "arms" along the given bearings, and where they crossed, the bomb had landed. It was then possible to read off how far the bomb had landed from the target, and the direction needed to correct it.

It only needs people to fuck up a system as simple as that—and objects, of course. Like on the first day I was on duty—not my fault, of course. As RTO, I was on the radiotelephone. The pilot of the aircraft would call us up, tell us the approximate time he'd be with us, then announce when he could see our arrow pointing at the target. Then a quick run down and he'd announce the release of the bomb.

Comfy in our little observation hut on the top floor, I sat with my headphones on, though there was a loudspeaker so that they weren't really necessary, and my microphone. By my side was Bo with the telescope pointing out through the window. Spic was at the map waiting for the instructions. Sergeant Bingham was in the easy chair drinking a mug of tea and smoking a Woodbine.

In the other observation tower, Jim and Curly were waiting, one at their telescope, the other waiting to pass the details of his reading over to me.

To an onlooker, I suppose, we looked like a well-oiled machine, uniformed, efficient, ready for action—only Sergeant Bingham letting the side down.

The loudspeaker crackled, as did my earphones. Then a voice. "Hatrack Control, Hatrack Control"—our call sign. "This is Able, George How"—his call sign. "How do you read? Over."

"Able George How, this is Hatrack Control. Reading you loud and clear, strength five," I answered, then remembered, "over."

"I'm twenty miles away," said the voice. It sounded young. I wondered if he was any older than I was. "I can see your arrow. Permission to proceed. Over."

I looked at Bingham, puffing away at the thin stick of his Woodbine. He nodded.

"Alpha George How," I said. "Clear to proceed." I remembered the other outlook. I picked up the

receiver of the landline. "All right Hatrack Two? Bomber coming in."

Jims voice answered. "Okay, Mike," he said knowing Bingham couldnt hear. "Were ready for anything."

There was a pause while my heart pounded. Bingham puffed away contentedly. Bo, sitting next to me, his hand on his groin, was rearranging himself. I wondered whether excitement made him feel sexy. The voice came over. "Hatrack Control. Bomb run commencing. Five, four, three, two, one, bomb gone." We peered out of the window, seeing nothing, only the gray sky, the tussocky grass. "Wheres it gone?" asked Bo.

"Did you see anything, Jim?" I asked.

"Not a fuckin thing."

"Must be a dud," said Bingham.

I swallowed my disappointment. "Sorry, Alpha George How, looks like we have a dud."

"Shi—" came the voice, cut off. Swearing over the RT was a cardinal sin. Then his voice again. "Ill go round again. Over."

"Understood," I said.

We repeated the procedure. This time a plume of smoke curled into the air. "There it is," I said to Bo, but he had seen it, and he focused the telescope on the mark. "Got it," he said. He read off the bearing.

"Got it, Jim?" I asked. I heard him asking Curly for the bearing. There was a pause, and my heart stopped. What if hed fucked it up? I found I was using the word even in my thoughts. Must be becoming like the others. Then his voice. "Zero, four, five," he said.

Spic had already put one arm to Bos bearing. I repeated Jims, and Spic moved the other arm. For a moment, the two didnt seem to join, and I wondered what wed done wrong, but then he moved it so that the two arms crossed. He whistled. "Nearly a direct hit," he said. He used his ruler to measure the distance between the center of the target and the hit. "Five yards south, south-west," he said.

"Nearly a direct hit," I said to the pilot, though I knew comments like that werent really approved of, but I thought he deserved it after the first dud. Then I told him the distance from the target.

"Bloody good show," I heard the pilot say to his bomb aimer.

Three more runs, all except one with very good results, and the "failure" was only twenty yards off. The pilot signed off sounding pleased.

"Good show, lads," said Bingham, his voice a low grumble, "but dont let it go to your heads. Weve got that dud to find."

No one had told Jim and me about this, perhaps keeping the "best" news for later. It seemed that if any bombs didnt go off, we had to go to find them. Sometimes this was easy. They might just be lying on the ground in clear view. At other times, especially if, like now, the ground was soft and probably waterlogged, they might go straight in, and the only way wed find them was by stepping into the hole. If the crater had sloping sides, the bomb had exploded. If it was straight down, the bomb was probably at the bottom. According to the sergeant, there was no danger. You couldnt set a bomb off by treading on the fins, but I was, to say the least, a bit doubtful.

There were no planes due until the afternoon, so I told Jim and Curly to start searching from their post. I heard them swearing. Sergeant issued out the wellington boots. "What happens if the holes really deep and full of water?" I asked.

"You gets your feet wet," he said. He was all heart.

Even though I didnt really like the idea of looking for unexploded bombs with my feet, I felt elated. The first runs had gone well. The only foul-up had been in the bomb itself, and we could

hardly be blamed for that.

“What does the finder of the bomb get?” I asked. “A kiss from the sergeant,” said Bo. Bingham grunted, but I don't think he was upset. “What about those that don't find it?” I asked. “A kiss from me,” said Bo.

I knew which I'd prefer. Actually, I'd really have liked a kiss from Jim, but I could hardly say that. I wasn't sure I could analyze my feelings for Jim exactly. Certainly I liked him as a friend, but I also liked being with him, having his physical presence near me, and when we occasionally touched, accidentally, I felt an excitement go through me. I put thoughts of what all this meant to one side. Though at night, when I remembered that first night in the transit hut and his body spooned round me, his arm round my chest, I wondered what I would have done if his hand had gone the other way, down instead of up.

We splashed out into the cold bog, and I was glad. The thoughts had given me a hard-on, which the winter weather soon took care of. We splashed our way toward the target. If all his bombs had been pretty close, even the furthest one away, probably that first dud, would be in the area. After ten minutes, we saw Jim and Curly coming from the other direction. We'd been given sticks to poke down likely looking holes, and we prodded away, the excitement ebbing as we found nothing. Then, at long last, when even Bingham was about to give up. Bos stick struck something metallic. Spic and Curly had their spades, and they dug the thing out. Jim and I looked on. He stood close and I could almost feel his warmth. I would have liked to put my arms round him, but of course I didn't.

The bomb looked small and innocuous. We carried it back and put it in the special store. I noticed this was defended with concrete cladding. So it was all right to go looking for bombs in our bare feet, as it were, but storing them required real protection. I hoped we wouldn't have to do this very often.

Bedtime. The nighttime arrangements were primitive, as was the cooking. There was a small Calor gas stove on which we used a huge frying pan to cook anything that had been provided by the cooks at base camp. Sausages, usually, and more of the tinned tomatoes. There were some boiled potatoes, remains of last night's supper, probably, but good for a fry-up. Plenty of grease and stodge, and it filled us up.

The beds were on the lower floor. Six rickety army beds, with another one for the sergeant, hidden from the rest by a half partition. You couldn't see what he was doing, but you could certainly hear him. He farted a lot, but then so did we—all that greasy food, I guess.

We climbed in, Jim in the bed next to mine. Someone, Curly I think, started a song from the war, and we all joined in.

“... „Kiss me goodnight, Sergeant-Major, Sergeant-Major, be a mother to me.”

Bingham was having none of it. He puffed on his eternal Woodbine, and when we finished, grunted, “Kiss you kids? I'd sooner kiss the Popes arse.” I remember being slightly shocked at this. It wasn't done in my family to make antireligious comments, but I supposed Bingham was a Protestant. He had a slight accent and could, I guessed, have come from Northern Ireland.

Bo stood up in his pajama trousers, tall and handsome. “Well,” he said, “if he won't, I'll have to do it. Pucker up, lads, here I come.”

He went round all of us and gave us each a kiss on the lips, soft and light, almost the sort an aunt might give us. Only Curly turned his face so that he got a kiss on the cheeks. I looked over at Jim after Bo had kissed us. He smiled and made a slight movement of his lips as if he was blowing me one. I grinned back.

Then there was a sudden shout from Bo, high pitched, not like his usual voice at all. He'd just kissed Spic. “The slut,” he called. “She opened her mouth. Wanted me to put my tongue in.”

Spic was grinning, and I knew Bo was having a joke, but I was confused. Bingham said, “Go to sleep, you fucking nellys, or Ill have you out on parade at five oclock tomorrow morning.” It was an empty threat, we knew; Bingham was no more likely to want to get up that early than pigs might fly, but we settled down and Bo switched off the light. I could see a sliver of moon through the window and millions and millions of stars, more than Id ever seen in London since the streetlights had come on again at the end of the war. I could see the lump that was Jim and wondered what he was doing or thinking. Was he holding himself like I was? What did Bo mean by “putting his tongue in?” Into Spics mouth? What was that for? Was this the “French kissing” Id heard mentioned once or twice since I joined up? And did that mean that Bo was queer? He was nothing like the effeminate idea I had of those people whom my father called “Nancy boys.” Bo was tall and straight and, yes, manly. He looked a bit like the Captain of our First Eleven Cricket team at school, a hero to all of us juniors. Then I thought of Jim. Hed blown a kiss at me. Would I like to kiss him and open my mouth, allowing his tongue to come in and find mine? The thought was strangely erotic. I realized I was getting a hard and knew I wouldnt be able to sleep without a wank unless I got rid of it. I thought of kissing Sergeant Bingham and I drooped immediately. “Gnight, Jim,” I whispered too low for anyone to hear. But perhaps he did, for his shape moved. I could just make out his arm stretched out toward me. Our beds were close enough for me to reach out too. Our fingers touched—just.

IT WASNT this first time, but a week some months later.

Christmas was over, and wed had a weeks leave—very generous. Id gone home, but, though Christmas with the family was fun, and, in spite of the rationing, the food was good, my sister, aged fourteen, was a bit of a pain, and my brother, aged four, was a complete nuisance. So I was almost looking forward to going back to camp. Almost? No, really.

I fantasized about Jim, wondering whether, back in Nottingham, where Id heard the ratio of girls to blokes was three to one, hed had his share. I fantasized about Bo, whose “kissing us goodnight” at the range had now taken on the aspect of a ritual. I even fantasized about Spic and his open mouth. But especially I fantasized about Jim and then worried as to whether I was turning queer. And, of course, there was no one I could ask.

One evening he phoned me. Not that we said very much, seeing as how my family were listening at my end and his at his end. I didnt even ask him whether hed found himself a girlfriend, but I came off the phone so elated that my mother asked whether it had in fact been a girl at the other end.

So, at the end of the week, we went back to Bawtry and Hatrack Control, and a few days later, it happened. A comedy, which for some of us turned into a tragedy. It wasnt even at night when it could have been perhaps more understandable.

The afternoon began as normal. It was a fine clear day, though some clouds were piling up in the west, and we were awaiting that last bombing run of the day. Bo and Spic were in Hatrack Two; they had become very close and often chose to spend the shift together. Bingham didnt seem to object. They looked and seemed happy together.

The pilot came through, and we were surprised to hear an American voice. The message was hardly couched in procedural language.

“Hi, Hatrack, Im coming in for a run over your range. Okay?”

“Unidentified aircraft,” I said—I was on the RT, with Jim and Curly on telescope and map respectively—“What is your call sign? Over.”

“Jeez, You Brits. Er...,” came the voice. “Xray Yankee Zulu.”

It wasn't British phonetic alphabet, but I used it anyway. “Xray Yankee Zulu, you are free to start your run. Please call us when you can see the target. Out.”

Even Sergeant Bingham came up to the table. He said, “For fucks sake, make sure you get this one. We don't want to show ourselves up in front of these Yanks.”

I checked with Bo that he was ready, willing, and able. In the background I heard Spic saying something softly, obviously not for my ears. “Sure am,” said Bo, though I wasn't quite sure what he was referring to.

We waited. Then I could hear the sound of a plane's engines. Curly looked out and up. “There she is,” he said. “Christ, he's high up. Can he see the target?”

As if in answer, the pilot's voice crackled over the airwaves. “Your target in view, Hatrack. Am starting my bomb run.” His countdown came almost immediately. “Five, four, three, two, one, bomb gone!” Then a sudden shout. “Gee, sorry, Hatrack, I've bombed your arrow.”

It took less than a moment to realize what he meant, and then it sunk in. The arrow pointed to the target. It was next door to our observation post. In effect, he'd bombed us. There was another brief, terrified pause, and then Jim said, “Under the table.”

We tried, but the space under the table was full, full of Sergeant Bingham's not inconsiderable bulk. His face stared out, but he made no move to make space for us. In fact, there was no space.

I prepared for death. I grabbed hold of Jim and hugged him. I felt other arms clasping me. Curly was in on the act as well.

It seemed an age, but an object falling at an increasing rate of sixteen feet per second per second doesn't take long to reach ground zero. There was a sharp crack, then an explosion; the floor under us tilted to the right, and smoke drifted up past the window.

For a second we waited to see whether the whole thing would collapse, but we remained on the tilt. Bingham scrambled out and grabbed hold of the microphone. “You fucking Yankee cunts,” he shouted. “You want your fucking....” Many of the words he used were unfamiliar to me, but they were effective.

“Sorry, Hatrack,” came the answer. “Is anyone hurt?” “We're all fucking dead,” said Bingham and cut out.

To give him his due, though he'd been first under the table, he remained in the post until we'd all gingerly climbed down the stairs, now leaning at a drunken angle. We could see that the bomb had hit one of the wooden supports, but though it was fractured, it hadn't actually split in two, so it still supported the structure. But it looked as if it could give at any moment.

Suddenly there was a creaking sound and the whole structure wobbled. “Run for it!” shouted Bingham.

We did. I didn't look round, and the crashing seemed to go on forever. At last it stopped. We turned round. We were lucky to have escaped uninjured. Planks and spars with lethal-looking points and splinters lay all around. The twisted metal parts of beds protruded from the wreckage.

“Christ, my spare boots,” said Curly, peering into the mess.

Luckily, everything had missed the lorry, so as soon as Bo and Spic arrived, looking anxious, we drove back to the camp, where Bingham made his report and we were all interviewed. Our evidence, of course, agreed, though parts of it were subtly edited, and the blame fell on the American pilot.

But of course the bombing range was no longer functioning. It wasn't decided whether the observation

post would be rebuilt or not, and until things were decided, no one wanted us around. Our futures were decided without our wishes being considered, but of course, that's the services. Jim was transferred to RAF Bassingbourne, near Cambridge; I was sent to RAF Kidlington, near Oxford. The irony of two University cities always joined in popular parlance, but splitting us apart. The real tragedy was that Bo and Spic were also split. After Bo left Bawtry, Spic committed suicide by cutting his wrists in the bath. The suicide and any relevant circumstances were hushed up. I never heard what happened to Bo.

We were given a forty-eight hour pass, and Jim asked me to go with him to Nottingham to stay at his house. Trying not to think of what would happen afterwards, I was overjoyed. I thought about what we might do when we were alone together. I'd probably have to sleep with Jim, in the same room if not the same bed, as I knew the family was big and the house small.

Then all went wrong. I phoned my parents to tell them the news, that I wasn't hurt, that I would be visiting a friend for my forty-eight hour.

"Your grandmother's dying," said my mother. "This could be the last time you can see her. This pass has happened at just the right time."

"But..." I said, and knew I would have to refuse Jim's offer. And probably I'd never see him again. In a way I knew how Spic had felt, though his solution wasn't mine.

RAF KIDLINGTON is nearer the village of Woodstock than the

city of Oxford. Woodstock is the home of the Dukes of Marlborough and Blenheim Palace, a huge English Baroque mansion built for the first duke after his victory over the French in 1732. Winston Churchill was born there.

Not that any of this made much impression on us oiks. I was more concerned with my new quarters and companions. We were actually separate from the RAF camp. Ours was a small, simulated bombing range; simulated, of course, meaning no actual bombs were dropped. Instead aircraft focused on the corner of Cowley Motor Works in Oxford. They were picked up by radar, and the height, speed, and direction were shown on dials in the command room. A camera recorded these at one-second intervals, and then, when we were told that the bombs had gone, we'd give five quick clicks on the camera button. Somehow, and this was always a mystery to me, the trajectory and final destination of the bomb could be plotted on a large map. This was all handled by the REME (Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers) lads, who jealously guarded their secret.

In fact we were a cosmopolitan group: the RAF talked to the planes and operated the cameras, the REME worked on the bomb-plotting and mended the radar when necessary, and the RA (Royal Artillery) operated the radar. These were two huge mobile "cabins," each with a radar disc on top. Our initiation at the range consisted of climbing onto the roof of one of these holding an electric light bulb. This would light up if held towards the central antennae of the disc. I have no idea what damage this did to our frail bodies, through which, presumably, the same microwaves pulsed.

There was also a civilian who was responsible for making sure the cameras worked. Rather like Sergeant Bingham, he sat in a chair and smoked because the cameras rarely, if ever, broke down. They were about the only things that didn't, because the radar was always failing, and the bomb-plotting contrivance was also unpredictable, to say the least.

The whole enterprise was run by Pilot Officer Tate. Unfortunately "PO Tate" led to his nickname, "Potato," or usually "Spud," though, of course, never to his face. He was a nice enough guy, rather shy, and probably not much older than us National Servicemen, though his commission meant that he

couldnt fraternize with the men. I remember that, at the end of my time, he sent a report on me saying that I was in every way a gentleman. I was shown by the sergeant at my demob camp that someone had drawn a line through this statement and commented, “No one except an officer can be a gentleman,” but of course by that time I didnt care.

We all (except Spud) lived in a single barrack room completely apart from the main RAF camp. We didnt do parades, and the only contact we had with the other RAF lads was that we ate in the same canteen and ran across them in the NAAFI.

It was a grand life, and apart from missing Jim, I enjoyed it immensely. Wed fool around in the hut. One game I particularly remember was “shaking hands.” Someone would suddenly whisper, “Lets shake hands with...”

Everyone would advance on whoever was the victim, peacefully lying on his bed listening to Radio Luxembourg. He would be held down—arms and legs—and then two guys would do the “shaking.” This involved each one putting his hand up the trouser leg of the victim until it reached the top. Trousers in those days were comparatively full, and there was space at the crotch for fumbling around. Then, having touched the hand of the other one coming up the other side, they would withdraw. Well, that was the idea.

There were various ways of prolonging the agony (or pleasure). One I found particularly effective was to bend one of my knees so that, though one persons hand was able to go straight up, the other one was delayed at the knee area. The groping hand at the top, waiting for the hand to touch, would encounter various other parts of anatomy, and there would be shouts of protest and roars of laughter as the victims genitals were groped.

The only problem I had when I was the chosen victim was that I always got an immediate hard-on, which was considered bad form, though it never stopped them picking on me. Perhaps, indeed, it increased the occasions. One lad, an RA lance corporal called Rod, would unashamedly grab hold of my rapidly hardening cock and squeeze it. But it never went further than that.

And then there was Lofty. Lofty, it was rumored, had the biggest cock in the unit. Not that anyone had seen it. He was very shy when having a piss and always used the lockable bathrooms rather than the more public shower. But he was proud of his cock, and mornings he would lie on his back in bed with this monstrous erection sticking up under the blanket. “Its not real,” little Sparky the REME private said. “Thats your hand youre pushing up.” “Course its real,” said Lofty. “Go on, feel it.”

And Sparky touched the projection and squealed. “Its true.” So we all had a feel, one by one, and, if anything, it grew even bigger. Lofty just laid there, a big smile on his face—but he never showed us his prick.

So spring turned into summer, and then there occurred one of those coincidences that happen all the time in real life but are frowned upon in fiction (so you can work out which this is). Two RAF guys from our group were demobbed and replaced, and one of the replacements was Jim Ross, who was now an LAC (leading aircraftsman), as was I.

We had kept in touch, more or less, with occasional letters. He hated his time at Bassingbourne, the job apparently just consisting of his listening out on various frequencies and logging the conversations of the aircraft. There had been one occasion when he had heard a “Mayday,” but it had been far away, and the actual incident had been handled by another group. He missed me, he said, and though I missed him too, I felt slightly guilty that I was having a good time at Kidlington.

That makes me sound as if the only thing I was interested in was sex, which wasnt quite true. I enjoyed the job. A few of us used to walk the leafy lanes of Oxfordshire into Woodstock. We might

catch the bus into Oxford itself and walk around marveling at the University colleges. In fact, I knew that one of my fellow students from school was actually an undergraduate there, having obtained deferment from National Service to get his degree, though I never tried to get in touch.

I vividly remember the morning of Jims arrival. Id been on shift that night—they did simulated night bombing too— but no one had booked a run, so we had spent most of the night playing cards and smoking. I was tired and looking forward to spending at least half the day asleep in my bunk. The other group would be doing the day shift, so there wouldnt be anyone making any noise.

I went into the hut and moved down toward the center— by right of seniority, I was nearer the stove now, though as the weather was warm, this was no special perk. Someone was bent over putting his things into the bedside cupboard, arranging them with care, though we rarely had inspections, and if we did, they were always announced well beforehand. I admired the slim hips, the stretched material over his buttocks—you see Id obviously matured and become more sophisticated. Unfortunately I was still a virgin.

The guy stood up and turned. My heart, my stomach, my cock, all gave a simultaneous jolt. I looked into Jims handsome face, somewhat thinner than I remembered, framed in dark hair, his brown eyes, thick eyebrows, a smile broad on his face.

“Jim,” I said. I couldnt think of anything else to say. I was still not brave enough to be able to hug him, but that was what I wanted to do. Jim, though, was not so reticent. He came to me, arms open, and enclosed me in an embrace. He pulled me to him, and I almost thought he was going to give me a kiss, except that he saw the others coming in behind me.

I introduced him to them.

“Do you know this guy?” asked my lance corporal, prick-squeezer friend Rod. “You want to watch him; hes a sex maniac.”

“Thats good,” said Jim. “Thatll make two of us.”

I could scarcely believe he was here. I kept wanting to touch him. The others retired to catch up on their nights sleep, but I sat up on Jims bed and we chatted quietly, looking at each other. Sometimes he would put his hand on my arm or our fingers would brush as we passed each other cigarettes.

But enough of this romantic rubbish. All I wanted was to lose my virginity—or at least I think that was all. Life went on as always, except that Jim was there and I was happy.

And especially when we introduced him into “shaking hands.” Of course when it was my turn to be the “victim,” and if Jim was going up one leg (often with Rod at the other side), Id allow Jim up quicker than Rod. To feel Jims hand up there in my crotch, groping around, finding and grabbing hold, asking whether this was Rods finger while Rod was futilely trying to get past my knee, was highly exciting, though Rod didnt seem to enjoy it as much as I did.

SUMMER came and it was June. Wed been given a day off for June second because it was the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth. King George VI, her father, had died from lung cancer the previous February, aged just fifty-six. There was going to be a parade in the camp, but we werent included.

The most exciting news, though, came over the wireless and through the Tannoy first thing in the morning. It was announced that the tallest mountain on earth, Mount Everest, had been climbed for the first time. Two mountaineers, Edmund Hillary, a New Zealander, and his Sherpa, Tensing, had reached the top yesterday, but the announcement had been delayed until today to add even more importance to the coronation.

In Woodstock, an ox was to be roasted in the village square and pieces distributed by the Duchess of Marlborough herself. There was to be free beer too, which to us sounded more important. I

wondered why she wasn't at Westminster Abbey for the coronation. Perhaps she hadn't been invited, though I couldn't believe that, considering her relationship with Winston Churchill. Maybe she had been and then had driven back for her home celebrations.

In the morning Jim and I lay on the strip of grass between our hut and the one next to us. The sun was shining, birds of some sort—I wasn't very good at ornithology—were singing in the blue sky and in the trees around. There was the sweet smell of cut grass because the camp commander had ordered the grounds to be “put in order,” though I doubted the new queen appreciated that.

I lifted myself up on my elbow and stared at Jim, who was lying on his back, eyes closed, long lashes toward his cheekbones. His mouth was slightly open, showing a hint of white teeth. I could imagine kissing those lips, not as Bo used to do, the merest hint of touching, but full and hard, my tongue entering.

Suddenly Jim's eyes were open, the pupils brown like shiny butterscotch. “You're looking at me,” he said quietly.

“So,” I said. “Some people look at me too. Rod does quite a lot, though I don't know why.”

Jim laughed. “You're dim as a NAAFI candle,” he said, “if you don't know why.”

“I'll show you who's dim,” I said and flung himself at him; we wrestled. I suppose we were about the same strength, but his upper body structure and arms were strong and developed. I managed to get on top of him with his arms trapped under my knees, so he couldn't escape in spite of his struggles. But then he cheated—not that we had any rules in our games. He managed to get one arm free and grabbed hold of my balls. It wasn't a painful grip, but it was persistent, and he was laughing in my ear. “Let me up, Mike, or you lose your balls.”

I let go and tried to get up, but he grabbed at my cock and balls again and took hold of a mighty handful. So I took hold of his. There we were, rolling in the grass, holding on to each other's cocks. And we both were laughing, and in my hand I felt his cock grow large and knew that mine was growing too. I heard his voice in my ear: “Don't you think that's what he's after?” I was lying on top of him, and we lay top and tailed, as it were—as the corporal had told us to sleep that first night at Bawtry.

Suddenly he raised his legs, capturing my head between them, and now my face was near the fork of his legs and I could see the swelling that his erection made in his trousers. But I still had hold of his cock with one hand, and I squeezed it, feeling its hardness. Then, because his legs were in the air, locked behind my head, with two fingers of the other hand I found his arse and poked him. He gave a cry, not of pain, but of excitement, and immediately he did the same to me. Now his hand was scrabbling at my waistband, going inside so that, when his hand next found my cock, I knew that he had hold of the actual flesh.

This was enough for me, and I found his and fumbled it out from the restricting clothing. There it was just in front of my face, just in front of my mouth, with his legs forcing my head closer and closer until the two must meet together.

And then, just as I was about to take that cock in my mouth, there was a shout from the hut. “What are you two wankers doing?” It was Rod looking out through the window. I don't think he could have seen anything because we were hidden by each other's bodies, but he may well have suspected.

I shouted the expected answer. “What do you think we were doing? We're wanking.”

“Well, you better hurry up and finish,” he said. “Spuds coming.”

And PO Tate came round the corner of the next hut while we stood up, brushing off the grass bits, covering ourselves and hoping that our erections didn't show too much.

“Don't you lads want to watch the coronation?” he asked, his voice posh and fruity and nothing

like mine, I was sure. "It may be the last one you'll ever see. It's on the television in the NAAFI."

I knew there were other things that I'd prefer to do, but the lads from the hut came out, and we went in orderly fashion to the NAAFI. There, on a tiny screen, we watched the grainy picture of the scene in Westminster Abbey with all the pomp and circumstance of ancient tradition and the young girl, for that was what she looked like under that heavy crown, becoming a queen.

They drew the curtains so that everyone could see better, and Jim and I sat next to each other, hidden in the gloom, our hands in each other's laps.

Afterwards we had a special dinner; chicken, I expect, though I don't remember exactly. Later, as it grew dark, the lads and I had showers to celebrate, changed into civvies, and went into Woodstock to watch the celebrations there. In the market square a huge animal was being roasted over a fire, the fat dripping and sizzling in the flames. Crowds of people pressed around. The whole place smelled of succulent meat. A woman (the Duchess?) cut off slices and distributed them on cardboard plates while someone handed round bottles of beer.

There was a band playing, and then some people did Morris dancing. Some of the lads laughed, but I thought it was good—even with all that handkerchief waving and stick rattling and bells on their legs—because it was part of England and had come down from whoever knew how many hundreds of years.

We drank more beer and people danced. I would have liked to have danced with Jim, but of course we couldn't, so we moved in time to the music together, and it was the next best thing.

When it was really dark and people were carrying lanterns and the ox roast fire was just red ashes, we wandered off together toward the grounds of Blenheim Palace.

There were various places where you could get through over the wall, and we found one and got in. There we found a secluded spot bordered round with bushes; the summer air was warm and smelled of leaves and honeysuckle from the gardens.

There, on the soft grass, Jim and I lay down together as if it was the most natural thing to do in the world and, as we had done so many times before in my mind's eye, removed our clothing and stroked each other's soft skin, arousing one another in the action.

Jim cupped my balls, moist and warm, in his hand, and I opened my legs with the pleasure of his caress, exposing myself to a licked questing finger. He found my hole and pushed in.

"It feels so good to have you in there," I said. "Can't you go further?"

"My finger is full in," said Jim. I sensed his smile in the darkness. "There is only one thing I have which is longer and of the right size."

"I've already got it in my hand," I said and stroked the hard shaft of my friend's cock so that Jim shuddered. "Shall I put it in?" he asked. "I wouldn't want to hurt you."

Not answering, I opened my legs wider and pushed my body up so that I was open and available. "If you lie between my legs," I whispered, "and I rest them on your shoulders, you can enter. But first moisten the way with your tongue."

"Okay," said Jim, "and after that, I have something which will make the entry even more smooth and easy—Vaseline. I have some here."

"So you had some idea of doing this beforehand," I said. "It crossed my mind," said Jim, going at me with a ready determination and much use of his tongue.

I arched my body with pleasure, and my cock jerked in Jim's hand.

"Now the Vaseline," said Jim, suiting the action to his words, "and now... gently, smoothly in. Does it hurt?" "It's an odd feeling," I said, "but I could grow to like it. Go further. Yes, that is better. How

does it feel to you?" "It holds me so warmly. I think it is a taste of heaven.... Oh yes! Oh yes!"
THANK you, Sir Edmund Hilary K.B.E., (Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire).
Thank you, Sherpa Tensing Norgay, George Medal (the highest award given to a civilian).
Thank you, Queen Elizabeth II, Dei Gratia Regina. Fid Def. (By the Grace of God, Queen, Defender
of the Faith.) At last, I am no longer a virgin.
Thank you, Jim, who isnt one either.

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MICHAEL GOUDA was born and raised in London, England.

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