WITH THE RAF IN CYPRUS: 1956-1959.

In December 1956, we set sail from Southampton in the British troopship Empire Orwell bound for Cyprus. With two Army regiments on board, the passengers were mainly soldiers. I was RAF. We were in the minority. I was 19 years old, leaving England for the first time, and feeling apprehensive about being posted to Cyprus because the island was then a war zone. General Grivas and his Greek Cypriot paramilitary organization called 'EOKA' encouraged by the President of Cyprus Archbishop Makarios, were shooting British Servicemen. They were fighting for ENOSIS (Union with Greece). ENOSIS was anathema to the Turkish Cypriots, indeed Turkey was threatening invasion of Cyprus if Britain granted EOKA union with Greece. That is why they didn't get it. Britain gave Cyprus Independence instead. Many Greek Cypriots still feel resentful.

The political situation in Cyprus could not have been further from our minds as the Empire Orwell rolling up and down came struggling through the Bay of Biscay. This gateway to the Mediterranean Sea, with its mountainous waves, was living up to its greatest reputation, and I am convinced the troopship must have looped-the-loop at least twice. One fellow, attempting to prevent sea-sickness by lying on his stomach, fell off his bunk bed and broke his leg. I helped someone carry him to the sick bay, and while doing so, with the ship rolling all over the ocean, I learned that sea-sickness is a mental condition, not a physical one. There was no way I could have been sea sick because I had so much else to think about. We really struggled getting this fellow to the sick bay, we had to cling tightly to everything we could grab hold of while also holding tightly onto him. At last we stumbled into the sick bay and managed somehow to get him onto a bed where we left him under the care of the ship's doctor.

Through the Straits of Gibraltar we sailed in fine weather with seas now calm. We were somewhere off Malta. The early evening was upon us and our daily routine was coming to an end when we were startled by the sudden, long, loud blast of the ship’s hooter. The Empire Orwell was calling another ship. From a distance there came the welcome reply, another horn calling like a siren across the sea. Eager to relieve ourselves from the monotonous emptiness of the world around us; we had not seen another ship since we left Southampton; we all rushed up on deck. Excitement spread among the soldiers on board when the Captain, speaking through the Tannoy system, told them to watch out for friends coming the other way and lining the decks of an approaching vessel. We watched, fascinated, as the troopship Empire Ken, homeward bound from Suez, loomed up ever larger, approaching us from the east. As the ship got nearer we could indeed see soldiers lining the decks and, as the two ships passed, there was much shouting and cheering with friends waving over the waves . . . . until the Empire Ken disappeared into the gathering gloom.

Through that chilly month of December the Empire Orwell churned its way through the Mediterranean Sea. Beyond Malta there were times when we could see the North African coast. The Captain kept us informed when we were passing somewhere: Italy, Greece, on one side; Tunisia, Libya on the other, but more often than not we were unable to see land either side except when the winter sun broke through the thick sea mist. We made our own entertainment and the food on board was good. We saw one other ship: a fleeting glimpse of a Turkish destroyer which passed us in the night.

At last, after many days at sea we arrived in Cyprus, not at Famagusta which would have been the port for me, but at Limassol where we were ordered to disembark. From there we were escorted under armed guard overland through terrorist-infested country to Famagusta, while the ship simply sailed round the coast to Famagusta. I was never given the reason for this eccentric behaviour; perhaps it was so the ship could be prepared for its next voyage without having troops on board. At the time, endangering our lives by ordering us off the ship at Limassol seemed crazy to me. But we were armed, ready for any terrorist attack.

I was posted to 751 Signals Unit, RAF Cape Greco, a remote outpost on a peninsular eighteen miles south of Famagusta and situated on the extreme south eastern tip of Cyprus. There was a Cyprus Government lighthouse on the end of the cape complete with its own outbuildings. On the RAF Station everything was either in a tent or the back of a vehicle. There was a NAAFI in a marquee where in 1957 I purchased my Rolex Oyster watch and Agfa Isolette camera. We had an Astra Cinema which was also in a marquee. The toilets were so primitive: a row of buckets surrounded, but hardly covered, by a broken down wooden fence. We sometimes had to ask someone passing by to go and fetch some toilet paper!

We had to guard the camp from possible terrorist attack and for this we were provided with a Bren Gun mounted on a wooden platform, and a searchlight which we could swivel round to face any direction out across the surrounding country. The road (dirt track) climbed up from the camp to a plateau where we also had guard duties for the purpose of protecting a small Army encampment of three or four tents surrounded by radio aerials. For some reason the Royal Signals did not appear to be armed, and depended on the RAF for their defence.

There had, unfortunately, been casualties of the terrorist campaign before my arrival at Cape Greco. One airman who had not been out of the camp for six weeks volunteered for escort duty just to get away from the place. He never came back. At Paralimni he was shot in the head. Another airman, escort on a water bowser, was shot at Paralimni. He fell into the road. The driver of the bowser, while under fire, stopped the bowser and dragged the escort into the cab, an action for which he was later Mentioned in Dispatches. The escort later died from his injuries.

RAF Ayios Nikolaos, (Ay Nik) four miles from Famagusta, was from where Cape Greco was administered. Convoys of lorries travelled there and back every day and because of the distance involved, 22 miles, and the possibility of encountering terrorists, we were armed with Lee Enfield rifles or Greener 12-bore shot guns. One man in each lorry was escort, and, armed with a Bren Gun, he rode in front, standing next to the driver. A device resembling a dustbin upside down, with a revolving disk, had been welded to the top of the cab. The gun was on the disk so it could be turned to face almost any direction. The escort had a good view up there, with his head through an aperture in the roof of the cab, his shoulders and waist protected from gunfire by the dustbin. RAF Regiment Land Rovers bristling with machine guns escorted the convoys, front and rear. From Cape Greco the dirt track passed by the plateau where the Royal Signals were located. It then divided into two.

One track passed through the hamlet of Ayia Napa. This place consisted of about a dozen single storey stone buildings each with its own plot of land on which the inhabitants kept their sheep or donkey. The other track by-passed Ayia Napa, running parallel with it until the two tracks merged into one. At this point the track very nearly ran over a cliff. A very steep hill which we called The Cliff, on a gradient of 1 in 3, had to be tackled with care and it was necessary for the vehicles to proceed in first gear. Sometimes the convoy would include one or two radar units, enormous items of machinery transported on tremendous trucks. When these monsters were coming down The Cliff the convoy would wait, and the RAF Regiment would secure the area against terrorist attack. Had anything gone wrong on such a gradient and a radar unit ran away, nothing in its path could have stood a chance. (On the way back to Cape Greco these radar trucks would turn round and ascend The Cliff in reverse gear). Once safely down The Cliff, the vehicles would get back into line and proceed on their way. A Tarmac road continued the route to Ay Nik via Paralimni, the trouble spot where Archbishop Makarios was born; the village of Dharenia where we would stop for refreshments at the British Police Station; and Famagusta where we would often see the Army on patrol through the streets.

The procedure for passing through Paralimni changed several times while I was there, but generally what we did was this: The vehicles would stop. One Land Rover would proceed to the church at the other end of the village, turn, and wait while the other remained with the vehicles. From the back of the lorries we would disembark, form two columns, and then proceed on foot, one column on each side of the road, their guns trained on the roofs of the buildings opposite. Judging from previous experience, any terrorist would peer over the edge of a roof, and either fire guns, or drop bombs onto the column immediately below. The guns of the column opposite would prevent them from doing this. When the two columns reached the church the vehicles would move through the village. When the vehicles reached the church the two columns would all clamber back on board and the convoy would proceed to the next village.

We would stop at the British Police Station at Dharenia for refreshments which were always welcome after the trauma of having to force a passage through Paralimni. Once on our way we would reach Famagusta, then finally onto RAF Ayios Nikolaos.

It was against this background that day in 1958 when an event occurred in Paralimni for which we were not prepared and against which our orders had not been designed to apply. We had not received notice of any terrorist activity in Paralimni that day, but that did not prevent what happened when we got there. I was a good shot with a gun in those days, that is why they made me escort on the leading lorry. I was up there with my head above that dustbin thing. The Land Rover was waiting at the church and the two columns had almost reached it, but before the vehicles could move off, two men who had been watching us from a doorway came running towards us. One was brandishing a gun. He stopped in front of my lorry and took aim at me. I had to protect not only myself but the convoy and everyone in it, and I had to act fast, but first I had to fumble for the switch on the gun to ensure I fired only one bullet.

I shot him. I did not shoot to kill, I shot him in the leg. He fell with a yell. Blood could be seen seeping round his thigh. The shot echoed round the buildings. It sounded like the start of a battle. Everything happened at once. Pandemonium fired throughout the village. People came running from everywhere. Some were throwing stones at us. They were all shouting and screaming. The two columns came running back to the vehicles, the Land Rover forcing its way through the uproar. The vehicles accelerated to meet them, forcing the people clear. The moment the columns had clambered aboard, the convoy sped away.

Both men had been placed into one of the lorries. They were handed over to Dharenia Police Station. Although the police told us they knew these two characters, and had had dealings with them before, to our astonishment they let the other man go free. The man with the wounded leg was taken by ambulance to hospital.

When we arrived at Ay Nik we learned The Authorities had already heard what happened at Paralimni. We were questioned about it. They wanted to know why I caused chaos by opening fire on the public with a machine gun in a busy street. Many witnesses came forward on my behalf and explained it wasn't quite like that. One friend told them I deserved a medal, for I did not pull the trigger until I had checked the position of the switch. A Bren Gun is equipped with a three-position switch: Rapid Fire - Single Shot - Off. He told them while I was making sure the switch was on Single Shot, so it would fire only one bullet at a time, the man could have shot me dead, but I only wanted to wound the fellow. Thankfully they let the matter drop. No more was said about it officially, although my friends couldn't stop talking about it for weeks.

I was in the RAF as a Telegraphist. My job was Telecommunications; sending messages, not firing guns. (I was presented with a medal, but that was for Active Service duty in Cyprus and not for any one specific incident).

I well remember the time when, with clouds billowing across Cape Greco and the sea rolling over the coast warning us of bad weather to come, we were in for a most ferocious storm. It was at this time when the Commanding Officer complained he had lost his wrist watch. He had put it down somewhere but could not remember where. He offered five hundred Cyprus mils, that's five pounds, to anyone who found it. I cannot say this was uppermost in my mind when I climbed into the vehicle next to the Guardroom at the commencement of my guard duty that night. I was more concerned about the weather. A mighty wind had arisen. We were destined to endure The Night of the Great Storm. Next to this vehicle an incline ascended to the Mechanical Transport Section where the vehicles were maintained. It was winter. No longer the hot summer sun under which we accomplished our dark brown skins. The weather was foul. The wind had been building up for days. The swell of the sea was now covering the favourite places on the coast where we liked to go swimming in summer. Temperatures had dropped to 40 degrees Fahrenheit. We had at our disposal a Bren Gun which was placed on a wooden platform by the boundary fence, and a searchlight which we could swivel round to face any direction. But we had not been issued with goggles.

When my turn came for me to be sentry, I was awakened and, in the middle of the night I stepped into this wretched hurricane which by then was raging all over the cape. It very nearly blew me back into the guards' vehicle. I had heard it from inside but I had not realized it was so powerful. I wondered why I should be a sentry at all when the weather was doing my job for me. No EOKA terrorist is going to attack on a night like this, I told myself. No chance of challenging a terrorist in the three languages we had been taught: "Halt!" in English, Greek, Turkish, (Halt-Stamata-Dur). I had not been out in this storm for ten minutes before the force of the wind increased. Not only was sand and dirt blowing into my eyes, but I found it difficult to breathe. The wind was pulling the air from my lungs. It was so strong I was unable to stand on my own two feet.

I was only just able to grab and hold onto the boundary fence. I couldn't even stumble back into the guard vehicle to call for assistance. This situation lasted a good half hour before the ferocity of the wind decreased sufficiently to enable me to let go of the boundary fence. I could hardly walk because of the wind. I was unable to use the searchlight for two reasons: (1) My eyes were shut to keep the sand out, and (2) The hurricane had blown it away. But I had had an idea; an idea to protect my eyes. I made my way, by crawling on my hands and knees, up the slope to the Mechanical Transport Section where I selected a Land Rover. It had no ignition

key but all I needed was a handbrake and a steering wheel. As soon as I released the handbrake and put the gear in neutral, it moved.

It rolled down the slope and when it reached the barrier I stopped it. I was then able to sit there and survey the road beyond the barrier by use of its headlights, my eyes protected from the airborne debris by the windscreen. I was desperately hoping the Land Rover would remain upright. I felt it once or twice lifting off its two nearside wheels. I was unable to swivel its headlights to face any direction, but at least I could now see the road along which anybody out there would approach the camp.

And then I did indeed see the headlights of another vehicle. Someone was actually out there in that atrocious weather. Terrorists arriving by taxi? I told myself not to be so daft. One of ours? If it is he must be just as daft. I shuddered. He can't get through the barrier with the Land Rover blocking the way. To my relief, whoever it was out there, they turned and went back. Villagers from Ayia Napa looking for some lost sheep, probably. Anyway, my guard duty was now finished. I managed, with extreme difficulty, to stumble back inside the guard vehicle and awaken the next guard.

Some time overnight, we never knew when because we could not see it, the Guardroom was demolished by the hurricane. It was lucky for the RAF Police they did not work overnight shifts. We were doing that duty for them. A great number of tents also got blown down, or blown away, that night.

By morning the hurricane had ceased, the sun was shining - and the Bren Gun was missing. We found the searchlight a hundred yards away. The man who had taken over from me said he had not noticed any Bren Gun; he said he had not been aware there was one. I was the last person who had seen it, but because there had been no question of anybody else being around, I told them it couldn't be far. They told me it had better not be. When we were pushing the Land Rover back up the slope, we found it. The wooden platform on which it had been placed was found half way up the track to the plateau. Either the hurricane had blown the Bren Gun under the Land Rover, or, that is where it fell when the platform was blown away and I had inadvertently stopped the Land Rover over it. In fact the wind very nearly blew the Land Rover over. I often felt it wobbling with two of its wheels off the ground. Thankfully we never had a hurricane like that again.

I checked to ensure I had left the Land Rover in gear, and while looking through the passengers door window something shining in the glove compartment attracted my attention. It was the Commanding Officer's wrist watch. And so it came to pass I came off the trauma of guard duty on The Night of the Great Storm five pounds richer than I was when I had gone on guard duty the night before.

Peace came at last in the early winter of 1958. It was early December, before Christmas, and we were free to travel round the island without carrying guns, but that did not mean we were free to travel alone. But that was precisely what I was doing.

I was going to Famagusta to meet two friends from Ay Nik. We had arranged to meet in the docks at Famagusta. We had been invited on board a British cargo ship called Norton Rose where one of my friends had a cousin among the crew. I was required for duty at Ay Nik later in the day anyway so I had to be on my way. I had intended to reach Ay Nik by convoy and then get to the docks by bus. But I missed the convoy. I managed to get a lift in an RAF vehicle as far as the guard post on the plateau, but from there I started walking hoping to catch a bus at Paralimni. But I found a taxi at Ayia Napa. This was the last place I expected, I could not imagine anyone living in that tiny hamlet being able to afford a taxi.

I thought my luck was in, but it wasn't, it was about to run out. The nearer we got to Famagusta, the greater the trepidation I felt. When I left the taxi an awful sense of foreboding came over me. I experienced the dreadful feeling the whole town was watching me through the barrel of a gun. Three Army Land Rovers on patrol were coming up the street, for there were still periodic outbursts of terrorism. I was in uniform because I was required for duty at Ay Nik later that day to replace someone who had reported sick. I never arrived for duty, nor did I meet my friends in the docks. Instead, I met the other man: He whose companion I had shot in Paralimni. He was standing in a shop doorway with a gun in his hand. When he saw me coming towards him, his expression registered doubt over recognition. I made the mistake of calling out to him: "I could have shot you too but you had no gun." He understood. I passed him trying to look unconcerned, yet I was filled with apprehension.

He shot me. The coward shot me in the back as I was about to cross the street. The pain was so excruciating it took my breath away. I couldn't even call out. The force of it made me bend over backwards, my legs gave way, and I fell into the road in front of the Army Land Rovers. I had never felt so frightened in my life. As I lay there in the middle of the road, I genuinely thought I had been shot dead for I could feel myself slipping away. People were crowding round me, someone was shouting out orders. Through the midst of this traumatic experience there came a female voice speaking with an English accent. Must have been a female soldier kneeling beside me. At first she was telling me to clench my teeth, hold on, fight back and I would pull through; then she was pleading with me not to "go away" although I did not realize what she meant by that until she said: "You are too young to die." I was 21. I did not pass away, but I did pass out. I knew nothing more until I awoke, naked in bed, with a bevy of females all clad in red and white beaming down upon me. I asked them if they were angels come to take me away. They brought me back down to Earth with a burst of laughter. They informed me they were not angels nor likely to be. They were nurses: Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps. They

assured me I was not in Heaven, far from it. Instead, I was in the British Military Hospital Dhakalia. These nurses told me they had taken the bullet out, cleaned and dressed the wound, advised me to give it rest, and that I was lucky to be alive. There were all kinds of vital organs the bullet could have hit had it entered my body any higher, or at a different angle.

Three weeks later I was back at Cape Greco. My friends welcomed my return among them by celebrating in the NAAFI which also sufficed as the local pub. They had visited me in hospital, anxious for me when they heard what had happened, and now they were relieved I was back among them. They would have put the red carpet out for me if they had had one.

In January 1959 I took advantage of the opportunity of getting out of Cyprus by joining a party organized by a padre who took us to Israel for a fortnight. We flew by BEA flight which had come from London, calling at Nicosia en-route to Tel Aviv. A barbed wire fence ran through the middle of Jerusalem marking the border between Israel and Jordan, and when I stepped over it to photograph the Gardens of Gethsemane, a Jordanian Army guard came running up and told me to get back into Israel. Israeli trains ran so close to the border with Egypt they had a notice above the window which said: "Do not lean out of the Country." At the Twentieth Century Fox cinema in Jerusalem we saw the film: "Bridge Over the River Kwai" with English dialogue, French and Hebrew sub-titles. I well recall riding a camel in the Negev Desert while visiting Beer Sheba, and wanting to wave to the party while the padre was taking my photograph, but I didn't dare let go of the saddle! I also remember swimming in the Mediterranean in January, near our hotel in Tel Aviv. Altogether it was a most enjoyable break. But. . . . Then back to Cyprus.

The political situation in Cyprus was such that we had to be permanently on our guard. When the British deported Archbishop Makarios from Cyprus to the Seychelles in 1957 the Greek Cypriots became most resentful. When Archbishop Makarios was brought back in 1958, Cyprus went delirious. We could hear the cheering screams of ecstasy from the Greek Cypriots greeting him at Nicosia Airport, 45 miles away. From December 1956 to December 1958 we had been unable to travel anywhere without a gun. Between December 1958 and June 1959 we took advantage of the opportunity provided by peace, and we toured the whole island, Turkish and Greek partitions, and we saw for ourselves what Cyprus had to offer.

We were unable to leave the cape except when we had to, so we made our own amusements. We had our Astra cinema, but we also played cricket, football, hockey and archery. Our favourite pastime however was in the spring, summer and autumn when we could cool off from the sheer heat of the sun and go swimming. We took advantage of the fact that we were out of sight of the camp, did our best to ensure we developed rich brown skins, and in doing so we went swimming and sunbathing in the nude - much to the fascination of the lighthouse keeper's daughter who would watch us through her binoculars.

The food at Cape Greco was notorious for one item which has stuck to my memory. It also got stuck to everything else. I still recall what was written on the tin from which they dug it: "Air Ministry Provisions 1941. Dehydrated Potato" and this stuff was foul. It was more like cement than potato. It stuck your lips together, it stuck your tongue to your teeth, it stuck to the roof of your mouth, and you couldn't swallow it unless you had a gallon of gravy to wash it down. What it did inside you, Heaven only knows. Someone suggested we should take stiff doses of laxatives to get rid of the wretched stuff before it set. In time they mixed it with water and said it was now OK. But it was then so salty, and the sea so near, I am convinced the sea was where they got the water from.

My service in Cyprus came to an end in June 1959 when I was posted to RAF Benson following three weeks Disembarkation Leave. I did not sail to England in the Empire Orwell. I flew home by civil airliner, BEA, Tel Aviv to London via Nicosia, the same route (in reverse) that had taken us from Nicosia to Tel Aviv. Nothing untoward happened on that flight. For once all went well.

I spent that Disembarkation Leave with John Taylor whom I had known since our training days at RAF Cosford. We toured Cornwall, Devon and Somerset in my old car, a 1939 Standard Flying Twelve, in which we had a series of adventures. Crashing through a five-bar gate into a field near Exeter; sleeping in that field only to be woken next morning by cows licking our faces; rolling down a hill towards a main road on which the traffic had stopped to let us in because they had seen us coming down hill out of control; scraping against a hedge to stop at red traffic lights; and finally running into the back of a police car: these are the things I remember most about that car. Devon Police directed us to the nearest scrap merchants and told us not to leave any more litter on the public highway. However, our piece of litter got us home with the brakes repaired and we had no more trouble. Unlike what happened next.

In August 1959 at RAF Benson, a party of us borrowed a cabin cruiser on the River Thames. We intended to go cruising in it and camping in the Hartslock Woods, but the River Police came chasing after us and we all ended up in Wallingford Police Station. We had borrowed the wrong cabin cruiser. But that is another story.

THE END

Please forgive any inaccuracies This is based on memory not records

1929100 ANTHONY REEVE GSM = TELEGRAPHIST = ROYAL AIR FORCE