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Location: Aberystwyth

Interviewer: Neil Davies

Camera: Hugh Morgan OBE



Lionel Madden

aged 87 years

Aberystwyth, Ceredigion

Royal Air Force - 1956 to 1958

“ I was known as ‘The Tin room Boy’ ”

Methodology

This account largely relies on Lionel's memories, captured during a conversation with the author at Lionel's home. The author has cross-checked Lionel's recollections with additional sources of information to create an enhanced picture of his National Service experience. Where Lionel is quoted, the author has summarized some content in order to bring clarity and brevity to the account. The narrative accompanies two video films of the interview and begins below at film 1.

Background

Lionel was born in August 1938, 2 years after his parents were married. The newlyweds moved to Frecheville, a suburb of Sheffield, South Yorkshire. The family stayed in Frecheville for the next 8 years. His father was an Administrator, working on the railway network. In 1942, when Lionel was just 3 years of age, his father was called up into the Army. British forces were deployed across the world, fighting the Second World War on several fronts. This resulted in Lionel's father being away from home for nearly 5 years. It wasn't until Lionel was 8, that he saw his father more regularly, after he was discharged from the Army, in the rank of Warrant Officer.

The family moved across Sheffield to a street close to Hillsborough stadium, the home of Sheffield Wednesday FC. Lionel attended King Edward 7th Grammar school in Sheffield. He enjoyed his studies and this showed in his attainments. He won a state scholarship to Lincoln College at Oxford University. However, his entry into Oxford University was delayed by the matter of National Service.

Since 1950, when young men reached the age of 18, they were liable to be conscripted into the military for National Service. In 1951 overseas commitments demanded ever more resources, so the age limit was lowered to 17. Despite this change, it remained more common for men to enter National Service aged 18. In Lionel's case however, he was conscripted for National Service just before he turned 18 years of age.

Lionel was pragmatic about National Service.

"Well, every boy I knew at King Edwards' who was going to Oxford or Cambridge went through the same. We all went off for National Service, so I don't think we thought about it particularly."

Indeed, some boys were of the view that it was a positive development in their lives.

"It was actually quite good, because it was a rest from academic work before you resumed it. I found it quite good in that way."

As with most National Service candidates, a letter arrived through the letterbox, stamped with the official OHMS (On Her Majesty's Service) lettering. Inside were orders to report to the local National Service Office. Lionel believes that the department had an arrangement with his school.

“I think they must have had some arrangement with the school actually. They knew who was finishing and just before I finished, I got my call up papers.”

Along with some of his school friends, Lionel went through the pre joining formalities. The pre joining process influenced his National Service journey.

“I went for a medical and some sort of interview. He asked me if I’d like to do the language course and learn Russian, which I didn’t want to do. He asked me if there was anything else I’d like to do, which there wasn’t. He asked me which service I’d like to be in and I said the RAF.”

The offer to learn the Russian language offers an indicator of the times. In the mid 1950’s the United Kingdom was heavily committed to NATO’s mission to oppose the post war expansion of Communism. That is to say, oppose the mighty Soviet Union.

“Some chose to do the language course, but I thought a really intensive course of 2 years learning Russian, wasn’t really in my scheme of things. I wasn’t interested in it.”

National Service

“I began National Service in July 1956, and I was in for the full 2 years.”

Once it was determined that he was destined for the RAF, instructions were given to report to a ‘reception centre’. In Lionel’s case it was RAF Cardington, Bedfordshire. Here, the recruits were issued with uniform, inducted into the service and allocated to a particular training school. ‘Induction’ included a welcome many National Service recruits will remember.

“That was just kitting out for a week. That was really nothing, except being lined up and shouted at. Then they told us where we were going for ‘Square Bashing’. I went to Wilmslow.”

RAF Wilmslow

The station was constructed at the beginning of World War 2 and situated in Cheshire. It was home to no 4 School of Recruit Training. The School was responsible for instilling a sense of military discipline, education and procedural knowledge into new entrants. In essence, over an 8-week course, the Instructors were charged with turning civilians into competent airmen, worthy of joining an operational squadron anywhere in the world, where the Royal Air Force had a presence.



The main gate at RAF Wilmslow. Lionel arrived at this gate in 1956, to begin his National Service journey. Note the RAF Policemen supervising the RAF Guard.

Image courtesy of Wilmslow.org.uk

Arriving for basic training was a big step in the National Serviceman's journey. This was now the RAF proper and the serious business of turning civilian into military began. There was no opportunity to explore Wilmslow outside of the camp boundary.

“As far as I can remember it was 8 weeks. We were marched in and marched out!”

Lionel discovered that ‘Square Bashing’ was not as demoralising as some recruits recall. He was observant and intrigued by aspects of the behaviour and manner of his fellow recruits and the RAF Instructors. After all, the training school was a melting pot of strangers gathered together from all parts of the country.

“ Well, I’m interested in English language. The first night we were in the Billet, the Corporal came in and he spoke the English language like I’ve never heard it before. I learnt more new vocabulary in the half an hour he gave us than I’d known in 18 years. It was incredible!”

The short introduction from the Corporal clearly made a great impression on the young academic.

“I was really impressed. He shouted, raved and came up with his face next to you and that sort of thing.”

Lionel wasn't at all fazed by this welcome. In fact, it is entirely possible that the instructors themselves noticed his calm and confident demeanour.

“It wasn't long before they cottoned on to the fact that I had got a lot of GCE's. He used to scream at me ‘How may bloody GCE's have you got ?’ I'd say ‘14 Corporal!’”

It seems Lionel's academic ability became a focal point.

“Of course, everything I did wrong, it was always 14 GCE's and you can't do this and you can't do that!”

This focus in his GCE's became a source of humour for Lionel and no doubt for his fellow recruits. Perhaps it helped them all to get along and cope with the rigours of military discipline. Indeed, the Corporal's direct form of speech and constant reference to his GCE's didn't concern Lionel. He wasn't altogether surprised, as he had received some sage words before he joined up.

"It was just different. My father told me that I'd see a different side of life and he was right. I don't think I was worried about it. They weren't going to hit me or anything."

In fact, the Corporal's focus on Lionel's academic achievements may have resulted in him becoming a popular character amongst his fellow recruits. With the Corporal's attention on Lionel, they could breathe a sigh of relief!

"I became quite a treasure, because all the other men thought this was wonderful. They were all writing to their wives and girlfriends that they met this freak, who'd got all these GCE's."



A typical barrack room which was home to RAF National Servicemen in the 1950's. This is similar if not identical, to the room Lionel was accommodated in during training.

Image courtesy
www.midcenturychap.com

Some impressions of the time spent at RAF Wilmslow have remained with Lionel.

"You do everything so fast. You do parade and then you've got 5 minutes to get changed into PT kit. You're dashing in and out. In the evening you spent all your time polishing."

It was alright. 'Square Bashing' is just one of those things you endure. After that It's quite different."

Endure it he did and it wasn't long before the 8 weeks came to an end.

"I showed that I couldn't handle a Rifle or a Bren Gun. Or something useful, so they weren't going to send me off to some terrible place like Cyprus at that time. I had to decide what kind of training I wanted. They hadn't a clue really what to do with me. So, I said I wanted to be a Clerk. I became a Progress Clerk."

The next step was trade training, where the next generation of RAF Clerks were to be trained in the various aspects of Administration.

"I went for trade training at a place near Hereford, Credenhill."

Trade training

In 1956 the primary school for training airmen and women in administrative duties was a station situated on the western outskirts of the city of Hereford, RAF Credenhill . It was a non-flying station and home to various training schools and permanent staff.

Recruits destined for 'Progress Clerk' duties would require further education in mathematics, graphs and statistics. The training course at Credenhill was designed to bring the new clerks up to the standard required for them to become operational.

There was also an opportunity to learn a new skill.

"I learnt touch typing, which became quite useful later on. I became quite a reasonable touch typer."

Life at RAF Credenhill was less restrictive, and the trainees were allowed out to visit the local area. Lionel enjoyed catching the bus into Hereford.

"I enjoyed the freedom. It wasn't like 'Square Bashing. At the weekend I used to go out and take a bus ride. It was amazing. I went to the Cathedral and so on."

The City of Hereford became significant later in his life.

"Funny enough Hereford played a big part in my life later on. I wouldn't have known it then. I looked around the Cathedral. Later on in life, when I was in Aberystwyth I worked at the National Library. I used to travel regularly to Hereford Cathedral, because they had the marvellous chain book collection."

It seems that Lionel's National Service journey had begun to open his horizons, and he certainly appreciated getting to know this particular part of the country.

"Since then, Hereford has always been close to my heart."

Maybe not so much the RAF aspect, but rather the opportunity the experience gave him.

"I didn't go out and look at Credenhill again!"

With regard to the training course, he can recall some of the content and also how the classes differed from RAF Wilmslow.

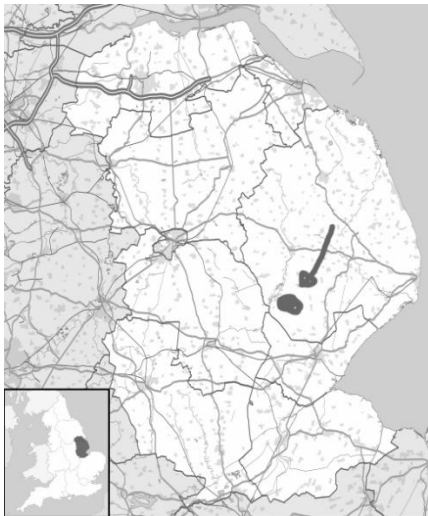
"We spent a lot of time typing and learning office management, which was useful. The people that were doing it were my sort of people of course. They were used to books and reading."

When the training course came to an end Lionel qualified as a 'Progress Clerk'. He was then posted to an operational station, RAF Coningsby in Lincolnshire. It transpired that he would spend the remainder of his National Service at Coningsby.

RAF Coningsby

The station is based more or less in the centre of the county of Lincolnshire. Although plans to build the station predated World War 2, it actually opened in 1940. It certainly played its part in the war and has remained central to RAF flying operations to this day.

When Lionel arrived, the station was part of the RAF's no 3-group command structure. Throughout 1956 major work was being carried out on the runway, in preparation for the arrival of the aircraft which would form part of the RAF's 'V-bomber- deterrent'. At the time the main aircraft operating from the airfield was the Canberra, built by English Electric. Eventually, a squadron of Avro Vulcan delta wing bombers arrived. Lionel can remember one of the Vulcan bombers arriving at the airfield.



A map of Great Britain, indicating where Lionel spent most of his National Service and a photograph of an RAF Canberra bomber from the 1950's.

Images courtesy if Wikipedia and RAF Museum Facebook page



83 Squadron became the first RAF squadron to fly the Avro Vulcan. It was formed in May 1957 and Lionel recalls seeing the iconic bomber operating at RAF Coningsby,

Image courtesy: Wikipedia

“They made a terrific noise. They were very beautiful but sinister as well.”

However, Lionel was not posted to a squadron operating aircraft. He was instead posted to the station's Mechanical Transport section (MT).

“I was the Clerk to the Mechanical Transport section. I wasn’t involved with the planes at all. That was interesting, because I spent the rest of my National Service in a billet with drivers.”

Lionel found himself in a situation, similar to his basic training at Wilmslow. The fact remained, he was a very academically minded person living amongst men with mainly practical skills.

“I was isolated in that sense, but it was okay.”

This was not an altogether bad situation.

“Actually, on one notable occasion I proved my worth to the chaps in the billet. 4 of them went out in an RAF car and smashed it up. They had to write up an account of what happened, but of course none of them could write a narrative sentence! So, they all turned to me. I dictated to them and I don’t know what the officer thought when he saw it, because I’m sure it was totally inappropriate. But I think after that they looked upon me as some sort of useful person.”

Of course, Lionel had an official role to play in the smooth running of the station’s Mechanical Transport section. He remembers what his day-to-day duties involved.

“There was a building which was the MT section, by the hangars and workshops. Most of the drivers of the lorries were civilians. Their rest room was in the MT building. A Pilot Officer who was in charge of the MT was in the building too and I was pretty close to him. The drivers and NCOs drifted in and out.

I was responsible for filing. A lot of forms came from Bomber Command, which had to be filled in by somebody and that somebody was me. I saw quite a lot of the Officer because I had to check with him that he was happy with what I was telling Bomber Command.”

The Progress Clerk was a vital cog in the running of the section and Lionel remembers one occasion when a particular problem landed on his desk.

“On one occasion HQ actually said that they didn’t recognize that we were in Bomber Command. Our Flight Sergeant went berserk at this. I can remember him shouting and raving about it. I wrote them a note to explain it must have got mixed up and so on. Then he found fault with that. That was an episode!”

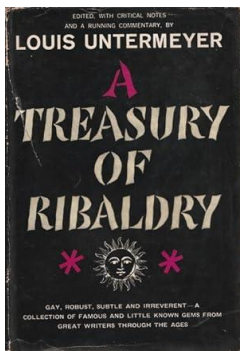
Interview film 1 ends and film 2 begins

As time passed, Lionel settled into the routine of station life and eventually found time to pursue his interest in reading.

“There was quite a good library on the station. The Education Officer responsible for it wasn’t very interested. So, I spent quite a lot of my time in the library sorting out things. I used to find the more interesting items that would appeal to people.”

Lionel’s efforts in the library, allowed him to share his passion for books and encourage his colleagues to read.

“I remember there was a thing that came out ‘A Treasury of Ribaldry’. None of them knew what Ribaldry meant, but I got them flocking to the library to look at it. That was quite good. I believe the Author was called Louis Untermeyer. (Published 1957).”



Lionel managed to encourage his colleagues to read. This 1957 publication by Author and Poet Louis Untermeyer was in demand.

“That was the most popular book I ever found”

Image courtesy ‘Abe books’

In addition to reading, Lionel was attracted to Cricket.

“I was also very interested in Cricket, and I used to go and watch Yorkshire. I had a big score book that I used to fill in.”

All 3-branches of the armed services have a tradition for playing competitive sport. To this day, commanders encourage personnel to take part in team sports at all levels, from individual departments to the Tri service teams. Whether it includes playing, assisting or supporting, time is allotted for sport.

“We had a cricket club. We went out to neighbouring towns and villages playing cricket and I was quickly enlisted in that, as the scorer.”

Lionel retains some specific memories of his involvement with the station cricket team. One particular match provided him with a lovely reminder of a childhood holiday.

“On one occasion we went to Skegness, to play the cricket team. We got into the ground and the moment we drove in, I knew that I’d been there before. It was a very impressive ground. They’d got a marvellous score board. I went up and looked at it and behind it there was a guesthouse, that we’d stayed at as a family. We’d delighted in the fact that the window of our room, looked out onto the ground. That was a really interesting afternoon.”

In 1957 RAF Coningsby was a busy operational station. It was a significant asset to the Royal Air Force, as the mission to deter aggression from the combined forces of the Soviet Union was in full swing. Lionel was surrounded by the sound of jet engines and smell of aviation gas, but he gave little thought to the bigger picture. He explains why.

“You’ve got to remember that for somebody like me born in 1938, I lived with war all the way through my childhood. My father went into the Army when I was 3. I remember we were in and out of this blessed air raid shelter. Sheffield was massively attacked. After the war I passed bomb sites all the time. There were craters everywhere. I suppose that war was an ever present. I think people got accustomed to war. I can remember our next-door neighbour got married to an air force man and he ‘d got married in uniform. War was just part of the scenery.”

There was the odd occasion when the reality of what was going on around him brought home the dangers of flying 'V bombers' at the time. Aircraft crashes often ended in tragedy and these accidents touched the staff working on the station.

"On this one occasion one of them, I don't know if it was one of the Vulcan's, crashed. One of the Officers who we knew well got killed. We went to a cricket match soon after and one of the Officers said, ' We're feeling a bit down you know, with the prang the other day.' It was one of the Officers we knew well, but there you are."

Unfortunately, both during the development and operational phases of the Avro Vulcan bombers flying history, the RAF lost a significant number of crew in air accidents. Lionel may well be remembering one of several fatal crashes.

Although Lionel was employed in an administration role, in common with the majority of airmen, at different times throughout the year he was required to undertake station guard duty. Most weekends were free, unless he was on guard duty or flying operations forbade personnel leaving the station. The fact that so many personnel had weekend leave didn't pass Lionel by and he pondered on this anomaly. It didn't take him long to develop a theory to explain the Monday to Friday routine.

"I could never understand that we were constantly being told that we had to be aware of the threat from the enemy, which was Russia and we had to be vigilant. Then we went off in these buses every weekend! It was to save money of course. They didn't have to give you rations or anything. The logic of it was totally confused."

"As time went on, we began to understand that National Service was going to be brought to an end. People that were in certain industries, like the car industry, were let out after about 18 months."

Lionel didn't make too many close friends, but he recalls a group of 4 airmen, including himself who shared more in common than others. His work in the MT section was perhaps appreciated by his CO, because Lionel negotiated a rare benefit.

"Because I worked in mechanical transport, I got the Officer to agree to us being allowed to be taken to the theatre in Lincoln. We had one of our drivers who used to take us into Lincoln and bring us back. That was quite good."

The same groups of friends also socialised on other occasions.

"Also, the same group of us used to go to a pub where they served marvellous meals. Every so often, when we saved up enough money. I can remember it was called the Lea Gate in Coningsby. It was wonderful. That was one of the nice times."



Some contemporary images of the Lea Gate Inn, Coningsby, where Lionel and his friends enjoyed some nice meals in the late 1950's.

Image courtesy of Blosslyn page (Echoes of the past)

As Lionel's recollection of his memories of National Service draws to an end, he recalls undertaking a specific duty, which other National Servicemen recall with less pleasure.

"One of the big punishments, particularly in 'Square Bashing' is sending you to 'The Tin Room'. If you've offended the Officer or NCO, they send you to 'The Tin Room' as a punishment. I was endlessly being sent to 'The Tin Room'. But it was one of the things that I really, really enjoyed. I've always enjoyed washing up! That was a curiosity. I was known as 'The Tin Room Boy'. It was a bit strange yes, but there we are."

Lionel recalls this specific memory with characteristic humility and humour. The Tin Room is the area in the kitchen of the Airmen's Mess, where the pots, pans and dishes used to cook the meals were washed and dried.

In July 1958 Lionel completed his obligation to undertake 2 years National Service and he was discharged from the RAF. He reflects on his time in the military.

"I never had any hassle, I was quite vulnerable, being so young and not knowing anything. The sort of things they talked about were completely unknown to me. Having been brought up in a strong Methodist family, I was never a drinker or a gambler."

Life after National Service

As planned, Lionel returned to academia and in September 1958 he entered Lincoln College at Oxford University. The course began soon after his discharge. Lionel graduated from Oxford and in time he enjoyed a long and successful career as a Librarian and Bibliographer. His love of books continued throughout his life. Eventually

this culminated in an enjoyable spell as the ‘National Librarian of Wales’, working at The National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

Moving to Wales

“I was 34 when I came to Wales. I’d wanted to be a Librarian. In Oxford I’d used the Bodleian library, which was one of the great libraries of the world. I’d met Mary, when we were doing the Library course. We got married in Hull. Eventually a job came up in Scotland, but I met a Chief Librarian from London. He said to me ‘Don’t go to Scotland, go to Aberystwyth, and see the College of Librarianship. So, I came and had a look, and I was just balled over by Aberystwyth. It was like paradise. The College of Librarianship was a marvellous place. A job came up and I got it. That’s how we came to be here. I later moved to the National Library and that was it.”



The National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, where Lionel continued a long enjoyable and successful career.

Image courtesy - Wikipedia

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