Tales From The Crew Room at AFEE

This Booklet.

This book has been compiled in answer to the challenge made by Group Captain Peter Hearn in his kind review of my book "First to Go", the story of AFEE. He said, "What we need now Alan, are the stories behind the story". So far it has only been possible to contact a few who were at A.F.E.E. in the period 1946-50. Those P.J.I's from the wartime period at A.F.E.E. have been more elusive and I even need help in finding their names. I aim to add more stories later.

Alan Brown.

The Front Cover of the Booklet.

The cover tries to depict the small 'Crew Room' at A.F.E.E. Beaulieu with a few of the characters.
Left to Right.

F/Sgt Jim Spalding, Jack Marlborough, toasting a NAAFI Eccles Cake. Frank Dunn, Johnny Barnes. Jack (Nobby) Clark

The Badge.

The personnel at A.F.E.E. were rather envious of P.T.S. having a badge for, even though A.F.E.E. had been in existence many years it still had no badge in 1949, but then the C.O. and Adjutant tried to rectify this. They ran a design competition and after careful consideration this design was submitted to the College of Heraldry. I have confirmation that they were working on this design when news came that AFEE was to close in Sept. 1950 and become a part of A&A.E.E. So this was the badge that never made it.

The History of the Beaulieu Airfields

The old airfield site at East Boldre had been, in 1910-12, one of Britain's first Flying Schools. Between 1915 & 1919 a large R.F.C, later RAF, Flying Training Base was built on the heathlands on that site. After 1919 buildings were removed. In 1945 it became A.F.E.E.'s Dropping Zone.

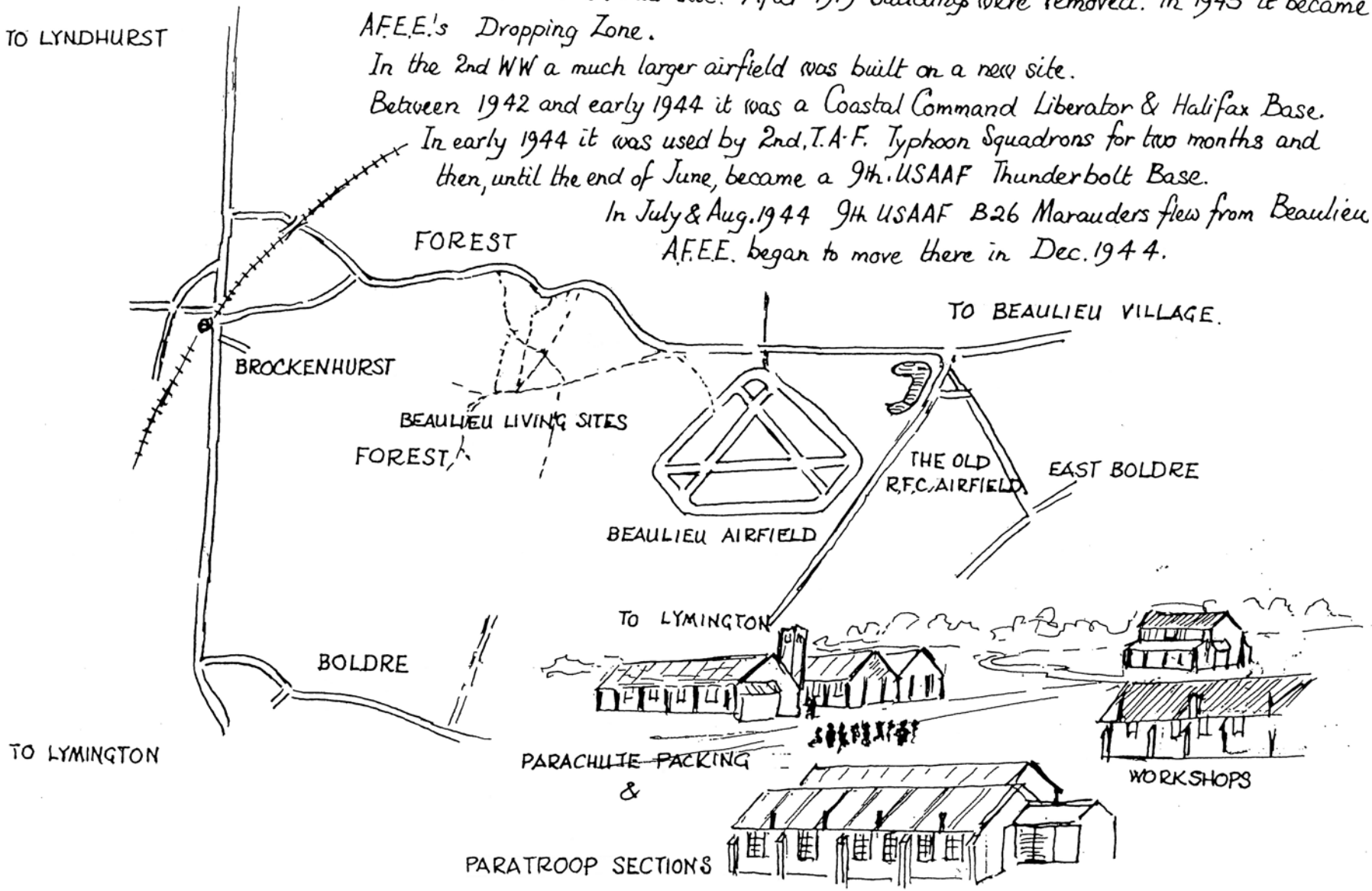
In the 2nd WW a much larger airfield was built on a new site.

Between 1942 and early 1944 it was a Coastal Command Liberator & Halifax Base.

In early 1944 it was used by 2nd. T.A.F. Typhoon Squadrons for two months and then, until the end of June, became a 9th. USAAF Thunderbolt Base.

In July & Aug. 1944 9th USAAF B26 Marauders flew from Beaulieu.

A.F.E.E. began to move there in Dec. 1944.

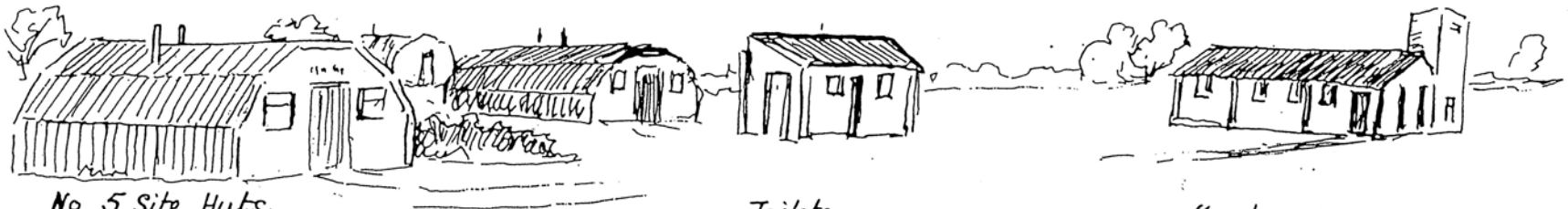


Where the hell is A.F.E.E.?

The Experimental part of the Central Landing Establishment had been formed at Ringway by September 1940, working side by side with the Parachute School. Renamed as Airborne Forces Experimental Establishment by February 1942, it moved to Sherburn-in-Elmet near York in August 1942, when Ringway became overcrowded. Sherburn was not a good choice for its runways were still being extended and flying had to take place at three other airfields, up to 65 miles away, until work was finished. Smog and bad weather also could often delay tests for weeks, but work went on until a better situated airfield was found in December 1944.

By 1946 P.T.S. itself had relocated to Upper Heyford and when A.F.E.E.'s old team of P.J.I's had departed quite "demob happy" a notice was sent to P.T.S. at Upper Heyford asking for six experienced P.J.I's to volunteer to work at A.F.E.E. However, being experienced was not without some cunning. They had heard tales of A.F.E.E. work and most were too well settled in comfortable Upper Heyford and the friendships of Oxford lasses. So it was left to convince six of us ex-U.T. aircrew doing a P.J.I. course to volunteer, in all our innocence! Whilst collecting clearance forms at the Orderly Room we asked the Sgt. "Where is A.F.E.E.?". "Oh, its at Beau Lieu, I think it's a French Airfield, which I believe is a few miles from Monte Carlo".

We thought "Wow! What a posting! All the four 'S's, Sun, Sea, Sand etc."
A day later we realized there was a snag when our route form said, Didcot, Reading, Basingstoke, Southampton, and so six much wiser lads arrived at Beaulieu in the New Forest during the areas' monsoon period! Dozens of old scattered nissen huts set in the midst of constant dripping forest, with pathways a few inches under water. The mess was half a mile away, the airfield another mile in a different direction. Was that Orderly Room Sgt. pulling our legs? No, at least two other tradesmen posted in from other camps had also been told it was in France and one had been told it was in the North of Scotland. In those days there was no well-known National Motor Museum to make Beaulieu known, and there was a small airfield at a place called Beaulieu in Southern France.



No 5 Site Huts. Toilets. Washouse.

We were billeted in the more outlying huts at the edge of 5 site which housed tradesmen of the Workshops Section. The particular hut had not been used for some time and thus had no coke ration for it's one very small black stove. The washhouse was some distance away with tin bowls and mostly cold water and the toilets were none too near, and without main drains, with what the Yanks called a "honey bucket" emptied three times a week by a man who turned up in a converted ex forces ambulance with a big tank inside. The same firm is now a very big operator in Hampshire, with a fleet of enormous bright coloured tankers, called the 'Cleansing Group' I often wonder if the man who carried the buckets to tip into the tank is now a Director of the Group.

That first full day at Beaulieu was taken up trudging miles around a much scattered camp, with an arrival form, in the pouring rain and we soon appreciated why there were no other volunteers from the older P.J.I's at Upper Heyford. Late that afternoon, now officially arrived, we made our way to the two buildings on the airfield that were Paratroop Section, my work place for the next four years.

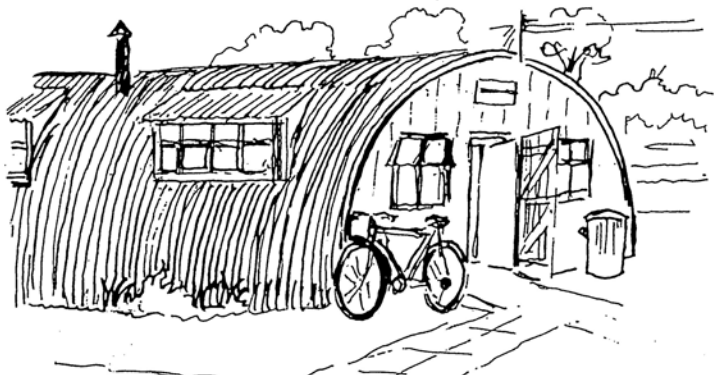
We met two Sgt. PJI's, about our own age and experience who had been posted in a few weeks earlier and a F/Sgt. ex AG, now P.J.I., Taff Roberts, and we were ushered in to meet our new officer i/c Major Peacock R.E, not a parachutist; but ex-WW1 airman. He turned out to be one of the earliest officers posted to the original Development Unit at Ringway and a man who kept strict control and care with all test work. He was one of the most capable, and pleasant officers I ever met. Also there was Jimmy Driscoll ex-WO of the 3rd 'Paras' who, since February 1944, had been the M.O.S. officer i/c live dropping. They had been having none too friendly phone calls to P.T.S. about sending down another six young lads, but had realised we were the only ones they were going to get. If we could convince them that we could make up the new test team and do all that was needed with testing the new aircraft expected, we were in. "Tomorrow morning we will give you a go through the hole of a MK7 Halifax." Down the dreaded hole, no longer used at PTS!

Things get better.

We reported back the next day by which time the sun was out and we could see a selection of aircraft scattered about on dispersal pans, a first RAF parachuting Dakota, various marks of Halifaxes, a Stirling, a one-off parachuting York, smaller air-to-air photo aircraft and, across the airfield, every type of glider and tug aircraft, and a few MK1. Hoverfly helicopters. Suddenly this looked an exciting type of station.

We drew parachutes and moved out to the old Halifax. The hole looked only slightly bigger than the Whitley one that we had heard about at P.T.S. We took off and the DZ came up quickly as it was only across the road. We went out in singles sitting on the edge of the hole with Jimmy Driscoll dispatching and Major Peacock on the DZ as they checked out our performance. There was also an air-to-air photographing aircraft so we had to be at our best. The DZ, as it came up to meet us, was quite a shock, for unlike Weston-on-the Green, this one appeared to be half covered with clumps of yellow topped gorse bushes, so we headed for a landing on one of the gravel tracks leading across this old 1st. W.W. Airfield. What we didn't appreciate was that they were four inches deep in rain water! Still we were down, if very wet, after making the best P.T.S. roll we could demonstrate.

More drops from other aircraft followed, some with kit bags, in the following days, as we were accepted for the test team. We had arrived at what was to prove a real wartime camp in an increasingly peacetime Air Force. The work was interesting, the conditions were what you made them, but the active personnel including the pilots were a great bunch. It proved to be a very happy RAF. station.



An ex-WAAF site Hut used by aircrew.

Our only problem was living on Workshops No 5 Site. The S/Ldr. in charge did not take kindly to what his airmen called 'Half Wings' and he pursued our every lapse with vigour. Perhaps it was understandable. His tradesmen had mostly been "Trenchard Brats" and had spent years becoming LAC's and Cpls. and along came these young lads who became Sgts. just by falling out of aircraft.

Six months later the station was 'de-WAAFed,' (Why did they always do that when we arrived?) and all of us and most of the flying personnel moved into their vacated WAAF site nissen huts because they had side windows and were more comfortable, even if further from the mess.

More recent P.J.I's might have a vastly different idea of a Crew Room with a bar, drinks machine, comfortable arm chairs, daily papers and wide screen T.V. For those at Beaulieu in 1946 it was a 20ft. x 18 ft. room in a temporary brick building. Next door was one cold tap, a large sink, but no kettle. In the same building were Major Peacock's and Jim Driscoll's offices and there was also an office for a mixture of Army, RAF, and M.O.S. officers, usually four in number, who dealt with heavy equipment dropping. Crammed into our crew room were one ex-Air Gunner turned P.J.I. F/Sgt Taff Roberts, and eight other P.J.I's, plus one AC1, Stornaway fisherman, who drove tractors, packed containers, crated heavy equipment and even helped to dispatch dummies. Of the ten in the crew room three were Taffs, Roberts, Davis and Brown, two were Jocks, two Geordies, one from Jersey, whose family had moved to South Africa, and just one Cockney and one Berkshire lad, who were southerners.

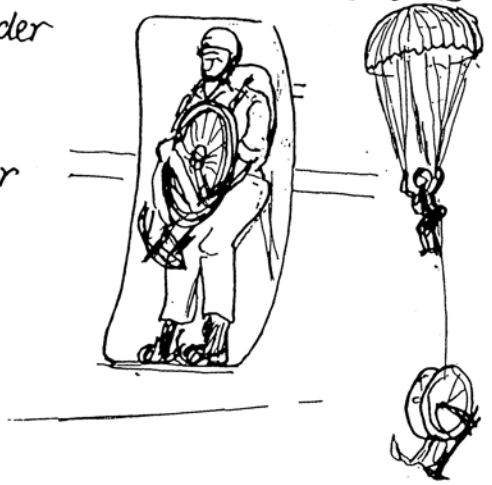
The crew room was further restricted in size by eight crew lockers, left behind by the previous occupiers of the airfield, the 9th. USAAF Bomb Group that flew B26 Marauders. I even found an American throat microphone which I sometimes used in the Dakota when dispatching.

The lockers were rather lightweight with mesh panels in the doors. A few years later we were joined by "Tiger Nicholson" a real character from P.T.S. who was forever leaving his locker doors open, with items scattered about. To teach him a lesson we fitted his locker doors up with spare bungees from an observer parachute, but they were not effective. So we then tried two massive bungees from a Jeep parachute cluster. 'Tiger' gave an impression of a weight trainer as he prised it with all his strength, seized his jumping smock and let the door go. With an enormous bang the door passed through the locker at high speed and this whole piece of delicate 'lease lend furniture' disintegrated into matchwood. It now really was US property!

The early weeks of 1947 saw very heavy snowfalls across the whole country and Beaulieu was soon snowed up and the water supply failed. The main pipe to the camp had burst, flooding a deep ditch, and then frozen over. Airmen were seen breaking the ice on a pond to wash and shave and, at the weekend, we trudged down to Brockenhurst to catch the train to Bournemouth for a bath at a Forces Club.

When the camp was back to normal, after the snow, we started on a very intensive programme of test work with every conceivable load whilst we waited for the arrival of the first Hastings. Using parachutes, both with and without reserve parachutes, we jumped with leg or chest kitbags often with heavy loads such as the Vickers gun. We also jumped with 2 and 3 inch mortars and even holding grimly onto a folding bicycle as the slipstream dragged it away under the tailplane of a Dakota. Dropping with a folding bicycle promised one advantage. You could roll up your parachute and ride the bicycle off the DZ, providing the spikes of the gorse bushes didn't puncture the tyres. At one time we had a folding bicycle each, which proved very useful for cycling along farm roads down to the local swimming bath, pubs, or dances at Lymington after work.

The test work, with heavy and difficult loads at this time, featured the first tests of snatch eliminators to replace the lowering of kit bags by ropes under hand control. On about twenty five occasions we used the Blank Gore Parachutes with kit bags. These parachutes had been tested at Beaulieu a year earlier, but even though being a wonderful improvement, had never been accepted for general service use. Now we were seeing if their added manoeuvrability could be used to avoid collisions between men in the big sticks when the Hastings arrived. As they were still classified as 'secret, under test' they were always used with a reserve parachute, but with full webbing under a jumping jacket whilst carrying a 60 pound chest kit bag, we were fully loaded. However, there was no more pulling down hard on front or rear lift webs. Control with the Blank Gore was just a matter of two little coloured rings which gave finger tip control. Avoiding the gorse bushes and coming in for a stand up landing near the spot, with kit bag still in place, was quite common. Almost the style of modern demonstration drops.

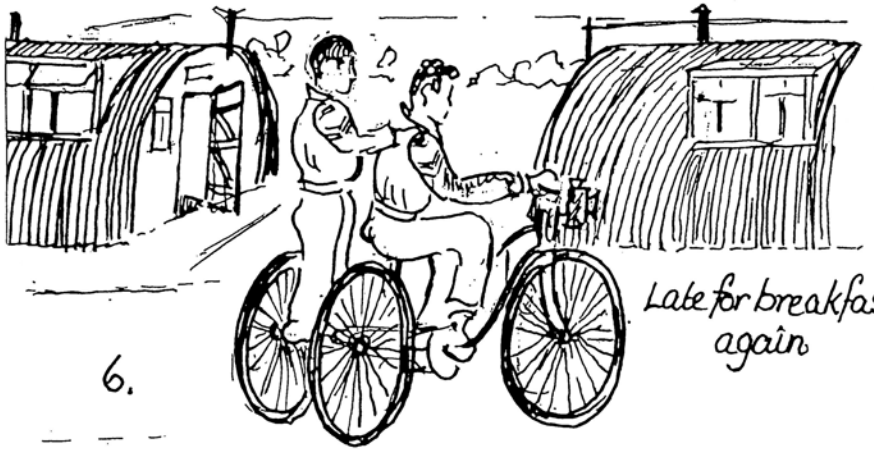


To just move about the camp a bicycle was essential, but RAF cycles were not only sub-standard, but also in short supply. The best the LAC in charge of cycles could offer was "I may be able to build you up one out of bits in about two weeks". He did, but the parts were from different styles of bicycles and did not match up. My cycle lasted just four months, then I brought my own one from home that I had as a 14 year old school boy. That lasted another eighteen months on the flint roads.

To consider going to Brockenhurst to catch a train to go on leave, week-end pass or just to visit one of its four pubs or regular Saturday dance was a 3 mile walk, but if you had a cycle you could leave it at an old ladies cottage near the station for 2d a night. The main train on a Sunday night got in at 2 am. and we just hoped that some bright airman had not borrowed our cycle and left us with the long uphill walk back to camp. You could take a short cut by a narrow path through the forest and over a stream by a one plank bridge, but you needed good night vision to do it. There was another small forest pub across the D.Z. at East Boldre, with shove-half penny and darts but it seemed that the locals turned down the oil lamps when we were winning. On special occasions there was a Sgts. Mess Dance with transport going out to bring nurses from local hospitals. The mess was decorated with the inevitable multi-coloured supply dropping parachutes.

For the last two of my four years at Beaulieu I solved my problems of transport around camp in an unusual way. I found an old 1890 adult size tricycle at Lyndhurst and rode it back to camp. I used it all around the domestic site and out to the airfield. On the way down to the mess for breakfast I sometimes had Frank Dunn standing on the bar at the back holding onto my shoulders.

For the 1949 Battle of Britain Display Day we were going to fit it up with crash pans and a parachute and drop it from the balloon, but the idea was vetoed for fear of it entangling with the balloon cable.



Late for breakfast again

A Seat Ejection Film — but from a Fairey Swordfish!

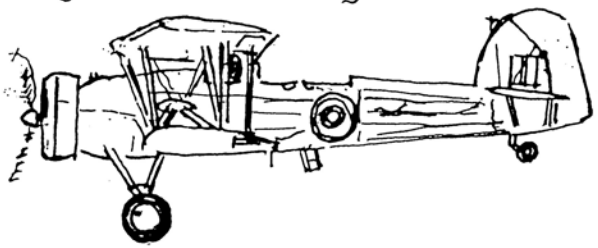
In 1947 there was a call for the first Seat Ejection Film to be made for fighter pilot training. The film unit sought help from the Beaulieu test team. The idea was to show the difference between leaving an aircraft in the old way and by the newly invented 'Bang Seat'.

The film company already had filmed Benny Lynch ejecting from a Gloster Meteor. We were being asked to stand in for his descent and landing dressed in the same garb. Two others of our team, dressed in Sidcot Flying Suits, were to take the parts in the old way of escape. One to leave a very old, oil splattered, RAF Swordfish with a seat type parachute and the other to stand in for his descent and landing.

We drew lots. I got the easy part as Lynch coming in for a landing, but Johnny Barnes drew the Swordfish jump. When the film crew aircraft was alongside he had to climb half-way out, then jib and climb back in. Then, after insistence from the pilot, do the jump. They missed him the first time and he had to do it all again. The other P.J.I did his landing for the film.

Johnny, after the two drops, became enthusiastic about rip cord parachutes and wanted to do more. Just before he was demobbed to join his parents in South Africa he was dispatching panniers. He had just pushed the last pannier out when he accidentally fell from the aircraft and parachuted down near Lymington, using a B5 dispatchers parachute. When they found him, quite safe, he explained that he had slipped on the roller mat.

We had serious doubts about this story as he never wore a parachute whilst dropping panniers and seldom even used a monkey chain. Johnny had done his third rip-cord descent and went on his way to South Africa



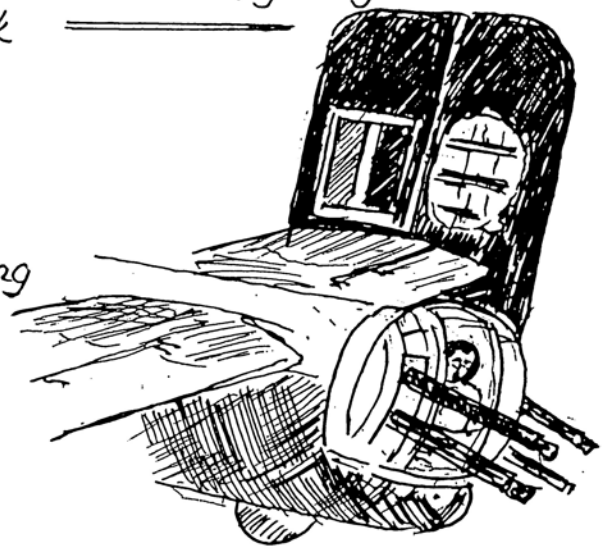
A return visit to P.T.S.

By early 1948 we had our first Airborne Forces detachment to help with the Hastings tests. They were experienced troops with many jumps to their credit, from Dakotas, but they had never done drill from star board doors. We had no training hangar, and the camp gymnasium was more a sport store, with one vaulting box and two mats. We tried to show them how to exit with a kit bag from the doorway of a small hut on the airfield, but as it had no wings or engines it lacked reality! We did have the one Hastings, but the starboard door was twelve feet above the ground!

So it was arranged that four P.J.I's take twenty-five 'paras' up to Upper Heyford for a day in the training hangar, flying up in a Mk 7 Halifax, as the Hastings was still not passed for other airfields.

In a training hangar dedicated to port door exits from Dakotas we caused many strange looks as we put them out with kit bags on the wrong legs, facing the wrong direction. At the end of the afternoon we crammed back into our rather old Halifax for a return flight to the wild woods.

"I don't think this hut will ever fly - Sarg"



Even without parachutes it was overcrowded, so Frank Dunn, being airgunner size, sat in the rear turret complete with guns and I looked over his shoulder. A real show off take-off from our pilot and we were soon looking down on Oxford. Suddenly there was a terrific bang followed by smaller rattles and Frank and I went forward to see what had happened. White faced 'paras' described flames dancing across the wing. We had been struck by lightning! 'St. Elmo's fire'. The pilot reported that every instrument was U/S so he would have to fly back 'by the seat of his pants.' We returned to our rear turret, only for Frank to spot a three foot hole punched through the tail fin just to his left. Fortunately the charge did leak away through the tail wheel on landing back at Beaulieu, but that aircraft never flew again!

Country Pastimes - The Rabbit Hunters.

Jack Marlborough found an unused air raid shelter at the edge of one of the sites and decided to keep a couple of ferrets with the aim of catching rabbits. One or two others of the lads joined him in flushing out rabbits in the late evening. The rabbits were then to provide the occasional stews over a stove in their nissen hut. There was one snag with this plan. None of the intrepid hunters knew how to skin a rabbit. To my lasting regret I had once, in the Scouts, learned how to do it for a badge called Backwoodsman.

Asleep in my own nissen hut I would suddenly be aware of someone dangling a dead rabbit over me calling "Wake up Taff and skin this for us." The promise of a small share of the stew was not too well appreciated at that late hour.

The Great Mushroom Racket.

As the weather turned to Summer we first became aware that there was a prolific crop of heathland mushrooms in the area between the runways. They have a very distinctive sweet taste.

At first Frank Dunn and friends took a few slices of bread from the mess, scraps of bacon salvaged from bones obtained from the camp butcher and with mushrooms, had a fry up in the evenings, but the supply of mushrooms increased and Jim Spalding suggested we enter the wholesale trade.

It then became an early pre-breakfast meeting of four or five P.T.I.s at Paratroop Section before moving out to the airfield with an airborne folding trolley to pick our crop. Boxed up, three or four boxes were taken to different pubs and cafés each day after work by bicycle or motorcycle. The trade added considerably to the beer money until one day, on Station Orders, there appeared.

"The picking of mushrooms on the airfield is dangerous and must cease at once"
Signed, Station Warrant Officer Mc Avoy. Not to be beaten we went out earlier the next day and were just leaving with a barrow load when there was the sound of a motorcycle approaching. On the front was Sgt. Clutterbuck P.T.I. and on the back was the S.W.O. complete with cricket bag. Come to pick his mushrooms! We shouted "Good morning Mac," to which he replied, "Morning Boys," and we never heard anymore about it. The trade went on!

I nearly bought it ~ but Frank Dunn did buy it.

No, not problems with a parachute, but problems over buying a bright red pre-war M.G. A group of aircrew warrant officers from 'A' Flight were selling this little 'status symbol' for just £35, and adding up my life savings I found I was just a couple of £'s short.

By next pay day I could make it, but it was no use. Frank Dunn, a slightly more wealthy colleague, had slipped in to clinch a deal. Several days of driving ended with a half-shaft having to be replaced at a local garage. About ten days later the same happened again.

Frank sold the M.G. on and bought a motorcycle.

One night, months later in the mess, I heard the reason why the M.G. was such trouble. The warrant officers had, after a pub crawl near Southampton Docks, taken a wrong turning and driven up a railway track, and the car got wedged in some points. The car now had a twisted chassis.

Back at Beaulieu they had found an old nissen hut on the long disused No. 2 W.A.A.F. site. It even had electric lighting. Undoing an end wall they had driven the car in and replaced the end wall. It was a dry place to work on the car.

Another Car Story involving the Fire Section F/Sgt. who was very colour blind.

He was quite a lad to us, but was known to pick on some of his section. He lost quite a few snooker games in the mess when opponents were unhelpful on colour identification. One day he turned up with his Morris saloon repainted in clashing red and blue. It was quite a laugh at the time, but fifty years later I met one of his section and the story became very clear.

The F/Sgt. had gone off on a week-long pass with a girl friend and left one of his more picked on AC2's with orders to go to the Dope Store, get some paint, and repaint the Morris. He got the most clashing colours available and painted not only the outside, but also the seats. The F/Sgt. drove this flamboyant car until he was posted away from A.F.E.E.

My informant could not remember what ghastly posting the AC2 had as his reward.

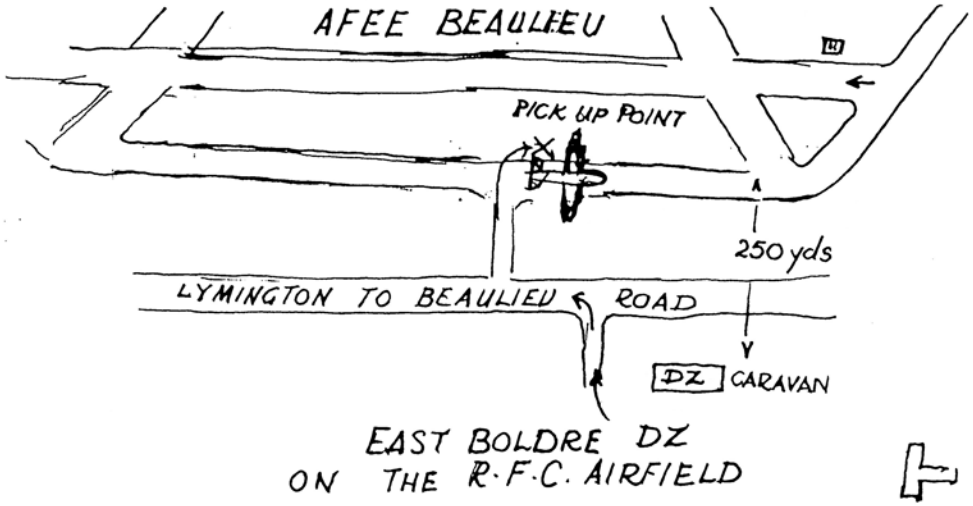
To set the record straight.

In the book "There I was at 500 ft." which has so many wonderful anecdotes from and about P.T.S characters there is one by a P.J.I. about a time when he visited Beaulieu to join in Hastings trials. In it he claimed to have taken part in "a record of sorts", seven jumps from a starboard door between 7.10 am and 11.00 am. It wasn't a line shoot, but contained a slight fisherman's tale or golfer's tale exageration.

Actually it was on the 4th April 1950 and it was six jumps and they were not the first starboard jumps from a Hastings. They were done on 10th. Dec. 1947 by Jimmy Driscoll M.O.S. officer, F/Sg. Jimmy Spalding and myself in three singles. However, 4th. April was a record. The particular Hastings with modifications to the tail unit, TG 500, was needed back at Farnborough by the afternoon of the 4th With one P.J.I. injured and one demobbed the A.F.E.E. team were down to six and for some days we had a few P.T.S. lads to help. By the evening of the 3rd April we still needed 54 jumps to complete the tests.

Major Peacock and Jim Driscoll worked out how it could be done.

Breakfast at 5.00 am. draw two 'chutes each at 6 am. Jump at 7.00 am, then as the Hastings landed and taxied around for a second take-off we boarded it from a jeep, fitted the second 'chute and jumped again. A quick cup of tea, draw two more 'chutes and repeat, more tea, two more 'chutes and by 11.0 am the programme was completed. The P.T.S. lads left for Upper Heyford at noon. There was a 7th. and 8th. drop that afternoon according to my log book, but they were two dummy and heavy equipment drops from a Halifax MK.7.



This record of 6 jumps each from a Hastings in four hours would not have been possible, but for East Boldre D.Z. being just across the road from the Beaulieu Airfield perimeter track. We didn't even have to roll up parachutes. Out of harness and picked up by jeeps. We even had parachute packers to roll up our parachutes and take them back in a three tonner.

However, we did have to buy our own tea from the NAAFI van!

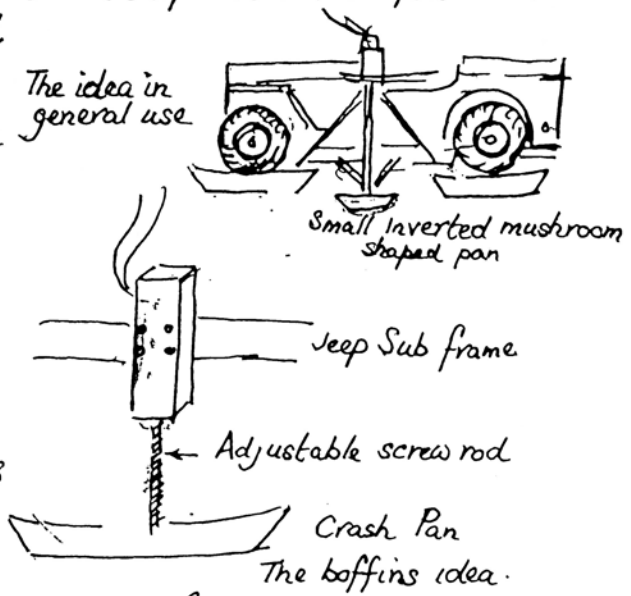
Heavy Equipment.

The earliest tests of jeep and gun dropping at Sherburn-in-Elmet had to wait until 1943, when 'Bomber' Harris at last released a few of his less needed Stirlings and early Halifaxes big enough to take these items for airborne tests. By June 1944 the technique of such drops was well enough developed to allow jeeps to be dropped to S.A.S. units operating behind enemy lines in Central France.

However, the tests of heavy drops were not always free from problems. One new posting to Sherburn was greeted by the sight of a foreshortened jeep with oval wheels lying near the section buildings.

By 1946 the P.J.I.'s when not engaged in dropping tests, often worked at the Heavy Equipment Section on the other side of the airfield helping the few technical officers to crate and load jeeps, guns and trailers for test drops. They also flew when the equipment was test dropped. New ideas on heavy equipment dropping also came from other units including R.A.E. Farnborough. One new idea in 1949 was less than helpful.

To prevent a jeep being dragged over after landing inverted mushroom shaped rods were fitted on either side of the jeep so that, on impact with the ground, these triggered off a small explosive shackle which released the parachute cluster. The 'boffins' said they could improve on this with a small metal box and an adjustable screw rod which would strike the inside of the crash pan on landing and explode the shackle. They said it was a better arrangement for the first drop of two jeeps in salvo from a Hastings. Two new jeeps were crated up and duly fitted under the Hastings, but what the boffins had forgotten was that the Hastings vibrated when the engines were run up before take off. The rods wound down, touched the crash pans and exploded the shackles and after take-off the Hastings dropped two jeeps from 2,000ft. followed by their disconnected parachutes. We picked up the wreckage and it was decided not to use the boffins invention in future!



The most difficult loads of heavy equipment always asked the impossible from even our expert pilots and the diminutive and puckish F/Lt. Davies, a product of the 'Welsh Scrum Half Factory' was one of the very best pilots. An ex airframe fitter described cadging a flight with him in a Halifax

about to drop the massive 25 pounder gun (see page 50 of "First to Go")

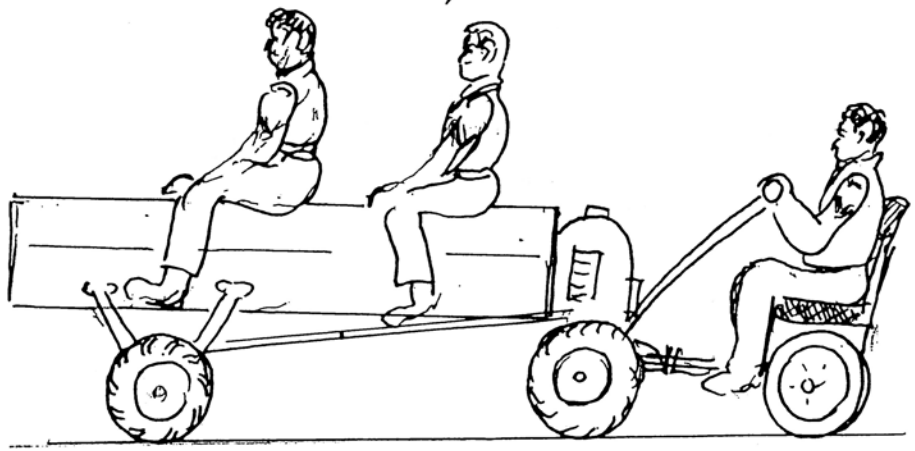
Over the target area the release repeatedly failed to work. It was a hang up. They flew around and around trying to shake it free, but finally F/Lt. Davies, who had done previous drops of this gun, ordered everyone to take up crash landing positions, for the jolt of touch down might shake the gun free and destroy the aircraft. He wheeled the aircraft in for the softest of three point landings, with the gun load having less than 18 inches ground clearance.

Very Special Transport.

For PJIs, working at the Heavy Equipment Section, added about an extra mile to walk to and from work and bicycles were much in demand, but amongst the jeep wreckage and dented crashpans near the buildings we discovered the now discarded "Jarrow Container" complete with engine (see page 45 of 'First to Go') Fitted together we found it still worked.

Fertile minds began to work. Tinkering with the engine got it up to 20 mph. and soon a small aircraft seat mounted on a pair of wheels was attached to the rear and we had the most unusual transport for three P.J.I.'s around the perimeter track back to Parachute Section.

For several weeks it entertained all ranks as it passed by before some spoil-sport asked the question 'But where are you getting the petrol?" We lost that mode of transport as the Jarrow went back in the container, but the Fordson tractor did a few more miles to the gallon.

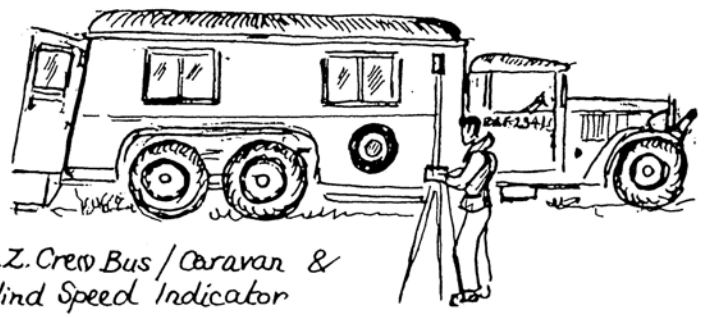


The Jarrow Container Transport

Who stole the D.Z. Caravan ?

The Dropping Zone at East Boldre, unlike Weston-on-the-Green, was on forest land on which ponies and cattle grazed. It had no boundary fence even though it had been a 1st, W.W. Airfield. With the exception of the village hall, which had been the R.F.C. officers mess in 1915 and later the Y.M.C.A. canteen, all the old buildings, including six hangars, had been removed in the 1920's. To the south-west the land sloped away to the Solent with no real wind-break before the Isle of Wight. The only permanent D.Z. items were a 'caravan' and a 'T' cut into the turf as an aiming point. Surprisingly the 'T' can still be seen today, 50 years later. The ambulance, lorry and tractor and trailer, to remove parachutes and containers, came across from the 2nd. W.W. Airfield just before dropping was about to start. Jimmy Driscoll, the D.Z. officer, put up the wind indicating anemometer which, at times, strangely seemed to register a much lower speed than that which thumped us down to plough a furrow through successive belts of gorse bush. Perhaps the malfunction of this instrument might be explained by the way he carefully positioned it shielded between the ambulance and the three-ton lorry.

The D.Z. caravan was an old 'crew bus' with it's engine removed and it's front wheels disconnected. We repainted it bright yellow and it became a land mark to estimate drift as we descended. One morning we looked down as usual, but there was no caravan.



D.Z. Crew Bus / Caravan & Wind Speed Indicator

It had been stolen during the night. Eventually the civilian police were informed and they found that it had been seen passing through the village of Beaulieu on a low loader at 2am the previous morning, but after that the trail ran cold. For days nothing more was heard. It was then that 'B' Flight took over with what must be the first ever crime air search using it's Hoverfly Mk I helicopters and a spotter aircraft. After a search the distinctive caravan, still painted bright yellow, was spotted by a helicopter locked in the yard of a surplus stock dealer 8 miles away. The police were informed and the thief dealt with. Other items were also found. It was a 1949 forerunner of today's use of helicopters by the police.

Sport at A.F.E.E.

There had been a Gym/Cinema building at Beaulieu during the war years, but by 1945 it was just used as a cinema with two shows of third-rate old films a week. These became far more entertaining by the wry comments of wits in the audience. The Gym was now housed in a much smaller hut. A standing Hop, Skip and Jump would push you out through the other end window. It was really just a sport store with end bunk rooms for the two Station P.T.Is. Most personnel on the camp were kept more than fit by the many miles they walked daily. There was a sports field of rough farm pasture which was alright for soccer and rugby pitches, but the cricket team always had to play away games. With two or three resident P.T.I's plus eight P.T.I/P.J.I's and several excellent pre-war rugby and soccer stars we had very strong rugby and soccer teams with enjoyable games on Wednesday afternoons. We also entered a team in local tug-of-war competitions. Even though there were no swimming facilities excepting from Solent beaches, we had a very good water polo team using Southampton Baths or the very big open air sea water baths at Lymington for matches. On one occasion we beat the top team Lymington Town 3-1 and that merited a special mention in the Station Records.

In early 1949 the farmer reclaimed our sports field and the only place left for a Rugby Pitch was the grass strip bordering the Main Runway. Concrete holes were made so that the posts could be put up before a game. However, should an aircraft arrive during a game the flying-control jeep would come over and the referee stopped the game. Both teams then, with much hilarity, took down cross bars and posts. After the aircraft landed up went the posts again and the game restarted where it left off.

If ever they build another runway for Heathrow, Twickenham may have to adopt the same procedure during International Matches!

A Problem With a Reserve Parachute.

We only borrowed a balloon at A.F.E.E. for a very short while for the first jumps with a difficult piece of kit. We did retain it for two weeks for a display drop at an 'Open Day', but strong wind blowing in from the Isle of Wight direction later destroyed it at its moorings. So my total balloon jumps including those at Upper Heyford were just thirteen. There were no regrets about that low number.

Without a training hangar it was difficult to train paratroops who arrived to join in test work, especially on new aircraft with twin doors Verbal advice had to suffice. They were also using the reserve parachute for the first time and we warned them not to pull them unless in serious trouble.

It was therefore ironic that only I should get into trouble with a reserve.

Whilst on a month's duty as mess barman in 1949 I had an urgent phone call. "We are one short for a mixed drop of 30 'paras' and P.J.I.'s from a Hastings". We will draw your parachute and reserve and put it in the aircraft with your tin hat". Take off in 20 minutes". I rushed out and cycled up to the aircraft. "You are No 7 Port Door". The crowded position in the sky.

As we ran out of the aircraft at 1,000 ft. I wondered what had hit me! My reserve developed under my left arm whilst I was passing under the tail, pulling me to the rear, whilst my main parachute tried to develop moments later. Then the 24 ft. canopy and the 28 ft. one began to entwine. Only frantic tugging on lift webs managed, at 200 ft, to change the tangled development into my personal cluster.

I had bad sear burns up my left arm for, in my rush, I had only been in 'Summer shirt-sleeve order'. All tests were stopped for three days whilst we studied air-to-air film to discover what had happened. The reserve parachute's rip cord handle had still been in its housing. At last we solved it. The para' who was No. 6 had jumped well up on exit and his static line was across the doorway and his hook had torn away the bottom flap of my reserve.

This led to a minor modification to the hooks on the straps and we enforced the order never to jump up on exit.

The busy day when we did six jumps from a Hastings before 11 am. and two heavy equipment drops from a Halifax may give the impression of constant flying and parachuting taking place. However, we were often hampered by the weather or unserviceable aircraft. As the aircraft under test was often a prototype or 'one-off aircraft' there could be quite long delays getting parts. For the PJIs these delays were frustrating, but we could always switch to other work using older aircraft such as Dakotas or Halifaxes for equipment tests. There was also work preparing guns and jeeps at Heavy Equipment workshops. In the storeroom of Paratroop Section we spent very many days packing Kitbags, containers and panniers. For a full Hastings drop it was 30 kit bags and 20 containers of 300 pounds. For a full pannier drop it was 28 panniers of 350 pounds, with a third needing repacking after a drop. Containers and panniers were packed with concrete blocks, bales of straw and anything else we could find. There were failures in supply drops. On one Hastings drop 4 pannier parachutes did not open and 4 350 pound panniers hurtled down to straddle the Lymington to Beaulieu road with concrete, straw and wicker work in all directions. A very white faced Austin 10 driver later turned up to complain that he had been bombed.

"C" Flight and Paratroop Section Personnel (Including Air-to-Air Pilots)

Pilots before 1946

W/Cdr Dunder, S/Ldr Pitt, F/L Farren, F/O Matthey, F/O Griffiths, W.O. Beal.

after 1946, W/Cdr Gibbson, S/Ldr Price, F/L Taff Davies F/L Flavell, F/L Cliff, F/L Knight, F/L Stagg, F/L Roberts, F/O Smale, F/O Matheson.

Paratroop Section. (Technical Staff)

Major Peacock, Mr L Driscoll, Cpt Steers, F/O Trimm, Mr Stott, Mr Bartram, S/L George, Mr Martindale.

PJIs before 1946.	PJIs 1946 - 1947	Replacements 1947-48	Later Replacements
F/Sgt Le Bretton	F/Sgt. Taff Roberts	F/Sgt. Jim Spalding 1947 - 1950	
F/Sgt	Sgt. Eddie Watson	Sgt. Frank Dunn 1947 - 1950	
Sgt	Sgt. Den Pett	Sgt. Hodgkinson	Sgt. Ken Kidd.
Sgt	Sgt. Taff Brown 1946 - Sept 1950		
Sgt Jack Drinkwater (demob '46)	Sgt. Johnny Barnes	Sgt. Jack Clark demob 1948	Sgt. Mason.
Sgt George (Lilley ?)	Sgt. Ted Robson	Sgt. Hutchinson demob 1947	Sgt. Fergusson.
Sgt	Sgt(W) Taff Davis	Sgt. Jack Marlborough	
Sgt	Cpl. Ian Bruce	Sgt. Noel Callaghan	
(Above names not known.)	Cpl. Eric Bule.		Sgt. Nicholson.
Sgt Drinkwater re-enlisted at P.T.S. in 1947			

Plus Short Period Detachments of P.T.S PJIs to help with Hastings Tests.