

A Speech given by Dave l'Anson at a Liverpool Waterguard Sports & Social Club lunch - April 2010

John Curphey

Before I start my rambling, I'd like to say a few words about these biannual lunches that we have. I've been coming to them for about 12 years or so, some of you for much longer. The common factor of all these lunches is that they seem to go without a hiccup as if they had arranged themselves. Of course that is not the reality. Those of you who have been involved in the arranging of functions will know that there is a great deal of hard work that goes on behind the scenes to make them a success. For the past 10 years John Curphey has undertaken the responsibility for arranging these lunches. All the more remarkable because, not yet being retired, he is not strictly eligible to be here in the first place! However, I think that we owe John a debt of gratitude for all the hard work that he has done, and I would ask you to give a big hand in recognition of all of John's efforts.

The Job

It's quite remarkable, isn't it, that 50 or 60 people gather twice a year to celebrate a job that went defunct almost 40 years ago. It was a unique job, the likes of which will never be seen again, with you, the many unique people who helped to make it what it was.

I joined the job in 1964, having previously attended an interview panel chaired by Frank Coker: "Can you tell me the colour of postage stamps from 1/2d to 6d?" was his key, surprise question – It was quite clear that Frank was no fool, and from that moment I was left in no doubt that I was entering an organisation that demanded the highest qualities and standards of intellect from its staff.

I can still hear the words of the late Eric Murray after he had introduced me, a new APO, to the many and varied attractions of The Empress of Canada: a couple of hours socialising in the bar, then a five course lunch with liqueurs (of course), followed by a trip to the butchers, followed by a game of hearts and a few nobblers back at the Landing Stage; "This isn't really a job," he said, "it's more like a gentlemen's club, but without the gentlemen.

But some would say that by the time of reorganisation in mid 1971 the Waterguard had had its day. Think about what we were up to. Trying to prevent the importation of such memorable anti-social and dangerous material as:

- The Story of "O", the original pornographic book, printed as I recollect by the Paris Printing co. of Hackney. All known published copies thought to have been seized years ago by Jim Berry.
- Amorces or fulminating cartridges (caps)
- seditious literature, aimed at causing political unrest and the downfall of the government of the day.
- Shaving brushes –to prevent anthrax (but only if they were made in Japan!)

- American Horror Comics, the likes of which I had been reading since I was about aged seven, courtesy of my cousin's husband a GI at Burtonwood.

Whilst not searching for these elusive items, I spent my spare time studying – not the Waterguard Codes, as you might expect - but The Bumper Fun Book - author Charlie Mansour, editor Des O'Hare, which seemed to travel of its own accord between Princes Landing Stage and W Kings.

So perhaps the demise of the Waterguard was no surprise as a new dawn arrived by way of Reorganisation and the subsequent advent of the dreaded VAT.

Those of you who were still in the dept post 1993 will remember the introduction of the new Staff Reporting System, and the new concept of "Competencies" which underpinned the Annual Performance marking.

But we all know that it wasn't a new concept at all. The WGD had its own unwritten code of competencies which individuals would draw upon in pursuance of their official duties.

I would like to remind you of a couple on my own experiences.

Financial Understanding:

I met Ray Robbie a few months ago He was 90 last month. He reckons he is young enough to have been Jack Colley's APO. Ray reminded me of an incident when I was an APO on boarding with him at Carriers on a Norwegian with Chinese catering crew. After doing the boarding duties, I decided to do a bit of rummage. I went down to the crews mess. I unscrewed a table from the bulkhead - I couldn't believe my eyes – The proverbial cut-out! Trembling hands reached inside and felt a nail. Attached to the nail was a length of string. I hauled up string and found four pounds of black tar-like substance which proved to be opium, and a football sock containing about 10 pounds weight of . . . lighter flints. Back at the office no one remotely interested in the opium. It soon dawned on me why. Reward on the lighter flints vastly exceeded the opium. Unfortunately, the duty and hence the reward was based on the actual number of flints – not the weight. So I counted out 1000 flints which weighed a couple of ounces or so, then weighed the total flints and calculated that there were 80,000 or so flints. The reward for the flints was the maximum of the day and peanuts for the opium. I think the opium is probably still lying forgotten in a locker in the APO's room at Gladstone!

Delegation of Responsibility:

With Dick Haskayne at Alex: boarded a Vestey meat boat fresh from South America. AB declared on List C142 one Monkey. Another declared a quantity of Bulbs. Dick suggested I deal with the monkey and he would deal with the bulbs, because according to him, he knew more about phytosanitary certificates than he knew about monkeys. Went down with the AB to view said monkey in his cabin. The forlorn creature was standing on its hind legs in the cabin and was hand-cuffed to the bed rail. Told the AB that under no circumstances could he land the monkey, and that, in the absence of an import licence, he would have to re-export it. The seaman said that he couldn't do this as he was due to pay off in a couple of

hours. I decided to advise MAFF so went ashore to the office to telephone. Returned some 15 minutes later to be met at the gangway by the AB who told me that the monkey had just died. To my question "How" he replied "it must have been the cold weather". Went down to the cabin to find the monkey lying dead on the bed, obviously strangled. The seaman said that as the animal was now dead he proposed to throw the corpse into the dock, and that this would resolve his problem. I advised that he couldn't do this as the importation of monkeys dead as well as alive, was also prohibited. This left us both in a quandary. I knew he couldn't import the animal, and he knew that he couldn't leave the vessel until the matter was resolved. It was no use trying to seek advice from Dick as he had already said that he knew nothing about monkeys. Over a couple of beers with the AB I suddenly realised that the answer to the dilemma lay on the ship itself. We went to see the Chief Engineer and on payment of one case of Tenants (courtesy of the Chief Steward who had joined us as a co-conspirator), with due solemnity the poor dead monkey was taken down to the engine-room where he was placed in the ship's furnace and duly cremated.

Feeling chuffed with myself, I reported back to Dick in the officers' saloon to see how he was managing with the paperwork associated with the importation of bulbs. He was ensconced in a big easy chair, huge nobler in one hand, fag in the other, red in the face and unable to get his words out. The technical term for this condition is "pissed". Unable to get any sense out of Dick, I picked up the 142 from the table. Against the entry for the imported bulbs he had written " = electric light . Duty Trifling".

Health and Safety:

Compared to the current day, Health and Safety training in the WGD was non-existent. We learned from each other, and hoped that our mentor of the day knew what he was talking about when we sought advice about machinery in the engine room, entry into the chain-locker, fuel tanks etc. But woe betide the APO who sought advice from John Keogh who, it was reported, dropped his Bright Star spark proof torch into an empty, highly potentially explosive fuel tank on a tanker over at Tranmere and then lit several matches in an attempt to find it.

The most traumatic experience I had was one evening watch on the river, Jim Welsby fell from the Jacob's ladder as he left the Parthia, a light ship very high in the water. Jim hit the water between the Parthia and the launch and stood no chance as he hit a flood tide and was swept away. I came on nights a couple of hours later, to be met by Dave Lee, Jim's APO who told me the tragic news. Told by Linford the Waterguard Supt. to go with Hughie Fisher to break news to Jim's old Father in Old Folks Masonic Home on Wirral. The events of that night brought home the very real dangers associated with the job.

Toast

As far as I am aware there have been two Watergard officers who died on duty in Liverpool There was Jim Welsby and Gil Hornby an APO who died in a transom space under the steering gear on the S/S Andros Champion in 1957. I think it is unfortunate that the deaths of these two officers seem to have gone unheralded from a Departmental point of view and therefore I would like to take this opportunity to ask you to raise your glasses in memory of Jim and Gil, and also to Buster Burton whose funeral is taking place as we speak.

Finally and not wanting to finish on a sombre note:

PO'S EXAM 1969

Three APOs go down to the bond on S/S Halizones and order 3 bottles and 3 cartons. The barkeeper charges them £30 - £10 each. As the bar-keeper is leaving the bond to pay the money to the Chief Steward, he overhears the group complaining about the cost. He tells the Chief Steward about the complaint and he is told, in the interests of good industrial relations, to return £5 to the group. Realising that the group are unaware of this, he pockets £2, returns to the bond and gives the group £3 ie £1 each. This means that the APOs have in fact paid £9 each. Three times £9 is £27 and the bar-keeper has pocketed £2, so what happened to the other £1?