

RAF WEST MALLING

RAF West Malling near Maidstone was a World War 2 fighter base which was leased to the United States Navy. It was maintained as a base for the Admiral in charge of whatever the US Fleet in this part of the world was called, probably CINCANT or some other acronym. The Admiral kept his 'chromium plated' Dakota at West Malling but it was flown to RAF Northolt whenever he needed it. However the Airfield had a lot of use just 'because it was there', and there were daily arrivals from all parts of the world.

Customs control was exercised from Dover and the job rotated for a week at a time as part of our rostered duties. Every morning the nominated Preventive Officer would ring the Control Tower and be advised of the scheduled arrivals and departures for the day, and then make his way out to Malling by car or arranged to be collected by a US Navy Driver.

The first flight of the day was usually the mail plane from a base just outside Paris which also brought fifty or sixty French bread rolls. These were dumped in the office allocated to HM Customs and bodies arrived and took what they wanted until they were all gone.

The Preventive Officer was also the Immigration Officer for this facility and this was quite a pantomime. The Liaison Officer with the Customs was an American Petty Officer of Russian extraction whose English accent sounded as though he left Leningrad the week previous. He was referred to by his colleagues as 'Red' or that Goddam Russian.

The system was for the passengers to be brought to the Customs Office where Red gave everyone a pencil and a Landing Card. He would begin by telling everyone that I was the Immigration Officer and that they should fill in their cards to his instructions. He would treat them all as if they were little children irrespective of their rank. It was almost 'take the pencil in your right hand and the card in your left hand and fill in your name where it says NAME'. Every one did as they were told. The passengers were mostly Service personnel but there also a few bodies who had managed to hitch a lift, journalists, film makers etc. If any one raised a question 'Red' would reply 'Hold your horses General or Major or sailor. We will get there in a minute' - 'Red' was in charge.

The next move was for me to put my cap on and be the Customs Officer. 'Red' would translate my little spiel to the assembled group, and then we would all go for doughnuts and coffee in the canteen. Every one queued up, from Generals to Privates, all in the same democratic Army.

One afternoon I had a call for an early visit the following day for an attendance at 6.30 am to deal with a flight of planes by the Canadian Air Force arriving from France. Bang on time about ten fighter planes landed and the pilots made their way across the tarmac. I met them outside the office as they had no baggage, said good morning and asked them how long they would be stopping, only to be told 'we have just stopped off to go and see the Boat Show at Earl's Court we will be off at about 1800 hours'. They stripped off their flying suits and bone domes, which they left in my office, and scrounged a lift to London whilst I wondered how much that little junket had cost the Canadian taxpayer.

There was quite a lot of freight which made its way to or from the USA, and one day an Officer gave me a copy of a manifest for a package of electrical equipment for the Brooklyn Navy yard. In theory only Government stores were allowed in Service Aircraft. I asked him what it was and he told me that it was a lamp but he seemed a bit reticent about it. I told him that I would like to see it and it turned out to be a handsome Victorian street light about 25 feet tall that he had picked up in a scrap yard in London, God knows how he was going to smuggle that out of a Navy Yard.

We had an Office copy of the Visiting Forces Act for guidance, but really it was just a question of keeping the Union Flag with RAF Roundels flying at the same height as the Stars & Stripes at the Main gate. The RAF representative at the base was a Squadron Leader who lived in splendid isolation and I was told that he was in fact a Pole but I never met any one who ever saw him.

R.W.Gregory.