

WATERGUARD TALES FROM OLD LONDON AIRPORT - 1963/5

By Vic Briggs, former APO

DRESSED TO THRILL

Air travel in the 1960s was an exciting new business and those who could afford to indulge in it were often the rich and famous. Handsomely suited gentlemen escorted chic ladies to their fancy destinations. Yes, people actually dressed up to fly. Big airports were fantastic places, busy and bright with well turned out travellers, airline and flight personnel, and all the airport workers who looked after the requirements of a big international airport.

Important amongst those workers were the representatives of Her Majesty's Customs and Excise Department, in the form of Officers of the Waterguard Service (an odd title if historic title, one might think, for those working far removed from watery matters). But young Vic Briggs, newly appointed Assistant Preventive Officer, was proud to take his place in the ranks of the thin blue line of Revenue Officers. Valiant heroes who were there to defend the nation against the tide of humanity often determined to avoid or evade customs duties, taxes and the many other impositions and restrictions applied by the state.

Into this frantic and busy airport life young APO Vic fitted very well in all respects save one. It was his trousers. The requirement to be 'well-fitting' had obviously not been in the minds of those who had laboured to produce the garment. Not unless the manufacturers had envisaged the wearer to be of exceptional height with very short legs and a skin resistant to the abrasive properties of the awful trouser material. That stiff and hairy stuff could easily flay the wearer's limbs and more sensitive parts into a state of extreme soreness and irritation. And the trousers, admittedly for temporary issue, appeared to be very old and of naval origin, perhaps even of Nelsonian vintage. Heaven knows what maritime adventures they had enjoyed!

On this particular morning young Briggs had been assigned to duty on the exit to the long-haul baggage hall with a colleague, to make sure that all passengers presented themselves, and their baggage, for clearance. A secondary duty was to keep at bay the hordes of often very excited meeters and greeters. Vic's colleague was an experienced APO in an immaculately tailored suit. He looked the part and controlled the exit with smoothness and efficiency. Vic looked like a refugee from a very poor jumble sale, and his performance was not aided by the sniggers he heard from behind his back. He looked and felt like a complete idiot, so when a bristling Chief Preventive Officer approached, nicely suited and dripping with gold braid, to enquire if all was well on the exit he received a much less than respectful reply.

Later in the CPO's office fences were sort of mended between them but it was probably just as well that Vic's proper uniform arrived a few days later and that the massive former naval trousers with short legs and sagging elephantine crutch never again graced the baggage hall or were exposed to public gaze. Not long afterwards, in the tradition of a Viking funeral, the offensive garment was cast with much

pleasure into the flames of a garden bonfire. Much later the same fate awaited a huge Waterguard greatcoat and sundry books of instruction but that's another story!

HANDS UP!

Boarding duties that evening were proving challenging for APO Vic Briggs. He had been assigned to go out with senior PO, Rusty Peasmold (a 'nom de guerre' it must be added!). No problem with that but red-faced Rusty was a salty old ship man, an ex RN Petty Officer, and Glaswegian to boot. Nothing wrong with all of that but what he was doing at LAP was a complete mystery. He was a genial, bucolic old chap completely out of step with the fast moving requirements of a modern airport. There were rumours about certain unexplained deficiencies in certain spirit sample cupboards in certain northern port offices, but whether or not this had led to a transfer situation south of the border was unproven.

The airport was very busy that night and it was raining steadily. Noise, lights, traffic, people, and the pressure to board incoming aircraft was in the air, and to clear the crews, seal the bar boxes and move on the next aircraft. Up and down the aircraft steps went the two Boarding Officers in their sodden raincoats with their little brown suitcases containing the tools of their trade at the ready. It was all go! Mostly Rusty went up to the front of the aircraft to deal with the flight crews and first class bar stores whilst Vic dealt with all of the back end formalities. After a time Rusty decided he wanted a change and would take charge of the rear of the next aircraft.

The next plane in line for boarding was a sleek Caravelle of the Spanish airline, Iberia. Vic climbed up the front stairs whilst Rusty waited to mount the rear ones. Now the Caravelle was an unusual aircraft in one important respect – it had integral rear stairs. That meant they could be lowered rapidly after landing to offload passengers. But that made things very trying for HM Boarding Officer. The rear galley space was very limited. Ten or so bar boxes had to be checked and secured, on one's knees, with lead seals, against a tide of disembarking passengers, cabin staff, and airline or airport people. It was a job for a really agile boarding officer.

Suddenly, Vic and the personnel at the front of the aircraft were startled by high-pitched female screams from the back of the aircraft followed by a torrent of very angry Spanish. Next moment two haughty, tall, angry and very flushed air hostesses pushed their way down the aisle gesticulating wildly. Following some way behind was a bemused Rusty holding out his lead sealing iron and a length of sealing twine. It transpired that somehow or other Rusty, in a heroic attempt to seal up the lower rack of bar boxes with his trusty iron in the dark and confined spaces available, had strayed into the infinitely more dark and dangerous spaces adjacent to the hostesses lower limbs. His intentions in those areas had been seriously misunderstood.

None of us knew that at that time that hostess's jobs with Iberia were much sought after and usually allocated to the daughters of VIPs and other Spanish grandees. Poor old Rusty's feet had barely touched the ground before he found himself in the

middle of a minor diplomatic incident and he was whisked back up north on the wings of a compulsory transfer to more familiar maritime duties, far removed from the risk of collision with Spanish ladies' nether regions. Rarely had the rivers of HMC&E officialdom flowed so rapidly. Young Vic was always very careful thereafter when up at the back end of a Caravelle.

NIGHT FLYING

It was a cold clear night and recently appointed APO Vic Briggs was experiencing his first 11/8 night shift on boarding duties. He had three reasons to be very pleased with himself. Firstly, his brand-new uniform had arrived with its one gleaming gold ring and, after his mum had worked away with needle and thread, the outfit almost fitted him. Secondly, after three attempts last week he had passed his driving test (Kindly paid for by Her Majesty), and thirdly, he would receive the night shift allowance for the whole week – a very handy bonus.

On signing on that night young Briggs was required by the Duty Officer to draw lots. This was for the privilege of either being 'first on call' that night, or getting a few hours welcome shut-eye. No harm in that because noise restrictions severely limited night-time aircraft movements at that time. Young Briggs drew the short straw which meant that he would be up most of the night. He wasn't worried about that. In fact he was glad because he knew that every night at about 3am a big old Canadian freighter aircraft would arrive on the far side of the airport. It was a 'doddle' to clear but it would require a twenty-mile round trip for someone to do it.

He also knew that only the week before the Honourable Commissioners of Customs & Excise had generously augmented the battered and ageing fleet of chariots provided for the use of their minions with a great big gleaming new black Ford Cortina. So Briggs volunteered to cover the night arrival and as soon as the ticker-tape announced the imminent arrival of the plane he set off in the nice new official car in his nice new uniform and with his nice new driving licence.

The airport perimeter road was dark and deserted. Just the open road was in front of him with the sparkle of lights and stars flashing by as he accelerated rapidly. There was even a radio in the car to fiddle with. Heaven. Things could not be better! The car hummed and quivered with power. Rock and roll music screamed out of the speakers. Faster and faster he roared down the long straight perimeter road. There was his plane just about to land. His eyes lingered on it and followed its graceful descent back down onto solid ground. His feelings of pleasure knew no bounds.

Suddenly his own descent back into reality and solid ground thumped him savagely into his seat, and the car ploughed with a heavy thud into a mound of soft earth by the side of some unlit roadworks. He had driven off the perimeter road at great speed and 'flown' some distance in the Queen's nice new car. It was in a very sorry state and took much persuasion to restart. His nice new uniform was also in a sorry state - torn, crumpled and stained. Eventually he and the car, rattling and coughing, staggered on to meet the incoming aircraft. A very chastened young APO then spent the rest of the night trying to clean up the mess and concoct a good cover story.

For some time thereafter he was not permitted to carry out solo driving requirements and colleagues were reluctant to travel with him at the wheel. Truly, a night to remember for the young Assistant Preventive Officer.