

RAF Station, SAUL, Gloucestershire
The recollections of ex-Flight Sergeant Eric Blackman, aged 81 years
Dated 9th December 2003, Weymouth, Dorset

SAUL

I will explain how an RAF Unit came to be operating at Saul Junction on the Gloucester-Sharpness Ship Canal in 1943.

1918

In 1918, when the Royal Flying Corps emerged as the Royal Air Force there were several flying-boat bases already active and flying squadrons. Flying-boats float on a single hull formed from the fuselage of the aircraft. The flying-boats were already among the largest aircraft extant and the Air Ministry was inclined to the view that these were the way forward. Landplane weight was restricted by the weakness of their bolt-on undercarriages. Flying-boats, whether carrying passengers or military cargo needed their maintenance facilities delivered by water. To cope with the marine environment, the RAF Marine Craft Section was formed in 1918. Those who have served in the Section are proud to have been part of one of the oldest branches.

1943

A Motor Boat Crewman (MBC), named Owen, had been in my class at RAF Calshot. Both Owen and I had now been to Calshot twice and were now Sergeants. Having got Roseneath up and running and considerably expanded, we were next both posted to Tewkesbury on the River Severn. This was 62MU HQ, which had moved from Dumbarton, Scotland to a large boathouse on the River Severn in Gloucestershire. Our old Dumbarton Flight Sergeant was in charge. No sooner had we arrived at Tewkesbury than we were given a new Marine Tender and told to find our way via Gloucester Docks to Saul Junction on the Gloucester - Sharpness Ship Canal. Our kit was loaded on a lorry which was to meet us there. We were to report to the bridge-keeper. We made the voyage without mishap, found the bridge and keeper. He was attended by PC Blick, the local bobby.

The constable explained that he would take us to our billets. He strongly advised us (as the Sergeants), to choose Mrs Honey at Springfield for ourselves. We took his advice and were taken to the little cottage and were welcomed by a rosy-faced countrywoman of about 60. The dining room had a table laid ready with Severn Salmon salad, apple pie and cheese. Afterwards in our bedroom, Owen said "This can't last", but it did for the whole time I was there, before being posted to Calshot and Ferry Pool.

Our first task at Saul was to take over Wycliffe College Boathouse situated at The Junction. Tools, workbenches and heavy equipment had been fitted into the boathouse, while the upstairs rooms became an office and crew-room. We were told to reclaim a short reach of the Stroudwater Canal and make it ready to receive several High-Speed Launches (HSL's) for storage afloat. There was a swing bridge which had been not been opened for years. Our parent unit was at Stoke Orchard Aerodrome and they sent all our requests for equipment to RAF Quedgeley. We had never experienced such prompt attention to our requisition forms before.

Sledgehammers, axes, mattocks, crowbars, pickaxes and wheelbarrows arrived in quantity from Quedgeley. Soon the Stroudwater canal looked quite navigable. The time was Spring 1943. The Air Sea Rescue Service was now firmly established in many new bases around our coasts. There was a shortage of HSL's, especially as many were being sent overseas.

HSL's and Pinnaces (ASR) soon started to arrive. Driving mooring posts into the gravel towpath of the canal was a problem soon solved by using screw pickets instead.

The Stroudwater proved an ideal secure hideaway for the craft. Very convenient for replacements to the busy SE coast bases which were sometimes shot up or mined, and convenient for West Coast ports. We were soon overwhelmed with work and we called urgently for reinforcements. HQ responded by sending us 7UT's — Under Training Marine Fitters — to help out. HSL's and Air Sea Rescue Pinnaces were arriving every day... none were being sent away and we were getting full of boats! HQ also decided to send some Seaplane Tenders to Gloucester Docks by road to be then floated and towed to Saul by our Marine Tender. Two days later there was a phone call to say a Seaplane Tender was already at the docks. Owen and I took the MT 3 UT fitters and a bike to the docks. We arrived just in time to join an argument between the lorry driver and the crane driver.

The point was how to unload a 41-foot 6in Seaplane Tender weighing 7 tons by a steam crane with an SWL of 5 tons. Owen intervened saying "It'll be alright" — a statement he always made when a risky problem presented itself. The crane, little more than a tin shed on railway lines, shunted itself amid clouds of steam and smoke on the rails between the lorry and trailer on which the ST cradle rested, and the basin. Rusty iron callipers and chains secured the crane bogie to the rails.

With shouts and gestures from Owen, the crane steered its jib up to maximum elevation and just managed to lift the boat high enough for the lorry to drive clear. With my heart in my mouth, I watched the little steaming beast gradually slew its unwieldy load to the water's edge. The callipers visibly lifting the rails with the strain. With the boat safely in the water, the crane driver said, "Don't want no more of them". Little did he know there were about twelve more lifts, in and out, in the pipeline. The following tow went well with one member of the crew cycling ahead to open the bridges for us. We were soon likely to run out of mooring space on the canal land.

Eyes were turned to the pound above the seized shut swing bridge.

Taking advantage of the mechanical bent of some of our Under Training Fitters (Marine) we set them to work freeing the bridge and getting it to swing again. The bridge opened easily to cheering onlookers and the consternation of the local bread van driver who suddenly appeared round a nearby bend in the lane. Hitherto much of our labours were viewed with indulgent amusement by the locals, especially all those who worked on the cut. The swing bridge episode marked a change of view and all concerned appeared more co-operative.

We had already enjoyed a good deal of hospitality from the scattered residents of Saul. Invitations to tea, supper and drinks from far-flung outposts like Frampton, Framilode and Arlingham. Jolly summer tennis parties with the family of the Vicar of a nearby parish I remember with pleasure.

To help pay for the war villages and towns all over Britain held what they called "Wings for Victory week". Saul of course had to be in the swim especially as they had their very own RAF Unit. We were asked to spearhead that year's effort to raise funds.

Mrs Honey did not approve of the methods by which money was raised. The system was that well-heeled people in the district (and there were a fair few) were canvassed to give more or less valuable small personal items to be auctioned for the fund. Successful bidders were required to buy National Savings Bonds to the value of the item "bought".

Mrs Honey complained that this resulted in many valuables being "sold" for a fraction of their true worth and nameless "people" taking an unfair advantage.

Mrs Honey knew that I had just celebrated my 21st birthday. She also knew that my relatives had taken advantage of wartime shortages and sent me cheques instead of goods as presents. In other words, she knew I was in funds. She suggested that I should go to the auction for Wings for Victory especially to run the prices up.

She went along as well to do the same thing while I underwrote her if she overstepped the mark. On the night everything went according to plan. It took some time before the competitors realized that a mere RAF Sergeant was a genuine bidder. One "mistake" I made was being landed with a gigantic and beautiful soup tureen with lid and label by Spode with about a gallon capacity. I presented it to Mrs Honey who served us with many a rabbit stew or tripe and onions supper.

While all this was going on in deepest Gloucestershire, the war was being waged around our coasts. The concept of Air Sea Rescue had changed from the original idea that fast launches would be called from the harbour to rescue ditched airmen at sea. A better idea was to send the boat out to sea in readiness for any casualties that may have been in trouble. East Coast Bases sent their boats out at 5 am to rendezvous positions every 20 minutes. The recall was usually some time before midnight.

One evening, Mrs Honey's telephone rang with a message for me. HQ Tewkesbury informed me that a dispatch rider was bringing orders to our office at the Junction and I was to meet him to receive them. I jumped on my bike and duly received a brown paper envelope marked "MOST SECRET". RAF Saul had grown! Armourers, electricians, wireless mechanics and other specialist trades had been added to our ranks. Newly arrived vessels could be put into operational mode by our staff.

Opening the orders, I was appalled by their content. We were required to "make operational and ready for service" no less than four 'Hants & Dorset' HSL's, complete with rations for four crews to arrive the following night and be made ready to sail within 48 hours. Two of the boats listed were moored east of the Stroudwater Swing Bridge. I began to feel that Owen's often repeated remark "It'll be alright" had got through to HQ somehow. Fuel and water, we could probably manage, but food? On my way back to Springfield that lovely summers evening, I stopped off at the village shop and knocked up the two ladies who ran it. Rations for two days for 36 men? Without payment? Without coupons? "That will be alright if you say so, Sergeant". Bless them.

The ladies selected all the items and included tomato sauce, salt and pepper. They made up eight cartons, two for each boat. The boats were taken to The Chocolate Factory Quay where their water tanks were filled with fresh water. The stores loaded onboard there included ammunition from Stoke. The launches all had to be towed to the quayside by our one Marine Tender. These triple screw 1500HP beasts did not handle well in confined waters. Drag on the gearboxes produced a speed of six knots in neutral when new.

Some of the airmen were living out with their wives and there were plenty of girlfriends too. We asked for volunteers to man the galleys of the boats and cook a meal ready for the crews arriving after a long rail journey. This scheme proved a great success, and a good time was had by all. Next morning road fuel tankers arrived to fill the launches.

Frightful snag... being used to supply by gravity, they had no pumps to fill the vessel's fuel tanks. Someone had the brilliant idea of mooring each launch beneath Fretherne Bridge and then to park the tanker in the middle of the bridge, so giving the height required for the gravity transfer of fuel.

The four boats sailed for Sharpness on time!

Shortly after this episode, I was posted to Calshot at my request where I found myself coxswain of Ferry Crew No.8. I later did two or three trips to Saul and Dumbarton now completely unrecognizable as 238 MU.

My exploits following this account are to be found in my book "Airman at the Helm".