

## A CHRISTMAS TALE

**T**HIS STORY takes place in the days when Britain still had a lump of Empire, ruled some of the waves and had large overseas air forces. To the millions of service men and women, being stationed abroad was an accepted part of life and often looked forward to. The venue was Royal Air Force Station Kabrit, Egypt. The airfield was home to five Dakota Squadrons and a Communication Squadron which had a mixture of Dakota's and Avro Ansons. The year 1949.

It was custom for most of the Officers on stand down at Christmas to enjoy the festive season off the base, visiting friends in married quarters at other stations or going to Cairo, Suez, Port Said, Ismaelia, anywhere but Kabrit. After all, this lonely airfield was about 25 miles from the nearest town and built on the edge of Great Bitter Lake. We the flyers, the lucky ones, could in the normal course of flying duties visit anywhere in the Middle East. Malta, Cyprus, Baghdad, Amman, Wadi Halfa (now under Lake Nassar) Khartoum, Juba, Nairobi to mention but a few places.

For those who remained on station the daily excitement was to watch the ships going either North or South in the Suez Canal, to sail or swim in the lake or play sports. It was pretty spartan to say the least and thus an all male station. Not a female in sight. So we were all very fit. The Officers on duty over Christmas were all promulgated in Orders and had very little to do with events that followed.

As relative newcomers to the Middle East Command, my crew and I were obvious candidates for remaining on station over Christmas and as such, unofficially, to help out. There were twelve of us, the stalwarts, expected to help hold the fort for almost three days. One of the "unofficial" duties was to fly Santa Claus from airfield to airfield within the Canal Zone. I never did work out who Santa was but he obviously had lots of mince pies and sherries as he travelled between the children's parties.

On arrival back at base we dressed up in uniform and went off to the Airmen's Mess to serve Christmas Dinner. This was followed by the "Traditional" fancy dress soccer match between the Officers' and Sergeants' Messes. The goal posts were made up of crates of Stella Beer (a local Egyptian beer). The rules were pretty loose, there was no referee, there were twice as many Sergeants as Officers and there were several footballs in play. Every time a goal was scored, irrespective of end or team, the score was celebrated with a drink of Stella. It was tough but great fun and finally came to an end when the beer ran out.

After a shower and into No 1 uniform we assembled and sat down for our Christmas dinner served by the usual Egyptian staff. When the port arrived we drank the loyal toast which was followed by another "To wives and sweethearts, may they never meet". The caterer had done it's calculations very carefully indeed and had provided this handful with

enough turkeys for the whole Mess. There was in fact a turkey each; just fancy, a turkey each!

Anyway the port, brandy and liqueurs flowed until we all drifted off for an afternoon nap. The evening gathering in the mess bar was initially somewhat subdued but after a few drinks and a game of darts we attacked the cold buffet! What a sight, 24 turkey drum sticks, a huge ham and a great lump of beef with all the side dishes. We did our best but the caterers had won, without any doubt they had us beaten.

As the evening progressed, one of the characters, I'll call him Benny, began to pass out, he didn't fall but gracefully slid to the floor and began a gentle snoring. By various means we managed to carry him from the bar to his room. Now this is where my memory begins to fade but I clearly remember the following morning.

Calling in on Benny I found him in bed unable to get up or out. The reasons were very simple, his whole bed was covered with sand in the form of a pyramid and the rest of the room was filled with bicycles.

Don't ask me who had collected them, there they were, dozens of them. It should be explained that bicycles formed the major part of ground transport in those days, one just booked them out from the cycle store and used them to get around the airfield. Each cycle had a station number so were easily recognised.

Eventually we got Benny free and the cycles placed near sick quarters. A Tannoy announcement was made to the effect that "misplaced" cycles could be found at sick quarters. Apart from lots of laughs and sniggers from those whose cycles had been "misplaced" the whole incident passed off as though nothing had happened. We remained on "duty" throughout Boxing Day, absolutely sick of the sight of turkey and all the variations produced by the cooks, and awaited the return of our colleagues on the 27th. Fortunately there were no call outs and no incidents of note.

I was to spend two more Christmases in the zone. Both entirely different from the first, but they are tales yet to be told.

Anon

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### **ST. MARY'S CHURCH, SHIPTON-UNDER-WYCHWOOD**

A service of worship for Christians of **all denominations** in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity will be held on  
**Sunday, 22nd January 1995 at 6.00 p.m.**

Preacher The Revd. David Winter  
The Bishop of Oxford's Officer for Evangelism

**ALL ARE VERY WELCOME**