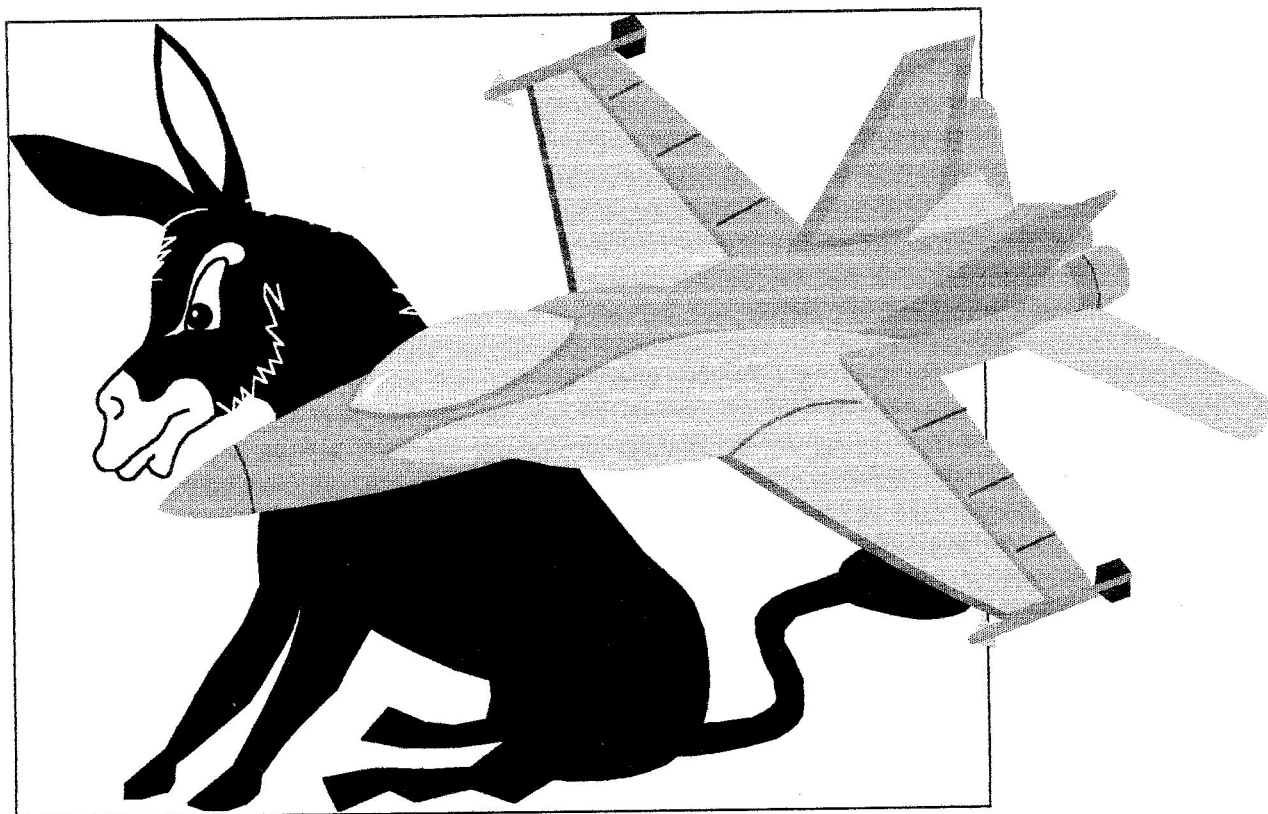


JACK



JACK

I was born in Lakenheath in 1919? The second son of Sergeant and Marion Coleman. I had three brothers and four sisters. Life in those days was very different from life today. At thirteen I was working with the family horses before and after school. We had twelve horses and it was my job to clean them out, curry them and get them ready for their days work. Most of them worked in pairs and they had to be ready when their drivers collected them. Dad bought all the horses, but he didn't have a good eye for them and often paid out twenty pounds for a creature that was more fitted for the knackers yard.

Of course working with the horses I became fond of some of them and got to know their ways. One of them called Beauty was a favourite. One afternoon she was taken to the blacksmiths for shoeing, the next morning when I went to her stall she was acting strangely she wouldn't walk forwards but just stepped around the yard backwards. After watching her for a while I hurried home to Dad and told him that something was wrong with Beauty. Dad came and looked but he'd never seen anything like it either. Beauty kept walking backwards. Dad sent me to fetch Doctor Barr. Doctor Barr looked at Beauty and concluded that she had lockjaw. Dad asked if there was a cure, and Doctor Barr told him that he thought he could cure her using medicine normally used on his human patients, and he suggested that Beauty be dosed with triple the amount given to humans. However this ^{trebled} would cost somewhere on the region of sixty pounds, and sixty pounds was an enormous amount of money in those days so sadly Beauty had to be put down.

We also had a big white horse called White Willie. His job was to pull the boats down at the quayside.

He didn't have to move very fast just rock backwards and forwards as the boats were only moving at about three or four miles an hour. He was fastened to the boat by a length of inch thick rope. One January afternoon just as the men were thinking of packing up for the day one of the men Billie Horn, threw a lump

of clay at Willie and hit him in the stomach. The horse leapt forward in shock, and was catapulted into the water by the rope. It took two more horses and most of the men to get him out. Billie Horn had to be fished out of the water too as Father threw him in when he learnt what Billie had done. We took Willie back to the stable and rubbed him down and settled him down with plenty of warm straw to warm him up but all our efforts were in vain, he caught pneumonia and died.

One thing I do remember from my childhood was going to Chapel. We lived next door to our grandparents and on a Sunday morning, Grandma would come round to our house and say "Granddad wants to see Jack." I knew what this meant he wanted me to go to Chapel with him. It was the Baptist Chapel and Granddad paid for an annual seat which meant he was determined to use it. In Chapel I would cough on purpose until Granddad gave me one of his black Nibit sweets.

After Sunday dinner I would be sent to Sunday School with my brothers and sisters, and at tea time Grandma would be back to say that Granddad wanted to see Jack and I would have to accompany him to the evening Service.

When I was thirteen Mum was very ill she had a condition called whiteleg and had to stay in bed sandbagged so that she didn't move for six weeks. Someone had to take over the cooking and looking after the younger members of the family and that job fell to me. Dad and Jim, my older brother, had to go out to work and the younger ones were too young. So I had to stay at home from school. The days were just one long round of cooking. Dad and Jim had to have an early breakfast before setting off to work, then the younger members of the family had to have theirs before they set off for school. Dad often came in for lunch at 11.30, then the children would be in from school for their dinners. Jim came in for his meal at three thirty then the youngsters needed their tea. And if Dad went out to the Legion it would be suppertime at ten o'clock. Besides the cooking there was also the washing, and there was plenty of it. One day as I was hanging the sheets on the line, Dad came home for his dinner. "If you make the fire up I'll finish hanging these out and come in and cook your dinner," I said. Dad went inside and made the fire up then decided to come out and give me a hand grabbing hold of my nice white sheets with a very sooty hand.

I'm now the last of the brothers we all fought in the second world war, we all served overseas. Jim the eldest of us fought on seven fronts. Geoff and Ken my two younger brothers were in Gibraltar and Italy and Europe and Africa respectively. I was in France and Africa. I have never told my story before. We came home from the war and that was that. No one spoke about those things much in those days. It was difficult to put into words the sights we had seen and the events that we had experienced so we said very little. Just came home from war picked up the pieces and moved on with our lives. Now I'm 82 years old and I'd like to recount some of my war time experiences before it is too late.

I was called up the Day that War broke out. I was nineteen years old. I'd never been of Lakenheath never been on a parade ground or been taught to sloped arms or fired a rifle. I'd joined the Air Force Reserves a few months earlier with three other Lakenheath lads, Hector Tuffs, Tubby P and Felix Gathercole. We were supposed to have weekly training sessions but our Sergeant Major preferred to take us dart playing at Eriswell Chequers.

I had been refuse collecting in Mildenhall that day and when I got home there was a telegram ordering me to report to the Adjutant's office at Mildenhall in uniform straight away. There I was given the choice of Fire Engine driving or Ambulance Driving. I choose to drive the ambulance working eight hours on sixteen off. At that point no one bothered to query our lack of training.

In 1940 I was sent to France, to Le Harve to work on the balloons. On our first night in Le Harve five of us strolled out to explore the local area. We could hear music, English music coming from a house. Inside was a large hall with a bar and a dance hall. We were told that the girls and there were it seemed to be ten of them would be coming soon. When the girls appeared they were all wearing transparent negligees and very little else. They were of course prostitutes and we had unknowingly walked into a brothel. I had never been in such a place before and we didn't stop in this one not even to drink our pints. We just took to our heels and ran. I was earning 320 Francs a week as a Corporal, a pint of beer cost 1 and ½ francs and a meal cost 10 francs.

As a driver my regular run was from Le Harve to Bologne to the gas works. We had a wagon and two trailers which we would drive down one day and return the next with the gas for the balloons. The balloons were flown up 500 /1000 feet attached to thick steel wires, the wings of incoming enemy aircraft on bombing raids would hit the steel wires and snap bringing the aircraft down. Each trailer had nine canisters on. These canisters were twelve foot long and each weighed one ton. Our speed limit was 10 miles per hour. And in those days there were no air brakes you had an air cylinder which helped the brakes but on a hill we had to each use the hand brakes on the trailers otherwise the back one would try to pass the front one, it was a nightmare in traffic as if you used the air in the cylinders you had no brakes at all.

We'd been there about five months and were making our regular run back one day two men with each trailer, we were within two or three miles from Aberville when we saw a large crowd of people on the road. It was a real jam, prams, donkey carts, cars, and any other kind of transport possible we were stuck amid the lot. We had four cans of petrol in the back which we handed out to get the traffic moving as they had all run out of fuel. In the end I decided to leave the main road so we turned down a side road we had no idea where it went but we knew that the sea was to the right so thought we might make it back to Le Harve. We hadn't gone more than half a mile when one of my mates who was sitting on top of the gun turret in the cab trying to see what was up front shouted out "For God's sake" and fell back down into the cab. He jumped out of the cab on to the ground. We thought he had gone mad as he was waving his arms and urging us to follow him. Looking up into the sky we saw what looked like a black cloud coming our way. Then in a matter of minutes we saw anything up to a hundred bombers. We ran about a hundred yards into this cornfield. The corn was only about a foot high, we lay flat out down on our faces with our hands over our ears, the noise was deafening. The enemy aircraft bombed and machine-gunned all the town, Thank God we turned when we did.

When we got back to base we learnt that the Magino line had broken down and the enemy had broken through. The guns on the Magino line only pointed in one direction, they were unable to turn round and the enemy had slipped around the side. This may have been due to the Fifth Columnists who were numerous among the French.

Back at HQ we (220/250) men and 13 officers were told to get some sleep as we were moving out at 1.00 am. The office supplies were loaded on to the trucks and we set off for ZantaZars, it took us thirty-six hours to get there bombed and machine-gunned all the way. At the dockside we were told to slip the truck containing the office supplies into gear and let it run over the dock and into the sea. Everything went over except for the cases of sherry and wine for the officers. We were expecting to get straight on to ships but we were all loaded on to landing craft 30 men to a craft and taken a mile or so out to sea where there were three ships waiting to take us back to England. The Canterbury, one of the ships was blown up when a bomb was dropped down its funnel, it was full of troops. At Le Harve the thirteen officers left us we never saw them again until we got to Cardington. When we got back to England we landed at Weymouth and were taken to 101 RAF Cardington. We were paraded in front of the Sergeant Major who ordered us not to say anything about what had happened in France, if anyone did they would be court-martialed. We had to protect the officers – they were all cowards, every one of them.

While we were in France with nothing to spend our money on we decided to save as much as we could, we were encouraged to give half our pay to the Paymaster each week as this would give us a tidy sum to start ourselves off when we were demobbed. Unfortunately when we arrived back at Cardington we were told that all the documents relating to our savings had been destroyed and there was no proof that the Paymaster had taken care of the money. So we never got a penny. We had been saving 7/6 a week for nothing.

Back in England I worked on the Air Sea Rescue for two years on Sunderlands.

My next venture overseas was to Sierra Leone in West Africa. Again with the Air Sea Rescue. We were in the middle of the bush, miles from anywhere. Every night I could hear the monkeys chattering and screaming, there was every noise imaginable every night of the week. A far cry from Lakenheath. I had been in West Africa two days when I developed Prickly Heat. Everyone had it. From the scalp to the bottoms of the feet I was covered with tiny water blisters as the water struggled to get through my skin in the 130-degree heat in the shade. But my houseboy had the remedy for it. We were allocated a hut. Two men to a hut and we shared a houseboy. The houseboy was there to look after me and my colleague, to

wash the clothes etc. His remedy for prickly heat was to scrub the heads off all the blisters to let out the water and smear us all over with dettol.

A lot of the time spent in Africa was spent combating illness I had dysentery three times, malaria seven times and black water fever once. For the latter I had to drink nine pints of water or lemonade a day and had to be sandbagged on arms, legs and chest. Of course if you get Black Water Fever too badly that's it.

I can remember one of the occasions that I caught Malaria it was at a Christening party. My house-boy was only sixteen but he was married to a girl of fourteen and they had their first baby. We were only allowed to pay the houseboy 6d a week for his work, but we had been told that it was considered appropriate to give the baby a silver coin for it's christening. We told the houseboy that we couldn't leave the camp but he said he could arrange it for us and that the Christening was to be at night. He came for us my house mate and me at mid-night and led us out of the camp. In the native village (two or three mud huts) we were offered wine they had made from the sap of trees. The tom-toms were playing and the locals were dancing with little or no clothes on. We were in full kit, but with the heat and the wine, and the tom-toms we too gradually stripped off and ignoring the mosquito's joined in the dancing. Two days later we were down with malaria.

Apart from the Christening we also witnessed other aspects of African life. Their funerals for example were considered to be a time for rejoicing with the tom-toms playing, singing and dancing there was no mourning. They would take the coffin to the graveside, remove the departed place the body in the grave and take the coffin back to the village to be used again. Coffins were too expensive to be buried.

Although we were not allowed to pay our house-boy very much money he did his best for us nothing was too much trouble for him. Infact the natives were lovely people when we arrived they didn't have much but seemed content and happy with what they had. Our Squadron Leader however, decided to give classes at night teaching them lessons and so over time things changed and they became discontented. There were no tribal wars or unrest in the 1950's. And no beggars in the streets.

The Africans were greatly in fear of their local Witch-Doctor who was an awesome sight and who would for a fee put a curse on their enemies

One of the hazards of life in Africa was the scorpion. You never put anything on, shoes or clothing without shaking it first to ensure that it was free of them as these scorpions had deadly stings in their tails.

Another hazard was the drinking water, it was not safe to drink any water or eat any fruit that hadn't been sterilized

For entertainment we often went swimming skinny-dipping with the natives, no one took any notice of that sort of thing. We also went to the cinema at Lagos. It was an open-air cinema, just walls and a screen; there was no roof. You walked into the cinema at ten minutes to six in the daylight and at six o'clock it was dark, pitch dark. There was no twilight, ^{just} daylight or night. At the cinema we would sit in wicker chairs or on forms, whichever seating was available service men and native Africans watching the films. Cowboys and Indians were a great favourite with the Africans.

We went to Africa via Gibraltar while in dock I had to visit the dentist to get a tooth pulled, unfortunately the dentist was out of anesthetic so I had to have the tooth pulled and suffer the pain as we crossed the sea to our posting.

On one four day leave I visited the mud walled Old Cerno City with a group of friends it took us two days to reach it by train. We never got off the train during those two days. At the end of the journey we had half an hour to look round before getting back on the train again for the return trip. It was worth it though for the wonderful scenery.

One of the unfortunate things about the African posting was the lack of communication with the folk's back home. You could write as many letters home as you liked but you never knew if they were received. It was the same with letters to us. They were very spasmodic. I was married at that time, we had honeymooned at the Union Jack Club in London. But as the years past communication with my wife broke down. Eventually a friend wrote and said that he believed she was seeing another man. This was quite common during the war year. Men were often seen crying having received bad news from home, and there was no way that you could go home to sort things out for yourself. In my case the forces sent a welfare person round to visit my wife and her family, and I received assurances that all was well. However this was not really the case. Unbeknown to me the welfare person sent round to my wife was a friend of my wife's mother so the assurances were false, they were just interested in the money that was taken from my pay each week.

I never really understood why ~~were~~ we were out in Africa for three years, we never saw any action but were just there as reserves. There were certainly no aeroplanes.

I was demobbed on 16th January 1946 from RAF HQ London. I was given a pin-stripped suit, a great-coat and a trilby and eighty two pounds.

Strangely I haven't got any medals. When I was demobbed I was told they would be sent on but I never received them. I still have my old arm pay book, but no medals.

I returned home to Lakenheath to live with Mum and Dad, but I found it very difficult having been away for so long to be back living under my parent's roof again. So after just two weeks I left to have a holiday in the North of England, in Lancashire with relatives. While I was staying there it was suggested that I might like to stay on as there was a job available at Ratcliffe's that I might be interested in. Although my relatives only had a two up two down cottage their son was away doing his National Service and so I was invited to use his room for the time being. When he returned I moved into lodgings with a friend of the family.

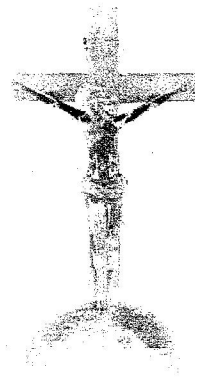
I am convinced if it was not for bad luck I would not have any luck at all. I divorced my first wife as she was having another man's child. I was married to my second wife Olive for thirty-five years until she died of cancer we had two daughters. I was married to my third wife for ten years before I lost her also through cancer.

I've had a long life. I stayed in the North for thirty five years before returning home to Lakenheath I've had three wives, now I've two daughters, grandchildren and even a great-grandchild. It's been a long and interesting life.

Service at Chapel of Rest and Burnley Crematorium

by Reverend Margaret Almond-Birtwistle

25 April 2008 - 2.20pm



In celebration of the life of



Leonard John Coleman (Jack)

Born 17 August 1919

Departed 20 April 2008