

By Appointment ... After A Fashion.

One lesson I learned from my time as an Engineer Officer in the RAF was the importance of the least of my subordinates. In those days, the Russian Bear was the perceived threat, and the Exercise scenarios all ended in total oblivion after a couple of weeks of war. Quite fun really.

Amongst other duties, I was obliged to appear in the Magistrates' Courts to represent any of my subordinates who fell foul of the Law. I rather resented this work on my first outing, and regarded the two airmen as guilty even before we went to the Court. As witness after witness gave evidence, I began to realise that contradictions were arising. My Airmen gave their account of events, and I was asked to make my representations on their behalf. My preconceptions regarding the guilt of my men were by this time shattered. However, I had arrived in the Court totally unprepared, and failed to make a realistic case in defense of my subordinates. They were duly - and wrongly - convicted.

That experience sharpened me up. Before long it seemed that anyone on the station who got into trouble wanted me to represent them in Court. A Magistrate's Court can be a daunting place, and is deliberately designed to achieve that effect. Courts are portrayed as places where Justice is done, and seen to be done. To have any hope of achieving such a lofty goal, there must be proper representation by both parties, with each side being permitted to present its version of events. Much court activity centres around objections, which are required when one party or the other tries to manipulate the hearing. While always careful to present themselves as reasonable people, unscrupulous Counsel employ objections for the purpose of silencing any views of which they disapprove.

My job was to keep my eye open for that kind of behaviour and ensure that my subordinates did not suffer as a consequence. I had quite a few pleasant successes, but the satisfaction came from making a fair case for people under my command.

In the case of an air force, only a small proportion of personnel are truly in the "Front Line". These, of course, are the Aircrew. However, no aircraft would ever leave the hangar, much less take off, without the contribution made by the most junior servicemen and women. The civilian contribution can be significant too. An army marches on its stomach and an air force flies on its.

Anyone who behaved as though military ends were achieved by the simple expedient of giving orders would quickly come a cropper. The most lowly cook and cleaner make an essential contribution. The respect due to them is well earned.

There is a saying that a salesman is only as good as his



Photograph 1. Agony reveals itself in the faces of the boys as their sadistic father subjects them to Ordeal by Iron Foundry Tour. (Bo-Ness Iron Foundry near Edinburgh. Circa 1991.)



Photograph 2. By 15 years of age, Mike was suffering from a desperate psychological insecurity. To reinforce his identity he had purchased his first machine tool. Mike concealed the Cincinnati universal mill in his playroom where he could avoid attracting the attention of his evil father.

last sale. Perhaps a Flight Commander is only as good as the last thing he did in support of his subordinates. The final case I handled ought to have been dismissed. In the event, the airman was convicted. That is the case which often bothers me in the wee small hours. To make matters worse, the young Airman was so grateful for the effort I had put in on his behalf.

Those days of smart turnout, salutes, and Dining-In Nights, are a distant memory for me. Boiler suit and wellington boots are the uniform of the Honorary Labourer. Nevertheless, the lessons remain.

Our sons had the great misfortune of growing up surrounded by engineering activities. Their childhood was filled with the obligatory Meccano, toy trains, and model making. However, as Photograph 1 illustrates, there was much worse to endure.

This seemed to induce some form of mental disorder, and as can be seen in Photograph 2, before long they progressed to toys of considerable destructive capacity.

Our two younger sons in particular have been mentally scarred for life as a consequence of my irrepressible sadism and have set up their own business.

They provide services from pest control to significant mechanical and civil engineering works.

Bill and Mike joke about how Michael Meechan employed them to build the “Tycooley Bypass”. The “Bypass” is about half a mile of roadway constructed across Michael’s land, an area known as Tycooley. The job entailed moving a couple of thousand tons of earth and clay. House extensions and barns regularly figure in our sons’ workload.



Photograph 3. The feeder for horses. The upper section is in two parts, one of which is hinged. The bale, which weighs about 600Kg is loaded from the side by tractor or teleporter.

additives. Feed is expensive. Mike’s customer wanted a feeder which held the bale clear of the ground and sheltered it from the rain.

Another example was for Joe Tracey, one of the lads’ regular customers. Joe ordered some gates and railings recently. He wanted the style to match the traditional riveted construction which is quite common in this area. Mike devised a means of simulating the rivet effect. A sample piece is illustrated in Photographs 4 and 5. The method is equivalent to that used by some model engineers, although Mike had not come across it.

Mike’s technique is to install a punch of one diameter in his metalworker with a rather larger die beneath the workpiece.



Photograph 5. Close up view of the simulated rivets on a finished gate.

The “Old Lad”, as they call Michael, is about the same age as I am, and a sight healthier too. Our sons’ gay wit and repartee does nothing for my self esteem. In common parlance I am the “Big grey monkey”. I tend to keep a low profile, largely confining my activities to the supply of refreshments and general tidying. Occasionally my sons will trust me with something a trifle more demanding, but I know my place.

Some of the work the lads get is unusual. Earlier this year, Mike was asked to come up with a ring feeder for horses. Together, Mike and Bill devised the arrangement shown in Photograph 3. The feeder holds a round bale of feed which looks very similar to a bale of silage for cows. Several horses gather round the feeder to eat the bale. In this part of the world, horses are fed ordinary silage.

Racehorses fare differently.

Mike’s customer is one of Ireland’s wealthiest individuals who owns a sizeable spread about 80 miles away in the heart of County Kildare near the Currags. A third party had given him Mike’s name. The bales of feed for the thoroughbreds are kiln dried grass with nutritious



Photograph 4. A sample of the simulated rivet. The punch has penetrated to about half of the thickness of the metal. The die has a larger diameter than the punch. Since the underside of the workpiece is not supported as it would normally be, the steel is stretched into a dome as shown in the example formed from the opposite side of the test piece.

The stroke of the metalworker is then set so that the punch does not penetrate the workpiece. The domed effect achieved by this method is quite convincing, though the gates are actually of welded construction.

What, one might ask, is the relevance of all this? Well, Joe Tracey’s brother, Philip, is a well known London Milliner who designed many of the hats worn by Ladies at the Royal Wedding on 29th April 2011.

So there you have it. I’m the man who sweeps the floor, for the boy who makes the gates, for the man whose brother designs the hats, for Her Majesty the Queen, and many Ladies of the Court. British High Society and The Aristocracy are actually entirely dependent on me. If I didn’t sweep the workshop floor conscientiously, Her Majesty could never venture out of Buckingham Palace. Royal Ascot would have to be cancelled, and the Duchess of Cambridge would still be Miss Catherine Middleton.

The Queen’s Diamond Jubilee was a guaranteed success. - I had bought a new broom specially for the occasion.