

Remembering Coronation Year (1953)

I returned to my training at an R.A.F. station in Lincolnshire after Christmas. 1953 had arrived! It was not only Coronation Year but it would be a year of notable events.

The first was the Great Storm including the devastating North Sea flood which caused catastrophic damage and many deaths, and which led to the building of the Thames Barrier. I remember attempting to play hockey on the bleak airfield in winds gusting to 100 m.p.h!

There were still reminders of WW2. Churchill was Prime Minister, Eisenhower was inaugurated as U.S. President, and Stalin seemed immovable but soon died suddenly. On February 5th, sweet rationing ended!

Soon after that, the R.A.F. selected me for air navigation training at Winnipeg in Canada. In early April I reported at London Airport wearing uniform with a black arm band (Queen Mary had just died). Nowadays a direct jet flight to Winnipeg would get you there in 12 hours or so. But this was 1953; we eventually arrived there by steam train over a week after leaving home.

Back home, that Coronation summer was happily marked by feel-good events. Stanley Matthews lit up a famous Cup Final; Gordon Richards at last won the Derby; and England, captained by Len Hutton, recaptured the Ashes. And Hilary and Tensing conquered Everest three days before the Coronation. But we were far away in Winnipeg with none of the connectivity of today's world. We learnt to navigate by 'direct reckoning', by the stars and by other methods long forgotten, since superseded by today's technology. We flew Beechcraft "Expeditors" (noisy things with propellers, dating from 1937!). They usually got us back to Winnipeg safely after our 3-hour flights over nothing much. If we got lost then we could look for a rural railroad station and fly down low enough to read the name of the station - yes really! Navigating 'by the stars' meant using a sextant - just as sailors did, but more difficult in a plane. Today's 'navigators' have it easy!

My first 'ceremonial occasion' was the huge Coronation Parade in Central Winnipeg on the day of the Coronation. All did not go well. As we approached the saluting base at the Manitoba Legislature we marched in perfect step to the Royal Air Force March, played by the splendid Central Band of the R.C.A.F. ahead of us. But just behind us was a local Drum and Trumpet Band who started to play a different march at the worst possible moment!

Our training continued, with much flying over the emptiness of Canada. In October we had mid-course leave and dispersed - all aiming to travel as far as possible as cheaply as possible! I set off with a friend. and we headed south to a U.S.A.F. base where we hitched a long-distance free ride by air. It was all very casual, with no security. A "Skytrain" fitted for paratroops was going to Butte, and we joined Bandsmen sitting on the hard bench facing the permanently open door. Butte was of no interest, so an overnight Greyhound coach took us to Salt Lake City. We visited the Mormon Temple, and then the friendly driver of a fruit truck took us 650 miles to Sacramento, from where we went to Los Angeles.

The next morning we checked in hopefully with the United Services Organisation in Hollywood. A uniformed chauffeur soon arrived, ushered us to a gleaming Cadillac and took us to M.G.M. where Gene Kelly was filming. I also remember the Ray Anthony "Big Band" open-air concert, where we chatted with the Hollywood star Rhonda Fleming, the "Queen of Technicolor" (right - my photo). Just 5 years ago I shared that distant memory with Rhonda Fleming, by email, and had a charming reply!



It was soon time to return to Winnipeg. Our best free ride was a long section across flat, empty Nebraska and Iowa. The driver casually handed over his car keys to me and went off to sleep beside me as I drove.

Two more months at Winnipeg passed quickly. Our 'passing out parade' took place in a hangar in the midst of a snow storm, and soon afterwards we made the long journey home, this time by sea from Halifax, Nova Scotia.. Food-rationing in Britain had not yet ended - but at least we had no more pumpkin pie!

1953 was over! **What a year for Britain and for me!**

And now it is Coronation Year again - 70 years later in a very different world!