

Bomber Tales

The Night the Ops Clerk Flew "Spare"

By: John M. Rhoads (566th BS/389th BG)

To get away from the airbase for a couple of hours or so after duty, I would join a few men at a small tavern near Hethel air field. We sat back, sipped our ales and relaxed. Occasionally, we were invited to join our British cousins in a game of darts or bowling on the green behind the pub. To "crash" a private game uninvited was socially taboo and rude. Invitations came when the patrons got to know us and to observe how we conducted ourselves. The British did not care for Yanks who threw their weight around. We were keenly aware of what the British felt about Yanks in general: "Overpaid, oversexed and over here." Here we could avoid the hustle common at pubs in larger towns and cities.

However, I still enjoyed an occasional "twos" at Backs Pub in Norwich. The motor pool provided trucks each night to take men on pass to Norwich. Once there men were on their own but they had to be back at the Cattle Market at 2200 hours for return to Hethel. Upon arrival in Norwich men headed to one of the local pubs unless one had prearranged to meet a lassie. Usually I headed for Backs Pub, my favorite, for a couple of ales before going to the American Red Cross Club for a meal. I would remain there until time to join the waiting trucks. Men who missed the trucks departures and did not have an overnight pass were faced with the choice of taking a train to Wymondham (if the last train south had not departed), hire a taxicab or walk back to Hethel. The walk from Norwich was about nine miles.

One night while on an evening pass in Norwich, I stayed much too long at Backs Pub

and missed the 2200 hours departure. I went to the nearby fish and chips stand and had a snack while waiting for a taxi. When the taxi arrived, five of us piled in where only four were permitted by law. The driver insisted that one of us had to dismount. I was chosen as the one to get out. When the driver went to the fish and chips stand, I climbed back on and lay on the floorboard underneath the legs of the other four. On returning, the driver looked in and asked whose feet were lying on the floor. One of the men told him that was his own spare shoes he had bought. Then the driver asked whose legs were sticking out of those shoes. The jig was up, the driver was upset, and I had to get out.

This was the last taxi to make the run to Hethel that night and the last train to London that would stop at Wymondham had already departed. Since I did not have an overnight pass, in which case I could spend the night at the Red Cross Club in Norwich, I was faced with a long nine miles plus walk to Hethel. Frustrated and near tears, I walked down the alley from the chip stand to the street. As I neared the street, the taxi passed and stopped at the street before proceeding. I got this sudden wild idea and climbed

onto the spare tire of the taxi for one of the wildest rides that I ever experienced. Upon arrival at the Hethel gate, I jumped off before the driver could see what I had done. One of the men that was in the taxi told me that I did some pretty quick thinking. He said that a couple of the men saw me climb on and one started to say something about it but he was hushed.

What I did was foolhardy, for I could have lost my grip and ended up in hospital having to explain my action—or worse I could have suffered a fatal accident. But it beat that nine mile walk to base.



Illustration by: Kelsey McMillan