

## THE ROYAL AIR FORCE CAREER OF FLIGHT LIEUTENANT MATTHEW 'PADDY' COWAP.

Included in the 'Global History of the Royal Air Force Police (Europe)' By Stephen R Davies

In June 2015, at the age of eighty-three, former Flight Lieutenant Matthew Cowap, who retired from the Provost Branch forty-two years earlier, commented on his nineteen year RAF Police career: "My nineteen year term was short by many standards but no less significant and certainly time enough to be influenced and impressed by the wonderful people, from acting corporal to Air ranks, that I met along the way. We all did what was asked of us, some with more success and distinction than others but outcomes are determined by fate rather than choice and we have to live by our lot. I certainly have many reasons to be grateful to those who helped me, forgave and corrected my mistakes and inspired me. I was blessed with the support and the experience of good staff; I relied upon and learned much from my warrant officers and senior non commissioned officers. With a few exceptions, most of the NCOs I knew were worthy of promotion to the next rank and beyond and many should have been commissioned. All had to be encouraged and some had to be persuaded and even bullied into getting their act together and stop wasting their inherent talents and abilities. One such young waster, who I threw out of my office in frustration at his irresponsible antics, eventually saw the light, pulled himself together and made squadron leader. He thanked me and we still exchange Christmas cards. I was delighted when another young rascal who had been one of my NCOs at Waddington, visited me at Bruggen as a newly commissioned officer; nothing could have given me more satisfaction. I vividly recall the astonishment of one of my senior corporals when I promoted him, he expressed his surprise because of several 'rockets' he had received. I explained that I had been impressed by his acceptance of responsibility for what happened on his watch and because he had never tried to pass the buck which was an essential requirement for promotion. He went on to make a very good sergeant. In the early days I had always regarded myself as a 'professional copper' with primary responsibility to my branch. I still believe in the need for specialist skill and knowledge but there must also be a wider collective responsibility to the service. The service must be able to rely on that individual commitment. Now aged eighty-three and mindful of my own mortality, I have put these notes together while I can still recall the fond memories of my RAF service, of my friends and my absent friends. Should anyone ever read them, I hope they will take into account that they are the work of a very small cog in a very big machine." Indeed, the RAF that Flight Lieutenant Matthew Cowap MBE reluctantly left in June 1973, after being dined out in the Officers Mess with his friend and colleague Squadron Leader Tommy Winters, was very different to that he had so reluctantly joined in 1954. Some of the changes were due to external influences and legislation but in the main, the changes came slowly and from within, brought about by the changing attitudes and thinking of those entrusted with the functional management of the Service. As he looked back on his past, he realised that the most fulfilling part of his life was during his service in the RAF, and although he found a successful career in civilian life afterwards and continued working to age seventy-nine, nothing could ever compare to service life.

Having spent the first six years of his working life in the Merchant Navy, he was 22 when he enlisted, purely to discharge his National Service obligation. He signed on as a three year 'regular' for the simple reason that he could not have survived on the pay of a National Serviceman. Indeed, he had no interest in following a career in the forces and even declined the opportunity to be groomed as 'Potential Officer Material' (POM). However, he would regret that decision later on. After induction and aptitude testing at RAF Cardington, Aircraftman Cowap was mustered in the trade of RAF Police (Provost) and posted to RAF Bridgenorth for recruit training. Older than the mainly eighteen year old conscript flight he was joining, and based purely on age, he was appointed 'Flight Senior Man' or to be precise, 'the corporal instructor's dogsbody'. His introduction to service life however, was something of a culture shock; he had been appalled by the squalid living conditions, the lack of hygiene and the poor food. The new recruits were housed in single skinned twenty-four man wooden dormitories, unheated but for a single pot bellied stove and a seven pound coke allowance per day that provided about ten to fifteen minutes heating in the immediate vicinity of the stove. Washing facilities were contained in a separate block and hot water was the exception rather than the rule. Further, rubbing wax floor polish onto dirty floors and *bulling* them, simply to put a shine on the ingrained dirt, seemed totally unhygienic; the floors, in his opinion, should have been scrubbed clean first. Recruits were required to send their civilian clothes home and their RAF kit issue included three collar detached shirts, three sets of underwear and three pairs of socks. The rule being that they would wear one shirt for a week, the second shirt would be in the laundry and the third shirt would form part of the permanent bed layout for daily kit inspection. Of course, the same rotation applied to underwear and socks. Although the RAF talked about cleanliness and hygiene, the reality was very different. Accordingly, Cowap hand-washed his shirt, underwear and socks in a hand basin every night and although he ironed them dry, he often found himself wearing a damp shirt as an alternative to a sweat stained one; so much for the RAF concept of being clean and properly dressed, they were merely 'covered' not dressed. Consequently, Cowap gritted his teeth, concentrated on the training and finally graduated with the a Certificate of Merit.

After leaving Bridgenorth he reported to the RAF Police School at Netheravon on Salisbury Plain. The accommodation for trainees was a marginal improvement on that at Bridgenorth but the billets were located a mile away from the training rooms which meant a minimum four mile daily march. The food had been worse than appalling and while on voluntary kitchen fatigues one day, Cowap discovered that the four choices offered at the main meal each day were in fact the same but for one minor detail. The food was contained in large shallow metal trays, each containing the same ingredients. However, one tray would be topped with mashed potato and described as cottage pie, the second topped with sliced potato became Lancashire hot pot, the third topped with pastry became meat & vegetable pie and, the fourth left open was described as Irish stew. No-one, it seemed, could complain about a lack of choice, ingenious though it was. Each trainee was issued with a dinner plate, a soup plate, a knife, fork and spoon, known as irons, which they carried to meals but which otherwise formed part of their kit inspection layout. Of course, having only two plates meant that they could only have two of the three courses on offer, unless one went outside to wash a plate in the trough of lukewarm greasy water that was provided for washing the dishes. The biggest surprise came when the trainees discovered

that their 'white webbing' equipment was in fact blue. However, they were quickly assured that, as if by magic, it would become white overnight and so it did. All it took was a lot of scrubbing to get the blue colour out and another lot of rubbing in of the blanco to turn it white. Although when it was done properly it looked extremely smart, in wet weather, the trainees often ended up looking like snowmen after the rain dissolved the blanco which then ran onto their uniforms. To qualify as provost, the trainees first had to undergo an intensive four week driving course and pass the final driving test. Once successfully completed, the provost course followed and the successful candidates passed out as Leading Aircraftman Acting Corporal Paid. However, during their time at Netheravon the dreaded daily kit inspections continued and some trainees regularly slept on the floor rather than upset the kit that they had so meticulously laid out on the bed. At the time, the officer in charge of Basic Police Training was Flight Lieutenant B C Player, while Flight Lieutenant G Innes was the officer in charge of Advanced Police Training; both officers would later rise to be appointed Provost Marshal. After successfully completing his training, Acting Corporal Cowap graduated with another Certificate of Merit and embarked to his first posting.

He arrived at RAF Wilmslow in 1955, and could hardly believe the difference between training and the *real* air force. The unit was paradise; the mess, the food, the corporal's club, all seemed a million miles from the conditions at the training units. He quickly settled into his new environment, made friends with Corporals Fred Prestwood and Arthur Winters and discovered that the work was interesting with the provost element carrying out foot patrols in Manchester, Stockport and Wilmslow town. The RAF Police used public transport to get around and in the days before radios were commonplace, each NCO always carried two penny coins just in case they needed to make a telephone call back to their unit. In addition, whistles were used to summon assistance. Later, he returned to Netheravon to qualify as 'Senior Aircraftman above the Line' which resulted in promotion to substantive corporal within eighteen months of joining. At that point he was beginning to enjoy service life and thinking about a career, he signed on for twelve years and was paid a £50 bounty. He later signed on to age 55, which attracted a further £100 bounty.

In 1957, he was posted overseas to West Germany with No 12 P&SS Detachment, based at RAF Geilenkirchen located on the Dutch border near Brunssum (Holland). The detachment, under the command of Flight Lieutenant D Heron-Weber, covered most of Southern Germany and provided provost support to the many RAF Stations within its area of responsibility. He clearly made a good impression from the start and as such, the commanding officer gave him the opportunity to serve as a probationary criminal investigator. Initially, after joining a team of senior NCO investigators, he made a lot of tea and did a lot of odd jobs around the office, which his superiors assured him was an essential part of his training. However, one day he was entrusted to take on an investigation on his own. At the time RAF Wahn (now Cologne/Bonn airport) was being prepared for handover to the Luftwaffe, but a large quantity of service equipment could not be accounted for and police assistance was requested to investigate. At that time, military inventories/equipment were managed by the use of three official forms; F673 recorded all issues; F674 recorded all exchanges, and; F675 recorded all returns. The entries on each of the forms was hand written by the staff employed in the stores section and the individual inventory holders. Soon after arriving at Wahn, Corporal Cowap began the laborious task of looking

through the records going back twelve years to 1945 and found a recurring mistake. It seemed that inventory holders would correctly obtain new items by means of the F673, but, when they wanted replacements, they would again submit a F673, instead of a F674, which showed the issue of a new item rather than the replacement of an old one. It had been a tedious inquiry but his report was accepted and as a result, he was substantiated as a criminal investigator. Shortly after, he was moved to the sub-detachment at RAF Butzweilerhof, near Cologne, to help deal with the high levels of crime in the area; the large off-unit married quarter estate at the Volkspark attracted high levels of vandalism, burglaries and assaults. In addition, while the many traffic accidents involving RAF personnel were dealt with by the RAF Police Traffic Section, fatal accidents were dealt with by the Criminal Investigation Section and over time Corporal Cowap became involved in several such enquiries. During his time at Butzweilerhof he conducted an investigation involving five RAF Station Police NCOs who were illegally selling NAAFI stores on the black market to German civilians and making modest personal profits. At the end of a successful investigation, the five disgraced RAF Police NCOs were tried by Courts Martial, found guilty and sentenced to six months military detention at Colchester and remustered to other trades. At around the same time, the formal recognition of police investigators was authorised and Corporal Cowap returned to Netheravon in 1959, where he successfully graduated as an accredited investigator from the first formal Investigators Training Course.

In 1959, Corporal Cowap left Germany and returned to the UK and was posted to RAF North Luffenham, which at the time was home to a Thor missile base with four outlying satellites units where the missiles were kept at permanent readiness. Although there had been a Station Police Section established there to look after security at all the sites, a separate provost element was formed with responsibility to provide armed escorts for the missile convoys when they travelled on public roads to and from the satellites. Frustratingly, there were insufficient billets at North Luffenham to accommodate the large RAF Police element and as a result, the *hot bed* system was employed, which meant that the off duty shift took over the beds that had been vacated by the on duty shift. Further, Corporal Cowap could not understand the unit's emphasis on ceremonial matters. At the time, he and his colleagues attended daily and sometimes twice daily parade rehearsals for the Air-Officer-Commanding's (AOC) annual inspection and indeed, the AOC sometimes attended his own rehearsals. Consequently, his time at RAF North Luffenham was brief and from there he returned to Netheravon to successfully pass the RAF Police (1) course advancing to RAF Police (1) Investigator.

At that point in his career, Corporal Cowap successfully applied to become an instructor at the RAF Police Depot and was consequently interviewed for the job by Squadron Leader A A Witherington. Starting his new role as a Basic Police Training instructor at Netheravon, he moved to the new RAF Police Depot at Debden in August 1960. At the time, other notable personalities at the Depot included; Group Captain W G Parry. Depot Commandant, followed by Group Captain H M Shephard (later Provost Marshal), Wing Commander A A Witherington (later Group Captain), Squadron Leader R D England (later Wing Commander). Flight Lieutenant R R B Truscott (later Squadron Leader). Warrant Officer W Thompson and Flight Sergeant R Jennings (later Warrant Officer) and Corporal D Wise.

In 1963, after serving three years as an instructor, Corporal Cowap was posted back to West Germany and onto the strength of No 11 P&SS Detachment based at RAF Gutersloh (between Munster and Bielefeld), under the command of Flight Lieutenant R Weisham (and later Flight Lieutenant Stan Grayson). He became the NCO in charge of the Counter Intelligence Section, which included the Soviet Mission (SOXMIS) Control Unit, and was assisted by Corporal's C Andrew and A Priggen. During the tour however, he was promoted to sergeant and was consequently selected by the Station Commander RAF Gutesloh; Group Captain D G Evans, for commissioning. In 1966 he returned to the UK to begin his officer training at the Officer Cadet Training Unit (OCTU), located at RAF Jurby on the Isle of Man.

In 1966, after successfully graduating as a commissioned provost officer, Flying Officer Cowap was posted to RAF Waddington near Lincoln, which at the time was home to No's 44, 50 and 101 Squadrons that operated the Vulcan bombers of the RAF's nuclear V Force. The station was also a Master Diversion Airfield (MDA) required to provide facilities for HM Customs & Excise when needed. His first meeting with the Station Commander, Group Captain C G Maugham was however, a show stopping shock; there was no warm greeting, no introduction and before he could even say "Good morning Sir", his commanding officer came straight to the point by saying, "This is not personal but I have told Bomber Command that I do not want you on my station, you are fresh out of OCTU, totally inexperienced, yet expected to command the biggest RAF Police & Security Flight on a major nuclear bomber station, my station. You can not possibly meet the round the clock demands of the post. I asked for a senior flight lieutenant and I've been given the most junior flying officer. If I had my way you would not be staying". After the initial broadside, the Station Commander went on to explain that he was only being allowed to stay because Bomber Command insisted he be given six months probation to prove his worth. With the interview over, he was waved out of the office without having said a single word. To say he was stunned was a massive understatement. As he left, he was confronted by the Officer Commanding Administration Wing; Wing Commander Norman Sellers, who had overheard everything from his adjacent office. Norman was a kindly officer within weeks of retirement who explained that the Station Commander had 'relieved' several wing commanders from their posts and was not entirely satisfied with the existing security standards. However, as took the new flying officer around the Station Headquarters to meet the other officers, he assured *the new boy* of his personal support. Thankfully, the other officers also turned out to be extremely pleasant and welcoming. After leaving Station Headquarters with mixed feelings, he made his way to the RAF Police & Security Flight but could not find the officer who he was supposed to be taking over command from. He did however, meet Warrant Officer Edwards, who quickly proved to be a most helpful, valuable and supportive deputy and a pillar of strength. The provost officer he was meant to be relieving had recently transferred from the Supply Branch and was about to transfer once again. He was finally tracked down and during the hour that followed Flying Officer Cowap signed for a number of secret documents and was assured that everything else was in order and that the warrant officer would brief him and bring him up to speed. It quickly transpired that the RAF Police & Security Flight was no in order but was in total chaos. There were no orders or standard operating procedures (SOPs) for his staff to follow; the control centre was a bare room with a table, a

telephone and a radio that worked intermittently; a road with public right of way ran through the unit's domestic area, and the Special Storage Area (SSA), where most of his staff were employed on security duties, was separated from the station by the A15 public trunk road. The set-up, it seemed, was a total shambles and but for the efforts of the warrant officer, the whole thing would have collapsed. As he pondered where he should start to achieve some sort of order, he was beginning to think that the Station Commander's views were well founded. Mindful that he only had six months to prove himself, he determined that even in that time he would leave things in better order than he had found them. Initially, he set about having the control centre decorated and begged and borrowed the material required to build a proper counter, reception desk and radio console. In doing so, he quickly transformed the control centre into a more ergonomically attractive place for his staff to work. At the same time, he was simultaneously trying to achieve the same within the SSA control room, as well as producing RAF Police Flight Orders and SOPs, which included addressing the issue of transporting weapon convoys safely across the A15 road between the SSA and the aircraft squadrons. As improvements were made, the overall morale of his men improved significantly. He still had the tricky issue of the public right of way through the station's domestic area to resolve but after six months hard work he was delighted to hear that the Station Commander was pleased with his efforts and had recommended his promotion to acting flight lieutenant. Soon after, Group Captain Maugham completed his tour and was replaced by Group Captain Arthur Griffiths, who turned out to be a splendid and supportive Station Commander. Wing Commander Sellers had retired and had been replaced by Wing Commander Jack Wilson and Squadron Leader Johnnie Johnson had been replaced as Officer Commanding Station Services by Squadron Leader Paddy Watson, and both officers were charming and helpful. Warrant Officer Edwards retired and became the RAF Police Flight's civilian clerk, and was replaced by Warrant Officer Tom Briggs, another stalwart and first class deputy. In the lead-up to Christmas 1967, Wing Commander Wilson thought it would be a good idea if Flight Lieutenant Cowap organised the children's Christmas party. So, together with his flight sergeant, reluctantly playing the role of Santa, and with enormous voluntary help from the three education officers, the 250+ children belonging to the service personnel on the station were organised into three groups; dwarves, elves and pixies. There were three parties and a pantomime combining Robin Hood, Sinbad, Dick Whittington plus cat, Aladdin and of course, the Ugly Sisters and everything went off splendidly. A successful Royal visit to RAF Waddington by HRH Princess Marina came and went, as did the 1968 Golden Anniversary of the RAF and the formation of RAF Strike Command. The station won the Group RAF Police Dog Working Trials in 1967 and 1968, due entirely to the efforts of the dog handlers under the control of Sergeant Mike Greenaway. Towards the end of 1968, Flight Lieutenant Cowap handed over command of the RAF Police & Security Flight to Flight Lieutenant B C Clarke and prepared once again to head out to Germany. He was however, surprised and proud to receive a Commendation from the Commander-in-Chief, Air Chief Marshal Sir Wallace Kyle for his service at RAF Waddington. In receiving the commendation, he reflected on his first day and the Station Commander's opening words, and gave humble thanks to all for the help and support he had received.

After arriving in West Germany he proceeded to RAF Bruggen, located between Monchengladbach and the Dutch border to take over as the Officer Commanding RAF Police & Security Flight. At the time, the station was home to No's 80 and

213 Squadrons flying Canberra aircraft as well as No 431 Maintenance Unit (MU). However, plans were in hand for the Canberra to be replaced by the Phantom operated by No's 14, 17 and 31 Squadrons. Additionally, No 25 Rapier Squadron, operated by the RAF Regiment was also to be added to the stations establishment. On this occasion, his initial interview with the Station Commander, Group Captain D C A Lloyd and the Officer Commanding Administration Wing; Wing Commander C J Sammouelle, went a lot smoother and he was given a warm welcome onboard. Wing Commander Sammouelle then aged fifty plus was short and stocky, a real presence and something of a human dynamo. He had joined the RAF at the beginning of World War II, hoping to become a sergeant pilot and had exceeded all his expectations. Once again, Flight Lieutenant Cowap was informed that the RAF Police & Security Flight was in a shambles and needed a new broom. Although the news seemed to be RAF Waddington all over again, he was thankful that he had the full support of both the Station Commander and his Wing Commander from day 1. As he entered the RAF Police & Security Flight and was delighted to meet up with his deputy, Warrant Officer Ron Liversage, who he had last seen at RAF Geilenkirchen, and Flight Sergeant Ian Le Crerar who had a reputation of being a first class senior NCO. Once again, the RAF Police Flight orders and SOPs required urgent attention and updating. Likewise, the security arrangements, in conjunction with the USAF Air Police, were reviewed and strengthened at the facilities which housed the armed Quick Reaction Aircraft (QRA) and at the SSA. Given the important role that the base played within NATO, it was subject to regular surprise inspections by NATO tactical evaluation teams (TACEVAL), when the base went on full alert to practise and demonstrate its war role. With his feet hardly under the table, the first of many TACEVALs during his tour of duty, took place a few days before Christmas 1968 and lasted several days, which provided him with a good insight of the base operating as if at war.

The base was one of the largest 'garrisons' in the RAF at that time and apart from the large number of military personnel working 24/7, there were an even greater number (2000+) of service families living on or near the base. Consequently, there were constant domestic problems with vandalism, shoplifting and other anti-social behaviour, mainly involving the bored teenage children of service personnel who had nowhere to go and nothing to do. Indeed, a couple of families were facing early repatriation for their unsociable behaviour. In an attempt to overcome the problems, Flight Lieutenant Cowap wondered if the establishment of a youth club might help calm the situation. After discussing the idea with the Station Commander who was fully supportive, he commandeered an empty H Block and opened the youth club, with different rooms for different ages. It became an instant success, was very popular, and as a result, the anti-social problems diminished to almost nothing fairly fast.

On Boxing Day 1969, Flight Lieutenant Cowap was invited to join Wing Commander Sammouelle as Assistant Project Officer to prepare for a Royal visit that would take place in September 1970. The planning started there and then and concluded with a very successful visit to the base by HRH Princess Anne. Although the experience was a very steep learning curve, he learned a great deal about detailed planning from his wing commander. Group Captain Lloyd completed his tour of duty and was succeeded by Group Captain John Curtiss, a quiet dedicated man, inspirational and a pleasure to work with, who later became Air Marshal Sir John Curtiss. Flight Lieutenant Cowap worked alongside several

other officers at RAF Bruggen who would later distinguish themselves: Wing Commander Patrick Hine who later rose to Air Chief Marshal; Wing Commander John Sutton, who later rose to Air Marshal; Squadron Leader Bill Wratten, who later rose to Air Chief Marshal; Squadron Leader R A F Wilson, who later rose to Air Marshal, and; Flying Officer Robert Wright who would return to Bruggen, first as Officer Commanding a Phantom Squadron, then as Station Commander, before later rising to become Air-Officer-Commanding RAF Germany and retiring as Air Marshal Sir Robert Wright. Flight Lieutenant Cowap was awarded the MBE in the Birthday Honours list of 1971, and in August, handed over command of the RAF Police & Security Flight to Flight Lieutenant Hugh Straford. and prepared to return to the UK. During his time at Bruggen, he had been reunited with old friends and had made new friends, some of whom were destined for higher appointments: Group Captain Harold M Shephard, who was leaving Germany to take up his appointment as Provost Marshal; Wing Commander George Innes who was taking over as the Command Provost Marshal, and who himself would later become Provost Marshal; Wing Commander Harry Taswell, who he would be joining at HQ P&SS UK; Flight Lieutenant Fizz Hales, his opposite number at RAF Laarbruch, a little further north, who later became Provost Marshal, and; his long time friend, Flight Lieutenant Len Waite, who was stationed at HQ RAFG.

In 1971, Flight Lieutenant Cowap arrived at HQ P&SS(UK) based in Acton, West London and joined his old friend Wing Commander Harry Taswell and Squadron Leader John Harrow in the Counter-Intelligence (CI) Section. It was a role that he cherished and enjoyed, particularly during his dealings with the other services and agencies and his experience quickly widened as he became aware of the global overview of CI activity. At the time, Group Captain B C Player, who had been his squadron commander at Netheravon, was the Officer Commanding, but later, when he had been appointed Provost Marshal, he was succeeded by Group Captain Alan A Witherington. He happened to be the weekend Duty Officer in May 1972, when he received news from the Ministry of Defence that HRH The Duke of Windsor had died in Paris and for the following thirty six hours he was kept extremely busy dealing with the matter; HQ P&SS(UK) were a small but very important part of the unfolding scenario. Although the procedure, in the event of the death of a member of the Royal Family abroad was fully covered in the contingency plans it was not known if the procedure might be varied due to the Duke's personal circumstances. Added to that was the fact that during the week that followed, there were eight Royal visits scheduled at RAF stations and initially, no-one knew if all or any would be cancelled. Accordingly HQ P&SS(UK) was bombarded with queries and demands from all sides. Part of the problem was that the media were happily predicting what might, or was likely to happen and of course, they could guess with impunity because if they got it wrong they were not accountable. HQ P&SS(UK) however, were accountable and though they could prepare to some extent, they had to wait for orders from above to proceed. In the event, Her Majesty made her wishes known and a very smooth ceremonial procedure followed. Of the eight planned Royal visits, seven were cancelled, the exception being a visit to RAF Ternhill by HRH The Duke of Edinburgh.



On the 10 October 2021 Paddy passed away peacefully after losing a long battle with illness. He may have been posted to a higher calling but the story of his life will live on. My condolences to his wife Patricia and the family for their loss and may Paddy rest in peace and suffer no more.

