



Sub. Officer William Noel Adrian “Taffy” Hackfoort

25th March 1921 to 12th September 2016

To say William Noel Adrian “Taffy” Hackfoort led a varied and exciting life is, to put it mildly, an understatement. The eldest of three children of a Dutch merchant seaman and a Welsh mother, Noel was to be the last of his branch of the family to carry the name Hackfoort.

With a merchant seaman for a father and a Welsh boatman and bargee for a grandfather the “call of the sea” probably flowed through Noel’s veins from the day he entered the world and it’s therefore no wonder that the fifteen year old son & grandson of two “old men of the sea” would join the Merchant Navy (as a Galley Boy) and set sail on his amazing life’s journey from Avonmouth to South America via Cardiff, Bahia Blanca,

The River Plate and Buenos Aires. On the return trip he crossed the Equator and, at the tender age of sixteen, entered the “*Realm of King Neptune*” allowing him to “*Sail the Seven Seas Unhindered*”.

With the outbreak of World War Two nineteen-year-old Noel volunteered for the Royal Air Force, where he was selected for Aircrew as a Wireless Operator/Air Gunner. Noel later impressed his instructors with his understanding of using Morse Code and the translation of coded messages that he was recommended for extra training, before transferring to one of the Intelligence Service “Y” Stations linked to Bletchley Park.

L.A.C. 1079836 William Hackfoort would always pride himself in being able to decipher Japanese Morse code. This specialist expertise would lead to postings both on the home front and overseas, including involvement with “Operation Torch” in Algeria, North Africa, Pakistan and finally India where, at the Castle Barracks in Bombay, Noels unit became inadvertently embroiled in the riots associated with the insurrection against British Rule. He was later to say how it was the closest he ever came to losing his life!

It was here that Noel learned the “English” Fire Brigades were recruiting men demobbed from their war service and, following a successful interview and pending a medical, was told to contact the Headquarters in Bristol on his return. Leaving the Royal Air Force in 1946 “Taffy” joined the National Fire Service, serving initially at Southampton and Bristol, before transferring to Somerset Fire Brigade and Weston-Super-Mare from where he retired after twenty-seven years’ service in 1973. In retirement, Noel decided to “put pen to paper” and write an account of his experiences during World War Two.

LEADING AIRCRAFTMAN

William Noel Adrian Hackfoort.

Service No: - 1079836

1939-1945 Medal

Africa Star (T Clasp)

Defence Medal

War Medal

Special Certificate and Code-Breakers Badge

Special Commissioned Veterans Badge



“With the kind permission of his family, we present Taffy’s story in his own words”.

“I was born on 25th March 1921 at Barry Island, South Wales. During my growing up years times were very hard for my parents. There was no financial support to help, unlike today’s welfare system. The whole world was in crisis.

As Barry was a seaport I managed to enter the Merchant Service as a galley boy on the ship “Caduceus”. I was just 15 years old and my salary was a meagre £4 a month! We sailed from Avonmouth and Cardiff to Argentina transporting coal and returning to England carrying grain. After two trips, I managed to get a shore job at Barry Docks Pit Drop Depot, adjacent to Ranks Flour Mill. Following a short period, I was able to get better employment as a Milling Machinist with good pay. I worked there for quite a time.

When the war started I knew things would change, no one could have predicted how much. I was 19 years old and knew I would be “called up”. I didn’t like the idea of going into the mines, nor was I keen on the Army or Navy. I eventually decided on joining the Royal Air Force and had an interview at the R.A.F. Recruiting Centre in Cardiff.

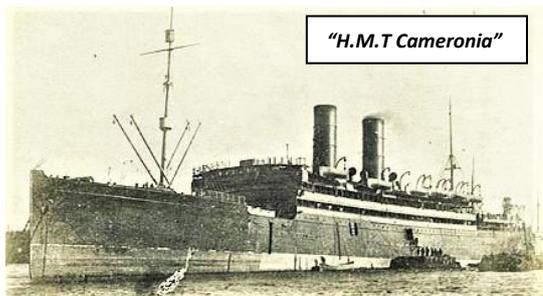
I passed all the educational tests with “flying” colours and when asked what I would like to become in the Service I asked to train as a wireless operator as I could already read Morse Code and Semaphore, having been taught this by an old Navy sailor during my time with the 10th Barry Sea Scouts. I had a feeling as a boy that this would be worthwhile in the end! I left the Recruitment Centre that day with instructions to “*wait for my call up letter*”

I eventually enlisted in December 1940 and called for service in February 1941. I was sworn in at RAF Padgate, Lancashire and posted to Blackpool. Whilst there I was issued with uniform and selected for Aircrew duties as W/Op/Air Gunner. I completed their discipline course plus further training in Morse Code, although of course, I had a head start in that. My initial training comprised up to 12 words per minute.



I was then posted to Compton Bassett, Wiltshire to complete my Wireless Operator’s course, from there I was stationed at St. Athan, Wales where I gained experience in Wireless duties and received further training on the Browning machine gun. I was later posted to Weston Super Mare on Wireless Operator’s duties, working at Tower House, Walliscote Road.

Whilst there I was selected for a course to learn the Japanese Morse Code system at Newbold Revel, Rugby, the objective was to intercept Japanese wireless transmission with a possible posting to the Far East, now being embraced in the R.A.F. “Y” Service Intelligence Unit. On completion of this course I was posted to RAF West Kirby, near Liverpool to await overseas posting and it was here that I was issued with my tropical kit. However, after three weeks of anticipation this posting was cancelled and I returned to Newbold Revel to await further instructions, after a few weeks I was sent back to West Kirby.... Surprise!!!! My R.A.F. uniform was withdrawn, all except my forage cap and I was issued with khaki army battledress and a sten gun. I was taught how to use this weapon and hand grenade throwing. All my unit were taken to the station barbers where our hair was shorn before, in late October 1942 at 3 am, we were taken by R.A.F. transport and train to Gourock on the Clyde, arriving just as dawn was breaking. What a sight to see!! Troopships of all sizes anchored in the Clyde...It is a sight I will never forget!



We were hastily launched into ferry boats and embarked on the troopship “Cameronia”. Next morning we began our journey in convoy – destination unknown! After eight days at sea the outline of Gibraltar was spotted through the mist, we were summoned to report to our Mess Decks and informed that “Operation Torch” (the invasion of North Africa) had taken place. Issued with military currency and iron rations we were told we were going ashore at Algiers. During the evening we inched into the harbour at Algiers where, amongst all the activity, we formed part of a baggage party to

unload our unit’s equipment. Next day we were taken by R.A.F. transport to a Chateau at Draria, near the village of El Achour, 9 kilometres outside of Algiers. This Chateau was known as “Chateau Beraud” and had originally been built for the mistress of Napoleon III ;- this was to be our Headquarters! We were now Wireless Unit No 380. 329 R.A.F. Wing under the command of Squadron Leader G V Cottam, Adjutant F/L Veitch, Intelligence Officer F/Lt. J Simmonds, Pilot Officer Hecht (Cypher Officer) and Flying Officer Prior.

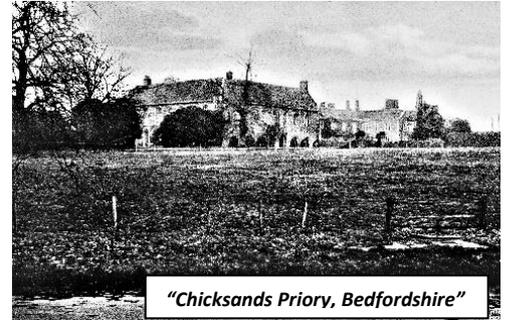
Very quickly all our equipment was set up and a new adventure began! Myself and my mate, Joe Crowshaw, were the first two W/Ops to establish contact with Cheadle, England and were presented with a bottle of wine by Squadron Leader Cottam (*call sign to England H8P*). Whilst there I passed many more trade tests and became an A.C.1. later passing further tests to become L.A.C. I performed various wireless duties including the interception of German reconnaissance aircraft, point to point duties and wireless contact with the UK and North African Units. During this period, I was awarded the 1939-1945 Medal and the Africa Star with Clasp and Rosette for operational duties.





A year passed. I was sent home embarking on the troopship “S.S. Otranto”, eventually docking at Liverpool in November 1943. A Military band was playing on the dockside as we arrived, which proved itself to be a very emotional moment. I was then taken, by R.A.F. transport, to Morecambe, Lancashire where I was kitted out with my new R.A.F. uniform, placed in a civilian billet for two nights and then sent home on leave.

On return I was posted to Chicksands Priory, Bedfordshire to carry out interceptions duties in both Japanese and German. Eventually I was posted to Folkstone in Kent, working from a message centre in a converted bungalow high on the cliffs at Capel, where I largely performed interception duties, particularly the recording of German activities on the French coast. I was billeted with Mrs Brisley, 71 Sidney Street where I recall being caught up in a shelling incident when the school opposite suffered a direct hit whilst my landlady, her family and myself sheltered under the stairs.



I later spent some time at another address in Folkstone (*with the Harris family*). It was whilst there that I witnessed the many preparations for D. Day plus the first arrival of the V1, which quickly became a daily occurrence! Later I was posted back to Chicksands Priory until V.E. Day after which I was posted to Hunsdon, Hertfordshire where I only stayed for a few weeks before being posted to North Weald Fighter Station...where I met the famous Douglas Bader.

I was then informed I was being sent to India and taken, by R.A.F. transport once more, to R.A.F. Broadwell in Oxfordshire, a wartime aerodrome. Together with nineteen colleagues I boarded a Dakota KN286 and so our adventurous journey to India began! Our kitbags were all we had to sit on – it was an uncomfortable journey! As we passed over the English Channel we were informed by our pilot that we had generator problems and, despite battling on, we eventually force landed at Le Bourget Airport, France. Whilst there we were able to enjoy a few days in Paris and took the welcome opportunity to travel on their metro system and visit many of the famous attractions, including the Arc du Triomphe, Eiffel Tower and the Seine. Finally, we were able to re-board and recommence our journey.



We eventually landed at Cagliari, Sardinia and then onto to Luqa, Malta before continuing to Cairo, Lydda in Palestine, Habbaniya in Iraq and Bahrain in the Persian Gulf...stopping a few days in each place. We reached our final destination...Karachi, Pakistan...where we stayed for a week.

From there we were taken by train to Bombay where I carried out wireless duties and completed my overseas service. It was whilst there that we were scarily caught up in the Indian Navy Mutiny in the Castle Barracks dock area of Bombay (where we were working as Wireless Operators). We were virtually held prisoners in the wireless section as mobs were whipped up to a frenzy by agitators. They started to enter the building shouting for us to come out, fortunately the British Army arrived just in time to save us. All the shooting and mob violence was because they wanted the British out of India; we were then armed with rifles to safeguard ourselves. This was an extremely frightening experience at the time, something I will never forget. I was sent home for release on the Troopship “Strathmore”, docking at Southampton from where I was posted to Warton Camp, Kirkham, Lancashire prior to de-mob (31st March 1946), I had proudly completed 5 years and 6 months service! Whilst in Bombay I discovered that the English Fire Brigade were recruiting for the post-war Fire Service, I was interviewed by the Recruitment Panel and informed all was satisfactory and that, on my return to the UK, I should contact Bristol to complete my medical etc. Following my return and after my demobilization, I eventually joined the N.F.S and completed my training at Grendon Hall, Aylesbury. As a fully-fledged new recruit, I was posted to my first station – Hulse Road, Southampton where I served just 6 months before joining the Somerset Fire Brigade”.



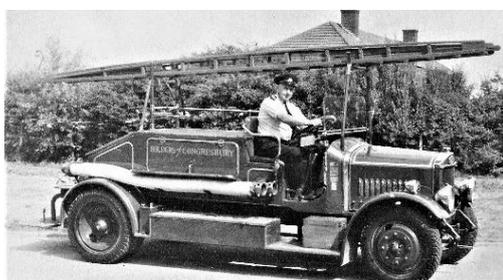


The ensuing years saw Noel consistently attaining “high grades” in exams and refresher/training courses, especially where mathematics and hydraulics were concerned. Clearly this had not gone un-noticed because, in 1958, the Chief Fire Officer added his personal hand-written congratulations after Noel gained first place on the Revisionary Training Course held at The Fire Brigade Training Establishment, Birmingham.

Recalling his long career Noel remembered many “incidents” especially the Major Oil Fire at the Regent Oil Company’s 15-acre site at Avonmouth on Thursday 6th September 1951. The following is taken from his own handwritten account.

“On reporting for duty at 1800 hours I was detailed to don my fire kit and told to drive an Austin Towing Vehicle laden with foam compound and to pick up a number of retained personnel and to proceed to the fire ground at Avonmouth, which I did. We

booked in at Fire Control and were taken to a fire fighting position using a foam making branch directing the foam on one of the tanks that was on fire. We were there for over 24 hours”. It’s worth remembering that this incident involved 55 pumps, the fire boat Endres Gane, 667 firefighters from 25 Brigades, members of the armed forces, 55,000 gallons of foam and more than 100,000 feet of hose. The incident also left seven firefighters in hospital and two port workers killed by the explosion!!



Noel was promoted to Leading Fireman at Weston Super Mare in December 1960 (with an annual salary of £895 for a 56-hour week!!). In 1964, he was promoted to Sub Officer and three years later passed his Station Officers exams at the same time as qualifying as a Graduate of the Institution of Fire Engineers.

Towards the end of his time in the Fire Brigade, Noel travelled the County giving talks on Fire Prevention to schools and workplaces, something he always said he enjoyed doing.

In 1973, Noel was presented with a Certificate of Merit from Somerset Fire Brigade marking a career spanning 27 years of “*efficiency, devotion and loyalty*”. As a Station Representative, Noel worked tirelessly raising money for the Fire Services National Benevolent Fund, often recalling the pleasure (not to mention the hard work) he shared with his colleagues when organising fund-raising events such as Jumble Sales, Summer Fetes, Station Open Days and of course, the annual New Year’s Eve Ball. Likewise, who will ever forget the good-humoured team spirit enjoyed when building and touring the streets of Weston Super Mare with the Carol Float each year?



In recognition of all his voluntary work over the years, Noel was rightly awarded one of the Fund’s coveted National Certificates of Appreciation, which reads:

The Chairman and Officers of the Fund wish to place on record their grateful thanks and appreciation of the valued assistance of: Mr N.A. Hackfoort. Dated 1st December 1983.

After a career spanning 27 years, Noel retired from the Brigade in 1973. Although the time had come to hang his fire kit on the peg for the last time, his strong ties with the job would be rekindled when, after only six months in retirement, Avon Fire Brigade offered him the position of driver/handyman at their “C” Division Headquarters.

He was to stay there for thirteen years before retiring for the second time, just days before his 65th birthday, totting up forty years within the “Fire Service Family”. At his retirement party, held at Weston-Super-Mare Fire Station, Divisional Commander John Barnes presented Taffy with a bronze bust of a fireman with the words, “*Taffy was always willing to undertake any task with enthusiasm and dedication, he really cared for his vehicles*”. Taffy responded by saying “*I have enjoyed every minute of my time in the Brigade. A part of me will always stay here. I will be coming back as often as I can to see the chaps*”



By now Noel and Linda had retired to Burnham on Sea where he planned to concentrate on his garden, not to mention his many other varied hobbies and interests, including his continuing work for the Fire Services National Benevolent Fund. He was also fluent in French (thanks no doubt to his father who could speak eight languages and had been “employed” as an interpreter by the Local Authority during WW1) and kept up the practice with a French friend in Weston.

Noel’s beloved Linda had predeceased him, when he died on Monday 12th September 2016 aged 95, leaving his daughters Rebecca and Alysia and five grandchildren.

We would like to extend our most grateful thanks to Rebecca & Alysia for sharing their father’s personal memories and for their kind permission in allowing us to tell “Taffy’s Story”.

Penny & Chriss Deverill MBE

Avon Fire & Rescue Service Pensioners Association.

1st September 2018