

French Run - Spring 1992

At last, the pre-briefing briefings had been finally completed, warning triangles, first aid outfits, lens converters, yellow bulbs issued and here we all were gathered together for the final briefing in the Crest Hotel, Southsea. This was invasion night. Peter Sheen's long planned 'raid' to France was go.

It makes one think about the organisation for an earlier invasion - planning for the 'Euro-celebratory' Spring Run 1992 was obviously well advanced in June 1990 as that is the earliest briefing document your scribe has on file. From then on meticulously crafted communications regularly emanated from Starley Towers to ensure all were well up to speed before the great day.

Assembling at the Crest we were treated to a buffet meal and issued with a travel kit comprising a Club logo endorsed 'GB' sticker and violently-hued miniature water wings - the sort that small children wear around their arms to prevent total immersion. Unfortunately it was rapidly discovered that two elementary design errors had been perpetrated on the wings: firstly, the design appeared to contemplate only single-armed users; and secondly, on trying to inflate them, no valve could be found. no matter the ebullient Mike Jackson soon demonstrated an alternative use as a natty form of garter.

Boarding instructions were issued and then off we went to gather on the pier head. Then the purpose of the master plan revealed itself in all its glory - the armllets were not for swimming purposes but to prevent us being swept up with the common throng of bikers who were queuing to board the same ferry on their way to the Le Mans Endurance round. We were destined for far superior dedicated accommodation.

On board and having safely battened down machines, the stalwart souls no doubt did justice to the demon drink; us mal-de-mer prone landlubbers followed the briefing instructions and retired immediately to our palatial cabins. These were obviously designed by someone whose talents went unrecognised by the constructors of accommodation for remand prisoners, although perhaps his design brief did not incorporate the requirement to take in umpteen layers of bulky motorcycling clothing, boots, helmets etc.

An early start the next morning and then over the Seine via the famous Pont de Tancarville with all members feverishly 'tenezing la droit' - and, I believe, succeeding all through the weekend. A relatively short tun via Honfleur then into a typical French market scene in Deauville for a brekky of Coffee and Croissants.

Then along the coast road to the Pegasus Bridge over the Orne, the objective of Operation Deadstick. For us youngsters with little comprehension of such operations in the war it was a sobering thought to consider the exploits in taking this via a precision night landing of gliders, described afterwards by Air Chief Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory as 'one of the finest pieces of airmanship thus far in World War Two'. Sadly the bridge is no longer in place, having been dismantled to be replaced by a wider one, but the associated bijou museum and cafe we viewed remain.

On to the Canadian cemetery near Reviers which was, for this scribe and, I am sure, many others, the most poignant experience of the trip. Row upon row of graves of young Canadians killed in the first days of fighting, having probably come over from Canada, finished training in England only to be slaughtered on landing. Futility.

Next stop Arromanches, up on the cliffs looking down on to Gold Beach then down to the ville to see the remains of the massive concrete caissons of the Mulberry harbour.

After varied gastronomic experiences (depending which eating establishment was selected) we then struck inland to Bayeux. The culture buffs went to the Invasion museum; the knitting enthusiasts went to the tapestry. This scribe having had his fill of rusty militaria decided to view the knitting - it doesn't quite tell history the way she is taught to us Brits but then does it ever?

A quick blast to St Lo and thence to Avranches, the outskirts of which were marked by a new concept in flower beds with a Patton tank growing out of the centre of a roundabout.

Our base camp at Avranches, the Croix d'Or, was a super establishment - homely but spacious, being a former staging post - and well looked after were we.

A hard taskmaster start the next morning (well 9.30 local time) and then off to Domfront and coffee at Putanges. Then wonderful nadgery in the 'Suisse Normande'. Lunch was at a creperie at Segrie Fontaine, with views over the gorge. Much speed afterwards and a beautiful afternoon ride into the sunset to Mont St Michel and back to Avranches for dins and much merriment. Joining us for dinner were Nick Rogers, and IMMA, and representation from RAC France.

Chairman Norman Hyde regaled us with worthy witticisms. A little unfair perhaps mildly to chide PRTS for acquiring a set of high powered sunglasses for protection against the burning rays of the springtime sunshine, which merely had the effect of encouraging the rain.

And PRTS did himself down in apologising for some of the roads. The Normande Suisse section worked wonderfully with one Jackson M reporting great scratching on Hinckley's finest (doesn't quite have the ring of 'Meriden's finest' does it?).

Sunday dawned bright and early ... and looking forebodingly inclement. A 'group snap' was taken of all and then we headed northwards to Coutances for coffee. Here a certain member (no names mentioned) deserted his marshalling post and allowed a contingent of members to go exploring the delights of the town, permitting them to examine at close quarters the pock-marked town hall. In the cafe the erstwhile MD of a multi-million pound company (one P J Agg) surprised us all with his ability at table football ...

Having safely gathered together we left with the rain now coming down with a vengeance. We splashed our way to Carteret where lunch was taken a choix. By this time most members were well-sodden but did the more upmarket restaurants object to a stream (literally) of bedraggled reprobates tramping through their dining rooms? Not a bit of it. even better, deciding to eat at one of the aforesaid restaurants not a hair was turned when their rather posh reception area was turned into a cloakroom with piled soggy clothing.

The final run to Cherbourg was not of the most enjoyable, at least weather-wise, but safely gathered together the good ship lollipop got us back to a dry Blighty by 9.00 p.m. And so homeward our various ways.

A truly memorable weekend, and brilliant testimony to PRTS's organisational abilities. Not only that but, having planned the weekend to be on the normal Friday night to Sunday basis, we then go and mess this up at an earlier run by somewhat imperiously directing PRTS *in absentia* to extend the run by one day! All taken in his stride without a murmur. So grateful thanks due to Peter, ably supported by Frank Finch and Tom Waterer. A super final touch to round off the weekend was a beautifully presented commemorative tie. Thanks again Peter.

Memories

- Lester Harris' fetching Goldtop leather jacket, not a lightweight garment to start off with, ending up weighing more than the original Z1 Kawasaki he was riding. Has the jacket dried out yet I wonder? Brave man too, with 'early era' Nipponese brakes guaranteed not to work in the wet.
- Peter Agg being observed to have attracted the attention of the Gendarmerie on a slight technicality of excess velocity. Money apparently chanted hands, although for what purpose we were not informed ...
- Dennis Bates coping with mountains of 'funny money', along with IOUs in various currencies with all his usual aplomb. Then, not having enough to pay the bill, with Mike Evans stepping in with his Gold Card (flashy b.....d, but grateful thanks anyway).
- Mike Jackson complaining on the Sunday morning with the rain sheeting in from the sea that not only was his riding suit leaking but his bike was going rusty at the same time.
- Nick Rogers riding in from his Paris base on a Yamaha FJ1200, which his lofty frame made look like a FS1-EI.
- John Nelson's trusty Triumph twin showing what a well screwed together Meriden product can do with long bouts cruising at a sustained 90 per.
- Dennis haggling with the parking attendant in Arromanches, with neither speaking the other's language, still successfully negotiating a discount.
- David Strathcarron playing a variation of this on the boat homeward by refusing to understand the steward attempting to evict him from the couchette he was occupying - and succeeding in remaining in occupation.
- The German cemetery visited by Mike Jackson and Dennis Bates and others - a grimly Teutonic construction with heavy stone and the memorial featuring a majority of 19-20 year olds. More futility.
- Rollo and cronies demonstrating bonhomie, camaraderie etc at Friday lunch-time and going native with an enormous central dish of crustaceans and fish, washing down with liberal quantities of local vin and servicing wenches in equal quantities.
- The antics of the Hill (S), Smith, Davies and Bates party at Sunday lunch whereby the former three attempt to persuade Dennis to stay the night in the hotel. Dennis goes for a leak. On return they had brought the maitre d' into the act, who pointed to a youngish couple at lunch claiming that they had been asked and were willing, nay demanded, that Dennis take their room for the night. With Simon Hill at the tiller of this particular ship no wonder Dennis did not believe him.