

Heaton Park

By Tony Eley



It was another of those one-sided telephone conversations. I was in the boss's office again, and only a couple of weeks after my first and dramatic air-sea rescue escapade – in early 1970

“ Manchester “ , “ Royal Air Force Exhibition “ , “ No medical plan!” “ Queens Colour Squadron “ , “ Harrier Display “ , “ Gastro-enteritis “ Long pause “ Today “ , “ Yes sir “

The boss looked at me!!

“ It appears that there is an RAF Exhibition taking place in Heaton Park in Manchester this week “ he said. “ Some-one forgot to include any medical planning and all hell is being let loose”. “ The Queen's Colour Squadron has gone down with gastro-enteritis and there is a planned demonstration by a Harrier over the weekend . Command say you have to be there today to sort it out!”

Pack the suitcase, kiss the wife and into the car!!

Two hours later I was in the portacabin which was masquerading as the office of the Commanding Officer of the exhibition.

He explained the medical plan. There was no medical plan!!

A long wheel base landrover ambulance with a driver was on its' way but apart from that I had a blank sheet to work with. The most pressing problems were the colour Squadron and sorting a disaster plan for the weekend display by the Harrier.

I set to work. I visited the Colour Squadron in their accommodation – they appeared to be on the mend.. Prescription – plenty of fluids, light diet and fingers crossed.

Back to the portacabin. Several hours of writing, phone calls to the Hospital Secretary (yes they still existed then) at all the major local hospitals and the local Ambulance Service along the lines of

“ Hello. I'm the Medical Officer at the RAF Exhibition in Heaton Park. You will know we have a Harrier demonstration this weekend. I'm just calling to confirm that you have a major incident protocol in place. No, no, I'm sure we won't have any problems but it's best to be prepared. Could you let me have a copy of your plan and I'll co-ordinate the plans for the weekend!”

By the end of the day the plan was in place!

My ambulance and driver arrived. He was a somewhat morose Senior Aircraftsman. Summoned at short notice from his unit and detached to Manchester he was not disposed to be cheerful. He viewed the access roads inside the Park surrounding the exhibition site

“It'll be a disaster at the weekend” he said “ If we have an emergency we'll never get out. We'll have to go through the fence” I assured him it would not be necessary. He was right, I was wrong!!

We had only one major emergency whilst we were there. A really good military medical emergency! Well not quite. We were summoned to a collapsed civilian.

His distraught wife said “ I don’t know what’s wrong. We were sitting watching the display, he had a drink of Coke and he just collapsed”

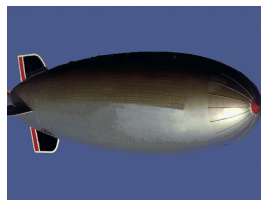
I opened his mouth and a wasp flew out!! Clearly the wasp had been in the coke – then in his mouth and then stung him! His breathing was very noisy. I put in an airway and he improved. We loaded him into the ambulance, lit the lights and siren – and went straight through the fence!!!!

For the first time since his arrival the SAC smiled as we roared into the local Casualty unit!!

Oxygen, hydrocortisone and within minutes a recovering patient. We returned to the exhibition.

On Friday the wind picked up – and continued to rise. By coffee time it was clear we were in for a blow. The portacabin door crashed open. The Sergeant in charge of the barrage balloon blew into the office. The balloon was there as part of the exhibition – partly as a visible sign that we were on site and partly to allow the local TA parachute unit to display their prowess in leaping out of balloons and descending serenely to earth – but not today!

“We got the strong wind warning” the sergeant said “ we were winding the cable in, but a gust got the balloon and it’s broken free!!!!



Pandemonium!! We’ve got a loose barrage balloon flying over Manchester and entering the controlled air space round Manchester Airport

The boss sprang into action

Frantic phone calls to air traffic control, notification to the Ministry of Defence, and then time to draw breath!!

“There’s a rip panel on the balloon “ the sergeant said. “ When the cable breaks a safety device pulls a panel off the top of the balloon so that it comes down fairly quickly”

The boss turned pale. “ You mean it’s going to come down somewhere in the city?”

The sergeant agreed that that was the case.

“ Well go and find it” the boss snapped.

Within minutes the entire balloon section and almost every spare vehicle has streamed out of the park in pursuit of the balloon.

I saw no reason to be excluded. “ Shall we take the ambulance?” I asked. He nodded.

My SAC smiled for the second time!!

We leapt into the ambulance and joined the chase. As we approached the first junction I saw an RAF vehicle at the side of the road. A man in uniform was in conversation with a passer-by. The passer by raised his arm and pointed to the left

“ Turn left, turn left” I shouted. We turned to the left. Half a mile ahead the tableau was repeated

“Straight on straight on I shouted”

We careered across Manchester in a 1970 remake of the Keystone Kops!!



Finally we rounded a corner and there was the balloon. It lay in a great silver heaving mass entirely surrounding a small almost idyllic cottage (yes they do exist in Manchester – or they did then)

I leapt from the ambulance and started up the path. Pause for thought. We are the first arrivals.

I look around, no other Air Force personnel in view at all but already I can feel the Manchester press corps bearing down.

I walk up to the front door and prepare to knock. The opening door anticipates my knock.

“ Good morning” I said in my best apologetic, concerned, thoughtful Royal Air Force Officer’s voice.” I am the Medical Officer from the Royal Air Force Exhibition in Heaton Park. .I must extend the apologies of the Royal Air Force for dropping our balloon in you garden”

He looked directly at me. “ I wanted to see that exhibition” he said wistfully “ but I can’t get about too well now” I noticed his two sticks! “ An don’t worry about the balloon – we had one here in 1942 so it’s the second time it’s happened.

“ I will make sure we send a car to collect you tomorrow morning so that you can visit the exhibition as our guest, “ I said, and his eyes brightened.

By now the road was filling. Air Force vehicles and personnel, emergency vehicles and personnel and the Press!!

The press pack made a beeline for the door. Bad PR for the Air Force coming I thought. I can already hear the questions. “Scandalous, negligence, compensation” The words are coming thick and fast – but not from the householder!!

Quiet begins to descend and at least I can hear the voice of the old man “ Oh no. I’m not bothered. This is the second time a balloon has landed here. And the nice Officer over there has arranged for me to go the exhibition tomorrow and I’m really looking forward to it”

The press pack moved away, clearly no major headlines here and already the balloon section are beginning the retrieval of the balloon

My SAC is still smiling!!