

I was a 'Military Brat'!



*Memories of growing up as the daughter
of a British serviceman*

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By Pauline Ponsford, nee Vipond

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'Scaly Brats' was another term used in the 1950s and 1960s for describing the children of military families with 'Scaly' referring to the rank/scale of the military person, which in turn was applied to various situations and regulations; the 'Br' of 'Brats' referred to British children.

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Dedicated to Mum and Dad

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Richard Vipond: b. 13.07.1925, d. 16.12.2005

This book is dedicated to the memory of my father, Richard Vipond, who survived the war on Bomber Command, and his brave attitude to life. After the war he rejoined the Royal Air Force and served for 35 years.

On their marriage in 1948 my mother, Mollie, joined him on his various postings home and abroad and never complained as to where they were going next.

In the 1950s/1960s children of servicemen were known as 'military brats' or 'scaly brats'

Looking back, I can hardly believe how much I can remember of all the places that I have lived. Each place brings back many memories, some I can remember very clearly and others, especially in my early years, I am afraid it is only photographs and information from my parents that I can piece things together. In that time I met and made a lot of friends along the way and always I was asked the same question "Where were you born?" I guess people were intrigued then, more so than nowadays, especially when I was younger and moving from place to place in a short space of time.

My father originally joined the Royal Air Force in 1943 aged 17. During World War II, he trained to be an air gunner and wireless operator on the Lancaster aircraft. He was stationed at RAF Waterbeach in Cambridgeshire and I am so proud to say he accomplished many sorties, including a food drop over Holland and he survived the war.

It was not an easy time for him or the other aircrew losing their comrades and never knowing if they themselves would make it back to base after a mission. It was tough then and they just got on with it. There was no help or counselling available and I wonder how they got through it all.

Dad never spoke much about his time during the war and even years later he was reluctant to say anything, so it makes you wonder what went on in his head over the years. I realised latterly that he was quite uneasy in lifts and confined places, which might have had a bearing on his war days in the aircraft space. I do know that he never complained or had a bad word to say about his work in the military.

Dad remained in touch with his Skipper (Richard Marks) for many years after the war and until his death in 2005. They met up at Waterbeach every year for the annual reunion and between all the servicemen on Bomber Command, they tried to get recognition for their war efforts and it is only latterly that Bomber Command finally got their request (unfortunately too late for my father) and a statue of a Bomber Command crew was installed in Green Park in London and surviving members were given a clasp of their services to the country. My father continued in the Royal Air Force after the war and was stationed at RAF Waddington in Lincolnshire on Wellington and Lancaster aircraft. He was detached to RAF Tangmere in West Sussex and it was here that he met my mother who lived in Chichester.



See a close-up of the crew on page 16; my father is in shirts/sleeves.

After their marriage in 1948 Mum moved to Lincoln. This was to be my birth place. I was born in Lincoln on 21st February 1950. I spent 48 years of my life in the military, firstly as the daughter of a serviceman and then latterly, the wife of a serviceman.



As a child of a serving airman I was one of the travelling families who spent most of my childhood moving from one air base to another and changing schools every two to three years. Children adapt very quickly and you soon joined in with the local children in that area and made friends. Unfortunately the time went by too quickly and before you knew it, you were off once more to another place and hence had to start all over again.

I will never know whether I could have bettered myself at school. My reports usually said I was a very quiet and shy child and could do better! However, I reckon I was top of the class as far as geography was concerned? I had been to most of the places on the map!

My parents shared a rented cottage with another military family in a little village called Harmston, not far from Waddington, and it was here that I was born. I was christened in Lincoln and my Godfather was a Polish pilot and a war hero (Chev Rogers) who also happened to be my father's skipper on the Lancaster aircraft.

Considering what they had been through previously they took everything for granted such as, there was no running water in the cottage and they took it in turns to collect water from a well at the bottom of the hill.



One of Dad's jobs was to empty the ablutions daily at the bottom of the garden in a dug-out trench! He later told me he had to hold his breath for ages otherwise he would be sick! Finally, my parents were offered a married quarter at Waddington and this was pure luxury in comparison. In those days, there were no radiators to warm the rooms, only a coal fire in the living-room. However, this first house was short-lived as my father was then posted to RAF Scampton in Lincoln. Apparently we were the first ones in the road to get a television, and although I was too young to remember, everyone came round to watch Princess Elizabeth being crowned Queen of England in 1952 on a black and white television.

Our next move was to the Far East, Singapore, where my father was on the Sunderland Flying Boats as air crew. My father went ahead with the military personnel and six months later, mum and I joined him along with the other families. We went on a big ship named HMS 'Empire Clyde' with a Scottish crew, and it took over three months to reach Singapore. I was told by my mother that the crew had to remain below deck at all times and families shared cabins and it was the longest three months ever!



We started off our tour of Malaysia in a wooden hut in a place called Seleter, living with local residents and quite a few chit-chats, and other types of insects apparently, but it was a friendly place and the local people made us very welcome - unfortunately, again, because I was so young, I can't remember much about it - luckily my parents took loads of photographs to prove that I was actually out there!

We then moved to married quarters at Changi for the remaining two and half years stationed there. We had an amah who looked after us. This was the norm then with British families living in a warm climate, and she lived with us and had her own little room. She cleaned our house and did the laundry and she took me to school on the back of her bike and she became part of the family whilst we were there.



Above: Sunderland Flying Boat - my father's posting to RAF Changi, Singapore. For right, on page 9: Schooldays in Changi. Also see p 15.



At the end of our tour, we arrived home to Great Britain in February 1956 in freezing cold weather and I think we shivered until Easter but thankfully my grandmother in Chichester had knitted us all lots of woolens and I can remember even now, all the different coloured twinsets she had knitted for me and they were laid out on my bed.

The next stage of my life was living in Chichester with my grandparents. My father was once again stationed at Tangmere.

I started primary school in Chichester and made some friends, one of whom, Julie, I still keep in touch with now after all these years! At this point of my life, my brother, Philip, was born and he too went on to travel with us. We had some lovely times in Chichester over the years, visiting my grand-parents in between all my father's other postings.



We also visited my father's family in the north of England. I remember with fondness visiting my grandmother in Sunderland – unfortunately my grand-father died when I was only six years old, so I did not get to know him. I loved listening to my father's family talking in their 'Geordie' accent and we were known as the 'Southerners'!

My gran spoilt me rotten and I can remember her buying me my first ever record – it was Cliff Richard's Living Doll. I felt so grown-up at ten years of age! My father had four sisters and one brother. They all lived in Sunderland apart from one, his sister Audrey, she married an American serviceman and went to live in America after the war. My mother had an older sister and she emigrated to Canada in the early 1950's as a newly-wed and they made their home in beautiful Vancouver. However, as most people in the forces know, moving around with the military, we didn't get to see family as much as we would have liked but they did come to visit us at times as well, which was nice.

At the age of 9, my father was posted to RAF West Drayton in Middlesex. We were here for three years and at that time it was occupied by both British and American service personnel. I attended a local primary school and I also went to an American Sunday School, so naturally I was mixing with a few American children, where I picked up a slight accent, much to everyone's amusement.

A few people might remember this – families on the base were able to change bed linen once a week? In the school holidays I was allowed to take the dirty bedding and change it for clean at the barrack stores. I can remember to this day quoting my father's number, rank and name to enable me to do this and asking for 2 doubles, 4 singles and 8 pillow slips! I felt so grown-up!

Before long, we were on the move again. This time my father was posted to RAF Sopley in what was Hampshire but is now known as Dorset. This camp was positioned right in the middle of the New Forest. However, instead of living in married quarters, we were very lucky in having accommodation in Christchurch. It was only a five minute walk to school and I managed to stay for a full five years at one school (for a change). The school was called Twynham, a secondary modern school and I settled in quite well and made lots of friends in the time living there. I kept in touch with two good friends both called Carole and Carol. I actually lived with Carol's grandmother for six months so that I could complete my final year at school and take exams because my father was posted to another base before I finished school. I am still in touch with both of them.

I suppose I did pick up a local accent after all that time living in Christchurch. After finishing school I rejoined my family – this time to RAF Henlow, in Bedfordshire. I don't know how my mother coped each time with moving as everything in the married quarter had to be presented in top-class condition ready for hand-over to the next occupant. I can remember the cutlery and crockery laid out in uniform order on the table. The kitchen was immaculate, especially the cooker. The sheets and blankets laid out on each bed upstairs and the bathroom spotless. The Barrack Warden would go from room to room checking that all was fine and with his white gloves on he would check tops of cupboards or doors for dust and woe betide if you missed something! Each time I can remember sitting in the car outside our old house with my brother, waiting for our parents to sign the inventory to say that all was present and correct and they were free to move on. We always knew if they were smiling that all was well.

By now, I was beginning to think I would never stay in one place. I was now 16 years old, missing my pals and looking to find either work or college. In the end I was persuaded by my father to go to college and take up secretarial studies – for which I am now grateful but at the time I just wanted to earn some money! I did have the best of both, as luckily I got a part-time job at a hairdressers in Hitchin, washing hair, sweeping up and making teas and coffee! After almost two years at college and learning shorthand and typing, I went home one day to hear that my father had been posted to Germany.

On arrival at RAF Laarbruch in Germany at the age of 18, I managed to get my first job on camp as a typist. I was obviously very young and nervous but I soon settled in and everyone made me very welcome. I was working with not only British service personnel but also German and Dutch civilian workers and we all got on so well. I went to evening classes to learn German and of course, working and living amongst them I picked up the language fairly quickly, although at times I must have said the wrong word as I would have them laughing and they would try and tell me what I should say! Again, I made some wonderful friends and I made the most of the tour and the three years went by far too quickly as far as I was concerned, but all good things come to an end and once more my father was posted back to the UK.

Another thing about our life was that everyone looked out for each other. They were our family. There was always available babysitters, people to drive you to NAAFI or medical centre or whatever. We took in neighbours who were posted in or out and gave them meals and a bed and they did the same thing for us when needed. We were in our own little world and we felt

safe, especially as children, able to play outside with our friends and it was only when we went to the local school or shops that we left the camp gates.

My father's final posting was to RAF Brize Norton in Oxfordshire. I was now aged 21. I can imagine everyone thinking "What is she still doing living at home with her parents at that age?" I would not have missed the chance of going overseas for anything and maybe things would be totally different had I stayed at home – but I will never know.

I had a wonderful childhood with loving parents and even with all the moving around, different schools and meeting new friends, I will never forget those times.

I guess it was inevitable that I would meet a serviceman and when we got married, I went on another journey throughout the years in the forces and we produced our own 'military brats' ('scoy brats!') who continued the military lifestyle.



Photos from Changi:

Left: detail of the photo on page 8 - what a sweet little dress I'm wearing!



Above right: Did you spot me in the school photograph on page 9?



Above: Mum and me - our first Christmas in Chang!



*Me, aged about 16, wearing a 'shift dress'
I had made myself!*



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