

Les James



My first posting was CFE RAF West Raynham along with Dicko (Al Dixon) and Slab (Alex Moir). I was the CFEs spare GWF which meant the odd detachment to fill at other stations, 6 weeks at Bishops court NI on CADF an auto triangulation site for Preston/Prestwick ATC, 4 weeks at Wattisham in the control tower. I went on the mandatory British UHF course at Compton Bassett, bliss!

In March 1961 I was posted to Bahrain but never got there. Whilst in transit in Aden my posting was change to RAF Eastleigh, Kenya. Ended up at Ruiru the Comcen Transmitter site. Great site, solid stone main building (standard cruciform layout), mess block and power station. Then tagged on the end of the site, like an afterthought, the living accommodation, tents! All sorts of things passed through, either crawling, hopping or slithering. A great place for photography, one of my hobbies to this day, and I spent much of my off duty time travelling around the games reserves and the coast around Mombasa. One of my colleagues, a national serviceman, had been an apprentice with BR at Crewe. He knew the chief of the East African Railways in Niarobi and we spent some interesting weekends in the engine sheds. This culminated in a trip on the footplate of the, at the time, most powerful metre gauge locomotive in the world. We went from Niarobi to Nakuru and back which entailed running down the escarpment into the Rift Valley. My stay in this idyllic location came to an end when I was promoted, and by the rules at the time was moved within the command to Aden. The flight from Niarobi to Aden was eventful, the aircraft was a Valletta and after a couple of hours one engine started to splutter and eventually expired. The pilot ensured us that one engine was enough to



finish the trip. After a while the remaining engine started to emit black smoke. We were informed to brace ourselves for an emergency landing. All I could see out of the window was sandy rock strewn scrubland. The second engine finally packed up, the land was clear of the larger rocks and looked quite smooth and we made an extremely bumpy landing. We had actually landed on an emergency strip close to Hargeisa Airport in Somalia. Our pilot managed to get us a lift on an Aden Airways DC3, wow luxury flying. So I entered Aden through the civil area at Khormaksar and got my passport stamped at immigration, after lengthy explanations of what had happened. I was attached to No.10 Radio Fitting Party at Saltpans a receiver site part of a new Comcen being built by Marconi.

March 1963 posted to Locking as an instructor along with Gerry Smith. This was a rewarding time, I enjoyed the work. Sadly Gerry was killed in a car crash shortly before he was to be married. This event stunned everyone in 4(T) Block, Gerry was very popular with both staff and students.

March 1965 posted to Labuan (Borneo). Again I was employed on the Airfield but also travelled around to service military radio equipment at forward area airstrips and civil airports. I had 2 weeks Rest and Recuperation leave in Singapore and Penang. Travelled from Singapore to Penang by train, brilliant trip, stopped off at Kuala Lumpur for some sightseeing. Must admit didn't do much Rest or Recuperation in Singapore.

In April 1996 posted to RAF(HQ) Kenley for duty at MoD Comcen Whitehall. I was employed in the Whitehall TV Group. I was allowed to live at home and commuted to work on the Southern Region. Various duties including servicing equipment in No.10 Downing Street, all the offices of the Service Chiefs and Assistant Chiefs. Run various TV training courses including a course on TV principles for a RAF/RN team at RAF Ternhill for the Martell TV Guided missile.

Fell foul of the defence cuts and left the RAF in December 1969.

I then joined Redifon Communications Ltd at Wandsworth in December 1969. I was initially employed as an installation engineer for overseas projects. My first assignment was to Jordan in May 1970. I was to supervise

the installation of the transmitters and receivers of a new comcen for the Royal Jordanian Air Force in Amman including the Remote control system and aeriels. A secondary task was the installation of 2 Non Directional Aeronautical Beacons at Mafraq and H5 (now the Prince Hassan Airbase). The project was interrupted in June when I was one of the 58 hostages held by the PFLP in the Intercontinental Hotel in Amman for 5days. After a brief holiday back in UK I returned in July and commissioned the NDBs. The RJAF requested we completed 2 complete Tx/Rx systems with ancillaries and instruct local staff. Then observe the local staff install the next 2 systems. In September we had almost completed this exercise when the Black September civil war started. Major fighting broke out in Amman between the various Palestinian organisations and the Jordanian Army. As the airport was closed the company agent arranged for a taxi to take me from Amman to Beirut via Damascus. A very interesting trip. I returned again in June 1971 to complete the commissioning of the system.

From October 1970 to February 1971 I was in Libya planning and implementing the re-location of the Communications system at Beida to a new site in Tripoli. From August 1971 to September 1972 I worked in Iran updating the HF Comms at the major airports including Tehran, Shiraz, Mashed, Tabriz, and installing NDBs at a dozen minor sites.

Then in 1973 I transferred to the Naval Project Division. Redifon was keen to get back into major naval communications work, having fallen behind Marconi.

From 1973 to 1981 I worked on internal and external comms systems for various navies, including Abu Dhabi, New Zealand, Qatar, Oman, Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria and the Type 21 Frigates for the RN, initially installation and commissioning then planning and System design. In 1976 I was given my first system design task, four fast attack craft for Malaysia which were built in Sweden. The system consisted of HF, VHF & UHF comms and an internal comms fit. This lasted 3 years from initial tender to commissioning.

In 1981 Redifon bid for the Minor War Vessels contract for the Royal Navy. This was the start of my serious involvement with the RN in fact up to my

retirement in 2004. The system designed for the MWV project was accepted and designated ICS25. It was the first system in the RN to use fibre optics to connect the user units with the main system. The system was fitted to many ships including most RFAs, the Single Role Mine Hunters (Low magnetic version) and Fishery Protection Ships. ICS 25 gave me more foreign trips to extol the virtues of the system to the Dutch, and Spanish

I was also invited by the Chinese Naval Defence ministry, along with the Company's Technical Director, to a Naval Symposium in Beijing. 2 days at the Symposium, 3 days visiting various Defence departments and in between visiting the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, The Summer Palace and The Ding Ling tombs, that's what I call work.

The next major project was the Type 23 Frigates, designated ICS6. Redifon Comms equipment interfaced to a Marconi control system.

I spent 4 weeks in the USA carrying out EMP trials on HMS Lancaster (Type 23 Frigate). This utilised the US Navies Empress (EMP Radiation Environment Simulator for Ships) system. Empress was a 120 x 90 feet barge with a 155 feet high conical antenna, with a top diameter of 190 feet, mounted on the deck. Below decks high voltage generators were used to charge banks of large capacitors and quickly discharged in a series configuration into the aerial to create the EMP. The Empress rig was towed by the USNS Mohawk, an ocean going tug, with HMS Lancaster sailing alongside. By varying the distance between Empress and Lancaster different pulse levels were achieved from 1kv/m² to 20kv/m². Quite a bit of arcing and sparking but the ship passed the test.

In 1991 Redifon MEL formed a partnership with BAeSEMA and Thomson CSF to tender for a design study for a Fully Integrated Communications System for the LPD(R) project. Two ships were ordered from Vickers in 1996 but Redifon had a contract for the Comms system about two years before to enable the system to be developed. In the meantime Thomson CSF was so impressed with Redifon they bought the company. Once the system had been developed and built it was handed over to a separate department for installation and commissioning.

I started on the next project the Type 45 Destroyer, the Daring class. Another leap in technology, Software-Defined Radios (SDRs), Antennas designed for stealth capability and all shipboard personnel with access to the Internet I stayed on this project until I retired in Dec 2004.

I stayed with the company in all its various disguises, Redifon Communications becoming Rediffusion Radio Systems, becoming Redifon. Then Redifon SPT, followed by Redifon MEL which was then taken over by Thomson CSF. Thomson then changed their name to Thales.

I was appointed as a Trustee of the Redifon Pension scheme in 1991 (after the Maxwell debacle). When Thomson took over Redifon I was elected as a Member Nominated Trustee for the two Thomson schemes. On retirement I was asked to stay on the Trustee Board and a year later re-elected by the members. In 2008 Thales, who were running 9 pension schemes, decided to form one scheme. I was elected again as a Member Nominated Trustee to two sections of the new scheme.