

# The Suitcase Set

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# THE SUITCASE SET

by  
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## INTRODUCTION



Ted Hall

The following story concerns an episode that occurred during WW2 in which I was involved. I have given it the title of "*The Suitcase Set*" as I believe it could be read by those who have an interest in Amateur Radio and probably know about the set from programmes on TV and radio.

A few words about my RAF career prior to becoming a member of MI5 (SOE.) Special Operations Executive. As a result of a recruiting campaign by the Government for all three fighting services begun in 1936, I decided to join the RAF in August 1937. When asked what I wanted to do by the Recruiting Sergeant I could only say I wanted to learn to be a pilot. I was so ignorant about what comprised the crew of a plane believing the only requirement was a pilot. It was explained that it would first, be necessary to be trained as a wireless operator and then apply to become a member of a bomber squadron.

After three months disciplinary training and a year at the Cranwell wireless school I emerged at the end of 1938 as a w/op 2nd class and sent for further training in the erection of mobile DIF stations. When war was declared in September 1939 I was sent to France and subsequently to Egypt for the North African campaign serving with 73 Squadron equipped with Hurricanes.

How I became involved with the SOE is covered in the story. It shows that my involvement was by accident rather than from any thoughts of a heroic adventure. I am, now, of the age where it is easier to look back rather than think about the future so, I make no excuses for having the opportunity to recall some of the incidents which took place.

Hope you enjoy the story.

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## CHAPTER ONE

I had served in North Africa from November 1940 with 73 Squadron equipped with Hurricanes. Our job was to provide fighter cover for the 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division. My story commences in April 1943.

The Allies for the first time were beginning to show that they could match the aggressiveness of the enemy under General Rommel. In 1943 a number of those who had been with 73 from the beginning of the Desert War were posted to other units in the Nile Delta.

This became necessary, as bully beef and hardtack biscuits with hot sweet tea were all we had to eat and drink and the results of this poor diet were beginning to show.

I thought I had drawn an easy number when told that I was posted to Southern Rhodesia as an instructor teaching Canadians how to operate the radio equipment used in Beaufighters. They had been flying Beaus as night fighters in Southern England. These were equipped with RADAR hence their lack of knowledge of HF sets.

I arrived at RAF headquarters in Cairo and was informed that the only method of transport to Rhodesia, at that time, was by ship to South Africa and sailing was limited due to the action of enemy submarines which operated off the East Coast of Africa. A couple of weeks went by, with me asking, every two or three days, about progress in my travel arrangements. For the first time since hostilities commenced in September '39 I felt as if I had been side-tracked, and was impatient to start the next phase of my service life. After three weeks, I received a message asking me to see the Officer responsible for the movement of personnel. My hopes were rekindled and I hurried off to find out what was to happen to me. The officer said he had made numerous requests for information from the Merchant Navy about my transfer but there had been no positive reply. My disappointment must have shown. However, instead of letting me walk away, he had more to say, and I was completely unaware of the unexpected outcome of his words.

He told me that a message had been received from a non-RAF unit in Cairo with the title of MO4 (Military Operations 4). Their request was

for the transfer of wireless operators who had considerable field experience and could be recommended for work of a special nature. He said that in the Middle East the RAF was already short of operators so he couldn't comply with the request from MO4, but he implied that it might be something I could do whilst waiting for my transfer. I suspect, too, he wanted to hear no more of my persistent questions about when I could get moving again, and saw this as his opportunity to kill two birds with one stone, to coin a phrase!

'Why not go and see them,' he suggested. I agreed to the suggestion because I was given little to do in my present, temporary, position. At least it would allow me to think I could be useful to someone. He then handed me a piece of paper on which was written: *Mr. Robins, 6 Rue Eleusis, Cairo 4. Tel. 812 324.* 'Memorise the content and then destroy the paper,' he instructed.

All of this I found strange. First there was the title of Mr., not a rank, and secondly, it was a private address. I found it quite intriguing. I telephoned the mysterious Mr. Robins and made an appointment to see him on the following day. Early the next morning, burning with curiosity, I took a taxi to Rue Eleusis, which turned out to be a dormitory area used by non-Egyptians. There were low-rise apartment blocks interspersed with large houses. The houses were fronted by well-kept gardens and number 6 one of these.

When I rang the doorbell I was asked my name and business by a voice from a concealed loudspeaker. I said my name was Hall and I had an appointment to see Mr. Robins. With that, the door clicked open. I entered the building and found myself in an entrance hall at the far end of which were double doors. I walked along the hall and pushed open one of these doors, this led into a large room.

It contained a number of tables and chairs, and about twenty men in army and naval uniform, standing or sitting and chatting in small groups. Mixed in with them were a few others in civilian clothes. As I entered the room, one of these came towards me. He offered his hand.

'Good morning, Sergeant, my name is Ron Simpson,' he said. 'Mr. Robins is expecting you. Follow me please.' We climbed a large

staircase to the first floor where there were six doors. Simpson tapped on the first of these and a voice from within told us to enter. As we did so a tall, well-built man, aged about fifty, also in civilian clothes, rose from behind a large desk. We shook hands and he introduced himself but failed to mention what position he held. He spoke unaccented English.

‘Would you like tea or coffee, Sergeant?’

‘Coffee, please,’ I replied.

Simpson then departed; presumably to organise the refreshments.

Robins invited me to take a chair on the opposite side of his desk.

‘Are you mystified by our request for wireless operators?’ he began.

‘Not particularly’ I replied. ‘The exchange of personnel between Services often takes place, but I don’t know who you are.’ One thing the war had taught us was the need for extreme caution when dealing with civilians, and I was used to receiving instructions from men whose rank was clearly evident.

There was a slight pause ‘I’m afraid, for the moment I can’t tell you, for security reasons,’ he said, almost as if he had been reading my mind. ‘I realise we’re asking a lot of you, to offer yourself for something about which you have little knowledge but, on occasions, that’s the way it is in wartime.’ ‘I came here today to find out what type of work is to be undertaken and for how long,’ I persisted. ‘I’m due to go to Rhodesia shortly and my bosses thought I might be able to help you until my transport is available.’

Robins thought about this for a short while and then said, ‘Supposing I could get agreement with RAF HQ that your journey would be held in abeyance until after you have completed your work with us, would you then consider joining us?’ He gave me a confiding smile.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said stubbornly, ‘but before I can reply I must know more about the work and the length of time involved.’

This caused him to hesitate again, but after a short while he said, ‘Normally, at this stage, I would decline to elaborate. But in view of this *impasse*, which I can quite understand, I have to acknowledge that our shortage of wireless operators changes the situation. As you will know, to train somebody to operate a radio receiver and transmitter,

using Morse code at 20/25 words per minute, and gain field experience takes at least two years. As a result, our plans are held up because we have only just started our own training programme. For the present, we find ourselves dependent on the three main Services for a supply of skilled operators, but our requests are constantly met by them telling us they are short of operators for their own requirements. So, if you are prepared to sign our security form, which is similar to that of the Official Secrets Act, I’m prepared to tell you who we are and what our function is. You might think we are being fussy, but we have to be particularly careful here, in Egypt, as the locals have no particular liking for the British, and we are aware that there are many enemy agents about.’

He gazed intently at me, as if willing me to accept his proposal.

‘Providing I still have the right to opt out at the end of the meeting, I’m prepared to sign your security form,’ I said. With that, he produced a document and I started to read it, but found I couldn’t concentrate and, in any case, I didn’t understand it all. I reasoned that, if I kept my trap shut, I would conform to the requirement, so I signed and he countersigned. At this point our discussion was interrupted by the return of Simpson with the coffee. I was beginning to find the situation interesting and wondered just what was involved. After coffee, we continued our conversation, and I started the ball rolling by putting a card or two of my own on the table.

‘If you can obtain a postponement for the Rhodesian posting and I could have that in writing, I would think seriously about joining you,’ I told Robins. When Robins heard this, his eyes lit up and he said, ‘We do have considerable influence in matters of this sort, and I believe I can get agreement with the RAF, today, for the posting to be held until your return. Of course, I can’t get the decision in writing at such short notice. If I can arrange the matter verbally, you will have to take my word for it that the confirmation will follow. Before we met, I had no knowledge about your forward commitment, but I had every hope that you would consent to join us, so I’ve arranged for a medical examination and a session with a psychoanalyst.’

‘Why don’t we proceed with this arrangement and afterwards you can return to me?’ In the meantime, I will discuss the matter of your transfer and, I hope, have a positive answer for you in a matter of hours. There will be time for the medical before lunch and I will arrange for Simpson to take you to a nice little Italian restaurant nearby.’

I agreed to this suggestion and he rang for Simpson. When he arrived, Robins asked him to conduct me to Dr Andrews and, afterwards, arrange a table for lunch at Riminto’s for the pair of us. After lunch, Simpson was to escort me to Mr Collins. I shook hands with Robins and we left the room.

‘You must be an important guest,’ said Simpson. ‘Lunch at Riminto’s is regarded as something special.’ I had no reply for this remark but was feeling flattered by the attention I was receiving.

## CHAPTER TWO

Dr. Andrews’s surgery was behind the last of the six doors. When I had been introduced, Simpson asked if he could be informed when I was free. The medical was thorough, but not as extensive as the one for aircrew. At the conclusion, Dr. Andrews said, ‘You’re in pretty good shape young man.’ He put the cap back on his fountain pen and rang for Simpson.

Riminto’s was a small, air-conditioned restaurant, with a number of potted palms and other trailing plants to provide a relaxing atmosphere, where the food was well prepared and presented, though pasta dishes are not among my favourites. During the course of the meal, I tried to find out something about the organisation, but Simpson said he was not at liberty to discuss the matter, which made conversation a little difficult and left me feeling mildly uncomfortable.

On our return, I was taken up to the second floor of the house, where Collins had his office. My ignorance of the medical profession was such that anyone who was not simply a doctor, surgeon or nurse, with a title of psychoanalyst or neurophysiologist put the practitioner in the land of mumbo-jumbo.

After introduction to Collins, I was asked to lie on a couch and relax. He then asked a number of questions, mainly about my early youth and schooling. I explained that my father had been killed in a road accident when I was five years old and my brother three. My mother was left penniless and had been compelled to take a full-time job. As a result, we were sent to a rough, tough boarding school for fatherless children, in Essex. Shortly after leaving school, I joined the RAF, at the age of seventeen. When Collins had finished his questions, Simpson was informed and while we waited for him to appear, Collins wrote a note, put it in an envelope, and sealed it. Simpson was asked to give the note to Robins.

I was sitting opposite Robins once again, He opened the note from Collins, read it through in silence, folded and slid it back in the envelope. Well,’ he said, ‘I think you will be pleased to know you’ve passed the medical and nothing derogatory has emerged from your session with Collins. I have also been able to establish that your transfer to Rhodesia can be deferred until a later date. Although it’s only a few hours since you made arrangements for this morning’s meeting, I’ve already been able to obtain a copy of your service record. You certainly have had a busy war, with a variety of different types of work, making you just the type of person we require.

‘It’s time for me to explain something about our background, as I promised. MO4 is part of MI5 and was formed as a result of discussions which took place when Mr. Churchill came to Egypt last year, to thank General Montgomery for the Desert victory. Mr. Churchill said that an organisation was to be set up to parallel the SOE (Special Operations Executive), who have been supporting the underground activities in France, Belgium and Holland. Assistance was to be given to any properly organised guerrilla movement operating in Eastern Europe and Italy.

At the present time we have Missions in Crete, Greece, Yugoslavia and Italy. Each Mission usually comprises a leader, an explosives specialist and a wireless operator. The Missions, all volunteers, most

of them wearing uniform, go in either by submarine or parachute and are supported by the dropping of arms, ammunition and other supplies by parachute. Naturally, as the Missions are operating in enemy territory, there is constant danger, but no sabotage or other action is undertaken if there is an unreasonable risk. 'Well, I think I've said enough for you to make up your mind whether to join us.'

I must admit, I had not known quite what to expect by way of explanation from Robins. I felt the need for some time to think.

'If we could have a cup of tea, I'll think it over,' I said cautiously.

'We can have something stronger, if you prefer,' said Robins.

'No, thanks.' I replied.

He phoned Simpson, requested tea and then left me alone in the room for a short while. I was intrigued by what I had heard but not fully convinced that I wanted to take part. However, I couldn't think of a good reason for not doing so. When Robins returned I told him that I had only one question to ask. 'What about the language requirement?'

'Most of our Leaders have the capability to converse in, or at least an understanding of, the language of the country they go to, but we usually find that someone at the other end can speak English.

You would be provided with a phrase book and dictionary in the appropriate language.' After a short hesitation, I said, 'OK, count me in.'

### CHAPTER THREE

'Good man. I'm sure you'll find the work interesting and see that it makes a real contribution to the war effort. Now, let's have that cup of tea and push on, because there is no time to spare and I have quite a bit to tell you. You'll find things will happen rather quickly from now on.'

'That makes a change from recent weeks,' I said, with real feeling.

'You will not return to your unit' Robins said. 'I will inform them and arrange for the transfer of your paper work. Ron Simpson will go and collect your kit tomorrow. A room is available here for the next two nights, pyjamas and shaving kit will be provided. Please don't leave the building without being accompanied by Ron Simpson, your Conducting Officer. Our security is as tight as we can make it, because, in the SOE, in France, some networks have been infiltrated and eliminated due to poor security and we must avoid a similar

situation happening to us.'

He sat back in his seat and assumed a businesslike expression. 'Now, the subject of pay. Do you have a bank account?' 'No,' I replied.

'In that case, any money due to you will be held by our Accounts Department until your return. Our minimum level of pay is for 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant in the RASC, so you will derive a small financial benefit from joining us. In addition, as you'll not be able to write letters home, a telegram will be sent, each month, to your next-of-kin, saying you are fit and well but unable to write. Is all this clear?'

'Yes, I think so,' I said hesitantly.

'Then, I'll press on, because Ron Simpson will be able to fill in any detail required. The day after tomorrow, an aircraft has been arranged to fly three of our people to Ramat David, in Palestine. You will join them. Their destination is the Parachute Regiment Training School. It is a condition that all our field staff are qualified parachutists. This means they will have completed at least five jumps. We have special arrangements with the Paratroopers for them to do a short course of five days for us. The first two days are spent learning how to fall correctly when you land and the next three days are devoted to the jumps. I told you things would happen quickly.'

'I can see you weren't joking.' I replied.

'After the jumping course,' he went on, 'you will go with Lieutenant Marshall, one of the other members of your party, who is also a wireless operator, to Mount Carmel, only a short distance from Ramat David. Here we have our wireless and code training school. You will spend a week with them, putting together the wireless you will be taking with you and also learning our method of coding messages. On your return, you will report to me.'

'To finish our long session,' he said, 'I want to tell you about the other members of staff you will shortly be meeting. Many of them have been members of the LRDG (Long Range Desert Group). This unit has now been disbanded. I think it is highly unlikely that their contribution towards the winning of the Desert War will ever be truly recognised. As the group is disbanded, the members had three options. They could go into either of the two new units being formed: The SAS (Special Air Service) and SBS (Special Boat Service), or join us. We had so many applications that some had to be declined

because we couldn't have employed them all within a relatively short time. The problem was that the LRDG did not have wireless operators who were able to read Morse. They maintained radio silence once they had left base.'

He then made a telephone call to Simpson. 'Ron,' he said, when Simpson appeared, 'I'm sure you'll be pleased to know that Sergeant Hall will be joining us. Will you please show him round the house, see he is accommodated in Room 8, and pick up his kit tomorrow. He will be leaving on Thursday, for Ramat David, with the others. As I will be away tomorrow, please answer any questions he may have. I've rather rushed things today.' Robins turned back to me. 'Well Sergeant,' he said cheerfully, 'I'll not see you again until you return from Palestine. Just one final point, you now have the freedom of the house and there is no doubt that you'll be very popular, as soon as the others see the wireless operator's badge on your uniform. They are all very anxious to get into the field, but lack an operator. Take my advice, avoid detailed discussion with them until you return from the training sessions.'

Simpson showed me round the house. The facilities were excellent and a feeling of friendliness emanating from those we met during our tour; this was a new experience for me, particularly as I had recently spent nearly a couple of years in the desert under canvas. I gave Ron Simpson details about where I had been sleeping at HQ and said I had only a few personal belongings. These would be found in, or on, the locker by the bed. Much of my kit was still unpacked, as I had been expecting the move to Rhodesia. Finally, he took me to Room 8, which contained two beds. I could see no evidence of occupation so presumed I would be alone. He said dinner would be served promptly at 7.30 p.m. and he would look for me in the bar at about 7.

I took a shower and then lay on the bed to think over what had happened during the day. There was no doubt a transformation was going to come about in my life and I could only hope I'd be able to cope with the change. For the previous three or more years of the war I had lived from day-to-day without any thought of the future. Although I had responsibilities, I'd only had to react to orders from above. Now, it could be different and I found the prospect exciting.

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