

July 2004

5 Preparation for service

At a missionary breakfast in my second year at Cambridge the invited speaker was Dr Bill Lees of the Borneo Evangelical Mission. He stressed the value of the Wycliffe Language Course (now Summer Institute of Linguistics) for those preparing to be missionaries. I attended the 12-week course during the summer of 1955, between my second and third years of College. This was held near Abridge, north of Chigwell, north-east of London, on a site used by the army during the war. The men students were all living in a large marquee. A groundsheet, a metal bedstead with a straw mattress and an orange box on end to serve as a dressing table - that's all you had. However, with Christians together from many different backgrounds, some with many years' experience serving the Lord overseas, the fellowship was wonderful.

The summer after I graduated (1956) I returned to the camp near Chigwell to teach. My subject was Phonemics (how to devise an alphabet for an unwritten language). One of the students there was Jean Bellerby. Our friendship deepened during the course, and by the time Jean had to leave we were convinced that the Lord meant us for one another.

Jean had just completed a degree in English at Durham University, and had to return for another year to study for her Diploma in Education. I had to do my two years National Service in the RAF.

In autumn 1956 I reported to Cardington (near Bedford) for my first few days in the RAF. There I was issued with my uniform and kit. Cardington was the site of two enormous hangars which had been erected to accommodate airships such as the R101, each of them the size of many football pitches. One day we had to sweep part of one of these hangars. I recall seeing inflated weather balloons, at least 40 feet in diameter, looking quite small on the floor of the hangar. Then we saw movement, and realised that there were women inside them, looking for leaks.

We were taken by sealed train from Cardington to West Kirby, near Birkenhead, to begin three months 'square-bashing'. In our compartment was a Lancashire lad who found it hard to speak any sentence without ending it with 'you know' or 'like'. He was conscious of his problem. He said, 'I'm always saying, "you know", like, and "like", you know.'

At West Kirby each flight had a corporal to lick them into shape. The first evening when we were assembled our corporal told us we were likely to be sworn at continually, and asked if there was anyone who objected to being sworn at. I had heard of this from the Christian fiance of a friend of Jean's, who had had this experience and regretted that he had not spoken up. So I put my hand up - the only one who dared to. The corporal looked at me indignantly and told me with many oaths that I would be sworn at from morning till night. Never mind, I had made my point.

When the three months at West Kirby were over we were scattered to various trade training stations. I was sent to Yatesbury, near Calne in Wiltshire, where I was to be trained for nine months as an air radar fitter. Our flight consisted of some National Servicemen and some regulars. The first night in the billet I determined to pray kneeling by my bedside. There was so much noise I could not concentrate without putting my hands over my ears. I had not been long in this position before I felt someone shaking me by the shoulder. It was one of the regulars, concerned to know if I was all right.

I was fascinated to learn electronics (though with thermionic valves, not transistors) and understand the working of amplifiers, oscillators, multi-vibrators and flip-flops. After passing all the tests I became a Junior Technician, with one stripe upside down.

My next posting was to Spitalgate, on the hill above Grantham. Our flight had charge of several ancient Avro Ansons. Radar maintenance was limited to flipping the aerial before the plane took off and after it landed, to see that it was still there. I have never been so bored in my life.

One Christmas I was put on fire picket, so Christmas dinner was provided in the mess. It was a very good meal, and by tradition the officers and senior NCOs served us, from the Station Commander down. I was given New Year off instead. When I returned from that leave I found that at last they had discovered that they did not have an establishment for a radar fitter. I was posted away at a moment's notice.

My final station was Henlow, near Biggleswade, Bedfordshire. I was attached to the Guided Missiles wing, though I knew nothing about guided missiles. During the summer Jean was teaching at Chigwell, so I spent one weekend there, cycling each way. Jean tried her hand at cutting my hair. When I got back, the Flight Sergeant asked, 'Who cut your hair, Day?' 'A friend of mine, Flight,' I replied. 'No friend of yours,' he said. 'Oh, it'll grow,' I suggested. 'It'll have to!' he retorted.

In the autumn of 1958 Jean and I went for a year to the Bible Training Institute in Glasgow. Though we were attending the same Bible school, we saw little of one another. Men and women were for the most part strictly segregated, so we hardly had time to talk together except we went to church on Sunday morning, or when there was a hike on a Wednesday afternoon.

In the summer of 1959 we were back teaching at the Wycliffe Language Course near Chigwell. During that summer we felt it was right to apply to join Wycliffe Bible Translators. We were accepted, on the understanding that, since we had an interest in the Far East, we would go to Viet Nam. We spent the autumn in

deputation work, travelling round and speaking about the work of WBT.

We were married in January 1960. In the February, along with a number of others, we set sail from Southampton on the SS United States bound for New York, along with a number of other new British WBT members. After a few days there, we travelled by Greyhound long distance coach to Laredo, Texas, and then to Mexico City.