

Extracts taken and abridged from **Beneath The Clouds** - Jackie Stuart

Life on an airbase

"After supper the first man who got back to the hut had to build a fire. That was if we had any fuel. Our heating for this airy, cold and uninsulated steel shed was a wood burning stove. We were not allowed to keep a fire in the stove during the day when we were working. Our wood and coal was strictly rationed and our hut was ALWAYS damp and cold when we returned at night. Our huts were never ever warm, but they were less miserable when we managed to get fuel. The summer was Ok, but the winters were really tough."

Problems with rats!

"I woke up one night to find something walking around on the top of my blanket down near my feet. The first thing I thought was that a cat had got in to the hut somehow and had jumped on my bed. I let him walk around for a bit until he got to my waist. When he got there I knocked him so hard he flew clean across the hut. I got up and turned the light on and to my surprise saw that it was not a cat, but a very, very, very large rat!"

Dealing with Mud

"Mud was the biggest thing that we had to do battle with on the airbase. In the early days we used to sing 'it always rains in England, at least once a day, and it

always rains on Sunday because it has more time!' The mud was horrific and you could not get away from it. It was in your hair, your clothes, your hut and your bed. It made our lives impossible."

Fear of flying

"At first we were childish and innocent. We thought that we couldn't get hurt and that nothing bad would ever happen to us. However, the first time we saw a plane exploding in front of us a falling out of the sky we realised what we were in for. It was not glamorous. It was terrifying. The fear of dying never left us. We always wondered, when will it be me? Or, who will be next? The worse thing was returning to our huts after a mission and seeing an empty bunk. It was then we realised one of our friends had died, and was never coming back."

Meeting the locals

"The English people were quiet but kind. They lived in small houses and everything seemed old fashioned. We had to remember that they had been living in a war zone for years, so their clothes were tatty and their homes were cold.

There was a family up the road; their son was fighting in the war, so I think they were lonely. They used to invite some of us boys to their house for Sunday lunch and the use of a comfy bed. They were very polite and kind. They did not have as much money as us Americans so their food was very basic and sometimes pretty grim. We were really grateful anyway. It was nice just to be in an actual home and away from the mud and the mice on the airbase!

Arriving in England

"On our arrival to England we struck by how green everything was, and how small the fields were. The hedgerows were thick and full of old looking trees - England was green, green beyond anything we had ever seen at home. We were also shocked by the beautiful antique looking towns and villages, and by the amount of thatched roof cottages. We had never seen so many old houses and churches. It was so different to back home."

Village dances

One Saturday night, me and about 30 other Americans decided to go down to the dance at the local village. For most people in the village it was the first time they had ever met an American. They were shy and curious - the older men were downright suspicious of us. However as the night went on we made ourselves at home, dancing with the local women and having a good time. It was a noisy and happy night, and by the end even the older men had warmed to us!"

Conditions on board

"Some missions in the aeroplanes can last up to eight hours. That means eight hours of being terrified, freezing and miserable. We have to expect attacks from fighters with machine guns, rockets and heavy anti-aircraft fire from the ground. Bombs can even be dropped from above us. The planes are unheated and the temperature often drops to below minus 60 degrees centigrade. We have to wear oxygen masks which usually freeze onto our faces. If we try to take them off in a hurry we can rip the skin off around our mouths."