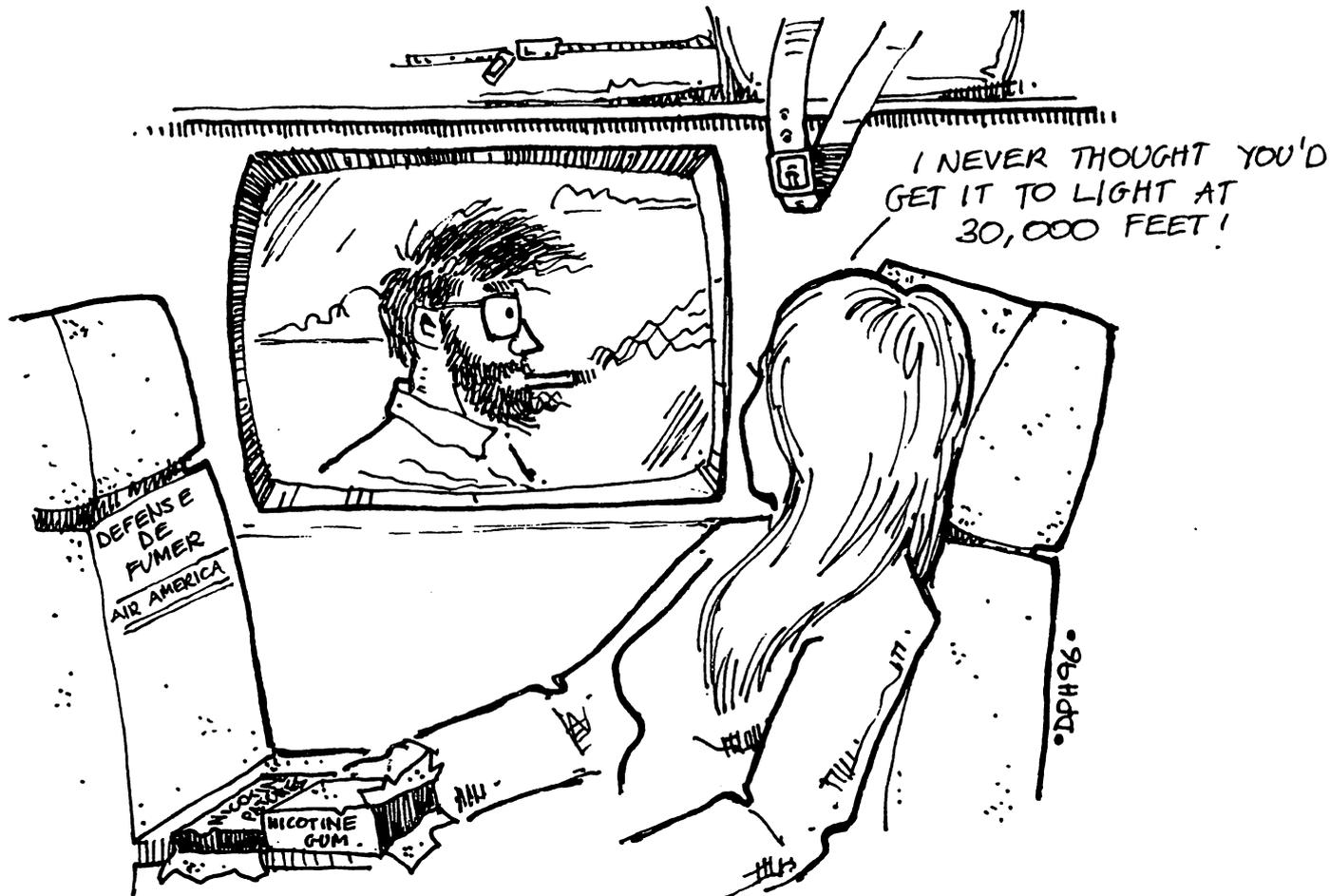


HAVE BAG WILL TRAVEL

TAFF BULLETIN #1



Part One: "Gimme Some Money"

After months of nail-biting tension it was finally happening - we'd got the all clear to go ahead and book our tickets! I'd been checking out various travel agencies for a few months and had an idea where to go for the best deal so I started calling people. Immediately, however, I ran into a problem - there were no seats available out of Heathrow on any of the days we needed to travel. We decided we'd have to fly from Birmingham, forking out the extra 200+ pounds each and even then we'd have to settle for a no smoking flight.

Next problem was how to pay - the money was going to be taken another week to clear through my account, but with the popularity of our dates I figured we couldn't wait that long; so I called my brother Keith who agreed to slap it on his credit card for a week. He also suggested trying a company called Trailfinders, which I did and miraculously they had two seats out of Heathrow (due to a cancellation that day) on United Airlines, as well as seats on all the internal flights we needed. Even better than that the all-inclusive price was several hundred pounds cheaper than anyone else. (Although, of course, they were all no smoking, gulp.)

With just six weeks to go things were getting quite hectic: I still had to produce two BSGF newsletters, the fourth Novacon 26 progress report and EMPTIES #17; I needed to tie down a hotel for Novacon 27; finish printing, collating and mailing WAVE #47; organize the auction material and get it to the USA - and time was running out. Then I was informed that the Elderly Resource Centre where I worked was being closed and that, as my job was disappearing, the Council were putting me on the redeployment list. They went

on to inform me that there weren't any jobs in the pipeline. Great, by the time I came back from the USA I'd have nowhere to work.

I must admit I started to panic. I'd already been applying for jobs, and was waiting for replies from four of them, but I'd figured we had until March 1997 - the end of the financial year - to get sorted. Wrong! As I was already working a 45 hour week (to make up sufficient flex time to add two much needed days to my annual leave for the trip) and spending my usual 20 hours per week travelling to and from work there really wasn't enough time to do any more than chase for replies to existing jobs. I checked the papers for vacancies anyway, but there was nothing going.

Of course, this news meant a lot more work at the office as well. We'd started winding things up as soon as we realized that it was likely the Centre wouldn't continue, but there was still a hell of a lot to do and only a month or so to do it in.

There wasn't much more I could do about the job situation than I was already doing so I put it out of my mind and concentrated on the fanac. I finished printing and collating CRITICAL WAVE #47 and decided I should get out a TAFF newsletter to let people know what was happening, remind everyone in the UK that TAFF existed and plug the TAFF auctions I intended to organize. I produced TAFFlon Tudor #1 on 17 July and mailed it out with WAVE, the August Birmingham SF Group newsletter, and sent bundles to everyone I thought would be willing to distribute them.

Fortunately a Novacon committee meeting was cancelled - which gave me an extra weekend to play with and I got stuck in to doing EMPTIES #17. Dave Cox had lent me his laptop computer to take with me on my trip so that I could produce HAVE BAG, WILL TRAVEL more easily, but never having used a laptop before I figured producing EMPTIES on it would give me a head start and if I was to run into any problems with it it would be easier to sort them out when Dave was just a trunk rather than an international phonecall away. As it happened his laptop had Word 6 loaded on it, and as I was already familiar with Word 5.5 I picked it up quite easily. I managed to produce some copies of E#17 for the committee meeting of Attitude: The Convention on 3 August and hand them out.

Attitude was looking in good shape, so the only work that meeting generated for me was a letter of confirmation to the Abbey Hotel in Great Malvern. Pam Wells had brought a load of fanzines for the TAFF auctions up with her to the meeting that weekend, so I spent every available moment the following week sorting through them as well as sorting my own fanzines which I had collected out of storage at my mother's and from the Evans' at Cape Hill.

The days sped by and suddenly, on 9 August, Greg Pickersgill and Catherine McAulay arrived with another load of fanzines to be sorted.

Greg and Catherine had come up to collect seven boxes of stuff that I was donating to Memory Hole (it was impractical to auction all 16 years worth of my fanzines and we needed the space). They also wanted to attend the special MiSFiTs "Good Riddance to the Tudors" meeting/farewell party at Paul Berry's pub the Three Tuns in Willenhall. Quite a crowd showed up with locals such as Tony Berry, Dave Cox, Theresa Derwen, Mick and Bernie Evans and Anne and Alan Woodford being supplemented by Greg and Catherine, Pam Wells, Julian Headlong, Chris Murphy, Mike Siddall, Cat Coast and Dave Hicks (the latter bringing the first four of the HAVE BAG, WILL TRAVEL headings and swiftly drawing the final two, whilst sitting, hungover, on our sofa Saturday morning!)

After over-indulging on the Friday and Saturday nights, Greg got stuck into re-sorting the auction material for me. We had several piles of stuff by the time we'd finished: material to take/send to the USA; fanzines for the postal auction (coming to a TAFF newsletter near you in November!); stuff for the Novacon auction; material we decided wouldn't sell which went off to Memory Hole. (*PLUG* For information regarding Memory Hole contact Greg Pickersgill, 3 Bethany Row, Narberth Road, Haverfordwest, Pembrokeshire, SA61 2XG.)

I was still waiting on several specific issues of fanzines to complete runs or part runs of material before I could mail them to the USA. Unfortunately as Britain was suffering the most disruptive series of national postal strikes since the seventies, I checked the post each day to no avail.

I'd arranged a meeting with the Britannia Hotel in Wolverhampton on 13 August. A lovely, old, worn-out "station hotel", the Britannia has suffered

an unfortunate "refurbishment" which has destroyed most of the previous bar/lounge space - turning it into a plastic wine bar area and tacky looking restaurant. So, despite reasonable prices and half-way decent function space it wasn't suitable for a Novacon. (If anyone is looking for a venue for a convention of 120-180 people, however, this is your place!)

When I got home I opened the mail to find a letter about the last of the four jobs I'd applied for. I now had a full set - they'd all turned me down. Shit.

Another postal strike on the 14 August had delayed the fanzines again, but finally on Thursday 15 August they arrived. My mother-in-law and Helena's brother Pete came and collected the two hastily packaged parcels that night; and I called UPS couriers on Friday morning to collect them from their house. (With Helena and I both out at work from early morning to late evening each day, it was the only way we could dispatch the parcels.) Finally things were going right - 42kg of fanzines were on their way to Arnie and Joyce Katz, and at my redeployment interview on Thursday morning my Area Manager had confirmed that she had a post for me at Selly Oak Area office - whoopee!

On Friday morning, the 16 August, I stopped off to draw some cash from the ATM on my way to work. It was the BSGF meeting that night, with my illustrious ex-opponent Simo addressing the Group on the delights of working for SFX magazine. As usual I was heading straight to the meeting from the office and as my bus passes the Prince Hotel before it reaches the city centre and I don't pass a cashpoint, I needed to get some money on my way to work.

The machine read "Service Declined".

Now I knew I had plenty of cash in the account - all the spending money for the trip had been paid in and while some of it may not have cleared there should have been a few hundred quid at least.

I tried for a balance enquiry - "Service Declined".

Shit.

So when I got to the office I called Girobank who said that my account had been closed on 13 August. "WHY!" I enquired, they told me that there had been a review of my account and, as they hadn't approved of the way in which it had been handled over the last 12 months, it had been closed, my direct debits and standing orders had been cancelled and there was a letter in the post informing me of this.

[Now, those of you who have read my article "'All Banks Are Bastards' (Trad.)" in Tony Berry's EYEBALLS IN THE SKY, will know that I have had more than my share of problems with banks over the years. But until the Alliance & Leicester Building Society had taken them over 18 months ago, Girobank had been an exceptionally reliable bank. Last year, however, I had several run-ins with them over their annoying habit of treating cash deposits as cheques (and taking four working days to clear them) and their even more annoying habit of paying one of my direct debits twice each month and bouncing all my standing orders (charging 10-25 pounds a time in fees) which constantly put my account into the red. Eventually, after contacting the Banking Ombudsman, I received a letter of apology and a refund of over 200 pounds in charges. A brief six month period followed where they did their job and then early this year they'd started their old tricks again. I'd been keeping a dossier of all their mistakes and intended, on my return from the USA, to open an account with another bank, and then report Girobank to the Banking Ombudsman and their parent company Alliance & Leicester to the Building Societies Ombudsman (who has considerably more power).

[They'd beaten me to it. Obviously realizing that, as my account had more money in it than ever before, this was the best chance they were going to get to claw back not only the overdraft but also help themselves to as many fees and charges as they cared to invent.]

Somehow, through a superhuman effort of will, I kept my temper and enquired, politely, how I was supposed to get my money back with my account closed. They told me that they'd sent me a cash cheque in "a week or two" as soon as they'd calculated and deducted outstanding charges. I pointed out that within the week I'd be flying to the USA for the best part of a month and needed MY money back NOW. They told me it would take at LEAST a week. I pointed out that I had only just received a bank statement including charges

up to the 8 August and that if, as they said, they'd closed my account on the 13 August they only had five days of charges to calculate - how could it take longer than the period to be charged to calculate the charges? They replied it would take a week to ten days to calculate the charges after which they would send a cash cheque.... Having used the "broken record" trick on difficult clients myself I realized I wasn't going to get any further and told them I'd be back in touch.

Once I'd finished smashing my head against the desk and swearing profusely I called our Salaries department to stop them paying my salary into my now defunct account on the 21 August (the day before we left for the USA). Too late, said Richard at Salaries, the instructions went out yesterday. Between sobs I explained my circumstances and, kindly soul that he is, he promised to do what he could and get back to me in a few hours.

Next I took a deep breath and called Helena at her office to ask if she had any cash she could bring along that night for the BSFG meeting and to get the details of HER Girobank account. (The only way I could think of to get our hands on the money was if we could persuade Girobank to transfer whatever money they left me with into her account - where she could draw on it from a Visa compatible ATM in the USA.) Once she'd stopped hyper-ventilating she confirmed she'd draw some cash for the evening and gave me her bank details.

Girobank agreed that if I wrote a letter of authorization they would transfer the cash.

I somehow made it through the day without slitting my wrists or leaping on a train to Bootle to deal (in a terminal manner) with "C J Longworth" at Girobank; at 15.30 Richard called back to confirm that if I could get into Birmingham and report to the Council Tax office on Wednesday, there would be a cheque for my salary waiting which I'd be able to cash at the Co-Op bank around the corner. Phew, we'd have some spending money at least.

Now, if I was spending all of my salary on dollars I needed to find a way to pay my bills while I was out of the country. Intersection had promised to pay Dan Steffan's hotel room bill from the convention and there was supposed to be a cheque in the post. Dan had told me to use the cash (thus avoiding bank charges for conversion) and we'd sort out the two TAFF accounts when I got to Washington DC. So I called Alice Lawson to ask whether the cheque had been mailed yet and if not to make it payable to my wife Helena. It turned out that the cheque was in the post made out to me. I called National Westminster, where the WAVE account is held, to confirm that I could endorse the back and clear it through them. They said this would be fine. Whew. So I could leave post-dated cheques with Helena's brother, Pete, who was house-sitting and my bills would be paid. I called all the organizations who were due payments and explained that I was changing banks and that they would be paid by cheque this month and requested new standing order/direct debit mandates.

The next day, Saturday 17 August, Helena and I rolled into the Abbey National to convert her unused account there into a joint account, so that I could arrange for my September salary to be paid in (as my Salaries department could only make one cheque payment per year). Finally we were sorted.

When we got back home I continued copying EMPTIES #17 and THE TUDOR DYNASTY - the latter being a collection of my fan writing that Bernie Evans had produced for my TAFF campaign. Beautifully illustrated by Daves Hicks and Mooring, these had been mailed out to fans in Britain but, thanks to the Post Office losing the US masters, it had never appeared in the USA. Having managed to dispatch all the heavy auction material I figured we could use our luggage allowance to transport fanzines to the States; so I was trying to produce 200 copies of EMPTIES and TTD to take with us - I'd convinced Helena that non-essentials, such as clothes, could be purchased over there! (Copies of THE TUDOR DYNASTY are available from me at Toner or Lacon III for a \$5.00 - or more! - donation to TAFF.)

But, of course, with its usual impeccable sense of timing (which comes, free of charge, with the machine's built-in "critical stress analyzer") the WAVE copier broke down on Sunday night. On Monday morning I called our service company to arrange for an engineer to call on Wednesday - well it wasn't as if I had anything better to do the day before we travelled....

Tuesday, 20 August, was a fun-filled day. As it was my last day of work at the Billesley Resource Centre for the Elderly (when I return from the USA I'll be starting my new job at the Selly Oak Area Office), Ann Conrad, one of

my colleagues, had organized a leaving lunch and a collection. A wonderful buffet had been prepared by Ann with an excellent curry and rice supplied by Sheila Parmar, a Home Care Assistant, and in the region of 50 people showed up. I was presented with an engraved tankard and over 50 pounds in cash (VERY useful) from the people at the office and a \$20.00 note from the staff at our parent office "to gamble in Vegas" - a really nice send off.

I arrived home from work shortly before 9pm on Tuesday to be welcomed by a mountain of mail - we hadn't received a delivery for several days. Amongst this was a letter from the Passport Agency telling me that as my cheque from two months (!) previous had bounced, my passport would be impounded unless payment by postal order was received before it was used.

Panic.

We were due to fly on Thursday morning. There was another postal strike scheduled for Thursday - short of traveling to Peterborough and paying in cash or finding a courier to take the postal orders same day on Wednesday there was no way I could guarantee payment before I had to use my, now apparently invalid, passport....

Helena and I, given the fact we couldn't do anything about this until the following morning at 9am, went to the pub and wept into our drinks.

Wednesday morning the copier engineer arrived bright and early at 8.15, fixed the copier and left by 8.40. At 9.05 I was talking to the Passport Agency - don't worry, they reassured me, it is a form letter, just send the postal orders and as long as the payment clears you'll be fine. You'll be able to leave the country no problem, but if the payment isn't made we'll impound your passport on your return. Hell, I thought, they can have it then!

I quickly copied the flyers for the September meeting of the BSFG, copied the covers of the newsletter; dashed into Birmingham, collected my salary cheque, cashed it, collected some money from Tim Stannard which Dave Holmes had arranged to be repaid to me, delivered the flyers to Andromeda for Steve Jones, the BSFG's publicity officer, to collect, hurried back to Walsall and bought the dollars from Co-Op Travel, got my haircut and went home where Helena's brother Pete, took me to Staples to collect more paper. Then I started copying the interior pages of the September newsletter: the copier broke down again.

I sat down and cried, again.

Then I called Bernie Evans to check that it was okay to send her the masters of the newsletter for her to copy for my return. It was, and I did.

Luckily I'd finished copying TTD, I just needed to take the masters for EMPTIES #17 to the USA and get it copied there.

Despite all this, by staying up all night, Helena (who'd managed to grab a few hours sleep) and I were packed, showered and ready for 5am on Thursday 22 August when my brother, Stephen, and his wife, Tracy, were supposed to collect us and drive us down to Heathrow....

By 5.30am, after several phonecalls to their house - and messages on their ansaphone, we were starting to panic. I called Wolverhampton station and checked train times: to make our flight we'd have to catch the 6.15am train to London, which meant we'd need to be in a taxi by 5.45am. I was calling a second taxi company when Stephen and Tracy arrived - at 5.40am....

The drive to Heathrow was uneventful (thank God) and we were soon being processed through the system at Heathrow. The officials were obviously dubious about why I should be taking a laptop computer on what I claimed was a holiday - strangely Helena's explanation about a trip report didn't satisfy them, but when she mentioned she worked for the government they let us through, doubtless deciding we were spies.

There were further problems, of course, at the x-ray machine, but eventually after loading the pc and proving it wasn't actually a bomb in disguise we got through.

After an hour or so wait in the departure lounge our Gate number was announced - it was Gate 13.

Now Helena had been very good and patient so far. She'd put up with my incredible run of bad luck through job scares, banking problems and invalid passports - but this was the final straw. But she took a deep breath, and taking her life in her hands, she headed off through Gate 13 with a man, she was now convinced, was the unluckiest man on earth. Brave? Foolhardy? Only time can tell.

Well, we made it to the Dulles in Washington DC with only minor turbulence suffered and body and soul intact - and without having to resort to a single nicotine patch or piece of nicotine gum!

We had been due to wait 2 hours 45 minutes for our connecting flight, but as our flight was early arriving and our departure to Vegas was delayed, this turned into closer to five hours. But all was not lost - down by Gate D28 we found not only a Samuel Adams bar with several excellent beers but a smoking lounge! So more relaxed and happier than we'd been for several days we headed off, at 6pm, for our flight to Vegas - in Row 13...

Obviously, though the gods were quite obviously playing with us, they meant us no harm and an uneventful flight again followed.

As we staggered off the "mobile lounge" into the airport, at 8pm Vegas time, I was feeling tired and dreading trying to find my way to the baggage claim. Having stumbled over the carpet, I glanced up and there stood a tall guy, with fair, spiky hair, holding a piece of cardboard with "Toner for Tudor" scrawled on it; I staggered over and introduced myself and Helena - we'd arrived.

[This has been the first of six installments of HAVE BAG, WILL TRAVEL Martin Tudor's 1996 TAFF Trip Report; written on the mornings of the 23 & 24 August. Future installments will be available, as they appear, from Bernie Evans, 121 Cape Hill, Smethwick, Warley, West Midlands, B66 4SH, England (send five self-addressed, stamped envelopes or ten IRCs).

[The completed report (with an introduction, lots of splendid illustrations and seventh installment/conclusion) will be available in November 1996 from Martin Tudor, 24 Ravensbourne Grove, (off Clarkes Lane,) Willenhall, West Midlands, WV13 1HX, for a mere minimum £3.00 donation to TAFF (or the equivalent of £5.00 outside the UK), inclusive of postage and packing. Cheques/money orders payable to "Martin Tudor".

[Many thanks to DAVE HICKS for the illustrated headings; BERNIE EVANS and DAVE LANGFORD for British production and distribution; DAVE COX for the loan of his laptop (camera and card 'n'dollars!); HELENA TUDOR for sub-editing this when she'd much rather have been sleeping; and whichever kind person printed the US masters for this issue and e-mailed the text to the UK.]