

Theft of my Blazer containing my Passport etc at the Eurostar Terminal at Waterloo on the 21st August 1997, en-route to Wilhelmshaven - Joe Kinson

Someone on reading my article “My life after PRS”, in which I commented “that attending the 1997 Reunion in Wilhelmshaven was a reunion that many of you will now know I was determined not to miss, no matter what obstacles got in the way”, asked “what were the obstacles that got in my way?” Only a few close friends knew the whole story, so here is what happened.

I had originally planned to fly from Manchester Airport with the O’Brien twins and another Rodney girl called Maureen Sanders (maiden name), we four having all been in Rodney House. However, when George Gladwish was located, and wanted to go by train, I said I would travel with him, as he had recently undergone heart surgery. Mike Griffiths, also wanted to travel by train, so we three Rodneyites, decided to meet up at Waterloo Station. I met up with Mike Griffiths and we had a snack at Waterloo Station, while waiting for George to arrive. My change of plans almost cost me the opportunity to attend the 50th Anniversary Reunion at Wilhelmshaven.

The day of our travel, which was a Thursday, was probably the hottest of the year, and the sweat was just pouring from everyone, so I took my blazer off, and carried it. We proceeded to the Eurostar Terminal at the end of the station, and met up with lots of friends. Typically, we were all chatting like mad, and I placed my blazer on a hook on my baggage trolley. Near the time of our departure, George went to our collection point and tried to collect our tickets. Having made the booking for George and myself, I was the tour leader for my group (George and me), but they would only give them to me, so George came and said I needed to collect them. I said to the group with whom I had been chatting, keep an eye on my blazer and luggage and went to collect the tickets. On my return we were so busy chatting I did not realise that my blazer had been stolen from under their noses. Considering in my absence there where two men and five ladies, the thief was very experienced and probably part of a team with lookouts telling him when to make his move.

When it was time to get on Eurostar and I needed my passport, I realised my blazer had been stolen, so reported the loss to the Transport Police and made a report of what was in the blazer, and was given an incident report number and a copy of the report for insurance purposes. It meant although I had my tickets for the train, without the passport I was unable to travel. Tony Griffiths, another pal who lives in Kenya, tried to coax me to get on the train, but I realised that would only make my predicament even worse and foil any attempt at trying to get to Germany. I remained with my group until they left and just as they had boarded, two sisters (Jackie and Josie Witham) turned up, and were very distressed, as they could not collect their tickets, and they were not where they expected to be able to collect them. They live in different areas, so had arrived early and decided to go for a meal together, and I suppose they must also have gone window shopping, because they arrived just in time for the train departure, but quite a while after the time allocated for collecting their tickets. I was more concerned about their plight than my own, having felt, that I just was not meant to go back out to Wilhelmshaven, and there being no point in crying over spilt milk! We each headed for home.

I expect most people would have been angry and very depressed with what had happened and even I am surprised how calmly I accepted my loss, as my blazer contained my passport which had £300 worth of Deutschmarks (820 DM) tucked in it, my driving licence, car insurance certificate, and my cheque book. Fortunately my wallet and my credit card were not in the blazer, so I was not without money or the ability to obtain more money. I telephoned my Bank to cancel the remaining cheques and ordered a new book for my return home, also confirmed it in writing.

On arriving home I unset the burglar alarm, and visited my neighbour who was keeping an eye on my house while I would be away. She was shocked and said you should be on your way to Germany and have been looking forward to it for two years. She made me a cup of tea, and while I was drinking it, she phoned several airlines to see if any flights were available. Bremen was fully booked, but there was a flight at 1400 hrs the following day to Hamburg, but only a return two days after the reunion. I told her to give me details of whom she was speaking to, and to tell him I would like to think about it for about 30 minutes and I would ring him back. After considering

my options I decided, that although I felt from past experience in 1960, they would not give you a passport, and insisted in sending it to you, I also thought, nothing ventured, nothing gained, so I decided I would try to get a passport. When I phoned the airline booking agent, I asked that if I was unable to obtain a passport in time to catch a train to Gatwick, could I cancel the ticket without penalty. He advised that it would be OK if I phoned as soon as I realised I could not get the flight. I mentioned my cut off time would be 1145 -1200 hrs and he agreed that would be OK. I did some phoning to the twins, my parents and my children, and then started searching for the two spare passport photos. I didn't get to bed until 0400 hrs and was up at 0600 hrs, to get ready and drive to one of the local Supermarkets to use their photo booth. No luck they were closed, so I drove to another some distance from the first. It wasn't working properly, as it produced 12 very small pictures, so I obtained a refund in the store, and decided to drive back to the first store and they were by then open and took my photos. Belinda, my eldest daughter, collected an application from for me, on her way to pick me up, which I completed and got someone to validate that the picture was me. She drove me to the station and my adventure was on.

I arrived at Petty France in the city, at 1005 hrs and joined a queue for a ticket which was numbered about 485, and this was at 1020 hrs approx, and they were only up to about number 50, so I said to the lady what had happened and she just wasn't listening as she said wait for your number to be called out. After 15 minutes when it became obvious that it would be about well after my flight departure time when I would be called forward. I again approached the clerk, and there was no queue, so I had her full attention, and she then said go to a window, which she pointed out and ask for a Supervisor. I was dealt with immediately, and I had taken a previous passport with me from about 1977, which was a good help, but the form was the incorrect form as Belinda had obtained a form for a replacement Passport instead of a lost or stolen Passport. She completed the correct form from my information, and because I knew when the stolen one was issued and had been issued from Glasgow, she rang to confirm the information. I paid my cheque and then had to wait to be called when it was completed. Wait I did, but never heard my name, so near to my deadline, I approached a lady and asked if it was nearly ready to find it had been ready for ages and they had called out my name. I suspect as they had many foreign staff, they had mispronounced my name so badly I did not recognise it. I collected my passport at 1135 hrs. With it now safely in my hands I had just enough time to get to Victoria and get a ticket with five minutes to spare. Now was I excited and ready for whatever was thrown at me, this time I was determined to complete my journey.

I arrived at Gatwick and collected and paid for my ticket, which cost £226.50. I then obtained another £300 worth of DM's on my Credit Card, and phoned Belinda to let her know I was on my way. I rang the hotel in Germany to make sure they retained my room to be told that Liz Bird had given my room to a disabled teacher, so I said I had paid for my room and I expected a room on my arrival to which they said all rooms were occupied. Not a good feeling, but I said I would be calling at the hotel, so sort it out.

I had a very good flight on a Deutche BA plane and the flight was a very comfortable one, but even if it hadn't have been, I don't believe it would have bothered me.... I was going home to see my old school site! This, plus the added bonus of seeing old friends had the previous day seemed something that I was destined not to do.

Having passed through customs and collected my luggage, I realised that because of my original travel arrangements I had not brushed up on my German, which I had last spoken in 1964, when serving in Minden. I eventually located which bus I needed to get to a station to take me to the Hamburg Haupt Bahnhof. When I paid for my ticket I thought it rather expensive but didn't care, and was only concerned that perhaps if things were now that expensive in Germany, perhaps I did not have enough German money with me. I asked the driver to tell me when at my destination. A German airline steward spoke to me and he actually took me and we sorted out what train and platform we had to get on at, and I said where do I get my ticket from and he said the fare I had paid on the bus had included the train fair, so I felt happier about how much I had with me. He left the train the station before me, and told me my station would be the next one.

Having left the train I was then going to find the Haupt Bahnhof, and went up the stairs to find myself in the largest shopping mall I have ever seen, and walked about looking for a ticket office. I eventually stumbled across a desk in the Mall, which I had a gut feeling might be where I could get my ticket and found I was right. I explained what I wanted and paid my fare and was given a computer printed timetable giving arrival and departure times

at each of my stations and platform numbers. My first stop was Bremen where I changed trains, from there I was off to Oldenburg and again changed trains and platforms and my next stop was Wilhelmshaven. I recall feeling like I was on the school train on my way back to school and just kept looking out of the window, and in my mind I could see the old train carriages, which had the German Eagle and swastika on the outside of the carriages. We certainly used to see these on our journeys to and from school, in 1947 and 1948 during our journeys and maybe slightly later. A trip down memory lane, and made up for the disappointment of not being able to travel with the group of friends I was originally to travel with on Eurostar and the coach from Brussels to Wilhelmshaven. It just goes to show that some good can come out of a misfortune.

On my arrival in Wilhelmshaven in the dark, I eventually found a taxi to take me to the Am Stadtpark Hotel, and on my arrival they had not done anything about sorting out a room for me. My taxi having now left, I asked them therefore to arrange for another taxi for me, realising that the group were now at the Pumpwerk for the Friday evening Social. On going outside to wait for the taxi, a very kind TWA member asked was I heading for the Pumpwerk and offered me a lift, so I asked the hotel to cancel the taxi.

On reaching the Pumpwerk and entering the building, I saw Liz Bird who turned round and was excited at seeing I had arrived saying, "She was glad that I had made it". My answer was "Yes, and you have given my room away". To which she replied, "We have three options." To which I replied "What is option one" and she replied, "Share with George Gladwish" and my immediate reply was "That is fine." We had originally thought that if a great demand was made on the hotel we would share anyway. Liz then said, "You had better go in and surprise all of your friends." Leaving my luggage secure, I entered the reunion area and what a loud cheer rang out when they all saw me. Never before have so many ladies kissed me in one evening, and that alone made it almost worth all the effort of my second attempt to be present at such a wonderful reunion. The rest of the evening was a great round of meeting as many old friends not seen since 1948 and 1949, many who had been attending their first reunion from far away places.

Having paid to travel by Eurostar and coach I decided I did not want to stay on in Wilhelmshaven on my own, and wanted to travel home with my friends, as I had taken my Eurostar ticket with me. So I at least had that experience also and enjoyed my journey home amongst my friends.

The day after I arrived in Wilhelmshaven a friend's wife received a telephone call (they found a phone number on a piece of paper in my pocket) saying my blazer contained my possessions (less the money) had been found in the stairwell area of Shell House close to Waterloo Station. I collected my possessions the day after my return to the UK. I was eventually visited at home by the Railway Police asking where I had been standing in the Eurostar area and what was I wearing etc, as they had video footage a person who had been apprehended shortly afterwards when he was fleeing the area in a taxi (having changed a 200 DM note into sterling for his taxi fare). Fortunately typically of London Taxi's it was stopped in a build up of traffic and being a well known thief, he was spotted by two policeman who had previously arrested him, and had realised he had jumped bail. He obviously recognising them, fled from the taxi without paying his fare. He was caught and arrested, and when searched had all my DM's less the one 200 DM note, so the sterling was returned to him, and the rest confiscated as evidence. He was brought to court and bailed and to appear at court at a later date. He again failed to appear, and when again caught, he admitted the theft and was tried and awarded a four month jail sentence, which meant he spent Christmas 1997 in jail.

The Association blanket Insurance cover did not according to the insurers cover the loss of my passport in the UK, so all I was covered for was cash up to £100, so with the excess of £25 I received £75 back. All my other expenses were not covered either. On 10th December the Railway Police visited me at my home. They returned my stolen money, having kindly changed the confiscated 620 DM notes into sterling for me. I would have had difficulty changing the notes, as they were stained by a special dye. One of my friends later gave me some photographs taken while waiting near Eurostar, and I believe the thief is caught in the background as he is so obviously trying to not have his face in the photo, but he was not quick enough. I keep a watchful eye if I am ever at Waterloo station, in case I see him targeting someone else.

Joe Kinson (Rodney 1947-1950)