HEAT

(By Malcolm Mowbray)

Entering the factory through the guard house I was stopped by one of the black clad officers, who, complete with peaked cap, closely resembled and acted like the dreaded 'Gestapo.' I was terrified, and as ordered, waited outside with other spotty new starters waiting to be collected and taken off into the depths of the huge industrial complex. The towering, intimidating buildings were black painted corrugated tin sheeting, most of which were rotted away at ground level. I was duly 'collected' and with much trepidation I followed Jack up a staircase onto huge steel staging which stood about twelve feet above the rest of the factory floor. On this staging sat three gas fired smelting furnaces which resembled small yellow brick bungalows, each with five rising doors in the front. All along the furnaces, tongues of fire licked out from gaps around the doors and from fissures in the brickwork where mortar no longer clung, the flames offered the only glimmer of light in the otherwise dark and sombre interior. The crews were all similarly dressed; heavy corduroy trousers, thick ex-military shirts, flat caps and white towelling scarves around their necks. Small round glasses with dark blue lenses hung on elastic straps, and finishing off the dress code, all wore old sacks around their waists as aprons, each tucked loosely beneath wide leather belts to enable quick removal as they frequently caught fire; all essential protection against the intense heat endured in the execution of the work.

Martin, the first person to befriend me, showed me around the furnace, where, with the use of his blue glasses, I could look through a peephole where a brick had been omitted, to see heaps of scrap steel inside being slowly melted in a huge bath of fused sand; the scrap slowly succumbing under the withering 1800 degree temperature within. Everything inside the furnace was white hot, the creamy rivulets of melting steel rolling down the mounds to join the ever rising pool in the bottom of the furnace. I was mesmerised, and scorched from the heat blasting onto my face, but I didn't care; everywhere fire and heat threatened careless moves. Back at the front of the furnace I stood next to Martin as he pulled on steel chains to raise the furnace doors as a bizarre revolving machine charged even more scrap into the inferno. We were standing next to brickwork which was too hot to touch, flames licked out here and there; the heat radiating onto our bodies was enormous and when I was given the opportunity to raise a door, the latent heat in the chains caused by their close proximity to the wall burned my hands to the point where I had to let go. Martin appeared immune to it. When the contents of the furnace were finally melted, Martin and Joe picked up a rabble, and with me painfully handling the chain to raise the middle door by about 12 inches, they entered it into the white hot pond within. A rabble was basically a huge rake like tool with a solid head attached to a steel bar of about 20 feet in length, the end formed into a ring by which to hold it. Working face to face they pulled and pushed the rabble to stir up the steel, whilst continuously moving side to side in perfect unison. It was then that I realised the value of the clothing. The flat cap was pulled well down to cover the forehead; the sweat towels around their necks were lifted up and clenched in between the teeth to protect the chin and lips, continuing higher to cover the nose. The dark glasses provided eye protection against the blinding glare. All around me the continuous smell of burnt gas mingled with that of scorching fabric from their clothes as they worked back and forth about 8 feet away from the intense heat being belched out through the open door. No gloves were worn to protect their hands.

Later when the refining began, it was necessary to take samples. This was done using what can only be described as a large spoon on the end of a metal rod which was pushed through the gap beneath the open door and scooped into the molten steel. Naturally protection was in place, but once

again bare hands, despite working no more than 6 feet away from the open door and 1800 degrees. The secret of the work I was informed was to keep moving; never, ever, halt or falter in front of an open door on penalty of severe scorching and burning. Shovelling ore and limestone into the furnace was the same procedure; cover up, no gloves, keep moving as this involved being within 4 feet from the open door and the flames coming out to meet you. Later when I joined in with these tasks I opted to wear leather gloves which I thought would give me some protection against the searing heat, hence my nick-name of 'The Kid Glove Smelter.' As it turned out, the intense heat merely scorched the leather rigid, making it impossible to withdraw my hands quickly when, inevitably my flesh started burning inside. I was therefore highly delighted when one of the crew finally threw them into the furnace and I was forced to work bare handed, eventually growing impervious to the heat like the rest of them. Shirts were changed daily, being discoloured by white salt stains on the fabric from perpetual sweating. Dehydration was a constant problem and anything was consumed to alleviate it; cold tea, cold coffee, or water with supplied lime flavoured salt tablets. The popular solution however was to drink beer while you worked, which was permitted providing it was not to excess.

What had I let myself in for? As a 15 year old I had no idea what the job entailed until that day in the summer of 1960 when I started work at The Darlington Forge as a 'steel smelter'. I loved every minute of the six years I put into it, despite the work being scorching, gruelling, sweaty, painful and exhausting. A year after I left, British Steel Corporation closed the complex down, probably for reasons of economy, but I like to think that they just couldn't go on without me!!