Surviving the Graveyard Shift
When things go Jingle in the Night
by Mike Nash, Prince George, British Columbia

Reading your *'Remember When'* flashback story in *NetLetter 1498* about working in Air Canada's computer rooms in the 1970's brought back memories of ten years spent working in the large computer facility at 151 Front Street West in Toronto from 1969 to 1978. There, I participated in the development, testing, start-up and operation of the Reservec-2 system, centred on a Univac 1108 mainframe computer; and later a network controller project that included eight months working in Dallas Texas as Air Canada's project lead. During that early decade of information technology, we had a gigabyte of state-of-the-art online drum storage taking up an arena-sized computer room. (Half a century later, it's common to have a hundred or thousand fold amount of digital storage on a thumb drive or handheld device, but a gigabyte was huge in the 1970's).

There are many stories that I could recount from that exciting and turbulent period of change, but one that stood out actually predated my time with the airline. I began my I.T. career in the UK in 1966, in the era of second generation, and even some lingering first generation computers. My employer, the East Midlands Gas Board (Emgas) was headquartered in Leicester in a modern building located just across the main Leicester to London railway tracks from an impregnable-looking Victorian era jail that, appropriately, housed Britain's famous *Great Train Robbers.* Between my ground-floor office in Emgas' headquarters and the impossibly high walls of the jail was a low railway bridge that every few years took the roof off a double decker city bus. As far as I know, no passengers ever lost their heads in these accidents, which seemed to occur when an incautious driver tried to take a short cut back to the depot at the end of his shift.

Emgas, in the late 1960's, was a mammoth operation stretching across the English East Midlands, with some 25,000 employees and then state-of-the-art second generation IBM 1440 and 1460 computers. There were no computer science degrees in that era; almost everyone learned the profession on the job and came to it with unrelated, or no university degrees. My three years with Emgas was an exhilarating time as I dived deep into the emerging world of computers. Adding to the ferment, we were in the process of switching from coal gas to North Sea natural gas, and from second to third generation computers.

In 1969, Emgas purchased a third generation multi-processing machine, a Univac 1108, which was what soon afterwards led me to Toronto to work for Univac, and later for Air Canada on the Reservec-2 project. After initial training on the 1108, which included an operating system course in London taught by an American engineer whose career, remarkably, had included writing the technical specifications for the zero-gravity commode on the Apollo moon ship, I was assigned to a team tasked with designing a database engine. You couldn't just go out and buy an off-the-shelf database product or service in 1968. This was my first exposure to an American consultant when Emgas imported a 'database expert' from the U.S. who, for several months, spent his time wowing management with his southern drawl and prowling around the antique shops in Leicester selecting choice pieces to import back into the States. As for providing guidance to our team, he made us feel great by agreeing to everything we dreamed up, without actually contributing anything original as far as I can recall.

As with my subsequent time with Air Canada's Computer & Systems Services in Toronto, much of our program testing at Emgas had to be done overnight when the mainframe computers were available. One day, while working a graveyard shift alone in the computer room, I took a break at around 2 a.m. and headed for the cavernous men's toilets in the otherwise deserted headquarters building. I was sitting quietly in a corner stall when a group of men entered, talking and laughing loudly and accompanied by much jangling of metal. I had no reason to think they weren't legitimate, but some ancient survival instinct made me stay very quiet until they had left. The next day I learned that all of the vending machines in the building had been broken open and robbed by a gang of thieves who, like me, thought they had the building to themselves!