

## Dick Rooke – The Early Years

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I was born in June 1923 in a sleepy village in Surrey, although only 20 miles from Waterloo Station in London. I was the 5<sup>th</sup> child of the family and one other child followed to complete the family. It was a conventional childhood at first, although not well off they managed fairly well.

At the age of 8, I was orphaned by the sudden death of my father. His death was the result of being gassed in the 1<sup>st</sup> World War and it never really left his system. Mother was left a widow with six children to bring up. The widows pension was 10 shillings (50p) a week, the same as the old age pension. It became very much of a make do and mend and nothing to spare for treats. We were kept neat and ate a wholesome diet. Mother was a good cook and some of her meals I have yet to have eaten any that were better. Things eased slightly as the two eldest boys started work. The wages were very low at that time and skilled craftsmen only received £2-£3 weekly.

I was academically bright and was usually in the 1<sup>st</sup> 3 in my form. I passed the scholarship exam for Grammar School but family finances would not stretch to uniforms, books and the 10 miles each way train journey to school.

At the age of 14 I started work as a tea boy in a local electrical factory and eventually progresses to winding armature coils for transformers. The factory produced the world's largest and most powerful transformers for Battersea Power Station. It took 4 days to transport them the 15 miles as they could only travel in the early hours of the morning.

Come the war and I was 16 years old. Two of my brothers had been called up. I changed my job and worked on the outskirts of Brooklands racetrack and aerodrome for a company that specialised in repairing crashed and shot down Hurricanes and Wellington Bombers. Both of these type of aircraft were manufactured on opposite sides of Brooklands and during the Battle of Britain the Wellington factory was bombed and the canteen suffered a direct hit with over 200 people killed. I had a grandstand view of the event which helped to change my mind about the course of my life. I was still too young to enrol and because of my employment I would not be released anyway. My memories of the London blitz include seeing the red glow of the London docks as they were struck and how every night for months. The air raid sirens were on from dusk to dawn. One occasion on the way to work with a workmate who owned a car we had a road to travel which was like a switchback and as we were going up the hill there was a burst of machine gun fire as the cars lights were pointing upward and had attracted the enemy planes. It was a case of stop the car, lights off and pray. It was a regular thing as a young teenager to be in the streets during air raids and search for shrapnel which you could hear bouncing of the roofs of the houses. There were many instances of air battles: Spitfires & Hurricanes against Dorniers (217), Heinkels (111) & Junkers 88's, occasionally ME 110's were involved. The whooshing noise of bombs being dropped usually had the effect of seeking temporary shelter against a wall or tree trunk. In hindsight not really a safe place of refuge.

One summer day in 1942 I was in the Recreation ground watching cricket when a young Sgt Pilot joined me and my mates. It was Alan Barnes, my mate and rival from schooldays. It was usually either Alan or I that would be top of the class in examinations but there was never any bad blood

between us. Seeing Alan as a pilot was an eye-opener as never in my wildest dreams did I think that a working class lad could reach such heights and I decided to try and emulate Alan. The nearest recruiting office was in Guildford a train journey away. I took a ½ day off work and went to volunteer. As I worked in the aircraft industry I was exempt from call up and could only volunteer for P.N.B. (Pilot-Navigator or Bomb Aimer). If you failed as a pilot you trained as a nav and for a bomb aimer if you failed as a nav. After about 4 weeks he had orders to report to A.M. offices in Euston. This was to test fitness and educational ability. The tests took 2 days: the physicals were most exacting and every single aspect, even teeth were highly rigorous. As I lived reasonably near I was allowed to come home (courtesy of another railway pass). I reported again and we had about 5 papers to tackle. I was sent home to wait for the results and 2 weeks later I was recalled and re-joined the group that had passed. We were sworn in given one shilling to seal the enrolment, and given our service numbers and a little silver badge to indicate we were officially in the RAF VR. Mum could not understand why I should want to go but I hated the thought of being a "civvy" when my mates were in uniform.

It was 8 months before I was recalled to be a full time "erk" as we were known. My first posting was to St Johns Wood (ACRC) known as Arsy Jarsy Aircrew Reception Centre. I spent 4 weeks here getting uniform, unending injections, drill parades, dinghy drill (if ditching in sea), pre parachute jump training etc. We were billeted in what we were luxury flats pre-war. Minus carpets, curtains and often doors. They were Spartan and I was unlucky to be on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor and five flights of stairs to reach my bed. The great day dawned when we had a passing out parade and were posted to an ITW (Initial Training Wing). No. 6 ITW Aberystwyth was to be our home for 12 weeks in which we were at school every day. Theory of flight, triangulation, meteorology, Morse code sending and receiving (20 words per min), astronomy, maths, swimming and dinghy drill, prep for para jumping, geography, aircraft recognition, Link Trainer, PE, route marches, cross country runs, clay pigeon shooting and continuity drill which we practised every drill. When we passed we did 10 mins of Con-Drill without a word of command. We practiced on the promenade watched by locals and visitors. Not all of our flight qualified to become pilots and were regarded as Nav / Bomb-Aimer and some to air gunners.

Our next posting was to RAF Sealand at Chester EFTS (Elementary Flying Training School) on DH24 Tiger Moths. My instructor was F.O. Roper an Aussie fighter pilot. I did 11 hours training, take-off and landing (circuit and bumps), climb, turn and steep turns and familiarity with use of rudder ailerons & elevators. Open cockpit and you sat in the front seat. On the fateful day near the start of the course I was judged proficient enough to go solo. One sits in the rear seat when only one person in the plane. Take offs are fairly easy, I did the circuit and made a landing of sorts (couple of bounces). F.O> Roper said "not too bad", but I was still singing in my heart as I had been singing vocally on my first solo.

Everyone did their first 12 hours; some did not go solo but were allowed to continue in training. I had 2 days in hospital with a strep throat but was released in time to go with my "oppos" to PDC (Personnel Despatch Centre) near Liverpool. After a few days we were in Liverpool Docks boarding RMT Andes, a 26000 ton passenger ship which had been commandeered as a troopship. The food was all American as it went between New York and Liverpool. The bread was as white as snow compared with the national loaf of the UK, grey because it had everything from the flour left in on economy grounds. We slept in hammock and when we left Liverpool it was a stormy night with very high seas, a lot of people had "mal de mer" not me though, but later I had one session of head in the

toilet bowl. I blamed it on the rich food – beef, bacon, donuts, cream, and fruit etc. – my story anyway.

I lost my best mate Doug Rawson from Walney Island Barrow In Furness. He was on deck watch at night and was caught smoking and clapped in irons. We were sailing singly with no convoy and the crew said that a U-boat could see a cigarette glow from miles away and a torpedo would appear in mid ships. Doug was kept in the brig till the boat docked again in Liverpool. The journey was uneventful and every evening there was a choice, Bingo, music or storytelling. People got up and told of events in their life, some were too explicit. We woke one morning to the land on the starboard side which we were told was Newfoundland. Late evening we saw New York lights and the Statue of Liberty. We were told to be ready to disembark next morning after breakfast. There were no customs except for the Americans on board. We went aboard a ferry and then bussed to a railway station. Our train was waiting and it was to be our home for the next three days. I cannot recall much of the journey, we had bunks and washing facilities. We were travelling through snow and on one part of the trip we stopped and there were lots of silver haired ladies with hot coffee, tea and donuts and cookies and Hershey bars. We were very grateful as they must have been standing in the snow while they were waiting. Later we went through a long tunnel, the name Hossier springs to mind, and we went through the mountains. I'm not sure if they were the Appalachians, Adirondacks or whatever? We arrived at Moncton New Brunswick from where we would find out where would be stationed and finally start flying. The whole of our intake took a walk in Moncton with most people saying they were going to have a T-bone steak, probably been watching too many films. I had a beef burger and fries in a basket. Many of the others did not finish their steaks. The snow was quite thick on the sidewalks but the roads were all clear. It was here that I first heard the term Bingo. It was always called Housley Housey in the UK. One evening we went to a house of a jazz fanatic and he played all the standards. Woe betides anyone who tapped their feet in time with the music. After 4 days we were told of our various flying venues. When it was given out as Oklahoma there was great joy. A lot of people went to Moosejaw and Medicine Hat in Canada.

Once again we were to live on a train for 3 days. The trip was parallel to the border and we crossed into the States and to Chicago. We had 8 hours free. Fortunately all public transport was free for servicemen and we went in the centre and to the PBX (NAAFI but luxurious). Free meals and drinks and offers to be taken home by volunteers. We did not have time to be entertained in their homes so we gawped at the skyscrapers and the shops full of all that we could not get or afford in England. We made our way to Dearborn station. A long walk but made it in plenty of time. A not salubrious area with a lot of burlesque shows etc. a slice of London Soho. Lots of young ladies eying up the talent. Two days previously most of them were saying tearful farewells to their boyfriends (we saw this on a film show later). There was an introductory dance next night. Pleases I could not dance. One maiden asked me if I shagged. Shock horror. Turned out to be the latest dance, The Shag!!

We settled into our living quarters, long barrack rooms with rows of bunk beds, a long line of toilet seats without walls or doors. No time to be shy or ashamed. Showers similar, everyone cheek by jowl with men shaving etc. It worked fantastically after the first few days. At the far end of the block was another block which was recreation facilities, Snooker, Pool, Billiards, Darts and a cupboard full of games, chess, checkers etc. A quiet corner for writing or reading or nattering. A one minute walk to the PX (Part Exchange) equivalent to NAAFI. You could buy virtually anything you might need during the 6 months training. There was elsewhere 5 classrooms and a Link Trainer where did

instrument flying. It was realistic flying, even up to putting turbulence etc. in difficult manoeuvres you were trying to cope with. There was a signals room where you practiced Morse code. 24 words a minute had to be reached and maintained. As a pilot you had to be able to do every job in the plane. There was gunnery, signals, wireless protocol etc. Navigation which was vital when you were flying solo you had to map read your way when you did cross country flights of over a hundred miles in length. We divided our working days 50/50 flying and school. The dining room was excellent and the fact that there was chicken on the menu twice a week. Compared to UK where chicken was for the 25<sup>th</sup> December only.

When we were introduced to our primary business P.T. 19a [US designation] the RAF named them Fair Child "Cornell" (maker) 2 seater slow in height and you practiced swinging the prop to start. Frightening the first time but easy after a while. After a while we were driven by coach to an auxiliary flying field (all grass) about 10 miles down Route 66. PT66 came by the front gate of the camp and we could walk along it to the small town of Miami, pronounced meamma (they called the neighbouring state of Missouri Mizzoorah. If you went into town and into a shop etc. it was "Howdy All" and when you left it would be "y'all come back now". After going back into the shop we learned it meant "shop with us again". The weeks passed and the great day of flying solo was imminent. My instructor was Wayne I Scaft ? and he did not push anyone to solo unless perfect so I was not in the early soloists. It came and I was over the first hurdle. We practiced "take-off and landings, straight and level. R & L turns, climb and descent and steep turns. When proficient the exciting part began. We practiced loops. Stalling the plane and later spinning and recovery (essential), barrel rolls and slow rolls, forced landings and take offs. We did small cross country flights and oxygen tests and altitude tests. Evening and weekends we would be in Miami. Jack Butt and I frequented a soda fountain cum restaurant just to speak with Venda Mae Wohwasuk, a Cherokee beauty. Nothing came of it but we dreamed.....

I teamed up with Jack, he was from Bournemouth, not as tall as me but we were bosom buddies. We went swimming together and we shared dislikes of fellow cadets (certain ones) English and Yanks. One weekend we were taken by one of the Flight Controllers to his little cabin and we had a taste of the outdoors. His name was also Jack and he was not much older than us. The cabin was on the edge of a lake called the "Lake Of The Cherokees". I had a swim but I was told that a Water Moccasin was swimming after me! The snake was a deadly one and I scrambled out of the water. To this day I don't know if they were kidding me. Jack caught some fish and he cleaned them and fried them on a small frying pan on a picnic stove. After two months we had 3 weeks break and everyone was out of the camp going all over the States. We headed for Kansas City, Missouri as there was a lady who took the "Brits" in. We hitched to KC and phoned the address. It was answered by the young son who said he was the butler and he told us the bus to take and where to get off, and we became one of the family. There were three others from our course and we found that they had contacted Mama Jenks earlier and she had picked them up at the school gates. It solved the problem of returning to the camp. 'Mama Jenks' was the widow of a man who owned a chain of music shops, "Jenkins", all over the Mid-West. She had a huge car, a Packard which could seat ten at a pinch. We were fed and bed but we had to pay where we went. A 'big night' we went into the city and saw Duke Ellington. Nobody danced but everyone crowded in the front of the band and just lapped it up. When you go to these place you drive up and your car disappears and when you depart your car appears. Slick ! One evening we went to a 'Fun Park', we might call it a fairground, mostly rides. We had three girls with us I earned the nickname of "forty five minute Rook" when I took a young lady to her door and I

could not summon up the courage to kiss her. We had a real insight into American life (upper echelons). You changed clothes daily and it was washed and ironed and laid out on your bed by a coloured lady who also cooked fantastic meals most days. She was a jewel to us. Mama Jenks took us back to Miami and dropped us at the gates. We could not thank her enough! – One of the highlights of our US trip.

Many tales were told by the other cadets of their exploits during our break. Two brought photos of them standing in front of the Hollywood sign. Some reached El Paso, others Denver, St Louis and one lucky cadet was flown to Wyoming and Yellowstone and photographed by the geyser that you could set your watch by. We had two days to get back in the swim of things. I haven't got used to being '45 minute Rook' I'm sure it was no more than 6 or 7 minutes.

We had now reached the stage of flying a powerful aircraft and we had a half day going through the multi-dialled cockpit layout compared with simple dials of the PT19a. (The AT6 Advanced Trainer). The landing was different on the PT19; it was a 3-point landing. The two wheels and the tail wheel should hit the ground at the same time. It was very difficult. The AT6 you landed on a hard surfaced runway and you tried to just run the wheels on the runway and lower the aircraft gently on to the tail wheel. Much smoother when you did it correctly. This was the real flying we had to manage throughout our career. The take-off and climbing was so quick after we had the PT19. After the routine exercises we had the exciting promises of aerobatics. Simple loops. All the roads in US are straight lines and if you were proficient, you started your loop aligned with the road and you had to be still following the road when you came out of the loop. We half rolled before barrel rolls, the easiest of the lot and a slow roll had to show you had the mastery of the planes. When you had instrument flying the hood was pulled over your cockpit and the instructor would put you in unusual positions and by looking at your instruments you had to return to straight and level (I made hard work of it).

Flight Lieutenant Frizzle came from HQ to lead us in formation flying. He was leading a briefed the three US instructors and three cadets. He finished by saying "close your throttles judiciously". When I got into the plane my instructor asked me what judicious meant. I interpreted for him, it was good and I thought we did very well especially me. We did lots of cross country flights around Okla, Kansas, "Mizzorah", Arkansas and Texas. On night flying we had goose neck flares for runway lights and on one landing we turned over and we were upside down. I released my seat belt and dropped to the ground and stood up. My instructor asked me to release his seat belt and he slowly lowered himself by holding the cockpit and then said I could have broken my neck by just dropping to the ground, I was taken to the medical centre and had numerous tests to gauge my judgements and I was not told of the results. I must have been okay as I was the first plane to fly to see if I had lost my nerve for flying and if I had any reactions. I had no doubts over flying again. We had three plane formation flying and a leader (RAF FLLT). I thought it alright and gentle turns and changing from V formation to line abreast then line astern. That was really enjoyable.

We were nearing the end of the course and we had to complete a long distance cross country flight. Two cadets, alternating as pilot then navigator. I flew the first leg to Des Moines (Iowa). I navigated to Scott Field (Illinois) St Louis. From there I piloted to Madison (Wisconsin) and navigated to Columbus (Indiana). As pilot from there to Blytheville (Arkansas). We took off from there after four

Flying Fortresses. As you waited to take to the runway the wind from their props was frightening. I flew the last leg to Miami Oklahoma.

It seemed straight forward but it turned dark and there was a huge cloud ahead. We decided that we should fly over the top of it. It was very dark and then it was becoming turbulent. Unanimously we thought better of it and to go under it. I lowered the throttle and put the nose down to descend. The thermals were too strong and we were ascending. I put the undercarriage down increase the drag effect and put the flaps down which did the trick. We were flying over the Ozark Mt's and when we could see the ground again there was a thunderstorm on our starboard side. On reflection we thought it could be a prelude to a Twister. Maybe not. We did not know our position but the navigator gave me a course to steer and was scanning the ground for clues. I saw a railway on my side, there were not many rail lines and my navigator gave me a new course which brought us to familiar country and home, phew.

Two planes had to force land in Arkansas and an instructor flew two instructors in a four seater plane to fly the planes from the fields where they had been hurriedly landed and the four cadets were flown back. They reckoned they had been treated as royalty.

And here the story ends....

**Excerpt from Eleanor Roosevelt's diary:-**

## SEPTEMBER 24, 1942

TEXT SIZE: A A A A

NEW YORK, Wednesday—Yesterday, in Washington, was a fairly quiet day. I held a press conference in the morning and had one or two visitors in the afternoon.

I caught the night train to New York City. So far, the day has been taken up with the dentist, shopping and seeing a friend, Mrs. Henry Goddard Leach, who is in the hospital. She slipped on a mountain trail last summer and broke her arm and has had a most uncomfortable time, but now is well on her way to recovery.

The other day, I told you about some American boys who thought they had found the most wonderful foster-mother in the world near their camp. That column brought me a most charming letter from some British boys, who are not going to be outdone by any Americans in loyalty and appreciation for a woman who has taken them into her home and shown them real hospitality. I think you would like to read the letter, which is an example of how to build understanding and good feeling with people of other countries. Here it is:

"We would like to tell you of an American mother we've found over here in these wonderful States, so far from our own mothers in England. She is Mrs. Paul W. Jenkins, of Kansas City, Mo., only we call her 'Mama Jenks.' In spite of her large and active family of four youngsters, her never-ceasing interest in civic enterprises, etc.; she has found time to adopt and mother us Royal Air Force lads, located in a training school not far from Kansas City.

"The most wonderful time any of us ever had was on our first visit to Kansas City, when seven of us spent a week in the Jenkins home. There we were surrounded by delightful music of all kinds (since it is Mrs. Jenkins' hobby) table tennis, a bridge game any time, badminton, bicycling, croquet and worlds of good reading material.

"Ever after this visit, our week-ends were spent in the Jenkins home. No advance notice from us was ever necessary. Mama Jenks let us plan the meals, so we might each have in turn the particular dishes we had been craving.

"Following our visits, letters (with snapshots of us enclosed) were written to our parents telling how well we were, etc.

"One of our lads was taken very ill with strep throat while on a week-end visit to Mama Jenks and remained seriously ill for ten days, during which time she nursed him day and night. Our flight commander, over long distance, suggested that this lad be removed to a hospital, fearing it would be too difficult for Mama Jenks to carry on. But not our Mama Jenks—she was in attendance every minute, until this lad recovered sufficiently to return to his training school.

"As our birthdays came along, so came each boy's favorite cake. They were always huge ones and enclosed in each was a package of candles with which to adorn each cake.

"We could continue indefinitely to write about our Mama Jenks, her unselfishness, her characteristic thoughtfulness and how we all love her, but suffice to say, we hope to come back to this wonderful America to live after this war is over, and rest assured we will all locate near our Mama Jenks, because we think she is a bit of all right. From Mama Jenks RAF Sons."

E.R.

AT6 plane





PT19



02-11-04