

Chapter One Early Days

1920 was a very special year, George V was King of England, David Lloyd George, the Liberal Statesman was Prime Minister; the Peace Treaty was ratified, the first meeting of the League of Nations took place, there was prohibition in the USA and, on July 8th I, Eric William Hookings was born in Clapham, in southwest London !

Before their marriage my father William Herbert Hookings served in the 1914 -18 Great War with the Royal Horse Artillery Regiment and my mother Rosina (nee Barber) was Nanny to the children of a Captain Talbot whom she accompanied, along with his family when he served some considerable time in India.

I was the first child of William and Rosina but within two years I had a brother Dennis and there followed five years after that a little sister Barbara. It was the middle of the Great Depression and there is no doubt that we were poor, we all lived in two dark and dingy rooms in Battersea that were rented from a Mrs. Lye, who terrified me.

To me she appeared as the wicked witch and one of my first memories was an occasion when my parents had left me to look after my brother whilst they went out for an evening. I must have been about seven years old and - as usually occurs my brother started to cry for Mum and Dad. I had no idea what to do and eventually Mrs. Lye appeared bringing us food and drinks. This terrified my brother and I even more for we were both convinced she was trying to poison us ! She really was a horrendous figure, always dressed in long black clothes and wearing a bonnet.

From a very early age I was fascinated by the local markets and regularly accompanied my mother on her shopping trips. The noise hustle and bustle, the smells and the general atmosphere caught my imagination and I wanted to be involved.

2 On one occasion my mother took me with her to buy her vegetables and I can recall

the allure of the balance scales, with their brass weights. They were irresistible, especially the four-ounce weight with a hole in the middle and one day I secreted one from a market stall.

I slid it into my pocket unnoticed and that night threaded it onto a piece of string and hung it above my bed. It was wonderful to have this object swinging above my bed and I imagined it to be a pulley. But my happiness was to be short lived for the knocking of the weight against the bed head brought my mother into the room to see what on earth I was doing.

Her “What have you got there ?” and “Where did you get it?” was followed by “Tomorrow you will come back with me, return the weight and apologise” mortified me,

But early next day I was dragged back to the market and red faced, made to apologise for my misdeed. I still hold that fascination for markets of any kind and as you will see if you have the patience to read on, buying and selling became my life.

My mother was a very strict disciplinarian, probably her nanny training and I recall the day she took me to the barbers for a gentle trim as she requested of the barber. Off she went on one of her many errands leaving me to wait my turn. She returned to find me with the shortest haircut imaginable, I had been scalped. She yelled at the barber that he had given me a short back and sides and that I was not the sort of boy who wore his hair like that. I had visions of the barber sweeping up my hair and trying to stick it back on to my head !!

3 The highlight of our week was Sunday when father would be at home with us.

During the winter the muffin man used to sell his crumpets and muffins from the tray he

carried around on his head and in summer it would be the ice cream barrow selling what we called 'hokey pokeys' or cornets as they are now known.

There was never much money, father was the only one who worked and he supported mother and three hungry children, all squashed into two rooms, but somehow they found the means to one or other of these Sunday treats.

Time came for me to start school and mother searched for an appropriate school to accommodate her eldest son. The local school was not good enough, mother felt this to be rather rough and not of a high enough standard for me, for as well as being a strict disciplinarian she also had what was deemed as 'ideas somewhat above her station', Consequently, although certainly not of that faith, in 1925 I was enrolled into St Joseph's Roman Catholic School in Battersea.

It was not too long after joining the school that mother's ideas of her 'little gentleman' were questioned, for during one of the playground games that we played - British Bulldog, which was a rather strong physical game that involved trying to tip each other over whilst on the 'piggyback' of another, I was thrown headfirst into a brick wall and knocked out my two front teeth. Short back and sides and no front teeth, always-grubby knees under my short trousers, and with a strong south London accent, I must have been a charmer.

4 We were poor but very happy, there was always food on the table and clean clothes on our backs, father worked very long hours and it seemed, mother always washing, ironing and cleaning our spotless little home.

In 1926 came the General Strike throughout Britain and although only five at the time I

can still recollect crowds of men standing at street corners looking tired and hungry whilst begging for work. The street fights between the strikers, strike breakers and police were to me really frightening.

My father was fortunate enough to be employed as he had, since leaving the army. He was a dray man working with the horses he so loved. He would leave home at 6.00am every Monday to Saturday and not return home until 9.00 pm at night, tired and exhausted.

I adored my father and would stay awake waiting for him to come home, I would then sneak from my bed, sit on his knee and help him eat his dinner (pinching quite a lot of it as I recall).

The highlight of my life was to be taken to work by my father during weekends and school holidays. I dearly loved the two huge horses and was so keen to help him bed them down and feed them in the evenings.

It was my father's job to collect waste paper from commercial outlets and private homes and to take this to the salvage depots, today known as re processing.

Off we would set each day with me feeling as big and important as my father, we would harness up the horses into the huge dray cart and, complete with my big toothless grin would set off around the London that I grew to know so well and come to love.

5 My father taught me to be most respectful and polite and to touch my cap, especially if we were given tips !

But for me the best and most exciting part of the day was to stop at one of his favourites local cafes that he frequented with all his mates and to thoroughly enjoy a huge mug of

steaming tea and a great slice of bread and dripping. I was a man of the world !

6 Chapter Two Moving On

One of the highlights of my father's job was to participate in the Easter Parade, held annually in Regent's Park in London on Easter Monday, I would rise with my father before dawn to prepare the horses and drays for their entry into the competition for the smartest and best turned out horse and vehicle.

There were drays to be scrubbed, brasses to be polished, paint to be washed and for the horses there was grooming until coats gleamed, manes and tails combed and plaited and decorated and their shoes blackened until you could see your face in them.

I was never happier, working with my father along with his workmates, in an atmosphere that crackled with excitement and anticipation.

At the back of each dray would be placed a couple of kegs of beer - just a little refreshment for father and his pals before, during and after the parade.

The family was included in the parade and mother scrubbed and polished her offspring with equal gusto to that of father and his horses.

The horses and drays, full of well-presented families would line up in Regents Park and slowly walk through the park to the judge's stand where they would be inspected by (as I recall) rather portly gentlemen in suits and waistcoats complete with gold watch chains and bowler hats.

Competition was very keen for the enormous prestige of winning the 'Best in Show' rosette which could result in not only a small financial reward from the boss but the respect of fellow draymen for that year. My dear old dad had won several times and the

horses stable was well decorated with rosettes for Best this and Top that. He was a well respected man whom I adored.

7 There was one particular parade I shall never forget, I must have been about ten years of age. My father had a pal called Tommo, he was a very short, bow legged fellow who liked his pint or six of beer. He was funny, always smiling and laughing and together he and my father got up to all sorts of pranks. Mother did not exactly approve of Tommo she thought he led my father astray ! Never ! it was six of one and half a dozen of the other.

We had all risen very early on this particular Easter Monday and arrived at the depot for hours of preparation, mother arrived later with Dennis and baby Barbara and we set off in the dray, for Regents Park.

Now quite naturally, all this hard work makes a bloke really thirsty doesn't it ?

Consequently the two kegs of beer and I think a third one had been thoroughly enjoyed by Dad and Tommo. I was given the honour of sitting up front beside my father and I felt so proud to even be given the important job of holding the reins.

The two giant horses were well used to the parade and moved along by themselves automatically. It was a slow task for each entry had to be inspected and judged so it was stop and start all the time but the horses knew the routine and lumbered along accordingly. By the time it was our turn to be judged father and Tommo had consumed a great deal of the contents of the kegs for it was a very warm day. I was holding the reins tightly when suddenly there was a gap in the queue and the horses lurched forwards.

Totally unprepared for this sudden movement, father, whose attention had been diverted at that second, fell over backwards into the dray, arms and legs waving hat rolling away and face very red with not just the heat and humiliation.

8 My mother was furious and berated him all the way home for the embarrassment he had caused her. Father and Tommo - they just laughed and spent many a long and happy hour in their local pub telling this tale. We had even won one of those much coveted and prestigious rosettes !

1930 brought about big changes, not only in my and my family's lives, but worldwide too. The area in which we lived, Battersea, was recognised as being 'the slums' and in the early thirties a clearance programme of the whole area began. There were five of us still squashed into the two rooms at Mrs. Lye's so we were one of the first to be moved.

We were allocated a council house in Morden and what a fantastic change it was from the damp and dingy unhygienic conditions in which we were all squashed, to a brand new house that not only had a garden but it had running water, a real bath and an inside toilet !

To have a bath, which always seemed to be on a Friday night whether we felt we needed it or not, one had to first light the fire under the boiler in the kitchen, then fill the copper with buckets of water, sit back and wait for it to boil.

Above the copper was a large round pump complete with a long wooden handle which, when you pushed it back and forward pumped the water upstairs and into the bath.

There was a cold water tap above the bath but that was not really necessary for by the time the water had travelled through the myriad of pipes to the bath the water seemed to be tepid anyway.

Dennis and I regularly fought to be 'pump boy' and after the tin bath in front of the fire the pure luxury of having what we thought of as a real bath was beyond our dreams.

Being the eldest I was allowed to have first bath with the rest of the family coming in after me with the bath being 'topped up' for each following member.

9 Chapter Three

'Allo 'Allo - Wot 'ave we 'ere then ?

So thrilled were we to have such luxurious accommodation, the whole family rallied round to create a home of which we could be proud. The garden was dug and bricks were found to lay little paths and we all lent a hand to paint, distemper, clean and polish and dig and plant vegetables.

The best item for me in our new home was an indoor toilet, no longer would I have to trail downstairs in the middle of the night and out across the dark frightening yard in all weathers where I knew the bogeyman was waiting for me. It was bad enough during the day, but there had been times when I over indulged in rare green apples that resulted in the old 'gippy tum' - now that was horrendous.

The only person inconvenienced by our move was my father, the move from Battersea to Morden resulted in his taking the tube train to Clapham and then the bus to Battersea Bridge which still left him a considerable distance to walk to his place of work where he had to be at 6.00am every Monday to Saturday. He then had to reverse the procedure to return home where he would arrive after 9.00pm - exhausted.

Every cloud has its silver lining however and father's was the fact that he now lived nearer to his old mate Tommo. Every morning Tommo would appear wearing his big grin and off they would go down the road, whistling their way to work. How I loved those days when there was no school, for I could go with them. If I was not up and ready by the time Tommo arrived he would rush in to my bedroom, rip off the bedclothes and tweak my big toes, a very painful torture that soon had me hopping around throwing on my clothes in haste.

10 A new area to live, meant a new school for me and mother registered me into the Number Three Council School at Morden. This school had a very good record for the education it offered. I enjoyed Math's, particularly in relation to pounds, shillings and pence and Science but English was a mystery and spelling way beyond my comprehension the latter, a fault that still baffles me at times.

As with many council estates, the kids formed 'gangs' and I tagged along with a gang of about eight or nine lads of my age. We got up to mischief - naturally for boys, but our mischief was to tease girls, play knock down ginger and generally play very tough, physical games.

Being the 'new boy' on the estate, I was proud to be asked to join what was considered to be the 'best' gang in the area, especially when they asked me to tag along with them when they were going to the rail station to get some chocolate from the machines on the station platforms. "But I haven't got any money" I had to admit, thinking it would mean my exclusion from the best gang. "You don't need money" they explained and I followed along full of admiration for a gang that could have such treats given to them for nothing.

Arriving at the station, we all crowded around the machine that spewed out chocolate bars and I watched in amazement as each member fed a flat disc the size of one penny, into the money slot and then pulled out the draw that to reveal their prize of a bar of chocolate ! "Come on Eric, you want one don't you?" they whispered pressing one of the magic discs into my hand. Not to be outdone I took the disc, fed in into the machine and lo and behold, there was my bar of chocolate !

11 So enthralled in what I had achieved, I failed to notice how quiet it had become and as I turned, a large hand grabbed me by the collar of my jacket almost lifting me off the

ground. “Allo ‘allo ‘allo what ‘ave we got ‘ere” a voice shouted in my ear as he spun

me round and I was confronted by the biggest policeman I can recall ever seeing who demanded to know just what I thought I was doing.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry” I wailed, wriggling with terror, noting that all my newfound mates

had disappeared.

Within minutes a large black Wolsey police car complete with ringing bell had pulled up and I was unceremoniously bundled into the back and taken to Wimbledon police station, where I was thrown into a cell.

Locked up all alone in a police cell at ten and a half years of age is terrifying, my mates had scarpered, I had been arrested and worst of all my bar of chocolate had been confiscated !

There were not many houses in the area that had telephones in the 1930’s and I was compelled to wait in that awful cell until the police had called to my home, told my parents of their errant son and brought them to the station to collect me. It was past ten o’ clock and I was cold, hungry and very frightened but that was nothing to the anger portrayed in my mother’s face when I was released into her care.

She had strict instructions to report with me to the Magistrates Court next day and I was brought before the Magistrate who asked me many questions about my relationship with what I had thought to be my mates. I can never thank my mother enough for the way in

which she supported me throughout that awful ordeal, a tiny figure in that Courtroom who begged for me not to be punished for I really was a good boy.

I was let off, but the worst punishment was my mother’s anger and the fact that I was never allowed to join another ‘gang’.

12 Chapter Five My working life begins

I have always had a very sweet tooth and used to frequent a little sweet stall outside the school gates. When that sweet stall came up for sale I bought it - my first venture into the world of commerce.

It cost me two shillings and sixpence - a whole half a crown ! The stall had previously been owned by a boy who was leaving the school and, having noticed how popular it was I had been most interested and longed to have one like it, for a considerable time.

I asked the owner of the house adjoining the school if I could leave my new possessions in her back garden, - and complete with scales and weights and a cover I parked my sweet stall there each night, paying her a few pennies a week in rent for her letting me do so.

I was there selling my sweets not only before school but every playtime and lunch break and after the school closed too, selling my selection of toffees, bulls eyes, chocolate and humbugs and tiger nuts, that I purchased from Ivycon , the sweet wholesaler nearby in South Wimbledon. My best seller was Kay's toffee, which came in 12" by 8" trays, complete with little hammer with which I would break up the toffee. I became quite adept at weighing out 2 ounces of toffee with my fingers strategically placed under the scoop !

I kept my sweet stall until I left school at thirteen and made quite a lot of pocket money from decaying the teeth of my peer group at school !

Whilst shopping in Sutton one day my mother saw a notice in a shop window for an errand boy, the shop was Talbot's, a high class fruiter and grocer and without further ado she marched in and put my name down for the job.

13 The pay was half a crown a day - half a crown being 2/6 or twelve and a halfpence

today and the shop's idea of a 'day' was from 7.30 am until after all the shop had been cleaned out, usually around 10.00pm. I got the job and every Saturday and during school holidays I was there, keen as mustard and very eager to learn.

My work included unloading the delivery lorries, packing the stock, filling the shelves, cleaning the shop and best of all, making the deliveries to customers. The good point was that Sutton, being quite an affluent area in those days, the tips were good ! I ensured that I was most polite as my father had taught me, I was helpful and obliging and consequently I did quite well financially.

The bad point was Sutton Hill, a very steep gradient that I had to climb with my trade bike loaded so high that I could hardly see over the top of the boxes that were stacked over the front wheel. I huffed and puffed up that hill, my heart beating nineteen to the dozen but the thrill of freewheeling back down with legs sticking out each side of the bike made it all worthwhile.

There was one special delivery that I really enjoyed making and which I recall so vividly, I must have been around twelve and just becoming aware of the difference between the sexes. At one particularly large house in Sutton, the lady of the house always answered the door wearing a rather low cut negligee, with my eyes glued to her cleavage, I soon learned that if I placed the box of groceries on the door step, rather than handing them over to her, as I had been taught to do, she would have to bend over to pick up the box, thus giving me a further glimpse of the most beautiful sight I had ever seen.

No wonder I returned to the shop with a smile on my face !

14 Earning half a crown a day made me aware of money and I was very interested in

acquiring more. All the money I could save was intended for one purpose - to buy my own brand new bicycle and eventually I achieved my goal and bought myself a Sturmev Archer, three speed, drop handle bar, red racing bicycle ! The world was mine to explore and with my pals I set off early on Sunday mornings to places like Southend on Sea or Folkestone.

I bought a tiny tent and sleeping bag and other camping paraphernalia and with my many friends I had now made we would set off at weekends and holidays in the summer to enjoy the fresh air, fun and much, much laughter - idyllic days.

15 Chapter 5 Growing Up

Leaving school, I had to sell my treasured sweet stall find full employment. Talbot's had been such an experience for me and I grew to enjoy working with the fruit and vegetables, meeting customers and of course earning money. Consequently when Mr. Talbot offered me full time employment I was over the moon.

Talbot's were well known and respected for the high quality and exotic fruit and vegetables they sold, Avocados, Custard Apples, Mangos, Passion Fruits and many others which have become common place today. One of the specialties were Corbert Grapes, an English grown grape. I can still recall seeing these lying in their individually constructed baskets, they were the top of the range and so expensive but Talbot's had a clientele at the top of the hill that requested such delicacies and luxuries.

The next opportunity that Mr. Talbot offered me was to join him on his early morning trips to Covent Garden, the biggest fruit and vegetable market in the country. Corberts and Munros were the suppliers of all the high quality imported produce for Talbot's and I

was thrilled to be able to see for myself how we actually obtained our supplies.

Covent Garden fascinated me, porters rushing around wearing their flat hats upon which, with great dexterity they carried as many as ten large bushel baskets, piled high with the fruits and vegetables that were in season. The excitement was catching and I loved to mix with all those fascinating cockney characters, watching listening, discovering and learning so very much that although I did not realise it at the time would put me in good stead for my future life.

16 The early morning start that going to Covent Garden involved meant that my day began at 6.00am, but this was greatly rewarded in two ways, the first, by sharing the tea breaks with my fellow buyers, at the working men's cafes, where we ravenously devoured great mugs of tea and thick chunks of my beloved bread and dripping but the second, was Mr. Talbot's car. The car was a very large Ford Lincoln which boasted a special body with folding seat in the back which enabled six people to travel in the huge vehicle in the three seats in the front and divided by a glass partition -three seats in the back.

I not only had the pleasure of going with Mr. Talbot to Covent Garden in this car but occasionally, on a Wednesday afternoon (half day closing) Mrs. Talbot, who had taken quite a shine to me would invite me to join her on one of her weekly trips to Brighton ! She would take me to the Ship Hotel in Brighton for afternoon tea - what a treat for such a young lad from such a poor background, not only the ride in the fabulous car but the opportunity to eat such tasty food- especially the cream cakes !

There were many employees at Talbot's but my 'pal' was Harold. Harold was a couple of years older than I was, although he acted as if he were much younger. He was a determined body builder with aims of becoming 'Mr. Atlas' the hero of all young men in the

1930's whose muscular body adorned many an poster with the slogan "You too can have a body like mine" if you used whatever product he was advertising !

We would compete to see who could lift the heaviest weights and who could carry them the furthest, with sacks of potatoes being the burdens. Oh the energy and exuberance of youth!

17 Chapter Six Me and my bike !

Between 1935 and 1938, my new found friends, shop assistants, delivery men and office workers would meet in the local cafe, near to Talbot's store. It specialised in spaghetti and beans on toast which we invariably followed with a Lyon's fruit pie, washed down mugs of strong tea. This, I thought, was the high life of cafe society.

One day, the more senior members of Talbot's staff decided to have a race and, borrowing trade bikes from the delivery boys, which had a large wheel at the rear and a small wheel at the front over which sat the trolley on which the large delivery baskets were placed, we decided to race down Sutton Hill.

My bike was the one that still had the large wooden boxes full of oranges in front, securely tied down of course - or so I thought.

Off we set at break neck speed, pedaling like fury, hoping to be the first one to be able to reach the point where we could free wheel the rest of the way, thus assuring first place.

Half way down the hill, the top box of oranges began to wobble and before long it fell off into the road, taking with it the rest of the boxes which scattered in all directions bouncing out their contents of oranges into gardens and gutters, under prams and push chairs and motor cars and charabancs !

I did not win that race and instead I was left, rather shamefacedly, to salvage what I could of the oranges and their boxes which had by now been reduced to matchwood.

How is it I wonder that whenever I am in trouble there is always a policeman about ?

I looked up, and there he was, looming over me watching, with a meaningful glint in his

beady eye. His remark that I should be more careful or I might have an accident was I

thought quite unnecessary but I got away with it this time !

18 Fred, one of the lorry drivers at Talbot's gave me my first introduction into driving a motor vehicle. Although not exactly law abiding, for the laws of the road were nothing in comparison to what we have today, I discovered I had a natural flair for the motor engine and I relished the opportunity to get behind the wheel of the company van on every occasion, which for a mere fourteen year old at that time was quite a feat.

Another employee called Webb, encouraged my love of cycling and with my Sturmeys Archer drop handlebar bike I was easily led to purchase all the gear, which included a pair of double seated corduroy cycling shorts, cycling shoes and an alpaca jacket - I was the king of the road !

Thus, fully equipped we would set off on Sunday mornings in the summer to take part in the cycling speed tests that were held on a new bypass in Kent that had recently been opened, I still have the photographs of me looking a treat - even if a dated one.

Hormones and pubescent urges were now changing my body and I was becoming very interested in the opposite sex, especially one young lady who worked in Talbot's office. My parents never explained the intricate details of any birds or bees and even today, I still regret my innocence at not having any idea of how to approach a young lady and ask her to accompany me on a 'date'.

Having left school a few days after my fourteenth birthday I felt, in 1936 at the age of sixteen that I should be making some progress within my career, if I was to have one.

I had obtained a great deal of experience within the world of fruit and vegetables and I felt confident enough to approach Mr. Talbot and ask for a step up his ladder and try my hand at buying the produce for the shop.

19 Fortunately as it turned out, this was denied me and Mr. Talbot insisted that I continue learning about the origins of the produce and that I sustained display work that involved the baskets of fruit that I had become most proficient in arranging. I found solace however in my cycling and each weekend my friends and I would set off for faraway places such as Southend on sea, Margate or Portsmouth. Another favourite haunt for me was Croydon Airport for I was fascinated by aero planes even in those early days of my youth. I loved to watch the little 'planes land or take off, knowing their destinations were Paris or Amsterdam, places I longed to see, but never imagined that I would.

One evening whilst cycling toward Croydon, I saw a vast red glow in the sky and I realised it must be an almighty fire. Cycling as hard as I could, I tried to get as near to the fire as possible, which I could see was on the far side of Croydon but it was impossible to get very near and I went home quite disillusioned.

Next day the newspapers were filled with the tragic story of the huge fire that I had seen and I realised I had witnessed the burning down of the famed Crystal Palace !

20 Chapter Seven Grown up responsibilities.

At sixteen I felt a restlessness with life in general, I liked my job but felt the frustrations of not getting anywhere. I was therefore most delighted when a friend, who managed Bernard's, (another famed fruit and vegetable merchant in Kingston upon Thames) told

me of a vacancy in their shop for the position of an Assistant Manager.

I attended an interview and to my delight I got the job ! Gladly I accepted the position and was delighted to be given the task of arranging all the window displays and the fruit baskets. I knew I had some artistic talent and appreciated the fact that they recognised it.

The only real issue that I missed were all the 'perks' of working at Talbot's. On a Saturday evening Mrs. Talbot would tell me to go through all the remaining stock and pick out all the fruit that was specked or damaged and to take it home to my mother.

Mother would make fruit salads and pies that were so gratefully appreciated and a fine contribution to the diet of the family.

Working at Bernard's, gave me much more varied experience of the trade plus the fact I was now earning two pound and ten shillings per week, which was a great boost to my morale.

After eighteen months I was offered another job, this time it was with A A Smith of Stoneleigh - it was the position of manager ! It was great to be sought after and not to have to 'job hunt' as so many of my friends were having to do.

The pay rise gave me an income of three pounds per week and I so gladly accepted the position for unemployment at this time in 1937/38 was rife.

The shop that I was given to manage was situated in Ewell in Surrey and with my own shop and a staff of three I was a king ! It was hard work with weekly targets that I had to achieve but, I was keen and those targets were achieved.

21 Opposite the shop in Ewell was a ladies hairdressing salon that employed several very attractive young ladies. I made great friends with some of the girls and we all used to go off cycling on our half days off. For me once again it was the old story of not knowing how to handle a situation that involved the opposite sex. My body was telling me what to do but my brain left me floundering !

My relationships with the girls may not have been very adventurous but my work improved greatly and I was complimented upon my creativity in the display work of the fruits and vegetables in the windows and for my fruit baskets that were works of art, Mr. Smith valued my work so much that he gave me a pay rise of ten shillings which was over a 15% raise.

I worked at the shop in Stoneleigh until I was eighteen when I was approached by Mr. Smith with what I felt to be a great proposition. He explained that his shop in Streatham was not doing too well - in actual fact the whole shop needed revamping and he thought that I may be the person to undertake the whole project.

Streatham certainly was not such a pleasant shop as that which I left behind in Stoneleigh, but, I was keen and full of determination to make a success of it. Starting work very early each morning I worked until late at night, decorating and cleaning the shop, creating displays of fruit and vegetables and turning the whole outlet into a very attractive and thriving business.

This, in time led to another rise in my wages, a ten whole shilling increase which now made my weekly wage £ 3.10 shillings and at the age of nineteen I was now earning more than my father !

22 Chapter Eight Discovering Girls.

One of the pleasantries of working in Streatham was the proximity to the Ice Rink and the Locano Ballroom and very soon, along with my mate Harold, I learned the art of ice skating and ballroom dancing.

This of course led me to start to take more pride in my appearance and, with my new found wealth of £ 3 .10 shillings per week I felt able to do so. Gaynors of Mitcham Green

and another branch in Sutton both sold Guards clothing which I cherished and I became hooked. Guards were middle market outfitters and I bought several sports jackets, trousers and even an overcoat from them. I thought I was the cat's whiskers in my new clothes and, what with these and my new Hercules Sturmey Archer, three speed, drop handlebar bicycle that was costing me 2/6 per week in hire purchase, I knew I was just that!

My first encounter with the opposite sex had been was a disaster. It was in 1936 when I was working at Talbot's in High Street, Sutton. The secretary to Mr. Talbot was, in my eyes, the most beautiful creature I had ever seen. She wore very high heels with stockings with seams down the back, she had a tiny waist and beautiful bosoms over which she wore Crossover blouses. Her lips and nails were high gloss red and I was captivated.

Her boyfriend was Fred, the van driver who had film star looks which made me green with envy but, after deliberating and agonising for weeks I plucked up courage and asked her if I could take her to the cinema. Her reply was with a winsome smile as she patted me on the head was "Come back and see me Eric when you have grown up!" What a put down, I was puce with embarrassment as I crept back into the store. It took me weeks before I could speak to her again.

23 The first real girlfriend that I had was Doreen who lived in Moleshill in Surrey. In 1938 friendship was just that, for relationships between the sexes rarely progressed beyond hand holding and a little 'Goodnight kiss' on the cheek. We were just two innocents who had no idea - and who were too afraid to take our relationship any further.

We used to go out for days, visiting Madame Tussauds or just sightseeing in London.

The problem was Doreen, whose father worked for Costain's the builders, lived in Moleshill whilst I lived in Morden some miles away.

The last Green Line bus each evening left at 9.30 pm and if I missed that it would take me hours to get home. I had a mile to walk from Doreen's home to the bus stop and then another mile when I got off the bus in Morden so I was very aware of time.

However the inevitable happened one night when after a rather protracted goodnight kiss I ran to catch the bus, only to find it pulling away from the stop and no amount of waving or shouting could stop it. It was an eight-mile walk home and the reception I received from my mother when I did eventually reach home was not exactly welcoming. An eighteen year old earning what was a very good wage, having a very attractive girl friend whom he did not know how to handle and who still lived at home with his parents and brother and sister was bound to feel frustrated and things began to get a little tense and fraught.

I recall so well asking my mother if I could bring Doreen home to meet the family or if I could bring her home for Sunday afternoon tea, her reply was "What do you want to do that for?" "Well" I replied "I want you to meet Doreen". "Huh" she said "I don't want to meet Doreen so the answer's NO" We had reached stalemate !,

24 Doreen eventually moved to Dagenham and, after another fracas with my mother I, after threatening many times to leave home, eventually packed my bags and set off for Dagenham. Doreen's mother welcomed me but insisted that I let my mother know where I was - a wise move but I was sure my mother did not want me. After five days a telegram arrived for me at Doreen's home, it was from my mother and read "Please Come home" - Mother. I had had enough adventures for a while, admitted that I was

homesick and with my tail between my legs, I returned to Morden.

My friendship with Doreen ended amicably a short while after this incident, she found another boy friend and I buried myself into my work.

25 Chapter Nine Threats of Aggression.

Thoughts of a possible war were on everyone's mind during 1938 and early 1939 but Mr. Chamberlain, the Prime Minister at that time, reassured us all, as he waved the famous Peace Treaty that had been signed. Peace in our time was agreed and there would be no war.

The media thought differently and the continuing news that we, as a nation were rearming, building Hurricane fighter planes, tanks and weapons, prepared the country for the anticipated announcement at 11.00am on Sunday September 3rd that we were indeed at war with Germany. Within hours the first siren - the wailing scream that warned of imminent enemy attack sounded, caused panic, but instilled into all the urgency of defending ourselves. My family along with hundreds of others began the task of filling sandbags, building Anderson shelters in our gardens and preparing for what was anticipated to be a quick fight that would be over by Christmas.

With no disrespect to my bicycle, for I had great love for my chariot of speed, I bought myself for the princely sum of £ 5.00 a 250 cc Velocet motorcycle, much to the chagrin of my mother who predicted dire happenings on such a machine. However, aboard my noisy machine, I set off along with many other nineteen year olds of that era - to fight the war ! I had given a lot of thought to volunteering and knew even then that there would be no way that I would join the Army for the tales my father had told me of his harrowing experiences in the 1914-18 war, the mud, the filth, death, fear and the sheer futility of the whole debacle made me vow to never become a soldier.

It was the Royal Navy for me for I was already familiar with the names of the ships that I had seen off Spithead when I had cycled to Portsmouth and I could envisage myself on the bridge of one of these giants, complete with binoculars, looking out for the enemy. I had forgotten that I was always very sea sick - even in a rowing boat !,

26 I arrived at the recruiting office, along with many others who were volunteering and carefully explained to the officer in charge, my intentions. I had thoughts of signing the dotted line and emerging wearing my navy blue bell bottoms. Nothing prepared me for the conversation that ensued:

“Please sir, I want to volunteer for the Navy”

“Yes of course my lad, just fill in these forms”

I sat and laboriously filled in the spaces

“ Right now, off you go and we shall consider sending for you in six months’ time”

“But, I want to join NOW sir”

“Impossible - how do you think we could manage if we enlisted all the young men who are volunteering? You have to be trained and pass all medicals and that alone may take weeks and still you may not be accepted. Anyway we haven’t got enough training personnel to cope with all the volunteers that we have already, so off you go and we shall see you in six months”

I was disappointed and completely deflated but, it made me think very hard for there was every possibility that I would be ‘called up’ into the Army and I would move Heaven and Earth to avoid that.

What about the Air Force ? Well, I liked the colour of their uniforms and I loved to watch the planes at Croydon, so why not give them a try - in fact anything to avoid the Army.

The RAF recruiting officer kept me waiting but eventually, after taking my details, he told me I would have to have a medical and then - if I was suitable and fit, I would be contacted.

I explained to him that I was on the waiting list for the Royal Navy, to which he roared

“Well go away and make up your mind either say YES NOW or go away and WAIT TO BE CALLED UP !!!” **The thought of being called up into that khaki uniform was enough for me and I signed up for the Royal Air Force with haste !**

27 Chapter Ten Into Uniform.

A couple of weeks later I was summoned to Uxbridge for my attestation to see how bright or thick I really was and the dreaded medical where they really did the things that blokes dread or enjoy ! I obviously passed for eventually I was summoned or ‘called up’ and sent to Blackpool in July 1940 much to the consternation of my family, especially mother who once again found her eldest son leaving home.

The shock of change was enough to make me bald let alone having my head shaved, uniforms, kits, square bashing and those dreadful boots - what a change of life from my cocooned home life with my job at the greengrocers and my dancing, ice skating and cycling. Even the weather was such an extreme change, from cosy Morden to the cold windy sea front in Blackpool and the eternal marching up and down and getting up at what always seemed to be the crack of dawn.

They say Lady Luck always looks after her own and I really was one of the lucky ones for instead of being billeted under canvas as were so many of my compatriots, I was placed with a delightful Landlady on the south side of Blackpool who not only issued us with our own front door key but also fed us extra tit bits for we were always hungry. The food that was given to the hotels to feed us was never enough for young chaps.

There were six weeks of initial training and, by the end of those six weeks we had become men. We had discovered the Tower Ballroom and the attractions to the opposite sex of men in uniforms !

28 Following my initial training in Blackpool, I received my first posting, it was to R A F Nottingham which was a front line aerodrome. From here flew squadrons of Fairey Battle 'planes to attack the French coast down as far as Brest and across eastwards to Holland. The Fairey Battle aircraft which had a single engine was a sturdy and strong 'plane and although very slow, it was all that England really had in those early days. We suffered very heavy losses with these 'planes, the worst night being when Maastricht in Holland was bombed - twelve 'planes left England for this raid, from which not one single aircraft returned.

Being a new boy I was given every conceivable job from guard duties, police work, kitchen duties, patrols, and manning the gun pits to loading the bombs and ammunition on to the Fairy Battle aircraft.

I was trained to use the Lewis machine gun and one day I was posted to the outskirts of the airfield, to a gun post near to the bomb dump. It was a cloudy, dull day, I was on duty on this site from 8.0am until 4.00pm and I recall being rather bored.

Suddenly, out of the clouds appeared a German Junkers 88 plane which began to strafe the airfield. I flew to the Lewis gun and opened fire but - the Lewis gun was really rather unreliable and it jammed after about twelve rounds. The pilot of the Junkers 88 however had spotted my gun firing at him and he came toward me and I realised he was dropping a stick of bombs straight in my direction.

One bomb hit the area between me and the bomb dump and the blast from its explosion sent me flying through the air, my steel helmet went one way and I went the other. I was knocked unconscious and later recovered in the hospital to the realisation that if this was war then it could be rather dangerous.

29 Winter in 1940 was one of the coldest on record and one bitterly cold night I was posted to guard duty in the edge of the airfield. Being so cold, my duty hours were just from 4.00pm in the afternoon until 8.00pm in the evening. Feeling completely isolated I stamped around trying to keep warm and thinking of very little but getting back into the billet and having something hot to eat and drink.

Snow started to fall which quickly, in the icy wind that was blowing, became deep drifts. I was freezing cold, tired, hungry thirsty and very lonely. Eventually, through the snow I saw the small slits of light that emitted from the blacked out headlights of the lorry carrying my relief but then, to my dismay, I began to realise that it was making no progress towards me at all. After an hour of peering at these distant lights I knew there was no way that the lorry could reach me for the snow by now was very deep and still falling heavily. Suddenly the field telephone in the sentry box rang and I was told that although every effort was being made, it was highly unlikely that my relief could get through to me that night but, they would try to get me some hot food.

The night wore on and I knew that there was no way anyone would be able to reach me and any thought of hot food was completely out of the question. What I did not realise was that in the next field was a large herd of cows who decided to meander up to the barbed wire fence at the edge of the airfield where I was stranded.

The twenty year old city boy, who had never been near a cow was terrified ! I had no idea if they were cows who may have a bull amongst them who might take an unhealthy interest in poor lonely little Eric. What would I do if they got over the fence and came nearer ? I had no idea at that time how glad I would be a few years later to cuddle up to cows for warmth and shelter - but that is another story.

30 It was in November 1940 whilst stationed at RAF Newton, Nottinghamshire that I

was summoned to the administration office and told that my parents, living in London had been 'bombed out'! I could not obtain any information as to whether they were safe or even alive and, in spite of my begging for information I was told nothing.

I was just told to report to the Commanding Officer and request more information for, in spite of the dreadful fear that I felt and my deep, deep concerns, I was in the RAF and had to go through the regulatory offices to find more information.

All leave had been cancelled and only compassionate leave was allowed. To my mind this was compassionate enough, but I still had to appear before him to try to get a pass to travel to London. That Commanding Officer was not at all sympathetic or understanding and showed not one iota of concern, his words to me were "If every time a bomb falls I let airmen go home to see if their family are OK then the RAF will be nonexistent".

I stood my ground and eventually he relented and gave me a 48 hour pass.

48 hours to get from Nottingham to London and then back - hitch hiking - for there were no trains and I could not have afforded the fare anyway. He stuck to his guns and told me to take it or leave it. I took it and wasted not one minute collecting clean underwear, my razor, warm clothing and what money I could scrape together.

A service uniform was an asset in 1940 and I was able to thumb lifts quite easily - a venture not entirely recommended today but although there were petrol restrictions, there were still vehicles on the roads and I found my way to London.

I eventually arrived at my parents home in Netley Gardens late at night, but was distraught to find that where the house has stood, there was now just one large gaping hole in what used to be our lovely little front garden.

31 Fortunately for me an air raid warden was just passing and he directed me to the local community air raid shelter where, to my immense relief I found my parents, brother

and sister safe and very much alive.

It seemed that a land mine had been dropped onto the house whilst they were in the Anderson shelter in the back garden, which father, Dennis and I had helped to dig. They were alive but had lost everything we ever possessed.

Eventually they were all re housed, again with another family in lodgings and were compelled to stay in these cramped, stressful conditions for some time. It was fortunate that they all got along pretty well but nevertheless the strain must have been horrendous.

I spent quite an enjoyable Christmas in Nottingham in 1940 and if I have any regrets it is that memory has erased the names of the majority of my fellow compatriots who were there and I did not take the addresses and means of future contact for those good pals that I made.

Weekly dances were held at the village hall for all the local residents and the RAF boys, probably to promote friendships or what today we call good relation exercises.

The floor was the most uneven, badly knotted floor boards that I had never before encountered, but we did not care although there was some doubt as to whether or not the floor would give way under the stomping in unison feet, all clad in heavy duty, air force issue, boots.

Saturday nights found us full of trepidation, hearing the three piece band and eagerly viewing all the girls who seemed to sit on one side of the hall whilst we sat on the other side watching them watching us ! We certainly knew how to enjoy ourselves for we were taken from the RAF base to the dance hall and then shuttled back after midnight - there was no such thing as being drunk whilst driving for us !

32 One evening, returning to our billet after what I considered to have been a great night out, one of the chaps in the billet called out “ Eric, I have been watching you

dancing this evening and I must say you are just too fussy - you look for all the pretty girls and will only dance with them! When I go dancing, I look for all the cross-eyed girls wearing glasses for they are so grateful to have someone dance with them they are far more eager to go little further - if you get my meaning”!

I did, but still did not know how I would handle such a situation like that, if it arose.

I did enjoy my stay at RAF Newton, it was a full time active aerodrome and there never seemed to be a dull moment in squadrons 103 and 105. My awareness of the uncertainty of life was realised when I saw these little Fairy Battle planes - the front line of our defences take off, whilst knowing full well that they may never return.

I was very proud to serve them and to have served at RAF Newton.

My family meanwhile had been rehoused and their new address was 74, Abbotsbury Road, Morden in Surrey, it was a council house, having three bedrooms, one for mum and dad, one for Barbara and the one that Dennis and I shared. However the best thing about that house was for me Joan - the girl next door, she was lovely, had a superb figure, smart and was very pretty. We dated many times, went dancing, walking and lots of canoodling in fact I think she really was my first love. Marriage ? At this time in my life I felt far too young to even contemplate it for the most important thing in my life was my career and learning to fly.

33 Chapter Eleven Air Crew wanted.

Time, it seemed just flew by along with all those aircraft, but, one day my life changed forever. Whilst walking past a bulletin board, I spotted a notice which read :

**‘AIR CREW WANTED, IF YOU WISH TO VOLUNTEER,
APPLY TO THE ADMINISTRATION OFFICE’**

My hopes and imagination soared and I envisaged myself up there in the wide blue yonder, flying my own little Fairey Battle. I applied!

To my amazement my application was accepted and I was posted back to London not to south London and near to my old home, but to near Lords Cricket Ground and London Zoo.

I was billeted in the most lavish accommodation I had ever encountered, opposite Regents Park, where there are the most magnificent buildings divided into sumptuous apartments that boasted marble bathrooms with fittings to a luxurious standard and furnishings throughout the apartment that appeared to have just been left by the owners.

There I was, twenty one years old, from the poorest part of the city, living in such splendour! Such extravagance I had never before beheld and I reveled in the grandeur.

I stayed in the apartment for several weeks whilst completing my training, which was actually staged in Lords Cricket Ground with meals being eaten in vastly different accommodation - London Zoo !!!!! The rarer animals had been removed for safety but it looked as if the food which we were served was that which had been rejected by them before they left.

Our daily routine of PT before breakfast, followed by lectures and schooling throughout the day was tiring, but not so tiring as to realise that we were in the West End and the nights were ours to live it up.

34 Our only misfortune was that we were all so poor, that everything was beyond our reach but, I was young, I was keen I was ambitious and eagerly anticipating my future. At the end of the training period I, along with everyone else took the examinations to see just how far I could go. My results were not good and I realised how limited my chances were of ever making air crew. Through my lack of schooling and basic dearth of

education I had failed miserably.

My saving grace was that although my answers upon that examination paper were not all correct, the 'layout' was acceptable and, it appeared, that I had managed to grasp the fundamentals of what my tutors had tried to teach me.

I was called before the examining board, five gentlemen of varying ranks and - standing to attention I was told " Hookings, sorry to have to tell you, you have failed this examination - BUT" and I held my breath "although you have failed, we believe you do have potential and, with the possibility of further education there is a chance that you may pass next time"

The Chairman of the examining board then asked me if I would be willing to attend a six week course of further education and then re sit the examinations.

Would I be willing ??? My heart leapt with joy and I more than eagerly agreed to accept this second chance rather than be returned to the ranks as a failure.

I was not alone for there were several of us who had failed this initial exam who were offered a further opportunity to prove that we were capable of doing far better things.

My posting, when it did come through thrilled me to bits for I was to go to my old haunt of Brighton, the seaside town with which I was so familiar.

I eagerly boarded the transport, leaving behind the luxury, and set off for my second home where I found much to my delight that we were to be based at the Metropole and the Grand Hotel where years before I had taken tea with Mrs. Talbot !

35 Once again I was blessed with luxury, I had a superb room overlooking the sea the best plus however, was that our food was considerably better and this time our meals were eaten in the huge dining rooms and not in the local zoo.

Although there were plenty of opportunities to go out and have a good time, the majority of my time was spent studying, doggedly persevering with what I should have learned whilst

at school. I was so resolute for I had been given this second chance and I was determined to take it. My time was spent between lessons, drills, PT and studying, leaving very little time for play.

One of the most fascinating lectures was hygiene, which at that time I did not comprehend its importance, however in my later years and experiences of close communal life, the value of these lectures were proven to be so very beneficial.

Final examination day arrived and we were sat at desks and papers handed out which, to my delight appeared comprehensible. As the papers were finally collected I heaved a great sigh of relief, knowing I had done my best and now what would be, would be.

That night along with my pals I certainly went out and enjoyed myself and, to my great delight a few days later I was told I had passed and was now officially AIR CREW !

Whilst awaiting my transfer to the Initial Training Wing for pilots, I stayed on at Brighton, studying navigation, aircraft recognition and the simple basics of flying.

The Brighton public baths were commissioned by the RAF for the exclusive use in training crews in the basics of survival, rescue and other such events that may happen over water and, what with the swimming, drills, exercise and fresh air, I think I was at the peak of my fitness.

36 Chapter Twelve Stratford on Avon

The war at this point was uppermost in our minds, the Battle of Britain was over, heavy fighting was taking place in North Africa and we were all very much aware of our responsibilities. We were continually worrying when our training in full would begin and just where we would be posted.

The relief of having passed all my exams was so reassuring that I must admit my social life

improved considerably at this point. The town centre of Brighton was considered to be safe but the beaches were full of mines and covered in barbed wire which rather curtailed any amorous adventures on the beach late at night. I compromised !

Eventually my posting came through, I was to go to Stratford on Avon that lovely old town in the Cotswolds so steeped in history and, to crown it all, the Gods were still with me for I was again billeted in great comfort, in the Linton Hotel on the banks of the river Avon. In 1941, rivers were not as they are today, polluted and unfit for swimming in, but were clear, clean and a pleasure for bathing. During my stay in Stratford on Avon in the summer of 1941, the weather was perfect, long hot summer days, staying in a hotel next to the old water mill - I was in paradise.

We would swim, boat, visit the theatre and thoroughly enjoy the town and its history and culture between our intense periods of study during which I discovered aerodynamics and solved the mysteries of flying.

Our corporal in charge of our group would daily, proudly march us through the centre of the town to the local cafe where we would all ravenously fall upon piles of tea and toast. We were a rather arrogant group, with our 'chip bag' hats with the white flashes that denoted we were air crew but, the local residents accepted us and we were warned and emphatically drilled not to cause any trouble.

37 I spent six months in Stratford on Avon and I recall those as being one of the happiest times of my life. The camaraderie, the fun, the feeling of achievement, the excitement and the anticipation of our unknown futures, were the essence of life.

The thoughts of failure never occurred to us, for we were all so keen to achieve our aims and ambitions - to learn to fly. Unfortunately for some there was failure at this stage, but not for little Eric !

After my six months at Stratford on Avon I was posted to Heaton Park, just outside Manchester which was the place of dispersment for Air Crews, it was from here we were sent to points of the globe that were considered to be 'safe' for us to learn to fly - Rhodesia South Africa, Canada and of course the United States of America.

There were thousands of men living here, the majority living under canvas, in tents which was not the most comfortable billet in which to be found in Lancashire in the middle of winter ! Again I was blessed, I was billeted with a young couple in their house nearby. They made me so welcome, offering me the freedom of their house, giving me the key, telling me to come in whatever hour I wished and what is the most generous - they offered to share their food with me. This I could not accept for I was well fed by the RAF whilst they were on the meager allowance of rations that were allotted to the civilian population of Great Britain. I could not accept this hospitality but felt myself again to be so blessed by the generosity of people.

I spent many weeks at Heaton Park patiently waiting to learn where I was to be posted and then came that fateful day - I had achieved the best posting that I could have wished for, I was off to the United States of America, via Canada !

38 Chapter Thirteen Off to see the world.

Anticipation, excitement, fear of the unknown, these were the mixed feelings that we all had for several weeks, whilst we constantly searched the notice boards for the dates of our departure.

We were allowed a short embarkation leave, under strict instructions (which meant to us the fear of being shot) not breathe to a soul where we were to be posted. My parents were

aware that I was going overseas but to them the fact that they knew not where, only added to their worries.

Added to their fears, apart from the nightly air raids over London was the fact that my younger brother had been called up and was, like me, now serving in the R A F.

Eventually the call came and I was posted to Greenock in Scotland - for the first time in my life I had ventured beyond the country of my birth and I was ensnared in the vast changes that travelling those few hundred miles made in Great Britain.

The dock where we were to board our ship - as yet unknown to us, was a hive of industry, noise, fumes, smells, people rushing everywhere in what to me was organised chaos - it was Covent Garden early in the mornings all over again, but with far different smells and voices with strange accents that so few of us could comprehend.

And then I saw her, the biggest and most wonderful ship that I could only dream of travelling upon - The Queen Mary ! I had seen pictures of this wonderful lady sailing from Southampton and here was little old me about to board her - I felt I had arrived and somehow at this stage in my life I knew that this was to be the beginning of the style of life that I would endeavour to always enjoy.

39 I did have deep consternation about the large hole in the side of the ship and felt depressed that we would have to wait again whilst they repaired her. Wrong ! large chains were placed around the hold of the ship and the hole was blocked We were to sail in her in that condition and we were ordered to muster on her deck. How long could my luck last I thought when I was allocated my accommodation, in the most luxurious cabin imaginable ! Here was I a little nobody from Battersea aboard the most opulent ship in the world, wallowing in untold comfort. It was just too good to be

true.

How much would this have cost me I pondered, if I had to have paid for this trip in peacetime? What a marvelous run of luck I had enjoyed in all my accommodation since joining up - but, could it last?

We left England filled with trepidation and the fears of the unknown, wondering if we would ever see our homeland again. Our real fears were realised when next day the Captain summoned us all onto the decks to instill in us the life boat drill and dangers we may encounter crossing the submarine infested waters of the Atlantic ocean.

He explained to us how the ship came to be holed. On the homeward journey, the Queen Mary when entering the mouth of the river Clyde, sliced through the ship that was escorting her, the Curacao. The zig zag action that both ships were taking to avoid the submarines put them on to a collision course and the Queen Mary, being such a huge vessel and so fast was unable to stop and consequently she sliced through the Curacao. The Curacao sank with a loss of two thirds of her crew. From a crew of 430 men, only 101 had survived

The words of the Captain regarding our safety still ring in my ears

“ Any man who has the misfortune to fall overboard during our voyage will be responsible for his own life”

40 If there is an opportunity, he will be thrown a life belt, but, there will be no prospect to stop, turn around and search for that man for the Atlantic is filled with U Boats, just waiting to torpedo us. It is far too dangerous for us and we shall not put the lives of hundreds of men at risk for the sake of just one man”

The message sent a chill of fear through us all and brought home to us the stark realities of war.

Because of the damage that had been incurred to the ship, we did not put in to our intended port of disembarkation - Halifax in Nova Scotia, instead we sailed in to Boston Massachusetts, U S of A where the ship could be repaired.

The journey which in peace time would have taken four days, took us six, for our course was far from straight, and the Queen Mary although she could out sail and U boat took the evasive zig zag pattern of sail, changing course continually.

Glorious sunshine and a calm Atlantic made our crossing perfect and we felt as if we were on holiday on a luxurious cruise ! We learned of the submarines that were in certain areas from the ship's crew, but although we felt safe, we were somewhat relieved to eventually see the shores of the United States.

What a shock to our systems when we disembarked, for having left the blackouts of the U K, here we were in a fairytale world of brilliance, with well fed, smartly dressed people, all seemingly blissfully unaware of what was happening on the other side of the Atlantic ocean.

41 Chapter Fourteen The wonderful U S of A

My posting was given to me as we left the ship and to my delight, I found I was off to Ponca City in Oklahoma - sounded like an Indian reservation to me but, before I could find out just what Ponca city was like we all had to go to Monkton in Canada to be officially designated and dispatched. I did not care one iota which way we would travel, this was my first time out of England, I had escaped the blackouts, the food shortages and the constant fear of air raids. My only worries were for my family, pals and many girl friends I had left behind.

Leaving Boston, we travelled by the most wonderful train I had ever seen, passing through

Maine and New England which was at its most glorious best - in the Autumn or the Fall as I learned it was called. I had never seen foliage of such brilliance nor such vast landscapes. This beauty coupled with the excellent food we were served upon that train gave me the first insight into a world that little old Eric from Battersea could never have envisaged.

We travelled through Toronto and Montreal where to our surprise, we found ourselves caught up in a parade. So caught up were we all in the excitement of seeing, for many of us for the first time, the beauty of Canada that we had not realised that it was November 11th and the parade was for Armistice Day.

Monkton as I recall, was just a whirl of to's and fro's, papers to fill, goodbye's to be said to friends we had made, who were off to different flying schools, classes to attend where we learnt the customs and ways of our host country and where we learnt this difference between British English and American English. Then the longed for day arrived and I was off to learn to fly - off to Ponca City in Oklahoma, to the Number 6 British Flying Training School, known locally as the Darr Flying School.

42 The first few days were spent acclimatizing ourselves with the layout of the station, our billets and of course the completely different way of life we were all discovering.

Much to my surprise, one morning whilst on parade, I was called out of line and told to report to the Officer commanding our group, fearing the worst, wondering what I had done as well as imagining my self being shipped back to Blighty, I knocked upon his office door. To my delight I found I had done nothing wrong, instead I had been selected as the Leader for Group A - a group of very keen chaps. Peter Watson, a fellow new arrival was to be the leader of Group B.

The idea of splitting us into Groups was one of pure competition, for we were not only pitted against each group but also against other Sections some of whom were far advanced

in their training, from us. Although called the British Flying School, it was not only British Airmen who were stationed there for there were many Americans too. Our instructors were not servicemen but instead were civilians with a vast amount of knowledge and experience of flying.

Friendly rivalry between the 'Poms' and the 'Yanks', excellent food, comfortable dormitories and the feeling of security allowed us the ability to give our entire concentration to what we had all come so far to achieve - to learn how to fly.

The course was not a 'walkover' by any means, nor was it a holiday although it was obvious that some there had thought that was what it was to be. Within a very short while some began to fall by the wayside, either through their basic inability to grasp the fundamentals of flying, not being up to the standards set and failing their examinations or even the basic fear of flying. Our course in which eighty keen individuals began finished with only 33 of us passing, which was apparently about the norm expected.

43 Not all of those who failed to learn to pilot an aeroplane were sent back to England, quite a large majority were redirected back to Canada where they trained as Navigators or bomb aimers.

The next nine months were to be the most important in my life, I was aware of the intensity of the course, I knew I would work and study harder than I had ever done before, I realised the enormity of the responsibility I had undertaken but, I knew that I wanted to succeed and I wanted to go home to England wearing a pair of precious R A F WINGS

Our early lessons were very elementary, we learnt what keeps a 'plane flying and about lifts and drags'. It would have been difficult to find more enthusiastic young men who were so keen and who had the hunger to learn how to fly.

This was all so interesting, but for me all I wanted to do was to see and climb in and inspect the 'planes and have the opportunity to touch the controls !

Our flying instructors were Americans and our daily routine began with the famous American breakfast which consisted of streaky bacon and pancakes with maple syrup - different but we loved it. Then it began and for six days out of seven we drilled, took PT, attended lectures and we learned to respect, concentrate and to OBEY !

The rules had been set down long ago by experienced pilots and drummed into us was the fact that you never 'did your own thing'

The normal time for completion and for being able to fly solo was from seven to ten hours and after that we knew that we would have to be moved on.

44 Chapter Fifteen Going Solo.

For me, the most frustrating fact was that I had to sit in the seat behind the instructors I wanted to be in the front and to see where I was going. I had already had twelve hours of instruction and I knew the time was fast approaching that would be make or break for me. I just could not get my head around the way to land the 'planes softly and I bumped and skidded, hopped up and down and really made a mess of things.

Finally I was given notice, and I was told to report to the Chief Flying Officer next day, for what was to be my final chance.

This was it, all 'my boys' had passed and that night were going out to celebrate and yet here was I their section leader and I had not even passed my examination. They invited me along to what I felt was to be our final night together and I thought 'What the heck - just go' I was not a drinker, just the sniff of the barmaids apron would put me under the table but I was determined to go out with all my pals that night although I knew I had to be at the flight office at 7.00 am next morning.

We crawled back to the airfield around 2.00am and slipped quietly under the barbed wire perimeter fencing. I could not face going back to the billet with the lads and all those happy smiling faces, so I walked straight to the flight room where I set up my kit and putting my head on my rucksack promptly fell asleep.

At 7.30am next day I was on parade and waiting for the CFI. He appeared and standing to attention, I greeted him with a smart “ Good Morning Sir”

“Get in the ‘plane Hookings with me and taxi out to the runway ready for takeoff. You are in control” he said. “I want you to make a full circuit and then come in to land” Full of trepidation I did as I was told, I reached the end of the runway lifted her up and I was off.

45 During the requested circuit I looked into my side mirror and saw his steely eyes staring back at me, instead of fear I felt that this was my chance to really prove that I could fly and I approached the runway ready to land, full of determination. I kissed the ground and made the most perfect landing possible and thought to myself “I think I have done it !”

“Well done Hookings” the CFI said “ Now taxi back to the flight office, let me get out then make another full circuit and land” I had satisfied the CFI and now it was up to me to prove that I really could go solo.

There I was. In takeoff position, waiting for the flashing signal from the Aldis lamp to signify I was free to go. It came and I began to roll.

Three hundred feet - great - whoopee - marvellous then - whoops, I have to land this thing !

My landing with the CFI had been marvellous but, could I do it again ?

My approach was good, although I felt nervous, now was the moment to kiss that ground again but no, touch again, then again and again, I bumped up and down on the runway and my heart sank - it was not good.

I got back to the flying office and approached the CFI “ I am sorry Sir” I apologised “ I have made a bad landing” I expected me to tell me that I had failed.

“ A bad landing” he queried “that was not a bad landing, it was a safe one, you did everything you have been taught and you have passed. Now enjoy your day.”

I could have kissed him but instead thanked him profusely and walked back to be with my boys with my head held very high.

The time had come for us to move on -perhaps a bit of leave and then for our advanced training and the final course examinations and those set of wings for those who were to pass.

46 I had completed my first solo at last, it had taken me far longer than anyone else in my Group and my fellow comrades as well as myself had begun to despair that I, the Group leader would not make it because I could not pass my first flight examination. What a feeling of relief it was to be ‘in control of my life again’ and to retain my dignity as Leader.

My first plane that I flew alone was a P17 Stearman it was heavier than the Tiger Moth but it was the first training plane used in the USA. The problem with this particular little craft was that it tended to ‘ground loop’ on landing. I was one of the lucky ones, fortunately it never happened to me, but to those that it did I knew it was a very frightening experience.

The world was mine and for the first time in my life I knew the feeling of freedom, I could take off alone, fly across the countryside, do my own map reading and explore Oklahoma from the air.

As I gained more experience and confidence it was time to go back to school and I was put

in to an aerobatic instruction class. I admit this did concern me somewhat but the instructors were adamant that we were not allowed to attempt any feats below a certain height thus possibly giving us more space and time to correct what we were doing.

Me ? Well I was always up there in the clouds, not the 3,000 feet that the instructors told us would be a safe height, but I was 5,000 to 6,000 feet, thus giving myself plenty of time if I did get into any difficulty to straighten out and fly right !

One of the most exciting feats in aerobatic flying is the 'spin' where you have to gently pull up the nose of the 'plane until you stall and then, when the wing drops you will spin into that direction and you will find yourself going down toward the ground.

47 The first time that I did this I was more than a little anxious but I had listened to my instructor and, by applying the opposite rudder, although the plane was still descending , it stopped spinning. I pushed the stick forward and, with the blood draining from my face, the 'plane levelled out and I was safe.

Although the course was very intense, we were learning to fly in the correct manner, putting in long hours of study and practice but, we still found time to go out to play !

48 Chapter Sixteen Generous Hospitality

We were free in the evenings and at weekends and considered ourselves to be very lucky, for the local people who lived in Ponca City were so kind and hospitable to us 'poor RAF chaps who were so very far from home and missing their families.' These kind people would arrive at our base in their cars to collect us and take us to their houses, feed and entertain us and make us feel so very much at home.

One family in particular that 'adopted' me had a very attractive daughter who took a shine to me, she was allowed to drive her father's car and we would go off for hours

visiting local hostels but, there were conditions laid down for her to have permission to take me out and her father lending us his car - I had to attend church every Sunday.

Being compelled to attend church every Sunday with the Training School and then again with my adopted family should have improved my religious knowledge and also my morals but in 1943 to put your arms around a girl was risky and to kiss her Goodnight was considered to be rather 'fast'.

The weeks flew by, hours and hours of lectures covering all subjects such as flying, navigation, personal hygiene, mathematics, astronomy, cloud formation and such like.

Somehow personal danger never seemed to occur to us, for we were all so keen to learn to fly, to then go back home and do our bit but, mostly to get those pilot's wings.

Then came that final day of examinations and to my utter delight I passed and for those of us who did so it was up and away for a two week furlough as the Americans called it.

I had made a good friend of a fellow trainee pilot called Ray Harvey and he and I set off to explore the US of A, beginning with Wichita.

49 Accommodation had been provided for us throughout our tour in what is the equivalent of our YMCA, but it was far more upmarket than any YMCA that I had seen. Our greeting in Wichita was so welcoming, there were special more 'mature' ladies whose duty it was to meet and greet us and when they heard our accents they were fascinated and asked us to just carry on talking to them. They wanted to know who we were, where we were from and even - "In which U S State was England" Each day we were collected by ladies who accompanied and mothered us during our stay.

One of the first visits was to the huge Boeing Aircraft factory and it was here that I met

Pauline and Ray met Fiona ! The hospitality they showed us was like nothing we had ever known, food and drink flowed and we were entertained and treated like royalty wherever we went. Pauline and I became firm friends and wrote to each other for many months of my stay in the United States and we were later, invited to visit Pauline and Leona their homes in Dallas.

It was two months before that opportunity arose , for we returned from our leave in Wichita only to be summoned into the main hall of the flying school in Ponca City and told what our next course was to be.

I was directed to course number 11 which was the elementary class for advanced flying.

The C O told us that the aircraft we were about to learn to fly would be much heavier, fly faster and have different dihedrals for landing. It was back to school for us to learn to fly what was to become one of my favourite aeroplanes - the Harvard.

It was not just the flying of 'planes that we were to experience, we had flying lessons in the mornings and after lunch I was back at school sitting in our basic classrooms.

50 The AT6A or the Harvard was a completely different craft from anything that I had ever flown, there were rev counters, fire extinguishers, retractable undercarriages, instrument panels, oil pressure gauges, pitch controls and so many other dials and panels, it blew our minds.

We flew in pairs for it was essential, as we were doing 'cross country runs' that one could fly the 'plane and one could navigate. Ray Harvey was my flying companion, we got along so well together and became very firm friends. Night flying was a completely new experience that was at first very frightening, little did I know at that time how much night flying I was later to experience.

I consider myself to have been most fortunate at this school of learning for, having taken 13 hours to learn to fly solo, I passed all my examinations and tests and was the first in my group to fly solo on the Harvard. I did it in only three hours and forty minutes and broke the school's records ! What a wonderful feeling that was, my normal height was 5 feet 11 inches but on that day I was over 7 feet !

It was not long after 'soloing', that I was instructed to take cross country solo flights - at night ! The weather in Oklahoma is normally calm and settled - one of the main reasons for us learning to fly there but, one particular night I recall so well.

I set off alone and flew off in to the wide blue yonder and eventually, one and a half hours into the flight I realised it was time to turn back.

What I had not noticed was that the cloud which was at 5/10ths had become 8/10ths ! We had been taught not to reduce height through cloud because you did not know what was underneath so, my only alternative was for me was to make contact with base and ask for help.

51 The spins, rolls and stalls that I had learned and practiced were fine but they were of little use to me now, I had to rely upon my lessons learned to 'blind fly' and regretfully these were not, as I recall, my strongest point.

Now keep calm think hard, what do you do when you can't find your way home in a London smog ? Ah - look for landmarks ! OK but there are not land marks at seven thousand feet, in thick cloud. Got It - Beacons, they would indicate where I was. I saw a break in the clouds and slipped down through it and to my relief I found the beacon signal and railway lines and with these 'landmarks' I was able to find out where I was and finally make my way back to base.

What a relief to land, I was shaking with tension, relief, fear - I don't know what, but I

saw my instructor approaching and to his question “Is everything OK Hookings ?” I smartly replied “Yes sir” but then admitted “I was so scared”

Leave came round again and both Ray and I set off for Dallas to meet Pauline and Leona, two of the most attractive girls who had been part of the ‘welcoming committee’ when we had first arrived in Ponca city. We had the most wonderful holiday, good hotel, excellent food, generous hospitality from so many of their friends who were all so keen to meet the two boys in funny uniforms, who spoke so strangely.

I never did get to meet Pauline’s parents for the week just flew by and before we knew it we were heading for the train to take us back to base. Pauline and Leona drove us to the rail station and as I hugged Pauline goodbye, she slipped a letter into my hand and said “Don’t open this until you are on your way”

Through tears and kisses the train pulled slowly out of the station and I eventually sat down and looked at the letter she had given me.

What was it ? Had she fallen in love with me ? Was I to get married in the U.S of A ?

No, she had a regular boyfriend who was a great big Marine (I had seen the photographs)

52 I opened the envelope with trepidation and there with a wonderful letter of thanks for being such a good friend was a crisp 50 dollar note ! I had never seen such money - it would keep me in coffee and doughnuts for weeks !

What a wonderful friend, she was not only beautiful and fun to be with but she was so kind and generous to boot.

53 Chapter Seventeen Those Coveted Wings

The day finally arrived for the presentation of those well-deserved wings.

Wings signified that you had passed all exams necessary to become a pilot. The RAF’s type

were a set of cloth embroidered, gold coloured pair of wings set each side of the RAF crown and emblem and it was the ambition of all those remaining in my group to achieve the receipt of this much desired badge of accomplishment.

From the original thirty five men who had begun their training in my group there were only eighteen of us left who had passed all the exams, tests and assessments and who had achieved their desired status as a pilot. For those who had, for some reason or other, not passed exams or were not considered capable of becoming pilots, it had been a return to Nova Scotia where they're trained as navigators or bomb aimers or for some it had been back to England.

I marched my proud little group into the parade ground and we stood to attention before the Commanding Officer - a Wing Commander Ball and I can envisage his face today as he called us out individually and I remember the pride I felt as it was my turn to stand before him and have this wonderful badge of triumph pinned to my uniform.

I imagined the pride I would have when showing these wings to my mother who had been quite convinced that I would never reach this status. I had been so determined to become a pilot and now I had scaled those heights and difficult days to reach my goal.

The euphoria of getting my wings was quite short lived, for a few days later I was summoned before Wing Commander Ball once again, this time to learn of my rank.

I felt confident that I had been an asset to the course with my leadership skills and my position as 'section leader' and beating the school record for going solo.

54 The interview did not go as I had hoped, I thought it would be just a matter of "Congratulations Hookings" and the presentation of my Commission but, unfortunately Wing Co. Ball spoke to me about my education and concentrated upon the fact that I had left school and my basic education at the age of only fourteen years of age and, because of that, in his eyes I was not his type for officer material !

I was given the rank of Flight Sergeant which to me was most demoralising.

The time came for us to eventually all say our Goodbye's and, although very sad, I was pleased to be going back to England for, having volunteered for Bomber Command, I was anxious to complete my training back in the UK. This meant I would either be flying twin or multi engined planes.

We boarded the train for Monkton in happy spirits, loaded with gifts for our families and girlfriends, but for me it was a heavily laden chap who had two kit bags full of food for Mum, Dad and my family to enjoy.

Two days later we arrived in Monkton, Nova Scotia to be told that we were awaiting shipment but that could take up to three weeks before embarkation came.

I was free of all training and school work and felt this would be my last chance to really let my hair down and enjoy the beauty of Nova Scotia. I visited the local beauty spots but my one outstanding memory is that of the local ice cream parlor where my pals and I devoured large quantities of such delights as knickerbocker glory's dished up in huge glasses and topped with tropical fruits all served by a young lady I shall never forget. It was Gladys, who always saw that my ice cream was the biggest, had the most cream, Wafers and fruits and all served to just me with a beautiful smile. We got along famously and I was even invited to her wedding bit, I could not attend for very soon we were told of our intended departure from the United States.

55 Since joining the Royal Air Force I had enjoyed all the trappings of luxury, from the Grand Hotel in Brighton, to the luxury flats in Regents Park and the opulence of the transatlantic trip aboard the Queen Mary and I hoped we would be returning home in the same manner.

We were notified of our sailing from Halifax but, to my horror came instructions that we

were only allowed to take one kit bag on board. - What could I do with all the goodies that I had saved ? I did not want to disappoint my family and so the 'Hookings enterprise' had to come to the fore and I set about sewing two kit bags together - making one VERY large one, which I filled with tins of del Monte fruit for mother, tins of ham for Dennis, silk stockings for Barbara and for Joan, the girl next door and the love of my life, perfume and luscious lipsticks ! In fact any goods I could carry or squeeze into that gigantic double kit bag which were completely unobtainable in the U K.

The luxury liner to take us home ? Was it to be those so comfortable beds aboard the Queen Mary ? We all hoped so for we had become very accustomed to the good life and had come to expect the best and now - now that we were fully trained pilots we all felt sure we would be treated in the grand style and well respected.

We duly arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia and loaded to the gunnels lugging my double kitbag I, along with all my fellow group and many more men from other training stations set off for the docks.

56 Chapter Eighteen Back to dear old Blighty

We arrived and frantically searched the docks for sight of that beautiful liner, the Queen Mary but there was nothing but an old French rust bucket, the Louis Pasteur, that was looking very much the worse for wear. This could not be it we all thought. She will never make it across the Atlantic. Officialdom could not have been so thoughtless as to spend all that money on training us to perfection only to let us sink in mid Atlantic !

It seemed my luck had run out at last and to cries of "All Aboard" we climbed the gangplank with our hearts in our boots and queued up to (as we expected) be allocated our cabins.

**“Officers this way please sirs” came the cry “All other ranks to the front of the ship”
Front of the ship ? Where was my cabin ? It was at this moment my feeling of intense
dislike toward Wing Co Ball rose into my throat - he had not given me my commission and
I was just another ‘oike’ in the general melee of serving men. It was hard to accept.**

**A steward passed me and I asked him to direct me to my cabin - “Cabin mate ? There
ain’t any cabins for you, so you better get moving so you can grab yourself a hammock
I climbed down into the bilges of this detestable vessel and found a large area with
hammocks strung across strategic points, most of which had already been claimed.
There were no portholes for we were well below the water line, the air was stale and I had
nowhere to stow my precious cargo.**

**“ Move along there” came the cry “We are sailing” I looked around in despair. A
hammock for me ? Just how stupid could that be ? I could not get in to it and when
eventually I did manage it - I fell out ! I hated it, I was sea sick and I just wanted to get
back to Blighty or go back to Ponca City.**

**57 The crossing was dreadful, the weather was bad, I was very seasick, we were not
allowed on deck, time dragged and the journey seemed endless. For safety and confusion
to the enemy we did not sail straight across the Atlantic but instead zig zagged across
making the journey all that much longer. There were several scary moments when
hatches were battened down and we were told there were U boats lying in wait in the
vicinity.**

**The Louis Pasteur had no escort and we knew that if we were hit there would have been
very little chance of survival. It was very frightening and I came to realise how lucky I
was to have been put ‘on standby’ by the Royal Navy when I had applied in 1940, for I
would never have made a good sailor. It was going to be so much easier being a pilot - or**

so I thought !

It took us five long days and nights to get back to England and the relief we all felt after being cooped up in that God awful ship was heartfelt when we were told that we were docking in Liverpool.

We hastily gathered our possessions and we were told to prepare to disembark and go through customs. CUSTOMS ? I had not given a thought to customs. What on earth could I do with a double kitbag filled with what would be considered contraband !

I would be locked up, demoted, or even worse have all my goodies confiscated. What was I to do ?

We left the ship - albeit thankfully and queued to go through the custom shed. It was glorious to set foot back in England but the accents of the dock workers left me quite flummoxed, I had not heard the Liverpudlian accent before and I wondered if I could explain myself and be understood by them ?

58 I need not have worried, the time came for me to go through and declare all my kitbag contents and I approached a cheery chap who greeted me with "Hello, Have you had a good crossing? "No," I replied "It was rough and I fell out of my hammock"

"Sorry about that" he said "Have you got anything to declare ?"

I had to come clean and I told him of the things I had things for my mum, dad and sister.

"Oh ! They will be pleased" he said as he waived me through "Enjoy your leave"

I had done it. I was going home and I had my precious cargo still intact, Whoopee !

I lugged my heavy kitbag to the office that had been specially set aside for us and I collected my leave pass and my train ticket to Kings Cross and Euston. And after saying fond farewells to all my pals and promising to keep in touch, I set off for the station and

home.

The welcome I received was overwhelming and the gifts I bore just knocked them all sideways, the food for mother and father who was still working for Phillip Mills, the paper recyclers, the lipsticks for Barbara were so appreciated and the special gifts of stockings for Joan were welcomed with more than open arms !

Dennis had joined the Royal Air Force during my absence and was stationed in Cornwall, but he managed to get a spot of leave and we all celebrated in style.

Here I was at last a fully-fledged pilot in spite of mother's doubts, she was so proud of me that one day during my leave, she asked me to meet her from 'work' to take her shopping. She had a job in the local munitions factory situated in Lombard Road, SW19 .

When the girls all came out of the factory and saw me complete with a full set of 'wings' they were so surprised, but the look of pride on my mother's face was enough to make me realise just how much she really cared about me.

59 I thoroughly enjoyed my leave, I met up with lots of my old prewar pals who, like me had 'joined up' into various armed services but who were either married or had steady girlfriends.

Here I was, twenty three years old, due to go onto operations from which who knew what would happen and I did not really have a 'steady' girlfriend, I just loved them all.

I had the girl next door to my parents -Joan - Joan was beautiful, very sophisticated with a superb figure and who, in spite of the clothing shortages always looked so smart - I loved her dearly.

We went walking, to the cinema, dancing and did all the things that girls and boys did in those days but, everything stopped at that 'goodnight kiss on the doorstep' Joan was very correct ! There was one thing that I never did and that was to introduce Joan to my

friends - she was so special to me that I feared that I would lose her to one of them.

Joan and I had been walking out together for some time and I realised that we should make some sort of commitment so, at Christmas I asked her to marry me and we became engaged. I bought her a ring and we had a shindig to celebrate with our families at the Park Farm Club in Cheam, and danced the night away .

I knew that before long I would receive my posting to an aerodrome in the UK where I would amongst other things learn to fly heavier 'planes, adapt to night flying in the UK and to learn to fly 'blind', that is totally using your instruments.

60 Chapter nineteen. Posted in the United Kingdom

I knew that my mothers work was hard, dirty and dangerous but I was not prepared for the nasty accident that occurred whilst I was on leave. She caught her hand in a machine and was badly injured and totally incapacitated, having to go into hospital for surgery. I was the only one at home, Dad having to go off to work all day along with Barbara and Dennis having to return to his post as an aircraft fitter so it was obvious that I was the one to look after mother.

Naturally - or 'Sod's Law ' as I called it, my posting came through at this time - it was to Banff in Scotland. I did not appreciate that one iota, all those mountains, valleys and mists and me just a sprog pilot to boot. I reported to the C.O. and explained my home situation and to my relief I was rerouted a week later to South Cerney in the beautiful Cotswolds.

With mother recovering off I went to Oxfordshire, looking forward to discovering England from the air, but it was straight back to school for me where for several weeks I learned aircraft recognition, weather situations and how to fly in them, night flying and

the dreaded - blind flying.

Eventually it was back to flying and I was in love and it was not just with Joan, but with the twin engined 'Oxford' aeroplane.

The Oxford was a neat, compact little 'plane that was easy to handle and I got along famously. I learned to 'blind fly' using only instruments, more navigation and aircraft recognition. I passed all my exams on twin engined 'planes and awaited my posting to operational combat, but this was not to be, for I was posted to RAF Maddingley in Herefordshire where I flew the DE Havilland Rapide - another twin engined 'plane that I enjoyed immensely.

61 My duties involved teaching other personnel to become crew members, there were wireless operators, navigators, gunners, bomb aimers and engineers all of whom, although they had completed their basic training, had never flown before. Their reactions varied from delight to sheer terror. I also regularly flew aircrew and other personnel up and down the country where they were to attend meetings of the War Office

My social life was hectic, the uniform attracted the girls and I was in heaven. In the United States I had learned to jive and to jitterbug so I was in great demand - pure bliss !

In the local pub I had befriended a Mr. and Mrs. James, local farmers who invited me to stay with them occasionally whilst off duty. They had cows, horses, sheep poultry and a large orchard - the fresh air was nectar and their hospitality extreme. One point of issue upon which Mr. James insisted was that I never went near his prize bull, a massive beast that he kept for breeding. It looked continually angry and there was really no need for Mr. James warning, I avoided it like the plague.

There were many land army girls working upon farms in the area and one in particular

took a shine to me. She worked on the farm that was at the end of the runway and whenever I took off she would be there waving to me and blowing me kisses. Food was plentiful on the farm and she supplied me with continuing gifts of pork, bacon and butter which I duly carefully packed and sent home to my family who were always hungry in war torn London. The precious eggs that she gave me were stored gently packed and then taken home with me on weekend passes. At the time I did not realise just how glad of this extra food my parents were.

My rank of Flight Sergeant, stood me in good stead for better accommodation, access to the sergeants mess and improved food, it also gave me a lot more responsibility which, on one occasion I regret I abused !

62 We regularly visited Hereford where we would attend en masse the dance halls, the station provided us with transport for these visits which consisted of an old 'Dennis' 'bus which had a six foot overhang from the back wheels. It was a rickety old 1930's banger but it carried us back and forth to our nights out without many mishaps.

One particular Saturday night Flight Sergeant Hookings, who did not usually drink alcohol , for as I have said, one sniff of the barmaid's apron would render him unconscious - decided to imbibe rather copiously. All was well until it was time to go home where, being the most senior rank I was in charge of ensuring all those personnel who got on the bus at the station and off at the dance hall did the same in reverse to come home.

The 'bus started off before I had chance to count heads and as I was standing up at the time the sudden jerk and lurch of the old bus shot me from one side to the other and my elbow went clean through one of the windows. There was glass everywhere much to the amusement of my charges. Had I been sober no doubt I would have been more steady but the result of my overindulgence meant that I was called up before the Commanding Officer

next day where I was severely reprimanded and told that with my rank I should set an example to other ranks. Expecting worse to come I was greatly relieved when he said that because I was doing so well with my flying, there would be no withholdings. I had hoped to be placed in operational aerodromes but neither South Cerney nor Maddingley were so and my duties consisted of transporting Military Personnel all over Great Britain as well as training air crew.

63 Chapter Twenty Promotion

In March 1944 I was promoted to Pilot Officer and I was transferred to Buntingthorpe an Operational Training Unit and it was here that I converted to two engined Wellington Bombers and where I formed my own aircrew and where, as a team, we trained qualified and became a skilled bomb raiding team.

The Wellington Bomber was a medium sized two engined 'plane, made by Vickers factory that was only a few miles from my home and for the next eight weeks we as a team learned to handle a 'plane with a bomb load. We flew out to the Wash in the north sea where we learned to bomb aim under dual instruction until after four weeks we were on our own. My team consisted of five sergeants - Ron Walters my bomb aimer, Ron was 21, very smart, with a moustache and a great big smile. Butch Crony who was 23, Butch had a very dry sense of humour, he knew his job so well. He was my Navigator.

Rex Temperman from Tasmania was my Radio Operator, Rex was 26 and smoked like a chimney. The two gunners were Alex Norris and Ted 'Timber' Woods. Alex was the rear gunner and Timber was the upper gunner, two great and very funny Midland lads. We shared and so enjoyed each other's company in those planes where we became a big happy family.

At weekends I would manage to get the occasional pass and would rush down to London to

take Joan dancing at Park Farm Club but, I must admit that I enjoyed female company so much that during the week whenever I had the chance I would be visiting the local 'hop' and made good friends with many a local beauty.

One day my sister Barbara came to the base to see me, she brought with her a girlfriend - Mary who I found to be good company and a good dancer.

64 As our training to fly Wellingtons went from strength to strength I became very much aware that 'blind flying' was not so easy for I did not care to have to rely totally upon instruments to fly, it was natural for the mind to take control and to believe that you were right and the instruments at fault. One day that actually happened and I lost control of the 'plane but, luck was on my side and I broke through the cloud only to find we were flying at a rather undesirable angle.

I had instructed the crew to 'belt up' for we were going to really try some blind flying. We dived in and out of clouds and 'played around' for about half an hour going across country and I really had a good feeling of confidence then, I found a real heavy cumulus cloud which meant plenty of turbulence and flew straight in. I quickly discovered that I was really no good at blind flying and became extremely worried as to where I was. The crew became very quiet and I felt that I had lost complete control. The answer was to tell the crew to bale out and, as I was about to do just that, I found a clear area. It had been a nerve racking experience. However the opportunity to fly those wonderful Wellington bombers was brilliant for us all, we dropped 14 lb. practice bombs in the Wash and I am pleased to say we had pretty good results, mainly because we worked so well as a team

Our next posting was to RAF Wigston in Leicestershire, which was an Operational

Conversion Unit and what a shock it was for me to see the great lumbering Stirling four engined bombers. They were so high up from the ground and looked to me to be a gigantic challenge. It was back to school once again for all of us, where we were to confront the liabilities of this great monster. An engineer joined us here - a crew member we had not needed in previous 'planes his name was Sergeant John Tate who was to become the most important man in my life in 1944 !

65 As with every conversion especially transferring from a twin to a multi engined 'plane, a lot more individual attention and concentration was required especially when 'taxiing'. This necessitated moving the nose of the plane from side to side to do which, we had to use just two of the engines.

Our training here was individual, I concentrated upon flying, John upon the engines, Butch upon the new navigation system, Rex upon the radio equipment, Ron upon bomb aiming and the two gunners Timber and Alec concentrated upon target practice.

This training school was considered to be capable of bringing us up to full operational standards.

Having experienced quite a few trips with my flying instructor who in his wisdom decided that I was ready for my first solo, the crew and I were more than thankful when that day arrived.

When flying the Stirling along with the instructor, it was he who assisted with the throttle control and lifting the undercarriage but, to fly solo it was up to John to undertake these duties for the very first time which at the age of 19 was a huge responsibility. We HAD to all work as a very close team .

Normally the first solo would involve only one circuit of the airfield with the instructor standing by the control tower watching your every move carefully and confirming that he had made the right decision in letting you all go solo !

Progressing through the course we were to spend a lot of time cross country night flying with 'blind flying' through cloud. All of which was to prove invaluable in the tasks that lay ahead of us.

66 The dangers of flying at night could involve the highly perilous position of being caught within the beams of a searchlight. If this happened to be the 'master beam' the pilot would become blinded instantly for this 'blue beam' was of such brilliance that nothing outside the 'plane or your instruments inside were visible.

To practice this experience we became involved with the Army in Bristol. The severity of the blue beam and the dangers even on a training exercise necessitated us having a special code that informed them of any dangers we were in whilst being caught in that dreaded beam.

On my practice run, I admit I was ill prepared for the strength of that searchlight's shaft of light but I had been trained and knew what I should do. I maneuvered, dived, turned, flew into the beam rather than away from it as I had been taught stood me in good stead of getting out rather than becoming more subjected to more dangers.

But, I was trapped and I realised that we were all in great jeopardy.

I knew that I had to issue instructions to Rex, my wireless operator for there was no way I could get out of that light. However, just as I was about to switch on the intercom to Rex, the Army must have realised that I was in difficulty and switched off the beam. Even when that light was switched off I was still blinded and it took me quite a few seconds to straighten up and fly right !

Upon landing we left the 'plane and stood in the airfield having a chat and for those who did so - a smoke. " Skipper - what the heck happened there ?" was the general question.

“We were thrown about - worse than being on boat in a stormy sea, were we in danger ?“
How could I admit that we really were, but this had just been practice What would I do if it was the real thing ? I was becoming very aware of the hazardous risks that were out there.

67 Chapter twenty one

Having left Wisley in Leicestershire with the experience of flying a four engine ‘plane, we were posted to Scampton in Lincolnshire where we were to ‘convert’ onto Lancaster’s and eventually to operations. Our squadron was to be 619 which was alongside 617 Squadron now famed for the Dambusters raid and the sinking of the Tirpitz.

Our conversion onto the Lancaster was pretty quick and before long I was enjoying being in control of that monster. An important factor was to be au fey with take offs and landings for the Lancaster was a much lighter ‘plane than the Stirling bomber had been. The landing of a Stirling was a matter of dropping it onto the runway whereas the Lancaster enjoyed ‘floating’ down.

A part of our training was practice bombing, which took place over the Wash - far more interesting for the crew as they were able to participate rather than just being involved with taking off and landing.

Weather played a most important part of what we did or did not do and on one particular windy day with a cross wind blowing I became aware as I approached the runway that I faced a difficult landing.

I realised that I would not make it on that first approach and at a height of about

twenty feet I shouted "Overshoot". This command to the crew meant for one thing that the engineer had to hold the throttles in place whilst I held the aircraft steady. Continuing down the runway ready to take her round again and having reached the required height I called to John the engineer "Wheels up"

68 "Skipper" came the reply "They are already up !" When I heard that I realized what a narrow escape we had for if we had landed with no wheels down sparks certainly would have flown !

Over the intercom came the voice of the Squadron Commander "Hookings I want you to go to the satellite 'drome, land and report back to me"

Having carried out his instructions to perfection I knocked on the door of his office hoping that he would praise me for my skills in holding the aircraft steady.

That was not to be, for his concerns were the fact that we were only inches from the ground with no undercarriage down.

"Why did you give instructions to pull up the undercarriage ?" he queried.

"No sir I did not, it was just a misunderstanding between pilot and engineer" I explained. His reply was sarcastic "We lose enough 'planes over Germany

Hookings and we don't need your help to lose more over here ! Now go away, concentrate upon your training and make sure it does not happen again"

Duly reprimanded I did just that and never was so inattentive again.

My private life however was very good for there were far more occasions to

socialise with the local girls at the village hops and occasionally my sister

Barbara and her friend Mary would come to see me again, staying at the parents

home of a Naval friend of mine - Tony Rasketts.

69 In August 1944 we were transferred to RAF Strubby in Lincolnshire, to join an operational squadron. Strubby was five miles west of Maplethorpe and our squadron was 619. I found squadron life to be entirely different from that of any previous training. I was amongst experienced crews who had flown many missions and I felt very much the new boy with a lot to learn.

In training you saw the same faces almost without fail, but within a squadron it became commonplace to realise a pal was missing or there were those dreaded empty spaces at the breakfast table.

I realized that one day it could be my turn and I reflected death or injury. In fact gave instructions to John my engineer that if I was ever injured whilst at the controls, he was to inject me with the morphine that was always carried in the survival kits, for I was the only person who would be able to fly that 'plane.

My only other alternative would have been to order the crew to bail out.

Never in my wildest imaginings did I contemplate what was to happen to Eric Hookings !

After the first couple of weeks I settled into squadron life. Although not committed to operations as such, we as a crew were directed to the bombing range on the east coast of England to practice, practice and then practice. As a crew we became a very happy bunch who were contented with our results but for me, I was so looking forward to going on my first operation as second 'dickey' or copilot.

The one incident that remains so clearly in my memory was one of the days we spent

practicing low flying over the Wash, off the coast of Lincolnshire.

70 We had been directed to fly our Lancaster's whilst overland, at a height no lower

than 1,000 feet but the sea gave us our opportunity to low fly. On this one occasion whilst at a very low height I had a call from my rear gunner Alec " Skipper - we are a Lancaster bomber - not a bloody submarine, take her up for God's sake " as I started to pull up I realized that my tail had been only about twenty feet from the waves. Now that was low flying!

71 Chapter twenty two...

There was no doubt in that we were a very happy crew working together in good harmony, with lots of fun and laughter. However, our objectives were recognized as being very serious and our lives were dedicated to practice, practice and then more practicing. How to handle an emergency should one arise was imperative. We were

taught what to do if we were (for whatever reason) forced down into the sea. We trained on how we would leave the aircraft and get into the large dinghy that was on board, then to send out that signal upon which our lives could depend.

The other actions we practiced so many times was how to leave the aircraft if, God forbid that we had to bail out over land. We were told that if there was a fire in the engines or cockpit it was the duty of the engineer, John Tate to press the gravimeter or fire extinguisher button, for my actions were to ensure the fuel supply system was turned off and the plane put into a dive that we hoped would extinguish any fire.

As anxious as we all were to commence operations it was crucial for me to gain further experience and I was ordered to act as second pilot on a bombing raid before taking charge of any operations with my own crew. I was summoned to a briefing, introduced to the crew and informed that the 'target for tonight' would be the Bergen submarine pens in Norway. The actual briefing covered the types of bombs we would have onboard, target indicators and their special color significance and the importance of knowing which color flares would indicate the enemy and not our own forces. Navigation aids and the weather was also of such importance to us all.

72 We taxied out and, for the first time I actually was in control of taking off the mighty Lancaster with her full load of bombs on board. What an experience it was and I heaved a sigh of relief when I completed it successfully. The crossing of the North sea was uneventful, we saw no enemy aircraft and the weather was kind but, problems arose when we arrived in the target area. The weather had closed in and with the cloud base at 9/10ths the master bomber was unable to drop the target indicator flares. After circling the area for 30 minutes we were directed to abort the operations and we headed for home.

I was sad that we were unable to fulfill our intentions but my concentration was brought sharply into focus when, on our way back across the North sea we ran into a severe electrical storm which was more than a little disconcerting, with lightning flashing across the aircraft which still had the full bomb load.

We eventually crossed the coast only to be told that, due to bad weather we would not be able to land at our own base ! We were transferred to a nonoperational base further up the east coast where the weather was clear. Here I was, not only having to try to land with this full bomb load, but also to have to land onto a strange airfield !

It was my good fortune that on this occasion I had with me the full assistance of the experienced pilot and, between us we managed to get her down. Thankfully all the 'planes on this sortie also landed safely and it was a relieved bunch of boys that went into the mess for our eagerly awaited bacon and eggs, followed by a good sleep.

73. We awoke next morning to good weather and, as our base was only twenty flying minutes away, we were eager to get going. We each arrived at our individual aircraft only to find to our utter horror some 'nonoperational based officer' had given instruction to ground staff to fill our fuel tanks to the top !!! This resulted in us all not only having to embark on the difficult take off with full tanks and bomb loads but, we were also unable to land at our home base due to the all up weight of those fuel tanks and bombs. We were ordered to fly out over the sea and drop our bomb load !

What a waste ! So, we flew out, bombed the North sea and flew back to home base !

What I had been up to with the crew of another 'plane was of great interest to my crew and they were anxious to discover if I had any contact with the enemy ?

It was September 1944 and we were soon making preparations for our own first raid as a full crew and that call appeared on the Daily Record board, a few days

later. We were summoned to the briefing room and told that our target was to be Dusseldorf and our squadron 619, would be in the first wave.

We now put into practice all our training routines, weather, type of bomb load, flares etc. and eventually went to our messes, they to the sergeants and me to the officer's mess for our bacon and eggs. Assembling at our respective dispersal point, complete with parachutes we awaited the transport to our Lancaster bomber and I suddenly became most apprehensive. It had arrived, I was there, this was it,

my 'plane was waiting to be boarded, I was in charge of this 'planes mission and I was responsible for the lives of those six brave boys.

74 I signed the 700, which was the logbook pertaining to the mechanics of Aircraft, confirming all was in order and we boarded, went to our fixed positions and commenced our checklists. I started the engines, carried out cross checks and proceeded to taxi out. Eventually, after what seemed a lifetime I saw the green light from the Aldus lamp giving me the all clear for takeoff.

It was an emotional Eric Hookings that roared down that runway at Strubby, I was fully aware of what I had to do and of my responsibilities but after takeoff and once I got to 2,000 feet I settled down and accepted my fate. As we crossed the English channel we - as was the normal practice - tested our guns, the navigator Butch Cronney set our course and we joined into the main force of over 900 bombers. There were no enemy 'planes on our outward bound flight but, our concern was collision, for there were so many of us and the danger was in the slightest touch of a wing that would spell disaster. All the crew was on intensive ob's for this and at

one time the shout from the mid upper gunner Timber Woods “Skipper, watch out there’s one right above us” brought us to the reality of close formation flying.

We neared our intended target and I could see nothing! No action from any other ‘planes, no flares, no fires and I wondered if we really were on the right course.

Butch reassured me that we were and reportedly told me we were in the target area and I consequently ordered the bomb doors to be opened. Ron Walters, the bomb aimer made his way to the bomb sights and within a few moments the whole scenario changed.

75 Searchlights beamed up at us, heavy flack was everywhere and we were in the thick of it. Ron gave me the directives “Left skipper” or “Steady” or “Right” It was my duty to keep the ‘plane as steady as I possibly could so that he could line up his sights onto the target. Ron’s cry of “Bombs away” was a relief to us all and it immediately became my urgent duty to get our craft out of the danger area as soon as possible for there were a great number of ‘planes behind me with sights set on the same target and I had to get out of their way. This I did by putting the ‘plane into a very steep downward turn which gave me the maximum speed to get away from the target.

In view of the amount of flack which we encountered, my first responsibility was to check that the crew were all OK. I knew that we had been hit, but where and how serious was it? All reported back that they were safe and we set our course for home.

We landed at Strubby in the early hours of the morning, a very happy and relieved

crew. We had completed our first mission successfully and our delight was increased tenfold later by learning that we had hit the target - the marshalling yards in Dusseldorf.

As we left the 'plane we became aware of the fact that we had been damaged, there were shrapnel holes all over the 'plane and, amazed at the damage that been incurred and we thanked God for our safe return.

76 "Gardening Raids" were so called because we undertook such tasks as 'planting' mines and attacking enemy shipping. It was on one such raid that, after briefing, we prepared for takeoff and having checked with the crew that all was well I proceeded down the runway on full power. The tail was up, giving me full control of the rudders and as we approached lift off speed, the port outer engine lost its power, causing the aircraft to veer off the runway at an angle of 45 degrees. A quick decision was called for and I immediately pulled back the column and issued instructions to the crew to get to the rear of the 'plane as the nose of the Lancaster was trying to bury itself into the ground!

Fortunately that ground was soft from earlier rain but nevertheless we were sinking into the mud as we headed toward the watchtower. Our aborted takeoff had left a very muddy Lancaster, a deeply furrowed airfield and a badly shaken crew !

I was more than a little pleased to find out that our next raid was to be in daylight and even more pleasing was the fact that we were to have fighter escorts

The target was Meebeck (Homberg) oil installation depot. It was a pleasure to be

able to see where we were going instead of flying by instruments and the feeling of

protection afforded by our fighters was reassuring, we almost enjoyed the flight !

Reaching the target however was a different scenario especially when we were greeted by flack which became very severe and we appreciated the knowledge that those fighter boys were always in the background warding off aerial attacks.

Of the 18 Lancaster's from 619 squadron that set off upon this raid only seventeen returned to base, the missing 'plane made it back as far as Woodbridge in Suffolk but crash landed killing the entire crew.

77 Having completed several missions we settled down to a working routine.

Never complacent we had complete faith and trust in each other and became a 'happy family' always looking out for each other.

Off base we could mix socially and many times we jumped aboard the camp bus for a night out in Skegness where I in particular could really enjoy the dance floors.

Having become a jitterbug champion in Bedford (flying a plane was not all that I learned in Oklahoma) I was quite popular with the girls and could hold my own against any GI challengers.

Saturday November 4th 1944 a crowd of us from 619 Squadron were enjoying ourselves in one of the dancehalls in Skegness when a particularly attractive young lady who was an excellent dancer caught my eye. I asked her to dance and could not let her go for she was as light as a feather and a joy to partner. We got along famously, she had a good sense of humor, told me she worked in Boots the chemist and later even escorted me to the 'bus back to camp. We all had to leave sharply on time for we were all on standby for missions from the next day.

Having all had such a good evening out, we were loath to leave but duty called.

As I gave her a goodnight kiss, I asked if I could see her again to which she replied

**“ Eric - I would love to see you again but, I have a bad record, for every flyer that I
have arranged to see again, never comes back !”**

I laughed and assured her that it would never happen to me.....