

A short summary of the life of Gilbert Gordon Harry Cook

Gilbert was born in Woolston 25th Feb 1914, and as a child lived in Putney, London, where grandfather Samuel Cook was a works manager at Grimaldi aircraft, Vauxhall. Making Sopwith planes during the WW1. Due to Zeppelin raids Gilbert came to live with his grandfather Vokes in Southampton, the family home. It was from him that Gilbert learned about horticulture as his grandfather Vokes was always winning various prizes. Great-grandfather Vokes was made Alderman of Southampton after many years on councils and as such Gilbert learned about conciliation. Grandfather Cook was a chairman of Supermarine at the time of the SE series of Schneider trophy flying boats, (later evolving to become the famous Spitfire). He worked with Pemberton Billing, Scott Paine, who later went on to develop high speed boats. (The RAF high speed recovery launches), at times Lawrence of Arabia was involved with the high speed launches.

Gilbert joined the 2nd Itchen scouts and spent 18 years up to "Rover" before becoming President of the Southampton scouts. He always wore his lapel badge Fleur de Lis at all solemn occasions throughout his life, and this was commented upon by many famous people. Gilbert managed to get a job during the depression picking up paper on a stick with a nail in the end at Southampton council parks. He also took on private gardening work. Grandfather Cook had meanwhile left Supermarine during a major redundancy and moved to Jersey, Channel Islands to work as a carpenter, his apprenticed trade. Gilbert with very good references, had managed to get a mature students place at Kew gardens, where one of his jobs was to take bamboo shoots to the panda at London zoo. War was declared, Grandfather Cook was taken off the Channel islands as a civilian P.O.W. by the Germans and locked up in Laufen Oflag VII, Salzburg, for 5 years until liberated by USA forces. The Americans were in no mood to take prisoners as they had recently liberated concentration camps in Germany, but the elder P.O.W.s of the camp prevented any "incident" by standing in front of the lined up German guards, as the elderly WW1 Cavalry officer who ran the camp had treated them as best he could and had earned their respect, allowing them to grow vegetables etc..and more importantly keeping the Gestapo away by telling them to bide their time and not do anything stupid like trying to escape as they were all elderly men and unlikely to succeed. Red cross parcels eventually arrived from the USA and red cross letters sent back and forth. Grandfather Cook was an industrialist in WW1 and attended a lecture where several model tanks made of wood were distributed by a junior officer from the trenches, tanks were initially scorned and the officer got angry and gave one to grandfather for his children to play with, hoping they would never have to go to war. This tank was played with by Gilbert and his brother Victor and was eventually lost.

Gilbert was not allowed to join up as the primary importance was to teach people how to grow food, he was also a reserve fireman at night. He also had a patrol to do, and reported a German parachutist shooting from Richmond park. For transport he had a 350cc Velocette motorbike, which had a noisy exhaust, a discussion with his uncle Gordon Vokes resulted in a small prototype "silent" exhaust being fitted, the larger version being used later for Bristol Beaufort night fighters. Gilbert was allowed to join up in 1940 and married Elizabeth Mary Connis while a private in the East Surrey Signals regiment. He was sent to officer training 38th Div. Battle school at Swanage and to assist in building defences. It was here that one of his duties was to burn the bodies of washed up German soldiers, presumably after a failed landing further up the coast. I believe that this was hushed up officially. He became an officer in the Welsh regiment, having to stand on a table and eat a raw leek. His old regiment went to Singapore to be surrendered a few days after arrival to the Japanese. There was also the occasion of a court martial, where he had to deliver 5000 left foot boots to an army base, but due to delays etc. instead he had to deliver them to a military warehouse, the boots were locked up in a secure room at the back of the main warehouse. When someone else went to collect them the next day, they did not look in the secure room and reported the boots stolen. Gilbert was fined a

week's pay, despite protests and a map showing where he stored the boots, after several weeks of complaining his fined pay was refunded, but no apology.

Gilbert was chosen to go to the middle east on a ship, he thought via Liverpool as it was at night, then via Scotland, Canada, USA, Brazil across to South Africa, where the men could smell Cape Town 30 miles out to sea, as the streets were ankle deep in orange peel from the thousand of soldier passing through and buying fruit that they had not seen for many years. His ship was followed by a German submarine until a Sunderland flying boat depth charged it away near Mombasa, Kenya. They eventually arrive at Cairo / Alexandria. On board was a French officer who Gilbert helped to improve his English.

Gilbert was part of the Spears mission with General Spears and Colonel Guy in Syria and Lebanon. Gilbert spent much of WW2 alone, with a young translator driver "Hassan" and a 1930's Chrysler Royale car. Places mentioned in letters home apart from Egypt, were Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Sudan, Iran, excursions "close" to Turkey. Cities of Beirut, Damascus, Basra, Baghdad, Tehran, often following in the footsteps of Lawrence of Arabia, and listening to various Bedouin Arab's stories of Laurence's exploits, and enjoy their delicacy of sheep's eyes. (One of Lawrence's brothers used to visit us in Albert, France, as he used to visit his other brother's grave who was killed in WW1, he signed a copy of "Seven Pillars of Wisdom" in Arabic for Gilbert, we have no idea what it reads). With the Bedouin he had to be very careful not to upset them by refusing gifts, anything admired had to be given to the admirer. Gilbert was offered horses and camels and had to thank them and ask them to look after them for him as he could not take them with him, on future visits the horses etc. were paraded for him and he used to ride them to show that he respected their gifts. Gilbert was once bitten by a stray dog and had to have painful rabies injections for several weeks.

They were once caught in a locust storm for several hours, the windscreen wipers were useless and the road became as slippery as ice with the fat from millions of crushed locusts. They had a large dog at their base house, who kept cats, dogs and other unwanted humans away. Eventually the dog was poisoned by burglars. The house boy was paid but also was given a packet of 20 cigarettes every day that he worked well. Gilbert's cigarette ration was 80 a day.

On one trip they hit a large stone in the road that ripped back the engine sump plug. They collected as much oil as they could in tin hats, gloves, canvas washing buckets etc.. The driver went to the nearest village and came back with dates, which were chewed mixed with sand and camel dung and slapped on the sump plug. This held for several days, and on return to motor transport for repair, a blow lamp had to be used to remove the hard as rock mixture. One morning Gilbert felt a tickling on his chest, it was a giant Centipede, he tried to flick it off but it then dug in, on calling for help "Hassan", grabbed it and ripped it off, leaving neat rows like a zip. Gold sovereigns were use with the various Arab tribes to barter and keep "Sweet". One trip involved taking a car boot loaded with at least 20 thousand pounds worth of sovereigns to Tehran. Even the Germans used British sovereigns when dealing with the Arabs.

Gilbert also brought back to Allied bases any downed pilots that the Arabs had collected in their travels.

On one occasion all his food was stolen, and they had to go 3 days without food, luckily water was available. Gilbert often slept on his rifle. On going back to the Officers mess in Alexandria, he came across desert turkeys, tried to creep up on them, but they always moved away. The answer was to drive full speed at them and then shoot them when in range. The meat was welcome in the mess. On

a trip on the Turkish border, where villagers were Turk, he was surprised to see dolls wrapped onto wooden boards which hung on nails in the huts, one of the "dolls" blinked, they were babies. Economic and political warfare involved many things. Near the Turkish border trains were filled with water and run back and forth pretending to be fuel supplies for the hidden army, and Germans collaborators/ Turkish spies would report back. Similarly BSA motorbike engines were fitted with propellers and attached to canvas aircraft, with the engines running and blowing sand around they looked like taxiing aircraft. Gilbert was not allowed to have a radio for communications as these could be tracked by enemies and he had to rely on carrier pigeons.

Food supply for the civilians was a major problem. Wheat for 5 years was delivered from Australia and distributed, but soon became in the hands of marketers, and much effort was involved in recovering it. Train wagons had holes drilled in them and a pipe inserted to fill sacks while the trains were moving. Overnight it was declared illegal to hold more than a certain amount. The village donkeys were loaded with sacks of sand and persuaded to wander off into the desert, where they stopped was where the wheat was buried and the donkeys wanted to be offloaded. The wheat had to be stored overwinter and corrugated iron sheds were built, but soon there was a rats and mice problem. Gilbert asked his delivery drivers to pick up any healthy stray cats and these were put into the sheds. In the spring when the sheds were opened there were many cats, all sizes and colours.

During one of his car trips, he found himself surrounded by tanks, which were not supposed to be there, he stopped the car and waved his union flag, hoping they were friendly. An officer came down and asked him who he was and what he was doing, the reply was much the same. They agreed not to mention anything about each other. That evening a carrier pigeon was sent back to base, which no doubt was leaked to the enemy. The tanks were part of the fake army, vehicles disguised to look like tanks. During a Christmas lunch party in Albert, one of his men talking about the desert war mentioned the event and Gilbert overheard him and asked him if it was near a certain wadi, the man asked how did he know that. Gilbert told him it was he with the car waving the union flag. Gilbert later went on to assist with the pretend army to stop the German's thinking about coming through Turkey to attack Egypt from the rear. At one time he had responsibility for 200 camels to carry food and equipment where vehicles could not go. This proved useful later on just before retiring when visiting a particularly difficult vicar in Norfolk, when he saw a picture of a camel in the vicar's office and they both realised they were "on the same page".

Gilbert rose from Private to Major in 5 years, and was offered the rank of Colonel if he stayed to assist with the Palestine / Israel problems, he declined having only had a few weeks of marriage before officer training and going abroad for 5 years.

In the desert during spare time at base Gilbert would grow tomatoes and other vegetables in the sandy soil, this was noticed by Colonel Griffin and Colonel Guy who both wanted him to work on their farms, one in Rhodesia, also the Israel and USA wanted him to work for them on growing food in their deserts.

On the train back from the middle east most of his belongings were stolen, at night he noticed a string moving down the passage way, then a suitcase being dragged slowly. Their suitcases were being stolen and thrown out of the train for later collection. The thieves jumped off the train at speed to escape capture. Gilbert came home with a cardboard box, one suitcase eventually arrived months later with just a few items in it.

From the desert Gilbert went to France as horticultural officer for the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to build the Cemeteries in Normandy from 1945 to 1952, many according to plans by Sir

Edwin Lutyens where he asked visiting dignitaries to sign back of his office door, Prime ministers, Ambassadors, maybe General Patton, Charles De Gaulle, Eisenhower, and others. (His Uncle had been Major Henry Victor Vokes, the first horticultural officer in France when the CWGC was first set up). One building was particularly too new, and Gilbert was asked how to age it's roof, the reply was to follow the next heard of cows up the road, collect the dung and spread it on the roof, sure enough new spring moss and lichen were growing very well. When he moved to Albert on the Somme he left the door to his successor, but somehow it was sanded and repainted much to his annoyance. He worked in Albert for the CWGC from 1952 until 1971, last year or so at the Arras CWGC office and last few months at CWGC head office at Maidenhead, before retiring back to the family area in Southampton and refused his greatest honour of all, "The Presidency of the Kew guild". For his work organising the 50th Anniversary of the Battle of the Somme, he received an M.B.E., and later in the year the Medaille D'Honneur de la Ville D'Albert, which had to be approved by the President of France. Gilbert met General De Gaulle several times, once he started to speak to him in French, but General De Gaulle replied in perfect English, which was an unusual privilege.

His garden in Albert was immaculate and there were weekly open visits by locals, sometimes visiting dignitaries who arrived with little warning would ask where to eat, Mother would often make up a meal for them at short notice if they went into the garden to pick their own runner beans, peas, etc.. they were pleased to do this as they were tired of expensive French restaurants by the time they got to Albert. Gilbert's garden speciality was not digging, but using compost instead. Most of the exotic plants in his garden had a story attached to them, where or who he got them from.

When watching the Remembrance cemeteries on TV, he used to remark at the trees, saying the when he planted them they were only a foot high, now 60 ft or more. He still remembered the names of most of the Cemeteries as they appeared on TV.

The aluminium penknife that he always carried from his Kew days was lost a few years before he died, we all searched for it for days, Gilbert searched everywhere in the house and garden for many weeks. By pure chance when I took a shower at his house, I noticed a glint in the overflow slot and found the missing knife, it had slipped out of the washing basket that was kept in the shower and into the overflow slot. On handing the knife over Gilbert spoke several sentences in Arabic. He also spoke a few in Romany as his family home at "Birch Lawn", in North East Road, Sholing, Southampton, had a respected Romany community that were often were employed by his father and others locally. Gilbert was lucky to find employment with the CWGC, in that his hobby of gardening was also closely linked to a profession that he enjoyed.

Gilbert died suddenly at 9.00 AM on 27th July 1997 aged 83, from a dissected split aorta, the main artery coming out of his heart. It was a shock to all the family as he was so strong and fit. He had led a very full life and done everything that he could image.

Misc.

His father Samuel Cook, was taken off Jersey, Chanel Island to spend the war in Ilag Laufen Vii civilian P.O.W. camp, and we have many red cross letters etc.. from that time. He was in Jersey working as it was during the depression and work was scarce in Southampton. He had to keep quiet about his involvement with the SE flying boats being forerunners of the "Spitfire" and no doubt had useful information about them.

Buried next to my father at St. Mary's extra Sholing, Southampton, is Harry Tremelling who married into the Vokes family, Harry was Mitchell's senior draughtman at Supermarine in Woolston, Southampton, where Spitfires were built initially and throughout the war. (Spitfires were also mass

produced under licence in the Midlands). All parts were made of wood initially and loaded with weights to see how they would break, the undercarriage of the Spitfire was always a weak area despite Harry and others spending considerable amount of time on it. Mother helped to build Spitfires in Woolston, making and assembling parts of the tubing for the machine guns in the wings. Blind or flat rivets were used initially which took a lot of time, to speed up production and test if they were really necessary, split dried peas were wallpaper pasted on top of the flat rivets and the aircraft flown at full speed, where the peas remained it was not considered necessary to make flat rivets. (Also early Spitfires during certain manoeuvres stalled because of excessive fuel flooding the carburettors / engines, a simple solution was found by putting a washer with a precision hole in the middle, in the fuel lines restricting the amount of fuel that it would let through).