

KEN RAISBECK – THE FATHER I NEVER MET

A TALK BY HIS SON JOHN

John tells the story of his father Ken, who lost his life in a flying accident on 26th June 1944, whilst learning to fly at No. 3 British Flying Training School, Spartan School of Aeronautics, Miami, Oklahoma.

His talk covers Ken's life as a young man growing up in his hometown in Northern England, his migration south after the great depression of the 1930s and his family life prior to volunteering to join the RAF during WW2.

Over the years John has taken an avid interest in researching the missing links during the last months of his father's life, from when he enrolled into the RAF and up to his untimely death when he was only 26 years old.

His research covers Ken's embarkation from UK to USA, his arrival in Miami, his training programme and social life right up to his ultimate tragic accident south of Oswego, Kansas.

John's intriguing story tells us how he managed to find out such detailed information by researching family archives, tracking down ex-BFTS comrades and contacting UK/USA agencies and historians in order to learn more about the father he never met.

1. The Early Years

My grandfather Jack Raisbeck was employed as a slate miner in an area known as Teesdale in the North East of England. When he met his future wife, my grandmother Dorothy Ridley, she was a farmer's daughter living on the other side of the mountain in an area known as Weirdale. They married during the first decade of the 1900s and lived a simple rural lifestyle in an area of beautiful high exposed moorland hills and mountains.

The Raisbecks already had a daughter Mary who was 7 years old when their son Kenneth was born on 24th August 1917. At this time the "War to end all Wars" as referred to by American President Woodrow Wilson, was raging in Europe and the year 1917 saw American soldiers entering the theatre of war on the Western Front in France.

The WW1 conflict ceased in 1918, a year after Kenneth was born, but Britain was soon faced with economic and industrial chaos and by 1930 and up to 1940, on the eve of WW2, up to 2 million people were unemployed.

At the same time, here in the USA the Wall Street Crash marked the beginning of a downward economic spiral. 'Dust Bowl' conditions persisted in the agricultural heartlands such as here in Oklahoma where angry farmers were being driven from their homes by drought, economic hardship and bank closures as the Great Depression took hold.

As your famous author, John Steinbeck said at the time, "The grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage".

Meanwhile, during this chaotic period back in the UK, Ken Raisbeck had completed his education at King James' Grammar School, Bishop Auckland. Ken was a bright pupil and had achieved good academic results but finding a job in his hometown was nigh impossible.

By this time his sister Mary and her husband George had already migrated to Luton in the South of England and had settled down to a relatively secure future working for Vauxhall Motors, a subsidiary of US giant General Motors.

Ken soon decided to follow his sister south and found temporary employment before applying to join the London Police. He was accepted and in September 1939 as WW2 was declared, Ken aged 22 years was enrolled at the London Police College and he was exempted from being drafted into the armed forces, due to his reserved occupation, as one of London's 20,000 policemen.

The Blitz of London quickly followed, and in 1940 the air raids by the German Luftwaffe destroyed much of the City of London. Police duties changed drastically from the normal day to day routine as crime flourished under cover of the blackout.

Ken enjoyed periods of leave from his police duties and spent much of his spare time with his sister in the relatively safer environment outside of London. Ken was an outgoing young man, he excelled at sports and enjoyed nights out with his pals going to the local dance halls on a Saturday night.

The town of Luton was renowned for the manufacture of straw hats and my maternal grandfather, Cyril Bartlett, was the third generation of his family to run the family owned hat manufacturing business.

Cyril Bartlett was born in 1894 and had survived the horrors of WW1 after serving in the British Army in Belgium and France. He married Maude Rignall after he was demobbed, and they had two daughters, Joyce and Edna. The eldest daughter Joyce, my Mum, was a pretty, vivacious girl who also enjoyed nights out with her friends at the local dance halls on a Saturday night.

It was at the George Hotel in Luton one Saturday night in 1941 that the handsome young Ken Raisbeck plucked up the courage to ask vivacious Joyce for a dance, and there was an instant attraction.

On 26th June 1942, a date that was later to have a huge significance on their lives for more reasons than their wedding, Ken and Joyce were married, and they spent their honeymoon in the beautiful Pennine Hills in Durham, close to Ken's hometown.

They then returned to Luton and Ken continued his police duties in London until mid-1943, when he was called up by the War Office.

2. RAF Volunteers Pilot Training Selection

Although the police force was a reserved occupation, as the war dragged on, the age of exemption rose until it was the turn of those policemen in the middle to late twenties to register for call up, even though they had previously been exempted. Such men were mostly married with settled domestic lives with wives who preferred their men to be live breadwinners, rather than dead heroes. Twenty-six-year-old Kenneth Raisbeck and his newly pregnant wife Joyce both fell into this category.

By definition the police were physically fit men and accustomed to responsibility. Ken had a compulsory choice to register into the Army or Navy or volunteer to join the RAF. If Ken had registered for the Army or Navy, he would have found himself in pretty short order serving in some unit such as the Tank Corps or sailing the seas on Atlantic convoys.

So, Ken pondered deeply and wondered if his Grammar School education would qualify him for RAF aircrew. All aircrew were volunteers and selection for pilot training was a lengthy process with a high failure rate. It took well over a year before even pre-operational flying ability was attained. Ken also figured that he could be better

equipped for a future career with a pilot's licence, so he duly volunteered for aircrew training.

After several weeks he was requested to report to the aircrew recruiting centre where he spent 3 weeks before he was selected for pilot training. Only 40% of applications were offered this opportunity, the rest being trained as navigators or bomb aimers.

Ken embarked upon his 50-week pre-wings training program, which started in various RAF camps across the UK, where cadets were posted for Elementary Flying and Training, before being confirmed as suitable candidates for commissioned pilot training overseas. Flying training to wings standard was carried out in either USA, Canada or Southern Africa, away from the dangers of unpredictable English weather and intruding German fighters.

Ken was stationed at Manchester in January 1944 when he heard that he had qualified for commissioned pilot training in the USA and would be making the long trip across the Atlantic Ocean, leaving behind his beloved family and country which was in the midst of war, testing the very will and soul of the Nation.

He said goodbye to his heavily pregnant wife, my Mum, at their home in Luton just after Christmas, in January 1944 and just a few weeks before I was born on 19th February 194. She was later to say that when he left for the USA on that cold January

morning, he walked through the door of the house and out of her life as he headed for Liverpool to join his ship that would take him across the Atlantic Ocean to the USA.

3. Arrival in USA and Life in Miami

By 9th February 1944, Ken had arrived in Miami and wrote his first letter home. He spoke of a rough crossing, being sick for 9 hours and ill for 3 days, but when they finally sailed into still, calm waters he watched the skyline of New York grow closer, a sight with which he was already familiar from dozens of films.

It looked exactly the same, the towering skyscrapers and Statue of Liberty, but what came as a shock were the lights. The entire city was ablaze with light and after years of total blackout, the sight was like fairyland. But he was soon marched off the ship onto a waiting train, heading for Canada.

The train rumbled north across New England, he said, snow lying thickly on the ground. The train journeyed through the night, crossed into Canada and finally arrived at Monkton in New Brunswick where, after a few days he boarded yet another train via Montreal to Chicago.

From Chicago the train headed south across the prairies of the mid-west, passing through Kansas City and a few hours later it came to a stop at their ultimate

destination, Miami. He recorded that his first brief impressions as the bus swept through Miami on its way from the railway station to the airfield 3 miles out of town, were favourable.

The main street was lined out with parked cars and trucks, it looked a bright, clean sort of place, and Ken wrote of the flying school, which was cleaner, brighter and more comfortable than anything that he had been used to back home. It comprised a collection of long, low wooden buildings, all recently erected by the look of them, set around a square of well-kept grass and crossed by immaculate paths. In the middle of the square was a flagpole, from which Old Glory and the RAF flag was flying.

The Mess was another revelation. It was a cafeteria style, but with a large choice of appetising food, limitless in quantity and served by cheerful smiling American civilians. The quarters sparkled with cleanliness, and unlike back home, a janitor did all the cleaning. There were stout wooden two-tier bunks, and every man had his own locker-come-wardrobe in which to stow his kit.

Ken wrote about the welcoming address from the Commanding Officer, Wing Commander Roxburgh. They were, he told them, guests in a foreign country and that the RAF would be judged by the way in which they conducted themselves. But the C.O. added before getting on with his pep talk that they would shortly have their first taste of local hospitality. A dance at the high school, which had been arranged to welcome them to Miami.

The social life in Miami throughout the course was well recorded in Ken's letters. The Coleman Theatre was always busy; the movies were free to the cadets. They consumed volumes of popcorn and sodas. Miami cadets could also be found at local drug stores, where they enjoyed a variety of luscious ice creams. The boys played a variety of sports, including athletics, soccer, swimming, golfing and all of them were in first class physical condition. Miami folk were kind and helpful to the cadets, they had phenomenal success in hitchhiking both locally and on longer leave vacations when Ken later travelled to Kansas and Chicago.

Over the coming months, Ken wrote many more letters to his wife, parents, sister and friends. He was a prolific correspondent and I have a file of the letters he sent back home, compiled from family archives, which go into great detail about his life in Miami.

He wrote details of the training program that began immediately and intensified as time went on, moving from Primary to Advanced Training. He wrote with excitement about the challenges of solo aerobatics, spinning, formation flying and night flying, which required a high standard of skill.

Ken wrote home about his instructor, whose name was Lentz, only 22 years old and had left school 3 years ago. Half of each day was spent flying and the other half in ground school. Four cadets were assigned to each of the flying instructors, all of whom were American civilians with aviation background, but there was a high failure rate.

Throughout the course about 20% washed out, a term used for repatriation back to the UK to be retrained as a navigator or bomb aimer. It was well known that the American training schools had a very high standard and to pass out was a great honour, but nevertheless, the pressure was very intense, and the failure rate was mentioned regularly in Ken's letters back home.

Ken graduated from Primary Training flying the Fairchild PT9, to Advanced Training, flying the Harvard or AT6 as the Americans called it. The Harvard, wrote Ken, had one unmistakable characteristic – its ear-splitting noise as it flew overhead. It must have been one of the noisiest machines ever produced, he said. It cruised at 160 mph with a top speed of 180 mph and something approaching 250 mph in a dive. Ken was soon flying solo in his Harvard after about 8 hours dual. Those who graduated to Advanced Training were expected to get their wings and were pushed ever harder both in their flying and ground studies.

4. News of the Crash

The months rolled by, January, February, March, April, May and then June, when Ken was promoted by his Commanding Officer to take charge as Squadron Leader of his flight.

On Friday 23rd June 1944 Ken wrote home to his Mum and Dad. It was to be his last letter. Here is an extract: -

“Dear Mum and Dad,

Well here I am again. Now promoted to Flight Leader, can you believe. I am so proud of this achievement. I have just another 5 weeks tomorrow before I get my wings, and won't I be glad when that day comes. I think that I have earned them now, after all the work that I have done over the past year or so. I am still flying day and night but have only a few more hours to do. I will be glad to get back to England once more, especially with wings and feel very confident about passing out.....

How's everything at home? It looks like the war will be over this year sometime, especially after the invasion success three weeks ago. I'm still living in the lap of luxury foodwise. I'm going to miss it all when I leave. Well, cheerio for now. Remember me to all.

Your loving son Ken.”

Ken spent the weekend relaxing by the pool with his pals. This photo was taken on the Sunday morning, and given to me 50 years later by Ken's pal John Weekes.

On the Monday morning 26th June 1944 at around 0900 hours, Ken climbed into the cockpit of his AT6 Harvard, started the engine and taxied along the runway ready for take-off in preparation for a routine morning session of aerobatics. The plane roared into the sky heading off in a North Westerly direction towards Chetopa.

Little did Ken know that he was approaching the last minutes of his life, as he was instantly killed when his Harvard nose-dived with its engine roaring at full blast into a soya field in Richland Township, north west of Chetopa and south east of Oswego, Kansas.

According to news clippings of the day, a number of people witnessed the plane fall, including several farmers. One reported that the plane was already in distress before it fell into a nose-dive, but we have never found a crash report nor any evidence at all as to why the plane fell from the sky. The general consensus was that the plane did not pull out of an aerobatic loop and that Ken may have suffered blackout due to 'G' force effects, but this is conjecture and inconclusive.

According to the Joplin Globe in its article of Thursday 29th June 1944, "K Raisbeck, 26, a former policeman from London, England, was instantly killed in a plane crash four miles south of Oswego, at 10.00 hours Monday morning. Raisbeck was a British cadet at the RAF Training School in Miami, OK. The crash was one of the worst that has happened in this immediate community. Those who saw the tragedy think that the plane headed nose downwards with its motor roaring at full blast from an altitude of about 2,500 feet. It landed in a field of soya beans and when it hit the ground there was a loud explosion which was heard by many people in the town.

The motor buried itself in the ground to a depth of 10 feet taking the greater part of the pilot into the ground with it.

The plane crashed on the farm owned by Mrs Elsie Hansen. Officials soon came and roped off the farm and started the work of removing the body of the cadet and the plane.

A number of people witnessed the plane's fall. One of them was Cleo Mosler who occupies the farm. Another was James Tullis a farmer in the community. He said that he saw the plane flying in a north easterly direction and that it appeared to be in distress even then and he saw it make a nosedive for the ground.

Claude Brown, another farmer working in a field on the C.B. Fritz farm across Labette Creek, also saw the plane crash. Mr & Mrs Woodrow Bryant were picking blackberries about a mile distant when they saw the plane fall. Ling Dudgeon of this City, who was doing some pipelaying for the American Gas Company, heard the crash and hurried to the scene and was first to reach the spot.

The body was taken back to Miami late Monday night and funeral services were held there Wednesday and the burial was made in the G.A.R. cemetery in Miami.

On Tuesday morning, while the work of recovering the plane and body was going on, another RAF plane appeared over the scene and did several aerobatic stunts. This is presumed to be a sort of airman's salute from one flyer to a fallen comrade."

On 26th June 1944, which was their second wedding anniversary, my mother received the following impersonal telegram:

“Regret to inform you that your husband Kenneth Raisbeck has lost his life as a result of an aircraft accident on 26th June 1944.”

The funeral was held on Wednesday 28th June at 09.30. Services were held in the Lane Funeral Home, Miami, and rites were held at the grave shortly afterwards, officiated by Harry W Curtis, Minister of The First Presbyterian Church and Chaplain of the Flying School. Officers of the Training School and a large group of cadets from Ken’s Flight were in attendance. The pall bearers were mostly ex-police officers.

My family received many kind letters from Miami after the funeral, including Minister Harry Curtis, Wing Commander Roxburgh and several cadets on the same flight as Ken. Stan Perry, one of Ken’s closest friends, wrote a moving letter of condolence in which he commented that he could not fail to notice daily letters from Joyce his wife. He also noted that the photograph of the baby (me!) was pinned up in his locker. It was a great source of pleasure and anticipation to Ken. Stan knew Ken for nearly one year and they had become bosom pals, both being ex-policemen. They went everywhere together and shared experiences like first solo trip, examinations and leave together in Kansas City. He said that Ken had an unassuming manner about him.

Stan said that he had no idea how Ken met his untimely end, only presumed that he had blacked out or was temporarily stunned whilst doing aerobatics. Stan said he was in the air at the same time and watched Ken doing his manoeuvres. He was at the correct height and everything was going OK. Stan was shocked when he heard the tragic news, but he thought that Ken knew nothing about it otherwise, he would have bailed out. He was far too steady to panic, he said.

There was another from the Servicemen's Centre signed by the following ladies:

Mrs Taylor Stein

Mrs Geo Stein

Mrs Jennie Williams

Mrs Ann Cochrane

Miss Lucille Furnish

Miss Dorothy Primsell

Miss Webb

Miss Margaret Horley

Miss Marilyn Worley

Miss Betty Chessoweth

Miss Ude Middleton

Miss Kay Breedlove

Mrs Minnie Jennison

Miss Hatfield

Jeanne Warn

Kathleen McBrian

Melba Ercho

Beth Tivitty

Leah Kite

Peggy Boyd.

I have mentioned these names in case there is anyone of the same family here today.

5. VE Day Visit to Miami

The loss of my father was a dreadful shock to my family, but eventually life moved on as it did for many thousands of others bereaved by the war.

Six years later, my mother remarried, and I had a new father in my life. In fact, the first father I ever knew. He called me son and I called him dad. I loved him and he became a very important part of my life for 60 years until he died in my arms in 2009.

Although Ken, my biological father, was never forgotten and frequently mentioned, I just accepted that he lay in his grave in Miami, Oklahoma, thousands of miles away. But I didn't know enough about him, only stories from family members. I needed to know more – what kind of a man was he, what were his characteristics – and I needed to know this from other men outside of the family group.

To this end, and on the 50th anniversary of his crash, I put a notice in the military column of one of our national newspapers the Daily Telegraph. To my astonishment I received many calls from his ex-flying comrades who had set up a No. 20 BFTS Flying School Association many years before. I was privileged to meet many of these men in their homes back in England where I learnt much more about my father and his days in Miami.

I joined the BFTS Association and took part in their reunion activities. Shortly after, they announced a reunion to be held here in Miami on the anniversary of VE Day, May 1995. I soon signed up for the visit and decided to take along my only son Oliver so that he could witness and carry the torch forward.

At the same time, I was contacted by Scott Thompson of KOTV Tulsa, who was a television news journalist. He told me of his intention to make a program about the BFTS in Miami in order to coincide with VE Day celebrations. Scott interviewed me back in the UK at the RAF Museum in London, and here in Miami whilst I was here with my son Oliver 21 years ago.

It is strange to look back at this film and think that the fresh-faced Oliver was 19 years old at the time, the same age as many of the pilots learning to fly here during WW2.

The flyers on the film were then in their seventies and I was 50 years old but am now the same age as the flyers were in 1995.

6. Search for the Crash Site

Apart from keeping in touch with Ken Odell who is the only known survivor of my father's flight, and after the 20 Course Association was disbanded some years ago, my research into Ken's life in Miami was curtailed. But last January, whilst idling over Christmas in Dubai with friends, I decided to check out articles from local Oklahoma and Kansas newspapers, and thanks to the wonder of iPhones and digital technology, to my amazement I discovered several, which I on passed to Nancy Bro here in Miami. Nancy in turn uncovered many more press cuttings over the ensuing weeks, when we pinpointed the farm where the plane came down from an old map.

In a search for a Crash Report I have drawn a blank although many leads from the UK and USA National Archives and other Government Agencies have been pursued.

More recently, I have been in touch with my new-found friend Philip Blair from the Oswego Historical Society. Philip has got the bit between his teeth and we have regular telephone conversations in our efforts to pinpoint the exact crash site. Philip tracked down my father's death certificate only a few weeks ago. We were hopeful that it would lead us to the crash site. We remain hopeful and, by process of elimination, we are almost certain that we are now within an area of only two or three hundred yards square where the plane came down.

With the farmer's permission I am hoping to erect a permanent marker in memory of Ken Raisbeck who tragically lost his life in this field on the Kansas Prairie.

7. Extracts from the film "Silver Wings over Prairie Skies"

8 Sequel

I have spoken to Philip Blair about continuing our research program and extending it to include every one of the 15 RAF cadets buried here at the G.A.R. Cemetery, Miami, and one in Tulsa Memorial Park Cemetery. Total of 16.

We already know from the Columbus Daily Advocate that Peter McCallum was killed on November 13th, 1941 aged 19, doing low flying three miles south of Columbus.

Donald Harfield aged 17, Herbert Hacksley aged 23, Harold Burman aged 21 and Alan Brown aged 19, all died on the same day, August 31st, 1942, when their planes collided somewhere or other, location unknown as yet.

Walter Elliott aged 29 was killed while flying a cross-country solo night flight 96 miles west of Columbus, Kansas, on October 20th, 1945. Frederick Dennis Beverley aged 20, died on 30th May 1945 when his plane crashed along the Neosho 3 miles south east of Chetopa on the Ben Mersman Farm when he lost control of the plane.

Ronald Harrison died August 11th, 1941 in a field west of Collinsville, Oklahoma, aged 19 and is buried in Tulsa Memorial Park Cemetery.

One other cadet, name unknown, was tragically killed when he inadvertently walked into a rotating propeller but must be one of the names below, as we have no information of the following cadets:

Fred Tuft October 17th, 1941 aged 31

Ralph Rice October 3rd, 1942 aged 19

William Spiers April 8th, 1943 aged 20

James Boyd December 14th, 1944 aged 20

William Mann March 21st, 1945 aged 30

Cecil Riddell May 2nd, 1945 aged 20

Dennis Mitchel August 10th, 1945 aged 20

Meanwhile, life goes on and here are a few photos of my Mum (Ken's wife), at 96 years old, and my son Oliver (Ken's grandson) with his wife and family. Oliver's son Rufus will carry the Raisbeck name forward.

9 **Thanks**

Finally, my thanks to all of you who have attended here today, and thank you for your wonderful hospitality, true to the traditions of Miami people. Special thanks of course to Nancy Bro and Philip Blair who have been of enormous help in providing me with so much information over the past few months.