

## PREFACE

I've a tale to tell. I am not only an ex-airman, but an old one with memories which I feel my children and grandchildren might some day like to read about.

Being in the Air Force with the surname Wright, it was inevitable that I should derive the honoured nickname of 'Wilbur' and so I am still known to my old 'wingers'.

Our squadron crest depicted the Lincoln Imp whose effigy can be found tucked away among the arches of Lincoln Cathedral. I suppose in those days of our wilful youth we often behaved in an impish and far from angelic way. In the company of many other young Imps I 'came to life' in the RAF and as a navigator in this great university tried to find my way. Other tales of such a life have already been told – I have tried to tell those parts the others didn't reach.

## BOYHOOD

As a boy living in a small, one street, Durham village situated at the opening to Weardale, my knowledge of war was gleaned from being acquainted with those men of the village who were survivors and veterans of the First World War. They were different in so many ways to the other men who had been in reserved occupations.

There was 'Willie', who told us of the Germans he had stuck his bayonet through when engaged in trench warfare. At first it was one body stuck on the end and then it became two and later we greeted him with, "How many Willie?" He would reply, "Six of the buggers!" and we would roll around with laughter. He was the target of our cajolery and taunts and it wasn't until years later we realised that he didn't work because he was still suffering from shell shock.

Then there was 'Natty' or Nathaniel who had an awful cavity to the side of his forehead. "He has a silver plate in his head!" we would remind each other with the emphasis on the word silver and our tiny minds boggled at the thought. He suffered from terrible headaches and bouts of depression, didn't do a real job, but just daily went surreptitiously from pub to pub collecting racing slips from the punters. He then walked through the fields to another village where he gave them to his bookmaker boss who knew the pseudonyms written on the illegal betting slips.

Josh, a tall guardsman type, had been shot through the eye. He lived well on his pension, half of which he would spend getting sloshed most Saturday nights. At closing time, even when we were in bed, we would hear his terrible cursing and shouting as he swayed along the street below with his drinking pals. He would resist and protest loudly as the village bobby endeavoured to lead him home to his quiet and fearful wife.

Just the opposite was the quiet and mysterious Mr. Brown. He was married but we never set eyes on his wife. "He brought her back from the war. She's a Froggie and can't speak English!" And so for years she led her cloistered life for no one in the village could speak French.

Our favourite teacher at the Junior School was the wonderful Mr. Kyte. He had been to the war and at times regaled our believing ears with unbelievable stories. At one time he was quartered behind the front line, in a barrack block which received a direct shell hit – only his corner of the block and bed remained intact while all the other inmates were killed. For punishment of misdeeds they were tied to the wheel of a gun carriage for hours on end. We loved his stories and the war ditties that he taught us.

Durham had always been famous for its good soldiers, like the quiet and brave men of the famous Durham Light Infantry and in the large posh house across the street from us, had lived the famous Bradford brothers who had both been awarded the Victoria Cross.

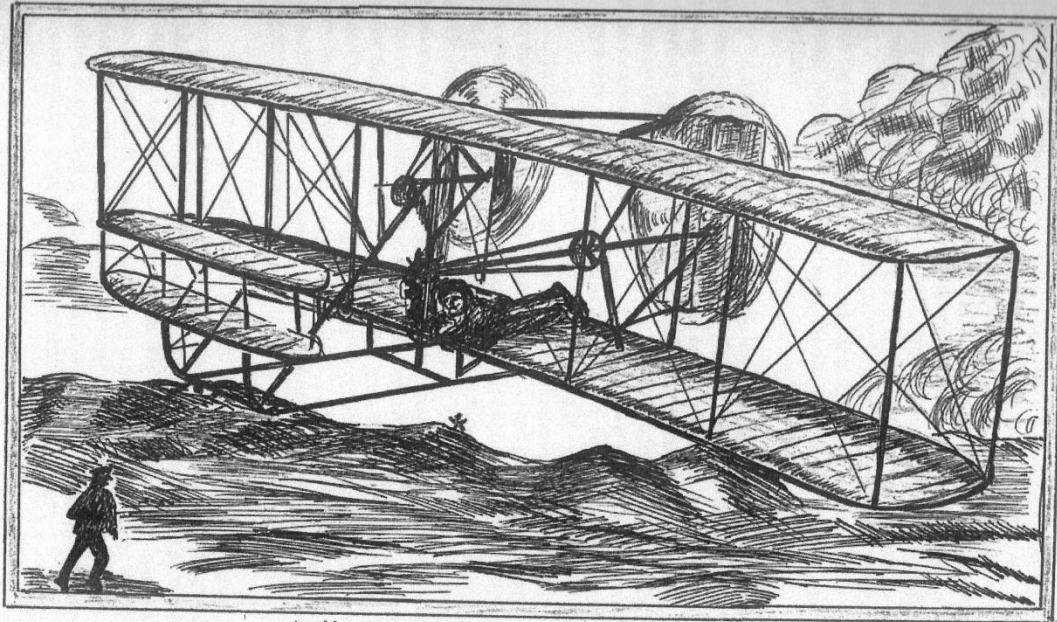
But then on some cold November days as little Boy Scouts in jerseys and shorts we gathered around the war memorial in the churchyard to hear read out the names of the glorious dead – the young village lads who became men the day they were killed. But young memories are very short and we still played war games with the Germans as the feared and hated baddies

Etherley was a cricketing village and most of our summer evenings were spent fielding the hard ball hit by the men when practising their shots for the Saturday game to come. The only time I saw my father in a drunken state was when the village team won the Mid-Durham Senior League Cup and the players celebrated in the nearby Dog and Gun. That night he fell out of bed and broke his collar bone. He was the least glamorous of cricketers and was known as a 'stone-waller', a batsman who could stay at the crease for a long time without getting out but not scoring a run. It was purgatory to watch him but he was in the team because of his wicket keeping ability and on those occasions when he arrived home with a damaged eye, my mother would place a piece of raw steak over the affected area.

In my early teens and being a Grammar School boy, I became scorer for the team and travelled with them in the special bus to play matches in the neighbouring towns and villages. After the game the men would adjourn to the 'local' either to celebrate or pontificate. On the bus ride home they would break forth into wonderful song. Many of them and all my pals were members of the church choir and went to church three times a Sunday. The cheerful singing contrasted with that which I heard later in life as a prisoner, when squads of German soldiers marched past the perimeter singing their martial ballads such as "Und wir fahren gegen England".

Life centred around the church and even though a small village we had a curate who organised the Scout Troop. Our annual week-end camps were spent at places up the dales, especially Teesdale and here you had fun learning to cook, make beds and sleep on hard ground, little realising that it was to be an ideal training for the years ahead living in the harsher conditions of the Stalags

We were Imps as well, even at that young and tender age, getting up to all kinds of mischief such as raiding orchards, playing 'knocky-nine-doors' and loving the sounds of missiles landing on the tin roofs of haysheds or even peering through holes in the surrounding stone walls to watch visiting nanny-goats being served by the local prize-winning billy-goat. But darkness was our friend and it was very rarely that we were 'captured'.



Kill Devil Hills. North Carolina

Orville Wright takes to the skies in mankind's first powered flight with brother Wilbur looking on.

During nine years service in the R.A.F I was christened Wilbur and even years after the war, when attending re-unions old pals were amazed to hear me called George.

## A CRIPPLED YOUTH

At the age of fifteen and like some other teenagers in the pre-penicillin years I was unfortunate enough to develop the bone disease osteomyelitis in the lower part of my right femur. It was thought to have been caused in part by an injury suffered when jumping straddle-legged over a trestle one night in the Scout Hall and in part because I was passing through the age of puberty. Any pain suffered later in life was incomparable to the agony of those days and nights and it was only after a delayed diagnosis by my family doctor that I was rushed to Darlington Memorial Hospital to undergo a major operation. The surgeons were in time to prevent the infection spreading into the knee joint. A large chunk of flesh was removed from my leg in order to expose the bone from which the infected part was removed, the cavity being covered with a rubber pad and drainage tubes inserted to lead away the discharge of pus which did not cease until three years later.

I was one of four boys with the same illness and to separate us from the men in the ward, our beds were placed on a verandah open to the elements, the beds being covered with a type of weatherproofed tarpaulin blanket. At six in the morning, when the departing night nurses woke us for breakfast, the stars twinkled in the sky above us and sometimes in winter a dusting of snow was shaken from our covers. Pain and humour there were in plenty, with it being an unwritten law that we would never cry out and many a time a handkerchief stuffed in the mouth was the real silencer.

Later we were to realise that if penicillin had been discovered then, we could have been cured and returned to our homes within a short period. Returning home after the first operation I adamantly refused to be pushed about in a wheelchair but accepted that at least a walking stick was a necessity. Subsequently I missed a whole year's attendance at the Grammar School and was now sixteen. My mother and I were interviewed by the headmaster who was of the opinion that after such a lengthy absence and at such a critical period in my education it was illogical to continue my schooling. Little did he know or realise that I now looked upon school with great fervour and when I persisted with my request to return to normality, he finally agreed that I should continue but in a lower form. So for a year and now in long trousers, I hobbled my way from class to class and in the end did gain my Cambridge School Certificate with a distinction in my favourite subject which was geography and with credits in maths and physics.

My love of geography was fostered by my teacher, a Dr. Hudson, who was years in advance of his time in his methods of teaching the subject and was one of the pioneers of field studies. To learn about ox-bow lakes, river estuaries and ports we were taken out of school to see them and walk by them. We even went as far as Liverpool to study the docks, the details of which remain in my memory until the present day. I could draw from memory the position and hinterland of most of the important cities in the world and delighted in compiling maps of any country. It was to be an admirable preparation for my future navigational work but little did I realise that at the time.

However, at the age of sixteen, I was still left with a leg whose femur was in part double thickness and which refused to bend past the right angle. There was no such aid as physiotherapy so it was either a question of self-help or remain a semi-cripple. The most wonderful aid did arrive in the shape of a Raleigh racing cycle that belonged to one of my older brothers and was his pride and joy. He, fortunately for me, had started courting and here was my golden opportunity. From the moment he left home I was mounted on the shining steed and free to speed along the local by-ways for an hour or two. It was the ideal therapy for my knee, for my weight was on the saddle and I did have a good left leg to do most of the work. The time came when my father, seeing the benefit I was deriving from such exercise, sacrificed some of his hard earned money to buy me a wonderful machine of my own, a lightweight Dawes Marathon.

Like many other young people living in a depressed area I had to take whatever job was available and secured work in a tailor's shop in the local town. Here I worked until seven o'clock each evening and nine o'clock on Saturdays, bringing home the sum of 5s 10½d for my week's work, plus 1d in the £ for my sales commission. I dearly wanted to be a surveyor but no way could my parents keep me until the age of twenty-one on a token payment of 2s 6d a week and also have to pay a lump sum to the Society as a premium. But life in such times of mass unemployment in the North of England was not doom and gloom. I was a country boy and my greatest pleasure was to be mounted on my cycle and, come hail or shine, to feel the air whistling past as I sped up hill and down dale, up Weardale and down Teesdale with legs spinning round to keep pace with the fixed wheel sprockets that we used. Some Sunday mornings saw me cycling thirty miles to take part in a twenty-five mile road race beginning at eight o'clock, or doing a hundred mile time trial south to Boroughbridge and return, or even enjoying the fun and spills of velodrome racing at Middlesborough.

On two occasions my pal and I cycled the 240 miles to London and when there was a tail wind we would do the journey non-stop. Even in the depths of winter we would ride up into the dales, find a lonely pub and ensconce ourselves in front of a roaring fire until it was time in the evening to wheel our way home again. Thus for three years I never ate a dinner at home on a Sunday. My achievements on a cycle, for what they were worth, were to help me be graded A1 in my medical examination for entry into the RAF.