

**MANX HERITAGE FOUNDATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT**

‘TIME TO REMEMBER’

Interviewee: Mr William ‘Bill’ Cook

Date of birth: 3rd December 1923

Place of birth:

Interviewer: David Callister

Recorded by: David Callister

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Topic(s): WWII memories
HMS St George and HMS Valkyrie
Manx CID and Isle of Man Constabulary
Enlisting underage and training
Charge of Absent Without Leave
Castletown Golf Links
Corporal and Sergeant in RAF Regiment
Teaching instructor for new recruits
Posting to Butlin’s Holiday Camp
VE Day [Victory in Europe Day]
Shooting at drogues at Ronaldsway Airport
Exhibition fights as a boxer
Isle of Man Police Cricket Team

William Cook - Mr C
David Callister - DC

DC On ‘Time to Remember’ today, you may hear some names and expressions that are not often encountered, for instance, Jankers, drogues, and the Bishop’s Belly. A Drogue is a funnel shaped device, similar to a parachute, which was towed behind an aircraft as a target. Jankers is the Services slang term for a punishment, which usually meant being confined to barracks to carry out menial tasks. And the Bishop’s Belly will be well known to many in the South of the Island because it’s the local name for Creggan’s Hill, which stands to the rear of the Ronaldsway Aircraft Company factory. The Bishop’s Belly became a regular wartime location for today’s contributor. During the Second World War the Isle of Man became an important training ground for all three of the armed services. Ballakermeen School became *HMS St George*, hundreds of Navel recruits were marched back and forward to the school each day. Hotels on Loch Promenade were converted by the Navy as *HMS Valkyrie* and radar operators were trained at what is now our broadcasting house on Douglas Head. Royal Air Force personnel were housed on Douglas Promenade and in the drives as well, of course, as the many hundreds at Ronaldsway, Jurby and Andreas. And on the programme today we hear from a former Head of the Manx CID, the first Detective Inspector in the history of the Isle of Man Constabulary, a man associated with Manx cricket for almost 60 years as player and umpire, an Onchan footballer and a member of St John Ambulance for 49 years. All of those achievements belong to one man ... it’s William Thomas Cook, known to one and all as Bill Cook. Originally a Londoner from Hackney, Bill was under age when he enlisted in the RAF.

Mr C On the 30th July 1940, and I was sixteen and a half.

DC And should you have been eighteen by then?

Mr C I should have gone – I should have been past eighteen years of age to enlist.

DC Well, there’s a story about your ... umm ... your birth certificate, isn’t there, that you were being requested and ... umm ... didn’t seem to be able to find it?

Mr C I went – I cycled down on a Sunday morning to a recruiting office in Romford, in Essex, which wasn’t far from Woodford Green where I was living. And I was asked to produce my birth certificate at the office there, but I hadn’t got it with me. So after I’d completed all the formalities and had in fact enlisted, I was told that when I was called, I would have to produce my birth certificate, and that I

would be called in about seven days' time.

DC Hmmm.

Mr C In seven days' time when I got me notice to report, I still didn't take my birth certificate with me. And the question was, 'Where's your birth certificate?' And I said, 'I've forgotten it.' 'Well, you're going to Blackpool, and when you get to Blackpool you'll make arrangements to get your birth certificate sent to you there.' 'Right.' So I went to Blackpool; I did a fortnight's training in Blackpool, on the North Shore – North Shore Promenade, and while I was there I was asked for my birth certificate, and I said, 'Well, it hasn't come through yet, you can understand the bombing that's down there at the moment, the post is all over the place, I haven't got me birth certificate.' 'Well, when you get to your new station, you will produce it there – get it and produce it there.' So I was posted to an RAF station in Wiltshire called Hullavington. And whilst I was there I was asked for me birth certificate (*laughter*) and I mentioned that the bombing raids were such in the area where I lived that the post was all over the place and I hadn't got it. So I was told, 'You'd better produce it.' And that was the last that was ever mentioned about the production of a birth certificate ...

DC (*laughter*) Right.

Mr C ... so I continued my service then, and nobody ever bothered again to ask me for a birth certificate.

DC So you were then firmly in the RAF at the wrong age, but what were you doing first of all?

Mr C I joined as what they called an aircraft hand ground gunner. And the object was the formation of the ground gunners was for the protection of the aerodromes ...

DC Hmmm,

Mr C ... and we were issued with a rifle, fifty rounds of ammunition, steel helmet and a gas mask ...

DC (*laughter*) Right.

Mr C ... and at Hullavington, we were under canvas in the centre of the married quarters block.

DC Oh, right, yea. What was it like living under canvas then? What time of year would that be, then?

Mr C July and August.

DC Oh well, it wasn't bad then, was it?

Mr C No, it wasn't bad at all, no, no, no.

DC What's the story of how you got to the Isle of Man, then, and actually came to the Isle of Man facing a charge, or actually on a charge, weren't you?

Mr C *(laughter)* Well, they were sending the gunners, ground gunners, to the Isle of Man from all round the country, on what they called a two-gun course. It was a *Lewis* anti-aircraft gun, 47 round magazines, 97 round magazines, and the *Vicker's* water-cooled, which was used for ground-firing ...

DC Hmmmm.

Mr C ... and when I was at Hullavington they started sending them, two at a time, over to the Isle of Man for the course. And in due time, I went to the ... I came to the Isle of Man and I did the two-gun course, and I did very well, actually, because I was asked to stay on to see would I do the instructors course, and I said, 'No, I'm going back because I haven't had any leave yet and I want to see if I can get some leave.' So they said, 'Well, after you've had your leave, will you consider coming back?' and I said, 'Yes.' Now, at that time, when they were coming over to the Isle of Man, from Hullavington, it was the practice to take a few days home, on the way back, because, without the leave, nobody was getting home at all and it was unofficial, everybody took four days home ...

DC *(laughter)* Right.

Mr C ... I decided to do exactly the same, and I took my four days home, and reported back. Unfortunately I didn't know that the chap who'd had been on the course before me, had gone sick for four days, and he then took another four days of

unofficial leave, to keep the system going, so when I returned to the camp I was called into the office by the Sergeant, who asked me where I'd been. I told him – the Isle of Man on a course – he quoted a date, and with a bit of quick thinking I said, 'You can't come back from the Isle of Man, it's a Sunday.' *(laughter)* He called to the fellows in the orderly room, 'Bring me that telegram, Harvey.' And Harvey brought the telegram, and the details on the telegram were that the fellow who ... a fellow named Armstrong, who had been sick for four days, home for four days, the date of his actual return, when he should have returned, was on the telegram, and so was the actual return date of AC2 Cook ...

DC *(laughter)* Oh, right, yes.

Mr C ... so I hadn't a leg to stand on. So I was put on a charge, Absent without Leave, and I was told, nine o'clock, Staff Parade the following morning. I paraded, and I went – marched up to the Group Captain's office, who was too busy to deal with the charge, so he ... I was remanded without prejudice and marched out. Now being under 17 years of age, I didn't know what remanded without prejudice was.

DC No. *(laughter)*

Mr C Now there was a wonderful treat – a turn to this story, because when I got marched out, instead of going back onto my normal patrol duties with a rifle, bayonet and fifty rounds and so on, I was given the job of distributing the rations on the ration wagon to the dispersed aerodromes we had in Wiltshire ...

DC Hmm.

Mr C ... which was a plum job. And I did this job for several days and then the fateful thing happened – I was called back into the office. 'Group Captain's orders – nine o'clock tomorrow morning.' So I said, 'What for?' And I was told, 'That charge.' I said, 'What charge?' He said, 'The charge of being Absent Without Leave. I said, 'That's been dealt with.' 'Oh no, no, no.' The Sergeant went to great lengths to explain to me what remanded without prejudice meant.

DC Yes. *(laughter)*

Mr C At nine o'clock the following morning, went up to the Group Captain's office,

and the Group Captain was too busy – come back at two o'clock in the afternoon. Went back in the afternoon, and they listened to the evidence, I was awarded four days' pay stopped and fourteen days CB [Confined to Barracks].

DC They called it *Jankers*, didn't they? (*laughter*)

Mr C *Jankers* ... march out, and we went out, and outside was halted, 'Prisoner escort halt!' and Flight Sergeant said, 'Cook.' 'Yes, Flight.' 'Here you are.' And he handed me a route form and a warrant to travel to the Isle of Man. I was posted to the Isle of Man to do the instructor's course. And to make sure I got here, they sent another man on a course as an escort.

DC Right. (*laughter*)

Mr C So I arrived here in the Isle of Man and I then went onto the instructor's course.

DC So you'd avoid doing this CB [Confined to Barracks] then?

Mr C No, when I got off the boat, which had travelled from Fleetwood, I got off at Douglas Harbour and I was met by a Corporal Henry, who, when he was assembling the troops, shouted out, 'Cook,' and I said, 'yes, Corporal?' He said, 'Report to me at the Guard Room at seven o'clock.' We were marched over, then, this was gone six o'clock at night, we were marched over then, along the promenade, to *The Empress Hotel*. At *The Empress Hotel* we were sectioned off for two gun courses, instructors' courses and permanent staff. And because I'd been posted there, I was in a bit of a quandary, so I said to the Corporal, 'Where do you want me to go?' And he nearly told me! But he said, 'You'd better go on the instructor's course for the time being.' So we were marched into *The Empress Hotel* then, and between the time that we arrived there and seven o'clock, we'd had the old fashioned FFI, which army and navy personnel will know all about, we had a meal, issued with some blankets, and shown a room. And at seven o'clock, I went downstairs to the reception office as it is now ...

DC Hmmm.

Mr C ... and the Corporal in charge of the Guard Room, as it was then, said, 'What do you want?' And I explained my position. He gave me a sheet of paper with my orders on, and at five past seven I was downstairs in the basement in *The*

Empress Hotel cleaning the bacon slicing machine.

DC Oh, right! (*laughter*)

Mr C My *Jankers* had started.

DC Right.

Mr C Now ...

DC Well, CB was ‘Confined to Barracks,’ wasn’t it? But it wasn’t barracks exactly that you were in.

Mr C No, it wasn’t. I was in a room right at the top of *The Empress Hotel* ...

DC Yes.

Mr C ... and I carried on doing the work on the instructor’s course and each evening I would report to the Guard Room and I was given certain tasks to perform, mainly in the kitchen, and this went on until I had two days to go. And one of the things that we were doing, apart learning how to be instructors – and we had 21 subjects to do in 21 days – we used to go out on exercises with the *Vickers* guns in particular, chasing round Castletown Golf Links and throwing grenades over nets into dustbins, and things like that ...

DC Yes.

Mr C ... and on this particular occasion, as I say, with two days to go, I came back and I was absolutely deadbeat. I went upstairs to my room, flopped on the bed and went out like a light. And I woke up at twenty-five past ten ...

DC Yes. (*laughter*)

Mr C ... shivering, cold, it was dark. I hurriedly put me things on, went downstairs to the Guard Room, and the Corporal there who was on duty said, ‘What’s up with you?’ and I told him that I should have reported for ten o’clock Staff Parade, and what had happened. He listened to my story and he said, ‘Think yourself lucky that it was me, now go back to your bed.’

DC Right.

Mr C I could have kissed him!

DC Yes.

Mr C Could have kissed him ...

DC Yes.

Mr C ... because being late on that parade would have meant an automatic seven days further confined to barracks.

DC Yes.

Mr C Anyway, I finished the course, I passed, I did a probationary course, and then after that I got two stripes and I was a Corporal then until they put us into the RAF Regiment. Now the story attached to that was, we were marched round to Castle Drive, opposite *The Castle Mona Hotel*, and the Warrant Officer in charge, a Warrant Officer Whittaker, he told us that all the Corporals were promoted to Sergeant. And he gave us a lecture on etiquette in the Sergeants' Mess – the Sergeants' Mess being *The Marlborough Hotel* on the front.

DC Right. *(laughter)*

Mr C We were in what they called, House 19, in Mona Drive – that's the house that was burnt down by the fire ...

DC Hmm.

Mr C ... and I didn't – I wasn't responsible, didn't leave anything behind – it wasn't me. *(laughter)* Now the lecture involved etiquette on the behaviour in the Sergeant's Mess, and we were warned as to what would happen if we didn't behave ourselves. We were marched, then, to a store to get three stripes each, to sew on our 'blues'.

DC Yes. Did you have to sew them on yourselves?

- Mr C** Sew them on ourselves – we had blue uniforms up till them.
- DC** Hmm.
- Mr C** A couple of days later, we had another parade and Warrant Officer Whittaker, I think, was delighted to tell us that we'd all been transferred to the RAF Regiment ...
- DC** Hmm.
- Mr C** ... so we marched round to the stores and collected a set of khaki with a blue beret, and we had to take the stripes off the blue and put them on the khaki.
- DC** Right, yes. (*laughter*)
- Mr C** ... so we had a khaki outfit with blue stripes on ...
- DC** Yes. (*laughter*)
- Mr C** ... now, I continued then, as a Sergeant, doing the instructing ...
- DC** So did you stay on the Isle of Man for the instructing?
- Mr C** I stayed here, yes.
- DC** Where was the instructing carried out, then?
- Mr C** We did the instruction in that block of houses in – what I called *The Drives*, between Empress Drive and Castle Drive, and most of those houses there were occupied by people who had come in for training.
- DC** Yes?
- Mr C** In one of the house, *The Brookwood*, a mounting with two machine guns on it ...
- DC** Hmm.
- Mr C** ... and we did training of one sort in there.

- DC** So that would be to teach them how to use the guns and so on?
- Mr C** Correct. We also had certain rooms as classrooms ...
- DC** Yes.
- Mr C** ... and we would show them how the guns were stripped, assembled, cleaned and all the rest of it ...
- DC** Hmm.
- Mr C** ... so that everyone, we hoped, would be proficient. So this went on for some time, and of course the war was going on, and they decided that instead of bringing all the people from these various parts of the country to the Island for training, they formed practise camps in and around England and Wales ...
- DC** Hmm, hmm.
- Mr C** ... and a number of our instructors were posted to those practise camps to do the training there, which saved the travelling backwards and forwards. The result was that after a couple of months, I found myself as one of the senior Sergeants. And then I was posted and I left here in 1943 – late on – and I went to Butlins Holiday Camp in Filey.
- DC** Yes.
- Mr C** When I got there, not only was I one of the senior Sergeants, but they made me a Flight Sergeant. And I used to take the Officers and the NCOs for the various guns and so on ... umm ... and I did this for several months ...
- DC** Hmm.
- Mr C** ... and by this time we had progressed from the *Lewis* and *Vickers*, through the 20mm *Hispano*, through the twin mounted machine guns, *Brownings*, which were capable of firing 1250 rounds a minute, and then we went on to the *Bofor* gun. And it was at Filey that we started to use the *Bofor* with predictor equipment ...

DC Right.

Mr C ... so that we were advancing all of the time. And I was there when eventually we got VE Day [Victory in Europe Day] ...

DC Yes, yes.

Mr C ... so I did quite a bit of time there in Filey. Now at that time, towards the end of the war, they started to open up the camp, and our camp was on the left and the holidaymakers' was on the right. On the main road down between the two camps was a tier, if you've seen them, of three coils of barbed wire ...

DC Yes, yes. (*laughter*)

Mr C ... and that was the dividing line between us ...

DC (*laughter*)... the holiday camp and the services – RAF, yea. When you were in the Isle of Man, though, some of the time was spent, wasn't it, down at Fort Island ...

Mr C Correct.

DC ... in practical use of weaponry?

Mr C Correct. We fired these guns when we did the anti-aircraft firing. We fired at a drogue pulled behind an airplane which was located at Ronaldsway Airport.

DC Right, so these shots would be, what, going out to sea, virtually?

Mr C The shots were beam shots – left to right, then right to left, then an oblique shot, and then one overhead – a direct overhead shot. And I'd love to get all the ammunition that was fired into the sea from Fort Island.

DC Well, what would it be – what would that be – brass or what?

Mr C Lead.

DC Yea.

Mr C Lead bullets.

DC Oh right.

Mr C Lead bullets.

DC So this – I mean, you weren't firing blanks, then?

Mr C Oh no, no, no, no, no – live ammunition. You see, part of the course was, first of all, to get used to the guns. Then we used to take them to Bishop's Belly which is opposite the airport ...

DC Hmmm.

Mr C ... and on the top there we had mounting with – and we put camera guns in them, and the camera guns used to be used to shoot at the planes which went backwards and forwards from the airport. And then, when that had been finished, the following day, or perhaps a day after, we'd go to the dome, which was in the grounds of *The Villa Marina* ...

DC Yea.

Mr C ... on the Broadway side, and all these films which had been shot, would be projected inside the dome ...

DC Yes.

Mr C ... and you could tell whether they were good shots or bad shots ...

DC Right.

Mr C ... and there weren't many good ones. (*laughter*) When it came to the actual firing with the guns and the correct ammunition, the ammunition tips – the bullets were all painted. And they were painted in a little shed by *Derbyhaven Hotel* ...

DC Really?

Mr C ... which is gone, now. And we had ... the colours were black, red, green and blue. The theory being that, when the bullets went through the rifling of the gun, the bullet would heat up, the paint would be sticky, it would hit the target and there would be a ring of the colour in around the hole.

DC Yea. (*laughter*)

Mr C There weren't many holes in the drogues.

DC Really?

Mr C No.

DC Just to explain a drogue then, this was dragged behind an aircraft, wasn't it?

Mr C Some distance behind the aircraft on a wire.

DC It was like a kind of – looked like a balloon in the air, did it, or something?

Mr C Well, if you see the windsocks that are attached to poles outside aerodromes, that is it.

DC Right, yes, yes

Mr C It's one of those.

DC Wasn't the pilot of the aircraft, or the aircraft in danger of being hit, then?

Mr C Yes, particularly on an oblique shot or an overhead shot.

DC Yes (*laughter*) and that happened did it?

Mr C No.

DC It didn't happen?

Mr C There was a rumour that on one occasion one bullet went through the wing of a plane, but I don't believe it ...

DC No.

Mr C ... I don't believe it, no, we never – there was too much wire at the rear of the plane to the drogue ...

DC Yes.

Mr C ... so that if you did your job properly, they couldn't possibly, couldn't possibly ...

DC So if this accuracy wasn't as good as it should have been, when these trained men went out, then, they wouldn't be as efficient in the field as they should be, either?

Mr C Some were, some weren't. But you see, the beauty of the *Browning* machine guns, where we had the twins – twin guns on a mounting, these were harmonised to hit at a particular spot ...

DC Hmm.

Mr C ... so it didn't matter really, if you were dead on the target, you could spray them ...

DC Ah yes, yes.

Mr C ... and this *Motley* stalk mounting, you had two handgrips, one on either side, and you pressed with your thumbs on the triggers, and that's how you controlled the up and down movement and so on and firing.

DC When you were there, down at Fort Island, then, what did you have – field rations for food?

Mr C No ... *(laughter)* ... we used to have our meal at *The Derbyhaven Hotel* ...

DC Oh yes.

Mr C ... and the meal was always the same thing.

DC What, every day?

Mr C Every day. The actual meat was as thin as a razor blade, and that was accompanied by beans and some mashed potato which was usually fairly watery ...

DC Right.

Mr C ... and that was the meal, followed by the sweet, which was always the same. It was rice pudding with raisins or sultanas in it. And you had to virtually chew the rice pudding because it wasn't cooked properly (*laughter*) – it was gritty! ...

DC Yea.

Mr C ... and with the meat – I've always said, if you stood on a seat with a slice of this meat, between your fingers, and let it go, it would float gently down to the ground. (*laughter*)

DC So really, you had a war then where you were in the Isle of Man, away from bombing, you were in a holiday camp, away from bombing, so you missed all the action, did you?

Mr C Yes, yes we did, we did. But ... umm ... we also fired from Langness ...

DC Oh yes?

Mr C ... and if you go down to Langness now, there are six gun posts which were brick built, erected by the Fleet Air Arm who took over from us, but you can see our post, where we had the concrete slabs to put the guns on ...

DC Yea, yea.

Mr C ... alongside ...

DC Hmm.

Mr C ... so that if you go down there, you can see those.

DC Still there?

Mr C Still there.

DC Just a few of Bill Cook's memories of RAF days. A keen sportsman, he was a capable boxer, and during those war years he took part in exhibition fights in Douglas and after the war, in July in 1946 he joined the Manx Constabulary. He became Captain of the Police Cricket Team there, and played for the Island and still stands as an umpire today in his eighty-second year. And with that, we reach the end of today's programme. There will be more World War Two memories at the same time next week.

END OF INTERVIEW