

Old Riponians - Ike Dawson (RGS student 1948-54)



Ike Dawson hailed from a tenant farming family who lost their farm in the Great Depression and father was reduced to farm labouring. Life was hard and money very tight. Aged 8, I saw Spitfires in air combat over grandma's house near York and set my sights on being an RAF fighter pilot. Happily for us, first my sister, then my brother, then I won scholarships to Ripon Grammar School.

Ripon Grammar School was a wonderful start in life, for which I have been grateful. In our busy lives we often fail to express our appreciation to those who helped us get going but fortunately for me the RAF connection helped me remain in touch each Christmas with three of the four most influential of my RGS teachers until they died.

They were:

John Allinson – or 'Panic' – the Maths Master and Air Cadet officer who rescued my delight in maths after the disaster of thirteen different maths teachers in the first four years, lost me – and others. He was a Bomber Command Lancaster captain with thirty-six operational missions. Crews who survived a tour of thirty missions normally did no more.

John Brown – or 'Masher' – Deputy Head, chemistry master and a great cricket and rugby coach. He was an RAF Sqn Ldr station armament officer who went into the bomb bay of a shot up burning Lancaster which crashed on landing, to defuse the hang-up bomb load - whilst others dragged out the shattered crew.

Lesley Eley – or 'Les' – physics – wireless operator/air gunner who survived more Bomber Command operations than most Wop/AGs by far. It was always the Wop/AG or tail-end-Charlie that the fighters took out first!!

Major E'DThomas – or 'Ted' – English – who taught in India, was in the Indian army and was called to the defence of Singapore and the Malaya peninsula. He survived three years in Changi Jail as a POW of the Japs.

To a man they were magnificent role models and I owe them so much.

My RGS days were busy and exciting. Under-age, I had inveigled my way into the Ripon City Air Training Corps Squadron and flew for the first time. When the school cadets were formed I opted for the school Scouts and with excellent guidance and encouragement from 'Taddy Kempster' and 'EgoBurton', in 1952 Colin Avery and I were invested as Queen's Scouts [my scroll prepared before February 1952 reads King's Scout]. Inevitably, with much to do and too little time available, I gave up City air cadets and swapped Scouts for Cadets at school.

Guided by John Allinson I was soon spending the weekends when I wasn't playing school sport, gliding at RAF Rufforth near York. I also had the great fortune to be awarded an RAF Flying Scholarship and opted for the civil flying school at Burneston, Derby . The 'Miles Magister' was a joy to fly and after going solo in 4.55 hours there was a right rumpus...seventeen was the minimum age to fly a powered aircraft solo! I understand some very creative recording was done ensuring the Air Ministry desk wallahs were kept quiet.

First XV rugger and First XI cricket with preparation for O-level in 1953 and A Level in 1954 gave us all two busy years but the cream on the pudding for me was to be one of the thirty strong group of English air cadets on the annual Air Cadet Exchange to Canada in 1954. I loved Canada, the space, the land, the people, the smell of the pines, Niagara Falls and much more. Many of our disparate group sang, as did I, in their school choirs. Our accompanying mentors quickly grasped a different way to express our thanks to our Canadian hosts. As a group, in harmony, we sang our thanks in English Folk songs. The Cannucks loved it. All too soon we were singing farewell at RCAF La Chine with our adaptation of Swing Low Sweet Chariot, 'Swing Low Ye Ole North Star – coming for to carry me home'.

Academically I found O-levels and A-levels a struggle but managed half a dozen decent O-levels and respectable grades in chemistry, physics and mathematics A-level. I should have done better but met the requirements for RAF pilot training which was my goal.

After RAF officer training I was lucky enough to be in the group detailed for pilot training in Canada. Flying off rolled snow in the Harvard at Centraillia on Lake Huron near London, Ontario and then out west at Portage la Prairie Jet school west of Winnipeg on the T33 was a very good grounding in first generation jets!

After Gunnery School in UK and my first 'dead-stick' landing, I was on a Comet at 40,000 ft over the Indian Ocean out of Bahrain, bound for Changi, when half the tail came off. Then I flew a fully armed Venom 1 to meet the Mig 15 fighter sweeps down from 'White Cloud' to plague Hong Kong. Only those

guys almost always turned back north, short of the border. It was all change to the Venom 4 and Hunters in Aden, Oman and the Gulf, one of Britain's dirty little wars where I lost a number of very good friends and found that bullets don't hurt - at first. Becoming a flying instructor in UK for 4 years was then rather tame although the next job as the Training Officer on a cold war nuclear Strike Squadron in Germany not long after the Cuban Missile Crisis was anything but!

As the youngest member of the course and newly promoted to Squadron Leader, frankly I didn't enjoy the RAF Staff College – they took themselves far too seriously. However, it did give me the leg up and for the next three years life; was rich as a Training Squadron Commander at Linton-on-Ouse. One of my pleasures was to have two RGS air cadets on the squadron each Wednesday for a jet-familiarisation flight.

Staff tours are inevitable but mine could not have suited me and my family better. For the three years I served as a NATO staff officer in Norway we skied and skated in winter and walked the forests and swam the lakes in summer. Back home and back to the academic grind for another year, this time the National Defence College. My posting then was as the RAF's Chief Flying Instructor (Advanced Flying) at the RAF Central Flying School and Commanding Officer of the Red Arrows for two and a half years.

I opted to retire early as a Wing Commander aged 40 to become the Operations Director of Northern Ireland Airports Ltd during the troubles from which I was then recruited to turn Teesside Municipal Airport into a limited liability company. In many ways that was my toughest assignment: the airport was losing half a million pounds a year. I was proud to hand it over with a very strong balance sheet and healthy profit over 15 years ago. Alas, since 2006 Durham Tees Valley has declined dramatically – perhaps irredeemably. I think I will take as my epitaph the remarks of my Convenor of Trades Unions at Teesside.

When I retired he came to say goodbye and he left me with the pithy little observation: “Our members have mandated me to tell you, we think you have been a right hard nosed old b....but always a very fair right hard nosed old b....”.

Thank you Ripon Grammar School...you schooled me well!!!

Ike Dawson

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