

Episode 1

Rising to the Challenge

I found myself as a twenty-two-year-old standing with my back against a wall, with two policemen pointing machine guns directly at me somewhere along a road in Teheran.

How on earth did I get myself into such a mess at such an early stage in my life?

Well, I suppose it wasn't really the easiest of starts after all my father, Bruce, who was a corporal in the Royal Air Force, was killed on his way to West Malling Aerodrome ten months after I was born.

Bruce of course, was quite unusual. He was born in Australia where he lived with his mother until he was twelve. His father who had been a soldier in the First World War died on his return to Australia at the age of 29 from the gas poisoning in Ypres. This alone was a bit weird as he had already survived battles in Egypt and Gallipoli in Turkey. Bruce and my grandmother found themselves destitute as no War Pension was available, and so they decided to head back to Europe.

Earlier the meeting of my grandfather and grandmother was a bit of a fairytale. Grandfather was recovering at Cobham Hall in Kent following injuries at Ypres. My grandmother was a talented actress and singer from Gravesend who entertained the Australian wounded Officers for Lord Darnley in his Cobham Hall home. They met, fell in love, married and my grandmother followed her new husband back to Adelaide separately, as she was not allowed on his troopship. Both Adelaide and Cobham Hall were to play a big part in my life later in life.

My mother, although poor and from a very working-class family in Dartford Kent was, thankfully extremely bright, hardworking and ambitious. She was educated at Dartford Grammar School (along with Mick Jagger!). She was clearly determined to better both her life and mine.

We initially lived under the roof of my grandmother in her council house near Dartford, complete with outside loo and coal bunker. My mother soon became the secretary to seven doctors at a Dartford surgery where we lived above the surgery in quite a nice home with a huge garden, which I loved.

As an only child and to some degree quite lonely, I became very independent with a huge sense of responsibility for my mother. Life was still pretty good and to be frank what you never had you never missed.

Life did take an early lucky break for me at five. I was sent by the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund, to a private Infant school called St. Margaret's in Wilmington near Dartford. Here I experienced a first-class education in a tiny little school. It was probably this experience that encouraged me many years later to volunteer and work hard for children that did not have such a great start in education. Strangely, 65 years later I still, together with my wife, meet once a year with four other 'children' with whom I shared those years.

My mother really was determined to provide me with quite a cultural early upbringing, and she became secretary of the Jeffrey Whitworth Theatre in Crayford. Her secretarial skills and attention to detail (none of which sadly ever wore off on me) helped make this a highly successful thriving theatre for the members. I meanwhile of course, because there were no babysitters, would attend every single one of the plays about every six weeks. It was responsible for introducing me to all the great playwrights and I was fortunate enough, by the age of ten, to have seen most of the famous plays.

Despite my loneliness, I was fortunate early on in life, to be introduced to a different world. I remember a knock on our door one day, with a woman talking to my mother, announcing that she had heard 'a nice little young boy was living here who might be a good playmate for her employer's son' (how nauseating!). She turned out to be the 'nanny' of Christopher, son of the Hon. Patrick Best. Christopher became a good friend and whose home turned out to be a huge, beautiful Tudor mansion. Gone were my lonely holidays and this was my first introduction to 'how the other half lived.' From now on I was never to be intimidated nor jealous of others. A great lesson to have learned before I arrived at Kings School Rochester.

Another early lesson that I learned whilst very young was how kind, generous and caring people can be to the son of a widow. There were people, very kind people, who kept an eye on my mother and who helped and supported us when the chips were down. Dartford seemed to have a plethora of very special families, amongst whom were the Strattons, Brewsters, Stubbs, Cornwalls, Quicks, Bells and Ingrams. If only now, in later life, I had discovered a chance to repay these families, or to find a needy family locally in Hampshire to inspire and support as they had.

There was hardly any money to go around in those days. My mother was desperate to improve her station in life. Our holidays were spent, usually in a friend's caravan near Southend, or indeed at a wonderful Christian community in north Devon called 'Lee Abbey'. It was here that we met another of these special families who were going to make a massive impact on my life.

The Powells were a super-kind, Christian and successful family living in Beckenham. Roy Powell, the father, was a successful businessman and Director of Pearce Duff, the custard and jelly manufacturer. It wasn't until later in life that I realised the 'coincidences' of my own life were no such thing- and that his example had guided me in so many ways. Why did I start my career in the food industry? What made me join a City Livery Company? How come I didn't know that we had both joined the HAC Regiment as Reservists, let alone that he too had served the Lord Mayor as a Pikeman?

Mark Powell became my closest friend until moving to live in Vancouver, his sister Dawn is still today a good friend and I spent nearly every school holiday with Murial, his mother, and the family. My passion for the sea and sailing was born during these summer holidays, when we sailed on the family catamaran to Brittany, through the canals and out to the Gulf of Morbihan. I still remember Roy Powell's great friend the Viscount de Trogoff taking me round to his friend's chateaux for lunch and his sons heralding us with music from their

Brittany horns, wafting through the forest trees as our boat approached his chateaux. If only every young disadvantaged boy had a family like this to inspire them.

My mother wanted to improve her career and she decided to become a teacher, later becoming a business college lecturer. She set off to a teacher training college in Roehampton London. It was time for us to move back into my grandmother's council home, where she looked after me during the times that I wasn't at boarding school in Rochester or accompanying my mother.

During the school holidays, to earn money to pay for this teacher training and to feed us, my mother would work for Barclays Bank in Threadneedle Street in the City of London (probably now the only branch left in the country!) This indeed was my first introduction to the wonderful world of the City of London.

At the age of seven and a half, I would arrive with my mother at her Barclays office at nine in the morning, where she would bid me farewell until lunchtime. I would just quite simply wander round the city by myself, going into the churches, looking at every museum I could find and generally keeping myself occupied. It was a great adventure - and I had great adventures! At lunch, I would return, we'd have a sandwich somewhere or another and then after lunch, I would head back into the city until 5.00pm.

Of course, today, my mother would have been arrested for abandonment of a child! But in those days, it was safe as anything. I never had any bad incidents, and it satisfied my sense of adventure and self-reliance. When it rained my mother gave me enough money to go to the next station on the Circle tube line and I would simply go the wrong way around, to stay dry and comfortable for the rest of the day. Little did I dream of just how huge a part the City of London would play in my future life!

I grew to have a larger and larger sense of responsibility year on year. I think that any son of a widow feels so responsible for their mother. I probably took life far too seriously too early on in life. I guess that we should all feel that sense of responsibility to sort out those things that worry us today in the world.

They were all very good and formative years for me, and they set many standards for the rest of my life and career. I look back with great awe at how my mother managed to fight through some difficult years to improve both her status in life and indeed mine.

My life was about to take a very important turn for the better.

The Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund decided to support my mother and I by sending me to King School, Rochester for the next ten years as a boarder. Starting, I hasten to add, at the age of a seven and a half (not a great idea in today's world!).

To be honest, I pretty much hated the first five years, but the second five years more than made up for it by creating my resilience, character and my whole future.

It's quite common these days for all public schools to be giving away significant bursaries for people that are bright and who perhaps haven't had the easiest of lives to date. So, this for me, is one of the most wonderful services that the Public Schools can provide for society. Hopefully this will continue for many years to come, and not simply to escape from a government taking away their charity status.



Attending Kings provided me with a very good and solid perspective on life, a very deep respect for a Christian way of life. (I even remember becoming a server in Rochester Cathedral for several years). Strangely, the Cathedral life, which started each morning with a hymn and prayers before the first lessons, also introduced me for the first time to a world of Bishops and Archbishops. This helped me never to become intimidated with people from a different social status.

Joining a school which was founded in 604AD was special and provided me with a great love and respect for tradition. When later in life I was the President for the past pupils, I hosted a celebration dinner in the Mess of the Royal Engineers in Chatham for our 1,400th birthday. Now that's an honour no one is ever going to forget!



Another great benefit from this type of education was that at the tender age of seven and a half, I was shoved into a dormitory of seven or eight other boys, each coming from a different creed, race and culture. Kids speak plainly at this age and we were lucky that the years of WOKE had not arrived! Our black friends always beat us in most sports, except swimming and I suspect that several are now running parts of Africa and the Caribbean! This experience is one of the greatest advantages that a young person could ever have in those days in preparation for a diverse modern world.

The teaching staff were quite remarkable, most of them had been teachers at the school for some 30 years or so. They were, pretty much without exception, Oxbridge graduates, very good at both teaching and setting a good example to us as students. As my mother become more seriously ill in my later years at Kings, they also proved to be both compassionate and supportive. At the time I was surprised when the Headmaster invited

me to join his family at their Welsh holiday home over one Easter holiday, little realising that my mother was unable to support me.

It was a strange life for me, having come from a very poor background, to suddenly be mixed with many boys who obviously came from very different worlds. I well remember some amusing moments as my mother drove me the 13 miles, along an incredibly dangerous road, from Dartford to Rochester on the back of her Vespa scooter. I would dismount amid their beautiful Jaguars and Bentleys on either side of us, with my friends clambering out of them.

Interestingly, I never ever felt any concern or jealousy about my own background versus theirs and I don't honestly think that it ever made one little jot of difference in my ten years at the school.

Discipline was very tough in those days at school, to put it mildly. It was a rough 'Tom Brown school days' type environment in which to be raised. I had never ever been away from home when I started at Kings, and I can remember probably at least a couple of years of acute home sickness. I think I was probably a pretty pathetic creature in my early years (some might say for a lot longer!). I remember crying outside the House Tutors office even before being faced with my first of four canings at the school. Somebody in the dormitory had spoken after lights out, so we all got dealt with (the culprit was subsequently 'dealt with' by us all!). I don't think I'd ever really experienced male discipline or even a telling off in my life and although I don't think the whacking even hurt me, I found my dignity deeply insulted. Later, as a Prefect and Head of School I was permitted to dispense corporal punishment, but I would like to think that I dispensed it less harshly and with greater careful consideration.

The Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund quite sensibly were insistent that I worked hard and did well in my studies and I was always under the threat of having to leave Kings and be sent to another non-fee-paying school. I say it was probably an advantage because I did clearly work pretty much harder than most of the other boys around me. I consistently throughout my entire school career came top of the 'B' stream. Latin, I think probably gave me up, or I gave it up, at about the age of eight and a half. All my chums in the 'A' stream went on to Oxbridge, but I bet that most didn't have the fun and adventure that I experienced later in my career.

One of the great things about the English public school system was that it gave you an incredible range of extracurricular options. How I so wish that students in my State Schools today were able to experience this. Whether it be in the team sports field with Rugby, Cricket, Hockey or in individual sports such as fencing, tennis, shooting or athletics there was always a chance to 'discover' your success.

We also had our own Scout Troop which inspired me to be adventurous later in life. I will never forget one expedition which today I am quite certain, for health and safety reasons, would never have been allowed. At the age of twelve I walked 50 miles along the Pennine Way at Easter carrying my heavy backpack, camping in the snow at the tops of the hills. The next morning finding ourselves in a pub somewhere to dry off our clothes. There were no members of staff with us, just senior scouts from the school who put us through some fantastic and probably dangerous adventures. It was these early adventures that were to greatly enhance my life - and my courage to do some weird things later.

Kings also had a thriving CCF (Combined Cadet Force) which is still popular and character-forming today. I thrived in this, had my first lessons in public speaking, loved the adventurous expeditions to Bodmin Moor, The Lake District and Peak District. (none of which would have been accessible to a boy with my financial restraints). Little did I realise what a great advantage was in store for me from my days as a Cadet!

Every child, whatever their school, needs to discover something at which they can excel. I really believe it doesn't matter what that something is, but to leave school at the age of 18 with confidence and a feeling that you have achieved something already in your life is important. I was lucky and found that, although I was useless at a lot of team sports, I was good at long distance running. I was selected to represent Kent for cross-country running, and I subsequently became Captain of Cross country, Captain of Athletics and Captain of Shooting at Kings. I broke the school mile and cross-country record a couple of times, and all of that gave me status in the school, which I hadn't ever found before. All of this led to a surge in my self-confidence and a recognition of my own abilities. Gone were those days of being bullied and although I was never really 'one of the gang' it eventually led me to become the Head of School and Head of House at King's Rochester. These appointments led to yet another turning point in my young life.

I picked up skills that were going to become indispensable for the rest of my life. By the time that I left school, I was very comfortable and confident speaking in front of several hundred people. I had become pretty darned good at detailed project management and had importantly learned many of the skills of leadership and of managing and encouraging people under me.

Pretty much everything in the senior school was run by the Prefects and the Monitors under the direction of the head of school and the teachers were left to just simply get on and teach. It taught me that I had a responsibility to set a good example to everybody else, and never to be intimidated by others, whatever their status might be in life. It forced me to have a pride in my appearance, which clearly helped me in interviews in later life, and it helped me grow in stature and self-esteem. I left Kings with probably an unusual degree of self-confidence, which helped me to stand out in those first few years of my career.

I also left Kings a very different person from when I arrived. In the absence of a father and little time spent with my remarkable mother, I had become a product of a system that is often criticised, but for me it left me a person better equipped to cope with the challenges of an exciting, although at times stressful life ahead.