

Mr Robert (Bob) Boocock



Bob Boocock lived with his family in Escrick from the 1960's until his death on 7th September 2020 aged 101.

He had a long and remarkable life and was very supportive of the village community.

Here is his Obituary published in the Times on 28th October 2020.

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Register | The Times | Wednesday October 28 2020

Robert Boocock

Airman who survived a Japanese prisoner of war camp as well as one of the infamous 'hell ships' to later prosper in business



While a prisoner Boocock survived on watery soup and two ladles of rice a day

In later life, when he faced setbacks, Bob Boocock would remark that "I've been through worse". Those were not just figures of speeches. As a young man Boocock survived three-and-a-half years as a prisoner of the Japanese in the Second World War. He survived a lengthy voyage in one of Japan's infamous "hell ships", 22 months in a labour camp and the atomic bomb being dropped on nearby Nagasaki.

His only solace was a book of poetry that an aunt had given him before the war and he would read poems to his comrades to keep their spirits up. When he saw Allied warplanes flying over the camp and realised liberation was near, he cried. Of the 257 men in his Royal Air Force squadron just 51 came home.

Robert Boocock was born in Newcastle during the Spanish flu pandemic of 1919. His parents, Robert and Annie, moved to York when he was a boy, and he was educated at a long-defunct institution called the York Day School of Commerce. From there he briefly joined a solicitor's firm but war broke out when he was 20.

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He joined the RAF, hoping eventually to become a pilot. In October 1941 he joined 242 Squadron, which had been commanded by Douglas Bader until he was shot down over France two months previously. The squadron set sail from the Clyde on the *Empress of Australia* in December that year, not knowing its destination. The day before the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor, drawing the US into the war.

The squadron landed in Jakarta on the island of Java in what is now Indonesia but was then the Dutch East Indies. Within weeks the Imperial Japanese Army overran Java and Boocock was captured while hiding on a tea estate in the mountains. He was 23.

He spent the next 18 months as a prisoner of war on Java, filling craters in runways and making sisal rope.

In September 1943 he was one of 519 PoWs transferred from Java to Singapore where he spent a few days in the notorious Changi prison. He was then moved from Singapore to Japan on board the *Seishin Maru*, one of the infamous Japanese "hell ships". The prisoners on those

floating dungeons were deprived of air, space, light, food, water and sanitation. Temperatures in the hold reached almost 50C. Dysentery was rife. Many died of thirst, heat, beatings or execution. The convoy in which the *Seishin Maru* sailed was attacked by US warships, and the vessel next to it was torpedoed and sunk.

The voyage lasted three weeks. From the port of Moji Boocock was taken to Fukuoka Camp 8 on the southern island of Kyushu to mine coal. Over the next 22 months many were killed by their captors, or died of malnutrition or disease. They were allowed one rest day a fortnight. No letters from home ever reached Boocock, but he was lucky to work on the surface, not underground. Malaria was common but it was dengue fever that he contracted.

"The main problem was a shortage of food. We were fed a small ladle of rice in the morning and another at lunchtime with a bowl of soup that consisted of water with a few cabbage leaves floating in it. Sometimes there were slugs or weevils in the rice, but we never had enough to eat. I was 11 stone

when the war started and nine stone when it finished."

He survived, he said, because he was young, fit, never smoked or drank and had been a boy scout.

As US troops neared the Japanese mainland in the summer of 1945 the camp guards ordered the prisoners to dig a mass grave, saying they would be executed if US soldiers landed on Japanese soil. But on August 6 the Americans dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, followed by another on Nagasaki three days later. Nagasaki was barely 40 miles from the camp, and the inmates sheltered in a tunnel. On August 15 Japan surrendered.

Boocock started his long journey home six weeks later. He and his fellow survivors were driven past Nagasaki and saw total devastation. From Okinawa he flew to Manila, then boarded a troop ship for San Francisco. He took a train across Canada from Vancouver and sailed from New York on the *Queen Mary*, landing in Southampton on November 20, 1945. There he was given a ration book and a railway ticket to York where he was reunited

with his parents. After the war Boocock worked initially as a paint salesman for ICI. In 1951 he set up a gas cutting and welding equipment firm called Centrajel with his father and a friend. It prospered, and was taken over in 1992, but he remained chairman until his retirement at the age of 77 in 1996.

In 1961 he married Rosemary, whom he had met when she was working in a stationery shop near his office. They had four children: Robert, Nick, Anna and Katie. They lived in a house he designed himself in Escrik, south of York, and he remained there after his wife's death in 2003. He skied until he was well into his seventies and water-skied for the last time at the age of 87.

In 2003, aged 84, Boocock returned to Japan on a "reconciliation" visit organised by the Far East Prisoners of War Association. He enjoyed the trip, he said. By then he had come to terms with his wartime experiences.

Robert Boocock, prisoner of war, was born on January 7, 1919. He died on September 7, 2020 aged 101 ■

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