

The Original Filby Cocktail

The original 'Filby Cocktail' was named after one of our members, Robert Gordon Filby, better known as 'Bob', who, over a period of forty-one years with Gordon's Gin Company, worked his way through the ranks within the export department to become Managing Director and eventually Chairman.

I asked Bob how this cocktail came about.

GRAND PRIX DE PARIS 1978

The May Fair Hotel is proud to announce that Head Bartender, Peter Brennan, took first prize with this cocktail in the International Mixed Drinks Competition held in Paris in December

'THE FILBY'

5/10 Gordons Gin
2/10 Amaretto di Saronno
2/10 Martini Dry
1/10 Campari
Zest of Orange

Why not take this opportunity of sampling this drink which we are offering at the special price of £1.00.

In 1978 the United Kingdom Bartenders Guild were entering various cocktails for an international competition held in Paris, and Peter Brennan at the Mayfair Hotel in London was instructed to make up a short drink. When asked by the committee what name he was giving, he thought for a moment and said it contained 5/10th Gordon's so why not call it 'The Filby' as Bob Filby was a great supporter of bartender's guilds. It won first prize and is still featured in the International Guide for Drinks. The photo above is of the original 'tent card' used for its promotion. Bob's advice is to drink it slowly!

Jessica Gill, our U.S. correspondent, found the Filby Cocktail when working in a bar and brought it to our attention on her Facebook page. This recipe however, has slightly changed over a period of thirty years and Bob said that he personally would not have made it more bitter by increasing the Campari.

Resulting from Jessica's enquiry about the origin of the cocktail, it has come to light that Bob Filby did not just have a cocktail named after him, but has also had an interesting life in many ways, all of which he attributes to a lot of luck and help from others, both in the army and his working life. Five years ago a profile of his life appeared in The Eagle - Journal of the Essex Regiment Association, which I found most interesting and would like to share with you. Here is a brief biography of 'our' man behind the 'Filby' cocktail.

Bob was born 26th November, 1923, the youngest of seven children, four brothers and two sisters. One of his brothers was Fred Filby, a founder member of The Filby Association, whom I am sure many of you will not only remember, but will have met.

His parents were Licensed Victuallers and had some very successful pubs, until tragedy struck, and his father died after a long illness when Bob was just nine years of age. His mother was left with terrible financial difficulties because the business had been left to the running of others and this was disastrous.

Fortunately, his father had been a Mason and Bob was sent to the Royal Masonic School where life in the junior boarding school was tough. However, although discipline by today's standards was very strict, even at so tender an age the 'stiff upper lip' seemed to prevail, and he considers those formative years greatly contributed to his ability to cope with harsh realities of life that were to come later during the war.

On entering senior school life became entirely different and opportunities for sport and other activities outside of school were made possible. Bob was in a production of 'Goodbye Mr. Chips' at Denham Studios. He was in the Cadet Corps and became proficient with simple military weapons. He loved rugby, hockey, and water polo. He considers he was very fortunate to be sent as a boarder to a very fine school at no cost to his dear mother. Being at a school in which all the pupils had lost either one or both parents, sympathy was a cardinal virtue and perhaps a natural development to the charity work Bob did in the twilight years of his life.

Bob left school in 1939 and joined a company based in the heart of London, but when the heavy wartime bombing started the company relocated to Pinner, Middlesex. During the course of his work he visited the local post office and met and courted his future wife, Joyce who was the officer supervisor.

On reaching the age for military service Bob decided to volunteer to join the Essex Regiment and soon found himself a very young recruit at Warley Barracks where his military training at school stood him in good stead. He was soon promoted to the rank of Lance Corporal, and shortly selected to go to OCTU and passed through the hands of the renowned RSM Britton who terrified everyone. Following his tough training he returned to Warley Barracks as a young 2nd Lieutenant but was soon to be posted to the 2nd Essex and was eventually to lead a platoon of men in the invasion of Normandy on D-Day.

There were many fierce battles and in just one action Bob lost seventeen of his twenty-eight men killed or wounded. Historians have recorded the terrible casualties suffered by the 2nd Essex between 6th June 1944 and 8th May 1945. Bob was very lucky to survive and was a Major before he was twenty-one having been awarded the Military Cross for conspicuous gallantry and leadership. King George VI sent him a letter of congratulations and on another occasion The Secretary of State for War conveyed His Majesty's high appreciation for Bob's distinguished service. It didn't end there as the French Government also honoured him with a Croix de Guerre. Bob merely states that it was a great privilege to command very brave soldiers and today he is still deeply saddened by the heavy loss of life of men who were his friends.

When the war in Germany ended Bob was posted to the Far East for the intended invasion of Japan, but fortunately for him and all the invasion forces, the Americans dropped the Atom bombs and the Japanese capitulated. However, he then found himself in India commanding a Company in the 1st Battalion of The Essex Regiment who had the difficult task of quelling riots between religious sects prior to India gaining independence.

Although being asked to stay on in the army, Bob had married Joyce on 22nd February 1945, before he left the U.K. and didn't think she would enjoy life as a soldier's wife, so he decided to take demob when it was available. It meant starting again in civvy street and he joined the Gordon's Gin Company as junior shipping clerk, thinking that it would be a temporary job until he could find something better.

However, he then decided to attend night school to qualify as a member of The Institute of Export and was promoted to Senior Shipping Clerk. After this there was no stopping him and Senior Shipping Clerk was followed by Assistant Export Manager, Export Manager, Export Director, Senior Export Director, Managing Director, and finally, after forty years he was to become Chairman of this multinational company.

Being on the international side of Gordon's business for many years, Bob had to travel abroad for long periods and this was hard on Joyce who was left on her own to bring up three children. However, in due course the DCL group then introduced a rule that if an executive travelled a lot, he could occasionally take his wife subject to the cost not exceeding a certain sum. So when the family were old enough to look after themselves, Joyce did, from time to time, accompany Bob, thus easing the pressure for both of them.

One of the highlights of Bob's career was when Gordon's Gin sponsored the Lawrence Olivier Awards Ceremony at the Victoria Palace Theatre, and as Chairman he had to play host to H.R.H. Prince Edwards and a galaxy of stage and screen stars. He was called upon to make a speech which was televised at prime viewing time – he said it was more nerve-racking than landing on the Normandy beaches on D-Day! However, it went well and after the Awards Ceremony he entertained all the guests to a dinner at the Grosvenor House Hotel in London.

Bob's involvement in charity work came from a decision by Diageo to provide the President of the largest trade charity, namely the Licensed Victuallers' National Homes, established in 1842 to provide retirement homes for elderly and distressed people in the licensed trade, their wives and widows. He was following in the footsteps of HRH Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh and also HRH The Duke of Kent, as well as renowned sporting personalities. Supported by a wonderful team and above all, his wife, Joyce, who was a tower of strength throughout, they raised £1.46 million, which was, and still is a record sum. He was host to Prince Philip at the charity's HQ at Denham, and he and Joyce were subsequently invited to Buckingham Palace. He describes this as the icing on the cake to a wonderful career.

When he retired, Bob was asked to help to form the Diageo Retirement Association and took the chair of the London & Home Counties committee looking after 5,000 pensioners. He subsequently set up five branches each with their own committee answering to him and this proved to be extremely successful. After twenty years Bob has finally taken a back seat and at the age of eighty-six is enjoying retirement to the full with Joyce and their very supportive family. He reiterates that he has had more than his fair share of luck in life and enjoyed a fabulous career having met some marvellous people and been treated with great kindness and respect.

His final words to me were "I am proud to be a member of the Filby Association which my brother, Fred, and Mary Filby formed with Ellsworth Filby from Kansas City, in 1968. We all greatly appreciate the hard work of the present conscientious Officers who have given the Association a truly international status".

He apparently has retained a very old newspaper dated 4th July, 1977 in which there is a headline 'Filbys of the world unite' and hopes there will be similar headlines in years to come! Bob is currently attending Kensington Palace for his portrait to be painted – what an honour! *We thank him for sharing his life story with us. Marion Filby (Editor)*