

# **Account of Purley on Thames**

## **A Prisoner of War**

R200474 15/1/2018

*These two articles were published in the Project Purley Journal of January 2018. The first is a recounting by Ted Williams of his experience as a bomber crew and capture as a POW. The Second tells us more about Ted as gleaned by his friend Mike Adnett.*

### ***A Memorable Return to Holland***

***by Ted Williams***

*Ted was a senior estimator for Trenthams and lived in one of the Trentham's Cottages at the foot of Long Lane. Here he recalls his visit to Holland to follow up his war experiences. He wrote this for the Trenthams Staff Magazine in 1984; but it is only part of the story.*

On the night of June 22nd/23rd 1943 I was the bomb-aimer on a Lancaster flying operation over the Ruhr (or "Happy Valley" as it was known to the air-crews of those far off days).

Flying over Holland on our way to the target, we were attacked by a German night fighter and set on fire. The disastrous result of this attack saw me baling out over the town of Nijmegen and spending the next two years in a POW camp in Germany and my fellow crew-mates all killed when the Lancaster crashed some eight miles away in a field in Beuningen.

The coincidences which resulted in my return almost 40 years later to the scene of my wartime experiences are almost unbelievable but, nevertheless, this is what happened.

I had never before taken a holiday abroad, but last year decided to take the plunge, and my family and I went to Majorca, where we met a Dutch couple.

During our conversation I mentioned the fact that I had been shot down over their country during the war. Amazingly, they told us that they were originally from Nijmegen and, although now living in Helmond, they ran a bakery in Nijmegen at the time of my unscheduled visit in 1943.



*A Lancaster Mk III Bomber of the type Ted flew in. This mark was also used for the famous Dam-buster raids led by Guy Gibson*

The coincidence of meeting two people from that town on my first visit abroad was so fantastic that we met again on two other occasions before the end of our holiday to discuss our various wartime experiences.

We corresponded frequently over the months after our holiday when I supplied them with further information regarding the night of 22nd/23rd June 1943.

Armed with this further information, Tony Las (our Dutch friend from Majorca) set himself the task of tracing the details of my wartime exploits. First of all, he rediscovered the house and garden into which I had parachuted, and what was even more amazing was the fact that his own bakery at that time was a mere 500 yards from where I had landed. The present owner of the house was living there as a boy of 12 when I parachuted into his garden and remembered well the events of that night.

With this starting point, Tony progressed further by tracing the man who was brought from a house opposite to converse with me in English, as no one else could speak our language. Tony's discussions with this man brought out the fact that I had received attention from a Dutch doctor.

Arrangements were now put in hand for me to revisit Holland and meet again with all those people whose lives were intertwined with mine on that night so long ago.

I suppose that not having experienced the dreadful indignities of an enforced occupation, we cannot fully comprehend what a thankful release it was for the Dutch people when the British and American forces liberated them from the tyranny of the occupying Germans.

My first and most important pilgrimage was made on our arrival in Holland, when we were taken by our hosts to a small British War

Cemetery in Uden. This was the most moving of all my experiences, for it is here that my six former crew-mates lie buried.

The following morning we were taken to Nijmegen and I stood once again on the spot where I parachuted almost 40 years previously.

The welcome we received from Mr Janssen (the occupant of the house) was out of this world. Although unable to speak any English, we had no difficulty whatever in establishing a rapport with each other.

We were then taken to meet the doctor who attended me that night. He is now 78 years old and retired some many years from his medical practice.

We met the man who was brought from a house opposite to act as translator. Until he was called that night, I had little idea of where I was, and thought I had landed somewhere in Germany. I heard with some relief therefore, that I was in Holland.

The next visit was to the small township of Beuningen, where our Lancaster had crashed. This place holds a particular importance for me for a very special reason. From what I have been told, the crashed Lancaster had been quickly cordoned off by the occupying Germans but, during a lapse in their sentry duty, a Dutch farmer and some colleagues managed to spirit away one of the damaged propellers which was then hidden in a meadow for the duration of the war.

On the cessation of hostilities, it was decided by the Burgomaster and the inhabitants of Beuningen that this propeller should be used as a monument to the memory of my six crew-mates, together with those brave Dutch people who also lost their lives in the fight against the Nazis.

In 1950 the propeller, still in its bent and buckled state, was erected in front of the Municipal Buildings and a plaque bearing the names of my six former crew-mates was duly unveiled.

My recent visit to see my old propeller, therefore, was a very moving experience. It stands there still, on a lawn, surrounded by a bed of flowers, cared for and revered by all the inhabitants of

Beuningen.

After visiting the propeller we were invited to spend the evening with the Burgomaster of Beuningen and his wife at their nearby home.

After a toast, and with great formality, I was presented with a book commemorating the ceremony of the inauguration of the propeller, together with a plaque bearing the Coat-of-Arms of Beuningen as a mark of gratitude from the inhabitants of the township.

Each year, on the day the Dutch people commemorate their final liberation from their occupation a ceremony is held at Beuningen and fresh flowers are placed around our propeller by the local school children as they remember those six young men.

The Dutch people will never forget them, and neither shall I.

## *A Bit More About Ted Williams*

*by Mike Adnett*

*Mike knew Ted well and he and his wife Pam wheedled more of the story out of Ted.*

We moved to our present house in 1988. Two years later the house next door was sold and Ted, his wife Pam and their daughter Bridgette moved in. Ted was a Senior Estimator for G Percy Trentham who at that time were a major construction contractor with their head office located in the parcel of land between the bottom of Long Lane and the Oxford Road. The family had been living in a cottage at the bottom of Long Lane but had to leave it as the land it was on was owned by Trenthams and was being redeveloped.

My wife Sheila and I got to know the family well but there was part of Ted's past we did not know about. Ted was a very likeable man, always smartly dressed, a keen bowler and easy to talk to but he never spoke about the war. We only became aware of this part of his past the more Sheila got to know Pam and we found that Ted was still suffering effects from his wartime experiences. After Ted's death in 1991 Sheila spent most Friday evenings chatting with Pam and we gradually learned more about his wartime experiences.

Ted grew up in Caerphilly but had found work hard to come by

after he left school at the age of seventeen. He enlisted in the RAF before the war and wanted to be a Spitfire pilot until an order went out calling for bomber crews to be urgently formed.

Ted was a bomb aimer in a Lancaster Mk III bomber, LM325 SR-J, on the night of 22/23 June 1943 which took off for a bombing raid on Mulheim, Germany. They were carrying a total bomb load of approximately 10,000 lbs. They were attacked by a German night fighter on the way to the target and the Lancaster crashed close to the town of Beuningen in Holland. They managed to jettison their bomb load before the order to bale out was given. Because he was close to the escape hatch Ted was able to escape when the order to bale out was given. On the way down Ted suffered injuries to his ears from the parachute harness before he landed in a garden in Nijmegen.

Ted wrote a letter on 19 October 1945 to a relative of one of his crew members describing the events when they were shot down:

“We were attacked somewhere over Holland. I was in the bombing hatch at the time preparing for our run over the target. I can’t really say for certain what hit us, but I heard a noise like cannon fire and although I never saw it, I’m almost certain we were attacked by a night fighter and as neither of the gunners, Ron and Vince, said anything over the intercom. It must have come up underneath us from the rear, because that was a blind spot, where none of us could see it coming.

Anyway a few seconds after we were hit the aircraft was on fire, and Roy (the pilot) gave us the order to prepare to bale out, so I jettisoned the front emergency hatch, then I asked Roy to open the bomb doors, because I was afraid the incendiary bombs were on fire and I didn’t want to risk having the 4,000 lb bomb exploding with the heat before we had all jumped clear. I then jettisoned all the bombs and Roy then gave the order to bale out. I didn’t see or hear Ted after we were hit, in fact the only ones who spoke over the intercom were Roy, Jack Osborne and myself and the only two I saw before I jumped were Roy and Jack and they were both OK. You see May, from my little compartment in the nose of the aircraft, it was impossible to see the centre or the rear of the “kite”? so I can’t really say whether or not Ted was OK before I jumped. After Roy had given the order to bale out, I grabbed my parachute pack and I had to beat out a small fire that had started on it before I strapped it on, then I jumped for it.

I landed in the back garden of a house in Nijmegen, and after I had



Map of the area around Stalag Luft VI

been treated by a doctor for various burns and cuts, I was taken away by the Germans. (Nijmegen at this time was a German garrison town)

The next night I was awakened by my guards and was told that my aircraft had been found and that the rest of the crew had been killed in the crash. Of course for obvious reasons I had to deny that it was my aircraft they had found, so seemingly to prove their words and convince me that they were right they showed me identification discs and marks etc of all of our crew, all except Tomkins but even though they could not produce any identification of PO Tomkins, they seemed definite in their statement that six bodies were found in the aircraft, and from the five identification discs etc. they showed me, it seems that this terrible news is true. Of course not being shown the bodies, I can't swear to anything, but all that I do know and all that was told me by the Germans I've now told you in this letter."

Ted's injuries were treated by the local doctor before he was captured by the Germans. Several days of interrogation and torture followed before he was sent to Stalagluft VI. He was subjected to further torture which resulted in the complete loss of his sense of taste and also affected his health for the rest of his life.

Ted was in Stalagluft VI for two years before there were rumours circulating that the allies were getting close and the prisoners were force marched away across Germany. At times prisoners were shot by the Germans and Ted concluded that as this might be his fate he would try and escape and when the opportunity arose he jumped behind a pig shed and hid. An Australian friend had also done the same thing and when they were convinced the Germans were far enough away they moved in a direction which they thought might take them to the allies. The Australian became unwell and convinced Ted that he must go on alone which he did until he eventually met a column of British Sherman tanks. After the tank commander had satisfied himself of Ted's identity he was handed an 'April' Christmas pudding by one tank crew. Eventually he was able to make his way home on a Dakota cargo plane.

Ted met Pam in 1972 and married her on 23 June 1974 which he considered a lucky day. We learned that Ted found it tough to get over his war experiences both physically and emotionally. He never left the country again until the family booked a holiday to Majorca

in 1983.

Ted's account of what happened next on this holiday he wrote for the G Percy Trentham staff magazine in 1984.