

My Life and Time

(Dedicated to Peter, my son)



By Ken Turnham (1924-2018)

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Born in the year 1924, and brought up with my family of two brothers and two sisters in the village of Tyttenhanger, St Albans, Hertfordshire, I can recall that I had a very happy childhood, with very fond memories of rural life in our village community.

In those days, school days were happy days, something which I looked forward to eagerly, especially the summer holidays, which I invariably spent with my relations down on the farm in Weeden outside Aylesbury, other times down in Weymouth also with relatives.

My early recollections of my youth, living in Tyttenhanger were very happy times. My father was a great gardener, he grew almost every conceivable vegetable you could name, peas, beans, marrows, onions, celery and we even had a brick building where he cultivated mushrooms, plus a 22 pole allotment for potatoes only, the harvest of which he claimed for our supplies, in addition our soft fruits raspberries, strawberries, red and black currants, gooseberries, apples, pears and plums were plentiful.

We also had plenty of livestock, goats, hens, rabbits, pigs, geese, ducks, we were truly self supporting. With a deep well at the bottom of our garden, a lovely supply of cool water but a bit of a job for my mother on washdays, when all had to be brought up and the old copper boiler put into operation.

The same procedure was carried out on bath nights, fetching the water from the well, heating by the copper boiler and filling the tin bath in the kitchen, this was a great treat.

I remember I used to help with the harvesting at haymaking time, it was great fun. The local farmers used to employ some of the inmates from the local Hill End Hospital (mental). My reward was enjoying the large wedge of fruit cake and a mug of tea at the end of the days work. I can recall two inmates in particular who were named 'Jesus', always singing hymns and 'Dusty' who was always playing the Jews harp.

My eldest sister Rose, nearly poisoned my father, one day Mum told her to go to our store shed and collect some onions to prepare a stew for Dad, but she collected daffodil bulbs from the wrong sack.

There was another time my father, out walking his dog Tiny, a greyhound, (really he used to use her for catching rabbits and hares) when he caught me smoking. I had just turned nine. My eldest brother Len who was in the Navy, regularly sent home tobacco for my father, which my other brother Billie and myself used to help ourselves to, and roll our own cigarettes.

My father's remarks were "So you think you can smoke, son?", he then promptly filled one of his clay pipes with his combined 'Digger Flake' and 'Twist', a mixture which he rolled in the palms of his hands, then lit it for me. Naturally, I turned all shades of green and felt sick - but unfortunately it didn't cure me, and 67 years later, I'm still smoking.

Having completed my school days, Camp Road Junior, then Hatfield Road Boys and finally Beaumont Old Boys School, I started my career as an apprentice Draughtsman (office worker) with a builders, named Tacchi and Burgess; Mr Tacchi, Senior, being a past Mayor of St Albans.

It was due to the outbreak of the war 1939, that the son Steven Tacchi decided to join the Armed Forces, and at that same time reduce staff to lighten the burden placed upon his father, therefore I never was able to finish my apprenticeship, but sought further employment which took me to travelling to and from Radlett each day.

I can remember vividly the day 'War on Germany' was declared. I was having a bath (not in the tin one!). We had moved into Prospect Road, St Albans by then, when my sister Rose shouted up to me to "Hurry up", as we were at War. I don't know if she expected them to arrive within the hour or not.

My eldest brother, Len who is nearly 14 years older, was already in the Navy, having joined in the Boys Service at the age of 14 1/2. Billie joined the R.A.F in 1940, I also tried to enlist, but was told I was too

young and to come back when I was 18.

I then joined the L.D.V. later to become the Home Guard, carrying out duties guarding the Cell Bames Hospital, very much like the comedy programme 'Dad's Army', with rifles from the First World War.

It was on my 18th birthday that I returned to Oxford for my attestation, joining the R.A.F. on completion and being accepted, I started my initial training via St Johns Wood, Regents Park, London, then onto Bridgenorth, Yatesbury before becoming a fully fledged member of aircrew.

Having passed my initial tests and being accepted for training to be a member of Air Crew by 13th December 1942. (Hitler must have been quaking in his jackboots, knowing that a third member of the Turnham clan was after his blood). I was over the moon and eager to serve my country.

In the meantime, I had progressed from St John's Wood, London, onto Bridgenorth for square-bashing and training, then onto No.2 Radio School at Yatesbury, nr Calne, Wiltshire to begin extensive training for aircrew flying in De Haviland 'Dominies' and Percival 'Proctors', progressing onto Avril 'Ansons'. Having passed out and obtaining the rank of Sergeant, I was then posted to No.20 O.T.U. Lossiemouth, Scotland flying in Wellingtons operating local cross-country bombing-fighter affiliation - air - air firing - stick bombing tactics.

My next move was to No.1669 Conversion Unit flying Halifaxes. Then, just as we had settled into a routine as a crew on Halifaxes, we were again posted to No.3 Lancaster Finishing School and given just 12 hours conversion only before being posted to No.115 Bomber Command Operational Squadron at Witchford nr. Ely, Cambridgeshire. All this had taken 12 months of basic training and a further 12 months of flying training before reaching the ultimate - of being on an Operational Squadron, so naturally one was excited, apprehensive and the adrenalin flowed, waiting for the first op. After waiting two weeks it came. The target was Siegen, taking just under six hours flying time - this was quickly followed by trips to Trier (twice), then Cologne and Vohwinkel. These were all carried out in my first two weeks - all daylight raids.

My first night operation was on Nuremberg~ which took 7½ hours, then quickly followed up by Ludwigshaven and the following day Neus, after which a break for two weeks.

Next one was Duisberg then came Wiesbaden - Dortmund and Hohenbudberg, followed by two very large targets on consecutive nights. The first being Dresden, which apparently was a very beautiful city, this raid by over 1,000 bombers dropping incendiary and high explosives, was completely gutted. You could see the fires raging miles away from the first wave of aircraft's attack. It was reported over 60,000 people lost their lives in this one raid - it took over eight hours flying, most of the time over enemy territory, in fact we were instructed that if we were shot down - it would be easier for us to continue eastwards to escape as we were so close to the Russian frontier, rather than try to make our way home through enemy territory. This also applied to the following night's target of Chemnitz, again over eight hours flying time. Two days rest and back again on two consecutive daylight raids on Wesel.

This was followed up with a target of Cologne, a place I had been before, but this time, we managed to get shot-up slightly, a matter of 47 holes in our fuselage and wings and to cap it all, a burst tyre on landing - finishing up with a quick exit and a complete write-off.

During the next three weeks, targets were Saltzbergen, Dessau, another eight hour night job, then Essen, Hennichstrasse, Nais, Bruchstasse and Munster.

Hallendorf followed by Kiel and finally Potsdam, which also was over eight hours night raid. What a relief after landing to be informed that you had completed your first tour of operations. What a celebration we had also before leaving the Squadron. I had been recommended and received my commission, which was a great honour.

Looking back on my squadron days, I recall vividly the feelings of myself and the rest of the crew members, that on each return from an operation, after debriefing - coffee, laced with rum and the usual supply of cigarettes, great relief - that one was over, wondering whether we would survive and be able to complete our tour.

Then when you went for breakfast in the mess the following morning, you looked around to find a batch of new faces replacing those you had lost on the last op, but life had to go on.

The feeling one experienced when taking off from the airfields - heavily loaded with bombs, possibly 12-16 planes from your squadron, depending on the availability - flying down to the crossing point of our coastline, joining up with other squadrons, especially on the 1,000 bomber raids, planes milling around you like a swarm of bees - steadily increasing one's height, we usually flew in 18 - 9 - 20,000 foot waves; all of a sudden it's dark - you look around searching, thinking where are they all? - suddenly you find the skies are illuminated with searchlights, the enemy had a radar operated main beam and when this picked you up, it was very difficult to break off - the best way was to dive directly towards it and veer off sharply, or as in many cases one of your comrades would fly between you and the beam to break it, then the anti-aircraft guns would start all the way to and from the target area.

Enough praise cannot be given to the members of the P.F.F, the Path Finder Force of the R.A.F. who flew mainly Mosquitos (and unarmed), courageously operating over the target area, marking the designated target with either red or green flares which were constantly altered by them - depending on wind changes and drifting, broadcasting instructions for our bombing runs.

One always felt apprehensive when you opened your bomb door and slowed down as you approached the target to ensure a good bombing run - you felt more exposed.

Our skipper, as soon as we had left the target area, just put the nose down and dived, flying as low as possible, hoping to avoid the ack-ack searchlights and fighters - he had a reputation on the squadron as 'First Back Briggs'.

The main crossing of the Rhine under Field Marshall Montgomery took place on the night 23rd/24th March. British Commando troops had been sent over on the 23rd, before the main crossing began, to capture the key town of Wesel, probably the most strongly defended of German positions of all across the Lower Rhine.

A target which I had bombed on two consecutive nights earlier. Then about an hour later the air attack opened against Wesel, the town was pulverised to a heap of rubble, with only the shells of a few buildings left standing.

April 10th, 1945, the American Ninth Army occupied the great German industrial city of Essen, to find that the home of Krupps armament works, the most famous arms centre, had been completely destroyed. This had been one of my targets on 11th March, the heaviest attack of over 1,000 bombers, we had finally destroyed it.

On completion of my Operational Tour, the crew members went their various ways. I personally went on to the Administration and Accountancy School at Credenhill, nr Hereford. Then a further posting and promotion to Flying Officer, taking up duties of Release and Resettlement Officer for the personnel leaving the forces after having served their country.

My next posting was to Germany operating from Hamburg, Bielfeld and Guterslow and then to No.2 MREU at Rarlsruhe. During these postings, I was able to see at first hand the devastation caused to these cities by our bombing raids.

The duties of Missing Research and Enquiry Units (MREU) was a very rewarding and satisfying job. Air Ministry supplied information of aircraft missing from specific targets. It was my job then to investigate each case, to ascertain what had happened to the crew members, whether they had been taken prisoners, escaped or killed - where they were buried, and if so, to carry out exhumations for identification purposes - then to make the arrangements for reinternment to the War Graves Commission cemeteries.

Having operated in the British and French zones, I then moved to the American zone stationed at Regensburg and Kelheim, north of Munich, continuing this investigating work and leading up to Nuremberg with any atrocities that had occurred.

It was a very stressful experience, but the reward was more satisfying, knowing that the families back

home knew the final resting place of their loved ones.

During my travels throughout Germany, I had the great pleasure and honour of meeting Madge (now my wife). She was working in Heidelberg, as chief cashier for all the Pxs (Post Exchange) of the American Services under Colonel Aitken, a position she obtained after serving with the American Red Cross in Manchester, London and Paris and eventually in Heidelberg - the romantic city.

Having successfully completed my investigations throughout the three zones in Germany, British, French and American, by which time I had attained the rank of Flight Lieutenant (F/LT) and was second in command to the S&DR, I was requested by Air Ministry to go to Paris to continue this work, but as that meant separating from Madge. I persuaded another officer, Ray Smith, to accept the posting on my behalf (a couple of bottles and cartons of cigarettes did the trick). He was at the time engaged to an heiress from the North West. Unfortunately for him, she flew over to Paris to surprise him - but he was out on a date! Needless to say, the engagement was broken off!

I had a second posting to Brussels, which once more I managed to wangle out of, same tactics used.

The final posting arrived for me to Warsaw, Poland, one which I could not get out of this time, so after lengthy talks with Madge, we came to the decision of me resigning my commission in the R.A.F. and Madge leaving her position, rather than be separated and return to the United Kingdom 1948. Later in life, I met up with S/LDR Chic Riddell (who took my place in Warsaw) at one of our reunions in London, only to find out that he had been awarded the OBE for that particular job.

Going back in time of the war, my father, (who had served in both the Boer War and the First World War) had passed away with cardiac failure and my eldest sister Rose had lost her husband Henry who was a Staff Sergeant in the army, having served in the Middle East battles. He came home on compassionate leave to attend to Dad's funeral and on his return to Italy he was taken ill with rheumatic fever, leaving Rose with a small child, Joan, to bring up on her own. Later in life she bought her own house in Camp Road, naming it Milan, in memory of where Henry had passed away.

Having left home at the age of 18 and returning six years later to the United Kingdom, I never really went back home to live. I was determined to have six months on holiday - one month for every year's service. Madge and I thoroughly enjoyed ourselves before settling down in Manchester - her home town. It was in the early 1950's that I returned to my home town, St Albans when my mother was taken ill. Madge and I moved south and lived at St Michaels Court, off Fishpool Street, close to Verulamium, the ancient Roman city. Mum, in the meantime, improved in health and went to live with Rose.

Billie also came out of the R.A.F. and after a couple of years of managing the White Swan Hotel in Moorgate, London, he decided to join the New Zealand Air Force, with June his wife and Susan, their daughter, following on out six months later.

Len was still serving in the Navy after doing a half years boys service, then 22 years senior service, which he also extended further before finally leaving.

Rose, who had met and married George, also decided to emigrate to New Zealand with Joan and my mother as well - they also had a daughter Julie, born in New Zealand.

Madge and I in the meantime, had already returned to the north and after several jobs, I joined Renold Chains Engineering Company, on production control, where I remained until retirement.

At the age of 41, Madge had given up the idea of ever having a family, she always wanted four - it wasn't for the case of not trying - then one morning, she said to me, "I think I had better stop having this porridge for breakfast - it keeps on upsetting me - making me feel sick". Yes! you are right - she was pregnant. We were both happy and excited.

Peter was born on 8th July 1961, by caesarean section, due to the umbilical cord being wrapped around his neck. A great day in our lives.

He has since enriched our lives so much and I am very proud of his success and achievements in life. Looking back on his childhood days, Madge really enjoyed every moment and with pride ferrying him to

and from schools and sharing little secrets, a natural bond being established between them. We all shared a mutual love of golf and had some wonderful times together, something which we all had great success in.

After completing his education at Stockport Boys Grammar School, Mile End, he took up an apprenticeship at Renolds, going onto college and obtaining his HND in Mech Eng.

Reflecting back on my life, I know that my mother who passed away in New Zealand, was very proud of her three sons who had served their country in time of need - she used to say that we were her "war effort".

Shortly after Peter was born, Madge unfortunately had to have a hysterectomy, which didn't go right to plan and she finished up being transferred to Christies cancer hospital for radium treatment and whilst there she also had an overdose of radioactive iodine which destroyed her thyroid gland, for which she now has to have medication to control.

During the past six years to date, Madge has been suffering from dementia problems. I have taken her to the top neurological specialist at the M.R.I., Professor Neary, who has carried out various tests and scans of the brain, both nuclear and magnetic. The end result being that of Alzheimers, for which at present there is no known cure. She has completely lost her memory and no powers of recall, a general deterioration which is very sad to sit around watching someone who has been so active in life, just wasting away in front of you, followed up by being incontinent.

Having nursed Madge to the best of my capabilities, I eventually finished up having a stroke, ending up in hospital for a period of two and a half months. On my discharge, I still carried on nursing Madge until approximately 18 months ago, when she was eventually placed in a Residential Care Home for those suffering from Alzheimers.

My life with Madge, which began when we met in Germany in 1946, has been a wonderful experience, which we lived to the full, enjoying each and every moment. Times we spent in Heidelberg, with Madge living at the Reichspost Hotel, whilst I was at No.28 Peter Snellsbackstrasse, across the river Neckar, evenings spent in the Red Ox, a favourite haunt, the student's local Bierkellar, trips up in the cable car to the Mulkenkukr restaurant for an evening meal.

Christmas 1946/47 we went to Prague, what a fabulous city - something which can never be wiped from one's memories - other times, virtually every other weekend were spent in Garmisch, Partenkirchen, Bavaria skiing on the Zugspitz and Ibsee mountains, or boating on the Reisersee and Ibsee lakes.

I remember having the pleasure of dining with Monty Woolley (American actor) at the Schorinbrun Palace, Vienna on one of my many visits to the Palace as liaison officer, in conjunction with the American Ambassador and War Graves Commission conferences.

Madge and I travelled extensively whilst living abroad and also on return to the United Kingdom, visiting Portugal several times, Tunisia, Canada and America.

During the past two years, I have visited New Zealand on three occasions. The first was Christmas 1998 with Peter on a short flying visit of 3 1/2 weeks, to the South Island, visiting Bill and Susan in Blenheim. We hired a car and toured approximately 2,000 miles, taking in a 'whale watch' at Kaikoura, then onto Christchurch, calling in to see young Billie and Lexi, whom I had never met, a breeder of horses in his spare time - further south to visit 'Noddy' and his family, who worked in the gold mining industry, another of Bill's sons.

Then driving to Queenstown, a place of activity - staying there for four days over the Christmas period, taking in the Shotover Jet and with Peter doing a bungee jump. During this period we also drove to Milford Sound and enjoyed the boat trip.

The beautiful scenic routes are somewhat breathtaking - in parts reminiscent of Scotland and Wales. We also sampled the nightlife of Queenstown before leaving on our journey along the coastline, taking in Greymouth and one or two other stopovers, before returning to Blenheim.

Peter, having planned the itinerary, included a trek and horse riding for New Year's Eve, so I decided to fly up to see Rose in Auckland on New Year's Eve and return on New Year's Day - not having seen her

for over 20 years, but I promised to return to meet all of her family, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

My second visit was in June 1999, arranged for a period of five weeks, whilst Madge was in care for six weeks and assessment, when they decided that she should become a permanent resident.

I started off my second visit with Bill and Susan for a couple of weeks, then flew up to Rose in Auckland, with the intention of spending the next three weeks with her and family. With Peter constantly informing me of Madge's progress and the fact that she was having to stay as a permanent resident, I continually postponed my departure date, extending my stay for 5 1/2 months.

This really enabled me to meet up with all the family, whom I had never met, but of which I now feel part of.

Rose and George had arranged a trip to Rotorua with Joan and Julie - we had a splendid time - the home of the thermal volcanic springs - boy, what a smell! Sulphur - just about the same as rotten eggs but apparently good for you. The sort of place one could walk down the main street, break wind, and people would think you were wearing a new aftershave.

We took in the local 'hangi', a Maori custom of cooking in earth, also a visit to a Maori village and tribal customs, plus a traditional concert of folklore dancing, etc. Also rides on the luge, tenpin bowling, in fact, the works.

Joan and Jim arranged a trip up north to the Bay of Islands, visiting many beauty spots on the way. Jim and I went for the boat trip through the Hole in the Rock, whilst Joan enjoyed her favourite hobby - shopping.

During this visit, I really got to know everyone, including many of the family's friends and really felt at ease, and at home.

It was during this time that George, who had been waiting a long time for a hip replacement joint, was taken in, and the operation was a success, but unfortunately complications set in and he passed away. A sad loss to a great family.

After everything settled down, I returned home with the intention of returning.

My third visit began in November 2000. This time I booked for six months, sharing my time equally between Rose, Joan and family.

Annex Written By Rod Mountney 2018

The previous writings are Ken's own words transcribed on his behalf by John Payne and tells some of Ken's story from birth to 2000. The following tells of the key major events in Ken's life from 2000 to 2018.

During Ken's visit to New Zealand he lived with family members. He would bet on the horses and shared his winnings by treating the family to slap up dinners. He joined in normal day to day life, sharing time with the extended family, who all have fond memories of his stay.

Ken returned home to Burnage Lane, Stockport, in 2001 to continue a quiet retirement. Madge remained in a residential care home unable to remember anything of her life with Ken. In 2002 his son Peter was diagnosed with a debilitating spinal cancer which required surgery and rehabilitation. Although the treatment was initially successful the cancer returned in 2004 and Peter passed away at Christmas 2014. Peter asked his wife Melanie and her family to keep a lookout for Ken.

In March 2005 Ken took part in the Heroes Return initiative. One major objective was to try where possible to link these 'Heroes Returns' to the related scheme of 'Their Past - Your Future'. An initiative to encourage awareness of young people of all the aspects of WWII. For his return Ken chose not to

revisit the towns and cities it was his task to bomb during conflict, but to the villages, towns and sites where he carried out the valuable and humane duties for his fallen comrades and their families while working for the RAF - MRE Unit, in Southern Germany. This is also where he met his wife Madge in 1947. As Madge could no longer recall any of these places or times the visit also had very important personal reasons for Ken to make his return. John Payne (Melanie's father) acted as companion and carer for Ken and they were able to relocate many of the places that Ken had lived and worked immediately after the war ended.

Madge passed away in May 2006 after a long illness. Ken was suffering from a number of health issues himself but continued to live independently and enjoyed going out for family events and meals. His next door neighbours Val and John helped him with shopping and cooking him a dinner most days right up until he went into hospital in 2017.

Ken had a bad coughing fit in 2011 and decided to quit smoking after 78 years saying it wasn't doing his health any good! By this time Ken had limited mobility and mainly relied on his wheelchair for moving outside of his house.

In 2012 the Bomber Command Memorial commemorating the 55,573 men who lost their lives during the war was opened in Green Park London. Ken attended the event with Rod acting as carer and was seen by family and friends as the TV cameras panned in from long range, ending in a close-up of Ken smiling enjoying a chat with other veterans while waiting for the Queen to arrive.

Ken wished to visit the Aviation Heritage Centre East Kirby Lincolnshire where it's still possible to see and hear the privately owned Lancaster Bomber NX611 using it's four engines on a 'Taxi Run'. In October 2015 all WWII RAF veterans were invited by the International Bomber Command Centre (IBCC) to the opening of their Canwick Hill Spire and Walls Memorial. A tribute to Lincolnshire's Lancaster Bomber Crews. By good fortune it was possible to attend both events on consecutive days, Thursday 1st for the 'Taxi Run' and Friday 2nd for the opening of the Memorial. John again acted as carer and Ken was photographed alongside the rear turret of the Lancaster, as well as meeting the dignitaries opening the Memorial.

By this time Ken was a regular visitor to local hospitals with increasingly debilitating health conditions. In 2016 he had the news that he needed a heart operation to treat a failing valve. The operation was a success but the valve remained poor and it was determined too dangerous to attempt to replace it. After the operation Ken's health improved considerably for a while but it was always known that the fix was temporary. Ken continued to live independently, visiting family and enjoying a game of snooker playing from his chair while advising his fellow players how they should line up their shots. His health again started to deteriorate in the autumn of 2017 leading to hospital admission in November following a fall at home. After a period in hospital and the rehabilitation home in Gorton, Ken eventually passed away on 27th February 2018. On his last day in hospital Ken had 8 visitors in person – a measure of the regard and esteem felt for him.

All of the above provides context for Ken's personality:

Above all Ken was an optimist with a huge sense of fun. He focused on what he could do, finding enjoyment wherever and whenever he could. He loved to play games, golf, snooker and cards and would "help" his opponents with advice and encouragement whenever he could. Ken got his face painted as a tiger at an armed forces day and went round in his wheel chair roaring at people behind their backs. He also led the conga at Ian's and Rachel's wedding in his wheelchair with a lady (no names, no pack drill) draped across his lap.

Ken had a sense of playful mischief and a sharp wit. He would deliberately and blatantly look at the bottom card when he shuffled or cut a deck of cards pretending innocence if questioned. He thanked Julie for her last present referring to the "Red Cross parcel" and would ask John about his troublesome caravan with the face of an angel while being shouted at to shut up by everyone else present. These days the term "wind-up merchant" would be used but everyone enjoyed Ken's teasing and it was always in fun.

A hearty dinner, a few drinks and good company was very valuable to Ken throughout his life. Although

he was not a wealthy man he was rich in his love of family and friends and their love for him. An evening with Ken always ended too soon and left you waiting for the next time.

Ken took a genuine interest in others, took time to know them by name and would enquire on their lives and concerns. He had a superb memory recalling events, places and people with startling accuracy. People found Ken engaging and easily made friends with him. He was able to connect with all ages and treated all equally. He quietly helped others when they needed it most and never asked or expected anything in return.