

MY POW DAYS – POSTSCRIPT

Caterpillar Club

I became a member of this Club soon after the end of WW2. I registered that I had saved my life, having baled out of an aircraft on fire and out of control. In freefall, I manually pulled the ripcord of my Irving parachute, which released the parachute canopy and supporting shroud lines.

The Club has no structure, committees or branches, but is still famous for its huge worldwide membership of airmen who have **saved their lives** by parachute.

The Wright Brothers of America designed and launched their rudimentary Wright Flyer aircraft at Kittyhawk in 1903. But it was many years before an acceptable parachute was designed to save the lives of aircrew escaping from disabled aircraft.

The Centenary of the 1903 event was celebrated at the Biggin Hill Airshow in 2003, when Barbara and I were invited to a VIP Marquee with a number of the Caterpillar Club members who resided in the London area.

Leslie Irving was the American pioneer who developed the successful parachute. In 1911 at the age of sixteen he jumped from a static balloon, and continued his interest in designing parachutes. In 1919 he designed a parachute pack, using pure silk for the large canopy and the shroud lines, and a ripcord for manual release of the parachute after baling out. His design proved that you could parachute safely from an aircraft in flight. However there was doubt that it was safe to bale out from a stricken 'plane. Until in 1922, Lieutenant H.R.Harris made an emergency jump using this Irving parachute. As a result of his experience the American Air Force adopted the Irving design that same year. And in 1925 the RAF chose the Irving seat pack parachute for their use. WW2 brought about a huge demand for parachutes (seat and chest packs).

In 1922 Irving decided to form a club of those who had saved their lives and Harris was to be the first member. Irving named it the Caterpillar Club and by 1945 there were 34,000 members! (The caterpillar is symbolic of the silk worm which descends gently to earth from heights, by spinning a silky thread from which to hang.)

The Irving Parachute Company gives every member a certificate and a gold tie / lapel pin, shaped like a caterpillar, and with red eyes (red eyes if the aircraft was on fire). The recipient's name and rank are engraved on the reverse.

The Post War Years

One month after WW2 ended, our surviving crew of four met at Laurie Underwood's wedding. This was a time of great celebration for us and we didn't waste time reminiscing about the RAF or the previous 15 months in captivity!

I remained in the RAF until August 1946 but no longer on flying duties. During this time I was promoted to Flight Lieutenant. I had several months on leave after which I attended an RAF Administration course and eventually was posted to RAF Hornchurch, where I was in charge of the Overseas Holding Unit. This Unit was responsible for looking after RAF personnel, serving in Germany and on leave in the UK. Some, who were on compassionate leave, needed more time to deal with their problems; some, on normal leave, had applied for an extension of leave on compassionate grounds (often 'passionate' rather than compassionate!); some just went absent without leave and had to be arrested by the RAF police! It was not the most exciting job, but I was able to live at home and it filled the time until I was back in 'civvy street'.

After we were all demobbed, the ensuing years were spent on developing our careers etc. I returned to Unilever and eventually became a management consultant. George Griffiths continued flying as a pilot in a civilian air transport company and then, a senior captain with British Airways. Laurie studied accountancy and eventually, as sales manager of Philips, sold mechanised and later computerised accountancy equipment. Johnny Bushell developed tuberculosis shortly after the war, contracted as a result of poor conditions in Stalag1VB. He had one lung partially removed and was awarded a full war disability pension. He was still able to work and became a housing officer for Bedford Council. Johnny remained a bachelor, but George, Laurie and I married and raised families, which gave us little time to muse about our wartime experiences.

Remembering our wartime experiences

Apart from exchanging Christmas cards and an occasional meeting up with Laurie and John, in my business travels around the UK, we didn't meet as a group. I had lost contact with George Griffiths until, sometime in the 1970's, I managed to locate his wife's parents in Craven Arms and they gave me his address. He was still serving with British Airways when, some time later, I phoned him - at precisely 8 o'clock GMT on 20 January (the anniversary of the exact time when we were shot down). This became a pleasant ritual, and every year by this means, we congratulated ourselves on our lucky survival.

I retired in 1984, and George who lived in Ruislip retired some time later. Barbara and I managed to visit George when we stayed over at Northolt to see Barbara's mother - this would be in the early 1990's. George had done some retirement research at the RAF Museum at Hendon, and had obtained photographs and information about the four crew we had lost. They were all killed. Two were buried in the 1939-45 Berlin War Cemetery, and two were

remembered on the Runnymede Memorial, as they had no known graves. Also, George had obtained (through a German archivist) details of how and where we were shot down. We were not shot down by flak, or a bomb through our wing from one of our aircraft above as first thought, but by an ace night fighter pilot. The archivist had also traced the crash point of our plane in Berlin. In support of this information he had sent George a photograph, a 'history' of the night fighter pilot, and a map of the exact point where the 'plane debris had fallen. (George had landed in waste ground, amongst the wreckage.)

Our 50 year reunion

All this information, and reading several books about Bomber Command and the Berlin Raids, stimulated my thoughts, which had remained dormant on this subject for many years. As a result, we and our wives arranged to meet at a Peterborough Hotel on our 50th Anniversary, to exchange our personal experiences and to celebrate our survival. We dined and raised our glasses "to absent friends" at the exact hour (8pm GMT, 20 January 1994). This was our first meeting as a group since June 1945!

A cousin of Laurie Underwood, hearing about this celebration, contacted the BBC and arranged that a TV team and a Radio car would attend this meeting, in the afternoon prior to our dinner at 8pm. We were requested to bring any memorabilia we had; which meant we were able to fill in a number of gaps in our experiences. Johnny and I learned how George, when the plane was 'on fire' over Berlin, had been held in his seat, with his head thrust forward and the throttle levers behind his ears, when the plane went into a spiral dive. He had a vivid recollection of seeing the altimeter 'unwind' from 17000ft through 7000ft before he blacked out! He regained consciousness and was 'in the air' in freefall, after the plane's fuel tanks had exploded and he had been blown out of the aircraft. He was now only hundreds of feet from the ground, but managed to pull his parachute ripcord. His parachute opened but was still 'on the swing' when he hit the ground, with the debris of the aircraft around him. Although in shock he had landed virtually unscathed.

Laurie told Johnny and I how, immediately after arriving at Stalag Luft3 Poland in February 1944, he was recruited as an extra lookout, whilst they completed the escape tunnel 'Harry' for the Great Escape. Laurie being a latecomer was not included in the escape. He was lucky, as 50 of the 76 who did escape and who were recaptured, were murdered on the orders of Hitler. Laurie and George, like me, had to march away from their prison camp as the 'Front Line' approached at the end of January 1945. In their case it was the Russians on the Eastern Front. They marched in freezing conditions and then entrained on 2 February to Malag camp, where they stayed until 10 April. They then marched again for two weeks across Northern Germany, and were liberated a week later on 2 May 1945, just south of Lubeck on the Baltic, by the British Army.

Thus, by the end of our celebrations at Peterborough, we had learnt more about each other's experiences. BBC made a three minute video tape of the occasion, which was sent out over Yorkshire and Look East Television on the Eight O'clock News that night. George and I were interviewed in a BBC radio van and a three minute radio tape of the interview was broadcast from Cambridge also. The tape was so popular that it was broadcast three times.

Following this occasion I began to compile some of my experiences in Bomber Command, and assemble documents, and letters received after being shot down etc.

Runnymede War Memorial

In August 1994 Barbara and I attended the annual Memorial Service, arranged by the Aircrew Association, at the Runnymede War Memorial. This was particularly important to me as we were able to view the names of the two of the four members of my crew - Flight Engineer L Bremner and Mid-upper Gunner C Dupueis - who were killed and have no known graves. Their names are recorded within in the cloisters of the Memorial, and 1994 was the 50th anniversary of their death. The Memorial lists some 22,000 names of RAF personnel without known graves, who were killed in WW2.

Laurie and Beryl's Golden Wedding in Wetherby and other Yorkshire visits

In June 1995, it being Laurie's Golden Wedding Anniversary, we all met again, this time in Laurie's home town Wetherby, Yorkshire. After the celebrations we took the opportunity of visiting the Yorkshire Air Museum at Elvington, which was a satellite airfield to RAF Pocklington during the war. They were in the process of rebuilding a Halifax Mk 3 Bomber to represent the most famous wartime Halifax, 'Friday 13th', which achieved 128 bombing missions. It was displayed on Horse Guards Parade in London after the war and then broken up!; whereas a Lancaster has a 'place of honour' in the RAF Memorial Flight, and another is displayed in the RAF Museum at Hendon for all time.

There were over 6000 Halifax aircraft built during the war. They were used for over 80,000 bombing and mine laying missions in Europe in Bomber Command, and supported the other armed forces on D Day and in the continuing liberation of Europe. They operated in the Middle-East, and in Coastal Command attacking U-boats in the North Sea and North Atlantic. They also towed airborne troops in gliders to Normandy on D Day, later to Arnhem and, in the final stages of the war, to the crossing of the Rhine.

It beggars belief that any Government would scrap every Halifax built, taking into account its contribution to the success of WW2 and its place in history, but they did!

It was not until 1983 that there was enough historical interest to consider restoring a Halifax. Yorkshire being the 'birthplace' of the aircraft, it was natural that the Yorkshire Air Museum would take on the task. In 1984, they found the fuselage of a Halifax that had crashed in the Hebrides in 1945. It had been bought by a farmer and used as a hen house! This was acquired by the Museum and moved to Yorkshire. Parts were collected from almost all corners of the world. Pieces from at least three Halifax aircraft were used: the wings came from a post-war Hastings and the engines were donated by the French Air force (who flew Halifax bombers from Elvington in 1943). The nose section had to be rebuilt from scratch with the help of British Aerospace, aided by volunteer engineers. When we visited the Museum the aircraft was still only partially assembled. It was some years later before it was completed and is now on display, as 'Friday 13th', in its own hanger. As far as I know, contributions to its construction, both in effort and cost, were all voluntary; no Government money was ever offered.

We also took the opportunity, mainly for the benefit of Laurie and George, of visiting another Museum in Yorkshire. (This site was originally a British POW Camp for German prisoners of war and now converted to a WW2 Museum). One of its exhibits was the replica of the escape tunnel 'Harry' used at Stalag Luft3 for the escape of 76 RAF prisoners (50 of whom were murdered when recaptured). The tunnel was of particular interest, as it displayed the pump system for providing ventilation and the novel trolley mechanism for moving the escapees along its whole length, to the end of the tunnel.

Tom Nelson and Stalag1VB

On 23 December 1995, the Daily Mail had a double page spread featuring life in Stalag1VB, and particularly what happened at Christmas in 1944, when American prisoners of war arrived. Taken prisoner at the Battle of the Bulge, they were in a very sorry state, physically and mentally. The article had been supplied by Tom Nelson (and included a large photograph of him). I did not know Tom Nelson in Stalag1VB as he had been in another barrack block whilst I was there. But I met him in OflagV11B when we were both moved to this camp in February 1945. We shared the same room with two Australian army chaps, until we marched out on 15 April 1945. Apart from a chance meeting, and a fleeting hello in London in 1946, I had not seen him since our liberation at the end of April 1945.

I got in touch with the Daily Mail, and they agreed to forward a letter to him but they would not give me his address. I wrote him a letter and included photocopies of my drawings of OflagV11B, from my wartime logbook. In particular there was a drawing of 'our room', which he and I had signed, along with our two Australian colleagues.

A week or so later I received a phone call (at least two hours long) from an amazed Tom Nelson. He said his memory of OflagV11B was a bit hazy but the signature on the drawing was without doubt his, and we agreed to meet at the RAF Club in Piccadilly and renew our memories.

After Tom was demobbed, he worked for several American airlines in flight operations, and married Pat, an American. He spent time in America and Germany and returned to UK to run a travel agency. It was then that he joined the Stalag1VB ex-POW Group and attended their annual reunions in Edinburgh. As a result he had collected photographs, drawings, poems and various records about 1VB. He brought these along to the RAF Club, and I was able to copy them.

The most important information I learnt from him, was what had happened to the Muhlberg Stalag1VB Camp Site in 1945, after this area of Germany became part of the Russian Zone. At first Stalag1VB ex-kriegies, returning to visit the Camp Site post war, were told by the Russians or members of the GDR (German Democratic Republic), that it had been occupied by German refugees who had nowhere to live. And as there were barracks, electricity and water available here, they had made it their home. These were complete lies:

The Camp had become Special Internment Camp No.1 (with even more barbed wire than Stalag1VB), where Germans who were considered to be a danger to the Soviet State, or for any 'reason', could be interned without any evidence or trial. They were not allowed visitors, parcels, or help of any sort, and were not able to communicate with anybody outside the camp. In a short time it became a filthy, disease-ridden place. This camp remained open until November 1948, during which time about 22,000 'victims of communism' passed through it. Some 6700 of them died of starvation or disease during this period and were buried in mass graves, just northeast of what previously was the RAF compound when I was there. Many others were moved to Soviet camps and never heard of again. All this information was withheld from the general population, and those who did know were threatened with punishment if they disclosed it.

After the closure of the Camp, the Russians removed all the wooden barracks for workers' huts elsewhere. Other structures were sold to local farmers. In the end nothing was left except the concrete foundations of the washhouses, the barracks, and the 40-holer latrines and the static water 'reservoirs'. The Russians then decided to obscure the place by planting birch trees overall. Soon the site became overgrown with trees and brush.

Now that the Russians have left, East and West Germany unified, and the lies and cloak of secrecy exposed, many of the relatives of those who died in the camp have visited the site. They have put crosses in the area of the mass graves and the place has become a shrine, with its own Memorial.

I met Tom several times in the next few years at the RAF Club but later, he suffered from double vision and did not travel on his own. He put me in contact with Stalag1VB ex-POW Group, which by now was much depleted, and with fewer members had moved their venue south, to Peterborough.

Public Records Office at Kew

In August 1999 Barbara and I visited the Public Records Office as I needed some more detail for my RAF memoirs on my operational flights in 102 Squadron. Also, as my first pilot had been killed, I wanted to know the circumstances in which my second pilot Sqdn. Ldr. G. A. Harvey, withdrew from flying on medical grounds, yet was later awarded a DFC. This left our crew 'headless' and meant we were destined to fill in as 'spares' until another pilot was posted to the squadron. Being a spare was not an enviable roll to have in operational flying, especially if you were the navigator!

I found the Records Office a fantastic place for providing information. All operational squadrons had their records held on microfilm and every operation throughout the war was accessible. Other documents such as RAF Station records and medal award citations were the original documents, but surprisingly still available on request. Harvey's DFC citation was in great detail and stated his award was long overdue. He had clocked up 390 operational hours in the Middle East in 1940-41.

Mel Rolfe and 'Flying into Hell'

During the period 1999 – 2000, Laurie was in touch with Mel Rolfe, the author of two successful books about crews' experiences in Bomber Command, and was planning to write a third book.. As a result of this meeting, Laurie, Johnny and I (but Laurie being the prime subject) featured in one of 20 chapters in the book entitled 'Flying into Hell', which was published in 2001. Our chapter focussed on our first operation, mine-laying, during which we were badly hit by flak and had to bring damaged mines back, in an aircraft without radar or hydraulic power. And our last operation, when we were shot down over Berlin by an ace night fighter pilot, with incredible escapes for the four survivors.

In order to advertise his book, Mel Rolfe contacted local newspapers and BBC Radio and gave them the addresses of those mentioned in the chapters. Laurie, Johnny and I, all gave newspaper interviews. Laurie and I also gave 25 minute live radio interviews, Laurie from Leeds and I from Essex. We were able to get copies of the newspaper articles and tapes of the radio broadcasts. Sadly George Griffiths, our pilot, who had the most remarkable escape, had died suddenly in 1998 and thus could not be featured in any interviews.

Planned visit to the Stalag1VB site

In year 2000 the son of a member of Stalag1VB ex-POW Group, Tony Drewitt, offered to organise a visit to Muhlberg and the Stalag 1VB site, which was enthusiastically taken up by the members of the Group (this included Tom Nelson, Johnny Bushell and myself).

In 1944 Tony Drewitt's father (Harry Drewitt) had lost his best friend in 1VB. His friend had been shot dead by a guard, as he leaned over the trip wire to pick some wild strawberries. In recent years Tony and family have gone to

Germany, visited Muhlberg Stalag1VB site and the Berlin 1939-45 War Cemetery. His friend and all those British & Commonwealth POWs who died in Stalag1VB, (previously interred in Neuburxdorf cemetery), are buried there.

On these visits to the Stalag1VB site, the Drewitt family met Mayor Brendel and others who, since 1990 (after the Russians and the GDR had left), have openly publicised the atrocities perpetrated in Muhlberg Special Internment Camp No.1, (previously Stalag1VB). To this end they have formed the Muhlberg Initiative Group, to make the Muhlberg Camp a permanent memorial. They have cleaned up the main road through it, marking out the various areas of the camp, and where the mass graves and memorial of the Special Camp No.1 is situated. Where possible, they have revealed the foundations of the cookhouses, barrack washhouses and latrines etc, which is all that is left of the original camp - see my notes about Stalag 1VB under 'Tom Nelson'.

Mayor Brendel and the Muhlberg Initiative Group welcomed the idea that a party of British ex-POWs and families might wish to visit the site, and said that Muhlberg would like to host to the visit.

Every year ex-kriegies from Poland, France and other countries visit the Neuburxdorf cemetery (about 4000 POWs who died in 1VB were buried here originally). It now has a War Memorial to represent all the nations who had prisoners there. This visit is now combined with the service, held in the Muhlberg Camp, for the German civilian post war victims who died in the Special Internment Camp No.1.

As a result, Tony Drewitt agreed with Mayor Brendel that she would arrange the hotel accommodation in Muhlberg, and host an evening dinner with the Initiative Group. The date would coincide with the remembrance services at Neuburxdorf cemetery and Muhlberg Camp site. Coaches would be available for all planned visits.

Visit to Berlin, Muhlberg, Stalag1VB, related sites and Colditz

Day 1

There were over 90 ex-POWs, family and friends including Tom Nelson, Johnny Bushell, Barbara and myself, who flew to Schonefeld, Berlin on 6 September 2001. (The airfield was only a few miles from where I landed by parachute on 20 January 1944)

We were taken in two coaches (which, with their drivers and guides, were to 'look after us' for the rest of our visit), to Treff Park Hotel, about 6 miles southeast of Brandenburg Gate. We had dinner, and then a coach tour of central Berlin. Although the tour was impromptu, with a helpful but inexperienced guide, it was sufficient to give us a glimpse of the contrasts between 'East' and 'West'. We had a passing view of the main shopping centres which showed that the 'East' looked deprived with poor buildings, displays and lighting etc. We also viewed the famous graffiti on the remains of the Berlin

Wall and, at my request, the new Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church alongside the ruins of the original. The original church was destroyed on 22 November 1943, the second Berlin raid that I was on. It was a somewhat similar Memorial to that of Coventry Cathedral, destroyed in 1940, with the exception that Coventry Cathedral was deliberately destroyed.

Day 2

The following morning we were taken to the 1939 - 45 British War Cemetery, where nearly 2900 RAF aircrew, killed during the Battle of Berlin and other raids in East Germany, are buried. (Only 800 of the 4000 shot down in the Battle of Berlin, survived this operation - John and I are two of these). Many whole crews are buried together, in lines of seven graves, running up to the Stone of Remembrance and on as far as the Cross.

The Cemetery is situated in an area of woodland, which is part of the Grunewald Forest in the district of Charlottenburg, west of Berlin. It was beautifully maintained, as are all British War Graves. Barbara and I together with Johnny Bushell, took some time locating and placing poppies on the graves of our two crew members who are buried here: F/Sgt. K F Stanbridge (Co - Pilot), and P/O. E Church (Wireless Operator), as they were not side-by-side, but on opposite ends of the Cemetery. We found Ken Stanbridge's grave first and I remembered that Ken had passed George Griffith's parachute to him, not long before the aircraft went into a spiral dive. George lived and Ken didn't. Visiting Eric Church's grave had a particular significance for me, as he had helped Laurie Underwood and me, kick out the jammed escape hatch, and he should have followed us out. But the 'plane must have gone into the spiral dive immediately after we had baled out, and he had no chance to bale out - just a few seconds, between life and death. George, Laurie, John and I, were incredibly lucky to survive this event.

Following personal visits to the graves of colleagues, Reverend Michael Whelton (a friend of Tony Drewitt who was acting as the 'Padre' for the party) held a short but emotional service. Then a wreath was placed on the Stone of Remembrance, before we continued our itinerary to the centre of Berlin.

I was glad that Johnny and I had been able to make this visit to the Cemetery after so many years and it closes a chapter in my mind.

In Berlin, we first visited the Brandenburg Gate. This also had some significance for me, for it was 18000 ft. above here that we were attacked by a night fighter and shot down in 1944. Our target had been Hitler's Chancery which was just south of the Gate. Our second visit was to the Reichstag, a short distance away. The Reichstag was not destroyed during WW2. After the re-unification of East and West Germany in October 1990, when Berlin became the Capital again, it was to house the German Parliament. It was renovated by the British Architect Sir Norman Foster, who had been chosen to do the work. His idea was to enlarge the Plenary Hall and add a new modern glass cupola, from which the public could view Parliament in action - its main feature. The task was completed in 1999. Although the cupola could be seen

from outside the building, we didn't have time to go inside to view it, before we continued our journey south to Muhlberg.

We travelled about 75 miles to Muhlberg through mostly open countryside, passing several buildings or barracks that were once occupied by the Russians, and were now in a dilapidated state.

Muhlberg is a small town on the river Elbe, noted for its number of Renaissance buildings (which luckily escaped damage when the Russians advanced through it on their way to Berlin in April 1945). But today the town is also remembered for its close proximity to the Prisoner of War Camp, Stalag1VB which, post-war, became 'Special Internment Camp No.1' where German civilians suffered under Russian Occupation.

On arrival we were met by Mayor Brendel and a number of helpers, who took us to our small hotels or private accommodation dotted around the town. In the evening we were invited to a reception in the Town Hall organised by Mayor Brendel and the Muhlberg Initiative Group.

The reception was addressed by a Representative from Berlin, to all of us from the Stalag1VB ex-POW Group and those connected with the Muhlberg Initiative Group; this being the 11th.Anniversary of their Memorial and Remembrance Meetings.

In the address he explained that Initiative Groups were formed all over Germany (after the Reunification in 1990), by survivors of the Special Internment Camps, to remember and make known the atrocities perpetrated by the Russians during their occupation. To this end the Initiative Groups have preserved sites like Muhlberg, Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen etc, and set up small museums, containing documents and photographs, so that the younger generations (their children and grandchildren) will know about these dark days of their history. To these memories they have added the wartime atrocities of Nazi Germany, in their own country and the occupied countries of Europe. In Muhlberg, they have also included Stalag1VB, as it is said hundreds of thousands of POWs from all over the world, passing through the camp from 1939-1945, suffered from cold, damp, overcrowding, poor inadequate food and lack of hygiene. There were many deaths, many more than those recorded in Neuburxdorf Cemetery, including thousands of Russian POWs who died of typhus in the early years of the war and were buried elsewhere.

After the address, to complete the evening we were hosted to a fantastic buffet dinner, provided by the people of Muhlberg, who really did appreciate our visit to their town.

Day 3

The following day (punctuated by heavy bouts of rain) we visited the small Muhlberg museum which had, apart from their local history, records, drawings and artefacts donated by ex POWs from 1VB. This was followed by a lunch of

soup, goulash, hunks of bread and coffee (warming and very welcome), provided by the Town Fire Service. Luckily it was in a Marquee, erected for the occasion, which sheltered us from the drenching downpours.

In the afternoon we were taken in our coaches to Neuburxdorf and we viewed the railway sidings, where all POW's had 'disembarked' from their cattletrucks, for their march to the sinister Stalag1VB in middle of the flat fields of Saxony. I recall the ground was covered with slushy snow and the camp site looked as if were in the extremities of Siberia!

After this visit we proceeded to the Neuburxdorf Cemetery to attend the annual memorial service for all POWs (Polish, French, British, etc.), who died in 1VB and were buried here. During this service, our exPOW Stalag1VB Group dedicated a plaque, which was laid in the Cemetery as a Memorial to the 60 British POWs, who were buried here and now removed to the Berlin site. The plaque was donated by the Canadian RCAF.

To complete the day's visits we travelled the short distance to the Stalag1VB site. We drove through what was originally the East Gate. The lagerstrasse or main road was still there, but now flanked with birch trees and undergrowth which covered the whole site. As described earlier, the Muhlberg Initiative Group and associates had cleared some parts of the camp to reveal the concrete foundations of washhouses and latrines. They had marked out the areas of the various compounds and the two cookhouses. As my barracks was close to the French cookhouse, Barbara, John, Tom Nelson and I, were able to locate the area of the barracks, but due to the undergrowth we were unable to reach it. But we were able to get to the site of our 40-holer latrine, which still had (though somewhat crumbled) the concrete foundation and septic tank below. It still had four open channels in the concrete base. Over each channel there had been a long wooden rectangular box as a seat with ten holes in it, (so 40 of us could be there at one sitting!)

We were only a short distance away from the mass burial site of the victims of Special Camp No.1, just a few yards to the north-east of us. Here, there is now a large Cross erected as a Memorial to the 6700 German detainees who died of starvation and disease (1945-48). Amongst the undergrowth, near the Cross, there were many smaller crosses put there by relatives and friends over previous years.

We joined the Muhlberg Initiative Group, again in a drenching downpour, with relatives and friends (of several nationalities), for their annual service of remembrance, at the Memorial. Then we made a further inspection of the remnants of the Camp, nearer the West Gate entrance, before returning in our coaches to Muhlberg.

So we said 'goodbye' to the site of Stalag1VB and Special Camp No1. It was now a 'sleeping forest' of birch trees, encompassing (in this terrible place) the memories and miseries of probably hundreds of thousands of 'prisoners' from many nations, who passed through it during the war years and the aftermath.

On return to Muhlberg, we attended yet another Memorial Service in the Church, just for ourselves this time, before we had our evening meal in the Town Hall. This was followed by Lew Parsons (our Chairman) giving a slide presentation of photographs of Stalag1VB to local people, including some older children, who afterwards asked us questions about the camp and WW2.

Day 4

On our 4th day we visited two preserved POW Camp sites, Jacobsthal and Zeithain. Both were originally slave camps for Russian POWs. Later Jacobsthal was a punishment camp for Stalag1VB I believe, (though Zeithain seemed to have more evidence of Russian prisoners). We were told that many tens of thousands of Russians who died of a typhus epidemic in 1941-42, are buried in mass graves beneath the lawns at the entrance to this camp. It now has a Memorial Archway, erected by the Russians during their occupation after the war.

At Zeithain, the Initiative Group had built a wooden hut to illustrate the type of barracks used to house POWs. We had to criticise it, as it did not illustrate the conditions under which prisoners had to live. It had no rickety three-tier bunks, it was not overcrowded or dilapidated, it had no floor of bricks set in earth, and it did not indicate the unhygienic state of living. They also had a small museum which included photographs showing guards and others, mistreating and punishing prisoners.

Our next visit was 30 miles or so southwest, for a tour of Colditz Castle. We had lunch in a restaurant first and then (in the pouring rain again), we made our way up hill to this gaunt formidable place.

Colditz Castle, first mentioned in 1014, built on a hill overlooking the river Mulde, was never used as a stronghold. It was destroyed by fire in 1504, and rebuilt in 1583. Used as a residence and then a hunting lodge, the building was not popular and fell into decay. In the 1800s the State took it over as an alms house and then a workhouse. In 1929 it was used as an asylum, then a prison for anti-fascists and finally an old folks' home until 1939, when it became a POW Camp until 1945.

Colditz was used for high ranking officers and persistent escapees, as it was considered to be, because of its design and location, virtually escape proof. In fact it became an 'academy for escapers'. Over the period of the war, 300 escape attempts were made - only 120 prisoners got out but were recaptured, 31 escapees got home. The camp was a hive of ingenuity, manufacturing German uniforms, forging documents, and finding ways to get out via the main gates. The most audacious plan was to build a glider for two escapees, to be launched from the roof. It was to be catapulted to give it gliding speed to get over the river Mulde. This was to be achieved by dropping a bath tub filled with concrete, 60 feet 'through' the floors of the castle, to pull a cable attached to the glider. The glider was built in an attic, behind a false wall above the Chapel, but the plan was never carried out as the war ended sooner than expected. (Later another glider was built to the plan specifications and tested

successfully!) One of the first British escapers to get home was Airey Neave. Post-war he became an MP and was murdered by the IRA, when his car was blown up by a bomb in the Palace of Westminster car park.

Our visit to Colditz covered only a small part of the building, mainly the rooms adjacent to the spiral staircase. At the top of the building we saw a copy of the famous glider and some of the rooms of the high ranking POWs. A museum covered several floors with photographs, displays of escape clothing, forged keys and documents, 'rubber stamps' for approving passes etc., a sewing machine made of wood and several other artefacts. A 'tunnel' constructed by the French POWs was exposed. It was unusual, in that it was made up of channels located between walls and floors and not as you would think, dug underground. My general impression was that Colditz was a claustrophobic place compared with the three camps I experienced. But they were probably better supplied with food than we were and had better amenities.

The camp was liberated on 16 April 1945 by American forces. They had made rapid advances to the east and did not know that this castle was a POW camp. The Germans were still defending the town and castle approaches. The Volkssturm ('Home Guard'), now integrated with the Wehrmacht by Hitler, were also active in its defence. The American Commander was just about to order the shelling of the Castle, when Allied flags were waved from windows high up in the building! This saved the day and the order was cancelled - another bout of 'friendly fire' was averted, and no doubt casualties as well!

After this visit we returned to Muhlberg, stopping on the way to view Strehla on the river Elbe, where the Americans and the Russians met in April 1945. It was fifteen miles or so south of Torgau, which was later named as the official meeting place, on 4 May 1945. In the evening we returned to the Town Hall for our final meal of the tour.

Day 5

After breakfast we assembled at the Town Hall and said goodbye to the people of Muhlberg. We travelled, accompanied by Mayor Brendel, to Holzdoff Airbase (where her son was stationed) for a presentation by the Stn. Commander.

Holzdooff was a Helicopter Base (a part of the new German Airforce) and was involved in civil duties. The Commander gave a detailed talk about the work of the station. We were given a tour of the hanger responsible for the maintenance of the helicopters and a demonstration by the fire fighting services. This was followed by a snack, before we continued our journey to Schonefeld and back to Stansted.

We arrived back in Stansted on the evening of 10th. September, after a very busy and successful tour. We were to find that we were back 'in the present day' - just a few hours before the atrocities perpetrated by terrorists in New York (nine/eleven!) were to make a 'world change' of momentous proportions.

Tom Nelson and his American wife, both knew New York well, and were very upset about what had happened. Sadly Tom, who had not been completely fit for some time, died suddenly later that year, in November 2001.

Stalag1VB ex- POW Group Reunions in Peterborough

The 1VB reunions were held every year over the weekend nearest to the 23 April, which was the day the camp was liberated by the Russians. Barbara and I have attended these in April, years 2002-4 and we will attend next year, which will be the 60th anniversary of liberation day, Saturday 23 April 2005, and the final reunion for the Group. This will be a memorable occasion. No doubt the day will end with an even more rousing rendition of 'Land of Hope and Glory' which is sung every year. It was sung in 1VB, in place of the National Anthem, which was disallowed.

Medals

After my 80th birthday I decided that, for the sake of my children and grandchildren, I should claim my medals. According to my assessment I was entitled to four. If Bomber Command had been awarded a campaign medal, it would have been five. Air Chief Marshall Sir Arthur Harris said that 'every butcher, baker, and candlestick maker' within 200 miles of the front got a campaign medal ...but not Bomber Command'. The post-war government was embarrassed about the heavy loss of life in the bombing of Dresden, and the aircrews got the blame for it! As a result a campaign medal was not granted, despite their courage and dedication, in high risk bombing operations night after night. Bomber Command aircrews, mostly in their early twenties, carried out orders in a total war situation, and suffered the highest casualties of all the British and Commonwealth forces during the whole of WW2.

In fact my claim for medals finally amounted to three; the fourth medal, the Defence Medal, required three years' non-active service. After deducting eleven and half months training time abroad, I could only muster two years nine months, even adding my Home Guard time before I joined the RAF. The rest of my war service (one year three months) was as a POW, and I was told by a civil servant in the Medal Agency, that the time as a POW didn't count! (In America, there was an additional medal - for being a POW!)

My medals are:-

- 1939 -1945 Star - active service.
- Aircrew Europe Star- aircrew active service Europe 1939 - D Day 1944
- War Medal - general service.

These are still in a small cardboard box with a piece of ribbon for each rolled up in it, sent to me by registered post. There was no covering letter, only a printed list of all the medals available, with their ribbon colours, so that you can match the medal to the ribbon yourself.

Footprints on the Sands of Time (Bomber Command Prisoners of War in Germany 1939 – 45) by Oliver Clutton – Brock

This unique book, published in 2003, covers the German POW Camps. It includes anecdotes and stories of aircrew in the camps, covering capture, escape, liberation, those who were wounded, suffered illness and many that were murdered. It lists all the 10,999 POWs, who did not suffer in any way like those in the 'Holocaust' yet, nevertheless, experienced poor living conditions in German hands. They owe their health and many of them their lives, largely due to the food, clothing etc. supplied to the camps by the International Red Cross.

I add a few comments here about the treatment of POWs featured in this book, which I have not referred to directly in my experiences. It is important to include them here, as they are the additional risks that aircrew were exposed to, when they baled out near or in the target area, in the last two years of the war.

Also I refer to escaping and getting back to England, which only a tiny number succeeded in doing, despite the large number of prisoners who attempted it.

Additional risks to Aircrew in 1943-45

From mid-1943 onwards, after baling out into enemy territory, the treatment received on capture was a matter of luck. Many were humiliated, beaten and murdered. It was estimated, that one-in-twenty captured aircrew never returned home, overall more than 800 RAF were lynched or shot.

Personally my capture was reasonably civilised. Apart from the hint, at a suburban police station, that I was a 'terrorflieger', and experiencing, with a party of other captured RAF, ugly threats from a crowd of civilians at a Berlin main railway station, I was ok. But of course we were under armed guard at the time!

Interrogation at Dulag Luft for me was a relatively mild experience, and the 'heat treatment' I received lasted only a couple of days. However this book states the Kommandant and some of his staff were tried for War Crimes in 1945, and he was given five years' imprisonment for his use of heat treatment (from 1943 onwards), and for withholding urgent medical attention from some wounded aircrew whilst they were being interrogated.

Following the Hamburg raids in August 1943 when the port and town were virtually destroyed, Himmler ordered the police not to interfere with the lynching of aircrew (who had baled out) by the civilian population. In March 1944 after the murder of the 50 escapees from Stalag Luft 3 POW Camp, Hitler ordered that airmen making emergency landings in Germany should not be protected by Wehrmacht from the atrocities perpetrated by the enraged population. In June 1944 Goring, Ribbentrop, and Himmler stated that airmen

strafing trains, non military targets etc, would not be protected as POWs. In 1944 generally, there was a 'drip down' from the Nazi leaders to all the Military and Luftwaffe, not to interfere when civilians had taken action against captured airmen. They were also encouraged to take the lives of the hated 'terrorflieger'. After the Dresden bombing in February 1945, Goebbels stated that the 1929 Geneva Convention wasn't worth the paper it was written on. He hinted to the neutral Swedish press, that more heavy raids could result in all RAF and American airmen POWs, now in custody, being summarily executed! Hitler subsequently dropped the plan.

Churchill, early in 1945, was fearful of reprisals against all POWs in Germany. He suggested to Roosevelt and Stalin that a warning to Germany, - not to maltreat prisoners - should be made by the Allies. But it was not until 23 April 1945, (due to the prevarication of Stalin,) that warning leaflets were dropped over Germany. By that time the war was almost over.

The worst excesses of murder happened during the last 12 months of the war and this book describes a number of them. The following example relates to what happened to a flight sergeant rear gunner from my squadron (102). On 24 December 1944, a Halifax on a raid to Mulheim, was shot down near Neuss. All seven crew baled out, but only F/Sgt J G Williams was known to be captured at the time. He was taken by car, by the police, and handed over to Kreisleiter Johannes Esser (Nazi Party Official) who took him to a room where he was reproached and beaten for bombing the town. He was then shot in the head and his body taken to a cellar, where it was wrapped in paper and sacking and tied with string. Esser and another, then took the body by car and threw it into a stream running into the Rhine.

On 28 September 1946, Esser was sentenced to death by a Military Court and hanged in Hameln prison, on 23 January 1947.

It is possible that the pilot and mid-upper gunner were also murdered on the same day. No details are known, but a letter from the MOD, as late as 1982, to their next of kin, suggests that a war crime was committed against them and four Germans were tried for the killings, in 1948. Looking up 102 Squadron records, I find that three of the crew were killed (murdered?) and the remaining four survived as POWs. This is an example of the 'hairs breadth', between life and death, when members of the same crew were captured by different Germans, probably only a few hundred yards apart.

Escaping - 1939 to 45

Despite the large number of Bomber Command POWs, there were only 34 successful escapes from prison camps, of aircrew, during 1939 - 45. Most of these were by aircrew, exchanging their identities with working parties who worked and lived outside the main prison camps. There were eleven (over the war period) who made their escape from Stalag V111B by this means. Not all got back to England in good time; some former Polish aircrew (now in RAF) stayed with the Polish Resistance until the war ended! Others stayed with Underground Forces until liberated by the Allies.

There were two escapes, both from Stalag Luft 3 that were made via tunnels. The most famous, the 'Great Escape': 76 POWS (out of 200 planned) managed to get out before the tunnel was discovered. Unfortunately 73 were recaptured and Hitler ordered the murder of 50 of them, as a reprisal. Only three, two Norwegians and one Dutchman, all in the RAF, managed to get back to England.

The other, earlier escape, planned at the beginning of summer 1943, 'The Wooden Horse', was probably the most ingenious and most successful of them all. Everyday a wooden vaulting horse was carried out to the same spot, only 30 metres from the wire. While other prisoners exercised, Eric Williams, Michael Codner and Oliver Philpot, would dig from a trap door beneath it. After 114 days of work, the three men finally escaped on 29 October 1943. All three, Oliver Philpot separately, caught a train from the local station, Sagan. Philpot posing as a Norwegian reached Danzig, slipped aboard a ship and arrived in Sweden on 3 November and was taken by police to the British Legation in Stockholm the next day. The other two got to Stettin, then by ship to Copenhagen, and finally to Sweden and the British Legation in Stockholm on 13 November. After being delayed by a spell of bad weather, they were flown home at the end of December.

I met Oliver Philpot at the end of the 1950s, when he was Chairman of Truefoods (a Baby Foods Company), then owned by Unilever. I was in Organisation Division and doing an assignment there. Shortly afterwards he was made the Head Office Manager of Unilever House.

Memories of my RAF service

1. These are contained in the following documents, computer files and on floppy disc :-

BOMBER - deals with my time in the RAF until I was shot down.
NOEL COWARD - a poem paying tribute to Bomber Command
POW DAYS - covering my prisoner of war days to the end of the war
POW Days Postscript - covering events post war until 2004

2. There are also other records and papers :-

- Pilots Log Book and Observers/Navigators Log Book.
- A wartime log written as a POW, which also contains photos and sketches (unfortunately not completed).
- Two binders
 - Red - containing telegrams and letters from relatives and friends, and memorabilia, after I was shot down and became a POW.
 - Blue - containing details of my bombing raids and when I was shot down over Berlin, with drawings and photographs.

- All my POW letters to my parents.
 - There are short one-page descriptions of the following events
 - 'RAF arrive with pyjamas'
 - 'Friendly Fire'
 - 'Our Incredible Escape'
 - The following events covered in my documents have supporting records
 - 50th anniversary of our survival, celebrated at the Post House, Peterborough: there are photographs, a 3 minute video tape broadcast over the BBC 'Look East' network; a 3 minute radio tape of me and George Griffiths (Pilot) broadcast several times over BBC Cambridge Radio; Laurie Underwood also produced a video tape of the whole event.
 - Attending Runneymede Memorial Service (ACA) to pay our respects to the two of our crew who have no known graves - photographs and programme of the service.
 - Laurie Underwood's golden wedding anniversary, visit to the Yorkshire Air Museum to see the Halifax Bomber being rebuilt - photographs
 - Tom Nelson meetings - his Daily Mail newspaper article re Christmas at Stalag1VB, photographs, drawings, poems of Stalag1VB, also photographs obtained from the Stalag1VB website
 - Visit to Kew Public Records Office - extracts from 102 Squadron micro film operational records, original records of Pocklington Station and S/Ldr Harvey's DFC citation.
 - Visit to Germany covering Berlin, Muhlberg, Stalag 1Vb site etc.- photos and data (including descriptions of Stalag 1VB post war from the German Muhlberg Initiative Group). There is also a map of the area highlighting places connected to our visit and when I was shot down
 - Two local newspaper articles and two 25 minute radio tapes (also recorded on a CD), of live interviews of me at BBC Radio Essex and Laurie Underwood via a telephone link to BBC Radio Leeds, used to advertise the book 'Flying into Hell'.
- 3 A number of books about Bomber Command, the Berlin Raids, a book and two journals about 102 Squadron, and two books about RAF POWs were used in making my own records

4 Sundry items that support my records :-

- Banner of all Bomber Command Squadrons
- Banner of all Halifax Bomber Squadrons
- My Commission Parchment
- Framed picture and separate copies (one black & white and one coloured picture) of Stalag 1VB layout.
- Photo album of my training days in USA and Canada
- Photo of a Halifax 3 Bomber and a large model, made by my son-in-law, David Hughes

March 2005