

**ROBERT CHARLES STEPHENSON HANCOCK**

**HIS WORLD WAR 2 LIFE AND EXPERIENCES AS SEEN THROUGH HIS  
HANDWRITING SAMPLE presented at the BIG meeting, 20<sup>th</sup> February 2010**

**TOLD BY HIS DAUGHTER, PAT JACKSON (nee HANCOCK)**



77 Squadron  
RAF Cranwell  
1913-1945

**Robert Charles Stephenson HANCOCK**  
RAF, 77 Squadron  
(13 October 1913 - 1 May 1965)

His WW2 life and times,  
as seen through his handwriting samples:

- The War (1939)
- As a Prisoner of War (1944 - 45)
- Post War (1946)

Dad was now a Sergeant and a qualified fitter.

This journey has taken me to:

- look more closely at his handwriting samples and photographs from the family archives;
- glean documents from the National Archives at Kew;
- read books written by those who went through similar experiences;
- trawl the internet for information and photographs.

As a result, I've met and corresponded with, via the internet, children and grandchildren of other RAF servicemen, together with historians, researchers and authors. All have generously shared their documents and given me advice and further insights. I visited Poland just four weeks ago and will next be visiting Holland, both places my father would have known well.

Above all, I've been privileged to meet several of his courageous comrades, members of the RAF's ex-PoW Association, now in their late eighties and early nineties, who were there with him and experienced similar deprivations as prisoners of war.



RAF 77 Squadron  
RAF Cranwell  
1913-1945

To set the scene, my Dad was the first-born only son, with two younger sisters. His father sustained a war injury in exceptional circumstances in WW1, for which he received the Russian equivalent of our George or Victoria Cross - the Order of St Michael - the highest order for bravery under fire. But his right arm was rendered useless as a result and so he was invalided out of the Army, with a lump sum and a small pension. Hence my Dad was brought up as a young boy in a household with a disabled, but highly decorated, war veteran for a father, who had previously been a proud regular in the 11th Hussars.

Dad's father set up a taxi business with his lump sum, but it failed and so he was out of work in the twenties and thirties, when Dad

was a young school boy. His mother was a strong and resourceful woman, and so she took in lodgers to make ends meet.

My father is on the right, aged about ten or eleven, looking suitably serious, with his disabled father on the left and grandfather Henry Hancock in the centre. Dad's family background was perhaps poor, but they were undoubtedly close, loving and happy. Education and training was valued and Dad was an assiduous and dutiful scholar.

When he was 16 years old, Dad left home to join the RAF on an apprentice scheme instigated by Lord Trenchard. The young boys were famously known as 'Trenchard's Brats'. He enrolled in the Electrical and Wireless School (21st entry) at RAF Cranwell in 1930.

After he graduated in 1933, when he was 20 years old, he was posted as a Radar Operator with the RAF, in the Mandate of Palestine (now Israel) for the next five years.



September 1939  
Dad has just been  
out and we had spent  
about 25 and Mum  
hadn't yet married  
away from their  
family in Wiltshire  
Cirencester, Wiltshire

Here is one of Dad's letters home from Cranwell, written on RAF headed notepaper, on the eve of his 17th birthday, 14 October 1930.

The tense and narrow writing, with a strong right slant and extended upper and lower zones, show his serious nature and wish to stay in control in order to do things properly. In spite of the extended upper and lower zones, the writing has good dovetailing and shows how meticulous he was, even at that young age. The narrow right margin indicates that he is keen to get out in the world and take his life forward into new experiences and challenges. EQ.\*

Aged 25, he was then posted from Palestine to Yorkshire in 1939. Hitler had risen to power in Europe and the Second World War of the 20th century was declared later that year, following Germany's aggressive invasion of Poland.

Yorkshire had its charms for Dad and he soon met and married my mother, a solicitor's secretary and a local farmer's daughter, who taught him to dance.

Dad was now a Sergeant and a qualified Observer Navigator, a key aircrew member. In the years following his marriage, he was engaged on regular flying operations over Europe, dropping propaganda leaflets and also engaged on strategic bombing raids to various key German military installations.

I was born two years later in 1941, the eldest of three children, on my grandparents' Yorkshire farm.

My father was based at RAF Leeming in North Yorkshire and I was a thriving young baby. Here is a happy letter he wrote home to his father at that time:

My dear Dad,  
Many thanks for your kind gift of cigarettes and pipe. I only got back from base the day before yesterday and intended to write last night but I had a splitting headache and just could not write at all. You must have been well organised to have got so many cigarettes and I appreciate the trouble you must have gone to in order to get them. Thank you also for the grand letter. You seem to have set down on paper my exact feelings with regard to the war and that is good. It is hard to associate a brilliant outlook and longing with a only love and trust that I can finish my 30 trips and get back to my home and with God's help I will. I am sorry that we did not come down to see you this time, but

This letter was written to his father, 1941/42 when he was aged about 28

The script has become more mature and is more spaced out. He was taking control of his life and what he wanted to do. The tension still evident, and the starting strokes show that he was always careful and mindful of lessons learned, so he took good care to be organised before he took action. The right slant is consistent – he did what was correct and was mindful of standards to be maintained. His sense of responsibility is clear also.

Just seven months after I was born, on a freezing night of 27 February 1942 at 10.58pm, Dad's Armstrong Whitely bomber ZX9280 KN-K with its crew of five was shot down by an agile two-man German nightfighter over Friesland, north Holland. It was then returning home to England after a bombing raid on Wilhelmshaven port, on the north German coast.

On the occasion of my 17th Birthday  
To my dear Dad and Mother  
I want to thank you both for all the affection and care you have given me. I am perhaps like you, because I should only be allowed to write letters. But thank you, Mom and Dad, and God bless you and keep you all in the best. Your grateful and loving son  
Dad's son



September 1939:  
War has just broken out and so Dad, aged almost 26, and Mum hastily get married away from their families, in Western Zoyland, Somerset

The crippled bomber, out of control, having lost a vital part of its port wing, plunged down into a vertical dive at 11,000 feet.

The aircrew in the cockpit – the pilot, co-pilot, radio operator and observer navigator, my Dad – were all standing on the aircraft's instrument panel, unable even to move to the escape hatches because the violent g-force immobilised them. Certain death awaited them.

The rear gunner (see his guns at an angle by the tail fin) was well away from those at the front of the Whitley's coffin-like fuselage. He too may have been immobilised. Or he may have been wounded, or even worse.



The light and efficient German night-fighters usually came in for attack from the rear, first picking off the rear gunner who may otherwise get them first. The life expectancy of rear gunners was very short, and they knew it.

In its plummeting descent, Dad was somehow thrown out of the top escape hatch. His parachute fortuitously opened in time and he saw his comrades lost in the debris of the flaming explosion below him as he slowly descended to the frozen snows of Driesum, north Holland, in the light of the flames thrown up from the crash, to be seen by friend and foe alike.

He landed badly and suffered injuries to his ribs and face and was now far away from his family and home comforts. He didn't know what lay ahead for him as he floated down – death, escape or capture – he was too busy trying not to land directly on top of the flaming Whitley and listening out for the cries for help from his comrades – but there were none.

This is how he became a member of the exclusive Caterpillar Club – the humble caterpillar spinning the silk that saved his life.

Here is an artist's impression taken from Dad's Prisoner of War log book of what happened on the night of 27/28 February 1942, entitled 'THE START OF IT ALL'.

I recognise the handwriting as his, as I'm sure you will too from the samples to come. More samples of Dad's handwriting will be taken from his log book later in this story.

#### Something about POW log books before we continue the story

These little 100+ page log books were provided to prisoners of war by the Red Cross and YMCA. They were used as diaries, autograph books, photograph albums and scrap books for bits and bobs such as wryly observed cartoons – and drawings such as this.

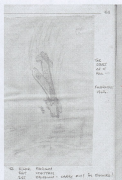
And I'm quite positive they must have provided therapeutic morale boosters too. In compiling them, and in later re-reading their musings and re-looking at their photographs of family time and again, they were able to leave the confines of the prison in their mind's eye and so pass away the endless hours of boredom.

I'm not sure whether or not Dad drew this picture, as there was a healthy culture in the prison camps whereby those with artistic talents were in demand for their skills for log book entries, often in exchange for cigarettes, which were the common bartering tender in the absence of currency.

Artistic comrades would do drawings to order, or else replicate the same drawing as their 'party piece' and so earn their cigarettes – either to smoke themselves or to barter for food or other luxuries – even, perhaps, bribe a guard for vital electrical or radio equipment. Cigarettes ruled.

As the picture has been pasted in, perhaps it was drawn by someone other than my father. That said, it's not signed, so perhaps my father drew it after all?

Compared with the previous photograph of the Whitley, this drawing is surprisingly accurate, considering it would probably have been drawn from memory or else description. You can see the small figure representing Dad, involuntarily tossed out from the top escape hatch when the aircraft turned over at the last minute in its high-velocity descent.



27 February, 1942,  
10.58pm

The Whitley plunges  
to earth, throwing  
Dad out from the top  
escape hatch as it  
rolls over

The annotations in capitals are definitely Dad's handwriting, where he lists the four crew members who lost their lives, recording the last poignant words of the brave co-pilot, Sergeant Sandlin, 'Carry on! I'm jammed', at the foot of the page.

I found this drawing extraordinarily moving when I first saw it. It was the first clue I had as to what had happened and my thoughts whirled. The thought of those young lives lost – the certain knowledge they were going to die, as did my father, as they plummeted down at increasing speed. The horror of Sgt Sandlin's last, generous and courageous words.

But my father survived, against these odds. I had no idea as to what happened next, other than the fact he was sheltered by the local Dutch population for a few days and then was captured and imprisoned. But my recent internet research has supplied the answers.

#### So what DID happen next?

First, I discovered this astounding photograph on the internet when I simply Googled the name of the German pilot, Heinz Vinke, who shot his aircraft down.

It was probably taken the day following the crash, 28 February 1942, as you can see what remains of the burnt-out Whitley fuselage in the background on the frozen Dutch field.

On the left is the engaging young German pilot, Heinz Vinke, proudly sitting on the Whitley's starboard wing, practically all that was left intact. He was 20 years old and had just killed four young men in the name of defending his country.

Soon to be decorated with the Iron Cross with Oak Leaves, one of the highest decorations that the Luftwaffe awarded, Heinz himself was killed in action three years later, almost to the day, on 26 February 1945, after 54 night-time 'victories'.

The radio telegrapher, Karl Schrodel, sitting on the right, was killed in action just over a year later in 1943. Like Dad, they were young men doing their duty, serving their country as they saw it and obeying orders.

It's reassuring to know that the four aircrew who lost their lives were given a military funeral in the nearby Dantumadeel Protestant Churchyard nearby, with a German priest officiating, just three days after the crash, on 3 March.

But it was to be at least another **three weeks** before their loved ones at home were informed of this sad news.

Likewise my mother was in limbo for several weeks, until it was announced by the German propagandist broadcaster, 'Lord Haw Haw', that he was alive and captured as a prisoner of war.

Local Dutch farmers, who had been alerted by the noise of the crash and who had seen his descent in the reflection of the flames, found him and took him in that night, dazed, shocked, injured with painful broken ribs.

In giving him shelter, his kind protectors were risking their lives. There was a real threat of secret informers, along with swift reprisals by the harsh German occupiers. The Germans were already out looking for him – his slow parachute descent had been seen by many – friends and foes alike.



Dantumadeel Protestant Church:  
The final resting place of the Armstrong Whitley 2929 crew, brought down on the night of 27 February 1942:

Sgt Loh Leslie Hugh William Parker, DFC, aged 30 (pilot)  
Sergeant Wilfred Whittam, aged 26 (wireless operator and air gunner)  
Sergeant Douglas John Sandlin, aged 25 (second pilot)  
Sergeant Edmund Sidney Ayton, aged 25 (rear air gunner)

*How young men who lost their lives, do not cry for them  
They are not really gone, you know:  
It's just a body which they left behind.  
They will only be gone forever when we no longer remember*

(from a text by Brian Viner)



He remained with his kind Dutch protectors for two nights, under their cover. But too many people knew about him already – news had travelled fast in the community and he was the object of great curiosity.

When a notice was put out by the Germans on 3 March to the effect that a reward of 100 guilders was on offer to anyone who could give information leading to the apprehension of the missing crew member, things were getting hot.

The Germans meant business and took into custody three suspects for harsh questioning. However, the resourceful Dutchmen matched their stories when the Germans made the mistake of putting them all into the same cell, and so they were able to vigorously protest their innocence, despite threats of violence.

It still left open as to the whereabouts of the valuable parachute ... being first buried in a snowdrift at one point and then later passed around the families, as the silk made highly desirable blouses and underwear.

The parachute even had its very own moment of glory, in that a poster was displayed warning that anyone who was in possession of any part of the crashed plane must, in his own interests – as well as the interests of the population – hand it over to the County Police. **Especially those in possession of the parachute**, who were severely warned of the consequences of not handing it over.

I don't yet know whether or not it was eventually handed over to the German authorities, but as I'm planning to go to this area of Holland later this year I'll be on the look-out for a preponderance of silk blouses and underwear being worn by the locals.

Dad would have realised that he could no longer remain, when posing such a threat to his kind and brave hosts, who were risking their lives in protecting him.

So he set out alone that same fatal day as the funeral, 3 March – for who knows where – still no doubt in a state of shock, still injured with his sore ribs. He was last seen walking in a southerly direction along the frozen Zwemmer canal, towards his fairly certain capture by the German occupiers.

Fortunately for the three brave Dutchmen in German custody, Dad's swift capture provided a reason for their immediate release.

Dad was held for more than three years as a prisoner of war in overcrowded camps in Poland (Sagan, 1942-1943), in present-day Lithuania on the east Baltic (Heydekrug, 1943-44) and finally near Hanover, Germany (Fallingb., 1944-45), for roughly a year in each camp.

His final camp, Fallingb., was liberated by the British Army on 16 April 1945 and he returned to England on 21 April after a short stay in hospital, sick and having lost considerable weight. I'm told he weighed under 7 stone, with legs as thin as my wrists (show). Aged almost four, I was introduced to a new man in my life – my father!

I came into possession of Dad's *PoW* log book from my step-sister just a few years ago. This encouraged me to look further and to learn about the experiences about which he hardly spoke – just as did so many of those who returned home to the austere post war life and rationing of dear old 'Blighty'. They pulled themselves together and got on with it, hardly missing a beat.

So this little book has led me to know him better and to possibly know myself and even my family a little bit more. I've also learnt more about the historical events of WW2 – which from today's comfortable perspective, 65 years later, are now hardly believable.

I've learnt inspirational stories of amazing courage – as well as incredible stories of man's terrible inhumanity to man.

In my quest, less than four weeks ago, I was privileged to visit one of Dad's three main prison camps – Stalag Luft III – in Silesia, south west Poland – the camp from which there was the famous Wooden Horse escape in 1942, when Dad was there, as well as the Great Escape in 1944, after he had already been transported to the Heydekrug Stalag Luft VI camp in east Prussia (now Lithuania), in the north east, along with two thousand other NCOs.

Sagan was also the camp from where the infamous Long March took place, when the prisoners, in their sick and starving states, were force-marched for 60 miles under armed guard in January 1945 out of the camp to Spremberg railway station, with minimal provisions of cold-weather clothing, and with food and shelter foraged along the way.

This was my first disturbing view of Sagan, which sent shivers down my spine as this would have been a very familiar sight to my father.

This is what was known as a 'goon box' to the 'kriegies', as the prisoners of war called themselves ('krieg' being German for 'war', as in 'Blitzkrieg').



'Kriegie' sounds quite sweet, but existence as a kriegie was far from sweet and many lost their lives during their incarceration as a result of illness, starvation, ill-treatment, physical disease and mental illness.

'Goon' was the common kriegie parlance for anything German – hence 'Goons up' meant 'watch out, guard approaching' and a 'goon box' was the guard tower for the armed guards, posted at regular intervals around the camp perimeter fence.

Armed guards with searchlights were stationed 24 hours a day in each guard tower, with all prisoners warned that anyone stepping over the warning fence, into the 'no-man's land' area between it and the main perimeter fence, would be shot on sight (as did happen on more than one occasion).

I experienced first hand the bleakness and gripingly cold conditions of minus 25 degrees with frozen snow and rock-hard lethal ice on the ground.

The prisoners' starvation rations, their over-crowding (with double or even triple bunk beds, with just a 12" gap between), the ever-present guards with their savage dogs, the twice daily Appels (roll calls) on the parade ground, exposed to the elements, sometimes taking hours if the Germans were in a bad mood or couldn't get their sums right, even the boredom and frustration at no longer being able to defend their country, let alone see their loved ones, would have given them challenges that we will never experience.

'For you, ze war is over' – yes, the Germans really DID say that – was far from good news. Their future was uncertain – they had no idea whether or not they would ever see home and their loved-ones again. They were in a complete vacuum, a recognised psychological torture in itself.

Disproportionately harsh punishments were dished out for the least transgression. Smoking, chatting or reading on Appel could result in solitary confinement for one or two weeks in the 'cooler' on a sparse diet consisting of bread and water.

You can see that this cartoon was drawn in my Dad's log book by R L Betts in August 1944, which would have been a warm time of year in Lithuania, shortly before a horrendous train journey in a cattle truck to his last main camp, Failingbostel, in Germany.

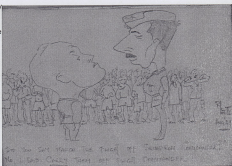
This is but one tiresome incident from one of the Appels, where the prisoners were kept out longer than normal in the hot sun. Note the body languages! That of the prisoners, tired, ill-dressed and fed up, and that displayed by Dad, one of the senior NCOs and Administrators by now, conscious of his rank and responsibilities, chest out, buttons and shoes polished. I think you will see these attributes appear in his handwriting samples to come.

Contrast this scene with what was to come at Failingbostel at the end of 1944, when things were going from bad to worse for the kriegies.

Here is a picture of the meagre Ablutions facilities provided, in the open air and in the mud, for 1,000 men at Failingbostel, the prison camp from which Dad was finally liberated in April 1945. One prisoner was shot without warning one day, going to Ablutions at 6.25am, perhaps to beat the queue, but fatally he was five minutes too early.

In 1945 Germany could no longer sustain the battering from the Allies on all their fronts. The prisoners therefore received a battering by default, as the lowest of German priorities. The RAF prisoners were hated by one and all, being regarded as the 'terror flyers' who had bombed German civilian targets in cities such as Dresden – and who allegedly roasted babies on their bayonets, according to the propaganda. This resulted in yet more abuse and attack whenever the opportunity presented.

When viewing samples of my father's handwriting, these mental, emotional and physical deprivations are part of what he was experiencing at the time. Add to which were the ever-present lice, which could (and did) lead to diseases such as typhus. Hence they had to be subjected to 'delousing' showers on a regular basis.



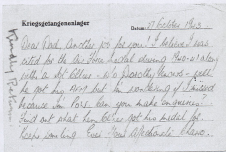
Dad's letters to my mother from PoW camp have sadly disappeared, and so I have just one letter, kept by his parents.

This letter is written in pencil to his parents, when he would have been at Sagan. Pencil was the order of the day for most kriegies but those in administration were allowed fountain pens, as was my father next year at Heydekrug camp.

Ink, pens and artists materials could be obtained, but there was a caution because they could be (and were) assiduously used for forging documents. And there were some excellent forgers in the camps. Here is but one example, a forged German Identity Card – unbelievably hand-drawn!

This is still recognisably the same script, but the tension that he must have felt has caused the writing to draw in. The letters are very tight and the extensions are consequently dominating the text. His individuality, while clearly there, was kept in check and he did what he had to do and showed little emotion in the process.

Even under these conditions, the writing is well laid out and the zones are not tangling. He was always aware of his responsibility to do his best and take what came without making a fuss. EQ



The photograph was taken with a camera that had been smuggled in by a bribed German guard.

Letters and photographs from home (when passed by the German censor) took on disproportionate importance and of course some of the letters were less than welcome when girlfriends finally wrote after a long silence to tell that they had met some-one else – sometimes a Yank with access to nylons and other charms on offer – 'over paid, over sexed and over here' was the cry from the Brits who found it impossible to compete.

Sometimes it was a wife who wrote this kind of letter ... causing devastation to a kriegie who was already in despair.



#### Back to Dad's PoW log book

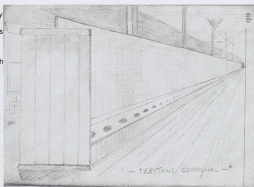
We have already seen two drawings from Dad's PoW log book, of his escape from the Whitley and the Appel.

Here are two more, certainly drawn by him, illustrating conditions in the camps in this case. My father was more used to the precision of electronic circuits and radar technology – and so his drawings were carefully observed and executed, as seen.

Here is his impression of the 30-seater latrines, which were constructed over an open cesspit which was emptied on a weekly basis by a man with a horse and cart, otherwise known as the 'honey wagon'. Summer smells and fly infestations provided additional challenges.

'Everything communal' provided yet another opportunity to exchange gossip and pleasantries and to perhaps remind each other that 'it will all be over by Christmas'.

In the overcrowded huts, privacy was at a price – so that even a spell in solitary in the cooler had its charms. You can imagine the noise levels, the air heavy with cigarette smoke and smells, of a hut crammed with 72 men living cheek by jowl.





Here is his illustration of Dad's bunk bed, conveniently near the heater, a privilege as he was a senior NCO Administrator, a Warrant Officer, now with his own fountain pen. His corner is neatly organised and neatly drawn. I feel his bunk was the lower one.

And here is his log book in scrap book mode, with memorabilia from his everyday existence, the palliasso straw mattress, a label from a parcels sent from home and a Spam tin opener. Opposite is a greeting from the readers of the Hull Daily Mail, the local Yorkshire newspaper, reminding him he was not forgotten.



the ages of 29 to 32. He was right handed by the way.

As Dad's autograph in another kriegies' log book, that of Pilot Officer Wally Layne, I found this little gem on the internet last year, posted by his son David.

His writing is less tense than the previous sample and he's able to use ink which apparently as the guy in charge was an extra privilege. It helps the script to be smoother, but there is still the discipline that is surely what got him through his war without allowing his emotions to interfere. Note the good dovetailing that comes through as his focus stays objective. EQ

#### The final days of 1945

The sample in Wally's log book was written when in Heydekrug, in happier times.

This next sample is dated February 1945, when Dad would have been 31 years old, weary and undemourished after three long years of imprisonment.

He would have been in Fallingbomel, in Germany, at this time, when conditions for the kriegies were getting tougher with each day. The end of the war is approaching. Heavy nightly bombing raids were beginning to take their toll and the Allies were advancing by day and night by sea, land and air, from all directions. The gloves were off! That said, in kriegie life, the gloves were firmly on, as the weather was bitterly cold, in one of the coldest winters in Europe in living memory with temperatures down to minus 20 degrees.



And here it is in photograph album mode – me, growing up with my Mum in the farm orchard!

Of course Dad's entries when in diary mode are central to our interest today and so now I've partly set the scene, let's look at his handwriting as a kriegie, at

Good for thought  
 thing I found this little  
 book on my desk in Stately 35? and I have  
 come to the probably erroneous conclusion that  
 you wish us to do something in it, Wally.  
 I hope one day to meet you again, but, in  
 case I don't – it you remember –  
 "a journey from Heydekrug to St. Ignace?"  
 "a slightly fragment when we came back?"  
 "listing the best from the St. Ignace?"  
 "my practice on the guitar?"  
 "the day after the last was discovered?"  
 "the night of the St. Ignace?"  
 "the St. Ignace?"  
 "the railway coach in a German station?"  
 "the second team's centre-half?"  
 "the jumps and of the feeling at Heydekrug?"  
 "the navigation of Heydekrug?"  
 It would have gone on for hours, but  
 the phone will be enough – all the best –  
 from Kethanach.  
 Goodbye then.  
 Accomplished E. Yorks.

The amazing thing is that he remained strong and resilient in spite of all the difficulties through cold and hunger and this personality style is obviously what enabled him to come through his war and apparently adjust to civilian life. However, as a man who didn't share his feelings, there must have been a lot kept inside that stopped him and many other men who survived the war talking about their experiences. His daughter said that he told them very little about his life at war. EQ

Life Period 10.2. Feb. 1945.

"Today, all day, every dragging minute  
hasn't smoked at all. The first  
has without me smoking at all for  
any years. All day I've been telling  
I have finished smoking for good -  
in kidding myself. Last night I  
smoked for so in England perhaps I  
had with cigarettes and by at least  
we 100% like smokers if not a  
shot. So far I've not been assailed  
by the fangs of craving - they say  
to the days are the worst and  
OK - I'll write up my notes  
in my struggle. At the moment  
we hardly eat and feel I can get  
nothing cigarettes, - with me!  
22. Well, I didn't stop smoking  
I did

Defeat is in the air, but there was still a long way to go. The German infrastructure is falling apart at the seams and the civilian population is almost as short of food, as were the Krieges on their starvation diets. Red Cross parcels were the vital lifeline.

A note of macabre humour for the log book, sad and poignant.

The men were starving, food was scarce and desperate measures were sometimes taken.

His sense of humour came through when he had a reason to let it and automatically the writing has a softer appearance. All through the writing samples it will have been clear that the middle zone of his script varies considerably in height, but his upper and lower zones are firm. It must have become a habit (and it would have been consistent with his personality) that he operated through his sense of purpose and subsequent action, rather than through his feelings. EQ

In 1945 the Krieges were regarded as potentially useful hostages by the now-desperate Nazi regime, who finally scented defeat. An infamous plan was already under consideration - to march out the prisoners under armed guard to the north German coast, to be loaded on to ships - with the threat that they would be scuppered, should negotiations fail.

can't get any more and so now I just do  
not smoke. I miss them badly, but as the  
days go by the loss does not assume such  
terrible importance - as a matter of fact, I'm  
beginning to forget about cigarettes - thank  
goodness. If I ever arrive I don't doubt but  
what I shall start the habit all over again  
my will under these conditions of food shortage  
is not very strong. I lack so many of the  
small things of life that it is a treat to give  
myself a few things that I realize should not  
be done. For instance, I get about five  
teaspoonful of black leather and 50g of  
margarine each week. On the day that these  
two commodities are issued I cut my 1/2 of a  
loaf of bread into four slices, put margarine  
thickly on each and a generous dollop of  
leather, eat them slowly to enjoy them and then  
when they are finished "at least with a  
little - that is eat what I can. In a

Notice offering in "Bunent Affairs" stating 35  
prisoners, January - 28 March 1945.

"Personal" R. Hayfield and D. Thomas of  
Bosworth 12/4 would like it known that on  
Saturday evening March 24, their dog  
belkie was killed and eaten by some person  
unknown. They would like to thank all the  
who had so kindly helped to feed her  
during the last few weeks; no doubt the  
persons who ate her would like to add  
their thanks."

The prisoners were fortunately unaware of this plan, but in the chaos of April 1945 many were still marched northwards at gunpoint, including my Dad, who spent several days and nights in open barns, scrounging on scraps of food. Then they were inexplicably marched back again to Fallingboetel, which was by then in a state of chaos with thousands of prisoners of all nationalities now occupying added to which, there was an infamous incident where British Typhoon fighters attacked a straggling column of kriegies, assuming they were the enemy. 'Friendly fire' is the euphemism used today. So even more were killed, but this time by their own side, just weeks away from the end of the war.

April 6. The Germans have decided to try and move us. We are to march - to where? - no one knows but they say that the R.A.F. and Americans are to go first. We hastily grab our all available food and cigarettes - a very meagre supply. I make up a pack of two blankets and coats and coats and depart into hiding by theory is that the longer I delay the greater becomes my chance of being liberated by our own armies whose progress I've been following with great hope in the last few days. The local goons are very apathetic - many of them hoping to be taken.

This example is one of the first where I can detect a sign of urgency, laced with panic, in his words that they were going to go into the unknown. Still the tangling, but space at a premium.

It is clear from this varied pressure and again tightly placed words, that things are not going well and he's being very self contained. It is just possible to note the long starting strokes to his words. These have been in all the writing, but there seem to be more of them in this sample. He certainly had plenty of reason to feel both anxious and resentful about what had happened to him over the years. EQ.

Written in a state of shock of realisation that the war was over - the day he had waited for three long years had finally come. But he carries on peeling potatoes.

What would his family at home be like? It could be that freedom has its own terrors after having come to terms that freedom was no longer an option over such a long period of time.

It is important to realise that men would have become institutionalised by the lifestyle and would find it difficult to adapt to family life. He would have had difficulty in adjusting to freedom and the unexpected. EQ

In Dad's case he had to be carted back again on Doctor's orders, being no longer able to walk, let alone march. My Dad was lucky. For some, this march was the final straw - they could no longer cope, they lost hope and so never returned.

In exactly the same way that he went on peeling the potatoes on 16 April 1945, he returned his career in the Air Force, his family and loved ones and so I finally got to know my father. And so my two brothers were born in 1946 and 1947 respectively ... just as he had predicted to his father in his letter home from RAF Leeming five years ago.

16 April, while I stayed at a lot of party British troops of the 8th Airborne spent their attack on Fallingboetel I knew away and by noon had occupied the town. At 11.15 a cheer went up in 357 - a jeep arrived and we were officially liberated - I felt a lump grow in my throat - maybe the suggestion of a two-three years of their waiting was over - then I went on peeling the potatoes for dinner, and now it is just a matter of waiting some more - perhaps the longest wait of all - for the home-ward trip.

Dad's prediction of 1941

As for our baby being a girl well I'm perfectly happy with her, and you will be too when you see her. They wanted a girl and I'm happy that her wish was fulfilled, in any case God-willing we plan to have two more children and one of those will be a son.

## Post script

To refer to the beginning of my story regarding the bomber's final moments - Dad gave me the briefest details, in a matter-of-fact way - that the bomber was shot down over Holland; that the rest of the crew were killed; that he was sheltered by the Dutch until his capture shortly afterwards. And a few similarly brief indications of what happened when he was a kriegie. He didn't encourage my questions and so I never ventured beyond what was comfortable.

Only last year, thanks to Dr Theo Bollen, a Dutch academic and WW2 researcher and author, and Andy Flexen-Pailot, a WW2 memorabilia collector, I came into possession of an astounding letter handwritten by my Dad in 1948.

This letter was written by my Dad to the bereaved parents of the Whitley's pilot, Lt Col and Mrs Parkin of Buxton, Derbyshire, explaining the final minutes before the it smashed to pieces on impact on that frozen Dutch field, when their only son, with the three others, lost their lives. It must have made very disturbing reading for the Parkins to know about the last minutes of their hero son's life.

### What exactly happened on the night of 27 February 1942

The letter was written when Dad was 35 years old, now a father of three and back in peacetime England, continuing with his career in the RAF.

It is quite formal, giving a chillingly graphic account of events, praising the bravery of Sq Ldr Parkin and also expressing condolences.

It was invaluable to me and answered so many questions, giving many of the facts about the crash in Holland I've been able to share with you today.

*The writing flows well, but the verticals seem to stand out. He was doing his duty and we can tell from the occasional tangling that it was difficult and he felt very much under pressure to ensure that the parents of this man were given the information to which they were entitled. EQ.*

**Conclusion** Until very recently I hardly knew a thing about this part of my father's life. This past year been an exciting roller-coaster journey of discovery. Dad's handwriting samples have been but one tool in getting to know so much I never knew, 25 years after his passing.

I'm looking forward to the next step and am quite sure there is more to come when I meet my new Dutch friends in Holland later this year.

I dedicate this presentation to those 55,573 who lost their lives in RAF Bomber Command and particularly the four crew of my father's Whitley bomber, shot out of the sky in the Friesland area of North Holland.

### Bomber Command Memorial

\*Graphological comments by Elaine Quigley

*still jammed and still doing all I could to get free the aircraft started to tip over on to its back, I can assure you I was almost resigned to death and hoping it would not be slow. I was still thinking that when I suddenly found myself in space on my back I pulled my rip-cord and as my parachute opened there was a terrific explosion immediately below me. The aircraft immediately caught fire and owing to practically no wind blowing and lack of height I was in immediate danger of going into the middle of the fire so I side slipped my chute violently and hit the ground close to the aircraft. I cracked my ribs and hit my head badly. I remember looking at the wreckage trying to see which way up the fuselage was, and listening for cries - but there was nothing but the roar of the flames.*

