

Cpt Harold M Butterworth

ROYAL ARTILLERY

I FOUND HARRY

" On the 10th of April 1942 a massive bombing force of 254 British planes took off from various bases in the south and east of England destined for the German city of Essen in the heavily defended industrial Ruhr Valley. Just another night sortie (the British R.A.F. version of mission) to try and stem the ever growing tide of the Nazi menace that was engulfing the European theatre of war. At 22.50hrs a Wellington Mark 1c Bomber No. HB856 left Stradishall Royal Air Force base. On board was my uncle, Captain Harold Butterworth, a 20 year old from Inverness Scotland. A Royal Artillery regiment officer he was now attached to the R.A.F. as a rear air turret gunner and observer. Intelligence had predicted clear weather over the whole bombing run and as with the 3 previous night sorties that week the planes of his 214 Squadron should return in the early hours of the next morning. A complete radio silence would be maintained throughout the flight as was normal procedure, the only exception was in case of a mayday call for help. There was no such call from HB856 and as the dawn broke over the quiet English countryside the loyal ground crew waited for any sign or sound of an approaching aircraft. All the other planes that had departed from Stradishall the previous evening returned to base one by one. The news was not encouraging. The weather forecast had not been correct and once over Germany the formations broke up in the heavy cloud and encountered concentrated and accurate anti-aircraft fire.

That mayday call never did come and as another day greeted the anxious ground crew it was now clear that HB856 had not made it. My Uncle Harry was not coming home this time."

Fast forward to the present and I lifted the phone to recognise my sister Fiona's exited voice on the other side. " I've found him. It was on the Internet. I cannot believe it. Our uncle is buried in Germany." I was stunned and after some small talk sat back to reflect on what was now the beginning of the end of a search to solve a family mystery that had puzzled me for many years. So now I knew where he was I could start to put all the pieces of the puzzle together. What had happened to Harry on that fateful night? I was born 13 years after his death and never had the privilege to know the man and had to rely on stories from his father and brother as I grew up. Even then they seemed reluctant to talk about him, suffice to say that he had been a very brave man who had been killed in the war. I recall seeing a couple of photos of him, both as a child and a serving soldier and at one time even saw the 2 telegrams that my grandfather had received from the Ministry of Defense informing him that Harry was missing in action and the final one a few days later delivering the fatal blow that he had in fact been killed in action. What I was never to know until many years later was the devastating effect that his death had on his family.

With the death of my father in 1989 the last of Harry's immediate family was no more and I was left with the legacy of a young man that would, I feared, eventually be forgotten. This thought troubled me as well as his fate and where, if anywhere he had been laid to rest. After completing my own military service in

the then Rhodesia I went on a working holiday in 1978 to Inverness and with the help of another uncle I managed to find myself at a War Memorial close to the banks of the River Ness (home of the famous monster Nessie!) and there was his name. So he had not been entirely forgotten. On that trip I was also told of the story that after his death his school headmaster had gone to Germany and basically found out that he had been executed on the ground by the S.S. But there was no proof of this and shortly afterwards I returned to live in South Africa. To my knowledge there was not even a photograph of him and I got on with the task of making a new life for myself. In 2000 an event occurred that rekindled my interest in my forgotten uncle. For reasons only known to themselves a group of loutish youths vandalised the Cenotaph in London . As with many other people I was shocked that the present generation could have so forgotten the sacrifice and honour of the hundreds of thousands of men and women that went to war in far away lands and never returned. It was these very people that kept the flames of democracy alive during the dark days of WW2 and all the various conflicts that were to follow. That day I vowed to find out the full story of Uncle Harry and to show that his own sacrifice was not in vain.

The day that the call came from my sister I silently thanked Bill Gates ! After fiddling around for some time she had stumbled across the right website, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. In the Reichswald Forest Memorial Site in Germany lay the remains of over 8000 fallen servicemen (including 1 South African) and surprisingly there were 3 men with the name of Butterworth! She faxed me through all the particulars and it was an emotional moment for me as I stared down at one of the names. Captain H.M.Butterworth R.A. Service number 179318 and laid to rest in Plot 19 Row F Grave no. 3, alongside the other 5 crew members of their ill-fated mission. Tears filled my eyes as I read the names of Pilot Officer J. Murray, Sgt's Smith, Bonser and Penny as well as Flight Sgt. Neal. Six men now nearly 60 years away from home and their loved ones and at the same time I could not help to begin to think about their families and pray that they had found closure on these honourable men. Six men had fought for a cause that they believed in, and in the prime of their lives they now lay side by side in the peaceful German countryside. I was now more determined than ever to pursue my goal. Unbeknown to me that day I was about to really get to the bottom of my mysterious Uncle Harry.

My letters started to pay off and the replies poured in. It was a sad period of my life as I gradually put a human face to the name. Initially the contacts were all from Inverness itself in the form of old friends. In the 1930's Inverness was a relatively small town and it seemed as though everybody knew everybody. As the Nazi menace gathered pace in Europe Harry lived a normal middle-class life as he passed through his school years. His father was an ex-Canadian soldier wounded in WW1 and sent to recover in Inverness where he met and married my grandmother. She was a Macrae and came from a well-to-do family. There was a younger sister, Opel but she tragically passed away at the age of 10 and the only other sibling was my father, Douglas, a few years younger than Harry. By all accounts a normal and balanced family getting on with the business of life. It was indeed touching and at the same time sad to read the various recollections from people now well into their 70's and 80's. He appeared to have left strong memories in the short time that most of them had with him. The stories covered all the usual activities of a youngster growing into a young man. Pinching apples in the summer, playing tennis at the local sportscentre and

taking a dare to swim in the freezing cold River Ness. One elderly woman reminisced about how good looking and clever he was and I almost got the impression that this was an old flame. There was also the gentleman explaining to me in a very nice way about how he and Harry used to get "sloshed" together when he came home on leave from the Royal Artillery. In that very same letter he mentioned that my uncle was a very brave man to volunteer to serve as he did with the R.A.F. Correspondence was arriving almost daily now and one particular letter really put a human face to what had previously only been a name to me. His second cousin replied and explained how his death had come as a real shock to his friends and family. It hit his mother very hard and she was never the same person again, eventually passing away in 1955 as a broken spirit. As I was growing up in Rhodesia I never got the opportunity to see a lot of my Canadian grandfather. According to my mother he took to the bottle and experienced terrible rages. The very last time that I saw him in 1978 he implored me not to return to Rhodesia and continue doing military call-ups. When I asked why he could mumble that war was futile but looking back now I can see that his own awful years in the trenches of WW1 and the death of his beloved son had also broken his fighting spirit.

I now had a much clearer idea of the mysterious Uncle Harry. A popular, fun loving scholar with a bright future after school in one of Inverness's top legal companies. But I still had no idea of his military record and the actual circumstances of his death. Almost as the private correspondence started to dry up I received a reply from the British Ministry of Defence Historical Records Office.

Here was the news that I had been waiting for. Harry's 214 Squadron had been part of a 254 plane bombing raid on the German town of Essen on the night of 10th April 1942 flying out of Stradishall Base in the east of England. Along with 5 other crew his Wellington Mark Ic Bomber no. HB856 never returned and 5 days later the German authorities informed the British military that their bodies had been recovered and buried at Gelsenkirchen. After hostilities had ended in 1945 the whole planes crew was moved and reburied at Reichswald Forest. Bad weather over Essen had presumably affected the sortie and only 3 out of the Stradishall planes managed to reach and bomb the designated targets. HB856 was the only plane that did not return. There was no witnesses to the crash and it was written up "as a result of enemy action". The Ministry of Defence as a matter of procedure allows close relatives of casualties down to nephews and nieces to use a Researcher to probe for any more info required. However the cost was around R800 and could take a lengthy period. But my good fortune continued and the writer of this official letter included a note with the name and address of the current Historian of 214 Squadron, a Mr. Jock Whitehouse. I immediately wrote to him and anxiously awaited his reply. Two weeks later I finally received the reply that was to answer many of my questions. Mr. Whitehouse's practical knowledge of the bombing operations proved invaluable to me in filling in the pieces of the puzzle. His information was both fascinating and sad at the same time.

He went out of his way to answer all my queries and I could never have finished this story without his help. At the end of the day he apologised that he could not actually state what happened on that fateful night. HB856 had become separated from the other planes due to the bad weather and either took a direct

hit from the very effective Ruhr Valley flak or was persuaded and shot down by German nightfighters. At a top speed of 375 kms. and with a 2 ton bombload on board the Wellington would have stood no chance against a sustained attack from a number of nightfighters. The latter appeared more likely as the bodies were able to be recovered, identified and buried individually rather than in a mass grave. It was chilling to read that the end would have been brutal and I can only imagine my uncle's state of mind at the time. He was rear turret gunner and as a Royal Artillery officer he was also in a good position to assess what ground-fire was in action. Mr. Whitehouse also stated that if they could have the crew would have baled out and taken their chances on the ground. But he could find no evidence of capture and execution by the S.S. so I finally closed the door on that family myth. Interestingly enough the co-pilot Harry Neal was an American from Chicago U.S.A. and had joined the Royal Canadian Air Force before enlisting in the R.A.F. Tragically the previous week he had flown on a sortie where only 7 out of 14 planes had returned. HB856 had taken part in 3 raids that week and as was explained to me it was all a question of percentages. The more that you went out the less chance that you were coming home. Mr. Whitehouse went so far as to say that as the Bombing campaign intensified you could never rely on getting too friendly with any individual as you could never know when that potential friendship would end over the skies of war-torn Europe. As that great statesman Churchill so aptly put it, " Never has so many owed so much to so few ".

Uncle Harry had not been completely forgotten. Through all my contacts I now knew that In his home town of Inverness his name was displayed in the Town Hall, the Island Bank War Memorial and in his Crown Church. Outside of Stradishall at St. Margaret's Church he is mentioned on the Roll of Honour as well as with the Royal Artillery Regiment. Mr. Whitehouse wrote a book entitled ` A History of R.A.F. Sradishall ` . His name is also there. And of course he now lives on in the memory of his nephews Alan in Margate, Neil in Cape Town and his niece Fiona in Johannesburg. My one wish is to one day visit his grave in Germany and stand to attention and salute this brave man.

His story is not unique and generations before him and generations since have paid the ultimate sacrifice in the service of their cause. The list is endless of warring sides that have gone to war. Talking is not always possible and the results are names of the casualties and more meaningless statistics. But behind each of those names is a human story and the emotional devastation that was left behind.

I feel that I could have been good friends with my uncle. The fickle finger of fate stole our time. But I am glad that I found him. He has lain alone for nearly 60 years now, far away from the land of his birth. I owed him this effort. One of Mr. Whitehouse's letters really moved me to tears when he described the inscription that his family had requested for his cross at Reichswald. It simply read " Goodnight dear son".

~ Rest in peace Captain Harold Butterworth. Uncle Harry, remembered with Honour ~

The article above was written by Harold's nephew Alan, who has kindly given

permission to share his story here on the Squadron site.



Crown Scouts, Inverness circa 1935
Harry is top row, third from right.

It is terrible to think that many of these boys would be lost in a few short years.



CREST OF THE ROYAL ARTILLERY



Source : Alan Butterworth (nephew of Cpt Butterworth)