

Soldier from the Sky

Mrs Susan Clark

Prestatyn

On November 21 1944 my husband's father, Edgar Clark, an RAF Flight Engineer seconded to the Royal Canadian Air Force and stationed in Yorkshire, was killed when his Halifax bomber was shot down over Dusseldorf. My husband, John, was 3 months old and Edgar's only child. After the war Edgar was buried in a Military Cemetery in Germany.

The family had never been given any details of the incident. All they knew was that the Canadian pilot had survived and he and Edgar's widow exchanged Christmas cards until the mid-1980s.

In 2005, soon after his retirement from a busy surgical practice, my husband John began to research the events of that night using the vast resources of the internet.

He established the identity of the crew and to his surprise discovered that not only had the tail gunner also survived the crash, but that he was still alive and well and living in Canada. We have had several visits with him. A charming, sprightly retired family doctor, he remembers Edgar and provided us with a wealth of information about the squadron, their life in Yorkshire and their training. His accounts of the mission in November 1944, his eventual capture and experiences as a prisoner of war in Poland and the subsequent emotional toll are detailed and heartfelt.

At the same time, by sheer coincidence, a young German man who had also been investigating the crash got in touch with the tail gunner. He had identified an engine from the Halifax which had been found submerged in a pond in the village of Trills, near Dusseldorf. The aircraft debris and bodies of the crew had crashed onto the village and we have spoken to several people who witnessed the event and enabled us to piece together what happened to each of the airmen, one of whom had been badly injured and died later that night.

Further research has revealed more details. The target was an oil refinery in Castrop Rauxel near Dusseldorf and we have met a retired Judge who was responsible for anti-aircraft guns at the target site that night who remembers the attack clearly and has written a book about it. We have recently had sight of the written reports of the crew of the German plane which shot down the Halifax. We have been able to contact and meet members of the families of the Halifax crew who have shared their personal memories with us.

We were able to contact and meet the pilot's grandson who has his grandfather's diaries he kept in his POW camp and the scrap books he compiled on his return.

We now have a unique insight into the experiences of that terrible night from four first-hand sources - the crew in the Halifax, the crew of the attacking plane, the anti-aircraft gunners at the target site and the villagers of Trills in which the plane crashed.

It has been an amazing journey of discovery involving determined research, fantastic coincidences and some extraordinary good luck.

We have more information about that night than we could ever imagined and not just about the actual events. We have made some very significant friendships during several trips to Canada and Germany during the last few years. We have learned about the experiences and attitudes of ordinary German people during the war, who themselves were victims of Hitler's regime. We have heard many accounts of the kindness and compassion shown by ordinary Germans to the two who survived. That empathy and respect was shown at a ceremony in Trills in 2010, attended by 300 local people, the Mayor and the local MP, when the engine was placed on a specially designed plinth with a description of its journey from Yorkshire to its final resting place.

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