

## **I REMEMBER**

**I Remember** in 1941 standing on the Pier Head Landing Stage at Liverpool watching a Troop Ship about to leave port. Every porthole and every little bit of space was occupied allowing a final view of Liverpool and the few people on the landing stage.. The singing from the troops was very loud, mixed with shrieks of excitement. Destinations were kept secret. Not knowing the risks, that they were to face, it appeared similar, to what we see at modern airports, a crowd of excited young men setting off on holiday to The Costa Brava.

To me, as a sixteen-year-old boy, they were brave men setting off to fight for their country. At the time, they appeared lucky and I was unlucky, being left on the landing stage.

As I grew older and read World War 2 histories in detail. I was able to understand that all troops leaving Liverpool by ship in 1941 were going to Campaigns either in the North African Desert or in South East Asia. In both of these campaigns the casualties were very high and, it is certain, many of the brave men who sang on the ship would not survive.

At sixteen years old they appeared to me as mature fighting men, but a few years later I was able to appreciate many of them were about twenty years old and some of them younger.

The sight and sound of this and similar situations has remained prominent in my memory

**I Remember** my sister Ray Houghton, she married Gerard Clarkin (born **23.10.1921**). Gerard joined the Royal Navy in 1940 and saw service in every theatre of operations. He wrote an account of his service and gave a copy to a researcher of Liverpool University. Included in his experience was having to watch other young sailors who had been torpedoed, fighting to stay afloat and calling for help. All that could be done was to throw them life rafts; to stop to pick up survivors was an invitation to u-boats to sink another ship with its entire crew.

In 1941 Gerard had a few days leave and needed to return to his ship via London, he left my parents house to catch the mid-night train out of Lime Street Station, Liverpool. It was noticed he had by mistake left some important identity documents at the house. I accepted the task of taking the documents to him and joined the train twenty minutes before departure. It was an experience, looking into every face, all of them military men and the majority struck me as being so very very serious. The tragedy of Dunkirk may have involved some of them, but all had to face the prospects of a very long war and in my boyhood dreams and ignorance, I wished I could join them.

I located my brother-in-law but the faces of the men on their way to war stayed with me

As Gerard travelled the high seas and oceans under continuous risk, Ray my sister, his wife, worked in a munitions factory. During the blitz of 1940 she played a leadership role with her use of stirrup pumps extinguishing fires caused by incendiary bombs.

My mother Catherine Houghton was the local A.R.P. (Air Raid Precaution) Warden and my father William Houghton took over the unofficial co-ordination of air raid protection activities for the local area, the local community accepted him as their protector.

**I Remember** in January 1943 a consignment of bananas arrived from overseas, we had not seen any for years, all children, including myself, were issued with a small allocation, a month later it was my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and on the 20<sup>th</sup> April 1943 I was called up to join the Royal Air Force. Like so many mothers all over the world my mother was devastated to see me go, especially as I had just received bananas as a child, but just like the men (boys) sailing out of Liverpool to North Africa or to South East Asia, to me it all seemed as an adventure into the unknown.

Most of World War 2 veterans played a small part in a big task, books are written about those who were heroes, many of them did not survive the war, but the heroes who did survive seem reluctant to talk about their experiences, We have a debt of honour to the bravery and sacrifices of these people.

**I Remember** when the War in Europe ended in May 1945 I was in Belgium and was required to travel with a mobile signals unit to Western Holland, which at the time was still under German Occupation, bridges over the various rivers had been blown by the German army; we had to make a wide de-tour on the same route used by the Market Garden/Arnhem Campaign, which had taken place a few months previously; via Eindhoven, Nijmegen to Arnhem

Arnhem was like a ghost town, because of their co- operation with the Allied troops, the population had been punished by the German Commander and sent from their homes. It was very strange not to see any movement in a big town and experience a silence broken only by the sound of our trucks. I recall seeing a sign outside a bar/café, the sign had been damaged in the fighting, and a piece of wood hanging on wire was swaying gently in the breeze. It was a situation, which would go unnoticed in normal circumstances, but in the absence of any other movement it was outstanding.

Outside Arnhem, there was a major road with a wide grass verge; it was covered with small white crosses marking the graves of the men killed in the Market Garden/Arnhem Campaign,

Peace and Liberation of the Netherlands was signed in Wageningen, west of Arnhem, Present: Allied Generals, German Generals and Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands. Our Commanding Officer, Group Captain E.F.Pippet, was required to wait 24 hours during which the German troops in Western Holland were informed of their surrender, He then proceeded with an armed guard to an airfield named Valkenburg. Our mobile signals unit was ordered to follow him to Valkenburg 24 hours later..... More than 50 years later the paths of the Group Captain and I were to cross in very different circumstances, but that is another story yet to follow.

**I Remember** Our journey to Valkenburg Airport, through the liberated regions of Western Holland, it was unforgettable; mile after mile of roadside was thronged by a never ending sea of thin faces, supported by weak impoverished, poorly clothed bodies; but the rapturous welcome from those thin smiling faces and out-stretched arms is an experience which can never be forgotten, What I did not know at the time,

was that my future wife, Francisca Reitsma, destined to share her life with me, was at the roadside near to Valkenburg waiting to welcome the liberating troops.

**I Remember** The distressing situations, which had occurred during the German occupation, near Valkenburg Airport and the nearest city, The Hague. In The Hague, a German soldier had been shot during the night outside a maternity hospital. In the morning all mothers who gave birth that night were paraded with their babies, just a few hours old, outside the hospital and they were all machine gunned to death and left where they fell for a week. A young man was being taken to a railway station for transportation to Germany for forced labour. He tried to escape but was shot in the back and fell to the pavement near a rain water drain. His young wife and mother screaming tried to help him but were pushed back. A doctor attempted to save his life but received the butt end of a rifle in his face. The young man's blood drained away in the drain and he died. The Dutch gentleman who became my father-in-law was riding his bicycle behind an open top German vehicle, a cyclist in front of the German vehicle did not move sufficiently quickly for the driver to pass, A passenger in the vehicle took out his revolver and smashed it into the skull of the cyclist killing him.

I visited the sand dunes where frequent executions took place of Dutch citizens

These situations were not isolated cases and in many towns and cities the reaction of the Dutch, when liberated, involved wishing to take revenge. The revenge was held under control and almost limited to rounding up girl collaborators, who had associated with the Germans, shaving their heads and daubing them with orange swastikas.

For several days thousands of defeated German troops were marched through our camp having to be escorted back to Germany. It was difficult to associate the majority with the atrocities, which had been committed.

**I Remember** in our training we were told “**The only good German, is a dead German**” and we accepted it and believed it. We had Short Lee Enfield Rifles, Bren Guns and Hand Grenades all our training was directed to kill Germans, it had to be to defend justice!. In Bayonet Practice, we charged suspended straw sacks (replica Germans) Shouting “In Out on Guard”.

In later years we realised that the average German was just like ourselves, they wanted peace, a comfortable home, security and a family, but their war machine had driven many of them to commit outrageous atrocities; more shocks were awaiting the allied armies: the concentration camps, revealed the most brutal cruelty that was almost beyond human belief.

**I Remember** when I left Valkenburg, in 1946, Francisca Reitsma and I were destined to remain in contact no matter how far my travels would take me. I was posted to a barracks north of Hanover. The railway station was elevated above the town, Looking from the platform of the station I could see mountains of bricks and sitting on top of the bricks many Germans with their hammers, chipping away at the mortar, in preparation for re-building, one had to admire such determination to recover from the chaos.

In the barracks I worked with Padre Weatherhead, Staff Chaplain to the R.A.F in West Germany. I organised Anglo/German Meetings, musical evenings and a variety of programmes. Our tasks involved working with a British Franciscan Monk, Father Douglas, he arrived in Germany with nothing more than the clothes he stood up in, but did much to re-settle the defeated Germans who returned to the area, by the provision of basic meals and accommodation in locations known as transit islands. Padre Weatherhead and I were required to visit Luneburg Heath, the place where peace in North West Germany was signed. It was an impressive moment for both of us.

**Our next visit was one to remain in our minds for as long as we live. It was a visit to Belson Concentration Camp. We walked through the buildings of horror including the site for incinerators. We paid our respects to the mass graves. Admission to the camp at that time was very restricted and it required the authority of a high-ranking Chaplain for us to gain entry. The silence throughout the camp was very strange and noticed by both of us immediately, it was later reported by many other observers. In meetings with the Padre 50 years later we both recalled the strange silence we had experienced.**

**I Remember** My next posting was to R.A.F.Gatow, Berlin, there is so much to tell about Berlin as it was in 1946, so I will limit my comments and leave the major task to the many writers who have already described the situation as it was then and to the many T.V. documentaries which have recorded the extent of devastation.

Berlin is 500 miles from Valkenburg, Holland (and from The Hague where Francisca lived). I frequently took unofficial leave to visit her, the journey by train with hard wooden seats, was in two slow stages: one of 250 miles to a village, north of Hanover and then 250 miles the next day to The Hague. I did the round trip of 1,000 miles in four days. The stay north of Hanover involved an over night stay. On one occasion I shared a room with a soldier about 20 years old, he had been in the battle of Arnhem, to understand the state of this young man's mind, one has to read the account of the battle (in the book "A Bridge Too Far")

He had been caught in cross fire and many of his comrades on all sides were torn apart by heavy machine gun fire. The young man started talking and could not stop. As tired as I was, I felt it was my duty to listen to his experiences as he talked all through the night, I hoped he could make a little progress in coming to terms with the situation, My guess is he will remember his experience all of his life and will never come to terms with the situation.

The destruction of Berlin by the Russian army was almost beyond belief, to appreciate the reasons for this response it is necessary to consider the harsh treatment and enormous loss of life, inflicted on the Russian military and civilian population by the German army, the devastation of their cities and the damage to their entire economy. As I recall the Russian troops were given two weeks following the occupation of Berlin to do what ever they wished to do, then they were placed under strict discipline. In the two weeks they did some terrible things, to people and to buildings.

Berlin was divided into four sectors. R.A.F.Gatow was in the British Sector and the other Sectors were out of bounds to us, especially the Russian Sector, to get caught there could involve the individual in military and political problems. the temptation was very great to risk a break into the Russian Sector, I met one man who had successfully made the trip and all the places of historic interest were there to be seen. No point in hanging around, so I went for it!

Through the arches of Unter den Linden (Brandenburg Gate, that is the structure seen in later years where the Berliners smashed down the Berlin Wall) On the left of the gate was the burnt out building of The Reichstag and a road to the right included most of the buildings of the Nazi Party, including the Ministry of Propaganda and the Reich Chancellery, All had been magnificent buildings. The Chancellery, Hitler's Former base, was the most interesting; it was in the form of a square building, four sides and a grass square in the centre. Inside the building, there had been magnificent chandeliers, mosaic flooring, luxurious wooden panelling, room after room had been smashed inch by inch by grenades and by concentrated machine gun fire, this was not as a result of battle, but setting out to destroy the site of evil, or perhaps an expression of revenge, who can say?

**At the front of the building there was an elevated marble veranda, where Hitler could review his troops. I took a piece of marble from the floor where the evil man once stood. I still have that marble.**

In the rear left hand corner of the centre grass square there was an entrance to a bunker, together with an American Pilot (complete with camera) we approached a Russian Armed Guard and with gestures and speaking English asked if we could enter the bunker. He showed no sign of understanding our request, but after many attempts to gain entrance he made a phone call and then allowed us into the bunker, first taking the camera from my American Pilot companion. We viewed the inside of the bunker where Hitler married Eva Braum on the 29<sup>th</sup> April 1945 on the following day they committed suicide. Near the entrance of the bunker their bodies were burnt together with confidential documents. At the time of my visit the remains of the fire had not been removed, but the remains of the charred bodies had been removed.

Visits to the site then were very restricted, but no reports or complaints were made against us. The American got his camera back, but the film had been taken out and exposed.

**I Remember** Returning to civilian life on the 4th June 1947 and unlike some of my former comrades was able to turn off the influences of military life. To some of them the war never ended in their minds and in their talk, the comradeship was kept alive by joining Military Associations and The British Legion.

Family life, catching up on studies and making a firm foundation for my business career, provided the satisfaction for the future, which worked, for me.

When I retired from full time business life in 1990, I kept a number of active interests, including setting up a reunion of my war time comrades, we were together from April 1943 at first training to being separated in April 1946 from Valkenburg to various locations in Germany.

**I Remember** My concentration in 1947 turned to building the important means for civilian life, and yet every subsequent year my family and I made the journey to Holland, mainly to visit Francisca's relations, but the pull was strong to visit the airfield, previously R.A.F. Valkenburg, changed to Dutch control. Each year I made this one-man vigil, feeling I represented the silent voices of 1945 and wondering where they were.

One way of finding out, I was skilled in Family History Research, and would apply similar search techniques, in 1994 my searches located more than 20 old Valkenburg comrades, the very first being my closest old comrade Paddy (Robert) Mc Caigne, he had rejoined the air-force and was a dedicated military man. I arranged for a reunion to visit Holland in May 1995 joining in the Dutch Celebrations to Commemorate the

50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Liberation of the Netherlands. Including a guided tour of the airfield and other activities.

The reunion became an annual event; I made contact with our former Commanding Officer, Group Captain E.F.Pippet (Retired) and gave him copies of documents of interest: from H.M. The King, General Eisenhower and photographs of German prisoners marching through the camp when he was C.O.

Grp.Cpt. Pippet was the same officer who in May 1945 took an advanced armed guard to occupy Valkenburg then ordered our unit to join him.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2001 he did me the honour by asking if he could join my reunion party to tour the Valkenburg Camp. I was delighted to welcome him, knowing that our paths of 56 years ago had crossed in very different circumstances.

In 1997 I made contact with one of the Dutch Airman, Henk Ruper, who had taken over from our unit in 1946, he introduced me to the R.A.F. Association Amsterdam we joined them marching in May of each year, with 5,000 multi National Veterans, including survivors of the Market/Garden/ Arnhem Campaign We marched at Wageningen, where we had been held up in 1945 and where peace in The Netherlands had been signed. At these marches Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands took the salute, For we who had experienced the welcome of the liberated Dutch in 1945 we realised that the children of that time were now standing with their children and their grandchildren. The welcome was still a wonderful experience and as sincere as in 1945

**I Remembered** reference has been made to The Market Garden/ Arnhem Campaign. In 1944 the allies had been winning the war too fast to keep up with supplies of ammunitions, food and fuel. A single column thrust from Belgium, through Holland, via Valkenwaard, Eindhoven, Nijmegen, and over the River Rhine to Arnhem, with para-troops dropped at Arnhem, was considered the best plan to conserve supplies and shorten the war, all went well at each major bridge crossing except at the bridge crossing the River Rhine to Arnhem.( A Bridge Too Far). 10,000 allied para- troops had been dropped to take Arnhem, but the depleted German forces had reformed, at that location, including a Panzer Division with heavy armour, the allied forces did not have the equipment or support to stand against the overwhelming superiority of the German armour, they fought bravely, for nine days from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 25<sup>th</sup> September 1944, until they ran out of food and ammunition. At night 2,000 men escaped over the Rhine to Driel. 8,000 died, were wounded or were captured.

The brave stand against superior odds was a great achievement for those involved, it earned for them outstanding honour in the field of battle.

The Campaign had been so important, I was determined to trace the steps of the troops involved, please remember I had seen Arnhem as a ghost town In 1945, listened all night to a 20 year old soldier who had been caught there in cross fire and saw the many road-side crosses of those killed in the battle of Arnhem.

About 1980 my Dutch Brother-in-Law, Jan Bolle, and I made the journey from the Belgium Border through each stage taken by the troops to Arnhem, our journey was recorded on cine-film and colour slides, the main areas of battle were filmed and we re-crossed The Rhine to Driel then returned to Arnhem to visit the troops temporary Headquarters Building (Hartenstein Hotel). A short distance from the Headquarters Building we went to Oosterbeek Cemetery, and studied 1,200 well maintained graves,

these were the graves of the men killed in action in Arnhem and whose temporary graves I had seen in 1945, marked by white wooden crosses at the road side. The men had died very young, it was difficult to find many over 21 years old.

**They Remembered** The Dutch at each subsequent generation remember the sacrifices made by their own country men and women and by the allies who liberated them. Care of graves and commemorative sites are all the year round activities, but each May to commemorate the liberation many special events take place, one which we attended for a number of years was in an orchard where a British Blenheim bomber had been shot down, on the morning of 19<sup>th</sup> August 1940, it sank into the soft earth containing the bodies of Sergeants Dodd and Pillams. The local people had built a decorative grave and headstone, we had English Services, a fly passed of Dutch planes, the last post and the presentation of poppy wreaths. At least 100 people attended services, including top representatives of the small village.

The number of Valkenburg reunion numbers dwindled due to ill health, death and in some cases lack of finance. We have to call an end to some of our activities, but we who are left should remember.

Valkenburg Airport has ceased to be an important centre of NATO and plans have been submitted to turn the area into a housing estate. I had in mind to make my final sole representative visit in the spring of 2006, but strong memories keep pulling me back.

Stan Houghton

Email [stan.houghton@ntlworld.com](mailto:stan.houghton@ntlworld.com)