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(Reproduced as first and self- published in 2005 by Brian Wilkinson).

New 2015 edition cover features three RAF Avro-Lancasters in flight, 1956.

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“Please Take Care of Bethany”

I am PC 5427 Wilkinson, Police Constable Brian J.B. Wilkinson of the Drover Estate in Liverpool. My middle name is Josef-Benjamin. I was born on Merseyside during March of 1945, a small back-to-back terrace house. What today, if it still existed, well I guess you would term it a slum. That smoky, charcoal-black stained stone from the pollution of the chimneys and factories likened to the lungs of a heavy smoker. All the way over there, down the small dank cobbled street away from the house, the toilet block. The toilet block that all twelve houses on our street shared, a most unpleasant walk during the cold Liverpool winters.

In the house opposite us, there lived a beautiful young girl called Doreen, her eyes always alight with joy and happiness. We would play marbles in the street, always such fun as the bumpy old cobbles would never allow the marbles to roll in any predictable straight line.

Doreen and I were the best of friends. We would sit hand in hand on the wall at the end of the street, watching the old trolleybus go by and the old horses, the nags that dragged the coal cart, struggling to stay on their feet given the excess weight of their load. This was a Britain recovering from the war and we “made do”. We were happy to be free and that’s what they would say to us as kids, the grown-ups on the same street. Mr Parker, the old storekeeper down the next road, would always say to me every time without fail as I went in to buy Mum some bread, “Freedom Brian, freedom. That is what your dad gave his life for. Be very proud of him son.”

I missed my dad so very much, as I grew up without him. He went to war and he never returned. We knew nothing of whatever really happened to him until one day long after the war had ended. The day when my mother was just stood there washing the dishes at the old Belfast sink and staring out into the yard, the day that she suddenly dropped the plate that she had in her hand. Smash! I remember the noise and Mum freezing motionless there on the spot. Then that outbreak of emotion as she fell to the floor and started crying, sobbing to herself quite uncontrollably.

I had never met my dad. He had gone to war and I was born at home. But Dad was everywhere. He was in every conversation that we, the family, had. He was never forgotten. I never understood his sacrifice fully until this particular day, the day that the plate smashed to the ground.

The knock at the door. The man I didn’t know who was escorted in by one of our neighbours, a lovely lady and a dear friend to my mother, the same lady who helped my mother back to her feet. “I’ll put the kettle on,” she said to Mum and I was sent out to play. I was eleven I think at this time. The year was 1956.

“Who is he?” I remember asking my Doreen, our hands as always clasped together and both of us sat up there on our favourite wall-top seat. “My dad says he’s from the government,” replied Doreen, giggling excitedly.

From that point in time and over the next coming few years, and as I became an independent teenager, I started to understand the magnitude and the

significance of the sacrifice that Dad had made for his country; the personal sacrifice that he had made for us all, the reason that Dad had given his own life away. Just as Mr Parker, the old shop keeper would always say to me, “He died for freedom Brian, he died for freedom!”

You see that man, the man who came to the door that day in 1956, and the man who had upset my mum so very much, this same man from the government, well he had been to our house just the once before. This government man was the man who had come to our house just two weeks before I was born to tell my mum that Dad had been shot down and killed in action. My father, RAF rear gunner ‘Bull’s-Eye’ Brian Wilkinson was dead.

You understand now why Mum had been so very upset that day, don’t you? Why she had frozen at the window, frozen at the sight of this very same man returning to the house again for a second time. He, removing that same black bowler hat again as he entered through the gate of our small stone-flagged front yard for this second visit. Bernadette, my mum’s dearest and closest life-long friend standing there at Mum’s side throughout. ‘Bull’s-Eye’ Wilkinson, my father, well his body had never been recovered until this day in 1956 and now eleven years after the end of the war with Nazi Germany my dad was coming home to us again.

I want this to be a happy story and I want there to be a happy end but there is not one. Dad’s B17 Bomber had flown low on its final returning flight and had struck head-on into the cliffs at Dover. Those beautiful White Cliffs of Dover, this first visual sight of home had probably been the very last thing that he had seen before he died. Then here we are, eleven years later, his body had been finally recovered, found to be still strapped there into his seat and entombed within the shell of the bomber, this old American B17 warplane.

Excavations had started for the building of a new terminal for shipping at Dover port, as post-war Europe had started to blossom again and economic trade with the wider world was much needed. Structural engineers and drillers had unearthed what was the crumbled wreckage of this old warplane sunken deep into the mud below the cliff-face, and the Royal Air-Force had now identified it as the Thompson. This was my dad’s plane. The man from the government, the man in the black bowler hat that I clearly remember from being such a young child, had come to the house that day to make the arrangements, the arrangements with my mother Evelina for the return of my father’s body back to Liverpool.

It seemed like the whole city turned out for the funeral of my dad, RAF rear gunner ‘Bull’s-Eye’ Brian Wilkinson on this particular Sunday of April 1956, a sense that Liverpool in its entirety had come to a complete standstill. I know now as an adult that this isn’t true but that’s the feeling I had got as a child of just eleven and in seeing so many thousands of people there, all stood silently and respectfully as the procession drove through the city. The burial was a private family matter. Mum had wanted this and she said to me that day, as Dad

was lowered into the ground below, “I will tell you about your dad when you are old enough to understand son, but for now let’s just leave him to sleep in peace.”

Then the day came, the day of my eighteenth birthday and I let go of Doreen’s hand to take the hand of my mother, the hand of the wonderful Evelina Wilkinson, the hand of this oh so proud war widow. I knew then that she had finally found the strength to tell me. I had never asked previously about the letter Dad had left her. I heard the family talk of it often but I never troubled Mum as I knew this was something so dear and special to her. I knew that she would tell me in her own time and in her own way when she was ready to do so.

Today, the day I became eighteen, a man now and a man so very much in love with Doreen, Mum gave me that letter to read, a letter addressed to her, the last thing Dad had ever written down on paper and a letter found with him inside the plane. A letter sealed inside an airtight mission bag and so perfectly preserved, a letter that had somehow and almost by miracle survived all of its years below the cold strong tidal waves of the English Channel and as if it had only been written yesterday. A letter that he had penned for my mother and had then stuffed safely hidden deep down inside his flight jacket. A letter to my mum that was held close beside his heart as he breathed his last. It was this very same love letter that that government man, the man in the black bowler hat had returned to her, Evelina, on that day of 1956.

It read:

My Dearest Evelina,

I have so longed to come home to you, my dear precious Evelina. Our bombing raids over Bulgaria have ended and I no longer fly from Italy. We have for the last three months been involved in a special mission, a secret mission of which I am forbidden to speak of but I am frightened as we all are now. I write you this letter in the hope that you will understand why I volunteered to do this and should I not return home this time, to know of my love for you: my deep, endless, undying love for you, the undying love that keeps me sane during these, the darkest of hours. You are always in my heart.

As I sat to the rear of my flying tin can, us up there so very high up in the sky, I watched our bombs fall down below onto Sofia, this once so beautiful and ancient city that had now found itself thrown into the war against us. I saw the sky light up with the blast of the bombs we dropped and I wondered who we were killing. There were no Germans down there really. These were just people like you and me. Imagine my love, what I see in my mind, women just like you with their children queuing for the bus and then blown up, in an instant, blown into thousands of pieces of human dust by what we had just delivered to them. I am so tired and sick of this war. I am so tired of the loss of my friends. Half of us never return home. How much grief can this great nation of ours bear? They

will never build a monument to remember me. Us lot, the bomber crews who kill women and children.

Do you remember Willy? Young Willy Garth from over on Sander's Fields? He killed himself last week. He was terrified and couldn't board the metal bird as ordered. I wish you could see what we see, all those planes that take off and we wait to count them back in, safely home and back at base, but they don't return anymore. We sit here strapped in with nowhere to run, nowhere to go other than downward, just sitting here waiting for our turn to be the next missing crew too, simply fall from the sky. Willy was thrown, rough-handed back into his seat by a Squadron Leader, ordered to do his duty at all cost. It was a cost to him. He jumped from the plane in flight during take-off. I think he knew he would die soon anyway and just couldn't face the fear of waiting for it to happen anymore.

We've now been given a new crate to work with, an American B17 Bomber. She's a big old heavy bird and the American pilot says, "It's like trying to steer a brick." We've had to strip it completely down. She's an amazing old bird, very strong but very heavy. She lacks the range capability we need and we have fitted new drop tanks. We've called her the Thompson. We all named her after the guy we had down there on the ground below.

We've been in constant training for weeks. We're good now, well, I think as good as we can get given what we have to work with. I always worry about having an American pilot though, a bit too gung-ho for my liking but he's a great laugh, don't get me wrong. He's a Texan and as loud as you can imagine any Texan to be. Oh, we have a French Bombardier too, Pierre, a perfect English speaker and hand-picked just like the pilot and me. We're the best in the air apparently. The lads mock us with phony salutes, funny really.

Pierre is also navigating for us. We are a jolly mix and try to have a good laugh, even if sometimes we don't quite understand each other's sense of humour. That's about it, just us three, a crew reduced by seven in this stripped down metal brick that we can hardly believe can still fly, especially given everything we have had to take off her. We have a new nick-name; they call us back at base, the Magnificent Three. I guess it's got a kind of good ring to it. The Magnificent three, imagine that?

I wanted so much to be home with you, holding your hand when Bethany was born but I volunteered to do this. I was given the choice not to do this if I so wanted, but I want to be honest with you about that fact, I have to do this for myself. Think of what they have done to your family back home and try to understand me and my motivation. Please try to understand, and remember this, I am 'Bull's-Eye' Wilkinson the best rear gunner in the sky and with me on board, well what can possibly go wrong?

I have this last mission only my love and then I shall be home with you, at home for the birth of our child. They have promised me this. They have

promised me at least two months down leave and I can't wait to see you. I love you with all my heart,

Yours eternally, all my love, Brian xxxxx

And then, there, at the bottom of the letter and scribbled hurriedly across it, as if an afterthought, below Dad's signature it said;

"Fuel out, dropping fast, too low to bail, please take care of Bethany for me."

<oOo>

That's how my dad had died. He had died a war hero alongside his new crew, just the three of them alone together. My mum had known nothing of this letter or his final mission until eleven years later, and not until after the body of my dad had been recovered from beneath the sea at Dover.

The man from the government would never go on to say what the full facts of this ill-fated final secret mission were, but he did say this to Mum at the time, she recalled;

"The Thompson, a B17 Flying Fortress with a hand-picked specialist crew of three, had left an airbase in occupied British territories on February 26th 1945 at 22.30 hours. The mission was to deliver a massive, single precision payload bomb of huge devastating capacity against a research facility beyond German held lines. Major Frank Thompson, a British officer beyond these enemy-held lines had reported, before all communication with him had been lost on the 23rd May 1944, the development of a new chemical warfare facility. 'The crew of the Thompson B17 Heavy Bomber had completed this mission with great accuracy and with great effect. They had died on their return journey having changed the course of the war. The crew were to divert and return the bomber to the UK after the payload had been delivered,'" he said.

The reason for this diversion was never stated. Mum explained to me that she'd asked this man what drop tanks were, as written in dad's final letter. He replied by telling her, "They are extra fuel supply tanks attached to the outside of the aircraft. They are used to increase the flying range and can be released and jettisoned by the crew when empty. The heavy bomber had been stripped down to reduce its weight load and to allow for the extra weight of the bomb and the additional fuel needed. I am so sorry but I cannot tell you more."

Mum was so very proud of Dad and what he had done. You see my mum was of Polish origin and her grandparents, my great-grandparents, had been executed by the Nazis during the war in a reprisal attack against partisan resistance in their home village. She had survived only because her mother and father had arrived to live in Britain in 1913 and before the outbreak of the first

war, World War I. She would simply smile at me and say, “Be very proud of your dad, I understand why he volunteered for this. I am very honoured to have met him and so very proud that he did so.” Mum never remarried.

I have for so many years had these stories, these childhood war time fantasies, in my head about what Dad was actually doing during his final flight and I suppose that, well in the absence of the full true facts, I like these stories. Maybe they were attacked by German fighters and my dad, ‘Bull’s-Eye’ Wilkinson shot them all out of the sky before they realised they were hit themselves and now leaking fuel? Maybe they received heavy flak over France and struggled at the controls in a desperate last-ditch attempt to reach home and clear the cliffs ahead of them?

Or maybe they just didn’t have enough fuel to start with, a tragic war-time miscalculation and fatal error. What-ever the true story, my dad is a war hero and that’s all that matters to me. I’m named directly after my dad, Mum told me. “We were certain you were going to be born a girl at the time, that’s why we chose the name Bethany together, but the name Brian is so much more special now, don’t you think so son?”

My study notes conclude that at the outbreak of World War II, Bulgaria, at the time a kingdom under the governance of Prime Minister Bogdan Filov had always declared a position of (Bulgarian) military neutrality in the hope of avoiding direct conflicts and to regain lands lost during the previous Balkan Wars and the First World War, the Great War, to these original pre-Balkan War boundaries. She also sought to reclaim the areas neighbouring her sovereign borders and those lands with high populations of former Bulgarian patriots.

Hopes to resolve these older territorial claims were aided when Southern Dobruja, a part of Romania since 1913, was repatriated to the Kingdom of Bulgaria under the Treaty of Craiova in 1940. Bulgaria also maintained its non-aggression pact with its immediate southern neighbour, Turkey.

Due to Bulgaria’s strategic geographical position however, such bloodless neutrality would prove impossible to maintain. In 1941 Bulgaria officially joined the Axis Powers. German forces had amassed on her border demanding the right to pass through her sovereign lands in preparation for Germany’s planned invasion of Yugoslavia and Greece. Bulgaria signed the Tripartite Pact, firmly cementing her position as an Axis power on the 1st March 1941. The Soviet Union had by this point in time also signed up to a non-aggression pact with Germany and little opposition to Bulgaria’s new war-time position was noted.

Bulgaria, despite this new allegiance at this point, continued its course of military passivity. Germany, Italy and Hungary had now successfully invaded Yugoslavia and Greece with Yugoslavia officially surrendering to the Axis powers on the 17th April and Greece shortly afterward on the 30th April.

On the 20th April, just ten days before Greece’s capitulation, Bulgarian forces, seizing their opportunity, had entered Yugoslavia and Greece following

closely behind this Axis invasion. The military objective was to take back the lands of Thrace and Eastern Macedonia. Bulgaria now occupied the area between the Struma River and the city of Alexandroupoli and her Aegean Sea gains also included the islands of Thasos and Samothrace. Her occupation also included much of modern day Macedonia and Eastern Serbia. Although Bulgarian forces never directly entered into combat with British forces, they did reinforce former German held lines within these new gained territories.

Despite popular myth, Bulgaria was involved in the deportation of the Jews to Nazi concentration camps. Following significant protest to Germany, principally by the Bulgarian government, Dimitar Peshev MP, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, and some members of the Royal Family, it is historically recognised that Bulgarian territorial Jews were saved from deportation. However, Bulgaria was fully complicit with the Nazis in the deportation of the Jewish communities beyond her sovereign border, such as the Jewish population of Greek Macedonia and Vardar Macedonia. Had the Axis powers won the war, without doubt the same fate would have then befallen all Bulgarian Jews.

June 22nd 1941 saw the invasion of the Soviet Union by German forces, an invasion that Bulgaria did not take part in. No official declarations of war between the Soviets and the Bulgarians had been formalised however but despite this, a number of direct Bulgarian naval skirmishes against the Soviet Black Sea Fleet did take place. Back home Bulgarian opposition, anti-fascist and partisan resistance, and other Soviet Allied Communist groups conducted numerous sabotage attacks against Bulgarian armed forces. Resistance to Bulgaria's new war-time stance led to a developed and popularist united resistance movement. This ultimately led to guerrilla warfare turning Bulgarian against fellow Bulgarian. This united resistance movement, officially formed in August 1942 was called the Fatherland Front. Partisan detachments were particularly active in the mountainous regions of western and southern Bulgaria.

The Bulgarian government declared war on both the United Kingdom and the United States on the 13th December 1941. Allied bombing raids, in which many Bulgarian cities and towns were bombed in strategic co-ordinated operations, began in retaliation.

The balance of power in 1943 between the Allies and the Axis powers was now changing and Germany had suffered serious and major defeats on the battlefields of its occupied territories, especially those on her Eastern Front. In August 1943 the Bulgarian King 'Tsar Boris III died suddenly during a visit to Berlin, a visit in which he was to renegotiate his country's Axis position with Hitler. He was succeeded to the throne by his 6-year-old son and direct heir Simeon II. Bulgaria was now to be governed by a German puppet administration headed by the new Prime Minister, Dobri Bozhilov. Diplomatic relationships with the Soviets were, however, still maintained by Bulgaria, this despite its ongoing membership of the Axis power.

Following Germany's defeat on Soviet occupied territory, and in particular the areas of Iași and Chișinău, Romania broke away from the Axis during the summer of 1944 and declared war on Germany. The Soviet forces were now given consent to cross her borders and thus the ability to later militarily invade Bulgaria. Within Bulgaria, the resistance movement of The Fatherland Front had by now ceased and a new anti-fascist government was formed on the 2nd September. Following the declaration of war made against her by The Soviet Union three days later, and subsequently as a result, on the 5th September, Bulgaria officially joined the Soviet Forces (8th of September) in the war against Nazi Germany.

Frank Thompson was born in Darjeeling, West Bengal in British India. He was born on the 17th August 1920 to a missionary family, and was the elder brother to E.P Thompson, the later famed English historian, socialist and peace campaigner. Frank Thompson was educated at both Winchester College and New College in Oxford. It was here at Oxford, whilst studying at the university that he became a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, influenced greatly by his dear friend, Iris Murdoch.

Despite Thompson's affiliation to the Communist Party, he did not agree with the party's neutral position dictated to its membership following the Molotov Ribbentrop Communist Pact, and he signed up voluntarily for service in the British Army. He saw active service at home in England, North Africa, Syria, Iraq, Sicily, Serbia and finally in Bulgaria. Here, he became a crucial part of the Special Operations Executive (SOE). His role as a British officer and representative of the British War Office, and of Winston Churchill, was one of a liaison officer between the British Army and the Bulgarian anti-fascist partisans, many of whom were members of the Bulgarian Communist Party. The Bulgarian partisans played a key role in helping Britain win the war, notably the numerous and most successful sabotage missions of Bulgarian and German artillery supply lines.

Thompson, along with three other British Commandos, was parachuted into hostile territory on January the 25th, 1944. His role was to establish a direct military and complimentary link between British fighters and their Bulgarian counterparts, the Bulgarian resistance divisions led by Slavcho Transki. Thompson and the commandos landed in the district of Dobro Pole in Macedonia. The single radio which they were carrying and one that was essentially needed to maintain contact with connections in Cairo, Egypt and also in Bari, Italy, soon broke, and this just shortly after arrival.

Thompson and the other three commandos took part in the brutally violent and the significantly outnumbered clashes between the fascist sympathetic Bulgarian Gendarmerie and the anti-fascist units of the Second Sofian Brigade of The National Liberation of Partisans. He was captured on the 23rd May 1944 in the village of Batuliya in Bulgaria after being wounded by Bulgarian

Gendarmerie forces. He was executed by firing squad in the nearby village of Litakovo. He was only 24 years of age.

Following the post-war establishment of the new communist government of Bulgaria, the villages that had witnessed these violent military clashes were renamed. These villages being Livage, Lipata- Tsarevi, Stragi, Malak-Babul, Babul and Zavoya were all merged into one district and are to this day and remain so, simply called Thompson in honour of the British officer. Mayor William Frank Thompson and his fellow commandos are just a handful of so many more of today's forgotten heroes of World War II.

His brother, E. P. Thompson wrote two books about him, the first with his mother 'There Is a Spirit in Europe: A Memoir of Frank Thompson' and the second 'Beyond the Frontier: the Politics of a Failed Mission, Bulgaria 1944'. This latter work was published in 1996.

Of my dad's plane, the so-called Thompson, it was developed in the 1930s for the United States Army. The Boeing B-17 heavy bomber was fitted with four engines. Boeing, in commercial competition against both Douglas and Martin aircraft, won the contract to build an initial batch of 200 B-17 aircraft. The B-17 outperformed all the rival contract entries at the time. Regrettably, following the crash of its first prototype, Boeing soon lost this contract with the United States Army Air Corps (USAAC), but the US Army remained impressed with the overall design and capability of the aircraft and placed an order for a further thirteen aircraft. During many years of evolution the B-17 undertook numerous changes and advances in basic design and was finally introduced into military service in 1938.

The so-called Flying Fortress was primarily used during World War II for daylight precision and strategic bombing campaigns against German industrial and military targets. The B-17 was based at many RAF stations in southern England and was used as far away as North Africa. The B-17 was also used in Foggia, Italy, where it complemented RAF Bomber Command's night-time bombing raids. This was to secure air superiority in preparation for Operation Overlord, known to us today as the D-Day landings. Code named Operation Pointblank, its purpose was to secure air superiority over the cities, factories and battlefields of Western Europe. Its involvement, though to a much lesser degree, continued during the War of the Pacific where it was used for raids against Japanese shipping and airfields.

From the very beginning of its service, the USAAC made great use of the B-17 as a strategic weapon, given its powerful, high and long-distance flying range capabilities - a craft that proved time and time again that it would be able to return home despite extensive and heavy battle damage scars. Within a very short period of service time, the stories about the B-17 Flying Fortress had soon taken on almost mythical proportions. War time stories and photographs of these heavily damaged (though still flight capable) aircraft, soon gave it an iconic

status among the servicemen who flew them. An emotional testament that made this clear, is found within my father's final letter.

The B-17 dropped more bombs on Axis occupied enemy territory and Axis power homelands than any other aircraft throughout the war. Of the 1.5 million metric tons of bombs dropped on Germany and its occupied territories by US built aircraft, 640,000 tons of this sum were dropped directly from B-17s. The standard crew membership of the B-17 was typically ten persons: a pilot, co-pilot, navigator, bombardier/nose gunner, flight engineer/top turret gunner, radio operator, two waist gunners, ball turret gunner and a tail gunner. My father, Brian 'Bull's-Eye' Wilkinson had flown her with a crew of just three.

“Doreen”

I have no one left to talk to anymore, only my wife Doreen, Doreen who I visit every Sunday down at the Meadow Bank Park Cemetery. My dear and so desperately missed Doreen, my faithful lover and friend to a man for an entire lifetime. Doreen Janet Wilkinson 1944 – 2004. Doreen who honoured me so much, just as my mother Evelina felt honoured to have known my father. Doreen who married me in 1963.

There are four of us in the family plot, the plot my mum Evelina bought back in 1956 for the return of my dad's body that year. It's a beautiful spot, this small piece of Earth, the 8 foot by 4 foot rectangle we own. It's the only piece of land the family ever bought in fact, well the British side of the family that is. Dad was the first in and then followed by Mum in the spring of 1973, the year when she too went in. Born in 1920, she died in the April of '73 at just fifty three years of age. I'm amazed she lived that long.

Mum had a terrible drink problem. It was controlled and she managed to work, but every night at 7 pm she would open her bottle. Always whiskey, she loved Irish whiskey. She was never completely drunk or even in fact any trouble at all. She just drank heavily, drinking to ease her pain and grief until she too eventually died suddenly. A massive heart attack it was, gone in an instant, her glass fell to her lap and the whiskey poured over Dad's old war-time love letters that she'd been reading all alone that evening. Those letters, Dad's very private letters, all posted from the front in Italy. They still smell of the whiskey today. I keep them very safe.

There is no cure for a broken heart and she died of loneliness for certain. She never remarried or even dated again after Dad. She was a fabulous looking woman my mum. Everybody tried to romance Evelina over the years but she was never interested in men at all after the war. She would say to me, “Son, when I see how much you and Doreen are in love, well that's all I need. Your dad and I loved as you two do now, how can you ever expect me to become accustomed to the loss of such happiness? No son, I will be with your father again soon one day and that's all that I want now.” My mother, Evelina Wilkinson died of a broken heart for sure. She never recovered from the loss of her husband.

Then Doreen, my wife, joined them both in that cemetery plot in 2004. All there together now, all three sleeping together in this little plot of earth below the old willow tree down at Meadow Bank Park Cemetery, the top left hand corner of it. Doreen had been so ill for so many years. I'm not happy she died, of course not, but I am relieved for her. Cancer is an awful thing. It comes at you from nowhere; it gives you no warnings of its pending arrival until it is so often just too late. Just like the German fighter pilots my dad would shoot down I suppose.

Doreen suffered with cancer for over three years until eventually she told the doctors she could take no more. No more surgery, no more treatment, and no more hospitals. It all started with a lump under her armpit, a lump that grew hard and painful. Surgery removed the first lump and all was good for a while until then, well, the removal of her left breast by mastectomy. She had a further seven operations in total until the final removal of her right breast two and a half years later. That was it. She would take no more invasive surgery. My Doreen had had enough, the tiredness and the sickness and all that pain. Doreen gave up her battle and let nature take its course. There was no more will left to fight anymore.

Doreen died peacefully at home as she wished. She had been in Banklands Hospice for several weeks and by negotiation with the palliative care team, she was allowed to return home for her end. Those last thirteen days back on the Drover Estate with me in our flat and with the camper van parked down below. She wanted so desperately to go away in that van for a few days but she could not walk the distance. Just getting out of bed became quite impossible for her. To see such a beautiful woman, such a strong-minded and determined character become so weak and frail was heart breaking to watch. The nurses would come three times a day to bathe and clean her. I wanted to do all her personal care for her but she wouldn't have it. "No way!" she would say. "I want you to remember me for who you married, not this thing I have now become."

Her second wish was, "In the end Brian, when the end comes, take me out in Winjin' Pom for a last drive with you. Promise me you will do this for me, promise me this, won't you Brian?"

And just as my dad, Brian 'Bull's-Eye' Wilkinson had seemed to stop Liverpool from moving that day back in 1956, so too did Doreen. I think everybody who owned a vintage camper van from all over the world came to Liverpool that day for her, the club we were in together having organised a farewell procession. Oh Doreen, how I wish you could have seen it. Winjin' Pom all covered over in flowers, tulips actually, her favourite flower, and Doreen there inside taking her last ride with me, there in the back for one last time.

We never had any children as I said earlier. It wasn't that we didn't want to; it's just that it didn't happen. "If it's meant to be it's meant to be," she would say. It just never happened, the kids, we had each other and it was never a concern really. Honestly, it was never a real concern for either of us. It was just the way it was.

We were a very mixed family. Doreen was Roman Catholic, Dad was Church of England and Mum, Evelina, was of Polish-Jewish origin. I was Baptised Church of England, not for any specific reason of faith but I think it was just because that was what my dad was. Religion was never strict for any us. We had faith, but this faith was more a sense of self-spirituality. Doreen and I would later start attending Quaker meetings together, the religious Society of

Friends down on Rawden Avenue. We would sit in silence for one hour and just think about what God, if God was ever up there at all, well what he would want of us.

Doreen was more active within the Society of Friends than I was. She would read and discuss things with the Friends present. She was always so inspired to say something beautiful, something poetic that would bring a sense of warmth and love into the room. Always involving herself with every activity, the peace campaigns and the jumble sales, the car boot sales, everything that went on. Doreen would write for many hours; letters to prisoners on death row in American, just writing words of love and forgiveness to them. Letters to prisoners of conscience in Latin America too, writing to them to let them know that the world had not forgotten their plight and freedom struggles, and that she was still watching over them.

I never became a Quaker. If you've ever met a Quaker, a true Quaker that is, well you are fortunate indeed. They are beautiful people, so committed to justice and peace. They are all pacifists. That was the problem for me, the pacifism. I wanted so much to believe in this but after Dad I just couldn't. Dad had gone to war to fight and that meant he had to kill people, people who if he didn't kill them would certainly and without fail kill him. I know that should the same situation occur now, that I too would go to war. I would be prepared to kill others if it meant that some other neo-dark fascist evil could be stopped.

We were a strange mix; Doreen the peace campaigner and me, the amateur military historian. I must have bored her so much talking about military history. Her, always so patient with me, smiling and saying, "Really dear, I didn't know that." The Military Channel on the TV was on almost on a daily basis, always that is, until the soaps came on in the evening. That's when Doreen took control of the remote. It was a brave man indeed who would dare to stand between Doreen and Coronation Street. I hated it myself, but I did enjoy EastEnders with her. All day, tanks and war and planes and technology, and she would just sit there, tucked up in her favourite red fleece blanket, doing her favourite thing, embroidery.

Sparky, always curled up on her lap. The mutt, the homeless stray that we had taken on in the winter of 2001. God that dog was ugly. How she ever saw anything beautiful in it was completely beyond me. We found him down at the communal bins, in a dreadful state he was. His long hair all matted and coated with filth. You could only see one eye, such was that matted hair. He was a long haired dog, a real Heinz 57 but probably more miniature poodle than anything else. I just couldn't do anything with him. Every time I tried to trim his coat he'd try to bite me, such was his gratitude, the little bugger! Eventually we had to take him to the vets who gave him a jab to calm him down, and whilst he slept, off came all that old matted hair.

He was pink for weeks, a dog with no hair and pink and with the biggest ears you've ever seen in your life. He looked just like a gremlin! The hair soon

grew back and he settled in at home with us. Living in the flat had never really been suitable for keeping of a dog but he was an abandoned one and therefore a special case I guess. He was so old anyway that he never really wanted to go out for walks. All he ever did was sit on Doreen's lap as she did her embroidery. His breath was awful. I don't know how she could stand it. 'Sparky' she named him, Sparky because he was so volatile and bad tempered with us.

They're all together now. As I said there are four in that plot, three people and now including one homeless mutt. I suppose that when my time comes to go in there with them all, they'll have to move him out of the way first. I put him in there when no one was watching; you're not allowed to bury dogs in cemeteries. A policeman like me doing something illegal like that, who'd have believed it of me?

We had a modest wedding back in 1963, Doreen and I, at St Catherine's Church. Close friends, workmates and family only. I was a security guard then and we didn't have any spare money to speak of. I was only eighteen and she was just a year older than me. I worked for Macintosh down on the Dock-side. I only did the job for a few years until I joined the force when I was twenty one. Doreen worked in town, a clerk for a local bank.

Just as Mum and Dad had, Doreen and I had never known any other. We were in love together from the day we met and grew up together as children, sitting and holding hands every day on the wall at the end of our street. I remember when I first kissed her. I put my lips against hers and never moved, motionless I was. I had my lips to hers for ten seconds without moving my lips a millimetre. I know it sounds a little strange but I was only nine at the time.

The wedding was wonderful and everything was perfect. Me, just a tender eighteen years of age and her having just turned nineteen. You know, nobody, not a single person tried to talk us out of it, not one single person. Old Mr Parker, the man from the corner shop said, "That's my boy Brian. She's a cracker that one, that's what your dad would want son, a cracker she is. Just like your mother, a real cracker." Then his wife in return, Mrs Parker, hitting him around the back of the head with a sharp swift slap. The reception that evening was grand too, down the Dockyard Club; the swing band and all the food and drink we wanted. It was a fine day indeed, our wedding, Doreen and I.

Like I say, everybody wanted to flirt with my mother, Evelina. I think this definitely included Mr Parker. Mum was born in 1920, not in Liverpool but in Pontefract, Yorkshire. Her parents were from a small village back in Poland. I don't know why or what the circumstance was, that made them decide to come and live here in Britain, but I do know it was in 1913. They arrived here, initially landing in Hull but soon afterward settling down in Pontefract, just before the outbreak of the First World War. He, Izaak Stoltzman was a coal-miner and never sent to the front as so many other men were. She, Haka Stoltzman (née Rejchgold) was a seamstress. The family again resettled later on

Merseyside during the mid-1920s where they both opened a haberdashery shop together.

I had confirmed the following events during my research for this book, and the fate of both the Stoltzman and Rejchgold families in Poland, is not a happy one. Izaak Stoltzman's father, Evelina's grandfather, Josef B. Stoltzman, was executed by German soldiers in retaliation for Polish resistance and partisan activities. He was executed alongside his wife Greta, by firing squad. The remaining family members on both sides all died as a direct result of the Nazi Holocaust. My mother Evelina named me directly after my father's first name. My middle names however come from my Polish great-grandfather, and those names are Josef-Benjamin.

The Nazi Operation Reinhardt was responsible for the death of over 2.9 million Polish Jews. Additionally, and throughout the entire period of World War II, a further 2.5 million non-Jewish Poles perished whilst under the control of Germany, murdered by the Nazi regime. Two million of this figure were ethnic Polish and half a million more were of non-Polish origin but were living in Poland at the time. A further 300,000 Poles were later killed directly at the hands of the Soviets.

In 1926, in his book *Mein Kampf*, Adolf Hitler had sought to outline his plan and place Eastern Europe into the hands of a greater Germany. The German Lebensraum plan as it was known (German living-space) was to occupy and gain German ethnic control over the entire region. Slavs as an ethnic race were all viewed by Nazi ideology to be racially inferior. "Kill without pity or mercy all men, women and children of Polish descent or language," was the express instruction given to the German occupying forces by Hitler. The systematic genocide of the Polish people soon followed upon Germany's invasion of the region.

During 1939, Reinhardt Heydrich (September 7th) decreed that all Polish nobles, clergy and Jews were to be executed. Wilhelm Keitel extended this death-list on the 12th September to include and demand the murder of all Polish intelligentsia. By the end of 1940 Hitler had also demanded the liquidation of all leading elements in Poland. Himmler, March 15th 1940, then added: "All Polish specialists will be exploited in our military-industrial complexes. Later, all Poles will disappear from this world. It is imperative that the great German nation considers the elimination of all Polish people as its chief task," he wrote.

Operation Reinhardt was the code name given to the German plans to exterminate, specifically, all Polish Jews. Reinhardt was the deadliest phase of the Holocaust, with the introduction of Nazi extermination camps where over two million people, almost all of whom were of Jewish origin, were sent to the death camps in Bełżec, Sobibor and Treblinka.

Originally, German concentration camps were used for forced labour, imprisonment, and for the re-education of political prisoners. Nazi brutality and the direct policies of the German National Socialist far right ensured that human

cruelty such as starvation, non-medical attention to control disease, ill treatment, and murder were tolerated. Within camps in Germany and Austria such as Dachau, Bergen-Belsen and Mauthausen-Gusen, murder was not only expected but also ruthlessly encouraged. In 1942 and as part of Hitler's Final Solution to the Jewish Question, Operation Reinhardt would ensure the complete liquidation and the systematic murder of all Jews in Europe. Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka were built with only one purpose in mind: extermination camps. Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek were also extermination camps but were jointly used as forced labour camps.

Senior key roles within the development of these new extermination death camps were given to Christian Wirth, Franz Stangl, and Irmfried Eberl. All three had been pivotal within the Aktion T4 operation in which over 70,000 German men, women and children with a physical disability or learning difficulty were executed between the periods 1939 – 1941. The SS Guards responsible for these murders would wear white coats to give them the appearance of medical authority. After medical assessment the unsuspecting patient was then sent away for 'Sonderbehandlung', which translated literally means 'special treatment.'

The SS, Hitler's own personal bodyguard were now in control of the operation and efficient running of all death camps and used many such disguised tactics. Commonality included railway stations with medical staff on hand at arrival, directing the unsuspecting prisoners to the disinfection centres. It is noted that Treblinka had a booking office with signs displayed throughout the railway station advising prisoners that connecting trains for other camps further east were expected. But of course, these connections never arrived for these connections never existed.

The very old or sick and infirm prisoners were directly transferred to the Krankenhaus (hospital) to help speed up the process of mass extermination of the others. This process could be hindered by the infirm. They would be killed later on and after the death of the larger proportion of the transport, mainly the women and children.

Men and boys were separated, the stronger for labour, and criminal prisoner elements were often selected into the Sonderkommando where any previously known violent background would enable them to become a lower tier of camp guard. The SS and the Sonderkommando recruits, after separating the men, women and children, would order the transport to leave its valuables behind and then direct them straight into the cleansing centre. Here before entry, clothing was searched for any hidden valuables such as gold and personal jewellery. These valuables were collected and sent by the Economic and Administrative Department to the German Reichbank. Men who were still physically able to work were selected for forced labour at the labour camps.

Most of the prisoners who arrived at the camps on these transport trains were gassed immediately. Of the Aktion Reinhardt camps, it is certain that all died

shortly after arrival. In 1942 alone, this number stood at 1,274,166 murders of Polish Jews.

Extreme brutality was used to force people into the gas chamber, such as rifle butts, clubs and whips as well as guard dogs, usually German Shepherds. These severe blows on their now bare human skin would eventually force everyone forward into the chamber. To avoid and minimise any unwanted available air, all were forced to stand as tightly as they could against each other inside. Gas such as the cyanic poison Zyklon B, was already being used at other death camps such as Auschwitz, however the Aktion Reinhardt camps used only the lethal carbonic monoxide exhaust fumes that were filtered into the chamber from captured Soviet tank engines.

After all sounds of screaming and panic had stopped, usually taking up to 30 minutes, the Sonderkommando would remove the corpses. Before the corpses were thrown into mass graves, any gold teeth were removed and all human orifices of the dead were searched for jewellery, currency and other possibly hidden valuables. From 1943 onward, and in an attempt to hide any evidence of German war-crimes, all bodies were burned in open pits. The Leichenkommando (specialist corpse disposal) exhumed all previously buried bodies from the mass graves and burnt them. Nevertheless, the Reinhardt death camps still left an evidential paper trail of its activity behind it. In an intercepted telegram sent by Hermann Höfle on 11th January 1943, to Adolf Eichmann in Berlin, confirmation was obtained of a total number of 1,274,166 Polish arrivals. All had been gassed at the camps and all killed before the end of 1942.

“The Bombing of Sofia”

Of course I've read Dad's private letters to my mum. They are in many ways all I have of my dad and the ability to understand the depth of love he had for my mother. They are both gone to the grave. I hope they really are together again and I don't think they would mind me, now, reading their letters.

All of the letters are addressed from North Africa and later on from Italy, from Bomber Command. Before Dad's final and doomed mission on-board the American-built B-17 heavy bomber the Thompson, he refers affectionately to be flying inside a Vickers Wellington craft. He wrote home in October of 1943:

Can you believe what I and the boys are watching? I think they are trying to boost our morale. We are all watching a film about the building of a new Vickers bomber at the Broughton factory. It's a new world record by all accounts, my love. The workers have given up their day off to meet the challenge. To build the new bird, Wellington number LN514 in as quick a time as humanly possible. It takes at least 60 hours to get one of these things complete, but these guys, men and women, have done it in just 23 hours and 50 minutes. Isn't that incredible? We can now build these new buggers as fast as Adolf can shoot them down. We did it. We beat the Yank's record of 48 hours, previously set in California. That'll put a smile on their faces. It's a newsreel Worker's Week-end film; they're going to watch in the States as well. This bird was flying within 25 hours.

From beginning to flight within 25 hours. Isn't that incredible?

<oOo>

You could sense how proud Dad was by his letters. You could sense the real pride he had in the Wellington. In an earlier letter he also noted;

Barnes Wallis has developed this geodesic construction method. It's based on his early airship designs, the same designs used on the early Wellesley Bomber. The fuselage is made up of 1650 elements; I know, mad, isn't it? She's aluminium alloy, the W-beams are duralumin. Wood is screwed onto the aluminium and covered over with Irish linen. It's treated with dope and makes her an outer skin. She's amazingly strong, a metal lattice, her stringers can support the weight, even from all the way up the other end.

She can still fly even without her skin, just the frame.

<oOo>

One thing that my father would never write home about was his fear. Never. He would protect mother at all times and just talk day to day pleasantries and military facts and figures. I guess this is a family trait I must have inherited genetically, directly from him. He must have known that this chit-chat of his reassured her. To talk about the war in such a day-to-day matter-of-fact way, as if the war was nothing to worry about at all, and he was just doing an everyday job like everybody else at the time. The only letter I ever read of his that even hinted at a sense of fear or realisation of his own mortality, was within his final letter, that letter found aside his body in the bomber during 1956.

Most of the letters talked about his friends and his relationships with others. You would come across words that gave you a great sense of time lapse like nigger and dead Hun. You felt a world away from a generation now long gone. With all my training with the force I cringe at the use of these words, but these letters are written back in the mid-1940s. They're not meant to be offensive I'm sure. I guess it's just the terminology they all used back then. Other words, RAF jargon, are used frequently and I needed some help from the old chaps down at the military club to explain them to me, I admit, the curious use of the term 'the two hundred,' a term that regularly crops up within his letters to Mum back home. From time to time you also read of Dad's despair at the war, how he questions himself about what he is doing there.

On the 11th January 1944, Dad wrote the following. It is the only confirmed date of one of his exact-referenced involvements in the raids over Sofia in Bulgaria:

Yesterday afternoon we joined a squadron of 143 American bombers, we ourselves made up just 44 Wellingtons during the darkness. We have again pounded Sofia into the ground. I imagine this is Liverpool below me and what I would think if the Hun were doing this to us, you there at home, terrified and all alone below a skyline of explosion. What would you be doing now? Is there any sense or reason in this campaign of strategic bombing? Will this make any real difference to the outcome of the war after all is done? We are bombing a city, a city full of citizens who just like everyone else in this God-forsaken war, are just trying to survive. The younger boys, they just like the thrill. They are here to kill Germans but they soon lose that sense of youthfulness from their pale, fresh faces. I watch the bombs fall down, that rain-fall of terror we deliver. They can't all be bad these people down below. We have no idea who we are really killing. No idea at all.

<oOo>

Dad had a terrific sense of humour and also he had a great sense of natural justice. I always got the feeling from these letters that were written home that he

was not a black and white person at all. That he was a very complex man with great warmth and human conscience, a man of great compassion.

I am fascinated by wartime stories and of wartime history but I could not have gone through what these men did. I read the story of Sergeant James Allen Ward. His Wellington had caught fire in mid-flight. The fire had broken out and taken hold inside the outer wing of the bomber. Sergeant Ward had climbed out of safety and onto the wing in mid-air to put the fire out. He kicked holes in the doped fabric, holes in which to gain a foothold and for which he used to hang on. James Ward successfully extinguished the fire, an action for which he earned the award of the Victoria Cross, the highest honour of all for any selfless act of bravery within the armed forces.

Think about it. Just stop for a moment and really think about it, this co-pilot who climbed out of his seat to physically smash holes in the wing of his own aircraft. There, thousands of feet up in the intense cold, hanging on for his life to save his crew, and all at such great personal risk. What kind of man has that courage? I am not that kind of man for sure, but my dad was that kind of man. He knew that on his final mission; knew that he probably wouldn't come home again, but he still volunteered. He volunteered because of what those Nazis had done to my mother's family back in Poland. He knew that in writing that final letter to her, she would somehow understand his sacrifice. This, she did. My mother did understand why he had sacrificed his own life. We, all of us here are alive today because of these men. We know nothing of courage: our fast food prepared within an instant and all that mindless gut-rotting mind-numbing television we sit and watch.

Superheroes, that's what these men were, all of them, superheroes. Superheroes who thought they were all normal. My dad, the rear gunner Brian 'Bull's-Eye' Wilkinson, a perfectly normal everyday superhero. I can still smell the whiskey on that letter, the last letter that Mum read before she died so very suddenly. Shall I read it for you?

July, 1944. My Dearest Evelina,

My two hundred is up again soon and I have leave to return home for 14 days. I shall be on the 16.30 from Piccadilly on the Thursday. Put the kettle on, the tea over here is quite undrinkable, almost like someone has been wringing out their socks in it. I'm a little fatter now. I do apologise. It's all that canned meat. I think that they, Bomber Command, think we are dogs and that's all we need. A can of the cheapest meat served several times a day and that'll keep us all smiling. I hope that after the war Winston Churchill will soon ban the sale of Spam!

How are you? Did you buy the dress after all? I really want to see you in it. A beautiful new dress for a very special lady. What shall we do? Do you have any plans my love? I know that I should spend some time down south with the

family but I've decided not to tell them I'm coming home this month. I want to spend the time just with you. Can we go dancing again? Let's find a dance band and I'll twirl you around like you are a princess, my very own royal princess, to see you twirl in that new dress of yours.

The war is nearly over now; rumour is that Bulgaria will soon join up with the Soviets in a unified attack. We are all together forcing the Hun all the way back to Berlin. Is it time to consider having our baby? I'd like to call her Bethany if you agree? I know it sounds silly but I've bought her some new clothes already. A little white christening gown, I bought it in Italy. Pure white silk. I know you will like it when you see it. Funny thing is it's made from an old parachute, don't worry, it's a new one, one taken out of service, but this old Italian lady makes them. They are so beautiful to look at.

I'll be home with you soon. I love and adore you so very much, can't wait to see you again,

Brian xxxxxx

<oOo>

There you have it: the letter that my mother Evelina was reading, reading again and again for a millionth time. The letter she was reading in that final moment when her heart finally broke and she died. The letter of events in which I guess, later on, led to my birth the following year in March. Mum had always told me that Dad was so convinced that their firstborn would be a girl. It seemed as if all firstborn babies in the Wilkinson family were always girls. I still have that old silk parachute christening gown that I would have worn had I been born a girl. Although just like Mum said, "Brian is so much more special now son, don't you think?"

Dad talked about Bomber Command considerably, about his friends, but never about the losses. He hid my mum from the real truth and horror of the war, a truth that I am now only really discovering, and beginning to understand.

I found out as much as I could about Sergeant James Allen Ward. He was awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery exactly as I described. I also continued to find out much more. In October 1943, workers at the Vickers Broughton factory did in fact give up their weekend to build Wellington number LN514 against the clock, as a propaganda and morale boosting exercise. This story as detailed in Dad's letter of 1944 is factually correct.

The Vickers Wellington (Vickers-Armstrongs), a twin-engine and long range medium bomber was designed in the mid-1930s at the British factory in Brooklands, Weybridge, in Surrey. The chief designer was R. K. Pierson.

During the early years of the out-break of World War II the Wellington was predominantly used as a night time bomber before the Avro-Lancaster, a four-

engined heavy became more prevalent within the wartime theatre of operations. The Vickers-Wellington was the only British-built aircraft to be continually produced throughout the entire course of the war, and used later (and particularly) as an anti-submarine aircraft. The aircraft was named after the 1st Duke of Wellington.

The geodesic structure of the Wellington Bomber gave it a very strong but light structure for its considerable size. The Wellington had a great advantage over other aircraft of its time given its load and range to power-ratio advantage, this without sacrificing its overall robustness, protectiveness and shell armouring.

Sofia, the capital city of Bulgaria suffered a series of Allied bombing raids during World War II. Bulgaria declared war against the United Kingdom and The United States of America on the 13th December 1941. Sofia was targeted for strategic bombing missions between the periods of late 1943 until early in 1944. Bulgaria and other Axis powers were now within the comfortable bombing range needed by the Allies from bases they now occupied in Southern Italy.

The raids resulted in the direct deaths of 1,374 people and additional non-fatal injuries accounting for a further 1,743 persons. 12,564 buildings were damaged. 2,670 of these were completely razed to the ground. Allied aircraft losses amounted to a total of 117.

Note; A 'two-hundred' as it appears in the letter, refers to a minimum flying requirement of 200 flying hours flown in active service before a crew-member's sortie was considered to have been completed.

Bombing Raids – Sofia

- 6 April 1941. 17 aircraft. Industrial section of Sofia. Fatalities; 8. Kyustendil. Fatalities; 58 civilians, military, 2 Bulgarian, 8 German. Injured; 59 civilians, military, 5 Bulgarian, 31 German. Additional raid of Petrich and Haskovo. Fatalities; 18. Injured; 28.
- 14 November 1943. 91 aircraft. Industrial section of Sofia. Fatalities; 59 mixed civilian and military. Injured; 128.
- 24 November 1943. 60 aircraft. Sofia, Central Rail Station. Fatalities; 5 people. Injured; 29.
- 10 December 1943. 120 aircraft. Sofia, Hadzhi Dimitar, Industrialen, Malashevtsi and Voenna Rampa Quarters, Vrazhdebna Airport. Fatalities; 11.
- 20 December 1943. Sofia. Fatalities; 64. Injured 93.
- 30 December 1943. Sofia, Central Rail Station. Fatalities; 70. Injured; 96.
- 10 January 1944. Sofia. 187 aircraft. Fatalities; 947. Injured; 611. (Referred to in Father's letter)
- 16 March 1944. Sofia. 50 aircraft. Fatalities; 43. Injured; 58.

24 March 1944. Sofia, 40 aircraft. Fatalities; 0.
29 March 1944. Sofia. 50 aircraft. Fatalities; 0
30 March 1944. Sofia. 370 aircraft. Fatalities; 139.
17 April 1944. Sofia. 350 aircraft. Fatalities; 128. Injured; 69.

It was not until nearly some seventy years after the end of World War II, that on the 20th June 2012, a £6m memorial to commemorate the deaths of the 55,573 British airmen of Bomber Command was unveiled by the Queen. Air Chief Marshall Sir Stephen Dalton said, “Bomber Command’s service and raw courage had finally been recognised.” The unveiling ceremony took place in London's Green Park. During a fly-past, a Lancaster Bomber was used to drop many thousands of poppies in memory of their service and courage. Large scale criticism of strategic wartime bombing raids had prevented any earlier plans for such a memorial for many years.

The memorial consists of seven bronzed Lancaster Bomber crew airmen. Veterans from around the world described it as “impressive” and “moving”. The event was organised by the RAF Benevolent Fund which will look after the on-going maintenance of the memorial. Russell Oldmeadow, now 90 years of age and a veteran of the war, from Canberra (Australia) was present. He was a Lancaster pilot during WW2, and one of many Commonwealth airmen present. “My brother was killed - that's one reason why I'm here,” he said. “But it's also a great occasion and I'm privileged. The memorial is absolutely magnificent.”

Air Chief Marshal Dalton said, “Many of those who gave us our freedom, and to whom this memorial is dedicated, cannot join us physically, but their spirit is certainly here. For their bravery and sacrifice which helped to give us our freedom, we will never forget them.” An extract of the poem ‘For the Fallen’ was read aloud by Doug Radcliffe, the secretary of the Bomber Command Association. The repetition of the final words, “We will remember them,” by all gathered at the ceremony, was followed by a trumpeter playing the “Last Post” while veterans and current service personnel saluted. Pilot Alan Biffen who was present that day, and himself a war veteran of 87 years of age, said, “I am so glad that at long last Bomber Command is being remembered, not only for what it achieved, but also for the lives of the young men who never came back.”

The memorial features a 9ft-high sculpture of seven Bomber Command aircrew and was designed by Liam O'Connor. It is built in Bronze and Portland stone and has an aluminium covering which was re-claimed from a Handley Page Halifax III bomber shot down over Belgium in May of 1944. The sculptor, Philip Jackson, wanted the dedication to be reflective. “I chose the moment when they get off the aircraft and they've dumped all their heavy kit on to the ground.”

An inscription written on the face of the memorial reads, "Also commemorates those of all nations who lost their lives in the bombing raids of 1939-1945." The average age of a bomber crew member was just 22.

Almost half of the 125,000 men of Bomber Command died in active service. There were no campaign medals awarded to Bomber Command after the war. The irony of this, having read those words in Dad's letter, "They will never build a monument to remember me, us lot, the bomber crews who kill women and children." Notably; Bomber Command was never mentioned during the Prime Minister's (Winston Churchill's) victory speech at the close of the war. One life of so many now forgotten, my own father, Brian 'Bull's-Eye' Wilkinson.

“The Final Mission”

You cannot grow up without a fascination for wartime history, not when you have a background like mine. Dad, Brian ‘Bull’s-Eye’ Wilkinson, must have been involved in so many bombing raids, but Sofia is the only one he makes direct reference to in his letters home. For what reason I do not know, and I understand that after all these years now that I will never know this answer. Trying to find out all about the missing pieces of what is a fascinating jigsaw of a man’s final moments, led me to a final story, one that none of us had known previously. I had realised many years ago the controversy caused by the British and Allied strategic bombing campaigns and had always assumed this was the reason why Dad and so many thousands of others, had no memorial, why Dad had no service medals or other written authoritative accounts praising the actions of the Thompson Bomber Crew. These three men had, as we were told, changed the course of the war. Why on earth did we still know so little about them? What really happened that day? I thought about it continually. The more I found out about my father and of his personal involvement in the war, the more answers I needed. When one was given, always without fail, it led me on to a further question.

It was all this latter curiosity that would lead me to the final answer. My research and my letters, the many letters that I wrote to the few, but still living, former Bomber Command veterans; writing to them to ask for knowledge of my father. It was an internet forum that finally unveiled the truths to long unanswered questions. After Doreen died I had so much time to myself. Loneliness creeps in very fast, like a cold frost, and after a time I tried to go out and meet new people. Just to get out of the flat, that endless climbing of the walls, and to make friends again.

In 2005, I joined the Liverpool Veterans of WW2 Association and they were the golden goose. They had so much information for me. The story about my father as told to my mother Evelina back in 1956 was the known by all at the time version of events; they, the old guys, who would sit at the bar and just drink beer all day as they hand-rolled their cigarettes. They knew nothing more than this, this original and official version of events. The forum, the forum online that they had recommended to me, was the final link. The forum, Friends of The Forgotten Heroes of Bomber Command WW2 - as it was so named. I placed the following ad under a thread called ‘Searching for The Forgotten’. It read:

“Brian Josef- Benjamin Wilkinson born Liverpool 1945 to Evelina, seeking knowledge of his father, also Brian. Can anybody with knowledge of Brian ‘Bull’s-Eye’ Wilkinson please make contact? Flew with Bomber Command North Africa and Southern Italy WW2. Involved in bombing raids of Sofia, Bulgaria, as a rear gunner. Later flew on a final ill-fated mission, a B17

American Bomber. Pilot known to be American, an unknown Texan with French bombardier named Pierre. Aircraft re-named the Thompson. Crew nickname was the Magnificent Three. Any help is most appreciated.”

<oOo>

And then, three days later, on January the 12th 2005 at 4.16 pm precisely, a reply came. It read;

“Far too much information there lad. All you needed to say was ‘Bull’s-Eye’. Best God-damned gunner in the sky, wasn’t a lad at base who wouldn’t fly with ‘Bull’s-Eye’ Brian.’ What can I do for you son?

Yours Albert.”

<oOo>

I talked for a while to this old chap about my dad’s wartime history. I heard many stories that confirmed just what I had read in so many of Dad’s private letters to Mum. I told him all about Dad’s letters before I finally posed the unanswered question. “What was Dad’s final mission?” I asked. A reply soon came;

“Not a bloody clue lad but I know a man who will; Stanley Jack, a Londoner living in The Midlands now, suppose he couldn’t help that bit. Very old mind, in a care home now just like the rest of us sad old buggers. I’ll do what I can. You won’t find him on the computer, wants nothing to do with them. Back soon, fingers crossed. Consider the mission accepted.

Yours Albert.”

<oOo>

It felt that weeks had passed until I finally heard back from old Albert. In reality it was only eleven days. He had contacted Stanley Jack and had messaged me in private. There was Stanley’s home address in front of me, a hospice on the outskirts of Wolverhampton in the West Midlands. I worried about this, a hospice address, was Stanley dying? I didn’t want to trouble a dying man but equally, and I know quite selfishly, I had a sense of urgency. Time was limited. So I wrote to Stanley Jack immediately and, to avoid any further and unnecessary loss of such valuable time, I invited myself down to Wolverhampton for a cup of tea.

I remember his first words to me as I walked in. “Got your letter my boy. Well there’s a thing, a double of the man himself, spittin’ bloody image you

are,” he said to me. “Sit yourself down, just watching the race.” So there I sat for over an hour watching the race, and the next one and so on; horse racing. The room was comfortable, a window over the garden. Benches placed around rosebeds with older people and families enjoying the sunshine. “Don’t look out there son, nothing out there but niggers, all niggers now son, whole bloody country’s niggers,” he would go on to say to me. Not the better of first impressions for a policeman, I thought.

And then, after the racing, with the telly now finally turned off, the conversation began. “Outside now, come on let’s go. I need a fag. You have got some fags lad haven’t you?” he uttered forcibly. I couldn’t help but see the oxygen cylinder to the left hand side of Stanley’s bed and looked back at him quite astonished. Though, outside we went, him in this old grey NHS wheelchair, and we both sat beside the pond, a pond full of fish to which Stanley again added, “Don’t be looking in there son, niggers all of ’em.” Commenting on what was obviously quite a fine and rather expensive collection of mixed Koi carp.

Just like my father before me, I hand-rolled my own baccy, and I rolled him a cigarette. Stanley’s hands were clearly too fragile and shaky to do so for himself. They wouldn’t allow him to smoke inside and without family visits he was quite stuck. The nursing staff were very kind to him, he told me, but they were expressly forbidden to give patients cigarettes. He remarked that he thought the world had gone crazy, that he had survived World War II, and here he was now, not allowed to have a “bloody cigarette”. I didn’t ask why he was there, at the hospice. He seemed to think the only reason was that somehow he had driven his wife crazy back at home, and she’d now got him out of her way. I knew that there had to be so much more to the story than this, but I didn’t pry further.

Despite it being January, it wasn’t too chilly outside in the garden, in fact a crisp but warm sunny afternoon. Stanley wasn’t too quick off the mark in telling me what I had driven all this way to hear, and soon wanted to go back in. Not for long mind, he clearly had other plans, but he wanted to show me something. He directed me to a beside cabinet, lower left hand drawer, a photo album contained within. An old fashioned grey card cover and the title ‘The Boys’ written across it. “First page lad,” he shouted to me as he beamed me a smile.

There on the front page, the very first picture I saw, there was Evelina my mother. Sat there on the side of a bed and with her skirt pulled up, not too risqué but just enough to display a silk stocking top to the right crossed thigh. My face dropped and I turned to look back at him. “No worries there lad. It’s a photo of a photo your dad took of her. Gorgeous woman your mother, never met her personally but felt like I was married to her myself,” was the reply he gave to my expression of total amazement. Just like old Mr Parker had said, it seemed

that not just everybody in Liverpool, but now everybody in the RAF had wanted to catch the affections of my mother.

He explained to me that the photo was taken from another photo that my father had kept beside him in his original Wellington aircraft. Stanley had taken a photograph of the original picture. It then dawned on me just how well Stanley must have known my father to be able to do such a thing. Had he actually flown with him? I had so many questions but didn't like to just ask them without the opportunity having first arisen. Stanley was clearly very ill and I didn't want him to feel that I had only come to bother him with my own selfish inquiries.

Then we were off yet again. "Bring the baccy," he said. So me, a 94-year-old terminally ill war veteran, and an old metal NHS wheelchair went to The Nag's Head, only a short walk from his room at Willow Drive Hospice and we were both soon there together in the pub. There were two pubs on Willow Drive that I had noticed but this one was the only choice given to me. Not really any choice at all. "Don't wanna go in that one son. Ain't nothing in there but niggers," was by now quite the predictable comment from this bigoted old school racist.

I wanted to challenge his racism, this old age bigot that I had found myself in the company of today, but I couldn't. A war veteran, a terminally ill one at that, a very ill 94-year-old man who had known my father. He, Stanley, using this grossly offensive word that I had heard used previously and frequently within my dad's own personal letters. He was just of a generation Stanley Jack, his behaviour quite unacceptable but I couldn't help but feel a sense of understanding. There wasn't anything I was going to be able to say to him now that would alter his behaviour. He just wasn't going to understand.

All of the cigarettes were on me, as was all of the beer that day; in total eight pints over a period of three hours that he had, by now, drank. However; the conversation soon proved to be priceless. A conversation for which I would have paid ten thousand pounds. The conversation in which I learnt so much about my dad. A conversation that told me the following.

Dad had originally been based in North Africa and had bombed Italy extensively throughout the early years of the war. On 3rd September 1943, the Allies had invaded mainland Italy. He had then transferred to operations based there and had therefore subsequently been involved in the bombing raids of Bulgaria. It was in Italy that Dad and Stanley had first met. It also transpired that Stanley wasn't his real name after all, but a nickname he had earned for himself, just like my father had during the war, from other servicemen in Bomber Command. Jack was his first name; his last name was Shirley. I could fully appreciate why and after the end of the war, he had stuck to using the name I had known him as, Stanley Jack.

He flew with Dad on many occasions. Stanley was a pilot. During one particular bombing run they had been shot down. They had been attacked by three German fighters that evening and Father had managed single handedly to

take all three of these attacking fighters out of the air. They had received considerable damage. The Wimpy as Stanley called it (the Wellington was popularly known as the Wimpy by service personnel, after J. Wellington Wimpy from the Popeye cartoons) was in critical condition. He (the pilot) and the co-pilot and navigator were unhurt; the Bombardier was seriously injured as was another gunner. The fifth member of the crew, also a gunner, had already been killed. "Can't do anything about it now son. He was gone, clean and quick," Stanley coldly told me.

The crew had bailed out over Italy just 30 miles from base. The hydraulics all shot up and quite useless. My father and the navigator (a man who Stanley had only referred to in the conversation as Arnold), had parachuted the injured crew to safety whilst the two pilots had fought hard together to maintain the control and altitude of the wounded aircraft. They had also 'chuted the body of the dead gunner. The remaining three had then jumped at low altitude after a desperate bid to save the Wellington had failed.

"And there we were son, back on terra-firma again, only your dad wasn't quite with us yet," he laughed. I looked at him agonisingly and imagined my father to be still stuck inside the plane. Then he said to me, "In the bloody tree son, your dad had got himself all caught up, the useless sod, stuck in a bloody tree. That's why they call me Stanley lad. I was the only one of us that still had a knife to cut him down from there; a Stanley knife it was. That's how your dad got his name too, the name 'Bull's-Eye' Wilkinson, for bringing those three bastards down all on his own."

Mum had never told me anything of this story and Stanley Jack assured me that she wouldn't have known about it. He told me that all of the crews would never tell their wives and girlfriends of such things. "War is war son and you leave it at the back-door," was his humbling response. The two injured crew that had been bailed-out by my father and Arnold had both survived. The body of the gunner was later recovered by local villagers and remains buried to this day in the small village cemetery of Carpi, Modena Province. His name was, and will always remain to be known; Gunner Joshua Petterson aged 23 years. Of the remaining crew, they are all now long deceased except the pilot, Stanley Jack.

I reached into my top left-hand-side jacket pocket and pulled out that letter, the last letter that Dad had ever written to my mother, Evelina. Somehow the timing just seemed to be appropriate. Stanley read it quietly. I know he read through it more than once. "Sofia changed a lot of us son. The war was nearly won and this just didn't seem to be right," he said, and I saw a single tear drop from him before he quickly wiped his eye. "It all brings so much back to me now, I watched your dad leave that night with the B17 on February 26th 1945 at 22.30 hours precisely. All that the man in the black bowler hat told your mother in 1956 is correct but..." and then he paused.

"Do you know about your granddad son?" he asked me. "All I knew of my grandfather, Papa Wilkinson as Dad called him, is that he died in France during

the First World War,” - I replied. “Oh he did indeed,” replied Stanley. “We killed him you know, not the Hun.” “We?” I queried. “I don’t understand what you mean.” “We,” he stated firmly once again. “The British. We shot him for desertion of duty. He was executed by his own side,” Stanley explained to me cautiously.

Stanley didn’t have any further details other than to say that this story was commonly known to be correct back at Bomber Command. Dad had told him personally that this was the truth and that Dad had somehow thereafter felt the need to prove himself. Grandfather Wilkinson had suffered from shell-shock apparently, and had been quite ill. He had left the front and had been found later hiding in a French village. “Sorry son to have to tell you this,” Stanley softly uttered. “It was never necessary. Cold blooded murder of our own, that’s all it was. Why your dad even gave it a second thought is beyond me,” he said. “It wasn’t just what had happened in Poland to your mother’s side of the family that had made him volunteer that night. It was also something he held much deeper down inside. Take me home now son. I’ve ‘ad too much drink and I’ve said far too much I know. Take me home and I’ll put the kettle on.” We talked about what had really happened to granddad on the way back. I had absolutely no memory or recollection of anybody in the family ever talking about Granddad Wilkinson’s fate. The penny had never dropped. Did anybody else know anything about this secret within the family? Why hadn’t they told me? I just grew up believing he had been killed during the First World War in France. When I ponder on this thought now, I suppose that nobody had ever lied to me about this. Then again, they certainly hadn’t told me the whole truth either, had they? Perhaps they thought it would upset me in some way.

Thereafter, when back inside the warmth of Stanley’s own room (after three hours of drunken wartime conversation down at The Nag’s Head), I asked him directly; “What was Dads final mission Stanley? Please tell me what you know?”

He told me how Dad and he were the best of friends, confidants to each other. How he and the boys that night had gone to a bar and drunk heavily, all except Brian who was prepared to fly. Stanley and the other boys that evening had gone upstairs to seek comfort from, as he put it, the young Italian girls. Brian had not gone with them, he was adamant of this fact. “Your dad would never do such a thing,” he told me again and again, and talked about how my dad was so completely and utterly devoted to my mother.

He hadn’t seen Dad leave the bar that evening. He had left quietly and quite unnoticed much earlier on. Though, they had all watched Father’s plane, the Thompson, take off at 22.30 hours that very same evening. They had all returned drunkenly to base for evening curfew. “I’ll tell you the truth Brian now. Your father would want that, I know,” he said in a very calm and almost by now sober manner. “Roll me another cigarette then,” he asked of me. “There’s nothing those fuckers can do about it now I don’t suppose anyway. Top-secret my arse.

You couldn't keep a secret like that quiet down at Bomber Command," he said, "That's the truth lad and your father had already told me everything before he flew that night, regardless." The Thompson had taken off as scheduled on February 26th, 1945 at 22.30 hours precisely, from the base in Foggia, Southern Italy. The crew, known as the Magnificent Three had been hand-picked because of their military expertise. It was a joint Allied forces mission of the upmost importance and secrecy. The Thompson had left Italy that evening en route for Soviet occupied Bulgaria, and to deliver a single massive payload explosive.

I was told that the Soviet forces, our new wartime allies, were to believe that the bombing mission had been conducted by German aircraft and that the plane had been subsequently shot down by the British over France. Two German scientists, now working as captives in a recently Soviet acquired former Nazi research facility in North Eastern Bulgaria, had supplied covert information. They had confirmed military intelligence gathered from the original radio communications known to be from Major Frank Thompson. This had been crucial information obtained from partisan resistance fighters before communication had been lost with them on the ground on the 23rd May 1944. A weapon of such magnitude had been developed; an atomic weapon that had the Soviet Union not have invaded Bulgaria in 1944, would have most certainly been used against us by the Germans. A weapon that had been just months away from field use and commission.

Although no longer a direct threat to the Allies at the time, this former Bulgarian-based German research facility could not be allowed to fall into the hands of the Soviets. The Thompson's mission was to deliver the bomb onto the target, to bomb the facility and in doing so the Soviets were to believe that all German research personnel had been killed in the airstrike. The Thompson was to land prior to the attack and pick up both scientists. These now allied friendly German scientists and at a secret pop-up airfield constructed for the single use mission purpose within rural, Soviet occupied, Bulgaria. Having landed and collected the two additional passengers as covertly organised, it would take off and thereafter go on to destroy the facility behind them. Many lives would be lost alongside the technology housed within. "All we wanted to steal that night was the brains behind it all," Stanley said.

Ironic as it sounds, our once German enemy was now going to assist us in defending ourselves from the future attack of our now wartime allies, the Soviet Union. The plane had been stripped to allow for the massive increased weight of this single bomb, the additional crew of two and one ton of aluminium piping. The aluminium piping, rods of approximately three feet in length which all but filled the plane, were to be dropped individually and slowly by parachute throughout the mission. This system was known to defuse the effectiveness of both early Soviet and German radar systems alike. The two German scientists responsible for the creation of this atomic weapon were to be smuggled on board the Thompson to the safety and future containment of the British mainland.

“The fact that the Thompson crashed during her return at Dover can only be confirmation that this mission must have proved successful,” Stanley confirmed.

I sat bemused by what I had heard from Stanley and was completely lost for words. “Before you go,” he said, “Just one more thing. Pass me that photo album of mine, the photos of your father and the boys again?” He opened the front page and there with his pen he wrote inside, “Upon the time having come, I give this album to Brian J. B. Wilkinson of Liverpool, son of Brian ‘Bull’s-Eye’ Wilkinson, the best rear gunner in the sky and to him I owe my life.”

So there I was. I had just been told how my father had saved the world from nuclear obliteration and within the same sentence he, Stanley, then says to me, “Before you go.” I would most definitely be arranging to chat with old Stanley again and very soon about this rather important Bomber Command revelation but the words, “Before you go” intimated to me that Stanley was by now tired of conversation and clearly needed to sleep. “Where there’s war you find heroes and where you find heroes there’re secrets,” he said. A wartime revelation of such magnitude that now appeared to be so just a matter of fact for him.

Stanley Jack died peacefully on the 4th February, soon after we first met. The wartime photo album, as promised, was given to me at Stanley’s funeral later that week. It contained many photographs of Brian ‘Bull’s-Eye’ Wilkinson that had never previously been seen by me or my family before.

Had Nazi Germany really been that close to developing an atomic bomb? At the out-break of the World War II, Germany, under the leadership of the fascist dictator Adolf Hitler, had maintained a significant advantage over the Allies in regard to innovative weapons technology. These secret German weapons, as they were known to the Allied Forces, were referred to at the time and back in Germany as, the Wonder Weapons. This was not a coincidental advantage. Pre-war Germany was an extremely and technologically advanced nation with a firm technological history, born out of its military innovation, such military innovation that led to her resurgence as one of technological superiority once again toward the end of the war.

Hitler had been elected on the back of his firm and declared mandate to go to war. He did, however, win by only a narrow margin. Massive financial budgets were released to his military officials alongside an unlimited supply of natural resources and raw materials within a national offensive to prepare for such a war. By the outbreak of WW2, the German military machine was already well equipped with the most advanced weapons available to them.

The Allies at this same time, noticeably the British, were not prepared to return to war and as a nation were crippled by post-WW1 pacifism and the human losses of the previous conflict. The First World War had been huge and incalculable; the will to fight Germany once again was long gone. Nothing remained of a viable British defence budget and any realistic military response to this new rising threat of post-World War One fascist Germany was inconceivable. Stalin’s Soviet centralist totalitarian regime had also failed.

Failed not only to support the free thinking of Soviet Russian military and technological innovation, but had also actively repressed it. These combined factors all added together to allow Germany, during the period 1933 until 1939 to maintain a significant military advantage over its enemies.

Hitler's over confident attitude and assurances of success during the early stages of the war led him to make new wartime budgetary cuts. These financial cuts were made on all new weaponry and any such new weaponry that would not be expected to be operational or to be available for use in the field beyond an eighteen month time period. This short-sighted decision and the subsequent gross lack of German military investment, only resulted in those previous militarily and technologically advanced gains that had been made to be soon and swiftly lost. This was all to the struggling Allies' full advantage.

The advantage was only regained by Germany through massive re-investment toward the end of the war. But all at the cost of immediately existing and readily available resources being taken away from the desperately and much needed mass-production of mature field weaponry. Germany's sudden and desperate re-investment in new weapons' technology, though producing some impressive results, had now come far too late to save her. By this point in time Germany, now at war with the USA also, was all but in name, already defeated.

These German technological innovations included the Arado 234 - the world's first jet bomber, a highly advanced single-seated bomber with automated pilot ejection seat. Fitted with twin jet-engines and breakthrough technology in regard to aviation stream-lining, it was quite simply too fast for the Allies to intercept. The Arado was also fitted with the first rear-facing, though at the same time, pilot-aimed machine gun. Jet fighter technology also included the Messerschmitt 262, the world's first jet fighter and used predominantly as a bomber interceptor. Its sister plane, the Messerschmitt 163 was the world's first rocket-powered fighter, again an incredibly fast and extremely agile short-range defence bomber interceptor. Resembling more the characteristics of a re-usable anti-aircraft missile, it could scramble at immediate notice and counter-attack Allied bombers at speeds exceeding 600 mph.

It would attack without prior warning, exhaust its very limited fuel supply quickly and then glide back to base. Even this unpowered gliding speed was still far too fast to allow any Allied bomber crew or accompanying fighter escort to catch it. It is noted that one single German pilot using such a 163 was able to shoot down three B-17 heavy bombers, this consecutively during one single sortie. Allied bomber crews, those who came face-to-face with it in air-combat, were thus considered to be nothing less than sitting ducks.

The Heinkel 162 was another jet fighter but one designed to be mass-produced by a minimally skilled workforce using readily available and non-strategic materials and further to be piloted by fresh young pilots with minimal training. Just 69 days after Heinkel was given the production go-ahead, the 162 made its first successful test flight.

Other advanced German aircraft of the time included the Dornier 335. Unlike typical twin-engine aircraft fitted with propellers (one on each wing), the Dornier fighter had one propeller mounted to the central engine front-nose position and a secondary propeller mounted at the aircraft's tail. It could climb at a rate of speed far greater than any other propeller powered fighter available. The Junkers 87, more commonly referred to as the 'Stuka' was the world's first efficient precision bomber. To this day it is still considered to be the best dive bomber ever manufactured throughout WW2. It played a key role in the German Blitzkrieg victories.

Germany also produced the first militarily operational helicopters, notably the Flettner 282. This was a small maritime reconnaissance helicopter. Another, the Focke Achgelis 223 was a utility helicopter used extensively during the battle of the Mediterranean. Due to successful Allied bombardment however, Germany's helicopter production remained low.

The Schrage Musik was an upward-facing recoilless machine gun and the Sondergerate, its directly downward firing equivalent. Both guns were installed on many fighter aircraft. The guns were automatically triggered by photoelectric sensors when flying under the target bomber's night-time shadow or at the targeted tanks on the ground below.

Other German firsts included guided weapons systems such as the Henschel Hs-293. On August 27th 1943, during its first operational use, it successfully sank a British warship. The Hs-293 was a radio-controlled guided missile that had a 500kg warhead. Over 2300 of such missiles were used with deadly accuracy throughout the final years of the war. They were launched mid-air by the bomber crew's bombardier.

The first guided bomb, the Ruhrstahl Fritz-X was responsible for the sinking of the Italian warship *Roma* on the 9th September 1943. Comparable to today's modern bunker-busters, the two radio-controlled Fritz-X bombs (weighing over 3460 lbs each) hit the 45,000 ton vessel so hard that it sunk immediately. Only 20 per-cent of Fritz-X bomb weight was actually explosive material, the remaining weight being solely solid metal giving it the ability to pierce even the hardest of battleship armour known and available to the Allies at the time.

The V-1 rocket was the world's first cruise missile. This jet-powered rocket was fitted with an 1875 lb warhead and could travel to any destination within a range of 125 miles. Launched from fixed ground positions, these mobile launchers were very hard to identify and find. Only occasionally were they ever launched mid-air from bombers. A piloted suicide attack version of the V-1 rocket was also developed but never actually used in combat. The later developed V-2 became the first long range ballistic missile, delivering a 2150 lb warhead to a range of 200 miles. Unlike the cruising altitude of the V-1, the V-2 ballistic missile would fall directly downward from extreme altitude and at speeds exceeding 2500 mph.

Unlike today's modern nuclear submarines, the diesel-powered equivalents of World War II were designed to submerge only when required to attack. They were required, out of technical necessity, to spend the vast amount of their time on the sea surface. The German Type 21 however, was the first developed to be able to submerge throughout its entire patrol.

With most impressive submerge and resurface speeds and a battery-powered range of over 300 miles, it was required to re-surface only to use its diesel engines for necessary battery recharge. This resurfacing and recharge technique only required a minimal snorkel type exhaust system to be raised to break the water surface and not the resurfacing of the entire submarine. It used advanced SONAR to target allied shipping whilst remaining submerged and without having to raise a periscope.

It was also fitted with a secondary electric motor especially for silent combat running and also air-conditioning systems. It is said that the Type 21 could reload its missile tubes faster than any other submarine. A later development, the Type 23 was a smaller version of the Type 21 and developed specifically as an attack submarine weighing just 250 tons. Manned only by a crew of 14 submariners, it was designed for use in low level waters and coastal tidal areas. The Type 23 could complete a full dive in less than ten seconds if required.

Years in advance of its time was also a stealth type submarine with a painted coating that made surfaced German submarines almost invisible to infra-red night time detection. The coating was also an absorption layer capable of absorbing Allied RADAR waves, this coupled with the first use of electrically powered torpedoes that did not leave bubble traces or streams in the water behind them. These older and dated torpedo traces were often used by the Allies to detect the position of an attacking sub.

Other notable German advances in war technology included radio navigation, the forefather of the modern GPS systems had been used by bomber crews since the beginning of World War II. German bombers could efficiently navigate their way to their targets using this new system during their complete darkness night-time raids. The system operated on fixed radio transmitters and radio receivers installed within the bombers super-structure – an equivalent to which the Allied forces did not develop until much later in the war.

The German army were also issued with the Sturmgewehr 44 - the world's first assault rifle. At the time of issue this gun was equivalent to the technology of a modern M-16 and AK-47, it being a practical compromise between the basic field rifle and the sub-machine gun but now combining the combat advantages of both. The German army had use of the first synthetic fuel, a replacement to the traditional reliance on petroleum based products; but one which despite massive quantity of production plants involved in production process, proved to be far more expensive. It was consequently proven economically unviable for mass manufacture.

And now to end this post-war chapter of mine and on a much more terrifying note. Germany was also the first country in the world to develop chemical weapons: this being three defined types of nerve gas. They were tabun gas in 1936, sarin gas later in 1938 and finally soman gas during 1944. They were all far more lethal than any previously known or previously used.

Unlike mustard gas, which would burn away at human skin tissue, these new nerve gases behaved more akin to snake venom by paralysing the essential muscles required for breathing. The Allied forces were oblivious to the existence of this most vile and horrific secret German weapon and had no knowledge until the end of the war that German artillery forces had already been fully equipped with it.

Germany on the other hand wrongly presumed that we, the Allies, already possessed chemical weapons which were equal to the power and destruction of their own. Winston Churchill publicly announced to Hitler that should Germany ever use chemical warfare against us, then he would in retaliation "Rain down the entire British stockpile." It was this false sense of the mutually assured destruction of both nations that prevented Germany from using them in combat.

“Have You Ever Had That Feeling That Someone’s Watching You?”

It took a few days of serious thought before what Stanley had said to me really, well honestly, sank in: the story that he had told me about Dad’s final flight. All so much sadder knowing that Dad had almost made it home and how different life would have been had he done so. There was a sense that there was so much more that had been left untold, somehow that this story wasn’t over and far from being so. There had to be so much more to all this, answers to questions that I would probably never find out. I would never, now, get the whole true facts, of this I felt sure. Stanley was now dead and buried. I had his old photograph album and I wanted to know more about the pictures - who, where and when? But all the old boys, Stanley’s crew too, were all now long gone; dead and buried.

I updated my online thread, told the story so far as it was on the forum and it generated much discussion although no new information came from it. The local paper on Merseyside picked up on my wartime story. They published everything, all exactly as I had been told. So now I wanted some time away, time to think and reflect. To travel to the places that Dad had made reference too. I had the story so far but the need to retrace his own personal journey, to follow in his own footsteps where possible, grew stronger inside.

A holiday was needed. That’s it, and I had plenty of annual leave now due to me. I never ever took all of my full holiday entitlement from the force as there was nowhere to go without my Doreen beside me. Always so much work to do, working with the residents on the Drover. So we planned a new holiday together, the first since she had died. I know she is dead; you’ll just have to humour me on this point as I want her to come with me too.

Just imagine as I do, imagine that she is at my side once more. I need to think that she can hear me. Grief never goes for it doesn’t ease. The pain always remains and you just learn to live with it. I’ve never managed to adjust to the loss of such happiness, that happiness we shared together, and I was quite unable to adjust to my new life, this new life of complete emptiness.

I packed up Winjin’ Pom. He was all freshly serviced mechanically, the oil change and filters. Now he was as ever, raring to go again. I’d forgotten what fun it was working on that old bugger again. In addition, I renewed my road-side recovery service and membership of the vintage auto-club. I packed up my favourite CDs for the long trip, the music of Jonathan Taylor essential; a British singer songwriter. Deep, poetic and moving and acoustic stuff mainly. He’d written many songs about war and conflict, ones that I could directly and emotionally relate to. I guess it is my obsession with military history creeping into my music taste again, I suppose.

“So where shall we go first, my dear?” I asked. Doreen was very keen to travel to France; to visit the battlefields of World War I. “We need to start with

your grandfather I think love. We need to find out if he really was executed and see if Stanley was actually correct in telling you this dear,” she smiled.

I bought a lap-top, a new personnel computer. Nothing too posh but a good one, just as a little treat for myself. I told the salesman that I wanted speed, reliability and ease of use, nothing too fancy or complicated. I explained that I was going to set up a blog, with the intention of writing a book. I needed basic word processing software and an unlimited connection to the internet, a connection that would work, be reliable from anywhere that I would find myself during my European travels. This, a must have, so I could upload my story and keep the interested boys back home informed. Of course, I also bought a new easy-to-use French dictionary, pocket sized, to take along just in case.

I had got the hang of it quite easily, using the new computer that is. I had worked on them for several years at the station and the police had always offered us older bobbies any new information technology training that we needed or indeed wanted. It was easy. We just filled in the training requisition form and handed it in, and they had never said no to me. There must have been a bigger budget for that I suppose. The forum too had opened a whole new world for me and I soon naturally gravitated to the the First World War, WW1, forums as well. One was particularly interesting. ‘The Great War Forum’ it was so called and from there I discovered many more links to the most useful resources available to me online.

I learnt a new French word, not from the dictionary but from those such links that I had followed on the internet. I posted “Searching for information on Brian ‘Bull’s-Eye’ Wilkinson’s dad, John E. Wilkinson” etc. It wasn’t too easy as I had so little information to go on. In fact I had no information on him at all, just a name and the circumstances of his death. I soon found out that wasn’t going to be a problem. The new French word I learnt was *fusil*, which translated into English means rifle or gun. Execution by firing squad used to be called fusillading, an English word derived from this French word. The online site Shot at Dawn provided so much stuff of interest.

Usually, all members of the firing squad were instructed to fire simultaneously. It prevents disruption to the process, but also the inability to identify the member who had fired that lethal shot. Sometimes, but by no means always, only some of the guns had live rounds and the others were loaded with blanks. It took me a while to understand why, but I guess that if you are going to kill someone, and a friend perhaps who had fought alongside you in battle, guilt must play a weighty part. Stanley’s words come back to me when I think about it. “Cold blooded murder by our own side,” that’s what he had said. “It was cold blooded murder.”

The execution is traditionally carried out at dawn giving rise to the term, ‘shot at dawn.’ Though usually, and in reality it meant shot at first light which can be up to an hour in time later than sunrise. I found it almost inconceivable to read that many executions were carried out with the soldier tied into a chair and

in a sitting position. This is what I read about my grandfather. He was shot by firing squad whilst seated. Then I learnt another new French word. It was the word *coup de grâce*. The *coup de grâce* is a final and single after shot from a pistol by the unit commander and into the back or side of the victims head. This was not only used in the cases where the initial volley proved unsuccessful, but it was used as a way to ensure certainty.

My grandfather, John Edward Wilkinson had been executed by the British for cowardice. His name I discovered was on a memorial in Staffordshire, his name written alongside the other 306 British and commonwealth soldiers who were executed by the British. My journey to France with Doreen would start here, at the memorial in Alrewas.

I read a book by Robert Graves, (*Goodbye to All That*, 1929) and he had written the following:

“I had my first direct experience of official lying when I arrived at Le Havre in May 1915 and read the back-files of army orders at the rest camp. They contained something like twenty reports of men shot for cowardice or desertion. Yet a few days later the responsible minister in the House of Commons, answering a question from a pacifist, denied that sentence of death for a military offence had been carried out in France on any member of His Majesty's Forces.”

<oOo>

It seemed that the British had kept quite a few secrets from the families back home. If the principal point to make with these executions is one of a warning to others of what is to come if they refuse to fight, then I never fully understood why it was such a secret.

Granddad's war service records said the following: “The court of Ville Pas-de-Calais records that Wilkinson failed to report for duty on October 3rd 1918.” Granddad had “fell out, without permission” and had run back toward his trench. He was later discovered hiding in a disused and shelled-out barn some 3 miles behind the front line. He was charged with desertion and sentenced to death, to be shot at dawn on the 7th October.

That's it, for that is all I know really. I have no family still alive who can provide me with any further information. I do know now that he had been previously injured. I read from archives that Granddad had been injured during an assault on enemy positions. Apparently he had been bayoneted through the arm, the right shoulder actually, during a German counter charge. He had returned home to Liverpool briefly to recover during August of that same year, 1918, and almost at the end of the war. How he had come to return to the front I do not know, but return he did. John E. Wilkinson was a volunteer. He signed up

for service when he was 18 in 1916 and died just two years later at the tender age of 20.

The dates to these things all start to add up when you look at such paperwork. My father was born in 1919, in the month of May. You can't help but notice a direct similarity between the two men, my father and his father, my granddad. Granddad Wilkinson too, for certain that is, had died before the birth of his own firstborn child, his son, Brian 'Bull's-Eye' Wilkinson.

John had volunteered and had served for two years and had also been near fatally wounded: a man who had returned from the safety and security of home to fight on the wartime front in France yet again. These just do not seem to be the actions of a coward to me and I wish that I could find out more about his story. Maybe one day I will but for now I find that all the soldiers of the First World War are now long gone. I shall keep trying over the coming years but cannot help but feel that Granddad's true story has been taken to the grave along with that of my father's.

One secret that has not been taken away is the location of John Wilkinson's grave, John was buried in a small cemetery called, Windy Corner, a stone's throw only from Calais and it is here that Doreen and I shall start our journey in France.

So we set off, Doreen, Winjin' Pom and I, and the first port of call as we headed south to the ferry was Alrewas in Staffordshire. I remember our conversation well, Doreen and I, as we drove down. The conversation about a soldier called Farr. How could we, the British military have done such a thing?

The transcript of his court martial at Ville-sur-Ancre records that Farr failed to report for duty on 17th September. He had fallen out without permission, with the sole intent of finding an officer to report sick to. However, his plea for understanding fell unheard. He was literally dragged whilst kicking and screaming and pleading for mercy, towards the front line. Following this incident and Farr's complete mental breakdown, he too was charged with cowardice.

He told those present at his court martial that day, "I returned to the 1st Line Transport hoping to report sick to some medical officer there. On the Sergeant Major's return I reported to him and said I was sick and I could not stand it." Farr went on to say. "He then said: 'You are a fucking coward and you will go to the trenches. I give fuck-all for my life and I give fuck-all for yours and I'll get you fucking well shot.'" Whilst Farr was in the hospital suffering from profound shell shock, a nurse wrote home on his behalf. She addressed the letter to Farr's wife Gertrude. Farr was reported as being unable to write as his hands shook too much. He was unable to even grasp the pen when offered it. This was the last time that his wife Gertrude would ever hear from him. Farr was shot at dawn on the 18th October.

Farr and my grandfather, John E. Wilkinson were sick, they were cold and hungry, they were tired, exhausted and they were terrified. They had witnessed

their friends being bombed, gassed and cut to pieces, mowed down by machine gun fire in incalculable numbers. Men; the 'for King and Country' volunteer soldiers, now reduced to trembling wrecks. Men now bearing no resemblance to the men they had been before the war. This caused by the relentless ongoing shell-fire and the realization of their own imminent death, the fear of their own certain demise.

Many were just boy soldiers having lied about their age. Three hundred and six of them were executed, often for little more than being frightened, confused young men. Between 1914 and 1920 more than 3,000 British soldiers were sentenced to death for desertion or cowardice, for striking an officer or disobedience, for falling asleep on duty or for casting away their arms. Of these 3000 sentenced, 11 per cent of summarily executions were carried out. The 306 men shot at dawn had all been denied legal representation and any right of judicial appeal. Today we know that the overwhelming amount of evidence available to us proves the men suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. This medical information, at the time was often never discussed by the court and quite simply ignored. Military court martials concerning cowardice were scheduled to be completed within a maximum time frame of just 20 minutes.

Among the 306 men executed by British court martial during The First World War (WW1) were 25 Canadians, 22 Irish and 5 from New-Zealand. Australia was the only Commonwealth member that refused the execution of "any volunteers". The 129 Australians that were sentenced to death by the British were never subsequently shot.

American court martials sentenced 24 American deserters to death but these sentences were never carried out. 150,000 soldiers deserted the German lines, most fleeing to the neutrality of The Netherlands and Denmark and often Switzerland. Of those caught, Germany executed 18 although I noted that during the Nazi occupation of Europe later on and during the World War II, over 10,000 German deserters were executed. During WW1, the French put more than 600 of their own death.

On Thursday, March 17th 2005, I arrived at Alrewas in Staffordshire. Then, without any hesitation, neither a coffee nor anything to eat after my long drive, I stood before the 'Shot at Dawn' memorial. There I stopped silent and still, and I read out-aloud every one of those 306 names inscribed upon it. The memorial depicts a young British soldier blindfolded and tied to a stake; he is tied there waiting to be shot by a firing squad. I stared deep into the face, the accurate likeness of 17-year-old Private Herbert Burden, both his name and his face there before me. Herbert had lied about his age in order to enlist and was later shot for desertion. The names of the 306 dead are represented by a semicircle of stakes upon which are listed their names. This too included the name of Harry Farr, who like my grandfather, I had now read so much about. I found out that the memorial was created by an artist named Andy De Comyn. It was unveiled in

June 2001 by Mrs. Gertrude Harris, the daughter of Private Farr. Many descendants of these 306 men shot also attended the unveiling.

I was comforted to know that Doreen was with me, as I admit I broke down in tears at the sight of my grandfather's name. Her, so tenderly reassuring me, talking to me over that later light meal, a vegetarian sausage sandwich and a coffee. We decided to stay for just one night and then rush for the channel ferry crossing the next morning. Doreen and I had always been strict vegetarians, though unlike her, I do put my hands up to eating the odd smoked kipper or two occasionally. There was to be no fish supper on this trip. Doreen would never approve of that!

It felt appropriate to me that I spend at least one evening camped up near this memorial, in recognition that the deaths of these brave young men had finally been recognised. Also to feel that in some way I was meeting my grandfather for the very first time.

Saturday, March 19th, 2005, we arrived at Windy Corner, Pas-de-Calais. I couldn't decide which was the lesser of the two evils; re-adjusting myself to gravitational normality given the extremely rough sea crossing I had endured yesterday or coping with the culture of French drivers today. Both seemed to me to be rather unpleasant and unwanted experiences. Windy Corner, WW1 War Graves Cemetery, was just a short drive from Calais and across eastward toward Belgium to the Pas-de-Calais region. But to hell with it we all thought, 'all' being the inclusion of the third person's perspective on matters at hand, the opinion of our dear faithful friend, the Winjin' Pom. So we had stayed impromptu overnight at Dunkirk.

In May of 1940, the British Expeditionary Forces had been cut off from the rest of France, and indeed a significant part of the supporting French Army also, this by the German advance. The BEF had retreated to Dunkirk and had become completely encircled, cut off and trapped. The British and French soldiers cut off were forced to retreat to the area around the port.

Having been forced to retreat in such haste and leave all heavy military equipment behind, the Germans could have easily defeated us. To think that personal squabbling between Hitler and his Generals led to our escape. It was always assumed that Adolf Hitler had ordered the halt of land forces, favouring an aerial attack instead by the Luftwaffe. Although within the official war diaries of Army Group A at the time, Generaloberst Gerd von Rundstedt had made the order, Hitler had merely validated the command some hours later. Modern historians tend to believe that, regardless of who actually made the order to stop the advance, it was issued as a command due to in-fighting amongst the German Military leadership. Someone somewhere wanted the full recognition for beating the British Army and the German Commanders and Generals couldn't decide amongst themselves which one of them it should be.

Well actually, who really cares what truly happened? I don't. The fact is that this lull in the action gave the British a few days to evacuate by sea. It's a much

better story and to be totally honest with you, the Nazis are not a group of people that I am particularly fond of talking about in any admirable manner of fashion.

Churchill ordered any ship or boat available, regardless of its size and capacity, to sail and pick up the 338,000 plus men, including a further 123,000 French soldiers who were also stranded at Dunkirk. Over 900 vessels were used to evacuate, or if you prefer “rescue” the Allied Forces. In excess of 40,000 vehicles and countless tonnage of other military equipment and supplies were left behind on the beaches. Britain desperately needed its trained fighting men back. Equipment and supplies could be replaced but an army, no. The miracle of Dunkirk, Churchill called it. The official operation name was Operation Dynamo. Sadly, 40,000 Allied troops fell into the hands of the Germans that final day. Only a few groups managed to return home afterwards as free men through a variety of routes including via neutral Spain.

Under the command of German Admiral Friedrich Frisius, the now occupied Dunkirk Fortress, as it was known, was not liberated from German occupation until the 9th of May, 1945 when the Germans, forced into eventual and unconditional surrender, did so to the Commander of the Czechoslovak forces, Brigade General Alois Liska. The artillery siege of Dunkirk was directed on the final day of the war by pilots from No. 625 and No. 652 Squadrons of the RAF.

I had to smile to myself at the irony of all this. Why? Well because until that day of Friday, March 18th, I had never seen so many Germans collected together as a unified group in my entire life. I think that everybody in Germany who owned a motor-home or camper van was parked up at Dunkirk that day. Literally, and I kid you not, hundreds of German campers were there and clearly for many, money was no object. There were vans from all over Europe and something I had never thought of beforehand - what a tourist trap Dunkirk had now become. I could criticise none too harshly as we too were there that day for no other reason than a fascination with our own military history.

I did try to talk with the owner of a British registered car though. Not because they were British but because I had seen them previously in Alrewas in Staffordshire, earlier on my trip. I had seen this blue car before for sure. It had stood out to me with its tinted side windows. That kind of thing always draws the attention of a policeman’s eye. Nonetheless, I could not find the driver and didn’t feel the need to wait around too long. I’d liked to have shared our mutual journey destinations and chatted over a cuppa. Clearly somebody else was as interested in The Shot at Dawn Memorial and Dunkirk just as I was. I felt certain we would have had many interests in common.

But, what of Windy Corner Cemetery? Well it was perfect. Not because of the overall feeling of great sadness and loss, but in the way in which it was so perfectly maintained. Respectful, unforgotten and appropriate. Not a weed in sight, the grass mowed to its lowest level; a carpet of green perfectly maintained

throughout. Flowers and bushes planted amongst the graves. I felt it was tidier than any English country manor garden, any that Doreen and I had ever visited together. We always maintained our membership of the National Trust and loved visiting country gardens and manor houses. That was a really special thing, the big thing between us.

Inside the front gate there was a metal box built into the stone wall. Open and unlocked, it contained the names and plot references (numbers) to all the soldiers who now slept there. My granddad's name was there. I somehow felt that through all the tragedy of his death, somehow he was now finally respected in death. All those rows and rows of military white, cold head-stones, so many of them, and there amongst them all side by side my Granddad, John E. Wilkinson. I wonder, am I the very first person from the family to have ever visited this grave? I suspect that this is the case.

Then as I sat there beside his grave, a feeling of absolute coldness took over, a bitter chill which I cannot explain. A feeling of negative spiritual haunting. Something destructive and unclean. I became anxious and upset. Had I upset my grandfather? Was my presence here today unwanted somehow? I am not a person that believes in spirits or ghosts but that is the only way that I can explain the sensation to you. I decided to return to the van and grab a jumper. Winjin' Pom was very close and parked just out beyond the gate. Windy Corner was a small, almost a hamlet type village community, with just a few detached houses along the roadside. This isolated and obviously small rural French community explained to me the absence of any graffiti or vandalism and the reason that the cemetery reference book was not locked away. As I left and upon closing the gate behind me to turn outward, I saw it again. I saw that same Blue British registered car, the car with the tinted windows.

Alrewas in Staffordshire and Dunkirk were a reasonable coincidence, but here as well? Here at Windy Corner? That was not a coincidence surely. Then as my mind started to run away with me, I became convinced that it had shared the same channel ferry crossing with me also. I was sure. It sped away and almost in such a manner as if to say that I had clearly taken the driver by complete surprise. I noted the plates this time. Whoever it was, it had made it indisputably clear to me, they didn't want me to see them.

I hooked up online and shared the registration number with the boys back home at the station; a quick email and they ran a plate check for me. Just an hour later they replied and told me the car was a Renault Clio, a green one and registered to a pensioner in Edinburgh. The lady who owns this car is 73 years of age. The car I saw was a Ford Mondeo, it was navy blue and most definitely, most definitely indeed, it was not driven by an old lady. I left it with the lads to make some further routine enquiries for me. Police business and all that.

I then realised. I had uploaded every word that Stanley Jack had told me about Dad's last top secret and final mission. Every detail was on the forum, there written down on the thread for all to see. Had I drawn the attention of the

military? Had I somehow upset the British Secret Service? Surely not? It may appear of me to be somewhat naïve in doing this, but surely no. Who would care after all this time? Not the Soviets. The communist regimes had long fallen into history and the Berlin Wall had long been pulled down. The new Russian democracy wouldn't care and why would the British? Everything there is to know about WW2 and the German atomic research programmes was now widely and publicly known, readily available to anyone who wanted to read it. You can watch all this stuff anytime you like on numerous British cable channels. But upset them, someone somewhere, I had, I turned to Doreen and nervously asked her, "Have you ever had that feeling that someone's watching you?"

“But Why Three?”

But why three? Just the three of them, only the three bodies found inside the plane. The question went around and around like an endless circle in my mind. All newspaper correspondence published in 1956 confirmed there were only three RAF men found inside the Thompson. This also corresponds completely with the account given to my mother by the man in the black bowler hat all those years ago. Also, given what Stanley Jack had told me, there had to be at least five bodies. I understand that if Stanley’s story bears any truth, then the reason why the official version would not account for the two additional passengers inside the craft would make perfect sense, but what about the press? Why would they report that only three bodies were found inside the doomed craft? The original article of the plane’s discovery was published almost immediately upon the find. This surely, long before the British Military of the day had any time to conceive any form of governmental cover-up or alternate story.

Whose version of events was I to believe? The government line of the day or Stanley’s? What reason had he got to lie to me knowing my father so well, this fact evidenced by the photograph album that he had left for me? They were obviously very close, and he, without doubt, had flown with my father during the larger part of the conflict.

Had only three bodies been found that day? All three were reported to have been still strapped into their seats. If two additional passengers were also on board I consider that reasonably they could easily have been washed away at sea. This could account for both Stanley’s version of events and the press accounts of the day. It is possible that they are all telling the truth isn’t it?

Now the car, and the uncomfortable feeling I was being followed and watched. Why had I attracted this attention? My gut feeling on all this was that Stanley had been telling me the truth and this was a truth that somebody somewhere did not want me to publish. I had already published the story so far. I’d updated the online thread regularly. So was it my search for evidence, factual information to support the story, that was causing the problem? Were they worried that I would find out much more or something unknown about this very old, but equally massive war-changing top-secret mission?

The boys in blue, my old mates at the station, had made their discreet off-record enquiries for me. The car, a green Renault Clio was there in the UK parked in the street outside this old lady owner’s flat that day, the very same day, Saturday March 19th 2005. I had seen that registration number attached to a blue Ford Mondeo in France. So the plates were false. Somebody was without doubt following me. Just how far were they prepared to follow me became the next big question?

I made some decisions. Doreen and I had initially planned to travel from France to Bulgaria via Germany, Austria, Hungary and Romania, taking in all the old wartime sites along the way. We had plenty of time and were in no hurry whatsoever. That old bugger (no, not Doreen!), the BMC camper was holding up well. I had a reluctance to travel across Germany anyway. It wasn't an initial reluctance but one that had grown after visiting Granddad at Windy Corner. It wasn't racism or anything that shallow, but a feeling of general inappropriateness. Both Dad and he had died fighting Germany and I wasn't keen to visit German war sites for now. I would, yes of course later on, but not on this particular trip. After much discussion, and indeed curiosity, we changed our original planned route. We would now travel south and follow the Western Front's First World War Hindenburg Line. We would start with Passchendaele, the Somme and onto Verdun and then into Switzerland. From Switzerland to Northern Italy, Slovenia to Serbia and enter Bulgaria at its north-western tip. Doreen was as cross with me as ever. "You silly old fool," she said. "This isn't a game Brian," she shouted at me. Doreen had wanted an immediate end to the trip at this point, but I would have none of it. I did choose not to update the lads back home with my new and drastically changed travel plans. For the time being, I would continue to allow them all to think I was still heading for Germany. If someone was reading my updates for a more sinister reason, then they too would lose track of me for the time being.

In 1914, the German Army opened the Western Front following its invasion of Luxembourg and Belgium, and also controlled many important industrial regions in France. Both sides had dug into their trenches following the race for the sea and the Battle of The Marne. These trenches were heavily fortified on both sides and meandered across the countryside, remaining unchanged in their original basic locations for most of the war.

The Western Front saw numerous offensives between 1915 and 1917 with heavy losses to all following ongoing artillery bombardment and infantry advances. Barbed wire, mines and machine gun nests, which repeatedly inflicted severe casualties, led to the ultimate stalemate of wartime gains. The entrenchments remained fixed and the fighting became nothing more than one of charge and counter charge and so on. Little ground was ever gained.

The Battle of Verdun left 700,000 men dead and was just one of many costly offensives. The largest well-known battle was that of the Somme which resulted in more than one million casualties. Another, the Battle of Passchendaele, resulted in a further 600,000 casualties. This deadlock was never broken but ultimately led to new military technology in an effort to push forward. These developments, principally tank and aircraft designs alongside, and more horrifically, poisoned gases. The adoption of improved hand-to-hand combat tactics was developed largely as a result of massive previous human losses.

Germany's Spring Offensive (1918) followed the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litvsk. Her war on the eastern front was over and now all efforts could be

concentrated to the west. Germany managed to advance some 60 miles, making the deepest advance in land gain on either side since 1914. The Germans almost made a breakthrough but the inexorable advances made by the Allies in the latter half of 1918 forced them back and following the possible, indeed inevitable defeat of Germany on the battle field, the German government was forced to agree an armistice. In 1919 the terms of peace were finally agreed following the signing of the Treaty of Versailles.

The Battle of Verdun followed a nine day delay caused by bad weather and commenced on the 21st February, 1916. Following a massive eight hour artillery bombardment, with little retaliation, the Germans made a slow advance on the town and its forts. Having failed to keep control of the French Fort of Douaumont however, heavy French resistance did eventually halt the German advance some seven days later.

Germany then turned its attentions north and to the Le Mort Homme, from where heavy French shelling was being endured. Following intensive fighting, Germany captured the hillside positions in late May. An attempt by the French forces to recapture Fort Douaumont on 22nd May failed. Using the poison gas diphosgene and the capture of Fort Vaux, on the 7th June German forces advanced to within 1,200 yards of the final ridge over the town of Verdun. The advance halted there on the 23rd June with the later summer months seeing the French force the invading army into retreat, but just 1.3 miles backward. The Battle of Verdun, also known as the Mincing Machine of Verdun, became the ultimate symbol of French determination and resistance.

Diphosgene gas was developed as a pulmonary agent for chemical warfare by Germany. It was used as a poison gas and fired from inside artillery shells. Its first ever recorded use was by Germany in May 1916. Germany developed diphosgene gas because the vapours could destroy the filters housed within French-made gas masks that were in use at the time.

Allied commanders witnessing the carnage of Verdun became concerned about the ability of the French army to withstand such ongoing and enormous human loss. The original joint French/British plans for an attack at the river Somme were changed and the British would now take the lead during the attack. This would serve to relieve pressure on the French, and also the Allied Russian forces who equally were sustaining huge human losses.

The Somme offensive began on the 1st July following a week of heavy rainfall. The British divisions of Picardy, supported by five French divisions to the right flank, attacked after an unprecedented week-long heavy artillery bombardment designed to destroy opposing German lines. The French divisions were successful in advancing but British artillery failed to destroy numerous German-held trench positions and heavy barbed-wired perimeters. The British lost 57,000 men in one single day, the biggest loss of life in any single offensive,

the largest number of men to be killed, wounded or missing ever to be recorded throughout the entire conflict.

After regrouping, the Battle of the Somme continued during the months of July and August. Despite heavy reinforcement of German lines, some slight progress was eventually made. A complete military breakthrough was believed unlikely however. In August of that same year, General Haig switched tactics to form a series of small unit incursions. This had the effect of straightening out the front line in preparation for a further massive artillery bombardment and thus allowed for a major British push forward. This final Somme offensive would see the first ever use of tanks in combat. They were, however, extremely and technologically limited in practical battlefield use due to their mechanical unreliability and to the limited supply numbers that were made available for use. The new British tanks advanced just 3,500–4,500 yards in total.

Producing the by now predictable and limited gains, the final phase of the battle took place in October. Throughout the entire period of the Somme offensive only five miles of land was taken and all original battlefield objectives had failed. In total, British casualties were over 420,000 and the French, 200,000. Germany suffered a loss of 465,000, although this figure is disputed.

August 1916 saw a change in the German leadership along the western front. Falkenhayn resigned and was replaced by General Paul von Hindenburg and General Erich Ludendorff. In recognising the huge German loss of both Verdun and the Somme, Germany's military capacity to continue fighting was now becoming recognised as unsustainable. For most of the remainder of 1917, Germany's wartime position became one of defensive control rather than offensive incursion.

Throughout the winter, the German forces created a prepared defensive position behind their original front lines at Verdun and the Somme. This section of their rear-guard front would become known as the Hindenburg Line and was built using effective and well tested defensive principles developed during the defensive battles of 1915. The Hindenburg Line was intended to shorten the old German front line by at least 30 miles and free up ten German military divisions who would then be able to concentrate their efforts elsewhere. The Hindenburg Line, the construction of which was first spotted by British long-range reconnaissance aircraft in November 1916, was a line of fortification stretching from Arras to St Quentin.

Blog update: *“Tuesday 29th March. We are in Sofia. We have arrived in Bulgaria. Switzerland was stunning having taken the famous green mountain scenic and tourist route. Swimming in Lake Garda, Italy, was I have to say, warm and magnificent. It has been many years since I dived off a rock into a lake.”*

We had motored on through Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia and had not seen a Ford Mondeo, well a blue one with tinted windows that is, on the entire journey. My plan to change route last minute and to not put this changed update onto the forum had clearly worked. Then, I kept thinking back to what Doreen had said: "You silly old bugger." Maybe I was just being paranoid. Maybe seeing this car again at Windy Corner, even though it had false plates fitted was after all, purely coincidental.

My immediate gut feelings of Bulgaria? Tuesday 29th March, 2005, yes March and it's already too bloody hot! We've enjoyed a lovely drive down through the hills and subsequent journey through a marvellous canyon pass en route. The necessary personal matters such as a good bath and a decent meal are now on the cards. So now I've booked us both two days in a rather impressive, but also very inexpensive hotel. One gets the sense of value of the Great British Pound against the Bulgarian Leva now at an exchange of 3 to 1, in my favour that is! I feel like a King and could easily get used to living in luxury for just a few quid a day, very quickly. A full three course meal and two beers for less than a fiver, and that's hotel prices! I hope that Bulgaria's ambitions to join the European Union next year (2006) don't destroy this exceptional value for money. I'm going to take three days of pedestrianised sightseeing of the capital, Sofia and then do some more travelling again. I need a chance to update my thread online and rest my poor old weary bones. I'm getting a bit too old for camping these days.

I visited the Nevsky Cathedral, the Palace of Culture, the Boyana Church, the National Museum and so much more; far too much to mention without boring you all so I'll avoid it. If you are anything like me, looking at other people's holiday snaps drives me to insanity so I'll avoid falling into the same trap. Vitosha Boulevard is apparently the seventh most expensive shopping centre in Europe they tell me; well I had to have the guided Sofia city tour didn't I? Been there, done it and yes, I did buy a T-shirt! Normal service will soon resume I promise and I'll stop rubbing it in lads and return back to the story of my dad now. Pressing upload, job done!

A strange thing happened today, Thursday. I visited the Commonwealth war graves cemetery in the capital. I had taken directions from the hotel reception. I was to take tram 18 from Slavekov Square, famous for its second-hand book stalls. I found it without problem and just a couple of hundred yards to walk. I caught the tram as planned and got off at the flower market as told. The war graves site is part of a much bigger complex, Sofia Municipality Cemetery. To say it is huge just doesn't explain it well enough at all. It must be a ballpark figure of at least sixty acres and probably bigger. I don't care to over-estimate this approximation.

I walked in through the main central entrance. A security guard caught my eye and I politely asked for directions. There was no way on earth I would successfully manage to navigate my way through this huge labyrinth. Through a

serious of exchanged polite hand-gestures I understood the basic direction which I needed to take, and seemed to understand it was at the far rear wall. I started to walk, just a city map and my mobile telephone in my hands. The outer wall of the complex was reserved for crematorium ashes, urns sealed inside stone-covered vaults, stacked a multitude high, one on top of the other. Clearly there were many many thousands of them around the entire outer perimeter wall. I was both saddened and shocked at the apparent lack of care and poor condition in which I found them to be. Many had fallen to pieces and the enclosed clay-pot and even plastic urns were clearly visible. Many had the ashes just poured into them without any sight of an urn at all. To my astonishment I found countless human ashes had somehow just been poured out onto the road and pavement walkway. I found the whole experience and sight deeply disturbing.

I hadn't walked more than perhaps fifty yards when I became aware of the presence of a car, which had stopped alongside me. The driver I soon recognised to be the security guard who had given me directions earlier, just minutes before. He beckoned me in to join him and I sat beside him on the passenger seat. There it was, a chauffeured ride in the car all the way to the site of the war graves. For such a kind ride I was extremely grateful, it was indeed a much further walk than I had envisaged it to be. After thanking him and shaking his hand I got out and walked across to the entrance gate to the site.

I was the only person there and just as I had found it to be the case at Windy Corner, the condition of the area and upkeep of the graves was without complaint. I found everything to be clean, tidy and perfectly maintained. I was so relieved to find it so, given the poor condition I had seen the rest of the municipal cemetery to be in. The signage I read soon clarified why. The Commonwealth Graves Commission maintained this section whereas the rest of the cemetery was the responsibility of Sofia City Council.

Then just as quickly as he had left, the kind helpful security guard arrived back again. This time he had others with him. He had returned with colleagues, an additional security guard but the other, the third man, a real bonafide Bulgarian Police Officer with apparently no sense of humour and a gun. I naturally felt quite threatened. They did not enter the war graves site but the policeman immediately beckoned me over to the gate; one which he was now casually leaning on. I stopped taking photographs and walked back over toward him.

The two security guards, one of whom I had obviously already met, talked in Bulgarian amongst themselves, with an apparently aggressive air to their manner. The policeman however spoke faultless English and to his credit remained extremely polite to me throughout. I wondered just what on earth I had done wrong. Maybe it was the camera? The signage clearly permitted photography. What else could it be? I thought.

I lost count of the amount of questions I was asked. So many questions but always politely framed. I accounted for my entire journey and was required to

explain my presence there. I was asked for my papers. I felt an eerie sense that perhaps this new nominate for EU membership had not as yet quite managed to shed its old communist culture. After ten minutes of intensive questioning, I was allowed to continue with my visit, although I wanted to clarify if the photography was problem, to which the reply was “no”. I had assumed that as the map and the camera were the only clearly visible effects I had on my person when the security guard had originally given me a ride, that perhaps the camera must have been the reason he returned with reinforcements. Somehow it was this that had caused him such concern.

Interestingly, I had left my passport back at my hotel room and was reminded that it was an offence to be in Bulgaria without personal ID carried at all times. My apologies had been accepted and my verbal statement of identity accepted. The only condition the police officer imposed on my visit was this: “You can take photographs for two minutes more and then you must leave here.” This policeman’s consent in allowing me to continue appeared to be much to the discontent of the other two. I did exactly as told and left after taking just a few more photos.

I would ponder upon this strange but true event for many days. If the pictures were not a problem, then what was? The paranoia started to creep in again. The blue car that I had seen four days ago had now gone. I certainly wasn’t aware that I had been followed there that day. How could I have been? It was not until after this visit that I updated the forum, so nobody could have possibly known where I was going beforehand. Well actually I correct myself here. It was known that I had intended to visit the cemetery but nobody could possibly have known exactly when.

I cannot be so important that extensive covert surveillance was in place all the way across Europe, surely? I’d now travelled two and a half thousand miles and for the last couple of days used public transport. No, it wasn’t possible and even if it was, why would such covert cover be blown over a concern for a war grave cemetery, a cemetery that had no connection with my father’s secret wartime story? The cemetery contained seven graves of allied bomber crew members shot down over Sofia from WWI. The only possible connection there could be was that my dad may have been one of them. But he wasn’t. He wasn’t buried there.

I talked it over with a chap back at the hotel, over a beer or two. He was a Bulgarian business man and his view of what happened and why did seem to be a bit more realistic. The municipal cemetery was known to be vandalised regularly. The urns were stolen for the metal content, usually made of brass, and this was done without any regard or dignity for the dead. They would be thieves simply poured the ashes out onto the ground. It made sense to me. The plastic and pot urns remained. This matter, a subject of huge embarrassment to our next-in-line EU accession member state, was something that they would like to keep secret. The man explained that the camera had perhaps given the

impression that I was a foreign journalist, given also the city map and my British accent. “Yes, this had to be the case,” I reluctantly agreed with him. This too made sense given that police officer’s final statement to me. What he had said when I simply enquired, “What is the problem if it is not the camera?” His two word reply; “It’s politics.”

On the Saturday, Doreen, The Winjin’ Pom and I travelled upward out of Sofia. We travelled north of the city to visit the village of Thompson, as previously outlined in chapter one. Having stayed a full two nights in the region and despite the fact that many locals spoke good, if not fluent English, I was saddened to discover that I knew more about their local history than they did. I failed to find a single person who knew why their home village had been given the name it had. It seemed that Major Frank Thompson and the other commandos had fallen into a sad, forgotten and very distant past.

From Thompson we travelled east to Balvan, a small village west of the ancient capital, Veliko Tarnovo. Balvan was the scene of the fiercest fighting between the Bulgarian partisans and the Bulgarian gendarmerie. After the war, the communists had built a huge monument to honour their fallen comrades, sadly a monument that

from a distance appeared to resemble that of the fast food giant McDonald’s logo, a stretched letter M. Only a few of the trapped, and hugely outnumbered, partisans managed to flee the battle site and later survive. One of which such stories led us to the family house of Mitko Palauzov.

Mitko Palauzov was the youngest of the Bulgarian partisans to be killed. He was just fourteen years of age. His father had fought in the battle of Balvan and had survived, taking refuge in a secret dug-out hiding hole (a *zimlanka*) within a sympathiser’s garden. Mitko was with his mother. She was a nurse and attended the sick, the wounded and dying in another secret dug-out. The hospital, an infirmary hidden below ground, was located near Osenikova Polyana, a hillside in the district, Uzana. With his father in hiding and facing certain execution if caught, the local village doctor had been forced, by torture, into giving away the secret location of the hospital. The fascist Bulgaria gendarmerie arrived there not long after the battle, just five days, and upon arrival had thrown six hand grenades down into the hospital dug-out. Mitko Palauzov, just a boy standing alongside his mother the nurse, was blown to pieces. A monument to his memory can still be seen today in the town centre of Gabrovo.

This saddest story of all continued further. Mitko’s father, a partisan and resistance fighter and a card-carrying member of the communist party, was in his later years murdered. A new political system that he and so many others had fought for, to create a new future for the poor of Bulgaria, a system of political fairness, justice and equality, was now hijacked by pro-Soviet puppets, an unelected totalitarian state with which he had strong disagreement. A dictatorship that wished to expel him from the party he had helped to create. He was quoted as saying to the regime at the time, “I fought for the right to hold this

membership card and I will fight again before I let you take it from me.” Whilst in Sofia, he was murdered by poisoning following an invitation to attend a meeting held by the Bulgarian Communist Party.

The family of Mitko Palauzov gave us the warmest welcome one could ever receive. I believe that you will be hard pushed to find a warmer and more generous welcome than that offered to the stranger in Bulgaria. A feast fit for a king and I felt like bursting open with the amount that I ate that day. Simply the best of homemade village rakia, the local spirit distilled from grapes, plums or anything else for that matter. It leaves one with a rather thick head the following day.

Thursday 17th April saw us arrive at the mighty Buzludzha building having spent the preceding night just a mere 10 miles down the road at Shipka. Shipka Pass, central Bulgaria was the site of four major battles fought between the Russian Empire, the Bulgarian Volunteers and the Turkish colonial occupiers of the time, the Ottoman Empire. During this period of the Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878), it became the site of a major victory when 5,500 Bulgarian Volunteers supported by 2,000 Russian soldiers defeated a military incursion to take the pass. The Ottoman Central Army were beaten back despite the Bulgarians being heavily out-numbered.

Russian forces had taken the pass from the Ottomans and gained control of the region in July, 1877. The Russian General, Stoletov, then commissioned three main defensive positions at the head of the pass; 7,500 defenders (5,500 Bulgarians and the 2,000 Russians) at St. Nicholas (now known as Peak Stoletov), the Central Hill and other crucial reserve emplacements in between,

The Ottoman Commander, Suleiman Pasha, had the fighting force of the central army behind him, amounting to over 38,000 combatants. Pasha was determined to regain military control of the pass in what was apparently nothing more than an action of military pride. He could have simply bypassed it, if he had chosen to. August 21st saw intensive bombardment by his forces against Russian/Bulgarian positions and predominantly, the location of St. Nicholas. The attack proved fruitless and was stalled by Bulgarian Volunteers who were dug-in 100 yards to the south. At dawn the following morning, Ottoman forces moved their heavy artillery canon further up toward the mountain side and continued to bombard the pass. Suleiman’s infantry then moved in to out-flank the opposing Russian flank. On August 23, the Ottoman forces attacked all Russian/Bulgarian positions. The military effort again concentrated on St. Nicholas Mount where the majority of poorly equipped Bulgarian Volunteers were positioned.

Pride and arrogance had given Commander Pasha a deeply misconceived and false sense of security. The Ottoman, believed the volunteer positions would be easy to capture. The first military retreat that day was of the Russian positions on Central Hill, the Bulgarian Volunteers at St Nicolas held fast throughout. Regrouping and later with the fresh reinforcement of the 4th

Russian Rifle Brigade, Ottoman offensives were again halted. On the 26th, Ottoman forces did finally reach the Russian trenches situated on St. Nicholas hillside but a counter bayonet charge of Bulgarian Volunteers soon forced them into retreat. During the siege, both Bulgarian Volunteers and the Russian soldiers completely ran out of ammunition. They repulsed ongoing and uphill Ottoman charges by throwing rocks, wheels and even the corpses of fallen comrades downward and into the lines of the Ottoman advance. It is noted as the most gallant military stand of the entire Russo-Turkish war.

Pasha continued to be driven and now blinded by his military pride, would attempt to retake the pass once more during the year 1877. The Russian and Bulgarian Volunteer defences had been pounded continually during August of that year, but Ottoman reinforcements were now extremely limited due to the ongoing siege of the city of Plevan to the south. On September 13th, Suleiman Pasha again began to shell both the Bulgarian and Russian defence lines. The bombardment continued for five full days until on the 17th Suleiman launched a full frontal assault yet again against the St. Nicholas hill-side positions. Upon successfully capturing the first line of defence trenches, Ottoman forces finally moved upward toward the summit.

The military gain was extremely short lived. The new Russian commanding General, Fyodor Radetzky, brought forward Russian reinforcements. This Russian counter-attack proved to be a vital defensive action in this second major battle and the Ottoman forces were driven back from all captured ground. Additionally, secondary Ottoman assaults to the north were also repulsed. Between January 5th and 9th, 1878 the final battle for Shipka Pass was fought, a further crushing defeat for the exhausted Ottoman Central Army. This would be the last attempt made to retake the Shipka Pass and thereafter, the Ottoman rule over Bulgaria collapsed.

Now, what of the mighty Buzludzha itself, a building I have completely fallen in love with? A short drive east along an old side-wooded roadway Buzludzha is a building that evolved from a completely different era. Here on the Central Stara Planina and named from the origins of a Turkish word *buzluca*, the literal meaning glacially. Today a more modern Bulgarian translation of the word Buzludzha however reads as 'the highest road'. The building is situated at the site of the final battle of Bulgarian rebels in 1868, led by Hadji Dimitar and Stefan Karadzha opposed to Ottoman rule. Standing at 1441 meters high, Buzludzha is Bulgaria's largest ideological monument to Communism.

Over 6,000 workers were involved in its seven year construction, this number including 20 leading Bulgarian artists who worked solidly for 18 months on the interior decoration alone. Designed by architect Guéorguy Stoilov, it is undoubtedly one of the most impressive architectural buildings I have ever seen. I can liken it only to a flying saucer that has somehow unexpectedly just landed there. The construction was funded by a small (but expected) donation from every citizen in the country. This voluntary donation of

one leva (30 pence) formed the largest portion of funds required to build this most impressive structure. Buzludzha was finally unveiled in 1981 on what was the 1300th anniversary of the foundation of the Bulgarian state.

The monument was built on the peak by the Bulgarian communist regime to commemorate events of 1891 when the socialists led by Dimitar Blagoev met in secret at the site in order to form an organised socialist movement. Since the collapse of the Bulgarian Communist Party in 1991, it is no longer maintained by the Bulgarian government and has fallen into disrepair. It is now found to be abandoned, vandalised, and internally devastated. To this day, buried in the monument's concrete structure is a time capsule explaining the significance of the building.

Bulgaria's bloodless revolution (1989) ended with the disbandment of the Party. Ownership of the monument was ceded to the state and with no further interest or use for it, it was left to ruin and decay. It stands today as an iconic monument to a now abandoned political ideology. Every year Bulgarian Socialists still gather at Buzludzha to mark the founding of the Bulgarian Social-Democratic Party.

“All Good Things Must Come To an End”

It's been an amazing trip. I don't want to rub it in but I can't help but smile when I update the forum telling all of my recent travels, and of my day-to-day discoveries. One particular upload led me to notice a new contact name within my private messages. I receive many messages daily via the forum, mostly wishing me luck with my quest and to wish me safe travelling. This one was however quite different, the name standing out and clearly Italian. I had mentioned that upon leaving Bulgaria our intention was to cross over to Italy and visit the old airbases from which my dad may have flown. Also to most definitely pay my respects in the small village cemetery of Carpi, Modena Province, at the grave site of Gunner Joshua Petterson. He was the young gunner whose body was parachuted out of the Thompson by my father that day.

I read this new private message with much curiosity and quite a degree of uncertainty. By all accounts it was an invitation to meet a man who had further information about my father. This gentleman was named Carlo Ghirlandaio, and by all accounts was the same age as me; mid-fifties. He was very keen indeed to meet with me. His first email read;

Hello to all you all Brian

I follow the story with big interest and I sorry strong for not to in touch earlier. This was not reluctant to me no but unsure to tell you the story. You are come to Italy yes? I want much to see you. We talk about Brian. My mother being was friend good to him.

Carlo Ghirlandaio

<oOo>

Carlo and I began a series of correspondence over the next couple of days, but try as hard as I might I could never get a straight answer to a simple question. The question was easy: “What do you know about my dad?” I thought maybe it was a translation issue, although his English was understandable it did lack a degree of correct grammar. But no, Carlo would say to me “I speak in when Italia, no for forum words.”

Well what choice did I really have? I was heading for Italy already and a fact that was widely known back home. Carlo had obviously known this too and perhaps now with my being in Bulgaria, well he realised the timing of the invite would be appropriate. It made sense too. I'd just been in Italy but had kept this change in travel direction off the thread so he wouldn't have known that until

quite recently. He was clearly keeping himself well up to date with my activities and my whereabouts too, obviously with some degree of sincere interest.

What exactly did he know? And why wouldn't he tell me? Doreen and I concluded that it must be something important, as he was not prepared to part with this information in writing, publicly or privately. I toyed with the idea of ringing him as he had given me his telephone number, but if his writing was anything to go by, a fluent conversation seemed quite unviable. Though I have to say, Doreen did rather fancy a few more days back in Italy again.

After a few more days in Bulgaria and Macedonia we headed west to the coast of Albania. From there, from Durres, we caught a direct ferry over to Trieste, Italy. I have to say that this six hour crossing wasn't one that I welcomed given the upset caused by my last boat trip. That one, Dover direct to Calais, was only half of this at just under 3 hours long. I have to say it proved to be a very pleasant crossing indeed. We really enjoyed it and had no complaints whatsoever. The E55 soon taking us up to Foggia, where my father had flown from on his last final mission.

The military airfields at Foggia were a series of World War II airfields located within a 25 mile radius of the town. Foggia is in the Italian Province of the same name. It was a collection of airfields that became known during the war as the Foggia Complex and from any number of this group of air-strips the Thompson could have taken-off from. The fifteenth United States Air Force, the Twelfth (1944 – 1945) and the British Royal Air Force (1943 – 1945) all used strips at Foggia throughout the Italian Campaign.

The Italian Royal Air Force Regia Aeronautica had constructed a series of airfields in the Foggia area before the outbreak of war. They consisted of hard-surfaced runways and taxi-ways, concrete parking areas and permanent buildings used as military barracks. Following the Armistice signed between Italy and the Allied armed forces during September of 1943, the airfields were violently seized by German forces and became a central airbase for the German Luftwaffe.

The German Luftwaffe occupation of the Foggia airbases drew extensive and continued heavy bombing by both the RAF and USAAF. The airbases were eventually seized by the British Eighth Army in October 1943. After the area was captured, extensive repairs were conducted by the United States Army Corps of Engineers (COE), enabling the complex to be adapted for use by heavy bomber operations. Italian weather conditions were notably more favourable than of those in Britain. These favoured conditions would allow the Fifteenth and Eighth US Air Force to conduct daylight strategic bombing of both occupied Europe and Nazi Germany. The Foggia Airfield Complex would now enable heavy Allied bombers to strike countless previously unreachable targets in France, Germany, Austria and particularly the Balkans (Bulgaria) which, due to flight range, was totally inaccessible from England. In addition to air support,

Foggia was also a major Allied command centre for land ground forces in Allied occupied southern Italy and the naval forces of the Adriatic Sea.

Beyond those captured concrete strips that remain even today were constructed numerous temporary and semi-permanent airfields throughout the war years, now all lost and returned to local agriculture. I could picture the scene in my mind, even if little physical evidence of their pre-existence remained before me here today. Dad's letters, the personal wartime accounts of 'Bull's-Eye', had always left a firm imprint in my mind. He wrote home of the "green grass that grew up through the pierced steel planking of the temporary runways" and of the "parking and dispersal areas" where they would stand to see which of their friends would return from sorties alive, and to note those who would not. He frequently apologised for his short letters saying that it was due to the poor lighting available, the mess hall constructed out of wood, and his sleeping quarters often nothing more than a canvas tent. "There is only one dimly lit light bulb at the centre of our tent," he wrote to Mother. "Our tent floor is grass. When the rain falls we often sleep on nothing more than dirt." In another letter he said, "We have scavenged plywood for flooring. We have converted old wooden cots into beds and an old damaged 55-gallon oil drum we have converted into a wood burning stove." I tried to imagine the site of that old steel control tower he would often reference, in saying "never did the cold touch of steel feel so warm than when it came into a pilot's sight." These old control towers now gone and long since removed for scrap.

Six-man tents were used for billeting and all lined up in rows with both orderly and mess hall at one end. I imagined the fear that these men must have lived through, sleeping under canvas whilst enemy fighters would swoop down, strafing them with machine gun fire overnight. With little or no protection from enemy attack, many must have died whilst they slept. Dad would, as I have said, never write home about the losses of the war.

Wrecked enemy aircraft, Italian and German, were apparently a common sight. Stanley had told me this and had proudly shown me a photo in the album of my father standing beside a downed Stuka. The twisted metal frames and fuselages and wings, the glass and all other useful parts finding themselves reused in a multitude of ways by the boys. Dad had joked in one of his letters about how they had used the old cockpit glass to make themselves a bread oven. The heat of the day's hot Italian sun would naturally warm the dough to rise inside it.

About two dozen airfields were in operation in Foggia during 1944, all supporting strategic bombing missions and bomber crew escort duties, tactical fighter operations and of course general reconnaissance and air defence. All of them gone with the end of the war in May of 1945, abandoned by the Allies and the land returned to the original owners, or to the Italian government. Only a few strips still exist today as commercial airports and only one of them is still used by the Italian Air Force, the new Aeronautica Militare.

So, now we draw to the conclusion of my story and the end to my trip. “As all good things, sadly, must come to an end,” Doreen said, as she placed her arm around my shoulders as I drove. I had felt that I had become so close to my father during these many days of travel and felt saddened to return home. What Carlo would go on to tell me however would shatter that feeling. My whole world would for a time, fall apart. Although at last I finally gained the truth about what had happened that evening, that fateful night, at 22.30 hours when the Thompson had flown for the last time from Foggia.

Carlo lived very close to Foggia, in a small coastal town called Manfredonia, just a short drive up toward the north-east. His house easily found, I received a very warm welcome on my arrival that day: at the time, a welcome that seemed somewhat out of place, somewhat over-the-top if I can say. I would come to understand this strange and quite unexpected over-emotional reaction later. It was a beautiful house and I had nervously knocked upon the door, a door upon an external wooden mezzanine above his garage and with a clear view of the deep blue Italian sea. I remember thinking, momentarily thinking to myself, how lucky he must be to live in such a beautiful place; the air so fresh and clean. Then the door opened suddenly within seconds of my knock, as if he had been waiting for me, he stood at the other side of it.

I went in. I was greeted by his wife, Pietra and their two daughters who had come to their parents’ house that day just to meet with me, their names Pia and Luisa. Everything about this greeting, his physical reaction to me and the family get-together was just so bizarre. They gave me a wonderful meal, all vegetarian. They were not vegetarian but Carlo had found out this information about me from the forum thread. I started to believe that he probably knew more about my own life than I did. After sharing a rather expensive bottle of Italian red wine, and you could tell by the taste that no expense had been spared, we approached the subject. Carlo’s spoken English was almost perfect, so much better than his written word and not at all what I had expected. I presumed he must have used an online translator whilst writing to me. Pietra, Pia and Luisa were not so confident; just very basic greetings and expressions. Pleasant formalities of a sincere and polite nature, I would say.

“Let’s walk Brian?” Carlo suggested. “We will talk about Brian now.” Off out down a small narrow stone-paved street and along a quiet pedestrianised coastal wall we went. Nothing too grand this sea wall, probably only twelve feet or so above the sea level below, but very pleasant indeed. We sat, seated on a wooden bench overlooking the sea and admiring the moored boats and craft in front of us. “That one’s mine,” he said, pointing to a modest wooden clinker. “I use it when I need to think. I’m going to re-name her the Thompson.” Excitedly, as if a child in a sweet shop, he continued. “Look at what I have brought you here to see Brian.” Carlo pointed to the back of the wooden bench behind me. This bench, a normal everyday traditional (oak) wooden bench on which we sat was obviously new. It could not have been more than just a few

weeks old. There upon its back support, a brass plaque that Carlo was eagerly pointing toward. It read to my complete astonishment, "In Loving Memory of Brian 'Bull's-Eye' Wilkinson – RAF. Foggia 1945. Look upon the sea and remember me."

I didn't know what to say or where to turn. This was indeed a very kind gesture but why had he done it? What reason or business of his was it anyway? These private thoughts at the time. My reaction was one of shock, of gratitude but also of anger. Why had he not told me this previously? Why bring me all the way here just to show me a new bench and why had he not just chosen to email me a photograph of it? But most of all, why the hell was my father's name on it?

There was a period of silence between us that was only broken by a single tear, a single tear that fell from Carlo's eye. "Brian, please forgive me," he said, "but is the only way I think how." He reached into his inner upper coat pocket and pulled out an envelope, an old envelope and inside it a collection of tattered black and white photographs. They must have been in some form of pre-arranged order, as he removed the top one carefully without looking inside to select it. "This is a photograph of me as the baby in 1945. I was just a few weeks old at the time and this is my mother," he said. I looked appreciably at the photograph. Whilst his mother was indeed very beautiful I still failed to see what exactly his point in all this was and what this had to do with me. Then he took out another photograph. "This is my mother and father together before I born late on in 1945," he said, but this time his voice was delivered in a very quiet and almost worried manner. He paused and passed it to me. His father was an identical twin of Dad. I had discovered that my "father had had an unknown twin brother" I thought... But this wasn't a twin, and the penny finally dropped; this was my father.

I had thought to myself the first time I saw Carlo, just a few hours beforehand that he was the spitting image of my father too. There was also an apparent family likeness between us but like I have just said, the penny just hadn't dropped. Why should it? This was the last thing I expected to find out today or even on any day. I remembered what old Stanley Jack had said to me the first time we saw each other, "spittin' bloody image of the man himself," I recalled him saying this to me. Carlo grasped me firmly by both shoulders and almost shaking me to pieces, said, "I am your half-brother, Brian."

There it was, that was that, the 'In Loving Memory' phrase upon the plaque now explained the reasoning to me in full. I mean, at the time I didn't understand why it hadn't simply read 'In Memory Of'. The addition of the word 'Loving' always implying a close personal or family connection. But I fully understood now.

He continued to show me many photographs, all of them old, all of them black and white and all of them of my father. Brian 'Bull's-Eye' Wilkinson, the whiter than white Brian, a man I had believed to be as pure as the driven snow

had been shagging an Italian woman behind my mother's back, and this woman was Carlo's mother.

I stayed with Carlo and his wife for several days, initially in disbelief and often at times arguing with him as to the degree of accuracy of his facts and information. With every objection point I raised, he would soon knock me back down to earth. It was either an answer that I couldn't argue with or some form of physical evidence to suggest that I was the one who was wrong. As unbelievable as it was to me, I had to concede the fact that Carlo Ghirlandaio was my half-brother. The love letters he showed me were just as intense and as personal as those written to my mother, but these ones addressed to his mother, and all indisputably in my (our) father's own hand.

The drive homeward and north was a sombre journey. I had liked Carlo and his family very much and in many ways delighted at my time of life, to discover a long lost half-brother. I use the word sombre because I felt so very sorry, mournful for my mother. She had died crying over Dad's love letters and here I was confronted with his dishonestly and betrayal of that profound love. In my personal judgement, the contents of Carlo's letters confirmed Dad had loved his mother quite equally. Life can be so very complex, so very complicated. I tried not to judge 'Bull's-Eye' too harshly. After all, Stanley had said, none of them ever expected to return back home after the war. They all flew in the full knowledge that they would die at any moment, and half of the bomber crews never did return. They died in service. What was now made clear is that my father knew nothing of Carlo's birth and he, upon completion of this final mission was coming home to be with my mother. Surely this was just a wartime fling?

I had always planned to end my trip at Dover. I had been there many times over the years to see the location of Dad's demise. The Thompson was now situated on a plinth to the port-side, not often noticed by the boarding traveller as it was sited to the far eastern perimeter and hidden from view by cargo freight and shipping containers. I think what kept me sane on my long journey home was the sense of humour of all the lads, the boys, who by now were overloading the forum threads with their smutty sense of humour, making a joke of the whole situation. These jokes, all so very funny and often just one line sentences of support reading no more than, "chin up lad!" The funniest comment I read was, "What is the difference between Brian and Carlo? None." Somebody else had voted to rename the Foggia Airbase complex simply the "Hornio Foggia!" An airport to be named after my father! Well that's an honour usually reserved for the likes of JFK or Charles de Gaulle, I chuckled inwardly to myself.

Carlo gave me a letter; a letter written by his mother, a letter that she had written to him to be read only in the event of her death. She had left it in the strict care of a friend. Carlo was firm and forceful in the words he said to me. "Do not read letter until you are safely home Brian. You are to read it when you

reach Liverpool and not before. This you will promise me?" He explained that it was this letter that had led him to find me and make contact.

He had tried to verify the contents enclosed, as written by his mother for two years but had failed. Then he had received a random and anonymous postcard simply signed off with a letter X. Maybe this was a kiss or perhaps just a signature to reinforce and demonstrate the writer's anonymity. He had shown me the card previously that day but it made no sense to me. It arrived post office stamped just three weeks before we had both met up for the first time, and posted from northern France. It simply read, "Search for Brian Wilkinson, the Thompson, online blog. You'll find your answer there - X." On doing so he had then come across my war forum thread following an internet search using these suggested words. He said that it was also quite apparent that his mother had not known anything of my existence. "If she had, I feel sure she would have said so within this, her final words," he exclaimed.

Carlo's mother had died in 2003 at the age of 78 years, three years before I started to tell the world my story. He slipped the postcard in alongside his mother's final letter and I promised him; one, not to read it before my return and two, to return them both to him in person at a later date. I think this gave him some sort of personal assurance that we would stay in touch with each other and that we would meet again soon.

I broke this promise. I had no choice. I thought long and hard about it, Doreen telling me not too. "There's a reason he said what he said Brian. Please don't read it yet." Her words echoed around and around inside my troubled mind. But I had to read it. Contained within was the answer surely? Why all this cloak and dagger behaviour? There was no other explanation. This letter was left for Carlo to read after his mother's death and he had given it to me for a good reason. Nobody would ever part with such a treasured personal possession without good cause, would they?

I cannot begin to explain the emotion I felt. I read it again and again and again and wanted to return to Manfredonia to confront Carlo. I wanted him to tell me to my face that this was not true, that it was all lies and the basis of some sick joke. I also realised why he had given it to me to read later at home. He knew how shocking it would be to me. He knew that our one meeting so far could easily have proved to be our last. But I also knew that this was not something that I could have told my half-brother to his face, so how could I expect him to have done so? The hurt, the disbelief, the absolute anger that I felt, but above all a sense of deep respect for him. Carlo could have taken this letter to the grave with him, kept it private as a lifelong secret but he had chosen not to. He was honest with me, the kind of painful honesty that one would only find from one's brother, a real brother. For this very reason and despite everything else, I understood him and his final motives fully. He must have agonised over it.

The letter is far too personal to post on the thread or to later add to this, my war time story and my search for my war hero father, Brian 'Bull's-Eye' Wilkinson. Three pages of honest and brutal confession, and for the respect of Carlo who will read this, I choose not to publish it. I will however tell you what it said.

Just like me, Carlo had never met or known our father. His mother, Alessandra Ghirlandaio was a Nazi sympathiser during the war years; her husband Marco, an Italian pilot shot down by the RAF in 1943, and killed in action; an event that she had apparently never recovered from. She had never re-married, had not borne a previous child to Marco and had maintained her husband's family name, Ghirlandaio, until her death in 2003.

Alessandra, originally from Genoa had moved to the Foggia region for one single purpose. She was to spy on the now allied occupied airbases and this she did with great efficiency, covertly reporting back to fascist contacts who remained unidentified within the letter.

Alessandra Ghirlandaio had successfully infiltrated the base and worked as a volunteer kitchen hand, her paperwork and identity all falsified, her passport at the time stating the name Alessandra Orsini. Alessandra became a close confident of our father and inevitably they became lovers. However, despite my father's clear devotion to her, her hatred and despise of the RAF crews based at Foggia remained. It was Alessandra who would betray my father that night, alongside two additional passengers, the scientists. Alessandra Orsini as she was known at the time had, under the direct instructions of Berlin, placed a bomb aboard the Thompson that evening.

We had successfully prevented this devastating German nuclear technology from falling into the hands of the Soviets and Berlin had successfully prevented it from falling into the hands of the Allies. Now I had my answer, all thanks to the written confession of the woman who had murdered my father.

Why had this woman chosen to do this? This question was unanswered as I would later read. This letter wasn't written to me but it was written to her son, her only child, Carlo. She remarked how she had kissed my father goodbye that night. How my father had cried in her arms and how this at the time meant nothing to her. Not only was she crippled with revenge for Marco's death, she was also paralysed by her belief that Nazi ideology would survive; that Germany was certain to win the war. For her Brian was already dead, as she knew he was now returning to his wife Evelina back in Liverpool. Their relationship was over. Alessandra Orsini had also wanted an abortion when she later found out she was pregnant. I felt for Carlo when I read this. His mother had killed his father, and she had also wanted to kill him.

But the guilt of her actions had taken their toll on her and she was unable to terminate her pregnancy. She said that she couldn't kill again. By the end of the war she had seen Germany for what it was and long turned her back on fascist ideologies. She remarked that during the war, she and so many other Italians

were overcome with hate and that after the war, “We couldn’t even remember what we had been fighting for.” She made a reference to the Italian Allied armistice of 1943, and how thereafter the truth of Nazi revenge and retaliation against the Italians had not been fully known to her. She said she was young and naïve, foolish, with misplaced loyalty, and she considered even her own homeland of Italy to be a traitor at the time.

Alessandra could not live with her actions following the end of the war and other than the letter she had left Carlo, she had only ever confessed her secret to her Priest who had enabled her to come to terms with her actions and who had forgiven her. Her own self-imposed punishment was to never to love again or to remarry. She would love and care for Carlo as Brian would have wanted. This she did until her end. Her final written words to him; “Son please forgive me.”

And here we now find ourselves back in the UK. I, PC Brian Wilkinson finally had and knew the whole truth. What I had now, and needed to do, was to somehow find a way to accept it as the truth. After a short period of readjustment, in May of 2005, I arranged to travel down to the Royal Air Force Museum at Cosford, Shropshire. There I would meet up with a gentleman called John Stevenson. John was a highly trained and skilled aviation mechanic who had written a series of books, one of them entitled ‘The B17 Strategic Heavy Bomber from Inside Out’. John Stevenson had obtained a PhD for his work, but always declined to be referred to as Dr Stevenson. He had been recommended to me as a useful contact by Albert, my original forum contact.

From Cosford, he would join me and travel down to Dover. This was all free of charge as his curiosity was proving to be greater than mine. We already knew a bomb had been placed on the plane in Italy. If the purpose of this sabotage was purely to kill the German scientists on-board and prevent the Allies or Soviets from gaining this technology, then it must have been timed to explode after they were on board, and after the destruction of the facility. This single and overriding guiding principal we both agreed upon. The precise location, timing and purpose of the mission was fully known, as confirmed by Alessandra’s letter. Brian ‘Bull’s-Eye’ Wilkinson, in his blindness of passion had confided all to her. The mystery was why had the plane not been blown out of the sky?

We kept referring back to my father’s final letter, his last words, “Fuel out, dropping fast, too low to bail, please take care of Bethany for me.” He had had time to write these final words and he makes no reference to any blast on-board. It was no catastrophic explosion that had brought the Thompson down that night but a lack of fuel. Why didn’t they bail out? Why had they left it so late and not tried to save themselves?

There are so many scenarios to consider. The drop tanks used to increase the bomber’s flight range would already have been discarded and dropped long before reaching Dover. This we also agreed on, and that meant the B17 was flying using its normal wing-housed fuel tanks. Had the bomb failed to go off and had they quite simply run out of fuel? Had his phrase “too low to bail”

meant they had left it too late after falling from a much higher altitude, or were they intentionally flying at low altitude to prevent detection?

We would never know the answer to this particular question, and this John and I accepted. This answer would only be found out at a time when secret military files concerning the mission would be released. This for certain was not going to occur within my life time. All of my correspondence and requests for information from the Royal Air Force directly had been declined. The RAF had refused to comment on any matter whatsoever concerning the final flight of the Thompson.

The Thompson had left the Foggia complex on February 26th 1945 at 22.30 hours. This date just a little over three months before the Allied D-Day landings of Northern France. This date a most significant date. From Bulgaria she would have flown directly back to conserve fuel, her flight path taking her across Romania, Hungary and Austria before crossing Germany and Belgium or at least the northern tip of France, all of which were at the time heavily occupied by German forces. Realistically, as John would put it to me, "There wasn't anywhere to bail out Brian. This cargo was far too precious to fall back into enemy hands. I suspect that in the event of a failed mission, these two scientists would have been executed by the crew long before that would be allowed to happen." A chilling thought but one that made perfect sense to me.

So, what of the two German scientists then? If the bomb had failed to go off, had they sabotaged the flight in a desperate escape plan? We agreed that for sure the scientists would not have known about the bomb on-board. If they had, they would have warned the crew. "And let's face it Brian," said John. "If they had fallen back into enemy hands they faced execution. Berlin knew of this mission, they were traitors. There was no way that they would double-cross the crew and sabotage a plane and thus ultimately lead to their own certain deaths." And he added a point that had not crossed my mind previously. "Although they were fleeing to the UK to escape the Russians, they were still our enemy. They would have been restrained in the plane somehow and at the very least handcuffed to some form of fixed panelling." This all made perfect sense to me too. The crew wouldn't have trusted them and therefore there would have been no opportunity for them to sabotage the flight.

So if the bomb did not bring down the Thompson and the scientist couldn't have had the opportunity (or the political will) to sabotage it, what did bring it down? "Well," said John, "that's what we are going to find out."

We arrived at Dover and headed straight for the port and parking up alongside the old Thompson, her standing there overbearingly looming down upon us from its mighty stone plinth. We got out and noted the relatively good condition she remained in after all these years. "Off you go," John said to me. "What?" I replied. He explained. He needed the space to concentrate without disturbance. He had a lot of work to do and he wanted to do it right. I had to agree, despite the fact that I wanted him to talk me through the entire process. I

arranged to meet him back at the guest house we had pre-booked at 8 pm that Saturday evening.

Time passed slowly at first and there are a limited number of shops that one can occupy one's time with in Dover. I do give the town credit for one thing though, the best fish and chips I have eaten this side of Liverpool. I later whiled away my time with a visit to the castle and the underground war bunkers. The castle is spectacularly situated above the White Cliffs of Dover and has guarded our shores from invasion for over twenty centuries, and now was in the protective hands and security of English Heritage. The darkly atmospheric 'Secret Wartime Tunnels' as described, and its splendid most "vivid recreation of the Dunkirk evacuation, all this complete with dramatic projections of swooping Spitfires and real film footage," proved to be as promised in the brochure, absolutely fantastic. Before I knew it, time was upon me and I rushed to get back for 8 pm.

John was already there waiting at the bar with a fine pint of beer in his hand and a rather large smug grin upon his face. "A beer for my friend," he said to the barman. "I have some good news for him." We took a seat at a table by the window, and from a brown cardboard tube he produced a sketched technical drawing plan, detailing the mechanics of a B17. "Now then, first hear this Brian," he said. "I agree with you, you are being followed." And then he laughed. "I didn't believe it at first but it's true, a blue Ford Mondeo with tinted windows, sorry couldn't get the plate but it's been watching me all day. It was there at the port and a moment ago it was here in the street outside. Personally I don't believe in coincidence like that Brian." He already knew of my previous sightings of it having read so on my thread.

"Now on to the plane. Look at the plan Brian. What I expected to find I didn't," he said. "Under the circumstances as we know, if I was going to bomb that plane and ensure everybody was killed immediately, killed without any hope of survival at all, I would do it here." He pointed to the left wing, to a fuel line junction pump and at a schematical point where the wing joined onto the main fuselage section of the bomber. "This is the central fuel pump housing Brian. It would rip the outer wing away, cause a violent and uncontrollable downward spiral force, one that nobody could survive. The gravitational pull would be so violent it would prevent any hope of escape and the fire within would be intense. She would be engulfed in seconds."

He continued, "The plane has been restored to an exceptionally high standard. I've seen better planes than this get scrapped. They spent a lot of money doing this Brian. They may be following you and they may be keeping secrets from you but one thing is for sure, the Thompson means a lot to them." "Yes, I suppose so when you put it like that," I replied. He continued. "It was found in three sections; the left wing detached and the cockpit, main fuselage and right wing intact. The rear fuselage tail section was snapped away. Are you still following me Brian?" he asked. "Yes," I replied, "fully. Please go on."

“Well, here it is then. There has been extensive damage to the left outer-prop and wing tip, all now fully restored and no expense has been spared. Damage sustained when it crashed. This plane did not fly directly into anything but had caught the water, left wing down. It twirled over, causing the wing to snap away and landed heavily tail first, this rear fuselage section then breaking away.” (He demonstrated this half somersault motion to me using a beer mat). “So the bomb didn’t bring it down then?” I blurted out. “No it didn’t Brian. No doubt there was a bomb on board, we know that but it most certainly didn’t detonate. I cannot find any evidence whatsoever of an explosion taking place anywhere within this old bugger, absolutely none. And furthermore, fully restored or not, there is absolutely no evidence of any attack from outside bringing her down either.”

“So what does all this mean then John? I must confess, I’m a little confused.” “It means exactly this Brian,” he patiently went on to add to the conversation. “Realising that they could not clear the cliff top at Dover they navigated portside, left, and attempted to land at sea and as close to the cliffs as they could. They would have tried to land her with the cockpit raised and belly first. They wouldn’t have lowered the landing gear as they needed a smooth water landing. But this didn’t happen. The left wing caught the water first and not the belly. It dug in immediately and turned her violently around anti-clockwise. I have absolutely no doubt Brian, this was nothing more than a tragic wartime accident, and she quite simply ran out of fuel,” he added. “There is no evidence of burning, none, no explosion and no fire. There was no fuel on board when she hit.”

“And what of the bodies?” I asked. “Where are the other two bodies then?” “Well, we know that the pilot and navigator were found strapped in the cockpit side-by-side and we know that your dad was also found strapped into his rear gun placement. The B17 crew were equipped with heated suits given the high altitude at which she could fly, but your father was found still in his flight jacket, yes?” He asked. “Yes,” I said. “The man in the black bowler hat had said this, the letter was pushed down inside his flight jacket, and no mention of a heated suit was ever made.”

“Well here it is then. If we go with that info, we confirm that she had returned at low altitude. I think they almost made it, but they were already by now flying low and by the time they had dropped without sufficient fuel over the channel, the only place they could possibly conceive to bail out without certain capture, well by then it was too late. The scientist seated in the main fuselage would have, upon the fuselage snapping in two, been thrown out and washed away, handcuffed or otherwise (I shuddered at the thought of arms being torn from shoulders) given such violent impact as the plane tossed herself over.” John used his cigarette packet to further demonstrate this motion and continued. “No attempt was made by the crew to escape afterward, they were all found still strapped in. This was February Brian. The channel was freezing cold and she

sank deep into the mud below. I'm not a pathologist Brian but I think it's reasonable to assume that because of this fact they went into immediate shock and quite simply drowned in their seats."

"Excuse me John," I said tearfully, and stopped the conversation there, "I just need a moment," and in trying to contain my emotion I took out my mobile phone. I rang Carlo and upon his answering I simply said, "It's all okay Carlo. Your mother didn't kill our father."

The next time that Carlo and I will meet again will be as agreed, the next year on February 26th 2006 at 22.30 hours, the anniversary date of our war hero father's flight. We will be here again, at Dover Quay, where we will jointly throw a wreath into the sea.

The memorial card will read,

In Loving Memory of Brian 'Bull's-Eye' Wilkinson and the crew of the Thompson. The best rear gunner in the sky, the Magnificent Three never forgotten. Our eternal love and gratitude to you all,

Brian's boys.

<oOo>

Happier times: (One) Jonathan Taylor and UNESCO poet Steve Wilkinson (right). Remembrance Day fundraising concert in aid of Help For Heroes. War poem and song: Victoria Hall, Skipton, North Yorkshire. (Two) Taken shortly before his disappearance on Sunday, 25th March (2015) Odd Jonathan, partner and friends on the steps of Buzludzha Communist House.



From L to R: The Writer; Jonathan R.P Taylor (Odd Jonathan), photographer and partner Nicola Miller, archivist and translator Radoslav Denchev and architect and restoration campaigner, Dora Ivanova. Warnings signs prevail through legal statute and forbid entry.

PC BRIAN WILKINSON

**WHERE THERE IS WAR YOU FIND HEROES AND
WHERE THERE ARE HEROES YOU FIND SECRETS**



**PLEASE TAKE CARE
OF BETHANY**

**THE UNTOLD STORY OF BRIAN 'BULL'S-EYE' WILKINSON
"THE BEST REAR GUNNER IN THE SKY"
A MAN WHO GAVE HIS LIFE TO SAVE THE WORLD
FROM NUCLEAR OBLITERATION**

Picture: the Thompson, B-17F Flying Fortress
The original front cover of Brian's 2005 book.

Top speed: 287 mph (462 km/h).

Introduced: USAAF April 1938.

Retired: 1968 (Produced: 1938 – 1945).

Manufacturer: Boeing USA

Designer: Edward Curtis Wells.

Total number built: 12,731



Photo 1: B-17G 43-38172 of the 8th AF 398th BG 601st BS which was damaged on a bombing mission over Cologne, Germany, on 15 October 1944; the bombardier was killed. It was images such as this that gave the B-17 its legendary reputation as a heavily damaged but still flight capable craft, "The Flying Fortress".



Photo 2: German training model on how to attack Aviation School - models of an American Boeing B-17E/F with lattice model (sphere of aircraft weapons) and model of a German Focke-Wulf Fw 190.

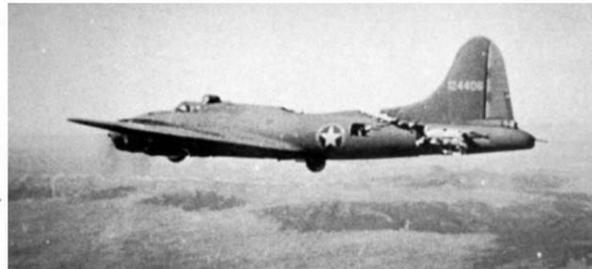


Photo 3: The severely damaged B-17, "All-American" continues to fly after an attacking Bf 109 fighter collided with the aircraft. The B-17 flew home and landed in this condition without major injuries to any of the crew members.



Photo 4: B-17 Flying Fortress bombers flying through dense flak. A very famous view of the formation flying through a field of flak. Believed to be at Merseberg, Germany. Photographs courtesy of Wikipedia Public Domain.



Memorial to the victims of The Holocaust - Central Sofia

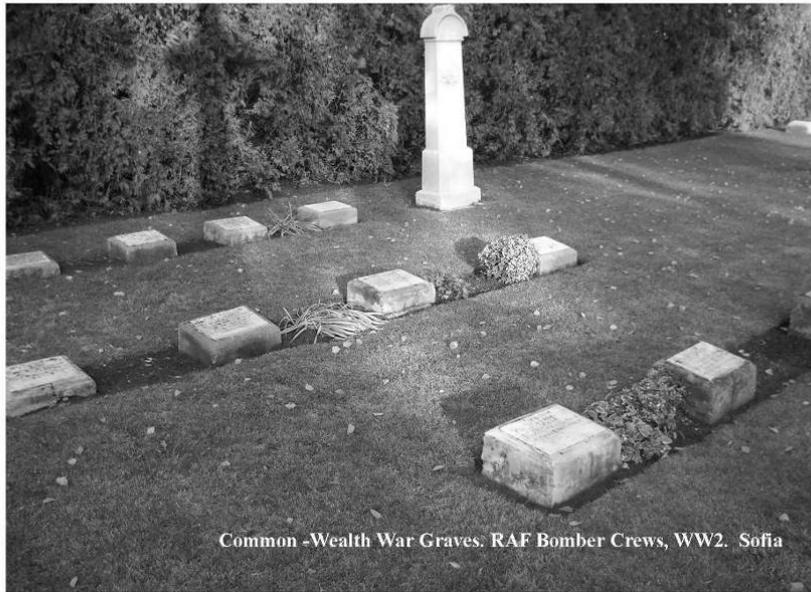




Memorial to the victims of The Holocaust - Central Sofia



The Eternal Flame War Memorial - Central Sofia



Common -Wealth War Graves. RAF Bomber Crews, WW2. Sofia



Memorial to Frank Thompson. Common -Wealth War Cemetery Sofia

Other titles by this author:

**MEAT: MEMOIRS of A PSYCHOPATH
'THE DEFINITIVE EDITION 2016'
Dr CERYS DAVIES et al**

'Meat: Memoirs of A Psychopath, The Definitive Edition', is truly a world's first in contemporary literature. Each book contained inside is written by the characters within. Each work is intentionally written in a quite specific and separate genre. This unique publication, 'The Definitive Edition 2016', contains ten separate and individually identifiable works including a radio play and musical soundtrack (1 hour 40 minutes) and additional audio book. There is even an accompanying film script which concludes Part Four; the Gabrielites.

Their strong driving narrative concerns the relationship between an ageing, retired police officer, and the sadistic cult leader who now stalks him. The story herein is carried across several books, all self-contained. Each story collides with another developing into a complex plot; but they can also be read quite independently away from the common narrative.

The intention is that this novel be later published by mainstream publishing houses (or independently) as eBook and print versions and released as one volume. However, in later printed versions beyond initial promotional proof copies, it is the author's intention that it be easily adapted into a continuation series of paperbacks. Accordingly you will find that The Definitive Edition is split into appropriate sections as intended.

The author of this work has also included a download link for the accompanying radio play and soundtrack, 'Meat: The Musical', and the children's story audio book. We sincerely hope that you enjoy this publication. Please note that whilst the children's story contained is indeed most suitable for minors, the publication as a whole alongside other works is most definitely not suitable for children. Use only the download link provided to obtain the audio version when sharing with children.

If you are a member of the press or media and would like a free copy of this publication for review we would be delighted to hear from you. Please contact us by using the eForm supplied on the publisher's Brittunculi Records and Books, website.

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