

**By James H. Murray, Flight Sergeant (Navigator) in 77 Squadron, RAF in 1944
sent by his daughter Mary Brown to www.airmen.dk on 28 April 2009**

MEMORIES FROM WORLD WAR II

GARDENING

In April 1943, I had finished my course in Air Navigation, received my navigator's wings and proceeded to England to partake in the Air War over Europe. I quickly found that I needed more training before joining an operational squadron. I was first assigned to an Advanced Flying Unit, which was based on the Isle of Man. This was very welcome because the Isle of Man had much more food than the mainland and the weather was wonderful in July and August 1944. The purpose of the "advanced" flying training was to acquaint us with the unique problems of flying over Britain in wartime- there was the weather, of course, but also there were prohibited areas, restricted areas and always the danger that there might be enemy intruders- "Bandits".

Having received that instruction, we were now ready to proceed to "Operational Training". This involved being assigned to a crew of pilot, navigator, bomb aimer, wireless operator and rear gunner. It also involved learning to take part in "operations", in an aircraft that was not a trainer.

We were assigned to an operational training base that flew Whitley bombers. These were actually used in the early part of the war but were too slow and carried such a small bomb load that they were taken off operational duties and sent for "Operational Training". We learned how to take part in an operational briefing where the various officers detailed the target, the weather, the enemy defenses, the take-off times, the bombing times, and the emergency procedures if one ran into trouble. We really felt that we were getting into the "Air War".

Conversion Training then followed operational Training. This was where we actually learned to fly and operate in the "Real Thing" -the aircraft that we would fly on actual operations against the enemy. My crew was sent to a conversion unit that flew Halifax Mark 11 aircraft. We knew that the Mark 11 had been replaced by the much better Halifax Mark 111, which had more powerful engines and could keep up with the mainstream bombers, which were mainly Lancasters,

To our dismay, we learned that our mission would be "GARDENING".

"Gardening" was the code name giving to the operation of laying Sea Mines in the shipping channels used by the enemy ships. The aim was to sink the ships if they hit one of the mines or, at least, make it difficult for the enemy to use the sea-lanes to transport materials needed for the war. In our case, the shipping lanes were those in the Baltic Sea that the Germans were using to transport Swedish iron ore to Germany – apparently the very high grade Swedish iron ore was necessary to make the grade of steel required to

make the excellent Tiger tanks and 88 millimeter guns that gave the German forces such a tactical superiority. The shipping lanes were quite narrow where they passed through the Danish Islands on their way to the Kiel Canal and Hamburg. Our job was to drop the mines in those narrow waters exactly in the shipping lane- requiring a very accurate navigation. We usually made a timed run from a prominent coastal landmark such as a headland.

The enemy also knew that we had to make such a run and so knew exactly where to wait for us to come. Since only about 15 or 20 bombers would be sent to each area, it was easy for the enemy radar to plot our course and for them to determine where we would have to fly in order to reach the drop zone accurately. In addition, the mines had to be dropped from no more than 15,000 feet so that they would not explode on impact. We were sitting ducks!

On April 23, 1944 we left the Air Force base in Elvington in Yorkshire with 6 crew on the Halifax bomber loaded with mines. I was the navigator in the 77 Squadron of the Royal Air Force Bomber Command.

At 1:30 AM, just as we approached the start of the “timed run” ready to drop the bombs in Oster Soen, the rear gunner gave the warning that a Messerschmit 110 Fighter was approaching from behind. This was their favourite attack as they could see the red glow of our exhaust pipes if they were in the right position. The pilot immediately started to fly a “corkscrew” pattern to make it difficult for the fighter to get an aim. The gunners let off a few streams of 0.5-inch machinegun fire to at least give the fighter some reason to go and find a less wary bomber. Alas, his second burst of 30-millimeter cannons hit our plane causing the port engines to catch fire and some burst inside the plane. One was between me and the wireless operator who was inside his radio cabinets. The metal casing probably saved both of us from being hit by shrapnel.

The plane was on fire and the pilot gave the order to “bail out”. My escape hatch was right under my feet and as the bomb aimer and Paddy Powers, the wireless operator, also had to go out that hatch, I received a lot of help to stow my desk and lift the hatch. I clipped my parachute onto the harness which we always wore, swung my feet into the hatch and was immediately sucked out into the slipstream. Paddy Powers was out next and they saw a third parachute come out of the plane. Then to their horror, they saw the plane explode with the pilot and midupper gunner on board. They then knew that the Germans saw the explosion and would be looking for survivors.

As soon as I got my bearing, I inflated my parachute and looked down. Although I was over land, I could see that I was going to drift out into the icy April water of the Baltic Sea. I tried to guide the parachute to land, but those chutes did not steer well. I kicked off my heavy, fleece-lined flight boots so I would not be pulled under water when I landed. I inflated my life jacket (“Mae West”) and landed in the cold water a few hundred yards from shore. I swam as best I could towards a small light on shore with my parachute under my arm. Once on shore I would have to hide or bury my parachute so the Nazis could not find it.

The beach where I landed was near freezing and covered with sharp obsidian and chalk rocks. It cut and bruised my feet. I knew that I was not going to walk very far without boots so I headed for a farm near the shore. I was a typical Danish farmhouse with the house and the barn attached. The first building was the cow barn. As I went in, I immediately stepped in a fresh cow pie. The warmth was so wonderful on my bare feet that I put my other foot in it.

Ascending the stairs to the loft above the barn, I quickly hid the “Mae West” and the parachute. I bumped into large sheepskin hanging over the rafters. I was so wet and exhausted that I wrapped myself in the sheepskin. At the other end of the barn was a door that led into the kitchen of the farmhouse. In the kitchen was a huge cook stove that was warm I was so cold and tired that I lay down and went into a very sound sleep.

ESCAPE

Fortunately, I came ashore at the farm of Mrs. Johanne Sorensen at Reesnesgaid, between Reesno and Blans on the southern Danish Island of Lolland. The farmers on each side of the Sorensen farm were both “Nazi-farmers”.

Sometime the next morning, I awoke and a little grey-haired lady (Mrs. Sorensen) was standing over me smiling. She had recognized my uniform. She put her index finger against her lips and gave a little shake of her head and disappeared down the stairs into the barn. She returned and gave me coffee and I knew I was safe. With her were her son Harald, his wife and their ten-year-old daughter. Harald spoke a little English, so I was able to tell them my story and of Paddy Powers’ escape from the airplane. They knew that the Germans would be looking for me and it was a crime for them to assist Allied flyers. They gave me dry clothes and took me to a hiding place in the nearby woods. They covered me with branches and told me to stay there until nightfall.

Mrs. Sorensen returned later that evening with Paddy Powers. They had found him about two miles away, hiding on the beach.

The following morning, Harald Sorensen, brought brother Djeld and Erik Neilsen and Thorvald Jensen, who were members of the Danish underground to the woods. They discussed how Power and I would get to Copenhagen and then to Sweden (which had remained neutral during the war).

Later that evening, they brought farmer’s clothing and two bicycles to the Sorensen’s home. They set off after dark to ride to Maribo, the capital of Lolland. They rode through the woods and back roads, about 25 kilometers, to Maribo. Around midnight, Dr. Iben Hansen greeted the escapees and members of the underground at his home. After a warming drink and a hot meal, Dr. Hansen led Powers and I to a hiding place in his attic. At this time, our rear gunner who had been rescued by another cell of the underground and taken separately to the Hansen house joined us. This was our home for the next ten days. Dr. and Mrs. Hansen had two young daughters who never knew of the

attic guests. Since Dr. Hansen's medical office was in the house, we knew that we had to be very quiet. Through a small crack in the boarded-up attic window, we saw our first Nazis drilling in the park right below us. Needless to say, we were a bit frightened to see the Germans so close.

Plans were made by Dr. Hansen and the underground to transport the men to Copenhagen by train. The three attic dwellers had to pretend to be displaced workers. Powers also had to pretend that he was a deaf-mute and a little retarded. I knew a little German, so was put in charge of the tickets. A "guide" from the underground accompanied us to the train but did not speak to us or have any contact with us, but purchased the tickets. If we were captured, the "guides" would be at great risk.

The train ride to Copenhagen went well and we were whisked away by university students to another hiding place. This time, our hideaway was a basement somewhat near the Railroad Station. We watched the students prepare bombs for railroad destruction to impede the Germans and watched them produce propaganda leaflets. One day, the students let us out for a walk and Powers accidentally bumped into an oncoming German officer. He automatically uttered, "Excuse Me" in **English!** The students and we were terrified! The officer apparently didn't hear the apology and carried on.

After a week in the basement, word came that passage had been secured on a boat carrying empty beer bottles to Malmo, Sweden. This would mean we would have our freedom if they were successful.

We went to the "beer boat" at the dock under the cover of night. Once on board, we were instructed to lie down on the deck. There were about 20 Jewish people in the hold on the boat. The hold was barricaded and covered with empty beer cases. I was put beside a Jewish mother and year-old baby. Boxes of beer were placed over and around us and we waited in darkness and silence. Suddenly, the sound of Nazi "jackboots" was heard on deck and, at the same time, the baby began to cry. The mother clamped her hands over the baby's mouth until the Nazi inspection was completed. The engines then started and we were all on our way to freedom in neutral Sweden.

Since we had left all our identification in Maribo, Denmark, we were put in jail in Malmo, Sweden. After a day in the Malmo jail, a representative from the British Embassy arrived and secured our release. We were then taken to the capital, Stockholm, put up in a fine hotel, and given Swedish clothing and Kronas. All the clothing was made from rayon (pulp paper) and was "zoot" style (padded shoulders, tapered waist jacket, pleated full trousers with very tapered legs and slim ankles). All that was missing was the long gold chain. A very wide brim felt hat, pointed shoes and long "great coat" completed the outfit.

After a week of fun and relaxation in Stockholm, we were flown back to England in a black "night fighter" (Mosquito) one at a time. We were placed singly in the bomb bay of the fighter for an extremely cold flight back to Britain. The Mosquito bomber was painted with British Overseas Airways markings to make it look like a civilian airliner so

that it could land at the “neutral” airport in Stockholm. The Germans knew about the deception and did the same with their aircraft flying into Stockholm.

When I returned to England, I discovered that I was considered “Missing and Presumed Dead” and all my possessions and R.C.A.F. uniform were gone! I was granted compassionate leave to return to Canada for a month. The only clothing I had was the “zoot” suit. My five days in London, before my return, I was met with jeers, insults and scorn in a wartime London where people did not dress very well.

After my leave, I returned to England and completed another 20 missions (a Tour) over Germany with the R.C.A.F. Ghost Squadron 428.

I lost track of the Irishman Paddy Powers.

After the war, Mrs. Hansen embroidered a map of Denmark with Maribo clearly identified and sent it to me. When, Joan, my first child was born, they sent me a brooch of the flower of Denmark for her.

In 1961, I returned to Denmark with my wife, Helen, and daughters Joan, Janet and Mary. Ebsen, the mayor of Maribo, organized a meeting with the wonderful people that saved my life. I discovered that Dr. Hansen had to escape to Sweden soon after he had helped us. He became a physician in a refugee camp near Malmö and died in 1960.

On this visit, the underground came forward and for the first time I knew their real names. Old Mrs. Sorensen was still alive, but when son Harald and his daughter greeted us, there was an embarrassing confusion. The daughter looked exactly as I remembered Harald’s wife but his wife had died before the visit. I mistook the daughter for her mother. Fisherman Christian Jensen, of Reersnoes still had my “Mae West” that he had kept hidden since April 1944. In August of 1961, he inflated it and it still held air. He had kept it as a souvenir.

During our visit, a Danish magazine did an article on me and the reunion with the wonderful people who made it possible for me to go back to Canada graduate from medical school and continue the rest of my life. On the day we were leaving Maribo, I went down to pay the hotel bill for my family. These amazing people had already paid the bill.