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# Memories of War

Heroes Return 2 veterans tell their stories



## **Memories of War**

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# About Heroes Return

The Big Lottery Fund launched the Heroes Return 2 scheme in April 2009. So far Heroes Return 2 has funded over £7.8 million in grants to 11,507 veterans, spouses, carers and widow(er)s across the UK and the Republic of Ireland to make trips to France, Holland, the Far East, USA, Italy and Greece, as well as to places within the UK. Grants of up to £5,500 were made available for travel and accommodation costs for veterans or their widow(er)s, along with spouses and a carer.

## Heroes Return extended

In December 2010, the Big Lottery Fund announced that it has committed over £1 million additional funding to Heroes Return 2 to extend the scheme until January 2012 (travel before the end of December 2011).

**For more information visit our website at: [www.biglotteryfund.org.uk](http://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk) or call our application helpline on 0845 0000 121**





# A life-long friendship



Arthur Smith, a Royal Navy veteran from Armagh in Northern Ireland, used his grant from the Heroes Return 2 programme to return to Ischia, off the coast of Naples, with his wife Freda. It proved an emotional trip for the veteran

Arthur Smith was 18 when he signed up for the Navy in 1942 and was assigned as a crew member on ML 567, a lightweight motor launch ship that carried out mine-sweeping missions and submarine patrols in the seas of Europe. The ship was part of a flotilla that docked at Ischia in May 1944 after helping free the island from the grasp of the German Navy. Little did Arthur know as he stepped off the boat all those years ago and was greeted by a nine-year-old boy named Pippo that this was to be the start of a friendship that would last for the next 68 years.

"When we docked at Ischia I was greeted by smiling young children who treated us like heroes. I got to know one of them really well," says Arthur. "His name was Pippo Conte and I quickly struck up a close friendship with his family.

"They were wonderful. They were so poor but they welcomed me with open arms. I remember visiting their home for dinner one night and they presented me with egg and chips while they all ate spam and bread."

Arthur repaid the friendship shown by

the Conte family by giving them rations from the boat – bread, tins of corn beef, chocolate and coffee. "It was the first time they had tasted coffee and they really loved it; they told me they felt so spoiled!" he says. "They told me that I had saved their lives."

Arthur, who was born in Kent but moved to Northern Ireland to be close to his family in 2005, has never forgotten the generosity shown to him by the Contes. During the war he carried out missions in Malta, Gibraltar, across Italy, Algiers and Yugoslavia, but it is his time on Ischia that remains closest to his heart.

He has returned to see his old friends on several occasions, and Pippo and his wife even came over to the UK when Arthur and Freda celebrated their golden wedding anniversary a few years ago.

But his Heroes Return-funded visit proved particularly poignant as he knew it would probably be his last. "I look back with pride to have served my country on that ship alongside some of the best pals I've ever known," he says.

"I have such fond memories of Ischia. It's very moving to go back there and see those children grown up and doing so well. There's only two of us left now from the ship, but I know that all the lads would be so happy to see how the island is thriving.

"It was an honour to serve and I saw so many wonderful places, but it is the memories of Ischia and the great friends I made there that will be with me forever."



# Aftermath to the war in Italy



In 1944 ex-Royal Artillery man Bill Parr, then 18, from St Helens, Lancashire was posted to Eboli, near Naples, for the final onslaught against German forces in Italy

Just as Bill Parr was about to see action in the field, the European war came to an end.

"I was pleased that it was over but I felt disappointed that I had not had the chance to do anything.

"When I was 15 and in the Home Guard, I used to pray that the war would not finish until I got there."

Deployed to collect armaments and ammunition in the wake of the Allied army, Bill travelled through war-torn Italy where he witnessed the terrible legacy of the German occupation.



"As we moved up towards Milan we came to a place with a long avenue of trees. Hanging from each one were the bodies of Italian partisans executed by the Germans. In the village they told us that the partisans had been in jail for blowing up enemy communication lines. The Germans had told the partisans they would be released but when they came out of the prison and started back to their villages the Germans then re-captured them and hanged them as a reprisal for the damage they had caused.

"A bit later we saw a young woman being dragged out of a building by a group of men. They were beating her and she was screaming. We felt awful, but we didn't know what to do. Our commanding officer told us not to do anything and just to get on with our job of collecting guns. We found out later that the girl had been collaborating with the Germans."

When Bill eventually reached Milan he also witnessed the bodies of Benito Mussolini and his mistress Clara Petacci strung upside down from the roof of a petrol station. "Their faces looked battered and his girlfriend had a rope tied to her skirt to stop it falling over her face."

However, despite the terrible things he had witnessed, Bill found personal spiritual comfort from one special meeting.

"When we got to Rome a group of us



went to the Vatican and were invited to an audience with Pope Pius XII. It was a great experience, I even asked him to bless some rosary beads and a crucifix, which I brought home for my mum."

Now aged 84, Bill used his Heroes Return 2 grant to return to Italy, and in particular to visit the monastery and the Polish Cemetery at Monte Cassino.

He says, "When we went through Cassino after the battle, there was hardly a brick standing. I went back to see what it all looks like now."



## The War in Italy

Italy entered World War Two in 1940 on the side of Germany. The Italian leader Mussolini, wanting a quick victory to copy Hitler's Blitzkriegs in Poland and France, invaded Greece in October 1940 but was forced to accept a humiliating stalemate after a few months.

At the same time, Italy, having invaded British Somalia and parts of Egypt, faced an allied counter-attack in the desert leading to the loss of all its imperial possessions in Ethiopia and north Africa.

This series of military defeats, the hostility of a people exhausted by failure, and the landing of the Anglo-American forces in Sicily in 1943 brought about the fall of the fascist regime. Mussolini was arrested and, on

8 September 1943, Italy surrendered.

At this point Italy split into two, and the country was a battlefield for the rest of the war. The Allies moved up from the south, and the Germans invaded Italy to try and stop Allied progress.

The Nazis rescued Mussolini and set him up as the head of a puppet government based on the shores of Lake Como. The north was the base for loyalist Italian fascists and German Nazi forces, and a bitter two-year civil war broke out between the fascists and the Italian resistance movement, the partisans.

The Nazis finally left the country on 25 April 1945. Three days later Mussolini was murdered, and the remaining Italian fascist forces eventually disbanded. Nearly half a million Italians (including civilians) died in the conflict.

# “Thank you for what you did”



One veteran who took part in the Allied advance through Holland in the months following Operation Market Garden is Ernest Briggs from Peterborough who joined up with the Coldstream Guards aged 17

After military training, and while awaiting posting to action, Ernest Briggs was deployed for guard duty down at Chartwell in Kent as part of Winston Churchill's bodyguard.

However, as the Allied invasion stepped up he received his first posting to Normandy, landing at Gold Beach three weeks on from the invasion. From there he joined the Allied advance up through Belgium and into Holland.

Ernest soon found himself in action on 9 March 1945 as his battalion prepared to clear the Rhine bridgehead against fanatical resistance from the German 7th Fallschirmjager, an airborne division of the German military. There was hard fighting, with Ernest's battalion taking heavy casualties.

"It was known as the Guards' death parade," Ernest says. "I was positioned back on the embankment and there was a lot of shelling.

**“I remember seeing our padre walking about amongst the explosions helping the injured men”**

"I remember seeing our padre walking about amongst the explosions helping the injured men – English and German. The attack started at 2.30pm and the fighting went on until midnight.

A couple of weeks later the Allies constructed pontoons over the Rhine, and on Good Friday in 1945 Ernest and his battalion crossed over from Holland into Germany where they took part in the attack and liberation of Enschede.

They fought on up through Germany and into Schleswig-Holstein where the Germans finally surrendered.

"It's funny when you're young – you don't realise things," he says. "The Guards were like a family. Our officers were marvellous – an inspiration to us all. Being in the mortar platoon, I was in the support group and always slightly back from the action. It was the infantrymen down at the front who had the hard job." Ernest used his Heroes Return funding to take a trip to Enschede in Holland.

"The Dutch people were wonderful and so friendly.

"I was walking down the street when a little girl, no more than 4 years old, suddenly broke away from her mother and came running up to me.

"Shaking my hand, she said, 'Thank you for what you did'."





# Arnhem: a bridge too far



September 2010 was the 66th anniversary of Operation Market Garden, the largest airborne operation in history. Over 86,000 Allied troops took part, their aim to seize control of bridges and river crossings in Germany and the Netherlands from the German Army. Control of the Rhine was crucial to the success of Market Garden but the bridge at Arnhem proved to be a bridge too far

Gerry Dimmock, (pictured left) 90, from Newton Stewart in the Scottish Borders was one of the 10,000 troops that landed at Arnhem on 17 September 1944. Gerry says, "We were part of the force that was sent in by military glider, which were engineless aircraft that were towed in the air and used to drop troops as near as possible to the target zone. Because they didn't have engines they had no control of where they landed and we were also being shot by German soldiers. Many of my comrades lost their lives before they even landed on Dutch soil.

The troops were supposed to hold the bridge at Arnhem for 24 hours but the brave few held out for nine days before making their dramatic escape.

Only 2,000 men were able to move along the front line; the rest were either killed or captured by the Nazis. Gerry was one of the lucky ones and he made his escape by swimming 500 metres across the Rhine.

"I had to discard my uniform and my kit as they would have weighed me down. Luckily I was pulled out the other side by a British guardsman."

In September 2010, Gerry travelled to Arnhem with the Liverpool Arnhem Veterans' Club to take part in commemorative services and a parade across the bridge itself.

"This trip was very emotional for me as I met up with an old friend, Harry Houghton. It's the first time I'd seen him since we completed our parachute training. In the Battalion (10th Para) we were all very close – more so in wartime as you don't know how much longer you are going to live!

"I didn't know that Harry had survived Arnhem as during the battle I was a jeep driver moving between the lines picking up survivors. I probably picked him up and took him to the dressing station at Oosterbeek.

"Of the 750 battalion members, there are now only 13 still alive today.

"I've been back seven times since the Second World War and I so look forward to each visit as I get to meet old comrades and take part in all the events.

"I'm always upset when I visit the cemeteries to pay my respects and remember those who didn't come home."

## Operation Market Garden

Operation Market Garden (17–25 September 1944) was the largest airborne operation in history and one of the most audacious of the Allied offensives in World War Two.

A force of over 86,000 men, paratroopers, air and ground units, were involved in the operation to seize control of bridges and river crossings in Germany and the Netherlands. The Allied assault was initially successful, but ultimately ended in defeat with up to 13,000 men killed and many more injured or taken prisoner.

The plan was for Allied forces to secure a series of bridges over the main rivers of the German-occupied Netherlands and allow a rapid advance by armoured units into northern Germany.

At first, the operation was successful and several bridges between Eindhoven and Nijmegen were captured.

However, ground forces were held up by the demolition of a bridge over the Wilhelmina Canal at Son, delaying the capture of the main road bridge over the Meuse until 20 September.

At Arnhem, the British 1st Airborne Division met far stronger resistance than anticipated. In the battle that followed, only a small force managed to hold one end of the Arnhem road bridge and they were overrun on 21 September. The rest of the division were trapped and had to be evacuated on 25 September. The Allies never reached Arnhem.

The Allies had failed to cross the Rhine in big enough numbers, and the river remained a barrier to their advance until March 1945. The failure of Market Garden ended Allied hopes of finishing the war in 1944.

Although Operation Market Garden was perceived to be a failure Montgomery predicted that "in years to come it will be a great thing for a man to be able to say: 'I fought at Arnhem'." He claimed that Market Garden was 90 per cent successful.



# Hero number 50,000

Former RAF bomber command navigator 91 year old Gordon Mellor was the 50,000th individual to benefit from the Heroes Return grant scheme

Gordon Mellor was awarded a Heroes Return 2 grant in December 2010 to fund the commemorative visit he made to pay his respects to those of the fabled Comète resistance group who helped him escape across Nazi occupied Belgium and France and over the Pyrenees into Spain.

The Comet Line was a route by which Allied soldiers and airmen were smuggled out of Belgium and France into neutral Spain and returned to Britain. Their journey usually began in Brussels where the men were fed, given civilian clothing and false identity papers. A network of people organised by a Belgium woman named Andrée de Jongh, who was 24 years old when she started the Comet Line, then guided them through France and over the Pyrenees by foot.

Serving with Bomber Command 103 Squadron, Gordon aged 22 was shot down in November 1942 while his Halifax bomber was returning from a raid over Germany.

"Returning from a short night raid over Aachen we were chased by a Messerschmitt 109. He cracked us four times on each set of engines and we started to hurtle down fast. I managed to bail out and crashed into a tree. The flight engineer came out behind me but



**"As I stood in the darkness looking at the flames, I had the loneliest feeling of my life"**

his parachute failed and he hit a roof on the side of a house and was killed. I saw the plane burning in a field about 2km away. Inside were the pilot and rear gunner who hadn't managed to get out. I got out of the tree, stuffing my parachute between the branches. As I stood in the darkness looking at the flames I had the loneliest feeling of all my life – a desperate feeling of being completely alone. I decided I had to get away as quick as I could so started heading south west across the blackness."

Gordon was taken to a farmhouse and his long journey to freedom began. Dressed in civilian clothes, Gordon, now travelling with other allied escapees, was passed from one safe house to another as he made his way across Nazi-occupied France heading up towards the Pyrenees.

"As we passed through one town we boarded a tram and it was quite full so we stood on the platform," Gordon says. "Suddenly a group of German soldiers got on and we were all squashed up together on the platform. Further along, five German officers got on, so we all had to squeeze up even more.

"After a while the officers got off and the soldiers gave them the Nazi salute. All we could do was just try to look as nonchalant as possible.

"Sometimes I was certain that we looked different and the local people must have spotted us, but if they did, they never showed it."

Gordon's long journey took him through Belgium, France, over the Pyrenees and then to Bilbao, Madrid and finally Gibraltar where he was once again kitted up in uniform and flown back to Britain in a Dakota.

When he returned to France to pay his respects to those who helped him escape to freedom, Gordon said, "It was like going back to meet old friends. The efforts of those people were amazing. They were just ordinary people yet so extraordinary.

"We can never pay back the debt we owe them."

**The Comet Line** was a resistance group in Belgium and France which helped Allied soldiers and airmen return to Britain. The line started in Brussels, where the men were fed, clothed and given false identity papers. A network of people guided them south through occupied France into neutral Spain and home via British-controlled Gibraltar.

The Comet line was created by a young Belgian woman in the Belgian Resistance, Andrée de Jongh (nicknamed "Dédée").

De Jongh helped 400 Allied soldiers escape from Belgium through occupied France to the British consulate in Madrid and on to Gibraltar.

Comet Line members and the families took great risks, and De Jongh escorted 118 airmen over the Pyrenees herself.

After November 1942 escape lines became more dangerous when southern France was occupied by the Germans and the whole of France was under Nazi rule. Many members of the Comet Line were betrayed, hundreds were arrested, and after interrogation and torture, executed or deported to German prisons and to concentration camps.

In total 2,373 British and Commonwealth servicemen and 2,700 Americans were taken to Britain during World War Two through the Comet Line.

# Breaking the code



At Bletchley Park in Buckinghamshire ciphers and codes were decrypted during World War Two, most famously the ciphers generated by the German Enigma machine. The intelligence produced from decryption at Bletchley contributed greatly to the Allied successes including defeating the U-boats in the Battle of the Atlantic and the success of the D-Day landings

Now aged 86, Hilary Stanger-Leaths was just 19 when she was posted to Bletchley Park in 1943. During the war Hilary also worked at the intelligence bases at Stanmore and Eastcote. She had volunteered for the WRENS, but she and her sister were chosen for the intelligence role.

"They observed us for a fortnight, looking into our backgrounds and producing a profile on us. We didn't know at the time what we were being chosen to do. We were very young, I was 19 and my sister was just 17 and a half. We were very young to be trusted with such a high level of responsibility."

Hilary was first stationed at Stanmore and then moved to Bletchley Park for a year in 1943.

"Everything was top secret and you had to keep quiet. We put up with it though because we knew it could be our brother, our father or our uncle whose life could be put at risk because of something we might say.

"We worked in pairs in watches of eight hours on and 16 hours off. We were working on the machines that deciphered the German codes. We would receive

a job which we would process in the machine, we would then process the same job in a checking machine and if we got a good match, one of us would send it on to headquarters.

"You didn't know what other people at Bletchley Park were doing, you only knew what your job was and we didn't understand at the time the great things that were going on. All ranks mixed together and you would be sitting at meal times together, chatting away with each other but you never knew what job they did and you never asked.

"The secrecy was quite hard because you were not allowed to talk to people and your movements were restricted, but I was lucky because I had my sister with me.

"The security at all the secret locations was very tight.

"When I was stationed at Stanmore, no one was allowed to go in without a work pass and we were trained in first aid and firefighting, because we had been told that should we be bombed while working there we would have to rescue ourselves because the fire and rescue service would not be allowed in.

"I never talked about my work at Bletchley





**“The secrecy was quite hard because you were not allowed to talk to people and your movements were restricted”**

after the war – in fact, nobody did until someone who was stationed at Bletchley wrote a book about it in the 1970s.

“I had a friend who I worked with at Eastcote and we always kept in touch and maintained our friendship, but we still never talked about what we had done during the war – not until it became public.”

Hilary used her Heroes Return 2 grant to make a commemorative visit to Bletchley.



## **Bletchley Park**

During the Second World War Bletchley Park in Buckinghamshire (also known as Station X) was the site of the UK's main decryption establishment, the Government Code and Cypher School. Ciphers and codes of several Axis countries were decrypted there, most importantly ciphers generated by the German Enigma and Lorenz machines.

The high-level intelligence produced at Bletchley Park, codenamed Ultra, provided crucial assistance to the Allied war effort.

Some 9,000 people were working at Bletchley Park at the height of the codebreaking efforts in January 1945, and more than 12,000 people (of whom 80 per cent were women) worked there at some point during the war.

A number of Bletchley Park employees were recruited for various intellectual achievements – chess champions, crossword experts, polyglots and mathematicians. In one case the ability to solve the Daily Telegraph crossword in under 12 minutes was used as a recruitment test.

Harry Hinsley, a Bletchley veteran and the official historian of British Intelligence in World War Two, has said that Ultra shortened the war “by not less than two years and probably by four years”.

# Precious cargo



In the war former merchant seaman John Burgess, 83, from Taunton served as a radio operator aboard Atlantic convoys. With his Heroes Return 2 grant he visited the Brittany Merchant Navy Museum and Memorial as part of a group of four veterans from the Taunton and District Merchant Navy Association

It's very important for veterans to make the trip to remember our time in the war and the men that were lost," John says.

"Obviously most veterans funded through Heroes Return 2 go back to the places where they fought, but as we can't go back to the middle of the ocean we decided to go to the museum dedicated to the Battle of the Atlantic."

John joined the Merchant Navy and first went to sea aged 16. During the war he served on nine Atlantic convoys, helping to bring pork from Canada in banana boats and steel and timber from New York safely home to Britain. He also served in the Pacific alongside the Americans up to VJ Day in August 1945.

"At the end of the war I was part of a very memorable convoy," he says.

"Because the ship I was serving on was a refrigerated ship we were sent down with two other ships to South Africa.

"Each ship carried a cargo of oranges from South Africa set for the UK. My ship went to Glasgow. We brought the first

commercial cargo of oranges after the war. One orange was allocated to every child younger than 14 for Christmas 1945.

"As far as I was concerned the worst of the war was over by the time I first went to sea in February 1944. But I saw a ship sink and lost friends on other ships in other places.

"I was delighted to make the trip to the Merchant Navy Museum and to meet the other veterans. I carried a precious cargo – a letter of friendship from the Mayor of Taunton to the Mayor of Camaret. It gave me great pleasure to pass this on when I met him during our stay in their country.

"Our party attended a special ceremony alongside members of the French resistance in the Finistère region and laid wreaths in memory of those who lost their lives.

**"It's very important for veterans to make the trip to remember our time in the war and the men that were lost"**

"We exchanged neckties with our French hosts and they gave us a bronze plaque each to mark what was an emotional occasion. The friendship they showed to our whole party was first class – I'll never forget it.

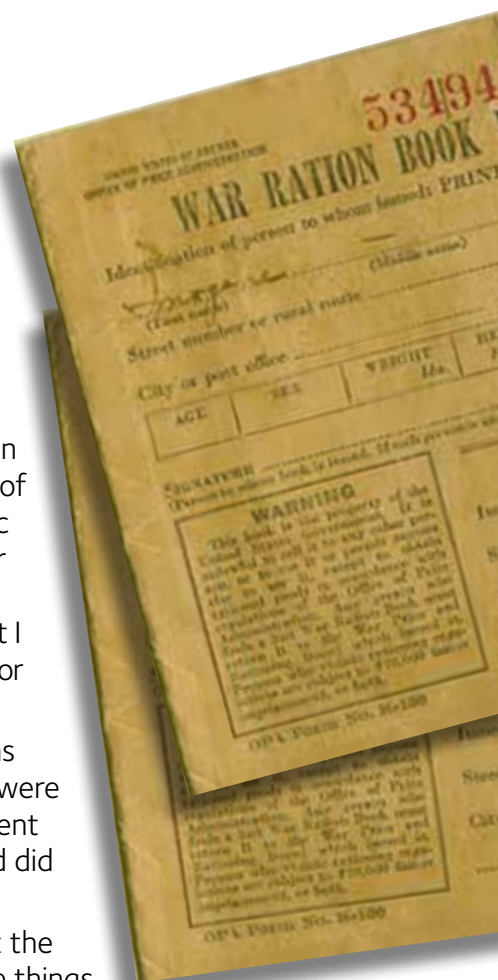
"The museum in Camaret is the only museum in mainland Europe that's solely dedicated to the Battle of the Atlantic.



"The exhibits are built into the structure of a former German gun emplacement. Looking at charts of the wartime action in the Atlantic brought back many memories for me. They also displayed some of the communication equipment that I operated in my role as radio operator on the convoys.

"I don't want to be looked upon as being unique in any way – there were lots of young lads like me who went to war without making a fuss and did their part.

"I've never had any regrets about the choices I made back then and the things I witnessed – I loved every minute of it."



## Rationing in the war

Despite the dig for victory, Britain remained heavily dependent on imported food during the Second World War. Merchant ships bringing vital goods across the Atlantic were, therefore, Britain's crucial lifeline, one which German U-boats were determined to destroy in one of the deadliest campaigns of the War. The strategy was to starve Britain into submission.

To deal with extreme shortages, the Ministry of Food introduced a system of rationing. Each person had to register at local shops, and was provided with a ration book that contained coupons. The shopkeeper was provided with enough food for registered customers.

When buying goods, the purchaser had to give the shopkeeper a coupon as well as money.

Rationing was introduced very early. On 8 January 1940, bacon, butter and sugar were rationed.

This was followed by meat, tea, jam, biscuits, breakfast cereals, cheese, eggs, milk and canned fruit.

As the war progressed, most foods came to be rationed, as were non-food commodities such as clothing and petrol.

The dangers to British shipping also restricted the import of exotic fruits, such as oranges and bananas, both of which were virtually unobtainable until the war was over.



# Japanese surrender



On 15 August 1945, the Japanese surrender to the Allies brought an end to war that had cost nearly 450,000 British lives

John Chittendon, 85, from Pevensey Bay in East Sussex joined the Royal Navy Fleet in 1943 as an Ordinary Seaman. He used his Heroes Return 2 grant to retrace the steps of his remarkable journey 65 years ago when along with two of his shipmates he entered Singapore just after it was liberated from the Japanese.

John took a pilot's course when he joined up, but was unsuccessful as a flyer so he transferred as a DEMS (Defence Equipped Merchant Ships) Gunner on a Merchant Liberty ship, as part of the Arctic Convoy taking vital supplies to Russia.

On 5 September 1945, John was serving on the Indian Coaster SS Pasha, loaded up with food and medical supplies and cruised into Singapore Bay. "Everywhere looked very quiet. We couldn't see any

other supply ships but we noticed some of the British invasion fleet anchored nearby. I asked to go ashore and was granted permission along with two others, so we got all dressed up in our white uniforms and headed into Singapore.

"I took a dagger and one of the others had a revolver. We followed the roads then crossed over some fields. There were lots of little huts, but not a soul about.

"All the time I had this strange feeling that we were being watched when suddenly I heard a cry of 'Hiya coppers!' and then all these Australian POWs appeared from the huts and ran up to us patting us on the back. They had escaped from Changi gaol and were hiding from the Japanese army, which had disappeared back into the jungle only minutes before we had arrived."





As they were talking with the POWs a Chinese civilian who had been smuggling them out throughout the war, came over and guided them to a nearby civilian internment camp.

"They were in a terrible state too, most just dressed in rags." But they were interrupted by a commotion coming from the direction of the harbour as a British naval officer arrived with a party of marines.

"He came striding up to us. He was very angry and shouted, 'What do you think you're doing here? Get back on your ship we haven't occupied Singapore yet!' So I said, 'Well we have'. Then he said, 'Don't be cheeky and get back on your ship!'"

John attended the official surrender taken by Lord Louis Mountbatten on 15 September.

"There were 40 or 50 high-ranking Japanese officers present. Even without

## The fall of Singapore

The Japanese occupation of Singapore in World War Two occurred between 1942 and 1945 after the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942.

Japanese military forces occupied Singapore after defeating the combined Australian, British, Indian and Malayan garrison.

After a battle lasting only six days, the supposedly impregnable fortress surrendered to General Tomoyuki Yamashita. The surrender was described by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill as "the worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history".

Singapore was officially returned to British colonial rule on 12 September 1945, following the formal signing of the surrender at City Hall.

their swords and weapons they looked very menacing as they marched out through the crowds. I was told afterwards that some people booed, but I just remember it being strangely quiet."

John's war service finally ended in February 1946 when he was injured in a vehicle accident and taken to hospital in Calcutta before recovering and coming home.

"Apart from being injured once when a wave slammed me across the deck of the ship, I went right through the war escaping serious injury just to end up with a jeep on top of me. But fortunately I wasn't killed. My mum and dad would never have forgiven me."

# Shot out of the sky

In 1944, Lancaster Bomber aircrew member John Davies Jones from Usk in Monmouthshire, was shot down over Germany, captured and held as a Prisoner of War (POW). Two of his fellow crewmen were killed. A Heroes Return 2 grant paid for John to return to Germany and visit Durnbach cemetery to pay his respects at the graves of his colleagues



John Davies Jones joined the RAF as an apprentice in 1938 when he was just 16 years old. Four years later, he was flying in dangerous and daring night missions over the occupied territories of Europe on board a Lancaster Bomber.

John was a bomb aimer – his role was to guide the pilot and the aircraft into position over a target and then release the bomb load.

On his 19th mission on the evening of 12 September 1944, John's aircraft came under attack from a German fighter plane and crashed.

"It was 23:00 hours and we were on route to bomb a target in Frankfurt. As we turned to bomb Frankfurt we were engaged and shot down by a German night fighter.

"Everything happened very quickly. My initial duty was to put the fire out in the bomb bays. I thought I had stopped it

but the order came to bail out. The plane went down near Mannheim in Germany and not everyone on board made it.

"Our skipper, Norman, a 20 year old New Zealander, and the mid-upper gunner, Harry, were both killed.

"I was only 22 but I was one of the oldest crew members on the plane. That's how young some of the crew were.

"A couple of the lads were lucky enough to land near one another but I landed on my own. I was captured the next day hiding in the woods. People were leaving Mannheim to get away from the bombings and they happened to come into the woods I was in and I was caught by German soldiers."

"I was taken to Dulag Luft, a well-known interrogation centre where they try to break you to get information out of you. The only thing that you have to give is your number, rank and name – and that's



what you keep to. I was put in solitary confinement for two-and-a-half weeks. They prey on you and play terrible mind games. They leave you in the cold, try and starve you and stop you from having sleep. During the interview they threatened me with my life."

John was then taken to a POW camp called Stalag Luft VII in Bankau on the Polish/German border.

"Daily life was monotonous in the camps. We weren't treated like the army prisoners and there was no work to go out to. But we had a Welsh club and choir. We also had a grass-covered ground to play rugby and soccer. We even played internationals. My wife had been notified that I was a POW. We were allowed to send cards home. She sent cards, but nothing ever got through from the Germans."

"The worst thing about it was the enforced march we had to do from the Polish border to another prison camp south of Berlin in the freezing cold winter of January 1945. The Russians were advancing and the Germans ordered everyone to leave.

"We started at the beginning of January and the march lasted the whole month."

John was a POW until the advancing Russian Red Army finally overtook the Germans and pushed them back.

"But then the Russians wouldn't let us go home for three weeks because the Allies were fighting over who took parts of



Berlin and we were pawns in that game.

"We were eventually released in May 1945 and I came home in June, when I was able to see my baby daughter, who I had only ever seen once before I was shot down. I then had some leave and went back to the RAF.

"Looking back, I count myself to be one of the lucky ones. I've never talked much about this with my family and I doubt that I've talked about my experiences in this way for 60 years. They never really asked either. I think they were just glad to have me home."

# Relieved to be alive!

Leslie Temple used his Heroes Return 2 grant to travel to Canada to pay his respects to his commanding officer whose bravery and ingenuity saved an entire bomber crew

RAF veteran Leslie Temple from Ilford in London travelled to British Columbia to remember his skipper Erik Nielsen who later became Canada's Deputy Prime Minister and was brother to Airplane actor Leslie Nielsen. Leslie joined the RAF in 1943 to train as an aircrew wireless operator and later trained on B-17s – the famous Flying Fortress bombers.

"On the night of 30 March 1944 my life took a dramatic turn because that was the night of the RAF Bomber Command raid on Nuremberg, which saw 96 aircraft lost in one night – the single highest loss of the entire war. While it was still easy to replace aircrafts it was not so easy to find personnel that spoke German.

"Next day the Station Officer asked for German-speaking volunteers and I was one of few who knew the language.

"On 23 July 1944, we were bound for the naval base at Kiel in northern Germany for a bombing mission.

"Just after dropping its load our bomber was picked up by German radars and came under heavy gunfire. Out of the four engines in the aircraft two were hit and caught fire. Although we managed to put it out we were still under massive attack. It felt as if this was the end.



"Our skipper Erik ordered the remaining two engines to be switched off making the plane drop from 23,000 feet to 10,000 feet and disappearing from the enemy radar screens.

"We made our escape over the North Sea by the skin of our teeth. However the fire had destroyed the navigation system and we had to use the stars to find our way home.

**"The BIG grant helped me pay my respects to the man who saved my life"**

"This was not the end of our troubles as liquid in the hydraulic system, which is used to get the wheels out in preparations for landing, had been lost during the escape."

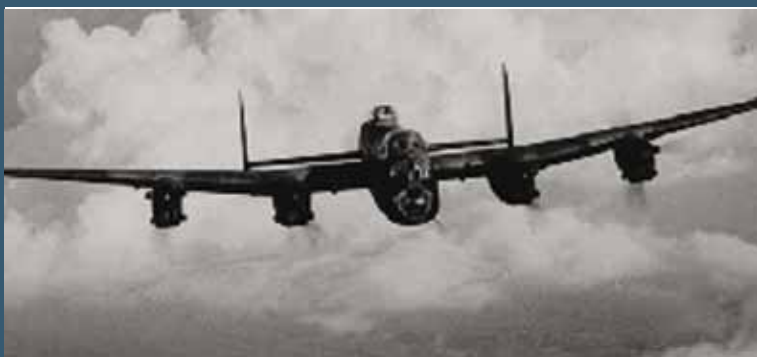
In an inspired moment Erik ordered his crew members to urinate in the hydraulic tank enabling the bomber for a hair-raising, bumpy but safe landing.

"Without Erik's prompt action we would have been lost that day.

"Every year we have a reunion at Ludford Magna, Lincolnshire, home of Squadron 101."

In 2008, Erik passed away in Canada but none of the three living crew members were able to attend his funeral.

"I am very appreciative of the Big Lottery Fund grant which helped me pay my respects to the man who saved my life."



## RAF Bomber Command

During World War Two RAF Bomber Command destroyed a significant proportion of Nazi Germany's industries and devastated many German cities.

At the beginning of the war Bomber Command concentrated on precision bombing in daylight. However, when German defences cut several British raids to pieces in late 1939, there was a switch to night attacks. This created a new problem of finding the target.

Because of inaccuracy in hitting targets, in February 1942 Bomber Command were authorised to use area bombardment of German cities. All large German cities contained important industrial districts and were considered legitimate targets by the Allies. The carpet bombing of cities continued throughout the rest of the war, culminating in the controversial bombing of Dresden in 1945.

Allied bombing of German cities claimed between 305,000 and 600,000 civilian lives. But Bomber Command crews suffered an extremely high casualty rate: 55,573 killed out of a total of 125,000 aircrew. A further 8,403 were wounded and 9,838 became prisoners of war.

The very high casualty levels suffered give testimony to the dedication and courage of Bomber Command's aircrew. Statistically there was little chance of surviving a tour of 30 operations, and by 1943 the odds against survival were grim with only one in six expected to survive the first tour.

In total 364,514 operational sorties were flown over Germany by Bomber Command; over 1 million tons of bombs were dropped; and 8,325 aircraft were lost in action.



# On the radar



**Aged 19, Peggy Hamilton from Bromborough on the Wirral in Merseyside joined Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), training as a radar operator on heavy Ack-Ack guns**

"At first my mum didn't believe what I'd done until I showed her the call-up papers," Peggy Hamilton remembers. "First we had to go for a medical and then on to a special training course to find out what we were good at. I was chosen for radar so spent six weeks training. When we had finished they burned all our books – anything to do with radar was very secret and nobody could afford to take any chances."

When she completed her training Peggy was assigned to the 631 Mixed Heavy Ack-Ack Group where she travelled up and down the country as part of a mobile gun battery setting up vital defence positions against German air raids and missile attacks.

Operating from inside a radar cabin about the size of a small shed that contained a radar computer machine known as a 'Mark I', Peggy's job was to monitor high frequency electromagnetic waves on a large screen to search and track approaching enemy targets, plot their position and pass on details to the nearby gun control command centre.

"We operated in 30 minute shifts sitting in darkness watching the radar screen," she says. "It was a feature of the cabins

that you could rotate them 165 degrees to sweep for aircraft positions – the guns would then pick them up until our fighters went up. Then we had to stop. The doodlebugs were difficult to track as they were travelling at great speed and once their motors cut out you couldn't see them. The V-2s were terrible – you couldn't pick them up at all; they just whizzed across the screen. But at least you knew they were coming."

Always on the move, Peggy's unit set up defence stations in Anglesey, Northern Ireland, and the coastlines across England. But the raids got heavier, and

**"The doodlebugs were difficult to track as they were travelling at great speed and once their motors cut out, you couldn't see them"**

in 1944 the unit was sent to defend London, setting up batteries on Dollis Hill, Clapham Common and Bromley.

"I remember being at Anglesey and having to climb high up a steel ladder in freezing winds and rain to clean the radar aerials. We lived in barracks wherever we went. It wasn't too bad.

"When we were in London we used to dodge the redcaps (Royal Military Police) and sneak out into town, usually to the Royal Albert Hall or dancing at one of the army clubs. But you didn't do that too

often as the raids were horrendous and it was very dangerous.

"As well as the Doodlebugs and V-2s there were also the firebombs. I think if the Germans had been able to keep up the V-2 bombing we would have been in a terrible state."

In spring 1945 the Ack-Ack units were disbanded, and Peggy was transferred to a vehicle reserve depot in Shropshire where she worked in communications. It was here at 4am in the morning that she took a call bringing the message that the war was over.

"That morning I grabbed some things and went home," she says. "I just wanted to be with my folks."

Now 87, Peggy used her Heroes Return 2 grant for a commemorative visit to the National Arboretum in Staffordshire and a tour of the London World War Two defence sites.



## The London Blitz

Between September 1940 and May 1941 London was bombed for 76 consecutive nights. By the end of May 1941, about 21,000 Londoners had been killed, and more than a million houses were destroyed or damaged in London.

The Blitz aimed to demoralise the British into surrender and make a German invasion easier. But by May 1941, after the Battle of Britain, the immediate threat of invasion had passed, and Hitler's attention focused on the Soviet Union. Aerial bombing now aimed at destroying industrial targets. British defences were much improved by this time with ground-based radar guiding night fighters to their targets.

Although the Germans never again managed to bomb Britain on such a large scale, they carried out smaller attacks throughout the war, taking the civilian death toll to 51,509 from bombing.

The Robot Blitz from 12 June 1944 to 27 March 1945 consisted of V-1 (flying bombs) and V-2 rocket attacks. Although these attacks had been predicted by Allied Intelligence, they were especially effective, because, of course, they were long-range missiles that could be launched from the Continent. On 12 June 1944, the first V-1 flying bomb attack was carried out on London. A total of 9,251 V-1s were fired at Britain, with the vast majority aimed at London; the 2,515 that reached the city killed 6,184 civilians and injured 17,981.

The V-2 was first used against London on 8 September 1944. An estimated 2,754 people in London were killed and 6,523 injured by the 1,115 V-2s that were fired at the UK. A further 2,917 service personnel were killed as a result of the V weapon campaign. Unlike the V-1s, there was no warning or defence against these weapons and the danger only passed with the capitulation of Germany's armed forces.

# Last man out of Calais



Leicester World War Two veteran, Robert Watt, 91, managed to catch the last boat out of Calais in 1940 before it fell to the advancing Germans. In the years that followed his lucky escape he rose rapidly through the ranks to become the youngest Regimental Sergeant Major in the British Army

"I managed to squeeze myself onto the very last boat out of the harbour in Calais in 1940," says Robert Watt. "It was crowded with hundreds of soldiers like myself so as you can imagine it was desperately chaotic – I was pleased to be a skinny lad.

"Even now, I still end up asking myself how I managed to survive and why I'm still here today."

Robert had enlisted with the Royal Tank Regiment's third battalion back in 1937 at the age of 18 and he was sent to France with the British Expeditionary Force in 1940.

'Jock', as he was known to his comrades, was later sent to defend the northern borders of Greece, before rejoining his regiment in Egypt.

As a tank commander, he went on to take part in some of the toughest battles of the Desert War, including El Alamein.

It was to North Africa that Robert returned, with funding from Heroes Return 2, where he attended

commemorative ceremonies, laid wreaths and travelled back to the desert.

"Returning to North Africa was something that I had to do and now I feel that I've finally laid a ghost to rest.

"Both Egypt and Libya have changed immeasurably since I was there, but being there brought back very strong memories of the three years that I served in those countries.

"I remembered the sometimes awful conditions we had to endure and the terrible battles that we had to fight.

"Every moment of my service was frightening and anyone who tells you otherwise is lying. Only 17 men from my regiment returned and before war was declared we were roughly 500-strong.

"All soldiers are professional and carry out the orders that are given to them – I trusted my commander.

"The desert would shimmer with heat and there would often be nothing to see except the distant horizon, many miles away.

"With only two or three hours sleep each night, we were all too tired to be depressed.

"To get myself through the long missions, I'd imagine that over the next sandy ridge I'd find something that I'd wanted all my life.

"I never knew quite what it was but the thought kept me going."





**“Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end, but it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.”**  
**Winston Churchill after the battle of El Alamein**

### **The Western Desert Campaign**

From the start, the Western Desert Campaign was a continuous struggle back and forth between the Allies and the Axis powers.

In September 1940 Italian forces in Libya launched an invasion of Egypt against British and Commonwealth forces stationed there.

The Italian offensive was halted and, in December 1940, the British made a counterattack, resulting in massive Italian losses. The Italians’ Axis partner, Germany, provided ground and air forces to prevent a total collapse, and Germany became the dominant partner in the campaign.

Axis forces launched two more large-scale assaults against the Allies.

Both times the Axis pushed the Allies back into Egypt, but the Allies retaliated and regained lost ground. On the second Axis push, the Eighth Army under the leadership of Montgomery recovered, winning the Allies’ first major victory of the war, at the second battle of El Alamein in October–November 1942. They then managed to drive the Axis forces west and out of Libya and into Tunisia.

“I am delighted to be invited to offer my support to the Heroes Return 2 scheme. It is heart warming to read the stories of those former service personnel who have been able to revisit places that shaped their lives so greatly, to meet old friends and to pay their respects to their fallen comrades.

“On behalf of the Government I thank the Big Lottery Fund for making these trips possible and for their support to our former personnel. I wish you well for the future.”

Rt Hon Andrew Robathan MP, Minister for Defence Personnel, Welfare and Veterans

“The Heroes Return scheme has helped thousands of our armed forces heroes to pay their respects to fallen comrades, and to renew friendships with fellow ex-servicemen and women. It is a fantastic opportunity for veterans to revisit the scenes of their wartime service and I would urge them to do so.”

Gemma Doyle MP, Shadow Defence Personnel, Welfare and Veterans Minister



“I am delighted the Heroes Return 2 programme is not only celebrating veterans’ returns and contributions but also recording it – it sets a seal on one of the most imaginative and moving Big Lottery Fund initiatives in recent years.”

Gordon Marsden MP, Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Veterans Group







