



The Flowers of Remembrance

By Diana Cormack

World War I came to an end on 11 November 1918. The Armistice bringing peace after four awful years was signed at 11 am in the Forest of Compiègne, in northern France. Despite the terrible conditions on the battlefields, the blood-red poppy managed to survive and flower. This gave a Frenchwoman called Madame Guerin the idea, copied by others, of making artificial poppies.

In 1922, helped by Earl Haig, who had commanded the British army in the war, the British Legion opened the first poppy factory in Britain. The poppies were made by disabled ex-servicemen and were sold to raise money for these victims of "the war to end all wars." Unfortunately that was not to be, for another World War began in 1939. When it ended in 1945, poppies were sold to support the men and women injured in

that war too.

Silent Tribute

The one-minute's silence held at 11am on 11 November, when everyone stopped what they were doing, was extended to two, thus remembering the dead of both World Wars. These silences gradually died out and were held only on the Sunday nearest to 11 November during Remembrance Day ceremonies at the Cenotaph in London and other war memorials in towns and villages all over

our country, where wreaths of poppies are still laid.

With the fiftieth anniversaries of VE and VJ Days (marking victories in Europe and against Japan) we have begun to hold the two minutes' silence at 11am on 11 November again. The people who died in the two World Wars and all the wars, which have sadly occurred since then, gave up everything. When you think about it, two minutes isn't that much to give in return.

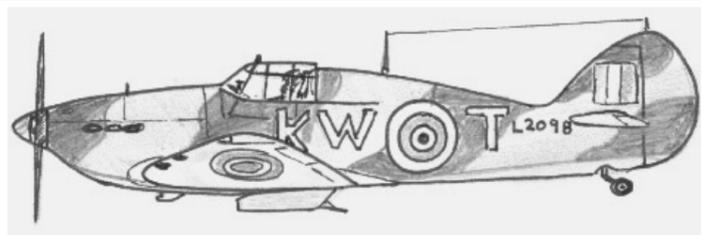


Illustration of Hawker Hurricane Mk I No 615 Sqn 1940 by John Boyd

Tribute to a Pilot

By Daphne Chamberlain

This is my tribute to a World War II pilot. I can't remember his name, but I shall never forget him.

In the 60s, when I was a very young library assistant at Church End, he was a regular borrower. His face had been badly damaged, but his personality was un-dented: brisk, cheerful and confident. At first sight, as he must have known, it was his scars that people noticed, but by the second meeting they were just a part of him.

We heard that he had fought in the Battle of Britain, and was one of the "Guinea Pigs" treated by Archibald McIndoe. As many people know, it was McIndoe's experimental work with burned airmen at Queen Victoria hospital in East Grinstead which pioneered plastic surgery.

Flash fire

We didn't know any details of our Church End pilot's injuries, but I was reading a book recently about front-line nurses in World War II. One paragraph read, "In the summer of 1940, the badly burnt airman was a problem confronting nurses all too frequently. Squadron Leader Tom Gleave's case was typical. His Hurricane was hit by cannon-shells, and great spouts of flame engulfed him

in his cockpit as if from a blowlamp nozzle. There was an explosion, another huge flash, and his whole body and face were wreathed in flames... His eyelids and nose were burnt away, his legs and body horribly scarred."

Tom Gleave survived, to become a member of the Battle of Britain Fighters' Association. 544 pilots were killed, followed by a further 794 from November 1940 to August 1945. Between 600 and 700 needed plastic surgery throughout the war.

Squadron Leader Gleave described himself and his fellow Guinea Pigs as "all but dead casualties, who have become living miracles." Peter Williams and Ted Harrison wrote a book* about them, called "McIndoe's Army - Injured Airmen Who Faced The World." One of them was our Church End pilot.

You can find out more about the Guinea Pigs at the RAF Museum, Colindale.

*Published by Pelham, 1979. (ISBN no. 0-7207-1191-6) "Front-Line Nurse" is by Eric Taylor. (Robert Hale, 1997. ISBN no.0-7090-5819-5)

The Escape

By Toni Morgan

On 17 June 1940, Private Albert Victor Nutting found himself a survivor of one of the worst troopship disasters in British Maritime history. He was part of the remnant of the British Expeditionary Force trying to get back to England following the invasion of France. They had been taken on board the HMS Lancastria, which was lying at anchor outside St Nazaire Harbour, and on that warm June afternoon with over 6000 mixed troops onboard, she was sunk by enemy aircraft with enormous loss of life.

Many of the survivors were picked up by a French destroyer and taken to a convent in St Nazaire. Vic Nutting decided he had to escape and with the help of one of the Sisters of Mercy who found him an overcoat and some shoes, ladies high heels if you please, he managed to make his way to the port, and with the assistance of two French gendarmes who put him on a stretcher and took him by ambulance to the harbour, he joined the crowds who were trying to board anything to get them away from the town. Two days later he and many other survivors arrived in Devonport where Vic spent the next two and a half months in a military hospital recovering from his appalling burns.

Golden Years

On his return to civilian life in East Finchley, Vic met his future wife, Gwendoline who had been an evacuee, and on the 17 June 1950 (this time dressed in his own clothes) he led his bride down the aisle of Holy



Vic and Gwen Nutting enjoying their Golden wedding celebrations. Photo by Toni Morgan

Trinity Church and they started their married life in his parents' home in East Finchley, where they still live. Their son Chris was born in East Finchley and attended Holy Trinity school. On 17 June 2000 Gwen and Vic celebrated their Golden Wedding and just a week before they marked the occasion with a party at Holy Trinity infants 'school. Together with their son Chris, daughter-in-law Eileen and granddaughter Charlotte they were joined by other members of their family and many friends. A truly romantic occasion after the horrors of war sixty years earlier.

Talking to ghosts

Dunkirk 2000: Maurice Kanareck joined the Dunkirk Veterans Association in the final, 60th anniversary pilgrimage.

It was the last time that the veterans would gather at Dunkirk and a day that combined the formal and the informal. There was the formal march past with the veterans bearing their own standards, some in wheelchairs pushed by their comrades, but all erect, blazered, be-medalled and proudly wearing berets proclaiming the cap badges of many famed regiments. There was the informal: a lively group of French grandmothers, all in local costume, singing their hearts out. Their voices echoed across the quayside, blending strangely with the strains of Vera Lynn tapes from a boat moored further down as Prince Charles inspected the Little Ships.

Following his departure we descended ourselves to the quayside and spoke to some of the owners of the boats. I was particularly taken by one which had been the property of Commander Lightoller, the senior surviving officer of the Titanic. In 1940 he had skippered her to Dunkirk to return to Ramsgate with 130 men.

After the moving Service of Remembrance at the Allied

War Memorial and a fly-past by planes from the RAF Memorial Flight we strolled down onto the sandy beach. The veteran's thoughts must have been of a very different scene, sixty years ago. One of them, William Blackwell, a dapper, twinkley-eyed, pipe-smoking youngster of eighty-four, told us that, back in 1940, he waited for thirty-six hours on the Mole before being taken off, together with

a puppy. Many servicemen, he told us, could not bear to leave abandoned animals behind and a considerable number came back, tucked under battledress blouses.

He told us that one of the biggest problems when they got back was men bunking off when they reached their home town, so when he embarked on a train back in England they were all locked in. When they stopped in his home town of Tunbridge Wells he was unable to get off but, spotting a mate on the platform, he rapped on the window and yelled 'Tell mum I'm all right - it's Tunbridge Wells 271'.

As my friend so eloquently put it, we had been talking to ghosts.

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