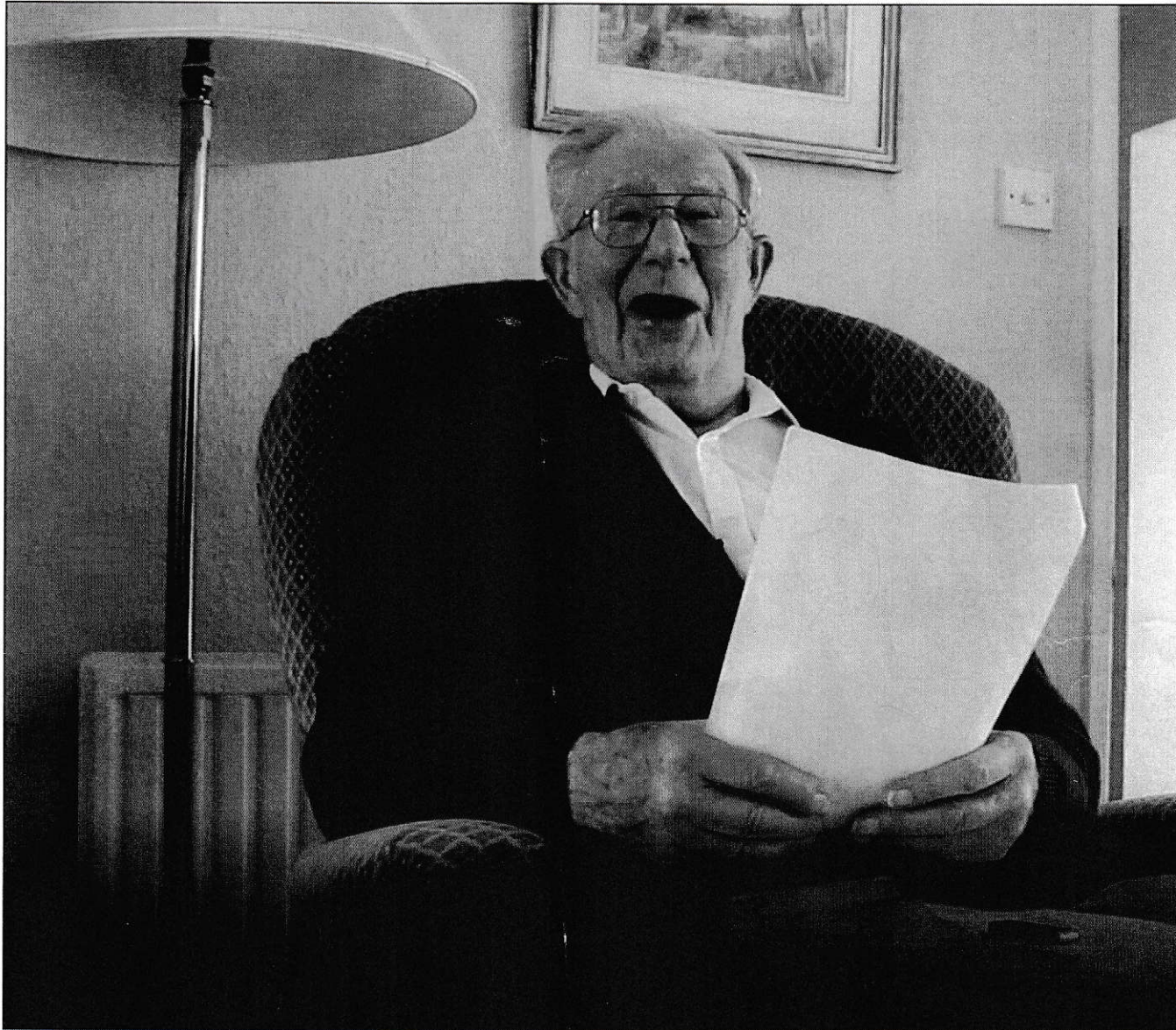


As requested for the Heritage Society

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Ron Johnson [Glider Pilot Regiment]

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I think I should start, Nicola, in April 1944 as newly commissioned 2nd Lieutenant, I arrived at Down Ampney having completed my training, a very short training, which was on Tiger Moth, the Hotspur, which was the medium glider, and the Horsa glider.

Now, you know already, but your youngsters may not, but the Horsa would take 28 fully armed troops, or a jeep and a couple of trailers, or a jeep and a gun. SO it was quite a fair sized glider. I've never flown in the Hamilcar, which was the large one which was towed by a four engined bomber. That glider would take a light tank or two Bren Gun carriers, or a 17 pounder gun, or equipment out to build an airfield when the battle was getting to a close. So the gliders were big things, they were not the sort of sail planes you see flying around in the sky today. And of course, when you go to Arnhem or to Normandy, you see in the museums there things of the gliders so you get a full indication then.

So have your youngsters actually been to Arnhem this time? They have been? They went in June? Good, so they'll have seen these things already. So they'll be getting it old hat from me. But never mind.

So I arrived at Down Ampney, which is a wartime airfield, not all that far from here. It's about 20 minutes in the car from here. Now, what had happened after D Day, and D Day the youngsters will remember was the 6th of June, after D Day we were briefed for a number of operations but one after another they were all

cancelled. We wondered if we were ever going to get into battle. At one stage we thought we were going to be the first troops into Paris with the Americans, we were going to land at Grandbuiey (sp?) but that operation went so well for the Americans they didn't need us, so we didn't go to that one.

On the 17th September, that was the first day the lift got away, and I was given the job of helping to see them get away and I was due to go in on the second day, which was the Monday. I was due to go in on the Monday. Now this time, I knew I'd be going as we'd got the first lift away. We were due to go off earlier in the day but because of the bad weather we didn't get off ... On the first lift from Down Ampney I saw get away 49 Horsas, so that gives a size of the details of the lift. And I knew we would go the next day, so I knew that it was on. Our glider had a jeep, two trailers, four REME men – REME are Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers – and we had a fold up bicycle. Now, on the second day our take off was delayed by bad weather. We were due to take off at 7 in the morning but we were delayed by about 4 hours. So, Market Garden was on, and I was going – hooray!

Now, we got away from Down Ampney about four hours late, and we used the Northern Route. And if you look at the site plans, which you'll have, the Northern Route took us out over Hatfield, over Aldborough, and then out over the North Sea. As we passed over the North Sea, as far as we could see we were in two lanes, tugs and gliders, and as far as we could see, we were told afterwards, it stretched for a hundred miles, and it was one of the most amazing sights I've ever seen. These tugs and gliders, right into the far distance. It really was quite a sight.

And also something on the way over the North Sea, that I wasn't very pleased about, was there were two Horsa gliders down in the water and something had gone wrong with them. Either the tow rope had broken or something had gone wrong, and they'd had to ditch into the sea. Now, I remember particularly well passing the Dutch coast on the way in and thinking 'Well, we're making good time'. And then the glider path took us over a town called Hertogenbosch, which they can pick out on a map, and then I knew even more that we were going to do what we came for, because it was the final turning point, and there we could get our run straight up to Wolfhazen (Wolfheze) so wow, we're here, we're going to make it, we're not going to be shot down on the way, we're going to make it to Wolfhazen.

So we're over Hertogenbosch, and we're flying in, and we know now that we're going to do what we came to do. We feel pretty certain about it; we're not going to be shot down by enemy aircraft; we're not going to lose our way; we're not going to have the towrope break; we're going to be there and do what we came to do.

We fly in and – as far as my memory's concerned – we were flying at about 2,500ft in our glider. When we got up over the landing area at Wolfhezen, we could see that we were in the right spot – exactly where we were briefed to be – so we pulled off from our tug aircraft and the tug went away to the – as far as I can recall – to the port-side, moved off the port, and we went in and straight down into the landing field at Wolfhezen. We put on full flap. In some of the things the youngsters have seen, you see a full flap landing in a Horsa and you come down almost like a lift. We levelled off just above the ground and landed our glider absolutely where we were due to be, so we were feeling well satisfied at that stage.

Now, we had REME personnel with us, as I've mentioned already. With the Horsa that we were flying in those days, you had to take the tail off to get your load out. Obviously if it was just men flying in the glider you didn't need to do that, but if you were carrying a load – a jeep and two trailers – with the Mark I, which ours was, you had to take the tail off. It took about half an hour to get the tail off. Even though we had four REME people helping us, it still took us quite some time. It's not the nicest of places to be, on a landing field where you can be shot at, taking half an hour to get your stuff out, but that's how long it took us.

Anyway, we got our jeep and two trailers out and the foldup bicycle, and we were ready then to move off into the battle. We went for a short distance with the REME personnel and then we moved off separately to join our own squadron – E Squadron, Glider Pilot Regiment – which we were coming from Down Ampney. We were on scrubland which was to the north east of Wolfhezen. I met up there with my section, which consisted of 11 other glider pilots and myself, making 12 in total. By this stage, I was Lieutenant and I'd got another pip on my shoulder, so I wasn't the lowest of the low at this stage – I'd gone up one.

To the youngsters, that may not mean much, but the Second Lieutenant is the dogsbody of the officers – he gets all the mucky jobs to do, so when you get your second pip you're quite pleased about that.

When we got there, we were all tired, having flown a Horsa for three-and-a-half to four hours. It's a very tiring thing to do, and so it was with a bit of difficulty [that] I made my 11 glider pilots dig in; they wanted to scratch the surface and I made them dig in. I made each of them dig a slit trench for two (the two pilots),

so altogether we had 6 slit trenches dug there in the area of Wolfhezen. Later on, they were thankful that I did [make them dig]. So, this was the Monday night [that] we were digging in Wolfhezen.

On the Tuesday morning – quite early on Tuesday morning – an ME 109, which was a German fighter [plane], came over and shot at our positions. As he came around, I understand (but I've never been able to prove it) that he killed two glider pilots on his first pass, and I felt sure that he would come around again. Having fired earlier on in the war at a low-flying aircraft with the Lewis machine gun, I thought 'well, if he comes around again, I'm going to have a go at him'. So, I got the Bren gun from our section, used it from the hip and fired at the ME 109 when he came around the second time. Now I know a lot of people here thought I was stupid. I do know that, because your chances of bringing him down are not all that great, but he didn't come around the third time, so I felt that I'd probably done some good. I may have hit him, but I certainly didn't bring him down. But, as I say, he didn't come around a third time.

Later on that morning, we had one of the most amazing sights I've ever seen; we had the Royal Air Force come in to do the supply drop and the idea then is that they bring in supplies for us and drop them by parachute. Now, they are briefed in the area where they are due to drop them. Unfortunately, the area where they were dropping we hadn't managed to win those positions so the Germans got lots of supplies.

The reason I want to talk about this in particular is the sheer amazing heroism of the Royal Air Force crews – they were absolutely incredible. There was one plane [that] came around and [as] he flew around, you could see that he was on fire. He hadn't managed to drop all of his panniers so he went right around again on fire and came in and flew over again. They were at a low height at this stage to drop their supplies. I remember saying to my men, 'well if they can do that for us up there, we got to put our backs into this battle' – I've never forgotten saying that.

I found out later that the pilot, the Flight Lieutenant, who was flying that aircraft won a Victoria Cross posthumously. The citation for the Victoria Cross was given by my squadron commander, Lieutenant – Major then he was – Major Peter Jackson, and Wing Commander Booth, who was a wing commander of the squadron that were towing us.

Not everybody has seen a Victoria Cross being won. It was posthumous, but I witnessed it, and it was one of the most amazing acts of bravery I've seen. I found out later that he was Flight Lieutenant from the same mess that I was in at Down Ampney, so I knew him well. And I knew him as Lumme Lord – that was his nickname that we knew him. Lumme Lord. Flight Lieutenant Lord.

David Samuel Anthony Lord VC, DFC (18 October 1913 –

19 September 1944)

The window commemorating his Victoria Cross is in the church at Down Ampney, so if any of the pupils ever get to Down Ampney, go and look in the church and they will see the window commemorating Flight Lieutenant Lord, VC. Amazing.

So, that's the Tuesday. Now, on Tuesday night, they decided that they would move us from Wolfhezen into Oosterbeek. Now, night time is not the best of times to move, but it's sensible because you're not nearly so likely to be detected or shot at. Anyway, we were on the move, and my section was the very last section of all the glider pilots in E Squadron, so I was 'tail-end Charlie' you might call it - bringing up the end. In that move in the night I got separated by being mixed up with the King's Own Scottish Borderers, who were also moving, so I found myself with my section of 11 pilots being with the King's Own Scottish Borderers and I thought, 'Well, what do I do now? I've either got to break off in the night and try and find out where my squadron is or stay with the King's Own Scottish Borderers'. I decided to do that and I reported to the Colonel of the King's Own Scottish Borderers and asked them, you know, could we join them and they gave us an area in the grounds of The White House Hotel, which is very prominently known in the battle and is now the Dreyeroord Hotel and is fairly near Oosterbeek station, so this helps you to position where I'm talking about.

So, again, this is on the Tuesday night, we dig in again. And we were tired and not wanting to dig in, but again I made them dig in and dig in, and inspected their pits that they'd dug. You've got to remember that these are all sergeants and staff sergeants and experienced pilots. In fact, as a pilot, I was less experienced than they were, but I was their section commander as an infantry man. So, we dug in. That was on the Tuesday night.

All understandable so far...?

Right, nothing more happened on that night - the Tuesday night. But on the Wednesday morning, then things began to happen, and heat up. I was standing near the end trench of my section when suddenly a half-tracked vehicle came right up close, and he was so close that he was, well, about the distance to that window there - so really close. Standing up was the commander of this half-track vehicle. And without thinking too much about it, I got my revolver and fired at the man. Rather incredibly, I shot him, and killed him. The other two that were in that half-track had to either go on blind and drive their half-track away, or they [had] to try and escape. Well, they decided to try to escape, and they were also shot down - those two. Now, it was important that they *were* shot because it was a reconnaissance half-track. If they'd have gotten away, they could have given away our position. You may think, 'well that's cruel shooting them - the men are trying to escape', but, in battle - and that's important for youngsters to learn - you don't have any choice. Battle, being at war, is a horrible, horrible thing. I wouldn't recommend it to anybody. We must do everything we can to see we don't go into war because it's not very nice shooting somebody. I remember on another occasion, when I was back in my trench after this incident with the half-track...

Oh, incidentally, the half-track was found in the position that I'd talked about and it was completely intact and completely useable, so it was only the personnel that had been lost; the half-track itself was alright... shortly after that, I remember being in my position there, and the soil there was very sandy. And suddenly there was a sharp crack and right beside my eyes - as close as that, it was the nearest I came to losing my life in the battle - right beside my eyes, in the sand was where this bullet had gone through. I thought to myself, 'By golly! You're meant to get through here because that was so close. It was a really, really lucky escape!' And they were coming from snipers in the houses that were near us.

So, this was the Wednesday. Now, on the Wednesday evening, there was a tremendous fire in one of the houses right near our position. The whole of the sky was lit up. Suddenly, out of this blazing furnace, came a young Dutch woman. I would guess she would be somewhere between 16-20 - that sort of age - and she called out to us. She said, 'Please, can I come across to your position? Please, can you help me?'. I called out as I was the officer nearest to this young lady. I called out at the top of my voice, 'Stop firing! Stop firing!'. I didn't think to call it out in German and I didn't know enough German at that stage, and, well, I just didn't think about it. I just called out 'stop firing' and then when I got (or thought I got) everyone's attention, I called out to this young lady to come across.

She got halfway across the road and a machine gun opened up and shot her down. So that was a very sad thing to happen, and I realised then that I gotta do something about it. So, again, I called out at the top of my voice 'Stop firing! Stop firing!' and I went out and picked this young lady up and brought her back to our position.

Fortunately, they did stop firing...

I've never known to this day who fired the first time. I've never known whether it was a German machine gun or one of our own. If it were one of our own, you could understand it because moving about at night in the battle – even though it was lit up – you can't be sure what's taking place there.

Anyway, I picked this young lady up and I brought her back and I handed her over to one of my sergeants who was there, Des Page, and he then gave her an injection from his first aid pack, and then he took her to the first aid dressing post.

We tried to trace that lady, but we never ever found her. And had the Dutch people trying to find her. Because we all wanted to say sorry for what had happened to her. We made contact with another lady who'd had part of her foot shot away, but it wasn't the same one as our lady. We never could trace this dear lady.

So, this was on the Wednesday evening. Quite an adventurous day. Not a very nice day. A mixed day. Some successful; some very sad with a lady being shot.

Now on Thursday, I decided – I've never been sure whether it was wise or not – but I decided that we were not in a very good position with the field of fire. Lots of the King's Own Scottish Borderers' people had been killed, and lots of their trenches were empty, so I talked to a senior officer with the King's Own Scottish Borderers and said, 'look, I'm going to move my section back a bit where we got a better field of fire; we're gonna occupy the trenches of the King's Own Scottish Borderers that are out of action', so, in other words, 'we're coming into your positions', which they agreed to. And the reason I've never been sure whether we did the right thing is because we had casualties there ourselves; there were snipers firing at us from the houses, so our casualties, like the King's Own Scottish Borderers', started to come.

So, I thought, 'well, I've either gotta take a section of my glider pilots and get into these houses and root the snipers out, or do something else', so I decided that I would use a PIAT – that's a 'Projector, Infantry, Anti Tank' – it fires a small bomb that you could fire at tanks. It helped if you could hit the tracks of a tank – it would immobilise a tank – but, anyway, they *were* used in the battle. At this stage, I decided that we were losing people, so it was worthwhile putting a bomb into the house where we knew the snipers were, and I did that myself: crawled across the ground and put a bomb in there. We didn't have any more trouble from that house, so I think my action on that particular occasion was successful.

Shortly after this, the mortar started raining down on us. A mortar landed in the next trench to mine and it immediately killed the two people who were in the next trench: two King's Own Scottish Borderers' personnel. I was hit by mortar pieces, dirt and dust, and so on, so my face and head were all bleeding, and I was obviously concussed. I waited a few minutes and then I decided I'd better get over to the first aid post to get them to do something about it.

I went across there, and I'd got a rifle with me, and I thought, 'well, I'd better leave this on the wall outside the dressing post' – it's not right for an officer to take a rifle into a first aid post, so I parked it outside. Silly things that happen in war. When I got inside, they treated me; they spent about an hour picking up all the pieces out of my face, my head and so on. I'd got my head in bandages, so that just my eyes were free and my mouth was free, and the rest was covered in bandages.

Anyway, they let me go, and then I decided I'd go back to my trench. So, I looked outside and my rifle had gone. Anyway, what could I do? I went back to my trench and got down inside the trench. After a few minutes – I was probably still a bit concussed, I don't know – after a few minutes, I decided I'd better have a look in the next trench yet again to confirm. What good I was going to do after an hour or two to help them in there I don't know, but I could see that they were definitely killed. As I bent down to have a look at them, a sniper put a bullet through my back.

It went in through my back and came out through my arm here. It was a tiny... in fact, I didn't realise it'd gone through my back – all I knew was that I'd been shot in my arm. It was painful there and I'd a great big hole there. So, I thought, 'well, I'd better go back to the dressing station again'.

So, I went back there and they said, 'oh, no, not you again; we've just spent an hour on you'. Anyway, they realised that this time I was wounded and they couldn't deal with it, so they said, 'this is the end of the battle for you', and they put me in a jeep that was marked with the red cross, and they took me to the Hartenstein Hotel, which the youngsters, I know, have been to.

Down there in the Hartenstein, I was treated by Lieutenant Randall. I'd always thought medical officers were at least the rank of captain, but he wasn't; he was a Lieutenant. He explained to me that he was treating my arm and patching it up with a new medicine that was just out, so I was one of the very early people in the Second World War to be treated with penicillin, and he packed my arm with penicillin. It was really remarkable because it was about three weeks before anybody looked at it again, and yet it saved my arm, and I've got a perfectly good arm. So, penicillin in my case worked and I was very lucky.

I didn't ever manage to meet that doctor, but I talked to him on the telephone in 2015 and talked to him several times.

He died in early March 2015, and he was the same age as I was; he was 22 at the time of the battle and 93 at the time he died. Lieutenant Randall. There's quite a write up about him. He went on to become a surgeon in Sheffield hospitals. A very, very, fine man.

Now, after being treated by Lieutenant Randall, I was then put in a jeep and taken to the Tafelberg Hotel. Now, the Tafelberg had been made into a temporary hospital and I remember so well, as we drove up to the Tafelberg, I could see that the garage door was open and I got one of my shocks of this battle that we were in because this was the Thursday - we landed on the Monday and this was the Thursday - and on the floor of the garage it was piled with dead bodies. That really brought home to me what a terrible, terrible battle we were in.

So, in the Tafelberg, I was led upstairs up to an upstairs room and there I was given a bed. Oh, wonderful - being in bed! Well, as I've explained, head all in bandages, arm in a sling, feeling a bit sorry for myself but I've got a bed. In there with me at that time was a Major Murray and he'd been shot through the neck - through the fleshy part of the neck. Well, he was coping all right. Anyway, I had a bed. That was the first night.

I don't really remember all that much about being in the Tafelberg but I do remember, on the second night, I had to give up – not had to, volunteered to give up – my bed to someone who was more wounded than I was and I had a place on the floor. That was the Friday.

On the next day – the Saturday – it was even worse than that and I had to give up my place on the floor and move down to the stairs. I had one step on the stairs. Now, you can imagine, young folk, a young man of 22 or 23, head all in bandages, arm in a sling and he's got one place on the stairs at the Tafelberg. Not the ideal place to be as a wounded ... *[he laughs]*.

Anyway, so the Tafelberg was filling up and filling up with wounded people and, on the Saturday, the Germans overran our position and then we were taken prisoners of war. They moved us in trucks up to barracks called Apeldoorn and this was the big collecting point for the wounded. In Apeldoorn, I remember it was better there because we were in two bunks and we had a straw palliasse and we could sleep there. As far as I can remember we had bread and some water there. There wasn't other food.

Anyway, we were there for about three days and they decided that they would move us in a so-called hospital train marked with red crosses on the top. In fact, they were cattle trucks and there was straw on the floor. I found out later that there was only one contingent that went away in cattle trucks and it was an absolute disgrace. But I do know the Germans had trouble because they needed to try to get their wounded away, try and get their prisoners away from the battle area and they didn't have other suitable transports to move them in.

Anyway, four days and three nights in the cattle truck was the low point of the battle for me. Without any doubt it was the worst of all and, without doubt the low point of my life, being taken away in a cattle truck to a prisoner of war camp. That was at Fallingbostal which is just a bit south of Hamburg. Fairly near there we heard that there was a terrible place where the Russians were prisoners of war. I found out later that was the Belsen camp so we were quite near to one of the most horrible camps of all time. Thousands died in the Belsen camp.

Our prisoner of war camp was bad, really bad. I was very glad I was there for only a few days but I found out later, after war, that it had been improved tremendously by one warrant officer, WO1 Lord of the parachute regiment. He had instilled discipline and brought Fallingbostal up to a high standard. By the end, the troops there were looking after themselves and were in fact guarding themselves.

I was moved on after three days with six other glider pilots to a castle in Germany, Spangenberg. Like Colditz but not Colditz. Very similar to Colditz which is so well known.

I was in there for six months and then they moved us and I escaped on the march with another glider pilot and we hid up in the hills for eight days. Then we managed to join up with the Americans and we were flown back to Paris.

I think I should stop the account of my story there, Nicola, because I could spend a lot of time talking about what happened there and being back to London for VE Day and all of that sort of thing! *[He laughs]*

Nicola: that would be interesting, if you don't mind.

Are you sure? *[He laughs]* Having hidden up in the hills with another glider pilot, Lieutenant Bob Garnett (he went on to become Lieutenant-Colonel Garnett), we were placed in a house by the Americans who provided us with a bed and food to eat.

We had to be careful what we were eating because we had been almost starved in the prisoner of war castle so we needed to be careful what we were eating, some people didn't bear that in mind and ate too much and caused themselves terrible difficulties. Anyway Bob and I were sensible and we ate, some, enough to satisfy ourselves but without being silly about it and then the next morning we hitched a lift on a French farm workers lorry to where the Americans were landing and they were flying in petrol for their forces and they took the two of us back to Paris to the airport in Paris where we were put in a hotel for the night and I remember that I had not been able to sleep when I was not in very good order so I got a doctor to give me an injection to put myself to sleep. Now its not a very good tale when all the others were out in Paris for a night out and I was put to sleep but that's what I needed and the next morning I was fit after I woke up to go down with the rest of the remainder by train to an airport there and then we were flown back to England and on leave, now the reason I'm carrying on a bit here is because I was one of the very lucky people who managed to be outside Buckingham Palace on the night of VE Day and that was the most tremendous celebration. I met up with 2 other army officers and we met 3 young ladies down from Scotland who joined us and we had a very good night out in London on VE night, again one of the things I remember very well, celebrating, all dressed up in Sam Browns looking smart and feeling smart and feeling very contented with life and I think I will end my story there.