

Flight Sergeant Bill Johnson **Ewelme News, Jan-Feb 2004, March-April 2004**

A Wartime Story – PRU Spitfire pilot Flt Sgt Bill Johnson and his wife Mabel - billeted at ‘The Views’

Mabel Johnson and her two daughters visited Ewelme in August 2003 bringing her husband’s memoir of his service as a pilot on 541 Squadron Spitfires in the Photographic Reconnaissance Unit at RAF Benson in 1943. The memoir also covered his flying training in Canada and America, Spitfire conversion in Frazerburgh, Scotland [where he had a fortunate escape from a sabotaged Spitfire which claimed the loss of 4 Spitfires and the lives of 2 pilots!], his operational life at RAF Benson and subsequent years as a prisoner of war in Germany. Bill had died on 3rd April 2002.

The Johnson’s arrived in Ewelme as a newly married couple in early February 1943 and lodged at ‘The Views’ with Walter and Iva Main and their two small daughters Becky and Ellen. When Bill was shot down and captured on June 13th 1943, Mabel had to leave her new-found friends and return to Doncaster. Interwoven with Bill’s wartime experiences is Mabel’s recollection of living in the village as a young bride. This opens an intriguing window on domestic life in wartime Ewelme, how the couple coped with the privations of rationing; their appreciation of Ewelme and the surrounding villages (explored on their bicycles), but always in the shadow that Bill’s next ‘sortie’ could end in tragedy.

The only words Bill wrote about Ewelme are of how he found lodgings for them both - *“I don’t know how I got to hear about the Main’s farmhouse. Nevertheless, I went there and arranged to share the house with Mr and Mrs Main, and their small daughter Ellen and a new baby Becky. They gave me the use of the downstairs front room with a fireplace, and an upstairs bedroom at the back of the house. Mabel was to share the kitchen with Mrs Main.”*

Mabel takes up the story on their arrival in Ewelme.

“It was exciting to be going to make a home of our own and when Bill came up (to Doncaster) to help me take my stuff down to Benson, I was delighted. We seemed to have lots of bags and cases. We also had our bicycles. It wasn’t a good journey, the last bit of which seemed to be pushing our bikes up the edge of a ploughed field. The suitcases were balanced on the seats of our bikes, and everything else hung from the handlebars. We made it however and soon arrived at the village of Ewelme. Although Bill was stationed at Benson the closest village was Ewelme, as his dispersal where he flew from was about halfway between. The Main’s house was perched on a hill overlooking the village, it stood in fields on its own and had a driveway up to the front of it. It was an old house and it lacked much of the charm of the village houses I was used to seeing in Yorkshire. Nevertheless, it was sound and roomy and we had space for ourselves. Mrs Main was kind and thoughtful, we never lacked for anything that the farm could supply. We were given the odd treat, and eggs and vegetables in profusion. The floors downstairs were all stone blocks, and the kitchen was cavernous, it had a huge unused fireplace that was almost a small room. But the village was a dream. It only had one street, with a crystal-clear watercress stream running down one side, a village shop, a pub and a small bakery that only opened about twice a week and then only to sell ‘Lardy Cakes’. I made a point of being there for that event.

The stream ran down into the water cress beds just across the road from the farm where we lived and I used to go and ask the men cutting it if I could buy some, they seemed glad of a diversion. They would ask me to hold my apron out. They would try to see how much they could put in it. I always asked them 'how much is it?' They would grin at me and say 'tuppence' and I would hand over two pennies. We enjoyed the fresh greens. It was good with most of our meals. We cycled around the countryside when Bill was not flying and soon had our favourite places to which to go. At Shillingford – which was on the Thames, we could rent a punt and we often went there. Going down river was fun, but not so pleasant returning upstream, however, the time spent together was always lovely. Sometimes we would go into Wallingford and look around the shops or go to the movies. Mostly, however, we spent time around the village or cycled over to Benson, it was much larger than Ewelme, quite a metropolis..."

Bill's first three sorties were over occupied France but soon he was flying to targets in Germany. On his eighth operation his landing at RAF Benson was hindered by an Avro Anson in the circuit and he was ordered to put down on the grass. He dared not use the brakes to stop his Spitfire as the ground was very uneven, so let it run on to stop of its own accord. He was running out of grass and heading for an anti-aircraft battery where its crew had spread barbed wire on the grass. The plane had almost stopped when the wheels caught in the barbed wire, teetered for a few seconds and finally tipped onto its nose. Unbeknown to Bill he was being observed. Mabel continues...

"When Bill was on a sortie, I think I spent much of my time at our sitting room window watching the airfield. We could see much of it from our house perched up on the hill. I could watch the comings and goings now knowing who was in the planes, and I well remember the above episode. I was glued to the window as usual waiting for Bill to come home and I saw the Spitfire land and taxi over the grass, it had almost stopped. It was a relief to see the plane safely down and then it just went gently onto its nose bending the propeller. It was not a serious accident as not much speed was involved, so I was not alarmed. I was glad to see Bill coming up the driveway a little later, and was going to tell him all about the plane that had landed on its nose. Not knowing of course, that he had to tell me about it too..."

Our time passed very pleasantly in Ewelme. The village was old and interesting and our bike trips around the countryside were real treats. We made the most of the time when Bill was not flying. Nevertheless, the danger of not returning from an operation was always present and we knew that our lives could change drastically in a matter of minutes, it was the same with all Allied aircrews then. We shared all the same hopes and fears. I was the only aircrew wife living locally. At least I never met any others.

I did my shopping at the village shop, but I used to go to Benson for vegetables. I bought them in a pleasant little greengrocer's shop on the main street that was a modified cottage. Sometimes the owner would bring me a tightly closed paper bag from the back of the shop and say, 'That'll be a shilling'. I would pay up willingly, not knowing what I had till I got outside. The bag would contain a few tomatoes or another of the scarce commodities that he was giving to his regular customers. I had a basket on the handlebars of my bike and that is how I carried all my treats home. Apart from hearing and seeing the planes I could almost forget the war, the day-to-day living went on as of old. I remember passing a sign on the Benson road one day on my way home. It read that they had rhubarb for sale, of course such a bonanza like that could not be passed up. Even if it had to be sweetened with a few

saccharin tablets. Crossing the ditch to the house, I noticed a wagon wheel with a new iron rim lying in the ditch to cool the metal and make it tight. It was a reassuring sight, life going on in the countryside so deeply at war."

Coming up to Whitsuntide, Bill was due for a week's leave and we were getting ready to go up to Doncaster and York. We were due to leave on Whit Monday and I had been busy getting our clothes ready and pressing Bill's uniform. He had already ordered a taxi to take us to Wallingford Station to get the train to Chipping Norton on the main line. We loved the Wallingford train, it was only one carriage long and ran on a single track back and forth between Chipping Norton [they would have changed trains at Cholsey] and Wallingford. Everyone would pile in and the guard would shout, 'Take it away, George', and off we went, all to be repeated at the other end. Bill was flying at the weekend and on Saturday he got to know that a big sortie would be flown very early Sunday morning. The weathermen had predicted good weather, so Bill knew that he would probably be called upon to fly on Sunday too. Saturday evening was a clear summer night and we decided to go for a walk through the village before turning in early, as we knew we would have to be up at 4.30 am on the morrow. The village street was peaceful. We appeared to be the only people about, we walked up to the church and for a time leaned on the graveyard wall and talked about our anticipated leave. Then we went to look at the school and the almshouses and wonder at the timelessness of them. We walked past the village pub. [The Greyhound] It was only a large cottage, very attractive with green creepers on the front. We had never been inside it, a large portrait hung over the door, and we called the pub 'The Marquis of Granby'. This may not have been its name but Bill and I had a thing about the names of pubs and we called all of them 'The Marquis of Granby'.

Going home up the main street we were talking and enjoying the evening, I remember turning suddenly as I walked and my glance fell immediately on the village war memorial, it sent a shiver through me. I turned away quickly, saying nothing, and we went swinging along on our way home, glad of such a lovely evening.

We were up at 4.30 am and when Bill was dressed we went downstairs and I made breakfast, he only wanted a bowl of cornflakes and we had tea together. I remember walking down the steps at the front of the house. Bill picked up his bike that he always left leaning against the wall and we walked down to the iron gate that was about halfway down the driveway to the road. It was that special early light that is so transient. The cool grey quiet time, before the start of day, not quite dawn. I always think it is a lovely time, but it is so quickly gone and the day begins. We opened the gate and Bill got on his bike, he kissed me 'good-bye' and rode down the driveway to the road that led to the airfield. He waved at the turn where the driveway met the road, and the last glimpse I had was of him bending over the handlebars with my school scarf wound round his neck. Slowly I turned back to the sleeping house and went upstairs to bed."

Bill took off at 6.30am and successfully accomplished his mission of photographing the Dortmund-Emms canal, an important waterway for barges carrying German war material. The photographs were required to confirm that, as a result of the Dambuster Raids on May 16th/17th, it had dried up. On his return journey Bill had engine trouble, and whilst pre-occupied with changing fuel tanks he neglected to check his tail, and he was 'bounced' by an enemy fighter. He put the Spitfire into an inverted dive and lost his attacker, bailing out (he writes he literally fell out of the cockpit) at 20,000 ft. Bill parachuted into occupied territory and his landing was observed by 50 to 60 Dutch people near the town of Rosendahl. They

were friendly enough, giving him strawberries and weak cocoa, but told him escape was impossible, as the Germans knew where he was and were on their way to capture him.

Meanwhile, waking up for the second time back in peaceful Ewelme on a lovely Whitsunday morning, Mabel was unaware of her husband's plight. Mabel recalls the events of the day.

"I woke up to the sound of aeroplane engines coming through the open bedroom window. I realised it was time I was up if the planes were returning. As I washed and dressed, tidied up the room etc. I kept running to lean out of the window as each plane came by. The planes always flew low over the field at the back of the house. Then they flew down one side and across the watercress beds, and over the Benson road to the end of the runway. The planes were low enough to see the pilot but recognising who was flying the plane was impossible. I didn't count the planes, it would not have done me much good if I had, I didn't know how many had gone out, or even if I had awakened as the first one returned.

I went downstairs to breakfast, as I knew Bill would be home when possible. Because we were going on leave the next day, I decided we would eat our whole bacon ration – two rashers – along with lots of mushrooms. We ate a great deal of mushrooms, Bill found them growing around the dispersal and often gathered a bag full while he was waiting to fly. I stood around in the kitchen with Mrs Main, she was getting food ready for her family too and we chatted away. She knew that Bill was off flying, and she had heard all the planes coming back too.

Time passed and Bill did not come home. I made tea for myself and sat by the window, finally I decided he was not going to get back for breakfast, maybe he was staying at the mess for an operational meal. So, I started thinking about lunch. We had two lamb chops – our meat ration for the week – and I got them ready to cook, along with some vegetables, and I sat by the window again waiting for Bill to come back. While I was in the kitchen Mrs Main and I chatted on and off. I think she was getting a little uneasy watching me hanging around waiting for Bill. As it got to lunch time and then later, I think we were both thinking of little else except the fact that he wasn't home yet!

Suddenly we heard a loud knock at the open front door, it seemed to echo down the stone hall. Mrs Main turned a little pale, and I felt pale too. She went out of the kitchen to answer the door and I could faintly hear voices. I thought 'Oh, good, It's not for me', not when they were talking. I thought if they had come to see me they would hardly be talking so long to Mrs Main. However, shortly I heard footsteps echoing down the hallway coming towards the kitchen door. Then I was really afraid. Mrs Main came into the kitchen and close behind her was Bill's Squadron Leader and his Flight Lieutenant. I knew why they were here; I cannot remember exactly what they said, I don't know that it was necessary for words, they must have expressed sorrow that Bill had not returned. Yet I do remember, that as I held onto the kitchen door, I turned and hid my face for a moment behind the door to compose myself. Taking them into our sitting room, we sat around the fireplace. They then told me that although Bill had failed to return from his sortie, they did at least know what had happened to him. Apparently, the radio operators employed to listen constantly to all enemy transmissions had picked up a message that the German pilot was sending back to his base. He was reporting that he had shot down a Spitfire As 541 Squadron was the only one flying Spitfires that morning, we knew it had to be Bill. We even knew the exact time, the exact place, the only thing the German pilot did not say was whether anyone had bailed out of the damaged plane.

Having to come and give me such news must have been difficult for them. I was conscious of this. Normally letters would be sent to families of missing airmen. Difficult as it must have been to write such letters, it was probably easier than having to look into my face and give me the news. We sat and talked together, and I was working out in my mind exactly when – by English time – that Bill had been shot own. I suddenly felt much better. Probably I said the most naive thing they have ever heard, I said ‘if that were the time he was shot down – then I’m sure he must be all right. I’m sure he could not have died while I was sleeping peacefully upstairs. I don’t suppose they had much faith in this theory, but it eased my mind, and made me stronger to face all that had to be done now I was alone. I didn’t cry, I think I felt I should not give way and make everyone around me feel helpless and uncomfortable, after all this was happening to many of us. Before they left me, they said they would send an airman up with Bill’s bike that was still at the dispersal, and they asked me for all of Bill’s Airforce clothes. We went upstairs and I emptied the drawers of everything, including the things that were in the suitcases ready for our leave along with his newly pressed uniform. It was a strange feeling, handing over things that had only a short while ago been part of our lives. Bill was gone and almost every vestige of him had gone as well.

I had to go to the kitchen and see Mrs Main. She was standing white faced and tearful, very upset. She listened to all I could tell her about Bill and she did her best to comfort me. I realised that I had to let Bill’s parents know as soon as possible what had happened, also my family. The farmhouse had no phone, but I knew there was a phone box down in the village. I collected all our coins up, and borrowed more, and cycled down to the kiosk. We could send telegrams over the phone. It was a matter of having enough change to put into the box. It all seemed so strange and unreal. The day was beautiful, a typical early summer Sunday afternoon in rural England. A day for strolling on the riverbank, and tea in the garden. On such a day it seemed so wrong that I would soon be breaking the most dreadful news to our families..... I forget much of what I did the rest of the day. I gave all our rations that I had been going to cook for Bill to Mrs Main. Later I realised I had not eaten all day, so I made myself a bowl of porridge and a cup of tea. Then I prepared myself to be off in the morning when the taxi came...”

Mabel went north to break the news to the two families but had to return to Ewelme within a few days collect her things prior to returning to live and work in Doncaster.

“It was decided that Bill’s dad would take a few days off work and go down with me to Ewelme, to help me carry our things. So, the next day we left for the journey back to Ewelme. Mrs Main made up a bed in her spare room for Bill’s dad and I fed him in a haphazard way on boiled eggs, tomatoes and watercress.

While we were in Ewelme Bill’s dad wanted to see where Bill had flown from and so we walked along the road to Benson. When the village was almost reached, a gated lane led off to the left, and we took this lane. It had high hedgerows and turned and twisted until it came out at the edge of the airfield and spread out in front of us we saw the dispersal point. This was a flat grassy area with a hut used as an office and a shelter when needed. However, mostly the pilots just sat around on the grass waiting for the call to fly. I was not very happy going up the lane knowing that by chance we would see, and be seen, by the pilots with whom Bill had flown. I was pleased when the Squadron Leader and his Flight Lieutenant. came down the lane to meet us. They had obviously caught sight of us and had come forward to forestall us. I introduced Bill’s dad and we stood in the lane and passed comfort and sympathy to each other. The Squadron Leader told Bill’s dad that he had put in a request a couple of weeks before to have Bill made a Pilot Officer. I felt they were anxious to see us off. I was unwelcome, and knew it, I was a reminder to them all that they could be the next one not to return,

and that their families could be as devastated as ours were now. So, it was with relief that I said goodbye and we walked back up the lane,

With our packing all done and a taxi ordered we were ready to leave. A sad goodbye was said to Mrs Main and little Ellen and we were off. I did keep in touch with them, I let them know about Bill as the events unfolded”

During his interrogations Bill was visited by a man purporting to represent the Swiss Red Cross. He invited Bill to send a message home. Fearing a trick, but anxious to reassure Mabel if it was possible, Bill dictated a brief message assuring her that he was alive and asking her to continue to bottle gooseberries. Bill knew only she would understand this reference and therefore know he had sent the message.

At home in Doncaster Mabel was visited by a neighbour who had, by chance, heard on a German propaganda wireless station that Bill was a POW and a message from him would be broadcast that evening by the Nazi stooge William Joyce, nicknamed Lord Haw-Haw. To attract British listeners Haw-Haw would broadcast messages from one or two POW's at the end of his diatribe. Anxiously, the family gathered around the wireless that evening. Haw-Haw came up trumps and Mabel wrote:-

“It was as if Bill had said, telling me he was safe and unhurt and that I was to carry on with the gooseberries. Only he knew about that, so I then felt confident Bill was really alive and a prisoner of war. The gooseberries I had picked in the farm garden at Ewelme and canned them two or three jars at a time. “

Mabel added that Bill always carried a nylon stocking of hers in his battledress pocket. This he kept throughout his years as a POW. She had it to the day she died well into her 90s.

The Memoir goes on to detail Bill's frank account of his arduous years as a prisoner of war until his dramatic liberation by the Allies on 14th April 1945. After almost two years apart, he and Mabel were finally reunited in Yorkshire and were able to celebrate VE Day together on the 8th May. After being demobbed Bill became a schoolteacher and in 1952, he took his young family to a new life in British Columbia.

The Johnson's war-time story had a happy ending, and they were to enjoy another 57 years of married life together. The Johnson's wrote their Memoir primarily for their children and grandchildren, but it is evident from Mabel's explicit recollections that the village and the Main family have always held a special place in her heart.

(As the story was so evocative of the experiences of so many in the last war, we suggested it be included as a story entitled 'The Girl at the Window' in a book which was published titled "How was it for You? Memories of the 1940's" by Rob Horlock. Published 2005 ISBN 1-58832-128-2).

Ewelme Village Archive