

ME846 Family

Spring Newsletter 2017 – Vol.10



The famous photograph above of the ME846 crew was taken in March 1944 and if you look carefully you can see piles of snow in the background. By way of a contrast the accompanying photograph of the RAF Winthorpe Memorial Garden at the Newark Air Museum, where the crew are commemorated, was taken on the warmest day of the years so far here in the UK.



Similar contrasting weather conditions are still prevalent between the cold spring conditions that Jane and Marjan are currently encountering in northeast America as compared to near temperate conditions in the UK.

In recent weeks our crew has been at the centre of the museum's World War II education offer to a host of primary school children from across the Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire areas.

Creative writing sessions entitled 'Superheroes' were hosted at the museum in early March for primary school children. These sessions compared fictional superheroes as described by a children's author, to the wartime heroes of Bomber Command as described by Howard, with a big emphasis on the crew of ME846.

For some slightly younger children another education session was hosted at the museum that looked at evacuation and wartime Nottinghamshire. As well as featuring Howard's late father, Eric who was evacuated to the local area from Sheffield; the session also featured the crew of ME846 and an explanation of how they had travelled from Australia, Canada and around the UK and volunteered to fly with Bomber Command and fight for freedom.



Such education sessions are an important part of the museum's diverse aviation offer and it enables the stories of bravery and heroism to be passed on to future generations. Similar stories are entwined throughout the ME846 story, none more so than the story of Dimphna Sterckx.

The story about Dimphna Sterckx is written by Liz Johnson, Jane Knox-Kiepurra and Frans Maes, Dimphna's son. Dimphna was born in 1926 and only a teenager when Liz and Jane's fathers, Reg Brookes and Peter Knox were hidden at the family farm. Dimphna's heroism should be an inspiration to us all.

Dimphna



“My vivid memory of Dimphna was of her wending her way singing through the cornfields to my place of hiding, a basket of cherries over her arm.” Thus recalls an evader, who had the good fortune to find a place of safety with the Sterckx family in June 1944. His Lancaster bomber had been shot down on its return from an air raid over Düsseldorf on the night of 22/23 April 1944.

Dimphna was born on 24 April 1926 in the Flemish-speaking town of Geel in the province of Antwerp in Belgium and named after its patron saint. This was the site of a major battle between the British and the Germans in September 1944 during the liberation of Belgium; the British finally forcing a retreat on the part of the Germans on 13 September.

Dimphna lived with her parents Frans Sterckx and Clementina Heyns and two siblings Alfons and Jules on a small farm, Hoge Hof, to the south of Geel, not far from the Albert Canal.



Frans Sterckx and Clementina Heyns

Frans Sterckx, as well as being a farmer, kept horses and bees and like many in the area, the family made their living off the land. Until the outbreak of war, their lives followed the rhythm of the seasons and demands of rural life. Their living was a profitable one enabling Dimphna to attend a prestigious boarding school in Berlaar near Lier where she met her lifelong friend Josefina De Kinder, widow of Jef Sels.

Dimphna was 13 when the Second World War broke out and in May 1940 the Germans invaded and occupied Belgium.

As the war progressed, the occupation became more repressive and life became increasingly difficult with rationing, curfews, deportation of Belgian civilians to work in German factories and persecution and deportation of the Jewish and Roma populations.

Against this background, life and work on Hoge Hof went on and Dimphna during this period got to know, fell in love with and become engaged to the son of a neighbouring farmer, Marcel Maes. He came to live with the Sterckx family and worked on the farm to avoid being conscripted to work in Germany.

Dimphna and Marcel married in 1947 and later Marcel was to become the Head of the Technical Department in Geel's equivalent of the local council. They had three children, Frans, Jan and Marie-Christine.



Marriage of Marcel & Dimphna in 1947

Organised resistance to the occupation in Belgium began to take root in 1941 and took a number of forms from sabotage, clandestine press, intelligence gathering and of course the organisation of 'Lifelines' to save Jews and Roma from deportation and later to assist allied airmen who had been shot down over The Netherlands and Belgium.



Drawing of 'Hoge Hof' in Geel Liessel by Frans Aldelhof

The Sterckx family became involved in the Geel 'Resistance Lifeline' through a chance encounter with a surveyor who was working on the then recently completed Albert Canal. The surveyor got to know the Sterckx family and was invited to Hoge Hof for a meal. He then revealed that he worked for the 'Lifeline', and suggested to Frans & Clementina that they might also wish to be involved and they agreed.

From that day, Dimphna's young life and the lives of members of her family and Marcel were to change dramatically as their farm and family home became a safe house for evaders. This was dangerous work, vulnerable as the 'Lifelines' were to infiltration and detection. As is well known, many members of the Belgian Resistance were captured, tortured and executed.

From late 1941 to the spring of 1944, Allied servicemen, mainly airmen, were helped by evasion organisations including the Belgian Comet Line who planned escape routes, to France, then neutral Spain so they could be returned to England, often via Gibraltar.

By the end of 1943 there was another wave of arrests of airmen and their helpers. By the beginning of 1944 the increase in arrests along with the foreseen disruption of travel due to pre-invasion bombardments of roads and railway lines meant this route had to be abandoned.

The last Comet Line evaders reached Spain just before D-Day and in the meantime, the group had found alternative solutions which meant the growing number of evaders now had to be sheltered locally, often changing places, with the growing risk of detection.

Places of concealment not only from the Germans but also from neighbours and other prying eyes therefore had to be found. At Hoge Hof this included the cornfield when it was fine until it was learnt that the German military would be carrying out manoeuvres in the area. Otherwise hideaways in the attic or in a barn were created. To access the latter, two loose boards in the back wall of the barn had to be removed revealing a stack of bricks which was in fact a small room with a candle, mattress and bucket. Food would be passed through a small opening in the bricks.

Two allied airmen, Peter Knox (Australian) and Reg Brookes (British) were helped by the Comet Line and sent to Hoge Hof through the local resistance in 1944. Between 28 June and 10 August their stay overlapped with both airmen then being transferred

separately to Brussels via Turnhout. French was the language of communication as none of the Sterckx family spoke English.

In his Memoir¹, Peter Knox recalls his first meeting with Dimphna and her brother Jules who had come to the home of the local leader Jeanne Leemans Schlessler. Leemans was a prominent local Resistance figure of the Geel Section of the GL "Geheim Leger" or Secret Army. She was later captured and tortured but survived.



Peter Knox, Dimphna Sterckx, Reg Brookes June 1944

Dimphna and Jules escorted Peter through the streets from Geel to Hoge Hof. Peter wrote, "***It was the first time they had undertaken such a mission and it was a feat of great courage on their part as I was obviously a foreigner to this region. Many dangers existed for them***".

With the Germans all around, there were many moments of danger and anxiety. In his memoir², Reg Brookes recalls the farm being visited by three Germans with Alsatian dogs on leashes. To reach the farm they had to pass the cherry orchard and decided to pick cherries rather than investigate the farm. Reg Brookes recalls Dimphna's huge relief that despite ferocious barking, the dogs had not been released to find a scent trail to his hiding place in the cornfield.

On another occasion when Reg Brookes was hiding in the house he had been invited to join the family for breakfast. They were all startled and terrified when they heard the sound of rifle butts banging on the door. Two German soldiers were after fresh eggs and they went on their way once they had been given what they wanted.

Dimphna played a key role in the running of the household and both Peter Knox and Reg Brookes recall the family's hospitality and generosity inviting them into the house when it was considered safe to share meals and to use the house's facilities. Notes that were written by Peter Knox and Reg Brookes at

the time of their stay with the Sterckx family have been recently discovered. They pay tribute to the warmth and care taken by their hosts to ensure their safety and well-being.

Both men wrote their memoirs to thank and pay tribute to the bravery of the Belgian Resistance and to keep alive the memory of people like Dimphna and her family who risked their lives to provide refuge and safety to two allied airmen. In 1951 the family including both Dimphna and Marcel were officially commended by the Belgian Government for their bravery and service to the Resistance. Dimphna, in 1944, would no doubt have been one of the youngest serving members of the Resistance.

In 2006 Jane, the daughter of Peter Knox and her husband Marjan Kieपुरa brought together the Maes-Sterckx, Knox-Kieपुरa and Brookes-Johnson families with other families and former members of the Resistance at a ceremony in Postel near Mol.

The occasion was the unveiling of a memorial stone to the memory of the pilot and crew of the crashed Lancaster ME846 from which Jane's father, Peter Knox had bailed out. The pilot's body was never found.



The memorial unveiling & dedication ceremony, September 2006

Dimphna is 91 and lives in a care home in Geel with her children and grandchildren living close by. Her husband Marcel died in 1987 at the young age of 63. Her brother Jules died tragically in a car accident in Kenya in 1957 and her other brother Alfons died last year.

Peter died in 1998 and Reg Brookes in May 2014. Reg Brookes' farewell visit to Dimphna was in September 2009. The families of Peter and Reg remain in touch with Dimphna's family and they will

never forget her or what she and her family did for them.



Dimphna



Credits to: Frans Maes, Jane Knox-Kieपुरa, Liz Johnson, Edouard Renière

April 2017

¹ Peter Knox's memoir <https://goo.gl/0Z5wI9>

² Reg Brookes' memoir 'Echoes from the Past'

Part 2 of this Newsletter featuring Zosine Lafili Verstraeten will also provide a background on the Comet Line and researcher Edouard Renière.

We thank Edouard for his contribution to this article.

STOP PRESS **Knight at the Museum**

For a few days in late April visitors to the Newark Air Museum will be able to see a themed Knight from the Lincoln Knight's Trail, which is being displayed in the Castle Square in Lincoln from 20 May to 2 September 2017.

The themed Knight called 'Knights of the Skies' has been painted by noted Lincolnshire artist Rosie Ablewhite, for Game Engineering of Witham St Hugh's.



Knight of the Skies, pictured March 2017

Game Engineering is based on part of the former World War II RAF Swinderby Bomb Store and the company is a supporter of the International Bomber Command Centre that is being built at Canwick Hill, Lincoln.

The 'Knights of the Skies' will be at the museum during the weekend of 29 & 30 April, 2017.

As you can see from the photograph the artwork on this Knight is stunning; plus it has been signed by 'the last surviving British Dambuster', George Johnny Johnson.

Special thanks go to Di Ablewhite, for helping the Newark Air Museum to make these special arrangements for the Knight to appear at the museum.

Special Museum Visit **Saturday 8th April, 2017**

The education provision at the Newark Air Museum was again to the fore with a visit by a Polish Saturday School to the museum site. The visit this time was from the Polska Szkola w Sheffield im gen.

In the morning the school had visited the Polish War Graves section at the Newark Cemetery, which is located just across the road from the Grange Hotel, where we had our reunion gathering in 2015.

A total of 42 young people (aged from 4 to 15) visited, along with 8 adults. The beautiful cherry blossom in the RAF Winthorpe Memorial Garden provided a welcoming sight to the group when they visited to see our commemorative trees.



Spring 2017 in the Newark Air Museum Memorial Garden

During the brief visit, Howard told them all about the involvement of Marjan and Jane as patrons of the museum and about the crew of ME846.

One of the groups was called 301 Squadron, which is one of the two Polish Air Force squadrons that were the first to be based at RAF Winthorpe. Each child proudly wore a squadron badge during their visit.

They were an excellent group that was keen to learn about their shared history and we suspect that they may pay the museum a return visit in the future.

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