

My Dad in the Netherlands – Some Reflections



This picture, which I posted on my Facebook page on the 31st December 2019, is a montage of five photographs. They, along with many others, came into my possession the day before. It is possible I may have seen one or two of these many years ago, but I had forgotten about them. Many of these photographs, however, though very old, were, I think, new to me. It came about like this.

My sister and her husband had cleared out my parents' flat in Findon when they moved into a home; my mother, alas, did not live there for very long, but my father lived on for a few years. Most of their possessions, however, were either kept in store by my sister, given to family members or otherwise disposed of. Among the items kept by my sister were boxes of old photographs. A few years later, she and her husband also helped clear out the house of my uncle and aunt after they died and thereby acquired yet more boxes of old photographs. Sadly, before a serious attempt could be made to sort these out, my sister died on the 20th of February, 2017; she was only 69 and the victim of cancer.

These boxes of old photographs were passed on to her eldest son, Brendon. It took him a while to get around to looking at them and making any attempt to sort them out; there was too much emotional pain and he found the task difficult. Eventually, however, he did start work on this and on the 30th of December last year arrived with two large boxes; we spent most of the day going through them. I acquired a considerable number of photographs which, so far, I have roughly

sorted into groups, intending to go through them all more carefully.

One group contains photographs of my father from the period of World War II and before, and associated war time photographs, several of which I noticed stamped on the rear by the RAF Censor. It was from this group that I made the montage which I posted on Facebook on the following day.

The coloured photograph is not a colour photograph; the original, which I also have, was a monochrome black and white one. It was possible, however, to have a monochrome photograph coloured. On the reverse of the coloured version there is written in pencil: "Hair, Light Brown – Eyes, Blue – R.A.F."

Sadly, I know very little about what my father did during the war; service men liked to forget it afterwards or keep it to themselves. But I do know that at the end of the war, he was stationed in the Netherlands in a town called Terneuzen. There is a plaque in that town which commemorates the RAF being there from November 1944 to May 1945. I assume the photograph on the top left is from Terneuzen; it is obviously in the Netherlands as we can see the Dutch tricolour flying from two of the houses. There is nothing written on it other than the censor's stamp on the rear. But why else would my father have had this if it were not Terneuzen?

The photograph of my father in the bottom right shows there was a bit of snow about in Terneuzen in the winter of 1944/45. As for the other two photographs, the one on the bottom left clearly shows airmen as the lorry has the RAF roundels painted on it. The photograph in the top centre is, in fact, on a postcard; but there is no indication of where it is or who the person in the photograph is. I included it as it is clearly connected with my father's wartime photographs and it is a reminder of the destruction suffered in that war.

When I posted this montage on Facebook, I added the words:

"Been doing a preliminary sort out of the many photos I acquired yesterday. Here is a coloured photo of my Dad in his RAF uniform; at the end of the WW2 he was serving in the Netherlands (notice the flags in one of the photos). From one photo it seems there was a bit of snow there in the winter of 1944/45. A reminder of why the EU was formed - for peace, unity and cooperation.

"So sad that Johnson & Co are determined that we leave."

I was born eight months before the war began. I was too young to recall the earlier years of the war and, living in a village in West Sussex, we were spared the worst of German bombing. I do, however, remember the V1s which were fired at south east England from the summer of 1944. Their presence was signalled by the wailing of a siren and we sheltered where we could. The missiles were primarily aimed towards London, but aiming was not accurate and their engine could cut out at any time, letting the missile glide to land. One indeed only just missed the roof of our house as it glided down; it landed in a field on the other side of the road and exploded there.

Soon after that, my mother took my brother and me to visit an aunt and uncle in Dorchester in Dorset – well out of the range of V1s. We stayed there until sometime after the end of the war. I remember the night of VE day. My brother and I were woken by our Mum and aunt and taken the short way to the crossroads where North Square, the High Street and South Street met; there was a huge bonfire – something we had not seen during the war – apparently being fed by anything people could get their hands on and accompanied by a lot of singing and dancing. I recall also in the days that followed seeing captured Nazi flags displayed in some of the shops in South Street. But there was not, as I recall, any air of triumphalism; it was thankfulness that the war was over and we had survived.

Everyone had suffered and we remained with shortages and rationing in the post war years. There was a determination that such a disaster should not happen again. I remember the hope in

the 1960s when Prime Minister Harold MacMillan applied to join the growing European Common Market and the frustration at the French president's persistent veto of our joining; and I recall the hope and joy I felt when, under Prime Minister Edward Heath, we did join on 1st January 1973.

I find it almost incredible that a political party that was pro-European for more than half a century has, in less than four years, changed so radically to become a pro-Brexit party.

The veteran, Victor Gregg, who was interviewed on BBC Breakfast on the occasion of his hundredth birthday last October, said during that interview: "It's breaking my heart, what's happening. It really is, after all that struggle and all the sacrifice ... I think it's terrible. It's terrible. It makes me want to cry to think about it - thinking that we should go it alone. We can't."

It is, indeed, heartbreaking after all that struggle and all the sacrifice; it makes me want to cry to think about it too. Why are we doing this? Why are we allowing the loss of so very many of our rights, and the rights of our children and grandchildren? It is, as StandUp2Brexit said in its Facebook post on 6th January, "a massive injustice." That post had the heading: "RAGE, RAGE AGAINST THE LYING OF THE RIGHT," echoing a refrain from Dylan Thomas' famous villanelle.

As I look again at the photograph of my father and those other photographs, I feel moved to write *this* villanelle:

Do not go gentle into Brexit's plight.
Britons should rave as rights are stripped away;
Rage, rage against the lying of the Right.

Young folk, who in the EU had the right
To travel, study, work, get wed and stay,
Do not go gentle into Brexit's plight.

Old folk, who lived through wartime's dreadful blight
And yearned for Europe healed where peace held sway,
Rage, rage against the lying of the Right.

And men and women, who in Europe might
Have once established business where they may,
Do not go gentle into Brexit's plight.

All those with open minds, whose hope is bright,
Who 'gainst the spite of xenophobes inveigh,
Rage, rage against the lying of the Right.

My countrymen, whose leaders lacked foresight,
Stop, think again. With earnest tears, I pray,
Do not go gentle into Brexit's plight;
Rage, rage against the lying of the Right.

