

# “The hand was warm, but a life had slipped away”

by Cathy Rudkin

*The article below first appeared in Shorelines, Issue 19, Aug-Sept 2016, and concerns Owen Gape who, when still a young teenager back in 1944, witnessed a collision between a Wellington bomber and a Mosquito fighter over Chidham. The Mosquito plane crashed in Brook Meadow and that side of the story was featured in The Emsworth Echo for 2020. Cathy got in touch and related what happened to the Wellington bomber. Here, in Owen's own words (transcribed by Cathy) is his personal description of what happened:*

I witnessed a dramatic incident that occurred in 1944, 72 years ago. I was then 14 years old, and lived on Main Road, Southbourne, opposite the Harvest Home... now long gone. I was a member of the Southbourne Sea Scouts and spent many hours either in or under the waters of Chichester harbour.

During the evening of 8th February 1944, I decided to go for a walk round the sea bank of Prinsted bay. In those days there was a gate across the end of the lane leading to the bay, and just inside the gate the army had built a hut in the grounds of what is now the Sea Scouts centre. They had a small lorry, an anti-aircraft gun and a search light. On this evening they were away and I didn't see anyone around.

I walked westwards towards Thorney Island, where there was an RAF base, but there was no activity there that evening. Eventually, I turned round and walked back towards the gate. Still no-one about, but I did see my friend Cyril Mapley (thought to be aged 8 at the time). He lived in a small cottage at the end of the lane just before the gate, which was a local checkpoint.

We stood at the gate chatting. It was about 8.10 pm and starting to get dark. We could hear aircraft overhead but took no notice because we knew the engine sounds belonged to 'our' planes — the German engines had a different sound.

Within a few minutes we heard a loud crash in the air. Looking up we couldn't immediately see anything. Until eventually

we saw what looked like the rear end of a large bomber, it was floating down, going round and round like a sycamore 'wing'. As far as we could see the tail plane looked intact, which probably enabled it to spiral down rather than plunge.

The tide was out and we watched the tail end fall into the mud, just inside the 'Cuts', a large bank once built across the bay to reclaim land lost to the sea. Realising that the rear gunner was probably still in the tail plane, Cyril decided to go out over the mud to look, and I went with him.

We knew the mud well but it still took us some time to get to the wreck. When we reached it the mud looked like a saucer and the tail plane looked in a right mess, all twisted and crushed, so despite pulling and pushing we could not get in. We needed something to cut away at the fuselage so I went back to the shore edge to try and find a hacksaw.

By then the soldiers had returned and I told them what we had seen. We found a hacksaw and they asked if the searchlight would help to illuminate the wreck. So they brought the dynamo-powered searchlight on to the shore and aimed it at the wreck. Although the sea bank obscured the light beams, as I returned to the plane it did help to light the scene with a glow above our heads.

We were now able to cut and shove our way into the rear of the tail plane turret, but we could not pull the gunner out. His foot,

I think it was his left one, was jammed into the squashed ribs of the bomber.

Cyril had a good idea, and unzipped the gunner's boot and was able to get the man's foot out. He was free and I held his hand, and it was still warm. In my young innocence I knew that dead people were cold, so, as this hand was warm, to me he was still alive.

We then had another problem — how to get the gunner back to the shore. Thinking a stretcher would help, once again I made my way over the mud back to the shore. By then a crowd had gathered to watch the scene.

The soldiers gave me a stretcher from their lorry. It was a standard wartime-issue one, a large oblong of canvas with the side rolled up and stitched to a long pole either side. I carried it back over the mud on my shoulder, being very careful not to get it muddy, but back at the wreck Cyril, to my horror, flopped it down on the mud!

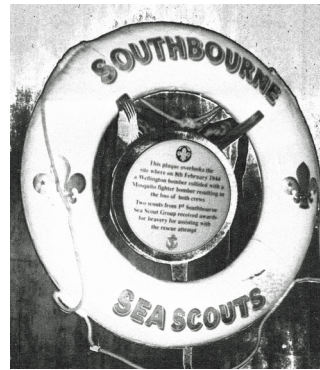
I haven't the faintest idea how we got the gunner on to the stretcher. Brute force, I imagine. We both took an end of the stretcher poles and dragged it over the mud. It took us a while, but we got there.

Waiting for us on shore was a man with a stethoscope, a doctor I imagine, maybe from the RAF base on Thorney. He knelt down and examined the gunner, whose hand I was holding again. It was still warm. But the doctor suddenly looked at me and said, "This man is dead."

I burst into tears. I am not a hero.

*Memorial plaques recording the crash can be seen at Southbourne Sea Scout HQ and also at Brook Meadow in Emsworth.*

*After the war ended Owen went on to join the RAF and, after only five hours training, went solo in a Tiger Moth. After he left the service, Owen joined the police in Brighton, but was at one time stationed at Southbourne, where he often had occasion to visit the RAF base down on Thorney Island.*



*The plaque seen on the left in the lifebelt hangs in the Southbourne Sea Scouts HQ in Prinsted which is currently being refurbished*

The citation states:

*This plaque overlooks the site where on 8th February 1944 a Wellington bomber collided with a Mosquito fighter bomber resulting in the loss of both crews.*

*Two scouts from 1st Southbourne Sea Scout Group received awards for bravery for assisting with the rescue attempt.*



The rear gunner was Sgt William (Bill) Varley aged 21, not much older than Owen Gape. Bill Varley was a member of the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve and is buried in St Helen's Cemetery, Merseyside. Two other members of the crew, N C Jones and J Riddell are interred in graves by St Nicholas Church, Thorney Island.

The Wellington bomber had a crew of five men.