

'Dowdeswell'  
163, New Barn Lane  
Prestbury  
GL 52 3LH.

15 June 1994.

Dear Margaret,

Thank you for your letter of 4th June; I am pleased that you have found some of the 'souvenirs' and that they will now have some significance for you all. - Have you by any chance found the gold caterpillar brooch and the plastic membership card of the Caterpillar Club awarded by the Irvine Parachute Company to all aircrew who have saved their lives by parachute? The badge is a little gold caterpillar about 1" long. It has red ruby eyes and Bob's name will be engraved on the back?

I do hope that Joe will eventually be found - he has probably been tucked away somewhere for I cannot believe that he would have been just "chucked away" for he will have had too much significance to Bob - and to the rest of the crew!

2.

The parachute harness release is an alloy metal box about 4 ins square weighing about 2 lbs. On the front is a knurled metal wheel, spring loaded with "Press to release" engraved on it. On each corner of the box are slots into which the metal lug on each of the harness straps was fitted. (like a seat-belt strap). The object of the "quick release" was to release the harness when the knurled wheel was bashed with the hand. All harness straps were released quickly and simultaneously so that if the chute was dragging along the ground or if the aviator landed in water, he could release himself from the chute and avoid damaging his body - being dragged through trees or wet buildings at say 20 mph could be painful and dangerous - especially in the dark.



the piece of wire and scraps of silk that you have found is most probably part of the "pilot-chute". This chute was spring loaded to open immediately the main rip-cord was pulled. The pilot opened by spring pressure to form a small chute about 1yd. square. This "brake" pulled the main chute from the pack together with the rigging lines as the aviator continued to fall away from the "pilot." The main chute was thus pulled cleanly away from the pack together with the rigging lines so that the chute streamed freely before it opened and so avoided any tangling of the rigging lines.

The significant point about these items is that Bob himself would not have been able to cut them free and carry them with him. — I never saw them in Switzerland and certainly they would have been much too dangerous to carry them about in France. They must have been saved by the French

people and hidden away until they were restored to Bob when he visited them after the war. - So they are again rather special - for to have had them found by the Germans would have meant death to those possessing them!

Now, to find the farm where the plane landed, & suggest that you contact Denis Teave in the Isle of Man. He lived in the area for about a year and has visited the site in the last year or so - the site is now on a NATO Tank Training ground!

The farmer gave Denis one of the rusted machine guns that he had ploughed up! Denis & I am sure will be able to give you much information and maybe addresses of people as well.

Bob's 2nd daughter Heather who lives near Reading is also thinking of visiting the area next year as she and family spend Summer holidays in S of France and pass the area on their way South.

Bob's notes may be amplified a little:  
 As you probably know he landed  
 in the river and was fished out by  
 the Resistance and hidden in a barn  
 (hence they would have the chute and harness!)  
 a day or so later he was joined by  
 Bill Milburn who had also been picked up.

- Belfort was the "frontier" town where  
 the Swiss crossings were planned. I went  
 through Belfort railway station as a  
 high school boy - complete with school  
 bag and satchel (for no one ever  
 checks on passes held by schoolboys!)

The other barn that might be referred  
 to in Bob's notes was nearly on the Swiss  
 frontier well into the "interdite" zone -  
 these movements were strictly limited by  
 a German "shoot first" policy. The barn  
 formed part of a forest farm and was  
 used to store farm implements but also  
 had a hidden passage leading to a  
 hollow haystack. It provided a bolt  
 hole for us and a storage area for  
 contraband goods from Switzerland

The one armed man was in his mid thirties and had lost his arm in a farming accident. He was, I think, the organiser of the smuggling expeditions.

The horse and cart was the means of transport from the Railway station at Belfast to the farm - and was subject to cursory checks by Germans. We lay on the floor and were covered by bags of vegetables and items of furniture!

Pontentruy jail was the Swiss prison where all suspects were interrogated to discover their "how, why and when" and of course "when" - as you can imagine, smuggling of goods out of Switzerland was a problem at that time as well as the movements of 'Agents' both allied and German as the Swiss frontier was officially closed.

I do hope that this has shed some light on your research into Bob's escape.

7

- As you are compiling a record of Bob's story it crosses my mind that I have written an account of one of our operations which took place in early summer of 1943 (about June I think) & wrote it to answer many questions on "what was it really like" and "how did you feel at the time". So it is really our account of what, I suppose, we all went through as members of Bob's crew on a raid over Germany; it is of course as factually correct as far as my memory goes. If you would like a copy to keep in your family records please let me know.

My regards to Bob and to you all

Sincerely  
Eric Dickson

P.S. Your note about the German newspaper report intrigues me.  
- About that time the USAF had bombed a Swiss town by accident and there was much local anti-American feeling against American Interred airmen at Dubendorf.  
- As it may be argued that US Thunderbolts shooting down Swiss Me 109 fighters over Switzerland - a German plane with Swiss white crosses was difficult to identify and distinguish from German aircraft markings. Incidentally Swiss pilots were required to insulate their own aircraft and were therefore reluctant to "mix it" with American Thunderbolts!  
- May I suggest that you ask a local school to translate the cutting for you & could then perhaps shed some light on the events recorded - The school would be delighted to help I'm sure.

21