

Ted Mansfield

This is Ted's son Brian's tribute to his father, with special reference to his RAF career. Ted, as you will see, was a brave man and a Tiger through and through.

Ted was born in Staines, Middlesex on 25th March 1921, the eldest of three children. His father had joined the Royal Flying Corps so Ted grew up on various RAF Stations in Norfolk, Hertfordshire and Hampshire until his father got a posting to Egypt for three years and Ted, his mother, brother and sister sailed out to join him. On their return to England Ted's father was posted to Worth Down near Winchester.



Ted became friendly with a local shepherd who taught him to send the dogs out to round up the sheep and how to skin and gut a rabbit, a good dinner in those days.

At 14½ Ted left school and worked at Sloane Gate Mansions in Belgravia as a page boy, sweeping stairs, polishing brass, carrying shopping in and anything else that needed doing. After a year Ted became fed up with this and took a job as a barrow boy at Peter Jones Department Store in Sloane Square, where his job was to take customer's purchases to the basement for delivery. This was a much better job and Ted started to make friends.

At 16½ Ted's father said he should join the RAF as a boy entrant armourer, Ted really wanted to be a photographer but his father said 'ARMOURER' and that was that! So, in October 1937 Ted joined the RAF, did a year's training as an armourer and was posted to RAF Feltwell in Norfolk. After the outbreak of war he was posted to a Wellington bomber squadron at Bassingbourne where he cleaned and inspected the guns and turrets and flew on post maintenance test flights.

Ted was a survivor of the sinking of HMT *Lancastria* by German bombers on 17th June 1940 which was reported as the biggest sea disaster of the war. He was also an active member of the *Lancastria* Association and marched proudly to the Cenotaph with fellow *Lancastria* survivors on Armistice Day.

The following excerpts from Ted's memoirs emphasise what a brave man he was:

In January 1940, I was 19 years old and volunteered to join the British Expeditionary Force and was posted to Chalons-Sur-Marne in France, later being posted to H.Q. BEF east of Paris. I fitted guns to two vehicles as we were to move west to Nantes to guard the convoy.

They were too far south to make it back to Dunkirk so headed for St. Nazaire where ships were waiting to evacuate them.

On the 16th June 1940 we moved down to the docks at St. Nazaire and slept on the ground under the eaves of a warehouse. All night the ack-ack guns were firing and shrapnel was raining down on the warehouse roof.

On the 17th June 1940 the evacuation from St. Nazaire began and I embarked on a small lifeboat to be taken out to the *Lancastria*, one of two liners anchored about 10 miles out, sent to take us home. The men on board were mostly army: I had already lost touch with the rest of my mates.

At about 4pm there was a loud explosion which rocked the ship: we'd been hit. Everyone started making for the stairs to get up on deck. The ship rolled first to port then to starboard then back to port and settled. Alarm bells started ringing and the call came over the loud speaker system 'Abandon Ship' as she started to sink. Someone called out 'help me!' and because of the angle of the ship the chap couldn't reach the stairs so six or so of us linked hands and pulled him to safety. I made my way to the starboard side as by this time her port side was under the water. German bombers came over, machine gunning the hundreds of men in the water who were already fighting for their lives in the thick oily water. *Lancastria* was sinking fast and so I decided it was time to get off, so I took my boots off and tied them together and hung them over the rails – I'm not sure why! As I walked down the side of the ship and into the sea I could see men through the portholes but was unable to help them in any way knowing that they were soon to perish.

As I was swimming away 4 or 5 older men in life-jackets called out for help. I made them lie on their backs and hold onto one another and I towed them to a capsized lifeboat. I climbed on top and saw a launch from the *Lancastria* just floating empty about 200 yards away. Knowing I was a good swimmer I dived in and set off towards the launch. Eventually a lifeboat with two army lads and a sailor came towards us and tied the boats together and set off picking men out of the sea and headed towards HMS *Highlander* which had been sent to escort the liners home. Instead she was now a rescue ship. I was covered in thick oil and only had my shirt on having taken my trousers off so I could swim better. I was given a duffle coat to cover up and a big mug of hot tea.

We watched as the *Lancastria* took 20 minutes to sink before its final plunge to the bottom of the sea.

The *Highlander* was overloaded with survivors and so those not wounded were transferred to the *Oronsay*. A plank was put between the two ships and when told we had to run across but some fell between the two ships and were killed. When it was my turn the men on *Oronsay* shouted 'now!' and I ran like a bullet out of a gun. Once on board I was given a mug of tea and a big corned beef sandwich.

We set sail for England, sailing all night and docked in Plymouth on the afternoon of 18th June 1940. During the journey an army chap saw we didn't have much clothing and ran a mock auction giving his own clothes away, so I ended up with an army shirt, a cook's black and white trousers and a pair of army socks with my duffle coat from the *Highlander*.

I was to learn later that there were about 9,000 men, women and children on-board the *Lancastria* and 4,000 lost their lives.

After 3 weeks survivors' leave Ted was posted to RAF Cardington, where he was promoted to corporal and taught new recruits how to fire a rifle. But after requesting an operational unit Ted was posted, in January 1941, to No. 74 Tiger Squadron flying Spitfires at RAF Biggin Hill. The squadron moved around England and Northern Ireland before being kitted out with tropical gear and sent to the Middle East for 2 years, returning to the UK in 1944 for D-Day.

Throughout 1944 and '45 Ted worked on Mosquitoes of different squadrons at RAF Hunsden where he met and married Joan on 13th December 1944. In August 1945 he was sent to an airfield on the Belgian/French border, later moving up into Holland where he saw VE Day in. Ted was then promoted to sergeant and with his squadron was moved to Germany where he stayed for 2½ years and was accompanied by Joan. They lived in a maisonette which had been commandeered from a German family, but even then Ted's good nature shone through and they allowed the German family to live in the attic which was like a small flat.

In December 1947 Ted was posted to a bomb disposal unit and Joan returned to England, but after a couple of months Ted was again posted, this time to Hamburg where he stayed until being discharged in March 1948.

There was not a lot of call for armourers in civvy street and so, in January 1949, Ted took a job at Standens Agricultural Engineers in St. Ives as a paint sprayer. In November 1956 he applied for and got the job as a civilian driver at RAF Wyton working mainly refuelling aircraft but also carrying out many other driving roles, including being selected from 400 applicants to drive trucks for the British Embassy and British Consulate in Turkey. On returning to RAF Wyton Ted's common sense, understanding and charm served him well and he was made foreman of the M/T section.

Ted retired on his 65th birthday on the 25th March 1986.

For those who were fortunate enough to know Ted they discovered a lovely, friendly man, a real gentleman, with sparkly blue eyes and a quick smile which won people's hearts immediately. He was always quick to lend a hand to help his friends and neighbours and was loved by everyone. He was Standard Bearer for the British Legion for many years and proudly marched leading the parade on Armistice Day each year after he found it too difficult to travel to the Cenotaph in London. He also made the pilgrimage to St. Nazaire for many years, to remember the 4,000 that didn't make it back from the sinking of the *Lancastria*.

Teds willingness to learn carried on throughout his life as he mastered computers - even Windows 10!! - printers and scanners, digital cameras and mobile phones and loved his Kindle.



Taken at the Reunion in 2007, four veteran Tigers. From left to right John Freeborn, Doug Tidy, Derek Morris and Ted Mansfield. Alas none of these fine old gentlemen are any longer with us.