

SHOT DOWN!



*When his bomber exploded over Nazi-occupied France,
only John survived—and found a new life*

John M. Curnow



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Above all, I want to thank God for bringing me alive from that doomed plane as it plummeted to earth and for guiding me in so many wondrous ways ever since.

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PREFACE

Stunned, I sat in front of my computer monitor, staring at the picture of six gravestones, each bearing the insignia of the Royal Air Force. Deep emotions began to well up within my heart. Slowly I scrolled from one close-up picture to the next—John Dobie, Jack Smith, John Roper, Ernest Waghorn, John Todd, and Stanley John Rose. On the headstones were engraved short messages from loved ones. On the headstone of John Todd, my bomb aimer, his wife had had engraved:

FROM TWILIGHT
TO THE HALLS OF DAWN HE WENT.
HIS LANCE IS BROKEN,
BUT HE LIES CONTENT.

When I read those words I broke down and cried. For the first time in sixty years I truly grieved the loss of my six friends and crew members. When we were shot down I had been sorry they had been killed, but preoccupation with trying to escape, and then being captured, had left no time for real grieving.

As I looked at the photos, I knew I had to go to that church graveyard in the village of Lavannes, France.

A young friend of mine, Tony Muse, saw a Lancaster bomber model kit on eBay. Knowing I had flown on the Lancaster in World War II, he bid for it so he could model it for me. When it came time for the decals, he wanted to use the letters and numbers of my old squadron. Going to an Internet search engine he entered my name, followed by “Royal Air Force.” This took him to Olivier Housseaux’s French Web site.

Housseaux had dedicated his Web site to keeping alive the memory of Allied airmen shot down and killed over his county in France. He knew about my crew, for they were buried only eight miles from the city of Reims where he lived. Knowing there had been a lone survivor, he had written on one of his Web site pages, “I am looking for J. M. Curnow.”

Thanks to Tony Muse, Housseaux has at last found me, and I have found my crew!



The poster jumped out at me, grabbing my attention! I sat in the train on my way to school in London, my eyes riveted to the image of a young Royal Air Force pilot, his outstretched arm and finger pointing straight at me, his piercing eyes boring into mine. Underneath the picture, in bold type and capital letters, I read: YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS YOU—JOIN THE ROYAL AIR FORCE!

I felt my heart pounding in my chest. A small voice within me was saying, “Do what Norman has done. Do what Norman has done.” Norman Howard was my best friend. We had grown up together in the picturesque village of Ickenham situated about twelve miles west of London.

Some two months earlier I had bumped into Norman in Ickenham. Excitedly, he had exclaimed, “John, guess what! I’ve just joined the RAF to train as a pilot!”

Surprised, I responded, “How did you do that? You’re not old enough.” I knew he had only recently turned seventeen and that the minimum age for volunteering was eighteen.

He grinned and waved his hand nonchalantly. “I put my age up. I told them I was eighteen!”

My admiring eyes had followed him as he hurried on his way. In a few weeks I would be seventeen, too. What if I . . . ?

The year was 1940. The “Phony War,” as it had been called, had come to a violent and sudden end earlier that year, as the Germans launched their blitzkrieg on the Western Front. Smashing through

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The old St. Giles Church, Ickenham village

Belgium and Holland at bewildering speed, German Panzer divisions had been able to drive deep into France. The French were completely unprepared for such a lightning advance. Resistance collapsed, and France was forced to sue for peace.

The British army that had gone to bolster the French forces was outflanked, but managed to make a fighting retreat to the French coast. There, at the famous Battle of Dunkirk, a thin line of gallant British soldiers kept the enemy at bay while more than three hundred thousand of their comrades were snatched from the blood-stained North Sea beaches and from certain imprisonment. Defying enemy U-boats and the German *Luftwaffe*, hundreds of ships and boats, large and small, military and civilian, plowed back and forth across the forty-five miles of dangerous waters separating England from France and successfully ferried the British soldiers back to England.

The bulk of the British Expeditionary Force was now safely back in its homeland. But it was an army without weapons, for all arms and equipment had to be abandoned in the evacuation. Britain, with its back to the wall, was virtually defenseless except for its fighter planes patrolling the skies and its navy dominating the seas separating it from what was now Nazi-controlled Europe. Would proud England, which had not been invaded for nearly a thousand years, survive?

These were truly England's darkest days! But our new leader, Winston Churchill, in a mighty speech to the nation, lifted us out of despondency and filled our hearts with a determination to fight back and win. It was at this time that I joined the Home Guard, a volunteer paramilitary force of civilians made up mostly of men too old for the regular military, but also including a few teenagers like

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myself who were too young to enlist. It was one of Britain's lines of defense against a German paratroop invasion.

The uneasy calm was shattered one sunny day in August 1940 as Hitler launched his vaunted *Luftwaffe* against England in an all-out attempt to gain mastery of the skies over our green and pleasant land. The air war was intended to prepare for a ground invasion. In what was to become known as the Battle of Britain, hundreds of Messerschmitt 109 and 110 fighters and many Dornier, Heinkel, and Junkers bombers swept over the English Channel in an endeavor to destroy the Royal Air Force both in the air and on the ground. But Hitler was to lose the Battle of Britain with very heavy losses as RAF Hurricane and Spitfire fighters rose to shoot down hundreds of the enemy's planes.

The valor of those gallant fighter pilots was etched into my mind as I listened to the daily reports of this epic struggle. One Hurricane pilot was shot down twice in one day! Both times he landed safely by parachute and commandeered a car to get back to his aerodrome and take off once more in another Hurricane to do battle with the enemy! The sacrificial gallantry of these brave pilots was immortalized by Churchill's tribute: "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few."

Failing in his daylight attacks, Hitler turned to nightly bombing of my beloved London. Night after night, while on Home Guard duty in Ickenham, I would watch the eastern sky turn red as the fires raged from the bombing. I became bitterly angry and wanted revenge.

Now as I sat in that train, my eyes riveted on the poster and its challenge, YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS YOU—JOIN THE ROYAL AIR FORCE!, I was about to make my fateful decision. One of the recruiting centers listed on the poster was in the town of



The Battle of Britain, 1940. "Never. . . was so much owed by so many to so few."—Winston Churchill.

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My beloved London under attack. This was a challenge I had to meet!

Acton, the very next station! As the train came to a stop and the doors opened, my eyes went to the station name on the platform, then back to the poster. Again, my glance went from the station name and back to the poster.

With heart thumping, I bounded onto the platform just as the doors closed behind me and the train went on its way.

I located the recruiting center, took a deep breath, and strode inside. The recruiting sergeant looked at me enquiringly. I told him I had come to join the RAF.

"How old are you?" he asked, no doubt because of my boyish face.

"Eighteen," I answered defiantly, daring him to challenge me.

Was it my imagination or did I see his eyes narrow a little as he pushed an application form across the desk to me? Quickly filling out the form, I signed it and pushed it back to him. As he took it, I knew a bridge had been crossed; there was no turning back now!