



HEINZ SCHMIDT

My name is Heinz Schmidt and I was born in Berlin in 1919.

When I was 12 my mother died and we moved to Tempelberg in Pomerania (this is the former part of Germany extending along the southern Baltic Coast east to the River Vistula). My father remarried, my stepmother being only 10 years older than me.

When I was 19, I joined the Luftwaffe as ground crew and became a gunner manning an anti aircraft gun. We were deployed mainly around Dortmund and Duisburg although I did spend some time at the Möhne dam. I was moved away about 1 week before the raid on the dam took place. I don't think we ever hit any aircraft as our guns could not shoot high enough and they frequently went wrong.

In 1943 I was hit by an incendiary bomb and had to spend a few months in hospital with a damaged back.

In 1944, because of the shortage of soldiers, I was switched to the army and became an NCO in charge of an anti tank gun. We were positioned on the German/Polish Border but after 2 or 3 weeks we received a telephone call in the night saying that we were to be moved. A half-track lorry arrived, the gun was loaded onto it and we drove to the nearest railway where both gun and lorry were put on a train.

We then travelled west, eventually unloading at St Avold in eastern France. We were told that we had to defend Metz against the advancing Americans. We started to drive west but there was heavy snow and it was impossible to see the road in many places. Eventually, we stopped between 2 villages, I think they were named Destry and Martell. We were ordered to unload the gun on the top of a hill which was a stupid place to put it as it was in full view. The lorry was parked under a tree which did not hide it in any way as, being winter, there were no leaves on the tree.

We had only been in position for a short time when a shell landed short of us. A second shell passed over us and I realised that these were range finders. Myself and the gun crew took cover in a nearby ditch filled with snow and cold water when a third shell hit the magazine on the gun blowing up the ammunition and destroying the gun. Another shell hit the lorry so our means of escape had gone. Ordering the crew off the gun, I had disobeyed orders as we had been ordered by Hitler to fight to the last drop of blood.

We remained in the ditch and after sometime I was conscious of some movement. By raising my helmet slightly, I was able to see a tank emerging from the trees. This stopped opposite us and some soldiers climbed down setting up a machine gun pointing towards us. The tank moved off and we thought it was going away but it circled round behind us. A voice then told us that our war was over and that we should surrender. We all climbed onto the tank which went back the way it had come. Eventually we were put in a barn overnight, given some food and some dry clothes.

We were moved progressively across France eventually finishing up at Liege. Here I had a fall from a plank whilst crossing the butts on a rifle range where we were billeted. This aggravated my back injury, so I had to have a short spell in hospital.

We now started moving west and finally arrived at Cherbourg. We were then put on a ship to New York. The crossing took 3 weeks and we were told, whilst on the voyage, that President Roosevelt had died. When entering the harbour at New York, we saw the Statue of Liberty and the whole of the Manhattan skyline.

On being unloaded we were given a medical check up including being covered all over in powder to kill any lice. We were then sent to Camp Maxey in Texas but were only there for a short time before being moved to Camp Wiggins in Colorado. I caught a throat infection and had to go into hospital in Colorado Springs.

I remained in Colorado for about 18 months. We worked on the land, cultivating and harvesting sugar beet and I also worked in potato factory.

The Americans decided that we should now return home, so we were taken to Los Angeles and put on a ship. After some delay, we passed through the Panama Canal, crossed the Atlantic and arrived at Liverpool. I was taken to a camp at Colchester and then moved to Old Buckenham where we worked on an old American Air Force base.

After about a year I was sent to Guildford and then on to South Godstone. We lived in Nissen Huts on land belonging to Norbryght House which lies off Tilburstow Hill. Each day we were taken to various farms in the area. I worked mainly at Beeches Farm, Dry Hill, Dormansland which belonged to Mr Ken Faire. I became friendly with them and they arranged for me to live at the farm which I did for 2 years or so.

Mr Faire senior, whom I understand had bought the farm originally, died. So Mr Ken Faire decided to sell the farm and take over the running of the family motor business. I then went to work for Mr Young who owned the farm to the east of the railway line in Lingfield, Blackgrove Farm in Tandridge Lane and other farms at Barrow Green and Staffhurst Wood. I did not do agricultural work but was employed as a decorator/handyman looking after all the properties that they owned.

I did not go back to Germany as the town where I had lived in Pomerania was now part of Poland and I had no way of tracing my parents. I eventually met up with them in Berlin in 1951 and they advised me not to return as they were now under Russian control and there was no work available.

My wife came from Austria and was in England before the war started. When Germany invaded Austria, all Austrians were told to return home to exchange their Austrian passports for new German ones. After the war, she returned to England to learn the language working at Blackgrove Farm as an au pair looking after the 2 children. That is where I met her and we married in 1953 living in Waterside Cottages, Haxted Road.

I left Mr Young in 1963 to take up work as a full time painter and decorator. I was employed by Mr Beswick who ran his business from Station Road, Lingfield and had 5 employees. Mr Beswick eventually went into liquidation and I then worked for Stanfords, the builders next to the Victoria Club. This was taken over by Mr Brunning and I stopped there until I retired.

As told to Michael Chappell

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