

## TED HARPER

*Rob Forsyth*



Albert Edward (Ted) Harper was born on 13 September 1920 in New Street, Deddington. He was brought up by his grandparents William and Alice Harper.



**William Harper**



**Alice Emily Harper**

He attended the local village school, followed by a place at Banbury Grammar School. On leaving he went to work in the office at the Shell Mex depot in Banbury.

When World War II broke out on 3 September 1939, he was eager to enlist. He went along with Clive, a close friend since childhood, and they both enlisted with the Royal Warwickshire Regiment. He became Private A E Harper, No. 5383360.

He carried with him a miniature leather-bound *Book of Common Prayer* and a picture of his grandmother, Alice Emily, whom he always referred to as mother.

After the completion of basic training, his regiment was part of the ten infantry Divisions which made up the British Expeditionary Force deployed to the Franco-Belgian border, following the invasion of Poland.

In May 1940, his regiment was amongst the troops which were cut off, forced to retreat and ultimately trapped on the beaches at Dunkirk. During the evacuation of

Dunkirk between 26 May and 4 June 1940, when every available ship and boat was utilised, 330,000 men were rescued. The larger ships were unable to anchor too close to the shore, so soldiers would swim out to them. He was swimming out to one of these ships with Clive, who was not such a strong swimmer, when they were captured by a German U-boat.<sup>1</sup> They were landed and then forced marched into Germany, being ill-treated en route by beatings and starvation.

The soldiers were sent to Prisoner of War (PoW) Camps by railway. He and Clive were sent to Stalag XX-B PoW camp in Malbork, Poland. His family received a postcard from him, confirming he was a PoW, that his PoW number was 50404 and that he was in Stalag camp No XX-B - and nothing more.



Ted is marked with an X in this very rare camp photograph taken in Stalag No XX-B

During his period as a PoW he was part of a work force doing agricultural work on local farms. Whenever possible he would take the opportunity to steal and eat raw eggs for the protein, not forgetting to hide the shells. He tried to smuggle eggs back into the camp for other PoWs but rarely succeeded.

<sup>1</sup> U-boat or E-boat? Ted's recollection was that he was captured by a U-boat i.e. a submarine; it is arguable, however, whether Admiral Doenitz would have risked one of his valuable submarines to be on the surface in shallow water and so unable to dive to evade attack. There are no records of such in the RN Submarine Museum or in the Royal Warwickshire Regimental Museum. However, there were a number of German high-speed, motor torpedo E-boats operating in the area throughout the evacuation. Dare one suggest that, to an army man, the distinction between a small surfaced U boat and an E boat may not have been absolutely clear. But this is not to state that his recollection is incorrect and it has sparked off further research into this interesting event.

When it became evident that he spoke German fluently he was used as a translator. Over time his health, along with others, deteriorated badly: partly because the Germans withheld Red Cross parcels. He was admitted to the camp hospital with a severe case of pleurisy, the treatment for which included using leeches, and gave him a life-long phobia of hospitals.

In late 1944, the British and American Allied Forces advanced through Europe. The Germans retreated and evacuated PoW camps in the East, including Stalag XX-B, in order to take the PoWs away from the advancing Allied Forces. These enforced marches have been labelled the Death Marches. The PoWs were weakened and emaciated by ill-treatment and poor diet. Many were forced to march for 86 days covering 500 miles, dressed only in rags against bitter winter weather and with virtually no food. Stragglers were shot. He was one of the lucky survivors; however he was devastated that his friend, Clive, died on this march. It was reported that when the Allied Forces rescued the PoWs, they resembled those liberated from concentration camps.

After being liberated, he was flown back to England and was admitted to Walton Hospital in Liverpool as a patient - he is marked by a cross in the photograph below. It was during this time, that he met, and would later marry, Staff Nurse Ceridwen Jones (on his right) who had trained and then qualified as an SRN at Walton Hospital during the war.



When he recovered he was assigned by the army to be a military presence on hospital wards where German PoWs were being treated.

After he was demobbed from the army, he returned to Deddington and resumed employment at the Shell Mex depot, where he was promoted to foreman. He married Ceridwen Jones on 13 July 1946. They were allotted the first post-war council house built in Deddington (No.1, The Paddocks) because of the number of points they were awarded for their war service.

He bore no ill-feeling towards the German people, in fact Hermann Kruse, who was a German PoW, used to do some gardening for him at No.1. Their two children, Michael and Marian (who provided me with most of this information and the photographs) were born while living in Deddington. A work promotion meant the family moved to the outskirts of Coventry in October 1955 where their second son Graham was born in 1956.

Ted worked for Shell Mex for most of his working life before taking voluntary redundancy in 1969. He spent his last few years working for the Standard Triumph Motor Company in an administrative capacity. He died on 1 April 1976. Ceridwen is a resident in a home in Coventry.