

McGarvey POW brothers reunited

By Julie McGarvey, Trustee, RAF Museum

It's an honour to be a trustee of the RAF Museum since my father (Bob McGarvey) and his elder brother Alex were both in Bomber Command in WW2. Dad was a navigator, and uncle Alex a pilot. Both ended up as PoWs in the same German camps, serving lots of time in the "cooler" (solitary confinement).

Dad's incarceration as a POW ruined his health and he died in 1960, aged 38. According to mum, he didn't talk much about the war except being starved and eating the Germans' potato peelings! My brothers and I grew up knowing very little about his war experiences apart from family anecdotes. My passion for genealogy inspired me to track down dad's service records and the International Red cross plugged gaps.

The 'McGarvey boys' – both champion swimmers – both signed up as volunteer reserves in 1941: Bob aged 20, an ATC student at Glasgow University and Alex aged 23, a young police constable in Glasgow.

- **Sgt Robert Robinson McGarvey** (Reg 1550844) trained as a wireless op/air gunner and according to his service records joined 231 Squadron before the heavy bomber 460 Squadron RAAF based at Binbrook, Lincolnshire (the US airbase in the film *Memphis Belle*). Apparently 460 Squadron flew the most sorties in 1 Group and dropped the greatest tonnage of bombs.

From visiting the National Archives in Kew I discovered from ORBs that dad's Lancaster was shot down on Operation Hanover in October 1943: "*Weather: fine becoming fair to cloud before dusk. After several aircraft did some local flying 18 were detailed for an attack on Hanover. From reports on their return it appears that it was highly successful – a very concentrated attack and fires were left burning well in the target area – PFF (Pathfinder Force) were well on the job this time.*" Two aircraft failed to return: Aircraft ED 658 (bombload inc x 4000 lb and 2 x 1000lb.

All crew were captured and held PoW, at camps including Stalag IVB Mühlberg and Stalag Luftwaffe VI, Heydekrug (East Prussia) where he was reunited with Alex in January 1944. The camp was evacuated with the McGarvey brothers bound for Stalag 357 in Poland in July 1944. Bob was a book worm and in Stalag 357 sat the intermediate BA exam in Arts (Latin/French) with the University of London. There were severe food and medical shortages at Stalag 357 as war drew to a close and the PoWs watched Mosquito fighters fly over the camp to bomb Hamburg, Bremen and Hanover in January 1945.

- **Flight Lieutenant Alexander Robinson McGarvey** (Reg 1345818) trained as a pilot in Texas. In August 1943, after 27 ops, uncle Alex piloted his Stirling bomber over the North Sea returning from an attack on Hamburg. Flying below waves of Halifaxes and Lancasters in an electric storm, the aircraft iced up and crashed into the sea after being coned by German searchlights and anti-aircraft fire burst under the nose. All six crew baled out but only two survived, thanks to Alex's swimming ability. Despite severe injuries which rendered his legs almost useless, Alex kept his injured navigator, Andrew Grainger, afloat in the freezing water for over 8 hours before being lifted by a German E boat on 3 August. In ankle chains, prodded by bayonets they moved to war-torn Hamburg and buried German dead in mass graves.