

Austinplein – A Sacrifice Honoured, by Jeff Austin Part One

A few weeks ago, Jill Austin, owner of The Flower Factor Florists on Selby Road told us the story of her Grandad, who died heroically after being shot down in a fighter aircraft returning from Germany in the 2nd World War. She showed us a Memorial Document which was prepared by her nephew Jeff who lives in Canada. Later this year there will be a Memorial Service in the Dutch village of Herkingen, which Jill & her cousins from the Skyliner Chippy and 14 other members of the Austin Clan will be attending. In a hands across the ocean moment we asked Jeff to write the story for the magazine, a story of genuine humanity spanning almost 70 years, involving five nationalities and two continents.

As the bus wound through the countryside, I gazed out the window at the lush and flat landscape where scores of massive and modern windmills dotted along the coast of this Dutch island called *Goeree-Overflakkee*. My feelings were mixed; I felt both excited and sombre as I headed to Herkingen, the place where my great grandfather, *Herbert Ingle Austin* of Leeds, had met his valiant end during World War II.

Growing up as a young boy in Canada, my father had described the devastating impact the war had on our family, most significantly the loss of Herbert in this remote village on the coast of Holland. I was also told about how the Dutch people had honoured our family, building a monument, and naming a street after him, called *Austinplein, or Austin Square*, which marks the site where Herbert's Halifax bomber crashed in April 1944. This honour had intrigued me for years and I was finally going to stand alongside my great grandfather at his resting place and see it for myself. Up until this point, my knowledge surrounding the specifics of his death was limited, so heading to Herkingen was the first step in my journey to discover what motivated these Dutch villagers to honour my great grandfather in such a meaningful way.

When I arrived at Austinplein I was flooded with emotions and truly felt my visit was going to be a special experience. I was accompanied by a young Dutchman named Arno who had attended to Herbert's grave for many years and spoke of the sacrifice he made with the utmost admiration.



I had come into contact with Arno through my aunt and uncle from Wakefield, who met him on a visit to Herkingen the year before. Arno and the other Dutch villagers I encountered were sincere and benevolent, and upon discovering I was a descendant of Herbert Austin, treated me like I was a dignitary from a foreign land, even extending an invite to include me in a delicious family dinner. By the end of my visit I came away from Herkingen with a renewed love and appreciation for Herbert and his Dutch companions. Yet, nonetheless questions lingered in my mind about the circumstances of his death and the men he served with.

Several years passed and the reunion with my deceased great grandfather in Herkingen remained close to my heart. Then in July 2011, my aunt was contacted by a woman named *Maureen Fennessey*, from Alberta Canada, who said that her uncle, Francis Fennessey, had served and died with Herbert during the war. At the time of his death, Herbert was a sergeant and flight engineer on a bomber crew at RAF Leeming.

Maureen had made it her mission to understand the circumstances of Francis' death and track down the descendants of the bomber crew he had served with as captain. She had connected with a Dutchman in his mid-thirties named *Dennis Notenboom* from Goeree-Overflakkee. Dennis was involved with various groups honouring fallen Allied soldiers from World War II. He joined Maureen's search and became the link that connected my family, and the families of the other five crew members. The e-mails flowed into my inbox, providing me with new information and answering many questions I had. I also added information whenever I could. I was surprised to learn that Herbert had been flying with the *No. 429 Bison Squadron, Crew LK802* - part of the Canadian Air Force. As a dual citizen who is Canadian and British this information deepened my connection to my great grandfather, but I was puzzled why as an Englishman he flew with the Canadians? I learned that Herbert was assigned to the Canadian Air Force because he was a skilled flight engineer, and with the arrival of advanced *Halifax Mk. III* bombers equipped with new Hercules engines, the Canadians didn't have the expertise to operate them. Ultimately, it was this transfer that would lead to Herbert's death and eternal memorial in Holland...

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Austinplein – A Sacrifice Honoured, by Jeff Austin Part Two

The continuing story of The Flower Factors Jill Austin's Grandfather. Written by her nephew Jeff, a Canadian Yorkshireman.

On the night April 23rd, 1944 the LK802 crew of seven brave men were flying back to Leeming after an attack on Dusseldorf. As they neared the coast of Holland, a German fighter plane attacked and badly damaged their aircraft.

With the bomber on fire, the pilot, Francis, told the crew to bail out and that he and Herbert would be right behind them. Five of the crew members immediately parachuted out, landing in the ocean and flooded polders along the coast. In those days, almost half of Goeree-Overflakkee Island was flooded by the Germans as defence against land invasion. This made it appear as if the ocean extended beneath them when in reality the water level was only about three feet deep. Hebert and Francis were preparing to bailout of the flaming plane when the wing collapsed over them, obstructing the exit, and likely injuring them in the process. What happened on board next is unknown, but eye witness accounts from Dutch civilians describe the plane heading for the village before suddenly being manoeuvred away to crash in the St. Elizabeth polder. Both Herbert and Francis were killed immediately, and their last heroic efforts avoided any civilian casualties.

Of the five crew who bailed out, four of them – Crosswell, Kempton, Low, Miller – were taken as POWs. In the chaos during the bailout navigator Alex Achtymichuk did not put on his life jacket and was swept out to sea never to be seen again. Crosswell later succeeded in escaping from *POW Camp Stalag Luft VII* at Bankau in April 1945. Unfortunately he was captured and shot by the Gestapo on April 14th, 1945. Crosswell and Achtymichuk's remains were never found, so their names were inscribed on the Tablets for the Missing in the Runnymede Memorial in London. At the end of the war, after being liberated as POWs, Miller and Low returned to Canada, and Kempton returned to the United States to continue their lives.

The bodies of Herbert and Francis remained in the crash site for over a year, as the Germans were unwilling to recover any bodies from the wreckage in the inundated polder.

Then in June 1945, shortly after the liberation of Holland the polder was drained and the villagers recovered both Herbert's and Francis' remains. Since a rosary was found on Francis, his body was sent to a Catholic cemetery in Middleharnis while Herbert was buried in Herkingen. After ten years in Middleharnis, Francis' body was moved to the Bergen Op Zoom Canadian Military Cemetery nearby. A few months after his burial, Herbert was honoured by the villagers with a small ceremony and wreath being placed on his grave in gratitude for his sacrifice.

However, this would only mark the beginning of the villagers' gratitude towards Herbert, as they established a commission to collect funds to build him a memorial grave. According to speeches from the memorial unveiling on June 8th 1946, the villagers felt it was their debt of honour to erect a monument in his memory. Their intention was to show their appreciation for Herbert, who had sacrificed his life while fulfilling his duty to serve his country, protect it from tyranny, and liberate his fellow allies under occupation. For the villagers, Herbert's grave would be a symbol of blood and tears, and the enormous sacrifices made by the Allies in the Dutch liberation. During the ceremony, the Union Jack proudly draped over the grave and it was unveiled under supervision of a Dutch military guard of honour, a member of Dutch parliament, and the Dutch military commander in the region. My great grandmother and great aunt also attended the emotional ceremony as honoured guests.

Years passed and in early 1980, a new housing subdivision was proposed in the St. Elizabeth polder where Herbert crashed and died. In an effort to again honour Herbert the villagers proposed that the street and square be named in his memory, forever immortalizing his sacrifice. The town council agreed and a street and square, surrounded by thirty houses was designed and named **Austinplein**. Although his tragic death happened many years before, the people of Dirksland and Herkingen did not forget the sacrifices that were made to liberate them from the German occupation. Again they invited members of my family to Herkingen for the *June 1981 Austinplein Naming Ceremony*, and both my great aunt and great uncle attended as special guests. Local officials, military officials, a military band, and the British wing commander also attended in his honour.



It has now been nearly 68 years since Herbert's death and in the past eight months my family and I have learned more about what happened to him than in all the years prior. We have also found new friends in both Dennis Notenboom and the descendents of the other members that served with Herbert in the LK802 crew. This April, Dennis and the Dirksland WWII memorial organization, have invited all the families to Goeree-Overflakkee, to attend a special three-day ceremony in commemoration of the entire crew. My family and I eagerly accepted this invitation - and altogether there will be fourteen Austin's from England and Canada attending the ceremony. Many of the descendents of the other crew members will also be attending and it is an exciting prospect to meet them. There is no doubt in my mind that this event will not only bring my family closer together, and finally heal the wounds of Herbert's death, but also create a lasting bond with our Dutch friends and the families of his brothers in arms.

I can only imagine the suffering my great grandmother and other family members went through following Herbert's death. Over the years I myself became resentful of his loss because I knew of the hardships and fractures it caused my family in the ensuing years. Then one day I read a transcript from the Dutch vicar who presided over the memorial grave unveiling and it provided me with a renewed perspective. Addressing my great grandmother the vicar stated, *"It was not the intention of God to destroy your family and lose yourself in sadness, but that He wanted to insert this grave and this sacrifice too in the building of His kingdom, in which He wants to insert you too in glory like the charity forgiving God."*

This powerful statement has resonated strongly in my heart ever since, and made it clear that sometimes things don't turn out the way we expect but everything happens for a reason. I am truly proud of my great grandfather Herbert, and know his sacrifice supported the greater good, and meant freedom and life for others.

