

A Sailors lot is not always a happy one.

Having retired from the MCA, I am now living in Dorfmarm in Lower Saxony where my wife is working as a Psychologist with the British Army. The town is in the Lüneburg Heath area where Monty took the surrender of Northern German forces.

The countryside is beautiful and is frequented by many during the summer holidays. Wild boar and deer are plentiful and thrive on the vast NATO training areas.

There are plenty of pretty villages to visit however there are ghosts of the past. During WWII there were plenty of POW camps and in nearby Bad Fallingbommel the camp for displaced POWs (Russians etc) did not close until 1958.

The other day I was driving to Honer Garrison which is situated in Bergen Belsen. On the road from Soltau is Becklingen War Cemetery. The grave stones are facing the point on Lüneburg Heath where the surrender was taken on the 4th May 1945.

Apart from the graves of pilots and aircrew, most of the young men lost their lives in the closing stages of the war. I was surprised to find the graves of sailors most of whom died in the last few weeks of the war. What were they doing in Germany so close to the point of surrender?



The grave of Commander B. G. Scurfield DSO, OBE, AM, RN stood out and a small card left by pupils of Charterhouse School revealed all. Cdr Scurfield was taken prisoner after being rescued in 1941. He had charged his ship, HMS Bedouin at the Italian fleet in June 1942 and his ship was lost during the battle.

Nearby there is a cluster on Merchant Navy graves. Chief Engineers, Chief Officers, Radio Officers, Stewards, Firemen/Trimmers and other ratings. These all appeared to have died either on the same day or around the time of Cdr Scurfield.

Unlike the young men of the Army and RAF, they were older men with a number in their late 40s. The names of their ships are fascinating as were the titles of the ratings with many trades not heard of today.

The small laminated card placed on the grave revealed a sad and shocking story.



Commander Scurfield had been moved from Italian POW camps to Germany and joined the other sailors imprisoned in the nearby camp. After spending so much of the war in captivity, imagine their relief when the camp was liberated by the Guards Division. Soon they were marched out of the camp towards the friendly British lines. Many if not all of the Merchant Navy prisoners would have been off pay from the moment they lost their ships and would be desperate to see their relatives after so much time in captivity.

As the column marched towards the British forces, there must have been much confusion in the area. Belsen camp was being liberated and my late father recalled how the Germans were fleeing in every direction for fear of capture by the Russians.

In the midst of all this, the RAF mistakenly thought the column heading towards the British lines was German forces. The date on the headstones of the accompanying Guards and the column of POW tells how devastating the strafing was.

The date was the 11th April, just 23 days before the surrender.

So close to freedom.

David Lee

