

## **Excerpt from memoirs of Flight Lieutenant Alex (Tommy) Thomson,**

Royal Canadian Air Force

Flying with 129 (Mysore) Squadron, RAF

Aircraft type: P-51 Mustang III - fuselage number "DV-X"

"My first show on our second go-around escorting bombers was on 27 September [1944] which resulted in my quite unplanned second landing on the Continent. Our flight was nursemaiding a Halifax with one engine out, returning from the Rheine, not far beyond the Dutch-German border. When we were far enough West that there was little danger of Jerry fighters we wagged wings and headed more to the southwest, since we were based in Kent [Brenzett] and the Halifax in Yorkshire.

We had been flying above 10/10 cloud so we went down to see if we had reached the coast. Finding we were still over land and the cloud base was 3000 [feet], we dropped to deck level so as not to be silhouetted as an east target from possible ground fire. At this point, I had lost contact with the rest of the flight, thereby reducing the likelihood of rejoining them, a matter of minor concern.

Ahead, I could see water, which I thought might be the Scheldt. Barrelling downstream at 300 mph [miles per hour] and 50 [feet], I was bracketed by a burst of light flak. Moments later, white smoke was pouring from the exhausts and the needle of the engine temperature gauge was rising rapidly. I immediately went into a climbing turn towards the south bank, easing back the throttle since the engine was running increasingly rough. By the time I was at the shoreline, I was barely at 1000 [feet] and, as they say in the business circles, I had an executive decision to make: should I bail out or do a wheels up landing on the narrow strip of beach between the water's edge and a 30 [foot] embankment running parallel. With the throttle fully back by then, I was beginning to lose altitude and would lose more before I could jump – besides I was plain scared to do so. Circumstances having decided the issue, I adjourned the meeting and concentrated on landing. Happily, it went very smoothly into 2 [feet] of glorious mud (apologies to Flanders and "Swan's Ode to the Hippopotamus").

Once on the ground, the euphorious feeling of relief was quickly replaced by one of intense loneliness. So I promptly popped the two Benzedrine tablets from my escape kit in my Mae West. This in addition to the adrenaline and other hormones cascading through my body may explain my less than cool, calm and collected behaviour in the next few minutes.

I could see two men coming towards me and dismissed the thought they may be storm troopers since they were not goosestepping, which would have been a trifle hard to do in 2 [feet] of mud, to say the least. To my relief, they proved to be local farmers and the strange weapons that I had spotted in the distance, close up, turned out to be mere shepherd's crooks and not secret weapons designed to shoot around corners.

They were chattering away in what I assumed to be Dutch or Flemish, so I thought I would try out my German, having taken a course at university. This proved to be an embarrassing mistake. Wishing to know where the Germans were, I started out "wo ist die" and then got stuck on "Deutsche." In my twisted mind, I dismissed that to mean "Dutch." This left me reduced to repeating "wo ist" and then throwing a Nazi salute simultaneously putting the index finger of my other hand under my nose [like Hitler's moustache]. I was totally humiliated when they responded in unison: "Die Deutsche!" but equally relieved when they pointed across the river and said "Dar." This sobering experience decided me to find another means of communication. French became our lingua franca, in which they were fairly proficient.

As we slogged along towards a farm house they said was behind the embankment, a bizarre figure came down from the crest of the embankment towards us. He was wearing a high crowned cap, a khaki trench coat, navy blue trousers and what I assumed to be jack boots. My by now lifetime buddies pronounced him: "Nicht gut." He stopped his descent when he saw me fumbling with my holster for a quick draw,

just like in the Westerns [cowboy films]. Incidentally, I was packing an austerity 32 calibre Enfield revolver with a tacky plastic butt. As a kid, I had more authentic looking cap [toy] pistols. I had never fired it and as often as not didn't bother carrying it.

Anyway, back to the impending Shoot Out At the OK Embankment.

Confronted by my 5 [foot] 8 [inch] impersonation of Gary Cooper, he called out "I'm Dutch naval officer. Really, I am." My buddies kept their lethal weapons at the ready and I remained resolutely on guard, but the feeling was growing that the situation was beginning to take on Gilbert and Sullivan overtones.

Happily at this point a 6 [foot] 4 [inches] Royal Engineers major, puffing on a Sherlock Holmes pipe, entered centre stage at the crest of the dike. He confirmed that the suspicious character was indeed a Dutch naval officer wearing a borrowed army trench coat. At this juncture, I realized his SS jackboots were merely half-Wellingtons, so popular with naval types, though why they did not wear half-Nelsons I never understood. They set off to do their thing which was to select embarkation sites for troops to go across to flush Jerry out of Flushing or some place; they were not specific. My buddies and I went on to a farm house to await their return when they would give me a lift to Brussels.

In an absolutely spotless kitchen, except for the mud I tracked in, an ample motherly lady served me ersatz coffee from a gleaming tiled stove. I can't say it tasted very good but the farmer and his wife were so hospitable that it put a nice cap on what had been a somewhat hectic experience. Also, my hormonal-benzedrine cocktail had worn off and I was about as normal as I ever got.

Climbing onto the flat bed of a small lorry, carrying helmet and parachute, we left beautiful, below-sea-level Hulst, for that was the name of the hamlet, and were off to Brussels. The major's driver rode in the back with me; the major was at the wheel with his Dutch partner at his side. They dropped me off at TAC HQ (Tactical Airforce) housed in the Residence Palace Hotel on Rue de la Loi near the royal palace, quite a spiffy neighbourhood, making me aware of my scruffy, mud splattered battle dress. Before entering I shook off as much mud as I could and decided to remove the second ribbon pinned to my epaulets (I had recently been time-promoted to the lofty rank of flight lieutenant and was still looking for someone handy with a needle).

Uneasy about entering the ornate lobby, I went looking for someone to whom I could report and arrange transportation back to England. Eventually I found a wing commander who took my name and noted I had crashlanded. He then issued me a pass to get in and out of the building and somewhat grudgingly gave me a room, saying it might take sometime to arrange transportation. Obviously I did not qualify for VIP treatment. Equally obviously he was not going to recommend me for a Mention in Dispatches for valiantly salvaging my helmet and parachute. To be fair, he said nothing about charging me for the aircraft I had left in the mud and assured me he would signal the squadron to say I was OK.

After cleaning up in the room I had been assigned, I borrowed a wedge cap from the very accommodating chap whose room I had in fact invaded and set off to liberate Brussels all over again. This laudable purpose, I felt, fully entitled me to expropriate the funds in my escape kit, containing French and Belgian francs. I thought it prudent not to try passing the Reichsmarks. Needless to say, I had a terrific time. Except for VE-Day, which was still dim in the future, I had never met so many happy people. I don't think any Belgian had stopped partying since the Allied forces had arrived. I was repeatedly accosted on the street with invitations for dinner. The fact I spoke French was greeted with delight."