

An interview with Bill Lucas – local war hero and Olympic athlete

Can you tell us something about your family background?

I was born on 16 January 1917 in Upper Tooting, London SW17 of poor stock. My father was a bricklayer but later worked on the improvements to the Houses of Parliament and became the Clerk of Works. I had no brothers or sisters.

Do you know anything about your grandparents?

My father was a countryman who came from a place near Guildford and his antecedents were also farmworkers. I never knew my grandmother on my mother's side, she died a long time before I was born, but my grandfather was a postman in London when they were making 12 deliveries a day; he got a special award from the Queen for his services. He was born within the sound of Bow Bells and so was a true Cockney.

How about your current family?

I have been with my wife, Sheena, for around 35 years. I have two daughters; one lives in this country and the other lives in Crete but she comes over a couple of times a year.

Sheena and I came to the village in 1979 and she has been a Parish Councillor for many years.

Where did you go to school?

I went to a good primary school, it was called Hillbrook Road, a mile away from home, and I walked back for lunch every day - nobody seems to do that these days. I moved onto grammar school, The Bec, also in Upper Tooting, which was also a good standard - not a public school but a bit better than the others in the area. There, I did quite well and qualified to go to Christ's Hospital but my parents were poor and could not afford the cost involved in going there. (In those days you had to pay for clothing and that sort of thing.) That was during the period 1928 to 1932.

How were you employed before the War?

At the age of 15, I left school and went for a job in the City of London. I got into a trading company and was packing parcels for two weeks. I quickly got fed up with that but was told that if I stayed I would become a buyer – being a buyer was the plum job to have at that time. I left there and went to a publishing company down in Kingswood; I was there for about 12 months and did quite well, not doing anything very important other than clerical work. My mother in the meantime had got me an interview with an insurance company, the London and Lancashire. She said that it would give me a good pension. I never regretted the move as I had a very good job being out and about assessing properties and determining rates to be charged for fire and so on. The company was based in the



City of London - 155 Leadenhall Street; it was on the corner and had a very nice clock tower but is not there now.

How did you sign up for the RAF?

I was a bit lucky because I lived in Sanderstead in Surrey and was called up in 1939 to go to a school where a doctor was carrying out medicals to check if I had flat feet and so on and he asked what service I would like to join. I said that my father had been in the army, a sergeant in the Northamptonshire Regiment, and he got himself a Military Medal by saving his Commanding Officer, which was considered not the right thing to do. I said that I didn't like water and didn't want to go in the Navy so that left the RAF. He asked what I wanted to do in the RAF. I said: "well there is only one thing to do in the RAF and that is fly". So he checked me over and said that I would never fly because I had an enlarged heart and an uneven heartbeat. I explained to him that that was because I was a reasonably good athlete heading for the Olympics in Helsinki in 1940. I convinced him that hearts did enlarge when you were a distance runner but the uneven heartbeat I couldn't account for. "Oh well", he said, "you sound very enthusiastic so I will push you forward". Eventually, I got called up to Uxbridge where I took flying medicals and they got me running up and down stairs in order to get the heartbeat going a bit faster so eventually I got into the RAF.

What training did you do?

For the first three months I went to help guard a newly built airfield in Wiltshire, RAF Wroughton, and we spent our days assembling a Lewis gun, taking it apart and putting it back together again. Then came the call up to start formal RAF training, which constituted an initial period of around six months of basic ground training in the Torquay area. I was then transferred to an elementary flying school at RAF Burnaston. There, we flew single engine aircraft, a Miles Magister in my case, and, if you didn't go solo in 8 hours, you were relegated to a lesser role - I think I got in by about two minutes. We then moved onto a more advanced flying course in another Miles aircraft, a Miles Master. This was another single engine aircraft; it was quite fast and I learned that I was to become a fighter pilot.

At the end of the course, I was sent home on leave, called back and posted to RAF Lossiemouth in Scotland where, upon arrival, I found that the whole of my course of 30 were there. We had then won the Battle of Britain and were holding Germany at bay and, therefore, there was no need for extra fighter pilots. Instead, we were to fly Vickers Wellington Mk 1C bombers so we went on another course, this time to learn how to fly heavy aircraft and undertake bombing runs and things like that. Overall, we were at RAF Lossiemouth for a period of four to five months.

Tell us about your first tour

I was then a qualified pilot and had the rank of sergeant and eventually, in August 1941, found myself with 9 Squadron at RAF Honington in Suffolk, which was carrying out bombing raids over Germany. I went with a qualified pilot for the first three missions and then had a crew of my own which I stayed with for 14 trips. I was asked one day if I would like to take over one of the first four engine aircraft, a Short Brothers Stirling, which was considered to be somewhat of an honour. There wasn't much option, so I said OK and went on another conversion course from Wellingtons to Stirlings. I transferred to 15 Squadron at RAF Wyton in Cambridgeshire and flew another 26 missions

up to the middle of 1942. They were relatively straightforward bombing raids and the one that sticks most in my mind was 30 May 1942 when the first thousand bomber raid went to Cologne; I flew a Stirling on that trip and came back with a picture of what I thought my bombs had done.

What was your life like on tour?

If you don't feel nervous going on a bombing raid then you are not natural but if you are too nervous you are not doing a good job. The missions were mainly dependant on the weather and I suppose you had one about every three or four days. In the meantime, you did flying tests and attended courses on operating procedures, etc. It was quite intense but there was a lot of spare time and we drank a lot. I had a crew then of seven – we all enjoyed each other's company. When I moved from



flying Wellingtons, the original crew still had a number of trips to do; I learned some time later that they had been lost on their first time out with a new captain. I fully believed that they were all dead but only two or three years ago my picture appeared in the Sunday Telegraph with the crew and a young lad rang me up and said that he thought one of the crew in the picture was his grandfather - it was Jack Taylor, my engineer. (I am on the left and Jack is

second from the right on the back row.) He said that he had been withdrawn on the morning of the flight and was probably just as convinced that I had not survived as I had believed he was dead. He too received the Distinguished Flying Cross and lived until 1996. It transpired that we had lived quite close to each other all the time: he lived in Purley when I lived there, he moved down here to Horsham when I came to Cowfold (in 1979) and his parents lived in Shipley, just down the road.

What did you do after your first tour?

When you complete a tour you then stand down for a couple of weeks and I was then posted back to Scotland to train others at 19 Operational Training Unit (OTU), RAF Kinloss, for a period of something like two years. I had gone up from Sergeant to Flight Sergeant; I was commissioned and by the time I got to Scotland I was a Flight Lieutenant.

What was your involvement with the Pathfinder Force?

Whilst I was at RAF Kinloss I met up with a man who became very prominent, a Wing Commander called Hamish Mahaddie. He had been tasked with finding crews for the newly-formed Pathfinder Force by Bomber Command. Whether he remembered me or not I don't know but the next thing I know is that, in October 1944, I was transferred to 162 Squadron at Bourn in Cambridgeshire. Here, I joined the Pathfinder Force (which was responsible for identifying and marking targets with flares) and flew Mosquitos. It was considered to be a little bit of a step-up on other bombing squadrons.

I survived the rest of the war, totalling 81 trips in all. (Hamish Mahaddie did 125!) I was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and was also Mentioned in Despatches.

Tell us about your athletics career

I had been in athletics before I joined the RAF and was running up to County standard. I started at school; you were Shanghai'ed into various events and, if you didn't qualify, they put you in for the mile. Well, actually, that was the best thing they could have done because I became fairly proficient. The London & Lancashire were very strong in all sorts of sports; they had three companies all together and they were very ambitious. One day, someone came round and said that I looked a tall skinny type - I was about 10st 10lbs - and asked if I had done any running. I said that I had whilst at school. I got dragged off to do a bit of training and it went well. I soon became the outstanding athlete at London & Lancashire. I was hopeful that I would be selected for the Helsinki Olympics in 1940 but Mr Hitler decided otherwise and instead of running against his lot I bombed them instead.

I missed out not only on Helsinki but the scheduled games in London in 1944 as well. With a bit of effort, I just got in into the 1948 London Olympics in the 5000 metres but didn't run very well and was beaten in the heats by a man called Emil Zatopek, a well known Czechoslovakian athlete who got a number of gold medals: one in 1948 and three in 1952.

Which athletics club did you belong to?

I belonged to the biggest athletics club in the country before the war - Belgrave Harriers, which was based in Wimbledon. I still am a member and have been since 1935; I am the oldest by age and the oldest by service and have been their President twice. I went on running for a long time after the 1948 Olympics, winning a few championships and was pretty well known. When I stopped running competitively, I did administrative jobs for Belgrave Harriers. I became the chief manager for their winter fixtures and that went on for a long long time. We won many cross country events and were a very prominent club. I was also involved in the management committees for Surrey, Southern Counties Cross Country, Southern Counties Track and the insurance world as well. I became President of all of those organisations and Chairman for some of them. I was also dragged in to do announcing at White City events and that went well as I think that I have the right sort of voice for it. When activities transferred to Crystal Palace, I still continued team managing and for a long time I controlled the whole of the ground area.

Where did you work after the War?

I went back to the London and Lancashire insurance company for a comparatively short time and then moved into the broking world. I had two shortish periods with a couple of firms and then moved in 1960 to the company that I was with for another 22 years until I retired in 1982 at the age of 65. I took up golf and played for another 22 years. I was a member of the Mannings Heath club and did well enough to be picked for most of their veteran teams. That went on until I was aged 87.

Do you have other interests?

I read the Daily Telegraph and other material. I have a computer which I play with. I belong to a stack of organisations. I am president of the Royal Air Force Association branch at Haywards Heath. I am a prominent member of the Aircrew Association which meets at Burgess Hill. I still keep my contact with Belgrave Harriers. I am the oldest member in the Horsham branch of the PROBUS Group, which has 55 members and is very active, arranging outings, visiting garden centres, etc.

I am also heavily involved with Sussex Bomber Command Veterans, a group of high ranking former flying crew members who are raising funds for the maintenance of the Bomber Command Memorial recently erected in Green Park, London. We take part in signings of pictures of WW2 bombers and other memorabilia at a variety of venues in the South East and this has proved to be very popular and lucrative.

What lessons has life taught you?

The most valuable lesson that life has taught me is to toe the line, I suppose; I learned that in the services, of course - you didn't dare do anything else. Whatever I get involved in, I seem to rise to the top, probably because I think about it and, perhaps, am better organised than most other people.

Who would you most have liked to meet?

I ran against the man who would have been my hero and that was Emil Zatopek.

Is there anything else you would like to do?

I want to live to be 100. If I live to be 100 and I am as good as I am now at 98, then the next ambition, of course, is to be 114. This is the top age at the moment but by the time I reach 114 somebody will probably have gone to 120!

What would you like your epitaph to be?

'He served his country well.'