As is well-documented, few combatants ever spoke afterwards of their wartime experiences, and then often in quite modest terms. My first sense of military conflict was when, in the midst of the Suez crisis, our mother took out Dad’s RAF uniform, and announced that “he might have to go back to war”. But, by that time, I was much engaged in the exploits of Biggles, and my fantasies almost invariably centred around Spitfires and Hurricanes, and not the ponderous Halifax bombers of my father’s war. Surprisingly, though, I would regularly experience almost lifelike dreams of being the victim of a bombing conflagration. It wasn’t until the 1960’s, and at university, and during the Vietnam and Cambodian conflicts, that I gave more than one second’s thought to Dad’s lived experiences between 1943 and 1944, and the completion of his 31 trip “tour” on D-Day. The moral complexities and ambiguities were uppermost in discussions then, but I did, and still do, hang on to the notion of a just war.

Our lives largely diverged thereafter, but on the 50th anniversary of the Second Front, our families resolved to see on the ground what Dad had only witnessed from the air. Armed only with his logbook, we stepped into the tractor store/chicken coup that had once been the gun casements of Mt Fleury, overlooking Gold Beach, and then on to St Lo, where he and the crew had returned for a second flight that day. It was an emotional undertaking, as expected, not least in discovering the wall plaque as tribute to the brave imprisoned resistance fighters who died that day as a result of collateral damage, which Dad had clearly remembered as a consequence of deliberately avoiding the destruction of its Church. From that point on, and perhaps in recognition that he was no longer a young man, we “rediscovered” Peenamunde, and then the later rocket sites that he had visited many years earlier. By now, we knew a great deal more of Dad’s War, but the ladies in the party were singularly unimpressed; why after all, were his exploits in the RAF more deserving
of celebration than Mum’s in the Land Army, or our mother-in-law’s WRAF days as a photographic developer?  Dad appeared-unusually- to have no answer to that, and in more recent times, was lucky enough through a number of veterans’ schemes to to have the chance to return to Berlin, and some of the PoW camps he might well have spent his days acquainted with, were he not “the cat with 9 lives.”  On a separate visit to the Great Synagogue in Berlin, with its stunning gold dome, my wife and I noticed the pictures of its virtual destruction on a November night in 1943 with some trepidation.  And yes, days later he checked his logbook, and you know the rest.  The fact that he has acquired a Jewish granddaughter-in-law is yet another happier twist in the tragedy that is war.  On helping sort his memorabilia recently we discovered that the crew’s navigator -Dick Rath - was a second-generation German, Jewish too it is believed.

For the past ten years, Dad has not ducked a single opportunity to reconnect with his fighting past.  So, the son of a coalminer and a maid has met the Princess Royal, been a guest of honour with the Red Arrows, as with 10 Squadron, has flown an aerodrome lap in a Jaguar, and gloriously returned to land at Melbourne in a light aircraft.  It is almost his 95th birthday, and recently he managed another visit much closer to home, for the Remembrance Service at his former aerodrome.  There he was reacquainted with Harold Dummer, whose brother literally stepped into Dads crew’s shoes as they completed their tour.  Less than two weeks later, he lost his life in the same plane that had been so faithful to them.  Also we met for the first time the daughter of Fl.Lt “Homer”  Lawson, whose log book appears on this site.  We were amazed to discover that they flew the same sorties on “D” Day, (he in VA “J,” dad in VA “G”) and their logs indicate that they took off in the evening at exactly the same time, suggesting they were near-neighbours whilst taxiing!

Dad’s last journey will take him into sheltered accommodation. Since turning over his car a year or so ago he has lost much of his mobility.  As he was being flown to Sheffield General in the air ambulance, he was moved to criticise the general state of the vehicle, stating that he could not have got away with it in his war!

On researching his war recently, I discovered that his Halifax HR698, on their first flight, had lost its undercarriage on taking off.  (There is no record of this in his log).  On being quizzed about this he said that “it was only a bump” and that they simply stepped into another plane and took off twenty minutes later.

But his proudest moment recently was the award of the Legion d’Honneur from the French consul for his bravery on D-Day; as he says, on behalf of all his ex-comrades in 10 Squadron.

And, as he delights in pointing out, he must now be amongst the very oldest survivors of Dad’s War.

Jim Beard - As written in 2016
French medal
honour for war veteran Kenneth

A 93-year-old Worksop RAF veteran has been awarded the prestigious Légion d'honneur from the French President.

Kenneth Beard, who is now a Knight of the French Ordre national de la Légion d'honneur, was awarded the accolade due to his role in liberating France from German occupation in the Second World War.

MP for Retford John Mann visited the veteran, of Farndale, to congratulate him on his award on Friday, October 30.

He said: "Ken fought during the Second World War to liberate France and selflessly put his life on the line in order to free a nation under occupation. But he also fought to protect and defend our freedoms at home in Britain. Those awarded this medal are incredibly brave and thoroughly deserve our respect."

"We are all incredibly proud of Ken and indeed all those veterans who have fought for their country, past and present."

Ken is the second veteran in Worksop to make the Légion after 91-year-old Robert Parnell also received the accolade at the beginning of October for risking his life in the D-Day landings back in 1944.

Ken, who served in the RAF, said: "I am very proud to win the award. Being in the RAF was obviously a very dangerous occupation but it is something that still fascinates me to this day."

"I don't fly anymore but I have friends that take me up in the aircraft and I have also lectured on flying at different airfields."

An event is being organised at Retford Town Hall on November 20 by the Royal British Legion and the French Embassy, where Retford veteran Geoff Lister will join Ken in being officially presented with their medals by the French Consul.

Turn to pages six and seven for our full round-up of Remembrance Sunday pictures.
Heroes honoured by France

Three war heroes were officially presented with Legion d’honneur medals on behalf of the French President last week.

Veterans 93-year-old Ken Beard and 91-year-old Alan Harvey, from Worksop, and Geoff Lister, 89, from Retford, were presented with the medals by French Consul Jean Claude La Fontaine at Retford Town Hall.

The ceremony, which was jointly organised by the Royal British Legion and MP for Basestowe John Mann, took place on Friday, November 30.

Mr Mann said: “These three men fought during the Second World War to liberate France and selflessly put their lives on the line in order to free a nation under occupation, but also fought to protect and defend our freedoms at home in Britain.

“Those awarded this medal are incredibly brave and thoroughly deserve our respect and I am delighted that Ken, Geoff and Alan have been awarded the Legion d’honneur from the French President.

“We are all incredibly proud of them and indeed all those veterans who have fought for their country, past and present”. Ken Beard told the Guardian: “I am very proud to be a knight of the Legion d’honneur.

“Being in the RAF was obviously a very dangerous occupation but it is something that still fascinates me to this day.”

A one minute silence was held before the ceremony as a mark of respect to remember the victims of the Paris attacks earlier this month.

Watch a video of the presentation on our website at worksguardian.co.uk