

A Conversation with John Phillips

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One sunny day in August 2010 I had the pleasure of a conversation, for over an hour, with John Phillips in Norwich Castle. I have known him for nearly as long as I have known my wife Bridgid, since 1959. But I had no previous inkling until that lunchtime meeting of the facts that he related to me then, in response to my rather persistent questioning.

I already knew that he had made his career as a priest in the Church of England, with training at Ridley Hall in Cambridge. John then held appointments in Derbyshire, Colombo (Mission to Seamen for three years), Vienna (ministering for six years to the English speaking community there and in the Czech Republic and Hungary), and East Anglia. Before that, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, he was a solicitor, in training, and then practise in Guildford, where he met Maria.

But I had no previous knowledge of the fact that John, who was born in 1923, had spent time as an airman in the Royal Air Force during the Second World War.

John told me that he had wanted to be a pilot, but this ambition was eventually closed to him because of slightly defective colour vision in one eye. So instead he trained to be a bomb aimer. This duty did have one particular advantage. The bomb aimer sat, or squatted, right in the very nose of the aeroplane, at the front and on the floor. This meant that if he had to get out of the aeroplane quickly, because it had received flak or cannon damage, the bomb aimer had only to open a trap-door underneath him and drop out. Some of the other crew would have had to struggle along the inside of a bucking and disabled aeroplane to find an exit door.

It was the case, unfortunately, that on one bombing raid over Germany, John's plane was hit by anti-aircraft fire or flak. His pilot managed to struggle half-way back with this disabled aircraft, but eventually had to give the order to bail out over occupied Holland. John told me that he recalled wishing "how much nicer" it would have been if they could have continued their flying journey to England.

But John bailed out as ordered, and he told me what a relief it was when he felt the very sharp tug as his parachute opened. He landed unhurt, and he was taken in by a friendly Dutch couple, into their house for the night. But the next morning there was a heavy knock on the door, and John was taken off by the Germans as a prisoner-of-war.

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Eventually he was installed in a prison camp in the forests of eastern Germany or Poland, perhaps Stalag Luft III, where he was incarcerated for two years, in the company of many other British and allied soldiers and airmen.

Escape plans were often mooted, and some of these are public knowledge now, associated with the digging of clandestine tunnels and the dispersal of soil in exercise yards. Actual escape would have been hazardous, because it would have been very hard to travel undetected westwards for hundreds of miles through hostile territory in cold weather. And recaptured escapees were often shot by the Germans.

John told me that he did not get the opportunity to escape because “my number never came up”. I think that, although it may have been frustrating for him, it might have been just as well that he never broke out.

Eventually, as the end of the War came, the prison guards “just melted away and we were able to walk out”.

I found this to be a very moving and compelling story, quietly told in response to questions, and unsuspected by me beforehand.