

# Major F D Howarth RA 1918 – 2009

## A Tale of History in the Making

Frank Howarth, my father, was serving officer in the Royal Artillery in WWII. He volunteered immediately following his marriage to Edith, my mother, on the day war was declared. Frank had an uneventful war, manning coastal artillery batteries on the South Coast, that is until mid April 1945.

His recent qualification as a solicitor hardly met Artillery needs that was until it seemed likely that Britain, on the expected surrender of Germany, would need to establish some sort of administrative and civil control of Germany and its cities. So, with a couple of days' notice Dad, aged 27, found himself in an army jeep with an ex metropolitan Detective Inspector and a driver making their way through Belgium and the low countries en route to somewhere in Germany. But they hadn't told him where. My story is gleaned from thirteen letters Dad wrote to Mum between 30 April and 26 May 1945.



May 4 found them in a convoy in Holland close to the German border. He tells of towns and villages razed and of deprivations and poverty with much looting by retreating German troops. And also, of a dull acceptance of the British presence in contrast to the welcome they received in Southern Holland. By now he knew he was going to Flensburg a Baltic port in North West Germany, home to the Germany Navy's Dartmouth equivalent. A city that was to play a major role in the surrender of the Axis. But no one knew that yet. Neither did my Mother – he couldn't write that in his letter of course. His job was to establish military government in the area prior to an occupying government being set up. He says in his letter that if there is anyone to arrest, the policemen will do that, and I shall try them. It turned out to be much more.

On May 5 The news that Germany had capitulated in Holland, Denmark and NW Germany was greeted with joy. He writes "Our mess was besieged, and an old Dutchman cottoned on to me and cried with joy. I felt like crying with him"

May 8 He writes "Well sweetheart victory has come at last thank God for that". But they couldn't hear Winston Churchill's or the King's speech because there was no electricity. They lived in commandeered houses throwing out the occupants and travelled by day through the retreating German army. While they were on the road they had hundreds of German soldiers surrendering to them. But there were only three of them, so they directed them to POW cages of which there were many.

Arriving in Flensburg alone with no escort, they commandeered the best hotel, and now I'm recounting the tale my Father told me personally. They barricaded themselves, all three, in one bedroom, pushed the wardrobe against the door and slept with their revolvers under their pillows. To their surprise the next morning there was knock at the door and a very English voice asked to come in. Who the dickins are you? Edward Ward BBC was the reply. Father said you could have knocked him down with a feather duster. They thought they were the only British within 100 miles. Edward Ward, one of the BBC's best war reporters, later to become 7<sup>th</sup> Viscount Bangor, had been captured by Rommel in 1941 and spent most of the war in a POW camp. He had just been freed by the American and sensing something big was to happen had made his way to Flensburg.

The something big was that the German High Command had retreated to the Naval Academy in Flensburg. Grand Admiral Doenitz was appointed Fuhrer and was holed up with the rest of the high command. Father didn't know this at the time and was expecting the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army to arrive at any time. But they didn't. So, for three days he, together with Bert, the Met police officer set about establishing military rule. They took over the Town Hall, arrested the chief of police and mayor to gain their cooperation, appointed five interpreters and set about their tasks. The navy arrived but were no help. They were there solely to prevent the Russians taking control of the port. But Father tells of one very disturbing event,

He had to try a German Major on a charge of raping his maid. He was found guilty and sentence to be hanged. But he said to Father words along these lines: "I cannot hang for this. It is my privilege as a gentleman to use my maid as I wish. Surely you as gentleman too understand this." Father had to witness his execution.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Army arrived and with Fathers possible presence, as a legal representative, arrested Doenitz and the high command. He doesn't write specifically to say that he was present when this happened (censorship?) however his letters report he met these people and in his letter of 24 May he says "Well things continue to be pretty busy here and you will have read of the arrest of Doenitz, Speer etc. It makes me laugh the way the Staff Control Commission and SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force) boys step in when all the dirty work has been done for them by a handful of Majors, Captains, Subalterns and Privates. Never mind I suppose it's the way of the world."

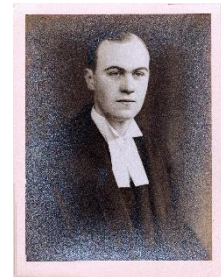
On You Tube there is a propaganda a clip of a Pathe News item showing the German high command, in their leather coats, being walked out of the Naval academy by British Tommies with their hands up. He writes on 26 May – his last letter: "You will no doubt have read of the arrest of the 'Flensburg' Reich Government. I read it this morning in the Daily Express and believe me sweetheart I have never read such bunkum in all my life. The facts as depicted to the British Public are entirely untrue. The whole crowd of these Reich government men have been working under British instructions since the day this town was occupied. I can say that if that is the press recording of facts I never want to read a newspaper again" He says in his earlier letter of 20 May that if the true facts were published there would be riot in the House of Commons.

At one stage he was in charge of over 3500 foreign workers in camps and responsible for prisons, law courts, the post office and some of the police, all at the tender age of 27. He is

impressed by the physical appearance of the German youth and the efficiency of the workforce. He found the German Army Officers arrogant; the Gestapo sly and sneaky; the SS thugs. At his disposal he had a 28hp Mercedes drop head coupe as had Bert the policeman. But he says they never had time to use them.



Three months later he came home to a loving wife, a daughter of 2 years and a son, me, aged 5 and no car. He went back to work as a newly qualified, very junior solicitor in his hometown of Barnsley and hardly ever spoke of his experiences.



In 2015 The BBC Drama Department broadcast an afternoon play **'Fankie goes to Flensburg'**  
It is based on my Father's letters and was written by my sister **Jennifer Howarth**

Clive Howarth 5 May 2020