

# Commemoration service May 4<sup>th</sup> 2022



## *Speech by Peter Powers, son of Airgunner Ron Powers*

DRONTEN 2022

After two years missed because of the pandemic it is wonderful to be here, almost a miracle! All the more so because Airgunner Ron, my dad, is another couple of years older. We celebrated with him on Sunday 1st May his 97th birthday.

It is a privilege to have a few minutes to share a couple of thoughts with you all as we mark the Commemorations in Dronten in 2022. The last couple of years have been especially difficult. Many people have been seriously ill. Many people have lost loved ones. In some ways our lives will never be the same.

That sense of 'life never being the same' is at the heart of my thoughts today. For those who pass through times of conflict life will never be the same again. We know that because of the two world wars of the 20th century and from the memories of those who lived through them. Yet again we face conflict in Europe and our thoughts today also have to be with the people of Ukraine and those other countries nearby that are helping refugees the most and who, themselves, may live in fear that the conflict will escalate.

'Life never being the same' is also the experience of those who have been part of the links Dronten has with the Airgunners. Ron is proud to be here this year, representing those who served during WWII who cannot be with us. We will remember them. I wanted to take you on a little journey with my dad. A journey that in some small way represents the journeys of so many Airgunners that you will have known and come to love over the years.

Photo 1 (Ron in training):



This photo is of my dad aged 16. It was taken in 1941 at the beginning of his journey to becoming an Airgunner. Life would never be the same again for him, as for the thousands affected by the war. We cannot say he has not changed a bit, because he has. All of us are changed by the experiences of life, especially if we are touched by conflict or other traumas. Like so many images of that time, I see a young man keen to embrace life, keen to serve his country, keen to save the world!

Photo 2 (Ron's Sunderland):



This is the aircraft that Ron spent much of his war flying in. A Short Sunderland Mark Five. These aircraft flew for 15 hours and sometimes more, over the sea protecting convoys and seeking out and destroying Nazi U-Boats. Ron would have been sitting in the front or rear turrets. This very aircraft still exists in the museum at RAF Hendon. We took dad to visit it a few years ago. These aeroplanes were not often shot down, as were so many in bomber command. But they did often simply disappear, lost forever in the violent seas of the North Atlantic. I remember dad telling me that some of the bomber boys felt they were division one airgunners compared to others, like my dad, who served in other parts of the RAF. It became a bit of a joke with wonderful gentlemen like Tom and Bill in the visits to Dronten. It was, of course, the luck of the draw. You went where you were sent and all served and did their duty. For them all, life would never be the same again.

Photo 3: (Ron with his .303)



This photo is of Ron with a .303 machine gun. He had four of these in his turret. Some Airgunners would fire four or perhaps two of these in tandem in the turrets in which they sat for hour after hour making their part in the war. None of the crew members that Ron flew with are still alive. He kept in touch with some of them for many years after the conflict ended and I still write to the son of one of those daring airmen who piloted the aircraft.

Photo 4: (And so to Dronten)



This is Ron with the De Groots. Representative of the many, many, many hosts who have not only welcomed Airgunners and their families into their homes, but have made them a part of their family. Strangers that became friends. You will notice the drinks and food that symbolise the generosity of the hosts and the town of Dronten. They also led to the kind of parties into the wee small hours usually reserved for much younger people! Who would have thought that such deep friendships would grow from those early visits? Friendships that would last for more than forty years. A reminder that the encounter means so much for both guest and host. For Airgunner or their host families their lives would never be the same.

Photo 5: (The Dronten Memorial)



Set at the very heart of this wonderful town is the memorial. This photo of my mum and dad at the memorial was taken just a year or so before her death in 2012. The flower wreaths and propeller blades are a reminder of those who died during the war, both in the aircraft that flew overhead, the communities of the Netherlands and many other countries. Reminders of harrowing times, that transformed for so many into joyous times as new friendships were made and bloomed like the tulip fields of the Polder.

Photo 6: (Old and young together)



One of the most wonderful things about the Dronten visit is how the young people of the town have befriended all these old veterans coming to visit them. Initially in large numbers. Around 250 Airgunners arrived on coaches having travelled from different parts of Britain. This photo goes back into the 1990's. I love the way three old RAF Air Gunners are flanked by two young lads from Dronten. I remember on my first visit with my dad going to the school and seeing the children asking questions and showing my dad some of the bits of aircraft they had found in the fields around the town. A reminder that bringing young and old together to share stories brings immeasurable benefits to all ages.

Photo 7: (Farewell until next year)



My last image represents all those farewells over the years that have inevitably come at the end of the Air Gunners annual visit to Dronten. We have said farewell many times now and this year will almost certainly be the last farewell for the last Air Gunner. My thanks today to every household and every individual in Dronten that has made the link so strong and long lasting. On behalf of every Air Gunner and every family whose lives have been changed forever by your welcome, your hospitality and your kindness. Thank you.

**God bless the people of Dronten and God bless the Air Gunners!**