



# Remembering Eddie Wheeler

IF CATS have nine lives, Eddie Wheeler must have had a least 20. As a war hero, he survived being shot at by the Germans, having his parachute torn to shreds to save a doomed plane, and a crash landing in a potato field near Haverhill.

Eddie was born into a very poor family and had to leave school at 14. It was 1934 and jobs were very tight, but the local Labour Exchange offered him a clerical post in a company called Herbert & Sons in Smithfield. It was there that Eddie's six decades of association with our company began. He started as an office boy until his potential talents were spotted by Arthur Herbert who

**Eddie Wheeler, our former Personnel Director and Company Secretary, died at his home in Haverhill on Wednesday 7th October at the age of 88.**

**Here is an extract of an interview *Lion News* did with Eddie back in 2003. We reprint part of it in tribute to a war hero and an extraordinary man.**

told him: "I'm going to teach you to become a cost accountant." Eddie started at a very respectable 12/6 per week (62.5p). Eddie joined the RAF in 1939 as a trainee wireless operator with the promise of a two-year apprenticeship.

He skated through the aptitude test and passed his physical – all was going very smoothly. It was when he had to show his birth certificate that he got a big shock.

"My mother brought the certificate but it didn't say 'Edwin Wheeler', it bore the name of 'Edwin Scheidweiler.' I found out that my great grandfather was German and that was my real name. It had never been changed." Eddie's German roots came under some suspicion. As Eddie says: "Remember this was 1939, just a few months before war broke out against Hitler."

After checking his origins (his English roots go back to 1812) the RAF gave him the all clear and he was duly sent for drill training. After this he was sent on a wireless training course learning about radio and morse code; "I thoroughly enjoyed myself," recalls Eddie.

Eddie's good times came to a sudden stop in September 1939. War was declared and suddenly the RAF needed air crew. "I didn't want to fly, I hadn't joined up to fly", says Eddie. But there was no choice: "I learnt the true meaning of 'Volunteer.'" His radio course was cut down to 12 weeks, and he was posted to Duxford as a Radio Transmissions Operator. There he met and got to know the legendary flight commander Douglas Bader.

Eddie signed up to be a radio engineer but in the way of all things, the RAF had other ideas for our former Personnel Director. In 1940, when he joined 214 Sqdn at Stradishall, he found himself posted to fly Wellington Bombers – one of a crew of six. Eddie flew on 38 missions and in his words, "We had many narrow escapes." Eddie soon became an instructor and was sent out on the massive bombing raids over Cologne and Essen.

It was during one spell while on leave that Eddie 'phoned the Company 'for old times



Doing the Can-Can ... Eddie pictured with Isobel Malyon, who also passed away this year, and Richard Herbert

## Eddie's mission: To bomb V1 German rocket base

sake' and, on the spur of the moment, dated the bright new telephone operator at the Edmonton factory. That call led to love at first sight, and to Mollie becoming Mrs. Wheeler.

Soon Eddie the instructor was flying in gigantic American Flying Fortress bombers.

He was in a leading plane of 12 on a practice run when the US captain called to Eddie, "Hey, I'm lost – can you get us back to base". Eddie used his radio skills to get help and the squadron landed safely. They were so pleased with Eddie that they gave him access to a Jeep, which was used for trips to London. Eddie got tired of training and went back to bombing operations as a target finder. One of his raids was on the German rocket base at Peenemunde – home of the deadly V1 missiles that caused

such havoc on British cities.

All went well until a German gun hit Eddie's plane and the pilot announced that he had lost control of the aircraft.

Eddie was ordered to hand over the nylon cord of his parachute so that the airmen could do a temporary repair on the plane. With time running out and the bomber out of control, Eddie and his crew managed to fix the damaged steel cables of the plane. Amazingly, the pilot regained control of the aircraft and they got back home safely. For this, Eddie received the DFC – the Distinguished Flying Cross. Eddie was detached to RAF Scampton, home of the Dam Busters, famed for their 'Bouncing Bomb' raids on the German Dams, and his aircraft led the first 'shuttle raid' on the Zeppelin Hangars at Friedrichshaven in

Southern Germany, finally crash landing at Algiers in North Africa.

These were incredibly dangerous missions. "I walked out of three crash landings," says Eddie, who is still amazed at his good luck.

Flight Lieutenant Wheeler DFC saw out the rest of the war in South Wales.

After his demob, Eddie came back to Herberts where he had been employed before the war. "I left twice but kept coming back," he recalls. "Herberts was a wonderful company to me. They gave me all the opportunities I needed," he says. Eddie retired from the Company in 1983. Says Eddie, "I've had a wonderful life, met fantastic people (such as the Queen Mother and Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands) and have so many happy memories."



Gone but not forgotten ... Eddie pictured with Ted Crichton (centre) who died in August, and Jim Herbert