

Letter written by Leslie James

Nearly a step too far!

I spent the first 20 years of my life living in Fulham, London. I was the second eldest of four boys and I well remember my father (who died when I was the tender age of 14) telling me about his service in the First World War as a Ground Engineer for the Royal Flying Corps (the forerunner of the RAF).

I was 'called up' in 1940 and wanted to follow in my father's footsteps and so I joined the RAF. For some reason the RAF thought that I would make a good wireless operator and so I was trained as such. My first posting was to RAF West Kingsdown (near Dartford, Kent) which turned out to be a 'hush-hush' station and I was now part of 'Y' division, the secret service of the RAF.

My posting at West Kingsdown was short and soon I was moved with two other airmen and a sergeant to Strete in South Devon. Living and working in Devon, one felt a bit detached from the main theatre of war but it wasn't always the case!

Initially I was billeted in a pub, what an idyll that should have been but then that's another story. I was then moved to a prime billet, in a house owned by a local farmer and his wife which was adjacent to the RAF unit, it was there that I experienced 'a close encounter with my Maker!'

Quite frequently Fockler Wulf 190 German aircraft would carry out what we called 'hit and run' raids on coastal towns. Their main armament was cannon shells. On this particular occasion I had been on duty until midnight and was not in a hurry to have my breakfast the following morning, when I heard aircraft in the vicinity.

From my bedroom window I had seen one German fighter pass over the house at a very low level, it seemed that I could have almost punched the pilot on the nose, he was that close! Knowing that they often flew in pairs, my immediate reaction was to get downstairs as quickly as possible in case another of the enemy was on the way.

Sure enough there was and I could hear him firing bursts of cannon shell. I realised that I was too late to leave my room, although I had opened the door and was about to cross the threshold. Fortunately I had the presence of mind to step backward, instead of forwards when a cannon shell came through the landing fanlight window and buried itself in the architrave of the wooden door.

When I recovered from the shock, I measured the trajectory of the missile and was certain that had I stepped forward it would have gone through my head!

The ironical thing was that my new wife, who was working in London, felt the need to send me an urgent telegram, with the message 'Are you alright? Love, Bettina'. Her psychic ability happened several times during our married life.