

It's A Long Way from Kilkishen

In the course of researching material for my book *Their Name Liveth for Evermore* (the Memorial record of the Limerick casualties of World War II), I had occasion to visit the fabulous Foynes Flying Boat Museum. This excellent project under the direction of Margaret O'Shaughnessy is a joy to visit, an Aladdin's Cave for those with an interest in the flying boat history of this historic sea base. My quest was to source information about a British Overseas Airways Corporation's Sunderland flying boat that had crashed on Mount Brandon, Co. Kerry in 1943, with the loss of 10 lives including Captain Diarmuid Hartigan, Royal Artillery, who was subsequently buried in Bruff, Co. Limerick. To my surprise I found that museum had an engine from the ill-fated flying boat on display together with other memorabilia, including a post card from a Japanese Prisoner of War camp inmate interned in Java. The card was part of a mail consignment aboard the Sunderland that had crashed that fateful day. I had learned from newspaper accounts of the crash, that the aircraft carried a considerable amount of mail from prisoners of the Japanese, the one on display was from Wing Commander Maguire, an RAF prisoner on Java, addressed to Mrs. Maguire, 6 Churchill Terrace, Ballsbridge, Dublin.

by Patrick J McNamara

Intrigued by the card, I decided to find out more about the sender, I presumed from the name and address that he was Irish, what I found was a fascinating story.

Harold John Maguire was born at Kilkishen, Co Clare, on April 12th 1912. He was educated at Wesley College and later at Trinity College, Dublin.

After working briefly as a travelling salesman for Smith's Premier Typewriters, he was commissioned into the Royal Air Force in 1933 and in late 1934 joined 230 Coastal Command Squadron at Pembroke Dock, Wales. The next year the squadron was ordered to Egypt during the Abyssinian crisis and Maguire piloted a Short Singapore twin-engine flying boat out to Alexandria.

In September 1939, he took command of 229 Fighter Squadron flying Bristol Blenheims on convoy patrols and night-fighter radar trials. In March 1940 the Squadron was re-equipped with Hurricanes and Maguire led it first from Biggin Hill, Kent, to cover the retreat of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk and later from RAF Digby, Yorkshire, during the Battle of Britain.

Early in February 1942 Maguire arrived

in Batavia (now Jakarta) to assume command of No 266 Fighter Wing. This consisted of some 40 Hurricane aircraft and pilots, who for the most part were inexperienced recruits from the Dominions, although Maguire himself was a veteran of the Battle of Britain, seven other pilots had yet to experience the taste of combat.

On Friday February 13th 1942, Maguire led these seven aircraft to the airfield at Palembang, Sumatra. They arrived overhead just as the strip was under heavy attack by Japanese fighters; Maguire claimed a Zero before landing.

Shortly afterwards, Palembang airfield was cut off and surrounded by Japanese paratroops; Maguire took charge of its ground defence; aircraft were stripped of their Browning machine-guns, and anti-aircraft guns were re-aimed to give a horizontal line of fire. Even so, Maguire found himself with only a total of 20 men, scant food, water and little ammunition with which to take on the advancing Japanese.

Maguire next took up a position in a slit trench and found himself facing several Japanese soldiers who were similarly dug in. When, unexpectedly, they climbed out and began to run towards the jungle, he and another officer managed to kill a number of them.

He had been informed that some Dutch troops had arrived to reinforce his hard



Morning Star Hotel, Bruff, Co. Limerick

Photo: J. J. Hurley



Main Street, Bruff, Co. Limerick

Photo: J. J. Hurley

press little garrison. He made for the main gate to greet them, only to discover that the new force in fact comprised of 70 Japanese paratroops. Maguire resorted to bluff. Laying down his machine gun, he marched purposefully up to the nearest Japanese soldier and demanded to see his commanding officer. When the Japanese officer appeared, Maguire informed him that the Japanese were vastly outnumbered and advised him to surrender.

The Japanese officer, however, who spoke English, countered with a promise to give safe conduct to Maguire and his men if they left their positions. On the pretext of consulting a non-existent superior officer, Maguire returned to the airfield and organised the destruction of all remaining aircraft and equipment.

He and his men then trekked for a week to the west coast of Sumatra, where they found a small coaster to take them back to Batavia. There, Maguire took command of what remained of its air defences.

By early March, further resistance proved impossible and Maguire was allocated a seat in one of the last aircraft to leave Java. He did not avail of the opportunity to escape, instead, he gave the allocated seat to a wounded pilot. When the island eventually fell, he was taken prisoner.

Maguire, together with the other captured prisoners, were sent to the Boei Gledale POW camp, Java, there he exhibited great devotion to those under his command in conditions of tremendous hardship. He was remembered by many

prisoners for the way in which he stood up to the bullying treatment of the Japanese. After the return of peace, Maguire compiled a detailed dossier on the war crimes perpetrated by his captors, but otherwise succeeded in putting the experience behind him. If asked about his time in captivity, he would only describe his experience in the camp as "a bad time".

On his release from captivity, Maguire resumed his career in Fighter Command. Initially he took charge of the RAF station at Linton-on-Ouse, North Yorkshire, flying the new piston-engine de Havilland Hornet.

From 1950 to 1952 he commanded RAF Odiham, Hampshire, which was home to a wing of de Havilland Vampire fighter jets. In 1955, he was moved to Malta as Senior Air Staff Officer, returning to the Air Ministry the next year to direct tactical and air transport operations.

In 1959 Maguire, by now an Air Vice-Marshal, was flying a Spitfire over Whitehall in a display commemorating the Battle of Britain. As his engine failed, he was forced to land on a cricket pitch in Bromley. He spotted the company sports ground of Oxo and managed to put the aircraft down on the square, splintering the stumps at one end while the teams were off having tea. When he entered the pavilion, nursing an injured back, he was welcomed by the players with a strong cup of Darjeeling.

In 1962 Maguire returned to the Far East to take part in the Indonesian Confrontation as Senior Air Staff Officer. He then became Assistant Chief of Air Staff

(Intelligence) and in 1965 Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Intelligence). He retired in 1968, but was then called back to become the Ministry of Defence's Director-General of Intelligence for four more years.

From 1975 until 1982 he was a director of Commercial Union, the insurance group, and he was also its political and economic adviser from 1972 to 1979. In final retirement, he lived at Brantham, Suffolk, where he was an active churchgoer. He was chairman of the local Conservative Association and the local branch of the British Legion, and was a keen member of the Royal Harwich Yacht Club. He also enjoyed fishing and swimming.

Air Marshal Sir Harold Maguire died 1st February 2001, aged 88, a gallant and highly decorated officer. He had led RAF resistance to the Japanese invasions of Sumatra and Java in 1942 and subsequently endured great privation during three years in a Far Eastern prisoner of war camp; he had been awarded the DSO in 1946 for the gallant example he had set to his fellow captives. In 1949 he was appointed OBE and CB in 1958. In 1966 he was knighted and advanced to KCB. He was also mentioned in despatches three times, in 1940, 1942 and 1946.

He married Mary Elisabeth Wild in 1940, she died in 1991. They had a son and a daughter.

It was indeed a long way from Kilkishen.

***Sadly, Patrick J McNamara passed away shortly after writing this article.**