

I am grateful to Mark's family for sending their Grandmother Esta's autobiography book 'Count Your Blessings.' The following are excerpts about Mark's life in the RAF from her book.

'Her thoughts turned to her son. Each day she waited eagerly for the postman, hoping for a letter from Mark. His first three months in the RAF had been spent somewhere in the south of England, and from there he had gone to Canada for a year's training as a pilot. Mark loved the experience. His letters home were always very long, usually fifteen to twenty pages. Mark's year in Canada eventually came to an end. Excitement reigned – he was returning to England and home to his family. Raphael, Esta and Celia were counting the days. Next – excitement when the phone rang. Mark had arrived in England. His first words, *'Hello folks – how are you all? I'm fine but broke. Dad, can you please post me on my fare home? I'll pay you back when I get my next pay packet.'* Then came the great moment when they opened the front door to their son. Esta could not take her eyes off this tall, handsome young man who was her son. He was now nineteen and a half years of age and every inch a man. When the time came to say goodbye Esta consoled herself with the knowledge that he would now be stationed in England, and they could all look forward to those periods of leave. These they always enjoyed together in their London home which had been temporarily repaired and restored into useable condition after being damaged in the Blitz.

On Mark's leave periods his sister Celia was brought from her boarding school in Newport Pagnell to London. Mark was blessed with the capacity to enjoy life to the full every moment of his life. When going to a dance he would invite a girlfriend whom he knew to be an excellent dancer. He would invite his cousin Maurice to join him when he went to a symphony concert, as both were fond of classical music. Being a strong swimmer, he would enjoy the sport with an old school friend who, like himself, would swim two or three miles. Mark came home every time he had leave, looking so handsome in his officer's uniform with his pilot's wings.

One year went by, two years, three years and Esta wondered would this war go on forever? She knew that for a long time now that Mark had been backwards and forwards abroad on active duty although he never told his parents of this or where he was. When on leave the other youngsters comprising his crew were often in her home. Just after Celia's eleventh birthday she had passed her entrance exam to Haberdashers Aske School in London, where she was due to commence in the September term. They had hoped the war would be over by that time. Mark's birthday was due the following week when an official letter arrived. Raphael immediately left London for Newport Pagnell to break the news to his wife that their son was believed 'missing in action.' Now began a period of hope that Mark was a prisoner of war. The family decided to leave Newport Pagnell and return to London as Celia would soon be starting school. The family settled back in London making themselves as comfortable as possible.

Each day when she was out with Celia, Esta would find herself running home. Maybe there would be some good news of her son? At the front door, however, fear overtook her. What if it was not good news? She was usually trembling as she opened the door, and then, seeing no telegram, would relax and hope would return. This went on for three long, very long months until hope gave way to despair. The telegram from the War Office arrived: Regret your son, Warrant Officer Mark Azouz, killed in action September 23rd, 1944.

Five of Mark's crew were, during these past weeks, continually in Esta's home, where they had been hopefully waiting for better news of their pilot. They recounted their experiences. They had been on their fifth trip to Arnhem in Holland where, due to a British military mistake, 10,000 British troops were in dire straits, caught in a trap surrounded by the enemy and in desperate need of supplies.

On this particular day Mark could have been exempt from duty because it was Yom Kippur, the Jewish day of Atonement, when all Jewish servicemen were on leave to attend prayers. Mark could not, at a time like this, let down his crew and the thousands of soldiers so desperate for supplies of food and ammunition. He volunteered to go again. When they were due to leave it was discovered that there was a fault on their plane, which the crew felt nervous about it as it was considered unlucky. By the time the changeover was accomplished their squadron had left, leaving them to follow on alone.

On the way to the target, they came under enemy fire, killing their rear gunner, a young boy of eighteen. The plane continued on to Arnhem where the supplies were dropped. They started on the homeward journey and immediately came under enemy fire. The plane caught fire and Mark ordered his crew, one at a time, to bale out. This they did. The navigator, the last to leave, said that the last he saw of his pilot was of him holding up his two thumbs in an 'I'm O.K.' gesture, then his order to jump. He was sure that he saw Mark also leave the plane, his parachute open, but knew no more.

The five members of the crew were fortunate on landing to be picked up by Dutch farmers who hid them for the next five days. This was, according to them, the most terrifying experience for them. They were moved from cellar to cellar during the night and could occasionally hear the footsteps of the Germans who were searching for them. Five days later they were rescued by the underground movement and very soon were safely back in England. All felt confident that Mark would eventually follow, and waited day after day, week after week, month after month until the arrival of the telegram which ended the waiting and hoping.

Esta, whilst one day listening to the escapades they had shared with her son, had once enquired if Mark had ever been afraid. Jock, the Scotsman, had answered sharply, 'Mark afraid? He did not know the meaning of the word!' The boys went their various ways, Esta and Raphael eventually losing contact with them.

By coincidence, a neighbour of Raphael's, an officer in the British Army, was at this time stationed in Holland. He promised to make enquiries about Mark. Esta was still hoping that it was all some horrible mistake. The young officer made enquiries, and eventually a letter arrived stating that he had now the information that Mark had been shot clean through the heart as he parachuted down. He spoke to the chaplain who had buried him in a temporary grave by a quiet roadside. He even sent a snap of the grave. Later, when the war at long last ended, all such remains were reburied in the British cemetery in Nijmegen in Holland.

Sometime later when it was possible to do so Raphael and Esta visited the cemetery. Their feelings were very mixed. Facing them stood a very large cross, alien to the Jewish religion, with a few words stating that 'This piece of Holland that will be forever England.' They signed their names in the register and strolled slowly amongst the rows and rows of graves, casually reading names and ages of hundreds and hundreds – such young lives cut off before they had the opportunity to reach full manhood. So many pathetic wooden crosses, every now and then one with a Star of David. Eventually they arrived at their son's grave.

There it was with the inscription 'Mark Azouz, aged 22 years. Killed in action.' Raphael placed his hat on his head, opened his prayer book and prayed that his son would rest in peace. Esta wept as if her heart would break.

Raphael received a letter from the War Office, notifying him that his late son was to be posthumously awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for bravery in action in Brest, France. It read as follows:

11th September 1946

Air Ministry WC2

Sir

I have the honour to inform you that your attendance is required at Buckingham Palace at 10.15 o'clock a.m. (doors open at 9.45 o'clock a.m.) on Tuesday, 29th October in order that you, as next of kin, may receive from the King the Distinguished Flying Cross conferred on your son the late Warrant Officer Mark Azouz.

Dress. Service Dress, Civil Defence Uniform, Morning Dress or dark Lounge Suit.

You may be accompanied by one person only related by blood to the deceased. Children under seven years of age may not attend. I shall be glad if you will complete the enclosed form and return it immediately in the envelope provided. This letter must be produced on entering the Palace as no further cards of admission will be issued.

I am, Sir

Your Obedient Servant

F. Lywill

The very special day arrived when they were to attend Buckingham Palace. Celia had permission from her headmistress to be absent from school. This caused quite a commotion amongst both teachers and friends who assured her that they would be eagerly awaiting a full account of this exciting and interesting experience. Raphael decided to go with them to the Palace, but as only two would be allowed to enter he wished Celia to take his place, realising that it would be a day she would never forget. He waited outside while Celia waited with her mother. They had been informed previously as to procedure. Uniformed footmen directed them along with many others, some coming proudly together with their heroes, others, like Esta, coming on their late heroes' behalf, through the elaborate rooms to await the arrival of His Majesty George V. Celia was excited and thrilled to be actually inside Buckingham Palace awaiting the entrance of the King. Esta could feel no pride in her son's achievement, just a sad, sad ache that he was no more.