

Obituary: Peter Harding ARSM – Spitfire pilot taken prisoner in 1941 who was a veteran of The Great Escape
Born 11th May 1919 - Died 24th January 2006 Aged 86



Photograph of Peter on his 75th birthday

Peter Harding was born in Forest Hill and his early childhood was based around outer London. He was schooled at Dulwich College and later gained an entry to Imperial College London to study metallurgy.

When war broke out in 1939 Peter was evacuated to Swansea with the Department of Metallurgy. However his stay in Swansea was short-lived as he soon went off to war as a pilot officer affiliated to Air Reconnaissance. On 27 August 1941, while flying a mission to Kiel, his Spitfire engine failed over Germany forcing him to parachute to safety into the arms of the Luftwaffe.

During his time as a POW he was involved in numerous escape attempts, two of which were later turned into films – The Great Escape and The Wooden Horse. Due to asthma he was not allowed into the tunnels, a fact which probably saved his life, but he played his part by obtaining whatever tools and implements could be used in the escape efforts. This experience showed throughout the rest of his life in a passion not to throw things away that could perhaps be put to good use.

After the camp was deserted by the Germans, Peter was captured by the Russians and then released and repatriated to England. He was demobbed on 17 August 1945, having spent the best part of four years in a POW camp, and returned to Imperial College to complete his degree.

Following his graduation, he began work for a lead smelter in Bermondsey called Enthoven and Sons and stayed with them for 33 years before retiring at 63 as technical director. At around the same time he was introduced to Sheila, marrying her on 26 January 1952. Their first son Barry was born the next year, followed by Christopher 2 years later and Timothy 2 years after that.

Peter didn't begin to recount his war time experiences until later in life when, perhaps conscious that many involved in the war were dying without sharing their memories, he became involved with groups such as the Spitfire Society. A particular highlight for him was digging up his own crashed spitfire, aided by local Germans, some of whom had witnessed the plane's final dive. 'Spitfire Pete', as he was known, took his final flight on his 75th birthday.