

## Neil Gunn Writing Competition 2016/17: Secondary school section

Commended: Daniel McKay, Millburn Academy

### The Night in Dusseldorf

My grandfather loved the darkness. Whenever we make the long trip up north to Inverness from Liverpool where I grew up, I always get excited because I know he will tell the same story about the time he travelled to Dusseldorf during the war. He will always start by saying "I remember back in 1942...." and when he starts with that simple phrase I am both thrilled and humbled by such an unassuming man and his extraordinary life.

In his younger years, from what I can see from his old, stained sepia photos, my grandfather was a very tall athletic man, with short hair swept to the side, probably using hair wax which was common at the time. However, not so common was the job he found himself doing during the second world war. He was an exceptionally clever individual whose talents were used for the benefit of the country. He left Inverness when he was 15, the same age as I am now, and moved to London. He eventually studied ancient languages at Cambridge University. He told me that he wanted to work in translating ancient hieroglyphics at the British Museum and possibly travelling to exotic and distant lands such as Egypt or Persia, which not many people did back then. In 1938, in the inevitable march towards war against the seemingly all powerful Germany, he was recruited by MI6 for code breaking due to his unusual talent for languages.

By 1942 he was one of the best code breakers in Britain and was respected by everyone. However, there was a serious problem that troubled his superiors in Whitehall. The Germans had a code that my grandfather's team had been unable to break. It had been used to co-ordinate attacks throughout the Mediterranean with devastating loss of life to Allied troops and innocent civilians. British spies had obtained pictures of the machines used to generate the secret code. They were large, heavy, complicated pieces of machinery which were situated in three secret bunkers across Nazi Germany. Military intelligence believed the only way to break the undecipherable codes was to somehow get a code breaker to travel to one of the sites and access the machines. As someone at the peak of his intellectual powers but also very physically strong, my grandfather was selected to go. He was told that they were going to target the machine situated in Dusseldorf, near the border with Holland. He had reservations about going. He had no field experience and had never used a weapon, except for his catapult when he was a child. When I think about the situation, it would have terrified me and I can't imagine the feelings that must have run through his mind. I suppose this was war and everyone was expected to do their duty for King and country. I think they were made of stronger stuff in those days.

The night before he made the short flight to Dusseldorf, my grandfather wrote a letter to his wife who had evacuated to a small secluded croft near Thurso, in the far north of Scotland, to escape from the constant fear that continued bombing of London had caused. He told me once that he wrote the letter in tears. Although he hoped the mission would be a success, he knew there was a strong chance of failure. He feared this might be his last words he shared with the love of his life. I found this moving, imagining myself in the same situation. He flew out the next day with a small group of paratroopers. He always says the plane journey was the most eerie and unnerving experience of his life. Under the cover of darkness, they parachuted into the outskirts of Dusseldorf in the freezing cold weather.

He told me that as they reached the city, it seemed deserted. The required "blackout" conditions meant it was pitch dark. He remembers walking through the streets, the silence chilling his spine. When they reached the bunker where the code machine was hidden, my grandfather said he could

see his comrades were uneasy yet had a steely determination to do what they had come for, in full knowledge that they could face death. As they entered the bunker he said there was more security than anticipated and they were spotted almost immediately. The one thing he says he will never forget is the wailing noise when the siren went off and the Germans screaming abuse at them and then pinning them to the ground. One of his fellow troops resisted and was shot without hesitation and that's when my grandfather knew that he had to accept his fate and there was nobody or anything that could save him. He was blindfolded and taken to a secluded part of the city for interrogation. For the next three weeks he lived in a world of darkness, only seeing brightness when a fierce light was pressed into his face and he was asked questions. The rest of the time he was blindfolded and he told me that this time, spent alone and away from the Nazis who interrogated him was very calming. This always surprises me – somehow he began to long for the darkness with its solemnness and tranquillity. He thought he would die and it gave him time to make his peace with the world. After the three abhorrent weeks he was transported to a concentration camp where he spent the next three years. He told me that the daylight hours with its horrific scenes of maltreatment and deprivation scared him. The night time however was a time of reflection and hope. I guess I understood how this could affect his mind and why darkness was a relief. Eventually he was liberated in 1945 when Allied troops pushed back the enemy and reclaimed Europe.

However, the sense of peace he found in the darkness in those difficult days has stayed with him ever since.

Now, I find myself sitting beside him as the train chatters noisily towards Scotland. My family are all gathered expectantly around him waiting for him to tell us about his war time exploits. He looks around the carriage and smiles. His eyes light up as he starts "I remember back in 1942...."