

## IBCC Interview #9: Denis Kelly – 467 Squadron Wireless Operator and Evader

Denis Kelly was already married with an infant son when he joined the Air Force at 19, wanting to be a fighter pilot. A lack of depth perception discovered at Initial Training School in Victor Harbour saw him chosen instead for wireless training, which he completed at Ballarat. He sailed to war via the USA (including an unauthorised couple of days in New York), did some more flying at Llandwrog in north-west Wales and crewed up at RAF Lichfield with an Australian pilot named Tom Davis.

Posted to 467 Squadron at Waddington, Denis and his crew began flying operations in late April 1944. They were on many of the same trips as the crew of B for Baker, including Mailly-le-Camp on 3 May (though not the fateful Lille raid a week later). Life on operations was a continual strain, broken only by wild parties in the Mess or short periods of leave. Denis was convinced that with each trip, his supply of luck was steadily being used up. "Every op you completed brought you one closer to the one that would get you."



On 18 July 1944 the crew attacked Revigny, in France. Close to the end of their tour, this one would indeed turn out to be the one that got them. "We had dropped our bombs," Denis recalled, "and we'd just turned round and [were] making for home and then BANG, we were hit." His radios exploded as the aircraft started to burn. The pilot yelled to bale out. Denis immediately clipped on his parachute and went down to the door at the back of the aircraft, pulling on the mid-upper gunner's legs as he went past to signal that he was about to go. He opened the doors to the rear turret to help the 19-year-old gunner inside to escape, to be confronted by a shocking sight. "His head was... well, he was dead."

Denis' parachute pack and battledress were beginning to smoulder by this time, and the pilot was still yelling to get out. "So I went to step out – and then I remembered, never step out of a Lanc, you gotta dive."

Denis dived.

"Next thing I know, I was falling, I was smoking, so I pulled the ripcord at the exact second I hit the ground."

The impact caused him severe injuries: he later discovered that it had compacted his legs and spine so much that he was a full three inches shorter afterwards. "I thought I broke my spine," he said. More immediately, his legs simply refused to work. Denis dragged himself painfully over to a nearby tree. "I thought, 'my wife's not going to know I'm here, she'll think I'm dead. She'll get the telegram, I can't do anything about it...'"

Two other members of his crew had landed nearby, and all three held a council of war to decide what to do next. Unable to walk, Denis decided he would be a liability and convinced the others to go on without him. They left – and Denis began a courageous attempt to crawl his way across France. "It was marshy ground, fortunately," he said.

For the next two days, Denis dragged himself laboriously along on his elbows, moving about "50 yards every three hours." At one point he slithered into a canal and swam, until he came to a bridge that had German guards on it. In the water he beat a cautious retreat. Getting out of the canal was difficult without the use of his legs, but after several attempts he managed and continued on his slow, determined but excruciating way. He came to a road, started crawling across it – and mercifully passed out.

Evidently deciding he was safe enough, Denis' mind simply shut his body down. "The Harley St people said it was mind over matter, [my] mind said 'you're safe there,' so..." The next thing he knew, he was being prodded by the boot of a curious French civilian. Lying there, Denis croaked the only French he knew: "Je suis Anglais parachutist – soif." – "I am an English parachutist – thirsty." The Frenchman produced a full bottle of beer, and Denis gulped the lot. Then the Frenchman rolled Denis into the ditch at the side of the road – and left him there.

"I thought, I'm done, I can't get out of this ditch, I'm gunna die here. And that was frightening."

After Denis spent a terrible day in the ditch thinking the worst, that night the Frenchman returned. He brought with him two others, some spare civilian clothes and a bicycle. Dressing Denis in the clothes, they propped him up on the bicycle, legs hanging below, and took him just a little further downstream from where Denis had scabbled out of the canal to the house of a lock-keeper named Victor.

Denis stayed here for several weeks while his immediate injuries healed and while he figured out how to walk again. At one point he was taken to see two other members of his crew, in another safe house nearby. This happened to be on Denis' 21st birthday. Unbelievably, when Denis informed one of the Frenchmen of that fact he produced a bottle of Moët champagne, and all present enjoyed a glass.

After leaving Victor's care, Denis was hidden, guarded by a gigantic and fierce dog, in the locked room of an unknown house, and later in the attic of a hospital. A little later Denis was picked up again, by a pair of Resistance fighters driving a car fuelled by a charcoal-burning contraption bolted to the back of it. They informed him that a British aeroplane was coming to pick him up that night, and that they were taking him to the landing ground. But on the way there, they saw an identical little car being towed by some German soldiers. The Frenchmen, recognising the car as belonging to one of their comrades, panicked. Clearly the operation had been compromised. The car stopped, the Frenchmen jumped out and urgently knocked on the door of the nearest

house, and Denis was unceremoniously pushed inside. (Denis was later told that a British aircraft did indeed land to pick up a whole bunch of evaders, and that the Germans waited until it was loaded and had taken off before shooting it down in cold blood.)

Denis' new host was not enamoured with the idea of involuntarily sheltering an Allied airman, and by the third day, despite not sharing a common language, he made it clear that he was not welcome. So Denis left.

He was now alone in occupied France.

For the next little while (he isn't certain how long), Denis wandered between farmhouses scrounging for food. It was at one of these places that he met an American airman, a Thunderbolt pilot who he knew only as 'Tex' who had been shot down some nine months previously. They decided to join forces. For a while all was ok, but scrounging sufficient food for two was even harder than it had been when they were on their own. As they got hungrier they started to take more risks, and one day it all came unstuck.

They were in a café and the plan was for Tex to cause a distraction at the counter while Denis pinched a loaf of bread. Unfortunately, two German soldiers walked in at the exact moment that Tex began talking, in his broad Texan accent, to the girl behind the counter. The game was up. The two unfortunate airmen were handcuffed and taken away.

Interrogated half-heartedly by an elderly German soldier who reminded him of a nice old school teacher, Denis was informed that as they had been caught in civilian clothes it was being presumed that they were spies. They were to be taken to Berlin for further interrogation by the Gestapo. "I'd visions of my fingernails being pulled out," Denis said with a shudder. Sure enough, the next night Denis and Tex were taken to the station, handcuffed together, and were on the point of being bundled onto the train when one of their two guards ducked around the corner to answer a call of nature.

"Tex looked at me," Denis recalled. "He didn't say anything but I knew he was going to [do something]." Denis watched wide-eyed as Tex kicked the remaining guard in the groin, stole his gun and shot him in the head. Predictably the other guard then stuck his head around the corner to see what the fuss was about, and Tex shot him too. And then, still handcuffed together, the two airmen ran. Amazingly they were not chased. They spent the next few nights in several barns until they managed to convince one of the farmers to remove their handcuffs with a cold chisel.

Despite their shared perils, however, Denis and Tex went their separate ways shortly afterwards. And here's where Denis' story gets truly bizarre. He was just outside a forest one day, foraging for food, when he heard some tanks approaching. So he high-tailed it into the forest and up a tree – then watched in horror as the tanks, which were German, stopped and proceeded to set up their own camp directly underneath his tree.

They stayed there for four days.

For all of that time, Denis remained in the tree, having used a piece of his parachute which he had been carrying to tie himself to the branch so he could sleep. He sucked the dew off the leaves to survive. The hardest part, he told me, was smelling the aromas when the troops were cooking their rations. The tanks eventually packed up camp and left – and not once had anyone looked up.

Denis crawled down from his tree, very stiff, very sore, very hungry and very thirsty. He had a drink from a nearby stream and, stumbling across a calf, hacked a piece of flesh out of the unfortunate beast's side. Suddenly beset by terrible stomach cramps from the unaccustomed nutrition, he drifted into an uneasy sleep just outside the forest. He awoke the next night to the sound of a big aeroplane circling very low nearby.

It was a lone Shorts Stirling bomber, and it dropped something big on the end of a parachute. Denis watched as the parachute descended and was making his way over to investigate when suddenly he heard a deep, threatening and unmistakably British voice. "You German bastard," it growled, "you stop where you are!" Denis turned around, very slowly, to find a mean-looking soldier levelling an equally mean-looking submachine gun in his direction.

"I'm not a German," Denis squeaked. "I'm an Aussie!"

It turned out that he had blundered into a small platoon of SAS commandos, operating from a well-hidden base behind the lines. The Stirling had been dropping them a Jeep. Denis would stay with the commandos for several days. At one point while they were out on an operation he snuck into their camp, found their radio and tapped out a desperate message to England. "They never answered and I never knew if it had been received," he told me, "but I found out later from my wife that the federal police came to her [at home] and told her that I was safe at that time, but still behind enemy lines."

Some time afterwards the commandos handed Denis back to the Resistance who placed him in yet another safe house – where he found Tex and several of his own crew waiting. Knowing that the fighting front was getting closer, the French were collecting their fugitive airmen in one place to wait for liberation.

It was not long coming. "We heard guns," Denis recalled, "and thought, that's real firing. So we went up the road, and it was General Patton's mob, so we waved them down." Once they had convinced the Americans that they were Allied airmen who had been in hiding, the Yanks invited them into their tanks, and Denis had the surreal experience of standing in the gun turret, being handed bottles of wine from the grateful inhabitants of several villages as they were liberated.

Denis was sent back to Paris and eventually flown back to England in early September 1944. He had been on the run behind enemy lines for nearly three months. He eventually returned to Australia and his family.

Perhaps unsurprisingly after his experiences, Denis is still coping with the effects of his war. He still occasionally suffers nightmares – "it's horrifying how realistic it is" – and he said he'd told me things during the interview that he never told his wife (who died about fifteen years ago). It's clearly hard for him to talk about. But a decade or so

ago, his son sat him down and said, “look Dad, you’ve got grandchildren and great grandchildren now – you should leave your story.”

And so Denis wrote. Only ten copies of the resulting manuscript were ever printed. The book includes his whole story, from enlistment to demob and beyond, and it’s uncompromising in its detail. It’s in need of a good edit but its raw honesty, and the astonishing story it tells, makes it one of the more remarkable aircrew memoirs that exist

As well as setting the incredible tale onto paper, the act of writing the book, it helped Denis to in some way cope with the demons he’s carried for so long. But something else helped too. There’s a photo on Denis’ wall of him with his son at the Bomber Command memorial in London. It was taken in 2014 when they went on a pilgrimage to Europe.

As well as England, they went across the Channel to France. They visited the lock keeper’s house where Denis had been hidden. They attended receptions in town halls with ceremonies and local dignitaries. They even found a woman who, as a young girl, had been present at the impromptu party when Denis celebrated his 21st birthday behind enemy lines. But most important of all, they visited two lone war graves in two separate churchyards: those of rear gunner Sgt Col Allen and pilot P/O Tom Davis, the two members of Denis’ crew who did not survive the crash.



Standing next to the grave of his brave pilot, Denis broke down in tears. “I bless all of you for coming here today in memory of my comrade,” he told the gathering of local townsfolk. “But also a very important agenda on my plate today is to say thank you, thank you, thank you.”