

# Harry's War



Leading Aircraftman Harry Shaw during his war service.

***During the Second World War, All Saints' parishioner Harry Shaw was posted to the RAF station of Brindisi in southern Italy, where he serviced and maintained Spitfires. Here he recalls his experiences on his tour of duty, during which he took the opportunity to learn Italian – and even had an audience with the Pope!***

During the Second World War Harry Shaw was an aircraft fitter in the RAF. At the end of 1944 he was posted to 392 MU (Maintenance Unit) attached to 1435 Squadron in Brindisi on the Adriatic coast of Italy.

Historically, Brindisi has always been a strategic city: at the time of the Crusades for example, it was a departure point for Christian armies embarking for the Holy Land

during the Crusades (1096-1291). When Harry was stationed there, it had become a base for the Allies in southern Italy after the invasion of Sicily under General Patton's command and the combined US/British invasion of Italy in September 1943.

Harry's job involved servicing Spitfires. All the aircraft had servicing schedules and after a certain number of flight hours they would be called in for routine maintenance.

One of his tasks was to look after the undercarriage's 'OLEO' legs - on take-off and landing the aircraft sustained a lot of jolting which damaged the bearings, so he used to get the legs on the workbench and rescrrape the bearings. As Harry describes it: "They needed to be scraped and refitted onto the pintle assembly."

He also maintained and checked the fuel systems and tested the aircraft in an outside bay. Harry remembers:

"Two or three of the lads had to hang over the tail section. At the 'peaks' of the propeller rotations, the wings were anchored down to rings in the concrete, but the tail part used to shudder around on full revs so we used to hang over the tail to add weight and keep it steady. Being right behind the prop the slipstream was terrific – you could feel the skin trying to move off your face!"

While Harry never got to fly one of the Spitfires, he was in and out of the cockpit frequently while engine testing. When Harry arrived in Italy, the aircraft he serviced were flying combat missions over northern Italy.

Relations were improving with the Italians in Brindisi. Indeed Italian partisans were helping the Allies in their fight against the Germans. At first, Harry used to go into

town with his mates in twos and threes. But as he gradually got to know the locals better, he, unlike many of his mates, made efforts to be friends with them and that friendship was returned. They developed a mutual friendship and Harry made the most of his time among them by learning the language.

When the war ended on May 8<sup>th</sup> 1945, there was not quite so much maintenance work to be done and Harry and his mates were able to play more sport, especially football in their spare time. Harry found himself selected for an area team to play against a Yugoslav team in the Bari Stadium just north of Brindisi.



**Harry's unit at the Vatican. Harry is on the front row, far right.**



**The golden ball at the top of St Peter's Basilica holds 16 people.**



**Pope Pius XII in 1945**



**The Rosary blessed by the Pope in Rome, in 1945.**

During this time Harry's unit was joined by a South African unit, known as No. 8 ARD. They soon became comrades and together with nine South Africans, he and a mate visited Vatican City.

To their complete surprise, while touring the Vatican, they were approached by a guide and taken right up to the gilt ball on top of St Peter's Basilica. Amazingly, they found themselves in a private audience with Pope Pius XII, who blessed them and the articles they had bought outside, Harry's being a set of Rosary beads.

After Brindisi Harry was posted to 159MU attached to 49 Squadron at Capodichino in Naples, where he was engaged in scrapping aircraft parts. Just across the bay in Sorrento was a hotel that was used as a rest and leave camp, which Harry used on several occasions!

In mid-1946 he was posted to HQ MRES (Missing and Research Unit) in Traviso north of Venice doing general maintenance and servicing of a fleet of Humber utility cars used by crews to gather details of missing aircraft.



**Harry in 1947 with the cup he won at his RAF unit's sports day, and below, with the same cup today.**

Once again, he took part in sport, entering a unit sports day in 1947, in which he won a cup for 2<sup>nd</sup> best individual competitor.

In mid-1947 Harry returned to the UK at 5PDC station in Church Lawford near Rugby, and was demobbed in November 1947.

On his release from military duty, and returning home, Harry helped to clear the land and lay the pitch for Tividale Rovers football club, which is now Tividale FC.