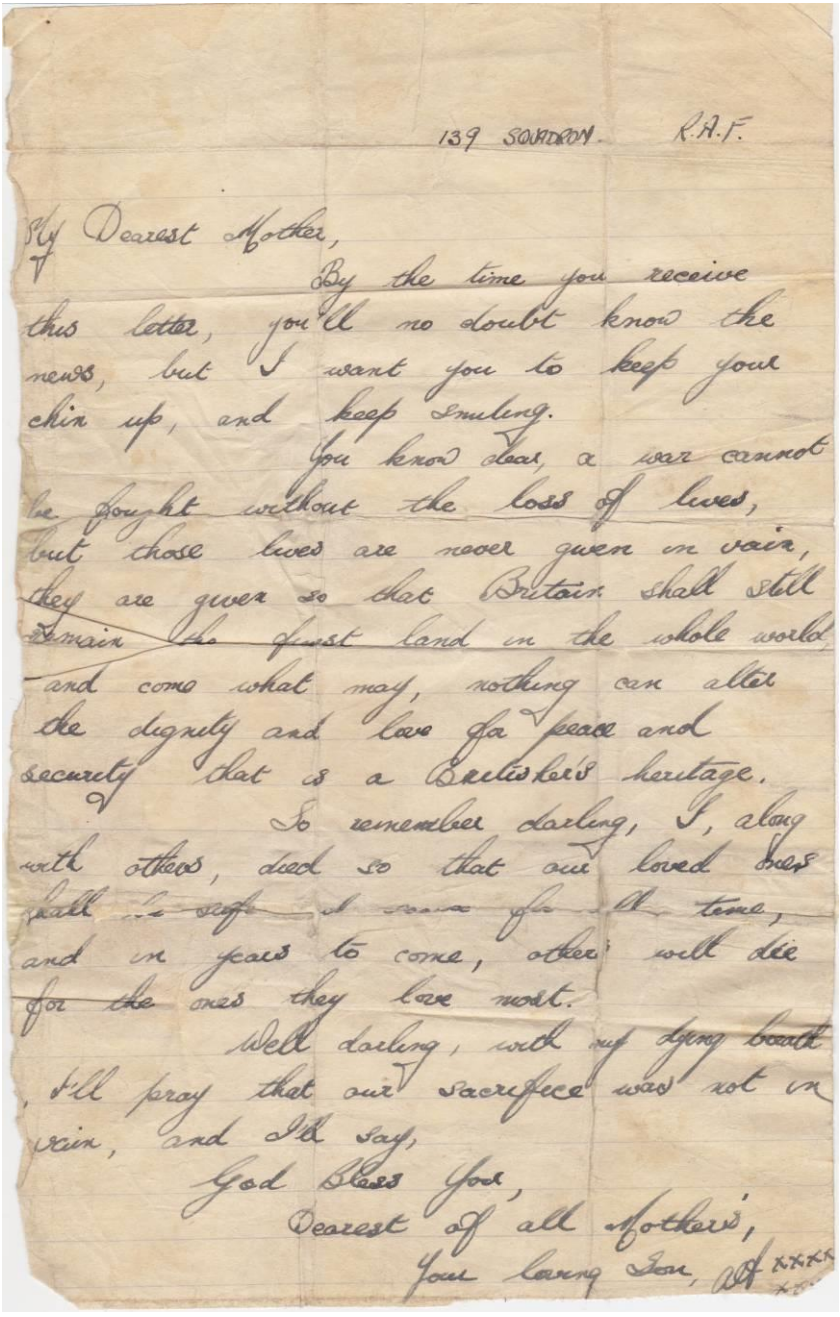
Dearest Mother

Margot Albrecht



139 SQUADRON R.A.F.

My Dearest Mother,

By the time you receive this letter, you'll no doubt know the news, but I want you to keep your chin up, and keep smiling.

You know dear, a war cannot be fought without the loss of lives, but those lives are never given in vain, they are given so that Britain shall still remain the finest land in the whole world, and come what may, nothing can alter the dignity and love for peace and security that is a Britisher's heritage.

So remember darling, I, along with others, died so that our loved ones shall be safe. I gave for a time, and in years to come, others will die for the ones they love most.

Well darling, with my dying breath, I'll pray that our sacrifice was not in vain, and I'll say,

God Bless You,

Dearest of all Mothers,

Your loving Son, XXXX

139 Squadron, RAF

My Dearest Mother

By the time you receive this letter you will no doubt know the news; but I want you to keep your chin up and keep smiling.

You know, dear, that a war cannot be fought without the loss of lives but those lives are never given in vain.

They are given so that Britain shall still remain the first land in the whole world, and, come what may, nothing can alter the dignity and love for place and security, that is a Britisher's heritage.

So, remember darling, I, along with others, died so our loved one's shall be safe and secure for all time; and, in the years to come, others will die for the ones they love most.

Well, darling, with my dying breath, I'll pray that our sacrifice was not in vain, and, I'll say:

God bless you,

Dearest of all mothers.

Your loving son, Alf

xxxx

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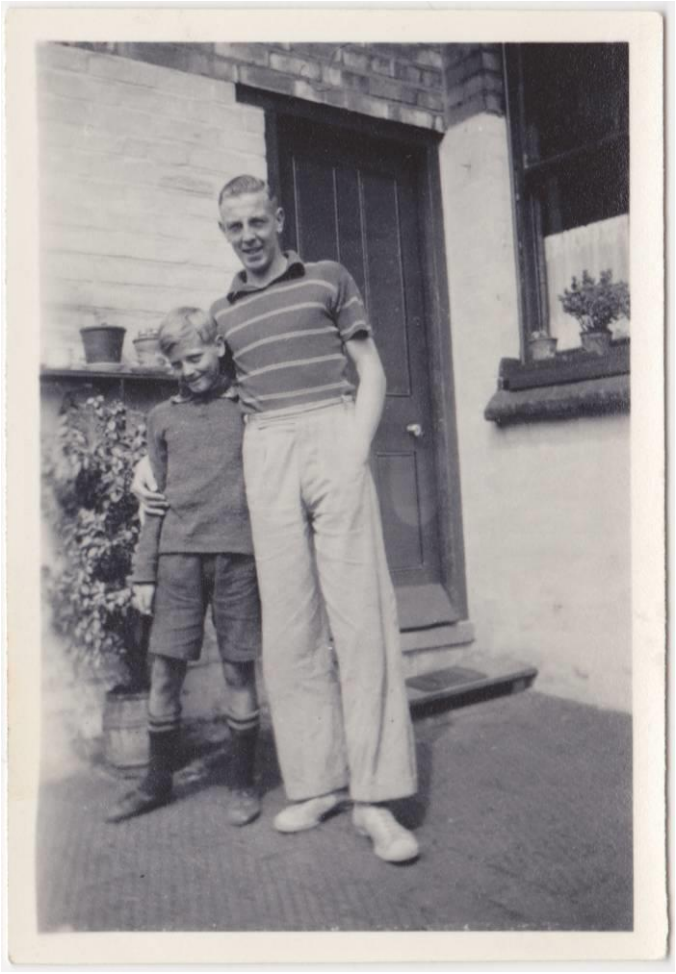
My Uncle Alf was five feet, nine inches tall when he joined the Royal Air Force in April 1939. That's a whole half inch shorter than me. According to the particulars on his Certificate of Service and Discharge, his fully expanded chest was 33 inches, he had fair hair and pale blue eyes and, at 19 years and 105 days, he possessed a 'fresh' complexion. He bore a vaccination scar on his left arm and a birthmark at his umbilicus. When he was formally discharged, following his death one year and 260 days later, nothing remained of these distinguishing features; for Uncle Alf was so terribly burnt that he was heavily bandaged, only one eye showing and, according to my father (who was Alf's kid brother), a tuft of grass poked out from the

bandages. His body, in a military issue casket, was transported by train from Norfolk hospital to my Grandmother, Polly, in Nottingham.



Ensuring there was no misunderstanding as to the young airman's status within His Majesty's Royal Air Force, Alf's Service and Discharge record was updated accordingly. An administration officer, armed with a ruler and fountain pen, efficiently depicted the end of Alf's life with blue lines drawn through every remaining blank space. The lines ruled out any future opportunity for extended or prolonged service, further promotions or remusterings. His Air Gunner's Badge in May 1940 would be his only recorded award.

The blue lines also ruled out any prospects for marriage. The 'Particulars as to Marriage' section remained empty, for Alf did not have time to marry his young fiancée, Ivy. A black and white snapshot of her was found in Alf's personal effects. A pretty young girl, her

smile radiated the sentiment of her handwritten message on the reverse of the photo, which she had bordered with neat little kisses:

I love you with all my heart.

I have no doubt she did.

Six simple words record the reasons for the young airman's discharge; 'Died of Injuries received in Action'. I have now lived twice as long as my Uncle Alf, who died two days before his 21st birthday.

After the death of my father, Ron, in 1982, my mother became the custodian of Alf's letters. Now in her 80th year, she recently relegated custody of these letters to me. As a child, I was aware that my father's only brother had tragically died in World War 2, but my father rarely spoke of his brother or his mother, Polly. I became curious about the uncle I never knew and began to read the letters that were now in my safekeeping. As I carefully sifted through the letters, now yellowed and fragile with age, I was astounded to find newspaper cuttings recording Alf's death, Alf's poetry, love letters from his beloved fiancée Ivy and even some from his estranged father, Albert**.** However, it was the letters of condolence to my grandmother that left me with so many more questions than answers that I was compelled to research the life and death of my young uncle. As the sister-in-law Alf never knew, my mother was able to help me piece together his story.

My uncle was born in 1920 in a terraced house in The Meadows, an inner-city area built during the Victorian era to house Nottingham's railway and factory workers. By the time of the Great Depression of the 1930s much of the housing was in poor condition, but the community was still strong. People there walked a narrow path through life. At best, a young man could aspire to follow his father into one of Nottingham's many industries, to marry a girl from the next lane and, if his family had stayed in favour with the Rent Man, hope to move with his new bride into a house 'next-door-but-one' from 'Our Mam', perhaps across the street from 'Our Aunty.' It was a community where a woman's worth was measured by the whiteness of her washing

hanging in the yard, how clean her front step was and if she washed her windowsills. In domestic science at school, girls were taught the proper way to scrub a kitchen table, following the grain of the wood – a skill they would take into their marital home. A table scrubbed almost white was a source of great pride, and a woman's moral inclinations would be judged by her domestic standards. A woman who left her table uncleared and unscrubbed was likely 'no better than she ought to be', destined to be the subject of yard-end gossip.

Alf's education was comprised of the three R's (reading, 'riting and 'rithmatic) and a firm grounding in the glories of the British Empire, whose many colonies were represented in red on the world map. On leaving school at 14, there were few opportunities for a Meadows lad with such a limited education, and Alf became a bricklayer's labourer. When he wasn't mixing mortar and handing bricks to the bricklayer, he was writing poetry on great sheets of butcher's paper. He wrote of lonesome prairie riders, Nottingham dances and unrequited love – poems of courage in the face of the wily Hun. Though his poetry might be considered amateurish, I find its simple sincerity all the more poignant. Here is a short example:

Listening to the wind in the grass and the trees
To the patter of the rain on my window pane
In my heart there will be no peace
I am wondering when I will see you again

Alf was also an artist, drawing intricate scenes of Wild West adventures, horses and wagons, cowboys and Indians for his kid brother, Ronnie. Being a labourer must have been a frustrating existence for a young man with such sharp intelligence and imagination.

He eventually sought a better life for himself by joining the RAF. But five months later war broke out with Germany. Alf quickly ascended the ranks, becoming a sergeant in a few short months. He was transferred to 139 Squadron as a wireless operator and air gunner, flying as part of a three man crew on raids to Europe in a Bristol Blenheim Mk.IV. The Blenheims were ill matched against the German

Messerschmitts, routinely suffering terrible losses at the hands of the German Luftwaffe, and by 1942 they had been withdrawn and replaced by The Mosquito.

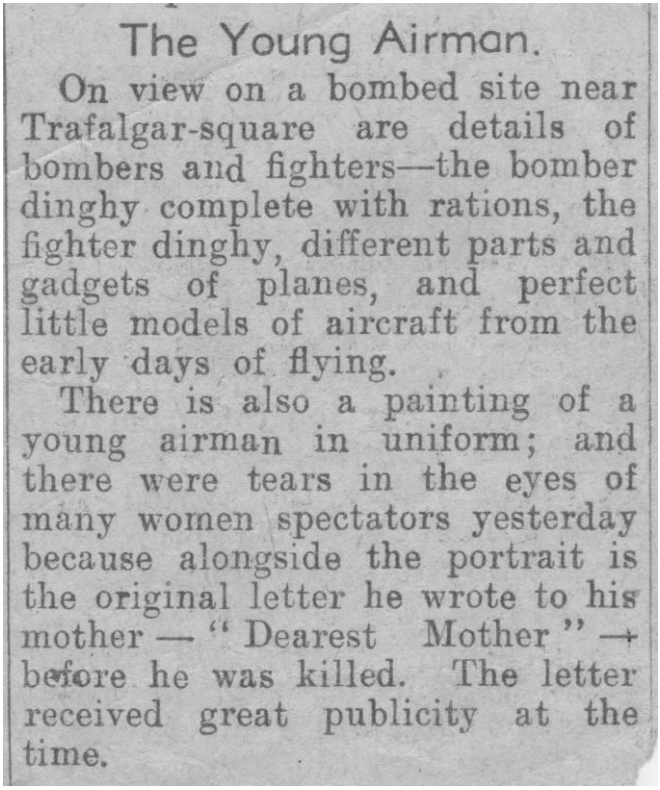
On its return from one such raid, on 23 December 1940, Alf's plane would crash into a field in Norfolk. The other two crew members perished in the plane and young Alf was on fire as he bailed out, his parachute tangling in the branches of a tree. He was found by a farmer, still hanging by the straps of his parachute, terribly injured but alive, and was taken to the Norfolk hospital, where he would die 18 days later.

During his time in the RAF, Alf had written most days to his mother, Polly. In one letter he confided his love for Ivy, seeking her approval to ask for Ivy's hand in marriage. Their remarkable bond was obvious. But of all these letters, he was to be remembered for his final one, in which he said goodbye to his Dearest Mother.

My father, Ron, was 11 when his big brother's body came home to Nottingham; as was the custom, Alf was laid out in the front room. My father recalled creeping down the stairs late one night to witness Polly, hysterical, breaking her heart over her eldest boy's body, clutching Alf's final letter from his personal effects. One can only imagine Polly's state of mind when a reporter from the Nottingham Evening Post called looking to report the local boy's death. Somehow Alf's letter ended up with the Press. Within a month his image and letter had appeared in the London Daily Mirror and, six months later, the Toronto

Weekly Star as part of a recruitment drive. Alf was labelled a hero, who 'had died so we might live.' It was hoped his brave and patriotic farewell letter to his 'Dearest Mother' would inspire other young men to take up arms with the blessing of their mothers.

My grandmother, Polly, did not need the Ministry of Information to tell her Alf was a hero. He'd been her hero since he was 10 years old. During the final fight of his parents' marriage, Alf had defended his mother, smashing a chair over his father's head after he'd raised his fists to Polly. Ronnie was only two years old but remembered my grandfather, head bandaged, arriving the next day for his belongings. He was to remain out of my father's life for the next three decades. Life was hard for Polly and her two boys once my grandfather left. The three of them moved around, living in someone's front room for half a crown a week until Polly got behind in the rent or they outstayed their welcome. Then it was time for another moonlight flit, their possessions balanced on a handcart.



The Young Airman.

On view on a bombed site near Trafalgar-square are details of bombers and fighters—the bomber dinghy complete with rations, the fighter dinghy, different parts and gadgets of planes, and perfect little models of aircraft from the early days of flying.

There is also a painting of a young airman in uniform; and there were tears in the eyes of many women spectators yesterday because alongside the portrait is the original letter he wrote to his mother — "Dearest Mother" — before he was killed. The letter received great publicity at the time.

After Alf's death, Polly received letters of condolence from far and wide, from places she'd never heard of and would never visit. But the

strangers' letters did not give her comfort. They made her angry and she stopped reading them. For Polly carried a secret. It was rumoured her beloved son, who loved Britain so dearly, had been killed by his own; that Alf's plane was accidentally shot down over England by British anti-aircraft guns.

Strangers told Polly she was lucky to have another son and that Ronnie would have to make up for two sons. But Ronnie could not take the place of Alf, and a bereft Polly could not keep smiling nor keep her chin up, living with the knowledge that the death of her elder son had been unnecessary. Nine months after Alf died, Polly's life tragically ended.

Polly chose the son she had lost, and left behind the son who still lived. At 12 years old, my father was alone in the world, losing his big brother and his mother within months of each other. Alf and Polly are buried together at Wilford Hill Cemetery, in Nottingham. Alf has a military headstone and Polly a simple flower pot, her life condensed into a few words: 'Mary Elizabeth Harrison, Died Aged 42, Mother of Alf and Ron.' Having only recently learnt of Polly's secret, I struggle with my feelings of anger and sadness at the fates of Polly and Alf and Ronnie.

My own son has fair hair and blue eyes and, at the age of four years and 96 days, he possesses a fresh complexion. He bears a faint scar across his nose after a close encounter with the family cat when he was two. I have given him the middle name Harrison in remembrance of his Granddad Ron and his Great Uncle Alf; and when he is older, I will tell him the story of a young man from the back streets of Nottingham, who was a poet and an artist, who loved his mother and his country with a blind passion. I will tell him, too, of my pride in the working class lad whose death touched so many, so far away.

Margot Albrecht (née Harrison)
October 2011