

Book tells how pilot was shot down and killed

# Joan's war





**CHRIS FERRIS**

**A** SILVER cigarette case lies on the table at the home of Joan Baughan, a unique memento from the Second World War – the conflict that claimed the life of her husband and launched her into the top secret world of Royal Air Force bomber command.

Her memory has hardly faded with age and she can still convey her remarkable story with passion and humour at her quiet riverside house in Devon's Teign Valley.

More than half a century after the end of the war, Joan sat down to write her memoirs. It is the tale of one of those unsung heroes – the WAAF's who populated operations rooms, glimpsed in war films sticking pins in maps and listening intently to radio messages as their loved ones fly out on bombing missions.

It was pretty much like that for Joan, now 88, although her love affair ended only weeks into the war.

Exactly 100 days after their marriage, her pilot husband Norman Beck was shot down while flying his Handley-Page Hampden over Heligoland. He had not even told her of the mission and she thought it was a routine flight north to Liverpool.

"He said the night before he left 'I will be back for lunch'. He did not come back for lunch."

"Later, in the afternoon, I was told they had all been shot down and two officers had been saved but they didn't know which two," said Joan.

Weeks later a telegram reported her husband had died, although his good friend Bacchus – the best man



● **DASHING:** Norman Beck

at their wedding – had survived and was being held prisoner.

"The Germans returned the cigarette case," said Joan. She can still pick up the case, open it and see their marriage date inscribed inside.

Fifteen years after the war, she met up with Bacchus again, eventually becoming her second husband. Today they still live together, a stone's throw from their son's house, deep in the Devon countryside.

"They were chivalrous people, the Luftwaffe," said Bacchus. "It's not what you normally hear now of course."

He remembers escaping from the POW camp in Germany but being recaptured.

"We were on Frankfurt Station

when a crate of champagne arrived. It was a present from the commandant of the prison camp."

He said "it was my job to keep you in and your job to escape. You win."

Back in Britain, Joan became a WAAF, helping to plan the details of raids and plotting the movements of the German airforce planes from HQ Bomber Command under the ultimate command of the legendary "Bomber" Harris.

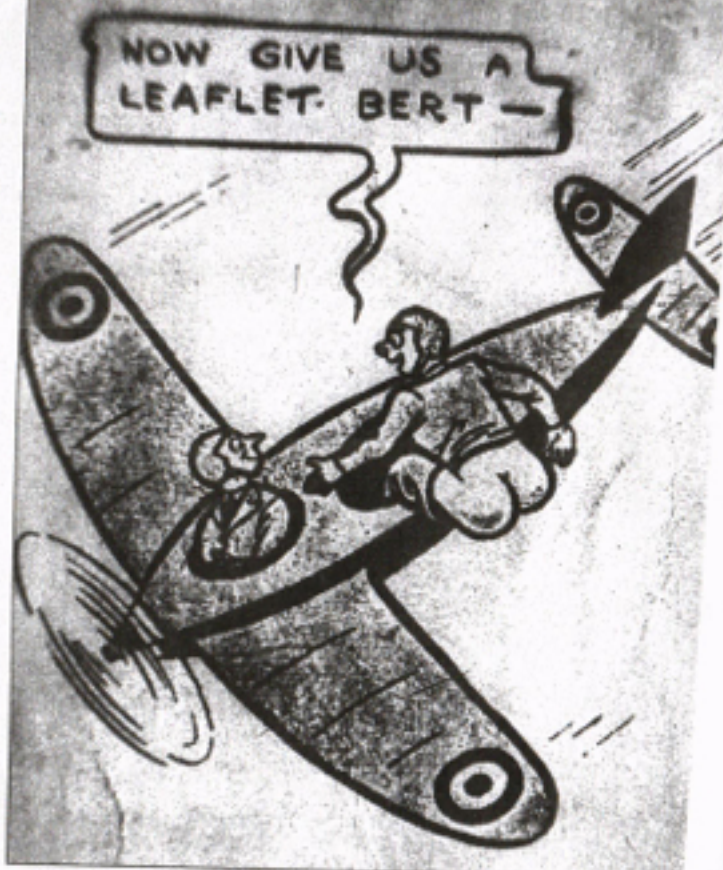
For her, places such as Dresden and Berlin were more than just names on a map and targets to be struck.

"I had visited Germany in the thirties," said Joan, who remembers travelling to Bavaria with a friend, two years before the war. "There were miles of soldiers and camps. It was the time of the Nuremberg Rallies."

She also remembers watching Hitler and other senior Nazis on a visit to the town where she was staying.

Much of the paperwork on which Joan worked still remains intact today. Most of it was released under the 30-year rule and she has received copies showing her own calculations, essential preparations for some of the biggest Allied bombing raids on Germany.

In a foreword to Joan's book, Group Captain PDB Stevens said: "There have been many, many books and articles written about World War II and a good proportion of these have been autobiographies. But there has never before been one quite like this; Joan has written entirely from the heart and, as she passionately insists, every word is part of a true account of what went on around her."



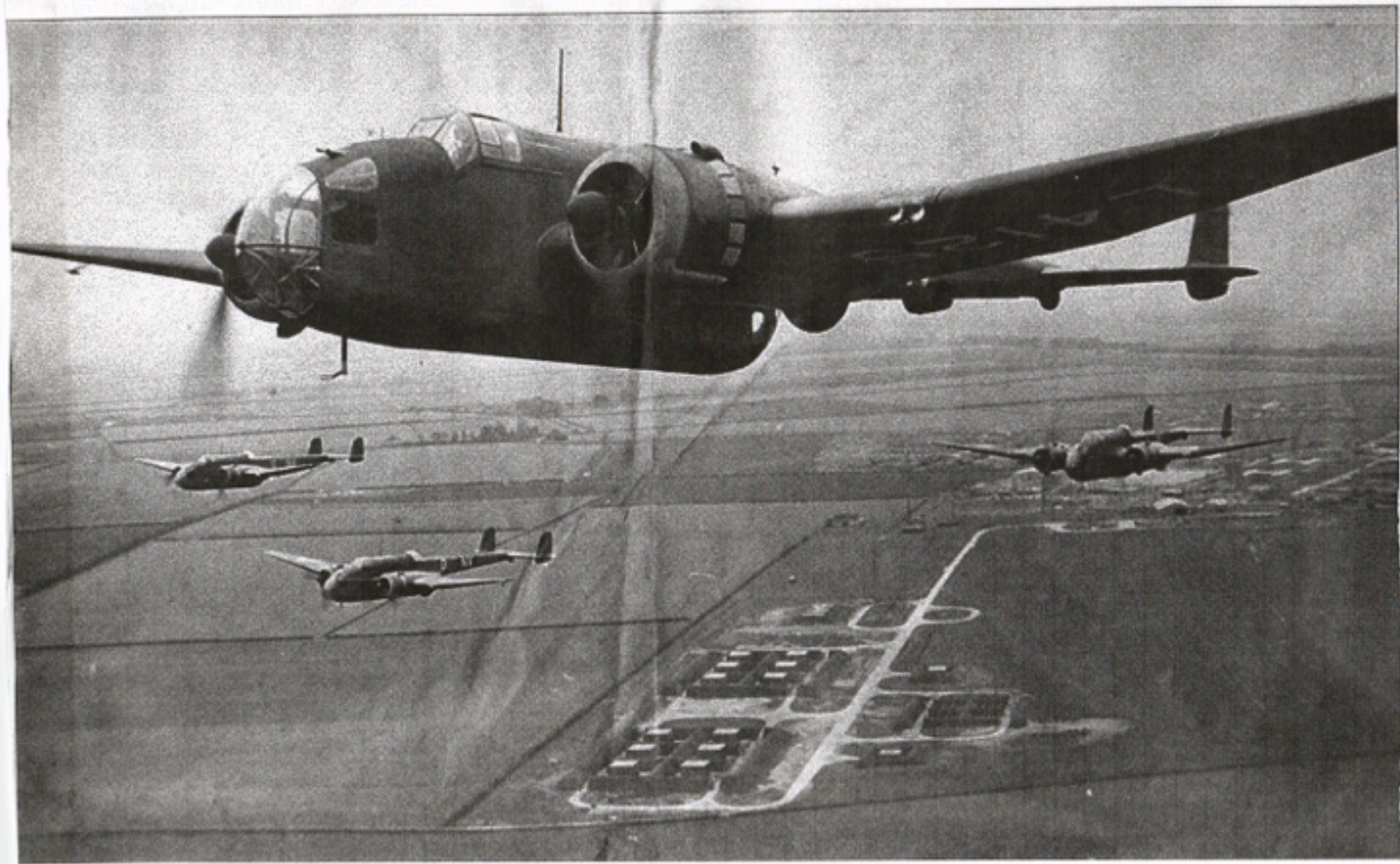
● **LIGHT-HEARTED:** A cartoon referring to the propaganda leaflets dropped over Germany by the RAF, featured in Joan's book

■ Joan Baughan's book *The Inimitable Joan, The War Years 1945*, is to be serialised over the next four weeks in the *Westcountry Morning News*. Starting next Tuesday, her story will be featured as part of our special supplement: *The Westcountry At War*. The book, which is published by Square One, costs £8.50.



just 100 days after his wedding — and his widow went on to plot bombing raids over Germany

# lives on in her memoirs





● **THEN:** Joan Baughan in 1939 before war tipped her world upside down



● **NOW:** Joan's memories of the war are still clear today



WAYNE PERRY



● **MEMORIES:** Joan Baughan, who now lives in a quiet riverside location in Devon's Teign Valley. Below, Joan, pictured with a friend, Mary Turner, taken during the war years while they were collecting scrap, such as garden rollers, for the war effort





The Second World War shaped the life of **JOAN BAUGHAN** launched her into the top-secret world of RAF Bomber Command. She tells her remarkable story.

# That wonderful life after 100 days

**M**Y war years began three months before war was declared. I was married on Saturday June 10, 1939, to flying Officer Norman Croxon Beck, and my name changed from Joan Evelyn Robertson, to 'Judy' Evelyn Beck, the Christian name being a nickname.

At the time of our marriage, he was 28 years of age in the previous April, and I became 28 in the August after our wedding. We were very much in love, and believe it or not, he asked me to marry him before even kissing me, and I remained a virgin until we married.

Very soon after the war started, the RAF dropped leaflets over Germany, informing the nation that we were at war to fight the Nazis. This started the "pantomime".

The first of such raids was on the night of September 3-4 and seven "attacks" were made in the first week of the war. Whitleys were used for this purpose, and the leaflets were dropped through the flare-chute and scattered by the slip stream. Several further raids of leaflet dropping were made during September. The first raid of leaflet dropping on Berlin was on October 1-2.

Aircraft from Finningley, another station in 5 Group, came over to us at RAF Station Hemswell, also in 5 Group, and dropped "leaflets" - sheets of 100 paper! That was too much for our chaps, so we at Hemswell retaliated by bombing Finningley with "jerrys" - in other words chamber pots, that's the polite word! The 5 Group of 144 squadron were equipped with Handley-Page Hampdens.

Soon after this "raid", Finningley came over again, and were met by a barrage of "balloons" - in fact they were not really balloons, but inflated condoms. You can imagine the release of tension this caused. Those early days were really horrid, but although many of us felt that war was looming, we tried to push the idea under the carpet.

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**DURING** late June or early July 1939, Norman, with others, flew to Paris to give an air display. They had a hilarious time, as one can easily imagine, swanning in the evening, dining and drinking, with the result that they were late on duty the following morning. The punishment was confinement to "camp" (the hotel) that evening. Wing Commander James C Cunningham, who was in charge of the officers, had to stay in the hotel also, to be sure that none of them escaped. Goodness knows how it was done, but at some time they date-stamped the receptionist's bottom!

Then the day came for their return. They flew over the keeper's cottage which Norman and I rented,

terribly low, so that I could see all the nuts and bolts on the aircraft. It was terrifying. The aircraft were loaded with booze, so the Station Commander, Group Captain E A B Rice, had to phone customs to say that his officers had each brought in some wine and other alcohol.

The all clear was given by customs, and a party in the mess was on. There was so much champagne and other wines, that some of the chaps tried to throw empty bottles through the wooden structure of the officers' mess.

A Squadron Leader Derbyshire came up to me and said: "Are you standing on your two legs all right?" I replied that I was, and he said that he was not. He had a wooden leg, which I did not know about until he told me!

Norman kept his eye on me, and eventually came over to me and asked what I was drinking. I said, "I don't know, but it's delicious!". He smelt it, and declared, "We are going back to the cottage". It was Pernod, which on top of champagne was a bit much. So off we went.

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**I MUST** admit that I really had a wonderful time before September 3, 1939, when war was declared. I became a widow on September 29, 1939, after 100 days of marriage.

On Wednesday, September 27, Norman was at home all day. He wrote letters to his mother, paid his tailor's bills, and so on. Then he suggested that we went on the lake. We were, as I said, living in a keeper's cottage on a large estate. We were allowed to use the little boat and row about on the lake. During this trip, we went amongst the water lilies. Suddenly I felt truly frightened. I asked him to take me ashore, as I felt the lilies were pulling at me, to drag me down. He said to me, "You must not be afraid of drowning, it's said to be a very kind way to die, and unstressful".

It was on the 29th, two days later, that he was drowned after being wounded.

Early that morning I heard the aircraft warming up. But Norman had told me he was duty officer for 24 hours, and would not be back until lunch time on the 29th. So I turned over and went back to sleep. The dream I had is still vivid in my mind today.

I saw lots of water, and Bacchus Baughan, who was a great friend of Norman's, and best man at our wedding, coming towards me. I asked him, in my dream, where Norman was, and he only said he did not know. But I do remember all that water.

The real story was this. Norman was the first to be shot down over Heligoland, and Bacchus was shot down over the sea. There were five Hampdens



**IN.** The conflict which claimed the life of her husband also  
nmand. Over the next four weeks, Westcountry at War will  
rkable story

# il time ended of marriage



**HAPPY DAYS:** Joan in 1939 before the war

n this raid, and none returned. However the Ger-  
ians reported that two officers had been saved and  
ere now PoWs.

Extract from *Bomber Command - The Air Ministry  
account of Bomber Command's Offensive against the  
axis - September 1939-July 1941 (HMSO):*

**URING** the first weeks of the war it was rarely possi-  
e to act on the information obtained by air reconnai-  
nce, for the ships of the enemy remained too close to their  
uses. They cruised about at night, returning in the morn-  
g and remaining in port every weekend.

It was therefore decided that Bomber Command should  
iderake reconnaissance in strength, using aircraft  
ipped with bombs and ready to attack. In pursuance  
this policy, a squadron of Hampdens patrolling the  
eligoland Bight on September 29, in two formations of  
and five, found and attacked two enemy destroyers.

Owing to what appears to have been an error in timing,  
e two formations became separated, and when the sec-  
d reached the area the enemy had been roused to action.  
ie five aircraft comprising this formation were intercept-  
ed. None of them returned, and the Germans claim to

have shot them all down with the loss of two of their own  
fighters.

The other formation, attacking the destroyers from 300  
feet, was met with heavy pom-pom fire, and a well-aimed  
shell went through the nose of the leading aircraft of the  
first flight. It struck the pilot on the elbow causing him  
involuntarily to pull back the stick and swoop sharply  
upwards. The other two aircraft close behind followed  
their leader. All the bombs fell into the sea wide of their  
mark...

The experience gained from this raid and that of Sep-  
tember 4 appeared to show that a level attack of heavily-  
armed naval vessels from such a low height was likely to  
prove a costly undertaking. Moreover, the penetrating  
power of the bombs dropped is uncertain, and the risk that  
they may bounce off the decks or turrets very real...

■ This is the incident which cost Norman Beck his  
life.

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SO for over six weeks I waited and waited, hoping  
Norman was one of the two saved. Then the  
telegram arrived, reporting his death. The shock  
temporarily partly paralysed me. The other Officer  
besides Bacchus who was saved was Bob Coste, a  
Canadian.

Soon after this dreadful shock, the Germans sent  
Norman's silver cigarette case, and silver chain with  
identity discs back to me, through Group Captain  
Burgess at Air Ministry, who asked me if Norman  
had at any time given me the key to the code for  
writing to PoWs.

I had to say no, he had not done so. Under his  
instructions I did try to write to Bacchus, but to no  
avail. But all his letters to me were seen by Burgess  
in those early days.

After Norman was killed, it was not only heart-  
breaking, but my parents had not been in favour of  
my marriage to Norman in the first place. My wed-  
ding had enabled me to escape. A bride's thrill, of  
a white wedding, bridesmaids and so forth, was not  
on.

I suppose this was my punishment. But this atti-  
tude of my parents did not gain them much. It gave  
me untold happiness to see my friends, who had  
gate-crashed the wedding.

They all adored Norman, who had the most noble  
character. He was always thinking of others, and  
never hurt anyone with a stray remark. He was com-  
pletely unselfish.

■ These extracts are taken from Joan Baughan's book,  
*The Inimitable Joan*, which is published by Square One,  
priced £8.50. In next week's *Westcountry at War*, Joan  
Baughan signs up as an airwoman with the WAAF





● **ANY OLD IRON:** Later in the war Joan and a friend, Joy Blackwell (pictured below), were involved in the campaign to collect scrap metal





# The Inimitable Jo

**J**OAN Baughan's early life reads like a fairy tale. Born into a well-to-do family, she lived in luxury in a large house with a lake in the garden and grew up to be a beautiful woman.

A social butterfly, in great demand at parties and balls, she had a string of admirers. Joan met and fell in love with her Prince Charming right on cue. He was a dashing RAF flyer, Norman Beck.

They married in June and expected to live happily ever after. But this was 1939 and 100 days later he was dead - shot down in the second daylight raid of the war. The shock temporarily paralysed Joan. She was now a widow at 28 and needed to lose herself in work of some kind.

Girls from her background were not expected to have careers but the war was starting to change attitudes. She became a metallurgist, travelled the country selling metals and collected "any old iron", door to door. Joan was willing to turn her hand to anything to fill her days and heal her grief.

The turning point came when she joined up as an ordinary WAAF. This opened up an extraordinary chapter in her life that led to a commission and top-secret intelligence work at Bomber Command Headquarters - for a time she was the only WAAF officer in the whole intelligence section.

For 50 years, Joan has had to keep her secrets but has now broken her silence in a book: 'The Inimitable Joan', a fascinating account of her war years. Joan is 84 and has enough sparkle to outshine a woman half her age.

She found love again and in 1954 married Bacchus Baughan, the best man at her first wedding.

He was Norman's friend, shot down on the same raid, who was rescued and spent the war in German POW camps.

They have lived in Ringmore, near Plymouth, for 38 years and it was at her thatched cottage - complete with ghost - that Joan shared highlights of her remarkable story. She tells me it has already caught the attention of one local TV producer.

Joan said she'd had a spectacular week, with the launch of the book, packing up to move house and keeping builders converting her new home, on their toes.

She started writing the book a year ago and it came easy to her.

**'She regularly took the famous blue book, containing top-secret documents, to Churchill at Chequers.'**



**WRITE STUFF:** Joan Baughan today and, left, in August 1931

done in the war. I hope it helps to show those who lost loved ones what went on.

Joan doesn't gloss over the horrors of the war, but brings a light touch to anecdotes about wartime life and the young men and women facing death but determined to live life to the full for as long as they were able. It is a captivating read.

Joan said her war really started when she sold her old Austin 7 car to Air Commodore Robert Stanley Aitkin and they became firm friends. She giggles as she remembers the look on his face when he saw her little car, hidden by her father's Silver Cloud Rolls Royce.

He took the young widow in hand, inviting her to the Officers' Mess and bringing her out of her shell. He also persuaded her to join up and request posting to Intelligence and Operations, which she did.

Her early days as an ordinary WAAF proved an eye-opener.

fun-loving personality endeared her to the crews. She saw them go off on raids like fresh-faced boys, returning with the haunted look of old men. At these times she'd give them cocoa and listen sympathetically.

"I was asked years after the war what I had done to be mentioned in dispatches and I replied - 'I made cocoa with bubbles on top'."

Joan felt she had found her niche when she was summoned to Bomber Command Headquarters at High Wycombe in 1942, shortly after Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur "Bomber" Harris became Commander-in-Chief. She was to spend the rest of the war there.

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as losses," she said.

As the war heated up, Joan spent so much time in the "h" - the underground nerve centre that her doctor ordered her to have sun ray treatments.

Once her superiors realised she could be relied on and knew to keep her mouth shut, she had access to vital plans and information. She regularly took the famous "blue book", containing secret documents, to Churchill's Chequers.

When she learned that Nuremberg was a target, it brought back memories of her 1937 visit when she had seen Hitler at the airport and been terrified by what she saw.

She was on duty when Dresden was bombed and watched the mounting casualties as the bombers drew to a close.

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Joan said she'd had a spectacular week, with the launch of the book, packing up to move house and keeping builders converting her new home, on their toes.

She started writing the book a year ago and it came easy to her. Some parts were painful but she felt the guiding hand of Norman as she wrote.

"I'm psychic, you see. I've seen two ghosts in broad daylight. One in this house and one at the church," she said.

Joan had a premonition on the last day she and Norman spent together. It happened when they were boating on a lake and went among waterlilies.

"I asked him to take me ashore because I suddenly felt the waterlilies were dragging me down. He told me not to be afraid of drowning because it was a kind way to die. Two days later he drowned in the plane crash.

"We were very much in love. Things were different in those days. He didn't kiss me until he had proposed and I was a virgin when I married him," said Joan.

She agreed that writing the book had helped lay some ghosts.

"I was proud to write it. If you put your mind to it, you can do anything. I've had someone tell me I have the knack of describing both fun and pain that comes straight from the heart. I was told I should record what I had

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documents,  
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WRITE STUFF: Joan Baughan today and, left, in August 1942

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Her early days as an ordinary WAAF proved an eye-opener. Conditions were primitive and at her first station she had to eat runny stew with a handbag mirror and a nail file because there were no knives and forks. This was not easy for a girl brought up to appreciate the finer things of life.

"Int Ops in the early days before I was commissioned was sort of donkey work, doing call signs which were changed every day, but they had to be accurate otherwise some lives would be endangered.

"It was not so important as my first station where I interrogated crews coming back from missions over enemy territory. I also made daily broadcasts which wasn't easy if many planes had been shot down," she told me.

In the briefing room one day she chatted to a Fligh. Lieutenant who asked her about herself and she told him what she could.

"That night he was shot down and captured. I learned after the war that the next morning he and Bacchus had a long chat about me in the POW camp," she grinned.

Joan's pretty face and warm

fun-loving personality endeared her to the crews. She saw them go off on raids like fresh-faced boys, returning with the haunted look of old men. At these times she'd give them cocoa and listen sympathetically.

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**'He told me not to be afraid of drowning because it was a kind way to die. Two days later he drowned.'**

Harris would probably have been accused of sex discrimination today - women had to be removed from the ops room during his daily conference to discuss the target for the night.

Joan has a multitude of stories about wartime figures, film stars and royalty she encountered. Her book has data, interception and tactic reports of interest to students of the war years and flying buffs.

"Intelligence III was the section in which I worked. My boss was Wing Commander Vivian Varcoe. Our responsibility was enemy defences, German fighter aircraft, gun sights, balloons and searchlights. We also kept charts giving the statistics of bombs dropped and the number of aircraft on each raid as well

as losses," she said.

As the war hotted up, Joan spent so much time in the "h" - the underground nerve centre that her doctor ordered her to have sun ray treatments.

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"Bomber Harris did not want to bomb Dresden, but he was ordered to do so," she says in the book.

A month before VE day, Joan's mother had a stroke and she had to leave to nurse her. It was a blow because she felt she had been new ground for women.

"It was a bitter disappointment when I had to hand over a man," said Joan grimly.

As the men started to come home, and she was alone, Joan felt she had to get out of England. She went to Denmark and lived in a castle with a Baron then worked her way across Australia for 23 months.

When she got back, Bacchus looked her up and asked her to marry him. Joan had been a widow for 15 years and had turned down many proposals of marriage. This time she said "Yes".

At 45, Joan gave birth to her son, Charles, and after a post-war move to Germany, the family settled down to country life in Devon where she has a happy retirement.

● The Inimitable Joan is published by Square One at £8.95 and is available from Dillor Bookshop, Plymouth. You can order by phone on 01548 81031