



Après Moi



The 617 Squadron
Aircrew Association Newsletter

Winter 2009/10



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Cover Photo: Robert Owen and John Bell at the dedication of the memorial at Rilly la Montagne

Editorial

Somewhat later than originally planned, this issue of *Après Moi* placed me in the unusual position of having too many articles to include, and I had to make a difficult decision which ones to leave over to future issues; these include Arthur Ward's account of the final Tirpitz raid flying with Wg Cdr 'Willie' Tait which was sent to me by Arthur's widow, Peggy, and an article on the record breaking non-stop flight from UK to Sydney in 1961 by a young Sqn Ldr Beavis of 617 Sqn in a Vulcan B1.

This slightly expanded edition includes three eye-witness reports of 617 Sqn's World War II exploits – two from members of the Squadron and one from a German survivor of the destruction of the Tirpitz, kindly sent in by Tom Bennett.

If you are one of the eighty or so members who have not updated their membership standing orders to £10 per annum payable on 1 September each year, please do so as soon as possible to ensure that you continue to receive *Après Moi* and details of Association functions after this edition.

As always, I appeal for articles from all members of the Association for future issues of the newsletter.

Chris Henderson

Deadline for Summer Newsletter

1st April 2010

email: 617sqnnews@tiscali.co.uk

or

Springfield Farm, Old Church Lane, Pateley Bridge, Harrogate HG3 5LY

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Robertson's Ramblings

I am pleased to report that the Association has been given planning permission for the erection of a post-World War 2 memorial adjacent to the existing memorial in Woodhall Spa. With this permission secured, we can now begin to consider how we could raise the monies required to pay for the new memorial. You might recall that the original cost was estimated to be in the region of £22,000, however, this did not include the landscaping of the ground on which the memorial will sit – and knowing how costs tend to escalate upwards, I think that it would be wise to plan for the final cost to be in the region of £30,000 by the time it is finished. I'm hoping that at least half of this can be raised through corporate sponsorship and fund raising and this is where the Association now needs your individual support.

What we need now (and in relatively quick order) are ideas for fund raising and thoughts on how we could attract corporate and media sponsorship. All ideas will be considered and I should be grateful if you would let me know your thoughts via my email address (opposite) or via snail mail to my home address. In particular, if any of you would like to take this on as a 'project', under guidance from the Committee, please let me know.

On the subject of the Committee, there are a number of positions that will become vacant next May and I am looking for volunteers to fill them. I will relinquish my role as Chairman of the Committee, Dave Moore requires someone to take over as Membership Secretary and as Clive Mitchell has landed a plum job overseas which will not allow him to continue as Treasurer, a replacement for him is also required - Chris Henderson is currently standing in for Clive. Three key appointments that need committed individuals to take the Association forward. None of the jobs are onerous but without individuals who are willing to give their time and brain power, you wouldn't be able to enjoy our regular reunions. Please let me know if you are a 'committed' member of the Association and willing to give up some of your time to help.

Finally, I hope that you are all well and that you enjoy this latest missive of *Après Moi*. I look forward to seeing you once more at our next gathering in May.

Yours aye

David

d.robertson474@btinternet.com

News from the Frontline

After a difficult period during which the Squadron was split across two continents in support of the Lossie training wing Op HERRICK deployment, we can finally look forward to a period of relative stability and the return of the crews we loaned out.

With a spate of new arrivals we are concentrating on combat ready workups with the odd more advanced sortie thrown in to maintain a core capability. The flying rate itself would appear to have taken a turn for the better. The Squadron hierarchy would have us believe that is due to us wholeheartedly embracing the new engineering concept giving the engineers a chance to work on aircraft between waves. It did, however, also coincide with all the flight commanders going on leave at once which allowed us to avoid a plethora of niff-naff and trivia allowing us to concentrate on our core tasking; the jury is still out. What is not in dispute is that it has been successful, so much so that several navigators, other than Woody, actually managed to get their hours into double figures for the month.

Over the summer and autumn months the Sqn supported a number of close air support exercises which involved training for British forward air controllers in preparation for their forthcoming deployment in support of operations in Afghanistan. Furthermore, exercises such as Joint Warrior and Tactical Leadership

Training (TLT) were also supported by the Squadron in which a number of 4-ships were flown (for the past 18 months, this has been a more unusual occurrence).

This autumn has also seen a large turnover of personnel with many leaving to enter the training world in one form or another. We say goodbyes to Gav Card, Andy Slater, Chris Harding and Jon Mulhall and hello's to Jane Pickersgill, Tim Colebrooke, Dan Holford, Jake Fleming, Garry Montgomery, John Overton and Sam Williams; two of whom have seen the light and joined us from the F3. The numbers will also be boosted when Fish and Gav return to flying after their little experiment with parachutes in Afghanistan.

Despite this large turnover, 617 Sqn managed to deploy the majority of the Squadron to RAF Marham for three days in November. On Thursday 12 November, exactly 65 years after the sinking of the Battleship Tirpitz, 617 Sqn and IX(B) Sqn re-enacted the event at Wainfleet range in a bombing competition that lasted an entire day. Following the bombing competition both squadrons attended a dining-in night at the Officers' Mess at RAF Marham, along with the original Tirpitz bulkhead, to find out whom the rightful winners were. No 617 Sqn left Marham victorious and IX(B) were left with a long bomb to find!

For the forthcoming year the Squadron have got a number of

things on the horizon to look forward to. We say goodbye to Flt Lt Dave Tait who is off to do the Qualified Weapons Instructors course for nine long months. In March the Squadron will detach to RAF Gibraltar for 10 days for some air combat training and

finally April will see the Sqn moving to the USA for three weeks of heavy bombing.

Meanwhile, Merry Christmas and a Happy New year!

Lucy Williams



© Peter West

Dams Raid Weekend 15/16th May

This year's Dams Raid Reunion Dinner will be held on Saturday 15 May at the Petwood Hotel, Woodhall Spa. The cost of the dinner will be £32 per person including wines. For those staying at the hotel a special reduced rate for members is available. The Vicar of St Peter's Church, Woodhall Spa, the Reverend Andrew Smith will conduct a short service of remembrance at the 617 Sqn Memorial at 1000hrs on Sunday 16 May. Weather permitting (and subject to MOD funding), a fly-past by aircraft of 617 Sqn will follow the service.

Contact the Secretary, Mike Hines for further details.

RAF AGAINST THE E-BOATS

ROTTERDAM 29 DECEMBER 1944

During World War II some operations carried out by RAF squadrons were considered less hazardous than others. With one or two exceptions these were usually the shorter trips to targets on the enemy coast, or limited depth penetrations when opposition was expected to be slight. This did not detract from the value or the significance of the trip, nor signify that its importance to the war effort was any less than longer and more dangerous sorties. It is one of these shorter operations that I will describe below, but one that through a strange coincidence of history has a twist in the tail.....

Although many had believed that the war would be over by Christmas 1944, by the end of December that year the conflict was still unabated and about to enter its sixth year. As the Allies advanced into Europe, forcing the German forces back across the Rhine, the Kriegsmarine (German Navy) had been forced to surrender its French Atlantic and Belgian bases, placing even greater importance on those in the Netherlands and Scandinavia.

One such port was Rotterdam. From here high speed torpedo boats – S-boats (known to the Allies as E-boats) of the Kriegsmarine's 9th Flotilla set out on night-time minelaying and torpedo sorties. Although limited in scale, these

operations were seen as a serious threat to Allied supply shipping and naval operations. Protected by their speed and the cover of darkness the E-boat threat was difficult to combat. By day day, the boats were based in and around the large concrete shelters constructed by the Germans at Rotterdam and IJmuiden.

The Rotterdam pens were situated on the east side of the Waalhaven and were built in three sections, each measuring some 150 feet x 25 feet with an 8 feet thick roof protecting 16 pens, together with workshops and torpedo and mine preparation areas. Anti-aircraft positions on the roof were intended to deter any Allied aircraft from passing directly overhead.

Intensive E-boat activity on the nights of 22/23 and 23/24 December caused the senior Allied commanders to request heavy attacks against the pens at the earliest possible date.

The Royal Air Force's only weapon capable of breaking through the thick concrete roofs of the pens was the 12,000lb Tallboy deep penetration bomb. Designed by Barnes Wallis, Tallboy measured 21 feet long, with a maximum diameter of 3 feet 2 inches. The cast steel nose section contained 5,200 lb of Torpex explosive. The bomb was of streamline shape, with a long light alloy conical tail, mounting four small square fins. The fins were

offset by 5 degrees, causing the bomb to rotate during its fall, improving stability and improving its accuracy.

Since June 1944 when the Squadron had been equipped with Tallboy we had used it to great effect against the large concrete V-weapon sites and massive U-boat shelters in France, not to mention the battleship Tirpitz. The Rotterdam pens were shortly to join the list of seemingly impregnable targets to succumb to Tallboy.

The morning of 29 December dawned with patchy mist forming over the flat Lincolnshire fens, giving way to clear blue skies. Orders were issued at 10.40 am for the Squadron to prepare 16 Lancasters, each carrying one Tallboy, to attack the target.

As we received our briefing, ground crews prepared the aircraft. Loading each Tallboy was a complicated business. Three fuses were fitted into the rear of the nose section before the tail unit was fitted, the completed bomb being lifted by a 6 ton crane onto a special trolley to be towed by a tractor and carefully positioned beneath the aircraft. Owing to the great size and weight of the bomb, rather than winching it slung from the aircraft, it was mounted on a special cradle on the trolley. At each corner of the cradle was a winch operated by an armourer who wound the bomb up into the bomb bay, ensuring that it was positioned accurately against stops that would prevent it from moving in flight. Arming wires, enabling the bomb to be fuzed in the air were connected. A linked metal strop, connected to a release unit, passed around the bomb holding it securely

in place until the moment of release. Whilst this activity was going on, other ground crew were busy readying the aircraft, ensuring sufficient fuel oil and ammunition was loaded and carrying out final checks to ensure everything was fully serviceable.

Briefing was by now a routine affair. A general overview of the war situation would be given, followed by a description of the target and its significance. Crews would be shown maps and aerial photographs of the target and its surrounding area to help them identify key features. Critical times and heights would be detailed; navigators prepared their flight plans, plotting routes and turning points, noting predicted winds and weather conditions. Wireless operators were given call signs, radio frequencies and signals procedures, bomb aimers studied their aiming point. After briefing we would all return to our Messes for a meal before regrouping at the Flight to gather our flying clothing and equipment ready to board the transport taking us across the airfield to our waiting aircraft. After an external inspection of the aircraft to ensure all was in order, we climbed aboard and commenced our pre-flight and start up checks.

At the appointed hour the silence of the airfield was shattered as one by one 64 Rolls Royce Merlin engines burst into life and aircraft began to taxi from their dispersal areas to the end of the runway. The first Lancaster, piloted by Flt Lt Bernard Dobson began its take off run at 1305. The remaining aircraft were to take off at two to three minute intervals. At 1309 I

positioned Lancaster NF992, carrying the squadron codes KC-B, at the end of the runway. Taxying forward to straighten the tail wheel I applied the brakes awaiting the signal to go. A green light flashed from the Runway Controller's caravan - the signal for me to push open the throttles, taking care to keep the aircraft straight along the runway. With the build up of speed I could feel the flying controls become more responsive as the wings took the load until finally the heavily laden Lancaster left the ground. Resisting the temptation to climb, I retracted the undercarriage, watching the airspeed increase before starting the long slow ascent to operational height, milking the flap off in stages. By 1336 all the Squadron were airborne and circling ready to set course.

The first part of their route took us from Woodhall in a straight line towards Southwold, on the Suffolk coast. From there we flew south-east to a position on the Belgian coast near Blankenberge. As we crossed the North Sea we climbed to our briefed bombing heights of between 16,000 – 18,000 feet, forming up into our familiar “gaggle” formation. Now each of the sixteen aircraft was flying at a different height and position to its neighbour. It was a very loose formation designed to create a difficult target for the flak gunners whilst ensuring that each aircraft had a clear run directly over the

target without being buffeted by the slip stream from the aircraft ahead.

It was an uneventful flight in a bright, clear sky. We joined up with two squadrons of Spitfires from the 2nd Tactical Air Force who took up their positions above and up sun of our formation, providing defence against any Luftwaffe fighters that might attempt to intercept them. Increased Allied air superiority had lessened the chances of such an interception; nevertheless we were further reassured by the sight of this escort. Our 0.303 machine guns were no match against the 20 mm cannon of the Luftwaffe's Bf 109s and Fw 190s.

Reaching Blankenberge, Fg Off Harry Watkinson, my navigator, gave me a new course to take us north-east towards Dordrecht before turning for the final run towards the target.

The key to our extreme accuracy was the Stabilised Automatic Bomb Sight



Target photo taken by Fg Off Leavitt's crew

Mark IIA. Given optimum conditions an average well-trained crew could place a bomb within 80 yards of the target from 20,000 feet. However achieving this precision required considerable training, preparation and extremely accurate flying, including a long straight run up, during which no evasive action was possible, making us a sitting target for the defences.

Flying at 17,650 feet, we were approaching Rotterdam. At about 1435, some 20 minutes or so before reaching the target my bomb aimer, Flt Lt Tony Hayward, settled himself into his position in the nose above the bomb sight and switched it on to check it was functioning correctly. The sight was stabilised by gyroscopes that required some 15 minutes before they finally settled down. Meanwhile he set up the rudimentary computer box that controlled the sight, feeding in information on height and speed given to him by Harry Watkinson. Ensuring that the sight was set correctly for a Tallboy bomb load he clicked the bomb fusing switches to "Live" and called out, "Ready for bombing."

Harry was keeping me informed of the time and distance to run until we reached the calculated point some four minutes from target which marked the start of the bombing run. As we reached it, I opened the bomb doors, compensating for the slight change in the aircraft's handling as the Tallboy was exposed to the air. From now on it was essential that I maintained a steady course, keeping within 50 feet of the height and 5 knots of the airspeed set on the bomb sight computer. In addition I was

watching the needle of an indicator positioned above the instrument panel and connected to the bomb sight. As Tony made adjustments to keep the target in his sights the needle would move instructing me to make slight (and very gentle) changes of course to bring the aircraft exactly onto the target. As we approached the target a few guns opened up, but the bursts were inaccurate and caused little concern.

Although an attempt had been made to camouflage the target, bomb aimers were able to identify its position using nearby features. Tony Hayward had spotted the pens and was adjusting his sight, positioning them in the centre of the aiming mark. Now as the aircraft approached his task was to adjust the sight and keep the target centred in the graticule until the release point. About 15 seconds from release an illuminated light warned us that we were near dropping point. At the point calculated by the sight the bomb was released automatically and the light went out. At the same time Tony called "Bomb gone" to confirm the fact and we felt the aircraft lift, relieved of its 12,000 lb load. The time was 1457. Although we didn't see our bomb impact, it looked at this stage of the attack as though most bombs were falling short of the target.

Released from an optimum height of 18,000 feet at an airspeed of about 170 mph, a Tallboy took 37 seconds to fall. By the time it hit the target it was travelling at some 1,100 feet per second (750 miles per hour – approximately the speed of sound). For this attack the Tallboys had been

fitted with 11 seconds delay fuzes. These not only allowed them to achieve maximum penetration through the pen roofs before exploding but also ensured that smoke and dust caused by the detonation of the earlier bombs did not hamper the bomb aimers in the later aircraft.

The first two Tallboys had been released by Flt Lt Mark Flatman and Flt Lt Howard Gavin at 1456. Their bombs fell together, one scoring a direct hit on the roof, the other falling in the water just clear of the entrance to the pens. Six more Tallboys were released at 1457, followed 30 seconds later by four more. The remainder of the bombs fell in quick succession. Within two and a half minutes the attack was over, except for one final bomb released by Flt Lt Dobson. Unhappy about the accuracy of his first run he turned away to make a second attempt, releasing his Tallboy at 1505 from 17,100 feet. It overshot the target by 40 yards.

After bombing we headed back towards the coast. Passing over Hoek van Holland we turned to make a landfall at Cromer on the north Norfolk coast where we swung north-west onto a course that would take us back to Woodhall Spa.

All 16 Lancasters returned safely, landing between 1603 and 1636. At de-briefing we reported a successful attack. One direct hit had been seen by most crews in the centre of the southern end of the target. Two more hits were claimed on the western end, but smoke had prevented observation of the other bursts. It appeared to have

been an accurate and concentrated attack with only 3 wide bombs.

The following day photographic reconnaissance confirmed significant damage to the pens. At the entrance to the southern pens a Tallboy had caused a crater some 25 feet in diameter in the roof and destroyed a small building. Above the entrance another bomb (probably one of the first two to fall) had destroyed a section of roof measuring approximately 158 feet by 20 feet. Other bombs had fallen to the east, north-east and north-west of the pens, close to what were believed to be barracks and stores, destroying a number of buildings. Some 400 feet of quayside had been damaged, with railway tracks (essential for supplying the pens and delivering material and equipment for repairs) being cut in several places.

Despite the highly visible structural damage, German documents record that no E-boats were lost. The Squadron's earlier attack against the pens at Ijmuiden on 15 December 1944 had resulted in the destruction of one boat and severe damage to six others, with six pens being made unusable. As a result instructions had been issued that E-boats were no longer to be housed in the shelters, but would be dispersed around the harbour. The Rotterdam pens had been empty.

Nevertheless the effect on morale was significant. The Germans realised that the pens were no longer any guarantee of protection, whilst the Dutch civilian population took heart from the sight and sound of the

Royal Air Force, as they had done throughout four and a half long years of occupation.

As I mentioned, there is a twist to this story. That day, not far from the pens, a young Dutch girl was skating with her friends as the attack commenced. RAF attacks were familiar events at this stage of the war and she and her friends continued to skate, relatively unconcerned. To her this was just another stage in the inevitable and much-longed for liberation of her country. That young girl's name was Connie, and at the time she had no idea that over the next 65 years she and her future husband Jan van den Driesschen would establish a unique relationship with the airmen who were

bringing destruction to the Waalhaven pens. As a result of their dedication in tending to the grave of 617 Squadron's first Commanding Officer, Wg Cdr Guy Gibson VC, DSO, DFC at Steenberg and their desire to commemorate the contribution made by the RAF, Connie and Jan have become honoured guests at the Squadron reunions. In further recognition of their work and achievements they have now been elected as Honorary Members of this Association. They are but one example of the strong and lasting bond established between the British and Dutch people during this dark period in their history.

Benny Goodman

A Visit to Wartime Russia or Tirpitz Ahoy!

At 1700 on 11 September 1944 we left Woodhall for Yagodnik which was to be our base for an attack on the German battleship Tirpitz (Operation PARAVANE). This was an alteration of the original plan due to the prevailing weather conditions with a view to arrive soon after dawn on 12 September, and to prepare to operate that afternoon. What a hope! The ground crews were due to arrive in two Liberators before us and then prepare the aircraft for the operation. Last minute changes made this impossible, and the subsequent foul weather and lack of navigation

and radio aids also disrupted the plan. Around twenty or more aircraft appeared to have landed elsewhere, or made forced landings in the area. The field weather was 10/10ths cloud between 150ft and 300ft, and visibility 600yds to 2000yds in heavy drizzle and squally showers – nothing like the forecast (so what's new?) – combined with a lack of navigational aids. Had the ground crews arrived ahead of us, as expected, I am sure that they would have done something to help us, particularly radio/beacon wise.

Thanks to our excellent navigator Charlie Howsden, we arrived over

Yagodnik, but the weather did not allow a visual let-down. Skipper Freddie Watts asked me if I could do anything. I tried to contact the field without success and after several attempts managed to tune into a beacon on 325m/cs, and tuned it to the visual display meters (one in the cockpit). We let down on the approach and broke cloud at about 150ft abeam a power station on the Dvina River (pewh!) and flew up the river and straight into the field at Yagodnik. We had been airborne 11hrs 35mins. It was said that the beacon was out of service but I believe some crews misread the charts (which I still have). I understand our crew was the only one to use the beacon for landing.

We were greeted with a banner, 'Welcome to the Glorious Fliers of the Royal Air Force' but as we did not sink the Tirpitz on this occasion I think that was a little premature. The officers were accommodated on an old paddle steamer, the Ivan Kalyea on the river. Russian women seemed to do all the work and were loading logs on the ship and other duties.

Out of the force, twenty four aircraft were declared serviceable for the operation on the 13th. But, instead of finding fuel bowsers, six had been ordered, refuelling had to be done by slower means and it was not until early on the 14th that all aircraft were refuelled. What a task, and what a superb effort by all the ground crews who worked without respite for almost two days! Praise cannot be too high, and they had to do it in typical British weather – rain and cold, and the

aircraft were dispersed over a wide area with little transport provided.

The following day, 15 September was decided for the operation and we took off at 0925GMT which meant that we should land back before dark because of the lack of night flying facilities. Twenty seven aircraft took part with twenty Tallboy aircraft and seven loaded with Johnnie Walker mines. The Russians saw us off with a band playing 'Hail the Conquering Hero Comes' – again it seemed a bit premature in retrospect when we failed to sink the Tirpitz on this occasion.

We transited at low level to avoid detection by German radar. I was in the astrodome during the climb from low level to our bombing height but the Germans must have had warning as the smoke gushed out of pots on the shore and on the battleship. The weather over the target area was ideal and the smokescreen did not affect the first attacking aircraft which was flown by Wg Cdr J B Tait. We commenced our run behind him with our Johnnie Walker mines – I believe Tait's Tallboy hit the ship on the port quarter and some mines may have caused some damage, but one cannot be sure with so many aircraft involved fairly close to each other. We were airborne for 7hrs 25mins and landed safely back at Yagodnik.

While waiting for the weather to clear (it had rained for three days) we were entertained with cinema shows (underground) of Russia at war – all blood and gore, and a football match which we lost by a number of goals.



Conquering Cleo - "C" Charlie

Back Row: Dennis Cooper (W/Op A/G), Harry Luck (Flt Eng), M L MacKay (BA),
George Matthews (R/G)

Front Row: Charles Howsden (Nav), Robert Heggie (MU/G), Freddie Watts (Pilot)

Kit Howard and I went on a boat trip to Archangel, laid on for the crews, and had a meal at the Merchant Navy Club. We then went on to the Opera House with a woman Russian officer who showed us around and pointed out three massive pictures on one wall of Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin. On the way back one member jumped overboard into the icy river and was lucky to be very quickly picked out by a boat nearby. Sadly, Kit Howard and his crew along with Drew Wyness were to lose their lives on the Kembs raid. Kit had done sixty operations without a decoration and some people tried to get an award backdated as only a VC or MiD could be awarded posthumously. His family were understandably very upset over his loss as his elder brother had also

been killed in action. The family home was Castle Howard in Yorkshire.

Our stay at Yagodnik was quite interesting and not all bad, although the bed bugs caused much discomfort on the boat. The women cleaners came in every morning to wash the floors and paid no attention to us getting up half dressed. The Russian men stood on the deck smoking while the women worked. Everyone did everything possible to make our stay comfortable, and I have nothing but praise for these people who had 325 men suddenly dropping in on them. We left for home on 17 September at 1700GMT but were diverted to Lossiemouth, landing after a nine hour flight. Next day we returned to Woodhall and our comfortable life in the Petwood Hotel.

Dennis Cooper

Thanks to Air Traffic Control



Photograph: © Keith Sowler / www.abpic.co.uk

All Vulcan Mk2 crews will have heard of XL444 or better known as “Trouble Four”. Back in the distant past on 617 Sqn at Scampton, namely 44 years ago on 27 July 1965, myself and crew were scheduled to fly a Training Profile with a take-off time of 1800hrs. My co-pilot was John Foster, Chris Webster as Plotter and Pete Fry as AEO. The other rear seat was occupied by Flt Lt Knight from No 1 GSU – on board to carry out an AEO standardisation. We were allocated XL444 which was fully fuelled.

Everything went as routine on a beautifully clear and calm evening with take-off going fine, speeds as expected and “Rotate” called on schedule around 150 knots. Just at that moment as the wheels left the deck, a very pertinent piece of information came over the R/T from a very observant Air Traffic Controller. “You have lots of flame coming out of your port engines”

The immediate reaction was “S...” or similar followed by a very fast double check of engine instruments which showed everything to be OK. Pete Fry quickly scanned with the periscope and confirmed flames from the port side but was unclear as to which jet pipe they were emanating from although he thought it was No 1 – engine instruments still OK. At this stage as we were gently climbing away with gear coming up, I had no firm idea whether my problem was with No 1 or No 2 or both. Instrument readings remained normal, no vibration and no fire warning lights. Since the R/T call, probably no more than 10secs had elapsed but as something was obviously wrong I decided to shut down both engines on the port side and operate the fire extinguishers as flames were still in evidence even after shut down. Vulcan drivers will recall that it’s usually a case of “one out both out” with engines buried in

a tunnel. I made a gentle turn port at this high AUW and levelled out at 1000ft for an asymmetric circuit and landing. Flames and smoke ceased as I turned downwind. Pattern speed would have been around 183 knots with approach at 169 and threshold at 155. On touchdown I held the nose up for a while and then streamed the parachute so that it deployed at 135 knots or below. No problem at all and we stopped on the runway for the Fire Crew to check the aircraft and as the fire was now out and with no obvious signs of damage we taxied slowly into dispersal.

After exiting "Trouble Four", the Crew Chief told me that No 1 had seized solid but No 2 was still rotatable. I never did find out the cause of the problem with No 1 as it

was returned to the manufacturer for strip examination and somehow the feedback did not materialise. One wonders what the outcome might have been if we had not been told of the fire and had continued as normal with no abnormal instrument readings – the mind boggles. It tells you something about the good old Olympus 201's though.

XL444 went on to fly many more hours in her life but I bet you that it caused "Trouble" on numerous occasions. This was my heaviest landing and shortest ever Vulcan sortie thanks to the exceptional vigilance of an Air Traffic Controller who well earned a large number of beers in the bar.

Pete Odling

617 Squadron Aircrew Association Merchandise

The following items are available by post from John Bell at the address below. John will advise the additional cost of packing and postage. Cheques should be made payable to 617 Squadron Aircrew Association. John will also have the full range available for purchase at Association events at the Petwood Hotel, Woodhall Spa.

Gold Wire Blazer Badge - £5

Large Association Lapel Badge - £3.50

Small Squadron Lapel Badge - £3.50

Cuff Links - £6.50

Polyester Tie - £6.50

Silk Tie - £12.50

Bow Tie (untied) - £6.50

Bow Tie (tied) - £7.50

Scarf (Maroon & Blue) - £8.50

Silk Cravat - £17.50

Polyester Cravat - £10

Cummerbund (Poly) - £12.50

J R Bell, 5 Manor Court, Church Street, Storrington, Pulborough, RH20 4LH

New Zealand Bomber Command Memorial

I am aware of the ongoing discussions and the arguments for and against that have been expressed in the UK over the question of creating a memorial to honour those who lost their lives when serving in Bomber Command during the 1939-1945 War. I thought that it may be of interest to our members to advise of the successful effort made here in New Zealand to honour the 1,852 New Zealanders who lost their lives when serving in Bomber Command.

The decision made in 2006 to establish a Memorial and the

subsequent implementation including fund raising was led by a group of Air Force Veterans based in Auckland led by Wg Cdr Bill Simpson QSO,DFC, ex 109 Squadron and President of the NZ Bomber Command Association. Mr Richard Taylor of Weta Workshops was commissioned to design and manufacture a suitable sculpture. Members may remember that Richard was awarded several Oscars for his role in creating the special effects for the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy. Following consideration of designs submitted to Bill Simpson and his





Wg Cdr Bill Simpson QSO, DFC lays a wreath at the New Zealand Bomber Command Memorial

associated veterans, the sculpture as viewed in the accompanying prints, was commissioned at a cost of little over NZ\$100,000. As I understand it, the crew is made in bronze and the background clouds in white marble.

The site of the sculpture was originally planned for a specific position in the War Memorial Museum but a change of Directors resulted in that position being vetoed and this created difficulties between the Museum Board and the Association veterans. After the Association received considerable public support the Museum Board agreed to a compromise which included agreement to consult on a final alternative position of the sculpture

within the Museum area. A public dedication and unveiling was then held with the sculpture in a temporary position in the Hall of Memories on Sunday 1st March 2009.

There was a large attendance of Bomber Command veterans as well as considerable numbers of the public. Following the dedication the sculpture was jointly unveiled by the Chief of Air Force AVM Lintott ONZM and Wg Cdr Bill Simpson QSO, DFC. Special guests who addressed the gathering were The Hon John Banks, Mayor of Auckland, Mr A Vial, DFC, OAM, OPR, [Poli], President of the Pathfinder Association of Australia.

In attendance was Air Marshall Sir Richard Bolt, KBE, CB, DFC, AFC, and last but not least with 617 links myself and partner Christine, Arthur Joplin and Bette, and Ella Hebbard together with her son and daughter Bruce and Alison.

Les Munro

V-Force Reunion

Following the success of the previous V-Force Reunion in 2004, it has been decided to hold another reunion at Newark Air Museum on Saturday and Sunday 24th/25th April 2010.

On the Saturday evening there will be a buffet reception for up to 250 people at nearby Newark Golf Club.

See www.vforcereunion.co.uk for further details.

Returning to Rilly

On 31 July 1944 the Squadron despatched sixteen Lancasters, each carrying a Tallboy, to attack a railway tunnel south of Reims being used as a storage depot for V-1 flying bombs and which had been attacked a fortnight earlier by US 8th Air Force B-24 Liberators.

The Squadron were to bomb at the head of some 80 other aircraft from No. 5 Group. The Tallboys would be aimed to seal both ends of the tunnel, whilst the main force aircraft were to drop delay action 1,000 and 500 pounders to disrupt access to the tunnel and hamper repair and recovery work. There had been some consternation at briefing when it was revealed that the Squadron would be bombing from a lower level than the main force aircraft, but it was calculated that they would be clear as bombs from the higher force fell through the Squadron's bombing height.

Unfortunately timings went awry and both main force and the Squadron arrived over target at the same time. Flt Lt Bill Reid VC had just released his Tallboy and was holding the aircraft on course to obtain his aiming point photograph when the aircraft shuddered twice as it was hit by two bombs falling from the force above. One bomb fell through the fuselage by the mid upper turret, severing the controls, the other detaching a port engine. Realising their predicament Bill gave the order to bail out and

after seeing three of his crew descend into the nose, and receiving no reply from his gunners, sought to get out himself. With movement restricted by the increasing violent gyrations of the aircraft he tried unsuccessfully to exit via the cockpit side window, then, remembering the dinghy exit in the roof, reached up and turned the jettison handle. As he did so, he found himself falling through space, surrounded by parts of his disintegrating Lancaster.

Deploying his chute, he landed in a tree, but despite an injured hand and leg he set off in an attempt to clear the target area as soon as possible, but to no avail. After travelling for a mile or so he was captured by German troops, who took him to a nearby flak battery. On the way they passed the shattered tail section of his aircraft. Reid asked to inspect it and was horrified to discover the body of the mid upper gunner slumped near the door. The rear turret had broken off and lay wrecked a few hundred yards away, the dead gunner was still inside. Shortly after his arrival at the flak battery the Germans brought in his Wireless Operator, David Luker. Although it was not known at the time, the remaining crew had all been killed. The Germans recovered three bodies and buried them in Clichy Cemetery, Paris, but the body of F/Sgt Donald Stewart, the Flight Engineer was only discovered a week later and interred in the local cemetery at Germaine.

Two aircraft were lost during the operation, the second, a Lancaster from No. 9 Sqn being hit by flak and crashing locally with the loss of all its crew, who were also interred in Clichy.

Sixty five years later, inspired by members of a local aviation group, the inhabitants of Rilly la Montagne, took the decision to commemorate the attacks and remember those who had lost their lives during this operation with the erection of a memorial stone in Rilly's Place de la Gare, a short distance from the northern tunnel entrance. John Bell, who had flown as Bob Knights' bomb aimer on the operation and myself were invited to attend the dedication ceremony on June 3 and assist the mayor of Rilly in the unveiling of the memorial.

Travelling out on Friday June 12 and crossing the Channel via Le Shuttle we had a pleasant journey through the Pas de Calais and Picardy to Reims where we were met by Olivier Housseaux, who took us to meet another of the group, Joachim Lelongt, an instructor with the French Air Force who, along with his parents, were to provide us with accommodation and hospitality for the weekend.

Friday evening was spent on a "familiarisation" session, meeting other members of the group and travelling some 5 miles south to Rilly la Montagne, a delightful flower bedecked village in the champagne producing region, adjacent to the tunnel. Here we were shown the tunnel's northern entrance and watched the setting up of a commemorative exhibition in the local "village hall", a modern, stylish concrete and glass building adjacent

to the village's imposing war memorial. The exhibition comprised photographs of some of the Squadron's wartime personnel and aircraft together with various artefacts including fragments from one of the Tallboys dropped during the attack, mounted on a metal framework and with a replica tail unit, creating in effect a scaled down replica of the weapon. The team were delighted when John pointed out that one of the photographs showed his own aircraft, DV385, KC-A, "Thumper Mk III". More telling were photographs of the damage inflicted on the village – although our hosts were quick to point out that the majority of this was caused by an earlier attack on the tunnel by the US 8th Air Force, and not by Bomber Command – a fact borne out by study of post-raid intelligence reports. Despite the physical damage to property, human casualties were minimal, most of the population having taken shelter in the limestone caves beneath their homes, normally used for making and storing the local product. Despite our curiosity, we were not allowed to see the memorial, being deliberately kept well away in order to preserve an element of surprise for the following day.

Saturday dawned bright and sunny and we were taken to the village of Germaine, a short distance from the tunnel's southern entrance. Here we were joined by the mayor, Mme Corinne Demotier and other inhabitants of this small commune in the local cemetery where, after a brief and moving service, John and I laid a wreath on the grave of Donald Stewart, after which a trumpeter

played “God Save the Queen”. We then made our way with the entire entourage to La Mairie where we were entertained to champagne and speeches, during which a former mayor of the commune presented a portable oxygen bottle salvaged from the remains of Bill Reid’s Lancaster. In subsequent conversations with the villagers we learned much about Germaine’s wartime history, older residents recalling the period 1939-40, in particular the reaction of many members of the British Expeditionary Force whose arrival in France brought them into contact with the delights of French wine for the first time! More poignant were accounts of the village during the First World War, when, like Reims (which was reduced to rubble by German bombardment), it became caught in the middle between opposing French and German advances.

After an excellent lunch – and yet more champagne – we were taken back to Rilly for the dedication of the Memorial. Arriving in the square the town band was assembling and whilst John was being interviewed by the editor of the local newspaper the local population began to congregate for the event. As the appointed hour arrived we were taken over for our first glimpse of the memorial – at present shrouded in an RAF ensign. After introductions to the Mayor of Rilly and various other officials we positioned ourselves appropriately either side of the memorial. The band struck up and a number of proclamations were made, after which John and I were invited to join the mayor and reveal the monument.

The memorial comprises a slab of polished black marble, inscribed with a coloured Squadron crest, and bearing the inscription:

On 17 and 31 July 1944, the tunnel at Rilly la Montagne. A storage depot for German V-1 flying bombs, was the target for Allied bombers. On 31 July RAF Bomber Command mounted an attack by 97 Lancaster bombers, amongst them 16 Lancasters of No. 617 Squadron each carrying a 6 tonnes Tallboy earthquake bomb.

2 Lancasters failed to return from this mission: ME557 – 617 Sqn and LM453 – 9 Sqn

In memory of these two crews who died for our freedom



Rilly la Montagne Memorial

Beneath this is an applied metal relief showing a representation of the tunnel entrance, being broken by a Tallboy. The stone is approached by a short path, into which have been set railway lines leading to the memorial, with "sleepers" represented by inset pebbles.

As the ensign was removed the audience applauded and the band struck up the "Marseillaise", whilst an aerial tribute was made by the appearance of a Tiger Moth that continued to circle the village for the remainder of proceedings. John and I laid a wreath on behalf of the Association, to be joined by others from Rilly and Germaine. The mayor of Rilly then gave a speech recalling the courage of the crews and the sacrifice they had made. Having been briefed the night before, and asked if we would contribute to the proceedings, I had prepared a suitable oration, which had been refined from my very rusty 'O' level French into a more refined work by Olivier. Nevertheless, it was perhaps fortuitous that the Tiger Moth's Gypsy Major engine did much to conceal the inadequacies of accent and pronunciation as I echoed the mayor's sentiments and emphasised the importance of the lessons of history. A further declaration by a member of the aviation group was followed by a stirring speech by the local Member of Parliament (they always have to have the last word!) before we were asked to pose for numerous photographs before the appreciative audience.

After our fifteen minutes of fame we were led up across a footbridge,

providing an excellent view of the tunnel, to join the band who were to lead us together with other French veterans in a ceremonial march back through the houses to the exhibition hall, where yet again more champagne awaited our arrival.

Inside the exhibition hall villagers, both young and old, surrounded us, seeking signatures for their commemorative programmes. A number of the older residents recalled the events of July 1944, including Jean Bernard Quicheron, a young boy at the time, who is today a translator for the EC, and whose skills were invaluable in interpreting and facilitating many an interesting conversation. Several had brought along souvenirs of that time, including a pocket diary recording the effects of the bombing, photographs of the damage, and even a large piece of black camouflaged aircraft skin from Bill Reid's aircraft.

The following day we returned to Rilly for a closer inspection of the tunnel and the memorial. Courtesy of a local forest warden we were able to enter the woodland surrounding the tunnel where our hosts took us to see what has become known locally as "Le six tonne" – a perfect example of a Tallboy crater, part water filled, but still clearly recognisable. Heading south again towards Germaine, we visited the southern tunnel entrance and descended into the cutting, where the scar of a second Tallboy impact could still be clearly seen on the opposite slope. Above the entrance we were shown two excavated depressions, now reclaimed by nature, that once

contained light flak guns for the tunnel's defence.

Lunch was taken at the home of Jean-Marie Chappelleut, a local aviation historian, who invited us to view his collection. Having already seen a few small fragments of aircraft in the kitchen we imagined further similar small items but were totally unprepared for what was to follow. Leading us through a doorway into one of several side buildings we entered a veritable Aladdin's cave of material – including a complete nose art panel from a B-26 Marauder, the mainwheel from a B-17, Lancaster undercarriage struts, box after box of other Lancaster components, all bearing testimony to an aircraft's catastrophic end during the notorious attack on Mailly le Camp in May 1944. The Luftwaffe was well represented too – a complete bomb rack and fairing from a Ju 88, and the engine and propeller from a Messerschmitt 109. An airborne supply container, complete with its parachute lay near to a group of French Army saddlebags from a horse drawn artillery unit that had been decimated by Stukas only a mile or so up the road in May 1940. It was an incredible collection, which continued to unfold as we were taken upstairs and into another building.

After lunch we set off for the Group's public museum at Vraux. Housed in farm buildings in the centre of the village this tells the story of the nearby airfield which was originally occupied by the French Air Force pre-war, then handed over to the Advanced Air Striking force of the RAF, with Fairey Battles, Bristol Blenheims and Hawker

Hurricanes. After destroying many of these on the ground the Luftwaffe was in occupation until the airfield was liberated for use by the American Air Force in late 1944. Photographic exhibits are supplemented by salvaged and preserved artefacts together with aircraft components. However, as with Jean-Marie's collection, a surprise awaited us as we were led through to another room with the comment, "And in here is the Stirling..."

Expecting to see perhaps a few components and photographs of an aircraft that in theory is all but extinct, we were astounded to see some 30 feet of Stirling fuselage, from mainplane trailing edge to leading edge of tailplane. Although sectioned into three and with the floor removed by a farmer who had used it to house various animals and farm machinery, it still retains its camouflage, code letters, D-Day striping and serial number – confirming its identity as an aircraft that had belly landed whilst on an SOE supply mission in September 1944. A truly remarkable exhibit.

All too soon the weekend was over and it was time to say our farewells, feeling that we had known our hosts for a far greater time, such was their exceedingly generous hospitality and warmth. We left Reims reflecting on the knowledge that even after 65 years the Squadron's, and indeed the RAF's contribution toward the liberation of France is still very much recognised and commemorated.

Rob Owen

TIRPITZ - A German Sailor's Eye Witness Report

This day began like many others. I was on duty in the First Division on the Tirpitz. I had written up my watch report and then went down to the Mess to have breakfast. The Mess was forward in the ship. After that I sat down to immerse myself once again in the book of German history that I had started a few days previously. Outside it was splendid weather; sunny weather, clear visibility, almost cloudless skies. I had wondered whether something would happen today. I had not read much and there was suddenly an announcement over the Tannoy. Aircraft in the west, and a short time later identified as German. Once again it was nothing. Yet now and then a flak alarm was given. I alerted the gun crew. And then the announcement that literally snatched us up from our stools, and filled the air with electrifying tension, "Twenty, four-engine aircraft, south-west, 100 km away."

We clenched our teeth together; each of us inwardly preparing ourselves for the fight. The approaching aircraft are identified as Lancasters. We have to deal with machines carrying six ton bombs. Small alterations are quickly made to the gun batteries so they are ready. We are all full of confidence, because a fortnight ago we had beaten off the bombs that had attacked us from 30 four-engine aircraft. We only sustained slight damage through that. The Commandant, Captain Weber,

announces this time we will prepare a hot reception for them. Firing cover is requested. After some time, and it seemed much too long for us, it was reported that fighters were on their way. All the time I called out the distances which were given to me over the phone. 30km, direct height 3,000 metres. 29kms; the aircraft were flying relatively very slowly as I established from the varying distances. Tension and expectation increased more and more after the first shot opened fire at 28 km. Comrades on the upper deck must know that so that they are ready for the first salvo. In the meantime the distances come down to 20.5km. The warning bells ring. Our ship shudders with the firing of the heavy shells. The turrets are reloaded. The 10.5cm guns open fire. The second salvo shakes the ship to pieces.

Now the whole ship's artillery opens fire. Everyone only has ears and eyes for his own activity; carries out his job; strains the last nerve, passing on the orders. The heavy guns have just fired for the first salvo of defensive fire. Now things hit us. The ship jumps up; vroom; a further two hits; everything flies about on the ship. The ship rocks as if it is being shaken by gigantic fists. The resonant sound of the hits is like cloud in the room. Now the ship begins to list, slowly and relentlessly. In horror I stare at the gauge. It is now showing 18 degrees. You have to hang on if you don't want to fall

over. I hear voices and confused shouts on the telephone. Then it goes dead. More flak, and the means of communication, lines were dead - no answer. Our lifeline is dead. First Lt Mettegang is about to go to the emergency telephone and stumbles, falling down the steeply sloping deck; pulls himself up and is now standing by the telephone, snatches the receiver to his ear, calls to the bridge and asks if we can get off. Everything has packed up working, no more electric power. The force that keeps everything going has been clobbered. Since he has to shout to make himself understood, we can hear everything clearly, and 30 men are waiting for the answer. It can perhaps give them light; daylight and life, or it can keep them prisoners in the dark on the lowest deck of the ship in the space into which the water can already be breaking in the next moment. He repeats the order, "Don't get out." We have all heard that and we know what that means. So we stand there in groups and wait for our fate, enclosed in an iron space.

Above us it booms and thunders. Suddenly, new terrific hits, new gigantic shakings, stronger movement to its side and then an officer gives the order, "Get out." I took the head-set off; I keep the gas mask. I rush to the emergency exit - 15 to 20 men are standing in front of it, each one wants to get up on deck, wanting to get out into life, wanting to escape death, and yet only one at a time can make their way through the narrow shaft. So we stand there and wait, with the floor burning under our feet.

Now I climb up on deck, clambering along the pitch-dark narrow hold and reach the gun deck where something fearful awaits us. We cannot cross the smooth surface of the lino covered deck which is now on an incline of 45 degrees. Some comrades try to do, slip down, slide out and roll down the sloping surface and desperately try to get up again. The others with trembling hands hold tight onto anything they can get hold of, struggle so far; they can get no further because they cannot reach the next hold. I am about to throw myself to the ground and to pull myself up that way but I slip back every time with each attempt.

The shaft that could rescue me is six metres above me. I desperately try to get up again, make two metres and then slip back again. The water breaks in, gurgling black and oily, and comes up to my chest. Death takes hold of me with iron arms. Good God I cannot die here! "Help comrades, a life belt" but no-one could help me. I battle with my hands; more and more water comes streaming in, holds me tight and does not let me go. New hits boom through the ship. At last I find a hand-hold and pull myself up. A comrade stretches out his hand to me so that I can reach a ventilator. The ship is turning over more and more. It must now be at an angle of 90 degrees because now I am hanging on to a pipe that beforehand was standing vertical, holding tight with both hands. Three metres below me the water is whirling round. How long can I stand this? The cramped hands can hardly hold my body which has

become heavier because of the wet clothes. I can literally feel the strength draining out of my fingers. A few more minutes then it will be over, I think, and I will become quiet and calm. Then I manage to step on to a ventilator. I can release my hands. Someone shouted into the emergency exit. I am separated from him by two metres but I have to jump over. Beneath these two metres death is lurking. If I don't do it my body will splash into the water and then my life will be extinguished. My knees tremble; I have lost my cap long since. First of all I want to gather up a little strength, then pull my exhausted body together and jump over. Done it!

Behind me comes another chap, Hegendorf. I clamber back into the emergency exit. When Hegendorf tries this he is already in the water. He is about to give up the struggle. "Leave me, I just want to die." My answer is "Don't talk nonsense." I pull him quickly through the gap. My goodness is the fellow heavy! Then we close it, and that way stop the water coming in. We climb further through the Mess with a number of comrades with whom we look for a way out of our prison. Volsing is there too. He sets off with a few people and searches. I stay with the others and pass on to them what he is saying. His voice now comes from far below somewhere in the dark. Now we hear nothing further from the searchers. When I call to them they answer, but they have not found anything. In the meantime we calm ourselves. None of us wants to show the others what he fears. Hegendorf panics. "We

will all die. I want to see my parents again." I forbid him to talk like that. I quieten him down. No panic among the people - that would be the worst thing that could happen. When Volsing comes back he starts lamenting. "If you don't stop your lamenting I will shoot you down." Now Hegendorf becomes calmer. Volsing takes me to one side and softly says to me, "It is pointless, we will not get out." We looked everywhere but, loudly he says we will find a way out yet. I do not want to give up the struggle.

I seek further and at last manage to get into another part of the ship but the only thing I find is one of those lamps which unfortunately gives up working later, and I also find dry clothes to put on. Now we see about some food. All we find are a few stale loaves and some coffee. While we are searching we go into the A Deck radio room where I see several figures lying. First of all I thought they were dead or wounded; they turned out to be radio operators of whom only one is wounded. Because of the danger of the water breaking in, we take them over to where we are. We sit down and rest our heads in our hands and stare in front of us. I take out a few items of clothing in order to change my wet things - a white pair of trousers, over these trousers of green material, a blue shirt of some mechanic, and finally a sweater, which is the 'trademark' of a mechanic. The comedy of my situation becomes evident. Gallows humour flickers. Someone throws me a sailor's hat. Unfortunately, it is much too small. Suddenly someone says it is his birthday today. Everyone



congratulates him on his birthday, yet many of us will be thinking, let us hope your birthday is not your death day as well. Do life and death have to be so close to each other? We have three bottles of Cognac, a large box of cigarettes and one with sweets and also a tin of coffee. The birthday boy is allowed first to take a big swig and then it is the turn of the others. The sharp stuff runs invigoratingly down the throat. Now everyone gets a sweet and a few coffee beans. Everything has to be shared out fairly because no-one knows how long we will have to stay here. The morale is good. Then someone utters the question that has occupied everyone - whether those outside will try to rescue us. The Master Radio Operator, an admirable fellow, calmness itself, says, "Of course - it does take time for them to be here with the gear. Pay attention. Our boat has a beam of 36 metres; the water is 17 metres deep, so if our ship goes over, there is always going to be a bit sticking out of the water." To prove it I drop something to show where up is and where down is, because no-one any longer has their bearing in the ship. Suddenly there is knocking from somewhere - bang,

bang, bang. We answer with a fire extinguisher - bang, bang, bang. Now the bang is quite soft and weak, then it is very light indeed - bang, bang, bang. Always three bangs. It is a frightening sound through the space. Will we get out here? What will my mother do if she has to be informed of the news of my death? A year and three days ago her eldest son fell on the eastern front, and now me! What will Ruth say? When I saw her again before I went to the front, she was glad I was on a big ship because she thought less could happen to me. Someone says, "If I get out of here, I will get married at once." Now they all start saying what they intend to do if they get off. They perhaps do not hear the hiss of the water as it breaks in. They perhaps do not feel the drips falling from the deck, which was earlier the floor. Only the radio operator keeps asking, "Is the water rising? Shall we get out here?" He is told to shut up. We have taken Hegendorf into a dark corner where no-one can hear his frightened questions and his lamenting. From somewhere we have heard voices; now we join in a chorus "Where are you?" Quiet. We cannot understand the answer. Our shouts resound long

and stretched out. We keep on roaring out the sentence in short phrases. Was that an answer, also in chorus? We cannot understand the answer. Now each one of us shouts with tense senses. "Switch Room 3" we can understand with difficulty. We bellow we are in the forward Mess. We do not know if our comrades have understood us. Gradually we become hoarse. Our shouts become weaker. Now we only beat out three short, three long three short taps (SOS). All sorts of stories about trapped liners and of people buried alive come to mind. One has too much time and thoughts go round and round in one's mind. All at once there is a joyful shout and screaming in our ears. Someone thinks he has heard the words, "Here we are" and "deeper" and yet it all goes quiet again. After a period of time the same man thinks he has heard the noise of cutting apparatus but it can only be the water coming in under high pressure. The senior man takes the fire extinguisher and wants to break down the wall to the next compartment. He works like one possessed. When he has broken through the metal there is actually the wall or ship's side of steel which defies all blows however violent they are. Now I too hear the noise we have mentioned, the hissing that stops and starts. It can come from cutting apparatus. I still cannot believe it, and again there is hissing, crackling, and banging. The man who has been watching the water rising says it is rising slowly. There! We have all heard it; there is the hissing of cutting apparatus. Something, an iron blade, falls to the floor. And yet

the water is hissing and rising. We shout, 'Hurry up, the water is getting higher. We need help!' A watery grave approaches with deathly slowness. The hissing comes nearer. The water rises higher. Our room is still dry.

We can see the water rising through the hatch, it will fill our space. The hissing carries on approaching, and stops and starts again. Perhaps they are already cutting our wall. We shall give a knocking sound on the side of the wall which is most favourable for the cutting. No-one can imagine these minutes, this uncertainty. Will we be rescued or will we be suffocated and drowned? And so we listen to the hissing. One type of hissing means rescue, the other is death or perish. It strikes me as almost symbolic, a contest with death. A man at the hatch says the water is rising, and he tells me it is rising very quickly. The senior man with the fire extinguisher carries on working. Now the noise is already quite near. Someone puts his hand on the steel wall. It is quite warm. "Hurry" we shout. We are happy, like small boys. There the steel blade is cutting red on one point. It is melting; sparks come out into our room. We can hardly contain ourselves for joy. We do not know where to go in the narrow cramped room. For us, these red sparks are the light of life. With the sparks come pungent fumes. I put on my gas mask which I have still got with me and yet I almost don't get any air because it is so stale. And then I hold my wet clothes in front, of my face and creep into some corner. My eyes are watering and my mouth is gasping for air. Now there is a hole that has

been cut into this prison. I give a man my wet clothes and he smothers the flames which are already leaping up the walls. Tensely we stare at the narrow gap which is slowly becoming bigger. We stare at it, drinking in every centimetre of its growth. Suddenly the hissing stops. We hear voices moving away. There is deathly silence around us. What is this then? Are we going to be deserted with rescue so close to our eyes? Will the ship sink further? Why have they not carried on cutting? We shout, screaming and banging. There is no answer, only the echo of our desperate shouting sounds from the walls. The water rises, hissing and crackling! It can't be possible! Are we now to become further victims of the water? The water carries on rising. We crouch where we are and wait. Time is running out drop by drop into the sea of eternity as the drops of water on the wall unite themselves with this mirror of black, gleaming water. There it lies and eats slowly at the walls, and we can do nothing but wait. Then they are back at last. The sparks start again. No-one can imagine our feelings as we greet these red sparks.

The gap grows, takes on the form of a rectangle. Now only a small bit then it will fall out. There it is already thumping on the floor and there is no end to the shouts of "Hooray," and there are two people in the rectangular hole and they speak to us. They came towards me as if they had come from another world. We can hardly grasp it - rescue is at hand, and so we ask, "Can we get out here?" "Yes, of course. We can come in there from out here," comes the reply, and now

everyone is happy. We climb through the hole. It is so cramped with the men outside pulling us out and we have to push from inside to get a man out. The passage behind the hole is only 40 cm wide, and then we climb out the space onto a ladder and again through a narrow hole and now through a rectangle we see the sky. It is now evening. The stars are sparkling. I will never forget that moment. Now, just through this hole and there I am, standing free and saved and sucking better air into my lungs. Yet, where I am is the bottom of the ship across which I am led by a soldier. I cannot believe my eyes. Our ship has turned 180 degrees. The soldier tells me why our rescuers have gone away. They were taken away because they had lost consciousness through lack of oxygen. We present to the men a box of cigarettes which we found in the ship. Now I go over the ship's bottom of the Tirpitz. I smoke a cigarette. Me, a non-smoker! After a few hours rest and we have everything we need, enquiries begin. "Where is this chap?" "Where is that chap?" Slowly tension is reduced. In answer to my enquiry about Mettegang, I learned that he is trapped with 50 men. The next day I am told that all suffocated. The rescue team were also able to speak to them through a ventilator. However, despite desperate efforts it was not possible to get through to them and an influx of gas took them across into the great army.

Alfred Zuba
submitted by Tom Bennett

Final Landings

BILL GORDON

Born in Honor Oak Park, London in 1922, Bill Gordon enlisted in the RAFVR in 1941. He was trained in the USA and commissioned in September 1942 being initially retained in North America as an instructor before returning to the UK. Instructing was not without its mishaps, but Bill seems to have avoided the more serious, although he suffered minor injuries at No. 6 (Pilots) Advanced Flying Unit at Little Rissington in October 1943 when the tyre of an Airspeed Oxford burst on take off, the aircraft running into soft ground and overturning.

Bill assembled his first crew at a Wellington OTU and then progressed to 1661 Conversion Unit at Winthorpe, converting to the Short Stirling that at that time was being used as a stepping stone from the Wellington to the Lancaster. During this period his navigator was withdrawn from the course, and replaced by John Langston, who had by co-incidence flown with Bill's bomb aimer, Pat Shirley, during training in Canada. After a quick three day conversion to the Lancaster at No 5 Lancaster Finishing School at Syerston, the crew were posted to their first operational unit, 630 Sqn, based at East Kirkby in July 1944.

In keeping with standard practice, Bill flew his first operation as "second dickey" with New Zealander Sqn Ldr Roy Calvert DFC, "B" Flt Commander, on an operation against Stuttgart on 25/26 July 1944. Five days later he

was captaining his own crew on their first operation, a daylight raid on the railway yards at Joigny la Roche. It was a challenging baptism of fire, with moderate heavy accurate flak over the target and poor weather on return, necessitating a number of diversions.

August continued with further daylight operations against French targets, assisting the Allied push through France or attempting to stem the flying bomb offensive against London: Trossy St Maximin, St Leu d'Esserent, Sequeville and Chatelleault. By the end of the month, however, attention turned again to night raids deep into Germany. On 25/26 August the crew went to Darmstadt, the next night to Koenigsberg, returning to this target two nights later. Then back onto daylight operations in September against the ports of Brest, Le Havre and Deelen airfield, with the longer nights creating the opportunity for night raids again; Stuttgart, Darmstadt, Bremerhaven and two trips to Munchen Gladbach, the latter being controlled by Wg Cdr Gibson on his final operation. More than once nightfighters intercepted his aircraft. On one occasion he was forced to execute three corkscrew manoeuvres in order to throw off a particularly persistent attacker. During an attack on Munster, the mid-upper gunner demonstrated further the crews fighting spirit by shooting down a Junkers 88 that was stalking them. Throughout these attacks Bill

demonstrated his calm and collected qualities of leadership, further inspiring the confidence of his crew.

October brought attacks in support of the amphibious assault against Walcheren and, on 15/16 October, a frustratingly unsuccessful attempt to lay mines in the Kattegat, handicapped with a faulty H2S and thick cloud that prevented the visual identification of landmarks.

By now having completed 25 operations the crew were posted to 189 Sqn based at Fulbeck, with Bill being promoted to squadron leader and taking command of a flight. He was soon leading the Squadron on several operations and on occasion led Main Force against the Urft Dam at Heimbach, descending down to 5,000' over the target in order to find a break in the cloud through which the force could attack. The crew concluded their tour on 13/14 January with a deep penetration operation to the oil refinery at Politz.

The following morning, with the rest of his crew looking forward to a well-deserved break from operations, Bill announced that they had been selected to join 617 Sqn. It was not a universally popular decision, but it speaks well for Bill's embodiment of 'esprit de corps' that his crew soon agreed to accompany him to Woodhall Spa.

Arriving on 6 February 1945, the crew were to completed eleven operations with 617 before the War's end. As 'B' Flight Commander Bill led the Squadron against the Bielefeld Viaduct on 9 March. This was

followed by attacks on the Dreyse, Nienburg and Bremen bridges, the E and U boat pens at Ijmuiden and Hamburg, and all three attacks against the Lutzow at Swinemunde (on one occasion returning on three engines), concluding with an attack on Heligoland on 19 March 1945.

On 22 May 1945 Bill was awarded a justly deserved DFC for 'numerous operations against the enemy in the course of which he has invariably displayed the utmost fortitude, courage and devotion to duty'. At the end of the month, along with those members of 617 Sqn not destined for Tiger Force and the Pacific Theatre, he was posted to 15 Sqn at Mildenhall. But his time with Bomber Command was to be limited. Transport Command needed captains with four engined experience and in July 1945 Bill was posted to 1332 Heavy Conversion Unit, Riccall before joining 246 Sqn based at Holmsley South in Hampshire, flying Avro Yorks out to Calcutta twice a month.

On 29 December 1945 he was seriously injured when his York crashed at New Milton whilst carrying out a practice three engined overshoot. He recovered from his injuries and was promoted to flight lieutenant in March 1946, coming back into the post-war rank structure. Eventually however, his injuries would result in his transfer to the Engineering Branch. Awarded the MBE in the New Year Honours, 1972 he remained in the Service until March 1977, retiring as a squadron leader.

Robert Owen

HARRY JOHNSON

Harry Johnson recently passed away at the age of 86. He was born in Sheffield in 1922. After leaving school he started work for a local engineering firm. At the age of eighteen, like many of his friends, he volunteered for military service and joined the RAF in late 1942. After initial training Harry was posted to Market Bosworth for operational training. During his period at Market Bosworth, Harry flew in a Wellington on a 'Nickel' sortie to Paris. This was standard practice at OTU - 'Nickel' being the code name for leaflet dropping. On completion of crew training he and his crew were posted to RAF Scampton to join 57 Sqn. Soon after arriving Harry reported to the sick quarters with severe stomach pains. The Medical Officer rushed him by ambulance to RAF Rauceby Hospital, near Sleaford. After examination he was found to have appendicitis. That put paid to any operations for the next few weeks. In August 1943 during his recovery period 57 Sqn were posted to their new base at RAF East Kirkby. Shortly afterwards Harry started his first tour of duty. During the next few months he did ten night bombing trips to Berlin, as well as many other important targets in Germany.

In February 1944, at the age of just twenty-one, he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal. His determination and skill as a navigator, overcoming major personal problems on every flight was detailed in the recommendation for his award.

On completion of his first tour he was posted along with the rest of his crew

to 617 Sqn based at RAF Woodhall Spa. His first operation with 617 Sqn was on the night of the 23/34 March 1944. The target was the German aero engine repair factory in Lyons in France. He took part in the first ever 12,000lb Tallboy attack which was against the Saumur Tunnel.

On the 18th of August saw Harry fly for the last time with Flt Lt Arthur Fearn DFC, and his crew. Harry had been his navigator since they first met at OTU. Fearn was posted to a Staff Instructor's Course, but Harry decided to stay on 617 Sqn where he crewed up with W/O Paddy Gingles and flew on all three Tirpitz raids.

The November Tirpitz attack was his final sortie with 617 Sqn. He had completed over fifty bombing operations. He came out of the RAF but could not settle down in civilian life, and returned to the RAF as a navigator. He was posted to Transport Command and flew on 97 Berlin Air Lift sorties flying in Dakotas. Leaving the RAF once again he returned to civvy street. He met his future wife Rose Serle in 1953, and they were married on the 18 June 1956. Harry's seemingly perpetual happy outlook on life made him such a notable character.

He died in Leeds General Infirmary on Monday October 12; he had been ill for sometime. He leaves his wife Rose, three children, and two grand children. The service was conducted by The Rev David Rivers at the Lawnswood Crematorium,

Jim Shortland

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