



Après Moi



The 617 Squadron
Aircrew Association Newsletter

Spring 2008



Contents

Editorial	2
Robertson's Ramblings	3
The Post-WWII Memorial	5
Bombing and the Royal Naval Air Service	8
Glad to be Back?	10
Proposed North European Tour 2009	17
Tirpitz Dinner - November 2008	17
Tirpitz Dinner - November 2007 - Photo Gallery	18
Final Landings	20
Data Protection Act	26
617 Squadron Aircrew Association Merchandise	26
Dams Raid Weekend 17/18 May 2008	27

Cover Photo: Stephen Westley, Tony Iveson and Paul Hill

Editorial

Shortly after the previous issue of 'Après Moi' was published last year, Gerry Hobbs contacted me to say that he was one of the three survivors from KC-G shot down near Leulingham on 24 June 1944 and featured in my article about war graves of 617 Sqn members in Northern France. Gerry had written an account for the Imperial War Museum of his capture and time as a PoW about fifteen years ago. After a search Gerry managed to find a copy which I scanned and the first part is reproduced in this issue – the concluding part will be in the Spring issue. If anyone else has similar articles please let me have a copy for future issues.

Please read the article on the proposal for a post-WWII memorial and let the Committee know your choice of design if you are unable to attend the AGM on 17th May – you can use the slip enclosed with this newsletter or email your choice to **617sqnnews@tiscali.co.uk**. Similarly the Committee wants to know your potential interest in a four/five day tour of Northern Europe to sites associated with 617 Sqn in May 2009 – again you can indicate your choices on the enclosed slip or email us at the address given above.

Finally, the Association website is up and running at www.617aircrew.com; this is just our first attempt - please let us know what you think about it, and what you would like see on the site in the future.

Chris Henderson

Deadline for Autumn Newsletter

1st September 2008

email: 617sqnnews@tiscali.co.uk

or

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

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Robertson's Ramblings

A very Happy New Year to you all and I hope that your post-Christmas diets are going well and that you're sticking to them. Mine is still on track but then I was the heaviest that I have ever been so I had an incentive to succeed – you'll be able to check whether or not I did when we meet again in May! I hope that the year 2008 will prove to be an exciting one for the Association as a whole as we have a number of initiatives that are reaching maturity or a major decision point – and each of you has a part to play. So, read on. Before I do though, I am delighted to announce that Air Commodore John Langston CBE RAF (Retd) agreed to succeed Group Captain James Tait DSO***DFC* RAF (Retd) as President of the Association following James' death last year. Hugely respected, Air Commodore Langston has been a credit to the Association and will no doubt prove to be an outstanding President.

You might remember my aim on taking over as Chairman in 2005 was to improve communication between the Executive Committee and the Membership. One of the ways that we took this forward was to produce this magazine. With Chris Henderson at the helm as Editor/Publisher, I'm sure that you will agree that it has gone from strength to strength. In addition, those with email addresses have received often communication on short term issues such as deaths of members etc. Although we have devised a plan of action that places responsibility on Committee Aircraft

Representatives to inform their fellow aircraft type members who do not have an email address, if everyone had access to one (even a family member), information would be disseminated more expeditiously. It is therefore in your own interest to have one and to let your colleagues know it.

That leads me nicely into the first of the new initiatives that I want to raise – the new Membership Handbook, compiled by Chris Henderson from the Association's membership database which is maintained by Dave Moore, with additional help from Robert Owen, Rich Crook and others. An excellent and clear document which should be easier to update (we shall see), but it still relies on each one of you to check its content, particularly your email address, and to pass any necessary amendment on to Dave Moore – please! Otherwise, you only have yourself to blame if you are not informed about Association business. On membership, we have had an increase in our membership of late, due primarily to the efforts of Dave Moore and others. So, if you know of an old friend that was on 617 Sqn, encourage him/her to join us as well.

The next initiative is the result of the Website Sub-Committee that was set up some time ago. Led by Chris Henderson, the website is now up and running and can be accessed by typing in www.617aircrew.com. This is a first edition and there are plans for each member to be able to access more sensitive information such as

Committee Minutes via a gateway in the future. Chris mentioned the website in the editorial and he would welcome helpful suggestions on how to take this project forward.

This edition of *Après Moi* contains information from Robert Owen concerning a proposed trip to Holland and Germany in 2009 to commemorate the Dams Raid. If there is enough support for the trip, it will take the place of our weekend at the Petwood Hotel next year but again, it **needs a response from you**. Importantly, we are **looking for a volunteer from the Membership** to take on the administrative organisation – so **please look into your soul and consider doing your bit**. If this is successful, we will consider organising a trip every 18 months (Nov 2010, May 2012 etc) focussed on other important locations in the Squadron's History – suggestions welcome.

Now, to the final initiative and to a most important decision that the Membership will need to make very soon. The Memorial Sub-Committee, comprising Phil Spencer, Robert Owen and John Reed has two proposals that it will put to the Membership at the AGM that follows on from last year when it was authorised by the Membership to proceed with a project to purchase and construct a Post-WWII Memorial. The plans are in their final stages and a decision is required at this year's AGM. Attached to this edition are the two

proposals that your Committee has selected to take forward. **If you don't think that you will be able to attend the AGM, you have an opportunity to vote via the post and email – please use this opportunity as your opinion counts.**

Finally, I look forward to seeing as many of you as possible at our next event in May – the AGM and the dinner. This is perhaps one of the most important AGMs that the Association has had for many years so please support it. As an added bonus at the dinner, Barry Masefield, a new member of the Association, has agreed to give an account of his time flying Black Buck missions in Vulcan aircraft during the Falklands War. So you won't have to listen too much to me!

Yours aye,
David Robertson



Al McDicken, Dave Thomas and Barry Masefield and restored Vulcan B2 XH558 (Photo:Daily Mail)

THE POST-WAR MEMORIAL

As Members will be aware, a decision was taken last year to investigate the possibility of erecting a memorial commemorating aircrew who have served with the Squadron since the end of WW II in 1945. The planned location is to the right and slightly forward of the Wartime Memorial (on the grassed area at approximately the location occupied by the bugler at the Remembrance Day Service).

At least 30 aircrew members of 617 Sqn have died whilst either serving with the Squadron, or subsequently with other units since the end of WW II. However, it is not possible to produce a definitive list, partly because of the way the RAF personnel records are compiled and, unlike the wartime memorial, there is no "cut-off" date. As a result it was agreed that it would be impracticable for the memorial to carry individual names, but would instead carry an inscription along the lines of:

"In Memory of all members of No 617 Sqn RAF who have given their lives since 1945 in the service of their country"

In addition, the Post-War Memorial should carry the Squadron badge and the two additional Battle Honours ("Gulf 1991" and "Iraq 2003") with provision for the inclusion of any future honours that may be awarded.

A sub-committee was established led by Phil Spencer and including John Reed and Robert Owen, with the brief to investigate the feasibility of such a project, commission possible designs, and obtain costings that could be

presented to the Committee and Membership with a view to selecting a final design for construction.

It was felt that it would be appropriate to establish a local, county connection and an approach was made to the Department of Art, Architecture and Design at the University of Lincoln. As a result of this, two final year design students, Daniel de Aston and Sylvia Waugh, were given a brief to produce a number of possible executions for the Memorial. Of these, two stand out clearly as worthy of further development. For identification purposes they have been called "Alpha" and "Beta". These designs, together with explanatory notes and an estimate of cost for construction are shown later. It is also intended that the chosen execution will be constructed using a local Lincolnshire stonemason.

A meeting was held at the RAF Club in January between the Association's management committee and the design students to discuss the designs in more detail. The AGM in May will decide whether to proceed with this project and if so with which design. All members are urged to indicate their preferred design either by voting at the AGM or by completing proforma enclosed with this newsletter and returning it to the Secretary by 1 May 2008. Naturally the selected design will have to be approved by East Lindsey Council before construction, but we are keeping them informed of developments.

At the same time we shall need to consider means of raising the funds necessary to undertake construction. The Committee is currently investigating opportunities and would welcome suggestions from any member who has ideas or contacts that might assist with this task.

“ALPHA”

Artist: Daniel de Aston

The concept is based on a stylized human form, with arms raised and outstretched, head inclined, looking downwards in an “overseeing” or protective stance. The form may also be interpreted by some as a propeller – thereby subliminally creating an aviation link



- The inscription will be carried on the flat plane of the outstretched “arms”, (or it could be carried on the base plinth).

- The Squadron badge is carried on the central “head” – in effect this will be a stylized head, but with the “face” replaced by a flat plane, inclined downwards, which will carry the badge.

- The badge will be in relief, carved as part of the “head”

- The base is three foot high, highly textured, and the upper “figure” is seven feet tall, being four feet wide at the top and tapering to thirty inches at the base.

- The “arms” and “body” will be in polished stone, in keeping with the wartime memorial. It will be a similar bluish-grey stone, with textured sides contrasting with the polished front face.

- Cost has been estimated by a Lincoln stonemason at £22,000 if executed in quality South African dark grey granite, textured and smooth, stainless steel securing rods etc, carving/inscribing of the badge and inscription, and installation). This costing is naturally dependant upon the final dimensions and materials.

“BETA”

Artist: Sylvia Waugh

The design takes its inspiration from the delta and swept wing planform of the Squadron's aircraft.

(It may also be interpreted as the nose of an aircraft pointing skywards)



- The memorial will be in a dark granite.
- The front faces of the design will be in polished stone, whilst the reverse will be rough hewn.
- The Squadron badge will be incised and positioned on the front sloping facet of the smaller “pyramid” at the front to the memorial, with the two recent Battle Honours below and to each side, with space left below for further awards.
- The inscription will be placed on the lower vertical face beneath the badge panel
- Dimensions are approx 3 metres high x 2 metres wide and 1.5 metres deep. (Thus the footprint is rectangular 1.5m x 2.0m)
- In addition it would be possible to incorporate the Squadron lightning flask in the left and right sides of the memorial in either red glass or resin, inset into the stone.
- The provisional cost for this (from Leake's of Louth, who fabricated the wartime memorial) is also £22,000, but this is very much dependent upon the final dimensions and type of stone selected.

Bombing and The Royal Naval Air Service

When Murray Valentine, armed with his glistening guitar, rose to his feet at The Petwood in November 2007, veterans of Association dinners expected his traditional tribute to Elvis Presley. Instead, Murray paid tribute to Henry Allingham, aged 111, a survivor of the Great War who had served in the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) and later the RAF.

Henry Allingham's war record is well known through extensive items in the press and on TV. He joined the RNAS as an Air Mechanic Second Class on 21 September 1915 and initially maintained aircraft at Great Yarmouth. At sea during the Battle of Jutland in May 1916, he helped to provide seaplane cover for the Grand Fleet, and the following year was

posted to the groundstaff of an RNAS shore base near Dunkirk. Allingham returned to England in February 1919 and was discharged from the RAF two months later.

Many of those listening to Murray would have been familiar with this background. However, judging by the comments at my table, little was known about the RNAS, why Allingham progressed from that air arm to the RAF or that the RNAS initiated the strategy of long-distance bombing, which would ultimately result in the creation of Bomber Command in 1936.

The Royal Flying Corps (RFC), comprising a Military (army) Wing and Naval Wing, was formed on 13 April 1912, but from the outset the relationship between the two wings proved uneasy. Encouraged by an energetic First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill, who was portrayed in a *Punch* cartoon as an airborne cherub breathing life into aeroplanes and airships over the ocean, the Naval Wing gradually distanced itself from the military squadrons. On 1 July 1914, it declared unilateral independence as The Royal Naval Air Service.

With the outbreak of war on 4 August 1914 came another twist. The RFC (in effect, the Military Wing) in the words of one of its pilots, 'staggered across the Channel' to support the British Expeditionary Force. As it did so, apart from providing 'the eyes and ears of the fleet', the RNAS assumed responsibility for the aerial defence of Great Britain. Churchill declared that 'passive defence against aircraft is



Henry Allingham in 2005

perfectly hopeless', and from a base close to Antwerp the RNAS soon set out to bomb German air bases at Düsseldorf and Cologne from which enemy airships threatened to attack Britain.

On 22 September 1914 four two-seater, single-engine Sopwith Tabloids set off for the Rhine. None reached Cologne and only one located Düsseldorf to drop four 20lb bombs, three of which missed the target and the other failed to explode. On 8 October two Tabloids tried again. One crew could not find the Cologne sheds in thick mist, so released its load on the city's main railway station. The other encountered better weather at Düsseldorf and destroyed a Zeppelin airship in its shed. These primitive operations were the start of long-distance bombing, attacking targets beyond the battlefield and so making a strategic contribution to the campaign, which theorists would later dub 'strategic bombing'.

Throughout the war, the RNAS gave close support to the fleet and, until the RFC assumed control of the aerial defence of the homeland in 1916, also protected Great Britain. The launching of long-distance bombing attacks increased as the months passed, expanding to include raids on industrial targets far behind the front line. RNAS squadrons were deployed alongside those of the RFC in major battles along the Western Front and played a pivotal role in the work of the Independent Bombing Force, set up in June 1918, specifically to attack German industrial output over the Rhine.

On 1 April 1918, the RFC and RNAS merged into the RAF, which is why Henry Allingham served in the RNAS and RAF. The legacy of the RNAS, whose flimsy machines had launched those early raids on Germany's airship centres, was demonstration that aeroplanes could hit targets far from their own airfields well into hostile territory. Before the Armistice in November 1918 four-engine bombers stood by in Norfolk to hit Berlin, and the principle of 'strategic bombing', the undermining of an enemy's industrial capacity to wage war by destroying his factories, had become widely accepted. On that concept, and Churchill's contention that aerial attack is the best means of defence, Bomber Command would be formed.

Henry Allingham has reputedly ascribed his longevity to 'cigarettes, whisky and wild, wild women'; a colourful image utterly unrecognisable to any member of Bomber Command, of course.

John Sweetman



Henry Allingham in the Great War

GLAD TO BE BACK?

It was the 24th June, 1944 and this was to be my thirty fifth operation. Earlier in the month 617 Squadron had completed their special 'D-Day' duties and had also clobbered the 'E-boat' pens in the Channel ports. Now it was the turn of the V2 rocket sites and this menace had assumed top priority as virtually no warning of their approach could be given and civilian morale would suffer accordingly. We were the only squadron then equipped to deliver the 12,000 lb Tallboy, the Barnes Wallis bomb that could penetrate 50 feet of reinforced concrete. They were in short supply and we had to identify the target visually or bring the bombs back. On this day reconnaissance had reported light cloud over the target area earlier so that take-off was delayed until late afternoon. The target was situated at Wizernes, a village near St Omer. The V2 site was set into a hill with a large concrete dome covering it. The actual launching sites were only about the size of a tennis-court and bombing from 17,500ft to obtain maximum penetration, called for a high degree of skill. We carried the new Stabilised Automatic Bomb Sight (SABS) to assist accuracy, but even so, it was like putting a bomb in a barrel at that height.

In a cloudless sky we climbed over the Channel and heading towards the target the English coastline could still be seen. We were on our straight and level bombing run when two Flak bursts hit us and both port engines were set on fire. The flight engineer was killed

instantly and but for the huge bomb beneath us the Flak may have claimed more victims. The navigator, after checking the flight engineer, assisted the pilot in trying to extinguish the fires but to no avail and the pilot ordered him to jump. I was the wireless operator and I returned to the intercom when I saw the engines alight and heard the pilot call, 'Abracadabra, jump, jump', which was our pre-arranged signal to abandon aircraft.

There was a split second of panic whilst deciding whether to remove my flying helmet but I took it off and then the drill took over and I moved aft to the rear door. I clipped on my parachute pack and I noticed that some of the silk was showing so I kept my arm across it to prevent any further spillage. (In retrospect I can only assume that a piece of Flak must have hit it in its stowage, immediately behind my seat.)

I climbed over the main spar and met the mid-upper gunner who shouted in my ear that the rear was alight and that we couldn't get out that way. Forward again over the main spar and now the aircraft was shuddering violently. I stepped over the flight engineer just as the pilot was leaving his seat. He didn't see us and I didn't distract him but I remember releasing his oxygen tube as he made his way down to the front hatch. I saw him checking his harness and then I passed out through lack of oxygen.

I 'came to' in a cornfield with some German soldiers and French civilians looking at me. I recall seeing some

burning wreckage in the next field, but things were hazy as I must have banged my head on landing and I had a broken nose as well as a broken right arm and leg. My parachute must have dragged me too, as my face, legs and hands were covered in cuts and grazes. I looked at the Germans and asked 'Deutch?' and one answered, 'Ja', and that was the limit of our conversation. I indicated my top pocket and a Frenchman took out my cigarettes and lit one for me. (At the end of the narrative I will give an account of this Frenchman, André Schamp, whom I met again 38 years later, in 1982.)

Splints were put on my arm and leg and a lorry, with a layer of straw on the floor, took me to the hospital in St.Omer. Beside me lay the mid-upper gunner, wrapped in his parachute with a lot of blood on it. At the hospital a nurse tried to give me an injection but I fought against it as I didn't know what they were going to do. "Amputate, amputate?" I asked, and she smiled and said, "Nix amputate," and as she seemed a motherly type, I let them get on with it.

When I awoke next morning I gradually pieced together all that had happened and I noticed beside my bed my 'aircrew breakfast' - German style. It consisted of one lettuce leaf, one slice of black bread and a cup of cold 'ersatz' coffee. I drank the coffee as I had a raging thirst and then I realised that I couldn't feel anything in my right leg. Fearing the worst I flung back the bedclothes and thankfully my leg was still there but my toes were turning black as the plaster cast was too tight. I was alone in the room but soon a

uniformed German doctor came in to see me. The first thing he did was to tweak my moustache and say, "Mr. Anthony Eden" and laugh at what he thought was a huge joke. I showed him my leg and he immediately got some shears and cut the whole length of the cast and then bandaged it. Whilst he was doing this a fighter plane 'shot up' the hospital. I could hear glass breaking and the thud of cannon shells hitting the outside wall. The doctor lay on the bed beside me away from the window but it was soon over. A soldier burst into the room and appeared to be threatening me but the doctor ordered him out. That evening I was transferred to a large hospital in Lille, where I shared a room with three or four others, one of whom was my mid-upper gunner who never regained consciousness. Another occupant was a French Resistance fighter called Alexandre Duvois. He was watched constantly through a small window in the door and I gathered that he recovered to eventually be tried for sabotage. He was a brave young man and detested everything German. He would even close his ears to the band that played outside occasionally for the benefit of the German patients.

I underwent a further operation on my arm and leg and awoke in a different room. It wasn't yet daylight and I remember calling for a drink of water and an English voice saying, "You won't get any water yet, old man", and I replied, "Sorry, old man" and drifted off again.

Next morning I discovered that my arm had been put in a wooden cradle arrangement, presumably until the

plaster cast hardened that held the traction pins. The cradle was smashed where I had been thrashing about whilst coming out of the anaesthetic, but my leg was still in position, in traction, and without a cast to allow a stitched wound on my kneecap to heal. My room-mate was John McLaren, an air gunner from 97 Squadron (Pathfinders), who had baled out the previous night. He suffered a fractured upper arm but otherwise he was OK. Each day we cheered ourselves up by thinking that our troops would soon reach us but it was a vain hope. We had a daily ration of two cigarettes or a cigar and occasionally, loose tobacco. This latter was of little use to us and I nearly set the bed alight in my one-handed attempt to roll a cigarette out of a square of newspaper. These newspaper squares were for use with the bed-pan and we would amuse ourselves by trying to find the word with the most letters in it. There were just two English books at our disposal, 'The Forsythe Saga' and a religious publication. We had a tall, angular middle-aged nurse looking after us and she could move us in bed with amazing ease. She would say, "London kaput", and we would laugh and say, "London nix kaput" and this would make her angry as the propaganda had led her to believe that the V2s had flattened London. We knew her as Sister Cornelia. The stitches in my knee were removed and a new plaster cast put on my leg. I had been about two weeks in this room and now I was moved again but I met up with John again in the PoW hospital.

My next room was in another part of the hospital and I shared it with an

American fighter pilot who had suffered burns to his hands. He was what might be described as a 'tough cookie', as he would have no truck with the Germans and was aggressive towards them. He was really pleased when some P38 Lightnings shot up the airfield at Lille. He was flying this type when he had had to bale out. He told me that he had sprained his ankle on landing in a field that contained a most unfriendly bull. He reckoned that it was a 'Vichy' bull and despite his handicaps, he had to run and jump over a hedge to avoid it.

I was 'kitted out' for car journey to the interrogation centre near Frankfurt with an old RAF tunic, a sock and left shoe and some ill-fitting trousers the right leg of which I tore open to allow for the cast. The American was still wearing most of his uniform and early next morning we were off.

The journey from the hospital in Lille to Dulag Luft at Frankfurt was something of an ordeal. Our party consisted of seven or eight, mostly American with two or three British and all of us airmen. I was the only one unable to walk. In the hospital yard we were loaded onto an open truck, all of us standing except me who sat on the floor between all of their legs. The German hospital orderly, who was organising us, was trying to impress upon the others not to tread on the plaster cast on my leg and then promptly stepped on it himself. I can still recall the unprintable words that I used to give vent to my feelings as we lurched off to Lille station. Just as we were entering the station I looked up and saw a Ju52 transport plane flying overhead. My immediate reaction was to alert someone until I realised where

I was. We were put in an open type carriage with a central gangway and wooden seats. Soon after leaving Lille we stopped in a cutting with grass banks on either side. It was soon apparent why we had stopped as the heavy roar of engines indicated that the American bombers were out in strength. Some of the fighter escort would shoot up anything that moved, especially trains. Everyone left the train and scrambled up the banks and I remember some French passengers laughing openly at a German officer, immaculately dressed, who slipped on the grass and dirtied his uniform. We prisoners were the only ones left on the train with the guards. They positioned themselves facing us at the open door with guns at the ready, prepared to jump at the last minute and giving us very little chance to escape. With an arm and leg in plaster I knew that I didn't stand a chance of getting out. I had the same feeling as when I was on ops, frightened, but more scared of being seen to be frightened. I was sitting with my leg resting on the seat opposite and I just hoped that if the worst happened I would get it in the back and not in the face. This was mid-July 1944 and early enough in the morning for the sun not to have dispersed the mist in the cutting and this probably saved us from attack. As we reached Belgium we could see ladders placed against trees in gardens as the cherries were being picked. It was at Liege station that as our carriage stood there, a Belgian woman handed us a bag of cherries through the window and a lousy German official confiscated them. He stood there in full

view of us and ate them and spat the stones, at the window of our carriage.

Our first stop on German soil was Aachen. We were in a group on the platform when the air raid warning siren sounded and our guards herded the party off to seek shelter whilst I was left on the platform. It was probably a relief to four of the Americans who were always detailed to carry me when we had to change trains or platforms. They were well built lads but I was no lightweight at 170lbs and whilst they didn't complain I knew that I imposed an unfair burden upon them. I was left sitting with my back against a pillar which supported the roof. A German troop train was leaving the adjacent platform and they must have spotted us, as I was subjected to a lot of abuse and catcalls. I didn't need to know German to understand their feelings and gestures as they were probably heading for the front. I refrained from returning their insults as the more reckless of them might have tried a pot-shot at me. I just sat up straight and glared at them with haughty indignation until the last carriage had left.

We had a feldwebel (sergeant) in charge of us with two privates and we soon noticed that when we travelled in separate compartments the Americans were always separated as they must have posed a threat of escape to the guards. Not all of the party were fully fit as one American had burnt hands and a British lad, Geoff. Marshall had a slight head wound and also only possessed one flying boot.

With all the endless stopping and starting it was dark when we got to Cologne and as we were being herded through the

station an elderly woman belaboured one of my British colleagues with her umbrella. It seemed that we were put in an empty compartment of a train in a siding for the night. I don't recall how the others got on about relieving themselves but I was not given the chance and I was hoisted up on to the luggage rack where I stayed motionless in case I fell off. I determined that I would make it a point of honour that I would not wet myself or my colleagues below me.

The next morning we were in a train travelling along the banks of the Rhine and in happier circumstances I might have enjoyed the view of the terraces of vines and the little castles perched on the heights. I was beginning to get increasing discomfort from a sore spot at the base of my spine, due, I suppose, to sitting on wooden seats with my leg up on the seat opposite for long periods. Four of us shared a compartment, Geoff Marshall, myself and another chap together with a guard who was quite friendly. He wanted to know what our jobs were when flying and the yellow spanner painted on Geoff's lone flying boot readily identified him as a flight engineer. I explained that I was a wireless op and as we talked we ate the last of the black bread and sausage that we'd been given the day before.

It was then I noticed that our compartment shared a toilet with the next one, so here was an ideal opportunity to make use of it. The toilet was situated at one end between the two compartments. You entered if it was unlocked and then locked the door opposite before locking the door

behind you and this procedure was reversed when leaving. This is where I endured probably the most uncomfortable and necessary visit to a loo in my life. I indicated my intention to the guard and he nodded his assent. I hopped to the toilet, entered and locked both doors. Due to the lack of room I couldn't sit in any position because of my plaster cast reaching up to my thigh. To complicate matter's further, a flat semi-circular metal plate extended a further 4 or 5 inches beyond my foot. This had been used when my leg was in traction and was secured by a pin passing through the cast and the bone above my heel. Where the pin emerged each side a cork had been pushed on to prevent the ends from catching on things. Having lowered my trousers, I assumed the best posture that I could, whilst standing on one leg and with one arm to steady me against the jolting of the train; I did what had to be done. There was no toilet paper so I managed to get hold of the end of the German nightshirt that I was still wearing with the fingers of my broken arm and with my teeth I tore off a piece and used that. I had to use my steadying left hand so I leaned forward against the window to keep my balance. When I eventually hopped back to my seat, Geoff remarked that I was sweating.

Our train journey ended at a small station outside Frankfurt. Our next mode of transport was a tramcar and as we waited at the stop, the Americans with us leisurely sat on the guard rail at the kerb. A senior German officer was passing and he stopped his car and gave our feldwebel a good

dressing down and he in turn, lost no time in getting the Americans onto their feet again. When the tram eventually arrived it proved to be a two-car affair, with the driver and passengers in the front and the rear car empty. The chaps climbed aboard the second car but they weren't allowed to use the seats; instead, everyone had to stand crammed together on the driver's platform. I was pushed on last by the guards in my usual sitting position with my legs between all of the feet again. Unfortunately a small strip of metal on the top step was sticking up and caught in my trousers so that I couldn't go forward as the guards pushed me. I yelled at them but of course they didn't understand but one of our chaps saw the problem and managed to free me. The journey lasted about ten minutes and we all got off the tram at the point nearest to Dulag Luft.

The four Americans had to carry me again and it seemed like a tiring walk for them. We were strung out a bit now and the feldwebel kept looking back at us bringing up the rear. I told the Americans that I was not prepared to let them carry me any further. I said that immediately after the feldwebel looked round again that they put me down and continue walking close together so that he wouldn't notice anything wrong straight away. Of course as they neared him he saw me some way back, sitting in the gutter. He yelled at me in German and I swore back at him in English and he halted the party whilst he waited to commandeer a passing vehicle. A truck loaded with gravel was stopped and I was thrown up on top of it and

there I lay spread-eagled. I must have been eight feet from the ground and I was fearful of falling off and injuring myself further. Of course the gravel was shifting under me so I dug in with my fingers and toes and though the journey was only a few minutes, it seemed like an eternity to reach Dulag Luft.

Initially we were all in one room there and I warned the chaps to guard their talk in case of hidden microphones. Eventually I was left alone and an elderly, white-haired German officer came to interrogate me. He spoke perfect English and wanted to know what squadron and station I was from. He implied that he already knew and that he merely wanted confirmation and he held a sheet of paper which, he said contained all of the stations in 5 Group. I asked to see it and to my surprise he handed it to me and he was right, virtually all of the stations were there but not Woodhall Spa. I still refused to give him any information and he started the threatening routine by saying that as the Second Front had opened, spies were parachuting in, claiming to be priests and all sorts of people and that as I had no identification, I too, could be a spy. Through being thoroughly fed up and tired and without any hint of bravado, I said "OK I'm a spy." This immediately called his bluff and he said, "Don't be silly flight sergeant," and the interrogation ended soon afterwards. The wounded prisoners didn't stay at Dulag Luft but were transferred to a large house about five minutes drive away and which was run mainly by nuns. Three of us from our party, along with some other wounded, were put in

a lorry and driven to the large house. The so-called German efficiency must have broken down that day as we were trundled back and forth three times before they had got the paperwork sorted out with heated arguments. With my sore tail I was glad that my thirty six hours travelling was over and I was finally put to bed and thankfully fell asleep on my side.

There were prisoners there who appeared to be 'permanent staff', and although we couldn't be sure, we made sure that we didn't divulge anything to them in case they were German 'stooges'. A young British airborne soldier, a patient, had what appeared to be pronounced dimples in his cheeks. It appears that a bullet had passed through his face, missed his teeth and miraculously doing little harm.

The main topic of conversation among the flyers, both American and British, was how we each became prisoners, as if to justify to ourselves why we were no longer in the war.

Whilst here I was allowed to send my first prisoner-of-war letter home. I got one of the chaps to write it for me and explained to my folks that I had injured my arm a little.(I didn't mention the leg but they got to know of it eventually from someone in the UK who had heard my name mentioned by the infamous Lord Haw-Haw).

There were four others in my room and I was the only one bedridden which meant bottles and bedpans but we had good food from the Red Cross parcels and fair treatment generally.

I was there for just over a week when suddenly, one morning, a young Luftwaffe officer walked straight into the room and said, "Good morning, and how is Wing Commander Gibson and Wing Commander Cheshire this morning?" I didn't answer but my face probably gave me away. He went straight on to say that the 'Dams' raid was very well done but that they had now strengthened the defences. I said, "That's like shutting the gate after the horse has bolted," and he replied, "Yes, or as we say in Germany, putting the lid on the well after the child has fallen in."

I had been expecting further interrogation but this caught me unawares and as others came into the room the conversation was along the lines of 'all flying men together', though I was careful of what I said. Geoff Marshall asked him if he had ever bombed London, and with heavy sarcasm the officer replied; "What, with our ten aircraft?" this being a reference to Allied propaganda that the Luftwaffe was almost finished. We had about fifteen minutes of general conversation and then he wished us well and took his leave. His parting question to Geoff, was, "Were you ever intercepted by night fighters", to which he promptly replied, "What, with your ten aircraft!"

Gerry Hobbs

The concluding account of Gerry's POW experiences will be published in the next issue of **Après Moi**.

Proposed North European Tour May 2009

Following the decision at last year's AGM, our historian, Rob Owen has been investigating possible itineraries for a tour of sites associated with 617 Sqn in the Netherlands and Germany.

The suggested itinerary for the tour in May 2009 would commence with an overnight ferry from Hull to Rotterdam on 15th May. On arrival in Rotterdam we will be met by Jan and Connie van den Driesschen and board the coach for our first day's tour via the Reichswald Forest War Cemetery, Raesfeld, Marbeck (which was the crash site of Flt Lt Astell's aircraft), and then on to the hotel at Kamen for dinner and overnight stay.

On the second full day (17th) we would visit the Moehne Dam followed by a visit to Flt Lt Hopgood's crash site. Then we would travel to the Arnsberg Railway viaduct and the Sorpe Dam, before returning to our hotel at Kamen for dinner and another night's stay.

The next day (18th) we would visit the Eder Dam and possibly pay a visit to the museum, and then return to our hotel at Kamen for dinner.

On the fourth day we would visit the Rheinberg War Cemetery, before going to Bergen op Zoom War Cemetery then on to Steenberg, where Guy Gibson is buried. We would catch the evening ferry to Hull arriving next morning, Wednesday 20th May, at about 8.00am.

If this is too long then the alternative could be to include the Eder Dam on the 17th, making it a longer day, then on the 18th do the 19th itinerary as above, arriving home on the 19th. This would also cut out an overnight stay.

The cost of the full itinerary would be between £360 (40 in party) and £440 (20 in party); the shorter itinerary would be between £300 (40 in party) and £380 (20 in party). These costs exclude travel to and from Rotterdam.

Please let us have your views and intentions by completing and returning to the Secretary the slip enclosed with this newsletter

Chris Henderson

Tirptz Dinner - November 2008

This year's Tirptz Dinner will be held on Saturday 8 November 2008 at the Petwood Hotel, Woodhall Spa. The cost of the dinner will be £30 per person including wines. For those staying at the hotel a special reduced rate for members is available. Room reservations should be made directly with the Petwood Hotel (01526 352411). Early booking is recommended.

Tirpitz Dinner - November 2007 - Photo Gallery



Archie Johnstone

Gray Ward

John Reed

Alex McKie



Richard Todd

Dave Robertson

John Langston



John Clarke

Rich Crook

Jock Cochrane



Basil Fish

John Bell

John Langston

Final Landings

Hubert “Hugh” Evans

Hugh Evans joined the Squadron on 3 February 1945 as a Fg Off having teamed up as Wireless Operator in Flt Lt Alan Quinton’s crew at 5 LFS at Syerston during the late autumn of 1944.

The crew’s first months with the Squadron were spent working up with cross-country flying and bombing practices. His first operation with the Squadron was on 16 April against the German pocket battleship Lutzow, moored at the Baltic port of Swinemunde. One of the first aircraft to attack, despite moderate, but extremely accurate heavy flak they flew a second run with other aircraft in the gaggle who had failed to release on their first run, thereby affording them a degree of protection.

Three days later he was operational again, as one of twenty squadron aircraft detailed to drop a Tallboy on the German island fortress and naval base of Heligoland. His third and final operation (and indeed the Squadron’s final WWII operation) was flown on 25 April 1945 against Hitler’s “southern redoubt” at Berchtesgaden. The target area was snow covered and the crew’s primary target, the SS Barracks at Wachenfels could not be identified in time for release. In accordance with briefing instructions they turned for home and their Tallboy was released on a target of opportunity, 32 miles SE of Munich.

The war over, the crew participated in Operation Wastage, the dumping of unwanted incendiary bomb stocks in the North Sea and on 29 April 1945, having recently been promoted to Flt Lt, Hugh was posted along with fifty-five other Squadron members as “C” Flight to join No 15 Sqn at Mildenhall, before leaving the RAF in 1946.

Harry Humphries

Humph or “Adj”, as he was known to wartime members, was 617 Squadron Adjutant from April 1943 until April 1945, thereby serving with the Squadron under its first five commanding officers for all but a month or so of its wartime existence.

Since the Squadron was barely organised, and had only started flying a few days before Harry arrived, it is fair to say that Harry was “Founder Adjutant”, although, to be strictly accurate, he was not the Squadron’s first. The initial post holder survived for less than a week before WgCdr Gibson arranged his removal following a frank exchange of views. Gibson had come to know and respect Harry during his previous tour with 106 Sqn at Syerston and organised his immediate posting to 617 Squadron as a replacement. Starting in effect with a blank sheet of paper, Harry’s abilities played a not inconsiderable role

in laying the foundations for, and maintaining, the efficient organisational and administrative structure of the Squadron.

Writing in *"Enemy Coast Ahead"* Wg Cdr Gibson paid him the following tribute:

"He had been in business in peacetime and everything from Orderly Room clerk upwards in war. He was mad on flying, but his eyes had stopped him. Moreover he was young and keen. Such men are the right type for this job... ..and a quick call to Group had him posted within 48 hours".

Harry Humphries was born in Leicester in 1915 and joined the RAF in 1940. One of his early duties, after appointment to commission from the rank of LAC to Acting Pilot Officer in November 1941, was that of Committee of Adjustment Officer, responsible for the collection and processing of the personal effects of aircrew who failed to return from operations. He served in an Assistant Adjutant capacity at Syerston before being posted to 617 Sqn at Scampton as a Flying Officer and immediately promoted to Flight Lieutenant.

Outside the select inner sanctum of senior officers, flight commanders and section leaders, Harry was the first to know of the Squadron's debut operation when Gibson entered his office at 9 o'clock on the morning of May 16 1943 and ordered him to draw up a Flying Programme. Harry recounted the event in his later memoirs *"Living with Heroes"*:

"Training programme, sir?" I asked.

"No. um, that is yes to the rest of the Station," he answered. Seeing the look of bewilderment on my face at this statement he said, "We are going to war at last, but I don't want the world to know about it, so do not mention the words 'Battle Order', just make out a Night Flying Programme."

It was Harry who arranged meals for the crews, co-ordinating the transport to take them to dispersal and collect them on their return, and drafted and despatched the stark telegrams to next of kin of those who did not come back. He organised leave, raising railway warrants, ration cards and the necessary passes in addition to administering recommendations for awards. He co-ordinated a myriad of other tasks, all essential for the smooth running of the Squadron, often unnoticed and for which there was usually little praise. Awards for non-flying personnel were rare, but official recognition came in January 1944 with a Mention in Despatches.

There were lighter moments – well liked by the aircrews he was often involved, willingly or unwillingly, in some of their off duty pursuits and parties. His attempts to maintain a degree of order and decorum during the Squadron's "Appointment in London" for the post-Dams Raid investiture at Buckingham Palace are well documented. Lesser known perhaps is his participation in the various activities held in the grounds of the Petwood or Jubilee Park raising funds for charities or

war bonds, such as a fete for the Woodhall Spa Ambulance in July 1944, where his judging skills came to the fore officiating at the Ladies' Beautiful Ankles contest!

With the end of the war in Europe in sight, the RAF switched its focus to the continuing conflict in the Far East. On 5 April 1945 Harry departed Woodhall Spa for No 2 Personnel Despatch Centre at Morecambe from whence he was posted to tropical climes, arriving in Bombay on the 8 May, the day hostilities in Europe ceased and co-incidentally his 30th birthday. En route, he entertained his traveling companions with impersonations of Winston Churchill, quoting extracts from his speeches – a performance he had perfected on occasion in the Kinema in the Woods at Woodhall Spa.

Leaving the RAF a year later, he returned to civilian life in Leicester, becoming sales manager for Parker Shoes, manufacturers of children's footwear. After their absorption into the British Shoe Corporation he took early retirement and moved to Weybourne.

Throughout the war he collected material and kept notes on the Squadron's activities and by the early 1950's had begun to write his personal account of the Squadron's history. He was then persuaded by Leonard Cheshire to make his material available to Paul Brickhill, who had been commissioned to write an account of the Squadron's history. Much was incorporated into what became "*The Dambusters*", regrettably without acknowledgement. He read and made a few comments to the script of the 1955 film, which he felt was a fair reflection of events, but it was only in later life at the age of 88 that he achieved his ambition of seeing his own account in print. His unique collection of material was auctioned in 1996 and was acquired appropriately by Grantham Museum, where it remains to this day, only a mile or so from the former No. 5 Group Headquarters where in March 1943 Wg Cdr Gibson was summoned to a meeting with Air Vice Marshal the Honourable Sir Ralph Cochrane to discuss the formation of a new squadron.

John Sayers DFC and Bar

John Sayers was born in Brisbane in 1921. After a period working as a fireman and trainee engine driver for Queensland Railways, he joined the RAAF in 1941. He commenced his flying training at Narromine, New South Wales, during which time he acquired his nickname "Slapsie", after a pre-war light-heavyweight boxing champion, having intervened in a fight to assist a friend.

After transferring to Canada, Sayers crossed the Atlantic aboard the Queen Elizabeth and was posted to No 27 OTU flying Wellingtons at Lichfield, where he was to team up with his crew, before progressing to Stirlings at the Conversion Unit.

Commissioned in late 1943, he was posted to No 467 (RAAF) Sqn at Waddington at the end of January 1944. The start of his operational career was a case of being thrown in at the deep end. Bomber Command was engaged in the "Battle of Berlin" and his first two operations were "2nd dickie" trips to the "Big City" with experienced crews.

Flying with a heavy cold Sayers burst both eardrums was forced to take a two month break until he was able to operate with his own crew; his first trip as captain being against Juvisy marshalling yards, Paris on 18/19 April 1944 – when 467 Sqn participated in a 5 Group operation marked by Leonard Cheshire and 617 Sqn, pioneering their precision targeting technique.

With the exception of half a dozen trips to German targets the majority of his first tour was flown against French targets in support of the Allied invasion and countering the V-weapon threat. It was by no means an uneventful period. On the night of 22 May, attacking Brunswick both gunners fired at a Me 110 which came in for an attack, and then his aircraft was damaged by flak whilst passing through the Emden searchlight belt. Bombing Rennes from 4,000' on 8/9 June he was targeted by light flak and dived to 2,000' enabling his gunners to engage the five searchlights that were coning his aircraft. A trip to Gelsenkirchen on 21/22 June saw two encounters with enemy aircraft, resulting in a port engine being set on fire, and several small holes in the fuselage beneath the mid upper turret. Once again his gunners gave a good account of themselves, claiming one of the fighters destroyed. A week later, attacking a target at Vitry, the crew became aware that a short circuit had caused their tail identification light to come on as they made their bombing run. After five minutes tense waiting for the sound of flak or fighter, which fortunately did not materialise, the light went out as mysteriously as it had come on. Shrapnel from heavy flak at 18,000 feet over Thiverny on 19 July shattered the bomb aimer's blister, wounding Flt Sgt Weaver in the eye. Undeterred, he returned to his sight to complete the bombing run. Attacking a V-weapon site at L'Isle d'Adam on 18 August their aircraft incurred yet further flak damage. Hardly a quiet tour!

After 32 operations he was declared 'Tour Expired' at the end of August 1944, and would be awarded the DFC on 14 November for his "skill and fortitude in operations against the enemy". Rather than transfer to a training role, he and his experienced crew opted to join 617, arriving at Woodhall Spa on 1 September.

The crew were on the Battle Order for the first time on the night of 23 September for a long and inauspicious haul to the Dortmund Ems Canal near Munster. Finding the target despite a defective compass, they were unable to obtain a clear enough bombing run and returned with their Tallboy. Their next operation to West Kapelle again saw the Squadron recalled without bombing. Nor was Lady Luck with them on their third operation, as part of the high level force attacking the Kembs Dam on October 7. Four minutes from target, an electrical fault caused the premature release of their Tallboy as the bomb doors were opened, buckling them as it fell.

Tirpitz at Tromso was the target on 29 October when they made their first successful Tallboy release although they were unable to see the results of their efforts. They had better fortune on the final attack a fortnight later when they were able to follow their bomb into the smoke, claiming a hit on the bows or a very near miss. Operations were spasmodic for the crew over the winter months with a number of abortive attacks due to weather.

On 14 March 1945, the day that Sqn Ldr Calder released the Squadron's first Grand Slam and demolished the Bielefeld viaduct, Sayers and his crew were making their bombing run in the same aircraft as they had flown against the Kembs Dam. Once again, their Tallboy suffered premature release, damaging the bomb doors as they opened. Three days later attacking the Arnberg Viaduct flying one of the new B 1 (Spec) Lancasters they fared no better when their Tallboy hung up, and on the next operation, against a bridge at Dreyse their bombing run was disrupted by the slipstream from another aircraft and they were forced to release their bomb aiming at a nearby railway junction.

A successful operation against Nienburg on 22 seemed to break the curse, but the following day their starboard outer engine failed on the way to Bremen caused them to abort and return to Woodhall. The crew made good use of their opportunity to drop a Grand Slam on the Farge U-boat construction pen and scored a direct hit on the U-boat pens at Hamburg. They flew only two more operations, both abortive due to weather, against the Lutzow at Swinemunde in mid April, before the cessation of hostilities served to bring their tour of 19 operations with the Squadron to a close. Despite the setbacks and equipment failures his service was such that Sayers was awarded a Bar to his DFC in December 1945.

As the war came to a close Sayers was posted to No 54 Base, Coningsby, pending repatriation, thence to RAF Gamston, Notts where he remained until his discharge from the RAAF in May 1946. However he was not to return to Australia for a good many years. Marrying an English girl he remained in the UK and joined the RAF in 1949. Promoted to Squadron Leader in 1969 he finally left the Service in August 1971 to spend his retirement in Brisbane.

Jim Soilleux

Jim Soilleux was posted to the Squadron on 15 February 1944 from No 61 Sqn at Skellingthorpe as a Sergeant Flight Engineer in Fg Off John Williams crew. The crew had to wait a day or so before transferring to Woodhall Spa, since that night they were sent to Berlin on the final operation of a rigorous tour that had commenced the previous autumn.

Jim's tour with No 61 Sqn included no fewer than nine trips to Berlin flown in EE176 – a veteran Lancaster that went on to complete 119 operations. New Year's Day 1944 had seen them again off to Berlin, but Jim found his hands full on the outward leg, as the starboard outer engine burst into flames, and the rear turret hydraulic supply burst. Jettisoning their Cookie they returned to base. The superstitious might pause to wonder whether Lady Luck was the crew's eighth passenger. Others might consider divine intervention played a role in their survival; post-war both the crew's navigator and pilot went on to take holy orders.

Operations with 617 commenced on 2 March with a factory busting operation to an aero engine plant at Albert. After their eighth operation with the Squadron, the attack on Munich on 24/25 April the Squadron ceased operations for a month to train for Operation Taxable, the D-Day feint, using "Window" to simulate an invasion fleet, the crew being doubled up with Ross Stanford. The remainder of the summer was spent attacking V-weapons sites and U and E-boat pens using Tallboy. During these operations Jim always kept an eye open for the navigator who had a disconcerting habit of accidentally disconnecting his oxygen supply, Jim considering it "important" since he didn't think anyone else in the crew could navigate.

Flt Lt Williams was due to be posted to an Instructor's course in September and the crew fragmented. On 27 August Jim flew with Fg Off Geoff Stout to Brest, before being commissioned and re-crewing with Fg Off Arthur Kell, whose Flight Engineer was being posted as tour-expired. His first operation with his new crew was no easy ride – the Operation Paravane trip to a Russian airfield at Yagodnik, prior to attacking Tirpitz in Kaa Fiord, northern Norway. With minimum servicing support the mettle of flight engineers was truly tested, since they were expected to supervise refuelling and carry out Daily Inspections in addition to their flying roles. Jim's next two trips were also against Tirpitz, his skills being challenged again monitoring fuel consumption and engine settings for each 13 hour return flight to Tromsø. One final trip, to the E-boat pens at Ijmuiden on 15 December 1944 saw the completion of his 30th operation with the Squadron.

After a period in limbo at Woodhall he was promoted to Flying Officer on 23 January 1945 and posted two days later to Stoney Cross to join No 46 Squadron, which had just been reconstituted in Transport Command flying Stirlings, operating a freight run to India and Ceylon. He remained in Transport Command for the remainder of his flying career, transferring to No 466 Sqn operating Halifaxes and Liberators, and finally to No 231 Sqn with Lancastrians – the "civilianised" Lancaster.

Leaving the RAF in January 1947, Jim worked post-war for the Ministry of Defence (Army), retiring as a Professional and Technical Officer in 1987.

Data Protection Act

The update of the Members' Handbook raised the question of whether the Association complied with the Data Protection Act (DPA) of 1998 which protects data of a personal nature. The DPA now covers both manual paper records as well as computer-based records. The DPA lays down eight principles that should be observed when storing and using data of this nature. The Association, by its nature of purpose and management, is not required to register with the Data Commissioner but is nevertheless required to abide by these eight principles. The Association's committee follows these principles and requires all members to do likewise. In particular individual members should not pass

details of other members to any third party without the permission of the member(s) concerned. In addition, the Members' Handbook, in either computer file or hard copy, should be kept secure.

The Association uses members' details for the maintenance of subscription payments, management of accounts and for mailing newsletters and other communications. It is implicit in accepting and continuing membership that members' personal details will be used for the foregoing functions. Any requests from third parties for members' addresses are met by offering to forward letters etc.

Further details of the DPA can be found online at www.opsi.gov.uk and www.legislation.org.uk.

617 Squadron Aircrew Association Merchandise

The following items are available by post from John Bell at the address below; please add 10% of the total cost to cover packing and postage (minimum 50p, maximum £2). 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 Lapel Badge - £3

Small Lapel Badge - £3

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

orders to:

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

Dams Raid Weekend

17/18th May 2008

Dams Raid Dinner 2008

This year's Dams Raid Reunion Dinner will be held on Saturday 17 May at the Petwood Hotel, Woodhall Spa. The cost of the dinner will be £30 per person including wines. For those staying at the hotel a special reduced rate for members is available.

Dinner – Saturday 17 May

We will meet in the Petwood Lounge at 1930 for Dinner at 2000. Sherry and soft drinks will be served. Dinner will be in the Woodland Suite and a seating plan will be displayed.

Memorial Service – Sunday 18 May

The Vicar of St Peter's Church, Woodhall Spa, the Reverend Ann Gunner will conduct a short service of remembrance at the 617 Sqn Memorial at 1000hrs. Weather permitting (and subject to MOD funding), a fly-past by aircraft of 617 Sqn will follow the service.

Lunch – Sunday 18 May

Lunch will be available at the Petwood at a cost of £13 per person. Please pay for lunch directly to the Petwood.

Deadline for Autumn Newsletter

1st September 2008

email: 617sqnnews@tiscali.co.uk

or

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

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