



Après Moi

The 617 Squadron
Aircrew Association Newsletter



Summer 2010



Contents

Editorial	2
Robertson's Ramblings	3
News from the Frontline	4
Personnal Recollections	6
617 Sqn Aircrew Association Merchandise	6
The Non-Stop Flight, UK to Sydney, Australia	7
With Tait to the Tirpitz	15
A Tribute to Richard Todd OBE	21
Final Landings	24

Cover Photo: BBMF Lancaster over the Petwood Hotel © Sophie Spence

Editorial

Sadly I have to report that Conny van den Dreisschen died recently. Conny and her husband Jan have tended the graves of Guy Gibson and Jim Warwick over the past four decades. A tribute to Conny will be published in the next issue of *Après Moi*.

The next issue of the newsletter will also include an article by Tom Bennett on the Kembs Barrage attack in October 1944, and articles by John Sweetman and others.

If you have not updated your membership standing order 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 activities and functions.

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

Chris Henderson

Deadline for Winter Newsletter

1st October 2010

email: 617sqnnews@tiscali.co.uk

or

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

© 2010 617 Squadron Aircrew Association

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form, or by any means, recording, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owners.

Robertson's Ramblings

I hope that this latest missive of *Après Moi* finds you fit, well and healthy. For those of you that attended the AGM and Reunion in May, this should not be news but for those of you who were not able to attend, I am very pleased to report that we have been successful in our application for planning permission for the Post WW2 Memorial, which will be erected adjacent to the current 617 Squadron Memorial in Woodhall Spa. The memorial is likely to cost in the order of £25,000 to build and erect and we need to raise monies quickly as we only have until November 2012 to break ground. By the time that you read this, we should have launched our appeal and hopefully, you will have read about it in local and national newspapers. We were given a massive boost for our fundraising at our Dinner in May when Fran and Reg Brealey, the owners of the Petwood Hotel in Woodhall Spa presented the Association with an original oil painting 'Enemy Coast Ahead', which is signed by Bomber Harris and Micky Martin, specifically to raise funds for the memorial. It is a magnificent and generous gesture which should generate a significant amount when it is auctioned in the coming year. Other ideas to generate funds will be circulated to you soon but I would be most grateful for your personal support in this endeavour – we cannot ask the public to help if we do not do

so ourselves. Your Committee has some ideas but if you can think of innovative ways to generate support, please let me know by email at d.robertson474@btinternet.com.

In early December, Mike Hines requested assistance via email from Association members to give their time to take the Memorial Project forward. Mike Feenan offered support – many thanks Mike – but disappointingly, he was the only one! We have formed sub-committees to consider our charitable status (Keith Walters, Mike Hines, Mike Feenan), Press and Publicity (Robert Owen, David Robertson), Memorial Liaison (Phil Spencer, David Robertson), WW2 Stamp and Print Liaison (Dave Moore, Basil Fish), Fund Raising (Phil Spencer, John Bell, Keith Walters, David Cooper) and Local Liaison (David Robertson, Rich Crook). Overall leadership for the project will be with me, Phil Spencer and Robert Owen.

I would like to welcome some new members of your Committee; Bobby Bethell has taken over as the Tornado Representative from Rich Crook, Jock Cochrane has taken over as the Treasurer from Chris Henderson and Rich Crook has taken over as the Assistant Secretary (Membership) from Dave Moore. To the new members, a very warm welcome and to Chris, Dave and Rich, a huge thank you for your help and support over the

many years that you have been doing it. Contrary to my original intention, I was re-elected as Chairman of the Executive Committee for another five-year term of office.

Finally, the Association remains strong and we have achieved much together in the past five years. We have a new constitution, new categories of membership to include Honourary and Associate, an Association website www.617aircrew.com, this excellent publication 'Après Moi', an increase in membership with improved communication across the membership and new products in the 'shop'. We have tried to conduct

excursions and we will do so again but hopefully with more success. Above all, we still come together twice a year as friends to enjoy each others' company. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the President, Air Cdre John Langston and every member of the Committee for their support, guidance and help during my tenure as Chairman to date and to Robert Owen for his knowledge and support. It really has been a privilege to serve the Association.

Yours aye

David

d.robertson474@btinternet.com

News from the Frontline

As Moray shivered under a blanket of snow and ice, 2010 heralded a slow start to flying for the Dambusters. After the Christmas grant, we returned to a 'black' airfield (looked white enough to me!) and the deep freeze persisted until mid-February. This meant that we were only flying a few hours per week, and in some weeks not a wheel was turned across Lossie. Undaunted, the Squadron continued to put in the hours at work with a daily ground training programme covering weapons, aircraft systems and phase briefs on everything from winter ops to evasion training. Word soon spread that the Execs were using their time on the ground wisely too, and sure enough a variety of secondary duties and 'little' jobs to do came floating from their offices in the direction of

unsuspecting passing aircrew. To break up the days, under the guidance of Junta Leader, Flt Lt Lucy Williams, the Squadron saw the chance to exercise its social performance via a number of Tactical Evaluations (TACEVALs). To those unfamiliar, nowadays this term refers to a spot inspection of a Flight Commander's house by the Junior Officers who arrive en masse one evening bearing great hunger and thirst! The wives are warned, the children are put to bed, and the Squadron can let their hair down before another day of PowerPoint and board (bored?) briefings. After two such occasions the Execs decided it was time to get their own back and attempted to turn the tables, TACEVALing Lucy - the ringleader. However, prior

preparation and planning are still the keys to preventing poor performance and, on this occasion, making sure Lucy was at home that evening would have been a good idea. The shame-faced Execs were eventually tracked down at the Beach Bar in Lossie and debriefed on their rather woeful performance over a few quiet drinks.

As Lossie finally thawed, and with flying rates returning to normal, we have achieved some excellent training sorties as the Squadron prepares to deploy to Cold Lake, Canada, in April. The work-up for Exercise ALBERTA FOCUS is progressing nicely, as shown by the number of videos piling up on Baz, our QWIP's, desk for debriefing. On most days the Squadron can be found in the planning room surrounded by piles of work; the weekly quizzes set by the weapons instructor have required books to be dusted off that haven't been seen for a few months. This has translated into plenty of flying with the TIALD and Litening III targeting pods, and has proved to be invaluable training for all Squadron members as we look forward to dropping live weapons in Canada. Morale is high in anticipation of a good few weeks training away from our home base.

Turning to our professional development, the Squadron has taken advantage of the wintry weather by sending various members away on courses. Several people went to Exercise MOUNTAIN DRAGON at Waddington, acting as subject matter experts to the Forward Air Controllers and Joint Terminal Attack Controllers in a simulated Close Air

Support environment – great training value all round in the run up to our Op HERRICK deployment next year. As well as this, four Junior Officers attended the Air Electronic Warfare Course at Cranwell for three weeks. Finally, four have gritted their teeth, donned several thermal layers, and disappeared to the dreaded 2-week survival course down south. We wish them good weather, comfort and luck!

Following the departure of our most recent QWIN, Gats, with an extra stripe, 617 Squadron is looking forward to welcoming Conan Mullineux as the new QWIN – he plans to join us during our deployment in Canada. Lt Josh Thompson has also arrived in Scotland for an exchange tour on 617 Squadron following a tour on VFA-195 'The Dambusters' F-18 Squadron, United States Navy. Welcome also goes to Flt Lts Cormack-Loyd and Day, fresh from the OCU, and Flt Lt Rob Perry the new JEngO. Sadly the Squadron says goodbye and good luck to Stilly, Small(er) Fry, Dockers, and Mark Haley who leave us for the dark side to instruct on XV(R) Sqn.

We also have a few very junior additions to the Squadron – congratulations go to Sqn Ldr Fisher and Angela on the arrival of baby Oliver, also to Sqn Ldr Griffiths and Ang and Sqn Ldr Kent and Rowena as they wait expectantly for their new babies, due in April and May respectively. There must be something in the air around the Exec offices.

Following Monty's outstanding efforts in winning the Squadron Jumper at the end of last year, by allowing IX(B) Sqn to temporarily

steal the Dambusters' Standard before the Tirpitz dinner, it seemed impossible for anyone else to surpass his achievement in gaining formal recognition for the biggest professional or social gaffe in recent months. However, nominations have been coming in thick and fast. The award will be made in Cold Lake and almost everyone on the Squadron is already a contender. The results, and

a few of the more publishable stories, will be revealed in the next newsletter. In the meantime, best wishes to the Association and its members from the current Dambusters for the next few months in 2010.

Jane Pickersgill

'Après moi le deluge'
(see photos on back cover)



Personal Recollections

On the first anniversary of the Dams Raid, the Station Commander at Woodhall Spa, whose name I regretfully forget, decided that, in view of the fact that there would be many VIPs attending and due decorum should be maintained, a marquee would be erected on the back lawn of the Petwood Hotel and several barrels of beer purchased from the local Spa Hotel and installed therein so that the junior officers could drink to their heart's content and not be an

embarrassment to the VIPs and their lady wives in the Petwood itself.

In the event, it teemed down with rain during the whole of the afternoon and evening so nobody ventured out to the marquee. All went well however during the evening. But to us junior officers' delight, the next morning we discovered six 12-gallon barrels of beer unused in the adjacent marquee. As we were not on ops for the next two nights you can imagine the result!

Arthur Poore

617 Squadron Aircrew Association Merchandise

Please see previous newsletters or www.617aircrew.com for a list of items 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.

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

THE NON-STOP FLIGHT FROM THE UNITED KINGDOM TO SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

By SQUADRON LEADER M G BEAVIS, AFC, RAF

(reproduced from the RUSI Journal)

BOMBER COMMAND undertakes a variety of tasks in support of its primary function as a deterrent force, and I experienced a considerable thrill when told that No. 617 Squadron had been selected to provide a crew to be trained for a non-stop flight to Australia, a distance of 10,000 nautical miles, to practise air-refuelling procedures. No. 617 Squadron is based at Scampton, in Lincolnshire, and is equipped with Vulcan aircraft.

It was decided that three crews were to undergo training in air-refuelling. There was no shortage of volunteers, and after some good-natured lobbying, my own crew was selected for the primary task with two other crews to train as reserves.

Air-refuelling has become commonplace in the Royal Air Force during the last few years, but long-range, non-stop, air-refuelled flights had not previously been flown in Vulcan aircraft, and none of the three captains had any experience in this type of flying. Fortunately a wealth of experience and advice in air-refuelling techniques was available from No. 214 Squadron, which has been actively engaged in flying Valiant tanker aircraft for several years and has to its credit many record non-stop flights. Our crews spent some time with No. 214 Squadron, planning all aspects of the air-refuelling techniques to be used. The success of any air-refuelling operation depends upon the abil-

ity of tanker and receiver aircraft to make visual contact with each other at a predetermined rendezvous. As this may have to be accomplished with limited navigational facilities and possible radio silence, it is imperative that procedures are adopted to suit the worst possible conditions. A thorough training in these procedures and a high standard of navigational accuracy are essential.

Our ground indoctrination with No. 214 Squadron began with a showing of their training film. In full colour and with the aid of superb aerial photography, it describes the 'probe and drogue' method of air-refuelling which is currently in use in the R.A.F. Fuel is passed to the receiver aircraft through a hose trailed from a winding drum in the bomb-bay of the tanker aircraft. At the end of the hose, which is 90 feet long, is a cone-shaped metal drogue three feet in diameter. The receiver aircraft has a probe fitted to its nose and in order to achieve a coupling between the two aircraft, the receiver is flown towards the tanker at a slow but steady overtaking speed, guiding the probe into the drogue. As this coupling, or contact as it is called, is achieved, the receiver pushes the hose forward from the fully trailed position, automatically opening the tanker's fuel supply cock after 15 feet has been taken up on the drum. The training film shows a normal sequence of events and demonstrates the skill

required in the operation. Tenseness and over-controlling are common faults. The probe will not positively engage in the drogue if the contact is made at too slow an overtaking speed, while too fast an overtaking speed could result in the probe nozzle being snapped off.

During initial training in air-refuelling we all tended to be heavy-handed on the control column, giving our navigators and air electronic officers some rough and uncomfortable flying. My own crew members recall soup and sandwiches becoming weightless for seconds at a time before crashing back upon their desks. Another difficulty was caused by the central mounting of the probe on the nose of the Vulcan, while the captain's seat is on the left-hand side of the cockpit. Frequently one made what looked like a perfect approach to the drogue only to saunter past it a few inches to the right or left. There were occasions when the drogue bounced off the probe, while if the overtaking speed was a little too fast the drogue sometimes came within inches of the windscreen. Mastering these problems gave us some entertaining flying. Our practices progressed from medium to high altitude as our proficiency increased. A common feature of high-altitude flying is clear-air turbulence, which adds considerably to the difficulties of air-refuelling. The drogue dances out of line just at the critical moment, and the exasperated captain must make a fresh approach.

After a few weeks of intensive training we were reasonably adept at

receiving transfers of fuel. While the captain concentrates on 'forming' on the tanker, the co-pilot manipulates the fuel control switches which regulate the flow of fuel into the Vulcan's tanks, in order to maintain the aircraft's centre of gravity within limits.

As already mentioned, accurate navigation is essential for making a rendezvous with tanker aircraft. It is not sufficient to rely on a visual pick-up because air-to-air visibility, oddly enough, decreases with altitude, the sky taking on a massive empty aspect and the eyes tending to focus on infinity. Sophisticated airborne radar and electronic aids are carried to overcome the problem, but in case these aids should not be available, timing and fixing have to be absolutely precise. Flying at 600mph, an error of 15 seconds represents two and a half miles.

An important aspect of our training was night air-refuelling. The tanker aircraft can be illuminated for night work with underwing floodlighting. This is very effective and gives the receiver pilot a datum on which to fly should the natural horizon be obscured. Fitted into the nose of the Vulcan are two probe lights, the intensity of which can be varied. They illuminate the tip of the probe and throw a pool of light ahead of it. Providing a normal approach to the drogue is made, the probe lights show up the drogue in plenty of time to make a contact. Many of the aircraft handling faults which we had encountered during day training returned with our introduction to night air-refuelling, but intensive practice soon enabled us to overcome them.



Concurrently with flying training, detailed plans for the flight to Sydney were taking shape. No. 214 Squadron was to provide the tanker support, and a steady exchange of viewpoints, suggestions, and ideas between the two Squadrons ensued. The choice of route was governed by two main factors; the location, of suitable airfields from which tanker aircraft could operate, and the availability of diplomatic clearance to overfly foreign countries. After detailed examination of all possible tanker bases, those selected were Akrotiri in Cyprus, Karachi in West Pakistan, and Tengah in Singapore. Refuelling to full tanks over Singapore was found to be insufficient to allow for adequate fuel reserves in the event of a bad-weather diversion from Sydney, and it was decided that another air-refuelling would be made a few hundred miles south of Singapore by a tanker operating from Tengah. There were thus four air-refuelling points from three tanker bases. The

selected airfields are all modern in layout, with a minimum of 9,000 feet runway length. Akrotiri and Tengah are operated by the RAF and have adequate instrument approach aids for landing in poor weather, but Karachi is a civil airport and at the time of the flight had no GCA or instrument landing system. This was a

problem for the tankers based at that airfield, as early morning mist and low cloud is a regular feature of Karachi's weather.

The distance between each tanker base lay well within the range capability of the Vulcan, and a great circle track between each rendezvous point would have achieved the shortest possible flying time. However, as it was necessary to avoid Soviet and some neutral territories, the final route was a series of great circle hops around these territories, totalling 9,993 nautical miles. Statistics giving winds and temperatures applicable to the time of year were studied. With allowances for making visual contact with the tankers and transferring fuel, it was calculated that the flight should take just over 20 hours.

It was apparent from the outset that at least one night air-refuel would have to be carried out, and it would be best for this to take place over Cyprus, leaving only daylight hook-ups along the route as crew fatigue increased.

This was ruled out because a daylight landing was required at Sydney, and no matter how one juggled the take-off times, the total flight time was such that refuelling over Cyprus at night meant a night landing at Sydney. The best compromise was achieved by planning the night hook-up in the Karachi area, giving daylight conditions at Cyprus, Singapore, and Sydney.

A most important aspect was the setting up of adequate communications facilities. HQ Bomber Command arranged a vast signals network which made possible the exchange of operational, administrative, and meteorological information along the entire route. Before the actual flight several overseas flights of up to 17 hours duration were completed by our crews and on all of them the communications organization functioned satisfactorily. Various safety circuits were introduced so that alternative routing of signals was available in the event of a primary circuit breaking down. Emphasis was placed on the speedy administrative handling of all signals traffic, and the experience gained in flying long distance practice flights under efficient and prompt communications control gave us tremendous confidence. Amendments to rendezvous times due to fluctuating wind velocities never once failed to reach the tankers in ample time.

With this background of support, and with training completed, my crew looked forward keenly to Tuesday, 20th June, the day the flight was to take place. The tanker force was split

into three components and deployed to the three selected airfields. Ground crews of No. 617 Squadron were flown by Transport Command to Richmond, the terminal airfield at Sydney, so that the Vulcan could be inspected and serviced on arrival. At Scampton I made a final choice of aircraft and decided to take Vulcan XH481, which was air tested and pronounced satisfactory.

Shortly after midnight on the 19th/20th June, meteorological reports and forecasts started to arrive from airfields along the route. Confirmation of tanker serviceability followed. Flight times to rendezvous positions were calculated and rechecked. Crew baggage and flight rations were stowed in the aircraft and we climbed aboard. Engines were started, all checks completed, and we were ready to go. The stage was set. The rest was up to us. At the take-off point I lined up on the runway and ran the engines to 80 per cent, power holding the aircraft on the brakes. Precisely on the planned time I released the brakes, the Vulcan accelerated, and in a few seconds we were off. The time was 10.35 hours GMT. The co-pilot cleared VHF contact with Scampton tower and we climbed away.

It had been a cloudy, dull day at Scampton. By the time we levelled out at 35,000 feet heading for the Kentish coast, the cloud below started to thin out and dissipate. Crossing the French coast in the Pas de Calais area we had an unobscured view of the ground for miles ahead. Flying Officer Knight, the air electronics officer, reported that communications and electricals were

fully serviceable. In the well below the pilots' seats, Chief Technician McAlpine, the aircraft servicing chief, busied himself preparing a most welcome cup of coffee.

In a cloudless sky we crossed France, Italy, and Greece, with picturesque views of Lake Geneva and the Alps. The Italian coastline slipped past and in southern Greece, Athens airport stood out clearly from its surroundings in the afternoon sunshine. Periodic checks confirmed that all equipment, including engines, oxygen, radar, and radio, was functioning properly. Two and a half hours before the first rendezvous time we made contact on HF W/T with the tankers standing by on the ground at Cyprus, and Knight reported good contact with Headquarters Bomber Command and other controlling stations. Half an hour before the rendezvous I was able to speak to the tankers by radio, and was told that both primary and reserve tankers were airborne and ready to transfer fuel. On his screen, the controller at a Cyprus radar station watched our courses converging and gave directions by clock references: "Your playmates are at twelve o'clock, range 25 miles." We sighted the two Valiants flying in wide echelon starboard, and gradually caught up with them. A Canberra was in company with the tankers, carrying an Air Ministry photographer whose cinefilm of the refuelling operations was shown on BBC television the following day.

Pre-contact checks were carried out, systematically ticking off the selection of all the necessary switches. I

positioned the Vulcan about 30 yards behind the leading tanker and slowly approached the drogue. There was a satisfying 'clunk' as the probe slid into the drogue. After first throttling back to stabilise speed, I applied more power and we moved forward to the optimum refuelling position. Fuel started flowing, pressures and flow rates were normal. It took 13 minutes to receive 5,000 gallons. With power reduced the Vulcan dropped back, unwinding the hose until signal lights in the tanker's bomb bay indicated that fuel had ceased to flow. I closed the throttles completely as the hose reached its maximum trail so that the probe came out cleanly from the centre of the drogue. The time was 14.42 hours GMT. From the first visual sighting to completion of the transfer, 22 minutes had elapsed. Weather conditions had been perfect, calm and smooth. The first and easiest hurdle had been crossed.

During the refuelling a gentle turn northwards had been made so that on parting company, with thanks to the tanker captain, we were well on our way across Turkey. Turning eastwards towards Iran, the ground below soon became rugged and mountainous. The sky was darkening and small blue flashes of lightning were visible on the northern horizon from thunderstorms over southern Russia. The lights of Teheran disappeared under the nose and we crossed into Pakistan at 17.42 hours GMT. Half an hour before the second rendezvous, firm VHF contact was established with the tankers which were airborne from Karachi.

We sighted the Valiants at 18.20 hours GMT, corresponding to 23.20 hours Karachi local time. The powerful red flashing beacon mounted in each tanker's tail beckoned us on. Approaching from almost-directly astern I misjudged the overtaking speed and had to pull out to one side before sliding in behind the leading aircraft. In perfect weather conditions, with no moon but a clear horizon unobscured by cloud, I made a good contact and fuel was flowing by 18.33 hours. After taking on about 800 gallons, the probe, for no apparent reason, came out of the drogue. We had experienced pressure disconnections during training and this was the most likely explanation. A reduction in fuel flow rate sometimes overcomes the trouble. I decided to make another attempt and if the same thing happened again, to switch over to the reserve tanker.

Precious time was being wasted and the perfect weather in which we had started refuelling had given way to thundery cumulo-nimbus clouds. The comforting clear horizon was no longer visible. I prodded at the drogue as it came into the patch of light in front of the probe and we were reconnected. Almost at once the windscreen was obscured by a spray of fuel and I throttled back to clear the drogue, assuming that we had lost contact again. Before I had time to tell the crew what I thought had happened, there was a loud and distinctly ugly noise from the probe. Unable to see the probe and drogue because of the fuel splashed on the windscreen, I had incorrectly assumed

that there had been a pressure disconnection. A leak at the coupling must have caused the fuel splash and the harsh rending noise seconds later marked the withdrawal of the probe under considerable stress because, on dropping back, I had not stayed directly in line astern of the tanker. I could visualise the probe quivering like an arrow as it recovered from its sideways load. It was a sickening moment and there is no doubt that I must have been within an ace of snapping off the probe nozzle. Waiting for the windscreen to clear so that I could allay my fears was an absolute torture. With great relief I saw that the probe was undamaged.

Any thought of continued attempts to refuel from the primary tanker quickly evaporated after this episode. I switched to the other Valiant and asked its captain to reduce the flow rate in order to minimise the chances of further pressure disconnections. Soon after making a contact we flew into cirro-stratus cloud, which lasted until the transfer was complete. Reports of active cumulo-nimbus cloud ahead and to each side of us were passed to me by the navigator radar, who could see the storms quite distinctly on his screen.

In spite of the difficulties we had experienced in this night air-refuelling operation, it had been completed successfully and we turned our attention to a continuous line of storms which stretched across our track two miles ahead. Within seconds of clearing the tanker we were in the thick of it. During the prolonged refuelling operation the tankers had

weaved gently away to the south of track in order to avoid the storms, and we were approximately ten minutes behind schedule. The latest winds which the tankers had passed over W/T indicated that we were unlikely to make up any time on the way to Singapore. To offset this was the comforting knowledge that we had completed the most difficult part of the operation. There was adequate fuel on board for the next leg and the aircraft was still fully serviceable. The balance between success and failure was now heavily weighted in our favour.

Working together, the two navigators threaded a path through the storms which avoided the worst of the weather. The leg across the Bay of Bengal to the coast of Malaya was uneventful. Minutes ticked away into hours. The cockpit was warm and comfortable. Tins of soup were warmed in the ration heaters and we followed this with cold chicken salad. The autopilot functioned perfectly and each pilot relaxed in turn at hourly intervals whilst the other monitored the flight instruments. The rear crew members kept up a steady volume of work and I could hear Knight tapping out or receiving a continuous stream of Morse code. He reported radio contact with the Valiants on the ground at Tengah two and a half hours before rendezvous time and maintained periodic transmissions with them all the way in. Dawn revealed grey, murky conditions of half cloud cover at cruising altitude, precisely as forecast by the meteorologists.

The rendezvous and fuel transfer at Singapore worked very well.

Intermittent visual contact with the tankers was established at 23.50 hours GMT. A break in the high cloud enabled a coupling to be made before entering cirrus cloud for most of the 18 minute transfer. The tanker's main pumps were not used in order to minimise the chance of a further disconnection. After taking 5,000 gallons from the first Valiant we 'formatted' loosely with two other refuellers to a position about 400 miles along track south of Singapore where a final topping-up commenced. The weather was now perfect, without a cloud in the sky. Wg Cdr Hill, captain of the final tanker, called out every few minutes a running total of fuel transferred, and as the figures crept up towards the planned total needed to ensure a safe diversion from Sydney I knew that, barring accidents, we were sure to complete the trip. The transfer was completed at 01.01 hours GMT. We had been airborne for 14 hours and 26 minutes and had travelled just over 7,000 miles. There were nearly 3,000 miles still to go.

After passing Java we crossed the Timor Sea and there, ahead of us, was the north-west coast of Australia, which we crossed north of the town of Derby at 03.21 hours GMT. The vast expanse of the Australian land mass lay between us and Sydney. Apart from its colour, which had a reddish hue, it could have been the Sahara. Mid-way across the continent the town of Alice Springs lay on track and we exchanged a few words with the airfield air traffic controller as we passed high overhead. The last three hours of the flight seemed to take

an age to complete. The cramped conditions and lack of sleep became more noticeable. Unstrapping from my ejector seat, I climbed down into the well and stretched my muscles. All of us shaved, using tepid water from a thermos flask, and with this freshening up we looked forward eagerly to the final stages of the long flight.

We made contact with Richmond air traffic control on VHF at 06.25 hours GMT. Under radar control we started a let-down along track, aiming to be at 2,000 feet when five miles short of the airfield. Breaking through a thin layer of cloud at 5,000 feet we could see our terminal airfield dead ahead. We were cleared down to 500 feet and as we flashed past the

control tower an official timing of the flight was recorded. It had taken 20 hours, 3 minutes, and 17 seconds. Five minutes after flying past, we had landed and were standing on Australian soil, to be welcomed by the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Bomber Command, Air Marshal Sir Kenneth Cross, who was visiting Australia at the time. The flight had been completed as planned and in addition to meeting a large number of press, radio, and television reporters, we received a great welcome from thousands of spectators, all eager to see the aircraft which had flown non-stop from 'the old country' in record time.

Sir Michael Beavis



Vulcan B1A XH481 at Perth after its record breaking flight in 1961. The aircraft was borrowed from 101 Sqn because of its excellent reliability

***Crew:** Sqn Ldr Mike Beavis (captain), Fg Off Dave Bromley (co-pilot), Flt Lt Jeff Jukes (nav-plotter), Flt Lt Clive Taylor (nav-radar), Fg Off John Knight (AEO), Ch Tech 'Mac' McAlpine (crew chief)*

Tirpitz Dinner 13 November 2010

This year's Tirpitz Dinner will take place on Saturday 13 November at the Petwood Hotel. A memorial service will be held at the Squadron Memorial on Sunday 14 November in conjunction with the Woodhall Spa Remembrance Service and Parade. Full details will be sent separately by email or letter.

With Tait to the Tirpitz

One day, in the dining room at Petwood, I was asking the Gunnery Leader if he needed any extra Gunners for the next op, when the CO who was sitting at the same table said, "Why not come as my wireless operator?" Larry Curtis, the Signals Leader was at the time flying with Tait but the CO felt it was about time he had a rest (he'd done 93 ops). So, after four months waiting, I was back in a regular crew. Danny Daniel, the spare bomb-aimer was with us and a new navigator, Joe Bayne. Paddy Gallagher was our flight engineer, Chapman, an Australian, our rear gunner and Micky Vaughan our mid-upper gunner. There's something good about being in a regular crew, especially with a chap like Willie Tait: we flew together, faced the same dangers and went out in the evenings to parties more like a crowd of schoolboys.

Brest was not a pleasant target; Jerry was surrounded at this time and was determined to make things as unpleasant as possible for us when we went there. The daylight sky would be full of those large 14 and 16 inch naval shells that gave out a horrible orange puff and a devil of a lot of shrapnel too. Also, Willie had an annoying habit of having a last look round that was not all that popular with the crew. However, we always came through OK although every machine in the Squadron was hit in some way or another. Having paid some attention to Brest, La Pallice,

Lorient and Ijmuiden, news went round that we were to have a crack at the German battleship Tirpitz which had been giving our Navy a headache for some while.

Anchored as she was in Alten Fjord, at North Cape, the extreme North of Norway, she constituted a serious threat to our convoys and kept valuable ships tied up in home waters when they would have been more than useful in the Pacific area. It was decided to make the attack from Russia which caused great excitement among the crews in expectation of a visit to distant lands. To make the journey to Archangel carrying and landing with a 12000lb 'Tallboy' bomb was no mean exploit in itself; especially as we could expect little help in the way of radar navigational aids etc from the Russians. Overload tanks were fitted all down the inside of the fuselage to give us the range needed.

On the 11th September 1944 at 5pm we set course from base to fly over Norway, Sweden and Finland to a small island outside Archangel - Yagodnik. We remained accurately 'on track' all through the hours of darkness and when dawn broke we were over vast forests and swamps which characterise that part of Russia. The cloud, which we were told at briefing had not been lower than 1500ft for 25 years in this area, was down to within three or four hundred feet, as near as we could judge and was almost ten-tenths cover. While

we were wondering whether we'd be able to find our small island, a break in the clouds revealed it almost below us and we made a very good landing on the small grass airfield.

Our 'quarters' were on a large paddle-steamer moored close by and as we made our way towards it a silver band struck up a lively tune to welcome us. Right across the side of the boat was a large banner in red and white, 'Welcome to the glorious fliers of the Royal Air Force'. We were considerably shaken and walked up the gangway very self-consciously. The amusing thing was that as the various crews came in we were able to have a good laugh at their reaction when the band struck up for their special benefit.

We were very hungry of course, after ten or eleven hours in the air, and rather curious too to see what kind of fare would be provided. Our first meal consisted of four slices of bread arranged on one plate - one had a piece of raw bacon, another jam, a third cheese, and the fourth Spam. To wash this queer mixture down was a glass of sweet, hot tea without milk. A refreshing drink it was too! Next morning there were hard-boiled eggs and raw bacon. One or two enterprising chaps went down to the galley and soon showed the cooks the British way - from then on it was OK.

After checking over the aircraft, one or two of which had been shot up over Sweden, a football match was arranged for the afternoon and the Russians gave our team a sound thrashing - 6-1! Every time a goal

was scored the band struck up. In the evening there was a film show. The cinema was built almost underground. The films were continuous War - terrific banging of guns and marching of men for two solid hours.

In addition to the discomfort of the hot, stuffy atmosphere, a more s more subtle irritation had to be borne, an invasion totally different from that shown on the screen had taken place. Our Doc was well prepared for such eventualities; he was spraying our small cabins and dusting our pillows with 'Keatings' when we came back to the boat. Next morning several of the lads were covered in enormous red blotches, one chap's eyes were completely closed up and another looked as if he'd developed Mumps in the night. What a voracious appetite these little red devils had!

Weather was still unfit for our trip so Willie Tait decided that mass PT would do us all good and also clear the heads of those who'd had too much Vodka the previous evening. I think this was a piece of pre-arranged propaganda to convince the Russians that it was just a part of normal routine. Anyway, if they'd understood any English they would have known by the grumbling that it wasn't our idea of fun. Willie of course, did the PT with us as he always shared in everything we did on the Squadron. Arrangements had been made for another film show for the evening to be followed by a dance. Our interpreter, who, by the way had silver-filled teeth and smelled strongly of perfume, couldn't understand why we weren't keen on more films but promised to do what he

could to secure alternatives. We were pleasantly surprised to have Bachelor Mother, Popeye and Mickey Mouse. The Russians of course laughed with us at the latter, but Bachelor Mother must have strained their patience almost as much as their War films strained ours. The dance was a great success. We learned the Russian way and they tried out the Jitter-bug.

Next morning was taken up with thoroughly going over our machines with the help of the ground crews who had flown out in two Liberators. Unluckily owing to various accidents, there were only 27 Lancs serviceable out of the original 38 brought over by ourselves and 9 Squadron. Weather was reported to be excellent over the target so, at 1650 GMT we set off, flying at a fair height over the vast expanse of swamp and forest. Some four hours later our objective could clearly be seen lying at anchor in the fjord, surrounded by snow-covered mountains.

We 'turned on' to make our bombing run but Jerry had spotted us and slowly the fjord began to fill with smoke from containers around the Tirpitz and also from high speed boats. It was a race against time but in nine minutes from when we had first sighted her she was effectively obscured and although we dropped our bomb it was with a very faint hope of a hit being scored. We returned to Archangel and those whose machines could be refuelled and were serviceable, next day flew back to base.

The Russians minced no words about our failure: They knew we wouldn't be able to sink the Tirpitz.

September passed, and at the beginning of October we made what undoubtedly was the riskiest raid of my tour. There was a dam on the Swiss border which had to be breached before our armies in the South could take their next step forward. If Jerry breached the dam during an advance our armies would probably have been overwhelmed by the flood. The attack on the Kembs Dam was carefully planned: several squadrons of fighters came with us as escort and others to attack gun positions as we went in. Six Lancs were to fly in at 9000ft and bomb. Immediately afterwards, six more were to attack line-astern at 500ft and drop half hour delayed-action 'Tallboys' (12000 pounders). We were leading the low force.

Everything went according plan, including the weather and exactly on H-Hour we dived out of the 1500ft cloud base, levelled off at 500ft and bombed. As we swept away in a starboard curve I saw the kite immediately behind us burst into flames, go into an uncontrolled dive and explode on the ground - all in less time than it takes to write this. Of the four others who followed us in, one exploded in mid-air and the remainder like us were lucky. Tait climbed straight to 8000ft and decided to go round once more to see if any of the others had scored hits. While doing this, owing to a misunderstanding, we flew straight over a power station which had two four-gun batteries of light flak. In a few seconds they were on us and followed us all over the sky until we went out of range with one 40 millimetre shell in the wing root.

We made a safe landing at base with one tyre shot away and found that the shell had missed our main petrol tank by about four or five inches. As it was, the explosion had pierced the corner of the tank which was leaking like a colander. Our bomb-aimer scored a direct hit for which he was awarded a well-deserved 'immediate' DFC. The dam was effectively breached as we saw by photos taken only half an hour after we left the target area.

The Tirpitz in the meantime had been moved to an anchorage further south - Tromso Fjord. On the 29th October we left Lossiemouth for the long trip north intending to attack shortly after dawn from the landward side to deceive any radar devices Jerry might have there. Dawn broke shortly after we crossed the Norwegian coast and turned northwards when about 50 miles inland. It was a really wonderful sight - everything beneath us covered in snow. Then the sun rose slowly over the horizon tinting all the mountain-tops pink just like a wedding cake. Ahead, we could see banks of cloud and when we reached Tromso the sky was about seven-tenths covered making a good bombing-run impossible. However, we persevered and most of the Lanes bombed, although once again good results were most improbable.

We arrived back at Lossiemouth after 13¼ hours in the air and slept very soundly that night. Next day we flew a spare wheel up to Sumburgh for a crew who ran out of petrol and needed to put down there. We were given a hearty welcome by the officers of the station who, tucked away from

civilisation as they were, were always pleased to see fresh faces. Later we returned to Lossie and then straight on to Woodhall.

For almost a fortnight the weather was unsuitable. We would fly to Milltown or Lossiemouth, wait a couple of days, then return to base. These visits, which always seemed to occur at weekends, became quite a joke on the Squadron.

On the 11th November 1944 Met decided there was a good chance and at 3am on the 12th we set off for Tromso. 617 Squadron were leading the attack and 9 Squadron were to follow 3 minutes later. All went well at the rendezvous point some 100 miles from the target and from then on, we flew in what was termed a 'Gaggle' - that is at slightly different heights but in a fairly compact mass. This enables each pilot to make an accurate 'run up' without interfering with his neighbours and also splits up the flak. Our bomb aimer, Danny, sighted the Tirpitz well beforehand and Tait turned the Squadron in to the attack. Tirpitz lay in front of us like a small island and there was no cloud or smoke screen to prevent us making a perfect run.

Every one of our bombs went down on the first run and immediately the Tirpitz was obscured from sight by a pall of smoke which made observation difficult. Danny was certain he'd got a good bomb and Willie agreed that the run in was as near perfect as could be. 9 Squadron came in as we were turning off and struck another very accurate blow. We circled round just out of range of the flak to assess the damage. The large mushroom of

smoke made this difficult although we felt certain that she'd been badly hurt because even at that height (14000ft) flames could be seen. Willie came through on the intercom and gave me a fairly long message to radio back to Group who were anxiously awaiting news. This message was to the effect that one direct hit was probable but results were difficult to assess accurately owing to heavy smoke. This was picked up immediately at Lossiemouth, some 1400 miles distant and passed on to Group Headquarters. Meanwhile, the weather was deteriorating and when we reached the Shetlands it

was impossible to obtain an accurate pin-point owing to cloud and rain. I took a number of bearings for the navigator which gave him some idea where we were. A diversion message was coming through on the radio but I found great difficulty in picking it up owing to our aerials being iced up and the fact that we were in cloud. However, as we neared Lossiemouth I got some very accurate bearings and we came over the airfield at about 500ft in a rainstorm. Tait turned off to the eastward where it looked slightly clearer and in a few minutes we made a perfect touch-down at Dallachy, a small Coastal Command



'Tirpitz' Tait and his crew (allegedly on their return from the sinking of the battleship by 617 Sqn but the crew composition does not match the ORB)
 Left to Right: Arthur Ward (W/Op), James Chapman (A/G), Danny Daniel (bomb-aimer), Micky Vaughan (A/G), 'Willie' Tait (pilot), Paddy Gallagher (flight engineer), Joe Bayne (navigator), Harold Ellis (navigator)

station, From here we went by transport to Lossie about 10 miles away. The whole trip had taken about 12½ hours so it must have been about 6pm when we got to the Mess. We were all dog-tired but decided to have a bit of a party. About 8pm the news came through that the Tirpitz was upside down in Tromso Fjord. A recce Mosquito had been out so there was no doubt about it. Of course, the party really got going then but after a short time I felt so tired that I went off to bed and slept for 10 or 12 hours solid.

As soon as we stepped out of the Lanc next evening at Woodhall Spa, we were besieged by photographers; cameras clicked left, right and centre (incidentally none of those photos came out, it was too dark).

When we reached the control tower, the funniest happening of all, the Station Commander had 'roped' in the Staffordshire's Regimental Band and they were all formed up, blowing their heads off when we drew up in Willie's car.

The following day Wg Cdr Tait and Danny, our bomb-aimer were to broadcast in London and were flying down to Northolt so the rest of the crew thought it would be a good idea to go down for a celebration. We arranged to meet after the recording had been made and were lucky enough to get accommodation at the Savoy where Willie's mother and fiancée were waiting to meet him.

When he did eventually manage to tear himself away from the BBC at 8 pm, we all went to dinner at the Mayfair after which we left his mother and fiancée to enjoy his company while

we gate-crashed a few night-clubs. Our rear gunner, Micky Vaughan had bags of push and after an argument at the door we were made guests of Harry Roy at the Milroy Club. We got awfully tight and sang our Squadron song with the band - went to bed at 4.30 am.

The next thing I remember was a distant ringing of phone bells and after some groping about found the receiver. It was 6.30am and we were to get ready immediately to motor back to Woodhall where the two Squadrons were to be congratulated on their feat by the Air Minister. Just two hours sleep after a night like we'd had! The two large Humbers took us comfortably back and we were soon listening to Sir Archibald Sinclair's address. It sounded almost as if he were speaking in the House of Commons.

In a very short time the excitement died down and we made three raids in December before taking Christmas leave. Back at the Camp after nine days we found that Willie had been posted to East Dereham and that a new CO had charge of the Squadron. It all happened so suddenly that there was no opportunity to say goodbye to our late skipper with whom we'd had so many really enjoyable times. Almost every evening unless there was something brewing, he'd be in the bar with a pint tucked under his arm and an old pipe going....

Arthur Ward

Thank you to Peggie Ward, Arthur's widow for providing this story from his archives.

A Tribute to Richard Todd OBE



During his illustrious and distinguished career Richard Todd played many character parts, becoming renowned for his portrayal of war heroes. Of these, that of Wg Cdr Guy Gibson is perhaps his most enduring, and arguably most defining. Critics have repeatedly praised Richard's performance in this role, and to many who never met the real Gibson, Richard was "Guy Gibson" so great was the impression he created.

With hindsight he was the obvious choice for the part. At the time however, this was far from the case. In 1952 Richard was already well established in the British cinema and beginning to make inroads into Hollywood, having starred in Walt Disney's "Robin Hood"

and being earmarked for the lead role in "A Man called Peter". However contrary to later popular belief and in stark contrast to his previous "real life" existence (a captain in the British 6th Airborne Division and one of the first members of British Forces to land in Normandy on D-Day) he had yet to feature in a film about wartime combat.

When purchasing of the film rights to Paul Brickhill's book, however, Robert Clark, Associated British Films' Director of Production had the foresight to consider that Richard, then under contract to the Studios, would be ideal for the lead role of the Squadron Commander. It proved to be a shrewd move.

Previous roles had demonstrated Richard's outstanding ability to communicate strength of character and portray heroic qualities with typical British understatement. In height, build and general physical appearance Richard was well set for the role. Indeed, one of the film's many strong points is that Robert Leonard, the film's Casting Director, sought to employ actors for the major parts who had a strong physical resemblance to their characters and, although perhaps older in years, illustrated the maturity that war brings to young men.

Richard's development of Gibson's character was typical of his professionalism and application. R C Sherriff's script provided a firm basis. Although of an earlier generation, having served in the Army during WW I, Sherriff understood the ethos of service life and of "Britishness". Writing only eight years after the event his dialogue retained the language and idiom of the period. Likewise, Richard's Service career meant that key attributes were second nature. He (as

did other members of the cast who had served in the Forces) knew how to wear a uniform, how to salute and stand when addressing his men or being spoken to by a senior officer – after all he had done them “for real”.

It was with this raw material that Richard set to work to create the character of Gibson. He spent two years in preparation, reading as much as he could about him, meeting his father and schoolmaster, and others who had known him. Photographs and film footage were studied to observe mannerisms and body language – the solid Gibson stance, feet firmly planted apart, hands on hips, though Gibson’s slightly rolling gait was seemingly overlooked (perhaps on account of Kenneth More’s recent portrayal of Douglas Bader in “Reach for the Sky”?).

Richard adopted a slightly stronger, voice with more timbre than evidenced by the surviving recording of Gibson (made however in the relaxed atmosphere of a studio). By doing so he quickly communicated a sense of decisiveness and leadership. Strangely, despite this additional ‘edge’ some later critics have viewed the overall characterisation as too warm, with little evidence of Gibson’s disciplinarian tendencies, especially toward lower ranks. That said, it is understandable, since those consulted were mainly from Gibson’s inner sanctum of peers, and Gibson was a complex character. Above all the image intended, and acceptable to a 1950’s audience, was that of a popular and respected leader, very much the “school head boy”, as AVM Sir Ralph Cochrane had once described him.

It is perhaps little known that Richard and Gibson had curious parallels in their own lives. Guy Gibson was born in India of Anglo-Scottish parentage, the son of a colonial civil servant. At an early age he was sent back to England with his mother, who in reality had little to do with his upbringing, which was spent either at boarding at school or with relatives in Cornwall. On leaving school Gibson decided on an Air Force career. When he was 21 his mother, of whom he had seen little, died having suffered serious burns in a fire. At the time Gibson was becoming fully immersed in the war.

Richard was of Irish-Scots descent. He spent some of his early years in India where his father served with the Army, before returning to the UK as a boarder at Shrewsbury, spending holidays at the family home in the West Country. On leaving school Richard initially joined the Army but then a decided to pursue of a career on the stage. This resulted in estrangement from his mother, who also



died in tragic circumstances when Richard was 19 and immersing himself in his new career. Might these similarities of experience have created an innate, if unsuspected, affinity facilitating interpretation of the role?

(Eight years later, art would again imitate life in the film "The Longest Day" when Richard, cast as his real wartime commanding officer, acted out a scene talking to an actor playing Captain Richard Todd).

In pursuit of accuracy (as far as secrecy then permitted) and attention to detail Richard found an ally in the film's Director, Michael Anderson. This consideration extended to the wardrobe department - with the wearing of a Luftwaffe style life vest and a scout badge on his wrist (occasionally erroneously referred to as a second wrist watch) and to the production designers. The film set of the interior of Scampton's Mess would be instantly recognisable to any members of V-Force who served on the Station.

Richard's dedication to the role extended to his learning how to start up and taxi a Lancaster, to provide verisimilitude to those scenes showing the departure of aircraft from Scampton. In addition he was given rudimentary "flying training" on the studio rig used for filming the cockpit sequences in order that his manipulation of the controls would appear convincing.

As a dog lover, Richard had no difficulty in working with his canine co-star – an Army Mine Detecting dog. A close affinity developed between the two. There were but few instances when there were difficulties. The best known is probably the dog's refusal to walk across the area of Nigger's grave outside No. 2 Hangar; another being the fact that in order to gain the dog's obedience Richard needed to adopt him as his own for the duration of the shoot and take him into the White Hart at Lincoln where the cast were staying during location work. Being a kennel dog, and not house trained, Richard was terrified that there might be an accident, but his fears proved unfounded.

If one discounts the special effects, sophisticated for their time but dated compared to today's technology, and the constraints placed on revealing the true nature of the weapon, "The Dambusters" retains its position as a classic of British cinema and epitome of the British war movie. So much so, that it was selected in 2007 to represent the war genre in the UK Film Council's "Summer of British Films" where cinema audiences were able to see once again on a large screen high quality digital imagery with unsurpassed clarity.

Lest their be any doubt as to the contribution Richard's performance made to the success of the film, perhaps the final word should be left to Guy Gibson's father who, despite initial reservations as to how his son might be portrayed, after seeing a pre-release version of the film commented... "in Richard Todd you have chosen an actor who is, to my mind, ideally cast for the part of Guy... and I am personally deeply grateful to him for his understanding interpretation of the part." A view echoed by countless cinema goers and aviation enthusiasts over the last half century.

Robert Owen

Final Landings

Ray Grayston

Ray Grayston enlisted in the RAFVR in February 1940. Having worked pre-war as a motor mechanic he was accepted for ground duties, and after a month of “square bashing” at No 7 Recruits Centre, Morecambe, found himself posted a short distance south the No.3 School of Technical Training at Blackpool. Posted in August 1940 to No.6 Flying Training School he spent a year in the Cotswolds before returning to 3 SoTT. A further year on and Bomber Command had instigated the “Pilot, Navigator, Bomb Aimer” scheme for aircrew, and with it came a demand for flight engineers. Volunteering for aircrew Ray was accepted and in August 1942 found himself at No.4 SoTT, St Athan, learning his new aircrew trade. Two months later he was posted to No. 50 Squadron at RAF Skellingthorpe having joined the crew of Australian Les Knight.



The crew bonded well and soon demonstrated the determination and professionalism that would see them selected to form what was to become 617 Squadron at Scampton in March 1943. After watching the successful breaching of the Mohne Dam the crew carried on to attack the Eder Dam. Surrounded by steep hills the bombing run relied not only on the pilot’s flying skill, but close co-operation with the flight engineer to regulate the speed and apply full power to enable the aircraft to execute a climbing turn out of the valley after crossing the dam. After two unsuccessful attacks by Flt Lt Shannon and Sqn Ldr Maudslay, Knight and his crew carried out an immaculate run which breached the dam.

Apart from making a trip to Bologna at the end of July, dropping leaflets, the crew did not operate again until September, concentrating on both high and low level training, the latter in preparation for a forthcoming operation to breach an embanked section of the Dortmund Ems Canal at Ladbergen, near Munster. After an abortive attempt on the night of 14/15 September, when the force was recalled owing to poor weather, the Squadron took off again the following night. As with the Dams Raid the operation was to be completed at very low level, in moonlight. Penetrating into Germany at low level, Sqn Ldr Holden, leading

Flt Lt Knight and Flt Lt Martin, was shot down en route, the explosion of his aircraft and 12,000lb HC bomb jarring Knight's aircraft.

On reaching the target area they found mist restricting visibility and began a square search in order to locate the correct stretch of canal – a difficult task made more hazardous by concentrations of light flak batteries defending this vulnerable stretch of



canal. Whilst conducting this search a bank of trees, on rising ground loomed up ahead out of the mist. Despite Knight's quick reactions the aircraft struck the tree tops.

Almost immediately the oil and temperature gauges for the two port engines indicated serious damage and control response suggested additional damage to the tail unit. Requesting permission to jettison their bomb Knight struggled to gain height and turn the aircraft on a course for home. It was not long before the starboard inner engine started showing signs of distress and it became obvious that despite jettisoning equipment to lighten the load the aircraft was doomed. Coaxing the aircraft to about 1,500' Knight gave the order to abandon aircraft.

Ray Grayston was the last to leave the aircraft after making sure that pilot had his parachute. However Les Knight fully realised that the aircraft would crash the moment that he left the controls and attempted to belly land the stricken Lancaster. As the aircraft touched down it struck a low bank and exploded. Flt Lt Knight's sacrifice and skill had enabled the other seven members of crew to escape with their lives (the Lancasters were carrying an extra gunner on this operation). Of these five would evade capture and make successful home runs back to the UK. Unfortunately for Ray and Harry O' Brien, the rear gunner, this was not to be the case. Though uninjured they had the misfortune to be taken prisoner almost immediately.

After interrogation at Dulag Luft, Ray was sent to Stalag Luft III, where he remained until January 1945 when he and his fellow PoWs were forced to march westwards, away from the advancing Russian Army, on what became known as the Long March. After three months at Stalag IVA at Luckenwalde he was liberated and repatriated to England.

On leaving the RAF he joined Hawker Siddeley at Dunsfold, becoming a quality inspector on Hunter, Harrier and Hawk aircraft, retiring in 1984 as chief inspector at British Aerospace (Military Division), Kingston.

John Cockshott DFC*

Born in Bradford in 1922 John Cockshott was educated at Grange High School and Technical College, Bradford and joined the RAFVR in 1940.

His first tour of operations was eventful. After completing his flying training he was posted in October 1942 as a Sergeant pilot to No. 61 Sqn at Syerston, flying Lancasters. His first two operations to Wismar and Kiel were completed as a second pilot to established crews, before he took his own crew on an operation to Genoa. On return he landed at Tempsford, Beds. where, after taxiing to dispersal a fire, believed had been started smouldering by several electrical faults experienced on the outward flight which had broke out in the cockpit.

He was to cross the Alps on no fewer than seven occasions during his first tour, which also included attacks on Essen, Hamburg, Wilelmshaven, Nurenberg, Stuttgart, Cologne and Dusseldorf. Approaching Paris during an operation to Turin, his gunners spotted a fighter which fortunately did not close in for an attack, and he was forced to return early from an attack on Mannheim in early December with his port inner engine out of action. He was commissioned later that month. A number of his trips were carried out as part of the working up trials of the Hercules engined Lancaster II, of which 61 Sqn had a flight.

On completion of his first tour he was retained at Syerston. He was awarded the DFC in May 1943; the citation recording that, "He has always displayed courage and exceptional determination to achieve his objective regardless of the opposition encountered. Plt Off Cockshott has set a magnificent example by his careful pre-flight planning of all details incidental to the operation."

After a period as an instructor at 1660 Conversion Unit, Swinderby, Acting Flt Lt John Cockshott, was posted to No. 617 Sqn at Woodhall Spa on 31 July 1944. Within a week, after one trip as a passenger with Flt Lt Kit Howard "to see how it was done", he had started a period of intensive operations, attacking the French ports of Brest and La Pallice as part of the Squadron's campaign to harry the enemy's U-boat campaign. Again, ill-luck dogged his new crew, when on their second operation with the Squadron they were forced by engine problems to return early from an attack against La Pallice.

He participated in Operation Paravane, the Squadron's first attack against the battleship Tirpitz, launched from Yagodnik in Russia, but during the attack on 15 September the defensive smokescreen effectively shrouded the target and he was forced to return his Tallboy to base. On 7 October he was one of the six crews selected to comprise the low level force for the attack on the Kembs Dam, near Basle. Making his run in at 600 feet in the face of concentrated anti-aircraft fire his aircraft was buffeted by the slipstream of the preceding aircraft, causing his Tallboy to fall on the west bank of the river. Sickness removed him from the Battle Order during November, but he returned to operations during December, participating in all the Squadron's six operations during that month.

He celebrated the arrival of 1945 over Oslo Fjord, fruitlessly hunting the German cruisers Koln and Emden, and the first months of the new year were equally frustrating. After participating in four attempts to attack the Bielefeld viaduct, abortive due to weather, he was not on the Battle Order to see its dramatic demise on 14 March. Compensation was forthcoming the following day when he released the Squadron's second Grand Slam, against the Arnsberg viaduct. Further attacks followed against rail bridges and the U-boat construction facility at Farge, his final operation and 29th with the Squadron being against the pens at Ijmuiden. The final accolade for his outstanding wartime service came on 5 May 1945, when he was awarded a Bar to his DFC, the citation highlighting "The determined and courageous manner in which he pressed home his attack" on the Kembs Dam.

Leonard Rooke

Len Rooke was born in Brentford, latter moving to rural Oxfordshire where his mother kept a small grocer's shop. He joined the RAF on leaving school in 1932/3, seemingly as a woodworker and possibly later an airframe fitter.

Following In early 1943 he volunteered for aircrew duties and after training as a flight engineer, Sgt Rooke joined the crew of Fg Off "Mac" Hamilton in September 1943 at 1654 Conversion Unit, Wigsley, Notts. Having completed the final part of their training the crew were posted for operational duties to 619 Squadron at RAF Woodhall Spa, Lincs, flying Avro Lancasters.

The Hamilton crew flew their first tour during the winter of 1943/44 focused on German targets, including Berlin, Frankfurt, Stettin and Brunswick, usually flying "Q-Queenie" - a veteran Lancaster known as "The Highland Queen". There were several close shaves: on one occasion coned by searchlights at 22,000 feet, on another, chased by a night fighter into cloud. Another time, attacked by a night fighter, the pilot started to suffer from anoxia as his oxygen tube became disconnected after putting the aircraft into a violent evasive manoeuvre. Len realised that something was amiss when his pilot mis-set a new course passed to him by the navigator and only after a considerable struggle with Mac (who was unaware that anything was wrong) was he able to reconnect his captain's oxygen.

Mac Hamilton trained his crew hard, but it produced results. Towards the end of their tour the crew had come top in the 5 Group bombing competition for three consecutive months, with scores averaging 70 yards using the standard Mk XIV bomb sight, and were extremely proud of their record.

Their success was recognised by being posted after 20 operations (half of them having been to Berlin) in February 1944, to 617 Sqn, the Dambusters, then under the command of Wing Commander Leonard Cheshire. After training to use the precision Stabilised Automatic Bomb Sight (SABS) the crew

commenced operations against French factory targets, dropping 12,000lb HC blast bombs, subsequently flying in the vanguard of attacks against Brunswick and Munich in April 1944, as Cheshire's low level marking technique was put to use against German city targets.

After a month's intense preparation on 5/6 June 1944 the crew participated in Operation Taxable, the D-Day spoof, dropping strips of "window" (metal foil), to simulate an invasion convoy on German radar, deceiving the enemy into thinking that a landing was taking place north of Le Havre. For the remainder of the year they attacked French ports and hardened V-weapon installations using Barnes Wallis' Tallboy 12,000lb deep penetration "earthquake" bomb.

On 15 June, whilst attacking Boulogne his aircraft was very badly damaged in the nose and bomb bay by flak, and his bomb aimer wounded in the legs. Len administered preliminary first aid and gave morphine to his wounded companion whilst his pilot nursed his aircraft back across the Channel to make an emergency landing at West Malling where rapid medical treatment was available for his injured crew member. Len's prompt action contributed in no small way to saving his companion's legs.

September and October 1944 saw two trips against the Tirpitz then anchored in the North of Norway, the first operating from Yagodnik in Russia (Operation Paravane) to Kaa Fiord, and the second from the North of Scotland to Tromso. Regrettably the crew missed the final coup de grace in November 1944, being on leave at the time.

After completing 28 operations with No. 617 Squadron, Flight Sergeant Rooke, as he had become, was posted from operational flying for instructional duties at No 26 Operational Training Unit at Wing, Beds. at the end of January 1945.

Phil Martin DFC

Aged 18, Phil Martin left his clerical job in April 1942 to enlist in the RAAF in Perth. After ab initio training on the Tiger Moth, followed by progression to the Anson he arrived in the UK and was posted to No.17 OTU at Siverstone, where he converted to the Wellington. He was commissioned in January and following further conversion to the Lancaster he was posted to No. 61 Sqn at Skellingthorpe in May 1944.

His first tour opened with night and day attacks mainly against tactical targets in France as part of the preparation for the forthcoming Allied invasion, including the ill-conceived attempt to assist the Allied breakout with the bombing of Caen. On July 25, the crew encountered their first direct baptism of fire when, during an attack against the Luftwaffe stores park at St Cyr his aircraft was hit by flak and the mid upper turret holed.

From the start Phil captained an efficient and well-disciplined crew. There was no smoking and no idle intercom chatter. The latter was to ensure that any warning of an converging aircraft, enemy of friend, would be heard. It paid dividends on at least two occasions. Such was Phil's ability that on completion of his first tour in August he was recommended for a DFC and asked if he and his crew would consider volunteering to join 617 Sqn.

It was, an offer that they readily accepted, arriving at Woodhall Spa on September 1. At the time of his arrival the Squadron were preparing to fly to Russia on Operation Paravane – the Squadron's first attack on the Tirpitz. As a new crew, uninitiated in the use of SABS the Martin crew were not on the Battle Order, but were instead split up and distributed amongst other aircraft, Phil being allocated to that flown by Gerry Fawke.

Their first operation as a crew took place on the night of 23 September, against the Dortmund Ems Canal, an uneventful trip for them, other than for the fact that they made no fewer than six runs over the target before releasing their Tallboy owing to the poor visibility. In this they faired better than some crews who returned with their bombs.

The beginning of October saw an abortive attack on the sea wall at West Kapelle and the crew began practising with the Mk III low-level bomb sight in preparation for what was to be Phil Martin's most hazardous operation to date – the attack on the Kembs Dam. On this occasion his was one of the six crews comprising the low level force who were to attack from 600 feet, aiming their Tallboy at the sluice gates of the barrage.

Phil's was the third aircraft in this force to attack, but such was the turbulence and buffet from accurate flak bursts that Don Day, the bomb aimer, found it impossible to accurately judge the moment of release and called for his captain to make a second run. Following Flt Lt Kit Howard who was also making a second run, having suffered a hang-up, Phil came in again, the two aircraft making a clear target for the German defences. Howard's aircraft was the first to be hit, his starboard wing burst into flames and folded up. A few seconds later, as Howard's aircraft exploded on the ground, Don Day released Martin's Tallboy.

Simultaneously the crew felt the aircraft shudder violently as the flak found its second target. The rudder controls had been hit and the Lancaster began turning to starboard, heading straight for barrage balloons marking the Swiss border. Using the engines to counteract the turn, Phil skilfully avoided the danger whilst his Flight Engineer assessed the damage, eventually restoring sufficient control to enable the damaged aircraft to return safely to Woodhall where over 100 holes were counted in the aircraft. Martin was awarded an immediate DFC, which was true to its description, being processed in advance of that from 61 Sqn which was not promulgated until May 1945!

Phil participated in operations through the remainder of the year including the second attack on Tirpitz, but missed the *coup de grace*. On January 12 1945,

whilst participating in the attack on Bergen, a heavy flak burst directly beneath the aircraft blew the tail off their Tallboy, peppering the bomb doors, but without severe damage to the aircraft.

On March 19 1945, Phil was recorded for posterity by the Bomber Command Film Unit as his Lancaster YZ-C released its Grand Slam against the Arnsberg Viaduct. It was an appropriate way to mark his 19th, and what would turn out to be his final, operation with the Squadron.

On return to Australia he was discharged from the RAAF in January 1946 becoming a photographer for the West Australian newspaper in Perth.

John H Leavitt

John H. Leavitt, an American who served as a Lancaster bomber pilot for RAF 617 (Dambusters) Squadron and senior CIA officer, died on 31 December 2009 at the age of 91. Born in Paris on 6 Feb 1918 during a Zeppelin raid, of an American father, who later served as a US Consular translator to the Versailles Treaty, and an English mother, he grew up in Istanbul, Connecticut and Washington DC.

A graduate of Brown University, he was teaching English at Robert College in Istanbul in 1939 when Britain declared war on Germany. Keen to get involved in the war effort, he volunteered with the RAF through the British Consulate and trained in Rhodesia and South Africa before returning to England as a Lancaster pilot with the renowned RAF 617 (Dambusters) Squadron. His first two sorties were against the German battleship Tirpitz, sister ship to the Bismarck. In the first, his plane took enemy fire and was forced to make an emergency landing with a flat tire, due to shrapnel damage to the gas tank and landing gear. In the second, his crew scored a near miss off the forward bow helping to turn the Tirpitz on her side. He flew 21 missions and logged 911 hours in the Lancaster, with his final operation a British-American effort to destroy Hitler's so-called "last redoubt," the Eagle's Nest at Berchtesgaden.

At the end of the war, he joined the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the precursor to the CIA, as an intelligence analyst, specializing in Middle Eastern issues and drafting National Intelligence Estimates, including his favorite assessment in the early 1950s—that it would be a long time before the Arabs and Israelis saw eye-to-eye on any issue. Soon after, he transferred to the CIA's Directorate of Operations and joined the inner cadre of the Agency's campaign to reinstate the Shah. He spent 15 of his 30 years of service at US Embassies in Tehran, Athens, Ankara and Tel Aviv. Retiring in 1978, he continued working as a private consultant on Middle Eastern affairs, returning to the Agency to assist with, among other things, the Iran Hostage Crisis and the bombing of the American Embassy in Beirut in 1983.

from the Leavitt family

617 Squadron Aircrew Association

President

Air Cdre J Langston CBE RAF Retd

Committee

Gp Capt D G Robertson MA RAF - Chairman

(Lancaster/Lincoln Era)

J R Bell MBE DFC

C B R Fish BSc CEng FICE

(Canberra/Vulcan Era)

C J Henderson - Newsletter Editor

F M A Hines - Secretary

D H Moore MBE

J K Walters

(Tornado Era)

Flt Lt R Bethell

Wg Cdr J Cochrane - Treasurer

Sqn Ldr R Crook RAF- Assistant Secretary

617 Sqn Aircrew Association Official Historian

R Owen

Overseas Committee Representatives

J Dacey DFC DFM - Australasia

S Fraser-Lowe - North America

Contact details for the Committee are in the Membership Handbook



Published by the 617 Squadron Aircrew Association
Reproduction of 617 Sqn Crest by permission of MoD



Members of the Squadron celebrate at RAF Marham after beating IX Sqn in the 'Tirpitz' Bombing Competition and winning the Medium Bomber Efficiency Trophy



The roof of 12(B) Sqn after redecoration by 617 Sqn revealed at the Wing Lunch of the Year