



# Après Moi



The 617 Squadron  
Association Newsletter

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Summer 2013



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**Cover Photo:** A Tornado GR4 of 617 Sqn decorated with special 70th anniversary of the Dams Raid tail art.

## Editorial

After ten years as editor of the Association newsletter (and almost as many as treasurer) I feel it is time to hand over the reins to someone else. So this will be my penultimate issue before I shut down my desktop publishing software for the last time. If you are interested in taking over as the newsletter editor please give me a call for a chat about what is involved.

The month of May was quite extraordinary with all the events to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Dams Raid. The Royal Air Force hierarchy took the opportunity to promote the Service and formed a planning committee twice the size of the planning staff for the original operation! In the event the RAF and the Squadron were to the forefront in many newspapers and TV programmes throughout the month. How Johnny Johnson and Les Munro managed with all the demands on their time was quite extraordinary.

The news that the Squadron will disband next year was tempered by the announcement that it would reform at RAF Marham in 2016 flying the F35/ Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter. All the more reason to encourage past colleagues and groundcrew to join the Association as the number of aircrew on the Squadron will be halved with a single-seat aircraft.

**Chris Henderson**

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### Deadline for Next Newsletter

**1st January 2014**

**email: [apresmoi@btinternet.com](mailto:apresmoi@btinternet.com)**

or

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

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## Robertson's Ramblings

What an exciting period the last 6 months has been for the Association, the Squadron and the Royal Air Force. We kicked off the 70th Anniversary commemorations with a gala screening of 'The Dam Busters' film at the Kinema in the Woods on the Wednesday evening before our reunion weekend. Official guests were Johnny Johnson and Mary Stopes-Roe and several members of the Association and Squadron attended. The following day, the BBC screened the 'official' commemoration of the 70th Anniversary at Scampton, hosted by Dan Snow. Johnny and Mary were joined by Les Munro as official guests in a moving parade reviewed by Air Vice Marshal Stu Atha, AOC No 1 Group at which the Squadron Standard was on parade. The timing and professionalism on a bitterly cold evening was exceptional and many people remarked 'only the Royal Air Force could do that'. Even some of my Army colleagues agreed - through gritted teeth! On Friday it was the turn of more than 2000 members of the public to join in a Service of Commemoration at Lincoln Cathedral, of which the 'official' commemorations were concluded by flypasts from the Lancaster and two Tornado GR4 aircraft.

Then it was over to the Association's commemorations. An AGM on Saturday was followed by a Dinner at The Petwood Hotel, attended by 160 people, which is the most that has attended any event since I have been Chairman. Our Guest of Honour was Air Marshal Sir Andrew Pulford KCB CBE RAF (who has since been promoted to Air Chief Marshal and taken over as Chief of the Air Staff) and the Lord Lieutenant of Lincolnshire, Mr Tony Worth. It was a memorable and joyous occasion, which was rounded off by a 'Dambusters' firework display. The following day saw the culmination of the Memorial Project, initially agreed at the AGM exactly four years previously. The sun shone and everyone was in good spirits as they watched the official unveiling in Royal Square by Air Marshal Pulford in what was a superb mix of the pageant, the ceremony and the ordinary. The Association was joined by members of the Squadron, the RAF Wyton Voluntary Band, ATC Cadets and many of the local community. It was an excellent event at which the Squadron Standard was again on parade and nothing appeared to 'fall through the cracks'. We even managed to get the road closed!! The new memorial is magnificent and complements the WW2 memorial perfectly.

Last month, the Association received the news officially, that the Squadron would be disbanded by 1st April 2014. However, as they say 'every cloud has a silver lining' and we were delighted to hear that it would be reformed in 2016 at RAF Marham in Norfolk as the first RAF Joint Strike Fighter Squadron, named Lightning II. It is disappointing but understandable that there will be a gap in Service and we wish Wing Commander David Arthurton and all

members of the Squadron every good wish for the months ahead on 617 Squadron and for their future RAF careers, wherever they may be. Before then though, they will make another journey to Afghanistan, where we wish them success and especially, a safe return. The Squadron has been very supportive of the Association during David's tenure and we are extremely grateful for it. A word of warning though. From 2016, the Squadron aircraft will be manned by pilots only – and one per cockpit. A very good reason then for the AGM to have confirmed full membership in the Association for ground crew, which should help the Association to thrive into the next decade and beyond. I'm certainly aiming to be around to commemorate the Association's Centenary in 2043!

Now that the Memorial Project is complete, issues of interest that the Committee is currently considering include allowing relatives of members to join us at our future Reunion Dinners, a potential trip to Holland to commemorate the 70th Anniversary of Guy Gibson's death (September 2014) and a potential trip to Tromsø to commemorate the 70th Anniversary of the Sinking of The Tirpitz (November 2014). If you have any comments about these, or think that you might want to attend, please let me have your views to [d.robertson474@btinternet.com](mailto:d.robertson474@btinternet.com) before the Committee next meets in November.

Yours aye,  
David

## Veterans Reunion



Dambuster veterans Les Munro and 'Johnny' Johnson at the RAF Scampton sunset ceremony on 16 May 2013

## From the Frontline



It has been a year of operational output and media stardom for No 617 Squadron. With the majority of Squadron personnel returning in July 2012 from operations in Afghanistan, Wing Commander Keith Taylor handed command to Wing Commander David Arthurton who would lead the Dambusters into their 70th Anniversary and a year of commemoration. The sacrifices made by our forefathers remained at the heart of all personnel as we balanced our commitment to the Transitional Intervention Capability, our enduring commitment to Operation HERRICK in Afghanistan and support to our anniversary commemorations. The Transitional Intervention Capability is Royal Air Force support to contingent operations, and puts No 617 Squadron at the very tip of the spear should diplomacy fail somewhere in the world and UK military air power be required. Typically, this would involve our Tornado GR4 aircraft employing Storm Shadow cruise missiles, a weapon introduced to the RAF inventory by No 617 Squadron during Operation TELIC overhead Iraq in 2003.

As 2012 drew to a close and the New Year beckoned, the Dambusters experienced a large turnover in aircrew and groundcrew manning. With the focus shifting from Close Air Support to higher-end training, No 617 Squadron commenced a program of Level 2 and 3 Combat Ready training to further crew qualifications, particularly in low level night flying at 350 feet above ground using only Night Vision Goggles. This minimises emissions from

our aircraft rather than employing our Terrain-Following Radar. Other flying consisted of operational low flying, conducted at heights as low as 100 feet above ground by day. In the theatres we train to operate within, our preferred tactic would be to enter at low level in order to hide ourselves amongst terrain and to make the most of the limited performance available to us in the Tornado GR4.

Two crews, three jets and a number of support personnel also deployed to the Tactical Leadership Programme run by NATO at Albacete in Spain during January 2013. This course is designed to expose multinational aircrews to Composite Air Operations missions featuring a number of different nationalities, capabilities and tactics. Having flown around 16 missions together with their Belgian, US, Italian, Spanish and Greek counterparts, the crews returned home to RAF Lossiemouth qualified as NATO Mission Commanders.

Unfortunately our planned deployment to Exercise RED FLAG in Alaska was cancelled by our United States Air Force hosts due to the sequestration process, but a short-notice tasking to support Exercise SHAHEEN STAR in the United Arab Emirates served to test both our flying skills and our ability to deploy worldwide rapidly. A multinational exercise flown alongside US, French and UAE aircrews flying F22, F15, Rafale and F16 aircraft, Exercise SHAHEEN STAR provided an opportunity for our junior crews to experience an overseas deployment for the first time, gained others tactical qualifications, and enabled all who participated to achieve worthwhile high-end warfighting training. The challenges of supporting Tornado operations in 50degC heat, integrating within an Expeditionary Air Wing at a relatively austere base, and being at the end of a long logistics chain posed our engineering and support personnel a number of difficulties; there could be no better training for operations in Afghanistan for some of our newly-qualified technicians who had not yet deployed.

Concurrently, a small rear party worked hard to support a week of commemorative events including live broadcasts on television and radio, numerous flypasts in conjunction with the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight, a service at Lincoln Cathedral, and a Sunset Ceremony at RAF Scampton. None of these events would have been possible without the hard work, tenacity and good humour of our engineering personnel who worked tirelessly to maintain our commemoratively-painted aircraft despite numerous logistical challenges. To be able to achieve everything that was asked of us in front of two of the three surviving aircrew who participated in the Dams Raid was both an honour and a privilege for everyone involved. These events have also helped us raise a large amount of money for our chosen charities, Leonard Cheshire Disability and the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund. Fundraising will continue over the

coming months and through our operational deployment, but our efforts look set to raise in excess of £125,000 for these extremely worthwhile charities.

Over the summer months No 617 Squadron will continue to support national events to commemorate the Dams Raid, while simultaneously preparing for our forthcoming deployment to Kandahar Air Field in Afghanistan as part of Operation HERRICK. Scheduled to take place from October 2013 to February 2014, this deployment will be the last for No 617 Squadron in our present incarnation. With our last flight prior to disbandment fittingly set to occur on operations, every one of the Dambusters will work tirelessly to maintain our reputation as the premier precision bombing Squadron in the Royal Air Force. March 2014 will see a formal parade marking the end of our 30 year association with the Tornado, and the close of this chapter of the Dambusters' illustrious history. Future Dambusters serving on the F35 Lightning II aircraft will indeed have a lot to live up to.

**Mark Jackson**



## Bomber Command Clasp and Arctic Star

Eligible veterans and next of kin are now encouraged to apply for the Bomber Command clasp and Arctic Star medal using the forms, which can be found at [www.veterans-uk.info/arctic\\_star\\_index.htm](http://www.veterans-uk.info/arctic_star_index.htm), or by telephoning the MOD Medal Office on **08457 800 900** (a local rate number) for further details. An application must be made as it is simply not possible for the MOD to contact veterans or families of all of those who may be eligible going back almost 70 years. A number of members have now received their Bomber Command clasp and Arctic Star medal - the photograph right was sent in by Frank Tilley: the Arctic Star medal is shown in the centre.



## A Land Fit for Heroes - appeal to buy Woodhall Spa Airfield



The Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust has launched an appeal to raise half a million pounds to buy Woodhall Spa Airfield, home of the 617 'Dambuster' Squadron during the last years of World War 2. The charity needs to raise half a million pounds to secure the site.

The charity currently owns over half of the airfield and an adjacent nature reserve, Kirkby Moor. By securing the rest of the site, the runway can be saved and a new nature reserve created. It will be a pastoral landscape with skylarks singing overhead, farmland birds such as linnet and yellowhammer, and birds of prey soaring in the open skies.

Alongside the huge benefits for wildlife, local people will have the chance to be involved. New footpaths and hides will allow visitors to share in the unique atmosphere of open countryside - its spaciousness and serenity.

As well as its importance for our natural heritage, the site occupies a special position in our national history. Much of RAF Woodhall's central runway still survives, from which the squadron dropped the Tallboy and Grand Slam bombs and sank the Tirpitz. The Victoria Cross was awarded to three officers based at RAF Woodhall: Guy Gibson, who flew his last fatal mission from here in September 1944; Leonard Cheshire, the most highly decorated bomber pilot of the war, who went on to found one of the largest charitable foundations for disabled people; and Squadron Leader John Nettleton, who led 97 Squadron in the daring daylight raid on the submarine plant at Augsburg in 1942. The runway and wartime buildings will be preserved for future generations of visitors.

We believe that the creation of a new nature reserve will be fitting tribute to the many servicemen and women who gave their lives to preserve and protect our 'green and pleasant land'.

**Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust (website [www.lincstrust.org.uk](http://www.lincstrust.org.uk))  
from John Reed**

## Mary Stopes-Roe - Memories

This has been an eventful year for the RAF, in particular 617 Squadron, or to use the popular name, the 'Dambusters Squadron'. Seventy years ago on the night of the 16-17 May these highly skilled and courageous airmen inflicted a crushing blow to the Nazi war strategies by delivering what at first had seemed to be an impossible weapon - a child's game of pebbles skimming over the sea, or marbles hopping along a water tub.

The weapon was invented and designed by my father Barnes Wallis, and unsurprisingly it was not brought to fruition as readily as a simple child's toy. The intricacies of design and the calculations involved were time consuming and prolonged: the exact placement of the bomb in relation to the dam wall, the proximity and the depth required to discharge the explosive, the exact distance from the dam wall for the delivery of the bomb, the exact height of the 'plane above the water when releasing it, all these severally and in conjunction had to be correct. And after the months of calculations, designing, re-calculating, re-designing, and testing, finally on a clear moonlit night the invention was proved. It has gone down in history most memorably as illustrated by the fine film 'The Dam Busters' of 1955. But as my father always firmly made clear, in his view the real honour goes to the airmen, pilots, navigators, gunners, bomb aimers, ground crews, who carried out the raid. I well remember him saying "any fool can invent something; it is the people who make it work . . ." and he gave all the honour to his beloved squadron. There is only a handful of old-timers who experienced the event who are left to remember. I was 15 at the time, very happy at Godolphin, but well aware of events in my own home and in Europe; so I have been asked for my memories of the time, the event, and of my father.

Of course my memories are not of the designer and inventor, but of the family man, and I have become very interested in his earlier experiences. Whatever made him intent upon engineering - his father was a doctor, his grandfather a priest; the Church, the army, and education were the professions of his background. And yet, Barnes decided for himself, against the wishes of parents and teachers, that he would leave school in 1904 when he was 16 and become an apprentice engineer. The only clue to this decision that I can find is in his early childhood. Until he was three years old, his father had a practice in Ripley near Derby, and Ripley had several coal mines and a very large iron foundry. Barnes's mother Edie was a lively woman, and interested in what was around her, so she took her two little boys, Barnes and his elder brother John aged three and five to the pit heads and the foundry to watch the workings of the men and the machinery. The men were friendly to the little boys, and Barnes even at only three must have been fascinated by the size, the power, the noise of machinery, and the light of the flames from

the foundry furnace. Perhaps there is a lesson there which Health and Safety might consider!

So Barnes apprenticed himself to the sea, and worked on destroyers in Cowes in the Isle of Wight. He loved the sea, swam, had a small sailing boat of his own, and showed no interest whatever in the burgeoning excitement about flight. The early 1900s saw the Wrights in America, Alliott Verdon Roe in Britain, and Bleriot and his Channel crossing. Edie talks of all these in her letters to Barnes, but he mentions them not at all. It seems that pure chance drew him away from the sea into the air.

In 1911 Barnes's seven year apprenticeship ended, and he was promoted to the drawing office. Another new recruit here was a young man, H B Pratt whose previous job had been in airship design at Vickers in Barrow-on-Furness. He and Barnes became good friends and enjoyed sporting and social life in the Island. But in 1913 the government, becoming anxious about German military development of airships, turned to the armaments firm of Vickers Armstrong to re-invigorate the airship industry. The likely young chap from Cowes whom they had dismissed in 1911 was called back to his airship job; he in turn brought in his talented young friend Barnes Wallis. So Barnes was launched into the air, to design ships of the air not the water. But they were still ships, under Admiralty control.

In the end the air won without too much difficulty; a strong feature of Barnes's character was a need to be looking ahead, to be considering future possibilities for development. He stayed with airships until the works closed in 1919, and then, in need of a job he taught maths for a couple of years. He was a fine teacher, and his lessons, passed on to the young lady whom he was courting, are highly individualistic, a delight to read, and a treat to learn from. 20 years later I learnt from them too, but that is another story. When the commercial airship industry opened in the 1920s, Barnes joined Vickers again to design the R100 airship, a perfect silver fish gliding through the air to Canada, America, and safely back, a luxury liner compared with the sardine-tin passenger aircraft of to-day. And NEVER to be confused with the disastrous R101, whose brief life ended in a burnt-out heap on a hillside in Northern France. But that again is another story.

The lasting legacy from the R100 was the adoption of geodetic design which Barnes developed for strength and lightness in curved structures. But even before the R100 gasbags were fully inflated, Barnes was looking beyond the present beautiful light-weight lady, to the possibilities of heavier-than-air craft. The application of geodetic structures here was hugely successful in the development through the '30s of the larger aircraft needed for wartime operations. But as ever, it was the next step which preoccupied Barnes. He knew that carpet bombing would not end German resolve, nor achieve more than minor checks on industry, any more than these tactics did in Britain.

What was needed was precision bombing to destroy set targets of particular relevance to the armaments and transport centres; and out of this came first the plan for destroying the energy from water power contained in reservoirs. The well-known success of this venture made clear that our airmen had developed the amazing skills required for precision bombing.

But sources of power other than reservoirs, and their dependent factories, the pens, bunkers and launch pads for submarines and rockets, means of transport such as bridges, viaducts and tunnels, could not be reached by rolling balls across the countryside. So Barnes had moved on to the earthquake bombs of much larger explosive power, such that a hit within some yards of the target would cause a shattering of earthquake proportions.

Before the war ended, however, Barnes's familiar need to move on had made him shift his thinking to the possibilities of a peaceful world. He held very dear the position of the British family of nations which had been known to him as the Empire and had now developed into the Commonwealth. An aim which he set himself to achieve was to devise a craft which would fly at a speed sufficient to reach Australia non-stop in a few hours. The family joke was "finish your lunch and get to Australia in time for tea". To achieve such speeds supersonic flight is necessary, and this requires a streamlined wing position. But take-off and landing need wings in the traditional position - solution, the variable geometry plane, known in a friendly way as the 'swing wing'. Very large scale radio-controlled models were successfully flown and test pilots were keen to try the real thing; but Barnes would not have this. In his distress at the loss of life over the Dams raid, he had sworn that he would never endanger another man's life, and he never did. Before the machine could be thus tested, the research funding was stopped. Our industrial expertise was being reduced, and the design was sold to the USA. General Dynamics made use of it, but as Barnes sadly said, "they spoilt his beautiful design by adding a tail plane".

At the same time he was pursuing another line of thought - that of efficiency of long distance transport. This produced designs for submarines which could take the shortest route to the antipodes, which is under the Polar icecap. And further, designs for what he called the 'universal aircraft', a machine with a rectangular inner structure into which slid containers of seats for passenger transport, or carriers for goods. To the family, "the flying shoebox"! Our industrial might having been severely reduced, BAC decided in 1971 that it was time for their figurehead designer to retire. Barnes was adamant; he did not retire, he was made redundant, and he carried on his own consultancy from home. His fame did not abate, and he had endless calls upon his time and expertise. I think his most treasured were those from the young and aspiring, whom he never failed.

This has been a memorable year for me. I have had so many requests from TV, Radio, phone-ins, to describe my father. What an impossible question, how can a complex character be described in a few words. For me he was admirable, sometimes rather strict it is true, and often absent in his study or at work, or suffering from endless migraine. He was a devout Anglican, devoted to learning, to inspiring, to encouraging the young, and to serving his local community - the village where the family lived for 50 years, and the wider community of his country. All this sounds rather pompous and pious, but as family man he was warm, loving and relaxed and humorous. Our summer holidays through the '30s camping with Territorial Army precision were an unforgettable pleasure. We were taught to be personally responsible, and allowed to explore as we wished. He was a keen player of outdoor games, and of the more intellectual indoor sort; he and my mother were energetic walkers, and he was a great swimmer. But all this was not what I needed to say in the interviews of the last 4 months.

I was so glad to have the opportunity to correct some misconceptions. Barnes was not a man of war. He was a man of peace whose duty it was, when necessary, to fight to preserve his country, his beliefs, his own people. He looked always to the future, to development, to the young. And he was humble. In time of success he gave thanks to the Lord who had endowed him, and St Joseph the carpenter who supported him. This may sound a little pious, but he never preached it or spoke of it, or claimed to be in any way virtuous, rather the opposite. He was devoted to, and dependent on, my mother, and his colleagues and friends. And he was proud and very fond of his children, a quiver full of grandchildren, and a legion of great grandchildren, who met in troops at the family home.

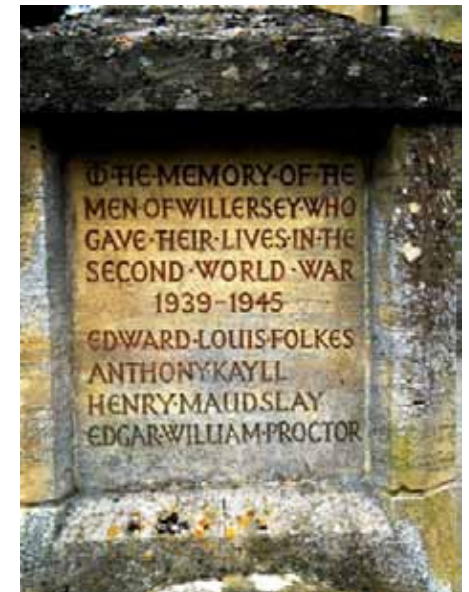
At his funeral in the village the community gathered, but the most moving tribute was paid by the RAF. It was a grey and misty November day and the flag of St George hung at half-mast on the Church tower. As we gathered round the grave, out of the cloud over the tower from the West came silently, engines throttled back, a low-flying Vulcan, over the grave and the mourners, and disappeared as silently in the cloud eastwards. I shall never forget that. Nor shall I forget the most moving ceremony from the 4 days I spent in Lincolnshire from the 15-19 May this year. A service in Lincoln Cathedral was wonderful, moving and beautiful, but for me, the Sunset Ceremony at Scampton was a tribute almost indescribable. It was a freezing evening, windy and wet, but we gathered under an awning, impressed by the meticulous marching of the RAF and the playing of its excellent band. The BBC took comments from the old stagers, the Lord Lieutenant and the commanding officer took their places. A Spitfire and a Tornado took up their places on either side behind the flagpole, and finally the grand old Lancaster flew down, taxiing slowly up towards the stand until it was directly behind and very close to the formation of RAF personnel, standing guard over the troop.

The squadron standard was presented before the dais, and lowered as the RAF flag was slowly taken down from the flagpole as the sun set. The Last Post rang out into the silence, and the lost crews seemed very close. It was a tribute which drew tears, worthy of the courageous men who went to war for our freedom. May they never be forgotten.

Mary Stopes-Roe

## Squadron Leader Henry Maudslay DFC

While great commemorations of the 70th anniversary of the Dams raid were held at RAF Scampton, across in the Cotswolds on 17th May, an Act of Remembrance for local boy Squadron Leader Henry Maudslay DFC was held at St Peter's Church, Willersey, Gloucestershire. The Maudslay family once lived in the large Edwardian Foxhill Manor on the escarpment above the village and several family members, including the present Henry Maudslay (let out from Eton for the day), returned to Willersey to attend the local commemoration, together with some three dozen people representing ex-service organisations, RAF Brize Norton and the village. For the event the village war memorial had an attractive special display of flowers arranged by Lady Alison Dear.



Willersley War Memorial,  
St Peter's Churchyard

The short church service, conducted by Canon Peter Burch, included the hymn 'God is our strength and refuge' to the theme of Eric Coates' *Dambusters March* and an appreciation of the men of the squadron was given by the event organiser, Mr Philip Jarvis, who acknowledged the help given him by Squadron historian Robert Owen. Wreaths were then laid at the village war memorial by three local branches of the British Legion, the North Cotswold RAFA and by RAF Brize Norton. The Maudslay family laid their own wreath, young Henry Maudslay himself laying that of the 617 Squadron Association - all in an afternoon of splendid spring sunshine.

Robin Woolven

## Kings Monkton honour former pupil

from the Kings Monkton School website - 2nd May 2013

Pupils from Cardiff's Kings Monkton School this week paid tribute to a former pupil who made history books for his efforts in World War II.

Year 9, 10 and 11 history pupils honoured Group Captain James 'Willie' Tait, a celebrated bomber commander, who attended Monkton House, as it was then, between 1926 and 1929.

Tait had a brilliant wartime career flying more than 100 operations by the end of the war, in respect of which he had been awarded, uniquely, four DSOs and two DFCs.

He will long be remembered for leading Lancasters from 617 Squadron – the famous 'Dambusters' – and 9 Squadron on a series of raids that resulted in the sinking of the German battleship Tirpitz, the pride of Hitler's navy and the largest and most powerful battleship in Europe.

At a special ceremony at the school, pupils unveiled a commemorative plaque in recognition of Tait's heroic leadership during the war. Attended by representatives of the 617 Squadron Aircrew Association and several World War II veterans, many of whom were veterans of Bomber Command, pupils got to quiz the ex-servicemen on many aspects of the war. Pupils were also presented with a signed copy of 'Target Tirpitz' from its author Patrick Bishop, one of Britain's best-regarded military historians, who attended the ceremony.

Kings Monkton School's head of history Nick Shepley said: "It has taken a year of planning and organising in coordination with the 617 Squadron Association, but the result has been a plaque to commemorate the actions of Group Captain Tait. The school is exceptionally proud of our Year Nine, Year Ten and Year Eleven pupils who read and researched Tait and his role in role in sinking the Tirpitz."

Robert Owen, the Official Historian of the 617 Squadron Association, said "It is fantastic that the pupils had the opportunity to learn about a former pupil and real life World War II hero as part of their studies. I'm sure their research on Tait and his role in sinking Tirpitz brought their studies to life and I was delighted to learn of the School's intention to commemorate him with this plaque."

With six gallantry decorations to his name, Group Captain Tait remains one of the most distinguished airmen in the history of the Royal Air Force. Born in Manchester in 1916, James Tait moved to Abercynon in 1926 where his father worked as a mining engineer. After studying at Monkton House, he transferred to Wellingborough School before joining the RAF and going to Cranwell. He died aged 90 in 2007.

## Post - WW2 617 Squadron Memorial



Air Marshal Sir Andrew Pulford KCB unveils the Post-WW2 617 Sqn Memorial on Sunday 18th May 2013

## Tirpitz Dinner 9<sup>th</sup> November 2013

The 2013 Tirpitz Dinner will take place on Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> November at the Petwood Hotel. A memorial service will be held at the Squadron Memorials on Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> November following the Remembrance service at St Peter's Church, Woodhall Spa and the town's Remembrance Parade. A limited number of rooms at the Petwood Hotel will be reserved for Association members at a special reduced rate per person for bed and breakfast. Early booking is advised.



# Final Landings

## Bob Barry

Born in Freemantle in 1925, Bob Barry was rear gunner with Sayers' crew when they joined the Squadron from No. 467 Sqn in September 1944.

The crew were first operation with their new squadron was on the night of 23 September, against the Dortmund Ems Canal near Munster. Despite a faulty compass, they were able to reach the target, but unable to obtain a clear enough bombing run they returned with their Tallboy. The next operation to West Kapelle again saw the Squadron recalled without bombing. On their third operation, as part of the high level force attacking the Kembs Dam on October 7, an electrical fault caused the premature release of their Tallboy as the bomb doors were opened. It seemed an inauspicious start to their new tour.

Over Norway en route to Tirpitz at Tromso on 29 October Bob was startled to see a German Ju 52 transport passing them on a reciprocal course, only a few hundred yards away. Realising that the breaking dawn had given him the advantage and that the enemy pilot would not have seen the Lancaster, Bob resisted the temptation to open fire, which would have revealed the presence of the approaching force to the Tirpitz defenders, possibly resulting in their being intercepted by fighters. Over the battleship they made their first successful Tallboy release although they were unable to see the results of their efforts. 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. The winter months saw a number of abortive attacks due to weather.

On 14 March 1945 – the operation that saw the release of the first Grand Slam - flying in the same aircraft as they had flown against the Kembs Dam, their Tallboy suffered premature release, damaging the bomb doors as they opened. Five days later attacking the Arnsberg Viaduct flying one of the new B I (Spec) Lancasters they suffered another failure as of 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.

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. There were only two more operations in mid April, both abortive due to weather, against the Lutzow at Swinemunde, before the cessation of hostilities served to bring their tour of 19 operations with the Squadron to a close.

On 1 June, nine months to the day from joining the Squadron, Bob was transferred to No. 54 Base pending posting to the RAAF Aircrew Holding Unit at Gamston as Assistant Adjutant, prior to his own repatriation home to Australia.

## Tom Bennett DFM



Thomas 'Ben' Bennett was born in 1919 in Poplar. After a civilian career as a clerk he volunteered for military service in 1939. Called up in the spring of 1940, he was told that he did not qualify for pilot training as his maths was not sufficiently strong to enable him to cope with aerial navigation. Instead he would train as a wireless operator/air gunner. Tom's Morse skills were insufficient, with the result that he only qualified as an Air Gunner. Service life being what it is, he was then offered, and took, an opportunity to re-muster a navigator. (There were later to be a number of times over Germany when he wished he had taken the advice of the Wing Commander at Uxbridge).

After an initial course on Ansons and Blenheims at Jurby, Isle of Man, in April 1942 he was transferred to No. 19 OTU, Kinloss, where he would team up with his pilot Gerry Fawke.

His first operational posting was to No. 49 Sqn at Scampton in June 1942. He considered himself fortunate in that they had just declared Manchester's non-operational as he arrived and that the Squadron was converting to Lancasters. On an early operation to Duisburg, their aircraft was coned and only violent evasive action by Fawke saved the day. During a low level operation against Wismar in September 1942, he received a slight flesh wound from shrapnel and was admitted to RAF Hospital Rauceby.

Fawke and Bennett took part participated in the daylight Le Creusot attack of 24 October 1942. During that month Tom was recommended for the DFM and subsequently awarded a commission. Further trips followed, to include Berlin and targets in Italy. The crew were just about to depart on their 30th operation, against Bremen, when they were prevented from taxiing out by Charles Whitworth, Scampton's Station Commander, who told them that they would not be going, and that their tour was over.

Tom was then screened and posted for duties at No. 1661 CU, thence to HQ No. 5 Group at St Vincents, Grantham, before being sent to No. 1654 CU, Wigsley as an instructor. Promoted to Flying Officer in April 1944, he had just



Tom Bennett and Gerry Fawke

arrived on No. 83 Sqn at Wyton, a Pathfinder Squadron, when he received a phone call informing him that he was to team up with his former captain at the Mosquito Training Unit at Warboys, prior to transfer to 617 Sqn.

As one of the Mosquito Marker crews Tom and Gerry Fawke were to help perfect the low level marking technique against increasingly defended targets, starting with the French rail yards of Juvisy and La Chapelle, then targeting targets in Germany, including Munich. Returning to their forward operating base at Manston after the latter trip on 24/25 April, the crew discovered to their chagrin that their markers had hung up and were still there suspended in the bomb bay.

Transferring to the Lancaster for Operation Taxable, Tom was one of the key navigators responsible for perfecting the pattern of overlapping orbits and perfect timing that were vital to the operation's success. Such was Tom's desire to see recognition for ALL the Squadron's navigators that he was later to lobby Leonard Cheshire to campaign for a retrospective award, but without success.

Reverting to the Mosquito and their marking role, the crew participated in the attack on the Saumur tunnel, and Le Havre. The Squadron then switched to daylight attacks on the large V-weapon sites at Watten, Wizernes,

Mimoyecques and Siracourt, before again targeting U-boat pens and port facilities. During one of the latter operations, an attack on the Gueydon at Brest, after diving to low level Fawke opened fire on a vessel with the Mosquitos cannon and machine guns, prompting Tom to comment "You've just killed four German sailors in LA PALLICE". Later operations also saw the crew armed with cameras to photograph proceedings, and he made the only known image of one of the Squadron's Mustangs as he used up footage filming Wg Cdr Cheshire forming on his Mosquito.

With the Squadron's marker role now firmly established with No. 627 Sqn, Gerry Fawke and Tom returned to the Lancaster. Tom became Squadron Navigation Officer during August 1944, and was responsible for overseeing navigation for the first two Tirpitz operations and the attacks on West Kapelle and the Kembs dam. The latter would be Tom's final operation on the strength of 617 Sqn. Posted as Station Navigation Officer, Woodhall Spa at the end of October 1944, he was still able to keep an eye on his successor and in February 1945 flew with the Squadron on two further operations. He would later recall: "I flew 62 trips, that's why I tell people I'm lucky to be alive. But I lost a lot of friends and you always remember them as they were — young men".

Post war Tom remained in the RAF, serving with the RAF Delegation in Greece in 1949 and later with No. 38 Squadron, flying Lancasters on Maritime Reconnaissance in the Mediterranean. His final posting saw him as Wing Adjutant of the RAF's Initial Training School before he left the Service, as a Squadron Leader, in March 1955.

After a civilian career with the Port of London Authority, he retired in 1980. Tom was a staunch supporter of the Association, and an ardent defender of the Squadron's reputation. He turned his attention to working with Association members to record aspects of the Squadron's history, which resulted in the publication of "617 Sqn – The Dambusters at War" and a number of magazine articles, together with a number of illustrated talks. Tom's contribution not only to the Squadron's story, but to the recording of that history, along with the photograph of Wg Cdr Cheshire in the Mustang serve as his unique testimony.

### James "Cass" Castagnola DSO DFC\*

Born in 1922 in Islington, "Cass" as he was known to all, enlisted in 1941 and trained in North America. Returning to England he crewed up at OTU and after completing their HCU course the crew, captained by a newly commissioned Cass, joined 57 Squadron in December 1943 for their first tour of operations. They were to be blooded with a series of attacks against Berlin, completing three operations against this target in four nights during January 1944. In all Cass was to visit "the Big City" eight times during his tour.

During the Nuremberg operation of 30/31 March 1944 his Lancaster's rear turret guns froze up but a burst from the mid-upper caused an approaching Me 210 to break away. On return his gunners also claimed one Ju 88 destroyed and another damaged.

On 5 April 1944 the crew were one of six attached along with their aircraft to the Squadron at Woodhall Spa, to provide an H2S capability. After an initial trip as passenger with Fg Off Fearn for the attack against the Luftwaffe Depot at St Cyr on 10 April to observe the Squadron's methods, Cass found himself non-operational for a month as the Squadron trained intensively for Operation Taxable. Teamed up with Nick Knilans he completed the D-Day deception operation and three nights later he was operating against the Saumur railway tunnel. Unable carry Tallboy, his H2S equipped aircraft was loaded with thousand pounders to be aimed at the adjacent railway bridge across the Loire. His next three trips were as an additional member of Knilans' crew. By July Cass had been posted back to 57 Sqn at East Kirkby and would complete his first tour with them.

He was not away from Woodhall for long, arriving back on the Squadron on 15 August to start his second tour. This was to be much more satisfying. With his trademark "operationally battered" cap, Cass and his crew soon proved themselves a popular and valuable asset to the Squadron. Starting with a trip to Brest on 27 August and now carrying Tallboy they were part of the high level force for the attack on the Kembs Dam, and took part in all three operations against Tirpitz, claiming a direct hit in the middle of the superstructure during the final attack.

During the attack on Bergen on 12 January 1945 his aircraft came under fighter attack and Cass dived to within the range of the flak batteries; the fighter deigned to follow. Heading out to sea he spotted Ian Ross' aircraft at low level, on fire and under fighter attack. With his bomb aimer manning the front turret and without thinking of his own safety Cass dived to offer whatever assistance he could. He was successful in driving the fighter away, but Ross was forced to ditch, while Cass circled overhead dropping an emergency radio wrapped in Mae Wests when it was seen that Ross' dinghy had not deployed. Climbing to 500 feet they signalled the ditched Lancaster's position and remained in the area, seeking cloud cover when a German fighter came too close. With fuel running low he was eventually forced to leave the stricken crew to their fate.

The remaining months saw a new routine develop, railway viaducts replacing U-boat pens as targets during February and March, before returning to April's target list, along with other naval targets during the last month of hostilities. After a total of 62 operations Cass' war came to an end on 19 April 1945 with an attack on the island fortress of Heligoland. The latter part of 1945 saw him as the Squadron's Inspector Pilot as they worked up for "Tiger

Force" – the RAF's projected contribution to the Pacific War but, with the squadron prepared to go overseas to India, in January 1946 he was posted to RAF Snaith, to conduct aircrew training.

Having been awarded the DFC for his time on 57 Sqn, Cass was to receive a bar in March 1945 for his service with 617 and a further award of the DSO in October 1945.

Awarded a permanent commission in 1947, he was posted to the Central Flying Establishment, RAF West Raynham, flying Mosquitos, Vampires and Meteors, before transferring to the Empire Test Pilots School, RAE Farnborough, in March 1950. After qualifying as a test pilot his experience was put to good use for four years at the Aeroplane and Armament Experimental Establishment, Boscombe Down.

Cass transferred to fighters in April 1954 and served in the Middle East and Germany before becoming Officer Commanding No. 41 Sqn, Biggin Hill, flying the Hunter F 5.

In keeping with a number of pilots following their fighter tour, at the beginning of 1958 he was sent on a radar control course prior to being posted to Neatishead radar station, Norfolk, as Control Executive. After a final tour as a Staff Officer with HQ No. 13 Group, at Ouston, he left the RAF in November 1961 as a Squadron Leader, joining British Airways as a captain on Comets and Tridents until his retirement in 1980.

### **Peter Langdon**

At the end of hostilities in Europe, Peter Langdon was a captain on Lancasters serving with No. 9 Sqn at Bardney, having previously been awarded the DFM for a tour with No. 207 Sqn. He joined the Squadron as a pilot at Binbrook in November 1947.

His time on the Squadron was typical for the period, with continuation training relieved by Group and Command exercises over the UK and the annual 'Sunray' to Shallufa. In March 1948 he was appointed OC Flying Flight (in effect deputy Squadron Commander) and two months later he had his crew were detached to Manston to participate in the making of an accident prevention film. In December he was sent to Old Sarum on a tactics course, returning to serve with the Squadron until July 1949.

He subsequently took part in the atomic tests at Christmas Island and later flew Canberras from Wyton with No. 82 Sqn. Thirty years after initially serving with them, he returned to his first squadron, No. 207, during 1972-4 and then remained at Northolt, having moved to the Operations side, until his retirement in 1977.

**Robert Owen**

## Cryptic Comment

In the days before the internet, Twitter, Facebook and mobile phones, the Personal Columns of "The Times" served an important function, enabling the rapid mass communication of private information between individuals, or groups who might otherwise be non-contactable by other means. These columns were used not only for the usual "Hatch, Match and Despatch", but cryptic messages, whose meaning was only understood by sender and recipient, were frequently to be seen. Whether these were arranging clandestine assignments between lovers, communicating vital information between spies and their Masters (this was the period of the Cold War) or promoting other covert activity could only be speculation.

Searching through "The Times" archive for totally different material, I chanced upon the following such notice in an issue dated 12 November 1981. (Most of you will be aware of the significance of the day and month).

The message read:

"TO ALL 617 SQUADRON Members on Anniversary of Tirpitz Raid.

Metal flotsam return rightful keepers following daring night strike. J.N.H."

A quick check revealed, as those in the know might suspect, that this message had been inserted by Wg Cdr John Herbertson, OC 617 Sqn. and confirmed that the Squadron had mounted yet another precision night operation, retrieving the Tirpitz bulkhead from the clutches of "the other Squadron", then based at Waddington.

Full details of this operation are as yet unknown, since no op order exists in Squadron or No. 1 Group files. Perhaps Association Members serving at that time might be able to provide further information?

**Robert Owen**

## Dams Dinner 17 May 2014

The 2014 Dams Dinner will take place on Saturday 17 May at the Petwood Hotel. A memorial service will be held at the Squadron Memorials on Sunday 18 May. A limited number of rooms at the Petwood Hotel will be reserved for Association members at a special reduced rate per person for bed and breakfast. Early booking is advised.

## 617 Squadron Association Merchandise

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

Gold Wire Blazer Badge - £5

Large Squadron Lapel Badge - £3.50

Small Squadron Lapel Badge - £3.00

Silk Tie - £13.00

Polyester Tie - £7.00

Bow Tie (untied) - £6.50

Bow Tie (tied) - £7.50

Scarf (Maroon & Blue) - £8.50

Cummerbund (Poly) - £12.50

Silk Cravat - £17.50

Polyester Cravat - £11.00

**Contact: John Bell**

**Tel: 01903-741743**

5 Manor Court, Church Street, Storrington, Pulborough, RH20 4LH

**Deadline for Next Newsletter**

**1st January 2014**

**email: apresmoi@btinternet.com**

or

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

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