



Après Moi

The 617 Squadron
Association Newsletter



October 2023



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Cover Photo: BBMF Lancaster over the Petwood Hotel

Editorial

It has been a busy few months for your Association, spearheaded, of course, by the 80th anniversary of 617 Squadron. It was great to see so much interest across the media ensuring the story reaches new audiences. Some of the clips were from school and youth groups which is tremendous. GB News conducted a lovely summary, supported brilliantly by Chris Williams. This clip is very well worth 3 minutes of your time:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=osl9xEuoT0o>

This edition is once again packed with great tales as well as beautifully crafted obituaries, as ever superbly researched by our historian, Dr Rob Owen. I sincerely hope you enjoy this edition and look forward to hearing any feedback you might have.

Personally, I have moved to a new posting, returning to the United States to participate and teach at the United States Air Force Air War College. Some of you know I have a close affinity with the education system 'across the pond' so another chance to influence future leaders is a privilege. It also provides me a new audience to share 617 Squadron stories!

I wish you all the very best for the months ahead.

Stu Clarke
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Dams Dinner 2024

The 2024 Dams Dinners will be held on Saturday 18th May at the Petwood Hotel, Woodhall Spa. A memorial service will be held at the Squadron Memorials on the morning of Sunday 19th May.

Walters' Warblings

Your Committee thought it important to mark the passing of our last Dambuster late last year, so on the 80th anniversary of the Dams Raid we organised a memorial service at the RAF's central church, St Clement Danes in the Strand, for all the Dambusters. Although the Squadron was deployed in Alaska, their rear party very aptly supported the event. For the first time, Guy Gibson's Victoria Cross was displayed along with the Squadron Standard at the altar. I'm extremely grateful to the RAF Museum and 617 Squadron for pulling out all the organ stops to make this happen.

The service focused on remembrance and reconciliation, with moving readings delivered by the Australian and German Air Attaches, and also by Pam Quick, the daughter of the pilot of AJ-H, Geoff Rice, whose aircraft was badly damaged during the raid. Guests included many Dams Raid relatives from across the Commonwealth, the MPs for Scampton and Woodhall Spa (Sir Edward Leigh and Victoria Atkins), the staff of the RAF Museum, led by CEO Maggie Appleton, and a BAE team led by Air Marshal Sir Stuart Atha. The service was mirrored in Germany at the Dams by a series of events led by mayor of Mohnesee, with representation from the 617 Squadron Association.



Memorial service at the RAF's central church, St Clement Danes in the Strand

For those of you unable to attend, our 80th anniversary Dams Dinner was a great success. Members attended from across the Commonwealth and the RAF's Deputy Commander, Air Marshal Harv Smyth, was our guest of honour. We were treated to a moving sunset ceremony by the RAF College Band on the Petwood's lawns. The BBMF engineers pushed the boat out to rectify a last-minute engine problem and the crew battled against minimum rest requirements to set the Petwood gardens reverberating with the sound of four Merlins. The subsequent dinner, and Sunday's services at both the Squadron memorials and the intersection of the Woodhall Spa runways, gave us the opportunity to renew acquaintances and remember old friends.

Our main charitable endeavour remains our annual Guy Gibson VC Flying Scholarship, which funds a young underprivileged ATC/CCF cadet to go solo in a light aircraft. The operational pause over COVID gave us the opportunity to award two scholarships last year, and it was smashing to see both our scholars at last May's Dams Dinner. This year's scholarship has been awarded to Samuel Baker who I hope you will have the opportunity to meet at the Tirpitz Dinner.



Scampton Church 617 Sqn Memorial Window

Aside from these scholarships, the Association has also contributed to the funding of an impressive stained glass window dedicated to the Squadron at Scampton Church which was unveiled by Johnny Johnson's grandson, our member Richard Bartlam, on 23 March, the anniversary of the Squadron's formation. These charitable endeavours are all funded by your subscriptions, so thank you for your support.

Our bonds with the Squadron at Marham are as strong as ever. A couple of Committee members attended a smashing all-ranks dining in at Marham following the unveiling of the window at Scampton Church. Although our President, Wg Cdr John Bell, was unable to attend, he presented OC 617



617 Sqn Trophy with designer James Aldridge

Squadron, Wg Cdr Stew Campbell, with a framed print of all the Dams Raid crews. We have subsequently commissioned a magnificent trophy of a Lightning for the Squadron that will be awarded by OC 617 to the most deserving member of the Squadron each year. Although the Squadron was on exercise in Alaska over the 80th anniversary, their rear party supported us magnificently, with the Squadron Standard being paraded at both St Clement Danes and the Petwood events. We are hoping that the Squadron will be able to attend future events in strength.

The Association has also been keeping an eye of developments at Scampton. The Station formally closed on 31 March 2023 (along with its Heritage

Centre) and the RAF handed over the estate to the Defence infrastructure Organisation to sell during 2023. West Lindsey District Council had developed an impressive plan to conserve RAF Scampton's heritage and invest £300 million in developing the site for business, aerospace, aviation technology and education. However, as you will have heard, the UK Home Office subsequently selected Scampton as a site to accommodate asylum seekers. Although the Home Office has stated that it recognises the importance of Scampton's heritage and will not be using any of the heritage assets (including the Officers' Mess which has just been Grade II listed) within their accommodation plan, we share everyone's concern. RAF Heritage plans to move the grave of Guy Gibson's dog have now been shelved. Unfortunately, the whole situation has been partially hijacked by extreme political factions so, as a non-political charity, we have decided not to make comment. However, we would encourage members to make their views known to the authorities.

Our next Association function will be a joint Tirpitz Dinner with IX(B) Squadron Association on 11 November at the Petwood. I would like to thank all the Committee for their hard work in making the reunions and all our other activities happen.

Andrew

Dams Dinner May 2023



RAF College Band at the Petwood Hotel



BBMF Lancaster flypast over the Petwood Hotel



Mike Hines talking to Air Marshal Harv Smyth with John Maltby (son of Dambuster David Maltby) in the centre background



Photographic display of wartime members

Acts of Commemoration

Commemoration takes many forms. From official ceremonial or unveiling of memorials, though to a simple act of remembrance or personal quiet reflection.

In the past British commemoration of Operation Chastise has focused appropriately on the people, skills, airmanship and engineering that made the operation possible. In their later years, reflecting on the events that had shaped their lives, surviving veterans' thoughts turned to the future and the role of commemoration in not so much for keeping their memory alive, but of ensuring that we not only remember the past, but learn the lesson it can teach.

Understandably, the German perspective has been through a different lens, focused on commemoration of those who died as a result of the inundation. The horrors of that May night are recorded by the memorials at the dam itself, at Himmelforten, Neheim and other settlements along the River Ruhr. These commemorate not only the German casualties, but also acknowledge the large number of foreign workers who perished either as a result of the floods or during reconstruction.

Despite their apparent differences, both recognise the value and importance of remembrance, not only as an acknowledgement of the past, but as a tool to influence the future. In this respect, Johnny Johnson and his compatriots understood the importance of engaging with the next generation in the hope that their understanding of the past might build a better future. This was very much the ethos of our last "original", Johnny Johnson, who in his latter years was keen to engage with schools and youth groups and echoed by the Association's support of an Air League flying scholarship. Now with Johnny's passing, the torch of remembrance has been handed on to a new generation.

The Germans too look to the future, using the past to emphasise the need for harmony and cooperation rather than conflict between nations.

Thirty-four years earlier in 1989 forty-six years after Operation Chastise, David Shannon's bomb aimer, Len Sumpster, visited the dam and met his former adversary for a symbolic handshake on the dam. Memories of this visit, combined with unease within EU membership, inspired a local schoolmaster, Meinolf Padberg, who in 2019 began to formulate the idea of links between the two nations. In 2022 the German schools completed a large montage comprising a dove of peace flying over a representation of the Mohne Dam,

beneath which were hands clasped in a gesture of friendship and unity, surrounded by 198 flags of the world.



Mohnensee Peace Panel 2022

These jointly held values of peace and reconciliation were very much in evidence at the Service held in Scampton church on 23 March, the 80th anniversary of the Squadron's formation when Johnny's grandson, Richard Bartlam formally unveiled the plaque dedicating the new stained-glass window to the Squadron. The service combined recollection of the past with inspiration for the future. The shared ethos

was exemplified by the participation of pupils and staff from Scampton C of E and Pollyplatt primary schools and representatives of schools from Mohnesees and Mohnesees-Gunne, adjacent to the Mohne dam who are building a strong affiliation to promote peace and friendship through the exchange of postcards and Zoom links.

I experienced further evidence of the importance afforded to this relationship when at the Scampton service I mentioned to Elke Husemann, representing the Mayor of Mohnesees, that I would be leading a small group to visit the dam on 16 May. This immediately led to the suggestion that here was a further opportunity to further Anglo-German harmony. The idea grew, and at midnight on the 16/17 May I was part of a group of some fifty locals and twenty-five British visitors gathered to hold a commemoration in the lee of the dam's north tower – the tower on which had been mounted the flak gun manned by German gunner Karl Schutte and which brought down Flt Lt Hopgood and his crew.

The ceremony on the dam combined solemn reflection and hope for the future. In attendance were the mayors of three local communities who spoke, recalling the events of that fateful night and their desire to forge stronger bonds between former adversaries. I contributed a British perspective: Over the years, as former enemies had the opportunity to meet, they discovered something of which we are now very aware: that more unites us than divides us.

Len Sumpter and Karl Schutte's generation were no longer with us, but they are still here in spirit. They would be in full support of this gathering to acknowledge what has happened in the past, and to move on in friendship and harmony.

The Group then moved on in candle lit procession to the north tower, for an address by Meinolf Padborn, against a backdrop poster of Len Sumpter meeting Karl Schutte. Wreaths, including one on behalf of the Squadron Association, were then laid to commemorate all who lost their lives in Operation Chastise. The assembled group then linked hands as a symbol of international unity, and accompanied by the local vicar on his guitar, sang the anthem "We shall overcome". The assembly then broke into small groups to exchange mutual greetings and expressions of goodwill concluding with many "Auf Wiedersehns" and Danke, danke schon".



Mohne Dam at midnight 16/17 May 2023

The following day saw a series of events. On the dam, in Neheim and in Scampton schoolchildren took part in peace walks and exchanged greetings via Zoom. Teams of cyclists and motorcyclists arrived from the UK, completing

sponsored rides via various cemeteries and crash sites to raise money for charity. Later that day in Gunne a commemorative service was held in the local church, attended by Scampton's last Station Commander, Group Captain Neill Atkins and former 617 Squadron commander, and Association Member Air Commodore Keith Taylor and his wife Lizee. After the service the party proceeded to the local Schutzenhalle for the official opening of an exhibition. Further events later in the week included a service within the ruins of the Cistercian church of Himmelforten destroyed by the flood.



617 Sqn Association wreath at site of Hopgood's crash

A wreath was laid on behalf of the Association at the crash site of Flt Lt Hopgood's Lancaster AJ-M. Until recently this memorial comprising a wooden post mounting a plaque presented by the Squadron in 2010, sat in an overgrown area on the edge of a field but in the last year this too has been transformed by local school pupils under the guidance and support of Meinolf Padberg and local historian Joachim Peters. The area around the marker has been cleared and paved, to improve access and an interpretation panel erected.

The Squadron's fallen who rest in Reichswald Forest War Cemetery, near Kleve, were also visited and tribute paid with the laying of a wreath on behalf of the Squadron Association.

Dr Robert Owen

The three South Australians played crucial roles in the Dambuster strike. At 20 years old, the youthful Dave Shannon, was already a season Bomber Command veteran when he arrived at 617 Sqn as the youngest captain at the squadron. He flew Lancaster AJ-L as the seventh aircraft in the first wave of the audacious strike. After seeing the eventual breaching of the Mohne Dam he was tasked mid-flight by Wg Cdr Guy Gibson to proceed onto the Eder Dam where after four attempts he successfully dropped his bouncing bomb with it detonating at the base of the dam. He survived the war completing 69 operational missions and is regarded as one of Australia's most brilliant and decorated Bomber Command pilots.

Born in Renmark in regional South Australia, Flt Lt Robert Hay, DFC and Bar, was a bomb aimer on the third Lancaster to strike the Mohne Dam. Like Shannon, Hay was already a veteran having completed postings to No 455 Squadron RAAF and No 50 Squadron RAF where he had earned a Distinguished Flying Cross. He was the Squadron Bomb Leader responsible for the overall development, mentoring, training and standardisation of the units bomb aimers. Hay was later killed in action in February 1944 when, on a difficult 617 Sqn mission targeting the Antheor Viaduct in southern France, a cannon shell hit and exploded in his bomb aimers compartment at the front of the aircraft. He was the only crewman of the aircraft to perish that day. He was buried in Cagliari, Sardinia.



617 Sqn memorial plaque at Torrens Parade Ground, Adelaide

Flying Officer Freddie Spafford, also a veteran of Bomber Command having completed a tour at 50 Sqn (RAF) alongside Robert Hay, was selected by Wg Cdr Guy Gibson to be his bomb aimer at 617 Sqn. Thus, he was in the lead aircraft (AJ-G) of the first wave and dropped the first bouncing bomb of the strike. Guy Gibson regarded Spafford as the best bomb aimer there was. Spafford was tragically

killed in action serving with 617 Sqn only several months after the Dambusters Raid on the evening of the 15/16 September strike on the Dortmund-Ems Canal using similar tactics to those used on Dambuster strike Raid. In patchy fog and poor visibility, and against alert defences, five of the eight attacking aircraft were shot down. Hit by flak, Spafford's plane caught fire, crashed, and blew apart on the ground. There were no survivors.

Attendees at the service included senior Defence and Government representatives, members of the South Australian veterans, heritage, aerospace, defence support, and Indigenous community and the public. Key guests of honour at the service were Ms Nikki King, daughter of Sqn Ldr Dave Shannon and Ms Jean Miller, niece of FgOFF Freddie Spafford and their respective families. Also attending was 101-year-old Mr Ray Merrill DFC, a Bomber Command tail gunner who flew Stirlings and Lancasters on 35 missions with No 218 Squadron (RAF) in World War 2.

Air Cdre Adrian Maso, Senior Air Force Representative Australia and Commander Air Warfare Centre, laid a wreath under the 617 Sqn Plaque on the Air Force Memorial on behalf of the Air Force. The Honourable Justin Hanson MLC representing Hon Geoff Brock, Minister for Veterans Affairs SA laid a wreath on behalf of the people of South Australia and Ms Nikki King laid a wreath on behalf of the families of South Australia's Dambusters.

Air Commodore Adrian Maso AM, provided the keynote address highlighting not only the need to remember and honour the aircrew involved but also the importance of the lessons the Dambusters Raid provides the RAAF and Australia. Stressing the increasing uncertainty in the world at the moment, he noted the Dambusters Raid shows the value of innovating to obtain a decisive capability edge through the fusion of technology with the human spirit and doctrine, the value of precision strike and the notion of operational and acceptable risk in situations that require it (eg strategic need and national interest).

Members of No 462 Squadron (RAAF), a Bomber Command squadron in World War 2 supported the service providing the Master of Ceremony and Catafalque Party. Meanwhile, members of the No 617 Sqn (Australian Air Force Cadets) based in Adelaide provided guards at a special 617 Sqn wreath in which rosemary and poppy was placed by attendees. This wreath was then placed at the SA Dambusters Memorial located on the nearby Pathway of Honour at Torrens Parade Ground.

Attendees then enjoyed a wonderful lunch at the Combined Ex-Services Mess at Torrens Parade Ground where members of 462 Sqn provided short biographical profiles of the three South Australians who flew in the Dambusters Raid.

The service was held at the Air Force Memorial, Torrens Parade Ground, Adelaide which commemorates the men and women of the Royal Australian Air Force (R.A.A.F.) who served in World War Two. It comprises 36 R.A.A.F. squadron and unit plaques mounted on both sides of three granite plinths in the form of a three-blade propeller. Dedicated in 2013, the memorial is used for most Air Force commemorative services held in Adelaide. Dedicated in 2008, the nearby South Australian Dambusters Memorial comprises a plaque honouring the three South Australian airmen who flew in the Dambusters raid mounted on a granite plinth located on the Pathway of Honour at the Torrens Parade Ground, Adelaide.

The memorials provided a most appropriate location to mark the 80th anniversary of one of the most audacious military raids of World War 2 and the brave aviators who flew in it.

The Air Force Association (South Australia) is dedicated to ensuring Air Force veterans receive the support they need and that their legacy is ensured for generations to come. To promote Air Force heritage and commemoration, the association partners with RAAF Base Edinburgh to conduct three annual commemorative services through the year – The Formation of the RAAF Anniversary Service on 31 March, the Bomber Command Commemorative Service in the first week of June and the Battle of Britain Commemorative Service in mid-September.

The 80th Anniversary of the Dambusters Raid Service was a special service noting the significance of the anniversary, the operation and the continuing relevance for today. In particular, it honoured the Australians who participated in the raid and of those, the three South Australians. The distinguished Bomber Command pilot and Commanding Officer of No 617 Squadron, Group Captain Lord Leonard Cheshire VC OM DSO DFC, wrote in his later years “617 was composed of men from a number of countries, each with their own unique contribution, but I think it is fair to say that it could not have been the squadron it was without its Australian contingent.”

Group Captain Greg Weller RAAF

Vice-President of the Air Force Association (South Australia)

photos by Gary Petts

Cenotaph Parade 2022

For me, as a first-time participant, the atmosphere was distinctly electric. Arriving at the Embankment Station at around 0845 it became obvious that I was far from the only one on a mission. Walking towards Trafalgar Square the pavement became progressively more congested, until after passing Nelson's Column, progress became really slow.

A steady stream of taxis ferried veterans, many of them carrying wreaths, from the various London termini. Here, I joined a true crocodile at the start of Whitehall, literally hundreds of veterans and other parade participants waiting to make their way through the security post, which was situated further along the Mall, beyond Admiralty Arch. The crocodile initially moved along Whitehall for some seventy metres, then turned onto a reciprocal heading to return to Trafalgar Square, finally shuffling beneath the Arch to reach the security post. This process lasted about thirty minutes. At the security post it was necessary to show photographic identification together with one's security pass, which had been previously issued by the Royal British Legion, the event organisers for the veteran contingents. Having gained access to the assembly area, Horse Guards Parade,

I found myself amongst literally thousands of former servicemen and women, forming loosely into their allocated columns. I was first to arrive from 617 Squadron and soon was in conversation with the neighbouring 31 Squadron contingent. Still alone, I was invited to march with them, if it became necessary, typical of the spirit of camaraderie of the occasion. Later I was joined by two other former 617 Squadron members. As the time approached to march into Whitehall, some contingents were being organised in the time-honoured drill fashion, however our column moved quietly into order, marching through the Horse Guards Arch into Whitehall. There we stood, applauding the various groups which passed us. These latter included the Chelsea Pensioners, the disabled vets on their mobility scooters and the wheelchair bound and their careers.

As the time neared 1100 and the Royal party arrived the parade was brought to Attention. The commencement of the two minutes Silence was announced by the first stroke of Big Ben, closely followed by the boom of the field guns firing on Horse Guards Parade. The end of the Silence was marked by another battery report and The Last Post. The parade was then Stood Easy, prayers and a well-known hymn followed,



and this part of the ceremony finished with a spirited rendering of the National Anthem. This was another especially moving part of the occasion.

Shortly afterwards the column was brought to Attention and marched off towards the Cenotaph in smart order. As we approached the Cenotaph, we were given the order Eyes Left and all near me obeyed smartly. One of our contingent was carrying a wreath from the Squadron, which he duly handed over as we passed the Cenotaph. After leaving Whitehall the column continued swiftly via Parliament Square, Great George Street and Horse Guards Road, where the Royal Dais was situated and a smart Eyes Right was executed.

Throughout I considered that the marching pace was brisk, probably a necessity, in view of the large numbers involved in the parade. The final section of the route was the return to Horse Guards Parade for dismissal. As soon as the columns broke up many groups formed to discuss the morning's events. It was obvious from overheard remarks that many intended to gather at the various service clubs in the city to extend their reunions.

I felt real pride in taking part. It was a pleasure to meet other former 617 Squadron colleagues and such an occasion I will long remember. Overall, it proved to be a truly moving experience. I was surprised that, even though it had been fifty-eight years since I had last paraded at Scampton, my drill reactions felt as if I had never really been away. I sincerely hope to be given the opportunity to return to the Cenotaph Parade in 2023.

John 'Dixie' Dean

Final Landings

ALAN BUXTON

Alan Buxton, who has died aged 102, joined the Squadron as a navigator on fellow Australian Flt Lt Howard Gavin's crew on 31 October 1944.

Born in Parramatta, New South Wales in December 1920, Alan was a clerk before joining the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in June 1940. As a gunner serving with the 2/1st Survey Regiment AIF he was posted to the Middle East, where he took part in the Syrian Campaign. Returning from the Middle East in May 1942 He was discharged from the Army in November 1942 and the following day enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF).



After six months holding in Australia, during which time he got married, he was selected for training as a navigator and embarked on a troopship for Canada, arriving on 25 July. It was a further 6 weeks until he was posted to No. 2 Air Observer School at Edmonton. He was awarded his Air Navigator's badge on 28 January 1944.

Arriving in the UK, on 18 April 1944 he was posted to No. 1 (Observers) Advanced Flying Unit at Wigtown, where he honed his navigation skills, familiarising himself with European charts and reduced scale of the English landscape. He was then posted to No. 27 OTU at Lichfield, where he formed up with Howard Gavin and his all-Australian crew, flying Wellingtons. Training then progressed to the Stirlings of 1661 Heavy Conversion Unit, Winthorpe, where they were joined by their English flight engineer, the only non-Australian in the crew. While returning from a night flight off the Dutch coast, three engines failed, and the captain ordered the crew to abandon the aircraft near Clacton. Despite hitting his head and being knocked unconscious when bailing out at 1,000 feet, Alan regained consciousness just in time to pull the rip cord, resulting in two swings before landing in a potato field. His survival earned him

membership of the “Caterpillar Club” entitling him to its tiny golden caterpillar badge with ruby red eyes.

Posted to 617 Squadron at Woodhall Spa, as one of the “first tourist” crews they commenced operations, inauspiciously, on 8 December 1944. Making their way to the Urft Dam, the squadron found cloud over the target and were recalled without bombing. Three days later they returned to this target to drop their first Tallboy in anger, although the gremlins were still with them. A partial hang up resulted in a having to make a manual release after masking 8 runs and spending 35 minutes over the target. They were fortunate not to be scheduled for the Politz attack, next operating in daylight against the E-boat pens at Rotterdam on 29 December, with a visit to the IJmuiden pens the following day. Smoke obscured their target during the Bergen operation of 12 January, but they evaded the fighters and returned safely with their Tallboy. Smoke hindered their aim again against the Poorteshaven pens on 3 February, but they were able to get their Tallboy away, seeing it impact at the same time as three other bombs some 30-40 yards from the target.

The crew’s relationship with the weather still did improve. Operations on 6 and 24 February and 9 March were recalled due to cloud over the target and it was the same situation 25 April for their tenth and final operation against Berchtesgaden, the last of World War II for the Squadron.

After V-E Day, Alan was posted to No. 467 Sqn, at Metherringham. This Australian squadron was earmarked to form part of “Tiger Force” bound for the Pacific. With the dropping of the atomic bombs and Japan’s surrender “Tiger Force” was disbanded in September and two months later Alan embarked on a troopship heading for Australia. He arrived in Melbourne on 3 January 1946, soon to be reunited with his wife and to meet his three-year-old son for the first time.

Qualifying as an accountant, he worked for Shell Oil until he retired, aged 60, in 1980. Both his parents had died relatively young, and after experiencing a heart attack aged 64, Alan was not expecting longevity – but an active lifestyle of tennis and golf, combined with a heart by-pass at the age of 84 gave him a new lease of life which saw him exceed his century becoming the oldest member of the wartime squadron. For the last 33 years Alan was a stalwart of his retirement community, serving as treasurer of the Residents Committee, and an active member of the Gardening Club, Finance Committee and Fellowship Prayer Group, always keen to volunteer and support his fellow residents.

Dr Robert Owen

Arthur Joplin

Arthur Joplin was born in Auckland in October 1923. After leaving school he became a clerk but in May 1942 volunteered for the RNZAF. After training in New Zealand, he qualified as a pilot in February 1944. Although an only son, "Joppy" persuaded his parents to sign the consent form permitting overseas service and was promptly posted direct to the UK.

Arriving in Liverpool the following month, he found himself posted to No. 17 OTU at Turweston, where he assembled his crew fly Wellingtons before moving on to Heavy Conversion Unit and finally to No. 5 Lancaster Finishing School at Syerston.



On 17 March 1944, Joplin was posted to No. 17 Operational Training Unit where he took the next step towards an operational career with Bomber Command. After two months flying Wellingtons, the crew transferred to No. 1660 Conversion Unit at RAF Swinderby, to acquire a flight engineer and master the complexities of four engined bombers before transferring to No. 5 Lancaster Finishing School at Swinderby, where they finally converted to their operational type.

On completion of this course the crew were surprised to learn that they were to be posted to No. 617 Squadron which normally only took experienced crews who had completed a tour of operations. However, at this point as an experiment, a few new crews who had demonstrated above average ability were being posted directly to the Squadron. The intention was that they should learn by example and osmosis - in effect being fast tracked to a level of operational expertise.

They arrived at Woodhall Spa in mid-August 1944, initially feeling rather overwhelmed and unsure as to how they would be received as a "sprog" crew. Their concern was unfounded. After initial wariness they found themselves absorbed into the routine of extensive practice and training in order to achieve

the precision for which the Squadron was renowned. It was a steep learning curve, but they found support and encouragement from the “old lags”.

Joppy made his first operational flight on 18 August 1944, as “second dickey” with American Nick Knilans for an attack against the U-boat base at La Pallice. Their first operation as a full crew came just over a week later, no easy “milk run” but a daylight attack against various vessels in the harbour of the heavily defended port at Brest with 1,000lb bombs. All seemed to go well, but they were unable to observe any results owing to smoke and spray.

The crew had insufficient experience to participate in the Squadron’s next operation, an attack on the German battleship Tirpitz, flown from an advanced base in Russia. By October, however, they were sufficiently practised to carry the 12,000 lb Tallboy deep penetration bomb, although their first attempt to drop one, a daylight operation to attack the sea wall at Walcheren on 3 October, was thwarted as they approached the target. ‘Tallboys’ were in extremely short supply and needed to be conserved whenever possible. The Squadron was positioned at the end of an attack by other aircraft of Bomber Command. On arrival the target was seen already to be breached and their bomb was brought home. Four days later they got their first opportunity to release ‘Tallboy’ during an operation against the Kembs barrage, on the River Rhine, near Basle. The attack was made in two parts – an initial high-level force to cause confusion and distract the defences, followed by six aircraft coming in along the river at 600 feet. Bombing from 7,500’ in the first wave, the crew reported a very near miss close to the barrage.

Tirpitz had been brought south to Tromsø following the previous attack and was now within range of aircraft operating from Scotland. Now a proven crew, their next two operations were directed to finally despatch this vessel. On 29 October they were part of a force of aircraft from Nos. 9 and 617 Squadrons which detached to Lossiemouth where they refuelled before heading for the Arctic Circle. After a flight of nearly 7 hours they reached their target. The weather was clear, but as the Squadron made their bombing run a layer of low cloud moved in. Despite this, the crew released their ‘Tallboy’, as did some of the other aircraft, but the cloud had prevented accurate aim. Tirpitz was not so favoured when the squadrons returned on 12 November. The leading bomb aimers were able to see the battleship clearly and soon it was surrounded by smoke and spray into which following crews including Joppy’s dropped their ‘Tallboys’. By the end of the attack, after at least two hits and several near misses, Tirpitz had rolled over to port, and capsized. There was insufficient depth of water for her to sink beneath the waves, but as the aircraft turned

for home sight of her dark red keel confirmed the success of the operation. The long flight home was exacerbated by headwinds and after discussion it was deemed prudent to plot a course to Sumburgh in the Shetlands where they refuelled before finally returning to Woodhall.



Joppy with a scale model of the Tirpitz built by Bruce Heberd

December saw a return to land-based targets, with two attempts, along with other aircraft of Bomber Command, to breach the Urft Dam, near Heimbach. Once again, the weather was against them. On the first attack on 8 December not only was the weather against them, but heavy flak struck their aircraft, forcing them to limp back and put down at the nearest UK airfield, Manston, in Kent. Three days later they tried again, only to see their 'Tallboy' overshoot the target.

After one more daylight attack, against the R-boat pens at IJmuiden the Squadron found themselves detailed on 21 December 1944 for a deep penetration night attack against an oil refinery at Politz, near Stettin (Szczecin) in Poland. For four of the crew, including the pilot, it would be their ninth operation together and their first night operation over Germany. To make things more difficult there was the expectation of poor weather on return to the UK necessitating possible diversion to other airfields at the end of an eight-hour flight. The outward flight was uneventful, and the crew reached the designated area, but found that the target marking appeared haphazard. After releasing their

'Tallboy' against a nominated marker they headed for home, setting course for their designated diversionary base in Scotland, which would have not only the advantage of clear weather, but would also shorten the length of the flight. Soon afterwards the wireless operator reported that they were being ordered to return to Lincolnshire. Basil Fish, their navigator, recalculated their course, but as they crossed the coast it became apparent that Lincolnshire was still shrouded in fog. A further message instructed aircraft to land at the first available airfield. It seemed that crew were in luck, for very soon they saw a glow through the murk which was identified as the airfield at Ludford Magna. That this was visible was solely due to the fact that it was one of a small number of airfields equipped with FIDO –using burning petrol to disperse fog on the runway approach enabling aircraft to land in such conditions. Joppy homed in on the glow and circled, calling up and asking permission to land. There was no reply. The crew were now in a perilous position. Other aircraft would also be circling, increasing the risk of collision, and their fuel state prevented diversion to any fog free airfield. They needed to land as soon as possible and were also aware of the rising ground of the Lincolnshire Wolds beneath. A few minutes later, while still circling, a sudden shudder ran through the aircraft as the port wing brushed a hillside. Joppy immediately called for more power. The aircraft was still airborne, but only just, and would not remain so for long. After a further bump, a horrendous noise and violent shaking, then everything became still.

Joppy was trapped in his seat in the remains of the shattered cockpit, pinned by his legs. Basil Fish himself originally trapped and injured, had managed to extract himself from the burning Lancaster but realising that other crew members, including his pilot were unaccounted for, went back into the wreckage. He managed to free Joppy and drag him clear of the burning aircraft. After making his pilot and other casualties as comfortable as possible Basil set off into the pitch black, fog shrouded night to summon assistance.

After several hours help arrived and Joppy was transferred to Louth County Infirmary, suffering from a broken left ankle and right leg fractured below the knee. He was later transferred to the RAF Hospital at Rauceby. During the journey he learned for the first time that two of his crew had died in the crash, a discovery which came as a severe psychological blow. Officialdom too, was not conciliatory, recommending that both pilot and navigator were culpable for the accident and that a red endorsement should be made in their log books. It was a decision with which few on the Squadron would concur. The weather conditions that night had claimed several aircraft on return besides Joppy's crew.

His injuries were such that it was not until December 1945 that he was repatriated to New Zealand. There he was demobilised in February 1946 and joined his father's knitwear company remaining in the industry until his retirement. Despite his injuries which affected him for the rest of his life, Joppy was for many years a keen golfer, and a keen member of the New Zealand Brevet Club for ex-aircrew. He participated in the Association reunions in Australia and New Zealand in 1980 and 1986, and in 1984 enjoyed a more personal reunion with Basil Fish, the navigator who had saved him from the crash, to mark their appointment with Tirpitz 40 years earlier.

Dr Robert Owen

George “Johnny” Johnson

George Leonard Johnson was born on 25 November 1921 in Hameringham, Lincolnshire, the sixth and last child of Charles and Ellen Johnson. Although his first name was George and he was known as Len or Leonard to his family, when he joined the RAF he was nicknamed 'Johnny', and this is the name by which he was mostly known for the rest of his life. His father was a farm foreman, living in a tied cottage, and the family grew up in very poor conditions. His mother died when Johnny was three, and his family life was then very disrupted, due to his father's abusive nature. His older sister Lena was living away from home, in service as a maid and it wasn't until she moved home that the situation improved and he went to a local primary school in Winthorpe.



At the age of 11 he was sent as a boarder to the Lord Wandsworth Agricultural College in Long Sutton, Hampshire. At the time, this was run by a charity catering for the children of agricultural families who had lost one or both parents. He did reasonably well at school and passed the School Certificate as well as playing cricket and football to a good standard, and winning several athletics events. When he left school in December 1939, he started work as a park keeper in Basingstoke.

Johnson volunteered to join the RAF in June 1940, applying to become a navigator. He was, however, selected for pilot training and eventually joined up in November 1940. He was posted to various training establishments but there was some compensation for all the moving around – at one in Torquay, he met Gwyn Morgan, the woman who would later become his wife.

In June 1941, Johnson was eventually sent for pilot training in Florida. More than one-third of those selected for pilot training were eventually ‘washed out’, which was what happened to him. As he always doubted he had the necessary skills he was not surprised, and he opted for air gunner training instead, arriving back in the UK in January 1942.

In July 1942, Johnson was posted to 97 Squadron at Woodhall Spa. He was designated as a spare gunner, without a regular crew, and so he flew with various skippers if one of their own gunners went sick. His first operation was on 27 August 1942, flying with Sqn Ldr Elmer Coton on a trip to Gdynia in Poland. However, an engine failure en route led to an early return, so the first time he saw action was the following day, on an operation to Nuremberg.

Johnson flew on a few more operations but then the opportunity came up to train as a specialist bomb aimer, and he completed the course in late November 1942. Within a month, a vacancy for a bomb aimer came up in Flt Lt Joe McCarthy’s crew. McCarthy was one of the several thousand Americans who had joined the Canadian air force before Pearl Harbour, and had gained a reputation as an excellent pilot. There were three Canadians in his crew of seven and at first Johnson wasn’t keen on flying as part of a British minority with an American captain, but a conversation with McCarthy changed his mind, and he was introduced to his future crewmates. What united them, he wrote later, was the fact that they all had inbuilt confidence in McCarthy.

Johnson’s first trip with McCarthy was an operation to attack Munich on 21 December 1942. It was packed with incident. In appalling weather, they were attacked by fighters and on the return trip lost all power in one engine and suffered problems in another. They were forced to land at Bottesford.

Johnson soon gained the confidence of his crewmates and flew on eighteen more operations with McCarthy in the spring of 1943, which brought him to the end of a full tour of thirty operations with 97 Squadron. Knowing that he would then be entitled to some leave followed by six months working in a non-combat training role, he and Gwyn arranged their wedding for 3 April 1943. However, the ceremony was nearly called off when the whole crew were

transferred to 617 Squadron at RAF Scampton, under the command of Wg Cdr Guy Gibson, for a new secret mission and all leave was cancelled.

Determined that Johnson would keep the date, McCarthy assembled his entire crew and marched all six of them into Gibson's office. Johnson described what happened next in his 2015 autobiography.

“‘The thing is, sir,’ [McCarthy] said, very forcibly, ‘we’ve all just finished our tour and we are all entitled to a week’s leave. My bomb aimer is due to be married on the third of April and let me tell you he is going to get married on the third of April!’

There was a short pause while the others, no doubt, wished they were anywhere else except standing in the office of Wg Cdr Guy Gibson DSO, DFC and Bar, who had a fearsome reputation as a strict disciplinarian and had been known by the crews of 106 Squadron as ‘The Arch-Bastard’.

He looked us up and down and said, ‘Very well. You can have four days. Dismissed.’

Thank you, Joe! I left for Torquay immediately, before our new CO could change his mind.”

In fact, McCarthy and his crew didn't know that several other crews had been told by their previous COs that they could take leave before their new posting, and therefore would not arrive at Scampton for several more days. Although he didn't say so, Gibson was probably relieved not to have all his new men arriving at once. He would have known at this stage that he didn't yet have enough aircraft for his new squadron to train on, so a crew going on leave for four days was hardly going to upset the schedule too much.

Johnny returned from his wedding and honeymoon to start the training. At first all they knew was that they would be flying at very low level – below 100 feet – and would need to be able to drop their spinning ‘mine’ with great accuracy. They didn't know that the weapon had been designed by the scientist Barnes Wallis to ‘bounce’ on the waters of a lake where its momentum would carry it up to a target, where it would sink below the water level and then explode. The target was the German dams in the powerhouse of the Ruhr valley, but they didn't find this out until the day of the raid, Sunday 16 May 1943.

In his training for the Dams Raid Johnson practised dropping the mine as his aircraft flew straight towards the target at low level. However, on the Sunday afternoon, McCarthy, Johnson and their colleagues were told that they would be one of the five crews detailed to attack the Sorpe dam, an earth embankment-

type dam with a concrete core. This meant they had to fly along the dam wall and drop their mine at its centre. It would roll down the wall on the water side and explode when it reached the correct depth.

McCarthy's Lancaster was supposed to lead off the wave which was detailed to attack the Sorpe Dam but when a technical problem was discovered on their favoured aircraft they had to transfer to the spare. They realised when they got to the Sorpe Dam that they were the only crew of the five which had got that far. Having to line up a completely different approach, over land and along the dam wall, took them a while to get correct but eventually, on the tenth try, McCarthy managed to make a near-perfect run, getting down to about 30ft, and Johnson released the weapon. However, the dam failed to breach, and the crew had to make their lonely way home.

Although AJ-T had failed to breach the dam, Johnson, McCarthy and navigator Don MacLean were all decorated for their part in the raid. Johnson received the DFM and travelled up to Buckingham Palace for the investiture. At that point in his life, he was a non-drinker, so he didn't participate in the festivities that followed. Johnson was commissioned in November 1943 and went on to fly with McCarthy on eighteen more operations with 617 Squadron, up until April 1944. At that point, knowing that Gwyn Johnson was shortly to have their first child, McCarthy insisted that he stand down.

Reluctantly, Johnson agreed and was sent back to Scampton as a bombing instructor and served out the rest of the war in various training jobs. After the war, he was told that if he qualified as a navigator, he would get a permanent commission. He accepted this offer, and stayed in the RAF until 1962, retiring with the rank of Squadron Leader.

Now in his forties, Johnson was without a job. So, he retrained again, this time as a teacher. He worked first in primary schools and then later in adult education, including a period teaching psychiatric patients at Rampton Hospital.

When he retired, he and Gwyn moved to Torquay, the town where Gwyn had been brought up. Although she came from a Labour-supporting Welsh mining family, she was a keen Conservative, a strong admirer of Margaret Thatcher. 'The lady's not for turning' became Gwyn's own catchphrase, used to settle any minor family disputes. The pair had been active in local Conservative Party politics for a while, but after the move to Torquay Johnson was elected as a councillor, and became chair of the constituency party, amongst other things having to deal with the wayward activities of Rupert Allason, the local MP. Allason was a Maastricht rebel and a plotter against the Prime Minister

John Major, who Johnson admired. Johnson also took part in reunions and other activities relating both to 617 Squadron and the wider world of Bomber Command, and the pair were very happy with frequent visits from their growing numbers of grandchildren.

Gwyn Johnson died in August 2005 and for a while Johnson withdrew from public life. But then he started accepting invitations from the media for interviews and documentary appearances, and as the number of those who had served in Bomber Command during wartime inevitably dwindled, he became one of the most familiar veterans. Even in his late nineties he was a compelling speaker and a willing interviewee. Any public appearance would result in a steady stream of people wanting to shake his hand and have a selfie taken.

He had always worked hard for charity, particularly campaigning for improved resources for mental health, and this was recognised on three separate occasions at the time of the 75th anniversary of the Dams Raid in 2018: a visit to Buckingham Palace to be invested with an MBE by the Queen, an honorary doctorate at the University of Lincoln (back in his home county) and a flight over the Derwent Dam in the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight Lancaster.

As a centenarian and ‘The Last Dambuster’, Johnson occupied an important place in what sometimes seems an insatiable public interest in the Dams Raid. But as his son Morgan points out in the last chapter of Johnson’s autobiography:

“[H]e is the first to recognise that all this attention is not purely about him personally but is directed at what he represents. The Dambusters became a wartime legend that captured the public imagination and, as the last British survivor of that night, he represents all of them and what they achieved. There are many, many other stories of individual and collective achievements during World War II. Stories of extraordinary courage, of battles won in impossible situations, of acts of heroism against overwhelming odds. But the Dambusters remain high on the list of public affection. And that is what he will be remembered for, by the public at large.”

Like many of the generation which came of age during the war years, Johnny Johnson always said that he was simply doing his job. The fact that by doing this job he was risking his life, defending liberty against those who sought to bring tyranny to these shores, is immaterial. The qualities by which he lived his life were those of honesty, discipline, respect, and loyalty.

Johnny Johnson is survived by his son Morgan, his two daughters Susan and Jenny, and his grandchildren.

Ray Newman

Ray Newman was born in Middlesborough in 1934. After posting to the the Air Signallers' School at Swanton Morley in April 1954, followed by the Coastal Command Gunnery School and Maritime Reconnaissance School at St Mawgan, in October 1955 he was posted to No. 236 OCU at Kinloss before serving with No. 240 Sqn, flying Shackletons from Ballykelly, Northern Island.

During 1957-58 he was attached to Christmas Island during the period of Operation Grapple, the tests of the British Hydrogen bomb, before returning to the UK. After two years at the Air Electronics School at Hullavington and a further Coastal Command tour, in 1963 he was posted to No. 232 OCU at Gaydon for Conversion to the Vickers Valiant, the first of Britain's V-bombers. After two years with No. 90 Squadron at Honington, he then converted to the Vulcan B 2 at No. 230 OCU, Finningley where, as a Flying Officer he teamed up as AEO with Flt Lt Don Exley and his Vulcan crew.

They were posted to 617 at Scampton on 10 September 1965 and almost immediately Ray, along with co-pilot Ed Carter, Nav Plotter Dickie Woodacre, Nav Radar, David Moore were attached for a four day course at the Bomber Command Armament School, Wittering. That completed, Don Exley, Ed Carter and Ray Newman were sent on a further four-day course at Lindholme, to master the intricacies of Blue Steel.

By October, the crew had returned to Scampton, but for the first month Ray and the other "back seaters" found themselves flying with a range of other captains and co-pilots, including Arthur Spain, and Peter Odling before coming together as a crew in November for a crew check with the Squadron commander, Denys Heywood. From then on training commenced with both high- and low-level attack profiles, including a couple of minor landing incidents, one when the brake pads fused to the discs, and another where wet and icy runway conditions resulted in a minor incursion into the overshoot area.

By March 1966 the crew were participating in generation exercises such as "Finnigan" – a four aircraft dispersal exercise to Bedford with a Blue Steel. Three months later they participated in the monthly Group exercise "Billion". Although operating largely as a constituted crew, Ray also flew occasionally with a number of other crews during this period, notably that of Joe LeBrun.

In August 1966 the Exley crew completed their first Goose Ranger, during which they were given the opportunity to sample two of the Canadian low-

level routes for the first time, although a third sortie had to be cancelled owing to aircraft unserviceability. Warmer climes beckoned that autumn when they were detached to Luqa for an Exercise "Sunspot" from where they participated in the annual Malta Air Defence Exercise.

The beginning of 1967 saw increased activity in preparation for the Bomber Command 10-day inter-Squadron competition held between 8 and 17 March. The competition, for best free fall bombing, Blue Steel Bombing, navigation, communications, and best overall squadron, involved 71 Bomber Command crews from 15 V-Bomber Squadrons. Three crews of the USAF Strategic Air Command also participated. The Exley crew's practice paid dividends, with their being declared winners of the Command Navigation Trophy.

As a result of this success the crew were one of four crews (two each from Vulcan and Victor units) selected to take part in Operational "Fresno", the live firing of a fuelled (but unarmed) Blue Steel Missile over the Aberporth Weapons range, Cardigan Bay. After two "carry over" flights on 3 and 4 July the crew attempted a powered launch on 5 July, only to be thwarted when the range was declared "Black" owing to the presence of shipping in the sea area. They were successful on 7 July when the missile was released and flew as planned for 35 miles with an impact error of 515 yards.

The crew then carried out further flying trials, acting as a potential target in connection with the development of the English Electric Thunderbird 2 surface to air missile.

Although still constituted with the Exley crew, in September 1967, Ray continued to fly a number of sorties as AEO with the Lucas crew, including a Lone Ranger to Luqa. Returning to the Exley crew he a longer Western Ranger to Offutt with further Rangers to Luqa to complete the year.

1968 saw increased Blue Steel training, with both high and low levels profiles, although emphasis was now on low level attacks, combined with low level fighter affiliation exercises. Variety was provided with formation flypast rehearsals for the review to commemorate the RAF's Silver Jubilee at Abingdon in June, followed by participation in another Exercise Billion.

Much of July and August 1968 was occupied with ferry flights between Scampton and St Athan of aircraft undergoing maintenance and modification, and a Lone Ranger to Laarbruch. By autumn Ray's time with the Squadron was coming to a close and once again he was flying with a number of crews including those of Sqn Ldr Desmond Clarke, Sqn Ldr Keith Walters and latterly Wg Cdr Bob Allen.

Posted to Transport Ops, Akrotiri on 31 January 1969, he did no further flying for the next three years until he joined No. 51 Sqn, an Electronic Warfare unit, at Wyton in January 1972. In 1978 he was granted Designated Specialist aircrew status, as a Flt Lt. Promoted to Sqn Ldr in 1982 he remained at Wyton for a further two years. After a short period at the Joint Intelligence School at Ashford he transferred to HQ RAF Germany in January 1985. Three years later, still employed in the world of Intelligence and Electronic Warfare, he returned to Wyton to complete his final tour of duty, retiring from the Service in 1989.

Dr Robert Owen



Wg Cdr Guy Gibson's Victoria Cross displayed with the 617 Squadron Standard at St Clement Danes in the Strand

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