



# Après Moi

The 617 Squadron  
Association Newsletter



Autumn 2014



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**Cover Photo:** George 'Johnny' Johnson DFM the last British Dambuster, poses with a copy of his autobiography of the same name on the occasion of its launch in Guy Gibson's Office at RAF Scampton Heritage Centre on 17th May 2014.

*With kind permission from Mr Matt Reid, Photographic Section, Media Services, RAF Cranwell.*

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## Editorial

I am delighted to have the opportunity to edit *Après Moi* but want to introduce myself and provide a brief overview of my time with 617 Sqn.

I first worked with the Dambusters in the early 1990s at Dhahran, in Saudi Arabia, although had to wait another 16 years to become the senior engineer officer (SEngO) in 2010. I remember the day that RAF Manning called to ask me to consider the role; I didn't have to consider for long as an opportunity like this was simply too good to turn down! Arriving in 2010, I then embarked on two tours of duty to Afghanistan, under Keith Taylor.

Now based at HQ Air Command within the recently reformed No 38 Group, I reflect on my time with 617 Sqn as the most privileged and rewarding period of my career to date. I am proud of the Royal Air Force and proud to have been a member of the Dambusters. This explains why I took up the challenge of replacing Chris Henderson.

I would like to thank Chris for his many years of producing the *Après Moi* newsletter although I am pleased to report that he is remaining as a member of the Association Committee.

I hope that you enjoy this edition and look forward to meeting some of you at the Tirpitz Reunion Dinner in November.

**Stu' Clarke**

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**Deadline for Next Newsletter**

**1st December 2014**

**email: [clarke318@gmail.com](mailto:clarke318@gmail.com)**

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# Robertson's Ramblings

**T**hose of you who maintain contact with the Association via email will know that Wg Cdr Stuart Clarke stepped up to the plate to volunteer to take over from Chris Henderson as Editor of *Après Moi*. First, thank you Stu for volunteering and I hope that you enjoy it as much as I know Chris did. Second, thank you Chris, for putting together a 'really good read' for us over the many years that you have done so. We are still looking for a volunteer to take over from John Bell as the Stockholder (ties, cummerbunds etc) so please consider lending your support.

You will recall that I told you in my last Ramblings that planning was at a very early stage for two significant events this year; the 70th Anniversary of Guy Gibson's death in September and the 70th Anniversary of the sinking of the *Tirpitz* in November. The good news is that both events are going ahead with the September event taking place over 2 days (18th/19th). However, the November event is being marked only by a low-key ceremony on the Fjord on 12th September. You should already have been informed of the details of each via email from our new Communications Director, Chris Henderson.

The Association is now officially Squadron-less. I was fortunate to attend the disbandment of 617 and 12 Squadrons at RAF Lossiemouth at the end of March as part of the drawdown of Tornado GR4. It was a fabulous event at which every man and woman was outstanding. You could feel the sense of pride that all on Parade had for the Squadron and the Royal Air Force. The Parade was followed by a Dinner and an hour or two of sleep, on the night that the clocks went forward, before a taxi took me back to the railway station to get my train home. A good decision not to drive! The Squadron Standard was subsequently laid up at RAF Cranwell in April. 617 Squadron will reform as the first RAF F-35 Lightning II Squadron in 2016 in the USA and will remain there for 2 years before returning to RAF Marham in 2018. Current plans are for the Squadron to be jointly manned by RAF and RN air and ground crew. It is also a single-seat aircraft, so changes ahead.

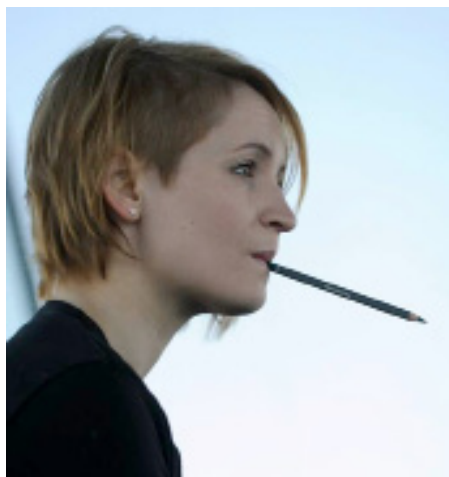
Talking of changes, this will be my final Ramblings as Andy Walters will take over from me as Chairman in May 2015. If there is another issue of *Après Moi* before then, it will be an opportunity for him to introduce himself. Andy comes from a Tornado GR1/GR4 background and was my Executive Officer when I became Officer Commanding 617 Squadron in 2000. The rest, I will leave Andy to tell you himself but I know that the Association is in good hands. My 10-year tenure as Chairman has been twice as long as I intended but I have enjoyed it tremendously and the Committee and I feel that we have moved the Association forward and evolved. Membership has and will hopefully continue to grow and we have formalised our Constitution with the Charity Commission,

making ourselves a Charity in our own right. There is still much to be done and this is where a fresh mind and a new leader comes in. Finally, thank you for your support and friendship since I became a member of the Association. A special thank you goes to every Committee member that has served with me on the Committee during my tenure. It has been a privilege to serve the Association in that capacity and I wish you all good health and happiness for the future.

Yours aye,

**David**

## War Artist



**S**ara Waymont, a former RAF Reservist and full time artist, tells her story of her time deployed with 617 Sqn, capturing history:

2014 has turned out to be a remarkable year for me. Not only did I fulfil my ambition of visiting theatre as a war artist, but I did so alongside one of the most famous squadrons in the history of the Royal Air Force. In January I had the privilege of embedding with 617 Sqn at Kandahar Airfield (KAF), as their final tour before disbandment was drawing to a close.

As a former RAF Reservist I was familiar with the artwork that commonly adorns the walls in messes and MoD buildings across the country. The work is beautiful, executed with enormous technical skill and perfectly captures the various flying machines that have been put to work by the Royal Air Force over the years. However, there always seems to be something lacking – a disjoint between the RAF that I have worked in and come to love and the subjects that these artists have chosen to depict. The Royal Air Force, for me, is about the people that I have met and their huge personalities, rather than the lumps of metal that they pilot.

Now before I cause uproar please allow me to explain. I do not deny that these machines are remarkable feats of engineering, or that they are full of grace and grit or even that they can, in some respects, be considered to have personalities of their own. However, it is people that bring them to life, that care for them and maintain them and use them for precise and sometimes

deadly intent. I wanted my art work to be about the people of the Royal Air Force and to depict them in a contemporary way, with the forward-thinking attitude the junior Service is renowned for.

I love the old Commando comics and the unofficial nose cone art that has existed almost as long as planes themselves. When I learned that I was to embed with 617 Sqn I was overjoyed. I couldn't think of a more fitting style to depict the legendary Dambusters!

The first half of my Afghanistan sketchbook is filled with sketches from the many departure lounges we endured on the flight out. There are lots of very uninteresting images of the backs of peoples' heads and sleeping squaddies, but they were a good way for me to practice making quick sketches of people in DPM, as well as giving me the opportunity to engage with some of the men and women I was travelling with. Once I reached KAF and the Tornado Detachment (TorDet), however, my subject matter became vastly more interesting.

I was immediately made to feel welcome and everybody was full of enthusiasm for my visit. I spent my days pushing either a camera or sketchbook under 617 Sqn's noses and was accommodated admirably. I even went so far as to track the pilots down to their accommodation block for an impromptu portrait session that dragged on until after midnight, an intrusion which they met with good grace and a little ribald humour. I was lucky to spend a considerable amount of time with lots of different ranks and trades on the squadron, as they sat for portraits for me, and was very privileged that this also included the OC. My time in KAF was unique in giving me a real insight into how the RAF function in theatre and how everybody works together, no matter what their rank or role.

I watched one of the jets being worked up to the after-burn out on the pan and was staggered by the sound, so vast that it could be felt rather than heard, and the amazing purple-blue flames that the exercise produced. I spent a very warm day on the range, sketching and snapping with my camera, as the Dambusters honed their weapons skills on an International shoot. I was lucky to



OC 617 Sqn  
Wg Cdr David Arthurton



be able to get up close and personal with the Tornados and even watched one being taken to pieces, as the engineers carried out maintenance work. I also spent some time with HercDet, getting to know a very different aircraft. I packed an awful lot into a very short space of time!

I was thrilled to discover that there are quite a few artists on 617 Sqn. With little to do between shifts (once the possibilities of 'Warbucks' and the gym had been exhausted) personnel got busy with paint, pens and cameras. In fact, there appear to be quite a few artists in the Services across KAF and Bastion, if the amount of graffiti emblazoned across both camps is anything to go by. I have tried very hard to incorporate this 'low brow' art into my own practice, as I really want my work to reflect everything I saw and experienced in Afghanistan. I even took the time to tag a couple of walls myself, leaving behind my own piece of wall art for 617 Sqn and the RAF Regiment.

Now, back in my studio, I am working to select the best images from the two thousand odd I brought home. I chose the title 'The Last Tour' for my solo show, as it seemed so appropriate for the Dambusters; it being not only their last few weeks in Afghanistan, but also the last tour they would go on together before the disbandment. There is something rather melancholy about the people of 617 Sqn going their separate ways. In my mind they will always exist as they did in KAF, with all of the wonderful people I met working together to keep their magnificent fighter jets in the skies.





It is this snapshot in time that I hope to have captured with my exhibition. So my work has a certain surreal and illustrative style about it. The pilots and engineers are my war heroes, my canvases the pages of Commando magazine. Thanks to 617 Sqn for hosting me and I hope that the Association readers enjoy The Last Tour.

My website, although still in progress, can be viewed at [www.sarawaymontartist.co.uk](http://www.sarawaymontartist.co.uk) and I am happy to discuss my work and commissions enquiries via email [sara@sarawaymontartist.co.uk](mailto:sara@sarawaymontartist.co.uk).

You can also find me on Facebook and Twitter (for the social networkers among you).

**Sara Waymont**

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## The Dacre Trophy

**A**t the No 1 Group Awards dinner in March 2014, 617 Squadron won the Dacre Trophy. The trophy is awarded to the best squadron within No 1 Group and was accepted by Wing Commander David Arthurton, Officer Commanding 617 Squadron. The Dacre Trophy is sponsored by the Dacre Family and was presented by Group Captain Dacre. The citation is provided below:

Success on Operations, short-notice overseas detachments and sustained periods of high-readiness posture for contingent tasking punctuated 617 Sqn's 70th anniversary year. Through dedication and hard work, the highly motivated personnel of 617 Sqn delivered truly impressive results and raised over £170,000 for charity.

After the last minute cancellation of Ex RED FLAG, the majority of the Sqn deployed to Minhad, UAE, conducting a very successful exercise with coalition forces; simultaneously, a small but focused team delivered a broad range of commemorative events, including the incredibly moving Sunset Ceremony at RAF Scampton. The 70th anniversary generated significant media interest that endured for the remainder of the year.

A period of intense yet efficient operational work-up training culminated in an excellent Mission Rehearsal Exercise. Subsequently, in Theatre, the Sqn demonstrated superb levels of engineering output, flexibility to meet Combined Air Operations Centre intent and the precise delivery of kinetic and non-kinetic effect when required.

Highlights of the year included:

- Raised over £170,000 for Leonard Cheshire Disability
- Cancellation of Ex RED FLAG ALASKA resulted in just over two weeks' notice for Ex SHAHEEN STAR which was a great success
- Tornado Standardisation Visit on Ex SHAHEEN STAR – High Average Assessment
- 617 Sqn 70th anniversary drew global media attention
- Week of high profile events to mark the 70th anniversary of the Dams Raid
  - Charity Dinner in the House of Commons
  - RAF Scampton Sunset Ceremony – live broadcast on national television
  - Multiple media engagement opportunities
  - Service of commemoration in Lincoln Cathedral
- Supported the three major UK airshows flying with the BBMF Lancaster
- Sqn Charity Run – 700 miles in seven days for Leonard Cheshire Disability
- Highly successful Op HERRICK deployment

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## Tirpitz Dinner 8<sup>th</sup> November 2014

The 2014 Tirpitz Dinner will take place on Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> November at the Petwood Hotel. A memorial service will be held at the Squadron Memorials on Sunday 9<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.

Members with email addresses will have received details of the weekend and the dinner menu with a form to complete and return to the secretary, Mike Hines. For those of you not online, you should find a copy of the letter and form enclosed with your hard copy of *Après Moi*. Please return your form and payment by 19th October.



# The Last British Dambuster

**T**he last British Dambuster tells Siân Ranscombe about the special mission in May 1943. Reproduced with permission from the Telegraph Magazine.

“My crew and I were with the 97 Squadron before we moved over to the new 617 Squadron for a special mission in March 1943. With me are the bomb aimer; Len Eaton, wireless operator; Joe McCarthy, pilot; Ron Batson, front gunner; Dave Rodger, rear gunner; Don MacLean, navigator; and Bill Ratcliffe, flight engineer. Joe was the big man and I thought of him as an older brother. We had a friendship that was beyond that of pilot and bomb aimer, and when we first met we just seemed to gel.

We had no idea what we were training for until the day of the briefing. I was young enough and stupid enough to not think too much about it. The general conjecture had been that it would be against the German battleship Tirpitz, but the next day, May 16 1943, we discovered how wrong we were when we went to the briefing with Wg Cdr Guy Gibson and the inventor of the bouncing bomb, Barnes Wallis. That was the first indication we had of what the target was going to be – three dams within Germany’s Ruhr Valley.

It is difficult to say what the mood was when we found out. At that stage, most people were concerned with their own crew, because the crew were a family, always. But I do know there were one or two who had a nasty feeling they weren’t going to come back.

Gibson was a strict disciplinarian and his big problem was that he could not bring himself down to lower ranks. He had no verbal connection with the air crew except to tell them off when something went wrong. But the true essence of the man as a leader was portrayed in the actual raid, where he made the first attack on the Möhne. We knew it was the only dam that was defended. As he called each aircraft in, he flew alongside them to attract some of the defence. He said, ‘You’re doing this, I’m doing this, we’re doing this together.’ That to me is the essence of good leadership.

The scale of the raid didn’t hit most of us until we saw the outcome and the number of crews we’d lost – we lost eight of our 16 attacking planes that night and only three of the aircrew from the downed Lancasters survived. We lost 53 crew in total. It was pretty devastating.

I’ve talked to school children about the raid and I can see the interest in their eyes. That makes it for me. It’s a relief to know that they’re teaching Second World War history in junior schools. There’s been an increase in the interest over the last three or four years, and I enjoy it.”

*The Last British Dambuster by George ‘Johnny’ Johnson (Ebury Press, £17.99) is out now*

## 617: Going to War with Today's Dambusters

From 2010 to 2011 I was privileged to spend many weeks with 617 Squadron, initially at RAF Lossiemouth witnessing the work-up to their deployment to Afghanistan and then joining them at Kandahar Air Field (KAF), the squadron's first operational tour as part of Herrick 14. Commanding 617 was then new boss Wing Commander Keith Taylor. An operational veteran with seven tours over Iraq, he knew that even with the latest cutting-edge weapons and sensors, only rigorous flying standards and watertight tactics would keep his young pilots safe. Many of them had never flown in a war zone before. A full-throttle account of daring feats in modern fast attack jets, 617 Going to War with Today's Dambusters is also a very personal story of a closely-knit band of men and women working under immense pressure, where every decision could affect the lives of NATO troops and an entire country's hopes for a better future.

Flying Tornado GR4s out of Kandahar (KAF), the Dambusters' brief was to provide close air support (CAS) to ISAF ground forces 24/7, and particularly 3 Commando Brigade, based in Lashkar Gah, during Operation Omid Haft, launched with the Afghan National Army in May 2011. The goal of this complex operation was to drive the Taliban further out of the parts of central Helmand where they were still deeply embedded, especially Nahr-e Saraj and Loy Mandeh which the Task Force regarded as the 'last ulcer' in its area of operations. 617 Squadron supported troops in contact (TIC) and convoys under attack with the capability of deploying a range of bombs and missiles or high-speed, low-level shows of force at 150 feet to flush insurgents out into the open.

As Omid Haft drew to a close in the middle of June 2011 with greater security hard won but firm, Brigadier Ed Davis commanding 3 Commando Brigade held a news conference: "the people of Nahr-e Saraj are one step closer to a life free from insurgents. I salute the supreme professionalism and unfailing bravery of the Afghan and ISAF heroes whose sacrifice has made this possible." In the complex military jigsaw that was Operation Omid Haft, the Tornados of 617 Squadron not only commanded the sky, they had also helped prepare the ground.

From dramatic air strikes to the life-and-death search for IEDs I was able to track every mission and was continually impressed by the skill, resilience, banter and exceptional airmanship of the air crew and the crucial round-the-clock dedication of the engineers that ensured a 99.6 per cent rate in launching aeroplanes. In three months 617 flew 452 air tasking orders, ten GCAS sorties and clocked up 1400 flying hours.

Following a second deployment to Kandahar in 2012 under Keith Taylor's command, 617 began its final deployment to Afghanistan on November 2, 2013—now under the command of Wing Commander David 'Arthurs'

Arthurton—taking over from 31 Squadron at Kandahar at the symbolic time of 12.06:17. On return to the UK 617 Squadron was disbanded at RAF Lossiemouth on 1, April 2014, just as it had been when crews switched from Lancaster bombers to Vulcan jets and then to the Tornado.

The Dambusters' mountain of memorabilia from vintage bombs to photograph albums and oil paintings of breached dams, smashed railway viaducts and the stricken Tirpitz was all carefully packed away ready for the move to the Squadron's new home at RAF Marham in Norfolk where 617 Squadron will reform in 2018.

The 617 Squadron I spent time with have mostly gone their separate ways: to staff college and promotion, Whitehall desk jobs, to other squadrons or in the case of Flight Lieutenants Stu Campbell and Joe Hourston to the Red Arrows. Keith Taylor, promoted to Group Captain, is now Chief of Staff British Forces South Atlantic Islands, based in the Falklands.

The next generation of Dambuster pilots assembling at RAF Marham in 2018 will climb aboard the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. Priced at £71 million each, it will be the most advanced combat aircraft ever flown by the British military. Tomorrow's Dambusters will wear specially developed £300,000 helmets that give them a 350-degree view around the aircraft which will bristle with advanced intelligence gathering sensors and eight million lines of software code that assess which targets to attack.

From Guy Gibson, bouncing bombs and Lancasters to Top Gun and beyond to the stealth technology of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, the iconic history of 617 Squadron remains a crucial part of its DNA. But the story of the Dambusters has never been about just grandstanding the latest kit. Celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Dams Raid in May 2013 Keith Taylor spoke for all his predecessors as OC 617, and all those who will follow him. "The modern Squadron is very aware of its illustrious past and their pride in that inspires all ranks to go the extra mile to do just that little bit better."

People often talk of '617's press on spirit'. As Barnes Wallis's daughter Mary Stopes-Roe reminded everybody at the 70th Anniversary Weekend at Woodhall Spa, when many thoughts turned to Upkeep, the iconic bouncing bomb: "My father said that any fool can invent something but it takes those that use it to actually make it work. It was 617 Squadron who had to face the flak and the terrible barrages. It was nothing to do with him then."

**Tim Bouquet**

## **617: Going to War with Today's Dambusters (Orion £7.99)**

*Win a copy of the paperback version released in May by answering the following question. Question: what City of London Livery Company has been associated with 617 Squadron, providing charitable funding and supporting events since 1990? Please email your answers to the Editor (clarke318@gmail.com)*

# F35B Lightning II – Project Update

**N**ow that the Tornado era is over for 617 Sqn, Après Moi will feature regular updates on the progress of the F35 programme and the return to flying of the Dambusters. This first edition has been provided by Wg Cdr Andy Fell:

Lightning II will place the RAF at the forefront of fighter technology and will give it a true multi-role aircraft that will surpass the majority of other weapons systems in production today, or envisaged in the foreseeable future. Lightning II and Typhoon aircraft will make up the Fast Jet Combat Air elements of Future Force 2020. Having a capable, adaptable and agile combat air force is an influential strategic message in itself, deterring and preventing conflict whilst reassuring our allies.

Together with Typhoon, the new Lightning II aircraft provides the nation with an invaluable means to protect UK citizens at home and British interests worldwide. Combat Air Power delivers influence worldwide with speed, precision and agility; it is a central and crucial component of our Nation's global influence.

- First 3 UK aircraft accepted and flying under Military Flight Test Permit since Dec 12 at Eglin AFB, FL
- UK Aircraft have accumulated approximately 700 flying hours
- First 3 UK pilots being employed as Instructor Pilots
- 45 UK engineers undergone training at Eglin AFB
- 17(R) Sqn has stood up at Edwards AFB as the Test and Evaluation Sqn
- 617 Sqn crews and engineers forming from 2016 in USA
- New OC 617 Sqn appointed in Jul 2017
- Transition to RAF Marham in Autumn 2018 with 617 Sqn

The F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) is a fifth generation, multi-role stealth aircraft containing cutting-edge technologies. It will deliver an affordable, sustainable, expeditionary airpower capability for the UK. The F-35 will be capable of undertaking a wide range of operations from intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions to high intensity combat, including air defence for a Carrier Task Group and offensive support for ground forces, and when required will be able to employ a range of sophisticated weaponry, even through adverse weather.

The RN and RAF are partners of choice to our allies. Interoperability and developing partnerships are key to ensuring the success of future coalitions. The UK is the only Level 1 partner with the US on developing the Lightning II. RAF and RN personnel will operate Lightning II both on land and embarked on the new generation of aircraft carrier.

# Memorial Chapel at East Kirby

*Good Morning:*

*I am God. Today I will be handing all of your problems. Please remember that I do not need your help. If the devil happens to deliver a situation to you that you cannot handle, DO NOT attempt to resolve it. Kindly put it in the SFJTD (something for Jesus to do) box. It will be addressed in MY time, not yours. Once the matter is placed into the box, do not hold onto it or attempt to remove it. Holding on or removal will delay the resolution of your problem. If it is a situation that you think you are capable of handling, please consult me in prayer to be sure that it is the proper resolution. Because I do not sleep nor do I slumber there is no need for you to lose any sleep. Rest my child. If you need to contact me, I am only a prayer away.*

The above prayer was found in the Memorial Chapel at the Lincolnshire Memorial to Bomber Command RAF East Kirby recently. As no background information accompanied it, I can only assume that it had, and has, some significance to the Chapel's worshippers and visitors given the amount of memorabilia there. This includes the roll of Honour naming all 848 air crew and ground crew who gave their lives whilst serving in 57 and 630 Squadrons, out of East Kirby, between August 1943 and VE Day.

Well worth a visit and the long trek to get there is the Main Hangar which contains amongst hundreds of items, an Avro Lancaster (which you can go aboard), the Barnes Wallis Bouncing Bomb and the Dambusters' story, the remains of crashed aircraft, etc. There are 14 other areas of interest including the Escape Museum, NAAFI, Home Front Exhibition, a Billet Hut (desperately moving with last letters), the Control Tower (with

ghostly sounds of Morse Code and recordings of stricken aircraft being talked back to base) and a Briefing Hut.

For further details visit:  
[www.lincsaviation.co.uk](http://www.lincsaviation.co.uk) or  
tel. 01790 763207



David Robertson presenting a picture created by Des Knock from Woodhall Spa to Janet of Janet's Tearoom for her Memorial fundraising efforts.

# Final Landings

## JOHN LANGSTON



It is with great sadness that we mark the passing of the Association's President, John Langston. John was born in Dawlish in 1924. Educated in Exeter he completed an RAF War Short Course at Wadham College, Oxford, before progressing in October 1943 to train as a navigator at No. 5 Air Observer School at Winnipeg. After qualifying, he returned to the UK and was posted to No. 1661 Conversion Unit at Winthorpe, where he as a sergeant navigator, he first met up with Bill Gordon, the captain with whom he would fly for his whole operational career. This was followed by a few days at No. 5 Lancaster Finishing School, Syerston, to convert from Stirlings to Lancasters.

In July 1944 the crew were posted to No. 630 Sqn at East Kirkby. From there they attacked targets in occupied territory in addition to German targets such as Darmstadt, Königsburg Stuttgart, and München Gladbach. John was commissioned in September and by December was lead navigator for a force of 233 aircraft attacking the Urft Dam. In the New Year of 1945 having completed 25 operations, the crew were posted to No. 189 Sqn at Fulbeck, from where they flew a further six operations, completing their first tour with an attack against the oil refinery at Politz on the Baltic coast.

The crew were now entitled to a rest from operations, undertaking instructor or administrative duties, but their captain had other ideas. Offered a posting to No. 617 Sqn he accepted and then persuaded his crew to accompany him. They arrived on the Squadron on 6 February and after a fortnight's training to familiarise themselves with the use of the Stabilised Automatic Bomb Sight they flew their first operation on 9 March 1945, carrying a Tallboy to the Bielefeld viaduct where the Squadron found the weather too poor to bomb. A fortnight later they carried out their first successful operation with the Squadron, dropping a Grand Slam against a railway bridge at Dreyse. Further bridge targets followed at Nienburg and Bremen. Naval targets would predominate for the remainder of the war – E and U boat pens at Ijmuiden and Hamburg, three trips to the Lutzow at Swinemunde (from one of which they



returned on three engines), culminating in an attack on Heligoland on the 19 April.

A month later, with victory in Europe achieved, John was amongst those posted to No. 15 Sqn at Mildenhall, with the intention of using their precision bombing skills to conduct trials with Tallboy and Grand Slam. Before these took place, John was posted again in July – this time to Transport Command - where after a spell at No. 1332 Heavy Conversion Unit he found himself with No. 246 Squadron navigating Stirling transports and later Avro Yorks, conducting trooping movements to India and the Azores. His navigation skills were recognised by his becoming a Qualified Navigation Instructor in 1946, and a Specialist Navigator “N” the following year. Posted to the Air Navigation School at Manby in 1948 he was selected as lead navigator for the 1949 Battle of Britain Flypast over London and co-authored the first post-war edition of the RAF’s Manual of Air Navigation.

1950-52 saw John as Exchange Officer to the USAF Air Bombardment School at Mather AFB, Sacramento. Returning to the UK he was posted as an instructor to the Bomber Command Bombing School at Lindholme, subsequently becoming its Chief Ground instructor for two years before moving on to the Ops Training Staff at HQ Bomber Command, High Wycombe.

A year as a student at the RAF Staff College, Bracknell was followed by a year with Bomber Ops Training Staff at the Air Ministry, before returning to Bracknell for a two year spell on the Directing Staff, during which time John was promoted to Wing Commander.

A return to the front line ensued in 1962, as Officer Commanding No. 49 Sqn at Marham, flying Vickers Valiants as part of Bomber Command’s contribution to the NATO’s Tactical Bomber Force. The Squadron comprised 10 aircraft armed with two American Mk 43 atomic bombs, each with a TNT equivalence of 1 megaton. This period was to be the Valiant’s swansong. Increased Soviet defences against high flying aircraft necessitated that Bomber Command switch to a low level attack profile. The additional buffet and stress imposed on the airframe, in particular the main spar, was to prove too great. After several cases of fracture, inspection revealed that most of the fleet were suffering from advanced fatigue and the Valiant was withdrawn from service.

John’s two-year operational command was followed in 1965 by a period of study at the RAF College of Air Warfare, Manby, before taking up a post with the MoD Central Planning Staff, during which time he also served as a member of the joint US / UK Planning Staff and a member of the General Strategy Team. Following a year as RAF Instructor at the Army Staff College, Camberley, John was promoted to Group Captain in 1970 and appointed Principal Staff Officer to the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe,

SHAPE, in Belgium. In 1973 he was back in the front line again, with a posting as Senior RAF Officer, Northern Ireland and Officer Commanding RAF Aldergrove (part of which also served, separately, as Belfast Airport). He returned to London as an Air Commodore becoming Director of Personal Services in 1975, being appointed CBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours, June 1975, for his services in Northern Ireland. After a two year term as Air Commander, Gibraltar and COMAIRGIBLANT John finally retired from the RAF in September 1979.

On leaving the Service, John became increasingly involved with the National Society for Clean Air and Environmental Protection (NSCA) becoming its Secretary General, 1981-92 and Vice-President in 1992. From 1986 he was also simultaneously Director General, International Union Air Pollution Prevention Associations (IUAPPA) a post which he held until 1996.

John was an active member of the No. 617 Squadron Aircrew Association (as it then was), serving as Chairman from 1990 until 2005 and as the Association's President following the death of Gp Capt Tait in 2007. He and his wartime colleagues represented the 617 Squadron Association at many wartime Lancaster events in recent years.

### **ALAN GARROD**

Alan Garrod was a Sergeant Flight Engineer who flying with Australian John Spiers. The crew joined the Squadron in January 1945, from No. 467 (RAAF) Sqn at Waddington and flew 13 Tallboy operations with the Squadron.

Their targets were the Bielefeld and Arnsberg railway viaducts, railway bridges at Dreyse, Nienburg and Bremen, the U-boat related pens at Farge and Hamburg, the Lutzow, Heligoland and Berchtesgarden.

Along with many other Squadron members who would not be destined for Tiger Force and the Far East, Alan was posted was posted to No. 15 Sqn at the end of May 1945.

### **ALAN EVANS**

Alan Evans, was a former coal miner from Ipswich, Queensland, Australia. Despite having been accepted by the Service, his efforts to join the RAAF were initially thwarted by the essential nature of his occupation. After finally obtaining his release, he enlisted in October 1941 and was sent for training as a wireless operator/air gunner. After qualification he embarked for the UK, travelling via New Zealand, San Francisco and New York, completing the journey on the requisitioned Queen Elizabeth.

After crewing up at Operational Training Unit as wireless operator with pilot and fellow Australian Arthur Kell, Alan was posted to No. 463 (RAAF) Squadron. The crew's period with the Squadron saw them completing their

tour at the height of the Battle of Berlin, having undertaken no fewer than twelve operations to the 'Big City', a remarkable achievement.

The crew arrived at Woodhall Spa on 15 February 1944 and after the necessary training with SABS were cleared for operations, making their first attack against an aircraft component factory at Albert on 2 March. After a month of attacks against six more French targets the whole of May was spent practising for Operation "Taxable", the vital D-Day deception operation.

The crew returned to bombing on the night of the 8/9 June, when they were part of the force attacking the Saumur railway tunnel, using Barnes Wallis's Tallboy deep penetration bomb for the first time. After two attacks using this weapon against the E-boat pens at Le Havre and Boulogne, the Squadron, including Alan and his crew, were tasked with eight operations to render inoperable the large V-weapons sites at Watten, Wizernes, Mimoyeques and Siracourt, along with the V-1 supply depot at St Leu d'Esserent. With these dealt with, their attention returned to denying the enemy his use of naval facilities, notably the U-boat pens at Keroman, La Pallice and Brest, paying two visits to each of the latter two heavily defended targets. By 12 August, following the second attack on Brest, his 25th operation with the Squadron, Alan's second tour was deemed concluded.

A fortnight later he was posted for instructor duties to No 17 OTU at Silverstone (now the motor racing circuit) a task he would fulfil until his discharge with the rank of flying officer, on 22 August 1945.

## **ARCHIE JOHNSTONE**



Archie Johnstone died on 10 April 2014, five months short of what would have been his 100th birthday. He joined the Squadron in October 1944, as bomb aimer with Bernard Dobson's crew who were posted in from No. 44 Sqn. His first operation was the successful third sortie against Tirpitz on 12 November, and he completed a further eleven trips with the Squadron before being posted to No. 29 OTU at Bruntingthorpe. He was scheduled to go out to the Far East as a codes and cyphers officer, but before this could be implemented the Pacific war was brought to a close by two bombs, each reputed to be 2,000 times more powerful than the Squadron's Grand Slam.

Archie's long and eventful life is perhaps best recounted by his son, Robert:

Born on the Isle of Bute, the son of a Glasgow Engineer, Dad was eldest of a family of nine. His first job was as an apprentice central heating engineer, starting off on a wage of 5 shillings a week, which is 25p these days! Following the tradition in those days, he came home from work at the end of the week and gave all the money to his mother. She always gave him sixpence back as his pocket money for the week. Dad said he always saved the sixpence, because by the Thursday of the following week, she needed the money. What a fantastic journey he made of his life from such humble beginnings.

When the recession struck, just before the war, there wasn't any work for central heating engineers, so he joined the police. Apparently he wasn't legally quite tall enough to be a policeman. However because his uncles were in the Glasgow police, somebody exercised some influence and he got in anyway.

His first posting was near Windermere; and in Bowness on Windermere he met my mother, Edith, at a tennis game where the romance started to blossom, and the rest is history (as they say). Every time we drove past Lake Windermere in later years, he would tell us how at night he had to go out on his own to check all the big houses along the shore of Windermere. He was alone, in his cape and the only protection that he had was his truncheon, and his whistle, because of course in those days there were no mobile phones, or radio, or anything like that. So he'd go and check on these big houses to make sure no-one had broken in to them. He told me that all the wealthy people who were going to be away would slip the Chief Constable a bottle of whiskey to make sure that the constables had to go and check on their houses late at night. Of course the Chief got the whiskey but the constables took the risks.

One of his best stories was while he was based in Windermere during the war. Someone travelling up to Windermere by train had avoided the guard and had not paid his fare, and had jumped off just as the train pulled in to the station. So they told the local bobby to keep an eye out for this guy, as there might not be just one little offence, there might be something more serious.

Dad had to go around with a very narrow-beamed torch because of the blackout and check petrol pumps and so on, to make sure no-one had been siphoning any petrol. Anyway, while he was checking one particular petrol station, he caught sight of somebody nearby. He caught him in the beam of the torch and realised straight away that this was the chap he had to arrest. But he knew this might be a bit difficult in that situation as he was on his own. So he challenged the man, and the man said he was looking for such-and-such a street. Thinking quickly Dad said, "I happen to be walking that way, why don't you come along with me?" So they went off together, and Dad said, "I just have to pop in to my auntie's house here, why don't you come in with me and then I'll show you the rest of the way?" So he took him straight in to the

police station, whose sign was covered up because of the wartime blackout. Once inside the man he was arrested, and it turned out he wasn't just a fare-dodger, a con man who had done all sorts of crimes and as listed as wanted in the Police Gazette. So Dad had out-conned the con-man! For that, he received the Chief Constable's Medal.

The police were a reserved occupation; but in 1941 it was decided to give them the option to join either the Commandos or Bomber Command. As he said, at the time it seemed safer to join Bomber Command. With hindsight, we know that out of 120,000 members of Bomber Command, 55,000 were lost. So in one sense he made the wrong choice, but in another way everything worked out.

They sent him to South Africa for the aircrew training. It took six weeks to get there on the troopship in convoy, but after arrival Dad embarked on intensive navigation training. During one training flight in an Avro Anson, there was a problem with one of the engines, which eventually cut out. In theory they could have kept on with one engine, but then the second one cut out as well, and they had to crash land. That was extremely dangerous but I now realise how foolhardy my Dad was in his youth. He says that he decided not to put the seatbelt on, just braced himself against the dashboard! All survived but some were badly injured.

The interesting thing about this story is that it turned out to be pilot error; he hadn't turned on the reserve fuel tank. So in the end there was a court martial; and my Dad had to stay in South Africa for the duration of this court case until the pilot was prosecuted. Probably, staying in South Africa for a number of months may have saved his life, because if he had gone back earlier, it was a time of very heavy attrition against Bomber Command. Arriving back in England Dad joined No. 44 Squadron. His first mission was dropping leaflets over Paris in a suburb called Villeneuve St George.

In total we think he flew 43 flights over enemy territory. The most prominent one is where they bombed the German battleship, the Tirpitz. It was north of the Arctic Circle, so he has a medal to say that. His plane was the lead plane in terms of navigating, with two squadrons; and they got to the right spot, and there was no sign of the other squadron. So the pilot said to Dad, are we in the right place? And Dad said, yes, we're in the right place, the others are in the wrong place! Luckily he was right.

After the war he trained as a teacher at Loughborough and Cardiff, and he taught in three places: Hereford, Belper and Bolsover. Bear in mind that he left school at the age of 14, with very few qualifications but then went on and did lots of evening classes, and became a teacher in 1948 with a final diploma in '53. At the same time, he was training with the Royal Life Saving Society, first a diploma, then the Instructor, then the Examiner qualifications. He also

had an Athletics teaching certificate; he was a Football Association referee; and had a coaching certificate in football. He was qualified to teach athletics; javelin; discus; shot-putt. He also qualified to teach sprints - 100 yds, 220 yds, 440 yds and had a Lawn Tennis Coaching Certificate. He qualified as a cricket umpire and he did three courses with St John's Ambulance in First Aid.

I knew he was a PE teacher, but I had no idea of the level of qualifications. There's a great letter written by his head teacher in 1956 commending Archie Johnstone - I'll just pick out one or two things he says - "strong, robust physique," "enjoys splendid health," "is an inspiring example to the boys." "His lessons are lively and obviously enjoyed, his enthusiasm is infectious, so he has no disciplinary troubles."

Dad was completely open about approaching people, in a way that would probably give him trouble in the south of England - in the north we can just about cope with it. For instance by Lake Windermere he walked up to a stranger he had never met, and said, "Of course, I was a Dambuster, you know". Or another by Lake Windermere - "the last time I swam this lake was in 1936". Then he'd start conversations which would go on for ever! But he was a great guy, there's no doubt about it. And after Mum died, it was phenomenal, because he was the archetypal male, from the north, and he wasn't particularly proficient around the house, because that's what Mum did. So he learned to use the washing machine, he learned to do the shopping, cooking, house cleaning. I was very impressed with that flexibility.

He moved to Skelmersdale in 2012 and spent his last 30 months or so in Birch Green Care Home. When it was his 98th birthday, the first one there, we managed to arrange a flypast by the BBMF Lancaster. The Lancaster appeared spot on to the minute, and circled four times over the care home. Apparently a little old lady in the local shopping centre saw it and panicked; she thought it was a terrorist attack.

## DES PHILLIPS

On 28 October 1944 the Squadron were detailed for their second attack, against the German battleship Tirpitz, now moored at Tromsø, northern Norway. The target was beyond the range of the standard fuel load and each Lancaster had been fitted with additional tankage inside the fuselage. Each loaded with a 12,000lb Tallboy and with the additional fuel, the aircraft were significantly over their officially approved take-off weight.

Sqn Ldr Tony Iveson's aircraft was about to become airborne when its port outer engine lost power and the aircraft started to swing. With great presence of mind, the Flight Engineer cut the starboard outer throttle before gradually opening all four engines back to full power again. The swing was checked and the heavily laden aircraft clawed its way into the air, missing other waiting



aircraft on the perimeter track by a matter of feet. Disaster had been narrowly averted only by the engineer's prompt action and the pilot's skilful airmanship.

The flight engineer aboard Tony's Lancaster was Desmond Phillips, a 20 year old Welshman from Carmarthenshire. Des had originally applied for pilot training, but there was a greater demand for flight engineers. Keen to get into the air he commenced training for this crew role in July 1943. Following ground training he was posted to Winthorpe in Nottinghamshire, where he joined the Iveson crew. After passing through No. 5 Lancaster Finishing School at Syerston, the crew found themselves posted to No. 617 Sqn in July 1944,. The posting of novice crews to the Squadron was a new move, recently instigated by AVM Cochrane who believed that it might be possible to "fast-track" those who showed above average potential in training. Iveson's previous experience as a fighter pilot, combined with a period as an instructor had made the crew a natural candidate for selection.

The crew proved their mettle with half a dozen daylight Tallboy sorties against U and E-boat pens. On 10 September 1944 they were detached to Yagodnik Russia as an advanced base for an attack against the German battleship Tirpitz in Kaa Fiord, northern Norway. With only limited ground crew being taken as part of the detachment and minimal servicing facilities it was very much left to flight engineers to supervise the maintenance of their own aircraft.

Returning to the UK the crew participated in attacks against the Dortmund Ems Canal and Westkapelle, on each occasion being ordered to return with their Tallboy. They were part of the high level force attacking the Kembs Dam on 7 October 1944 before the two further operations of 29 October and 12 November 1944 against Tirpitz, resulting in the battleship's demise. After three more operations against the Urft Dam, Ijmuiden U-boat pens and a long haul trip to Politz near the Baltic coast, the crew found themselves on the Battle Order for an attack on the U-boat pens at Bergen on 12 January 1945.

A Mustang fighter escort failed to protect the force and over the target the Lancasters were heavily engaged by Fw 190 fighters. Two Lancasters, flown by Fg Off Ross and Flt Lt Pryor were shot down and during the engagement Tony's aircraft attracted the attention of an Fw 190 that raked the Lancaster severely damaging the port fin and tailplane, damaging the controls and setting fire to the port inner engine. With an aircraft that was barely controllable the order was given to prepare to abandon aircraft. Mishearing the instruction, three rear crew baled out of what they believed to be a doomed aircraft.

The enemy fighter broke off its attack. While Tony struggled to maintain control of the badly damaged aircraft, Des brought some semblance of order, feathering the burning engine and extinguishing the fire before venturing aft

to inspect damage to the tail. With the trimming tab cables damaged, the Lancaster continually wanted to climb, requiring the efforts of both Tony and the bomb aimer to hold the aircraft level. Des set to work swiftly effecting a makeshift repair to the trim controls. Undoubtedly his capable action restored sufficient control enabling Tony to nurse the badly damaged aircraft back to the Shetland Isles where a successful emergency landing was made.

Tony Iveson would be posted from the Squadron, and with three others of the crew now residing as prisoners of war, Des found himself as a "spare bod". As a result his war concluded operating with a number of captains including John McLoughlin, Joe Warburton, Gordon Beaumont and Gray Ward. His targets during this period comprised the Squadron's early attacks against the Bielefeld viaduct and other railway bridges, the pocket battleship Lutzow and the final operation against Berchtesgaden.

Post-war, Des spent 15 years with the Royal Aircraft Establishment at Aberporth. After a period as an engineer for the National Coal Board he joined Lockheed aircraft, working for them in Saudi Arabia where he worked on aviation projects for Lockheed aircraft until retirement and a return home to Machynlleth in 1980.

### JOE DACEY

Joe Dacey was one of that rare breed of aircrew who survived two tours of operations which commenced during the early days of the war. A Lancastrian, from Bolton, Joe gave up his civilian occupation as a clerk in a lead works to join the RAF for ground duties in October 1939. Attracted by the lure of enhanced pay and promotion to Sergeant, he remustered as aircrew, and trained as a wireless operator/ air gunner. His first tour was with No. 44 Squadron, flying in Hampdens from Waddington during 1941. Returning from one operation his aircraft was attacked by an enemy night fighter. The rear lower gunner was killed and the pilot forced to ditch the Hampden. The three surviving crew survived in their dinghy for over 10 hours before being sighted and rescued by a Dutch destroyer. On completion of his tour he was transferred to instructor duties. His second tour



commenced with No. 106 Sqn at Syerston, in 1943. In September 1943, Warrant Officer Dacey transferred to Coningsby to join No. 617 Sqn where he became part of the influx to re-build the Squadron following the disastrous losses against the Dortmund Ems Canal.

Joe joined the crew of Terry Kearns, an experienced New Zealander who had previously completed a tour with the Pathfinder Force before joining 617. The new crew commenced their operational career with the Squadron on 11 November 1943, with an attack on the Antheor Viaduct. The remainder of Joe's tour would see the crew attacking French targets, under the leadership of Leonard Cheshire. It was a challenging but rewarding period, where after initial failures the Squadron evolved their highly successful and effective precision marking technique.

By the end of March Joe had completed 16 operations with the Squadron. At this point his captain was selected as one of the pilots of four Mosquitos that soon would be allocated to the Squadron. Since the Mosquito had a crew of two (pilot/navigator) Joe found himself part of a "headless" crew. Taking his earlier trips with No. 106 Sqn into account, he was deemed to have completed his second tour and on 4 May was posted for instructor duties to No. 30 Operational Training Unit at Hixon, Staffordshire, flying Wellingtons. His final posting was to No. 1315 Transport Flight, ferrying DC-3 Dakotas out to Australia and then operating them on a transport and communications service between Archerfield, Brisbane and various Pacific islands.

Joe completed over 60 operations. On 30 June 1944 he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for "constant courage and devotion to duty over a long period of exacting service".

Three years after leaving the RAF, in 1949 Joe emigrated with his wife and young son to Australia where he would establish his own painting contracting business. Maintaining the strong link that had brought together aircrew from all parts of the Commonwealth he was an active member of the Squadron Association, in later years serving as the Australasian representative.

**Robert Owen**

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## **Dams Dinner 16<sup>th</sup> May 2015**

The 2015 Dams Dinner will take place on Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> May at the Petwood Hotel. A memorial service will be held at the Squadron Memorials on Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> 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

Registered Charity No 1141817

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