



# Après Moi

The 617 Squadron  
Aircrew Association Newsletter



Summer 2012



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**Cover Photo:** 617 Sqn Aircrew at Kandahar Air Base, Afghanistan, 2012

## Editorial

Our chairman's 'ramblings' brings the news that we have now raised sufficient funds to proceed with the construction of the Post-WW2 Squadron Memorial which should be unveiled alongside the existing memorial in Woodhall Spa next year.

I am delighted that Elizabeth Taylor has provided an article about life back home at Lossiemouth while the Squadron was on active service in Afghanistan this year. Thank you, and I hope you will continue to contribute to *Après Moi*.

Judith Devereux provides us with an insight to her time as personal assistant, carer and neighbour of the late Richard Todd who was an honorary member of the Association.

Congratulations to Al Monkman for his marathon effort of walking his dog Rinnes from Lands' End to John O'Groats (and not by the shortest route). Al has raised a large sum of money for charities including nearly £700 towards the Memorial Appeal.

Plans are in hand for the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the Dams Raid next May; further details will be published in the next issue of *Après Moi*.

**Chris Henderson**

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**Deadline for Next Newsletter**

**1st December 2012**

**email: [617sqnnews@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:617sqnnews@tiscali.co.uk)**

or

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

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# Robertson's Ramblings

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Those of you who attended the last Reunion at the Petwood will know what an excellent evening we enjoyed together in what was an extremely convivial atmosphere. As you know, we invited guests not associated with the Squadron to the event, as it was a fund-raising evening comprising a four-course meal and an auction of memorabilia, prints and paintings associated (in some cases very loosely) with the Squadron. I am delighted to say that as well as having a really good evening together, we raised over £4,500, which I must say was more than I had anticipated. That brought the total raised for the Memorial, with pledges, to just over £30,000 - a brilliant result. Earlier in the month, I met with the stonemason and explained to him that £40,000 was just a little too much to spend and that we needed to compromise in some way to make the Memorial more affordable. He went away and considered this and proposed an alternate solution, which was more affordable yet critically for us, vandal-proof and long-lasting. He proposed 'cladding' the concrete-core memorial in one-inch thick granite, rather than working in solid granite. This would also reduce the impact of making a mistake! Importantly, it would bring it within the affordable range of about £30,000.

Whilst this was going on, the Woodhall Spa Parish Council was considering a refurbishment of the Royal Gardens, where the existing Memorial resides. They have presented an option that would improve on our original proposal, and I will continue to participate in the committee that is taking this forward. I must let you know that nothing has been confirmed, but that we are involved in a significant way in the proposals and importantly, we are aligned with the local community, an important aspect for us as you are aware.

The 70th Anniversary is looking as though it might be a grand event. The Battle of Britain Memorial Flight wants to be fully engaged and has proposed a number of events that you might find of interest; a visit to the Derwent Reservoir to see the Lancaster flyover, a cocktail party at Scampton, and a Hangar Party at Coningsby. We shall have our usual Dinner at the Petwood but there will be several more events at the same time, so lots going on that week.

Finally, an important change in the membership was agreed at the AGM. For the first time, we agreed to permit members of the ground crew to become members of the Association. The reality is that if we don't consider succession to the Association, it will die as future aircraft become single seat or even become pilotless. However, importantly, groundcrew provide a rich source of experience, and that we can understand and embrace. Whilst they will begin

as Associate members, I anticipate that they will become Full members at next year's AGM.

As you can see, there is a lot going on and I can see light at the end of the tunnel. I anticipate that we will unveil the Memorial in time for the 70th Anniversary and permit ground crew to provide an additional richness to our Association. It remains a pleasure and a privilege to be your Chairman,

Yours aye

**David**

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## **Tirpitz Dinner 10 November 2012**

The 2012 Tirpitz Dinner will take place on Saturday 10 November at the Petwood Hotel. A memorial service will be held at the Squadron Memorial on Sunday 11 November following the Remembrance service at St Peter's Church, Woodhall Spa and the town's Remembrance Parade. Booking forms and menus will be sent out in September.

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## **Dams Raid 70th Anniversary Dinner**

The 2013 Dams Raid Dinner will take place on Saturday 18 May at the Petwood Hotel. A limited number of rooms will be reserved for Association members at a special reduced rate of £50 per person for bed and breakfast. Early booking is especially advised; there is very limited availability of rooms on the Wednesday and Thursday nights before the dinner. There will be a number of events organised by or in conjunction with the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight from the Wednesday through to the Saturday. Further details will be published in the next issue of *Après Moi*.

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## **Tornado Representative Required**

Rob Bethell is now serving in the United States and has resigned from the Committee where he was the Minutes Secretary and Tornado representative. If you flew Tornados and would like to support the Association by serving as a committee member and trustee please contact the secretary, Mike Hines on 01673-860688 or email him at [mike.hines57@btinternet.com](mailto:mike.hines57@btinternet.com).

Sqn Ldr Rich Crook has recently retired from the Royal Air Force and handed over his Membership Secretary role to Flt Bill Williams. The Chairman and Committee thank Rich and Rob for all their hard work over the years.

# The Dambusters' Home Front

**E**arly March seems a long time ago and yet as I write now in mid-July, here we are preparing to welcome home our loved ones from their latest operational tour of duty in Afghanistan. The families are gathered together in the departures lounge of the Movements Section at RAF Lossiemouth – some have come from as far afield as Southern Scotland to wait for their partners and relatives, whilst many more families live locally and have spent the last few months supporting one another during the deployment. Now everyone is busy keeping excited children occupied and butterflies at bay with biscuits and tea, listening for the updates on the progress of the Homecoming flight.



Families wait excitedly as they watch the plane bringing their husbands and dads lands at RAF Lossiemouth

Everyone's experience of the last four and a half months has been different, each with their own ups and downs, challenges and achievements. For some of the younger wives and partners this was their first experience of an operational deployment, whilst others have seen it all before – often many times. Our Squadron Family is widespread – some partners live and work away from Lossiemouth, whilst the parents and relatives of the deployed personnel live all over the country. However, we all had the opportunity of staying in touch with the Squadron through the use of Airspace – a secure online community available to families through their computers. We were able to view photographs of the Squadron at work – and play! – send messages

and ask questions. We could exchange news and views both with Kandahar and amongst ourselves at home. We could also post photos of our own, allowing the Squadron to see what the families were doing whilst they were away. Flt Sgt Paul Pedan once again took charge of ensuring that we had a steady stream of photos from Kandahar, which kept us all smiling – he even managed to respond to requests for specific pictures. The children got involved by following the exploits of Guy, the Squadron teddy bear, properly dressed in uniform and deployed for the duration. One wife expressed ‘massive thanks to all the photographers for all the marvellous photos posted onto Airspace – they have all been wonderful and kept me going.’



Guy, the Sqn teddy bear, in his office in Kandahar

More importantly, we knew that we could trust what we read on the Airspace forums – Keith kept us informed about stories which emerged in the press which, whilst not always accurate, could be worrying. One article in particular played up the dangers faced by our aircrew and related an incident in which a crew apparently returned to base with all but no fuel left. Keith was able to put it into context and reassure families that the story was both outdated and exaggerated, much to the relief of some –

*‘So thanks to the Boss for his post which both informed and reassured me’* posted one contributor. Another response commented that *‘Without this support I would have found (the deployment) hard. Whilst my partner was away, I moved back down south (although) my friends and family...didn’t understand when I was having a bad day. Airspace assisted in keeping me updated and informed and the photos were great.’*



This one speaks for itself!

For many of the families living close to RAF Lossiemouth, the Deployment Support Programme (DSP) made the time spent apart from our loved ones so much easier to cope with. Organised and run by the Station Community Support Officer and his team, this is a comprehensive programme of events designed to inform and support the families of personnel deployed on operations. Our fortnightly briefings provided more than just a marker for the passing weeks. 'Newsletters' from theatre gave us a feel for what our other halves were experiencing – their daily routines, what their accommodation was like, how they spent their time off duty, the sandstorms, ever-rising temperatures (which we in damp and chilly Scotland could barely imagine!) and dramatic lightning storms as well as the chance to learn more about what they were doing in support of the ground troops operating throughout Afghanistan. As time went on we were joined at our briefings by the wives and families of 5 Force Protection Wing, whose RAF Regiment husbands and partners were deployed during May, and from their briefings, we learned more of how the Regiment operates on the ground. These sessions gave us the chance to get together with others in the same position as ourselves, share a meal and meet with the support team who were always there to help with any query or problem. Moreover, the children were fed and entertained at the same time, providing a welcome break from cooking and washing up!!

The DSP team also provided us with a programme of activities giving us the chance to get together, keep busy and entertain the youngsters. Archery, swimming and skating sessions, family outings and bowling afternoons were very popular amongst the children, whilst the Mums enjoyed a couple of meals

out, cooking demonstrations and a 'well-being' evening with the opportunity to sample various alternative therapies. The response to the DSP has been very positive and we all hope that it will continue, to the benefit of families in the future. Some of the wives explained it in their own words:

*'This has been my first experience of DSP and I can honestly say I don't think ... I would have got through the last 20 weeks without it. The programme has been fantastic and the support we have been offered very welcome. It was a pleasure to meet new friends and spend more time with old(!) friends.'*

'All the weekly events have given me something to focus on and make each week pass a little more quickly.'

Forces families being what they are, they don't waste time feeling sorry for themselves, and as well as joining in with all the activities provided, many wives joined their partners in theatre in raising money for the charities chosen to benefit from 'Operation Gymbuster'. The Squadron set itself the challenge of covering a huge total of 61700kms by cycling, rowing, running or walking either in the gym or out in the fresh air. Each Squadron member was allowed to nominate a 'gymbusting' partner back home to help contribute, and impressively this total was reached with over 5 weeks left of the deployment! Such was the competition which developed between (and within!) couples, that many continued adding to the total. Keith and I were keen to try and get ahead of SEngO Clarke and his wife, but I was equally determined not to let Keith get ahead of me and although he would say that his workload forced him to concede to me, I still maintain that I had him on the run anyway!! Not only were the kilometres covered, but pounds and inches were lost and a more svelte Squadron returned, having raised over £10 000 for our chosen charities – The Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund and Forces Children's Trust. 'Op Gymbuster' efforts at home were augmented by a series of fun events, raffles and cake sales run by a small group of dedicated wives, who added the fundraising effort to their busy schedule of keeping the home and family going as well as their work or study commitments.

Alongside 'Op Gymbuster' we also ran 'Op Playbox', a scheme to help equip a small schoolhouse on base in Kandahar. It is the custom for trusted local Afghan tradesmen to be allowed to run a weekly market on Kandahar Airbase and they bring their young sons with them to help set up. Personnel from various nations have built a small schoolhouse, run by the Padres, to give these young boys something to do whilst they wait for their fathers to finish trading. The children have nothing to bring to school and so the Squadron devised a scheme to collect pencils, crayons, jotters, small games, puzzles and sweets and package them up in shoeboxes to be distributed to the boys attending the school. This task was enthusiastically co-ordinated by one of the wives back home in Lossiemouth and almost 400 boxes were delivered to



Volunteer wives wrapping and addressing some of the 400 shoeboxes full of school supplies

the school – so many in fact, that there were enough to donate to the children in the local hospital who were receiving treatment after having been injured as a result of the conflict.

Modern communications being so fast and available has meant that contact with our husbands or partners has been very easy. Although a bit of a traditionalist and a letter-writer, I nevertheless went hi-tech and wrote my letters to Keith via a system of ‘e-blueys’ – the electronic version of the old blue military airmail letters. I was able to type my news into the form on my computer and once I clicked ‘send’ my letter was electronically printed, sealed and delivered to Keith the next

day – thus he had letters to open, keep and re-read, and the news was still fresh! Although Squadron personnel were not allowed to take mobile phones with them for security reasons, they were each allocated 30 minutes of free phone calls every week. In addition to this, they had access to computers and so e-mails could be exchanged very easily – in fact one wife was able, in this way, to break the happy news to her husband that they were to become parents for a second time! The use of Skype meant that we could see our loved ones as well as hear them via video calls, which was especially important for very young children, who could keep in touch with their fathers this way and thus make the reunions easier – Dad was not a stranger in uniform whom they didn’t recognise.

And so, at last, we have watched as the plane bringing the Squadron touched down in front of us on the runway. We saw our husbands and partners as they disembarked to the sound of the pipes and a greeting from the Station Commander and the other Squadron Commanders. Then at last they were able to make their way between the two Tornados forming a welcoming ‘guard of honour’ towards the waiting families. Many of the children can wait no longer and burst from the ranks of waiting families to dash headlong across the uneven grass and into their fathers’ arms. As they are followed by the wives and girlfriends, the long wait is finally over.

**Elizabeth Taylor**



Keith is greeted by the Stn Cdr, Gp Capt Ian Gale as he steps off the plane...



...and leads the Sqn towards the waiting families

*'Homecoming was everything I would have hoped for and more. The anticipation, the arrival of the plane and seeing the men walk between the two Tornados and towards their families still brings tears to my eyes. Watching the children hold back and hold back until one made the break from the barriers was priceless.'*

Karen Bremner

*'Deployments never get easier the more you encounter them; you just learn to cope with what is thrown at you. I think I can speak for most of the wives, girlfriends and parents when I say we dread the words "detachment" and "months". However here at Lossiemouth we have a fantastic support network and we all know that if we ever need anything even if it's just a chat, a cry or a hug there is always someone there to support us through the detachment. The homecoming was more than I could have hoped for. Seeing that plane finally touch down after 20 long weeks brought huge relief, but a whole load of new emotions for both myself and the 2 children when the piper started to play and we finally laid eyes on our loved one.'*

Emma Sharp



The schoolhouse, built by troops of various nations on Kandahar Air Base

*'Following on so quickly from 2011's deployment, I have to be honest and say that I was dreading February 2012 rolling around. Although I knew I had done well getting through three and a half months, this deployment was a month longer and it just seemed like a black hole looming ahead of me. As with the previous deployment, I decided to throw myself back into the DSP events and try and surround myself with people in the same situation, knowing that it is always better to have someone around you who understands what you are going through. Once again, I found the support given by the team and the other wives invaluable and thoroughly enjoyed all the events put on to keep us occupied. There were tough times, but there were also some great times and I know I have made good memories and even better friends.'*

Karen Cox

# Richard Todd – a Personal View



I would like to share some memories of Richard Todd with the members of 617 Squadron Aircrew Association who knew him and valued his friendship, as I did. Through happenstance, I came to know him and shared some heart-warming and tragic times with him from 2003 to his sad death in December 2009.

Just who was Richard Todd? Was he the actor who starred in fifty-odd films and was the Tom Cruise of his day? Was he the theatre impresario who revived and indeed saved many provincial theatres during the 60s, 70s and 80s when their existence was threatened by TV and the overwhelming popularity of the London Theatre? Was he the gentleman farmer who turned to dairy production on a very successful scale? Was he the War Hero so many of the older generation remember?

In fact he was all of these, and his many talents and skills were shaped by his early life and the personal struggles he had to overcome.

He refused to give in, ever. As a fit and athletic youngster, he was diagnosed with a heart problem and told he would never lead a normal life. He secretly devised his own rehabilitation regime (we would call it today) and returned to athletic competition under an assumed name, and when examined by his aghast doctors proved that he had recovered totally. This shaped his future – the War Hero is a case in point. Few people realise that on volunteering for

the Army in 1939 he concealed the fact of his drama training (at the Italia Conti School of Drama). He wanted to play an active part in the War – not end up as a permanent Entertainer. He then calmly resumed his acting career after all the excitement was over.

Of course all of us are made up of multiple facets: we change according to circumstances – one day we are young and enthusiastic teachers, soldiers, engineers, ready to change the world. The next day we fall in love, marry, raise children and then we are proud parents, serious earners and providers, and we find that changing the world can wait until tomorrow, or at least until we have put new tyres on the Audi.

But Richard's whole life was so public and so colourful that this multiplicity was written about, portrayed in film and the press, and sometimes we are at a loss to define him. I don't think we have to; he was all the above things and more.

I first met Richard in 2003 when he moved into my village. He was a guest at a late-summer party and my husband and I, both ex-RAF, fell into conversation with him. We asked him how he was settling in. He lamented the fact that his papers and correspondence were 'in a terrible mess' – he was by now divorced and he no longer employed a full-time secretary. I offered to find him someone discreet, educated and with administrative skills who could do some part-time work for him. Two days later he asked me if I would do it myself – help him with his 'terrible mess' – I said I would be honoured. 'First you have to read these,' he told me, thrusting two books into my hands: his two-volume autobiography entitled 'In Camera' and 'Caught In The Act'. 'To save time and save me answering a load of damn fool questions,' he explained. Later I was to be jolly glad I'd read them.

So I ended up as his Secretary/Personal Assistant/Minder/Carer. From him I learned a great deal about fortitude, forbearance, diplomacy and kindness, as well as about the pressures on someone in public life, and the vulnerability of those who live alone. I can't say I was the only person in this capacity; many of his neighbours were only too happy to help him with the things which were beyond his skills, and which are easy if you have a partner or family close by. He asked me on several occasions when one or other of this coterie of friends was particularly generous or kind to him 'Why are they so good to me?' and I replied, because it was true, 'Do you think they would be so willing if you were a miserable old fart with no redeeming features? They do it because you are gracious, charming and polite, and you make them feel important'. That was what he did – he was always the gentleman, and never dropped his standards; he was a delightful person to know.

Richard was always keen to oblige his fans and admirers by accepting invitations to speak of his colourful past. Some of these engagements were a

pure pleasure – the Dams Dinner for one – and some took a heavy toll on him. In failing health, he would not refuse to attend a weekend book-signing event, with two gruelling days of answering ‘a load of damn fool questions’, and being polite and charming to all. Or dress up and take the train to London, again to make a speech to a group of War Veterans, who would be unaware that it took him a couple of hours to get dressed up (his War Wounds plagued him to the end of his life); I might drive him to the station, put him in a wheelchair, deliver him to the porter who would get him onto the train, then reverse the process when he came home. On one of these occasions he insisted on driving to the station himself. At 7pm there was a plaintive phone call from him ‘I seem to have lost my car keys – er, would you mind awfully bringing me the spare set – my train arrives in about half-an-hour....?’ As I arrived at the station, I glanced into his car, and there were the keys, in the ignition. As I said, forbearance.

He was invariably kind to his fans. He would personally answer letters from most members of the public and the volume of his fan mail was impressive; young and old, ordinary people and even the rich, titled or famous would write out of the blue. He had fans in the USA, Canada, Australia, South Africa, France, Germany and Italy, and would write back to them all, enclosing a signed photograph; all he demanded (and not always then) was the courtesy of a stamped, addressed envelope.

One of the most persistent was a lady from Newark who wrote a fan letter and asked if he remembered signing her book. Well, of course she did not know that his memory in later years was absolutely awful, and he neither remembered her nor signing her book. So in his reply he dodged the question. She became one of his most persistent and irritating correspondents, writing (with FIRST-CLASS stamped, addressed envelope) to repeat her question. Did he remember signing her book. So Richard and I spiralled down the scale one by one: he wrote to her, then I drafted in his style and he signed; I wrote on his behalf, then I wrote asking her not to write again, but still she wrote and asked if Richard was angry with her, and did he remember signing her book. Finally I wrote and returned her stamped addressed envelopes, saying Richard appreciated her letters and tried to write to all his fans, but could not enter into a lengthy correspondence and would she please stop writing and of course he remembered her. She stopped writing – but for weeks I would wake up in the middle of the night and say ‘Please, not the woman from Newark again’ when I was due to see Richard the next day. Gradually we relaxed. As I said, diplomacy.

Two of his sons killed themselves. What would have destroyed most people gave him of course unimaginable agony, but typically he grieved, organised the necessary, threw himself into his work, picked himself up and started again.



‘The best party I have ever had’ was how he described his 90th birthday party. Thanks to a whole host of friends who called in favours, pulled strings, or simply used their contacts, we (Bridge, Susie, Sue, Annie, Peter and I) drew together at Grantham House a fantastic celebration to say a big ‘thank you’ to some of the people who had entertained, hosted or helped Richard over the latter few years. He supervised our efforts (he called it ‘supervision’, we called it plain ‘interfering’) and we pulled out all the stops. Although he was quite ill at this stage, he loved every minute of it – the music, the (superb) weather, the constant stream of well-wishers, friends and family who had come from all over the world to be there, the speeches... there was a magnificent fly-past by the BBMF Lancaster, which

made no fewer than three passes – everyone was absolutely enthralled, and Richard was left in no doubt that he was loved and cherished by all.

The next day he was taken into hospital. He soon made a temporary recovery, although he knew his condition was serious in the long term. Still refusing to give up, he devised a scheme for fitness, wanting to come home. He started to plod the corridors of his nursing home, with walking-stick. When he progressed from the corridors to the stairs, he thought he had it cracked. ‘Don’t tell them - Matron would have a fit’ he said impishly. He resumed his correspondence, and he insisted on signing and answering letters and fan mail to the last. Inevitably, he eventually ran out of steam, and passed away peacefully, still with plans and hopes in his mind.

Richard was a remarkable person and it was a privilege to know him – as you who also knew him will agree. Certainly I learned so much from him – I feel fortified in a way after witnessing such personal courage; he set such a superb example that no-one who knew him could remain untouched by his gusto, his charisma, his wit and charm and his indefatigable spirit. None of it was an act – strange from one who thought of himself mainly as a retired actor.

**Judith Devereux**

(Neighbour, personal assistant, carer to Richard Todd, Sep 2003 – Dec 2009)

# Lands' End to John O'Groats



Looking out the window of the BA flight heading north from Heathrow to Aberdeen at 37,000ft one sunny Friday evening, sitting comfortably with glass of red wine to hand, it had all seemed such an easy venture. Returning home from work in London to a weekend with the clan in Scotland, it had suddenly occurred to me that a long walk along the length of the UK from Lands' End to John O'Groats would be the perfect antidote to offset the sedentary stresses after an armchair warrior's life in the MoD. Just me and the dog together - taking time to see the UK, dawdling along for once at 3mph vice 480 knots and stopping at every open hostelry en route – what could be better?

Some months later, waterproofs buttoned to the chin to keep out the driving snow as I trod the same route (this time at ground level and with only a flask of cold tea for comfort), I had plenty of time to re-consider my earlier optimism! Having retired from the RAF in December, my Labrador Rinnes and I had trained daily over the winter months and were, by spring, reasonably confident that we could complete the UK's 1206 mile-long toughest walking challenge, given a fair wind and plenty of chocolate. The route was straightforward and had been done before – sticking to quiet country paths and linking major trails such as the South West Coastal Path, Offa's Dyke, Pennine Way, the West Highland Way and the Cape Wrath trail into a single sinuous line on the map, we could explore the nation's pubs and byways to our heart's content.

Starting appropriately enough on 1 April 2012 we enjoyed marvellous weather for the first few weeks and made excellent progress along the North Cornish coast, despite the roller-coaster paths atop the cliffs. However, whilst traversing Exmoor, our luck changed and the monsoons duly arrived, bringing rains that were to last most of the way to Scotland! Sticking to pre-booked....  
...bed and breakfast accommodation and resolutely refusing to use the tent

and sleeping bag carried in my 40lb rucksack helped offset the worst of the elements and also ensured that I always got a good night's sleep. We walked approximately 20 miles a day – taking roughly eight hours depending on terrain, weather, my mood and other distractions – and enjoyed the company of many other like-minded lunatics attempting to be alone in the hills! I can certainly recommend it for those wishing to lose a few pounds of excess personal baggage. I ate like a horse, consuming at least three meals a day plus unlimited pints of carbohydrate re-hydration – and still lost over a stone in weight. I also now have a recipe for midge porridge which, I'm sure, could make me a millionaire!

Despite the weather – the 57 day experience was certainly a fantastic one. The UK is a marvellous hotchpotch of varying regional accents, foods and views – and it needs to be savoured slowly and deliberately, one step at a time. I cannot begin to recount all our adventures – stop me in the bar at the Petwood Hotel next time and I'll sing for my supper - but the overall walk was challenging, strangely uplifting and hugely satisfying – and made all the better by the kindness of strangers. As a catharsis for 27 years in the RAF it was an effective, if unusual, resettlement event! So go on, have a go and see what lies beyond your home town; what have you got to lose but a few pounds of leftover easy living and some excess boot leather?!

**Al Monkman**

## Final Landings

**Hubert “Nick” Knilans**



One of several Americans who were to serve with the Squadron during World War II, Nick Knilans was a farm boy from Wisconsin who had evaded his draft into the US Army by the expediency of “taking a break” in Canada in October 1941. Once over the border he headed for the nearest RCAF recruiting office to offer his services in the fight for freedom.

He was accepted for pilot training and after elementary flying training in Canada, embarked aboard RMS Queen Elizabeth to arrive in the UK in the autumn of 1942. After further advanced training at Tatenhill

he transferred to 19 OTU at Forres, to fly Armstrong Whitworth Whitleys, before being posted to 1660 Conversion Unit at Swinderby to convert to the Lancaster.

In June 1943 he was posted to 619 Sqn at Woodhall Spa. After two trips as 'second dickey' with an experienced crew he flew his first op as captain with his own crew against Hamburg on 24/25 July, 1943.

In November 1943 Nick was transferred to the USAAF, with the rank of 1st Lt. (earning the equivalent of an RAF Group Captain!) but permitted to remain serving with RAF Bomber Command on account of the time and cost of re-training to become familiar with US equipment and procedures. In January 1944, and following a number of demanding operations, including one in which his rear gunner was killed during a night fighter attack and with several more to Berlin, he was awarded the DSO.

He and his crew joined 617 Sqn in January 1944, staying put as 619 Sqn moved from Woodhall Spa to be replaced by 617 Sqn. He served with the Squadron's factory attacks, pre-invasion transportation attacks and took part in Operation Taxable, the D-Day deception. He took part in the first Tallboy operation against the Saumur railway tunnel and participated in subsequent operations using this weapon against V-weapon sites and U-boat pens.

In September 1944 he was part of the Paravane Force despatched to Yagodnik, Russia to attack the Tirpitz. Arriving over Russian soil, low fuel compelled him to make a force landing. The aircraft was undamaged and refuelled. Taking off for Yagodnik the aircraft flew through tree tops, causing severe damage to the Lancaster. Repairs were effected and on 15 September Knilans participated in the attack on the battleship. It was to be his thirty-first and final operation with the Squadron, his fiftieth in total.

Due to be rested he was finally posted back to the USAAF, where undaunted and still seeking action he re-trained to fly the Northrop P-61 Black Widow night fighter and applied for a posting to the Pacific theatre, but the war ended before this could be effected. He retired from the USAAF with the rank of Major,

Whilst flying on early operations Knilans had vowed that if he survived he would devote himself to constructive public service work. He became a teacher in California. He retired in 1978 after twenty five years, during which he completed two years as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Nigeria, championed the betterment of young Americans of Mexican descent and served as a counsellor for the California prison system. His support for philanthropic bodies and improvement programmes would continue for the rest of his life.

## John Cole

From Warrnambool, Victoria, Australia, John Cole enlisted in the RAAF in October 1942.

After training in Canada as a navigator he was posted to the UK, arriving in December 1943, where he undertook further training before being posted to 1654 Conversion Unit at Wigsley. From there he joined Fg Off Ledeboer's crew and was posted to 57 Sqn with whom he completed 29 operations including attacks that included Norwegian U-boat bases, German oil refineries and the Dortmund Ems and Mittelland Canals.

The crew joined 617 Sqn at Woodhall Spa on 30 April 1945 and for two months John undertook "Exodus" flights repatriating British prisoners of War from Europe, also initial training in preparation for Tiger Force. However, his sojourn with the Squadron was to be brief and in June 1945 he was posted to 54 Base before being admitted to hospital at East Grinstead, after which he did not return to the Squadron. Prior to his repatriation to Australia he was posted to 9 Aircrew Holding Unit and subsequently discharged from the RAAF in February 1946.



Left-Right: Ernest Hyde RAAF Bomb Aimer, **John Cole** RAAF Navigator, Jimmy Cotton RAF Rear Gunner, Graham Ledeboer RAF Pilot and Captain, John Francis RAF Flight Engineer, Peter Ryan RAAF Wireless Operator, Bill Harrop RAF Mid Upper Gunner

## Grant McDonald



After initially serving in the Canadian Army, Grant McDonald transferred to the RCAF during the summer of 1940. Following initial selection for pilot training he was re-mustered as an air gunner and on completion of his training was posted to the UK.

After passing through the reception centre at Bournemouth, he was posted for further training to Stranraer before moving on to 19 OTU at Kinloss, equipped with Armstrong Whitworth Whitleys where he was to meet up with fellow Canadian Sgt Ken Brown, whose crew he would eventually join.

As part of their training at Kinloss, the crew were detached to Cornwall to fly anti-submarine patrols, lasting up to ten hours in duration; a detachment not without its hazards from weather, mechanical failure or human error, in addition to the risk of an encounter with the enemy.

Subsequently posted to 1654 CU at Wigsley the crew converted to the Lancaster in preparation for posting to 44 Sqn, at that time commanded by Wg Cdr John Nettleton VC. On 27 March 1943 after only four operations from Waddington, having completed only seven sorties in total and despite their protests, the crew were posted to the newly formed 617 Sqn at Scampton.

The crew were to form part of the mobile reserve for Operation Chastise, F – Freddie being the seventeenth aircraft away from Scampton that night. They crossed the Scheldt estuary a little south of track and then, nearing Tilburg, came under fire from light flak and searchlights - to which Grant responded by firing 100% daylight tracer. Another of their wave nearby, Plt Off Burpee was not so fortunate and crashed on Gilze-Rijen airfield. At another point, Grant and his fellow gunner raked a locomotive and wagons that came within range.

They witnessed the loss of another of their number, Plt Off Ottley, near Hamm, before receiving instructions to attack the Sorpe Dam. This target had already been attacked by Flt Lt Joe McCarthy and the crest was slightly damaged. There were no defences, but now the lake was becoming shrouded in mist. The technique to be used for Upkeep against the Sorpe involved flying at 180mph, across the lake, parallel to the dam face. The weapon was not to be spun, but dropped, in effect as a large depth charge, from as low as practicable as near as possible to the centre of the dam, and about 30 feet out into the lake.

The approach necessitated avoiding a church steeple on the hillside above the dam, and then after diving to the release height climbing steeply to avoid wooded hills on the other side. After three abortive attempts incendiary bombs were dropped to provide a datum and then after about half a dozen attempts they finally dropped their bomb at 0314hrs. The attack was accurate, but the dam still held.

Returning via the Möhne Dam, they witnessed the floods caused by its breaching, and came under further fire near Hamm. On reaching the Helder peninsular and within sight of the North Sea the aircraft was coned by searchlights and heavily engaged by flak, forcing Brown to fly on instruments at 50 feet. The aircraft was hit and badly damaged, but survived to return its crew to Scampton.

The crew were to complete twelve further operations with the Squadron, including the Italian "shuttle" raids, all three attacks on the Antheor viaduct, four attacks on V-1 sites and the successful operation against the Gnome Rhone factory at Limoges.

During the spring of 1944 the crew were split up and on 26 March Grant was posted to 29 OTU, as an instructor, flying in Wellingtons from Bruntingthorpe.

On returning to Canada he declined to remain in the air force and instead embarked on a new career working for the Canadian customs service.

## **Jim Rosher**

Jim Rosher enlisted in 1941 and subsequently re-mustered for aircrew. After training as a Flight Engineer he was posted to 1660 Conversion Unit at Swinderby, where he teamed up with the crew of Sgt Don Cheney. In August 1943 the crew were posted to 106 Sqn at Syerston, to join the offensive targeting German cities including Berlin, Nuremberg, Kassel, Stuttgart and Munich. Transferring to 630 Sqn following its formation at East Kirkby in November 1943 they continued their tour with a further seven trips to the German capital amongst other city targets.

The crew were posted to 617 Sqn on 15 February 1944, having completed 20 operations. Following extensive training in the use of the SABS bombsight they took part in their first operation with the Squadron on 5 April 1944, against an aircraft factory at Toulouse. After participating in only two operations they found themselves, along with the remainder of the Squadron, concentrating on practising precision navigation and flying in preparation for Operation Taxable. With their first use of Tallboy against the Saumur Tunnel, the crew continued to participate in daylight operations against U-boat pens and V-weapon sites in Pas de Calais.



Top row, left to right: Radio Operator Reg Pool, Flight Engineer Jim Roshier, Rear Gunner Noel Wait, Mid Upper Gunner Mac McRostie. Bottom row: Navigator Roy Welch, Pilot Don Cheney, Bomb Aimer Len Curtis.

On 5 August they were briefed to attack the U-boat pens at Brest, it was to be Jim's 36th operation, his 16th with the Squadron. During the bombing run their Lancaster was bracketed by a barrage of flak, some of which struck the aircraft causing severe damage. Jim immediately went to investigate, finding both the navigator and wireless operator injured. Whilst he was attending to their needs, aided by other crew members, flames were seen starting in the starboard wing. Don Cheney gave the order to prepare to abandon aircraft and with the bomb aimer engaged in tending to the injured, Jim went forward to open the forward escape hatch, which jammed in the opening. All attempts to clear this failed and he returned to his position alongside the pilot. As he did so the starboard inner engine failed and began to burn. Taking the necessary feathering action he went back into the nose, trying again to free the hatch. Assisted by the injured navigator he was able to move it sufficiently to permit escape.

Following the navigator, Jim was the second to leave, but twisted parachute shroud lines made for a rapid descent into a roadside ditch, injuring his ribs and an ankle. Fortunately, before the Germans could arrive, French farm workers came to his aid and he was taken to a farmhouse before being hidden in the grounds of a convent. Taken to a doctor he was then passed on to the Free French Forces, meeting fellow crew member Ken Porter. With the retreat of German troops, Jim and Ken were passed on to the advancing British Army and taken to Rennes, from whence they were flown back to the UK, returning to Woodhall a fortnight after their previous departure.

**Robert Owen**

## 617 Squadron Aircrew Association Merchandise

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

Gold Wire Blazer Badge - £5

Large Squadron Lapel Badge - £3.50

Small Squadron Lapel Badge - £3.00

Silk Tie - £13.00

Polyester Tie - £7.00

Bow Tie (untied) - £6.50

Bow Tie (tied) - £7.50

Scarf (Maroon & Blue) - £8.50

Cummerbund (Poly) - £12.50

Silk Cravat - £17.50

Polyester Cravat - £11.00

J R Bell

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

Tel: 01903-741743

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**Deadline for Next Newsletter**

**1st December 2012**

**email: [617sqnnews@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:617sqnnews@tiscali.co.uk)**

or

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

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