



Après Moi



The 617 Squadron
Association Newsletter

Autumn 2015



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Cover Photo: Les Munro and Lancaster - photograph by permission of David Vernon, Tauranga, New Zealand. Website: www.nz-photographer.co.nz

Editorial

Welcome to the Autumn 2015 edition of the 617 Squadron Association Newsletter. Firstly, I wanted to thank those of you that I met at the Dams Reunion Dinner in May who offered some very kind and thought provoking feedback on the newsletter; it is your newsletter so please do feel free to point me in the right direction! The dinner was a fantastic experience for me and the Petwood Hotel once again did us proud. I hope to meet more of you at the Tirpitz Dinner later this year.

I make no apology for the focus on this edition as it was sad to hear that Les Munro had passed away on the 4 August. I had been corresponding with Les during July as he wanted to ensure that you understood the decision to sell his medals and flying log book. I promised Les that I would ensure that his side of the story (and not necessarily the press' version) was told. As I think you will agree once you read his story, Les was selfless to the end I can only hope that my editing has met his expectations. I met Les in 2013 and know how passionate he was about ensuring that the Bomber Command story is never lost; his donation to the RAF Benevolent Fund will go a significant way to keeping the Memorial maintained.

In addition, you will find plenty of other articles, including 70th anniversary of the loss of 'Dark Victor' at Douarnenez in Brittany. Thanks for your continued support and articles and I welcome any comment you might have or material for the December edition. Please try and get your draft to me before the end of November.

Yours
Stu

Deadline for Next Newsletter

1st December 2015

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Walters' Warblings

Although the Association provides a great opportunity to renew old Acquaintances, our primary purpose is charitable. As a result of the excellent stewardship of our previous Chairman, the Association is now able to actively support several new charitable causes. We have donated the remaining equipment required by the 'Spirit of Goole' project to help young people complete the construction of their light aircraft, as explained in Rob Owen's article. We are also supporting the International Bomber Command Centre in Lincoln and have dedicated an engraved paving stone for the Centre's 'Ribbon of Remembrance' in memory of all those who served on 617 Squadron. Because of their role in educating young people about air power, we aim to support the Air Cadet Organisations, not only by sponsoring visits to the Dams, but also by giving presentations about the Squadron, something which all Association members can play a part in. On a similar educational theme, four members represented the Association at the Staff College's annual Dambusters Dinner where the Navy, Army and RAF students retain their historical keen interest in the Squadron. We are also renewing our links with Leonard Cheshire Disability; their Chief Executive, Clare Pelham, will be our principal guest at the Tirpitz Dinner in November. As always, the Committee invites your suggestions for other charitable causes to support.

The Association's new website, hosted by the RAF, is now up and running at **www.raf.mod.uk/history/617sqnassociation.cfm**. The website would benefit from photographs of past events so, if you have any suitable shots, please send them to Stuart Greenland at **stuartgreenland@hotmail.com**.

I am keen to widen the Association membership and make our reunions even more inclusive. To this end, we are actively trying to recruit Vulcan crew chiefs as well as the full spectrum of personnel from the Squadron's latest disbandment. This broadening is another area where the full membership can be involved, so please encourage any ex-Squadron members to join the Association via our Membership Secretary, Bill Williams. As I mentioned in the previous edition of *Après Moi*, the Association remains the only embodiment of the Dambusters until the Squadron reforms with the F35 Lightning II. However, we look forward to meeting the Squadron's next Commanding Officer, Wing Commander John Butcher, at the Petwood in November.

It is always deeply saddening when members pass away, but particularly so when it is one of our founding members. I have passed the Association's condolences to Les Munro's family on your behalf. Les was a great supporter of the Association and his lifetime of service is recorded in this edition of *Après Moi*.

Since joining the Committee, I have been bowled over by the support we receive from the community of Woodhall Spa, particularly in the tending of the Memorials and the support for our ceremonies in Royal Square. This was particularly evident in the way they encouraged the local council to swiftly repair the recent damage to the WWII Memorial in time for the last Dams Dinner. We do not take their efforts for granted and are now working with them to improve access to the post-WWII Memorial. I am equally grateful to our overseas friends who so willingly tend the graves of the Squadron's fallen.

Finally, I would like to take the opportunity to warmly welcome our new President, Wing Commander John Bell, our Australasian Rep, Dr Peter Ryan, and our new Stockholder, Squadron Leader Mike Beesley.

Yours Aye

Andrew Walters

The “Spirit of Goole”

The RAF has long-since recognised the need for trained engineers and technicians. The Boy Entrant Scheme, was established in 1934, taking 15 year olds and training them to master a variety of trades fitting them for employment in the Service. The scheme ceased in 1965, but the Service still continues to provide technical training to ensure the highest standards are guaranteed.

Nevertheless, even in this increasingly technological world and despite the emphasis placed on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects it is perhaps surprising that many schools no longer teach their pupils “hands on” practical skills such as woodwork and metalwork.

To address this issue Goole Academy have been pioneering a “build a plane” initiative giving students the opportunity to gain practical experience in engineering and technical skills by constructing a 2 seat “Sherwood Ranger XP” bi-plane, to be known as “The Spirit of Goole”. This will then be used to provide air experience and subsequently flying training to enable pupils to acquire their basic pilot's licence.

The project is being undertaken as an “out of hours” project under the supervision of an ex-RAF Engineer, Jack Milnes. Although the aircraft is a professionally designed kit project, this extends only to the design and key components – the remainder of the airframe build, including wing rib, fuselage former and stringer construction, fabric covering, control runs, installation of fuel, electrical and instrumentation systems etc. is being done by the students from raw/sheet materials. By doing so the students are learning all the basic workshop skills that most of us probably learned at school, but which are no longer on today's academic curriculum together with more specialist construction techniques to aviation quality standard.

Some 45 students have given up time after school and attend on Saturdays to work on the project which is being supervised by Jack and professionally examined and checked at the relevant stages to ensure full compliance with air safety and construction requirements. The project is also being endorsed by the Royal Aeronautical Society and the Light Aircraft Association. This school's project is being used as a prototype and marketing tool to encourage the development of similar projects by other schools and organisations. To this end every stage of the Goole project is being recorded and written up to form "the manual" to assist future projects and enable them to learn from this build. The Goole project has inspired 6 similar projects in different parts of the country – a "Spirit of Heathrow" is being built at RAF Northolt, and 5 other aircraft are in the pipeline.



The Spirit of Goole colour scheme

This is a most impressive project: not only in its physical aspects – build of the basic airframe is almost complete – but also its educational value. The students engaged in this work are not only knowledgeable and enthusiastic but extremely personable individuals. Many of them intend to pursue a career in aviation or engineering. One has already gained a place on an engineering course at Selby College and another has started a Mechanical Engineering Course at York College, both on the strength of this project. Six students have been awarded a Breitling Certificate of Recognition for outstanding achievement by the Royal Aero Club.

Once the aircraft is completed it will be used to provide air experience and training not only for the students who built it, but the intention is that it will then continue to be used for many years to continue this part of the project by initially offering 10 flying scholarships. The organisers have obtained the services of instructors from a local flying club who will provide their skills and services free of charge.

The project has been well supported by both individual and corporate sponsors, including the donation (on indefinite loan) of a brand new engine by the manufacturer. Nevertheless the project still requires funding to enable completion of the aircraft build which is scheduled (funds permitting) for next July. After this funds will be required to provide basic equipment for students (Maps, Pooley's guides etc.) and of course to finance operating costs and overheads. The students and project organisers have so far raised over £50,000 and the project is nearing completion, but still requires funding for key components to complete the build. The Barnes Wallis Foundation has given funds to purchase the propeller and spinner, together with a set of strobe lights.

Following discussion by the Committee it had been agreed that this project is in keeping with the Association's charitable objectives and well-deserving of the Association's support. As a result it has been decided to provide £1,600 to purchase items comprising the fuel system (gauge, cut off kit, fuel injection kit) instrument wiring and the radiator and exhaust system. These are some of the last major components that will facilitate completion of the aircraft.

At the time of writing the airframe is being covered with an iron-on polyester fabric covering, which is then made taught by use of a heat gun. The material is pre-coloured; the final scheme for "the Spirit of Goole" will be red with white trim, sponsors names – in our case the Squadron Badge and the wording "No. 617 Squadron Association" - will also appear on the aircraft. Engine and propeller trials are also in progress and it is hoped that the aircraft will take to the air later in the year, with its first flight being made from RAF Cranwell.

See www.thespiritofgoole.co.uk for further information about this project.

Robert Owen

St Peter's Church Organ Appeal

St Peter's Church in Woodhall Spa has been closely associated with the 617 Squadron Association over the years. The Church has recently launched an appeal to fund a long-overdue rebuild of its 122 year-old organ, which has 'stops' ranging from a 2ft piccolo to a 16ft bourdon. If you would like to support this project, please send individual cheques made out to 'Woodhall Spa PCC Gifts and Legacies' to James Cardwell, 1 Maple Avenue, Woodhall Spa, LN10 6QQ. The Church will acknowledge all donations.

70th anniversary of the loss of 'Dark Victor' at Douarnenez in Brittany

In July last year Don Cheney's daughter, Janice asked if anyone from the Association would like to attend a ceremony in the French town of Douarnenez in Brittany at the beginning of August to commemorate the loss of Don Cheney's aircraft 'Dark Victor' and the deaths of three of his crew. I recalled that Gordon and Suzanne Rayfield now live in Brittany, and when I contacted him Gordon immediately offered to represent the Association.

The ceremony was attended by family members of Don's crew and about 200 people. The French armed services were well represented (the most senior man a General), with the local president of the Chevalier d'Honneur, the Mayor and many of the Breton families who were involved in hiding and ensuring the safe return of the survivors of Dark Victor.

On a showery day even the weather was kind. Gordon laid three Poppy wreaths; two representing the Association and another from the Royal British Legion with his regional President's hat on. The attendees returned to the Mairie where the Mayor gave a very nice address - this was followed by Jan Cheney giving fulsome thanks to the city of Douarnenez and its citizens for saving the survivors and honouring our dead.



The graves of Noel Wait, Roy Welch and Reg Pool at Douarnenez

The painting she had commissioned of her father's aircraft Dark Victor was unveiled and presented to the city. City of Douarnenez medals were presented by the Mayor to each family. Asked to speak, Gordon gave warm thanks from the President and members of the 617 Squadron Association for the great kindnesses extended to our former members in wartime at great risk to themselves. The usual vin d'honneur followed and great fun was

had by all - the Breton hosts made everyone most welcome and were quite charming. Gordon and Suzanne were included in the lunch the Mayor gave afterwards for the relatives.

Sadly Don Cheney died on 26 August 2014, but not before his daughter Jan had told him how the events of 5 August 1944 had been commemorated. The story of the Dark Victor's loss is told elsewhere in this issue in Don Cheney's own words.

Chris Henderson

The Last Flight of Dark Victor

in the words of its pilot, Flt Lt Donald H Cheney DFC

“Half way along our run to the target I noticed that our aircraft was slightly in the lead of the others on either side. We were also tracking closer to the coastline on our starboard side than the others, though still over a large body of water. My eyes were glued to the instrument panel and felt as though they were being pulled out of their sockets. Time seemed to stand still and sweat trickled down my temples under the flying helmet.

Shattering the intercom sequence between Len Curtis and me came the warning voice of Jim Rosher. ‘Flak straight ahead, port and starboard - our level! The puffs of the exploding shells drift past in seconds, but I could hear the muffled boom and catch the angry red centres of the bursts dead ahead in my peripheral vision. They were close! Then whump, whump, whump under the nose and to each side. No question, we were flying straight into radar-predicted anti-aircraft fire! Then again suddenly whump-clang, whump-clang, whump-clang four, five, six times. After one of the whumps there was a short cry over the intercom, and then another. This time we were not going to get off without some serious trouble! The aircraft filled with blue cordite smoke.

The sky around us had erupted in angry black clouds with fiery red centres. The aircraft shuddered under the impact of a couple of direct hits. Another volley, another cry, then ‘bomb gone!’ from Curtis. Immediately I banked to the left pushing forward on the control column to increase speed and lose altitude, the fastest way out of trouble. Jim Rosher, like a big indestructible rock, had stood beside me spotting each Flak burst. I shouted to him to bring me a report on the condition of the crew. The intercom was working and both mid-upper and rear gunners reported damage but turrets working, no fire and no wounds. Jim Rosher returned to my side looking grim. Len Curtis had come up from his nose position and was unpacking first-aid equipment. Rosher’s report confirmed both gunners OK as well as himself and Curtis. However, navigator Roy Welch and wireless operator Reg Pool were badly wounded. He then began assisting Curtis in administering first-aid to the two wounded men.

I looked back for the first time into the navigation and radio compartments. A near miss had sent shrapnel bursting up through the bomb bay, tearing a twelve inch splintered hole in the navigator’s table. The rest of the compartment was a scene of chaos, but Roy was still seated at his table looking at his maps. There was no doubt that we had taken two or more direct hits in the bomb bay just after releasing our Tallboy. Over the intercom I asked Roy if he were able to give me any kind of course to direct us to base. The Flak had stopped and I had been able to level off on a heading out to sea. By this time the other aircraft had flown past us, dropped their bombs, and



Painting of Dark Victor by Mark Postelthwaite

were turning inland to starboard. Reg Pool was slumped in his seat, his eyes wide and his skin very pale. Ken Porter had joined the others in tending the wounded. Roy Welch appeared beside me leaning unsteadily against the side of my seat. One hand held a large antiseptic pad, already stained with blood, which he pressed across his mouth and nose. Obviously, he was unable to speak. In his other hand Roy had a clipboard, which he held out in front of me. Across the paper attached to the board he had scrawled - heading 060 degrees. I gave him the thumbs-up and a grateful nod, followed by a pat on the shoulder as he turned slowly to return to his seat. There were splatters of blood around his collar and the side of his head. Looking back again, I could see Reg Pool immobile in his seat, with two of the others tending him. Reg had been hit by the same bursts as Roy. It was now clear to see that he had severe wounds to his chest, stomach and upper legs.

Jim Roshier had helped Roy back to his seat while I continued my bank gently to port, intending to take Roy's course of 060 degrees. He then returned to my side, folded down his jump seat and stood to my right checking his instrument panel and keeping a lookout for trouble. He gave me a poke with his finger and pointed to the starboard wing. There were a number of jagged holes of various sizes; the one between the starboard engines was large enough for a man to pass through! Flames were licking up from several of the holes and a trail of black smoke and flame issued from the large one. I applied left rudder, causing the aircraft to sideslip to port to blow the fire away from the fuselage. At this point the starboard-outer engine failed, the

propeller windmilling wildly as flames and black smoke belched from under the cowling. Roshier quickly and efficiently feathered the propeller and activated the Graviner fire extinguisher. The engine fire appeared to be under control as I continued to descend to a safer altitude, because the navigator and wireless operator were without an oxygen supply. A further damage report from the gunners and flight engineer indicated that both wings were riddled with holes and the fuselage was badly torn in many places. The number 2 fuel tank was still burning and the blue-orange flame was getting bigger. It was also spreading along the starboard wing.

I ordered the crew to prepare to abandon aircraft. I can still hear the voice of rear gunner Noel Wait calling over the intercom, 'wait for me, wait for me!' My response was, 'don't worry, Noel, I'll give you time to get out.' As this was taking place I stared in horror at the flaming wing and gritted my teeth in expectation of an almost certain explosion of the fuel tanks. I had seen several crews survive such an event, but the prospect was terrible to contemplate. Heat was building up noticeably in the cockpit. I realised that there was absolutely no chance of putting out the fires and gave the order to abandon the aircraft. As he came past me on his way to the forward escape hatch Jim Roshier laid my parachute pack under my legs, having extracted it from under the back of my seat. He then proceeded into the nose with the navigator to join Len Curtis, who had already activated the release handle of the escape hatch. Unfortunately, either as the result of damage or a faulty mechanism, the jettison device caused the hatch to twist in the rectangular opening and jam, thus partially blocking it. Curtis and Roshier wrestled with the hatch cover and finally forced it into a position, which allowed a man to squeeze through. The navigator left first, followed by the bomb-aimer and the flight engineer. Meanwhile the mid-upper gunner, who had been helping to attend to his wounded comrades, went aft to secure his parachute and left by the rear door which had already been jettisoned by the rear gunner when he baled out seconds before. The badly wounded wireless operator and I were now alone in the aircraft.

Holding it as steadily as I could with one hand, I reached back to help Reg Pool to his feet. He kept shaking his head, but I persevered and he gradually crept towards me. As he slumped against the side of my seat the plane began to wallow from side to side and the nose began to drop, increasing the speed rapidly. I had to get back into the pilot's seat again in order to pull up the nose and apply some rudder control. I got out of the seat again, stood up, and clipped Reggie's parachute pack onto the snaps of his harness, placing his hand on the large steel ring of the ripcord activator. Each time I let go of the control column the aircraft would begin to nose downward and I could feel the air speed build up quickly. It was necessary, therefore, that I move back and forth between the controls and the injured crewman. By this sequence of actions I was able to manoeuvre him to the escape hatch. I pointed to the

ripcord and asked him if he could pull it. He nodded. His legs were already dangling in space and he was wriggling down through the partially restricted hatch. He waved at me to leave him and get out. I gave him a salute and turned my attention to my own escape.

The aircraft had pitched into another dive as I turned to the controls. Looking to my right momentarily, I could see yellowish brown bubbles and blisters breaking out on the flight engineer's panel on the right side of the cockpit. I felt the heat increasing. I was certain that the machine would blow apart at any second. I was still standing in the passage beside the pilot's seat, my left hand on the controls. I knew that there was no possibility of stabilizing the aircraft long enough to buckle on my parachute, get to the nose hatch and force myself through. Two alternatives remained, the rear door and the ditching hatch directly over the pilot's seat. I would never make it over the main spar, down the fuselage and past the flare chute to the rear door. I grabbed my chute pack from under the seat and buckled it on to the big snap fasteners on the harness. With the chute pack now large on my chest, I climbed onto my seat on my knees, with my rump against the control column, grasped the handles of the hatch release and gave it a firm twist. The hatch cover flew off with a whoosh! The noise and roaring of the wind increased. I tore off my sunglasses and helmet and they went flying back into the cockpit. I got one foot up on the seat, and then the other, crouching with my knees bent. Slowly I began to stand and stuck my head and shoulders out into the slipstream. But I was not far enough out to be able to jump clear of the aircraft. Putting one foot and then the other on the arm rests of the seat I could get somewhat further out, but then came to a stop. With the chute pack fastened to my chest I was too fat to be able to pass through the hatch! I crouched back down inside the cockpit, by which time the nose had once again begun to dive more steeply and the airspeed was building up. I pulled on the controls to get the nose up again, and it came up a little. This time I had to make it!

I flipped the chute pack upwards away from my body and stuffed it out of the hatch just before putting my chest out. It worked! I knew that I would be able to straighten up, but I also knew I then had to get my legs and feet up as high as possible, and push like hell with one great leap to have a chance of getting clear. Once more, with my feet on the arm rests of the pilot's seat I proceeded to get one knee on the outside edge of the escape hatch. Now I had to get the other foot higher. I felt around for the back of the pilot's seat, raised my foot until I could get a grip on the topmost part, then pushed with all my strength. I shot out into the slipstream. The blurred lump of the mid-upper turret flashed past. The two big tail fins zipped by and I was tumbling in space, knees drawn up towards my chest. Tumbling over and over I waited a few seconds as I felt around for the large ring of the ripcord on the side of my chute pack. I found it, grasped it and pulled it straight out as hard as I could. It came away with incredible ease and I was conscious of holding the ring in my hand with a two

foot length of fine steel wire attached to the end of it. Good Lord! I've pulled too hard, broken the cord and the chute isn't going to open! Whump!! With a sudden heavy jerk I flipped upright and the tumbling stopped, as did the rushing of air in my ears.

I floated in silence with only the lazy flap-flap of the fully opened parachute pluming out in a beautiful white canopy above me. I heard the drone of my aircraft and, looking around me, I caught sight of our dear Dark Victor about a half kilometre away. The plane had come out of a dive and was climbing at a very steep angle. It got almost to the top of a loop, before stalling part way over on its back. Then the nose dropped suddenly and, with motors still revving, it fell in a classic spin towards the sea trailing flame and black smoke. Finally, there was a thunderous roar as it dived nose first into the sea. For a few seconds red flames mixed with black smoke towered fifty metres into the air, billowing and swirling. Then came a bubbling, boiling circle of churning, hissing seawater, a column of water vapour, a shower of splashes from pieces of flying debris, and then silence.

The parachute flapped lightly in the breeze. I sensed the droning of aircraft engines in the distance. Turning my head towards the sound, I could see the last several units of my squadron who, having dropped their bombs, gradually disappeared, black specks against the distant blue sky. I could see no other parachutes in my vicinity. I tried to manoeuvre my parachute by pulling on the shrouds in an effort to make it drift towards land. It was very hard work however, and I soon gave it up. I was alone in the sky. I had no sensation whatever of falling, it was more like being pinned to the sky like a toy doll. Suddenly, out of nowhere, came the crackling roar of a Rolls-Royce Merlin engine. A Spitfire dived past me with a whistle twenty metres away to seaward. I could see the pilot's goggled face clearly as he had his canopy pushed back. He waved, and I waved back with enthusiasm giving the thumbs up sign. He wheeled round to seaward and made two or three more diving passes, following me down. I could see that I was still drifting over a large bay and that I was almost certain to fall into the sea. When I was fifty metres above the water the Spitfire made a final pass, waggled his wings, climbed away and was gone. I was completely alone again."

Don Cheney was picked up by French fishermen from Douarnenez and was kept safe until the Germans left the town a few weeks later. Jim Rosher, Len Curtis and Ken Porter also landed safely and eventually returned to England. Sadly, the bodies of Roy Welch and Reg Pool were washed ashore some days later, both having succumbed to the terrible injuries that they sustained from the flak burst. The final tragedy was the discovery of rear gunner Noel Wait's body, entangled in his parachute lines, having presumably got into difficulties after landing in the sea. He was a non-swimmer and had always been concerned about the prospect of baling out over water.

Bomber Command Memorial Service at Amberley Air Base, Queensland

I was invited as an official visitor to lay a wreath on behalf of the Dambusters' Association by the Queensland University Squadron Branch of the Australian Flying Corps and the Royal Australian Air Force Association Queensland Division. I had inherited this position from the late Joe Dacey who was the Australasian Representative of the Association having completed three operational tours including one with 617 Squadron.

This was the eighth occasion the service has been held and it has become increasingly popular with a substantial number of wreaths laid and growing numbers of the public attending. W/O 'Dusty' Miller of IX(B) Squadron spoke wittily on behalf of the aircrew but regrettably Mrs Sheila Henderson a wartime RAF Dental Nurse was excused from speaking on behalf of the ground crew as her husband Vic, also a Bomber Command veteran had passed away just a few days earlier.

The Amberley Brass and the Ipswich Ladies' Orpheus Choir provided appropriate music during the service which was followed by luncheon in the Officers' Mess. Similar services were held simultaneously in each of the other capital cities but this was the only one to be held at an Air Force base. The horrendous losses in Bomber Command are belatedly being recognised with the younger generation showing increasing interest and concern.

The Dambusters' Dinner – Sydney

The Dambusters' Dinner was organised by a group of retired Australian Army Officers who meet from time to time to celebrate one or other military occasions. On this occasion they moved from Army to Air Force memorial and contacted Annette Guterres who had taken a group of us to London and back for the Bomber Command Memorial opening in Green Park. She supplied them with the names of several veterans of the trip residing in Sydney and added my name as a wartime member of the Squadron and they kindly offered to fly me down and back for the dinner.

Their organiser, David Brown gave an address which was so thoroughly researched that one would swear he had a background in Bomber Command where in fact it was in the Australian Army.

The generosity of the group did not end there. David had arranged for a set of Lancaster cuff links to be presented to each of us - a wonderful memento of an extraordinary occasion. I stayed overnight as a guest of Tony and Annette Guterres and flew back to Brisbane the following day.

Peter Ryan

Les Munro - Handover of Medals

Les Munro contacted me in July 2015 to ensure his side of the story was provided to 617 Squadron Association Members. The text below was provided by Les. Ed.

‘On the 21st May 2013 together with Christine and family I visited the RAF Bomber Command Memorial sited on Green Park, London. During that visit I was interviewed by Ann-Marie Freebairn of the RAF Benevolent Fund (RAFBF) who used my presence to make an appeal on air for funds to meet the cost of maintaining the Memorial in perpetuity. This was the first occasion on which I became aware that the RAFBF had that responsibility and that caused me some concern from the financial point of view. This is a major ask on top of its basic role of providing financial assistance to veterans in need. It may interest you to know that since 2011 the RAFBF has advanced £60k to 32 NZ Veterans or their families.

On my return home I began reflecting on the question of maintenance of the Memorial to the 55573 aircrew of Bomber Command that lost their lives during the 1939-1945 War and should this factor concern me. I then remembered that amongst that number are the names of 130 aircrew of 617 Squadron who I lived and served with and who lost their lives during the 15 and a half month period I served on the Squadron. That is an abnormal number because it includes the 53 lost on the Dams Raid and a further 40 lost on the disastrous operation on the Dortmund Ems Canal. I also thought of the 1679 Kiwi's who travelled some 12000 miles to fight for King and Country and freedom and democracy only to lose their lives in pursuit of those objectives.

My underlying concern gained initially during my inspection of the Memorial in May 2013 was the possibility that the Memorial would suffer through lack of maintenance and I thought of how imperative it was that every effort should be made to ensure that this magnificent Memorial is adequately maintained as a symbol of those lives lost as well as for the benefit of future generations. And it was this heavy burden of responsibility on the RAFBF to maintain the Memorial that led me to donate the sale value of my medals and log books to the Endowment Fund.

Before presenting my medals, log books and menu to Museum of Transport and Technology I would like to publicly thank Dix Noonan Webb and staff for all the work they put into preparing them for sale and most importantly for donating the equivalent of their costs and commission (approx. £10k) to the Fund. I would also thank my family for accepting my decision and to my son Graeme who has been closely involved in the whole process from the beginning.

For many years now the New Zealand Bomber Command Association has been compiling a collection of Air Force Memorabilia, expanded over recent years to include a section on 617 Squadron, all situated in the Aviation Display Hall. Prominent in this hall of course is the beautifully restored Lancaster the result of many years of hard work by a team of dedicated veterans. I am pleased that my medals will be sharing space within the collection and adjacent to a similar plane to that in which I piloted on all but one of the operations I carried out. I am aware that there was much concern expressed at the possibility that my medals may leave NZ. However through the generosity of Lord Ashcroft that possibility has now been averted and I take great pleasure in asking Michael Frawley on behalf of the Museum of Transport and Technology to accept my Medals, Log Books and Celebratory Menu for display in the appropriate area



Lord Ashcroft, New Zealand Prime Minister John Key, Les Munro, and Museum of Transport and Technology Director Michael Frawley

The RAFBF received £75k from Lord Ashcroft plus the Dix Noonan Webb donation of £10k. The amusing part is that after all of this, I handed my medals to Lord Ashcroft, before he handed them directly back to me for delivery to the Museum. I was also grateful for several replica sets being provided.

Les Munro

Final Landings

Benjamin Bird

At the outbreak of war Ben Bird was too young to join the armed forces, so enrolled as a cycle messenger with Air Raid Precautions, before transferring to the Home Guard on its formation in 1940. With his father's connivance Ben falsified his age and presented himself at his local RAF recruiting centre. Passing the medical he was called up to No 1 Recruit Centre at Cardington before being rapidly processed to Blackpool and then onto the groundcrew training at Kirkham for training as a Flight Mechanic/Airframes.

Once qualified he was sent briefly to maintain the Wellingtons of 27 OTU at RAF Lichfield before transferring to Bramcote and Wellingtons of No 18 OTU training Polish aircrew for Bomber Command.

As the demand for aircrew volunteers increased Ben volunteered for aircrew, attending the Aircrew Recruiting Centre at St John's Wood (Lord's Cricket Ground). Destined to become an air gunner he was posted to Morpeth, where he undertook initial gunnery training flying in No 4 Air Gunnery School's Blackburn Botha aircraft. Surviving the attrition rate of this underpowered aircraft, he passed out second in his course.

Declining the opportunity to become an instructor Ben opted for an operational unit. At No 14 OTU Cottesmore he renewed his acquaintance with the Wellington, this time as an aircrew member. Destined for "heavies" the crew moved on to 1651 Conversion Unit at Waterbeach, for conversion to the Short Stirling, before being posted to No 149 Sqn at Lakenheath. His first two operations demonstrated other challenges to operational flying. On his first, a hydraulic leak caused his turret Perspex to be coated with oil, Ben naively believing that the entire trip had been flown through heavy cloud; a severe fuel shortage necessitated an emergency landing on his second.

Ben's first encounter with the enemy came on his third operation, to Bochum in May 1943. Nearing the target his aircraft was bracketed by flak at 12,000 feet, causing it to enter a steep dive. Pulling out at 3,000 feet above the target it was discovered that enemy fire had punched a large hole in the fuselage, damaged the main spar and rendered the ailerons inoperative. In this damaged state the aircraft headed for base, enduring seven night-fighter attacks en route. Ben's vigilance and accurate firing drove each away enabling a safe return. In July 1943 during an operation against Cologne, he spotted a Ju88 about to make an attack, watching it and giving his captain a running commentary on its position. As it made its attack Ben held his fire until it came within lethal range of his .303 Brownings. After a three second burst it was seen to burst into flames and dive into the sea. During an attack on the Dunlop

tyre factory at Montlucon in September 1943 his aircraft was hit by flak which damaged the port undercarriage and blew the dinghy out of its stowage which hit the tailplane feet in front of Ben's turret with an almighty thump.

In January 1944 over Denmark, Ben was concerned about a single blue searchlight that seemed to be indicating their course. Searching the night sky he spotted a Me110 turning in to attack. Again holding his fire, Ben despatched it with a burst of fire and it was seen entering a layer of cloud below them. A minute or so later a dull yellow explosion on the ground confirmed its fate.

By now Ben had completed 16 operations and this second victory brought with it the award of the DFM, having "set an excellent example of keenness and determination and proved him to be a reliable and vigilant member of aircraft crew".

Ben served a brief spell with the Stirlings of No 620 Sqn at Chedburgh during the autumn of 1943 but by the winter of 1943 the Stirling squadrons were beginning to be re-equipped with the Lancaster. Until this occurred the Stirling squadrons became increasingly engaged flying low level night sorties to drop supplies to resistance groups in occupied Europe. Ben enjoyed the exhilaration of low flying in bright moonlight, and on occasion found himself having to resist the urge to jump from the aircraft to meet the patriots he could see running across the fields to collect their supplies.

By the summer of 1944 Ben had completed first tour, after which, in keeping with normal practice, he was posted for instructor duties. Once again he found himself flying in Wellingtons, this time with No 14 OTU at Market Harborough. Soon the tedium of instructing began to irk, and Ben requested a posting back to an operational unit. His request was eventually granted and after a brief period at No 5 Lancaster Finishing School at Syerston, he found himself posted to the Squadron at Woodhall Spa on 13 February 1945 as a Warrant Officer Air Gunner.

By now the Squadron was commencing its final campaigns against German inland communications and naval targets. Ben's first operation was an aborted attack against the Dortmund Ems Canal with Sqn Ldr Brookes. This was followed by two attacks with Australian Flt Lt John Spiers against the Bielefeld Viaduct, resulting in its destruction on 14 March. Another viaduct, at Arnsberg, was destroyed on 19 March. Without a permanent crew, it was almost a month before Ben operated again, flying a recalled operation against the German pocket battleship Lützow at Swinemünde with Sqn Ldr John Powell's crew on 15 April. The Lützow was also the target for the following day – but on this occasion Ben was flying with Flt Lt Alan Quinton's crew. It was to be a fortuitous switch. Powell's aircraft received a direct hit from flak on the approach to the target, losing a wing and crashing with the loss of all the crew.

Ben would remain as a member of the Quinton crew for his remaining two operations, against Heligoland on 19 April and the Squadron's final raid of the war, against Hitler's Bavarian redoubt at Berchtesgaden on 25 April.

With the war in Europe over the Squadron, along with Ben, transferred to Waddington, to train as part of Tiger Force – Bomber Command's projected contribution to the Pacific war. This was curtailed with the dropping of the two atomic bombs and Tiger Force disbanded in September 1945. With the war now over there was rapid re-mustering of aircrew as the RAF adapted to meet peacetime requirements. Ben opted to return to ground duties and was posted to the MT Section at Bicester. An attachment to decommission the airfield at Rochford prior to its return to civilian use gave him the opportunity to live back with his parents for three months, before returning to Bicester and subsequent demobilisation at RAF Uxbridge.

Don Cheney



Don Cheney enlisted with the Royal Canadian Air Force in July 1941, two days before his eighteenth birthday. Selected for pilot training, after two months of kit allocation and square bashing, he was posted to No 3 Initial Training School to learn the basic theory of navigation and airmanship. His first opportunity to sample flight came in February 1942

with a posting to No 4 Elementary Flying Training School, at Windsor Mills, where his first flights were in Fleet Finch biplanes, equipped with skis for snow operations. With the spring came transition to wheels and after about 40 hours experience he was posted to No 11 Service Flying Training School at Yorkton. There his hopes of becoming a daring fighter pilot were dashed, for the unit was equipped with twin engine Cessna Cranes. He was now destined to be a Bomber Boy.

Don received his "wings" at the beginning of September 1942. Embarking on the Queen Elizabeth, he arrived in Greenock. Don's introduction to the shooting war came early. In keeping with other RCAF personnel he spent his first few weeks in the UK at the reception centre in Bournemouth, at that time a target for lone "tip and run" attacks by the Luftwaffe.

After a brief period flying Airspeed Oxfords to re-affirm his flying skills, learn RAF procedures and appreciate the different appearance of the English

countryside Don was posted to No 29 Operational Training Unit at North Luffenham where he was introduced to the Vickers Wellington and teamed up with the men who were to form the basis for his crew. The next major step came with a posting to No 1660 Conversion Unit at Swinderby for conversion to four-engined bombers, leading to the thoroughbred Lancaster, during which they added a flight engineer to complete their crew of seven. Life at Conversion Unit was not without its dangers and excitement. An engine fire during one of his early flights again raised awareness of the dangers of wartime flying.

In August 1943 Don and his crew were declared operational and posted to No 106 Squadron (Wg Cdr Gibson's former Squadron) at Syerston, Don making his first bombing sortie to Leverkusen on 22 August as a "second dickey" with another experienced crew. As the nights grew longer Bomber Command pressed further into Germany and the enemy defences became ever more effective. Part of the return from a trip to Dusseldorf in November was accomplished on two engines. Meanwhile Bomber Command was expanding to meet the challenge; new squadrons were forming and Don and his crew were transferred to the recently formed No 630 Squadron at East Kirkby. Targets such as Nuremberg, Kassel, Munich, Stuttgart and Hanover led into Air Marshal Harris's intensive winter onslaught against Berlin. Having first visited the German capital in September 1943 (from which he returned on three engines), Don was to pay it a further ten visits between the end of November 1943 and the end of January 1944. Such intensive activity brought the crew's tour to an early conclusion after 23 operations when Don was asked if he wanted to join No 617 Squadron. After a brief meeting with his crew they agreed and were posted to Woodhall Spa on 15 February 1944.

After some six weeks of training to acquire the necessary proficiency with the Squadron's SABS bombsight the crew found themselves on the battle order for their first operation with 617, attacking an aircraft repair plant at Toulouse. It was an inauspicious start to their career. An electrical fault released their entire load as the bomb doors opened prior to their run up to target. Their next operation against a Luftwaffe depot on the outskirts of Paris proved more successful. Nevertheless Don and his crew missed the Squadron's remaining operations during April and then found themselves non-operational throughout May as they carried out intensive training for the D-Day deception, Operation TAXABLE, for which the crew were teamed up with Australian Arthur Kell.

TAXABLE was carried out to perfection, and was the precursor to a new phase for the Squadron with the introduction of the 12,000lb Tallboy deep penetration bomb, first used on the night of 8/9 June 1944 against the Saumur railway tunnel. Tallboy opened up a new range of targets for the Squadron. After two attacks against the heavily reinforced E-boat pens at Le Havre and

Boulogne, the Squadron was switched to massive concrete structures being built in the Pas de Calais region. Described enigmatically as 'Constructional works', their precise purpose was uncertain but known to be connected with the enemy V-weapon campaign.

Attacks were now being conducted in daylight, with fighter escort, though the latter was no defence against the increasing flak defences. During an attack against the V-site at Watten, near St Omer, on 25 July, Don's aircraft was bracketed by several bursts of flak, which wrecked the hydraulic system and put an engine out of action. A vocal check of the crew brought no response from the mid upper gunner and the wireless operator was sent to investigate. He returned to say that as he went aft he found the turret empty, but looking aft, caught sight of the gunner baling out of the rear door. Banking the aircraft Don caught sight of a white parachute blossoming over the French countryside as his gunner descended into captivity. Although damaged the aircraft was still flyable and Don headed back to base, using the emergency system to lower the undercarriage and deliver his crew safely back to *terra firma*. A few days later Don felt discomfort and discovered a scab on his right lower leg. After a few days he went to the Medical Officer, who after a little probing extracted a piece of shrapnel, which he proceeded to place in a box with some cotton wool and presented it to Don as if it were a trophy.

At the beginning of August the Squadron returned to naval targets, this time the U-boat pens of the Biscay ports. On 5 August the Squadron was detailed for a daylight operation against the U-boat pens at Brest – always a hotly defended target. Approaching the target on their bombing run the aircraft was engaged by heavy, radar predicted flak. Just after releasing their Tallboy the aircraft was hit by three accurate bursts in quick succession. The navigator and wireless operator were both severely injured by shell fragments. Despite being unable to speak, the navigator held up his log to show Don the correct course for home. While other members of his crew attended the wounded Don began to turn the aircraft to port. As he did so, the starboard outer engine failed and looking out Don saw it was on fire. Activating the extinguishers seemed to have an effect, but almost immediately it was seen that the starboard wing was alight, fed by fuel from damaged tanks. Large holes were also apparent in the fuselage and both wings were riddled with holes. As the fire took hold in the starboard wing, Don realised that the aircraft was doomed and gave the order to bale out.

The flight engineer put Don's 'chute ready for him as he came forward, but the forward hatch jammed. It was eventually freed sufficiently to allow the engineer, navigator and bomb-aimer to escape. Meanwhile the mid-upper gunner went out via the rear door. Aware that the wireless operator was still at his station and unable to move, Don pulled the aircraft into a climb and went back to assist him, going backwards and forwards between him and the



Don Cheney (bottom row, centre) with the crew of his Lancaster before their ill-fated 1944 mission to bomb Nazi submarine pens on the coast of occupied France.

Top row, left to right: Wireless Operator Reg Pool, Flight Engineer Jim Rosher, Rear Gunner Noel Wait, Mid Upper Gunner Mac McRostie.

Bottom row: Navigator Roy Welch, Pilot Don Cheney, Bomb Aimer Len Curtis

controls, alternately pulling the aircraft into a climb and helping the wireless operator attach his parachute push him through the restricted forward escape hatch. Going back to the controls and again pulling the aircraft into a climb Don saw that flames were breaking through the side of the fuselage, burning his face and knee, and cutting off his return to the front hatch. Standing on his seat he jettisoned the dinghy hatch in the canopy roof and pushed himself through the top of the aircraft, leaving the aircraft at about 5,000 feet. He was fortunate to clear the mid-upper turret and aials and pass between the fins. Deploying his chute he drifted down into the waters of Douarnenez Bay. Landing uninjured he inflated his Mae West and discarded his parachute which sank immediately. After about an hour in the water he was rescued by a fishing boat.

He was taken to the local harbour and then hidden at the home of the local harbourmaster and resistance leader for over a month. During that time the house was visited several times by the Germans but Don's presence was never discovered. As the American advance progressed towards Brest, Don, along with an American Air Force evader, were moved to Quimper and then into the countryside until after several days they passed through the American lines and reported to members of Patton's 5th Armoured Division. After a somewhat cursory reception they were sent by train to Rennes where the American was swiftly processed through the system. Not so Don, who

was literally put on the road to hitch a lift to Bayeux, where he was promptly arrested by military police and held in custody until his identity could be proven. After 24 hours a flight was arranged and Don found himself returned to Northolt where he recounted his story.

Although he returned briefly to the Squadron, Don's operational career was over. Repatriated to Canada he married the girl who had been waiting for him to return and embarked on an Economics degree at Queen's University. A distinguished career with the Canadian Trade Commission followed, taking him to numerous overseas postings as far-flung as Moscow and Peru, until he retired in 1977. In his later years Don became the Canadian focus of the 617 Squadron Association, generating its own newsletter and performed sterling work maintaining contact between members and their families from across Canada and USA. He never forgot the courage and loyalty of the French, returning with other members of his crew in 1994 to pay tribute to those who had sheltered them fifty years earlier.

Robert Owen

Les Munro



Les Munro was born in Gisborne, New Zealand on 5th April 1919; he was the eldest child of John and Alice Munro. His father was a shepherd at Marshlands station at nearby Ormond. Les was brought up in fairly spartan conditions in a small cottage that lacked running water and used candles and kerosene for lighting. As soon as they were old enough, Les and his younger brother were responsible for bringing the cows in for milking, chopping wood and helping in the vegetable garden. The pair of them would roam over the station on horseback from an early age, and travelled to school on a pony until his mother bought him a second-hand bicycle. In his own words,

primary school, his parents decided he would attend Gisborne High School where he studied agriculture. He stayed with his uncle and aunt in Gisborne during his studies, and his aunt's regard for etiquette and good manners had a lasting influence on him. His 'apprenticeship' in politics and community groups began while he was at Gisborne High School, becoming a member,

and eventually secretary, of the Gisborne Young Farmers Club. After leaving school in 1935 he worked on a dairy farm and continued in farming until he enlisted in the Royal New Zealand Air Force in 1941.

When he applied for pilot training, he was informed that, because he had not gained his matriculation, he could join immediately as an air gunner, or he could undertake a correspondence course in mathematics to qualify for entry as a pilot. He opted for the latter and it showed his determination and single mindedness that at the same time as he was studying he was managing a farm and living on his own and had no one to turn to for advice. It was a steep learning curve for him to come to grips with the intricacies of algebra, logarithms, trigonometry and its sines and cosines, all double Dutch to him and difficult to understand. During that time he also had to learn Morse code and operate a Morse key and was travelling some distance to Gisborne once a week.

After a year he was finally accepted as a pilot and reported to the RNZAF Initial Training Wing at Levin in July 1941. He was posted to No 2 Elementary Flying Training School at Bell Block, New Plymouth in August. His first flight occurred on 16 August 1941 in a Tiger Moth and lasted 15 minutes. He had to abandon his first solo test – the reason – air sickness! The conditions were rather bumpy and feeling airsick he was unable to concentrate on what the instructor had asked him to do. After another two flights of 30 minutes, he was then sent off solo which he managed successfully. It was towards the end of his time in New Plymouth that the trainees were asked to state their preference as to whether they wanted to go into fighters or bombers, which in turn would determine where they would go for further training. Those opting for fighters would go to Wigram, a small South Island town, while those with a preference for bombers would go to Canada. He opted for bombers, but could never remember the reasons for that decision.

He left Auckland on 20 October 1941 crossing the Pacific to San Francisco – then by rail to Vancouver and to No 4 Service Flying Training School at Saskatoon. On completion of this phase of his training, he sailed from Halifax across the Atlantic to Liverpool in March 1942, and was sent to No 11 Advanced Flying Unit at Shawbury to convert to Airspeed Oxfords, and then on to 29 Operational Training Unit at North Luffenham to fly Wellington bombers in July 1942

On the night of 13/14 September 1942 he was flying his first operation as the captain of a Wellington ordered to attack the port of Bremen. However, immediately after take-off, shortly before midnight, he found that the aircraft would not maintain speed or height and was forced to belly land, with a full bomb load just three minutes after take-off. The crew were all uninjured and managed to evacuate the aircraft before it caught fire and was destroyed as its bomb load detonated.

In November 1942 he was posted to 1654 Conversion unit to learn to fly the Lancaster bomber and moved on to 97 Squadron at RAF Coningsby the following month. Over the first three months of 1943 he flew 20 operations with 97 Squadron with targets ranging from Wilhelmshaven in northern Germany, to St Nazaire in western France, and Turin and Milan to the south in Italy. Amongst these 20 ops were three raids on the “Big City” – Berlin. On only one sortie was he forced to return early – 19 sorties were successfully completed and established his reputation as a bomber pilot.

His last operation with 97 Sqn was to St Nazaire on the 22 March 1943, before he and his crew volunteered for a special operation. They were posted to X Sqn at RAF Scampton. Intensive flying at low-level and at night was practised continuously but none of the aircrew knew what the target would be apart from the squadron commander, Wg Cdr Guy Gibson. X Squadron became 617 Squadron and the legend was born. On the night of 16/17 May, 19 Lancaster bombers took off from RAF Scampton loaded with a single weapon – Barnes Wallis’ revolutionary bouncing bomb to attack the Möhne, Eder and Sorpe dams that fed the Ruhr factories.

Les’ aircraft was the second to take off on the Dams Raid and followed a route across the North Sea to northern Holland and the Zuider Zee. Immediately after crossing the Dutch island of Vlieland, his aircraft was hit by flak, damaging the Lancaster’s rear fuselage and putting the intercom out of action, and also the VHF radio for communicating with other aircraft in the force. It also damaged the Distant Reading Compass. The damage had destroyed vital equipment and without it Les realised that it would be impossible even to co-ordinate his own crew’s attack, so reluctantly he returned home with his bomb and eventually landed back at RAF Scampton with the UPKEEP bouncing bomb still on board.

In June he was awarded the DFC for his operations on 97 Squadron. The citation read: “This officer has taken part in numerous operational flights, many of them sorties against the most heavily defended German and Italian targets. He has invariably pressed home his attacks with great courage and determination, and his leadership sets a fine example to all other captains in the squadron.”

What was left of 617 Squadron, with the addition of replacement crews, then went on to attack numerous high value targets throughout Europe using specialist techniques that Les and his colleagues developed separate from the rest of Bomber Command. Through the rest of 1943 Les’ crew attacked vital targets in northern Italy and southern France. At the end of the year and beginning of 1944, they attacked V-1 rocket flying bomb sites in France and the Antheor railway viaduct – a vital link between Italy and France.

On 14 February 44 Les was promoted to Acting Squadron Leader and became a flight commander. By this time the commanding officer, Wg Cdr Leonard Cheshire had developed his low level marking technique. Les was initially one of the low and medium level markers, but later when the Squadron obtained Mosquitos to carry out the low level marking, Les became the leader of the higher level Lancaster flare force whose job it was to release flares to illuminate the general target area in order that Cheshire and the other low level markers could go in and place their markers accurately. He also took on the role of Link aircraft, relaying the Marker Leader's bombing instructions to the Main Force.

On occasion Munro took senior officers on operations as a passenger, to see at first hand the effectiveness of the technique being developed, and on other occasions carried a cameraman from the Bomber Command Film Production Unit.

In March and April 44 Les was involved in precision attacks against war production factories throughout France and Germany. On the night of 5 June, with Leonard Cheshire as his second pilot, Les took part on Operation Taxable. This operation required precise flying in terms of timing, height, speed and course to complete slightly overlapping circuits that progressed slowly closer to the French coast whilst other crew members pushed out "Window" – strips of metal foil - to create a response on German radar to look as though an invasion fleet was approaching the French coast. It required intense concentration and was physically and mentally demanding. The operation was successful and the D-Day landings were completed without the intervention of German forces from further up the coast.

A few days later Les was one of the first to drop the new Tallboy 12000 pound bomb on an attack on the Saumur tunnel – the tunnel was completely blocked preventing the movement of Panzer divisions to reinforce the German troops facing the invading Allied forces.

For the next two months he continued to fly on precision bombing raids against E-boat pens and rocket sites in France before his final sortie on the Squadron on 6 July. Along with Australian, Dave Shannon and American, Joe McCarthy, he was retired from the squadron having flown operations continuously for 15 months and forming what Cheshire called 'the backbone of the Squadron'.

He had received the Distinguished Service Order in April 1944 – the citation read: "Since being awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross this officer has completed very many sorties, involving attacks on well defended targets. He has displayed unflinching devotion to duty throughout and his example of gallantry and leadership has inspired all. On many occasions his aircraft has been damaged by enemy action but in every instance, Squadron Leader

Munro has flown safely to base. His achievements have been worthy of the greatest praise.”

Following eight months as the commanding officer of a Bomber Defence Training Flight, he returned to New Zealand on October 1945 on the SS Andes, and was demobbed from the RNZAF on 5 February 1946. He completed a five and half month refresher course at Massey College in sheep and cattle farming. He then commenced what was to be another career working for State Advances Corporation (SAC). He met Betty Hill, who was lodging with his father and sister (his mother had died in 1944). The couple married and had five children. His eldest son, John died in a flying accident when he was 35 years old.

His career with SAC took him around New Zealand where he enjoyed the valuation of farms and he was always pleased when a valuation resulted in a settlement of a returned serviceman. He was successful in 1961 in a ballot for a sheep and cattle property at Mapui, which he farmed for 14 years. It was during his time at Mapui that he became involved in local government which lasted for 30 years. When he became chairman and subsequently Mayor of Waitomo County his philosophy was one of decision making by consensus rather than of block voting. When the farm at Mapui was sold he moved to a smaller farm on the outskirts of Te Kuiti which gave him more time for civic duties. After the death of Betty, Les sold the farm and moved to an apartment in Tauranga. He was a regular at the local gym until December last year. At the age of 83 he acquired a computer and, after a couple of Internet courses, learnt the skills to use it to communicate with friends around the world. At the age of 89 he did a parachute jump, and he continued flying, often in World War II era aircraft, until shortly before his death.



After his visit to the Bomber Command Memorial in Hyde Park in 2013, he reflected on the heavy burden of responsibility on the RAFBF to maintain the Memorial in future years. That led him to donate the sale value of his medals and log books to the Endowment Fund - the details of this story is described earlier in this newsletter.

For some years, he was the last surviving Dambuster pilot and this brought many requests for interviews, autographs, signing sessions etc all of which he cheerfully agreed to. He maintained a close relationship with the Squadron

Association and regularly donated his fee for signing fine art prints, first day covers and books to the Association funds. He attended many reunions over the years; his last attendance was at the 70th anniversary commemoration events in 2013.



Les and 'Johnny' Johnson at the 70th Anniversary at RAF Scampton in May 2013

Les believed that his war service in the RNZAF had a major effect on moulding his subsequent career in civilian life. He believed it taught him to get on with other men and respect their points of view. Above all his period as a flight commander in the Cheshire era (whom he had the utmost respect and admiration for) gave him the ability to lead and to direct, attributes which served him well during his time in the State Advances Corporation and during his Local Government career. He touched many people in many different ways as he lived his life and expected nothing in return.

Chris Henderson

(with contributions from Graeme Munro and Robert Owen)

Tirpitz Dinner 7th November 2015

The 2015 Tirpitz Dinner will take place on Saturday 7th November at the Petwood Hotel. A memorial service will be held at the Squadron Memorials on Sunday 8th November. 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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Layout and Typesetting by Chris Henderson