



# Après Moi

The 617 Squadron  
Association Newsletter

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Autumn 2017



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**Cover Photo:** Honorary members of the Association, Marielle Plugge and her father, Jan van Dalen who have tended the grave of Sqn Ldr Meliyn 'Dinghy' Young DFC & Bar and other Dambuster graves in the Netherlands for many years.

## Editorial

I sincerely hope that you have enjoyed the summer and are now looking forward to the Tirpitz reunion in November. The date and details are provided later within this edition. I have again been really pleased to see so many of you take the opportunity of providing me with your story. I am always on the lookout for more, so please again consider dropping me a note with tales from your time on 617 Squadron. Sadly, I shall be absent from the reunion in November due to my imminent deployment to Nigeria. Fear not, I remain in contact via email and will hopefully be back in time for the May 18 reunion and the RAF100 events. On that note, I am also excited to be joining some of our colleagues in a cycle event from Scampton to the Möhne Dam next year, so look out for an article on the conclusion next summer.

I was saddened to hear that Tim Nicoll passed away in late August. Tim had recently submitted a letter and a number of articles to *Après Moi* about his time on 617 Squadron; these will be published in this and future issues. As a former Senior Engineering Officer in the early 1970s, he has offered us some Vulcan-era memories that I hope you will enjoy. Tim and his family remain in our thoughts.

**Yours  
Stu Clarke**

### Tirpitz Dinner 2017

The 2017 Tirpitz Dinner will be on Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> November, at the Petwood Hotel. A memorial service will be held at the Squadron Memorials on the Sunday. 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.

**Deadline for Next Newsletter**

**31st December 2017**

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# Walters' Warblings

Ladies and Gentlemen,

You may recall that we recently set up the 'Guy Gibson VC flying bursary' to sponsor an Air Training Corps/Combined Cadet Force cadet to solo standard. Well, our first candidate, Annie Cleve, went solo over the summer. Annie has written a brief article about her experience which, I think, demonstrates how well your subscriptions are being used.

I would also like to welcome several new Associate members and 'Friends' of the Association. Friends are people (other than partners of full members) who have been proposed by a member for their service to the Association and have been elected at the AGM. By virtue of the proven track record that saw them elected, Friends have a significant amount to offer the Association in terms of much-needed horsepower, support and friendship.

The centenary of Leonard Cheshire's birth on 7 September 2017 was marked by our Historian, Dr Rob Owen, supporting Cheshire disAbility during a couple of events in London. This marked the start of a series of significant events for the Association.

Plans for the Dams 75<sup>th</sup> are firming up. It is hoped that a joint RAF/Association event will be held at the Petwood on 12 May 2018 as part of the RAF Centenary celebrations with a ceremonial parade and dining-in night, so please pencil the date into your diaries. We are looking at ways of raising funds to make it a fitting event. 617 Squadron reforms in the States next spring and returns to RAF Marham in the summer. The new Squadron will be holding an event at Marham in August 2018 to mark the centenary of Gibson's birth and the presentation of a new Sqn standard to which OC 617 Squadron, Wing Commander John Butcher, has kindly invited Association members.

We are developing a plan with IX Squadron for a joint event to commemorate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the final Tirpitz Raid in Tromsø. The current concept is to fly to Norway on Monday 11 November, holding a service and dinner on the anniversary itself on Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup>, returning Wednesday 13 November 2019 – another date for your diaries.

Thank you to everyone who completed the on-line survey earlier this year. Perhaps predictably, your feedback generated more questions rather than answers, so we hope to launch another, more thorough, survey so that we fully understand what the membership wants from the Association before we make any changes to the format of our events. As always, I very much look forward to seeing you and your families at the next reunion.

**Yours aye,  
Andrew Walters**

## Storm Shadow David Robertson

The introduction of Tornado GR4 into Service with the Royal Air Force in 2000 brought a whole range of new capabilities with a plethora of new weapons systems able to be integrated into the aircraft. It was therefore decided that individual squadrons would be charged with 'taking the lead' on assisting the introduction into Service for nominated systems. This involved interaction between Air Staffs, manufacturers, the Air Warfare Centre (AWC) and the lead squadron. No 617 Squadron was charged with leading the introduction into Service of Storm Shadow, a conventionally armed stand-off missile born out of Staff Requirement 1236. For the first two years of our task, the Squadron's involvement in Storm Shadow was minimal with flight trials conducted in the USA and warhead trials at Pendine Sands in South Wales. The Squadron's responsibility was limited to and focussed on developing Storm Shadow Standard Operating Procedures (SOP), once information became available. This started to change in late summer of 2002 when it became clear that military action in Iraq might be on the horizon. At that time, the Squadron was deployed to Ali Al Salem (AAS) in Kuwait on Operation RESINATE SOUTH (Op RS), policing the no-fly zone in Southern Iraq, not returning to RAF Lossiemouth until the end of September 2002. A decision was made for a hardened purpose-built storage area to be constructed at AAS and a handful of our engineers were seconded to the AWC to assist in the flight trials, which provided them with valuable experience of loading and unloading the weapon.

In the run-up to Christmas, we received a new Storm Shadow/GR4 software load together with two drill rounds that would provide us with loading/unloading, ground and flight carriage training opportunities. This contrasted with the 1991 Gulf War where crews gained carriage experience of JP233 by flying with real weapons. As Christmas was fast approaching, we were told to train six aircrews and 'sufficient' engineers to deploy a capability. Sqn Ldr Andy Myers, the Squadron's Weapons Leader, and Flt Lts Andy 'Turkey' Turk and Bob Chevli, the Squadron's Qualified Weapons Instructors (QWI) set to work and in a very short space of time, they developed a series of SOP for weapon ground, flight and firing procedures. Chief Technician Paul Brown developed similar procedures for the engineers in Storm Shadow ground handling, loading and unloading. This was conducted in direct liaison with the AWC and MBDA's weapons and planning experts. Storm Shadow was a joint RAF/French Air Force (FAF) project with the French version called Scalp. As part of their SOP work, Turkey and Bob were shown the planning system that MBDA developed and they immediately saw a problem. In FAF planning systems, the aircraft

turns ahead of a waypoint, with the aircraft setting off from the waypoint on planned track. In the RAF planning systems, the aircraft reaches a waypoint and then makes a turn onto its outbound track. This demonstrated one of the reasons why it makes sense for front-line users to be directly involved with the manufacturers at an early development stage. Whilst it is understood that there is reluctance from Air Staffs to involve users to avoid requirements creep, it can also pay dividends and early sight permits Air Staff-approved corrections to be made in time. Whilst the politics of where we would operate from were being played out, the Squadron air and ground crews continued to train in all disciplines that would be required if deployed. Unfortunately, different GR4 software loads were required for different weapons plus aircraft were removed from the line to be converted to 'operational standard'. This limited the number of aircraft available for training and on the number of sorties that were achieved. However, we managed to get six trained Storm Shadow aircrews up to speed in Storm Shadow carriage and launching procedures by the end of the first week in February, which was our initial scheduled deployment date. Subsequently, Air Vice Marshal Glen Torpey, the UK Air Component Commander (UKACC), informed us that the UKHQ would stand up on 15th February and that by then he wanted a demonstrated Storm Shadow capability. Cutting it fine, we deployed from Lossiemouth on 14<sup>th</sup> February, arriving at AAS the following day. The rest of the Squadron's air and ground crews deployed a week or so later to Al Udeid, Qatar as part of the Lossiemouth Tornado deployment there.

For the aircrew, the initial few days at AAS were used principally to 'get up to speed' in operational procedures and Op RS Special Instructions (SPINS) together with 'chalk and talk' update briefs given by the QWIs on weapons and defensive systems that we were likely to operate with. Andy Myers provided a Storm Shadow briefing to the detachment and emphasised to all there that as the MOD had officially denied that Storm Shadow would be used, everything to do with Storm Shadow needed to be kept as 'need to know'. We were also informed that the media would record Storm Shadow at every opportunity so that after the first wave, if it went well, the UK would then tell the world what had been achieved but until then, all Storm Shadow activity was secret. However, even so, communication security proved a problem in the first few weeks, with several transmissions made over hand-held radios referring openly to the movement of Storm Shadow. Consequently, the weapons became referred to initially as 'RAPTOR 2' and then 'Combat Marrows'. The engineers, led by Warrant Officer Ian Winters, were well-versed in the AAS environment and settled in quickly, although as normal operations and training continued, the Storm Shadow Team was split between the two shift patterns that the resident

engineers had running. This arrangement created a bit of a headache for Ian when Storm Shadow loading or tasking was required and needed copious amounts of Ian's tact, subtlety, man-management and organisational skills to maintain a harmonious atmosphere amongst the engineering teams.



I spoke to the UKACC Chief of Staff (COS), Group Captain Bob McAlpine, and informed him that the Squadron had demonstrated a Storm Shadow capability up to a point but we were concerned that whilst flight trials had been undertaken, a live Storm Shadow missile had not even been loaded to a Tornado GR4 before, let alone flown or fired from one. I also outlined the potential risks concerning reverse thrust and thermal shock to the missiles but suggested that once the Service Deviation (SD), which provided authorisation to fly with the missile and software combined was issued, that we load two missiles and fly them up to a simulated 'power on' point. This would provide us with greater confidence in our procedures. Fortunately, he agreed and gave permission for us to conduct a night sortie up to the point where the missile was powered up. I felt then that proving the capability was more important than potentially trashing two missiles and was pleased with McAlpine's forward-leaning attitude. The Tornado GR4 used the Tornado Advanced Mission Planning Aid (TAMPA)



to plan sorties and weapon profiles although the Storm Shadow part of mission planning was still very immature. Consequently, it was agreed that the missile mission planning (from target backwards to weapon release point) would be conducted at PJHQ and that this information would be transmitted in a data file over satellite to AAS. The data file with the missile release point would then be the start point for the aircraft mission plan, which was from take-off to weapon release point and return to base (RTB). This became a limitation to our flexibility to amend target data or timing of missions but it was the only solution that provided an operational capability for a missile that wasn't due to enter Service with the RAF for at least another couple of years. Furthermore, if we involved PJHQ in our plan to fly a live sortie, it would also provide an end-to-end test of our capability up to a weapon release point. On 25<sup>th</sup> February the SD notification arrived, two data files were received from PJHQ and two live missiles were loaded and checked by the engineers and the QWIs. Sqn Ldr 'Noddy' Knowles and Turkey planned and flew a simulated live sortie within Kuwait and whilst all was good with the loading and ground operations, when the start of the launch sequence was initiated (before power was applied to the missiles), only the left-hand missile indicated that all was well. The right-hand missile eventually became good but it would not have done so in time for launch on Night One.

An extensive debrief and several discussions took place over the next two days to try to establish why the missile would not have been available when required. We determined that there were two possible explanations for the failure; a loose connection or a pylon switch in the wrong position. As the latter would have affected the missile loading, I favoured a loose connection. As this was 617 Squadron's most important task during my tenure in command, I wanted to make sure that the system would work when Night One came and therefore asked for and received, McAlps' approval to fly the missiles again. This time, we decided to load the same missiles, containing the same mission files, to the same aircraft, but on opposite pylons. The groundcrew double and triple-checked all connections and switches and Andy and I got airborne. We flew two representative sortie profiles and initiated two simulated missile attacks, on each occasion with no problems. We were pleased and believed that we were right to fly the missiles as we now felt that we had done as much as we could to provide an operational capability.

On 14<sup>th</sup> March, details of our likely contribution to the first night indicated that four Tornado GR4 each loaded with two Storm Shadow would be required on the first wave with another two aircraft on the second wave of strikes. This would continue for the first three nights. We planned to operate in pairs with

Andy Myers and me leading Noddy and Turkey in the first pair, Bob Chevli and Flt Lt Andy 'Ray' Reardon leading Lt (RN) Phil 'Flea' Lee and Sqn Ldr Mike 'Old Bloke' Wood in the second pair and Flt Lt Kev Gambold and Flt Lt Toby Warren leading Flt Lt Bobby Bethell and Flt Lt Al Reid in the third pair.

Information about Storm Shadow targets and launch points for Wave One were received the following day and plotted, with Wave Two to follow. We had a mix of Storm Shadow missiles deployed at AAS; Initial Operating Capability (IOC) and Full Operating Capability (FOC) with the FOC missiles being more capable and it was critical that the correct missiles were allocated to the correct targets. So, not only were we challenged by an aircraft loser plot if an aircraft became unserviceable, when planning missions, we also had a missile loser plot to consider. I asked UKHQ for guidance on what we should do if missiles failed to release from the aircraft - should we jettison them into the desert or bring them home? Unsurprisingly, the guidance provided was to bring them home. The planned mission that our pair was due to fly concerned me greatly, as to reach the missile release point, which itself was within a SA3 Missile Engagement Zone (MEZ), we would need to pass very close to two active fighter airfields. I therefore emailed McAlps to let him know of my concern. The following day, I received McAlps' response that informed me that we would be accompanied by F-16CJ, EA-6B and F-15C aircraft, which made me feel much more comfortable. Andy and I looked at our original plan that Bob and Turkey had updated overnight with the actual target coordinates and somehow, we were now on negative combat fuel i.e. we did not have enough fuel to conduct the mission as planned. A bit of head scratching before I realised that they had not 'dropped' the Storm Shadow missiles at the targets. A quick replan and now we had 300kg combat (spare) fuel.

On 17<sup>th</sup> March 2003, the Detachment Commander, Group Captain Simon Dobb, informed the squadron commanders and warlords at AAS, that the first air offensive of the Iraq War would take place on 21<sup>st</sup> March, which just happened to coincide with the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the formation of 617 Squadron – sweet. The following day, training waves were cancelled to improve aircraft availability, and whilst Op RS and 'shaping missions' continued within Iraqi airspace, most of our concentration was focussed on the first missions. With all data for the first missions received, we decided to load the Storm Shadow aircraft with missiles and to validate all the real data files. The missiles were loaded in less than 30 mins per weapon, which was excellent, and all data files were validated. However, just before completing all checks, one of the missiles suffered a technical failure, which was not recoverable and the missile needed to be replaced. However, on 19<sup>th</sup> March, and only two days before the first Storm Shadow launch, we





received a message from MBDA in the UK informing us that at the UK missile storage facility, they had discovered 'safety pins' still in place on missiles received from the French part of the company. If this were the case on our missiles, it would mean that the wings would not deploy post-release and the missile would fall into the desert. When diagrams of the checks that we needed to perform were faxed to us from the UK, the 'safety

pins' turned out to be small grub screws that could be detected without having to dismantle the missile and that once each missile had been 'broken out' from their storage crates, it would only take about 15 mins per missile to conduct the check. The engineers set to on this task for each missile that we had at AAS and found that all grub screws had been removed, however, it was still something that distracted us from the task in hand.

The day before our first missions, the news was full of the US attacks on the Iraqi leadership. That afternoon, Kuwait suffered its first attack when two surface-to-surface missiles were launched from Iraq. The Patriot air defence missiles could be heard launching against them as we dashed for the bunker, which was a reinforced sewage drain. No one panicked and the 'hostiles clear' call was soon followed by the all clear. Just as we had undressed out of our NBC suits and packed everything away, another attack was made and we reconvened inside the same bunker although this stay was shorter-lived. When back in operations, we continued with our mission planning and I was asked an urgent question by the UKHQ – could we bring our attack forward by 12 hours? This was not possible, as we did not have the facility in ASS to make amendments to the missile data files. One hour later, another attack was made and we again ran for the shelter and dressed in our NBC kit. Eventually, we finished our planning and went back to the Combined Mess for dinner. I had just picked up my plate when another air raid was called. I ran to the shelter, approximately 400 yards away, with my mask on – a big mistake as the flow of air into the mask is not great, and certainly not good enough to cope with running. Once I reached the shelter I was close to suffocating but managed to control my breathing and eventually got dressed – but I learnt a good lesson from that. **To be continued**

## Masirah by Tim Nicoll

Those of you from the Vulcan days who travelled through RAF Masirah probably wished that you hadn't, while those of you who didn't probably still thank your lucky stars! As for those of us who spent a tour there, we will surely remember the shock upon arrival as we stepped off our aircraft. The prospect of spending nine months in that dust, heat and almost complete absence of vegetation rather than in the holiday camp atmosphere of RAF Akrotiri, or even on RAF Gan seemed a terribly unfair roll of the dice. But I think I speak for everyone when I remark that the island soon exerted a fascination upon even the most skeptical of us.

Our work ethic and pride in our role as a staging post pervaded the station. Unlike the other two places mentioned, we never claimed to be full to capacity and were always prepared by one means or another to find the resources to accept yet another aircraft – even to the extent on one occasion, of parking aircraft on the camp roads. From time to time we had the added excitement, and complete break in routine, when the whole base geared up to support at no notice a detachment of Vulcans, armed with simulated nuclear weapons, at 15 minutes' readiness. But carrying a personal weapon for 24 hours a day soon became rather tedious - it was best left to the RAF Regiment!

Off duty there was the fascination for many of us of watching the turtles coming ashore each to lay up to 200 eggs; and of turning them in the direction of the sea when they became disorientated by the rising sun. Again, to keep us mentally alert we could always try to anticipate the next ruse the wild camels would adopt to get within the perimeter fence. If successful they would forage for just about anything even vaguely edible, ranging from discarded fruit skin to flip-flops. Most of all we valued the occasional opportunity to leave the base and explore a little of the island.

There were no roads outside the base, merely tracks that from time to time disappeared into seas of sand. Consequently, although desirable as a derring-do tale for the bar, circumnavigation of the island within a day was an exhausting undertaking. Instead a small sandy wadi featuring the only two palm trees on the island became a popular destination. It felt like heaven to sit in their shade and drink a cold Tiger beer from an Australian-style "stubby". The old RAF seaplane base on the mainland side of the island, established in the nineteen twenties for the biplane seaplanes of that era and used again in WWII for Catalinas, gave testimony to the spread of air power to the Far East. Not only was it an interesting destination, it made us quite thankful to be living on land, albeit in aluminum huts, rather than on the water in steel lighters.

A destination far closer to base and carrying an interesting tale in its own right was the memorial near the northern tip of the island, erected in 1943 by a group of airmen, to the crew of the SS Baron Innerdale. The fact that the stone mason misspelt "Innerdale" as "Inverdale" deducts nothing from the poignancy of the story.

The ship, of 3,344 tons and 335 feet in length, had been built on the Clyde in April 1896 and had been owned from new by the Ardrossan firm of Hogarth and Sons. On 29 July 1904 she had set out from Karachi, bound for Liverpool, with a cargo of grain and timber. Four days later, during the South West Monsoon, in the thick, squally weather associated with the southern coast of Arabia at that time of year, she ran aground on a small uninhabited island of the Kuria Muria group about 25 miles off the Omani coast. As she was not fitted with radio, the captain could only hope that a passing ship would come to his rescue.

The explanation of the stranding given to Parliament on 21 March 1905 seems both contradictory and confused. However, subsequent reconstruction of events suggests that on 6 August the captain and 21 of the crew took to a lifeboat leaving the ship, which was in no danger of sinking, in the care of 10 or 12 men. It remains a mystery why the captain took so many men with him but it is assumed he intended to allow the northeasterly current to carry him along the Omani coast into the shipping lanes of the Arabian Gulf where he could find assistance. On 17 August the SS Prome sighted the Baron Innerdale, took off some of the crew and reported the matter to The India Office in Aden. In response the SS Dalhousie was dispatched to search for the missing lifeboat. Sultan Faisal bin Turki of Oman himself became involved in the search along with HMS Merlin. On 12 September the Sultan arrived at Masirah to discover that the lifeboat had landed there. It appears that the islanders were at first friendly but that at some stage one of the crew fired a pistol. Whether the crew feared for their safety or there was an accidental discharge will never be known. Suffice to say, the local people killed the whole crew, with the exception of the cabin boy, and buried them near to the site of the current memorial. The Sultan's concept of justice was to execute nine of the ringleaders and bury them close to their victims.

*Just to tie up a few loose ends.....*

Although an apocryphal story relates that the cabin boy was adopted by a local tribe and brought up as an Omani, he was in fact taken aboard the Dalhousie.

Sultan Faisal imposed the further punishment that Masirah islanders could not build permanent homes. Hence, as late as the 1970s, they were still living in *burastis* made from palm fronds. A quick glance at Google Earth shows that Sultan Qaboos must have relaxed this rule.

Ironically, the Baron Innerdale was refloated and, under her own steam, reached Bombay on Christmas Day. After repairs she put to sea again only to sink in the Red Sea on 27 October 1914 following a collision with the SS African Monarch.

That the cross on the memorial remains intact, is a tribute to the Ibadhi concept of Islam, prominent in Oman, which recognises that there are perceptions of God or Allah other than their own.

# Letters to the Editor

## **Guy Gibson VC Flying Scholarship**

*The Association's current main charitable endeavour is the sponsoring of a young member of the Air Training Corps or Combined Cadet Force to solo standard through the Air League's Flying Scholarship scheme. Our first scholar, Cadet Warrant Officer Annabelle Cleve, has written us the following report:*

Dear 617 Squadron Association,

I just want to say how grateful I am for the sponsorship from the 617 Squadron Association for me to do my flying scholarship at Tayside Aviation. I had a fantastic 10 days continuing on from my previous 12 hours flying experience that I had undertaken in the Aquila last year, whilst on the Air Cadet Pilot Scheme.

This year, I had the privilege to fly the PA28 Warrior II which was certainly very different to the Aquila! Despite this, my skills on the Aquila were easily transferred and I thoroughly enjoyed flying the Warrior! With hard work and growing confidence with the Warrior, I was able to achieve solo standard and did my first solo for 20 minutes, followed by 1 hour and 35 minutes of solo circuits across the following days. It certainly was an amazing feeling and experience to fly solo in an aircraft, I think it's safe to say I have well and truly got the flying bug! Being responsible for an aircraft with the absence of an instructor is such a valuable way to learn and gain experience in my opinion, something of which I hope to get the opportunity to do again.



In terms of total flying experience I am now at 24 hours, also including steep turns and practice forced landings, some new skills which I learnt on my scholarship. During my time at Tayside Aviation I met some incredible young people, who have the same drive and passion as myself, many of which I hope to stay in contact with in the future!

The next step for me is to apply to Air League again next year and continue towards my PPL, as it is really something that would love to continue with. I have taken up a University place to study Aviation Technology with Pilot Studies at the University of Leeds, with the intention of joining a University Air Squadron, to gain as much flying experience as I can. As a career prospect, I am looking into joining the Royal Air Force as a pilot after I graduate.

On a personal note, I would like to thank the 617 Squadron Association for providing me with such an incredible opportunity to pursue my ambition and work closer to my ultimate goal. Being a Lincolnshire girl myself and a cadet for five years, I felt very honoured to be sponsored by the Association, as I have grown up knowing so much about the Squadron and its amazing history. When my brother and I were young children, our parents would often take us out to lunch at the Petwood Hotel on a Sunday and they would take us around the old Officers Mess in the hotel, to look and learn about the Squadron memorabilia.

Once again thank you so much for giving me this opportunity to pursue my love for flying.

**Yours faithfully,  
Annabelle Cleve**

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Dear Editor,

A few days ago, having enjoyed "Salmon Fishing in the Yemen", for the second time, my thoughts went back to Goose Bay in the early seventies. In case the connection is not immediately apparent, I invite the Vulcan era personnel to recall the former B58 pilot who acted as OC Ops Wg on the USAF side of the base. In which case, they may remember his obsession with salmon fishing. This led me to wonder how many other people, like me, had been offered a trip in the station flight Beaver, fitted with floats, to a particularly well stocked lake?

There must surely be numerous other stories to be told about our visits to Omaha on Rangers, McCoy or Barksdale for Giant Voice, Nellis for Red Flag or our forays to downtown Sacramento or San Francisco when staging through Travis. In the course of my many visits to the USA, Royce Hodge, a cowboy and poet

became a valued friend. So, let me kick the ball into play, hopefully creating a wry smile and perhaps even triggering some deeper thoughts, by quoting him:

*There's never been a breed of man around the World and back  
That joked as free as cowboys but still it is fact  
That sitting 'round the wagons when the stars ain't far away  
They sometimes talk as serious as preachers on the prey.  
"Now there's one creek we all must cross" observes old Bobby John  
"And no man really knows when his time is coming in,  
If I had my choosing of the place I'm doomed to die  
I'd pick the highest mountaintop right up against the sky.  
Now I might not git to heaven that's one thing no man can tell  
But that old devil would sure have to climb to round me up for Hell."  
"I'm different that way" says Lionel Jim with pride,  
"I'd die in Texas where the plains are flat and wide,  
For if so there'd be horses in that land we speak about  
An' I'd like to wake up riding where a man can stretch 'em out."  
Now Butch who wants his boots off said he'd like to die in bed  
Amongst his weeping kinfolk with a pillow 'neath his head.  
As he's rolled up in a tarp so long out where the cattle range,  
He'd like to die in bed, if only for the change.  
They all expressed their wishes with good reasons for the same  
Leaving Bravo Bill the only one who ain't put in his claim.  
He sat there kind of studying and scratching at his hand  
"Well boys when I'm due to quit I just don't give a dam,  
I'd just as soon be afoot as on a bucking horse  
To know when, and where, and what for is just up to the Boss.  
To freeze up in some snowdrift or git drowned in some draw  
I just ain't got no bother when my time comes to tour.  
It really wouldn't matter where the place is but I'd like to have the chance  
To know the true location just a little in advance.  
Now it might be near, it might be far, it really wouldn't matter where  
But if I sure enough know the place, why I'd stay away from there!*

I now look forward to reading lots of tall tales!

**Yours,  
Tim Nicoll**



## Final Landings

### Frank Tilley



Frank Tilley was born in Hackney, London, on Boxing Day 1922, the youngest of 8 children. After education at the Grocer's Grammar School, Hackney and Hackney Technical College, he joined Dessouter Brothers, in Hendon, manufacturers of artificial limbs.

The work did not exactly fire Frank's enthusiasm. The call for men to join the forces at the outbreak of war seemed to offer an escape route, but it was not to be. Much to Frank's dismay he discovered that he was in a "reserved" occupation. However, he eventually discovered a loophole – the embargo on his recruitment did not extend to RAF aircrew.

So, it was that in early 1943 that Frank presented himself at RAF

Cardington as an aspiring aviator. Deterred by the length of training required to become a pilot, he opted for a trade which admirably suited to his engineering aptitude – that of Flight Engineer. A few months later he was formally called up and instructed to report to the Aircrew Reception Centre at Lord's cricket ground in St John's Wood, before being posted to No 3 Initial Training Wing at Torquay, where he was introduced to the discipline of service life. After six weeks of lectures on Air Force Law, endless drill and relentless physical education and swimming designed to transform pale civilians into toned fighting men, he was posted to No 4 School of Technical Training at St Athan, in South Wales in September 1943.

Here Frank was taught the intricacies of aircraft engineering and systems; engine management to obtain the most economical fuel consumption and optimum power settings, fuel management to balance the aircraft and reduce the strain on its structure, and a myriad of other technical details necessary to maintain the aircraft systems in the air. Despite his aircrew status, Frank had yet to

experience any form of flying; training was conducted using diagrams and test rigs, graduating to the real thing in the form of the written off aircraft relegated to ground instructional airframes.

By March 1944 Frank was deemed sufficiently proficient to become part of a bomber crew. Along with others from his course he was posted to No 1660 Conversion Unit at Swinderby, Lincs. Here he teamed up with six other young men who had already formed a crew and had been training on Vickers Wellingtons. Now they were about to convert to the Short Stirling, a more complicated machine, necessitating a seventh crew member – the Flight Engineer.

The crew that Frank joined reflected the cosmopolitan and all-embracing social nature of Bomber Command. The captain Arthur Joplin ('Joppy' to the crew) was a 20 year old clerk from New Zealand; the bomb aimer, Loftus Hebbard, a fellow Kiwi, at 24, the oldest member of the crew. From Lancashire Basil Fish the navigator, had been studying civil engineering at Manchester University, and air gunner Robertson Yates was a classics scholar; the other gunner had been a carder in a woollen mill. Having mastered the Stirling the crew transferred to a so-called "Finishing School" at Syerston, for a week or so of learning to master the machine in which they would go to war, the Avro Lancaster.

At the completion of this course the crew were dumbstruck to learn that they were to be posted to No 617 Squadron – the "Dambusters" based at Woodhall Spa. This was a special duties squadron, which normally only took on experienced crews who had already survived a tour of 30 operations. However, an experiment was being introduced whereby a few new crews who had demonstrated above average ability were posted directly to the Squadron. It was intended that the newcomers would learn by example and osmosis, in effect being fast tracked to a level of operational expertise.

They arrived on the Squadron in mid-August 1944, at first feeling rather overwhelmed by the propensity of experienced crews and unsure as to how they would be received as a "sprog" crew. Their concern was unfounded. After an initial wariness they found themselves absorbed into the routine of extensive practice and training in order to achieve the precision for which the Squadron was renowned. It was a steep learning curve, but they found support and encouragement.

The crew's first operation came a fortnight later, no easy "milk run" but a daylight attack against the heavily defended port at Brest. On this occasion the target was not the reinforced concrete U-boat pens, necessitating the

12,000lb 'Tallboy' deep penetration bomb, but various vessels in the harbour attacked with 12 x 1,000lb bombs. All seemed to go well, but they were unable to observe any results owing to smoke and spray.

The crew had insufficient experience to participate in the Squadron's next operation, their first attack on the German battleship Tirpitz, flown from an advanced base in Russia. For his second operation, Frank found himself as stand in Flight Engineer for S/Ldr Drew Wyness for a night attack against the Dortmund Ems Canal. It was a tough operation. Poor weather over the target forced the crew to return with their 'Tallboy' – but at several times during the return flight their heavily laden aircraft had to fend off approaching German night fighters. They were fortunate, although one of the Squadron's aircraft was not so lucky.

'Tallboys' were in extremely short supply, and needed to be conserved whenever possible. A daylight operation to attack the sea wall at Walcheren on 3 October saw the squadron positioned at the end of an attack by other aircraft of Bomber Command. On arrival the target was seen already to be breached and their bomb was brought home. Their first opportunity to release this weapon came four days later, during an operation against the Kembs barrage, on the River Rhine, near Basle. The attack was to be made in two parts – an initial high-level force to cause confusion and distract the defences, followed by six aircraft coming in along the river at 600 feet. Bombing from 7,500' in the first wave, the crew reported a very near miss close to the barrage.

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

long flight home was exacerbated by headwinds and despite Frank's careful management of fuel the additional fuel carried it was deemed prudent to land at Sumburgh in the Shetlands to refuel before finally returning to Woodhall.

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

After one more daylight attack, against the R-boat pens at IJmuiden the Squadron found themselves detailed on 21 December 1944 for a deep penetration night attack against an oil refinery at Politz, near Stettin (Szczecin) in Poland. For four of the crew, including the pilot, it would be their first night operation over Germany and to make things more difficult there was the expectation of poor weather on return to the UK necessitating possible diversion to other airfields at the end of an eight hour flight. The outward flight was uneventful and the crew reached the designated area, but found that the target marking appeared haphazard. After releasing their 'Tallboy' against a nominated marker they headed for home, setting course for their designated diversionary base in Scotland, which would have not only the advantage of clear weather, but would also shorten the length of the flight. Soon afterwards the wireless operator reported that they were being ordered to return to Lincolnshire. Although this would stretch their fuel reserves Frank considered it was a viable option and they headed for Woodhall Spa. As they crossed the coast it became apparent that Lincolnshire was still shrouded in fog. A further instruction was received for all aircraft to land at the first available airfield. It seemed that crew were in luck, for very soon they saw a glow through the murk which was identified as the airfield at Ludford Magna. That this was visible was solely due to the fact that it was one of a small number of airfields equipped with FIDO –using burning petrol to disperse fog on the runway approach enabling aircraft to land in such conditions. Joppy homed in on the glow and circled, calling up and asking permission to land. There was no reply. The crew were now in a perilous position. Other aircraft would also be circling, increasing the risk of collision, and Frank reported that their fuel state prevented diversion to any fog free airfield. They needed to land as soon as possible and were also aware of the rising ground of the Lincolnshire Wolds beneath. A few minutes later, while still circling, a sudden shudder ran through the aircraft as the port wing brushed a hillside. Looking out past his pilot, Frank was seemingly aware of the wing beyond the outer

engine bending upwards. Joppy immediately called for more power and Frank responded by pushing the throttles forward. The aircraft was still airborne, but only just, and would not remain so for long. After a further bump, a horrendous noise and violent shaking then everything became still. Frank looked back and saw that the cockpit and nose had broken off from the main fuselage. Shouting to the navigator to get out, since the wreckage was on fire, he tried to get clear, but found that he could hardly stand. With great effort he crawled and dragged himself clear of the cockpit and to relative safety. Looking around him, he saw the Basil Fish, the navigator removing smouldering flying kit from the wireless operator before heading back to the blazing wreckage to rescue Joppy who was trapped in his seat. This done, the navigator went back in effort to locate other members of the crew, but the heat of the flames drove him back. Realising that he was the least injured and the only one of five survivors with any degree of mobility Basil set off across the fields in search of assistance, having briefed Frank to listen out for a series of whistle blasts that would signal his return. Nearly three hours later Frank heard a whistle, and sounded his own in reply to guide the rescuers to the injured.

Frank was admitted to the RAF Hospital at Rauceby with a broken leg and severe bruising to the other. Considering that he was not strapped in at the time of the crash since his role as flight engineer required him to stand for much of the time next to the pilot, or perch on a rudimentary canvas sling seat, he was incredibly fortunate not to be far more severely injured. As his condition improved, he was sent to Hoylake for convalescence before returning to Woodhall Spa in August 1945. However, by now the European war was over, and following V-J Frank was keen to return to civilian life. However, it would be another eighteen months until this could be achieved, during which Frank re-mustered to a clerical role, serving with Polish units operating in Transport Command and finally left the Service in February 1947 to commence a new career with the National Cash Register Company, which eventually led him into the world of computing. He retired as Worldwide Technical Services Manager for ICL in 1982.

**Robert Owen**

## Tim Nicoll



Tim Nicoll was commissioned in the Technical Branch and trained as an engineer at RAF Henlow. On completion of his course, he took the opportunity to undertake pilot training. On graduation he opted to complete a flying tour, and completed this on 103 Squadron flying Whirlwind helicopters in Borneo. He subsequently wrote an excellent book about his experiences entitled '*A Tour in Borneo with 103 Squadron Royal Air Force*'.

By the early 1960s, Malaysia had been formed, incorporating Sarawak and Sabah in the north-western part of Borneo with the Indonesian controlled area to the south. Indonesia was becoming

increasingly communist and expansionist. Guerrillas, with the backing of the Indonesian Army, attempted to annex the northern part of the island, to gain control of the extensive oil reserves. The hostilities which followed, officially given the misleading misnomer 'Confrontation', lasted until November 1966.

Tim joined 103 Sqn at RAF Seletar in Singapore in August 1965 at the age of 27 for a two-year tour in which he flew almost 300 operational sorties. Before deployment to Borneo, he attended the Far East Air Force Survival & Parachute School where he completed the rigorous training course in the Malayan jungle. Interestingly, about half the students with him were USAF aircrew destined for service in Vietnam.

Tim also qualified as a Search and Rescue (SAR) pilot; 103 Sqn had SAR detachments at RAF Seletar and at RAAF Butterworth near the Thai border. However, most of the aircrew and aircraft were deployed to Kuching in Sarawak, Borneo where 66 Sqn also operated four Belvedere twin-rotor helicopters.

Living accommodation in Kuching was very basic with most buildings placed on raised stilts where at least it was dry underfoot, even if the roofs leaked. OC 103 Sqn decided that Tim's aeronautical engineering qualifications also qualified him as a civil engineer and he was instructed to build a squadron toilet. Most materials for the toilet were 'acquired' locally but one item missing was a hand washbasin. In return for dropping off an SAS NCO next to the SAS fortified



compound in town, thus saving him a journey by Land Rover from the airfield, Tim discovered on his return to Kuching not one but a crate of six washbasins. The NCO explained later that if he had removed a single basin it would have been noticed, but by taking the whole crate it would be assumed that it had never arrived on the monthly landing craft!

Whereas the Dutch had surveyed their East Indies before independence, the same had not been done for Sarawak; aircrew had to make their own maps of the area. This put them in the position of being more sure of their location when over enemy territory than when over their own.

Tim's tour in Borneo was full of incidents which are recounted in his book, and undoubtedly, he helped save a number of lives, not just soldiers but also some of the indigenous population. In recognition of his exceptional flying skill and judgement he was awarded a Green Endorsement in his flying logbook. The endorsement describes how, on 26 February 1966, he was detailed to evacuate casualties from a forward location near the border between Sarawak and Indonesia. The casualties were in a clearing in primary jungle which was not large enough to allow a landing and whose entry was obstructed by a large overhanging tree. Nevertheless, Tim manoeuvred his helicopter into the clearing and achieved a hover over the smaller trees at a height of forty feet. The difficulties in accomplishing this were aggravated by the recirculation effect brought about by the larger surrounding trees. Because the ground party had difficulty securing a badly injured soldier in the stretcher it was necessary for Tim to maintain this hover for fifteen minutes whilst the two casualties were winched in. After fifteen minutes in the hover at almost full power, Tim's legs were losing all sensation until his co-pilot, who had been acting as a lookout, was able to relieve him of some of the tail rotor load. With insufficient power margin to outclimb the terrain, Tim had to circle over enemy territory until he had sufficient height to clear the ridge. After refuelling at base, the casualties were safely delivered to the hospital.

On completion of his tour he was invited to transfer to the General Duties (Pilot) Branch and attend the Empire Test Pilot School at RAF Boscombe Down. Aware that GD officers often had to perform, sometimes tedious, ground duties he decided on balance to remain as an engineer. Thus, in the early 70s, Tim became Senior Engineering Officer (SEngO) at RAF Scampton on 617 Squadron, commanded by Wg Cdr Mike Hines. Tim's experiences on the Squadron of detachments to Darwin, and of TACEVALs will be described future editions of *Après Moi*.

Other postings included time in Oman with the Sultan of Oman's Air Force (SOAF), and staff tours including a NATO appointment at HQ AAFCE. He kept in flying practice on the station's Chipmunk wherever possible. He finally retired as a group captain and moved to Yorkshire where he acquired a share in a four-seater light aircraft in which he flew around Europe with his wife, Jane giving support with radio frequencies etc. On one occasion he flew from his home airfield near York to Wickenby near Lincoln, picked up our secretary Mike Hines and his wife, then flew to an airfield in Norfolk where they had lunch in a local pub before returning to Wickenby and dropping off his passengers. He will also be missed by the members of the White Rose Aircrew Association in North Yorkshire where he was an active member.

**Chris Henderson**

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**T**he Association recently commissioned some improvement works around the Post-WWII Memorial in Woodhall Spa. We are exceptionally pleased with the results shown in the photograph above. However, it is well worth taking the trouble to visit when you are next in the area.

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## The 617 Squadron Netherlands Aircrew Memorial Foundation

**M**y father, Jan, has always been interested in WWII; he and my mother took us to places of interest related to WWII. In 1992, we went to England for the first time, visiting museums and old airfields; this became a regular part of our holidays. It was inevitable that my brother and I were also 'infected' by my father's enthusiasm. I specifically became interested in the RAF and the Avro Lancaster at this young age, especially after seeing the Lancaster fly.

Throughout the years, my father collected many books and memorabilia and when he was missing books from his bookshelf, then he knew that I had borrowed them 'temporarily'.

During this time, we both started to develop a special interest in Operation CHASTISE (the Dams Raid) and the crew members of aircraft AJ-A who are buried near our home in the Netherlands. Thus, 617 Squadron and their exploits became increasingly important in our lives. My wish to visit RAF Scampton came true in 2001; we visited the airfield and the Petwood Hotel, and also attended the memorial services in Woodhall Spa for the first time. On this occasion, we met many crew members and thereafter it became an annual trip. On May 17<sup>th</sup> 1943 the Lancaster AJ-A, flown by Sqn Ldr Melvin 'Dinghy' Young DFC & Bar, was returning from Operation CHASTISE, the attack on the German Ruhr dams, and was hit by flak near Wijk aan Zee. The Lancaster crashed south of Castricum aan Zee and all seven crew members lost their lives; they were buried at Bergen General Cemetery. We have tended the graves for many years, placing fresh flowers on the seven graves. My father goes to the cemetery at least every two weeks to maintain the graves.

Earlier this year, we established "The 617 Squadron Netherlands Aircrew Memorial Foundation" to commemorate all the members of 617 Squadron Royal Air Force who lost their lives since its formation in March 1943. In May 2018, it will be seventy-five years since the Dams Raid and the goal is to unveil a memorial plaque at Castricum aan Zee as a permanent homage to the seven crew members of Melvin Young's aircraft.

If you would like to support us, please visit our website ([www.617sqn-namf.nl](http://www.617sqn-namf.nl)) for more information and how you can donate.

The involvement of the crew of AJ-A on the raid is told in detail in Chapter 9 of Arthur Thorning's book 'The Dambuster Who Cracked the Dam – the Story of Melvin 'Dinghy' Young' (published by Pen & Sword, 2008)

**Macy (Marielle) Plugge**

# 617 Squadron Association

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