



Après Moi

The 617 Squadron
Association Newsletter



Autumn 2016



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Wg Cdr Guy Gibson and his crew board their Avro Lancaster AJ-G (ED932/G) aircraft for the Dambusters raid in 1943. Left to right: Flt Lt R D Trevor-Roper DFM; Sgt J Pulford; Flt Sgt G A Deering RCAF; Plt Off F M Spafford DFM RAAF; Flt Lt R E G Hutchison DFC; Wg Cr Guy Gibson and Plt Off H T Taerum RCAF



Members of the modern day 617 Squadron with an F-35B Lightning II stealth jet at MCAS Beaufort, South Carolina, USA. Pictured from left to right: Lt Rich Pavey, Wg Cdr John Butcher (Cockpit), Sqn Ldr Hugh Nichol, CPO Gary Lister, Chief Tech Gary Gibbons, Cpl Patrick Bearefield, AET Alfred Burrows

Cover Photo: 'Then and Now' - Pictured at MCAS Beaufort, South Carolina

Editorial

Welcome to the latest edition of *Après Moi*. I trust that you will find plenty within this edition of interest, but may I draw your attention to the wonderful article provide by Benny Goodman; I think many of the modern members of the Squadron would agree that his personal insight and memories are a real privilege to hear and read about.

I am also grateful for the latest update from Wg Cdr John Butcher regarding the status of the F35 Lightning and the reality of bringing 617 Squadron home from the USA. You may also find some images of the current team interesting as the photographer has attempted to capture a 'then and now' of John and his team against the famous shots of Guy Gibson and his crews. As ever, please let me know what you think as feedback is always welcome to ensure that I am filling these pages with material you want to see.

We are approaching the Tirpitz reunion so please get you name down if you can join us. As mentioned with 'Walters' Warblings' the membership is becoming more diverse, so I really would encourage attendance to see some of the new members and where they are from.

Very best wishes and I look forward to seeing you at the Petwood Hotel.

**Yours
Stu**

Deadline for Next Newsletter

31st December 2016

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Tirpitz Dinner 2016

The 2016 Tirpitz Dinner will be on Saturday 12th 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. Early booking is advised.

Walters' Warblings

Continuing the theme from my last Warbling concerning the format of our reunions, you should all soon receive an online survey asking for your opinions on how the Association should evolve. I'd be very grateful if you would complete this survey to ensure the results reflect the aspirations of the membership as a whole. Efforts also continue to widen the membership, currently focussing on engineers and 'associate' friends of the Association. The project to improve access to our shining Post-WWII memorial in Royal Square has been hampered by issues, but is now building up momentum.

We have been building our relationships with like-minded charities. We now have a strong bond with Cheshire disAbility and are currently kindling an affiliation with the 'Doolittle Raiders', the association representing the eighty airmen who launched a sixteen-strong B25 attack on Tokyo in April 1942. There are striking parallels between our two Associations: both the Dams and the Doolittle raids saw air power striking the enemy's heartland at a time when our backs were against the wall; and the reformation of 617 Squadron with Lightning II aircraft will see a land-based squadron launching from aircraft carriers, just like Jimmy Doolittle's Raiders. We hope that the wider membership will be able to participate in joint events between these charities.

Several important anniversaries are approaching fast. September 2017 sees the centenary of Leonard Cheshire's birth. Our historian, Dr Rob Owen, is working with Leonard Cheshire disAbility to see how our organisations could celebrate this event together. 2018 is not only the centenary of the formation of the world's first independent air force, but also the 75th anniversary of the Dams Raid and will see the reformation of the Squadron. The Association is working with the Air Staff towards including the Dams 75th as a vignette within the RAF's wider Centenary celebrations, with a view to highlighting the strategic use of cutting edge aviation technology.

I look forward to seeing you at our increasingly family friendly reunions.

Yours Aye
Andrew Walters

617 Squadron – Yesterday and Tomorrow...

This article has been adapted from a report that featured in the Daily Mail however, I was grateful to personally check in with Wg Cdr John Butcher to see how 617 Squadron is standing up...Ed.

Aircrew from the iconic 617 Squadron have recreated the famous pictures of Guy Gibson's flying heroes in their state-of-the-art F-35B Lightning II. The government has ordered a first batch of 14 Lightning IIs which are capable of vertical take-off and landing.

Of course, the new aircraft are very different from the Avro Lancaster bombers which carried out some of the most dangerous raids during Operation Chastise. The raids on three dams in Germany led by Wing Commander Guy Gibson on May 16, 1943, disrupted much of the country's war production. The Dambusters of 1943 were crews of British, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand and American personnel.

Wing Commander John Butcher, 35, is leading Britain's first F-35B Lightning Squadron and was named after his grandfather who flew the Lancaster in World War Two.

'Leading 617 Squadron as it starts this new chapter in its history is a huge privilege. If I could show Gibson around the F-35B Lightning and introduce him to the team, I hope he would feel the same spirit and determination that he created in 1943. I also think he would be very happy to see the Squadron once again re-forming for a very special purpose, staying true to the heritage of being at the cutting edge of aviation; I think he would like that.'

'Gibson and his men flew at very low level to the target, with limited enemy awareness of what they were doing. When I flew the Harrier, much of our training was at low level preparing us to avoid enemy radars by hiding in the terrain. The F-35B Lightning uses stealth technology to hide from enemy radar systems, effectively making the aircraft invisible. This is a significant tactical advantage as an enemy cannot fight what he cannot see. In 1943 Gibson's Lancasters' had VHF radio telephones installed so that he could have direct speech communication with all of the aircraft. This was unusual for bomber aircraft at that time, but it was essential for him to co-ordinate the mission. Today, in the F-35B Lightning, we have a datalink that automatically shares information between pilots in real time, without even the need for voice communications. It's a little like all of us using smart phones at the same time, we all see the same information on the same apps. It's similar to the way your smart phone picks dates and times out of your emails and puts them in your calendar.'

The Squadron has been working along the US Marines, Air Force and Navy during training. The newly formed 617 Squadron will be a combined team of Royal Navy and RAF personnel who will fly from both land and sea, based from RAF Marham and deployed periodically on the Queen Elizabeth Class Carriers. They will return to the UK in 2018 from their current training base of United States Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort in South Carolina, USA.

Wg Cdr Butcher told me that 617 Squadron development is going well. 72 personnel and 2 aircraft now at Beaufort and growing steadily; by the end of the year they will be at 100+ pers and 4 aircraft. The Squadron will officially reform in 2018 with arrival at Marham in Summer of 2018 to commence Interim Operation Capability work up to declare readiness in December 2018. He then stated that: "I think Guy Gibson would be very proud to see the Squadron reforming with the Lightning aircraft. When he first formed the unit it was formed for a special purpose with cutting edge technology. Once again, the Squadron finds itself being reformed for a special purpose with unprecedented technology which will deliver a capability for UK defence that we have never had before."

Stu Clarke

Then and Now



Wg Cdr Guy Gibson with members of his crew at RAF Scampton ahead of the Dambusters raid in 1943. Left to right: Wg Cdr Guy Gibson, Plt Off F M Spafford, Flt Lt R E G Hutchison, Plt Off G A Deering and Fg Off H T Taerum



Members of the modern day 617 Squadron emulate the famous picture of the Second World War Squadron. Pictured at MCAS Beaufort, South Carolina, from left: Wg Cdr John Butcher, Sqn Ldr Hugh Nichol, Lt Rich Pavey, Chief Tech Gary Gibbons and AET Alfred Burrows.

From Student to Taming the Beast

By Sqn Ldr Lawrence 'Benny' Goodman

It was September 1939. A few of us were sitting around the wireless waiting for the Prime Minister to make an announcement. He did so and told us we were now at war with Germany. I was a student, in digs, and a long way from my home in London. I decided to telephone my parents and talk things over with my father. My first instinct was to leave my studies - not a hardship really! - go home and join up. Eventually, my father agreed, much to my mother's consternation, I discovered later. He had served four years in the 1st World War. There was no doubt in my mind that I was going to join up. However, I did not want to join the navy or the army and it was only then that I realised I wanted to become a pilot.

I was almost nineteen and had no idea what was entailed, but with the ignorance and cheek of youth I presented myself at the RAF recruiting office and told the officer who interviewed me what I wanted to do. He didn't say a word, finished filling in the form he had in front of him and told me I would be hearing about my application very soon. Not long afterwards I went for a general medical and when I passed this I was sent to an RAF medical centre for a more involved air crew medical. Everything went well except when it came to the eye test. My eyesight had never been top class so I went to the back of the queue and learnt the two or three lines that each candidate was being asked to read. I passed! After attestation, I went home to await call up. It came a few weeks later and I reported to RAF Cardington, where I was issued with a uniform and all the accoutrements for an AC 2. This is it, I thought. I shall be a pilot in a couple of weeks and will save the world!

Things didn't quite turn out like that. After about 10 days at Cardington, we were told to pack our kitbags and were marched off to the local railway station. Rumours were rife! And if you listened to everyone, your posting was to anywhere in the world. In fact, we went to RAF Bridgnorth for six weeks square-bashing and all that went with it. 'Bull' was the order of the day - the camp had four parade grounds. Then I and another chap were posted to RAF Abingdon. When we got there nobody had any idea we were coming and so the Orderly Room Sergeant asked us our trade. We both said 'U.T. Pilot' and consequently we were sent to the aircrew quarters, which were in fact the married quarters on the station. Abingdon was a straight through course for Whitleys and so, with much justification, we thought we would be on the next course.

However, there was a war on! It was decided that the Whitley course running at the time would be the last one and again, no one knew what to do with us. The next day we were moved from our relatively comfortable billet to a remote part of the airfield. Located there was a Nissen hut with six beds, no sheets, no pillowcases, just blankets and pillows and a Fairey Battle packing case as a so-called recreation room. The latrines were self-dug, but permanent. We were to be ground gunners!

It was explained to us that this was only a temporary move but as such we had to learn, amongst other things, how to strip and re-assemble the COW 37mm gun and the water-cooled Lewis gun. Duties were 4 hours on / 2 hours off in the gun pit. We patrolled the airfield at night and challenged anyone on it for the password of the day. You can imagine the sort of answers we got from the aircraft technicians with their bags of tools in the pitch black trying to find the Whitley they were to work on. At dawn every morning we had to march around the perimeter track with our gas masks on in case of a German paratroop invasion from the air.

Our food was brought out in hay boxes and so was never very warm! We used to try to sneak in once a week or so to the airmen's quarters to see if we could get a bath, but if we were caught the airmen billeted there showed no mercy! In our off-duty time, we were sent to the coal dump to load coal bags and to carry out various other domestic duties on the camp. One of these included cleaning out the grate in the Officers' Mess before they came down to breakfast. On many occasions I did this and always had to finish by black-leading the grate and all the surrounds. Some years later, I went back to Abingdon as the Adjutant of the Overseas Ferry Unit. When I went into the Mess, I looked at the grate and at the few officers sitting around it in armchairs and thought to myself: "If only you chaps knew how many times I cleaned this thing!"

A posting came through eventually to start pilot training and I was sent to Stratford-upon-Avon, which was a Reception Centre. As I walked into the Orderly Room to report my arrival, a voice shouted: "Airman, you're on a charge". I looked around and saw no one else - I had the horrible feeling that I was already in trouble, and this was the case. Having spent some months as a ground gunner and living in my uniform it was, to say the least, scruffy, as was the cap. Not very politely I was told I was a disgrace to the service because of the state of my uniform. All the other chaps, of course, were wearing brand new uniforms and I stood out like a sore thumb. I tried to point this out to the Sergeant but he wasn't interested. Next morning, I appeared before the OC unit who was sympathetic but clearly felt he had to back up his Orderly Room Sergeant. Seven days jankers was my reward.

A posting duly came along to Initial Training Wing (ITW) and there we did six weeks of ground school prior to EFTS. Just about everyone passed and I was sent to 17 EFTS Peterborough for ab initio training on Tiger Moths. The course was about 48 to 50 hours and, to the horror of another chap and myself, we were posted to RAF Woodley for an instructors' course. Both of us could just about manage to fly the Tiger Moth and so to be told we were going to be instructors frightened us considerably. Following this, after a couple of weeks at Clyffe Pypard, a holding unit, and a spell at a Manchester park, awaiting posting, we went to Canada to do a SFTS on Ansons. Boy! This was living. A twin-engine aircraft with a retractable undercarriage, even though we had to wind it up! The course included night flying, the first time I had experienced this, and I can truly say that on my so-called first circuit I varied between 600ft and 1,500ft AGL and lost sight of the airfield completely. I hadn't got a clue. To my surprise, my instructor didn't seem at all phased and by the end of the detail I had at least got the circuit and the heights

more or less sorted out. What a brave man he was! After another night sortie, I was passed fit to do a solo circuit and I truly believed I was just about to die! However, all went well and I was then sent to Kingston, Ontario, to - believe it or not - instructing on Harvards. This aircraft is still in use to this day.

The thought of flying this monster, let alone instructing on it, made me feel quite sick. Kingston Ontario was an RAF station dedicated to the training of Fleet Air Arm pilots. "Is everybody mad?" I thought. The other instructors, all of whom had done an operational tour (and one was Fleet Air Arm) readily accepted me - the sprog in every way. The Flight Commander took me up and put me through my paces on the Harvard and pronounced me fit to start instruction. However, he showed me and tested me on one lesson at a time, so that I could take up an acting leading naval airman and show him the particular procedure. Nobody else had a clue how inexperienced I was, except the other instructors in the flight who thought it was a great joke. So, I started with one lesson at a time and over a few weeks built up to the whole syllabus. I have to say that the Harvard was a wonderful and responsive aircraft to fly and, despite the tales of woe and misery about ground looping, I never saw one instance of it ... and that includes me!

By this time, I was a pilot officer and because there was no room in the Mess I had digs in town and even bought myself a Chevrolet with a dicky seat. My Canadian driving test consisted of reversing the car about 2 feet, being told to 'stop and get out, come into the office' ... and I was presented with my Canadian driving licence. In a short time, I had come from cleaning the grate in the Officers' Mess as an AC 2 to a Pilot Officer Instructor, with a car and living in digs! Was I dreaming?

All good things come to an end and I was posted back to the U.K. to prepare to go on ops. We set sail on the Awatea from Halifax, Nova Scotia, and of course nothing ever goes well for long. Twenty-four hours later in the Atlantic we were torpedoed. Fortunately for us, a US Navy destroyer intercepted the torpedo and took most (90%) of the subsequent explosion and sank, leaving us damaged. We had no rudder and there were several other things wrong with the ship; we went around in circles for some time. Rough repairs were made and we went back to Halifax. We kicked our heels there for a while and then were put on a train journey, which lasted for several days, to New York. There we transferred immediately to the Queen Mary. There were huge numbers of American troops and OC Troops was an American officer. He called all the officers together before sailing to tell us that, if we were torpedoed, we must remember that officers were last to leave the ship. Bearing in mind our recent experience, this didn't exactly cheer us up. We did arrive safely in the UK and I found myself flying Martinets for a time, carrying out simulated air attacks on Wimpeys, and for their air gunners to cine-gun their replies.

At last a posting came through to an OTU at Silverstone. By this time, I had already met Tony Hayward, who wore an Observers brevet, and we had become good friends. We went to the OTU together and there we picked up our full crew. Crews selected each other in what seemed to be a very haphazard manner, by talking to those whom we thought would be suitable, but I can't remember ever meeting any crew member

who was subsequently dissatisfied and wanted to leave his original crew. In the end, everyone was crewed up.

From Silverstone we went to the heavy bomber Conversion Unit at Swinderby flying Stirlings, and then to the Lancaster finishing school at Syerston. At the end of the course, the Flight Commander sent for me and my crew said: "What the hell have you done, Benny?" I protested my innocence but everybody laughed. When I entered the Flight Commander's office I felt sure that I had done something terribly wrong because there, facing me, were the Flight Commander, OC Flying and two or three other officers. My heart sank into my boots and the only thing I could think of was 'court martial'. I felt slightly cheered when the Flight Commander seemed quite friendly as he spoke to me and one or two of the other officers questioned me about my flying and the practice bombing results that we had obtained. I felt further heartened and, knowing the results, couldn't believe that was what I was being called in about. After a couple more questions, one of the officers said to me: "How would you like to join 617 Squadron?" I truly didn't believe that I had heard correctly and said: "Excuse me, sir. Did you say 617 Squadron?" He answered: "Yes". I felt a heavy weight suddenly had been lifted from my shoulders and said that I and the crew would be delighted to do so. At that time the only other crew which had been invited to join the squadron and had come directly from training was headed by Tony Iveson, and he had been a Battle of Britain pilot. He had been on the Lancaster course immediately before me.

I was told that we had been selected for 617 and to report for duty within 48 hours. When I got back to the crew and told them the news, at first they didn't believe me. Eventually, I convinced them and we all packed up and got transport to Woodhall Spa.

On arrival and after checking in at the Mess and going through the usual procedures, I reported to the Squadron Adjutant. I waited a few minutes and was ushered into Wing Commander Tait's office, who was OC 617 Squadron. We had a chat, or more accurately - he spoke to me and allocated me to a flight. I reported to the Flight Commander Johnny Cockshott. He welcomed me and told me that the crew would have to go on a short training course devised by the squadron and, importantly, to get used to the SABS bombsight and to obtain bombing results within the limits prescribed by 617 Squadron. We did this and found ourselves accepted as fully operational on the squadron.

My first trip was with Flight Lieutenant Bob Knights ... without my crew but with his. I sat in the dicky seat where the Flight Engineer usually sat. I couldn't have been luckier in the choice of captain I was to fly with. Not only was Bob an extremely nice chap but he was most helpful as well. To give you an idea of his value, he was a Flight Lieutenant with a DSO and I think you all know there aren't many of those to the pound.

I did a full tour of thirty trips with the Squadron. The first trip as a crew was to Brest and, of course, being a sprog crew things had to happen, didn't they? Over the sea, I suddenly found the cockpit full of smoke and the wireless operator telling me his radios were on fire. He and the navigator were trying to make sure the fire didn't spread.

Just the sort of confidence booster you need on your first sortie on a new squadron! I opened the DV panel and fortunately the combined efforts of the wireless operator and navigator dealt with the fire ... we carried on. One thing was certain: none of us could have faced a return to the squadron without completing the trip saying: "We couldn't do it. We had a fire on board." How's that for luck?

Some of the trips we did were quite well known. There was the Tirpitz trip (13¼ hours) and a 9 hour 25 minute night trip to Politz-Stettin. That was the first time I could truthfully say that, at 18,000ft with oxygen masks on, I can remember smelling the cordite from the flak that was thrown at us. That may sound like a line shoot, but it certainly wasn't at the time. A further notable op was against the Arnsberg viaduct, when we were selected to drop the 22,000lb Grand Slam on the viaduct.

We received Grand Slam in March 1945. To carry this a number of modifications were made to the Lancaster – a Lincoln undercarriage was fitted to allow for the increased weight; mid-upper and front turret were removed, along with the wireless operator's equipment and the W/Op himself. Other armour plate was taken out and the ammunition load reduced, all to save weight. The bomb doors were removed and replaced by fairings and a chain link strop with electro-mechanical release was fitted to hold the Grand Slam in place.

As I recall it I was number three to release a Grand Slam, Jock Calder was the first, and Johnny Cockshott the second. This was in March – yes we are still in March, and the Arnsberg Viaduct was the target. On release I remember the aircraft went up vertically about 100 – 200 feet. My flight engineer recalls hearing a loud bang at the same time, as the release slip parted.

In all 617 dropped 41 Grand Slams before the end of the war in Europe. I like to think Grand Slam punched its weight. We were the only squadron to have this bomb.

Another op that had high squitter value was against Hamburg. We had the misfortune to have a hang-up and the bomb dropped a few seconds late, which meant that it didn't fall on the target but into the residential area beyond the target. We didn't feel good about this, but there was nothing we could do. We set course for home. About fifteen minutes later my flight engineer nudged me and nodded his head towards what I thought was the instrument panel. I looked and could see nothing wrong, so went on flying. He nudged me even harder and moved his head rather more urgently towards the starboard side. I looked out and to my horror saw the latest German twin engine jet fighter, a Messerschmitt Me262, in formation with us on our starboard wing. I thought I must be dreaming but knew very well I wasn't, and thought: "This is it." It seemed to me that if I tried a 5 Group corkscrew we wouldn't have a chance against the German aircraft. We had no mid-upper turret and clearly the rear gunner was completely unable to train his guns on him. So, there we were at the mercy of the Luftwaffe. The flight engineer and I looked at each other again and then I looked at the German pilot, but there was no friendly wave from him - so much for the fellowship of the air! Suddenly the Me262 disappeared as quickly as it had appeared and I wondered if we had all been

smoking opium the night before! It was only some years later when I was talking to Air Commodore John Langston, who at the time was a Flying Officer navigator; that what appeared to be the same aircraft had attacked and shot at John's aircraft. The German pilot must have just left training school because, although he clearly had used all his ammo on John's aircraft, he hadn't shot him down. I thought later how fortunate we both were.

Three more incidents out of a number of lucky escapes makes one ask the question: Did Lady Luck really play a part?

On one raid during the bombing run the nose section of the fuselage was hit. Everyone seemed okay, but after landing back at base the bomb aimer discovered that both heels of his flying boots were pitted with shrapnel. An inch or two either way?

On another raid the wireless operator was tuning his radio and leaned a little closer to the set. As he did so, a large projectile or piece of flak entered one side of the fuselage and exited the other. After we landed, the wireless operator sat normally in his seat and we measured the two holes and the position of his head. If he had been sitting in this position at the time of the attack, the projectile/flak would have pierced one side of his head and exited on the other. An inch or two either way?

There were three Tirpitz sorties. The first trip involved a direct flight from the UK to Yagodnik, Russia, land there, refuel and stay the night. From there on the next day, the first Tirpitz attack was attempted. This was a hazardous plan as it included flying over Europe both ways and in the end the attack was not successful. However, we unfortunately lost one aircraft.

For the second and third Tirpitz trips, amongst the modifications, two large fuel tanks were fitted inside the fuselage. Health and safety, eat your heart out! The flight engineers had to master the new fuel system very quickly, and indeed they did. Both these trips were made from an advance base at Lossiemouth. On both occasions the squadron flew up to Lossiemouth with Tallboys already on board, refuelled and attended a final briefing. On the second trip at midnight, we lined up around the perimeter track, taking off in turn at a green signal from the control tower. The weather was unkind - low cloud and rain - just the job for a night low level trip across the sea! Our turn was approaching and I was having a last look around the cockpit when the flight engineer poked me in the ribs, pointing at the canopy. I looked up and saw a massive pair of main undercarriage wheels heading straight for us. There was nothing I could do as there were aircraft either side of me. We both sat there, like rabbits caught in headlights, and waited for the inevitable. At the last moment, the wheels cleared our canopy and all was normal again. Just the sort of experience you need before take-off on a foul night!

Later, we discovered the errant aircraft was flown by Tony Iveson. He had suffered an engine surge on the point of leaving the ground. By a masterful piece of crew co-operation and training he and his flight engineer finally kept the aircraft straight and it just cleared the top of our canopy. But we were all young and I suppose took it in our stride. Now, I'd have the vapours. Lady Luck again.

Due to cloud and an efficient smokescreen, it was not possible to bomb the Tirpitz with any accuracy and we returned to Lossiemouth. However, on the third trip - a replica of the second - 617 Squadron finally sank the Tirpitz.

My last trip was to Berchtesgaden, the Eagle's Nest, and I understand that we were followed by Main Force. We, 617, certainly made a mess of the Waffen SS barracks. This was my last trip with the Squadron although we were already made aware of a possible raid, I believe over Denmark. However, a truce was declared before this. After the war, I went into Transport Command but everything seemed so tame after 617 Squadron.

Finally, but certainly not least, I pay tribute to the ground crews. Working out in all weathers, often in wind, snow and rain swept dispersals they were always there to ensure the serviceability of our aircraft. Despite working long hours, they were always there to see us depart, and waited in uncertainty, eager to witness our return... ..and woe betide us if we damaged **their** aircraft! For 365 days and nights a year they made it possible for us to do our job. All of us who flew knew their worth, but why were they never publicly recognised? We would have been wingless wonders without them

'Benny' Goodman

The Spirit of Goole

Our donations towards the funding of Goole High School "build a plane" project are now evident as the aircraft nears completion. The Association made a donation of £1,600 towards the purchase of elements of the fuel system, electrics, radiator and exhaust system. These have now been purchased and installed, and the aircraft covered and painted.



At the beginning of July the aircraft, which is being completed at Robin Hood Airport (in the shadow of Vulcan XH558) was taken to Brighton airfield, near Howden, Yorks. for its first engine runs.

These have now been successfully completed and the Light Aircraft Association inspector has signed it off. Jack Milnes, the project team leader is now awaiting the full permit from the LAA. "The paperwork is in, but we are still waiting...." Nevertheless he is confident that the aircraft will soon receive a clean bill of health enabling it to obtain full certification for flight.

The aircraft is currently based at Hangar 3, Doncaster Airport (better known to many members as RAF Finningley – former home to No 230 OCU) and its first flight is scheduled to take place from there within the next month or so.

Final Landings

Colin Cole



Born in Kingston on Thames in 1924, Colin Cole took his first flight in a Tiger Moth from Fair Oaks in 1941 as Sergeant in the Guildford ATC.

At the age of 18 he volunteered for aircrew, joining the RAF in 1942, and trained as a wireless operator/air gunner, passing through Blackpool, Yatesbury and No 10 Air Gunners School at Barrow in Furness. After initial training in Dominies and Ansons, he was posted to Bomber Command, joining the crew of Fg Off John Leavitt (an American serving in the RAF) at OTU where he transferred to Wellingtons

and subsequently onto Stirlings at Winthorpe. After passing through No 5 Lancaster Finishing School at Syerston he and his crew were posted for their first tour to 617 Squadron in September 1944.

His first operation was a memorable one, being the third and final attack against Tirpitz. Colin recalled looking down and seeing the capsized vessel. Further operations were flown during the winter of 1944, dropping Tallboys against the Urft Dam, E and R-boat pens at Rotterdam and IJmuiden. The night of New Year's Eve 1944 saw the crew over Oslo Fiord attempting to bomb the German cruisers Köln and Emden by the light of flares.

1945 opened with an attack against U-boat pens at Bergen, followed by attacks against the Bielefeld railway viaduct and Dortmund Ems Canal as the Allies sought to isolate Germany's industrial heartland of the Ruhr. The introduction of the Grand Slam carrying B I (Special) aircraft officially limited operations for wireless operators, since these aircraft had their radio equipment removed (along with the Wireless operator's seat) in order to save weight. Nevertheless, this did not stop some wireless operators continuing to fly with their crews, and it is believed that Colin was no exception. On his twenty-first birthday, 13 April 1945 Colin took part in a raid on the pocket battleship Lützow at Swinemünde, which had to be abandoned due to 10/10 cloud over the target. This was to prove to be his final officially recorded operation with the Squadron.

Following V-E Day, Colin remained with the Squadron, completing preparations for "Tiger Force" (Bomber Command's projected contribution to the continuing war in the Pacific, negated by the dropping of the atomic bombs). Nevertheless, his preparation for the tropics was not wasted when the Squadron was transferred to India for a short period in 1946. Returning to the UK, he was finally posted to Scampton and took part in the disposal of surplus "Upkeep" weapons and whilst doing so had the privilege of flying in the aircraft flown by Wg Cdr Gibson on Operation Chastise.

After de-mobilisation in 1946 he returned to Guildford and then moved to Lincoln to work for the City Council. He joined the Lincs Lancaster Association in 1980, for many years carrying out sterling work as its Secretary.

Dennis Cooper

Dennis Cooper enlisted in the RAFVR in 1941 and trained as a wireless operator/air gunner. After passing through OTU, flying Wellingtons, and conversion to the Lancaster. Crewing up with Freddie Watts he was posted to No 630 Sqn at East Kirkby in October 1943 to commence his first tour of operations.

His final operation with No 630 Sqn was the notorious Nuremberg attack of 30/31 March 1944, which cost Bomber Command 96 aircraft. Having completed 15 operations Freddie Watts was asked if he would like to join the Pathfinder force, but instead opted to remain with No 5 Group and on 5 April 1944 was transferred to 617 Sqn taking with him with his crew and H2S equipped aircraft.

Flt Sgt Cooper's first operations with No 617 Squadron were to the La Chapelle railway yards, Paris, on 20 April, and to Brunswick two nights later – before participating in a decoy attack on Milan whilst the majority of the squadron led No 5 Group squadrons to Munich. Operations were then suspended for a month whilst the crews trained for the D-Day spoof "Taxable", for which Dennis and other members of the crew were teamed up with Fg Off Geoff Stout's crew, after which attention was turned to Tallboy attacks against the large V-sites and E/U-boat pens, during which Dennis flew two operations as an extra gunner for Don Cheney and Ernie Willsher.

Commissioned in August 1944, he took part in the attack on the Kembs Dam, during which his aircraft's cockpit canopy and one engine were damaged by flak, and participated in attacks against Tirpitz, involving the hazardous return trip to Russia for the first, Operation Paravane. After his 23rd operation, the second operation against the battleship at the end of October 1944, he was taken off operations and a month later he was posted to RAF Hurn, where crews were being assembled for the post-war BOAC.

Dennis subsequently transferred to the Aircraft Control Branch serving at various locations. He relinquished his commission in 1951, after which he continued in air traffic control at various locations including Southampton until retiring in the 1970s.

Gerry Hobbs

Gerry Hobbs was born in Guildford in 1921 and enlisted in the RAFVR in February 1941. After training as a wireless operator he was posted to OTU where he became part of Plt Off John "Teddy" Edward's crew. After further training at 1660 Conversion Unit the crew were posted to N. 50 Sqn at Skellingthorpe in June 1943.

Due to several members of Edward's crew being used by other crews, they did not operate as a full team until August at the tail end of the Battle of Hamburg. The crew's entire tour was spent making deep penetration attacks against German city targets including Mannheim, Munich and Berlin, together with two operations against Milan during August in support of the Allied invasion of Sicily. This was a period of growing night fighter activity and the gunners were forced to open fire on at least seven occasions, although they were fortunate to avoid any major damage, resulting in the award of a DFM for one of the gunners and the DFC for their pilot. Such determined spirit earmarked the crew for the Pathfinders, or for No 617 Sqn. After considerable discussion most of the crew opted for the latter and after 23 operations were posted to Woodhall Spa on 16 February 1944.

The Squadron was by now engaged in attacks against factory targets in occupied territories, dropping the 12,000lb HC blast bomb (not to be confused with Wallis's later 12,000lb 'Tallboy'). The first month was taken up by the crew practising the necessary teamwork to achieve the required precision using the SABS and acquiring new crew members to replace those who had decided that they did not want to continue. Once operational, targets included the Michelin tyre works at Clermont Ferrand, the explosives works at Angoulême and the aircraft plants at Lyons and Toulouse, culminating in the operation to Munich on 24 April.

There were no operations during May as the Squadron practised for the Operation "Taxable" – the D-Day feint dropping strips of metal foil (Window) to deceive the Germans as to the real location of the invasion.

Following D-Day the Squadron commenced its attacks with Barnes Wallis' 12,000lb deep penetration bomb, 'Tallboy'. Gerry took part in the operations against the Saumur railway tunnel and the E-boat pens at Le Havre and Boulogne. The Squadron was then switched to attacks against the large V-weapon sites. On 24 June Gerry took off on his 15th operation with the Squadron, a daylight raid on the large concrete dome protecting the V-2 rocket preparation and launch site at Wizernes, near St Omer in the Pas de Calais. During the long straight run up to the target essential for accurate bombing the Lancaster was hit by flak, mortally wounding the flight engineer and setting the aircraft on fire. Realising that the aircraft was badly damaged, John Edward gave the order to bale out.

Gerry went aft intending to check on the rest of the crew and exit through the rear door, but the fire was too intense, so he moved forward to exit through the nose. As he reached the main spar the aircraft began to shudder and descend rapidly. At about 500 feet above the ground the Lancaster exploded. Gerry recalled no more until he regained consciousness in a field of oats, cut and bruised and with his right leg and arm broken. He was surrounded by French civilians and German soldiers, one of whom gave him a cigarette before he was taken to St Omer Hospital where his injuries were attended to. Transferred to Lille for further treatment he was then taken to the notorious Dulag Luft Interrogation Centre, near Frankfurt, where the Germans questioned him about the Squadron and its operations.

Realising that Gerry would give them no useful information, his captors transferred him to a PoW Hospital at Stalag IXC, south-west of Erfurt. There he remained, with periodic moves to a nearby convalescent facility at Meiningen until liberated by Patton's 3rd Army on 3 April 1945. Repatriated to the UK by Dakota he was initially received at the RAF Hospital at Wroughton, before being transferred to Cosford.

[Gerry's own account of his final operation was printed in *Après Moi* in 2008]

Robert Horsley

Born in Poppleton near York in 1921, Bob Horsley enlisted in the RAF after leaving school and trained as a wireless operator and gunner. In August 1941 he was posted to No 50 Sqn, at Swinderby, initially flying Handley Page Hampdens. The Squadron subsequently moved to Skellingthorpe and during the spring of 1942 re-equipped with the twin-engined Manchester.

On the afternoon of May 30 1942 Bob, who had been commissioned the previous month, was briefed for his 30th operation. He was flying as wireless operator with Fg Off Leslie Manser's crew and this would be the final operation of his first tour, after which he was due to be rested. The target was Cologne and this was Air Marshal Harris's first 1,000 bomber raid, requiring every aircraft that could be made serviceable. The Manchester had a notorious reputation for its underpowered and unreliable Vulture engines and the example allocated to the crew that night was no exception. On the outward flight it refused to climb above 7,000 feet, only half the height of the main bomber stream. Manser pressed on, but over the target the Manchester was caught in searchlights and repeatedly hit by flak. Manser took evasive action, but was only able to escape the defences once clear of the target, by which time the crippled aircraft was down to 1,000 feet. After straining to climb to 2,000 feet the port engine burst into flames. After ten minutes the fire was brought under control, but even after jettisoning extraneous equipment the aircraft continued to lose speed and height. Once over Belgium, Manser ordered the crew to abandon aircraft, holding the aircraft steady as they did so at extremely low altitude. Seconds after the last man had left, the bomber hit the ground and exploded with Manser still at the controls.

Bob landed in a field at Limburg, Belgium. After initial assistance from a farmer, he was passed to the local resistance group, where he was reunited with two others from his crew and taken to Liège where they met two more of the crew and became part of the Belgian Comet Line, assisting allied aircrew evaders.

They were passed through the network to Paris, then to Bordeaux and to the Spanish frontier. From there they were led through the Pyrenees to San Sebastian in neutral Spain. After a brief period in Madrid they were passed on to Gibraltar, from where they returned to the UK.

On return to London, the evaders gave testimony to the sacrifice of their pilot, resulting in the posthumous award of the Victoria Cross to Fg Off Manser. Bob received the DFC

and the four others also received decorations. Since evading crews were not permitted to continue operations over Europe, Bob was posted to Canada where he re-mustered and trained as a pilot, spending two years as an instructor before engineering a posting back to Bomber Command. With France and Belgium liberated Bob was able to organise an operational posting and after crewing up and passing through No 5 Lancaster Finishing School at Syerston, he joined No 617 Sqn at Woodhall Spa on 25 November 1944.

His first operation with the Squadron was flying as “second dickey” to Sqn Ldr John Cockshott on an atypical attack, searching for German naval units in Oslo Fiord on New Year’s Eve 1944. His first operation as captain was against the midget submarine pens at Poorteshaven on 3 February, after which he carried out two operations, dropping Tallboys on the Nienburg and Bremen railway bridges, before the Squadron switched its attention to German Naval targets in the form of E and U-boat shelters at Ijmuiden and Hamburg, with three attempts to attack the German pocket battleship ‘Lutzöw’ at Swinemünde. On the last of these Bob’s aircraft was badly damaged by flak, but he brought it home safely. Bob’s twelfth and final operation was also the Squadron’s last, against Hitler’s Bavarian redoubt at Berchtesgaden.

At the end of May 1945, Bob was posted to No 15 Sqn at Mildenhall and continued to serve with Bomber Command for a further 5 years, with Nos 7 and 44 Squadrons. After a period commanding flying training and maintenance units, for which he was awarded the King’s Commendation for Valuable Service in the Air and the Air Force Cross, he served with the Air Ministry on intelligence duties. He was subsequently posted to the Middle East, serving as air attaché in Baghdad for three years from 1959. After a further spell of flying duties, he returned to the diplomatic role as air attaché Jeddah. After retiring as a Wing Commander in 1968 he worked for the Foreign Office in Beirut, but was forced to leave rapidly after allegedly wrecking a Soviet arms deal. After spending three months under cover in Italy he travelled to Australia, where he established a new life.

By coincidence, Bob’s brother, Squadron Leader Hugh Horsley AFC, was shot down in 1944 and also evaded capture, but was killed on 1 February 1945 when his Lancaster lost an engine taking off for an operation from Skellingthorpe. After a successful three-engined circuit the bomb laden Lancaster exploded on landing, killing all on board.

Reg Spencer

Reginald W ‘Reg’ Spencer’s operational wartime career was undertaken with No 514 Sqn flying Lancasters from Witchford. His first was op was as wireless operator with the Squadron Commander, Wg Cdr Peter Morgan DFC, on 14-15 February 1945, but he subsequently flew with Plt Off Bill Winkworth’s crew for a further 10 sorties between 27 February and May 1945. He also undertook three ‘Manna’ operations (dropping food to the starving Dutch), two ‘Exodus’ (repatriating allied prisoners of war from

Europe) and one 'Baedeker/ Cooks Tour' (taking ground staff to see the results of the bomber offensive from the air).

Reg joined No 617 Squadron in May 1945, a week after V-E Day as a Flight Sergeant wireless operator, and was posted to No 53 Base, Waddington on 21 June 1945, where he was subsequently joined by Nos 9 and 617 Squadrons as they worked up as part of Tiger Force, Bomber Command's projected contribution to the Pacific War. He remained in the RAF until 1947.

Murray Valentine



Any search in the wartime records of No 617 Sqn for Murray Valentine will be unsuccessful, since Murray was recorded under his birth name of Vagnolini.

Born in West Ham, Murray was evacuated to the anticipated safety of the countryside in 1940, only to find himself in proximity to the heavily bombed airfield at Biggin Hill. He enlisted in the RAFVR in 1942 as a wireless operator. After completing his initial training, he was posted to No 14 OTU at Cottesmore, where as a sergeant he crewed up with a Canadian pilot, Charles Nelson Hill.

After completing their training in July 1944 the crew were posted to No 61 Sqn at Skellingthorpe, from where they were to fly their first tour of 30 ops. This comprised attacks against heavily defended targets including Kiel, Stuttgart, Koenigsburg and

Nuremburg and also attacked enemy communications and strong points in France and the Low Countries.

As Murray's aircraft was approaching the target of Harburg one night in November 1944, it was attacked by an enemy night fighter. With the rudder and fuselage damaged, Hill was experiencing great difficulty in controlling the aircraft. Nevertheless, they pressed on and delivered a successful attack. After leaving the target the aircraft ran into heavy flak and suffered further damage, but Hill's great skill brought the damaged bomber safely back to base.

Murray was promoted to Warrant Officer and in October 1944 he was commissioned as Plt Off Vagnolini. The crew completed their tour at the end of December 1944, but

rather than wanting to transfer as an instructor, Hill wanted to continue operating, and Murray and Sgt Les Goss, the Flight Engineer, decided to stay with him.

They were posted to No 617 Sqn at Woodhall Spa on 4 January 1945. Since the Squadron carried the 12000lb deep penetration bomb, known as Tallboy, and used the specialist Stabilised Automatic Bomb Sight (SABS), they had to team up with four other crew members and then undergo a period of training before being allowed to go to war again. It was not until 22 February that they took off on their first operation with their new Squadron, against the Bielefeld railway Viaduct, carrying one of the key rail lines from the Ruhr and transporting armaments and other essential supplies for the German war machine. Though battered, the viaduct remained. Two days later they were despatched against another vital communications artery, the Dortmund Ems Canal, but were recalled on account of poor weather. Three more attempts to destroy the Bielefeld Viaduct followed, success finally being achieved on the 14 March 1945, when the Squadron mounted an attack, dropping Tallboys and also the first 22,000 lb Grand Slam which reduced several spans of the viaduct to rubble.

Further rail bridges and viaducts were then attacked at Dreyse, Nienburg and Bremen, as the Allies sought to restrict the flow of prefabricated U-boat components to the German naval construction yards, such as the partially completed factory bunker at Farge, near Bremen, which the crew attacked as their final operation of the war on 27 March, 1945.

By May, the war in Europe was over, and although the Squadron was earmarked to travel to the Far East as part of Bomber Command's proposed contribution to the Pacific War, Murray's crew, on account of their pilot's Canadian nationality, found themselves amongst a number of crews posted to No 15 Sqn at Mildenhall.

While with No 15 Sqn Murray attended a selection board syphoning off Bomber Command aircrew for BOAC which was now beginning to open up long range routes after the war. A month later found himself as a Flying Officer instructor to the Heavy Transport Conversion Unit at Ossington, whose task it was to convert ex-bomber crews to civilian airline duties. But Murray's time in Bomber Command was not quite yet over. In February 1947, by which time he had anglicised his name to Valentine, he was offered a four-year extended commission and posted to No 44 Squadron at Wyton as Signals Leader, flying the later development of the Lancaster, the Avro Lincoln.

However, with the war over, Bomber Command was changing and Murray decided to leave the RAF, taking a job as a Welfare Officer. Although there were benefits with the routine and regular hours, he soon realised that he missed Service life and re-joined the RAF as a Flight Lieutenant and was promoted to Squadron Leader in April 1949, on transfer to the Secretarial Branch. His service included OC GSO Germany – and he was on the directing staff at RAF OCTU..

Murray finally left the Service, retaining the rank of Flight Lieutenant in 31 March 1962. He soon established himself in the entertainment industry, booking groups for night

clubs. He progressed to managing and running a chain of venues in London and the East Midlands, engaging leading contemporary stars and acts. In later life Murray transferred his skills and geniality to the hospitality industry, running a hotel and latterly a popular bar in Seaford, Sussex.

Maurice Webster

Maurice Webster was commissioned as a Navigator IV in 1949 and saw service with Nos 61, 57 and 7 Squadrons, flying in Lincolns, before converting to Canberras and flying with No 45 Sqn in Singapore. Transferring to V-Force as a Flight Lieutenant Navigator/Plotter he joined Flt Lt Peter Odling's crew for initial work up at No 230 OCU, Finningley. After completing their course there, the newly qualified crew arrived on the Squadron in December 1963.

In keeping with all newly arrived navigators his first task was to learn the complexities of Blue Steel for which was sent on a month's course at Lindholme. In addition to acquiring these skills, the Squadron had only recently switched from high level and the crew were also required to become proficient in the tactics required for low level penetration and delivery of this weapon.

By April 1964 they were deemed sufficiently proficient to partake in their first Station generation exercise, Operation Nursemaid as one of the two Squadron crews executing the end of exercise fly-off. This was followed the following week by a Groupex, involving the execution of various attack profiles against Radar Bomb Scoring sites. By the end of August they had proved themselves and were despatched on their first Goose Ranger.



War games at Waddington circa 1977 with 44 Sqn: Fg Off Mike Hill, Flt Lt Ray Walters, Sqn Ldr Maurice Webster, Flt Lt Roger Dunsford and (crouched) Flt Lt Chris Hickson.

Life settled down to the standard routine of exercises and continuation training, including Kinsman dispersal flights to Lossiemouth and Burtonwood. There were the inevitable mechanical glitches, such as in July 1964, when failure of the bomb bay heating necessitated an early return to base. A year later a more serious situation arose when the crew felt a dull thump on take-off. Observers watching from the tower were more exercised, having noted a bang and a flash from the aircraft. The cockpit instrumentation recorded a rise in No 1 jet pipe temperature as the vibration increased. The engine was duly shut down and Peter Odling brought the Vulcan back round for an emergency overweight landing. It was just as well; subsequent investigation revealed failure of a blade in the low pressure compressor unit. Prompt action had prevented possible disintegration and a more major incident.

Overseas flights were an essential part of training regime, although being a Blue Steel unit the Squadron did not enjoy such frequency of these trips as free fall squadrons. In May 1965 the crew flew a Lone Ranger to Luqa, Malta, then on to Kano, Nigeria, before returning via Idris, Libya. Three months later they were on another Goose Ranger, practising on the low level routes over the Canadian tundra. Six months later came a Western Ranger to Goose and Offutt, but Maurice missed out on a return to Malta three weeks later, when his position in the crew was taken by Flt Lt Neil MacFarlane. He was back with the crew for a "Mickey Finn" no-notice dispersal exercise in May, dispersing to Bedford for three days before returning to Scampton after executing a Blue Steel low level profile.

With the crew coming to the end of the tour with the Squadron a farewell party was held in the Mess at the end of July, but they weren't quite finished yet. Although Maurice flew his final overseas trip with the Squadron at the beginning of July 1966, to El Adem, he was not to leave Scampton for a further month, posted on 1 August to No 1 Air Navigation School at Stradishall, to take up a post as a Staff Instructor training pupils in Dominies and subsequently becoming the School's Operations Officer. This however did not mean the end of Maurice's connection with V-Force. In May 1969 he was posted to Waddington as a supernumerary and five months later reverted to his former Vulcan role of Nav Plotter, his final tour being with No 44 Squadron. He retired from the Service as a Squadron Leader at the end of 1984.

Robert Owen

Dams Dinner 2017

The 2017 Dams Dinner will be on Saturday 13th May, 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. Early booking is advised.



Joe McCarthy (centre) and his crew are pictured sat next to the airfield at RAF Scampton in Lincolnshire during the Second World War



Members of 617 Squadron strike the same iconic pose of their Second World War predecessors on the grass beside the airfield at MCAS Beaufort, South Carolina, USA. From left: Rich Pavey, Wg Cdr John Butcher, CPO Gary Lister, Chief Tech Gary Gibbons, Cpl Patrick Bearefield, AET Alfred Burrows

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Published by the 617 Squadron Association
Layout and Typesetting by Chris Henderson