



Après Moi

The 617 Squadron
Association Newsletter



Spring 2016



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Cover Photo: 'Johnny' Johnston at the International Bomber Command Centre memorial spire in Lincoln.

Editorial

Welcome to the latest edition of *Après Moi*. I was delighted to be able to meet so many of you at the Tirpitz reunion at the Petwood Hotel last November and was able to talk to some of you about the content of your magazine and what you would like to see in it. I hope I have been able to meet some of your requests, as I am pleased to include an article from a portrait artist, Paul Meredith, who specialises in capturing the people who served during wartime. Paul mentions that there are plenty of artists who capture the magnificent machines of war, but very few who capture the heroes who fly in them!

Also included with this newsletter is an advertisement for the Association memorabilia; Mike Beesley is in charge of the stock and likes nothing more than selling you his goods! As ever, his prices really are good value and help make the reunions more collegiate. Also, many of his items are reserved for members, so I invite you to review your association kit and top up.

Now that we are into 2016, much focus will soon be on the 98th anniversary of the formation of the Royal Air Force. A couple of our serving members are participating at St Clements Danes in London followed by a reception at the Royal Courts of Justice. After that, we look forward to the Dams reunion and please see the details within this edition for dates and timings.

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

**Yours,
Stu**

Deadline for Next Newsletter

31st July 2016

email: clarke318@gmail.com

Wg Cdr Stuart Clarke, 13 Hillcrest Avenue, Market Harborough
Leicestershire, LE16 7AR

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Walters' Warblings

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The main challenge that our Association currently faces is to ensure that it retains its relevance and develops its membership to reflect the Squadron's historical diversity. While we are looking forward to welcoming new members when the Squadron reforms, our Tornado rep is also trying to recruit those who were serving on the Squadron when it disbanded. There is also significant potential to attract former ground crew from all eras. We would like to broaden the use of Associate membership to include our friends who, despite not having served on the Squadron, nevertheless continue to support the Association. Please do send your suggestions for potential new members to our Membership Secretary, Bill Williams. We are endeavouring to embrace modern social media to reach out to these new members. As a charity, we are also reinforcing our ties with other charities with similar aims and roots to our own.

Our plans are firming up to increase access to the Post-WWII memorial. Our black, shining monument commemorating our more recent fallen deserves to be viewed from 360 degrees. However, it currently lies surrounded by Lincolnshire lawn, which can make the going rather heavy underfoot during the Autumn and Winter. So, Dave Moore is progressing plans to lay paving to allow the memorial to be admired from all directions.

Finally, we are keen to broaden the appeal of the Dams and Tirpitz dinners by making these smashing events more family friendly. As such, members are welcome to bring guests of an age that you deem can maintain an appropriate decorum. So, I look forward to meeting you and your guests at the Dams Dinner on Saturday 14 May!

Yours Aye,

Andrew Walters

Association Membership Subscriptions

The Association membership subscription was increased to £15 in March 2014. A significant number of members have not amended their bank standing order mandates since that date despite several reminders. Any member who has not updated their subscription by 30th March 2016 will be removed from the active membership database and recorded as a lapsed member. For simplicity a new bank standing order mandate will be included with this newsletter to all members whether by email or post - only those members paying the old subscription need take action.

The International Bomber Command Centre Lincoln

Having seen a great deal of press about the fantastic facilities being unveiled in Lincoln, I thought you would appreciate an overview of what it is, how it is coming along and what to expect from a visit.

The International Bomber Command Centre (or IBCC for short!) is being created to provide a facility to serve as a point for recognition, remembrance and reconciliation for Bomber Command. The Lincolnshire Bomber Command Memorial Trust, in partnership with the University of Lincoln, aims to fully open the Centre to the public in 2017.



The IBCC Spire Memorial at Canwick Hill, Lincoln

Lincoln has been chosen for the site as it provides a central point for all 27 bases that earned Lincolnshire the title of 'Bomber County'. Lincoln Cathedral provided a landmark for crews both leaving and returning from missions and, for those who failed to return, the Cathedral was often their last image of home. Lincolnshire housed over a third of all the WWII Bomber Command Stations making it the ideal home for this commemoration of the bravery of the men of Bomber Command.

The IBCC will provide a comprehensive record of Bomber Command action and will ensure that generations to come can learn of their vital role in protecting the freedom we enjoy today. During WWII were more than 125,000 men, from all over the British Commonwealth, who served as aircrew in Bomber Command.

Pilots, flight crew and supporting personnel came from the UK, and 59 other nations including Canada, America, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Germany (many escaping from the Nazi regime) as well as other European refugees.

Bomber Command developed and pioneered new technologies that together with Allied contributions of both men and material allowed a huge expansion of bombing operations after 1942 contributing to the eventual victory in Europe.

It was Bomber Command that delivered the world's first airborne humanitarian mission, Operation Manna, delivering over 7,000 tons of food parcels in 10 days over the west of Holland where 1,000,000 people were registered as starving. And, they acted as a vital element to Operation Exodus that saw the repatriation of over 70,000 POW's from internment camps across Europe.

Over 55,000 men from Bomber Command died in the skies over Europe with only 30% of those that flew getting to the end of WWII without being killed, injured or taken prisoner of war.



Although not fully open, the IBCC has set up a series of free guided walking tours which can be booked through their website at www.internationalbcc.co.uk/events.

The website also provides comments from a few eminent visitors who have already seen the IBCC:

Richard Munro, Representing 460 Squadron Veterans & Friends Group

“The IBCC is an amazing project that in my mind will do more to “keep our BC Veterans’ flame alive for future generations” than anything else I’ve seen. Most memorials to BC and BC Squadrons are static – typically to remember and honour those killed in action. The IBCC has the traditional static memorial together with a vision that is both kinetic and holistic – future researchers

anywhere in the world will access a database that will continue to grow with everything about BC including everyone directly and indirectly involved in BC's essential period in history, including the Luftwaffe."

John Sergeant, Television and radio presenter

"Having a centre devoted to telling and explaining the story of the bomber offensive in the Second World War is long overdue.

The unveiling will come at a time when the Nation and our Commonwealth and Allied friends will be remembering the sacrifice of those who fought and hoping that the 70th anniversary of the ending of the Second World War will engender a new spirit of reconciliation between old enemies who are today friends."

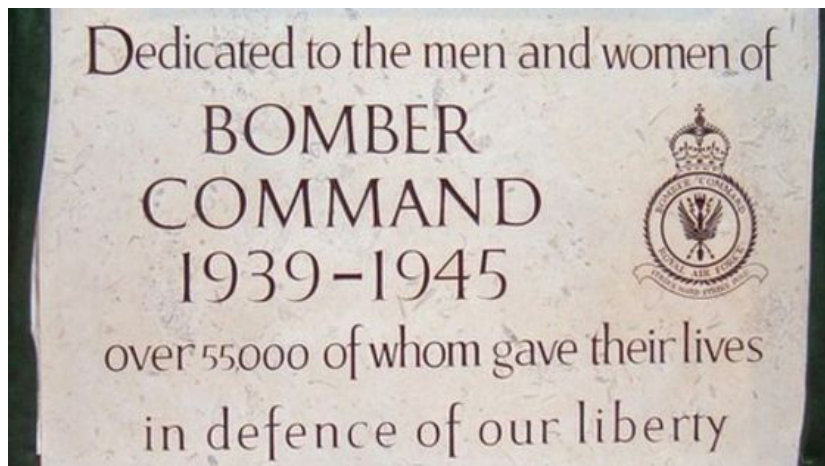
Dan Snow, historian and television presenter

"There are few more deserving projects in the UK than the International Bomber Command Centre. Lincolnshire needs a proper memorial to the service personnel who faced appalling conditions as they did their bit to liberate Europe from fascism. There is no other centre in Britain or any other country where the history of the bomber offensive can be preserved, gathered, curated, studied and debated. This centre will be a world leader."

President of the Bomber Command Association, Air Commodore Charles Clark DFC

"Knowing how difficult it was to raise the funds for the memorial in London, it is exciting news that the HLF are supporting this worthy project. We have to do everything we can to ensure this project is delivered whilst we still have some veterans alive."

Stu Clarke



Paul Meredith - Portrait Artist

Several of the 617 Squadron Association Committee have seen Paul's work so thought it fitting to invite him to contribute to this newsletter. As you can see from his work below, Paul has a talent for capturing the very spirit of the RAF and its brave wartime airmen. Ed.

My connection to the RAF and my interest in painting aircrew comes from my Grandad, WO William White, who served as a rear gunner in Bomber Command on Wellingtons during WWII. He was shot down over Schleswig in July 1942 and was POW in Lamsdorf VIIIB.

I never knew my Grandad, he died two days after I was born, but over the years I have learned of his service and am immensely proud of what he and his friends and comrades contributed to the war effort. My Mum and I were privileged to attend the unveiling of the Bomber Command Memorial in Green Park in 2012, which has changed the perception of Bomber Command in the eyes of the public.

This has been the catalyst, over the past two years, for me to produce a number of portraits of Bomber Command aircrew as my own personal commitment to keeping their memory alive – particularly as there are many fine paintings of aircraft but not enough of the extraordinarily brave men that flew in them.

My work has included pencil sketches, pastels and, more recently, oils. One of my pencil sketches was of Sqn Ldr George 'Johnny' Johnson DFM, which I was able to present to him in the bar of the Petwood Hotel in 2014. I had the pleasure of meeting Johnny the year before at the 617 Sqn 70th Anniversary dinner, which I attended as a guest of Ken Pilbeam.

Until recently, my main body of work has been in pastels. These included a portrait of my Grandad and a piece entitled "Gentlemen, Your Target for Tonight is...", showing a pilot and navigator at an ops briefing.



My Grandad WO William White



"Gentlemen, Your Target for Tonight is..."



WO Harry Irons DFC

This last year I have moved into oils and have produced two main pieces. The first is a piece taken from a wartime photo showing the de-briefing of a Stirling crew. This will be unveiled in June at the Bomber Command Memorial anniversary event at the RAF club. The second is of WO Harry Irons DFC, a veteran air gunner of 60 ops and one of the trustees of the Bomber Command Memorial.

Paul Meredith

Paul does not stock prints nor sells from a gallery; however, if you are interested in discussion a commission with Paul, please contact him at prwmrdth@aol.com. Ed.

Dams and Tirpitz Dinners 2016

The 2016 Dams dinner will take place on Saturday 14th May and the Tirpitz Dinner on Saturday 12th November, both 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.

From Dambuster to Dambuilder



In November 2015, the family of Flt Lt John 'Hoppy' Hopgood announced that they had decided to auction his Distinguished Flying Cross and Bar to raise funds for the charity WaterAid. It was hoped that the money would be used specifically towards building a new sand dam in Uganda that will give almost 100,000 people access to clean water. His sister Elizabeth Bell, 92, and her daughter Jenny Elmes hope the pilot, who was killed on the Dams Raid, would have been proud of the fitting legacy being left in his name.

John Vere Hopgood was born in Hurst, Berkshire on 29 August 1921, the son of Harold and Grace Hopgood. Harold's first wife Beatrice had died leaving him with two sons. Harold, a solicitor, then married Grace and they had three children of whom John was the second, and the only boy.

John was educated at Marlborough College where he joined the Officer Training Corps, and would have gone on to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, but the war intervened and he joined the RAF in 1940. His sister Elizabeth recalls a conversation with him in which he said he wanted to be a conscientious objector but when he saw and understood what the Nazis were doing he had to fight for justice.

John Hopgood qualified as a pilot in February 1941, and was then commissioned. He spent his first tour with 50 Squadron and was then posted to a training unit. In February 1942, he went back onto operations with 106 Squadron, based at RAF Coningsby, which was flying the unreliable twin-engined Avro Manchester. In April, a new Squadron CO, Guy Gibson arrived. He described his first impression of Hopgood in Enemy Coast Ahead:

'He was a fair-haired chap about medium height, rather good-looking, except for one prominent tooth. The boys seemed to be always taking him off about this, but he took it very good-naturedly. He was a serious fellow at heart, though, even though he spent most of his time with the boys. As soon as I saw him I thought, "What an ideal squadron type. I like that chap."'

The squadron was converting to Lancasters, and Hopgood was one of the first to retrain on this much more powerful aircraft. He was one of the pilots who

then had to pass on their new skills to Gibson and the other pilots. In October 1942, after flying 32 operations, he was awarded the DFC, and commended for his 'magnificent dash and courage when pressing home his attacks whatever the opposition'. This was followed just four months later by a Bar to the DFC.

On the formation of 617 Squadron, John Hopgood and David Shannon, former 106 Squadron colleagues, were both encouraged by Gibson to join him. Hopgood brought two members of his regular crew, flight engineer Charles Brennan and rear gunner Tony Burcher. However, his bomb aimer wasn't deemed suitable and his navigator fell ill, so two Canadians from 50 Squadron, John Fraser and Ken Earnshaw, were recruited instead.

Hopgood was nominated by Gibson as his deputy leader on the Dams Raid and took off in the first wave of three aircraft along with Gibson and Micky Martin's crews. According to Tony Burcher's account of the raid, Hopgood's aircraft was hit by flak about 20 minutes before the attack on the Dams; the front gunner Gregory was almost certainly killed and Hopgood wounded at this stage. John Minchin, the wireless operator was also badly wounded. Nevertheless, Hopgood told his crew he intended proceeding to the Moehne. Burcher recalls Hopgood saying:

'Right, well what do you think? Should we go on? I intend to go on because we have only got a few minutes left. We've come this far. There's no good taking this thing back with us. The aircraft is completely manageable. I can handle it ok. Any objections?'

Hopgood pressed on, with Brennan beside him holding a handkerchief on his head to stem the bleeding. They got to the dam. Gibson attacked first, unsuccessfully. The gunners defending the dam didn't start firing until Gibson was very close but did not damage his aircraft. But, minutes later, when Hopgood approached, they were ready. His already damaged Lancaster was hit again. An engine caught fire, he struggled to keep the aircraft level, and the mine was released too late, bouncing over the dam and into the power station below, where it exploded.

Hopgood tried desperately to gain height, in an effort to give his crew a chance to bail out. John Fraser left the aircraft from the front escape hatch by first pulling his parachute ripcord and allowing himself to be dragged clear of the doomed Lancaster. Tony Burcher had evacuated his rear turret and made for the crew door. There he was confronted by the pained face of John Minchin, who had dragged himself the length of the fuselage, his leg almost severed. All Burcher could do to help his comrade was to clip on Minchin's parachute and push him out into the darkness, pulling his D-ring in the process. The Lancaster crashed three miles to the north-west of the dam and exploded in flames killing Hopgood and the rest of his crew.

John Minchin, badly injured, didn't survive the parachute drop. Tony Burcher landed close to the wrecked aircraft but he had seriously injured if not broken his back bailing out, in addition he had also cracked a kneecap. Somehow he managed to drag himself to a culvert where he avoided the initial search for survivors. He nourished himself with some Horlicks tablets given to him by his mother. After almost three days he surrendered to a member of the Hitler Youth. He was interrogated and claimed to have given only his name, rank and number. He spent the rest of the war in Stalag Luft III. He credited the German doctor who treated his injuries as the reason he was eventually able to walk again.

John Fraser landed about a mile from the aircraft. What happened next is not clear. His family believe that he evaded for ten days and was eventually captured near the Dutch border. However, his German prisoner of war identity card (*Personalkarte*) clearly states that he was taken prisoner on 17 May at Söest which is the nearest town to Ostönnen. This is also corroborated by a report from Geneva, held in Canadian archives, which gives the date of capture as 17 May. Fraser, as the bomb aimer, was specifically interrogated about his knowledge of the 'bouncing bomb'. He was first imprisoned at Stalag Luft IV and then, when his commission was confirmed, he was moved to the officers' camp at Stalag Luft III. After the war Fraser returned to Canada with his young English wife Doris, where they had two sons named John Hopgood and Guy after his captain and CO, and a daughter Shere, who is named after Hopgood's home village. John Fraser retrained as a pilot but was tragically killed in a flying accident in June 1962.

Hopgood, Brennan, Earnshaw, Minchin and Gregory are buried together in Rheinberg War Cemetery, Germany. Many consider that Hopgood should have been awarded a posthumous VC for his bravery.

The sale of Hopgood's medals was held by Morton & Eden in London on 15 December 2015. In the event the medals were sold for only £25,000 - well

below the estimate of £40,000 but nevertheless a substantial donation towards the building of the dam in Uganda.

I would like to thank Charles Foster, nephew of David Maltby of 617 Squadron, for his permission to quote from his excellent website www.dambustersblog.com which tells the story of all 133 men who took part in the Dams Raid in 1943.

Chris Henderson



Scampton Bomb Store

Many of you will know that the Association is now actively seeking to find those ground crew members who served with the Squadron. You may already be aware that three of the current Committee are former Senior Engineering Officers (including me!). I was delighted to invite Mr Gerald Davies to the Tirpitz dinner in November where he and his wife, Brenda, had a great time amongst the Association members. Gerald served on 617 Squadron after the war and into the early 50s. I am pleased to report that he has expressed an interest in joining as a full member.

This subject leads to the challenges I face when I received material such as the photo below. Mrs Janette Jones kindly sent me this image from her late father's effects. She noted that very little history is afforded to these men who – let's be honest – enabled the war effort.



Our Association historian, Robert Owen, has researched Leonard Rowlands but sadly to no avail. Robert thinks that many of the support crew came under Station strength rather than actual members of the Squadron.

In Janette's own words: *"My father, who passed away in March 2012, was very proud of the small part he played in 617 Sqn. Although he spoke very little about his wartime years, he wore his medals with pride every Remembrance Day. For many years he organised and led our local Parade. I do know he was affected for life, with hand tremors, by an explosion in the bomb store. When he was demobbed he went on to serve in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers TA up to the rank of Colour Sergeant. He then worked with the Army Cadet Force, achieving*

the rank of Major and Company Commander. His name was Leonard Rigby Rowlands."

Robert has reviewed the story and stated that: The story of the explosion in the bomb store would fit with Scampton – mines in the bomb dump detonated in 1940, and on 15 March 1943, a few days before the Squadron formed, ground crew were de-bombing a 57 Sqn aircraft which had been prepared for ops the previous night, but the operation had been cancelled. As they did so a bomb detonated and six aircraft were destroyed. Such incidents were more common, to varying degrees, than might be thought.

Stu Clarke

Dorothy Vaughan

by her daughter, Elizabeth Lyons

On what would be my last visit to Bentley Care Centre to visit my mother on October 26th 2015, I could see that she was quite anxious. She told me that she was very worried about everything. I tried to reassure her that as one got older, it was normal to worry more. But, she said, "I am only 70." "No, I replied, you are 93." "Really?" she said, "Then now I understand that I am old enough to be worried." My mother never thought of herself as old. She was gregarious, enjoyed festive occasions, had a keen sense of humour and was very independently minded.

After leaving the village school in Bulkington, at 14, she worked for a while in Tom Smith's stocking factory. She had dreams of being on the stage, but this was frowned upon by her mother and her stardom was limited to school productions.

A door opened for her in 1939, with the outbreak of the Second World War. She took herself to Coventry and unbeknown to her parents joined the Women's Auxiliary Air Force. They were devastated, she was overjoyed and was posted to Wellesbourne. Here she made firm friends and had wonderful times. Her main complaint was having to wash in cold water every morning!

At the end of the war she was swept off her feet by Mike Vaughan, serving in 617 Squadron and they married in Bulkington in December 1946. The snow was heavy, the Tea urn in the Congregational hall where the reception was to be held, broke down and 2 Weston in Arden became the venue for the wedding celebrations.

My parents settled in London and my mother found a fascinating job in an antiques company. This fuelled her interest in antiques in later life and the way she furnished their house-later, reflected her appreciation-of china, glass and - period furniture.

In November 1947, I arrived and firstly lived with my grandparents. My parents continued to work in London, visiting me at weekends and eventually had saved enough to buy a house in Bulkington, firstly in Barbridge Road and later in Coventry Road.

In the living room of both, was a piano. This played a very important part in her life. She had had piano lessons in her childhood and had the gift of being able to play by ear and was not just restricted to reading music. At festive occasions such as Christmas, the enjoyment of her playing was appreciated by our children and relatives, especially on Boxing Day evening. This became an annual event and when Uncle George was alive, she accompanied him in a powerful rendition of Gracie Field's Sally. These gatherings continued until my mother was in her eighties with a repertoire that included carols and of course war time favourites.

My mother's great affection for London lasted throughout her life. She would visit it often, sometimes to go to Hampton Court Flower Show and often for a Christmas shopping expedition where Fortnums and Harrods were always on the list. A trip to the Ritz at the end of it all was just magic for her. She loved watching Hollywood musicals, enjoyed champagne, pearls and sparkle. In 2004, I took her on the Eurostar to Paris and she enjoyed every minute, from a champagne breakfast at St Pancras international to having dinner with a view of the Eiffel Tower.

Her travels stretched even further than France: my father had been a member of 617 Squadron Aircrew Association, and she accompanied him on many reunions, to America, Belgium, Holland, Scotland and Germany and of course, to the Petwood Hotel in Lincolnshire which was the home of the Squadron during the war and after. That she was able to do this for the years during which my father was in poor health and after his death, was due to the loyal friendship of Joyce and John Reed, very dear friends to both.

At the Petwood, her company and sense of humour were enjoyed by many as was her piano playing and she was renowned for leading the community singing into the early hours. They remained great friends with many 617 members. One of the received letters of condolence was from the son of Chan Chandler, who flew with my father during the war. His wife and my mother remained very good friends after being widowed and continued to attend one or two events. He remembers her as a real character, a lovely person and very good company. Other friends that spring to mind are Willie Tait, Bob and Helen Knights, Pat and Mac Hamilton and Les Munro.

Even in her 80s she was particularly vigilant about anything that could damage her health and had a list of rogue additives in the kitchen and would scrutinise the food labels to check if such dangers were lurking in the food. I remember assuring her that if she had got to this age, she shouldn't start worrying about them now. She also trusted homeopathic remedies rather than prescribed drugs and this preference stayed with her even in the care home when tablets she had been given were found in the flower vase on her table. Needless to say, her flowers lasted longer than anyone else's!

My mother was very independently minded and wished more than anything to stay in her own home. On her 90th birthday, she had a memorable celebration at The Denbigh Arms in Monks Kirby, with family and her first great grandchild, just 3 weeks old.

With the help of a care agency and also the generous help of friends, she lived in her own home until 2012. However, she became prone to falls and her last resulted in a spell in hospital which made it necessary for her to move to a care home.

Bentley became her home since January 2014 and she enjoyed its beautiful gardens, participated in the many activities and enjoyed having her nails varnished and still enjoyed a glass of wine with her lunch. She particularly looked forward to lunch at the nearby Rose Inn and was given a very warm welcome there. In 2014 we celebrated her 92nd birthday there, enjoyed a Christmas lunch in December and in March 2015 met there once more for her 93rd birthday, which she enjoyed so much.

In the last few months, she became increasingly frail and although an extremely resilient person, could not overcome the last challenge. My mother had a long, varied and at times, exciting life with many journeys. Now she has made her last and all our love goes with her.

Final Landings

Robert (Bob) Allen

Bob Allen's flying career began as a Cadet Pilot in 1953. His association with V-Force began with the Valiant, rather the Vulcan. In December 1963, as a Sqn Ldr, he was posted as Squadron Training Officer for No 207 Sqn at Marham, and appointed B Flight Commander, becoming Acting OC of 207 in September 1964 until he was posted as OC the Fighter Command Controlling Unit at West Drayton in February 1965.

Promoted to Wg Cdr in January 1966, Bob was subsequently earmarked as the next Officer Commanding No 617 Sqn. He was posted at the end of February 1967, along with his newly assembled crew, to the Bomber Command Bombing School at Lindholme for a Refresher Course prior to his assuming command from Wg Cdr Denys Heywood the following month.

The Squadron taken over by Bob was by now well versed in its Blue Steel role, having come to accept the idiosyncrasies and difficulties of this temperamental weapon system. Routine comprised planned training sorties: Lone, Goose and Western Rangers; together with the less predictable Micky Finn and Kinsman readiness and dispersal exercises, notwithstanding the occasional unforeseen event. Such occurred within a fortnight of Bob taking command. On 6 April Scampton was treated to an impromptu bonfire display as Bill Taylor's Vulcan suffered a catastrophic engine disintegration just as the throttles were opened for take-off. This started a fire after which all that remained of the Vulcan, apart from the nose section, was a delta shaped impression of ash and charred remains on the runway threshold. Fortunately, Bill and his crew were able to escape uninjured.

The following month saw Bob presiding over another memorable event in the Squadron's history – the 24th Anniversary of Operation Chastise, with a major reunion at Scampton, attended by many of the operation's key players including ACM Sir Ralph Cochrane and Air Cdre John Whitworth, (AOC No 5 Group and Station Commander, Scampton respectively at the time of the raid) and Barnes Wallis, who gave an illustrated talk on the development of the Upkeep weapon and his ideas for the swing wing concept. As one commentator remarked: "The evening was a resounding success, though for many it ruined the rest of the weekend!" One other notable visitor attended the event, Lancaster NX611 (now preserved at East Kirkby) which was then airworthy and flew up from Biggin Hill carrying some of the Squadron's wartime veterans as passengers.

The 1968 anniversary of "Chastise" again during Bob's tenure, saw an even bigger gathering of veterans and notables, with over 160 diners gathering at the RAF Club in Piccadilly on 18-19 May. In addition to Sir Ralph Cochrane and Barnes Wallis, guests this year included Sir Arthur Harris, Leonard Cheshire, James Tait, Johnnie Fauquier and Mick Martin together with many veterans from overseas. It was a memorable event. Whether or not it distracted the participants of the (newly formed) Strike Command Bombing Competition held from 13-21 May is hard to judge, suffice it to say regrettably that this year the Squadron failed to win any of the four main trophies.

The commitments of command restricted Bob's flying regime, and it was not until October during his first year of command that he was able to undertake a one week Goose Ranger, flying three of the Command's low level routes. His next spell away came the following March with a three day Lone Ranger to Luqa. After that he managed a Ranger every three months, including one carefully engineered to permit the welcoming-in of 1969 whilst at Akrotiri. October 1968 saw a visit to Goose Bay, his second, in February 1969 and only a month before his departure from the Squadron, being extended into a Western Ranger to Offutt.

Bob's departure from the Squadron at the end of March 1969 was marked in traditional style. A sedate Sunday afternoon party for Squadron members and their wives, followed by a more robust "service" party three days later held at the Monck's Arms, Caenby Corner. After being presented with the ubiquitous Squadron tankard, Bob reciprocated by presenting "the Allen Mug" to the junior member of the Squadron, charging him with the responsibility of passing it on to the next junior member when they were posted in.

Bob's flying career came to an end with his departure from Scampton. After a period at Latimer Staff College, he was posted in 1975 to serve for four years with the Directorate of Air Staff Plans. After two years away as Station Commander at Wyton he returned to the planning role, now as an Air Commodore, as Director of Defence Programmes Staff. His final three years in the Service were spent

as Air Officer Administration. Bob was awarded a CBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours, 1986, retiring from the Service the following August.

Benjamin Bird

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

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

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

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

Ben's first encounter with the enemy came on his third operation, to Bochum in May 1943. Nearing the target his aircraft was bracketed by flak at 12,000 feet, causing it to enter a steep dive. Pulling out at 3,000 feet above the target it was discovered that enemy fire had punched a large hole in the fuselage, damaged the main spar and rendered the ailerons inoperative. In this damaged state the aircraft headed for base, enduring 7 nightfighter attacks en route. Ben's vigilance and accurate firing drove each away enabling a safe return. In July 1943 during an operation against Cologne, he spotted a Ju 88 about to make an attack, watching it and giving his captain a running commentary on its position. As it made its attack Ben held his fire until it came within lethal range of his .303 Brownings. After a 3 second burst it was seen to burst into flames and dive into the sea. During an attack on the Dunlop tyre factory at Montlucon in September

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

In January 1944, over Denmark Ben was concerned about a single blue searchlight that seemed to be indicating their course. Searching the night sky, he spotted a Me 110 turning in to attack. Again holding his fire, Ben despatched it with a burst of fire and it was seen entering a layer of cloud below them. A minute or so later a dull yellow explosion on the ground confirmed its fate.

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

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

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

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

Heligoland on 19 April and the Squadron's final raid of the war, against Hitler's Bavarian redoubt at Berchtesgaden on 25 April.

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

Bill Hume

Bill "Jock" Hume's boyhood was spent on the banks of the river Tweed until he enlisted in the RAFVR in 1941. In the autumn of 1942, after some 6 weeks' basic training as an air-gunner in Wales, he was posted direct to an operational Squadron, rather than passing through OTU, owing to a shortage of gunners. If this was a reflection of the rate of attrition his experience on arriving at No 102 Sqn Conversion Flight was none too reassuring when the Canadian pilot with which he and his fellow crew were teamed with failed to return from his initial "second dickey" familiarisation trip with another experienced crew.

As a result, Bill and his comrades were posted to No 1658 Conversion Unit at Ricall as a "headless crew" in order to acquire a new pilot. This was to be W/O Bernard 'Bunny' Clayton, an experienced pilot who had already completed a tour on Wellingtons with No 9 Sqn. The re-established crew were posted at the end of November to No 51 Sqn, operating Halifaxes from Snaith, in Yorkshire.

Operations commenced with an attack on 15 January 1943, Bill taking what would become his usual mid-upper turret position against the U-boat pens at Lorient as part of Bomber Command's contribution to the Battle of the Atlantic. This was followed by attacks against targets in the Ruhr and further into Germany, including abortive trips to Hamburg due to severe icing, and two others to Nuremberg Berlin, curtailed due to mechanical failure. During an attack at extreme range against the Skoda armament works at Pilsen in April, their aircraft was fitted with additional fuel tanks and Bill was task with helping the Flight Engineer manage the complicated transfer system. Over the target their aircraft was attacked by a night fighter and coned by searchlights for four minutes, escaping only by diving to 3,000 feet. Returning to base after nearly 10½ hours they discovered that one wheel would not lock down, but with only 25 gallons of reserve fuel they have no option but to come straight in. The undercarriage held.

That was Clayton's last flight with 51 Sqn and he was posted as an instructor. However, the crew was re-formed on Clayton's posting to No 617 Sqn in July, where they became part of the intake to replace losses on the Dams Raid. Bill missed the crew's first operation to Italy in July and his first with the Squadron was in September, against the Antheor Viaduct the night following the disastrous attack against the Dortmund Ems Canal. It was an inauspicious baptism of fire, for the aircraft iced up over France and after jettisoning their bomb load they struggled back to Predannack in Cornwall.

The crew returned to the viaduct in November, but the Squadron failed to inflict serious damage. The following month saw the unusual activity of dropping supplies to the French Resistance, and the start of attacks against the V-1 sites in the Pas de Calais. Now, having developed a precision marking technique and equipped with the SABS precision bombsight, and the 12,000lb HC blast bomb the Squadron was detailed to attack factory targets in occupied France. The crew underwent minor changes as their regular rear gunner and wireless operator were posted. For a time, various replacements took their place, until Sgt Alec Sharp became their other regular gunner. As a result, Bill, now the senior gunner in the crew, generally took the rear turret. The crew had almost two months respite from the enemy after an operation against the Luftwaffe stores depot at St Cyr on 10 April during which period they trained intensively for the D-Day deception Operation Taxable.

Post-D-day the crew took part in the Tallboy operations against the Saumur railway tunnel, the E-boat pens at Le Havre (when they lost an engine) and Boulogne, and the hardened large V-weapon sites. Their final operation came on 25 June 1944, against the V-site at Siracourt, for Clayton it was his 31st with the Squadron, bringing his total to 82. For Bill it was his 49th. Wanting to make it a round 50 he remonstrated with Leonard Cheshire, who stood his ground, and although he was not posted to No 5 Lancaster Finishing School as an instructor for another month, he never flew that tempting operation. In recognition of his service he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal in September 1944.

After a period with the supply Branch in Hong Kong Bill returned to the UK, married and emigrated to Canada in 1956, with his family, becoming a stalwart supporter of the Bomber Command Museum of Canada.

Harold Riding

At the outbreak of war, Harold Riding ran away with a friend and attempted to join the Royal Navy. Under age for military service without parental consent both were returned home. On reaching 21 in 1942 Harold finally enlisted, this time in the RAF Volunteer Reserve.

Trained as a wireless operator he was commissioned in November 1943. After training as a W/Op air gunner he was posted to No 29 OTU at Bruntingthorpe

during the spring of 1944, subsequently transferring to No 51 Base, Swinderby. Posted to No 617 Sqn he arrived at Woodhall Spa on 29 September 1944 to crew with Flt Lt Ian Marshall and crew.

Their first task was to become proficient with the Stabilised Automatic Bombsight and meet the Squadron's exacting standards for the release of the 12,000lb Tallboy. A month after joining the Squadron the crew found their name on the Battle Order. Their target, Tirpitz, was a demanding one. Not only did the operation involve a round trip of some 2,500 miles to Tromsø, but to achieve this, the aircraft had been fitted with an ad hoc arrangement of additional fuel tanks inside the fuselage, necessitating the removal of the mid upper turret from the aircraft. Seated a short distance ahead of the fuel load, Harold spent nearly 14 hours knowing that the aircraft was an easy target should they be intercepted by fighters, and vulnerable to the slightest piece of red hot shrapnel that might ignite the heady vapour filling the fuselage. The target became obscured by a thin layer of cloud as they arrived, but they released their Tallboy, but were unable to confirm the accuracy of their attack.

Two weeks later the crew returned to Tromsø. This time the weather was favourable and the results conclusive: "Our bomb fell into the main concentration which appeared to be around the Tirpitz. The ship was covered in smoke and a fire was seen on board." Indeed, it was. Shortly after this observation Tirpitz heeled over, finally despatched.

December was a frustrating month for the crew. Two attacks against were made against the Urft dam, the first without bombing on account of poor visibility, the second with inconclusive results. Reaching Ijmuiden on 15 December they were unable to see the target and returned with their bomb; the experience being repeated a week later when they brought their Tallboy back from the oil refinery at Politz, near the Polish port of Świnoujście (Swinemünde), returning to find Woodhall cloaked in fog, necessitating a diversion at the end of a long and arduous flight.

Better fortune accompanied them to Bergen on 12 January 1945. Bombing the U-boat pens early in the attack they were able to avoid the subsequent fighter attacks which cost the attacking force three crews and seriously damaged another aircraft. February took the crew to the midget submarine pens at Poorteshaven, where a direct hit was claimed, before the Squadron turned its attention to severing communications serving the Ruhr. Harold flew to the Bielefeld viaduct on three occasions between 14 February and 9 March; yet again the crew returned with their Tallboy on two occasions, underlining the Squadron's dependence on perfect visibility if the Tallboys were not to be wasted. On 24 February an operation against the Dortmund Ems canal was aborted over base when an engine developed a coolant leak. March saw the introduction of 22,000lb Grand Slam. In order to save weight, the wireless operators and their equipment were removed from the Lancasters modified

to carry this remarkable weapon, although a number of wireless operators are known to have continued to fly “unofficially” with their crews. The remainder of Ian Marshall’s operations were flown using a Grand Slam aircraft, and as such the Squadron records conclude that Harold’s last operation was flown on 9 March, against the Bielefeld viaduct. Nevertheless, he remained with the Squadron until 28 April 1945 when he was posted to No 619 Sqn at Strubby. With the war in Europe at an end, and the reduction of Bomber Command, he was posted to Blyton, thence to Elsham Wolds before attending the School of Physical Training at Cosford. Further postings followed, but demobilisation finally arrived in August 1946 and Flt Lt Harold Riding returned to a career with the Manchester Ship Canal Company, retiring as Chief Clerk in the stores office.

Ken Stott

Ken Stott was an Australian navigator who hailed from Victoria. After leaving Ballarat High School, in 1934, Australian Ken joined the Bank of New South Wales as a trainee. By the autumn of 1940 he was a clerk in their Melbourne branch and a volunteer in the Militia, when he enlisted in the RAAF, with the intention of becoming a pilot. After ground school he was sent to No 3 Elementary Flying Training School at Essendon, Victoria for basic training on the Tiger Moth. However, all did not go to plan. After falling behind the remainder of his course, despite mentoring by three instructors, Ken was late in going solo and once having done so still failed to make progress. At his own request Ken asked to be scrubbed from the course and re-mustered for other aircrew duties. His mathematical ability earmarked him for training as a navigator and after passing through No 1 Air Navigation School at Parkes, New South Wales, and No 1 Bombing and Gunnery School he was awarded his Observer’s badge in August 1941.

Two months later he embarked for his passage to the UK, via Canada, arriving at the Bournemouth Reception Centre in November. By Christmas he had been posted to No 14 OTU at Cottesmore to continue his training on the Handley Page Hampden and where he joined his initial crew prior to their first operational posting to No 50 Sqn at Skellingthorpe, in May 1942, equipped with the temperamental and twin-engined Avro Manchester (forerunner of the Lancaster).

Perhaps fortunately for Ken his time with 50 Sqn and their Manchesters was short-lived, the Squadron was transferred to Swinderby and he spent most of his time with their Conversion Flight before being posted to No 1654 Conversion Unit at Wigsley, for conversion to the Manchester’s successor the new four engined Lancaster. On completion of the course in September 1942 Ken found himself posted, back to Skellingthorpe, and 61 Sqn which now shared the airfield with No 50 Sqn.

His first tour was undertaken at a time when Bomber Command was growing in strength and confidence. His first tour commenced as a NCO navigator, culminating his being commissioned in January 1943, by which time he was recorded as “a capable and confident navigator, courageous and determined” and resulted in the

award of the DFM, the citation for which recorded that, "during this period he had contributing in a large amount to the creation of a first class operational crew with a fine fighting spirit. He participated in the daylight raids on Le Creusot, and Milan and in two recent raids against Berlin."

On completion of his first tour in February 1943 Ken was posted to No 1656 Conversion Unit at Lindholme, where he instructed on Halifaxes and Lancasters, before transferring to No 1660 and No 1654 Conversion Units at Swinderby and Wigsley respectively. While playing tennis for the latter unit against a team from Coningsby he met some of Mick Martin's Australian crew who informed him that their navigator had left them to go on a pilot's course, and that they were looking for a replacement.

A posting was arranged and Ken arrived on the Squadron on 14 September 1943. Within twenty-four hours he was flying with Martin's crew in the low level attack on the Dortmund Ems Canal, from which only three of the five participating aircraft would return. Despite deteriorating weather conditions it is testimony to Ken's skill and the crew's overall ability that they found and bombed their target.

The winter of 1943 saw Martin and Cheshire pioneering accurate low level marking first against lightly defended V-1 sites in northern France. On 12 February 1944 the Squadron were directed to attack the heavily defended Antheor viaduct on the Mediterranean coast. After several abortive attempts to mark the target Martin made a determined run. His Lancaster was hit, his bomb aimer killed and flight engineer wounded. With engine controls damaged and difficulties in releasing his bomb load Martin nursed the damaged aircraft to a safe landing in Sardinia.

On their return to the UK Martin was posted from the Squadron, and after one trip with Nick Knilans Ken found himself a permanent position as navigator to Flt Lt David Wilson's crew. Ken flew a further 17 operations with them through the spring and summer of 1944, including the D-Day spoof "Operation Taxable" which demanded the utmost navigational accuracy. Compared to his operations with Martin these were nevertheless generally uneventful trips, targeting French V-weapons sites and U-boat pens. For his service with the Squadron he was awarded the DFC in October 1944.

Having completed two tours totalling 53 operations in total, he was posted at the beginning of August to No 27 OTU at Lichfield, to train RAAF aircrew and subsequently to the Transport Command OTU at Bramcote to undertake a special navigation course. On completion of this he was sent to No 11 Ferry Unit, Talbenny, responsible for ferrying aircraft to the Middle East, before returning to Australia in December 1945 where he rejoined his former employer, the Bank of New South Wales. Six years later he applied for, and was granted, a permanent commission in the RAAF as a navigator, being promoted to the rank of Sqn Ldr before transferring to the reserve, finally retiring as CO of the ATC in Brisbane.

Robert Owen

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