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## Goodwill Centurion.

A number of the Squadron's wartime members were fortunate to achieve their centennial birthdays, With the passing of the last of the wartime veterans, we now move into a new era and it's pleasing to note that one of the Squadron's early post-war members has also attained that remarkable age.

The first of these (at least as far as we are aware) is Cliff Bagley, who commemorated his 100th birthday on 16 April 2026. Cliff's time on the Squadron was brief, but definitely memorable. As a 21 year old air gunner he was fortunate to have been one of the aircrew selected for the Squadron's 1947 "Goodwill" tour to North America.



August 1944, piloted by Peter Quick, second from right in the front, with Cliff Bagley standing middle-back

By the summer of 1947 the wartime bonds forged by the Atlantic Charter of 1941 - later to develop into "the special relationship" - were still strong, although America's post-war industrial and economic might were beginning to widen the gap between the two former allies. Britain's global reach was being challenged by the American aspirations, and it was decided that a soft power approach should be taken to demonstrate that Britain was still capable of deploying her military might effectively at great range.

Accordingly, agreement was reached between the USAAF and RAF for an RAF Squadron to make a tour of selected US cities and USAAF Air Bases, as a means not only of "showing the flag" but also exhibiting Bomber Command's equipment, and professionalism, to the American military. As similar tour had been conducted by 16 Lancasters from No. 35 Squadron in 1946 to great acclaim.

617 Sqn was selected for this next tour, not only did they have an impressive wartime reputation, but they were now equipped with the Lancaster's successor, the Avro Lincoln.

However, owing to post-war contraction of the Royal Air Force, the Squadron now comprised only 8 aircraft and crews, commanded by a Squadron Leader. For appearance sake, it was agreed that the Squadron's strength would be temporarily doubled. Sixteen of the best Lincolns were earmarked from the squadrons within No. 1 Group. They were given extensive maintenance at Scampton to ensure maximum serviceability, along with various modifications including navigation equipment, extra fuel provision and bomb bay panniers to carry tools and spares.





Air and ground crews, totalling 58 officers and 176 NCOs and other ranks, were also selected from across No. 1 Group's Lincoln squadrons, much to the disappointment of some existing 617 Sqn crews (including Flt Lt George Chalmers, who had been one of the originals on the Dams Raid) who found themselves posted to other squadrons. Those chosen were kitted out with tropical lightweight flying suits for aircrew and white drill overalls for the ground crew – with light khaki dress uniforms for receptions, as well as informal sightseeing. Along with this came strict orders about behaviour during the tour. The Squadron were not only representing the Royal Air Force but were ambassadors for their country.

Binbrook's Station Commander, Gp Capt Thompson, would lead the tour, while the enlarged squadron would be commanded by Wg Cdr Cecil Milne. Former OC 617, Sqn Ldr Clive Saxilby became A Flight Commander while Sqn Ldr Alastair Lang was posted in from No. 12 Squadron as B Flight Commander.

Cliff had not completed his training in time to participate in wartime operations. However, during training and exercises Cliff (classed as a Gunner II in the short lived RAF aircrew classification of the time) had proved himself as one of 12 Squadron's leading gunners, a fact which doubtless led to his selection as one of the aircrew posted to 617 for "Goodwill" as part of Sqn Ldr Lang's crew.

[Cliff's son, David, adds: "Dad has always said they were just waiting to be activated as a replacement crew but that by the last few months of the war in Europe the Allies had gained enough air superiority that the RAF bomber crews weren't experiencing the number of losses they had planned for (obviously a very good thing). He has just now told me how they did get detailed for a mission, but one of their crew members, he believes it was their navigator, had come down ill and a doctor said he was unfit to fly. Not wanting to alter a crew for their first mission, they were pulled-back, and that mission turned-out to be the very last one that 12 Sqn. flew before Germany surrendered."]

The Squadron's 16 Lincolns departed from Binbrook on 23 July 1947, accompanied by an Avro York carrying additional ground crew and equipment flying direct to Gander, Newfoundland. By doing so they made the first non-stop crossing of the Atlantic by an RAF bomber squadron (the previous year No. 35 Sqn had taken a southern route, staging via the Azores). Lang and his crew in Lincoln RF386. KC-K completed the 2,000 mile overnight flight in some 12 hours,

The tour would embody a considerable number of long duration flights. With no enemy fighters to contend with (in any case the Lincoln's turrets though fitted with guns, carried no ammunition) the gunners kept themselves occupied assisting with other tasks as required. A number were kept busy distributing flight rations, and using a specially fitted heaters to make fresh tea which was "very welcome" as a potent morale and efficiency maker".

On arrival at Gander the gunners too assisted ground crew in removing the bomb bay overload tanks and fitting the panniers to carry spares and equipment.

On 28 July the Squadron departed for Andrews Field, Washington DC in preparation for participation in Air Forces Day, commemorating the USAAF's 40th anniversary. Three days later they participated in a mass flypast of 12 cities across three eastern states, taking part in displays at 4 airfields and passing directly over the Empire State Building and the statue of Liberty and flying a salute over the White House and Capitol building.

On 4 August the Squadron flew to Selfridge Field, Detroit, four days later to Smoky Hill, Salina,

taken on factory visits –Ford at Detroit and the aircraft plants at Wichita, and to sports events, and ball games, which few understood. In keeping with protocol, officers enjoyed, formal receptions and sit-down meals in the Officers Club, while other ranks were treated to buffets and dances in the enlisted mess or Base Gym. At Smoky Hill Officers found a bottle of whiskey and a box of condoms amongst their “welcome” packs.



Two days later the Squadron found themselves in Los Angeles. En route KC-K developed an oil leak necessitating a diversion, landing at March Field with only 5 gallons of oil remaining. Yet more hospitality, this time from Hollywood, with visits to film studios and pool parties and barbeques with stars such as Bob Hope, Bebe Daniels and Ben Lyon and a guided tour of the Long Beach Dockyard, where they viewed Howard Hughes’ “Spruce Goose” flying boat under construction.

On to Fort Worth, Texas on 18 August where, despite the hot weather, the crews enjoyed a visit to a rodeo, an intrepid few even taking part and attempting to ride a bucking bronco or steer. Great mirth when Flt Lt John Simpson, at 5 ft 3 ins the Squadron’s smallest pilot was given a calf to ride. Another aircraft factory – consolidated Vultee, to see construction of the USAAF’s vast six engined B-36 “Peacemaker” bomber.

Four days later, on to Maxwell Field, Alabama before returning to Andrews Field, Washington DC on 25 August. There, the crews, many of whom were fatigued from their hot and intensive tour, enjoyed an eight-day respite. Advantage was taken for more sightseeing, and to re-establish contacts made during their brief stay on arrival.

The Squadron said farewell to America on 2 September, heading across the border to Trenton, Ontario to participate in the Canadian National Exhibition, with both a mass flypast and ground visit. Then after three days at Trenton it was on to Gander to prepare the aircraft for their trans-Atlantic return to Binbrook on 8-9 September.

The 20,000 mile tour was an outstanding success, serviceability had been maintained at a high level, despite a number of technical issues, and the Squadron had been exemplary ambassadors.

A number of personnel made contacts during the visit which continued after their return, there were a few romantic liaisons too, most of them of fleeting duration.

There was an exception, In Washington, Cliff Bagley had met a girl by the name of Grace Mason, who worked for the US State Department. When the Squadron left for Canada Cliff imagined that that he’d never see her again. Grace had other ideas, and engineered a short posting to the US Embassy in London and regained contact with Cliff. Her posting over, Grace returned to the USA, only to return within a few months. She and Cliff were married in his home town of Bromsgrove, Worcestershire. Grace then returned to await Cliff’s discharge from the RAF the following year when he again crossed the Atlantic to join her, and start a new life in the USA.



## Cliff's son, David, has kindly added some more personal memories...

The morning after VE Day my father woke-up with his back against the boarded-over pedestal for the Statue of Eros in the middle of Piccadilly Circus with a sea of others asleep all around him, the statue had been removed for safekeeping during the war, but the pedestal was still there. During the Summer of '45 he said there was some talk of them being shipped-out to the Pacific to help finish-off the fight there when the U.S. dropped 'The Bomb' on both Hiroshima and Nagasaki and it was all over.

One thing that pushed him back in his training was that just before he was set to start gunnery training, it was halted, and they were given a couple of options for what they could train for instead. One of those was glider pilot training, and since, as my father has said "We all wanted to be Spitfire pilots", and figuring they could at least claim to be an RAF pilot, he, and a large portion of his group that had been about to start gunnery training chose that option. There was a bit of a wait, and just before that training began, gunnery training was opened-up again. They were told they could go back to that or stay where they were. Some stayed, and some, including my father, went back to gunnery training. He has always told the story that the guys from his original group that stayed in glider pilot training completed that training in time to be sent on the ill-fated Operation Market Garden and that "almost to a man" the guys from his group were "wiped-out" (did not survive).

1947 Goodwill Tour: When they landed at Andrews Field, it was just around dusk on the evening of 28 July, and as they approached Andrews but before they had to report to their positions for landing, the members of my father's crew not charged with flying/landing the plane had imbibed in something a bit stronger than tea, he just said

he thinks it was rum. Upon exiting their plane, they thought they were seeing things and wondered about the strength of what they drank. Andrews was surrounded by forests in those days, some of it still is, and what was playing tricks on them were Fireflies (aka Lightning Bugs), lighting-up and swirling around for a just a second everywhere they looked, apparently none of them had ever seen them before.

During that first short stop in Washington, D.C. my father and one of his mates were doing the tourist thing, walking around the grounds of the Washington Monument on the Mall. A recruiter for a nearby photo studio encountered them and convinced them to come by the studio and get formal shots done of them in their uniforms. They did that but the photos wouldn't be ready for several days. They said they had to fly out before then but would be back by 25 August for a layover there and would pick them up then. Well, that mate of my dad's knew a young lady from back home in England who had a strong romantic interest in him (him being the mate), and she just happened to be staying in Washington, D.C. at the time and was no doubt thrilled to learn the man she was so interested in was coming to the same city so far from their home. He was friendly with her and in contact while here but he didn't share the same level of interest, he had however, told her a little too much about their activities while in the city. When they returned to DC and went back to the studio to get their photos, they were told "Your friend came by and picked them up for you, she said you could collect them where she's staying". She had found a way to make him come and see her in-person. Where she was staying just happened to be my grandmother's boarding house called 'The Tudor Inn' (there was nothing Tudor about it, it was a massive Victorian-style rowhouse) at 12th and Massachusetts Streets in the city. It had passed down to my grandmother from her parents who started the business upon moving from Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1903. My mother Grace, 22 and single, was present when these two RAF Airman showed-up to collect their photos. Ever the opportunist, the pursuer of my father's mate suggested they all go out for the evening, and that "Grace can keep Cliff company". That's how my parents met.



During the Alabama stop on the tour, a large dinner was arranged with a local women's college, and they were all seated in the classic 'boy-girl-boy-girl' arrangement. During the dinner, the young lady sitting next to my father, in her full Alabama/Southern drawl, said "Cliff, could you please pass me the Wor-ces-ter-shi-re sauce?" with every syllable fully pronounced. My Worcestershire-born and raised father said "I'll be happy to, but it's pronounced 'WUSS-ta-shur'. She tried to correct him, saying "No, it says right here: Wor-ces-ter-shi-re", he said "This is actually where I'm from"... It was to no avail, he said she was too pretty and too sweet to argue with.



When they were in Hollywood, they were presented with a choice of tourist things to do, one was a tour of Universal Studios, my father may have regretted his choice of a different option when he learned afterward that Bob Hope was filming a movie that day at Universal. When word reached Hope that there was a group of RAF 617 Bomber Sqn personnel touring the studio, he stopped what he was doing and went to meet them.

My father almost failed to show-up for his flight home. I quizzed him on those circumstances and learned my assumption was wrong, he hadn't spent the night at my grandmother's boarding house, but had stopped by to say goodbye to my mother the day of their departure, and nodded-off there (no doubt having been out late the night before), and that's why he barely made it back to Andrews Field in time, jumping into his Lincoln and rushing into the tail turret (protocol dictated they all had to be at their positions during take-offs and landings) as the crew was going through their pre-takeoff checks on the radio, they would call-out their respective positions in an established order, he made into the turret just as his turn came around and said "Tail Gunner", only to hear his skipper, Sqn. Leader Alastair Lang, interject sternly: "I'll have a talk with you later".

Not too long after he returned to England from the tour, my father was doing some required target shooting with a Colt revolver, and instead of the proper way in which they were trained, he drew and fired-off 6 quick shots from the hip, just like a gunslinger in an American Western movie, and put the shots in a very tight grouping that was more than enough to pass the testing had he been shooting from the proper posture. The shocked instructor asked: "Where did you learn how to shoot like that?!" My father, putting on an American Southern accent, said "I learned that in Texas, sir". The instructor said "Very impressive", and then added sternly: "Don't do it again!"



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