



Après Moi

The 617 Squadron
Association Newsletter



Spring 2020



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Cover Photo: The passing of Basil Fish in February this year was very sad for Sharelle and me, as we had enjoyed many Dams and Tirpitz dinners in the company of Basil and his flight engineer, Frank Tilley, pictured here in November 2011 - Frank on the left and Basil on the right.

Chris Henderson

Editorial

I must first make an apology to Paul Morley, who kindly produced 'The Promise', published in the previous edition. The article mistakenly accredited 'Paul Murray' as the author. I try my best to spot these mistakes, but occasionally, one slips through.

While I am feeling apologetic, the timeliness of this edition is an unfortunate result of the impact of the Corona virus pandemic. Association members have rightly been forced to prioritise their activities. I know you will understand and wish you all a safe journey through the crisis.

Anyway, welcome to the belated Spring edition of *Après Moi*. As always, this edition provides a range of articles that I hope are of interest to you. I want to express my thanks to Officer Commanding 617 Sqn, Wg Cdr John Butcher, as he handed over to Commander Mark Sparrow RN on 2nd April. John stated on 18th March that, "It is with some amazement that two weeks tomorrow is my last day in command of the Dambusters. It has been a turbulent two years for the Squadron, but, as ever, the Dambusters have performed exceptionally well, and I am very proud of the Squadron's achievements. I am aware that I was not able to attend either function last year as I was deployed for both, but I hope you still felt attached to our activity through my updates and feel a sense of pride as well." John also endorsed the incoming Officer Commanding, "I have known Mark for years and he is absolutely the right person to lead the Dambusters into its next chapter of an ever more maritime focussed unit, and I know you will give him the warm welcome you gave me when I first attended a dinner in 2017."

Once again, I sincerely hope that you enjoy this edition of your newsletter although I am genuinely interested in hearing your story. Please get in touch via my email or letter to discuss how we may be able to incorporate your 617 Squadron experience.

I hope you enjoy this edition and welcome any feedback.

Stu Clarke

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Walters' Warblings

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I write, the Covid-19 pandemic hits the UK. In April, we learnt that 96-year-old Flying Officer Ken Sumner DFM, a 617 Squadron Lancaster bomb aimer, has died of this terrible virus. Although not an Association member, we mourn his loss. In many ways, we have seen the nation adopt a wartime spirit. It's now our turn to look after our veterans who gave so much to secure the freedom we have enjoyed since WWII. Please do keep in contact with our veterans and your other Association colleagues to help soften the solitude of social isolation. And, of course, we all applaud the heroism of the nation's care workers who leave their families at home and risk their lives every time they go to work, just like our veterans did for us.

Unfortunately, we have had to cancel the Dams Dinner in May due to the pandemic. However, we hope to hold a combined AGM/Dams/Tirpitz Dinner on Remembrance weekend instead. We are in some ways fortunate that the spate of Squadron 75th anniversary commemorations ended in November. In May 2019, the Association marked the 75th anniversary of the Dams raid with a parade by the Queen's Colour Sqn and a flypast by the BBMF Lancaster which brought a tear to AOC I Group's eye as he saluted our veterans. Even more importantly, we brought together many relatives and grew our Association family. The relatives are very important to us, as they help us maintain a connection with our founding fathers. We then accompanied the RAF on a 'staff ride' which not only visited all three Ruhr Dams, but also included a dining-in night overlooking the Möhne. We had the opportunity to reflect while standing on the Möhne exactly 75 years after Gibson flew over in AJ-G. In September 2019, we commemorated the 75th anniversary of Guy Gibson's death in Steenbergen. And prior to that, our Historian had been working with Cheshire Homes to mark the centenary of his birth.

The Tirpitz events in November 2019 were the last of our major 75th commemorations. After a marvellous evening at the Petwood, the IX(B) Squadron Association followed us to Tromsø in Norway where we participated in another RAF staff ride. Two years of planning resulted in the laying of wreaths over the Tirpitz wreck site exactly 75 years after our veterans released their Tallboys. The event is recorded in an article in this edition of *Après Moi*. Sadly, we subsequently lost one of our remaining veterans, Basil Fish, after a long and bravely fought battle with illness.

With this spate of commemorations behind us, we need to look to the future. The committee will hopefully now have the headroom to look at ways of growing the membership, especially our Tornado, Lightning and ground crew cadres, and re-examine the format of our reunions, so they are attractive to all our members.

I have two committee member changes to propose. Firstly, Wing Commander Mark Jackson has stood down as Tornado Rep after many years of service to the Association. We welcome his replacement, Wing Commander Mark Still and hope you will confirm this at the next AGM. Secondly, Wing Commander John Butcher handed over command of No 617 Squadron to Commander Mark Sparrow RN at the beginning of April. I have thanked John for his marvellous support and for his generosity in including the Association in the Squadron's events since it reformed. Mark is the first Naval officer to command the Squadron, of course, but he is of sound RAF extraction as his father flew Vulcans on 617 during the late 1960s. Mark is now an ex-officio committee member and I have sent him our congratulations along with our warm welcome.

Please stay safe and look after each other,

Andrew

75th Anniversary of the Death of Wg Cdr Guy Gibson VC DSO* DFC*

The Association was represented at the memorial service at Steenberg Cemetery on 19th September 2019 by Glyn Hepworth who stood in at short notice after Chris Henderson had to cancel his planned visit. Glyn laid a floral tribute at the graves of Guy Gibson and his navigator, Jim Warwick.

Glyn is the son of Fg Off Albert Hepworth who served on the Squadron as a W/Op from 1944-46. Glyn thanks his Dutch hosts for looking after him - particularly Honorary members of the Association Marielle (Macy) Plugge and her father Jan van Dalen.



75th Anniversary of the Sinking of the Tirpitz

Dr Robert Owen, Official Historian
Dr Andrew Walters, Chairman

November 12th, 2019 marked the 75th anniversary of the sinking of the German battleship Tirpitz at Tromsø, Norway, by RAF Lancasters from 617 and IX(B) Squadron in 1944. To mark this event, the 617 and IX(B) Squadron Associations liaised with the RAF to commemorate the anniversary with a ceremony in Tromsø. This article outlines the RAF's campaign against the Tirpitz, describing the Tallboy attacks in some detail, and records the 75th commemorations that were attended by RAF personnel, family descendants, Association members and international VIPs.

'The Beast'



Following the sinking of her sister ship, the Bismarck in May 1941 and also the smaller Scharnhorst in December 1943, the Tirpitz remained the German Kriegsmarine's only operational battleship. Commissioned in February 1941, she spent her entire career in the Baltic (detering the Soviet Baltic fleet) and the Norwegian Sea. Although she spent most of her time sheltering in Norwegian fjords, Tirpitz nevertheless posed a potent threat to the Allied convoys resupplying the Soviet Union. This compelled the Royal Navy (RN) and US Navy to retain significant naval forces in the North Atlantic to contain her, rather than deploying these badly needed capital ships to the Pacific to counter the Japanese. The combination of U-boats and the Tirpitz posed a complex threat to Allied merchant shipping. The standard Allied tactic to counter U-boats was to package merchant ships into tight convoys, so that

anti-submarine destroyers could sanitise the area ahead and around the convoy. However, convoys, once discovered, were vulnerable to heavily armed surface raiders who could engage and sink the tightly packed merchant vessels with their heavy guns. This, in turn, compelled the Allies to employ scarce battleships and aircraft carriers as defensive 'covering forces' for convoys. This quandary (depicted on the famous 'bulkhead' depicting the Tirpitz and a U-Boat working together) was tragically exemplified in June 1942 when arctic convoy PQ17 was forced to scatter when false intelligence indicated that Tirpitz had sailed to intercept it. The convoy escorts were unable to defend the widely scattered ships, allowing U-boats and Luftwaffe aircraft to pick off 24 of the 35 merchant vessels, despite the Tirpitz never setting to sea. The losses were such that arctic convoys were suspended for three months, which resulted in significant tension between Churchill and Stalin. Given the strategic implications of Tirpitz as a 'fleet in being', it is, perhaps, no surprise that Churchill became preoccupied with what he called 'The Beast'.¹

Preceding attacks on Tirpitz

Tirpitz was subjected to over 20 separate attempts to sink her during her short lifetime. Bomber Command conducted three raids against her during her construction, slowing her completion, and continued raiding until Tirpitz was deployed to Kaafjord in Norway in early 1942, beyond the range of UK-based aircraft. The RN subsequently launched attacks with manned torpedoes later in 1942 and X-Class midget submarines in 1943, the latter putting Tirpitz out of action for at least six months. These attacks resulted in the strengthening of Tirpitz' underwater defences, leaving air power as the only option. So, between April and August 1944, the Fleet Air Arm launched six raids of up to 84 carrier-launched dive bombers and fighters. Despite several hits, only one of the newly developed 1600lb armour-piercing bombs penetrated Tirpitz' deck armour (where it failed to explode), resulting in only superficial damage. It was realised that the Fleet Air Arm's bombs were too small, and their aircraft insufficiently fast to attack before Tirpitz had deployed its defensive smoke screen, so the task was passed to Bomber Command.

¹ A 'fleet in being' is a naval term for a naval force that extends a controlling influence without ever leaving port. Were the fleet to leave port and face the enemy, it might lose in battle and no longer influence the enemy's actions (as was the case with the Tirpitz' sister ship, the Bismarck), but while it remains safely in port, the enemy is forced to continually deploy forces to guard against it.

Tallboy

Tallboy was not designed for armoured targets, but rather for deep penetration into the ground and for maximum earth shock. However, following its first use (which collapsed the Saumur rail tunnel on 8/9 June 1944), the potential effectiveness of Barnes Wallis' 12,000lb bomb against hardened targets became self-evident. The availability of increasing numbers of Tallboy bombs resulted in No IX(B) Squadron, a high-performing main bomber force Lancaster Squadron, being re-assigned to Tallboy operations. This second Tallboy squadron was taken off operations in August 1944 while its aircraft were retrofitted with large bomb doors and its crews trained with Tallboy. However, IX(B) Squadron retained the main bomber force's Mk XIV 'area' bomb sight due to a shortage of the Stabilised Automatic Bomb Sight (SABS) used by 617 Squadron. With the precision SABS, the bomb aimer tracked the target with the crosshairs allowing the sight's mechanical computer to automatically calculate and compensated for the wind. With practice, an accuracy of less than 100 yards could be routinely achieved, but the aircraft had to fly a non-maneuvring approach at a precise speed and height. In contrast, the Mk XIV area bomb sight allowed more tactical freedom and manoeuvring but required an accurate wind to be manually entered into the sight. Despite IX(B) Squadron's impressive main force bombing results, this latter limitation would prove problematic for the main force Squadron on the final Tirpitz raid.

Bomber Command's turn

The British Joint Planning Staff initially considered, but rejected, tasking Mosquito aircraft with 2,000lb bombs against the Tirpitz. As Allied land advances were over-running the Tallboy's routine E and U-boat pen targets, Bomber Command's AOC-in-C, 'Bomber' Harris, agreed to target the Tirpitz in No 5 Group's 'spare time', using both Tallboy Squadrons. As Kaafjord was beyond the range of the Lancaster, the Soviet airfield at Yagodnik, south east of Archangel on an island in the Dvina River, was selected as a forward operating base. To increase the Lancaster's range, the mid-upper turrets would be removed to reduce weight. One third of the Lancasters would be armed with 12 'Johnny Walker' air-dropped oscillating mines. The 350lb, 6ft-long 'JW' Mk I was dropped on a parachute (which jettisoned on hitting water) and would sink to about 60 feet, before an internal gas supply made it rise to the surface, where its 90 lbs of explosives would hopefully detonate on the relatively thin 1" lower double skin of the Tirpitz. If contact was not made, the mine would sink again and 'walk' laterally about 30 feet (with luck, towards the ship), before rising again. This cycle would repeat until the gas supply ran out. Understandably, many of 617

Squadron's crews were dubious of the JW's effectiveness; then Flight Lieutenant Tony Iveson considered it 'a crazy idea'. In the initial plan, all aircraft would bomb Tirpitz on the outbound sortie, with the JW aircraft then returning to the UK while the Tallboy aircraft would proceed 680 miles to Yagodnik.

Yagodnik

Following a change of plan and one aerial turn-back, 37 Lancasters, two Liberator transports (carrying spares and Group Captain McMullen's small HQ staff) and a film unit Lancaster, set off directly to Yagodnik on the evening of 11 September 1944. Unfortunately, the RAF weather forecast for Yagodnik proved unreliable and the crews were forced to fly below a cloudbase of 150-300 feet in heavy rain with 600 yards visibility. Soviet W/T and beacon frequencies proved incorrect and hampered navigation for most aircraft, as did the RAF's inaccurate maps. Low on fuel, only 13 Lancasters landed at Yagodnik. Five landed at Kegostrov airfield on another island in the Dvina River, nearer to Archangel, while the rest were scattered around in fields and marshes. Miraculously, nobody was hurt, but four IX(B) Squadron Lancasters and two from 617 Squadron were written off, while the remainder re-positioned to Yagodnik as the weather improved. Eventually, 31 Lancasters assembled at Yagodnik where Soviet engineers eagerly completed repairs, using cannibalised parts from the written-off aircraft. Officers and SNCOs were accommodated on a paddle steamer moored in the Dvina, while non-commissioned ranks slept in semi-underground, earth-covered dug-outs; all were infested with bedbugs and mosquitoes from which, allegedly, only OC 617 Squadron, Wing Commander 'Willie' Tait, proved untouched.

Operation PARAVANE

After a 24-hour postponement due to poor weather, 17 Lancasters from 617 Squadron and 10 from IX(B) Squadron (21 armed with Tallboy and six with JW mines) launched from Yagodnik on 15 September, accompanied by the film unit Lancaster. The plan was for the Tallboy Lancasters to bomb in four line-abreast gaggles of five aircraft from between 14,000 and 18,000 feet, each line-abreast gaggle spaced at a few hundred yards, with 617 Squadron leading. The JW-armed Lancasters would follow up in 2 lines abreast, bombing from 10,000 to 12,000 feet. About 8-10 minutes before the first wave bombed, Tirpitz deployed its smoke screen, which obscured the ship just as the first gaggle released their Tallboys, making the initial impacts difficult to assess. Subsequent aircraft bombed on the Tirpitz' muzzle flashes, with several aircraft re-attacking. Fortunately, no German fighters were encountered, although four Lancasters were damaged by flak. In total, 17 Tallboys (all fused with a 0.07 second delay) were released against the Tirpitz, with Group Captain McMullen's subsequently

reporting 'one explosion with red flame and thick smoke'. All aircraft then returned to Yagodnik except the film unit Lancaster, which continued on to the UK, landing after a 15½-hour flight.

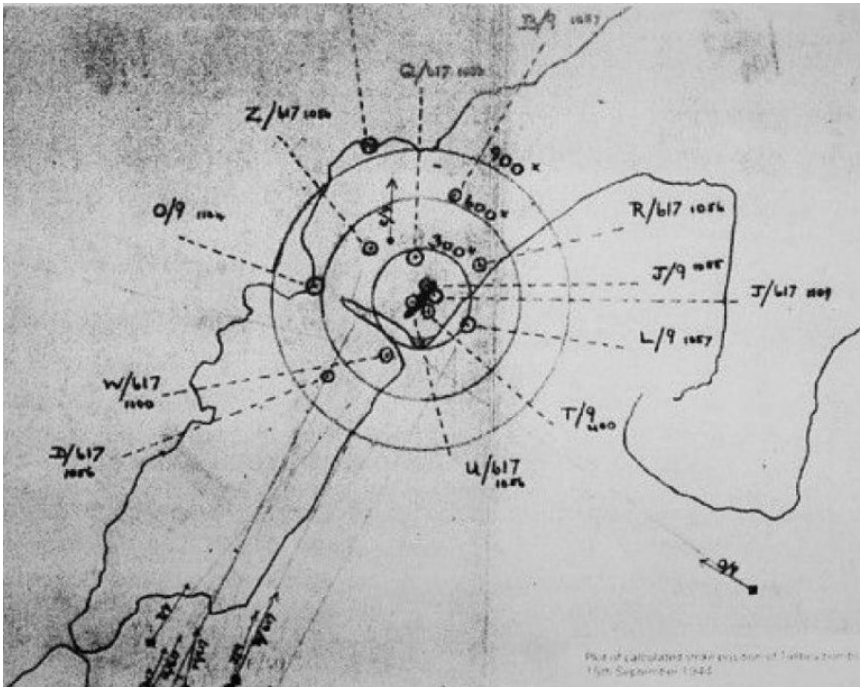
Sixteen Lancasters, led by OC 617 Squadron, returned to the UK later on 16 September; unfortunately, Lancaster KC-V, piloted by Flying Officer Frank Levy, crashed into a mountain near Nesbyen in Norway, killing everyone onboard. The remaining aircraft returned from Russia over the next few days. In an attempt to delay IX(B) Squadron's departure, two 617 Squadron Lancasters buzzed Yagodnik, firing Very flares which caused a serious forest fire. Group Captain McMullen lost his normal sense of humour and reported the crews to AOC 5 Group. Six Lancasters were left behind in Russia having been declared written off. The Soviet Naval Air Arm later repaired and flew two of them as long-range maritime reconnaissance and cargo aircraft.

Neither reconnaissance flights nor Norwegian Resistance reports provided conclusive evidence of the damage inflicted on Tirpitz, although it was suspected that one Tallboy had hit and several others had been very near misses. By luck, given the smokescreen, a Tallboy had hit the bow forward of the anchor cables, passing through the ship, exiting on the starboard side below the waterline where it detonated in the sea, leaving a large gash through which 2000 tons of water flooded. Indeed, the bow remained attached only by the keel and port armour plating. This Tallboy, and other near misses, had buckled hull plating and damaged the engines and generators.

The question of whose Tallboy struck Tirpitz cannot be easily resolved. Although 617 Squadron's Tallboy aircraft were scheduled to bomb first, records show that two IX(B) Squadron aircraft were amongst the first 10 aircraft to release. Indeed, the 'F540' Operations Record Book (ORB) records that IX(B) Squadron B Flight Commander, Flight Lieutenant Dougie Melrose, released a minute before Wing Commander Tait. However, the various records are confusing – using a mix of Russian local time, GMT and Double British Summer time. The timing anomaly may also be subject to rounding up or down to the nearest minute.

Melrose's debrief stated 'Stern of ship seen in sights'; however, his Tallboy was subsequently officially plotted as impacting off the bow. Yet Tait, bombing at the same time, reported 'No results seen because of smoke screen'; given the significant time of flight of the Tallboy, Tirpitz may have been visible at release, but not impact. Certainly, by the time the fourth or fifth aircraft bombed, the ship was completely obscured by smoke – her position only being revealed by muzzle flashes. Melrose's crew are also reported as saying that Tait's aircraft was

converging on them from the starboard beam and that Tait released marginally before they did. Conversely, Tait did not record seeing anyone ahead of him when he bombed. So, the exact events and timings are unclear. The official RAF bomb plot records Melrose's bomb from WS-J striking just off the port bow. Tait's Tallboy, released from KC-D at 15,000 feet, is shown as 700 yards short, which is unusual given 617 Squadron's 97yd average with the SABS. However, the plot also shows very near misses by 617 Squadron's Flight Lieutenant John Pryor (in KC-U) and Squadron Leader Gerry Fawke (in KC-J), with another, at a slightly greater distance, by IX(B) Squadron's WS-T. However, these plots, all annotated as very near misses, must have a fair margin of error as a result of the smoke screen, especially since we now know there was one direct hit. On this basis, both 617 and IX(B) Squadrons had two bombs apiece that are candidates for the bomb that impacted the bow. Since other evidence points to this bomb being amongst the first impacts, then Melrose's, dropped at 12:55, appears the most likely, although it could have been Pryor's, released at 12:56 at the same time as Tait. IX(B) Squadron's WS-T didn't bomb until 13:00 and Fawke is even less likely to be the claimant since he did not release until 13:05 on his third re-attack.



Operation PARAVANE bomb plot (Thorburn)

But Tirpitz had been hit. The Germans estimated it would take nine months to repair the damage in a German port (the St Nazaire dry dock being out of action following Operation CHARIOT in March 1942 when HMS Campbeltown rammed and detonated in the dock gates).¹ But the Kriegsmarine's commander, Admiral Doenitz, declared Tirpitz non-operational. As it was neither practical to repair her in Norway nor move her to Germany in her vulnerable state, he decided to use her as a floating artillery battery to defend Tromsø against Soviet advances. He also hoped that, unaware of the true extent of the damage, Tirpitz would continue to tie down Allied resources. He was right.

Operation OBVIATE

On 15 October 1944, Tirpitz sailed slowly south west to Tromsø, sometimes under her own steam, but assisted by tugs. She moored in the shallow waters off Haakoy Island, 2 miles west of Tromsø, where dredgers moved additional mud under her keel to stop her sinking if struck again. Allied pressure to eliminate Tirpitz grew, as RN capital ships were required in the Pacific to bolster British influence with the Americans against the Japanese. Despite strong suspicion of severe damage, both the RAF and RN contemplated that Tirpitz may have been moved south to keep her outside range of airfields that the advancing Soviet Army were capturing. It was necessary to inflict sufficient damage on her to ensure she could not reach Germany and be repaired, thereby allowing scarce RN capital ships at Scapa Flow to be redeployed to the Pacific

To bring Tromsø within range of UK-based Lancasters, a Wellington fuel tank and a Mosquito drop tank were installed in the fuselage of 617 and IX(B) Squadrons' aircraft. This added an additional 252 gallons of fuel but required groundcrew to wear plimsolls to avoid sparks. To reduce weight, the front gun, 3,000 rounds of rear-gun ammunition, superfluous oxygen and nitrogen bottles and the pilots' seat armour were removed. The latter modification did not impress the pilots' union! All aircraft were fitted with more powerful Merlin 24 engines and armed with Tallboys, as the Johnny Walker mines had proved ineffective.

On 28 October, 617 and IX(B) Squadrons forward deployed to RAF Kinloss, Lossiemouth and Milltown to refuel. Early the next morning, 19 Lancasters from 617 Sqn and 20 from IX(B) Squadron launched against the Tirpitz. Flying at 1000 feet across the North Sea in poor weather which rendered Gee inaccurate

¹ St Nazaire was the only Atlantic dry docks large enough to take the Tirpitz and had been deliberately targeted to deter Germany from deploying the Tirpitz into the Atlantic, thereby constraining her in the North.

and astro fixes challenging, the Lancasters dead reckoned through a gap in the German radar chain on the Norwegian coast at dawn and then climbed to rendezvous over Akkajaure Lake in neutral Sweden in good weather. Four IX(B) Squadron aircraft were equipped with Air Position Indicator (API) equipment to obtain the wind data required by their Mk XIV area bombsights, which would then be passed to the rest of the IX(B) Squadron aircraft. 617 Squadron was assigned a one-minute window to attack, with IX(B) Squadron following four minutes later, both led by their Squadron Commanders, although OC IX(B) Squadron, Wing Commander James Bazin, was late at the rendezvous lake. Unfortunately, although the Tirpitz was visible at the beginning of the attack, low cloud gathered and obscured the ship during the target run. Fortunately, no German fighters appeared, but flak from shore batteries, flak ships and even Tirpitz' 15-inch guns damaged two 617 Squadron aircraft and four from IX(B) Squadron. Although Midshipman Alfred Zuba later reported that the ship's crew thought their flak had dispersed the bombers, both Squadrons flew on unperturbed. However, the gathering cloud resulted in some aircraft re-attacking up to four times from various directions in the hope of glimpsing the ship through the cloud.

The re-attacks broke down the formations and extended the raid window to 18 minutes. Nevertheless, 16 Lancasters from 617 and 17 from IX(B) Squadron released their Tallboys. Flight Lieutenant 'Benny' Goodman's attack in KC-B was typical, his bomb aimer having tracked the Tirpitz from the initial point of the target run, only to have become obscured just prior to release. Crews had been ordered to bomb if the ship's position could be estimated by identifiable features in the vicinity, so, on the re-attack, KC-B released despite not seeing the ship, but aiming at the flak. Flying officer Freddie Watts in KC-N, with the recently arrived American Flying Officer John Leavitt as second pilot on the 'dicky seat', also released on his second attack, but was hit by flak just after release and had to land at Sumburgh in the Shetlands, low on fuel and with a deflated tyre. RAAF Flying Officer Bill Carey in KC-E released on his sixth run but was twice hit by flak which damaged both port engines; he force-landed in a Swedish bog near the rendezvous lake at Porjus, where his crew were interned until just after the final raid. One IX(B) Squadron pilot was injured in the face, forcing his bomb aimer to fly the aircraft back to Sumburgh, where the pilot took control again and landed safely.

The Squadron debrief summaries show the tremendous difficulties of both accurately witnessing an attack and trying to subsequently re-create the pattern of events, leading to controversy over bomb claims. Many post-flight crew reports describe previous or subsequent aircraft's weapon impacts,

rather than their own, and are an amalgam of events throughout the attack. This makes recreating the attack chronology a challenge. Furthermore, most of the bombing camera photographs were obscured by cloud, while cine footage is not continuous, and edits can create a false time scale.

According to evidence from the ORBs, early in the attack, 617 Squadron's Flight Lieutenant John Sayers (KC-X) observed a big flash from the ship which he believed to be a bomb burst, followed almost immediately by Flight Lieutenant Bob Knights (KC-O) with a near miss 20 yards off the starboard bow at 07:52 which rocked the ship. Two minutes later, IX(B) Squadron's Flying Officer Taylor (WS-F) observed what appeared to be a direct hit on the port side 'by another aircraft' and at 07:55 the rear gunner of another IX(B) Squadron aircraft, piloted by Squadron Leader Williams, reported a 'direct hit on the bows of Tirpitz, followed by a big explosion and clouds of brown smoke'. A minute later, IX(B) Squadron's Flying Officer Dunne (WS-E) observed a direct hit on the stern. At 07:57, 617 Squadron's Flying Officer 'Joppy' Joplin observed a bomb burst on the forward end of the ship followed by brown smoke. Bombing a minute later on his third re-attack, 617 Squadron's Flying Officer Phil Martin (KC-H) observed a direct hit on the stern. In all probability these were all the same weapon impact – confusion between the bow and stern seems to be a frequent issue with the Tirpitz attacks. Bombing at the same time as Joplin, IX(B) Squadron's Flying Officer Stowell (WS-B) reported seeing three explosions – 'two in the bows, one in the stern' while Williams, also from IX(B) Squadron, reported: 'Two hits were seen on battleship, one in centre near superstructure and the other on bows. A third bomb seen to fall very near the bows'. At 08:00, 617 Squadron's Flight Lieutenant 'Mac' Hamilton claimed: 'Own bomb believed hit on bows followed by big flash'.

Yet despite crews reporting at least three hits on Tirpitz, neither bombing camera images nor imagery from the Photographic Reconnaissance Unit aircraft the following day detected any damage. Ultra intercepts also reported no hits, although subsequent post-War German accounts revealed that a near miss had damaged the port propeller shaft and rudder, letting in 800 tons of water and causing a one-degree list to port.

Operation CATECHISM

Planning for a re-attack commenced immediately on the return of the Lancasters to their home bases. Both Squadrons re-deployed to the Scottish forward bases on 4 November, but the operation was postponed due to gales. On 11 November, they re-deployed again to Scotland. The operation was on!

Operation CATECHISM was a re-run of the OBVIATE plan, which some crews found unsettling. Heavy hoar frost accumulated on the aircraft during the evening, challenging the groundcrew and grounding seven of IX(B) Squadron's aircraft, including those of the Squadron Commander and B Flight Commander, Flight Commander Dougie Melrose. From 03:00 on 12 November, 18 aircraft from 617 Squadron and 13 from IX(B) Squadron took off, many on instruments as the pilots' breath froze on the inside of the windscreen. The weather at the Swedish rendezvous lake was startlingly clear, although the lakes were ominously covered by low cloud. Despite the crews searching the sky for German fighters from Bardufoss, none appeared.

Again, Tait led the first gaggle of six 617 Squadron Lancasters, who found the Tirpitz lying naked without cloud nor significant smoke screen; the smoke pots had not been primed. Tirpitz' main armament opened fire at the approaching bombers, followed by the ship's smaller calibre guns. 617 Squadron's SABS bombsight required a long, steady run-in, with the bomb aimer tracking the clearly visible ship, the pilot maintaining the precise altitude and following the Bombing Direction Indicator (that was fed from SABS) as the target disappeared below the nose, while the flight engineer maintained an indicated airspeed of 170 knots with the throttles. The rest of the crew searched for fighters, the navigator having directed the aircraft to the initial point of the target run and passed environmental data to the bomb aimer. The first crews released at 09:41 local time and reported a good grouping of impacts on and close to the Tirpitz, curtailing much of the flak while smoke and spray began to obscure the ship. 617 Squadron's second gaggle of three aircraft bombed 30 seconds later into the centre of the growing pall of smoke, followed by a third gaggle of five aircraft another 30 seconds later. Two more 617 aircraft released 30 seconds later and the last after a further minute. Unlike the previous raid, the gin-clear weather allowed all of 617 Squadron's aircraft to release on their first pass; as a result, their attack was over in four minutes.

IX(B) Squadron followed behind 617, the first two Lancasters dropping into the smoke using their Mk XIV bombsights at 09:45 local, the same time as 617 Squadron's last aircraft. Thirty seconds later, Flying Officer Dougie Tweddle (who had derived the bombing wind required for IX(B) Squadron's bombsights) released, having seen a previous 617 Squadron Tallboy hit the fjord side of the ship. A minute later, another single IX(B) Squadron aircraft released, followed by a gaggle of three, 30 seconds later. After another two minutes, a single IX(B) Squadron aircraft released, followed by the final two releases at 09:49, the last of which was a re-attack using the emergency computer after the Mk XIV bombsight had failed on the first attack. An eleventh IX(B) Squadron aircraft,

piloted by Flying Officer David Coster, attacked at some stage, but was hit by flak in both starboard engines and, short on fuel, limped to Sweden where the crew were interned and later repatriated. The final two IX(B) Squadron aircraft were late at the rendezvous lake and returned home with their Tallboys.

As the Lancasters departed the area, still searching the skies for fighters that, fortunately, never appeared, a large explosion was seen at 09:51, with Tirpitz already listing at 60 degrees, as the 700-ton 'Caesar' turret blew out of its barbette, landing in the sea and crushing many sailors as they swam ashore. The film unit Lancaster turned back to take a final roll of film at 5,000 feet as the ship capsized.



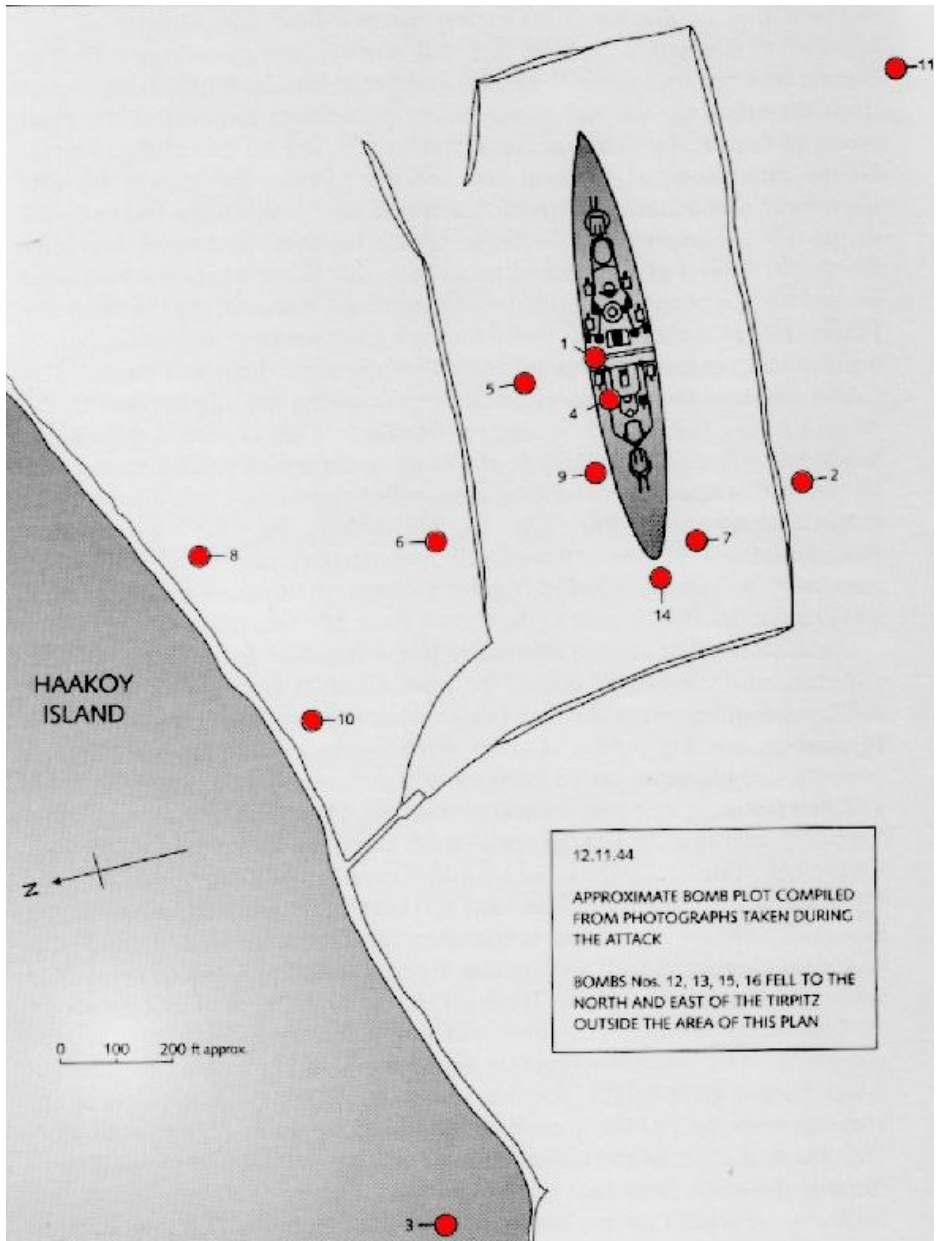
Mission Accomplished by Mark Postlethwaite

The return to Lossiemouth was hampered by strong winds, with some 617 Squadron aircraft diverting to Milltown, Fraserburgh, Peterhead and Dallachy due to poor weather. Short of fuel, Flying Officer Mark Flatman landed at Scatsca, while 'Joppy' Joplin landed at Sumburgh, both in the Shetlands. Joppy's navigator, Basil Fish, later described it as 'a wonderful bit of flying by old Jop to get in, because there was a large hill at one end'.

The official German, Air Ministry and US Navy reports concerning the loss of Tirpitz, derived from diver reports and interrogation of the ship's Chief Engineer and other German informants, make interesting reading. Tirpitz had been warned about bombers 200 miles south as early as 08:00 local time. When the bombers were 55 miles away, Tirpitz realised that they were the target. At seven miles, Tirpitz' main guns opened fire, followed two minutes later by

medium and anti-aircraft guns, which damaged Coster's Lancaster. However, Tirpitz' senior flak officer grossly underestimated the bombers' altitude as 2,500-3,000 metres (7,500-9,000 feet), which may explain why Tirpitz' main armament detonated below the bombers flying between 13,000 and 16,000 feet. German records show that two Tallboys hit the ship on the port side, one near turret 'Bruno' and the other amidships near the plane hangar, which started an internal fire. The amidships Tallboy penetrated the decks and armour, detonating in a wing tank outboard of the port turbine room, which blew off the hull plating and armour, pushing the armoured decks downwards and opening a gap between the side of the ship and the decks. Reports of a third hit near 'Caesar' turret were denied by the ship's Chief Engineer, who concluded that the turret's detonation at 09:51 (after the raid had ended) was probably caused by powder igniting in the turret's magazine, either by an electrical fire or shock from the detonating near-miss Tallboys. Other German reports suggest the cause was the internal fire caused by the midships Tallboy. An Air Ministry report from May 1945 cited an informant describing how this turret detonation contributed to a 120ft-long hole on the port side of the ship from deck to keel. German divers found no evidence of Tallboy damage near this aft turret. The other near misses on the port side swept large quantities of water over the ship and generated a sudden, tremendous inflow of water through the damaged hull. When the listing started, the order was given to counter-flood to keep the ship upright, but the crews had abandoned their stations. The Captain ordered 'abandon ship' as IX(B) Squadron's attack commenced at 09:45. This evacuation broke down the watertight integrity of the ship, allowing water to fill its entire port side. The capsizing took place in 3 stages: 35, 60 and finally 135 degrees. The initial list was probably due to the sudden inflow of water through the hull breaches. When the watertight doors were opened as the crew escaped, the flooding increased the list to 60 degrees until the ship rested on the dredged mud that the Germans had placed below her to stop her sinking. However, the force of the detonation of Caesar turret, combined with the dredged mud being blown out from the seabed by the subsequent misses on the port side, lifted the ship, upsetting the previous balance and allowing Tirpitz to capsize until its superstructure embedded in the sea bottom.

Alfred Zuba was one of about 80 sailors cut from the upturned wreck in the 48 hours before their air expired. Some of his colleagues lie buried at Botn-Rognan German war cemetery near Bodo, but most of the 1000 German casualties have no known grave, despite the wreck being salvaged after the War. As an example of reconciliation between the former adversaries, Alfred would become lifelong friends with 617 Squadron wireless operator Syd Grimes.



Approximate Bomb Plot compiled from photographs taken during the attack

But which Squadron's Tallboys inflicted the fatal damage? The first 4 bombs, each dropped by 617 Squadron, scored 2 unequivocal direct hits on the port side, something confirmed by both photographic footage and German documentary evidence, including German diver reports. However, the initial close grouping of impacts created severe smoke and spray, which made subsequent aiming progressively more difficult, along with any further assessment of bombing accuracy. By the time IX(B) Squadron bombed, they had to aim at the estimated position of the ship beneath an ever-increasing pall of smoke (which was also spreading due to wind, so its centre was not consistently directly over the ship). The IX(B) Squadron ORB records that no IX(B) Squadron crews saw their own bombs hit the ship, although one crew claimed a hit based on a fire that bloomed after their Tallboy had disappeared into the smoke. They did, however, observe direct hits and very near misses from the preceding Squadron before Tirpitz became shrouded in smoke. The German informants cited in the Air Ministry's May 1945 report expressed the opinion that the ship would not have capsized had not an internal turret explosion occurred, caused by a fire from the second bomb hit. The evidence points to this bomb being one of the first four dropped by 617 Squadron, two of which were confirmed as direct hits. As far as can be ascertained, there is little evidence that a bomb hit Caesar turret at the time the final explosion occurred.

617 Squadron had the advantage of attacking first with a clear view of the Tirpitz through the world's best bombsight. By the time IX(B) Squadron bombed, Tirpitz was largely covered in smoke from the initial hits, so it is perhaps unsurprising that their bomb scores suffered as a result. Additionally, unlike 617 Squadron's SABS, IX(B) Squadron's Mk XIV area bomb sight needed an accurate wind to be manually inserted. Post-raid analysis by the 5 Group Armaments Officer, Wing Commander Richardson, indicated that the wind, derived by the Squadron's API-equipped 'wind finder' Lancasters before the attack, had a 20mph vector error. He also noted random aiming errors by IX(B) Squadron, probably caused by smoke obscuring the ship, with only one bomb within 200 yards of the mean point of impact. In contrast, Richardson plotted seven 617 Squadron bombs within 200 yards. AOC 5 Group, Sir Ralph Cochrane, declared IX(B) Squadron's results 'highly unsatisfactory' and did not allow each Squadron to see the other's bomb plots. This decision, which led to neither Squadron being aware of the other's scores, allowed both Squadrons to claim they had sunk the Tirpitz, whereas the reality would have been obvious from a combined plot. Nonetheless, near misses probably blasted dredged mud from beneath Tirpitz' keel, which created enough draught for her to capsize. So,

both Squadrons contributed to Tirpitz' capsizing, despite only 617 Squadron's bombs hitting the ship.

In 1981, Ludovic Kennedy observed that Tirpitz 'lived an invalid's life and died a cripple's death' due to her lack of naval engagements and the Allies campaign of attacks which repeatedly limited her operational capability and inflicted her final demise. However, the Tirpitz story illustrates how tactical assets can have strategic effect. Churchill became obsessed with 'the Beast' due to the strategic tension she generated between him and Stalin over Arctic convoys. Nonetheless, Doenitz used his last remaining battleship to good effect, retaining it as a 'fleet in being' which tied up significant Allied naval and air assets, undermining Kennedy's statement. Some have noted that further attacks following the fortunate Tallboy hit during Operation PARAVANE were unnecessary, as the Allies should have realised that Tirpitz had been rendered non-operational as a surface raider. However, Churchill's emphasis on her destruction reinforced the deception of an Allied invasion of Norway (Operation FORTITUDE NORTH), which helped fix over 300,000 German troops in Norway when they were badly needed on Germany's Eastern and Western fronts. Nonetheless, the Tallboy campaign against Tirpitz illustrates the enduring challenge of Battle Damage Assessment and the vital importance of being able to determine the amount of damage that an attack has inflicted. As a result, despite the critical damage inflicted during Operation PARAVANE, Tirpitz remained perceived as a threat until she finally capsized.



Tirpitz capsized after the final attack

The 75th Anniversary Commemorations

Seventy-five years later, 22 members of the 617 Squadron Association, 13 members from the IX(B) Squadron Association and 40 serving RAF and RN personnel, including many current members of both Squadrons, travelled to Tromsø to commemorate their forebears. In the preceding two years, the Associations had worked with the RAF to ensure that this important event was commemorated.

Under the gin-clear, freezing skies of 12 November 2019, attendees gathered on a ship over the final resting place of the Tirpitz for a short service during which wreaths were cast into the sea to commemorate all those involved in the duel between the RAF's Tallboy Squadrons and 'The Beast'. Its bow now marked by a red buoy, the current carried the wreaths across the Tirpitz, overlooked from the snow-covered shoreline by one of Tirpitz' steel bulkheads standing proud as a memorial to her crew. Descendants from both Squadrons from as far afield as Australia, New Zealand and America stood in respect at the point where their fathers' Tallboys had dispatched the Tirpitz 75 years before.



Wreath laying service over the final resting place of the Tirpitz

Unfortunately, Defence commitments scuppered plans for flypast by a 617 Squadron Lightning and a IX(B) Squadron Typhoon, and the back-up Royal Norwegian Air Force P3 Orion from 333 Squadron was called away to shadow Russian submarines the day before. However, the instructors of the RNoAF flight school at Bardufoss were up to the short-notice challenge and performed three impressive flypasts in six Saab Safari trainers, each time overflying in a different formation. As they departed, the sound of their piston engines was replaced by the dying notes of the Last Post echoing off the snowy mountains surrounding Tromsø Fjord.



Members of 617 Sqn and IX(B) Sqn Associations

Once back ashore, we held a further service at the Tromsø Commonwealth Graves Commission Cemetery and paid our respects at the final resting place of the X-Class submariners and Fleet Air Arm aircrew who died during the RN's campaigns against the Tirpitz.

After a lunchtime presentation by the local Tirpitz expert, Kjetil Åkra, and a visit to the Tromsø Defence Museum, a dining-in night was held with 85 attendees. The guest of honour, Irene Dahl, the head of the local Parliament, presented the RAF with a knife, its handle crafted from steel from the Tirpitz' 15-inch guns and its handle carved of ivory from the Tirpitz' officers' wardroom. Silence descended on the lively evening when specially made video interviews were shown of Tirpitz raiders Benny Goodman, Joppy Joplin and Sydney Grimes describing the raids, as some of the oldest members of the RAF passed on their wartime experience to some of the RAF's youngest.



Attendees at the Dining-in Night

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Cuban Missile Crisis – Appeal for Memories

The Autumn 2019 edition of *Après Moi* carried Bob Hailstones' memories of his Vulcan B2 tour on 617 Squadron in the early 1960s in which he mentioned the October 1962 Cuban Missile crisis. Having researched for some years Bomber Command's activities through that crisis I would like to hear from former members of 617 Squadron (or of any other V-force unit) just what they remember of the Cuban crisis 60 years ago.

My reason for continuing digging is the marked difference between the memories of front-line survivors and the very limited activities reported in the Forms 540 (Operation Records Books) of Bomber Command, of Nos 1 and 3 Groups, their stations and the front-line squadrons held in the National Archives at Kew.

I did not join 617 Squadron until April 1964, but I have run a Cuban Crisis witness seminar at the Institute of Historical Research¹, was responsible for arranging a BBC Radio 4 'Document' programme², published a journal article³, a book chapter⁴ and a Cuban crisis chronology⁵, all on 'what really happened in Bomber Command during the crisis' so I am well aware that survivors' memories vary.

However, the more memories we can collect of that week the country came close to a nuclear exchange, the better served will be historians of the future.

If you can contribute your memories, I would much appreciate you emailing me on: robin.woolven@btinternet.com.

Sqn Ldr Robin Woolven (retd)

¹ Seminar held by the Institute of Contemporary British History British Bomber Command and the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, 23 June 2009 – when the witnesses included Sqn Ldr Jock Connolly who recalled his experience as a co-pilot on 617 during the crisis

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00dkzlj>

³ <https://www.eupublishing.com/doi/pdfplus/10.3366/brw.2012.0037>

⁴ *What really happened in RAF Bomber Command during the Cuban missile crisis?* in 'An International History of the Cuban Missile Crisis' edited by D Gioe, L Scott and C Andrew. Routledge, 2014

⁵ <https://www.raf.mod.uk/what-we-do/centre-for-air-and-space-power-studies/documents/air-power-review-vol-20-no-2-deterrence-special-edition/> *Note: This link may not work directly on some systems - in which case copy and paste into your web browser.*

Paying Respects to

Flt Lt George Aldred Kendrick (1921-1945)

Megan Tiltman (nee Hepworth) is the daughter of Flying Officer Albert Hepworth, a Wireless Operator with 617 Squadron from 1944 to 1945. In June 2019, while stopping at Bergen on a Norwegian coastal cruise, Megan planned to visit the grave of Flt Lt George Aldred Kendrick who died, aged 24, on a bombing raid of German U-boat pens in Bergen in 1945.

Flt Lt Kendrick had joined the RAFVR before being appointed to the crew of Flt Lt Thomas Vincent O'Shaughnessy, as a bomb aimer, with 619 Squadron. In September 1943 the crew were transferred to 617 Squadron. Whilst on a low flying exercise over the Wash in January 1944 their Lancaster crashed killing the pilot and navigator, Flt Lt Kendrick received critical injuries and was not

expected to survive. By sheer effort and determination, he returned to flying duties in December 1944 and joined the crew of Flt Lt John Pryor.

On 12th January 1945, Megan's father Albert, who was on his final operation to complete his sorties, and Flt Lt Kendrick were crew members on Lancaster PD233 KC-G, piloted by Flt Lt John Pryor. Their aircraft was one of 32 Lancasters of 617 and IX(B) Sqn loaded with Tallboy 'Earthquake' bombs weighing approx 10,000lb and one Mosquito tasked to bomb the U-boat pens and the harbour at Bergen. After six attempts to bomb a designated ship anchored outside the U-boat pens, KC-G was attacked by a pair of Focke-Wulf 190s. The port wing engines were hit, and lost power causing Pryor to turn north and



Grave of Flt Lt Kendrick at Mollendal Cemetery, Bergen

jettison his bomb before trying to head home. The fighters kept up the attack and the order was given for the crew to bail out. Unfortunately, George's parachute did not open, he received severe injuries to his head and back and died two days later. The rest of the crew were captured by the Germans and spent the last months of the war as POWs.

On a very wet day in June, Mr Arnfinn Seim, the Honorary British Consul for Bergen, collected Megan and her husband Paul from their cruise ship and escorted them to the Mollendal Cemetery where Flt Lt Kendrick is buried. Megan laid a poppy tribute in memory of Flt Lt Kendrick and shared the story of the raid with Arnfinn. He then showed them around the CWGC section of the cemetery.

Megan and Paul found the visit to be an extremely moving and thought-provoking occasion. They will always be grateful to Arnfinn for his kindness to them, his vast local knowledge and for making the visit such a memorable event.

Our historian, Dr Robert Owen has kindly agreed to write an article about the 12 Jan 45 Bergen raid for the next edition

Reginald James Henry Elsey

Reggie was born on 25th June 1913 in Plumstead. At the outbreak of the war in 1939, Reggie was 25 years old. He was destined to join the RAF and undergo his initial flight training in Alberta, Canada. Reggie at 28 years old was enlisted in the RAF Volunteer Reserve on 25th May 1941. He attended No.2 Recruit Centre at RAF Cardington. In November 1942 at the rank of Sergeant, Reggie was selected for appointment to a commission to the rank of Pilot Officer. Between March and May 1942 Reggie commenced flying training in Tiger Moths at Central Manitoba Flying Training School in Canada.



Flt Lt Reginald Elsey DFC

In October 1942 Reggie qualified as Air Bomber (Armament). He attended an ab initio Gunnery (Bombing) Course at Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada between July and September 1942 flying in Fairey Battle aircraft. He then attended Air Observer School from September to October 1942. From July 1943 to January 1944 Reggie was flying with 106 Squadron on Lancaster bombers as bomb aimer. He carried out operations over Essen, Hamburg, Milan, Nuremberg, Berlin, Munich, Hannover, Manheim, Stuttgart and Frankfurt.

In February 1944 Reggie was transferred to 617 Squadron based at RAF Woodhall Spa in Lincolnshire

under the command of Wing Commander Leonard Cheshire. Reggie was learning to use the SABS precision bombsight with 617 Squadron, once again as bomb aimer. By this stage of the war 617 Squadron was engaged in attacks against industrial targets in occupied France.

Later in the run-up to D-Day they were attacking communication targets in France. Since the costly low level 'Dambuster' raids of 1943, 617 Squadron had by this time switched to high altitude precision bombing using 12,000 pound blast bombs and later Tallboys. Reggie also flew missions in support of the second front; in particular he flew a night mission [Operation TAXABLE] on the eve of D-Day in support of the Normandy landings of 6th June 1944. Two

nights later Reggie flew a mission to destroy the Saumur Railway Tunnel. In July 1944 his Lancaster bomber attacked a V-rocket site at Pas de Calais.

No 617				Squadron		Time carried forward	
Date	Hour	Aircraft Type and No.	Pilot	Duty	Remarks (Including results of bombing, gunnery, exercises, etc.)	Flying Times	
						Day	Night
3.6.44		LANCASTER D.V. 351.	PLT. POORE	BOMB AIMER	SPECIAL TRAINING		50
4.6.44		"	"	"	AIR TEST		20
5.6.44		"	"	"	OPS. <u>HEVED START THE 2ND FRONT</u>		3.55
8.6.44		"	"	"	OPS. <u>SAMUR RAILWAY TUNNEL.</u>		6.15
11.6.44		"	"	"	N.F.T.		25
12.6.44		"	"	"	H.A.B.		1.10
14.6.44		"	"	"	OPS. <u>D. BOAT PENS NE BURG</u>		
15.6.44		"	"	"	OPS. <u>E. BOAT PENS EDUNBORE</u>		
19.6.44		"	"	"	SHOT UP BY F.W.K. AT 1000 FT		
20.6.44		"	"	"	OPS. <u>SPECIAL INSTALLATIONS FOR DE</u>		
22.6.44		"	"	"	OPS. <u>PAS DE CALAIS ACETONE BURNING</u>		
22.6.44		"	"	"	OPS. <u>PAS DE CALAIS ACETONE BURNING</u>		
24.6.44		"	"	"	OVER TARGET BROUGHT FALLOUT ON TRAINING		3.05
24.6.44		"	"	"	OPS. <u>PAS DE CALAIS (FLY HOME IN COMBAT</u>		
25.6.44		"	"	"	PANEL ALSO HIT IN TAIL FLOW		2.40
25.6.44		"	"	"	OPS. <u>PAS DE CALAIS BOMBING ESCAPE ROUTE</u>		
30.6.44		"	"	"	BURNING ON TAKE OFF WENT WITHOUT		
					AIR TEST		10
Total hours for June						23.10	10.10
O.C. B FLIGHT 617 SQUADRON						Attwood	SLDR
O.C. 617 SQUADRON							W/CO
TOTAL TIME						386.00	300.45

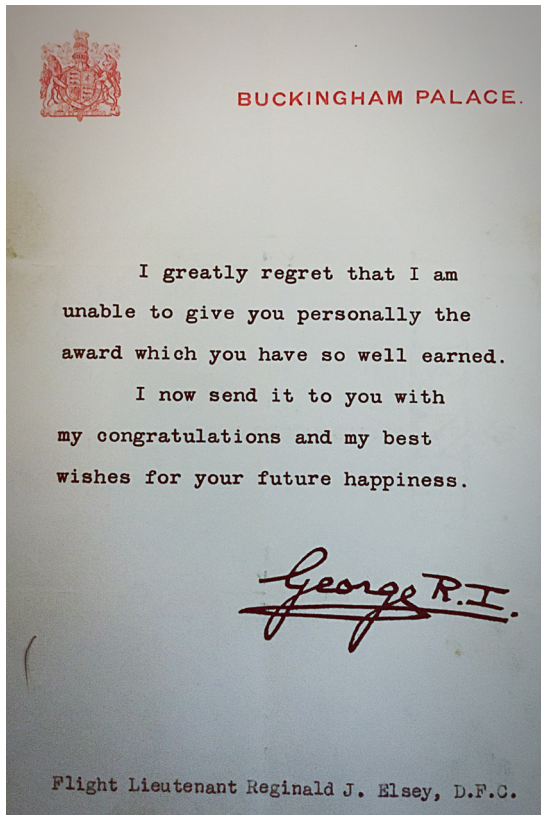
Flt Lt Elsey's Logbook entry for June 1944

Reggie's first tour of 30 operational sorties on 106 and 617 Squadrons was completed in April 1944. His final operation on 617 Squadron was completed on 5th August 1944. He flew a total of 53 sorties with 617 Squadron, 24 of which were on operations. Between December 1944 and July 1945 Reggie was still flying Lancaster bombers on local and test flights as bomb aimer and observer. After V-E Day Reggie started flying with No. 15 Squadron on specialist missions over Bari and Berlin. His last recorded flight as bomb aimer was in January 1946.

During his service in the RAF, Reggie flew on board twelve different aircraft types - Tiger Moth, Defiant, Anson, Fairy Battle, Whitley, Oxford, Manchester,

Lancaster Mk1, Lancaster Mk3, Beaufighter, Proctor and Mosquito. Reggie therefore had a most distinguished career in the RAF having served as a flight navigator and bomb aimer in both 106 and 617 Squadrons. In recognition of his distinguished service, at the end of the war, Reggie received the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC).

Reggie retired from the RAF after the war and eventually became a civil servant. He remained in this employment until January 1976 when he was made redundant having reached the retirement age of 60.



Reggie suffered a nervous breakdown around 1974 and was admitted as an in-patient to Kingston Hospital Psychiatric Unit for a short period. This was believed to be caused by a delayed reaction to the stress of participating in multiple bombing raids over Germany and France in 1943 and 1944. Reggie died on 7th February 1976 after being struck by a bus near Surbiton Station.

Anthony Shoult

asaconsult@icloud.com

Ed: I was delighted to receive this article from Anthony, Reginald Elsey's nephew.

Deadline for Next Newsletter

31st July 2020

email: clarke318@gmail.com

Final Landings

Basil Fish

In November 1941, after twelve months at Manchester University, during which time he became a member of the University Air Squadron 19-year-old Basil Fish enlisted in the RAFVR. He was accepted for Pilot/Observer training but continued studying for his BSc while completing his Initial Training Wing requirements. In the summer of 1942, he was mobilised and sent to No. 42 Air School, Port Elizabeth, South Africa and completed his navigator's course in August 1943.

Returning to the UK he was sent to No. 8 Advanced Flying Unit, on Anglesey where, he later recalled: "We thought we knew it all until we returned to England, and then we all had to re-educate ourselves for serious flying over here." On 17 March 1944, Basil was posted to No. 17 Operational Training Unit where he took the next step towards an operational career with Bomber Command, teaming up with a New Zealander pilot Arthur Joplin. After two months flying Wellingtons, the crew transferred to No. 1660 Conversion Unit at RAF Swinderby, to acquire a flight engineer and master the complexities of four-engine bombers before transferring to No. 5 Lancaster Finishing School at Swinderby, where they finally converted to their operational type.

On completion of this course the crew were surprised to learn that they were to be posted to No. 617 Squadron which normally only took experienced crews who had completed a tour of operations. However, at this point as an experiment, a few new crews who had demonstrated above average ability were being posted directly to the Squadron. The intention was that they should learn by example and osmosis - in effect being fast tracked to a level of operational expertise.

Basil and the crew arrived at Woodhall Spa in mid-August 1944, initially feeling rather overwhelmed and unsure as to how they would be received as a "sprog" crew. Their concern was unfounded. After initial wariness they found themselves absorbed into the routine of extensive practice and training in order to achieve the precision for which the Squadron was renowned. It was a steep learning curve, but they found support and encouragement from the "old lags".

Their first operation came a fortnight later, no easy "milk run" but a daylight attack against various vessels in the harbour of the heavily defended port at Brest with 1,000lb bombs. All seemed to go well, but they were unable to observe any results owing to smoke and spray.

The crew had insufficient experience to participate in the Squadron's next operation, an attack on the German battleship Tirpitz, flown from an advanced base in Russia. By October, however, they were sufficiently practised to carry the 12,000lb Tallboy deep penetration bomb, although their first attempt to drop one, a daylight operation to attack the sea wall at Walcheren on 3 October, was thwarted as they approached the target. 'Tallboys' were in extremely short supply and needed to be conserved whenever possible. The Squadron was positioned at the end of an attack by other aircraft of Bomber Command. On arrival the target was seen already to be breached and their bomb was brought home. Four days later they got their first opportunity to release 'Tallboy' during an operation against the Kembs barrage, on the River Rhine, near Basle. The attack was made in two parts – an initial high-level force to cause confusion and distract the defences, followed by six aircraft coming in along the river at 600 feet. Bombing from 7,500ft in the first wave, the crew reported a very near miss close to the barrage.

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

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

in Kent. Three days later they tried again, only to see their 'Tallboy' overshoot the target.

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

The flight engineer, Frank Tilley was shouting, "Get out!" but when he tried to move Basil found his feet were trapped. Despite concussion and a bleeding head wound, he managed to extract himself from the wreckage and get clear. After removing the Wireless Operator's smouldering 'Mae West', Basil went back to the shattered nose of the aircraft. Seeing his pilot trapped in his seat, Basil managed to drag him clear of the burning aircraft. Realising that two of the crew were still unaccounted for, Basil ventured back towards the flaming

wreckage, regardless of exploding ammunition and fierce heat. Peering into the flames he saw, one, possibly two bodies, but despite his determined efforts the heat was too intense and he was forced to retreat.

Realising that he was the only survivor capable of summoning assistance, Basil made the other casualties as comfortable as possible and set off into the pitch black, fog shrouded night. With visibility down to a few feet and nothing to indicate a direction in which help might be found Basil struggled across fields and through hedges, eventually finding a track which he followed, leading to a farmhouse. Hammering on the door he roused the occupant, who then led him to the nearby village of Tealby and the nearest telephone, from where Basil was able to summon assistance for the four injured survivors. He led them back to the wrecked aircraft, homing in with blasts on his whistle which were answered by the others.

The least injured, Basil received only seven days leave followed by a medical which, by the middle of February 1945, cleared him to return to operational duties. Now without a crew, Basil was likely to become a “spare bod” – flying with whichever crew might need a replacement navigator – never an enviable position. However, he was fortunate in that his return to operations coincided with that of Australian Fg Off Bill Carey, recently returned from Sweden following a forced landing there following the October Tirpitz operation. Carey’s regular navigator had not returned to the crew and Basil became his replacement for ten further operations, mainly against German rail viaducts, until Carey was taken of operations at the end of March 1945. Basil then transferred to the crew of Flt Lt Stuart Anning, concluding with Sqn Ldr Gray Ward, leading the squadron’s final raid, on 25 April 1945 against Hitler’s redoubt at Berchtesgaden. It was Basil’s 24th operation.

Basil relinquished his commission as a Flying Officer in April 1946. He returned to Manchester University to complete his degree in Municipal Engineering before embarking on a successful international career as a civil engineer. At the age of 60, while working in Africa he returned to the air and qualified for his private pilot’s licence, some 40 years after gaining his navigator’s badge on the same continent.

Basil was a regular attendee at Association gatherings until prevented by ill-health, although contact was still maintained and in 2018, to commemorate the 74th anniversary of the sinking of Tirpitz, members of the current Squadron presented him with a framed image of one of their Lightning aircraft.

Dr Robert Owen

617 Squadron Association

Registered Charity No 1141817

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Wg Cdr M Still RAF - Tornado Rep

Flt Lt J Ballantine RAF - Lightning Rep

Cpl A Dennett-Cook - Groundcrew Rep

Rosemary Smith - Social Secretary

Heather Allsworth and Nigel Favill - Fundraising

Overseas Committee Representatives

Shere Fraser McCarthy - North America/Social Media

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