

The Chinthe

Spring 2006

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PRESIDENT'S REPORT

I am very happy to report that the Association has had a highly successful year with the promise of further progress in the years ahead. Given that this year was the 60th Anniversary of VJ Day, there have been a number of commemorative events. These have helped to remind us of the commitment, sacrifice and good humour of our forebears.

Reports on the various events can be found in the following pages. Of particular note is that we, yet again, formed a contingent at this year's Cenotaph Parade, and once again we received good TV coverage, largely thanks to Ted Maslen-Jones' close liaison and interview with the BBC. I wonder whether next year we should also attend the Festival of Remembrance?

Our link to the current Squadron remains very strong, and it is always our aim to continue the good work of past years. I am most grateful to the Officer Commanding, Major Andy Cash, and the Association Liaison Officer, Captain Piers Lewis. Whilst committed to an intensive and all-consuming operational training programme, the Squadron has offered unstinting support to the Association. On this basis, we had a most successful and enjoyable Annual Reunion at Dishforth in early July. Our close working relationship with the current, serving soldiers enriches our Association.

We wish the Squadron good fortune and safe flying on their forthcoming operational tour to Afghanistan.

2006 promises to be just as busy as 2005. Our annual reunion will be at Netheravon over the weekend of 1st/2nd July, with a Dinner on the Saturday night, and the AGM and an Auster Fly In on the Sunday. Details and a Return Slip can be found in the Journal. If you are able to assist prior to, or during the event please contact a member of the committee. Meanwhile, the arrangements for the Association trip to Malaysia in May 2006 are well advanced.

The progression of the Association and the day to day work would only be possible with a dedicated Committee team. I would like to thank the committee members for their hard efforts on behalf of us all. Especially pleasing is the news that John Bennett has been awarded the Army Air Corps Association's Silver Medal. This is wonderful news for John, Joyce and everyone in the Association.

Wishing you all a contented 2006, and I look forward to seeing as many of you as possible at our various events.

Andrew Simkins

SQUADRON COMMANDER'S REPORT

Despite already delivering the first Apache Attack Sqn for Initial Operating Capability in 2004, the Squadron has not stopped. In fact with the single focus of Conversion to Type training complete, we have had multiple demands for our attention.

The second major milestone for the delivery of the Apache came in May 2005 with the delivery of an Attack Aviation Battle Group (Avn BG) based on 9 Regiment AAC during Exercise Eagles Strike. This was a significant test for the entire Regiment. We started at St Mawgan in Cornwall, moved to Merryfield and culminated on Salisbury Plain. The exercise was a great success, proving all our hard work over the past year or so and proving that given a captive audience of technicians and the right spares priority we could achieve over 90% serviceability rates! 656 Sqn AAC then took on the first ever Very High Readiness commitment for an Apache Sqn as the Lead Aviation Sqn group from 1 June this year. This meant that we were at 5 days notice to move anywhere in the world for operations. We had arrived!

However, there was no time for complacency as 5 days later we were off again. This time we were packing to embark in HMS Ocean at Sunderland. We were beginning the process of delivering the Initial Operating Capability (Maritime); support to the RN and RM in the delivery of Amphibious and Littoral operations. Individuals had been attending specific Maritime training courses since October 2004, but this was our, and Army Aviation's first ever Attack Helicopter Sqn embarkation. This was to be many peoples first experience of life on board a Landing Platform Helicopter (LPH) and everyone took to it like a duck to water! The primary aim was to complete a deck landing qualification for all the aircrew, the secondary aims were to prove our procedures for embarkation and practise the complex ground and technical support procedures to support Apache when embarked. This was our dress rehearsal for the major Maritime Ex PYXIS later in the year. Integration with the ship's company was amazing, we were made very welcome and the chaps responded accordingly. It was the start of a very special relationship with HMS OCEAN.

As a reward for all the hard work, the Squadron then split to the four winds for some summer adventurous training. This consisted either of windsurfing in Italy, sailing across the English Channel, or a multi activity week in the Lake District. This preceded well deserved summer leave.

In true 656 Squadron nature, on return from leave we deployed immediately to Plymouth to join HMS Ocean again for Ex PYXIS. We operated as part of a full ship's Tailored Air Group alongside Seaking, Lynx, and Chinook helicopters. It was a refreshing experience with a strong emphasis on aviation operations. That said for the first time we found Apache playing second fiddle to

a higher priority; while converting the Marines to the new BOWMAN radio system. It was challenging for all groundcrew, technicians and aircrew. We disembarked earlier than expected, because by this time we had been tentatively warned that we might have to begin planning for a possible deployment to Afghanistan in 06.

Back at Dishforth we are still living in uncertain times. As I am writing, the Ministerial decision has not yet been taken for a deployment next year, despite the fact that we could be deploying as early as March. Nonetheless, the Regiment (for it will be a Regiment effort, with 656 Squadron spearheading the Apache capability) is training and planning for a deployment. We shall have to see, but I have no doubt that the personnel of 656 Sqn AAC will be ready for any such challenge, wherever that may be. I do not underestimate the dangers of such an operational tour, but I know the Squadron is ready. My next report may be from somewhere completely different!

Andy Cash

SECRETARY'S REPORT

I am writing this after watching the Remembrance day service on television. I was pleased to see that the VJ Anniversary gave the Burma veterans pride of place on the parade. Once more our Association was given excellent coverage, including a recorded interview with Ted Maslen-Jones at the start of the March Past.

Eleven of our Burma veterans and widows, with spouses and invited guests, attended a VJ celebratory luncheon in the Officers' Mess at Middle Wallop on 2nd September. The photograph shows them on the Mess steps having just watched an Auster MkIII fly past.



This was a curtain raiser to the drinks and luncheon which was enjoyed by all. The finale was a flypast of the Historic Aircraft Flight, headed by the Auster MkIX. Inevitably the luncheon over-ran and although they did not witness the flying, the Auster engine roar at zero feet overhead, kindled memories of low flying which we all knew so well.

Our 2006 reunion at Netheravon is now confirmed as 1st and 2nd July. This will now take the established program of Dinner on Saturday and AGM with activities on Sunday. Once more the International Auster Club will be there to give attendees a chance to fly in these wonderful old aircraft. Please put your names down early to help us plan the days. Whilst on the subject of planning, there is still time to grab a place on the Malaysia and Singapore trip in May, contact John Heyes now.

Since the last newsletter we have had a few resignations. Sadly we have three deaths to report, see page 43.

We welcome eight new members to the Association, and hope to meet them at some future get together, their names can be found on page 42.

Future Events. I have applied to the AACA to hold our 2007 reunion in conjunction with the proposed 50th Anniversary celebrations of the Army Air Corps. Planning is still in its infancy but it looks as if it may be like the old times, when there was an AAC day with flying displays, sideshows, hangar exhibitions, and a super private marquee for AACA members to which we were invited. So make a note that the reunion in 2007 will probably be on Saturday 1st September, at Middle Wallop of course!

I look forward to meeting you later in the year.

John Bennett

BOOK REVIEW.

‘Auster’ by Barry Ketley

I recently bought the book, ‘Auster’ by Barry Ketley, from Flight Recorder Publications, see advert on page 36. The book is an excellent history of the Auster Aircraft Company from its early beginnings before the war to its eventual demise. The book is full of facts and photographs, some of which brought back fond memories. The book also charts the formation of the early AOP Squadrons and the aircraft that were used in all theatres of war. I recommend it as an excellent read for those interested in the history of the ‘Cloth Bombers’

Ed.

BURMA VETERANS' 60th ANNIVERSARY COMMEMORATIVE LUNCHEON 2nd September 2005

Given that this year is the 60th Anniversary of V J Day it was decided to hold a Commemorative Lunch for the Burma veterans and their families. Permission was obtained to hold the event in the Officers' Mess, Middle Wallop on Friday 2nd September, this being close to the anniversary of VJ Day and only one day after the 48th Anniversary of the formation of the Army Air Corps.

Eleven veterans confirmed their availability to attend along with two widows and twenty family members. The day dawned clear and bright, and the veterans travelled from all over the country, many staying with old friends in the local area.

From 11.30 am attendees started to arrive at the Mess, along with our senior guests of Maj Gen Gary Coward, an ex OC of the Squadron, Brig Iain Thomson, Director Army Aviation and Brig (Retired) Ed Tait, Chief Executive of the Museum of Army Flying. On the pretext of being invited outside to have a group photograph, everyone assembled on the steps of the Mess only to hear the distinctive sound of a Mark III Auster - the model flown in Burma and the only serviceable Mark III in Europe. A few moments later the aircraft curved over the front of the Mess to general applause. The Pilot, Nigel Skinner and his wife, Jackie, having flown up from Devon, subsequently landed at the airfield and joined us for lunch.

We all then moved into the Mess for the lunch. The setting could not have been more appropriate, it having been an ex-RAF wartime Mess which retains an atmosphere of aviation excellence, commitment and wartime service.

After the meal the Association President, Lt Col Andrew Simkins, welcomed everyone to the event, before handing over to (ex Capt) Ted Maslen-Jones MC DFC. Ted is very well known both inside the Association and within the Burma Star Association and further afield, not least because he has written the definitive history of the Squadron's Burma campaign. Ted painted an evocative picture of service over 60 years ago, recalling past successes, setbacks and personalities, such that to glance around the table one observed hardly a dry eye.

In conclusion Ted raised a Toast to 'Those who cannot be with us today', and then read some words written by Gordon Graham after he had revisited Kohima, where he had been awarded the first of his two MCs. Ray Pett then recited the Kohima Epitaph.

Given that, inevitably, we had overrun our planned timetable, the next event came as a complete surprise to most members, as the Historic Aircraft Flight

of the Army Air Corps, lead by the Flight's Auster, flew low level over the Mess creating an impressive roar first from the aircraft and then from those assembled below.

After signing a record of the event, we assembled outside the Mess for the official photographs which have subsequently been assembled into a commemorative booklet. Members were free to leave after the photographs.

However, everyone then moved across the road to the Museum of Army Flying, where Brig Ed Tait had arranged for Squadron archives to be laid out, while everyone had tea in the Museum Restaurant. Eventually and reluctantly members said their goodbyes and departed home, after a quite remarkable and memorable reunion of friendship, humour and fond memories.



L to R: Ray Pett, RA; Jack Hallam, RAF; Arthur Maycroft, RA; Bill Peers, REME; Mr. Merryweather, RAF; Basil Appleton, RA; Bob Henshaw, RA; Vin Weaver, RA; Arthur Windscheffel, RAF; Ted Maslen-Jones, RA; Gwyn Thomas, RA; Peter Andrews, RAF.

ASSOCIATION CONTINGENT AT CENOTAPH PARADE 2005

Members may recall that the Association formed a Contingent at last year's Cenotaph Parade. Given that this was our first appearance, it was particularly pleasing to receive good BBC TV coverage during the March Past.

This year the 60th Anniversary of VJ Day gave our attendance added poignancy. In the early stages of planning we made contact with the BBC to update them on the Squadron's history and current activities. Ted Maslen-Jones was asked if he would give an interview and this was arranged to be held in Salisbury some 4 weeks before the Parade.

I also contacted the Squadron and asked if they could be represented. As before our Association Liaison Officer, Captain Piers Lewis, said he wished to attend, and that three soldiers had also stepped forward. This was particularly pleasing as it formed a bridge between the formation of the Squadron, and its wartime activities, and the current day and the likelihood of further operational service.

The day dawned clear and crisp. By 1000 hrs eleven of us were formed up on Horse Guards Parade – this should have been twelve, but (perhaps true to form) one of the Airtroopers had got lost en route from Dishforth. Before we marched onto Whitehall I called the BBC to check that they were ready to cover our small but noteworthy contribution.



L to R: John Heyes, Air Trooper Ryan Johnstone, Maurice Haynes(back to camera) Robert Warner (bowler hat) Jim Stirton, Ted Maslen-Jones, Cpl. Janine Nicoll, Capt. Piers Lewis, Lt.Col. Andrew Simkins

Given that we were in the first column, we marched onto Whitehall early, thus allowing us time to soak up the atmosphere and chat with the other veterans on parade.



L to R: Lt.Col. Andrew Simkins, Capt. Piers Lewis, Ross Kingsley, John Heyes and Ted Maslen-Jones

Her Majesty, The Queen, with her senior officers, came out onto Whitehall at One minute to Eleven. This signified the start of the Parade. After the Two minute silence there followed a short but moving service of reflective hymn and prayer.

After the laying of national wreaths, the contingents March Past. The first column, which included ourselves, was led by the Burma Star Association. It was not long before we were within sight of the Cenotaph. As we were expecting to be covered by the BBC, we were not surprised to see a cameraman and an assistant to our left panning onto our front rank, and onto Ted especially. We were not expecting, however, to see him drop out of sight, apparently having fallen over the BBC assistant!

The regimental and association wreaths were laid as we passed the Cenotaph. Six abreast we passed through the impressive lines of Service units, including the Massed Bands. Beyond, the vast crowds lined and clapped our journey all the way back to Horse Guards Parade. Here, Prince Charles, the Army Air Corps Colonel in Chief took the Salute before the columns reached their start point, from where they dispersed.

After the Parade the majority of us retired to the Charing Cross Hotel for a relaxing lunch. It was particularly gratifying to chat to Cpl Nicoll (it is a sign of the times that she has already amassed five medals) and Airtrooper Johnstone who had thoroughly enjoyed the experience and had represented the serving contingent in exemplary fashion.



L to R: Capt. Piers Lewis, Air Trooper Ryan Johnstone and Cpl. Janine Nicoll

Eventually we made our individual ways home after an excellent day of dedication and reflection.

Once home we discovered that Ted's interview some weeks earlier had been included in the BBC coverage, prior to the Contingents' March Past, and that, yet again, the Association Contingent received good coverage before the cameraman fell from grace!

As I have mentioned to many members, I believe that it is every veteran's duty and honour to attend the Parade at least once in their lifetime. I commend it to you all – it is a truly uplifting experience.

Right: Christian Cook who kindly supplied the photographs



(Copies of the event are available from Maurice Haynes, in either video or DVD format).

Andrew Simkins

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Thank you for your most interesting Summer Newsletter and especially the article written by Peter Harris '*In search of Fort George*'.

I was with 1913 Lt. Liaison Flight under Captain 'Tiny' Urwin based at the other end of the airstrip and can recall that very unfortunate accident to Major Harris. I was one of the first to dash down to the other end of the runway as the American aircraft crash landed. With the help of comrades we managed to free the pilot but didn't realise that the plane had careered into Major Harris's jeep until we found his body. It was a shock to us all.

I can say that Coronation Day was one that I'll never forget and I'm sure that all remaining 1913 members send our condolences to his family and admire the courage of his son to fly out to Korea in search of his father's dreadful accident.

I belong to the Kent Invicta Branch of Korean Veterans Association and we all gave our accounts of what we remembered of Korea. They were made into a magazine. (*Mr. Belsey's account appears later in the newsletter*) I never forgot the unfortunate accident of Major Harris.

Unfortunately I find Dishforth is too far to travel from Kent, but hope that when a reunion is at Middle Wallop I will try to attend.

Thanks for all the very hard and dedicated work you all put in to keep the Association going.

Allan Belsey

I would like to say what an excellent publication you produce. I always find material of interest for me in it.

Terence FitzGibbon

I must express my appreciation of the efforts you put into the newsletter, well done to you both. I was interested in the account, by Brig. Mike Webb, of an Auster, force landed into the Sugei Buluh Leper Colony. (*Summer 2005*) I have tried to remember this to put into my diary of those days.

I was a poor kid who had an experience of a lifetime, to visit a foreign country and travel all over Malaya. I have taken hundreds of photographs of this time with a Japanese copy of Zeiss Ikon bellows camera bought from a Japanese POW. I never expected to own a camera and never stopped taking pictures of 1914 Flight under Russell Mathews (1947 - 1948) from Grik to Singapore showing us out in the field, even events of our CO's wedding ... nobody seemed to mind.

I send you a picture of our officers, taken at Sembawang 1948.



Col. Jebb, Russell Mathews, Mike Collins, Dick Haig, Mike, (I believe on the bench right side) is Captain Churcher, killed with Brig. Erskine. This may not be true.

Tom Sutcliffe. Known as 'Ron or Twink' someone explain why!

YOUR ARTICLES AND ANECDOTES REQUIRED

We are in need of your anecdotes or reminiscences for the Journal. The contributions can be as short or long as you wish to make them and they do not have to be literary masterpieces. Amusing, sad or just memories of your time with the Squadron will help to fill the pages and perhaps give the younger and serving members an insight as to what it was like to serve in the Squadron in the early days. We would also like to have articles from younger and serving members to give us 'oldies' a feel for what modern Army Air Corps soldiering is all about. So, think about it and put pen to paper, or finger to keyboard, in time for the next edition. Send your writings to me, the editor, at the address on page 44.

Send them in any form, hard copy, disc or by email. I look forward to hearing from you. *Ed.*



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ARMY AIR CORPS ASSOCIATION SILVER MEDAL AWARD



It is with great pleasure that we congratulate John Bennett, our General Secretary, on the award of The Army Air Corps Association Silver Medal, which was awarded in recognition of his long and unstinting work for 656 Squadron Association. John took on the job when Nobby retired from the post where he had literally run the Association as a 'one man band' for some considerable time. His appeal for the assistance of a committee was only relatively recently heard, the formation of which allowed him to step back a little from all the minutiae of managing the Association. John thought that he had escaped by moving to France, no such luck, the committee played the 'electronic age' card and persuaded him to continue in the post of General Secretary. It should not be forgotten that, as with all demanding tasks, there is a woman somewhere in the picture, usually working harder than the titular head. Joyce has laboured hard with John to make the Association as successful as it is and our congratulations and thanks should go to her in equal measure.

On behalf of all members of the Association we commend John on his well deserved award of the Silver Medal.

MEMBERS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The following was sent to 'The Chinthe' by
Major General Ken Perkins CB MBE DFC

in response to the article in the Summer 2005 newsletter by Peter Harris.

Sir,

In his interesting account of his visit to Korea, Peter Harris touches on the incident in which Senior Aircraftsman Goodfield died. Peter draws on a letter written at the time by his father which mentioned engine trouble. Why Wilf Harris wrote this we cannot say but, knowing him, I am sure his reasons were valid. However I cannot allow myself to be exonerated so easily. What happened is as follows, taken from my autobiography, *A Fortunate Soldier*.

'The summer rains produced a spate of flood water and the River Imjin, brimming its banks, was flowing at a fast rate. Somewhere upstream a pontoon bridge had been swept away. As the wreckage was a danger to other bridges, I went up to assess the situation. The ground crew often accompanied flights in rear areas and my engine mechanic, Senior Aircraftsman Goodfield, was sitting behind me. Seeing what appeared to be several half submerged pontoons I went down to within a few feet of the water to have a closer look, meanwhile keeping an eye out for cables which were slung across the river to enable the passage of supplies should the bridges become unusable. These cables were usually marked with fluorescent bunting and I was surprised, as I was about to pull up over Pintail Bridge, to see a set of unmarked cables immediately ahead. As I focused on these in order to fly beneath them there was a loud bang and the aircraft cartwheeled through the air and into the water. The wheels had struck a low cable which dipped into the centre of the river to catch debris before it hit the bridge. On surfacing I found Goodfield having difficulty in keeping afloat because of his heavy boots. I managed to grasp him but my calf length flying boots strapped firmly around the ankles were pulling me down like two buckets filled with water and my swimming ability was not up to saving my companion. I eventually got the boots off and, clinging to one of the aircraft wheels which had subsequently come to the surface and was being swept down the river, struggled ashore. The brigadier within whose command the flight came declared that there was no need for an enquiry but the Royal Air Force from their headquarters in Japan insisted on one. Predictably its findings were "pilot error". Fair enough I suppose. Had I seen the wires my engine mechanic would not have died. Few days go by without me remembering it.'

Submitted by **Cpl. L.A. Belsey M.I.D.**
Gilder Pilot Regiment

I was in charge of the small transport section of 1913 Light Liaison Flight which was part of 656 Squadron. We used to fly in Austers Mark V in which we did reconnaissance over the enemy lines at dawn and again just before dusk, reporting back on enemy troop movements.

What I remember most was on the day of our Queen's Coronation. An American Sabre Jet Fighter crash landed on our airstrip, which was only meant for small aircraft. It went along on its belly and unfortunately at the far end of the airfield was one of 1903 Flight's Officers waiting in his jeep to cross. The plane smashed into the waiting jeep killing the driver outright.

We managed to get the pilot out alive, he was not seriously injured and to this day probably doesn't realise the tragedy that happened.

After serving a year in Korea, I went to 1911 Flight in Malaya and Singapore also doing reconnaissance over the jungle taking pictures of clearings to see if the Communists were cultivating them. If this was so then the RAF used to bomb them.

The journey out to Korea in early February 1953 was on troopship 'Austarius' Then from Japan to Singapore on the 'Devonshire' and from Singapore to England, Stanstead by 'Hermes Horacius' arriving back almost three years to the day.

I was de mobbed in August 1956 after Serving five years in H.M. Forces.



Allan Belsey

*Words you don't want to hear on the grenade throwing range...
"I've dropped it Sarge" Anon*

Kai Tak 1950. Tech Wing.

After 3 years service as an RAF Apprentice and 3 years 'man's service', now a Leading Aircraftsman Fitter II E servicing Spitfires; half way through my tour, awaiting married quarters, when ... POSTED! ... to 656 Squadron about which little known except Gipsy Majors, certainly a change from Merlins and Griffons. Had I, perhaps, transgressed and so been posted to the Air Ministry equivalent of Siberia? Apparently not. Ten uncomfortable hours in the canvas seat of a RNZAF Dakota, refuelling at Saigon, brought me to Changi and one of the most satisfying postings in 13 years service!

Warm welcomes were received from the Commanding Officer Major Oldman DFC, RA, (gentleman) down to Gunner Brooks (network demon and comedian). In between, sundry fitters, riggers, instrument makers et al, even a familiar face from Apprentice days. Then the aircrew, Captains RA, rugby enthusiasts, keen pilots and willing to help with the chores (*were they ill? Ed.*) – covers on/off, piquet down, re-fuel etc. (strange new world!) All enthusiasts, sharing the sense of involvement in seeing off the Red Menace from inhospitable terrain: yet after work, always time for a Tiger.

One novelty at Changi was the left hand swing of the Auster Mk V, then nearing the end of its service life.



*Changi 1950
656 Squadron Auster Mk V
Note left hand swing to start.
Leading Aircraftsman George
'Snowy' Simpson*

Novelty number two, was a trip in a Harvard to a clearing at Kluang to revive an ailing Mk VI: Harvard departs leaving me in a clearing containing a short strip, one Auster and nothing else. No human beings, no tents, buildings or NAFFI wagons, just trees! Every incentive to get the wretched thing working and

go home. Eventually, having heard me run up for engine checks, pilot appears in a 'puff of smoke' and whisks us back to Changi.

Novelty number three. Detachment to 190(2)? Flight at Johore Bahru. Mahjoli Barracks and the 2/2nd Ghurkhas; Big smiles, bagpipes and Very Active Service. The novelty of being on a flight after three years of various 'Tech.Wings' was much enjoyed.

Once invited (!!)
by CO to fly with him in support of infantry engaged in squeezing out terrorists onto a river where they were dealt with by RN gunboats. Sat in the back of a Mk VI map reading and trying to make a contribution.

All in all, very satisfying service in good company and to ice the cake, my tapes came through in time to become 'tour ex' in March 1952.

Thank you 656 Squadron.

George Simpson



*Strip at Johore Bahru
656 Squadron Auster Mk VI 1951*

Things not to say to the R.S.M. ... "I'm not in the army Sir, I'm in the REME" Anon

FLIGHT LIEUTENANT JOHN DUNBAR DFC, ROYAL AIR FORCE

by Ian Frimston

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John Dunbar DFC

As a keen 17 year old, like all would-be pilots entering the RAF during WW2, John Dunbar's ambition was to fly Supermarine Spitfires. Little did he realise that, years later, he would say of part of his air force service: "We lived like animals".

John began his flying training at No 26 Elementary Flying Training School (EFTS), Theale, Berks, on December 31, 1941. The course was interrupted when he was posted to No 31 EFTS at De Winton in Alberta, Canada, followed by No 38 Service Flying Training School (SFTS) at Estavan. John takes up the story:

"At Estevan we started our training on MK 1 Ansons that had been used operationally in the UK, but soon progressed to the new Canadian built Mk V. No more winding the undercarriage up. On one occasion the chief flying instructor had organised 2hrs of night flying for each student while he partied in the Mess. This was my second night solo, and I took off at midnight to do circuits and bumps. We could hear sounds from the Mess indicating that the party was in full swing, and we were left to our own devices.

"On my first downwind leg problems arose. It was standard practice at 1,000ft to throttle back both engines to check that the stall warning was working, then open up and complete the rest of the checks. On opening up both engines all went quiet! All I could do was turn towards the airfield and point the aircraft at the ground. It was pitch black, and I struck the ground quite hard. The aircraft broke into a thousand pieces, leaving me sitting, without a scratch, in what was left of the cockpit. I got out, but not a soul stirred or came near, so I began the long walk to dispersal. When I reached the flight office the duty NCO, Flt. Sgt. Long, looked at me in disbelief before we went back outside to survey the wreckage. After an expletive, I was told to go and get a cup of tea, and trudged yet another mile to the cookhouse. Here I was met by an NCO who hated Long and refused to let me have a cup unless I had a chit. Yet another trek back to Long resulted in him exploding and insisting I accompany him back to the cookhouse, whereupon

set about fighting each other. By this time I had had enough. It was four in the morning, so I left them to it and went to bed. Amazingly, though a new Anson had been written off, no officer was involved and no-one said a word to me.”

John was presented with his wings on September 10th 1942 aged 19 years and three months. “Fifty four of us passed out on the SFTS course. You can imagine my feelings upon discovering that I was to be retained as a flying instructor. Not knowing I had come top of the course, I stormed into the group captain and said what a disgraceful decision it was, that I was the youngest on the course, that I was totally ill-equipped to become a flying instructor, and wanted to go on operations. He sat there and then said: ‘You are our choice, and are going to No 1 Flying Instructors’ School at Arnprior’.” After an argument he was given the alternative of a posting to a radio operators’ school at Winnipeg, where he would be flying Tiger Moths on circuits and bumps with trainee radio operators in the back seat. That did not appeal, so John duly became a flying instructor.

John spent two years instructing, returning to the UK in 1944, having completed 2,000hr+ of flying and with an Exceptional rating as a night flying instructor. He was then put down for a Mosquito nightfighter Operational Training Unit. There was quite a wait for the course, and after some time he was sent to meet an air commodore at Adastral House in London. John was asked if he would apply for a job about which he could be told nothing, except that it would require him to recruit 30 pilots, each with a minimum of 750hrs flying on light aircraft. They had to have an “above average” assessment as pilots, be under 27 years old and single. This limited the choice to ex-EFTS instructors. What the air commodore *would* say was that here was a chance to do some operational flying. John agreed to take on the task.

John began recruiting pilots. One, Dave Proctor, one of life’s characters, said to him: “What have I done to upset you? Why haven’t I been asked?” John replied that, at 29, he was past it. Dave asked if the rules could be bent. The reply was a definite “No”. “I’m begging you,” said Dave. “There’s only one place they will want us for, and that’s Burma. My brother was lost on the retreat and he’s never been found. If I could get out there maybe I would have a chance of finding him.”

John managed to arrange for Dave to join the Squadron, and by the end of May 1944 they were undergoing a commando course. An intensive short-landing programme began at No 6 EFTS, Sywell, Northamptonshire, on July 17th. On November 23rd, 1944, the Squadron boarded



*John ‘Ginger’ Dunbar
during the war*

Liberators, bound for India. Because of the urgency the flight was routed directly over Europe, from Lyneham via El Adem, Shaibah and Karachi.

When they eventually arrived at the Maintenance Unit (MU) at Jodhpur, the pilots found 30 new Stinson L-5 Sentinels, still crated. No-one knew anything about the aircraft, but it was eventually realised that these were the pilots for them. At the time there were 29 pilots, Dave Proctor having been run over by a horse and cart when inebriated. He joined the Squadron later. With the help of MU personnel the aircraft were assembled. With no Pilot's Notes available, John performed



Posing with Stinson Sentinel, 'General Ginger', are L to R, Fg Offs Robby Robinson, Jimmy Norris, Woodhouse DFC (sitting on wing), Flt Lt John Dunbar DFC and Fg Off Dave Proctor

the first test flight and then began to check out the other pilots. The squadron then flew in formation across India, a navigator seconded to them was flying in John's aircraft. At this stage they still did not know where they were headed. Restricted to 200-mile hops, they took nearly a week to reach their destination. None of the squadron had any tropical kit apart from khaki shorts, which were forbidden in Burma.

On the final day the navigator announced that they were going to Imphal. John's reaction was, "That's dangerous, isn't it? There are people banging off guns at each other!" They had to fly over a 12,000ft mountain range. John points out that they had no parachutes and no radio, which made flying in the monsoon period a very interesting experience. He takes up the story:

"We eventually dropped down into Imphal. At the time the Japanese were strafing it. We landed and there was not a soul in sight. The scene was one of utter desolation and slit trenches. I taxied to the end of the runway and a head poked up from a trench. This bod crawled across to the aircraft, and turned out to be the Group Captain in charge of Imphal landing ground. He shouted. "What the hell are you doing here? Get these bloody toys out of here. Don't you know there's a war on?"

Explaining that there was not enough fuel to do so, we were eventually dispersed and I was asked to report to Gen Frank Messervy, GOC in charge of IV Corps, and to take 12 pilots with me. It transpired that the Squadron was to be dispersed between the three Corps of the Army in Burma. Having just broken out of Imphal, IV Corps had the almost impossible task of getting through the jungle to the Irrawaddy river in total radio silence without the Japanese knowing. The Japanese did not believe it was possible for an army to move through the thick jungle without their knowledge. I became the General's personal pilot and flew him every other day.

“Our armament in the L-5 was the personal issue revolver we carried and any hand grenades we could scrounge from the Army. The initial job of the pilots was to provide a ‘radio’ service by dropping the order of battle first thing every morning to the advanced units of IV Corps. They would also bring back information on the progress of the units.

“Once beyond the Irrawaddy, I would fly the General to observe actions. At times I refused to fly him over the battlefield, and he would say: ‘It’s all right, Ginger,’ and I would relent. On one occasion, when I was on another op, he suddenly wanted to fly and Jimmy Norris took him. Jimmy returned and said to me: ‘The General tapped me on the shoulder and said he wanted to go down and take a look. Flak suddenly burst around us and I said to the General, awfully sorry, but we are going to have to go back. They are shooting at us. The General said: ‘Why? They aren’t *hitting* us’.

“The dash to Meiktila, our next base, was the worst month of my life. The progress of the war depended on us capturing this airfield. Once we were there, the Japanese were still around the edge of the field. It took 28 days for us to clear the surrounding jungle of Japanese troops. As we took off or landed they were able to fire at us. I tried various techniques, but soon settled on approaching just inches from the ground.

“After we had captured Meiktila everyone was on a high from the General down, and I was asked to fly him to Yamatain, a town some 30 or 40 miles south of Meiktila, for a conference with his divisional commanders. It was imperative that they reached Rangoon by the beginning of May, or they would be bogged down by the monsoon. All our supplies, even the petrol for the L-5s, were dropped to us from Dakotas.

“I flew Gen Messervy to the airstrip, and there were the Generals waiting with maps spread over the bonnet of a jeep, and I was once again very lucky to be privy to the discussion of how the Army were going to take Rangoon..”

Just as the decision was being made on the deposition of the British forces there was the crack of a rifle shot and a bullet whistled across the little gathering. Ginger Dunbar, who was not trained in ground warfare and who considered it nothing to do with him, dived face-first into a slit trench. “A burst of machine-gun fire was followed by a ‘plop’ as a Japanese sniper fell out of a tree. I crawled out

The trench, trying to appear dignified. Suddenly I noticed that not one of the Generals had moved and they were carrying on with their discussions. Messervy just looked at me, and I felt I had gone down in his estimation and let the Air Force down.

“On the way back the General mentioned that his ADC, Maj Bob Nottingham, who suffered from shell shock, had got the only Japanese boat out on the lake near our headquarters, along with the only WASB (Women’s Auxiliary Services Burma) for miles around. ‘I want you to dive on him and put the fear of God into him’ he said ‘I’ll give him take my bloody boat out with my WASB!’ As we approached the lake there was the boat in the middle, and I did what I thought (bearing in mind the rank and importance of my passenger) was a fairly daring beat-up of the boat. This was in the middle of a war. As I pulled up, Messervy was jumping around in his seat, saying; ‘You’ve got to go lower, he’s still in it’. He goaded me into making one more pass, even lower. In the boat, Bob was standing up shaking his fist at me when it dawned on him just how low we were. He flung himself overboard. Messervy went bananas in the back of the aeroplane, saying, ‘I just can’t wait! I just can’t wait! That will teach him! Thank you, Ginger!’.”

Living as they did, moving through the jungle and flying behind the lines in support of 136 Force, there was obviously tension and fatigue. John flew more than 400 operations behind Japanese lines: sometimes up to four a day. The L-5 would take in supplies and on occasions bring out injured soldiers. Each sortie would be of an hour or two’s duration, but with the constant fear of being forced down in the jungle.

On May 19th, 1945, John led what was to prove to be the beginning of his most dangerous but rewarding mission of the war. By this time they were operating from a strip called Pegu, some 50 miles from Rangoon. A call was received that four ‘bodies’ were to be picked up urgently from a clearing some 50 miles behind Japanese lines, across the Sittang River, where heavy fighting was taking place. The usual briefing took place, at which the signals, comprising of strips of white parachute laid out as a letter ‘X’ if unsafe to land, and ‘U’ if safe, were made known. John had picked Fg Offs Dave Proctor, Jimmy Norris and ‘Robbie’ Robinson as his other pilots.

“We flew as low as possible to the Napyawdaw area, where we climbed to 2,000ft in order to spot the clearing. We were dead on track, but to my consternation the signal was a letter ‘L’. I motioned to the other pilots to orbit and dived down flat-out across the clearing. Immediately Japanese troops emerged from the jungle and opened fire. We returned to Pegu, and the following day I paid a solo visit, making one pass across the clearing at treetop height. There was no signal. Much to our amusement, 136 Force later sent a letter apologising for the debacle and stating that they had been ‘victim of the ungodly’.

On May 25th we were asked if we would make another attempt to rescue the four ‘bodies’. It was unthinkable that they could be left to the Japanese, so the answer was yes. The following day, with an escort of 12 Spitfires, we returned. We had objected to the presence of the Spitfires, knowing that, with our speed of 120 m.p.h., they would alert the enemy to our presence. Luckily they returned home some 15 miles before the clearing was reached.

“ A letter ‘U’ was clearly displayed, and all four L-5s landed safely but with no room to spare. To my consternation five people emerged from the trees. A large man, wearing a full-length Burmese skirt and naked to the waist, covered with jungle sores, came forward and demanded to know where the fifth aircraft was. It was clear we had a major problem, and it was at this stage that we broke the golden rule and switched off our engines. Each aircraft could take only one passenger, the take-off run was short and there was zero wind. One person had to be left behind.”

The group consisted of Wg Cdr George Nottage, CO of 177 Sqn, who had force-landed his Bristol Beaufighter in a paddy field on April 26th, and his navigator, Plt Off Norman Bolitho: Sqn Ldr Turner, who had flown a Westland Lysander, with Maj King of 136 Force as passenger to pick up Nottage and Bolitho but had crash-landed: and Ali Mohammed, an Indian soldier who had escaped from the Japanese.

It was decided that Ali Mohammed would have to stay. “As I started to taxi,” says John “I saw the look on Ali’s face. He knew what the outcome would be if he was recaptured. I stopped the aircraft and went across to him and gave instructions that he hide in the jungle and await my return in about two hours.”

John, flying Sentinel KJ400, was rapidly refuelled at Pegu and returned, to be greeted in the clearing by a very happy soldier. They were off within seconds, the flight back seeming an anti-climax. The Japanese, alerted by the activity turned up too late to take action. They beheaded the chief of the local village as a warning against any future help to the British.

The story behind the ‘L’ in the clearing will never be known, but it probably



A painting by the late Ken Aitken GAvA, showing John making a low pass on his first visit to the jungle clearing before the rescue.

involved great bravery by a member of Force 136. In the seven months to March 1945, of 176 aircrew forced down in enemy-controlled areas or in jungle in Allied territory, 166 were lost without trace.

After the end of the war, during which he flew 228hrs operationally over the jungle, John was flying at Batavia in the Dutch East Indies when he was sent for by Messervy, now GOC far East, to be his personal pilot, based at Kuala Lumpur. After just a few weeks John semi-passed out while airborne with his navigator, Jimmy Rainbow, after flying Messervy to Bangkok. Having had flying tuition from John in their short time together, Rainbow was able to land the aircraft. The cause was a combination of battle fatigue and malnutrition. No-one had eaten properly for close on nine months, and John weighed exactly 100 lb. As he says, after a few days flying they put their own tents up: no batman and no Officers' Mess. During the last month of the advance on Rangoon water was rationed to one pint per day per man for washing, drinking and cooking, in a temperature of 120F. Food was limited to one eighth rations. John has little recollection of the succeeding weeks in Changi Hospital, Singapore, before he returned to England.

After leaving the RAF John worked briefly for Hunting Air Travel and then for Airwork in the Middle East. Returning to the UK in November 1948, he joined Flight Refuelling in time to take part in the Berlin Airlift, flying as a copilot on Avro Lancastrians taking fuel into the city. He was promoted to Captain in June 1949. Operating from Wunstorf and Hamburg, John made 104 return flights to Berlin. Flying throughout the airlift, he was conscious of sitting on the end of a 3,000gal petrol tank with a take-off weight 1,000lb above normal landing weight. They were also likely to be used for target practice by MiG's and, when landing at Tegel at night, to have a Russian searchlight shone in their faces.

John subsequently left aviation, joined a steel company and eventually became a general manager and director, retiring in 1983. Over the years he has often said that if you told people what conditions were like in Burma they would not believe you, or would think you were shooting a line, which is why so many kept quiet. He flew more than 50 aircraft types, but never achieved his dream of flying a Spitfire.

I spotted this article in the Aeroplane Monthly magazine and wondered if John Dunbar had been part of the embryo 656 Squadron. Aeroplane kindly gave us permission to reproduce the article and to put me in touch with both the author and John Dunbar himself.

I have now spoken to John and it would appear that his squadron was not 656 but operated in the same areas at the same time. John has expressed a desire to join the association and to meet the Burma veterans at our next reunion. Ed.

Introducing the A.O.P. Mk .9

"Far away Places"

by L.A.Leetham.

Getting the Auster Mk.9 into active service with 656 AOP Squadron RAF in Malaya meant that we had to pull out all of the stops to get the very latest information on modifications, essential spares and other data still in preparation, plus any hardware, ready to fly out with me by the end of July 1955.

Drawings and provisional manuals that were practically being handwritten right up to the last moments finally took up most of the 80 lbs. baggage allowance allocated to me, so that my personal effects were cut down to an embarrassing minimum. The Drawing Office and the assembly line very soon became used to me being constantly at their elbows as I gleaned every morsel possible, and it was in this way that I found out that two of the fellows in the spray shop that I had known for ages had been prisoners of war in Singapore and they told me that if I was ever near to Taiping they would like me to try to find the graves of some of their closest friends buried there. My visit was to be for 4 weeks, and I thought that I would be expected to hand over all of the paperwork and spares etc. at Seletar, demonstrate the Mk .9 and talk to the pilots out there so did not expect to go "up country" --it was not to be that simple however. As the data pile grew I began to have doubts. We already knew that the payload and performance would be criticized and that the ground staff would find the Mk .9 as strange as Malaya would be to me. I could not imagine that much of the news that I would be sending back would be good news and thought of the old time Chinese Emperors that had the bearers of bad news beheaded. Financial matters also began to concern me. The firm had calculated an amount that should last the month, and I guessed that the usual care and thrift would apply but had no way of arguing against them without some experts advice that was not available. However the Ministry granted me officer status and undertook the feeding and accommodation details so basic needs were covered.

July 25th. found me as ready as I would ever be at the Air Trooping Section, RAF Hendon to meet up again with F/Sgt. Len Childs prior to being "emplaned" on an Airworks charter aircraft at London Airport on the 27th. with some sixty or so National Service airmen also bound for the Far East Air Force at Changi, all looking very young, sporting severely close cropped haircuts and all shod in gym shoes for the trip out. It was on the stages (via Reggio, Nicosia, Bahrain, Karachi, Delhi, Calcutta and Bangkok) that I prepared my party piece -a monologue that would anticipate the complaints and put over some of the reasons for the Mk.9's final format in a way that would be acceptable, as humour, where a "whitewash" attitude might be resented. This "Albert and the Lion" type

recitation was later modified to include topical references and delivered at a "do" to mark the 10th. Anniversary of the AOP presence in Malaya.

We arrived at Seletar on 10th. July but found that Monday was a holiday, giving us time to acclimatize and enabling me to augment my skimpy wardrobe -essential if I was to be socially acceptable amidst the heat and humidity. One memory of those days is the scent of baby powder -it was lavishly applied by one and all from huge economy sized tins in an effort to get into clothing when the mere effort of showering left the perspiration springing afresh.

On Tuesday we leapt into action and got a taste of things to come. The Rebuild Section had managed to assemble four of our charges but a quick check proved that their manuals were out of date. We began correcting the publications after we had shown them our copies and helped to re-rig the Mk.9's. We also had the experience of raising our first AOG signal, sadly the first of many, the supposedly magical Aircraft On Ground priority for urgent action. The cones of the propeller hubs had all begun to corrode due to cadmium transfer during transshipment -either the sea air or climate or both. This was when the urgency for the Mk.9's clearance became understandable. The Mk.6's and Mk.7's had begun to shed their propeller hubs in the same way that the Avis 2 Ambulance had, only the Army pilots were over hostile jungle territory and not Rearsby's green fields, so prop hub doubts were not good news. With such a fault so early in the venture it seemed ominous that some of the technicians that we were working with turned out to be visitors from the Salvage Section seeking a degree of familiarization with these potentially new customers.

It was on this first day that the Unit Test Pilot, a very friendly and helpful Flt.Lt. Sinclair, made himself known and was surprised to find that the "civvy" bod working on the elevator rigging was also the firms test pilot, technical rep. and general dogs body, but gladly accepted my copy of the Pilots Notes for future reference. The day finished with a hurried cable to confirm the AOG action and to urge information on new batteries and the jacking adaptors that were on the manifest but still missing, a longer follow-up letter to complete the picture with a restless night over such an inauspicious start. All this haste was later proven unproductive as, of course, it was the August Holiday week back home and the call for aid lay dormant.

The next day proved even worse. I had to sit in on a meeting of F.E.A.F. senior staff that was to settle the modification standard for acceptance and clearance at Seletar and during the meeting I was given the first news of the fuel starvation fault found during tropical tests, in Idris I believe. The de-aerator in the system was acting like a kettle and causing vapour locks with ambient temperatures of 30 degrees (C). After the first days problems this blow caused the RAF staff's attitude to become very chilly - the only thing that was cool about the whole visit. My feelings probably spilled over into that day's cable and letter

-anger at getting such information in those circumstances and demands for immediate action, as amongst my eventual replies was a "cool it" letter from the Managing Director at Rearsby instructing me to restrict the mail to the brief essentials.

When we finally got WZ670 airborne on Friday it was a very un-glad representative that found the mag.drop excessive, after having to re-bleed the undercarriage personally (the NCO we had shown the method to managed for a long time to get more air than fluid into the unit), and bully the electrician into signing the Form 700 before the new batteries arrived. I took the Unit Test Pilot along as passenger and to give me some familiarization with the local territory. He was as keen as I was to get to grips, so we swapped over and he did some circuits in readiness for his role as official test pilot.

The "dual" was in name only as the dual control modification parts had also gone astray, and in fact were to remain absent until nearly all of the pilot conversion had been completed, but Flt.Lt. Sinclair had also had an eventful day as his last trip had also seen as "second dickie" in a Meteor that had crashed on the runway on take-off. The aircraft was a write-off but he had escaped with mild burns on his arm, so a mag. drop and no dual controls was par for the times.

We changed the plugs next day without much improvement, but I was able to get some operating temperatures and performance figures to report to Rearsby -my qualms about my budget were being realized. Apart from kitting myself out the cables had become more extended and costly than expected and in a way it was fortunate that I was too busy to spend much time in the Mess in the evenings.

Monday's flying proved the engine still rough but gave me the chance to take a visiting AOP pilot along. We checked points, the injector system and more plugs, and once the engine was run it seemed to stay hot for the rest of the day with the result that we got burns trying to set the inaccessible points in situ, so removed the magneto for subsequent adjustments.

The theory that WZ670 had a rogue engine proved incorrect when the next two Mk.9's were ready for flight. All of these faults were separate from any vapour locking symptoms and were purely down to the climatic conditions. We finally tried altering the fine adjustment screw in the pressure-compensating capsule, by trial and error as the manual gave no information on such use, and we found that we could reproduce the effect of either richening or weakening the mixture as a carburetor would. We settled for a third of a turn out and cleared WZ670 for the official check by Flt. Lt. Sinclair.

Feeling very resourceful I cabled this data to Rearsby and had the quickest reply ever. They were horrified - a check with Blackburns had confirmed that two "clicks" was the maximum that could be permitted without expert tests. We repeated our alteration on the next rough power unit and sure enough we

could feel slight clicks as the screw was turned -ten in all to get the required running.

The next flight test I made was an extensive one, verifying the magneto drop was OK and that temperatures and running etc. remained satisfactory at levels, maximum r. p.m. checks right up to 6,000 ft. and remained satisfactory on subsequent ground runs so we decided to carry on but to keep a wary eye on the engine's performance and to be less cavalier in our adjustments.

Other snags occupied our attention, one rudder became bowed, aileron ball race housings loosened. We blamed the heat for those and for nuts loosening that had never given trouble all through the intensive trials. The more aircraft that were put together the more the variety of faults escalated until I felt like one of those music hall jugglers spinning plates on long canes as we hastened from one crisis to another to examine those that had previously been alright to see if the fault was common to all or just the one aircraft. Amongst all this my ghash got really flabbered when the Wingco called me in to tell me the Army had sent a signal that said they did not want the Mk.9's. Apparently they had begun a programme of engine changes on the Mk.6's. His other news was that he was going to request via the Air Ministry that I be kept on for another month, if I was agreeable.

The second item allowed me to get slightly un-cool again as I pointed out that there was no point in staying on if the aircraft were not wanted and that he could get a Blackburn representative out to fix the rough-running, fuel leaks etc. and that I did not intend to continue as a stand by fitter-cum-engine man. We exchanged views and he eventually agreed to force two Mk.9's into service at Kuala Lumpur for handling and familiarization .

Feeling better I returned to the Rebuild Section to find that the latest item was that cracks were starting in the nose cowls. We had a repair scheme that involved glass cloth but of course no glass cloth kits. A few enquiries and I was en-route to Singapore in Flt.Lt. Sinclair's new Alfa Romeo to buy some "Bondaglass" kits (more dollars gone) and then went through the reinforcing of the repairs with the ground crew.

The next day I had the firm's confirmation that I was to stay if I agreed, reply to be urgent - more dollars gone again.

At last the CO of 656 Squadron, Major Robertson arrived with another officer for conversion flying. I was busy getting two machines clear for use when they turned up but they did not seem surprised, perhaps the news had spread. I ran through the briefing that I had prepared (it seemed a long time ago) and insisted that spinning was to be part of the procedure as it must have been a long time since the AOP pilots had done any and also to counteract the rumours that I had heard that the Mk.9 was vicious in spins - the strakes had been the cause of the concern -and all went well.

The two carried on soloing (my first flights with all of the pilots was from the starboard. dual-less seat) and were much less hostile afterwards. The CO came back unexpectedly again the next day for further practice to find me stripped off in the running battle with WZ670's engine -it gave trouble right through my visit -and insisted that I lunched with him in the Mess.

Afterwards I ferried him over to Changi to catch the Pembroke back to Kuala Lumpur -a little bit creepish but he had told me that I was to go "up country" to train the pilots that could not travel down to Seletar. This meant using the Army strips -literally single strips 400 yards by 30 yards usually and living in their temporary quarters where necessary, so I needed to be cooperative.

The CO also explained that part of the delay that had not been publicised was that the AOP units had been involved in a minor scare, searching for a band of terrorists that had stolen arms from the Johore camp.

Pilots began to trickle in after that with varying responses to my stalling and spinning routine but all seemed pleased after and their confidence in this new mount was obvious, some even carrying out additional spins during their solo's.

When I had finished my visit this right-hand hands off introduction had been given to some 25 AOP pilots -the CO had trained the rest- and only had one "freeze" in the spin. A quick thump on his shoulder and a very clear shout of "stick forward" had him un-froze, but he had to do a few more, and from rather higher after that.

The ground crews were getting used to the airframes and the snags so that things became more as I had originally anticipated and I was moved over to Sembawang to let the pilots there "have a go". This flight had been allowed to operate from a corner of a Royal Naval Air Station there, and when I was allocated quarters some amusement arose as I was a civilian with an RAF officer's temporary rank attached to the Army on a Naval station.

With the officers there dealt with, one of the Noble Field pilots (Noble Field being the Army strip near Kuala Lumpur) arrived to ferry WZ669 back there with myself to ferry WZ670. It was a two hour jaunt - my longest since the Rearsby trials, and of course 670 turned rough again and was grounded on arrival.

Handling trials were started immediately and we soon proved that the payload quickly reached its limits, that the width of the fuselage was a handicap on supply dropping missions and that the 30 degrees(C) limitation meant that operations had to be halted very early in the day. Flying started at first light, and at about 6.45 a.m. the sun shot up out of the mists which burnt off almost as quickly. Once the dreaded 30 (C) was reached it was servicing time -"genning" up the ground crews and up-dating their manuals and often the temperature didn't drop below the forbidden figure until about 6 to 6.30 p.m. and it got dark about 7 p.m. Perhaps it was in return for my initiation routine that I was taken to some of their "pet" strips -the hairy ones -some literally hacked out of the surrounding

jungle with the felled giants being used as the foundation for the 400 by 30 yd. runway, with a surface of the all pervading laterite -the local red, shale type deposits with the consistency of crushed brick.

With some I was told that if you could see the strip during the approach you were too high. On one it was advisable to land uphill and take-off downhill regardless of wind, and it wasn't unusual to see directions in the flight's strip manual(essential reading) that certain locations in valley bottoms had offshoot clefts in the valley sides that had to be avoided after take-off as they quickly became blind alleys, ending abruptly before the aircraft had time to gain height and, were too narrow to allow a turn. I wondered how they found out in the first place.

One favourite "scarier" location was KKB. -Kuala Kubu Bahru -amongst deep narrow valleys and dense jungle. It was whilst the ground forces were making such sites that the AOP pilots were using the Mk.6's to drop cross-cut saws, dynamite etc. and when I carefully edged the rudder of the Mk.9 into the growth at one end and studied the trees looming so solidly at the other I wished that those working parties had been rather less optimistic about the aircrafts abilities or more generous in their measuring as the jungle looked much closer than 400 yds.

The mag. drops were checked much more carefully and the throttle well and truly wide open before releasing the brakes. As the strip was quickly used up the Amly's yearning for helicopters soon became very understandable.

After seeing the terrain and the strips, remembering the storms and the down draught season when aircraft could be literally pushed below the tree tops, dodgy engines etc. you could only admire and marvel at the casual professionalism, courage and skill of the AOP Pilots

On September 4th I celebrated my first month in my new role by spending Sunday working on one of the pilots MG that also had engine trouble. I missed my own toolkit, as I had throughout the visit, but managed to get it running although it really needed new plugs and points, but my next bit of fixing was less demanding.

The communal "boy" who looked, after our block of cabins was known as Flash, not a complimentary term either. He could have been any age from 40 to 70 but had recently bought an almost new bicycle. In whatever few spare moments we allowed him he lovingly polished his bike and I got myself priority for his services by re-adjusting his brakes, chain tension and giving the bike a much needed oiling.

An unplanned and brief spell of formation flying happened when two returning Mk.9's joined up on me near the circuit and afterwards I caused some comment by telling them that if I had known we could have had the pilot head probes retracted and got close.

I did some flights in the Mk.6's for comparison purposes and managed to go on a reconnaissance sortie, 'Beehive' area as the observer in a Mk. 7, before moving from Noble Field to Taiping. I recalled the lads in the spray shop and made a point of finding that cemetery. It was at the foot of Maxwell Hill near the Lake Gardens, quiet and peaceful and very well kept. The caretaker helped me find the graves and as we stood by them and I tried to imagine all of the suffering of those days my own problems seemed so very small.

To help get the hours in we did some night flying assessments and I was taken on a flare-dropping sortie. The faults still kept cropping up but the ground staff seemed more adaptable and made less fuss so that I was able to get the last few pilots converted at Taiping within the week. Comments, criticisms and performance figures at the overload weights needed, all were still being funneled back to Auster's but by the 29th September the wheels were in motion to get me on my way home.

Back at Noble Field the rundown got under way, handing over all of my reference books, manuals and what spares I had left, there were still problems that I was drawn into, but by now the third batch of five Mk 9's were in the pipeline and the spares were beginning to filter through to the various units.

Before leaving I was able to make myself useful once more. I gave one more "dual" session for a new arrival and then helped Capt. "Bunny" Allum with his move to Benta, a strip North East of Kuala Lumpur, on detachment. Instead of a long hot drive by road my offer of ferrying the Mk.6 back enabled him to move all of his gear and his very large dog, Buster, in a half hour flight.

It was only on the return trip that it dawned on me that this aircraft was VF618, the very machine that I had spent some time on in the winter of 1948 fitting a special SKI undercarriage, and sitting there (the doors were not fitted -they seldom were on any of the flights) I wondered if this engine was a new one as I studied the jungle below and remembered that terrorist bands were able to roam throughout the district.

Len Childs tour was also over and we were taken over to Kuala Lumpur on the 6th October to catch the casualty evacuation Valetta to Changi. I don't know how Len felt but as we drove past the end of the strip for the last time I felt almost guilty to be leaving but began to look forward to getting home at long last.

We left on the 8th in an RAF trooping version of the Hastings, via Negombo, Mauripur, Hahbaniyah and Idris to Lyneham with the knowledge that the mod. kits to allow operating in temps of 40 deg.(C) were at last available.

It was home by the 13th. (definitely not unlucky for me) and a quick visit to Rearsby to show my face before having a whole weeks holiday -a belated Bank Holiday -before getting back into harness again. It had been an eventful eighteen months with the Mk.9 and as we eventually sold 35 to the Indian Air Force the engine problems were presumably cured as I at least heard nothing more.

The second anniversary was marked by one last hiccup. Ranald Porteous had taken XK379 on a sales tour of Europe when on the 9th. April 1956 we heard that he had made a precautionary landing at Le Touquet with a dodgy engine. Spanner Man was called out again. While the firm got XK376 ready as a replacement I rushed home to collect my passport and toothbrush and Blackburns flew their representative to Rearsby. His tool kit nearly filled the rear cabin (I could not help thinking that this was what we had needed out in Malaya). 'Mac' McSwaby was prepared to practically rebuild the engine if needed and we were under way by late afternoon. At Lympne I had to argue them into letting me carry on to land at Le Touquet after dusk -it was by goose-necks that our arrival at 15 minutes after dusk was greeted and the first action was to run the engine to try to get some idea of the task ahead. Mac sat in the cockpit with Ranald demonstrating the noise that had caused the scare. I could not hear anything from my position outside in the dark but they called me to the open window and the knocking was loud and clear. I took Mac's torch to see if there were any visible signs and saw that the exhaust pipe from the cartridge starter was fouling the bulkhead. This had been one of the earlier faults, due to the reaction of firing the starting cartridge, if the tightening and locking was not absolutely positive.

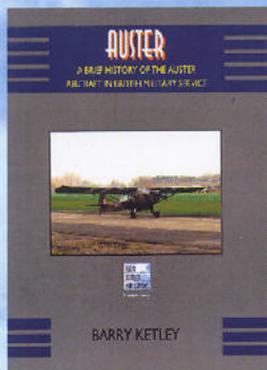
I pushed a handful of cotton waste from Mac's kit between the pipe and the bulkhead and asked them to run the engine up again, and all was well. Mac and I rested better that night knowing that we had no major rebuild or delays in store, but in the morning Ranald insisted that we still swapped aircraft.. His had the cable-laying mod as part of the sales feature, I had to borrow Mac's tools and swap the rear cabin layouts over so that it was 3 p.m. before we each went our different ways.

Two very unusual years indeed, and so you can see why that tune of Auld Lang Syne, played for the finale of the Mk.9 after 15 years "in action" sets my memories wandering all over again.

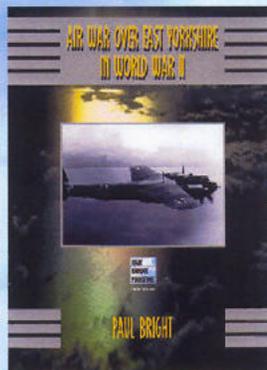
656 Squadron REME LAD. Netheravon 1988?



4th from right , middle row, Christian Cook. Right end, middle row, Nick (Stuck ?) 3rd from right, middle row, John (Reveley ?) 6th from right, middle row, Mel Ireland. 2nd from right, back row, Ned Edwards. 3rd from left, back row, Gary Massey. Can you identify anyone else in the picture? (*sent to us by Christian Cook*)



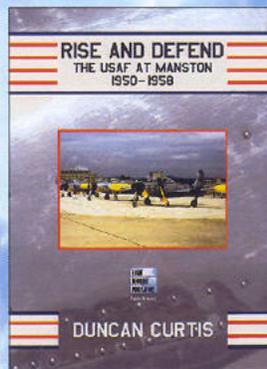
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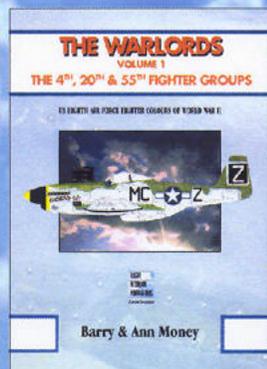
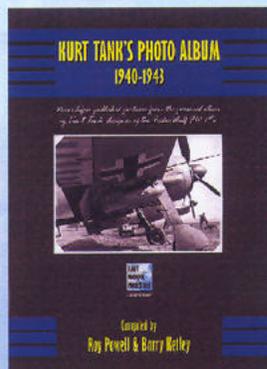
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ANNUAL REUNION 2006 - SAT 1st AND SUN 2nd JULY 2006 – NETHERAVON

The 2006 Reunion will be held at Airfield Camp, Netheravon, Wiltshire over the weekend of Sat 1st and Sun 2nd July 2006, by kind permission of Commanding Officer, 7 Regiment AAC.

The outline programme is as follows:

Saturday 1st July.

1900 hrs. Annual Dinner, Officers' Mess.

Sunday 2nd July.

1100 hrs. AGM, Officers' Mess

1215 hrs.

- Auster Fly-In commences on Airfield.
- Aircraft Flights.
- Buffet Luncheon commences.
- Licensed Bar opens.

1630 hrs. Fly Past by AAC Historic Aircraft Flight (tbc).

As with previous events, the Association will subsidise the event. Thus the planned costs per person are as follows:

Saturday Dinner.	£15.
Sunday Luncheon.	£10.
Aircraft Flights.	£15.

If you wish to attend could you please complete the enclosed slip and return it to Maurice Haynes by the end of February.

MALAYSIA/SINGAPORE TOUR MAY 2006

There is still time to book for this tour but hurry. Contact the editor or Mary Tippet at Magic of the Orient on 0117 311 6050 or at mary@magicorient.co.uk

The tour itinerary has been finalised, as below.

Tuesday 9th May 2006

Depart Heathrow on Malaysia Airlines MH3 @ 1200 hours. Non stop to Kuala Lumpur.

Wednesday 10th May 2006

Arrive Kuala Lumpur @ 0725 hours. Aircraft change. Depart Kuala Lumpur on MH611 @ 0925 hours. Arrive Singapore @ 1020 hours. You will be met and transferred to your hotel.

2 nights - The Phoenix Hotel, Singapore

Standard room on a twin share basis with breakfast.

A comfortable 3 star hotel, which is located in the heart of Orchard Road, very near to shops and restaurants.

Thursday 11th May 2006

Day at Leisure.

Friday 12th May 2006

Transfer by air-conditioned coach to Kuala Lumpur. Transfer to Kluang to visit MAAC then to Seremban to visit the site of Paroi camp. Arrive Kuala and arrive at your hotel.

5 nights- The Renaissance Hotel, New World Wing, Kuala Lumpur.

Superior room on a twin share basis with breakfast.

A comfortable 4 star hotel. Conveniently located in the Golden Triangle area of Kuala Lumpur. All rooms have air-conditioning and there is one of the largest free form swimming pools within Kuala Lumpur, fringed with tropical palm trees.

Saturday 13th to Tuesday 16th May 2006

Days at Leisure.

Wednesday 17th May 2006

Transfer by air-conditioned coach with an English-speaking tour guide to Penang via Ipoh and Taiping. Visit the Chinese and Indian temples in Ipoh. Transfer to your hotel.

4 nights - The Casuarina Beach Resort, Penang

Deluxe seaview room on a twin share basis with breakfast.

A comfortable 3 star hotel, excellent location on the Ferringhi beach. The hotel also has a swimming pool.

Thursday 18th to Saturday 20th May 2006

Days at leisure.

Sunday 21st May 2006

Transfer from your hotel to Penang Airport. Depart Penang on Malaysia Airlines MH1167 @ 2120 hours. Arrive Kuala Lumpur @ 2215 hours. Aircraft change. Depart Kuala Lumpur @ 2340 hours.

Monday 22nd May 2006

Arrive London Heathrow @ 0550 hours.

Price: £1055.00 per person (based on two people sharing)

Single supplement £335.00

N.B. Tour costs are based on minimum of 32 passengers

(So far we have 34 firm bookings)

NOTICES

CHANGE OF ADDRESS

When we send out the Journal, a lot of the mail returned comes from serving members. Returned mail adds significant cost to the Association as we have to pay again once we have discovered your new address. Orderly rooms or Squadron offices seem to be reluctant to forward mail to those that have been posted. Members who are registered with the Association at civil addresses are equally guilty of not informing the Secretary of their change of address. Please let either the Secretary or the Editor know of your change of address so that we can keep the records up to date.

TRAVEL AGENTS

Magic of the Orient have organised two tours to Malaysia for the Association, one in 2000 and one in 2006, at very competitive rates under very trying circumstances. They have also agreed to purchase advertising space in our journal as you may have noticed. In recognition of this we have appointed them as our recommended travel agent. For their part, they will, where possible, discount their services to the association and its members. See page 14 for their contacts.

BURMA LUNCHEON

The Burma Veterans' Luncheon, which was held at Middle Wallop in September, was a huge success. Many letters of thanks and praise for the occasion have been received for which the committee is grateful. Thanks must go to Col Andrew Simkins, our President, for his organisation and the success of the occasion.

ASSOCIATION SHOP

The Association now has a new stock of Association ties, Goldwire Association blazer badges and Goldwire Squadron blazer badges.

Ties: £ 9.50 ea. Inc UK postage. Overseas postage at cost

Goldwire badges: £10.00 ea. Inc UK postage. Overseas postage at cost

Non Association members prices add 50%.

Please contact the President if you would like to purchase any of the above.

TREASURER

Urgent help needed

Our treasurer, Ken Mattocks, will be leaving us soon for sunnier climes; he's off to Australia to join his family.

We need someone to volunteer to take up his post in the very near future so that we can have a reasonable hand over period. The duties are not too onerous, says Ken, and will not take up too much of the volunteer's time. Most of the communication is by e-mail. The committee usually get together once a year either at the reunion or at some mutually agreed location which is central to everyone. So, if you feel that you would like to assist in the running of your Association and can give a little time and effort, financial control experience is not necessary, please contact any member of the committee and put your name forward.

OUTSTANDING SUBS

When we audited the books recently we found that quite a lot of our members were either still paying £3.00 pa (Subs went up to £5.00 pa at the 2003 AGM) *or not paying at all!!* The association finances depend solely on members subscriptions and we operate to very tight budgets to provide the new and improved Journal twice a year and to put on the annual reunion. Members who have outstanding subs have been sent reminder letters but would you please check your subscription, if you have not already done so, as your subscription is vital to the continued well being of the Association.

PHOTOGRAPHS

Would any members who have photographs of the reunion at Dishforth please send copies to the editor. They can be sent in any format. If you send originals they will be sent back to you by return when we have copied them.

Photographs will be retained in the Association archives and a selection will be published on our website.

NEW MEMBERS

Mr. D. Murray	AAC	Joined July 2005
Mr. J.D. Dunbar	RAF	Joined Aug 2005
Mr. P. Mooring	AAC	Joined Sept. 2005
Ms. S. Joyce	Associate member	Joined Sept. 2005
Mrs. P.V. Deacon	Associate Member	Joined Sept. 2005
Mr. G.A. Mansfield	REME	Joined Sept. 2005
Mr. K.T. Hamilton	RA	Joined Oct. 2005
Mr. P. Hardy	AAC	Joined Dec. 2005

REUNION RAFFLES

As you all know, we usually run a raffle at our reunions. The last raffle was very successful and added to our bank balance to the tune of £258.00. Proceeds from these raffles all help to subsidise the dinners and other events at our reunions.

We are now asking for donations for our next raffle. To date the prizes have nearly all come from either our association shop stock or from committee members.

So!! Have a dig around in your attic and shed and see if you can find items suitable for our raffle. If you can't find anything there, the off licence can often help for a few pounds!

When you have found something to donate, please bring it along to the next reunion or send it to me, the editor, at the address on the back page.

ADVERTISING

The committee has decided that, in order to fund a bigger and better journal, we should offer advertising space in our journals. Hopefully, by the time that you are reading this, you will be seeing some advertisements from companies that we have approached. In addition to corporate advertising, we will be dedicating space to members for their private advertisements. The costs are as below.

Whole page (A5)	£50.00
Half page	£25.00
Quarter page	£12.50
Classified (Three Lines)	£ 7.50

The costs cover publication in two editions of the newsletter which will also appear on the website.

Members wishing to advertise should send their copy and cheque payment (to: 656 Sqn Association) to the editor at the address on the back page.

HONOURS AND AWARDS

Congratulations to Captain David Wilkins on being awarded the M.B.E.
Congratulations to Mr. John Bennett on being awarded the Army Air Corps Association Silver Medal.

DEATHS

Mr. Norman Clarke	RAF	Died October 2004
Mr. J.J. Landers OBE	RA	
Mr. D. Barbour	RAF	Died September 2005

COMMITTEE MEMBERS DETAILS

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Ty Ni, Corwen Road, Pontybodkin, Mold, CH7 4TG

Tel: 01352 770100 E-mail: heyesjs@aol.com

Correspondence to the General/Membership Secretary, should be addressed to John Heyes at the above address, who will distribute accordingly. Thank you for your co-operation.