

THE CHINTHE



SUMMER 2015

656 SQUADRON ASSOCIATION
JOURNAL

ASSOCIATION SHOP



PRICE LIST

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 Auster to Apache - Sold out. See Amazon or Kindle for copies
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ASSOCIATION ACTIVITIES

ANNUAL REUNION -

WATTISHAM AIRFIELD - FRIDAY 10th JULY

This year's reunion was one of the best. This was mainly because of the excellent hospitality of the Squadron and an interesting and thoughtful programme.

It is our practice to visit the Squadron every two years, to ensure that we stay connected to the present and also to not over burden a very busy operational unit.



So it was that we gathered at Wattisham Airfield on Friday 10th July, where we were welcomed by the Officer Commanding, Major Jules Pannett and Captain Olly Snell, our Liaison Officer. We assembled in the Crewroom, and a chance to meet up with everyone again, including our two visiting Auster crews, Peter and Ann Gill and Roy and Gemma Ingram. After a quick coffee and introduction from the OC, we made our way outside to watch an Apache flying display. This is a quite awe-inspiring show, which takes your breathe away. It was a real privilege to be afforded the display which the crew would next perform at the Yeovilton Airshow the next day.

We then moved back to the hangars to tour the current equipment which the Squadron had put on display. The size and complexity of the equipment defies description, while the knowledge and enthusiasm of the crews is impressive. It was then the ideal opportunity to have a group photograph in front of an Apache and an Auster, along with Squadron personnel.



This is a unique record as we are the only Squadron association, which affords us such close contact with the present generation.



After an excellent barbecue, we all moved into one of the hangars for a talk on the Apache by Captain Percy Pearce, a Qualified Helicopter Instructor. This was a *tour de force*. Percy gave us a very personal, technical and engrossing talk which left us all spellbound. It is obvious why he is an instructor as he had a natural, straightforward way to explaining complicated systems in a straightforward way. For many this was the highlight of the day.

However, there was one further visit. We were bused round to Aviation Training International Limited, which provides the simulation training for the Apache pilots and their crews and technicians. Here we were royally hosted by Mick Favager and his team. We were split into 4 groups and shown around the simulators and training rooms. Again it was the guides' enthusiasm and straightforward way of explaining which made the visit so enjoyable and educational. Another highlight of the day.

We then all departed to the Premier Inn to get changed in time for the coaches to take us back to the Officers' Mess for dinner. Here we were joined by Jules Pannett and his wife, Kate and also Margaret Windscheffel and Angela Ruthven. The setting of a dinner in a Mess is difficult to beat, with the panelled Dining Room with oil paintings of aviation scenes and the table set with silver centre pieces. This helped to ensure a very relaxed evening with lively discussion and good food. After the toasts and speeches the raffle was held, and the £50 prize, donated annually by John and Joyce Bennett, was won by Bob Thorpe who kindly put the money back in the Association coffers. Most people retired to the Ante Room for coffee while a few "warriors" told exaggerated tales of 'daring do' in the Bar. 11pm arrived far too early and the 2 coaches were waiting to take everyone back to the Premier Inn. A thoroughly worthwhile, friendly and enjoyable day.

656 Squadron AAC – OC's Report

Another frenetic period for 656 Squadron brings to a close my time as OC. It has been my absolute privilege to command such a professional and dedicated Squadron, and it is with real sadness that I will hand over the reins to Maj Alex Harris in August. I wish Alex all the best as OC of the finest Squadron in the Army Air Corps, and I know that he will relish the challenges that the next 2 years will doubtless bring.

My time here has passed in a heartbeat as far as I am concerned, but when I look back at what we have achieved as a Squadron over the past couple of years it is quite staggering; holding Very High Readiness for both Land and Maritime operations has brought with it a high tempo of exercises and training deployments that has involved a great deal of time spent away from loved ones. The stoicism shown by both the soldiers and their families has been humbling, the latter being absolutely crucial to maintaining the potent capability of the Squadron and must never be taken for granted.

In January and February we managed to get another batch of the Squadron away to Norway to undertake the Cold Weather Survival Course. I have written about the merits of this training in a previous report, but it again proved to be both excellent training in the basics of fieldcraft in an unforgiving environment, as well as a genuine life experience; the chore of being on sentry is made slightly better by being able to watch the Northern Lights! During this period we also rotated the aircrew through environmental training and live firing in the USA; very useful and fun, but it was a fairly quick turnaround due to having to maintain an extremely high state of readiness for a potential operation.

At the start of 2015 we were still pretty poorly placed in terms of our ability to conduct operations from the Maritime environment. A long period without having had the chance to embark, due mainly to having to compete for deck space on HMS OCEAN with other types, meant that not only were the majority of aircrew not fully qualified for deck landings, but our groundcrew's experience of operating on deck was waning. It was therefore a great opportunity for the Squadron to embark for the duration of Ex JOINT WARRIOR in March and April. We quickly settled back into life aboard, and great steps were made towards achieving our combat ready status whilst operating in support of 3 Commando Brigade in the waters around Scotland, including live firing of both 30mm and Hellfire on high-seas ranges.

A short turnaround during May saw us preparing to embark again at the start of June, again on HMS OCEAN, but this time sailing into the Baltic on Ex BALTOPS. We again managed to achieve some good training, this time as part of a package of 40-odd NATO warships – shadowed by the Russians for most of the time – in some beautiful scenery. We operated in southern Sweden, before moving to conduct an exercise in Poland, but a real highlight was the ‘run-ashore’ in Kiel. After a long time at sea it was great to have the opportunity to let our hair down as a Squadron during the festivities of Kiel week!

My final time away prior to handover will be another exercise in support of specialist users, something that we have been continually conducting in the background to all of the activity listed above. After that we all look forward to some well earned summer leave – hopefully any opportunities to deploy on operations can wait until after leave, unlike last year!

On 10 July it was our absolute pleasure to host members of the 656 Squadron Association here at Wattisham for a reunion. The soldiers were very proud to demonstrate the current capabilities of the Squadron, as well as keen to speak to Association members about their experiences. As I said on the day, there is something very special about 656 Squadron, manifested not only in the shared history and sense of purpose, but also compellingly demonstrated by the unique Association. It is a great thing to be a part of, and all here in the Squadron are keen to support such events; I will encourage Alex to again support Remembrance Day at the Cenotaph this year.

I wish all association members the very best for the future, and will be keeping a keen eye on the Squadron’s activities when I move on (and wishing it were me!).

Jules Punnett



PRESIDENT'S REPORT

This has been a very successful year, to date, for 656 Squadron Association. Our members have participated in more events than in any previous year. Our Reunion alongside the Squadron was one of the most successful and enjoyable. This was thanks to the hospitality and professionalism of all the Squadron personnel, under the command of Major Jules Pannett. As he prepares to depart we wish him all success for the future and warmly welcome the new Officer Commanding, Major Alex Harris.

We are pursuing a number of major projects, not least some detailed and increasingly fruitful archive research at the Museum of Army Flying. This work, coordinated by Mark Meaton, has been especially beneficial for the recently unveiled Air Observation Post Memorial in the Museum's Memorial Garden. We are also updating our trusty website and establishing our own Facebook page.

The Association has had a website for many years, www.656squadron.org and it has proved very popular and successful. It has been particularly beneficial for research and archiving. But it is now old fashioned in layout and is in need of upgrading. As a consequence we applied for a Lottery grant and were awarded £1,300 subject to final confirmation. This should be sufficient to conduct a review of content and then upgrade the site. The primary aims are to make it easier:

- To navigate around the site.
- To display and access the archive material.
- To access the Membership page and The Chinth
- To obtain information about associated sites and social media.
- To find details of future events.
- To join the Association.
- To be useable on other media, ie Smartphones and Tablets

At previous AGMs we have discussed the pros and cons of having our own Facebook Page. We have now decided to go ahead and create that page at the same time as updating the website. We plan to call the page "656 Squadron Association" and once the page is up and running, we will encourage members to join and "like" the page (this helps to publicise the site and generate interest). The page will be linked to the website (and vice versa) and we will also offer links to other useful pages. It will enable us to post up to the moment information and highlight details of recently held events. Most importantly, as social media is dynamic and developing, we hope to attract many more recent Squadron personnel to the Association.

These are important and exciting developments which are still in progress, so we will update members by email. We would welcome any views, experience and assistance in these developments.

Whilst we are successful in holding a variety of events we would love to have greater participation. This is partly why we are upgrading our communications. If you have any further ideas here please let us know.

As I write this in early August we still have a number of events this year. We aim to have good representation at the VJ Day 70 event on Whitehall on Saturday 15th August. Let us hope for good weather for our valiant Burma veterans who set the standard of duty and comradeship that has remained a key factor in the life of 656 Squadron.

And we will form a contingent at the Cenotaph Parade on Sunday 8th November. If you haven't participated before why not join us this year at the Nation's Act of Remembrance.

Best wishes and I look forward to seeing you soon.

Andrew Simkins

CENOTAPH PARADE, 656 CONTINGENT
WHITEHALL - SUNDAY 8th NOVEMBER

The Association and hopefully members of the Squadron will form a Contingent at this year's Cenotaph Parade on Sunday 8th November. This is a unique event which is the focus of the country's Act of Remembrance in the presence of HM, The Queen.

This year we have been allocated 20 tickets, and we encourage members who have not attended before to join us "on parade" and afterwards at a local restaurant. The contingents form up on Horse Guards Parade from 10am, prior to marching onto Whitehall in time for the 11am 2 minutes silence. There is a short march after time spent on Whitehall, but it is not too tiring. Widows and dependents are allowed to attend, so long as they are representing a veteran.

Please complete the enclosed Return and post to Andrew Simkins before 30th September.

Editor's Corner.

Because of a prior engagement I was unfortunately unable to attend this year's Reunion. The reports I have heard is that once again it was a huge success, with the Squadron personnel putting themselves out for our benefit.

There is a great deal of work undertaken by your committee and also the hosts, to arrange the venue, negotiating discounts, entertaining, meals, hotel etc, etc. All working unpaid and in their own free time.

Following the event Andrew received 2 emails which I quote:

"Being my first reunion I was rather apprehensive but within a very short time I was made to feel much more relaxed. The day with the Squadron was to use a word AWESOME and I was really impressed with both the Squadron and the Association input.

Needless to say I fully intend to be a regular attendee at future reunions".

Brian Rook.

And from one of the Auster crews. *"Just to say thanks for having us at your event last Friday. Gemma and I really enjoyed ourselves. It's a pleasure to be able to bring the Auster along and support the Association."* Roy and Gemma.

So members, take note and if you have not been before I hope to see you at next year's events.

Your Association is in need of a volunteer to assume the position of **Honorary Secretary**. You will need skills in use of Excel and Word. For more information contact me or Sylvia Heyes.

As you will have read in the President's Report we are taking steps to have the website updated and also have a Facebook page. This good news also brings about now the urgent need for a **Webmaster**. This will require reasonable knowledge of Internet workings. It would help if you have some knowledge of maintaining a website and suitable software. Who is going to step forward and also have the chance to influence the new site? Call me or a committee member!!

DEATHS

Sadly, we announce the death of the following members and offer our sincere condolences to their relatives and friends.

W.Batey	REME	died March 2015
M.S. Wilson	REME	died July 2015

We welcome the following New members:

Mrs Alice Warner	Associate	joined Feb 2015
Mrs Wilson	Associate	joined July 2015

My Special Day Royal Garden Party 28th May 2015

by Sylvia Heyes

As I'm sure most of you know, I had the honour of being awarded the British Empire Medal in the Queen's Birthday Honours list in 2014. It was a wonderful surprise and I couldn't wait to get my medal.

Finally, in March 2015 the day of my Investiture arrived and I went along to Bodelwyddan Castle, here in North Wales to have my BEM formally presented to me by the Lord Lieutenant of Clwyd.* A very enjoyable evening spent with my family, chatting to the seven others there who also received their BEM's.



Then, a few days later I received a 'phone call from the assistant clerk to the Lord Lieutenant, asking me what day would I like to attend a Royal Garden Party at Buckingham Palace! Wow!

I chose to go on 28th May, as I hoped the weather would maybe be warm and sunny. It was! A beautiful day, wall to wall sunshine, but a bit of a stiff breeze. Who cares?

My son, Brett, was my escort, making me a very proud mother! We left from his home in Kent and travelled up to Charing Cross on the train. I had taken my walker along, as, since my operation a year ago, I'm unable to walk very far or very fast without a sit down for a breather. That proved to be a very fortuitous decision as I will explain later.

We walked from Charing Cross, down the Mall to the Palace. There were hundreds of people all dressed up to the nines obviously all going to the same place. We timed it beautifully, as the gates had just opened when we arrived. So in we went, through an arch way to the court that led to the main entrance of the Palace itself. We all strolled through gazing about us, to the rear and into the gardens.

The tea room was already open, so I perched myself on my walker while Brett queued up for tea. He came back with cucumber finger sandwiches (no crusts of course!) ham and tomato sandwiches and a selection of tiny cakes and scones. Very nice! Then it was getting close to the time when the Queen was due to arrive and we all went to form a couple of lines to watch the Queen walking down the middle and chatting to a select few. As I had my walker, I was given preferential treatment and ushered to the front so I could sit and watch it all! While I was waiting for the Queen to pass by a gentleman in top hat and

tails (who was obviously one of the people there to keep us in order!) came over to speak to me and a lady next to me, also sitting on a walker, and told us that if we went behind a building 'over there' at about 5.15pm, we could line up with the other wheelchair users and when the Royal Family had finished their tea, they would walk past us and chat to us on their way out!

Exciting!....

Once the Queen had passed by, Brett and I walked around the beautiful grounds then eventually found empty seats and sat and 'people watched' for a while. Brett took a couple of illegal 'selfies' (we were not supposed to take photos, but of course everyone was doing it!)



Then, we strolled over to the place where we were told to go to see the Royal Family leave. I felt a bit of a fraud, as I wasn't in a wheelchair, only sitting on my walker, but not badly enough to miss the opportunity! After all, I was invited to be there!!

We heard clapping and knew it wouldn't be long. Then they were right there. The Queen stood in front of me, dressed from head to toe in pink, and asked if I'd had a good time! She passed on to the next person and

the Duke of Edinburgh came over and shook my hand and said 'I don't think you'll win the race getting out of here with those small wheels!' Next, Princess Anne came over, shook my hand and said 'I hope you're warm enough, the winds a bit chilly'. She was followed by Princess Beatrice who stood in front of me and smiled and said 'Hello'. Then Prince Michael of Kent came over, shook my hand and asked where I'd come from, I told him North Wales and he said it was a place he'd never been. I told him he should come some time as it's so beautiful, and he could stay at my place if he wanted! He said he might! He was followed by Princess Michael of Kent, who also shook my hand and chatted.

Unbelievable! I couldn't have wished for more. It was the last thing I expected. Thank goodness I took my walker!!!!

Brett and I then walked back to Charing Cross and met up with Lisa my daughter in law and my two grandsons, Noah and Monty. Had pizza together and then back home on the train.

What a wonderful, wonderful day.

* Mr Henry George Fetherstonhaugh OBE FRAGS

The Not Forgotten Association

11th June 2015 will remain in the minds and the hearts of The Not Forgotten Association and its many friends and beneficiaries because of a memorable Garden Party in the presence of our Royal Patron HRH The Princess Royal and Admiral Sir Tim Laurence.



Ted Maslen-Jones

The privilege of a Garden Party at Buckingham Palace goes back to the 1920s and this year's tri-service event in our 95th year was an opportunity to entertain veterans from WWII to Afghanistan. Her Royal Highness and Sir Tim stayed 20 minutes longer than was planned and we believe that the Royal couple really enjoyed the afternoon.

The NFA office has received more comments of thanks than anyone can remember and our Chairman David

Cowley has said he thought it was the best Garden Party he had attended.

None of this would have been possible without the superb advice and support from Buckingham Palace and from the Service Helpers; and to cap it all we had wonderful weather and The Band of Her Majesty's Royal Marines (Portsmouth) to Beat Retreat. Our social media has been running hot with comments which we hope will also stimulate interest in this charity and its unique work for the wounded, injured and those with disabilities.

HRH and Sir Tim took a great deal of time and care talking to those in the presentation groups and then others on an impromptu basis. What pleasure they gave to everyone who was in attendance. Halfway through their walk in the Gardens they met some special supporters of the NFA in the Royal Enclosure. This gave us the opportunity to say thank you to them. Just before the Royal couple departed Mrs Anderson presented a posy of flowers to Her Royal Highness.

The Garden Party is the most important event in The Not Forgotten Association's calendar – it is a showcase event at which we are able to demon-

strate to a large number of well-wishers, dignitaries, celebrities, senior serving personnel and members of the House of Lords, exactly what we stand for and



Alfred Howard

why our mission in the ex-service charitable world is so hugely important. The celebrities by moving around the tables and agreeing to be photographed brought great pleasure to so many of the guests.

The Not Forgotten Association wishes to thank all those who contributed towards the success of this day.

484 More photos of the Garden Party from our official photographers are available on our website. <http://www.nfassociation.org/latest-news/> (Ted M-J can be seen on page 13 Nos: 10/11/13/16/17/18/19/20/21)



ERRATUM

Issue 3 Spring 2015.

Page 10. The badge illustrated on the right should read 656 Air OP Squadron RAF **1952 - 57** as below, not 1942 - 52. The text on page 11 explained the changes.



1942 - 52



1952 -57

Page 27. The titles on the maps are transposed. The top map is the RAF WOOD whilst the lower one is BURMA WOOD.

I offer my sincere apologies to Ron Ward for these errors.
Not an auspicious start as your new editor.

Press release

WINSTON
CHURCHILL
MEMORIAL
TRUST



Andrew Simkins, attended a reception at Buckingham Palace, hosted by Her Majesty The Queen, who is the Trust's Patron. Her Majesty The Queen hosted the event, on 18th March, to mark its 50th anniversary as Sir Winston's living legacy.

Since 1965, over 5000 British citizens have been awarded Churchill Fellowships, from over 100,000 applicants, to travel overseas to study areas of common and personal interest. The knowledge and innovative ideas they bring back are shared, for the benefit of their profession and their community. For many people, a Churchill Fellowship proves transformational, and they go on to achieve great things - effecting positive change within society.

Andrew Simkins undertook his Fellowship in 2008 to the USA and Chile to investigate veteran support in the community. Since then he has championed veteran issues through his membership of veteran organisations.

"We were delighted and honoured that the Queen hosted a reception to mark our anniversary year. Sir Winston's legacy lives on through our Fellows – individuals who, like him, have vision, leadership, a passion with a purpose, and a commitment

to help their fellow citizens"

says Jamie Balfour, Director General of The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust.





FALKLANDS MEMORIAL SERVICE.



On the 6th June a short ceremony took place on Mt. Pleasant Peak to remember the crew and passengers killed when their helicopter was shot down.

S/Sgt Griffin, L/Cpl Cockton (656 Sqn)
Maj Forge, S/.Sgt Baker (205 Signals Sqn)

The wreath was provided by 656 Squadron Association and the card (text below) was written by Sgt Tony Crawford, who also sent the photos:

“Come dance with the west wind,
And touch all the mountain tops,
Sail o'er the canyons, and up to the stars,
And reach for the heavens, and hope for the future,
And all that we can be, not what we are.”

The card ends with “Rest easy my brothers”

Haywards Heath Fly-in Sunday 21st June

656 Squadron Association has a long record of holding and attending Fly Ins, so it was a pleasure to receive an invite from George Butler to attend his Fly In near Haywards Heath on Sunday 21st June. George is ex-RA and an Association member who served with us during 1954-55 with 11 Flight at Benta, Kuala Lipis, RNAS Sembawang and 14 Flight at Seremban



So come the day around 10 members made their way with some trepidation, as it was the morning after the Summer Solstice and the day of the London to Brighton Cycle Race. It was therefore a relief to find that the roads were actually manageable, with relatively few holdups.

The Fly In is held on a farmer's field which is well laid out with markers and a large enough area to the side to park up visiting aircraft. When we walked the line we counted around 40 aircraft (although George said that they had had 70 in previous years) which included the history of Post War aviation, including one helicopter, a couple of powered gliders, at least one 1970's twin-engined aircraft, bi-planes and any other variants.



It was particularly pleasing that the International Auster Club had advertised the event, so there were 7 Austers, including Nigel Skinner and Jeff Houlgrave all the way from Eggesford Airfield, Devon. They would say that they took significantly less time than those of us on the M25 and M3/4!



The local Royal Air Force Association arranged the barbecue lunch and there was plenty of



time to chat and exchange experiences. (The Association made a £50 donation to the RAFA for their efforts).



The afternoon concluded with an aerobatic display, after which the aircraft departed back to their bases, and we jumped into our cars for the drive home.

This was a delightful way to spend an afternoon, and we are indebted to George Butler for his kind invitation.

PRESENTATION TO EGGESFORD AIRFIELD IN THANKS FOR THEIR SUPPORT

The Association has had a close relationship with the International Auster Club for many years. Many of you might recall our joint Fly Ins at Netheravon, Popham (except that the high winds prevented flying!) and Middle Wallop. Auster crews have enthusiastically supported our events, whether it was Arthur Windscheffell's 100th Birthday party, a commemoration or our reunions. We have come to know many of the Auster crews and their families. We therefore decided that we should formally show our thanks, especially to Eggesford Airfield, which holds a commanding position on the eastern edge of Dartmoor, which has always answered our call. Nigel Skinner and his wife Jackie are wonderful hosts, and their close knit team are very welcoming.

The Airfield holds an annual Fly In Weekend and this year Andrew Simkins took the opportunity to present Nigel Skinner and his team with a plaque in recognition of their unstinting support to the Association and its members.



Len Edgecock's Brunei

Continued from issue 3

So far I have concentrated on the admin as it must be remembered that we had gone out there with virtually nothing. We had therefore to rely on doing everything for ourselves except cook, which was done by the RAF. This situation was to change.

The RAF had allocated the car park for our aircraft. This consisted of hard packed earth with a lead off of earth from the pan. Then the rains came and came and came. The hard packed earth became about nine inches of mud. More on this later.

About ten days after we had landed we were told to expect some of 7 Flight and, sure enough, Jack Greaves turned up with some of his blokes. He was a bit worried because he had heard nothing of his aircraft. They had fitted long-range fuel tanks to his Austers to enable them to fly from Singapore to Kuching. We had been flying this route for some time with Beavers but, Austers across 800 miles of South China Sea and he was only a bit worried! However, they made it and joined us in Brunei. This meant we had two half-Flights with limited equipment with neither of us able to bring out a full Flight. Someone had excelled!



Keith Frostbridges

Back to the rain, and the rain, and the rain for ten days and nights non-stop. The aircraft were now parked in the mud. Shreddie and Dick liberated a motorised jump-hammer and started to hammer the earth down. We all had a go and the situation slowly improved. Then the jump-hammer ran-away while Jack Greaves was using it. It seemed to enjoy hammering his feet: it was an interesting sight seeing Jack hopping from one foot to the other whilst trying to control the hammer and get it to stop.

In the meantime we flew. We now added flood relief to our other jobs. Flying supplies to patrols, dropping food to outlying villages, dropping animal feed to name but a few. All the aircraft performed admirably except one Auster. We had done a number of engine changes on this Auster before we came out for different reasons; now we suffered with mag drops, oil pressure and then a new one - metal particles in the fuel system: the Amal pumps were disintegrating. I went to the RAF 'equippers' and asked if they could get me a couple of Amal pumps:

- "Of course. Section and Ref number, and nomenclature. When do you want them?"
- "Yesterday!"
- "I will put them on Sophie Dark then".

I wandered away wondering who Sophie Dark was. Next day I received one pump for which I thanked the RAF lad and asked when I would receive the other. Blank amazement that it had gone wrong and a promise of another soonest. It arrived next day which impressed me so I went to find out more about Sophie Dark. It seems I was using the V-bomber priority. I was to use it again later.

We fitted the pumps and the engine was fine for a few more days until we found metal in the oil filter: yet another engine change. The rains came and so did a new

engine: so we started an engine change in the open. This time the engine was good and the aircraft began pulling its weight. Later on we lent it to the Kuching detachment where it was shot out of the sky. A rogue aircraft?

At that time we seemed to be inundated with visitors, mainly coming out for a day or two to qualify for the Brunei medal. We were in the middle of the engine change when this REME Half Colonel came over announcing that he had come out from Blighty to see if we needed anything. Mick Blake told me later I was rather abrupt with him. Seems I looked up into the rain, contemplated for a minute, looked at him, said ‘Shelter’, then carried on working. I will give that Lieutenant Colonel his due; within two weeks a shelter manufactured by 40 Base Workshop was delivered to the Flight. He has my apologies for being rude.

We had been working the shift system with Mick Blake, Dick Jones and Noddy Needham on one and Shreddie Stone, Killer Mansfield and myself on the other. Scouse Lees decided that he and the gunners needed more to do so they joined our crews. They helped with the servicing, refuelling and aircraft cleaning. They had not thought of aircraft crewman at that time.

Brunei airport buildings were becoming overcrowded by this time so we moved into the Brunei School buildings. We were first in so we quickly liberated a fridge and some crockery. We fought off other people’s claims to the fridge in the weeks to come by saying it was needed to keep the aircraft instruments in a cool environment. The first night was livened up by shots in the street so we raced to take up defensive positions. On my way I came to an abrupt halt with the barrels of a double-barrel shotgun resting in my stomach. I immediately yelled ‘Friend’ to the Ranger on the other end hoping he would agree. After what seemed like years he did, so we went our separate ways.

The disadvantage of being on our own was that we now had to do our own cooking. Now the rations we had ‘liberated’ came into their own. It meant that each day the off duty crew now became the cooks. Some of the concoctions had to be seen to be believed. However, we survived until the rest of the troops moved in and we became HQ COM BRIT BOR.

Primary and Primary Star servicing was carried out at night. Occasionally a bloke who became known as the “Phantom Shot Gunner” would remind us of his presence by letting off a couple of shots, whereupon all lights went out and we took up defensive positions. One night whilst we were servicing, a couple of shots, all lights off except for a torch moving slowly around an Auster engine. Don’t shout, whisper:

‘Noddy!’. No response.

‘Noddy!’. No response.

‘Noddy!’.

‘Yes’.

‘Put that light out and get down, please.’ Or words to that effect.

We eventually got Bill Dick from Sandakan. He took over my crew and I got on with the overdue paperwork. By this time Jack Greaves and his half-Flight were in Seria.

Someone in Kluang had begun to think that two half-Flights in Brunei were not a viable proposition, besides which 7 Flight were needed to move to Thailand on Scheme, so action was afoot for 7 Flight to leave Brunei. This was our chance to bring the rest of the Flight and our equipment to Brunei.



After our abortive attempt with the jack hammer, Shreddie said that he had come across three road-rollers just down the road so he and Dick were despatched to liberate a couple. About an hour later they turned up driving one each. It seems that they had been immobilized but they had got two from three. We now started rolling the mud whenever the aircraft were away. I was still being pestered for the aircraft 'stats' so started reporting road-rolling and jack-hammer hours as well; all on the backs of leaflets. Very wary!

Having seen the way our aircraft had to negotiate the congestion each time they landed, I decided that a ramp leading directly off the airfield onto our car park was the answer. I went and 'liberated' a D6 Bulldozer and a grader. Having been taught to use both on my 'Tiffany' Vehicle Course, I put it to the test. I had only just started when I noticed the Wing CO come racing out of the tower into his Landrover and come over to talk. It went something like this:

'What in hell do you think you are doing?'

So I explained. After a short interval he said: Oh well! You might as well carry on or words to that effect.

It seems he had not had much to do with the Army before and had been fascinated by our antics. It was the beginning of a somewhat turbulent acquaintance. We dozed a ramp and graded it when the Gurkha Engineers turned up to lay a PSP park and finish the ramp. They laid the park, then up the ramp with the grader, broke down, recovered the grader with the blade down, cut a monsoon drain through the ramp and disappeared with our road rollers, D6 and grader. All our work for nothing: our aircraft still had to negotiate the crowded pan.

The RAF aircraft used to come in at all times. One evening watching an RAF bloke trying to marshal a Beverley, Mick Blake dashed out with two of our pencil torches and took over. It was marvellous to see this great cab responding to what was not much bigger than fireflies.

The RAF moved into a longhouse for offices and storage. This had been built along the road and faced onto our parking area. The Wing CO allocated a small room for our use and seemed surprised when asked for another to be used as a crew room. Being a good bloke, he gave us one. At the same time they were living in tented accommodation, with duckboards as floors, on the other side of the road. Behind these they started to build a wooden longhouse. A large board proclaiming that this was now RAF Brunei was erected on the road side of our office.

The rest of the Flight and equipment turned up. We needed somewhere to keep it so Scouse had his blokes erect a longhouse of tents. For a floor we used some of the

duckboards which had miraculously appeared: others were used to build racks. At long last Les Rogers, Dink Isaacs and Don Powley had managed to join us. Our Navy contingent was made up by Wags Wager. Captain Beech, Peter Shields, Tony Horsey and Bob Parkinson made up the rest of our pilots. We flew even more. We were able to operate as a Flight with our own vehicles.

Not long after we had set up the Wing C.O dropped in to see how we were doing. He seemed quite impressed with the set-up. As he left he said "I wondered where our duckboards had disappeared to!"

Up to now we had been well supported with spares from Kluang, but suddenly the supply dried up. After about three weeks the situation was getting serious. During this period I watched a Beverley loaded with dustbins for the RAF land. The final straw came when they flew in a priority load consisting of two huge boxes of sanitary towels for use by our one WVS woman. I sent off an Op Immediate signal to Kluang that read Spares situation now bordering on the ridiculous. Unless this situation relieved in the near future 14 Flight as a flying unit will cease. Forty-eight hours later four large boxes of spares were delivered along with a signal which read Bottleneck found in Seletar. Now moving. Do not threaten Majors. Two of our greatest needs had not been met. The first was cleaning rags so I AOG'd a sack. The second was Beaver brake pads. At this time the Beavers were flying with Red Ink Entries which read Brake pads badly worn. Brakes to be used only in an emergency. I decided to use Sophie Dark again. This time it took about 48 hours to get them. About a year later I found out what had happened: when I walked into Wallop Yorkie Kent said I've been waiting for you. It seems that when my demand had arrived the Ordnance Stores were out of stock and so they had got Yorkie out of bed and had him arrange to remove the brake pads from beavers in his workshop and ship them out to me. Some priority!

Talking of spares priorities! When I went back on R & R, I was chatting to the Wing Ordnance Officer when he suddenly said "I have found a new priority you may be able to use". I was always interested in anything that would help so I asked what it was. He came back with "Sophie Dark" and then noticing my grin said "You bastard! You've used it!" I then learned that Majors do swear.

Then came the order that Red Ink entries could only be signed by an officer. Major John Palmer, Wing EME, and I delighted in keeping our signals short so I sent him a signal reading "Ref your Signal. Does this mean me?" Back came the reply "Ref your signal. Yes." I had a Beaver requiring a compass swing, a fault which I would clear until we could carry out the swing. However, our landing compass was away for calibration. So I priority signalled off for permission for a Red Ink entry. 24 hours passed with no answer. Sods Law had taken a hand. Bill Duthoit was upset. An Op Immediate signal was sent asking for an answer. Back came the reply "Permission granted. Consider yourself WEME's representative in Brunei. You will sign all required Red Ink entries." Another problem solved.

No report would be complete without a mention of Padre Evans, a highly popular man who used to drop in at any time, sit and listen, crack a joke, maybe have a drink, scrounge what he needed and depart. He decided to do a Saint Eligious Sunday Service to which we decided to go. During the sermon he told us his true story which

went “I remember when REME first formed. I was in the desert where I got around on a motorbike. One day this Staff Sergeant turned up and said I’ve come to inspect your bike and started to fill in all the little boxes marked engine, transmission etc. When he came to the last two boxes condition and cleanliness he paused, looked at the bike, then at me and said “Padre. If cleanliness is next to Godliness – you’ve had it!””.

With the beginning of Confrontation we sent a detachment under Raymond Beech, Peter Shields, Don Powley and Les Rogers to Tawau. The signal situation soon became quite amusing. All Beech’s signals were Op Immediate or Priority and all our answers were Routine. For example: Op Immediate signal requesting message bag weights - our answer, Routine Suggest you walk out of your tent, look down and select the most appropriate sized pebble. He also flashed a signal to Kluang for a set of spark plugs, got them and was immediately christened ‘The General’. The rest of his antics must be written up by one of the detachment.

I’m not certain whether it was before or after the Tawau detachment when Beaver XP817, under the guidance of David Pitkin, had an argument with a hidden tree stump. Whichever - Don Powley was dispatched to assess the damage with the instruction ‘Get it back here if at all possible’. Later that day XP817 hove into view and landed very carefully, only putting the tail wheel down at the last moment and taxied in. It seems that the tail wheel took the impact from the tree stump when XP817 was turning to line up for take off. On first inspection nothing seemed to be wrong so we started jacking the tail up. We stopped fairly quickly when the jacking point started disappearing. We lifted the tail with a lifting bar and supported the ends with ammo boxes. Don Powley went down the back-end and reported Cat 3 damage. The RAF supplied a repair team fairly quickly.

One fairly large job carried out by us around this time was the re-covering with fabric and hand-painting of one of our Austers. The word ‘Fred’ appeared all over the aircraft.

I wonder if the messages that were sent from place to place on the inside of the flaps still remain on any of the existing Austers.



Editor’s Note:

It was not always blood, sweat and tears.

This is the author at a Christmas Fancy Dress party!

WORLD WAR 1, BATTLE FIELD TOUR SEPTEMBER 2014

At the 2013 AGM there was an overwhelming agreement to enquire into the possibility of arranging a Battlefield Tour during 2014. With this in mind the committee set about locating a suitable tour company, resulting in a D-Day tour being agreed upon and arrangements made for September. Unfortunately when association members were approached, the uptake was very small (3) and did not allow for a coach of our own, so after consultation with the tour company and an approach to friends, a group of five, three members only, was assembled to undertake a World War 1, Battle Field tour, along with the 'Bromborough Lads and 'The 13th Bn East Yorks Regt ' contingents, overall twenty eight persons, on the appropriate dates.

It was decided to meet the coach from the Wirral at Dover. Thus on the 10th of September we ventured forth from Westbury, Salisbury and Ashford to begin our



adventure on the cross channel ferry to Calias, arriving at 1700hrs local, then continued on for our first visit to the grave of the one of three double VC holders, Capt. Noel Chavasse, VC and Bar, MC, RAMC, in Brandhoek, New Military Cemetery, this being the only such headstone in the world. We then drove on to Ypres, where we had our first meal, surrounded by many tourists about to visit the Menin Gate ceremony, held nightly, which was just around the corner, amongst some really spectacular buildings, all of which had been reconstructed after the First World War, to their original form and design. We then re-embussed and headed for Dixmuide and the Best Western, Pax Hotel,

where we spruced up and were briefed by our guide, Barry Mathews, on our following day itinerary, we then discussed the events so far over a litre of beer or two. Next day we were to rise by 0630, breakfast and be at the coach for 0800 or we would be on your own! These were strong words to the assembled company, but they paid dividends, because during the tour we virtually gained eight extra hours for our visits!

DAY 2

Next morning nobody was late! So off we set for our first full day, and were handed a number of pamphlets on the itinerary, battle maps, summaries of the areas of battle and a chronological time frame of the four years of the 'The Great War'. The guide had also included various war poems, expressing the changing mood of the country towards the prosecution of the war and its participants being recruited and sent forward to the front.

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We traveled towards Ypres, the initial area of BEF, ‘The Old Contemptibles’, defence and action in the Great War, the ‘Schlieffen Plan’ and trench establishment. We initially drove to ‘Langmark Cemetery’. A very dark, and repressive place. Called The Kam-rardengrab (men’s grave) and the Alter Friedhof (Old Cemetery) which contains 3000 casualties of the Student Battalions who first encountered the BEF in the 1st Battle of



Ypres. These were war volunteers and the cemetery became known as ‘Der Studentfriedhof’ ‘Student Cemetery’. Later other German Cemeteries were evacuated and the internees placed here, in the additional area around the original ‘bunkers’ of the Langemark Line, there being 44,000 German dead buried here. Held by the British in 1914 Langemark fell to the Germans in 1915, was recaptured by the 20th Light Division in 1917, and twice changed hands during 1918. |

We departed the cemetery heading towards the ‘Hooge Crater’. A small area of ground constantly fought over during the Great War, due to the commanding views it offered, especially over British lines, to the south of Ypres. Then on to Gheluveit, a village and Chateau, forever linked with the 2nd Worcester’s, who in a crucial stage of the 1st battle of Ypres, (1914) prevented the Germans from breaking through to Ypres, by their desperate action, giving the BEF, time to reorganize and stabilize its defensive line.



From there we moved to ‘Pilckem Ridge’ this was the scene of the first German gas attack (Vifwegen), in April 1915, during the 2nd Battle of Ypres. A memorial to French and Algerian Troops, who died here, marks the place. The Germans failed to press home their advantage from their gas attack, allowing the Canadians to fill the breach, between Pilckem and St Julian. As we drove from Pilckem we passed ‘Memets Wood’, an area later to be covered by the 38th Welsh Division, during the battle of Passchendaele, and the fight for Langemark, where a monument surmounted by a Red Dragon, now stands dominating the countryside, most impressive.



Arriving at ‘Essex Farm Cemetery’ and ‘Dug-outs’ we were briefed on the Canadian Army surgeon John McCrae who wrote ‘In Flanders Fields’ here in 1915, during the 2nd Battle of Ypres. It was the site of an Advanced Dressing

Station, in essence still existing, with dugouts protected by the canal bank. Buried here is the youngest British casualty, Pte. Strudwick (15), also Pte. Barratt VC. Looking across the canal demonstrated the nearness of the troops involved in this early action.

The 'Yorkshire Trench', at this point is a recently excavated area, giving a glimpse of the construction methods used by the British on the Western Front, showing the 'zig-zag' shaping, sandbagging and duckboarding. An original 1915 trench is depicted by planking. A few feet in front is a 1917, repositioned trench, showing the entrances and pools of water so dreaded by the trench occupants of the time. From here we visited the 'Messires Church', on the way to the 'Spanbrockmolen Crater'. The Germans used the crypt of this church as a medical post, being the only part of the building that survived the Battle of Messines. Paintings of the exterior, in watercolour, were undertaken by Adolph Hitler, while stationed here after being injured in 1915 or 1917. The New Zealand Division captured Messines in 1917.

The 'Spanbrockmolen Crater', now named 'The pool of Peace', was the strongest point in the German line. The mine used to destroy it contained 91,000lbs of high explosive, with an approach tunnel, to deposit the explosives, of 515metres. The present pool is 27metres deep with a diameter of 129metres. The remains of the German Bunkers lie on the northern side of the crater. This was a very impressive site and the mind boggled to consider the explosion which caused it, at the outset of the battle, 16,000 Germans were killed and 8,000 injured here... It must have been deafening for those all around, and was said to have been heard in the UK, but once again the views offered of the enemy from this point, necessitated its capture.

Also in the area is 'Hill 60', originally built from the spoil removed from a 19th Century railway cutting, being captured by the Germans in December 1914, and used as an Observation Post overlooking the British Forces. The British lost 3000 men trying to retake Hill 60 in April/May 1915. The whole surround is pitted by mine craters (22) (the BIG ONES) detonated as the attack started. The Germans used gas three times during this battle. Finally in June 1917, during the 'Battle of Messines', the hill was taken, when a further two mines were detonated under the German positions. A Pill Box atop of the hill, designed by both sides, was used in 1940, as a Company HQ, during the Retreat for Dunkirk. Close to this location is 'Artillery Wood', Cemetery, named after the nearby wood captured by the Guards Division, at the battle of 'Passchendaele', in 1917. The Irish poet, Francis Ledwidge and Ellis Evans (Hedd Wynn, - posthumously given the Bardic Chair at the Birkenhead, National Eistedffod in 1917), are buried here.

We also passed on the way to 'Passchendaele Ridge' and 'Tyne Cot', Cemeteries, 'Vancouver Corner', where the memorial, sometimes called the 'Brooding Soldier', commemorates the Canadian 1st Division's, action in halting the German advance following the 'Vifwegen Gas Attack', at the beginning of the '2nd Battle of Ypres', in April 1915. The Canadians suffered 2000 casualties, but the intervention prevented the Germans from exploiting a breakthrough. Also passed was the turn off for the Menin

Road, which was one of the main approaches for the troops going up to the front and 'Hellfire Corner', so called due to the heavy artillery fire that the crossroads drew, as a major junction, and was depicted as 'the most frequently shelled place on earth' by the end of the war. The 'high water mark' of the German advance in 1918, is depicted by a 'large stone' near a modern traffic roundabout, and is nearly indistinct, given the surrounding signage and such! The 'Menin Gate', also re-known for the commemoration of 55,000 names of those 'missing' forces on the Ypres Salient, was inaugurated in 1921, and designed by Sir Reginald Blomfield, it was completed by the Imperial War Graves Commission. 'Last post' is sounded here daily at 2000hrs in a short ceremony commemorating the fall of the entire Salient.

At one point, later in the journey, we stopped at a 'Foreign Labour Force' Cemetery, being unaware that Chinese and East Indian labourers had been brought to Europe during the war, apparently the pay was much better for them, and they relieved up to 250,000, troops from the 'Service' and 'Pioneer' Battalions of the British Army, for service at the front. Although many returned home at the end of the war, quite a few settled in Europe and Britain.

We arrived on the 'Passchendaele Ridge' and de-bussed to visit 'Tyne Cot' Cemetery. This is an area of many Regimental Cemeteries, once again reminding one of the large numbers of various units that participated in this battle. 'Tyne Cot' cemetery is named because of the similarity to 'Crofters Cottages', of the German Bunkers, that stood here. It stands on 'Passchendaele Ridge', and is the largest British War Cemetery, in the world with nearly 12,000 graves, of which two thirds are 'unknown'. On 'Panels' at the cemetery's rear, are recorded the names of 35,000 of the 'missing' casualties. The remains of two German bunkers, which formed part of the German 'Flanders Line', still stand within the cemetery; a third is under the 'Cross of Sacrifice'. The small original cemetery can be seen up behind the cross. A new Visitors' Centre offers excellent views towards the 'Ypres' and 'Passchendaele' Battlefields. We found this visit very thought provoking, and each was left with their thoughts at the time.

From here we returned to Ypres, taking in 'St Georges Chapel', used by the Field Ambulance Units, from October 1915, until the Armistice, and 'Reservoir Cemetery'. The cemetery contains 2000 graves including Pte. Charles McColl, who was shot for desertion, he was executed in the prison and buried here on 28th December 1917. The Knott brothers, Henry and James, are also buried here, Henry being transferred from Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery, Holland, in 1918 and James from Fricourt, having died in July 1916, on 'The Somme'. It appears their father was able to wield much power in high places to achieve this relocation, and now they lie side by side. A pleasantly surrounded, tree and fenced area, within the main town of Ypres, obviously central for casualty treatment in that period.

Here we had our evening meal, now surrounded by school children, and then off to the Menin Gate Ceremony, with medals and beret, to parade and offer our respect to the fallen. Later we returned to the hotel in Dixmuide, and reviewed what had been a long

and amazing day. Most of us were quite exhausted, and so it was off to bed to prepare for the next day.

DAY 3

As day three dawned we were destined to visit 'The Somme'. At the northern end of the Somme Battlefield, the 31st Division, consisting of 'The Pals Battalions', drawn from Leeds, Bradford, Barnsley, Sheffield, Durham and Accrington had the task to capture the village of Serre. Within minutes of 'zero-hour', over 5000 men were killed. The effect this had in UK, was very dearly felt. The remains of the Front Line from which the 'Pals Battalions' attacked, can still be discerned, known as 'Sheffield Memorial Park', also the trenches of the Accrington Pals. The cemeteries in the old, 'No-Mans', land, bear witness to their loss. The ground at Serre, offers excellent views towards the 'Quadrilateral' and 'Newfoundland Park', areas, enabling the enemy to easily monitor British and Commonwealth troop movements and locations.

Traveling on in beautiful, hot sunny weather, we arrived at the 'Newfoundland Memorial', this is a preserved battlefield, on the site of an ill-fated assault by the Newfoundland Regiment, who were virtually wiped out before joining the front line to go into battle proper at "Y" Ravine. The opposing trenches remain, and the ground still bears the scars of the shell fire. "Y" Ravine Cemetery was the approximate location of the German Machine Gun positions which wreaked such death on these troops. The Park also contains the 'Caribou Memorial', erected to the 'Newfoundlers'. You can also see a memorial to the 51st Highland Division, to the front and the 'Danger Tree' too. This was the point beyond which advancing troops came under the sights of German machine gunners, in "Y" Ravine. This park belongs to Newfoundland, having been donated to them by the French Government in perpetuity. The success of the Highlanders on 13th November 1916 is indicative of the development of the British Army in both experience and tactics during the course of the battle.



A short distance from Newfoundland Park is The Ulster Tower Memorial, a memorial raised to the 36th Irish Division, and stands on what was the site of the 'Schwaben Redoubt', on the German Front line. Although the Ulster's managed to penetrate deep into the German lines, failure from flank support, left them isolated and exposed to heavy gun fire which prevented reinforcements advancing, so they had to retire. Half the Division became casualties. The frontline positions of the Ulster Division lay along the edge of the Thiepval Wood, opposite the tower.



It is here that the 'Thiepval Monument', is located. It was designed by Lutyens, and is the largest memorial of its kind, commemorating the names of 72,000 men who died on the Somme, and have 'no known grave'. The cemetery contains 300 British and French casualties, symbolizing the alliance of the two countries during the war, also their losses. The Thiepval position was a dominating one for the German defenders and the 32nd Division's, assault foundered quickly, with very few British Troops, ever reaching the uncut German wire. The magnificence and size of this memorial has to be seen to be appreciated fully. There is a large customer reception and museum area located near the coach and car park.

We traveled on from here to visit a number of the salient points and cemeteries in the 'Passchendaele area', along narrow twisting lanes. The first was 'Blighty Valley' Cemetery, which was first used at the beginning of the 'Battle of The Somme', in 1916. It contains 1027 casualties, and being close behind the British Front Line it was a dangerous, and frequently shelled location which probably accounts for the name, as injured soldiers got a return to UK (Blighty!). Further along is 'Crucifix Corner', so named after the wayside shrine that stands there. The fields across the other side of the road were often filled with the wounded and dying who had been carried there by the Stretcher Bearers during the night, and left for medical attention or burial, and so it became a collection point. On then to 'Mash Valley', which is on the northern side of the Albert-Bapaume road and was the 2nd Middlesex Battalion's site, who were assaulted by machine guns to their front and the direction of La Boissolle, on the opposite side and suffered 500 casualties moving across 750 yards of 'no-mans' land. The cemetery is at the east end of the valley near Ovillers, which formed part of the German Line. This is a cemetery in solitude, overlooking the battlefield on which the buried had died.

Further along was a series of redoubts or strongpoints, in addition to which the Germans had fortified nine villages along their front line. The 'Tyneside/Scottish' Brigade, of the 34th Division, was decimated as it attacked one of these, 'La Boisselle', which is on the opposite side of the Albert-Bapaume road. Near 'La Boisselle' is the 'Lochnagar Crater' this was created by 90,000 lbs. of high explosives, being set off under the German Lines. The crater is 90 feet deep, and some 200 yards wide, but had offered excellent observation of the ground over which the 'Tyneside Irish' Brigade advanced, at the time from their reserve line, causing them 3000 casualties.

Then on to 'Pozières Cemetery', Pozières village was incorporated in to the German 'Second Line System' of fortifications and stood on a ridge. The battle around

‘Pozières/Mouquet Farm’, during July/August 1916, cost the Australian Divisions, who fought there, 23,000 casualties, many of which are buried there. This was more than all their casualties at Gallipoli. The capture of the ridge was to make an attack on ‘Thiepval Hill’, redoubts, from the south possible.

We then preceded to ‘Dartmoor Cemetery’, originally called ‘Becordel – Becourt’, Military Cemetery; it was changed in 1916, at the request of the 8th/9th Battalions of the Devonshire Regiment. There are 768 troops buried here in all including Sgt George and Cpl Robert Lee, father and son, and Lt Henry Weller, aged 68, the oldest front line soldier killed during the war. Pet John Sweeney, a New Zealand, soldier, who was executed for desertion, is also buried in this cemetery. A little further down this road lies ‘Devonshire Cemetery’, where a hundred and sixty two men are buried belonging to the Devonshire’s, 8th and 9th Battalions. They were involved in the action of the 4th July 1916, in what was part of the old, front line trench, in Mansel Copse. The poet Lt Noel Hodgesson, MC and Capt. Duncan Martin, are also buried here. The latter believed a German Machine Gun was situated in a cemetery at Mamets, and it would inflict much deluge on his men, as it did, on the 1st of July’s attack. It is a Regimental Cemetery, similar to the Gordon Highlanders Cemetery, just down the road. A prominent memorial stands at the entrance to Devonshire Cemetery.

We then drove to ‘Carnoy Military Cemetery’. This cemetery was begun in 1915, and used by the troops holding this sector until 1916, when Field Ambulance Units arrived and a camp was established on the high ground, north of Cornoy village. The cemetery closed in March 1917. From March to August 1918, it was in German hands. It contains over 850 casualties.

From here we returned to Arras, to overnight there. After getting suitably refreshed, we entered the large market square to enjoy a pleasant evening of music, food and wine at the many, open air restaurant areas, surrounding the square. Once again the authenticity of the rebuilt buildings, damaged in the Great War was very spectacular, convincing and genuine.



DAY 4

We assembled on day four, in the morning, in Arras, at the main square car park, to prepare for visits to the ‘Arras/Loos’ battle sites. It was a grey misty day, not quite the weather for the ‘ground appreciation’ viewing, the guide was intending. Hence to Gheluvelt, which was still in heavy mist, where rows of graves in the cemetery, reflected dates of intense ‘periods of action’, covering the whole conflict from 1915 to 1918, resulting in a mixture of troops of many nationalities being buried there. These periods, reflecting the importance of the area during the varying phases of the war. Due to the heavy fog and dew, our shoes and trouser bottoms got soaked, and remained so until much later in the day!

Further on was the ‘Lochnagar German Cemetery’, on arrival at this cemetery, in the very reminiscent weather of the period and era, damp and foggy, the ‘Bromborough Lads’, had a ceremony to perform and asked us to wait awhile before entering. With due military deference, they had held a “Court Martial” in the hotel the previous evening, and found one of their members guilty of ‘desertion at the front!’ He had been sentenced to be shot at dawn. Of course this was news to our groups, so we stood by as the full ceremony was carried out, and the incumbent returned to the coach to sit out the cemetery visit! This Cemetery is the largest German Cemetery in France, with almost 45,000 bodies, including more than 8000 ‘unknown’ soldiers. Most soldiers were in smaller cemeteries behind the German Lines, previously but later the French Authorities concentrated them together, in 1919 and 1922. The vast majority died during the battles for ‘Notre Dame de Loretta’, and ‘Vimy Ridge’. A very dismal place, fog bound, crosses and oak trees, as far as the eye could see in any direction. A map of the battle areas, as held by Allied and enemy troops is depicted on a large rock slab, carved out on its upper surface.

After sometime we then set off for ‘Notre Dame-le-Lorette’, French Cemetery, It stands on a very important strategic high point, dominating the Douai Plain, north of Arras, the others being ‘Mont St Eoli’, and ‘Vimmy Ridge’. The largest French Military Cemetery in the world with just over 40,000 casualties buried there, with individual and several ossuaries on site, the hill was captured by the French in 1915, during the Loos – Arras offensive, at a loss of 102,500 casualties. The Germans lost about the same number. Petain commanded the XXXIII Corps during the battle. A number of ‘unknown soldiers’ bodies are entombed in the Landern Tower, from French Colonial conflicts, such as Algeria and Indo China, and the ‘Unknown Soldiers’ of the 1st World War, who were not selected for the ‘Arc de Triumphe’ in Paris. This mausoleum is very impressive. There is also a wonderful chapel on the site which was well worth the visit, foggy day or not, for its content and colour. A small café with a museum depicts the effect of the 1914/5 to 1917/8, war by different battles and troops involved in the area.

After coffee and cake, still in foggy conditions, we carried on to ‘Vimy Ridge’, and ‘The Canadian War Memorial’. As we ascended the hill the sun broke through and on arrival it was easy to see the surrounding area at last. Built on Hill 145, overlooking the Douai Plain, made from Dalmatian Stone, the memorial is one of the most impressive on the



Western Front. Two pylons represent France and Canada, with one bearing maple leaves the other Fleur-de-Lys. The size, location and prominence of this memorial was breath taking, and a very worthy memorial to the 24,000 men that died taking the ‘Ridge’. Below the memorial is a reconstructed Canadian and German trench layout, showing the Canadian Observation line as near to the Germans trenches as possible and in advance of their own main de-

fences, now, only separated by craters of the mines detonated prior to the Canadians assault. The reconstructed trenches are positioned, complete with concrete duckboards and sand bagging, sniper shields and firing steps, on the lower area of this site. A large area is still taped off due to the unexploded munitions still present in the ground and old collapsed trenches still there. To take this ridge twelve tunnels were dug from 800 feet below and ‘worked in’ a kilometer and a half, prior to ‘blowing’ and allowing access for the thousands of Canadian troops. It defies the imagination, when on site, to think of such a task! It is a site constantly visited by many Canadian tourists, as was apparent during our short visit.

From here we returned to Arras for lunch prior to assembling for a visit to the ‘Wellington Quarries’. Quarries?! What do quarries have to do with World War One?’ more later. Having found a major Superstore, with restaurant, near to hand, we proceeded to lunch and discuss further the aspects of the morning’s visits.

After lunch we moved on foot to ‘The Wellington Quarries’, the visit started with us all gathering at a glass covered entrance way, to be split into two equal groups, who were then kitted out with helmets, head lights, and audio devices to accompany a guide to a lift, then descended sixty metres down under Arras City, to undertake a two hour tour underground!



From 1916, the ‘Old Quarries’ that lay under Arras, used in the 16th Century to build the city, were transformed, by the NZ Engineer, Miners, into a nineteen kilometer warren/labyrinth, in which 24,000 troops slept, ate, lived, and prepared for battle for seven days prior to the ‘Battle of Arras’. It is now a museum, mainly for students, to show them the conditions imposed upon the troops and view their preserved, charcoal murals, and paintings, including a picture of a wartime sweetheart

carved into a wall. Lyrics of popular songs of the time are also being played, an amazing place, quizzing the mind at the number of troops constricted and going about their ablutions and normal duties therein; it defies belief.

From Arras we departed for the Cemetery at Perronne, which was on our way to our next hotel at St Quentin. This is a remote roadside cemetery, with a very impressive gate house and entrance, and falling away, via steps, is the main cemetery area inside. Row upon row of headstones stand in the ground, many being to ‘unknown’ soldiers. The whole is surrounded by a vaulted, walled, walkway, and within each vaulted arch is a plain marble plaque, embellished with the names of the ‘missing’, by Regiment or Corps. Being sunset it was most poignant for us all. But the day had taken its toll, having visited so many burial areas and relived the history with our guide and self-inspection, that tiredness was overtaking us. So we re-boarded the coach and moved to the hotel. After a simple evening meal, we retired to our rooms to prepare for our last

day, having just been reminded to have all our luggage down by the coach for seven thirty.

DAY 5

We awoke for our final day, breakfasted and boarded the coach ready to visit the 'Hindenberg Line', area and work our way back to Calais for the afternoon ferry, home to Dover. We drove initially, once again in somewhat overcast weather, reflecting so much the conditions experienced by the troops during that time in this area, to 'Maissemy German' Cemetery, which contains 23,278 casualties, 8000 buried in a central grave. The headstones reveal the extent of failure of the 'Kaiserschlacht'. Graves date from 1917, to early 1918, before the German offensive. Further graves from September 1918 are also here, from when the Germans found themselves back where they had originally started the war .

We then drove through the meandering countryside, with its wooded copses and large flowing acres of meadow, to the 'Riqueval Bridge', over the St Quentin Canal, scene of an epic capture by the 137th Brigade, of the 46th (North Midland) Division, on the 29th September 1918, the canal having been used as a main supply route by the Germans for their troops on the western side of the canal throughout. There is a well-known photograph taken a few days later, showing the British Troops on the canal bank, being addressed by Brig. Gen. Campbell VC, from the bridge itself. Much of the tunnel and staging, along with the electric current supply still exists along the canal and in the tunnel. It's a steep path down to the canal but worth it to understand the task faced by the British Forces in achieving a successful operation.

From the bridge we proceeded further along the 'Line', past a turn off for 'Cambrai', the scene of a major tank offensive, onto 'Bony – Ballicourt', areas fought for by the French and Australians, in the closing days, until we turned off towards the 'The Somme, Bony American Cemetery', passing through their battle field area. The Cemetery contains 1844 casualties with 333 names of soldiers on the wall of the small chapel, who were originally listed as missing. Rosettes mark the name of those who have since been recovered and identified. This peaceful open cemetery, surrounded by a low white wall in which is a large gate house and chapel, mounted by eagles and Stars and Stripes flying in the breeze, belies the limited input the Americans gave in those last months of the war. They too have a number of graves for the 'Unknown', in their midst.

From here we refueled the coach and make our way to Calais. The coach was filled with much humour amongst our different groups. Searching questions were asked of the guide and a discrete reading of the pamphlets we had been provided with to reassure ourselves that we had covered all the detailed itinerary listed! What a tour; what a guide; for whom we had much to thank, a complete expert in his field! Arriving at Calais, we saw those who wish to enter our country illegally standing by the fencing. We were lucky to be able to board an earlier Ferry, and arrived back in Dover ahead of schedule. However life is never simple! The coach driver missed the drop of point for 'exiting' passengers, and was virtually on the Dover town limits before he could turn around and

However life is never simple! The coach driver missed the drop of point for 'exiting' passengers, and was virtually on the Dover town limits before he could turn around and drop us off, after reentering the docks area, for us to debus. We moved to our vehicle for homeward transportation, to discover one had to drive back down the single ramp the same way as we had come up! The vehicle arriving at the top as we went down was quite alarmed, but then he wasn't the only one!

Driving home to Salisbury and Westbury, we contemplated what a tremendous time we all had, and how lucky we had been on this tour, with this guide and such great people. The educational value alone delighted us too, and gave us much to contemplate for those 'Old Contemptibles', 'Reservists', 'Territorials' and finally 'Volunteers' who had gone before, to fight the country's battles in this Great War. Which was not just two rows of opposing trenches, as portrayed so often by the media? Thoughts too, about the large number of casualties involved within the war and even further, the hundreds of thousands listed as 'Missing', to which monuments were erected afterwards. Many grave-stones bearing 'Unknown Soldier' on them, also brought home the unrecognized endeavors endured by individuals in these victories and defeats, during the conflict by both sides, including our Commonwealth personnel, lying or remembered in these 178 cemeteries.

So you readers, when the next battlefield tour is organized, probably a WW2 one, make sure you put your name down and enjoy the event as we have all done on this one.

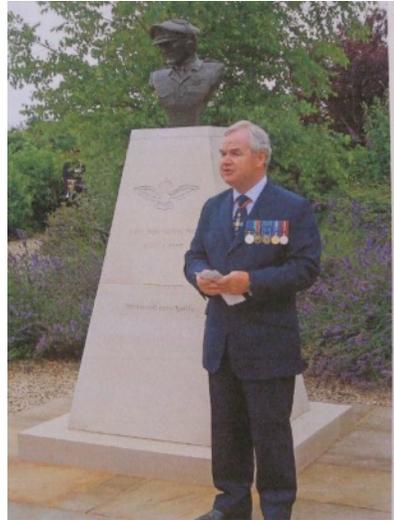
Derek Walker

AIR OP OFFICERS' ASSOCIATION

The Air OP Officers' Association has been in existence since the Second World War and has acted as a focus for Air OP remembrance. In more recent years it has held highly successful and enjoyable dinners, mainly in the Officers' Mess at Middle Wallop, as well as organising the Air OP participation on Remembrance Sunday at the AAC Centre. All this has been arranged through the hard efforts of the Association's committee.

The Air OP Association is well presented with 656 members. The President is Lt Gen Sir Gary Coward, the Honorary Secretary is Tim Deane and Ted Maslen-Jones, Spencer Holtom and Andrew Simkins are committee members. It was decided about a year ago that it would be right and appropriate to erect an Air OP Memorial in the Memorial Garden of the Museum of Army Flying. Tim Deane took on the majority of the organisation and his wife, Gilly Maclaren, volunteered to design and sculpt the Memorial bust. The bust was based on Ian Neilson who waded ashore on D Day to recon landing sites for his Squadron,

652 Air OP Sqn RAF. For his brave efforts on D Day and immediately afterwards he was awarded the DFC.



The design and construction of the Memorial was coordinated by the Regimental Colonel, Lt Col Chris Ions MBE, with input from the committee members. The Dedication was held on Wednesday 15th July. In attendance were further members of our Association including Mark Meaton, who had undertaken the research into the Honours and Awards, and Guy Warner who flew over from Northern Ireland especially for the occasion.

The Service was overseen by Lt Gen Sir Gary Coward and it was a most poignant and moving event. Ted Maslen-Jones recited the Kohima Epitaph after the Minute Silence and prior to the laying of a wreath by Gen Sir John Learmont. It was intended that Ian Neilson would receive the Ordre national de la Légion d'Honneur (Chevalier) but sadly he was in hospital, so his son Hamish, accepted the award from Colonel Olivier Fort, Senior French Liaison Officer, Army Headquarters on his father's behalf.

After photographs and toasts there was a single Auster Flypast. The participants then departed for the Officers' Mess for Lunch, and a speech by Brigadier Andy Cash, a former OC 656 Sqn AAC.

Afterwards the French Liaison Officer and Lt Gen Sir Gary Coward drove to Great Western Hospital, Swindon to personally present the award to Ian Neilson DFC.

The Memorial can be seen in the Memorial Garden, Museum of Army Flying and we strongly recommend a visit.

APACHE OVER LIBYA

A book has been written, which places 656 Squadron firmly front and centre, called Apache Over Libya. A contract has been signed with Pen and Sword who will publish later this year. All royalties will go to military charities. There is a Facebook page 'Apache Over Libya' - you can view. A website will follow when ready to take pre-orders... Oh, and in keeping with MoD rules we can't name names - everyone has a pseudonym.

The Apache Over Libya story recalls a perilous combat experience in the face of deeply unattractive survival odds over Libya in the summer of 2011. Flying ultra low-level over the sea at night into hostile territory became normal life for the Apache crews of 656 Squadron, Army Air Corps. Often engaged by Gaddafi's forces as soon as they were in sight of the coast, they had to fight their way into Libya, complete their mission while evading lethal fire from the ground, and then fight their way out again, before searching for a ship in the dark many miles out to sea. Flying well within the reach of Gaddafi's prolific ground to air weapons, these men made nightly raids behind enemy lines and got away with their lives. This is the story of 8 Army and 2 Royal Navy pilots who went up against the most potent enemy British aircrew have faced in generations. They defied the odds and survived, playing a fundamental part in the NATO led campaign. This is the truth about the Apache at sea and in combat over Libya. This book is the combined recollection of the men and women who operated the Apache attack helicopter over Libya during the summer of 2011. It is their truth as noted in their own diaries at the time and now collated, as a historical record of a six-week training exercise that unexpectedly became a four-month high intensity combat operation. Spending 155 days at sea, with 130 days on station poised off the coast of Libya, they flew 48 combat sorties firing 99 Hellfire missiles and 4800 rounds of 30 millimetre cannon, striking 116 targets. Every mission was flown from and to HMS Ocean, using procedures they themselves designed in the first Apache maritime operation anywhere in the world. The words are theirs, none are embellished or dramatised, nor have they been ghost written. The story is told by the squadron commander, Will Laidlaw, and has been checked against the remembered experiences of those involved. Some of the protagonists continue to serve in Her Majesty's Armed Forces, while others have since left. In respecting their wishes for anonymity some replacement names have been used.

(Preview of the new book sent to us by the Author)

Last Laughs

Continued from issue 3:

Subject: Royal Flying Corps Monthly Safety Report - December 1917

ACCIDENT BRIEFS

No. 1 Brief

No. 912 Squadron 3 December 1917

Aircraft type B.E. 2C, No. XY 678, Total solo - 4Hr.20min Pilot Lt. J. Smyth-Worthington, Solo in type- 1Hr.10min. The pilot of this flying machine attempted to maintain his altitude in a turn at 2,500 feet. This resulted in the aeroplane entering an unprecedented manoeuvre, entailing a considerable loss of height. Even with full power applied and the control column fully back, the pilot was unable to regain control. However, upon climbing from the cockpit onto the lower mainplane, the pilot managed to correct the machines altitude, and by skillful manipulation of the flying wires successfully side-slipped into a nearby meadow. Remarks: Although, through inexperience, this pilot allowed his aeroplane to enter an unusual attitude, his resourcefulness in eventually landing without damage has earned him a unit citation. R.F.C. Lundsford-Magnus is investigating the strange behaviour of this aircraft.

No. 2 Brief

No. 847 Squadron 19 December 1917

Aircraft type Spotter Balloon J17983, Total solo 107Hrs.00min. Pilot Capt. * * * , Solo in type 32Hr.10min

Captain *** of the Hussars, a balloon observer, unfortunately allowed the spike of his full-dress helmet to impinge against the envelope of his balloon. There was a violent explosion and the balloon carried out a series of fantastic and uncontrollable manoeuvres, while rapidly emptying itself of gas. The pilot was thrown clear and escaped injury as he was lucky enough to land on his head. Remarks: This pilot was flying in full-dress uniform because he was the Officer of the Day. In consequence it has been recommended that pilots will not fly during periods of duty as Officer of the Day. Captain * * * has requested an exchange posting to the Patroville Alps, a well known mule unit of the Basques.

More history next time folks!

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Webmaster: Replacement needed

Ron Ward - continues whilst awaiting a replacement

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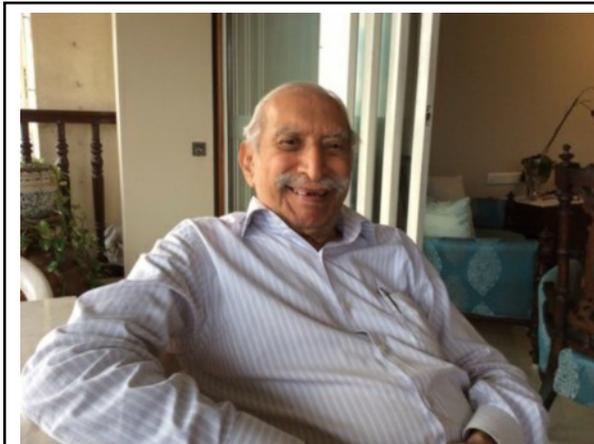
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Reunion 2015 - Wattisham





Ted Maslen-Jones talking to Michael Brown,
Glider Pilot Regt. at the NFA Garden Party.



Brigadier 'Duck' Mehta