



Tempsford Veterans and Relatives

Newsletter Spring 09



Notes from the Cockpit

We are delighted to present the latest edition of the TVAR newsletter, for which we have received 3 articles, one from a veteran member, Tommy Thomas. These articles are greatly appreciated by those of us who were not “there”, as they all help to build a better picture of life on the squadrons - more, please! Further more, enquiries for help and information are still coming in thick and fast. Both Steve and I receive requests (via our websites) on a regular basis from veterans and relatives, and contacts come from other sources as well. We hope, therefore, to see more new faces at the summer gathering - all veterans and relatives are welcome.

It seems that a trend is being established in that, at each gathering, there is a surprise in store for somebody.....

I had told Edwin that, as I had been over so many times already in 08, I would not be able to come to the November Remembrance Service. However, I had already made plans, bought tickets and made hotel bookings. On several occasions, I checked with Edwin on progress, all the time reinforcing the message that I would not be attending.

On the Saturday before the service, a number of people had made arrangements to meet at an hotel in the evening. As I could not allow myself to be seen, I had booked into another hotel. During the course of the day, Edwin and I had exchanged text messages - mine from my Greek mobile phone, to keep up the pretence that I was busy in Crete.

When Edwin entered the “Crown” in the evening, and spotted someone sitting in the “reserved” area there was a look of indignation that the TVAR space had been violated. This changed to puzzlement as his mind registered the fact that the man “looked like Bob, who was in Crete”!

The final expression on his face when he realised that it was his turn to be surprised was a joy to behold. Edwin - a payback for the surprise of the picture. They say that revenge is a dish best

Bob Body

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Tempsford Web Sites

www.tempsfordsquadrons.info

www.161squadron.org

www.geocities.com/fk790

www.tempsford.20m.com

A Veteran's Story

John Andrew Thomas was born in Le Touquet, France, with a French mother and a British father. He was educated in France, and then came to England to further his education. During this time, war was declared and, in 1940, at the age of 17½ volunteered for the Royal Air Force as General Duties AC2; he was called up, and reported when 18 to RAF Uxbridge in Middlesex. After initial training at Blackpool he was posted first to RAF Heston, then RAF Llandow, in South Wales. This was No. 53 OTU (operational training unit) for Spitfire pilots.

“I was lucky enough to be attached to the TTO section (target towing) and was trained to be a winch operator. This meant operating a sophisticated winch, streaming a drogue out of the aircraft, this drogue being the target on which the Spitfire pilot would train to fire. This firing exercise would take place over an appointed firing range over the Bristol Channel. Three Spitfires, in turn, would then practise firing at the towed target, each with different coloured ammunition. The exercise completed, we would return to the airfield, release the target and check the number of hits, if any; this was done by a ground team. Hits would be defined by the colour of the bullets, red, green or blue, marked on the drogue.

The towing aircraft used at first at RAF Llandow was the Fairy Battle, and then we used Lysanders. Eventually, these were adapted with a better, but still sophisticated, electric winch which would enable the operator in the rear cockpit to stream out the drogue during flight, return over the airfield after the completion of the Spitfire exercise, release the drogue over the field, return to the firing range and stream out another drogue without having to land, thus saving much time to do many more exercises.

In October 1942 I remustered to become an Air Gunner. The course successfully completed, I got crewed up onto operational training unit, and then went on to convert to fly on the Halifax bomber. We carried 7 crew members. The pilot was already experienced; Warrant Officer rank. My position was rear gunner. We did well in our training and were chosen for Special Operational Duties on 161 Squadron at RAF Tempsford in Bedfordshire. Due to very high security at Tempsford, it was two days before Johnny Scragg, our skipper, was told of what we were about to do. 138 Squadron also operated there doing similar operations dealing with SOE (Special Operations Executive) carrying and dropping agents and supplies to the Resistance in enemy-occupied Europe, a much more interesting and rewarding duty than bombing. I did most of my operational tour as a rear gunner on the Halifax, this being the only armament on this type of aircraft at Tempsford.

After a refresher course at Newmarket, I was told by the Flight Commander, Squadron Leader Hugh Verity (author of the book 'We landed by Moonlight') that I was to be transferred, on my return, to 'B' Flight of 161 Squadron, operating Lysanders and Hudsons which landed in Occupied France carrying agents and supplies. There was to be an added type of operation called MPU (Mail Pick Up) and I was to be the operator of a winch adapted on a Lysander (G for George) which did not land. There was 15 foot bamboo cane, sort of a fishing rod, suspended through a trap door under the rear cockpit. A hook adapted onto a rail was attached to the rod, lowered, and locked to 4 feet in height below the wheels of the aircraft. The winch and an arrestor gear braking mechanism, which I had to control when the bag had been snatched. This done, I had to winch it in, hoist the bag in the rear cockpit, retract the rod, and that was it. Very careful coordination between myself and the pilot was most important, so as not to foul the tail elevator when winching the mail bag in. With my previous experience when on target towing, the use of a similar winch, the over 400 operating hours and the feel of the Lysander in the rear cockpit, I was comfortably at home!

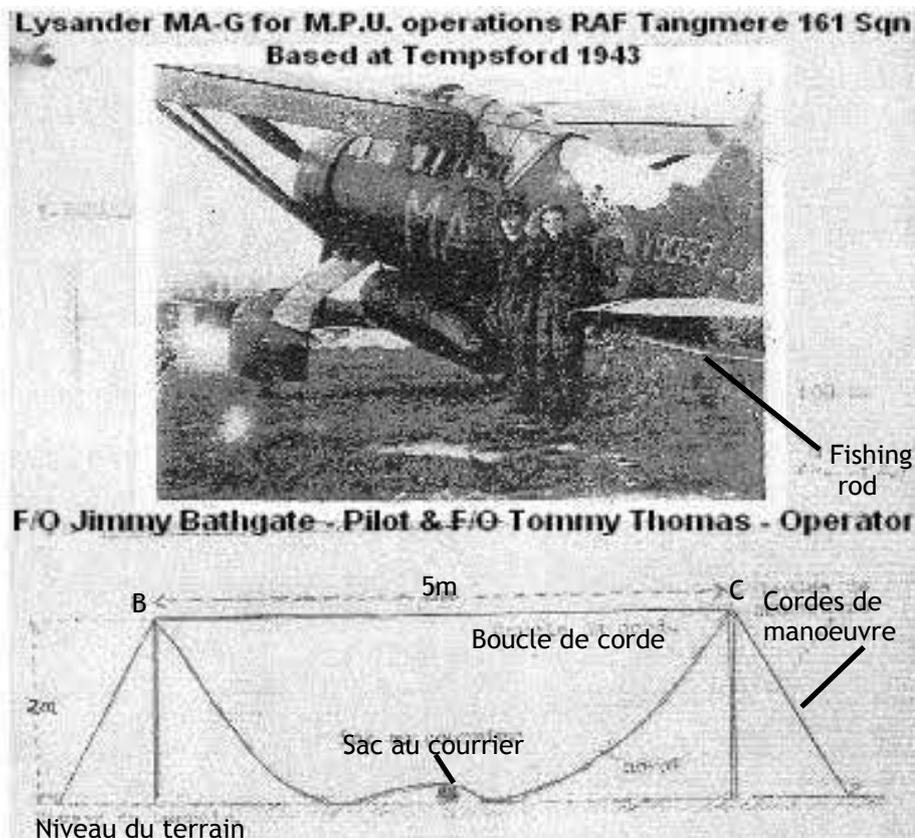
Because we carried no guns to defend ourselves, smart evasive action on the part of the pilot was most necessary at times.

Lysander pilots were exceptional types, some of them had been fighter pilots before coming to Tempsford. Out of 8 chosen to train for this kind of operation, only 3 were really good at it. To succeed, the pilot had to skilfully line the aircraft to fly at the height of 27 feet, by moonlight, aided only by 3 torchlights. Light 'A' was to give the pilot his direction of approach. Lights 'B' and 'C' were placed on top of poles (6 feet high, 20 feet apart), onto which was attached a looped rope, with the mail-bag lying on the ground. On a few occasions, several attempts had to be made, but we never returned empty handed. Many hours were spent training, mostly in a farmer's field near Tempsford, or Cowdray Park near Tangmere, away from prying eyes. On one of these training sessions, piloted by Bob Large, the bag, in this case filled with sand, bounced onto the triangle of grass between the concrete runways and split open. Quite unseen by me, the hook flew up and engaged in the Lysander's elevator. I was winching in, and Bob noticed that the 'stick' was moving back against his hand. The Lysander started to climb uncontrollably, and Bob yelled on the intercom 'what the hell are you doing?' I had no idea what was wrong, but reversed what I was doing - i.e. winching in. After having landed, we discovered that the hook had whipped up over the tailplane and got engaged in the elevator. Had I not reacted instantly, Bob reported, we would certainly have stalled and crashed. I was not totally unprepared. On a similar occasion, during my towing days, the drogue had been shot off and the swivel at the end of the line, when winching in, narrowly did the same as the hook. But this time we were at 1000 feet - time to think.

During my operational Squadron service at Tempsford and Tangmere, which lasted 2 years and 8 months, I did 33 sorties, was flown by 31 different pilots, and flew just short of 500 hours, many of these training on Halifax's, Hudsons and Stirlings. I operated out of Blida, North Africa, and Brindisi, Italy, on Hudsons as Air Gunner.

I ended my service with the Royal Air Force in 1946, and was demobilised at RAF Uxbridge, with the rank of Flying Officer."

J.A. Thomas



F/O Jimmy Bathgate DFC was a New Zealander who failed to return from a pick up operation, on the night of 10/11 Dec 1943. There was no news of him until the Air Ministry informed that he had been shot down (news of this was not until June 1944) He is buried in WW1 Cemetery at Juvincourt, France.

TEMPSFORD IN WARTIME - from the "Home Front"

To the East of the Great North Eastern Railway Line is the Airfield and to the West lies the Village, and running through it the Great North Road.

The village is in two parts, namely Church End that is part of the A1 and Station Road; this stretches from the Anchor Hotel to the railway station.

During the war years, the village had: two general stores, a butchers, a post office, a garage, a blacksmiths, three public houses, an hotel and eight farms, as well as St. Peter's church and a Methodists' chapel, the Village school, and a population of approx 350. The Stuart Memorial Hall was the village hall, which had a library, snooker room, kitchen, function room, a quite large room with dance floor, stage and balcony; at the rear of the building there was an excellent bowling green.

We were proud to have an airfield built at Tempsford, and even more so when it became known that it was a base for clandestine operations. As teenagers, we watched the airfield being built with great interest, hitching lifts with the lorries transporting the rubble from Tempsford railway station to the emerging airfield. The rubble had come mainly from the London blitz. We saw the various buildings being erected and the hangers, which seemed huge, back then.

One Sunday, news spread that aircraft had arrived at the airfield so several of us chased up to Everton road to watch the take offs and landings of the Wellington bombers. This was the first time I had been so close to an aircraft and for them to be taking off just above my head was a big thrill.

The next planes I recall arriving were the Hampdens and as they flew in over the farm to land on the NE-SW runway, one of the farm hands said, "who ever would believe that an iron bird could land on Tempsford marshes."

Later, there was the arrival of the Lysanders, Halifax's, Stirlings and Hudsons which carried out such skilful and daring operations.

The airmen were very welcome to share our village and all the social events that took place. The dances were very popular and there were many of them; Wings for Victory weeks, and so forth. On some occasions the airmen provided the music with their own station dance band. The band also played on the back of a lorry traveling up and down Station road, at a carnival raising money for the war effort.

With so many personnel arriving, the village was a hive of activity, the pubs were overflowing and very often running out of beer, but it all seemed to be taken in good part and not too much moaning.

The dances were always packed out and were attended by all ranks, aircrew and ground staff and different nationalities, British, Australian, Canadian, Polish, French etc. Even with all the various cultures I cannot recall any trouble or unpleasantness.

There was one amusing incident when the hall was used for a private RAF party. Normally, alcohol was not allowed in the hall but for this function it was agreed it could be as it was the RAF, and special. When the caretaker came to lock up after the party he found the dance floor swimming in beer. To say he was none too happy would be an understatement, as he was proud of his dance floor. The next day a senior officer came to see my father, as he was chairman of the SMH committee to apologies for the mess that had been caused. He said he would send a squad to scrub and clean the floor; needless to say this was carried out efficiently the same day.

The River Ivel flows into the River Great Ouse to the rear of the school, and should it be a hot sunny week-end it would be swarming with bathers; it was a popular place with the locals and the RAF came to join the fun. On one occasion, a Halifax also joined in with a very low fly past, despite pylons with high voltage wires in close proximity.

If you happened to be in Church End late Friday afternoon you would find scores of airmen thumbing lifts for a weekend pass to London. They would not have to wait too long to get a lift.

From local gossip, we gathered agents and supplies were being parachuted into occupied territories. Later we witnessed, on many occasions, large canisters being loaded into the bomb bays from our vantage point near Woodbury Lodge or Everton road signal box when the right person was on his shift.

The Lysanders with their extra fuel tank and ladder on the side were very puzzling and it was a long, long time before we got to know they were actually landing in France etc. As for the Hudsons, we thought they were for carrying VIPs about the country. Come to think of it, they were doing so and further afield; a far more dangerous and important job than we had visualized.

The local agent delivered newspapers to the airfield daily. When he wanted a Sunday off he would ask me if I would do this for him. He had previously taught me to drive in his Flying Standard. I was in my glory, as under age for a driving licence, but drove to the airfield where a queue would be waiting patiently for the news to arrive.

Some times I would hear the planes returning in the early hours of the morning and would wishfully think that I could be in their position. Later I was to realize how fortunate I had been in being too young for the war, and how grateful we all should be to the young men who flew from our airfield.

Years later, when books were published on the activities of Tempsford airfield it was a great shock to read how many lives had been lost and the amount of aircraft lost; we had no idea at the time.

We give grateful thanks to these brave young men who helped to bring this terrible war to its end and victory.

Les Quince.



Tempsford airfield in the 1940s

Remembrance in Luxembourg

In September 2008 Jane and I spent 2 weeks in Germany on holiday staying in the village of Wehlen, which is some 30 miles north of Trier, on the banks of the Moselle River. Jane and I are both wine fans so this is an ideal base for us.

Prior to going on holiday I found out that there was a memorial in Luxembourg to 3 crew members and 3 agents who were on Hudson FK 803 which was flown by Terry Helfer of 161 Sqdn. We decided that we would make a visit to the memorial and take with us a poppy wreath to lay at the site, my navigator (AKA Jane) was tasked with plotting the route to get us in and out of Luxembourg.

We calculated that the memorial was some 80 miles from our hotel in Wehlen so we decided that we would make a day trip to Luxembourg and possibly include some time wandering around the Duchy.

It was decided to visit Luxembourg on 7 September (Sunday). When we set off it was a typical British summer's day - the rain was hammering down and did not stop all day. Looking on the bright side - at least we could get some cheap petrol in Luxembourg.

The border was located fairly quickly; we crossed into Luxembourg at about 1030hrs and very quickly had to leave the autobahn for the quiet roads of Luxembourg. Then the fun started - I think Sundays in Luxembourg is classed as "Diversion Day" and the country is closed.

Those who have visited Luxembourg will agree that it is very small and beautiful - be assured that when you are diverted to roads that do not appear on the map it appears very much smaller. We were diverted in one village because of a fire in the main street (I say main but I should say only) and had to retrace our route some 5 miles. There was another diversion because of a road race but the best was when we were diverted and our new route took us through a farmer's field full of crops (could not find this on the AA Roadmap).

We eventually arrived in the village of Maulusmuhle near which the memorial is located and decided that we would ask for directions. Remember - Luxembourg is closed on Sundays!! We eventually found somebody who gave us a rough grid reference and my navigator set course again.

As we left the village of Maulusmuhle Jane spotted a sign for a memorial and decided that we should head that way. We spotted a series of signs telling us which way to go and after each sign the road got narrower (and the rain heavier).

We eventually found a sign that said the memorial was 300 metres and that one should travel on foot (remember - it is a British summer). We decided to risk the drive and drove in the direction indicated. By this time we were heading into a forest and the road now consisted of stones but we eventually arrived at the memorial.

As we stopped I noticed that my speedometer showed the trip as being 100.1 miles.

The memorial is located in the immediate area where FK803 came down. Jane and I were both



The people in the village of Maulusmuhle look after the memorial and they do a first class job. When we arrived we found that there were small poppy crosses on each of the 6 headstones and also flowers growing in tubs. Alongside the graves is an area which contains parts of the aircraft - the letters FK803 are quite clearly visible.

A wreath was laid at the memorial and on the card was written:

FK803

*Far from home but never forgotten.
Temsford Veterans and Relatives
September 2008.*

We spent some time at the site and found it very emotional but both of us were glad that we had made the journey to pay our respects. The trees around us were so close together that they formed an umbrella to protect us from the rain as we stood at the graves and laid the wreath.

After departing from the memorial we then spent the rest of the day in Luxembourg before returning to our hotel.

Remember earlier that I said the journey was planned at about 80 miles - but after diversions this came to 100.1 miles. For those amongst us who like interesting things - 100.1 miles equates to 161 kilometres.

Edwin Bryce

It is with sadness that I must report that Stan Sickelmore passed away on 4 March 2009.

Stan was a keen supporter of the Tempsford Veterans and Relatives, and will be greatly missed.

It was Stan's suggestion to hold the pre-reunion evenings which are turning into such a success - I think that this year there will be a glass or two raised, in memory of a wonderful man.

Remembrance Sunday



The November Remembrance Ceremony was well attended, on a fine, but cold, day. Among the guests were 3 former members of 161 Squadron, Harold Watson, Tommy Thomas, and Kenneth Tattersall. The Reverend William Thackray took the service, and members of 22 (Sandy) Squadron ATC formed the honour guard, and took part in the service. Mark Stafferton was the bugler giving, as ever, fine renditions of the Last Post & Reveille.

We are delighted that so many members of TVAR and members of the public are able to attend this service each year.



138 & 161 Special Duties Squadrons



Special Then - Special Now - Special Always