



Tempsford Veterans and Relatives Association

Newsletter
Spring 2011



FROM 'THE UNDERGROUND'.



Agent: "Caught! My false papers are too false!"
Milice: "Don't worry, I'm a false agent also!"

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From Bob

Edwin has, at his own risk, allowed me to write the opening paragraphs to this first newsletter of 2011 so, here goes.

Firstly, I would like to advise that we have a new member on the team - Helen Body (the same surname as mine is no coincidence!). Our group of veterans and relatives is growing and growing. Looking at a group photograph taken, I believe, in 2003 (which would have been our third summer gathering), there are just 15 people. Today we have over 150 names on our books. It is because of this growth that Helen "volunteered" (read "was seconded") to assist Edwin in any matters of administration that are required. No doubt you will be hearing from her in due course.

The increase in numbers attending has also meant that we have now "outgrown" the Wheatsheaf, where we have enjoyed lunch and a chat, after the airfield visit, for several years. New arrangements have, therefore, been made; we feel that the new venue, giving us much more space as well being able to cater for the increased numbers, will make the lunchtime even more pleasurable; more about this later.

Edwin, I have found that writing this opening piece, although most satisfying, is not as easy as I first thought; I would like to take this opportunity to say "thank you" and I am sure I speak for many *out there*.

Edwin's thoughts on a fascinating meeting

On 12 November 2010 Bob and I were lucky enough to spend the afternoon in the company of Wing Commander L F Ratcliff DSO, DFC & Bar, AFC, Chevalier de Légion D'Honneur, Croix de Guerre avec Palme - the last surviving Commanding Officer of 161 Squadron.

Wing Commander Ratcliff had kindly invited us to meet with him at his home - a meeting that both Bob and I looked forward to with anticipation and also some worries. I was worried in case the conversation were to dry up and it became difficult to hold a conversation - would Wing Commander Ratcliff approve of what we were doing with the TVARA; I think that Bob had similar thoughts. We need not have worried.

From the moment we arrived both Wing Commander and Mrs Ratcliff made us feel at home. The afternoon seemed to fly past with numerous stories and anecdotes - how I wish I could have put a tape recorder on the table!

Len (if he will permit it) is still recovering from a hip operation last year but is hoping to join us at Tempsford in 2011. His memory is wonderful - some of his recollections were so clear one would think the event had only happened in the previous week. After many stories were exchanged it was suddenly time to take our leave. Books were exchanged - Len gave us a copy of his published memoirs in which he kindly wrote a message and signed the book, and Bob gave Len a copy of his book, "Taking the Wings of The Morning". As for me - the only book I have written is my diary and I did not think this was suitable to exchange.

This was one of those wonderful days that should never have ended as there was so much still to talk about but sadly time was against us and we had to depart late afternoon to make our way to Tempsford in order to prepare for the weekend.

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Tempsford Web Sites

www.tempsford-squadrons.info

www.161squadron.org

www.tempsford.20m.com

Remembrance Sunday

It is very difficult to write something new and original about Remembrance Sunday. However, this year it is worth commenting both on the numbers both of people attending (around 130) and tributes which were laid.



The age range of those attending was also notable, as can be seen here.



We would like, as always, to extend our thanks to Mark Stafferton, Rev. Margaret, and the Cadets of 22 (Sandy) Squadron ATC for their valuable contributions which made this such a memorable day.

An extract from 161 Squadron Operations Record Book -
Villagers determined to pay their respects

Extract from the SUNDAY EXPRESS dated 29th August, 1943. :-

5,000 STORM CEMETERY
TO MOURN PILOT.

More than 5,000 French men, women and children, carrying wreaths in their national colours, defied German police to attend the funeral at Montlucon of a Canadian pilot, shot down in a British bomber near St. Sauvier.

When the Germans tried to stop the crowd joining the cortege, they broke through the cordon and sang the "Marseillaise" and "Tipperary".

Young men and girls climbed over the cemetery walls after the gates had been barred and stood round the open grave.

MASS OF FLOWERS.

As soon as the German military pall-bearers and chaplain had left, French patriots removed the two formal wreaths and covered the grave with their own tributes.

The grave-side was a mass of flowers.

The Canadian pilot was Flying-Officer Lavallee.

According to a report received at Fighting French H.Q. in London, two of his companions, wounded when their plane crashed, were captured. Others of his crew are believed to have escaped.

Latent.

Sgt Cromie
Sgt Patterson } Escaped +
Sgt Paulin } arrived back
Sgt Hawkes } in England
Sgt Hunter }

Sgt Hathaway } Prisoner
Sgt Allen } of War.

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Tempsford Squadrons Honoured in New Biography

TVAR member David Abecassis has finished his biography of his father, S/L George Abecassis, DFC, which was published late last year by P J Publishing under the title *A Passion for Speed: the life and times of George Abecassis*.

George was a well-known racing driver before and after WW2, and so most of the book is devoted to his exploits on the track. However, three whole chapters are devoted to his wartime service, with one 28-page chapter given over exclusively to Tempsford. David spent much time interviewing veterans Harold Watson and Tommy Thomas, both of whom remembered George and had retained records referring to him, and their anecdotes and memories inform the text and lend it an authenticity difficult to achieve by mere book-reading. Not that this form of research has been neglected, and Bob Body helped David enormously by researching the official records now in the National Archives at Kew. To cap it all, David quotes very extensively from one of the most remarkable documents to emerge from the Tempsford experience - a handwritten record of every completed flight made by George while he was in 161 Squadron. These tell of routine flights which went well, flights which went badly wrong, and those which went spectacularly well. George's last flight, in which he was shot down over Denmark, is reconstructed from a letter George wrote after the war, George's own POW diary, accounts given by other members of his crew (including P/O Patrick (Paddy) Moloney and F/L Richard (Dick) Gee, DFC, kindly provided by Paddy's son and Dick's wife), and the official debriefs written on the return of the crew members to Britain. One reader has commented that as he read it, he 'felt as if he, too, was aboard that flight'.

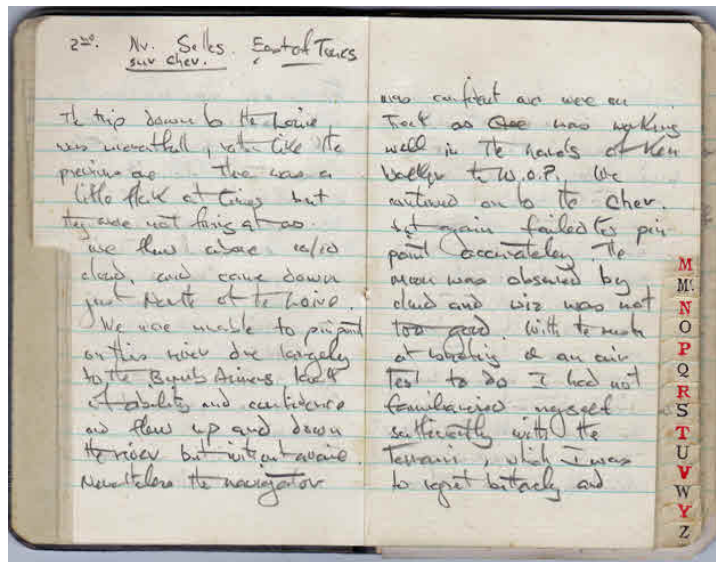
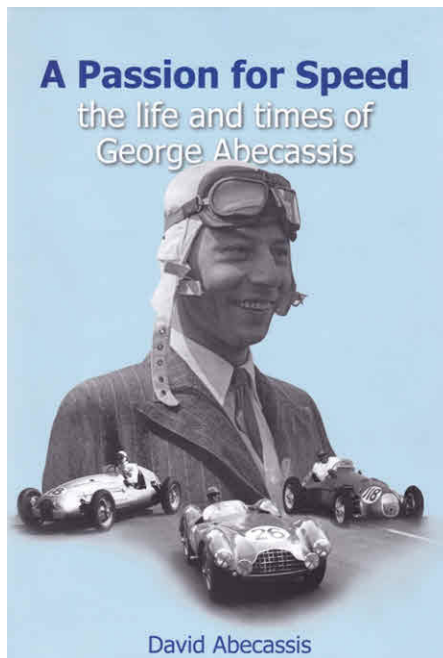
The book is richly illustrated with high-quality photos such as this one of a Stirling coming to land.

The result is a detailed and accurate account of George's operations and of life generally at Tempsford from June to October 1944. It is spectacularly illustrated with a large number of photographs drawn from a wide range of sources. One independent reviewer, commented:

“George's war service in the RAF, in which he became a Squadron Leader flying Halifax and Stirling bombers, covers three totally absorbing and thoroughly researched chapters, illustrated in part by sketches made whilst a prisoner of war in Stalag IIIA, Luckenwalde. The dangers of motor racing must have seemed trivial by comparison.”



David would like TVAR members to know that if he could have dedicated this chapter separately, he would have dedicated it to all who served at Tempsford throughout the war. Any TVARA members who would like to read the chapter can email David from a website he has set up in George's honour - www.georgeabecassis.com - and David will happily send a low-resolution pdf of the entire Tempsford chapter free of charge. Anyone who would like to buy a copy of the book can follow the links on that site to the publishers' website, and there they can order it online for delivery to their door.



A page from George's remarkable account of his flights at Tempsford.



George drew this picture of the attack on his aircraft in his POW diary.



This picture of the burnt-out aircraft piloted by George was taken by a Danish Resistance member the following day in October 1944. David and his sister visited the very spot in 2010, courtesy of Søren Flensted, at a day-long celebration of the work of the Tempsford Squadrons which was held at Gording.

Close Encounter

There we were, minding our own business, heading home after a successful drop over Denmark, approaching the coast in bright moonlight and flying low as usual. I had often wondered about the German flak batteries along the coast and the height at which their shells exploded when they tried to shoot down low flying aircraft. Surely when an ack ack shell bursts the explosion results in a spray of metal through 360 degrees in all directions. Aren't the ack ack gunners likely to be hit by shrapnel?

Special Duties Squadron 161 of the RAF were specialists at low level flying and the squadron was heavily involved with the underground of Europe. The four engined Stirling bombers had no front gun turret (space required for the map reader) and no mid-upper (space required for passengers etc.) Hence low level flying in moonlight was the order of the "day"

Back to Denmark and as we crossed the coast we were hit. There was one heck of an explosion and the starboard outer burst into flames. A rather dicey situation with a fire so close to petrol in the wing tanks. During the course of other ops. we had witnessed aircraft blown to pieces when hit directly and others go down in flames.

Not nice to know when it appears your turn has come.

Our skipper, (S/Ldr. Les Madders DFC) told me to break wireless silence and send an emergency message. Every wireless op. was aware that some special frequencies had been reserved for emergency situations and had tuned into at least two of these frequencies which he had marked on the transmitter So it took little time to turn the dial and transmit the emergency letter. The first frequency I tried was already engaged but the second acknowledged immediately. So I gave F/S Len Lovett, the engineer, the thumbs up and he then informed the rest of the crew.

To go back to the explosion; a second before it happened I had noticed a light go upward past the port wing. Later other members of the crew also commented on the same thing. So it seems we had been straddled by the normal six ack ack guns. When, about a second or less later, the explosion occurred I can remember freezing - probably with an appropriate expletive when everything went quiet in my head and a voice distinctly said "You'll be alright." I swear that this is true. I had a guardian angel and high hopes of surviving the war.

Shortly after I had sent the emergency message the in-built fire extinguisher in the starboard outer put the fire out and we returned to our base at Tempsford on three engines. On leaving the aircraft we found that we had not been hit by an explosive shell. We had several feet of strong springy wire hanging from the starboard outer and this had wrapped around the prop and caused the explosion and fire. We assumed that the lights we saw were associated with lengths of wire.

When the rest of the squadron heard on the following day what had happened they accused us of flying too low as usual and stealing some poor farmer's fence wire. The incident was duly reported in official RAF publications---I mean what happened over Denmark, not what some ignorant personnel said!

Noel Gomersall A426578.

P.S .With regard to time frames mentioned above such as "shortly after" etc. I claim writers privilege. Actually I have no bloody idea to this day how quickly it all occurred.

How things have changed! (...or maybe not)

In a fine example of inter-service co-operation, the *Silver Wings* concert party put on a show as part of Merchant Navy Week and "Farm Sunday" in 1943. It seems, however, that the programme was not to the liking of some members of the audience, and letters of complaint were sent to the local paper (St. Neots Advertiser). It isn't certain precisely what people found so objectionable, (though the complainants give some fairly anodyne examples) but the organiser of the concert party, in his responses raises some thought-provoking points.

We reproduce here part of this correspondence:

From - Geo. Stuart

....." I must write to protest against the type of concert given in Russell Park on Sunday evening last in connexion with Farm Sunday. Let me say at once that the artists are talented, but their performances should be confined to week days. A young man giving an impression of a woman taking a bath, red-nosed comedians, and caricatures of clergymen do not present an edifying spectacle on the Sabbath." *From - Eddie Smith (organiser of the concert party)*

....."He says that earlier in the day people had gathered together to thank God for his providence and to pay tribute to the land workers. Does he think the members of the concert party are heathens? I might say that several of my party attended Holy Communion.....and do so each Sunday. We gave the show, as we do all others, free of charge in aid of a good cause, and had no thought of offending anyone. If the show was so vulgar and not fit for Sunday, why did Mr Stuart and the large audience stay and see it right through? Will my friend answer me this: if it is right for people to kill each other on Sunday, surely it is no sin to give a show in aid of charity on that day.If we are going to be so narrow-minded as my friend, what a grand New Order we are fighting for! No, let's get on with the war and give those who are working and fighting hard for victory and peace the enjoyment they deserve."

From - Frank Davies

....."I have known the Silver Wings Concert party a long time now, and they have no wish to tread other than the straight and narrow path. I have known these boys start rehearsals after I myself had given a show, continuing well into the early morning. Why? Because their leader, Mr Smith, who saw service in the last war, is brightening up the home front in this."

From - F L Phillips

....."Seated in our homes after coming from a place of worship we were obliged to hear (from the loud speakers) jokes that were far from refined, and also the imitation of air-raid sirens and of the screaming of bombs falling.Surely when our brave men are laying down their lives for us, it would have been more to the credit of those responsible to remember the Sabbath day and not profane it."

From - Eddie Smith

....."The members of the concert party thanked God in the morning on two occasions, and do so each Sunday. The writer was lucky to be seated in his or her home, while we of the concert party are stationed miles away from our homes.....please remember that those performing were members of His Majesty's forces. They were not lying back fat and contented and escaping the discomfort and discipline of Service life.all our work has been done for charity, and not to profane the Lord's name.we have raised just over £1,600 in eighteen months."



138 & 161 Special Duties Squadrons

Special then - Special now - Special always