



TEMPSFORD VETERANS AND RELATIVES ASSOCIATION

SPRING NEWSLETTER 2017



Bob's Diary

My thoughts as we enter a new year are mixed. 2016 was a year of highs and lows for me.



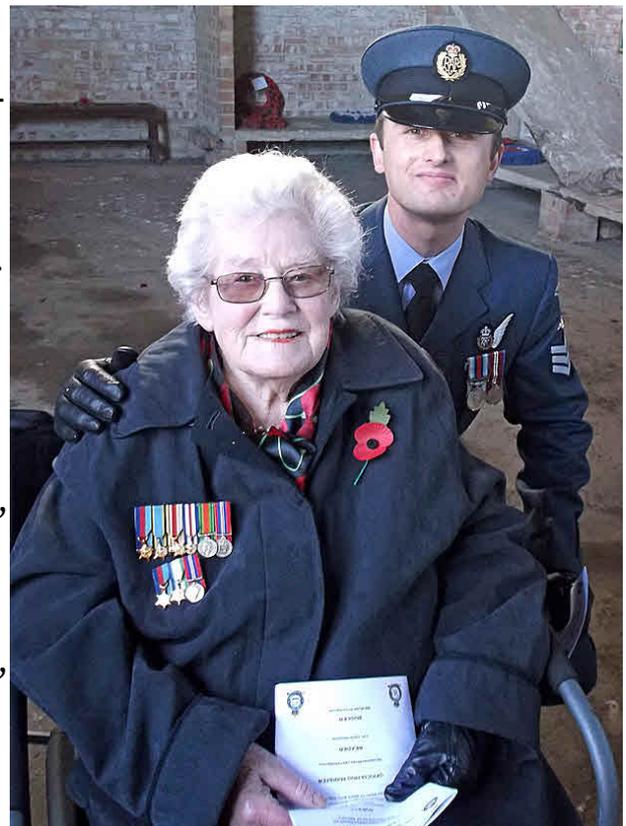
As reported in previous newsletters, we have lost several members of our TVARA "family" in the past year.

I have attended 3 funerals or memorial services for our members, and the number of surviving veterans is now quite small. We were delighted, therefore, that Ken Hazelwood (seen left with Yvette Pitt) was able to attend the Remembrance Sunday Service. Having a veteran present at the Service is very important for the rest of us and gives a focus to our remembering.

The year has not been all about sadness, however. We have been contacted during the past year by many families eager to find out about their relative's service at Tempsford, and it has been a privilege to be able to pass on information to them and to invite them to join the TVARA. Some have been able to attend events as a result.

Most recently, 95 year old Mary Brown was able to join us on Remembrance Sunday to honour her brother, Sgt Harry Minshull, who was killed in action in 1945. Mary had never previously been to Tempsford, and was accompanied by several members of her family, including her grandson, who is pictured with her here, in the Barn.

The Remembrance Sunday Service was well attended, as always - more than 90 of us sat down to lunch and enjoyed, afterwards, an extremely interesting talk given by Steve Wilkinson, cousin of S/Ldr Reg Wilkinson, 161 Squadron.

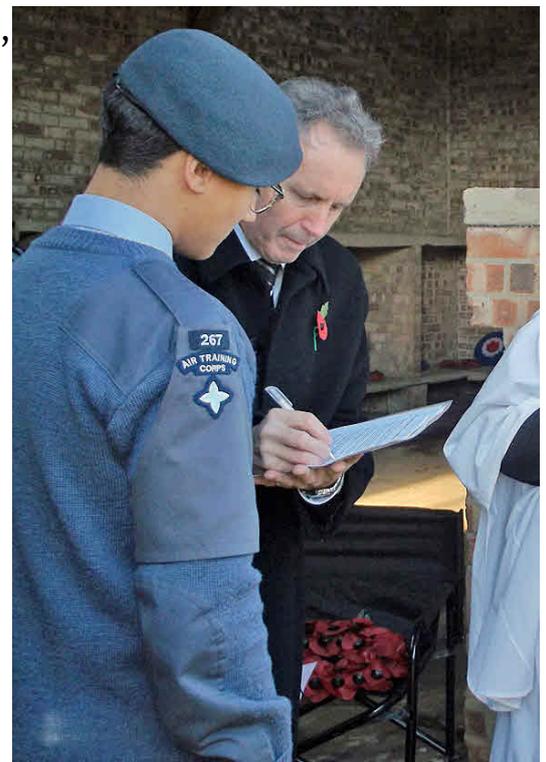




The wall of Remembrance - more wreaths and tributes than ever!

This has been a busy year for the TVARA, with 3 events taking place. It seems a good moment, therefore, to thank those who participate and those who do the “background” work which helps to make our gatherings successful.

Special thanks are due to Rev Margaret Marshall for taking the Remembrance Sunday Service, and Mark Stafferton, our bugler, who plays in the service in Sandy before coming to us; we are delighted, always, with the participation of the cadets from 2500 (St Neots) ATC Squadron.



One of the happiest aspects of the last year has been the presentation of the Legion d'Honneur to some of our surviving veterans. I think that the prize for the oldest recipient goes to New Zealander Naylor Hillary, who celebrated his 101st birthday in the summer. He is seen here being presented with his award by The Honorary French Consul in Christchurch, Mrs Martine Marshall-Durieux.



As far as we are aware, other than Naylor Hillary, the following Tempsford Personnel are/were recipients of the Legion d'Honneur.

Fred Bowman
Mike Gibbons
Bob Large
Len Ratcliff
Bill Stoneman
Tommy Thomas

If anyone knows of any others, please let us know, so that we can add their names to our records.

AIRCREW REMEMBERED

For many years, one of the people always in attendance on Remembrance Sunday has been Tom Vincent, who lays a wreath in memory of his brother, John, and his comrades.

John Vincent was killed on 3 June 1944, when the aircraft in which he was the rear gunner crashed onto the island of Tholen. All of the crew and two of the agents on board perished.

John (far right in the picture) had, previously, been fortunate to escape with his life from another crash, on 17 December 1943, in which four of the crew were killed. Tom Vincent wrote:



“The Halifax aircraft had flown out with a crew of 7 and 3 French SOE spies to drop over France. The drop was aborted due to the thick fog making it impossible to carry on. They returned to RAF Tempsford, but again the fog was so thick, they could not see to land. They were then diverted to Blackwater Bay in Essex where the aerodrome had ‘Fido’ - this was a channel of fuel set alight to disperse the fog. They could not see to land and the Pilot, Tommy, was told to set a course for the open sea and ditch the aircraft. The three French spies bailed out first and were rounded up quickly and safely by the British Police. John, my brother, and Bert Vick were next and they landed reasonably safely, but this was not the case with James Hannah aged 20, Tom Hawkes aged 21 and Robert Marshall aged 31 - drowned in the sea and their bodies were found and picked up by the Air Sea Rescue launch. Tom Lynch aged 20, his body was not found for three and a half months. The Pilot, Tommy, was the last to go and he landed in the sea in thick fog along side a fishing-boat who were pulling in their nets, when he plopped in the sea and as he did so, the fishermen pulled him into their boat.

John had his parachute on his chest as he went out head first in a blue clear sky, he watched the Halifax leaving him behind, he thought it was time to pull his rip-cord and as it opened it hit him under the chin, he then was lost in the thick fog and had no sense of movement - suddenly he hit the ground having just missed a five bar gate. He could see nothing and felt very cold and wrapped himself in his parachute. As time passed he heard the rattling of chains and as a farmer he realised the cows had been brought into a barn and were chained up for milking. He followed the sound and found the door to the barn, he opened it and stepped in - the farmer’s wife looked scared and thought he was a German airman. John explained he was an English airman and she was not to worry. He asked her to telephone the local Police to arrange for his collection.”

The three survivors attended the funerals of their friends. They then reformed a new crew with additional aircrew. In June 1944, with his tour finished, John was due to take up a post in training, and had married, thinking that the most dangerous part of his career was over. However, in the run up to D Day, all available crews were needed for operations. On 2 June, Halifax LL307 NF-J took off on Operations RODERIGO 1 & OSRIC 77, carrying the normal crew of 7 and 3 Belgian agents. Having dropped its containers, Halifax LL307 NF-J was seen, by an eye witness, being shot down over Tholen. One of the agents, Gaston Masereel, was the only survivor. He was arrested by Armenian troops of the Wehrmacht. The commander of Tholen island did not allow the bodies to be buried; they were left in place for three weeks, after which they were buried at the foot of a dyke. After the war they were recovered and reburied at Bergen-op-Zoom.

In a letter to John Vincent’s mother, Masereel later explained what had happened to him following the crash.

“We were three Belgians, Lt Stroobant, Lt Filot and myself. We were to be parachuted in Belgium. Our plane was attacked on the 3rd June, at about 0h.30. The fight must have been very short. I was wounded at the very beginning and I lost consciousness. I do not remember all the details of those tragic moments, and I must have jumped with my parachute being half-conscious. When I regained consciousness I was sitting in the water along the coast, just in front of Stavenisse and I was badly wounded. There was another fight in the course of which I managed to kill four Germans. I was wounded again but I tried to escape to the coast when I was finally captured. Being in civilian clothes, my quality of secret agent was discovered and I was to be shot on the spot without being sent to hospital as I should have been. I was kept in close confinement during two and a half months without clothes, practically without food and medical attendance. I was brought back to Brussels around about the 15th August 1944 for a further inquest and at the time of the German evacuation of Belgium the train in which I was and which was just leaving Brussels went slow enough to enable us to come back to Brussels during the afternoon of the 3rd Sept, at the time as the army of liberation. This is all I can tell you of this unhappy adventure. In 1945, I had the occasion to return to Stavenisse and I visited the place where my unfortunate companions had been buried. The inhabitants of the village are taking care of the tombs in a religious way, bringing flowers regularly. I hope to be in London this year and I shall not fail to pay you a visit when we talk about things in a more easy way than by letter.”

As with many of our members, this correspondence between Masereel and John Vincent’s mother shows very clearly how much importance the citizens of the occupied countries attached to the work of the Tempsford Squadrons, and how much they appreciated the sacrifice made in order to help the work of resistance groups. In 1949, John’s mother visited Bergen-op-Zoom, where the crew of Halifax LL307 NF-J are buried. She wrote of her experience:

“My host told me they did not mind how long or how hard they worked so that their country could recover. He said to me often when you mourn your son, think that he and others like him gave our Country back to us.

The Mayor of Stavenenisse took me to the Island where John’s plane crashed. He picked me up in his car - a modern English one and we crossed a newly built bridge from the mainland on to the Island. The farms were neat and trim with modern brick houses and teams of fine horses were at work. Women in native costumes waved from their doors and I said to the Mayor ‘I suppose they all know you’. He said in his quite good English - ‘No it is to you, they wave. They know you are the mother of one of our liberators’. I felt almost like Queen Victoria. I saw during the day one of the few bits of the island not covered with water, where our boys, though unknown by name by the Dutch people, had been buried, until after the war had ended, when they were taken to their final grave in the lovely Cemetery at Bergen-op-Zoom. I was told ‘we stood by and mourned them as we buried them as our own sons.’”



AGENT TRAINING

One of the final parts of an agent's training was to be sent on a "mission" somewhere in the UK and to achieve the goals of that mission without being detected. This might sound reasonably straightforward, but the local constabulary was informed that a "spy" was operating in its area, and clues to the identity of this person were "drip fed" to the police on a daily basis.

A Dutch agent, Len Mulholland, described this part of his training, and the novel method he used to keep "under the radar". Posing as a German spy, his task was to report on the harbour area of Liverpool and use this information to recommend to his "masters" the best time and place for the enemy to bomb it. He had to achieve this and not be caught before his assignment was complete. Len was given false ID papers, money and clothes and set off to Liverpool. He had no idea that Liverpool police would be looking out for a German spy in their area, or that his description and other details would be passed on in order to make it easier for them to find him.

Given that the first place police or anyone in authority would search to find possible spies would be hotels, Len decided to be creative; he made a deal with the madam of a brothel! By paying to forgo the "services" of the establishment he thus obtained a place to stay where he would be undisturbed for a few days. Given that a young man in civilian clothes who was obviously not working and snooping around the port would be viewed with great suspicion, this ruse was highly effective, as Len was not apprehended until the fourth day of his mission. The Chief of Police then phoned London to report that they had picked him up. What followed was an object lesson in what might be expected if an agent was caught by the Germans.

The Liverpool police were asked to interrogate Len and get as much information as possible out of him. He was interrogated almost continuously by different officers, with a bright light shining in his eyes throughout. From time to time he was returned to a totally bare, smelly cell in the basement. By the middle of the second day the police had still not managed to get Len to disclose any information, and were becoming extremely frustrated by his intransigence. They had found nothing incriminating on him, as he hadn't made notes, and had left his unfinished report under his mattress in his room at the brothel.

When the officer from London arrived to collect Len, the police were told that he was one of their "students" and were asked how much information they had been able to get out of him. He was delighted that they had been unsuccessful. When Len was brought up from the cell, he received an apology for the rough treatment, and was then congratulated on the successful completion of his assignment. He had left scribbled notes about the bottleneck of the railways around the port under his mattress at the brothel, but was able to write a detailed report from memory.

On the journey back to London he was asked how he had managed to keep his identity a secret from the local police. His "handler" found it hilarious, but was impressed with his ingenuity, and asked how he had come up with the idea. Len said *"it was obvious to me that the first place to check would be to look in the hotel registers. I couldn't think of any other place where I could stay undetected, and for very little money to boot! They always gave me a friendly 'hello' when I came in and never asked any questions!"*

Picture courtesy of Tangmere Museum



138 & 161 Special Duties Squadrons

Special then

Special now

Special always

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