



Tempsford

Veterans and Relatives

Newsletter

Summer 2008



Captain's Report

Although this newsletter is bi-annual, it certainly does not feel like six months since I was writing about the November service - time flies when one is having fun!

Somehow, we managed to arrange a day for the summer reunion which was mainly dry and, as appears to be the norm these days, a surprise or two in the proceedings.

Again our numbers are increasing - it was a pleasure to be able to welcome Ted Privett and John Ashcroft (members of Stan Sickelmore's crew) and Bill Gass (161 Squadron), together with even more relatives who are only just finding out about TVAR. When one thinks of how Bob started this some 8 years ago, with about 8 people at the first meeting one wonders how many more people are still looking for information and have yet to find us.

The night of 4th July was (eventually) a success, and something to be repeated (hopefully). The Wheatsheaf again proved a good venue for a meal and a chat; for both of these, I would like to thank both Steve and Pam for their work "on the ground" .

Details of the November service appear later, and I hope to see many of you there again.

Edwin Bryce

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For some, this year's Summer Gathering started a day earlier than on previous occasions. Following a suggestion that, as there was so little time to chat some people might like to arrive on the Friday and have an evening meeting. Local hotel details were distributed so that those who wished to do so could make bookings. A "private area" had been arranged at another local pub for veterans and relatives to meet in the evening.

On the Thursday evening the alarm was raised by Steve, who had discovered that the pub, with the meeting area, had closed down without telling him! Following a brief period of near panic, I'm very glad to say that Edwin managed to save the evening by securing an area in the "Crown" which, very conveniently, adjoined the hotel in which most of us were staying. Thanks also go to Steve for waiting at the "Anchor" to re-direct those whom we had not been able to contact about the change of venue.

I think that I can safely say that the few hours spent in the "Crown" were most enjoyable, but still seemed too short!



So - on to the day itself.....

The meeting on Saturday 5th July, was a very significant date both for me and TVAR.

It was on this day (5th July 1944) that my uncle, Flight Lieutenant Ian Menzies DFC, his crew and four Dutch agents left Tempsford for Holland, on operation FIVES 1. They were intercepted by a night-fighter, and all were killed. Had Ian returned, then I would not have started on the research which began 23 years ago and, as a result, TVAR (formerly Friends of Tempsford) would never have been born.

I would like to point out that this date was not chosen deliberately. Edwin picked it and it was, once again, one of those strange coincidences that keep happening.

A day of surprises

Once again, conditions of strict secrecy, as practised by all those who served at Tempsford, had been employed by the organisers of the day. The result of coded phone calls and "eyes only" emails was that not one, but two, presentations were to be made during the course of the day.

As at previous meetings, Edwin (Biggles*) Bryce opened the day with a short speech of welcome at the Barn.

In the Barn, a table had been set up, dressed with RAF flags, and the plaque to be presented to the Rev. Barbara Ebeling later in the day was displayed on it.



Really, this was a bit of camouflage for the first presentation.

Kenneth Tattersall, upon his arrival, was ushered to a chair beside the table.

Following his words of welcome, Edwin made reference to the significance of the date, 5th July, for a certain 161 Sqdn pilot who had hit power lines on his way to a drop that night in 1944. Whilst Edwin was talking, and Ken was watching him with an expression of realisation that he was the pilot in question, our "volunteer" presenter was uncovering the real reason for the table being there with Ken sitting next to it.

Harold Watson removed from their hiding place three bound volumes that contained not only the Battle Orders, Operations Record Book entries and copies of the hand-written Debriefing Reports, but also some reports from those on the ground. A little more information than that in his Log Book, which has the entries DCO (Duties Carried Out) or DNCO (Duties Not Carried Out).

* Get Edwin to explain!



Ken recalled the events of that night, 64 years ago, saying that, after hitting the power lines, his rear gunner announced over the intercom "my turret is shaking badly", to which Ken replied "so am I!"

After spending some time in the Barn and the Museum we all moved on to St Peter's Church in Tempsford, for a short service of thanksgiving and remembrance.

The service this year was made more special as the church bells rang out prior to the service, and a choir added strength to the singing.

This was Barbara's last service for the TVAR and, at the end of the service, the second presentation of the day took place. As the choir processed down the aisle, followed by Barbara, the organist.....set the ambush. He stopped playing, the choir stopped and turned round, watched by a somewhat bemused Barbara.

Edwin, on behalf of TVAR, thanked Barbara for her commitment to the organisation over the years, and for her thoughtful sermons. She was then presented, by Harold Watson, with the plaque, bearing the Crests of 138 & 161 Squadrons, and by Steve Harris with a beautiful bouquet of flowers.



It seems that the management of "covert ops" in the spirit of Tempsford still lives on!

Those were the days!

In the last issue of the newsletter, Stan Sickelmore gave us an insight into the Tempsford part of the Battle of the Bulge. I am delighted to say that in this issue we have not one, but two, personal experiences to share: from Harold Watson, a piece on the lighter side of life at Tempsford; from Stan, another article which helps those of us who were not there to understand a little more of what it was like to be involved in an operational drop.

Thank-you to both of you for sharing these memories. If anyone else has a memory which they would be willing to share, just get in touch with Edwin, Steve or me.

Tempsford at play

Some time ago Bob Body said "What about writing something for the Newsletter". I agreed and then sat down to think what to write about. How about a description of an SOE Operation – No, that's already covered in many books. What about the activities of those on the ground – No, that has already been covered many times. Then I remembered about three years ago when some young ATC lads from 161 Scottish ATC Squadron visited one of our meetings at Tempsford and the most frequently question they put to Ron Morris and me was "What did you do when you were not flying on operations? That's it!

Our crew arrived at Sandy Railway Station on a very wet Sunday afternoon at the end of June 1944. We were met by a WAAF driver whose name was Paddy and who was to become the crew's mascot. From then on she took us out to our aircraft and picked us up on our return from every trip except the last. This often meant her changing shifts at the last minute, but she also accompanied us on our trips to Sandy and to Bedford. It was stated that she was the only WAAF with seven boy friends but this was changed to six when the rear gunner met a WAAF from the Sergeants Mess. Paddy always expressed a desire for a white roll neck sweater, which was issued to aircrew, and we 'found' one for her – much to the annoyance of other WAAF drivers.

Entertainment on Camp was limited, mainly comprising the Station Cinema, which generally changed programmes twice a week, but the films were rather out of date by the time they reached us. Of course there were the Officers and Sergeants Messes, both of which boasted anterooms and full-size billiard and snooker tables.

Crews tended to go off station and ours in particular favoured the Red Lion Public House in Sandy (now demolished and the site of a supermarket). Transport was non-existent so one had to walk or borrow a bicycle. After a short time the crew decided to invest in a car and a member of the crew was delegated to obtain one. One evening he burst into the Mess saying that he had got one and to come outside and see it. It was good goer he said and had been well looked after. I went outside in time to see the farmer unhitching the horse from the front of it, and as for being a goer it had not gone for many years! It had two seats in the front and two 'Dickey' seats that appeared when one opened the boot. The next remark was " You're the Engineer and can fix anything ". To which I replied, "You do not need an Engineer but a Magician". With the help of the ground crew and the blacksmith in Everton –who manufactured parts for us, we were able to get it going. After this it was nothing unusual to see it 'tearing along the road' full out at 25 mph with about 9 or 10 people draped over it. As for coming up the hill from Sandy, it was some out and push. Road

Tax or Insurance they did not exist but three of us did have driving licences. It was very temperamental and we did not stray any further than Biggleswade with it. It was always advisable not to leave a bus route.

Mentioning the Red Lion brings back memories of our crew landing in trouble. In the back room of the Red Lion was an old piano and in those days I could torture a song out of it, and as a result the landlord saw that we were never short of a drink. Once he organised a visit to the Brewery at Biggleswade where refreshments were laid on – liquid, of course, and he also organised the transport. When we returned to Camp in the early hours of the morning we had to call in the Mess and we carried on our celebrations with me on the piano. Suddenly I was conscious of the fact that white liquid was coming from out of the spaces between the keys and on looking up saw our Australian wireless operator emptying a fire extinguisher into the top of the piano. Next morning the crew had to appear before the Station Commander who demanded who was responsible, but no one admitted being the culprit. Punishment – two weekends duty crew.

The Station boasted a bus, which went into Bedford every evening and at lunchtime at the weekends. It was an old Albion with gate gears and Flight Engineers and Ground crew Engineers were most welcome on board as it was always breaking down. It was also known for a volunteer driver having to be found to get the bus back to Camp as the official driver was in no state to drive. BBC Studios were situated in Bedford having been evacuated from London and audiences were made welcome. There were pleasant Cinemas and of course many pubs, though one tended to give the Silver Grill a wide berth as it was the home of the USAAF. There was a small Café close to the Bunyan Bridge, which our crew frequented. We were always escorted in to the back dining room for Mixed Grills etc. Where the meat came from one did not ask. One problem was that if we took any WAAFs out with us they had to be back in their Camp by a certain time. However the problem was soon overcome as a shortcut was found through Everton Church yard leading to a gap in the hedge which in turn lead to a small footpath, which went round the perimeter of the WAAF Site. Somehow a hole had appeared in the wires, which on being moved was sufficient to smuggle the girls in. One evening after having smuggled one girl through the gap we were met by the Queen Bee (WAAF Senior Officer) who in a stern voice said “ Flight Sergeants you should know better.” The girls were not punished and the practice continued.

Service Canteens were to be found in the larger villages and word soon got around where the best food was to be found. In Tempsford there was a lady who had made her front room into a small café and she made the most delicious rock cakes ever known. (She also had a very nice daughter)! I was a frequent visitor to her café and over the last years have attempted to locate it without success. However this last July, with the aid of two wartime inhabitants of Tempsford, I was successful but the lady and her daughter have passed on and the house considerably changed.

I was a member of the infamous Witt Crew, led by a pilot who did not suffer fools gladly and was often at loggerheads with the Senior Officers of the Squadron. We consisted of five Englishmen, an Australian and a New Zealander and we worked hard and played hard and as a result had a reputation in the Squadron - but that is a story for another day.

Harold Watson

Norway By Moonlight.

My memories of operating with 138 Special Duty Squadron from Tempsford, are of an unusually quiet airfield. Not because it wasn't a busy place, but it was a very secret place. We had very few visits from high ranking officers or politicians. We were not allowed to talk freely about any aspect of our work to anybody. The local people knew nothing of what we did. Another reason was that our aircraft, Short Stirlings Mk IV's were powered by Bristol Hercules XVI air cooled radial engines. They were sleeve valve engines and so were remarkably quiet. A distinct advantage when flying low over enemy territory. Thirdly we operated individually to different targets at varying times, so that there were rarely a great gaggle of aircraft staring up and taking off at the same time.

Since I joined the squadron I had completed five operations to France, two to Belgium, one to Denmark and now I was to do the first of five to Norway.

On 30th. September 1944, I and my crew were called for a briefing. Our task was to drop supplies to a group of Norwegian Resistance Fighters at a place called Honefoss a few miles northeast of the Telemark area, codename Crupper 9. The meteorological officer forecast clear skies all the way. The SOE officer briefed us on latest information of the defences in the area, and the code letters and colours that would be signalled to us by the reception group. Having planned our route we went down to dispersal to do our various checks on the aircraft, and discuss any problems with our maintenance crew.

At 21:44 that night S for Sugar slipped quietly into sky and turned north at 1500 feet. Once over the sea our Rear Gunner Bill Dennison tested his guns, the Dispatcher, George Stevenson checked the supplies ready for the drop, while our Flt/Engineer, Ted Privett, kept an eye on the fuel and engine instruments. Harry Richards our Navigator steered us across the North Sea, while Bob Anderson the Radio Officer monitored the air waves. John Ashcroft, our Bomb Aimer/map reader, kept a sharp lookout for shipping and of the approach to the Norwegian coast. As we approached the Skagerrak, with the coast of Jutland away to our right, I descended to about 150 feet. We crossed the coast at Kristiansand, climbing to just above the mountain tops. Everything was covered in snow, which was quite blinding in the full moonlight. It looked very beautiful, but also bleak and forbidding. Johnnie, with his usual accuracy, guided us to the rendezvous, which was just near the northern tip of a frozen lake. The waiting resistance group flashed the code, two whites and a red, plus the correct letter. We therefore completed the drop of twelve containers from the bomb bay and twelve large packages from the fuselage hatch, pushed out by the dispatcher and the R/O. Having watched them floating down on their chutes, we turned for home at about 02:30.

We were just crossing the coast when the rear gunner called that a Messerschmit 110 was approaching fast from astern. I can't remember our altitude but we were flying just above the mountain tops, so we were probably at about 3000 feet. I pushed the nose down, into a steep dive, and opened the throttles fully. My intention was to get as low over the sea as possible, as fast as possible. I pulled out of the dive at between 50 and 100 feet keeping the speed at maximum. We lost the fighter, so I eased off the power and continued low over the water. During the dive we had reached a speed of 375mph, which was 65mph above the absolute limit for the aircraft. All four engines had over heated but were now under control and within limits. We were safe, or so we thought!! A few minutes later we

were in the middle of a stream of light anti-aircraft fire which was coming from a flak ship that we had failed to see. They were often positioned off the Danish coast, and frequently moved around so that it was impossible to forecast their positions. Due to our low altitude and still fairly high speed, the arc of fire from the ship was short and we were clear within a few seconds. We suffered no hits.

We continued back to Tempsford, landing at 06:50, after a flight of just over nine hours. We debriefed, had some breakfast, and went off to bed. We later found that we were not very popular with the engineer section, who'd had to change all four engines after my rather rough treatment.

However, as I pointed out, we still had an operational aircraft and crew who had survived to fly it again.!!

Stan Sickelmore

Remembrance Sunday

The Remembrance Sunday Service is the next occasion on which we will meet. The gates to the airfield will be open at 09:30, and we suggest that people assemble at the Barn for 11:45, with the service due to start just after 12:00. The museum will be open for those who wish to view. Arrangements for a meeting in a local pub are under way; details of where, when and refreshments available will follow once they have been finalised. Some people may, as in July, wish to come down the day before and stay at a local hotel. The one we used in July was the Premier Inn at Eaton Scoton - 0870-9906314 for bookings. Edwin and, hopefully, Steve will be in the bar of the adjacent pub (The Crown) at around 19:00 and will look forward to a chance to have a chat before the event on Sunday.

Medals

May I remind people that there has been a discussion about the wearing or not wearing of medals. As this will be a "military" occasion, those attending who are/were in the Services should wear their medals. Some of the "civilians" attending may have the medals of their relative, and it is quite in order for them to wear these (on the right breast) should they so wish. Personally, I would encourage this, as a mark of respect to the relative.

Bob Body



138 & 161 Special Duties Squadrons

Special then - Special now - Special always