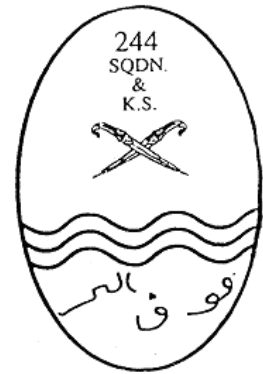




244 SQUADRON & KINDRED SPIRITS ASSOCIATION



Newsletter No. 10

Report From Secretary At long last the lapel badges have arrived (courtesy of Alan Summerbell Mem. No.134). We are most pleased with them. For those members who have ordered and already paid for them, your badge is enclosed. Members who now require a lapel badge, should now forward £2.25 to Jim (cheques made out to 244 Squadron & Kindred Spirits Association). As regards other items, i.e. Plaques (£20), Blazer Badges (£15) and Ties (£10), we are still taking orders for these. (All orders to Jim as above). Many thanks to members for the copy we are receiving for inclusion in our Newsletters. Please keep sending it along.

Report From Treasurer I think you will agree that Winter seems to be past. Our thoughts are now centred on the 1995 Reunion. Already we have a number who state their intention of arriving at Southport, 1995. Lets make No.3 a Bumper Reunion!

Back to earth, we still have some 16 members who have not paid their 1994 Subs. Jim will put a note in this Newsletter to let you know if it is you! All those who have paid for '94 should have had a membership card.

I am afraid I am rather behind with my correspondence (as we both are). Please be patient, keep the letters flowing. I will do my best to answer them all. All the very best to you all, from both of us.

Memories of Habbaniya

"An island set 'midst silver sands, this camp of ours Habbaniya stands. A monument to Britain's might, a will to wage and win the fight" etc. etc.

Thus it was at Habbaniya, April-May 1940. G.E.S. Billet D11. D. West. A fair mix of trades in our billet. 'Chippys' (No, not the Harry Ramsden's variety!), M.T., Metal bashers and office types.

Regular working hours, early start, early finish. 11.30 a.m. in Summer, a bit later in Winter. 'Charp' in the afternoon, followed by the usual. Swimming bath, tennis, football, cards (Solo mostly - hours on end!). Boating on the lake if you were affluent enough to own one.

All this went on smoothly until twelve months later, when Rashid Ali put his spoke in! Up to this time the war could have been a million miles away for all it affected us. But suddenly, here it was, right on top of us! Hitler had just taken Crete, and Habbaniya was next on his list (for the OIL of course).

For a few days we had all been watching the Iraqi army coming up, and settling down on the plateau (no binoculars needed, they were quite close). Lorries, big guns, men, the lot! It was all bluff of course, a big joke really. How could they attack us? We were Great Britain, they wouldn't dare!

At 0500hrs, May 2nd, 1941, I was on duty up at the hospital grounds with three other lads (we were a machine gun crew). When suddenly (as quoted in "The siege of Habbaniya") "Five Wimpeys hove in sight, they'd journey'd up from Shaibah, been travelling half the night, eighteen 250 pounders had each of them on board, and they dropped them very neatly, amongst the Iraqi hoardes"! Who, by now, were surrounding the camp. Simultaneously, things were happening around us. Screeching, thuds, clouds of sand, dust and smoke! "Bloody Hell" The Iraqis were shelling us!

Daily, the Fiat CR42's, with the odd Heinkel 111 or two came over, dropping their lot on us. They were nearly always followed by low-flying Messerschmitt 109's, strafing us as soon as the bombers left. We soon got used to this, and kept well out of the way. No air-raid shelters or owt like that here, a few sandbags placed around us was the best we could do. Work went on as usual, but you'd keep eyes on D.R.O.s to see if you were down for any other duty. For example, one day I would be working in the Carpenter's shop. The next day I'd be on a gun-crew at some part of the camp. Another day I would be sent up to 4 E.F.T.S, one of our Fairy Gordons or Avro Ansons had been 'shot-up', and needed repair. Some of the repairs I did would not had got me my 'City and Guilds'! Plywood, or a bit of fabric or linen (doped over) and held in place by tacking strips. No matter, as long as they could get the 'Kites' airborne again! To quote once again:- "We sent up our old Gordons, museum pieces these, and with our Hart and Audax, brought Ali to his knees".

It wasn't long before help arrived in the form of the Kings Own (Lancs.) Rifles plus a dozen or so Ghurkas. Glubb Pasha's Camel Corps were also to be seen. Previously, two big guns (3.7s from WWI)- purely ornamental, were parked outside the Officer's Mess. In short order the Army had these guns in working order, and banging away at the enemy. Soon after this fracas started, we (the chippys') got orders to construct half a dozen 'dummy guns'. Having made these guns, (imagine 6ft x 6ft square boxes - painted black, with a barrel of some sort poking out 10ft from one side). These were placed strategically around the camp. The two real guns were then towed to each of these sites. A couple of shells were fired, before moving onto the next site. This gave the impression that all these sites were active.

Every airman was well armed (!) A .303 SMLE with two clips (10 bullets) plus bayonet. Air V/M. Smart had it worked out precisely:- 1000(?) men = 10,000 bullets - should be enough to cope with 8/10,000 Iraqis advancing on Habbaniya! During this time we ate and slept the best way we could. Fortunately, the cookhouse escaped damage, so you got a meal when you were free to do so. You'd go for days without seeing your mates. Everyone seemed to be occupied. When you did get back to the billet, at first it seemed deserted, until someone spoke up from no-where - they were all sleeping on the floor, under the beds!! The 'Bisquits', as we called them were on top of the beds, as protection against stray shrapnel.

It only lasted short of a month, but someway or other, we held out. When you come to think of it, from then on, it was the turning point of the War. Had Habbaniya fallen, Hitler would have control of the OIL, and to all intents the war would have been lost! Not long after this, when normality returned, a notice appeared, stating a Staging Post was to be established down the Gulf at a place called Sharjah. Volunteers were required, and thus it was I found myself boarding the S.S. Baroda at Basra (24/8/42), bound for Sharjah. That's another story!

Bob Norcott (mem. No.39) get some in! Otley. Yorkshire.

News from Masirah (from your resident correspondent)

Jim has asked me to write something for your Newsletter, so I thought I would let you know what I have found from the 244 Squadron era. First, A Bristol Mercury engine (from Bisley. ED.) which had obviously been involved in a serious accident. Some of the cylinders had been knocked off. It had a maker's identification plate on it, but it had been removed. I know who has it, and can supply details, and even get hold of the plate, if anyone is interested.

Also, there are two Bristol Hercules engines and parts of a Wellington undercarriage on a smallish island off the mainland immediately to the West of the airbase here. The small island is about a mile north to south, and half a mile wide. The propellers are still on the engine, one feathered, and the other obviously under power when the aircraft touched down. There are some fishermen's shacks and enclosures on the island, and some aircraft structures have been incorporated in them. But there is no sign of the airframe. I can produce photos if anyone is interested.

I have poked around where I think your accommodation was, but there is very little sign of anything much. Immediately South of the 'Black Hills' are some concrete foundations, and an enclosure made of cylindrical drums, much corroded, but obviously smaller than the present day standard 44 gallon drum. There is even a very rusty 4 gallon can filled with concrete. Close by are a couple of Palm trees which must have been planted when the site was in use. (not in my day! - ED.). There are bits of broken china, one of them has 'EIRR Grindley 1952' written on the underneath. (So the site may have been started after your time).

Jim indicated that your accommodation was a little further South, where the Black Hills to the West are not so high, and there is a larger black hill to the East. There is the odd concrete foundation here, but the rubble lying around is old breeze blocks, some plastered, and the plaster painted blue. There is also a small water tank. Locals had their shacks here in 1976 when I first arrived. So what I have found may be due to them.

The Wali Camp is now reasonably civilised, and an hotel is being built.

Anyone like to come and stay?

Colin Richardson (mem. No.125) - Masirah Island.

'The Coin That Will Not Die' (By an American War Correspondent [Circa 1944])

Travelling from country to country, most war correspondents find themselves becoming coin collectors. Oddest coin in my collection is the 165-year-old Maria Theresa thaler, which is somewhat larger than an American silver dollar, and weighs 433 grains, with 360 grains of pure silver.

I picked it up on Masirah Island, undoubtedly the most desolate base in the Air Transport Commands whole world-flung net of airfields-also one of our two air bases over which the American flag never flies.

About twenty miles off the Saudi Arabian coast, Masirah is a bleak, barren sand strip, thirty-six miles long and nine miles wide, flat as a beach except for scattered volcanic hills. Monsoon winds blow steadily over the island, preventing it from getting unbearably hot, but also keeping the rain away. In fifteen months, a sergeant said, it rained just twice, each time for about ten minutes.

The winds whip up sandstorms regularly-I had mine for lunch. Drinking water has to be distilled from the sea and all supplies are flown in. Since local building materials are lacking, all the structures on the island have been put together by ingeniously filling five-gallon petrol tins with sand and plastering the tins, row on row, like bricks. The one compensation of living on Masirah is fishing. Some soldiers salvaged a lifeboat from a torpedoed freighter, put an engine on it, and catch king-fish, barracuda, tropical salmon and deep-sea bass.

Masirah's importance lies in its being the best refuelling spot breaking the 1600- mile flight between Aden in Saudi Arabia and Karachi in India. Masirah is owned and governed by the Sultan of Muscat and Oman, an Oxford graduate and rather jealous of his prerogatives. He consented to our having air bases at Masirah and Sallala, on the Arabian coast, only on condition that no foreign flag fly over his land, neither British nor American. Last Fourth of July, however, several Americans furtively ran up an American flag, saluted it hastily and whipped it down. Another of the sultan's conditions requires that all native labourers, whom he provides under an indenture system, be paid in Maria Theresa thalers. The natives will accept no other medium of exchange, regarding both the British pound and the American dollar with suspicion. This has nothing to do with the soundness of the governments in question, since the Hapsburg Empire, which minted the first Theresa thalers back in 1780, disintegrated into the ashes of history long ago. Not only at Masirah but all through the Middle East, in Ethiopia, Arabia, Somaliland and the Sudan, many natives will take only thalers. The British, French, Italian and Belgian governments have minted the coins, always with the original date of 1780 on them.

Secretary:- Jim Heslop

Treasurer:- Don James