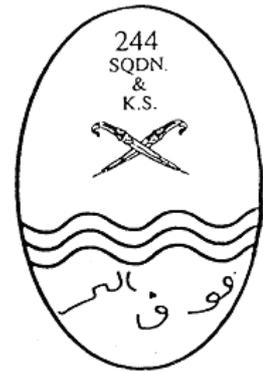




244 SQUADRON & KINDRED SPIRITS ASSOCIATION



Newsletter No. 11

Jim Says From all the correspondence we receive here, letting us know all your news, both good and bad. It seems that 244 & K. S. is not just an Association, but part of an extended family. That is how it should be, as we are all joined with a common bond. Having served both on the ground, and in the air in a most inhospitable area, whilst enduring most Spartan conditions.

We have now reached halfway point between Reunions, and pretty soon, Don and I will commence operations towards Southport 1995. We have already had quite a number of members who have signified their intention of turning up. As we know, accommodation at the Scarisbrick is limited. All of those who wish to stay at this Hotel, should now reserve their rooms (forward a small deposit, say £10 per person to Don please!). As regards the retail side, we still have plaques (£20), blazer badges (£15), ties (£10) and lapel badges (£2.25) in stock. A new line has now appeared. These are leather bookmarks (£2.50). They consist of an aircraft (either Vincent, Bisley or Wimpey) flanked by two Association badges - they are most attractive. (Don immediately filched the Vincent sample). All orders to Jim. State aircraft required, if ordering bookmarks.

We still need copy for future Newsletters. Come on, you budding journalists, Keep sending it in!

Don Says Here we are three quarters through the year. We will soon have to think about Subs again, as they are due on 1st January next. The good news is that they are still £5.00. When you send your £5, also enclose your membership card, so I can update it and return. Whilst talking about Subs, there are still a couple of you who have yet to pay for 1994. I am asking Jim to put a note with this Newsletter to those concerned.

My Ledgers are now ready for 1995 Reunion. You can send your deposits when you like (the sooner the better!). You will remember we have to guarantee 100 beds in order to obtain the Isherwood Suite at the Scarisbrick.

The letters still arrive from all around the world, Australia, Canada, South America, Spain and Ireland. I think we have managed to put the Association on the Map. I had one letter from Australia, where a Grandfather proudly wore his Association tie to his grandson's wedding! Personally, I find that the one thing that causes interest is the lapel badge. It is really excellent, and there are still some available.

A CATERPILLAR BADGE FOR A FIIE.

I must explain as to why I was a Fitter IIE (Flying). At Comm Flight Habbaniya, we flew all over the Middle East, and used to land at all manner of 'God forsaken spots'. Consequently, we carried nearly always, an engine fitter, as in the Blenheim. Also, when there was room, a rigger was on board, responsible for refuelling, D.I's and problems.

On this occasion we were down the Gulf We had just taken off from Shaibah, bound for Habb. Suddenly, the port engine started cutting out. After strenuous efforts by the pilot we landed o.k. After composing himself, the pilot said that he and the w/op would cadge a lift back to Habb, and leave me to fix the engine.

I won't go into how long I was at Shaibah, and the trouble in locating the fault. The end result was that both engines had to be changed. Then, one day I was told to report to Shaibah Control Tower. A crew had arrived to fly the aircraft back to Habb. There was Jackie Earnshaw our w/op (Member No. 145), a LAC (FIIF) like myself, and the pilot, a Canadian, F/O MacKnight. He had only recently being posted to Comm Flight.

I remarked to our pilot that it was a bit late in the day to get to Habb. before nightfall, but he didn't like the look of Shaibah. So off we went in the Blenheim. All went well until it got dark. The radio then packed in (could transmit, but not receive). We then got lost. A small town was sighted, which we circled (found out later it was Hilla). Next we saw what we thought was an airstrip lit up. We approached, but it was a road and a bridge!

Real trouble now hit us! The exhaust ring on the starboard engine burst. Flames were going inside the engine nacelle and out of the cooling flaps. Not a pretty sight! The pilot gave the order to bale out. We had no Intercom, so I crawled over the mainspar to tell the w/op to transmit what we were about to do - and go! He did, and went! ! (Not at all pleased).

Now, my turn. I was sitting on the tip up seat beside the pilot. Every time I put the seat up, it fell down again. I was so mad with it, I can remember this quite clearly - I tore the seat off the side of the fuselage! Next move - open the hatch, which dropped away o.k. All this I am doing with one hand firmly grasping the ripcord (following the pilot's instructions not to let go of it, for if I did, I would probably not find it when I was falling). The next thing - get out! I decided to go feet first, but as soon as my legs were out, the slipstream clamped them to the belly of the aircraft! I then came back in, stuck my head and shoulders out, and kicked myself away. I counted to ten (pilot's instructions). I defy anyone to count to ten faster than I did that night!

I made a good landing, being pitch dark helped! Then started walking and shouting. All I got in reply was a shot! I dropped the 'chute and ran. Only a short way and 'Whoops!' I was up to my hips in a water-filled ditch! Anyway, after jumping on a wall to avoid some dogs, who had taken a dislike to me, I finished up in a native village for the night. They wouldn't take me to Hilla in the dark. They made 'cut throat' signs!

So, via Hilla, to an army camp. Where the RSM gave me plenty of Whiskey. A train to Baghdad, a car to Habb, I returned to my Unit.

P. S. I still have the ripcord.

PPS. I don't think any of us had a 'ghody chit' I know I didn't!

Lofty (Mem. No. 114).

'WINGS OVER THE PIPELINE' 18th May 1941

We had a Hurricane up at Lydda that needed some more film and we, back at base at Heliopolis, needed to collect the films he took on a sorti the previous day. That was the way we worked it in No. 2 Photographic Reconnaissance Unit in the Middle East. We had a little Lockheed Electra which acted as a tender, I was detailed that day to take some more film up to Lydda and bring the exposed magazines back for processing and interpretation back at base. It was a pleasant trip, it took just over the two hours to get there and we landed and taxied up to Flying Control where I saw our Hurricane was parked. I would normally have had a bit of a natter, checked to see that all was going well, then shoved off back to Heliopolis with the exposed film. But today it was different, all Hell was breaking loose, or quite a lot of it! A Blenheim from 14 Squadron had just swung badly on takeoff, had run into a steamroller half way down the runway decapitating the driver and bending its undercarriage a little more than somewhat.

Under normal circumstances I would not have felt that this incident had anything to do with me, but the passenger in the Blenheim was A.V.M. D'Albeck trying to get to Habbaniya to relieve A.V.M. Smart, and the next thing I knew was being introduced to the great man by my C.O. with the words "Of course Walker will take you over to Habb.. We'll just collect your cases!". I was about to turn round to my C.O. and say, words to the effect that Walker bloody wouldn't take anybody over to Habb.., because he had a date in Cairo that night, when the A.V.M. said, "That's very good of you, by the way I have an Iraqi Major with me, there will be room for him too won't there?" Well, Hell, what's a girl to do??

So we refuelled and packed all the luggage, got the passengers on board and took off for Habbaniya. I had never been to Habb.., in fact, I had no idea where it was or how to get there. For security reasons nothing about the troubles they were having with Rashid Ali had been allowed to leak out, but the urgency over the A.V.M.'s movement struck me as being a little odd. I had a quick conflagration with the Blenheim pilot who gave me his map of Habb.., and told me to get over the Jordan and pick up the oil pipeline at Mafraq and follow it through to Rutbah and straight on to Habb.., by the lake on the edge of the cultivation. Seemed easy enough so off we went over the river Jordan and northish for Mafraq. Before we reached Mafraq we could see the oil pipeline stretching out across the desert in a dead straight line, mile after mile into the haze. So we settled down to follow it. After a

couple of hours I began to realise that we were plugging away into a pretty stiff headwind, and when we passed the pumping station at Rutbah I began to have serious doubts whether we would have enough fuel to reach Habb.. However, my map showed me that there was an airfield at Ramadi, so I went back to the A.V.M., and told him that for safety reasons I was going to land at Ramadi to top up the fuel. He reacted very strongly against this, and, later on, I could see why, for as we turned right off the pipeline to head for Habb., we were within a mile or two of Ramadi and there, dispersed round the airfield perimeter, I could clearly see Heinkel 111's and some Fiat CR42's - what the hell were they doing there???

We learned later, when we got a fuller picture of the local situation, that we were witnessing the sharp tip of the left arm of the massive pincher movement that Hitler had conceived, Rommel coming up from the south through Palestine and the European Armies coming down from the north through Russia. Stalingrad and El Alamein put paid to that. We landed at Habb., with about 4 gallons of petrol left in the tanks, so it was a near thing.

I was immediately collared by the Evacuation Section who wanted to know how many Levy families I could take back to Palestine with me the next day. I settled for 8 seats.

I have many memories of Habb., irrigation ditches, avenues of greenery, the damp fresh smell of the place before the sun got up, endless opportunities for all kinds of sport, and above all, the feeling that you were on a R.A.F. Station even though you were bloody miles from anywhere. However, I do have a very powerful first impression from that first visit - I walked into the Mess and went to wash my hands and found myself peeing on the glazed-in fly of a genuine Shanks Urinal - I wonder if you remember them?? And I thought how on earth had they managed to get them out here twenty odd miles from Baghdad.

The next morning I went down to the aircraft, hidden safely behind a hangar from the prying eyes of Rashid's Boys up on the escarpment, and found my Fitter, LAC Bissett, struggling with about 20 assorted Levy families all wanting a seat. We picked 10 and sent them off to have a pee! After all, why use and Elsan when the floor is available. We took off for the return trip, and after about ten minutes I had to send Bissett back to get them into their seats again because they were all sitting in a circle in the entrance area by the door and the aircraft was so damned tail-heavy that it would hardly fly. However, all went well after that and we dropped them off at Amman, where they were claimed by relatives, and we went back to Lydda.

I was back at Habb., in July/August 1941 with a flight of our Hurricanes photographing the Persian Oil Wells, pipelines and general oil distribution - so maybe we were getting our fingers out!!!

R.G. Walker (Mem. No. 91),

AIR VICE MARSHALL'S DO NOT KEEP PETS.

The pilot lowered himself gently from the cockpit, missed the stirrup, and continued on his merry way through the Gladiator's fabric mainplane. It was my very first job as an aircraft rigger, and it was Communications Flight, Habbaniya. Being responsible for my own aircraft was not easy to accept for a technical misfit who believed religiously in left-handed screwdrivers, steam by the yard, striped paint, sky hooks and the Golden Rivet. And it seemed that Sergeant Metcalfe had blown his tiny mind when he gave me charge of the A.O.C. Middle East's personal Gladiator, a job not for the faint hearted.

Air Vice Marshal Champion de Crespigny was a fearsome figure, with a huge handlebar moustache that we swore contained throttles. When he drove down the dusty road to the hangar it reminded one of Charlton Heston driving a team of four. He usually gave 3-4 hours' notice of his intention to fly, ample time for us to each kick the tyres and dance around the aircraft like braves around the chiefs tepee.

The usual cloud of dust heralded his approach, and with a 'Two-Six!' (why not 10-4, or 4-7-11, I never knew), we wheeled the immaculate bi-plane out into the melting pot atmosphere that was midday Habbaniya. We faced it towards the airfield gate so that he would not have to turn into his own dust. We had even painted the chocks. Regulation tepee at the correct angle - dead straight! - I helped him on with his parachute. Overhead, a solitary bird descended gracefully in ever-decreasing circles as Charlton de Crespigny checked the exterior of his chariot.

We watched in open-mouthed fascination as the bird, known in Indian parlance as Heap Big Shy Talk, peeled off and went into its finals. Then, mouths closing with a series of 'clops', we watched it discard its breakfast, aiming deliberately at the larger bird below, obviously with recycling in mind. Just as the A.V.M., located the stirrup to help him climb aboard, two trickles meandered lazily from a three-inch diameter pat on the upper

mainplane. (Would you accept the top wing?). As his fingers curled around the hand-grip, ready to 'humph' himself into the cramped cockpit, he saw it, already baking in the noonday sun, giving the appearance of having been there for weeks. He fixed one bulging eyeball on it for a full two seconds before going into reverse and dropping sack-like to the ground. With a thump that would have floored Joe Louis he released his parachute, then dumped it on the tailplane with an even louder thump that made every rigger within twenty yards wince.

His driver had backed up the car to within three strides of the aircraft. On the first stride, the right handlebar came into view as he barked "Wash the aircraft!". On the second stride, "I'll be back in one hour!". And on the third, a view of the left handlebar as he turned to get into the car, as came the unkindest cut of all, "And put the rigger on a charge!". The stunned silence was broken by a pale-faced Sergeant Metcalfe. "Wheel it back inside then". With not a word, three riggers, one fitter, and six Arab coolies pushed the creaking warrior into the hangar. As the sergeant lowered the tail-tiller to the floor, he said to me what a sergeant had to say, "You, my friend, are on a charge".

The Glad., went off on the second try, with dark thoughts making each tug on the chocks feel like forced labour. The salutes from the wingtips were cold and void of feeling. I could have sworn Jack Davies did an eyes right into his salute, bringing his thumb to his nose by accident.

War is hell, I thought. But the A.V.M., proved he was as soft-centred as the rest of us when he quashed the charge the next day, and I thought the war had taken a turn for the better when in a few days' time I was assigned to the A.O.C's new Fairchild Argus, truly a 'Rover with wings'. The fitter ran it up just inside the partly open hangar door as the familiar cloud of dust approached. As the car drew up we opened the doors just wide enough for the Argus. The A.V.M., tossed two observer-type harnesses and two chutes on to a ledge behind the seats, and the attentive Sergeant Metcalfe closed the door after him. He ran it up, throttled back, and reopened the door, "Where's the rigger?", he bellowed. The others froze as I reached the door in a movement that wouldn't have looked out of place in a Tom and Jerry cartoon. My mind was in overdrive, "now what?", was my first natural thought. Then, in quick succession, came, "Not an oily rag on the stick, please", and, as I saw the NAAFI wagon retreating up the dusty track, "Oh God, no! I didn't leave my wad on his seat!". I snapped him up one of my favourite, quivering Home Guard salutes and awaited the onslaught.

"Hop in", he said, sounding just like Dad used to with the Morris Eight. Hesitating, I wondered if my ears were full of sand after having sat on an Audax tail during run-up. "Well come on, man!". This time it called for action, and I was beside him in a flash, almost knocking him out of his seat as I reached for the harness. Resisting the temptation to give the sergeant a royal wave as we taxied out. I sat back and enjoyed my war as the A.O.C., flew out towards the fort at Rutbah, with the borders with Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia at equal distances. If he had a plan I missed it, and decided he was purely joy riding.

As Lake Habbahiya came into view I saw a Hudson starting its run through its own dust, and knew Jack Davies was off to Lydda (on an ill-fated trip, for he was to crash and burn out, luckily with no casualties). "Hudson coming up Sir!". It broke the cathedral-like silence that had reigned for nearly an hour. "Theng kyoh!", came the reply, and again my guardian angel came to my rescue as I thought to ask him if it was hard learning Chinese. And then came a third narrow squeak as no less a person than Sergeant Kennar marshalled us into the hangar, and I fought back, "Thank you, my good man", as I stepped down.

I began to look upon the A.V.M., as almost a father figure, referring to him as Champ among the other crews, and I had to dodge many a punch as I began to walk tall, not easy anyway with short legs. I really thought my cup runneth over when I was granted the coveted Mogadishu trip, a tour of fifteen R.A.F., stations down the Gulf, along to East Africa, up to Egypt, and then back to Habb. Hard work in the heat, especially when refuelling at Sharjah and Port Sudan, two places I placed on my list to avoid at all costs in the future.

Jack Davies came back from the airmen's mess a few days after the Mogadishu trip. "You're posted, mate", he said. A favourite ploy to get your hackles up, I went along with it as usual. "Somewhere nice?", I asked, "Cairo, Bahrain, Cranwell?". "No, Sharjah", he said, with a hint of a smirk. "244 Squadron". My only consolation was that he joined me there a fortnight later.

A. Alder

The Reluctant Rigger.

Inmate No. 26.

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