



## 244 SQUADRON & KINDRED SPIRITS ASSOCIATION



### Newsletter No. 16

**JIM SAYS** Many thanks on behalf of Don and myself, for the 60+ Xmas cards we received. Also, for the letters of commendation for another Reunion which went off so well. As you can understand, we could not reply to each and every one of you. May we both wish all our members a happy, healthy and prosperous *New Year*. As regards to Reunion 1997, you will be glad to know that a firm booking has been made for week-end 26th & 27th September 1997 (at the Scarisbrick).

Recruitment to our Association has slowed down somewhat (only four new members since the Reunion). My main avenue to bring in new lads has always been adverts in "Air-Mail" and messages on TV (Ceefax). Both these methods have limited appeal, and it is time to try a new tack (in which members can help). I suggest we try adverts in regional daily and evening newspapers (a number of these accept free adverts for Forces Associations). We did try an advert in both Liverpool and Bristol newspapers with some success. Could members help by making enquiries and if possible, placing our message in any newspaper or periodical their area? I am sure there are many ex Gulf lads out there, who do not know we exist. The message would read, "244 Squadron & Kindred Spirits Assn." If you had "RAF service at Habbaniya, Shaibah, Sharjah, Masirah, or any Paiforce station, you are eligible to join. Regular Newsletters and Reunions. For details ring Jim Heslop. 01704 26995

You will see from Don's report below that our retail sales at the Reunion did very well. This was mainly due to the efforts of Langton Moore (Supplies Officer) for which many thanks. Unfortunately, Langton has now resigned his post, and in the interim, I have taken over the post. In future, all orders to me.

As I have mentioned in previous Newsletters, we are always short of copy for Newsletters. Don and I have discussed this. We would like anecdotes and stories of, "How I arrived at Habb/Shuibah/Sharjah/Masirah/or wherever". Anything interesting will be put in print. All copy to me please.

Finally, I have had several requests from members to explain the meaning of the Association Logo. All this was explained in Newsletter No.4. For the benefit of our newer members I will repeat the relevant paragraph. "As we have been refused an official squadron badge by M.o.D., we will have one of our own! The design is one based on one submitted to the Air Ministry in 1944. As we know, this was allowed to lapse. Details are:- An oval background (Sand); superimposed two Kunja Knives (black) in saltire; below, the waves (azure); below, our motto "Over the Sea" (in Arabic characters); at top of oval, "244 Sqdn. K.S."

**DON SAYS** Please see balance sheet at the end of Newsletter. I think a few words of wisdom are in order regarding the increase in Cash at Bank 31.12.95. The main increase is in membership, up in 1995 (29 @ £5 - £145). This is mainly due to Jim's efforts. (Let's hope 1996 is as good!). However, wastage through the years for one reason or another, means we presently have 154 active members.

Another item is donations. You have generously given £133.25 to the 1995 Reunion plus £112.92 to general funds. Again, many thanks to all those who donated. Retail sales went better than expected at the Reunion, and generated a profit of £114.50. Keep up the good work and we will have a bumper

Reunion 1997. Last, but not least, Subs are now due (£5). and there are 65 out there who have yet pay. Don't forget to forward your membership card for notation.

## AN APPEAL.

At the last Reunion there was a "Find the crashed Wimpey" competition. There were recent photos of a crashed Wellington, and next to it a map (of Masirah) on which everybody was invited to guess the position of the crash site. No one guessed the correct position, which was not on Masirah at all. It was on a small flat island very close to the mainland, and due west of the airfield. Nobody at the Reunion knew about this crash, but someone reading this could know. If so, please contact Colin Richardson, who is writing a book on Masirah. His address is:- Five Acres, Fulbeck Lowfields, Grantham, Lincs. NG32 3JD. He would like to hear the story of this crash.

He would also like to know about a thing which looked a bit like a traction engine. It looks like the firebox and boiler of a steam locomotive or traction engine, and it is still at Masirah. A 1951 photo shows it on wheels like a traction engine, with a tow bar at the front. But, there is no piston/cylinder, flywheel or steering mechanism. It has been suggested that it was neither a traction engine or a water desalination plant, but it was used for steam cleaning dirty greasy things. If anyone can shed any light on this contraption, please write to Cohn.

## THE GREAT OIL MYSTERY

There have been times during the past so years or so when I began to think I had imagined all that had happened at Masirah during what is referred to as the great oil mystery in Newsletter 15. Hardly anyone I had spoken to over the years remembered anything about the crews and Wimpeys that never returned.

I was a Fitter 2.(E.) on Base Flight and together with Maurice Rowan, Len Lomas, Les Hyland amongst others spent many frantic days trying to solve the problems of the mysterious losses. We took engines out, changed them, took them to bits, put them back together again and the only thing we found was that on some engines, the bottom oil scraper rings were on upside down. Rectifying that made no difference at all.

I, along with other fitters then spent hours flying, often with the C.O., round and round in circles trying to fail the engines - Again without success. Even the Bristol Aero Company's expert could offer little advice. Then two incidents occurred in quick succession. Firstly it was, I think a Sgt. Pilot Taylor and crew who were escorting a convoy towards Aden reported that the port engine had fallen out of the airframe. Luckily, the crew ditched and all survived, Sgt. Taylor, I believe, had a badly injured back. This was the first time we had any first hand report of what was happening. When we were told about this, we looked at each other in disbelief, knowing that engines did not behave like that, we had thought it impossible for them to leave the airframe. Then secondly, when running up an engine down on the flight, a certain Sgt. Vezey (pilot) was heard to say, "Oh look, oil is coming out of the breathers". Well, again, we knew that oil did not come out of the breather pipes - but as it happened he was absolutely correct. This engine was removed, but no mechanical defects were found, and it was at this time suspicion fell on the oil, I can remember putting oil into containers and labelling them to be sent to A.H.Q.

At this point the N.C.O. Engine Fitters were removed from duty and I was taken along with the others to Khormaksar to await a Board of Enquiry. Our tool boxes were taken away from us and we were forbidden to enter the Technical area of the camp, spending all our time swimming, playing football, going to Steamer Point and sitting in the N.A.A.F.I. bemoaning our fate.

I think we should have still been there had it not been for Maurice Rowan who pleaded in the Admin., for us to be returned to the U.K. It was at this time we heard that the authorities had discovered that the oil which originated in Bahrain had been tampered with and was the cause of the engine seizures. Eventually we were put aboard a ship and sailed from Aden, but were taken off again at Kasfareet. Eventually a handful of us (about ten I think) boarded the Dutch liner "Batavia" and came through the Med., unescorted to Liverpool.

I served out the rest of my time at various stations in the U.K., and, as a regular airman became "time expired" when at Stoke Heath in Shropshire. When being demobbed from Kirkham I was called into the office and informed that I was to notify the Air Ministry of every change of address in case I should be required to attend a Board of Enquiry, and was given cards to fill in for this purpose. I went off in my new brown suit, raincoat and trilby hat and I have heard nothing from that day to this (or at least the day your newsletter came through my door).

I should add that I have now stopped notifying the Air Ministry of changes of address - there must be some Statute of Limitations to cover this.

Tom Booth (Mem.No.59).

## **THREE-TONNERS OVER. WE SHATT-AL-ARAB**

Shaibah 1942 They say "Never Volunteer". What am I doing producing a U.K. driving licence, when a call is made for "Any drivers here?" Being the senior member of the party (Lac), and also the oldest, I was I/C, and told to pick up three 3-tonners at Transport Section (with two other erks) and deliver them to Abadan (where's that?)

I thought it was a short journey, but no such luck ! Report with them to the clock at Basra. Perhaps we *were* taking them back to Blighty (Well, one can dream).

On arrival at Basra we were told to pull alongside the flat-top barge and lead the lorries on. I went off to find a crane but, "No crane Sahib, drive on !". Close inspection showed the barge only 10 inches wider than the trucks - no margin for error here ! I managed to snaffle some lengths of 4" x 2" batten to put on the far side of the flat-top. This to prevent the vehicles rolling off into the Shatt-al-Arab. One had to act smartly from throttle to brake, or that was where one would finish up, 4" x 2" or not. We managed to get the three vehicles loaded, but they were only held by the brakes, no straps or ropes ! It was dusk when we set off, and our tug kept letting the tow-rope out until it appeared as if we were sailing on our own.

The first few hours were uneventful, then I heard a hum in the distance. I saw two lights approaching fast. The tug boat skipper must have been awake. We seemed to be on one side of the Shatt, and the tug on the other. What the skipper appeared to be doing was cutting his speed, but we on the barge were still travelling, and the tow rope was sinking. It only seemed a minute before an Airsea rescue launch came charging through the gap between the tug and our barge. The launch crew didn't know how near they *were* to being decapitated ! It was quite 'hairy' whilst it lasted.

Now approaching Abadan, and I *was* beginning to wonder how we would unload. The vehicles were four-wheel drive, and we'd only driven them from Shaibah to Basra. I had visions of selecting the wrong gear, and shooting off the barge into the drink.

When we docked I noticed the dock was 18" higher than the barge. Fortunately a mobile crane arrived, and all was well. After unloading, an officer appeared, and I enquired how and when we would return to Basra. To my surprise he said, "You are not going back. You are now the Transport Section of Abadan"! (See what I mean about volunteering).

Still, all was not lost. After enduring the privations of Shaibah, we now found ourselves occupying wonderful billets in the Oil Company bachelor bungalows. We even saw our first English ladies since leaving U.K.! We had use of the Gymkhana Club for recreation. Our meals were served by British Petroleum Ex-Pat ladies. To see the behaviour of some of the lads was unbelievable. "Yes Miss, No Miss". Butter wouldn't melt in their mouths!

Bill Westwood ( Mem.No.151)

## **'ANY MORE FOR 244 ?'**

As the saying went, Friday the Thirteenth came on a Saturday in November 1943, but we ignored the prophets of doom as we piled untidily and somewhat reluctantly into two RAF gharries and lurched through Habbaniya's main gate, past the sign that read 'London 3287 miles'. Baghdad 55 miles'. Unfortunately, we were being taken via the shorter route. Eighteen months ago we had passed the same *sign* as we entered the camp after a three months' journey from Liverpool. Now, we were Sharjah bound as replacements for some thirty browned-off erks who were Blighty bound.

There's Boot Hill' said someone, and we spared a few moments' thought for the comrades who lay there, victims of dysentery, malaria, jaundice, Blenheim hydraulics, or Hudson undercarriage failure. It had been an adventurous eighteen months if nothing else, and most of us could relate stories of hairy trips in Valencias, Vincentas, Harts, Audaxes, Oxfords, Tiger Moths, Bombays, plus the odd Rapide, Wellesley, and the aforementioned Blenheims and Hudsons. Riggers, fitters, and wireless operators carried log books that made a mockery of their ground crew status and their rates of pay, and the 'graveyard' at the end of the runway bore witness to some memorable experiences, often brought about by the bone-shaking obsolescence of some weird and wonderful flying machines. Farewell, Habbaniya! Nostalgia soon gave way to road-sickness as our *drivers*, Campbell and Fangio, sought to dislodge us from our precarious seats as they picked out each pothole unerringly until we screeched to a tailgate bouncing halt at Baghdad station. The train ride to Basrah was just

as primitive as it had been 18 months ago, and when we finally boarded the small ship and stowed our kit we were looking forward to the best part of the journey - a November cruise down the Gulf , seven days of relaxation and recovery from the 48 hours of road and rail torture we had just endured. Funny how the fickle finger of fate sometimes intervenes.

On the morning of the second day we fell out of our hammocks to a rude awakening, at 5 a.m. to be precise, when the skipper of the ship, an Indian Army three-pip Captain, mustered us on deck, which even the thickest AC. plonk could see was motionless in a calm sea. Then, with a masterpiece of understatement, he announced, "We are having a slight problem, gentlemen. During last night our crew left us, for reasons unknown to me, and except for Li, OUT Chinese cook, they have presumably boarded another vessel and sailed off into the night. What is worse, however, is that they have taken all our food stocks with them, and we are left with one sack of flour, some bacon, dried egg, and condensed milk. We also have some tea and plenty of drinking water".

He went on to explain that to return to Basrah to try to muster another crew would add at least three days to the total sailing time. "The alternative, gentlemen", he continued, "is that you all help me sail this ship to Sharjah, where I can raise another crew from Dubai and also deliver you to your squadron in the allotted time. What do you say?". As if we had a choice, we said "yes". In a few minutes engine fitters, riggers, wireless operators, electricians, instrument mechanics, armourers, G.D's and one M.T. driver willingly volunteered for duties in the engine room, on the bridge, in the wireless room, stores, and in the galley. For those without more vital tasks, buckets, mops, cans of grey paint, brushes, and polish were issued. The engines were started and we headed south, hugging the Saudi coast, and keeping watches in true nautical style.

Nor was the occasion devoid of humour, and one heard references to 'a ship seen sailing in ever decreasing circles and finally disappearing up its own funnel', and, 'We'll run her on Brylcreem, Mr. Christian', and, 'Anymore for 244?'

To this day I cannot remember volunteering to help in the galley, but that's where I spent the next six days. It was a flat iron shaped area right up the sharp end, (and not much bigger than a flat iron either) with iron work surfaces, stove, sink, a sloping floor, and two port-holes that gave the only light. With such culinary ingredients we were restricted to making pancakes, (Li called them chapatis), and cups of tea. The bacon would have soon run out if we had served it on its own so it either went into the pancakes or was served as a side dish. The menu was pancakes, with or without bacon, and tea. Li told me that he lived in Dubai which explained his non-participation in the crew's mutiny. Six days, and some forty (each) pancakes later we dropped anchor off Sharjah. Two dhows came alongside, and after each of us had shaken the Captain's hand, we disembarked with full kit. The dhows all but beached in the shallows, and a line of tall Arabs waded out to meet us, each taking an airman on his back and delivering him to dry land, while others brought our kit ashore onto the hot sands of Sharjah. The replacements for thirty of the 244 Squadron's time expired airmen had arrived on time, thanks to some old-fashioned RAF adaptability, and not forgetting the unseen presence of the squadron's patrolling Bisleys.

Alec Alder. (Mem. No.26)

Don't Forget Your Sub is Now Due for 1996!  
Thank you to those Who have already paid.

Hon. Secretary: Jim Heslop      Hon. Treasurer: Don James