



244 SQUADRON & KINDRED SPIRITS ASSOCIATION



Newsletter No.17

JIM SAYS in our last Newsletter, in order to increase our membership I requested members to try and set our appeal for new members into their local or provincial newspaper. So far I have received news of two periodicals where our details have appeared. My recent insert in 'Air Mail' (Spring Edition) has borne fruit. Already I have received 17 enquiries from Paiforce lads, and most of these are now paid-up members. Our appeal will shortly be appearing on T.V. (Channel 4) and also in the 'Liverpool Dairy Post'. Membership has now reached 258 (gross).

When visiting the RAF Museum at Hendon, it can be seen that all RAF squadron crests are on view. However, there is a blank space where 244 badge should be. In an attempt to remedy this, I am contacting the museum curator, I am requesting that our Squadron logo should be placed in its rightful position. We will await developments.

Our up to date Nominal Roll is now on sale (£1.50 post free). It lists all members paid or unpaid. Also, our video of the 1995 Reunion is now going the rounds. Anyone interested in viewing 'Reunion '95', give me a ring.

In conclusion, congratulations to Ken Igglesden (Mem. No.4), Bexhill-on-Sea. Ken was recently awarded the M.B.E. for services to charity (RAF Benevolent Fund). Good on 'yer Ken!

Footnote in order to give credence, and to further publicise our Association, we are forwarding a small donation to the RAF Benevolent Fund. As well as being charitable, this is another method of putting '244 Squadron & Kindred Spirits' on the map.

Don says We are now well into 1996, and a number of you are still outstanding in my ledger as having not paid your 1996 subs. There is a notation on this Newsletter to those non-payers. If you have already paid and your name appears, please let me know. Otherwise, when paying, please enclose your membership card for endorsement.

Talking of money (it seems that's all a Treasurer does!). At the A.G.M. last year the next Reunion was discussed, and you all agreed it would be a good idea to send deposits for the 1997 Reunion by September this year. This would give us some idea of numbers, as we still need 100 for the Isherwood Suite. I would suggest a deposit of £10 per person. It would also be useful to know if you wish to stay at the Scarisbrick. We are hoping to maintain last year's prices. Full details will follow later. Also, would you let me know whether Double/Twin/ Single room. Looking forward to hearing from you.

"GOOLIE CHITS"

The "goolie chit" was about the size of a postcard and on one side was a photograph of our King, wearing his Crown and dressed in coronation robes, with the orb and sceptre in his hands. On either side of him were smaller photographs of King Feisal of Iraq, the Shah of Persia and a few lesser Sheikhs and Emirs of the Gulf States. I have a faint recollection that the pictures were superimposed on a Union Jack flag.

This "chit" was issued to RAF aircrew based at Habbaniya, in Iraq and, maybe, also Bahrain and other places.

The substance of the text reads : "The bearer of this chit is a true and valued askari (soldier) of the great King (George), and all the lesser rulers shown. He must be treated with the greatest respect, and given all the care necessary for his welfare. He should be safely escorted to the nearest ruler shown in the photograph. The finder will then be awarded a bag of gold for his conduct. Thanks be to Allah". It had previously been the practice of the finders to castrate any RAF crash survivors on the grounds that they were not true believers, but only the "Ibn Kelb" (Sons of Dogs) and, therefore, not allowed to produce any progeny.

However, if the RAF man had red hair, then he was taken to the women of the tribe, who then enticed him into sexual intercourse in the hope that a red-haired son might be the result. For was it not written, "The Holy Prophet (Peace and Blessings be upon him), had red hair, and when he returned to his flock he would be born a man"? I picked these tales up in Baghdad and similar places and took them as hearsay.

Uplifted from a magazine via Ken Whittaker (Mem. No. 36).

R.A.F. HABBANIYA

Habbaniya was a huge camp on the bank of the river Euphrates. It had properly laid out roads, all named, and even road islands. In the guard room the S.P. checked the paperwork and directed us to the Transit Camp.

"Straight down Uxbridge Road to the road island," he said. "Take the second exit, that is Farnborough Road. Go right to the end and the Transit Camp is on the left.

Blimey! it was Like being back in the U.K. The mind boggled.

Following his instructions we arrived at the Transit Camp just before they finished serving tiffin. By the time we had eaten the whole camp had closed down in the heat of the day.

"That's it!" one of the bods in the cookhouse told us. "There will not be anybody about until dinner time".

We found our way to the Transit lounge, stocked up with lemonade, and lay on our beds in the shade all afternoon sweating and swigging lemonade. It was hot. It was very hot.

When the sun began to go down I had a shower, put on some clean K.D. and went for dinner. There was fresh fruit salad for starters, it was luscious.

That evening Sammy, Norman and I headed for the N.A.F.F.I. which I had been told was in Cheapside. As we walked back along Farnborough Road, I was intrigued with the names of the roads leading off it. Tangmere, Upavon, Milton, Andover, London, and Kingsway were all roads we passed before reaching Cheapside.

In the N.A.F.F.I. I learned a bit about the camp. It was a pre-war station covering an area of 22 square miles. It had two large shopping centres, the largest R.A.F. Cinema in the world, tennis courts, hockey and football pitches, a swimming pool, a school, a hospital, a golf course, a riding school, a racecourse, and an extensive taxi service. It was like a large town.

Although it had all these amenities, it was not a popular posting. it was far too hot for most of the year. At one time it was only an 18 months posting instead of the usual four year stint of most overseas postings.

The next day I found my way to 'D' Group to unload. The pace of life here was very slow. Nobody rushed about. It was too ruddy hot. It took all morning to get the load off, then work came to a standstill. It was time for tiffin and a siesta.

Nobody worked in the afternoon, so I returned to my tent. No dusty sand floors here. It had a concrete base, but that did not deter insects of various sorts nipping across it. I was pleased they didn't stay to explore my kit. I wrote a couple of letters then succumbed to the heat and lazed around and dozed until dinner time.

In the cookhouse I met up with a bod from Mansfield.. Most of my relations live in that area, so we found quite a lot to talk about. It was from him I learned what life was like in Habbaniya. I wasn't the least bit envious.

The following day, adjusting to the steady pace of life here, I loaded up for 120 M. U. at Ras-el-lin, took a steady walk back to the Transit N.A.F.F.I. for morning break, and returned to sheet and rope the load down. Time then for tiffin and a siesta before finishing work for the day. What a steady life it was.

HOW I ARRIVED AT 244

On 1st December 1941, we left U.K. in Blenheim IV Z7907, bound for Middle East. Our route was U.K. - Gibraltar - Malta - Egypt arriving 8th December. However, on 7th December, the Japs bombed Pearl Harbour, and our posting was changed. Instead of the Western Desert, we were off to Singapore! Leaving Egypt on the 12th we arrived at Habbaniya after 5 1/2 hours. On the 16th we left Habb for Bahrain. There were no RAF at Bahrain, so we were refuelled by local Arabs (by hand, using the usual four galleon cans). Take-off from Bahrain was at 3.10 pm. Shortly after leaving, the port engine packed up. We could not maintain height, and crashed landed some 10 miles S.W. of Dohah. (We found out later that one of the four gallon cans contained water !).

It turned out that the local manager of the Standard Oil Company (Esso to you), was paying a visit to the Sheikh of Dohah. He saw us break away from formation and try to land, so help was at hand. The Blenheim was a 'write off'. The manager had us taken to the other side of the Dohah peninsula, where they were drilling for oil. From thence back to Bahrain by boat, and then on to Shaibah by Vincent returning to Habb, also by Vincent. Arriving on 27th December. We picked up another Blenheim (Z6186) to proceed once again to Singapore.

We left Habbaniya on 1st January 1942, but on route the Skipper took ill and we landed in one piece at Shaibah. The pilot was taken to Sick Bay and then flown to Middle East. The observer, Tommy Frost and myself were now spare. To paraphrase our song, 'Shaibah Blues' "And when the Air Force saw us, they said that's what we're looking for, and sent us to the famous 244", etc. etc. We were put on a Valentia, enroute to Sharjah.

On reflection, conditions were grim at Sharjah, but how much worse would they have been in Changi? How lucky I was!

D. James (Mem. No. 49)

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF MASIRAH (CHAPTER 1.)

I think it must have been in Air Mail that I first saw your notice about "244 Squadron & Kindred Spirits Association", and it brought back a lot of memories to me, nearly all of them wrapped up in one year of my service life. I was a regular, commissioned as a pilot in 1936, and I found myself posted to 244 Squadron as a Squadron Leader Flight Commander in April, 1943.

Squadron headquarters was at Sharjah where the C.O. Wg. Cdr. R.R. Rotherham already had a base Flight Commander, Sqn: Ldr. A.A. Nicholson, so I, being the only Coastal Command trained pilot, was sent to Masirah to take over the advanced Flight from Sqn. Ldr. Donald MacKenzie, an

old friend of mine, who was being posted back to H.Q.M..E. in Cairo. The Command of the Advanced Flight at Masirah also included the command of the island, which also contained a ground detachment of the U.S.A. Transport Command. This Detachment was really a signals unit set up on the route between Aden and Karachi and was serviced by transient planes on their way to the Far East via India. They carried an amazing assortment of cargoes, some of which we, the R.A.F., were allowed to share. This was thanks to Lt. Frazer of the U.S. Army Air Corps Signals, who used to delay the aircraft overnight if they were carrying any entertainment such as films or E.N.S.A. Parties, so that they could give us a show before moving on. It was in this way, at Masirah, saw the films, 'In Which We Serve', before it had even opened in London, and I had the doubtful pleasure of welcoming the Film Star, Nelson Eddy to the island and taking him up to the Mess for a drink after his singing performance (the U.S. Detachment being dry) he really was a very precious thing, bless him.

Having been pretty close to the war for four odd years I found the Island a haven of peace. There was, however an amount of maritime activity which could not be ignored. Our job was to provide anti-submarine air cover for convoys of oil tankers leaving the Persian Gulf Aden - bound. In fact, 244 Sqn. did sink a U-boat, but the crew actually came from Sharjah, and it was a U-boat, not Jap. However, the Island was vulnerable to an attack from the sea and to counteract this we had a Company of R.A.F. Levies, which I used to have to inspect every now and then. I remember one such Inspection very well. My Equipment Officer reported to me that we had run out of the bars of yellow soap we used to issue to the Levies, and would it be all right to issue them with Lux I agreed, and it all came back to me when I got wind of that parade - there was a romantic fragrance quite out of keeping with the occasion

We were supplied with a labour force from Muscat. There were about no of them used to come down about every 6 - 9 months in a coastal dhow which took the other lot back. One of these changeovers proved a bit dramatic in that the Doctor reported to me that there were five cases of smallpox amongst the new arrivals. No problem, he had put them in an isolation hut and picked five of them the most pockmarked among the others to nurse them. We informed H.Q.M.E. who found that they did not have enough serum to vaccinate all personnel on the Island. They called on the Americans to help and within two days it was delivered to us by 'Our Airline'. I ordered only two crews to be done at a time -just as well because when it came to my turn I joined several others flat out on our backs for about three days, and that can play havoc with a flying programme. It was a very powerful serum.

The coolies, would work in gangs of 8 or 9 at the disposition of the Clerk of Works, and if they were caught short away from their camp they would move away a little, crouch down and do their business. Witnessed one such incident and was surprised to see the lad shoot upright with a scream and then examine his private parts in great detail - apparently scorpions take exception to being shat upon from any height, this one had stung the first thing that was hanging in front of him. The M.O. dealt with it, but I don't suppose he ever visualised having to cope with that and smallpox amongst his patients. The Island had no fresh water and although we dug a couple of fairly deep wells the stuff we got out of them was so brackish as to be undrinkable. We did have a desalination machine but it used to take a gallon of fuel to get a gallon of water, and the water tended to taste of diesel. I feel sure that that is what was mistaken to be a traction engine - it certainly had a towbar in front. So for water we had to rely on the generosity of ships that called in, our Ureka craft and their ability to tow the water barge out to the ships and hold it in position while being filled. We had two Urekas, and they were American Small Infantry Landing Craft and were very dependable and very useful to us. Then, there was the M.V. Tinombo (But more about this ship in the next Newsletter).

From Johnny Walker (Mem. No. 91)

COMM. FLIGHT DAYS

An ENSA. party was being flown around the Gulf bases. The party included a magician. On a visit to the local market at Sharjah, this chap bought an orange. On breaking it open, he found a Maria

There were a dollar in it, as any self-respecting magician should be able to do. The Arab throng gathered around were amazed. Swiftly, the Arab onlookers, not being adverse to making a quick dollar, descended on the startled vendor, and bought the entire cartload. However, enough paid!!

Another ENSA party at Shaibah were receiving a terrible reception. The 'frontman' came out and apologised, saying they had been torpedoed on the way out, and lost all their props. A loud-voiced soldier called out from the darkened seating area: "Who was the idiot who rescued the actors?"

Brian Fitzgerald - Australia (Mem. No. 96)

COPY STILL REQUIRED

Jim Heslop (Secretary/Supplies Officer)

Don James (Treasurer)