



## 244 SQUADRON & KINDRED SPIRITS ASSOCIATION



### Newsletter No. 21

JIM SAYS Our last letter before Southport '97. Don and I will do our best to insure that our "Family do" will be on a par with our last three efforts. More about that in Don's report below.

First of all, our Coat of Arms. Matters progress, and our suggested design is now in the hands of the College of Heralds. We await their comments as to the suitability. Also, as regards cost. It seems that they will produce a painting of the design (complete with Queen's Crown, laurel leaves etc.). Another option is our badge being placed in the slate floor of St Clement Danes (the RAF church). All this will involve much expense. No doubt this will be discussed at our General Meeting in September. One small snag however. Although the badge is for intents a squadron crest, the word "Association" must appear on the badge. Alec Alder (mem. No.26) has produced a full colour design, and very impressive it looks.

Now, back numbers of Newsletters. I mentioned this subject in a previous Newsletter, and mentioned a price of £4 for our 20 issues made up in a binder. I now find I was way out in my estimate. In fact, the cost is nearly double. I am now breaking the Newsletters into sections of five issues. Prices are:-Issues 1 to 5 @ £1.50, Issues 6 to 10 £2.25, issues 11 to 15 @£2.50 and Issues 16 to 20 @ £2.50 (All post free). Please send your orders to me. Of course, they will also be on sale in our Shop at the Reunion.

Our friendly rival, "The RAF Habbaniya Association" is now up and running. The annual Subscription is £5, and regular Newsletters are promised. Applications should be made to "The Secretary, Dr C. Morris, 48 Brookhouse Road, Walsall, W. Midlands, W55 3AD". Cheques should be payable to "RAF Habbaniya Assn".

As regards the Reunion. For the benefit of our new members who are attending. For people staying at the Scarisbrick, the Balmoral Lodge or the Carlton Lodge, your personal envelopes can be picked up at their Reception desks. For all other members, your envelopes await your arrival at the Isherwood Suite, Scarisbrick Hotel. On the subject of Dress. This is an informal weekend, but jacket and tie on the Saturday evening. For those arriving Thursday, Don and I will be in the 'Barons Bar', Scarisbrick Hotel from 17.30 hrs to welcome you for a pre-dinner drink.

The table plan for Saturday evening. As usual, we will do our best to ensure that old friends will be together. Also, special groups such as Comm. Flight, Amourers, Habb-ites, Post-War etc. will, as far as possible, have their own tables. No requests for alteration please! I will welcome members who will volunteer a contribution to the Cabaret (?) Songs, monologues, anecdotes are all welcome. So, bring your music! As reported in a previous Newsletter, the replacement organist will not walk out of the room!

DON SAYS Whilst we have had in a record number of Subs for 1997, there are still quite a number of non-payers. If you are in this category, a sticky label reminder is affixed to this Newsletter. As we are now in the second half of the year, we are afraid that, in the future 'No Subs - No Newsletter'. We cannot afford to subsidise Non-payers. Once again, many thanks to the prompt payers, and to those who have paid for 1998. Also, there are still some members who have yet to pay their end of June instalment towards the Reunion. Forgive me for talking money again. But for the few it would not be necessary. Don't forget, full and final payment for the weekend should be made by 31st August 1997.

## Reunion Programme

Thursday 25th September. For those arriving early. Meet informally in Barons Bar 1730 to 1930hrs (Scarisbrick Hotel)

Friday 26th September. 1800hrs onwards. Reception in Isherwood Suite, Scarisbrick Hotel. General Get-together, Photo-Call, Buffet approx. 2015hrs. Illustrated Lecture by Dr Chris Morris on Habbaniya, Shaibah etc. Large prize raffle and competitions.

Saturday 27th September Bi-ennial General Meeting at 1000hrs (Scarisbrick Venue). Reception Isherwood Suite at 1800hrs. Dinner at 1900hrs. After Dinner 'Songs we Sang' and Dancing.

### THE CASE OF ME BURNING CHARP

I was sorry to hear that Bill Goddard had died (see Newsletter 20). I had a good chat with him at the last Reunion I attended.

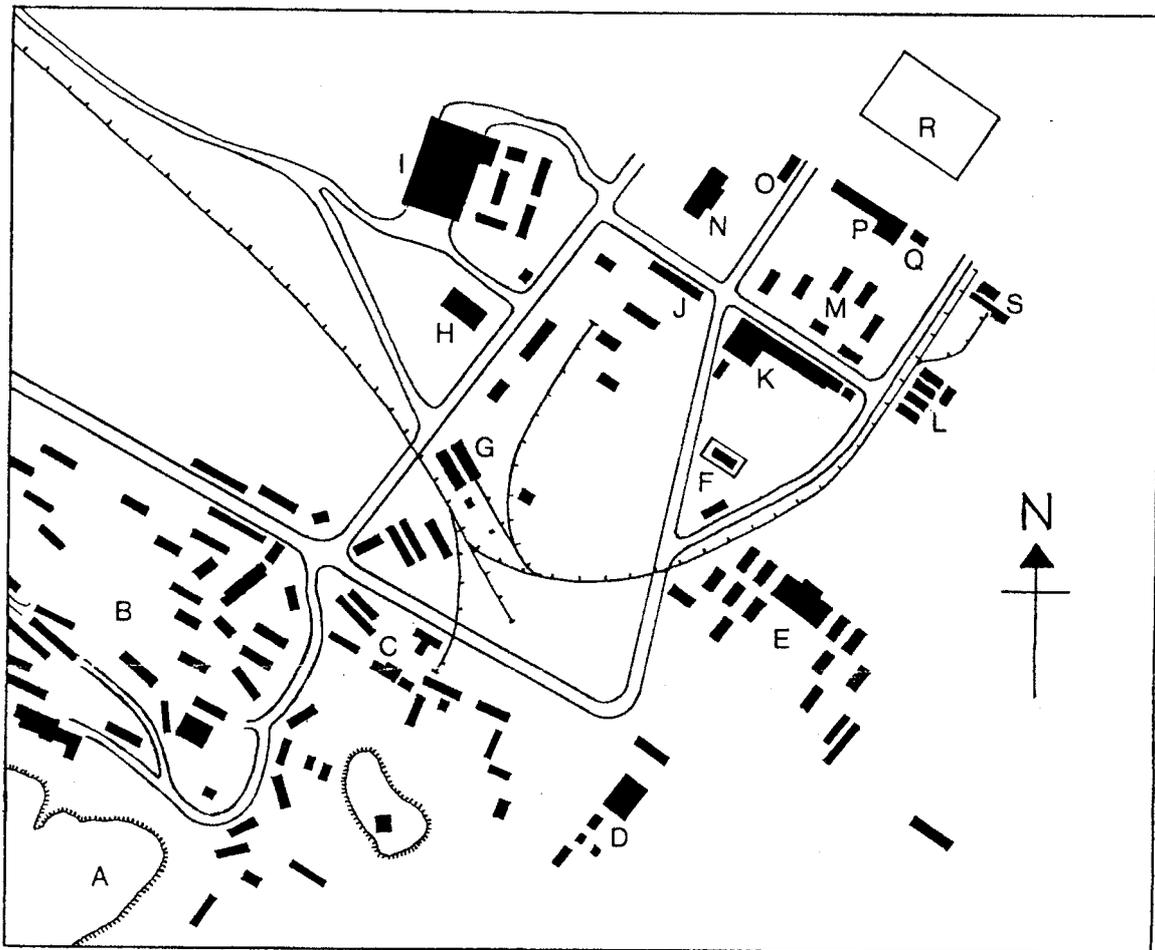
Back on Masirah I was having trouble with 'bed bugs'. These voracious little creatures used to hide in the raffia of my Indian charpoy. I had a tin of petrol and a paint brush, and painted the raffia where it was wrapped around the wooden frame (with 100 Octane!)

In those days I smoked, and of course, I set fire to the bed! I only just had time to sling the charp outside the hut, where it swiftly burnt to ash. I then had to front up to W/officer Bill Goddard to explain why I needed a new bed. I don't think Bill was over impressed by my explanation. However, he organised another bed, complete with a new set of 'Bed Bugs'!

Phil Watson (member No.38) Australia.

### FROM COLIN RICHARDSON

For the 'Masirah' book, I am having a bit of a problem producing a plan of the 'Petrol Can Camp'. The plan shown is actually after World War II, after the RAF had moved into the American accommodation. I have seen several photos taken from the black hills overlooking the petrol tin camp. but its a bit difficult to accurately place the buildings in the background. The largish building to the south, close to the hill, is sergeant's Mess, but I have no idea where the Officer's Mess was situated or what it looked like. I invite members to write to me with any suggestions or corrections. My address is:- 'Five Acres'. Fulbeck Lowfields, nr. Grantham, Lincs. NG32 3JD. I will, of course, be attending Southport '97.



RAF MASIRAH AFTER WORLD WAR II.

	Vehicle track		2 ft gauge railway
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- A. Low dark hills.
- B. Petrol tin camp (abandoned except for Wali and labourers).
- C. Air Ministry Works Directorate.
- D. Water desalination plant - Originally the American plant to the south. Later the RAF plant in the "Giraffe House".
- E. Aden Protectorate Levies.
- F. Station Sick Quarters.
- G. Two Nissen huts which have survived to the present day.
- H. Tall stores building.
- I. Hangar full of Wellington spares.
- J. Store which has survived to the present day as the clothing and stationery store.
- K. Airmen's Mess, NAAFI, cinema, and later the Sergeants' Mess.
- L. Airmen's Billets. Quonset huts.
- M. Officers' Accommodation. Quonset huts.
- N. Officers' Mess. A small annex to the north survives to the present day.
- O. Signals.
- P. Met, SHQ, Library. Air Traffic Control Tower.
- Q. Aircraft servicing and refuelling equipment.
- R. Concrete hardstanding for aircraft.
- S. Fuel tanks with underground pipes to hydrant refuelling on the hardstanding.

## THE LAST HOUR OF BISLEY BB154

In 1943 we needed every drop of oil which could safely be brought to our shore. Abadan was producing in large quantities, but shipping was decimated. In Cairo the RAF was asked to provide cover for convoys assembled in the lower reaches of the Persian Gulf. Accordingly, freshly trained crews with about a dozen aircraft were ordered to fly via Habaniya and control an area approximately 1,000 miles to the south east of Baghdad. We were to operate from a camp of barusti built huts near an ancient fort in the Sheikhdom of Sharjah, where there was a sandstrip airfield and Masirah (a desert island, without water, 500 miles away on the south coast of Arabia), where concrete huts had been constructed from blocks made out of empty petrol cans with slave labour provided (we believe) by the Sultan of Zanzibar, who was possibly a brother-in-law of the Sheikh.

Taking off "X" minutes before dawn from the Persian side of the Gulf and trying to get a submarine recharging her batteries at dawn on the surface or escorting very large convoys and eventually giving them a clearance approximately 200 miles ahead, was indeed the ultimate in navigation. We were required to fly no higher than 2,500 feet and had no radar. Parachutes were useless at this height so we sat on them. We did have "Mae West's". Radio silence was essential. No chance of survival if we ditched. It was known that there was at least one, if not two, German submarines in the area. They had been refuelled off the west coast of Africa in Mozambique. So we carried depth charges. On one particular day in October 1943, our crew were asked to protect a shipload of water (more precious than gold), bound for our island of Masirah. Consequently we were flying our Bisley (Blenheim Mk V) about 75 miles south of Ras el Hadd at 2,000 feet when our port engine spluttered and a few minutes later seized up and died, obviously starved of oil. (Well, what could you expect of mechanics working in a relentless sun in unbelievable humidity with nothing but a home-made canvas square for shade).

There were, fortunately my pilot, Ozzy Moseley (Mem No. 304), who kept a cool head. We dropped our depth charges into the sea and gained a little height. Naturally we headed for the nearest land although we knew that this was a very hostile coast, fanatically Moslem, where "unbelievers" were known to have been tortured and killed for no other reason. With our starboard engine pointing to the sky, we were losing height at several hundred feet per minute, but we were lucky to be flying at all.

When we got near the coast, we eased to starboard and headed for Ras el Hadd where there was a sandstrip and about 100 levies (militia recruited locally and friendly to us). We just made it to the shorter strip, but without brakes which operated from the dead engine. Then we hurtled off into the sea. Fortunately I had managed to fire an emergency rocket to bring down the undercarriage, and also opened up the top hatch so that when we somersaulted into the sea we would not be completely trapped. My pilot and wireless operator managed to get out of the wreck and I, (semi-concussed), not realising that we were upside down, had failed to find the top hatch which I had opened, accepted the fact that I was trapped and doomed, and was sinking when miraculously I dropped through the open hatch underneath me.

We were all helped to the shore by willing levies and an Egyptian doctor who took us to his hut surgery. He looked after us well and kept us in the dark for 48 hours (greatest kindness). The wrecked aircraft was dragged to land by ropes and was believed to have remained there in the desert for at least 30 years.

Mark Rowland (Mem. No. 295).

## TWO HOT SPOTS FOR THE R.A.F. (from the May 6th 1955 Evening Telegraph)

HABBANIYA and SHAIBA - these two names loomed large to the wartime airmen. For the two bases, handed back this week to Iraq, were very much part of R.A.F. tradition.

The World War Two airman soon came up against some veteran Regular who had sweated out part of his time at either of these stations.

He quickly let you know you had to be tough to survive a posting to these forbidding spots! Subtropical climate with a high disease risk and remoteness were the chief bogies.

"Habb," as every airman called it, stands on the Euphrates, and is the fourth largest town in Iraq.

Built by the R.A.F. it was the Service's biggest overseas station. It was the nerve centre of the R.A.F.'S Middle East theatre.

With a community of 12,000 and 15 nationalities, it was self-contained and almost self-supporting.

It was the only R.A.F. station in the world boasting its own racecourse, hunt and mounted police force. Thirty years ago the site was an empty wilderness. It was the R.A.F. who first discovered it was a land of arable silt from the Euphrates, extending for hundreds of miles to the Persian Gulf. While under R.A.F. command, the squadron-leader at "Habb" acted as mayor and magistrate. He held petty sessions every week. It was there that the R.A.F. Iraq levies served - a mixed force of Kurdish tribesmen, Assyrians and Arabs.

Shaiba - celebrated by the R.A.F. song "Shaiba Blues" - was considered the grimmest of the two stations.

It lies just north of the Persian Gulf, in one of the hottest regions of the world. From April to November the atmosphere is reminiscent of a Turkish bath. Topees, sun curtains and spine pads are among the necessary protective devices.

Tents have double roofs and walls of the bigger houses are two feet thick to keep out the full strength of the sun. Amongst the other precautions at Shaiba are the heat-stroke stations, equipped with ice.

### **FRIENDLY FIRE AT CHRISTMAS**

For many of us on Masirah Christmas 1944 was to be our last in the area, though few of us would have bet on it. The Americans had come and gone, taking with them their comfortable Nissen huts, portable refrigerators, and supplies that denied any shortages of creature comforts, leaving the R.A.F. to their daily ration of warm drinking water, no fresh water baths or showers, and bug-ridden bed-boards balanced on empty petrol tins.

Nevertheless, the airmen's billets had been partitioned and converted into make-believe bar rooms, using the inevitable petrol tins, aircraft fabric, wood and other materials scrounged from stores, dumps and a few forbidden sources. It was Christmas, and all was forgiven.

Then came a slight hiccup. An American warship, damaged in a Pacific action, was proceeding slowly under naval escort to Aden, and they had requested one of our Wellingtons to conduct a supplementary patrol and rendezvous with the convoy. This would be additional to our normal patrol already airborne. The C.O., Wing Commander Hankin would fly the patrol himself with a volunteer crew to include an engine fitter and a rigger. Those who went would miss Christmas on the island, and it was some indication of the men's priorities when a crew was assembled and an aircraft aloft within 30 minutes of the American request.

Jack Glidden and I had been on Masirah for 13 months, and suddenly Christmas was forgotten as we leapt at the chance to escape, albeit for only a couple of days. Being supernumeraries, we had no assigned position on the aircraft and chose the astrodome bubble, which at least gave us a view of the outside world. We were three hours into the patrol, and Glidden and I were pestering the wireless operator and trying to make some sense out of the tiny radar screen, when he tapped his headset and put a finger to his lips. "The boss is upset", he said. Then, "I should bloody well think so!", came from the skipper. We all shrugged our shoulders, mystified, and we were none the wiser until the return trip, when the wireless operator filled us in.

Apparently one of the escort vessels had either mistaken our radio signal or ignored it, and as we broke cloud about a mile from the convoy they opened fire, obviously following the recognised procedure listed in the U.S. gunnery manual - Fire, Aim, Identify Target, in that order. Needless to say they were oceans away from a hit, but still provoked our skipper's less than happy response to their apology as they realised that our red disc was not the Rising Sun - "I should bloody well think so !".

Half an hour later, in what proved to be an unrelated incident, I saw a ribbon of oil creeping over the starboard wing. As it widened rather alarmingly, Glidden went forward to alert the cockpit, but the Wing Commander was getting warning signals, and with the engine beginning to cook he shut it down and feathered the prop, with oil now pouring over the wing, a fitter's and a rigger's nightmare. The port engine did what we urged it to under threat, and after jettisoning fuel we made an unscheduled landing at Salalah. We worked well into the night, finally running up at 4 a.m. with new oil in both engines and the starboard wing restored to its pristine whiteness. Not only had we missed Christmas dinner on Masirah, but we missed it at Salalah too as we fell into an exhausted sleep from which we did not surface until 2 p.m. We scrounged a meal, and the CO. bought us a beer which we gulped down as he wanted to make Khormaksar by nightfall.

Later that night, two shadowy figures might have been seen at a corner of the immaculate square of green Lawn outside the Khormaksar guardroom. They made off carrying an ammunition box between them.

We made it back to the island on Boxing Day, and displayed the square foot of green turf in the airmen's mess. It was the only green the men had seen for many a moon, apart from the mildew. It smelled more of fauna than flora thanks to various passing dogs, but to the airmen of Masirah it was Kew Gardens.

Two months later we were back at Aden, being subjected to the ultimate indignity of a de-lousing process prior to boarding a nice clean, bug-free ship bound for Port Suez. Later, at Port Said, we embarked on the Duchess of Richmond, who three years earlier had delivered us shudderingly, but safely to Bombay. This time we did not mind her drunken antics. Also, most of the Americans were in Europe, so we figured we'd be safe in England, with only the doodlebugs to worry about !

Alec Alder (Men.: No. 26)

### **Roll on September!**

Jim Heslop

W/Cdr Ron Rotherham

Don James