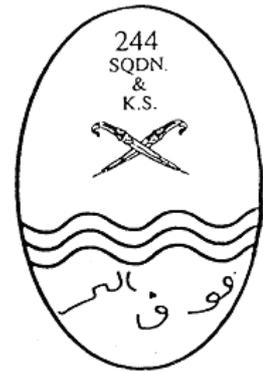




244 SQUADRON & KINDRED SPIRITS ASSOCIATION



Newsletter No. 36

Jim & Don Say. Belated New Year Greetings from Don, Jim, Frances and Audrey. Also, many thanks for the many Xmas cards received. We could not possibly answer them all. As this is the first Newsletter of the year members have not been reminded that ANNUAL SUBS WERE DUE ON 1st JANUARY LAST. Quite a number of you have yet to pay. Please spare a moment and send off your £5 to Don, and make him happy!!!

Now, early mention of the dedication of our Squadron Association badge on our tree at the National Arboretum. This is a joint affair with our friends of the Habbaniya Association. Full details are elsewhere in this Newsletter. We would like a decent turnout, especially as this is a handy spot for our Midland members. So make a date for Wednesday 22nd May.

We have lost another of our long serving members, Norman Gould passed away recently. Norman attended every Reunion excepting our 2001 effort. He was well known to his friends in the 'Amourer' contingent at our 'do's'.

From time to time we receive enquiries from people researching their relatives RAE career. (they must pick us up on the Internet-many thanks to Chris Morris!). Our most recent application concerns LAC Eric Batstone (Rigger). Eric served with both 'S' Squadron and 244 at Habb and Shaibah (40 -41). He also served at 119MU on the aircraft assembly for the Russians. Anyone who knew Eric could contact his son at Rob Batstone, 7 Showell Park, Staplegrove, Taunton, TA2 MY. Anyone with a story to tell about the assembly of aircraft for the Soviet Union should also write to Mr Batstone, he is most interested.

I make our usual appeal for your tales/anecdotes for entry into our Newsletter. They arrive here but slowly. Finally, our membership still increases. Where do they come from?

WORKING FOR THE RUSSIANS

We ultimately arrived in Shaibah (119MU) where we were working on the assembly of Baltimore bombers, after first unloading them at Basra docks. They were then transported in sections to 119MU. The planes were already marked with the Red Star, and women and men Russians were there to pilot them into Russia.

The first two assembled were test flown by British pilots, and both crashed, killing the pilots. We understood that this was caused because of the lack of the mid-uppergun turret which was to be fitted elsewhere. We overcame this by fixing ballast plates in the turret section, and henceforth all was o.k.

John Degg (mem. No. 241)

SHARJAH HERE I COME

Five days off the boat, I am leaving Kasfareet to HQ216. Transport Command Cairo for onward posting to their Staging Post at Sharjah. -My UK blue is a sore thumb amongst the Khaki of about nine Middle East and Sharjah veterans on the flight from Heliopolis to Lydda. We expect to be in Sharjah within three to four days (its going to be around 60 days!).

During this time I become closely acquainted with 'M' (initial of his surname). He is a six footer, and built like a boxer. He is a bit of a dandy, and careful about his appearance.

Our landing at Lydda is delayed, as the aircraft landing in front has crashed and lies burning. A SAAF Dakota will take us onto Habbaniya the next day. 'M' asks if I intend to go into Tel Aviv for the evening, he says the fact that I am flat broke presents no problem.

On arrival in Tel Aviv, 'A' takes us off at a brisk pace into the residential area. Another tall wiry Scot has now joined us. We climb the stairs at a block of flats. 'M' knocks, money passes and we enter a crowded room. Men and women stand, glasses in hand, soft music plays. 'A' disappears, and on his return, indicates we are moving on. Negotiating more streets we enter another block, and this visit is a carbon copy of the previous call. 'A' 's mood is. changing, a mixture of urgency and frustration. When he rejoins us he seems uncertain of what his next move should be, and we eventually spend the rest of the evening in the 'Honky Tonks' facing the sea. During the next weeks 'M' gives no indication as to why he made those visits. It is never referred to.

Loud protests from the 'vets' when we arrive at Hebb. They are NOT RAF, they are 216 Group and demand transfer from Transit Section to Staging Post Transit Sector. We get transferred, but get no further for five weeks. It seems Sharjah airfield is u/s.

At last, truck to Baghdad and overnight train to Basra transit camp. Ten days we are on a paddle steamer on the Shatt-al-Arab, and transfer midstream to an old Dutch ship which, in other days traded the East Indies. By now, we are 70 strong, our quarters are the open deck, the food is bully, cheese, biscuits and tea. The washing facilities for us and the native crew are one tap by the main engine.

A day is spent at Bahrein unloading. The pearl divers are trying to make a sale. On the next leg the crew lower steel screens to close in the lower deck. We are soon rolling madly to a beam sea. A timber bracing one of the screens flashes across the deck following a terrific crash as one sea hits the ship's side. Amazingly it hits nobody. We must be running for cover, as next morning we are anchored among Indian Navy vessels in a land-locked harbour. Next day we move off and land by dhow at Sharjah. It's the last Week in January, we left Cairo first week in December. The incoming postings have swamped the available accommodation. We are issued with a tent to every four people and sort ourselves out. The next day we report to the Flight office. We will now be servicing whatever aircraft comes in. The most common is the old workhorse Dakota on its 'milk-run', moving personnel mail, and some cargo or as a trooper. Irregular visitors are the fighter convoys, reinforcements for Burma and India. They are always American types, Hellcats, the beautiful Corsair and the occasional heavy, fat Thunderbolt. How can it be such an efficient fighter? The convoy 's navigator is with the Mosquito or Beaufighter that shepherds them.

(to be continued)

S.M. Smith (mem. No. 5)

A MUSICAL TALE

In between working on 119MU at Margil preparing Bostons for the Russians and getting posted to 244 Squadron at Sharjah I spent a few months on 56 R.S.U. at Habbaniya charging around the Iraqi desert picking up damaged Hurricanes, Blenheims and even a Liberator at Abu Kemal in Syria. Another job was to change the Meadows Stationary Engines in the R.A.F. Transmitters at the pumping stations along the pipe lines from Kirkuk and Kanequin. Having had a long hard drive across the desert through sandstorms and searing heat, we arrived at H.3 in the late afternoon feeling quite miserable and ready for a bath which we knew we would not get.

As we entered the compound strains of beautiful music wafted across the sands-it was, I later learned Greig's 'Last Spring'-a piece of music I shall never forget and shall always think of H.3 whenever I hear it. It was being played by a young Scot on a very old gramophone-he had just a few old 78's which he played constantly whenever he was in his billet.

Many years later I was working in the Seychelles Islands, in the 1970's. During my stay there as there was no television or other entertainment at that time we had formed a musical society and one of my tasks was to host a radio programme every Monday evening from 6.30 to 7.30pm. It was naturally called 'Music Hour'. I played mainly light popular classical music and talked generally about the music which I played. The programme was aimed mainly at the Ex Pat population of the islands.

During one programme I related the story about my experience many years before at H.3 making the point that many tunes are associated with some kind of event in life- and I then played Greig's 'Last Spring' in the programme. A few days later when I was on a boat travelling towards the Island of La Digue- a chap came to me and said he that he had listened to my programme on Radio Seychelles the Monday before and found it

quite interesting-and he then asked me where the place was in the Iraqi desert that I had heard the music being played during the war. I replied that I thought he would never know but it was a pumping station called H.3 on the pipe line. "Know it well" he said much to my surprise. We then exchanged reminiscences. Including a casual enquiry as whether or not I had ever served on 244 Squadron. "Yes" I said- I went down the Sharjah after my time with 56 R.S.U.

It then he revealed that he was my former M.O. He was none other than Ft. Lt. Robin Markham our station doctor at both Shaibah and Sharjah. (He was the M. O. before Doc Taylor). He was now the Doctor at the small hospital on the island of Praslin in the Seychelle Group where he lived with his wife Anne and their daughter Annie. I got to know them quite well and he was still resident there when I left the then Colony in 1976. He was busying himself building a yacht to sail to South Africa at the end of his stint out there, which I understand he did much later. You meet old friends and former colleagues in the strangest of places.

Tom Booth (mem. No. 59)

A SMALL POX CASE TO ADEN, FEBRUARY 1944

Minor panic at Masirah when there is a suspected small pox case. Don't know why everyone seems so worried apart from the chap who has it because we have all been inoculated dozens of times. However, Old Nick (Sqn. L Nicholson) informs me that I have been allocated the trip to Aden to take the bloke (Sgt. Weale) to the hospital there. Sounds good; I have not flown along this bit of the coast before and there should be some interesting scenery. Pahmi will be coming, but Mark is still at Habb., waiting for his commission. However, Dicky Larcombe will be with us, his assignment being to take a Fairchild Argus back to the squadron from Aden (light, high wing, single engine effort). It is only about 1500 miles to Aden so we should manage it there in one day if we get a reasonable kite. First day, February 15 we have to turn back to Masirah because the generator is U/S (E BA408 is the kite). The second day we start again, past Cape Madraka and the deep bays thereabouts, across the rocky, barren, lifeless Kuria Muria Islands, past Murbat and to Salala, where we refuel (2 hrs. 35 mins.). Salala airfield is 2 or 3 miles inland and between the sea, an Arab village with a few palm trees and mountains which are about 3000 feet high. Only a small RAF camp here mostly used by Ferry Control going to the Far East and it seems to be quite pleasant with not many flies. When we take off again the starboard engine cuts several times in rapid succession accompanied by terrific bangs. This somewhat worried us so we land again quickly and the fitters clean a few things and say, "right that'll be o.k.". Just about then, before we could decide whether we were still worried, a fusillade of gunfire came from the direction of the Arab village. This sounded interesting and we learned later that it had been quite exciting. We were told that the Sultan of Oman had been inspecting his guard (there is one of his palaces at Salala it seems), when suddenly some of them upped their rifles and had a go at him. The guard captain threw himself in front of the Sultan and was killed, but the Sultan survived. What happened after that we know not.

We then forgot about the ropy kite, and took off for Aden, proceeding across the sea to the rocky promontory of Ras Fartak, and then following the coast to Rian where there is a tarmac landing ground, with the mountains just a few miles inland. From Rian which is only a few miles from Mukalla, a brilliant white town in a magnificent setting between the sea and vertical mountains, we set course obliquely inland, climbing to 7000 feet to get over the mountains. We were now in the Hadramaut. Extremely craggy mountains with giant cliffs were occasionally visible through a layer of strato-cu. This is fantastic country, site of the old realm of the Queen of Sheba I believe, it would be nice to see more of it. Eventually 3hrs. 45 mins., after leaving Salala we landed at Khor Maksar, Aden.

As soon as we land a garry rushes out and guides us away to the far side of the aerodrome. When we get out, including Sgt. Weale, the suspected small pox case, everyone retreats before us- suspected small pox only but they must think it is death and destruction, and they reckon we will have to be quarantined. However, the M.O. examines the case and decides that it is not small pox after all, and so we are allowed to proceed to the mess and find ourselves a billet. I reckon they cocked it up at Masirah, but nice to have this trip over new ground and they did want the Argus at Masirah.

The kite is due for a DI before we take off for Masirah but is found to be dropping to pieces, so we have to stop at Aden until it is put together again, not to mind, the food is quite good here. However, it appears the carburettor air intake is loose, all its fastenings are broken and the air filter stays are all that has prevented it from dropping out of the engine (port engine). The nuts and bolts are missing off all the exhausts (stbd engine). Priming pump U/S (port engine). Something else (stbd engine). Also a hole in the wing. It will take two or three days to put all that right, so perhaps Masirah were on the ball, getting ropy kite repaired at Aden all for nothing.

Use some time by flying around with Dicky, testing the Argus. Move around the bay having a look at all the landing grounds here. (Sheik Othman, Little Aden, Hiswa), some fantastic spires of volcanic peaks at Little Aden on the far side of the bay. In the afternoon we all went into town (not Sgt. Weale, still in doc.). A taxi takes us first of all to the crater which lies through a rock tunnel. To the left there is a great mass of rock which rises for 1500 feet above the sea. From the crater we decide to have a look at the wells, ancient man made hollows 3000 years old I believe, and were for the purpose of holding water. They are now nearly empty, but their rock sides soars upwards for several hundred feet and look like excellent climbing material. The rock extends upwards to the mountain summit, but its a bit too warm to do much climbing now. There is a museum at the entrance to the wells. From here we go steamer point (6 chips in a taxi), and do some shopping. Silk to send home is quite cheap, and shirts are 5 chips. bazars are nearly all in "the crescent" and are run by Indians. We then eat very well at the services club before going back to camp for another pretty good dinner in the mess.

The following day is similar with an attempt at some climbing, whilst on the 19th Dicky starts off back to Masirah in the Argus. He will have to land to refuel at the small landing grounds we saw on the way here, and do his own refuelling from petrol cans carried in the back of the kite. Quite an exciting trip. On the 20th E is proclaimed serviceable and Palmi and I return to Masirah by the same route, much to our surprise with no problems. On arrival find that Mark and Niel Wren now have their commissions, but are still at Sharjah so we do a little sortie with F/O Davis as navigator. Have to return with the starboard engine cutting. Guess which aircraft? No prizes, it was of Aden fame. Still no-one can find out what is wrong and a few days later Sam Vesey has the same problem.

Frank Moseley (mem. No. 304)

VICKERS IN A TWIST OR THE RIGOURS OF BEING A RIGGER

Moving any large aircraft in or out of a hanger was never easy under the best of conditions, but with the Valentias of Habbaniya this operation was fraught with hazards numerous and varied, and occasionally unpredictable. A job not for the faint-hearted, with two feet or less between wingtip and hangar, a rigger in the cockpit watching ever-decreasing pressure as he strained to hear the urgent screams, "Brakes! ", a towing tractor with hiccups that didn't like being driven slowly, an M.T.: driver displaying a kinship with Malcolm Campbell, and a bloke guiding the tailwheel with a tiller with a rebellious sense of direction. Then the marshaller, a man skilled in walking backwards whilst giving hand signals with one eye on each wingtip where two more men walked with hands held aloft to indicate how close the wing was to hitting the hangar.

Having parked the thing without mishap, brakes applied and released, tail tiller and tractor disengaged, wheels chocked with ropes correctly placed around the chocks, the Valentia stood on uneven ground outside the hangar in the boiling Habbaniya sun. The pilot duly arrive by car, swapped his soft cap for helmet and goggles and climbed aboard. Crew on this occasion were pilot, navigator and wireless operator. No ground crew were travelling us the .flight was to bring back civilians from Baghdad. Apparently they would board with engines running. Whatever the pilot's rank, while the aircraft was on the ground the marshaller was in charge. Pilots respected and obeyed his signals even if it meant a Group Captain taking orders from an L.A.C. It was official R.A.F. procedure recognised by all pilots. Except one. Let us call him Prune. Engines were started and we awaited run-up, often a rushed affair as the sun beat down on the open cockpit. One could not blame any pilot for being keen to get airborne. Prune waved frantically to me, and I sprinted around the wingtip and up the fuselage to the cockpit, where he pointed to the brake pressure gauge. Too low. I gave him the thumbs up and ran back down. Another rigger and I manhandled the heavy hand pump to the nose, opened the hinged flap and plugged in. We eventually got the o. k. from the cockpit and we dragged the pump back to the side. I ran back to the nose to secure the flap, while Sgt. Metcalfe, playing marshaller out of respect for Prune's senior rank, stood with arms by his sides waiting for me to finish and run clear. But Prune wanted to get away, and with me still under the nose he opened both throttles. The Valentia lunged forward, needing to clear the tail from the hangar before making a 90 degree turn towards the gate. I ran backwards, still securing the flap, and then dived sideways to escape the pair of wheels under the port wing. I also threw my screwdriver somewhere. In a flash, my epitaph loomed before me, 'A tragic end. He fell on his screwdriver rather than be squashed by his aircraft. remember to this day praying that the port wheels would not go into a hole and that Prune would not lower the port aileron, for I had precious little room as the port wing passed over me. Surprised to be still in one piece I started to sprint to the right just as Prune opened the port throttle and went into his 90 degree turn to starboard. I was suddenly faced with the great brute of a biplane tail coming straight at me, and I thought, "this calls for plan B, sharpish". I changed direction, running fast with the aircraft, aiming forward of the fuselage where there would be more ground clearance, and dived again as the creaking monster went over me with almost nothing to spare, catching one knee that I had forgotten to straighten. I though how lucky I was that the Valentia had a tailwheel and not a skid like the earlier Victoria, as Metcalf helped me up, checked my skinned knees and elbows and sent me to Sick Bay where was painted with iodine and a couple of plasters slapped on.

Lucky again that the day ended thus, when it could easily have ended in a wooden box plus a letter home from the C.O. "We regret to inform you... .. "

Prune was quite oblivious to the fact that he had violated a long-standing R.A.F. code, and nearly squashed a rigger to boot. He made me feel quite expendable, and one wondered how he thought his Valentia kept flying when it should have been moth-balled ten years ago.

But be fair to the man, he did grant a lowly L.A.C. the proud boast of being the only man to have been run over by a Vickers Valentia and lived to tell Jim and Don about it'

Alex Alder (mem. No. 26)

**DEDICATION CEREMONY-WEDNESDAY 22^d MAY 2002
FOR THE TREES DEDICATED TO THOSE WHO SERVED AT:
RAF STATIONS BASRAH HABBANIYA MAURIPUR SHAIBAH WITH 244 SQN.**

Suggested Timetable

11.15	Assemble
11.30	Service in Chapel
11.50	Proceed to Trees
12.00	Blessing of Trees / Last Post & Reveille
12.30	Lunch in Visitor Centre Conference Room
14.00	Guided Tour of the Arboretum

Likely costs

	£2.50 Entrance Fee
	£5.00 Buffet Lunch
	£2.00 Teas & Coffees
Total	£10.00 - Seems a logical amount to ask from members

This Association is happy to co-ordinate the dedication ceremony with the linked Associations as Hon. Sec. is familiar with Arboretum and is geographically close.

A Chaplain is available within the RAF Habbaniya Association to conduct the ceremony and will be happy to co-operate with Chaplains from the other Associations. All Associations are asked to appeal in their Newsletters for a bugler/trumpeter. This Hon. Sec. is attempting to obtain a bugler/trumpeter from RAF Music Services. Arboretum can provide bugler/trumpeter for £35 if we fail.

It is appropriate for medals to be worn.

Early publicity to members of the date is appreciated. Publicity material for the National Memorial Arboretum can be provided if required.

There is ample car parking. The visitor centre has very good toilets. There is an excellent restaurant and a function room adjacent which we will use for our buffet lunch. There are facilities to put up some displays for the benefit of our members and the general public visiting the Arboretum that day.

There are disabled scooters available for those who need them and walking sticks are recommended for those who are a bit wobbly on their pins because the Arboretum does not have billiard table smooth paths!

The Arboretum is situated at Alrewas just north of Lichfield and is well signposted just off the main A38 Birmingham to Burton Road.

HABBANIYA ASSOCIATION CHAPLAINS

Most Rev Dr David Carey --- Archbishop, Lambeth (Not available)

Rev Michael Cole - Episcopal/C of E. Ex RAF Chaplain, South Carolina (Not in UK at the time) Rev David Farrant C of E. Worthing (uncertain- Family care commitments).

Rev David Longstaff- Free Church, Scunthorpe. (May be in USA on exchange).

Rev Trevor Rye Baptist. Crewe WILL OFFICIATE AT THE CEREMONY.

Jim Heslop

W/Cdr Ron Rotherham

Don James

MARCH 2002