



244 SQUADRON & KINDRED SPIRITS ASSOCIATION



Newsletter No. 41

Jim Says, Here we are again, with loads to talk about. Don's report is below. Firstly, the Habbaniya Reunion. This was held at Elvington Museum near York on 11th October last. 244 Sqdn. Association members were, as usual, invited to attend. My news from Chris Morris was that 244 members were few and far between. Amongst those attending were Jack Earnshaw and Mike Kerringan.. Quite a number had expressed interest, but failed to turn up, although transport difficulties prevented some arrivals (Bob Norcott being one.)

However, it seems the event was a total success. Nearly 200 turned up, the lunch was excellent, and 85 remained for the evening dinner. Amongst the toasts after this meal was one "to 244 Sqdn. Assn."

The programme during the day included the usual slide shows. However, the afternoon show included "Shaibah yesterday and today" (illustrated by colour slides). Yes, Chris has contacts in the Basra area. The camp is still there, although the runways were destroyed in the '91 Gulf war. The large hangar (area 1937), is still in existence, and some huts still stand (with numbers thereon). All this in colour.

As I've said before - copy required for future Newsletters. All you do send in must cover tales from the Gulf or Arabian Peninsula. Just lately I have had a couple of offerings which were good in themselves, but of no use for inclusion, as they basically were not 'Tales of the Gulf area etc.'

In an attempt to arouse your authorship, I am running a competition. Please send in your offerings on the subject 'The best or the worst or the weirdest meal I encountered during my service at Rabb, Shaibah, Sharjah, Masirah, Salalah, Jask, Rosalal Hadd or Riyan.' There will be a £10 prize for the best entry of 100 words or more. Entries to me before end of January next. Come on, give it a go!

Don says. How time goes by! It only seems the other day since I was doing the same thing for the last Newsletter.

By the time this reaches you it will be nearly Xmas. So all the very best from Jim and Audrey, Frances and myself and a very Happy, Healthy New Year.

With this Newsletter will be a notation reminding those of you who have not yet paid their subs for 2003. If no note you are up to date. We are quite worried that some of our regulars have not been in contact for some while. So please get a pen out and let me have a cheque. Please make it out to "244 Sqdn & Kindred Spirits" and send to me. By the way, subs are still £5, and don't forget subs for 2004 are due 1st January next.

MASIRAH (A new CO)

On the 10th February 1952 a new C.O. (F/Lt Matthews) took command at RAF Masirah. We all viewed this with a little apprehension. Conversation in the NAAFI for the next few days turned to personal encounters. He seemed ok, but appeared to be a little more authoritarian than his predecessor.

One day I was summoned to his presence. I duly entered his office with a little foreboding, saluted, and introduced myself for our first meeting. His first order was crisp and to the point. "Take me to the far end of the airfield", he said This was unexpected, no one went there. Apart from the 'Baron Inverdale' monument there was nothing to see.

I drove the 15cwt Fordson down the runway in complete silence until we reached the end. "Show me how to drive", he said. The penny dropped! The C. O. had quickly found that there were only two ways of travelling on Masirah – on foot or by vehicle, and 50% had to be cancelled out, as he couldn't drive. The remaining option didn't appeal to him.

I explained the foot controls, gear positions, and how to double-declutch, a necessity on crash type gearboxes; he pointed the vehicle up the runway and set off. At the end of an erratic journey, I was dismissed, and the truck returned down the runway.

A few days later, whilst gathered in the NAAFI, the Station Engineer (a Mr. Seckington) arrived, asking if anyone had seen the C.O. Apparently he hadn't attended dinner, nor was he in his quarters. Everyone listened but showed no particular interest. Suddenly, "His gharry is missing", penetrated my brain. This was serious now. If a vehicle was missing there were bound to be questions, forms to complete, and reports to write. Action was needed now. A quick tour of the camp, down to the jetty, to the monument, and outlying transmitter buildings brought no sightings. By nine o'clock the Bedford QL with tow ropes and five or six volunteers set out down the island towards Sur. Well south of Dawa the headlights picked up a figure dressed in whites. It was the C.O. He had been walking for some three hours after becoming 'bogged down' in the sand.

We returned to base after he said the gharry could be collected in the morning. After all, it wasn't going anywhere was it?

The next morning we set off again down the island. Crossing the salt flats and climbing the bluff Just over the top near the well at Dawa we saw a vehicle headed towards us some two miles away. We waited and found it to be the missing vehicle driven by a 'genuine Bedouin'. He wanted `baksheesh'!

Why, we asked did he want 'baksheesh'? Because he had found the gharry, and it was custom to reward the finder. The C.O 's decision was both quick and final. The vehicles position was known, therefore, it was not lost. If it was not lost it would not have been found and if it had not been found a reward was not payable.

The Bedouin departed walking back down the track. I had a feeling the CO's logic was lost on him. During the remainder of my stay on the island the C.O. never strayed beyond the camp bounds unaccompanied.

Bob Bolton (Mem. No.87)

HABBANIYA

*An emerald set midst golden sand,
This camp of ours – Habbaniya stands,
A monument to Britain's might,
Her will to wage and win the fight,
To passers-by it thus appears,
To us inside – Two bloody years.*

*An iron fence around this park,
Where fairy lights gleam after dark,
Scent of sweet flowers fills the air,
A fairyland at which to stare,
To passers-by; it thus appears,
To us inside – Two bloody years.*

*Young airmen dancing `tween the trees,
Their happy singing fills the breeze,
Officers with faces bright,
Escort sweet damsels out each night,
To passers-by; it thus appears,
To us inside – Two bloody years.*

*Sweet music rising to the sky,
In tune with song birds flutt 'ring nigh,
A garden fair where all is bliss,
A place the Air Force wouldn't miss,
To passers-by; it thus appears,
To us inside TWO BLOODY YEARS.*

VAUGHAN HINDER update. (On the crash at Socotra)

The story as we left it in Newsletter 37 was that Vaughan was probably co-pilot with W/officer Miller RCAF, flying in a mixed Canadian/British crew comprising Kenneth Mooney RAF, David Jones RCAF, Marie Joseph Leduc RCAF and an as yet unidentified sixth crewman. They tragically died on August 24th 1944 in an event you had recalled when the plane crashed shortly after take-off. Also you thought that the sixth crewman was the Rear Gunner who had survived the initial impact but had died subsequently.

So far I've pieced together a bit more of the story, with a bit of old fashioned detective work and a great stroke of luck. The detective work was to go through the Commonwealth War Graves Commission site on the Internet and search for all the airmen who sadly died on the days subsequent to Vaughan's death. The site forces you to narrow a surname down to two letters i.e. search for Aa, Ab, Ac etc. Eventually, I located Warrant Officer Class 1, W.Op/Air Gnr. John Keith Brown, another Canadian hailing from Ontario like the others. He had died only one day later and is also buried in Maala, Yemen with I am presuming the rest of his crew. It seems too much of a coincidence that we have an airman also from Ontario, also strangely commemorated as 21 Squadron, dying so close to the original crash date, in the same cemetery.

The stroke of luck was to pursue a long-shot with the RAF Museum in Hendon who I discovered hold an incomplete set of accident records from 1919 onwards. I wrote speculatively to them and incredibly they returned a photocopy of the same!

Date: 24th August 1944

Unit: 621 Squadron – that was a surprise.

Type: Wellington XIII No. JA835 or possibly JA535, the first digit is not clear.

Airfield: Ras Karma, Soqotra Island, Aden.

Pilot: Miller and 2nd Pilot Hinder.

Miller has his flying times, unfortunately not Hinder. Though Miller had 800 hours total solo, had 302 hours solo on type, the night solo come down to 76 and 53. Does that sound fair to say this seems a new crew who have only made a few flights together possibly?

Accident: 19:37, 5 minutes into flight, Night, Duty: Anti-submarine patrol.

"Propeller of aircraft heard to be running away on Take Off. Aircraft climbed to 100' and hit crest of hill at 150' when attempting to circuit on one engine or force land on top of hill. Pilot could not cope with aircraft after engine failure or starboard prop selector switch knocked into fixed or incorrect manipulation of switches by pilot. There is no evidence what caused the engine failure but aircraft had just completed a 9 hour trip with no signs of trouble". Then a Postscript: "CO - unlikely that prop selector switch was knocked across into fixed. Pilot would have noticed when he feathered. AOC — concurs".

It was just so incredible to hear this — the clinical crash investigator laying all options on the table including pilot error, then the CO and AOC moved to include comments that they thought this unlikely. The possible greenness of the crew. The fact that a plane that had just completed a 9 hour flight, should then be going up again. Five minutes from take-off to death.

RAF Hendon also enclosed a photocopy from "Coastal, Support and Special Squadrons of the RAF and their Aircraft", by John Rawlings which unfortunately doesn't have JA(5)35 against either 621 or 244 Squadron. Out of interest, the list provided for 244 Sqdn. for Wellington XIII is: February 1944 — May 1945

HZ658 W; HZ712 F; HZ897 C; HZ951 K; HZ979 M; JA149 W; JA182 B; JA627 N; JA406 G; JA482 B — recognise any of them?! I certainly do! (Edr).

Gary Tranter (Mem. No.353)

MEMORIES OF SHARJAH

On 27th September 1942 we took off from Sharjah with seven on board bound for Wadi Shariah in the then Palestine to pick up the first of the Bisleys. We were to go, landing at Bahrain, Shaibah, Habbaniya, Wadi Sharia, Gaza and Aqir. I had my crew, Gordon and Bill. The others on board were pilots who were to fly the Bisleys back to Sharjah following us.

The whole plan came very close to coming unstuck at Bahrain. Wanting very badly to do the trip to get away from the delights of Sharjah for a few days, I bent my rule of not taking any aircraft into the air if I had any doubts about its motors.

I ran up the motors and tested the mag drop. The port one was right on the limit. I tested it again and it seemed to be about the same. I fed the power to them, got off the ground and not far above the tops of the palms and the port motor quit cold. My training took over and I must have done all the right things because we struggled around the circuit and landed safely. We spent the night there and went on next day to Habbaniya. It's not true that the clothes line near our Bahrain accommodation held several pairs of underpants. Well, if it did I'm not going to admit it!

The remainder of the trip was uneventful until we left Gaza, flown by another pilot. There was very low cloud down on the hills and the pilot tried circling low to find the airfield in nil visibility. With much shouting in his ear and a good grip on something to beat him over the skull with if he didn't, I convinced him to return to Gaza. I didn't want us all to spend eternity in a big hole somewhere on a Palestinian hillside.

Perhaps they'd sprayed the Bisleys out with something like the used car salesman do these days to make them smell new, but they did. After the beat up Blenheims they looked good. Twenty minutes solo circuits and landings and we were ready to commence the flight back to Sharjah, via Aqir, Habbaniya and Bahrain. A few days later we repeated the trip to pick up some more Bisleys.

On one of these trips we'd been given some of the Mess funds to buy wine. I'm not sure if it was the first or second one as my logbook doesn't make mention of this. Naturally, if we were going to buy, then first we had to taste. Of course this involved visits to a number of tasting spots. We all know one taste isn't enough, particularly to quench a Sharjah thirst.

Mission accomplished, we returned to the airfield and loaded the wine into one of the aircraft so we could get away early next day.

Next morning I sat at the end of the strip, motors ticking over as I watched the wine carrying Bisley start its takeoff run. As it neared the end of the strip I could see that it wasn't about to get off the ground

No doubt the brakes were smoking A IT WENT OFF THE END OF THE STRIP AND DISAPPEARED FROM SIGHT, IN A CLOUD OF DUST, DOWN A DRY WADI. Quite spectacular!

Gunning our engines we raced down the strip, hoping the pilot was alright, we'd mentally written off the wine. The pilot emerged from the wrecked machine, shaken but unhurt and unbelievably not a single bottle was broken. Leaving the battered Bisley to its fate, we found him another one. This time the wine was distributed over all the aircraft. We made an uneventful flight back, climbing high enough a couple of hours before Sharjah to cool the wine.

It was on one of these trips to that we were adopted by Bisley, that little dog, Heinz variety. He was sunning himself in the middle of a busy street, completely unafraid of passing traffic. We called him off the road and he wouldn't leave us. Out at the airfield we thought he'd be terrified of the planes. Not him. Given a boost up, he

settled down and enjoyed every moment of the flight, hopping to the ground to christen a tyre when we'd landed. He settled in to Squadron life in no time and went on many flights, loving being in the aircraft.

Tony Tubbenhauer. Australia. (Mem. No.112)

SHIPWRECKED! A TALE OF MASIRAH ISLAND

One episode of adventure I cannot forget was swimming out to a drifting lifeboat abandoned by a previous group of swimmers. Two officers and two airmen (myself included) climbed aboard. But, due to the direction of the monsoon winds, and our lack of sailing knowledge, we were unable to steer the square-sailed ship back to shore. After contemplating abandoning the boat, we decided we had passed the point of no return considering the swimming distance back to shore. We drifted all night as the boat filled with water, but it managed to keep afloat with its Kapok tanks installed round the boat's interior.

The boat beached in the early hours, so the first thing we did was to erect a makeshift tent using the boat's mast and sail, then took turns to hold the boat by a long rope, enabling us to squat in a hollowed out area in the sand to avoid the driving grit coming along the beach in the path of the monsoon wind, only to find out the next morning the boat full of sand!

The Blenheims found us next morning and dropped food and water. Later we had visits from the Bedouin, partly out of curiosity I suppose. On the other hand we did not carry 'goodie chit' so there was always the fear of emasculation! The headman smoked a pipe of green tobacco which was lit by an iron gadget striking flint above a wisp of wool, which when ignited smouldered until the wool was nipped off into the pipe. Really primitive — but it worked.

Supplies were constantly dropped, on one occasion; a bagful of magazines was dropped, but disintegrated on impact, the contents rolling off into the desert in a stiff breeze. The Bedouin made daily visits, and on one occasion the Headman swapped pipes with one of the officers (the Masirah Medical Officer who was absent from the station for five days) and soon began to feel the effects of a stronger tobacco.

Eventually, a dhow with an Air-Sea Rescue Officer arrived to take us back, but the dhow's captain refused any navigational help, deciding instead to take bearing from one of the crew, who shinned up the mast from time to time, giving the captain sufficient information for him to know when the last tack was made enabling the boat to reach the jetty without any further deviation.

Jack Heap (Mem. No.360)

Jim Heslop (Secretary & Supplies) W/Cdr Ron Rotherham (President) Don James (Treasurer)