



244 SQUADRON & KINDRED SPIRITS ASSOCIATION



Newsletter No. 46

Jim says, I have been giving much thought about what we should do with our artefacts (especially our Squadron Badge) when we eventually disband our Association. I hold a large quantity of photos etc. covering our Squadron's history and the places from which 244 flew. Principally, I hold the hand-painted Coat of Arms which was awarded by the College of Heralds (and as most of you know cost £300 to produce and obtain). Several ideas have been mooted for the disposal of the badge, but this item is marked for posterity, and should not be lost or destroyed. It has been suggested that it should be presented to the Royal Omani Air Force on Masirah island. Another idea is to present the badge to the Museum at Sharjah, which already holds part of 244's history. There are other places which could accept our memorabilia e.g. RAF Museum at Hendon.

Has anyone any suggestions as to the disposal of our Coat of Arms and the rest of our stuff? I would be glad of any ideas.

I am pleased to say that payment of Subs for 2005 has gone quite well, and very few of you have failed to 'stump up'. Our bank balance stands at £2 182 (less cost of this Newsletter). I have made notation on this Newsletter to those who have yet to pay. Now we come to 'Copy' for future Newsletters. The situation is grim. I try to keep the content of reasonable standard. I have had promises of tales to be told, but most were unfilled. I am sorry to say our Newsletter will dry up, and you know what that means. I make one last appeal to you, and hope for response.

In our previous issue I gave details of the forthcoming Habbanyia Association Reunion to be held in Oxford on October 8th. To which all interested 244 & K.S. are cordially invited. Details are as in Newsletter No. 45, but contact Chris Morris on 01922 612296 for up to date 'info'.

Finally, Bill World (Mem. No. 332) tells me that all ex-servicemen of WW2 are now entitled to a 'Veteran's Badge' this is a government issue. Further details can be obtained by ringing 0800 169 2277

LEAVING MERBAT – THE CRUISE OF THE VINCENTS (continued)

The aircraft were refuelled, again from stock piled supplies. But this time we were helped by some local Arabs. Or, more precisely, by a few large and heavily muscled black Africans who were, for the want of a better word, supervised by their much smaller but vociferous masters. I had the impression that we were watching the diminished and dying embers of the results of what was once a flourishing slave trade, carried on between the Horn of Africa and Arabia by those old and famous ocean going dhows of piratical repute.

It had been deemed, for some reason unknown to the majority of us, that it would be more circumspect to stay overnight at Salala, which was only, a short fifty miles farther along the coast. So a half hour of virtually sea level flying saw us all safely landed in a broad V-shaped coastal inlet with three or four thousand foot mountains, heavily shrouded in low cloud, hemming us in on three sides.

Whilst brewing up the evening meal some dozen or so Arabs appeared from virtually nowhere and squatted on their haunches to watch our every move. They were passive but curious, and I felt convinced that it was the first time any of them had actually seen aircraft on the ground. Their galabiehs were thick, with some sort of black powder, and their eyes too were darkly rimmed with the same stuff. We presumed it was some sort of fly repellent. In any case the eye shadow made their gaze intimidating intense. And they all sported a repellent of a somewhat different nature in the form of either a dagger or a sword, the blades of which were a dull grey-black colour and coated with rancid mutton fat.

Later, when seeing one of our crew cleaning a sparking plug with a small wire brush and a piece of emery cloth, they were quick to make contact, making it known that they would like some of the same to clean and polish their weapons. Not wishing to appear uncooperative or antagonistic, and as screwdrivers versus daggers would appear to be something of a mismatch, we assumed an attitude of total non aggression and gave a couple of square inches to each of them. They then happily resumed their squatting positions and polished away vigorously, stopping every now and then to admire their handiwork. Leaving us meanwhile to quietly finish off our meal with a mug of tea.

Not unnaturally, I suppose, they assumed our generosity and hospitality to be not unlike their own and, when we put down our emptied mugs, they stopped their dagger work and came over to accept or, looked at differently, purloin, a mug each, causing us neither anger nor amusement, just wonderment tinged with almost disbelief. Come nightfall our friends melted away. Leaving us to enjoy a night out, sleeping peacefully under the guardian wings of our Vincents.

Dawn came and with it a load of problems and concerns, for the low cloud was still with us. This meant that take off had to be directly seawards to avoid any danger of flying into the mountains that lurked around us. After take off and some fifteen minutes of climbing through the cloud, I imagined that the aircraft suddenly hit an updraught, and glancing down I felt sure I saw a black mass glide past just feet below, and to this day I am convinced we missed hitting the top of those mountains by the merest fraction. But the pilot, Sergeant Richardson, would have none of it, denying any possibility of having been in any sort of danger. However, and whatever the truth, within minutes we had broken cloud to turn right to fly in clear skies over a carpet of cotton wool, heading towards Mukalla.

Fred Hitchcock (Mem. No.272)

TO HABBANIYA 1943

Push off today on one of the Nairn coaches, which are absolutely wizard efforts. First we pass through oases with the snow covered Anti Lebanon Mountains rearing on our left, but as the Barada dwindle the desert develops, although there is still sparse grass. Eventually all traces of any road are left behind and the bus drives straight across an absolutely flat partly stony desert with only a few stones to mark its route. At Rutbah (2am) there is a stop for shai, and then at 9am we reach Ramadi and have breakfast at the Babylon Hotel near the Euphrates. Crops are widespread around here using water from the river for irrigation. Then it is to Habbaniya and to the Transit Camp, ye gods, not another transit camp! (26 PTC), which is on the shore of Lake Habbaniya. This turns out to be quite a good transit camp with no bull good tents and pleasant surroundings along the lake, although barren desert. The next day (Feb 4) we take the garry to the main camp, which is about 7 miles, crossing the plateau from which Iraqi rebels shelled the camp last year I think. RAF Habb. It is very well organised and large (8 miles in circumference). Irrigation is widely used to give profuse vegetation; all the billets are of brick and each surrounded by a garden, and there is a criss-cross of paved roads with names like London Road, Grantham Road etc; a shopping centre (Cheapside, somebody's joke), several churches, a cinema, and a super swimming pool.

Back at the transit camp we can walk along the lake shore and at night listen to the eerie howling of the pyards. We find we have to keep a sharp eye on our kit though, because these Iraqi's are noted for being expert kit swipers. There are tales of tents being cleaned out at night, even when the blokes are asleep in them.

By Feb. 8 we are moving again (at least Mark, Palmi and I are). A garry takes us across desert dried swamp with salt patches everywhere and to Baghdad (55 miles). After a short stay here, where we can't get any food, there is a train ride in cattle trucks to Shaibah; arriving at 9am. Less said about the journey the better.

Yet another transit camp where much to our surprise we find Tommy Tucker, Sam Vesey and Don Nash and crews, all bound for 244. A week later along comes Jim Knapp, Dicky Larcombe, Tommy Leicester and their crews, so all is a grand reunion of Kenya OTU's.

Still here, but on March 23 the lot us are going back to the transit camp on Lake Habbaniya, incredible, no explanation given which is inexcusable. We have to travel those filthy cattle trucks again. However, this camp is better than Shaibah, it is getting warm now and the lake is very good for swimming. A Blenheim I also becomes available at the main camp so we can get in a little bit of flying. Other news is that a Vincent prangs near Shaibah with everybody killed. The lake which is about 10 miles across suddenly rises by about 4 feet. This is because it is fed by the River Euphrates which is fed by flood waters, melting snow and all that from Turkey. The swimming is still very good and the local rocks are interesting with layers of gypsum formed when the desert waters evaporate. Eventually it is April 27th and Mark rings up from the main camp where he has

managed to find some navigation work, to say that he has organised something. Two Bisleys have to go to Sharjah from 135 MU (Maintenance Unit) Cairo, and Tommy Tucker and crew and ourselves are to do it. Supposed to catch a kite the next day at 07.30 so go down to the main camp in the ration garry, and to Comm-Flight. No sign of life until after half an hour a kite starts up at the other end of the runway about a mile away. It takes off, we were told to wait at the wrong place. A common happening it seems, but we were lucky because a BOAC Loadstar from Tehran was going on to Cairo with a few spare seats. Off we go across miles of desert, the great cleft of the Jordan Valley, part of the same rift valley as the African one in Kenya, eventually putting down at Lydda in Palestine. Great to see green grass again. Off again, cross the Suez Canal at Ismailia, into the Cairo area and land at Almaza.

Frank Mosely (Mem. No.304)

MORE ON SHARJAH 1942

"With my Aussie crew Gordon and Bill, I spent a good part of 1942 at Sharjah. It was us who led the first of the Blenheims there from Habbaniya, arriving on April 8 in Z9305, giving the place a good beat-up before landing only to find the AOC had come on ahead of us. We reckoned we'd get a good bollocking, but he just grinned, probably remembering his young days.

Sharjah, as we all know, was the butt end of the world, or, if it wasn't you could see it from there. Poor food, tent accommodation, searing heat and stifling humidity, no entertainment except for swimming in water so warm we'd get wet and then stand in the wind to get cool, shortage of fresh water brought in tins on donkey-back, prickly heat to liven us up when we did get wet, clapped out aircraft, some so corroded I could break bits out of the wing's trailing edge with my fingers — and those were its good points. How the ground-staff guys managed to keep the aircraft serviceable I have never known. A heartfelt thanks to them, their good work in such horrible conditions kept us fliers alive.

Doc. Markham, I guess just to break the monotony, whenever he could get away, came flying with us and this the tale of how I shot him. Now, whilst we were waiting to leave Oz for the M.E. the police told us that, just to try to help, they'd rounded up the crims in Sydney and taken their weapons away from them and if we liked to call at the central cop shop they'd give us one each. I scored a .32 Smith and Wesson revolver which I found would tuck nicely into a uniform breast pocket.

I'd not had time to try it. Doc was upset by the village pi-dogs that, after first course at the garbage dump, headed for the cookhouse for their second. Not a good thing he said. I showed him the revolver. "Let's go to the dump and scare a few", he said. Of course, when we got there we had to have some practice shots. We both were in shorts, bare-chested. Doc stood ahead, but well off to one side as I fired the first round. I saw him grab his chest. There was a tiny trickle of blood. "Jesus wept", I thought, "I've shot the Doc".

When we found he wasn't mortally wounded, in fact there was only a tiny piece of lead that had barely punctured the skin, we examined the revolver closely. It had obviously had heavy use by its previous owner for the cylinder was worn and the bullet didn't line up exactly with the barrel. Every time it was fired a small bit of lead flew off at an angle. Dogs one, shooters zero. We never hit any, but we did scare some near to death.

Tony Tubbenhauer (Mem. No.112)

MEMORIES OF SHARJAH 1943/44

The variety of aircraft using the airfield at Sharjah, many in the hands of somewhat inexperienced crews, ensured that every landing was an event to be watched. There were a number of accidents, but no fatalities, but even a crash could be to someone's benefit as a Hudson that swung to port and had the starboard undercarriage collapse, which provided the port main-plane and a replacement engine for FH231, as well as providing other parts and assisting in the identification and installation of services.

There was the Wellington Ic that landed so heavily that it sheared the taper pins in the tail wheel mounting. No spares were available, so we hand-made replacements and fitted them, overnight.

A DC2 of Middle East Transport Command landed with a damaged elevator control rod. We made a replacement out of bits and pieces. On subsequent visits of the same aircraft, we noted that this home-made component had never been replaced.

Then there was the R.A.F. Catalina that landed on the Dubai Creek, requiring a major engine inspection and certification to enable it to continue its patrol duties. An inspection that required me to scramble around on top of the main-plane, high above the water of the creek.

One hair-raising episode was that of a Blenheim V (Bisley) of 244 Squadron that took off with its engine cowling gills open, the resultant drag and turbulence prevented it from gaining height. It was fortuitous that there were miles of flat desert and the sea at the end of the runway. Eventually the pilot was able to raise the undercarriage, gain height and close the gills.

The Bisley's of 244 Squadron, which replaced the Blenheim IV's had been in store in the Middle East and suffered from engine corrosion. Many, like the one in which I was flying to Karachi, suffered 'oiling-up' and loss of power on one engine. Fortunately they were just about able to maintain height on one engine and in every case were able to return to a safe landing. But this did not endear them to their crews.

But not all the events that come to mind were misfortunate. There was the Flying Display, with practice bombs and ground to air firing, staged for the Sheikh of Sharjah — I regret that I have no record of his name. This is depicted in one of the short sequences in the Black and White film that I can let you see. Also there was the rainstorm that flooded the airfield and the courtyard of the fort — so unusual that I recorded the flooded Fort on film, this is one of the sequences in the colour film 'On the Gulf'.

I am sure there must have been lots of other incidents, but I cannot remember them. Perhaps your article will, in due course, stir up further memories.

Langdale (Mem. No. 98)

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF

'Tis the end of May '44 on the Island (in my bunk approx 0730 hrs.). I arise from slumbers, a peaceful night has passed. This is mainly due to the fact that my three bed boards supported on two bearers, the whole supported on four sand-filled four gallon petrol cans were yesterday given the 100 octane treatment, which meant the army of bed bugs had been incinerated, and a 'bug free' 'charp' was the result (but for how long?)

Using my tin hat as a wash basin, and using the last of my fresh(?) water, I wash and shave. I will then toddle across to the showers and perform further ablutions. These are brackish water showers, and leave one with a slightly sticky feeling on the skin.

Now, across to the Mess for breakfast. On arrival I fill my water bottle with today's ration of fresh water. I then sit down to a breakfast of tinned bacon with a couple of fried seagull eggs (a rather fishy taste!) I note that the bread provided has improved. Recently we have been treated to bread which looked like current cake — weevils therein!

I haven't mentioned — there is no flying. The squadron is grounded, awaiting a complete engine change. This is the result of 'The Great Oil Mystery' (stories of which have appeared in previous Newsletters).

However, our C.O., W/Cdr Hankin keeps us on our toes, holding 'Bull or 'Gen' session, nearly everyday. Today is the turn of half of 'A flight crews, of which I am a member. We congregate in a large marquee, which becomes like an oven with all the bodies inside. This goes on for about one and a half hours, during which we learn that as soon as new engines arrive and are installed, we will begin nine hours air tests flying within sight of the runway. As we break off I take the opportunity of wandering around the Flights. I come upon two fitters at work on a Hercules engine mounted on a home-made jig. They are attempting to remove the constant speed unit. This is housed in the cone on the end of the propeller shaft. Having difficulty, they are hammering away at the cone with a hardwood chock (very high tech!!). At last the cone comes off to display the constant speed unit. This is composed of small gear wheels, supposedly running in high speed grease. Unfortunately, the grease has turned into something like plasticine. This mixture of sand and grease should be great lubrication! This does not increase my confidence in the aircraft we are flying/ I beat a hasty retreat to the Mess for Tiffin.

What treat do we have in store. Today it is bully beef fritters with something that tastes something like cabbage. All this can be washed down with a mug of tea made with brackish water but laced with condensed milk to make it palatable.

Afternoon looms. A three tonner picks us up outside the Mess, and runs us down to the swimming beach at the north end of the island. There we disport ourselves (naked) in the breakers for a couple of hours. As we return an old Halifax MK2 clatters over the airfield. Carried in its belly pannier are four new or refurbished Hercules engines down from Middle East (This 'Halibag' is nicknamed 'Pregnant Priscilla').

Later, our evening meal consisting of fried turtle steak, which resembles green liver with a fishy taste, backed up by the same vegetable as served at Tiffin. All above meals are served on those battered tin plates. Next, stroll into Mess bar. I order an orange squash (of course you have to provide water from your precious ration for this). The beer boat has not yet arrived, so no beer ration. We'll have to put up with what the Mess bar has to offer. No `Names' drinks available. Concoctions such as 'South African' brandy (quite palatable). Italian spirit drinks (brought from Mogadishu whilst on detachment — but I suspect wood alcohol therein).

What's happening in the Mess 'lounge'? A couple of bridge schools are starting up. I can see 'Squiffy' Miller and his Canadian crew shooting a desultory game of Craps in one corner (Sadly these lads will get the 'Chop' down on Socotra in August).

Unfortunately our poker school is presently mori bund owing to lack of funds. About three weeks back, one of the Wops - Taffy Lewis completely broke the school one night, and walked out with over 3000 'chips'.

Unfortunately, the very next morning poor Taff disappeared into the Indian Ocean whilst flying 'spare' with Johnny Croslands's crew.

There's no great action tonight. So after a few scoops of the S.A. brandy, I retire to my bunk to read awhile. Ready to face another boring day tomorrow — wish the flying would restart.

Jim (Mem. No.51)

JULY 2005

Jim Heslop (Hon Secretary/Treasurer)

W/cdr. Ron Rotherham (President)