



TEMPSFORD VETERANS AND RELATIVES ASSOCIATION

SPRING NEWSLETTER 2019



Bob's diary.

Yet again, we were lucky with the weather on Remembrance Sunday, and it was a great pleasure to see so many people there, including some new, young members of the TVARA. The “new” format for wreath laying seemed to work well; for those who were not there, wreaths laid in memory of the fallen were laid first, followed by those in memory of people who survived the war.



We are grateful to Lady Erroll for allowing us to hold the service, to the cadets of 2500 ATC Squadron (St Neots), to Mark Stafferton, our bugler and last, but by no means least, to Rev Graham Buckle, taking his first TVARA service.

A DIP INTO THE ARCHIVES

Report on Operation Haft ¹

By Capt MJDA Blackman - SAS Regiment

This was a British special forces operation by the 1st Special Air Service in the Mayenne area near near Le Mans in the north-western part of German-occupied France (8 July/11 August 1944).

Seven men of the 1st SAS were dropped by parachute to collect intelligence on German dispositions and strength in the area, find targets for Allied air attack, and establish links with the local French resistance forces. In overall terms the operation was notably successful. ².

On the night of July 7/8 my party, consisting of three officers, three ORs (*other ranks*) and one French private soldier, took off from Tempsford airfield in one Halifax. Our journey on the whole uneventful and only once did the pilot have to take evasive action. During our three hours in the plane I think we all agreed that the old Halifax was a 'total-war machine' built rather for utility than comfort. We were huddled together facing each other, getting colder and colder and becoming more and more mixed up with kitbags and life-belts as the aircraft bumped its way across the sea and North Western France. The rum which George White, our QM, gave us before we started off was much appreciated and this, supplemented with RAF tea, kept us warm until we flew over the DZ.

As I looked down through the hole I could see little fields and small woods rushing past in the full moonlight below us. I hoped they were about 800 feet below and not 500 feet which I think was the case. I seemed to be sitting over the whole for about five minutes before Tommy Thompson, our despatcher, shouted 'Go'. I think I felt the same as all the others in my party, in that we were never so glad to get out of an aircraft as we were on this evening where we had been cold and cramped and stiff.

We all landed safely over a relatively small area, and it took us about half an hour to get together. This may seem rather a long time, but we did not all land in the same field and there were thick hedges separating us. The dropping was good, and I actually landed on top of the man who was flashing the recognition letter at the aircraft.

Our reception on the ground was excellent. We were met by "SCIENTIST", the British agent in this area. There were also present his sister and another girl, as well as a number of MAQUIS, who helped us carry our kit.

We remained talking on the DZ for a few minutes and then in two parties moved off to two little farms about two-and-a-half kilos away.

The French peasants around us were reliable and loyal and would give us immediate warning of the approach of the enemy. They fed us excellently three times a day and I preferred that they should bring us our food rather than for us to go to their homes. Obviously this was better security.

On our third evening in France, Lt Kidner and I, with a MAQUIS guide called ANDRE, set out on a recce of the area to the South and East. I now found out for the first time how good and well trained the MAQUIS were. Our guide who before the war was a schoolmaster, led us faultlessly across fields and along roads from one objective to another. He could hear German voices seconds before us, he could smell the German quicker than us and he was adept at silent movement. True, he had been at the game for four years, but I think we in our small way did very nearly reach his standard before leaving France. German cars and motor-cycles passed us on the route, so we simply waited on the side of the road for them to pass. They were quite good targets, but as our whole aim was to get information I did not attack, as I did not want to jeopardise security.....

The details of the report are quite complex, and cover many days of moving from place to place. At all times the team seem to have been given excellent support by the Maquis, and were able to pick up and pass on much valuable information. However, ultimately, time ran out....(ed)

We liaised with local mayors in the area, who proved very helpful and often provided useful little scraps of information which corroborated our own theories.

We remained very busy with our information and were preparing to receive the remainder of my troops from 'B' Sqn. All had been prepared:- the DZ worked out, guides and fatigue men conscripted and operational areas decided on, when suddenly the German retreat set in. It was too late, as now through our area Germans of every type and arm of the service streamed Eastwards - panzers, Gestapo, SS units, tanks and guns and also German women agents.....we decided to evacuate.A few more days elapsed with the main battle approaching in different directions and in different degrees of strength. We heard it going on all day and night, and saw both our own and enemy planes shot down. Finally reports came through that we were virtually outflanked by the Americans.

He then decided to contact the Americans.(ed)

...we set off at 2 o'clock on August 10 with my party of seven, two MAQUIS men and two German prisoners. We passed between woods where Germans were situated with 88mm guns....and also our main roads patrolled by German military police. By 10 o'clock that night we were well in No Mans Land and made preparations against being contacted either by American or German patrols.

The following morning we set off at seven o'clock and by a devious route reached the forward elements of the American tank destroyers at mid-day. Of the first Americans we saw, two were asleep and three sun-bathing.

I reported to the colonel of the unit.....and the following day I flew back to England.

1. National Archives: WO205/93
2. <https://codenames.info/operation/haft/>

An Entente very Cordiale

By Michael Bryant

“It was a dark and stormy night” is an often-mocked and parodied opening to an 1830 novel. Well, the night of 15 August 1943 was anything but dark and stormy; the weather was good and visibility clear, and it saw Halifax B Mk2 JD180 of 138 Squadron, based at RAF Tempsford, set off on a mission to drop arms, explosives and food to the French Resistance operating near the town of Annecy, situated very close to the border with Switzerland. The mission was also to drop leaflets onto the town.

The flight was unremarkable for most of the way but attempts to parachute the supplies to the Resistance were unsuccessful, apparently because of an absence of signals on the Alpine plateau that was the base area of the Resistance. The aircraft then turned to Annecy to drop leaflets. The pilot made two passes over the town, but disaster struck when an Italian Alpini corporal on sentry duty with his unit billeted in the area, fired at the low-flying aircraft. A shot severed an engine coolant pipe and a fire ensued. It seems likely that, in the stress of the situation, a serviceable engine was cut, and now on just two engines, the aircraft started to lose altitude. The pilot wanted to land on the lake close to Annecy but first had to jettison canisters of arms and explosives. However, with the aircraft heading towards the town, it clipped a power or telephone pole and crashed onto a house close to the Tasset Bridge in the Meythet suburb.

The aircraft broke in two, damaging another house. In spite of the risk of fire from hundreds of gallons of aviation fuel, two local inhabitants bravely managed to recover the pilot who had been thrown clear but was burned and injured. The other six crewmen all perished, as did a number of French civilians, including two children, on the ground.

After tending to the pilot’s injuries, the people of Annecy managed to smuggle the lone aircrew survivor across the border to Switzerland from where he was repatriated back to the UK via Spain. The bodies of the other six aircrew were recovered by Italian forces who delivered them to the civilian cemetery in the town and, by all accounts, departed as quickly as possible.

The crash was a liberating element and a moment of expression for the population of Annecy, which had been rather Vichy in its sentiment until then. A recent French account states “When there was the burial of the crew, there were 5,000 people who came to attend the funeral. They shouted ‘Long live England’, ‘Long live Canada’ and ‘Long live the allies’. In the days that followed, there was a queue all along Cran Avenue to drop flowers at the crash site.”

Today, Annecy is twinned with the town of Cheltenham and, to commemorate the events of 75 years ago, a small delegation from Cheltenham was invited to participate. The delegation consisted of the Cheltenham Chairman of the Twinning Committee, an Honorary Alderman and former Mayor, the Chairman of the Cheltenham Branch of the Royal British Legion (W/Cdr Roy Roberts RAF ret'd) and myself (Mike Bryant) - Chairman of the Cheltenham Branch of the RAFA. We were joined in France by Dr Bryan Pattison, Chairman of the Swiss Branch of the RAFA. The warmth, hospitality and generosity of our French hosts was exceptional and could not have been bettered.

This demonstration of friendship and recognition of the contribution of the RAF during some dark days that our two nations have shared was apparent throughout our time there.

After arriving at Annecy, meeting our French hosts and having lunch, the by now Anglo-French party visited the Alpine plateau that was the operating base for the Maquis intended to receive the air-dropped supplies. I learned that the term “Maquis” referred to those members of the “Resistance” who were armed and carried out military operations against the Germans. Other members of the “Resistance” opposed the German occupation by, for example, printing and distributing leaflets, causing disruption, vandalism and propaganda.

The plateau was surrounded by mountains, making it an almost impregnable natural redoubt, with the Maquis numbering around 475, mostly young men led by professional French military officers. However, the Germans eventually attacked the area with over 14000 men, supported by aircraft and artillery, and killed large numbers of their opponents. Those that were left were ordered to disperse and join Resistance units in other parts of France. As one French member of the party at the commemorations ruefully remarked, being led by officers whose background was that of the French military academy St Cyr meant that the concept of asymmetric warfare would never have been adopted, and a conventional battle was doomed to defeat.

The next day, we visited the Meythet cemetery to lay wreaths at the graves of F/O Sydney Congdon (navigator), and F/Sgt Francis Pollard (air gunner). About a 100 civic dignitaries and local citizens attended the commemoration service there, with the British and French national anthems being played. The cemetery was beautifully kept and a memorial site with the headstones and a plaque bearing the names of the other members of the crew holds a prominent position. For reasons that are not known, the other members of the crew are buried at Rhône, some 100 miles away from Annecy.



They were:

- P/O Robert Peters (wireless operator/air gunner)
- Sgt Frederick Davies (flight engineer)
- Sgt John Maden (dispatcher)
- F/O Roderick Mackenzie (bomb aimer)



We then moved to the Tasset Bridge where there is a memorial garden to the event, with an impressive marker stone describing what happened and listing the names of the deceased aircrew and local civilians. As with the Meythet ceremony, the local people turned out in force and it was clear that crash had the great significance for the town. A notable feature of the commemorations at both sites was the attendance of over 20 standard bearers from a variety of French ex-Service and old-comrades associations. It was also moving that a number of children participated, keeping memories alive and giving hope for the future. At the conclusion of the commemoration at the Tasset Bridge, we moved to a civic reception hall where there was a display of the aircraft, a description of the crash and brief biographies of the crew.

Later in the day, we visited the Resistance Memorial and Museum on the outskirts of town. As with all the places we saw, the reverence and care that the local people show for what were unpleasant events was remarkable, as was their appreciation of the part that the RAF played in their interests all those years ago.

There is much to divide us, both in discover just how much one bonds of friendship between two cemented the RAF in the admiration not to forget the sacrifice that was made.



IN MEMORIAM

Many of you will remember Mary Brown, who has died. She was the sister of Sgt Harry Minshull of 138 & 161 Sqns.

Mary was a regular and enthusiastic attender of TVARA events in recent years, and will be much missed by all of us.

Pilgrimage in Dad's Honour

In October last year, TVARA member Dave Blackett had the chance to pay tribute to his father, Harold (Harry) Blackett, who served with 138 Sqn. In May 1944, Harold and the rest of his crew were on Operation Percy - scheduled to drop supplies to the French Resistance. The aircraft came under fire and crashed, having dropped its cargo. One of the crew, mid upper gunner Robert Clark, injured his leg on landing and surrendered to the local gendarmerie. He was a POW for the rest of the war. Blackett and bombardier Edward Jones were picked up by a member of the Resistance and were taken to headquarters to be interrogated. They were helped, initially, by a woman called Janine, and Harry later gave his own daughter that name, in recognition of the part she played in saving his life. Harry and Edward spent a further three months with the Resistance, taking part in the preparations for D Day.

The celebrations in October showed just how much the crews of 138 & 161 Squadrons were valued by the people to whom they made “deliveries”.



Dave and his son, Stuart, attending the ceremony at Foyer Royale, at which the story was relayed in both French and English with the assistance of Alan Latter (the historian who helped Dave to learn the truth about his father's mission) and the Mayor of St Saud.

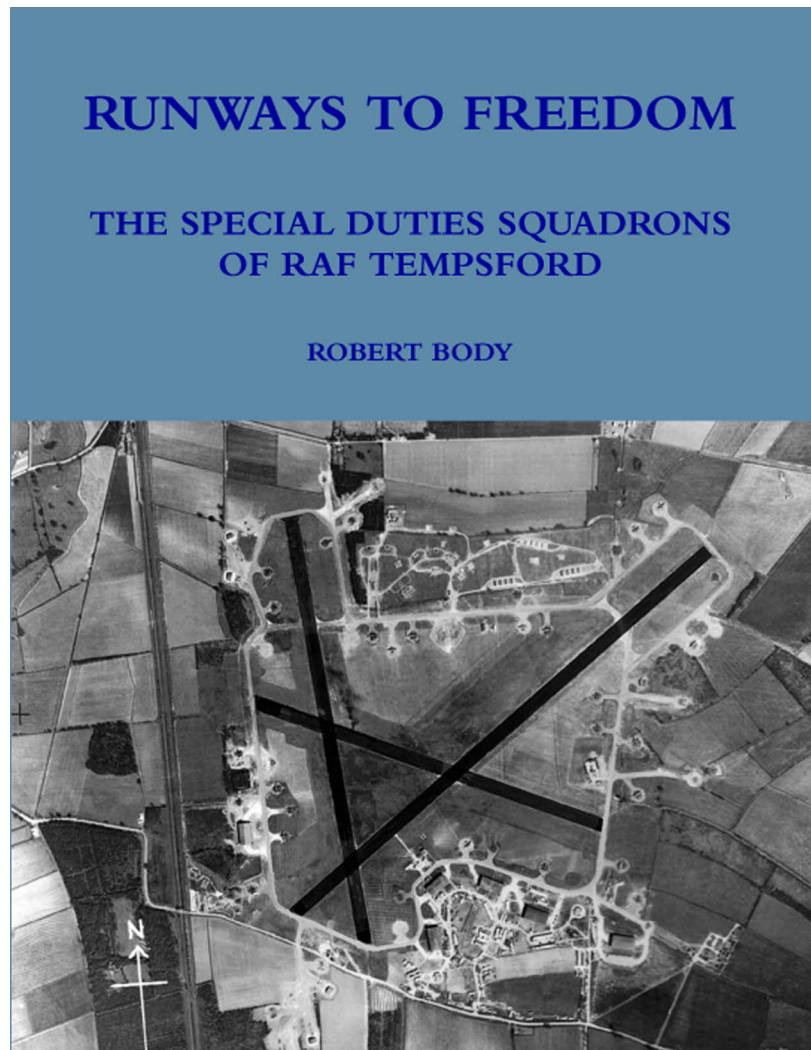


Dave meeting Abel Barthout who, at the age of 14, took the helmet of one of the crew from the crashed Aircraft. He has kept this as a souvenir for 74 yrs and Dave was moved to find he and his family including his 2 grandchildren aged 5 and 12 had unanimously decided that the helmet should no longer be used as a plaything but returned to a family member of the crew.



Bob's book, "Runways to Freedom" is available in both print and ebook formats from:

Lulu - www.lulu.com and Amazon.



138 & 161 Special Duties Squadrons

Special then

Special now

Special always

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