



TEMPSFORD VETERANS AND RELATIVES ASSOCIATION

SUMMER NEWSLETTER 2017



Bob's Diary

Once again, at our Summer Gathering, we were delighted to welcome members from the other side of the world. Marlene Orchiston, daughter of Jack Parker (161 Squadron), and Pam Bissland, daughter of our oldest veteran, Naylor Hillary (138 Squadron), were able to see for themselves what we are about, and to take part in the church service. The TVARA "family" is really international, and it is wonderful when people from so far away are able to participate in one of our gatherings. Marlene (pictured left) was also able to read a message to us from S/Ldr Geoff Rothwell.



We were delighted that veteran Ken Hazelwood was able to attend again - he is here with Shirley Gibbons.



Pam Bissland is here (left) talking to Shirley.

Pam & Marlene at the airfield.



After lunch, Nicholas Livingstone gave a talk about 138 Squadron in the lead up to the RAF Tempsford period.



Rev Margaret Marshall receiving her retirement gifts from Sue Woodard, Barbara Green and Gordon Franklin.



A disastrous night and some lucky escapes....



By November 1944, both Squadrons were flying Mark IV Stirlings, and had started to use “Rebecca” in conjunction with “Eureka” sets on the ground to assist in finding difficult drop zones in Norway, where the terrain was particularly challenging. The range at which Rebecca was effective, however, varied considerably - between 4 and 15 miles depending on the area. On the first night of November, a total of 18 aircraft from 138 Squadron (4 to Norway and 14 to Denmark) achieved a 88% success rate, with only 2 aircraft failing to drop due to lack of reception. 161 Squadron flew 7 sorties - 4 to Norway and 3 to Denmark. The weather was not helpful; 8 crews from 138 Squadron and 4 from 161 had to divert to Waterbeach on their return, because of fog. P/O Slevin could not retract his undercarriage when told to overshoot the runway at Waterbeach, and was forced to make the short trip back to Tempsford the next day with it still down. As the weather on both sides of the North Sea had deteriorated still further, it was 7/8 November before flights resumed. S/L George Watson, in LK151 NF-E made a particularly long and arduous flight to pinpoint 63° 56' 40" N, 12° 35' 00" E (a remote area close to the Norwegian/Swedish border, about 80 miles north east of Trondheim) to safely deliver 1 agent, 7 containers and 3 packages. He landed at Kinloss after 10 hours and 52 minutes in the air. F/O McGregor in LK 143 NF-B found no reception and returned to base with his load intact.

The next night was, perhaps, the most disastrous in the history of the Tempsford Squadrons. 24 aircraft in total were despatched to Norway. Only one crew found a cloud free reception to carry out a perfect drop, although P/O Slevin found near perfect conditions at his drop zone, but no reception, despite circling for 13 minutes. Overcast conditions and some icing meant that all other missions were abandoned. 2 crews vanished without trace F/O Ford, with 2 agents on board, and W/O Ouelette RCAF. Both apparently crashed in the North Sea on the way out, but the reason is not known. Two other aircraft were struck by lightning - those of F/S Witt and S/L Brogan; Brogan suffered temporary blindness, and his bomb aimer, F/O Wigley in the second pilot's seat regained control of the diving Stirling; Wigley was awarded the DFC for his action. On this awful night, 24 aircraft flew a total of 141 hours and 25 minutes, with two aircraft and 16 men lost; 2 aircraft were struck by lightning and 3 made early returns with engine trouble. Total “drops” - 22 containers.

As the month progressed, the weather improved, so the late moon brought a flurry of activity. Prior to this - in what was effectively a dark period - on 21/22 November, both Squadrons flew successful sorties to Denmark, with 9 crews involved. Most of England was becoming fog bound, so those with the longest flights were diverted to Woodbridge. Unfortunately, F/O Cornwallis' wireless operator didn't pick up the call until they were nearing the English coast, by which time the fog was creeping north. The crew flew north, looking for a fog free airfield, as their fuel began to run out. The flight engineer was operating the fuel cocks as red lights flashed on his panel when a light flashing the code for the fighter airfield at Peterhead suddenly became visible. With the warning lights on the last fuel tanks already flashing, Cornwallis brought LK 272 NF-P in for a perfect landing at the small Coastal Command field. The engine finally died being taxied to dispersal. This wasn't the end of the crew's problems - on their way back to Tempsford the next day, and flying over the sea, they were fired on by the Navy!

....and a vital operation (Gunnertime) successfully completed.



S/L Gibson took off from Tempsford on the evening of 16 February 1943 in Halifax NF-O with almost the same crew as in an earlier, abortive attempt to land 6 Norwegian saboteurs to meet up with an earlier 4 man team (codenamed GROUSE), which had been dropped on 19 October 1942. For this second attempt, he had F/Sgt John Charrot, a navigator, who would assist F/S Rigden in trying to identify landmarks in the snowy terrain where almost everything looked the same.

John Charrot takes up the story...

“...we left Tempsford at 1910 hours. On board we had a full load of containers and six young Norwegian Commandos. ..It was imperative that success was achieved on this night, as it would be the last opportunity this moon period. Intelligence reports had shown that it was now vital that the (heavy water) plant be destroyed at once.

Because of the failure to find the lights on the previous trip on 23 January 1943 it had been decided, before we left base that, if necessary, it would be a ‘blind drop’, which meant that if we were happy that the ground looked safe for a drop - so be it. We could not find the lights. The skipper, S/L Gibson and the Norwegian leader, Joachim Ronneberg decided that as it was such a vital operation they would parachute in without making contact with the four on the ground. So all six brave young men and their packages were dropped.* The rear gunner reported all parachutes had opened and we set off on the long haul to Tempsford.....On the night of 26 February 1943 these ten Norwegian commandos successfully destroyed the Norsk Hydro Plant. With their supply of heavy water cut off, the German scientists, who had been working on this project, had to give up.

....Some 50 years on - my wife and I were invited to the Gunnertime lecture at the Imperial War Museum to hear the leader of this raid, Joachim Ronneberg, give a first hand account of this daring and important operation....

So I met the leader of the ‘Gunnertime’ raid again. He and I had a long chat before he started his lecture. It was quite amazing that we could just stand there in the vast arena of the Imperial War Museum, oblivious of others around us and just talk. Joachim enthralled the very large audience with a fascinating talk. We had not got the dropping point quite right, but as they were pleased to land safely, and with all their equipment, they were not too worried, and quickly met up with the other four who had been waiting for so long. The truly amazing aspect of this raid was that no-one was injured; no shots were fired, and yet it was completely successful - truly remarkable.”

*According to Jeff Hill (Despatcher), all went smoothly with the drop until the last man to go, Knut Haukelid. It appears that the crew member helping the Despatcher somehow got tangled up in the static line so, in order to save vital seconds, Haukelid had to push him to one side and jump from a standing position. The static line did its job, however, and the parachute opened safely.

ATVARA

On 9 July, our “cousins” in the Southern Hemisphere held their annual ceremony at the Melbourne Shrine of Remembrance. Two of Naylor Hillary’s grandchildren laid a wreath at the Shrine in memory of the Tempsford RNZAF crews who failed to return home from their missions.



Cartoon courtesy of Tangmere Museum.

138 & 161 Special Duties Squadrons

Special then

Special now

Special always

Contact details:

Bob Body - editor@tempsford-squadrons.info

Helen Body - tvaradmin@tempsford-squadrons.info

Websites

www.tempsford-squadrons.info

www.161squadron.org

www.tempsfordairfield.com