



TEMPSFORD VETERANS AND RELATIVES ASSOCIATION

SUMMER NEWSLETTER 2018



Bob's Diary

As poor David Briggs was unable to be with us again, I had the great pleasure of being able to welcome members, old and new, to our Summer Gathering. We were particularly delighted, yet again, to welcome visitors from Australia - this seems to be becoming a habit! Malcolm Anderson and his wife were able to take part in the church service, too, and we are grateful that they agreed to do so.

Whenever the TVARA meets, it is always a pleasure to see how many people are able to stay on the evening before the main event. This gives a chance for "bonding" that might not happen otherwise, so long may it continue.



Many newer members will not know that we have a small group of people who work behind the scenes to ensure that TVARA events run smoothly. I won't embarrass them too much (they know who they are), but we are incredibly lucky to have such dedicated people in the TVARA "family". From taking photographs to setting up the hall, giving lifts and running raffles, the "team" makes all the difference to our events.



We are, as always, extremely grateful to Lady Erroll for allowing us to hold events on the airfield, and we were delighted that she was able to join us.



In a slight departure from the normal format, I thought that it might be an idea for you to just see more pictures of the day, without captions; so here you are!



A DIP INTO OUR OWN ARCHIVES

Following a look at the official records last time, we thought it would be good, for the sake of new members, to “resurrect” some stories from veterans told to us in the early years of the TVARA. We were all privileged, for several years, to be acquainted with a few veterans who were all too happy to tell their stories. The first tale came from Australian Noel Gomersall.....

NORWAY’S UNWELCOME LIGHTS

The drop for this op. was in Norway, identified in the normal way by four torches (3 white and 1 red) and a predetermined letter of the alphabet for confirmation. We had been given the position of a coastal flak battery and we hoped that our DR navigation put us to starboard. We knew that one of our own aircraft (with a different drop zone) was only about a minute behind us, so we kept watch to see if he too had avoided the flak battery.

Regrettably he received a direct hit. No names, but this crew's loss is recorded on the internet with the captain's name. Obviously he had crossed the coast closer to the battery than we did.

We made our drop successfully and turned for home. To port on the way to the coast we witnessed activity towards Oslo and saw another two aircraft go down in flames. Call it what you will, luck, coincidence or whatever, but dead ahead, on our flight path, but at a higher altitude than we were, another aircraft suffered a direct hit and exploded in flames. We believed a flak ship had been moved into position during the time we had crossed the coast on the way in and our way out. The question now was - do we risk the flak ship or the battery to our starboard which was the one we had avoided on the way in. The Captain, S/Ldr. Les Madders decided to risk the battery to our starboard. All of us who were available were instructed to watch the ground and if we saw the flashes of the guns as the battery fired, yell!

I can't remember how many yelled, but more than one of us screamed "Flak". Les then dived the aircraft towards the battery. Sitting in the loneliest place in the world, i.e. in the rear turret, our one and only gunner, F/S Joe Berry, a great bloke, a Yorkshireman through and through with a dry sense of humour, witnessed the explosion of the six flak bursts which lit up the Norwegian sky. We all heard the explosions but Joe had the box seat. A long drawn out, involuntary "Sh-i-i-i-i-t" was the only word he said. But packed into it, was fright, amazement and any other description you care to use. Because it was Joe, it broke the tension throughout the crew and we all burst into laughter. We simply couldn't help it. The inflections in Joe's voice said it all.

As I am here to tell of this escapade it is obvious that we levelled out over the sea at our normal height of 150 feet and came home safely. Actually, it could have been less than 150 feet?

Next, from Harold Watson - LOVE CONQUERS ALL!

The first full moon period of April 1945 was to be a very busy one for the crews of 161 Squadron. My own crew had nearly completed 30 trips but were told that we were being retained on the Squadron because of our knowledge of the East Coast of Denmark. The Allied troops had crossed the Rhine and were pressing forward into Germany, however Intelligence had been received that two German Armies were retreating into Denmark with intention of making a stand there. It was most important that supplies be dropped to the Resistance Groups in this area.

On the nights of the 10th and 11th April we carried out drops to Groups in Holland. Bad weather prevented operations the next night but on the 13th we carried out a drop on a Resistance Group at Sjaellands Odde on the East Coast of Jutland and from where we could clearly see the lights of neutral Sweden. We landed back at Tempsford at 04.19 hours.

We were aroused from our beds the following morning with the call that all crews were to report to Squadron offices. On reporting in we found that our crew did not appear on the Battle Order of that night, so arrangements were discussed on where to go, and Bedford was the answer. However this did not last for long as our crew were told to report to Intelligence for an individual briefing and that we would be flying that night. At this briefing, which was attended by Intelligence Officers, two members of Danish Resistance and a member of SOE, we were told that our target was to be in Denmark - Tablejam 322 and that it was most important that the drop was carried out, as the arms were urgently required. It was usual that only one run was made over a dropping zone, but on this occasion we were told that as many runs as necessary could be made; also if the drop could not be made it was essential that the containers were not jettisoned.

Take off was at 21.08 and, after crossing the coast at Cromer, we carried on over the North Sea at 1000 feet. On approaching Nissum Fjord the Danish Coast was crossed at 700 feet; we then dropped to 500 feet until reaching Allborg, where we then came down to 200 feet for the run up the North East coast of Jutland to the Dropping Zone. Visibility was excellent and the lights from neutral Sweden could be clearly seen on the horizon. The last pinpoint was located and a run in was made on the DZ. No lights or activity of any kind was seen and so we flew away and returned a short time later. Again no lights were seen and the same manoeuvre was carried out again. On the third run there was still no sign of any activity and as fuel was getting low it was decided to abort the mission. On leaving the DZ on route to Allborg a DZ was seen about four miles from our DZ but the lights were exceptionally bright plus the wrong code letter was being flashed. As a similar experience had been encountered over Holland, when on approaching the DZ anti aircraft fire had opened up, it was decided to ignore this DZ.

On reaching Allborg course was changed for Ringobing Fjord, which entailed flying over the Northern Lakes. As was the practice of our crew while over enemy territory I, as Flight engineer, was sitting in the second pilot's seat as I was the only other member of the crew who had instruction in flying a Stirling, and I would therefore be able to take over from the pilot if he was hit.

After flying over the Lakes for a short time, there was a loud bang and the rear gunner called out "Corkscrew, corkscrew we have been hit by a fighter". The pilot started to corkscrew then realised

that we were too low to carry out such a manoeuvre. This was immediately followed by a further call from the rear gunner stating that we should not corkscrew as we had been hit badly in the rear and that he thought the aircraft was on fire as there was a terrible smell. The pilot stated that the controls had gone stiff but that he could maintain height. I was instructed to go to the rear of the aircraft and assess the damage. I found that aft of the rear door there were a number of holes in the fuselage and at the same time located where the smell was coming from as shrapnel had punctured the Elsan (chemical toilet) and the contents were leaking onto the floor.

The rear gunner had vacated his turret and, with his assistance, I was able to scramble into the rear turret and then saw that the starboard elevator was missing except for some twisted metal at the far end - this no doubt was causing the controls to be stiff. It also appeared that part of the rudder was missing. Nearly every piece of Perspex in the rear turret had been shattered, plus a Thermos flask belonging to the gunner - he, however, was untouched but severely shaken.

On reporting to the pilot the extent of the damage and that we did not appear to be losing any fuel, he suggested that we should head for Sweden which was only minutes away, as it appeared to him that the aircraft was too badly damaged to get back over the North Sea. This did not go down at all well with some members of the crew who thought we should go home, one member especially saying that he had a heavy date lined up for that night. The pilot asked my opinion and of the chances of making it back to England and after our little 'committee meeting' it was decided to make for England. It was obvious that some of the crew thought that their engineer could carry out miracles!

Rinkobing Fjord was crossed, very low, without any opposition, but shortly after this our troubles commenced. The pilot, who had a cold, started sweating badly and had difficulty in breathing, and it appeared that there was every possibility that he might lose consciousness. The automatic pilot could not be used, and, as there was a danger with the controls being very stiff, it was arranged that the two of us would pilot it as a joint effort. Further troubles were to come as first the 'Gee Box' failed, and then the starboard inner engine started to run rough.

Discussion then began as to how we were going to get the aircraft down. As I had never attempted to land a Stirling, I suggested wheels up on the emergency airfield at Woodbridge, but finally it was decided to attempt to make a normal landing. On using Channel D (commonly called 'Darkie' and was used for emergencies only) the crash drome at Carnaby answered and gave us a bearing to them. Our pilot was feeling a little better then and suggested that with help he could land the aircraft. This brought forth the comment from 'lover boy' that in that case could not the same happen if we carried on to Tempsford. This was agreed on and the English Coast was crossed at Cromer, from where we were able to home in on the Rebecca operating from Tempsford.

On reaching Tempsford and informing Control of our problems, we were advised to fly low over the main runway so they could have a look at us and at the same time jettison the containers. Completing the circuit a landing was made (or possibly an arrival) and we were followed down the runway by the crash truck and ambulance. After parking on the hard standing next to the Control Tower, the aircraft was soon the centre of attraction with the remarks "How did that thing fly"?

After debriefing our pilot collapsed and was taken to Hospital suffering from severe bronchitis and mental and physical exhaustion. We were not to fly as a crew any more at Tempsford.

138 & 161 Special Duties Squadrons

Special then

Special now

Special always

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