



Woking and District Aircrew Association www.aircrew.org.uk/woking **Newsletter**

23 May 2020

Editorial

Hopefully you enjoyed our first COVID newsletter and, for those who could make it, the subsequent Zoom online get-together. It's about the best we can manage whilst restrictions continue, particularly given the age group of most of our members.

In this issue you will find the first of three instalments by past member John Dixon, a RNAS pilot towards the end of WWII whose contribution came too late for the Woking book.

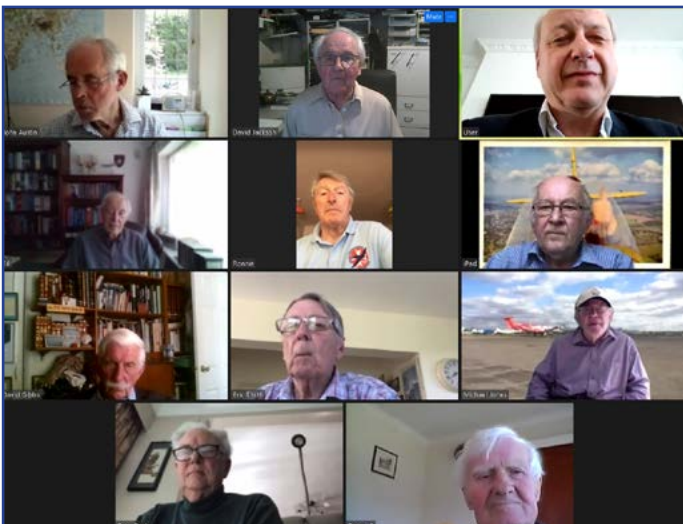
Please let me have some content for future newsletters. Items related to the ACA, aviation or anything else that might interest branch members, with pictures where possible and web links where relevant, will be very welcome. The more I get, the more frequently I'll be able to generate future editions.

David Jackson
akribie@ntlworld.com

Note that text styled like the adjacent email address indicates a clickable link to the web or email.

Zoom Meeting 5 May

The Zoom meeting on 5 May worked very well with 11 participants by the end of the session. Unfortunately we were cut off in mid flow by Zoom's 40-minute time limit for the free version.



Even if you didn't make it last time, you'll be very welcome at future Zoom meetings.

Committee News

The committee has decided to subscribe to a basic Zoom monthly contract so that future Zoom meetings will not be cut off abruptly just after 40 minutes, as happened last time.

It is also planned to hold virtual monthly meetings at 2pm on the same day as our normal monthly lunchtime meetings from now on until restrictions ease enough to meet normally. Joining instructions will be emailed shortly before the meeting. If anyone who didn't join the first meeting is unsure how to proceed, please contact David Jackson, via akribie@ntlworld.com, for advice.

The committee will keep COVID-19 restrictions under review and will adjust the programme and consider visit options as soon as relaxed restrictions allow.

Because we cannot hold proper meetings and visits are impossible under COVID-19 restrictions, the committee has also decided to waive subs for 2021 and extend 2020 memberships to the end of that year.

- For those who pay by automatic bank transfer, any subs received for 2021 will be treated as a deposit towards their attendance at the Christmas lunch.
- Members who find that they have made an automatic payment for 2021, but do not agree with this proposal, should contact the treasurer for a refund.
- New members in 2021 will pay subs as normal.
- Any unreturned 2021 subs paid by those who do not attend the 2021 Christmas Lunch will be taken to be a donation to our funds.

The committee always welcomes helpful suggestions, so please get in touch if you come across anything that might help us keep the branch alive and kicking.

Committee Members

Chairman
Vice Chairman & PRO
Secretary & Welfare
Treasurer & Webmaster
Deputy Treasurer'

Ron Hepburn
Bill Bawden
Tony Boxall
David Jackson
Tony Rest

COMMUNICATION BY CARTOON

by the late Laurie Taylor of Woking ACA

[I've chosen four of the sixteen cartoons which are still topical today to illustrate this introduction. Others may appear in later newsletters. Ed]

A cartoon can provide information that would take many pages of text & British newspapers have used cartoonists for many years, for information their art conveys lasts longer than text.

The RAF was aware of the value of cartoons and during WW2 used Chris Wren's talent (genius?) to teach aircraft recognition by exaggerating "features" of aircraft both allied and enemy. eg he drew the

A few need explanation - eg after taking up the IFALPA job I was asked many times if I missed flying, I replied "NO for I can simulate it. I sit in an uncomfortable seat for many hours, in a beam of bright light like sunrise, have cups of tea spilled in my lap by my wife who also creates a noisy environment by using a household device". Chris drew a cartoon illustrating this. Another of his cartoons has me 'exercising' on a beach at Acapulco (where I attended an IFALPA Annual Conference) while being watched by a Mexican boy who misunderstood what I was doing.

Anno Domini suggests that if I added one of these cartoons to each of my quarterly newsletters some of them will never be seen by members, so I had them all printed on A4 sheets and current members of Woking ACA should receive 'hard copies' prior to Christmas. I want nothing in return for I just want to thank Woking ACA for providing a welcome change in my post-retirement life.



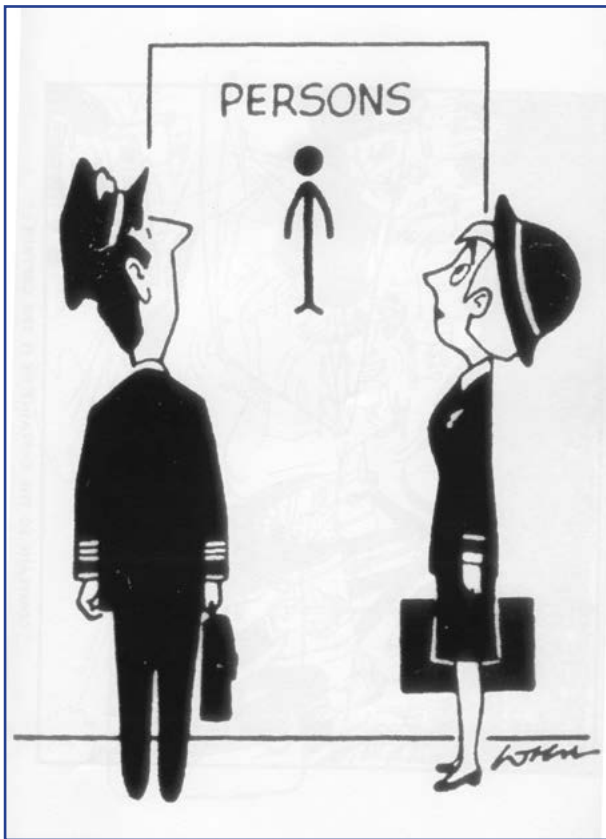
fuselage of a Lysander as a carrot. Cartoons were also used to convey other information and all who were in WW2 RAF who remember PO Prune. Basic wartime accommodation was in Nissan huts and featured in a memorable cartoon of PO Prune as Orderly Officer inspecting accommodation accompanied by a Senior NCO. Prune was pictured on his knees inspecting the floor beneath mattresses for cleanliness. The caption was the NCO stating: "Dead 'ot on fluff under beds, he is!"

I met Chris Wren in the 1970's when I resigned from BOAC to become Executive Secretary of the Int'l Fed'n of Air Line Pilot Associations (for ten years) that then represented 60 national associations (100 now) in the international arena of the Int'l Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) an agency of the UN. Ending of hijacking was a task tackled plus deficiencies of world wide ATC procedures and airports.

I wrote a monthly newsletter for IFALPA & always introduced some humour. Chris Wren saw an issue of the newsletter and offered to contribute cartoons relevant to newsletter content. I have copies of fifteen cartoons I believe would be enjoyed by Woking ACA members.

One cartoon features all fourteen aircraft types I flew, from Tiger Moth, via B747, to the Goodyear blimp. The blimp in the cartoon needs explanation. I served on a six man Civil Aviation Authority Committee chaired by Sir Douglas Bader set up to revise Aircrew Flight Time Limitations, with a senior official of the CAA serving as Secretary to the group. His main duty in the CAA was to ensure Certificates of Airworthiness were 'Current'. A test flight over London had been arranged for the Goodyear blimp and I was invited to observe and to pilot the blimp for about ten minutes. (It was like flying an unset jelly). Most of the aircraft types will be known to some of you but one type was different and perhaps deserves explanation.





The DC 7 C had unusual features, mainly because it was the first airliner capable of flying London New York non-stop in all seasons. Each of four 2800 HP radial engines were increased in power by installing three power-recovery turbines in engine exhausts. Extra power created by these small gas turbines (600hp per engine) was delivered to the crankshaft via flexible drives.

The DC 7 C had no aerodynamic speed brakes but the main landing gear could be dropped to increase drag and rate of descent. Propellers were not hydraulically controlled but by electric power. Other than these unique features needed to increase aircraft performance the aircraft was typical of that time - HOWEVER there were some nasty features to be encountered in operations, and flight-sim instructors enjoyed exposing pilots to them. eg metallurgy was not what it now is, and power recovery turbines could shed white hot turbine blades in all directions and at night these bore some resemblance to flak. If the electric control system of a propeller failed it went into fine pitch and created so much drag it was not possible to maintain level flight. There was an emergency drill to 'shed' a prop, by closing off its lubrication, and we were assured that the prop drive-shaft would then fail and the prop leave the aircraft without creating more damage! (No pilot believed this.)

When my flight-sim course with Pan American was successfully completed, I was given one more (horror) flight-sim session. At cruise altitude there was complete failure of cabin pressurisation so to increase rate of descent the main landing gear was dropped. Then the hydraulic system had a complete failure so that the 'gear' could not be raised when at a lower flight level. Then one prop control 'ran

away' into fine pitch and drag was again increased, so shedding-the prop by cutting off its oil supply became an option (that I would never accept because I did not believe that shedding a prop in flight was a "good thing to do" for it might hit the fuselage on leaving.) On my exposure to this torture I ditched the flt sim in the river near La Guardia New York & the simulator instructors said I had "done OK".

(After BOAC introduced the DC 7 C into service, a flight had the runaway prop event for real, and the Captain elected to do an emergency landing at a US Marine Corps airfield. All pilots qualified on the aircraft type would have done the same. Shedding props in flight is very dangerous!)



Sikorky (Erickson) S.64 Skycrane

You may have already looked at the video found by Dave Gibbs of a Skycrane placing an electricity pylon on its skeletal base frame. Most impressive! The [new avionics system](#) must help.



The Skycrane is used for many heavy-lift tasks in the USA. It has an interesting [history](#) and there are more [impressive videos](#) on the web of this huge helicopter at work.

A Right Royal Visit

It was whilst Prince Andrew (PA) was a naval student doing his basic flying training at RAF Leeming in 1980 that the Queen Mother (QM) came on a Royal Visit.

Now, royal visits are taken very seriously by the RAF. Comprehensive planning covers every tiny detail. All places to be visited are redecorated and a full rehearsal precedes the visit.

Rehearsals are not attended by the VIPs, so stand-ins are required to play their parts. In this case Prince Andrew stood in for the Chief of the Air Staff, who later would be his own escort, with the result that on the actual day, the prince knew all about what was going on and CAS had a much-less detailed preparation. To what extent this caused embarrassment was never made public, but rumours abounded at the time that humour saved the day.

The stand-in for the Queen Mother was a lady education officer a little out of the first flush of youth. Prince Andrew was played by one of the flying instructors. The practice arrival started with the 'QM' standing at the top of a set of aircraft steps as if she was stepping out of her Royal Flight aircraft. 'PA' stood at the bottom of the steps not far from the real PA playing his own part.

The signal was given for the arrival to start and the 'QM' made her way down the steps towards her 'grandson', at which point the real PA whispered to his alter ego 'now you have to give her a kiss on the cheek and say "Hallo Grandmother" (or something like that). Most flying instructors are always up for a jape, but the story goes that the 'QM', who was not expecting such exuberance, turned a very bright red to match the aircraft behind her and was greatly embarrassed. Rumour also has it that those nearby struggled not to laugh.

PA had a secure garage immediately opposite the window behind the top table of the dining room in the Officers' Mess, which was alarmed and closely monitored by his personal group of policemen who guarded him during his time at Leeming. Because the QM would be sitting at the top table for lunch, the local police carried out a detailed sweep of the garages on the morning of the visit. Unfortunately, the local police had not been briefed about PA's garage and its guard force, so when the time came to check PA's garage, we were treated to two different groups of police each determined to complete their briefed duties, which were mutually incompatible. The RAF audience thoroughly enjoyed the resulting confrontation!

The real visit went very well and the QM was her usual charming self.

Happy days!

Holiday Checkout

On holiday in Arizona nearly 40 years ago I arranged for a check flight in a Cessna 172 so that I could hire an aircraft to take my son flying. He was on a flying scholarship with the ATC at the time, so some cheap flying in the States seemed like a good idea.

The instructor who was to do the flight looked at my licence, saw the types in it and said, in a not too friendly fashion, "I hate airline pilots !".

Off we went and I demonstrated my abilities with steep turn, stalling, slow flight and a few others. After 30 mins or so we went back to the airfield for what I thought would be a few circuits. So far he had said nothing to add to his previous comments, apart from telling me he had 24,000 hours.

We joined the circuit and turned downwind, expecting to be told to do a couple of circuits and go-arounds. Half way downwind he leant across in front of me and took the ignition key out, put it in his shirt pocket, and said "Land on the numbers".

To say I was startled was an understatement, but managed to scrape onto the runway, where he deemed himself satisfied that I could bring one of his aeroplanes back in one piece! "The last guy I did that to was an American Airlines captain and he put me into a spin at 800ft".

I felt I had done CFS proud!

Ron Hepburn

No Face Mask ?

Need a cheap face mask during the COVID-19 restrictions? Why not make your own?

Go to [YouTube](#) and learn how to make a face mask very quickly from an old (preferably clean!) sock. Several alternative designs are demonstrated with single or double thickness and even a filter option.

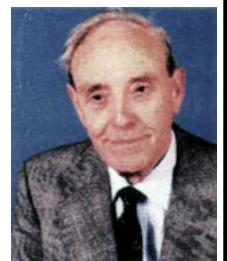
All you need is a sock and a pair of sharp scissors and then follow the online video tutorial of your choice.

Very Easy!

Derek Messent

With great sadness we report that yet another of our older members, Flight Engineer Derek Messent, died on 17 April at the age of 97.

We share his loss with friends and family to whom we send our sincere condolences.





812 Squadron RNAS

by John Dickson

Pilot 812 Sqn HMS Vengeance

*[After I converted the Woking book **Upside Down Nothing on the Clock** into a CD, because it would have been too expensive to have another print run, John Dickson agreed that I could have a copy of his memoirs as a Navy pilot at the end of WWII with the aim of including it in any future edition of the Book.*

The new edition never emerged, but these newsletters give an opportunity to publish John's memoirs within the branch. The first instalment is in this edition with more to come. I found it a fascinating glimpse into the life of a naval aviator at the end of the war. I hope you enjoy it too. Ed.]

The Squadron was formed at Stretton on the 1st June 1944, initially with 12 Barracudas which later increased to 16. Our CO was Lt Cdr (A) C R J Coxon who was, at the time, the youngest Lt Cdr in the Royal Navy (I believe he was only 23). He already had a busy war in Malta and had been Mentioned in Dispatches. The original complement of air crew was as follows.

Pilots: The CO Cedric Coxon, Lt Peter Poole (Senior Pilot), Lt 'Poppa' Bristow, Lt Charlie Wintringham (RNZNVR), Sub-Lts Les Terry, Digby, 'Jock' Balfour, Midshipman 'Dicky' Dickson, Acting Petty Officers Steve Blakey, 'Slip' Slater, and Sid Hunt.

There were also 6 pilots just back from the USA where they had been trained and where they had flown SBD Dauntless dive bombers that had done so well at the Battle of Midway. Our Navy had acquired some Curtis Helldiver dive bombers (a more modern aircraft) and formed 1820 Squadron. It was intended to form other Squadrons and our six lads thought that was where they would go. However the Helldivers were LETHAL! 1820 Squadron soon packed up and I believe the aircraft were too big for our ships anyway.

Nonetheless our six 'Yankee'-trained boys were not happy bunnies when they discovered that their destiny was Barracudas. These pilots were Sub-Lts 'Sam' Smallwood, Pete 'Ace' Throssel, Dick 'Robbie' Burns, Jack 'Jackie' Birch, 'Happy' Pain and Johnny Cookson.

Observers: There was a nucleus of senior (or experienced) observers with us from the outset - Lts

'Spike' Regan (Senior Observer), Gordon 'Blood' Wallace, 'Toby' Tobias and Sub-Lt 'Tommy' Dewsnap.

Telegraphist Air Gunners: I am not sure how many were on our original complement, probably eight or nine. I know POs Casey (Senior TAG), Rouse, Hughes, Sargent and Geoff Squire were among them.

When we 'clocked on' on the 1st June 1944, most of us pilots had not flown Barracudas, so we hustled across the airfield to 798 Squadron where we had an intensive conversion course by way of Masters, Fulmars and finally Barracudas. After six trips on 'Barras' I was back with 812 and first flew with the squadron on 17th June 1944.

In those days it was normal for aircrew to do their operational training as individuals in the various training schools around the UK. Torpedo attacks, dive bombing, anti-submarine attacks, target spotting and deck landing were all taken step by step and when completed the pilots were matched up with observers and air gunners who had been similarly engaged with their own trades. As fully integrated crews they then waited in a pool until they were fed into the operational squadrons as demanded and on a piecemeal basis.

We were different, probably as guinea pigs. We carried out all this operational training 'as a Squadron' and I think it worked. Morale was high, we got to know one another really well, and there is no doubt we were pretty good!! It also gave the CO and Senior Observer the opportunity to weed out the few who were not going to measure up. Although we didn't know it for some months, we were already earmarked for one of the new Light Fleet Carriers which were expected to be ready in late October/December 1944. 814 Squadron (who went to HMS Venerable) worked up in similar fashion, but they didn't form until 1st July 1944, so we were always the first and the best! I believe 837 Squadron, which formed at Stretton on 1st August 1944 and later went to HMS Glory, also followed this pattern.

On 28th June 1944 we departed Stretton for Crail on the north side of the Firth of Forth. We stayed there until 7th September and our time was spent learning torpedo attack by day and night, A/S bombing and W/T exercises. It was all very intensive, quite scary at times and hard work. Cedric Coxon lead us brilliantly. Amazing to think that by March 1945, when we were in Malta, we were told to forget all about torpedo attacks - there were no enemy ships left to sink!! After that we were mainly concerned with dive bombing, anti-submarine work and Army co-operation.

Steve Blakey must have been quickly off the mark when we got to Crail. He found himself a girlfriend who lived at Lochton Farm, probably six miles from the airfield. On 13th July 1944 he was showing her how low he could fly when he forgot the sloping ground and crashed into a field on the farm. Sadly L. Airman Sargent, his TAG, was in the back and they were both killed. I remember as a 19 year-old,

I was a bit upset (Steve had been on the next course to me while training), but Cedric was really livid. In his eyes Steve had broken all the rules: he was showing off; had killed another crew member; and written off an aircraft. He had no sympathy and, on reflection, he was right. The funerals took place in Crail Churchyard. Cedric did not let me go - he was obviously trying to protect someone so young! Apart from Sam Smallwood bending his aircraft in a landing accident we completed our time at Crail and had proved ourselves to be highly-competent torpedo pilots.

On 7th September 1944 we left Crail in formation and flew down to Burscough (just inland from Southport). On the way Les Terry had problems with the fuel feed and he ditched very gently off Blackpool Tower! He and Dewsnap stepped off the sinking plane into the dinghy and barely got their feet wet! Dewsnap was delighted - he was going on leave to get married and had with him a new uniform which had also stayed dry! Robbie Burns followed them down and, when he knew they were OK, landed at Squires Gate as he was by then low on fuel. Many years later I learnt that Blackpool Lifeboat, which picked them up, chalked up its one and only rescue mission. It was never called out again during the war.

At Burscough a whole crowd of newly qualified and just-commissioned observers anxiously awaited us. The news of what had just happened filtered through and they wore some pale and apprehensive features when we met!! These observers had been pupils of 'Blood' Wallace when he was an instructor at Arbroath and we understood he had picked the best of the course to come to 812. There was one Midshipman among them - 'Bambi' Brook (he looked too young to have left his Mum) so he was allocated to me! Geoff Squire, our TAG, was somewhat older and certainly more worldly-wise. It was generally accepted that he was our father figure and boss of the show. Geoff was a brilliant swimmer and as strong as an ox. I felt happy with him in the back seat because I was a very poor swimmer and tended to keep my 'Mae West' partly inflated - just in case. Geoff was courting an Admiral's daughter at that time. Just goes to show you didn't need a commission to pull the birds!

We stayed at Burscough until 10th November 1944, mainly doing observer-type exercises - navexs, W/T etc. We still did some torpedo practice (some at night), dive bombing and fighter evasion - a new game involving 'corkscrewing' in formation while being 'attacked' by the Fireflies of 1772 Squadron. On 6th October I was doing an air test, got up to 10,000 ft and managed to loop the aircraft. Some said it couldn't be done, but I enjoyed it and soon showed the crew that it was really quite safe. I was told that someone else (probably Throssel) had managed to roll the aircraft. I never tried it.

On 19th October Peter Poole said it was time for us to practice deck landing. The exercise, ADDLs, involves a tight low circuit, slow approach just above the stall

with plenty of power on and following the batsman's signals down to the deck, where hopefully he gave 'the cut', when you chopped power and sank gracefully onto the runway. Then, without stopping, you picked up flaps, opened up and went round to do it again and again and again! When doing it to give the batsman practice, we became known as 'clockwork mice'. Anyway, we were a bit apprehensive as no one likes dragging in just above the stall speed and we were even more in wonder when Peter said "We'll make a start straight away, like TONIGHT!"



The crew of 'R' for Roger, Barracuda II (MD 695).

L-R: PO Geoff Squire (TAG), Sub-Lt John Dickson (Pilot) and 'Bambi' Brook (Observer) at RNAS Burclough in October 1944.

So I did my first ADDLs at night and, having survived the first landing, I opened up to go round again, but in my panic pulled the flap lever right through a little gate to the dive-brake position! Now a Barracuda won't get airborne with dive brakes on and I ended up in the hedge at the end of the runway. No one was hurt and the aircraft was barely scratched, but I had learned a lesson.

At Burscough I managed to 'borrow' a Stinson Reliant from the Station Flight (an American aircraft like an Auster/Piper Cub etc). I took 'Bambi' up in this from time to time and he had his first flying lessons - it was a side-by-side dual control aircraft with passenger seats behind. As an aside, 'Bambi' obtained his private pilot's licence when he was about 68 years old. He now flies me about in a Cessna!

We left Burscough for Fearn (way up in the North East of Scotland above Inverness) on 10th November 1944. I would say that, by then, we were fully worked up and ready to go to sea, but no, the ship wasn't ready and they had to send us somewhere. My log book shows a 3-hour flight. My memory is of cold, snowy and frosty weather, a pretty bleak airfield, and no town nearby where one could enjoy a good run ashore. We continued the usual grind - A/S bombing, dive bombing, navexes, search and shadow ex's, fighter evasion with Seafires etc. The airfield was pretty crowded, 814 and 837 Squadrons were also there - all, like us, ready and waiting to join carriers that were delayed. Peter Poole taxied into the mud and got stuck. We practised carrier ranging - pretending to be on a flight deck and being flagged off in quick

succession, then joining formation with two other Barracuda squadrons. It must have looked impressive.

Sadly, on the 25th November 1944, we had our worst day. We were to take off on one of these carrier ranging exercises. It was very cold and very frosty. Apart from being iced up, I couldn't get my aircraft started - this meant a delay while new cartridges were installed. Meanwhile the rest of the squadron took off and my position in the first sub-flight was empty. Hunt and Muncer both thought they would fill the slot. As far as I know no orders were given for them to do so. One came in from below and one from above (should never do this) so one aircraft just sat on top of the other. Both fell down into Nigg Bay. Five of the six crew died and Harry Saggs escaped with a broken back. Apart from the two pilots, both air-gunners POs Hughes and Balsam and Sub-Lt +, who was Sid Hunt's observer, lost their lives. Of course we were all in a state of shock and disbelief.

Meanwhile back at Fearn life carried on and we all became rather bored. Exercises were repeated over and over and social life was almost non-existent. Christmas came and went. The Scots New Year was a bit livelier, but there was a grave shortage of Wrens. It was only the rather plain 'left overs' who offered any sort of hospitality and they were quite easy to resist. By then we were becoming a nuisance as Fearn was getting overcrowded. Other Squadrons in a less advanced state of working up needed our quarters, but where to send us? Eventually we were offered space at RAF Ballyhalbert in Northern Ireland. *[Probably wrong. Ballyhalbert is not an RN Air Station. "HMS Corncrake" JD]*

On 5th January 1945, in Squadron formation (now 18 aircraft), we flew from Fearn to Ballyhalbert. This was a forlorn and desolate spot. Cold, snow, ice, sleet and mud, damp miserable Nissan huts to sleep in - probably they hadn't been used for months. Our 'landlords', the RAF, were not at all friendly or hospitable. Most of us were so cold at night we didn't bother to undress. Carrier drill, dive bombing, A/S bombing and ADDLs were the order of the day. Sub-Lt Hodginson retracted his wheels instead of his flaps while taxiing and Sub-Lt Johnny Cookson ran off the runway into the mud and stood his aircraft on its nose. No casualties though.

[Cedric met Bonnie at 'Wigs' Muncer's funeral in Leeds. She was not a relative. She was the widow of a RAF Wing Commander who had been killed in a bombing raid. I believe she already had 2 children. They were married on 13 February 1945 and had more than 40 happy years together. There were three more children. Sadly Bonnie pre-deceased Cedric and he died in about 1989. JD]

At last, on the 15th January 1945, HMS. Vengeance was commissioned and it was only then that we knew for sure that she was to be 'our' ship. Some of the crews 'walked' on board on the 25th January while the rest of us (12 aircraft) flew as a Squadron to the

ship sailing off the Isle of Arran where we made our first deck landings on the 26th January 1945. There were no accidents and the drinks were free in the wardroom that night. The next day I did my first deck take off and my second deck landing with full crew aboard. Remarkable! I think the back seat boys were very brave. Those that had 'walked' aboard did their first ever deck landing with full crews!

Johnny Cookson in my aircraft ended up half over the side on 27th January and the next day 'Poppa' Bristow did the same. No casualties, but badly bent Barracudas. On the 1st February, five aircraft flew off to Ballyhalbert to collect odds and ends left ashore. On the way back to the ship, the weather closed right down and we got split up. Flying in NIL visibility and mindful of the high ground on the Mull of Kintyre, I turned back to Ballyhalbert and two or three others did likewise. The others pressed on at sea level and squeaked into RNAS Ayr where I joined them next day. It was a complete shambles and could have been very tragic. We were stuck at Ayr until the weather cleared and we able to fly back to the ship on the 4th February.



HMS Vengeance

On 10th February Sub-Lt Alfie Fyles tangled with the barrier while landing on, but only the aircraft was hurt. At that time Sub-Lt Jack Birch and I flew off to Ayr. For the next week we were guests of Rolls Royce in Derby where we did an engine-handling course. We lived in luxury as their guests and enjoyed a good break. We were able to break our journeys at Huyton, Liverpool where Jack lived and met his Mum and Dad and a couple of his lady friends. The ship was at anchor off Greenock when we reported back on board on 17th February.

The boys from 1850 Squadron flew aboard on 25th February 1945, having previously done some deck landings on HMS Venerable. I had lost another of my aircraft (mine were usually coded 'R') on 21st February when Ashton landed heavily on the deck and the undercarriage collapsed! No-one hurt. We were making a mess of the Barracudas, because Sub-Lt Roshbrook (another New Zealander) flew into the barrier at night on the 1st March and three days later Lt. Charlie Wintringham (RNZNVR), with Sub-Lt 'Shiner' Wright in the back, stalled on approach and flopped into the sea astern of the ship. They were soon fished out by the guard ship.

We sailed for Gibraltar on 12th March 1945. Before that we had the odd day at Ayr and I flew a couple of trips to Abbotsinch (Glasgow), probably collecting

replacement aircraft On the way to Gibraltar there was a U-boat scare and we flew the odd A/S patrol (operational at last). Nothing was seen, but believe it or not this qualified us for the Atlantic Star service medal. We did not go ashore in Gibraltar, but soon passed into the Mediterranean where on the 20th March we flew off the ship to Hal Far, Malta.

On 24th March, 'Jock' Balfour damaged his undercarriage doing ADDLs. Night dive bombing



Barracuda Mk.II of No 812 Squadron landing on "HMS. Vengeance. Other aircraft stacked, awaiting landing.

and night A/S bombing on towed targets by the light of flares were new games and good fun. Otherwise we practised laying mines in Tripoli harbour and on Lampedusa Island. We dropped bombs on Filfa rock, which we were assured was uninhabited. On 3rd April Sub-Lt Hodginson's engine failed and he ditched into a calm sea. He and Sub-Lt 'Dicky' Boston were soon picked up by the Air Sea Rescue launch, a bit wet but unhurt - but one less Barracuda remained. Two days earlier, on Easter Sunday, Jack Birch, Bill Broad, 'Bambi' Brook and I went to the Malta Opera House in Sliema. We saw 'Madame Butterfly' and it was magnificent, my first experience of opera.

In less than a week tragedy struck again. On 6th April Sub-Lt Bardner, one of our Corsair pilots, bailed out some way off the coast after his engine failed. His parachute was seen to open and the position was pretty well marked. During the day we flew off searches feeling pretty certain that we would see him in his dinghy, but no one did. I think we all volunteered to fly again that night hoping to see some signal flares from the dinghy. The sea was quite calm and it was a cloudless night. I took off at about the same time as Jack Birch and we were to fly diverging courses to the search area. No more was ever heard of Jack and his crew: Sub-Lt Dave Robins and PO Bamill. No wreckage was ever seen, no one knew what caused the accident and the Corsair pilot was never found either.

A few new crews had joined the Squadron just before we left the UK and now we picked up three more. At the same time a few 'old hands' departed the scene - notably 'Blood' Wallace, our second Senior Observer. At about this time there was some disquiet over the structural strength of the Barracuda (metal fatigue?). Apart from ours there had been other unexplained crashes so, in rotation, our aircraft were withdrawn

and, where necessary, the wing spars and cross sections were strengthened. There were also rumours that we should re-equip with Avengers, but I doubt if this was ever an option as there were none to spare and the light fleet carriers were not designed to operate these larger and heavier aircraft.

On 1st May 1945 I suffered my one and only deck landing accident. After taking off from the ship my throttle lever jammed (later discovered to be a linkage problem), which meant I could not fully close the throttle, which would lead to a fast approach. At the same time Geoff's gunner's hood had jammed open and this would make the control difficult at low speeds. The deck declared a full emergency and we nearly got away with it. We caught the last (8th) wire and the barrier operator didn't quite get it lowered in time. The prop bit the barrier, but there was no other damage. It couldn't have been too bad because I flew the same aircraft three days later. It was a night take off, using the accelerator, and this time the wheels would not come up so we did a quick 'about turn' and landed back on before the ship turned out of wind. All this happened in my own aircraft coded 'N1R'.

About a week earlier we were a bit upset with Les Terry, who was not my best chum anyway. Taking off the deck one night he flew the aircraft immediately ahead of me. He failed to obey the rules: turn smartly starboard on leaving the deck to clear the prop wash from the chap already on his way up the deck behind. When I went off the front end I had virtually no control and we rolled to starboard and slipped below deck level. Instinct and deliverance from on high gave me the strength to kick on full left rudder and somehow we missed the wave tops and staggered into the air. 'Bambi', Geoff and I thought Terry should pay our laundry bills for soiled underwear, but he seemed quite unconcerned.

'Poppa' Bristow had a new routine on the 4th May. Instead of his usual landing to port, where the batsman had to take smart evasive action, he thought he'd give the starboard side his attention. Unfortunately, he landed a 'bit long' and clobbered the crane with his wing tip. Not much damage, but I think the crane came off best.

On 8th May 1945, VE Day, the ship was in Grand Harbour and looked well with all the lights blazing. There was a party in the Sliema Club and we had a couple of days sailing and swimming. It was great to hear all the church bells ringing across the island. In retrospect I think our celebrations were a bit subdued, probably because we knew any action that might involve us was further East and we did not know how long that would last. Our war was not yet over.

to be continued

