



# NEWSLETTER

## Final installment of Jack Ball's wartime memoirs

### R B 'Johnny' Johns

Sadly just after the February Newsletter went to press we learnt of the passing of one of our oldest members 'Johnny' Johns. He had not attended meetings for some while as he retired to Lincolnshire. Last year he moved into a care home in Sleaford and passed away on 9 January 2014. A short profile of Johnny appears on Page 6.

### Cherokee Challenge to Australia

What a fabulous presentation from **Andy Hardy**, those privileged to attend the February Meeting heard. A pity that his young co-pilot **Sam Kydd** was unable to join him but it was obvious from the start that the camaraderie between them was one of the centre pieces of their success.

Andy gave us a thorough run through of the planning, modifications to the aircraft, the additional safety equipment and the execution of the flight. It was certainly not all plain sailing and we heard of the delays in Port Said, which required considerable tenacity and diplomacy!

In the end it all worked and Andy made it to Australia where he visited part of Northern Queensland where his ancestors originated. This was all before finally reaching his beloved Sydney and before landing he got Sam to put on his best English accent to persuade Sydney's Air Traffic Controllers to give permission for a low flight over the harbour area. A fitting treat to conclude the epic journey.

Andy said he already knew what a privilege it is to see the world from the air, it is what drives him to fly. But seeing so much of humanities variety slide under our wings from a height at which you can see houses and people, was an even greater privilege.

As for what he felt upon landing at Bankstown Airfield in the western suburbs of Sydney? Elated and Deflated! Elated because we've achieved our goals from an aviation and charitable fund-raising perspective, (*Ed- £14500 + to OXFAM*) but feeling a bit deflated because the journey has ended and I'd love to just keep going on and on.



*Andy and Sam reach Sydney*

## Jack Ball's Story-Part 10

Karachi was also good for relaxation. We frequently hired a boat at the harbour complete with a skipper and two tiny tots whose job was to squat on a plank set out to windward, thus balancing the craft when underway. I was happier when we anchored. We would have a good day's fishing with an exotic catch, plus a spell around midday when the skipper would set up a charcoal stove to cook the fish, reinforced with eggs, bread and beer. The alternative was a picnic facility at Hawkes Bay along the coast. In the Mess of an evening, I had drinks with the French pilots who were flying ex-RAF Halifax IIIs, laden with wounded from Viet Nam.

We proceeded via Calcutta's Dum Dum airport and the last leg to Singapore proved unpleasant with heavy cloud, rain and turbulence. We had to go through it. Unfortunately, the passengers were in considerable distress until we landed at Changi with a great clang. In those days the only runway was of PSP (perforated steel plate). We beat the BOAC York in, which meant our passengers were quickly through the formalities. Japanese Imperial Marines, prisoners of war, offloaded the luggage. They were all six feet tall and built like the proverbial out-houses.

Because of the uprising in the Dutch East Indies we had been issued with Sten guns and ammunition at Calcutta to be handed in on arrival. When we came to draw the Sten guns and ammunition for our return, we had to be content with a signed statement to the effect that they could not be found. This was not satisfactory but we were quite glad to lighten our load.

The return leg from Singapore to Ceylon, once we'd passed the northern tip of Sumatra, involved a long sea crossing. I found Ceylon fascinating, from the dung beetles up to the working elephants, but we moved on after a couple of days.

For the next ten months we settled into a regular pattern of trips to Delhi with mail or freight, sometimes to Cairo with a full load of passengers. In India, I found that the loading of the aircraft needed

supervision. Getting to the tarmac at Karachi one morning, I found them trying to push a huge piece of electrical equipment through the loading door by bumping a lorry into it. I suggested they find a train going to Delhi. By the end of my time in India, the troubles between Hindu and Muslim were getting out of hand and burning villages became more frequent en route to Delhi.

The scheduled service was subject to interruption given our circumstances, but we did at one time get up to fifteen successive days. Unfortunately, it was my turn on the sixteenth morning and when the Meteorological Officer briefed me, I decided that the weather through France was unsuitable. By the time I got back to the Mess there was a call to see the Wing Commander who asked me for an explanation. He was clearly upset, but I went over the salient weather points which had led to my decision, and he accepted them. We were both aware that Air Chief Marshal Leigh-Mallory, with a picked crew, had refused to be put off by the weather and had crashed into a French mountain en route to take command in the Far East: an end reminiscent of his brother's death on Everest twenty years earlier. This was the only time I refused to fly.

Between trips we were fully engaged in training and constantly being tested. There were still casualties. One aircraft had engine failure taking off from Ceylon, another ploughed a mile-long furrow in the Sinai desert - possibly the whole crew were asleep after flying from Karachi via Shaibah. This was a tiring trip and we had been told that we were being used to set the limits for future regulation of pilots' hours.

One happier incident was when a crew encountered rough weather over the Bay of Bengal, resulting in damage to the aircraft. The pilot managed to land on an old Japanese fighter strip in the Andaman Islands that was too small for a take-off. He retained the nickname thereafter. The aircraft remained there for several months, until a team was sent from England to chase away the animals, strip it down to a reasonable weight for take-off and fly it out.

*(continued on Page 3)*

*(Continued from Page 2)*

In March we landed at Istres in the south of France and had to sit through three days of the Mistral blowing down the Rhone Valley, very cold and strong. This was the last trip we called at Almaza, then the airport for Cairo, which had been delightful from a tourist point of view. The Egyptians were getting resentful and the city becoming dangerous.

Henceforth we went to Fayid, near Ishmalia in the Canal Zone. Here, German prisoners did all the manual duties, guards and truck driving. They were the Afrika Korps, a fine body of men, desperate to return home. So desperate, that they built three of their comrades into an igloo of mail bags in one of the Yorks, much to the astonishment of the authorities back at Lyneham. The prisoners had to be used, because our experienced men were being replaced by National Servicemen in their teens.

Although we were in tented accommodation in the Canal Zone, there were compensations. I could swim/float in the Bitter Lakes, where the water was so buoyant, and sail at the Officers Club in Ishmalia. I had never actively sailed before, but under the guidance of the Engineer who was an expert, we set off. Our faith was misplaced, because at the first alteration of course, we capsized. Gordon and I didn't even get our feet wet in climbing on to the side of the dinghy, leaving the engineer struggling in the water. The Germans, who manned the rescue boat, forbore to laugh.... out loud.



*RAF Avro York*

Another sign of the times was the switch to Luqa, Malta, instead of Castel Benito in Tripolitania, where the garrison was made up of local levies and the African Rifles. I found this out when I returned to the aircraft to pick up a map I needed. On trying to climb in I was met by the tip of a bayonet followed by the biggest African I have ever seen. I am still convinced that it was Idi Amin, his thigh below his khaki shorts looked bigger around than my waist then. I beat a quick retreat to find his officer who guaranteed my safe entry.

There was another occasion in Ishmalia when Gordon and I were being hassled by a crowd of locals and it looked as if it might become violent. It did when a trio of African troops waded happily into the fray.

Instead of Shaibah at Basra we started to call at Habbaniya, near Baghdad. This was the base from where the RAF and sundry civil servants ran the whole of Iraq from 1923 until the war. It had been besieged in the 1941 uprising and defended by a scratch force of RAF and Army until relieved by a column from Palestine. Compared with Shaibah, it was paradise. The desert had been made to bloom with an intricate system of waterways: there were swimming pools, gardens, racetrack, polo ground and golf course.

In August 1947, when I last saw it, I spent a pleasant evening at the cinema watching Rita Hayworth, then a quiet drink in the bar. I had a restless night watching the ceiling fan rotate, troubled by a pain in my abdomen. We had two senior officers doing a check on us until Fayid, so I did not want to go sick, which might look as if I was trying to dodge the check. Besides, there was a Bank holiday weekend coming up and I felt Malta would be preferable to Iraq in the circumstances.

The flight to Fayid went well. After refuelling, we pressed on to Malta where I reported sick in some pain. Following a bumpy ride, the ambulance delivered me to Imtarfa Military Hospital where they prepared to take out my appendix.

*(Continued on Page 4)*

(Continued from Page 3)

My companions in the ward were two young Commando officers from the garrison, suffering from amoebic dysentery picked up in the Far East. The Commando had been used to make first landings in Saigon and the East Indies wherever the welcome was uncertain. They were good company and had lots of young visitors who helped make the time pleasant; the occasional pilot from my squadron called in, one of whom carried the news of my promotion to Flight Lieutenant.

By September I was able to leave the hospital and after a splendid farewell dinner at the Commando Officers' Mess I caught the next York to Lyneham. I had to be cleared by the Central Medical Board before being in command of an aircraft again, so flew as co-pilot on some paratroop exercises from Brize Norton and on a Battle of Britain day in Hullavington. I also acted as liaison officer at the manoeuvres on Salisbury Plain attended by Field Marshal Montgomery and Air Marshal Tedder, which must have been the last time a thousand British paratroops dropped out of the sky and the first time helicopters took part.

My last duty was fending off the media when a USAAF Douglas DC4 landed after crossing the pond without intervention of the safety pilot.

Then to London, for the medical bigwigs. Two young doctors gave me thorough eye tests and I heard one murmur "a typical myope". So that was that: I was found to be permanently unfit for flying, and after waiting at Lyneham for the paperwork to seep through, I arrived at the demob centre on 4th November 1947 to get a new suit.

I had realized some time before that my dreams of getting a permanent commission or continuing in commercial aviation were unrealistic. I was upset, but in no way resentful. I had enjoyed seven years doing more or less what I wanted to do. I needed to get on with the rest of my life.

Over the years the bombing campaign against Germany has been the subject of controversy. It is easily forgotten that in 1941 this was the only way that we could strike back against an enemy that would overrun Europe: it had the direct effect in Germany of causing the retention of vast numbers of men, aircraft and 88mm guns to defend the Reich.

Every man on the Allied side that took part was a volunteer and the refusal to grant a campaign medal reflects badly on the top British politicians. Whilst the pilots could reasonably expect to be awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for leadership, or whatever, on the completion of a successful operational tour, the majority of aircrew have nothing to show that they took exactly the same risks.

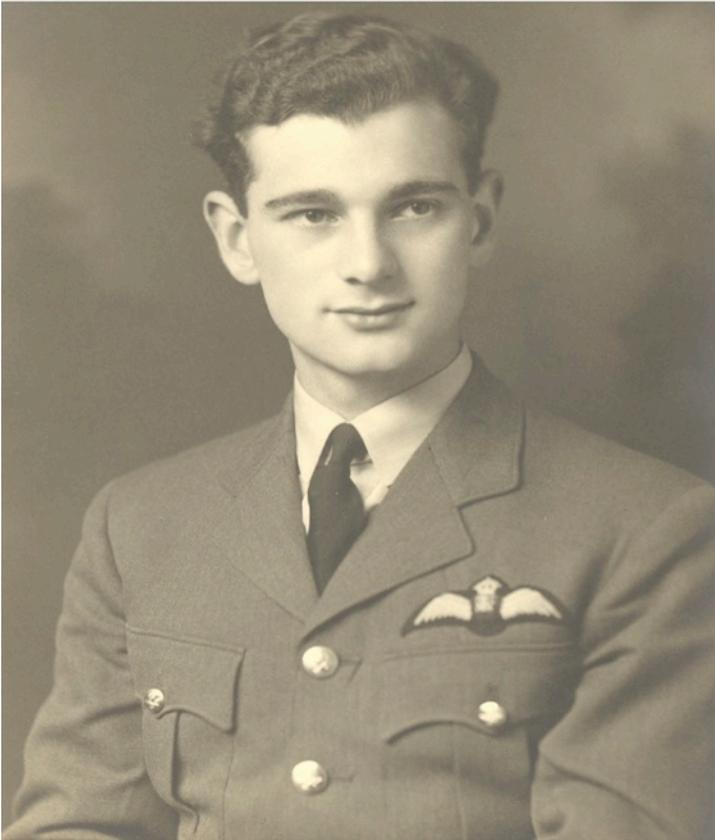
#### **Fg Off Arthur John BALL, 179079 RAFVR No 625 Sqn**



Fg Off Ball is the Captain and Pilot of a Lancaster aircraft and has almost completed a very successful first tour of operations consisting of 32 sorties comprising 175 operational flying hours. He has attacked many targets in Germany and the occupied countries including Dortmund (2), Dusseldorf, Gelsenkirchen, Cologne (3) and Essen (2), and has pressed home each attack in spite of severe weather on several occasions and heavy opposition of flak. This officer has consistently set a very high standard and has always carried out his tasks in a most determined manner, and his cheerfulness and fearlessness on all occasions has been very noticeable throughout his tour. He is a fine leader, skillful pilot and has shown commendable courage and devotion to duty. He has always set a fine example to his crew and by his gallant leadership has completed a most successful tour of operations

*(Jack's story concludes on Page 5)*

*(Continued from Page 4)*



*Flt Lt Jack Ball DFC RAF*

The Chiltern ACA was proud to have Jack as a member. He moved to the West Country to be near family but sadly passed away in 2012. We are indebted to his daughter Stephanie, not only for bringing Jack to our meetings but for persuading him to recount his wartime and early post war years. We must also thank her for allowing us to publish them in full. Footnote: Jack was pleased that some recognition had at last been given to the aircrew of Bomber Command with the building of the Bomber Command Memorial in London's Green Park. Plans for this did not exist when he wrote his memoir. Sadly, due to ill health, he was unable to attend the unveiling ceremony on 28 June 2012.

*Ed: Next month we will have some memories from Harry Purver*

## Letter to the Editor

I have followed Jack Ball's story with great interest, particularly his time with Yorks. After VJ Day I was remustered as an Air Movements Assistant and sent to Merryfield near Taunton to deal with Yorks. I was concerned with load control plus supervising loading and unloading – can't have them nose or tail heavy!

An unscheduled York landed one afternoon. 'Your turn, Dennis', said our CO and, together with the Customs Officer (who wore a Naval Lieutenant's uniform) we walked out onto the hard standing; he to have a look at the cargo, me to collect the papers and consignment notes. The fuselage door opened – the crewman had no time to warn us – lowered the short steps and was pushed aside by a red-tabbed Army Officer of exalted rank, his face as red as his uniform tabs. He ignored me – a mere Flight Sergeant, saw the Naval Officer and demanded to see the CO. Our CO was an ex-POW who didn't suffer 'brown jobs' much. (He thought the British Army took far too long to reach some of the POW camps.) 'Red Tab' demanded to know why twenty of his officers were off-loaded at Karachi on their way from Calcutta to the UK where he and the remaining ten officers of his retinue had to sit and face a 'damned great box' covered in purple and yellow striped labels. The 'damned great box' was a Merlin being returned to the UK for examination – we didn't know the exact reason but it was classed as 'AOG Trans' – to us that was 'Aircraft on Ground Transport' which had priority over anything and anybody except Royalty! He had a further wait until I came back with the papers for the CO's perusal. We had to leave the CO's office while he told why a 'damned great box' was more important than the red tab and his junior pals, but the tale later was a delight as our CO related it – threatened higher authority never got back to us.

Incidentally, garish purple and yellow labels were used on British Airways for similar situations until a few years ago.

**Denis Swains**

## Sgt R B (Johnny) Johns

Johnny started his service in 1937 as a 'Cranwell Brat' training on, among others, Valencia's, DH 86B's and Wapati's as a W/Op. He then became a W/OP AG in 1939.

Johnny served in France in Sept 39 in week two of the war operating from Lille, Abbeville and Arras on Photo and Tac,R, returning to UK in May 40 operating from Lymne on recce, bombing and supply sorties over the French ports. Bombed out of Lymne, bombed out of West Malling he finished up at Gatwick (but no holiday for him!)

Sent to the Middle East, using Tomahawks, he completed over 100 sorties, logging 60 over enemy territory. He moved to Cairo in Bombay's of No 216 Sqn where he was involved in dropping Randolph Churchill into Yugoslavia and with a 'cover up' mission following. He later became an 'inter-command wireless op' sending out the Middle East Broadcast twice a day at 25wpm. Here he also gained his 'props' and first Good Conduct stripe.



*Bristol Bombay 216 Sqn*

A keen sportsman he represented the Combined Services at Soccer (the only amateur among a team of professionals).

Having been offered a Commissioning Board or Pilot Training, he opted for the latter and in late 43 early 44 went through ITW (Bulawayo) and

EFTS (Induna) and finally SFTS on Oxford's and Anson's at Kumalo.

Back to UK on 57 Sqn Lancasters. After 7 more ops the war in Europe was over, so he moved to Digby and the formation of 57 Anti Submarine Warfare Development Unit on Wimpey's complete with de gaussing rings!

Post war he continued his links with sport and was Founder/Director of the London Youth Game. He was also an accomplished singer with the 'Squadronaires' (1945) and other Big Bands.

A fascinating career in the RAF and he continued his singing career with many charity functions as well as being a fundraiser and Hon Sec for Aylesbury/Halton RAFA.

## Were you involved in D Day?

**Dick Goodwin** represents the London Taxi Benevolent Association for War Disabled. Charity Reg No 264678 Web. [www.taxicharity.org](http://www.taxicharity.org) writes:

On Thursday 13th May we are grouping a number of WW2 veterans together at the RAF Club, who all will have a D-Day story of their own to tell. These veterans will take part in interviews by the BBC and Soldier magazine [Army only] which will be broadcast and published in June.

I wonder if you have any aircrew within your branch who took part in operations on D-Day or D+1, D+2, and may have a story to tell about the operation, who would be interested in joining us for the day.

If so, could you ask them to e-mail me, call me on the numbers below or put me in touch with them.

I am sending this request to all ACA Branches in London and SE area.

**Dick Goodwin. 01920 464748 / 07941 772264**

## Project Propeller 2014

GLOUCESTER AIRPORT (EGBJ)

SATURDAY 21 JUNE 2014



Opened in 1931, Gloucester Airport was known as RAF Staverton during the war. The RAF took over the site in 1936 and used it as a training school until August 1946. The airfield was used by a number of units and flights, including the No44 Group Communication Flight. A satellite strip of RAF Staverton at Brockworth hosted the first flight of the Gloster E28/39 jet aircraft. Various testing took place at RAF Staverton, including a plan for Lancasters to tow Spitfires from their airfields to targets such as Tokyo. This plan of course was not needed following the surrender of the Japanese after two A-Bomb attacks.



The airfield is now home to the new Jet Age Museum, which you will be able to visit on the day.

INVITATION: If you served in any capacity as WWII aircrew, then you would be very welcome. Each year, the aircrew have a wonderful day out when they are able to meet up with

former colleagues, enjoy lunch, live wartime music and the facilities of the venue and, most importantly, get airborne once again. Please register and we will try to pair you up with a pilot and aircraft from a local airfield to fly you to the meeting

REGISTRATION: Whether you are a former WWII aircrew member (friend or former foe), a current qualified pilot willing to fly in a veteran, or a volunteer helper, we invite you to join us by registering for the ultimate WWII aircrew reunion.

### HOW YOU CAN HELP

It typically costs over £4,000 to stage PP (marquee, catering, entertainment, etc.) and, so far, we have only raised half that amount from our usual supportive service and other charities. If you can help, please consider making a donation either via PayPal (using a credit/debit card) by clicking the button below, or by sending a cheque payable to 'Project Propeller' at the following address.

Project Propeller, 34 Dorset Square, London NW1 6QJ

e-mail: [ian@projectpropeller.co.uk](mailto:ian@projectpropeller.co.uk)

Tel: 0207 262 4709

### For an application form contact

Graham Cowie, Heygates Lodge, Elkington, Northants NN6 6NH

e-mail: [graham@projectpropeller.co.uk](mailto:graham@projectpropeller.co.uk)

Remember 19 Mar 14

THE HISTORY OF LEAVESDEN

by

Derek Sayell

Greenacres 11.00am.

## Programme

All events at 1030 for 1100 at Greenacres unless advised (\*)

- 19 Mar** History of Leavesden, Derek Sayell  
 16 Apr National Service, Wg Cdr John Gearing  
 21 May Guest's Lunch  
 18 June 'Malcolm's War', Malcolm Clouett

## Your Committee

**Chairman:** Geoff Hulett

11 Pearsewood Gardens, Stanmore, Middx HA7 1NU. Tel: 0208 952 4092

Email: [banghulett@btinternet.com](mailto:banghulett@btinternet.com)

**Newsletter Editor/Secretary:** Graham Laurie

19 High St, Prestwood, Gt Missenden, Bucks HP16 9EE

Tel: 01494 863492

Email: [graham@kitty4.co.uk](mailto:graham@kitty4.co.uk)

**Membership Sec:** Gerry Sealy-Bell

31, Hempstead Road, Kings Langley, Herts, WD4 8BR Tel: 01923 262707

**Treasurer:** Rod Finn

67 Hayfield, Chells Manor Village, Stevenage SG2 7JR Tel: 01438 350115

Email: [rodfinn@btinternet.com](mailto:rodfinn@btinternet.com)

**Welfare:** Bill Hyland

57, Limes Avenue, Aylesbury, Bucks., HP21 7HD Tel: 01296 415386

Email: [johnhyland228@btinternet.com](mailto:johnhyland228@btinternet.com)

**Programme Secretary:** Bill George

Blossom Cottage, 54, Green End Street, Aston Clinton, Bucks, HP22 5EX

Tel: 01296 630998

Email: [bill.bbgi@btinternet.com](mailto:bill.bbgi@btinternet.com)

## Welfare

Hopefully we are now coming to the end of winter which has brought its share of ills to our members. A couple of accidents also caused problems for Charlie Flint and George Biggs but they are now on the mend. The recent storms also tried their worst with Frank Barton playing host to his neighbour's fallen tree which filled most of his garden and causing Roy Briggs to tread very gently as he lives quite close to the Hemel Hempstead sink hole!

The main problem that I encountered on this round of calls was loneliness, with an increasing number of our members now living in care homes. They would appreciate a call or visit and if you don't have an address or number, myself or Gerry probably do, so get in touch. A new contact list is due shortly which should show current information.

However there is still an underlying cheerfulness, with members who are unable to attend sending their best wishes to everyone in the Association.

**Bill**

## Membership Secretary

You will have seen the sad news of the passing of Sgt Reginald (Johnny) Johns elsewhere in this issue. At our February meeting we stood in his memory. We will remember him.

Thanks you to all those who have renewed their membership. If you intend to do so please do get in touch ASAP as we wish to publish a new membership List, and we would hate to miss anybody out.

**Gerry**

## Treasurer

With membership fees nearly collected and a bumper raffle taking of over £100 at the last meetings I am pleased to report that we are in a healthy financial state.

One plea, please make any cheques payable to :

**'CHILTERN AIRCREW ASSOC'**

as other variations are liable to be thrown out by Mr Jobsworth at HSBC. In fact Mr J is probably a computer and if he say no....!!!

**Rod**