

BELGIAN BRANCH NEWSLETTER

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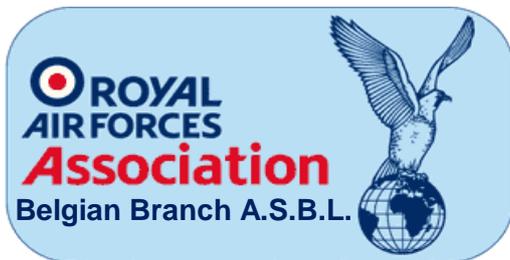
RAFA Belgian Branch
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NEWSLETTER NO 108

OCT – NOV – DEC 2012

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THE ROYAL AIR FORCES ASSOCIATION

Maison des Ailes – Rue Montoyer 1-B 33-1040 Brussels.

Branch No: 0645

Patron: Her Majesty The Queen

Honorary Patron: H.E. Jonathan Brenton British Ambassador

Branch Honorary Co-Presidents:

Air Marshal Sir Christopher Harper KBE MA FCMI RAF

Sqn Ldr (Ret'd) E Hearn DFC*

Life Vice President: Lt Gen Baron M Donnet DFC

Branch Hon Vice-President: Air Cdre S Corbett MBE MA BA RAF

BELGIAN BRANCH COMMITTEE - 2012

CHAIRMAN	Robert (Dick) Whittingham (Gp Capt Ret'd)
VICE CHAIR	Wg Cdr Gillian Ward
HONORARY CHAPLAIN	Father Walter Peeters
SECRETARY	Flt Lt Arlene Walker
TREASURER	David Trembaczowski-Ryder (Wg Cdr Ret'd)
HONORARY WELFARE OFFICER (HWO)	Mrs Ghislaine Walkden
ASSISTANT HWO	Mrs Deborah Whittingham
MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY	Mrs Brigitte Horton
BRANCH WEBMASTER	Bob Jenkins (Wg Cdr Ret'd)

For a quick answer to any query, please email: rafa.belgianbranch@gmail.com

From: Group Captain R J Whittingham FRAeS, Royal Air Force (Retired)

Brussels
November 2012

Dear Friends,

CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTION

The theme of this edition of your Newsletter is 'Remembrance'. Very appropriate I think for the November season where we have so many public acts all around Belgium to remind us of the great debt we owe to those who have suffered and given their lives for freedom and liberty. Not just in the, now rather distant, past of the Second World War, but also in the current conflicts which may be far away in foreign lands, but which nevertheless can require equal individual courage and sacrifice.

The 'Past Events' section of this edition includes a strong thread of 'Remembrance', but it also reflects the numerous occasions where Branch members and colleagues from sister organisations have been able to join together to enjoy the social and comradeship aspects of commemorative events. I am particularly encouraged to see increasing numbers of young (and not so young!) people participating in events for the first time. This is what our Association is all about, and I believe we should work hard to foster this interest.

One way of doing this is to capitalise on the opportunities offered by the new 'Social Media'. I am not (yet) advocating Twitter and Facebook, but, as reported in this edition, our industrious Webmaster Bob Jenkins has done a super job, and has got the Branch Website up and running. Well done: please use it and provide us with proposals for improvement.

I am very pleased to be able to report a first rate response to the 'Wings Appeal' in the last edition. My warm thanks on behalf of the Association to everyone who contributed. Two members deserve a very special 'Mention in Dispatches' in this context. Firstly, Mrs Dorothy Burch who now lives in Felixstowe but who used to be a member of the Belgian Branch and has many memories of 'Happy Days'. Secondly Ann Robins whose father Stanley was a Branch member and who died last year. Very many thanks to you both.

Please note the numerous 'Future Events', in particular the Annual General Meeting on 5 March 2013 (please see the Agenda on page 4), and the Branch Winter Lunch on Monday 10 Dec 12. For the Winter Lunch please let us know if you can come and your menu choices by 5 Dec 12 (see page 23).

Yours most sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dick Whittingham". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**2013 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE BELGIAN BRANCH
OF THE ROYAL AIR FORCES ASSOCIATION
NATO STAFF CENTRE - TUESDAY 5TH MARCH AT 11:30 HRS**

AGENDA

- | | | |
|----|--|-----------|
| 1. | Dedication | Chaplain |
| 2. | Minutes of the 2012 AGM held at The NATO Staff Centre,
15 March 2012 (as published in Newsletter 106, Jun 2012) | Secretary |
| 3. | Chairman's Address | Chairman |
| 4. | Election / Re-election of Officers / Committee | Chairman |
| 5. | Treasurer's Report / Approval of Accounts 2012
<i>(to be circulated in Newsletter 109 in Feb 13)</i> | Treasurer |
| 6. | Honorary Welfare Officer's Report and Proposals for 2013 | HWO |
| 7. | Budget for 2013 | Treasurer |
| 8. | Any Other Business | |

ITEM 4 - ELECTION OF OFFICERS

1. Extracts from Branch Standing Orders:
 - a. Only those who have paid their subs. for the current year may vote.
 - b. Nominations for election to the Committee must be in writing, signed by two paid-up members, and **must reach the Chairman by the 8th Feb 13.**
 - c. Existing Members of the Branch Committee holding office for one year are re-eligible for re-election.
 - d. No person nominated may be elected if not present at the Annual General Meeting unless his/her absence is justified and the Members present approve his/her election in absentia.
2. The following are officials of the Branch and do not require re-election:

Sqn Ldr (Ret'd) E.H.E. Hearn	Branch Honorary Co-President
Air Marshal Sir Christopher Harper	Branch Honorary Co-President
Air Cdre S. Corbett	Branch Honorary Vice-President
Lt Gen (Avi) Baron M. Donnet	Branch Life Vice-President
Father W. Peeters	Branch Honorary Chaplain

3. Nominations for elected members of the Committee will be circulated with Newsletter 109 in Feb 13.

BRANCH ADMINISTRATION

BRANCH WEBSITE

The Committee are very pleased to be able to announce that thanks to the outstanding efforts of our Webmaster Bob Jenkins, our initial Branch Website is up and running!

The Link is: <http://rafabelgianbranch.yolasite.com>

Even if you are not normally an Internet fan, please paste the Link into your Browser (or ask someone to do it for you), and set up the site as one of your 'Favourites'. You are then one click away from the 'Home Page' and lots of up to date information on your Branch and the RAF Association in general.

When you arrive at the site 'Home Page', you will see something very similar to the back page of this Newsletter. Clicking on the internal links (e.g. [Royal Air Forces Association](#)) or on the 'TABS' at the top (e.g. Future Events) will take you to new pages, documents or websites. Clicking on the 'Contact Us' TAB enables you to send an email directly to the Branch Committee: this is the preferred way for members to communicate.

We will progressively populate and develop the site to be of maximum practical interest and value to current members, and also to provide a source of historical data. Please assist these aims by using the site, and providing feed-back and new material which would be of interest to others (e.g. we are still missing Newsletters 1 to 7!)

NEWSLETTER

To help us cut our printing and postal costs, the Newsletter is available in electronic form for issue by email. If you are able to receive it in this way, and have not yet advised us, please let the Editor know.

MEMBERSHIP

Unless you are a Life Member, RAFA Membership fees become due on 1 Jan 2013. Fees for Ordinary and Associate Members are €25 for a 1 year subscription and €75 for a 4 year subscription. Please transfer funds to RAFA Belgian Branch account BE12-0000-0482-0492 (FOR MEMBERSHIP FEES) early in the New Year.

BELGIAN AIR FORCE ASSOCIATION

The Belgian Air Force Association was formed on 9 May 2011. Its objectives include to: 'perpetuate and promote the history and traditions of the Belgian Air Force, and to maintain relationships with similar Associations both within Belgium and abroad'. Since our interests are very much aligned, the Branch has become an Associated Member of the BAFA, and will maintain close links. Those Branch members who wish to join individually, and hence receive the quarterly BAFA 'Wings' magazine, can do so via the website: www.bafassociation.be.

Photographs on page 12 courtesy 'Wings of Memory', Mehdi and Vieilles Tiges

THE EXCEPTIONAL CONCERT THAT NEVER WAS*

In the year 1991, on the initiative of the British Air and Naval Attaché Wg Cdr Barry HORTON (future RAFA Belgian Branch Chairman) and under the aegis of the British Embassy, an exceptional event was organized:

A unique Charity Gala Concert of the « *Last Night of the Proms* » played by the Band of the Royal Air Force Germany at the Cultural Centre of Auderghem in Brussels.

First planning contacts began at the Embassy as early as 5 May 1991, and culminated in a General Briefing on 21 October presided over by Wg Cdr B. HORTON together with Bob WALKDEN — Chairman of the Branch, reviewing the responsibilities of the Committee members involved:

Gp Capt HUTCHINS — L. BEECH — A. de NORMAN (Welfare Officer) - L. GEORGE — L. RUBIN.

A total of 17 various 'Actions' were identified e.g. for: VIP reception, Contracts, Programmes, Refreshments, Copyrights, TV coverage, Ticket sales, Handling of the Band, etc and *SECURITY*.

Three rows were blocked for VIPs and guests, principally: The Ambassador H.E. Robin O'NEILL, RAFA Belgian Branch President Air Commodore Sir Denis MITCHELL, Lt Gen Avi Guido VAN HECKE - Chief of Staff Belgian Air Force.

They were under care of Mrs MEEUS (FONAVIBEL) and Col Avi Eddie LADEN and his wife Mary. Andrée de NORMAN (Welfare Officer) and Léon RUBIN liaised with the Cultural Centre.

The organization ran smoothly according to schedule, as from 19 June:

- Contracts were agreed with the CCA
- Printing of the tickets was achieved and the selling distribution under way
- Programs were printed (*see the next 2 pages*);
- Ushers, decoration (Palm trees, flowers, etc) decided
- Bar organised (20% of net revenue for RAFA); Insurance arranged. etc. etc
-

Publicity was made in the 'Bulletin', Newsletters of RBL, BCWCB, BBCA, Belgian Air Force 'Wings', and about 12 Air, Navy, Army Force-minded Associations, etc...

In the meantime the situation in Northern Ireland was becoming a serious cause for concern and it had been agreed that the event would be preceded by a Belgian Air Force Security dog search and a thorough Security sweep. However, despite these measures, on Wednesday 20 November, THE DAY BEFORE the concert, the whole scheme was cancelled by order of the British Embassy.

It transpired that precise IRA bomb-threats had been received, aimed at that very special Concert performance. No more explanations have been given ever since.

* *Contributed by Léon Rubin*

CENTRE CULTUREL D'AUDERGHEM



**THE BAND
OF
ROYAL AIR FORCE
GERMANY**

CHARITY GALA CONCERT

LAST NIGHT OF THE PROMS



**THURSDAY
21 NOVEMBER 1991**

BAND OF ROYAL AIR FORCE GERMANY

LAST NIGHT OF THE PROMS CONCERT

□
BRUSSELS
21 NOV 91

Programme of music

Festive Overture
Mexicana

Shostakovitch
arr Martindale

Solo Time

Mardigras
The Sheik of Araby

Cy Payne
arr Martindale

Introducing Steve Humphrey (vocalist)

Polovtsian Dances

Borodine

Interval

Radetzky
Gershwin
Country Gardens
Vera Lynn Medley

Strauss arr Martindale
arr Martindale
Grainger
arr Martindale

Introducing Steve Humphrey (vocalist)

Fantasia on British Sea Songs
Jerusalem
March : Pomp & Circumstance N° 1

Wood
Parry
Elgar

REPORTS ON PAST EVENTS

Last Battle of Britain Service at JHQ Rheindahlen, Germany.

The Joint Headquarters at Rheindahlen, Germany (the old 'Big House' to many) will be closed in mid-2013 and hence on Sunday 16 Sep 12, RAFA Germany Branch organised a final Battle of Britain Service at St Boniface Church. A small event compared to earlier days, but done in proper style and with a sprinkling of light blue.



The event was supported by RAFA representation from the Belgian Branch (Chairman, AHWO and Membership Secretary) and the Amsterdam Branch.

Memorial to 57 Sqn Lancaster at Lierde



Branch Honorary Chaplain giving the exhortation

On Saturday 29 Sep 12 the 'Wings of Memory' group marked with a ceremony at Lierde/Kakebeke, the 70th Anniversary of the loss of RAF 57 Sqn Lancaster W4234 'DX-P'. On 21 Dec 1942, 'DX-P' was en-route to Munich in a 100+ raid when she was shot down by night-fighters and exploded. All bar one of the crew were lost. The commemoration was, as usual, a very well organised event, with excellent representation from Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand as well as a group from 57 Sqn parading the Squadron Standard.

The Light Blue: 57 Sqn with WO Warner



The Belgian Branch was represented: the Honorary Chaplain read the exhortation; the Standard was paraded by Jean-Pierre Blanckaert; Warrant Officer Gary Warner laid the wreath.

Photographs courtesy 'Wings of Memory'

<http://www.wingsofmemory.be>.

Belgian Air Force Remembrance Service at Cinquantenaire

The weather on the 13 Oct 12 was not exactly ideal for the annual commemoration at the Belgian Air Force memorial at the Cinquantenaire. Nevertheless, the heavy rain did not prevent a large crowd paying homage with many wreaths laid by Belgian and International organisations.



Spitfire pilot Léon Rubin glad to be (fairly) dry



'There I was, in a steep turn....'
Spitfire pilot Bobby Laumans explains the finer points to the new generation

The Branch Standard was paraded, and a number of Branch members attended both the commemoration and the subsequent reception held in the Air Force Museum.

Photographs courtesy Mehdi and Vieilles Tiges

European Area RAFA Conference at Amsterdam, Netherlands

The RAFA Autumn European Area Conference was held in Amsterdam from 12 to 14 Oct 12. The Conference was well attended, with members of the Area Council plus 17 Branch Delegates: the Chairman represented the Belgian Branch. Main decision of the Conference was that the Area President should write to the RAFA National President stressing that the facts regarding membership costs should be circulated to all RAFA Members, together with proposals for the way ahead, such that resolutions could be made, and voted on, at the next RAFA Annual Conference in May 2013.

Comète Line Annual Reunion in Brussels

The Comète Line Annual Reunion was held in Brussels on the week-end of 20/21 Oct 12. A fine, well attended event as normal, with Veterans and 'Helpers' as well as members of the Escape Lines Memorial Society and other visitors from UK. On Saturday, the group visited the surroundings of Ypres in the "Flanders Fields", Belgian and Commonwealth cemeteries. On Sunday, the Church Service in the Koekelberg Basilica was followed by wreath-laying at the Comète Line Memorial and in the Air Force Chapel. The Branch Standard was paraded: wreaths were laid by Warrant Officer Gary Warner for the RAF and by the Chairman for the RAFA. The Branch was well represented at the excellent lunch at the Maison des Ailes.

Commemoration at the Belgian Air Force and Commonwealth War Graves at the Brussels Cemetery, Evere

As arranged by the 'Comité de la Pelouse d'Honneur des Aviateurs' in collaboration with the Belgian Air Force and the 'Vieilles Tiges de l'Aviation Belge', a ceremony was held at the Brussels cemetery on 1 Nov 12 to pay homage to Belgian airman who died in WW2. Lt Gen Mandl led proceedings. The Branch Standard was paraded. Wing Commander Ross McKenzie and the Chairman laid wreaths on behalf, respectively, of the United Kingdom and the RAFA on the Field of Honour and at the Commonwealth War Memorial



Wg Cdr Ross McKenzie and the Chairman together with potential new RAFA recruits...

British Ambassador to Belgium - Veterans' Reception

This year, the Veterans' Reception on 7 Nov 12 was held at the British School of Brussels (BSB) and co-hosted by the British Ambassador to Belgium, Jonathan Brenton, and the Principal of the BSB, Sue Woodroffe. The excellent event was well supported by Branch members and provided an ideal opportunity to meet colleagues from the Royal British Legion, the Comète Line and other veterans' organisations in Belgium. Members of the BSB, both Staff and pupils, provided moving and professional musical interludes which were very effective in drawing together the older and younger generations.

Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday – Holy Trinity, Brussels

The Royal British Legion (RBL) organised a Remembrance Sunday service at the Pro-Cathedral of Holy Trinity in Brussels on 11 Nov 12. A full congregation with strong RAF and RAFA Belgian Branch representation enjoyed an uplifting service. Colin Puplett, the RBL Welfare Chairman, read out the list of those RBL and RAFA Belgian Branch veterans who have died in the past year. The Branch Standard was paraded, and a wreath in memory of members of British and Allied Air Forces who suffered and died in the cause of Freedom and Liberty was laid by the Chairman.



Photograph courtesy Marc@englishshop.be

THOUGHTS ON REMEMBRANCE

Every country has its own history, its own past. Brave men and women shaped conditions and values that still matter for all of us today. History is not a mere overview of battles and feats. It is the living past of idealism and readiness to implement it. Like democracy it has lasted for centuries to come and to be refined. Thanks to those many known and unknown predecessors step by step we've earned our actual freedom like we consider it essential. Many generations brought forward heroes in all fields of life. These prevailed the good and wellbeing of our country. Tombstones on graveyards discretely mention their passing of a lifetime. But the heritage they left behind is a precious example of dedication and gift of their lives for the present day. At Remembrance Services we use to express it by this quote: 'For your future we gave our today.' Gratitude is not only a mere formal matter but also a deep esteem we keep in our hearts. Our attitude has also to be a living example for youngsters today: not to take for granted all good things we share in our Western civilisation. Even on this very moment brave Service Men and Women are guarding our safety and values at the fringe of our heritage. They also have to be remembered as the sentries watching for human dignity and justice.

Father Walter Peeters,
RAFA Belgian Branch, Honorary Chaplain

ACTS OF REMEMBRANCE



War Grave of the crew of 57
Sqn DX-P at Geraardsbergen



13 Oct 12 – Belgian Air Force
Memorial - Cinquantenaire



1 Nov 12 – Belgian Air Force
Memorial – Brussels Cemetery



1 Nov 12 – Commonwealth War
Grave – Brussels Cemetery

IN MEMORIAM

Group Captain John Scotter Owen RAF,

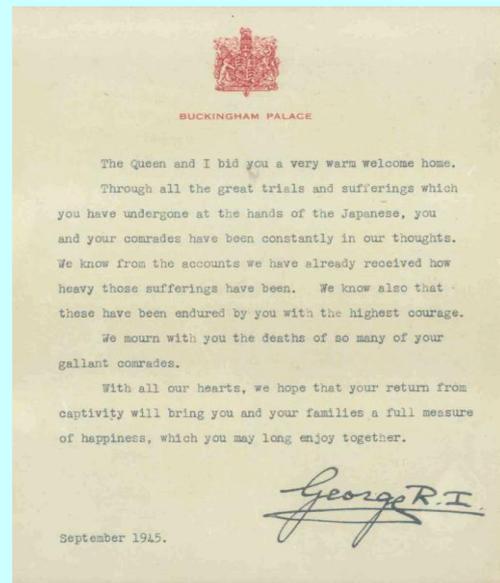
Lived in Bruges: died 7th September 2012 aged 93 after a long illness. RAFA life member since 1953, and a close colleague of the Belgian Branch for many years. John Scotter Owen was commissioned into the Royal Air Force as a Pilot Officer in 1939 shortly after the outbreak of war. He soon found himself on active service in the Near East based in Aden flying Blenheim light bombers with 84 Sqn.



In early 1942, now as a Flight Lieutenant, he moved with the Squadron to the Far East to attempt to prevent the fall of Singapore. Initially based in Sumatra, the Squadron fell back to Java where the base was overrun by the Japanese. Despite, in his words, a thrilling escape by sea, he was eventually caught and spent the next 4 years as a Prisoner of War in camps in Java, Sumatra and Singapore. During most of this time he was the Commanding Officer of around 500 troops of all Services.

The privations of this barbaric time are well known, as is the strength and leadership qualities needed to survive these experiences. As he put it: 'this was my university education - I learnt about human nature'. These qualities were formally recognised at the end of the War when the London Gazette noted that he had been 'Mentioned in Despatches' in recognition of his gallant and distinguished service whilst a prisoner of war in Japanese hands. They were also recognised by King George VI in a personal note in September 1945.

On return to United Kingdom he was pronounced A1 fit, and was granted a permanent commission and quickly took up normal peacetime RAF duties. In later tours he was Personal Staff Officer to the Commander-in-Chief of Flying Training Command: he seems to have had a wonderful 2 years being a VIP (although insisting that he was not one) before returning to pilot duties.



He became an instructor on all RAF in-service types and was awarded two Commendations for Valuable Service in the Air: one by His Majesty the King in 1950 and one by Her Majesty the Queen in 1957. His value was also recognised by quick promotion to Squadron Leader, Wing Commander and then in 1960 to Group Captain. Following an exciting tour as Air Attaché in Teheran, then Persia under the Shah, he was appointed Officer Commanding of a Wing of 4 squadrons of Valiant bombers. Sadly, it was here that Multiple Sclerosis struck, and he was unable to continue his flying duties. So, at the age of 45, he resigned his commission and left the RAF.



Despite the ever-increasing disabilities associated with his illness, he maintained his intellect and his interest in all about him. Writing as John Scotter, he completed two novels reflecting his RAF experiences: 'Operation Hercules' based in Gibraltar, published in 1978, and the 'Golestan Episode' featuring adventures in Iran, in 1979. John, and his wife Monique, became firm friends of the Belgian Branch throughout their time in Bruges. John's resolute courage and good spirits in the face of adversity provide a lesson to us all.

FUTURE EVENTS CALENDAR

Monday 10 Dec 12 - 12:30 for 13:00 hrs, Branch Winter Lunch at the NATO Staff Centre: all Members are encouraged to attend. Please let us know NOW if you are able to participate in this important Branch event. See page 23 for Menu choices and administrative arrangements.

Tuesday 5 March 2013 – 11:30 hrs, Branch Annual General Meeting to be held at NATO Staff Centre, followed by lunch. Please see Agenda and details for the Election of Officers at page 4 of this Newsletter. NB that additional Committee members are always welcome: your Branch needs YOU! Please make proposals to the Chairman by 8 Feb 13.

Sunday 24 March 2013* – St Clement Danes Church in the Strand, London. Annual Service to commemorate the formation of the Royal Air Force.

10 – 12 May 2013 – National and European Area RAFA Conferences at Eastbourne, Sussex. The Chairman will attend: others members who would like to join these policy-making events which also do much to foster the Association's comradeship aims, should contact the Chairman. It should be noted that although central funds only reimburse some of the costs of sending one delegate to Conference, it is Branch committee policy that available funds will be shared equally amongst all Branch attendees.

29 May 2013 - Memorial at Rebecq. Commemoration of the servicemen and the civilians who were direct or indirect victims of the crash of an RAF Lancaster of 550 Sqn in a meadow of "Stoquois" at the dawn of 28th May 1944. See <http://www.rebecq-memorial.eu/>.

Friday 28 June 2013* – Barry Horton Memorial Golf Tournament at the Duisburg Military Golf Club. Arrangements are envisaged to be similar to previous years. Mark your diaries for this major fund raising event! Details in Newsletter 109: see also DMGC website www.golf.be/duisburg

July 2013* - Belgian Armed Forces London Cenotaph Parade. Belgian Forces parade and march past at the Cenotaph in London. Participation by the Branch Standard Bearer is anticipated.

Jul 2013* - Neufchateaux. Ceremony to unveil a plaque commemorating the loss of an RAF 115 Sqn, Lancaster serial DS690, KO-C, in July 1943. See www.lancaster-ds690.com. Family members of those involved will attend: RAF and RAFA will be represented.

16 August 2013 – 'Wings of Memory' memorial. Event at local cemetery near Dover, UK, for Jean Seleys who crashed with his Typhoon in Belgium 70 years ago.

25 August 2013 - Tigelot Memorial at Jalhay. 62nd annual commemoration in memory of the sacrifice of all Allied Airmen who lost their lives in the High Ardennes in the Second World War. A church service will be held at Jalhay, followed by wreath laying at the memorial to Halifax MZ 829 lost with all crew on the 2nd November 1944: the event will be followed by the normal convivial lunch. RAFA will be represented.

** Dates to be confirmed*

The Chronicle of a Passer By

By Edward Harty Elliot Hearn

Editor's Note:

This 8th episode of our Branch Honorary Co-President's 'Chronicle' as transcribed by Gp Capt (Ret'd) Mike Connor, contains extracts from Part 2 Chapter 6 with the Author's observations of life in India after the end of the Second World War .

Please see Newsletter 101 for the Contents List.

PART TWO – 1940 -1946

6. Kashmir and Farewell to India

Taking advantage of the lull which followed the recent visit of Subda Bhowse, the success of the Station Dance, and the helpful appointment of the new Station Adjutant, I decided to take a few days of leave. It was the season of the Hill Stations and I planned to go north. I went down from Ranchi to Calcutta by car, then boarded the Rajdhani Express to cover the 1,443 kilometres to Delhi. It took 24 hours via Allahabad, Jhansi and Agra, the train averaging no more than 60 kilometres or under 40 miles per hour. This was not surprising considering the number of stops on the way. The time did not bother me because train journeys are always an enlightening experience. In Europe, I used to pass the time trying to assess the occupations of my fellow travellers. It takes a little time for the European traveller, especially in England, to start talking and eventually, more often than not, the profession of the voyager came out in limited conversation and one was able to ascertain whether the preliminary appraisal had been near the mark. This was, of course, impossible on an Indian train because most were dressed in the same way and the only distinction was the apparent difference between the rich and the poor. But the difference was made up by the average Indian's thirst for knowledge and he is not inhibited by a lack of talk. He asks pointed questions such as, "where are you going? Why are you going there? What do you think of India? What was London like? What was the cost of the boat fare from Bombay to Southampton – there and back?"

At Delhi, I arrived in time to catch the Jammu Tawi Mail train, which stopped at Rawalpindi. There I found lodgings in a respectable guest house which was always possible in this renowned military headquarters town. Rawalpindi was also the starting point of the road to Kashmir. I was joined at Rawalpindi by a group of nursing sisters from the Military Hospital who I had previously met in Ranchi, together with some of their friends. As my time was short, I only stayed a couple of

days in Rawalpindi, but even that short time carried the taste of the long history of a military presence.

We booked places in a twelve-seater minibus chauffeured by a turbaned bearded Sikh whose teeth gleamed more than white amidst the black growth around his mouth. We started off on our journey towards Srinagar sedately enough, but as we reached the mountain pass we unconsciously slid deeper into our seats as our driver took the hairpin bends without reducing speed. The winding road was not very wide and there was no protection against the steep falls to the left and the valleys below. Moreover, at each storming bend our Sikh, with one hand on the wheel, turned towards us with a flashing grin as though tempting our stamina and reactions to the power he held over us. It flashed through my mind that my mother had taken this same route a quarter of a century before us in less sophisticated transport. She had been with a party of wives being sent to the mountains during the hot season. She had recounted that half way between Rawalpindi and Srinagar they had been attacked by brigands who had demanded all their possessions – jewellery, money and footwear. These women avoided attack by telling the bandits that the whole of the British Army was following up behind them and if they were to come to any harm they would be slaughtered!

On our way to Srinagar we made one stop at Gulmarg Hill Station – known as the “Maiden of Flowers” or “Prairie de Roses”. With the mountain peak of Naiga Parbat in the background, it was our first taste of the delights of the natural scenery of beautiful Kashmir.

We had set out on this journey forearmed with the knowledge that Srinagar was in the vale of Kashmir, in north west India, bordering on the Himalayan and Karakoram mountains where the highest peak was Mount Godwin Austen reaching a height of 8,814 metres. It had been the starting point for the departure of caravans over the Himalayas towards Peking via Tibet. It had 120,000 inhabitants, mostly Muslims, but ruled by a Hindu Sikh and had been the centre of troubled times over many centuries.

We arrived along a tree-lined avenue and our first impression was that the recorded tumultuous history did not seem to have affected the beauty of the valley or the commercial friendliness of the people with its multitude of artisans. We were to discover its agricultural richness, the magnificent gardens, the flowering lakes and the thriving small industries around each of the seven bridges.

We were intent on occupying our few days stay by being able to appreciate as much as possible of Srinagar’s various assets and beauty. We spent one whole day rowing on Lake Dal and witnessed wedding parties on flower-bedecked boats. We toured the Mogul gardens including Shalimar with its floating colourful lotus blossom. The space around the seven bridges was occupied with artisans’ workshops, each workshop being run by a family exercising a trade which had probably been in existence for many centuries. At one of these workshops, dealing with decorative papier maché boxes, we encountered the commercial aptness of the Kashmiris. No

business was discussed while flasks of tea were handed around and pleasantries were bandied about for a good half hour. Then we went through the assembly line starting with a two year old whose job it was to bring the paint brushes to the artist member of the family and then followed the procedure until the final inspection of the finished article carried out by the grandfather. This salesmanship inevitably ended in a purchase, but the time spent was well worth the value of the article. In other workshops we bought Kashmiri woollen shawls and small items of teak hand crafted furniture. I was even measured for a Kashmiri tweed jacket which was delivered twenty four hours later.

One's first visit to a new environment always leaves a lasting impression of either pleasure or distaste. This stay in Kashmir was marvellous with every day living up to expectations. When the time came to leave, it was with great regret. We would never forget either the lasting beauty of the place, or the hospitality of the Kashmiris.

The return to Ranchi was via the same route. I left my companions at Rawalpindi and continued my journey to Delhi where I changed trains for Calcutta. My arrival at Ranchi coincided with the receipt of a signal announcing the posting of the Wing Commander. He was going back to England after serving several years abroad. My first meeting with him after the return from holiday confirmed the news, but it was impossible to tell whether he was pleased or sad. He told me that I was to take over command of the Station temporarily after his departure but, in reality, the appointment lasted throughout my remaining stay in Ranchi. We were all rather saddened by the news of his going. He was a pretty rough diamond, but his knowledge of the Air Force and the various campaigns in which he had played an active and honourable part were well known although he never spoke of them.

Two days after my last meeting with the Wing Commander, I was called to Calcutta to preside over a Court Martial. The defendant was a Sergeant who had been arrested by the Military Police after being reported as being 'Out of Bounds' in a red light district in the city. The case lasted two days. The defence was conducted brilliantly by a young Flight Lieutenant. The prosecution was unable to convince the Court with positive proof and the case was dismissed. The defendant's forage cap was handed back to him and, as he put it on his head, I noticed the silent smile on his face. Previous records were never made available to trials, but I was not surprised to discover after the dismissal that the accused had a long history of similar offences.

The Wing Commander had gone by the time I returned to Ranchi.

Our programme of refurbishment was nearing its end as we approached the Christmas period. It was decided to reactivate interest on the Station by holding a competition for the best decorated Mess and Billet – freedom being given in both ideas and execution. The only way to overcome the unsettled situation of 2,000 airmen now that the war was over was to stimulate a creative diversion in the hours outside the daily routine.

We knew that several protest meetings had taken place throughout the Station at the delays experienced in getting through the release procedures, mostly caused by transport and shipping availability. The morale on the Indian Squadron was good, but we were still wary of the Squadron Adjutant's activities because the Indian National Congress was becoming more vociferous in its fight for self-determination. It was not openly said, but behind our thoughts, the ominous prospect of 'revolution' was uppermost.

The regular mail from the United Kingdom was a solace and my mail was mostly from my mother who kept me posted on the frequent moves of the family. My father, after his long service at sea, extended because of the Second World War, was about to retire. There was also news of Cecil, Pat, Eileen, Charles, Brendan, Cissie and Paddy. All were well, but almost continually on the move.

On taking over from the Wing Commander, my first invitation came from the Indian Squadron who asked me to dine in their Mess. At the bar I was served with a full glass of neat whisky by a Sikh officer who gulped his own full glass down, eyeing me to do the same. But I had been warned of that trap, also the potency of the heavily spiced curried rice dinner which was to follow.



Sqn Ldr Hearn relaxing with Leopard Cub in Calcutta

The Indians never used curry powder – their curries were loaded with burning spices. Once assured that they could not topple their English guest by means of hard drink they became excellent hosts, extremely intelligent and never lacking in topical conversation. At no time were differences with the British discussed except in the performance of our respective cricket teams.

Back on the camp I stepped up my visits to the different messes, particularly at meal times when I made a point of sitting down with the non-commissioned officers and men, eating the same food as them.

For the judging of the best decorated Christmas Billet or Mess, it meant that I had to inspect each one of them and drink to the health of my hosts. What the Indians could not do, the British Contingent certainly did! I was perfectly normal until getting into bed that night. The bottom end of the bed seemed to lift right up and continually hit me on the head. Being impossible to sleep, I spent the night on the verandah outside my room, squatted down with my head between my hands.

Fortunately nobody spotted my night out on the verandah and I survived to face another day.

Release movements out of the Station were now speeding up leaving smaller numbers to deal with the day-to-day routine of the Camp. The lectures in the Education Centre continued; there was more physical training and former peacetime artisans were encouraged to pursue their trades. The Station Church increased its attendance, with regular services for Protestants, Catholics, Non-Conformists and Jews all carried out separately, but under the same roof.

Receiving a call from our Headquarters at Delhi, I flew up there on a bright February morning to attend the pre-arranged interview. Prior to the meeting I had not the faintest idea as to what it was all about, so I was taken by surprise when I was asked whether I was prepared to take over command of the Air Force Station at Chittagong on the north-western coast of East Pakistan (later to be Bangladesh) and close to the Burmese border. I asked for and was granted a few days reflection before making up my mind.

My practical dilemma was that I was due for release from active service in a matter of months, if not weeks. To accept the appointment at Chittagong would mean the indefinite postponement of my return to civil professional life, thus missing available opportunities in the aftermath of the war. On the other hand, I had become so attached to the comradeship in the Air Force during the troubled times of war and, it seemed, more so now in trying to shape the peace. In my locker I had a bunch of letters from the Manor Office in Folkestone which, over the years that I had been away, kept reiterating that my job was still open and that they would be happy to see me back.

Agonising over this problem probably brought back the stomach problem I had had at Amarda Road after arriving there from Bombay. I spent a week in a field hospital where they probed me in a tent and eventually diagnosed 'chronic dyspepsia'. I remember having described my ailment to friends in the Mess as "like having a grapefruit in my stomach". Ever helpful, they replied "Are you sure you haven't a grapefruit in there?"

In addition to this nervousness, my enquiries through an official source revealed that the retiring commander at Chittagong had had a very serious breakdown and had been flown back to Britain on a stretcher. I hesitate to think that these circumstances influenced my decision to turn down the offer of the post at Chittagong. I was rather more worried about the long-term future and the desire not to miss any opportunities in the immediate aftermath of the war.

News travels fast despite the supposed confidential nature of such matters. The Station Magazine 'Two Six' reported two weeks later, "The peripatetic Station Commander and Squadron Leader Administration continue to confound us. Getting the gen that he was posted to Chittagong, we prepared a paragraph for this column to that effect, recording also his enthusiasm and keenness for our welfare on this

Station. Then the gentleman returns to Ranchi, apparently to stay until he is released. Although slightly ruffled from a purely publicatory (?) angle, we are glad to see our Squadron Leader 'A' back."

The 'ruffling' to which the article referred concerned an editorial severely criticising a performance by the Station's Repertory Company of Patrick Hamilton's psychological thriller 'Rope'. Having followed the Company's strenuous efforts to put on a good show and having seen the performance, I tried to defend them in a strongly worded published letter to the Editor.

I had now put myself definitely in the category of those whose days at Ranchi were numbered. Recent weeks had shown that we had avoided trouble (or even uprisings!) on the Station in the aftermath of the peace treaty. The Station Magazine, in successive issues, reported on the various activities which had been put in place – "..... the building programmes continue although no one yet knows the precise purpose of them Builders of both sexes, questioned about their work recently, refused to comment "; "The Education fever which descended upon the Camp some weeks ago has in no way abated, and all are taking courses – either with a view to sitting examinations this month, or with other purposes in mind – are pushing forward with a seriousness and determination which will ensure that their efforts result in something more than the acquisition of a little learning..... New classes are being started, or have been started already and even the first Greek lesson has been received with enthusiasm in a few days time, it is hoped that the reading material for the advanced French classes will have arrived and that the shorthand and Italian classes will be underway"; "Our Church building is being renovated and when it is finished we hope that it will reflect the true spirit of devotional service. Members of all denominations are contributing in time and effort"

My walks around the Station confirmed that those who were awaiting their release and the long hoped for return to their homes had developed a patience which had a tranquillising effect. Even the Indian Squadron with its Commander and Adjutant living together but separately under the same roof was calmer and more self-assured, probably with increasing awareness of the future responsibility which would be thrust upon them.

In time, my movement order eventually arrived. The final die had been cast. With mixed feelings and some misgiving I packed my bags. I did a final tour of the Station, bade farewell to those who were to remain after me, handed over to the new Station Commander and attended my last 'dining in' night. Finally, I said goodbye to my faithful bearer who saw me go with tears in his eyes.

I managed to make a last visit to the town of Ranchi, called in to the Clayton's Hotel Building, passed the Imperial Shoe Factory – 'all boots and shoes made on the premises. Specialty brown, black waterproof field boots'; the Curio Palace; the Hero Cycle stores – 'Let us repair your wireless set'; the Great Eastern Restaurant; the

Himalayan Tea Syndicate, and absorbed the atmosphere of this typical Indian friendly town.

I made the most of the train journey to Bombay, gathering in my last hours in India all the fascination of that vast country, every aspect of life forming an irresistible whole.

John Keay defined my thoughts in the very last paragraph of his book, 'Into India'. He wrote, "The experience of India is punctuated by moments of such intense and arresting beauty that all else, poverty, heat and sickness are forgotten. As the experience crystallises, a hard crust of opinion and theory closes over the variety and fascination of India. Only these scenes and images are left. They grow sharper and brighter. Significantly, one forgets who or where they are. They are just scenes of India and Indians, a place apart and a people all of whom belong there."

My passage on the P&O ship at Bombay was booked. The long journey back to Southampton would give plenty of time to reflect on the other long journey, from the days in the Manor Office in Folkestone through the preparation for flying in England and Canada, the hazardous battle over Europe – six years of adventure surrounded by the memory of those that had fallen and the comradeship of those who had survived.

To be Continued

Branch Winter Lunch

10 December 2012 – 12 :30 for 13 :00

Menu

Aperitif

Pro Secco brut or soft drink

Starter

1. *Half a lobster Belle Vue*

Or

2. *Foie gras served with toasts, gingerbread & onion jam*



Main Course

A. *Venison fillet served with an apple stuffed with cranberries*

Or

B. *Cod fillet in wild mushroom sauce served with chicory & mashed potatoes and winter vegetables*

Dessert

The choice of the Chef

Plus Coffee, and served with 3 glasses of wine and water

Administration

*We need to know if you can attend the lunch AND your choice of menu items as above (e.g. 1A for Lobster followed by Venison) **by 5 December 2012.***

Please let us know, either:

Via the website: <http://rafabelgianbranch.yolasite.com> – [Contact Us](#)

Via email to: rafa.belgianbranch@gmail.com

By Phone to the Secretary: 02.707.7562

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RAFA Belgian Branch

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RAFA is the [Royal Air Forces Association](#): it is a Membership Organisation and Registered Charity whose aim is to provide welfare support to the RAF Family.

[Contact the Belgian Branch here.](#)

Our Work

This site helps you know more about our work and how we can help you. If you commit your life and the lives of your family to serve your country, it is only right that your sacrifice should be protected against poverty or suffering of any kind. Find out more about our [Wings Appeal 2012](#).



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