



THE ROYAL AIR FORCE REGIMENT ASSOCIATION
NORFOLK BRANCH
NEWSLETTER NO.248 June 2022

President: Squadron Leader Paul Bruning (Rtd)

Chairman: + Vacant

Vice Chairman: Mr. Paul Rainbird + Programme Secretary

Secretary: Squadron Leader Peter Lawrence (Rtd)

Treasurer: Mrs. Sue Lawrence



DEAR MEMBER

All paid up members of the Association should now have received their RAF Regiment 80th Anniversary badge. If yours has not arrived please contact Branch Secretary Peter Lawrence on 01603 438802.

If you have any RAF Regiment items or memorabilia, that you think would be of interest to the Heritage Centre at RAF Honington - please call them on 01359 237865. Thank you.

Reminder - There is no August Branch Meeting.

OBITUARY

It is with regret that I inform you of the death of Branch Member Alan Barkes, who died on the 29th May 2022 aged 101 years. Alan lived with his wife Lynne, at Holbeach, Lincolnshire.

Alan's funeral was held on the 14th June 2022 at All Saints Church, Holbeach, attended by family and friends including Branch members. The Branch Standard was paraded by our Standard Bearer Ken Thomas along with the Standard of the Lincolnshire County Royal British Legion.

In memory of Alan's life, donations, if desired, can be made to Patchett Lodge c/o Mrs. L. Barkes, 18 High Street, Holbeach, Spalding, Lincolnshire, PE12 7DY.

Alan joined the RAF in 1940 as a Ground Gunner and in 1942 the RAF Regiment, where after defence duties on the south coast, was posted to Secunderabad, 2846 Squadron and then to Burma and action against the Japanese, including the Battle of Meiktila.

In 1945, Alan volunteered for 2810 Squadron, the first RAF Regiment (Parachute) Squadron. The Squadron was to be parachuted into Malaya, as it was intended to retake Singapore. The Squadron had boarded the plane, when they were told that the A bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and war was over.

Alan was a keen boxer and the South East Asia Middleweight Champion. As war ended

he was offered some fights by a local promoter, but in 1946 he had the choice of fights or demob and home. No contest and he returned to the UK.

Alan was the holder of The Burma Star, 1939 - 45 Star, Defence Medal, 1939-45 Medal and British Forces Campaign Singapore Medal.

Returning to civilian life, Alan worked for Greene King as Manager of their Off Licence in Holbeach.

Alan's interests included supporting Holbeach Football Club, keeping canaries and finches, puzzles and for many years he was a boxing correspondent for the local paper.

It was at a boxing tournament that a reporter asked Alan if he could borrow some writing paper - which Alan gave him. And so began a lifelong friendship with the legendary boxing commentator - Harry Carpenter. Alan knew all the boxers of the day including Dave 'Boy' Green - The Fen Tiger who also became a lifelong friend.

Members will remember the excellent talks by both Alan and Dave to Branch members.

It was on the 8th October 2008 that Alan was reunited with his 2810 colleague and Branch member Norman Hunt, for the first time in 63 years at the Carlton Hotel, Gt. Yarmouth. And five years ago Alan met and became good friends with Nigel Fallow the son of the late Thomas Fallow, who was a 2810 colleague.

Alan and Lynne always enjoyed their visits and meeting up with members at the Carlton Hotel for the Branch Spring Reunions.

Alan had one son Des, by his marriage to his first wife Mabel, who sadly died. Alan later married Lynne. Des married Sandra but sadly Des also died, however there are two grandchildren, four great, great-children and three great, great, great-grandchildren.

Our thoughts are with Lynne, step-daughter Clare, Sandra and all the family at this sad time.

¹ WE WILL REMEMBER HIM.

OPERATIONS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN 1942 - 1945.

(First published in the RAF Mediterranean Review)

The story of the RAF Regiment's part in the Western and Central Mediterranean campaign has never yet been told.

In an earlier article (RAF Mediterranean Review No 4) of the work of the Regiment was recounted and a passing reference made to the fact that the Regiment took part in the operations in Northwest Africa, but to appreciate the part they did play it is necessary to go back to the summer of 1942.

In the planning stage of the Northwest Africa campaign, it was decided that units of the Regiment should be included in the Royal Air Force order of battle to fulfil the role for which they had been formed - the protection of RAF installations on the ground and it may be said, it was hoped by all those most directly concerned that a much more offensive role would be possible. How this hope was fulfilled will be seen.

Thus for the first time units of the Royal Air Force Regiment went overseas from the United Kingdom to take part in active operations in a theatre of war, the privileged squadrons ultimately selected were Nos 2721, 2744, 2711, 2778 and 2825 - all old established squadrons which had their roots in the ground Defence Forces of mid-1940.

These five squadrons were rearmed with up-to-date- weapons- Bren LMG's 2" and 3" mortars, Morris Armoured cars, 2 pdr and 25 pdr guns for anti-tank roles, and given the new designation of 'Field Squadrons'.

Five anti-aircraft flights, Nos 4088-89-90-91-92, each two officers and 60 gunners strong, were formed especially for this expedition, fully mobile units which in addition, were organized and trained to be moved by air and were rearmed with 20mm AA heavy machine-guns on a new mounting designed for air transport.

Landing in Northwest Africa, the honour of being the first units to land in Northwest Africa belongs to Nos 4088 and 4089 Flights which went ashore over the beaches at Ain Taya east of Algiers, on 'D' day 8 November 1942. They were quickly followed on 12 November by the first elements of the squadrons, the armoured car flights of 2721, 2771 and 2788 together with 4090 AA Flight and the Regiment headquarters.

Owing to shipping priorities, the Regiment squadrons had to come out in three echelons, but the first detachments were quickly out to their operational stations, and joined by the later echelons as they arrived.

They did not come without incident, for the transport 'Scythia' with 2788 Squadron's main echelon on board, was torpedoed off Algiers on the night of 22/23 November, but made port safely, the rear echelons of all five squadrons also were on board the transport 'Strathailan' when she was torpedoed and sunk off Oran on 21 December. Two members of the Regiment were subsequently awarded decorations for gallantry on the latter occasion.

Deployment of the Regiment's Units
The deployment of these units of the Regiment to their operational aerodromes was not easy - with only two exceptions, the unit commanders were on active service for the first time - and they had to move distances of up to 600 miles from Algiers over roads the like of which the drivers had never before encountered, yet it is a tribute to their training that they achieved it successfully, and the advanced echelons were quickly on their airfields.

No 2788 Squadron and 4089 Flight were with No 322 (Fighter) Wing at Bone, then and for long the hottest spot, being the nearest airfield and port to the Germans. Day and night almost continuously the AA guns were in action, the AOC of No 242 Group recounted after one visit that the Regiment gunners were literally ankle deep in spent cartridge cases.

It was here that the Regiment suffered its first casualties when in the evening of 21 November the Officer Commanding No 4089 AA Flight and four of his gunners were killed in action. But by this time the Flight had already two machines down and several damaged to its credit.

Nos 2744 and 2825 Squadrons with Nos 4088 and 4091 Flights were on the Souk el Arba-Souk of Khemis group of landing grounds of No 324 (Fighter) Wing, No 2771 Squadron with No 4090 Flight were at Canobert with No 326 (Light Bomber) Wing and No 2721 Squadron with No 4092 Flight were at Setif, the main airfield of No 325 (Night Fighter) Wing.

Main Activity with AA Flights.

The enemy air forces were active and persistent, raiding both forward and rearward airfields by day and night. Thus far, the major share of activity had gone to the anti-aircraft flights, all of which had their guns in action.

The field squadrons had the less exciting roll of airfield patrol, but they were doing the job they had come overseas- to do- ensuring the security of the forward bases of the Royal Air Force.

At this period the enemy showed some enterprise in landing parties, both German and Italian, behind our lines by glider and parachute, but their efforts were entirely directed against our long lines of communication in attempts to blow up railway bridges, etc, and no attack on any RAF installations was made.

Across the Nementcha Mountains
Early in 1943, however, opportunities arose which gave the field squadrons greater activity. In mid-January owing to weather difficulties amongst the mountains of Algeria, it was decided to establish an emergency landing ground for medium bombers some 200 miles south into the desert in the vicinity of Zribet Hamed.

This meant a difficult move over almost non-existent tracks across the Nemencha mountains, but the operation was successfully carried out by No 2771 Squadron.

The Officer Commanding first reconnoitred the route by air, and then the armoured flight of the squadron escorted the convoy with an AA detachment, down to the site. Contact with the enemy was unlikely and in fact did not happen, nevertheless it was an extremely useful piece of work.

Secret Occupation of Cap Serrat

At the end of January the first real opportunity of active operations in close proximity to the enemy presented itself, when it was decided to establish Nos 8009 and 8010 AMES at Cap Serat on the north coast of Tunisia, with the object of operating night fighters of No 325 Wing against the enemy air transport traffic between Sicily and Tunis.

No 2721 Squadron and 4092 Flight, then in reserve at Setif, were selected for this operation and they moved to the rendezvous at Tabarka on 31 January. Then task of

getting the AMES with their heavy technical vehicles into position was an extremely difficult one, the Germans had a virtually complete air superiority in that area.

139 Inf Bde was astride the main road Tabarke-Tunis at Sedjenane, the lighthouse at Cap Serrat was held by a small Royal Naval Commando detachment, and operating in the fifteen miles of mountainous scrub-covered country that lay in between, were some companies of the Corps Franc d'Afrique. The only road to the Cap was the road from Sedienane which, already in a bad state, became impassable.

However, after superhuman efforts by the squadron, particularly the vehicle drivers the two AMES and their technical personnel were installed between 1-6 February.

The operation was not carried out without loss of vehicles and personnel, but 4092 Flight had the satisfaction of shooting down one FW 190 out of the aircraft which frequently attacked them.

Once installed, the policy was to trust to camouflage and track discipline for concealment, with No 2721 Squadron deployed to prevent approach of any inquisitive enemy patrols. The AA gunners were not allowed to fire, much to their chagrin, as many easy targets offered themselves, but it was a wise precaution, as concealment of the real object of the occupation of Cap Serrat was vital.

Constant vigilance was necessary as enemy patrols almost nightly crossed the track Sedjenane-Cap Serrat, chiefly in the valley of the Oued Sedjenane, apart from which the whole area was mountainous and covered with dense scrub.

During the latter stages of moving into Serat heavy rain fell, finally making the track completely impassable, and a new supply route had to be opened. The only other track passable for MT was that from Tamera to Sisi Mechrig and from the latter all supplies had to be sent by pack animals.

Here the squadron transport officer organized a motely collection of camels, mules, ponies and donkeys, with their Arab attendants and guides, which daily made the ten miles march through the scrub, without any defined track, to Cap.

On 25/26 February the situation changed somewhat drastically.

The enemy launched a heavy attack on 139 Inf Bde positions east of Sedjenane. There was also a clash between an enemy battalion and the Corps Franc east of the track Sedjenane-Serrat, and on the 27 February enemy patrols were observed on the coastal high ground three miles east of the Cap.

No 2788 Squadron Covers the Withdrawal.
As 139 Bde was hard pressed, it was decided to bring up 2788 Field Squadron from Tingley airfield (Bone) to keep open the route out via Sidi Mechrig if the enemy could not be held at Sedjenane and it became necessary to withdraw from Cap Serrat, and by first light on 1 March the squadron was deployed east of and covering the southerly half of the track Sidi-Tamera.

On 2 March 139 Inf Bde was forced to withdraw from Sedjenane to Tamers and after consultations with the Brigadier, the OC No 325 Wing ordered the withdrawal from Cap Serrat and the destruction of equipment that could not be moved. This was done and by about midday on 3 March all personnel of the AMESs and the Regiment units reached Sidi Mechrig, bringing such equipment as could be carried over the hills, thence by MT to Tabarka.

No 2788 Field Squadron, having covered this withdrawal, remained in their positions under the command of 193 Inf Bde until 6/7 March, getting their baptism of fire and first experience in close contact with the enemy, but fortunately incurring no casualties.

Need for Battle Experience.

One lesson learned amongst many during this period, was the need of the squadrons for battle experience and after discussions between Commander RAF Regiment Headquarters First Army it was arranged that the squadrons should go into line with the Army units in order to gain this experience. No 2788 Squadron was first and on 22 March took over positions overlooking the Goubellat Plain under 38 Inf Bde, 78 Division, and held them until 1 April when the squadron was withdrawn to take part in another operation.

No 2744 Field Squadron then went into the line under command of 24 Guards Brigade, 1 Division on 3/4 April taking over responsibility for a frontage of some 5,000 yards on the hills commanding the road Medjez el Bab - Oued Zarga, where with 1 Bn Irish Guards, they carried out patrolling and advanced with the Brigade until on 14 April

they had taken over the northern sector of the Medjez el Bab perimeter defences.

Squadrons remain in the Line.

It had been intended to relieve 2744 by 2721 Squadron but at the request of GOC 1 Division 2744 Squadron remained in the line and was joined by 2721 Squadron on the night of 19/20 April, the latter squadron taking over the eastern sector of the Medjez el Bab perimeter astride the main Tunis road and facing Grich el Oued. Nos 4091 and 4092 AA flights also came in with these squadrons and their guns were constantly in action against the many raids by enemy aircraft on Medjez el Bab, several of which they shot down.

In the early hours of the morning of 21 April the Germans attack 1 Division and some tanks penetrated to within a few hundred yards of 2721's position's, particularly on the right flank, where a section of the support flight was in action against a German Mk IV tank and had one man killed and one wounded by machine gun fire from it.

Both squadrons held these positions until early May, they were constantly under shell and mortar fire, as well as bombing, but fortunately casualties were light. They did a great deal of active patrolling, 2744 Squadron in particular doing very valuable work in bringing in pilots and crews of several of our aircraft that had crashed in No Man's Land and also in recovering secret equipment from the aircraft almost under the noses of the Germans.

Also on the night of the 22/23 April a section of 4092 Flight attached to 2721 Squadron captured two prisoners from a German parachute regiment. No 2744 Squadron's armoured cars worked with the Divisional Recce Regiment, thereby experiencing many incidents and actions. They lost one car to a direct hit on one of these occasions, with one of the crew wounded, but he was brought in safely after a gallant action by another member of the crew.

Meanwhile the squadrons further back on the airfields had been kept alert by the parachute dropping of the enemy, and the efforts of 2771 Field Squadron at Canrobert were rewarded on 16 April when they captured an Italian Officer and four men in the Djebel Tarf after two strenuous days' combing of those mountains.
To be continued.

This story is from the 'Khaki Type' the magazine of 2829 Squadron, RAF Regiment, Celle, West Germany and was written in November 1945. (Unfortunately it doesn't specify which country it happened in - the Maas runs through Holland, Belgium and France).

THE STORY OF THE MAAS by Sgt G.D.A. Harmsworth.

The stay on the River Maas, will hold memories for the men of 2829 Squadron for many years to come. Their work, to say the least of it, brought them to fatigue bordering upon utter collapse but they carried on with it. Long and arduous patrols were carried out night after night, some exposed to great dangers, others just routine jobs.

Below, the story of the Mass is set out in full and contains the account of that ill fated patrol on which F/Lt Barlow received wounds which almost proved fatal.

At 18.00 hrs, on 14th December 1944 the first two patrols were briefed for night operations. Both were Recce Patrols and it was the one led by F/O Lockie that very nearly came to grief.

Their task completed, they were making their way back to our lines, when a few hundred yards from our most forward positions the patrol ran into one of the trip flares that had been laid to trap enemy patrols trying to get into our lines. The flare was exploded and immediately the Bren guns manned by the personnel of No 3 Flight opened fire.

So prolonged were their bursts of fire that the tanks manned by the Canadians, who were there in support of us, also opened fire with their heavier calibre machine guns.

There is little doubt that this being the first night in the line, our gunners were a little jumpy and 'light on the trigger'. F/O Lockie and his patrol were forced to go to ground and it is fortunate that no member of his party became a casualty, they certainly had a nerve racking experience with their own troops fire kicking up dust all around them.

The next day saw the first big task assigned to the squadron. A patrol was called for to cross the Oude Maas onto the island in order to ascertain enemy activity and bring back a prisoner.

F/O Wilkie was chosen to lead the patrol and

F/O Hildreth was to command the Support Group to assist them if necessary in crossing and re-crossing the river.

Both parties were briefed at 21.00 hrs, but the whole show had to be cancelled at 02.10 hrs due to the collapse of the boat that was due to take the patrol over the Oude Maas.

At 10.40 hrs, on 16th December, a report was received that four dead and two seriously wounded were out in a forward position. A Recce Patrol was immediately ordered out with a covering section and 3 inch mortar fire was to be given if necessary.

With the mortar crews standing by F/O Wilkie with three other ranks and the Medical Staff left our lines to investigate. They also took with them a Polish mine detector in case it was needed.

F/O Wilkie returned later with two seriously wounded Canadian soldiers of the South Alberta Regiment and they were immediately taken to hospital. Two other Canadians were also reported to be lying dead. These Canadians had been travelling in a Jeep, but the reason for them being out so far beyond our forward positions nobody knows. They had run into an enemy anti tank minefield. The wrecked Jeep and its dead occupants were later collected by their unit.

That night, two further patrols were ordered out. They were to take up positions on the banks of the Oude Maas and to look out for enemy activity from the other side. One of these patrols was the ill fated one led by F/Lt Barlow. With him went Sgt Philips, Cpl Climpson, and LAC Tovey. For his work on this patrol Sgt. Philips was later Mentioned in Despatches.

The patrol set out and when within a few hundred yards of its post, a V1 was heard to be approaching. As the 'horrible' machine drew nearer its noise grew louder until it seemed for all the world as if it was making its celebrated dash to earth.

F/Lt Barlow thinking that the 'doodle bug' would come to earth very near to the patrol and on the other side of the canal along which they were making their way, decided to take a look for himself. To do this he had to clamber up the bank of the canal which was about 10 feet high. He reached the top of this bank and a shot rang out. F/Lt Barlow fell and the remainder of the patrol immediately went to ground, not knowing exactly what had happened.

Sgt Phillip heard F/Lt Barlow calling for someone to come and fetch him. The sergeant knowing that the shot had been fired as soon as the officer had shown himself on the sky-line, did not take the risk of being shot himself

Instead, with the aid of Cpl Climson he succeeded in getting hold of L/Lt Barlow's hands and yanking him back on the safe side of the canal bank. Sgt Phillips examined his wounded officer and found a bullet had penetrated his chest and come out from his back.

Taking over command of the patrol he immediately sent LAC Tovey to contact Cpl Anderson who was on duty at the telephone land line connected to Flight H.Q., and he sent the information back.

While Tovey was away, Sgt Phillips set about tending the wounds of F/Lt Barlow. With the aid of Cpl Climson's field dressing, he plugged both bullet holes and then proceeded to take off some of his own clothing in order to keep the wounded man warm. It must be remembered that the weather was intensely cold and the patrol had many hours of duty yet to do. By the time he had finished, Sgt Phillips had only his pullover left to keep himself warm.

Some difficulty was experienced in trying to keep Mr Barlow quiet and Sgt Phillips had to resort to threats. The safety of the rest of the patrol was in jeopardy so long as the wounded officer could not be kept quiet.

Eventually help arrived. A half-track ambulance with Cpl Adam, one of our Medical Orderlies, succeeded in getting somewhere near the scene, and F/Lt Barlow was placed on a stretcher. It was a difficult job to carry the stretcher to the ambulance as the bearers had to wade through water, which at some point, was waist deep.

The patrol, now under the command of Sgt Phillips, continued with its task and it was not until 8 hours later that it was relieved.

For his actions Sgt Phillips was Mentioned in Despatches.

DID YOU KNOW

If you are living with just one other person and either of you are suffering with severe Dementia, Alzheimer or similar conditions or are wheelchair disabled

AND

are in receipt of Incapacity Benefits such as Employment Support, Attendance Allowance, Severe Disablement Care Component

Disability, Standard or Enhanced Rate of Daily Living - you may be eligible for a discount on your Council Tax.

For further information contact your local Council.

If you wish to claim Attendance Allowance Call Freephone - 0800 7310122 - for the deaf/hard of hearing ONLY 0800 7310317.

If you travel by train and it is running late or is cancelled, go to the internet on 1371/2007 UK Rail Passenger Rights - to see if you are entitled to compensation.

NEW MEMBERS.

We welcome Mr Reg Proctor from Dronfield, near Sheffield.

Reg served in the RAF Regiment from June 1951 to June 1953 in the rank of SAC. His postings included RAF Watchet, Dumfries and Yatesbury - 37 LAA Squadron (where he was a founder member) and from January 1952 to June 1953 to Abu Sueir, Canal Zone, Egypt.

AND

Mr Gordon Wilcox from Attleborough. Gordon joined the RAF in February 1953 as a Ground Electrician and retired in February 1978 in the rank of Chief Technician.

His postings included RAF stations St Athan, Christmas Island, Shawbury, Seletar (Singapore), North Luffenham, Honington and Laarbruch (Germany).

His best posting was RAF Seletar and most enjoyable job - RAF Luffenham servicing all ground radar equipment in the UK, Gibraltar, Malta and Cyprus.

His sport is rowing and he has rowed in the UK, Singapore and Hong Kong.

We wish Reg and Gordon a long and happy association with Norfolk Branch.

Subscriptions.

Just a few members have yet to renew their subs for 2022/23. Could you please renew by the 16th July 2022. Thank you.

That's all for now folks!. Remember 3rd Tuesday of the month- 12 Noon - Feathers Inn, Wymondham, for Branch Meetings. Coffee, a chat and a good speaker - how's that!

Best wishes,

Colin (01502) 585079.