

THE MEMOIRS OF WILLIAM WALKER

RAF 1939 - 1945

- 1939 posted to RAF Feltwell, Norfolk. No. 3 FTS (some of the group transferred to Methwold)
- Moved to Stradishall still as 3 FTS and later became 214 FMS Squadron.
- Severely injured, taken to Ely Hospital followed by a stay at a convalescent depot in Blackpool
- Briefly rejoined Squadron at Stradishall pending discharge due to injuries.
- Transferred to 1419 Flight at Newmarket racecourse.
- 1419 Flight personnel transferred to Tempsford and became 138 SOE, sister Squadron to 161.
- Feb 1945, Reported to Admiralty in London, assigned tropical kit, inoculations. Joined group forming as an RAF Detachment to Gibraltar which reported directly to the Navy.
- Posted to Gibraltar
- After three months, returned to Liverpool via Scotland aboard SS Banfora.
- Returned to 138 SOE
- Discharged

1939, posted to RAF Feltwell, Norfolk. During this time most tradesmen were training as air gunners in order to receive extra pay per day. The air gunners badge at the time was a winged bullet worn on the sleeve. My friend at the time being an ex Halton boy apprentice was commissioned in the new rank of Engineering officer.

We were issued with Wellingtons, and known as number three FTS. It was then that Methwold airfield opened, and one half of the Squadron move there into tents, whilst the other half flew there daily from Feltwell to do the training , circuits and bumps mainly. The airfield at the time was exactly that, a field. On the right hand side of the opening to the field there was a wood. At certain intervals the trees in this wood were removed to form dispersal points. Trailers were used as flight offices, and at evenings, and weekends. these were occupied by armed guards, and called telephone orderlies. These armed guards consisted of the tradesman servicing the aircraft. There was no such thing as the RAF regiment during those days. They were known as ground gunners, and wore khaki uniforms. At no time during my service did the RAF regiment or the ground gunners perform guard duties on aircraft. These duties were carried out by the tradesman of the aircraft in addition to their own duties.



I Believe this was taken at 3FTS RAF FELTWELL
Note the strange markings on the Wellington.

DOES ANYONE RECOGNIZE ANY OF THESE FELLOWS?

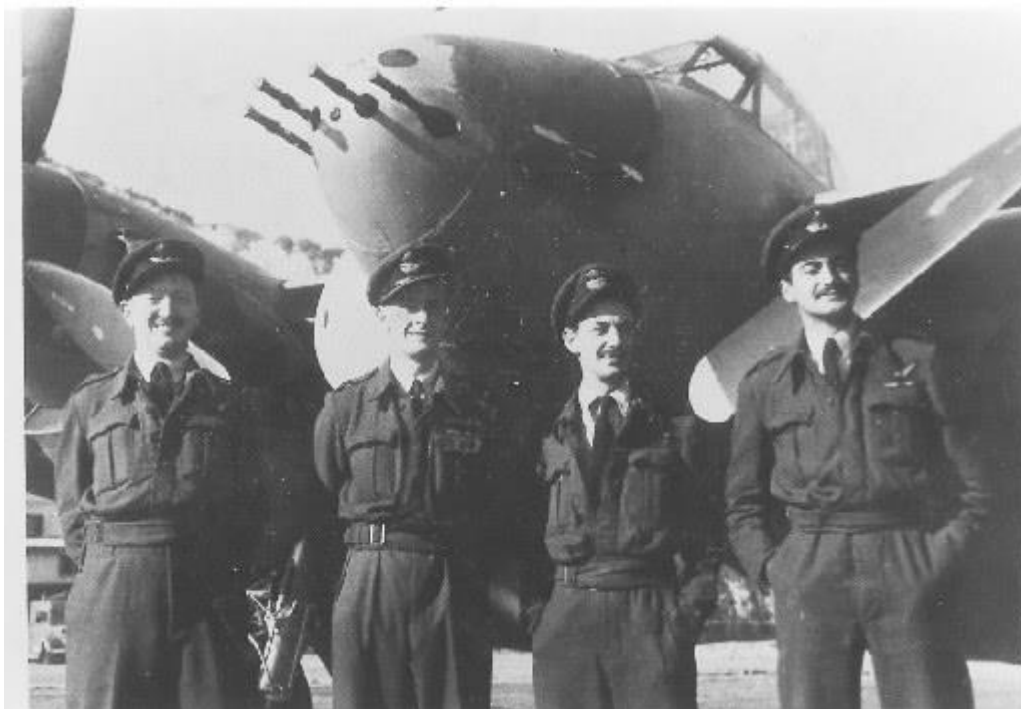
Some of the few names on the back which are barely legible are Hough (or maybe Stough), Len, H Kedington, Hall

During our stay at Methwold, apart from this large hall in the background, there were no buildings of any description there. We moved over to Stradishall still as 3 FTS, and after awhile became 214 FMS Squadron and became operational. I am sure that they were the first Squadron to fly to Berlin.

It was 1941, when a large draft of the personnel received a posting overseas. We were coming from dispersal discussing this posting. When I received severe injuries to my legs etc. I was rushed to the Ely hospital for immediate operations. After a lengthy spell in hospital, I was sent to a convalescent depot at Blackpool. During this period I was receiving letters from my mate's who were on that posting. Half that posting, plus many others from other Squadron's went to America in civies because at that time, America was neutral, and the other half went to Nova Scotia Canada. Of course, it would be my half went to America, and it just made your blood boil when they told me how they were being treated. The Americans were queuing up in their cars to take them to Dempsey's and everywhere else.

I was informed that I was to be discharged from the service due to my injuries, so I asked to go back to my Squadron in order to obtain some sick leave. This was refused however, I kept asking until they agreed to let me go for a brief trial. When I reported back to Stradishall, they had no idea what to do with me and one day the flight commander called me in his office and said "there's something happening over the other side of the airfield, I don't know what it is but would you like to join them, whilst waiting for your discharge." I agreed and as I went over to this outfit a Whitley plane flew low overhead and what I thought was a dummy dropped out and hit the deck with a resounding thump. I was just about to have a look when a jeep pulled up and ordered me back. I thought no more about it, and joined this new unit. It consisted of all the rubbish that bomber Harris didn't want. After awhile, we moved to Newmarket racecourse and became known as 1419

flight. From there, after awhile, we moved to Tempsford and became 138 SOE Squadron engaged in dropping agents and supplies to the resistance forces in France and Yugoslavia etc. We were issued with Halifax bombers and our sister Squadron at Tempsford was 161 Squadron. They were issued with Lysander aircraft, and they landed in enemy occupied territory to pick up the agents we had dropped after their tour of duty. These two Squadron's and Tempsford were the most closely guarded secret of the RAF, and everyone came under the official secrets act. During Moonlight operations all the telephone boxes for miles around were chained and padlocked with an armed guard to prevent anyone from disclosing what was happening. One word to anyone (and you never knew who you were speaking to) and you just vanished. It was ages before anyone not connected with the actual operations knew what was going on, and no one dare ask any questions.



GIBRALTER 1945

Note the Mosquito in the background

This group was an SOE RAF detachment to the Royal Navy on Gibraltar. The mission was to attack the recently launched HMS Barfleur to test her then secret equipment.

Carey Edwards writes : second from left is my father in law Frank Pringle and I think far left is Wayne Eaton

DOES ANYONE RECOGNIZE THE OTHER FELLOWS?

It is reported in books now that restrictions (some will never be released) are eased that even the ground staff were unaware of what was going on. This is absolute nonsense, because almost all tradesmen on 138 flew with the aircraft to places like Algiers to assist in long hauls. Quite a few were killed during these ops. I agree that non-tradesmen, such as cooks, and all those not engaged in the actual drops were kept in the dark. On the Squadron there were hosts of Canadians, and in the later stages we trained the Americans to form their secret squadrons, and they called themselves " Carpetbaggers". Of course, you will realize that by now, all talk my discharge was nonexistent. The drome was disguised as a farm, complete with a large barn where these agents were kitted out. Adolph tried every trick in the book to find us including sending his agents, but he never succeeded.

One day, returning from a 48-hour pass, I was greeted by my mate that I was on the boat (meaning an overseas posting) I didn't take much notice because unknown to them, I was excused overseas duties, and I only had to mention this to get the posting canceled. I called at the office to find out about the posting, only to be told that they knew nothing about where it was or for what purpose. All they knew it was a direct order from the same department we were now operating under, and that I had to report to the Admiralty in London. I was just about to tell them of my condition when I remembered that cushy posting to America, and to this day, I will never know why, but I kept my mouth shut. I then asked when I had to go and he replied "right now." "You should have gone yesterday, but you were on a pass." Have I to report to the M. O.? "No, get your kit and get on that plane to London". I reported to the Admiralty, who refused to divulge any information, and was told to report to the tropical disease hospital for inoculations including yellow Jack. From there, I was told to collect a tropical red uniform, and report back here to meet the rest of the mission. At this stage, I began to wonder what I had let myself in for because yellow fever inoculation, plus tropical red uniform means one thing, and one thing only, the far East. Twice more, we reported to the Admiralty, only to be denied any information about the mission. On the third time, I approached a Wren officer, who was busy playing footsie with a Naval captain. Upon my inquiry, she replied "oh yes, you are part of the RAF detachment for Gibraltar, oh dear, I should not have said that, what am I going to do." With that we were transported to a mansion somewhere in the country, and trained in the art of ditching from an aircraft into a dinghy. (As if we didn't already know).

Later during the early hours of the morning we were transported to an aerodrome, and I swear to this day that it was my own drome at Tempsford. We boarded a Dakota aircraft, along with several red tab General's, and a high-ranking sky pilot. Our first stop was at Istre's Marseilles, where we had to do several circuits, whilst they cleaned the Jerry aircraft off the runways. We had lunch in the German officers mess, refueled, and took off down the Pyrenees. We were challenged, and escorted to Gibraltar by two spitfires. At Gibraltar, we were met by a Naval party, who rushed us over to their side of the rock in the petty officers Billets. We were then interviewed by a Naval captain, who informed us that we were to have no contact with the RAF whatsoever, and that included messing. We were now officially attached to the Royal Navy, and the RNAS, complete with the daily rum ration. He then proceeded to inform us of our task. It appears that a brand-new destroyer by the name of HMS Barfleur was leaving England for the far East, and enroute was to call at Gibraltar for her trials, which were to last six months. Our task was to pick up to mosquito aircraft awaiting us on the runway, and to attack at all hours and from all angles this destroyer, especially sea level, without warning, to test all her then secret equipment.

It would take too long to tell of all our experiences, but we completed the trials in three months instead of six, much to the delight of the Admiralty, and the boffin's aboard. All I will say is that those three months at Gib, with the Navy were the best days of my service. We had the time of our lives. We came back by troop ship SS Banfora to Gourock Scotland, transported to Liverpool, and whilst we stood talking and making arrangements to exchange names and addresses in order to meet again, I was escorted to a train and sent back to my unit, where it transpired that it was all a mistake, and I should not have gone in the first place. But war was approaching the end, and my Squadron 138 ceased special duties and reverted to number three group on bombing missions. Later to repatriating POWs.

From that day on Liverpool Station, nearly 60 years ago, I have never been able to trace one single member of that mission to Gibraltar. Despite writing to every ministry known. Everyone denies any knowledge of it, and I was informed that the logbook of the HMS

Barfleur was destroyed when she was broken up. This of course is untrue and the whole thing is missing from my documents.

However, a while ago I received an e-mail from an ex member of the HMS Barfleur, who was on board at that time, and he has sent me a copy of his paying off book, complete with photos of our Mossies attacking the ship.

Looking back upon my adventures, I think the powers that be got the name of our drome, Gibraltar Farm mixed up with their mission to Gibraltar, plus the fact that the destroyer was going to the far East, Hence our inoculations and the tropical red uniform, with pith helmet. We never even tried the uniform on.

I finally received my discharge with the war pension.

RECOLLECTIONS

There were also two suicides in the gun emplacements. One in particular was a wireless operator, and they were not allowed to do guard duties, but somehow he actually bribed a member of the guard that night to change places. We had been noting for some time that he was acting peculiar, such as kneeling by the bed to say his prayers, and doing things out of the ordinary. At first they could not make out how he had shot himself in the head, and they thought someone else was involved, but what he had done was to remove his boot and sock and press the trigger with his toe. Also they could not at first make out who he was because he had assumed the name of the guard he had changed places with.

We also had the first full military funeral of the war. He was a friend of the C.O. and he ordered a full turn out with gun carriage, full band, the Flight marching with reversed arms. I think he was buried in Haverhill cemetery. To be quite honest i don't think it went down very well with H.Q. If i remember correctly he was a Pilot Officer. We never had another one.

Nicholas Livingstone, researcher, adds:

"The funeral he mentions is possibly that of P/O Boris Romanoff, who was killed on takeoff just before 138 Sqn left for Tempsford.

I have a note of a Sgt Walker, who appears to have flown with P/O 'Bunny' Rymill. I wonder if this is the same man?"

Tim Cattley, cousin of Boris Romanoff and Alfred Cattley adds:

"Just a few thoughts about the footnote to this article by researcher Nicholas Livingstone:- He suggests that the full military funeral that William witnessed at RAF Stradishall with burial at Haverhill could have been that of P/O Boris Romanof. I think it unlikely that Boris was the person in question because William in his memo seems quite certain the person was a Pilot Officer whereas Boris was a S/L having been promoted ex F/Lt on 16 December 1941 and posted to 138 Sqn on 1 March 1942 ex Ringway where he had been on special duties. Boris was killed along with the rest of the crew of Whitley Z 9123 when it stalled on take off from Stradishall on the night of 10 March 1942 ie some ten days only after he had joined 138 Sqn. I believe that Boris' body was returned to his next of kin residing in Ealing and was cremated at Golders Green Crematorium (CWGC states Hendon Crematorium) as had his first cousin F/O Alfred Patrick Cattley 221 Sqn RAF who had been killed on Ops 11 April 1941, Donegal, Ireland. Both sides of this family were close both emotionally and geographically and as Patricks body had been repatriated from the Irish Republic via Londonderry, RAF Limavady (Ulster) and then to RAF Bircham Newton (Norfolk) and finally Ealing, the short trip from Stradishall to Ealing would have been easy by comparison."



The hilarious caption on the back of the photo states: Thats me on the right, "I was just explaining to him that I knew his Grandfather"

Source : All photos kindly provided by William Walker. Note that several documents found around the site are also from William Walker and Nicholas Livingstone and Carey Edwards

Date record last updated : 17 November 2017