

Tiger News No 59

Compiled by Bob Cossey

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Did any of you see the Antiques Roadshow on November 4th or the special Christmas edition on December 23rd?

This plaque, made specially to commemorate the death of 74 Squadron pilot Thomas Brian Kirk during the Battle of Britain in 1940, was featured on the programmes. He was shot down but unfortunately died nine months later of his injuries. His parents commissioned well known artist, Robert Thompson, from Kilburn in North Yorkshire close to the Kirk's home, to make this

plaque in his memory. It is beautifully carved with a small mouse on the top edge, the artist's trade mark. Indeed Thompson was known as 'The Mouseman' and is widely regarded as having been one of this country's finest craftsmen of hand carved, traditional oak furniture. He was a quiet man, who never moved away from the cottage in which he was born but his work was discovered by leading architects of the day who commissioned major pieces for cathedrals, stately homes, and municipal buildings across the UK and overseas. But he was equally at home producing fine, unique pieces like this.

The exciting news for the Association is that we have spoken to Brian Kirk's sister, Marigold Simpson, who hopes very much to be at the 95th Anniversary Reunion. She will bring the plaque and her brother's flying helmet, the one he was wearing when he was shot down, with her. She has lots of memories of her own of that time and of other Tigers who her brother knew - Tony Mould (who we featured in Tiger News 58) and John Freeborn amongst them.

Another Tiger's plaque

Jon Mosen writes:

'The news about the plaque brought back some memories and had me thinking. Just down the road from 74's camp at Horsham St Faith was the 'Firs' public house. Back in 1959 it was a regular watering hole for us lads. So when the news came that the squadron was returning to Coltishall we decided that some form of acknowledgement should be given to the proprietor so that he would not forget us lot, but mainly as a thank you for their good service and understanding. For various reasons I was elected to produce a plaque which I made from wood. On to this was placed a squadron badge with gold writing below thanking the proprietor from us lads, the completed plaque being about 12"x10". This was duly presented during a usual boozy evening. I seem to recall that he was very pleased to receive it - or maybe it was because we were leaving!!

I took a very out of focus picture of the plaque which was pretty useless, but wonder if any other member may remember it or better still know if it still exists? If so please contact me on jonaqua@talktalk.net Thank you.

Membership Matters.

Our Chairman, **Dick Northcote**, has a new e-mail address of dick.northcote@live.co.uk

Richard Mahony of 213,1580-**Everall Street, White Rock, British Columbia, Canada** was a Tiger at Horsham St. Faith from 1955 to 1958. He was an airframe fitter holding the rank of Corporal. Richard's RAF career spanned 13 years in total. Apart from 74 he served with the Bomber Command Acceptance and Modification Unit at RAF Marham on Lancasters, with 3 GMSU at RAF Mildenhall also on Lancs and with 113 Airborne Support Squadron at RAF Fairford (Halifax 1Xs and Horsa and Hotspur Gliders). Of his time with 74 he recalls: 'Brian Rushen, an Armourer Corporal, and I organised an 'escape and evasion' type exercise for ground crew, who with ten shillings each in their pockets were sent off in nine pairs to see how far they could travel within the UK and return to base by 23:59 on the Sunday night. Eight pairs returned on time: the winning pair covered almost 2,000 miles and received a prize donated from squadron funds presented by the Station Commander on a Special Station Parade held in the hangar. He was also sporting enough to present a certificate conferring the Order of The Dirty Stop-Outs to the last ones home. Brian and I also created and published a 74 Squadron magazine which was unfortunately canned following the first issue which by all accounts contained something which offended the sensitivities of an Air Commodore's wife!

In case those of you who served at the same time as Richard are struggling to recall him, his time with the RAF was served under his birth name of **Keith Blackmore** which he later changed for family reasons. Richard's e-mail address is rickmah2@telus.net.

Lionel Owen was also a Tiger during the Meteor era at Horsham St Faith, in his case from October 1952 until October 1953. He was an engine mechanic with the rank of LAC then J/T. He

remembers that soon after arriving the squadron was sent to the coast at Sea Palling to build up the sea defences after the terrible North Sea floods of January 1953. The American Major Hulholland took command of 74 while Lionel was there. He also remembers an accident involving members of the squadron when an Avro Anson crashed on take off at RAF Acklington and all on board were killed. Apart from 74 Lionel was based at RAFs Cardington and Hednesford then RAF Weeton for trade training prior to joining 74, then post 74 he was at RAF St Athan for more trade training with two postings to Rolls Royce at Derby for Avon training prior to the introduction of the Hunter into service.

Lionel's address is **6 Lakeview, Rackheath Park, Norwich, NR13 6LP** and he has an e-mail address of **littlelion81@hotmail.com** and a Tel No of **01603 722130**.

Martin Loveridge has moved to **6 Whatfield Way, Stowmarket, Suffolk, IP14 2RB** and has a new Tel No of **01449 258163**. Martin's e-mail and mobile number remain unchanged.

We welcome new member **James Tait** who was an armourer on 74 from 1957 to 1962. He served 12 years in the RAF altogether, the Tigers at Horsham St. Faith and Coltishall being his last posting. Those who were on the squadron at the same time will remember Jim as producer and editor of the squadron magazine, Tiger Rag, from 1960-62. His address is **7 Hanbury Close, Cheshunt, Waltham Cross, Herts, EN8 9BZ** and he has a Tel No of **01992 637192** and an e-mail address of **jimjtait74@g-mail.com**.

Andy Nailard has a new e-mail address of **nailard@orcon.net.nz**

New member **Bill Killen** was a Tengah Tiger, serving on the squadron as an airframe fitter between 1966 and 1969. Bill's address is **Shieldaig, Kilkerran Road, Campbeltown, Argyll, PA28 6RB**. His Tel No is **01586 554004** and his e-mail address **billkillen46@yahoo.co.uk**

Ken Hazell, who has recently joined the Association, was a Tiger from April 1957 to August 1959, a squadron that he had long admired. 'My first and everlasting feelings for them started in 1951 whilst I was at a school in Norwich very close to RAF Horsham St Faith. Lessons were stopped at times when 74 and 245 Squadrons' Meteors took off but when I was posted there, having left school and joined up, 74 were just changing to Hunter 4s. I had a very happy time on the flight line where I helped with aircraft handling and got to talk with the pilots. But I missed the Cyprus trip in 1958 - I was sent on a fitter's course instead.' After 74, Ken was posted just down the road to Coltishall where he worked on Javelin and Hunter armaments. He served for a total of thirteen years, retiring with the rank of sergeant. His address is **Sunnymead, Water Lane, Ingham, Norfolk, NR12 0XA** and his Tel No is **01692 581376**.

Associate member **Justyn Keeble** has a new e-mail address of **tigerspook@rocketmail.com**



Farewells

Angela Cordell's husband Jim was a Tiger for a short while in 1941. Jim had sadly died by the time that Mike Rigg introduced Angela to us and she was very happy to accept Honorary membership of the Association in 2005 - and apart from 2012 she had been an ever present at Reunions. Sadly I now have to tell you that Angela died on October 21st in a nursing home at Yeovil. Those of us who got to know her found her to be a lovely lady, a real character and very supportive of the Tigers: she was always very pleased to be involved at reunion time. She was quite remarkable in terms of what she did as she reached her senior years - Mike met her when she enrolled to take lessons at a flying school at Exeter where he was instructing. She was 74 at the time! RIP Angela. We will all miss you.



Steve Child has told me that his uncle, **Reg Howard**, died on 11th October. He was 93 and we send our condolences to Steve, who has always been close to Reg, and to Reg's wife Dorothy (who Reg had met during the war when she was serving as a WAAF), his daughter Karen and the rest of his family. Reg joined 74 as an AC1 in 1940 at Rochford and was assigned to Sailor's aircraft. After his time with 74, Reg learned to fly in a Tiger Moth (see the photo) and after the Battle of Britain he was transferred to Rhodesia where he trained to be a navigator with Bomber Command.

Pam Thurlow, wife of Tiger Pat, sadly died on December 27th. Pam had been an ever present at reunions until a couple of years ago when her health prevented her from attending. All our thoughts are with Pat who will miss her so much. His friends in the Association will help him see this very difficult time through. Pam and Pat are seen here at the 2004 reunion.





Colin Hales (seen here with his wife Marion celebrating his 90th birthday) died on 25th September. Colin was the same age as the squadron (94) at the time. He joined the Tigers in January 1940 from the Electrician's School at Henlow and was allocated to B Flight under Flt Lt Paddy Treacy. A Flight was commanded by Sailor Malan. Other pilots on the squadron that Colin remembered included Sammy Hoare, John Mungo Park, Derek Dowding, John Freeborn, H M Stephen, Peter Stevenson, Ernie Mayne, Bill Skinner and the three Poles Szczęsny, Brzezina and Rogowski. He left 74

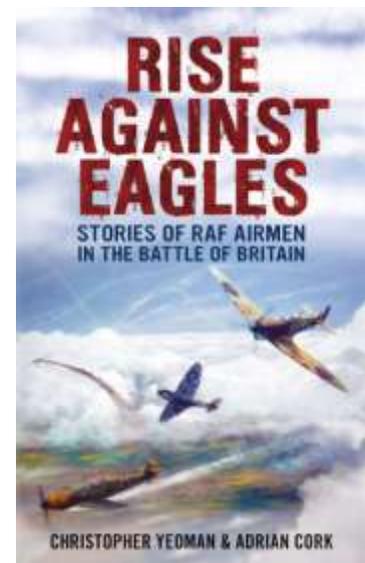
in the Spring of 1941, heading for the Middle East and 70 Squadron and 107 MU. Colin served in the RAF throughout the war having joined in October 1938 and being demobbed in November 1945.

I had several conversations with Colin over the years (he joined the Association in 2000). He would phone me after reading any piece in Tiger News relevant to his era and often adding valuable information to what had been written. He was a fine old gentleman and our thoughts are with his wife Marion and his family.

St Georges Chapel, Biggin Hill

The future of the Biggin Hill Chapel has been thrown into some doubt as the RAF may withdraw its funding. As you will all know, the chapel stands on the site of probably the most famous World War II fighter airfield and honours the names of almost 500 pilots from fourteen countries who flew, fought and died from Biggin during the war. There are plans for the Biggin Hill Battle of Britain Trust to acquire the chapel and the garden of remembrance together with adjacent land and create a new heritage centre. The RAF currently provides the funding for weekly services at the chapel and the associated staff costs, but when the transfer is made it's this level of support which will be re-evaluated and which will maybe put the chapel at risk.

Rise Against Eagles is a new book presenting tributes to an array of airmen from various nations who served in the Royal Air Force during critical battles of the Second World War. Three Tigers are included - Don Cobden, Wally Churches and Henryk Szeznsy - christened Sneezy by his fellow Tigers who couldn't pronounce his name but more generally known as Henry The Pole. Published by Fonthill Media at £18.99 it is slightly cheaper on Amazon. Well worth a look.



Tony Clay's Tigers

We've featured some of Tony Clay's superb models previously in *Tiger News* but we can now show you a full fleet of 74 Squadron aircraft from 1917 through to disbandment in 2000. These are a mix of his own plastic kits and diecasts. Tony has one more kit to complete (a Spitfire V tropical from 74's Middle East service), 'and then', says Tony, 'and only then can I be satisfied!'



Left - World War One and between the wars - Avro 504K, SE5A, Hawker Demon and Gloster Gauntlet.



Right - World War Two. Four marks of Spitfire flown by the Tigers 1939-1945 and a Hurricane, a type they flew briefly in the Middle East.



Above - Gloster Meteor F.3, F.4, F.8 and T.7



Left - Hawker Hunter F.6 and T.7

Right - English Electric Lightning F.1, T.4, F.3 and F.6. The camouflaged F.6 is from the 25th Anniversary airshow at Binbrook when one of the resident aircraft was given Tiger colours - the only camouflaged 74 Squadron Lightning there has been!



Below - McDonnell Douglas Phantoms - two F-4Js and an FGR.2.



Tony Clay joined the Air Cadets at the age of fifteen and after five years became a uniformed member of staff on the same squadron for another ten years. He has always had a high regard and interest in 74 Squadron and was 'absolutely gutted' when his Air Cadet squadron went to Wattisham for its annual camp back in 1992 and he couldn't make it. He started collecting diecast models in 1999 with his first fast jet being the Corgi version of the F-4J(UK). Whilst it is not the most accurate of the F-4 models, it does show off the weird blue/green colour the Americans applied to them prior to

delivery. Tony began plastic modelling again in 2009, mainly doing 'what if' aircraft models. It was while looking at his diecast 74 Squadron collection one night that he made the decision to start filling in the gaps using plastic kits. 'I'm quite proud of the set,' he says, 'and I hope your members enjoy these pictures of them. You never know, some may see their old mounts amongst them?'



Left - Bae Hawk T.1As in both schemes as flown at RAF Valley.

As Tony says, he is also interested in 'what if' modelling. When 74 disbanded on the Lightning at Tengah there were rumours they would become a Jaguar squadron. In which case this (right) might have been a familiar sight at RAF Coltishall - or in Germany.



More news from Wattisham

Progress is being made with the refurbishment and repainting of the Wattisham Station Heritage Hunter (Roger Topp's XG194) and 74's Phantom XT914. Chair Maggie Aggiss tells me 'the photos were taken on the Army 662 Squadron's Families Day (Prince Harry's squadron although he wasn't there as he was busy watching the Olympic Games at the time!) It was such a sight to see the Phantom 'moving' along the runway - you should have seen the look on the faces of the public watching from the crash gates - they did a double take!'



By the way, Maggie was presented in February this year with a Commander's Commendation by Wattisham Station Commander Colonel Neale Moss OBE and local MP David Ruffley. She has been involved with Station Heritage for 20 years and was honoured with the commendation at the reopening of the refurbished and newly fitted out museum in the former station chapel, built by the USAAF in 1943. Amongst the notable achievements during her time as Chair has been the original establishing of the museum in 1992, the creation of a memorial dedicated to those who lost their lives whilst serving at Wattisham, and the acquisition and restoration of the Hunter and Phantom.

1977 & 1988. Record Breakers.

25-minute flight sets new Edinburgh-London record

Flying a Royal Air Force Jaguar on a routine ferry flight, Flight Lieutenant Russ Peart set a new Edinburgh-London air speed record on September 9th, completing the journey in 25 mins 2 secs to average 731 mph and beat the 22-year old record by nearly 3 minutes.

At the time, Flt Lt Peart was a Staff Instructor at 226 OCU, RAF Lossiemouth, and the new record was set when he delivered the Jaguar to RAF Abingdon. Since then Flt Lt Peart has joined No 6 Squadron at RAF Coltishall.

The previous record was set by Sqn Ldr (now Air Cdre) Roger Topp, flying a Hunter of No 111 Squadron.

Photograph shows: Flt Lt Peart leaving the Jaguar after the flight.



I was going through some old aviation magazines a while ago and came across this. Association member Russ Peart was a Tiger in the Lightning days from 1969 -1971 before moving on to Jaguars. As the article says, he beat the previous record for the flight from Edinburgh to London which had been set by Roger Topp (see 'More News from Wattisham') in a 111 Squadron Hunter. Russ says:

"Thirty five years ago I was on the Jaguar OCU and heard about the record set by Roger Topp. I remember reading that the record was held initially by coach and horses (with the horses changed very frequently) and then by a train. After that I believe it was improved on by a bi-plane and then a Hurricane. Finally the record was captured by a Hunter, which I seem to remember was a long pointed nose version which was being operated by Boscombe Down to explore high subsonic Mach numbers.

I planned the attempt, which took a bit of organising because the SATCOs at Turnhouse and Benson had to be approved by the Royal Aero Club as official timekeepers. The BBC time signal was used as the official reference. Also I had to get a competition license from the Royal Aero Club. The opportunity was the occasion of the Battle of Britain weekend at Leuchars. I was

doing the Jaguar displays that year and so had a clean jet available, that is no pylons or stores. Which made quite a difference.

After arriving early at Leuchars for the weekend, I made the run from there, past the tower at Turnhouse at low level and going quite quick! After that a 550 IAS climb to high level.....45,000 feet I think. I 'accidentally' went a bit supersonic in the climb (perhaps I shouldn't admit to that!) and then cruised at M1.2 before throttling back a bit in a very lucky 120 knot tail wind. Descent was at M.96 -ish from near overhead Upper Heyford to low level past Benson tower. I arrived with plenty of fuel, so I suppose I could have gone a bit faster.

The time taken from Turnhouse to Benson (25 minutes 2 seconds) was converted to an average speed and that speed applied to the distance from Waverley Street Station in Edinburgh to Charing Cross in London, the official start and finish points. The actual run had to begin and end within a certain distance of these points and Turnhouse and Benson were OK. The converted time for the record was 26 minutes 25 seconds.

I received a certificate from the FAI in Paris. One of the signatures on it is that of Prince Charles as he was President of the Royal Aero Club at the time. The record appeared in the Guinness Book of Records, but only for one edition. And I received a telex from Roger Topp saying 'what took you so long?' As far as I know the record still stands, probably because no one is stupid enough to go down the middle of UK supersonically!

After the attempt I went back to Leuchars for the weekend to be met by much consternation from members of Treble One as their record had been broken! I remember them discussing the chances of beating it with a Phantom as of course the F-4 was much quicker than a Jag. They discussed options such as supersonic down the North Sea and coasting in over the Wash area etc....."

Which leads us nicely on to 74 Squadron themselves, who hold the record in the other direction, that for London to Edinburgh. As part of the squadron's 70th birthday celebrations in 1988 they decided to have a crack at it. The idea had been conceived by Ian Gale and he set up the logistics of the attempt with all the military radar establishments that were to be involved so that a clear passage could be arranged: and with the FAI who would monitor the attempt (on July 1st) and ratify any claims made. Ian was in F-4J ZE360/0 with Ned Kelly in the back seat.

In the other aircraft (ZE361/I) was our President, Cliff Spink, who was then OC 74 Squadron, with Steve Smyth in the back seat. Once airborne from Wattisham the two Phantoms rendezvoused with a tanker (the F-4s were clean and carried no tanks) and set themselves up abeam London for a subsonic M0.6 subsonic passage to the Wash, then a sustained M1.6 (1,150mph) dash at 40,000 feet up the east coast to a predetermined spot abeam Edinburgh. The record was theirs at 27 minutes and 4 seconds with Cliff a few seconds ahead of Ian across the line.

A legacy of the attempt was the stripping of the paint off the rear fuselage of both aircraft thanks to sustained reheat over the North Sea!

Peter May Remembers

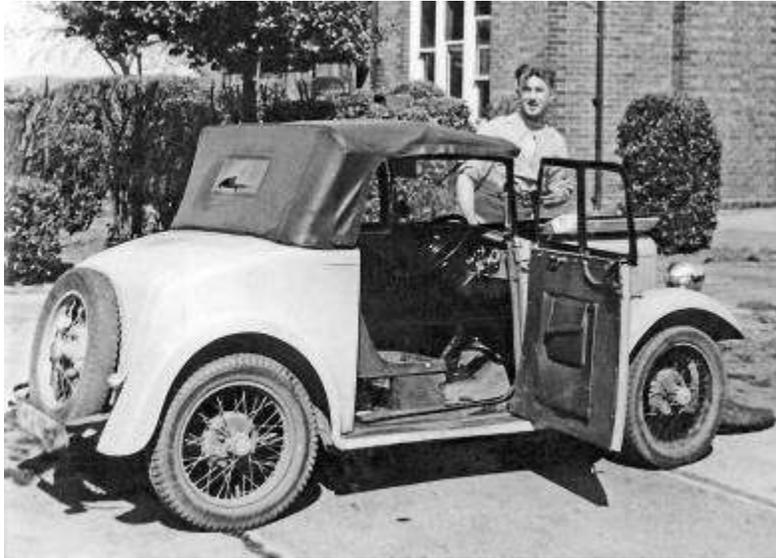
"Dear Bob. Many thanks for Tiger News 58. The article about my friend **Tony Mould (pictured right)** brought back memories and I thought at the age of 93 I must record some of them for posterity whilst I am still able.

The Battle of Britain was fought by the professional regular officers of the RAF assisted by a few members of the University Air Squadrons who flew at weekends. (Those who underwent training as NCOs such as I did were the amateurs). Consequently by the end of 1940 the position was that we had more fighter planes than pilots. It was quicker to build a Spitfire than train a pilot. I was accepted from training as a pilot myself after the outbreak of war in September 1939. In January 1940 a training programme was set up in Cambridge in various universities where we were taught square-bashing, Morse code, navigation etc.



In June 1940 we were sent to 15 Elementary Flying School at Carlisle to be taught to fly Magister monoplanes. In July I was over the Solway Firth at about 2,000 feet when I had engine failure. I turned down wind and did a stall turn over the hangars and managed to land into wind. I was commended on my skill and as a result was one of six pilots out of about fifty on the course to be trained as a fighter pilot. After fifty hours on Magisters and twelve flying Tiger Moths I was posted to No.5 Flying Training School at Sealand flying Master aircraft equipped with 750hp Kestrel engines. In November, flying with another pupil we decided to fly under the Menai Bridge. Then on December 4th 1940 I was posted to No.57 Operational Training Unit at Hawarden flying Spitfire Is after completing 120 hours flying time. Shortly after going solo in a Spitfire I was flying over Liverpool at 5,000 feet when once again I had engine failure. The only area clear of buildings was the River Mersey so I glided towards it. At the last minute I saw Speke aerodrome and using my emergency bottle to lower the undercarriage (Spitfire Is had manual control undercarriages) I managed to land safely.

With 150 hours flying time, I was posted with eight other pilots to front line operational squadrons - four at Biggin Hill with 74 Squadron and four with 92 Squadron at Manston. 74's Malan, Mungo Park, Freeborn and Bartley were all appalled by we Sergeant Pilots' lack of experience. For example, such was the urgent need for pilots we had never fired the eight guns with which the Spits were fitted, nor had we any combat experience. In the Sergeants' Mess I expressed my concerns to Sgt Glendinning who had been with the squadron for some time. I remember he was very proud of his wife and children. Unfortunately he was killed the next day whilst acting as arse end Charlie. Mike Halahan with whom I had flown down to Biggin and who was an Air Marshal's son was killed shortly afterwards. By the end of April 1941 I was in the RAF hospital at Halton myself after crashing at Manston on the 21st. Of the eight pilots posted to 74 and 92, only two of us survived although we did have some good news when another of the eight, Sgt McKee who was shot down over France with 92, walked home via Gibraltar.



At Manston Peter May is pictured with his pride and joy, a 2 seater Austin 7 tourer, outside the sergeants' billet.



Amongst Peter May's colleagues on 74 Squadron in 1941 were (left to right) Sgts Rex Mallet, Jamie Dykes and Clive Hilken



Peter's Spitfire II coded ZP-Y at Manston (below).



I finished my RAF career as Naval Liaison Officer in 1945 with 667 Squadron based at Gosport where I had the unique experience of a naval officer taking me to Bembridge on the Isle of Wight in a Hoverfly helicopter to attend a meeting. This was in exchange for me giving him 1½ hours instruction on a twin-engined Oxford. 667 was equipped with Spitfire XVI's and my last trip was on October 10th 1945. My log book shows I was in the air for 1 hour 35 mins.

After the war I joined the RAFVR (No.27 Reserve Centre) at Exeter Airport on Chipmunks and Oxfords, clocking up another 300 hours to add to my 1,400 in the air. The annual training involved being 2nd Pilot on a York transport, visiting Malta and the Middle East for fourteen days in 1950. In 1951 I was 2nd Pilot on an Anson flying from Croydon to Europe for fourteen days at night, carrying mail.

Sincerely, Peter May."

Missing Person Found!



In the last Tiger News I was unable to complete the caption to this photograph of the gathering of Tigers at Bruntingthorpe in June. Now I can!

The missing name is that of **Don Brown**, a Leuchars Lightning Tiger who went on to fly in Saudi

before starting a second career with Qantas. So, from left to right we now have John Yeo, Ray Jones, Bill Maish, George Black, Roy Phillips, Ed Durham, Ian McBride (behind Ed), Bob Lightfoot, **Don Brown**, Henry Lether, Ken Goodwin, Norman Want and John Crow.

74 Flies Again!



Supermarine Spitfire XVI TE311 made its first flight for 58 years at RAF Coningsby on October 29th. The fighter has been rebuilt by the engineers of the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight, something which has taken 12 years to do.

The significance for us is that TE311 has been painted up in the codes 4D-V to represent the Mk XVI flown by Sqn Ldr Tony Reeves DFC when he was the Tigers' CO from March-May 1945 (his aircraft was actually TB675). At the time 74 was conducting ground attack



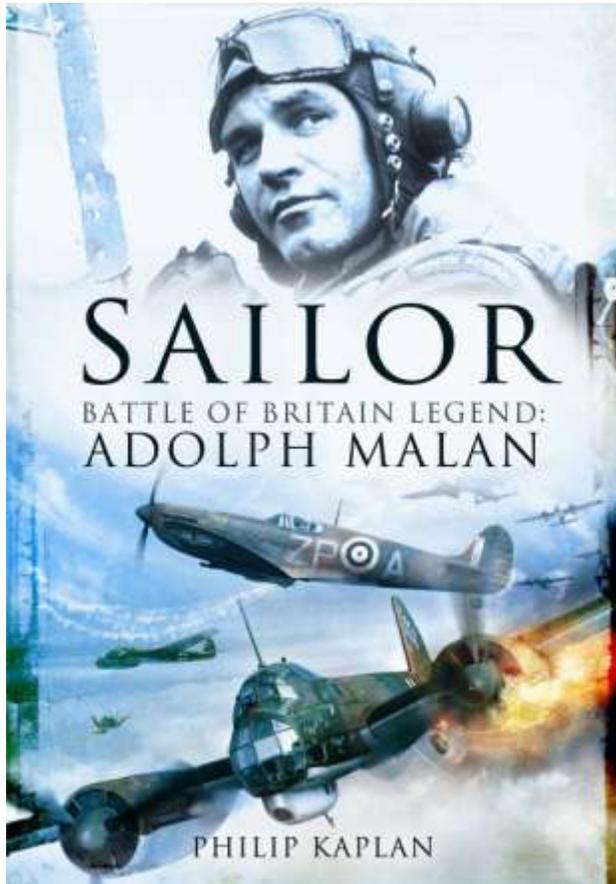
operations during the push towards Germany, initially from Schijndel in the southern Netherlands then moving to Drope close to the Dutch/German border. TE311 didn't itself see war service, being delivered straight from the Castle Bromwich factory to 39 Maintenance Unit at Colerne in June 1945 for storage before being allocated to the Empire Central Flying School Handling

Squadron at Hullavington. It went on to serve with the Ferry Training Unit at Benson in Oxfordshire in 1953 and the Civilian Anti-Aircraft Co-Operation Unit at Langham in Norfolk the following year before being retired from flying duties in December 1954. In August 1955 TE311 became the gate guard at RAF Tangmere, being removed in 1967 for transportation to Henlow where it was restored to taxiing condition. It went to the RAF Exhibition Flight at Bicester in January 1973 and finally arrived at Coningsby in 1999 with restoration starting two years later.

With thanks to **Paul Blackah** of the BBMF for the photographs.

Sailor

Pen and Sword have a new biography of Sailor Malan on the shelves (available direct from Pen and Sword or from Amazon). Promoting the book they say:



"Malan was thirty years of age during the Battle of Britain, old for a fighter pilot, but his maturity gave his leadership a firm authority. The Battle produced many airmen of great skill and accomplishment, high achievers who made their mark in one of history's most memorable and demanding campaigns. But only a few of these men distinguished themselves in such a way as to become legends in their own lifetimes. Among the greatest of these was Sailor Malan.

Here is the story of this talented man, eloquently told by Philip Kaplan who manages to strike a balance between objectivity and reverence in order to commit Malan's story to paper. Featured too are a series of evocative black and white illustrations which supplement the descriptive text and work to create a real sense of the character of the man, flourishing as he did in this dramatic wartime context. As Malan continues to

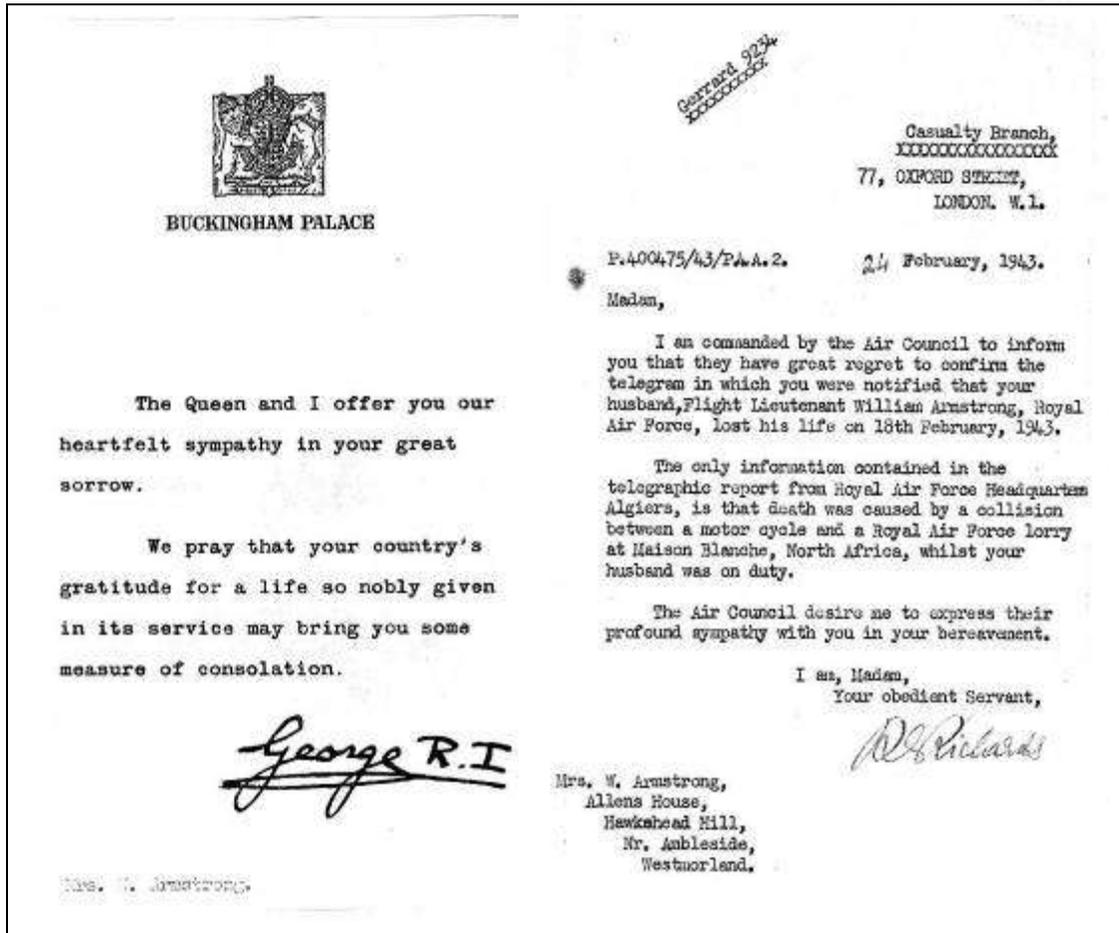
inspire young aviators, this record looks set to preserve his legacy for a new generation of pilots as well as hardy aviation enthusiasts."

'I do not think that Malan could join a squadron without improving it, however good it was. Not by sword-waving, but by a strength of mind and integrity that are at once recognisable and effective...he was the best pilot of the war.' - Air Commodore Al Deere.

Bill Armstrong - conclusion.



In the last couple of issues of Tiger News we have told the story of Tiger Bill Armstrong. As we heard in Tiger News 57, Bill didn't survive the war, being killed in the Middle East on Thursday 18th February 1943 when serving with the Gibraltar Ferry Pilots' Pool. Tragically, after three years of operational flying, he was killed in a road accident while on duty at Maison Blanche in North Africa. He was buried in Dely Ibrahim Cemetery six miles south-west of Algiers.



Two sad letters confirming the death of Bill Armstrong in February 1943

Associate member **Craig Brandon** now brings the story to a conclusion, firstly with an account of the recovery of Bill's Spitfire, P7386, in which he was shot down on 14th November 1940.

On 16th November 1940 the superintendent of the RAF Maintenance Unit at Faygate near Horsham in Sussex, wrote to civilian contractors Nicholls of Brighton instructing them to collect immediately the wreckage of a Spitfire which had crashed 'in a field near Sandwich on the Dover Road.' Nicholls attended the site and by 25th November had recovered the fuselage and wings but were unable to salvage the engine. The Company reported to the MU on 3rd December:

"Confirming my telephone conversation of yesterday re the above crashed aircraft. The fuselage of this machine was cleared on 25th November on which date I reported to Sqn Ldr Goodman that the engine was at least 20 feet in the ground. The gang had excavated to a depth of 14 feet and had not located it. I instructed the gang to leave the job and await further instructions. S/L Goodman instructed me to continue digging operations to excavate the engine. The gang therefore again commenced work on the 27th November and the excavation continued to a depth of 20 feet when the engine was located. At this depth water began to flow into the excavation and a pump was obtained to keep this down while the work proceeded. Unfortunately the subsoil at this depth was so wet that as the excavation proceeded so the engine sank deeper and deeper. This state of affairs was reported to you yesterday December 2nd and I confirm your final instructions to discontinue operations, fill in the excavation and leave tidy. This is accordingly being done."

And so the engine had defeated the best efforts of the 1940 recovery team and seemed destined to remain for ever beneath the Kent soil. But equipment and excavation techniques have improved greatly over seventy years and so in October 2011 Bill Fletcher, son of Bill Armstrong, received a telephone call which he originally thought to be a joke. It was not! The caller was from a TV company who had been searching for relatives of Bill Armstrong as they were going to film an attempt to excavate Bill's long buried Spitfire site and recover its Merlin engine. They would send a car for Bill Fletcher and take him down to Kent to witness the dig if he wanted to. Bill was soon on his way to Kent and watched as the team of crash site archaeologists struggled in the confines of a derelict market garden, their work constricted by old greenhouses and a large chimney. A large digger was used but the space was so small that at times the driver had to be guided as to where he worked. But after a great struggle and near defeat the 2011 team succeeded where their 1940 colleagues had failed and finally wrenched the Merlin from its glutinous coat of mud and lifted it to the surface. It was hosed down and found to be in good condition. Bill was presented with a piece of piping from the engine of his father's aircraft which contained a tap which, after being buried deep in wet earth for seventy years, turned freely. A tribute to the skill and workmanship of the Supermarine men of 1940!

By remarkable good fortune some of Bill Armstrong's letters survived. They were held by his son's sister -in-law and he only found out about them at the dig. So we can now add some of Bill's own words to our story. In the summer of 1939 he wrote to his wife Elizabeth from his new training unit, No 11 Flying Training School in Shropshire:

"We've had some pretty good flying this week. Bags of formation flying. That's wonderful stuff. It's great flying along with a pal about fifteen feet away on either side, talking to each other by radio telephone. One of the junior team had just landed a Hart and was taxiing to the hangars the other day when flames from the exhaust set the mainplanes on fire. The whole wing was ablaze within a second. In about 20 seconds more the whole plane was a blazing furnace. The chap jumped out in time and the fire crew had it out before the fuel tanks blew up. I hear we have lost 37 machines since the war began. That's nowhere near such a high level as we had expected but things are not warmed up yet."

The next letter was written on a visit to RAF Penrhos in North Wales, probably during a training exercise:

"We flew all day Sunday, doing air to ground firing. Boy! It's a comforting feeling hearing the guns roar as you dive low on the tiny target and watch the little black holes appear in it as if by magic. We were supposed to do high-dive bombing today from 6,000 feet but the clouds were too low, so I can't tell you what it feels like to drop a bomb. It would be wonderful if only our objective could be just targets. It rather takes the shine off the whole thing when we think that someday, probably quite soon, our objectives will be *men!* And men who are using us as *their* targets."

The following three letters were written during Bill's time at RAF Benson. The main text describes how on 3rd November 1939 Bill suffered slight injuries in a training misadventure. The day before the incident he had written home:

"They have a couple of Gladiator fighters here for station defence and as there are only five of us who can fly fighters, Neil and I have been chosen, or should I say ordered, to be ready at all times to attack enemy raiders attacking the 'drome. Twice this week we have been called out about ten o'clock at night to spend the night lying near our machines, keeping the engines warmed up by occasional running up and our guns primed. On Tuesday night about 2.30 we were ordered into the air but it turned out to be a false alarm. We were very disappointed indeed - missing out on our sleep and not being able to have a crack at anything. Gosh! We'd have given anything for a scrap that night. "

Training casualties continued to mount as the RAF's need for airmen increased and Bill started to become hardened to his life in the wartime Air Force:

"16th November 1939. Actually there is one piece of news and God! how I hate writing it. Another of my pals was killed last week. He was stationed at a Hurricane squadron at St Athan in Wales and he crashed while night flying. It was Ernie Crompton, a Canadian from Montreal - another great guy gone. It makes me wonder whose turn it is next and how lucky I was. He was killed outright thank heavens. It was a quick death and he couldn't have felt anything. However I guess the best thing for us is to forget it, best for our peace of mind I reckon."

On the first day of the New Year Bill was involved in an incident during a formation flight:

"2nd January 1940. You nearly lost me yesterday. Three of us flying together in Battles were caught in fog and at the same time our radio reception was jiggered by some interference that the wireless operator could not get rid of. So, there we were, three of us flying along in beautiful sunshine above a snowy white layer of our deadly enemy fog, with a chance in a thousand of getting through it unless our wireless was fixed. We got it going just in time to get us back to the aerodrome with ten minutes fuel left. We were in the air for 4½ hours - all through lunchtime too which probably gave me more cause for annoyance than the fog!"

Our final extract was written from Biggin Hill on the day after Bill was shot down.

"15th November 1940. Did you listen to the news this morning? We were the Spitfire squadron that destroyed fifteen Junkers 87s and one ME109 yesterday. It was a marvellous show. I got two of the 87s myself. I expect you heard that two of our fighters were lost but the pilots were

safe.....one of them was little me. [The other was Neil Morrison.] I baled out near Sandwich in Kent. I'm not hurt at all sweetheart so don't worry - all I'm suffering from is a slightly stiff neck, see! It was a marvellous party. We were patrolling between Biggin and Maidstone when we were told that there were 50 bombers and about 70 fighters approaching Dover from the French coast. So off we went. We spotted the bombers - 87s - just below us, but no sign of the fighters, they were above us in the clouds somewhere. We sailed into the Junkers and I took two on - knocked down one and then the other. I was going to follow No 2 down when I found myself in the Dover Ack-Ack barrage so I quickly broke away. While I was chasing No 1 I heard two or three bullets hit my aeroplane but they seemed to have no effect so I chased out to sea after the rest of my Flight. Then all of a sudden there was a terrific kerdoomph! A cannon shell burst in my port wing. I flicked round and down and there were five Me109s screaming out of the clouds after me, so I went down to the deck in a split second and hit out for home at ground level. I thought I could make it when suddenly there was a bang and my engine burst into flames. I climbed up until it conked out altogether and then baled [sic] out. One of the bullets must have lodged somewhere in the engine. Something blew up in the cockpit a second or so after I left it so I reckon I just got out in time. What a picnic! The extraordinary thing is I enjoyed every minute of it. Especially baling out!"



THE MoD has just published a list of items taken from bases in Norfolk. RAF Marham and the home of the Light Dragoons, at Swanton Morley, have both been hit. Thieves got away with thousands of gallons of diesel, along with military kit including electronic jamming equipment, a laser targeting system, night vision goggles and computers. But my eye was caught by two other items on the list - a karaoke machine and a stash of Viagra. Why is the RAF doling out Viagra? Now that the Harrier

fleet has been flogged off, do they feed it into other jet engines to give them extra thrust and help them make a vertical take-off? The official explanation is that the drug helps combat air sickness. So do air sickness tablets, without the other beneficial side-effects. Anyway, that's their story and they're sticking to it. I have visions of late-night karaoke sessions at RAF Marham, with Viagra-crazed air crew chasing WAAFs round the mess. Watch out, here comes Tall End Charlie!

With thanks to Ian Naylor who passed this on to me.