

The Aldwark Chronicle

Newsletter of the Royal Air Forces Association

- York Branch



**ROYAL
AIRFORCES
Association**

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Christmas Draw before the hoards arrived

Club opening hours: Thurs - 7:30pm to 10:30 pm; Sat - 11:30am to 3pm

Our Website is at: www.rafayork.org

Membership: 494

York Branch & Club Official Appointments for 2018/19

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Please address all general enquiries to the Hon Secretary

Editorial

By the time you receive this we will be into yet another New Year. Let us hope it is as good as the last, from the Branch's point of view, naturally, for it would appear the rest of mankind, and this planet on which we all live, could be well on the downward slope to Armageddon! You heard it here first. Or maybe you didn't!

As seen on the cover, and from the article within, we held our Annual Draw on Saturday December 22nd, and it was almost a full house. Let's have more of these, especially so for the AGM on Saturday February 23rd, that is 2019.

As this is an early edition of the April newsletter, so as to fit in with the posting of the Annual Report, it is somewhat lacking in Branch news, which is anyway in that Report.

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YORK BRANCH CHRISTMAS DRAW 2018

The eagerly-awaited Branch Christmas Draw took place at the Club on Saturday 22nd December and was well-attended. The Club lounge and foyer had already been decked out with festive decorations by Dick Gray and over 40 of us enjoyed a very convivial and well-organized Draw. The food was provided by Dick Gray assisted by Patricia Harrington whilst the Draw itself was conducted very efficiently by Gillian McCarthy, ably assisted by Mary Beattie and Kate Woods. There were in excess of 120 prizes to be won, so most people came away with something! After the Draw, we joined together in singing some Christmas songs, led by John Forrester. For some people, including myself, this was probably the highlight of the Christmas festivities and a "must attend" event in our annual social calendar!

Andy Bryne

* *

What did all those aircrew do after the war? Ex Air Gunner, Len Barnett DFM, ex Branch Member (and author of 'The Aircrew Sgts' Mess' story we ran in Chronicle a few years ago, and with whom I used to regularly co-respond) gives us a bit of an insight.

Though it is now some fifty-eight years since I was 'tail-weight' aboard a Halifax, it doesn't feel so long, though I guess I'd now have a bit of a job squeezing between the fuselage and tail wheel housing to get into a rear turret. Even bulked out with flying clothes, a parachute harness and Mae-West, in the old days I had no problem. Used to slip into the turret like a snake between silk sheets. In those days though, I didn't have a forty-three inch waist!

Don't know whether I've mentioned this before David, but VE Day 1945 found me stationed at my old OTU at Moreton-in-Marsh Glos. One of two Asst Gunnery/Leaders assigned to the Fighter Affiliation Flight.

With war in Europe at an end, training had come to a standstill, prospects of further employment training Air Gunners was remote. The other Asst Leader, Fg Off 'Chuck Morris, my room-mate, bossom companion and Snooker partner had, like myself, decided to stay in the service on an extended commission basis for four years. Neither of us looked forward to flying a desk, so looked around for something a little more 'active'. The RAF Regiment at that time was getting fully into its stride, away from its original role of Ground Defence into something more akin to Light Infantry, supported by armoured car units. So after buttonholing the local Regiment 2 I/C in the mess, plying him with strong drink and bending his ear for an hour - the Regiment was expanding, promotion prospects very good - Chuck and I decided to re-muster, become soldiers.

The Regiment's Home Depot was located at Belton Park - on the estate of Lt Gen Lord Brownlow - a couple of miles outside Grantham, Lincs, and was still in the hands of regular Army Officers and instructors. The titular head of the Depot was Group Capt Grey, but the real 'Boss, was Lt Col D'Bouley, Scots Guards, never out of Kilt and Bonnet, never without his leather encased walking cane, and always accompanied by his lion-size Golden Labrador. Rumour had it he had Haggis for breakfast, but as he never ate in the mess we were unable to confirm this.

The Depot was an Officer Training Unit for aspiring Cadets, all of whom it seemed had applied for commissions directly from their various Public Schools. There were lads from Winchester, Rugby, Somerton, and so on, even one boy from the Choir School Of Westminster Abbey; Lloyd John Charles Critchlow, who always referred to his mother as Mummy. There were twenty-five Cadets on course, all sporting a white disc behind their cap badge. Then there were Chuck and I, already Flying Officers, with A/G Brevets and wartime ribbons. It was a funny situation at first, both the cadets and the NCO Instructors addressed us as Sir, but Chief Instructor, Maj Hall, Green Howards, made sure that in every other respect we were treated as Cadets under training. Which was just what we were.

The course lasted three months, and Chuck and I enjoyed it enormously, so too did the majority of Cadets. Sunday was the only day of rest, every other day started with a five mile run and walk, culminating in a little jaunt around the Battle course, this sadistic combination of obstacles the brainchild of Maj Hall himself. We were introduced to, and fired, all kinds of interesting weapons. PIATs, (Personnel, Infantry, Anti-Tank); 2 and 3 inch Mortars; the American bazooka, various types of grenade. We blew up things with Amatol and Gun Cotton, came to be on intimate terms with all kinds of pistols and automatic weapons. We learned map reading and the importance of contours, put our learning to test on day and night cross-country treks. There were exercises in planning, logistics, and communications. Concealment, camouflage, and unarmed combat. The Corporal instructor for the latter took great pleasure in using Chuck and I to demonstrate his prowess in the art.

'Would you just step over here SIR and I'll show you what I mean.'

I enjoyed every minute of the course. In the first couple of months I must have shed about ten pounds, never before felt so fit.

By graduation, with a final parade, and a celebratory dance in the Cadets Mess, the original intake had reduced by seven. Three on medical grounds, the rest for other reasons. At the dance, all the other cadets received their commission as Pilot Officer.

Upon leaving the Depot we'd been given seven days leave, ordered to report afterwards to Wombledon, East Yorkshire - the Regiment's Battle School - for a month of 'fine polishing'. In his final address Col D'Bouley said; 'You've done fairly well gentlemen. Still a few little problems to be ironed out of course, but no doubt the Wombledon laddies will attend to those.'

Then we learned there was a final hoop to jump through before we would be posted off to Squadrons as Flight/Commanders, with a Sergeant, Corporal, and twenty O/R's to do our bidding.

Wombledon. What a dreadful name for a place. Sounds like a fox farting, had been Pilot Officer Lloyd John Charles Critchlow's comment.

Seven days later I took the train up to York, where I'd arranged to meet Chuck. After a couple of beers, we entrained for Thirsk, arriving in the dark of a cold - teeming with rain - evening, and not a Thirskite in sight. Not far from the station, on what I guess was High Street, we found and took refuge in the Royal Oak Hotel. A dismal sort of place - at least on that occasion - with a dismal looking landlord behind the bar, where Chuck and I were the only patrons. After ordering a couple of pints, we not having eaten, enquired as to the chance of a few sandwiches?

'No sandwiches gents', he said. 'Rations yer know'. Got a bit of 'ash left over and a few taters', he offered. So any port in a storm, we had his 'ash and taters' at five bob a head. He must have been saving it for his dog!

It would be about nine-o'clock then. So having determined from 'mine host' that a telephone was available. 'Yer 'ave to pay yer know.' Chuck who always had a pathetic faith in human nature, phoned Wombledon airfield and contacted the Duty Officer.

'DO says there's not much chance of him laying on transport', Chuck told me. 'Says the Commandant, (note the title) is averse to officers requesting transport. 'Not a holiday camp old boy, and all that.'

What's all this 'Commandant' business?' I asked. And Chuck said that maybe the French Foreign Legion were running the bloody camp. Not so. Turned out to be yet another kilted scot. A five-by-five beetle-browed Lt Col McKenzie.

Via the ill grace of the landlord, and another telephone call, we eventually retained the services of a reluctant taxi driver; chap no doubt already qualified for his old age pension. The cab was a goodly pre-war rattletrap that may at one period have been a Vauxhall, because it had flutes down its bonnet. In retrospect though, they may have been some later "modification".

The way from the town up to the moors and the airfield was, via that one-in-six horror, Sutton Bank! And on that pitch black raining night, the ancient taxi, ever on the point of stall, little left to the imagination had we have started to run backwards!

It was close to midnight when we finally arrived on camp, which to all appearances was still under wartime blackout regs. With a flashlight armed corporal of the guard leading the way. We'd been escorted to a couple of oversize Nissen Huts, lights shining from *their* windows like beacons of hope.

Here we found the rest of our course in various stages of undress. To our chagrin, some chaps had arrived at Thirsk earlier in the day, been met by transport. So 'twould seem the 'Holiday Camp' had been in operation at that time. A couple of chaps had ridden there on motorcycles, fuelled no doubt with Black Market petrol coupons. The rest had come up from Pickering by taxi.

While stationed at Pocklington, though I knew most of 4 Group stations by name, I can't ever remember hearing the name Wombleton. Could it have been Canadian 6 Group? Maybe you know David? (*Correct Len.*)

Besides being a Battle School for RAF Regt Officers, there was an Armoured Car Training Unit, and facilities for three inch Mortar crews. Live ammo and daring-do exercises provided for plenty of accidents, despite stringent safety precautions. The two most common accidents were armoured car roll-overs, and chaps stepping on, or otherwise disturbing unexploded munitions on the Moors, which during the war had been artillery training areas.

With the exception of Sundays - Chuck and I arrived on Sunday - the rest of the week Wombleton was like a wasp nest disturbed, every day starting in the wee-small-hours, often as early as 04:00hrs.

Our course was based upon practical application - under trying, contrived, and natural circumstances - of what we'd learned at Depot. Our assigned training area, the vast expanse of Wombleton Moor.

From provided *intelligence*, we were to **assess the situation, consider the ground, determine the required tactics**, then *plan* the operation, identifying all material, weaponry, and communication requirements. And finally. **Carry out the operation**.

Our take-off point for these exercises was Hutton-Le-Hole. Roads were forbidden to us, and to keep us 'honest', were patrolled by instructors in armoured cars.

Some exercises lasted for twelve hours or so, others a full twenty-four, and one - the ever to be remembered, **Operation Retrieval** - a full forty-eight hours, with just half a dozen dry ships' biscuits and our water bottles to sustain us. 'Twould seem the hidden agenda on that occasion was to achieve total exhaustion, for when we finally made it back to the pick-up area, two three-tonners awaited us. But before we could get aboard, they drew away and forced us to stagger on for an extra two miles.

At the end of the course, with those 'little problems' the good Col D'Bouley at Depot had hinted at all 'ironed out', the Commandant, Old Kilty himself, no doubt in a moment of madness, gave us seven days leave, and laid on transport to take us to the railway station.

Two days later I was married in my home town of Burslem, Staffs, and eight days later in Hull, boarding the *Empire Spearhead* for Cuxhaven, Germany. Posted to Delmonhorst, on the Wesser River, as Adjutant of the Squadron based there.

The three years that followed, my postings to other Squadrons - wife, Anne joining me in Germany - and me eventually leaving the service will be material for another occasion. But right now, it's 90°F, on a holiday Monday afternoon (Canada Day) and time for a shower followed by a couple of beers.

SHACKLETON DOWN

(The Sound Of Mull, Argyll)

RAF Ballykelly, Northern Ireland. During the afternoon of 11th December, 1953, Mk 2 Shackleton: WL746 of 240 Squadron, Coastal Command; captained by Flight Lieutenant Fielding Chevallier, took off from R A F Ballykelly in Northern Ireland, assigned to carry out a submarine radar homing exercise in the area of Lough Foyle-Rathlin Island, between Northern Ireland and the West Coast of Scotland. Having completed this sub-ex, it was planned to follow that with a navigation exercise. The crew completed the anti-submarine procedures, making a call to base at 1715 hours.

Variouly described as: '10,000 rivets flying in close formation'; 'a contra rotating Nissen Hut'; 'The Old Growler' or 'The Lovely Old Beast'; the Avro Shackleton, was designed by Roy Chadwick in 1947, to meet Coastal Command requirements during that period called 'The Cold War'. Chadwick had previously designed its' forebears: The Lincoln and The Lancaster.

The first production Mk1 Shackletons were delivered to the RAF at the turn of 1950/51, some going to 120 Squadron at RAF Kinloss, Morayshire, others to 224 Sqn, Gibraltar. Operationally these replaced the much-loved Sunderland, and the cramped for space, Mark3 Lancaster; the latter having been converted for use as General Reconnaissance aircraft. The Shackleton quickly claimed favour with aircrews since they provided head room throughout the working area of the cabin; rest bunks; the essential galley area; and the equally essential Elsan, mounted aft. There was also much more space for the crew to negotiate the main spar without difficulty.

Other squadrons to be equipped with the Shackleton in 1951 were: 220 (re-formed at Kinloss); 269 (re-formed at Gibraltar, then moving to Ballykelly); 240 (re-formed at St Eval, also moving to Ballykelly) and 42 (re-formed at St Eval). Three versions of the Shackleton were produced during the thirty-five years it was in service, many refinements and changes being implemented. The Mk 2 had a lengthened nose and tail cone, and a retractable 'dustbin' housing the radar in the ventral position just aft of the wing. The mid upper turret, housing twin Hispano 20 mm cannons, was removed. This was followed some years later by the Mk 3: tricycle undercarriage; wingtip fuel tanks; clear, wraparound windscreen; better sound proofing. Various other pieces of kit were introduced or altered over time; mostly associated with radar; sonobuoys; navigational aids; electrical generating capacity, plus search and rescue equipment (Lindholme gear).

The aircraft's primary role had always been hunting down and attacking submarines, and so it remained, but many performed part of their Maritime Reconnaissance role by tracing and recording movements of surface ships in various conflicts around the world. Such operations included spotting pirate junks and dhows in the Middle and Far East, and recording movement of ships belonging to powers unfriendly to the West.

No1 School of Maritime Reconnaissance, RAF St Mawgan, Cornwall. In February, 1952, with about two dozen colleagues, I successfully passed out from Air Signaller training at Swanton Morley, Norfolk, with the substantive rank of

Sergeant. We were posted to various Commands of the Royal Air Force, the majority of us going to Coastal, though a few went to Bomber and Transport. For me, this meant a posting to St Mawgan, the initial training school for all Coastal Command aircrew, for twelve weeks basic training prior to being posted to squadrons. The aircraft we flew in training was the Mk3 Lancaster, which was already being replaced by the Shackleton. So a motley gathering of pilots, navigators, air signallers, flight engineers and air gunners were teamed up into crews of ten, and we quickly settled down to this exciting and fascinating period of training.

All pilots and flight engineers were experienced aircrew, many having served during WWII; the remainder were newly trained, a mix of National Service and Regulars. After a few weeks instruction we were soon getting to know each other, and more importantly, the equipment and technical aspects of the Lancaster. Crews were made up of two pilots, flight engineer, two navigators, three air signallers, and two air gunner/radar operators.

Flt Lt Fielding Chevallier, Captain of Shackleton WL746, was a popular member of 240 Squadron. His crew, a tight knit team since coming together in the summer of 1952. I now have no memory of most of this crew, but I do have a clear recollection of the Air Signallers; all three of whom had signed as regulars. Mick Bern was a somewhat diminutive lad from West Yorkshire, who it was rumoured, had been a butcher's boy in civvy street, and at 17, was under age when he joined. It was said that he produced his elder brother's birth certificate and changed his first name. Whether that was a fact I can't say, but to make himself look older he grew a thin, wispy moustache; the result of which was it made him look even younger. Les Allen and Mike Griffin were close buddies and like most of our chums were typical likeable, lively, optimistic young men on the threshold of their careers. All three of these men easily mixed in with the rest of us, both on duty and socialising in the Mess. I think navigator, Horace Brown, came from the Hull area of Yorkshire. I had known him when we shared experiences on the Navigator's initial training course at RAF Digby, Lincs, in the bitterly cold winter of 1950/51. Don't ask what I was doing there, it is a long story. As for the rest, I regret but I cannot recall them.

After the contact at 1715 hrs on 11th December, 1953, no further communication was received from WL746. Later, members of the public in the south-east coastal area of the Isle of Mull reported hearing a low-flying aircraft followed by a loud explosion at about 5.30 pm. An extensive search was carried out, wreckage found in Scallastle Bay, Mull by Royal Navy frigate HMS Volage. All ten crew were missing. About a month later two bodies were recovered from the sea. It was reported that the condition of the wreckage indicated that a most violent impact had occurred but what caused the accident has never been established. Some months later however, more pieces of aircraft were found in the Sound of Mull which led experts to consider that the plane may have first struck the water whilst turning to starboard in a nose down attitude, before finally crashing nearer the shoreline.

A couple of years ago my wife and I, returning from a short holiday in Devon, diverted to visit the National Memorial Arboretum at Alrewas, Staffs. The main memorial at the centre of this vast acreage consists of a couple of

beautifully designed bronze tableaux within very tall carved white stone walls on which are recorded the names of all service personnel who have lost their lives since the end of the WWII. They are listed year by year, in service order. It did not take me long to locate the year 1953, RAF, showing the names of Chevallier's crew. I was at least able to pay my respects in silent meditation, remembering the young men with whom Roy and I had shared many happy times. There – but for the grace of God....

'Rear door closed – Ladder stowed!'

Lest We Forget

Harry Awty

(former Sgt. Air Signaller, 42 Sqdn. Coastal Command)

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From an article by Dave O'Malley, Vintage Wings of Canada.

Deja Vu

In early August, the aviation world was stunned when an employee of Horizon Air, stole a multi-million-dollar Bombardier Dash-8 Q400 aircraft and spent the next hour joyriding and stunting at low level near Seattle, Washington. The story ended with the crash of 29-year old ramp attendant Richard Russell on sparsely-populated Ketron Island. The young man, by all accounts a sweet, respectful guy, opened up to air traffic in his last moments, saying he was "just a broken guy" with "a few screws loose".

While astounding someone could start a large, complex twin, at a busy airport, taxi, take off and fly aeros, it was not the first time.

Donald Palmer Witman Scratch of Maymont, Saskatchewan, was an apprentice pharmacist in Edmonton before he joined the RCAF in the summer of 1940. Inspired by the stories of RAF fighter pilots, Scratch no doubt longed to show his metal in the skies over Europe.

Training was at No1 Initial Training School, Toronto, the start of a long process of assessing recruits, selecting those deemed suitable for aircrew training. Scratch graduated and, impressing his instructors, was selected for pilot training at No2 EFTS, Fort William. After 65 hours dual and solo on the Tiger Moth, he received a positive assessment: "Appears quite conscientious and sensitive. Flying ability a high average. Very keen, right attitude for service life. Should develop into a very good pilot. His conduct has been most satisfactory." Things were looking pretty good for young Donald Scratch.

Successfully completing his EFTS course, he moved to No1 Service Flying Training School, Camp Borden, for advanced instruction. After 88 hours dual and solo on Harvards and Yales, he qualified as a pilot in the RCAF.

Upon graduation in April, 1941, Scratch was promoted Sergeant, assigned to 118 (Fighter) Squadron at RCAF Rockcliffe, Ottawa.

He joined the squadron on May 1, but by June 12, he had left Rockcliffe behind, along with any hope of becoming a fighter pilot. Wg Cdr E A McNab, 118's CO and a Battle of Britain veteran, wrote: "A sound pilot, but not considered fighter pilot material." It's likely Scratch was stung by the back-handed compliment. The first of a string of setbacks that would weaken his confidence and eventually break his spirit.

The day after departing 118 Sqn, Don Scratch found himself in Halifax,

Nova Scotia, with orders to join 119 Squadron, a Bolingbroke unit flying anti-submarine patrols. 119 was fully operational, but also acted as an OTU, bringing pilots up to speed and assessing them. After nearly 6 months he was judged "Below average on twin engine aircraft; believe this pilot's heart is not in bomber reconnaissance work." As it turned out, he was kept on squadron, and despite this negative assessment, promoted to Flight Sergeant. In January, 1942, 119 moved base to Sydney, Cape Breton Island, where, not long after his arrival, Scratch met with disaster.

On March 16th, Scratch and his crew briefed for an anti-submarine patrol. On take-off the starboard engine "missed". Scratch continued the take-off and became airborne, climbing steadily to about 300 feet. He then initiated a climbing turn to starboard. Shortly thereafter, the starboard Mercury sputtered and died altogether, aircraft losing speed and altitude rapidly. Turning in an attempt to get back to the airfield, the aircraft flew over railway tracks, broke a high-power tension wire, skimmed tree tops, stalled, and crashed.

The Bolingbroke suffered Cat A damage, but the real damage was to Scratch and his crew. Air gunner and wireless operator were slightly injured, the navigator - a close squadron friend - was killed, Scratch himself gravely injured. In addition to second degree burns, Scratch suffered bilateral fractures of his ankles. He was hospitalized for six months. Recovery was slow and painful, but the fallout went beyond physical injuries. A later psychiatric assessment stated that during the period of hospitalization "He had repeated nightmares of horrible flying situations, in which things got out of control, but just as he was about to have a serious accident he would awaken. He was usually trembling, perspiring, tense with fright. The situation continued for about a year."

The finding of the investigating board was that failure of the starboard engine was due to faulty spark plugs.

During his recovery, Scratch was promoted to Warrant Officer. The promotion order stated "Excellent type of airman. Fully qualified and worthy of promotion."

Though his recovery was slow and painful, Scratch was commissioned as a Pilot Officer in March 1943, finally reinstated to flying duties in early May. He rejoined his squadron at Mont Joli, Quebec, but after a month was transferred to Gander, Newfoundland, to train on the B-24 Liberator. During this period he was promoted to Flying Officer. However, it was also when his problems with pain and the strength in his ankles began to tell. Flying a heavy bomber like the "Lib" required stamina, beginning to put doubts in the minds of his commanders.

Unlike the Bolingbroke, the four-engined Liberator required two pilots to operate its complex systems, and share the flying of long over-water patrols. Rookie pilots took the role of co-pilot. A pilot with operational experience and proven performance would move to the L/H seat to become Captain. Given egos, nearly all pilots strove for this increased responsibility and control.

Scratch's name appears for the first time in the squadron ORB on Oct 16th, flying circuits with his CO, Wg Cdr Martyn, and later a short cross-country. A month later Scratch flew a few circuits with three other pilots aboard, including Wg Cdr Martyn; assessment of progress. By the end of November, he had yet to fly an operational sortie. Scratch did not seem to get much flying - just 14 flights in the first six weeks, primarily circuits. Was this indication he was having

difficulty, or that commanders were not sure as to his ability?

In the first six months of 1944 Scratch flew as second pilot to a series of captains, and a single flight with Wg Cdr Martyn, who appeared to be evaluating him. On 3 June, 1944, he was paired with Fg Off R F Bedford, and would fly all his remaining operations as co-pilot to this officer. This despite the fact Bedford arrived on squadron after Scratch, and flew as a co-pilot for five months before getting the L/H seat. Being second pilot to one of his peers was another blow to his ego. Scratch probably felt the injuries sustained almost two years previously were keeping him from his captaincy. The "Lib" was physically demanding, requiring considerable arm strength and sustained use of the feet.

No doubt his lack of advancement, despite nearly three years flying on operations weighed heavy.

It is not sure exactly what went through Scratch's mind the first six months of 1944, but in mid-June, he snapped, did something that changed the course of his military career, and his life; he stole a B-24 Liberator.

On Monday, June 19th, the weather at Gander was poor. 10 Sqn stood down and the Officers' Mess would have been busy. At one point Scratch approached Wg Cdr Martyn and asked "how long it would be before he would be considered for a captain's position". Martyn told him his future depended entirely on himself.

Stories abound that in the mess there had been a lively discussion as to whether a Liberator could be started, taxied, flown and landed by one man. The general consensus being No. Whether this discussion took place or not, in the wee hours of the following morning, Fg Off Donald Scratch left his quarters, made his way to the flight line, selected a Liberator, removed the chocks, opened the crew door, climbed inside, made his way to the cockpit and strapped himself into the L/H seat.

In the dark he primed and started all four engines, unlocked the brakes, pushed the throttles forward and moved towards the runway. The Sqn often launched patrols at ungodly hours, engines often being tested, so one Liberator starting up at 0345 may not have immediately aroused suspicion.

Gander was a large airfield. In addition to its anti-submarine ops, it was a refuelling station for aircraft transiting the North Atlantic. Aircraft came and went at all hours, so a Liberator moving off the flight line was not out of the ordinary. Also, the layout meant departing aircraft could simply roll on to the runway then backtrack to the threshold. At 0345 hrs, the tower received a radio call from Scratch requesting a radio check. The Flying Control Officer (FCO) sent "a few check calls" and awaited a reply.

Scratch then radioed for permission to line-up for take off. The FCO directed him to the runway in use and Scratch taxied. The FCO then contacted Operations to inquire as to whether it was a patrol aircraft, was informed they had no knowledge a flight being scheduled. He then radioed the pilot to ask if it was a local flight. Scratch replied in the affirmative, then asked for clearance to the take-off position. He was cleared. Scratch then taxied to line up. He was subsequently given permission to take-off. Scratch commenced his take-off roll and, after travelling a short distance, cut the throttles. The FCO asked if there was a problem and Scratch replied "No", requesting permission to move back to the take-off position. This was granted, but he was asked to hold when there.

The FCO called three times without a response, then asked the pilot to flash his landing lights if he was reading the tower. This Scratch did.

As the FCO noticed the Liberator was commencing take-off, he held a steady red (STOP) signal on the Liberator. The time was 0400.

One can only imagine what was going through Scratch's mind as he brought the Liberator into wind. He had to know his actions would result in immediate arrest. Was he making some sort of statement about his unhappiness? Was he trying to prove he was perfectly capable of flying a Liberator, despite the handicap presented by his ankles, and his commanders' insistence he was not capable? He had to know his entire career would end the moment he touched down, yet sitting there alone, he chose to open the throttles, take his injured feet off the brakes and begin his take-off roll.

10 Sqn Diary for June 20th quotes: "At approximately 04:00 local a weird and wonderful exhibition of low flying was put on by F/O D P Scratch. He took off single-handed, and was airborne for approximately 4 hours."

Scratch climbed steadily into a dim but gradually lightening sky, and one can only imagine his thoughts; even if he turned round and landed right away, the outcome would be a court-martial and dismissal from the service. But he set off on what was to be a four hour display of his flying skills that found both admiration and condemnation.

Scratch not only single-handedly flew the Liberator that couldn't be flown by one man, he flew it aggressively, at extremely low level. At the same time he performed the role of navigator, flying 200 kilometres south to US Naval Air Station Argentia, making low-level beat-ups of that airfield. Following this, Scratch flew back to Gander and continued to fly over the base at extremely low level until the Station Commander finally raised him on the radio and ordered him to land immediately. Scratch finally came to his senses, ending his ill-conceived flight by bringing the Liberator in for a landing and full stop. There were service police on hand along with Wg Cdr Martyn and the Station Commander. Martyn walked to the front of the aircraft, signalling Scratch to roll up the bomb doors. Scratch complied. Martyn climbed, entered through the crew hatch and found Scratch in the L/H seat trying to restart the Auxiliary Power Unit, which had quit for lack of fuel.

Martyn ordered him to the R/H seat. Scratch eventually complied and Martyn taxied back to the flight line, Scratch assisting with shutting down. During the taxi back, Martyn asked why he had carried out such a performance. Scratch replied he was "getting tired, and had been here too long."

Scratch would spend the next 2 1/2 months under arrest. On 14 June he was informed his court-martial was four days hence, and served with a document outlining charges brought against him: Flying a Liberator without authorization; Taking off after being refused permission by the tower - that red light; Flying at low level without authorization. He was convicted on all counts.

On Sept 2nd 1944, a depressed and humiliated former Fg Off Donald Scratch was dismissed from the RCAF. At the bottom of psychiatric report, just above the consultant's signature, is the question: "Is this man fit for duty?" To which the consultant wrote "He is at present fit for all duties."

This may have sealed Scratch's fate, for though cashiered from the RCAF, he was, shortly thereafter, allowed to re-enlist!

Almost unbelievably, on Sept 14th, no more than 12 days after his dismissal in Newfoundland, he was applying for re-enlistment in Montreal! And on Sept 18th, a memorandum on RCAF letter-headed paper, signed on behalf of the Chief of Air Staff, shows Scratch accepted back into the RCAF, stating he had “been examined... is qualified as an Airman Pilot, AC2” It goes on; “in the event of enlistment, applicant is to be remustered, and appointed the rank of Temporary Sergeant (Paid) effective day of enlistment.” By Thursday 21st, he had re-enlisted, was now a sergeant. Next day he reported to the same Manning Depot in Toronto where his career had started four years previously.

One wonders if Scratch had known when he was cashiered that, while the door had been slammed shut, the RCAF had opened a window for his return. Had he been told the RCAF was open to re-enlistments because of a pressing need for pilots?

A few days later, Scratch was at No5 OTU RCAF Station Boundary Bay, Georgia Strait, a training base for B-24 Liberator pilots. But they also had B-25 Mitchell bombers, used for transition by students to nose-wheel operations before moving on to the B-24.

Scratch found himself still in the R/H seat, despite flying operations for a few years. Though he was lucky to still be flying, Scratch was likely frustrated at not having the L/H seat.

One week later, Scratch's world fell completely and fatally apart.

On the evening of Dec 5th 1944, with only six days left of his B-25 conversion course, Scratch went to dinner at the mess, drinking and dining with friends. Scratch was not a heavy drinker, but that night he went on a bender.

Sometime after 03:30, Scratch made his way out to the flight line. While mechanics worked in the hangars, a drunken Donald Scratch, walked down the long line of Mitchells and Liberators, and when far enough away from the maintenance activity, selected a Liberator, and slipped aboard.

At Boundary Bay, Scratch had been on the B-25 course, unlikely to have flown a B-24 since Gander. As previously, he strapped in, primed and started the engines, closed the bomb doors. He opened the throttles and pulled out, swung past the Mitchells and Liberators, and came to grief almost immediately.

As he rounded a corner, now moving at a good clip, he had the option of taking off from Runway 25, or turning 90 degrees to Runway 20. He did neither.

In the dark he simply missed the options. At considerable speed the Liberator rolled off the tarmac, across 200yds of soft ground, and plunged headlong into a drainage ditch, shearing off nose wheel. The Liberator collapsed onto its belly, massive thrashing, propellers striking the ditch. Momentum carried half bomber across the ditch before grinding to a shrieking stop.

Though apparently no one heard Scratch come to grief, the violent drop inside the cockpit must have been explosive and shocking. All four propellers struck the ground, those of engines 1 and 3 so violently the propellers sheared off. Scratch then clambered out of the Liberator and exited.

At some point during his walk back towards the flight line it seemed Scratch decided, in a for a penny, in for a pound, so he selected a B-25D Mitchell.

Dragging away the chocks, he clambered through the crew hatch, pulled it shut, squeezed his way into the cockpit and strapped in. He unlocked the

flying controls and adjusted his seat. He primed both engines and started up. Hurried and drunk as he was, it's doubtful he went through the check lists and litanies, but he would sit there for a while until pressures and temperatures rose. Then, he released the brakes, pushed the throttles forward, and moved off for the second time that night.

Making sure not to repeat his previous mistake, he rounded the turn and set up on Runway 25. After taking off in the dark, Scratch began an extraordinary and horribly dangerous exhibition of low-level flying that terrorized the base and amazed knowledgeable witnesses.

According to his own testimony, Grp Cpt Douglas Bradshaw awoke to the sound of engines at full power. His house was six miles from the airfield, close to the US border. Ten minutes later, he heard an aircraft thundering overhead, so low the windows rattled. Bradshaw was dressed and at the airfield by 06:00, where he recruited a crew and had them take another Mitchell to find and keep contact with the rogue. This aircraft took off at 07:12, would stay in the air until the arrival of fighter aircraft from RCAF Station Patricia Bay, Vancouver Island.

Around 06:30, Scratch turned towards Abbotsford, and was heard beating up that airfield, still in darkness.

After waking up Abbotsford, Scratch returned to Boundary Bay and continued his harassment of the base. As the sky lightened and people were assembling for CO's inspection, the wrecked Liberator was finally spotted. Norman Green, an airman, witness to Scratch's low level beat-ups, gave this description of events: "As usual that morning, 1200 airmen and airwomen, (I among them), formed up on the tarmac in front of the control tower for CO's inspection. Just as the parade was about to be called to attention a B-25 crossed the field at zero altitude, pulled up in a steep climb over the heads of the assembled airmen, just clearing the tower. Within seconds, 1200 men and women were flat on the ground. The Mitchell then made several low passes over the field. Grp Cpt Bradshaw dismissed the parade. Over the next two hours we witnessed an almost unbelievable demonstration of flying, much of it with the B-25's wings vertical to the ground, below roof top level. We were continually diving into ditches to avoid being hit by a wingtip. He flew it straight and level, and vertically, wing tip only six feet above the ground, defying all logic, and the laws of physics."

Scratch continued to fly dangerously as the sky lightened. Two P-40 Kittyhawks were scrambled at 08:35 from Patricia Bay. Red Section leader, Fg Off James McBain climbed on a vector for Boundary Bay with orders to shoot down the Mitchell on sight. On arrival, they were ordered by Bradshaw to find Scratch but not shoot him down unless he made an attempt to cross the border. Instead, McBain was to attempt to herd Scratch to Boundary Bay and convince, or force him, to land. McBain spotted Scratch at 09:00, testified that Scratch was diving towards the ground. Levelling out at 500 feet, Scratch then crossed the Boundary Bay airfield, turned and came back across the aerodrome at just 50 feet. McBain claimed that from that point on, Scratch never climbed above 500 feet.

Scratch continued his extraordinary flying. Some of the time, McBain held echelon position as close as five feet off his left wing and attempted to use hand signals to get him to land, but Scratch failed to acknowledge him. McBain

commented that Scratch's flying was "exceptional, except he skidded in turns" - usually the result of poor footwork on the rudders. Perhaps, after five hours of flying, Scratch's ankle injuries were finally getting to him.

By this time he was surely sober, having flown aggressively for so long. He was likely exhausted, for he'd not slept for more than 24 hours. After this time, he'd also be low on fuel. Throughout, Scratch had the throttles wide open. Both McBain and Bradshaw testified they believed Scratch had been flying in excess of 270 mph (max speed of a Mitchell).

Shortly after 10:00, Sgt D P Scratch climbed through 800 feet, and rolled left. His wings went over vertical and he nosed into a near vertical dive from which he would not recover. McBain saw the Mitchell dive straight into farmland on Tilbury Island. Scratch was killed instantly. He was 25 years old.

Despite Scratch's egregious crimes and failure to live up to the air force code, Air Vice Marshal Francis Vernon Heakes, Air Officer Commanding Western Air Command could not hide his admiration for his flying skills. Today, I doubt very much such a high-ranking officer would add such a comment when speaking to the press: "There are not more than five persons who could have given such a display of flying as put on by Scratch."

* *

EVENTS for RAFA (York) Branch 2018

Dates for 2019 (will be up-dated on a regular basis on website and Club noticeboard)

Please note, it would be appreciated out of courtesy if you intend/would like to attend any of the events listed to inform the chairman so we know numbers to seat/cater for.

Limited lunch menu available most Saturdays

2019

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|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Tues Jan 8 | Turning of the Page, York Minster |
| Sat Feb 23 rd | AGM at the Branch 12:00 |
| Sun 3 March | RAFA Service at All Saints Church |
| Mar 15-17 | N. Area Conference in Blackpool |
| May 10-12 | Annual Conference in Birmingham |

Please note that in relation to all the above Wings/Fund raising events, a list for volunteers will appear on the Branch/Club notice board nearer the event date (as times/confirmation details on some are yet to be ratified).

PS. Please note: 'Themed dining-in dates' may be subject to change/cancellation in order to avoid clashing with other more pressing branch activities/matters.

For the latest events list please check our website - www.rafayork.org