

The Chinthe

Spring 2005

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PRESIDENT'S REPORT

By **Andrew Simkins**

I am writing this Report during the festive season, when there is every likelihood of a white Christmas. It certainly feels cold enough! Writing at this time of year allows me to look back on the past 12 months, as well as to look to the future.

I can report that 2004 has been an excellent year for the Association. We have had a number of successes and we continue to make good progress. Our Auster Fly-In at Netheravon was a tremendous event, which will certainly linger in my memory for a very long time. We were blest with perfect weather and the unstinting support of 7 Regiment AAC. We look to hold a similar event in 2006.

In the last Newsletter I mentioned that we intended to hold our 2005 event at the Museum of Army Flying, Middle Wallop. The main reason for this choice was that the Squadron (656 Squadron Army Air Corps, based at Dishforth, North Yorks) was likely to be either on operations or preparing to deploy. Well, I am delighted to report that the Officer Commanding, Major Andy Cash, has confirmed that they are unlikely to be deployed and that they are happy to host us during the weekend of Saturday 2nd and Sunday 3rd July. I am especially pleased, as this maintains our principle of holding events alternatively in the North and South of England. If the Squadron is given orders to deploy, and is unavailable to look after us, we will switch to our alternative plan of visiting the Museum of Army Flying at Middle Wallop – giving members sufficient notice.

At the AGM in June we discussed several proposals to extend the activities of the Association, and I am delighted that a number of these have come to fruition. I have highlighted four of the items below.

1. The Association formed a Contingent at the Service of Remembrance at the Cenotaph on Sunday 14th November. There is a report of the event elsewhere in the Newsletter. A wonderful day for all of those that participated, and I hope we can build on this in the years ahead. I commend the event to you all; I believe every ex-serviceman, woman and close relative should aim to attend at least once in their lifetime.

2. I briefed the AGM on the National Memorial Arboretum, Alrewas, Staffordshire about my wish to dedicate a tree to the Squadron members. I have since dedicated a tree *to all those who served with 656 Air Observation Post Squadron RAF*.

I will take a photograph when I am next there, and ensure it is put on our website, and also in the next available Newsletter. I will discuss at the next AGM whether we should dedicate a further tree to another element of our impressive history. If you are in the Midlands I recommend a visit to the Arboretum as it is a place of wonderful peace and reflection.

3. We also discussed at the last AGM the idea of holding regional events, arranged at a local, informal level. Well, I was delighted to discover from Jim Stirton, whilst chatting at the Cenotaph, that there is an annual re-union of 1902 Flight. We have included a short article from Jim, and ask if anyone can identify the whereabouts of those who do not attend.

4. We also discussed the idea of including more personal recollections in the Newsletter, and you will see that we have some excellent articles. Please consider contributing. The item need only be one incident or recollection. I have also had discussions with Ted Maslen-Jones who has informed me that The School of Oriental and African Studies (Russell Square, London) has opened a Library called The Burma Campaign Memorial Library. The Library already contains some 1,200 titles covering the Battle for Burma. Most importantly, the Library wants unpublished work and personal diaries. So if you have written your account or was always intending to start, now is the time to add to this vital database. This is also a unique opportunity to formalize the 656 Squadron history. Thus, if you have material, please submit it either to me or Ted, and we will ensure it is passed to the Library and properly annotated.

Your small committee continues to work hard on your behalf. I am delighted that John and Sylvia Heyes have volunteered to take over the production and distribution of the Newsletter, and Mick Smith has volunteered to become Deputy Treasurer. If you have any spare time, and feel that you can help in any way please contact any of the committee members.

Finally, I hope you all approve of the much improved production standard of this Newsletter. We had a few problems with the last Newsletter for which we apologise. John and Sylvia Heyes came to the rescue and have personally masterminded this Newsletter, for which I would like to express our collective thanks. This is real progress and I, for one, will preserve my copies.

Wishing you all a contented 2005, and I look forward to seeing as many of you as possible in Dishforth in early July.

SQUADRON COMMANDER'S REPORT

By Major Andy Cash

We have continued apace since I last wrote my report. We returned to Otterburn Training Area (ranges) to conduct our Conversion to Role (CTR) live firing (30 mm cannon and rockets) towards the end of August. This time we deployed as a Sqn with ground crew, REME and aircrew as well as other Regimental assets. We had a very successful period, despite identifying several issues which need further attention including rocket misfires and launcher husbandry, but nothing could dampen our enthusiasm for live firing. We successfully developed running fire procedures and skills as well as Close in Fire Support (CIFS), which is a method to provide Attack Helicopter power directly in support of and on call from ground forces, including SF, down to the lowest level of an infantry section. This period proved the staggering accuracy of both the rocket and cannon weapon systems.

We then turned our attention, in September, to Composite Air Operations (COMAO) training, which was quite an eye opener for the Squadron as a whole, and especially the planning teams, who had to adjust from our usual 6 to 8 hour planning cycle to a 3 hour cycle! The purpose of the week was for us to operate within the Air environment, and understand their planning process and operating procedures. This would also be the exercise that would result in the award of Limited Combat Ready (LCR) status for the aircrew, a major milestone for the AH programme. The exercise itself proved incredibly valuable. We operated as part of, and in command of, mixed formations of Tornado, Jaguar and Chinook, supporting a ground commander, as well as working with AWAC and Seaking ABCCC. We had to do this in a high Air Defence and Electronic Warfare threat environment, whilst working through jamming, deception and airborne threat simulation provided by other airborne assets. Despite a steep learning curve and a high workload we had great fun, learned a lot and still managed to pull together a seven-ship formation recovery back down the A1 from RAF Leeming to Dishforth.

One week later, the aircrew and the planning staff went to the Combined Arms Tactics Trainer (CATT) at Warminster. The CATT is a warehouse housing state-of-the-art simulators for Challenger II tanks, Warrior fighting vehicles, Scimitar recce vehicles and a number of other miscellaneous simulators. Despite a low resolution generic simulator representing the AH the all arms training was fantastic and allowed us to go back to our roots in the land environment. Planning and fighting alongside virtual armoured recce and other forces and using simulator firepower (AH, artillery and fast air) we were able to very effectively replicate a genuine battle, demanding integration of assets and firepower to destroy the enemy, which definitely had a mind of its own. Success or failure was plain to see. We learned (or is that re-learned?) a huge amount about how to fight in an all arms battle.

Once again we had one week to draw breath before the climax of our year's AH conversion training; 16 Air Assault Bde's Exercise EAGLES EYE. This exercise was designed to prove the AH Initial Operating Capability (IOC) and took in the far extremes of the UK, from Warminster to Dumfries. Starting at Keevil airfield, north of Salisbury Plain, we had an opportunity to run through procedures and rehearsals along with Infantry BGs, Armed Recce, Chinook, Puma, Merlin, Lynx and Gazelle. We managed to develop our CIFS work with both 1 A&SH BG and 2 PARA as well as providing Apaches, daily, for the various Staff College demonstrations on the Plain. Once complete in the South, the entire Bde effort swung way North for several assaults in the West Freugh area. The rest of the exercise was high tempo operations based around two airfields near Carlisle and West Freugh, conducting missions across the north of England. The exercise was due to culminate in a final all arms dawn attack, however, mother nature had other ideas! The night before the attack, the Battle Group was hit by winds up to 60kts, blowing away a number of tents (including one housing our Mission Planning Stations), and damaging several aircraft. Come the morning, the wind was still too high to lift and unfortunately, the final assault never happened. Nonetheless, we had done enough and IOC was declared as having been tested and achieved.

The Squadron as a whole, has worked immensely hard over this period of training, the groundcrew, aircrew and REME personnel have been pushed to the limits almost consistently throughout. Our reward has been for the Sqn to be declared as the AH Initial Operating Capability, a really big 'first' for 656 Sqn and UK Defence. Sadly, now that our formal CTR training is complete, the training team have moved on and we now find ourselves having to play second fiddle to 664 Squadron, who are now back from their conversion and embarking on their CTR. This has given the Squadron a bit of a breather and we have been able to hold a well needed 'knees-up' to celebrate the IOC declaration. The aircrew also managed to get away to the annual Attack Pilots' dinner at Middle Wallop in October.

We are now looking firmly to the future. Already all Squadron personnel are away undertaking individual Maritime training, as well as Forward Air Control and career courses. We have to develop the Combat Ready syllabus and turn it into a training programme to take us forward. Early in the New Year we have another 16 Air Assault Brigade exercise, a significant COMAO exercise in March, a major 16 Air Asslt Bde exercise in May when the whole Regt will deploy to prove the delivery of the first AH BG capability and then we plan to conduct Maritime training on board HMS Ocean in June. Running throughout all of this, is the possibility that we may be called upon to deliver on our declared IOC status. 2005 has all the ingredients for another fascinating and incredibly busy year.

REUNIONS

1902 Flight Annual Re-unions

The re-union was started, I believe, approximately 10 years ago. We only found out about it 4 years ago and have attended them all ever since. They are held at a different location each year. The person who resides nearest to the chosen location organizes and agrees prices with a suitable hotel, and sends the details to all interested parties – both men and their wives attend – and it is thoroughly enjoyed by all. The full cost is covered by each person attending. It is not a full re-union, everyone knows everyone, because it is only for the servicemen who were in service at 1902 Flight, Ipoh in 1957, plus 6 months either side of it.

Those who attend are:

Pat Brighton	RA or REME?
Johnnie Downham	RAF
Ron Gartland	RA
Wilf Knowles	RA or REME?
Charlie Robinson	RA
Donald Donnelly	RAF
Trevor Foxcroft	RA
Les Jones	REME
Mike Mahoney	RA
Pete Robinson	RA or REME?
Derek Richards	RA
Vic Selwood	RAF
Jim Stirton	RAF
Jim Riddler	RAF
Bob Sim	RA

The names of some of those I remember who do not attend are: ‘Jock’ Findlay RA, ‘Jock’ McLean RA, Frank Milne RA, ‘Yorkie’ ? RA, ‘Ginger’ Royal-Cook RA, Tim Rowe-Cook RAF, Harry Hallsworth RA, ‘Jonah’ RAF, Mike Holloway RAF and Bill Baily RAF.

Jim Stirton (ex RAF Ipoh, Jan ‘57 to Dec ‘57)

656 Squadron Association 2005
Reunion
Saturday 2nd & Sunday 3rd July

The Officer Commanding 656 Squadron AAC has kindly agreed to host the Association in 2005. The Squadron is based in Airfield Camp, Dishforth, Boroughbridge, North Yorkshire. Planning is in the early stages, with a number of requests for support awaited. The outline programme is as follows:

Saturday 2nd July.

Members, family and friends arrive in local area. Settle into accommodation.

1900 hours, Association Dinner in WOs' & Sgts' Mess, (Agreement to use Mess tbc).

Sunday 3rd July.

1030 hours AGM in Airfield Camp.

1130 hours AGM ends.

1145 hours visit to Squadron starts. Collective photo. View Apache, ground stands. View visiting aircraft.

1300 – 1400 hours, Buffet Lunch.

1400 – 1500 hours, concluding events.

1500 hours onwards, members depart.

Costs.

The committee is keen to keep the costs to members to a minimum, thus ensuring that as many will be able to attend as possible.

Thus the cost of the Dinner will be no more than £15 per person, and attendance on the Sunday, including Buffet Lunch, will be no more than £10 per person.

If we are able to arrange flights, these will incur an additional cost, which we will aim to subsidise from Association funds.

Attendance Return.

If you wish to attend, could you please complete the enclosed slip and return to the Secretary by Thursday 31st March 2005.

656 Squadron Association at the Cenotaph Ceremony



656 Squadron Association formed a contingent at this year's Cenotaph Ceremony on Sunday 14th November. It proved to be a glorious event which will linger in the memories of those that participated for years to come.

Our President believed that the Association was sufficiently well established to warrant a marching contingent, and the idea was advertised to the members.

The day dawned frosty, with a clear blue sky. Members collected in Horseguard's Parade from 9.30 am. The Parade gradually filled with veterans of varying ages. The many coloured berets were a good indication of Service, Regiment or Corps, while the glistening medals showed the extent and variety of operational service. By 10.00 am our members were assembled, and obligatory photographs were taken. We then marched onto Whitehall through the archway of HQ London District. The pavements were lined with crowds of all ages who clapped and cheered as each contingent passed by. We eventually halted about 100 yards from the Cenotaph, but were able to watch events on a large TV screen. We therefore had a ringside seat of the Service of Remembrance and the laying of the wreaths. Once the Royal Party had departed and the Ambassadors and High Commissioners had laid their wreaths the 10,000 veterans started their march past. We were in the final third of the Columns so had a good opportunity to view the other contingents.

The Normandy Veterans and the Black Watch lead the parade; there were also many civilian and female contingents. It was then our turn to march past the Cenotaph, and our Secretary Maurice Haynes handed over our wreath. We completed the march back at Horseguard's Parade and eventually dispersed amongst the crowds of veterans and their families.



We all concluded that it had been a tremendous experience, and certainly one which every ex-serviceman should participate in at least once in his lifetime. The Association now aims to form a Contingent each year.

While we were conscious of the many cameras, it was only when we all returned home that we realised that we had received excellent coverage by the BBC and the Squadron was given a good mention by David Dimbleby.



MEMBERS CONTRIBUTIONS

Early Days

How 656 Squadron drove across India and stood fast at the Battle of Chota Maungnama

There cannot be many of us left now, the original members of the Squadron, and it occurred to me that some reminiscences of the early days might be interesting.

I joined the Squadron when it was newly formed, early in 1943, at Stapleford Tawney - I was 18-and-a-bit years old, a newly qualified Bombardier (Artillery Clerk) sent to look after the paperwork of the Army personnel of the unit. I was rather astonished to get a posting order to an RAF Squadron, but when I queried it in the Regimental Office I was told 'I dunno - that's what it says, that's where you go!'

It was, of course, a real RAF Squadron with a real aerodrome and real aeroplanes, although they looked to me rather like full-scale versions of the models powered by twisted elastic bands which we, as boys, used to make out of strips of balsa wood and tissue paper - which is not to detract from their air- and battle-worthiness. We were a young outfit - I was the youngest, but there were plenty of bods in their early twenties, with a stiffening of older personnel, some of them Regular servicemen. I remember Corporal Palfreyman in the Orderly Room, Sergeant 'Tug' Wilson in C Flight and Corporal Peers in SHQ - a benevolent (sometimes stern) 'uncle' to us youngsters.

We were about half-and-half Royal Air Force and Royal Artillery and we got on together wonderfully - a bit of banter, naturally, about Brylcreem Boys and Brown Jobs - but we lived together, messed together and went out on the town together. The officers, with the exception of the Adjutant and the Equipment Officer, who were RAF, were all Royal Artillery and young. The whole outfit was informal, cheerful and matey.

Soon after I joined the Squadron was ordered to mobilise

for overseas, and I spent my days in the Orderly Room compiling interminable nominal rolls of who was going and who was being left behind. In due course we entrained for Liverpool and embarked upon RMS *Monarch of Bermuda* (or was it 'Queen' or Empress'? - I can't remember) Anyhow, it was a magnificent vessel, a luxury liner in peacetime and I thoroughly enjoyed the voyage. I seemed to be immune to seasickness and since the rations came up for the number in the mess, sick or not, those of us who stayed on their feet lived very well until the sufferers recovered. The ship's kitchens were geared to catering for passengers who had paid a lot for their journey and the grub was wonderful - they baked beautiful bread daily, we had real butter (strict rationing in Blighty, remember) and eggs for breakfast every day. The sea was quiet, dolphins and flying fish intrigued us and the men of the South Wales Borderers sang to us beautifully on the main deck in the evenings.

This didn't last - at Suez we transshipped into a thing called *Ascaania*. I don't know what she did in peacetime - transported cattle, perhaps - but she was dirty, dark and dismal, the Indian Ocean was unkind and the weather was very, very hot. We sweated and moaned and the sickly became sick again and we were glad to get to Bombay.

We eventually arrived at a place called Juhu, which seemed to be a fairly genteel seaside suburb of Bombay, where we had a pleasant enough time getting ourselves together after the voyage and getting used to the Indian climate. There was a swimming pool, I remember and I have a snapshot of myself and Cpl. Peers on our way there with our towels under our arms. But we were destined for active service with 14th Army and kitted ourselves up on a war footing 'plus' - 'plus' because, there was apparently a shortage of vehicles in 14th Army, although we were issued with large numbers of them, more or less on a scale of one for two men, and told to drive them across India to the Arakan front.

As I look back on it this seems to have been quite a feat. The distance must have been some 2,000 miles of hot, dusty Indian roads. The roads were amply provided with staging areas - after all, they had been designed in the 19th Century for marching regiments - so we drove our couple of hundred miles

I don't remember much of the journey - it was pretty monotonous, of course - or even the name of my co-driver. We drove a Jeep, which was not the most comfortable of vehicles for a long journey.

Two things I do remember. One was the MT Sergeant - I can see his face although I can't recall his name. He rode a motorbike, backwards and forwards over rough roads, covered in dust from head to foot, marshaling the convoy, fetching help for the breakdowns, all day long. If we drove 2,000 miles, heaven knows what distance he must have covered. I thought he was a hero. The other thing was that someone had got hold of an Indian-produced copy of *The Adventures of Fanny Hill* which was passed from vehicle to vehicle for the man who wasn't driving to read, so that some of us proceeded through India briefly in a state of unnatural arousal.

We drove across India to Calcutta and then turned north, where and how we crossed the mighty Bramaputra I can't remember, then turned south for Chittagong and on to Bawli Bazaar, when we were in the 'forward area'. Our arrival there, early in February 1944, coincided with that of the Japanese 55th Division, who were attacking with Chittagong as their immediate objective.

At Bawli Bazaar I seem to remember a bridge over a river and an open space in which a number of vehicles were drawn up. In front was a dirt road stretching ahead blocked by stationary vehicles, some were on fire and one was an ambulance from which men were rescuing casualties. Suddenly, as we came to a halt, there appeared at the far end of the road a Japanese aircraft seemingly at head level, flashes from its gun muzzles flickering along its wings. This was 656 Squadron's baptism of fire and we did what seemed natural - out of the vehicles and down on the ground! I landed in smelly mud, to my subsequent disgust. Whoosh! And the thing was gone, leaving no casualties or damage that I could see. But what I did see as I wallowed in mud was a Redcap standing legs astride holding his revolver in both hands and banging away at the Jap, totally ineffective, of course, but it occurred to me that if every man there had stood up and blazed away with whatever weapon he had the amount of lead in the air would have at least given the Jap something to think about.

I resolved there and then that if I was attacked from the air again that is what I would do, and hope others would follow my example. Unfortunately the RAF, having acquired Spitfires to replace the Hurricanes they had been using, proceeded to shoot the Jap planes out of the sky and I never saw another one all the time I was in Burma, so I never had an opportunity to put this excellent resolution into effect.

The tangle of vehicles sorted itself out and we proceeded on our way to a place called Chota Maignama, which turned out to be our destination. Here Squadron HQ set up camp in a small valley overlooking the foothills of the Mayu Mountain Range. Major Coyle, the CO, explained to me and the other staff of the Orderly Room that a Japanese offensive was in progress and we must prepare to defend our position. He instructed me to take the Orderly Room staff and dig a weapon pit on the forward slope facing the Mayu foothills. This we did and on the reverse slope we dug a shallow pit over which we rigged a tarpaulin, in which we were to sleep. When I reported completion to the CO he congratulated me and said that intelligence was that the Japs were advancing down the foothill slopes facing our position. 'Then they could have been watching us digging in' I said. 'Yes' was his reply 'You will have an opportunity to cover yourself with glory when they come for you'. I hoped he was pulling my leg.

That night we settled down there, having placed one of our number on watch in the weapon pit, to whom I was connected by a piece of string tied to our respective wrists. No sooner had we got our heads down a most tremendous fusillade of rifle fire broke out and the tugs on the string nearly pulled my hand off. With bullets cracking over our heads, we crawled up the slope and tumbled into the weapon pit, one of our number was wearing a stark white boiler suit and as he crawled up in the bright moonlight I remember wishing he was not with us.

The terrific outpouring of small arms ammunition continued, but peering to our front we could see no sign of muzzle flashes or anything else, until it dawned upon me that the bullets were coming from behind us. This was disturbing - were we surrounded? Was everyone else wiped out? Then out of the night appeared the Adjutant 'Are you firing, Bombardier?' he asked.

I replied that we weren't, because we couldn't see anything to fire at. 'Then don't' he responded 'The twerps behind us have panicked and are blazing away at nothing!'

So ended the non Battle of Chota Maungnama, in which 656 Squadron distinguished itself by doing nothing and standing firm while all around them were losing their heads and expending ammunition at an alarming rate.

This revival of memory was prompted by the account by John Rolley of his adventure in Korea when attacked by American Sabres. While we were at Chota Maungnama, Captain Maslen-Jones came into the Squadron Office after a sortie to report that some Indian Air Force fighters had set upon him. Using the same tactics as John Rolley - low speed and tight turns - he had avoided them, but he asked permission to have painted along his fuselage 'DON'T SHOOT, IT'S ME'.

The road past Chota Maungnama led on to Buthidaung, Maungdaw and Razabil, scenes of hard fighting during the Japanese offensive, and to the site of the renowned Admin Box, in which 656 Squadron was involved - but that is another story. I was posted back to the Royal Artillery soon after and spent the rest of my time in the Far East with 26 Ind Div chasing the Japanese out of Arakan, finishing up in 1946 in Sumatra, after the Japanese surrender. There I became due for repatriation and was sent to a Transit Camp in Singapore to wait for the Blighty Boat. There, to my delight I found many of my former comrades from 656 Squadron - having embarked with me, they qualified for repat with me. It was good to see them again and to sail home with them.

Ernest Smith

The following was contributed by Jenny Boys, daughter of Captain Rex Boys.

Foreword: My father volunteered at the beginning of the war. Many years later he wrote his memoirs, not for publication, but for the benefit of his five children, who - as so often happens - until that time knew very little of his early life, and nothing at all about 'his war'.

In those memoirs, he described his training the Observer Corps, continuing after contracting - although relatively mildly - *poliomyelitis*, and managing to fool the medics by hiding the resultant slight leg problem. In due course, he was posted to Burma, and it seemed to me that it is this description of his - sadly rather brief - time and adventures there might be of interest to members of 656, and worth printing in the *Chinthe*. The following is an extract beginning at his arrival in India.

My orders were to get to Calcutta quick, but to get there whole: no fancy business! The Army had rules, of course, for every occasion, and in particular for that sort of road movement: speed, vehicle densities and so on. I tried to remember what we had been taught at Filey, however irrelevant it might be in India, but nothing came back to me. I was left with common sense as my only guide. The distance was about 2,000 kilometers over dirt roads, with no tarmac, as I recall, except near the cities. At least I was in the lead on this occasion, so others got my dust. The main thing obviously was not to lose the way: it would be no joke trying to turn a convoy of twenty or thirty vehicles on those roads! Fortunately they were mostly pretty new, which helped, and many of them were of American manufacture, which helped even more. I had a Dodge command car, tougher than anything I had driven before, superbly sprung and equipped for rough work in bad conditions, four-wheel drive and all. So I and my driver were happy. With hard going, we could have done the distance in two days, but the convoy was perforce slower. We took about a week and arrived without casualties.

I had time to drink in the novelty of the sights and sounds of the Indian countryside. We passed through everything from semi-desert to near-jungle. We saw hundreds of holy but starving cows; hundreds of coolie women with children at the breast, humping baskets of earth to make up the road; all the commonplace sights of India. At that time of the year, January, there was no rain, of course, and we saw much hardship, indeed starvation, for the 1943 famine was at its height. The worst scenes I had already experienced in Calcutta and on the railways: bodies lying about wrapped in rags; pot-bellied children scampering up and down the line whenever the train slowed, screaming 'No Mammy,

‘No Mammy, no Pappy’ and smacking their bellies, but laughing their heads off at the same time. It was impossible to distinguish between those in need and jolly kids exploiting the soft hearts of British soldiers fresh from home. We also saw some beautiful sights on the road, both scenery and the occasional palace. I remember one in particular which, perhaps because of some trick of the light, reminded me of Petra, but I was concentrating too much on my responsibilities to think about the ‘Rose red city half as old as time’

However enjoyable it may seem in retrospect, it was deadly serious then, and I felt my responsibility. I had only to take a wrong turning to have chaos on my hands. Nor of course was it only I who found myself in a novel situation. Almost every man in the convoy was in India for the first time in his life, and the long drive in such circumstances was a wholly new and rather tough experience. So it was vital to maintain morale and let everyone know that I was fully in command of the situation and of any emergency that might arise.

When we stopped for one of our periodic halts in a coconut grove I walked back along the length of the column joking with the men. It was perishing hot, and although we had plenty of water, the idea of some coconut milk was attractive.

‘Shoot us one down, sir!’ some wag shouted pointing aloft.

‘Sure,’ I said, drawing my pistol and aiming up into the tree. Bang! And to my amazement, down came a coconut. Prolonged cheers and we set off again in high spirits.

When we were about half-way, we received a radio signal from Headquarters that equipment in some of our vehicles was urgently needed in Calcutta as the Squadron was about to go into action at Arakan. I therefore took the necessary trucks out of the convoy and led them in my command car, driving more or less day and night. On our last halt on the outskirts of Calcutta, we stopped for breakfast and a shave so that we should not arrive bedraggled and exhausted. Denis Coyle took over the essential vehicles and sent them ahead to Cox’s Bazaar where his headquarters and ‘A’ and ‘C’ Flights were already established on the airfield. I waited for the rest of my column and, when it arrived a few days later, we went straight on board ship at the Hooghly River, finally reaching Cox’s Bazaar at the beginning of February 1944.(see Note 1. below)

Having been out of touch with Squadron Headquarters for so long, I did not know at all what was going on except that my Flight had been detailed to build the first forward airstrip, just over the hills in the Kalapanzin valley and therefore not far from Taung Bazaar. We were in support of the 7th Indian Division whose Headquarters were in the hills above our airstrip, although no operational sorties had yet been

flown. I had no further knowledge of the tactical situation, and there was no one at Squadron Headquarters to brief me. In the absence of Denis, therefore, it seemed to me that the first thing I should do was to see what was happening on 'my' airstrip, and then report to Divisional Headquarters. (see Note 2 below)

It was a long time since I had flown an aircraft and I felt quite light-headed as I set off on what was to become a very long journey. I intended only to inspect the work that was being supervised by Captain McLinden, a reliable officer several years older than I, who had served his time in the ranks as a regular soldier. He was not, I thought, a frightfully good pilot, though he proved his ability later in the capture of Akhyab and other operations, and not the brainiest of men. But he had a heart of gold and was utterly fearless. It was another lovely day and I flew in bush shirt and shorts, expecting to be back in an hour or so to pick up the other threads in our Squadron life. It was no more than fifteen minute flip, and the hills, which ran more or less north and south, were no obstacle, as I already knew from walking across them.

As soon as I cleared the hills I could see the airstrip, but to my surprise none of the activity I expected, particularly no dust from the bulldozer's blades. There was no one to flag me down, which was something I expected on a newly constructed strip, and when I landed I could see no sign of life. Then Mac came running up to me from a clump of trees at the corner of the airstrip where I could see the bulldozer parked and the men from Mac's Section crouching in the grass.

'What the hell's going on?' I began to rage, thinking they had 'stopped for tea'.

He pointed away into the hills and shouted above the noise of the engine: 'The Japs are just over there,' almost behind us, in fact, just where they should not have been. So I taxied to the clump of trees, stopped the engine and got out.

We held a council of war. Someone had warned Mac to stop work because he was now between the front lines, but had given him no orders or any other information. Mac was the ideal man for the circumstances. He had ordered his men, and I suppose the driver of the bulldozer, to take up a defensive position under the trees and load their rifles. He was quite unflappable and would doubtless have sold his life as dearly as he could. Yet he was, I imagine, glad to have his Flight Commander turn up in the nick of time to assume responsibility for a difficult situation.

I had no idea what to do next, as my military training had not covered such circumstances. There is, however, one thing about the Army: you should always be able to find someone to give you orders before you have to act on your own initiative. So I hurried off to Div. H.Q., hidden on the hillside among the trees, to seek out the C.R.A. or some subordinate under

whose command I assumed myself to be. He was nowhere to be found, being no doubt in conference with other senior officers about the day's sudden development, and planning for its consequences. Air O.P. could not have loomed large at that critical moment even if I had been able to find him. But at least he would have given me an order, probably to push off back where I had come from and leave the battle to him. All I could find was a baffled-looking junior officer who told me no-one had any idea what was happening or where the Japs were, and he could not advise me what to do.

So I returned to the airstrip, thinking hard. The only thing clear in my mind was that I must do *something*. Mac's Section might be surrounded by the Japanese at any moment as there apparently were no ground troops between us. The Division was facing south and was not expecting its flank to be turned. It was the same old story, but this time with a difference. 15 Corps, of which 7th Indian was a part, was ready to fight a defensive battle on the spot and had no intention of withdrawing. This was at last made possible by the huge improvement in our air capability, which enabled beleaguered troops to be supplied by air. Thus developed the 'Battle of the Admin Box', the first occasion on which the Japs were fought to a standstill, and in due course driven into their disastrous rout down the length and breadth of Burma.

That, however, lay in the future and did not help me to decide what to do. Since as far as I could tell nobody knew where the Japanese were, it seemed a good idea to find out. I did not, of course, know that all this time Tony's 'V' Force had been feeding information through about Japanese movements and intentions - he told me that part of it later - and that there must already have been a great deal of information, much of it no doubt based on rumour, in Corps and/or Divisional H.Q. It seemed to me that under the conditions of almost total ignorance, as I had been informed, I was probably the best man for the job of finding out where the Japs were because of my previous experience of the Kalapanzin Valley to the east of us. (*see Note 3 below*)

When I told Mac of my decision to make a reconnaissance he asked me to let him go. I did not even think about it. I did not consider that he was suitable and anyway the Kalapanzin was 'my' valley. Apart from that, it was clearly my responsibility and I could see no other way of assessing the risk to which we were exposed. It never occurred to me to be afraid. The alternative would have been for Mac and me to fly back over the mountains taking a man with us in each aircraft. That was unthinkable. And we could not just sit there. 'Time spent on reconnaissance is seldom wasted' was a popular Army catch phrase.

Perhaps it was a wrong decision. It certainly caused a great deal

of trouble for all concerned, though I suppose what happened to me was part of the body of experience that led the Squadron to its subsequent successful operations throughout the campaign. It would certainly have been bad for our reputation and our morale to have turned away from danger.

Anyway, I took off for the river, which was quite close, and flew up and down the banks seeing nothing. For the first time, I realised how little one could observe through dense forest even at low altitude. The whole area could have been teeming with Japs for all I could tell. Then I flew south to Taung Bazaar. There was no longer a Union Jack on Tony's *basha*. At once the Japs came swarming out of the village huts and began to shoot at me. I tried to count. Impossible. There were groups of men everywhere and flashes of small arms fire. Splendid targets, but I had no guns to call on. I saw no signs of vehicles or artillery. I was about to turn back when I realised I had lost control of my aircraft, which went crashing into the ground from about 500 feet. It happened very suddenly: No time to think. (*see Note 4 below*)

I should have been dead except that my guardian angel was watching over me and has continued to do so ever since. Even now as I write these words, aged nearer eighty than seventy, and continue to enjoy good health, I thank him for it. But on that afternoon the odds against my earning an old age pension would have been pretty long.

My guardian angel's main achievement was to put me down in a small clearing in the forest and prevent the aircraft from catching fire as it might well have done. I do not know how long I was unconscious, and the first thing I dimly realised was that I must get out quick. I opened the door and tumbled out bottom first, dragging my broken legs after me, and lay beneath the wing, losing consciousness again.

When I came to, I was aware of shadowy figures creeping around under the trees. These, as Tony Irwin was later to inform me, were Texas Dan and his mates, all set to earn the reward that 'V' Force offered for rescuing pilots who had force-landed. Seventy-five rupees was the official rate, but in the confusion of the Japanese attack, accounting procedures went by the board and Texas Dan was thought to have got away with nearly a thousand. I would not have quibbled. My silver cigarette case was the only thing of value I had with me. I pressed it into his hands, mumbling incoherently. (*see Note 5 below*)

The Japanese must have been close by, and it was touch-and-go whether Texas Dan would get me away before they came. He left me, and for a while I was alone. The teak forest all around, which had looked so fresh and green from the air, was an ugly dusty world of bare tree trunks and big dry leaves. I dozed off into unconsciousness again. When the gang returned, they brought a long bamboo pole on to which I was

hoisted, sitting sideways with my arms round a couple of necks, the others taking the weight on each side. They were small men and as they scurried off across the fields, my dangling legs banged against the paddy *bunds* as we passed, while I clung for dear life to my rescuers' necks. It was rather desperate, and my right leg in particular, which as I visualised it afterwards could have been severed with a sharp knife, was covered with dirt, protruding bone ends and all.

I thought we were going in the wrong direction, towards the Japs on the river and away from the airstrip, and I had some anxious moments. But Texas Dan had organised his team with courage and resourcefulness and if I had ever been able to find him again I would most willingly have paid my debt. I tried several times after the war, and sent money to the local District Commissioner, but Burma was soon overwhelmed by communism and there was no way of making contact.

Texas Dan's planning was exemplary. He had sent some men ahead to secure a sampan and another party down river to a Field Ambulance which happened to be there, to warn them of my approach. The doctor in charge, Major Crawford as I afterwards learned, had been ordered to withdraw in the face of the Japanese advance, but he decided to ignore his orders until I arrived. To him also I owe my life.

I was bundled into the sampan, again scarcely conscious. They covered me with leaves and grass and paddled cautiously downstream, crossing from side to side to avoid Jap patrols. Some of the party were doubtless reconnoitering ahead. I do not know how long that journey took, not too long perhaps though it seemed an age, partly because I had no idea where we were going. I was aware that it was getting dark when we reached the Field Ambulance, so it must have been four or five hours after my crash. Major Crawford was standing on the bank and came down to meet me, plunging a hypodermic needle into my arm without a word.

Afterword: Captain Boys spent the next ten months in hospital, first in India for seven months, Egypt for one month, and then in London.

Notes by Ted Maslen-Jones, Comrade:

1. Squadron Pilots, including myself had collected their Aircraft, which had been assembled at Barrackpore (Calcutta). The Grandstand at the nearby Racecourse (Dum Dum) was used as a billet, and the final furlong of the track as an Airstrip. From there we flew to Cox's Bazaar.
2. Squadron H.Q. and 'A' Flight moved to Chota Moghnama on the west side of Mayu Hills. 'A' Flight was to support 5th Indian Division, in the same way as Rex's 'C' Flight was to support the 7th Indian Division, on the east side of the range. S.H.O. were under command of 15 Corps. .

3. Tony Irwin's 'V'Force, made up largely with Burmese tribesmen, were commanded by him and operated behind the lines. Disrupting Japanese operations, and rescuing those who were lost or had crashed in the jungle. He was a truly colourful character, and the work he did was of tremendous value.

4. This was the initial reaction of all our pilots. Experience very quickly showed the advantages of being able to fly low over the jungle. Skills in this respect developed quickly.

5. Texas Dan. He was part of Tony Irwin's team. An American who had probably found himself in Burma at the out-break of war as a troubleshooter in the oilfields.

Addendum: by Ted Maslen-Jones

I was on the convoy, which he commanded on the journey from the School of Artillery at Deolali (India), to Calcutta in January 1944. 656 Air Observation Post Squadron was preparing to go into action against the Japanese in support of the 14th Army. Our destination at this stage was the Arakan.

Rex Boys joined Honourable Artillery Company at the beginning of WW2. He convinced his superiors to allow him to volunteer for training as an Air O P Pilot. Artillery Officers were at that time urgently required for directing artillery fire from the air. After completing his training he was posted to 656 Squadron in the Spring of 1943. The Squadron was the only Air O P unit to be sent to the Far East. It arrived in India at the end of August 1943, and was based at Deolali (some 80 miles north of Bombay) while preparing to go into action.

At the end of November, Rex was a member of a reconnaissance party, which went to the Arakan to familiarise themselves with the situation. This accounts for his reference in the above story, to those such as 'Texas Dan' and 'Tony Irwin' etc.

From a personal point of view, this is a sad story of an all too short Baptism by Fire. Rex was fully prepared and rearing to go. He had a huge contribution to make. He was prevented from doing so by an act of war that, given just a little more experience, he would have recognised and known how to deal with .

I used to meet him at reunions after the war, and in later years he would regularly entertain me to lunch at the Army and Navy Club in London. We talked through his experience time and time again. His debt to those that saved his life was never extinguished.

Christmas in Burma

By Edward Maslen-Jones

Christmas Day began with the arrival of an Auster which contained the CO, Dennis Coyle, and Captain Mike Gregg who circled the airstrip trailing a banner which had been cut out of aircraft fabric and carried the message 'Merry Christmas'. They spent an hour with us before flying off, again trailing their banner and visiting the most forward infantry positions. We had been able to give them the coordinates of some of them, and they not only saluted them but dropped packets of cigarettes and other goodies. This was all greatly appreciated, judging from the messages that filtered through to us. There was also a reference to the 'Mission' in 33 Corps Sitrep. Dennis and Mike returned to join us for a Christmas drink. We were also joined by two officers from 2 Dorset Regiment for what was in the circumstances a most civilized seasonal party which ended in the heat of the day at which time our visitors took off to repeat their operation with 'B' Flight some one hundred miles away. The day was not yet over, because at 5 pm we all sat down, officers and men together, to a dinner that was simply magnificent, Frank Mc Math records it in his memoirs as follows:

'Those of us who knew nothing about the preparations were amazed at what had been done. A "banqueting hall" had been created on a small paddy field at the edge of the forest. They set up a U-shaped table by robbing the office and the workshops, while "chairs" were made from anything from petrol cans to logs of wood. Parachute cloth covered the table and message bags were used for decoration. The whole Flight, with the exception of two cooks, sat down and we were served by the Indian enrolled followers who were attached to our unit. The menu was Fine Rich Soup, Steak and Kidding Pudding, Tinned Peaches, and finally Mince Pies which Whitelock had made himself and also the Iced Cake which had been sent from the Squadron'

It was a fantastic effort and, looking back, one is still filled with gratitude for the sheer dedication and generosity of effort that went into this celebration. In effect it gave us all a tremendous lift and above anything else reinforced the feeling of comradeship that was already very strong, but is so much easier to recognize on such occasions.

The meal itself was at its height when, once again, we heard the sound of an approaching aircraft. The festivities came to a grinding halt as everyone present recalled what had happened almost twenty-four hours before. Without exception we all made for the position of relative security from which the situation was assessed. This aircraft was, in any case, approaching from the north-west and soon identified as a DC3. As we began to resume our seats, it flew over the airstrip, circled and came in again low, on a path that took it over our dinner table. At the same time an object was ejected from the side door and descended on the end of a parachute. There was a great rush to retrieve it as it landed, when it was found to be a large basket loaded with goodies of all kinds: cigars, cigarettes, sweets, biscuits, a bloody marvelous collection of Christmas fare, plenty to go round, and greatly appreciated. On top of the basket was a card which carried the message: 'Happy Christmas to "A" Flight 656 Air OP. Squadron from "A" Flight 62 Squadron RAF, Good Luck.'

It was an emotional moment in which to think of the trouble that had been taken and the generosity of those that had made this gesture. We saw them every day circling over dropping zones and they had taken the time to identify with us at this time. It was frustrating not to be able to thank them individually.

For security reasons the evening had to be cut short soon after dark, but not before Gunner Taffy Harris had led the assembled company in a seasonal sing-song. It had without doubt been a day to remember. There are, I am sure, a number of Christmases in everyone's lifetime that are remembered in detail for some special reason. For me, at least, this had been one of them. There had been just one sortie on the 25th which was carried out by Pip who dropped a set of maps on 4/10 Gurkhas. On this occasion he had Gunner Vince Weaver as an observer. It was late in the afternoon and I have no doubt that, seeing an Auster coming over again, the troops thought that they were about to get another handout of cigarettes!.

The Move of 1907 Flight 656 AOP Squadron from RAAF Station Sembawang (HMS Simbang) to Kampong Benta.

By Neville Stubbings

1907 Flt was one of 6 Flts of 656 AOP Squadron. Four of these Flts were at various locations in Malaya, one being in Hong Kong, one in Korea and the Sqn HQ at Noblefield on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. Each Flt consisted of 6 Auster aircraft and they were maintained by 7 or 8 aircraft tradesmen, signals and drivers. Vehicle maintenance and catering was the responsibility of gunners from the Royal Regiment of Artillery (must get the correct title). Pilots were RA and Glider Pilot Regiment; about 25 personnel in each self-contained mobile Flt.

In 1952, I was enjoying life at RAF Changi in nice modern barracks. There was plenty of night life in down town Singapore, as far as our money would take us. As I'm sure many of you will remember, money was in short supply in those days. LOA was one dollar a day extra, or in the currency we most understood, 2 pints of 'Tiger' a day. Everything was looking good, when out of the blue came promotion to Corporal, and with it a posting to 656 Sqn. A few people had heard stories of the squadron but nobody knew where the squadron was. *I was soon to find out!*

A few days later I was on the night train to KL then taken on to Noblefield to be greeted by the news that I was posted to 1907 Flt and Sembawang Singapore, only a few miles from where I had started from the week before. Then the good news, I would not be travelling down by train, but would instead be flying down in an Auster Aircraft.

After a very interesting and bumpy flight, dodging the storms and stopping for fuel, we eventually arrived at Sembawang where I found myself serving in the RAF, on a mainly army unit, on a Naval Air Station, subject to naval procedures and discipline. Once again I was told not to get settled in as the whole flight was exchanging locations with 1902 Flt at Benta, as all the Flts rotated on a regular basis.

Came the day of the move and we left Sembawang in the early morning, making our way in convoy to Johore Bahru, Pontian Kechil, Batu Pahat, Muar, Malacca, Alor Gajah, Tampin and a night stop at Serenban with our sister Flt 1911. We had been routed up the coast road so as to avoid the trouble spots at Yong Peng, Labis and Segamat, names that will bring back a few memories. Next day on to Kajang, KL and Rawang then on to Kuala Kuba Bahru (KKB) where we refueled and waited for our escort to take us

over the Fraizers Hill Gap. The convoy was a large one and we were interspersed with civilian lorries and armoured cars (12th Lancers I think).

We set off from KKB, gradually climbing the hills, passing the spot where a few months previously the High Commissioner, Sir Henry Gurney had been ambushed and killed. We went past there with weapons at the ready, cocked and safety catches off. Luckily, the only terrorists we saw that day were the hoards of monkeys coming out of the trees, stealing fruit and other objects from the lorries in front and behind us.

After clearing the gap, we passed through Tras and Trantum, both empty, as the residents had been moved out, under guard, to new villages. Eventually we arrived at Ruab, our escort leaving us as they had to take a return convoy back to KKB.

Another 25 miles travel and at last we rounded a bend and there was our home for the next nine months. A few tents and atap huts surrounded by wire. *Where were the lovely barracks and comforts of Singapore?*

There was no time to muse about the past as the Battery Sergeant Major soon had us sorting out tents and mounting guards. Next day we started making ready for the aircraft to arrive. The Auster was an amazing Aircraft, considering that they were manufactured of wood and covered in fabric and parked out in the open every day in all types of weather that the Malayan climate could throw at it. They never let us down.

Life at Benta was a bit basic, but I would not have missed the experience, especially the comradeship of the friends I made during my time with 1907 Flt 656 AOP Squadron.



Neville Stubbings shown on the left

This item was sent to us by Harold Read



With regards to the item on Sgt. Jack Rolley (Newsletter Summer 2004) I served with him for my National Service in Malaya. 1914 Flt in Seremban, 1951 and part of 1952, then Taiping until November 1952, the boat for Christmas!

The group photo was taken at Christmas 1951 in Seremban. Jack Rolley is in the front row holding a dog. He was a great character and very proud of being a Yorkshireman.

As a bog standard Gunner Radio Operator, I had quite a few earfuls from him! He actually crashed three times in his career, on one occasion, I was on the net when he came down, there was quite a celebration when he walked in.

The other photo is an Auster of 1914 Flt achieving 10,000 flying hours. The camp is Taiping. I'm fairly sure Capt. Sellars was the pilot.



The President has received the following comments regarding the Auster Fly In last year.

Thank you so much for organising such a fabulous day on Sunday. We had a lovely time and Tom and Lucy were both amazed to have the chance to not only go in a plane but fly them also! It was also lovely for us to see so many Austers in the air and to get a better understanding of what it must have been like for Daddy and everyone else to fly them.

Just a note to congratulate you on running such a successful 656 Birthday party in Netheravon last Sunday. It seemed to me to go very well. I managed to fly 4 former squadron members – they were all very interesting about their past experiences, mainly in Malaya, and they all enjoyed it, on a perfect flying day. Many thanks for including me in the party.

I thought I should write and let you know how much my wife, family and I enjoyed the day we spent with the Association at Netheravon Airfield on Sunday. My daughter, son-in-law and I all enjoyed a flight in an Auster and also the visit to the Officers' Mess of the Royal Flying Corps. The event must have required a great deal of organisation and we send our thanks to you and members of the committee. The Auster flight took me back 60 years! Our OC, Denis Coyle, was an excellent leader and the morale in the Squadron was high in spite of the many problems that had to be faced in those days.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Please find enclosed loose leaf notice regarding Bank details for all your annual subscriptions.

ASSOCIATION SHOP



“Sweetheart Jewellery”



ITEM	SILVER	W/Y GOLD
Ladies Brooch	£47.00	£140.00
Tie Stickpin	£18.00	£ 50.00
Lapel Stud	£11.00	£ 45.00
Cufflinks (Chain or Swivel)	£45.00	£140.00

EXTRA on request: Add a Diamond (£10.00) or Ruby (£5.00) for the eye.

Commemorative Crystal Ware

The Chinthe was laser copied from the original Silver 50th presentation statue. Below the Chinthe is ‘656 Squadron’ but additional text can be added, up to 3 lines. The block is delivered in a stout presentation box which has a blue silk look lining.



Standard block 50mm x 50mm x 80mm tall	£ 35.00
Large block 60mm x 60mm x 120mm tall	£105.00
Postage is extra on these items. Orders to the Treasurer who will arrange delivery to your home address.	

NOTICES

HISTORY AND ARCHIVES

How many times have you heard that someone regretted when an elderly relation passed away that their memorabilia and artifacts were disposed of, as they were meaningless to others? It happens all too often as 'house clearance' men assign un-saleable items to the rubbish bin, or relatives have no care after the initial sorrow phase passes and dispose of them.

Please do not let this happen to anything you own connected with the 656 Squadron. Get you relatives to be aware of it, put it in your will, do what you may but please, ensure that anything, no matter how minor it may seem, is sent to the Secretary of the Association. Photos, letters, diaries all contain an historic aspect of the Squadron.

Even better, why not send them now so you can guarantee they are preserved? We can then decide if and where items should be best kept or copied.

'Wings over Westley'

Frank Whitnall has written a wonderful book, 'Wings over Westley, The Story of a Suffolk Airfield.'

It is beautifully illustrated, and very well written; indeed Frank acknowledges his indebtedness to Ted Maslen-Jones and Nobby Clark for the wartime period. Whether you saw service at RAF Westley, have served with Austers or are just an enthusiast this is the book for you. A perfect gift.

Available from either Frank Whitnall, 106 Hardwick Lane, Bury St Edmunds, IP33 2RA (01284 753974) or Printwise (Haverhill) Ltd, Homefield Road, Haverhill, Suffolk, CB9 8QP. Price £9.95 plus post & packing £2.05.

MEMBERS WITH INTERNET ACCESS

Members with access to the Internet and E-mail can read newsletters on the website. Members not wishing to receive a hard copy should advise the Editor accordingly.

The newsletter is published twice a year, usually in Spring and Autumn. Keep watching the website for the latest newsletter.

Any contributions to the newsletter should be sent to John Heyes, contact details on page 32

ASSOCIATION WEBSITE CALL FOR CYBER EXPERTS

The Association has now had its Website in service for several years, and it has been a major source of information and recruitment.

It could now benefit from an upgrade. If any member has the necessary expertise could they please contact the Membership Secretary, John Bennett who would appreciate some assistance.

**Please remember to
notify the General Secretary of any change of address,
telephone number or E-mail address.**

I know we don't like to talk about it, but please, leave clear instructions for your next of kin to contact the General Secretary on your demise, so that firstly, we can get a representative to attend the funeral and secondly, to avoid sending distressing correspondence. As membership is open to any relatives of persons connected to 656 Squadron, they may wish to continue with the Association in their own right.

NEW MEMBER

Mr. E.J. Holloway RA '52 - '54 1907 Flt S'pore, Benta, Taiping

DEATHS

Regretfully, we announce the death of the following members and offer condolences to their relatives and friends.

Lt.Col. J.B. Chanter OBE		Died 16th June 2004
Mr. G.W. Allison	RA	Died 1st July 2004
Mr. F. Fraser-Pidgeon MM	RAF	Died 1st July 2004
Maj.Gen. S.W. Lytle	AAC	Died 24th Oct. 2004

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