

202 Squadron Association Newsletter



Number 17 Autumn 2005

NEWS FROM THE SQUADRON

Five Members Honoured

2005 is turning out to be a significant year for 202, and it's not over yet! Apart from the usual array of rescues (of which more later), three aircrew have been decorated for gallantry, the Sea King has received an enormous enhancement to its equipment, and there's a fantastic party brewing in Edinburgh. Last and definitely least, there's a new association representative too (me!).

First of all, three Air Force Crosses have been gazetted in September for 202 Squadron aircrew, following two particularly demanding rescues. The first incident occurred on Skye, on 26 September 2004; a D Flight crew, consisting of Flt Lt John Sheldon (captain), Flt Lt Fiona Bailey (co-pilot), Flt Lt Pat Thirkell (radar/winch op) and Sgt Neil Finch (winchman), were returning home from Oban, where they had spent the previous night following a rescue on Mull. The crew was already tired, as bad weather had delayed the job on Mull, and the casualty was eventually brought down out of cloud by a Mountain Rescue Team at about 0200 for onward transport by air. Afterwards, the crew snatched a few hours sleep in Oban before launching for Lossiemouth, but while *en route*, they were tasked to reports of a fallen climber

with head injuries in the Black Cuillins.

The weather on the west coast was even worse than the previous night, and on arrival on Skye, the crew found very low cloud, torrential rain and exceptionally strong winds. The stricken climber, a man climbing with his son, was somewhere on Sgurr Dubh Mhor, the southernmost peak of the Cuillin Ridge, on the

Air Force Crosses are not given out with the rations. As the accompanying article tells, three Squadron members have been awarded AFCs for exceptional professionalism, valour and gallantry. I offer the Association's heartiest congratulations to Neil Finch, Nick Petch and John Sheldon and, of course, we include Fiona Bailey and Pat Thirkell who have each received Commander in Chief's Commendations.

This number of awards in only six months is a record that few, if any, Squadrons can have equalled in peacetime. We are proud to be the Association of 202 Squadron.

Derek Whatling (Chairman)

inaccessible northern face, above Loch Coruisk, known to D Flight crews as one of the windiest and most turbulent places there is. With the cloud preventing any effective searching by the aircraft, the crew decided to deploy the Mountain Rescue Team from Glen Brittle to the shores of Loch Coruisk. On each approach to the loch, the appalling visibility forced the crew to use Pat's radar skills to guide them into the entrance to the loch and round the corner; on the final run, with fuel running low and a dash to Broadford airstrip imminent,

a gap in the cloud exposed much of the mountain to view. The two climbers were in contact with the MRT at Glen Brittle via mobile phone, and using messages relayed from the climbers to the MRT post and thence to the aircraft, the pair was located on Sgurr Dubh

Beag, the eastern shoulder of the main mountain, and the aircraft moved in to attempt a rescue. The fuel situation was now critical, and the turbulence was so severe that the aircraft was repeatedly bouncing from maximum power down to minimum and back and again within several seconds. Nevertheless, John managed to position the aircraft up against the cliff, and Pat prepared to deploy Neil. Neil was winched out over the abyss into the turbulence and pelting sleet, and aware of the fuel shortage, he managed to secure and recover both men to the aircraft remarkably quickly, despite the slipperiness of the rock and the serious injuries which the father had sustained. As soon as all three were aboard, John raced to Broadford, with Neil treating the climbers, and the aircraft landed there on fuel minima, and handed the climbers over to an ambulance for hospital transfer.

John and Neil have each been awarded the AFC, and Pat and Fi have received Commendations from the Commander-in-Chief of Strike Command. As a crew, they have been short-listed for the annual Vodafone Lifesavers awards, and they will be travelling to London on 16th November to meet the Prime Minister and attend the awards ceremony.

The second incident involved Master Signaller Nick Petch, a winchman at E Flight. On 13th March this year, he was on the duty crew at Leconfield when they were scrambled to rescue five people in the water near Scarborough. The strong wind had created very high seas, which were breaking over the sea wall and had washed the people into the water, amid jagged rocks which were exposed between waves. On scene, it was clear that they were in severe danger, and neither the lifeboat nor land parties were going to be able to reach them. With the waves dashing them against the sea wall, and spray reaching the underside of the aircraft fifty feet above, Nick was winched down to attempt a rescue. Pounded by the water, and with waves frequently submerging him entirely, he was unable to place the rescue strops around the first casualty he reached, so instead he used his strength to hold the person while being winched up and placed on the sea wall for the waiting emergency services. Despite the enormous effort and strength used in a grip lift, and despite having swallowed a good deal of sea water, Nick then went straight back into the sea, with water now reaching the aircraft's rotors 65 feet up, and managed to recover another casualty in the same way. With more people apparently in difficulty, Nick then spent nearly a further hour

being lowered into the icy water in attempts to locate the remaining people, though unfortunately these proved fruitless.

Nick's citation closes:

"Throughout this rescue, M Sig Petch's selfless courage, stamina and consummate professionalism in exceptionally difficult conditions were in the finest traditions of the Service. He displayed valour and gallantry of the highest order...and is awarded the Air Force Cross."

Moving on to our new equipment, the Sea King has had a radar upgrade and been fitted with a turret which contains both an Infra-Red Sensor and a TV camera. The displays from the new kit can be seen in the photo. So far only D Flight have received the modified aircraft, but A Flight and E Flight will get theirs within the next six months. The new full-colour radar display is a massive improvement on the original (the scanner itself hasn't changed), and the new software removes the requirement for most of the mental gymnastics which radar operators have had to do until now when planning let-downs. The operators attended a three-week conversion course at St Mawgan, where they learned about both the new radar and the capabilities of the turret. The Infra-Red will make an enormous difference to our ability to locate people in the dark – until now, it was nigh on impossible unless the target had some kind of light source which we could see on the goggles. From now on, we will no doubt become expert at locating sheep and deer, and perhaps the occasional missing walker too. The TV camera is intended for use by day, where it will make searches safer by allowing the operator to scan nooks and crannies for stuck or injured people without the aircraft needing to be right up against the terrain; it also allows us to film what we're doing, so there is a good chance of decent footage of rescues from now on (the camera can be slaved to a target, so it won't matter if there's no one free to aim it when



the crew all have their hands full doing the rescue). The appearance of the aircraft has changed slightly with the new equipment: the turret dangles from the bottom of the port fuselage, just inboard of the undercarriage, and the radar cabin has been refitted with the single original radar display giving way to two new screens, each of which can display either the radar picture, the IR picture or the TV picture.

All the while, the rescues keep coming in, and at the moment it looks like 2005 will see slightly higher totals of jobs than last year. At the end of September, A Flight had done 122 jobs so far this year, D Flight 153 and E Flight 115. Of note in the last six months have been further jobs following natural disasters: when E Flight responded to flooding in North Yorkshire back in June, it meant that all three flights had been involved in this kind of incident in the last year (D Flight went to the landslides near Crianlarich last autumn to move stranded motorists from danger, but A Flight were at the most serious incident, that at Carlisle in January). Another rescue which generated rather more publicity than the crew might have expected was E Flight's recovery of a mountain biker from the middle of a large expanse of gorse; when winchman Sgt Colin 'Yorkie' Yorke was asked by the press for his thoughts on the rescue (the man had been missing for several days), he commented that he couldn't fathom how the hapless cyclist had ended up in such a large and deep patch of gorse, and added, "It was almost like he'd fallen there from a spaceship."

This simple statement caught the imagination of the press, and Yorkie has been the toast of not just news organisations but also UFO enthusiasts ever since – anyone doubting this should enter 'Yorkie' and 'spaceship' into the website Google and see the impressive list of results. One squadron member even found, on the internet, a South African extra-terrestrial fan group which was busily discussing his comment! As is so often the case, this rescue was not particularly difficult or memorable from an aviation point of view, it was simply the sound-bite which generated the remarkable amount of coverage.

I am looking forward very much to meeting all the Association members who are at the Edinburgh Big Bash, and I hope to meet many more at subsequent events. I am just finishing my first tour on D Flight, and am posted to A Flight just before Christmas, so I hope to be on the Squadron and active with the Association for several years at least – please use me as you see fit!

Charlie Logan

202 Squadron Catalina

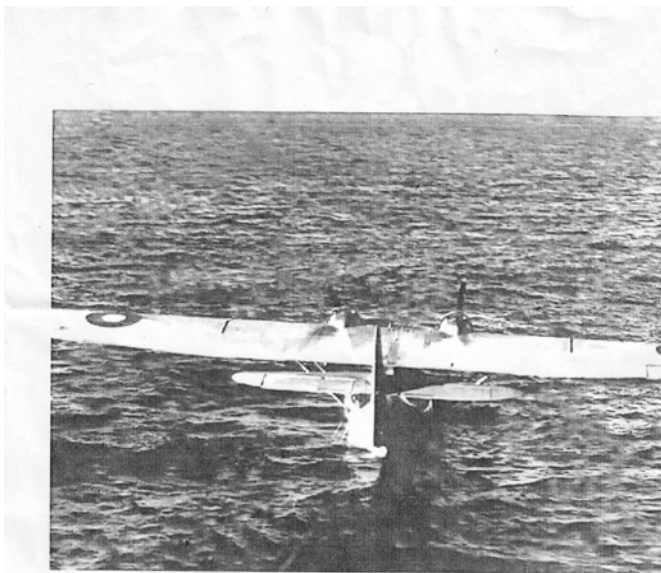
I would be grateful if you could help me with the following.

Let me first explain my interest. During the war years I was a Flight Engineer flying Lancasters first with 9 Squadron and then a tour with 83 Pathfinder Squadron. Since retiring to Cornwall some years ago, I have researched wartime RAF losses from Devon and Cornwall, nearly all Coastal Command. To date I have details of 1854 aircraft and the sad final resting places of the 4264 aircrew killed or missing in those aircraft. Being mainly Coastal Command 2334 have no known grave.

For my work in this area I was awarded an MBE.

However my query does not relate to a loss from this country, as I know that 202 Squadron was based at Gibraltar from September 1939 to September 1944.

A photograph came into my possession of a 202 Squadron Catalina damaged by flak floating (I do not know where) by a Royal Naval ship with everything on board but no crew.



The Royal Naval ship sank the Catalina to avoid it falling into enemy hands. The mystery is what happened to the crew? I have been told, but to factual evidence has come to light, that they were captured and taken on board the U-boat that had damaged their Catalina. That U-boat was later sunk as it was returning to its base with the loss of all on board including the RAF men.

The MOD have checked their records and also those at the Public records Office at Kew without success. I have the names of those 202 Squadron crews on the Runnymede Memorial, but as the Squadron was operating out of Gibraltar, other crews may have been lost over the Mediterranean. They may be named amongst the 2305 RAF and Commonwealth aircrew on the Malta memorial, but I do not have details of those.

Could you or your members give any information on this sad mystery?

Frank Harper

Further to the story on page 3, Mr Harper tells that the RAF Historic Branch at Bentley Priory have listed the 202 Squadron losses at sea while based at Gibraltar:

AH 537 failed to return on 5th June 1941 *en route* to Gibraltar – all crew on the Runnymede Memorial

AJ 158 Attacked by French fighters 18th May 1942 and ditched off Oran – all crew rescued

AJ 162 Failed to return 11th September 1942 – no further details

FP 124 Failed to return 3rd November 1942 – no further details

FP 153 Shot down by allied convoy 20th November 1942 – no further details

FP 144 Lost *en route* to Gibraltar 3rd August 1943 – all crew on Runnymede Memorial

Mr Harper hopes to have some more crew names from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission shortly and the Royal Naval Association is helping.

Mr Harper and his wife give assistance, on a purely voluntary basis, to families seeking details of the death and resting place of relatives. If anyone is interested, the Secretary or I can put them in touch.

Secretaries Spiel

Membership is increasing slightly to 139 Current Members – 6 Serving and 52 Life members. A few new members joined – welcome to them.

Attached to this newsletter is the new list of members, if any of your details are incorrect, let me know?

It is that time of year to pay the subs. Those of you that pay by Standing Order – Please check your bank to make sure that the mandate is still valid. Those that pay by Cheque, please send a cheque for £5, made payable to “202 Squadron Association” to me at the address below

If anyone knows of anyone that wants to be a member, please get them to drop me a line.

Hope to see you all next year at the reunion.

jules_rutt at yahoo.co.uk

Our Web Site

Mike is still toiling mightily on the update of the site with only a few more sections to add. The preview is at www.newsscreens.202-sqn-assoc.co.uk while the main address is www.202-sqn-assoc.co.uk

If you are not a visitor yet, it is well worth it.

Money Matters

Brian reports that our finances are quite healthy with a grand total of just over £3900 in our two accounts. It seems that we actually have a surplus for the year.

Details at the AGM

22 Squadron Association

22 Squadron Association are recruiting and have asked for publicity. If anyone is interested or would like a copy of their very professional looking newsletter, the contact is

iain-wright at lycos.co.uk

www.22squadronassociation.org.uk/

There have been quite a number of letters from the outside world in the past six months. I fear that some of the requests are beginning to refer to periods of prehistory beyond our collective memory. Where no contact details are printed, I can supply them.

Dear Sirs,

With the hope of you being able to assist us in this matter we have decided to contact you even though it is not the primary role of your fine organization.

We are two collectors with a historic interest in the time during the 2nd World War and the period immediately after.

My associate has come into possession of the full uniform of one of your former Squadron Leaders. We however have some difficulties in obtaining any information about him. In particular we are wondering what other medals/commendations he has worn on his uniform since there are "excess" holes in the uniform apart from the DSO and DFC.

The Sqn Ldr in question is E W Deacon. We estimate he was Sqn Ldr *circa* 1950 – 1952 based on the information that he was the 3rd in command since 1st October 1946.

We will greatly appreciate any information you can give us about the time he was in command of 202 Squadron and also any information about him personally that you may have.

Thomas Pedersen
RDAF 280 Sqn

Sir,

I am a member of an aviation club based in County Fermanagh where 202 was based from 44 to 45 at Castle Archdale. My old friend George Dodds who was in 202 said I should contact the squadron and I never got round to it. George has since passed away.

I am collecting information about personnel and war-time activities whilst at CA and would like any 202 members to contact me with their own recollections of the Squadron if possible. I hope I am not causing myself to be a nuisance.

Thank you

John McFarline
Mcfarline2@aol.com

G'day, [guess the country of origin]

My uncle, then F/Sgt DA Gammage was, according to his record, part of 202 Squadron from 18/11/42 until 1/12/42 when he moved on to 302 Ferry Training Unit. He was classified as a Navigator "B" (I assume the "B" was for Beaufighters?)

As I am aware that the "official" record is often wrong I was hoping that you may have further info. I am trying to recreate his record from scattered histories as he has now passed on and left no direct descendants.

I received great info from 211 Sqn where he served in 44! Anything you might have would be great.

Dear Mr Cumming,

I came across your e-mail address in a letter to Dad (Tam Rae) of some five years ago, so do not know if it is still active, but thought I would give it a go.

Sadly this e-mail is prompted by Dad's death on 1st May. He died peacefully in Louth Hospital after battling against lung cancer diagnosed at the end of 2003. I am not sure how much he was in touch with you, but I know he kept up with 202 Squadron via the Newsletter and I have been touch with Jules to let the Association know.

I am going to prepare a short obituary for the next Newsletter and also hope to put together a sort of history of Dad's career, for both my own benefit and for Cameron, our son (age 6) of whom Dad was very proud. I have just started going through much of his RAF memorabilia and am beginning to put dates together, but wondered if I might call upon you if necessary to perhaps fill in any gaps?

I hope that you will not mind me contacting you like this and I am sorry it is with such sad news. I know Dad looked back on his RAF days and time with 202 Squadron with great pride and I am sure that he will be remembered by many

Kind regards

Maureen Rae

The 2006 Reunion

It is almost certain that we shall be meeting again at RAF Leconfield, but Pete has not yet been able to confirm a date with the Officers' Mess.

As soon as something is settled a notice will be issued

Mucky Duck is published twice a year in Spring and Autumn. Contributions - letters, articles, photographs and anything else - are always wanted. If you don't want to write it yourself, give me your idea and I'll do it or farm it out.

hcumming at lineone.net

On the last Tuesday of August Mrs Ethel Martin of Chapel of Garioch Aberdeenshire took her dogs for their routine walk on the slopes of Bennachie. Unfortunately Mrs Martin who is 92 years old and has poor eyesight lost her way. Her family and neighbours mounted a search and eventually a helicopter from Lossiemouth was called in to assist.

At 11 pm it was decided to remove the searchers from the hill to let the helicopter carry out a thermal search and on their way off the hill two of the foot searchers stumbled (not literally I think) on Mrs Martin and the dogs.

According to the *Press and Journal* - an Aberdeen newspaper that can give accurate news, when the Sea King left her at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary, Mrs Martin said, "The best thing was that I had never been in a helicopter. The pilot said I knew what to do if I ever wanted to fly in one again".

The ex-Met Office members of the Association are only too well aware of MOD's push into marketing, but it is interesting that it has reached operational pilots.

Sic transit . . .

The Chairman has reminded us that is a "policy" of the Association that the same person should not stagnate too long in a post and that we should be thinking whether we want to replace him and others (including the newsletter editor).

This will come up at the AGM at Reunion time so start thinking.