



THE WHEEL

NZ Ex-RAF APPRENTICES ASSOCIATION

NEWSLETTER

ISSUE 21 Sept 2013

President Bill Cowham

Vice President Monty Firmin

Secretary Ed Austin

Editorial

Betty and I have been very busy since the last newsletter. First there was the reunion in Wellington which was followed by a family reunion in Geraldine. Then there were numerous trips to Nelson where we had made the decision to buy 'the right to occupy' of a retirement villa in a new Summerset village being built in Stoke. Being a new village we were able to select a three bedroom, 2 car garage unit which suited us and we had time to sell our Blenheim property without the hassles of deadlines etc. Even so it was quit stressful and during that time the village was hit by the severe weather event that occurred over Nelson in late April. Our proposed villa was one of six in the complex to be flooded. Fortunately there was an identical unit in a better position (which was already under offer when we first viewed the complex) available so we naturally transferred to it. We had been anxious about how long our house was taking to sell but it proved to be to our advantage in the long run as we think the villa we now have is in a better position.

We were very sad to leave Blenheim but there was nothing there which suited us at this time. It is also good to be a bit further away from the current earth quakes although nowhere in central NZ is entirely safe from quakes. Village life is as good as we had hoped and we are very happy with our decision and it is true what people who have made the move say, "We should have done it sooner".

Well that is where we are at and now to the newsletter. As usual there has been a deathly hush from you out there so I will have to wing it. Ever since I have edited the newsletter I have had trouble with handling columns so I have decided to do away with them in this issue and make life easier for myself. As I write this I am watching the Sydney Test Wallaby v All Blacks and it is currently 7-6 after 14 minutes. The Blacks are giving too many penalties away for my liking.

The Wellington reunion went very well and the general opinion was that it was right up there with them. I certainly enjoyed it. Perhaps there is a lesson to be learned. The less formal organisation, apart from the meet and greet and the 'The Dinner' the better. There was certainly more than enough to occupy all tastes in the immediate vicinity of the hotel in Wellington and I for one could easily have filled in another day or two. Food for thought if it is decided to proceed with the next reunion in Nelson.

I received the following email from Monty after the 2013 reunion and I reproduce it here for information and comment.

"Hi guys,

Thank you for a great reunion in Wellington. Everyone seemed to really enjoy it, so much so that it was suggested by someone "why don't we have one every year" Please don't go there.

There was some late lobbying again for the airshow in Blenheim and someone came up with an interesting idea. Have the reunion at Nelson on the Wednesday and Thursday which would not be a problem for flights or, hopefully, accommodation and then those that wanted to could stay on for a day or two and go to the airshow. I know it is quite a drive but if there is no reunion dinners or drinking sessions in the evenings they could have early nights ready for the next day if they wanted to go for more than one day. There might even be a bus service running for the air show. This would be more economical than having it in Wellington then having to get the ferry over to Picton etc. and still have the hassle of accommodation in Blenheim. And we haven't been to Nelson and the ladies tell me it's an interesting place to look around. I just throw it in for what it's worth.

Kind regards, Monty".

Before I discuss this further it is now half time with the score at 25 to 19 to the Blacks and it is time for a whisky (Johnny Walker Green Label). Well, I've settled back in and although the game is a bit scrappy we're holding our own so far! Back to business..... I told Monty, in Wellington, that I was not interested in organising the next reunion in Nelson. Obviously he has chosen to ignore my wishes. This leaves me with two options—spit the dummy or bow to your (the members) wishes. If you advise that you wish for the 2015 reunion to be held in Nelson I am prepared to arrange the following:

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Date Wed 01 to Fri 03 April 2015.
(Note: Good Friday is 3rd April)

Where Nelson City (Venue to be advised)

What Wed 1st Apr. Meet and greet at 1700hrs at venue .
Thurs. 2nd Apr. Individuals arrange own entertainment for day. (Reunion Dinner T.B.A.).
(Note, I will provide a list of local entertainment etc when venue known)

Fri. 3rd Apr. Return home, local sightseeing or attend Omaka Air Show.
Own arrangements.

The reason for the mid-week reunion is to give members the opportunity to attend the Omaka Air Show over Easter weekend in Blenheim. As far as I am aware there will be no suitable public transport available between Nelson and Blenheim so members will need their own transport or arrange hire vehicles. Nelson is approximately 100 km from Blenheim and it normally takes 90 minutes to drive. The road is good with two hilly stretches (Whangamoas and Rai Saddle to traverse) which deserve respect, particularly if it is icy. (Unlikely in early April).

There you have it with plenty of time to consider your options/interest. The Omaka programme is as follows;

Friday. Trade and practise day.
Sat / Sun. Air show proper.

If you wish to attend the Airshow/Omaka Museum you will have the option to select the days you want and whether to travel each day or try to arrange accommodation in, near, Blenheim. In due course the Classic Fighters Omaka web site will have all the details re the show, costs and timings etc. if you are interested.

Please talk amongst yourselves and let me know what you wish to do. I will arrange the programme as outlined above for the Nelson end of the deal (Venue and Reunion Dinner) but the rest is over to individuals. I would appreciate early advice regarding the level of interest.

Editor

Since I started this newsletter the two All Black/ Wallaby tests have taken place and the Louis Vuitton challenge has concluded, all with satisfactory results. Pity about my golf! I had better get on with this newsletter (such as it is) before 'The Americas Cup' is upon us. I have been dragging the chain in the forlorn hope that some contributions from the members would turn up!!

Those Were the Days

As an ex Brass Bandman the adjacent photograph from the cover of "THE HALTONIAN" (Issue 65 Feb 2013) caught my eye. Back in the late 1950s, early 60s, the Blenheim Municipal Brass Band (as it was then known) introduced display marching to the National Brass Band championships, under the Drum Major, Evan Musgrove. I recall the many Sunday mornings practising under his eagle eye. What on earth motivated us volunteer bandmen to undergo that torture! Particularly as a fair percentage of the band were RNZAF personnel. The display marching didn't survive in the championships for very long and even the set piece Marching competition has been replaced by the Street March...mores the pity!!

Back to the photo.... It was taken by the late W/O Stobbart who was i/c Instrument Maker workshop training and i/c the Apprentice photographic club from 1943 to the early 1950s. You don't see mace throwing like this very often. Even Lewis the 1st seems impressed!

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The following article is also reproduced with kind permission from The Haltonian. I couldn't reproduce the original articles accompanying photos so have introduced my own from the net. Editor



A MEMORABLE FRIGHT

Almost everyone in the aircraft industry and thousands of others beyond have heard of the RAF Engineering Officer who inadvertently found himself airborne in a Lightning. Wg Cdr Taffy Holden 47th, the very man, was so fed up hearing his story told and retold with fanciful variations on the actuality, he decided to write the definitive account of his very frightening experience, and has kindly allowed the Haltonian to be the first to publish it. If you read nothing else in this edition, his story is a must.

Some Background Considerations

In attempting to write a more detailed personal account of my unfortunate flight in Lightning XM135 back in July 1966, I think I should add some of the reasoning and reason why I attempted the test in the first place. This might remove some of the erroneous facts, misapprehensions and misconceptions which I have seen in some accounts of the event.

First I should explain that I was a qualified pilot, even though I was a R.A.F. Engineering Officer. I joined the R.A.F. as an apprentice in 1943, from which I gained a cadetship to university. At the university I read mechanical engineering and learnt to fly on Tiger Moths, with the University Air Squadron. On graduation, I was given the option to continue with an engineering career or to follow a General Duties (Flying) career. I chose the former path, and the Air Ministry, at that time, considered that there was merit in allowing me to qualify to 'wings' standard as a pilot, in the belief that an engineering officer with a pilot qualification could more easily see the pilots' point of view in aircraft maintenance matters. I too, thought this was a very good idea.

I qualified on Harvards, but my early engineering duties only allowed me to keep in flying practice on Chipmunks. Whilst I was at Kinross, I managed to get checked out on Oxfords and on occasions assisted a qualified test pilot to air test twin engined Neptunes. My only jet aircraft experience was as a passenger in the second seat of a Javelin T3 and again in the rumble seat, of a Canberra. In my service, one of my postings took me to 33MU Lyneham where as the CO of a civilian manned aircraft storage unit, I had Canberra, Meteor and Lightning types, which were gradually being prepared for dispatch to various flying unit tasks. When the Meteor and Canberra types had been cleared, the powers that be decided that the MU should be closed after the last Lightning had been dispatched. Up until the last Canberra, I had a qualified and current test pilot on my staff for those aircraft, but he was not a current Lightning pilot. When a Lightning needed test flying, I had to call for any available pilot with a current test pilot rating. Most times I could find one who could be spared within a 24 to 36 hour period. So much for my personal and R.A.F. unit background.

Lightning Mk 1A XM 135

XM 135 was being prepared for despatch to a Target Facilities Flight, but over a period of weeks it had been giving no end of trouble. Each time it was being flight tested the pilot found that on the initial few yards of a take-off run, the inverter, supplying power to the primary flight instruments, would cut out and the standby inverter would have to cut in: clearly an unsatisfactory state of affairs. Electricians were using every trick in their trade to establish the cause, each time thinking that they had removed, replaced and tightened every likely component. With nothing out of order, they would seek another test flight. It was a Boscombe Down pilot who next attempted to fly the aircraft, found the same problem persisting and refused to fly until a more positive explanation could be determined.

Back to the drawing board, electricians decided to devise some tests which might isolate the fault and indicate roughly where and which component was at fault. They intended to ask the next test pilot to switch in and out parts of the circuits, using trailing wires from the likely circuits to temporary switches in the cockpit and to do these switchings before and after each few yards of a simulated take off run, when the fault was manifest. The temporary wires from the internal circuitry required the cockpit canopy to be removed and in this state the aircraft was made ready for another air test. Being a pilot, it was easiest for me, as CO to request the services of a qualified test pilot, from wherever I could find one, but for the next test on XM 235, no pilot was available for at least another week. With my unit closing down, many civilians being made redundant, a timetable of clearance being upset by this 'rogue' aircraft,

there was much tetchiness and irritation amongst my staff. The intended Boscombe Down pilot, knowing that I was a pilot suggested I might try the test myself. He suggested using an out of use runway (Runway 36 as I would only be using 30 or 40 yards at a time). He suggested using a Land Rover to communicate with Air Traffic Control and to get their clearance for each movement of the aircraft. However, there was one remaining minor problem. I had no idea how to start its two Rolls Royce Avon engines! The Foreman of engine trades gave me a 5-minute briefing on how to do this and XM 135 was towed out to runway 05 on 22 July 1996 for my electrical tests.

It was by way of extraordinary good fortune that my engine foreman explained that, although I would not be needing engine reheat, that reheat needed the throttles to be pushed past a reheat 'gate' and one had to feel for the gate keys, behind the throttle, to unlock. My only other knowledge of the Lightning was what I could remember from pilot's notes. At each test flight by the qualified pilot I would be in ATC with a copy of the pilot's notes, should he need any aircraft figures to be relayed to him. One or two figures remained stuck in my mind, namely that the undercarriage had a maximum speed before it should be retracted and I had an even vaguer figure of about 150 knots for a landing speed. Some extra knots would be required for each 1000lbs of unused fuel, but I did not need to bother with any such figures for the test, for which I was to undertake.

The Ground Test

I was correctly strapped into the cockpit (seated on the in situ parachute and ejection seat) and after starting the engines and holding the aircraft static, on brakes, I did the necessary preliminaries for the electrical checks in the cockpit, checking the notes I had scribbled on a notepad which lay on the coaming in front of me. All seemed ready for the first test and I indicated to the Land Rover to obtain ATC clearance for use of the short 30 or 40 yards of runway. Holding the brakes I gradually opened the throttles to about 90%. My feeling at the time was the unexpected heavy vibration of Avon power held against the brakes. I did a quick check of the temporary electrical switches and circuitry lights, then released the brakes. The initial punch from the thrust was quite remarkable and I moved the expected 30 to 40 yards before I throttled back and applied the brakes. So far so good. I made some notes, altered some more switch positions, noted the on/off lights and prepared for the next test. This was done in a similar fashion and I was leaving the 'fault' diagnosis to my electrical staff who would have to interpret my notes. I needed to do one more test and ATC had noted that I had only used about 100 yards total, so they were quite happy to clear me for a similar short distance. ATC had also been holding up a fuel bowser and trailer with 3600 gallons of AVTAG for a waiting C130 aircraft refueling; they decided to allow the bowser to cross the runway. On opening the throttles for the final test, I obviously pushed them too far, misinterpreting the thrust, because of the unexpected heavy vibration and they got locked into reheat. Yes, I did use some expletives but I had no time to think about getting out of reheat, because in front of me, the bowser and trailer had just crossed the runway, from left to right, so my thoughts were to make sure I was missing them by sufficient margin. No, I couldn't steer to clear them; reheat takes you in a straight path like a bullet out of a gun. The time between finding myself in reheat and just missing the bowser was less than half the time I have taken to write this sentence.

Before my thoughts could again return to getting myself out of reheat, I was gathering speed and about to cross the main duty runway, where a Comet had just passed on its takeoff run. I then had no time to look for reheat gate keys, my eyes were on what next lay ahead. Two things, the end of the short runway 07 and just beyond was the small village of Bradenstoke, which I just had to miss. There was no chance of stopping, none whatsoever. I had gained flying speed (that is what reheat is for, short sharp takeoffs) and I had no runway left. I did not need to heave it off the runway, the previous test pilot had had trimmed it exactly for takeoff and only a slight backward touch on the stick and I was gathering height and speed. Then my thought was to get my speed back in case I should damage the undercarriage. Incidentally, I could not have raised the under-carriage: the ground locks were in place for safety reasons. With only clear blue sky in front of me, I could then search and feel for those gate keys. Yes, I found them and thanked my lucky stars that my engine foreman had quite incidentally told me of their location and I was soon able to get my speed back to (I am guessing now) about 250 knots. My next thoughts were to keep Lyneham airfield in sight and where had the Comet got to, the one I had missed a few seconds ago! Then I asked myself, should I eject and where and when? No, I could not; the safety pins were in the ejection seat and safe for servicing, not flying. My only alternative then was to attempt a landing, but how does one interpolate or extrapolate Tiger Moth, Chipmunk Harvard flying to a two engined, 11 ton, beast like the Lightning?

After regaining my bearings, a little composure and simply by observation, making sure that the Comet had been warned away, I decided I should attempt a landing on the duty runway and direction. I was trying to combine all my limited flying experience into a few minutes of DIY fight 'training' on a Lightning. It wasn't easy, but I must admit that some of the elementary rudiments of my proper flying training and flight theory were coming in useful. I needed to get the feel of the aircraft, if I was to get it back on the ground. My first approach was ridiculous, I could tell that my speed, height, rate of descent, even alignment wasn't correct and my best plot was to go around again. This time making sure that my throttles would be well below reheat position. A second approach was no better, I had some aspects better, but as the

duty runway was on the lip of an escarpment, with a valley floor beyond, my rate of descent took me below runway height and I found myself adding power to get back to the right level. More power meant more speed and I was trying to get to something like 150 knots for landing, but the uncoordinated attempt was becoming a mess so I abandoned it, took myself away on a very wide circuit of Lyneham and decided to land in the opposite direction. This I thought would give me more time to get the 'feel' right and if I made a mess of the landing, I would overrun the runway and just drop (crash) into the valley beyond. In that direction, with a messed up landing, I would have no fear of crashing into Lyneham village.

The long final leg of this approach gave me the thinking time that I needed and I gradually got the feel that speed, alignment, rate of descent, height and approach angle were better. I plonked it down at about the right position off the threshold, but just forgot that I was in a nose wheel aircraft and emulated my best three-wheelers in a Chipmunk or Harvard. The result was that I crunched the rubber block which encases the brake parachute cables. However, I had got down, but then I had to stop. I obviously knew that the Lightning had a brake parachute, but where was the 'chute lever', button or knob? There, I found it marked Brake Chute and I pulled it and I could then look ahead and concentrate on keeping straight and somewhere near the centre of the line. I hung on the brake lever, I wasn't slowing as much as I would like, so I just kept up my hand pressure on the brakes. I had about 100 yards of runway left when I stopped and, even then, I didn't know that the brake parachute had dropped off as soon as it was deployed, because the cable had been severed as a result of my super tail wheel three-pointer.

Events Immediately after the Flight

XM 135 was towed back to the hanger and I was taken to the medical officer who gave me some pills to calm my nerves. I felt reasonably calm as I had nearly killed myself on five occasions in that 12 minute flight, yet I had miraculously survived. What is more, I would see my wife and young family again. Two or three time in that same 12 minutes, I thought would never see them again. My only priority was to save my own skin, I was not thinking about the loss of a non-insured Lightning Mk 1A aircraft. The minor damage to the aircraft was repaired with a new set of brake shoes and a new rubber chute block. As a memento, I have kept the rubber block; one day I might return it to XM135 at Duxford.

The Fault

Although the tests I did and the ensuing flight did not immediately provide a reason for the initial electrical fault, my electrical staff, with additional assistance from English Electric, Salmesbury eventually did. Apparently, in early versions of the Lightning, there was to be a ground test button fitted into the standby inverter circuit. It was never fitted to the Mk 1A but the wires were left in the looms. It was one of these redundant wires which shorted onto the UHF radio as it moved on its trunnions when the aircraft nudged forward on its take off. Who would have thought I risked my life to find it in the way I did?

Events Subsequent to the Flight

There was a subsequent Inquiry to find out what had happened and why, and to make recommendations for it never to happen again. As I was the Commanding Officer of the Unit, I was responsible for my own as well as the service actions of all my staff. I was not acting against any orders in the Flight Order Book which I religiously kept up to date. But those orders did not cater for engineering officers doing investigative type checks on Lightnings. They were later amended. After the Unit Inquiry I had to go up in front of the Commander-In-Chief. That was when I thought my career would be placed in jeopardy. I even thought my coveted 'wings' would be taken from me; I had no idea how the incident was being regarded by Command or indeed Air Ministry. But, as I stood in front of Air Marshal Sir Kenneth Porter, he read the proceedings, asked me if I agreed with his view that "With the limited flying experience I had, the test would have been better left to an experienced and current Lightning test pilot". I agreed of course. He then told me to remove my hat, sit down and proceeded to tell me some of his unfortunate flying incidents in Mesopotamia in the Middle East. I was thankful that nothing more was to become of the incident and that I still had a job to do back at 33 Maintenance Unit, Lyneham.

I coped with all the official communications regarding the incident, but what I was unprepared for was the release of the story to the public. I had had very little experience of working with the press, certainly none with radio, TV, national and world press. I had no training of how to deal with their quest for news. My Command Headquarters suggested that I go away on leave before press releases were made by Air Ministry. This I did and took my family off camping to Jesola in Italy. Imagine my complete surprise when, on the first day of camp, on my way to find some ice, someone shouted "Hello Taffy, I've just been reading about your Lightning flight!!" The world seemed a very small place. On returning to the U.K., I was overwhelmed to find that the incident was still front line news. People wanted to write articles in newspapers, books, magazines, on TV and radio and underhand attempts to hear my account of what had happened. Having admitted that I had made an unwise decision to do the ground tests, I decided that the unwanted publicity that I

had attracted was in no way going to be for financial gain. I steadfastly refused offers, although for a two page article in the Sunday Express I requested the editors to make a contribution to the R.A.F. Benevolent Fund. Despite prompts, no monies were ever handed over and I became very disillusioned with all publicity media. Some friends thought I had gained some reward for an article in 'Mayfair'; it was written without my knowledge and authority but, because it was factually correct, I had no redress from the Press Complaints Board. Nevertheless, I was extremely annoyed. Some years after the incident, my hidden fears of high speed flight came to the surface and I had to spend two periods in hospital. I had not come to terms with the emotional side of the event. To return to my wife and family, after five close encounters with death, was indeed a miraculous experience, but I had not been honest with myself, to accept it as such, so I needed psychiatric help. I could recall the technicalities of the flight without any hang-ups, but was unwilling to talk about that emotional side of the ordeal until I was placed under medical drugs and to bring these emotions to the surface. That was a rewarding experience and it gave me a much better understanding of people who might need that kind of help, after similar unfortunate occurrences.

Forty Years On

I am now retired and living with my wife in Cheshire. Apart from being an active DIY plumber, carpenter, electrician handyman, my main pastime is involvement with family history. My inadvertent flight is still very vivid and, in writing this personal account, I needed little prompting. Over the intervening years, I have received many letters and reminders from people whom I did not know, all praising my efforts to return myself and aircraft back safely. Yes, I have basked in some glory, when accounts of what happened have been retold in social gatherings. I have never sought publicity but, whenever it becomes impossible to suppress, I have had to live with it. I enjoyed my career in the Royal Air Force, but not because of XM135.



In Closing Just on the off chance you may have something for me here are my new contact details:

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This issues content is a bit sparse apart from the couple of reproduced articles from The Haltonian. I have their approval to use their material and likewise they can use ours. It is a bit of a one way traffic situation at this time so how about you give me some interesting content. You never know you could find yourself published internationally!

I appreciate that many of you have supplied material for the newsletters in the past but there has been a very noticeable lack of material over recent issues. Please search your memory banks, or what is left of them, and give me something to use. Meanwhile,

give the 2015 reunion some thought and if you don't like Monty's proposal come up with something else. If the reunions are not well supported then the association will fold.

It would be very helpful at this stage if you could indicate the likelihood of your participation (or non-interest) in the possible 2015 event as proposed in Nelson. Comments to Monty, info Ed and myself please.

Gus.

