

A History
of the
No. 214 (Federated Malay States) Squadron Association



Motto: 'Avenge in the Shadows'

'Federated Malay Straits – FMS' – Adopted in 1941 to signify the wartime support given to the Squadron

Compiled and written by Vic Pheasant, edited by Alan Mawby and Jock Whitehouse.

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Flight Lieutenant Harold Bidmead DFC was a Flight Engineer and the Engineer Leader on No. 214 (FMS) Squadron when it was based at RAF Chedburgh near Bury St Edmunds in late 1942 and subsequently RAF Downham Market south of Kings Lynn in 1943. Harold had very happy memories of the camaraderie in his time on the Squadron and long harboured the ambition to form a Squadron Association whereby this could continue. Retirement gave him the time to assemble a list of names and addresses of former Squadron members and in early 1988 he sent out a letter seeking views on whether these former Squadron members would be interested in forming a Squadron Association. He was 'delighted' with the response. Over 150 former members of the Squadron, both air and ground crews 'spanning in time from 1919 to 1985', responded positively. Harold distributed his first Newsletter in March 1988, advising of his intention to hold a first Reunion meeting at the former RAF Chedburgh airfield proposing himself to be the 'Honorary Organising Secretary' with the undertaking financed by himself and from voluntary donations.



*The first meeting of the No. 214 (FMS)
Squadron Association. 28th May 1988*

The site of the former RAF Chedburgh airfield and the buildings was owned by the 'Chafers' agricultural supplies company. Harold was offered the use of the old No. 214 (FMS) Squadron briefing room in the company's administration building; the room was almost as it had been left by the Squadron some 45 years earlier, with the dais and large notice board still in place. The first meeting of the No. 214 (FMS) Squadron Association was held on 28th May 1988 starting at ten o'clock. Harold took great delight in addressing the meeting from the dais as he had done in a briefing for a 1942 Squadron raid on Germany, reading from his Log Book on fuel loads etc. Harold covered various aspects of his embryonic Association, which was followed by a finger buffet of choice provided at a modest cost together with refreshments and bar facilities.



Harold Bidmead addresses the first Reunion meeting of the No. 214 (FMS) Squadron

In his second, August 1988, Newsletter, Harold was pleased to announce that there had been some 90 attendees at the Reunion, spanning nearly the breadth of the Squadron's existence – 1919 - Leading Air Craftsman (LAC) Edwin Baldwin to 1977 - Squadron Leader (Sqn Ldr) Godfrey Moffatt, the last Squadron Commanding Officer (CO). He was now planning to hold a weekend Reunion early in the Spring of the New Year - 1989. Harold was also pleased to be able to announce that Marshal of the

Royal Air Force (MRAF) Sir Michael Beetham GCB CBE DFC AFC, a former CO (1958/60), had graciously accepted the position of Patron to the Association. By this time Harold had on his books some 187 Full Members (who had served on the Squadron) and 119 Associate Members (wives/widows/Next of Kin (NoK) of Full Members). At that first Reunion meeting, Harold announced that a No. 214 FMS Squadron Association bank account had been set up; but it was agreed that there would be no annual subscription, being financed by voluntary donations. Two forms of Association ties were to be available, one for Full Members and the other for Full and Associate Members as well as a head scarf square for the ladies.

Harold issued a 3rd Newsletter in December 1988. He was now recording some 240 Full Members in the Association, together with 150 Associate Members. He was also able to announce that the No. 214 (FMS) Squadron Association was now formally affiliated with the Bomber Command Association under the 1960 Charities Act and was 'empowered to benefit from all privileges thus created by the association.' Each of his Newsletters, personally addressed, had contained other items of interest, some about former Squadron personnel, others about previous Squadron events and activities, now increasing in length to some 14 pages. Harold had also started to compile a Squadron history with the help of Austrian, Gerhard Heilig, a former Special Operator on the Squadron in 1944. But then, nothing was heard from Harold until August 1989 when Jack Dixon wrote to Members of the Association to give the very sad news that he had received from Harold's wife Bettie - Harold had died suddenly in June.

Sqn Ldr Jack Dixon DFC had been a Flight Commander on No. 214 (FMS) Sqn in 1943 when the Squadron was based at Chedburgh. He had been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) for skilfully piloting his Stirling aircraft, crippled by enemy action, back to the UK from a raid on Germany. At Bettie's request, he had recovered all Harold's boxes of papers and files and was in the process of sorting them out. Harold had been planning to hold a Reunion at RAF Marham in the September of 1989. But Jack realised that it was now too late in the day to get it organised. In consultation with Association Patron and a few Association members that he could contact, it was agreed to postpone the event until the following year, 1990.

At this time, Jack was working in the City of London; a man of stature and natural authority. With his knowledge of company structures, he realised that as large as the Association had become, now with membership of over 400 Full and Associate Members, management of the Association could not continue as a 'one man band'. In his August 1989 letter to Members, he

felt that 'it would be a pity to let Harold's 'baby' die, and that it needed a 'proper organisation' of a Committee to keep it going. With this in mind, he assumed the role of Secretary and set about recruiting an ad hoc Committee.

Group Captain (Gp Capt) Ken Batchelor CBE DFC served with distinction in World War II (WWII). Having completed a tour of 30 Operations on Wellingtons in the early part of the war, he then commanded 138 Squadron, one of two squadrons taking agents and dropping supplies into the Axis held European territories. He was then in command of RAF Chedburgh throughout the period that No. 214 (FMS) Squadron was in residence on the base, and thus well known to the Squadron personnel at the time. Although a very busy man as Secretary of the Bomber Command Association and very much involved in the project to erect a statue in front of the RAF's St Clement Danes Church in central London of the wartime Air Officer Commanding (AOC) Bomber Command MRAF Sir Arthur ('Bomber') Harris GCB OBE AFC, he agreed to be the Chairman of the Association.

Squadron Leader Bevis Denton ('Bob') Davies AFC had been a Flight Commander on No. 214 (FMS) Sqn at the tail end of the War flying the B-17 Flying Fortresses out of RAF Oulton, to the north of Norwich. An exceptional pilot with a liking for fast cars, particularly American built large cars, Bob, as he was always known, had led a colourful life, both in the Service and in his personal life. Trained to fly in the USA, where he remained as a Qualified Flying Instructor (QFI), he had married a New York showgirl, the first of his three wives. In the RAF, after his QFI tour in the US, he had flown some 30 odd Operations over Germany during the War, and well over 300 sorties on the Berlin Air Lift in 1948. Court martialled twice, Bob was very much 'his own man', with a tendency towards stubbornness and irascibility, but always well meaning. In the early 1950s he was the personal pilot to ACM Sir Robert Foster, CinC Home Command/RAF Germany. Recommended by his ACM, Bob was awarded the AFC. But, in his usual stubborn way, Bob would only accept the award provided his Master Navigator Warrant Officer (WO), who had been with him throughout his tour and before, was also awarded the AFM! Bob Davis was also well known to Jack Dixon and agreed to take on the role of Treasurer for the Association.

Pilot, Sqn Ldr Godfrey 'Moff' Moffatt had completed three tours on No. 214 (FMS) Sqn flying Victor Mk1 tankers, the first two as a co-pilot and then as a captain. After a ground tour, he then returned as a Flight Commander and finally as the Sqn CO in the last year of the Sqn's existence until it finally disbanded in January 1977. With so much correspondence to handle from Association Members, Moff took on the job of Membership Secretary. Sqn Ldr Vic Pheasant MBE had been the last AEO Leader on the Sqn, and then Flight Commander when Moff assumed the role of Sqn CO. He also joined the embryonic Committee to provide whatever additional assistance that might be required and to help in defining the 'way ahead'.

RAF Marham had been the last operational base for No. 214 (FMS) Sqn flying Victor Mk1 tankers before disbanding in 1977, and many former Sqn members were still based there flying the Victor Mk2 tanker variant. With that association, agreement was given by the Station Commander to hold the 2nd Reunion meeting there, which was convened as a lunch time and afternoon event in the Spring of 1990. It was agreed by those present that: a formal Constitution should be evolved, with a registered membership listing and an annual subscription to cover

administrative costs: that there should be an annual Reunion, and the production of a Newsletter at periodic intervals through the year. The organisation of the Association was also re-vamped: MRAF Sir Michael Beetham assumed the role of the Association President, with Air Chief Marshal (ACM) Sir David Parry-Evans GCB CBE, another former Squadron CO, becoming an Association Vice-President together with Air Vice-Marshal (AVM) Eric Macey, a former pilot on the Squadron and Gp Capt Ken Batchelor. Sqn Ldr Jack Dixon assumed the role of the Committee Chairman, Sqn Ldr Vic Pheasant took over as Treasurer from Sqn Ldr Bob Davies, Gp Capt Charles Lilley (a former wartime pilot on the Sqn) joined the Committee as Vice-Chairman; also joining the Committee, Wg Cdr Bill Wilkinson, a former Stirling Bomb Aimer on the Sqn in 1942/43. (When, due to the very heavy losses, the Squadron was taken off front-line bombing operations, among the secondary tasks that it undertook was to supplement the work of 161 Squadron in dropping supplies to the Resistance and Maquis organisations in France. Despite the dangers, Bill had relished sitting in the nose bomb aimer's position while zooming at night at very low level over the French moonlit countryside and map reading for the navigator.)

Mr Jock Whitehouse also joined the Committee as the Squadron Historian. Born and raised in the 'Black Country', Jock had been a former military police dog handler. Moving into civilian life, he worked in the agricultural world, becoming a specialist adviser in pig farming, which brought him to live in Suffolk near to RAF Stradishall. He had witnessed the last few years of Stradishall being the RAF's No.1 School of Air Navigation, then it transitioning into being one of HM's prisons. With his particular interest in aviation from WWII days, he joined a colleague, who was compiling what would become the official history of RAF Stradishall, particularly during WWII. They set about researching and recording the history of the base. For the first few years of the war, from February 1940 until October 1942, No. 214 (FMS) Squadron was based at RAF Stradishall. From his researches on Stradishall and the operations over Europe flown from the base, Jock had become quite familiar with the history of the Sqn, which became even more so when he was involved in compiling the official WWII history of RAF Chedburgh, which is where the Squadron was based after Stradishall. Enquiries had started to come in from families, sons/daughters/grandchildren, seeking information of men who had served on the Squadron during the war, especially those who were Killed In Action (KIA). Jock, in his meticulous and dedicated way, had fielded most of these enquiries, a task that he undertook subsequently during the whole existence of the Association, and even after its demise. In the early days, he had been of great help to Harold Bidmead in assembling the list of names and addresses of surviving Squadron personnel to whom Harold had first written proposing the formation of the Association. Jock also undertook the research of finding the location of all the graves of former Squadron personnel that had been KIA, in support of Sqn Ldr Bob Davies who had been determined to photograph them all, a mammoth task long before they were available on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) web site.

Whereas the 1st inaugural and 2nd Reunions and AGMs had been day events of mainly Full members, with some accompanied by their wives, it was decided to make the 1991 3rd AGM and Reunion a weekend event over the period 4th – 6th October. The AGM being planned to be held again at RAF Marham on the afternoon of Friday 4th October, with the Reunion dinner to be held on the Saturday evening at a nearby hotel. With its ability to offer advantageous costings and booking arrangements, the SAGA organisation was approached to offer a suitable hotel, which

would give a more local proximity to some of the East Anglian airfields used by the Squadron during WWII, as well other places of interest and also good shopping facilities for the ladies. SAGA chose the Maids Head hotel in the eastern area of Norwich and undertook to make the appropriate booking arrangements; a coach was to be provided for transit to/from Marham on the Friday afternoon. Hosted by No. 55 Squadron in their crew room, the AGM was held in the Marham main briefing room. The principle item for discussion and agreement was the draft Constitution which would define the form that the Association would take, and the election of the Committee. Also at that meeting, a desire was expressed by Members for the Committee to consider the possibility of holding a Reunion on the other side of the country to be more accessible to Members living in that area. The afternoon at Marham concluded with a visit to the Officers' Mess bar for the 'Happy Hour', which, for some, had many pleasant memories of times past.

RAF Brize Norton, located between Oxford and Cirencester and a huge former United States Air Force base and later the home of the RAF's fleet of transport aircraft, was also the home of the VC10 tanker fleet and where a fair number of former No. 214 (FMS) Sqn personnel were based. It also had a large amount of Officers' Mess accommodation and, somewhat conveniently, it was also commanded by a former Squadron pilot, then Group Captain Keith Filbey, personally known to members of the No. 214 (FMS) Squadron Association Committee. In their considerations of trying to meet the desire to hold a Reunion 'on the other side of the country', Brize Norton seemed an eminent choice. The Station Commander was approached and he agreed to an informal Reunion and dinner being held there on 15th/16th May 1992. With over 90 Full and Associate Members in attendance, the Friday afternoon visit included a viewing of the VC10 tanker and a briefing on tanker operations. The evening dinner in the Officers' Mess 'was an altogether splendid occasion', with the Mess staff leaving 'no doubt that high standards and kind consideration are still a priority'. The Association Vice President, ACM Sir David Parry-Evans gave a 'most interesting and stimulating' after-dinner speech. The evening concluded with a 'lengthy session of reminiscences in the bar'. Not a lot had changed!

The formal 1992 4th Reunion and AGM were held at the University Arms in Cambridge over the weekend 2nd – 4th October, to be organised again through the SAGA company. In mind was its



nearby location to the famous Eagle pub with the well known 'RAF Bar' at the back, with the cigarette smoke coloured ceiling adorned with signatures and 'frescos', some featuring the female form, which was also much frequented by the US airmen in WWII. This weekend also allowed attendance at the unveiling of the RAF Chedburgh memorial on the afternoon of Sunday 4th October. The Association Historian had been closely involved in compiling the history of RAF Chedburgh as an operational airfield, and was where the Squadron was based through 1942/3 and from where some 395 aircrew lost their lives when flying on operations from the base. The Reunion dinner was held on the Saturday evening but, most inconveniently, it was held in a room with another event also taking place which rather restricted the conviviality of the evening, much to the displeasure of the Chairman, Jack Dixon.

The 5th Reunion and AGM, held in October 1993, returned to RAF Brize Norton with some 116 Full and Associated Members in attendance. It had been a busy year for the Association: The Chedburgh unveiling and memorial dedication to those who had lost their lives flying from the RAF base in WWII was performed by Association Vice President, and former Station Commander, Gp Capt Ken Batchelor (who, sadly, was to die in February the following year.)



Notification was given of an annual memorial service for a No. 214 (FMS) Squadron crew, who crashed in France in August 1943, at their graves in the French village of La Bussière-sur-Ouche, to the south-west of Dijon. Details were given of two other memorial projects of WWII RAF bases from which No.

214 (FMS) Squadron had operated – RAF Oulton and RAF Stradishall, that were to reach their fruition in May of 1994. Proposals were put forward to bring forward the 1994 Reunion and AGM to May to coincide with one of these memorial dedications. However, it was agreed by a majority vote to remain holding the 1994 function in October and return to the Maids Head Hotel in Norwich. Members were also advised by the Chairman, Jack Dixon, that a memorial to the Association founder, Harold Bidmead, had been agreed at the suggestion of the Chedburgh All Saints Church Vicar to be in the form of a plaque on the church organ; this would be a fitting tribute as Harold had been a builder of organs in his civilian occupation.



The October 1994 6th Reunion and AGM was duly held at the historic Maids Head Hotel in Norwich. The AGM endorsed the appointment as Vice-Chairman of Gp Capt Charles Lilley, who had done much to facilitate the current Reunion and AGM at the Maids Head Hotel, and Bill Wilkinson as the Treasurer, having previously been the auditor of the accounts, which was assumed by Vic Pheasant, the retiring Treasurer. Despite his busy schedule, the Association President, MRAF Michael Beetham, was able to attend the meeting and expressed his satisfaction at the progress the Association had made, and the success of its various activities. He stressed the need for a better understanding of the efforts and successes of Bomber Command, not only in WWII, despite the slur cast on the Command and MRAF Sir Arthur Harris in a recent Canadian made film, but also after the war, particularly that of the V Force. He also felt that

effort should be put in to encourage former members of the Squadron post wartime, and particularly during the V Force era, to join the Association and attend the Reunions and AGMs. (Despite this becoming a re-occurring plea at future AGMs, the Association activities were always to be dominated by its wartime members until the final years of its existence.)

There was much discussion on the format of future Reunions and AGMs; the pros & cons of holding meetings on weekdays or weekends; venues – an RAF station or hotel; luncheon instead of a dinner. The upshot was that the decision on these elements of the Reunion would left to the Committee to decide. Thus, subsequently, with the majority of Reunion attendees being satisfied with the Maids Head Hotel, it was decided to hold the 1995 7th Reunion event in the same format and at the same hotel. This hotel was well known to the wartime Association members, as mentioned, being close to several RAF bases from which the Squadron flew from in the wartime years; in fact the Reunion weekend for one couple coincided with their wedding anniversary, and it so happened that they had held their wedding reception in the hotel. When this came to the notice of the hotel management, they presented the couple with a dainty piece of crockery, found in the hotel crockery room that would have been in use at the time of the couple's wartime wedding reception.

The next ten years or so of the Association's existence were to be its halcyon years. With most of the Members of wartime vintage being now in their 70s, and with a small cadre of members from the Valiant/Victor years, the Reunions and AGM were well attended events. The spirit of friendship and camaraderie that Harold was so anxious to foster was readily apparent as Members and guests shared reminiscences of their wartime experiences. Although the actual AGM and Reunion dinner was on the Saturday night, most attendees made it a weekend occasion allowing them to visit old haunts and other places of interest in the area. Wartime members of the RAF, both ground crew and aircrew, had come from all corners of the Commonwealth, so mixed aircrews of airmen, mainly from Canada, Australia, and New Zealand with their British counterparts, were quite common, and was so on the wartime No. 214(FMS) Sqn. In early 1991, Harold Ferguson from Toronto had placed an advertisement in the Flypast magazine seeking to contact members of his 1945 crew. This was spotted by Bob Davis who contacted him. One of his crew members he identified as Flying Officer 'Chuck' Lilley. As mentioned, Group Captain Charles Lilley was an active member of the Association Committee, helping to organise the annual Reunion and AGM. A warm, friendly and gregarious chap, Charles was, nonetheless, a man of the 'old school' and was always known as 'Charles'. So it was not without a little trepidation that he was asked if, during his wartime service, he had been known as 'Chuck'. His reply 'Well, as a matter of fact old boy....!' With fellow Canadian, Jack Henderson, the crew's pilot/captain, Harold was able to locate most of his wartime crew and they all became regular attendees at the Reunions/AGM. Some of the former wartime members of the Squadron would casually relate quite remarkable stories – like the former Air Gunner who had completed three tours of 30 Ops before he reached the age of 21, which was unbeknown to his family who lived in Liverpool! It was quite a journey to get home from his East Anglia bases; but he ran an Austin 7 car and had an extra fuel tank fitted into the boot. With both tanks full – of aviation petrol, he was able to make the journey to Liverpool and halfway back, where he was able to refill his petrol tanks courtesy of an American friend who ran a US fuel dump in the Midlands!

The 1995 7th Reunion and AGM were duly held at the Maids Head Hotel in the same format as the previous year, but in the month of September (hopefully for attendees to enjoy better weather). Jack Dixon was unable to attend and Chair the meeting due to the very serious illness of his wife Valerie, sadly to be terminal, so the meeting was Chaired by Charles Lilley. Despite a plea for volunteers to come forward for the Committee, none were forthcoming, so the current Committee was re-elected unopposed. An increasingly major part of the AGMs was the recounting of enquiries, usually by Jock Whitehouse who mainly handled these enquiries, most often from families seeking information on the fate of their next-of-kin/relatives who had served on the Squadron during the war. As the Speaker at the Reunion dinner, Jock gave a résumé of his military career and explained how he had become so knowledgeable about the Squadron through his RAF Stradishall and Chedburgh work. He also outlined how he researched and replied to this increasing number of enquiries, and was conscious of how meaningful it was to the recipients; thus, the need for diligence, but also the increasing workload.

The Maids Head Hotel and its Norwich environs were becoming a very familiar venue for the annual Reunion and AGM, as it was for the 1996 (8th) event again held in the month of September. Conveniently having a number of reception rooms, the AGM would be held in one of the smaller rooms on the Saturday afternoon, typically the Erpingham Room, with the pre-dinner Sherry Reception (now traditionally paid for out of the Association funds) held in the rather



splendid oak panelled, thus unsurprisingly called, Oak Room, and the Gala Dinner in the much larger Minstrel Room. Again, at the AGM, with no volunteers forthcoming, the Association Committee was re-elected en masse, although Moff re-iterated his desire to retire from the Committee due to an increasing workload from his other activities. The Treasurer reported a healthy bank balance in his presentation of accounts, although there was a certain amount of tardiness among the Association membership in the payment of the £5 annual subscription. Association ties, in various formats, remained available,

as well as lapel and jacket badges, car stickers and table coasters. Jock Whitehouse reported a greater interest from families in ‘what their relatives did’ during WWII, in his discourse of the increasing list of enquiries he had received, which he felt was a good thing and a healthy sign in view of the current denigrating views of the media on the WWII RAF bombing campaign. Sadly, the Chairman reported an increasing number of Association members who had passed away since the previous meeting.

The speakers for the Gala dinner were a dual effort: Jack Newman described his experiences earlier in the war from a navigator’s viewpoint, and the Chairman, Jack Dixon, recalled his experiences in ‘Special Ops’. The weekend activities also included a visit to the embryonic RAF No. 100 Group Museum at the Norwich Aviation Museum, the former RAF Horsham St Faith in Norfolk. This was the fruition of the work of Association members Martin Staunton and his sister Eileen Boorman who had a brief wartime marriage to Flying Officer Stafford Sinclair DFM before he lost his life with his crew in a March 1945 crash flying in a No. 214 Squadron B-17 Flying Fortress.

The year 1997 was a significant year in the history of No. 214 (FMS) Squadron; it was the 80th year since the Squadron was formed in December 1917 as No. 14 Squadron of the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS), becoming No. 214 Squadron when the RNAS was combined with the Royal Flying Corps to become the Royal Air Force on 1st April 1918. It was also the 20th year since the Squadron was disbanded on 28th January 1977. In recognition of these facts, it was decided to make the 1997 Reunion weekend a more significant and memorable event. Also, as RAF Marham had been the last base for the Squadron, and where it had been finally disbanded, it seemed appropriate that 1997 9th Reunion and AGM should again be held at RAF Marham. Project managed by Godfrey Moffatt and Vic Pheasant, permission was obtained from the Station Commander, Gp Capt M Prissick, to hold the AGM and Gala dinner at the Station on Friday 17th October. On the Saturday a formal visit was planned to the No. 100 Group Museum at the Norwich Aviation Museum to include a light lunch, and a Sunday visit to the morning service at Ely Cathedral where the Squadron standard was laid up. Attendees, not living locally or accommodated in the Marham Mess, were booked into the Dukes Head Hotel on the Kings Lynn Tuesday Market Square. A coach was provided to convey Kings Lynn based attendees to/from Marham on the Friday and the Norwich museum on the Saturday; travel to Ely on the Sunday was through personal arrangement. Through the offices of AVM Eric Macey, ACM Sir Lewis Hodges agreed to attend as the guest speaker at the Gala dinner from his Special Forces war time experiences and his Chairmanship of the RAF Escaping Society. All the arrangements were to be fulfilled as planned and the whole weekend was rated as a great success.

At the AGM in the Marham Officers' Mess on the Friday afternoon, the Chairman Jack Dixon reported that the Vice Chairman, Gp Capt Charles Lilley, was retiring from the Committee on medical grounds, and that the Secretary, Godfrey Moffatt, who for some years had been seeking a replacement, was to be replaced by Martin Staunton. (Unfortunately, Martin was unable to take up the position due his need to care for his sister, Eileen Boorman, who had fallen seriously ill which, sadly, became terminal. So 'Moff' was to remain in post for another year.) The accounts were duly adopted with a plea from the Treasurer for Members to pay their subscriptions by Bankers Order, and the Historian's report on enquiries that he had dealt with was an even longer list than previously. Anticipating the evening's Gala Dinner event, in conclusion the Chairman commented that the Association was to be truly honoured: 'How many reunions can boast the attendance of a Marshal of the Royal Air Force, two Air Chief Marshals, and two Air Vice-M Marshals?'





*Back Row L-R: Jock Whitehouse (Historian), Mrs Prissick, Gp Capt Prissick (Stn Cdr) Wg Cdr Bill Wilkinson (Treasurer), Sqn Ldr Jack Dixon (Chairman), Walter Rowley.
Middle Row L-R: Sqn Ldr Godfrey Moffatt (Secretary), Mrs Jennifer Moffatt, Mrs Pat Whitehouse, AVM Eric Macey, Mrs Wilkinson, Sue Pheasant, Sqn Ldr Vic Pheasant
Front Row L-R: Mrs Macey, AVM Jack Furner, Lady Beetham, MRAF Sir Michael Beetham, Lady Hodges, ACM Sir Lewis Hodges, Lady Parry-Evans, ACM Sir David Parry-Evans*

The Gala dinner on the Friday evening, in the splendour of the spacious Marham Officers' Mess dining room, was a delightful and splendid event. With many Messes at RAF stations coming under civilian contract catering at the time, Marham, as the air-head for the Royal residence at Sandringham, had retained all Service personnel for the kitchen and dining room duties; and as it was the Royal air-head, these personnel were some of the best in their respective trade professions. So, not only was the meal served to be of a high quality, it was served with great precision and coordination - a unique experience for some of the Associations wartime members.

The 1998 10th Reunion and AGM was again held at RAF Marham on 25th September 1998, but was a much more muted event with none of the Air Officers in attendance. But the regular overseas attendees made their usual pilgrimage to attend, among them: Harold Ferguson from Canada and Gerhard and Sissie Heilig from Austria. This was to be Moff's last AGM as Secretary, finally to be replaced by Martin Staunton. Former Crew Chief on the Squadron, Roy Monk, volunteered to join the Committee to drum up support from former ground crew, and alongside him, Ian Coates, also a former engineer on the Squadron, volunteered to join the Committee and undertook the duties of 'stores and supplies officer' (ties, badges, stickers etc) from Jock Whitehouse. Flt Lt John Gulliver, a former Navigator Plotter on the Squadron, also volunteered to join the Committee. The Chairman appraised the meeting that he had been 'in the Chair' for ten years now; recognising that a peace-time 'tour' length was three years, he was now in his fourth 'tour' so it was about time that he was 'rested' – unfortunately for him, to no avail. So, together with the remaining Committee members, all were elected/re-elected en masse. There was considerable discussion about the location and organisation for the 11th AGM and Reunion in 1999, with Moff no longer able to be the organiser. Several venues were suggested and discussed, but in the end it was agreed that the decision would be left to the Committee. In his usual lengthy report on the enquiries that he had dealt with and some other matters, the Association Historian also reported on the recovery of an important piece of Squadron history:

In November 1941, flying a No. 214 (FMS) Sqn Wellington, pilot, Flt Lt Lucian Ercolani, son of the founder of the Ercol furniture company, had to ditch his badly damaged aircraft in the North Sea while returning from a bombing raid on a German target. Though injured, with his crew, he



was able to scramble into their multi seat dinghy. Undiscovered, they were adrift for nearly sixty hours, drifting into the English Channel and eventually beaching on the Isle of Wight. The crew's survival was not only due to Lucian Ercolani's piloting skills, but his inspirational leadership during their ordeal. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for his 'display of courage, initiative and devotion to duty worthy of the highest praise.' Over the near three days of being 'missing in action' Ercolani's family feared the worst - that he had been lost. In recognition and celebration of his 'miraculous' survival, Lucian Ercolani senior had one of his top craftsman

create two carvings in oak of the No. 214 (FMS) Sqn crest, one retained in the family and the other presented to the Squadron. Fast forward to the run-up for the Squadron disbandment in January 1977: all of the Squadron's trophies, silver, memorabilia and assorted artefacts collected over the years, had to be disposed of. Much of the silver remained at Marham, most of the items of memorabilia and artefacts were auctioned off to fund, in part, the Squadron's disbandment events, the remainder was sent to the RAF central storage facility at Quedgeley – and one or two items of significance just went 'missing'. The Ercolani crest was one of them. So there was some satisfaction when Jock was able to announce that it had been 'found' still in its carrying case by one of Moff's colleagues and returned to Jock. Regretfully, it had been painted in part, which Jock had made some attempt to remove. He was able to contact Lucian Ercolani, now in charge of the company after his father who died in 1976 and, surprised and delighted at its recovery, requested Jock to send it to him for expert full restoration, which was duly accomplished. The crest was put on display at all future Reunions.

The 1999 and 11th Reunion and AGM 30th September returned again to the Maids Head Hotel in Norwich, and this was to be the venue of choice for the next few years. As for the previous Reunions, this had become a two/three night weekend event with hotel rates being negotiated accordingly. Many attendees would arrive on the Friday, with the AGM and Gala dinner being held on the Saturday, and the Sunday free for members to visit old haunts as they might wish. The Saturday events followed the same format - the AGM in a side room on the Saturday afternoon, pre-dinner Sherry Reception in the Oak Room, and the Gala Dinner in the Minstrel Room. With many Association members being regular attendees at the Reunion, they became quite convivial events as members greeted each other from their meeting at previous Reunions.



This was especially so in the period after the Gala dinner. On occasions when a pianist was present and could be persuaded to play, a sing-song would develop with some couples taking to the dance floor. At the AGM, the Chairman, Jack Dixon, noted that, inadvertently and unknowingly, the October date of previous Reunions had clashed with that of the popular and well attended Air Gunners Association, which had given some No. 214 (FMS) Association members a difficult choice. With this in mind, it was planned that the 2000 AGM and Reunion would be brought forward to September time as earlier.

No. 214 (FMS) Squadron RAF

President:
Marshal of the RAF Sir Michael Beetham GCB, CBE, DFC, AFC,
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SUMMER 2000 NEWSLETTER

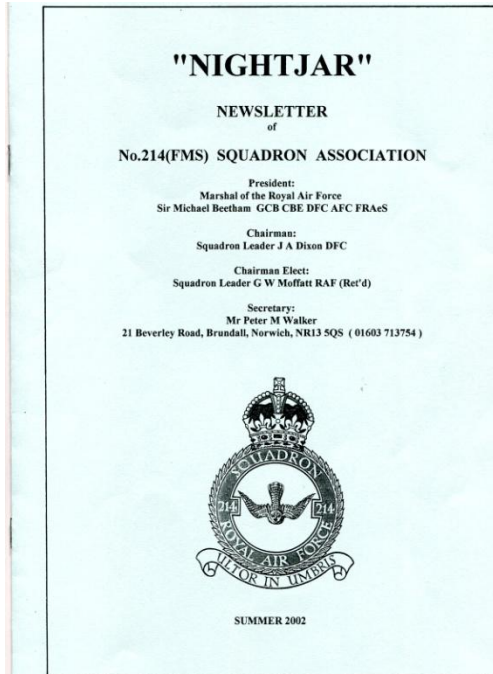


A 214 Squadron B17 showing the Radio Counter Measures aeriels.

In the winter period, 1999/2000, Martin Staunton had finally taken over as Secretary to the Association, with Moff continuing as Membership Secretary. In the Spring of 2000 Martin produced his first Newsletter in the form of an A5 size booklet. In addition to a record of the 1999 AGM and Reunion, it also contained snippets of information on No. 214 wartime operations and personnel, news of book releases and other items of interest. This was followed by another booklet in the Summer with further items of interest submitted by members as well as the Committee. Unfortunately, Martin's short period in office ended in the late summer when he succumbed to a debilitating illness which forced his resignation. Once again Moff stepped into the breach, resuming the full duties of Association Secretary.

The 1999 12th AGM and Reunion took place on Saturday 30th September 2000 following the usual format. The Treasurer, Bill Wilkinson, reported that the accounts remained in good shape; the Historian, Jock Whitehouse, recounted the significant activities and enquiries that he had been involved with over the preceding year. He was also warmly thanked by the Chairman, Jack Dixon, for his efforts in organising the Maids Head Hotel facilities for this and the previous AGM and Reunion. Roy Monk reported that he had made quite significant progress in recruiting former Squadron ground crew to be Association members, several of whom were present at the meeting and were duly welcomed by the Chairman. The Chairman was also able to advise that Peter Walker, a former engineer on the Squadron in the 1950s, had agreed to join the Committee as the Secretary, which, as it now stood, was re-elected into office en masse. At the Gala dinner, the Chairman as the speaker recounted the Association's development and history to date ending with the rather 'bomb shell' announcement that he would not be standing for office at the next AGM.

Peter Walker formally took office from Martin Staunton as Association Secretary on 1st February 2001. He was immediately immersed in organising the 13th AGM and Reunion at the Maids Head Hotel with the help and advice of Jock Whitehouse, the previous organiser of the last two functions. This was greatly helped by them both being resident in East Anglia and reasonably close to the Norwich venue. On 29th September 2001, some 86 Members and guests sat down for the Reunion Gala dinner, which was chaired by Sqd Ldr Godfrey Moffatt (Moff) as Acting Chairman in the absence of the Chairman, Jack Dixon, who was laid low with illness and unable to attend. (Moff subsequently assumed the office as Chairman, which was quite fitting in view of his strong connections with the Squadron having completed three tours as firstly Co-pilot, then Captain, and finally as Flight Commander and then Commanding Officer.) The speaker for the evening was Air Chief Marshal Sir Anthony Skingsley, GBE, KCB, a former Squadron Commander and an Honorary Vice President, who gave an amusing account of his RAF career especially his experience flying the Victor Mk1 tanker. The Association guest for the evening was Michael Rondot, the Norfolk based aviation artist (and former RAF Jaguar pilot) who offered one of his framed 'Victor' prints for auction signed by most of the members present at the dinner, the proceeds going to the Association funds. The evening ended with a most enjoyable 'sing-song'.



The Minutes of the 13th AGM were published in early 2002 in the first issue of the Peter Walker edited Newsletter, which he had called the 'Nightjar' in recognition of the bird featured in the No. 214 (FMS) Squadron official badge (motto 'Avenging in the shadows'). In addition to the AGM Minutes, the 10 page (19 sides) A4 size document also included the 2 page Historians report, the Secretary's report, a couple of articles, a few snippets of information and several pages of black & white photos, although not of great clarity. There was also a page of 'Help Required' from relatives seeking contact/information of personnel who had served on the Squadron. The Historian, Jock Whitehouse, had remarked on the increasing interest that there was in the activities and losses of Squadron personnel in the wartime years, not only their sons/daughters, but now grandchildren, nephews/nieces and other relatives. A further edition of the 'Nightjar' was issued in the Summer of 2002, in which the

Secretary gave notice of the 14th AGM and Reunion which was to be held again at the Maids Head Hotel on Saturday 28th September 2002. The Historian recorded several pages of 'Point of Interest', and the Treasurer lamented that with some 262 Members recorded on his books, only 122 had paid their £5 Subscription!

Peter Walker's Spring 2003 edition of the 'Nightjar' had a more 'classy' look, being printed on semi-gloss paper with pictures of much greater clarity. It recorded the Minutes of the 14th AGM and Reunion Gala dinner. With Jack Dixon still poorly and unable to attend, Godfrey Moffatt informed the meeting that Jack had formerly resigned as Chairman earlier in the year so Moff had retained the reins as Chairman but had to be formally elected into office, which was duly accomplished. With Vic Pheasant re-joining the Committee, the present incumbents were also re-elected into office. A signed copy of the M J F Bowyers book, 'The Stirling Story', had been obtained, to be signed by all those present and to be presented to Jack in appreciation of his guiding hand and long service to the Association. The Treasurer reported a fall in the monies held in the accounts due mainly to Members non-payment of their annual subscriptions and also an increase in expenses. A sad aspect was the continuing increase of the names of Members, in the 'In Memoriam' report, who had passed away, with over a dozen names being recorded.



Some 77 members and guests sat down for the 2002 Gala dinner, which Moff addressed as the 'after dinner speaker', in place of AVM Keith Filbey, a former pilot on the Squadron, who could not attend due to family reasons. Instead of relating some of his considerable tanking experiences, Moff spoke of his admiration for the wartime Bomber Command crews, their skill, determination and above all their bravery and self sacrifice. His toast was to the men and women of Bomber Command, especially those who did not return or were severely injured, in which he was joined and then warmly applauded. Over



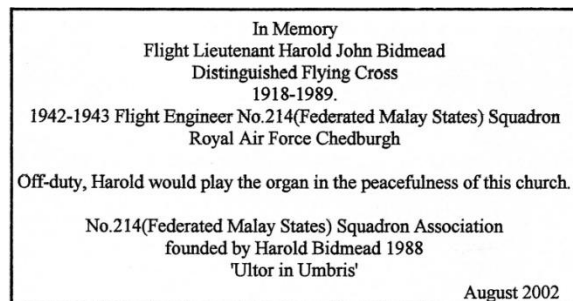
previous meetings and dinners, Jock had put on display some of the Squadron artefacts that he held. Despite Jock's non attendance (for the first time – attending a Singapore reunion of his Army Guard Dog Unit), these were again put on display by Peter Walker. In addition, a tradition had been established whereby Jock's daughter Keely had made a large cake for consumption with the after-dinner coffee at the gala. This too was duly given much appreciation by those

present. In addition to the 2002 AGM Minutes and the various reports and articles, the Spring 2003 'Nightjar' Newsletter recorded the full contact details of all Committee Members, and, reflecting on Moff's Gala Dinner speech, started a listing of the members of No. 214 (FMS) Squadron who were lost during WWII - either died or taken prisoner (POW). The names of the crews were taken (with his permission) from one of the volumes of W R (Bill) Chorley's series of books 'Bomber Command Losses 1939-45'.

Sadly, the 2003 15th AGM and Reunion suffered two major set-backs and did not get off to a good start when it was known that the Maids Head Hotel had managed to double book the Minstrel room for a wedding reception as well as the Association's Gala dinner. The alternative venue was the ground floor, awkwardly shaped, breakfast room in the older part of the hotel. Recognising that this room would significantly inhibit the grandness of the bride's probably most important day of her life, the Association conceded to accept the breakfast room for the Gala dinner – not without some strong words condemning the hotel inefficiency – the hotel agreed to pay for the pre-dinner sherry! In addition, Sqn Ldr Bob Anstee AFC AFM RAF (Rtd) was booked to give the after-dinner speech, relating his experiences in early 1952 (the early stages of the 'Cold War') flying in an American RB-45C four jet reconnaissance aircraft in a then top secret mission over the Soviet Union, which he titled 'Deep Penetration'. Unfortunately, just before the event, Bob was taken seriously ill and admitted into hospital (and, regretfully, subsequently died) and so was unable to give his presentation. Fortunately he had scripted his speech, which was made available and was read to the gathering by Jock Whitehouse. With two major events going on in the hotel, the meal service was very slow which, coupled with the reading of the speech, an enhanced raffle and an auction of a couple of select spirits in presentation boxes (by Norman Storey, also an experienced auctioneer), there was no time for the now customary 'sing-song' at the end of the evening. On the upside, it was good to see that the former Chairman, Jack Dixon, had recovered from illness, which had prevented his presence at the last two Reunions, and was now sufficiently recovered to be able to attend in his new status as an Honorary Vice-President. Jock put on display a selection of the Squadron artefacts he held, while his daughter, Keely, presented her customary No. 214 cake, with an even more elaborate decoration depicting the Federated Malay States 1941.

At the earlier AGM it was announced that the Committee member for 'Stores and Supplies', Ian Coates, was unable to attend the meeting due to illness, which also necessitated him to tender his resignation from the Committee. (Sadly, Ian subsequently succumbed to his illness and passed

away.) Although there was no immediate volunteer to replace him at the AGM, later after a little ‘persuasion’, Dave Parsons, a former Crew Chief on the Squadron, agreed to join the Committee and take his place. Illness also prevented the Treasurer, Bill Wilkinson, from attending, and he had also tendered his resignation from the Committee. His ‘Stand-in’ (and accounts auditor) Vic Pheasant presented his report, which was rather upbeat. It had been decided at an earlier Committee meeting that copies of the Newsletter ‘Nightjar’ would only be sent to those members that were ‘reasonably’ up to date with their Subscriptions, for which a slip to that effect had been inserted in the 2003 Summer/Autumn Newsletter. This elicited a strong response which resulted in a significant increase in the Association’s cash holdings. Frustratingly, the Chairman’s calls for a volunteer to replace Bill Wilkinson brought a negative response from those present. (Lack of committee volunteers proved to be the bane of many an association’s continued existence.) In later discussion it was agreed that Vic Pheasant would continue in the role of Treasurer through 2004, with John Gulliver agreeing to take over the position in 2005. (John was in the process of retiring from an over 35 year career in the RAF and re-settling in the



Isle of Wight and civilian life.) Jack Dixon asked whether anything had materialised regarding a plaque in Chedburgh church recording Harold Bidmead’s achievement in setting up the No. 214 (FMS) Squadron Association. Subsequently, Jock Whitehouse was able to confirm that a brass plaque, with wording approved by Harold’s wife Bettie, was on the wall just above the cabinet containing the book of remembrance.

Peter Walker’s Summer/Autumn 2004, well printed, edition of the Nightjar, at 16 pages, of Association information, news, articles and photos was the most comprehensive and attractive edition to date. It was also the most expensive to produce and distribute, despite only going to those Members reasonably up to date with their subscriptions, just over 200 copies. With the production of two editions, plus the usual Committee expenses, the Association annual expenditure was significantly exceeding the yearly income. This was the main topic for discussion at the March 2004 Committee meetings and at the later 16th AGM on Saturday 25th September 2004. After much discussion it was resolved to increase the yearly Association Subscription from £5 to £10, which some Members were already paying.

It was not without some deliberation, and a bit of trepidation, that the Committee had decided hold the 2004 16th AGM and Reunion again at the Maids Head Hotel, after the previous year’s debacle, on the basis that all prior events had gone well, that it was a popular venue, and ‘to give them another chance’. In the event, all went well, with the Maids Head staff up to their usual high standards, also providing, as a further conciliatory gesture, complementary pre-dinner sherry and table wine. MRAF Sir Michael Beetham, the Association President, was present for the Gala dinner, warmly welcomed by the Chairman. And Sqn Ldr Bob Tuxford, who completed two tours on the Squadron as co-pilot and then captain, was the after-dinner speaker relating his experiences and exploits in the 1982 South Atlantic, Falklands, ‘Black Buck Operations’, for which he was awarded the AFC.

The 2005 17th AGM and Reunion took place, as before, at the usual Maids Head Hotel on Saturday 24th September 2005. The Chairman considered that the Association was still ‘on the right track’, thanks to the ‘sterling work’ of the Committee. The Secretary advised that he had received some positive and encouraging feedback on the previous two issues of the Nightjar, which had been printed and distributed within budget. The Treasurer, now John Gulliver, reported that the Association accounts were now full computerised in the handover from Vic Pheasant; the funds held at just over £3,000 were in good shape; he intended to merge the two accounts (General and Reunion) in to one; and, to simplify the accounts, all stock holdings would be written down to zero. The nine man Committee, now joined by former Warrant Officer Shaun Broaders MSM MBE, and consisting now of Chairman – Godfrey Moffatt; Secretary – Peter Walker; Treasurer - John Gulliver, Historian – Jock Whitehouse; Stores – Dave Parsons; former Treasurers - Bill Wilkinson and Bob Davies; and Roy Monk were re-elected into office *en bloc* for another year by a ‘totally in-favour’ vote. At the end, the Chairman expressed his concerns about the long-term future of the Association. With a membership of just over 200, most Members were of the wartime vintage; new members were still being recruited, but they too were invariably of the wartime years. With the inevitable reduction in membership as nature took its course, and the reluctance of the post war Valiant/Victor fraternity to join apart from a small cadre, there were concerns about the way ahead for the Association. Thus, it had been decided to prepare a planning document titled ‘No. 214 Squadron Association, the Way Ahead’ which would be sent to every current Member ‘in an endeavour to seek their views and thoughts with questions on how they think the future should develop.’ Mirroring the Chairman’s concerns, a reduced attendance of 60 Members and guests sat down for the Reunion dinner. MRAF Sir Michael Beetham was again in attendance; and the after-dinner speaker was Air Vice-Marshal Keith Filbey who regaled the diners with amusing tales of his time on the Squadron as a co-pilot and captain as well as other topical embellishments.

Twenty Members were present at the 18th AGM on Saturday 23rd September 2006 again at the Maids Head Hotel. In the list of the nine Members that had passed away in the last year, several of which were regular Reunion attendees, was Sqn Ldr Jack Dixon DFC, the previous Chairman, who died age 85 in January 2006. The Chairman stated that the Association was in ‘a healthy state, both financially and in membership’ which had slightly increased to 215 Members. With the Committee being joined by Wg Cdr Alan Mawby OBE, a former Victor captain on the Squadron, they were re-elected into office for a further year. (Alan Mawby had agreed to take over the Chairmanship of the Association from Godfrey Moffatt at the 2007 AGM and Reunion.) But it was the reduced number of 54 Members and guests that sat down for the Reunion dinner. Group Captain David Seward AFC was the guest speaker giving an illustrated talk on his experiences flying the English Electric Lightning aircraft.

In line with previous years, the 19th AGM of No. 214 (FMS) Squadron Association was again held at the Maids Head Hotel, Norwich, on Saturday 22nd September 2007. Despite this being the 90th anniversary year of the Squadron’s formation and the 30th year since its disbandment, this was very much a low key affair compared to the events 10 years earlier. All AGMs opened with the list of apologies from members unable to attend, followed by the ‘In Memoriam’ list of those members who had passed away since the last meeting. This year the latter was a rather poignant list as it included the names of four men who had had a significant impact on the formation and furtherance of the Association: AVM Jack Furner, an Honorary Vice President and strong

Association supporter; Sqn Ldr Bob Davies, first Treasurer and long time Committee member whose legacy was the collection of photographs he had taken of the known graves of all No. 214 Sqn Members who had perished in WWII (now in the guardianship of the Association Historian, Jock Whitehouse); Dave Parsons, Committee Member for 'Stores and Supplies (task taken over by John Gulliver); and Martin Staunton, briefly a former Association Secretary, and joint founder of the 100 Group Museum.

At a Committee meeting earlier in the year, the then Chairman (Godfrey Moffatt) had suggested the placement of a memorial stone to No. 214 (FMS) Squadron to be erected in the RAF section of the National Memorial Arboretum (NMA) at Alrewas, near Lichfield, Staffordshire. Jock Whitehouse had undertaken to lead the project and his investigations had indicated a provisional cost of £2,500 to include the placement of the granite stone. This was the main item on the Agenda for this 19th AGM. The proposal was put to the meeting for approval, which was unanimous. Jock had prepared an approximate actual size illustration of the proposed wording, which was shown to the members present. The Treasurer, John Gulliver, advised that £1,000 could be made available from Association funds towards the cost; the Chairman (now Alan Mawby) considered that the balance of £1,500 could be raised by donations from Members and other sources. For the Committee elections: Alan Mawby was unanimously and formally elected to be the new Association Chairman; Moff, the previous Chairman, had agreed to remain on the Committee; Bill Wilkinson had tendered his resignation; and it was proposed to invite John and Carol Edwards, who ran the No. 214 Squadron website, to join the Committee. With no further volunteers to join the Committee, the current and proposed incumbents were unanimously elected/re-elected into office for a further year.

There was a further reduction in the number of attendees (37) for the Reunion dinner, so it was held in the smaller, but attractive hotel Oak Room. The dinner was graced by the presence of MRAF Sir Michael and Lady Beetham. The outgoing Chairman, Sqn Ldr Godfrey 'Moff' Moffatt, was presented with a bottle of malt whisky in appreciation for his leadership through his five years of Association chairmanship. The speaker was Gp Capt Phil Osborn, Officer Commanding RAF Marham, who gave an illustrated talk on the role played by the 21st century RAF in deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. A main base for the Tornado aircraft, his Station employed over 3,000 staff, one of the biggest employers in East Anglia injecting many millions into the local economy.

Over the past several years, the editorship and production of Peter Walker's Nightjar newsletter had been well appreciated by the Members. However, one of the concerns expressed by the Treasurer at the pre-AGM Committee meeting was the rising cost of its bi-annual printing and distribution. This was resolved by an agreement that Peter Walker would continue to edit and provide the material for the newsletter, which he would then forward to Vic Pheasant who would convert it into a computerised format for printing, assembly and distribution by John Gulliver, who had, for some time, provided printing services for the Association (membership cards, name tags, menu cards and seating plans etc.) It was in this form that the Winter/Spring 2008 Newsletter was provided to Members. In this edition, in an appeal for donations, the Chairman gave a fuller description of the proposed memorial stone to be placed in the National Memorial Arboretum at Alrewas. Designed by Jock Whitehouse, with his artistic flair and draughtsmanship, and in line with the rules set by the Arboretum, the memorial would take the



form of a block of rough-hewn natural granite approximately 91cm high by 76cm wide (3ft by 2ft 6in) with a rustic edge; the front face of the stone would have a smooth, slightly inset, central panel on which the details of the Squadron's history would be engraved together with a dedication to all those who have served on the Squadron. The layout and wording was an iterative process between Jock Whitehouse and Alan and Diane Mawby to determine actual content, final script, spelling, grammar - word-by-word and dot-by-dot before a clearance for cutting was given; it just had to be right for posterity as there would be no second chance.

The 20th AGM and Reunion dinner, at the Maids Head Hotel, was held on Saturday 27th September 2008. Appreciating the significance of the 20th anniversary of the formation of the Association, the Committee did consider the possibility of holding

the event at RAF Marham. However, the difficulties of reaching it for those dependent on public transport, with some attendees having to be accommodated off base with those attendant transport problems and, in particular the cautionary advice by the Station Commander that, for operational reasons, any Reunion would be subject to possible cancellation at very short notice, overall, the Committee considered that the advantages of the Maids Head in terms of its familiarity, location, and easy access to public transport, outweighed any other considerations.

The main Agenda item for the AGM was the arrangements for the unveiling and dedication service for the Squadron memorial stone at the Alrewas NMA. To encourage maximum attendance at the memorial dedication as well as the 2009 AGM and Reunion, and to minimise Members attendance costs, both events were planned to take place over a single weekend. To this end a suitable hotel was being sought in the Lichfield area. The date chosen was Saturday 18th July 2009. Furthermore, donations by Members had exceeded expectations, giving a small surplus over the initial required amount. Thus, to enable an extension to the event to cover a buffet lunch and associated facilities that were being planned, it was hoped that funds would be augmented by a grant being sought from the National Lottery Fund ('Awards for All'). The unveiling and dedication service would be held in the afternoon. MRAF Sir Michael Beetham would perform the unveiling ceremony and the Venerable Ray Pentland, Archdeacon for the Royal Air Force, had agreed to conduct the dedication service. The Reunion Dinner was held in the Oak Room with pre-dinner drinks in the adjoining Yard Bar. The guest speaker was Squadron Leader Tony Iveson, Chairman of the Bomber Command Association, to speak on his experiences with No 617 Squadron and the raids on the Tirpitz in 1944.



Nightjar

The Magazine of No 214 (FMS) Squadron Association - April 2009

214 (FMS) Squadron Memorial Dedication Edition



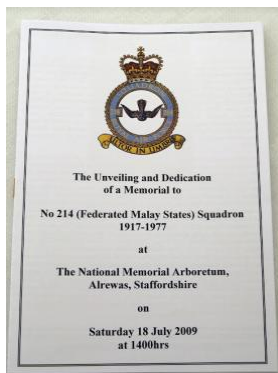
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DEDICATION OF No 214 (FMS) SQUADRON MEMORIAL AND ANNUAL REUNION SATURDAY 18 JULY 2009

Time seems to be moving on at an ever increasing rate and the unveiling and dedication of our new memorial at the National Memorial Arboretum at Alrewas, Staffordshire, on Saturday 18 July is drawing rapidly closer. Much has been going on behind the scenes. As well as the obvious activities associated with the design of the memorial, considerable effort has already gone into the arrangements for the day itself and into preparing a bid to 'Awards for All' for lottery cash to help defray the cost of the event. So far as the arrangements for the day itself are concerned, we had originally planned to have the unveiling and dedication ceremony at around 1200 or 1230, followed by a buffet lunch at the Arboretum. However, we realised that this would create difficulties for those who intend to travel to Alrewas on the Saturday morning. We have therefore agreed with the Arboretum that the unveiling and dedication will now take place at 1400, preceded by a buffet lunch in the marquee starting at 1230. Sir Michael Beetham, as President of the Association, has agreed to unveil the memorial, and the Venerable Ray Pentland, Archdeacon for the Royal Air Force, has agreed to conduct the dedication. The possibility of a flypast by the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight Lancaster is looking promising – so keep your fingers crossed! For those who will be staying at the Midland Hotel in Derby on the Friday night, the coaches will leave the hotel at 1030, arriving at Alrewas by 1130, and return to Derby leaving at 1530. This should allow plenty of time to see some of the many other memorials at the Arboretum, and especially the impressive new Armed Forces Memorial, as well as attend the buffet lunch and our own unveiling and dedication. Dress for the ceremony will be RAF No 1 Home Dress with medals or lounge suit/jacket and tie and the equivalent dress for ladies. Those in civilian dress are encouraged to wear their medals.

With the technology advance in the formatting and printing of documents, in the April 2009 issue John Gulliver re-vamped the layout of the Nightjar Newsletter and produced it in a Portable Document Format (pdf) enabling it to be distributed electronically, with a corresponding reduction in costs. In this edition, the Chairman gave further details for the memorial dedication service. The hotel chosen for the event was the Midland Hotel in Derby; its location next to the Derby railway station and close proximity to the M1 made for easier travel, and the Chairman was able to verify its good service from attendance at another squadron association reunion held there. A coach would be provided to convey Members staying in the hotel to the NMA at Alrewas. A main item in the Newsletter was a draft format of a revised Association Constitution. This had become necessary during the bid preparations seeking funding from the 'Awards for All' National Lottery Fund when it became clear that the Association's Constitution, written in the late 1980s, did not reflect the current

membership of the Association and imposed requirements that were now difficult to observe. The proposed changes to the Constitution were to be debated and agreed at the next AGM to be held at the Midland Hotel after the memorial dedication service.



Saturday 18th July 2009 was to be a big day, probably the most important day in the history of the No. 214(FMS) Squadron Association. While Jock Whitehouse had overseen the layout, sculpting and installation of the memorial stone at Alrewas, Godfrey Moffatt, who had suggested the concept of a memorial stone in the first instance, had been the focal point for the liaison with the NMA staff at Alrewas, the Midland Hotel staff in Derby, and for the transport arrangements. He had also been successful in seeking a grant from the 'Awards for All' National Lottery Fund, being awarded just less than £4,000, which covered the cost of all of the Alrewas activities, and the transportation costs, leaving an adequate amount for the future maintenance of the memorial by the NMA staff.

Despite heavy rain on the previous day, the Saturday was forecast to be cloudy but dry although rather breezy. More importantly, the ground in the memorial area was found to be firm underfoot. The location for the memorial in the RAF area was close to the Millennium Avenue, a short walk from the marquee where the buffet lunch was to be held, and in a lower area from where the imposing Royal Air Force Association memorial was in the process of being laid and erected; a fitting backdrop to the No. 214 memorial. There was a bit of a glitch in the memorial service arrangements when it was learnt that the person contracted to play the Last Post was



unable to attend for family reasons. On arrival at the NMA, it was noticed that a similar event was taking place with a splendidly red coated, soldier attired, chap playing the Last Post for their service. With a bit of quick thinking, he was approached and asked if he would

do the same for the No. 214 service, to which he agreed – albeit with a little financial inducement. As the service arrangements were being checked, it was noticed that very nearby there was a veteran Vernon HRD fully restored motor-cycle positioned close to the memorial site. On enquiry, rather poignantly, it was learnt that it been placed there by members of the Vincent Motor Cycle Owners Club to honour the memory of Squadron Leader William (Bill) Clarke who had been a Stirling pilot on No. 214 (FMS) Squadron flying out of Chedburgh in February 1943. Returning from a raid on Hamburg, his aircraft had been fatally damaged by enemy aircraft; he had given his life staying at the controls to save his crew. Regretfully, two of his crew perished with him, but three survived. In the 1930s, Bill Clarke had been a Director of the Vincent HRD company and had been very influential in the development of these iconic machines.



After a very pleasant and convivial buffet lunch, the over 170 Members and guests made their way along the Millenium Avenue to the memorial area for the start of the memorial service. Previous COs, Association President, MRAF Sir Michael Beetham, and Vice Presidents, ACMs Sir Anthony Skingsley and Sir David Parry-Evans, all in full ceremonial



uniform, and their wives, took their place in the front of the rows of chairs in the semi-circular layout. There had been some concern that the RAF Ensign covering the memorial stone would remain in place in the rather strong breeze until the unveiling. The service had been

programmed to open at 1400 (2pm) with a flypast by the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight but, to some consternation, they did not appear. By 1410, knowing their timing accuracy, it was concluded that there had been a change to the plan, so it was decided to start the dedication service conducted by Archdeacon for the Royal Air Force, the Venerable Ray Pentland. Following his words, voicing the opening of the dedication, to the loss of over 600 personnel of the Squadron in World War Two, the Chairman, Wing Commander Alan Mawby, also in full ceremonial uniform with a wreath in hand, invited the President to perform the unveiling. This was accomplished without mishap (the ensign had remained in place); the Chairman laid his

wreath, and the spoken dedication was completed. This was followed by an immaculate rendition of the two part Last Post and Reveille by the stand-in bugler. Following the National Anthem, and with appropriate background music (the RAF March Past, the Dambuster's March, and inevitably 'Those magnificent Men in their Flying Machines') with appropriate dignity, Members laid their own wreaths and flowers.



It was at this point the unmistakable sound of four Merlin engines was heard above the background music. Quickly spotted, it was, of course, the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight led by the Avro 'Lancaster', with the Supermarine 'Spitfire' in formation on one wing and the Hawker 'Hurricane' on the other. They performed, not one flypast, but three low passes to the delight of all those present. Despite the almost random timing, it could not have been better planned, and brought a magnificent finale to the memorial

dedication service. (It transpired that the dedication fly past had been coordinated with a major air show which had to change the show timings at the last minute leaving no time or ability to advise the dedication service organisers.)

There remained bit of time for the members and guests to view some of the many other memorials on the site, particularly the elevated circular edifice that is the very impressive Armed Forces Memorial which records the names of all military personnel



that have lost their lives in each year since the end of WWII, and which is updated annually.

Back at the hotel, the 21st AGM of the Association was convened. The opening 'In Memorium' recorded the loss of another 6 Members over the past year. Approval was given for the annual accounts and revised Association Constitution; a further donation of £No. 214 to the Bomber Command Memorial fund was approved; Vic Pheasant was re-elected to the Committee (he hadn't appreciated that he had left) and the current Committee members were also re-elected into office for a further year. There was a marginal vote on the preferred location for the 2010 AGM

and Reunion, which was slightly in favour of returning to the Derby location in view of its close proximity to the Alrewas NMA rather than the more familiar Maids Head Hotel in Norwich. For the slightly delayed Reunion dinner, some 70 Members and guests sat down to dine, after which they were privileged to hear first hand, from Sir Michael Beetham as CO of No. 214(FMS) Squadron in the late 1950s, how he led the introduction of in-flight refuelling in the RAF with the 'Valiant' V Bomber, which culminated in his record breaking, non-stop flight from the UK to Capetown in South Africa. The evening ended with an auction of a quantity of books which recorded the memoirs of the distinguished aviator in the first half of the 20th century, Air Commodore H G Brackley CBE, DSO, DSC, FRGS, FRAeS who, as Major Brackley, was the CO of No. 14 Squadron of the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) and then the first CO of the RAF's No. 214 Squadron on the RAF's formation from the amalgamation of the RNAS and the Army's Royal Flying Corps (RFC), on 1st April 1918. The over 200 copies,



enthusiastically auctioned by AVM Eric Macey, had been donated by his family with any sale proceeds being split between the Association and the RAF Benevolent Fund. Also on view, in display, were much of the Squadron Associations artefacts held by the Association Historian, Jock Whitehouse, brought in a fully loaded car with the help of the Secretary, Peter Walker. Thus, this most important day for the Association had come to a very satisfactory conclusion. All had gone (almost) to plan, the weather had

remained good, and the dedication service had been well attended. Most importantly there was now in place a permanent memorial to the achievements and standing of No. 214(FMS) Squadron, and in particular to those who had lost their life in its service.

As marginally decided at the 2009 AGM, the 2010 22nd AGM and Reunion was again held in midsummer at the Midland Hotel, Derby, on 17th July, however, there was a significant reduction in the numbers attending. So much so, that a further amendment to the Constitution was proposed and approved at the AGM, to cover the instance whereby there was insufficient numbers attending the AGM, as required by the Constitution, to form a quorum; this had been reduced from 20 in the former Constitution to 15 which, fortunately, was just the number present for the current AGM. Concurrent with the drop in numbers attending the Reunion was the increase in numbers of Members who had sadly passed away – 14 in the 2009/2010 period. Regretfully, the Chairman had to announce that John and Carol Edwards, who ran the Squadron web site, had submitted their resignation from the Committee. However, the Association would continue to contribute towards the cost of running the site. Otherwise the remaining Committee members were happy to be re-elected into office for a further year, which was duly proposed and approved. With all the memorial dedications bills now settled, the Treasurer was able to report there had been a marginal increase in Members funds to around £2.5K. The lengthy Historians report showed that there had been no reduction in the number of enquiries and events that he had been involved with over the previous year. On the Sunday there was an organised visit to the No.

214 memorial at the NMA at Alrewas, where the names of those members who had passed away in the previous yearly period were read out.

The 2011 AGM and Reunion virtually mirrored that of the previous year. Held on Saturday 9th July, again at the Hallmark Hotel in Derby, the 16 attendees of the 23rd AGM was just sufficient to make the required quorum and, regrettably, that number equalled the number of members that had passed away since the previous AGM in 2010. There was little to report: the accounts were 'sound' and were duly approved, and the existing Committee were re-elected into office for a further year. There was some discussion on where to hold the 2012 AGM and Reunion, the practical options being the current Hallmark Hotel or the Maids Head Hotel in Norwich, it being left to the Committee to make a final decision. Only 20 members and guests sat down for the dinner, now on one long table to aid towards a great conviviality. On the Sunday, most Members and guests were present at the No. 214 (FMS) Squadron memorial for the wreath laying in remembrance of those who had passed away.



Throughout this period, the Treasurer, John Gulliver, continued to formulate, print, assemble and post out to members the bi-annual Nightjar Newsletter, although not at regular intervals but when he had acquired sufficient material to make it of interest. Always included were the Minutes of the previous year's AGM and/or Committee meetings and a summary of the accounts; the names and some details of Members who had passed away since the previous issue; as usual the Historian Jock Whitehouse would provide a sizeable input on his dealing with enquiries as well as his activities with the former Squadron bases of Stradishall, Chedburgh and Oulton and their memorials; the Secretary, Peter Walker, would provide sundry items of interest usually associated with the Squadron's history and former personnel. In the Summer 2012 edition of the Nightjar, Alan Mawby, in his opening Chairman's letter, confirmed that the 2012 24th AGM and Reunion would be delayed until the Autumn in order not to clash with the dedication of the Bomber Command Memorial at the end of June and the Olympics in July and August. It was to be a return to the Maids Head Hotel in Norwich on Saturday 6th October. A visit to Blickling Hall was being planned for the Sunday morning to view the museum, which



recorded the history of RAF Oulton and the squadrons based there, and a visit to the rooms in the Hall used as dormitories by No No. 214 Squadron aircrew. The Newsletter also recorded details of an informal lunch for the Association President held earlier in the year in April at a north Norfolk hostelry attended by Members living in that locale. A similar event was held the previous year but the President had been unable to attend due to ill health.

The Spring 2013 edition of the *Nightjar* recorded the Minutes of the 2012 24th AGM, at which there were 'no surprises'. Roy Monk and Godfrey Moffatt had resigned from the Committee, and the remaining six incumbents, not unsurprisingly, were re-elected into office for a further year. Sadly the Minutes also recorded the loss of a further 14 Members of the Association. The sadness of *Anno Domini* taking its increasing toll over the past few years, and the loss of so many wartime members of the Association, was beginning to raise concerns about the future continuance of the Association.

In accordance with the agreed policy to alternate venues, the 2013 25th AGM and Reunion was back at the Midland Hotel in Derby on 5th October. As at the Maids Head Hotel the previous year, the majority of attendees were of the post WWII, Valiant/Victor era. Of the now 80 or so subscribing Members of the Association, nearly a quarter of them were in their nineties which precluded many of them from travelling. The AGM was a rather brief affair: the Chairman had little to report; he gave thanks for John Gulliver's efforts in keeping the *Nightjar* Newsletter going, which was well received by Members, especially those now unable to attend the Reunion. There had been another successful No. 214 (FMS) luncheon in May at the north Norfolk hostelry attended by the President, Sir Michael Beetham, who lived nearby. (Under doctor's orders, his frail health now prevented him from journeying far.) The Treasurer reported the accounts as being sound, and the Historian gave his usual brief rundown of the enquiries and activities he had been involved with over the past 12 months, with a fuller account covered in the next issue of the *Nightjar*. Most attendees were also at the National Memorial Arboretum the following day, Sunday, for the wreath laying at the No. 214 Squadron Memorial.

It was now becoming clear to the Committee that there was now some doubt about the Association's future viability. So many of the wartime Members had now passed away, while the remainder were at an age where travel to/from AGM/Reunion meetings was becoming too difficult, so much so only one or two of these gentlemen were able to attend these events. And, while there was a reasonable size cadre of post WWII Members, these Members were now in their 60s/70s and numbered under 30 compared to the probable hundreds of personnel that had served on the Squadron in the Valiant/Victor days. Thus, in the Spring 2015 edition of the *Nightjar* the Chairman made a plea for support to the AGM/Reunion events, at least until 2017 – the 100th anniversary of the Squadron's formation and the 40th anniversary of its final disbandment. The *Nightjar* report of the 26th (2014) AGM at the Maids Head Hotel the previous year might be described as 'routine' with all aspects in good order; there was no change in the six man Committee re-elected into office, and more inputs were being offered for the well received *Nightjar* on Members personal experiences while serving on the Squadron following the Chairman's pleas in several editions of the *Nightjar* emphasising the need to write of these experiences that future Squadron historians would benefit from. (The wartime history of the Squadron had been covered in the 2006 publication of 'Avenging in the Shadows' written by Ron James.) On the Sunday of the 2014 Reunion in Norwich, Shaun Broaders had arranged for a private tour of the Air Defence Radar Museum at Neatishead, known to many in the Valiant/Victor in-flight refuelling era when it was a Master Radar Station under whose radar control many of these operations were conducted.

Among those in the 'In Memoriam' section of the Spring 2015 *Nightjar*, sadly, was that of 89 year old Gerhard Heilig. He had been a founder Member and stalwart supporter of the

Association having assisted Harold Bidmead when he was setting it up in the 1980s. He and his wife Sissy made an annual pilgrimage from his home in Vienna to England and Norfolk to attend the AGMs and Reunions until he was prevented by ill health. As an Austro-Hungarian teenager in the late 1930s, he had fled to England when his journalist father had been arrested by the Gestapo. When old enough he joined the RAF, trained as a Wireless Operator and, as a German speaker, had been selected to train as a Special Operator. He joined No. 214 Squadron in early 1944 when it was flying the B17 'Flying Fortress' in the 100 Group Radio Countermeasures role. For his highly classified job (the crews that he flew with had little knowledge of what he was actually up to) at his position near the rear of the aircraft he was equipped with a radio receiver and frequency indicator together with a modified powerful transmitter. With his aircraft usually flying in the main bomber stream, he would scan and listen in to the German fighter control radio frequencies to check their authenticity and either then tune his high powered transmitter to jam the frequencies, or if appropriate give conflicting instructions – 'spoofs', to the German fighter pilots.

There was a sparse attendance at the 2015 27th AGM and Reunion when it returned to the Midland Hotel at Derby. With only three members of the Committee present, there was insufficient numbers at the 27th AGM to form a quorum to formally approve the previous AGM Minutes, the accounts, and the re-election of the six members of the Committee. (This was subsequently covered in the February 2016 Nightjar seeking members approval for the three Agenda items.) Among the names of the nine Members who had passed away over the period, sadly, was that of Wg Cdr Bill Wilkinson, a founder member of the Association and long time Treasurer and Auditor. The main topic for discussion was the outline arrangements for the proposed final Association Reunion in the centenary year of 2017. Only 22 Members and guests sat down to dine. The writing was really on the wall! The situation was again similar in 2016 for the final Reunion to be held at the Maids Head Hotel. Again, there were insufficient attendees at the 28th AGM to form the required quorum. With little of change, the Agenda items were dealt with as previously for approval. Sadly, the Minutes of the meeting recorded the death of the Association's President, MRAF Sir Michael Beetham in October 2015 (equally sadly, his wife was to pass away just a few months later).

The main topic for discussion again had been the plan for the winding up of the Association in 2017. It was a most appropriate year for this event and was to be held on the Saturday/Sunday 7th/8th October - 100 years since the Squadron was first formed in the summer of 1917 as No 7a Squadron of the Royal Naval Air Service - becoming 14 Squadron RNAS at the end of the year - and then No. 214 Squadron, Royal Air Force on its formation in 1918. It would also be the year of the final disbandment of the Squadron in January 1977, and the 30th year that the concept of a Squadron Association was conceived by Harold Bidmead. The final 29th AGM would be held on the Saturday afternoon, and the Gala Reunion dinner in the evening. The following day, Sunday at midday, there would be a short service and wreath-laying at the Squadron Memorial in the National Memorial Arboretum, Alrewas, followed by a buffet lunch subsidised for Members from the Associations funds.

The final Association Reunion dinner to be held at the Maids Head Hotel was attended by little over 20 Members and guests. The planned visit on the Sunday to the much improved Norwich Air Museum, which had opened early for the occasion, was well appreciated.

There was a significant concern about the attendance at this final Association event in 2017. At the Maids Head Hotel, 28th AGM in 2016, less than a dozen Members indicated that they would attend. So the Committee resolved to advertise the event early in 2017 in as many aviation orientated papers/periodicals as possible. This proved to be quite successful, as on the day just less than 60 Members and guests attended this final Association event. Most these were from the Valiant/Victor era of the Squadron; but there was one WWII veteran present – Paul Henry. Now in his mid 90s, he had been a Special Operator on the Squadron in WWII, and had been a staunch supporter of the Association from the outset, attending most of the past AGMs and Reunions.



Some 17 Members attended the 29th (and final) AGM of the No. 214 (FMS) Squadron Association, two more than the required 15 Member quorum, which ensured that any decisions approved at the AGM would be final. Apart from the arrangements for the evening and the memorial service at the NMA, the main topic for discussion was the disbursement of the

funds that would remain after the weekend's events. Sums of money were agreed to be given to cover the next five years of costs for the laying of wreaths through Jock Whitehouse, and the maintenance of the Squadron web site through John and Carol Edwards. Further sums would be donated to the RAF Benevolent Fund and, in due course, to the preservation fund for the 'Sally B' B17G 'Flying Fortress'. All Squadron artefacts in the custody of Jock Whitehouse would remain with him until a suitable museum type repository became available; subsequently donated to the RAF Marham Aviation Heritage Centre.



With so many of the attendees at the last Reunion dinner being from the Valiant and Victor tanker era and, in most cases, well known to each other, it was a very convivial and pleasant evening as reminiscences were shared and past exploits discussed.



As for the No. 214 (FMS) Squadron memorial dedication in 2009, the weather was kind with a cloudy but still day for the midday service. Sadly, for this day, none of the Associations senior Air Officer Members were in attendance, Sir Michael Beetham having passed away and Sir

Anthony Skingsley and Sir David Parry-Evans precluded by ill health. Words and prayers were said, the last Post sounded, but no flypast; nonetheless, a fitting final gathering of the Association Members



The occasion ended with a buffet lunch at the NMA before everyone departed for the last time. It was, in many ways, a sad occasion with the realisation that it might be the last time that we would be together. The atmosphere was lightened with an auction of a unique representation of the Squadron crest made Jock Whitehouse's very talented daughter



Keely, who had regularly provided the No. 214 themed cake for the Reunion dinners. It was achieved by repeated edge cutting and folding of each page – some thousands of cuts requiring much patience!



So, after a little less than 30 years of its existence, the No. 214 (FMS) Squadron Association was no more - what had it all meant?

It has to be said that the membership was, in the main, one of war time flyers – men, mainly of the RAF Volunteer Reserve, whom, when their services were no longer required, returned to their civilian occupations. It was not until many of them were in their retirement years, their civilian occupations coming to an end and their offspring flown from the nest, that they really began to recall those early 1940 years so seared into their memories; the exhilaration and fear, the training in far off places, the comradeship and humour, and of course those friends and crewmembers who did not make it through. They started to band together and form associations – the Air Gunners Association, the Air Crew Association and many wartime squadron associations, not least that of No. 214 (FMS) Squadron as established by Harold Bidmead. They felt such strong feelings of allegiance forged in those traumatic days; the humour, the camaraderie, the good times and the bad, and the relief to have survived often with ‘why me’ in the back of their minds. Who else could understand what it had all been like? They came from all walks of life, but they all had that common bond, that indefinable bond among those who had flown aeroplanes together. At the more serious moments, it was possible to detect in many their disappointment at the lack of a campaign medal through post war political shenanigans, and their disdain for the late compromise of a clasp to the 1939/45 Star. It was not until the Bomber Command Memorial was erected and unveiled by the Queen, located in such a prominent position on the south side of Piccadilly in Green Park and opposite the RAF Club, that they felt that their efforts and sacrifice had been fully and truly recognised. And a principle driving force for the memorial was that of the No. 214(FMS) Squadron Association President - MRAF Sir Michael Beetham.

For those of us who had been on the Squadron in the peacetime era, it had been a privilege to have been among these men, to have heard their often incredible stories, told sometimes reluctantly, but always so unassumingly, ever conscious of not seeming to ‘shoot a line’. But above all else, it had been the fun and laughter, the easy way that we all got on. They have been likened to be a unique generation; they would heartily rebut that but, from their experiences, they were certainly a unique bunch of chaps.



A painted montage, by Jock Whitehouse, of the aircraft, bases symbols and events in the life of No. 214 (FMS) Squadron, and the memorial to the Squadron that he largely designed.