

Branch
Membership

187

 **ROYAL
AIR FORCES**

Association

The charity that supports the RAF family

RAFAGEN

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE LETCHWORTH, HITCHIN & DISTRICT
BRANCH



Patron: Her Majesty The Queen

Registered Charity: 226686 (England & Wales) SC037673 (Scotland)

**Marie Mahoney lays
a wreath on behalf of
the Branch at
Letchworth**

RAFAGEN

The official newsletter of the Letchworth & District
Branch of the Royal Air Forces' Association



ROYAL AIR FORCES' ASSOCIATION LETCWORTH , HITCHIN & DISTRICT BRANCH OFFICIALS FOR 2020

Vice President:- Dennis Dawson

Chairman:- W.O. Shaun Griffin

Vice Chairman:- Lisa Berry

Secretary:- Ken Needham

Assistant Secretary:- Marie Mahoney

Treasurer:- Ken Needham

Wings Appeal Officer:- Roy Newbury

Branch Welfare Officer: Mark Howell

Contact details :- Tel :-07874015229 email :- markhowell65@gmail.com

Membership Secretary:- Headley Parkins

Branch Padre:- Rev. Canon Lindsay Dew

Contact details :- Tel :- 01462742165

email :- lindsay.dew@btinternet.com

General Committee:

Dean Meek ; Donna Cook ; John Airey ; Lesley Starr ;

Branch R.A.F.A.L.O. Warrant Officer Shaun Griffin

RAFAGEN Edited by Ken Needham

Monthly Meetings are held at the Letchworth Rugby Club, Baldock Road, Letchworth Garden City Herts (Behind the Letchworth Leisure Centre) on the 3rd Monday of each month at 19.45 hrs. Licensed Bar & Ample Parking

NAAFI BREAK is held at the Par 3 Golf Centre, William Way, Letchworth Garden City on the 1st Tuesday of each month 10.00 hrs 'til 12.00 hrs

ERIC FITTON

1922 - 2020



It was with deep regret that we learnt of the death of one of our oldest branch members', Eric Fitton. Eric was 98 years old

Eric joined the Royal Air Forces Association 73 years ago (1947) as a life member, and became a very active member of the branch. Although not such an active member in later years, he did attend our evening and daytime meetings until earlier

this year when mobility became a problem.

During his service days he was a cook, (Full story later in this issue). and in civilian life he was the Housing Officer at the local council. He had many amusing tales from both activities, and did amuse members by relating these at branch meetings.

He was a great celebraty at the branch and will be sadly missed. Unfortunately due to Covid-19 his funeral was greatly curtailed., With lots of members not being able to attend. The service, which took place on 6th November, was led by our Rev. Canon Lindsay Dew, with Vice Chairman Lisa Berry giving a tribute to our friend. To give Eric true branch send off, Mark Howell was present with the Branch Standard..

For those of you who were unable to show you respect at the funeral, there will be a gathering to remember Eric, when it is possible to do so.





A few Words from our Vice Chairman Lisa Berry

Hi everyone!

What a year so far! Its been a very long year for most, for me, I've been run off my little (size 4) feet and it seems to have flown by. We haven't been having the meetings this year but my goodness we have been busy ensuring all our over 70's / vulnerable Veterans have been receiving welfare calls. We have well over 70 veterans who are over 70 and these were divided out between 6 of us. Our objective was to provide weekly calls to check they were ok and offer help wherever it may be needed. Some were just happy to have a chat, some needed shopping or pharmacy runs and some told me to get lost (more or less). The calls are still ongoing and I think those that have received them are very appreciative. If you feel you would like a weekly call during the lockdown then please do let us know!

It has been a terrible sad time for most this year and we have had to say our goodbyes in our own ways to friends and family. The Branch has just recently lost one of our longest serving members Eric Fitton. Eric had been a member since 1947, he was an absolute joy to talk to at the meetings. I was given the honour of representing the branch at his funeral just a few weeks ago. May I ask that since we cannot be together to say goodbye, that you raise a glass in memory of our good friend Eric Fitton.

So, what have you all been doing to keep yourself busy? I have kept myself busy by volunteering to foster a dog through a charity called Pawprints to freedom. They rescue dogs from kill shelters in Romania, they are fostered in the UK until they are adopted. So, I ended up with a dog called Rocco, I knew nothing about him. This dog turned up and I swear it needed a saddle! Rocco was a lurcher – he was greyhound crossed with a Rhodesian Ridgeback and he was huge! Rocco was timid at first, a bit snappy, but after a few weeks he settled in and he was adorable, he didn't have to jump on the sofa or the bed, he was tall enough to just step onto them!! Rocco was the dream dog, loving, good fun and a joy to walk. We gave him the nickname of compost crapper because whenever he went into the garden he would just park his bum over the compost bag and do his business in there – we didn't even need to do a poo pick!!! We managed to find Rocco his forever home with a lady in Birmingham and he's settled in nicely.

We would love to hear what you have all been up to over the lock down, did you take up a new hobby? Dixie took up growing tomatoes (courtesy of Lesley Starr) and they were very nice indeed. My Daughter took up crochet and started glass painting. Please do send in pictures of your projects!

In the meantime, please do all take care. We are here to help if you need us!

PLEASE FOLLOW THE GUIDE LINES



LET US BE FREE OF THIS DECEASE



PADRE'S PAGE

A few words from our branch Padre,
Reverend Canon Lindsay Dew

Padre's Hour - November 2020

Hello again,

I suppose it had to happen, given the way things were developing nationally, and now here we are again facing another few weeks of lockdown. Coming just before such a nationally important and significant day means that we are going to be observing Remembrance Sunday in a very different way. Over the past few weeks I have been planning a service of Remembrance to be held in my local church rather than at our village War Memorial because of all the restrictions being placed on gatherings. At least a congregation could gather in a church building provided the rules were being observed. It seemed to me to be the best option. Now though we can't even do that and I will be using Zoom to lead the service from an empty church.

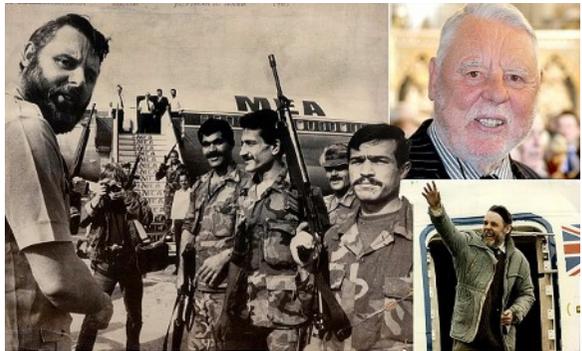
Through the first lockdown many churches throughout the nation discovered new ways of engaging with their congregations and wider communities. Imaginative ways using Zoom, YouTube and Facebook have been learnt to broadcast worship and meetings on line. Churches have also been providing volunteers and space to enable local food banks and pantries to remain open. These new ways have been a steep learning curve for many; not least clergy and the huge number of volunteers who have given their time and expertise to assist in ensuring a continuing church presence in both communities and parishes. Thankfully many of these new ways and initiatives have continued in many places even when the restrictions were lifted in the summer.

One of the good outcomes for the church, along with many voluntary and charitable groups, has been to discover that we can do things differently when the challenge is there, not only differently but effectively too and still deliver.

There's a lot of comment about whether a full lockdown was really necessary – to be honest I just don't know, but there are many who seem to! The complexities and challenges that any Government – nationally and locally - faces at time like this must feel rather overwhelming for those who have to make the decisions. Whichever way they 'jump' will be wrong for some and right for others. Choices made nationally can have huge effects on our lives personally. So if you are feeling overwhelmed or you need help and support, please don't be afraid to ask.

Our RAFA Branch has several volunteers ready and on standby to offer you a friendly voice as well as practical help. If you know of anyone who needs this please encourage them to ask too.

Even in lockdown we can make choices about our lives even though they may be limited because of restrictions. Remember, Terry Waite didn't have any of the home comforts or family and friends to provide him with support either. He spent 1763 days as a hostage in appalling conditions. Change your mindset he said, you're not STUCK at home, you're SAFE at home.



Just recently he offered this advice to all of us for every day:

- *Keep your own dignity - get out of your PJs!
- *Form a structure for the day
- *Be grateful for what you have - shelter, home, possessions
- *Read and be creative

Unlike like Terry Waite we do have nearby friends in RAFA who are willing to reach out and be a friend to any in need.

A prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you taught us to love our neighbour, and to care for those in need as if we were caring for you. In this time of anxiety, give us strength to comfort the fearful, to tend the sick, and to assure the isolated of our love, and your love, for your name's sake. Amen.

Whether you are someone with a faith or not, I am more than happy to be contacted if you think I can offer support and friendship, help or advice. I will usually be at the monthly Branch meetings and the NAAFI Break, (once they re-start) as well as serving on the Committee. For the time being you can ring me on 07545878082 or email me at my new address lindsaychalesdew@gmail.com

Kind regards & blessings
Lindsay
Revd Canon Lindsay Dew

REQUIRE THE SERVICES OF OUR WELFARE OFFICER?

Here are the contact details of the branch Welfare Officer :-



Mark Howell

Tel :-07874015229

email :- markhowell65@gmail.com

In memory of our member and great friend Eric Fitton, we reproduce a feature that we ran many years ago on Eric's life in the Royal Air Force.

ROYAL AIR FORCE

By Eric Fitton

When I was 'called up', the war in the Far East was still active and we obviously thought that that is where we would be sent after training. Some did of course but not me. I was called up for the Royal Air Force and given the choice of three trades, Service-Police, Medical Orderly or Cook. Well I did not see myself as a copper and I did not fancy emptying bed-pans, so stupidly I opted to be a cook.

I had to report to RAF Padgate to be kitted out and my first few days there were an eye-opener. It was so sad to see quite a number of lads, 18 & 19 years of age, crying because they were homesick and missing their mothers. I was missing a wife and baby daughter and just had to get on with it.

It was also an eye-opener to find so many lads of that age group who were unable to read or write. After 'Square Bashing' at Padgate I was sent for trade training at Halton, the Royal Air Force Number 1 School of Cookery.

This station was also the School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and the training place for RAF Apprentices. It was very strict and regimented there and I was glad to finish my course, which was mainly spent scrubbing floors, or in the classroom. A few days were spent on what was known as 'The Burma Road' where we were taught how to make cooking stoves and ovens from corrugated iron, sand, water and petrol. I was glad that I never had to put it into practice.

We learned how much, or how little, an airman could expect in the way of rations. It was drilled into us so much so that I have no difficulty in remembering it now. In 1945 daily entitlement for an airman was one shilling and eight pence halfpenny per day. For an airwoman (Waaf) one shilling and four pence halfpenny, for an officer, who had to pay extra messing fees, it was eleven pence halfpenny per day. We did get to see instructors making pastry but there was very little training in practical, hands on cooking, for cooks to be. I reckon we had 60% theory, rules and regulations in the classroom, 30% scrubbing floors, 10% practical, which included the 'Burma Road' so did not involve actually handling food.

The 'fun cry' when we were on our knees with buckets and mops was "You too can be a cook"

Next stop was RAF Wilmslow in Cheshire for post course training and there we were allowed to do a few things, like boiling potatoes and making gravy. Wilmslow was a WAAF Intake Centre where girl recruits had their first experience of service life.



One breakfast time boiled eggs were on the menu, a very difficult dish to produce in a batch of over 300, so the corporal in charge of the shift decided to put the eggs in trays in the steamer. When the poor girls cracked the shells they found that instead of egg whites, the perfectly cooked yolks were encased in green.

After three weeks of this '**I WAS A COOK**' and posted to RAF Broadwell in Oxfordshire, to spend a few months with Transport Command. Wonderful, it was an Air Force station that actually had airplanes on it. This was the station where most of the Dakotas, with Horsa Gliders attached, ferried the airborne troops to actions across the channel on D-Day and later to the battle for Arnhem. I enjoyed myself there, it was a working station and one felt useful. I had spells in both officer's and airmen's messes and found it quite hard work in both. There were no such things as 8 hour days or 48 hour weeks, if the job needed doing it had to be done. However I managed to get a 24 hour pass for one Saturday and arranged to go to RAF Compton Bassett, to meet up with a friend from Letchworth who was doing his 'Square Bashing' (i.e. Initial Training) there, having been 'called up' some months after me.

The corporal in charge of the airmen's mess put me in touch with a Waaf who was going to RAF Yatesbury on the same day, so that I could help with her luggage. Early morning I met this young lady at the Guardroom and we set off on my first experience of 'Hitch Hiking'. It was brilliant, didn't even need to raise a thumb. The first car stopped, in we got and informed the driver where we were headed for. When he dropped us the same thing happened again, first car along picked us up and this was repeated all the

way to Swindon and Yatesbury. Here the Waaf got out and the driver took me on to Compton Bassett. I met my friend and we went into Swindon to have a few beers together, then he went back to Compton Bassett and I started to hitch hike the fourteen or so miles to Broadwell. It was now a very different story, it was dark and I did not have a young pretty Waaf with me. Drivers ignored me and as it is a very rural area there was no public transport, so I had no option but to walk the whole 14 miles. I arrived back in camp and got into bed at about 4am, to be wakened by the early call bod at 6, because I had to be on duty at 6.30.

On an active station, differing from a training camp, Officers did not want to be saluted all the time so except in the vicinity of Station Headquarters, nobody bothered. However spuds had to be peeled, tins and cooking pots had to be washed so, if there were insufficient bodies available from men on 'jankers', a couple of officers would arrange for some poor mugs to be charged for 'Failing to salute an officer'. Strangely I don't remember any of them showing resentment of the scam. The difference in the feeding of Airmen and Waafs, compared to Officers I still remember.

A favourite sweet in those days was a Lyons fruit pie. These could be purchased in civilian shops and were very good value at two pence each so obviously they didn't cost anywhere near as much to the bulk buying RAF. However Airmen and Waafs were always served a whole pie plus a ladle of custard, Officers received half a pie, which had to be cut diagonally and with just a small amount of custard placed over one corner.

Squadron Leader Jimmy Edwards, who later achieved fame as a comedian on radio and television, was stationed there and I found him to be the most obnoxious officer on the station but he was good to the lads by providing transport to big football matches. He often filled a Dakota with airmen and flew them to Birmingham, Manchester or Leeds to see a game. One



Jimmy Edwards

LONDON

of the cooks in the Officers Mess was LAC Ted Lester whose hometown was Hitchin, 3 miles from my home in Letchworth. I only knew him for a few weeks in 1945 before he was posted, on detachment to Norway. The next time I met Ted was in 1976 when he bought and came to live in the bungalow next door to us in Letchworth, thirty one years later.

At Broadwell, Officers complained that they did not get enough chips with their meals and were told the reason, 'there was not sufficient oil or fat available'. No problem, a Navigational Training Flight was arranged and three Dakotas flew to Naples and brought back barrels of olive oil. I think they got so many chips then, they got tired of them. Another time they decided to have a big dinner party and this time the Navigational Training went to Southern Ireland, where there was no food rationing. They came back with everything needed for the finest meal I have ever seen, chickens, pork, beef, sugar etc. etc. There was even a pig's head which finished up with an apple in its mouth, as the centre point of the servery. It was noticeable that the two Customs Officers (one should be on duty to attend every aircraft arriving from overseas) were in the Officers Mess bar when these flights returned.

It was at Broadwell that I had my first experience of flying. I asked a pilot who was doing flying training if there was any chance of going up and he agreed to take me. They were supposed to be doing 'circuits and bumps' that is take off do a circuit, then touch down and go up again using only one engine. Dakotas were said to fly more smoothly on one engine than they did on two. We did this a couple of times and then he decided, as it was my first flight, to use both engines and fly over the Bristol Channel. I really enjoyed this and always made sure afterwards, that he got an extra egg or bacon rasher if I was on duty when he came in for breakfast.

Sadly I was posted again and the rest of my time in the RAF was not very exciting, although it was good fun with lots of friendly banter and horseplay. One of the funniest japes I saw was played on a lad who did not like taking a shower and there were no baths in the ablution blocks. There was however a big kitchen sink type bowl, used for filling buckets I think, and this chap, who was Scottish and stammered badly, used to get into it. One day he was happily soaking in nice hot water when some comic threw a bucket of cold water over him. He jumped out of the sink, stark naked except that he **still had his socks on**. He chased the joker who had thrown the water half way round the camp causing a lot of amusement to us all.

My posting was to RAF Kirkham, a demobilisation unit and I was sent out to the Freckleton site, a detachment station which was used to accommo-

date time-served airmen returning from overseas, for the two or three days it took to go through the 'demob' procedure. There were 4 cooks on each of two shifts and normally we could cope but on one occasion, with a lunch time meal prepared for the 30 permanent staff, some 1,800 airmen arrived. By the time we had fed them all, which was only managed by sending our MT drivers to other sites to beg, borrow and steal rations, it was well into the afternoon and the mood of the men waiting was quite nasty. The next morning we received notice that two ships would be docking at Liverpool, 1,800 men would be transported in and would need meals. Authorisation to collect rations from the NAAFI stores at Fulwood Barracks Preston accompanied the notice. The paper work was accurate in every detail except, it was three days late and nearly got four innocent cooks boiled in their own stew pots.

After a few weeks I was sent down the road to another detachment, RAF Warton. This site provided the same 'demob' service but on a much bigger scale, it was mainly for UK based airmen. It was here that I took my first Trade Test, which consisted of making a batch of Rock Cakes, something we never had to do during normal work. Passing this test meant that I was promoted from AC2 to AC1 (Airman second class to Airman first class) and a rise in pay. I don't remember what it amounted to but it was very small. After getting my AC1 I was very fortunate to be in the right place at the right time and was soon promoted again to LAC (Leading Aircraftman) and moved from Airman's Mess to Officers Mess. This meant cooking in the same kitchen but serving in a different dining room AND I WAS ON MY OWN.

In the Airman's Mess there were some eight cooks on each shift and one tended to do just one little part of meals. My move meant I had to do the lot. The first evening meal was a complete disaster, I had boiled cabbage in a large iron pot (called a fish kettle) and drained them by holding the lid and tipping the kettle over a gulley in the floor, which channelled the boiling water to a drain. The steam scalded my arm, I let go of the lid and away went my cabbage down the gulley. As the meal had to be served in the next few minutes drastic action was needed. With a fish slice I scooped the cabbage from the gulley washed it in a colander and placed it in the tureens, for the officers to eat. By this time my dessert of baked stuffed apples were over cooked, a soggy mess in the oven so I pulled all the skins off and served stewed apples with raisins and custard. It is hard to believe but one officer enjoyed his meal so much he sent me in a pint of beer. If only he had known ---- I wondered ---- and 'what had he been used to?'

From the Officers Mess I was eventually promoted to Corporal and put in charge of the kitchen in the Station sick quarters, a small hospital of three wards. I learned a great deal there about the real business of cooking and am reasonably sure that we didn't poison any patients while I was in charge. While at Warton I played postal chess with my friend Alf, who was still in 'civvy' street. The whole billet used to look forward to my letters from him and there was plenty of advice on what my moves should be.

Together with a Sergeant Palmer (medical) we *scrounged* a small film projector and used to put on film shows for the patients in the wards. The films we obtained from the local cinema in Lytham, which were kindly loaned to us after they had been shown to the paying public for three days. We had to rewind them using an old gramophone to revolve the receiving spool while I held the emptying spool on a pencil. The spools had to be returned to the cinema in a very short time and although we had learned how to, we had no time to make decent repairs to frequent film breakages, caused I am sure by our Heath Robinson type rewinds.

Some incidents still remain in my memory of my time at SSQ Warton, one of a patient who had tried to commit suicide by jumping in front of a lorry. He was kept in a locked room with a Service Policeman on guard. No shoe laces, no belt, no tie, no braces and nothing sharp. All food had to be minced and the poor chap had to eat it with a wooden spoon. I did arrange for him to have egg and bacon but it had to be minced. With another incident I was instructed, by the Medical Officer to prepare four pints of Saline solution. It was a very hot day and two chaps who had misbehaved were put on 'jankers', in full kit they had been made to march up and down for some considerable time. One had fainted and the other demanded to report sick, something you can ordinarily only do at 08.30 hours. So they were brought to Station Sick Quarters, diagnosed as de-hydrated and I had to hand them two pints of salt water each. I didn't stay to see them drink it.

Another incident, very tragic, occurred on the 12th December 1946, the day after my son Barry was born. I had been saving leave in order to be at home and help Jean for a while following the birth. Marie, who was just two and a half years old, was being looked after by my sister Annie in Oldham while Jean was in the nursing home and I had to collect her to

take her home. For the first stage of the journey I 'thumbed a lift' to start my hitch hiking to Oldham but had only travelled a few hundred yards when we were involved in a smash which resulted in the death of a cyclist. One minute we were driving along then we spun out of control a black shadow went over the window and we stopped facing back down the road we had just travelled and there was a dead man laying on the bonnet. At the spot where the accident happened the roads were icy and causing vehicles to slide all over the place. The inquest decided that no one was to blame but it did affect me quite a lot. For some time afterwards I was even nervous travelling on a bus and was sure that I would never have enough courage to ever drive a car. I did have one more attempt at hitch hiking and this was definitely the last time I would do so. 'Chalky' White, a nursing orderly who came from Tottenham persuaded me to join him and hitch so that we could get home for a weekend, neither of us having sufficient cash to pay rail fare. Our first step was to check if any RAF transport was available and this got us to Wigan. From there we got one of the mine lorries which took us as far as Birmingham, then a big van right to Finsbury Park where we parted company. The journey was great, very successful --- but --- it took about two months before I was completely clear of the coal dust that had got into my uniform great coat while in the mine lorry.

A good point about Warton was it's position, halfway between Preston and Blackpool and we used to go to football matches and see many famous players, Stanley Mathews, Stan Mortenson, Tom Finney and Bill Shankly on a regular basis.

**In Merory of our great friend Eric Fitton,
who passed away a few weeks ago**

MEMORIES BY JIM BOX

An RAF record claim?

In order to maintain operational standards, Shackleton crews had to complete a series of exercises each period. As our operations were all at low level over the seas and oceans, we were always outside controlled airspace therefore not required to report to any air traffic control centre. To keep in practice with air traffic procedures we were required to complete a specific number of hours on airways.

When I was with 38 Squadron at Hal Far in Malta, the usual method of completing this requirement was a trip back to the UK via airways. In September 1965 my crew were scheduled for our Airways exercise back to St Mawgan, Cornwall. These trips were planned for a Friday and return on Monday, giving us a weekend in the UK, and very often took a shopping list for the Squadron and the various Messes.

During planning for this trip, I was nominated to act as the radio operator for both the long range HF radio and the short range VHF that we would use with airways. Our route being over to Sicily, up the length of Italy, crossing over to France and up the length of France to the UK air traffic boundary and then direct to St Mawgan. We were airborne at 0730 and I made the usual radio calls to join Italian airways at Sicily. After about two hours our Flight Engineer reported a problem with one of our engines which resulted in that engine being shut down. As we were on Airways, I made the emergency Pan call on both radios and we diverted back to Malta on three engines.

The Pan call is the second tier emergency which means there is a problem on board but it is contained and the aircraft is in no immediate danger, but a return to base or diversion to another airfield is required. The Mayday call is the first tier emergency and means that the aircraft is in immediate danger and requires urgent assistance. Loss of power, damage to controls, total electrical failure, decompression and fire are the types of emergency that constitute a Mayday call.

Arriving back at Hal Far we were grumbling about losing our weekend in UK. Our CO came out to the aircraft to find out what had happened and then gave us the option of taking another aircraft back to the UK.

A new flight plan was filed with our same callsign and after changing over all our kit we departed for the second time to UK at 1420.

I made the calls to Italian airways and we joined again at Sicily. All went well up Italian airways making all the routine calls, crossed over to the French airways using a few words of French, as they always gave a better response. About half way up France, we again had an engine failure and had to shut down an engine. So, I made the Pan emergency radio calls to French airways and we diverted off airways and set course direct for St Mawgan.

Arriving at St Mawgan at about 2000, we were not popular dropping in on a Friday evening with a sick aircraft. A pleasant trip back home turned out to be rather a long eventful day. The following morning, we went about our various ways and returned for Monday morning. It took the rest of that week to get the engine changed, and we departed on Friday morning back to Hal Far.

Unless anybody out there knows anything different, my RAF record claim is that I made two emergency Pan calls on the same day, for the same reason, with the same callsign, but from two different aircraft.

