

**RANCH
MEMBERSHIP
198**

**ROYAL
AIR FORCES
Association**

The charity that supports the RAF family

Winter 2024

RAFAGEN

THE NEWSLETTER & MAGAZINE OF THE LETCHWORTH, HITCHIN &
DISTRICT BRANCH (including Stevenage)

Branch formed 15th October 1946



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RAFAGEN

The official newsletter and magazine of the
ROYAL AIR FORCES' ASSOCIATION
LETCWORTH , HITCHIN & DISTRICT
BRANCH OFFICIALS FOR 2023/4



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WEBSITE**

rafa-lethworth.org.uk

NEWS FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK



 The people of Hitchin did us proud again when we were in the High Street collecting for our Wings Appeal in September. I am always overwhelmed when members of the public put large amounts of cash in our collecting tins without wanting any of our merchandise, just saying that their father or grand-father served in the R.A.F., and it was for them.

 I would like to give you a heads up on something that will be happening in Letchworth next year. As you may be aware next year it will be 80 years since the end of World War II.

To celebrate this occasion, the Letchworth Branch of the Royal British Legion are organising a party for local Veterans. The date is May 10th and will be held in the Mrs Howard Hall on Norton Way South. All I can tell you at the moment, other than what I have already mentioned, is that the Legion would like to see you in costumes of the day. I will keep you posted on any further updates.



Before the February NAAFI BREAK, we will be holding the Annual General Meeting. As you will already know, all the Committee members are up for re-election, but may wish to stand again and put themselves up for re-election. This does not mean that new names are not needed on the committee, so if you think that you would like to join the Committee, and have your say on how the Branch is run, our secretary would like to hear from you. New faces are always welcome on the Committee. They meet on the first Wednesday of every other month at the Par 3 Golf Centre.



ATC ACTIVITY





What you have been saying about RAFAGEN.



Dear Ken,

Thank you for RAFAGEN which was awaiting us when we arrived home from Cornwall yesterday after a short week away. I enjoyed RAFAGEN, especially your police dog story! As for The Dam Busters and Freddie Tees I was sad to read how he had ended his life. With our Best Wishes,

Bernard and Roza Drummond. (Via E mail)

Hi Ken,

Many thanks for the RAFAGEN, as ever an interesting read. Especially interesting to read your story collecting your dog. Did the families really donate them or was it a compulsory thing?

We had a very interesting talk about 20 years ago at one of our Air Crew Association Branch meetings by an ex RAF & civil airline pilot or navigator. Arthur Creighton. He gave us an excellent talk about the 'DAMBUSTERS' featuring in particular Freddy Tees story. Creighton had gone into Fred's barber shop and noticed a picture of a Lancaster Bomber on the wall.

Regards Fred Maryon (Via E mail)

Editor replies :- I can assure you Fred, that in my days as a DH, all dogs were freely given to the Royal Air Force. I believe the dog I picked up, had out grown the family and was expensive to feed.

Arthur Creighton was also a regular speaker at our branch meetings, and very good he was too.

More doggie stories on page 11



COMMITTEE NEWS

September 2024

Quick meeting this month, for after the usual admin reports, there was only three items left on the agenda.

All three referred to calling for updates on further events. Wings Appeal collection in Hitchin on 14th September, Battle of Britain Service on 29th September and the Remembrance Service on 10th November.

Everything was going according to plan, including the wreaths for November had already been received by our Secretary.

Barely had to finish our coffee before the Chairman was closing the meeting. Wonder if the November meeting will be as Quick.



LETCHWORTH WAR MEMORIAL READY FOR REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY



Saturday 19th October 2024

&

Sunday 20th October 2024

Branch representative

Ken Needham

I attended the 2024 Annual Conference as a virtual member, along with 58 others. Over 100 delegates attended in person.

I signed on a little early and spent over 100 minutes listening to some splendid military music by, I presume, the Central Band of the Royal Air Force.

The screen bust into life to show the conference already to start. The opening ceremony began with the dedication, and the marching on of Branch Standards from, I assume, local branches, followed by the Association's own Standard. The latter being placed at the back of the stage whilst the others marched out.

The opening ceremony over the conference began with the Annual General Meeting. This comprised of the annual reports being read, and being approved. Then the approval of senior officers. One point that I was interested in was the numbers of members at the end of 2023 was 65,538 and the number of Branches 229. We were told that as at today that number had fallen to 213.

A.G.M. Over conference got down to voting on the resolutions. The first three all referred to "One member, one vote", a subject we have referred to on many occasions. Speaking personally, I am in favour of this, as it means that every member has a voice for future resolutions. I am pleased to say that all were passed with over a 90% approval.

The next eleven resolutions all related to needing approval to change the rules relating to the passing of the first three, plus the agreement needed to bring the rules and Royal Charter up to date. Because these are requests

to change the rules and/or Royal Charters, they need at least a 75% majority. All of them gained nearly a 100% majority.

You may think 'is that all conference is', well if you did you would be wrong. Before the vote on the resolution is taken, a representative of the division of the Association making the resolution gives conference a reason and an argument on why it should be passed. This is where we, as delegates have our say. We can make points 'for' and 'against' the resolution. They were not all from the floor. I, as a virtual representative can have a say. As a matter of fact a virtual delegate from Jamaica gave her comments on one of the resolutions. I was impressed to think that a lady all those miles away can have a place at conference, to represent her group. It was nice to see her sitting there under a parasol, whilst here it was raining.

The last of the resolutions to be debated was one put forward by a Branch. The Cheltenham Branch. Just as their delegate reached the rostrum to state what the resolution was and why it was being put forward, my Internet went down. A note came up on the screen stating that I was still connected, but the signal was weak.

By the time I had a stronger signal, and I had gone through the signing on procedure and was back at conference, the next speaker was on the platform. It was Air Chief Marshall Sir Richard Knighton, Chief of the Air Staff. He was explaining what the Royal Air Force was up to in today's troublesome times. I listened to him for a few minutes when the system went down again. I couldn't get back on again before the close of Saturday's conference.

A full report of conference will be available in November, so you can read what I missed, and you can read more on what I have just glanced over.

I have now attended both the Area and annual conferences as a virtual delegate, and I have enjoyed both, and learnt a lot more about the Royal Air Forces Association.

NAAFI Break

Meet fellow members and friends at the Branch's monthly morning coffee break.

We meet on the last Wednesday of each month at the [Letchworth Par 3 Golf Centre](#), William Way, Letchworth Garden City, SG6 3JH at 10.00 hrs.

£2 will get you a non alcoholic drink of your choice for you to drink over good conversation.

You will also receive news of what is happening in the big world of the R.A.F. Association and, if required, how they can help you.

We look forward to seeing you.....



BATTLE OF BRITAIN SERVICE



Some of the congregation who attended the Branch Battle of Britain thanksgiving service at the end of September.

Local dignitaries along with branch members and church congregation attended the Branch annual Battle of Britain service at the Letchworth Central Methodist church on the last Sunday of September.

Those attending along with Branch members were, Lord Trenchard (Deputy Lord Lieutenant of Hertfordshire & Branch President), Sir Tim Wilson, Tina Bharwas (Vice Chairman North Herts Council), Kevin Bonavia (MP for Stevenage), Chris Hinchliff (MP for North East Hertfordshire), Nigel Kenworthy (Chairman Royal British Legion Letchworth) Bryn Pike (Chairman Royal Naval Association Letchworth) Two Cadets from A.T.C. 438 Squadron, Letchworth

The service was lead by Rev. Emmanuel Onabanjo, (Letchworth Central Methodist Church), Rev Cannon Lindsay Dew (Branch Padre).

The sermon was given by Rev. Sqd. Ldr. Andrew Tucker (Chaplin R.A.F. Wittering). Rev Tucker read some of the actual words related by wounded pilots who took part in the Battle of Britain. Although most of the congregation were too young to remember the war, and those who were old enough, would have been just children, the words read out really brought the horror home to those of us those present.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF AN RAF POLICE DOG HANDLER

THE YEAR 1958

Story by Ken Needham

As well as our usual security duties, the dog section also undertook displays at various events, especially the annual R.A.F. Negombo Sports Day.

This consisted of a show of precision marching with the dogs. The dogs jumping up and over walls, through holes in walls, and up and down display stands, all much to the appreciation of the crowd.

The main attraction of the display was the exhibition of criminal work. The display was to be as we had been taught at Basic training with slight modifications. One handler would dress as a woman carrying a handbag, which was to be stolen by a bag snatcher. The dog would chase and catch the thief, and, well you can guess the rest.

The first year I attended such an event, I and my dog, Hausa, were on the display team, and it was decided that my colleague Tony and his dog, Rinty, (a very very vicious dog) would act as the lawful side of the display.



Our criminal knew that Tony had full control of Rinty, so there would be no problems. It would be just like a normal training session. All was going well. The criminal had snatched a bag from our law abiding citizen and was running down the field. Tony gave chase shouting the lawful "Stop or I will release my dog", three times. The criminal of course didn't stop. Tony released Rinty

who made off after the criminal as he should. BUT suddenly the dog made a sharp turn towards the spectators. Panic. All dog handlers who were not on the demonstration running towards Rinty. Tony shouting as loud as he could "Stay". The criminal had now stopped running and was watching the procedure. Suddenly Rinty turned again, away from the crowd, and off after our criminal again, who seeing the situation started to run again. Rinty caught his man even after being shot at by the criminal. (Blank of course). The rest of the display went off as per the book.

The crowd thought it was part of the display, and showed their appreciation with a resounding round of applause for the RAF Police dogs..

Rinty was not used the next year for the criminal work at the station sports day.



Found on the Web. This is the team leaving the field after the display. That is me 2nd dog in. If we look shattered, remember the temperature would be in the high 20's and we would have been out in the sun for about 15 minutes.



In a few weeks it will be Christmas, and we will be getting together with friends and family to over indulge and have a great time.

During your Christmas dinner may I suggest that, like the family above, you raise a glass to absence friends, and those who may not have family and friends around them at this festive time.

Let us wish for good health and happiness in 2025 for all



MERRY CHRISTMAS TO ALL OF YOU

WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS

Information supplied by Membership Department of The Royal Air Forces Association

Mr Umsh Schania of Stevenage

Mr Sean Gusson of Chicksands

Mr James Metcalf of Letchworth Garden City



**WE NEED MORE NEW
MEMBERS**



DIMPLES Bar & Cafe.

Willian Way,

Letchworth Garden City. SG6 3JH

Open Tuesday - Sunday

The home of the Branch NAAFI

BREAK

NEWS FROM THE ASSOCIATION

Respite Breaks –

Respite breaks are still available to beneficiaries (and/or their carer) in facilities operated by partner organisations.

Should financial assistance be required, there is a specific process to follow that considers the individual(s) current care plan and their financial position, including whether or not their carer is in receipt of carer's allowance.

Our specialist advisors within the Regional Welfare Teams are ideally placed to offer assistance with the respite break application process and are happy to help with the completion and submission of respite break requests and applying for additional financial support where necessary.

Respite breaks are offered in a range of locations and the Regional Welfare Team will help identify the ones located closest to the beneficiar



THE VILLAGE

By Bernard Drummond

Forward

Back in the year 2015 there was an article in “The Comet” which caught my attention. It had been sent by Michael Lespagnol, a Frenchman who lives near the village of Achief-le-Petit. Which is in the Pas De Calais area.

It was about a tribute to the Pilot and crew of a Lancaster Bomber that had been shot down on the 15th April 1944. It was a tribute to the Pilot and crew of a Lancaster Bomber that had been shot down on 15th April 1944. The plane had crashed near the village with no survivors. Michael Lespagnol had been trying to trace relatives of the bomber’s crew and had discovered that the pilot, Richard Picton had grown up in Letchworth, and had worked for the local newspaper before joining the R.A.F. Richard Picton had been Posthumously awarded the DFC.

Michael Lespagnol wrote to “The Comet” to see if anyone related to Richard Picton would like to attend the tribute that the villagers planned.

I was intrigued, and after some research contacted Michael and we exchanged correspondence. As a result of what he was able to tell me plus further research I wrote this short story. I hope it does show something about the bravery and goodness of those French villagers.

The Story

It was 15th April 1944 in an airfield in Lincolnshire the ground crew bustled about the large aircraft preparing for another night’s activity over occupied Europe. It was a wet and dreary early evening, but already becoming dusk. Only meagre lights showed up the Lancaster bomber LL836 that was known as C Charlie, that stood with its bomb bays open, waiting for the bombs to be loaded that would mean death and destruction for that night’s target.



The aircrew and the bomber had taken part in many raids in the past 12 months, over Berlin, Cologne, an Hamburg. They had returned every time with varying degrees of damage, from flak and the cannon fire from night fighters. The crew had so far, thankfully remained unscathed.

None of this however had made the crew complacent, as they attended that night's briefing. They sat together listening to their pilot and navigator who told the rest of them of the target for that night. Much to their relief, they learned that instead of another long journey to a heavily defended target in Germany that they would be attacking railway yards in France.

“Piece of cake” said Ben the navigator. Ben was one of the two Canadians in the crew, and was the resident comedian. The rear gunner Jack was also a Canadian, The pilot, Richard was an Englishman, and Tom, the flight engineer and Jim, the wireless operator were Scots. Vic, the bomb aimer, and Ricky the upper gunner were English.

They were eating their pre-flight meal that contained a precious fried egg, before they moved to a small unheated hut waiting for the signal to take off. Eventually that time came, and as they took off at 10.00 hours they climbed slowly to height in the heavily laden aircraft.

In occupied France life was hard, and in the small village of Achiet-le-Pit in the Pas-de-Calais region it was no different. Most of the young able bodied men had been taken for forced labour by the German occupying forces, and the remainder numbered a close knit community of just over 300 inhabitants. As the village was remote from the main roads or

railways, and the nearest town was many miles away, they were as a rule left alone by the Wermacht. Those that were able bartered their labour with adjoining farmers in exchange for food. Flour and eggs, and less often , pork and poultry. Some of the older men still knew how to snare rabbits, which were occasionally shared.

The village had a Mayor, but he was quite elderly, and ineffectual, and the spokesperson for the village was Henrietta Vennese, a redoubtable woman who ran the small village school. Henrietta had been widowed in WW1 and had never remarried. She was a strict but fair teacher who loved children, who in turn adored her. In the early days of the occupation she had formed a polite rapport with the commanding officer of the Wermacht, because of her grasp of the German language she had become ‘go to’ person for the German commander, Commandant Worth. Eric Worth was the eldest son of a German Catholic family but his father and grand father had both served with distinction in the German army, his father becoming a General in WW1. They were not however supporters of the Nazis, but in those dangerous times they had to be careful, and Eric Worth had no option but to take the Oath of allegiance to Hitler.

Henrietta lived in harmony with her late husband’s brother Paul Vennese, and his wife, Yvette. Paul survived WW1, but because of his age, had avoided further service in the forces.

In the evening of the 15th of April, Paul and two of his friends had set out to see if they had caught any rabbits.



Part of the crew of Lancaster LL836

“Please be careful” Henrietta had counselled them, because it was such a clear moonlit night, “You know that the farmer is likely to report you to the Gendarmes if he sees you”.

Meanwhile the bombers, completing their raid had turned for home, including “C” Charlie. It was then that they were attacked from below by a Fockewolf that riddled the aircraft with cannon fire. The Lancaster shuddered as the shells tore into it with devastating effect. Two of the crew were killed, and the pilot and navigator badly wounded. The latter soon becoming unconscious.

The pilot struggled to keep control as they began to lose height. The second pass by the fighter sealed their doom, as cannon fire ripped through the already stricken aircraft, killing the rear gunner and critically wounding the rest of the crew. The pilot tried desperately to land somewhere, but as he passed out the Lancaster crashed into a copse on the outskirts of the village, killing the remaining crew.

The final attack had been witnessed by the villagers, who had heard the gunfire, then seen the stricken aircraft crash. They rushed towards the copse, and in spite of the danger of a fire heroically began dragging the bodies out of the smashed aircraft. Retrieving the seven bodies before the Lancaster suddenly burst into flames. Henrietta had already sent some children to fetch hand carts, and putting the dead men into them, they took them to the chapel.

“The Germans will be here soon,” said Henrietta, “they don’t need to know about the airmen in the chapel, we must let them think that they all perished in the fire”. By the time the Wehrmacht patrol arrived the fire was almost out, and the villagers stood watching whilst Commandant Worth walked a safe distance around the wreckage.

“No survivors I suppose,” said Worth to Henrietta, “I could do without this mess, I no longer have the time or the men to clear this up, and get the remains of the bodies out”.

It was then that Henrietta suggested that they would do the necessary retrieval of the bodies, and perhaps be allowed to bury them.

“Well, it would save me a lot of trouble,” said Worth. “Between you and me Madame, our time here is coming to an end, so et’s be compassionate. I must insist that you give me any identifying documents that you find, but I have to say that you understand, I have to cover myself, and tell your men that I will show my gratitude for their efforts, a few bottles of Schnapps perhaps?”

“Of course” said Henrietta, they are somebody’s sons after all.” The commandant nodding his agreement called his men together and left, promising to return in a day or so.

And so it was that the villages were able to bury the dead airmen with due reverence. The bodies were carefully wrapped, and laid in a communal grave, as that was all that they could do at the time.

A week or so later, Commandant Eric Worth arrived at the village alone, and asked to speak to Henrietta in private. They sat in the small school and shared a bottle of french wine that Worth had brought with him, as well as the Schnapps that he had promised. Henrietta told him that they had retrieved what they could of the bodies of the airmen. Speaking in German, Worth obviously quite touched by the actions of the villagers, and began telling Henrietta that he felt the war was going badly for Germany. He had recently visited his mother who lived in the family home on the outskirts of Cologne. He had seen the devastation caused by the Allies Bombing raids, and told her that a fellow officer had also witnessed the bombing of Berlin.

“We were assured by Goering and Goebbels that this would never happen, like the Russians, who are advancing into Germany as we speak. So Madame, we are being moved to the coast, to oppose the invasion of the Anglo-Americans, who are surely coming. So my friend, you have done a good Christian thing. I will not be reporting this aircraft’s crash to my superiors”. As Eric Worth rose to take his leave, they shook, and the officer said, “The war will over soon, and France will be liberated. If I am spared, one day I would like to come and see you, but as a civilian. How would you feel about that?” “That would be nice” answered Henrietta, “but let us have peace first, and perhaps if you would write to me it would be nice to hear that you have survived”.

Two months later, the allies invaded France, and when the Germans had finally retreated from the area, and the first liberating troops arrived, the villagers were able to tell their incredible story. Officers of the intelligence corps listened in amazement, and collected the personal documents that Henrietta and the villagers had removed from the bodies, hiding them from the Boche.

In 1945 when Germany was defeated, the bodies were removed from the communal grave, identified and reburied by the War Graves Commission, in the cemetery of the village. Carefully tended by the proud descendants of those caring villages, the seven friends lie side by side in the small cemetery of the village, and above them fly the flags of Britain, Canada, and France.

On the 6th June 2015 The Mayor of the small village of Achiet-le-Pit organised a small ceremony as a tribute to the crew of Lancaster C for Charlie in the small cemetery where the seven graves are cared for.



A FEW DOGGIE QUESTIONS FOR YOU TO CHEW OVER.

ANSWERS IN THE NEXT ISSUE.

- 1 Name of Dorothy's dog in "The Wizard of OZ."
- 2 An Alsatian dog who was found War revenged in France during WW1 and adopted by an American soldier named Lee Duncan. The dog as later to become a film star.
- 3 A famous long-coated Collie and a film star of the 40s and 50s.
- 4 Name of the R.A.F. Police Dog who visited our branch after publishing a book entitled "The Dog Who Saved a Thousand Lives."
- 5 Bart Simpson's Greyhound dog adopted from a Grey hound racetrack.
- 6 Mickey Mouse's dog from the 1930's
- 7 The dog who appears in the Peanuts Cartoon.
- 8 "----- ----- WHERE ARE YOU?" Cartoon film and TV character from the late 1960's.
- 9 THE FILM CARTOON DOG WHO SHARED THE TITLE ROLL WITH A LADY.
- 10 TOM HANK'S PARTNER IN A 1969 COMEDY FILM WHEN HE WAS THE ONLY WITNESS TO A CRIME AND LIKES TO DRINK BEER.
- 11 THIS DOG TAKES ON THE JOB OF SURROGATE MOTHER TO A PIGLET NAMED BABE.
- 12 DR WHO'S MECHANICAL PET DOG.

The RAFAGEN is produced every quarter and sent to members of the Letchworth, Hitchin & District branch of the Royal Air Forces Association via email.

If you would like to tell your story in RAFAGEN or have any comments about the magazine, the branch or the Association, we would like to hear from you. It can either be by hard copy through the mail, (any photographs will be returned immediately) to Ken Needham 68 Broadwater Avenue, Letchworth Garden City, Herts SG6 3HJ, or via email to kwn056@btinternet.com

NAAFI BREAKS for the next few months are as follows :-

Wednesday 29th January 2025

Wednesday 26th February 2025 (Also AGM)

Wednesday 26th March 2505

Wednesday 30th April 2025

Should you wish not to receive the regular issues of RAFAGEN, would you please advise the branch secretary on secretary@rafa-letchworth.org.uk, who will arrange for your address to be deleted from our list.

