

## No.160 Squadron, Royal Air Force

# AD LIB

("The Chota Coggage" for survivors)

## NO.2

Autumn, 1997

**No.160 Squadron operated mainly with Liberators Mk GR.Vb and GR.Vc for Minelaying and Special Duties, and with PR.III and PR.V for Photographic Reconnaissance. The following marks of Liberator also served with the Squadron during its relatively short existence -Marks I II GR.III, GR.IIIA, Gr.V, GRVI and GR.VI11.**

For first rate descriptions of supply dropping, the work of SOE and Force 136, readers are referred to, THE MOONLIGHT WAR - The Story of Clandestine Operations in South-East Asia 1944-45, by Terence O'Brien, Arrow Books, 1989, ISBN 0 09 961050 7. The title is misleading, from our point of view, as the book is 99% Burma. The author served with 357 Squadron which had a flight each of Hudsons, Dakotas and Liberators, The author was O.C. Dakotas, but he mentions the work of their Liberators. Some readers may recall that 357's Liberator flight was on detachment with us at Minneriya and flew similar missions to our own. A jolly good read, even if the author does omit to mention 160 Squadron! (FWC)

A tragic loss occurred on the night of 30th April/1st May, 1945. Flying Officer L G Knowles, RAAF; Warrent Officer K L Westoott, RCAF; F/Lt L R Davidson, RAF and F/Lt W L Schroeder, RCAF, together with their crews, were briefed to drop mines in Singapore Harbour. All proceeded normally until F/O Knowles and crew, in BZ868 "X", were positioned at the end of the runway ready for take-off. At that moment they were Instructed to allow S/Ldr D G M Joy, and crew, to take over the flight in order to catch up on some lost operational hours.

F/Lt Schroeder had to abort his mission due to fuel flow problems The other three aircraft made it to Singapore. When within 100 miles of Ceylon on the return journey, S/Ldr Joy apparently ran out of fuel and had to "ditch". F/O Robertson, DFC, Navigator, was killed as a result of being thrown through the windscreen, and W/O R Arscott, RAAF, WOP/AG, was badly wounded and died in the water. S/Ldr Joy was mortally wounded, dying in the water about 10 minutes after ditching. F/O R L Freeman, RCAF, WOP/AG, was Injured in the right leg; W/O C M Fisher, RCAF, WOP/AG, had a large wound in the right leg; FISgt J L McDonald. Rear Gunner, had multiple lacerations and F/Sgt G P Brown , RAF, had very severe abrasions to his head. F/O K L Newby, RAF, Second pilot, was the only crew member uninjured.

The main dinghies failed to release and the surviving crew had to cling to a small 'K' type dinghy. The aircraft sank after 20 minutes. Survivors had to beat the water for some six hours to keep off sharks. *(it should be noted that sharks can defect one part of blood in 100 million parts of water.)*

The distress message from the stricken aircraft was picked up and relayed to Ceylon by one of the Wireless Operators in F/Lt. Davidson's aircraft. It was believed by Ceylon to be a practice message and not acted upon until it was realised that S/Ldr Joy's aircraft was missing. The missing crew, surrounded by about 40 sharks, were located by an aircraft of the Royal Netherlands Navy. They were eventually picked up by the crew of a corvette, who had to shoot many of the sharks.

Based on unpublished data, supplemented by information supplied by a 160 Squadron member In Canada, Erhard Cooke, of Leo Davidson's crew. Further data on this tragic ditching can be viewed in Bill Cooper's files)

At last 'our war' is getting recognition in the published histories. "THE FORGOTTEN AIR FORCE - THE ROYAL AIR FORCE IN THE WAR AGAINST JAPAN, by Air Commodore Henry Probert, ISBN 1 8575 065 9, was published by

Brassey's in 1995. It mentions 160 Squadron's involvement with minelaying, Special Operations and photographic reconnaissance. (*Contributions from Bill Cooper*). "WINGS OF THE DAWNING", by Dr Arthur Banks, ISBN 897817 70 3, was published by Images in 1996. It shows how 160 Squadron's minelaying played a fundamental part in reducing Japanese and German submarine operations in the Indian Ocean. (*Contributions from John Stacey, Jack Burgess and Bill Cooper*)

One of our reunion attendees used to spend his periods of duty sitting in the radio but at the end of the runway at Minnerlya. The following description of Special Duty Liberator takeoffs at Jessore, taken from THE MOONLIGHT WAR, should bring back memories:

"I never saw a fully loaded Liberator take off which did not brush the grass at the end of the strip. The reeds always either shivered from the proximity of the propellers or were flailed by actual contact, and at least one aircraft clipped the palms while I watched.

"There was a horrific fascination about the process, and it was impossible not to be distracted by it. I would be in the Dakota flight office ... then we would hear a throbbing roar from the far end of the strip. I would try to carry on the discussion, to shut out the fearful sound., but invariably we would abandon work and go outside to watch. And always I would be alarmed at how little distance the Liberator seemed to have traveled since we had heard the opening roar of full throttle - and how slowly it was still travelling as it approached our end of the runway.

"Its passage up the strip was more like that of a boat than an aircraft, a fat overladen barge chugging stolidly up a canal. As it drew nearer to us the speed seemed scarcely to alter, then when it was directly opposite and still firmly stuck to the ground the throbbing desynchronised roar would change for an instant into a flat ratchetting clatter I believe it was the Doppler effect, the Harvard was particularly noted for it. It was Impossible to make yourself heard above it, and the flight but itself would seem to shake under the tumult of sound.

"You would see the pilot, arms quivering at the controls, chin raised high as if trying to help lift the monstrous lump up into the alien air, then the bulk was past you and the deep desynchronised roar was once more ramming into your ears - a note of desperation in it as the aircraft came to the end of the runway and began to cleave through the grass. You would clench your fists, willing the thing clear of the ground, watching it thunder towards the reeds and then, miraculously every time despite its speed, its shape, its size and its weight, it would lumber into the air and miss disaster. And you would let your breath out at last, unclench your fists, and then go back into the shadows of the office chilled with sweat."

The 1998 Reunion will be held at the Falcon Hotel in Stratford-upon-Avon over the first weekend in September, unless those present at the 1997 reunion decide otherwise.

In the course of preparation for the 1997 reunion, Ted Daines and Bill Cooper, alone, exchanged some 80 letters, plus documentation and telephone calls.

AD LIB aims to keep Squadron survivors in touch. Comments and contributions to Ted Daines,45 Randolph Road, NORWICH, NR1 2RU. Donations towards production cost are always appreciated)

Designed and typeset in Cheltenham by ADASTRAPRINT - free, gratis and for nothing!