



Magoo's Bothy revisited

The President takes the high road to Choire Mhor, rediscovers why he left the Navy to fly Air Force, and is desperately seeking Splash Astridge!



RAF Benson 9 April 2001 Eighteen years ago I was standing in for OC 33 Squadron, Baz North, who was away on leave. It was late afternoon on 9 April 2001, and I can remember receiving the first of several calls from John Taylor, our detachment commander at Pristina airport in Kosovo, informing me that they had lost comms with one of our Pumas, XW200. The aircraft was on task down near the Kacanik defile and was part of Task Force Cambrai, involved in interdiction operations on the Kosovo-Macedonian border against ethnic Albanian insurgents. As the squadron executives gathered to start initiating the procedures for lost aircraft I received the call we were all dreading. British and American troops in the area had reached the crash site and there were confirmed fatalities. The BBC later summarised the crash as follows:

Two British military pilots have died after their helicopter crashed while attempting an emergency landing in Kosovo.

The British Puma helicopter came down in the mountains at Kranacia, south-west of Pristina, at 1345GMT on Monday.

Seven people were on board - three crew and four passengers - and the five survivors were injured in the crash.

The dead men were named by the MoD as the helicopter's two pilots, 28-year-old Captain Andrew Crous of the Army Air Corps and RAF Flt Lt Mark James Maguire, 31, both based at RAF Benson.

"It appears that the aircraft had to execute an emergency landing in heavy rain, low cloud and mountainous terrain," said an MoD spokesman.

"There is absolutely no evidence of any hostile action."

Later that month I remember standing with other members of 33 Squadron at RAF Brize Norton as the boys were brought home, and attending Mark's funeral at Ewelme Church on 25 April, when Cameron Maclachlan piped Mark out of the church, as he had done 8 months previously at Mark and Alison's wedding. The saddest part of all was having to fly up to Scotland to present Alison with the Board of Inquiry's findings.

The Oxfordshire Assistant Deputy Coroner, Andrew Walker, praised Andy and Mark's actions, saying: "Despite the desperate situation they found themselves in...(they) did not depart from a measured, calm and professional approach which, I have no doubt, saved the lives of the four passengers and the third member of their crew.

"Their conduct as a crew is entirely in keeping with the best traditions of our armed forces and can only be admired by those that they left behind."

RAF Benson Summer 2002 Over a year later, in Issue 15 of the Lions Roar, '33 Sqn Remembers' recorded 33 Squadron holding an unveiling ceremony for a memorial to Andy and Mark in front of the hangar. The memorial, shown overleaf, was unveiled during the Station's Annual Inspection by Air Vice



Above: Padre Simon Iredale dedicates the memorial.
Left and below: The memorial to Captain Crous and Flight Lieutenant Maguire in front of the 33 Squadron hangar.



Marshal David Niven, Commander JHC.

Further down the page the article records our involvement in a project that had been instigated by Alison and their friends to create a worthy memorial in the Highlands to Mark's memory, an area that Mark had loved. The project became to be known as 'Magoo's Bothy' and the article read as follows:

"Further to this, members of 33 Squadron have been involved in the rebuilding of a 'bothy' in the Highlands of Scotland in memory of Flt Lt Mark Maguire. The exercise took place over 2 weeks in June and was based at Choire Mhor, approximately 40 miles northwest of Inverness. Upon arrival the first team found the bothy in a state of ruin, as can be seen in the photograph, and



quickly set about assisting the stonemason in clearing the site in preparation to start rebuilding work. By the end of the second week, all of the walls had been rebuilt, the concrete floors put in and the structure prepared for the addition of a roof. A lot more work needs to be done over the coming weeks and months and it is hoped that it will be completed by late July/early August. So hopefully, we will be bringing you a full report of the Bothy rebuild 'before, during and after, in the next edition."



I do not know if that 'before, during and after' article was published as, in September 2002, George Bush began making a case for an invasion of Iraq, and the Squadron's focus started to shift towards a possible deployment back to the Middle East. Within six months 33 Squadron was in the Gulf and part of the invasion force that commenced combat on 19 March 2003.



As I recall, we were invited to the grand reopening of Magoo's Bothy though, sadly I cannot recall how many serving personnel managed to get there or when it opened. However, we were sent some photographs of the 'Opening Ceremony', which are reproduced here. Please note the chap in the photograph above with a cardboard box on his head is Alan Warwick, a man who is to stonemasonry what Banksy is to street art! Alan was key to initiating the recent 'walk in' with our President, Paul Lyall. This is Paul's version of events:

22 June 2019 Way back in 2002, a team from 33 deployed forward into the Scottish highlands to help convert a near-derelict shepherd's dwelling into a shelter for hill walkers, a free-for-all facility commonly known as a bothy. The site was north of Inverness, near Oykel Bridge, and as the last 10 miles consisted only of semi-passable land rover tracks, our Pumas



conducted some very useful training by flying in the necessary building materials. Over the next two weeks, Squadron aircrew and engineers camped out and acted as site labourers under the supervision of a master Mason, Alan Warwick. Using the local stone, the building rose again, despite some extremely windy weather conditions that blew away the scaffolding on the front elevation.

The whole reason for involving the Squadron was to celebrate the life of Flt Lt Mark Maguire, known as 'Magoo' who had died in a Puma crash in snowy conditions in Kosovo in April 2001, alongside Capt Andy Crous, on exchange from the Army Air Corps. A memorial to both of them stands today in front of the Squadron at RAF Benson. Magoo had been a keen hill walker and a family trust raised enough money to pay for the reconstruction of a bothy in his memory.

Which takes us to 2019. Alan Warwick, the Mason, tracked down the then Squadron boss - moi - and a plan was hatched to meet up with Alan and his wife Olwen at the bothy at the end of June. Many of the original Squadron working party wanted to attend but the normal work pressures and airline rostering prevented most from attending. In the end, my wife Lynne and I, and our spaniel, Bertie, picked up 'Conehead' (Gareth Cone) and 'JP' (John Peters AAC) from Shawbury and commenced the long drive north.

It soon became apparent that the bothy was a 6 hour drive north of the Scottish border. Pausing at a local B&B, the final assault was made on the Saturday morning. Abandoning the car as close as possible, a 3 hour walk ensued through the highland countryside, thankfully and unusually bathed in warm sunshine.

On arrival, the team found the bothy exactly as they had left it some 17 years previously. A fitting testament to the building skills of the original team. A glass or two (or perhaps 3) was raised to the memory of both departed friends. A happy evening and restful night ensued listening to Alan's memories of us (we had clearly made an impression on him, especially someone called Splash Astridge?!)

Given the long journey back and the early rising of the Scottish sun, the return journey started at 0530 and the team got back down south by the late evening.

It was a long trip, but worth making in memory of our departed friends. Hints and tips? If travelling up from the south, try flying into Inverness and hiring a car. Take a good camping mat. Make sure the rations are not 15 years old. And hope for good weather. We hear that some others from the original work party may attempt the journey next April, to mark the anniversary of the crash. Snow shoes and arctic sleeping bags may be required....."



The youngsters stoke up on e-numbers!!...



...and climb to the top of the mountain opposite the Bothy... (see photo overleaf)



... but are so knackered afterwards that retired Air Commodore Lyall has to row them back! How times have changed!



Above: The view over the loch from Magoo's Bothy.

Below: Looking down on Magoo's Bothy, outlined by the yellow box.



For a look around the bothy, maybe as inspiration for future visits, check out : <https://youtu.be/hW5XK5wfYro>