



Battlefield Tour 5-7 October 2018

'Zeppelin Hunters' 1916-1918: The Early Years in Lincolnshire



33 Squadron, R.F.C.



OFFICERS OF ROYAL FLYING CORPS—COLONIALS, CHRIST CHURCH, OXFORD

Gillman

From left to right are: Back row—2nd Lieut. N. Goudie (Canada), 2nd Lieut. W. N. Spragg (N.Z.), 2nd Lieut. D. D. Fowler (S.A.), 2nd Lieut. F. F. Woodyer (Ceylon), 2nd Lieut. S. Nixon (Canada), 2nd Lieut. G. V. Aimer (N.Z.), 2nd Lieut. J. Bell (Aus.); second row: 2nd Lieut. H. Larkin (Aus.), 2nd Lieut. P. A. Wright (Canada), 2nd Lieut. K. L. Caldwell (N.Z.), 2nd Lieut. C. W. Carleton (S.A.), 2nd Lieut. G. A. Bambridge (S.A.), 2nd Lieut. R. F. Talbot (F.M.S.), 2nd Lieut. H. Greenwell (N.Z.), 2nd Lieut. J. A. Cowling (S.A.), 2nd Lieut. L. V. Hirst (S.A.), 2nd Lieut. S. M. Pell (Staff), 2nd Lieut. — Grove (Canada); third row: 2nd Lieut. A. J. Court (Aus.), 2nd Lieut. G. G. Callender (N.Z.), 2nd Lieut. W. Fraser (Aus.), 2nd Lieut. P. W. Snell (Aus.), R. S. Jameson (S.A.), 2nd Lieut. F. B. Baragar (Canada), 2nd Lieut. A. M. Pearson (Canada), 2nd Lieut. F. D. N. Sams (N.Z.), 2nd Lieut. G. Mackrell (India), 2nd Lieut. S. G. Dowsett (S.A.), 2nd Lieut. F. S. Andrews (S.A.), 2nd Lieut. R. T. Barlow (N.Z.); sitting—2nd Lieut. W. S. Shirtcliffe (N.Z.), 2nd Lieut. T. Perkins (Canada), 2nd Lieut. C. F. Reeve (Aus.); 2nd Lieut. H. D. Benningfield (S.A.), 2nd Lieut. G. C. Burnand (Staff), Lieut. C. Court-Treatt (adjutant), Major C. Saunders, D.S.O. (commandant), 2nd Lieut. C. F. Anns (Staff), Captain J. A. Dennistoun (Canada), Captain H. S. Lees-Smith (S.A.), 2nd Lieut. I. D. Hewitt (N.Z.), 2nd Lieut. J. A. ...



Battlefield Tour 2018

'Zeppelin Hunters' 1916-1918 : The Early Years in Lincolnshire

With 33 Squadron having been formed in January 1916 as the Royal Flying Corps' first Home Defence squadron, and despatched North to defend the industrial centres of Leeds, Sheffield and the Humber, it seemed the right thing to do, as part of 'RAF 100', to go and have a look at the airfields where 33 had been based to counter the German Zeppelin raids on Britain, and where it had become 33 Squadron Royal Air Force on 1 April 1918. While the first deployment had been to Yorkshire, the Squadron spent most of the First World War in Lincolnshire, having moved in October 1916 to Gainsborough, where it set up its Headquarters (HQ), a small landing ground and workshops around the town, and had flight sites at Elsham, Manton near Kirton in Lindsey, and Brattleby, an airfield later renamed Scampton.

Bomber County

Lincolnshire was home to 27 Bomber stations and as 33 Squadron had reformed in March 1929 as a bomber squadron we also had a good excuse to look at what life would have been like if we had been recalled to Britain to be part of Bomber Command. The man in charge of Bomber Command, Arthur 'Bomber' Harris, knew all about 33 from his time as Air Officer Commanding (AOC) Transjordan. Several 33 Squadron pilots, whose first or second tours were with the squadron in the Middle East, returned to the UK in the late 30s and became key players within Harris' organisation, with three ex-OCs, Squadron Leader Francis Percival Don, Squadron Leader Joseph Breen and Hugh Walmsley, all holding senior positions with the Groups of Bomber Command.



Francis Percival Don



John Joseph Breen

Acknowledging the PRU Spitfire opposite the Benson Guard Room, a replica of the aircraft that Flying Officer Jerry Fray took off in very early in the morning of 17 May 1943 to fly over to Germany and take

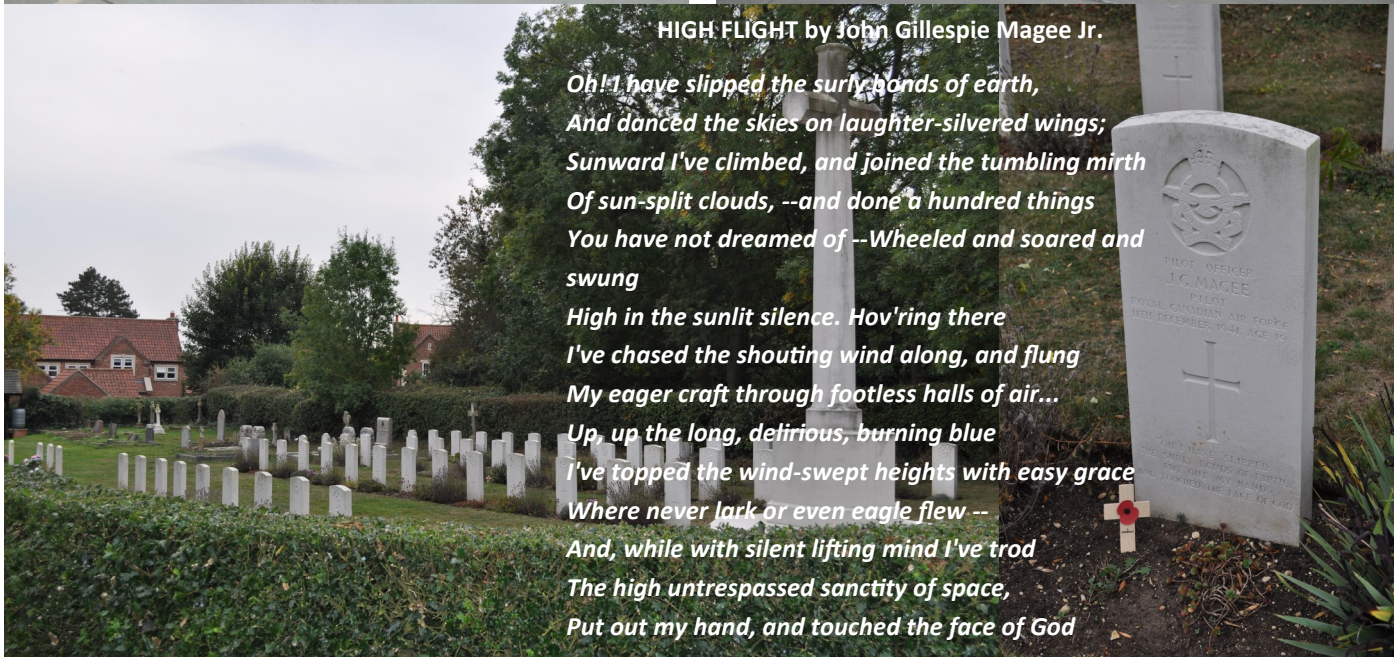
photographs of the results of the Dambusters Raid, our 16 seater minibus departed from Benson at 0930, with three old SODS (Society of Door Sliders) onboard, Neil Scott behind the wheel, plus freight : several cases of Loyalty beer, a large box of Puma HC Mk 1 cockpit instrumentation and Mr C's (Dave Coombes) Catering Box. We arrived at the 'Ginger Cow' RV a little later than planned, the minibus being limited to 62 mph, but met up Graham and Tony for a 'light lunch' before making our way to the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight Visitors' Centre. We arrived there just as our guide, ex-OC BBMF, Clive Rowley, drove in to park his car. Chris Perkins and Clive knew each other well, as Chris had been a member of the BBMF while he was at RAFC Cranwell, and Clive had kindly agreed to show us around the Museum even though he was not officially on shift that day. What a guide he proved to be!

Battle of Britain Memorial Flight

The collection includes aircraft types and marks that 33 had flown when it became a fighter squadron; once inside the hangar we were privileged to have a conducted tour around a Hurricane IIC (LF363 / PZ865), several Spitfires, including a Mk IIa (P7350), MkVb (AB910) and LFIXe with clipped wings (MK356). We were also fortunate to see the Hawker Typhoon there, (see photo below) the aircraft that begat the Tempest .

The Dakota was an aircraft that Chris had flown on many times as the Loadmaster, an aircraft that 33 personnel would have known well in WW2, as the ORB frequently mentions a Dakota moving 33's air and ground crew - Tangmere to Caen, Maldegem to Lasham, and Lasham to Predannack back in 1944.





HIGH FLIGHT by John Gillespie Magee Jr.

*Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth,
 And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
 Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
 Of sun-split clouds, --and done a hundred things
 You have not dreamed of -- Wheeled and soared and
 swung
 High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there
 I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
 My eager craft through footless halls of air...
 Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
 I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace
 Where never lark or even eagle flew --
 And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod
 The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
 Put out my hand, and touched the face of God*



The Lancaster, undisputed Queen of the BBMF, was the final treat and she did not disappoint. The size of the aircraft is remarkable, but the size of the losses incurred by the Bomber Command, in terms of aircraft and aircrew, was staggering. As Clive explained to us while we stood staring up at that immense bomb bay, he told us that while most people are aware that over 55 000 men were lost, another 25 000 men were wounded or taken POW, and of the 7 377 Lancasters built over half were lost to flak, enemy fighters or flying accidents. He also reminded us that all of the Bomber Command aircrew were volunteers, with an average age of just 22.

Scopwick Cemetery, near Digby

Heading to Lincoln from Coningsby we visited Scopwick Cemetery, which has fifty Commonwealth burials from WW2 and five German war graves. There are thirty seven Canadian airmen buried at Scopwick who all lost their lives while stationed at Digby, including an American airmen who served with the RCAF, Pilot Officer John Gillespie Magee Jr.



John Gillespie Magee Jr

Chris explained that John Magee Jr was an Anglo-American Royal Canadian Air Force fighter pilot and poet, who wrote the poem 'High Flight', which starts:

"Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;

Magee was educated at Rugby School and was visiting the United States in 1939 when Britain declared war against Germany. Magee was unable to return to Rugby for his final school year, so he finished his education in Avon, Connecticut and gained a scholarship to Yale University in July 1940. Instead of enrolling Magee chose to volunteer for war service with the RCAF and joined up in October 1940. After flight training in Ontario and Ottawa he passed his Wings Test in June 1941. He was then sent to Britain and received operational training at RAF Llandow in Wales before an assignment for Spitfire conversion training with No. 412 (Fighter) Squadron, RCAF, which had formed at RAF Digby on 30 June 1941. Magee arrived at Digby on 23 September 1941 to commence training. Shortly after he arrived the squadron switched from the Spitfire Mk II to the more powerful Mk Vb, and Magee first took a Mk Vb aloft on 8

October 1941. On 20 October 1941, he took part in a convoy patrol, and on that same day the Squadron moved from Digby aerodrome to a Digby satellite station nearby, RAF Wellingore.

On 11 December 1941, in just his tenth week of active service, Magee was killed while flying Spitfire VZ-H (AD291), the same aircraft he had flown in the engagement with the Luftwaffe over France four weeks earlier. He had taken off in the late morning with other members of 412 Squadron to practice air fighting tactics, and was descending at high speed through a break in the clouds in concert with three other Spitfires when he struck an Airspeed Oxford trainer flying out of RAF Cranwell, piloted by 19 year old Leading Aircraftman/Pilot Under-Training Ernest Aubrey Griffin. The two aircraft collided just below the cloud base at about 1,400 feet AGL, at 11:30, over the hamlet of Roxholme, which lies between Cranwell and Digby.

At the inquiry afterwards a local farmer who witnessed the accident testified that he saw Magee after the collision struggling to push back the canopy of his Spitfire as it descended apparently out of control. Magee succeeded in reversing the canopy and bailing out, but he was at too low an altitude for his parachute to have time to open. He died in farmland near the village of Ruskington. He was 19 years old.

From Scopwick we headed to Lincoln and settled in to the Bentley Hotel, a really comfortable hotel with good food, a swimming pool, where we negated any possibility of a bad's night sleep by getting to grips with several pints of Black Sheep over dinner. It worked!

Gainsborough

Day Two, Saturday 6 October, started out as wet as the forecasters had predicted the night before, so we decided to opt for wet weather gear and umbrellas instead of wearing our blazer and ties, which were going to be worn at dinner that evening. We met up with Peter Bradshaw and Susan Edlington at Gainsborough Cemetery on Cox's Hill at 1000 and walked down with them to the chapel in the centre of the cemetery, where we could be briefed under cover.

The research work that Peter had undertaken in discovering the stories behind Gainsborough's casualties during World War One is exceptional in scale and detail, and immaculately recorded in four large volumes of 'Gainsborough at War', Volume 4 covering 33 Squadron's arrival in the town. Although the Squadron did not shoot down a Zeppelin, many hours were spent patrolling and chasing the German airships, often at night and in marginal conditions, flying conditions that were new to many of the pilots. The Squadron lost fourteen aircrew to flying accidents or catastrophic technical failures, of whom eight lie



Top: Peter briefing the group. The graves, from left to right are: Lt. John Harman, 2nd Lt. Carey Pinnock, 2nd Lt. Frederick Livingstone, 2nd Lt. Laurens Van Staden and Lt. Frank Benitz.

Below: The two Canadian officers, Lt. John Brophy and Lt. James Menzies. Bottom right: Grave of 2nd Lt. Hubert Solomon, the only pilot to lose his life at Gainsborough.





Top left: One of 33 Squadron hangars from Saundby aerodrome, bought and moved in to the town in 1919.
Top right: original interior of the hangar. Centre left: The approach path over Gainsborough. Graham, Peter, Chris, Neil, Tony and Sue on the bank of the River Trent, overlooking the landing ground with the site of the Marshalls factory behind them.
Below: The site of Saundby landing ground, with the remains of the bases for the huts in the foreground.



buried in the Gainsborough General Cemetery. In the year that the RAF celebrates its 100th birthday, it was fitting that we paid our respects to some of the first men of 33 Squadron who had given their tomorrows for our todays.

After laying the wreath and crosses we walked up to Summer Hill to see where 33 Squadron had established its HQ in 'The Lawn'. According to Peter's research the grounds of 'The Lawn' were filled with wooden huts, which were used to accommodate the Clerks, Cooks, Drivers and other HQ staff. The Officer's Mess was also at 'The Lawn'. The CO at the time was 21 year old Major Arthur Thomson, MC and Bar, rather young to be in command of a fighter squadron; indeed, many of his pilots were older than he was.

33 Squadron's Landing Ground at Gainsborough was in the Parish of Saundby, on the Nottinghamshire side of the River Trent. The War Department took over some large flat fields which were owned by a Gainsborough butcher, a Mr Layne, and set up wooden huts and hangers around the edge of them. The location of this aerodrome was on the south side of the Old Flood Road, or Ramper Road, the A631 road, and went from the small humped backed bridge (Eight Arches) up to the Great Northern Railway that ran through Beckingham. This Landing Ground was used for servicing and repairs to aircraft, rather than as a front-line fighter base, although patrols were flown if an aircraft was available at night when Zeppelin activity was reported. Major Thomson always had an aeroplane ready across the river at Saundby every night, and if a Zeppelin airship alert was received he would take off to fly to whichever of his three Flights had been scrambled to try and find the German airships.

The ground staff soldiers, or 'Air Mechanics' as they were called in the RFC, lived in the Gainsborough Workhouse on Lea Road; there is an Aldi Supermarket there today. They must have passed to and fro over the Trent Bridge many times on their way to carry out their duties at the airfield, both by day and night. The Officers (Aircrew, Pilots and Observer/Gunners) lived at the Squadron Headquarters on Summer Hill, a short drive away from the airfield.

In June 1917 33 Squadron began switching from BE2s and 12s to FE2s, a 'pusher' design with the observer / gunner, unsecured and exposed to the elements in a large nacelle. Behind him sat the pilot, with the engine and propellor behind the pilot, enclosed in a lattice framework with the tail and rudder at the back. Although the FE2 was an odd looking aircraft it seemed to fly well and equipped several fighter squadrons at that time. Provided that the target was in front of the aircraft, the Gunner had a good field of fire.

Because the prevailing wind across England was from southwest to northeast, the aircraft of 33 Squadron would have taken off over the railway line and village of Saundby, and come into land over Gainsborough and the river. It would not have been an easy approach and on the evening of 20th October 1917 a report was received at 33 Squadron HQ that Zeppelins had been heard flying inland over the Lincolnshire coast. Two aircraft took off from the Saundby airfield to try to intercept them. One of the aircraft crashed as it was taking off, diving steeply to the right at about 200 ft and hitting the ground with the engine running. The aircraft turned over and caught fire, killing 2nd Lt. Herbert Solomon, who was the pilot. His observer, 2nd Lt. Harold Peterson, was thrown clear and survived. Herbert Solomon was aged 34, older than most of the other aircrew, and he was the fifth fatal casualty in the 10 months that 33 Squadron had been based in North Lincolnshire. While his Casualty Card states the accident was, "caused by machine going on fire after crash during air raid." Major Thomson thought that the crash might have been caused by Solomon's thigh length 'fug boots' fouling the controls. Below you can see a pair of 'fug boots on display at Newark Air Museum, made by Harrods for a Major Hawker.



RAF Hemswell

From Saundby landing ground we said goodbye to Peter and Sue and headed east on the A361 towards RAF Hemswell, known as RFCS Harpswell in 1918, and the airfield where 33 Squadron disbanded in 1919. If you have seen the 1954 film 'The Dambusters' then you have seen Hemswell, as it was used as a substitute for RAF Scampton. The RFC opened RFCS Harpswell in 1918 as a night landing ground with grass airstrip for two Night Flying Training squadrons, No. 99 and No.200. The airfield closed in 1919 but construction began in 1935 for a new bomber airfield that was opened on 31 December 1936 and became part of No. 5 Group. Hemswell's other claim to fame is that it was the station where Graham did his glider flying as an Air Cadet. Many of the old station buildings and hangars are still there, it is easily recognizable as an old RAF station, but all of the buildings appear to be used as Antiques Centres now. The Astra Restaurant was very good, and we all said that we could have lost half a day wandering around the antiques for sale. However, time was against us and we had to press on.

RAF Manton (Kirton Lindsey)

The airfield at Manton, home to 33 Squadron's B Flight, lies a few miles North of Hemswell alongside the A15, from where the remains of the former RAF Kirton Lindsey can be seen. It was at Manton, at 4.30 pm on Christmas Eve, 1916, that the 23 year old Canadian, Lieutenant John Brophy, crashed in his BE12. Brophy was an experienced pilot, having flown with No.21 Squadron on the Western Front from April to mid-November 1916. Joining 33 Squadron on 26 November 1916 he flew in response to the Zeppelin raid of 27-28 November, from 2100 hrs to 0003 hrs, and gave chase to L.14 and L.21, the latter being shot down 10 miles off Lowestoft by Royal Naval Air Service aircraft from Great Yarmouth at 0642 hrs.

Sadly it was during an air test that Lt. Brophy became the first of several fatalities during the Squadron's stay in the Gainsborough area. This is how the accident was described by his flight commander, Captain Gordon Richardson, in a letter to Lt. Brophy's parents: "...I left him in charge of the aerodrome and flight, whilst I went off to an accident some 12 miles from here...on my return I was informed by my clerk that Lt. Brophy had been killed only five minutes before I arrived back in the car...It appears he went up, as is usual for us all to do on a fine evening, to test his machine, B.E.12 No. 6661. He went up at 3.55 pm and climbed to about 4,000-5,000 feet. At this height he did some very sharp right and left turns and then after a steep dive he looped the loop. The machine completed the loop perfectly and then, as he usually did, he turned the machine into a left hand spiral to

come down. It was from this particular spiral that the machine never righted itself. It continued in left hand circles, getting more and more steep and sharp, until the machine hit the ground nose first, at about 150 miles an hour.

On examination of the wreckage I have found that every control is intact and still workable, showing they had not jammed, but I find almost conclusive evidence that the main spar of the left hand bottom plane had, owing to the enormous strain of the loop, pulled out of the socket and away from the securing bolt at the root of the spar. This, of course, would affect the whole rigging and stability of the machine, and almost automatically cause the steep spiral in which he came down."

The other pilot to be killed at Manton was the South African, 2nd Lt. Laurens Van Staden, who died in an FE 2b on 26 April 1916 during a practice flight at night. Van Staden was the first Royal Air Force officer that 33 Squadron had lost, but the fifteenth casualty overall.

Leaving Manton, time and traffic was against us to reach Elsham, C Flight's landing ground, and we turned south on the A15 to head back to Lincoln.

International Bomber Command Centre

Situated on Canwick Hill overlooking Lincoln, the IBCC has a most impressive monument that stands out well against the skyline and is just as impressive as the spire of Lincoln Cathedral, which we drove past on our way through the city. The monument is 102 feet (31.09m) tall, the wingspan of a Lancaster, and has a base that is 16 feet (5m) wide, the width of a Lancaster wing. Around the monument stand the Walls of names, 270 individual panels listing the 57 871 men and women killed while serving or supporting Bomber Command, a figure greater than the number of people serving in the RN and RAF combined.

During the BBMF visit Clive Rowley had pointed out that 125 000 aircrew from all over Britain, the Commonwealth, Occupied Europe and America had served, but only 28% got through the war without being killed, seriously injured or taken POW, while over 44% were killed while serving. With such a mixture of nationalities who came together and made the ultimate sacrifice for the freedoms we enjoy today, the IBCC Walls of Names are as moving as the Walls at the National Arboretum.

One of the many interesting facts that we picked up inside the Centre was an illustration of how military aircraft performance improved from the latter years of World War One. We had heard that in World War One, with strategic bombing in its infancy, the 78 raids carried out by German airships and aircraft had resulted in a fairly ineffective campaign, dropping just



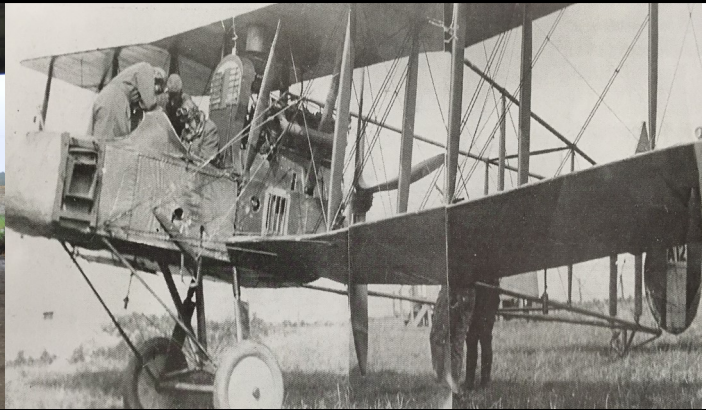
Above: the road to Manton airfield



Above: 33 Squadron groundcrew at Manton 1917



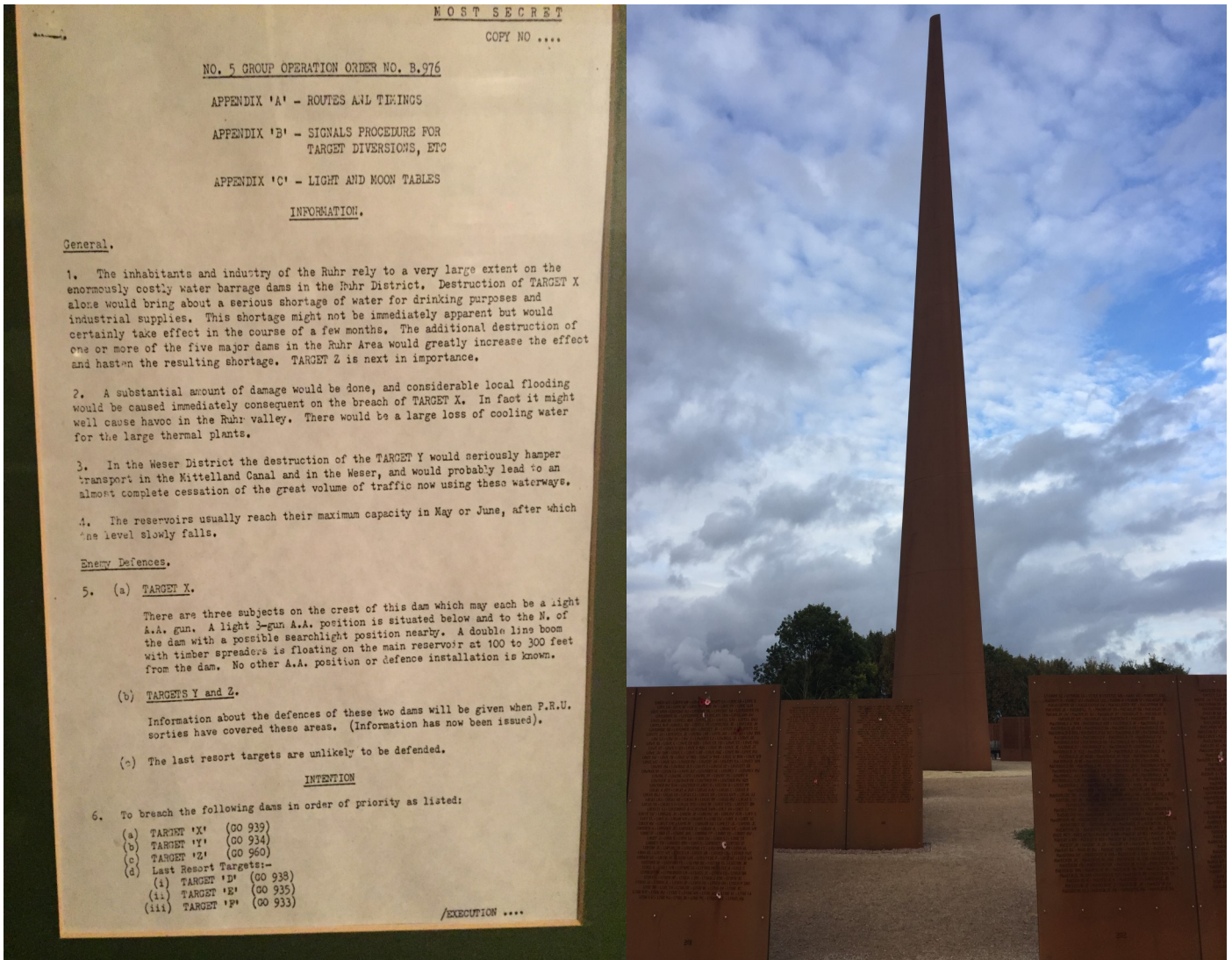
Above and below: Wet weather briefing facility opposite the old barn.



Above and below: FE2



Above: View across the old Manton airfield site.



Above left: Front page Op Chastise Operation Order

Above Right: The IBCC Monument and Walls of Names

Below: In the Petwood Hotel Bar, before going into the Squadron Bar



300 tons on Britain. On 6 June 1918 the RAF's Independent Force began its long-range bombing campaign against industrial targets deep in German territory, using De Havilland DH9s and Handley Page O/400s, but the war had ended before Britain's four-engined Handley Page V/1500 bomber, designed to drop 7,500 lbs on Berlin, entered service. However, British aircraft dropped 660 tons of bombs on Germany, more than twice what Germany had managed to drop on England. In comparison, the Luftwaffe dropped 74 000 tons of bombs on Britain during World War Two, compared to the 1 500 000 tons that were dropped by Allied bombers on Germany alone. The total tonnage of bombs dropped by the RAF and USAAF on targets across Europe was 2 690 000 tons. The Lancaster we had seen at Coningsby was capable of carrying the Grand Slam bomb, weighing in at a staggering 22 000 lb (10 000 kg). The bomb load of an FE2b was 350 lb, and 100 Squadron was using FE2s as night bombers in 1918. The Hawker Horsley's bomb load was 1 500 lb (680 kg), the Hawker Hart just 500 lb (227 kg).

Petwood Hotel

Day Two finished with a dinner at the Petwood Hotel over at Woodhall Spa, and was well worth the white knuckle taxi rides to get there and back! Much of the memorabilia is kept in the Squadron Bar, and we were fortunate to be able to enjoy pre- and post-dinner drinks in there, giving us plenty of time to read through and digest the amount of historic and fascinating information on display. Being able to read the original Operation Order for Op Chastise, the radio log as the messages were transmitted back to the Operations Room, the congratulatory messages from Kings, prime ministers and presidents was a real honour.

Newark Air Museum

Day Three, Sunday 7 October, started with a very leisurely breakfast before we took the short drive over to Newark Air Museum, where we had arranged to meet Kev Graham at 1000. Waiting at the gate to meet us I asked him what he wanted first, a case of Loyalty beer or a box of bits for XW208. No surprises for guessing that the bits were relegated to second place!

Kev has done a fantastic job in renovating XW208 to its current condition, as you can see from the then and now photographs of the cockpit, and we spent a good hour chatting through his plans and options before we started looking at what else the Museum had to offer. In simple terms, the answer is... lots! .

Newark has two large hangars full of aircraft and exhibits, with some real gems from both wars and the inter-war years that were relevant to 33 Squadron. As mentioned previously we saw a set of Fug Boots, there

are propellers from some of the aircraft we flew in WW1, plus a propeller from a Hawker Horsley, one of the largest wooden propellers ever produced at 14 ft 9 inches (4.5m). It was useful to be able to view a Fraser Nash and a Rose Turret side by side, the Rose turret being manufactured by the Rose family, the family who owned 'The Lawn' on Summer Hill in Gainsborough. There is so much to look at in Newark that we did not leave until 1515; I would simply recommend that you go and look for yourself. There was a very friendly welcome from every member of staff, and the restaurant was very good. If you would like to assist Kev Graham rebuild XW208 he would welcome you with open arms!

And finally ...

We arrived back at Benson at 1815, with rather more knowledge about 33 Squadron's time in Lincolnshire, and glad to have met up with people who have done some incredible work to keep the history of 33 Squadron alive in their areas. We could easily do a similar tour to look at 33 Squadron RFC's Yorkshire airfields in the future, and the Bentley Hotel, Petwood Hotel or Newark Air Museum would be fine venues for an AGM, with lots to see and do in the local area.

On the return from Ypres in 2017 we had said that it was a great pity that the first years of 33 Squadron's history lies in England, not in France, as the countryside, the cemeteries and the museums in the region look fascinating. As several members of 33, including a former OC, Major Cyril Gordon Burge, went over to join the RAF's first night flying squadron, 100 Squadron, who were flying the FE2b that 33 had flown for a substantial period, we now have a link to the Western Front that could be worthy of a future Battlefield Tour.

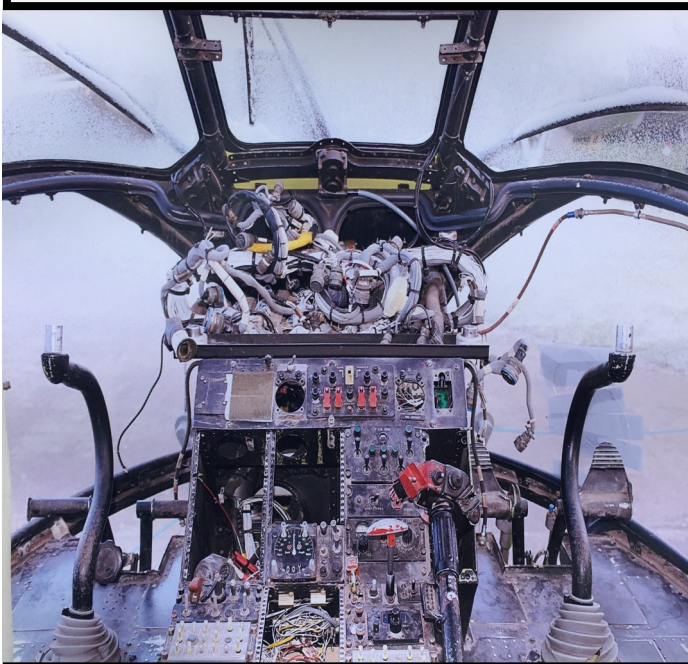
My thanks go to Chris Perkins, without whom the tour would not have gone ahead, Neil Scott, for driving us everywhere, Dave Coombes, for the fine inflight catering and photography, for Graham Lowe's suggestions and his eye for detail and timings, and Tony Whitehead's knowledge of the lie of the land across the border, which I hope will uncover some previously unknown gems about the squadron's time in Yorkshire.

Our special thanks go to Clive Rowley at the BBMF, Peter Bradshaw and Susan Edlington for their outstanding work as friends of Gainsborough Cemetery and the resulting books, all of the staff at the Petwood Hotel, and to Kev Graham and the staff at NAM, who take volunteering to a whole new level.

LOYALTY



Above: When in Lincolnshire - adopt the 'Gibson's crew' pose!
 Below: XW 208 cockpit, before (February 2018) and 7 October 2018.



Below: left, the Fraser Nash turret, with Rose turret to the right.

Below: Hawker Horsley propeller.

