



# ROUNDEL



April 2019

The Swiss Branch Newsletter

## 1943 - "O" for Orange crashes on Meythet

Alain L. Dardelin

On the night of 14 August 1943, twelve Halifax bombers took off from RAF Tempsford in Bedfordshire for a rendezvous with the *maquisards* and SOE at the Col de Fretallaz, north of Annecy (Haute-Savoie). All aircraft but "O" Orange of No 138 Squadron returned that night.



The aircraft flown by Squadron Leader Frank Griffiths and a crew of six men was on a mission to parachute a variety of supplies over the defined location and then fly on to drop explosives to the *Résistance* in Savoie near Modane.

However, arriving over the Annecy area, no lights indicating the exact drop zone were visible. While circling over the town at low altitude one engine was reportedly hit by ground fire from the Italian garrison and failed, then a second one. The two remaining engines then quit leaving no option but for the pilot to crash-land



the crippled aircraft. The Halifax struck trees and then houses in the hamlet of Pont de Tasset near Meythet killing five civilians, two of whom were children, as well as the six crew members.

Miraculously, the pilot was thrown clear of the bomber still strapped to his seat and landed in telephone lines. He broke his arms when being rescued but was whisked away to a "safe" house before hostile troops arrived. With the help of local patriots he was smuggled into Switzerland where networks ferried him back to the UK through Spain and Gibraltar.

On Saturday 15 September 2018, the commune of Meythet, in conjunction with Annecy, organised a commemorative ceremony which took on a particular importance being the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the crash but also as a fitting tribute to Mr. André Carton who sadly passed away in January 2018. Mr. Carton had managed the organisation and overseen the smooth running of previous ceremonies. The Swiss Branch of RAFA was cordially invited to participate in the ceremony and meet at 09.00h at the *Salle Météore*, one of the annexes of the town hall, for an early first ceremony at 09.45h at the cemetery. The organisers had conveniently chartered two coaches to transport guests, standard bearers, brass band from the meeting point to the cemetery. Also present was a delegation from the twin town of Cheltenham: Mrs B. Driver (deputy mayor), Mr. D. Seacombe (town councillor), Mr. M. Bryant (Chairman, RAFA Cheltenham Branch) and Wg Cdr R. Roberts (RAF Retd) (Chairman, RBL Cheltenham and District). Once all in place at the cemetery, Mr. Thierry Lavieille (MC) detailed the order of the ceremony. At the order "*Aux drapeaux*" given and sounded by a lone



trumpet, the many officials arrived, except for the *Préfet* Pierre Lambert (excused). Our Branch piper Ray Saunders then played "Scotland the Brave". During the short ceremony, five wreaths were laid on the graves of F/O Sydney John Congdon DFM and Sgt Frank Pol-lard, the only remaining crew buried there. Other members of the crew temporarily buried in Meythet were later transferred to Saint-Germain au Mont d'Or cemetery near Lyon: Sgt Frederick Ronald Davies, P/O Roderick Alexander Mackenzie, Sgt John Maden and F/ Sgt Robert William Peters.

At the order "*Aux Morts*", standards were dipped, the Bugler played the eponymous call and a one minute silence was observed, followed by 'God Save the Queen', '*La Marseillaise*' and the 'Ode to Joy'. The first part of this ceremony finished, most of us retired to our seat on the coach, while some people chose to walk the short distance of 500 m to the black marble memorial at Pont de Tasset. Mr. Lavieille again led the proceedings for the larger audience. The ceremony truly started with the "*Aux drapeaux*" and the arrival of the officials. A young girl read out the text inscribed in the grey plaque, our piper Ray Saunders played the air "Highland Cathedral", which was followed by a short




speech by our Chairman Bryan Pattison recalling the missions flown by the two special squadrons Nos 138 and 161 converted to support the French *Résistance* with the supply of weapons, ammunition and other equipment.

The Mayor Mrs. Laydevant, the Mayor of the children's municipal council Mr. Erwan Campart, and Mrs. Gonzo-Massol, representing the town of Annecy, also made speeches recalling the tragic day of the crash. Children of the commune read out the names of the victims, both civilian and of the crew, before laying carnations at the foot of the stele, and then the officials present each laid a wreath too.

"*Aux Morts*" sounded, flags were dipped and one minute silence observed bringing the ceremony to a close. 'God Save the Queen', '*La Marseillaise*', '*le Chant des Partisans*' were ably played by the band and 'Amazing Grace' on the bagpipes.



The audience walked off to the sound of the '*Allobroges*' and all present were invited to take refreshments back at the *Salle Météore*. There, Mrs Laydevant thanked the organising committee for making this event a success following in André Carton's footsteps, and presented his widow with a bouquet of flowers. The guests and audience had the opportunity to view a display of documents and photographs taken from Mr. Claude Antoine's book "*Crash à Meythet*" and a model of Halifax NF  O built especially for the occasion by Mr Lavieille. Then the time came to take our leave of our hosts and head back for home. As coordinator for RAFA Swiss branch, it has been a pleasure to work with the organizing committee headed by Mrs Catherine Chevalier, ably assisted by Mr Thierry Lavieille and Mrs Haldric.



## Cuisery—something new

*(Our commemorative diary was recently expanded to include a new event last February. One of the lighter notes about this event is that no lives were lost that night. The weather was glorious. We were warmly received and generously treated. Ed.)*

As if secrecy wasn't enough, landing strips were sometimes found to be too boggy to take the weight of an aircraft, and on several occasions pilots



were forced to abandon their trapped aircraft in France. One of the less serious of these incidents took place on the night of 24/25 February 1943 and involved a twin-engine Lockheed *Hudson*. Its pilot was Wing Commander P.C. Pickard, who had taken over as commanding officer of No. 161



Squadron on 1 October 1942, when Group Captain Fielden was given command of RAF Tempsford. Pickard was probably the best known bomber pilot in the RAF at that time, thanks to his role as the captain of the Wellington 'F for-Freddie' in the documentary film 'Target for Tonight'. He was subsequently to be killed in action in February 1944 when leading the famous *Mosquito* raid on Amiens prison. Pickard had carried out the first pick-up sortie flown by a *Hudson* on the



night of 13/14 February and this had gone according to plan. However, on the more eventful mission 11 nights



later, his aircraft had become stuck in a patch of muddy ground and, as one squadron member recalled, 'his crew were armed to the teeth with revolvers, Sten guns and so on, but not so much as a tea-

spoon to dig themselves out.' Eventually they succeeded in freeing the aircraft helped by an excited crowd of French villagers only to see the aircraft become bogged down again. By the time that the *Hudson* had been freed a second time with a yoke of oxen dawn was approaching, and the aircraft was fortunate to reach England unmolested by German fighters. The BBC radioed thanks to the French farmer who supplied the oxen the following night.

## Filed-down teeth and a wooden leg

### A Woman of no Importance

*By Sonia Purnell  
Published by Virago*

For a France under the German jackboot, the SOE agent Virginia Hall was a vital aid to eventual freedom. Hers is a cracking story of an extraordinarily brave woman. It is impossible to overestimate the dangers faced by those secret agents, infiltrated into a France occupied by a ruthless enemy, living in conditions of hardship and, if captured, often facing the most horrific tortures.

A leader from her Baltimore schooldays, this tall and glamorous redhead was expected by her mother to make a "good" (socially advantageous) marriage. But new ideas of liberation were at work in the Twenties and she persuaded her parents to let her study abroad. In 1926, Hall, aged 20, moved to Paris – then the capital of culture, as well as of clothes – and quickly found herself in the midst of that enthralling ferment of writ-

ers, painters and intellectuals, moving on to study in Vienna in 1927. After a broken engagement, she went back to the United States.

Staying at home did not appeal and she took a job in the American Embassy in Warsaw. Here, personal tragedy struck: out snipe-shooting in the marshes, she omitted to put the safety catch of her gun on, stumbled – and shot herself badly in the left foot. It was before the age of antibiotics and, when gangrene set in, her leg had to be amputated at the knee.

Once equipped with a wooden leg, she returned to Europe working as a clerk for the State Department. In France when war broke out, she was co-opted into the fledgling SOE, trained in survival and killing techniques and armed with pills that poisoned, simulated a high fever, caused someone to sleep for a few hours or kept the swallower awake for hours on end. Even so, no one gave this one-legged 35-year-old desk clerk more than a 50-50 chance of surviving even the first few days, with the prospect of a grisly death her ever-present shadow.

How she did so is detailed in Sonia Purnell's extraordinarily well-researched *A Woman of No Importance*. (Hall liked to stay in the shadows, so much so that even after the war she tried to avoid much-deserved decorations.) Returning to her beloved Paris, now crawling with Germans, in September 1941, Hall posed as a US journalist, dyed her red hair light brown and wore it in a bun, and abandoned her Paris clothes for subdued tweed suits. She learnt to change her appearance within minutes using hats, spectacles, make-up, or slivers of rubber inside her cheeks to puff them out.

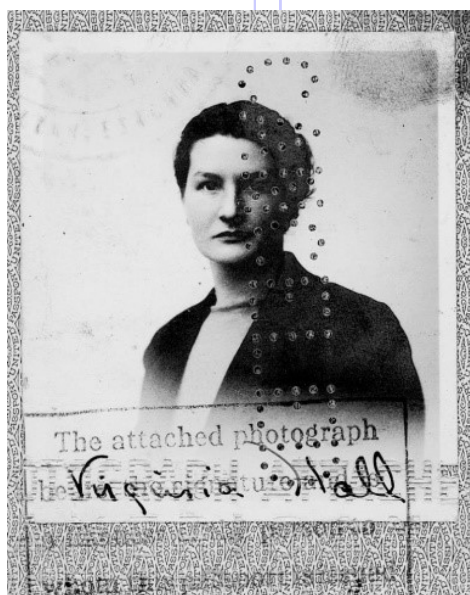
Her job was to mobilize *résistants*, ready for the day when the Allies would invade, but not to let them kill Germans, who would then retaliate by killing around four times as many civilians. Instead, there were subtle, untraceable acts of sabotage: from sugar dropped into a petrol tank to inserting a small piece of putrefied meat into carcasses bound for Germany. She kept up her cover as a journalist, which allowed her to move around and look at much that would have aroused suspicion otherwise, by writing articles, and was able to set up networks of resistance workers, passing information on anything from troop movements to armaments depots back to Britain. After America joined the war she went on to build up a formidable coterie of those who could be counted on to help her in unobtru-

sive ways or to shelter an agent on the run for a night or two. She received funds to entice other helpers via a friendly brothel. Danger, like cold and hunger, was ever-present. By now, with the Nazis systematically sending everything from food to rolling stock from France to Germany, survival had become such a priority that informers were rife.

There is a thrilling story of how Hall organised the escape of a dozen agents from the Vichy-run internment camp of Mauzac (near Bergerac) in July 1942, smuggling in items to help them forge a key – a tiny nail file inside a pot of jam brought by a devoted wife, wire cutters hidden inside a pile of laundry, tins of sardines to provide the metal from which the key was made – and managing to suborn certain guards and helpers outside.

Operation *Torch*, the Allied landing in North Africa, was followed by the German invasion of the Unoccupied Zone (in November 1942). It was imperative that Hall escape immediately, as the Gestapo were hot on her tracks; there were even posters of her with a reward offered for information as to her whereabouts.

There followed a nightmare flight over the Pyrenees. "After months of semi-starvation enforced by wartime conditions in France," writes Purnell, "[Hall] now had to climb 5,000 feet in the cruellest of winter conditions; each sideways step jarred her hip as she dragged her false leg up the vertiginous slope with the weight of her bag tearing at her shoulder and cutting into her frozen hand. On the one side of her yawned a precipice several hundred feet deep and on the other a steep slab of mountain with virtually nothing to hold on to... the snow was three yards deep in places." The loy-



#### The Team:

Editor, John Hannon, roving reporter, Alain Dardelin, photographers, Régis Pizot and Simone Meyer, contributing reporters and lifesavers, Alan Baker, Margaret Duff and Graham Robertson.

We regret to announce the passing of the following Members:

Nil

We are pleased to welcome the following new Member:

Nil

al network of French *résistants* she left behind were betrayed one by one by a priest they believed had befriended them. Once in London, she learnt of this and determined to return to France.

On the night of March 21 1944, a small boat landed her, dressed as a peasant woman in suitably distressed clothes, her wonderful white American teeth ground down to resemble the jagged mouth of a peasant and her hair dyed a dirty grey. Under pretence of working for an elderly farmer and his wife, she began to recruit for the increasingly powerful Résistance, and to set up safe houses for those on the run. During that year, she brought in 15 parachute drops supplying weapons and medicine and turned 800 fighters into the nucleus of a much larger force.

In September 1944, after the Liberation, two American agents were dropped in. To one of them, Paul Goillot, energetic, funny, cheerful, eight years younger than her and six inches shorter, she was immediately attracted; in all, they would spend 38 years together. For Hall, after five gruelling years, it was the happy ending she so richly deserved.

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## Flying through the Scottish Night

*Simon Vogt for AeroRevue (12/2018 – 1/2019)*

*(Those who attended the Remembrance ceremony last year in Vevey may remember the appearance overhead of two F-18 Hornets, courtesy of the Swiss Air Force. Our Swiss friends train in Scotland. This is a condensed version of an article about their training operations at RAF Lossiemouth. Ed.)*

For 18 years the Swiss Air Force conducted night-flying training at Ørland in Norway. In 2016 the Royal Norwegian Air Force upgraded the base prior to taking delivery of their new F-35 *Lightning* IIs and did not renew their agreement with the Swiss Air Force, causing them to search for an equivalent replacement. Existing good relations with the RAF led to a training agreement being reached. They offered the Swiss Air Force the choice of three bases. For the second year running 10 Swiss F-18 *Hornets* have been conducting four-week training deployments in the north of Scotland.

The various restrictions that the Swiss Air Force must operate under when conducting night-flying training in Switzerland prevent the service from attaining the necessary levels of performance; the restricted areas, limited flying times, civil air traffic density and noise pollution regulations over densely populated areas all combine to make night-flying training possibilities rare at best. The Swiss Air Force's Foreign Training Module covers several objectives with regard

to night-flying training. Night-flying rounds off the basic training that young pilots receive and experienced pilots can hone and consolidate their tactical skills in total darkness. Foreign air forces conduct about 30% of their training at night. This figure is not even 10% for the Swiss Air Force as a result of the restrictions they operate under. This is why the air force looks abroad for its additional night-flying training.

### Intensive training

The flying training conducted as part of 'SCOTNIGHT 18' covered the following areas; flights against enemies beyond visual range, air combat involving two or more aircraft, use of night vision equipment, navigation exercises, classic ground attack exercises and supersonic air combat training.

There were flights every evening in three waves until 21.30h. A mission would last approximately five hours for each pilot and include about 45 minutes pure air combat time over the training area. The remainder would be given over to briefings and debriefings, 'circuits and bumps' (approaches and landings) and pre-flight inspections. In the words of Swiss Air Force commander Bernhard Müller, "A pilot can pack as much training in in two weeks as he could in six months at home."

SCOTNIGHT 18 also covered inflight refuelling certification for the Swiss *Hornets* working with the RAF's KC-30 *Voyagers*. Another side benefit was the occasional air combat training sessions with *Typhoon* FGR.4s from the three squadrons based at Lossiemouth.

### Unlimited possibilities

The Swiss Air Force did not choose RAF Lossiemouth just by chance. The station is big and well-equipped. Its location directly on the coast makes the training areas easily accessible and there are almost no restrictions. On the old part of the station the Swiss had their own dispersal area available and a gigantic hangar capable of holding all 10 *Hornets* if necessary. The two training areas mainly used, Nos 613 and 809, each covering approximately 16,000 km<sup>2</sup>, represent together about four times the size of all the usable military airspace in Switzerland. The training areas are over water





making possible unrestricted tactical night-flying, including supersonic manoeuvres.

All this meant that aviation dry suits were added to the pilots' normal equipment. "After ejecting and getting into the dinghy, which is integrated into the seat, you can spend hours in the sea and still have good chances of survival," explained Captain Jason 'Jay' Stucki, one of the experienced *Hornet* pilots,



*Typhoons* are fuelled, armed and ready to intercept any incursion into northern UK airspace within minutes. Even if Wing Commander Matt Hoare is reticent about providing details, interception missions take place almost weekly, often against Russian bombers approaching UK airspace to 'test' NATO's capabilities.

The UK Ministry of Defence has recognised the importance of Scotland and of Lossiemouth in particular for the defence of the UK and has invested US\$ 1.7 billion to upgrade the station. In addition to three of the RAF's *Typhoon* squadrons (No 1 (F), No 2 (AC) and No 6), the station will receive Boeing P-8A *Poseidon* maritime reconnaissance aircraft which have been ordered and will be stationed in Scotland. An enormous hangar is to be built for nine *Poseidons* and should enter service in 2020.



"Without a dry suit you wouldn't last more than 10 minutes in the icy water".

The RAF has signed a contract covering search-and-rescue operations at sea with the firm Bristol Helicopters. The company operates the Sikorsky S-92 and the Leonardo AW189. Both helicopter types can operate from a variety of bases for search-and-rescue operations as far as the Norwegian coast in conditions where there are up to seven-meter waves. These SAR flights are suspended in more severe storm conditions, which means that for safety reasons, the Swiss pilots only fly when there is SAR helicopter cover.

### Looking for a new training site

'Lossie', as the station is affectionately referred to by everyone, is one of the RAF's three combat airbases and one of two QRA (Quick Reaction Alert) bases. This means that 365 days per year, 24 hours per day, seven days per week, two



Consequently the Swiss Air Force will have to look abroad for a new site in the coming years for its night flying training. "We would absolutely wish to continue night-flying in the United Kingdom," Lieutenant Colonel Aldo Wicki declared, "Co-operation with the Royal Air Force is excellent." Hearing Wing Commander Matt Hoare state that, "the Swiss are the perfect guests", it is quite probable that, after the transformation phases at Lossiemouth, Swiss *Hornets* will be back in the night sky over Scotland.



## Royal Air Forces Association Swiss Branch

### List of events 2019

10—12 May	Annual Conference, Hilton Birmingham Metropole, UK
1 June	RAFA Summer Lunch, Hôtel du Port, Yvoire, France
18 June	Anniversary of Gen. de Gaulle's Address in 1944, Plateau de Glières, France
15 September	Battle of Britain Commemoration and Lunch, Vevey, Switzerland
20 October	No 78 Sqn Halifax Commemoration, Montcony, France
25-27 October	European Area Autumn Conference, Best Western Hotel, Chavannes de Bogis, Switzerland

