

Narromine RAAF veterans meet after 60 years

Mike Nelmes (Curator, Narromine Aviation Museum) with information from Ross Shepherd

The Remembrance Day ceremony at Narromine cenotaph, at 11am on Thursday 11 November, had special significance this year. Present were several former Air Force air and ground crewmen who had served at Narromine during WW2. Museum volunteer Ross Shepherd spent the last couple of months tracking them down and organising a get-together for the veterans, many of whom have not seen each other for nearly sixty years.

After the ceremony, a bus took the veterans to the war graves cemetery, where thirteen of their young WW2 comrades, most of whom died in flying accidents, are buried. WIN and Prime News both had reporters there to record the veterans' recollections of their time here. Back at the museum they had a look around the new displays, before being treated to lunch courtesy of the Shire Council. After a welcome by the Mayor, we played some wartime film footage on the museum auditorium's new video projector system (which incidentally is available for hire for functions). Included were some rare scenes of 618 (Mosquito) Squadron RAF's 'Highball' skip-bombing trials in the UK prior to its posting to Narromine, the video coming to us via the RAF Museum and the efforts of Wal Rae during his recent trip to the UK.

John and Cathy Flinn, a delightful Welsh couple, have driven up from Mansfield, Victoria every Remembrance Day for the last 20 years. It was their annual pilgrimage that was the catalyst for last week's events. John has fond memories of his time at Narromine during 1945-48. In fact, he developed such a liking for the town and its people that he had planned to live here after the war, but with little accommodation available he moved to Victoria. The reason for his annual return to Narromine is a solemn one. As a wireless mechanic with 618 Squadron, John farewelled his friend, navigator Flight Lieutenant Francis French, as he boarded a Mosquito bound for Laverton, Victoria in July 1945. Within minutes French and his Australian pilot, Squadron Leader 'Sammy' McGoldrick, had been killed in a tragic crash near Narromine saleyards. John places a poppy on their graves annually.

John and Cathy have their Mansfield house on the market, and are talking about moving to Narromine. It would save them a twenty-hour drive each November! We would be very happy to have them. John is even keen on volunteering as a guide for the museum.

Also among the guests on Thursday were Roley and Lucy Manning. Roley was an English airframe fitter who serviced 618 Squadron's aircraft, and spent his first few weeks at Narromine in early 1945. He managed to 'borrow' some film for his camera (courtesy of the squadron's photo-reconnaissance flight – aircraft 'gun camera' film which he cut down the middle) and casually walked around the base photographing the Mosquito bombers which, due to their special modifications, were officially top secret, but at that late stage of the war, nobody stopped him. We're glad they didn't. Thanks to Christine Robertson's long hours scanning-in Roley's three albums full of photos of aircraft and personnel, the museum now has duplicates of what is likely the most comprehensive collection of 618 Squadron photos anywhere.

Roley headed off to Mascot (Sydney) in March 1945 to help assemble the squadron's new Mosquito fighter-bombers, recently shipped out from England. The de Havilland workers however didn't think they needed any help, and Roley had little to do. Little, that is, other than chatting-up one of the local de Havilland workers who was sewing fabric at the Tiger Moth factory (his future wife Lucy). During his time there he recalls one of the Mosquitoes exploding in the air during a test flight over Petersham, its wreckage falling onto the streets and houses below. After the war he returned with Lucy to Narromine, again with little to do on the base other than picking up his RAF pay from the aerodrome parade ground once a fortnight. During this time, he worked on the Perry property Nundah.

The third '618' man present was Mosquito navigator Eric Boreham from Warrumbungle. A fourth, Eric Knight of Dubbo, recently suffered a stroke and unfortunately was not able to travel. Ross also invited ex-93 Squadron RAAF instrument fitter Allan Atkins and his wife Shirley (see Ross' article in previous Flat Chat), but poor health has confined Allan to his Newcastle home.

It was especially good to meet three former 'VA girls' of Narromine's Voluntary Aid Detachment, Australian Red Cross, who helped out at the aerodrome sick quarters between 1940-45: Doss Quigley, Jean Walters (both nee Gainsford) and Joyce Leckie (nee Lloyd).

Joyce and her husband Ron came here from Coonabarabran for the event. Ron navigated Beaufighters with 93 Squadron during its time at Narromine in 1945-46, including a trip to Japan to escort the RAAF's occupation force of Mustang fighters. According to records, a passenger on Ron's Beaufighter was none other than Allan Atkins, although Ron doesn't recall after 58 years. Ron handed over the fruits of his last few months' research into the little-known 93 Squadron, as well as a group photo of 466 (Halifax bomber) Squadron RAAF with its commanding officer, Allan Wharton DSO OBE DFC, who later married Joyce's sister.

Another 93 Squadron man, Bill Hosking, was a pilot with several hair-raising stories. During a takeoff from Narromine he made the disconcerting discovery that two of his vital instruments, the air speed indicator and altimeter, weren't working. After a circuit he was able to make a landing, and investigated the cause. It turned out that one of the squadron ground staff had sabotaged two of the Beaufighters by blocking their pitot tubes (which measure air pressure) with wire!

Locals Keith, Jean and Eric Hayden (of Wright Flyer fame) were also guests. Keith enlisted at Narromine for the RAAF on 12 December 1941, five days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and was called up three months later. After qualifying as an airframe fitter he returned to Narromine in January 1943 to join 5 Elementary Flying Training School (EFTS) where he helped to keep the Tiger Moths in the air – despite the best efforts of some of the pilot trainees! Keith had an eye injury at work which put him in hospital for nine months. When he returned, the EFTS had disbanded and been replaced by 8 Operational Training Unit (OTU) with its Wirraway advanced training planes. Keith later flew as a fitter with an air sea rescue unit flying Catalina flying boats, coincidentally flying the same mission to Japan that Bill Hosking, Ron Leckie and Allan Atkins had made.

Earlier this year, museum volunteers attended a workshop run by Rebel Black of Lightning Ridge. While she was here, Rebel pointed to a group photo in the museum displays, saying “That’s my grandad”. It transpired that Rod Black had given the museum a detailed account of his time as a flying instructor and group commander with 5 EFTS at Narromine during 1942-44. Rod was present on Thursday too.

Thus, we had representatives of all five of the main units to serve at Narromine from 1940-46: 5 EFTS, 8 OTU, the VAD, 618 Squadron and 93 Squadron. Many thanks to Ross Shepherd for conceiving and organising the event.

Thanks to the efforts of our volunteers, Narromine Aviation Museum is now open longer hours: Wednesday to Sunday, 10am til 5pm. Come and see the displays, which include the above stories and many others. We are always looking for volunteers young and old to guide visitors, and to become part of historic events like this one. As for next year – the 60th anniversary of the end of WW2 and of 618 Squadron’s time here – the museum will be staging a travelling exhibition from the Australian War Memorial which looks at the Japanese attacks on Australia. Plans are beginning to formulate for a bigger reunion for that event – Ross will have his work cut out.

www.narromineaviationmuseum.org.au

Ph 6889731