



**JOURNAL OF THE 458 SQUADRON COUNCIL
Year 76 No. 281 November 2025**



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Bill Wake - United Kingdom**



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*Contributions and reports for the next Newsletter #282
are due to The Editor by 31st March, 2026.*

Special Edition
458 Squadron Association
Malta Reunion 2025
Commemorating the 80th Anniversary
of the end of World War II
October 13 – 17 2025



Attended by-

BAKER Charles (Black Jack Baker)	AUS	KELLIHER Bob (Bill Kelliher)	AUS
BAKER Patricia (Black Jack Baker)	AUS	KENT Stewart (Fred Kent)	UK
BITMEAD Peter (Don Bitmead)	AUS	KENT June (Fred Kent)	UK
HIGGS Jenny (Don Bitmead)	AUS	KIRKMAN Gary (Red Jack Baker)	AUS
BRUCE Stephen (Bob Bruce)	AUS	KIRKMAN Lureen (Red Jack Baker)	AUS
BRUCE Anita (Bob Bruce)	AUS	MATTOCK Peter-Bruce family friend	AUS
BRUCE Adam (Bob Bruce)	AUS	MATTOCK Beth-Bruce family friend	AUS
JAYS Ben (Bob Bruce)	AUS	ORCHARD Roland (Gordon Orchard)	AUS
BRUCE Samantha (Bob Bruce)	AUS	ORCHARD Jeremy (Gordon Orchard)	AUS
DODD Beryl (Eric Munkman)	AUS	ORCHARD Chris (Gordon Orchard)	AUS
DODDS Ian (Eric Munkman)	AUS	ORCHARD Norma (Gordon Orchard)	AUS
DOUGLAS James (John Douglas)	UK	ORCHARD Jessica (Gordon Orchard)	AUS
OSLUND Steffi (John Douglas)	UK	WAGSTAFFE Adam (Michael Wagstaffe)	
ELLIOTT Lesley (Don Bitmead)	AUS	CAN	
WALL Phil (Don Bitmead)	AUS	WAGSTAFFE Piroska (Michael Wagstaffe)	
ELLIOTT Clare (Don Bitmead)	AUS	CAN	
LUCKMAN Elysha (Don Bitmead)	AUS	WAGSTAFFE Cate (Michael Wagstaffe)	
FORGAN Rob (Wally Forgan)	AUS	CAN	
FORGAN Julie (Wally Forgan)	AUS	WAGSTAFFE Johanna (Michael Wagstaffe)	
HAYES Richard (Wally Forgan)	AUS	CAN	
FORGAN Stephen (Wally Forgan)	AUS	WHITTEM Wendy (Jim Whittem)	AUS
HICKS Keith (Thomas Hicks)	UK	WILKINSON Keith (Ken Wilkinson)	UK
HICKS Gail (Thomas Hicks)	UK	WILKINSON Anne (Ken Wilkinson)	UK
JOHNSTON Peter (Guy Johnston)	UK	WILKINSON Rob (Bill Wilkinson)	AUS
JOHNSTON Carolyn (Guy Johnston)	UK	WILKINSON Carolin (Bill Wilkinson)	AUS

SIXTEEN 458 SQUADRON HEROES

REPRESENTED BY THE MALTA REUNION

ATTENDEES



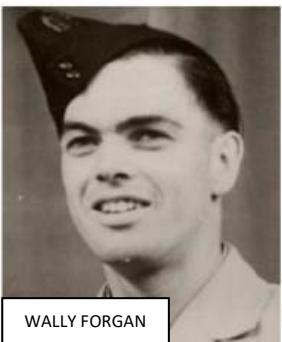
GUY JOHNSTON



BOB BRUCE



MICHAEL WAGSTAFFE



WALLY FORGAN



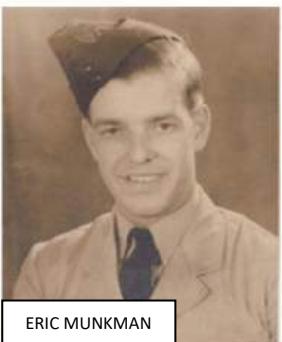
BILL WILKINSON



FRED KENT



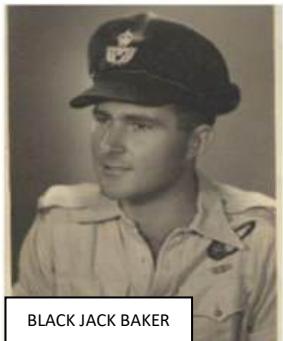
JIM WHITTEM



ERIC MUNKMAN



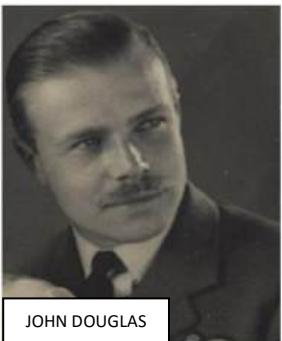
GORDON ORCHARD



BLACK JACK BAKER



THOMAS HICKS



JOHN DOUGLAS



RED JACK BAKER



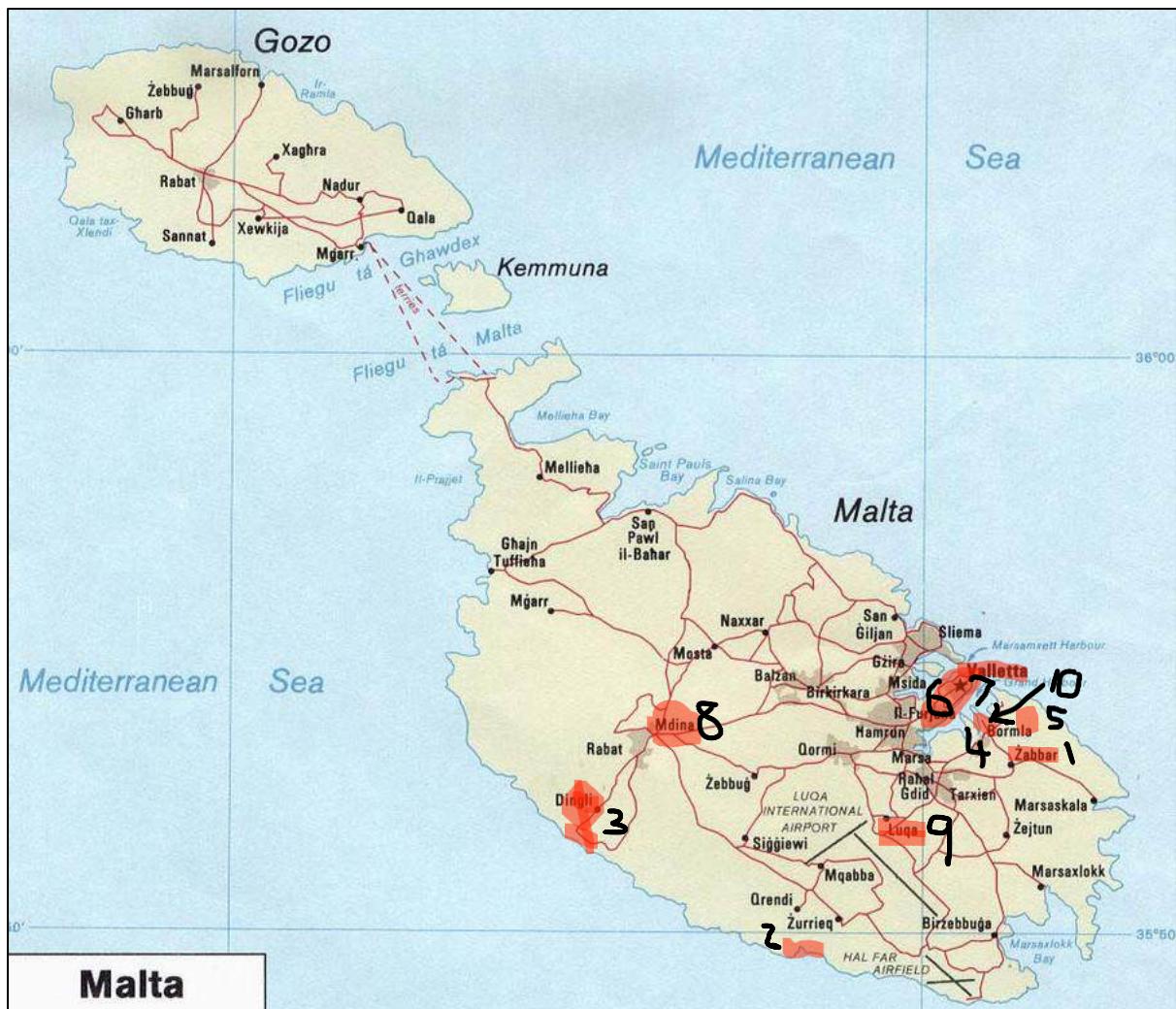
DON BITMEAD



KEN WILKINSON



BILL KELLIHER



Places visited marked in red on the Official Reunion tours. (many other places were visited by members in their own time)

1. Zabbar Sanctuary Museum, Zabbar.
2. Blue Grotto Caves.
3. Dingli Cliffs.
4. Malta War Rooms, Birgu.
5. Kalkara Naval Cemetery-(CWGC)
6. Malta Memorial, Valletta. Wreath laying Ceremony.
7. Lascaris War Rooms, Valletta.
8. Medieval City of Mdina.
9. Luqa Air Field – Air Wing Malta. Where 458 Sqdn was stationed.
10. Del Borgo Restaurant, Birgu. – our formal farewell dinner.

Day one of the Malta 458
Squadron Reunion kicked off with a coach tour firstly visiting the Zabbar Sanctuary Museum. By coincidence we joined a party of people from the UK commemorating the loss of Vulcan bomber XM645 which



finished with a delicious lunch at Tas-Soli restaurant, the day's tour and lunch generously supplied by The Maltese Tourism Authority.



exploded over Zabbar on 14/10/1975. Parts of this aircraft were displayed in the museum.
Next, we toured the coastline of south west Malta with some spectacular scenery. The day





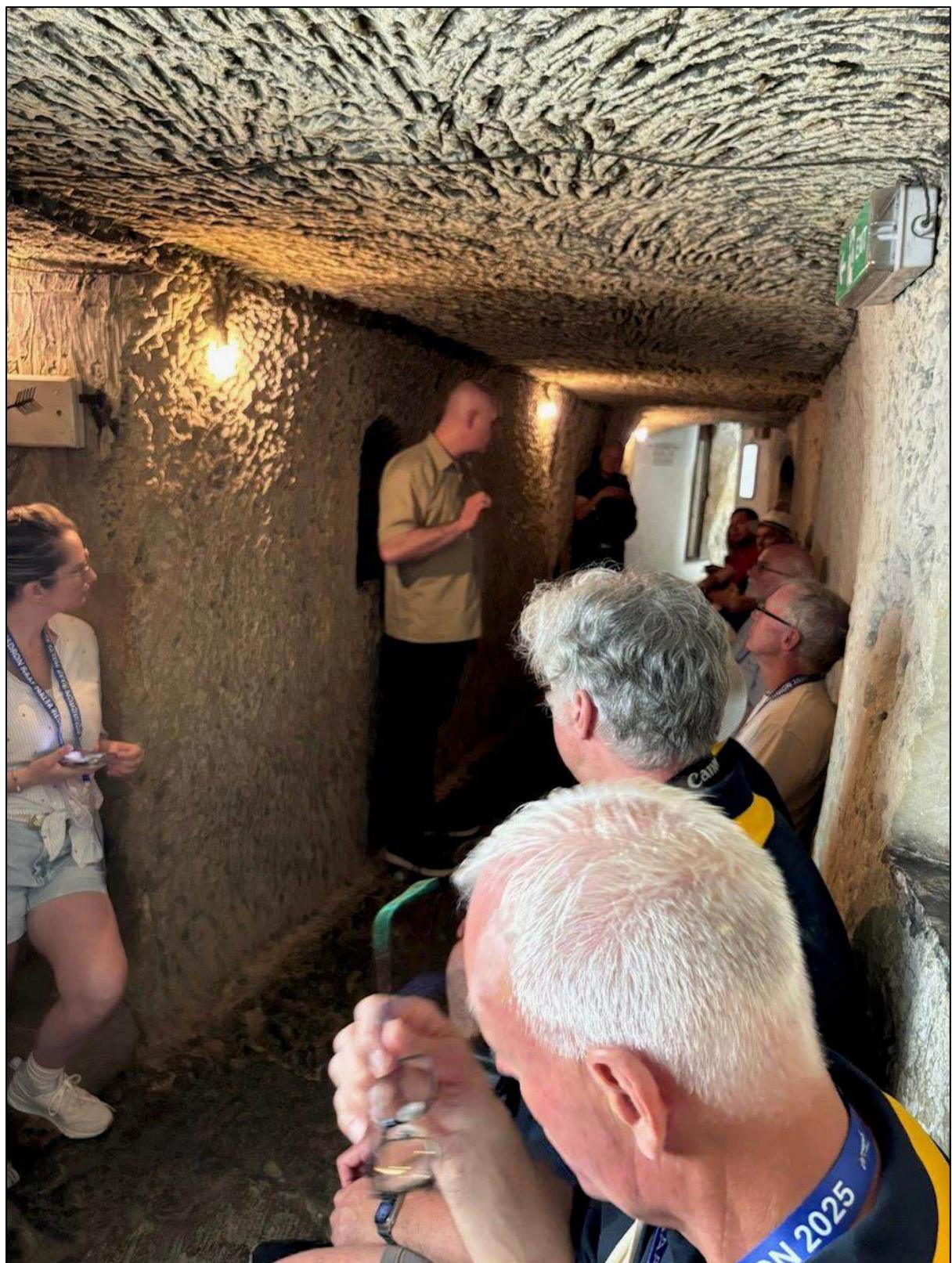
Day two – Visit to Malta at War Museum and an excellent tour of the bomb shelter at the museum. You would *not* want to be claustrophobic.



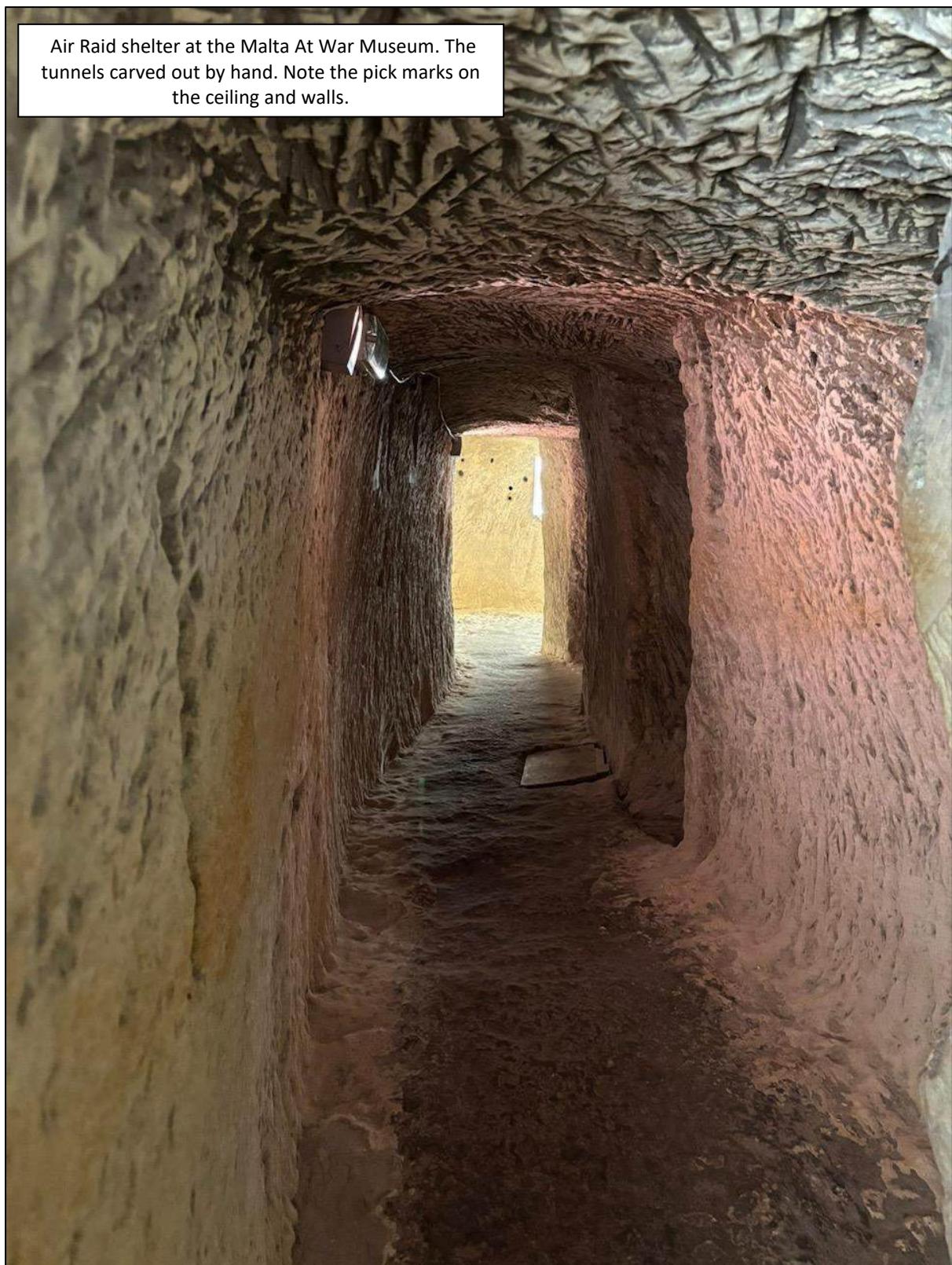




The very claustrophobic Air Raid shelters at the
Malta At War Museum.
Our tour guide telling the story of the shelter



Air Raid shelter at the Malta At War Museum. The tunnels carved out by hand. Note the pick marks on the ceiling and walls.



Air Raid shelter at the Malta At War Museum.
The surgery.



Day two afternoon- A very moving visit to Kalkara Capuccini Naval Cemetery where we paid tribute to our nine 458 Squadron airmen buried there. Including Adam Wagstaffe's uncle WO Michael Wagstaffe RAF. Very moving for Adam, Piroska, Cate and Johanna Wagstaffe.



Piroska,
Adam, Cate
& Johanna
Wagstaffe
beside
Michael
Wagstaffe's
grave



FLIGHT SERGEANT
A.J. Huntley RAAF
19TH April, 1944.

WARRANT OFFICER
J.M. WAGSTAFFE RAF
19TH April, 1944.

FLIGHT SERGEANT
R.H. WILLIAMSON RAF
19TH April, 1944.



SERGEANT
E.A. BROWN RAF
13TH February, 1943.

WARRANT OFFICER II
P.E.E. BROWN RCAF
13TH February, 1943

PILOT OFFICER
L.H. GLEESON RCAF
13TH February, 1943

FLYING OFFICER
M.McA. KEMPTON RCAF
13TH February, 1943

SERGEANT
H.E. STANLEY RCAF
13TH February, 1943

Please read the excellent article
written by Adam & Cate Wagstaffe
in this edition about this crew.



FLYING OFFICER
H.R. McMillan RAAF
19TH April, 1944.



WARRANT OFFICER
J.M. WAGSTAFFE RAF

Day Three- The reason why we are here. 458 Squadron Service of Remembrance. Malta Memorial, Floriana.

After the Squadron Banner was proudly paraded through the streets of Valletta, our Master of Ceremonies Rob Wilkinson welcomed us all; followed by a moving address by Adam Bruce giving a brief history of 458 Squadron and his Grandfather's service, Stanley Robert (Bob) Bruce, with The Squadron.

Beryl Dodds then read the salutation from the Commanding Officer of RAAF Williamtown. Also paying tribute to her father Eric Munkman who served with the Squadron throughout WW2. Service and prayers were led by Father Clement Upton & The Reverend Monsignor Alfred Vella.

The Ode of Remembrance was read by Roland Orchard.

Following the Last Post and minute silence, the wreaths were laid as the bagpipes played. The wreaths were laid by the following:
(See photos below)

Wendy Whittem - Australia

Keith Wilkinson- United Kingdom

Adam & Cate Wagstaffe- Canada

HE Mr Matt Skelly, High Commissioner of Australia, Malta

HE Ms Victoria Busby, British High Commissioner, Malta

Lt. Colonel Nicholas Grech, Commanding Officer Air Wing, Armed Forces of Malta

Mr Kevin Bonnici, Honorary Consul of New Zealand, Malta

Mr Stephen McCarthy RAFA Malta CG Branch

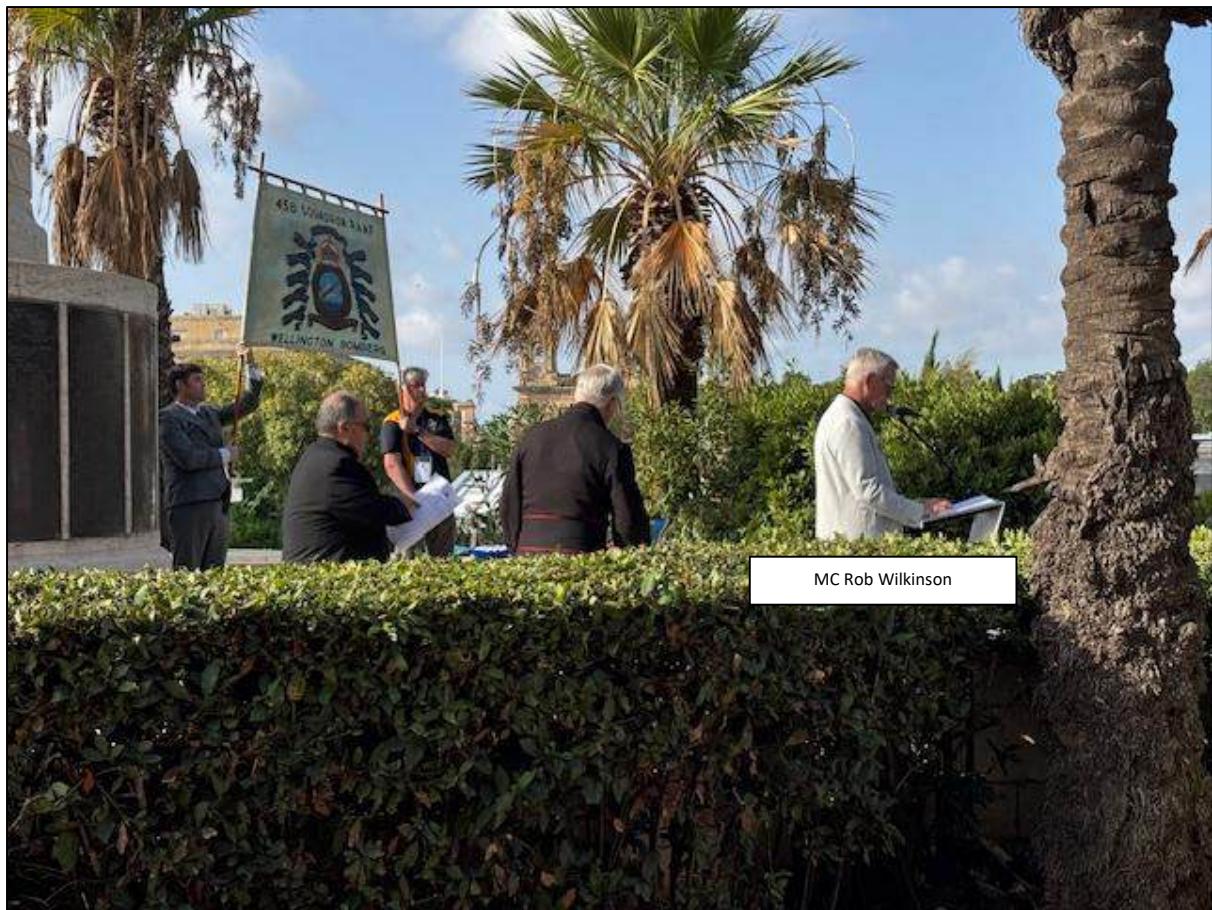
And other guests who wished to lay wreaths.

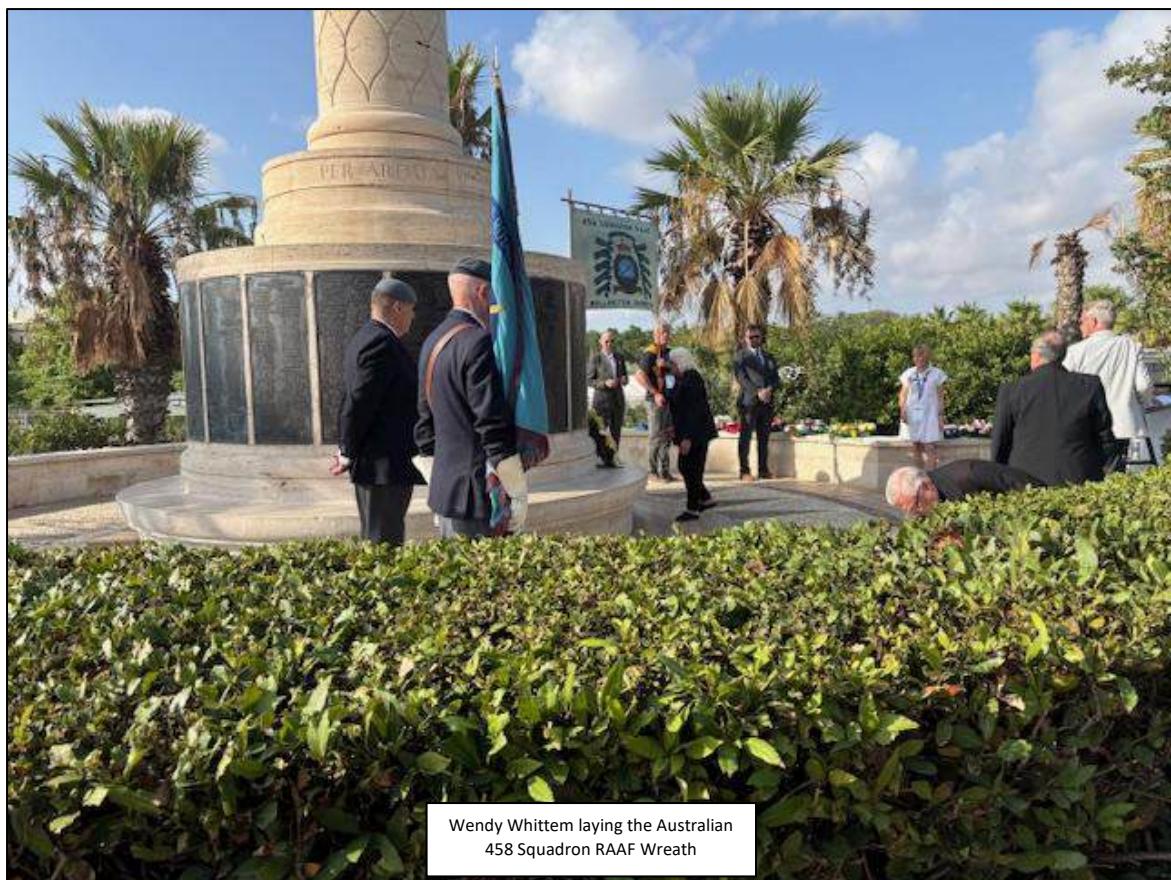
Closing remarks were made by HE Mr Matt Skelly-High Commissioner of Australia, Malta and to conclude the Ceremony, Rob Wilkinson thanked all distinguished guests, members of the 458 Squadron family and all other guests.

A very moving and fitting tribute, not only to the 458 men listed on the plaques on the Malta Memorial but all 458 Squadron men who paid the ultimate sacrifice during World War Two.

Lest We Forget











Her Excellency
Ms Victoria Busby laying a Wreath on behalf of
the United Kingdom



Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas Grech laying a
Wreath on behalf of the Armed Forces of Malta.



Stephen Mc Carthy and Liam Barlow laying wreaths
on behalf of Royal Air Force Association Malta.

We are missing a photo of Honourary Consul Mr Kevin Bonnici
laying a wreath on behalf of New Zealand.



Pipe Major Marion Tanti playing during the wreath laying

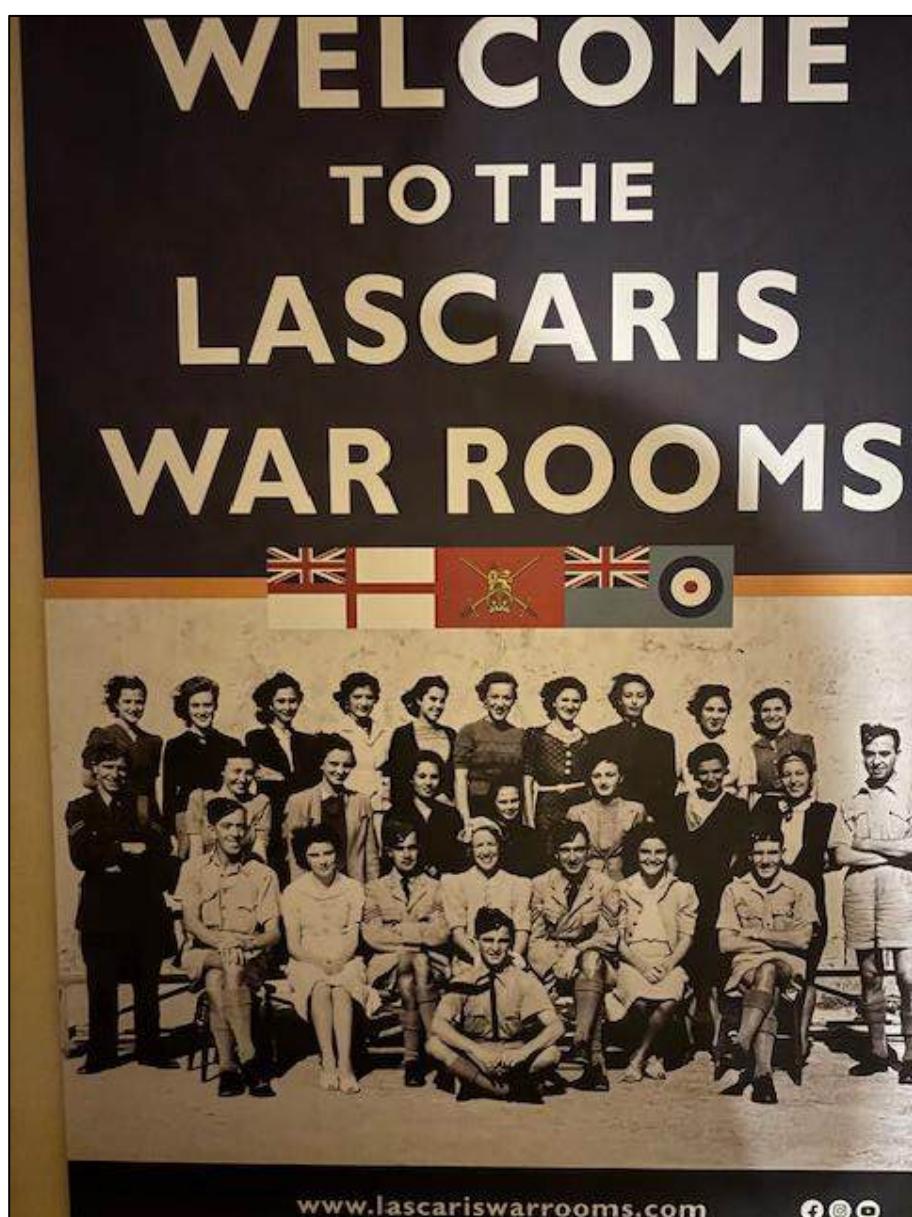


The Malta Memorial. The first of twenty commemorative panels paying tribute to Commonwealth airmen of World War II with no known graves



Day Three-afternoon. The Lascaris War Rooms- Valletta.

An excellent tour of the underground heart of military operations during WW2. Our tour guide was extremely knowledgeable of the defensive and offensive operations during a most harrowing time in Malta's wartime history. Malta was the most bombed place during the war. Even more so than the entire Blitz of London and other British cities. Again, as was the Malta at War Museum, the Lascaris War Rooms were deep underground. Many challenging stairs in deep tunnels carved out of the rock under The Saluting Battery overlooking the Valletta Harbours. (see photos on next page)

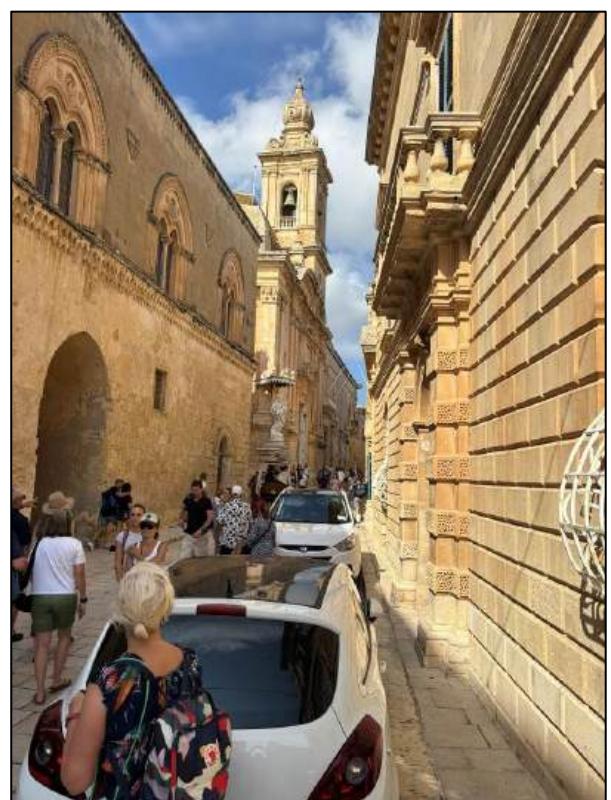
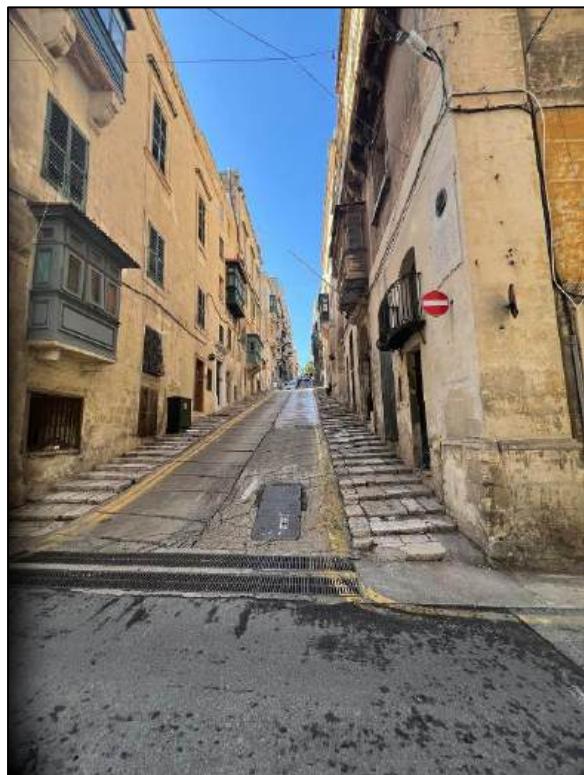
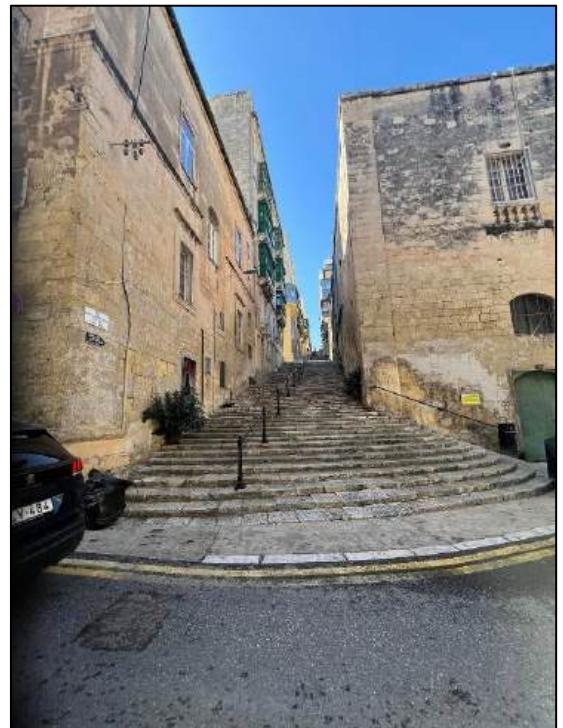




Day Four. It has been a few very busy days with the 458 Squadron group. Some have been saying at the end of each day that it *cannot* get any better. Then today happened. Our free morning found us at the old walled city of Mdina. It used to be the capital of Malta until Valletta took over in 1570. So, you will see how old this place is on the next few pages.









The Orchards: L-R Norma, Jeremy, Roland, Chris & Jessica outside the ancient walls of Mdina.



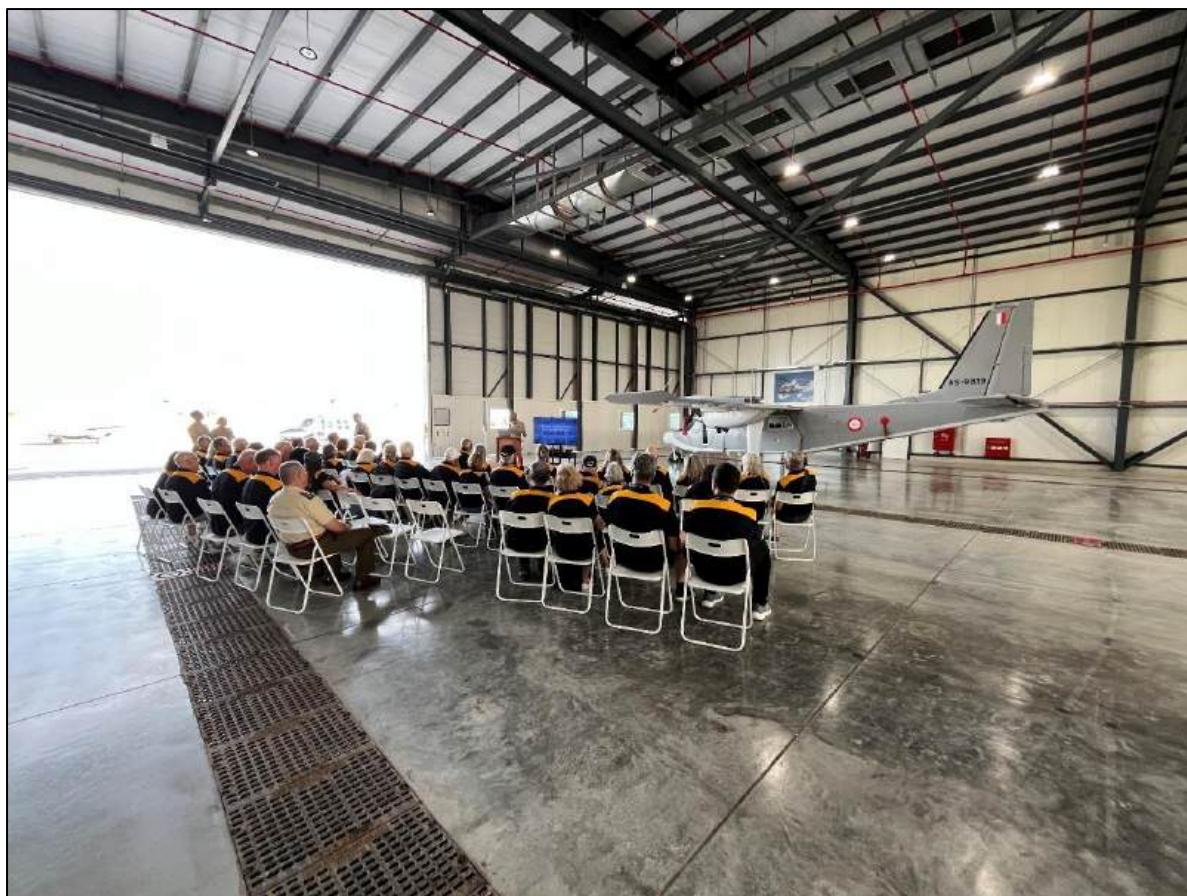
Mdina is a fortified medieval city in the Central Region of Malta. It was the island's capital from antiquity to the medieval period. The city is also known as the “Silent City” or Citta Vecchia. It was fortified by the Phoenicians around 700 BC. The city has a population of about 300 and is annexed to the town of Rabat.

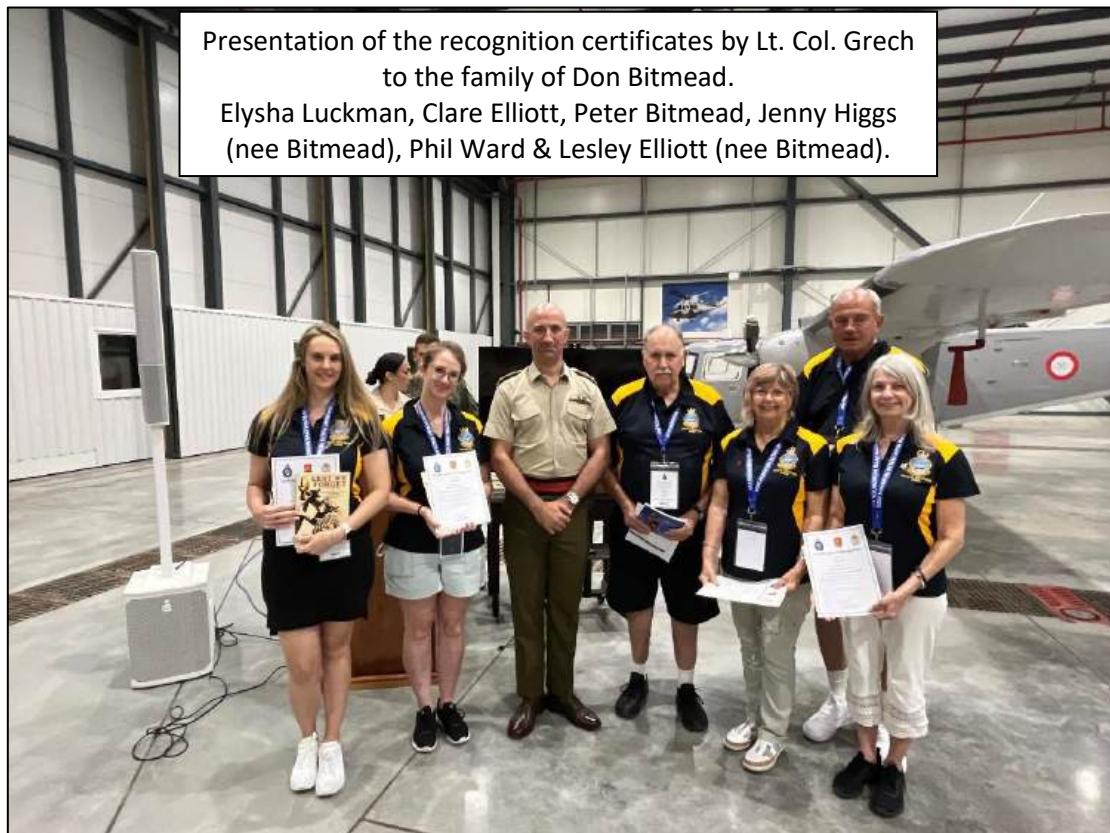
Day Four- Late afternoon. Our visit to the Luqa Air Field the site where 458 Squadron was based the few times they were there. Our host Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas Grech, Commanding Officer Air Wing Base, gave us an excellent presentation of the history of Malta leading up to the formation of the Luqa Air field to modern day operations. Captain Iona Muscat then gave us a very informative and interesting talk about the “458 Squadron Chapter on Malta” As she said, a challenging talk to give to many 458 members who would know more about it than her. She passed with flying colours imparting snippets of information that even the most well read on the subject may not have known.

The most solemn and poignant moment came when Jenny Higgs spoke about her dad Flight Lieutenant Don Bitmead’s sad story whilst on Malta. Jenny’s mum, the Late Bev Bitmead, always wished for Don’s ashes to be scattered on Malta. And so, Bev’s wishes came into being and Don’s son and daughters, Peter, Jenny, Lesley, together with Lesley’s partner, Phil and Don’s grand-daughters Clare and Elysha scattered Don’s ashes at the airfield also assisted by Rob Wilkinson. The Malta Air Wing Chaplain gave a short service and two buglers sounded the Maltese equivalent to the last post. To conclude this memorable evening, Lt. Colonel Gretch presented certificates of recognition of the sixteen 458 Veterans to the families represented at the Reunion.

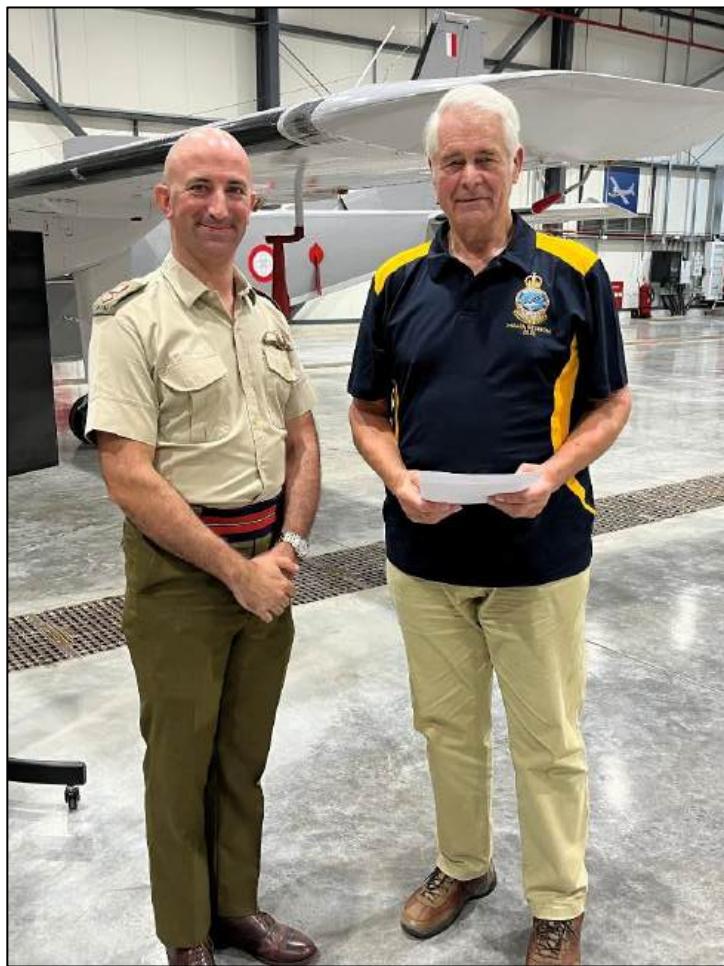
Lest We Forget











Presentation of the recognition certificate to Jim Douglas son of John Douglas.



Presentation of the recognition certificates to Stephen Forgan, Richard Hayes great nephews and Rob Forgan nephew of Wally Forgan.



Presentation of
the recognition
certificate to
Keith Hicks, son of
Thomas Hicks.



Presentation of the
recognition certificate
to Peter Johnston, son
of Guy Johnston.



Presentation of the
recognition certificate
to Bob Kelliher, son of
Bill Kelliher.



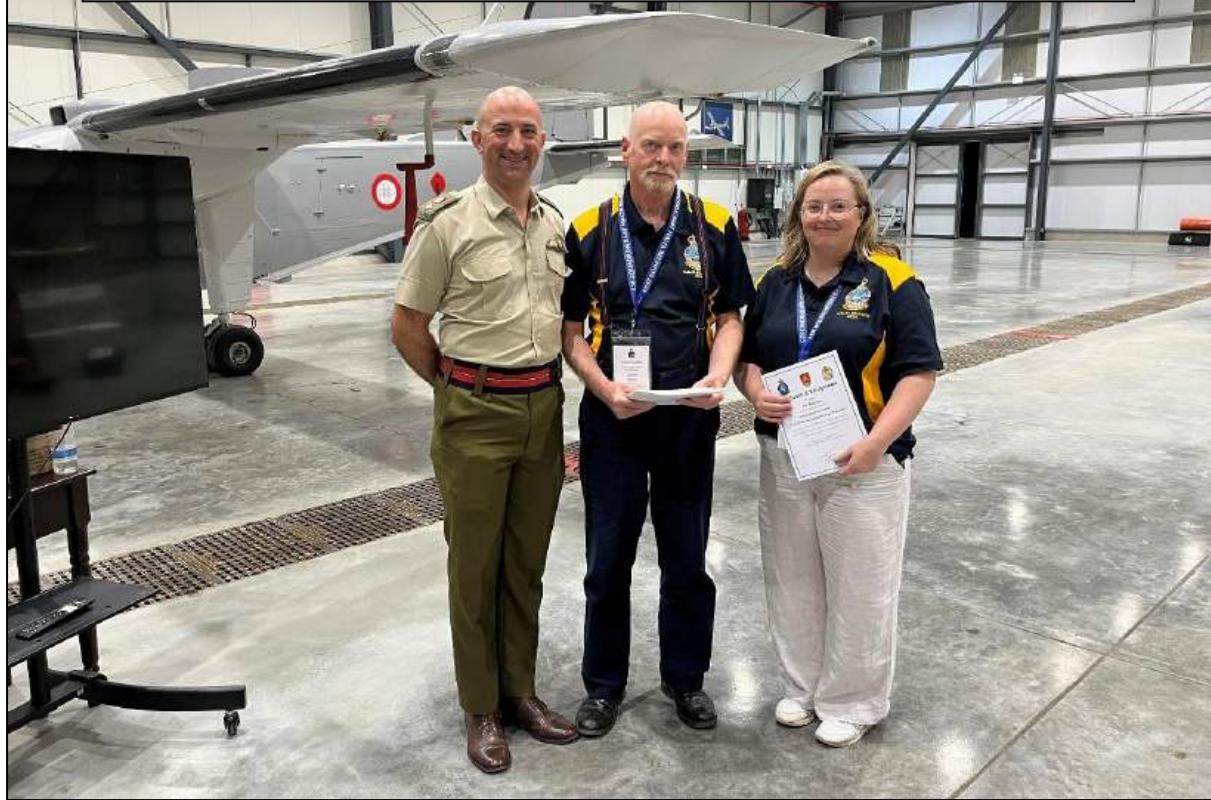
Presentation of the
recognition certificate
to Stewart Kent, son of
Fred Kent.



Presentation of the recognition certificate to Lureen Kirkman, daughter of 'Red' Jack Baker.



Presentation of the recognition certificates to Adam & Cate Wagstaffe, nephew and
grandniece of John Michael Wagstaffe. (Johanna Wagstaffe not present)



Presentation of the recognition certificate to Wendy Whittem, daughter of Jim Whittem.

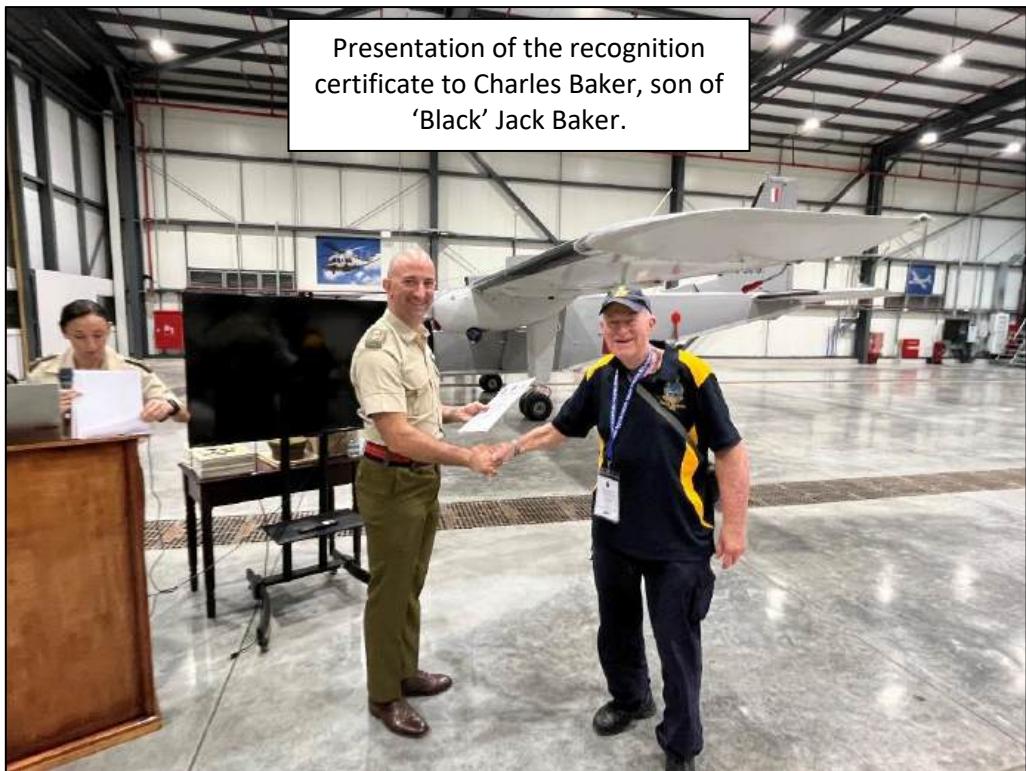


Presentation of the recognition certificate to Keith Wilkinson, son of Ken Wilkinson.



Presentation of the
recognition certificate
to Rob Wilkinson, son
of Bill Wilkinson.





Ceremony and spreading of 458 Squadron Veteran Don Bitmead's ashes at Air Wing Malta, Luqa Airfield. 16th October, 2025.

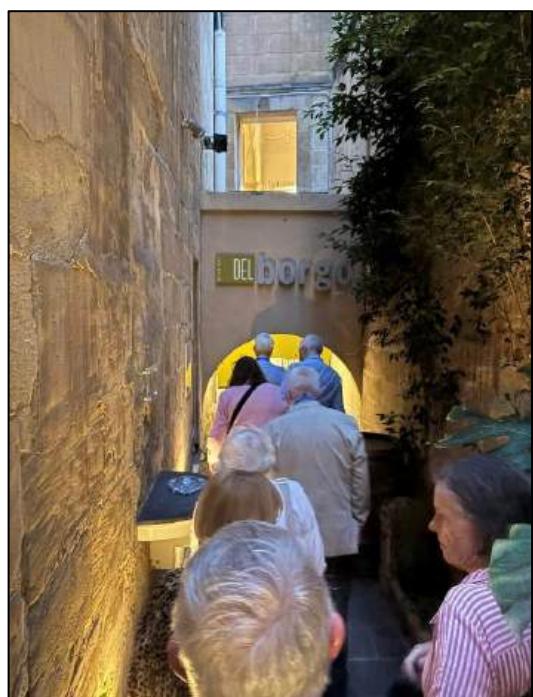


**Spreading of 458 Squadron Veteran Don Bitmead's ashes
by his children Jenny, Lesley & Peter.**



Day Five- final day of this memorable 458 RAAF Squadron 80th Anniversary of the end of World War Two.

After a free day our members celebrated a farewell dinner at Del Borgo restaurant at Birgu. A brilliant evening dedicated to the week that was and to the 16 airmen represented by their sons, daughters, grandsons, granddaughters, nephews, great nephews, great nieces and friends.







Speeches were made and letters of recognition of the sacrifices and service made by 458 Squadron from many dignitaries were read out; letters from Buckingham Palace, the Prime Minister of UK, Prime Minister of Canada, The Governor General of Australia, The Australian Minister for Veterans' Affairs and Defence Personnel, The Governors Generals of the Canadian Provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Quebec, Saskatchewan, Chief of The Air Force RAAF, Marshal of the RAF. Mayor of Vancouver, Sir Alec Shelbrooke (UK MP); UK Chief of Defence Staff.

A resounding applause for the organisers and Journey Leaders at the conclusion of the dinner and speeches.

**Rob Wilkinson Stephen Bruce Adam Bruce
With the help of Ben Jays and Samantha Bruce and others.**

On behalf of all Malta Reunion Attendees another huge thank you for all your hard work leading up to and *even during* the trip for last minute preparations. Bravo! Three cheers.



Photo above – Stephen Bruce, Rob Wilkinson, Adam Bruce & Samantha Bruce.
Right – Samantha Bruce & Ben Jays.





By Keith Wilkinson son of Ken Wilkinson

We did them proud! There is no doubt about that.

Our dads, our grandads, our uncles and great uncles. If they were "looking down on us" - as many believe - they would have been deeply moved by a generation that chose to remember them.

The Malta Reunion was an unforgettable experience for those of us who took part. It was a way of saying thank you to relatives who served in 458 Squadron - in my case to my dad and his crew, now all gone.



In the UK, two of their squadron comrades are still with us - Charlie Humbles and Bill Wake, both 103 years old. Clearly at such an age, and with health problems, they could not make the journey to Malta. But these two guys were very much in our thoughts and I mentioned them a number of times in my UK updates to the reunion group gatherings. And it was extremely moving to all of us to hear a recorded

message from Charlie in which he hoped we would have a good time.

On the final night of the reunion, I was presented with two beautiful quilts to take back with me to the UK as gifts for Charlie and Bill. Back in England I drove to Charlie's house to hand over his quilt in person. It was a delight to see his big smile upon receiving his present from Down Under. Thankfully, despite his age, his fond memories of the war years have not faded away.

Within a day or two, Bill had received his gift by recorded delivery.

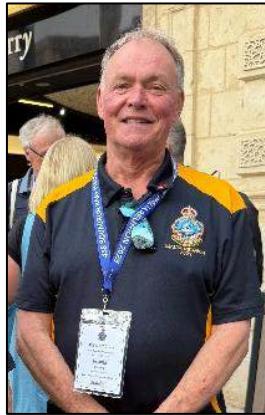
Following a fall at his home, Bill hasn't been too well lately. I have been able to speak with him by phone and he is grateful for the love shown by the 458 "family".



That feeling of "family" was very much present to all of us in Malta. It was one of the most special moments of my life when I laid a wreath at the airmen's memorial on behalf of the squadron association's UK Flight. At the front of my mind was my father's crew. In particular I thought of the man they called Benny. He was their second pilot and he was killed in a Wellington bomber on route to Malta.

Another poignant highlight of the reunion for me was when we walked through the streets of Valletta led by the squadron association banner. We were there with pride for our forefathers and to pay tribute to some of their pals...men buried on the island or still lost somewhere at sea. Eighty years on, we remembered them.





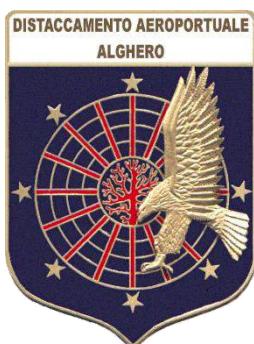
by Roland Orchard son of Gordon Orchard

I can only begin by saying, What an experience in Malta! I truly believe that Dad would have been watching from where ever he may be, very humbled but also proud that we took the time to honour him and his 458 Squadron comrades.

My brother Jeremy and my Reunion journey began when we landed in Rome a week before Malta and spent 4 days and nights seeing the sights of the Eternal City. Highlights for me was the Colosseum, the Roman Forum, Pantheon, Vittoriano and Vatican City.



The next leg of our Malta Reunion Journey was a three-night stay at Alghero, Sardinia. Jeremy and I met up with Rob and Carolin Wilkinson who were staying at the hotel Dei Pini. This hotel was built very near to where 458 Squadron set up their tent city, 'domestic' accommodation and is approximately 9 kilometres from Alghero Airport and 15 from the town of Alghero. Jeremy and I stayed at the Hotel San Francesco in the heart of the medieval area of Alghero. While in Alghero we were so generously hosted by Valter Battistoni, the retired CEO of the Alghero Air Port and the retired Commander of the Italian Aeronautica Militare, Alghero Air Base, Colonel Francesco Demontis. We felt very privileged to be shown around by the past two most senior men in both civilian and military aviation at Alghero, Sardinia.



The highlight of our stay was visiting the Italian Aeronautica Militare Base, the Airport Detachment at Alghero, hosted by Lieutenant Colonel Alessandro Scabia, Commander of The Base. Lt. Col. Scabia, together with his entourage, gave us a grand tour of the Base where once our fathers were stationed in 1944. The photo below is taken outside the Air Base Command building. It was pointed out to us that this building has not been altered and is as our fathers would have seen it in 1944. Thank goodness all booby traps set by the retreating Axis forces had been found soon after the Allies took control in early 1944.



L-R Italian Aeronautica Veterans, Lt. Col. Scabia, Rob, Carolin, Valter, Roland, Jeremy and Col. Demontis in front of the Alghero Air Base Command building.

Photo taken from the Command building looking toward the old runway and control tower of the Alghero Airport.



Lt. Col. Scabia imparting his knowledge of the history of the Italian Aeronautica Militare Base, Alghero.



Carolin, Jeremy, Roland, Lt. Col. Scibia and Rob at the Officers Mess.



A Toast to the personnel past and present serving at the Italian Aeronautica Militare Base at Alghero and to the 458 Squadron RAAF personnel who served there in 1944.



Colonel Demontis reminded us that in 2005 the members from UK had a 458 Squadron Reunion in Alghero. There had been an Air Show on Malta and the RAF contingent had a fuel stop at Alghero Air Port. This coincided with the 458 Veterans visit to the Italian Aeronautica Militare Base, Alghero, at that time commanded by Colonel Francesco Demontis himself.

See photo below.



2005 458 Squadron, UK Reunion, Alghero, at the Air Base. L to R
Former President Leon Armstrong, the then Base Commander Colonel Francesco
Demontis, RAF pilot, Jack Christiansen, Ron Moy and Keith Wilkinson

On the evening of the 10th October, 2025, Valter re-opened the “Allies in Alghero” photographic exhibition for us which had previously been presented in April, 2025 to coincide with the 80th Anniversary of the Liberation. The exhibit is curated by the Association National Partisans of Italy. This photographic exhibit is a fascinating insight into Allied operations in and around Alghero Airfield during the war. Valter then displayed his presentation of “The Military Dimension: Alghero in the 2nd World War.” A Power Point presentation shown with the aforementioned exhibit in April. Brilliantly researched and presented. Thank you Valter for taking the time and effort to re-open these presentations just for us. Thanks to Francesco and team for supporting Valter in the set up and display of the exhibit.



Above- Colonel Francesco Demontis & Mr. Valter Battistoni.
Below- Mr. Valter Battistoni in full voice presenting us with
“Alghero in the 2nd World War”



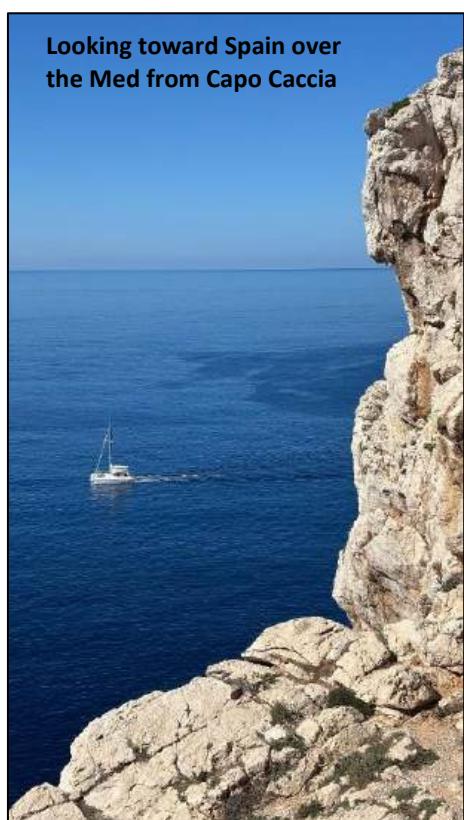


Photo taken in 1944 above shows 458 Squadron Personnel at Bombarde Beach. Alghero seen in the distant shoreline. Below current day view from the Dei Pini Hotel looking slightly more to the right toward Alghero



458 Squadron was stationed at Alghero from 25th March to 3rd September, 1944. Apart from the rampant Malaria outbreaks, the appalling famine conditions suffered by the local population and the stresses and strains that come with operational duties, the men of 458 Squadron enjoyed their beach front tent city 'domestic' accommodation.

The following day Valter and Francesco drove us to the scenic Capo Caccia, stopping at other places such as Porto Conte a former Seaplane base prior and during WWII and the complex of Nuragico Di Palmavera, an ancient ruin dated to 1500-700 BC



Our final evening was held at the Aragon Restaurant in Alghero for our farewell dinner and 458 Squadron Plaque presentation to our more than generous hosts, Valter and Francesco. (see photos in Jeremy Orchard's article).

Thank you to both of these men. Great friendships made through common interests.

Jeremy and I then flew into Malta on the evening of Sunday 12th October, narrowly missing the welcome meeting at the Osborne Hotel, however, then the Malta Reunion started. **(see my summary of the Reunion on pages 2-46.)**

Sunday 19th October, after the conclusion of the Malta Reunion, Jeremy, Chris, Norma, Jessica and I flew to Brussels for the next leg of our journey. A continuation of the Reunion, of sorts. After hiring cars at Brussels Airport we drove to Charleroi, Belgium.

Our meeting at the Novotel Hotel with UK 458 Squadron members, James Fitzmaurice and his partner, Katie, James' parents Lesley and Danny and our extra special friend of 458 Squadron, Claire Dujardin, was not by coincidence. We had been planning this meeting for some months. May I add here, Lesley Fitzmaurice is the daughter of



Sergeant P.G. BROWN.
James FITZMAURICE Collection

WO. P.G.E Brown, the only survivor of Wellington Z1218 who was later captured and made Prisoner of War by the Germans.

Claire Dujardin's article (Newsletter #280) on the fate of Wellington Z1218, is about the first 458 Squadron Wimpy (Z1218) shot down over the skies of Charleroi, Belgium, on the Squadron's very first operation on 20th October, 1941, flying from Holme on Spalding Moor, Yorkshire, UK.

Firstly, a background story to why we went to Belgium. Claire first contacted me about her article on the 8th November, 2024. At that time

the Malta Reunion planning was well under way. A short time after Claire's email, I had a thought that I would like to go to Belgium after Malta to meet Claire and pay my respects to our fallen heroes buried at the Charleroi Cemetery. After discussions with my family, I emailed Claire in January of 2025, my thoughts of visiting Charleroi. Well, the ball started to roll from there. Claire, with the help of Mr. Gerard Vanderweyden then set into motion events that astounded us Aussies and Brits. Claire's careful and meticulous planning over the following months culminated in a day of tribute and remembrance to our 458 Squadron crew members of Wellington Z1218 involving local dignitaries, representatives from the Australian and German Embassies and many others profoundly interested in saluting the bravery of the crew of Z1218. Thank you Claire!



L-R Katie, James,
Lesley & Danny
Fitzmaurice.



Claire Dujardin.

The proceedings started at 10am on 20th October, 2025. Exactly 84 years to the day of the crash of Z1218, a glorious morning was spent at the Charleroi Communal Cemetery honouring the five members who lost their lives in the service of their respective countries. (Sgt. Hamilton was an Australian serving with the RAF)

RAF	Sgt P J M Hamilton, Captain (Pilot-KIA)
RAAF 400410	Sgt P G Crittenden, (2nd Pilot-KIA)
RAF	PO Fawkes, D K (Observer-KIA)
RAF	Sgt A Y Condie, (Wireless Operator-KIA)
RAF	Sgt T Jackson, (Front Air Gunner-KIA)
RAF	Sgt P G E A Brown, (Rear Air Gunner-POW)



P.G. CRITTENDEN

James FITZMAURICE Collection

NOTE- THE RANGER AIRBORNE BADGE ATTACHED TO THE HEADSTONE. THIS WAS PLACED THERE BY MAJOR IAN CRITTENDEN, GREAT NEPHEW OF SGT. PHILLIP CRITTENDEN



Peter James Maxwell HAMILTON, 912385,
Sergeant
Photo from Facebook group RAAF Deaths
Photographic Archive of Headstones and
Memorials WW2 by Spidge



D.K. FAWKES
M. James FITZMAURICE Collection

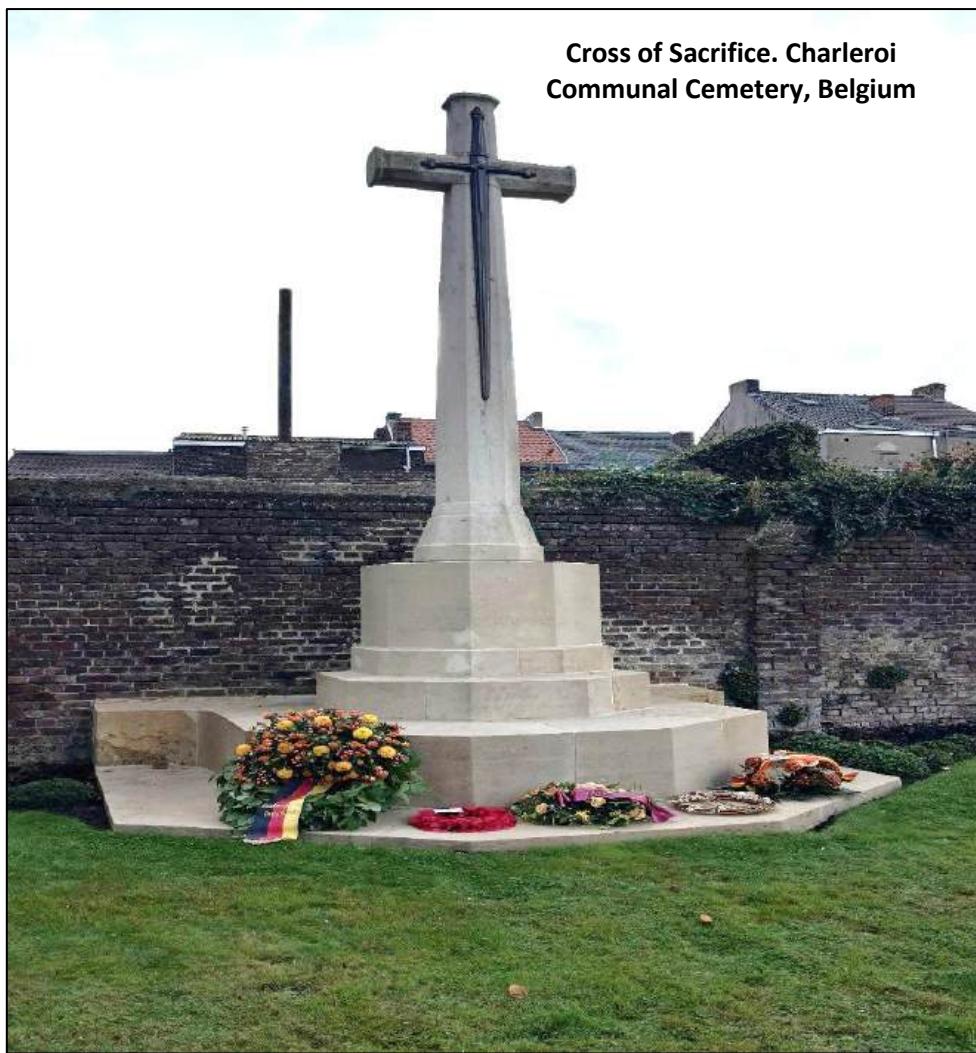


First on the agenda for the day was unveiling of the 'Tribute to Australian Servicemen' at the Charleroi Communal Cemetery on 20th October, 2025, by L to R Mr Peter Creaser, Minister Counsellor | Agriculture, Fisheries & Forestry Australian Mission to the EU & NATO, Embassy to Belgium & Luxembourg, Mr. Maxime Felon 7th Alderman City of Charleroi and Claire Dujardin, our honoured friend of 458 Squadron.

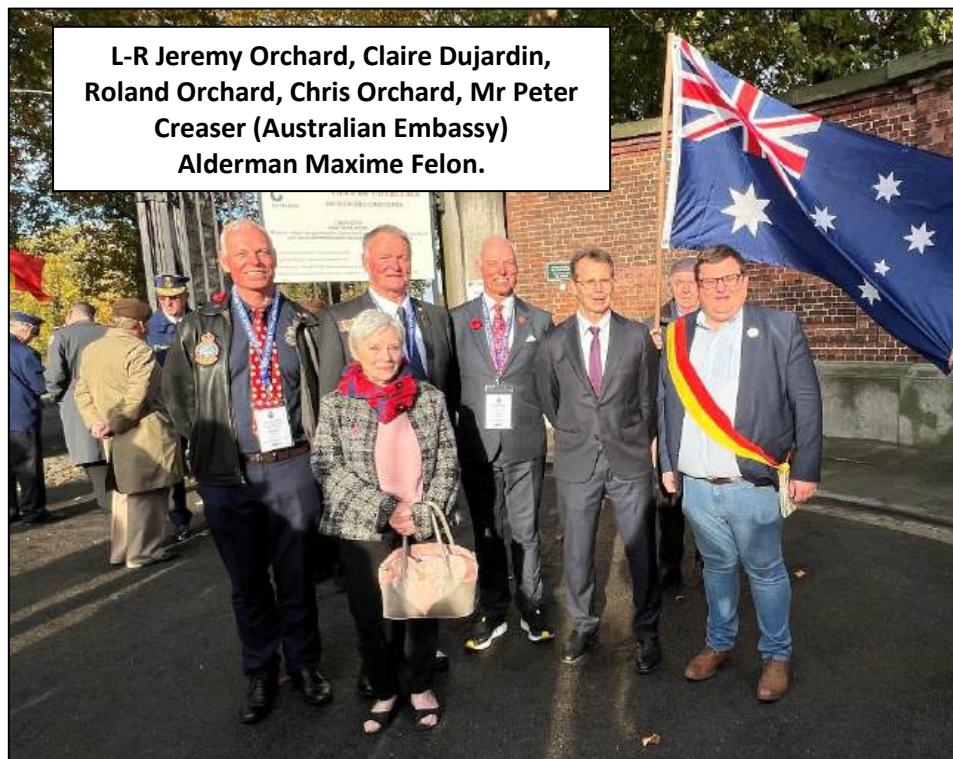


After the unveiling of the plaque, we moved to the Cross of Sacrifice within the grounds of Cemetery to lay wreaths on behalf of The City of Charleroi, The Australian Embassy, The German Embassy, The Memorial Museum of Charleroi and 458 Squadron Association (graciously donated by Claire). James Fitzmaurice then made a heartfelt and moving speech about his Grandfather and crew of Z1218, followed by myself telling the history of 458 Squadron RAAF. Many other representatives were present including The Belgian Liaison Committee of Patriotic Associations, The Belgian National Federation of Former Prisoners of War, Charleroi branch and other local citizens of Charleroi, some bearing the Australian flag.





**L-R Jeremy Orchard, Claire Dujardin,
Roland Orchard, Chris Orchard, Mr Peter
Creaser (Australian Embassy)
Alderman Maxime Felon.**



After the dedication and remembrance service at the Cemetery, we were cordially invited by Alderman Felon to The City Hall of Charleroi. After a welcome speech from Alderman Felon, we enjoyed light finger food and refreshments. I must say, the Belgians certainly know how to put on a 'spread!' We thank Alderman Felon, his team and the City of Charleroi for their warm welcome and hospitality.



Claire then escorted us to the crash site of Z1219 located south east of the City of Charleroi at a suburb called Mont-Sur-Marchienne. We there saw the vacant land that the Wellington had exploded on impact creating a huge crater (since filled in). It was presumed that the aircraft still had its full bomb load aboard. A very distressing thought. We were privileged to have met Mr. Michel Dubus, at the Town Hall, whose father, Marcel, saw the crashed plane on 21 October, 1941. Michel's father was just 18 years old.



R. Mr Michel Dubus
with L-Roland Orchard



The plaque dedicated to the crew stands testament to their loss.

The Field where Wellington Z1218 crashed. The owners of the land refused to sell over the last 84 years in remembrance of the crew.





**The only survivor WO. Percival Brown.
His daughter Lesley and grandson James
stand in the field contemplating the past.**



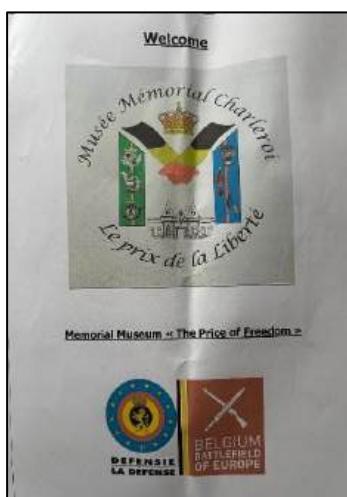
**Scars still visible to a nearby window sill of house
close by caused by the downed Wellington.**

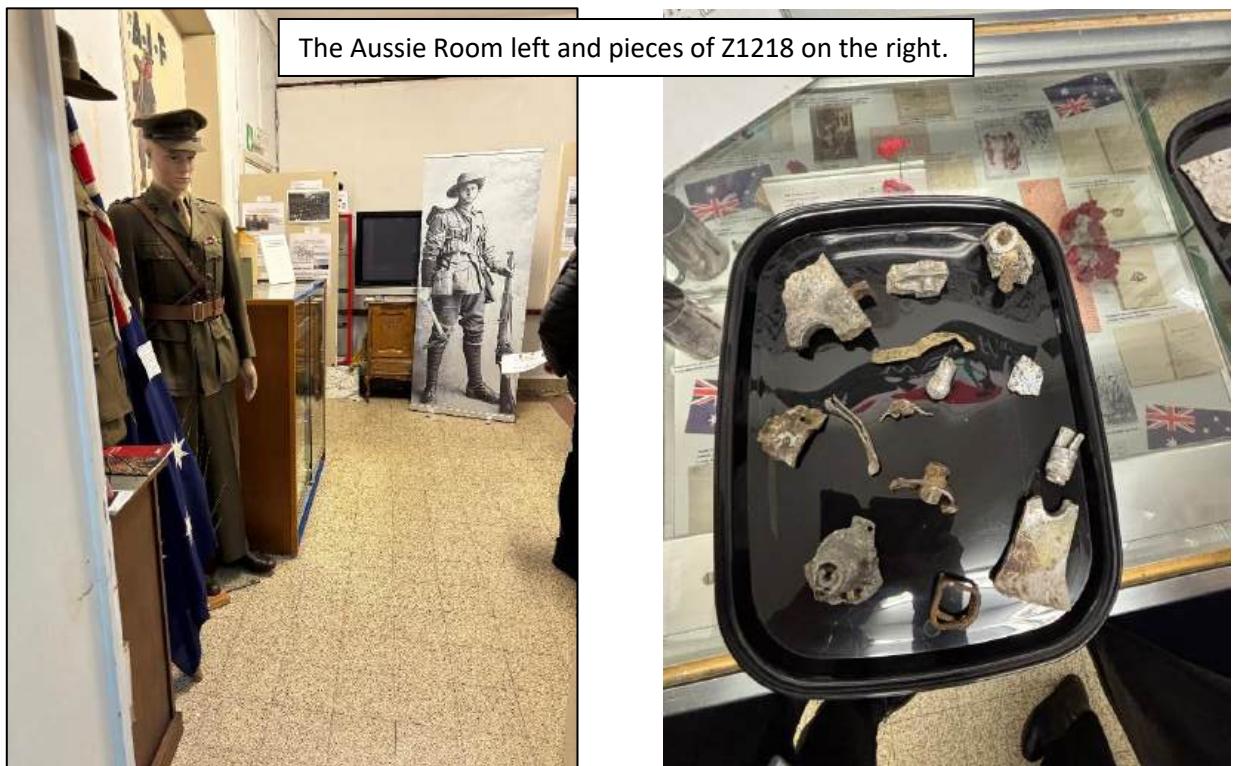
After leaving the crash site, Mr. Gerard Vanderweyden, Curator of



the Memorial Museum of Charleroi, played host to us for a tour of the brilliant Museum. We had met Mr. Vanderweyden at the cemetery earlier in the day. As well as the tour it was celebration of the successful day after the long and intense planning. Gerard had been terrific support to Claire for the long preparation of this memorable day. Thank you, Gerard and all of your assistants and volunteers, for your help in preparing for our visit. Your

museum is truly world class and a wonder to behold. This museum holds some small pieces of Wellington Z1218 recovered over the years. The museum hand out leaflet on the left and Claire in the Australian section of the Museum. Claire is a volunteer at the Museum and was proud to have helped set up this section dedicating it to the Aussies. The cabinet on the left of Claire holds pieces of Wellington Z1218





The Memorial Museum of Charleroi, Belgium, is very extensive covering two floors of exhibits. If you are in Belgium please visit. You will not be disappointed. Click on link to visit website.

[Museum](#)



A letter from Alderman Felon

Dear Mr Orchard,

**Dear members of the 458th Royal Australian Air Force
Squadron Association,**

I sincerely thank you for your warm and heartfelt message. It was a profound honour for me, for my team, and for the City of Charleroi to welcome you and to stand by your side during this ceremony of commemoration, so rich in history and emotion.

We carry an essential duty of remembrance toward the heroes who fell on 20 October 1941. Their commitment helped defend the values of freedom that continue to unite us today.

The presence of your delegation in Charleroi strengthens the bonds of friendship and respect that bring us together across continents. Please know that you will always be welcomed in our City, and we would be honoured to host you again on your future visits.

With my warmest and most respectful regards,

Maxime FELON

7ème Echevin – Alderman

VILLE DE CHARLEROI

**Echevin en charge des Fêtes et du Folklore,
des Associations patriotiques, du Protocole et du
Patrimoine remarquable.**

MCA de Marchienne-au-Pont

Place J-F Kennedy 1

B-6030 CHARLEROI BELGIUM

Letter from Mr Peter Creaser

Dear Roland

Thank you very much for your letter of appreciation and it was wonderful to meet you and your family and Claire. I really appreciated learning more about Squadron 458 and about the history of Australian serviceman in the Charleroi area. The ceremony certainly did leave a lasting impression, both in terms of the sacrifice of the air crew and also the efforts that you, your family, the 458 Association, the local community of Charleroi, and in particular Claire, have continued to keep the memory alive of these wonderful Australians.

Best regards



**Peter Creaser
Minister
Counsellor | Agriculture,
Fisheries & Forestry**

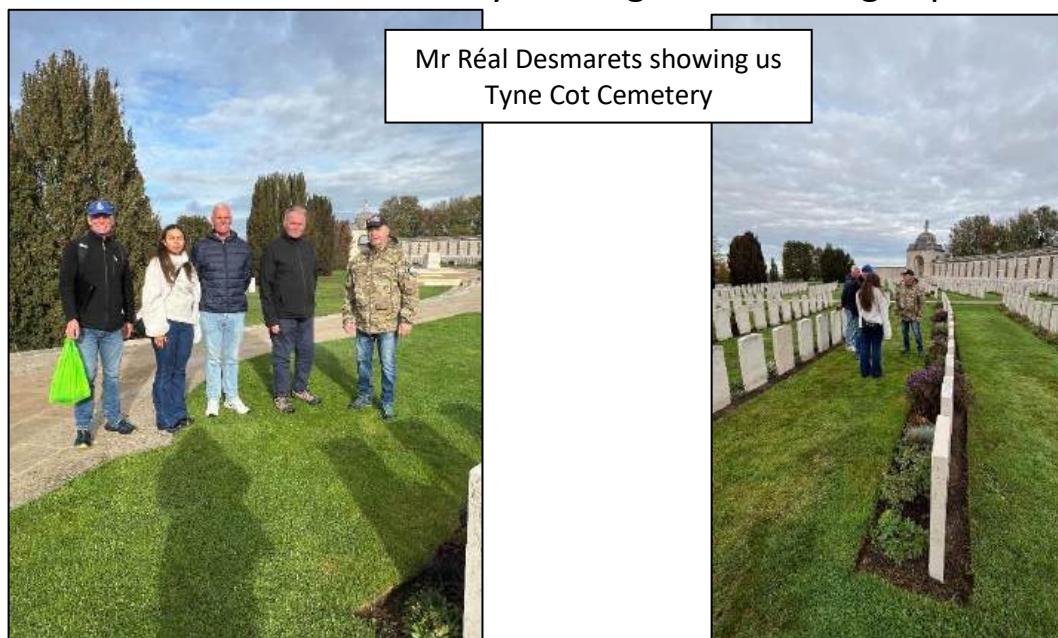
**Australian Mission to the EU
& NATO,
Embassy to Belgium &
Luxembourg
Avenue des Arts 56,
1000 Brussels**

After our memorable day in Charleroi, we moved on to Ypres, Belgium and Flanders Fields. This leg of our trip was in memory of our Great Uncle Captain William (Billy) Henry Orchard (pictured), 38th Battalion AIF, who fought in the Battle of Passchendaele during October, 1917. He was awarded the Military Cross on the 4th October at the Battle of Broodseinde.



We met up with a friend of Claire Dujardin's, Réal Desmarests on the 22nd October, 2025. Réal, an ex-Belgian Army Officer, served as a bomb disposal expert and served in Bosnia and Afghanistan as well as other places during his long career. His passion now is the World War I and II battle fields in

Europe, especially the western fronts of both conflicts. Réal had researched the movements of the 38th Battalion during the Battle of Passchendaele and kindly pointed out the Battalions movements during the course of the battle. Réal took us to the Dochy Farm New British Cemetery, the Beecham Dugout, Tyne Cot Cemetery, Hooge Crater (and lunch at the Café/Museum), Zonnebeke, Polygon Wood Cemetery, Brothers In Arms private memorial and the Memorial Paschendaele Museum. Very moving and sobering experiences.





Tyne Cot - the largest Commonwealth War Cemetery. 11,961 burials.
8373 of the burials are unidentified.



Thank you Réal. Your historical knowledge is extensive and astonishing.

The rest of our trip overseas included driving to Villers-Bretonneau in France visiting the Cemetery and the excellent Sir John Monash Centre. The Centre is a must for all to experience whilst in Northern France.



Our last destination before returning home was Epernay, south of Reims, Northern France. We spent 2 nights enjoying the tastes of the local Champagnes. Our Champagne House of choice was Moët & Chandon.





**Two of the best Hosts & Tour Guides
you could wish for!
By Jeremy Orchard son of Gordon Orchard**

Rob & Carolin, Roland and I were privileged to be hosted by Valter Battistoni, former Director of the Alghero Airport and Lt. Colonel Francesco Demontis, the immediate past Base Commander of the Italian Air Force Base at Alghero (pictured below). Because of these fine gentlemen we were able to see first-hand and walk in the footsteps of our 458 SQN men/fathers when they were based at Alghero on the Italian island of Sardegna/Sardinia, April – September 1944. A remarkable and vivid experience, here in pictures (9-12th October 2025 and 1944):



Alghero Military Air Base Tour and Command/Reception building



On our Base tour and reception, we were welcomed and hosted by Base Commander, Lt. Colonel Scabia. Also pictured are five retired members of the Italian Air Force. The presentation given to us included the 1944 photo previous page, left. What a magnificent and memorable tour it was, including dolce and fine local sparkling wine/ spumante to make the toast! We witnessed their traditional rendition of the Italian Air Force motto, and how stirring it was!
“Virtute Siderum Tenus: With valour to the stars”

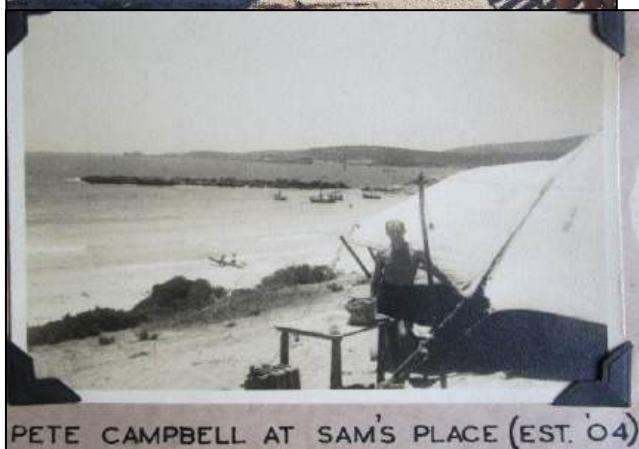
Maria Pia Beach and bay: where the 2 Wellingtons safely ditched, 14/8/1944



Enjoying the scenery and significance of the locations are Francesco, Carolin, Roland, Valter and Rob. This water/beach is actually on final approach, less than 5 km to the Airfield/Airport (The airport is 10 km from Alghero town). The two Wellingtons ran out of fuel when circling due to bad fog. The town of Fertilia (7 km from Alghero) can be seen in the distance. The SQN encampment is around the point past Fertilia. Pictured on the next page at the location of the encampment are Francesco, Valter and Roland. And Rob, Francesco, Valter, Roland and Carolin.

I also must mention the brilliant public photo exhibition and presentation “The Allies in Alghero, September 1943 to October 1944” put together and given to us by Valter et al. The exhibition brief concludes with: “On the 80th Anniversary of the Liberation, the Allies and our partisans who fought alongside them remind us that freedom is never given for free: it must be won day by day.” Profound words those.

Our farewell dinner together on Saturday night (11th Oct) capped off an inspiring pilgrimage & friendships forged from shared



history. Many thanks Valter and Francesco!

Bombarde Beach: where 458 SQN encamped

All 1944 pictures come from our Official Squadron Albums at

www.458raafsquadron.org/official-squadron-albums/album-1-chapters/chapter-4 Pages 86-96





Jeremy, Colonel Francesco Demontis, Mr Valter Battistoni, Roland

Farewell Dinner and 458 SQN Plaque presentations, Alghero



Colonel Francesco Demontis, Rob Wilkinson, Mr Valter Battistoni

The following comes from a Sardinian media article advertising our visit.

From Website: www.alguer.it/notizie/n.php?id=187691

Cor 16 September 2025

Australians in Alghero: a pilgrimage of remembrance

The visit of the children of two officers of the 458th Squadron of the Royal Australian Air Force - the Australian Air Force - stationed at Alghero airport in 1944 will take place in Alghero from 9 to 12 October.



ALGHERO - After September 8, 1943, the first Allied units landed in the port of a half-destroyed Cagliari. A few weeks later, the aircraft and personnel destined to continue the war in mainland Italy arrived in Alghero. Hostilities in Sardinia had ended, but in northern Italy and the rest of Europe, a war still had to be won. The Allied contingent based in Alghero comprised personnel of various nationalities, including a unit of Australian airmen.

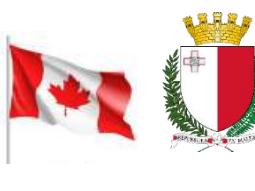
Among them, tasked with piloting a Wellington bomber, was Squadron Leader Gordon Stanley Orchard, who camped with his men in a sort of tent city on Bombarde beach, due to the lack of other available accommodations. Commander Orchard flew several risky missions throughout 1944 but managed to return home to Australia safely. We like to think that he told his wife and three children, in addition to his

adventures, about the beauty of Alghero, its sea, and its people. That was enough for his children, 81 years later, to decide to come and see with their own eyes the places where their father spent a long summer of war.

And so Penelope, Roland, and Jeffrey Orchard will arrive in Alghero in early October for a sort of pilgrimage of remembrance, a small tribute to the places their father told them about. They will also be joined by Flight Lt. William Wilkinson's son, Rob, accompanied by his wife, Carolin, whose story is similar. Together, they carry on the memory of the 458th Squadron RAAF, their fathers' unit, with a website brimming with memories, photos, stories, and biographies.

Several events have been organized for them, including a visit to the military airport, thanks to the availability of Lieutenant Colonel Alessandro Scabia, Commander of the Italian Air Force Airport Detachment, and the reopening of the photographic exhibition "The Allies in Alghero," held in April to coincide with the 80th Anniversary of the Liberation. The exhibition is curated by the local ANPI branch, with the collaboration of Obra Cultural and Platforma per la Llengua. The guests will then continue to Malta, where the periodic reunion of the children and grandchildren of veterans of the 458th Squadron will be held.

PS. Contact with the Association of the 458th Squadron RAAF began around 2010 as part of a search for material for the book "A Brief History of Alghero Airport" by Valter Battistoni, former director of the local civilian airport, whom the Australian guests contacted to organize their trip. Battistoni then involved Col. Francesco Demontis, himself a former commander of the military airport, in organizing the visit.



by Adam & Cate Wagstaffe Nephew and Great Neice of Michael Wagstaffe.

The Photograph



Visiting the crew of HX726 at the Capuccini CWWG, Malta

If you'd told me our first real 458 encounter would involve a centipede rather than a close call with an anti-aircraft gun in the dark, I'd have said you'd got the wrong squadron.

But there we were: Malta, day one, jet-lagged and slightly feral, shuffling into the hotel breakfast room at La Falconeria. This was our very first encounter with the 458 family in the flesh. We'd just come to grips with the amazing coffee we'd be drinking for the next week to which the server kept repeating "have you heard of Nescafe?" and then we got chatting to a gentleman named **Stewart Kent**.

Over eggs and toast, he told us how his father had once been shot through the canvas of a

Wellington, taking a hit in the ankle. A proper war wound. His father spent years recovering from the injury, and the story understandably took on heroic status in the family – a reminder of what he'd gone through in the air.

Years later, after his father had passed, Stewart found himself telling this very story to another former crewmember who'd served with him.

The crewmember listened politely, then shook his head.

"No, no... that wasn't a bullet."

"Oh?"

"No. That was a giant centipede that bit him in his tent."

Same ankle. Very different enemy.

That mixture of courage, chaos, and deadpan humour set the tone perfectly. This was our first contact with 458, and the rest of the reunion followed in the

same vein:

a series of hilariously bonding moments, stories that veered from heartbreak to ridiculous in the space of a sentence, and a profound sense that we'd somehow stumbled into a family we'd always belonged to.

You'll read plenty in this issue no doubt about the official tours, the ceremonies, the meals, and the moving moments of remembrance in Malta. Rather than repeat what others will describe so well, I'd like to take you through a slightly different door.

I'd like to start a week *before* we even set foot on the island of Malta.

It was only then that I realised, with all our research into 458 Squadron, I knew almost nothing about Malta itself. We had traced aircraft serials, dredged Ancestry profiles, harassed Archives Canada for photographs, lived inside the 458 operational records for crew movements, and operations in the Mediterranean, yet the island at the heart of so many of those stories was, to me, little more than a name and a set of coordinates on a war map. **The same can not be said for my dad – he is well versed in Malta's history – for the record.

Mildly horrified at this gap (and up against the clock), I did what any modern researcher does when they're short on time and long on curiosity: I opened a social media page and typed in **#Malta**.



The 'odd grainy street scene' I was expecting to find on social media. This was the Law Courts in Valletta after being bombed. - photograph from Malta Aviation Museum.

I thought I'd get a quick feel for the place before the reunion – a few black-and-white photos, bomb damage, perhaps the odd grainy street scene. Instead, that simple hashtag led me into a story I am *still* writing my way through; a story that links our family, the crash of Wellington

HX726, a grave in Malta beside Uncle Michael, a shadow box in a Museum, the discovery of another 458 Family member, a wireless operator's daughter who provided key evidence that made it all make sense... and a handsome Canadian tail gunner.

This opening is just the beginning of that tale – the moment the reunion to Malta quietly turned into something much larger. That innocent little hashtag, **#Malta**, did exactly what hashtags are best at: it completely derailed my plans. I'd meant to "just have a quick look" – a five-minute scroll to get a feel for wartime Malta before the reunion. Instead, I found myself staring at a familiar face: **Harold Ernest Stanley** from HX726.

We had only just written about Stanley in August (Newsletter 280), drawing heavily on material from our previous contributions (Newsletters 278 and 279), so we already knew what he looked like. But to have his photograph pop up *again* in my Instagram feed – this time as a shot of his shadow box in a museum – felt like pure kismet. What are the odds? We only just chased the man through records and logbooks in August, and then now he pops up between cat videos and holiday snaps.

Curious, I tapped through to the account that had shared the image. It was a personal profile, linked to a published book. And that's when everything turned on its head. Because the man on the book cover wasn't Stanley at all. The face on the cover belonged to **Wendell Drew** – the sole survivor of Wellington HX726 – who has since acquired a much-loved nickname in our family: "*Handsome Drew*."



Stanley photographed by Lance Fox at the Commonwealth Air Training Plan Museum in Brandon Manitoba.

We'd only mentioned him briefly in previous newsletters. Part of the reason is simple: Drew doesn't appear on the Squadron Nominal Roll (something we hope to change), having been posted away after the crash, he was no longer part of 458. Tail gunner on HX726, he walked away from the Malta crash of 13 February 1943 physically unscathed. Shortly afterwards he was sent back to England, retrained on Lancasters... and, in a grim twist of fate, was later killed in another aircraft in 1944.

Rotten luck doesn't even begin to describe it.

Surprisingly, the book with Drew on the cover, also introduced another central figure in this story: Gladys, Drew's fiancée in the UK.

We don't know exactly how they first met – somewhere between stations, dances, and postings, like so many wartime romances – but they fell deeply in love. Curiously, his near-miss in Malta seems to have been barely mentioned to her. According to her family, there was little or no talk of him walking away from the crash of HX726. Perhaps he didn't want to worry her. Perhaps it felt too raw. Or perhaps, like many aircrew, he simply treated survival as something not to be examined too closely.

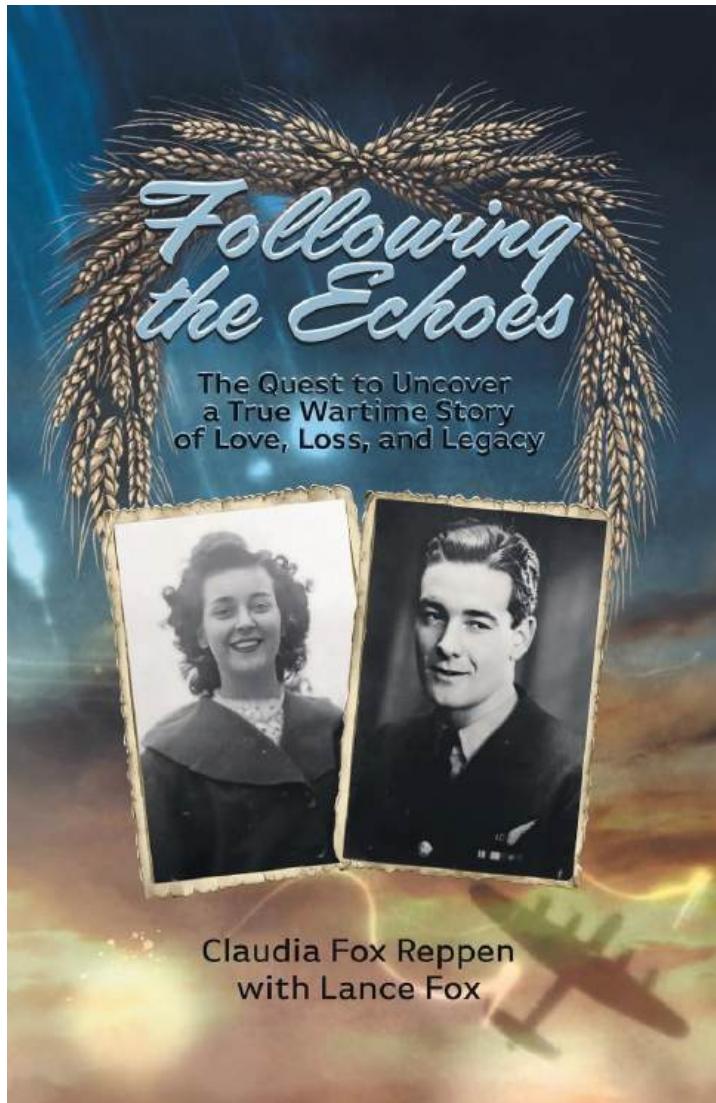
The news of his *second* crash, however, could not be softened. For his parents in rural Saskatchewan (or as **Rob Forgan** calls it: Skatchewean) – their only child gone – it was devastating. For Gladys, left in England with almost no detail from the War Office, it was the shattering of an entire imagined future.

In later years, Gladys did marry again (to another Canadian – clearly the woman had excellent taste) and built a good life. But she never forgot Drew. She spoke about him, quietly and honestly, to her grandchildren, **Lance Fox and Claudia Fox Reppen** – about the young man she loved and the life that never was. Those conversations stayed with them.



Wendell "Del" Drew - sourced from Archives Canada

Moved by their grandmother's memories, Claudia and Lance decided to write a book telling Drew and Gladys's story and the impact of his loss on their whole family. That book – *Following the Echoes: The Quest to Uncover a True Wartime Story of Love, Loss, and Legacy* – was what I was looking at when the penny finally dropped.



A highly recommended book about 458 Squadron, available on Amazon – Written and published by Claudia Fox Reppen with Lance Fox.

The Instagram profile shared Stanley's shadow box in the Commonwealth Air Training Plan Museum in Brandon, Manitoba. It was Lance who discovered the photo in the museum while researching the book.

While we were busy researching the crash of HX726 from our side – poring over squadron records, staring at grainy crew photos, visiting graves – Lance and Claudia had been tracing the same story from the other end: a farmhouse in Saskatchewan, a grieving fiancée in England, and the echo of a name carried down through family history.

We were working on the same story and didn't even know it.

Naturally, I did what any self-respecting researcher would do:

1. Ordered the book from Amazon at suspicious speed, and
2. Immediately sent them a message.

I reached out via Instagram and Facebook to say how thrilled I was by the connection, and to share a very poor, over-exposed photograph we had of Drew and his crew – one I hadn't seen included in the book. It's the same photo we used in Newsletter No. 278 (December 2024). I was surprised to see the photo was not included in Chapter 6 of their book, in the section on Drew's 458 crash



A not so high-quality photograph we used to admire until we went to Malta. - sourced from Archives Canada.

in HX726.

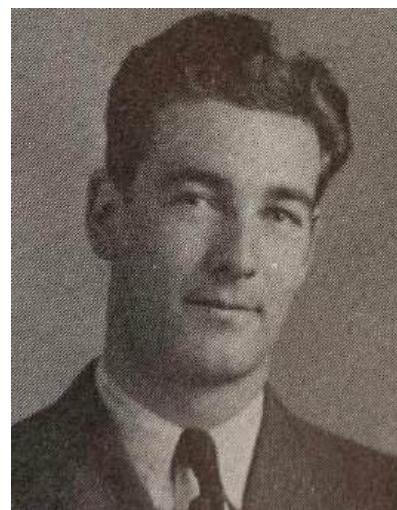
To my great delight, I fired off this grainy, low-quality masterpiece, fully convinced I was about to blow their minds.

Naturally, I was not.

Claudia and Lance, being far more organised than I was prepared for, had already seen the photograph and had simply chosen not to include it in the book due to the low quality and little information available about the men in it. While I was busy feeling very pleased with myself, they were already ten steps ahead in their 458 pursuits.

Mildly jealous that I was so late to the game, I tried to claw back some ground. I asked if they had ever visited the crew's graves in Malta and, before they even had a chance to answer, I barrelled on and told them – rather arrogantly – that I was going *next week* and would send them some photos that, this time, I knew for certain they didn't have.

That photograph – the blurred Wellington, the scribbled "Maurice" over one of the figures – links us back to the rest of the HX726 crew: **Gleason, Kempton, Brown (RAF), Drew, Stanley, and Brown...** or so I thought (more on that later). We've touched on them before in previous newsletters, but now, through this unexpected family connection, they suddenly felt less like names in a file and more like people we might almost have known.



Wendell Drew - contributed by Lance Fox and Claudia Fox Reppen

By the time our Malta reunion actually rolled around, I wasn't just packing clothes and travel adapters. I was packing *Following the Echoes...*, email printouts, and that terrible crew photograph – because it was becoming clear that this trip to Malta was no longer just about revisiting history.

It was about meeting the people who still live with its consequences.

Fast forward a week and there we were in Malta – jet-lagged, slightly overheated, and trying our best to look dignified at Luqa Airport. If it hadn't been for those brilliant commemorative golf shirts with the squadron crest that **Rob Wilkinson** organised, I've no idea what I would have done for outfit number five.

There was a rumour going round that **Jim Douglas** had a washing machine in his apartment and that everyone was quietly bribing him for access. Either that, or the more likely story: the Australians actually know how to travel and pack properly... except when they nick your umbrella and take it all the way back home with them.

On the Thursday afternoon we attended a presentation by **Captain Iona Muscat**. Many of you will know the name already: an archaeologist by training, Malta's first female military helicopter pilot, and one of those effortlessly competent people who can talk about aircraft, anecdotes, and wartime history without once glancing at their notes. I imagined she would have been eaten alive, doing a presentation on the history of 458 in Malta, to 40+ people who have spent most of their lives listening to firsthand accounts and stories of the aircrew who lived through that history— but Iona's presentation is pivotal to the rest of our

story in this newsletter.

Her talk wove together aviation archaeology, Malta's role in the war, and the 458 stories buried—sometimes literally—in the landscape. I was completely absorbed... then one of her slides flicked up and my heart did a very undignified lurch.

On the screen was a group of lads standing in front of a Wellington. *Our lads. Our Wellington.* Or so I thought.

It was the same photograph we'd used back in Newsletter No. 278 (see picture on previous page)— the one we'd squinted at for ages: blurred faces, blown-out sky, and that faint scribble pointing towards "Maurice". For many months it had been like trying to understand a friendship group from a photocopy of a photocopy.



Captain Iona Muscat, first female helicopter pilot in Malta Air Force. - sourced from internet.

But this time, in Iona's presentation, the image was crystal clear. Not just a bit better – *1000% clearer*. The sort of clarity that makes you sit back and think: “Right, well, now I've actually *met* them.”



Captain Iona Muscat delivering an excellent discussion on 458 family history at Luqa Airport.

You could see the expressions properly. The way they stood. The casual slouch of one, the slightly more formal pose of another. It stopped being “six airmen we're fairly sure are Gleason, Kempton, Brown, Drew, Stanley and Brown (RAF)” and became a row of young men who might, at any minute, have stepped down from the screen and started chatting.

And, of course, my first completely un-noble thought was:

I bet Claudia and Lance haven't seen this one.

While Iona carried on with her excellent talk, part of my brain was already plotting. I looked to my Dad to communicate this through a look but met his eyes with the exact same expression. We knew we had to tackle Iona and interrogate her for further information about that photo. Here, finally, was something I could send Claudia and Lance that they almost certainly didn't have. After being humbled by their advanced state of 458 research, I was quietly delighted at the prospect of being the one to say:

“You know that blurry Wellington crew photo we all hate?
Well... wait until you see *this* version.”

It was a strange moment – sitting in a hangar, listening to a Maltese helicopter pilot talk about what was happening in the exact spot we were sitting in 80 years ago. All while staring at a beautifully clear image of a 458 crew we'd been fumbling to see properly for months. All while an AgustaWestland / Leonardo AW139 (almost certainly the one Iona herself flies) and a Beechcraft King Air sat perfectly framed against a beautiful sunset in the middle of the only active runway in Malta. The very runway from which HX726 almost certainly took off from, and the same one we would be taxiing from in a few



Areal photo of Luqa Airport 1941 – Sourced from Internet

short days.

And there I was, thinking not just of that scene in front of me, but of two other people who cared just as deeply about those faces: Lance in Canada and Claudia in Norway. Three corners of the world, all emotionally tied to one grainy photograph that had just come into focus.

That slide at Luqa did more than sharpen a photograph. It sharpened the whole story: HX726, Drew, the rest of the crew, the graves at Capuccini, and the network of families and researchers quietly knitting their memories together across continents.

The moment the presentation ended – and the wine appeared – about ten people quite rightly descended on Iona and **Lt. Col.**

Nicholas Grech to thank them for a beautiful talk about our 458 family and Malta's rich history. When we finally, and rather bashfully, got our turn, we asked the only question that had been burning a hole in our brains since that slide appeared:



Figure 1 Lt. Col. Nicholas Grech, Commanding Officer, Air Wing AFM delivered an excellent presentation on the History of Malta – photo sourced <https://www.horizon.mt/2023/08/04/italian-and-maltese-military-bilateral-cooperation->

“Where did you get that photo?”

Not only did Iona tell us that it had come from **Ray Polidano**, the Director General, CEO and owner of the Malta Aviation Museum Foundation, but she messaged him then and there so that we could meet him at the museum and see the photograph for ourselves the next day.

We booked a Bolt car for the next morning and were dropped outside the Malta Aviation Museum before it had even opened. Classic us – keen as mustard and nowhere to go. No surprise, then, that shortly after our own tour of the first hangar, a small mob of **Orchards** descended on the museum and we all eventually squeezed into Ray's office like kids in a sweet shop.

Whatever cluttered treasure trove you're currently picturing – that's exactly what it looked like. Piles of paper, old photographs on the walls, an entire library of rare looking leather books, bits of aircraft, shelves that had clearly given up decades ago. It was glorious.



Ray Polidano explaining his Wellington restoration project in his "man-cave" office of treasure".

Ray disappeared into an inner room (which can only fairly be described as “even more of a cave”) and emerged carrying a dusty old photo album that had been contributed by **Percy Barham** of 69 Squadron stationed in Malta.



Now, I can't say that Barham had a morbid curiosity for photographing crashed and crumpled Wellingtons in Malta from 1941 to 1943... but I also can't *not* say it – If we're being honest, we share a little of that guilty fascination ourselves.

Page after page revealed Wellingtons in various states of disrepair: belly-landed, broken-backed, or scattered across rocky fields.

Photographs from Barham's album at the Malta Aviation Museum



Photographs from Barham's album at the Malta Aviation Museum

And yet, rather than feeling ghoulish, it was oddly moving – a visual record of what these aircraft and their crews endured. I wondered if Uncle Michaels plane was in one of those photos that said “clearing up after another raid” with a clearly burnt-out fuselage

of what was once a Wellington Bomber. Was this taken on black Monday? I wondered if Drew crawled out of the tail of one of the Wellingtons with a broken back.

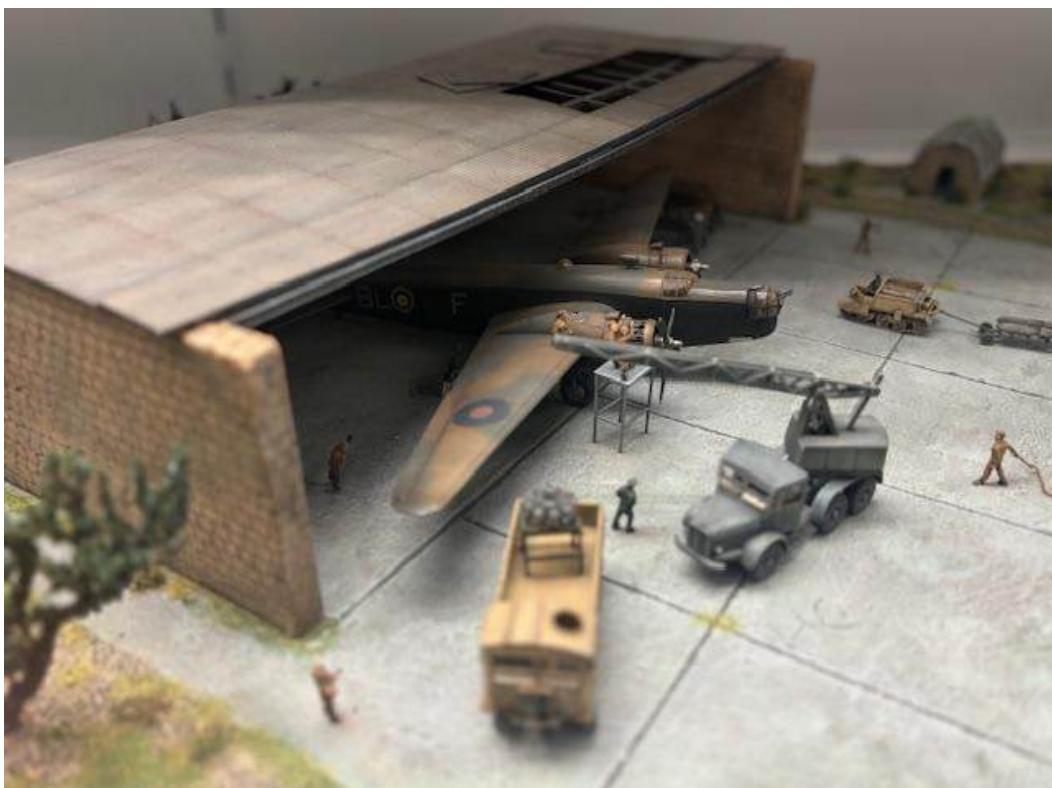
Honestly, leafing through Barham’s album became one of the unexpected highlights of the trip – right up there with finding Michael’s grave, which we managed thanks to the combined efforts of our entire 458 family behind us. Even now, thinking back to standing there beside his headstone, with you all,



A series of photos from Barham's album at the Malta Aviation Museum

HX726 crew nearby and these newly discovered images fresh in our minds, it still catches me in the throat. We could quite happily write another hundred pages on **Percy Barham** and the long life he led during and after the war.

From Iona's account of wartime activity at Luqa, it's clear that 69 Squadron and 458 Squadron were very close – not just in proximity. Their Wellingtons were often stored side by side in the same camouflaged huts; they shared the same airspace, the same night skies, and very often the same missions. In the case of HX726, they even shared the same men: its crew along with all the other Wellington crews had officially been transferred from 69 Squadron to 458 only two weeks before the crash.



Diorama of a Wellington in its hut/hangar in Luqa Airport WW2. – Malta Aviation Museum.

Barham's photo album sits right at the junction of those histories. His images capture not just wrecked Wellingtons, but the reality of the work both squadrons were doing – the strain on aircraft, the risks taken as routine, the constant traffic of machines and men between units.

Though Barham is no longer with us, we owe him a quiet debt. Thanks to his lens – and that dusty album in Ray's office – we now have an entire new set of rabbit holes to dive into: 69 Squadron Wellington crews, shared huts and shared missions, suspected sabotage – with Ray from the Aviation Museum backing our theory about sugar in the plane's oil – and the wider story of how HX726 and her men came to be on that runway in Malta in February 1943.

Somewhere in the middle of Barham's marvellous catalogue of "Wellingtons having a truly awful day", Ray disappeared again into the second cave and returned with a photo – the photo. The one in Iona's presentation. The clear crispy version that none of us Canadians had ever seen. It was worth the wait! We asked to take photos, "for research purposes" of course.

The photo was incredible in real life, no blown-out sky. No ghostly white faces. No guessing where "Maurice" might be hiding under a scrawl of ink. Just six young men in front of their Wellington, clear enough that you could see the way the light caught their hair, the creases in their trousers, and that half-grin worn by someone who definitely thought the photographer was taking too long. It was the kind of clarity that makes your stomach flip. For a second, I didn't say anything. I just stared, because it felt as if the boys had finally stepped out from behind the fog of copies and scans and were properly introducing themselves.

Then, of course, the researcher brain kicked in.

*This is it. This is **the** version. And Claudia and Lance are going to absolutely lose their minds.*



Claudia Fox Reppen



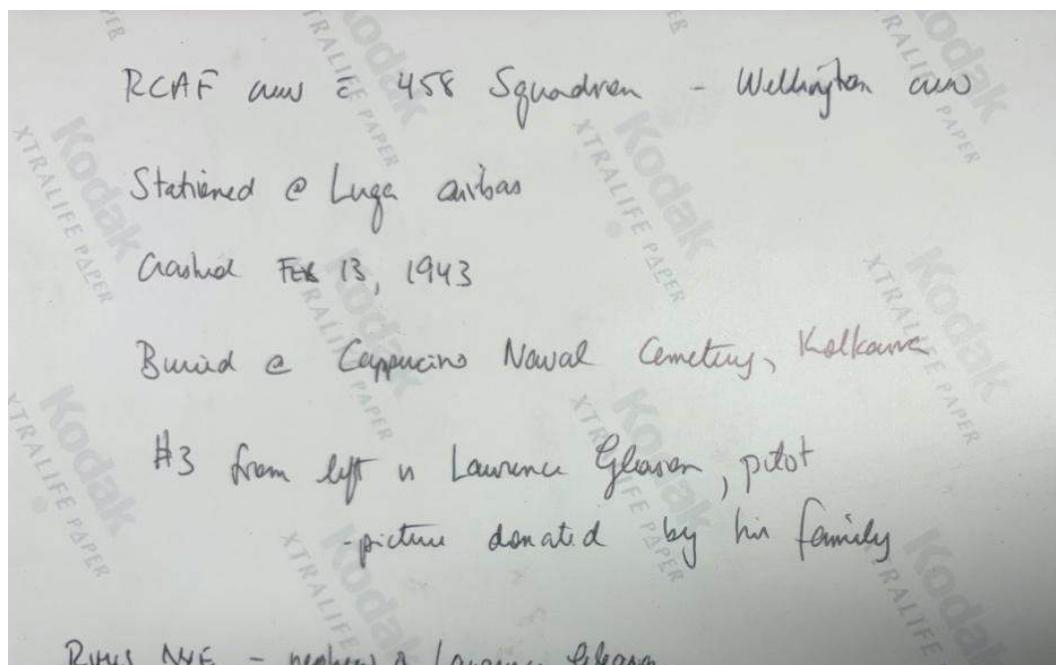
Lance Fox

Because really, that's what this whole Malta prelude became in the end: not just a reunion, not just a pilgrimage to Michael's grave, but a shared guardianship of one small crew of HX726 – their faces now just that bit clearer, their story a little more complete.

Before we left Ray's office, I did what any nosy researcher would do: I flipped the photograph over, just to see if our assumptions about who was in it were correct. There were no crew names written on the back – but we recognised Gleason and Kempton in a flash. Their faces have become so familiar now that seeing them clearly felt almost like recognising someone across a crowded room. It was the back of the photo, though, where the next part of this story begins to unravel.

There, in neat handwriting, was the contact information for Gleason's nephew, **Rhys Nye** who, would you believe, also lives in British Columbia. Did we really just travel 6,000 miles to Malta to find a long lost 458 family member who lives in the *same province* as we do?

Yes. Yes, we did.



The back of the photo at the Malta Aviation Museum

What an adventure.

We snapped as many photos as we could of the picture – front and back – before finally prising ourselves away from Barham's album. At some point during all this, Ray had quietly slipped out to help another gentleman who was writing a book. (Clearly, Ray is running an unofficial support group for aviation-obsessed authors.)

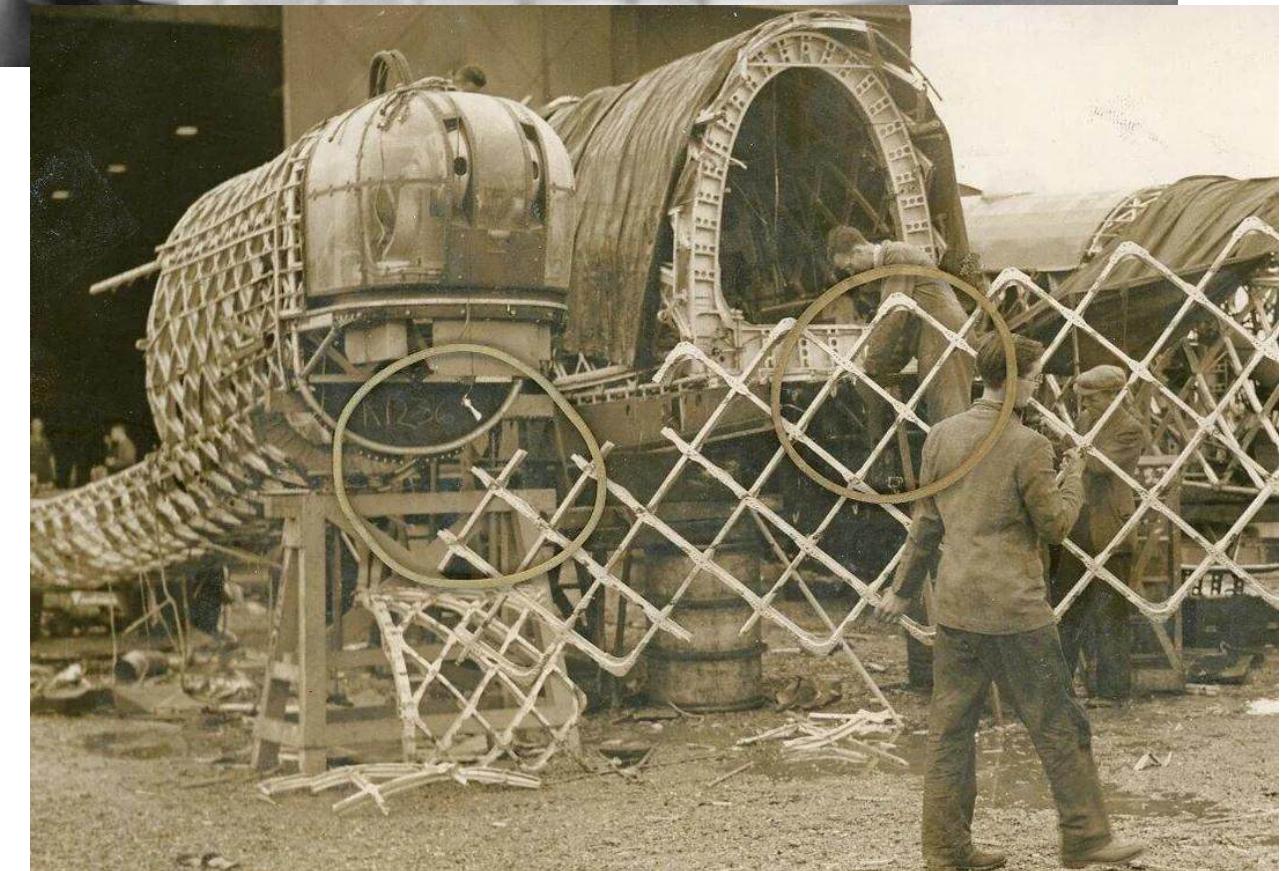
He had mentioned, almost in passing, that he was working on “restoring part of a Wellington”. That, of course, had the **Orchards, Wagstaffes and Bob Kelliher** staring at him with eyes like saucers.

If you took the full tour of the Museum, you’ll remember there are three separate large hangars full of aircraft and displays, a chapel, a canteen and then – right at the very back – a yard with a Nissen hut and assorted aircraft parts leaning against stone walls. A sort of graveyard of glory.

Propped up against one wall, all on its own, was a section of the geodetic airframe of a Wellington bomber – the bulkhead that once joined the wings to the fuselage. Ray has a vision of rebuilding parts of it for a visual display. The idea is that the Gleason photograph and Barham’s album could become part of that exhibit.



Adam Wagstaffe standing next to the Geodetic Wellington bulkhead, for reference. Pretty small space to crawl through. – at the Malta Aviation Museum.



*Picture Above: The inside of a Wellington showing the bulkhead piece in place. - Sourced from the internet.
Picture Below: A deconstructed Wellington showing the exposed inner frame.*

As we made our way to the final hangar to thank Ray once more for such an amazing experience, he guided us past a section roped off from the public. There, we had the great fortune of meeting **Reno Psaila**, an aircraft restorer painstakingly rebuilding a Gloster Sea Gladiator piece by piece.



Reno's man cave. The restoration shop for the Gladiator



Reno on left showing us that once he pieces it all together, he'll have to painstakingly take it all apart again to treat the metals.

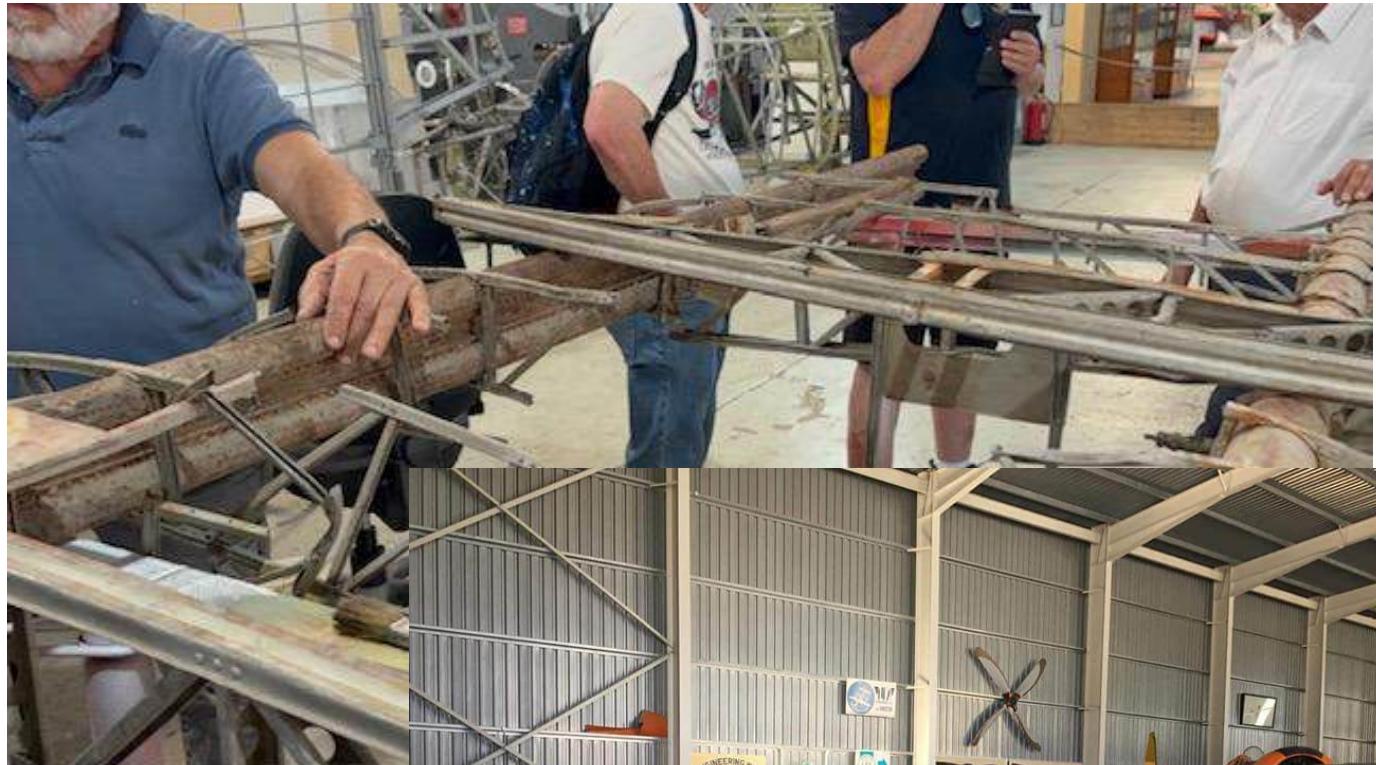
The Gladiator, as many will know, was the first enclosed-cockpit and last biplane fighter introduced into RAF service – a sort of elegant bridge between two eras of aviation. Reno wasn't just restoring parts; he was building the *machines that make the parts* for the plane. Back in the 1930s, large factories were set up to mass-produce three hundred of the same components at a time.



A formation of Gloster Sea Gladiators - sourced from internet

Reno, on the other hand, only needs *one* of each – and modern factories are understandably reluctant to divert resources for a single bespoke piece at anything resembling an affordable price. The Gladiator is, quite clearly, a labour of love for him, and we dearly hope to see it take off from Luqa one day in the future.

When we discovered he had also rebuilt a WW2, **Piper L-4** (for reference, **Adam Wagstaffe** restored and still flies an **Aeronca L-3**), we were more than ready to start drafting the modern chapter of *The Quest to Uncover a True Wartime Story of Love, Loss, and L-birds*.



Piper L4 at Malta Aviation Museum - photo sourced from internet

Upon returning home to Canada and breathlessly sharing our Malta discoveries with Lance and Claudia, it was Lance who calmly pointed out something we had completely missed.

Thanks to the beautifully clear versions of the photograph from Iona and Ray, the registration number on the Wellington's fuselage was now plainly visible:

HX428.



Now visible registration number HX428

And that's where the story gets properly tangled.

HX428 was a Vickers Wellington VIII from RAF No. 7 (Coastal) Operational Training Unit, which crashed on 28 October 1942 during a navigational exercise. In other words: this could *not* have been a Wellington actively flying with 458 at the time of HX726's loss which crashed in February of 1943.

So, if the aircraft in the photo wasn't a 458 machine, what on earth were "our" lads doing in front of it?

The answer, as Lance pointed out, is that Gleason and his crew must have first come together at No. 7 OTU in Limavady, Ireland, well before their time with 458 and their fatal crash in February 1943.

That's when Lance produced another gem from his collection: a very clear course photograph from No. 7 OTU – the very course that both Drew and Gleason attended together.



No. 7 OTU Course in July 1941 – contributed by Lance Fox

Kempton hadn't yet joined the scene at that stage, but the more we looked at the course photo, the more other faces began to look suspiciously familiar. It raised an uncomfortable but fascinating possibility:

The men in what we'd been calling "the Gleason 458 crew photograph" might *not* be the exact crew who later crashed in HX726 at all. Instead, they may be an earlier configuration of friends and crewmates, captured at Limavady in front of HX428 – their training aircraft, their starting point – long before Malta, Capuccini, and the final chapter of their story. And just like that, a single, sharpened registration number on a Wellington's fuselage turned a "solved" photo into yet another invitation to dig deeper.

This next part is where things start to sound a bit like CSI: Limavady, so bear with me. While Lance was studying the No. 7 OTU course photograph with Gleason and Drew in it, I went back to the service records of the HX726 crew. Now, I fully accept there were probably easier ways to approach this mystery photo, but once I'd noticed a pattern, I couldn't let it go.

I realised I already knew the recorded heights of each member of the HX726 crew. And in the Wellington photograph we were trying to untangle, we were confident about three of the faces: **Gleason**, **Kempton**, and **Drew**.

So, in a move that Lance is absolutely going to howl over, I decided to use their heights as a kind of human measuring stick to see whether the other men in the photograph were genuinely “our” 458 crew – or strangers I’d wrongly promoted into the HX726 line-up in previous newsletters.



The photo in Iona's presentation and held by Ray at the Malta Aviation Museum. Gleason is in the center. To the right is Kempton and next Kempton is Drew.

From the records:

- **Stanley** – presumed far left: recorded as **5'4"** (64 in / approx. **163 cm**)
- **Brown (RAF)** – presumed next to Stanley: recorded as **6'0½"** (72.5 in / approx. **184 cm**)
- **Gleason**: recorded as **5'11"** (71 in / approx. **180 cm**)
- **Kempton**: recorded as **6'0"** (72 in / approx. **183 cm**)
- **Drew**: recorded as **5'8"** (68 in / approx. **173 cm**)
- **Brown (RCAF)** – presumed far right: recorded as **5'7½"** (67.5 in / approx. **171 cm**)

HX726 Crewman	Actual Height	Archives Canada Photo	HX428 Crewman	“Gleason Crew Photo”
Stanley	5'4" (163cm)		?	
Brown (RAF)	6'0½" (184cm)		?	
Gleason	5'11" (180cm)		Gleason	
Kempton	6'0" (183cm)		Kempton	
Drew	5'8" (173cm)		Drew	
Brown (RCAF)	5'7½" (171cm)		?	

Lining up these heights against the photograph – with Gleason, Kempton and Drew as our fixed points – turned out to be a surprisingly useful way to check who could plausibly be who, and who might, in fact, belong to a slightly different chapter of the story. It was also the moment I realised just how wrong I'd been.

On paper, Stanley is my height at 5'4", and Brown (RAF) is a solid six foot and a bit. In the photograph, however, the man I'd confidently labelled as Brown appears *shorter* than the supposed 5'4" Stanley standing beside him. Once you see it, you can't unsee it. The proportions simply don't work.

We can now say with confidence that not everyone in that image is 458, and that what we're probably looking at is a blend of familiar faces caught at an earlier stage – Limavady, No. 7 OTU, friendships in formation – rather than the final, fatal crew of HX726 as we once assumed.

Lance then upped the ante by sharing the names listed on the OTU course photograph, which meant we might – and look at me sounding all “investigative journalist” here – be able to “positively identify” the men in the photograph from Iona’s presentation. Once we had the names from the course in front of us, things started to shift.

The man we had been calling **Brown (RAF)** was now looking suspiciously more like **Tomlinson**.



Circled in red: Gleason left and Tomlinson Right

Drew was just there getting more handsome by the minute and **Brown (RCAF)** was starting to resemble **Munroe** from the course photo.



Circled in red: Drew



Circled in red: Monroe



Mystery crewman - contributed by Rhys Nye



Mystery Gentleman - contributed by Lance Fox

That left the first man on the left as our stubborn mystery. He bore a resemblance to the chap standing next to Gleason in the OTU course photograph, which led us to a new candidate: A man with the surname **Laforet**.

Armed with just a last name, a first initial “L.” and a service

number, I did what any 21st-century researcher does: I took to the internet to unravel the mystery. You’d be surprised how hard it is to find people who survived the war... even more so, how many L. Laforets served with the RCAF (assuming he was even *RCAF* in the first place).

After a fair bit of digging, I managed to narrow it down to **two** possible men. At that point, there was nothing for it but to start asking questions. I reached out to someone on Ancestry named **Laura**, whose family tree included a Laforet who weirdly enough had a son named Lawrence (Gleason's first name) in 1942 no less, when we assume the photo was taken. So, I asked Laura – as politely as one can at a virtual set of traffic lights – whether *her* Laforet had trained in Ireland in 1942. And so, from Malta to Limavady to an Ancestry inbox, the thread of this one photograph kept pulling us further in.

Laura was immediately keen to see the No. 7 OTU course photograph I was talking about. Being extremely technologically advanced (in the sense that I can break any messaging platform in under five minutes), I promptly failed to attach the photo properly and we migrated to email instead.



*The first photo Laura sent of her father to confirm his identity.
- contributed by Laura Labute*

Once she'd seen it, Laura confirmed what we'd been hoping: **Lawrence Gleason** had been **Leo Laforet's** close mate during the war. So close, in fact, that Leo named his son, born in 1942, after Gleason. Laforet was Laura's father. She told us he was always deeply affected by the friendships he'd lost, and that it was a sadness he carried with him long after the war ended. The silver lining is that he also told Laura that those 5 years he spent in the war, were the best years of his life.

Laura also confirmed another crucial detail: Leo had attended the funeral of all his mates from HX726 in Malta after the crash in February 1943.

Laforet, it turns out, had been with 69 Squadron, along with Gleason and the others, before they transferred to 458 – just two weeks prior to the fatal crash.

As mentioned in previous newsletters (No. 275), as of February 1943, all Wellington crews and their aircraft were transferred out of 69 Squadron – Warburton's fantasy draft of Spitfires and Wellingtons finally untangled. Laforet and Barham therefore became official 458 Squadron aircrrew alongside Drew and should rightly appear on the 458-nominal roll. Even though Gleason and his crew had only been with 458 for a fortnight before their loss, the ORB already shows Laforet flying with the squadron, quietly proving the point.

5/6th	Wellington.	R.97597.					
Feb.	"111.	F/Sgt. Gleason.	Captain.	1810.	0300.		
	H.X.747."U".	1289528.					
		Sgt. Brown. E.	2nd Pilot.				
		J.9616.					
		P/O. Kempton. M.	Navigator.				
		R.93370.					
		Sgt. Laforet. L.	W./Optr.				
		R.92508.					
		Sgt. Brown. P.	S.E./Optr.				
		Aus. 405188.					
		Sgt. Armour. R.	Rear Gunner.				

458 Operation Records Book showing Gleason and crew (including Laforet) flying with 458 Squadron after transfer from 69 Squadron.

Woven through this, but on his own thread, is Perry King (Newsletter No. 278). By this time, he was captaining his own Wellington with 458 Squadron, having come across in the same February transfer. We've already followed his later fatal mission in an earlier newsletter, but the 13 February records link him briefly to Gleason's story: that night both King's and Gleason's Wellingtons were forced to turn back with engine trouble. King made it safely back on the ground; Gleason's aircraft crashed while landing. Two 69 Squadron alumni, two 458 Wellingtons, same night, different fates.

DATE	AIRCRAFT TYPE & NUMBER	CREW	DUTY	TIME		DETAILS OF SORTIE OR FLIGHT	REF
				UP	DOWN		
13th	Wellington. Feb. "Q". HX.728.	R.97397. F/Sgt. Gleason. L.	Captain.	2124.	Crash Landed. 0100.	Shipping Strike. Cape Bon/Maritimo/to Palermo. Apparently reached patrol area. Message received 2540 hrs, returning to base with engine trouble. No other messages received. Crash landed at Iuga, high speed, overshot on landing, either on fire or catching fire immediately afterwards. Crashed into quarry. All members of crew killed with exception of Sgt. Drew (R/G). Sgt Drew sustained cuts and bruises.	
		1289528. Sgt. Brown. E.R. J.9516. P/O. Kempton. M. R.91441. Sgt. Stanley. R. R.92302. Sgt. Brown. P.G. R.75245. Sgt. Drew. W.T.	2nd Pilot. Navigator. W./Optr. S.E./Optr.				
13th	Wellington. Feb. H.X.991."B".	R.93340. Sgt. King. P. R.105577. Sgt. Sheffield. R.104935. Sgt. Clarke. L. R.90549. Sgt. Jenkins. P. R.95368. Sgt. Kirk. J.P. R.A72864. Sgt. McLoed.	Captain. 2nd Pilot. Navigator. W./Optr. S.E./Optr. Rear Gunner.	1945.	2035.	Shipping Strike Patrol. 13. extended coastwise to Palermo. Cumulus Cloud. visibility 10 miles. Weather Good. Port Engine faulty. Oil pressure dropped 261bs. and temperature going up fast. Signalled that returning to base.	

458 Operation Records Book showing both Gleason and King Wellington crews flying 13 February 1943. Only one crew would return to base in one piece.

That timeline, set against the course photograph and Iona's image, makes one thing beautifully clear: the men of 69 and 458 were not separate cast lists, but a single, tightly-knitted story that has never really been told as one.

Unit: No. 69 SQUADRON, R.A.F.		Appoint. "A"		Form 641.		Month:
Aircraft Type & No.	Crew	Time	Time	Time	Time	
		Up	Down	Up	Down	
3rd Jan. 1943 No. Spitfire 905.	Sgt. Lewis A. co. Palermo to Naples.	Photo rec- 0350	1450			Naples. Raining and almost obscured Vis. practically nil. No photos or sightings : Palermo. Harbour just visible through small break. photoed but results doubtful. Either Trapani or Barletta Rizzo photos. Cloud 7/8/10 some large A/C on drone. Cante Vetrano. Photos. Visuals too difficult because of cloud. Pantelleria completely obscured by cloud. Vis. Good above cloud. Weather : stormy.
4th Jan. 1943 No. Spitfire 364.	W/Odr. A. Warburton.	Photo rec- 0750	1135			Naples 1 hospital ship. 1 liner 5 M/Vs 8/10000 tons 8 M/Vs 2/4000 tons. 4/5 small M/Rs 2 Fleet D/Rs photos taken. Castellammare. 1 light O/R 1 vessel under construction. photos taken in 2 runs. Palermo. 18 D/Rs 5 M/Vs 5/8000 tons 2 M/Vs 2/3000 tons and 1 of 4/5000 tons outside. Photos taken. Some flak Biscari. photos - no visual. Vis. Good. Weather : gusty.
4th Jan. 1943 No. Spitfire 402.	P/O Frazer J. co. Taranto & Messina.	Photo rec- 0925	1310			Taranto 2 R/S. 1 M/V 1,500 in outer harbour. 2 M/Vs 7000 1 M/V 5000 1 M/V 3000 1 M/V 2000 and 1 hospital ship. Photos taken. Messina 2 M/Vs 3000 tons 3 M/Vs 1,500 1 beached liner inside harbour. 5 O/Rs 5 D/Rs 1 tanker 7000 tons train ferry in harbour. Photos taken. Light A/A single bursts well below. direction accurate. Vis. and weather good.
4th Jan. 1943 No. Spitfire 402.	S/Ldr. Cox # and others SET 6/ BULL SET 10/ 10000 SET 11/ OLDHAM	Shipping search Cape Biscari area	1455	1612		220' Gogos 50 mls. found upper rear guns faulty turned for base. No sightings Weather stormy. Vis. bad .
4th Jan. 1943 No. Spitfire 402.	P/O Brown M	Photo rec- co. Palermo.	1450	1706		Palermo : photos taken no change in harbour. Biscari photos taken. sighted 10 small A/C on drone. Weather and Vis. Good.
5/5 Jan. 1943 Wellington D 723	F/Sgt. Gleason Patrol and crew. SET 10/ WEBS SET 11/ LAFORET SET 12/ DREW SET 13/ BROWN	Martino/ Gavoli area	1715	0506		50 knot headwind commenced patrol. A/C blips evasive action taken 2/3 A/C near Pantelleria. Saw one when it passed overhead on reciprocal course to Wellington. resembled Bovin 79 but appeared to have twin tail. 090° to Spartivento 30m. climbed through thick cloud. Weather report to base on request from N. of Tunis 3750 M. 1150 E. blip investigated found nothing. 2 blips 152° Garibaldi 30m. investigated and dropped flares nothing seen although orbited 2 miles round big flare. 270° Martino 20m. large and continuous rain squalls. 0547hrs. completed patrol. Weather : intermittent rain. Vis. poor. Dark. Clear in patches.

69 Squadron Operation Records Book showing Gleason and crew flying missions on 5 January, shortly before transfer to 458.

And just like that, the “mystery man on the left” stopped being a fuzzy face and became **Leo Laforet**. His nickname was “Bus” which he later recounted to Laura was short for Buster, as he had been the high school quarterback and apparently, according to Laforet himself, he was quite good at it and could ‘bust through’ the other teams’ lines. To us, Laforet wasn’t just ‘Bus’ but another thread in the growing tapestry of HX726.

As if that weren’t enough, Laura also shared several photographs from Laforet’s wartime album – images with no names attached, just faces and uniforms frozen in time.

As I waited for them to download on my phone (over heroic, deeply unreliable Wi-Fi), I was quietly giddy, getting ready for a “**Where’s Waldo? – 458 and 69 Squadron Edition.**” I was already half-convinced I’d spot Gleason, Drew, or one of “our” Browns lurking in the background of some mess-table scene.

When the images finally appeared, I was absolutely amazed by what came through.



Laforet on right with fellow 69 Squadron crew, name unknown - contributed by Laura Labute



Laforet on right with fellow 69 Squadron crew, name unknown - contributed by Laura Labute

It felt less like opening emails and more like opening a door – glimpses of the same little world our men moved in; tents and tunics, airfields and off-duty grins, the familiar tilt of a cap or stance of a man you’re sure you’ve seen in another photograph somewhere else.

Another set of rabbit holes. Another set of faces to learn. And yet again, another reminder that for every “official” record, there’s a family album quietly holding the rest of the story.



Laforet left and Drew right – contributed by Laura Labute



Laforet top left, Gleason bottom right - contributed by Laura Labute

Laura had also included something very special in those emails: Among the images from Laforet’s wartime album were several photographs of Gleason and his mates around Malta, casual little scenes that somehow bring the men closer than any formal portrait ever does. Even better, she had a fantastic photo of Drew and Laforet together.

So, there they were at last: Leo (Laforet) and Larry (Gleason), side by side – not just as names in service records or faces in grainy group shots, but as clearly recognisable friends, caught in a moment neither of them could have known would matter so much to strangers eighty years later.

But... just in case anyone reading this newsletter still doubts the connection – twenty-six pages into this saga – Laura had one more ace up her sleeve.

She sent photographs of her father’s logbook.

There, in black, white and red, were the entries showing Gleason and Laforet crewed together just two weeks before Gleason's crash, in the very same Wellington, HX726. Leo and Larry weren't just faces we'd matched on a hunch – they were crewmates, they were friends, and their paths really did run from Limavady to Malta to 458, side by side.

FLIGHTS IN 69 SQDRN LUQA				
Date	Hour	Aircraft Type and No.	Pilot	Duty
14/1/43	1830	WELLINGTON F/S GLEASON LB 134 CREW		
15/1/43	1600	Wellington F/S GLEASON HX 684 CREW		W/OP
15/1/43	2045	Wellington F/S GLEASON HX 684 CREW		W/OP
7/1/43	1600	Wellington F/S GLEASON LB 134 CREW		W/OP
7/1/43	1855	Wellington F/S GLEASON LB 134 CREW		W/OP
9/1/43	1520	Wellington SGT ORGAN HX 726 CREW		W/OP
11/1/43	1810	Wellington F/S Gleason HX 726 CREW		W/OP

Laforet's Logbook: crewed with Gleason as pilot in 69 Squadron in HX726, 2 weeks before Gleason's death.

While we were busy connecting with Drew's syndicate, Claudia and Lance and Laforet's daughter, Laura, another relative of the HX726 crew was quietly preparing for a grand entrance into the 458 family:

Rhys – Gleason's nephew.

Thanks to the contact details scribbled on the back of the photograph at the Malta Aviation Museum, I did a quick search on Facebook. Knowing that Rhys was somewhere in my own neck of the woods in British Columbia, I had a feeling our paths would cross sooner or later.

Rhys is the son of Gleason's younger sister, **Yvonne**. A few years ago, some friends of his were travelling to Malta and, on his behalf, they took the photograph of the "Gleason crew" to the Aviation Museum to share with Ray. The family now live in Port Alberni on the West Coast, but the Gleasons originally came from Canora, Saskatchewan.

Within minutes of dropping this whole bombshell of a story on Rhys – Malta, Barham's album, Leo Laforet, Lance and Claudia's epic book, Laura and the logbooks – he was firing back photos of his uncle's logbook, neatly tying the museum photograph up with a bow.

There in Gleason's own hand was a logbook entry naming all of the crew in the photograph:

YEAR 1942	AIRCRAFT		PILOT, OR 1ST PILOT	2ND PILOT, PUPIL OR PASSENGER	DUTY (INCLUDING RESULTS AND REMARKS)
	MONTH	DATE			
July	9	1942	WELLINGTON	420	SELF
					SGT CLARK P/MOKEMPTON Obs CREW SGT TOMLINSON P SGT LAFORET W/ob SGT DREW W/ob SGT MONROE W/ob W/T EXERCISE

"	11	1942	WELLINGTON	36	SELF	CREW	NAV. EX. A + PHOTOGRAPHY
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Gleason's Logbook: We assume Sgt Clark took the photo on 9 July 1942 of Gleason (pilot), Kempton (obs), Tomlinson (2nd pilot), Laforet (w/ob), Drew (tail gunner), & Monroe (w/ob). – contributed by Rhys Nye.

After I shared the images from Laura's father, Rhys added another tantalising detail: he believed those photos must originally have come from an RCAF photo album. You can imagine my reaction. More questions. Many more questions.

A few short days later, an envelope arrived in the post from Port Alberni. I carefully opened the side and slid out a single photograph that stopped me in my tracks: the funeral of **Gleason, Kempton, Brown (RCAF), Stanley and Brown (RAF)** – the crew of HX726, laid to rest.

And there, standing on either side of their graves, paying their respects:



Figure 2 The funeral of HX726 crew: Gleason, Kempton, Brown, Stanley, Brown (RAF) with Laforet second in on the left and Drew first in on the right. February 1943 - contributed by Rhys Nye, Gleason's nephew.

On the left, second in **Leo Laforet**.

On the right, first in **Wendell Drew**.

The men we'd been tracing through Malta, Limavady, albums, logbooks and family stories, suddenly together in one frame – saying goodbye to the friends whose names and faces we've spent so long trying to honour.

As we dug deeper into the story, we tried to imagine how Drew must have felt. The men of HX726 weren't just "the crew"; they were his mates – friendships forged back in the summer of 1942 at No. 7 OTU in Limavady, Ireland. To survive the crash that killed them all, then stand at their funeral in Malta, must have been almost unbearable. In the photograph of the service, Drew looks composed, but there's a pause about him – a stillness that hints at how much he was carrying.

The other photograph that Rhys included in the envelope was an original of the photo from Iona's presentation at Luqa Airport, crisper and more glorious than all the previous copies:



HX428: July 9, 1942, Left to Right: Laforet, Tomlinson, Gleason, Kempton, Drew, Monroe – Contributed by Rhys Nye, Gleason's nephew.

And on the back were the names we had traced and researched through their living relatives:

1. Sgt. "Bud" Lafaret - 1st
outfit 632 RCAF A.V.E. - Winkler
crews married - ap.
R83270

2. Sgt. "Tommy" Tomlinson
Englander - 100/261
second pilot -

3. P/O Kempston M.M.
"Kemp" J9516
new Moose Jaw SASK.

④ Sgt. Drews W.P.
"Ole" R75285
Rapison SASK.
2nd WAG.

⑤ Sgt. MONROE D.C.
"Corny" - 2nd WAG.
R67997
WINNIPEG ONT Rd -
835 DAWSON

The other mug unnumbered
& unnamed is me -

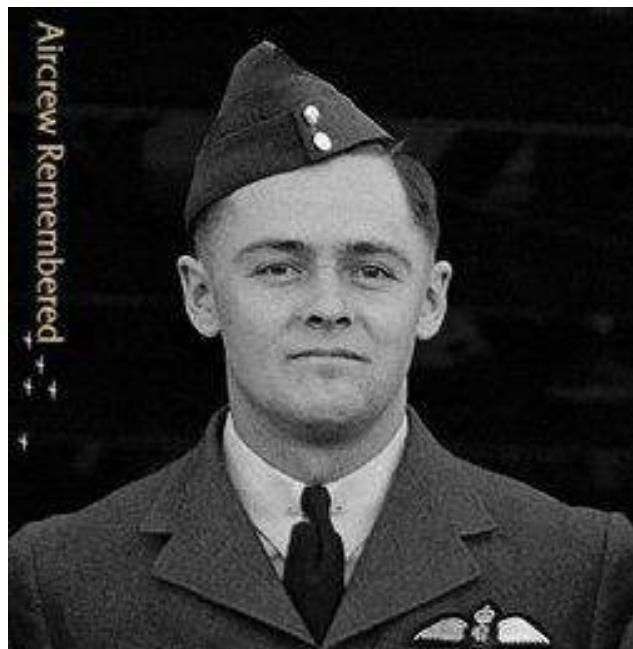
Back of the photo, In Gleason's own handwriting, the names of each person in the photo - courtesy of Gleason's nephew Rhys.

- Sgt “Bus” Laforet (original crew), 1st WAG;
- Sgt “Tommy” Tomlinson (England), second pilot;
- P/O Kempton “Kemp” (original crew);
- Sgt Drew “Dell”, 3rd WAG; and
- Sgt Munroe “Corny”, 2nd WAG.

And, best of all, at the very end in Gleason’s own hand: “the other mug” – his wry little nod to himself.

At the Malta Aviation Museum, there is a small chapel where you can pay your respects to the allied airmen fallen in Malta from 1940 to 1945. The book was hand written in 2008 in dedication to the memory of Group Captain AB Woodhall. All 458 squadron members who served and died in Malta are listed in the book, including Gleason and the crew of HX726.

In that single scribbled joke, set among the carefully listed names, Gleason turns from a line in a casualty file back into a real man: one of a tight-knit band of Wellingtons, shuffled between squadrons, sharing huts, missions and, in the end, fate. As we piece their stories together – name by name, family by family – HX726 is no longer just a lost aircraft on a February night over Malta, but a chapter in a larger, intertwined story that we’re only just beginning to tell.



Lawrence Harry Gleason - sourced from Aircrew Remembered

KTIEB TA' TIEKIRA

MEMORIAL BOOK

MALTA 1940-1945

KJ Garrett 27250 14.6.42	GD Garrod 8950 15.1.43	CP Garvey 27250 22.2.43
MI Gass 24950 4.10.42	R Gatien 6950 22.9.41	JR Gaudet 22150 18.4.43
AT Gell 6950 8.1.43	RS Gibbons 3950 6.9.42	HT Gibbs Halfar 30.4.42
J Gibson 10750 8.11.41	JG Gilbert 24950 8.7.42	MH Gill 10850 17.7.44
EW Gimson 6950 26.6.41	PJ Gladman 2350 25.6.43	RGill 4050 7.12.42
JK Glazebrook 27250 26.2.43	LH Gleason 45850 13.2.43	AG Glasgow 3.8.42
PN Goalby 22750 6.1.43	LJF Godwin Halfar 28.2.41	GA Glibbery 4650 15.11.42
DAD Golby 4050 22.11.42	E Goodfellow 3750 9.3.42	WO Goff 22750 31.1.43
RJA Goodman 21.6.43	SHK Goodyear 22950 15.2.43	E Goodings 20150 31.7.42
H Gorman 25250 15.2.42	JE Gorringe-Smith 22150 9.5.42	N Gordon 20350 15.4.42
MR Goulding 125AAFSQ 23.7.43	JS Grabham 2150 11.2.42	LC Gosling 22950 19.7.43
Granard Luoa 3.1.42	CR Grandfield 14850 8.12.42	RD Gracie 10750 13.12.41
		JR Grasley 45850 29.4.43

The Memorial Book at the Malta Aviation Museum. 2nd Row: LH Gleason 458 Sq 13.2.1943

Our deepest thanks go to the organisers of the Malta reunion for bringing those stories, families and memories together on that island once more, and to the Prime Minister and Lieutenant Governors of Canada for their generous and thoughtful words at the memorial service in Malta. Their support, and their presence, reminded us that the men of HX726 – and all who served alongside them – are still remembered, and still honoured, far beyond that wartime runway.



Queensland Flight Report by Brett Taylor

In this newsletter I'd like to cover three events.

The first is about an Omega watch that was owned by the Gibraltar Adjutant for 458 Squadron, John Islip in 1944. The second relates to my visit in September to Falconara and Ancona to see where my father served in 1944. The third was my visit to Brooklands Museum close to Heathrow to see the Wellington salvaged from Loch Ness.

1) The Omega watch.

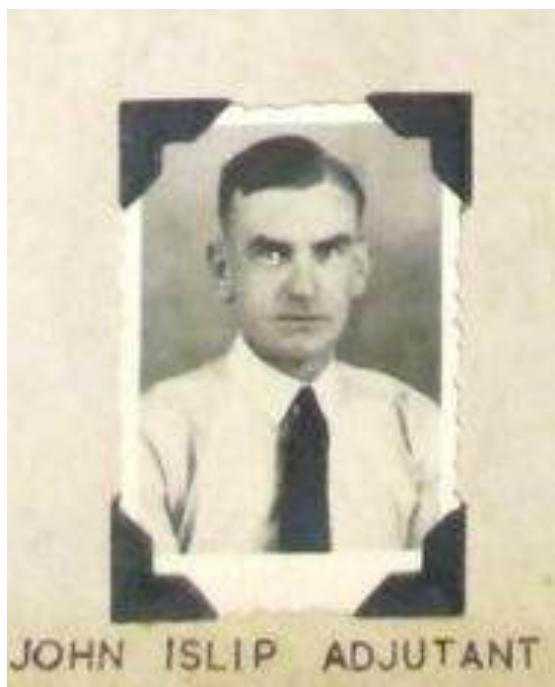
In early September Mr Dean Crosswell contacted this association flight to say he had acquired at auction, a vintage Omega watch with the inscription on the back "To our adjutant from the officers of 458 Squadron Gibraltar 3.3.45".

Dean provided the photos below and was curious to find out who these people were and the story behind the inscription which he knew should be saved.



I looked through 458 newsletters and "We Find and Destroy" and was able to confirm that Flight Lieutenant John Islip 255010

was the last 458 Adjutant at Gibraltar before the Squadron was disbanded on 9 June 1945.



John Islip presumably taken about 1945 copied from Peter Hedgcock's 458 Association Album.

John was from Deniliquin NSW and was born on 18th April 1904. He enlisted on 30 March 1942 and was discharged on 14 February 1946. His service career began as Assistant Adjutant and Squadron Works Officer to 4 Squadron that moved from Kingaroy to Port Moresby.



John Islip in
New
Guinea.

Some Officers of No. 4 Squadron, RAAF, have an afternoon's fishing on an island off Port Moresby". Identified, back row, left to right: 255010 Flying Officer (FO) John Islip; 129 Squadron Leader (Sqn Ldr) Geoff Quinan (Commanding Officer); NX38239 Major Geoff O'Hara (Army Liaison Officer); 282829 FO Keith Tuohy (Squadron Accounting Officer); 116251 FO Ken Joyce; Front row: Warrant Officer Robertson; Unidentified; FO George Ifould; FO French. Photo Australian War Museum website

His next posting was to 458 Squadron in Gibraltar. Once 458 was disbanded he was posted to England for the repatriation program which got all Australian service men and women back to Australia. According to his daughter Rosalyn, he was the Commanding Officer of the Australian repatriation operation. He was in the last group to return.

John in Egypt on route back to England.



A big thank you to John's grandson Sam who provided this photo. The 458 February 1983 newsletter describes John as having a part in arranging the changing of the colours by a specifically trained squad from 458 at Gibraltar. It was a historic event, as no other

unit had performed this ceremony outside of a royal regiment at that time.

Sam has provided this photo of John's medals.



After the war John returned to live in East Malvern, Melbourne with his wife Hilda. His house had been rented to the American military for the duration of the war.

Clearly John was a good organiser, as he received an OBE in 1963 for services to the architectural industry as an administrator.

Before retiring in 1970, John was Secretary of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects.

John moved to Adelaide in 1985 to be nearer his family and died in the same year.

Dean has advised me that he has passed this watch onto his friend Derek who is an avid Military Watch enthusiast with a passion and respect for these items.

2) Visit to Falconara and Ancona

To celebrate the 80th year anniversary of the end of the war in Italy, my wife and I visited Falconara and Ancona where my father served. On 28th October we met Graziano Fiordelmondo who lives there. Graziano is an enthusiastic amateur historian who had previously contacted me regarding photos my father took in 1944 that were included in my March 2024 newsletter of Falconara.

He is part of a group celebrating the liberation of the area 80 years ago.

Graziano's father, was a young teenager in Falconara at the time of the liberation.

During the morning Graziano showed my wife and I around the eastern part of the Falconara airport area where several WWII buildings stand within a closed military area. It is highly likely 458 personnel including my father, were based in one of them, which would have been similar to the building shown below.



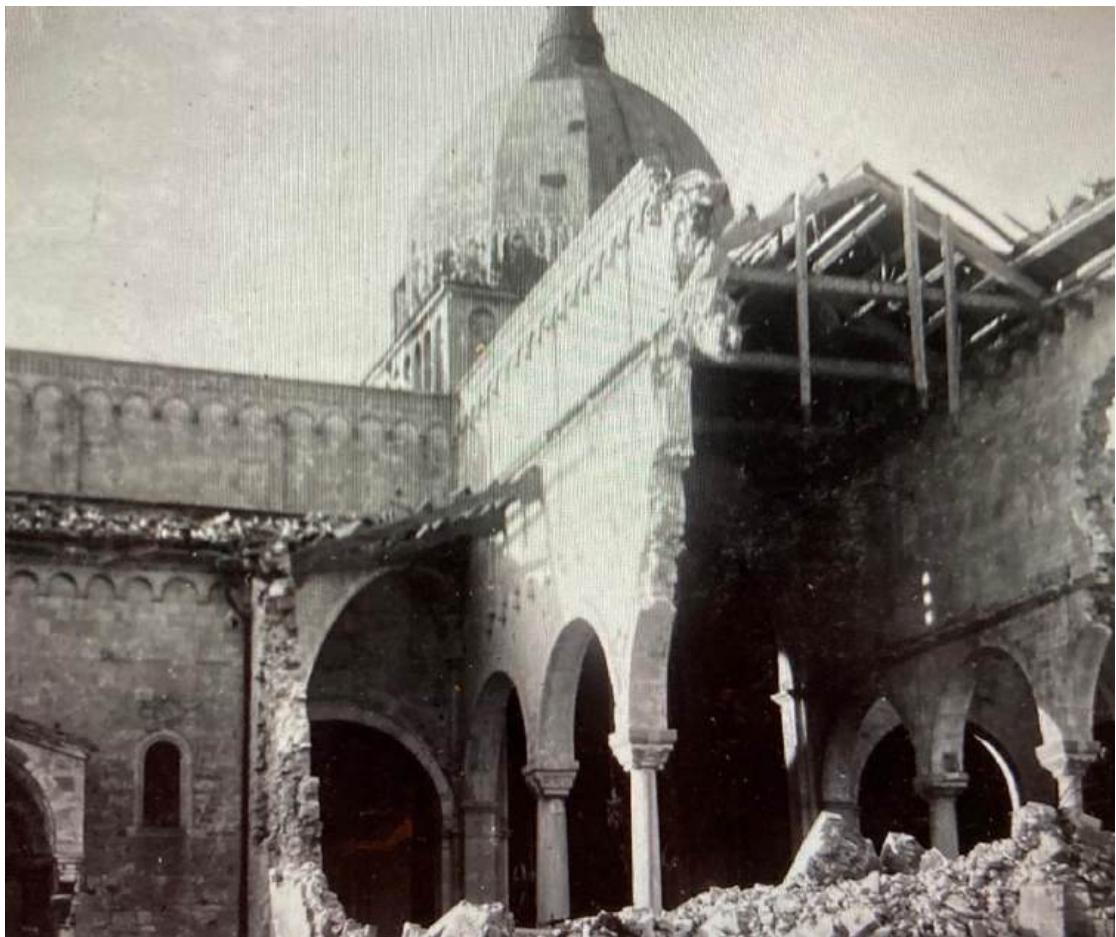
The airstrip has not changed significantly as illustrated in the photos of 1944 and 2025.



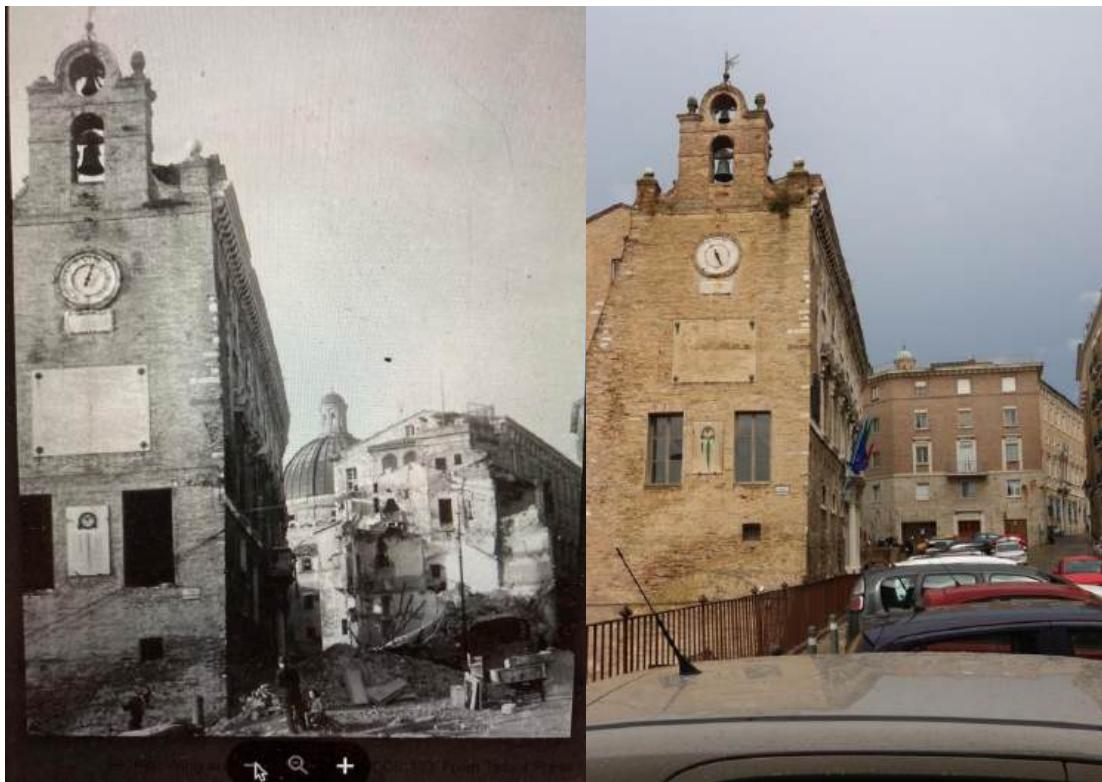
Seeing the River Esino just to the northern, western and southern sides of the airstrip that drains a large catchment, it is not surprising to read about the waterlogged conditions leading to deep mud on taxiways around the airport in 1944, which resulted in damaged undercarriage.

Graziano kindly drove us to Ancona to see the locations my father had previously photographed that had been damaged in 1944 including the Cathedral, Piazza Benvenuto Stracca and Piazza del Plebiscito.

Comparative photos are shown below.



Cathedrale San Ciriaco



Piazza del Plebiscito



Piazza del Plebiscito. Note soil placed during the war to protect the Statua di Clemente XII



We then visited the Commonwealth World War II Cemetery on the outskirts of Ancona which holds 1,019 Commonwealth burials. These include 6 from 458 Squadron where we placed floral tributes. Our friend Graziano (left) showed us around.



The 458 Obituary states – On the night of 13/14th December 1944, six Wellingtons were despatched on Armed Recce, from Maestra Point coastwise to Salvere. The Captains ere W/O Richards, W/O Cameron, W/Cdr. MacKay, W/O McCann, W/O Drinnan and W/O Simons. There were no hostile sightings. The weather deteriorated during the patrols and three of the aircraft were diverted to Falconara. Two of them landed safely there. When W/O Simons arrived over Falconara they were unable to permit him to land and at 0810 hours he was diverted to Jesi the next aerodrome which is about 7 miles away. It appears that the aircraft overshot Jesi and crashed into a hillside. Later this aircraft was found burnt out 10 to 12 miles southwest of Jesi. All the crew were killed. The names of the crew (Wellington NB8644) are as follows.

416371 W/O G.G. Simons. Captain
419785F/S K.J Leslie. Second Pilot.
425388 W/O J.H. Watson. Navigator.
420068 W/O H.S. Shying. Wireless Operator.
427457 W/O R.Ellis. SE Operator.
427504 W/O P.J. Farrell. Rear Gunner.



The cemetery was in excellent condition, and it was obvious that it was being cared for very regularly.

What upset us the most on reading the 458 graves, was the ages of the men.



Gordon George Simons 416371
Enlisted Australian Military Forces
Southwark, S.A. 6 Aug 1940
Enlisted RAAF 458 Squadron 24
May 1951
Married Margaret Gair of
Sandringham 9 Aug 1941
Posted to the Middle East June
1944
Died age 26



Burial of W/O G.G. Simons.



Kenneth James Leslie 419785
Flight Sergeant 3 Sept 1939
Enlisted as a sapper 5 Nov 1941
RAAF aircrew April 1942
Married Jean Lee 12 April 1943
Sergeant Pilot 17 Sept 1943
Attached to RAF 26 Dec 1943 to
12 Aug 1944
Made F/S 17 March 1944
Middle East 23 March 1944
458 Squadron 19 Aug 1944
Died age 22

John Hendry Watson 425388
Enlisted in Brisbane 1 Feb 1942
Married Margaret Neilson 14 Dec
1942
Middle East Theatre Nov 1943
Died age 24





Henry Samuel Shying 420068
Enlisted Australian Military
Forces 10 Oct 1941
Married Brenda Herz 1941
Enlisted in RAAF Oct 1941
Posted to Egypt April 1944
Died age 31



Robert Ellis 427457
Enlisted Perth 14 Jul 1942
Enlisted RAAF Warrant Officer
14 Jul 1942
458 Middle East 14 Dec 1944
Died age 30



Patrick John Farrell
Enlisted RAAF Warrant Officer
19 July 1942
Involvement RAAF 458
Squadron Middle East /
Mediterranean Theatre 14
December 1944
Died aged 28 years

On inspecting each headstone, we noted that Australian flags had been placed on each of the 458 graves. Clearly someone had specifically visited these graves. On inspecting the visitors book we noted an entry that appears to relate to John Watson's grave in Feb 2025. I would be very interested in knowing who that person was to find out more about John Watson from Coorparoo, Brisbane. If anyone has information please advise me.

While at the cemetery we met Mary Barber from Bedfordshire, UK, who was attending her uncle John Barber's grave. John, a Flying Officer with 70 Squadron, was also air crew on a Wellington with RAFVR. He died age 20. This squadron were tasked with attacking industrial targets in Italy from 1943.



3) Wellington aircraft in Brooklands Museum

On 16th September my wife and I visited the Brooklands Museum not far from Heathrow Airport, London. I wanted to see up close the well-preserved aircraft raised from Loch Ness in 1985. This aircraft was found by an American research team using sonar that recorded an object resembling a twin engine aircraft. Due to the cold, low oxygen conditions it was very well preserved.

The well-versed volunteers at the Museum told us that in the event of evacuating the Wellington aircraft, each crew member had to put on their parachute, move to the escape hatch and jump. Unless the aircraft was at high altitude and relatively stable during an emergency descent, none of the crew had much chance of escape at all.

Seeing the plane made me understand why my father's hearing was affected by the propellers and engines so close to the pilot's windows.



Loch Ness Wellington bomb doors open.





So much metal in front of the rear gunner's sight line.
A separate accessible Wellington fuselage was a highlight.
Pilot's instruments.





(L-R) Navigator then wireless operator positions and cockpit.



Wireless operator's position.



View towards the rear gunner's position, hammock for crew to rest and the navigators astro dome to take star fixes.

I suspect this display is the only accessible Wellington fuselage in the world, which provides an opportunity to see how cramped conditions were.

This museum is very well run with enthusiastic knowledgeable guides and is well worth a visit. It was wonderful to spend half a day although a longer period would have been easy.

I hope this record provides new information for 458 relatives and friends.

I can be contacted on btaylorc6@gmail.com



By Peter and Carolyn Johnston
Peter is the son of Guy Johnston



We made new so many friends from Australia, Canada and the UK, the common thread being the shared history of our relatives' service during WW2 - a shared history we are all rightly proud of. Being able to be alongside the Wagstaffe family from Canada at the military cemetery when they found the grave of their relative was a very moving moment.

Walking behind the 458 Banner in the centre of Valetta before the service at the War Memorial felt just the right way to acknowledge the courage and commitment of all those who served in 458.

The visit to the Lascaris War Rooms deep under Valetta really brought home the ingenuity of those controlling the limited air defences on Malta during the siege.

Some may remember that Carolyn's umbrella was one those deployed on the day of the visit to assist protecting members of the party from the huge downpour, but was reported 'missing in action' at the end of the day. Thanks to Rob however we have learned the umbrella survived and made it to Australia, where we understand it has begun a new life for itself, in the sun.

We will always remember the way Lt. Col. Grech and his team hosted our visit to the Luqa military airfield. The blend of detailed historical information with a chance to tell some personal stories handed down to us by our relatives, some who flew from the airfield, was just right.

Thanks to Rob, Stephen, Adam and all the team who worked so hard to make the 'Malta Reunion' such a great success. It will long be remembered.

Best Wishes and Happy Christmas to all,

Peter and Carolyn Johnston (UK)



By Jenny Higgs. Daughter of Don Bitmead



I hope you all enjoyed the rest of your trip after Malta. Pete and I came home afterwards along with the banner. Having been to Turkey for 2 weeks before Malta. Both were fantastic experiences. If you would like to include my little bit below in the newsletter, feel free to do so.

My brother Peter, sister Lesley, her partner Phil, along with her daughters, Clare and Elysha arrived in Malta to attend the reunion and anniversary of 458 squadron and to spread our fathers (Flt Lt Donald Bitmead's) ashes. My father suffered after the war with depression and guilt over the death of Flt Lt R J Huntley. Dad had developed appendicitis and was rushed to hospital on the day that they were to do a sorte. Flt Lt Huntley took dad's place and on returning to the airfield in bad weather, the plane crashed. Flt Lt Huntley was killed. My siblings and I thought it was fitting to honour and remember our father and Huntley by laying dad's ashes on the airfield.

I really thought we would just be sprinkling dad's ashes out quietly but to my surprise, it was such an overwhelming and beautiful service, put on by the Malta Air Force. It brings me to tears, every time I think about it. Especially Lt Col Nicholas Grech. It was so overwhelming what he had organised. It was held at sunset with bugles, red carpet and other officers attending. I think our father, would have been embarrassed, but proud, of that evening. He would have shed a tear. I am sure they are now resting in peace, along with many lives lost in wartime. I am so grateful and thankful

for the organisation that Lt Col Grech and Adam Bruce (Stephen Bruce's son) put into that evening. It was an incredible evening. Thank you.

I would also like to thank, Rob Wilkinson and Stephen and Adam Bruce and all who worked hard to make our whole Malta experience a wonderful week. Malta is a gorgeous and very interesting place. Full of beautiful architecture, history and stunning scenery. I would love to go back.

Merry Christmas to you and all and a healthy happy 2026.

Cheers

Jenny Higgs



By Stewart and June Kent. Stewart is the son of Fred Kent



Here is "our take" on the trip, please edit as you wish as there is so much more that we could have written about!

MALTA REUNION 2025

"I had been out of touch, apart from the great newsletters with the 458 RAAF UK branch since our move from London to Cornwall. therefore, we could not resist the invitation to attend this special reunion in Malta to meet the next of kin representing no less than 16 families of members of the Squadron. Our memories are too numerous to include all we felt about the trip on returning home. The one thing that stood out was a great sense of emptiness for several weeks after our return. Personally, it turned out to be a trip

of a lifetime. The organization and implementation was beyond superb thanks to our friends in Australia and all those in Malta who made us feel so welcome. The camaraderie within the group was wonderful. Lots of laughs, great anecdotes and understandably a few tears. We felt part of a very special club. To be able to walk in the footsteps of our next of kin brought such pleasure to June and I as well as a special closeness to my father that I can only remember as a child. Listening to others and the special briefings gave a better understanding of what the brave airmen had endured and the sacrifices made on our behalf. We can only thank Rob and the team from the bottom of our hearts for such a wonderful experience in Malta".

Many, many thanks

Stewart and June Kent UK

From the Heart-Another piece from Stewart-

Where to begin? and How to begin?

In past years I travelled to around 62 different countries, flying on 88 different carriers but I have never before felt how I feel today. Total emptiness is the only way I can describe it, a vast anticlimax to our trip. We went out for dinner last night with June's brother and his wife who very kindly looked after the house while we were in Malta. I hardly said a word and apologized saying I didn't feel well but it wasn't true unfortunately my mind was elsewhere.

The trip had a profound effect on me in a number of ways but I will only mention the main one.

I had a love hate relationship with dad. I was brought up by him with my younger brother when my mother left him after 14 years of a stormy marriage and returned to France. We had to look after ourselves to a great extent, dad never got over his marriage break up spending most of the following thirty years in bitter limbo so far as I am concerned. His marriage the only thing he ever wanted to talk about and complete indifference to our children. A life wasted after all he had been through in the war. I only realised after he passed that he had become an alcoholic, recalling his tipple of tequila on a

Saturday morning! He often threatened violence towards me, on one occasion a bread knife to my throat because I answered him back, saying that I reminded him of his wife and would amount to nothing! This was my RAF hero! Fortunately my brother did not suffer the same treatment. My teenage years were not pleasant and when I was around 18 I somehow found the courage to stand up to him and from then on he was always wary of threatening or bullying me. At 24 not having seen my mum for 12 years I went against his wishes (orders!) to see my mum. From then on I was not welcome at his house and he never left me a penny, not that that bothered me. He was also a man of many unkept promises. The irony of it was that in my naivety I had hoped to ask mum why their marriage had failed and be able to explain to dad and leave him some peace. No chance! In recent years my brother and I have discussed his mental imbalance. My legacy? insecurity for the rest of my life, although I did in my eyes and others "amount to somethin' in the end." My priority throughout 55 years of marriage was to ensure that our children never suffered such insecurity and it paid off. Looking back on all this a lot of people including your dear wife have said what a hard life we had. I never saw it that way but always felt sorry for my younger brother without his mum from the young age of five/six. Apart from the underlying insecurity and the need to prove to others I think it made us stronger, independent individuals. I have said it was not hard; we knew little difference and accepted most things as normal until I in particular started to question things in my teenage years. We can think of any number of reasons or excuses for how our father was but that's irrelevant now.

So, the trip to Malta was quite cathartic, a healing point late in my life where I have forgiven him. In Malta I just tended to concentrate my mind on what he had done in the RAF and listening to others appreciate just how lucky he was to survive. He became my hero again just as when I was a child.

So, I have a lot to thank you for directly and indirectly.

Your organization before and during the trip was second to none, the attention to detail and quality in all aspects of the trip was

magnificent and will never be forgotten. June enjoyed the trip immensely so that was a huge bonus. The supporting role played by Stephen, Anita, Sam, Adam and Ben can only be larded from on high, they really were a terrific team, so friendly and helpful to everyone. Please pass on our sincere thanks.

If there is any way that I can support RAAF 458 Squadron in the future please let me know. As soon as I can I will be sorting some more stuff for Roland's Archive, what a lovely man!

I will get the "other" painting off to you as soon as I can and advise. If you come to UK next year we would love to look after you in Cornwall or could go up to London to see you.

I had lots more to write but this will have do for now.

In conclusion you all went far above and beyond what was anticipated but particularly you Rob. I'm sure the whole group feel the same way.

Very best regards and love to all and safe onward travel!

Stewart and June

Photo below-November 2025- June Kent with Sir Ian Botham at the Perth Test.



Unfortunately, June had to pay for a full five days in advance (at the Perth Test Cricket which June went to in November 2025-visiting family as well) but should get a refund in due course. Her highlight at the ground meeting and chatting with a slimmed down Ian Botham! But as for the cricket 😳

All the very best to you and yours in the meantime.

Stewart



Memories made in Malta and a Ceremony in Charleroi. By Chris Orchard son of Gordon Orchard



What could be more moving than meeting in Malta with the 458 family, followed by a commemoration in Charleroi (Belgium), to honour our 458 heroes. Just two highpoints of so many in a European adventure, with pre and post Reunion including Italy (Rome, Sabaudia), Belgium (Charleroi, Ypres), France (Villers Bretonneux, Epernay).

It was a total thrill (11 out of 10!) to experience everything about Malta, the scenic harbours, being up close with the Air Wing staff at Luqa International Airport, absorbing the WW2-history, seeing the Air Museum (plus section of a Wellington's airframe), and be surrounded by limestone (a kind of "middle-earth" for geologists in the Mediterranean). I thought of Dad being here all those years ago with six other aircrews in search of a U-boat.



Flight	Date	Self	Crew	Pass.
10. WELLINGTON B12B	XIV	SELF	Crew	R.S. PAROL
11. WELLINGTON B12B	XIV	SELF	Crew	R.S. PAROL
12. WELLINGTON B12B	XIV	SELF	Crew	R.S. PAROL
13. WELLINGTON B12B	XIV	SELF	Crew	R.S. PAROL
14. WELLINGTON B12B	XIV	SELF	Crew	R.S. PAROL
15. WELLINGTON B12B	XIV	SELF	Crew	R.S. PAROL

A very fitting complement to Malta was Charleroi, in Belgium. Eighty-four (84) years after, to the day (when 458's first operation against the enemy, German Europe, took place on 20 Oct 1941), we stood with many Belgians (town officials, ex-military members, an Australian Government official, et al) at the Charleroi North Cemetery in honour, commemoration and ceremony for 458's first fallen heroes. Only rear air gunner, SGT Percival Brown, 611158 RAF, survived, having bailed out before the Wellington crashed with no survivors. SGT Brown's daughter, Leslie, and grandson, James, were present along with family.





By Lureen and Gary Kirkman. Lureen is the daughter of 'Red' Jack Baker



Thanks so very much for all your efforts and huge contribution that you The Wilkinsons and the Bruce family you all managed to make the week's activities an exciting and memorable experience for all who attended. For us the reunion was a very special and meaningful experience, we were privileged to walk with everyone in our forefathers' footsteps, see the places that they had seen, breathe the same air that they did over 80 years ago and especially to just take the time to remember the sacrifices they made to make the world a better place for us, their descendants. The things that we did together, visiting the War Rooms, the Museums and the underground bunkers, the great afternoon/evening at the Air Base with Lt. Col. Grech and Capt. Muscat. The spreading of the Ashes of 458 Veteran Don Bitmead on the Airstrip by his family with The Last Post playing and the Maltese Officers holding salute was a moving and very emotional experience for us all. The Remembrance Service and Wreath laying ceremony at the War Memorial, the amazing 458 Reunion Dinner, they were all such memorable experiences. We think that the privilege of being able to stand together as the 458 Family to witness and support the Wagstaffe family in paying respect to their fallen loved one Uncle Michael Wagstaffe was a very special and unique experience leaving us all with a tear in our eyes. Thanks again to everyone involved, the 458 family who attended, the Organisers, our special Maltese Hosts and to the beautiful country of Malta.

Love and best Wishes to all,
Lureen and Gary Kirkman



By Wendy Whittem daughter of Jim Whittem



Thanks all for a wonderful reunion... I am home & recovering still after visiting Croatia & an extra week in Melbourne.

Even though my understanding is that my dad did not serve in Malta, it was very moving to visit the various sites in our program, & especially for me to have the honour of laying the wreath on behalf of our Australian contingent. Meeting and catching up again with Dr Ivan Fsadni who hosted us during our 2005 60 year 'Final' RAAF 458 Reunion in Canberra was a highlight for me too. I am so glad you tracked him down. It was great meeting the UK & Canadian families too ... I am half Canadian, of course, as my dad continued his pilot training under the Empire Air Training Scheme in Canada, where he met & fell in love with my RCAF mother meteorologist before his UK & Mediterranean postings. I just can't imagine how hard & exciting it was for my mum to sail to Australia on a bride ship with her trunk of belongings and wedding dress after the end of the war and years of correspondence with my dad, her fiancé.

Thank you again all... trusting that we will meet together before long!
Cheers,

Wendy

LET'S ORGANISE A REUNION IN MALTA!

By Rob Wilkinson son of Bill Wilkinson



I think it must have been Anzac Day in 2024 when the serious planning began, for a Reunion in Malta, in October 2025!

It was somewhat of a crazy idea, but several reasons led to the decision:

- It was to be the 80th anniversary of the end of WWII
- The Maltese High Commissioner Ivan Fsadni had hosted us at the Consulate in Canberra at the “last Reunion” in 2005, and suggested we should one day gather in Malta
- Our NSW Flight “matriarch” Bev Bitmead urged us to plan a visit to Malta, for reasons that deeply touched her family

Several of us “next generationers” had derived a lot of joy out of organising the Sydney reunions in 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2022, so why not Malta??

Stephen and Adam Bruce and I – with assistance from the Orchard brothers – set about planning. We knew that everyone would have their own travel agendas, given that we were off to Europe, so we decided to organise the core activities in a 5-day Reunion, in Valletta, Malta.

Since my Dad, Flt. Lt. Bill Wilkinson, had only spent a couple of hours in Malta, during aircraft transits, I thought I would try and include a couple of other sites, where he had spent more time during his service. So, I picked Alghero (Sardinia) and Gibraltar. In addition to organising for others, I also wanted to tick a few personal boxes, in tracing Dad's movements throughout the Mediterranean.

Finally, after 18 months of planning and organisation, my wife, Carolin, and I flew and transited for 32 hours, from Sydney to Alghero, via Hong Kong and Milan. A long haul, and exhausting, but at the same time exhilarating to arrive in the north-west corner of Sardinia and land on the same airstrip that Dad had done so, 81 years earlier.

Mind you, he was cooped up and cramped behind the pilot in a Vickers Wellington, operating special equipment, and we had done it much more comfortably, but that didn't detract from what was an emotional and poignant moment, as we touched down.

I had booked our accommodation at the Hotel Dei Pini, on Bombarde Beach – the same site as a WWII tented camp, set up by 458'ers, and others, who could not be accommodated at the airbase dormitory.

We met up with Jeremy and Roland Orchard, who were there for the same reason. Sadly, their sister Pene, who had done all her planning, could not travel at the last minute due to a bout of shingles!

On Day 1, we met up with our very generous tour guides:

Valter Battistoni – a former CEO of Alghero Airport, 458 enthusiast and occasional “correspondent at large” with our Newsletter Editor, Roland.

Francesco Demontis – a former commander of the Military Airbase, recently retired.

We were all met with open arms at the Airbase, and welcomed warmly by Lieutenant Colonel Alessandro Scabia, his staff and also representatives, a group of service veterans of the AAA, The Associazione Arma Aeronautica, the official Veteran Association of the Italian Air Force. (see photo below)



We toured the base, and were shown the site of the hangar and dormitory, from WWII days, and we could feel the gratitude of our hosts as they reflected upon the way in which the Allies had helped liberate Sardinia.

At the Officer's Mess, Lt. Colonel Scabia gave us a rousing Italian Air Force "Battle Cry" or Air Force greeting of "gheregheghez", and then the crowd replied with "ghez", (that sounds like "gets") before drinking a glass of spumante (not champagne, as Francesco stated "we are Italians"). They toasted us with the spumante and we ate pastries. We acknowledged each other, with words, as a showcase of appreciation all round!

In the evening, prior to a tour of the Old Town we joined Valter, at a meeting of The Association National Partisans of Italy group, as he did a PowerPoint presentation on 458 to members.

Next morning, we visited Maria Pia beach, the site of the ditching of 2 x Wellingtons as they both ran out of fuel, short of the airport. Then, another visit to Bombarde beach, and then some scenic areas – including a filming site of a James Bond movie, and a romantic getaway of Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton!

That evening, the Wilkinsons and Orchards took our gracious hosts to dinner, and presented them with 458 plaques, with thanks.
(see photo below-L-R Francesco, yours truly, Valter)



It was sad to farewell Victor and Francesco, whom we now count as great, personal friends.



Photos above. L-R Valter Battistoni, Lt. Colonel Scabia, Francesco Demontis.
Lt. Colonel Scabia with the Certificate of Appreciation.

A few weeks after arriving back in Australia, I wrote a Certificate of Appreciation and sent it to Francesco to be presented to Lieutenant Colonel Alessandro Scabia for his generosity in hosting us on the 10th October, 2025, at his air base at Alghero.

We took off from Alghero on October 12, just as Dad and his fellow crew had done on 4 September 1944, as they decamped and headed to Foggia.

We arrived in Malta, via Rome, and had the great pleasure, late afternoon, of meeting up with Reunion attendees, generating great feelings of camaraderie. We put many new faces to names, particularly those of the 5 UK couples and the Wagstaffes, from Canada, none of whom I had met before. That was a real highlight!

Our first-day familiarisation tour saw us at a War Museum, where, by coincidence, we ran into Istar / 9 Squadron groups, from Scotland, commemorating the 1975 peace-time crash of a Vulcan in Malta.

Many thanks to the Malta Tourist Authority, and Donavin Borg, for their hospitality and lunch, following the tour.

Then, a well-spent hour with Australian High Commissioner Matt Skelly, and his off-sider Chris Steed, over drinks at the Phoenicia

Hotel. Both gents had put a lot of time into our plans, and our schedule for the week.

Tuesday saw us all head to Birgu to see the “Malta at War” Museum, and inspect the tunnels, dug out of the rock in wartime, to accommodate up to 500 civilians during air strikes.

My next highlight – an afternoon visit to Kalkara Cemetery – where 42 of us were very emotional witnesses as the Wagstaffe family (Adam, Piri, Cate and Johanna) located the gravesite of Adam’s Uncle Michael Wagstaffe, who had died in action. A poignant moment for all, and real gratification for me, confirming that all our efforts were, indeed, worthwhile.

A well spent day – finishing up at the Hastings Gardens, to see (in the distance) two Typhoons from #9 Squadron, doing a flyover in memory of the 1975 Vulcan crash.

Wednesday 15 October was a wonderful highlight – with a commemorative service, at the War Memorial, to honour 458, our Dads and their service. Many dignitaries – diplomats, military / association personnel etc - joined us at the service and laid wreaths. Squadron members laid three wreaths – from the three Reunion countries represented – Canada, UK and Australia.

I was honoured to MC the event. We involved many attendees in the program, and the day had started with the bulk of 458ers marching through the streets of Valletta, to the War Memorial, behind the 458 Banner.

Afterwards, we enjoyed a quick look at the noon firing at the saluting battery, followed by a rain-drenched visit to the Lascaris War rooms. Then, late afternoon drinks and pizza at The Osborne was the order of the day! In all, a great day, despite the fact my shoulder bag went “missing” for a few hours, only to be safely recovered and then celebrated with some extra drinks!

Thursday 16 October saw another highlight! After a late morning visit to the fascinating city of Mdina, we moved on to the Luqa Airfield (also the main airport of Malta) for a welcome by commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas Grech and his staff.

They did a presentation on 458, from their perspective, and presented everyone with a “Certificate of Recognition” honouring our loved ones. Then, another very moving moment, when we all shared with the Bitmead family as they spread the ashes of their beloved Acting Flight Lieutenant Don Bitmead adjacent to the airstrip.

With a Padre, Buglers, military involvement and civilian aircraft taking off in the background, the solemn Ceremony provided a fitting send-off to Don, and heart-warming memories for Jenny, Peter, Lesley and all the Bitmead family.

Following a day of “own arrangements” we all gathered at the delightful Del Borgo Restaurant, in Birgu, for the “458 Reunion Farewell Dinner”. We hosted all those who had played such a key part in the success of the previous 5 days, read out many of the 20 “best wishes” messages we had received from Kings, Prime Ministers, Governors General, Governors, Mayors, Military Chiefs and politicians. The depth of the acknowledgement, for what we had done, was incredible!

On the bus ride back to Valletta, we farewelled each other, hugged, reminisced and bathed in the glory of the week that had been.

After an enjoyable lunch, the next day, at the British Legion Club with Roland, Stewart & June Kent, from England, Carolin and I headed to the airport for a night-time departure from a stunningly lit-up Valletta and headed to Seville, in Spain.

At the same time, Jenny and Pete Bitmead had very generously offered to take the 458 Banner back to Sydney, since they were going straight through. The airline charged them 150 Euros for excess

baggage, but when I pointed out that the airline should be using a weight allowance, rather than a “piece” allowance, they admitted the error, and refunded the charge!

Again, flying out of Malta rekindled memories of those before us cranking up the two engines of a Wimpy and heading off into the dark, certainly without a skerrick of comfort!

Why Seville – it was the closest city to Gibraltar, to which we could get a direct flight from Malta. Also, it gave us the chance to enjoy another city, and spend a couple of relaxing days, relishing the fruits of the Reunion, and all that the program provided.

Dad has never spoken much about his time with the RAAF, but I do recall many mentions of his time in Gibraltar. Hence, my great desire to check it out!

On 20 October, we took a 3+ hour bus ride to Gibraltar – an unspectacular trip, due to the gloomy weather – but quite exciting as we descended out of the hills, into Algeciras, and saw there – in the distance – “The Rock”, albeit viewed through the many cranes on the Spanish dock!

Our bus dropped us at La Línea where we fully appreciated the size of The Rock, as we walked across the border, through immigration and into this small, strategically placed droplet of the UK, populated by about 35,000 people and, to my surprise, only 12 Km from Northern Africa. I think I’m pretty good at geography, but had never really contemplated the proximity of the two countries!

We stayed at the same hotel as Beryl and Ian Dodds – who were there to honour my good mate (and Beryl’s dad) Eric Munkman – so enjoyed our few days of sight-seeing with them.

A cable car ride to the top of the Rock; the Barbary macaques awaiting us at the top; the amazing views of the Mediterranean,

southern Spain and Morocco; we walked to various points of interest, such as St Michael's Cave and the incredible WWII tunnels.

Next day, we did what's only possible in a handful of places in the world – we walked across the runway of an international airport – checked out a WWII memorial and cemetery – noted gravesites of several RAAF servicemen along with colleagues from the RCAF and RAF. I reported the RCAF sightings to Adam Wagstaffe, and “before you could say Jack Robinson” – as my mother used to say – I had a reply from Cate Wagstaffe with all sorts of details on Frederick Scott, one of the servicemen honoured at the cemetery.

Our last night in Gibraltar was upon us, and, after a walk from one end of the “town” to the other, in a couple of hours, I washed down dinner with the best part of a bottle of Spanish Rose! Even though Carolin pointed out that my intake was excessive, I retorted that I had to drink many toasts – to Beryl, Eric, Dad, all the other 458ers who spent time in Gibraltar and, of course, our Reunion “mates”.

We farewelled Beryl & Ian the next morning as they headed to a tour in Morocco.

Given that the only flights out of Gibraltar go to the UK, I booked us on a flight to London, and locked in seat 3A, which, relative to the position of the pilot, was probably similar to where Dad sat on those many sorties in 1944-45.

Wanting, more than anything, to relive what Dad had done so many times, I was in the Mayor's Office!

Whilst it was a routine take-off for most, it was a real bucket-list moment for me – magical, meaningful, sentimental, spectacular, emotional and heart-rending. We had beautiful views of Gibraltar disappearing into the blue sky, surrounded by the very blue waters of the Mediterranean.

There are many who made it all possible, and I thank them all sincerely. But, the biggest highlight for me will forever be the mateship, new friendships, camaraderie and feeling of "family," formed from the 5 days we spent together, our shared "raison d'etre" and the collective gratitude, pride and admiration that we felt for our incredible fathers.

Rob Wilkinson
458 Association NSW Flight



Carolin and I having a quiet drink and relax in Malta - Cheers.

One last important piece to our Malta Reunion story.

Please click on this YouTube link. You will see the wonderful personal story of the Wagstaffe family in Malta.

'Finding Michael and the Canadians who flew beside him in WWII'

by CBC Reporter Johanna Wagstaffe great niece of Warrant Officer Michael Wagstaffe.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pIyD4iwaaQc>

Compliments of the season to everyone.

