

**Bomber Command Memorial Unveiling;  
Green Park, London, 28<sup>th</sup> June 2012.**



**157625 Flight Lieutenant Leslie Roberts, DFC.  
Navigator, Nos. 78 & 35 (PFF) Squadrons.  
Son of Thomas Tattersall Roberts & of Winnie Roberts,  
of Brierfield, Lancashire.  
Lost: Cologne Daylight, 28<sup>th</sup> October 1944.  
Runnymede Memorial, Panel 203.**



**Also in memory of his Cousin, Sylvia Edmondson, (Roberts) & her husband Fred –  
an RAF Malta Veteran.  
Our reasons for being there.**

The day awaited by so many for so long at last dawned. Despite atrocious weather reported in other parts of the country, conditions in Green Park can only be described as 'heavenly'. I felt that even fate lacked the audacity to rain on this particular Parade, so emotional and important was the hour.

At last, the subject that has been treated as almost taboo since 1945, and the participants vilified and insulted in many quarters, came into its hour when many who had played a part in that process of denigration now wanted some association with the Bomber Family, and pretended they sympathised and understood, even if it was for no other reason than to get a story. Even so, a certain newspaper and its art critic – they know who they are – could not break the habits of a lifetime, and insisted on being basically derisory about the style and expression of the Memorial.

I cannot say how vindicated I feel now, and so must countless others. For so long we have waited for some public recognition of the Sacrifice made by the men and women of Bomber Command. Now, all I have respected and spent my life with has come to fruition at last. They are Remembered in the Nation's capital. Our Pride in Them and for Them knew no bounds.

When I let my thoughts wander back over all those men and women of Bomber Command I have known down the years who would have LOVED more than anything to see this day, it is certain that there would easily have been six and a half thousand *Veterans* there. The array of gongs, ties, squadron badges and standards would indeed have been a pageant to behold, and it is certain the beer tent would have been drunk dry in the first half-hour!

However, it remains a crime beyond description that we have had to wait so long for there to be so few Veterans in attendance. On a more positive note, there was no obvious political participation either. For me, that would most certainly have tainted an otherwise red-letter day.

The unseen presence of many thousands we had come to remember was almost palpable, and we all walked, silent with our own thoughts and Remembrance, alongside the special person we had come to honour. It was indeed that much-anticipated day when we all met again, and it was later apparent that many were unwilling to leave when the public pageantry was over. There was an unspoken awareness that when we left the sanctity and environs of the Memorial, we would be leaving our loved one too, and the brief, almost physical bond would be broken.

Certain Veterans were encountered with whom we fell to talking, although, for some inexplicable reason, I fought shy of so doing. Perhaps I felt it was a day for them to be with their families, and to share their memories with those they loved and not be troubled to share them with strangers. Unreasonable perhaps, but this was the feeling that was with me, so I let it be the guide.

During a break in the refreshment marquee, a quiet haven enjoyed by many that day as a brief respite from the hurly-burly of music, people and memories outside, I could not help noticing a Veteran apparently struggling with a giant sandwich at a table nearby. After some considerable time, and refusing to be beaten, he finally vanquished it and I did approach him and asked if he would sign my Order of Service. This he immediately agreed to do and we had a most interesting conversation.

Peter Rowland by name, (Photo 1), he had been a No. 149 (East India) Squadron Stirling and Lancaster navigator at Lakenheath and Methwold in 1943/44, and had contributed to the book *Strong By Night*, about No. 149, some years ago. On pages 77 & 78 he gives a detailed account of his first operation, a minelaying trip to an area off La Rochelle in the Bay of Biscay, and it is well worth reading if you have, or can get hold of a copy of the book.

He also told me of the sad end to what may have been his second tour in November 1944, when they lost their Wireless Operator, Flt. Sgt. W. Scott. He died when a piece of flak came through the fuselage of Lancaster NF971 over the target, Heinsberg, and hit him in the thigh. A tourniquet was immediately applied and the blood staunches, so it was felt that in fact he had most probably died of shock. This was the 33<sup>rd</sup> of a 35-op tour, but the Wing Commander tour-expired them there and then.

Peter and the rest of the crew had the sad duty of accompanying 'Scotty' Scott's coffin, transported in the Guard's van of a northbound train, back to Leeds, and he will never forget the dignified sadness of the family waiting for them there.

Eventually we were able to see the Memorial up close, (Photos 2&3), and what an experience awaited us! Nine-foot tall effigies of a seven-man bomber crew; five staring skywards, searching for their returning comrades, and two with heads lowered and eyes cast down, reflecting the sorrow of losses and the strain and weariness after an operation. Their execution is exquisite and correct in every detail, and easily succeeds in filling a large, mainly open space with emotion and causes one to pause and consider the trials and anguish such crews as represented here passed through before their eventual deaths.

No words I could use will adequately describe what I saw and felt – the culmination of a lifetime's passionate belief in Bomber Command and all it gave and achieved that we might be free. Triumphant vindication on behalf of all who served and all who died probably comes closest to my emotions in that moment, and if that seems too strong an expression for modern liberal thinking, tough!

People thronged in the open space near the statues, and in every available nook and cranny nearby. People from the length and breadth of these Islands, from the Commonwealth and from the lands of our Allies.

Despite the vast distances many had travelled to be there, I personally only had one conversation and that with a lady who came from much closer to home. She, it transpired, had come all the way from Perton, near Wolverhampton – not too far from here, and, with her husband, was representing her 15 Squadron Navigator father, who should have been there, but was ill and unable to attend. It is, after all, a small world!

It was a never-to-be-forgotten experience, and I will always cherish the memory that we were there on that day.

There was ample opportunity for photographs throughout the day, and some of those taken can be found below.

I must confess though to some disappointment at the inscription to be found above and directly behind the seven statues: *"This memorial also commemorates those of all nations who lost their lives in the bombing of 1939-1945."*

If taken literally, we are being asked to remember the dead of a then enemy nation who not only started the war, but bombed others without a shred of compassion, yet found it unpleasant when later forced to swallow their own medicine in ever increasing doses!

I did intend to write at some length regarding my feelings on the presence of this inscription, but eventually took my wife's advice and not spoil this account of an otherwise outstanding and emotional day. Suffice it to say I hope the Mayor of Dresden is suitably happy with this 'gesture of reconciliation'.

On close perusal of the casualty figures, it seems that Ground Staff and WAAFs are not Remembered on the Memorial. Again, should I be right, I will not burden you with my feelings, other than not all had wings in Bomber Command, and not only people with wings were called upon to die.

It was also a touch unexpected to hear The Reverend Ray J. Pentland, QHC, Chaplain-in-Chief of the Royal Air Force, exhorting us to remember the dead of the Royal Navy, the Merchant Navy and the Army, the Civilian Services, the civilian population, and almost all and sundry, in fact. Having said that, I felt the remainder of what was said by those leading our Remembrance that day was beyond reproach.

Despite the comments above, please do not imagine for a moment that I mean any disrespect to anyone involved in this enterprise, no matter how remotely. I am well-aware of modern politically correct liberalism and its depredations throughout society, and it is not for me to question any action deemed necessary by those charged with bringing this magnificent edifice to realisation.

All concerned have done an absolutely first-class job and produced a Memorial in a prominent place that for many passers-by and casual visitors may prove the spur to gain a deeper understanding of and respect for Bomber Command in World War Two. If it is still delivering that well into the years to come, then it will have been well worth everyone's hard work and contributions, despite that frankly inappropriate inscription.

We were highly impressed with all service personnel encountered, (Photo 4), who were the soul of kindness and willing assistance. This from Air Vice Marshals down to ATC cadets. All were smart, polite and courteous to a fault, and the University Air Squadron volunteers from across the UK kept us well supplied with water and any other comfort or assistance they could provide.

These comments also include the extremely well turned out RAAF contingent, (Photo 5), distinctive as ever in their dark blue uniforms, so well remembered by many of the Veterans present. I tender a big thank you to them all.

In the Salute Area, we were more than adequately guided through the day's events by the extremely attractive and consummately professional Carol Vorderman; herself the daughter of a Dutch Resistance fighter. She did not put a foot wrong, and is to be thanked and highly commended for her efforts on the day.

Of our Royal Family, what can be said? From the Queen down they fulfilled their duties with the usual dignity and care; Prince Charles, Camilla and Prince Andrew passed down a line of Veterans and spent considerable time with each one. I was close enough to overhear some of their conversations, and none of the Royals skimped their time, passed over anyone or were brusque. They were enjoying this duty, and so were the Veterans. Come to that so were we, the onlookers. It could not have been better handled.

On a final note, there are many fleeting images, faces, events and memories of that day still clear in my mind.

We were in the Salute Area, enjoying a moment sitting in the welcome shade of one of Green Park's many trees, when we saw a couple coming towards us with improvised notices around their necks, clearly proclaiming the lost airman they had come to remember:

**35 SQUADRON**  
**RAF GRAVELEY 1943-45**  
**VICTOR ROE.**  
**Rear Gunner.**  
**No. 35 Squadron**

This had our immediate attention, and we thought what a good idea it was, and, had we all done something similar, many new friends would doubtless have been made and many unforgettable conversations had.

As we were talking to them, I kept feeling that, although I did not know them, somehow I did! Suddenly, it hit me – The Antiques Road Show! Some time ago, they had taken along the medals and other memorabilia once belonging to Warrant Officer Victor Arthur Roe, CGM, DFM, which had been seen by a former crew mate, who subsequently made contact with the show.

This merited the story's inclusion in a follow-up programme, *Priceless Antiques Roadshow*, which was broadcast on 27<sup>th</sup> June 2010. during which the whole story was told and included an interview with the Veteran who had come forward. During this interview, he recounted how he had decided – quite rightly - to call it a day at the end of his extended Pathfinder tour, but Victor Roe had elected to continue.

He had won both of his Gallantry Awards on No. 35; his DFM for Haine St. Pierre marshalling yards, 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> May 1944. Citation from the London Gazette of 13<sup>th</sup> June 1944 below.

*On the night of 8th/9th May, 1944, Sergeant Roe was rear gunner in a Lancaster detailed to attack Haine-St.Pierre. As the aircraft was approaching the target, two Ju.88's were encountered but successfully evaded. Shortly afterwards, an Me. 110 was encountered which made four successive attacks using canon and machine-gun fire. Sergeant Roe returned fire and on each occasion although his turret had been hit and become unserviceable, resulting in Sergeant Roe being covered in oil. When the Me. 110 made the fourth attack, it was seen to have caught fire in one engine and it is claimed as probably destroyed. Throughout the combat, Sergeant Roe handled his guns with cool determination, clearing stoppages in between attacks although he had received a slight injury in his right arm from a cannon splinter early in the encounter. He carried on, showing a fine offensive spirit. Sergeant Roe is a very reliable Air Gunner who has always carried out his duties most conscientiously. At all times his courage, skill and determination are a fine inspiration to his crew. In recognition of his courage and devotion to duty during the combats of the night of 8th/9th May, 1944, this NCO is recommended for an immediate award of Distinguished Flying Medal.*

It appears that the CGM was in recognition of his massive total of 85 operations and all that can be found recording this is:

*In recognition of gallantry and devotion to duty in the execution of air operations.*

The above appeared in the London Gazette of 13<sup>th</sup> April 1945, more than a month after his loss on Chemnitz, 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> March 1945. He and the remainder of Sqdn. Ldr. F. Watson's crew are remembered on the Runnymede Memorial.

We had a most interesting chat with Mr. & Mrs. Steve de Roeck – himself a pilot of some standing – and Julie had her picture taken with them. (Photo 6). It was a great pleasure to meet and talk to them. No family personally encountered that day had given more in terms of operations completed. In our case it was a mere 61!

I lost my wife, Julie momentarily, only to find she was close by and crouched down by a Veteran in a wheelchair, deep in conversation with him. After some minutes watching them, I too went and had a word with him and discovered he was a 50 Squadron Flight Engineer, who had done his ops from Skellingthorpe quite late in the war.

He told us that he had been singularly lucky on one operation, when a piece of flak smashed through the windscreen and came close enough to the top of his head to put a long gash in the crown of his flying helmet, but leave him unscathed. Next day he was feeling unwell and reported to the Medical Officer, who told him he was suffering from sinusitis – which he had never had before – and that he was temporarily grounded and would not be going on that night's operation.

His crew duly went that night and failed to return, leaving him to eventually continue his tour – this time with a crew consisting mainly of New Zealanders. His parting words to us were: "There was no skill in it, son, just pure luck". We understood how he felt, but I did say in return that it might be better if he didn't tell too many people that, or they might not buy him any more beer! This remark he seemed greatly to appreciate, but, despite all this, I failed completely to get his name.

The diminutive old lady in a large white hat, standing alone near the Memorial, apparently lost in her own thoughts and just gazing up at it. I almost failed to notice the Distinguished Service Order & Bar, Distinguished Flying Cross miniature medal group that was pinned to the right of her cardigan – almost certainly her husband's - so natural did it seem for it to be there, bless her. She suddenly became animated when a Veteran approached, gave her a hug and led her away. As he turned around, it could be seen that he had an Air Force Medal group affixed to the left pocket of his blazer. How can we ever adequately thank this irreplaceable generation who gave everything for our peace and freedom....?

The young lady talking to an RAF Regiment Sergeant on the approach to the Memorial – a clear plastic sleeve in her hand clearly showing a Halifax squadron photograph. From the way it was posed, I could see that it was probably of 466 RAAF at Driffield, but I resisted the urge to approach her and have a word, much as I wanted to.

Julie's encounter with a still-spry and very game Veteran in the refreshment marquee, who was far more taken with her appearance than he was with sharing his memories, bless him! (Photo 7).

There were other moving and memorable moments, as Veterans and their families were seen in dignified, but sometimes difficult, passage through the various areas, and the snatches of conversation overheard as a result. Small groups of Veterans deep in conversation, or animated as they recognised an old friend or even near-neighbour in the crowd. The emotion as pre-arranged meetings took place – some clearly for the first time in nearly seventy years.

The bright sunlight glinting on medals or dappling the green floor of the Park through trees swaying gently in what little breeze there was. The sound of Merlins over martial music and the exclamations of joy from the ground as the BBMF Lancaster roared overhead, showering Remembrance Poppies on us as she went.

There is no more I can say – it was indeed a day of days.

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**Impatient to get there!**



Photo 1



Photo 2



Photo 3



Photo 4



Photo 5

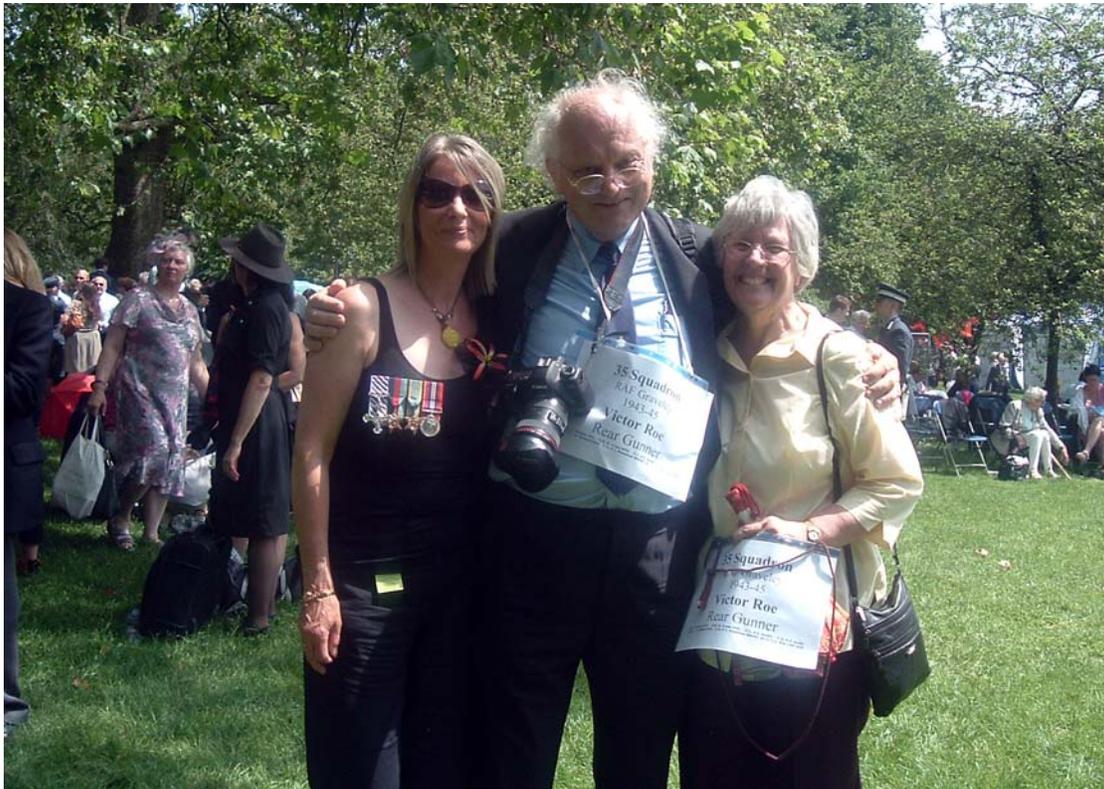


Photo 6



Photo 7



**The Twilight of Eagles – How can we ever repay them.....?**



**We can try by Remembering.**

**With many thanks to Angela Brierley - She knows why.....**