

A Story About a Ghost



Julian Horn

This is not a ghost story, but it is a story about a ghost; and whether you believe in ghosts or not, I promise you, everything happened as I relate it here. The story happened over a period from April to July in the mid 1990's, and because some of those concerned are still alive and may be sensitive about what happened, I have changed a name or two and there are one or two details I will not be precise about.

If there are such things as spirits and ghosts, then I imagine that an ex-Bomber Command airfield is most probably a likely place to find them. RAF Watton in Norfolk is one such airfield. For the early part of the war, Watton, and its satellite field at Bodney, was home to the Blenheims and crews of 21 and 82 squadrons. Some of the famous characters of 2 Group served here, for example, Sam Elworthy and The Earl of Bandon were both Squadron commanders here during the early and difficult months of 1940.

The Wartime Watton Exhibition set out to record the history of the station before it was lost to time. It started back in 1985, when a local builder, Paul Lincoln, recognised some tyre tracks in the upturned base of a Nissan hut as belonging to an American truck which must have driven over the excavations before they were filled with concrete. This spawned the thought that he should record these installations before they disappeared and consequently approached my Mother, who was a keen videographer, for help. On hearing about this I asked if I could get involved and that was the beginning of a period in my life when I would meet men who would become personal heroes, and hear stories of individual bravery that made the hairs on the back of one's neck stand up. It was also the time when I learned what true love was . . . that one man would lay down his life for another. Such was the service of the Blenheim Boys.

One of the great friendships formed in those years was with "Slim" Trew, a Wop/AG who served on 21 Squadron, flying with names such as Sigurdson, Coutts Wood, Petley, Sarl, Dunford Wood and many others, all of whose names probably mean nothing to you, but all of

whom were truly unsung heroes.

In August 1939, Slim flew a number of ops with a 20 year old Pilot Officer by the name of Ian Stapledon, but in September, at the outbreak of war, P/O Sigurdson became his “regular driver”. On the 11th June 1940, Slim’s aircraft was badly shot up by six Me109s and although he was not physically injured, he was terribly affected mentally and after a few more operations when he reportedly fell asleep immediately after take off, Slim was taken off operations and sent to Ely hospital. After 9 months ‘treatment’, he was posted back to Watton on ground radio duties.



Ian Stapledon

Sometime after the war, Slim moved away from Watton but, after attending a reunion here, felt compelled to return, where he became a valuable member of the team that ran the museum established by Paul and me at RAF Watton.

The museum was originally housed in one of the post-war barrack blocks at Watton but, as the operational demands on the camp changed, we moved it to the Old Guard Room at the entrance of the site. At this point I must confess that I am something of a wimp!

Although I could, fairly happily, be alone in the barrack block, the Guard Room was a different matter. During the daylight hours the atmosphere was just tolerable, but, at night, around 19:30 it changed dramatically and I could not be persuaded to enter the building unaccompanied. Paul on the other hand was completely immune to such things.

While the exhibition was housed there, one or two odd things used to happen. The most notable occurrence was when some pictures of American personnel and aircraft, which were mounted on a board and

sealed under a covering sheet, rearranged themselves overnight. The event attracted the interest of the local press and the local 'psychics'. Although they say there is no such thing as bad publicity, thereafter we were careful not to say too much about what happened from time to time.

When the decision was taken by the MOD to dispose of the camp, we



Officers' Mess

were offered accommodation in the upper east wing of the old Officers' Mess, a beautiful building full of character and with innumerable rooms that allowed us great scope to restyle the exhibition. Needless to say we accepted and Slim, working alone most of the time, moved the collection to its new home where we re-established the display.

Wherever the display was housed, we often used to show groups of visitors around the museum and tell the story of RAF Watton in the early years of WWII using the photos, artefacts and memories we had collected. One of the key points in any visit was a photo board with a

picture of 21 Squadron pilots standing in front of the first Mk IV to arrive at Watton. Standing under the starboard propeller is a young looking Pilot Officer, Ian Stapledon, and I would relate the following story, which is what we had been told by people who served at Watton at the time.

On the morning of the sixth of April 1940, just before 4am in the morning, Stapledon and his crew took off from Watton using the westerly run. Shortly after take off (we had been told), Stapledon changed the fuel cocks to switch over from the 100 octane tanks to the 87 octane tanks. In doing so, and by some mis-operation of the fuel controls, occasioned by the fact that he had to reach over to his right and behind, Stapledon cut the fuel to both engines with catastrophic effect. When both engines stopped, he did the right thing by gliding straight ahead over a wooded area on the Merton Estate. Unfortunately for him and his crew, in this wood grew three Douglas Fir trees which were tens of feet higher than the rest of the woods. Needless to say, the aircraft hit one of these trees killing Ian Stapledon and the Wop/Ag, Johnnie Ball, though the Observer, Sgt WJ Wetton, survived the initial impact. He was impaled on a branch of



Crash Site

the tree when found but died some 20 hours later from the massive injuries he suffered.

Ian had celebrated his 21st Birthday some six weeks earlier and the whole crew were going to attend a party that had been organised to celebrate Johnnie Ball's engagement that evening.

Both Stapledon and Ball are buried at St Mary's Church, Watton and they were the first of many RAF aircrew to be buried there; Wetton is buried at Heckington, thought to be his home town. That was the story we used to tell, one of simple tragedy, of lives cut short and illustrative of the dangers faced daily by the Blenheim air crew.



Crash Site

Having moved to the Old Officers' mess, life at the museum continued as before. Opening Wednesday and Sunday afternoons with a steady trickle of people visiting each day, and the museum staffed by members of the local RAFA branch and Aircrew Association and as for the "happenings" the new home was fairly subdued.

One of the rooms, devoted to civil defence had some dummies in it to display uniforms and people frequently reported they had seen the arms of one of them move. But it was easy, when in the room to see all sorts of things out of the corner of one's eye but both staff and visitors consistently reported the same event.

One day, Slim confided in me that he had been quite badly spooked while working in the museum when we were not open. While adjusting one of the displays, he heard whistling and someone calling his name. He came out into the corridor expecting to see whoever it was but the place was empty. He checked all the rooms but could find

no one there, so he locked up and left the building. We both returned to check the museum, but we found nothing amiss; however that was the beginning.

Over the following weeks, there was an increasing frequency of incidents at the Museum; just silly little things, a light left switched on, chairs moved out into the corridor, doors closed that were left open and vice versa. At the time there was quite a bit of trouble with children playing in the area and we put all of this down to them getting in through the windows – even though we were on the upper floor. So we obtained some L shaped repair plates and screwed the sash windows closed. We also ensured entrance could not be obtained through the doors, but the troubles continued.

During this period, came the time for our annual reunion, and attending that year was a lady by the name of Ivy Adland. While at Watton in 1939/1940, Ivy had worked in the NAAFI and I wondered why she bothered, given her ill health, to make the considerable effort to return to Watton; after all she only worked in the NAAFI. I talked with her in the mess ante room on the first evening for over an hour and I realised what an idiot I was in wondering why she bothered to come back.

Ivy remembered Slim and the others from the Squadrons, and she told me how, on many occasions, she had led sobbing young men back to their barracks out after a particularly bad trip. In her job in the NAAFI she became a resident agony aunt for the Wop/Ag's – remember at this time they were only ranked LACs.

I told Ivy about what had been happening expecting to be admonished for having a fanciful imagination, but to my surprise she accepted all I said without batting an eyelid. I then told her that whenever I wandered around the building I could feel where spirits were; every time I passed particular spots in the building a shiver would go down my spine.

“Oh yes” Ivy said in a matter of fact way “they are here. I can feel them too.”

“Really? Whereabouts do you feel them” I asked quite taken aback.

Ivy then pointed out the self same places where I had felt something in the corridors.

Now, you might be thinking that all this is just my imagination, but I wasn't the only one to be affected. There was a youngish JCB driver who had helped us with the museum and, like Paul, was quite disbelieving of all that went on. Until, that is, he went to use the toilets in the building that same evening. Whilst standing there alone in the toilets, doing what needed to be done, he heard footsteps enter through the door behind him and walk across the room. Adjusting his clothing, he turned around expecting to see someone standing there, but of course the room was empty. He said that he had exited the room fairly smartly!

After the reunion things continued as before with intermittent but frequent happenings in the Museum and then events took another turn.

At the time I had a TV repair business in a small shop on the road between Watton and the camp and I was working away one day when a chap walked in I had not seen before.

“Are you Julian Horn?” he asked.

“Yes.” I replied thinking that this was not too difficult as my name was over the door.

“Do you run the museum on the camp?”

“Yes”

“Well, look, I know you are going to think I am mad but I have got a ghost in my house!”

I asked where he lived and he told me. I knew his house was one of a group of wartime houses that was home to both ground and air crew at various times during the war. I told him I wasn't in the least bit surprised and that, given the history of the camp and his house neither should he be.

Well, that was the first of Lenny's several visits to me. Over a period of a few weeks he would call in twice a week telling me about his visitor and asking questions about the history of the station. Lenny told me that the ghost of a young man would appear in the corner of his bedroom dressed in RAF uniform at around four o'clock in the morning. I asked him to describe the uniform and he mentioned that whoever it was, he wore three rings on his sleeve. I thought that was strange, I wasn't aware of a Wing Commander who had been killed at Watton, but Lenny insisted that was the case.

Over the course of his visits, I began to get quite concerned about some of the things he was telling me; he was aware of things that I didn't think he should be and being a wimp I talked on a number of occasions with the station Chaplain who was the local Methodist Minister. Alex was very matter of fact about all that was going on but I don't mind admitting that I was actually getting quite scared.

Lenny told me his visitor had identified himself as Ian Stapledon and Lenny wanted to find out more about him. I told him what I knew and he seemed satisfied with that.

Meanwhile, at the museum things were getting worse. Downstairs from the museum was a room that was used as a Catholic Church and members of the congregation would attend in the morning to prepare for the service. Some reported hearing noises coming from the museum which had rather frightened them. Only later did I discover

that it was such a problem that they held a special service to try to prevent whatever was happening.

Alex, the Methodist Minister, offered to contact the Bishop's office to arrange a visit from a specialist to perform something similar. I was quite surprised to discover that such positions exist in the hierarchy of the church but I felt quite strongly that if all this activity was down to the spirits of aircrew, that I had no right to turf them out of the place they had chosen to be; although one or two of us had been seriously frightened, no harm had come to anyone.

Activity at the museum reached a pitch around this time and had reached the stage where Slim and I would visit every morning and every evening to switch off lights and put displays right. One day Slim found a door slammed shut and when we finally got it open we discovered that all the screws in door furniture had been removed and were lying on the floor of the room. There was no other entrance.

One Thursday, Lenny came in, "You are not busy are you." He said it more as a statement than a question.

"No, it is very quiet." I replied

"He said you wouldn't be." said Lenny.

I was really quite concerned about that, where was this one leading I thought.

"I have a message for you from Ian"

"Why doesn't he come and tell me himself?" I asked.

"Because you would be too scared" Lenny replied.

I had to admit, he was quite right. The thought of a figure appearing in the morning was more than a little disturbing.

"Ian wants you know he did not have a double engine failure."

Continued Lenny. “After he took off his starboard engine cut and he couldn’t hold the aircraft straight and it made a dive to right and although he could see the trees there was nothing he could do about it.”

I was puzzled why this was important but I just said OK and left it at that. Lenny left.

I had been keeping Paul up to date with all that had been going on and he told me the next day about a phone call he had had with another chap who helped with the museum. Paul lives in a quite isolated house and was alone when he spoke with Sean on the phone. They were having a jolly good laugh at my expense about all that been going on and how I was quite frightened about it. If you knew Paul and Sean you would understand how they found such humour in my plight.

Midway through the conversation, Paul said, the curtains in the room started to blow out even though the windows were closed and he said the hairs on the back of his neck stood up on end. Slightly concerned, he asked Sean to hang on while he went into his front room where they continued the conversation and the jokes. Above his television was a macramé pot hanger and while they continued to amuse themselves this began dancing around. Suffice to say Paul started to take things a little more seriously!

The following Monday, I was on a field adjacent to the local scout hut where I helped the Norfolk Standards Display Team of the Royal British Legion practice their displays by providing marching music over a small PA system. Part way through a display Paul came padding across the field and I rose to greet him.

“You’d better sit down” he said “because you are not going to believe this.”

I wondered what he was talking about.

“Ian Stapledon’s brothers are at the Hare and Barrel and would like to meet us.”

I was knocked out at this news. We had no idea Ian had any family, let alone that they visited Watton. They were staying at the Hare and Barrel, a local motel where we often had meals during the reunions. The two brothers, Bill and Nigel, were having dinner when landlord Stan heard the mention their brother was with the RAF at Watton here during the war.

“Oh” said Stan “You should speak to Paul and Julian. They know all about the RAF here.” Stan offered to ring Paul and a short while later I was sitting at their table.

After the introductions, the very first question Bill Stapledon asked me was what I could tell them about their brother’s crash. It turned out that Bill had visited six weeks before Ian’s death and Ian had taken him for a jolly in his Blenheim, sight seeing around the area. That was the last time they saw each other.

Bill explained they had been informed of the fact of Ian’s death but nothing about the circumstances and wanted me to tell him all I knew. So judging it would not be a good idea to tell them about what had been happening, I gave them the details Lenny had given me. After dinner we visited the museum for them to see the whole collection.

It emerged that Bill and Nigel had visited Watton every year since 1951, since their Mother and Father’s ashes were scattered on his grave (as indeed are Bill’s and Nigel’s now) but neither of us knew of the other’s existence. They had no idea that we had set up a museum with pictures of their brother in, nor that we laid a wreath on Ian’s and Johnnie’s graves at every reunion.

They had stayed at the Hare and Barrel on a number of occasions but it was only this year that the chance overhearing of their conversation, by Stan, that led to our meeting and to Nigel and Bill getting the answers they had long searched for.

Following the meeting and visit to the museum, everything at the museum returned to normal and I didn't see Lenny again for three weeks. When he walked into the shop next, I said to him "He hasn't been again has he?"

"No" he replied "How did you know that?"

I told him I now understood what it was all about and he probably wouldn't see his ghost again. But he did tell me that he saw him a couple of times over the next six months.



War Graves at Watton Church

Postscript

Make of the above what you will. You may think I have a vivid imagination and, if it were only me involved I would probably agree with you. But it was as I have written. Humour me for a moment and accept that it was Ian's spirit visiting Lenny, why was he so keen that I should know the cause of his crash?

I spoke with Smudge about the possible reasons for the loss of a Blenheim just after take off and he explained that, in his opinion there could be three possible causes. Most likely, he felt, would have been plug fouling as a result of excessive idling periods before take off; second would be excessive cylinder head temperatures and lastly mis-operation of the fuel system but he considered this was unlikely, as Stapledon would not have switched tanks until the aircraft was established in the cruise which would certainly not have been the case here.

Either of the other two possibilities would result in a turn resulting from the asymmetric power and the pilot would have had no chance of controlling the aircraft and a crash was inevitable. In essence this is what happened at Denham and we have all seen the consequences of that!

Because of the way I told the story, it appeared that the cause of the aircraft's loss was pilot error and the blame for it was attached to Ian.

As I now know, and as his brothers were told, that is not the case.

I leave you with two observations to ponder:-

Firstly Ian Stapledon must have been present at the museum during the times when I used to tell the story of his demise. How must he have felt as I repeatedly blamed him for the accident?

Secondly, He was a pilot officer when he was killed so why was he wearing a Wing Commander's insignia on his uniform?

