

## REMEMBRANCE

This article is most fitting for the time leading up to Remembrance Sunday. It was written by Dan Prosser, the nephew of Alan Collins from Clifton who organised the meeting described below and who tells me that his nephew is a 19-year-old aspiring writer/journalist who recently won the Motor Sport News Young Journalist of the Year award. But this is just an introduction and a hope that we hear more from Dan whose account follows.

'In a World War II Nissen hut, flyers young and old met. With an endearing eccentricity the elders would call senility, three RAF veterans discussed their days in the force. It was a social evening at the Enstone Flying Club, Oxfordshire, with Fred Ellis. Bill Drake and George Spenceley as special guests. All three live a Wellington's wingspan from one another in the village of Deddington. Club members and enthusiasts had gathered to hear the stories of their days in the service in the RAF, and shortchanged they most certainly were not. Immediately, the audience was struck by the honest sense of modesty that surrounded these gentlemen. All three of them were utterly shocked that anyone cared about what they had to say, convinced that their tales were unremarkable.

### Bill Drake



First up was Bill Drake, a navigator who recalled a crash landing following difficulties with the landing gear. Calling ahead, Bill requested permission to land on a nearby hockey pitch. 'Of course not' was the reply, 'there's a match going on, and you'll ruin the grass!' Bill later flew in a Canberra, a craft whose idiosyncrasies had major implications for him; the pilot had an ejector seat, whilst Bill didn't. This caused something of a dilemma. A RAF crew are such a tight knit group: they live together, fly together, and do everything in their power to ensure that they don't die together. This meant that the pilot would never leave Bill in an emergency. Bill tried to convince the

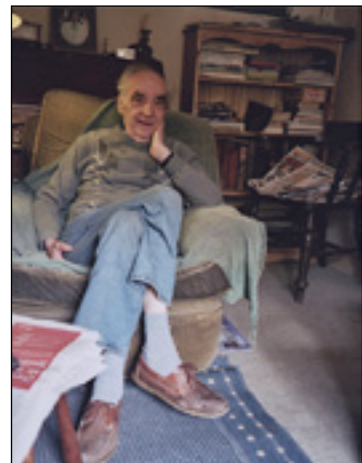
pilot that if ever the situation occurred, he should eject, reasoning that it was better that one person survived than none. Bill sat down on account of 'having spoken far too long'.

2007

### Fred Ellis

Radio Operator Fred Ellis who joined, and presumably left, the RAF three times gave his account of the origin of the phrase 'Gone for a Burton'. While training to be a radio operator, he attended weekly Morse code tests held above a tailor's shop by the name of Burton's. If anybody failed his test two weeks running, he would be kicked out. 'Gone for a Burton' was a kinder way of describing their failure to pass!

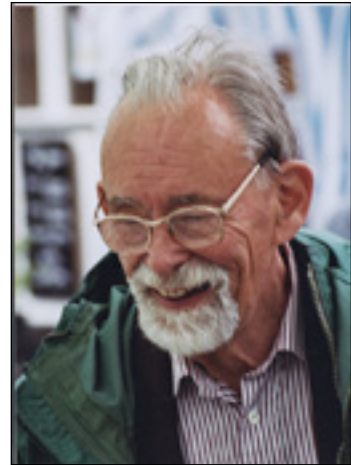
Fred demonstrated his efficiency in Morse and none of the qualified pilots present could match his skills. Fred recalled an incident that occurred in the Middle East when he was part of a Shackleton crew, who, issued with poor maps, found themselves flying towards a cliff



face that according to their map should not have been there. Fred saw the navigator cross himself, and the pilot getting into a panic. Fred buried his head in his hands waiting for impact. Luckily the plane just cleared the cliff by an estimated 50 feet!

## **George Spenceley**

The final speaker was George Spenceley, billed by the other two as the star of the evening. George joined the RAF soon after leaving Sixth Form, the desire to learn to fly being his motivation. He described the sheer terror he'd experience before every op, yet having to conceal it for the benefit of the rest of the crew. Negating this fear was the intense euphoria upon landing again. This euphoria he described as an exhilarating buzz to make you forget the fear. 'A drug!'



Having racked up 36 ops and finished his tour of duty, George decided to make his tour a round 40. A fellow pilot in the mess told him that he'd lost his rear gunner. George, after quite a few drinks, volunteered, but was slightly regretful come the morning. Nevertheless he flew with his new crew as 'Tailend Charlie' once and then once more. But then disaster struck. The plane was shot down and George was the only survivor – his location at the rear of the plane had no doubt saved him. George awoke three weeks later in a German hospital run by nuns and was later made a prisoner of war for three years.

Dan writes: 'What struck me, made me sit up and listen and respect these three men, was that when they started in all this, they were my age. They had their entire life in front of them, yet were prepared to risk it for the sake of their country. Would my friends and I do the same today? I couldn't honestly answer yes.'

2007

*The complete collection of Ruth Johnson's writings, which originally appeared in Deddington News between 1990 and 2010, can be found [here](#)*