A Tale of Two Glider Pilots

Let it never be said that the FCA-today magazine is parochial as this intriguing tale can verify.

Graham Hamilton takes up the story:

My good friend and former colleague Finlay MacRae died on 5th June 2014. I prepared an obituary which appeared in the Summer 2014 edition of this magazine and it was also published in Scottish Forestry Vol 69 (1) in 2015.

I had often heard Finlay talk of his wartime experiences with the RAF which he joined in 1942. He recounted some amusing recollections of his spell in Florida training to be a pilot.

Finlay on a training mission.

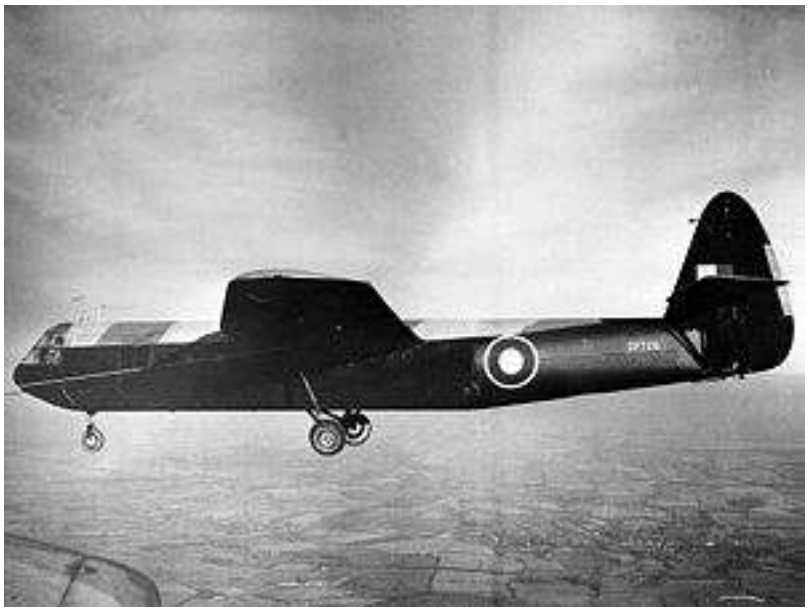
Later Finlay transferred to the Glider Pilot Regiment. There had been huge casualties incurred by the Army Glider Pilot Regiment resulting from various glider airborne operations including D-Day and Arnhem. This required the secondment ('volunteering') of RAF pilots to the Glider Pilot Regiment. Subsequently Finlay took part in 'Operation Varsity' on 24th March 1945. This was a major operation involving moving British and American troops and supplies across the Rhine into Germany. In his memoir 'A Tune in the Woods' Finlay described the event as the largest airborne operation in history.

It remains the largest operation in history and included the following

541 aircraft carrying paratroopers
1050 troop carriers towing an additional 1,350 gliders with troops and vehicles on board
They were accompanied by 2153 allied fighter aircraft

In total over 4000 aircraft and their pilots
And over 16,000 paratroopers

The Horsa gliders were capable of carrying 28 fully armed men or a mixture of men and supplies. There were two pilots in each glider. Some 3655 were built in Britain by Airspeed.



A Horsa glider

I referred to Operation Varsity in the obituary and mentioned that Finlay had been captured soon after the glider touched down. His subsequent experience as a prisoner of war was very unpleasant but it was mercifully short.

In May this year our Editor, Richard Toleman, got a letter from a lady called Rowena Smith who lives in Hampshire. In the letter she explained that her father Flying Officer Harry Grinham had been a glider pilot and had taken part in 'Operation Varsity'.

Flying Officer Harry Grinham

In his logbook his co-pilot was named as Sergeant MacRae but no first name or initial was given. Rowena had spent years trying to locate this person who she also thought had been best man at her father's wedding.

Remarkably, in the process of searching for Sergeant MacRae she came across Finlay's obituary in FCA-today and, given the reference to 'Operation Varsity' immediately saw the possibility that he might be the person she was looking for. I had mentioned Finlay's family in the obituary and Rowena managed to find a reference to Donna, Finlay's daughter, but that yielded nothing. So, she sent the letter to Richard who passed it to me. I then phoned Joey, Finlay's widow, to ask if Finlay had ever mentioned Harry Grinham, who was originally from the Borders. This name rang a bell with Joey but she could not quite recall the connection.

The possibility that Finlay was Harry Grinham's co-pilot was clearly a strong one, but some more evidence was needed. I passed Rowena's letter to Donna, Finlay's daughter.

Donna now continues the story:

"When Graham got in touch and introduced Rowena and I to one another I was quite amazed and really hoped that this Sgt MacRae would indeed turn out to be my late father. Rowena believed that her father's co-pilot had also been the best man at her parents wedding. I managed to find the photograph of the wedding online but, sadly, I confirmed this was not 'Dad'. However, Rowena quite undeterred went back to her family and discovered that her parents' best man had been a cousin of her father. So, we were back on the investigative trail. It was only when Rowena sent me a photograph of a page in her father's logbook that the puzzle began to come together.

Her father's logbook recorded an exercise with the glider (with troops on board) and landing in a field near 'Bigot Hall'. I suddenly remembered that in his autobiography Dad had also recounted this story and said 'my Skipper was a fellow Scot from the Borders'. Rowena had said her father came from Dumfries. Dad also said that they were carrying men from the Oxfordshire and Buckingham Light Infantry and that they had landed near a big hall and when they made their way there, that the door

was opened by a nun and that it was a girl's school. I went straight to Google and looked up Bigot Hall (recorded in Rowena's father's logbook). Sure enough it had been a girl's school run by nuns during the War! That was the conclusive proof we needed.

What a great story and how good to know that both these (then very young and very brave) men went on to earn their country's thanks for their civilian and Service achievements in the form of their respective MBEs.

Finally, a word from **Rowena**:

Having spent nearly 20 years researching my family history and piecing together my father's WW2 story, the search for his co-pilot, a Sgt MacRae, seemed impossible. Upon discovering the very sad obituary in the FCA for Finlay however, my excitement was escalated at the possibility of maybe discovering my father's missing Second Pilot.

Nothing ventured nothing gained, I composed what must have appeared a most random email to Richard as Editor FCA. I was amazed to receive an immediate response suggesting he would forward my details to Graham. I was beyond emotional and excited when I forwarded a copy of my father's Pilot Logbook to Donna. By comparing entries in the Log to Finlay's first-hand account, Donna was able to confirm that Finlay was indeed the 2nd Pilot in Horsa Glider RX875 towed by a Stirling Bomber. They took off together from RAF Great Dunmow, Essex on 24 March 1945 as part of the largest airborne operation of WW2 Operation Varsity, the Crossing of the Rhine.

I still have a lump in my throat that after 74 years, these two Scottish lads have now been reunited. I do not know whether either of them knew if one or other of them survived the war. My father being injured was listed as Missing in Action. Finlay route marched as a Prisoner of War. 'G' Squadron suffered 60% casualties.

Finlay and my father were two of the many brave men who piloted with skill and luck a flimsy glider with no engine, that was not meant to survive intact for a return flight. They also had the added responsibility for the lives of the troops they carried on board.

I am happy to conclude that my father's story is now complete, and I extend my overwhelming gratitude to Richard, Graham and ultimately to Donna. Thank you.