If Not Me, Who?

THE STORY OF

TONY GREIG

THE RELUCTANT REBEL

ANDREW MURTAGH

If Not Me, Who?

THE STORY OF

TONY GREIG

THE RELUCTANT REBEL

ANDREW MURTAGH

pitch

Contents

Chapter 1

The unveiling of the monument dedicated to Bomber Command – 28 June 2012

'At last, after 67 years of waiting, our comrades have finally been honoured.'

The words of one veteran

IN the event it was a bit like an Ashes Test match at Lord's; the demand for tickets far outstretched the supply. The ceremonial opening of the memorial to Bomber Command and the 55,573 aircrew of its squadrons who lost their lives in the Second World War had been eagerly anticipated and attendance at the event had necessarily been strictly limited. There was room for 6,000 veterans and their families but as at Lord's, a mere couple of miles away from its location in Green Park, there would be considerable numbers of people who wished to be present but were unable. The war had finished some 67 years previously and veterans of the conflict in the air were now thin on the ground but their relatives were not.

Sixty-seven years before a memorial is built? That is an unconscionably long time. How come? The somewhat shambolic preparations for the event – many veterans had been late in applying

and missed out on tickets, only placated by others who benevolently returned theirs so that they could attend – had been a symbol of a wider controversy swirling around the entire project. Successive governments over the years had prevaricated and postponed erecting a memorial to those who had lost their lives serving in Bomber Command, a dereliction of duty which many found shameful. Yet it is as well to remember that of all the top brass tasked with prosecuting the war none was a more divisive figure than Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris, Commander-in-Chief of RAF Bomber Command. He was dubbed Bomber Harris by the press and known as Butcher Harris within the ranks and that probably sums up his reputation at the time and latterly. His hotly disputed policy of area rather than precision bombing of German cities, resulting in hundreds of thousands of civilian fatalities, still stirs the bubbling pot of discord. His supporters believed he was a hero; his detractors labelled him a war criminal. As a result, the building of a memorial for his fallen airmen was put on the back burner.

To put the whole thing into perspective and leaving politics aside, it should not be forgotten that the men who served in Bomber Command were the bravest of the brave. Their average age was 22. All were volunteers and almost half would lose their lives. A further 8,400 were wounded and 10,000 taken prisoner. They were never given a campaign medal, let alone have a memorial dedicated to their sacrifice. Winston Churchill did not even mention them in his speech at the end of the war. The campaign to establish them permanently in the nation's memory was long and bitter.

Finally, after endless wrangling, political obstruction and financial difficulties, the monument was completed. On 28 June 2012, the Queen, accompanied by the Duke of Edinburgh, arrived to unveil the statue of the seven-man crew of a heavy bomber in front of a host of dignitaries and veterans and families. The day had dawned warm and still, a perfect midsummer's day, with the prospect of the temperature soaring later on. As is often the case on these sorts of occasions, there were numerous surreptitious glances and whispered asides as those in attendance strove to identify the great and the good as they arrived in their limousines. The royal family were out in force: the Prince

of Wales and his wife, Camilla, Prince Andrew, Prince Edward and his wife Sophie, the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester, the Duke of Kent and others less easily recognised. Politicians in the main were conspicuous by their absence but Philip Hammond was present in his capacity as Secretary of State for Defence.

One young man leant across to the elderly lady at his side, perhaps a grandson and a widow of one of the veterans whose name was inscribed within the memorial.

'Robin Gibb would have loved to have been here.'

'Who, darling?'

'Robin Gibb, one of the Bee Gees.'

'Why would a pop singer want to be here?'

'Because he donated a lot of the money to have this monument built.'

'That was very sweet of him. So why isn't he here?'

'Because he's dead, mother. He died of cancer a few weeks ago.'

'Oh, that is a shame. Poor chap.'

'Do you see that fellow over there? The tall guy with the sun hat?'

'Yes.'

'Do you know who he is?'

'Er … the sculptor?'

'No! Let me give you a clue. England cricket captain.'

'He looks a bit old to be … whatshisname … that nice boy … Andrew something or other.'

'Andrew Strauss. No, not the current one, a former captain.'

'I'm afraid you've got me there, dear.'

'It's Tony Greig.'

'Oh yes, I'm sure I have heard of him. He's the one on the television who always wears a hat, isn't he? Rather like the one he's wearing now. Or am I mixing him up with Geoff Boycott?'

'I don't think it's possible to mistake Tony Greig for Geoff Boycott, mother. Chalk and cheese, I should say.'

It was Tony Greig. And he was also right that the two, Boycott and Greig, could not possibly have been mistaken for each other. You could say that they came from two different planets but oddly enough, the two got on, both professionally and privately. As we shall see, most of Greig's contemporaries – as opposed to some of the game's hierarchy –

got on with him; he was just that sort of bloke. Many people there did of course recognise him but as he now lived in Australia and was but an infrequent visitor to these shores they did not immediately take note of his drawn and haggard features and the perspiring brow under the rim of his hat. His sister, Sally Ann, who was at his side, was aware that he was ill but had no idea of the seriousness of his condition. Neither did he, it appeared. 'He was on antibiotics for a chest infection,' she told me. 'This was his second course of treatment and the infection was proving to be stubbornly resistant to the drugs. We didn't know at that stage that he had cancer.'

The other question that might have intrigued onlookers had they asked was what Tony Greig and his sister were doing at the unveiling of a memorial to those who had served in Bomber Command. Greig had faced the fury of Lillee and Thomson on that famous, hair-raising tour of Australia in 1974/75, which had left experienced England batsmen demoralised and in some cases emotionally scarred for the rest of their careers, but the usual grim banter in the England dressing room about going to war and taking flak from the enemy would have seemed totally out of place at a solemn occasion such as this. He was not there for cricketing reasons, clearly.

Friends of the Greig family would have known straightaway. Alexander Broom Greig, known universally as Sandy, was born in Bathgate, West Lothian in Scotland in 1922, and educated at George Watson's College in Edinburgh where he excelled in games, notably rugby. Had war not broken out in 1939, who knows, Sandy might have emulated other alumni, such as Ian Robertson and the Hastings brothers, who went on to represent Scotland in the sport.

However, Herr Hitler had other plans in mind for the young Sandy. Family history has it that, two hours following the announcement by Neville Chamberlain that Britain was now at war with Germany, Sandy Greig signed up for active service. Furthermore, he lied about his age; he was only 17 and a half and the official age limit was 18. He had no intention of joining the army. Like many of his peers, he had studied enough recent history to have a horror of the dreadful conditions and loss of life suffered by soldiers in the trenches of the Great War. He chose the RAF. His father had done the same, lied

about his age so that he could enlist to fight in the Great War. When he remonstrated with his son about joining up before he was old enough, Sandy replied, 'You did the same, Dad.' Reluctantly, Greig Senior went along with the plan and did not spill the beans to the authorities. Already, one can sense in Sandy's personality elements of decisiveness, conviction and indeed stubbornness, which his son in turn undoubtedly inherited.

It took a surprisingly long time to train pilots for combat duty in wartime. Two hundred hours of flying was the norm, together with instruction in mathematics, navigation and the principles of flying, over an 18-month to two-year period. During his training, Sandy was sent to Rhodesia for flying instruction. There he crashed his aircraft. Details of the accident – a not infrequent occurrence for rookie pilots but on this occasion without the all too inevitable fatal consequences – are sparse but it is understood that he was dissuaded from continuing on the pathway to gaining his Pilot's Wings and instead switched to a navigation course. In this discipline, it could be said that he found his true vocation. Tony's mother once remarked that her husband rewrote the handbook of navigation in the RAF. Subsequent events were to prove that to be no idle boast.

The role of a navigator on a long-range bombing sortie is patently crucial and never straightforward, given the constantly changing variables of weather, visibility and enemy action. It has often been compared to a maths exam and having to get 100% every time. Actually, it was more than one exam because the examiners would keep on asking different questions. You might be diverted by unexpected circumstances. Your pilot would very often not take the same course back home. You might be attacked by enemy fighters, your pilot then taking evasive action, perhaps diving down to rooftop level in an attempt to escape. After a hair-raising period of violent manoeuvres, he would come on the intercom and casually ask you to set a course for home when you have no idea where you are. Put like that it is a wonder that any of them got back home. Many did not.

It is undeniably true that if Sandy Greig was a first-rate navigator, he was also extraordinarily lucky. The general rule of thumb was that a bomber crew would do a 'tour', that is 30 missions, before being stood

down having done their bit. Medical and psychological researchers had come to the conclusion that if anybody survived a tour he would more than likely be suffering from 'battle fatigue' and his effectiveness severely reduced. Sandy Greig flew on 54 missions and somehow beat all the odds. Two extraordinary statistics bring into sharp relief how much fate was kind to him. Only one in six crewmen survived a tour of 30 missions. One in 40 survived two tours of 60 missions. I use the word 'survived' advisedly; Sandy did not escape unscathed. As his grandson, Mark, explained to me, 'When he was shot down over the North Sea, he was burned as he attempted to rescue his pilot from the aircraft. In another crash, he lost feeling in the lower part of his face on one side, something that stayed with him for the rest of his life.' Something else that stayed with Sandy for the rest of his life, deeply hidden from view, from even those who loved him, were the emotional scars of his experiences. Today, we would recognise them as symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Back then they might have been described as shell-shock or battle fatigue – if they had ever been properly diagnosed at all.

In my research into Sandy Greig's war record, I am indebted to Air Commodore Graham Pitchfork, MBE, now retired from the RAF, who has forged an impressive career as a military historian, author and a writer of over 500 armed services obituaries for *The Daily Telegraph*. He whistled in disbelief and admiration when he told me of what he had unearthed. 'Squadron Leader Alexander Broom Greig was awarded two gongs while on active duty, the Distinguished Service Order and the Distinguished Flying Cross. The DSO is awarded for "meritorious or distinguished service by officers in the armed forces during wartime, typically in active combat". The DFC is awarded for "an act or acts of valour, courage or devotion to duty while flying on active operations against the enemy". So Greig had what would have been known as a "good war". It wasn't uncommon for a navigator to attain the rank of squadron leader and captain an aircraft. But it *was* unusual for a navigator to be awarded both the DSO and DFC. Now, under normal circumstances,' Pitchfork continued, 'the captain on board was the pilot, in sole command of his aircraft. Greig must have been some leader to have been granted that responsibility as a navigator.' I was puzzled about the split roles of navigator and pilot and

the possibility for confusion in the chain of command and wondered what it must have been like for the crew. He explained. 'The pilot was of course in charge of operating the aircraft; he flew the damn thing. If he said bail out, everybody bailed out. But Greig, the navigator and captain, was in charge of all operational and strategic decisions, for example whether to press on or turn back.'

Greig first joined 218 Squadron, which by September 1941 were flying four-engine Stirlings, the first of the heavy bombers. Targets included ports, railways, industrial sites, gun batteries, petrol installations, infantry columns, even V-weapon sites. In October 1942, the citation for Greig's recommendation for a DFC read:

> This officer has proved himself to be one of the most successful navigators in the squadron. During an attack on Poissy on April 2nd 1942 his aircraft was badly damaged by light anti-aircraft fire. Flying Officer Greig requested his captain to make a second run to enable him to release his five remaining bombs. These he dropped directly on the target.

Pitchfork added some further details of the raid. 'Poissy is just north-west of Paris. It was the location of a major factory operated by Ford France, requisitioned by the Germans in the war and produced light trucks.'

In October of that year, Greig was posted to 101 Squadron, flying Lancasters in specialised airborne radio-jamming operations to disrupt interceptions being made by German night fighters. These adapted bombers were fitted with distinctive large vertical antennae rising from the centre of the fuselage. In order to jam enemy radio traffic, the operator had to break radio silence, making his aircraft easy to detect and vulnerable to attack. 'Thus the hunter became the hunted,' Pitchfork added drily, 'and it was no surprise that 101 Squadron suffered the highest casualty rate of all bomber squadrons.'

In short order, Sandy had been promoted to squadron leader, and this, let us not forget, was a month after his 21st birthday. The words of the air vice marshal in his letter to Bomber Harris recommending the promotion make interesting reading:

> He is an exceptionally able officer and moreover has an outstanding enthusiasm for flying, particularly operational flying, in which he has shown great ability not only as a navigator but also as an officer. He possesses pronounced organisational abilities and has powers of leadership which mark him as fully qualified for the post …

The following year, 1943, Greig was recommended for the Distinguished Service Order. The citation says it all:

> This officer who has completed many sorties since being awarded the DFC is a fearless and courageous captain. His great navigational ability and fighting qualities have inspired all with whom he has flown and have played a large part in the many successes obtained. His record of achievement is worthy of the highest praise.

You might be interested to know that the motto of 101 Squadron is *mens agitat molem*: mind over matter. Does that remind you of anyone?

Whoever it was that decided Sandy Greig had done his bit, and much more, for king and country and took him off operational duties, did it not a minute too soon. It seems trite to say that he was surely due to run out of luck and no doubt he was as aware of that as anybody. The mental stress endured by these bomber crews each time they took off can only be imagined.

By all accounts, Squadron Leader Greig did not go quietly into 'semi-retirement'; he felt his duty remained on the front line, so to speak, and did not take kindly to being removed from operational duty to the role of navigational instructor. But that was the decision taken by his superiors and no doubt a wise one, given his already exceptional service and his undeniable knowledge of, and experience in, his specialised subject. In September 1943, he was sent to South Africa to train future navigators of the RAF and their brothers in the SAAF the art of plotting a course for a bombing raid. He was posted to No 47, Air Navigation School in Queenstown where he met his future wife. And this is where our story truly begins.

Before we do, let us briefly return to that sun-kissed, midsummer's day in 2012. Before the dignitaries arrived to witness the unveiling by the Queen of the new memorial in Green Park, the veterans who had survived were being interviewed on a specially erected stage. Sally Ann Hodson (nee Greig) happened to take her seat just as 101 Squadron – the few who were left – were strutting their stuff on the boards. 'How I wish Tony had been with me,' she told me, 'he would have been thrilled to listen to all the old stories being recounted of our father's old squadron.' *I thought he was with you.* 'No, he came later. He had a number of interviews to do for Sri Lankan television and he wouldn't miss that for anything.' Indeed not. Greig's love affair with Sri Lankan cricket began during the 1996 World Cup. He was almost alone in believing that the minnows might triumph and trumpeted their silky skills and uninhibited cricket to all and sundry. As it happened, he was proved right, a minor miracle he called it, and thereafter he became a tireless champion of that island and its people. Yes, Tony Greig was big in Sri Lanka, very big.

'He arrived a bit later,' said Sally Ann, 'and as he strode through the crowd wearing Daddy's medals, with his signature hat, towering above everybody else, I was aware of heads turning.' Apparently, luck had played a part in their being there at all. Sally Ann had applied for tickets through 101 Squadron but no joy – their allocation was exhausted long before. Nothing daunted, she appealed to a higher authority, none other than Field Marshal Lord Bramall, formerly Chief of the General Staff. 'If you go high, you may as well go to the highest,' she added cheerfully. She might also have added that Lord Bramall was also a former president of the MCC and her husband, Phillip Hodson, was the current MCC president. They knew each other well. 'Hey presto!' she grinned, 'two tickets landed on our doormat.' Well, nobody could begrudge her pulling strings on this occasion; the privilege was right and fitting. 'Tony came in Phillip's place and he was honoured to have the opportunity.'

The service of dedication and remembrance was led by the Chaplain in Chief of the RAF, thanking 'those who had laid down their lives in the cause of justice, freedom and peace'. One veteran, interviewed at the time, made this telling remark: 'At last, after 67

years of waiting, our comrades have finally been honoured.' Before the sounding of the Last Post, five Tornados flew past in formation. Then a hum, which became a roar, and then a familiar rattling in the ribcage, signalled the arrival overhead of the last airworthy Lancaster. Amidst gasps from onlookers, its bomb bays were opened and great clusters of red poppies were released to flutter downwards, scattering on the ground beneath. 'It was a spellbinding moment,' said Sally Ann. 'Tony and I just sat there and reflected on our father's life, his wartime experiences and the sacrifice all those young men had made on our behalf. Very poignant, just him and me. Tony turned to me and said, 'Dad would have loved to have been here. Do you think he would have been proud of us, here, honouring his memory?' Of course he would. He worshipped Tony. And to think my dear brother only had six months to live makes it even more poignant now, whenever I think of it. The end, Andy … well, it was just heartbreaking.'

Before an end, there must be a beginning. That was in Queenstown, a small town in the Eastern Cape of South Africa.