

SQUADRON LEADER ALASTAIR GRANT LANG, D.F.C.Pathfinder pilot who raised the morale of his Squadron with his repeated antics,

<sup>in 2007</sup>  
 Squadron Leader Alastair Lang, who has died aged 88, was posted to 156 (Pathfinder) Squadron at Warboys in September 1942 as a young Flying Officer with 22 operational sorties already under his belt. The squadron had just been selected, with three others, to form the nucleus of the newly-formed Pathfinder Force, and Alastair immediately volunteered for this new task to get away from interim instructional duties.

He arrived at Warboys, near Huntingdon, at the same time as a certain Pilot Officer Lighton Verdon-Roe, whose father, Sir Alliott Verdon-Roe had founded the famous aircraft companies A.V. Roe & Co. Ltd ('Avro') and later, Saunders-Roe Ltd.

Alastair and Lighton had several things in common – they had both been to the same Prep school at Seaford, whose headmaster was related to Sir Alliott Verdon-Roe's sister, Dorothy by marriage; and they were both adventurous and incorrigible youngsters – to the point of being called 'dare-devils' – albeit Alastair was already married with a young daughter, being two years senior to Lighton (who was nicknamed "Avro").

The squadron was equipped with Wellington bombers at this time, but by January 1943 had acquired the formidable new Avro Lancasters onto which it quickly converted. At this time, these two pilots were joined by an Australian, Flight Lieutenant Peter Isaacson from 460 Squadron, <sup>D.F.M.</sup> Royal Australian Air Force, who had already flown Lancasters, and personally checked out Lang and Verdon-Roe onto the new aircraft.

These three men became the greatest of friends, and quickly earned themselves the title of "The Terrible Threesome" from their C.O. Even prior to Isaacson's arrival, Lang and Verdon-Roe had distinguished themselves on a number of occasions, one being a supposed night visit to London with friends, when they flew a Wellington down to White Waltham, whence to take taxis to a party near Maidenhead. Unfortunately, heavy rain had flooded the grass airfield there and while en route they received a message to return to base. Undaunted Alastair pressed on with Lighton and Co. on board, and landed at White Waltham – only to get the Wellington bogged down and obviously not able to be returned the next day. They left it there and attended the party, ending up in London a little worse for wear the next day. Alastair sent a telegram to

*Original full Obituary (typed by Charmian Workes,  
 – second daughter of Alastair Lang.)*

their C.O. saying: "Delayed, pressing-on back to base!". They then stayed in London a second night, still the worse for wear, and Alastair sent another telegram: "Still pressing-on!".

When they finally got back, they were given an almighty rocket by their revered C.O., Wing Commander 'Tommy' Rivett-Carnac, but Alastair knew they were too indispensable to be court-martialled (and he was right!).

On another occasion shortly afterwards, they were at another party at Stevenage with some of their colleagues, and remembering their London experience, this time, Alastair persuaded their Station Medical Officer, Sqd. Ldr. Peter Bryce-Curtis to telephone their C.O. to ask if they could stay another night. The answer was an emphatic "No", and Rivett-Carnac said he would have believed such a request coming from Alastair or 'Avro', but not from the 'older and wiser' Squadron M.O.!

(Bryce-Curtis later married Alastair's sister, Barbara).

At the beginning of 1943, the squadron casualty rate was gradually rising, leading to a decline in morale. In 1942 the squadron had lost 45 aircraft, 19 since starting its Pathfinder role. In 1943 this would rise to 58 aircraft (each Lancaster having a crew of seven).

Now fast becoming the oldest members of the squadron, by reason of their continuing survival, Lang, Verdon-Roe and Isaacson ("The Terrible Threesome") decided occasional bouts of exuberance would not go amiss.

The C-in-C of the Pathfinder Group, Air Commodore D.C.T. Bennett came to inspect the squadron one day, and the Lancasters were all lined up, wing-tip to wing-tip, along a runway for this purpose. With the inspection over, Alastair decided a rather less formal ceremony was needed, and so, with the line of Lancasters now being busily made ready for that night's raid, he got his old Hillman car out, and with Lighton beside him, they stood up through the open top, using their feet to steer and accelerate, and solemnly drove along the entire line, Alastair giving the Nazi salute and Lighton shouting "Sieg Heil", to all the cheering crews.

A few operations later, the "Terrible Threesome" arranged (all now being Flight Commanders) to take off at the head of the queue (Alastair leading) and once airborne, they circled around the back of the aerodrome carefully forming up in line astern, and then swept back over Warboys at some 250 ft, 'beating-up' the rest of the squadron preparing to take-off. Their aircraft, like the rest, were fully loaded with bombs, markers and fuel, so that this manoeuvre was not a little dangerous, and extremely skilful!

They set course for Lorient and duly performed their tasks. What they had not seen was their C.O. standing by the control tower shaking his fist at them as they roared over. When they landed back, he was waiting for them and summoned them in separately to see him – Lang, Verdon-Roe and Isaacson. He said they had shown a reckless disregard for other crews, and ended sternly by saying: "If you ever do anything like that again, I'll have you court martialled immediately"! Then he paused for a second, and leaned closer to each of them, winked and whispered: "Bloody good flying!"

Quite frequently, at this period in Spring 1943, the crews had to fly on operations on three consecutive nights, and Alastair and his friends, although dog-tired, would continue with their exuberant escapades to lift the general morale in those dark days.

Lang and Verdon-Roe had recently developed another game to enliven the proceedings – on routine night-flying training flights over the U.K. they had raced each other back (and begun to involve others too) to try to be the first to be interrogated and de-briefed by an exceptionally pretty and intelligent W.A.A.F. officer (rather than by her male colleagues). The sight of their Lancasters screeching at high speed around the perimeter track to their dispersals, and braking abruptly to a halt, became a common sight to their ground crews as this game developed!

By early May, Alastair had extended the contest to the returning from operations over Germany, and he cut the corners on the normal 'dog's legs' to try to beat Lighton back. So far, Alastair had been successful, but cutting corners like this exposed them to areas of heavy flak, or night fighter activity. So Alastair had agreed a 'truce' with Lighton for the operation to Dortmund on May 4<sup>th</sup> (although he was in two minds as to whether to try it again). But he didn't have the change. Over the target, the Target Indicators in his Lancaster 'hung up' (although the rest of the

bombs dropped normally). A few seconds later his Lancaster exploded in a massive fireball, seen by Lighton behind him. The nose and cockpit section of the Lancaster tumbled down separately, while the rest disintegrated in flames. All Alastair can remember is that he and his flight engineer, Sgt. J.L. Clark, DFM, were somehow thrown out backwards and their parachutes opened just seconds before they hit the ground hard. He broke his ankle, and Clark then appeared and they were eventually taken to hospital by the Germans, and became prisoners-of-war in Stalag Luft III.

It had been Alastair's <sup>49</sup>50<sup>th</sup> operational trip, and just prior to this, he had been awarded the D.F.C. on March 9<sup>th</sup> in 1943 "for displaying exceptional ability and consistently setting a high example of courage and determination" on operations to targets in Germany and Italy.

D.F.C. He had also been confirmed as Squadron Leader a few days earlier. His wife Barbara and baby daughter Virginia learnt of his safety a month later, but his great friend Lighton (now also confirmed as a Sqd. Ldr and awarded a D.f.c.) perished a week later over Germany, and Peter Isaacson was given a Lancaster to fly back to Australia with his crew, and spend the rest of the war 'down under'.

The "Terrible Threesome" had outlived their luck, but had more than done their bit in lifting the Squadron's morale at a critical time.

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(now also  
awarded a  
DFC would be  
his DFM)

## GENERAL BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

Alastair Grant Lang was born on October 26<sup>th</sup> 1919 in Burma, one of three <sup>Sons</sup> ~~brothers~~ and two <sup>daughters</sup> ~~sisters~~ of Hugh Francis Lang and his wife Cara Jamesa Grant.

Shortly afterwards, Alastair's father, a Merchant Trader, died and his mother had to return to England to live at Bexhill-on-Sea, Sussex and bring up her family of five in considerable hardship.

Alastair was educated at Seaford College and Christ's Hospital, Horsham, and both he and his brother Hugh (known as Ian), joined the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve as war broke out in 1939, Hugh being trained as a fighter pilot and Alastair as a bomber pilot.

Alastair had gained his 'wings' by October 1940, and after converting onto Wellington bombers at Lossiemouth, was posted to 150 Squadron at Newton, Nottinghamshire in April 1941. He flew his first 'Operation' on April 15<sup>th</sup> as second pilot, and his first as skipper on June 11<sup>th</sup>. In the meantime, on April 20<sup>th</sup>, his brother, Hugh, flying with 242 Squadron over the Channel, was involved in a unique accident when Hugh, another pilot and their Squadron C.O., Sqd. Ldr W.P.F. Treacy, D.S.O., finding themselves suddenly under attack from German fighters all collided together, and drowned when their Hurricanes crashed into the sea.

Just 10 days after flying as skipper on his first operation, Alastair married his fiancée Barbara Davies in Eastbourne on June 21<sup>st</sup> 1941, and after a brief honeymoon in London, was back on operations again just four days later.

By August 1941 Alastair had completed 19 operational trips, before being posted to an Operational Training Unit to train more bomber pilots to help make up the losses now being sustained. By September 1942, although he had flown on the three '1,000 bomber raids' on German cities that had meant using the Training Unit aircraft to make up the numbers, Alastair was desperate to get back on regular operations again, and when he heard of the new Pathfinder Force being formed, volunteered immediately, and was posted to 156 Squadron by September 21<sup>st</sup> 1942.

After his return to England when the war ended, Alastair elected to remain with the RAF in Peacetime. He was posted to 12 (Bomber) Squadron on October 8<sup>th</sup> 1945, and found himself flying Lancasters again as Squadron Leader in charge of 'B' Flight. In August 1946 they converted onto Avro Lincolns, and in September Alastair was elevated to be the Officer Commanding 12 Squadron.

In May 1947 Alastair was posted to 617 Squadron ('The Dambusters') as 'B' Flight Commander and underwent intensive training in formation and instrument flying, in preparation for a tour of the USA. The squadron flew out from Binbrook on July 23<sup>rd</sup> 1947, crossed the Atlantic to Gander<sup>(d)</sup> and Andrews Field (Washington) and then toured the USA for the month of August, calling at Detroit, Salina, Wichita, Sacramento, Riverside, Fort Worth, Montgomery and back to Washington. Then they visited Trenton, Ontario, and flew back over Gander, arriving back at Binbrook on September 9<sup>th</sup> 1947.

Alastair then return<sup>ed</sup> as O.C. of 12 Squadron until the end of 1947, before making a major career course change and opting to become a fighter pilot from 1948 onwards (in his brother's footsteps).

After a course at the Central Flying School at Little Rissington (Jan-July 1948), Alastair dropped a rank back to Flight Lieutenant, and was posted to 615 (County of Surrey) Squadron, Royal Auxiliary Air Force at Biggin Hill, to fly Spitfire F.22s. He became O.C. of the Squadron and regained his rank as Sqd. Ldr. In December 1949, then after converting to fly the jet Gloster Meteor F.4, Alastair was posted to 66 (Fighter) Squadron at Linton-on-Ouse in May 1950 as Commanding Officer, flying Meteor F.8s as a key unit in Fighter Command. He immediately put the squadron on an intensive formation flying and aerobatics course of training, and he led the squadron in a memorable aerobatic display at the RAF Air Display at Farnborough on July 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, 1950. He remained in command until August 1952, remembering that on one occasion, he flew the BBC Air Correspondent, Raymond Baxter, in a Meteor 7 to make a broadcast on flying a jet fighter (Raymond himself being an ex-Spitfire pilot).

(to keep his hand in at flying) every year, and as part of his job (and with a twinkle in his eye) he insisted he personally tried out the new fighters that came along - the Swift F.4, Hunter F.4, Swift FR.5 and Gnat Mk 1.

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After this, Alastair took a post in Ceylon in October 1952, helping to train Royal Ceylon Air Force cadets on Chipmunk trainers, and preparing for them to receive De Havilland Vampire fighters from England.

Then in 1954 it was back, this time to the inevitable desk job in London, working for the Ministry of Supply and being responsible for arranging the cockpit layout, lighting and air conditioning of the RAF's new fighter aircraft. Alastair made sure he took the regular 'familiarisation' courses

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He would get a briefing on their handling, then climb aboard, and – as locanically stated in his log book – “climb to 45,000 ft, exceed Mach 1 (ie go through the Sound Barrier) and Aerobatics”. He thoroughly enjoyed these short flights, but finally decided to leave the RAF in August 1957.

Alastair then joined Mobil Oil in London, and worked his way up through several Departments, becoming manager of the Wholesale Fuel Department and looking after contracts with, amongst others, suppliers of aviation fuels at airports and airfields around the U.K. He retired as a Director in 1983 to his family home at Collingbourne Ducis, near Marlborough in Wiltshire.

Alastair was an all-round sportsman, playing cricket for his schools, rugby for his RAF units and tennis and golf in later life. He was also keen on horse-racing, playing Bridge, and he and his wife were well-known for their parties and social activities. He lived to the full, and felt the loss of his wife Barbara deeply, when she pre-deceased him on December 3<sup>rd</sup> 1992. He later married Tessa Anderson in 1999, who also pre-deceased him. *Daved*

Alastair died on October 28<sup>th</sup>, just two days after his 88<sup>th</sup> birthday, and is survived by his three daughters, Virginia, Charmian and Judith, two step-daughters and his grandchildren, Louise and Charles.

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## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- 1) Alastair Lang's wife Barbara with her three other sisters and two brothers, was the daughter of Canon B.H. Davies and his wife - ~~former~~ <sup>formerly</sup> vicar of St. Barnabas, Bexhill.

The eldest sister became a Holy Roman Nun and the other three sisters were married within the space of 5 weeks, in June-July 1941. Barbara had been a children's nurse at the Queen Alexandra Hospital in Brighton.

- 2) Alastair's father, Hugh Francis Lang, was a merchant trader working in Burma. Making a visit back to the UK, just after Alastair's brother Robin's birth in Burma, he was taken ill on board his ship, and died in a hospital in Italy. Alastair's mother, Cara Jamesa Grant (her maiden name) had to bring them up with very little money. Their names were Hugh (Ian) Barbara, Morna, Alastair and Robin. The schools at Seaford and Christ's Hospital, Horsham, gave a great deal of help to families with little resources.
- 3) Alastair's wife, Barbara Evelyn Virginia (née Davies), followed him up to live in a cottage in the village of Warboys, close to his aerodrome in 1942/3, with their little daughter Virginia. After his return from being a P.O.W. in 1945, they had two further daughters, Charmian & Judith, and later lived in Turfbridge Wells, <sup>near</sup> Horley before moving to Collingbourne Ducis in Wiltshire in 1968.
- 4) Alastair's brother, Hugh Ian Lang, was born on April 24<sup>th</sup> 1916 and joined the RAF like Alastair, on the outbreak of war. He became a fighter pilot, flying Hurricanes just after the Battle of Britain in 242 Squadron - the one Douglas Bader had commanded. On a patrol over the Channel on April 20<sup>th</sup> 1941, they were 'jumped' by German fighters and the Squadron C.O., Hugh and another pilot all collided together in a freak accident and fell into the sea and drowned. He left a wife and two daughters, Gail and Domini.
- 5) Alastair's grand-father (on the male side), was Hugh Graham Lang, a Major in the Seaforth Highlanders, based for a time in Inverness, where Alastair's father was born on November 17, 1887. He later became Chief Constable of Sussex. The Lang name came originally from a large estate at Selkirk on the Borders. Major Lang married one of the Rose family of Nairn, Invernesshire. Alastair's grandfather on the female side was Charles Martin Grant, a Minister of the Church of Scotland. Alastair's mother, Cara Jamesa Grant was born on December 1<sup>st</sup> 1886 in Dundee.