

**RANCH  
MEMBERSHIP  
198**

# **ROYAL AIR FORCES Association**

The charity that supports the RAF family

# **RAFAGEN**

THE NEWSLETTER & MAGAZINE OF THE LETCHWORTH, HITCHIN &  
DISTRICT BRANCH (including Stevenage)

Branch formed 15<sup>th</sup> October 1946

**Summer 2025**



## **BRANCH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

Branch Registered Charity No. 1071536

Association Registered Charity No. England 226686 Scotland SC37673

Patron His Majesty King Charles III



# RAFAGEN

The official newsletter and magazine of the  
ROYAL AIR FORCES' ASSOCIATION  
LETCWORTH , HITCHIN & DISTRICT  
BRANCH OFFICIALS FOR 2025/6



**Hon. President Viscount Lord Trenchard**

**Chairman:- Rev, Lindsay Dew**

**Vice Chairman:- Jim Box**

**Secretary:- Marie Mahoney**

(Contact:- [secretary@rafa-lethworth.org.uk](mailto:secretary@rafa-lethworth.org.uk))

**Treasurer:- Ken Needham**

**Wings Appeal Officer:-Eric Dagless**

**Membership Secretary:- Ken Needham**

**Branch Padre:- Rev. Canon Lindsay Dew**

Contact details :- Tel :- 07545878082

Email :- [lindsaycharlesdew@gmail.com](mailto:lindsaycharlesdew@gmail.com)

## **General Committee:**

**John Airey: John Tunesi: Elliot Needham:**

**Bernard Drummond**

**Branch R.A.F.A.L.O. Vacant**

**For Welfare Contact:-Branch Secretary**

**Email :-[secretary@rafa-lethworth.org.uk](mailto:secretary@rafa-lethworth.org.uk)**

**Or direct to RAFA Head Quarters**

**RAFAGEN is compiled and edited by Ken Needham**

(email [kwn056@btinternet.com](mailto:kwn056@btinternet.com) Telephone 01462671534)



Find us on  
**Facebook**

**VISIT OUR  
WEBSITE**

[rafa-lethworth.org.uk](http://rafa-lethworth.org.uk)

## 2025 Branch Committee



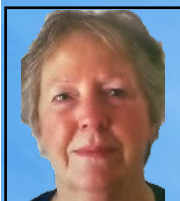
Chairman \*  
Rev Lindsay Dew



President  
Viscount Lord  
Trenchard



Vice Chairman\*  
Jim Box



Secretary\*  
Marie Mahoney



Treasurer \*  
Ken Needham



Wings Appeal Officer \*  
Eric Dagless

• Denotes Branch Trustee



ATC Coordinator  
John Tunesi



General Member  
John Airey



IT Officer  
Elliot Needham



General Member  
Bernard Drummond

**Conference : Branch Delegate : Ken Needham**

**Branch Padre : Rev Lindsay Dew**

**RAFAGEN Editor : Ken Needham**

**Membership Secretary : Ken Needham**

**Standard Bearer : Position Vacant**




**BRANCH ROYAL AIR FORCES  
LIAISON OFFICER**

**To be announced Shortly**


## NEWS FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK



 The Annual General Meeting went off well, as it should, with the best attendance we have had for an A.G.M. for a long time. Let us hope that those numbers continue for NAAFI Break over the year, or even increase. Although two members changed duties on the Committee, the rest of the members held their last years titles. One new face will be at the table, Bernard Drummond, a regular contributor to RAFAGEN, and a previous Stevenage member.

Welcome Bernard, and to the other members of the Committee, thank you for agreeing to stand again to keep the long standing branch active.

Full details of the Committee on previous pages.

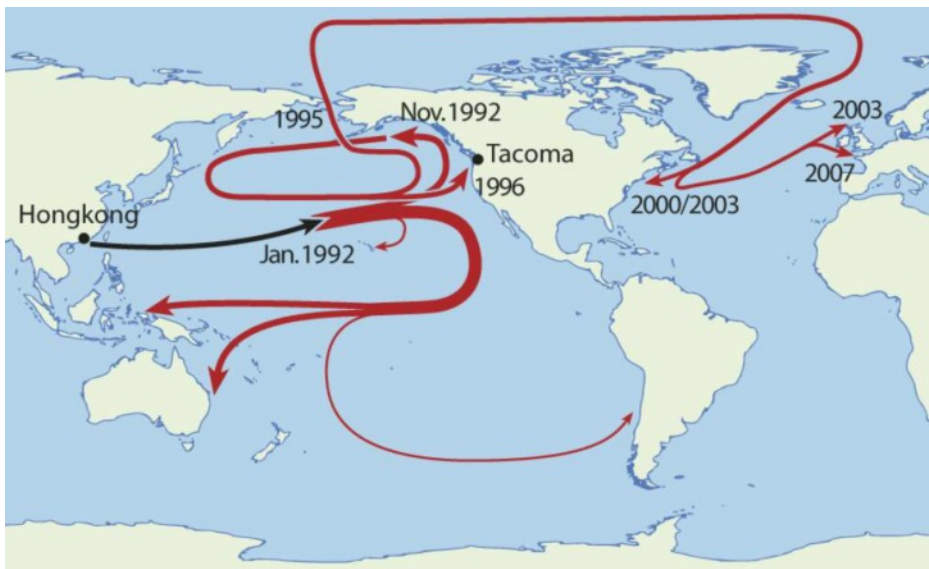
 Stand by for the new season of RAFA ducks. The new ducks are in a Typhoon aircraft. Talking about plastic ducks, here is a story you may not know. On January 10, 1992, a storm at sea in the Pacific set in motion one of the largest and most unusual studies into global ocean currents. A freighter travelling from China to America was caught up in the storm, which tipped the vessel and dumped into the waters

her cargo of containers, one of which contained a consignment of 28,800 bath toys. . The jolly characters burst forth from their shipping container, possibly due to its doors being opened by a collision with one of the other lost containers. It's suspected a combination of soaking in salty water and being jostled about by currents and waves set the quartets free from their packaging. The toys were designed without any holes so successfully bobbed to the surface.

Scientists could never ethically dump tens of thousands of plastic toys into the ocean, but the accidental release of so many toys represented an opportunity too fortuitous to miss out on. Drift bottles have been used to study ocean currents, but their deployment is normally capped at 1,000 bottles, many of which may never be seen again. A bumper crop of 28,800 ocean current trackers was therefore a boon for oceanography as it would likely return much more data.

These plastic friends have sailed the world, ending up in many countries over the years. In 2003 one was found in Scotland and in 2007 one in Northern France. I wonder how many have been found, but not know how famous the ducks are.

See below where they have been found over the years.





## **NEWS FROM THE ASSOCIATION**

### **An update on individual voting**

As you are aware, this year all members of the Association will have the opportunity to vote on elections and Resolutions proposed at Annual Conference. This means that there will be a new process for voting. Below is a brief update on the work that has taken place so far, and what you can expect in the coming months.

We are delighted to share that we have recently appointed a specialist election services provider called Mi-Voice. Mi-Voice are experienced in providing independent election services for a range of membership organisations including the Royal British Legion, the Scouts and the Camping and Caravanning Club.



Ballot papers will be issued directly by Mi-Voice. Members will have the opportunity to submit their vote in advance, either online or by returning a paper ballot, or on the day of Conference, either in-person or online as a virtual attendee.

Ahead of the distribution of ballot papers, a full guide to individual voting will be sent to members by the Association. As in previous years, registration for Annual Conference will open in June. A calling notice will be sent to all branches. Branches can still fund a branch representative to attend Conference. (Ken Needham has been appointed this Branch's representative).



What you have  
been saying about  
RAFAGEN.



Via E Mail

My congratulations to Ken for a superb RAFAGEN at 80, especially the Letchworth War efforts;.

And you said it all in 4 pages. Amazing Thank you.

Michael McDonough

---

I have a little reminiscing too! My Dad when the war finished, was a Royal Air Force Warrant Officer ever since 1933. He had been seconded to the Fleet Air Arm, one of some 400 personnel that chose to move over to the Navy rather than go on Reserve, as there was never going to be another war, according to the Politicians. Dad ended up in the South Atlantic Canada, The Russian Convoys, the relief of Malta, and sometimes in the Home Fleet.

My Dad was on the HMS FURIOUS, the very first purpose designed aircraft carrier. The sister ships were the Glorious and the Illustrious as far as I can find, the RAF Contingent were equally divided about 400 to each carrier. The Illustrious and the Glorious went down all hands lost, but none have ever been given a mention in anything I have researched. Sometime in 1936 Dad must have got some home leave as I was born in 1937, for some nine years I hadn't a clue who my Dad was and whether I'd ever had one!

Anyway Dad arrived I didn't know him when he knocked the door we were at the time homed in an Air Married Quarters on Thorney Island,

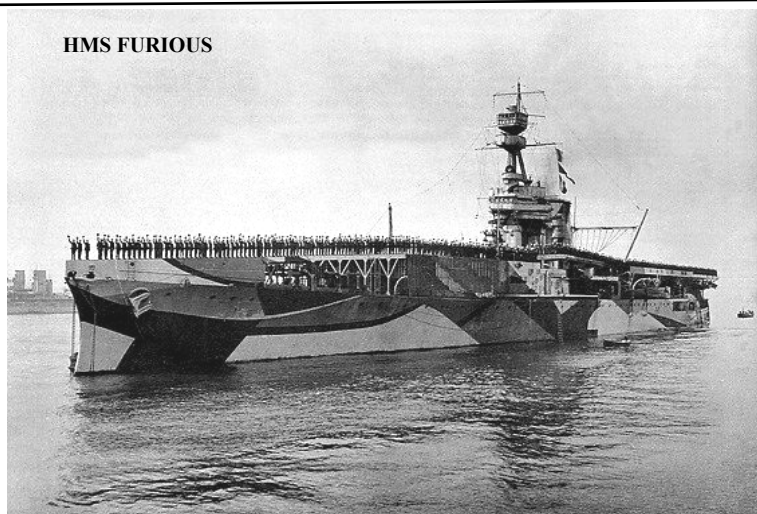


we were then posted to Chippenham my seventh home in as many years. Dad went into RAF Recruiting, but that's by the bye, he was a qualified airframe fitter. Dad arrived as I said the War was still going on and he went Instructing, so we were a complete family again, Mums relations all lived in and around Purley in Surrey, so before the end of the war we went on holiday to Purley, no thoughts of the War still going on and on the 8th May the War in Europe was declared finished and all of us made our way up to London that evening and we had contingency plans should we get separated

So there was I at 8 years old in Trafalgar Square hooting and rooting as everyone was. I got lost, but the plan was for me to get to the Coach Station at Victoria. I was only lost for about half an hour when my elder sister aged 12 and my Aunt Marge turned up and we made our way back to Purley.

What a day and what a celebration never to be seen and heard of again no hassle as everything had come to a stop the lights and the singing were tremendous, it was the first time in my short life that I had spent awake after midnight for quite some time .Dad was finally demobbed as a 27 years of service ending up as a warrant Officer on a pension of about £1,12 shillings a week, those were the days

Sent via BT Email John Smallwood.



Dear Colleagues,

As you will be aware, in 2024 we undertook another large scale outreach campaign to help identify members of the RAF community who may be struggling and in need of our support. Throughout the year, hundreds of volunteers, serving personnel and Association employees made 8005 welfare check calls to RAF veterans. From those calls, 14% of those whom we spoke to were subsequently referred into one or more of our welfare services. Those people are now receiving the support they need to deal with challenges ranging from financial, physical and wellbeing issues and those struggling with loneliness and isolation.

I am pleased to inform you that we will be continuing the deliver outreach again this year. We plan to deliver a small outreach campaign focused around Armed Forces Day and will be calling members of the Association who are aged 60 and over to check on their wellbeing. This event will run 23 June – 30 June and normally reaches around 500 members. We also plan to deliver a large outreach campaign around Armistice Day. This event normally reaches about 3000 members and calls will be made by corporate sponsors, RAFA staff, ambassadors, RAFALO's, Trustees and many more. Outside of these two focused campaigns, outreach will continue to happen throughout the year.

I am sure you will agree that these calls can be a lifeline for individuals who otherwise simply wouldn't be getting the help they need. Checking on the wellbeing of the RAF community is an important task and one in which our Branches and RMGs play a key role.

We look forward to working with you again this year as we continue with our outreach activity.

Thank you in advance for your support.

Jenna Middlemass

Member, Branch and Wellbeing Officer – (South East & Eastern Area)

Royal Air Forces Association

## A short story from member David Switzer

### SANDWICHES AT DAWN

I well remember being one of the very small “committee” who planned event. The food in general was not of a very high standard and portions meagre, and so a “boycott” was proposed. We did not want a mutiny but did want to make a point, preferably without any individual being held responsible. It was decided that there was very little action that could be taken against anyone who just said they just did not fancy the fare on offer, and provided we all kept to that line, it would not be possible to take any action against any of us. We also decided that in order to mitigate the pangs of hunger the two slices of bread, the knob of butter and teaspoon of jam, which was always available after collecting the main course, could be taken, along with the mug of tea. The boycott was reasonably effective; however, the twist to the tale is that it was organised by the 24<sup>th</sup> Entry Cooks! I think it was fair to say we “Cooks” were a little embarrassed with the fare on offer and “were going to sort out the R.A.F. Catering!



At a later stage in my R.A.F. career, having been commissioned as a Catering Officer, I encountered the other side of the coin. In 1972, I was posted to Germany as a Flight Lieutenant being the first commissioned catering officer with the Harrier Wing at R.A.F. Wildenrath. In the 1960's and 70's catering standards in the R.A.F. were generally quite high but I recognised that catering for the Harrier Wing, I was on a hiding to nothing. The reason being

that the cost of feeding a serviceman was based on a “Daily Messing Rate”. Whilst on a normal station perhaps only 30% would turn up for breakfast during the week and at weekends only 20% for all meals. Those unused rations were then used to enhance meals served during the week. In the field, catering for nearly 3,000 personnel, appetites were sharper, everyone turned up for breakfast and there was no going home for the weekend. Shades of the Cosford “boycott” vividly sprang to mind!

What I could never understand was that in those days, we appeared to have an endless supply of fuel for aircraft but a very carefully controlled allowance for the human element. My argument was that the Air Force were prepared to fuel the aircraft but not the servicemen who serviced them, that did not make sense to me! I was also aware that one of my fellow catering officers, a Squadron Leader, had recently been demoted, following a court-martial for overspending. So, I had a choice, a Cosford style boycott or court-martial! Was this was going to be a no-win situation, not if I could help it,

With the aid of my CO, (then Gp Cap, later Air Chief Marshal Sir Patrick, (Paddy Hine)) and the Director of R.A.F. Catering we set about the Treasury, who were the “Godfather” in these matters. I had had a previous run in with the Treasury over manning levels but determination and perseverance had won that argument. Despite advice that the Treasury would not bend, and against all odds, we persuaded the Treasury that a special rate should be authorised, it was, and my neck was saved and a re-run of the Cosford “boycott” avoided



100 receipts, 100 countries,  
100 years

# Annual General Meeting 2025

## GALLERY



Note our 3 visitors from RAF Henlow who joined us after the AGM





# COMMITTEE NEWS

**March 2025**

**&**

**May 2025**

**MARCH MEETING.** The first meeting of the year with the new Committee. The first job of the new Chairman, was to welcome our new addition, Bernard Drummond.

Following all the usual admin stuff, the next duty was to appoint the smaller duties of members of the Committee. These were as follows:-

Wings Appeal Officer ..... Eric Dagless

Conference Rep ..... Ken Needham

A.T.C. Coordinator ..... John Tunesi

Branch Padre ..... Rev Canon Lindsay Dew

Media Officer ..... Elliot Needham

Membership Secretary ..... Ken Needham

General Committee Members .... John Airey and Bernard Drummond

RAFAGEN Editor ..... Ken Needham

Don't worry Bernard, as soon as you have learnt how the Committee works, you will get a job.

Eric gave us the date of the Wings Appeal collection at Letchworth Sainsburys this year which is 5<sup>th</sup> April, and he will be looking for volunteers to help. He went on to say that will be having Wings Appeal collections at the Letchworth Armed Forces Day (28<sup>th</sup> June) and a date in September we will be in Hitchin. Eric also pointed out that the .

Whilst on the subject of dates , the Chairman added the Annual Battle of Britain Service will this year take place on 21<sup>st</sup> September at the Letchworth Methodist Church as last year.

We had received as suggestion from RAF Henlow that their Christmas Lunch would be at the beginning of December, and that was a lunch not to be missed. It meant that we would have to have our Christmas Bash late in December, which was not thought to be a good idea with all the other parties going on at the time. Therefore it was decided to have a NEW YEAR BASH instead. It will be just as good, possibly even better. Anyone ready for a second cup of coffee? Apparently not, as there s only one item left on the agenda. The Chairman goes quickly around the table to see if there is “any other business”. None? Meeting Closed

## MAY MEETING

A great deal of the time at this meeting was taken up with with general admin, and items that may come to pass in the future. Sorry to be a bit vague, but meeting came be like that at times.

The meeting was advised that on 28<sup>th</sup> & 29<sup>th</sup> June the RAFA will have a site at the Shuttleworth Air museum at Old Warden. These two days are flying display days at the museum. The Saturday date falls on the Letchworth Armed Forces Day. It was thought by the Committee that there would be no conflict, especially when ours is a free event.

The host of NAAFI Break was confirmed. Sorry I lost, and you have me for the next year.

Eric was looking for volunteers to help with the stalls on Armed Forces Day and at Hitchin. Don’t let it be the usual few.

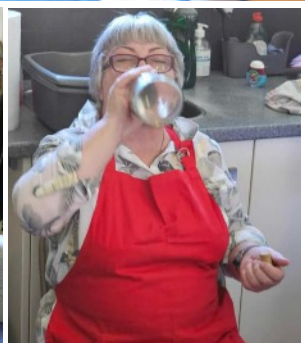
KN (That’s me) suggested a alternative venue for the Christmas lunch, and it was agreed that KN should make further enquiries.

Now that we have Committee members who live in all of the towns we represent, it was suggested that we have an area representative. More of this at the next meeting report, after more discussions by the Committee.

Letchworth Branch of the Royal British Legion held a '80 years On' Party for local veterans at the Mrs Howard Hall, Letchworth on 10<sup>th</sup> May.



Betty, was 100 years old, which was celebrated at the party



You just can't get the staff nowadays





Well done



Eric you are selling the wrong product



It can't be a military party without a raffle. I won a bottle of wine.



Thanks to Nigel at Letchworth RBL and his team for putting on a great afternoon.



Waiting for the food to arrive





Hitchin War memorial after VE Day at 80. Note the painted stones at the rear. Painted by children and placed there in respect for those who fought in the war.



**SATURDAY**  
**28TH JUNE 2025**  
**BROADWAY**  
**GARDENS**  
**LETCHWORTH**  
**10.00hrs 'TIL 16.00hrs**

**Don't forget to visit our stall and meet fellow members**



# NAAFI Break

**Meet fellow members and friends at the Branch's monthly morning coffee break.**

**We meet on the last Wednesday of each month at the [Letchworth Par 3 Golf Centre](#), William Way, Letchworth Garden City, SG6 2HJ at 10.00 hrs.**

**£2 will get you a non alcoholic drink of your choice for you to drink over good conversation.**

**You will also receive news of what is happening in the big world of the R.A.F. Association and, if required, how they can help you.**

**We look forward to seeing you.....**



# WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS

Information supplied by Membership Department of The Royal Air Forces Association

**NONE THIS QUARTER**





## **DIMPLES Bar & Cafe.**

**Willian Way,**

**Letchworth Garden City. SG6 3JH**

**Open Tuesday - Sunday**

**The home of the Branch NAAFI**

**BREAK**



**ROYAL  
AIR FORCES  
Association**

The charity that supports the RAF family

## **NEWS FROM THE ASSOCIATION**

### **Your vote, your voice**

**Reproduced from the Winter 2025 issue of AIRMAIL**

Following the Resolutions passed at Annual Conference in October all members of the RAF Association now have the opportunity to help shape the organisation's future by voting on elections and resolutions proposed at Annual Conference.

Of the delegates who voted during Resolution 1 of Annual Conference 84 per cent supported the principle of enfranchisement and that every member should be entitled to vote in Association elections and on resolutions.

The passing of a subsequent series of special resolutions (requiring a 75 per cent majority) means that Council now has the authority to implement the changes required to the Royal Charter and the rules to permit individual voting.

More information including timings and the process for voting will be communicated to members over the coming months.

To ensure all members can take advantage of this new opportunity and submit their vote, members are encouraged to check that the contact details held for them by the RAF Association, in particular email and postal addresses, are up to date.

This can be done by logging onto the community hub and accessing your details, or by calling **0800 018 2361**

# RAFAGEN

## Issue One

When first became a member of the Letchworth Hitchin & District branch all those years ago, I was invited to join their committee as the Treasurer, to stop the branch having to close. I cannot say I saved the branch as two other new members took on Officer roles on the committee. One as Vice Chairman (Ernie Brown) and the other as Secretary (Headley Parkins).

After a couple of months and we had learnt more about the branch, I suggested that we might produce a “Newsletter” for members. The then President of the branch, Gordon Collison, and one of the founders of the branch, told me that in the early days we had a “Newsletter” called RAFAGEN.

I learnt that a copy of one of the first publications was in the Garden City museum. In order that I could get some idea of what the early editor had in mind for his edition, I went along to the museum and obtained a copy. The copy I had was dated December 1952 marked Vol 1 No. 1 and was in booklet form and was for Letchworth branch only as it was before any amalgamation.

The Newsletter contained lot of adverts for a small 12-page booklet. from forgotten industry and retail shops of Letchworth. Such as The County Cycle Store : Pymans of Leys Avenue : Bollen stationer of Station Rd : T Brooker & Sons Leys Avenue : Staleys Shoes of Commerce Avenue : ST John Ryan Arcade : Farrar’s Station Rd : M G Bennett The Arcade : C Hartley & Son The Arcade : E Hartley & Sons Station Rd : Cobb & Ward Works Rd : R S Hall Chemist Station Rd : Lilian Reed The Arcade : The Hive Printers : V H Collins Florist The Wynd : Foster Instruments : The Irving Air Chute :

We were told that the committee consisted of 14 members and the meetings were held on the last Tuesday of each month at the Three Horseshoes Pub in Norton at 20.00 hrs. I was not surprised to note that a number of owners or managers of the advertisers were on the committee.



There is an editorial note inviting people to join the Association. First annual subscription 10/- (50p) Subsequent subscriptions 7/6 (38p) These subs include the bi-monthly issue of Airmail if you paid at that time. This offer closed in January 1954.

There was to be a Sausage and Mash Supper. This was to be held in the Three Horseshoes pavilion on Friday 16<sup>th</sup> January 1953 . It was thought that this type of function instead of a dinner would attract more members, and it was hoped to make it an annual affair. The charge is 4/6 (less than 25p) to members and friends. Menu: Soup, Sausage and Mash, sweet. Is this an idea for the present committee?

Most of the “stories” in he newsletter were from senior members of the committee, congratulating the editor with this first publication, which I thought was a good idea for the first issue.

Your RAFAGEN has changed a bit, but is still going strong, and has won the best Newsletter award from the Association.



# A STORY FROM THE ASSOCIATION

## INVICTUS GAMES

*When Luke Delahunty had a crash on his way to work at RAF Honington, his parents were told he may not last the night. He has gone on to lead a life of adventure and achievement and, he says, it's thanks to the support of those around him – and always saying 'Yes!'*



Serving with the  
RAF Regiment

An old friend of mine from the cadets said: 'You do more than I do and I'm not in a wheelchair,'" says Luke Delahunty. "And I laughed and said: 'Well, that's your fault. Life is what you make it, you know.'"

After leaving the RAF – following a near-fatal motorbike crash in 1996 – Luke has lived a life of adventure including winning a British gold medal, competing in the Invictus Games, cycling from London to Paris, teaching scuba diving in Egypt, sailing a tall ship in the Mediterranean and appearing on stage, in an opera and in a TV commercial.

"A vast majority of the things that I've done are through people that I've met," adds Luke. "People who told me about something that sounds amazing."

Despite the dizzying array of Luke's achievements, there is no sense of showing off. And as he says: "If I am not in a good place, other people are always the answer."

Luke was not particularly sporty as a child; he didn't really watch it, let alone compete much. He enjoyed playing Scrabble with his mum and joined the RAF Air Cadets because he thought: 'Why not?' when a friend joined up. But cadets engaged him enough to join the RAF at 17, as a

gunner. He served in Germany, Northern Ireland and Cyprus with 1 Squadron RAF Regiment.

Eight years later, in 1996, on his commute to RAF Honington, he and a tractor collided. His injuries were life-threatening. He had to be resuscitated in the ambulance, and his family were told their 24-year-old son would probably not last the night.



Luke with his motorbike before his accident.

But, somehow, he did. Luke spent the next year in hospital and at Headley Court, adapting to total paralysis from the chest down (T6). “I was lucky to survive it. That has always helped me to get through. I also broke my neck, but there was no damage to my spinal cord there. If there had been I would have lost the function in my arms. Pushing a wheelchair would have been very difficult and I would not have been as independent as I am now. My life could have ended or just been much worse; so, I felt it was my duty to make the most of it.”

“[Hospital] was only six miles away from RAF Honington so I still felt very connected to the RAF,” he says. “A few people would come to visit me; like Regiment Warrant Officer, Pat Sweeney. At that time, it wasn’t clear what the prognosis was going to be,” says Luke. “And he said no matter what happens, you’re going to be alright because you’re Regiment-trained. At the time I thought what the hell are you talking about? But over the years I think, well, yeah, he was right. In the military we are trained: we’ll never know where we are going to find ourselves, and wherever that is, we’ve got to make the most of it.”

After moving to the National Spinal Injuries Centre at Stoke Mandeville to continue his rehabilitation, Luke, by then 25, began to feel very detached. “Then one day a guy I’d served with in Germany came into the ward. He’d become a civilian paramedic. He said: ‘I’d heard you’d had an accident. And I’d heard you were dead.’ Once word got around that I

wasn't dead, a few people I'd served with came to visit. And one of the guys asked what I was doing the next night. 'Well, nothing; hospital,' I replied. He said they'd square it with the nurses and take me out for a drink. So they basically manhandled me into a Sherpa or whatever van it was and took me to the Rose and Crown near RAF Halton. There was a load of guys from 1 Squadron in the pub, because the Queen's Colour Squadron was there for some reason. Needless to say, I don't remember much about that night. At that time the internet wasn't a thing, social media wasn't a thing. That night out made me feel that people cared, wanted to see me, wanted to help me in their way."

Eventually, Luke moved to Uxbridge and got a job. He kept in touch with his squadron and would have a few pints with them when he could. He lived in London for 12 years. When RAF Uxbridge closed down, social media was just starting up and he kept in touch that way.

Luke's accident had happened on his way to work, so counted as being on duty. He's grateful that meant he got a medical discharge and a war pension that kicked in immediately. "I was financially OK, but still wanted to do something. I still wanted to be active. "

He went back to college and has had various paid jobs since, for News Quest Media, the NHS and as an actor. He began acting with B22, a theatre company for military veterans. From there he "randomly" ended up in an opera about military life, then got an agent and did a couple of TV adverts. He says: "I just said yes – as usual." He's also volunteered for the many charities that have helped, supported or inspired him: BLESMA, SSAFA, the RAF Benevolent Fund, The Jubilee Sailing Trust and The Back Up Trust. He's currently a trustee at his local Association branch.

The Back Up Trust gets involved with people with spinal cord injuries. During rehabilitation, it introduced Luke to pool, table tennis, archery, wheelchair basketball and rugby, water skiing, sit skiing, rowing and hand cycling. "It was geared to opening your eyes up to what is possible in a wheelchair," he says. "In the RAF I always applied for a sports parachute course, but never got onto it. So I did a [tandem] parachute jump after my injury. Also, it helped on the social side – with meeting other people with

spinal cord injuries. We've all got similar experiences; you can chat much more easily about the more private things to do with your injury like bladder control, bowel control, all of those personal things that people don't generally realise are affected. And it's through chatting with other people like that that you realise you learn from others."

"One of the first things I paid for out of my own pocket was learning to scuba dive," he says. "As a fairly new wheelchair-user, you learn from other people. I got talking to a girl I'd met who was a diver and knew where to go in Egypt that was fully accessible. I went out there, learned to scuba dive, and loved it. Later I qualified as an instructor and lived and taught in Egypt for a year."

Luke had also done rowing taster days while in London – then trained on the water and in indoor adaptive events: "The boats had side floats, like stabilisers," he smiles. Despite entering a few competitions, he became more involved in scuba diving and ignored messages asking if he'd like to take part in the Paralympics. It's the only time in our interview when the man who always says yes mused about what might have been. "I don't regret the choice I made, because I loved it [teaching scuba abroad], but I sometimes wondered what might have happened if I'd got into sports sooner after my injury." In London he also bought himself a hand-cycle, though "I wasn't confident enough to ride it a lot until I moved out to Aylesbury some years later."

After that he did the London-Paris fundraising cycle ride and other long rides two or three times on the hand bike, because: "a friend asked if I fancied it."

His participation in the Invictus Games also came about after taking advantage of a chance encounter. Living in Aylesbury, he'd taken up wheelchair rugby at Stoke Mandeville, and was hand-cycling regularly. "I thought Invictus was for people who had served recently," says Luke.

"The Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. I'd been out of service for decades and also didn't think my injuries qualified. I was at the pub one day in Stoke Mandeville, wearing an RAF Regiment t-shirt. The [UK] wheelchair



archery team was there after training at Stoke Mandeville stadium. We got chatting. An Army major in the team gave me some contacts and she gave me the way to go forwards.”

Luke was selected to compete at Invictus in 2016 (Florida) and 2017 (Toronto) in the rowing and hand cycling events. In Florida he got personal bests in both events. “I was happy with that. It was the experience...coming out to compete through the dry ice to Led Zeppelin’s Kashmir...the crowd cheering and clapping. My stomach was churning. It was a magical moment. But what made it more special was that I was allowed to take a couple of people with me. They had been there for me when I was low, and weren’t in a great place in their personal lives; I thought;

‘You know, we can help each other’ and I invited them along.”

Luke says he’s needed most support when relationships ended. A couple of friends he’d also wanted to invite to Invictus Florida had helped him through a breakup – they had phoned every day from Orkney to chat and check he was OK. “They were there for me – not physically, but they were there for me.” And during lockdown when another relationship didn’t make it through the enforced separation: “I was in an online meeting for



Handcycling started out as a leisure pursuit on the roads round Aylesbury, before leading to long rides to Paris and the Invictus Games in Orlando, Florida. © Tribune Content Agency LLC/Alamy

a resilience project I was involved in. The host took time to ask how each of the 15 participants was. And I just burst into tears and there was a stunned silence, you know, and a second later, everyone was like: ‘Oh! Are you OK?’ After the meeting my phone just kept ringing with people from the session calling me. And one of them only lived 45 minute away and she delivered pizza and wine. And you know, that’s just what I needed – just a person to be there for me.”

“The more things you do, the more people you meet and the more opportunities come along and then it just becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy almost, because the more you say yes to things...then you never know where it’s going to take you or who you are going to meet or what’s going to come from it. And so that’s how I live my life, just saying yes and doing stuff.”

## MEMORIES OF THE PAST



Armed Forces Day 2017



*The RAFAGEN is produced every quarter and sent to members of the Letchworth, Hitchin & District branch of the Royal Air Forces Association via email.*

*If you would like to tell your story in RAFAGEN or have any comments about the magazine, the branch or the Association, we would like to hear from you. It can either be by hard copy through the mail, (any photographs will be returned immediately) to Ken Needham 68 Broadwater Avenue, Letchworth Garden City, Herts SG6 3HJ, or via email to [kwn056@btinternet.com](mailto:kwn056@btinternet.com)*

**NAAFI BREAKS** for the next few months are as follows :-

Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> June

Wednesday 30<sup>th</sup> July

Wednesday 27<sup>th</sup> August

Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> September

Should you wish not to receive the regular issues of RAFAGEN, would you please advise the branch secretary on [secretary@rafa-leitchworth.org.uk](mailto:secretary@rafa-leitchworth.org.uk), who will arrange for your address to be deleted from our list.

